

A romantic couple's silhouette is shown in profile, facing each other. They are set against a vibrant city skyline at night, with various skyscrapers and buildings illuminated. The sky is a mix of deep blue, purple, and pink, with numerous bright, sparkling light effects scattered throughout. The overall mood is romantic and dreamy.

you  
belong  
*with me*

a collection

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

# YOU BELONG WITH ME

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A COLLECTION

WHITNEY G.

WHITNEY G.

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Pretend It's Real, for Me

Synopsis

A Note from Whitney G.

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#1 UFC & MMA Gossip Source for Fangirls

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#1 UFC & MMA Gossip Source for Fangirls

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#1 UFC & MMA Gossip Source for Fangirls

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**Pretend It's Real, For Me**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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a  
*you belong with me*  
novel

break up  
*with him,*  
for me

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

2



break up  
*with him,*  
for me

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

*For second chances in life.*



# SYNOPSIS

*Please leave your message at the sound of the beep...*

Penelope, I know that it's three o'clock in the morning, but I need to get this off my chest.

I can't give you any more advice on landing this other guy, can't tell you another "sexy" thing that you should do, or suggest a new set of filthy words that you should text him late at night.

As your best friend, I've reached my limit, and I can honestly say that he doesn't deserve you.

I'm not saying all of this because I'm fucking jealous, or because he had the audacity to say that he makes more money than me. (I still can't find his name on the *Forbes 500* list, and I know damn well that he's renting that Ferrari, but that's a story for a different day.)

He's not who you think he is, and the better man has always been right in front of you...

You have every reason to never give me a chance since you know me better than anyone, and you agree with all the tabloids calling me *The Cocky King of New York* and the *Untamed Playboy of Manhattan*. But I honestly believe that you're better off with someone else, and I need you to see.

I'm not asking for too much...I just want you to break up with him, *for me*.

## A NOTE FROM WHITNEY G.

Hey there!

Dear Awesome Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up *Break Up with Him, for Me!* I can't wait for you to fall in love with Hayden & Penelope!

If you want to be the first to learn of my upcoming releases, sales, and special things that I only offer to my readers, be sure to [sign up for my Exclusive F.L.Y. List](#). (F.L.Y. = Effin Love You. Because whether you love or hate this story, I still love you for giving it a chance!)

Sincerely,

WHITNEY G.

# PROLOGUE

SEVENTY TWO HOURS POST-BREAKUP



*Hayden*

**W**hen you and I meet again at the end of this novel, you'll owe me a huge apology.

Yes, *you*.

The person devouring these words.

I can see you prematurely judging me—wondering why my face is battered and bruised or why I'm slumped over a grey leather chair in my penthouse suite.

You're embarrassed that you ever told your friends how “drop-dead sexy” or “insanely gorgeous” I was. How I made your panties soaking wet when you saw me on the cover of *Esquire* or *GQ* magazine.

First of all, you're welcome for that last thing. I know that your boyfriend/husband hasn't given you mind-blowing, toe-curling sex in forever, so consider my panty-melting skills our dirty little secret.

Second of all, I'm well aware that I look nothing like the *Cocky King of New York* or the *Untamed Playboy of Manhattan* at this moment. There's no need to remind me.

And yes, I also know that I'm bleeding all over this marble floor...

I want to tell you what happened, but I can barely move my jaw right now, and you'd never believe me anyway.

So, I'll tell you something else.

Everything I've learned over the past seventy-two hours can be summed up in a single sentence: The only difference between a devastating breakup and a car crash is the fact that I would happily sign up to suffer through the latter more than once.

Broken bones, fractures, concussions, and cuts? I can deal with all of that.

The recovery time for those injuries lasts anywhere from six weeks to six months. And after doctors prescribe a medley of painkillers and intense physical therapy sessions, I can move on with my life as if the accident never happened.

A broken heart after a breakup, though? There are no painkillers, therapy sessions, or guaranteed recovery plans available. And anyone who says "time heals all wounds" has never loved and lost their best friend.

"You're a piece of shit!" My best friend Penelope's voice suddenly comes over the penthouse speakers for the umpteenth time this morning.

I've been struggling to walk over and turn it off, but it's no use. I can't feel my legs.

"I hate that I ever slept with you, that I trusted you to be anything more than the cocky, arrogant bastard that you've always been," she says. "I guarantee that I will never, *ever* talk to you again in my lifetime."

*Beep!*

"I *hate* you, Hayden Hunter." She starts a brand-new message. "I. Hate. You. I hope your cock falls off and you lose every dime in your bank account. Those things are all you've ever cared about anyway."

*Beep!*

"I left out one last thing, asshole..." Her voice cracks, and my heart bursts into flames. "For the record, you were the one who started our cold war years ago. It was *you* and that was always your fault... As your former best friend, allow me to

name our breakup like we've named every single one of my others."

She pauses for a few seconds, sniffing in between breaths. "You're officially 'The One That Should've Never Happened.' You were better off helping me land *other guys* than convincing us to cross the line. You also weren't that good in bed. I've had far better sex with my exes."

*Beep!*

There's no sense in me reacting to that last sentence, as we both know that's a lie.

*It's not even a good one.*

Even though hearing the pain in her voice hurts like hell, this is the most she's talked to me in days, and a part of me is glad she called.

As much as I've been dying to tell her my side of the story, i.e., why our breakup is *not* my fault, she might have a point about us crossing the line.

Maybe if I'd said, "Go ahead and keep dating him. He's a far better man than me,"—he *wasn't*—then I'd still be helping her date some other guy. Perhaps if I'd never insisted that our relationship was worth the risk, we could've remained best friends and nothing more.

Then again, Penelope and I weren't always this close.

Hell, she wasn't even my "friend" for the first few years that I knew her.

She was nothing more than a tag-along third wheel, a woman who was meant to be "off limits" forever.

She was my (other) *best friend's younger sister*...

SIXTEEN WEEKS AGO



No, *wait*.

Allow me to rewind things a little bit further.

SIXTEEN \*BREAKUPS\* AGO



Yes.

Let's start this train wreck of a love story *here*.

Shall we?



# BREAKUP #1

THE ONE THAT RUINED VALENTINE'S DAY



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

**M** *y brother is going to kill me...*

He's going to kidnap me the moment I step out of this dorm, drive me to an abandoned dump, and suffocate me behind a stack of burning tires. Even if it's what I deserve for lying to him, I doubt he'll bat an eye when he's sentenced to prison.

He'll probably *thrive* there.

In fact, I'm pretty sure that the headlines tomorrow will read: *International Figure Skating Champion Found Dead in Apparent Strangulation; Older Brother Confesses, 'I Told Her to Focus on Skating, Not Dating.'*

*Shit. Shit. SHIT!*

"*Babe?* Hey, babe?" My boyfriend, Michael, pushes me against the elevator's back wall, knocking me out of my thoughts. "Babe, you're scaring the hell out of me. What are you thinking about?"

"Getting murdered." I look into his eyes. "Did you notice anyone following us when we left the arena? Was the person driving that green Honda a guy who looked like a human version of the Hulk?"

“Um, wow. And no.” He tugs at the medal around my neck. “You’ve been away from me for months, finally won another medal like you wanted, and you’re thinking about getting killed?”

*You would be too if you knew my brother.* “Sorry, I’m just —” I struggle to think of a lie. “Tonight’s competition was a bit more intense than I thought.”

“The only thing you should be thinking about is how your loving boyfriend, *me*, is about to lay down this nine-inch pipe when I get you into my bed.”

I blink a few times.

I’ve envisioned losing my virginity hundreds of ways and a guy saying any version of “laying down this pipe” has never appeared in any of them.

Also, I’ve felt him rock-hard before, and he definitely isn’t nine inches.

*Four, maybe...*

“Babe, pay attention.” He presses his lips against mine, kissing me so hard that I lose my train of thought. Once he’s rendered me breathless, he grabs my hand and leads me off the elevator and toward his room.

Pressing a kiss against my cheek, he unlocks the door and pulls me inside.

The mixed scents of old pizza, beer, and soy vanilla candles waft around me as he walks me to the bed.

“I’ve missed you so damn much.” He slides a hand under my dress, pushing my panties to the side.

As if he can sense my hesitation, he pulls back.

“Let’s get tipsy so you can get comfortable,” he says. “I have strawberries, whipped cream, and some specialty champagne I bought for you.”

“Actually, I think all I need to do is make a phone call.”

“To who?”

“Travis.”

“Your *brother*?” He raises his eyebrow.

“Yeah.” I nod. “He’s called me like ten times tonight, so I should probably let him know that I’m fine.”

“Your brother is a thousand miles away.” He shakes his head. “And last time I checked, he left you in Seattle to fend for yourself. He can wait.”

*Good point.*

Pulling me close, he runs his fingers through my hair, kissing me all over again. I wrap my arms around his neck as he whispers my name. I try my best to focus on this moment. On him.

“Take off your shoes,” he says, and I kick off my heels.

Without another word, he rolls me onto the mattress and stamps a line of kisses against my neck.

As I’m threading my fingers through his hair, a loud knock sounds at the door.

“Coming!” He groans. “I forgot to put a sock on the door for my roommate, babe. Hold on.”

Walking over to the door, he looks through the peephole. “*Holy fucking shit.*”

The knock comes again, much louder this time, and he steps back.

For a moment, I start to believe that my premonition of murder is seconds away from coming true. I look around for our best chance at escape, but both windows are blocked with beer can towers and I can’t risk my legs by jumping down four stories.

I consider volunteering as tribute to be murdered first, but logic steps in to alleviate my fears.

It would take Travis seventeen hours to drive here, and even if he chose to fly, he wouldn’t dare waste money on a last-minute plane ticket.

He'd also call me a million times in advance to let me know.

"Who's at the door?" I ask him.

"Shhh." Michael presses a finger to his lips. Then he stares at me, looking torn between jumping out of the window and hiding under the bed.

Suddenly, like a scene straight out of *Mission Impossible*, he runs over to me and wraps his arms around my legs. Tossing me over his shoulder, he carries me to his closet and drops me onto a pile of musty clothes.

"Stay here and be quiet, okay?" he whispers. "I love you so much." He slams the door shut, but he quickly reopens it.

"Here. Take your shoes." He almost hits me with them.

*What the hell?* I stand to my feet as he pushes a laundry basket in front of the closet door.

Through the thin slats, I watch as he puts on an erratic one-man show.

In the first act, he makes and remakes the bed, adjusting the pillows by color. In the second, he takes off his jeans and changes into a pair of sweatpants, all while humming an off-key refrain of a familiar pop song.

He ignores my whispered demands for answers during the intermission, and after brushing gel into his hair, he takes a few swigs of Listerine and spits into the sink. For the finale, he rummages through his top dresser drawer for cologne, spraying a bit too much of it on his chest.

"You can do this, Michael. You can do this." He takes a few deep breaths before finally approaching the door and opening it.

"Hey there, babe," he says.

*Babe?*

"Hey, sexy." A brunette who looks way older than me wraps her arms around his neck. Her D-cup breasts are popping out of a tight, low-cut, pink dress, and her makeup is

painted to perfection. “I know that we agreed to celebrate Valentine’s Day tomorrow, but I can’t wait until then.”

Michael grips her waist in the same way he gripped mine, giving her the same deep, open-mouthed kiss that he offered to me minutes ago. He even whispers, “I’ve missed you so damn much,” in a verbatim cadence.

*What in the actual fuck?*

For a moment, I wonder if I ever looked as foolish and bewildered as the brunette does at this moment. So in love and so naïve.

When he pulls away from her mouth, he lets out a deep sigh. “I need to tell you something super important, Kylie.”

“Yeah?” She kicks off her shoes. “What is it?”

*“I’m a cheating bastard and I’ve been dating a high-school girl.”* I wait for him to say those words and let me out of the closet, so that we can marvel at his lies.

“I know that we’ve been ‘off and on’ these past few months,” he says, grabbing her hands and staring into her eyes. “But I want you to know that I’m ready for us to stay ‘on’ this time, for good, and I’ve put a lot of thought into making our Valentine’s Day special... I have strawberries, whipped cream, and a specialty champagne I bought for you.”

*No, really. What in the actual—*

“Oh my gosh, seriously?” She points to the red purse at the foot of his bed. *My* red purse. “Is that Coach bag for me, too?”

“Yes, it is.” He pushes it onto the floor. “I’ll let you grab that later. Kiss me first.”

I pinch myself a few times to make sure that I’m not imagining this scene. That somewhere along my linear narrative of the day, the universe hasn’t randomly decided to throw in a crazy subplot that ruins my story.

The painful pinches on my wrists are real as ever, though, and the more I watch Michael’s mannerisms—the more I hear him whisper the very words he’s whispered to me—the past

months of our relationship play before my eyes in a clarifying slow-motion.

He only called me at night and he hardly ever wanted to go on dates during the daytime since he claimed, “I want to keep you all to myself.” He preferred showing up to my practices at the rink instead of letting me come over.

Although he did come to some of my competitions, he never took selfies with me at the ceremonies. He waited until I joined him in the parking lot, and he was always parked in the farthest row.

*Foolish, foolish girl.*

By the time I’m finished replaying all of the memories that confirm he was never serious about me, the brunette is moaning and he’s trailing wet kisses against her chest.

“Oh Godddd, Michael,” she says.

*Screw this.*

I kick at the closet door until it opens.

“Seriously, Michael? Were you planning to let me rot in there all night?”

He looks over his shoulder and gasps.

“Um...Who are you?” The brunette covers her chest with a pillow. “And why the hell are you watching us from the closet?”

“Oh, wow,” Michael says, his voice deadpan. “This is so shocking. This is my roommate’s girlfriend. Well, *ex*-girlfriend. I think she’s here trying to surprise him or something.”

I stare at him in utter disbelief.

“That is who you are, isn’t it?” He shoots me a pleading look.

“Hell no.” I grab my purse. “This is *my* Coach bag, by the way.”

I look over at the brunette as I head to the door. “I’ve been dating him since January, and I almost gave him my virginity tonight. He’s been cheating on you, too.”

I don’t wait for the aftermath. I slam the door shut and rush straight down the emergency stairwell.

Seattle’s wet winds slap me in the face as soon as I push open the door. They remind me that I left my coat in Michael’s room.

Refusing to return, I fold my arms across my chest and walk to the front of the building.

When I make it inside the lobby, I pull out my phone and open the Uber app. The closest driver is an hour away and there’s a mandatory surcharge for the distance.

I groan and shut the app. Then I scroll through my contacts, pausing at “Dad” and “Mom.” If they were still alive right now, I’d happily submit to their “We’re so disappointed in you” lectures and threats of punishment for the entire ride home. Hell, I’d even suggest that they ground me for the rest of the year.

Shaking away those thoughts, I continue to scroll through the list, passing the names of my coaches, competitors, and neighbors. I know these people well, but not well enough to call for a favor at this hour.

Upon reaching the end of the list, only “**Ugh: Cocky Bastard,**” i.e., Hayden Hunter, my brother’s best friend, remains.

Just the sight of his name is enough to make me roll my eyes.

If there were ever an award for ‘Guy Who Thinks He’s God’s Gift to Women,’ Hayden would win it in a landslide every year. To make matters worse, every woman who has ever laid eyes on him would happily cast a vote in his honor and tell him that he has every right to think that way.

With his stunning blue eyes, dreamy dark brown hair, and chiseled jawline that’s practically made for the cover of *GQ* magazine, he’s definitely one of the most attractive guys that



I've ever seen in my life. Hands down. But once he parts his full and defined lips to speak, all his attractiveness goes up in flames.

He's the ultimate man-whore who has had a terrible influence on my brother and I'll always regret the day he came into our lives. The day he became the closest person to Travis and made me nothing more than a third wheel.

*He has to have at least ten STDs by now. No, twenty.*

Clicking on his name, I read through our recent, one-sided thread of text messages.

**Ugh: Cocky Bastard:** I dropped off a package at your house earlier. It's from Travis. Maybe he finally sent you what you need: Some goddamn gratefulness. You're welcome for my FREE help, by the way.

**Ugh: Cocky Bastard:** Your brother needs you to call him after your evening practice. He says that he doesn't want you out past eleven since you have a meeting with those *TIME* and *Skate World* reporters in the a.m.

**Ugh: Cocky Bastard:** I can SEE that you're reading my goddamn messages, Penelope. Can you at least respond?

I've never answered anything from him before and I have no interest in starting now.

I reopen the Uber app and decide to wait for as long as it takes.

*I'd rather freeze to death than deal with Hayden...*

BREAKUP #1.5

THE ONE THAT RUINED VALENTINE'S DAY



*Hayden*

*Back Then*

**Travis:** Hey. I'm sure that you're probably somewhere getting your cock sucked right now, but can you give me an update on Penelope? It's been FIVE days.

**Travis:** Did you deliver the training check to her coach yet? That three grand is still sitting in my account.

**Travis:** WTF? Answer me, Hayden. I'm only trying to check in on my goddamn sister. I'm doing all I can to make sure she's cared for.

**I** *f you care so damn much, you need to come back home...*

I clench my jaw as I read over Travis's latest text messages.

It's only been six months since he traded in the cold rains of Seattle for the sweltering summers of Las Vegas, but with each demanding text he sends, it feels more like a decade.

The morning after his parents' joint funeral, he placed a *UFC Looking to Expand its Sport* news clipping on my coffee table, along with a list titled, '*Things You Need to Help Penelope (Crown) with While I'm Gone.*'

With no emotion whatsoever, he said, "I need to focus all of my energy on taking care of Penelope now. I'm trying my shot at MMA fighting and I'll send as much money as I can

back home. You can still work on your dating app and help me with her from afar, right?”

He didn't wait for a response.

He picked up a duffle bag, drove home to break the news to his sister, and I haven't seen him since.

In his absence, I've found myself thrust into the world of competitive figure skating and I honestly preferred the days when I never knew it existed. The days when I didn't have to wake up at the ass-crack of dawn and shuttle Penelope to and from dozens of practices, when the phrases “triple toe loop” or “double axel” weren't things I understood, and when the only ice-skating competition I'd ever watched was on television via the Olympics.

*I'm sick of this shit.*

Rolling out of bed, I make sure not to wake the woman next to me. Our one night stand—along with her name—is long forgotten, but I'm not the type of guy who will ever let her know.

I uncap a marker and write, “*Thx for a good time—Had fun,*” on the back of a burger wrapper before setting it on her nightstand. Then I walk around the mattress to pick up my clothes.

After pulling on my T-shirt, I quietly grab my keys and put on my shoes. I double-check to make sure that I'm not leaving anything behind and head outside to my car.

Speeding across town, I pull into the driveway of Travis's house to “make sure Penelope's cared for.”

The porch lamps burn brightly, but there's no glare from Penelope's bedroom television like usual.

Confused, I take out my phone and send her a text.

ME: Hey. Can you flash the lights upstairs or turn on your TV so I can confirm that you're alive? Your brother wants to be sure that you're alright.

THE “MESSAGE READ” alert pops up, but she doesn’t respond.

*Of course.*

**Me:** Hey, Travis. Pen’s safe at home. Just checked. She says that she’ll call you tomorrow.

**Travis:** Thanks man, I appreciate it.

**Travis:** How have you been lately? Is your dating app going well?

I know that he doesn’t give a fuck about my work, so I don’t bother answering his questions.

Instead, I mute our thread and drive out of the neighborhood, heading home for an all-nighter. As I’m turning up the music, Penelope’s name crosses my dashboard via phone call.

I hit ignore.

She calls again.

I hit ignore once more.

When I merge onto the highway, she calls me a third time.

“*What, Penelope?*” I answer. “I already told your brother that you were at home. You’re welcome.”

“I’m... I’m not at home.” Her teeth are chattering. “Not at all.”

I know that I should ask where she is, but I continue driving, letting a silence stretch between us.

“Are you still there, Hayden?” she asks.

“I’m waiting to hear why the hell you’re calling me at three o’clock in the morning.”

“I need a ride home. Can you pick me up?”

“Come again?” I pull into the emergency lane. “Did you stay at the arena to practice or something?”

“This drunk couple stole my Uber and the closest one is two hours away.” She avoids my question. “I can give you gas money since I’m kind of far. *Please.*”

“Where the hell are you?”

“The Avis Dorm at Central University.”

*Huh?* I’m certain that I misheard that. “That’s an all-boys dorm.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then what are you doing there this time of night?”

“I was *studying*. With a boy.”

“Right.” I make a U-turn. I consider telling her to stay on the phone with me until I arrive, but I don’t owe her anything. She’s never once said “thank you” to me for anything.

“Are you coming to get me?” she asks.

“Unfortunately. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

I hang up and drive fifteen miles under the speed limit.

*She can wait.*



WHEN I PULL up to the Avis Dorm, I can see Penelope arguing with a security guard through the lobby’s windows. Her face is beet red and she’s shaking her head back and forth, looking as if she’s refusing to leave.

Dressed in silver stilettos and a thin, red dress that leaves little to the imagination, she was clearly here for anything but “studying.”

I honk the horn a few times, cutting her argument with the guard short.

She snatches something from his pocket before rushing outside and the guard throws up his middle finger.

*Where the hell is her coat?*

She flings the passenger door open and I turn up the heat.

As she buckles her seatbelt, I can't help but notice the tears streaming past her cheeks.

"*Studying* is supposed to be pleasurable, not make you cry." I pull onto the street. "Was your boyfriend that bad in bed?"

"You know what?" She wipes her eyes. "Can you drop me off on the highway? I think I'd rather wait for another Uber."

"Too late." I make sure the doors are locked. "Not that I give a damn, but please tell me that you used a condom."

"I didn't use *anything*, okay?" She glares at me. "Because nothing happened."

"That's not what your dress says."

"My dress is a costume that I've worn on the ice before, but go ahead and snap a picture. I'm sure you're itching to send it to Travis and tell him all about this."

"I'm not telling your brother shit." I look over at her. "Your sex life is none of his business. It's not mine either."

"That may be the smartest thing you've ever said to me."

"No, offering to get you condoms is. Do you need me to stop and get you some?"

"Are you dense? I just said that nothing happened. And nothing happened because my so-called boyfriend ruined Valentine's Day the moment his *real*, college-girlfriend showed up." The words rush out of her mouth. "He's been cheating on me this entire time. I can't believe I was naïve enough to trust that a college guy would ever be faithful to a high school girl. That he was ever worthy of being my first."

*Yeah, you definitely should've known better than that.*

"Would you like me to give you some boyfriend advice for the future?" I ask.

"Ha! I'll pass." She shakes her head. "I doubt that I'll ever need your advice on anything. Then again, the moment I want

to know how to be an asshole or a man-whore, I'll give you a call."

"Leave a voicemail." I turn on the music, preventing any further conversation.

I drive fifteen miles *over* the speed limit this time, and I don't stop at any red lights.

The quicker I can drop her off, the better.

Twenty minutes later, when I pull into her driveway for the second time tonight, I consider getting out and opening the door for her. Until I look over and see that she's changing my name in her phone again. I'm not listed as "**Ugh: Cocky Bastard,**" anymore.

I'm now **Unsympathetic Asshole (Do Not Call Ever Again).**

On the one hand, it's an improvement from the names "Fuckhead Hayden (I Hate Him)" and "Definitely Has Syphilis" from last week, but not worthy enough for me to be a gentleman.

"Okay, then," I say. "You can get the hell out of my car now. I'll pick you up on Saturday for practice, unless you find a new study buddy by then. Try to make sure that he doesn't have a girlfriend first."

"That's a low blow," she says. "Even for *you*."

"I can say much worse than that, trust me." I point to the door. "Only one of us has attempted to be cordial these past six months. Spoiler alert: It hasn't been you. Double spoiler alert: It won't be me after tonight."

"There's no need to be cordial when you're a huge part of the reason why Travis agreed to leave me here," she says. "The fact that he was ever willing to take *any* advice from someone who flaunts 'bros over hoes' as his personal motto has never made sense to me."

"I've never said 'bros over hoes.'" I lean over and push the door open since she's not moving fast enough. "I may have said 'Put me over pussy' a few times, but that's none of your



concern. Once again, *now* is the time for you to get the hell out of my car.”

“Gladly.” She steps out. “I need to hurry up and shower in case I caught one of your STDs during this ride.”

“You know what?” I’m done playing nice. “That’s exactly why your boyfriend cheated on you. He got tired of your bullshit in the bedroom since you probably kept asking about STDs every time he fucking *breathed* on you. I bet he wanted to date someone who actually knows which hole his cock goes into, someone who doesn’t have the body of a twelve-year old boy.”

Her jaw drops to the ground.

“Let me know if I need to pick up a *Sex 101* book for you the next time I’m at Walmart. I’ll even highlight the important anatomy parts if you like.”

“Fuck you, Hayden.” She slams the door shut.

I roll down the window, feeling a sudden need to get the last word. “You’re welcome for the ride home, Penelope.”

“No, thank you.” She glares at me. “I’ll never call to ask you for another one.”

“That’s more than fine. I’ll never pick up the phone for you this late again.”

“In the meantime, try to clean out your car. It smells like unsatisfied pussy.”

“How would you know? You can’t even find yours.” I roll up the window a bit, ready to pull off and leave her standing there fuming, but her lips begin to move.

“I hope your dating app fails and you lose every dime that you’ve ever put into it.” She looks right into my eyes. “I don’t even know why *you*, of all people, would attempt to build something like that when your idea of a relationship is fucking every woman you see. But I guess that’s why you haven’t gotten anywhere on it in two whole years. Maybe you should’ve stayed in college after all. Everyone isn’t meant to be like Mark Zuckerberg, especially not you.”

We glare at each other for several seconds.

Deciding not to continue this argument, I reverse out of the driveway. I'm determined to call Travis first thing in the morning and tell him that this little arrangement is over.

This "help" is far beyond best friend duties, and I can't deal with it anymore.

*I'm done dealing with Penelope.*



AN HOUR LATER, I'm walking down the candy aisle of a 7-Eleven armed with enough Monster energy drinks and Skittles to get me through a weekend of work on my dating app.

Contrary to what Penelope said, I've made some progress with it over the past couple of years; it's just been slow.

There's interest from investors, but they've all told me the same thing: "It's lacking heart," "Come back when you figure out what's missing," or "There's something I can't quite put my finger on..."

I grab a box of donuts before making my way to the checkout counter. As I pull out my wallet, my phone buzzes with a new text message.

Penelope.

**Travis's Little Annoying Sis:** Just so you know, I'm not sorry about anything I said to you earlier.

**Me:** I'm not sorry about the shit I said to you either.

**Travis's Little Annoying Sis:** Good... Can I call you for a second?

**Me:** For *what*?

**Travis's Little Annoying Sis:** The breakup advice you offered earlier. I want to hear it.

**Me:** I'm no longer interested in giving it to you. Call Travis and get some from him. I'm sure he'd love to know that

you had a boyfriend in the first place.

**Travis's Little Annoying Sis:** \*middle finger emoji\*  
\*vomit emoji\* \*suck my dick gif\* Sorry for even trying with  
you. I'll wait until one of my friends wakes up.

**Me:** If you have "friends," why didn't you ask one of them  
to pick you up tonight?

She doesn't answer, and as much as I'm ready to end all  
communication with her forever, I can't help but think about  
why she didn't call someone else. Why she's never asked me  
to drop her off at anyone else's house, any movies, anything  
non-figure-skating related over the past few months.

Between her twelve-hour practice days and her tutoring  
sessions, she's only gone to school a few times a week to take  
tests and turn in assignments.

*I have to be missing something.*

When I make it to my car, I open the glove box and  
rummage through papers for Travis's '*Things You Need to  
Help Penelope (Crown) with While I'm Gone*' list.

On the back, listed next to number thirteen, is a line I  
previously overlooked. It stands out more than ever now:

*13. Help her find some friends.*

*Our mom was her BFF/Coach/Everything before the accident,  
so... I know it'll be hard, but can you introduce her to the  
\*women\* on your app team sometime?*

*She doesn't have a single friend.*

Against my better judgment, I return her text.

**Me:** I'll give you two minutes. Call me whenever.

My phone buzzes instantly.

"My advice is super simple," I answer, getting straight to  
the point. "Any guy who really cares about you—especially a  
college guy—wouldn't invite you to his room for Valentine's  
Day, or any other special nights. He'd try to make a bigger  
effort than that."

“You mean, he would ask to come over to my place?”

“No, he would—” I pause, choosing my next words carefully. “You’re a virgin, right?”

“I mean, technically. A few of my ex-boyfriends have gone down on me, and I’ve also—”

“I don’t want to hear the rest of that sentence.” I cut her off. “*Ever*. You’re a virgin, so let’s leave it at that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, if this particular guy truly wanted you, he would’ve made your first time a lot more special. Did he treat you to a nice dinner first?”

“He took me to Burger King.”

“What about reservations for a nice breakfast somewhere tomorrow, then?”

“He said he would take me to Starbucks.” Her voice is soft. “He did have champagne and strawberries for tonight, though.”

“He probably bought that stuff at one of the frat house ‘V-Day for your Girl’ sales,” I say. “They sell that shit for super cheap since one of the founders owns a distillery in town. I mean, that’s how it was when I went there.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*.” I crank my engine. “Don’t take the next guy you date at his word, okay? You have a lot of shit going on in your life, and you can’t trust any of the boys out here.”

“You mean, boys like you?”

“Yeah, exactly,” I say. “Boys like me. Take it from someone who has mastered the game and has no intention of ever retiring.”

“Wow.” She lets out a light laugh. “Thank you very much, Hayden.”

“You’re very welcome. Bye.” I end the call and start to power off my phone, but she calls me again.

“Look,” I answer. “That’s all the advice I have to give you.”

“I’m calling because I have some for you,” she says. “You need a better name and a home page for your dating app. That’s a huge part of what you’re missing.”

“*What?*”

“Your dating app.” She speaks a little louder. “You need to name it something different and give it a sleeker home page. I mean, that’s what I’ve heard from my physical therapist who uses it.”

Silence.

“Are you there?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “You don’t think the name ‘Burning for You’ works?”

“Not unless you’re advertising ‘burning’ after sex.” There was a smile in her voice. “You would know a lot about that, though, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m blocking your number after tonight.”

“Speaking of other things that don’t work,” she continues to talk. “That ‘Rate Your Top Picks’ sucks. Oh, and so does the ‘Little Black Book’ thing where people can keep up with their conquests. That’s a disgusting feature, and it makes me gag whenever I see it.”

“Your physical therapist seems to know a lot about my app.”

“She’s rooting for you to fail at life.”

“I see.” I smile. “I’m headed back toward your part of town in a few. Do you mind if I stop by to get more of your *therapist’s* feedback?”

“I do mind, actually,” she says. “But if you want more of my help, you should bring me a bagel and coffee in exchange for my advice. You should also know that I will always despise you to your core, and this is a one-time thing.”

“Trust me, I already know that.” I scoff. “This is the last time I’ll ever spend this much of my free time talking to you.”

“Is that a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ to the bagel?”

“It’s an ‘I’ll think about it.’” I end the call, hesitating a while before sending her a text.

**Me:** You want cinnamon, garlic, or cream cheese?

**Travis’s Little Annoying Sis:** Cream cheese *and* cinnamon.

**Travis’s Little Annoying Sis:** Also, ummm... since this is the last time we’ll be nice to each other... \*thinking emoji\* When I’m done helping you, can I get your advice about some other breakup stuff?

I DON’T ANSWER THAT.

The last thing I need in my life after tonight is *more* Penelope. The second she gives me her opinion on the app, I’m insisting that we return to our stalemate.

*And then I’m calling Travis to end this arrangement.*

I look up the closest bagel shop, and she sends me another text message.

**Travis’s Little Annoying Sis:** The guy I was with tonight just texted me and said that he’s sorry and that he wants to come over and make things right with me. Of course, it’s a no on that, but can I still be his friend? Like, maybe just to have him around at my competitions?

I pull onto the road and call her.

“Yeah?” she answers.

“Hell no to dealing with him ever again,” I say. “Read me exactly what he sent you, though.”

“Now?”

“Right now.”

I didn't know it then, and I never would've believed it, but that moment marks the first time I gave her breakup advice in real-time. The first night of our friendship. As much as I wanted to resist it, my friendship with Penelope eventually becomes the best friendship I'll ever have in my life...

Ha.

*Please.*

I give her the advice, take her notes on the app when I arrive at her house, and then I return to our previous routine with ease.

Our rides remain silent on the way to her practices. She leaves my text messages "read," yet unanswered.

In the rare case that I do say something, it's nothing more than "Congratulations on winning again," as she continues to skate her way to the top of every judge's scorecard.

The only difference is that there's no hateful tension between us anymore. Well, that, and my name is now "Just Hayden" in her phone.

# BREAKUP #3



THE ONE THAT WANTED A THREESOME



(BREAKUP #2 WAS ‘THE ONE THAT WANTED ME TO CALL HIM DADDY,’ BUT I NEED TO PRETEND LIKE THAT ONE NEVER HAPPENED...)

*Penelope*

*Back Then*

One of the hardest problems that comes with not having any female friends is having to rely on Instagram and YouTube influencers for random life and dating advice.

My mom showed me the ins and outs of makeup—courtesy of her lauded career on the ice—and she taught me plenty about persistence and being the best, but when it came to guys?

The only advice she was able to share was, “Just don’t date anyone like your brother... Or that Hayden Hunter boy.”

That’s it.

That’s why I’m somewhat grateful that Kayla Lilith, the third-ranked skater in the country and my fellow “practice-mate”, has started to hang out with me.

After ballet intensives, between the stretch sessions, and during the off-moments of our morning runs, she’s slowly pulled me into her life.

She’s also the reason why I’m currently putting my number one ranking at risk—*again*—and standing outside my boyfriend Brody’s apartment on a Saturday night.

I've told her that I'm not really one for parties, not even his, but she's insisted that I show up and confront him about his "lack of communication." And then she suggests that we finally have sex.

*"You said you two were arguing a lot more lately, right? Go to his party and tell him what'll make you happy... I'll be there for support if you need me."*

I smooth my hands over my dress before opening the door.

His townhouse is filled to capacity with red-cup-holding college students and the scent of alcohol, sweat, and marijuana is in the air.

I spot him standing on the balcony talking to his other friends, but there is a swarm of girls blocking my way.

They're all fawning over some guy in a black leather jacket. Some guy who has a perfectly chiseled side profile, pearly white smile, and... Hayden?

*Shit.*

His blue eyes suddenly meet mine and he tilts his head to the side.

He dropped me off at the rink hours ago and I'm sure he's expecting to pick me up at midnight.

I turn my head and make a beeline for the punch table.

Grabbing a red cup, I fill it to the brim. I quickly down all of it, as if doing so will make me disappear.

Then I fill it up again.

"So, you decided to come after all?" Brody kisses the back of my neck and briefly grips my hips. "I'm glad you came."

"Me too," I turn around and he kisses me deeply.

He clasps my hand, leading me away from the crowd and into the hallway.

"Are you planning to stay the night with me?" he asks, pressing a kiss against my exposed collarbone.

"Yes."

“Good, because I think I figured out why we’re having communication problems. I also know why you always stop when I’m trying to have sex with you.”

I raise my eyebrow, confused.

“It’s a trust issue, right?”

“No, it’s because you always conveniently forget to bring condoms.”

“We should take some time to address this.”

“Or, you can just remember to bring condoms. Better yet, you can ask *me* to bring condoms.” I tug at the strap of my purse. “I brought my own this time.”

He laughs and leans closer, whispering in my ear. “I think it would be better if you experienced a threesome for your first time. I think having two people tuned in to your pleasure would relax you.”

*WHAT?* I can literally hear my vagina threatening to set itself afire if I even consider this.

“You want me to sleep with you and another guy?” I want to believe this is a joke. “Like, for my first time?”

“No,” he says, running his fingers through my hair. “Another girl, someone you trust.”

“*Who?*”

“Kayla,” he says. “You said you two were getting closer, so...”

“So, what?”

“So, I think that a threesome would be good for all of us.” He presses another kiss against my neck and my flesh crawls.

I’m grateful that we haven’t been together too long, but I’m hating the fact that I’ll have to start over and find someone else.

*There’s no way I’ll look at him the same after this.*

“What do you say, Penelope?” he whispers. “It’s what I think is best, if you want to continue this relationship. What do

you think?”

“I think we’re fucking over.” I push him away—*hard*—and head to the bathroom.

Slamming the door shut, I let out a frustrated scream and vow to call Kayla and tell her that she was dead wrong about me coming to this party.

I don’t want to wait for her to get here, I just want to go home.

As I’m splashing my face with water, a soft knock comes to the door.

Someone opens it before I can lock it shut.

“Last time I checked—” Hayden steps inside. “You’re not twenty-one years old yet. I don’t think you’re supposed to be drinking at a college party.”

“Thanks for the reminder, *Dad*. Last time I checked, you’re no longer in college, so you’re not supposed to be here either.”

He looks like he’s about to fire off more sarcasm, but his expression softens. “Why do you look like you’re about to cry?”

“Because I’m skipping practice for this terrible party.”

“I can see that.” He smiles. “I’m sure your opponents would be quite pissed to know that you have tons of extra time to spend on dating.”

I’m not sure whether that’s a compliment or an insult, so I don’t respond.

I lift the red cup to my lips, but he takes it and hands me a water bottle instead.

“All bullshit aside.” He looks genuine. “What’s wrong, Penelope?”

“I’m not talking to you about this.”

“If you don’t, I’m calling your brother and you can tell him.”

I'm tempted to call his bluff, but he pulls out his cell phone.

*Ugh. Traitor.* "I was planning to spend the night here when everyone went home, so I could..."

"Give away your virginity?"

"Hang out with my newest boyfriend."

"You moved on from the last guy pretty fast."

"Not as fast as you." I gulped down the water. "Anyway, we've been arguing a lot more lately, so I came here so we could make up. But then he said he'd only do it if I gave him a threesome with one of my teammates."

"Come again?"

"You heard me." I avoid his gaze and sigh. "Travis hasn't sent me any money lately, so I can't pay you for gas right now. Tomorrow?"

"Not so fast." He tilts my chin up with his fingertips. "Why would he ever have the nerve to ask one of your practice mates to join you in a threesome?"

"Because every guy who watches Kayla Lilith skate for all of five seconds is instantly turned on. He probably thinks we're close enough friends that we'd want to share him."

*"Penelope, Penelope, Penelope."* He shakes his head. "You don't see what's going on here?"

"Yeah. You're trying to make me feel worse about another breakup."

"I didn't make you feel bad about the first one. I only gave you my honest opinion."

"You said that I have the body of a twelve-year-old girl."

"Twelve-year-old *boy*." He has the audacity to smile. "That's a fact, though."

"I'm walking home now." I try to move past him, but he blocks me.

“First of all, your ex-boyfriend is too old for you, *again*. If the next guy you find can have a beer with me with a real ID, then he’s too old for you. Clear?”

I cross my arms.

“Second of all, your practice-mate—who rarely ever talked to you until recently—probably came onto him at some point. Or, vice versa. They’re both shitty individuals, but the threesome has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them.”

I mentally rewind my last few conversations with Kayla and remember how she spent more time talking about how “cute and sexy” Brody was than anything else.

“So, I was dating another cheater?” I ask.

“Another cheater with a backstabber’s influence,” he says. “There’s a slight difference with this one.”

My blood begins to boil. “What would you do if you were me?”

“I’d tell Hayden that he’s the smartest man I’ve ever met in the world. Then I’d vow to be a lot nicer to him and learn to say thank you.”

I give him a blank stare, and he laughs.

“I would leave this house, call the cops on my way out, and tell them that you saw a minor drinking at this party.”

“You want me to ruin the night for everyone else?”

“You asked me what I would do if I was seventeen.” He shrugs. “I’d use up the last of my immaturity while I could, especially if my feelings were involved.”

“What about Kayla?” I ask. “Does she get off scot-free in this?”

“Depends.” He returns my red cup. “I’ll be across the street. You have three minutes, and then I’m driving you to the rink so you can make up for lost time.”

“Because you actually care?”

“Because I made a promise to your brother.” He walks away, and I let out a breath.

I look myself over in the mirror one last time and leave the room, pushing my way through the bodies on the living room’s makeshift dance floor.

Completely shameless, Brody is pressing Kayla against the wall—laughing in between kisses.

I stroll right over and tap his shoulder.

“Yes?” He turns around. “Changed your mind so soon?”

“No, fuck you,” I say. “I just want to make sure you know how big of a douchebag you are.”

He smiles, looking completely unfazed. “Thanks for the reminder that I don’t need to date any more high school girls. You’re not mature enough to handle the complex things in life.”

*Welp. I’m definitely calling the cops.*

“Poor little ice princess,” Kayla says, confirming our friendship meant nothing. “I guess you can’t win everything in life. How does it feel to finally lose?”

I toss my drink in her face. “Pretty damn good.”

I turn away without another word and make my way through the guests. I call the police and report the house as I’m walking toward Hayden’s car.

When I slip inside, he cranks the engine.

We ride in silence for several minutes and I stare at the words “Future Billionaire” that he’s etched onto his dashboard.

“This little incident doesn’t make us friends,” he says once we reach a red light. “I need you to know that.”

“The two of us will never be friends, Hayden.” I roll my eyes. “But since we’re stating the obvious, I hate the new name of your dating app even more than the first one.”

“Something tells me that you’ll hate it even when I become a billionaire.”

*Right.*

“I practiced for three extra hours every day this week just in case I went out tonight,” I say, changing the subject. “I’d rather go home and think about things.”

“That’s the last thing you should do,” he says. “Idle thoughts won’t get you anywhere. You should at least work through your short program a few times.”

I hate that’s he’s right, but I don’t fight it.

“You really don’t think that I’m going to become a billionaire, do you?” he asks, looking over at me.

“No, I *know* that you’re not going to become one.”

“Want to bet?” he says. “Because *I’m* willing to bet that you’ll never find a single real friend for the rest of your life.”

“Deal. Now I’m really looking forward to watching you fail.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you cry in perpetual loneliness when I’m right...”



YEARS LATER



She lost that fucking bet, by the way...

As did I.

ONE

PRESENT DAY



## *Hayden*

*Billionaire Hayden Hunter is Officially Over! (Still Sexy AF, But Over)*

*Should We Stop Using Hayden's Cinder App and Switch to Tinder Once and for All?*

*How a Billionaire Playboy's Empire Crumbled Overnight: Will He Ever Apologize for the Lies?*

*Beautiful, Sexy, Liar: The Fall of Hayden Hunter (& Cinder)*

I held back a laugh as I read the latest headlines while sitting in a hole-in-the-wall café.

These people always acted as if I'd somehow failed to read the "What Happens When You Become a Billionaire Overnight" handbook.

There were no rules for me to follow, no list of 'Do's and Don'ts,' and I'd spent the past several years writing my own.

Was I reckless as hell sometimes? *Yes.* (Well, mostly in the past.)

Did I spend my hard-earned money lavishly? *Of course.*

Was I worthy of an ongoing smear campaign? *Never.*

Yet, after becoming one of the youngest billionaires and launching Cinder, the number one hookup app in the country, Karma had randomly decided to come for me.

With no warning whatsoever, she cleared the register of my life and printed the receipts of all my past mistakes for the entire world to see.

And for some strange reason, she decided to expose them on the same damn day.

*Yesterday.*

Leaked emails, private texts, flights logs, everything...

All those times when I smiled on live television and said I was “humbled” to have the number one app in the country, while secretly seething with rage that Tinder was getting closer with every passing day?

There were thousands of leaked emails with subject lines like, “How can I destroy their company by the end of the year?” “Stop letting these journalists ask me about Tinder,” and “I’m not humble at all... I *worked* for this shit,” that exposed the truth.

The numerous times I lied about being in a business meeting, but I was really in Vegas partying?

There was literally a two-foot-long hotel receipt and plenty of raunchy, resurfaced photos to prove the damages. In all fairness, I’d always avoided business meetings like the plague; I just never let the public in on that fact.

And all the times, years ago, when I was as reckless as I’d ever been, but had been pretending to be a “homebody obsessed with work”?

There were far too many hotel camera records for those.

The “receipts” had started dripping onto Twitter yesterday morning, eventually breaking into a full-scale flood, and I’d been pulled into a public relations crisis like never before.

“Stop reading that garbage over there and try to look like a competent CEO.” Lawrence, my advisor, and the man who was the closest thing to a real father I’d ever had, snapped his fingers. “And try to tone down that stupid James Dean thing that you do before the *Vogue* interviewer gets here.”

“What James Dean thing?”

“You know, the whole sexy smirk and smoldering blue eyes, ‘let’s go have sex after you ask me all these questions’ thing.” He groaned. “Be a goddamn professional for once in your life.”

“For the record, I haven’t had sex with anyone in six months.”

“Oh, okay,” he said, not looking convinced. “Well, for the record, you’re the best client I’ve ever worked for.”

“I’m telling you the truth, Lawrence.”

“Me too, Hayden.” He rolled his eyes. “Me too.”

I laughed, bringing a cup of coffee to my lips.

The door to the café opened seconds later and a redhead in a revealing black dress—one that was definitely *not* interview appropriate—stepped inside.

I stood to my feet and pulled out a chair for her. “Good morning, Miss Gregory.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hunter.” She extended her hand. “I’m so honored to meet with you today.”

“Likewise.”

Lawrence moved to another table as we settled into our seats.

“Before we get started, I want to give you this on behalf of my team members.” She handed me a small white box. “You can open that when we’re done.”

“Will do.” I waited for her to pull out notes and a recorder, but she just stared at me.

For a full minute.

“Is there a problem, Miss Gregory?” I asked.

“No.” Her cheeks reddened and she cleared her throat. “Well, yes. I’m not sure a light and fluffy interview is going to bring the public back to your side after your latest drama. I think you’ll need *way* more since everyone thinks you’re a liar now.”

“That’s for me and his PR team to decide.” Lawrence scoffed. “You’re not on Cinder’s payroll, so please get on with the interview.”

“Fine.” She pulled out a small spiral notebook. Then she crossed and re-crossed her legs.

“What does it feel like to be a billionaire?” she asked.

“I’m not sure how to answer that question,” I said. “But not having to worry about financial problems for the past few years of my life has been quite nice.”

“Is your father proud of you?”

“I wouldn’t know.” I sipped my coffee. “I haven’t spoken to him since he walked out on me when I was a teenager.”

“Family questions aren’t on the approved list, Miss Gregory.” Lawrence intruded once more. “Next question. Now.”

“Oh, that’s right. Um—” She looked down at her sheet. “You’re often photographed with a pretty brunette around town. You meet her at Central Park, at coffee shops, and most recently, you were spotted walking together on the Manhattan Bridge.”

“That brunette is my best friend, Penelope,” I said. “Everyone in the media knows that.”

“So, there’s nothing romantic between you two?”

“No, we’re just friends.”

“Has there *ever* been anything romantic between you two?” She tapped her chin.

Lawrence shot me a “Where the hell is she going with this?” look, and I shrugged.

Every now and then, an inexperienced journalist would ask me some form of that question, but once they tied our connection to “Travis Carter: The Punisher,” they let it go. A guy hanging out with his best friend’s younger sister was a non-story for them.

“Penelope and I are strictly platonic,” I said. “We always have been, and we always will be.”

“I’m sure that all of my readers will be happy to hear that.” She batted her eyes at me and Lawrence glared at her from across the room. “Speaking of romance—”

“You are here to write up a short piece called *Hayden Hunter’s Top Lessons in Life*.” Lawrence interrupted, crossing his arms. “That’s literally the entire reason why we shut down this coffee shop, since your editor demanded that we have the photoshoot someplace ‘down to earth and real.’ The photogs have taken their pictures and left, so you need to hurry up and get to the point.”

“Yes, of course.” Her cheeks reddened. “What’s your favorite color, Mr. Hunter?”

“*Oh, wow.*” Lawrence rolled his eyes. “What a thought-provoking question.”

“Ignore him.” I smiled at her. “He doesn’t get laid much. I like sky blue.”

“Okay.” She scribbled a few notes on her pad. “I’ve heard that you’re also a huge fan of candy, so do you like pineapple?”

“I do.”

“There’s a myth that if a woman eats pineapple, her ‘down there’ will taste better when a guy uses his mouth on her. Seeing as though you’ve mentioned loving pineapples several times, do you think that’s true? Do you have any experience in that area?”

I smiled as Lawrence looked like he was seconds away from losing his shit. “Next question.”

“Okay, then.” She shrugged. “When you first built your company here in New York... I’m twenty-four years old, no kids, tons of ambition, and I can suck your cock like you wouldn’t believe.” The words rushed out of her mouth as she jumped the shark. “I can make you forget all about your latest scandal if you give me three hours.”

*What the fuck?*

“You can take me up to your penthouse suite.” She leaned forward. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Security!” Lawrence held his cell phone up to his ear. “Security, come in from the outside, *now*. We have a certified psychopath on our hands.”

“I wanted this interview to see if I felt a vibe with you.” She clasped my hand atop the table. “I felt it the moment I came in and you pulled out my chair. From the way you looked at me, I can tell that you *care* about me. You complete me.”

I raised my eyebrow, wondering if a prankster TV host was seconds away from making an appearance.

“I run the *Hayden Hunter Wears Sexy Suits* blog and I’ve followed you for years. I think we belong together.”

I had no idea how to respond to that.

My security guards, Henry and Taylor, moved in front of her.

“Come on, Miss.” They helped her up, but she pushed back.

“I’m not done talking to him!” She tried to move around them, but Henry looped his arms under hers, pulling her away.

“I wrote my number in lipstick at the bottom of that gift box!” She shouted as they carried her to the door. “I’ll be waiting for your call!”

I shook my head once the door shut. “Well, that won’t be helping me anytime soon.”

“I’ll have Sarah do a better job screening the next interviewer,” he said. “I’m not sure how she managed to slip through the cracks.”

“It’s fine.” I stood to my feet. “I’ll be ready for *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* on Friday.”

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”



“Out. I have plans with Penelope.”

“No, you don’t.” He crossed his arms. “Unless she’s dying. Is she dying?”

“She wants to introduce me to her new boyfriend,” I said. “He’s making us dinner at her place. Italian, I believe.”

“*And?*” He looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. “Does he have some type of clout with the press that we can use to better your fuckups?”

“The ‘meet the family’ thing is a very important part in being her best friend, Lawrence.” I smiled. “She doesn’t have her parents, as you know. And she hardly ever gets to the six-month mark in any of her relationships.”

“Gee, I wonder why that is... ”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that your reputation—what’s left of it anyway—is in tatters and we can’t rely on your upcoming charity ball to help with your image this time. We need a hardcore plan with weeks of strategic moves, and you need to be there every step of the way.”

“I will be.” I slid a pair of shades over my eyes. “After I get done meeting with Penelope and her boyfriend.”

“How long are you expecting that to take?”

“An hour or two.”

“Then you’ll come right back here?”

“Of course.”

He leaned back in his chair and sighed. “So, that means I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Glad we’re on the same page.”

TWO

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**N**o one ever bothers to tell you what happens after you've given your all and it's still not enough.

I'd read enough self-help books to fill a swimming pool, highlighted every positive platitude, and I had yet to find the solution for my situation.

In fact, every morning, I woke up hoping that the past few years of my life were a cruel and twisted joke.

I desperately wanted to believe that I never fell face-first onto the ice in competition, or that I never lost several months of my life while being confined to a hospital bed, forever missing out on the chance to beat my mother's iconic medal record.

*Shake it off, Pen. Shake it off.*

I focused my attention on the twelve lopsided "We Made it Six Months" cupcakes that were currently cooling on my kitchen counter.

They looked like something out of a horror novel, all cracked open with a burnt spot at their centers, but they'd have to do for now.

This was my fourth and final attempt.

*Bing! Bing! Bing!*

The timer suddenly sounded and I pulled a tray of sauce from the oven. After setting it on the counter, I picked up my phone and called my boyfriend, Mack.

“Hey there, Gorgeous,” he answered on the first ring.

“Hey. The timer went off on your sauce. Do you want me to pour it over the noodles?”

“No, let it sit out for a minute. I’m looking for one last garnish, so I’ll be back in ten minutes or so.” He paused. “I’m sorry I wasn’t better prepared to meet your family today.”

“No worries. There’s no rush.” I ended the call and checked the time.

As usual, Hayden was ‘the world revolves around my ego’ late, so Mack could probably take another hour before he arrived.

Out of all the boyfriends I’d ever had, Mack was by far the most sympathetic and caring.

He never said things like, “Things happen for a reason” or “Maybe that career-ending fall was meant to be.” He let me vent and cry whenever it crossed my mind and he never told me that it was time to move on.

Hayden did the same, of course, but he didn’t count. He was a constant character in my life’s novel; Mack was an entirely new chapter.

I waited a few minutes before scrolling down to Hayden’s name and hitting call.

“Yes, Penelope?” he answered.

“Where the hell are you?”

“Around the corner from your brownstone.”

“Why are you always late?”

“Because I’m only on time when it counts.” There was a smile in his voice. “I stopped to buy a few gifts.”

“For Mack or me?”

“Mack.” He laughed. “You’re too stubborn to accept anything from me. I’m outside your door now.”

I walked over and looked through the peephole first.

As if he could see me looking at him, he smiled a perfect set of pearly whites.

Sometimes, I still found myself forgetting just how attractive he was. Even when he was dressed down in a white T-shirt and jeans, he managed to look as if he was seconds away from stepping onto the cover of a romance novel.

“People are talking a lot of shit about you on Twitter,” I said, opening the door. “I’m not sure if I should associate with you anymore.”

“I’m not sure if you should keep sending me the worst tweets via screenshot, then.”

“I have to in order to keep your ego in check.”

“Interesting.” He smiled and pulled a white box out of his pocket, handing it to me. “Here’s the gift for Mack.”

“This gift is addressed to *you*, Hayden.”

“Oh, right.” He tore the tag off and stuffed it into his pocket. “There. Now it isn’t.”

I rolled my eyes and ushered him inside.

He walked straight to the refrigerator as always, stopping when he saw my cupcake concoctions on the counter.

“Please tell me that you don’t expect anyone to eat these,” he said.

“They’ll be fine once I put the frosting on top.”

“I doubt that.” He plucked one from the tin and flipped it over. “They’re fucking burnt, Penelope.”

“They won’t be *after* I put the frosting on top.” I snatched it back, and he laughed.

“I hope that after today’s ‘Meet the Family’ episode, you’ll be honest with Mack and tell him about the lackluster sex.” He

poured two shots of scotch. “Reaching the six-month mark means you should be able to be honest.”

“Our sex isn’t lackluster.”

“You’ve finally had an orgasm, then?”

“No.” I swatted his hand away from the fruit tray.

“Has he gone down on you?”

“That’s none of your business.” My cheeks reddened.

“So, that’s a no.” He handed a shot glass to me. “You’re fine dying without any of your boyfriends properly doing that to you?”

“It’s not a big deal.” I shrugged. “Not every guy wants to do that.”

“It’s not about the guy, Pen. It’s about you. You need to tell him what you want.”

“I will.” I downed the alcohol. “But, you know, everyone isn’t comfortable talking about sex as easily as the weather like someone I know.”

“That’s a shame.” His lips curved into a smirk. “That means that there are a lot of people in this world having terrible sex. Hopefully you’ll stop being a member of that club before you turn thirty.”

I stood on my toes and slapped the back of his head.

He laughed and poured two more shots.

As we were tossing them back, Mack walked through the front door.

“Hey, babe,” he said.

“Hey.” I walked over and kissed him. “Mack, this is Hayden. Hayden, this is Mack.”

“Nice to finally meet you,” Hayden said, extending his hand. “I’ve heard a lot of good things.”

“I wish I could say the same.” Mack left his hand hanging and the room suddenly became ten times smaller.

*What the...*

Hayden shot me a confused look, but I had no idea what to say.

“Should we wait for your brother to get here?” Mack asked.

“No, he cancelled at the last minute. He’s too deep into training for his next fight,” I said. “He did say he could video chat with us later tonight, though.”

“Oh okay, cool.” He walked into the kitchen. “Well, you two can sit down and I’ll present the food like a true chef. I’m still fasting, so I hope I used enough seasoning.”

We obliged, taking our seats near the window.

Minutes later, Mack placed a huge platter of alfredo and a basket of rolls at the center of the table. Hayden made me a plate before making one for himself.

“Penelope tells me that you work in the book industry?” Hayden asked, attempting to lighten the mood.

“Yeah.” Mack nodded. “I’m a senior editor.”

“Any books that I should be on the lookout for?”

“There’s a *How Not to Be an Asshole: Part 2* self-help book coming this fall.”

“Interesting.” Hayden smiled. “Maybe I’ll finally get around to finishing part one.”

“I gave him a copy of that one for Christmas,” I said, looking at Mack. “He needs a year of intense therapy and a personality transplant, not a book.”

Mack laughed.

“Do you still have the book that I gave *you* for Christmas?” Hayden looked at me, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“No, I burned it.” I refused to discuss his handmade *How to Ask My Boyfriend for What I Want in the Bedroom* book

aloud. “The author didn’t know what the hell he was talking about.”

“I think he’s very skilled in that subject matter.”

“No, he just *thinks* that he is,” I said. “There’s a reason why his book has a one star average on Goodreads.”

“Because you’re the only reviewer. You’re also a terrible liar, Penelope.”

“And you’re an incredible shit-stirrer.” I changed the subject. “How’s Mack’s alfredo?”

“It’s pretty good.”

“Did I tell you that he was almost a chef?” I added more pepper to his plate. “His mom owns a restaurant in New Jersey.”

“You did tell me that. We went there for dinner a few weeks ago, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” I sipped my wine. “I guess I forgot since your world has imploded since then, and I can’t tell if you’re laughing to keep from crying or crying on the inside.”

“It’s a bit of both.”

We laughed.

“Okay, fuck this shit.” Mack cut off our laughter, his voice terse. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“*What?*” I looked over at him. “What did you say?”

“I said, I can’t do this anymore.” He let out a breath. “Me, you, him. I literally *cannot* do this.”

I set down my fork, confused as to what the hell he was talking about. “You said you wanted to meet my family today.”

“Your family, not your...” His voice trailed off for a few seconds. “I’m sorry. I was thinking more along the lines of your brother. I don’t need a dinner date to meet Hayden. I mean, as much as he comes up in our conversations, I feel like I already fucking know him.”



“Mack, I’m not sure—”

“Every morning you talk to him about what we did the night before.” He interrupted me. “You click over when we’re on the phone if he calls, and you leave me hanging for *hours*.”

“I’ve only done that once and it was an emergency.”

“Tinder suing him over Cinder for the umpteenth time is not an emergency.” He glared at me. “That shit happens every month, and you know what? One of these days, they’re going to beat him in court.”

“I highly doubt that,” Hayden muttered under his breath.

“I guess it’s good that he’s here, though,” Mack said. “Because I don’t have to hold back anymore and wonder how I should spend the next six months of my life. And I won’t bother being your roommate to help pay for a place that your best friend could easily buy for you if he wanted to.”

“I want to make my own way in life,” “She wants to make her own way in life,” Hayden and I spoke in unison.

“Him or me, Penelope.” Mack shook his head. “Tell me right now.”

“There is no ‘him or you,’ Mack.” My chest ached. “I want you as my boyfriend. Hayden is like a brother to me.”

“A brother in a taboo Pornhub video, maybe.” He looked disgusted. “I can’t continue to date you if he’s still in the picture.”

“Mack, wait. Can we talk about this in private?”

“No.” He crossed his arms. “What’s it going to be?”

Silence.

The past six months of our relationship suddenly played on a rose-tinted loop in my head. He was kissing me in the elevator, holding my hand in the rain, and promising me that he was falling for me like I was falling for him.

Hayden wasn’t in any of those frames, and I couldn’t believe that Mack was threatened by him in the slightest.

“I don’t want to lose you as my boyfriend, Mack,” I said. “Please don’t do this.”

“I’m not doing anything.” He looked into my eyes. “It’s your choice.”

“You know what? I’m going to head out.” Hayden stood to his feet. “You two clearly need to talk alone, so—”

“No, we don’t.” Mack’s face reddened. “I’ll leave. I think it’s more than clear that she’s choosing you. Right, Penelope?”

“Hayden is just my friend.”

“Right.” He rolled his eyes and stood up. “Just friends don’t do whatever the hell you two do, and I’m done pretending I’m okay with it. Thank you—both of you—for wasting the past six months of my life. You can keep the dinner and shit.”

He grabbed his jacket and stormed out of my place, taking a piece of my heart with him.

I moved from my chair to follow him, but Hayden rushed behind me and pushed the door shut.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked. “I need to catch him so we can work this out.”

“It’s on him to come back to you,” he said. “But even then, what’s the rule?”

I said nothing, even though I knew the answer.

*“Any guy that gives you an ultimatum without considering how you feel isn’t worth your time. Name the breakup, cry if you have to, and then move the hell on.”*

“How about, The One Who Thought I’d Choose Him Over My Best Friend?” I asked, pretending like my chest didn’t hurt like hell.

“We already gave that title to one of your other exes,” he said. “I think you should sleep on this for a while.”

“Okay.” I let out a sigh. “What did you really think about his alfredo?”

“It was bland as hell, overcooked, and it was missing something.”

“Parmesan and butter, right?”

“Plus chives.” He walked into the kitchen and pulled out a few bottles, placing them on our plates. Then he carried them over to my couch and I plopped down next to him.

“You can live with me for a while if you don’t find a roommate by the end of the week,” he said.

“No, thanks.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to live anywhere where groupies and paparazzi lurk outside every entrance. No offense.”

“None taken.”

I leaned against his shoulder and sighed. “Go ahead and say it, so we can get this over with.”

“Say *what*?”

“The right guy will come into your life when you least expect it.”

“Please stop going on Pinterest and pretending those bullshit quotes belong to me.” He laughed. “If you want me to say my usual, which always proves true, then—”

“Please keep that to yourself.”

“I fucking told you so,” he said it anyway. “I didn’t like him for you after the two-month anniversary, and I’m disappointed that you stuck around for six.”

“It’s called monogamy.”

“It’s called ‘torture’ if the only pleasure is in him taking you out on dates and being nice.” He looked at me. “Do me a favor and stop looking for Prince Charming. He doesn’t exist.”

“Should I seek out assholes, then?”

“No, you’ve had your fair share of those.” He shook his head. “Just stop trying so hard.”

“Fine. I won’t go on Cinder for a while... Or Tinder.”

“You should never go on Tinder,” he said, narrowing his eyes at me. “That’s the ultimate betrayal.”

“Just wanted to see if you’d still get angry at me for mentioning it.”

“I always will.”

“Will you judge me if I start crying about Mack breaking up with me?”

“Have I ever?”

“No.” I buried my head in his chest. “What would I do without you?”

“You’d never have to hear the words ‘I told you so.’” He rubbed my back. “You think that would be worth it?”

“No.” I shut my eyes. “Never.”

TWO (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*A few days later*

“I hope that having a career on OnlyFans won’t be a problem for you,” my latest “Hell no” roommate option said as she walked around my living room. “I’ll probably need to use this couch as a backdrop for some of my deep swallowing and faux-bestiality videos, if you don’t mind.”

“OnlyFans doesn’t bother me,” I said, trying to think of a way to get her the hell out of my place.

If her need to use my place like a mini-movie studio was the only thing that made me raise my eyebrow, I would’ve agreed to let her stay, but the more she walked around, the more red flags she threw.

She let her Chihuahua run wild the moment she stepped inside, and she encouraged him to pee in my plant since, “It’s good fertilizer for it. Trust me.”

“Well, I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice,” she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “I think you and I will make an incredible match.”

“I’ll let you know.” I forced a smile.

“Be sure to call me with a ‘Yes’ before eight tonight,” she said. “I’m taking Rex to the doggy spa and I don’t answer calls when I’m there.”

*Right.* “Will do.”

The moment she stepped onto the elevator, I picked up my plant and held it under the tap. Then I scratched out her name and looked at the last potential on my list: Ashley Brave.

If this last interview didn't work out, I'd have to choose between a chain smoking foodie and a mortician who warned me that she liked to hang up pictures of her “best work.”

Shuddering, I downed a glass of wine and watched the minute hand tick toward four thirty.

The doorbell sounded right on time, and I rushed over and swung the door open.

*What the...*

It took everything in me not to slam the door in her face.

This woman's name wasn't Ashley Brave. It was *Tatiana* Brave, and I'd live in a homeless shelter before living with her.

My fiercest competitor, and the only reason why I was missing three particular medals, she was still stunning as hell.

Her sun-kissed brown skin, curly hair, and hazel-colored eyes were striking as ever, and she looked like she could jump onto the ice and compete with ease.

*Ugh.* “It's you.”

“*You.*” She glared at me.

Too bitter to speak, I crossed my arms, waiting to see if she'd steal the first word like she'd stolen my ranking several years ago.

“If I had known this place was yours,” she said, “I never would've answered the ad.”

“It's a good thing you did.” I shrugged. “You can get a good look at a beautiful place where you'll never stay.”

“I've always known that you were a cold-hearted bitch.”

“I've always known that you were a bigger one.”

“I'd die before living here.”

“Do you see me offering to let you in?” I started to slam the door in her face. “Good luck with your search.”

“Wait,” she said, wedging her foot against the frame. “I hate to ask, but can I please use your bathroom before I go?”

*Offer her the plant to piss in.*

“Fine.” I opened the door. “It’s down the hall and to the left. Make sure you get a good look at my medal collection on your way there. Pay special attention to the gold one from the Olympics in Sochi.”

“Too bad you’re missing the gold one from Pyeongchang.” She shrugged. “I wonder who won *that* one.”

“You have two minutes to handle your business and get the hell out.”

“It’ll take me less than that.” She walked down the hall and shut the door.

I immediately pulled out my phone and texted Hayden.

**Me:** I’m going with the mortician. Can you have Sarah run the background check for me?

**Just Hayden:** Are you sure? She gets aroused by staring at dead bodies, Pen.

**Me:** 100%.

Tatiana emerged from the bathroom as I hit send.

“Your bathroom is nice,” she said. “Is that the only one?”

“No, there are three. Two more you’ll never see.”

She slid her purse over her shoulder and looked me right in my eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever hated another person the way I hate you.”

“The feeling will always be mutual.”

Silence.

We stared at each other, years of on-ice battles hanging between us. The utter viciousness I felt toward her hadn’t dissipated in the slightest.



“What are you doing now?” she asked. “Like, career-wise.”

I said nothing.

“I heard that you never got all your memory back after the fall. Is that true?” She looked somewhat sincere, and I hated that.

“I get bits and pieces back on some days, but I’m still missing a lot, and the memories are never in order.”

“Are you coaching?”

“I coach off and on,” I admitted. “I have a few private clients, but they’re not worth mentioning.”

“Let me guess. They have rich parents who are wasting their money since the kids can’t skate their way off the railing?”

“Exactly.” I nodded. “I give inspirational speeches to colleges and sports teams, too. I have one coming up a few weeks from now in California actually.”

“Does that pay well?”

“Sometimes.” I paused. “Not ‘living in New York’ well. Hence, the roommate thing. I doubt it pays as well as your career.”

“How do you know what I’m doing?” She looked confused.

“I hate-follow you on Instagram from a burner account. I’m the person who always comments: ‘You’re not that pretty’ and ‘Get over yourself.’”

“Good to know.” Her lips curved into a smile, but she didn’t let it stay. “I would say that it’s nice seeing you after all these years, but—”

“It’s not.”

“Agreed.” She walked toward the door. “Best of luck finding a roommate who doesn’t hate you.”

“Thank you.” I waited for her to step out before shutting the door.

I slumped against the wall and stared straight ahead.

It'd been years since I spoke to someone from my former life, someone who actually knew the ins and outs of skating. And for the first time in forever, my heart didn't immediately ache mid-sentence when I discussed the fall.

*Why does she have to be the best candidate? Should I interview her?*

Granted, I still hated her down to her marrow, but I already knew that she would stay out of my way. We'd shared hotel rooms during competitions before—not by choice—but we'd managed to stay alive until checkout time.

Sighing, I opened the door to run after her, but she was still standing there.

“I really need a place to stay, and I can pay for the first ten months in advance.” The words rushed out of her mouth. “And this is like the nicest, most affordable condo I've seen online since I moved here. Even if it belongs to someone who is practically Satan, can you at least give me the interview? We don't have to be friends to be roommates, and we've roomed together before, remember?”

“Well, that depends on how honest you are.” I crossed my arms. “How hard did you party when you surpassed me and ranked at number one?”

“Far harder than you did when you used to throw it in my face every month.” She rolled her eyes. “Of course, you know I was only number one for eight months, until Natalie La Croix got in the way.”

“She was so overrated.”

“Tell me about it.” She nodded. “Her programs were so technically sound that they were boring. I fell asleep forty seconds into her routine at Skate America.”

“That, and she always had a bullshit background story for her costumes,” I said. “She claimed that she wore flecks of

brown dirt on her sleeves one time because she wanted the audience to see the beauty of the earth as she skated. She said that shit with a straight face.”

“I’m still convinced that the white angel dust in her Cup of China costume was a different type of dust, if you catch my drift.”

Her eyes met mine and we both burst into laughter.

“We can do the interview,” I said. “But I can’t make any promises.”

“Okay.” She nodded and stepped inside.

“Tour first?” I motioned for her to follow me. I showed her the second master bedroom that was down the hall from me and then we returned to the kitchen.

“It’s even prettier in person,” she said. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. You say that you can pay ten months in advance?”

“I can write the check by morning.”

“Do you have any pets?”

“No.”

“What about any weird habits?”

“I like to watch anime and *Sailor Moon* marathons every Saturday morning.”

“You still do that?” I crossed my arms, remembering that she used to skate to that show’s theme song during her warmups. “Don’t you know every episode by heart at this point?”

“Yeah, but they recently released a new collection of crystal toy wands, so I’m re-watching to get the movements right.”

I gave her a blank stare. The “I like to stare at dead bodies” woman was still in the running.

“Will it bother you if I have a guy friend over once in a while?” I asked. “We hang out in the living room sometimes,

but I go to his place more than he comes here.”

“Not at all,” she said. “I don’t have any friends.”

“Me neither. Outside of him, anyway.”

She smiled. “How does it feel to have a famous ex-boyfriend?”

“Huh?”

“Hayden Hunter,” she said. “The guy who came to all your practices and performances. Did you know he’s like a super-rich mogul now?”

“Oh. We’re still friends,” I said. “He’s the guy I was talking about. We were never dating.”

“*What?*” She looked stunned. “Never?”

“Never.” I shrugged. “There was nothing there.”

“Sorry for asking.”

“Don’t be. We get that question all the time.” I started to tell her that I would give her a decision by nightfall, but my phone suddenly buzzed in my pocket.

**Just Hayden:** Sarah just ran the mortician girl through a background check. She stabbed her last roommate a year ago and claimed self-defense.

**Just Hayden:** She also received a citation for keeping raw pig heads at her last apartment.

I set down my phone. “What day do you want to move in?”

THREE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*A few weeks later*

**E** *eerkkkkk! Eeeerrrkkk! Eeeeerrk!*

The layover plane landed at Charlotte Douglas International with a sickening series of screeches that knocked me out of my nap.

*One motivational speech down, hundreds more to go.*

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for flying with Elite Airways.” The pilot’s voice came over the speakers. “Per the flight attendant’s previous announcement, most of you are taking this same plane to New York City in an hour. Please allow those who are not to get off first.”

“Also,” a soft voice came over the speakers next, “if you’d like to take the other flight to New York that’s in four hours, please see the gate agent at G-8 upon deplaning.”

I looked out the window as another plane rolled on the tarmac.

“Excuse me?” My seat-mate tapped my shoulder.

“Yes?” I turned to face him.

“Are you staying on this flight?”

“Yes.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and stood up. “After I get something to eat.”

“I wanted to say something to you earlier, but you had your earbuds in.”

“Yeah... ” I made a mental note to keep them in when I got back on later.

“I recognized your name from your bag.” He pointed to it and smiled. “Penelope ‘Perfect Feather’ Carter. I was a huge fan of yours back in the day.”

I nodded, wondering if I should ask if he wanted to take a selfie together.

“You used to look really good in your costumes,” he said. “You started skating at six, I believe.”

“Four,” I said. “I skated several years after that, too.”

“Yeah, but—” He waved his hand. “I stopped watching once you turned sixteen.”

“Um, okay.”

“You just weren’t my type anymore.” He winked. “You were past my preference, if you catch my drift.”

Bile rose up my throat.

“You were far more fascinating to watch in the beginning,” he said. “I still use clips of your old programs whenever I want a nostalgic night.”

I blinked a few times, rescinding all thoughts of offering anything except a police tip. “I uh, I need to go now.”

“It’s a shame what happened to you at the end, but are you coaching any new girls now?” he asked. “Any young hopefuls that I can look forward to watching this season? Better yet, don’t tell me now. I’ll wait until you get onboard again so I can write down their names.”

I turned around and rushed off the plane.

I was switching to that other flight. *Now.*

*G-8. G-8. G-8...*

Rushing through the crowds, I held my purse close to my chest and hoped I would run into an alternate version of

reality.

“Excuse me, excuse me!” I pushed my way past a group on the moving sidewalk, then I made it past the food court, and just as I was nearing Concourse G, I lost my balance and collided head-first into what felt like a wall.

For a split second, I could see exactly how everything after was about to unfold in slow, detailed motion.

Face meet ground. Everything in my purse flies high into the air, all before—

“*Whoa.*” A pair of heavy hands gripped my waist from behind. “Slow down there. Are you alright?”

I stared at the ground, my nose inches away from the concrete. I took a few seconds to gather my thoughts. I also couldn’t help but think that the deep voice sounded familiar.

I took my time standing up and turned around, finding myself face to face with a man I hadn’t seen in years.

He was a man who invaded my dreams whenever I wondered what could’ve been.

*The one that got away...*

My jaw slowly unhinged as I looked him over.

Somehow, all these years later, he’d become ten times sexier.

Dressed in jeans and a dark grey T-shirt that revealed muscles that were far more defined than they were years ago, he was also a lot taller. His dirty blond hair was cut low, and his full and defined lips were still tempting as ever.

As he stared into my eyes, I felt like we were in college all over again.

The memories flooded my brain frame by frame, blending into a beautiful montage.

I saw him asking me to stay later in his dorm room for “one more episode,” witnessed the two of us getting kicked out of the library for staying too long, and watched him subtly



throwing hints and smiles my way that I never seemed to catch.

I'd always asked Hayden about every guy before I made a pursuit, but since we were in the middle of our own Cold War then, I never got around to it. Instead, I watched some other woman intercept Simon's hints and smiles, watched as she ran off the field with him and scored an engagement.

"Simon Gaines?" I said.

"Penelope Carter." He smiled a perfect set of pearly whites. "I didn't think I would ever see you again. Good thing I did, though. My memories didn't do you any justice."

I blushed, and we stared at each other for what felt like forever.

"Dare I ask why you're running like someone is chasing you?" He smiled again.

"I think my seat mate was a pedophile. Well, *is*. And I need to change my flight before it fills up. That's a perfectly reasonable explanation, right?"

He pressed a hand against my forehead, sending every nerve in my body wild with that mere touch. "Do I need to call a medic for you?"

"No." I couldn't think straight with him this close to me. "I'm more than fine. I'm—*Hi*."

"Hi." He laughed and moved his hand. "Where are you headed today?"

"New York City."

"Really?" He crossed his arms. "Are you visiting someone there?"

"No, I live there."

"What?" He looked dumbfounded. "I'm in the process of permanently moving there. Well, I'm going back and forth to Florida to get all my things."

I glanced down at his left hand, where a wedding band should've been, but nothing was there.

There wasn't even a tan line.

"She and I didn't work out," he said, reading my mind. "Six months before the wedding, she told me that she was still in love with her ex, so she broke up with me."

*Oh.* "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be." He looked me up and down. "I'm not."

Silence.

"Attention passengers who are flying on flight 3505 to Miami International, the door at F-7 will be closing in fifteen minutes."

"That's my flight," he said, sighing. "I'm having a private 'Welcome to New York' party for my company two weekends from now," he said. "I'd love to see you there. If you're interested in me making you come, of course."

"What did you just say?" I was certain I'd heard that wrong.

"If you want to come, I'd love to see you there." He smiled. "What did you think I said?"

I didn't answer that. "I would love to go to your party."

"Good to know." He reached into his pocket. "Shit. I left my phone back at my gate. Can I give you my number?"

I nodded, pulling my phone from my pocket. I tapped the screen and it vibrated a few times, the tell-tale sign of battery death.

He laughed. "Maybe this is an omen."

"Yeah, I guess we should never speak again." I quipped. "I guess I'll see you later."

"I hope you're joking, Penelope." He motioned for me to follow him to the condiment stand outside of Starbucks.

"Here. We'll do this the old-fashioned way." He grabbed a napkin and uncapped a pen, scribbling down his number. "Call me whenever you're free and I'll give you more details about the party."

“Okay.”

He looked as if he wanted to say more, as if he wanted to pull me close and finally put an end to a fantasy I’d had years ago, but a reminder about his flight sounded over the speakers once again.

“I’ll be waiting for your call.” He looked me over one more time before walking away. “I’m *so* glad I ran into you again.”

“Me too.”

I waited until he was out of sight before rummaging through my purse for my phone charger. Plugging it into the closest socket, I connected my phone and waited until it reached five percent to power it on.

Scrolling down to Hayden’s name, I hit call.

It didn’t ring once.

His voicemail sounded instead.

“Leave a message at the beep, and I’ll *think* about getting back to you.”

*Beep!*

I sighed and sent him a text.

**Me:** Just landed in Charlotte. Call me when you see this.

I made it to the other gate and switched my flight before finding another Starbucks with a vacant socket.

Impatient, I ordered a cup of coffee and waited for Hayden’s name to cross my screen via phone call. It never took him longer than ten minutes to get back to me, and even in those rare cases when he couldn’t pick up, he’d have Sarah or his advisor Lawrence send me a “He’ll call you back in a few” message.

Confused by his silence, I sent an email to his business inbox just in case he had his personal alerts off.

**Subject:** GAHHHH! CALL MEEE!

Ten minutes passed.

Then twenty.

Too impatient to wait another second, I called Tatiana.

“Oh my god!” She answered on the first ring. “I’ve been waiting for you to call me. Are you back in New York yet?”

“Still in Charlotte on a layover,” I said. “You won’t believe who I just saw.”

“I bet I can guess,” she said. “Did he make your panties wet?”

“Um, maybe.” I laughed. “I’m sure if I’d stared at him any longer that probably would’ve been the case.”

“Maybe? You might be the only woman in the country who feels that way. I guess that’s why you two have remained platonic for so long.”

“Wait, what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about?”

“Simon Gaines,” I said. “A guy I went to college with. I think I’ve told you about him before. I showed you some of our pictures in my college scrapbook. He’s the guy with the —”

“I’m talking about Hayden’s dick.” She cut me off.

“*What?*”

“You haven’t seen it? It’s all over the news right now. Deservedly so, might I add.”

I tapped my fingers against the table, realizing that he was probably in another mini-crisis meeting with Lawrence now. The last time his “nudes” leaked, it was a few grainy pictures and the guy turned out to be an extortionist.

“It’s probably not Hayden, Tatiana,” I said. “Don’t believe the hype.”

“Oh, it’s definitely Hayden.” She laughed. “Look at them now and give me your thoughts.”

“No, I—”

“*Look. At. Them.*” She goaded me. “I texted you a few links.”

“Fine.” I sighed and put her on speaker. “Hold on.”

I clicked on the first link—expecting to be met with another montage of exposed-ab outtakes from his recent *GQ* cover shoot, but...

*OH. MY. GOD!*

My jaw dropped to the floor.

Hayden was standing on a balcony, his perfectly chiseled body on full display, a satisfied smirk on his lips. His eyes were staring right at the camera, saying, “Come here,” and there was a Cuban cigar in his left hand.

His cock stood hard and erect between his legs, thick and huge. Far bigger than any of the cocks I’d ever seen.

*How the hell does any woman take all of this?*

I shook my head in utter disbelief, unable to stop staring at it.

I scrolled down to look at the other pictures, him in other positions. His cock was breathtaking at every angle.

In all the years that we’d been friends, I’d jokingly asked why women couldn’t seem to get enough of him in the bedroom, why they’d asked for “repeats” long after he’d turned them down.

“Is your dick magical or something?” I’d say.

He’d laugh and say something sarcastic, and I continued to assume that they were blinded by his looks.

His cock pictures shattered that notion all at once.

*How does it even fit?*

“Um, hello?” Tatiana’s voice cut through my thoughts. “Are you there?”

“Yeah...”

“You agree it’s him, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are your panties wet now?”

*Hell yes.* “Nope.” I clicked off the picture. “Can I tell you about Simon Gaines now?”

“Depends. Does he have some dick pics that I can stare at?”

“No.”

“Then, no.” She laughed. “I’ll happily listen to it tonight when I get home from working out, though.”

“So much for being a new friend.”

“We’re still enemies.” She ended the call and I laughed.

Hayden never called me back, and against my better judgment, I spent the entire flight to New York staring at his dick for far longer than I would ever admit.

FOUR

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

“Can you give me any reason why I woke up this morning with your balls in my face?” Lawrence slammed a paper onto the café table. “Better yet, you want to tell me why your six-inch *slong* is currently the number one trending topic in the country?”

“First of all, hello, Lawrence.” I smiled at him. “I see that you’re angry as usual on this lovely afternoon.”

“Answer my question.”

“Second of all, I’m happy to let you know that my ‘slong’ is definitely longer than six inches.”

“Give me a reason, Hayden.” His face reddened. “Give me a reason right now.”

I said nothing.

I just watched as he popped a handful of stress relief pills and placed his hand over his heart. His “I’m so sick of you putting me through this shit,” speech was inevitable.

In the past, he’d effortlessly handled drugged-out rock stars, pop-star princesses with secret addictions, and boy bands with international fandoms. Yet, for some strange reason, he claimed that *my* scandals were the ones that drove him to the brink of insanity.



“If you think pleading ignorance is going to get you out of this one, you’re sadly mistaken.” He pushed the printed headlines closer to me. “Look at what they’re saying about you so far.”

I glanced down at the words and tried not to smile.

*The COCK-y King of New York, Indeed*

*Cinder’s CEO Can ‘Hunt’ Us Down Any Day*

*Hayden Hunter Shows Us His Huge... Ego*

“These are very creative,” I said. “Would you like me to host a contest for the best one?”

“Shut up, Hayden.” He pulled up a chair and signaled for the manager. “I called *Sinful Suit* a few minutes ago and spoke to the editor in chief. She said that an anonymous person randomly submitted these an hour before their issue went to print.”

“Oh?” I smiled.

“Yes. *Oh*. Any idea who might have perfectly curated nude photos of you at their disposal?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “You did say that we needed to give them something else to talk about, so I gave them *something else to talk about*.”

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t more specific about the type of shit I meant.” He held up his hands in surrender. “You need a fucking avalanche of good press at this point. I’m talking children’s hospital visits, soup kitchen volunteer hours, the works.”

“That sounds staged as hell, Lawrence. Everyone will see right through it.”

“Not if you do a good job and convince them otherwise.” He picked up his briefcase and set it on the table. “We can get started by using Penelope to show off more of your human side. Let’s put your overbearing friendship to work for a change.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tell her that she needs to join you on a shopping spree in full view of the press,” he said. “We’ll call some photogs and have them put a spin on ‘Most Generous Best Friend’ or something. Then we’ll make sure the cashier leaks the amount you spend on her, which should be at least seventy-five thousand dollars. Oh, and when you two are out, she should...”

I tuned out the rest of his suggestion, knowing that it was a hell no. Penelope would never *willingly* set foot inside of a clothing store. She’d freeze at the glass doors, come up with an excuse for why she suddenly needed to leave, and walk away in tears.

She’s never admitted the reason to me, even after all these years, but it was because of her mother. Shopping was the last thing they did together, half an hour before the accident, and she never got over it.

“Stop.” I cut Lawrence off. “That’s not happening. Give me something else to do.”

“What’s wrong with taking your best friend shopping?”

“Move on to another suggestion.” I kept my voice firm. “*Now.*”

“Fine.” He flipped through his folders, then slid a sheet toward me.

“Okay, next option,” he said. “I want you to write an apology letter to every single person or company that you’ve ever wronged. I’m sure that some people will leak their letters to the press, and over the long haul, this can start the rehab process for your image.”

“You know how I feel about apologies, Lawrence,” I said. “They don’t do anything but state the obvious.”

“They’ll do something more than that this time. Trust me.”

I looked down at the sheet. “You think that I’ve wronged two hundred and fifty people?”

“Ha! Don’t be silly.” He flipped it over. “There’s more on the back, and I left the other sheets at headquarters.”

Before I could tell him that this suggestion wasn't happening either, my phone sounded with Penelope's signature ringtone. A FaceTime request.

"Don't you dare answer her right now." Lawrence glared at me. "She can wait."

"This'll only take a minute." I tapped the screen. "Yeah, Pen?" I answered.

"Why haven't you called me back yet?" Her face appeared on screen and a subway whooshed by in the background. "I've already made it back to New York."

"I don't have any missed calls from you." I noticed the silver charm around her neck and tilted my head to the side. "Are you dressed up for something?"

"I've called you five times and—" Her lips froze and I waited for her to realize, for the umpteenth time, that her phone had terrible reception in the subway tunnel.

As the call stalled, I stared at her gorgeous face.

I wasn't sure when it happened, but somewhere between our final days in Seattle and now, she became sexy as hell. Her dark brown hair fell to her shoulders in waves, and her light hazel eyes perfectly accentuated her full, pink lips. Even though she usually wore T-shirts and sweats, she was fucking stunning without trying.

Now and then, I had to stop myself from looking at her too hard or fantasizing. Especially since I knew that her brother would have me stoned to death if I ever uttered the words "Your sister is sexy as fuck" within a hundred-mile radius, so I kept that opinion to myself.

"Hey!" Her screen suddenly unfroze. She was now on a street. "Can you see me now?"

"Yes." I stared at her lips. "I can see you."

"Guess what happened to me at the airport this morning?"

"Can he guess *after* we get done with our meeting?" Lawrence called out. "Hayden has a billion-dollar business to

run, Penelope. I've told you countless times to stop calling during business hours unless it's important."

"This is important." She smiled. "I ran into the one."

"The one who did *what*?" I raised my eyebrow. "What's the rest of his breakup name?"

"He's *the one that got away*."

I blinked. None of her exes came to mind.

"He's not an ex," she said, reading me. "And I never told you about him, because... It's a long story. Can you meet me at Central Park to talk?"

"No, but since I already know that you'll insist on talking to him anyway, you can come to him." Lawrence intruded again. "We're at Sweet Seasons on Park Avenue, and thanks to your friend's 'special member' making waves in the news, the paparazzi are outside. Please don't speak to them."

"I would never," she said. "I'll be there in fifteen."

I ended the call and looked over at Lawrence. "Now, where were we? Discussing how long these apology letters need to be?"

"No, we're at the part where I finally realize that you're incapable of focusing on anything if Penelope calls or texts you."

"That's not true." I picked up a pen. "I hit ignore when she calls sometimes."

"Ha! I'll believe that when I see it." He stood to his feet. "Now that you mention it, I don't think you could ever hit ignore on Penelope, even if you *wanted* to."

"How much would you be willing to bet on that baseless assumption?"

"I'll roll the dice on my entire life." He shrugged. "Want to take me up on it, so I can retire in peace?"

"No, I'd rather keep you miserably employed a little while longer." I smiled. "But just so you know, you're wrong."

“Deep down, you know that I’m not...”

# BREAKUP #6

THE ONE THAT DIDN'T PAY \$72.99



*Hayden*

*Back Then*

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** Hey. You busy?

**Me:** Yes. Do not call me.

**Me:** Aren't you on a date with your newest boyfriend right now?

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** He's in the restroom. I need to ask you something important.

**Me:** I just said that I was busy, Penelope. (Happy Birthday, btw.)

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** Do you think it's weird that I've never had an orgasm when any of my past boyfriends have gone down on me? Like, their mouths feel good against my lips down there, but it's never the OMG earth shattering thing that I've heard people talk about. (Thank you! Sweet 18!)

**Me:** Stop texting me. *Now.*

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** All of them have fingered me while they're doing it and I do like that, but... Is there something I'm not doing? How do I get an orgasm the next time?

**Me:** Reread my last message. I'm turning my phone off.

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** Why? You said I could ask you for advice.

**Me:** About dating and breakups. Not sex.

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** Who else can I ask then?

I set my phone down and sigh.

*You changed her name in your phone for a reason. Do not answer this. Ever.*

Tonight marks the umpteenth night in a row that she's taken my "I'll give you breakup advice whenever you want" offer a little too seriously.

At first, I honestly didn't mind, but that was until she started giving me a history lesson about all her breakups; the studies were never-ending for someone who was only seventeen.

Well, *eighteen*.

To her credit, she moved on fast after each one, dumping any guy at the first sign of disrespect. She also made it perfectly clear what she was looking for in the early stages, so any guy who stuck around after hearing her delusional outlook on love *had* to like her.

Not only that, but her relationships had to be balanced on a training, travel, and performance schedule that was getting stretched thinner by the day. Since she's placed first in every competition this year—The Grand Prix, Cup of China, and the Four Continents Championship—all while maintaining her number one ranking in the world, she's all but guaranteed to be selected for a spot on the Olympic team.

*Why do I know this shit?*

I tap my screen and scroll through our previous thread of messages, zeroing in on the one she sent me last night.

**Travis's Little Sis (Stop Giving Her Advice):** Is it too much to ask for a guy who wants me and only me? A guy who's in this for the long-haul? I know I'm young, but my



parents got married at 18 and they were always happy... I want that for myself. You think that's possible?

It's not, but I'd told her yes anyway.

Without thinking, I tap her name and hit call.

"Yeah, Hayden?" she answers on the first ring.

"Okay, look," I say. "Do you know where your clit is?"

"Yes."

"Good. After your date tonight, point it out to your boyfriend and tell him to kiss it slowly and use his tongue to focus on it."

"Wait. I thought you previously said that I shouldn't get intimate with a guy until date five. This is only date three, and I want to make sure I'm prepared."

I roll my eyes. "In that case, use two fingers and touch it yourself until you feel it swelling, until it feels like you can't take any more."

"I've tried that before, but I always pull back... I don't think I ever go long enough. How long should it take?"

"*Penelope.*" I can't believe she's not letting this go. "Tell you what. Buy a vibrator online and read the instructions. Or worse, if you're that damn anxious, go to CVS or Walgreens for an electric toothbrush. Take off the bristles, buy the padded attachment, and press that against your clit the next time you're horny. Don't move it until your pussy is super wet and throbbing in utter pleasure. You'll *know* when you're coming, clear?"

"Clear."

"Can I hang up now and act like this conversation never happened?"

"After one last thing," she says. "How long should I wait for him to come back from the bathroom before going to check on him?"

"Depends. How long has he been in there?"

“Fifteen minutes.” A paper rustles in the background. “He handled the check and then he—Holy fucking shit.”

“What?”

“He wrote ‘*Sorry. It’s Me, Not You. I Owe You*’ on the receipt!” She sucks in a breath. “This dinner cost seventy-three dollars and he—” She pauses again. “I’m looking at him now.”

“He’s returning to the table to pay it?”

“No, he’s outside getting into his car.” She sighs. “Should I ask the manager if I can wash dishes to pay for this?”

“No, sit tight.” I send my graphic designer a message to let him know that I’ll finish up the app’s logo some other night. “Order a dry, aged New York strip with extra butter for me. I’ll join you there in twenty minutes.”

“Really?” There’s a smile in her voice. “In that case, can you also take me to CVS when we’re finished?”

I hang up.

FOUR (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**A**t six o'clock, I emerged from the subway station at Lexington Avenue, heading straight toward the flock of photogs that were stalking Hayden.

“What did you think about his nudes leaking, Penelope?” “Is he still inside with Lawrence?” “Can you tell us how he’s currently feeling?” They yelled all at once.

I slid a pair of shades over my eyes as I moved through them, showing no emotion whatsoever as I made it in front of Sweet Seasons Coffee.

“How’s he planning to turn this one around?” “He’s still trending on Twitter!” “Were you the holding the camera while he was taking those pictures?”

I held back a groan at that last question and knocked on the door.

Within seconds, his security guard opened it wide enough to grab my hand and pull me inside.

“He’s upstairs, Miss Penelope,” Henry said. Then he lowered his voice. “Mr. Lawrence is on a bender, so tread lightly, and don’t say I never warned you about anything.”

I laughed. “Thank you, Henry.”

“Anytime.” He locked the door again.

When I made it to the top of the steps, Lawrence was pacing the other side of the floor and shouting into his phone.

Hayden was sipping a cup of coffee, looking completely unfazed.

“Hey.” I walked over and dropped my purse onto his table. “I told the photogs that you’re beyond embarrassed about what happened today. I also said that you’re gifting every offended person a bottle of eye-bleach and a memory-erase stick.”

“Thank you very much.” He smiled. “That’s exactly what Lawrence wants to do to fix this.”

“I knew it.”

He laughed. “Is that dress yours, or are you still borrowing things from strangers online?”

“It’s not borrowing. It’s *sharing*, and [renttherunway.com](http://renttherunway.com) dry-cleans everything before sending it out.”

“Hmmm.” He looked me over. “You look good in that one.”

“Thank you. I’ll try to dress up more often, so you can keep saying nice things to me.”

“I personally prefer you in sweats.” He stood to his feet. “Let’s go outside and talk so we can have some privacy.”

“Where the hell do you two think you’re going?” Lawrence stopped pacing. “Don’t you dare go out there.”

“Relax,” Hayden said. “We’re going to the alley.”

“Be back in ten minutes.”

“*Twenty*,” we said in unison.

“Fine.” He returned to his call, shouting as if he’d never lost a beat.

Hayden led me downstairs and outside, where we often went whenever our bench in Central Park was out of the question.

The street was blocked off with a deceiving wall that most people (more importantly, the photogs) thought led nowhere.

Bright pink lights hung high, complementing the iron rose chairs, and a small fire pit spewed short flames.

The manager followed us outside, setting two frappes and a tray of macarons on a table before walking away.

“So—” Hayden leaned against the wall. “Who’s this ‘the one that got away’ guy?”

“Simon Gaines.” Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as if I was still in the airport with him. “He was my study partner, and he’s pretty much a walking Prince Charming.”

“Anytime you say that, the guy ends up being a villain in the end.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, I never got to spend *that* much time on campus since I was still skating, but he always walked me back to my dorm whenever it was raining, went out of his way to help me on campus if I called, and threw hints here or there about ‘us,’ but I wasn’t sure if I should catch them because—” I paused. “You and I weren’t talking at that point.”

“So, you met him during our Cold War?”

“Yes.”

Silence.

We stared at each other for several seconds, like we always did whenever that sixteen-month gap in our friendship came up. We never talked about that era; we let it lay abandoned and forgotten. Casualties of a painful past better left unvisited for good.

The thought of it still made my heart ache from time to time, and I still blamed Hayden for starting it, but time had healed most of the wound. Supposedly.

“Anyway,” Hayden said, shattering the silence. “Keep going.”

“Yeah, anyway—” I cleared my throat. “This one time when we were driving to a movie, he saw a turtle that escaped from a pet shop and he pulled over to save it, so no car would

kill it. Then he took a half hour detour and set it free in the ocean.”

“He put a pet store turtle in the sea?” He raised his eyebrow. “He probably killed it faster than the traffic would’ve.”

“That’s not the point of this story, Hayden.”

“Then tell a better one.”

“I think he’s *the one*,” I said. “Like, I think it’s fate that I ran into him—literally—after all this time and things never worked out with the other woman he was seeing. I think this is the guy I’ve always belonged with.”

“You could’ve summed that up in five seconds.”

“I thought you’d appreciate the extended cut.” I laughed and pulled out the napkin that Simon gave me at the airport. “He wrote his number on this since my phone was dead and he left his elsewhere. Romantic, right?”

“That’s not exactly the term I was thinking.”

“Just promise that you’re going to give me advice on getting him this time,” I said.

“I might give you advice.” His lips curved into a smirk. “Are you going to take it?”

“I always do.”

“No, you only take the parts that you like.” He tapped his chin. “That aside, what do I get out of helping you with this?”

“*What?*”

“You heard me.” He smiled. “What’s my incentive to help you land this guy?”

“You get the honor of knowing that you’re a good best friend.”

“I’m a *great* best friend,” he said. “I want something tangible. A real payment that I can collect.”

“You bought a thirty-million-dollar condo last month.” I scoffed. “You don’t need any more money, and I’m not giving

you a dime of mine.”

“I wasn’t thinking money, per se.”

“No, I won’t replace your assistant Sarah at Cinder.”

“I would never hire you to work under me.” He laughed. “I just want your help with some letters I’m being forced to write. Well, unless Lawrence changes his mind.”

“I’m not changing my mind about shit, Hayden!” He called out from above, and we both laughed.

“What’s the catch?” I asked.

“There isn’t one.”

“Then how many letters are there?”

“Just a few.” He extended his hand like this was a business deal. “Deal?”

“Deal,” I said, shaking on it. “What’s my first step with Simon?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Wait for him to call you.”

“Did you miss the part where I said that he told me to call him?” I shook the napkin. “The part where I have his phone number and he doesn’t have mine?”

“I heard you.” He eyed my dress. “But since he saw you wearing *that*, he’ll find a way to call you. Trust me.”

I stared at him, waiting for him to elaborate more, to show how his point made any sense, but no words fell from his lips.

“Just to be sure that you won’t do anything stupid tonight...” He grabbed the napkin from my hand and tore it to pieces. Then he tossed the shreds onto the ground. “You’re welcome.”

“You think he’s going to find me by magic?”

“If he’s really into you, he’ll find a way.”

I stared at the shreds, tempted to pick them up and piece them together for insurance.



As if he could read my mind, he picked up a few of them and tossed them into the fire pit.

“He’ll call you, Penelope,” he said. “I’ll give it a week at best.”

“Fine.” I crossed my arms. “That’s when I’ll start helping you with your apology letters, then. Doesn’t make sense to hold up my end of the deal if yours falls through.”

“I don’t have a problem with that.” He smiled. “Is that when you’re going to tell me what you thought of my pictures?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You haven’t looked at my dick?”

*Do not answer that. It’s a trap.*

“I need to get home, so I’ll see you later.” I rushed back inside, then past the photogs, feeling my cheeks heat with every step.

Best friend or not, I wasn’t even sure where to *begin* with that discussion, and I didn’t want my mind to wander there ever again.

FIVE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**T**hree days passed without a single call or text from Simon.

I even started a brand-new Gmail account—PenelopeCarterNYC@gmail.com—but the only thing that inbox received was a fresh dose of spam.

FIVE (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**D**ay four came with nothing new.  
Then day five.

Simon never called, and I was tempted to return to that fire pit and summon his number to life from the ashes.

SIX

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

“**W**hat the hell was Hayden Hunter thinking?” “Are any of the rumors true?” “Leaking dirty pictures in the middle of a PR crisis is not how to run a business!”

Loud voices blared from the television in my living room, cutting through the soft streams of my shower.

I cursed myself for not unplugging it from the wall the night before.

My pictures were still the talk of the gossip world, but they’d done little to quell any of my other issues in the business realm. Those were somehow getting worse.

Now, on top of being a “ruthless liar” and a “reckless playboy with Daddy issues,” I was also a thief. A “thief with a big dick [we’d] love to fuck,” according to *Cosmo*.

Groaning, I stepped out of my shower and wrapped a towel around my waist before walking down the hall.

I grabbed the remote right as Tim Lassing, the CEO of Tinder, took his seat across from a morning anchor.

He still looked as smug as he did years ago when he first accused me of stealing his damn idea. As if “swipe right for yes and swipe left for no” was some type of groundbreaking concept.

It was a pure coincidence that we'd come up with it at the same time, and that was the only similarity between our apps.

His app had twenty-million world-wide subscribers. My app had one-hundred million. Case closed.

"Thank you for coming here to discuss your competitor Hayden Hunter this morning," the anchor said. "I understand that the two of you have been engaged in a bitter feud for years."

"Not necessarily." He smiled. "I've been desperately trying to prove that he's a fraud and a liar, but I'm glad that so many people are finally starting to see how reckless he once was."

"Once was?" she asked. "Does that mean you think he's changed over the years?"

"Ha! No." He rolled his eyes. "He's even more of a conniving asshole than he was before."

I crossed my arms. He looked saner today than he usually did, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he veered into psycho-territory.

He'd been in a skiing accident not too long after founding Tinder and some parts of his brain were still on the slopes.

"If you could offer any advice, CEO to CEO..." the anchor said. "What would you say to him?"

"I would say that he should lawyer up for one hell of a fight." His eyes went wide, nearly bulging out of his skull. "He should also admit that he kidnapped my dog in the past."

"He *what*, sir?"

"He stole my dog." He looked like he was about to cry. "I don't know why you people don't believe me. I can't remember everything exactly, but he's a dog thief, too. Never trust a dog thief."

*And there it is...*

I picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

Before I could send a message to my lawyer, Lawrence's email crossed my screen.



SUBJECT: **No Penelope Today. Whatsoever.**

The universe has gifted us with another meltdown from the Head Loon at Tinder.

Your lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, wants you to focus on writing one hell of a compelling letter to the judge about why his latest claims against you are bullshit.

After that, I need you to get to work on those damn apology letters so we can take advantage of this timing.

If Penelope calls or texts you, please don't answer her until you're finished.

Thank you in advance.

Lawrence.

I SMILED, immediately disregarding his request.

SUBJECT: **Fwd: No Penelope Today. Whatsoever.**

If you need me, email me at my alternate account.

As you can see, Lawrence doesn't want me to talk to you today.

Start a new thread and send it to my second phone.

Tell me what you're up to...

—HH

SUBJECT: **Simon (Does Lawrence hate me?)**

I'm currently waiting for a bird signal from you know who.

He still hasn't called or texted **because he doesn't have my number.** O\_o

I'm also watching two new clients bust their asses on the ice. One of them just turned to me and said, "What the hell would *you* know about completing a double lutz?" UGH.

—Pen

**P.S.:** I opened your letter list this morning... You honestly want me to help you with all 1000? How the hell have you pissed off this many people???

**SUBJECT: Re: Simon (Does Lawrence hate me?)**

It's been five days, Pen.

FIVE. DAYS.

Be patient and do something else with your time. Have you picked out what you're wearing to his party yet? He'll find you sooner or later.

—HH

**P.S.:** 2000\* letters. I was a very bad boy when we weren't talking apparently \*smile emoji\*

**P.P.S.:** Lawrence *does* hate you, but he hates everyone else, too.

**SUBJECT: Re: Re: Simon (Does Lawrence hate me?)**

I looked Simon up and found out that he made the *Forbes 500 List* last year. He's listed at #301.

Impressive as hell, right?

Tatiana offered to let me borrow one of her designer dresses. I told you that her mom was a former supermodel, right?

It's midnight, so that means it's been five and a half days now. The party is in three days!

—Pen

**SUBJECT: Re: Re: Re: Simon (Does Lawrence hate me?)**

I guess that'd be “impressive as hell,” if your best friend wasn't already listed at #1...

He will, Pen. Trust me. Have I ever been wrong?

—HH

SIX (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**T**here was a first time for everything.  
Day six.

No call. No email. No trail of magical breadcrumbs that Simon followed to find his way to me.

Utterly impatient, I continued my sleuthing online and found his firm and tons of articles about his hedge fund.

On his website, there was no direct way to contact him if I wanted to. The email addresses listed all went to various assistants and the phone numbers were 1-800 numbers that made it perfectly clear that they were for “Client Access Only.”

Refreshing my phone screen for the thousandth time, I leaned back against the seat in one of Hayden’s town cars.

“Hey there.” The driver’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. “Everything okay, Miss Penelope?”

“I’m fine, Chance,” I said. “Just waiting for something that hasn’t happened yet.”

“Well, whatever it is, I’m sure that you can tell your best friend and he’ll buy it within seconds.”

I forced a smile and refreshed my screen again.

As we rounded the block to my brownstone, my phone rang with an unknown number.

“Simon?” I answered without the slightest bit of grace.

“Who the hell is Simon?” Travis’s voice was on the other line.

*Ugh.* “No one I’ll ever tell you about.”

“Good.” He laughed. “I don’t want to hear about him until he proposes. This is my new business phone, by the way. Save the number.”

“I’m doing quite fine, Travis,” I said, hating that he had no phone etiquette whatsoever. “Thank you so much for asking. How are you?”

“Great, and good to know that you’re fine. You know I’ve never been good at small talk.”

*You’re not good at communication in general.* “My birthday is coming up soon.”

“I know that. I already asked Hayden for advice on what to get you.” There was a smile in his voice. “I’ll call you back later this week to spoil it, just in case you want something else. Love you, Crown.”

I laughed. “Love you, too.”

I ended the call and waited for the car to pull up to the curb before stepping out. Rummaging through my purse for my keys, I overheard a series of honking cars and yells.

*“What in the hell?” “Are you serious?” “What the hell are you doing?”*

“Hey! Hey! Penelope?”

I turned around and saw Simon rushing across the street in a suit. He was dodging taxis, ignoring the way they were flipping him off.

“I was hoping that was you,” he said, smiling. “I think I’ve tracked down every Penelope Carter in this city.”

I blushed as he moved closer. “You’ve really been trying to track me down?”

“Yeah. Is there a reason you haven’t called?” he asked. “Was I misreading our conversation at the airport?”

“No, I—” I tried to think of a non-Hayden reason. “I lost your napkin in baggage claim.”

“Okay, well...” He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to make sure that doesn’t happen again. Can I have your phone number?”

I nodded, reciting it and feeling a buzz against my pocket seconds later.

“I was hoping you’d still be able to come to my party this weekend,” he said. “Is that possible?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Where is it?”

“Pier sixty-two. It’s on a super-yacht.”

“You rented one of those for a party?”

“No, I *own* one of those.” He smiled. “It starts at seven, but people won’t start getting there until eight. Myself included.”

“In college, you were always an hour early.”

“That was before people started asking me for money.” He laughed. “Now I’m purposely late so they don’t get the chance.” He stepped closer. “They’re also a bit more hesitant to get closer if they see that I have a date.”

I blushed again.

“I should’ve asked you out in college,” he said. “I shouldn’t have been subtle back then, and I won’t make the same mistake twice. I’d really love to see you this weekend.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good.”

“Hey, asshole!” A gruff voice shouted from across the street. “How long do you plan on holding up traffic with your lover boy bullshit?”

“Yeah!” Someone else shouted. “I hope she’s giving it up to you if you’re willing to act like you own this whole damn street!”

“I guess I should move my car now.” He stepped back, laughing. “See you this weekend, Penelope.”

“See you this weekend.”

I watched him slip behind the wheel of a bright, candy-red Ferrari. I waited for him to disappear down the block before rushing inside my place.

The moment I entered the living room, I was slapped in the face with something soft yet itchy.

*What the hell?*

I stepped back, realizing that it was a silk shirt with sequins on its sleeve, and it was hanging from a wardrobe rack full of other silk shirts.

Stepping around it, I saw more racks lined up in the dining room, then black and white boxes that were stacked high near the windows.

*Versace. Fendi. Christian Louboutin.*

“Hey there!” Tatiana tiptoed around a tower of Prada boxes. “I’ve been waiting for you to get home.”

“Were you waiting to brag about a shopping spree?”

“Ha! Please.” She picked up an envelope and handed it to me. “Your best friend did all the shopping apparently.”

I tore it open and read the card.

*Penelope,*

*I think it’s way past time for you to have a wardrobe that you don’t have to rent.*

*Don’t try to pay me back, and don’t you dare ask how much this cost.*

*Just accept it.*



*Let me know what you pick for the party.*

*You're welcome.*

*Hayden*

***P.S.: Wear your hair down.***

***P.P.S.: Don't wear panties. Trust me.***

SEVEN

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*Saturday*

The second I stepped aboard the pristine white yacht, I felt out of place. My red dress, with its deep cut that revealed my cleavage and high thigh slit, stood out against everyone else's toned down black and blue formal wear.

*Shit.*

I debated running back to the town car and begging the driver to take me home to change into something else.

Before I could think that through, the security guard motioned for me to step forward.

"Next in line, please," he said, his eyes glued to a tablet. "Name and affiliation to Mr. Gaines?"

"Um..." I forced a smile as I moved closer. "Is there a coat check in there? You think I can borrow someone's jacket?"

"Your name and—" He looked up from his pad, his gaze traveling up and down my dress. "I think you're at the wrong party, Miss. This ain't a Hollywood premiere."

"Thank you." I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Penelope Carter."

He crossed his arms, still staring at me. "The private party for the Hollywood models is on Pier fifty-seven. Would you

like me to have someone escort you there?”

“I’m not a guest at the celebrity party. I’m here to see Simon Gaines.” I folded my arms. “We went to college together.”

He took another look at me before returning his attention to his tablet. He tapped the screen a few times and his eyes widened.

“Forgive me for not realizing that you were Mr. Gaines’ date. Please follow me.” He ushered me onto a small elevator and hit the “S” button. “Mr. Gaines is in the gallery room. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you.”

The doors glided shut and I took several deep breaths as the car rose to the third floor. When I stepped out, I found myself in a sea of more drab blue and black suits, but there were pops of color with other dresses here and there.

Still, none of them were as revealing as mine.

Weaving through the crowd, I followed the signs for “Gallery” and stopped once I saw Simon surrounded by a small crowd.

Looking sexy in an all-black tuxedo, he smiled and pointed to a vase.

“I have no idea why I let my advisor talk me into buying this thing,” he said. “It’s supposedly an Egyptian artifact, but I will happily sell it at no profit if any of you are interested.”

“How much?” Someone asked.

“Four million.” He picked it up. “Any takers?”

Everyone laughed, shaking their heads.

“What about taking my advisor as part of the deal, then?” He joked. “His stock market advice is way better, I promise.”

Laughter filled the room again.

“Excuse me.” A brunette brushed against me. Hard. “I hope you’re not looking to land anyone here while wearing *that*.” She sucked her teeth and walked past me.

As Simon picked up a different vase, I took several steps backward. I bumped into a few other people on my way to the bathroom and then I locked myself inside.

I stared at my reflection, swallowing. I wondered if I could have Tatiana bring me a more suitable and boring dress within the hour.

A knock sounded at the door as I pulled out my phone.

“Someone’s in here!” I called out. “Give me a minute.”

The door opened anyway.

“I just said that someone is in here.”

“I heard you loud and clear.” Hayden stepped inside, glass of wine in hand. “I decided to stop by to see if you were taking my advice.”

“I have a cell phone.”

“You didn’t answer any of my texts,” he said. “You also didn’t call me last night.”

“I did. It went to voicemail.”

“I was genuinely worried that you’d pick the wrong dress.”

“Did I?”

“Not at all.” He looked me up and down. “You did confirm that you still have no idea how to say thank you, though.”

“You’re welcome.”

He laughed. “Why did I know that you’d be in here, far away from the party?”

“Because you’re a stalker who somehow snuck onto the guest list.”

“I own the pier.” He sipped the last of his drink and set it down. “I’m on *every* guest list.”

“Of course.” I let out a sigh. “People keep staring at me.”

“Because you look sexy as hell,” he said. “Despite the fact that you’re not taking my advice like you promised.”

“How? I did every single thing you said.”

“*Almost* everything.” He placed his hands on my shoulders and spun me around to face the mirror.

In the reflection, his eyes met mine and I couldn’t help but inhale the sexy scent of his cologne.

He traced his finger against the back of my neck, running his fingers against the pair of black and white swans that were tattooed on my skin. Then he stopped at the line of cursive Latin underneath.

“I’ve never noticed this quote part of your tattoo before,” he said, his voice low. “I thought it was just a straight line.”

“It was, before I changed it.”

“When was that?”

“During our Cold War...”

“Hmmm.” He rubbed his finger against it again, keeping his gaze on mine. “I feel like I’m learning one too many new things about you that I should already know. Anything else you want to reveal?”

“I once bought a voodoo doll that bore your likeness when we weren’t talking,” I said. “It had blue eyes and everything.”

“Oh?” He smirked. “How many times did you stab it with the pin?”

“Thousands. I wished that you would fail at life with every prick of it.”

“I’m sorry to inform you that it didn’t work.”

“Clearly.” I smiled.

“Anyway—” He cleared his throat. “This is the first bit of my advice that you didn’t follow.”

He grabbed the glittering clip from my up-do and pulled it out, forcing the curls to fall to my shoulders. “I told you to wear your hair down. You look sexier this way.”

“Tatiana thought it looked better up.”

“Tatiana isn’t a guy you’re trying to get with, and from what you’ve told me, she’s been single for *years*.” His lips

curved into a slow, sexy smile. “You need to take everything she suggests with a garage full of salt.”

“You mean *grain* of salt?”

“No.” He ran his fingers through my hair, making sure all the curls were down. “I mean, she spends every night watching *Sailor Moon* marathons and playing with crystal wand toys, so it’s a whole fucking garage full.”

I held back a laugh. “Fine.”

Sliding his hand around to my necklace, he gently adjusted the silver skate charm that hung between my breasts.

“I also told you not to wear panties.” His eyes met mine in the glass again. “Why are you wearing them?”

“I’m not.” My cheeks flushed red. “I’m not wearing any.”

“You can’t lie to me, Pen...” He slid a hand under the slit of my dress, setting my skin on fire as his palm grazed my thigh. He slowly looped his fingers under the band of my lace thong, and yanked it off in one smooth motion. Then he stuffed it into his pocket.

“Much better.” He smiled. “Don’t you agree?”

“I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Believe it.” He looked at his watch. “You only have a few hours left before people start hogging him for photographs and favors. I highly suggest that you walk out of here with me. You can also say, ‘Thank you for your much-needed help,’ at any point.”

“Thank you for stealing my panties.”

“You’re very welcome.” He laughed and walked over to the door, holding it open for me. He started to walk away, but then he turned around.

“I don’t think that I can trust you to do this right,” he said. “I think it’s better if I make him come to you.”

*Huh?* Before I could ask him what that meant, he pushed me against a window. “How close are we, Penelope?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a simple question.” He lowered his voice, looking into my eyes. “How close are we?”

*Too close.* “Pretty close.”

“On a scale of one to ten?”

“Twenty.”

“I agree.” He tucked a few strands of hair behind my ear. “So, I need you to tell me something. What did you think of my dick?”

*WHAT?* “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You heard me,” he said. “I want to know what you thought when you saw my pictures.”

“Hayden Christopher Hunter.”

“Penelope Nicole Carter.” He mocked me. “Glad we’ve established our full names.”

“I’m saying your full name so that you can come to your senses.”

“I’m fine.” He smiled. “I’m asking you a simple question.”

“A very inappropriate question.”

“How?” He ran his fingers through my hair. “If your nudes ever leaked, I would give you my honest opinion. I wouldn’t even wait for you to ask.”

“That would never happen to me, because unlike you—”

“You’re *deflecting*.” He cut me off. “Stay on the topic of my dick.”

“*Fine*.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “I thought that you were very well-endowed. Happy?”

“Ecstatic.”

“How the hell is this line of questioning supposed to help me get Simon’s attention?”

“Because no man wants a woman that another guy isn’t into, and if the so-called *Untamed Playboy of Manhattan* is



making you blush in a corner, I think that speaks volumes. Don't you?"

"No."

"I do." He laughed and stepped back, looking over his shoulder. "Don't stay too long and don't drink too much. You're welcome."

He walked away without another word and Simon was suddenly strolling toward me.

"*Wow.*" He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips. He didn't say a word for several seconds, he just looked me up and down. "You look stunning, Penelope. Thank you so much for coming. I was beginning to think you were standing me up."

"Not at all." I blushed.

"Was that Hayden Hunter you were just talking to?"

"Yeah, but... *Wait.* How do you know who he is?"

"He's on the cover of *GQ* this month and I have a subscription." He smiled. "He's also the CEO of Cinder and pretty famous, I believe."

"Right, well, I, he," I stuttered, feeling butterflies flutter as he pressed his hand against the small of my back. "He's my brother's best friend. I mean, he's more like *my* best friend, but —"

"Is he my competition?" He interrupted, gazing at my lips. "Should I be worried that he wants you, too?"

*What?* My cheeks heated all over again. "No, not at all. Hayden is like an older brother to me."

"Good," he said. "I'd hate to watch him lose if the alternative was true. Are you available for dinner with me afterwards?"

I bit my tongue before I could blurt out "Hell yes." "No, I can't stay past the party."

"How unfortunate." He grabbed two glasses from a passing waiter's tray. "In that case, let's go to the top of the

ship and make the most of the time you have.”



THE YACHT SET sail around the river and I leaned against the railing as Simon grabbed the railing on both sides of me.

The years that we'd spent apart collapsed into an hours-long conversation and I felt as if we were back in his old dorm room all over again. His lips brushed against mine a few times, but he never let them linger for more than a few seconds and he never took his eyes off of mine.

Before I knew it, I broke both of Hayden's suggestions without even trying.

SEVEN (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

“I could’ve sworn that I told you we had a deposition prep session today.” Lawrence glared at me the moment I stepped inside my condo.

“Breaking and entering is a crime, Lawrence.”

“I had to sit there and make small talk with two of the biggest assholes in this city for an entire hour. Not only that, but they blinded-sided me with tons of things that are going to hit the papers tomorrow. We couldn’t get in front of that if we tried, but I’ve called some staff to work the next seventy-two hours straight, so we can clean up as much as we can.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“What?” He looked surprised that I’d uttered those words. “Okay, well uh, speaking of ‘sorry,’ how many apology letters have you finished?”

“One.”

“To who?”

“You.” I picked it up from my coffee table and handed it to him, but he didn’t make a move to read it.

Instead, he tucked it into his pocket. “The best apology is changed behavior, Hayden. That’s all I’ll ever want from you. Plus my paycheck and yearly bonus, of course.”

“Of course.”

“What were you doing instead?”

*Realizing how fucking sexy Penelope is.* “I stopped by Pier sixty-two to clear my mind.”

“In that case, your apology letter is officially worthless.”

“It’s true.” I smiled. “I needed to make sure I enjoyed my last day of freedom before I get into what looks like a never-ending apology tour.”

He didn’t look like he believed me in the slightest. He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen, then he hit the speaker button as rings filled the room.

“This is Sarah, how can I—” She paused. “Oh, it’s you, Lawrence. What do you need?”

“Can you tell me where Mr. Hunter spent his afternoon?”

“He was clearing his mind.”

“Don’t make me ask you again.”

“He was at a yacht party.” She betrayed me in seconds. “It was for Penelope and some guy she’s dating, but he made me promise not to say anything or bring up any meetings because he didn’t want to deal with that and was more worried about Penelope messing things up.” She finally took a breath. “You’re not going to tell him I told you this, are you?”

“I would never.” He ended the call and narrowed his eyes at me. “I want fifty letters in my inbox by the end of this weekend, and I want thirty Monday morning, and every morning after that. We can’t have an entire team working to repair your image if you’re only halfway in. Are we clear, son?”

“Crystal.”

“Good.” He headed toward the door, but then he looked over his shoulder. “Did Penelope mess things up?”

“Not at all.”

He left my condo and I walked into the kitchen. I needed a stiff drink.

I hadn't meant to show up to the yacht party at all, but I'd remembered a time in the past when she avoided the guy she wanted all night by overthinking too much in the bathroom. When she didn't respond to any of my text messages about making her move, I felt like I had no choice but to show up.

*And I fucking regretted it.*

The moment I saw her in that red dress, I envisioned her legs wrapped around my waist. My hands grabbing fistfuls of her chestnut colored hair as she took me deeper and deeper.

It wasn't until I silently chided myself with "Stop. She's your best friend and Travis's little sister" that I snapped back into reality.

Curious, I pulled out my phone to see if she'd texted me back about enjoying the party.

Still nothing.

My "Are you having fun yet?" and "Do you need a ride home?" messages weren't even read yet.

Just as I was about to call her, there was a loud knock on my door.

Confused as to why security didn't call me with an alert first, I walked over and stared through the peephole. Penelope was in some guy's arms looking like a dead fish. Her tell-tale drunk face.

*What the hell?*

I opened it and the suit came better into view.

*The Simon guy from the party.*

"Um, hey," he said. "Mind if I, uh, put her down in your place? She said—"

"I told him to bring me here." Penelope smiled. "There was too much traffic and Tati isn't answering her phone."

I held the door open. "White sofa by the window."

He carried her over and gently laid her down. Then he turned around and extended his hand to me.

“Simon Gaines.”

“Hayden Hunter.”

“I’m a big fan of yours,” he said. “I truly admire your hustle.”

“Noted.” I nodded. I wasn’t used to being friendly, let alone meeting any guy of Penelope’s this early in the game. I didn’t want to encourage him to stay in my place too long either.

“Why do you keep your condo so cold?” Penelope groaned. “Can you bring me a blanket?”

I ignored her question like she ignored my instructions.

“How much did she drink tonight?” I asked Simon.

“We shared three bottles of champagne.”

*Of course.* “For future reference, stick to wine. She can’t handle champagne.”

“I’ll remember that.”

She let out a soft sigh and tried then failed to roll over. “I think I need some water. Can you get me that with the blanket?”

“I can get it from your kitchen,” Simon said.

“I’ll handle it,” I said. “You can go now.”

“Are you sure? I mean—”

I raised my eyebrow. “You mean what?”

“I feel kind of responsible for this, so I can stay.”

“Or, you can go.”

He looked tempted to fight me on this, but he simply cleared his throat.

“I never noticed how stunning all of the details in your ceiling are, Hayden.” Penelope said. “What color is that? Taupe? Butterscotch beige?”

Simon smiled and moved closer to her. He took off his jacket and placed it over her chest. Then he whispered, “Call

me when you're sober. If I don't call you first."

He leaned in as if he was about to kiss her, but I cleared my throat.

"Nice to meet you, Hayden." He stepped back. "Hopefully next time it'll be under sober circumstances."

"Hopefully."

He walked to the door and I waited until I heard the ping of the elevators before looking at Penelope.

Even drunk, she was stunning as hell.

"Didn't I tell you *not* to get drunk?" I asked.

"Stop yelling at me."

"The only one yelling is *you*."

"I can see you judging me."

"Trust me, I haven't begun to judge you," I said. "I'll do that when you're sober, though. Once again, did you miss the part where I specifically told you not to drink too much?"

"The yacht was so beautiful." She sat up and smiled. "Simon took me on a private tour of it and showed me all these hidden rooms."

"So, you're blatantly ignoring my question?"

"We danced on the balcony to Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York.' I felt like I was living in one of those nineties rom coms."

"Okay, then." I propped her feet on a pillow and slid the stilettos off her feet.

"At one point, I felt like it was only the two of us aboard."

"Lay your head back on the armrest, please."

"At one point, I thought he was trying to kiss me, but I wasn't sure if I was reading him right, so I just grabbed another glass of champagne and drank it down."

I adjusted the pillows behind her head as she continued to ramble. She talked about the silverware that bore Simon's



initials, the way the waters sloshed against the ship, and a second, third, and fourth verbatim recap about how they danced to Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" like it was a "nineties rom com."

As I was pushing a few stray hairs off her forehead, she pressed her hand against my belt buckle and looked directly into my eyes.

I raised my eyebrow.

"Is it bad that I was thinking about your cock for an entire hour after you left?"

"I'm getting you a blanket," I said. "You can tell me about the rest of your night later."

"I thought about putting it in my mouth, if it would even fit, or if my eyes would water if I took it all the way down my throat."

"Penelope..." My cock hardened in my pants. "I need you to stop talking."

"You wanted my honest opinion about your pictures, right?"

"Not at this moment."

"I've always thought that you were the sexiest man I've ever seen, even when I *hated* you," she said. "Even when I thought your cockiness was simply you over-compensating for having a small penis." Her gaze moved down to my pants. "You clearly weren't."

I gently pushed her hand away and walked down the hall. I opened the closet and pulled out a blanket, vowing to forget her drunken rambling.

When I returned, she was smiling, looking as if she was waiting to finish her thoughts.

"I swear, the thought of sleeping with you never crossed my mind until I saw your pictures," she said. "Why didn't you ever go into porn?"

“I’m officially done talking to you for the night.” I covered her with the blanket. “Please stop.”

“I don’t think I would ever say those two words to you if we were having sex.”

“Penelope fucking Carter...” I narrowed my eyes at her. “Stop talking.”

She laughed and rolled over to face the windows. “Thank you for the advice so far on Simon. You’re the best, Hayden. You always have been, and you’ve *always* been there for me.”

She started snoring seconds later, so I hit the lights and headed to my bathroom.

I needed a cold shower.

Stat.

# BREAKUP #7

THE ONE THAT MADE ORIGAMI



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

*Sochi, Russia*

“**W**hat do you mean, you can’t be there for me?” I stare at Travis’s face on my laptop, hoping that this is some type of sick joke. “I’m about to skate in the effin’ Olympics. *Tomorrow.*”

“I know, but I was there when you skated in other competitions,” he says. “I’m sure you’ll win gold. You haven’t placed anything less than first all year.”

“Travis...” Tears well in my eyes. “If you’re playing a joke, now would be the time to say the punchline.”

“Listen to me, Crown.” He moves his head closer to the screen. “I got a call from Gatorade earlier this week with a six-figure sponsorship offer,” he says. “They said the deal was mine if I made it to their headquarters and signed off on everything ASAP. Six figures, Crown. Isn’t that amazing?”

I say nothing.

I’m having a sudden bout of déjà vu from when he missed The Grand Prix in Chicago because of a last-minute match opportunity. Or, maybe it’s from when he missed the invitational in Los Angeles when he couldn’t bear to miss a meeting with the UFC commissioner because he “Had to make it clear that he’s in this sport for the long haul.”

It doesn't matter that I've given up sleep to stay up late to watch all his matches or that I've skipped weekend's worth of practices to ride along with Hayden to attend his press conferences. His career is taking off, and since he's actually making money, his sport is the only one that matters.

"I just have to make sure that I beat Marquez on the fifteenth." His voice interrupts my thoughts. "I'm sure that more sponsors will come knocking at my door after that one." He smiles as if he's not stomping all over my heart. "Gatorade is only the beginning for us, Crown."

*Us?* "I'm sure Gatorade would've understood you wanting to be there for your younger sister."

"I *am* there for you." He narrows his eyes at me. "Last time I checked, I'm the one who buys you and your coach's plane tickets to wherever you need to be. I'm also paying for you to have the best physical therapy in the country, and the sponsorships you're getting—Oh, wait. Yours aren't at the same level, so someone else needs to take care of you."

"You promised, Travis."

"No, I *considered*." He lies. "And I'm done talking about this right now. I need you to suck this shit up. I'm doing the best I can, and if me not being there in the crowd affects your performance, then maybe—"

I hang up in his face and shut my laptop, preventing him from calling me back with an "I'm sorry, Crown. You know I'm more logical than emotional. I'm so sorry..."

I don't want to hear his apology this time. I need to talk to someone who actually gives a damn.

*Jackson...*

I'm grateful that my boyfriend is here. He's competing as a freestyle skier, and he's the first boyfriend who has completely understood how much dedication it takes to make it.

Even though I have an "advised team curfew," I've snuck out every night to chat with him in the hot tub for a few hours.

Getting out of bed, I pull on my boots and put on a coat. I walk over to the origami display he'd delivered last night—a tower of pink roses and white swans, with hidden messages between their folds.

I pick up a rose-colored one that reads, *“I know we’re here to focus on competing, but I’m always here for you. I’ll drop everything and listen.”*

Opening the door, I look both ways and head to the elevator.

“Well, look who it is.” The devil reincarnate, i.e., Tatiana Brave, steps in front of me.

I roll my eyes and hit the down button.

“Curfew starts in fifteen minutes,” she says. “It’d be a shame if I had to tell the team ambassador that my fellow American is sneaking out to see her boyfriend. With both of us scoring so high, I imagine you’ll need all the extra rest you can get.”

“If you want to snitch on me, go ahead and snitch,” I say. “It won’t make one bit of a difference.”

“Want to bet?”

“Absolutely.” I shrug. “It’s a shame you flew all this way for chance at silver or bronze. We both know there’s not a chance in hell you’ll win gold over me, but I love how you get your hopes up. It’s cute.”

“You’re a bitch.”

“You’re a bigger one.”

She storms away without another word and the doors glide shut.

When I make it downstairs to the lobby, I walk out of the doors and across the campus toward the hot tubs.

Rock music is blaring from the speakers and I easily recognize the hard metal from Jackson’s playlist.

I walk to the towel stand, but then I notice that Jackson isn’t here alone. He’s with another guy in the hot tub and

they're kissing each other like no one is watching.

I stare at them as Jackson pulls the guy into his lap, as their tongues collide, and it's not until the song ends that Jackson happens to look over at me.

"Oh, shit." Jackson's eyes widen. "Penelope, stay right there. I can explain."

"Don't bother." I turn away and rush back to my hotel.

When I make it back to my room, I flop onto the bed. I try not to cry, but it's no use.

I turn on the TV and flip to a dubbed version of *When Harry Met Sally*.

In the middle of the meet cute, a knock sounds at my door.

"We're over, Jackson!" I call out, walking over to it. "I don't even care that you're gay. It's the lies and the—"

I stop talking at the sight of Hayden standing in the hallway.

"So, your boyfriend *was* gay like I told you he was?" He smiles.

"No." I avoid his eyes. "No, he was not. I was saying the lines of a TV show aloud."

He glances behind me. "There's a commercial on right now."

My cheeks redden and I struggle to find the words to say. It's been three days since we last spoke and he's supposed to be pitching his dating app to people in California.

"Why aren't you in L.A.?" I change the subject. "I was planning to stay up for five more hours to call you."

"Since I know that you're not going to admit that I was right anytime soon..." He opens his backpack and pulls out a roll of chocolate chip cookie dough and a pink plastic spoon. "I fucking told you so."

Before I can slam the door in his face, he pulls me close for a hug.

“Thanks for not rubbing it in.” I smile.

“I’m still planning to rub it in,” he says. “I just want to give you a few more hours before I officially start.”

“Did you really book a twelve-hour flight just to laugh at me?”

“Of course not.”

“You’re smiling, Hayden.”

“Am I? I’m not trying to.” His dimples deepen. “I don’t see anything funny about this situation at all. I mean, I did tell you that your boyfriend spent more time asking about me than you, but what do I know?”

“Is that a man out in the hallway?” My coach calls out from around the corner. “Who is that?”

I pull Hayden into the room and shut the door.

“So, you woke up this morning and randomly decided to fly to Sochi?”

“No,” he says. “But once Travis told me that he wasn’t coming, I didn’t think you should be alone. I booked a suite at the hotel across the street.”

I smile. “Thank you for coming and being here for me.”

“It’s what friends do.” He shrugs. “Besides, I’ll expect something in return down the line.”

“I should’ve known.”

“I got you this,” he says, pulling a blue box from his pocket. “Saw this in L.A. and figured you might appreciate it.”

I flipped the box open, staring at the charm of entwined skates that hung on a silver necklace.

The letters *WWHS* are engraved on the front.

“WWHS?” I ask. “What does that mean?”

“It means you can cut down on calling me with so many questions because you can just ask yourself, ‘What would Hayden say?’” He motions for me to flip it over. “And then,



once you disregard that advice and fail, you can get a head start on hearing me say, I told you so.”

“Thank you for officially giving me the worst gift I’ve ever received.”

“You’re welcome.” He motions for me to turn around so he can clasp it around my neck. Then his eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“You’re all that Travis talks about,” he says. “He really measures every move he makes with you in mind, and I think you should cut him some slack. He lost his parents, too.”

I nod. “Okay.”

“Good.” He walks over to the tower and picks up one of the swans, reading the words aloud. *“Sometimes I feel torn with myself over liking a woman as beautiful as you. Someone who is so close to him. I really like you and I appreciate how you bring him around. Always.”*

“Seriously, Penelope?” He shakes his head. “How the hell could you not see that he was gay after reading this shit?”

EIGHT

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

I woke up in Hayden’s guest suite with a throbbing headache and a dry throat. The memories from last night were tumbling through my mind in an embarrassing rose hue that matched the champagne I abused.

An image of Simon helping me into a black car and carrying me past Hayden’s security guards kept playing on a loop. And I desperately wanted to believe that him seeing me drunk out of my mind was a dream and not a memory.

*I can’t believe I drank that much.*

“Ugh, why.” I groaned and rolled over to look out the window. The sky was still dark, and the sun had yet to peak over The Triborough Bridge.

On the nightstand next to me lay two bottles of chilled orange juice, aspirin, and a handwritten note.

*Working on the apology letters all day today.*

*Join me when you wake up—because we have a deal.*

*(Only if you’re 100% sober.)*

*—Hayden*

I tossed off the covers and unzipped my dress, letting the silk hit the floor.

After taking a long shower, I rummaged through the drawer that I kept at his place. Pulling on a pair of leggings and a Team USA sweatshirt, I followed the scent of freshly brewed coffee to the kitchen.

Surrounded by printed sheets and envelopes, Hayden was sipping from a cup at the breakfast bar.

“Hey.” I cleared my throat, and he looked up at me.

“Hey. Are you sober yet?”

“If I say no, can I sleep in for the rest of the day?”

“No.” He motioned for me to take a seat next to him. Then he slid a stack of cards toward me. “I finished these already. I just need you to look over them.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t take all of your advice last night.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “You typically do that in the beginning with all your boyfriends, so I would’ve been surprised if you’d done otherwise.”

“Did I say anything embarrassing while he was here?”

“Embarrassing? No.” His lips curved into a smirk. “Highly inappropriate? *Yes.*”

“What the hell did I say?”

“Nothing he’ll ever know.”

“Do you think he’ll ever call since I got smashed on our first date?”

“He didn’t seem to be put off by it when he tried to kiss you.”

“Well, good.” I let out a breath. “What did you think of him? Honestly.”

“He needs to hire a better tailor.”

“I’m serious, Hayden.” I punched his shoulder.

“We didn’t talk much, but he seems decent.”

“Great. I need to ask you about a few things he mentioned while we were—”

“I don’t think so.” He pressed a finger against my lips and my heart skipped a beat at his touch.

*The alcohol must be coursing through my veins still.*

“We’re talking about my letters for the next few hours.” He looked into my eyes. “And then I’ll let you waste my time by talking about Prince Charming. Deal?”

“Deal.”

EIGHT (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

A few hours later, I circled a typo and looked up at Hayden.

“So, you trashed a penthouse suite at the Marriott when we weren’t talking... So badly that the manager had to replace everything except the drapes?” I made sure I was reading his “Reasons I Need to Apologize” list correctly. “Why would you do something like that?”

“It’s a long story.” He handed me a check. “Put this in there before you seal it.”

“Will do. You know, I think it may be best if I just write a set of templates that you can adjust so you won’t have to spend so much time coming up with new things to say.”

“If two people get the same letter, they’ll get even more upset than they already are.”

“I’ll set it up so the words won’t repeat.” I opened my laptop. “I learned how to do this in a motivational speaking class. Trust me.”

“As long as Lawrence never finds out.”

“He won’t.”

Before I could start a fresh pot of coffee, my phone sounded with a new call. Simon.

I stared at the screen as it buzzed against the table. “Should I answer it?”

“Depends.” He crossed his arms. “Will you promise to accept my suggestion?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He picked up my phone and tossed it onto the couch. “No. You don’t answer the phone the first time he calls you. You can answer it if he calls you a second time, though.”

“Why wouldn’t he just wait for me to call him back?”

He shot me a pointed look.

“Fine.” I held up my hands in a surrender. “I won’t pick up unless he calls a second time.”

“Good girl.” He pointed to his list. “Back to work.”

I crafted forty different templates and downed an entire pot of coffee over the next couple of hours. I didn’t look at my phone or dare to pick it up, even when Hayden disappeared a few times to take phone calls.

It wasn’t until Sarah arrived with lunch that my impatience nearly got the best of me.

“Simon Gaines is a pretty hot guy,” she said, handing me a covered tray. “But you know you can’t have two hot guys swooning all over you at the same time. It’s really unfair, now that I think about it. You’re pretty, but you’re not *that* pretty.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Sarah?”

“Nothing.” She smiled. “I’m just enjoying how I get to spend my weekend getting a custom lunch order for my boss and his best friend. It’s not like I have a life of my own.”

“You can have the rest of the day off.” Hayden looked up at her. “Thank you for complaining about your easy-ass job as always.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Hunter.” She rushed out of the room.

“You really need to fire her,” “I really need to fire her,” we said in unison, laughing.



As I was picking up a fork, my phone buzzed against the sofa.

Without thinking, I stood up and rushed over to see who it was. Simon, again.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hey there, gorgeous.” There was a smile in his voice. “Are you still recovering from your hangover?”

“Maybe.”

He laughed. “Well, in that case, I’m calling to beg you for a second date.”

“Really?” Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. “When?”

“Tomorrow, if you can,” he said. “I’m hosting a second welcome party in the Hamptons. Would you be able to make it?”

“Um...” I looked over at Hayden. “Hold on a second, let me check something.”

“Sure.”

I made sure to hit the mute button. “He wants to take me on a second date in the Hamptons tomorrow. What should I say?”

“That normal people have jobs and can’t party with their blast from the past every night.”

“You know that’s super hypocritical coming from you, Mr. Untamed Playboy of Manhattan, right?”

He leaned back in his chair and laughed. “You should go with him. Tell him yes.”

I un-muted the call. “Sorry about that. I can come.”

“Great. I’d offer to pick you up, but I already promised my guys I would drive. Can I arrange for a town car to pick you up instead?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll have Hayden bring me.”

“Hmmm.” He paused. “Okay, then. I’ll text you the address and start time.”

“I had a great time with you on the yacht,” I said, hoping that his “Hmmm” wasn’t bound to lead down a familiar road I didn’t want to travel.

“Me too,” he said. “Although, I have to warn you. Once word gets out that my firm is here, you may see a few photogs trailing us here or there. I mean, if you’re still going out on dates with me, that is.”

“They won’t bother me at all.” I bit my tongue before I said, ‘I’m used to photogs with Hayden.’ “Trust me.”

“Tell me why your last relationship didn’t work,” he said suddenly, catching me off guard.

“What?”

“Your last relationship,” he repeated. “I’m curious as to why any sane guy would ever let you go.”

“It’s complicated,” I said, blushing. “It’s also a long story.”

“I have all day.”

I blushed again. “He just wasn’t right for me. We dated six months and he was harboring resentment over something stupid the entire time. Something that he knew about from the beginning.”

“You mean, the fact that your best male friend is a super successful CEO with a bad-boy reputation?”

“Yes.” I smiled. “*That.*”

“Well, so you know, that doesn’t bother me in the slightest.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Most of my friends fell off once I started getting obsessed with my work and it was hard to find new ones. I think it’s good to have a loyal friend like that in your life.”

“I think my obsession with skating cost me the chance of making a lot of friends, too. I don’t regret it in the slightest, though.”

“You shouldn’t,” he said. “You accomplished almost everything you wanted from your career, right?”

Just like at the yacht party, one simple question evolved into an hours-long conversation about everything and nothing all at once. I wasn’t second-guessing my answers or putting up boundaries like I usually did when I was pursuing someone new.

It was all natural and easy, smooth and sweet.

I didn’t even care that Hayden ate my lunch and literally lifted me up mid-convo to carry me back into the guest suite so he could focus.

In the middle of Simon telling me about his favorite places to eat in Florida, his assistant interrupted.

“Can I call you back within the hour?” he asked. “This will be quick, I promise.”

“Absolutely.” I ended the call and returned to the kitchen, stopping when I saw Hayden dressed in nothing but a pair of black briefs.

He was standing in front of the stove, letting droplets of water trickle down from his freshly showered hair and onto his perfectly chiseled chest.

He flipped a pancake before looking at me. “Are you finally done talking to Simon about your favorite Disney movies, or is there a part two for that riveting topic of discussion?”

“You were eavesdropping?”

“I walked by to shut the door. You want three or four pancakes?”

“I want you to put some clothes on.”

“In my own damn house?” He smirked. “Three or four?”

“Four. And yes, in your own damn house.”

He laughed and grabbed a pair of sweats from a chair, pulling them on. “Better?”

“Much.” I took out the syrup. “I need a favor.”

“Then you need to write some more letters for me.”

“Can you drive me to the Hamptons tomorrow?” I asked.  
“Preferably early in the morning so we can beat the traffic?”

He looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“I’ll give you some gas money,” I said.

“A full tank of gas in my Maserati costs two hundred dollars.”

“That’s not your only car.”

“It costs more in the Bugatti. Those are your cheapest options.”

“Can’t you buy a Honda or a Prius between now and then?”

He laughed. “I thought you had a session at the rink tomorrow with that Olympic hopeful.”

“I’ll call to reschedule.” I shrugged. “She’s only looking for feedback.”

“I’ll drive you, but under the condition that you don’t reschedule on her again,” he said. “You hated when your coaches did that to you, and I still have the angry text messages and voicemails to prove it.”

I stared at him, hating that he knew me so damn well. That he was taking me on a well-deserved guilt-trip.

“I’ll ask Tatiana to show up in my place,” I said. “She’s been itching to see good skating for a while.”

“Good idea.” He turned off the stove. “Be ready to leave at four. How much longer before you can get back to the letters?”

“Simon’s calling me within the hour.”

“Okay, well no pancakes for you. Just letters until he calls.” He took a bite of my stack and slid a pen toward me. “You’re welcome.”

NINE

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*The following morning*

“**H**ave I ever told you that you’re a terrible driver?” Penelope looked over at me as I steered my Audi through the back streets. “The speed limit is sixty-five and you’ve been going ninety this entire time.”

“If you like, we can switch seats and you can drive.”

“I actually *would* like that.”

“Tough shit, it was sarcasm.” I laughed and switched lanes. “How long did you and lover-boy stay on the phone last night?”

“Three hours. He’s had his heart broken in some pretty awful ways like me. Want to hear about it?”

“Sure,” I said, with no intent on listening to a single word she said.

I’d thought that working on the letters and chatting about ‘Prince Charming’ would be enough to stop the dirty images that were still flooding my brain from the night before, but I was wrong.

Dead wrong.

To make matters worse, she’d decided to get into my car wearing nothing but a bright red bikini top and light jean shorts that might as well have been panties.

I was playing my best game of restraint with every curve I steered, wondering where the hell my best friend who previously wore oversized T-shirts and jeans to parties had gone. My best friend who didn't arouse me every time I looked at her...

"What do you think about that?" Her voice interrupted my thoughts. "His fiancé dumped him the day that they were walking through the wedding venue."

"Sounds terrible."

"Yeah, it's really sad."

"Long-term commitment only leads to disappointment," I said. "Someone like him should've known better."

"Of course." She rolled her eyes. "I guess that's what makes you, *you*. You're a good muse for a late-night orgasm in bed, but a terrible template for a boyfriend."

"You touch yourself while thinking of me?"

"It was an analogy, Hayden."

"I think there's a hidden meaning behind it." I looked over at her as we pulled up to a red light. "You can be honest with me, you know."

"I honestly think that you're full of yourself, and if I'd known that you had over a thousand apology letters to write, I would've never agreed to help you."

"Then you probably would've spent the entire yacht party in the bathroom. You're still welcome for that, by the way."

She didn't have a rebuttal for that.

I steered the car around the corner and stomped on the brake once I saw what was ahead.

"What the hell?" Penelope sucked in a breath.

Miles of bumper-to-bumper traffic lay ahead of us, cars full of people with the same idea, killing her initial plan to get there early.

*Or on time.*

“Should I text Simon and tell him I’ll be three hours late?” She sighed. “I don’t see me getting there any sooner.”

“No,” I said, steering the car out of the lane and making a U-turn. “I’ll park at the garage and we’ll walk to one of my beach rentals. I’ll have Roger fly via helicopter to check on it, and then I’ll get someone else to bring me a different car so I can drive back home.”

“Do you ever stop and realize how ridiculously wealthy you are?”

“I do, but my best friend isn’t the slightest bit impressed.” I smiled. I drove under the underpass that led to a private garage.

Penelope grabbed my baseball cap and sunglasses from the backseat and handed them to me. “Here. I don’t want to risk too many women trying to distract you.”

“The beach on this side is empty.” I motioned for her to follow me across the lane and down to the sand.

We walked in silence for the first half-mile, with nothing but the sound of waves slapping the shore between us.

“You should get laid soon,” she said out of nowhere.

“Excuse me?”

“You haven’t had sex in months and I think it’s affecting you on a deeper level.”

“This coming from a woman who consistently fakes it in bed?”

“My moans are real.”

“Your orgasms aren’t.”

“I’m just saying.” She looked up at me. “You’re a lot more easygoing when you’re getting laid. Speaking of which, does your seven-date rule apply for me and Simon since I already know who he is?”

“I think you can fuck him whenever you want,” I said. “However, knowing you, you’ll probably wait until he tells you that he cares about you.”



“If that was the case, I would’ve slept with you a long time ago.”

“Penelope, you and I wouldn’t be compatible in bed.”

“Because your ego would be bruised when you realized I’m faking it?”

“You wouldn’t be faking it with me.”

“I think every guy says that.”

“I think I *mean* that.” I stopped walking and stared at her.

Then, because I needed a reason to get into the ocean and hide my hard-on, I picked her up and tossed her into an oncoming wave.

“Seriously?” She laughed and screamed, swallowing a mouthful of saltwater.

“You deserved that,” I said. “Any other bad hot takes you want to share?”

“I think you’re all bark and no bite when it comes to how good you are in bed.”

I pushed her into a wave again and joined her in the water.

As she attacked me with armfuls of heavy splashes, I realized that getting her into this water was a terrible idea.

Her bikini top was thin enough for me to see her nipples through the fabric.

*Fuck.*

She suddenly kicked a huge splash of water onto my face, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“I’m going to make you regret that.” I picked her up and tossed her over my shoulder with ease. Then I threw her down into the water again and again.

When she finally surrendered, she climbed onto my back.

“You can’t possibly pick me up and throw me into the water this way, Penelope.”

“I’m not trying to.” She wrapped her legs around my waist from behind. Then she pressed her breasts against my back.

“I think I sprained my ankle,” she said. “Can you carry me for a little while?”

*Can you promise to stop being so obliviously fucking sexy?*  
“Of course.”



BY THE TIME we made it to my rental house, we were both soaking wet and my Hamptons’ contact was pulling a car into the driveway for my return trip to New York.

Setting Penelope down near the pool, I handed her a few towels.

“Unless you want to show up to his event drenched, there’s a dryer in the back.”

“I know.” She dabbed her face. “I’ll shower first.”

“If he doesn’t offer to take you home, call me and I’ll come back,” I said. “But then you’ll have to immediately stop talking to him. If he’s truly into you after all this time, he’ll want to spend as much time with you as possible.”

“Noted.” She stepped back, and I tried not to stare too hard at her nipples.

*Are they hard?*

“Also,” I said, crossing my arms, “just in case he does take you home and you start penning your fairytale later tonight, do not call me to recap his party.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because whenever we’re on the phone mid-recap, the guy typically calls you, Penelope,” I said, heading toward the door. “Let him call you and talk to him first. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Well, thank you for everything. You’re being quite the gentleman today.”

*No, I'm showing impressive restraint.*

NINE (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

I shook the sand from my shoes the following morning, smiling as I remembered how sweet Simon was to me yesterday.

Honestly, his second party wasn't much to write home about. All his executive buddies drank beers and relaxed on beach chairs while he introduced me to them one by one.

His insistence on the introductions was the type of not-so-subtle approach that Hayden often called the 'See how hot my girl is?' move. It was a silent power play, but it boded well for us since I knew he wasn't trying to downplay his interest in me while in front of his friends.

Making sure the last of the sand was gone, I put on my shoes and grabbed my bag.

"I'll be back, Tatiana!" I called out. "I'll bring you a muffin!"

"Blueberry, please!"

I opened my front door and found myself face to face with Simon and a beautiful vase filled with red roses.

"Um, hey, Simon." I blushed.

"Hey, Penelope." He smiled. "I uh, I hope this doesn't come off like I'm stalking you or anything, but I was wondering if I could take you out for some coffee? I feel like I

spent more time talking *about* you to my team than actually talking to you yesterday.”

I was utterly speechless.

“I mean, if you can’t join me, I totally understand. I can ask you out another day.”

“No, I can totally come with you.” I reached for the flowers. “Let me put these in the kitchen, and I’ll be right out.”

“Okay, great.”

I rushed inside and snapped a picture of the flowers. Then I called Hayden.

“Yes, Penelope?” he answered on the first ring.

“Guess who got me flowers?”

“Guess who owes me some apology letters?”

“Prince Charming.” I avoided his sarcasm. “I sent you a picture. What do you think?”

“I think he spent over a hundred dollars on those, so he’s not cheap like The One Who Thought Ramen Noodles Were Italian.”

“I think The One Who Stole Starbucks might have him beat.”

We both laughed.

“He just showed up to my place and asked me out for coffee,” I said. “I agreed before realizing that I didn’t ask you if that was a good idea.”

“It’s a great idea,” he said. “It’s just coffee. You do have a client in a few hours, so you can’t stay that long anyway.”

“Good point. What are you doing?”

“Watching Lawrence glare at me for answering your call in the middle of an important meeting.”

“How hard is it for you to call Hayden *after* five in the afternoon, Penelope?” Lawrence called out. “Do I need to buy you a watch? Doesn’t your phone tell time?”

I snorted. “Sorry. I’ll let you get back to it.”

“Wait,” he said. “One quick thing. Since he’s a hedge fund guy, he may be the type that likes emailing and texting all day, so don’t do that with him. At least, not too much.”

“Why not?”

“You need to make him work for you,” he said. “He needs to call and show up in person. Plus, for whatever reason, you and emails don’t tend to do well when it comes to relationships.”

“They work with *you*.”

“I’m an exception.” He laughed. “Don’t send him an email or get involved in too much texting until you’ve been dating him for a few weeks, okay? Trust me.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later.” I ended the call and returned outside to Simon.

“Ready for coffee?” He asked.

“Yep.”

“You know,” he said as we stepped onto the sidewalk. “I wanted to text you before coming over here, but I’m an old school guy at heart and I don’t like too many digital things in a real relationship. I hope you’re okay with that.”

I smiled. I couldn’t wait to tell Hayden.

“I’m more than okay with that.”

# BREAKUP #9



THE ONE THAT SENT AN EMAIL/THE ONE THAT ALMOST  
GOT ITALIAN DINNER



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

**S**ubject: Us

Dear Penelope,

I've been thinking A LOT lately, and these past few months with you have been pretty fucking awesome.

I really like your vibe and all, but I don't think that this long-distance thing will work for me.

You spend more time at practice/on the ice than you do with me, and I don't think I'm built for all the traveling you do, so yeah...

I don't want us to be over AT ALL, I'm just asking for some space until you have more time for me.

Good luck at Skate Canada next month.

Ryan

SUBJECT: **Fwd: Us**

Yo.

You think this was a good enough message to end things with Miss "Too Good to Fuck"?

Kind of feel bad since she's a nice girl, but she was on some bullshit "7 date rule" and didn't even offer to suck my dick while I waited on her to give me pussy. I took her out to eat five times and she didn't even think about giving me her mouth once.

If she'd done that, maybe I'd have more of an incentive to stop messing around with Maya.

Let me know if you're still planning to head to the Alpha Party tonight.

I'm going to Maya's first.

Ryan

HAYDEN'S LIPS turn up into a smirk as he reads over my ex's accidental email for the third time in a row. He's read it in a different accent each time—Russian, British, and Italian—as if that somehow softens the impact of the words.

"Okay," he says, returning my phone. "I think that's enough. There's only thing left for me to say about this breakup."

"Don't you dare say it, Hayden." I narrow my eyes at him. "Keep that shitty-ass line of commentary to yourself."

"Why?" He smiles. "He's been calling your relationship 'long-distance' when you live thirty minutes away from each other. That was a red-flag from day one."

"I still don't want to hear you say it. Not right now."

"Okay, well—" He taps his fingers against the steering wheel. "I won't dare hurt your feelings any further by saying I fucking told you so."

"Ugh." I roll my eyes. "Thanks for being so mature."

"You're welcome. For the record, the next time a guy tells you that he needs space, he's just trying to be gentle about breaking up with you."

"Noted." I look outside the window, wondering if he's ever going to start the car.

We've been sitting here for hours.

"How much longer do we have to sit here and stare at your ex-girlfriend's house?" I ask.

"She was never my girlfriend," he says. "I just liked her a lot."

I tap my foot.

The woman in question is—well, *was*—a member of his app team. And she's the first woman who managed to get him to go out on ten dates in a row.

A record that will probably never be broken.

"I just don't understand why we're sitting out here staring at a house," I say. "Like—"

"She's in there fucking the new guy I just hired to the team." He interrupts. "He's engaged and she's fucking him. I had my suspicions, but I needed to see it for myself."

I look over and notice that the red Bronco from his other teammate is parked on the side of the street.

"I was planning to make her an Italian dinner if I was wrong about it," he says. "Oh well."

"All those grocery bags in the back were for her? Not you?"

He doesn't answer me.

"Do you want me to give you some breakup advice?" I ask.

"Not at all, Penelope."

"I'm going to give you some anyway." I clear my throat and look at him. "I think that we should drive to Wal-Mart and buy the best brand of box cutters. Then we should slash her and the new guy's tires. After that, you should send his fiancée an anonymous text via the Block Sender app with a picture of his car parked in her driveway. Then you should fire her via text with the same thoughtfulness that she gave you, and after that, you can use all those groceries to make *me* an Italian dinner. I'll probably feel starved by then."

“Are you being serious, Pen?” He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “That is by far the pettiest, immaturely stunted, and ridiculous advice that you could ever give someone in this situation.”

“I didn’t mean for it to come off that way,” I say. “I know that you’d never do any of that. I was trying to lighten the mood and make you laugh.”

“There’s nothing funny about this,” he says, pausing. “Because we don’t need to go all the way to Wal-Mart for a great box cutter. The gas station around the corner sells plenty of those.”

“Oh?” I smile. “Do you already have the Block Sender App, then?”

“I will in a few seconds.” He hands me his cell phone. “Download that for me, please.”

“Will do. Um, does this mean that you’re making me the Italian dinner once we’re finished? Are we following that part of my suggestion, too?”

“Don’t fucking push it.”

TEN

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Hell Has Frozen Over: Hayden Hunter is Actually Apologizing*

*Hayden Hunter, Untamed Playboy of Manhattan, Recent  
Revealer of D\*ck Pics, Wants Us to Know He's "Sorry" Now*

*The Allure of Handwritten Letters: How Hayden Hunter Is  
Bringing It Back to Life*

*Hayden Hunter's Apology Letter to Hilton Hotels Revealed:  
Details Inside!*

*Ten Reasons Why We're Skeptical of Hayden Hunter's  
Apologies (Just Give Us More D\*ck Pics!)*

ELEVEN

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

“Sarah, have you heard from Penelope today?” I looked up the moment she stepped into my office Monday morning.

“Why would she ever call me when she talks to you twenty times a day?”

“It’s a yes or no question.”

“It’s a pretty *stupid* question.” She smiled and set the latest copy of The New York Post on my desk. “The CEO of The Williams Company leaked your letter this morning. He still hates you, but he wants you to know that you’re forgiven for being an ass years ago.”

“It’s a yes or no question,” I repeated myself.

“Mr. Walsh from Tinder is currently giving a brand-new interview on Good Morning America and he says that he doesn’t want an apology letter from you. He wants a confession.”

“He’s not even on my list.”

“Thank you for finally joining me on this conversation topic.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve personally sent ‘Thank You’ packages to everyone who RSVP’d ‘Yes’ to your charity gala, and I sent one to myself since you have a problem saying that phrase to me.”



“Your paycheck says it loud and clear.”

“The fireworks coordinator is calling me in an hour via video-chat to give me a preview of the show based on your ideas. Would you like to join us?”

“Not at all.”

“I figured.” She shrugged. “Well, that’s all I have for you at this moment.”

I stared at her.

“We’re off to a fabulous Monday here at Cinder, Mr. Hunter,” she said. “It’s nice to have actual business things on my agenda instead of personal things for a change. Although, yes, I will be sure to deliver the second wardrobe to Penelope’s brownstone this afternoon. No need to ask me for that.”

*No, really. Why haven’t I fired you?*

I tapped my fingers against my desk as she smiled and silently dared me to do it.

“Oh, and I remembered something...” She pulled a yellow post-it from her pocket. “Penelope called me an hour ago since your phone kept going to voicemail. She said she needs a raincheck for dinner tonight because Simon is taking her to—” She squinted, then she tossed me the paper. “I can’t read the rest. I guess I scribbled it down too fast.”

“Why couldn’t you say that before?”

“Because I’m desperately waiting for you to threaten to fire me so Lawrence can offer me another big bonus to come back.” She smiled. “Is there anything else that I can do for you today?”

It took everything in me not to say what I really wanted to say. “No, thank you, Sarah. Please be sure that the next set of letters are sent off today.”

“Will do, Mr. Hunter.” She took her time walking out of my office.

I glanced at the post-it and read her handwriting just fine.

*Please tell Hayden that I need a raincheck for our usual dinner tonight.*

*Simon showed up at the rink and invited me to fly down to Miami for dinner.*

***P.S.:*** *Could you please NOT pretend like I didn't call and tell you this? Like, for once... Could you NOT make things difficult?*

TWELVE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*A few days later*

**M**e: Hey! Why does it feel like we haven't talked in forever?

**Hayden:** Because it's been five days. That's a record for us. How was Miami?

**Me:** Soooo effin beautiful. He owns a residency building right on the beach and he gave me a private walkthrough. He wanted to stay a few nights (separate suites), but I thought that would mean moving too fast. Right?

**Hayden:** Right.

**Hayden:** Feel like catching up at Central Park later?

**Me:** Can't. Simon is hosting a party at the top of the Empire State Building. It's a "Thank You" event for his top executives, and he invited me as his date \*blushing emoji\*

**Hayden:** Are you sure that Simon has a real job? When exactly does he work, if he has all this free time to fly you around and throw parties?

**Me:** That is so beyond ironic coming from you. (Did you receive the twenty apology letters I emailed?)

**Hayden:** How so? I'm a changed man now. (Yes.)

**Me:** You're a changing\* man, but you're still a womanizing asshole. LOL. I'll call you once I get home. I'll tell you all about it.

TWELVE (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**S**he didn't call.

She didn't even text.

All she did was send me a "raincheck" email.

For three days in a row.

This wasn't quite the five-day record we'd just set, but it was unusual all the same. Even when she'd dated boyfriends in the past, they never took up this much of her time in the beginning.

They received her mornings or her afternoons, and I received the rest. The *best*.

I wasn't sure why, but in all the time since we'd become friends, I felt like I was undergoing the oncoming symptoms of withdrawal.

And I didn't like it.

THIRTEEN



PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**A** couple of years ago, I unknowingly created one of my top enemies in this city. I was attending an opening night at Gershwin Theater and speaking to an undercover reporter.

At intermission, she said, “What do you think so far?” and I said, “I’ve seen better high school productions.” The following day, *The New York Times* ran my picture along with “Hayden Hunter Unimpressed with Opening Night” as a lead story, and it caught fire.

The play was deemed D.O.A.—dead on arrival—and the production lost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Ever since then, the director took out a full-page ad at the back of *The Post* with “Hayden Hunter is an Asshole” and a new picture of me.

Sighing, I looked over the last lines of his letter before tucking it into an envelope. As I was making sure the address was centered, my phone buzzed with a text.

**Penelope:** Can I have a raincheck tonight?

**Me:** Another one?

**Penelope:** I just sent you 20 letters.

**Me:** In that case, I’ll write as many rainchecks as you like.

I shut my inbox and decided to deliver the letter to the theater personally.



“HAYDEN! LOOK OVER HERE!” “Any comment on your pictures?” “Any word on Tinder?” The photogs yelled after me as I stepped out of my car.

I ignored them and made my way to the V.I.P. entrance. Before I could ask the hostess to direct me to the executive box, Mr. Lewis stepped in front of me.

“Well, well, well,” he said, crossing his arms. “Glad to see you here to insult my work all over again. We’re sold out tonight and the second act is almost over.”

“I’m not here to watch your show.” I pulled the envelope from my breast pocket. “I’m here to say sorry.”

He stepped back, looking scared to take it from me. “What type of poison did you put on the pages?”

“None.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s a goddamn apology, and it’s one of the ones I wrote by hand. I didn’t mean to affect your production back then, even if it *was* a shitty play with the most terrible acting I’d ever seen.”

“Seriously?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything publicly about it.” I held out the letter again. “I’m sorry.”

He stared at me for a few seconds before taking the envelope. “Can we bury the hatchet without me reading a word of this?”

“How so?”

“Well, um...” He looked nervous. “We’re doing well box-office wise so far, but I think we’d do even better if you were spotted here and maybe made a comment about how you love it so much that you had to stop by just to see your favorite part.”

“Sold.” I snatched the envelope back. “I’ll make an appearance at the bar during the intermission.”

“Thank you.” He snapped his fingers. “Brenda, can you get Mr. Hunter a drink and escort him up to the bar area?”

“Absolutely.” A redhead suddenly appeared at my side. “Follow me, Mr. Hunter.”

“Is this play any good?” I asked. “Be honest.”

She blushed, ignoring my question. “I saw your pictures online.”

“That’s nice. Is this play any good?”

“I saved them in my phone.” She lowered her voice. “I touch myself to them at night. Usually, I have to switch my porn videos after a few viewings, but I’ve been using your pictures for two weeks straight now. You have a gift. Feel like giving it to me later?”

I ignored her until we reached the top of the steps.

“I’ll get you a drink.” She pulled out her phone, snapped a selfie with me without permission, and disappeared.

I knew that drink wasn’t coming anytime soon, so I signaled for the bartender.

“Yes, sir? What can I get you?”

“Scotch on the rocks, please,” I said. “It’s on the owner’s tab.”

He nodded and made it within seconds.

The doors to the theater opened for intermission shortly after, sending audience members into the bar area.

I turned my head and nearly dropped my drink at the sight of Penelope. She was a vision in a tightly fitted top with a plunging neckline that cut below her breasts.

She was utterly oblivious to the way every man was stealing glances of her, completely unaware of how she was the center of attention without even trying.

*She didn’t tell me she was coming here tonight.*

Picking up my drink, I walked over to her.

“Hey,” I whispered into her ear from behind. “You look good.”

“Thank you.” She turned around to face me. “You do, too. I mean, as always.”

Silence.

“Did you come here by yourself?” I asked.

“No, this was another spur of the moment surprise from Simon,” she said. “We were talking Broadway and I told him that I’ve always wanted to see *Wicked*.”

*You’ve never told me that.*

“He showed up with yellow roses and told me I had an hour to get ready. I didn’t have time to put on any makeup.”

“You’ve never needed it.” I looked her up and down and she blushed. “You forgot to do something else, though.”

“What?”

“Here.” I gently grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a corner. I slid my hand around her neck—feeling her skin heat at my touch.

“Hayden...” She looked into my eyes and her cheeks flushed red. “What are you doing?”

I tore off the small price tag from her shirt and crumpled it. Then I pushed it down deep into her pants pocket.

“Oh.” She swallowed. “Why are you here? This director hates you.”

“I’m well aware.” I held back a laugh. “I came here to deliver my apology, but he asked me for a favor instead.”

“How nice of you.” She lowered her voice. “His first play really did suck, though.”

“I know. Is this one better?”

“It’s beyond amazing.”

“You look really good, Penelope.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. “I mean that.”

We stood staring at each other in silence, struggling for a new line of conversation for some reason. The thoughts running through my head were an insult to the word “inappropriate” and I wasn’t looking at her like she was “just my best friend” at all right now.

*She’s your best friend’s younger sister... Your best friend’s younger sister... Travis’s little sister...*

“Mr. Hunter?” A woman suddenly stepped in front of us. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’m Myra Tate from *Vanity Fair*, and I’ve been trying to get a comment from you for months on the new Tinder lawsuit. I know this is probably unethical, but I can’t help but ask if I could borrow a few minutes of your time tonight.”

Penelope glared in her direction, looking as annoyed as I felt about her intrusion.

“Here,” I said, pulling the envelope from my pocket. “Here’s a better story for you. It’s an exclusive.”

She took it from my hands and walked away as quickly as she’d appeared.

I returned my attention to Penelope, getting aroused at her puffy pink lips all over again.

“Are you going back to his place tonight?” I asked.

“Probably.” She stepped closer, lowered her voice. “We’re not having sex.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“You would’ve told me.”

Before I could ask her anything else, Simon moved between us and slipped his arm around her waist. He kissed her cheek and whispered, “Sorry for leaving you alone. Good evening, Hayden.” He smiled at me. “Nice to see you again.”

“Likewise.” I extended my hand. “I’ve been hearing good things.”

“Most of them are true.” He smiled. “We have reservations at The Murray across town after this. I’d invite you to join us, but I’ve heard that they’re sticklers when it comes to sticking to the reservation number.”

“I’m sure they’ll make an exception for *the owner*.”

“Oh. Well, in that case... ” He pressed a kiss against Penelope’s cheek. “Want to join us after the play?”

“Looking forward to it.”



I MADE it to The Murray and requested the table right next to the windows. I wasn’t sure why I agreed to this; I never wanted to be around any of her boyfriends.

*Probably just to see her lips again.*

As I was ordering glasses of water for the three of us, a roar sounded on my left. A bright red Ferrari swerved a U-turn in the middle of the street, swinging its way into a spot.

Simon stepped out of the car and walked over to Penelope’s side.

The patrons at the window “oohed” and “ahhed” as he helped her out. Photogs snapped pictures as people whispered and wondered about who they were.

Penelope’s eyes met mine and they made their way over.

*You are really fucking gorgeous.* I stared at her as she walked.

I stood up to pull out the seat next to me, but Simon pulled out the other one. The one *across* from me.

He took the one between us.

“Was the second half of the play as good as the first?” I asked.

“It was all phenomenal,” Pen said. “Ten-star show.”

“Nice to know. I’ll have to get tickets someday.”

“Penelope was telling me that you own the IMAX Theater in Times Square,” Simon said it as more of a question. “You also dabble in real estate and restaurant chains?”

“Yeah,” I said. “My advisor suggested that I do that years ago.”

“I wish I could branch out like that.” He smiled. “My investors want me to focus on the fund and nothing else, but maybe one day they’ll let me.”

Thankfully, the waiter appeared before I could respond to that. She set down menus and a basket of bread, rattling off the chef’s special for the night.

“Will this be one check or three, Mr. Hunter?” she asked.

“*One*,” Simon and I said in unison.

“You should let me pay for it,” he said, placing a roll onto Penelope’s plate. “I mean, I was planning to treat Penelope to dinner anyway.”

“Fair enough.” I looked at the waitress. “One check.”

“I’ll return shortly to take down your orders.” She walked away.

“I’d like the oysters,” Penelope said, standing to her feet. “I’ll be back.” She shot me two winks and a smile, our shared “Check him out for me” signal before stepping away from the table.

We both stared at her until she disappeared around the corner.

“So,” Simon said, clearing his throat. “Penelope was telling me that you have an obsession with watches. I couldn’t help but notice the Yachtmaster on your wrist. Is that one of your favorites?”

“Yes.” I picked up my water. “Are you into watches, as well?”

“Very much so.” He held out his wrist. His watch was the same as mine with a few adjustments.

“Very nice.” I was impressed. “How long did it take the designers to craft that?”

“Longer than I expected, but their new designer is a friend of mine,” he said. “She lets me have access to all of the newest ones before release.”

I raised my eyebrow. None of the watch designers I knew would let any customer request adjustments *before* the accessory was released. No matter how wealthy he or she was.

“Don’t tell anyone.” He must’ve read my mind. “She’s not supposed to do that and the design house would let her go if it got out.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I said. “She’s willing to risk her status, just because you’re *friends*?”

“Because her husband is my friend and I’m the reason they’re married,” he said. “It’s strictly platonic. Are you and Penelope like that?”

“Married?”

“Platonic.”

“She’s dating you, isn’t she?”

He picked up his glass and took a slow sip.

“Nice Ferrari,” I said, needing to change the subject.

“Thank you. I saw your car collection in *GQ* this month. I was shocked that you didn’t reveal any custom ones.”

“I like being subtle.”

“Right.” He laughed. “Well, I never want to share the same thing as another man. I like to always go custom and keep my things at a *far* reach from others.”

I tapped my fingers against the table, wishing that Penelope would hurry the hell up and come back before this turned into a full-scale pissing match.

“I read that you like scrappy investment firms in *Esquire*,” Simon said. “If you’re ever interested in investing some of your money in a hedge fund with small returns but great long-



term strategies, let me know. I manage three billion, which is a little more than what your company is worth, but I take on smaller clients, too.” He pulled out his business card and I let it hang in the air for a few seconds.

*Is he insinuating that he makes more money than me?*

“Thank you for the offer,” I said, taking it. “I’ll be sure to check it out later this week, Simeon.”

“It’s *Simon*.”

“That’s what I said.”

Silence.

“Sorry I took so long.” Penelope returned to the table. “Have I missed anything exciting?”

“No,” Simon and I said in unison.

I cleared my throat and stood up from the table. “I realized that I have something to do for Lawrence tonight,” I said. “It was nice meeting you, Simon. I’ll see you tomorrow morning for brunch at Wagner’s, Penelope.”

“You might see me, too.” Simon smiled. “She mentioned wanting to show me that place, and tomorrow sounds more than perfect.”

I walked away before I could say anything else.

FOURTEEN

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

I knocked on the front door of Wagner's in the morning, hoping that Hayden's security detail were the only people inside and that I'd get a few minutes alone to myself.

*I fucking needed it...*

The moment I saw Hayden at the theater last night, the butterflies I'd felt for Simon lost a fight to something far more powerful in my chest when I saw *him*.

The sight of him in a custom-black, three-piece suit had always been lethal to me when I was prepared for it. But when it caught me off guard?

There were no words to adequately describe it.

He'd ruined the rest of the play for me.

During the second act, I wasn't witnessing the story on stage; I was envisioning Hayden pulling me into that corner all over again. Pressing his lips against mine and gripping my waist, claiming me in front of everyone and not giving a damn about any photogs that caught shots of us.

*He's your brother's best friend, your best friend, and the ultimate playboy. Snap out of it, Penelope.*

Those words were the only ones that seemed to lure some sense into my brain.

Letting out a breath, I knocked on the door again.

“Sorry about that, Miss Penelope.” Hayden’s lead guard opened the door. “Happy Saturday.”

“Happy Saturday.” I took off my sunglasses and noticed Hayden sitting in the back, looking sexy as ever in jeans and a black T-shirt.

He’d already ordered my favorites—beignets and strawberries—and he was sipping a cup of coffee.

“Hey.” His eyes met mine as I approached.

“Hey.”

“Where’s Simon?”

“He had a last minute meeting.”

As I took my seat, his security guard set a rose bouquet and a note between us.

“For you, Miss Penelope,” he said. “From a Mister Gaines.” He pulled a receipt from his pocket and handed it to Hayden. “Also, he, uh, prepaid for the two of you to have brunch today.”

“How very kind of him,” Hayden said, and we sat in silence for a few seconds after the guard walked away.

“How was the rest of your night with Simeon?” he asked.

“It’s *Simon*.” I picked up a fork. “It was good. How was the rest of yours?”

“Good... You didn’t call me when you made it home.”

“I didn’t think you were still awake. We went on a joyride in his Ferrari and he didn’t drop me off until three.”

“Since when do I not answer late night calls from you?”

“Right.” I swallowed. “Look. About last night—”

“What about it?”

“I don’t think I ever told you that I wanted to see *Wicked*,” I said. “I kept thinking about it over dinner, and I feel like I should’ve. Would you have sat through it with me?”

He gave me a look that answered that rhetorical question.

“I think we should spend some time together. I feel we haven’t hung out that much lately.”

“We haven’t.” He tapped his fingers against the table. “My apology tour and gala planning has picked up, though. That’s probably why.”

“Oh, yeah.” I’d almost forgotten about the gala. “Well, Simon is taking me down to Miami this week to hang out at Sunny Isles Beach, so how about the day after we get back?”

“I took you to Sunny Isles last year.”

“He’ll never know.” I smiled. “I play dumb, like you said, whenever he suggests something I’ve already done with you before. It’ll be my first time going with him, right?”

“Right.” He downed his coffee.

“He hasn’t asked me to be exclusive yet,” I said. “We’re just dating.”

“I know.”

“It was a question.”

“I didn’t hear the inflection.”

“Oh.” I cleared my throat. “Is it a problem that he hasn’t asked me to be exclusive yet?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I know you two have a history, but it’s only been a few weeks. You should give it a few more. You should also remember to hold up your half of our deal.”

“I have.” I pulled a few letters from my bag. “Thirteen, for all the members of a street symphony that you insulted for playing love songs you didn’t like. You asked for Taylor Swift’s ‘Clean’ and they played ‘Blank Space.’ In all fairness, I probably would’ve lost my shit, too.”

A smile spread across his face and the strange tension between us slowly dissolved.

“That’s not what happened,” he said. “But thank you.”

“I’m not sure I want to know anything else about what you were doing during our Cold War.” I picked up a beignet. “You

were always pretty petty, but each set of apologies is getting crazier and crazier.”

“The only thing you need to know about our Cold War is that you started it.”

“No, you started it.” I pointed my finger at him. “But I forgive you.”

He laughed and sipped his coffee. “Your brother is coming into town. Want to bring Simon along for lunch?”

“Never.” I rolled my eyes. “The earliest I’d introduce him to Travis is at the fight in Vegas, where he’ll be too distracted to grill the hell out of him. That’s why I’m glad I have you. You’re far more understanding about guys than Travis will ever be.”

“I see,” he said. “That’s what *best friends* do for each other, right?”

I wasn’t sure why, but it sounded like there was a bit of grit in his voice when he said “best friends” and I felt like he didn’t really mean that.

A part of me, one I couldn’t deny or explain, didn’t *want* him to mean it.

“Dinner tomorrow night at Central Park?” I said, shaking away the thought.

“How about the next night? Lawrence is making me do a mock deposition and I don’t know how long he’ll make me stay.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Central Park. Tuesday night.”

FIFTEEN

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Tuesday night*

“**Y**ou really need to get better at disguises,” a familiar, deep voice said from behind me. “Like, I knew it was you from miles away.”

I turned around to see Travis in shades and a hoodie. “No, I just need to fire Sarah for always letting you slip by.”

He laughed and sat next to me on the bench. “When you finally fire her, let me know so I can make her an offer to work for me.”

“You can’t afford her,” I said. “Why are you in town so early?”

“All the hype in Vegas is getting to me.” He pulled off his shades and sighed. “All this buildup and training for the fight is a bit overwhelming, you know? I feel like I can retire after this one, though.”

I didn’t bother responding to that. Every one of his fights was the one where he could “retire after this,” and there was no way he was giving it up without a good reason. Or death.

“I want to personally give you something,” he said. “Where’s Crown?”

*With Simon.* “Running late, as always.”



“I should’ve known.” He pulled a few glittering lanyards with sparkling badges from his pocket. His face was on one side and “The Punisher, Forever Undeclared” was on the other. “These are for you, Crown, and her roommate that shall not be named.”

“Tatiana hated you in the past, too?”

“Rightfully so.” He smiled. “You can each bring a plus-one if you like, but you have to get their names on the list a week before or they can’t come.”

“Noted.”

“I’ve heard about your apology tour.” He crossed his arms. “Will I receive one from you anytime soon?”

“You can have it right now,” I said. “I’m sorry you ever think that I’m apologizing to you for shit.”

We both laughed.

We sat on the bench talking for hours, as if things were how they once were, and before I knew it, it was almost midnight.

“Shit.” He looked at his watch. “I need to get back to my hotel. Are you allowed to go out or are you still on punishment with Lawrence?”

“It’s not punishment. It’s image-rehab.”

“Whatever you say.” He stood to his feet. “Come over for lunch when you have some free time this week. I’m here through Saturday. Should I assume that Penelope isn’t coming at this point?”

“Probably.” I stood up, too.

“I should’ve asked if she had a serious boyfriend before coming into town,” he said, laughing. “I guess I can hang up seeing her before Vegas.”

I didn’t laugh with him. I walked alongside him as we made our way past my security and into separate cars.

As my driver pulled off, I took out my phone and saw that Penelope had texted me hours ago. Right before Travis arrived

at the bench.

**Penelope:** Can I have a raincheck for tonight? Simon surprised me again.

**Penelope:** I'll make this up to you, I promise.

**Penelope:** Hayden?

I LET OUT a sigh and texted her back.

ME: Of course. I spent most of the night talking to your brother anyway.

**Penelope:** I need to ask you about something later. Can I call you in an hour?

**Me:** Sure.

FIFTEEN (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**M**y phone sounded with Penelope’s signature ringtone early in the morning. I rolled over and noticed the time. Five fifteen.

*What the hell?* I grabbed it and swiped the screen.

“Yes, Penelope?” I answered.

“Were you sleeping?”

“Clearly.” I groaned. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll be quick,” she said. “Hold on. Let me move.”

The faint sound of elevator music and laughter came over the line.

“Have you ever had truffles?” She asked. “I think they’re a bit overrated.”

“I know that *this* is not what you called to talk about.”

“I called to tell you that I feel like I’m living in the pages of a romance,” she said. “Simon is perfect. He surprised me and Tatiana with this invite to a private truffle tasting. In the center of mine, he wrote a note saying that he’s really glad we found each other again.”

“You need advice on this?”

“He wants to take me to the Bahamas for a week,” she said. “We’d have separate suites since he’s there for business,

but is it too early?”

I said nothing.

I wasn't used to her dating someone with extreme financial means, someone who had access to so much and was willing to use it so soon.

“When exactly is he trying to take you away from me?”

“*What?*”

“When is he trying to take you away?”

“The end of next month,” she said. “After your gala.”

“Hmmm.”

“Hmmm, this is good, or Hmmm, this is not good?”

“Hmmm, this is interesting.”

“Well, he doesn't need an answer right away, so whenever you determine which one it is, let me know.”

“I will.”

Silence stretched over the line for several seconds.

“I feel like we haven't talked in a while,” we said in unison.

She laughed. “Good to know the feeling is mutual. How are your letters coming? I saw the editor of *Vogue* reading hers aloud to her fans on social media.”

“She didn't tell them that she sent me a letter saying that she'd only accept my apology if I doubled her check and gave her ten extra tickets to the gala.”

“Did you?”

“Only because I didn't have a choice.”

“Of course.” She laughed again. “Is Lawrence happy with the good press?”

“Lawrence is never happy, but I think he'll be less stressed out after the Tinder thing.”

“You could just lie and say that you did steal it so we can settle it once and for all.”

“Then they’d sue me for all of eternity.” I needed to change the subject. “You really like Simon?”

“Yeah, I do. I think he’s the nicest guy I’ve ever dated. I think he’ll be the first guy who actually believes we’re just best friends.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I sat up, convinced I was hearing things.

“Oh, just that—” She let out a breath. “I tend to forget how much I call or hang out with you.”

“We haven’t hung out that much lately.”

“That’s the point I’m trying to make.”

“Can you try a bit harder?” I asked. “I’m still not getting it.”

Her light and raspy laugh came over the line. “Go back to sleep. You’re being a grouch.”

“Fine.” I lay back down again. “Again, though. You really like him?”

“Yes, I do. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

SIXTEEN

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**S** **ubject: For Hayden**

Hey, Sarah.

Hayden's phone is going to voicemail again, and he hasn't "read" my text. Can you tell him that I'll need a raincheck on Central Park tonight?

**P.S.:** Can you also tell him that I'll need some advice on what to wear for a hotel's groundbreaking ceremony?

Penelope



**SUBJECT: Wagner's + Missed Your Call**

Sorry \*sad face emoji\*

I forgot to text you in the heat of the moment. Simon showed up and took me on a drive across the Hudson.

Also, I was knocked out last night, so that's why I missed your call.

**P.S.:** I still need your thoughts on the Bahamas trip. Yay? Nay? Wait?





SUBJECT: ???!!!

Hey.

Are you getting any of my texts lately? All of them are still on “read.”

Also, we finally got past the sweet kissing and dry-humped on his couch. It was pretty hot for dry humping :-)

Anyway, I’ll need a raincheck on Central Park this Thursday, too. I’ll tell you about it later.

Pen

**P.S.:** No, really. Is your phone broken or something?



SUBJECT: **Raincheck Requests in Advance**

Should I just assume that every day this week will have a raincheck request?

It would seriously save me unnecessary conversations with my boss.

Thank you.

Sarah

**P.S.:** His phone is definitely not broken...

SEVENTEEN

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**T**here was no raincheck today. No request for an extension. Only an “I’m running late” text, which was the first thing that felt normal in weeks.

According to Lawrence, my personal brand was looking better and better by the day, and he hadn’t felt the need to double his blood pressure medicine.

His daily “So proud of you son!” text messages and emails were supposed to be encouraging, but they were simply a result of me working as hard as I could to *not* think about Penelope.

I was hoping that our lunch at Tully’s today would bring her back into my orbit and our lives could align as they did before.

*Before Simon.*

I sat in the back booth and sipped my water.

“Mario?” I called out to the manager. “Can you turn on the TV?”

“Certainly, Mr. Hunter. What channel?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

He flipped between a house renovation station and the news, ultimately settling on a stock market show.

“Feel free to change it, sir.” He set the remote in front of me and refilled my glass.

I tried to pay attention to the boring suits and their predictions, but they weren't saying anything of value. I pulled out my phone and watched the time tick by instead.

Fifteen minutes passed and there was still no sign of Penelope.

“We're here with Simon Gaines of Gaines & Associates.” The reporter's voice made me look up again. “The biggest and most successful hedge fund right now. They've recently moved their headquarters from Florida to New York.”

Simon smiled and shook her hand.

I squinted at the background, realizing he was at the Park Bay Café off the Hudson River. He was wearing another custom suit and that custom watch he'd bragged about over dinner.

I tossed back my shot and ordered another.

“How are you enjoying the Big Apple so far, Mr. Gaines?” the reporter asked.

“It's been wonderful thus far. Already feels like home. My luxury cars have never been treated better.”

*What do your cars have to do with anything?*

“You have tons of high profile and big name clients,” she said. “Why do you think that is?”

“My experience and track record, especially landing on the *Forbes 500* at such a young age, speaks for itself,” he said. “I was more than fine in Florida, but the clients wanted me to be somewhere bigger, so I came here.”

I started to change the channel, but the sexiest woman in the world suddenly appeared on a boat behind him.

Penelope looked ahead at Simon with stars in her eyes, dressed in a white blouse and jeans.

“You were spotted with Hayden Hunter recently,” the reporter continued talking. “Is he considering an investment in

your firm, or are you investing in Cinder?”

“I can never discuss business publicly.” He smiled. “But for the record, it was a friendly dinner. He and I share a *beautiful* common interest, and I believe he now knows that I’m protective of the things that I like, that’s all.”

I clenched my jaw, catching the double entendre.

*Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!*

I answered my phone without looking at the screen. “Yes?”

“Really?” Penelope laughed. “Am I interrupting you?”

“No.” I noticed her onscreen again, getting out of the boat with the phone held up to her ear. “I believe you’re standing me up, though.”

“How so?”

“You said you’d meet me at Tully’s.”

“Yeah, on Tuesday,” she said. “It’s Thursday, Hayden.”

*Huh?* I looked at my watch.

She was right.

“Sorry.” I let out a breath.

“It’s okay. I’m losing track of time these days, as well.” She walked down to the edge of the riverbank, taking a seat at a table.

A waiter stepped in front of her and blocked my view.

“Are you there, Hayden?” Penelope asked.

“Yes.” I watched the waiter finally move and tried to tune out Simon’s never-ending spiel. “I’m here.”

“For what it’s worth, I like the fact that you make people schedule their interview with you in advance,” she said. “I’m literally watching a play by play of what happens when they don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some finance reporter spotted me and Simon walking and she just conveniently happened to have her full camera crew

and lighting kit ready. She begged for an interview and Simon actually bought into her ‘what a coincidence’ nonsense.”

“He’s just new,” I said. “He’ll adjust soon. You shouldn’t be upset.”

She leaned forward on her elbows. “Why is that?”

“Because during our Cold War, I was the same way. I stopped and talked to whoever asked me. The extra attention can be quite addictive at first. Besides, if this is the worst thing he’s done, then he’s a great guy, right?”

She smiled, and I honestly couldn’t believe that I’d just said that.

“Right,” she said. “This is the first time that I’ve been annoyed. Everything else has been wonderful.”

“Well, brush this off as a one-time thing and pick up where you left off. If he’s serious about you, he’ll find a way to make it up to you soon anyway.”

*I need a fucking lobotomy.*

“Thanks, Hayden.” Her lips curved into a smile again. “You’re the best.”

“You’re welcome.”

She opened her mouth to say something else, but the screen suddenly glitched and faded into a bottled water commercial.

“I think he’s done talking to the interviewer now,” she said. “I’ll call you later. Tonight, maybe?”

“Sure.”

EIGHTEEN

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**M**e: Raincheck on Central Park tonight? The ice at the rink is cracked around the edges again, so I'll have to be there tonight with the staff until they finish.

**Me:** By the way, Simon sent me chocolates and flowers at the rink this morning to make up for it. (You were right.)



ME: What should I say to his text? (Attaching screenshot) I think he wants me to fly to Napa Valley this weekend.



ME: Sorry I missed your call! I'll call you later. Thank you for the advice via voicemail [smile emoji]



NINETEEN

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

I was starting to get annoyed by all the advice I was giving her to land this other guy. And by “annoyed,” I meant jealous.

Stage ten envy. Full-blown fucking jealous.

To make matters worse, the fantasies that ran through my mind were getting filthier with each passing day. Uttering the words “Stop. She’s your best friend’s sister” no longer blocked me from thinking about all the ways I wanted to see her in my bed, taking every inch of me.

The more I thought about our missed meetings at Central Park and the nightly conversations that had come to a halt, the more I started to feel that maybe, just maybe, she’d be better off with me.

**Penelope:** Are you at home? I need some advice on something.

I didn’t answer her.

Instead, I headed downstairs to my private gym. I’d taken five cold showers today and I needed to take a new approach to get her *off* my mind.

Letting out a breath, I adjusted the weights on my bar and settled on the bench.

My phone sounded with more texts from her, but I ignored those, too.

As I was lifting the bar, I heard the sound of heels clicking against the floor. And then Penelope was suddenly standing over me. The sight of her in a tightly fitted grey dress damn near made me drop the weight onto my chest.

“You got a minute?” she asked.

“I’m clearly in the middle of something right now.” I tried not to stare at her lips too hard, but I couldn’t help it. I slowly set the weight into place and sat up.

I looked down at her deep red stilettos and knew precisely what new image would be running through my mind the moment she left.

“Make it quick,” I said. “I would like to finish this.”

“Fine. Why are you avoiding me?”

“What makes you think that I’m avoiding you, Penelope?”

“I’m not stupid, Hayden.” She crossed her arms. “You haven’t answered my texts for three days.”

*Has it only been three days?* “I’ve been busy with the latest Tinder lawsuit.” I offered a half-truth. “And I’m not sleeping well.”

“Oh.” She looked somewhat relieved. “Well, Simon just bought me this great sleep aid thing the other day. Want to borrow it?”

*Fuck no.* “I’ll buy my own. What do you need help with?”

“I want to know your favorite position in bed.”

“Come again?”

“What’s. Your. Favorite. Position. In. Bed?” Her eyes met mine. “Like the place where you have sex.”

“None of your business. That sounds like something you should be discussing with Simeon.”

“His name is *Simon*.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m only asking for your help because he texted me something dirty and

I need a super filthy response.”

“Go pick up a romance novel.”

“I’m serious.” She smiled. “Help me out, please.”

“Fine,” I said. “What were his exact words?”

“What?” Her cheeks flushed red. “I can’t tell you that.”

“I can’t help you if I don’t have all the details.”

She let out a sigh and tapped her phone, avoiding eye contact with me as she read. “You told me you’d like to take things slow, so that’s exactly how I’ll fuck you when I get you alone. Nice and slow.”

“That’s it?” I blinked. “Where’s the rest?”

“That’s the end of it.” She looked up at me. “Hot, right?”

“Right...” I tried not to laugh. There was no point in telling her something that was on the level that I would say; she didn’t need to show him up in the dirty talking department at this stage in the game.

“Tell him that when he fucks you slow, you want him on top of you, missionary style. Say something about wanting to feel how deep he can go.”

“Is that what *you* would say?”

“No.” I shrugged. “But you’re not sexting me, so—” I stopped and cleared my throat. “Send him what I told you and leave it at that.”

She tapped the screen. “Wait. So, hypothetically, if you were interested in sleeping with me, what would you sext?”

*Don’t you dare answer this. It’s a trap.*

“I need to finish my workout and get back to finishing some letters, Penelope. I’ll have to pass on a game of hypotheticals with you.”

“Just tell me what you’d say. It’s not like I’m going to laugh at your skills or anything.”

“The only thing you’d laugh about is how much better I am at it than your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend yet.”

*I don’t think he ever should be.* “Just take my word for it.”

“I’ll start taking your word for things when you turn back into the Hayden I know.” She stepped closer. “The one who behaves like a best friend and doesn’t go M.I.A. just because Tinder is suing him for the umpteenth time. You should be used to that by now, so if you think I’m going to buy that excuse—”

“I’m done trying to sell it.” I narrowed my eyes at her, she’d baited me. “If you want me to answer your silly-ass question, I’ll do it.”

“I want you to stop cursing at me first.”

“If you were sexting me and we were discussing your favorite positions, I wouldn’t want to waste my time with words. I’d just show up to your place, bend you over the couch, and *show you.*”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“It’s better than telling you that whenever we fuck, I’m going to pull you back by your hair while sliding my cock so deep inside of your pussy that you’ll never want to fuck anyone else.” I looked over her dress again. “I’d start with *that.*”

Her cheeks flushed red and she took a step back. “Um. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I think I should go now.”

“I think so, too.”

TWENTY

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

I stood still, staring at Hayden, pinned to the spot by his heated gaze.

“The door is behind you, Penelope,” he said, moving closer.

“I know exactly where it is.”

“Then why aren’t you walking toward it?”

“Because I’m starting to think that we need to set some boundaries in our friendship.”

“I agree,” he said. “You can send me the list in an email or a text message. You need to leave my condo, though. *Now.*”

“I don’t want to discuss my sex life with Simon anymore.”

“You mean, your *lack* of a sex life?” He narrowed his eyes. “Dirty texts and dry humps on the couch aren’t sex. Then again, maybe that’s what you’ve been doing with all your boyfriends this entire time.”

“I don’t want to discuss the sex I’ve had with my previous boyfriends either.”

“I’m not a fan of talking about failure anyway.”

“In the meantime,” I said, taking a step back as he moved forward. “I want you to go back to being a good best friend and calling me.”

“It would help if you actually picked up the fucking phone.”

“I pick up whenever you call.”

“Only to ask for a raincheck.”

“You sound like that bothers you.”

“It shouldn’t.”

“So, can you please go back to being my best friend and giving me advice when I ask for it?” I said. “We have a deal.”

“We need to make some amendments first.” He looked me up and down. “You haven’t been holding up your side.”

“Seriously? I send you ten fucking letters a day—*minimum*. I’ve crafted over a hundred templates, and—”

“You still can’t find the time of day to see me in person.”

“So much for it not bothering you.”

“I never said that it didn’t.” He closed the gap between us. “I said it *shouldn’t*.”

Silence.

“This is the part where you leave my place, Penelope.” He lifted his hand and tucked a few errant strands of hair behind my ear. “Otherwise...”

“Otherwise, *what?*”

He didn’t answer.

He crashed his lips against mine, sliding his other arm around my waist and pulling me flush against him within seconds.

I lost my balance as he dominated my mouth with his, taming my tongue in between breaths. I struggled to keep up with his tempo, clawing my fingers into his sides for some sense of control, but he didn’t give an inch.

My back hit the wall as he steadied me and his cock hardened against my thighs.

*Oh my god...*



“Open your mouth a bit wider for me...” he whispered.  
“We both know that all of me won’t fit this way.”

Lost in a trance, I willingly obliged, and he trapped my bottom lip between his teeth, biting down on it so hard that I couldn’t help but cry out.

Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he freed my lip and slid two fingers inside of my mouth, slowly pushing them in and out.

I moaned as he gently grazed the back of my throat, feeling my pussy get wetter with each teasing stroke.

He used his hips to tease me with another rhythm, showing me just how good we could be.

Smiling, he slowly pulled his hand from my mouth, trailing the pad of his wet fingertips against my lips.

“Does your boyfriend make you this wet?” He slid a hand under my dress and pushed my panties to the side, strumming his fingers against my soaking wet clit. His fingers found their way deep inside of me and I grounded against his hand.

He muffled my moans with his mouth again, pleasuring me all over at once with ease.

No man in my life had ever kissed me like this. No man in my life had ever—

I suddenly realized what the hell I was doing. Who the hell I was kissing and riding.

*Oh my god!* I tore away from him and he stepped back.

We stared at each other and panted heavily, letting the remaining tension suffocate any chance at conversation.

“I should go now,” was all I could say.

He didn’t say anything in return. He just stared at me.

Swallowing, I moved past him and headed to the door.

I took the elevator downstairs and signaled for one of his town cars.

When I was halfway home, with the taste of his mouth still on my lips, I sent him a text.

**Me:** That kiss never happened, right?

**Just Hayden:** Delete this part of our thread before your boyfriend sees it.

**Me:** Can you agree that the kiss never happened first?

He never answered.

TWENTY-ONE

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

I didn't text or call her for an entire week.  
I *couldn't*.

TWENTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

The leather seats in Simon’s Ferrari blew heat against my thighs as we coasted along the Brooklyn Bridge. Raindrops attacked the windshield with a vengeance, and he clasped my hand behind the gear shift.

For the second night in a row, I was taking him on a pastry tour—showing him some of my favorite bagel cafés in the city.

This man was honestly everything I’d ever wanted in a boyfriend, but that kiss from Hayden’s lips was still infiltrating my thoughts at every turn. It was showing up in the hidden places of my mind whenever I thought I’d forgotten it.

It was also far hotter than any of the latest “Disney kisses” and dry-hump sessions that Simon was giving to me.

*It’s a good thing that we haven’t spoken to each other this week.*

“Hey.” Simon waved his hand in front of my face. “Are you there, Penelope?”

I snapped out of my thoughts, realizing that we were parked in front of TJ’s Bagels. “Sorry. I was daydreaming.”

“Hope it was about me.” He smiled, brushing a few strands of hair off my face. “I really like you a lot.”

“I like you, too.”

“I can’t believe they close so early,” he said, reaching back to get his jacket. “I’ll be right back.”

“Take your headphones.” I pointed to the dashboard. “Trust me.”

He pressed a light kiss against my lips and grabbed them. “I’ll take your word for it.”

I watched him walk into the rain and hold the door open for a couple before stepping inside.

He blew me a kiss from the window, and I blew one right back.

*“La-da-da-da-da-daaaa...”*

My phone suddenly sounded with Hayden’s ringtone and I put in my air-pods before answering.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.” His deep voice came over the line. “Am I catching you at a bad time?”

“I’m out with Simon.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“No.” I wasn’t sure why my heart was skipping a beat. “This isn’t a bad time. He’s inside TJ’s getting us some bagels.”

“Did you warn him that the bakers are typically super slow because they’re perfectionists?”

“I think he’ll realize that pretty soon.” I held back a laugh. “That’s part of the first-timer’s experience, though.”

“I agree. While he’s in there, I need your help with a letter to someone you know personally. Well, someone you used to know.”

“Okay.” I unbuckled my seatbelt. “I’m listening.”

“Dear Spencer Turner...” He cleared his throat. “I would like to formally apologize for an incident that happened several years ago. Without saying too much, the reason you never made it to dinner at The Falls on your special day was

me. However, I'm only apologizing because I only meant to break your jaw, not your ribcage. My apologies, Hayden Hunter.' Thoughts?"

"I think you need to sit on that one for a while. Actually, don't send it or bother rewriting it. *Ever.*"

His deep laughter came over the line and my stomach tightened at the sound of it.

"That's not the real version," he said. "I only wanted to check and see if I could get away with what I truly want to say."

"So, you *did* beat up 'The One That Made a Podcast' back then?"

"I beat him up because you spent an entire week crying over what he did to you," he said. "There's a difference."

"Anything else you care to admit to?" I smiled. "Any other apology truths you want to spill?"

"No, but I have an apology letter that's addressed specifically to you. Is there time for me to read it?"

I looked ahead and saw that the line inside the shop hadn't moved much. "Yeah."

"Dear Penelope..." he said, pausing. "I apologize for a highly inappropriate conversation that we had years ago about touching yourself. It happened when you were eighteen and I was twenty-four. I should've known better."

"You really don't need to apologize to me for that."

"I think I do," he said. "I was the adult."

"You were a friend answering a question." I paused. "And the advice definitely came in handy over the years. No pun intended."

He let out a low laugh and my nipples hardened under my blouse.

"I'm serious, Hayden." I swallowed, unsure of whether he was joking about this. "I don't need an apology for that."



“Let me read it anyway.”

“Fine.”

“As your best friend, sometimes I forget just how close we are, how much you’ve been there for me like I’ve been there for you. Over the years, I’ve started to realize that...”

I tuned out his words, focusing on the deep sound of his voice, the way it served as a perfect complement to the heat under my seat.

Without thinking, I slid my hands between my thighs, pretending that we were in his condo all over again, that we were mid-kiss, and his hand was still under my dress.

*“We both know that all of me won’t fit this way...”*

I spread my legs as he continued to speak, biting down on my bottom lip as hard as he did to prevent myself from making a sound.

Pushing the lace of my panties to the side, I pressed two fingers against my soaking wet clit, rubbing it in a slow, sensuous circle. Just like he’d taught me over the phone years ago.

His voice was still playing in my ear, the unwitting conductor to the pleasurable, pulsing symphony between my thighs, the heat from the seat made it all the more intense.

“*Penelope...*” he said my name, and I shut my eyes as my pussy began to throb against my fingertips.

I didn’t care what he was saying now, but with every word that dropped from his lips, my hips slid off the seat a bit more.

*Please keep talking...*

“And then...” He obliged, giving me more words for a letter than he gave to anyone else.

I sucked in a slow, erratic breath as I neared closer and closer to the edge.

Visions of Hayden’s blue eyes looking deep into mine collided with fantasies of his lips owning my mouth.

Forbidden wishes that could never be fulfilled flooded my brain.

Him kissing me, fucking me, *wanting* me.

*Fuck...*

I bit my lip and gripped the sides of Simon's seat as I came.

“My apologies. Sincerely, Hayden Hunter.” His words sounded clearer now. “Penelope?” He asked. “*Penelope?*”

“Yeah?”

“How was that?”

“Completely unexpected.”

“I know,” he said, a smile in his voice. “I’m still getting used to giving apologies. Do you forgive me?” he asked.

I nodded as if he could see me. “Yes.”

“Okay, great,” he said. “I’ll give you the real copy in person. Well, whenever I see you in person anyway.”

*Ask him about that kiss in his condo now. Ask him if he felt something like you did.*

“Wait, Hayden.” I let out a breath. “About that kiss in your condo the other night—”

“It’s water under the bridge.” He didn’t let me finish my sentence. “I’ve already forgotten about it.”

My heart sank. “Oh, okay. Well, Simon will be coming back to the car soon, so...”

“Goodnight.” He ended the call before I could say a word, and I tried my best to ignore the strange pang in my chest.

“Ready to experience the best part of the night?” Simon returned to the car. “I can’t wait to try this with you.”

“Me neither.” I vowed to fully focus on what I was building with him from here on out. Hayden was just a friend, and a one-time good time, nothing more. “What flavors did you buy?”

TWENTY-TWO (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

“Simon Gaines,” “Simon G Fund,” “Simon Gaines, Forbes 500.”

My Google searches for today were all repeats from the day before.

Almost everything he’d bragged about checked out, except for one thing. I couldn’t find his name on the *Forbes 500 List*, even though he’d placed it on his website with the official symbol.

The editors had left me off their list one year out of pure pettiness (I forgot to give them tickets to my gala once), but Simon was a new addition, and I doubted he’d burned any bridges at this point in his career.

*Maybe it’s an error?*

I tried to pretend like this was a noble exercise, as if I wasn’t looking for anything that would make him look less than stellar in Penelope’s eyes. Anything that would bring her back to spending more time with *me*.

“You have a visitor.” Sarah stepped into my office. “A very important one.”

“Is it Penelope?”

“No.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s some guy from—”

“Send him home. I’m not interested.”

“He wants to donate two million dollars ahead of your charity gala.”

“Ask him how he takes his coffee and send him in.”

“I thought so.” She walked away, and I smoothed my tie.

I was going home after this. I needed some time to think.

The door opened seconds later and Simon stepped inside.

“Good afternoon, Hayden.” He smiled. “Hope you won’t mind me stopping by.”

“Be my guest.” I motioned for him to take a seat, but he remained standing.

“I really believe in the work that your charity is doing,” he said. “I can’t imagine what it was like to have a father walk out on you at only thirteen. For him to start another family like you never existed must’ve been really rough.”

“Tread lightly, Simeon.”

“And your mother...” He shook his head. “Word around business circles is that she was so distraught about him leaving the two of you that she drank herself insane, and you practically raised yourself.”

I clenched my jaw. “I highly suggest that you change this topic of conversation if you want to remain on my good side, Simeon.”

“It’s pronounced *Simon*.”

“You won’t be able to pronounce anything if you don’t change the topic.”

He smiled and pulled an envelope from his breast pocket. “I want to donate to your cause. I genuinely believe in helping kids who don’t grow up in the best of circumstances.”

“Thank you.” I motioned for him to place it on my desk. “You can leave my office now.”

“Actually, I can’t.” He was still smiling as if this was an enjoyable conversation. “I also stopped by because of Penelope.”

“Is she alright?”

“She’s more than alright,” he said. “She’s happy. With me. And I’d appreciate it if her best friend, who is just a friend, would refrain from calling her late at night when she’s with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’re going to be exclusive soon, so I want to let you know that I’m not the sharing type.”

I blinked.

“I’ve done my research on you,” he said. “You’ve never been in a real relationship before, so I can’t blame you for not knowing how they work.”

“Do I need to open the door for you to get you out of my face, or are you capable of doing that yourself?”

“The boyfriend, i.e., me, gets the majority of the girlfriend’s time, and the best friend, i.e., *you*, fades into the background until he’s needed.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Seeing as though we’re making travel plans for the next few months around her coaching and speaking schedule, you won’t really be needed. Thought I’d give you a heads-up.”

“So, I have to open it for you.” I walked over to the door and held it open. “Be my fucking guest.”

He let out a laugh and followed me over, stepping into the hallway. “I’m glad that we could have this conversation, Hayden.”

“The exit awaits you.”

“One last thing,” he said. “I hope you won’t take any of what I said personally. You seem like a good and mature best friend that knows his place, right?”

I slammed the door in his face.

TWENTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*The following morning*

I couldn't sleep.

Simon's unwelcome visit to my office had left me on edge, and the envy I felt before was intensifying by the second. So, like the "good and mature best friend" that he asked me to be, I decided to do some research on him.

*Via stalking.*

I pulled across the street from Penelope's brownstone in a tinted silver Prius.

I made sure that my baseball cap was secure, and then I waited for Mr. Prince Charming to arrive.

From the recent unanswered texts Penelope sent me, he'd started a brand-new morning routine: Bringing her a fresh cup of Starbucks coffee, along with a fresh flower bouquet at exactly seven forty-five.

He was "always on time," but unless my watch was wrong, he was about to be late.

*Five... four... three...*

Simon's red Ferrari suddenly roared down the center lane, right past me. As if he owned the street, he swung into the "No Parking" spot right in front of Penelope's place.



He stepped out with a coffee cup and a bouquet of red roses in hand. Dressed down in jeans and a black blazer, he looked more like an insurance salesman than a “billionaire in the making.”

He knocked on her door and she opened it within seconds. Kissing her on the forehead, he said something that made her smile and handed over his gifts.

I waited for him to kiss her on the lips, to be unable to resist her sexy mouth, but that didn’t happen. Instead, he grabbed her hand like a hero from a Disney movie and placed three soft kisses against it.

*Wow.*

I cranked my engine as he blew her an air kiss and returned to his car. When he pulled away, I trailed him from afar, keeping four cars between us at all times.

Half an hour later, I followed him into the parking lot of a private elementary school.

Tapping my steering wheel, I watched as he popped the trunk and grabbed a handful of bright blue balloons and a huge white box before he walked through the school’s front doors.

As my mind spun with theories, I noticed the flashing billboard on the side of the building.

*Thank you to the Simon G. Fund for sponsoring the fourth-grade ballet recital!*

*Love,*

*Elm School for the Gifted*

*Hmmm. It’s probably a tax write-off.*

Simon returned empty-handed minutes later and sped off onto the street.

I trailed him once more, and for the next five hours, I watched him like a seasoned chess player, committed his every move to memory.

He treated his entire team to breakfast at The Four Seasons and awarded them the next few days off as appreciation. He

drove along the outskirts of Wall Street to make deposits at his clients' banks. Anytime someone waved or complimented his car, he smiled and handed them a hundred-dollar bill.

After lunch, he stopped by Tiffany & Co. and purchased a charm bracelet that featured a diamond-encrusted "P" and a "You're so beautiful" necklace.

By mid-evening, when he was parking in front of Audemars Piguet, I was convinced that he pissed sunshine.

I was also convinced that day one of my mission was a complete and absolute failure.

Feeling defeated, I waited for him to leave before walking inside.

"Good afternoon, sir." A grey-haired man smiled as I approached. "How can I help you today?"

"I need a new watch." I couldn't help but still feel a pinch of envy about Simon knowing the designer. "The same one my friend just came in here and bought actually."

"Oh, you're one of *those* guys." He scoffed. "Follow me."

"What the hell do you mean, *one of those* guys?"

He didn't answer. He motioned for me to follow him into a side room.

"Please be sure to tell the others in your group that this arrangement will not renew at the end of the month," he said. "This hasn't been mutually beneficial in the slightest, and I can't believe my boss ever fell for it."

"I could follow this conversation a lot better if I knew what *arrangement* you were talking about."

"Don't play dumb with me, sir." He waved his hand. "You and your buddies lease our watches for days at a time because you can't afford to buy them. Then you have the audacity to request models of the more refined and exclusive collections, just because someone on this company's board went to business school with one of you."

I raised my eyebrow. "*What?*"

“Come on, you know the drill.” He pointed to my wrist. “I don’t know why the hell I ever let you rent *that* one, but you won’t be able to borrow it again. That’s in a collection far above your rental grade.”

“I didn’t rent this at all.” I unclasped the band, flipping it onto its back. “My name is engraved onto it. And for the record, I don’t plan on ever *renting* a watch.”

“Hayden Hunter?” His eyes widened. “I didn’t—Oh, I didn’t recognize you, sir.” He put on a pair of glasses. “I’m so sorry I ever engaged you in that conversation. How can I really serve you today?”

“I want to know everything about that arrangement and anything you know about the guy who was in here before me.”

“Well, I—” He stepped back, looking confused. “As one of our most esteemed customers, you know that I can’t share private information about another client.”

“Real clients don’t rent.”

He smiled, looking as if he was happy to oblige, but then it faded away.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “I’m not allowed to do that.”

“I’ll buy ten watches from the signature collection at a minimum of one hundred thousand dollars each.”

“Have a seat, and I’ll be with you in two minutes.”

TWENTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Later that evening*

I caught up with Simon at Citi Field. While the Mets were fighting the Dodgers at the bottom of the ninth, he chatted with a security guard at the Will-Call window.

I'd intended to continue my stalking tomorrow, but the watch seller's parting words wouldn't stop running through my mind.

*"He always pays with someone else's credit card, sir. And I know he's always flying in and out of Colorado, but I find it odd that he doesn't purchase the additional weather insurance. Any man who knows watches wouldn't dare wear these in the elements."*

It was his mention of Colorado that caught my attention. Penelope had consistently brought up the fact that he flew back and forth from Florida every week.

I questioned the seller, asked him if he'd misspoken about Colorado, but he showed me the "gift" Simon recently dropped off for him as a thank you: A 'Come Back to Colorado' keychain with a snowy cabin backdrop.

It made me wonder what else he could be lying about.

As he posed for selfies with the security guard, my phone buzzed with text messages.

**Penelope:** Hey. I'm torn between two dresses for your gala. What do you think? [img.] [img.]

**Penelope:** Also, I told Simon about how you typically have a special place reserved for me and you to talk when you're bombarded with guests. I hope we'll get those same minutes this year. We need to talk.

**Penelope:** Unless now is a good time? Simon has a few partners flying into town tonight. Please text me back.

My finger hovered over the images, but I couldn't bring myself to open them. I knew I wouldn't be able to handle it.

Deleting her messages, I put the car in drive as Simon slid behind the wheel of his Ferrari.

I watched him buy another bouquet of white and red roses, and then I followed him to John F. Kennedy International Airport into the arrivals lane.

This would be my last stop, I told myself. I'd call Penelope the moment he and his other watch-borrowing stiff rode into the city.

Keeping my distance, I waited for the group of suits he'd pulled in front of to get into his car, but they didn't move.

Instead, Simon stepped out of the car and walked toward the zone doors.

Before he could make it inside, a brunette in a blue dress ran into his arms.

He kissed her like there was no tomorrow, grabbing fistfuls of her hair with one hand and cupping her ass with the other.

*What the...*

They were oblivious to the people around them, as if this was a terminal for two.

When Simon finally tore his mouth away from hers, he led her to the trunk of his car, handing over the roses and the Tiffany & Co. bag from earlier today.

I blinked a few times, making sure that my eyes weren't deceiving me. That "Prince Charming" wasn't now playing the

role of a two-timing villain.

*My vision is perfectly fucking clear.*

Lawrence's name suddenly crossed the car's dashboard via phone call and I hit accept out of habit.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Oh, great," he said. "You *are* alive. I have good news, great news, and well, Tinder news. What do you want first?"

"I'm not interested in any of it."

"I'll start with the great news, then."

I didn't even pretend to listen. I was too focused on Simon kissing this other woman all over again.

He slid his hand under her dress and she playfully pushed his hand away.

He slapped her ass in return.

If the "Disney kisses" and dry-humping couch sessions were ever frustrating to Penelope, it was probably because he was pacing himself and giving those parts to someone else.

"Um, hello, Hayden?" Lawrence asked. "Where are you?"

"On a secret mission."

"Come again?"

"You heard me," I said. "I'm doing some much needed recon."

"Okay, fine. Once and for all, what drugs are you taking?"

"Instead of being a smart-ass, you should volunteer to help me with this."

"I have no idea what 'this' is, Hayden. When exactly would you need my help?"

"Tomorrow and every morning this week," I said. "We ride at dawn."

Silence.

“Can you be honest with me?” He let out a long breath. “Is it cocaine or heroin?”

“I’ll pick you up at four a.m. Be ready.” I ended the call and sent an email to Sarah.

I wanted her to do more than a simple, surface-level Google search. I wanted her to send me everything she could find on Simon, in every database, and I wanted it in my hands by midnight.

I also wanted—no, *needed*—to know if he really owned that Ferrari.

When I finally pulled out of the line and sped away, a new message from Penelope appeared on the dashboard.

**Penelope:** So, you’re just going to keep reading my messages and IGNORING me? Being fickle for no damn reason? This is what you call being my best friend? What the hell have you been doing these days?

*What I always do. Looking out for you.*



BREAK UP #12

THE ONE THAT STAYED THE NIGHT



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

*Ottawa, Canada*

**Me:** I lost my virginity tonight. Thought you would want to know.

**Hayden:** I'll pick up a 'Congratulations' card for you at Walgreens if you want to celebrate.

**Me:** I'd rather you pick up a 'Get Well Soon' one.

**Hayden:** [confused emoji] What's that supposed to mean?

I don't answer him. I tuck my medal from Skate Canada under my jacket and slip out of the hotel room.

Without looking back, I rush downstairs and run across the street to The Hilton.

Grateful that there's no one else in line at the front desk, I place my purse onto the counter.

"I need a room, please," I say. "I don't care how much it costs."

"I'm sorry." The desk agent looks up at me. "We're sold out due to the skating competition, Miss."

For a split second, it looks as if she may recognize me, so I look down.

"Are you sure that you don't have anything?" I ask.

“One hundred percent certain. I think most hotels downtown are filled to capacity for the weekend.”

“I see.” I’m tempted to ask if I can take a nap on the lobby’s couch.

“She can take my suite,” a familiar voice says from behind. “I haven’t been in it yet anyway.”

*Tatiana?* I turn around in utter disbelief.

We tied for first place today, and we traded insults on the podium hours ago.

“I have room 1242,” she said. “I can share a room with my parents.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She shoots me a sympathetic look, almost as if she wants to ask what’s wrong, but she walks away without another word.

The desk agent taps her keyboard a few times and hands me a key packet. “The elevators are down the hall and to the right.”

I thank her and walk in the opposite direction. I want to avoid the crowd of people who are headed that way for a while.

As I’m circling the water fountain, my phone vibrates with a call. *Hayden*.

“Yeah?” I answer.

“What do you mean by needing a ‘Get Well Soon’ card?”

I don’t say anything.

“Penelope, tell me.”

“I told Joshua no,” I say. “I told him that I wasn’t ready and that I changed my mind, and I know that’s a really shitty thing to say in the moment when he’s already on top of me and the condom’s on, but I didn’t want to do it. I said no...”

Silence.

“He said I was just nervous and then he uh—” I wince at the thought of him sliding into me all at once, him muffling my mouth with his hand and telling me to “Calm down and take this dick.”

“He fucked without any mercy, and he didn’t care that I was crying.” I can barely get the words out. “He left the room for champagne, but I couldn’t be there anymore so I walked across the street to stay someplace else for the night.”

He lets out a soft sigh.

“The only time he looked into my eyes was when he said his ex’s name,” I say. “The rest of the time, he was—” I can’t even finish my sentence. “I need to sleep this off so I can start forgetting about it as soon as possible. Can you tell Travis that I’ll need a raincheck for our video call over breakfast tomorrow? I’d really appreciate that.”

“Penelope, *wait.*”

I end the call. I don’t want him to hear me cry, and I’ve held back long enough.

Once I’m sure that the hallway crowd has gone, I return to the elevator bank. Then I turn off my phone before stepping inside.

I double-check the room number on the key packet and anxiously watch the numbers tick by as the car rises.

The moment the doors glide open, I rush down the hall and lock myself inside the assigned room.

I collapse onto the bed and the sobs wrack my body in waves. Shutting my eyes, I try to fall asleep, but it’s no use.

*You’re still a foolish, foolish girl.*

I can’t stop replaying the past hour and I know it’ll leave a scar on my brain for the rest of my life. There’s no point in giving him an ex-boyfriend title because I don’t want to remember him at all.

Sniffling, I wipe my eyes with the corner of a blanket and dial room service. I order two bottles of water that I don’t really want and a carafe of coffee that I don’t need.

Several minutes later, a loud knock comes at the door.

I grab a few dollars before walking over to open it.

There's no room service attendant on the other side, though.

*Hayden?*

I wait for him to look at me like I'm deranged, but there's sincerity and sympathy in his eyes.

He cups my face in his hands and presses his forehead against mine, but he doesn't say a word.

"He said his ex-girlfriend's name when he came. He said it *twice*." I can't help but replay that part. "What the fuck is wrong with me, Hayden? Why can't I find a decent guy?"

He doesn't give me an answer. Instead, he gently runs his fingers through my hair, pressing a kiss against my skin. Then he pulls me into his arms and holds me close.

I fight to hold back more tears, but it's no use.

Without judgment, he walks me over to the bed. Pulling me against his chest, he kisses my forehead a few more times and tightens his grip around me.

"It's okay," he whispers. "It's okay."

He stays the entire night, holding me through every shed tear.



WHEN THE SUN filters through the blinds the following morning, Hayden runs me a warm bubble bath.

I resist getting out of the bed to take it, so he slides his hands under my legs and carries me into the bathroom.

A complete gentleman, he undresses me down to my bra and panties—all while keeping his eyes on mine.

"I think you can take off the rest yourself," he says, whispering. "If not, I'm right outside."

When he shuts the door, I peel off my panties and bra and I take my time slipping under the warm suds.

I expect him to be gone by the time I get out since I take over two hours to soak, but he's there in the bed once I open the door.

Moving next to him, I lean against his chest and he wraps his arms around me again.

He stays with me another night.



ON MONDAY MORNING, I sit up in the bed alone. The drapes are pulled open, and there's a note on the pillow next to me.

*Stepped out to pick up some breakfast.*

*-Hayden*

*P.S.: Told Travis that you decided to spend the weekend hanging out with Tatiana.*

*(Couldn't come up with anything else, but he bought that shit. :-))*

I laugh and grab my cell phone from the nightstand. I scroll down in search of Joshua's name so I can let him know how awful he's made me feel, but it's not there.

He's not listed in my texts or recent calls, and when I manually type his number, an "Error: Not Allowed" message appears.

*What the heck?*

The door to the room opens and Hayden walks inside carrying two brown bags.

"Good. You're up," he says. "I'll let you choose which bagel stack you want."

"What did you do to my phone? I can't contact Joshua."

"Cinnamon or regular?" He ignores my question.

“Cinnamon.”

“Okay.” He opens a bag and takes his time setting a tray in front of me.

I can’t help but notice that there are cuts and bruises all over his knuckles. Cuts and bruises that weren’t there last night or the night before.

“What happened to your hands?”

“It’s nothing.” He hands me a fork. “I just hit them on someone stupid.”

“Someone or *something*?”

He doesn’t answer that question either. He fluffs the pillow behind my head and hands me a fruit cup.

“Hayden, what happened?”

“I was looking out for you,” he says.

Then he changes the subject, giving me a look that lets me know that the ship for the previous conversation has sailed. “Let’s talk about your next competition. It’s in North Carolina, right?”

TWENTY-FIVE



PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**S**imon Gaines was a fucking fraud.

The evidence lay ahead of me in black and white, and the numbers didn't lie.

The lengths he'd taken to craft his persona were enough to fill a nine-hundred-page novel, but no sane author would ever pen a story with a plot this insane. Then again, he was also a "*New York Times* bestseller," according to his website, so perhaps he was borrowing a storyline from one of his nonexistent books.

In addition to renting his Ferrari, his watches, and his suits, he dated a different woman in every city (five and counting), with a complementing wardrobe and personality to match.

In Los Angeles, he was a doting widower dating a nurse named Shelby. In Las Vegas, he climbed mountains and led spiritual yoga sessions with a thrill-seeking woman named Ana. In Indiana, he moonlighted as a part-time stock bro who "hated the thought" of spending weekends away from his girlfriend Yasmine.

The variations of his last name—Gines, Gains, Giannis—were adjusted sufficiently enough to maintain his ruse and keep his lies protected.

If he were any other boyfriend, I would immediately call Penelope and tell her what I'd found. I would say, "We need to talk about your boyfriend. You'll need to break up with him tonight."

But in this case, I needed to take a different approach because I wanted her to do more than break up with him.

I wanted her to break up with him, *for me*.

Pouring myself a shot of scotch, I contemplated how I should handle this. I pulled out one of my stationery sheets and clicked my pen.

*Wait. What the hell am I doing?*

I picked up my phone and scrolled down to her name. Then I finally opened the series of text messages I'd avoided for the past several days.

**Penelope:** Hey. Not sure if my images with the dresses came through or not? Which one should I wear? Can you answer my other messages as well? I would appreciate your help.

**Penelope:** I see you giving an interview on TV. You looked at your phone when I texted you. Why aren't you answering me?!

**Penelope:** Okay, let's pretend like you've had a string of bad weeks, and you'll tell me about it later. \*Fresh slate?\* \*Okay, great\* I'm thinking about sleeping with Simon after your gala since things have been heating up. Let me know what you think about my dirty texts/lingerie. [.img.] [.img]

*Fuck this shit.*

I clicked on her name and hit call.

It rang once. It rang twice.

"Please leave your message at the sound of the beep." Her voicemail sounded instead.

*Beep!*

"Penelope, I know that it's three o'clock in the morning, but I need to get this off my chest." I let out a breath. "I can't give you any more advice on landing Simon, can't tell you another sexy thing that you should do, or suggest a new set of filthy words that you should text him late at night."

I paused. “As your best friend, I’ve reached my limit, and I can honestly say that he doesn’t *deserve* you. I’m not saying all of this because I’m fucking jealous, or because he had the audacity to say that he makes more money than me. By the way, I still can’t find his name on the *Forbes 500* list, and I know damn well that he’s renting that Ferrari, but that’s a story for a different day.”

“He’s not who you think he is,” I said. “And the better man has always been right in front of you...”

“You have every reason to never give me a chance since you know me better than anyone, and you agree with all the tabloids calling me *The Cocky King of New York* and the *Untamed Playboy of Manhattan*. But I honestly believe that you’re better off with someone else, and I need you to see.”

“I’m not asking for too much, I just want you to—”

“Hello?” Simon picked up the call before I could save it. “*Hello?*”

*What the fuck?* “I was calling to talk to Penelope.”

“I’m sure you were,” he said. “She’s sleeping with me right now, though.”

“In that case, I’m sure she’s disappointed,” I said. “Give her the phone.”

“She’s sleeping, Hayden.” He hissed. “She’s also my girlfriend—like I told you before—and three o’clock in the morning isn’t an appropriate time for you to call.”

“I’m not going to ask you to give her the phone again.”

“Your name in her phone is now ‘Currently Being an Asshole’ so I don’t think you two are on that good of terms. She said you haven’t called or texted her in weeks. Why’s that?”

“That’s none of your fucking business.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Well, since you didn’t catch my drift when I stopped by your office, allow me to reiterate: You’re *just* her friend, not her boyfriend. Fall the fuck back.”

He hung up, and I didn't bother calling back.  
*I'd rather handle this in person anyway.*

TWENTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**I**n years past, Hayden called me at six o'clock the night before his gala. He'd tell me that he was outside my place and ready to drive me away so I could have a sneak peek of the party's theme before anyone else.

The first few themes were relatively simple: *Old Hollywood*, *A Night Under the Stars*, and *A Fairytale Escape*. But as the years progressed, he came up with more complex themes that never failed to leave me impressed.

Since it was one of the highlights of my year, I was holding out hope that he would set aside whatever was bothering him and still follow through.

I eyed the clock on Friday night, watching as the minute hand ticked past one, then two.

My heart dropped once it made it to fifteen.

I refreshed my phone's screen to see if maybe, just maybe, he was running late.

Nothing.

No new messages or emails. No mysteriously missed calls.

He was still avoiding me.

*Fuck him.*



THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, I stared at my reflection in the living room mirror. Since Hayden never bothered to help me pick a dress, I settled on a one-shouldered mauve gown that cinched at my waist and flowed to the floor. The thigh-high split on the right side of it revealed a pair of sparkling Cinderella-styled stilettos.

“*Wow.*” Tatiana stepped into the room wearing pajamas, a bowl of ice cream in hand. “I thought Simon was picking you up at eight-thirty.”

“Nine-thirty,” I said. “His flight from Florida is running late. Why aren’t you dressed?”

“Because it’s raining. I don’t want to get my gown wet.”

“The gala is *inside*, Tatiana.”

“Is it?” She smiled. “Well, hold on. Allow me to think of another excuse for why I don’t want to spend my night around a bunch of rich people who think they’re better than everyone.” She tapped the spoon against her bottom lip. “Oh, nooo. I’m suddenly feeling sick.”

“You’re so full of shit.” I laughed. “Thanks for the advance notice that you’re not going.”

“You’re more than welcome.” She picked up my purse and brought it over to me. “Let me know how the sex is afterwards. I want to know every explicit detail, down to how long each kiss is.”

“I’ll tell you *if* there’s sex.”

“There’d better be.” She scoffed. “You’ve been dating him for what feels like forever at this point.”

“I know.” I made sure that condoms were still tucked into my purse.

As if on cue, the doorbell sounded.

“Farewell, Cinderella.” Tatiana plopped down on the couch, and I walked over to the door.

When I opened it, I couldn’t help but smile at Simon. He was dressed in an immaculate black tuxedo and holding two long stem red roses.

“Whoa.” He looked me over for several seconds, struggling to say a word. Instead, he clasped my hand and held it up, motioning for me to twirl around.

“You look absolutely stunning,” he said. “I may have to watch my back tonight since I think all attention will be on you and this dress.”

I blushed. “Thanks for the compliment. Are you seeing more than one woman or something?”

“*What?*” He furrowed his brow. “What makes you ask that?”

“There are two giant roses in your hand, but only one me.”

“Oh, never that.” He kissed my lips. “One is for your roommate. Isn’t she coming with us?”

“No, she just caught the instant ‘I don’t feel like it’ flu and she’s a terrible person.”

“I heard that!” Tatiana shouted from inside.

“You can have both then.” He laughed and let up an umbrella. “Ready?”

“More than ever.”

He pressed his hand against the small of my back, walking me down to his Ferrari.

For some reason, the interior looked a bit different from yesterday. Gone were the customizations, and there was a strange bar code stamped onto the dashboard.

“The dealer gave me a loaner car since mine wasn’t detailed as well as I wanted it to be,” Simon must’ve noticed my expression. “Hope you won’t mind riding around in this one for a while.”



“Not at all.” I buckled my seat belt as he shut the door.

As he walked around to the driver’s side, my phone sounded with a ringtone I hadn’t heard in forever.

A text message from Hayden.

**Currently Being an Asshole:** Call me before you leave my gala. We need to talk.

That was it.

No “I’m sorry for being an ass and ignoring you.” No “I’ve been a bad best friend lately.” Not even a “Please forgive me.”

I turned off my notifications and looked over at Simon as he cranked the engine. I didn’t want to think about Hayden for the rest of the night, and I wasn’t calling him for shit.

“Tell me about your latest trip to Florida, Simon...”

TWENTY-SEVEN

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**T**he flashing lights from the cameras nearly blinded us as we stepped out of the car.

As always, a lush red carpet lay underneath a covered awning that stretched from the valet lane to the gala's tree-lined entrance.

"Welcome to Hayden Hunter's Annual Children's Charity Gala," a tuxedoed host greeted us at the door. "Name and affiliation, please."

"Simon Gaines." Simon squeezed my hand. "I'm one of the multimillion-dollar donors."

"Are you sure?" He shook his head. "You're not on the list, sir. Could it be listed under your company's name, instead?"

"The Simon G. Fund, perhaps." Simon shot me a confused look.

"It's not under that one either, I'm afraid."

"Try Penelope Carter," I said, and the host's eyes met mine.

"You already know that you're on *all* of Mr. Hunter's lists, Miss Carter," He smiled and lifted the velvet rope. "You and your date can follow the silver signs to the V.I.P. section."

"Thank you."

“That’s weird,” Simon whispered. “I personally delivered my donation check to Hayden.”

*When was this?* “He probably forgot to tell Sarah to add you,” I said. “That, or she wrote it down too fast and couldn’t read her own handwriting. That happens a lot with her.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

We made our way through the mirrored hallways and my jaw dropped to the floor once we set foot in the ballroom.

Thousands of twinkling white lights hung from the glass ceiling, perfectly arranged to frame the ice skating rink design on the floor.

The words for tonight’s theme—*Dreams are Forever*—were etched onto the champagne glasses that sat atop passing waiters’ trays.

“This is phenomenal,” Simon looked as in awe as I did. “Did you give any input on this?”

“No.” I noticed a walkway of ice sculptures in the form of skaters’ poses. “Hayden didn’t tell me anything.”

“There are snowflakes falling over the dance floor.” He pointed out. “Well, glitter maybe. Allow me to grab us something stronger from one of the bars.” He kissed my cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

I barely noticed him leaving.

I stepped onto the “rink,” pressing the front of my heel on top of a snowflake that was trapped under the glass.

I squinted at the tiny words that were frozen onto the ridges, but I couldn’t quite read the whole phrase.

*Still unmatched at twenty-seven?*

“There he is!” “That’s him over there!” “Get his picture, would you?” A chorus of voices from behind made me look up.

At the center of the floor, Hayden posed for a picture with Lawrence.

Dressed in a custom black suit and diamond cufflinks that put every other man in this room to shame, he instantly became the center of attention.

Flashing his perfect smile, he performed his staged laugh for the press as Lawrence gave him the usual signal.

He made brief eye contact with the photogs while they snapped thousands of pictures, and then he looked over at me.

Blinking a few times, his lips parted as he slowly looked over my dress. His gaze roamed my body up and down, and my body betrayed me with a reaction.

With every second that passed, my heart raced a brand-new rhythm, picking up speed each time his eyes returned to mine.

I tried my best to turn away from him, to focus on something else in this stunning room, but he was the best thing in it.

Looking me over one more time, he posed for a final picture before walking my way.

“Good evening, Penelope,” he said. “It’s good to see you here.”

“Is it?” I snapped out of my haze, refusing to forgive or forget his past few weeks of assholery. “Given how you’ve treated me lately, I’m shocked you even want me here.”

“Of course I want you.” He lowered his voice. “I think I’ve made that somewhat clear. Did you get my text?”

“Yes, I got it.” I shrugged. “I’m planning to text you back a few weeks from now since that seems to be the timeline we’re going with these days. Right?”

“You tell me.” He narrowed his eyes. “You started it when you got a boyfriend.”

“If you had a girlfriend, I’m sure it’d be the same.”

“I guarantee that it *wouldn’t*.”

We stood still, glaring at each other, ignoring the sounds of clicking cameras around us.

“Hey there, Hayden.” Simon stepped between us with drinks, deflating some of the tension. “This is the most beautiful gala theme that I’ve ever seen. I can tell that you’re a true artist and planner.”

“Yes,” Hayden said. “I think it’s some of my best work since it’s personal. Thank you very much for the compliment, Simeon.”

I didn’t bother correcting his name this time. I took the drinks from Simon’s hands and downed them both.

“Well, okay, then.” Simon looped his arm in mine. “Allow me to help you dance that off, shall we?”

“Yeah.” I glared at Hayden. “I think getting away from here is a great idea.”

Hayden clenched his jaw, but he didn’t say a word. His gaze lingered on me long after we walked away and I felt his eyes following me across the room.

Simon held me close for several songs on the dance floor, whispering words into my ear that I could only halfway hear. I was too busy thinking about Hayden to pay attention, too busy wishing that he wasn’t so fucking sexy.

*Focus on Simon, Penelope. Focus on Simon.*

“You’re being awfully quiet tonight.” He kissed the shell of my ear. “Are you having a good time?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to come over to my place after we leave?”

“Absolutely.” I looked up as I said those words, catching Hayden staring at us from afar.

His eyes were focused on my hands, so I threaded my fingers through Simon’s hair. Then I trailed them down to his neck.

Hayden’s face reddened, and I finally looked away from him.

“You want to try a few things from the inspiration bar?” I said to Simon. “That’s always the best part of this event.”

“I’d love to.” He let go of my waist and clasped my hand, leading me over to the side of the room that was partitioned by the twenty-foot ice sculptures.

He took his time making us a plate of appetizers, but before we could taste them, the CEO of Tinder, Tim Lassing, stepped in front of us.

“Well, look who it is.” He smiled. “Hayden Hunter’s partner in crime. You look stunning as always, Penelope.”

I didn’t bother saying “Thank you.”

“Are you ever going to admit what he did to me? Or are you going to forever cling to his bullshit lies?” he asked.

“Could you like, *not*?” I rolled my eyes. “I’m shocked Hayden even put you on the guest list.”

“Me too.” He smiled. “But he knows how to throw a damn good party and *you’re* always around, so I’ll never turn down the chance to get to you. Is this suited guy next to you your date?”

“Simon Gaines.” Simon extended his hand to him. “Nice to meet you.”

Tim didn’t shake it. Instead, he patted Simon’s shoulder.

“You’re wasting your time on this one,” he said. “Get out while you can before the coincidences start piling up.” He snatched one of the strawberries off our plate and walked away.

“I don’t even want to know what the hell he was talking about.” Simon laughed.

“He does that all the time.” I shook my head, suddenly needing a breather more than ever. “Can you give me a few minutes? I need to run to the restroom.”

“Take your time.”

I walked away and headed upstairs to the bathroom that few guests knew existed.

I needed to be alone.

“Mints, spritz, or napkins, Miss?” The attendant smiled at me once I pushed the door open.

“Water, please.”

“As you wish, Miss. What type of—”

“We need to talk.” Hayden was suddenly behind me. “*Now.*”

“I’m not in the mood to talk to you.”

“I didn’t ask if you were.” He stepped around me. “Can you leave us alone for a few minutes, Martha?”

The attendant nodded and left the room.

Hayden walked over to the sink, but I remained still against the wall that was closest to the door.

I waited for him to come clean, to throw himself at my mercy, and apologize for being an utter jerk these past few weeks, but he didn’t look remorseful in the slightest.

“For the record,” he said, his eyes meeting mine, “you’re fucking beautiful.”

“Thanks. You’re fucking avoiding me.”

“I vividly remember speaking to you a little over an hour ago.”

“You know what I mean.” My chest ached. “*Call me before you leave the gala?* That’s the only text you’ve sent me for the past couple of weeks, Hayden.”

“Is coming up here your way of telling me that you’re about to leave, then?”

“No,” I said. “I’m trying to tell you that you’ve been a terrible best friend.”

“Really?” He raised his eyebrow. “That’s what you think?”

“I can repeat it if you like.”

“Look,” he said. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with your boyfriend.”

“Yeah, that’s how relationships usually work.”



“He isn’t who you think he is,” he said. “Simeon has some shady shit going on, and I think you should know.”

“His name is *Simon*.”

“His name depends on what state he’s living in,” he said. “Nonetheless, he’s not Prince Charming in the slightest and I need you to know that now before you make a huge mistake.”

“You mean, before I fuck him tonight?”

“You’re not fucking him. *Ever*.”

“Why are you acting so jealous, Hayden?”

“Let me finish talking.” His voice was terse.

“After you stop acting jealous.”

“I’m not *acting*.”

Silence.

“Your boyfriend is a con artist,” he said. “He’s pretty much Jay Gatsby on steroids, and he’s been cheating on you this entire time.”

I crossed my arms, saying nothing.

“He has a different woman in six different cities, and that doesn’t include you.” He looked into my eyes. “As for his place on the *Forbes 500*? He paid for a journalist friend to place his name on the website for a day and he took a screenshot before the editor in chief corrected it.”

“How do you know all of this, Hayden?”

“That Ferrari that he’s been driving you around in for weeks is a *rental* and he hasn’t made the payments in two months.”

“*How* do you know all of this?” I repeated, my voice cracking.

He still didn’t answer that question. “I think you should break up with him. The sooner, the better.”

“You haven’t talked to me in weeks, and now you’re asking me to dump my boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice deadpan. “I wanted to tell you sooner, but you wouldn’t have believed me,” he said. “And you know it.”

“I don’t believe you now.” I shrugged. “Two weeks ago, you said that he was your favorite out of all my boyfriends.”

“I have never said that about *any* of your boyfriends.”

“You implied it. You also implied that you’d be there for me, but you seem to have dropped the ball on that one lately.”

“I stalked your boyfriend every day for weeks, okay?” He glared at me. “And I had Sarah do some advanced digging. That’s where the fuck I’ve been. Looking out for you.”

I swallowed. “You know what? I regret ever asking for your help on this.”

“I don’t regret giving it to you,” he said, moving closer. “The next thing you need to do is break up with him and start dating the better guy.”

“Oh?” I glared at him. “So, while you were out galvanizing and stalking Simon, you also managed to find me a replacement boyfriend? How generous. Will he be arriving to this gala anytime soon?”

“He’s standing right in front of you.” He hissed. “And I want you to break up with him, *for me*.”

Silence.

I blinked a few times and he took a few more steps forward.

“I fucking want you, Penelope,” he said. “You belong with *me*.”

Tension hung in the air, neither of us saying a word.

The music from downstairs suddenly sounded at a much higher volume, pulsating so loudly that the floors and walls began to shake.

I stepped back, my heart racing a mile a minute, my mind spinning in a million different directions.

Hayden closed the gap between us and pressed his hands on the wall above me.

Trapping my body between his legs, he looked deep into my eyes, his irises a mix of longing and lust. “You should leave this room now if you don’t believe that I want you.”

His eyes remained locked on mine and the suffocating tension in this room was begging to be addressed.

I slid my hand against the doorknob to my left and pressed the lock button.

“I’ll take that as your answer,” he said, tilting my chin up with his fingertips. He pressed his mouth against mine, kissing me deeply and thoroughly.

“*Ahhhh.*” I moaned at the feel of his tongue controlling mine.

He slid his hand under the thigh-high slit of my dress and tugged at my panties.

I expected him to tear them off like he did at the yacht party, but he suddenly stopped and pulled away from my mouth.

“Turn around to face the mirror,” he said. “I want to look at you while we fuck.”

I slowly turned to my right and he gripped me from behind.

His gaze met mine in the full-length mirror and he made me watch as he slowly pushed my panties down to the marble floor.

Stuffing them inside his pocket, he moved behind me again and bit my ear.

“Grab the sink for me.”

I obeyed, grabbing it tightly and watching as he bit my neck and pushed up my dress.

He unbuckled his pants and pulled out his cock. Without saying a word, he pressed the thick tip of it against my pussy.

My eyes widened and he let out a low laugh as he slowly—oh, so slowly—slid into me.

*Oh. My. God.*

“*Ohhh...*” I cried out as I adjusted to his length and his thickness, as he took his time positioning himself just right behind me.

“Does it feel good?” he asked when he was only halfway inside of me.

“Yes.”

“*Good.*” He slid the rest of himself into me all at once, making me cry out in a mix of pain and pleasure.

“Ohh God...” I kept my eyes on his in the mirror, loving the way he felt deep inside of me. Loving the way he groaned behind me as he owned my body with his.

My knuckles whitened as I gripped the edge harder, as he rocked against me and thrusted in and out with controlled yet wild abandon.

Years of our friendship unraveled and fell away with every deep stroke. With every wet kiss he pressed against my neck.

He slid his left hand up to my breast and squeezed it, whispering, “You feel so fucking good.”

I moaned as he slid into me harder.

The way he watched me through the mirror as he controlled me, as he fucked me, was beyond intoxicating. I never wanted to look away.

“Slide your hand to your clit,” he whispered. “Let me see how well I taught you.”

I sucked in a breath as he kept up his reckless rhythm and I slowly slid my hand under the slit of my dress.

I teased my clit with my fingertips, rubbing it in a slow circle, gaining his gaze of approval.

I tried to match his tempo, but it was no use. He was suddenly getting even more turned on at the sight of me

touching myself, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

*I can't hold on anymore.*

I gripped the counter harder than I had all night and screamed his name at the top of my lungs.

He stiffened behind me, reaching his orgasm next.

Both panting, our bodies still entwined, we stared at our reflection to see what we'd just done.

He kissed the back of my neck one last time before slowly pulling out of me. And he didn't take his eyes off mine while he zipped his pants.

He smoothed my hair into place, looking as if he wanted to say something, but no words fell from his lips.

The realization of what just happened dawned on me in slow motion. Each staggered second exposed that the two of us had done more than cross the line of our friendship.

We'd bulldozed over it and set fire to the bridge behind it.

"I can't do this." I pushed him away. "I can't believe that I... That we..."

I unlocked the door and left.

TWENTY-SEVEN (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

I ran out of the building and into the rain, rushing toward the first available town car. The sign in the rear window read, *Designated Driver: Paid for by Mr. Hunter*, and a valet quickly walked over and opened the backdoor.

“Have a safe night, Miss.” He shut it once I climbed inside.

“Where to?” The driver asked.

“555 Aurora Avenue. As fast as you can, please.”

“Will do.”

His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror as he pulled onto the street, but he didn’t strike up a conversation. Instead, he turned on the radio, letting the songs complement the rain’s steady percussion.

Holding back tears, I leaned against the seat and tried to process whatever the hell had happened between Hayden and me in that bathroom.

My heart pounded an unfamiliar rhythm with every instant replay, and my lips felt pleurably sore from how hard he’d kissed me.

How hard he fucked me...

*“Simon isn’t who he you think he is.” “He’s been cheating on you this entire time.” “That’s where the fuck I’ve been.”*

*Looking out for you.”*

I knew he'd never lie to me, but those words still hurt to hear. And I couldn't believe he'd waited more than a single day to tell me the truth.

*“You wouldn't have believed me.”*

My phone vibrated against my thigh as the car coasted through Manhattan, but I ignored it.

It wasn't until I was halfway home that I forced myself to face its screen and change Hayden's name for the umpteenth time.

**Hayden:** [img.] [img.] [img.] [img.] [img.]

**Hayden:** [img.] [img.] [img.] [img.] [img.]

**Hayden:** [img.] [img.] [img.] [img.] [img.]

I opened the images one by one, feeling my stomach tighten and twist with each stolen glimpse of Simon's other lives.

He kissed a blonde on a white-sanded beach, hugged a brunette in the corner booth of a crepe café, and laughed with a pretty redhead over confetti-speckled ice cream.

He wore glasses and a plaid shirt while wearing an “S. Gines” name tag, a suit while standing in front of a sign that read “Sam Giannis Wealth Building Seminar,” and jeans and a T-shirt while picking up a coffee reserved for “Silas Gains.”

*Oh my god.*

With every new picture, a memory of the time we'd shared over the past few months shattered to pieces in my mind.

As I was staring at an image of him groping some woman's ass in the arrivals zone at John F. Kennedy International Airport, his name crossed my screen via phone call.

I hit ignore.

I zoomed in on the image and realized that this woman wasn't just anyone. She was the fiancé who'd supposedly left



him hanging on his wedding day, the woman he'd crafted as a total villain whenever he brought her up to me.

*What a fucking liar.*

He called my phone again and I immediately answered.

"Yeah?" I didn't try to hide my disdain. "What the hell do you want, Simon?"

"I've been looking all over for you." He didn't catch my tone at all. "I wanted us to dance again before the fireworks. I was also hoping you'd want to leave early so we can have the rest of the evening to ourselves."

He sounded so damn sweet and genuine that I couldn't blame myself for not seeing through his facade.

"How the hell do you sleep at night, Simon?" I asked. "I want to know."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, how the hell do you sleep at night knowing that you have multiple women across the country vying for different pieces of your heart?"

He said nothing.

All I could hear was the clinking of champagne glasses and light laughter in the background.

"How many women are there?" I asked. "Do any of them know?"

"Wow. I'm not sure who has gotten into your head with these lies and ugly allegations, but—" His voice faltered for the very first time since we met. "None of what you've said about me is true. I'm falling for you and only you."

"You know, years ago, I would've loved nothing more than to hear you say that."

"Better late than never, right?"

"More like, better off never." I swallowed the lump in my throat. "We're fucking over, Simon. I'll send you some pictures as a parting gift, but please don't contact me again."

“Penelope, don’t do this to us.” He had the audacity to sound sincere. “We have something special here. I felt it the moment I saw you at the airport.”

“That was probably *guilt* for cheating on the other girls.”

I didn’t wait for a response. I ended the call and forwarded him every single picture I’d received from Hayden.

Once the last one went through, he disregarded my wishes.

**Simon:** I’m so sorry about this situation, Penelope. I’ve always been afraid of committing to one person, but I can honestly say that you were on the verge of transforming me into the better man I want to be.

**Simon:** I can let all of them go for you. I swear.

**Simon:** Please take as much time as you need to think about forgiving me. I’ll never talk to any of them again if you give me another chance.

I blocked his number and turned off my phone. I had someone far more important to think about.



WHEN THE DRIVER pulled the car in front of my brownstone, he turned around and handed me a Kleenex.

“Hope the rest of your night gets better, Miss.”

“Thank you.” I handed him a few twenties and headed up the steps.

As I was rummaging for my keys, I spotted a note that was taped to the doorframe.

*Soooo....*

*I went out to a Sailor Moon Con in Jersey for the weekend.*

*Don’t judge me!*

*Tell me everything (& I do mean EVERYTHING) on Monday.*

*Tati*

*P.S.: Please don't move the star crystals on the mantle.*

I CRUMPLED the note and pushed the door open.

Wanting to silence the thoughts that were racing through my head, I hastily unzipped my dress and avoided looking at myself in the mirror as the fabric fell to the floor.

I shut myself inside the bathroom and let the tears break free as I stepped into the shower. I turned the water to the hottest setting, allowing the streams to attack me with their scalding, unrestrained judgement.

*You had sex with your best friend.*

*In a public bathroom.*

*You fucked him in a bathroom, and you broke up with the guy he's been helping you chase for weeks.*

As much as I wanted to deny it, I knew that things would never be the same between us again.

Not after *that*.

I tried to think about something else, *anything* else, but it was no use. All I could hear over the water slapping my skin was Hayden's deep, rugged voice.

*"He's standing right in front of you."*

*"And I want you to break up with him, for me."*

The steam fogged the glass doors and assaulted my throat, making another minute inside the shower unbearable.

Giving in, I turned off the water and wrapped myself in a towel. Since I was still on edge, I headed toward the kitchen.

I needed a drink.

"Hello, Penelope." Hayden's deep voice stopped me dead in my tracks.

I turned around to see him sitting on the edge of my bed. He'd pushed his shirt sleeves back to his elbows and he'd loosened his dark tie.

Staring at me with his jaw clenched, he looked torn between pulling me against him or losing his shit on me for leaving the gala.

“Is your boyfriend coming over to join this conversation?” he asked.

“He’s not my boyfriend anymore.” I swallowed. “I’ll have to figure out a title for him soon.”

“‘The One That Wasted Our Time’ seems fitting.”

“*Our* time?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “He’s been in the way for too long, and I wasn’t lying to you about him.”

“I’m aware.”

“I also wasn’t lying about us.”

“There is no *us*,” I said. “That’s the most ridiculous thing that you’ve ever said to me. Then again, it may be tied for first place with you admitting that you stalked someone for an entire week.”

“Longer than that.” A faint smile crossed his lips, but he didn’t let it stay.

“I can’t be *just* your friend anymore, Penelope.” He looked into my eyes. “I refuse.”

“Are you saying it’s all or nothing?”

“Yes. But I’m also saying that I want to be yours, and I want you to be mine.”

Silence.

My heart was begging me to say yes and throw myself all over him, but my mind knew better.

Hayden had never been in a functioning relationship in his life.

*Stay friends, stay friends...*

“What if I said that I need to think about it?”

“I guess you can do that.” He walked over to me, wrapping an arm around my waist. “But that doesn’t need to happen until tomorrow. In the meantime, I think we need to pick up where we left off at the gala.”

“What makes you think that’s a good idea?”

“Because I know you,” he said, running his fingers through my hair. “And I know you want more, so tell me how you want it.”

I stood still, completely speechless.

“Tell me, Penelope,” he whispered. “Do you want me to go slower? Devour your pussy with my mouth?”

“Yes.”

“Can you say that for me?”

I swallowed, and he tugged at the edge of my towel until it fell away from my body. It landed on the floor in a useless heap.

“Penelope.” He bit my bottom lip, trapping it between his teeth while he stared into my eyes. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want what you said.” I struggled to speak. I was beyond turned on. “I want that.”

His low laughter turned me on even more.

Letting my lip go, he pressed a light kiss against my mouth. He pressed his palms against my ass, alternating between soft and hard squeezes.

“I’ll give you whatever you want,” he said. “But I need you to say it. I need you to be very clear and direct with me.”

As if his desire was to tease me, to give me a sample of how good he would be, he slowly licked his lips before leaning down and sucking my right nipple into his mouth.

He darted his tongue against it in a slow, yet firm rhythm, turning me on with so much ease that he could probably make me orgasm that way.

“I want you to fuck me slower and with your mouth,” I said, finally. “That’s what’s I want.”

“Good girl.” He pushed me back onto the mattress.

Moving on top of me, he kissed a scorching hot trail of kisses between my breasts, then he took his time moving his mouth down to my stomach.

Then lower...

He was staring at me with every move he made, silently demanding me to submit as he tightly grabbed my ankles.

When he blew a long kiss against my clit, I damn near lost it.

He teased me with another one, sliding two fingers deep inside of me and pushing me into a zone of pleasure I’d never ventured to before.

“I want you to look at me, Penelope,” he said. “Look at me while I eat your pussy.”

I opened my eyes and he smiled. Then he blew a soft, warm kiss against my inner thigh.

Without any warning, he spat directly onto my clit, and I gasped at the sight of him burying his head between my thighs and devouring me, rendering me utterly useless.

*Fuck.*

“Hayden...” I gripped his hair and screamed as he controlled my entire body with his mouth. As he owned me like no man had ever done before.

“*Ahhhh.*” I clawed my nails into his shoulders, but he didn’t respond to the pain. He only responded by devouring me more.

The tremors inside of me were building, building, and building, as he kept the same dominant tempo. My body was reacting more to *him* than my inner pleas to hold on just a little longer.

As he darted his tongue against my clit at just the right angle, just the right spot, I lost all control.

“Oh Godddd, Haydennnn!” I screamed his name at the top of my lungs as I reached an orgasm and came on his mouth.

He didn't let me go. He continued rolling his tongue against my pussy for several minutes after, until I'd completely stopped shaking.

When he finally stood to his feet, I lay against the mattress, panting and sweating, trying to come down from a high I'd never experienced before.

The sound of running water suddenly filled the room and it took all my energy to sit up a bit.

Hayden returned to the bedroom and stared into my eyes. “You're fucking gorgeous when you come. Do you know that?”

I blushed. All sense of conversation was eluding me at this moment.

I motioned for him to lay next to me, but he shook his head.

“I'm not done with you,” he said, moving on top of me. “I'm just getting started.”

He covered my lips with his, pulling me under his spell, and I became lost in him all over again.

For the rest of the night, he explored every inch of me, bringing me to orgasm after orgasm. Never letting up, never letting go.

TWENTY-EIGHT



PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**W**hen I woke up in the morning, Penelope was no longer in my arms.

Her dress from the gala lay in a silk pool on the floor and my shirt was hanging from the window sill.

I sat up, slightly confused.

She'd come on my mouth multiple times, screaming my name so loudly that I had to press my palm against her mouth so none of her neighbors would hear.

The look in her eyes when we were entwined, when I was buried deep inside of her, was something I'd never forget.

I was still replaying the way she looked the moment she stepped inside the ballroom, how every man she passed did a not-so-subtle double take. How I knew, the moment her eyes met mine, that I wasn't letting her leave with Simon.

Every move she made with him on the dance floor cut me, confirming what I'd felt for the past several weeks.

*Years, even.*

And because I knew her down to her marrow, I could tell that she was going to fight like hell to run away from this.

TWENTY-NINE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

“Come on, come on.” I pushed the fire escape window as hard as I could, but it wasn’t budging. *“Please.”*

I needed to breathe. Then I needed to analyze every single second of last night, preferably someplace alone before Hayden woke up.

“Need some help?” His deep voice was suddenly behind me.

“No.” I jumped, but I didn’t turn around. “I’m fine.”

He kissed the back of my neck and stepped in front of me anyway, pushing it open with ease.

“Thank you.” I started to step out, but he slipped an arm around my waist and spun me around to face him.

Bare chested and wearing his pants from the night before, he was turning me on all over again with ease.

“Want to talk about it?” He smiled.

“I don’t think there’s anything to say.” I crossed my arms. “We were drunk and we got carried away.”

“I was one hundred percent sober.”

*So was I.* “Well, I wasn’t, so...”

“So, what?”

“I’m willing to forget all about it and act like it never happened if you are.”

He let out a low laugh and picked me up in one smooth motion, carrying me out onto the fire escape. He gently set me down on the iron and trailed his finger against my exposed collarbone.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Yes, please.”

He disappeared for several minutes and I tried to focus on the slow trudge of morning traffic below.

When he returned, he was holding a blanket and two huge mugs.

Taking a seat next to me, he wrapped the blanket around my shoulders.

We sat in silence while we sipped our coffee as I struggled to find something to say. I felt him staring at me, watching my every move and waiting to look his way, but I kept my gaze toward the cars.

“I can’t wait to see what gala picture *Page Six* and *Sinful Suit* pick for their front covers this weekend. My money is on one of you standing under the awning of lights. Either that, or you giving your usual grand speech after the fireworks.”

“I didn’t give a speech after the fireworks this time,” he said.

“*What?*” I finally faced him. “Why not?”

“There was something far more important that I needed to address.”

Silence.

“Lawrence and Sarah gave the speech on my behalf,” he said. “I’m sure they did fine without me.”

“Did any photogs follow you to my place?” I was suddenly paranoid for the first time. “What if—”

“No one saw me leave.” He assured me. “And I drove Lawrence’s car here. He didn’t ask me any questions when I told him I needed to go.”

“Did you tell him why?”

“I think he knew.”

“I can’t do a friends with benefits thing with you.” I couldn’t help but blurt out the words. “That’s just not for me. I’m sorry.”

“*Penelope...*” He sighed, tilting my chin up with his fingertips. “I meant every word that I said to you last night. I want to be with you, and you belong with me. No one else. Don’t you believe me?”

*Tell him that last night was just a heat of the moment mistake.*

“It wasn’t a heat of the moment mistake,” he said, reading me easily. “What else are you thinking?”

“You’re my best friend,” I said. “Like, my *best* fucking friend, and even if I do believe you, I can’t vet you like I do with anyone else and that scares the hell out of me.”

“Okay.” He trailed a finger against my lips. “Let’s vet me, then. Tell me the pros and cons of being in a relationship with the guy you were with last night.”

“I can’t think of any pros right now.”

“Then tell me the cons.”

“He’s *never* been in a monogamous relationship.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s incapable of being faithful.”

“You’re not supposed to take his side,” I said. “You have to let me finish and stay neutral.”

“Okay.” He brushed a few stray hairs from my forehead. “Give me the next one.”

“This guy is close friends with my brother, and my brother wouldn’t approve of me dating him at all.”

“I don’t see why you would suddenly have the need to tell your brother anything. It’s none of his business.”

“You think I should wait until the wedding?”

“Since when did the guy in question ask you to marry him?” He smirked. “I believe he’s only asking to be your boyfriend. Next con.”

“He’s famous.”

“That’s a *fact*, not a con.”

“I wouldn’t want to deal with the press hounding me or making up rumors just because I was dating him.”

“I think the press would continue to assume that there’s nothing going on,” he said. “It’s not like the guy we’re talking about would ever touch you in public. No matter how badly he wants to. Is there another con?”

“I’m just terrified of getting hurt.” I looked into his eyes. “I can’t stress that enough. If *you* hurt me, I have no other best guy friend to talk about the breakup with, and I lose everything.”

“I can promise you that won’t ever happen,” he said. “Now that we’re done with the cons, allow me to list out the pros for you.”

I opened my mouth to interject, but he pressed a finger against my lips.

“One, I know you better than any other guy you’ve ever dated.”

“You didn’t know about Simon or the voodoo doll.”

“Only one of those things will ever be discussed again.” He held back a laugh. “Two, I’m not going to watch you date any other guys.”

“That sounds like more of a threat than a pro.”

“It’s a guarantee.” He kissed my forehead. “Three, I think that deep down you want me as much as I want you, and you know that we can work very well together.”

“I only think that there’s a chance.”

“All the more reason that you should give it to me.”

“Three pros?” I asked. “That’s all you have?”

“It’s not like too much would change between us, Penelope.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “We talk to each other every day already, and we see each other whenever we want.”

“We weren’t having sex before.”

“And I never want to know what that’s like again.” He smiled. “I promise I won’t hurt you, Penelope. Give me a chance.”

I stared at him for several seconds, not saying a word.

“Penelope?” He looked concerned. “What do you say?”

“Okay.”

“Okay yes, or okay you need to think about it?”

“Okay it depends on how good the next round of sex is.” I smiled. “I’m not sure if it’s as good as I remember.”

“Fair enough.” He laughed and clasped my hands, pulling me up against him. “Quick question. You really never thought about sex with me until you saw my leaked pictures?”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I’m just curious.”

“Yes, Hayden.” I only managed to get a few words out before he assaulted me with another kiss. “That was my first time.”

# BREAKUP #13



THE ONE THAT WAS SOMEONE ELSE



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

“What I’m about to say is highly inappropriate, so I’ll deny it if you try to repeat it later.” My coach places his hands on my shoulders and looks deep into my eyes. “You’re sucking ass out there.”

“You gave me a perfect score thirty minutes ago.”

“To see if that would inspire some life into your performance.” He shook his head. “You’re not getting any better, so I’m giving you the spoiler: You’re going to lose tomorrow morning and some other girl will be standing at the top of that podium.”

I bite my tongue to prevent myself from saying something sarcastic. “I’m really doing the best I can, Coach.”

“No, this is your worst.” He scoffs. “You’re out there skating like you’ve never been fucked before.”

My jaw drops. “*What?*”

“I said what I said.” He shrugs. “You had the audacity to tell me that you’re on the chase for *twenty-eight* championships so you can beat your late mother’s record? Well, I hate to break it to you, but you’re eight short, and if you want to even think about achieving that, you can’t afford to lose for two years.”

My blood boils as he berates me in front of my competition.

Before I can tell him that I'm done listening to him for the day, he lowers his voice and softens his tone.

“You're the best damn singles skater that I've ever had the honor of training, but you have to want this shit more than I want it for you, and you can't cut corners... Even if you have more talent than anyone else.”

I want to tell him that I'm trying my best, but deep down, I know that's not true. I've been on auto-pilot ever since Canada.

I've done my best to forget about wasting my first time on an asshole and I've spun through a few other first dates, landing on a guy who believes in romance for a change, but my skating has hit a robotic, complacent plateau.

“You want to continue reigning at number one?” My coach interrupts my thoughts. “You want to cement your legacy as only here to get first place and being the best skater to hit the ice since they invented this goddamn sport?”

“Yes.”

“Then tomorrow morning, I want to see you go out there and shut your eyes. Dig deep into your best thoughts of you and your boyfriend Francis—”

“Frankie. His name is Frankie.”

“Really? That name is even worse than Francis.” He shudders. “Anyway, go out there and pretend like every move is a passionate plea for Frankie when he's making love to you. Get the hell out of my sight until then.”



“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Skate America,” a loud voice comes through the speakers at Washington Arena in the morning.

Far across from me, in the front row, Frankie is wearing a bright blue “Go Penelope!” sweatshirt. Several rows behind

him, Hayden is attracting the attention of every woman in a hundred feet radius per usual, but his eyes are locked on mine.

He waves, mouthing, “Travis says sorry he couldn’t be here. Raincheck?”

I wave back. “It is what it is.”

Frankie blows me a kiss and I smile and hold onto it, not wanting that to get misdirected. *Ever.*

For half an hour, I watch my competitors dance on the ice with my heart locked in my throat.

It’s as if they’ve all noticed my slight slump into complacency and they’ve raised the bar in hopes of finally dethroning me.

*Especially Tatiana Brave.*

When it’s my turn, I glide to the center and shut my eyes.

*Think about Frankie. Be passionate about Frankie.*

An instrumental version of “Time After Time” sifts through the speakers and I push off backwards, launching into my routine.

My light blue skirt flutters as I spin around on the ice, as I jump into a triple axel, and again when I complete a double lutz. Instead of following my already-challenging program to the letter, I replace every double jump with a triple salchow or the ever-elusive quad that’s always come so easily to me.

Gasps from the crowd fill the arena with my every move, and I keep picturing Frankie kissing in my bedroom, him slowly pulling off my clothes and making love to me.

I know without a doubt that every move is perfect, that by the time the song ends and I complete a final Hamill spin that I haven’t made a single mistake.

Except when I finish and the crowd, judges included, are standing to their feet and clapping, I realize that it’s not Frankie who I was envisioning making love to me.

It was Hayden.

THIRTY

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Boston, Massachusetts*

If it weren't for the fact that I was adamant about keeping my promises, I would've spent the rest of my weekend in bed with Penelope instead of chartering a mid-day flight to Boston.

Alas, this date was set months in advance, and I'd always agreed to show up to the opening ceremonies for Travis's chain of workout gyms. It was something that ensured that even in our busiest years, we scheduled the time to support each other.

By the time my plane landed and the town car whisked me down Newbury Street, I was twenty minutes late.

I rode a private elevator to the top floor of the building, finding the usual suits already lined up for the photo.

Forcing a smile at the anxious press, I took my place right next to Travis.

"Thank you for blessing us all with your presence today," he muttered. "So glad that I'm worthy of your time."

"You're not," I said. "I'd much rather be in New York."

He laughed. "Penelope said she was coming, but apparently she's too sick to make it."

*No, she's too sore to make it.* "I'll check on her when I get back."

"Thank you."

"On the count of three, say, 'Congratulations on location number seven, Mr. Carter,' everyone!" The photog saved me from letting that conversation go anywhere else.

"One... two... three!"

"Congratulations on location number seven, Mr. Carter!"

Everyone smiled as Travis held a pair of oversized scissors above a red ribbon.

With the photogs trailing our every move, we walked around the gym and posed for perfectly curated shots for the next hour and a half.

"Which penthouse suite did you book for the weekend?" Travis tossed me a free weight after they snapped the final picture.

"None," I said. "I'm flying back home."

"Why so soon?"

"I have some personal business to handle."

"You're not the slightest bit interested in hanging out with me before I have to completely lock in for the fight of my life?"

*I'm more interested in your sister.* "I have plans."

"Some best friend you are." He feigned hurt and pulled a folded paper from his back pocket. "Guess who I spotted on the cover of *Page Six* this morning?"

"Whatever they wrote about me, it isn't true."

"You weren't important enough to make the cover this time." He unfolded it, revealing a stunning photo of Penelope and Simon staring at each other on the dance floor.

The words "New York's Newest Bachelor Dances the Night Away at Hayden Hunter's Annual Gala" graced the top of the page.

“I spent a few minutes researching her date this morning, and he looks like he totally has his shit together.” He smiled. “This might be the first boyfriend of hers that I actually approve. Do *you* like him?”

“They broke up already.” I didn’t want to acknowledge Simon Gaines’ existence ever again. “That was nothing more than a cordial photo opp. She’s dating someone else now.”

“Okay then... Is the ‘someone else’ a better guy?”

“A *much better* guy.”

“Cool.” He shrugged. “You know, sometimes I feel a tad bit jealous that she tells you more about her personal life than me.”

“That’s because I’ve never threatened to murder any of her boyfriends.”

“I only did that one time.”

“You’ve done it *six times*.”

“Those don’t count if I never made it to prison.” He instantly confirmed how unhinged he was. “Thanks for still being there for her whenever I can’t be, though.”

“No problem.”

“I really mean that, man.” He looked genuine. “I owe you a huge one, and I’m still trying to figure out a way to pay you back someday. If you were the one who’d lost your parents and had a little sister—”

“I would’ve never left her anywhere near you.”

“Yeah, true. What the hell was I thinking back then?” He laughed. “*Anyway*... how about joining me at the strip club before you leave?”

“I literally just told you that I have plans, Travis.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure that Lawrence can wait a few hours.”

“My girlfriend can’t.”

“Your *what?*” He looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. “What did you say?”

“I said, my girlfriend can’t wait.”

“Is this some type of fake arrangement for your image or something?”

“No, it’s the real deal.” I held back a sigh, knowing that the time to discuss dating Penelope would be long after Vegas. “I’ll introduce her to you later.”

“But like... Given your track record with monogamy and shit, you probably won’t last that long with her anyway, so can we still go to the strip club together?”

“Goodbye, Travis.” I patted his shoulder before heading towards the door. “I’ll see you in Vegas.”



THIRTY-ONE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**I**t took me fifteen orgasms to realize that I needed to do some *real* work before I spent the rest of my life in bed with Hayden.

While he stepped into my shower, I slipped away to the ice rink and found an envelope from U.S. Figure Skating waiting on my desk.

I'd been staring at it for over an hour now, brewing fresh cups of coffee while wondering what was inside.

“Open it already,” Tatiana said. “I need to know if it’s my biggest fear come true.”

“Why would the figure skating association send me a letter about you?”

“I don’t know, but I sometimes have nightmares that they’re going to give you this grand award with a special, over-the-top ceremony for being the best skater in the sport.”

“Glad you can finally admit that I was the best.” I smiled. “Took you long enough.”

“I didn’t mean it.” She eyed the envelope. “Open it, will you?”

I picked up a pen and sliced the top, pulling out a bright blue sheet.

*Dear Miss Carter,*

*As the most decorated female singles skater and a two-time Olympic gold medalist, we wanted to reach out to you about a rule change regarding the upcoming winter games in Beijing, China.*

*Per the International Olympic Committee, qualified coaches of individual athlete sports will now be eligible to receive medals.*

*Unfortunately, the coach for candidate Katie Folds is now banned from our organization, and we are hoping to replace him with someone who respects our sport at the highest level.*

*Per structural changes we've made (and the earlier date for the World Championships that began last year), the top choices will train at the Edwin Compound in Salt Lake City, Utah for four months before traveling to Beijing.*

*If you're interested in this opportunity, please contact me at your earliest convenience to go over the updated rules and terms for our organization. I'm sure you've kept up with them, but this is a formality.*

*The chase for 28 continues...*

*Deborah Walsh*

I dropped the paper to the floor, and Tatiana quickly picked it up to read.

Her eyes widened with every word and she let out a breath once she reached the end.

“Wow,” she said. “You’re totally doing this, right?”

“I need to think about it.”

“Why?” She crossed her arms. “This cements your legacy and gets you bragging rights forever, especially since Katie Folds will definitely get on that podium.”

“Exactly.” I sipped the coffee. “If the rule change is permanent, I’d rather coach someone I really helped to get there. It would mean more.”

She stepped closer and pressed her hand against my neck. “You know, I was about to check for a pulse, to make sure

you're alive, but—" Her lips curved into a smile. "There are red marks all over your neck, so I think this is the post-gala sex with Simon talking. We can discuss what day you're calling to accept their offer later." She plopped down on a chair. "Give me all the dirty details with Simon, full play by play."

"I didn't have sex with Simon."

"Ugh, come on." She crossed her arms. "That's how you want to play this?"

"It's true," I said. "I mean, I *did* have sex."

"Clearly."

"It wasn't with him, though."

She gasped. "You met some other guy that night? Who?"

"Hey." Hayden's deep voice suddenly filled the room and made me look toward the door.

My cheeks heated as he strolled inside and my body reacted at the sight of him in dark grey sweats and a white T-shirt.

He set my keys down on the desk and I had an instant flashback of hours ago when he was making me ride his hand in the shower.

"You might need those later," he said. "Don't you think?"

"Yes," I said, clearing my throat. "Thank you for bringing those here, Hayden. As you can see, I am busy speaking with Tatiana at the moment."

"I can see that." His lips curved into a smirk. "You left me, so I was checking to make sure you were alright."

"Yes, I left you at the coffee café, because that's where we were earlier." I tried to act natural. "I'll call you later to discuss more coffee."

He looked as if he was about to lean over the desk and kiss me, to kill my fumbling ruse on the spot, but he laughed and left the room.

“Okay,” Tatiana said. “Now, back to the guy you had sex with this weekend. You said you were never the one-night stand type, so—” She stopped talking and tilted her head to the side. Then she sucked in a breath. “You fucked Hayden, didn’t you?”

“No.” My cheeks heated again. “No, I did not fuck Hayden.”

“You did!” She saw right through me. “Did his entire cock even fit inside of you? Did it feel good? No, wait. Don’t answer that yet. Tell me everything—and I do mean down to every second—from the time Simon picked you up until now.”

“Can I tell you after I get done coaching my client?”

“Ha! No.” She pointed to the window behind me, where my “client” was coordinating her umpteenth TikTok video on the ice instead of doing a warm-up. “She’s only here because of her rich parents and you know it. Get to the sex recap. Now.”



TWO HOURS LATER, Tatiana fanned herself with a binder.

“Well, damn,” she said. “I feel the sudden need to go home and have a date with my vibrator.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

“Of course you did.” She laughed. “That way, you can go to his place and have more sex to tell me about later. Are you two an item now?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “But please don’t tell anyone.”

“Who would I have to tell?”

“Good point, sorry. I just want to make sure my brother doesn’t know until later.” *Much later.*

“I fucking hate your brother.” She stood to her feet. “He used to leave me ‘You’ll never outrank my sister’ and ‘How

does it feel to be number two again?’ voicemails after every competition.”

“*Really?*” I smiled. “He never told me that. That was sweet of him.”

She gave me a blank stare.

“I mean, I can’t believe he did that. What an awful human being.”

She laughed and picked up her purse. “Brunch tomorrow, if you’re not screwing Hayden again?”

“Sure.” I nodded and waited for her to leave.

I reread the letter from the skating committee a few more times, wishing that they’d written me sooner.

As I was weighing the pros and cons, Hayden stepped into my office again.

“I thought I asked you to leave, sir.” I placed the letter into the drawer as he walked over to me. “I’m busy at work.”

“You were busy discussing us fucking.” He smiled, pulling me up by my hands. “Very interesting recap.”

“You eavesdropped?”

“I briefly took notes on the second half.” He pushed me against the wall. “If you wanted more, you shouldn’t have left.”

“I have a job, Hayden.”

“You’re self-employed.” He pressed a kiss against my lips. “And your only client for the day left over an hour ago.”

“I have tons of other things to do.”

“I know,” he said, covering my mouth with his. “I’m one of them.”

“Did you overhear the part when I said I wanted to have sex on the ice with you someday?”

“I did.” He slid a hand under my shirt. “We’ll get to that next.”

THIRTY ONE (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Hayden Hunter's Gala Raises \$10M for Charity*

*Tinder Sues Cinder, Again: Why They Might Win The Case  
This Time Around*

*Chicago Woman Crafts Line of Vibrators Inspired by Hayden  
Hunter's "Member"*

*Fifteen Reasons Why We Think Hayden Hunter Is Currently  
Celibate*



THIRTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**I**n my office. On the ice. In his office. On the roof. All over every surface in his condo.

Not a day had gone by that Hayden and I hadn't had sex.

On the one hand, I felt like we were making up for years of repressed attraction and unrequited yearning.

On the other, we'd lost our late-night phone conversations, all-day texts, and meet-ups in Central Park. I didn't want to lose those things over sex, no matter how phenomenal it was.

I swiped my key at his penthouse suite Friday afternoon, hoping to surprise him when he arrived home from work.

When I pushed the door open, I found him reading a newspaper near his windows.

"Yes, Penelope?" He smiled at me. "Breaking and entering is a crime, you know."

"Not when you have a key." I blushed. "I didn't think you would be home yet."

He set down the paper and walked over to me. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk shit about my new boyfriend," I said. "But the guy I usually talk about this kind of thing with *is* my boyfriend."

“Hmmm.” He smiled. “Would you like to call Tatiana instead?”

“She’s still in-flight from L.A. She won’t land for another two hours.”

“I see. What’s the problem with your boyfriend?”

“We haven’t done much of anything except have sex.”

“Oh?” He looked amused.

“I know he’s supposed to be laying low with his scandals and all, but I feel like he knows me well enough to take me out somewhere. Don’t get me wrong, I mean, the sex is beyond phenomenal, and it’s the best I’ve ever had, but I loved our friendship.”

He didn’t say anything.

“This is the part when you join me in talking shit about him.”

Laughing, he took out his wallet and pulled out two tickets. “Your boyfriend was planning to take you to a private premiere tonight. After he took you to dinner atop the Empire State Building and his security team cleared a path for a private walk through Central Park.”

My cheeks heated as he wrapped his arms around my waist.

“I think your boyfriend knows you very well, and you should try to be patient with him since you’re his first,” he said. “He’s trying to be the best boyfriend you’ve ever had.”

*He already is.* “When were you planning to start tonight’s date?”

“Around ten.”

“If I said that I wanted to have sex first, would that make me a hypocrite?”

“Only if I granted your request.” He clasped my hand and led me out of his condo and onto the elevator. “Let’s do something else first.”

As the car moved down, I stared up at him. “Tell me something that I don’t already know about you.”

“I DVR your brother’s press conferences and watch them later,” he said. “Even though I tell him that I watch them live.”

“I’m usually there when you do that.” I laughed. “Tell me something else.”

“I sent an apology letter to my father today,” he said.

“What on earth are you sorry to him for?”

“Not feeling the need to reconnect or fix anything between us,” he said, looking at me. “I have everyone I want in my life already, and I have no desire to reconnect with strangers. Your turn.”

The doors glided open and I thought long and hard about something I hadn’t already shared with him.

When we made it into his car, I let out a sigh.

“I used to have the biggest crush on you. No, I actually *liked* you.”

“What? When was this?”

“A long time ago.”

“Before or after our Cold War?”

“Definitely not after.” I rolled my eyes. “It was fleeting, though. I think it lasted a week or so.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because you would’ve turned me down and said that you were too old for me.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “Probably.”

“Did you ever like me?”

“No, Penelope.” He laughed. “You were just a friend until now.”

“Well, thank goodness I never told you.”

“Exactly.” He leaned over and kissed me. “The walk from the elevator to my car counts as doing ‘something else’ before

sex, right?”

“Absolutely.”

# BREAKUP #15

THE ONE THAT NEVER EXISTED



*Hayden*

**T**here's a park bench hidden under an oak tree canopy on Covington Avenue and it's become my go-to meet-up spot with Penelope on Sunday nights. It's close enough to her rink and my rented office space that we can both walk there within ten minutes.

When we first found it, we called Travis via video chat to catch up on things with us, but after he continued to no-show or cancel at the last minute, we've kept it to ourselves.

Taking my seat, I see Penelope walking toward me from afar. Dressed in her typical sweats and oversized T-shirt, she looks more like a skateboarder than a figure skater.

*She's fucking beautiful.*

"Why the face?" I ask, noticing her scowl. "You're still ranked number one in the world and you just got paid two hundred dollars to give a speech full of platitudes to high schoolers."

"Platitudes?" She crosses her arms. "I put my heart and soul into writing that speech."

"You remixed a bunch of quotes from Pinterest."

"Thank you for un-remixing them for me." She smiles, but she doesn't let it stay. "Stephen broke up with me today."

"Why?"

She shrugs. “I don’t remember what he said. I don’t even care.”

“Wasn’t your boyfriend from four weeks ago named Stephen, too?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she says as she sits down next to me.

“You *think* so? If you’re forgetting your boyfriends’ names this quickly, you’re getting into my territory.”

“No, I won’t set foot in your territory until I contract a strain of syphilis.”

“Fuck you, Penelope.”

“I’ll never be that desperate.” She leans against my chest and I run my fingers through her hair.

“Do you think there’s something wrong with me, Hayden?”

“I can list way more than one thing,” I say. “What do you mean, though?”

“As of a few months ago, we’ve stopped counting my breakups as often,” she says. “We’re just *naming* them so I won’t feel so pathetic about the number of guys who don’t want to stick around that long.”

“That’s what dating is, Pen.” I’ve given up on her ever relinquishing her hopeless romantic ways. “Every guy you meet can’t be the one. Even if you get along great in the beginning, that doesn’t mean you’re meant to stay together for the long term.”

“I guess...” She repositions her body so that her head is in my lap. Then she shuts her eyes.

“If it makes you feel any better, most people who claim they find ‘the one’ at your age end up divorced five to ten years later with kids that hate them.”

Her lips curve into a smile. “That does make me feel better.”

“Good. You’ll find a good boyfriend eventually.”



“At the rate I’m going, it won’t happen until I’m twenty-five.”

“That’s a better age anyway since you have so many ridiculous expectations.”

“At this point, I’ll settle for a guy who won’t cheat on me.”

“Every guy who ever dared to cheat on you was an idiot.” I kiss her forehead, and she smiles again.

I stare at her cherry-red lips and suddenly feel the need to taste them.

Brushing a few strands of hair away from her forehead, I lean down to kiss her, but I catch myself when I’m inches away.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

Her eyes are still shut and her lips are tempting as hell, but the fact that I almost crossed the line is wrong on too many fucking levels.

“Shit.” I gently grab her hands and pull her up. “I just thought about something. I need to head back to my office.”

“Now? Do you want some help?”

*Not from you right now...* “No, I’ll call you later, though.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“I know.”



I IGNORE her call that night, trying to figure out what the hell almost happened on that park bench.

It was too natural and easy on my part. There was no hesitation whatsoever, and that means we need to set some better boundaries.

Perhaps we can cut back on the phone calls every night, do away with our Wednesday evening dinners, or ax the park

meet-ups on Sundays. Or maybe I can stop giving her a ride to practice and showing up to see her competitions.

*Fuck.*

I honestly don't want to let go of any of it and I can't believe that she's become this engrained in my life. Our friendship has evolved far past me giving her breakup and guy advice, far past the typical "I'll be there for you, you'll be there for me" framework.

It's almost like she's my... *girlfriend?*

"I can't even go there right now," I mutter and grab the remote.

I turn on the television and see my "father" starring in his latest bullshit commercial. Dressed in a custom suit and tie that cost more than what most people make in a month, he's grinning like he's won the lottery.

"If you or your loved one needs one-on-one support with a trusted professional, come down to Heartstone Therapy," he says. "We have more than fifteen locations nationwide to serve you."

Per the cheesy script, his new son, a two-year-old who is also named *Hayden*, jumps into his arms.

"I love you, Daddy!" His mouth is full of red gummies.

Thankfully, the screen transitions to a far more entertaining toothbrush commercial.

I still find it tragically ironic that he's a leading family therapist, despite leaving my mother and me out to dry years ago. That no one has ever bothered to look below the surface and discover how much of a fraud he is.

I flip through the channels, settling on a business infomercial. As I'm taking out my notebook, the doorbell rings.

Walking over to it, I see Penelope standing there with an oversized duffle bag.

"Yeah?" I answer.

“Can I stay the night?”

“Why?”

“Because you have a pair of compression boots that I like to use on Thursdays.” She looks confused. “Remember?”

“You can take them with you and go back home if you like.”

“No, I’m good.” She walks past me before I can say anything else.

As usual, she sets up camp on my couch and slides her legs into the compression boots. Like I’m instantly wired into what’s become our routine, I go into the kitchen and make her a vanilla protein shake.

I sit next to her on the couch and she leans against my chest.

“I met the cutest guy at the grocery store before coming over here,” she says, looking at me. “I think you’ll be super impressed with how I handled approaching him.”

“I’ve told you countless times to let the guy approach you.”

“That’s what I meant,” she says. “Anyway, I took a page from ‘The One That Was Shy’ and made direct eye contact and smiled. It took him a minute to ask for my number, but we hit it off pretty well after that.”

I listen as she talks about this guy for another hour while begging for advice, and I start to think that my ill-timed moment on the park bench may have meant nothing at all.

*It’s probably all in my head.*

THIRTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**T**he devil was lighting up a room in preparation for my arrival. Forget fire and brimstone; my punishment was bound to be a nuclear detonation that would leave an acre-wide hole in Hell.

I couldn't stop falling for Penelope if I tried, and I wasn't concerned with any of the consequences or repercussions right now.

We were toeing the line between reckless and insane—hanging out in public more often under the ever-snapping gaze of the photogs. The headlines had yet to reflect that, though; they were still distracted with my apology letters, still unassuming.

“Have you picked out a dress for your brother's fight?” I pressed a kiss against the back of Penelope's neck as we sat on my balcony.

“No, but now that you've brought it up, you can help me choose.” She moved out of my lap. “I stuffed a few options into my bag the other day, but you can pick out the lingerie that I'll wear underneath the dress first.”

“You don't need to wear anything underneath it at all.”

“We'll see.” She laughed. “Go wait in the living room.”

I kissed her one more time and headed down the hallway. I was halfway to the living room when someone knocked on the

door.

*Lawrence.*

I grabbed a few apology letters from my table before walking over to open it, finding myself face to face with Travis instead.

*What the fuck?* “Um, hi.”

“Um, hi?” He laughed. “That’s all I get?”

“Shouldn’t you be in Vegas?”

“My plane leaves in a few.” He held up a bottle of thousand-dollar champagne. “I can’t pop up to see you for a quick celebratory glass?”

“You haven’t fought the match yet, Travis.”

“I already know the results.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and ushered him inside. Then I sent a quick text to Penelope.

**Me:** Your brother is here. Stay in my bedroom.

“Do you still have that contact at Top Modeling?” Travis walked into the kitchen.

“I do, but she no longer talks to me.” I pulled two glasses from the cabinet.

“Is she still mad about you never calling her for a repeat?”

“Probably so.”

“Well, I won’t bring up your name when I call,” he said. “I need to hire a few more replacements for my grand entrance.”

“Good idea.” I tapped my screen and sent him the contact info.

I was about to ask him how long he planned to stay, but the sound of heels clicking against the floor made me turn around.

*Shit.*

Penelope walked into the room wearing a short, nude-colored dress that left nothing—fucking *nothing*—to the

imagination. The thin fabric exposed her hardened nipples and the intricate lace imprint of her panties.

“Hey there, Crown.” Travis looked her over. “I see that you’re currently searching for the rest of that dress. Try calling to the store and asking why they only sold you half of it.”

“Funny.” She hugged him. “Hayden is helping me pick out an outfit for your big event.”

“You don’t need his help if you’re considering that one,” he said. “It’s a fuck no, so pick another.”

“I’m twenty-five-years old, Travis. I don’t value your opinion on much of anything anymore.”

“Don’t you dare wear that to my fight,” he said.

She groaned and attempted to change the subject. “Are you excited about the big five-million-dollar payday?”

“I don’t even want you to pack it into your suitcase.” He narrowed his eyes at her.

Then he shot me a “You better back me up on this” look.

I could only nod. I was too speechless at how fucking sexy she looked, far too turned on.

“Anyway, *yes*,” he said to Penelope. “I’m excited about getting five million for showing up to fight this clown, and even more for winning. My rider is all set for everyone and—” He stopped talking once his phone vibrated in his pocket. “Yeah, Graham? Right. I’m on my way.”

He ended the call. “Well, so much for a quick drink. I’ll see you two in Vegas.” He looked at Penelope. “Preferably in a pantsuit.”

He shook my hand and I walked him out to the elevator.

I waited for it to go down before returning to Penelope. “Did you *not* get my text message?”

“I did.” She shrugged. “So?”

“So, I like *living*. Comprehend it a bit better next time.”

“I didn’t think he would suspect anything.” She pulled the dress over her head, revealing her breasts. “What do you honestly think he would do if he found out we were dating?”

“Before or after he hid my body?”

“Before.” She laughed. “Way before.”

“I think he would end our friendship, then he’d go out of his way to ruin me.”

“You’re kidding. I don’t think my brother is that irrational or petty.”

“Then you don’t know your brother.” I trailed my thumb against her bottom lip. “He would fucking kill me if he knew what goes through my mind when I think about you.”

“Are you saying that we should put a stop to this before he finds out?”

“No.” I pressed my lips against hers. “I’m saying turn the lights off...”



THIRTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**S**ometime between being named *The Humble Kid from the Emerald City* and *The Punisher*, my brother evolved into a cocky asshole.

Not to me, per se, but he'd definitely let the fame and the attention get to his head.

He was now the highest-paid athlete in MMA with the most endorsements, and he not only knew it, but he *acted* like it. He talked trash in the media about his adversaries, torched their accomplishments as worthless compared to his own, and went out of his way to make it clear that he was the best.

Still, his pre-fight routine was a legend around the UFC and he followed it to the letter each time he was up for a championship fight.

He made me follow it, as well.

It started with a midday brunch with the closest members of his entourage, his cornerman, and a bevy of personal trainers.

They sat at one end, watching practice film on a massive screen over high-price steak and waffles, while friends and "family" sat on the other end in utter awe of how much bigger his ego had become.

“When I win the match this weekend, I won’t be allowing bum ass photogs to come to my parties anymore,” he shouted. “Unless they want to pay to get a picture of this face, of course. They’ll probably make more on my picture than they will all year at their little journalism jobs.”

*Ugh!* I stabbed a salad tomato with a fork.

As I was raising it to my lips, Hayden’s hand lightly grazed my inner thigh.

My eyes widened and I looked over at him.

“*What?*” He smiled.

“You’re touching me,” I whispered. “In public and in front of Travis. I thought you liked living.”

“You’re worth dying for.”

I blushed and pushed his hand away, but he placed it back moments later, giving my thigh a soft squeeze.

“So, Crown...” Travis’s voice made me look up. “Hayden hasn’t told me much of anything about your new boyfriend. When will I get to meet him?”

*He’s sitting right in front of you.* “Sometime soon.”

“So, never?” He smiled. “You should’ve invited him to come here this weekend. I think he would’ve enjoyed it.”

Tatiana choked on a piece of bread and signaled for the waiter.

“If Hayden likes him, he must be a good guy for you,” he said.

“Yes.” Hayden squeezed my thigh again. “He’s a really good guy for her.”

Travis looked as if he wanted to say something more, but the waitstaff began serving the second course.

It was now time for the next part of his routine: Watching his most recent match one final time to inflate his ego.

It was good that he always encouraged everyone in the room to cheer and shout as if it was happening in real-time.

Otherwise, I'm pretty sure they would've noticed that my shouts weren't for the sport at all. They were because Hayden used his fingers to bring me to orgasm back to back under the table.



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I avoided Hayden's request to meet at the aquarium.

When he asked me to join him for a late lunch at the Aria, I turned him down and regretted every moment of agreeing to go to a three-hour anime cosplay show with Tatiana instead.

By the time I returned to my suite, it was a little after midnight and he was sitting on the sofa waiting for me.

"I don't remember giving you my other room key." I dropped my purse to the floor.

"I took it at brunch." He smiled. "Are you having a good time in Vegas so far?"

"Yep. You?"

"Not particularly," he said. "My best friend is avoiding me for some strange reason."

"You think so? I'm not really getting that vibe at all. I think you're misreading things."

"I'm not." He kept his eyes on mine as he walked toward me. "Do you plan on acting awkward with me this entire weekend?"

"I'm not acting awkward at all."

"You haven't come up to my room once," he said. "And at brunch, I saw you drafting text messages of excuses and rainchecks that you plan to give to me this week."

"Is that why you finger-fucked me under the table?"

"I did that to help you stop being so jittery," he said. "I also love the way you look whenever you come for me."

“Well—” My cheeks heated. “I’m sorry you think that I’m acting awkward. We can go up to your room now, if you’d like.”

“No, that’s okay.” He stepped closer. “Yours is fine. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing.”

“I know you, Penelope.” He looked into my eyes in the way that only he could. “Tell me.”

“It’s two things,” I said.

“Name the first one.”

“I think my brother really *would* kill you if he finds out we’re dating.”

“We’ve already established that.” He smirked. “Can I trust you to make sure that my funeral is a beautiful one?”

“Do you have a color scheme in mind?”

“Sky blue and white.”

“Noted.” I smiled.

“What’s the second thing?”

“It’s stupid,” I said. “Not even worth mentioning.”

“Tell me.”

“I haven’t gone up to your room because there are photogs watching the damn elevators, shouting rumors in hopes of getting the whiff of a comment and snapping pictures of anyone who dares to take a ride up to the penthouse.”

“What does that have to do with us?”

“Before, their presence never bothered me, but now it does for some reason.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could think them through. “I mean, the rumors they’re mentioning are nothing that you haven’t already told me. I just hate when they shout about it.”

“I do, too.” He tucked a few strands of hair behind my ear. “It’s in the past though, Pen. And you know that the worst of it happened when we weren’t friends.”

“Yeah.”

“You do know that when we’re a public couple, they’ll continue to do that, right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“You’ll have to continue tuning them out like you did before you were mine.” He kissed me. “Nothing changes.”

“When we were here together last year, I hardly ever went up to your room and it wasn’t a problem,” I said. “Things *have* changed.”

“For the better.” He looked into my eyes. “At least, I think so. I think you need something far more entertaining to focus on while we’re here.”

“Something like what?”

He didn’t answer me.

He covered my mouth with his and kissed me deeply, making me forget my trivial worries the more his tongue tamed mine.

Briefly tearing away from me, he leaned back against the wall. With his eyes on mine, he smiled.

“Let’s see if you can take it all the way down your throat like you mentioned to me before.”

I swallowed as he grabbed a fistful of my hair and kissed me again before he whispered, “Get on your knees.”

I obliged, sinking my knees into the hotel room’s plush red carpet.

He didn’t let his grip on my hair go, he tightened it. “Take out my cock.”

I reached up and unbuckled his belt. Then I pulled it through the loops of his pants and let it fall to the floor.

Unbuttoning his pants with my fingers, I leaned forward and bit his silver zipper with my teeth, pulling it down.

I took my time as he watched me and I watched him.

“*Fuck...*” He looked impressed.

Sliding my hands into the top of his briefs, I pushed down the fabric until his thick cock was staring me in the face.

I kissed the tip of it, swirling my tongue around in circles. Using my hand to rub up and down his length, I stared at the veins that swelled with my touch.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he said. “I want to look at you as you take it down your throat.”

I looked up and opened my mouth as wide as it could go, taking him in inch by inch, holding back my tongue as I adjusted to his girth.

I sucked it hard and moved back, slowly pacing myself to take another inch.

Without warning, he gently guided my head forward and then back. Forward and then back.

“Like this,” he said, staring at me. “Like you know there’s no place better for my cock than your hot mouth.”

I couldn’t even nod.

My mouth was too full of him.

I pressed my hands against his thighs to balance myself and then I slowly began establishing my own rhythm. And then he slowly stopped having to guide me.

“Fuck...” He groaned as I took him in deeper, faster.

In between taking him inside, I used my right hand to tease him.

His breathing slowed and I felt his body stiffen against me.

While his eyes were still on mine, he whispered, “Let me come in your mouth.”

I said, “Yes,” with my gaze, and he grabbed a fistful of my hair again. I took him deep into my mouth, as far as I could go, and the next thing I felt was his warm cum shooting past my lips.

I stilled as the saltiness sat on my tongue.

Then I swallowed.

Smiling at me, he grabbed my hands and pulled me up. He pressed a kiss against my cheek and positioned me on the bed so that my legs were hanging over the edge.

“Let me pay you back for that.” He kissed my thigh.

He slid a hand between my thighs and swirled his thumb around my clit.

“Wait!” I gasped and sat up.

“What’s wrong?” He pressed a kiss on my shoulder, looking completely unfazed.

“I think we should get dressed and take this upstairs to your room.”

His lips curved into a smile. “Why is that, Penelope?”

“Because some of my brother’s entourage is next door and they might hear us.”

“Then try not to scream.” He pushed me back down, rendering me useless with the skills of his mouth.



THIRTY-FIVE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“Is it me, or does your brother look a bit more psychotic than usual?” Tatiana whispered to my left. “Something’s off with him.”

I looked up from the floor as he danced in his corner of the ring.

“I don’t see any difference,” I said, noticing the same fire that’d been in his eyes since he was sixteen. “He looks focused.”

“If you say so.” She shrugged. “By the way, a brand-new designer wardrobe was delivered to our suite last night, but since you weren’t there and your boyfriend can afford to buy you another one, I’m keeping it for myself.”

I laughed. “Noted.”

“Ladies and gentlemennnn!” The announcer stood at the center of the ring, yelling into the mic. “Welcome to UFC Fight 1234 between Travis ‘The Punisher’ Carter, the undefeated, undisputed welterweight champion, and the challenger, Christopher ‘Red Eye’ Juarez!”

Screams filled the arena. The lights above flashed in an array of reds and blues.

“This match is five rounds,” he said. “The winner will be determined by judges, in the event that there isn’t a TKO. If you’d like to touch gloves out of respect, do so now.”

My brother didn’t make a move.

The announcer looked surprised at that, but he focused on the crowd. “Let’s fight!”

The referee took his place in the ring, going over the rules one more time, and I braced myself for an ongoing saga of brutal wear and tear.

My brother attacked Juarez the moment the bell rang, punching him straight in the face.

He didn’t falter, though.

He returned the jabs to my brother’s shoulders, kicking him in the legs whenever he couldn’t quite connect.

My brother smiled with glee as he punched Juarez in the throat, right as the first round came to an end.

“I wish he’d retire,” I whispered to Tatiana as the crowd roared.

“I don’t see why.” She tilted her head to the side. “I take back what I said about him earlier. Your brother is hot as fuck.”

“You’re dead to me.”

She laughed. “I’m just saying. Do you know if he has any cock pics out in the world?”

I swallowed before bile could rise up my throat.

The bell sounded for round two, and I leaned against Hayden’s shoulder.

He smiled and clasped my hand.

My brother bobbed and weaved between Juarez’s attempts to strike, but one of the left punches actually landed on his face. *Hard.*

Then Juarez landed another one.

And another.

The crowd collectively gasped as Travis stumbled backward.

I jumped to my feet as his head hit the mat with a sickening thud. Blood spewed from his lips.

Juarez moved over him, punching him in the face repeatedly until the referee pushed him away and called the match.

There was a stunned silence in the arena. Everyone held their breath in confusion, but then wild, raucous applause broke out amongst the fans.

Juarez strutted around the ring and blew kisses to the crowd.

My heart dropped to the floor.

I'd watched Travis conquer his opponents time and time again; I'd never once had to witness him in defeat.

In a state of shock, I rushed over to the side of the ring, waiting for him to move, but he was out cold. The bleeding was getting worse.

Medics surrounded him and I grabbed onto the rope.

"Travis!" I yelled louder. "Travis, get up!"

"He'll be alright, Pen." Hayden pressed his hand against the small of my back. "Come on."

I screamed his name again anyway, wanting to watch until the medics got him up, but Hayden pulled me away.



*Several hours later*

"JUAREZ IS ON FUCKING STEROIDS." Travis seethed from the hospital bed. "I want him tested for drugs, Shaw. I want him tested tonight."

"Yes, sir." His manager nodded, and his entourage of yes-men remained silent on the other side of the room.

“Mr. Carter?” A nurse held out a tray of pills. “Can you—”  
“Get the fuck away from me, please.” He glared at her.  
“I’ll heal myself.”

Her cheeks reddened and she rushed out of the room.

“It’s not her fault you lost,” I said softly.

“It damn sure isn’t mine.” He glared at me. “I’m fucking undefeated. This bullshit match doesn’t count, and it’ll be wiped away the moment everyone knows the truth about him being on drugs.”

I bit my tongue.

“How the fuck does some scrawny ass kid from the middle of nowhere beat a fucking champion?”

*I’m sure your first opponents thought the same thing...*

“I don’t think he was on steroids, Travis,” I said.

“He was, and he is.” He attempted to glare at me, but his face was too fucked up for it to have the full effect. “I’ll never make the mistake of pacing in a match again. Now that I think about it, I remember telling you to start every routine with an attack when you were skating.”

“Funny, I remember you hardly ever showing up for me when I was skating.”

“What’s that, Crown?”

I didn’t answer him. I’d already gotten away with more than usual.

Hayden suddenly stepped into the room, handing him an energy drink and a bag of Cheetos from a vending machine.

“Here you go,” he said. “Need me to get you anything else?”

“Yeah, I want you to fly Crown away from Vegas,” he said. “Distract her with something she actually understands.”

*What the fuck?* “My reservation is for the rest of the week, Travis. I’d like to stay and enjoy it.”

“I don’t want her here anymore. Take her and Tatiana to a beach or something,” he said. “I’ll pay you back for whatever that costs.”

“There’s no need to talk about me like I’m not standing right in front of you.”

“Oh, and keep checking out her new boyfriend for me.” He ignored me like I was seventeen all over again. Like he made all the decisions and I had to willingly accept the aftermath. “Maybe we can all get brunch sometime after I get Juarez’s drug test back. You can help me with this, right?”

Hayden didn’t bother answering him.

Travis’s requests were always rhetorical.

Right as I was about to tell Travis that he *deserved* to get his ass beat, that a part of me was happy his ego received a healthy dose of defeat, Hayden clasped my hand.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of Vegas.”

“Thank you, Hayden.” Travis shot me a “Fucking try me” look as we left.

Hayden held onto my hand until we made it downstairs and through the waiting press. He led me over to a waiting town car and pulled me into his lap once the doors shut.

“We’re really leaving Vegas tonight?” I asked. “Just because he said so?”

“Fuck no,” he said, smiling. “We’ll stay here as long as you want.”

“Promise?”

“Always.” He controlled my mouth with kisses until we made it back to the hotel suite.

For the next five days, he did everything in his power to make me forget all about Travis.

He ordered room service and explored my body, giving more than he took, holding me in his arms every time I collapsed from the pleasure.

THIRTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*A week later*

“I hope that smile on your face is because you’re seconds away from handing over the last bulk of your apology letters, son.” Lawrence looked up at me from his desk Monday morning.

“It’s because I’m taking the rest of the week off.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “It’ll be nice to give the photogs a well-deserved break. Hand over the rest of the apology letters that I asked you for.”

“I’m taking Penelope to Bora Bora for a few days. Then we’re going to Aspen.”

“I don’t care.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Letters. *Now.*”

“I’ll need you and Sarah to keep me up to date on the Tinder thing while I’m away.”

“The ‘Tinder thing’ is a multimillion-dollar lawsuit and they are beyond determined to fry your ass this time.” He leaned back in his chair. “Would you like to write Mr. Lassing an apology letter to see if he’ll drop it?”

“I’ll consider writing his letter after I get back.” I smiled. “That’s when I’ll pen the others. I’ll see you then.”



“Hayden fucking Hunter.” He stood up from his desk as I walked away. “Hayden, get back here right now!”

I made it onto the elevator before he could come after me.

When I made it downstairs, I slid behind the wheel of my car.

“How did Lawrence take it?” Penelope smiled at me.

“He was totally fine.”

“So he’s mad as hell?”

“Yep.” She laughed at that as I sped toward the airport. I clasped her hand behind the gear shift as I drove.

“I don’t want this to ever end, Hayden,” she said.

“It won’t,” I said. “This is just our beginning.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

THIRTY-SIX (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Hayden Hunter Jets Away with Friend As Tinder Case Heats  
Up*

*Was Hayden Hunter Trolling Us with His Apologies?*

*Simon Gaines of the Simon G. Fund Under Fire for Alleged  
Fraud*

*Hayden Hunter Spotted at Private Aspen Resort with Friend*

THIRTY-SEVEN

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**W** *hy didn't we cross the line years ago?*

Dating Penelope was the best thing I'd ever experienced in my life and I now understood why she'd so desperately chased this euphoric high.

My days started and ended with her taste on my lips, her laughter against my chest, and conversations that I never wanted to end.

Our nightly strolls through Central Park were slowly trickling onto the smaller gossip blog sites via "Is Hayden Hunter Dating His Best Friend?" and "Is it Me, or Are They A Bit Too Close in These Pics?" type of posts, but there was nothing more.

And I honestly didn't care.

I was in love with her.

Occasionally, she'd still say "Please don't ever hurt me" and "I don't have anyone else if I don't have you" when we spoke for a little too long, but I was determined to make her stop worrying about us ever breaking up.

Armed with roses and wine, I stepped out of my car and walked up the steps to her brownstone. I wasn't sure what came over me this afternoon, but I'd gotten up in the middle of a meeting and headed straight toward her side of town.

Walking into her kitchen, I pulled out a few wine glasses. Then I checked to make sure the catering would arrive before she came home from the rink.

As I was rinsing off the stems, Tatiana cleared her throat.

“You want to join us for dinner?” I asked. “I ordered Italian.”

“No, I’ll pass. I’d rather know how the fuck you live with yourself.” The harshness of her voice made me turn around.

“*Excuse me?*”

“You heard what I said.” She glared at me from across the room. “Are you happy holding Penelope back? Do you get some sick thrill out of it?”

*I think I liked you better when you hated Penelope.* “I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

“It must be nice to achieve everything you’ve ever wanted in life, huh?” She continued her one-sided conversation. “I bet you don’t have any regrets because the world laid out the red carpet for you and you’ve never had to face anyone ripping it from under your feet.”

“You know, I vaguely remember you playfully swinging a bat at Penelope’s knees at a competition years ago,” I said. “Do I need to find that video and blackmail you into talking like a normal person again?”

“I’m being serious, asshole.” She looked like she was on the verge of tears. “Bora, Bora, Aspen, Hawaii. What’s next?”

“The Dominican Republic.” I crossed my arms. “I invited you to join us for all these trips.”

“Yeah, and you purposely threw in little hints at your gala about ‘Twenty-seven still being great,’ right?” She shook her head. “I’m sure you thought that was a nice, warm touch. So, let me ask you something. When’s the last time Penelope went to the rink and worked with a client?”

I shrugged. I honestly couldn’t remember.

“When’s the last time she gave a speech or did anything outside of flying around the world and fucking you?”

I said nothing, unsure of where she was going with this.

“You know her better than I ever will, and everyone who’s ever been around you two knows that.” Tears fell down her face. “Which is why I don’t understand why you’re being so fucking blind about standing in the way of what she’s chased her entire life.”

“Tatiana—”

“*Her entire life.*” She interrupted me. “I may have hated her for years, but I’ve always respected what she was trying to do. And I think she would’ve done it if she never fell. But she has a chance to make it now, and she’s giving it all up for you.”

“I’m honestly lost as hell,” I said. “Can you tell me what you’re talking about?”

She walked over to a drawer and pulled out two letters, handing them to me.

“The president of U.S. Figure Skating sent me a letter this morning, saying that Penelope nominated me to go in her place to help coach Team USA in Salt Lake City for the Winter Games.”

I raised my eyebrow. Penelope hadn’t uttered a word about this and I refused to believe that this was true.

I opened the first envelope, the one for Tatiana.

“*You’ve been highly recommended by Penelope Carter...*”

I tucked it back into its envelope and opened the other. Then I flipped it over and saw that she’d received this weeks ago. It was timestamped for the week of my gala.

*She never said a word about this to me.*

“She watches her old performances in secret every night,” she said. “Well, before she was off traveling with you, anyway. I haven’t been living with her for that long, but I’ve never seen someone watch all of their perfect performances and say, ‘Too

bad I never surpassed my mom like I promised. I really wish I would've...' And then cry as if somehow her career was a fucking failure.”

I sighed.

I knew that she still cried off and on, especially with me, but I never knew it was enough for someone new in her life to notice.

“I didn’t know about this,” I said, setting down the letters. “I honestly didn’t know.”

“Well, now you do.” She shrugged. “I’m sure as her *best friend*—well, boyfriend—that you’ll talk to her about it? Make her reconsider?”

She left the room without saying another word to me.

I pulled out my phone and just as I was about to call Penelope, she texted me first.

**Penelope:** Hey! I showed up at your office for a surprise lunch date, but you weren’t there. Where are you?

**Penelope:** Want to grab Italian and wine later tonight instead? I don’t know why I’m craving that for some reason.

**Me:** Sorry. Something important came up. I need a raincheck.

I left the roses and the wine on the table, and then I went to my car and sped off toward my side of town, all with an agonizing ache in my chest.

I knew that there was a reason Penelope didn’t tell me about that damn letter and another reason why talking to her about it wouldn’t lead to her making the right decision.

I’d known her like the back of my hand for years, and there was only one way that she would chase twenty-eight again.



THIRTY-SEVEN (B)

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**M**e: Hey. I just heard that the IOC changed the rules for medals. The upcoming Olympic Winter Games will be the first to start awarding coaching medals alongside the athletes.

**Penelope:** Oh, wow. Really? I haven't heard that at all! Interesting! Are we still on for dinner tonight at Wardman's?

**Me:** Want me to email you the link? It looks like they're training in a compound in Utah, similar to where you trained for Worlds that one summer.

**Penelope:** No, I'll look it up later. And LOL yes! I remember that. I think you got kicked out for coming to see me. No outsiders allowed (smile emoji)

**Me:** I'm surprised that no one has reached out and asked you to be a part of the new change since you told me a lot of high-profile coaches have been banned recently.

**Penelope:** I'm not surprised. I'm not a coach, and I don't really care about that stuff anymore, you know? I have 27. 28 was the dream, but... life.

**Penelope:** Are we still on for dinner at Wardman's?

**Me:** No, Penelope. I'll need a raincheck.

THIRTY-EIGHT

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

“**L**ook at that control as she goes up for a triple salchow and immediately into a—*Wow!* Penelope Carter lands a quad instead!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are watching a master of her craft, a woman who will go down as arguably the greatest female figure skater of all time.”

I lay on my couch and watched my final performance at Skate America.

*Before the fall that ended it all.*

“I agree, Mary,” the third announcer said. “Look at the precision of her spin. I’m sure she’ll be notching the first-place position here and continuing her ambitious chase for twenty-eight.”

“The most complex combo of her program, two quads with a triple lutz, is coming up. Should she land this, she would be the first female singles skater to ever—”

I hit pause and stare at the freeze-frame of myself in mid-air, my arms high above my head as my glittering blue dress flies free.

To this day, I could never get past this part of the show.

It still hurt like hell.

Sighing, I clicked on my performance at the Sochi Olympics instead.

As I was taking to the ice, my doorbell sounded.

I grabbed a tip for the delivery guy, but when I opened the door, it wasn't pizza.

It was Hayden.

"Hey." I smiled.

"Hey."

"I thought you were working on the final apology letters tonight."

"I am," he said. "I wanted to stop by before I started."

"Come in."

"I can't." He shook his head. "Look, there's no easy way to say this, so I'll just say it. I need some space, Penelope."

His words hung in the air for several seconds.

"I don't understand." I crossed my arms. "You need *space*? For what?"

"It's complicated." He ran a hand through his hair. "I have the Tinder deposition coming up and I got hit with some new, silly headlines in the media this afternoon."

"Whatever they are, I'm willing to help you like I did with the letters."

"It's not that easy." He looked into my eyes. "I just need the space, Penelope."

I stared at him in utter disbelief.

"This doesn't make any sense," I said, crossing my arms. "You told me the other day that this was only our beginning. You also promised—repeatedly—that you wouldn't fuck 'us' up."

"That's not what I'm doing at all. I'm doing what I think is best for you. *Us*."

That “best for you” line made the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. That was a line from Travis’s controlling playbook, not Hayden’s.

“Did you tell my brother about us or something?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

“Then what the hell, Hayden? Space for *what*?”

He stood there looking half sympathetic, half defeated, and as much as I wanted him to pull me into his arms and say this was a bad attempt at a joke, I took a step back.

I couldn’t help allowing my mind to wander to several different places at once. The destination that stood out the most was the ugliest, and I didn’t want to believe it was true.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“What?”

“What. Did. You. Do?” My voice cracked. “Tell me the truth, because I’m not buying the ‘I need space’ bullshit.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders and pressed his forehead against mine. “I haven’t done anything that would hurt you.”

“Did it happen in Vegas?”

“Penelope...”

“Was it on the night you left the room to go to that cigar shop? Or was it here in New York maybe? Already tired of being with one woman?”

“No, Penelope.” He looked genuine, but his words weren’t adding up and every unanswered question was cracking a new piece of my heart.

“If this is some type of game,” I said, “I don’t want to play.”

“It’s not a game. I’m being honest.”

“Well, per your own advice, a guy only says he wants ‘space’ when he’s trying to be gentle about breaking up with

you or when he's cheated and wants to save face because he knows you'll never forgive him."

"Penelope, I would never cheat on you."

"I would never forgive you if you did, but you could at least have the decency to tell me why my best friend for almost a decade, the same guy who told me that he loved me last night and wants to build a future together, is now randomly—fucking *randomly*—standing on my doorstep and telling me something completely different."

"I just need some space. That's it."

"Okay, let's start now then. Don't fucking call me until you've taken all the space you need, and I'll consider talking to you again."

"Penelope, I'm not breaking up with you."

"Breaks and spaces lead to breakups, Hayden. You taught me that, too. Doesn't that still hold true?"

He let out a sigh but didn't say anything.

"I thought so." I slammed the door in his face.



GUILT TIGHTENED its grip around my heart later that night, pulling on the strings with every second that passed.

I couldn't help but think about the stretch of weeks in the past when I could only text or email him if certain trials and depositions wore on too long.

Besides, he didn't say, "Let's break up,"; he didn't mention anything of the sort. I was being overly dramatic, and I could probably blame it on the fact that U.S. Figure Skating had received my rejection letter by now.

I was taking my uneasiness about saying no out on him.

Sighing, I scrolled down to his name and started to send him a text message, but that guilt suddenly transformed into suspicion.

Something told me to search his name to see what “new, silly headlines” he was talking about.

The moment the results appeared, my stomach fell to the floor.

*Hayden Hunter Caught Leaving The Four Seasons at 4 a.m.*

*Hayden Hunter & Supermodel Anya Sterling Sleeping Together?*

*Hayden Hunter’s Late Night Tryst with Anya Sterling*

*What the fuck?*

I checked the dates.

They were for the other night. The night when he asked for the raincheck.

Even if I didn’t want to believe the headline, even if my heart begged me to call him and see if there was more to the story, the images said enough.

They said it all.

Hayden’s hand was pressed against the supermodel’s back as they walked through the doors of the hotel. The photog caught them coming and going, with time stamps confirming how long they were inside.

*He cheated on me...*



THIRTY-NINE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep.  
All I could do was cry.

I stayed in my room with the door shut, watching my old performances and wishing I could go back in time to the night when Hayden first picked me up in Seattle.

If I could rewind time to the beginning, I'd keep him at a cold distance that was never meant to be crossed or warmed.

*I should've waited for another Uber.*

My heart splintered in my chest, breaking into smaller pieces each time I refreshed my screen and saw another article about Hayden with Anya. Each time I replayed him standing on my doorstep and lying right to my face. Promising me that he would be different for me.

*I can't believe him.*

Hastily changing his name in my phone to "Do Not Answer" and blocking him did nothing except make me cry harder.

My worst fears about dating him had come true; I'd lost my best friend and my boyfriend at the same damn time.



AFTER CRYING for three days in a row, I called the U.S. Figure Skating Association and begged to speak to Deborah.

I needed to focus on something other than Hayden, and I should've never rejected their offer in the first place.

"Yes, Miss Carter?" She came on the line within minutes.

"I'd like to rescind my rejection letter. I would love to coach Katie Folds and be eligible for a medal."

"I thought you might." There was a smile in her voice. "I'll have our coordinator arrange for a flight and the required three months of accommodations. Would you like to fly in toward the end of this month?"

"No," I said. "I'd like to come as soon as possible."

"Next weekend soon, or this weekend soon?"

"This weekend soon."

Within minutes, I received a first-class flight ticket to Salt Lake City for Friday and a suite at the private training compound.

I didn't tell anyone.

I was too damn hurt.

Out of spite, I deleted Cinder from my phone and downloaded Tinder.

Then I vowed to never let Hayden hurt me again.

I should've known better the first time. From what I was beginning to remember anyway.

BREAKUP #16

THE ONE THAT STARTED THE COLD WAR



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

“**T**he best romance you’ll ever find is with your best friend.” The fortune cookie serves me a truth that I already know.

I’m falling in love with Hayden Hunter.

So much so that I make up fake problems sometimes just to talk to him on the phone at night. So much so that I lie about needing to make late-night runs to the grocery store just so that we can spend more time together.

In my mind, it all makes sense: He’s the guy I spend the most time with, he sits front row at all my competitions, and he knows me better than anyone else.

Given our six-year age gap, I know he’ll probably say, “Hell no, Pen,” but I’m hoping he’ll follow that up with, “We’ll try it after you win medal twenty-eight or after your brother is committed to a psych ward. Whichever comes first.”

That’s more than enough hope for me, more than enough for me to dump my boyfriend for him. Even if I have to wait for years.

“Let me see what your fortune cookie says, babe.” Tim Lassing, my latest space-filler boyfriend, snatches the thin white paper from my hands.

I'm only dating him because he reminds me of Hayden and he has a similar work ethic when it comes to building his dating app.

*He's still not Hayden, though.*

"Well, it's fate then." Tim smiles at the fortune. "We're on the right track with each other."

*Right.*

In the car on the way home, my phone buzzes with a text message.

**Hayden:** Sorry I missed your call earlier. About your voicemail, I'll be free tonight around 7. I'm dropping off some things for the manager at CinePlex.

**Me:** Okay, great. I'll meet you then and there.



MY HEART TAP dances in my chest as I stand outside the doors of the movie theater. As if this is a date, I'm wearing a sexy red shirt and tight jeans, along with complementing nude heels.

When I step inside, I see Hayden laughing as he shakes the manager's hand.

He starts walking toward me and stops.

For a second, I think he's checking me out, but I brush off the thought as I walk to him.

"Hey."

"Hey. What did you want to talk to me about?" He smiles and my heart skips a beat.

"I think I'm falling in love with someone."

"You mean Tim?"

*No, you.* "I mean, I want to tell him, but I don't know how. It could fuck up everything because he has a lot on the line, but I feel like he's the one."

“The one that *what?*”

“Just the one.”

“Hmmm.” He tucks a few strands of hair behind my ear, looking into my eyes. “Well, you should be honest with him then. He’d be out of his mind not to want you back.”

“Even if he’s six years older than me?”

“If he has good intentions, I don’t see why not,” he says, stepping back. “Now, your brother probably won’t approve, so you’ll have to date the guy in private for another two years before saying anything. You also need to make sure he won’t distract you from your ultimate career goal. Twenty-eight medals, right?”

“Whenever I’m with him, I don’t care about any of that stuff.”

“Any of that *stuff?*” He looks confused. “You mean, what you’ve worked for your entire life? That’s more than stuff, Penelope.”

“I know, but—”

“Don’t let a guy distract you from your dreams.” He interrupts. “He won’t be worth it, no matter who he is.”

I stare at him, feeling my heart beat an unfamiliar rhythm, the words stalling at the tip of my tongue.

*Go for it. Say “I love you, Hayden Hunter” and kiss him. Right now.*

“Penelope?” Tim’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I look across the lobby.

“Hey.” I step away from Hayden and smile at Tim.

He walks over, looking between us. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Hayden says. “I was just telling Penelope that I got an investor for my app. He wants me to move, so I’m considering it.”

*What?* My world comes to a complete stop, and I look up at him in utter disbelief. “You *didn't* tell me that.”

“I was about to.”

“Oh,” Tim says. “Investment company or single partner?”

“Single partner—at least for now anyway.” He smiles, then he looks at me. “I figured it’s time for me to make plans for the future. I think Travis is cool with me putting an end to looking after his little sister anyway.”

“Well, congratulations,” Tim says. “I’m looking forward to competing with you down the line.”

“Likewise.” He extends his hand and shakes it. “I’m sure we’ll meet in the future someday.”

“Come on, Pen. I bought tickets to The Tracy Show.” Tim wraps his arm around my shoulder, leading me away from Hayden.

It takes everything in me not to look over my shoulder, not to run back to Hayden and tell him what I feel, but his words are still stinging.

*Finally putting an end to looking after his little sister anyway?*



BREAKUP #16

THE ONE THAT STARTED THE COLD WAR



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

*A week later*

“We need to talk.” Tim leans against my kitchen sink one morning, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy. “And no, I’m not giving you another day for space. You’ve had an entire week, and somehow you managed to forget that today was my birthday.”

“I have a birthday cake being delivered this afternoon.”

“Well, you can call it a breakup cake now.” He shrugs. “Or maybe you can call it an ‘I want to fuck Hayden Hunter’ cake. The latter actually sounds better.”

“For the umpteenth time, Hayden is just a friend.”

“Friends don’t look at each other like *that*.” He shakes his head. “The way the two of you looked at each other before we went camping last month and at the movies last week told me all that I needed to know.”

“I think you’re reading too much into that.”

“I *know* that I’m not.” He walks over to his duffle bag in the corner and pulls the strap over his shoulder. “I can’t do this anymore, Penelope. I’m sorry.”

“Tim, there’s nothing going on between me and Hayden.” My voice cracks. “We’re really just friends.”

“Do you always get this emotional when you talk about your *friends*?” He puts on his jacket. “Better yet, if he wasn’t suddenly leaving town with little notice, would you even care that I was breaking up with you?”

Silence.

“I thought so.” He walks out of the kitchen, slamming the door on his way out.

I wait until he leaves before ordering an Uber to Hayden’s house.

Even if he rejects me, it’s worth giving it a try.



WHEN I ARRIVE, I find myself face to face with a *For Sale* sign in the grass.

There’s also a bright yellow note on his door.

*Please leave all packages with my neighbor.*

*She has my new address.*

*Thank you.*

*If you need to reach me, you can call me at 555-8756.*

*What the hell?*

It’s a new phone number, and I’m wondering if by “new address,” he means that he’s going to surprise me by showing me the realtor listing of his house later.

*Where is he staying now, though?*

“You’re here looking for your friend, hun?” His redheaded neighbor calls out from her porch.

“Yeah. Can you tell me where he went?”

“He’s in the sky by now, I suppose.”

“The sky?”

“New York City,” she says. “His flight is this afternoon. Got a love letter you want me to send him?” She smiled. “I’m

sure he'll think that's really cute.”

I rush toward the Uber and fling the backdoor open. “Can you take me to the airport, please?”



HALF AN HOUR LATER, I weave my way through the crowds at Sea-Tac International, looking for Hayden.

Two gates later, I spot him sitting at a Starbucks.

“Hayden...” I step in front of him. “Hayden, what the hell are you doing?”

“Going to New York,” he says. “I told you that I was leaving.”

“No, you told me that you were *thinking* about leaving. Last time I checked, you usually call and talk to me about major things in your life before jumping on them, because they affect me, too.”

He stares at me blankly, as if I'm speaking a foreign language.

“You're leaving, just like that?” My voice cracks. “When were you planning to tell me?”

“I *wasn't*.”

“Why not?”

“You didn't need to know. It's my life.”

“What?” I push at his chest. “It's *my* life, too. You're my best friend.”

“We'll always be friends, Penelope.” His eyes are cold and his voice is flat. He's nothing like the man I was talking to in the theater the other day, nothing like the man who has become my support system.

“Why are you acting this way with me, Hayden?” Tears prick my eyes. “Why are you really leaving me?”

“I’m not trying to act any way with you at all.” He grabs my wrists, holding me still. “I’m behind on my app and I’m running out of money and investors who are willing to help me fix it. I’m in a bad place.”

“A place so bad that you can’t talk about it with me?” My heart aches. “Tell me the truth, Hayden.”

“I need to leave so I can work on my app,” he says. “There’s nothing else to this.”

“Are you coming back?”

“I don’t see why I’d need to.” He shrugs. “You’re doing pretty good for yourself now. I’ll still call and text you, of course.”

“Of course.” Tears fall past my cheeks. “You’re being an asshole, Hayden.”

“Come again?”

“I thought you said you’d always be there for me.”

“I’ll always mean that.”

“Then an apology for blindsiding me with this goodbye would be a good place to start.”

“Apologies never change anything, Pen,” he said. “They just state the obvious.”

“Okay, then.” I step back. “Well, obviously fuck you. Fuck you hard.”

“Penelope, don’t be like this.”

“You and Travis are the most selfish bastards in the world,” I say. “You two don’t care about anyone else but yourselves.”

“Pen—”

“I hope you fail,” I say, not meaning that at all. “I hope you go fucking bankrupt and don’t make any friends, because you don’t deserve them.”

He still isn’t showing any shred of human emotion and I can’t bear to look at his face for another second. I tear off the

silver chain he gave me in Sochi, the one I've worn ever since, and toss it at his face.

"I don't want to hear from you ever again." I walk away without another word, letting the tears fall down my face.

It hurts to know that my love for him is unrequited, but deep down, I know that it always will be. That it's best to pull up the anchor and cut the chain, to sail across the sea and find someplace else I'm wanted.

I know that he was never my boyfriend, but "breaking up" with him hits me harder than all my other breakups combined.

BREAKUP #16

THE ONE THAT STARTED THE COLD WAR



*Penelope*

*Back Then*

*Several months later*

*Chicago, Illinois*

**W**ith the exception of “How are you?” “Happy Birthday,” or a “Congratulations on being ranked number one again” message that is delivered through my brother, Hayden never reaches out to me.

He doesn’t text.

He doesn’t call.

He moves on with his new life in New York like I never existed, and I do the same. At first, it’s hard to get used to not seeing him in the stands to watch me perform, even harder to resist the urge to call him at night and talk.

Some days, I want nothing more than to hear his voice, but I refuse to reach out and end a Cold War that he started for no fucking reason.

*Why the hell would he just leave me like that?*

“You skated like a drunk duck throughout your entire warmup today.” My coach moves in front of me, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Do you feel like winning today?”

“Yes.” I glare at him. “I do.”



“Then, do you mind taking to the ice?” He points to the rink. “It’s your fucking turn.”

*Shit.* I suck in a breath and force a smile.

“Hey.” My coach gently grabs my arm. “Think about whatever you thought about when I goaded you with Frankie and you’ll wash every girl here off the map.”

I nod and make my way to the center of the floor.

I shut my eyes and wait for the music to play. I’ve used Hayden as a muse before and I have no choice but to do it again.

He’s all I see whenever I shut my eyes, no matter how hard I try to get him off my mind.

As I start my routine, I hear a new addition to the soundtrack: audible gasps from the audience and their shouts of approval are louder than usual.

While I’m dreaming of Hayden coming back to say sorry, or him sitting in the stands and telling me that he loves me, I go up for the hardest jump in my program—a quadruple lutz—and I land it with ease. I complete a triple salchow and add back-to-back quadruple lutzes for the hell of it.

I launch into a triple toe loop and fall into the rest of my routine. I nail every spin, every twist, and as I attempt my fourth quadruple of the night, I feel like I’m flying, and for a few seconds, I’m untouchable.

My blade doesn’t touch the ice like it should once I complete my final spin, though.

And suddenly, I’m not flying anymore.

I’m *crashing*...

FORTY

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**Penelope:** FUCK YOU. We're over.

**Penelope:** Do not ever call me again.

**Penelope:** THIS is ME breaking up with YOU since you didn't have the balls to be honest and take responsibility for what is 100% your fault.

**O** *kay, maybe I made the wrong decision.*

My chest felt as if someone had set it afire and my pillow kept attracting some type of wet spot on it every night.

“Taylor!” I called out for my housekeeper.

“Yes, Mr. Hunter?”

“It rained in here last night, didn't it?”

“No, sir.” She looked confused. “It doesn't typically rain indoors.”

“There's a first time for everything.” I picked up the pillow and tossed it to her. “Can you take this down with you to the laundry? I think it got rained on.”

“You were crying, sir.”

“So you *agree* that it was raining.” I picked up my phone and she rolled her eyes. I waited for the door to close before scrolling down to Penelope's name.

I was tempted to hit call, but I held back.

Since I knew her down to her marrow, I was well aware that there was no need to initiate any conversations. At some point today, she would start calling to leave angry breakup voicemails.

Despite all the lessons I'd taught her over the years, she still had an issue mastering that particular one.

Before I could consider a better move, the doorbell sounded.

"I'm coming, Taylor." I groaned, knowing she'd locked herself out again. I swung the door and found myself face to face with Travis instead.

"Damn," he said. "You look like shit."

"Thank you, Travis. You looked like shit not too long ago."

"You're welcome. Who died?"

"No one." I ushered him inside. "I thought you were my housekeeper."

"Oh. I just ran into her on the elevator." He placed his hands on my shoulders. "Seriously. Who died? Tell me."

"No one. I broke up with the woman I was seeing."

"How shocking." He laughed, but I didn't join in like usual. It took him a while to realize there was nothing funny about this. "Have you been fucking crying?"

"No. Taylor used some new cleaning supplies that I'm allergic to, that's all."

"Want to talk about it?" he asked.

*Not with you.* "Not really." I walked over to my liquor cabinet and took out a bottle of vodka.

I needed to change the subject. Fast.

"Is your agent working on a new date for the trilogy yet?" I asked.

“After all the drug tests come back.” He leaned against the bar. “You’re scaring me, man. I’m not used to you showing any emotion when it comes to supermodels like Anya Sterling.”

“Anya Sterling?”

“Yeah. That’s who you broke up with, right?”

“Sure.” I didn’t feel like correcting him. The last time I saw Anya was sometime last week. She’d drunkenly fallen out of a damn cab and she was on the verge of embarrassing herself. I’d helped her up to her suite and waited in the hallway until her manager arrived.

“I swear, you and Penelope have the worst luck when it comes to the opposite sex.” He shook his head. “I could barely talk to her yesterday. She was sobbing out of control over this last guy. So much for him being good for her, you know?”

*What?* My chest twinged in guilt. “What did she say about him?”

“I don’t recall.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t translate through her tears.”

“Could you please try to recall?”

“Why?” He tapped his fingers against the countertop. “Shouldn’t you already know this? Surely she’s told you more than me.”

“That’s usually how it goes...”

“Yeah, it is,” he said. “Are you two upset with each other or something?”

“That wasn’t my intent.”

“When’s the last time you talked to her?”

“Feels like forever ago.”

“And what was your girlfriend’s real name?”

“Pen—” I caught myself. “You don’t know her.”

“Oh, I think I do.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “It’s Penelope, isn’t it?”

I didn't respond, didn't react. This was a far cry from how I wanted this scene with him to play out, but the film was already down to its final frame.

"You've been fucking my sister behind my back?"

"No, I've been *dating* your sister behind your back," I said. "Big difference."

"Were you 'dating' her in Vegas? When that other woman was screaming your name in your room hours before my fight?"

"There was no other woman," I said deadpan. "It's just been your sister."

"So, now you're going to lie to me?"

"Travis..." I didn't have time for this right now. "We need to do this some other day. I'm going through some emotional shit, and no offense, but you're not the guy I want to talk to about it."

"When were you planning to *ask* if dating my sister was okay?"

"I wasn't planning to ask you shit," I said. "I was going to *tell* you a few weeks from now, and you were going to deal with it."

"Deal with it?" He glared at me. "Is that what you just said to me?"

"There's not an echo in this room."

"When did you start grooming her then?" His face reddened.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"She was a fucking minor when I—" He shook his head. "Did you sleep with Penelope when I left her with you in Seattle?"

*You've officially lost your goddamn mind.* I shrugged. "Can we talk about this when you get that murderous look out of your eyes? Preferably like adults?"

“Of course, we can.” His left fist hit my eye first.

Then his right.

Caught off guard, I stumbled backward and grabbed onto the counter.

“Let’s talk some more, huh?” He seethed. “Say something else.”

He didn’t give me the chance. He opened one of the kitchen cabinets and slammed it against the side of my face.

He did it again and again until I fell to the floor.

Then he stood over me and fucked me up harder than he’d ever fought any opponent.

No referees came in to save me.

FORTY (B)



PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Seventy-Two Hours Post Breakup*

**M**y blood dripped onto the marble floor and my voicemail system tormented me by playing Penelope's messages on repeat.

I tried to open my eyes a bit wider, but it was no use.

Over the past several hours, I'd managed to string a few things together, albeit very little since I was pretty sure my skull was fractured.

One, my former best friend thought I was a pedophile.

Two, my far more important best friend thought that I'd cheated on her with a supermodel.

Three, my fucking voicemail machine was officially broken, and it was the first thing I was going to have destroyed once Lawrence or Sarah showed up looking for me.

"I *hate* you, Hayden Hunter," Penelope's voice came through the speakers again. "I. Hate. You. I hope your cock falls off and you lose every dime in your bank account. Those things are all you've ever cared about anyway."

*Beep!*

*Jesus Christ.*

FORTY-ONE

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

“I thought I told you to leave me here to die.” I looked at Sarah as she adjusted the bandages around my legs.

“I was planning to, but I saw that I wasn’t in your will, so I wouldn’t gain anything from your death.” She poured a glass of water and set it next to me. “Now, if you’d told Lawrence that, he might’ve obliged.”

“What day is it?”

“Healing day.”

“What day of the week, Sarah?”

“Healing day.” She smiled. “It’s a new addition.”

“Fine. How many days have I been like this, then?”

“Lots.”

*Okay, fuck it.* “Where’s my phone?” I asked. “I need to call \_\_\_”

“Penelope?” She shook her head. “She won’t answer you.”

“Can you give me my phone so I can test that theory for myself?”

“I’ll give you the whole thing whenever you’re well again.” She pulled it out of her pocket, and then she took out the battery before tossing it to me.

“*Sarah*, give me my entire phone.”

She picked up the remote and turned on the TV. Then she left the room.

I tried to get up, but it was too hard. My legs were still too numb.

“Sarah!” I called for her, but there was no answer. Before I could try again, the *Behind the Scenes: Journey to the Olympics* program appeared onscreen.

They panned the compound in Utah, then the interior facilities, and then Penelope.

The sight of her made me risk the pain of sitting up. Dressed in a bright red Team USA windbreaker, her hair was pulled atop her head in a messy bun and her skin was glowing.

“It’s an honor to be here,” she said to a suited reporter. “I’ve truly missed being a part of this world, and I’m hoping to guide the incredible Katie Folds to her best performance yet when the games begin.”

“Well, we’ve more than missed you.” The suit smiled. “Years later, and we still haven’t seen anything like ‘The Perfect Feather’ in this sport. You were one of a kind. Truly.”

She smiles uneasily, and I can see a hint of pain in her eyes.

As he gushed about her accomplishments, several highlights of her career began to play onscreen.

The last one, one of her nailing four back-to-back quadruple lutzers in Italy and pumping her fists merged into what happened once the music ended: Her running toward me in tears of joy.

*“I did it, Hayden! I did it!”*

Within an hour, I managed to get out of bed even through excruciating pain. I headed to the kitchen so that I could grab my other phone and charter a jet to see her.

But my legs gave out, and everything went black.

*Fuck.*

FORTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*Salt Lake City, Utah*

The sound of skates hitting the ice had never seemed so jarring and annoying. From the moment that I stepped into the training arena, I felt out of place.

As if I didn't belong in this world anymore.

All my days blended in a montage of nonstop workouts, media appearances, and incessant questions about my former fall.

My emotions were still playing an out-of-sync symphony of sadness and for whatever reason, I couldn't get completely locked into coaching.

Katie Folds was extraordinary in every way and she didn't need any guidance; my presence was a mere formality.

Sighing, I sipped my coffee and signaled for her to take a break. "Let's take twenty!"

She nodded and skated over to me.

"For the record, I watched you all the time when I was younger," she said. "I've saved all of your competition tapes for inspiration. Well, you and your mom's. You two are my favorites of all time."

"That means a lot to me, Katie. Thank you."

“Want something from the deli?”

“Lemonade.”

“You’re welcome.” She nodded and slid a bag over her shoulder.

I waited until she was gone before sitting down and giving in to my emotions again.

I’d thought that I could break my record of six hours without thinking about Hayden, but it was no use. He invaded my daydreams, stormed through all my thoughts, and I had to resist the frequent urge to pick up my phone and contact him.

He was, by far, the hardest breakup I’d ever had in my life and I hated having to deal with it by myself.

*Without my best friend.*

“You know a ‘goodbye’ would’ve been nice.” Tatiana suddenly stepped in front of me. “Actually, I would’ve settled for an ‘I’ve changed my mind about flying to the compound to coach’ text message. That way, when I came back into town from my mini-coaching stint, I wouldn’t have been itching to file a Missing Persons report.”

Tears pricked my eyes as I looked up at her. “What are you doing here?”

“No, no, no,” she said. “The person who booked a flight without paying her part of the rent can’t ask me any questions right now. The better question is, why are you crying?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Frenemies talk to each other, Penelope,” she said. “They tell each other things.”

“Hayden broke up with me.”

Her eyes widened. “*What?*”

“He asked for space, and he also cheated on me.” Tears fell down my face.

She tilted her head to the side. “Where’d you get that latter thing from?”

“I lost my boyfriend and my best friend in one fell swoop.” I didn’t feel like addressing that topic right now. “I just reacted and picked up everything and left. I’m sorry that I didn’t call or text... I didn’t know what to say. Now I’m here and this doesn’t feel right. I mean, I want this more than anything, but the timing isn’t right, you know? And I feel like the one person I want to share it with isn’t here to celebrate the chance with me.”

She sat next to me on the bench, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

I sobbed so hard that my chest and stomach ached even worse than they did last night.

“I have to vomit,” I said, rushing to the bathroom.

She followed and held my hair back just in time. “Hold on, let me get some tissue.”

“Ewww!” She scoffed. “There’s vomit in this other toilet already. Whatever food is being served here, don’t you dare offer it to me.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I forgot to flush that one an hour ago. That’s how upset I am. I’ve been crying every day.”

“Have you been vomiting like this every day, too?”

“Yeah.” I took the tissue from her. “I’ve never been like this after a breakup before. This is so beyond awful that I don’t think I’ll ever get over him.”

“I bet.” She leaned against the wall. “I don’t think everything you’re feeling is due to the breakup, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think we need to get you a pregnancy test...”



FORTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**T** **ravis:** Since you want to avoid my phone calls, I'm in town. Meet me for lunch. *Now.*

**Me:** Where? And what's this about?

**Travis:** Anita's at 43 Woodland.

**Travis:** You know what the fuck this is about.

I stepped into the café and took off my hat, stopping when I saw that all the shades in the room were drawn shut. The tables sat untouched and clear of silverware, and a brunette stood alone at the hostess stand.

“Good afternoon, Miss Carter,” she said. “Thank you for choosing Anita's tonight. Can I show you to your reserved table?”

“Sure.” I followed her to a booth at the back of the room.

Over the years, I'd come to know this “reserved table” routine very well.

Whenever Travis wanted to berate me for something, the idea of a public meeting was out of the question, so he made it look like he'd *considered* the idea.

This was how he'd always handled being a big brother, and I had no choice but to submit.

*His way or no way.*

I flipped through the pink plastic menu and ordered a stack of pancakes and a coffee. Then, just like clockwork, Travis walked through the door alone.

He handed the manager a clip of bills and made his way toward me.

“Hello, Crown.” He glared at me as he took off his jacket. “How are you on this lovely Saturday?”

“You’ve never been good at small talk, Travis. Please don’t try to practice now.”

“What can I get for you today, Mr. Carter?” The waitress moved in front of us, setting down two coffees.

“I’ll take what I discussed with your manager over the phone.” He kept his eyes on mine. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Yes, sir.” She stepped away.

“I really am interested in knowing how you’re feeling today,” Travis said. “Do you *feel* like hiding more things with Hayden or coming clean?”

“Cut the shit, Travis.” I rolled my eyes. “You don’t have to treat me like a kid.”

“Fair enough. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“First of all—”

“Let me answer it for you.” He interrupted. “You *weren’t* thinking. Because the idea of Hayden being someone worthy of dating should’ve never crossed your mind. You know how he is with women; you’ve had a front row seat to his show for years. Did you honestly think he would change his character for you?”

I didn’t answer.

“I’m beyond disappointed in you,” he said. “I taught you better than this.”

“You’re not Dad, Travis.”

“Good thing that I’m not.” He sipped his coffee. “He wouldn’t be this calm if he were here. And he damn sure wouldn’t be okay with you dating Hayden. Trust me.”

I gritted my teeth as the waitress returned to our table.

“Here you are,” she said, setting down more than what I’d ordered between us. Another power play by Travis.

He waited for her to leave before speaking again. “Good thing the two of you broke up before things got worse or he got you pregnant.”

“I *am* pregnant.”

“Stop fucking with me.”

“I’m eight weeks,” I said. “And yes, the baby is his.”

He sucked in a slow, steady breath. “*Penelope...*”

He didn’t finish that sentence.

Instead, he picked up his knife and sliced his pancake stack with such a slow and delicate precision that the nerves on the back of my neck stood up. The fear he’d instilled in me over the years was still there.

“Whatever he promised you while you were dating behind my back is a lie,” he said. “That said, I doubt he’ll ever walk away from his child. Given his past, he wouldn’t dare be a deadbeat dad.”

“I know that.”

“You should also know that I’ve talked to him about how he should’ve never touched you. There’s no future with him outside of a co-parenting schedule. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t *allow* it?”

“I didn’t stutter.” He glared at me. “He’ll be there for your child of course, but he’ll never be there for you in any other capacity. You should’ve heeded my words years ago. I’m the only one who will always be there for you. You’re all I have and vice versa.”

My blood boiled at his blatant rewriting of history, at his ability to say that shit with a straight face.

“Speaking of being there for you—” He pulled an envelope from his jacket and placed it into my purse. “I’ve had this account in your name since I started MMA and I planned to hand it over to you next year, but you’ll clearly need it before then. By the way, don’t be surprised if Hayden doesn’t acknowledge the baby is his for a while.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like,” he said. “I’ll be there for you for the long-term, since he can’t be.”

“You want to know who was really there for me when I needed him?” My voice cracked. “Who showed up to every fucking competition, even when I told him that he didn’t have to, because just like you, he was working on his goddamn dreams?”

He narrowed his eyes at me.

“*Hayden*, Travis.” I hissed. “Hayden was there, and you were not. So spare me the extra side of bullshit about being a fucked up white knight when I never needed you to save me.”

“Penelope—”

“You’re so full of yourself that you can’t even see it.” I stood to my feet. “But you know what? You’ve always done a pretty good job avoiding me for months at a time. Do me a favor and continue doing that for the rest of the year.”

“What?”

“I’ll be there in the front row at your next competition, or will I?” I said. “I vividly remember you feeding me that very line when you first left me.”

“Sit back down, Crown. I’m not done talking to you.”

“I’m done listening.”

I left the diner without another word, without telling him any of my plans.

I had a plane to catch.

FORTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**Pilot Nav:** I can't fly you to Utah until a doctor clears you, sir.

**Pilot Joel:** You've asked me this twenty times a day, sir. You need clearance from your doctor.

**Doctor Murray:** I've called every private airport/pilot union and listed you as a safety risk to commercial airlines. You have to heal for a few more weeks, Mr. Hunter. Be patient.

**F**uck it, I'll drive to Utah.

I was running on autopilot, commandeering a life I didn't want to live since there was no Penelope in it.

I called her phone multiple times a day, sent endless texts, and even had flowers and apology letters sent directly to the training complex, but they were all returned.

She was using my own breakup advice—"Ignore the asshole until he gets the point"—against me, and it hurt like hell.

"Your Honor, Mr. Hunter has done nothing but stare at his phone and mumble to himself since we started this hearing." The raspy voice of Tinder's newest lawyer snapped me out of my thoughts.

I looked up, realizing that somehow I'd arrived at an agreed-upon boardroom, surrounded by twenty people from each side of this tiresome lawsuit.

“He’s also shown up to this hearing wearing a fucking eye-patch.” She groaned. “He’s not prepared to take this seriously today and he’s wasting our time.”

“I was in an accident,” I said, sighing and taking it off. “I’m willing to answer all of your silly little questions.”

“You mean, my legally-binding questions?”

“That doesn’t make them any less silly.”

“Mr. Hunter—” The judge chided. “Please give us your undivided attention and stop looking at your phone.”

I refreshed the screen one last time before placing it into my pocket.

“Thank you.” The lawyer picked up a sheet of paper. “Do you know why we’re here today?”

“To try to get more money out of me.” I smiled, even though my cheeks still hurt. “Or maybe it’s because you’re trying to pretend like I’m not ten-times better at building apps than your client over there.”

Tim shot me a glare and the judge chided me again.

“Yes, I know why we’re here.” I changed my tone. “I’m here to discuss the similarities between Cinder and Tinder for lawsuit number fifty-seven between us.”

“*Eighty-seven.*” Lawrence coughed.

“Good.” The lawyer slid a folder toward me, but I didn’t look at it.

Instead, I looked over at Tim like I’d done several times in the past at these depositions. Even after all this time, he still looked as worried and saddened as he always did.

As if he was the only one in the room who knew the truth.

Well, besides me.

“Mr. Hunter,” his lawyer said, “Did you ever steal—”

“Yes.”

“What?”



“You heard me,” I said, standing to my feet. “Not everything, but yes. I stole from Mr. Tim Lassing.”

The room fell silent.

“For what it’s worth—” I looked at Tim. “I’ll settle with you for what your team asked for. Forty million. I also think you should pick up *The New Yorker* tomorrow. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry for what?” He crossed his arms.

“You know what it’s for.” I didn’t say another word. I left the room amidst whispers and murmurs, heading straight to the elevator.

“Hayden?” Lawrence was on my heels. “Hayden, what the hell are you doing? And what the hell is running in *The New Yorker* tomorrow?”

“I thought you hated spoilers,” I said. “A copy should arrive at your desk tonight, though.”

“What’s it about, Hayden?”

“The truth about The Cold War, Lawrence.” I hit the down button. “I finally told the truth about everything.”

BREAKUP #16.5

THE ONE THAT COULD NEVER BE



better yet...

The One That *Really* Started The Cold War

*Hayden*

*Back Then*

I can't believe that I'm falling for my best friend. My "she's way too young for you" and "her brother would beat me into another dimension" best friend.

Her breakups have become points of conversation and nothing more, comedic relief that only stands in the way of the main scene. Or, what I wish the main scene could be.

*Us.*

Not a night passes without us talking on the phone or discussing our lives. I've told her things that I've never told Travis. I want her to be mine.

Even though she showed up to meet me at the theater just to tell me that she's in love with Tim, to the point of putting her career on hold for him, I can't take that as a defeat for some reason.

"Well, that's it." Nina, the woman I'm on a fifth pointless date with, kisses me on the cheek. "I'm going to do you a huge favor and break up with me, *for you.*"

"What? Why?"

"Because I can't compete with the woman you're really in love with. That's her texting you now, isn't it?" She points to

my phone. “That’s who we’ve spent the past hour and a half talking about, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve told you that you taking me to see her skate isn’t a date. Even if it does come with perks.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“It’s exactly what I think.” She smiles, looking completely unoffended. “Go ahead. Answer it.”

“She can wait.”

“Ha! You never make her wait.” She pulls a bag over her shoulder. “See you around, Hayden.”

I watch her walk away and hold off for a few minutes just to prove a point.

**Penelope (Too Young for You):** Hey. Thank you for sending me the protein shakes and extra pressure sleeves yesterday. I appreciate that.

**Me:** You’re welcome. What are you doing tonight?

**Penelope (Too Young for You):** Nothing. Want to come over?

**Me:** Be there in ten.



WHEN I MAKE it to Penelope’s place, I take a deep breath and try to think about how I need to play this. She has dreams she’s chasing, as do I, but I don’t want to get in the way of hers.

But I’m also selfish and don’t want her to date anyone else. Not even Tim, just me.

*I’ll figure it out.*

I get out of the car and knock on the door.

Penelope doesn’t answer it, though. Tim does.

*What the hell?*

“Hey, Hayden.” He smiles. “Nice to see you.”

As if he can read my confused expression, he clears his throat. “The water pipes at my house burst an hour ago, so I figured I could stay with my girlfriend for a few days while they get fixed. That’s what *girlfriends* are for, right?”

“Right.”

I step inside and see that her living room is filled with his belongings. Rolling my eyes, I look around for her, finding her in her mother’s old library.

“Is Tim still taking you camping for the weekend?” I can’t think of anything else to say.

“Yeah, unless...”

“Unless, what?”

She doesn’t answer me.

“Did you mean what you said at the theater last week?” I ask.

“Yes.” She nods. “Every word. I really do love him.”

My chest aches at her confessing that she’s in love with him again. The look in her eyes is undeniably for him.

“Take things slow with him, then,” I say, surrendering. “Make sure he’s everything you want before you cross the line.”

“He is. I just wish that he could see that.” She hugs me longer than usual and I rub my hands against her back.

We slowly pull away and stare at each other.

*Fuck it. Tell her that she belongs with you instead. Consequences be damned.*

“Hey.” Tim steps into the room before I can utter a word. “I was looking for you two. I just got an email about free pizza night at Brick Oven. Let’s go, shall we?”

“No, I’m okay,” I say. “I need to pick up some stuff for her brother while I’m here anyway. I’ll be out of your way soon.”

“I’ll go.” Penelope keeps her eyes on mine, but she loops her arm in his. “We need to leave now if we’re going to make

it before they run out, though. Oh, and Hayden, can you shut the door all the way when you leave the house? Tim's dog is here."

"Will do."

I watch from the windows as they leave and get into his truck. Once they roll out of the driveway and pass the four-way stop at the end of the street, I treat myself to a private tour of his things that are in the living room.

I remember Penelope telling me that he was building a dating app, as well, but according to what she's said, he is a bit farther along in the process than me. Where I have a team of seven, he has a team of twenty.

Flipping through his folders, I raise my eyebrow at the logo and name ideas.

*Tinder as the name? A red or hot pink flame as a logo?*

I open one of the mini file cabinets near the coffee table and pause. There's a stack of papers, all dripping in code. In between the lines are the words, 'suggested algorithms and features.'

I know that I should let them lay as they are, but I can't help myself.

I make copies of everything in Penelope's library and unplug the printer. Then, just because he has the audacity to make my best friend fall for him, I knock over all his shit before leaving.

BREAKUP #16.5

THE ONE THAT COULD NEVER BE



better yet...

The One That Really Started The Cold War

*Hayden*

*Back Then*

**T**he copies on my front seat are taunting me as I drive; they're calling me a "thief." The guilt of what I've done almost makes me turn around and shred everything.

Keyword: *Almost*.

I want to look at his work, only to see if he's figured out something amazing for his app. If there's anything I can learn, not steal.

Trying to silence the voices in my head, I accidentally trigger the memory of a dog barking.

*Woof! Woof! Woof!*

I try to think of something else, but the barks get louder. And it only takes me half a mile to realize that those sounds aren't in my head at all.

*Woof! Woof! Woof!*

I pull over on the side of the road and look in the backseat.

"*Woof!*" Tim's grey and black terrier stares into my eyes.

He's sitting on the floor and his front paw is trapped under some shipping tape.

*What the hell?*



I mentally rewind the past hour, wondering when and how he jumped into my car.

He barks louder and struggles to free himself.

I sigh and take my time helping him, considering the pros and cons of returning him tonight or first thing in the morning.

The cons outweigh the pros, so I scoop him up and move him to the passenger seat. Then I grab a blanket off the floor and cover him.

Pulling onto the road again, I take a detour to the closest pet store and try to pretend like I haven't completely lost my damn mind.



*One hour later*

I PLACE a bowl of water onto my kitchen floor and make sure there's enough kibble in the new dispenser that's next to it.

*I'll return him tomorrow, and then Tim will never know.*

Pulling out the stolen notes, I sit down at my table and begin to read.

His idea isn't similar to mine in the slightest, but he's figured out the part that I've struggled to find: an addictive way to reject and accept matches.

Swipe right for yes. Swipe left for no.

*Hmmm.*

He has far more stupid ideas than good ones, though. Things like bagel meet-ups, murder mystery games, and more niche games that users can play to "score true love."

All of that was utter garbage. But the swiping feature?

That was impressive.

Very, very impressive.

A wave of envy washes over me, nearly drowning me with every hit.

He has my Penelope.

*My Penelope.*

Without thinking, I pull out the ‘accept and reject’ plans for my dating app and set them next to his. Then I compare every line of code.

I brew cup after cup of coffee, comparing the best parts of his app to the places where my app is at its weakest.

I only take the swiping feature—*obviously*—but I vow to never admit that shit to a single soul.

By the time I finish, the sun is rising into the sky and Tim’s dog is pawing at my leg, reminding me that I have to quietly drop him off at Penelope’s next-door neighbor’s house with an anonymous note so that Tim will never know that I “stole” from him.

*Shit.*

BREAKUP #16.5

THE ONE THAT COULD NEVER BE



better yet...

The One That Really Started The Cold War

*Hayden*

*Back Then*

I pack my broken heart into a suitcase and leave for the airport to head to New York.

I'm not sure how the hell Penelope finds me, or why she insists on making this shit even harder since *she* broke my heart by falling for some other guy, but I do my best to show no emotion.

I tell her that I'll still call.

That we'll still be best friends, but that's a lie.

I'm too in love with her for that to be a reality.

At first, things seem normal between us, like she doesn't notice, because I still send her small texts here or there. But I force myself to stop after a few weeks.

Outside of a "Happy Birthday" or a "Hope you're well," we rely on Travis for updates on one another.

He's far too involved in his own career to ever notice the change.

BREAKUP #16.5

THE ONE THAT COULD NEVER BE



better yet...

The One That *Really* Started The Cold War

*Hayden*

*Back Then*

Several months later, I sit in a bar in SoHo to watch Penelope compete in Skate America. My feelings for her have been compartmentalized and I've channeled everything I once felt for her into my newly named dating app—Cinder. (Yes, I know that it's petty to make it rhyme with Tinder, but I haven't completely let go of my envy. Plus, it *sounds better* than Tinder anyway.)

Alas, almost all my “She’s too young for you,” “It’ll never work,” or “She’s your best friend’s little sister” affirmations have finally paid off. I’ve also managed to get a therapist to convince me that my emotions for Penelope were misplaced for the family I never had.

“Can you turn the TV up a bit?” I call out to the bartender as the show begins.

“As you wish.”

“Welcome back to Skate America, ladies and gentlemen!” The announcer smiles onscreen. “First up on tonight’s program is the reigning world champion in singles figure skating, Miss Penelope Carter!”

I stare at Penelope as she takes to the ice in a stunning blue costume, still feeling remnants of feelings that I swore were

long gone.

*I have to call her after she wins today. We need to put an end to this Cold War.*

Her music begins to play and she commands the attention of everyone in the bar. Everyone in the arena.

She's utter perfection for the first minute and the announcers are already declaring her as the winner.

She deviates from her program with a quadruple lutz that she lands perfectly. Then she does another.

As if she has something to prove, she attempts and lands a series of triple salchows, and then she gears up for a fourth quadruple lutz.

She launches herself into the air, but she doesn't land with her blades this time.

Her head hits the ice first.

I stand up from my chair as blood spatters onto the ice, as the announcers scream for someone to help her.

Deafening screams and wails fill the bar and the TV cuts to a quick commercial.

Without a second thought, I rush to the airport and pay triple for a last-minute ticket to Chicago.



“TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH.” Travis stands up the moment I step into the waiting room.

“How is she?”

“Broken legs, wrist fracture, fractured skull, and selective, spatial memory loss. The latter has to be short term, because she remembers all of my transgressions just fine.” He rolls his eyes. “The doctors say she'll recover easily, but she'll never skate again. They say her chase for twenty-eight is officially over.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Me neither.” He pats my shoulder. “I’m getting her some snacks from the cafeteria. You want anything?”

“No, thank you.” I walk down the hall and into her room, expecting to see her sleeping, but she’s sitting up.

Even with her head wrapped in bandages, she’s still fucking gorgeous.

“You wear *suits* now, Hayden?” She smiles. “I would give you a compliment on how good you look, but I don’t want to feed your ego. And, according to my journal, I hate you.”

“You definitely do.” I laugh and set a bouquet of flowers on her table.

“Before you say anything, can you tell me if Hell has frozen over, or if I’m still in a coma?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“I had a vision that Tatiana Brave came in here with flowers, and she was crying like she gave a damn about me being hurt. I can’t believe that was real.”

“Hmmm. Let’s see.” I flip over some of the bouquet tags, stopping when I see one signed as, “Your sworn enemy and #2 Skater in the world.”

“She was definitely here.” I pull out the card and clear my throat.

*Penelope,*

How dare you get hurt months before the world  
championships?

You are utterly selfish for attempting another quad in what was  
already a winning routine, and I will never, EVER forgive you  
for that.

I’m praying for a miracle, because I want to beat you once and  
for all.

Love

(Ha! Not really. I don’t have any freaking white-out :-/)



*Tati*

**P.S.:** You're the only person in this sport I've ever respected 100%, but I still hate you down to your marrow.

"She drew a few lines through that last note, and then under it she wrote, '*Your costume sucked ass and I look forward to being the new #1.*'"

"Of course, she did." Penelope snorts. "I hate her so damn much."

"No, you don't." I sit on the edge of her bed. "I think you respect her, too. In fact, I think you two would be cool if you weren't such vicious competitors."

She doesn't respond to that, but the look in her eyes says it all. "Why aren't you and I friends?"

"Probably because of our Cold War."

"One you *started*, according to what I wrote." She holds up her journal.

"I'm sure your point of view regarding the past several months is biased." I take off my jacket.

"Why did you stop talking to me?" she asks. "Was it something I did?"

"No." I shake my head. "I was just being selfish. That's all."

"Selfish about what?"

I don't answer that. "Are you still with Tim?"

"Who the heck is Tim?" She shakes her head. "You're the second person to ask me that today. He must not have been that important because he's not written in my journal at all and I remember every guy I've dated since you left. I have Jackson, Roger, Tate, and Randall, all breakups that you weren't there for."

"I'm sorry. Will I have to grovel in order to get your friendship back?"

"Would you?"

“Yes.”

“I’ll be making a list, then.”

“I’ll follow it.”

She swallowed. “I’ve missed you, Hayden.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” I point to her journal. “Are any of those breakups worth recapping?”

“Well, let’s see. There’s the one who stole my car.” She flips a page. “The one who couldn’t stop burping, the one who told me that I was in love with someone else, and the one who pulled out his cock in the movie theater.”

“I’d like to hear about all of them except that last one.”

“I’ll have to start with that one, then.” She laughs and slams the book shut. “Promise me something.”

“Yeah?”

“The next time I’m head over heels in love with a guy, tell me to break up with him when things start getting serious if I’m not exactly who I want to be.”

“Why the hell would I ever tell you to do that?”

“Because I’m noticing a theme in all my journal entries,” she says. “I mean, at the end of every recap, I tell myself the same lessons and they clearly never take. I forget about my own dreams and latch onto his, or I try to become a part of his world at all costs, while sacrificing my own.”

“So, you want to push the one who loves you away?”

“He’ll understand why if he loves me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Penelope.”

“Just say you’ll do it, no matter how much it hurts. You’ll tell me to focus on my dreams and accomplish everything I want before I get super serious with anyone else.”

“Even if he really loves you?”

“*Especially* if he really loves me.”



SHE FALLS asleep after we've caught up on a few things, and then she's wheeled into a series of surgeries the following evening.

And again the next day.

Her memory comes back in pieces here or there, but it's never the whole thing. And it's never quite in order.

On the one hand, her failure to recollect Tim helps me with Tinder. I mean, *Cinder*. On the other, I know that one day, should we ever cross the line, she'll fail to see that I did exactly what she made me promise to do.

FORTY-FIVE

PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

**M**y letter in *The New Yorker* stopped the internet at nine-thirty in the morning. For twenty minutes, the tech world held its breath while they read my words, and then they collectively gasped in shock.

Thousands of emails flooded my inbox while #HaydenHunterisOverParty, #HaydenHunterStole, and #TinderMadeCinder made their way to the top of Twitter's trending charts.

As morning news shows caught wind of the story, I turned off my phone and told Sarah to avoid making any statements on my behalf.

I knew that more intense backlash was coming, but I wanted to stave off facing it directly for as long as I could.

*There was only one person I wanted to reach anyway.*

I sent out a company-wide memo telling everyone to enjoy the rest of the week off, and then I brewed myself a cup of coffee. It was almost time for me to begin stage two of getting Penelope back.

As I was looking over my list, a loud knock sounded at my door.

I didn't bother calling out to ask who it was. The people who were worth my time had keys.

The lock twisted and the tell-tale sound of loafers hit the marble floor.

Lawrence.

“I love what you’ve done with the place,” he said. “All these empty pizza boxes, takeout Chinese cartons, and beer cans add a true depressive flair to the room.”

“Thank you. That’s exactly the feel I was going for.”

“Hmmm.” He stepped on an empty wrapper and I turned around to face him.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You’re here because all of the board members are resigning and they want to see my head on a platter.”

“Quite the contrary.” He crossed his arms. “*I’m* the only person who wants your head on a platter, preferably a stone one, so I can crush it with a mallet. Everyone else at Cinder is beyond thrilled with you. They’re planning a celebration in your honor.”

*What? “Why?”*

“Because ever since you published that ridiculously, ill-advised lover boy letter, our subscribers have increased by three hundred percent and our stocks are approaching record highs.”

He sounded anything but upset. “I figured you were biding your time and preparing one hell of a gloating session, so let me have it.”

“There’s nothing to give.” I shrugged. “I don’t have anything to gloat about.”

“Allow me to repeat myself. Subscribers are up by *three hundred percent* and we’re reaching record highs on the stock market.”

“I heard you. Anything else?”

“Yeah, I need to give your doctor a follow-up call,” he said. “He clearly missed the fact that you’ve sustained some brain damage. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Wait,” I said. “Has Penelope called you? Has she emailed anything?”

“She texted me ‘Happy Birthday’ this morning.”

“Read me the message.”

“I just did.” He crossed his arms. “Happy Birthday, Lawrence.”

“Were there any emojis? Any hidden lines of code for me?”

He gave me a blank stare.

“Fine.” I downed my coffee.

“Can I give you some breakup advice?” He cleared his throat.

“No.”

“I’ll offer it up anyway,” he said. “The Hayden I know wouldn’t be here right now. He wouldn’t give a fuck about anything except getting what he wanted. Because everyone, and I do mean fucking *everyone*, minus her brother maybe, could see that you two belonged together.”

He was right.

This guidebook, phase shit in getting her back wasn’t my style at all.

I grabbed my jacket and headed to the door. “I’ll be back to work sometime next week.”

“Please don’t do anything stupid for the next month.” He held his hand over his heart. “You owe me four weeks without any heart palpitations.”

“I don’t have anything stupid on my agenda.” *Yet.*

“So, you’re off to get Penelope back?”

“No,” I said. “I’m off to put Travis in his place once and for all.”

FORTY-SIX



PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

I tore off my final wrist bandage and parked my car in front of B&B Warehouse.

To a passersby, it was just another place on the shipyard that blended into everything else. Nothing left to see.

I knew better, though.

It was where Travis held his private workouts. Since he was still nursing his ego from his Vegas loss, there was a ninety percent chance that he would be here.

I waited for a couple to walk past and pulled a pair of shades over my eyes before stepping out. Then I made my way to the side entrance.

Typing in the code on the keypad, I opened the door and found myself face to face with his bodyguard.

“You’re the last person Mr. Carter wants to see.” He bellowed. “Get the hell out of here if you know what’s good for you.”

“Are you still cheating on your wife, Greg?” I asked. “Or, have you finally stopped? It’d be a shame if I accidentally brought up your mistress’s name the next time I saw her out.”

“Go.” He glared at me before stepping out of the way.

I bypassed the remainder of Travis’s entourage and walked into the gym.

Standing at the center of a ring, Travis was bobbing and weaving, throwing punches at a dummy's torso.

"I see that you've healed pretty quickly." Travis's eyes met mine. "I wouldn't get too comfortable with that jaw if I were you. It'll be broken again by the time you leave."

"Fuck you, Travis." I glared at him.

"Come closer and say that shit to my face."

"*Gladly.*" I moved closer, and he punched the dummy a few more times.

Climbing past the ropes, I walked right up to him.

"You really do have a death wish, don't you?" he asked.

"Shut the fuck up and let me explain this," I said. "If you don't, one of us is leaving here hurt, and I can guarantee it won't be me."

"Only one of us is a professional fighter, Hayden."

"And only one of us has ever lost at something we're the best at," I said. "Reminder: you just fucking lost in Las Vegas."

His face reddened and he flexed his wrists. "I suggest you hurry up and say whatever the hell you want to say."

"One, you're lucky that I'm in love with your sister. Two, Penelope is my best friend," I said. "Not you, and it's been that way for *years*. I was never attracted to her when you selfishly made me agree to look after her when you left."

He clenched his jaw, but he didn't say a word.

"It was strictly platonic for years and there was nothing there." I admitted. "But I fell for her long before I came to New York. That's actually why I fucking came here, because in the best interest of her career, I didn't want to distract her. So I—"

"Fucked your way across the city until you decided that you wanted someone naïve to settle down with?"

“I’m still in love with your sister, and I don’t care if you agree with it or not.” I shrugged. “If you think so low of me to think that I was actually grooming her like a sick person and wasn’t looking after her, that’s on you. Because if I have to choose between which one of your relationships means the most to me, it won’t be the one I had with you.”

Silence.

I considered punching him in the eye, paying him back for the senseless beatdown he gave me, but he suddenly stepped back.

“I heard you with another woman in your room in Vegas,” he said.

“Like I told you before, there was no other woman.”

“And Anya Sterling?”

“A run-in with bad timing,” I said. “It was also blown completely out of proportion. I would never cheat on Penelope.”

He stared at me for a long time, looking torn between believing me and lunging at me.

I flexed my fist just in case it was the latter.

“I’m not sorry,” he said.

“I wouldn’t accept your apology if you were.” I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for the attempt, though.”

“Okay, I really am sorry.” He looked genuine. “I just thought you were treating her like every other woman you’ve... Well, you know.”

“I’m still not accepting your apology, especially if that’s the best you can do.” I crossed my arms. “You fractured my fucking eye socket.”

“If you thought some other guy hurt Penelope, I’m sure you would’ve done much worse.”

“You left me bleeding on the kitchen floor.”

“I remember you calling me about a certain guy you beat to a pulp before. What exactly did *he* do to Crown?”

I sighed. “Apology accepted. Have you talked to her? She’s ignoring me.”

“For now. She’ll have to talk to you within the next few months or so, I’m sure.”

“You must not know how long she can hold a grudge.”

He stared at me blankly for several seconds. “She didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I met her in Salt Lake City, but she’s upset with me now, too. I can try to call her.”

“No, that’s okay,” I said, stepping out of the ring. “I’ll find her myself.”

FORTY-SEVEN

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

**T**he moment that I landed in New York, I took a cab to Seventh Avenue Bank.

Since Travis made such a huge deal about this bank account, I decided to withdraw every dime and use it toward a new condo.

If there was enough for that, anyway.

“Thank you for calling ahead of your arrival, Miss Carter.” The bank manager extended his hand when I stepped through the doors. “We’re still getting things together, but we’ll be handling this in my office.”

“Sounds perfect.” I followed him into a large room where other suits were waiting.

He motioned for me to take a seat.

“Just to confirm, a few years ago, Mr. Carter transferred this account to a money market account. Then he started a new one in your name and invested almost all of it into Cinder’s shares. Does that sound correct?”

*He never told me that.*

“Sure.” I nodded.

“Okay, well—” He cleared his throat. “I recommend getting a few cashier’s checks, but I’ll happily dole your funds out however you like. How do you want it done?”

“Cash, please.” I set my bag on his desk. “All hundreds.”

He picked up the bag and looked inside of it. “Do you have other bags on their way here?”

“No.” I shrugged. “That’s it.”

He looked over at his associate, then back at me.

“Miss Carter,” he said, slowly sliding the reading glasses off his face. “How much money do you think is in your account?”

“Fifty thousand, give or take.”

“If it was fifty thousand, I wouldn’t have met you at the door and you would’ve been out of here minutes ago.” He leaned forward. “This is seven million dollars.”

My jaw dropped to the floor and I felt all the color leaving my face.

“Like I was saying.” He looked at me. “How do you want it done?”

“Cashier’s checks.” I could barely hear my voice. “But just for, um, ten percent of it.”

“I thought so.” He stood to his feet. “I’ll be right back, Miss Carter.”

I leaned back in my chair, beyond stunned.

I pulled out my phone to unmute Travis and send him an appreciative message, but he’d texted me already.

Several hours ago.

**Travis:** I love you, Crown... I hope someday you’ll see where I was coming from. Even though I couldn’t physically be there, every match I ever fought was for you.

FORTY-EIGHT



PRESENT DAY



*Hayden*

*Cinder Settles with Tinder for \$40M*

*Cinder's Company Valuation Now \$2B*

*Simon Gaines Arrested in Manhattan for Fraud, Hedge Fund  
Offices Raided*

FORTY-NINE

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*Manhattan, New York*

*“It took me all this time to realize that everything I’d done with Cinder, every move I’d ever made, was because I was in love with my best friend, and I didn’t want her to be with anyone else...”*

*“I was willing to lie, cheat, and steal to get back at the man who I thought had taken her away from me.”*

Tears hit my screen as I read Hayden’s words in *The New Yorker* for the umpteenth time. In revealing the truth about Tinder, he’d exposed bits of our story that I’d long forgotten, and late last night, the months before my accident unfolded in my brain like the pages of a novel.

Scene after scene of me wanting him and dating Tim as second-best, not knowing that he felt the same way that I did.

I wanted so desperately to call him and tell him to meet me someplace so we could talk, but I couldn’t do it.

The past headlines of his affair with Anya were still a barrier to us ever being friends again.

*We can be co-parents and nothing more.*

“Hey, Penelope?” Tatiana’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “You kind of need to get out of the car now.”

I looked to my left and saw her holding up an umbrella over the cab's open door.

"Oh, sorry." I stepped out and stood underneath it, shutting the door behind me.

"I think this is a decent complex," she said, tilting her head to the side. "Lots of great amenities, and it's close enough to two rinks. It's also close to, um..."

"Cinder," I said. "In case."

"Yeah, in case." She looped her arm in mine and led me inside. "I'm sorry I brought that up."

"No worries."

We took the elevator to the top floor, finding ourselves in the middle of a private party. We wrote our names on badges, then we moved over to the table of gourmet snacks.

From here, the view of Manhattan was perfect.

As I was pouring myself a drink, I felt a familiar jolt of electricity traveling through my body, that pulsating throb that I only felt when...

*"Is that Hayden Hunter?" "Oh my god, look!" "Is he here to buy everything before we can?"*

Hushed whispers suddenly filled the room.

"You want to leave through the back elevator?" Tatiana whispered. "I can put in bids for you if you don't want to stay."

Yes. "No." I shook my head. "I'm fine."

"You sure?"

I nodded and let out a breath. Tuning out the whispers, I scooped another handful of M&Ms onto my plate.

I managed to make it to the end of the snack buffet before giving in and taking a quick glance at Hayden.

Looking sexier than ever, he was dressed in a black V-neck shirt that clung to his muscles and dark jeans. Still incapable of looking anything less than perfect.

His blue eyes met mine and I tried to look away, but I couldn't.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please?" The curator clapped his hands and moved to the center of the room. "Thank you all so much for coming to our open house. Please follow me into the showroom area where we've set up space for the formal auctions."

The guests made their way toward the showroom, but I remained still.

A guy who looked a few years younger than me walked over to Hayden with his cell phone held high.

"You're my idol," he said. "Can I please take a selfie with you?"

Hayden nodded, but he kept his eyes on mine and the guy snapped the shot without noticing.

Tatiana moved behind me. "Do you want me to leave you two alone?"

"No," I said. "Please stay."

Hayden walked over, stopping right in front of me.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he said, his voice hoarse.

I didn't say anything in response. I simply stared at him.

"I've missed you." He looked into my eyes. "I've called you twenty times a day, left messages, and sent flowers. I've paid for ads on all the shows you watch, and I penned a letter in *The New Yorker*." He paused. "Have you seen any of those things?"

"No." I lied, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I've been trying my best to take a certain someone's advice and move on."

"Have you?"

"Not yet." Tears pricked my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. "You look good, too, Hayden. I bet Anya loves waking up next to you."

“I would never cheat on you, Penelope,” he said. “Those pictures aren’t what you think they are, but even still, I should’ve never asked for space with you. I’ll do whatever it takes to get you back and make it up to you.” He stepped close enough for me to inhale the scent of his cologne.

We stared into each other’s eyes for several moments, the unspoken words remained unsaid.

“Is this the type of condo you really want to buy?” he asked finally. “These aren’t your style.”

“I plan to renovate,” I said. “I’m bidding on it for the space and the amenities, so that—”

“So that *what?*”

“I was planning to call you sometime next week.” I refused to go there right now. “There’s something important I need to tell you.”

“I’m standing in front of you now.” He closed the gap between us. “No need to wait a week.” He lifted his hand and pressed it against my cheek, sending warmth through my entire body. “What is it?”

“Please write your initial bids on your cards for the first round!” The curator called from the other room. “You’re free to outbid your first one, but this is to ensure accuracy for the speaker.”

“I have to go,” I said. “I need to bid on this.”

“Or, you can let me buy it for you.” He grabbed my hands. “I need you to hear me out right now, Pen. We need to talk.”

“We will.” I stepped back. “Next week.”

I walked away from him before he could say anything else.

Anxious, I grabbed a paddle and a marker. Then I took a seat in the front row.

“For the first round, we are offering four condos identical to this one,” the curator said. “To start the bidding, I now welcome—”

“If you won’t talk to me in private, I’ll talk to you in public.” Hayden was suddenly in front of me, his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched.

“Sir, this is a bidding process.” The curator cleared his throat. “If you’re interested in staying, you can register and—”

“If you believe that I would *ever* hurt you after all we’ve been through together, you are sadly mistaken.”

The room filled with whispers, then those soft conversations dissolved into silence.

“I can’t go another day without you talking to me.” His voice was hoarse. “I have never felt for anyone else what I feel for you, and you’re more than my best friend, Penelope. I think that you always have been.”

Tears fell down my face.

“I’ve loved you since breakup number fifteen.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I wanted you to be mine back then, but I loved you enough to want you to focus on your own career...”

My breathing slowed.

“I love you, and I know you’ve read my letter. I can see it in your eyes, ” he said. “But just so we’re clear, I’m in love with you, every part of you, and I will never give you advice on landing another guy again, because you belong with me. And if you give me a second chance, you’ll never have to experience another breakup again.”

The room was now silent enough to hear a pin drop. The words I wanted to say aloud were trapped under my tongue.

I could feel everyone in the room staring at us, begging me to give him an answer.

“*Please.*” Hayden leaned close enough that our lips nearly touched. “Please take me back, Penelope.”

I swallowed. “I never wanted to give you a breakup title.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “Take me back.”

“Okay.” I nodded, feeling fresh tears fall down my face.

“Okay yes or okay you need to think about it?”

“Okay yes, and let’s leave.”

He kissed me without any regard for the guests, without caring whether they were recording this or not.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered. He threaded his fingers through my hair as he owned my mouth, making me remember just how badly I’d missed him, too.

When he finally pulled away from me, a few of the guests clapped.

“Can the two of you get the hell out of here now?” The curator groaned. “I have real estate to sell.”

We laughed and Hayden clasped my hand, pulling me out of the room. He led me onto the elevator, pressing his mouth against mine all over again as the car went down.

When we made it downstairs, he pushed me against a wall and kissed me so deeply that I silently promised to never go that long without kissing him again.

“My place or yours?” he asked.

“Yours.”

“Good choice.” He wrapped an arm around my waist, leading me down the street and toward his car. He held me tighter when the first photog stepped in front of us.

He kissed my forehead as two more started flashing their invasive cameras.

“No umbrellas in this rain?” “Are you two an item now?” “Any comment on Hayden’s letter, Penelope?”

Hayden opened the passenger door and helped me inside without saying a word to them.

He moved to the driver’s side and sped onto the street.

Holding my hand behind the gear shift, he looked over at me as we approached a red light. “What exactly did you have to talk to me about next week?”

“A communication schedule.”



“What?” He scoffed. “You honestly think I would follow something like that just to talk to you?”

“It was for co-parenting,” I said, pausing. “I’m pregnant.”

He put the car in park and looked over at me.

“Before you ask, there’s no need for a paternity test.”

“I wasn’t planning to ask that at all.” He glanced at my stomach. “How far along are you?”

“Thirteen weeks,” I said. “Are you scared?”

“Terrified.” He leaned over and kissed me, ignoring the honking cars behind us once the light turned green.

“Tell me something, then,” he said. “A communication schedule for a friendship would be one thing, but why did you think something like that would work once I found out that you were carrying my child?”

“I was willing to include a few no-strings-attached sex provisions if you kept up your end of the deal.”

His lips curved into a smile. “A few would never be enough.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I’m looking forward to a true new beginning with you, Penelope, but I want to make sure that I’m never in the way of your dreams.”

“I understand that.”

“Good,” he said. “I also want to make sure that you remain open with me and always tell me what you want so I can give it to you.”

“In the bedroom?”

“That’s a given, but no.” He shook his head. “I mean in everything. Tell me.”

“What about letting me drive your car?”

“Don’t fucking push it.” He laughed, kissing me again. “I’ll have to take you to a parking lot this week and test that out first. What do you *really* want?”

FIFTY

PRESENT DAY



*Penelope*

*A few months later*

I ran my fingers across a spool of red ribbon, letting out a breath as I read the words that were embedded in the trim.

*[The Perfect Feather: Ice Skating Pavilion]*

The grand opening of my rink wasn't scheduled for months from now, but I'd made it my personal mission to oversee all of the custom details for the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

My mother's collection of medals and awards would soon have a new home on the far-left wall, right next to mine.

In between ours, I'd leave spaces for other women to show off their accomplishments. I already knew that the skaters who'd signed on to work with me in the spring had high chances of developing long-term careers on the ice.

I also knew that I could still possibly train someone who could help me get to "twenty-eight" via the Olympics coaching rule someday, but it was far better to have twenty-eight *students* and counting instead.

Smiling, I walked over to a pair of skates on the bench, resisting the urge to put them on.

"I could've sworn we agreed that you wouldn't come here until after our son was born." Hayden's deep voice made me

turn around.

“Since you know me, you should’ve known that was a lie.”

“I did.” He smiled, kissing my forehead. “I also knew to fly home early if I wanted to know what you’re truly doing. This doesn’t look like hanging out with Tatiana.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to sit through hours of anime with a super-fan.” I shook my head. “How’d your meeting with Sarah and Lawrence go?”

“Good.” He wrapped his arms around my waist. “They’re happy to move to the next level. Speaking of which, on a scale of one to ten, how happy are you with me?”

“Eight.”

“Only *eight*?” He raised his eyebrow.

“It would be a ten if you could get the tabloids to stop printing their daily ‘How long will Penelope Carter last with Hayden Hunter?’ game. They run multiple versions of that story a week.”

“I told you that you’re not supposed to read that stuff.”

“I’m still working on it.”

“Hmmm.” He kissed me, pulling a small red box from his pocket. “Tell you what. The next time they play, you should join them and bet on forever.”

He stepped back and got down on one knee.

I gasped as he grabbed my hand and looked up at me.

“I wanted to propose to you months ago,” he said, “but I knew that you would want the traditional approach, i.e., asking your parents, which is unfortunately impossible.”

“Please tell me that you didn’t ask my brother instead.”

“I *did* ask your brother.” He smiled. “He said ‘hell no,’ but I did ask him.”

I laughed.

“He came around after a few days, though. Even if he hadn’t, I would’ve done this anyway.” He squeezed my hand.

“Penelope Carter, I’ve been in love with you since breakup number fifteen,” he said. “I wish I’d told you then and that we’d never had to go through a Cold War at all.”

Tears pricked my eyes.

“Nonetheless, I’ll never put you through another one, and I want to spend the rest of my life as more than your boyfriend.” He looked deep into my eyes. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Yes.”

He slid a massive diamond ring onto my finger and kissed my hand before standing up. Pulling me into his arms, he kissed me until I was nearly breathless.

“I’m glad that you’re my first and last relationship,” he whispered against my lips.

“Why’s that?”

“Because I know that I’ll never have to give you a breakup title.”

**THE END**

BREAKUP #17

THE ONE THAT OWES ME AN APOLOGY



Epilogue

*Hayden*

**D**on't forget that you owe me an apology.

I know that you made assumptions about me that didn't come true when we first met in the prologue. I could *see* you.

You probably thought I'd cheated on my best friend somehow or done something completely unforgivable.

Either way, since I've spent most of this novel doling out apologies like candy, I think it's only fair that you extend one to me.

I'll even email you one of Penelope's templates.

I'm waiting.

**THE END**

**(Again)**

IF YOU LOVED this story and want to A) read a couple of bonus scenes and B) Check out Travis & Tatiana's upcoming romance in *Pretend It's Real, for Me*, be sure to [sign up for my newsletter by visiting whitneyg.com](http://whitneyg.com)! In the meantime, flip the page to take a sneak peek at their upcoming story!

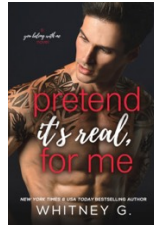
pretend  
*it's real,*  
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# PROLOGUE

FORTY DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

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I’ve googled that question a million times since I “married” the sexy bastard who dominates almost every billboard in Las Vegas, and the answers are always the same: “No, that’s not what that means” and “Prepare to spend the rest of your life in prison.”

I’ve even tried adding a follow-up question—“What if I’m married to *Travis Dante Carter*?”—but the results are even worse.

The only links that appear are fan sites, filled with stories of women attempting to send him their panties in the mail or forums on how they wish someone would murder *me*, so they can take my place.

Alas, I can’t take this arrangement anymore, and I’ve been planning my grand escape for weeks.

It’s now or never.

“Mademoiselle! *Mademoiselle!*” a woman yells in my direction. “Come back here now!”

I grip the handle of my suitcase and race down the hallway as fast as I can.

“Miss, please!” she calls after me again. “Your husband won’t be amused about this!”

*Oh, I’m sure he won’t.*

“Come on, come on, come on ... ” I jab the elevator’s down button. “Hurry up.”

The numbers above the shaft glow as they ascend, and I hold my breath as they get closer. When the doors finally glide open, I pull my luggage onto the car and release a sigh.

Swiping my security card against the keypad, I can almost taste the faint flavor of freedom. It’s all too sweet and lacks the bitterness that I’ll never have to devour again.

No more photo shoots with my fake husband’s full lips pressed against mine. No more suffocating tension that fills every room we’re forced to share. And no more long, hard nights of denial. (The denial is from him, by the way, not me.)

“You are now arriving at the private garage,” the speaker system declares. “Please watch for passing traffic.”

The elevator doors open, and my husband is standing right in front of me, instantly derailing my train of thought.

Sexy as ever, his black dress shirt is unbuttoned, exposing his perfect six-pack abs, leading the way down a rock-hard lane to his impeccably chiseled “V.”

His emerald green eyes meet mine, then his lips curve into a panty-melting smirk that I’ve never been able to resist.

*Say, “Goodbye, Travis Carter.”*

*Say, “Eff you, and goodbye...”*

“Going somewhere, *Mrs. Carter?*” he asks, glancing at my suitcase.

“It’s *Miss Brave* now.” I twist the wedding ring off my finger and hold it out to him.

“Would you like me to get that resized for you or something?”

“I’d actually like for you to take it back,” I say. “I don’t want it anymore.”

He lets out a low laugh and steps onto the car, blocking my escape.

“I could’ve sworn we had a ninety-day deal,” he says. “Was I wrong about that?”

“You’re wrong about a lot of things.” I shrug. “Feel free to sue me for breach of contract, but I’m done being your wife.”

He smiles, but it quickly disappears. “Where are you headed?”

“Somewhere alone.”

“Well, I’d like to come with you, so we can discuss whatever it is you *think* you’re doing.”

“I’m divorcing you.” I tuck the ring into his pocket. “Unofficially.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a cocky, arrogant bastard who thinks that the sun rises and falls over this city whenever you want it to.”

“It *does*, so I need you to give me a better reason than that.”

“Fine. I don’t want to be with you anymore.”

“A believable reason.”

“How about, *I hate you?*”

“You don’t.” He smirks. “Try again.”

“Rejection never has been your strong suit...” I suck in a breath as he steps closer. “I would honestly prefer it if I was no longer married to Travis ‘The Punisher’ Carter. He’s too much for me to handle.”

“That’s why you’re only *pretending* to be with him...” He closes the gap between us, then his eyes lock on mine, rendering me speechless. “We’re almost halfway through our contract, Tatiana. Tell me the truth.”

“I just did. This is becoming too hard of a role for me to play.”

“Then allow me to cast you in an easier one.” His lips brush against mine, and my heart flutters in my chest. “Pretend like I’m the guy you softly moan about while touching

yourself in the shower every night. That guy *isn't* me, correct?"

"Correct." I look deep into his eyes, hoping he can't tell I'm lying. "He's not you."

"Okay then." He pushes a stray curl away from my forehead, gently tucking it behind my ear. "Just pretend I'm that guy until this is over, and we can easily return to acting like we never knew each other. *Again.*"

Silence.

It stretches between us for several seconds, unraveling a long string of pain and heartache. The words we've left unsaid for years are still tied under our tongues, tragically trapped under seams of secrets that we both have tried to ignore.

He looks as if he's about to pull me close and kiss me senseless, but a young couple suddenly steps onto the car with us.

Dressed in matching grey fight club gear, their eyes widen at the sight of Travis.

"Oh, my god!" the woman screams. "You're Travis Carter!"

"The Punisher." The guy smiles. "Can we get a few photos with you, please? I mean, if it's okay with your wife."

"Is it okay with you, *Mrs. Carter?*" Travis asks.

"Yes..." I can barely hear my own voice as the guy thrusts his cell phone toward me.

I snap a few shots, and then they pepper him with questions as the elevator rises.

While he puts on the perfect performance, the words he uttered moments ago play centerstage in my mind.

*"We can easily return to acting like we never knew each other. Again."*

As much as I've tried to convince myself that this man hasn't left an unerasable mark on my heart, the truth is undeniable.

Once upon a time, we were friends to lovers to strangers to...whatever the hell we are now.

*Ding!*

The car jerks to a halt on the fiftieth floor, and the couple shoots one more smile and a “Thank you” toward Travis before stepping off.

I keep my gaze forward as the doors glide shut, watching Travis stare at me through the mirrored glass.

“Are we going up to my place or down to the garage?” he asks.

I don’t answer.

“Tatiana,” he says, his voice low. “Where are we going?”

“I’m *leaving* you.”

“Not for the next fifty days.” He narrows his eyes at me. “Until then, up or down?”

“I already took everything I own out of your condo.”

“My staff will happily help you put it back.”

“Okay, look.” I try to keep my voice firm. “I’m saying this in the nicest way possible. I’m not the slightest bit attracted to you anymore, and it pains me to be near you.”

“So if I were to slide my hand under your dress right now, your pussy wouldn’t be wet for me?”

My jaw drops and I immediately look away from him. “We’re going up...”

“I thought so.” He enters the penthouse code, and we ride the rest of the way without saying a word. Without having the conversation we should’ve had on day one of this deal.

Maybe if we’d been honest, I wouldn’t be here, and our secret history would still be a bittersweet memory. We wouldn’t have to lie to everyone in our lives about never knowing each other until recently.

Then again, even if we weren’t locked in this twisted game, there are two facts that make our marriage ten times

harder on me.

You see, Travis Carter is not just my fake husband, not just some blast from the past I've struggled to forget.

He was my first *everything*.

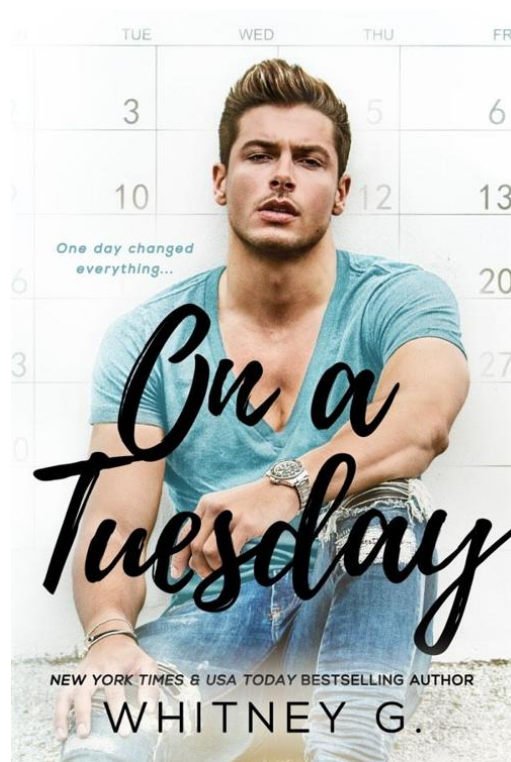
And he's also my best friend's older brother...

**[Click here to check out the rest!](#)**

NEED ANOTHER GOOD READ?



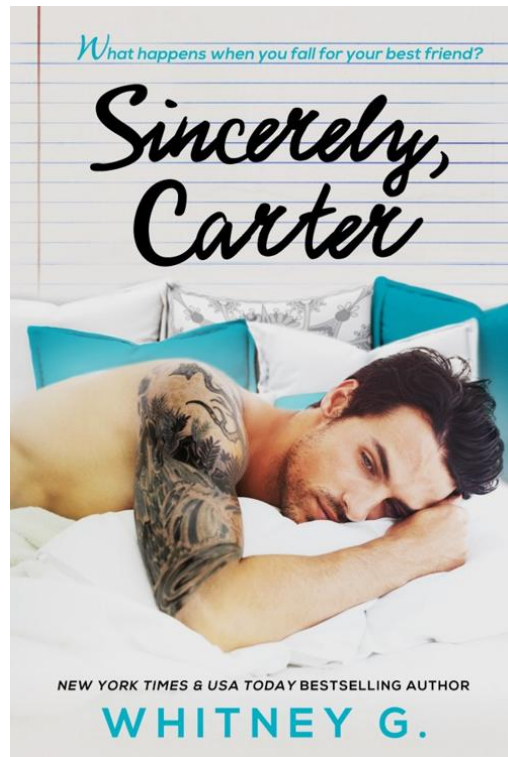
If you're in the mood for a swoon-worthy second chance romance, be sure to check out *On a Tuesday*! Available on [amazon & Kindle Unlimited](#)! I'm also including the links to my other KU titles!



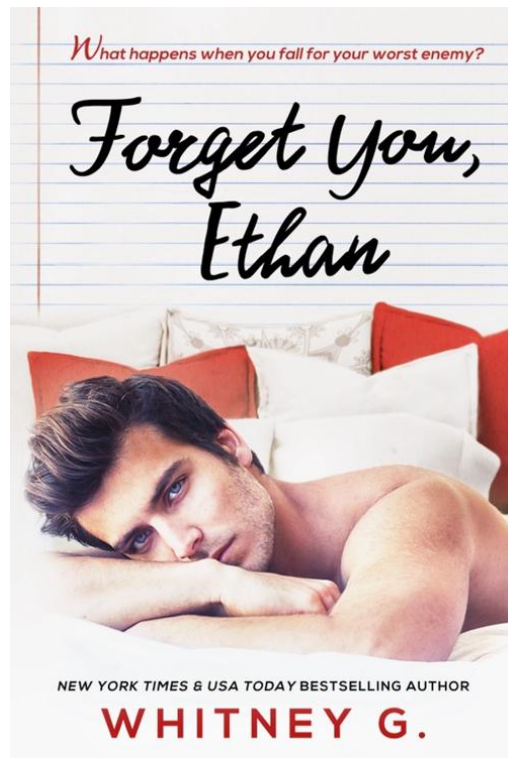
[On a Tuesday](#), a steamy, second chance romance.

Get ready to meet the cockiest quarterback at the university,  
and a tutor who can't help but fall for him.





**Sincerely, Carter**, a swoon-worthy friends to lovers romance. Carter and Arizona have been best friends since fourth grade until one night changes everything...



Forget You, Ethan, a steamy, enemies to lovers romance. Lifelong enemies, Ethan and Rachel, have vowed to never talk to each other, until one night in college changes everything.



*a*  
*you belong with me*  
novel

pretend  
*it's real,*  
for me

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

*For the readers who loved Break Up, with Him, for Me.*

*You were right.*

*Travis & Tatiana definitely have a story together.*

*I hope you love it!*

# SYNOPSIS

*Please leave your message at the sound of the beep...*

Tatiana, it's currently four o'clock in the morning, and I can't sleep because I'm drunk and wide-awake thinking about you.

*How I was almost yours, and you were almost mine...*

My life is currently in shambles, and my entire fighting career is hanging in the balance. So, I have to make some huge changes.

Since you still owe me that favor from years ago, I need to cash it in now.

I need you to pretend to be my fiancé for ninety days.

*Just ninety days.*

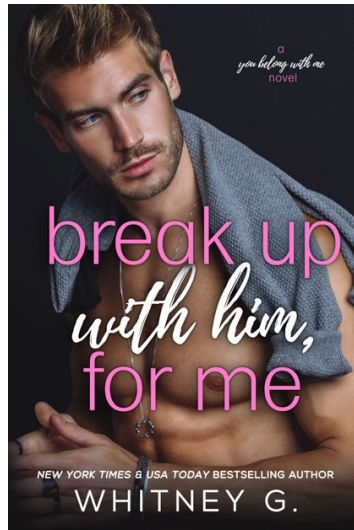
We don't have to talk behind closed doors and we don't have to try to be friends again. We don't even have to kiss—even though I can guarantee no man has ever kissed you better...

I can promise that we won't touch either. Although the last time we ran into each other, you looked like you wanted me all over again. (Don't deny it.)

Anyway, I'm just cashing in that delayed "I.O.U." that you swore would "never be too late to redeem."

I'm not asking for much. I just want you to **pretend it's real, for me.**

*Check out Book 1 in the Series, [Break Up with Him, for Me!](#)*



*Please leave your message at the sound of the beep...*

Penelope, I know that it's three o'clock in the morning, but I need to get this off my chest.

I can't give you any more advice on landing this other guy, can't tell you another "sexy" thing that you should do, or suggest a new set of filthy words that you should text him late at night.

As your best friend, I've reached my limit, and I can honestly say that he doesn't deserve you.

I'm not saying all of this because I'm fucking jealous, or because he had the audacity to say that he makes more money than me. (I still can't find his name on the *Forbes 500* list, and I know damn well that he's renting that Ferrari, but that's a story for a different day.)

He's not who you think he is, and the better man has always been right in front of you...

You have every reason to never give me a chance since you know me better than anyone, and you agree with all the tabloids calling me *The Cocky King of New York* and the *Untamed Playboy of Manhattan*. But I honestly believe that you're better off with someone else, and I need you to see.

I'm not asking for too much... I just want you to break up with him, *for me*.

[Available in Kindle Unlimited!](#)

## A NOTE FROM WHITNEY G.

Hey there!

Dear Awesome Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up *Pretend It's Real, for Me!* I hope you enjoy Travis & Tatiana's angsty & steamy romance as much as I enjoyed writing it!

If you want to be the first to learn of my upcoming releases, sales, and special things that I only offer to my readers, be sure to [sign up for my Exclusive F.L.Y. List](#). (F.L.Y. = Effin Love You. Because whether you love or hate this story, I still love you for giving it a chance!)

Sincerely,

Whitney G.

# PROLOGUE



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TATIANA



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It’s now or never.

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*Oh, I’m sure he won’t.*

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“I already took everything I own out of your condo.”

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“So if I were to slide my hand under your dress right now, your pussy wouldn’t be wet for me?”

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“I thought so.” He enters the penthouse code, and we ride the rest of the way without saying a word. Without having the conversation we should’ve had on day one of this deal.

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harder on me.

You see, Travis Carter is not just my fake husband, not just some blast from the past I've struggled to forget.

He was my first *everything*.

And he's also my best friend's older brother...

SEVERAL WEEKS AGO



No, wait.

Don't make me go there right now.

I'm not ready to face this part of the story yet.

SEVERAL \*YEARS\* AGO



Yes, much better.

Allow me to break down my terrible decisions with this man  
from here...



# ACT ONE

BOY MEETS GIRL

TRAVIS

*Back Then*

*Reno, Nevada*

“Ugh! I *hate* Tatiana Brave,” my younger sister Penelope groans via a rambling voicemail. “I don’t understand why she had to switch from pairs to singles, or why she has it out for me. Call me back when you get this. Stat!”

*Beep!*

I check the time and weigh my options. She’s left seventeen other voicemails, all within the last hour, and I doubt that any of them are an actual emergency.

*I could’ve sworn we just talked about this...*

Against my better judgment, I hit play on the next one.

“I had to watch her win last week and listen to everyone talk about how ‘stunningly beautiful’ she is when she’s beyond basic. Her skating is mediocre at best. At. Best.”

*Beep!*

“Before you say I’m overreacting or emotionally unstable because you *abandoned* me here in Seattle with your terrible tech-bro of a best friend, she called me an ‘overrated bitch’ when we were in line at—”

I end the message, unable to listen anymore. Then I delete the other ones because I don’t have to hear them to know what they say.

Despite being ranked as the number one figure skater in the world, Penelope always hyper-focuses on her biggest opponent—whoever that may be—for a few weeks at a time. But for some strange reason, this “Tatiana Brave” woman is an entirely different story. She’s lived in Penelope’s head rent-free for almost a year, and I’ve given up on attempting to serve an eviction notice.

As annoying as her messages can be, a part of me is grateful that we’re not holding the phone in silence anymore. That neither of us is struggling to find the right words to fill the gaping hole our parents’ recent death has left.

Memories of their fiery car accident still fill my nightmares whenever I shut my eyes, and I can’t bring myself to forgive the drunk teenager who ravaged our lives in a split second.

There have been plenty of times when I’ve wanted to tell Penelope exactly why I had to leave her back home in Seattle so I could come here to pursue a career in fighting, but I can never bring myself to do that either.

If she knew how much debt our parents left behind or how close the mortgage company is to taking their—now *our*—house, she’d probably hang up her skates and try to help me pay for things.

Then we’d both be forced to live a shitty existence...

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“Open this door, Mr. Carter!” The motel manager is suddenly on the other side of my door. “I know you’re in there!”

I remain silent.

“Open up *now*, or else!” He knocks again, but I stay still.

“I’ll be back for this week’s rent money on Sunday!” he yells. “If you don’t have it by then, you better be out of this fucking place!” His heavy footsteps trail down the concrete, and I let out a sigh.

Pulling out my wallet, I count all the money I have: One hundred eighty dollars and fifty-eight cents.

That's barely enough to cover the cost of this poor excuse of a room, let alone gas and food. To make matters worse, I promised to buy Penelope a new thousand-dollar costume next month.

*Fuck...*

In desperate need of fresh air, I grab my gym bag and step outside. In the distance, a billboard boasts, "Multi-SportsPlex. Open twenty-four hours."

I head down the street and take out my cell phone, calling the same number I dial like clockwork once a week. It's a secret call that makes me feel like I'm doing something extra to help Penelope besides sending money and playing guardian from afar.

It rings once.

It rings twice.

"You've reached Tatiana Brave," a soft voice says. "I'm unable to take your call at the moment, so please leave a message at the sound of the beep."

*Beep!*

"This is Penelope's brother Travis Carter *again*," I say. "Stop calling my little sister a bitch, and get comfortable being in second place for the rest of your career." I pause. "Oh, and your skating is mediocre at best. At. Best."

After ending the call, I rush up the steps of the SportsPlex.

I swipe a stolen member card against the keypad and tug on the door, but it doesn't open. I try another entrance, then another, but the results are the same.

*This has to be a mistake.*

Unwilling to give up, I walk to another side of the building, stopping dead in my tracks when I see a curly-haired woman clinging to the security fence.

*What the hell...*

“*Ugh!*” She jumps down, then she launched her body against the gate again. “Come on!”

I watch her repeat this failed routine five more times before clearing my throat.

“I take it that you’re also having problems getting inside tonight?”

She gasps and suddenly stills.

“No, I’m... I’m—” she stutters, keeping her gaze away from me. “I’m just trying to get my stuff back. I accidentally left it over there, see?”

She points to a grey backpack on the other side of the gate, and it’s clear it didn’t get there by accident.

“If I didn’t know any better,” I say, “I’d think you were trying to trespass.”

“Well, let’s assume that you *don’t* know any better, so you can walk away and mind your business.”

“I guess I’ll report you then.” I step closer, trying to catch a glimpse of her face. “It’s a crime to be here if you’re not a paying member.”

“*Seriously?*” She spins around to face me, and I forget whatever the hell I was about to say.

I force myself to blink a few times to make sure I’m not fucking dreaming.

*I could stare at you for years...*

In fucking awe, I take in her deep hazel eyes and her puffy pink lips. The beige tracksuit she’s wearing complements her cinnamon-kissed skin and hugs her curves. Even though she’s glaring at me, she’s the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen in my life.

I can’t think of anyone who’s a close second.

*Or third...*

“I wasn’t bothering you,” she says, revealing a set of pearly whites. “From the looks of that muscle shirt you’re

wearing, you don't strike me as gym security or a police officer, so please go bother someone else."

I continue staring at her, noticing the small beauty mark above her upper lip, the dimples in her cheeks.

"Wait... Are you security?" She lets down her guard. "I'm a real member here, and it's supposed to be open twenty-four hours, so someone on staff made a mistake and locked—"

"If I help you get over the gate," I interrupt her, "will you open a door on the west side for me?"

"Well, I..." She hesitates. "I'll have to think about that."

"Excuse me?"

"I didn't stutter." She looks dead-ass serious. "I don't know you, and I can't afford to be the inspiration behind a *Law & Order: SVU* episode at this stage in my career."

"I'm here to use the weight room." I hold out my stolen member pass. "I can't afford to be on *Law & Order* either."

She stares at me, contemplating my offer, looking sexier with each passing second.

"I can easily jump this gate without any help," I say. "If I don't hear a 'Yes' within the next minute, I'll do that and leave you here."

"Ugh, fine." She loops her fingers through the wire and looks over her shoulder. "Are you helping me or not?"

"I'm admiring this view first."

She lets go with an eye-roll, and I gently grip her wrists.

"I'm kidding," I say. "Grab on again, and I'll lift you on the count of three."

She obliges, and I immediately grip her waist.

"One, two ..." I pause. "Three."

I lift her higher and she grabs the top rung, flipping herself over like a gymnast before climbing down.

She picks up her backpack and looks at me. "Thank you very much. I'll meet you where you asked."

“Noted.”

Determined to get her phone number, I head in that direction, wondering why I’ve never seen her around before.

*This has to be her first night here.*

When I reach the west side, she’s holding the door open for me. Somehow, she looks even more alluring under the bright white lights.

“So, um...” She blushes. “Thanks again for your help.”

“You’re very welcome. What’s your name?”

“Tatiana,” she says. “Tatiana Brave.”

“*What?*”

“Well, it’s just Tati to my family and people who know me. Tatiana Brave for formal stuff and strangers, no offense. And you are?”

*In fucking disbelief.* “Travis Carter.”

“Nice to meet you, Trav—” She narrows her eyes and steps back. “As in *Penelope Carter’s* asshole older brother who leaves mean voicemails on my phone every other weekend?”

“I leave you a message *every* weekend. I believe in consistency.”

She gasps. “Did you come here to pull a Tonya Harding on me?”

“A *what?*”

“First you leave the voicemails, and now you’re here in my hometown trying to break my knee caps before I face your sister again, aren’t you?” She’s talking to herself, not me. “How low can she possibly go? Isn’t being ranked number one in the world enough?”

“Tatiana—”

“I know she’s a few years younger than me—which she *loves* to brag about—but I never thought she was immature enough to come up with this type of plan. You should be

ashamed of yourself for agreeing to it, and I'm definitely calling the police."

"First of all, I would never put my hands on a woman." I look her over again. "Not in the way you're implying, anyway. Second of all, I *live* in this city and I'm not here to sabotage you. Contrary to what you think, I had no idea what you looked like before now. I haven't been to any skating competitions in awhile."

"Like I'll ever believe that." She rolls her eyes. "But somehow you got my phone number so you could harass me?"

"Penelope has no idea that I have your number," I admit. "I asked my best friend to do some hacking and get it for me."

"Well, that scenario sounds sooo much better." She takes another step back. "*Not*. Anything else you want to admit tonight?"

"You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen in my life."

"Okay. *Bye*." She runs down the steps, racing toward the ice rink.

Amused, I watch until she disappears.

Walking to the weight room, I take out my phone and type "Tatiana Brave" into the search bar. I've never looked up any of Penelope's competitors because she already tells me far more than I ever want to know. Not to mention, I don't want to be a hypocrite since I always lecture her about focusing on herself and no one else.

I also don't want to risk coming across any negative articles that might tempt me to pay a reporter a visit with my fists.

As I settle onto a bench, images of Tatiana appear on my screen.

Beautiful at every angle, she's standing on various podiums—ranking first place on some, second place on others. She's twirling at the center of a rink, holding red roses in the air, or completing spins and jumps under various headlines that say, *Absolutely Breathtaking: Brave is a Marvel, Carving*



*Her Place in Figure-Skating History, and Brave Takes First Place Over Penelope Carter in Utah: Is a New Number One Coming?*

By the time I swipe through the fifth page of results, I'm convinced she's never taken a bad picture in her life. And despite what my sister claims, she is "stunningly beautiful."

*She's beyond that.*

I turn on my workout playlist and vow to do more research once I'm finished.



TWO HUNDRED REPETITIONS LATER, I return a set of dumbbells to the rack and take the elevator down to the ice rink.

Classical music is sifting through the speakers, and the tell tale sound of blades hitting the ice pulls me closer.

I move through the arena's empty seats and watch Tatiana skate alone with her eyes shut.

Dressed in a sparkling red costume, she's moving as if her life depends on it, and contrary to another comment my sister made, her skating is *far* from basic.

I've never been captivated by a routine that belonged to someone other than Penelope, but I can't take my eyes off this woman.

With every jump and landing, she looks as if she owns every inch of the ice. Like she's been skating since the day she was born.

Violin strings sing an abrupt final note, and Tatiana holds her head high.

She opens her eyes and waves to an invisible crowd, until her gaze meets mine.

For a moment, she looks as if she's about to wave to me as well, but then she throws up her middle finger.

“Fuck you, Travis Carter!”

I wink at her and laugh.

Then I head back to my motel.

*I'll call her next weekend.*

# ACT TWO

GIRL HATES BOY

TATIANA

*Back Then*

*A hundred miles away from Reno*

*The following weekend*

**I**n a fair and perfect world, I wouldn't be sitting in this arena today. Instead, I'd exist in some alternate reality, starring alongside my favorite characters in *Sailor Moon* anime.

All my problems would be scripted, with the outcomes bound to end in happiness, and everything would be a far cry from the dumpster fire that is my life right now.

The only bright spot in my entire year so far is seeing the sexy guy at the SportsPlex last weekend. Well, until I discovered that he's related to the very person I loathe the most on this planet. The cocky girl who calls me an "overrated cunt" every chance she gets and thinks she's God's gift to this sport.

*Her skating is so basic.*

Coming face to face with her sexy brother is a cruel joke by the universe, and I never want to witness it again.

Then again, I can't stop thinking about his eyes, his smirk, his lips. The way my body reacted when he grabbed my waist from behind and breathed against my—

"Um, hello!" a high-pitched voice interrupts my thoughts. "Are you on earth with me, Miss Brave?"

“Huh, what?”

“Exactly.” My coach, Miss Price, snaps her fingers. “It’s seating time, and you’re standing there looking like a dead fish. Get it together.”

The lights inside the arena are flashing, a sign that The West Coast Expo are about to begin.

I take a seat, desperate to shake the remaining thoughts of Travis away, but his words have dominated my brain for days.

*“You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen in my life.”*

I’ve replayed him helping me over that fence too many times to count, wishing he was someone else—*anyone else*, so I could have a person outside of my coach and my terrible family to talk to off the ice.

*I guess I’m not meant to have any friends in this life...*

“Before this starts, let me say something.” Miss Price places her hands on my shoulders. “I know this is your least favorite event, but those bad days are in the past and your future is brighter than ever. You were always meant to be a solo skater and you’re the best in the world.”

“Thank you, Miss Price.” I force a smile, even though I don’t agree with her words at all.

The West Coast Expo isn’t just my least favorite event, it’s an open wound that has yet to heal.

Whenever I walk through these doors, I’m forced to face what could’ve been, what *should’ve* been.

My true expertise has always been in pairs skating, and fate once dealt me a perfect partner by the name of Tristan Chamberlain. With him at my side, we won every competition we entered, wowing judges with our special brand of perfection.

We never fell, never faltered.

But when I turned seventeen, he served me a cruel and twisted ultimatum: become his partner in the sheets as well, or else.

I didn't like him enough to let him be my first, so he danced with someone new; I was left to rebuild alone.

My move to singles has been one hell of an adjustment, and although journalists call me "an absolute force," I'm not "phenomenal" like I was in pairs.

*Or "utterly spellbinding" like Penelope Carter...*

"Ladies and gentlemen..." a soft voice comes through the arena's speakers, interrupting my thoughts. "Please welcome Tristan Chamberlain and Monica Taylor, skating to 'My Sweet and Tender Beast,' for their short program."

I have no desire to watch a single second of their routine, so I pull out my cell phone and open my text messages. Unfortunately, fate hasn't texted me with an offer for a better life.

I only have messages from my stepsister, Harlow.

WICKED BIATCH

Hey. Can I just pick you up when the competition is over? Because like, at your age, do you really need someone cheering you on?

WICKED BIATCH

Okay, wait...I know this stuff kind of means something to you, so if I come, can we both leave early?

I debate muting her for the day when an unknown number calls.

"Hello?" I answer.

"So you blocked my other number?" Travis's deep voice comes over the line.

"You mean the other *twenty* numbers you've tried this week?"

"Twenty-six, but we don't need to count."

"Yes, I blocked you," I say. "I think that's quite obvious."

“That hurts my feelings, Tati.” There’s a smile in his voice. “I’ve been in a lot of pain about it.”

“Don’t ever call me that.” I scoff. “We aren’t friends, and if you’re the slightest bit hurt, it’s what you deserve.”

“Why haven’t I seen you at the SportsPlex this week?”

“Please hang up so I can add this number to my block list.”

“I was hoping you’d finally let me apologize.”

“For what?”

“For whatever you think I did to make you mad at me last weekend. I’m very sorry.”

“Apology *unaccepted*.”

“Fair enough.” He’s still smiling; I can tell. “Then let’s start over and pretend like you and my sister aren’t enemies.”

“*What?* Never.”

“Okay, okay.” He lets out a low laugh. “Let’s pretend you’re meeting me without any ties to her, then.”

“So you’ll just be the asshole who left me messages about how I’ll never beat my top competition?”

“You should consider those as motivational mantras or keepsakes.” He pauses. “You can also re-listen to them on your loneliest nights if you like. I’ve heard my voice can be quite the turn-on.”

I end the call and block him again.



*An hour later*

I’M SPINNING at the center of the ice with Tchaikovsky’s notes floating around me.

My ruby red dress is fluttering in the air, and I know without a doubt that I haven’t made a single mistake over the past two minutes.

As I'm raising my arms above my head to complete the second to last camel spin, I open my eyes and notice that the entire crowd is already standing to its feet.

The final note hangs in the air, and my body comes to a complete stop.

The entire arena erupts with applause.

"TA-TI-A-NA! TA-TI-A-NA!" They scream my name and toss roses and teddy bears onto the ice.

Smiling, I look over to where my stepsister and father should be—where my mother used to sit when she was alive—but their chairs are empty.

*Surprise, surprise.*

I swallow the lump in my throat and wave to everyone else who actually gives a damn.

After picking up as many rose bouquets as I can, I skate to the edge and snap on my blade covers. Then I head to the waiting area.

"You were perfect, Tati!" Miss Price hugs me so hard I drop a few blooms. "Fucking perfect. I couldn't find a single flaw in your performance."

"I'm sure the judges will find something." I look up at the board. "I bet they're all waiting for 'you know who' to perform."

"She's not on the program anymore." She loops her arm through mine. "I heard that her registration fee didn't clear in time, and I haven't seen her here today."

*WHAT?*

Before I can ask where she heard that rumor, my scores begin appearing on the board.

**10.0 10.0 10.0 10.0 10.0**

*A perfect score?*

I stare at the numbers in utter disbelief.



While Miss Price squeals with joy, I slide a hand under my sleeve to pinch myself, to make sure this isn't all a dream.

Tears fall past my cheeks, and my face appears on the Jumbotron.

As if on cue, the crowd gives me a second standing ovation, this one even louder than the first.

A cameraman and a reporter step in front of me, ready for the post-performance interview.

My voice is locked in my throat, though.

No matter how hard I try, I can't get a single word to fall from my lips.

It's probably best that everyone thinks I'm crying over this first-time achievement and not over the fact that it feels so damn incomplete.

My mother isn't here to cheer me on or tell me that she's proud.

My number one nemesis isn't witnessing move one step closer to dethroning her from the top.

I have no friends to celebrate this moment with when the lights go out.

*I might as well be dreaming after all...*

# ACT TWO & A HALF

BOY CHARMS GIRL

TATIANA

*Back Then*

*A hundred miles away from Reno*

*Later that night*

I'm standing in the arena's deserted parking lot, fantasizing about the day I'll have my own car so I won't have to wait around after events. Tucking today's medal under my sweatshirt, I vow to wait five more minutes before ordering an Uber.

With seconds to spare, Harlow's Honda speeds through the lot, swerving in front of me.

"Hurry up, Tati!" She rolls down the window. "We're already running late!"

"Late for *what*, Harlow?" I slip inside and buckle my seatbelt.

"I'll explain everything when we get there. I brought an extra outfit in case you don't want to look out of place."

I look over at her, eyeing the deep plunging cut in her sparkling pink party dress. It's a custom Chanel piece that doesn't belong to her.

"That was one of my mom's favorite runway dresses, Harlow."

"I'm aware." She shrugs, pulling onto the road. "I snagged one of her Givenchy rompers for you."

"You could've at least asked me if it was okay first..."

“I didn’t have any extra time.” She whined. “I’ve been having a super stressful day and the hours got away from me. Anyway, I saw the hottest guy ever during my manicure appointment. You’ll never guess what he said to me...”

I clench my fists as she rambles, waiting for her to ask me something—*anything*—about today’s expo, but she never does.

While she’s rehashing “how hard” it was for her to choose between Bubblegum Pink and Freakum Dress Poppy nail polish, I realize that I can’t take her conversation anymore.

“Can you drop me off at home please?” I ask.

“Hell no.” She scoffs. “That’s too far out of the way.”

“With all due respect, which is very little—”

“Let’s make it ‘with all *disrespect*’ then,” she interrupts me. “I’m sick and tired of my social life revolving around your joke of a career that does nothing except fill up a medal closet instead of a bank account. I’m sorry your mom died, but life goes on. You can’t skate forever, and I can’t drive you around forever either. So, we’re doing what *I* want to do tonight, and we’ll go home after.” She speeds through a yellow light. “If you want to spend hundreds on an Uber tonight, be my guest, but I’m not missing out on this for you. Clear?”

I sit on my hands to prevent myself from leaning over and strangling her.

“That’s what I thought.” She turns on the radio, and I look out the window—mentally calculating my chances of survival if I jump out of the car.

She’s lucky the odds aren’t in my favor.



FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, we park in front of a massive warehouse with tinted black windows. The towering red sign on its roof has four letters lit for the night.

*HELL.*

There's a line wrapped around the side, leading toward a flashing door that warns, "VIP only."

"What is this place?" I ask.

"I wouldn't worry about that if I were you." Harlow pulls down the visor and uncaps a lipstick. "You should be far more concerned with changing out of that ridiculous sweatshirt."

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Suit yourself." She shrugs, stepping out. "I don't trust you enough to leave you alone in my car, so are you getting an Uber or coming inside?"

"Inside..." I hold back a groan and follow her to the front of the line.

A bouncer scans her phone before handing us black and gold wristbands.

They read, "Welcome to The Underground: We don't talk about this. Ever."

I roll my eyes and reconsider getting that Uber.

"This way, Tati." Harlow leads me toward another door.

A security guard opens it, welcoming us into a world of loud roaring and applause. It's an indoor arena, with metal bleachers wrapped around something I can't quite make out.

Harlow squeezes my hand and tugs me through the crowd, stopping in front of a massive wire cage.

Inside, a salt-and-pepper-haired man mops blood off the white canvas while a badly battered blond tends to his wounds.

"Okay, really." I shake my head. "Where the hell are we, Harlow?"

"We're at a fight club." She beams. "This is the best place to meet hot guys and all the future stars of the MMA world."

"*MMA*?"

"Mixed martial arts." She looks at me as if I should already know this. "It's wrestling, boxing, karate, Jiu-Jitsu,

and, like, *everything* mixed in one. Anything goes.”

“Um...” I cough as a guy walks past us puffing weed. “Is this place legal?”

“Of course not.”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” A man dressed in all black steps into the cage, mic in hand. “Prepare for the first co-main event!”

The crowd’s screams are louder than any of the ones I’ve heard in a skating rink.

“Fighting in the red corner: Mad Max Jones!”

A sexy blond in grey shorts suddenly runs toward the cage. He kisses his wrapped fists before waving to the crowd and walking inside.

“His real name is Connor Masters,” Harlow says to me. “I was *so* close to fucking him last summer. I had to settle for giving him a blowjob.”

*I did not need to know that.*

“Fighting in the blue corner, well, he’s still refusing to name himself, but since he’s from Seattle, we’ve been calling him *The Humble Kid from the Emerald City!*”

The decibel level rises so high that it hurts my ears. The bleachers shake as the entire crowd jumps up and down.

Uninterested in joining this cult, I immediately open the Uber app, but the sight of Travis entering the ring in dark red shorts stops me dead in my tracks.

I swallow as the arena’s harsh lighting accentuates every inch of his perfectly sculpted body. His abs glisten and he not-so-subtly flexes the muscles in his back.

An intricate trail of ink-black tattoos mars his shoulders, dripping their marks on both his arms before stamping an emblem on the left side of his chest.

“I want him to fuck me!” Harlow screams.

“Me too!” The girl in front of us turns around and gives Harlow a high five.

Travis takes to his corner, and I can’t force myself to look away.

“Alright, you both know the rules,” the announcer says. “Three two-minute rounds, anything goes unless there’s a TKO. Prize is five thousand even. Approach the referee and touch gloves if you want to.”

Travis and the blond oblige, sending the crowd into another lust-filled frenzy. The announcer slips away, and a loud bell rings above the cage.

Without hesitation, Travis approaches the blond and punches him square in the face. As if he’s possessed, his eyes darken and he throws two jabs against the blond’s cheek.

His opponent throws a punch in return, but it doesn’t land.

Taking advantage, Travis lifts his leg and kicks the left side of the blond’s head, sending him to the ground.

For some strange reason, the referee doesn’t intervene.

Travis bends over and attacks the grounded guy viciously, feeding him blow after blow, drawing blood and applause from the crowd all at once. He throws four more blood-soaked punches before the referee finally pushes him away.

Travis stands to his feet, holding his fists in the air while the bleachers shake even harder.

Stunned at whatever the hell that was, I feel the sudden need to cool off.

“Where are the bathrooms, Harlow?” I ask.

“Now is *not* the time to go to the bathroom.” She scoffs. “We’re not losing these seats when there’s way more of him to see.”

“He’s fighting again?”

“No, but he always picks a girl to go home with at the end. I need it to be me.” She pulls down the top of her dress, exposing the swell of her D-cup breasts.

I look around and notice the other girls following suit. They're reapplying lip gloss, standing on the heels of their stilettos, and smoothing their hair into place.

My messy curls and light grey *Sailor Moon Fan Forever* sweatshirt stand out now more than ever.

Travis steps out of the cage and shakes hands with his cult members in the front row. Girls press their hands against his glistening chest as he walks by.

"Seeing him at my SportsPlex makes a lot more sense now," I say.

"You've met him before?" Harlow is practically salivating. "Can you introduce him to me?"

"I've met him *once*, Harlow. I don't know anything about him except his name."

While he's shaking another set of hands, Travis's eyes meet mine.

My stomach betrays me with a bout of fluttering butterflies.

A slow smile crosses Travis's lips, and he whispers something to a suit before walking toward me.

I try to look unfazed as he cuts through the crowd and jumps onto the bleachers but it's impossible.

"Hello, Tatiana Brave." He steps right in front of me, his voice low.

"Hello, Person I Have No Desire to Talk to Ever Again in My Life."

"Cute." He laughs. "Did you decide to come after getting my voicemail?"

"What voicemail?"

"The one left the morning," he says. "I had to call you from an old gas station payphone to get my call to go through, by the way."



“I had no idea you invited me to this.” I make a mental note to check my messages later, then I gesture to Harlow. “This is my stepsister, Harlow. Us coming here was *her* idea.”

“Hello, Harlow.” He smiles at her, and she damn near melts onto the floor, but not before she presses her hand against his chest.

*Ugh. Get a grip on yourself.*

“I think you’re totally going to be a star in the MMA world someday.” Harlow grins. “Your last five fights have been amazing.”

“Thank you for watching them.” He returns his attention to me. “I like your sweatshirt. I think you’re missing the other characters, though.”

“You watch *Sailor Moon*?”

“I will if you invite me over.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll pass.”

“There’s a private afterparty after the final fight,” he says, undaunted. “You should come dance on me.”

“*On* you?”

“With me.” He smirks. “Same thing.”

“Have you somehow missed why I’ll always hate you and your sister? Like, *forever*?” I ask. “How long will it take you to accept that fact?”

“I’ve never been good at accepting rejection.”

“Did you say *afterparty*?” Harlow’s eyes bulge out of her skull. “Where is it and what time does it start?”

“I’ll put the address in your phone,” he says, taking it from her hands.

Keeping his eyes on mine, he types in some place I won’t be going, and then he returns Harlow’s phone.

“Tell the guy at the door to call me so you won’t have to pay to get in,” he says. Then he lowers his voice and leans

closer to me. “You can ride there with me, if you like. Just let me know.”

“Ay, Humble Kid!” some guy below yells before I can respond. “We need you down here! Hurry up!”

“See you at the party,” he says, looking me up and down before disappearing into the crowd.

“Oh-my-god, oh-my-god, *oh-my-god!*” Harlow clasps my hands like we’re best friends. “You have to tell me everything you know about him so I can make my move at the party.”

“Gladly,” I say. “Under one condition.”

“Anything.”

“You have to take me home and get one of your other friends to go with you instead.”

“Ha! I was planning to do that anyway.”

# ACT THREE

BOY OFFERS TRUCE

TRAVIS

*Back Then*

*Reno, Nevada*

*2 a.m.*

“Thanks for getting me and my friend into this party for free.” Tatiana’s stepsister is batting her eyes so hard that her fake eyelashes are slipping.

“Are you staying until it’s over?” she asks.

*Not if I can help it.*

“I’m not sure yet,” I say. “Is Tatiana on her way here?”

“Not unless she has a personal driver on speed dial.” She shakes her head. “She’s not much of a partier like *we* are. She’s probably in bed reading a romance novel or watching anime.”

“Interesting...”

“When do you think you’ll try to get into the UFC?” Her friend rubs my shoulder. “Like, months from now? A year from now?”

“That all depends on the league and the commissioner.” I force a smile and entertain their conversation for as long as I can.

After refilling their drinks, I disappear through the crowd and escape to the parking lot.

Sliding behind the wheel of my car, I send the motel manager a text.

ME

I just sent you my rent money for this week and last week via email.

His response comes within seconds.

SLUMLORD

Hope you're not expecting a fucking thank you. It's still LATE.

I roll my eyes and pull onto the road. When I'm halfway home, Penelope's name crosses my screen.

"Yeah, Crown?" I answer. "Something wrong?"

"Yes and no," she says. "I think I tripped the lights again. Can you walk me through resetting the breaker box?"

"Of course. Grab a flashlight and head outside."

I wait until she's reached the side of the house before giving her instructions. When I'm finished, she asks me to walk her through unclogging a water pipe.

"Anything else?" I ask.

"Tatiana Brave got a perfect score at the West Coast Expo today." The words rush out of her mouth. "*A. Perfect. Score.* Do you have any idea what that means?"

"I have a feeling you're about to tell me."

"People are starting to wonder *when* and not *if* she'll be the new number one."

"*Penelope...*"

"Don't you dare give me the 'Focus on yourself' speech today," she interrupts. "Just let me vent about this tragedy, okay?"

"Okay."

“First of all, she’s not that pretty and her skating is—”

I hit mute and toss my phone onto the passenger seat.

Predicting the exact same words I’ve heard countless times before, I drive all the way back to my motel before picking up the phone again.

“—I couldn’t find a single flaw in her routine.” She sounds near tears, like this is a catastrophic event. “It may have been an omen that my registration fee didn’t clear in time. I hope you yelled at your bank’s manager for screwing up the wire transfer.”

*I couldn’t afford the transfer...or the fee...*

A pang of guilt hits my chest.

“Are you there, Travis?” she asks. “*Travis?*”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m here, Crown.”

“I was beginning to wonder.” There’s a smile in her voice. “Anyway, feel free to stop calling me that nickname whenever you’re ready.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it makes me feel like I’m still seven years old.”

“Mom and Dad called you that all the time and you never complained.” I step out of the car. “I doubt it bothers you in the slightest.”

“It doesn’t.” She laughs. “I’m trying to evoke some emotion out of you since you’ve let me ramble on and on without interrupting to give me advice.”

“I’m fine,” I say. “I wired a thousand dollars to your account a couple hours ago. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you never miss another competition. I promise.”

“It’s okay that I missed this one, it’s just an expo.” She pauses. “Your bank’s error actually saved me a twelve-hour car ride with Hayden, and expos don’t count toward the rankings.”

I unlock the door to my room, feeling too damn guilty to tell her the truth.

“Should I use some of this money for a bus ticket to come see you?” she asks.

“No, no, no,” I say. “Don’t spend any of it on me. *Ever*. Don’t ask Hayden to buy you travel tickets either. Focus one hundred percent on your skating career, and that’ll make me happy.”

“Okay.” She sighs. “Since you mentioned Hayden, do you have any other friends who can serve as my pseudo big brother while you’re away? Someone who’s not a man-whore with an ego the size of the moon?”

“Hayden’s not that a man-whore,” I say. “He’s just...”

I can’t bring myself to finish that sentence. His reputation with women has always been terrible, and he’s far worse than I ever was.

*He’s worse than anyone I know.*

“Exactly!” Penelope scoffs. “I’m thankful my coach is letting me rest these next few days so I don’t have to deal with him. Not only is he a terrible person, but he’s delusional enough to believe he’ll be a *billionaire* someday.”

“I’m aware.” I make a mental note to catch up with Hayden later this week. “Speaking of rest, Crown, I really need to hit the ice bath. I’ll call you tomorrow night, alright?”

“Wait.” She pauses. “If something was going wrong in your life or if you were ever in any trouble, you would tell me, right?”

*Wrong.* “Of course, Crown. I love you.”

“Love you, too. Talk later.”

I wait until she ends the call and then fill my tub with ice.

Sinking down to my neck, I try not to think about how many fights I’ll need to take to keep me and Penelope afloat for another month.



HALF FROZEN, I'm studying the current welterweight champion's workout routine on *The Snarky Glove* blog when a new text message appears on my screen.

TATIANA

Hey.

I squint, making sure I'm not imagining things.

ME

I thought you blocked me...?

TATIANA

I did, but now I've temporarily unblocked you.  
(Keyword: temporarily)

ME

How can we make this arrangement permanent?

TATIANA

We can't. Anyway, I'm only messaging you because my stepsister can't seem to shut up since seeing you at the afterparty. She really wants your phone number, so is it okay if I give it to her?

ME

Does she want it so we can talk about \*you\*?

TATIANA



Probably not.

ME

Then don't give it to her. Tell her I'm flattered she's talking about me & I hope to see her at my next fight.

Her name crosses my screen via phone call within seconds.

“Yes, Tati?” I answer.

“It's ‘Tatiana’ to you.”

*For now...*

“I don't understand the problem here.” Her voice sounds even sultrier now than it does in person. “My stepsister is like, *actually* attracted to you.”

“A lot of women are.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Truth hurts.”

“Look.” She pauses. “Not that my stepsister and I are on the best of terms or anything, but she's a pretty good catch for a guy like you.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“She's obsessed with combat sports, gets joy out of bullying complete strangers, and if you ever need someone to hang out with at night—”

“I'll call and ask *you*.”

Silence.

“I have a boyfriend, Travis,” she says finally. “I'm one hundred percent unavailable.”

“I'm willing to wait until that changes.”

“*What the—*” She sucks in a small breath. “Since you're clearly lacking comprehension skills, my mentioning the boyfriend implies that you don't stand a chance with me.”

“At this time.” I smile. “If I go out with your stepsister, that permanently ruins my chances, correct?”

“Your chances were ruined the moment you left me that first mean voicemail.”

“I was a different person back then.”

“Your latest message was literally a week ago.”

“That’s still in the past.” I place her on speakerphone and get out of the tub. “If it makes you feel any better, if I’d known what you looked like before now, I would’ve never left any of those messages.”

“The only thing that’ll make me feel better is ending this phone call.”

“Be my guest.”

I wait for her to end it, but the final beeping sound never comes.

I can still hear her soft breathing.

“You should give me ten minutes since you never showed up at the party,” I say. “Why are you up this late?”

“Because I’m—” She hesitates for a few seconds, and I’m convinced she’s moments away from hanging up on me.

“I can’t sleep.” Her tone is slightly softer. “I’m sitting in bed looking at my last performance and taking notes. Turns out, even with a perfect score, there are still some things I could’ve done better.”

“That’s the downside of wanting to be the best.”

“Yeah, tell me about it...”

Neither of us says a word as I dress for the gym and grab my bag.

“Why are *you* still up?” she asks.

“I needed to take an ice bath before my workout.”

“Shouldn’t you be resting since you just fought?”

“I can’t afford to rest at this stage in my career.” I lock my door and head down the staircase. “I can’t afford to lose a single match.”

“You’re undefeated?”

“I always will be.” I smile. “Whenever I make it to the UFC and become number one in the world, I probably still won’t rest.”

“Well, whenever *I’m* number one in the world, I plan on traveling to an exotic resort for a month-long vacation.”

“Are you planning to have a second job by then?” I raise my eyebrow. “Figure skaters don’t make that type of money last time I checked.”

“Screw you.” She bursts into laughter, turning me on even more. “You never know what could happen.”

“You’re right, I take that back.” I cross the street and walk toward the SportsPlex. “Tell me everything your stepsister said about the afterparty.”

She launches into a recap of things that definitely did *not* happen, but I don’t bother setting the record straight.

I scan my stolen badge at the front door and walk inside the building.

In the midst of Tatiana describing her stepsister’s obsession with “taking a selfie with anyone who has a chance of getting famous,” I hear classical music playing on the lower level.

Confused, I take the steps down to the plaza and spot Tatiana. She’s standing alone near the edge of the rink, holding the phone up to her ear.

Dressed in an all-grey tracksuit, she’s twirling her curls with her fingertips and tapping the tip of her blade against the ice.

“Wait a minute,” I interrupt her recap. “Didn’t you say that you’re currently *in bed* looking over your performance notes?”

“I am. Why?”

“Because I must be watching your doppelgänger at the SportsPlex right now. Maybe I can get her to give me a chance instead of you.”

She immediately looks up from her phone. Then she turns around and spots me, looking as if she wants to disappear.

Amused, I walk toward her.

“You can put your phone down now,” I say. “You’re a terrible liar.”

She tosses it onto an empty seat. “Does one small lie make me a liar?”

“No, but your denial that you want me does.”

“Seriously?” She laughs. “Have you always been this cocky and full of yourself?”

“Yes.”

She smiles, looking as if she wants to say something else, but no words fall from her pretty lips.

“Do you really have a boyfriend?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Why isn’t he here?”

“He lives in Philadelphia.” She crosses her arms. “We’re long-distance at the moment.”

“I’ve heard those types of relationships never work out.”

“I doubt you even know what the word ‘relationship’ means.”

“Good point.” I stare at her, still in awe of how fucking stunning she is. “Can you and I at least be friends then?”

“No.”

“Associates?”

“Never.”

“Occasional gym-mates who talk on the phone?”

“Do I need to speak another language for you to understand?”

“Which language will get me a yes?” I don’t give her a chance to respond to that. “Maybe you can consider us being gym mates who *pretend* like they never knew each other previously, but they talk on the phone every blue moon.”

“Fine.” She holds out her hand. “But we’ll never *ever* be anything more than that.”

I refuse to acknowledge that last sentence.

“Oh, and since we’re drawing boundaries,” she says. “Don’t call me until next month, because a part of me will always believe you’re hiding some type of ulterior motive for your sister.”

“My motives are one hundred percent selfish, I promise,” I say. “I’ll call you tomorrow night.”

“Are you deaf?”

“Only to things I don’t want to hear.” I shake her hand and pretend like I don’t notice her blushing. “Let’s not label things any further, though. It’s a bit early for that.”

“We’ll always be exactly what I just offered to you, Travis.” She pushes off onto the ice, skating backward. “Accept the facts.”

“Is nine-thirty a good time?”

“As long as it’s sometime next month.”

“Nine-thirty *tomorrow* it is.” I step back. “Looking forward to it.”

“I’m not picking up!” she yells as she skates further away. “I may even block your number before the end of the night!”

*I highly doubt that...*

SEVERAL YEARS LATER



I didn't block his number that night.  
But to this day, I really wish I would've.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY...



Thirty days before saying “I do”

—



THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,

Hell has frozen over, and clouds are falling from the sky!

After amassing an impressive 27-0 record during his UFC career, Travis “The Punisher” Carter is no longer undefeated.

**He. Got. Knocked. the. Fuck. Out!**

Christopher ‘Red Eye’ Juarez threw a brutal left jab, followed by a series of four punches that left Travis in a bloody heap, in front of millions of fans.

Our beloved King of Trash Talk who often says, “I’m too fucking good to lose,” “I’m the best fighter alive,” and “Your girlfriends aren’t safe around me,” looked like a shell of himself before the match even began.

After re-watching the footage, it looks as if something in the crowd distracted his attention, but that’s just our speculation.

Rumors are now running rampant about what’s next for the *former* welterweight champion (OMG, never thought we’d have to type that F-word in reference to him), so we’ll keep our eyes peeled for you.

*Stay tuned for more news & updates.*

*The Snarky Glove*

—

THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,

This next post hurts our hearts and is quite painful to write.

Our beloved “Punisher” is not handling his first loss well at all...

After a string of recent incidents—two bar brawls, an ejection from a basketball game, and a drunken tirade at a rooftop party where he threatened everyone in attendance—he’s losing sponsors left and right.

To date, the current list of companies that have left him stands at twenty, totaling a loss of forty-eight million dollars from his ungodly net worth.

His publicist, who typically says “No comment” whenever we reach out, has sent us an “I no longer work for that asshole,” notice instead. His manager of two years, long-time personal assistant, and legal team have apparently abandoned him, too.

As for Mr. Carter, he hasn’t been seen publicly in *months*.

If you happen to spot him out and about in Vegas, please send some proof-of-life photos our way.

We’re starting to get worried...

*Stay tuned for more news & updates.*

*The Snarky Glove*

ONE

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Dr. Devil's Private Practice: A Gentlemen's Club*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**D** *id I really 'lose' that fight? Or am I living in a never-ending nightmare?*

I knew the answer to those questions, and I could still taste blood on my lips when I hit the mat in defeat, but I was still steeped in denial.

My walkout was perfect.

The pre-match workouts were intense as always.

My opponent? Not even half as good as I was.

When the bright lights shone on me, I didn't wither at all. I was ready to hold my belt high at 28-0, but for some odd reason, I woke up in a hospital bed at 27-1.

Well, *supposedly*.

Over the past several months, I'd camped alone in the mountains of Tennessee, sulked on the sandy white beaches of Florida, and silently sailed the coastal waters near Seattle.

And yet, I never managed to stay away from home for too long; this city of sinners always lured me to return.

Shaking my head, I nursed my bourbon and wondered what the hell the stripper in front of me was doing.

Fully clothed and with the rhythm of a broken robot, she danced to the Hokey Pokey. Again.

*I've truly lost in life if this is the best entertainment I can get.*

Just months ago, I was hailed as The Undisputed King of Las Vegas, Mister Pay-Per-View, and 'the man who owned Sin City.'

No, *literally*.

A group of super-fans painted "The Home of Travis Carter" onto the iconic "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign, and the city voted to keep it.

I was on top of the world, flying high as hell, convinced that my reign of success would never end.

*Until it did...*

The last time I felt this broken and confused was when a certain someone—who I refused to name—obliterated my heart to pieces. When she left me for no good reason.

Then again, that was far worse than this.

"Um, Mr. Carter?" The stripper cleared her throat, interrupting my thoughts. "*Mr. Carter?*"

"Yes?"

"It's rude to have your cell phone in a private room." She pointed to it. "You need to turn that off while I perform."

"I don't think you know what the word 'perform' means."

"You requested the shy librarian experience, right?"

"No." I shook my head. "I would never ask for that."

"Well, do you honestly expect me to take my clothes off?"

"In a *strip club*? Of course not..."

"I thought you were different from the other guys."

"You're right." I nodded. "I came here, paid the thousand-dollar privacy fee, all because I was hoping to have a deep conversation with an undercover psychologist."

"Really?" She smiled. "I am totally open to that. What's bothering you lately?"

I didn't answer her. Instead, I picked up my cell phone, noticing new text messages from my sister.

CROWN

Hey. I'm sure you're probably hiding out in some new city again, so I'm reminding you about my grand opening today in Manhattan since I pushed up the date.

If you can't come, please don't send me your usual 'Sorry I couldn't make it' flowers. Make it up to me in person later. :-)

"Mr. Carter?" The librarian snapped her fingers. "I'm ready to dive into your feelings whenever you are. Are you still upset about losing that big fight to Juarez? I bet that really hurt, huh?"

"This has to be a nightmare."

"Let's compromise." She unfastened the top button of her sweater. "I'll unbutton a few more and let you see half a breast as long as you keep talking."

"I've seen enough," I said. "You don't need to take any of your clothes off. I shouldn't be here anyway."

"You're leaving?"

"Never coming back." I pulled a wad of hundreds from my pocket and placed them in her tip jar. "Thank you for making me see things clearly."

I pushed the door open and left the room.

With any luck, I could make it to Manhattan by the afternoon and disappear into another city by nightfall.

Slipping into the back alley, I signaled for the valet to bring my car.

"I didn't lose him, sir." Shy Librarian followed me, now sporting a 'The Punisher: Forever Undefeated' t-shirt and shorts.

She stepped in front of me with a phone up to her ear.

“We’re at the back of the club,” she said. “Yes, I’ll make sure he doesn’t drive away. Even if I have to knock him out.”

I didn’t want to ask what she was doing, so I called Hayden.

“Yeah?” he answered on the first ring.

“What were you telling me about that emergency meeting earlier?” I said, using our secret code for ‘Start talking about something random so I can leave an awkward date or situation.’

“I’m in love with your sister.”

“Please don’t remind me.”

He laughed. “I was watching the celebrity news this morning and there was a story about you slapping one of your fans in a bar bathroom. Is that true?”

“He slapped me first.”

“I doubt he hurt you.” He sighed. “*You’re* the professional fighter. Is he filing charges?”

“If he does, and all the facts come out, no one will be on his side.”

“You sure about that?”

“I guarantee it...” I shook my head at the memory of the guy following me into the bathroom and staring at me as I unzipped my pants and washed my hands. I was used to fans doing weird things around me in public, so I simply ignored him until he pulled a taser gun from his pocket and demanded that I listen.

*“I hate to say this but, I wish your parents could come back to life and then get killed again so you can fight like you used to. You cost me eight hundred bucks and I missed my rent betting on your last fight.”*

I’d gritted my teeth and let his callous comment slide, but then he slapped me across the face with that taser.

So, I let him have it.



“I saw your name in the news, too,” I changed the subject. “Apparently, *The Untamed Playboy of Manhattan* is embroiled in yet another lawsuit over his dating app.”

“He is, but he’s more focused on his upcoming wedding... to your sister.”

“Screw you, Hayden.” I ended the call as the headlights of my custom Audi rounded the corner.

The valet didn’t drive close enough for me to take the keys, though. Instead, he parked near the dumpster and flashed the lights. Then a man wearing an all-grey suit stepped out of the driver’s side and put on a fedora.

I squinted, slowly realizing who he was.

*Ralph Windsor. My former manager.*

He plucked a cigar from his pocket and lit it before walking toward me.

“Long time, no see, Travis. How have you been?”

I said nothing.

We’d ended our business relationship on the worst of terms, and I was convinced we’d never speak again.

“You know, I recall a conversation we had two years ago,” he said. “It was right before you fired me.”

“Give me the keys to my car, Ralph. *Now.*”

“I told you that you were getting way too cocky and surrounding yourself with way too many ‘yes-men’ who didn’t have your best interests at heart,” he said. “You were flying too close to the sun and you were bound to burn.”

“Thank you, Shakespeare.” I held out my hand for the keys.

“You shouldn’t have lost that fight,” he said. “Juarez is nowhere near as good or talented as you.”

“Do you want me to refer to you as ‘Captain Obvious’ *or* Shakespeare now?” I asked. “You can’t have both.”

His lips curved into a smile. “Have you filed the papers for a rematch yet?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“That’s none of your concern,” I said. “That’s something my current manager will have to figure out.”

“Your manager just released a five page essay about you being the worst fighter he’s ever worked for in *The New York Times*. He called you a tyrannical bastard. Have you read it?”

I had no idea the article existed, but I nodded. “It was very one-sided and biased.”

“Let me help you again, Travis,” he said. “It pains me to see the state of your career and we both know that I’m the best manager you’ve ever had.”

I crossed my arms, wanting to say something sarcastic, or lie and tell him that it wasn’t true, but it was undeniable.

“What’s in it for you?” I asked.

“We can discuss that on our way to New York.” He looked at his watch. “You’re heading to Penelope’s special event, aren’t you?”

“How long have you been stalking me?”

“Six months, give or take.” He puffed an “O.” Then he gestured to the woman who’d followed me. “This is Madeline Dawson. She’s an up and coming handler and well-versed in public relations. If you take me back, she’s part of the package.”

“You don’t have to look so surprised.” She extended her hand. “I know you’re shocked to find out I’m not a stripper.”

“I’m quite thrilled that you’re not.” I shook it. “I’ll have to *think* about hiring you.”

“You’re hired, Madeline.” Ralph overruled. “Now, show us to one of your private jets. I promised Miss Dawson that was a perk of this job.”

“Sounds like you were certain that I would hire you back.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He shrugged. “Given how awful you’ve behaved over the past several months, no one else wants anything to do with you.”

“I have a line of publicists itching to work for me.” I bluffed. “My inbox gets fifty new requests a day.”

“So, you *haven’t* read your last manager’s article.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how bad is it?”

“Fifty,” he and Miss Dawson spoke in unison.

“Fifty as in a pipe bomb or a hydrogen one?”

“Travis.” Ralph patted my shoulder. “It’s effin’ nuclear.”

“Hmmm.” I figured that words couldn’t make me feel any worse than I already did. “Pull it out and let me read it...”

ONE & A HALF

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*One Private Flight Later*

*Manhattan, New York*

**S**heets of rain fell over the city as the private town car swerved through the wet streets.

Ralph was locked into “manager mode” already, fielding phone call after phone call, while my new handler was staring at me like she was incapable of blinking.

She hadn’t uttered a single word during the flight, and every time I’d turned around to look at her, her beady brown eyes were transfixed on me.

“Is there a problem, Miss Dawson?” I asked.

“Yes.” She nodded. “A huge one.”

“Care to share it?”

“I have a confession to make.” She leaned closer. “Something important that I need to tell you if our business relationship is going to work.”

I shook my head, still reeling from my old manager’s scathing article. “I don’t want to know what it is.”

“I pride myself on being super honest with all my clients,” she said. “It’s something they teach at Cornell when it comes to things like this.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure Ralph is fine with it since he hired you to be on my team.”

She began rocking back and forth on the seat. Her eyes widened by the second, and I was tempted to ask if we could drop her off at a psych ward before going anywhere else.

“Ralph,” I said, “I know you think I can’t get anyone else for this job, but surely—”

“I used to be the CEO of the ‘I Hate Travis Carter’ website,” she blurted out. “I scaled it into a seven-figure empire with tons of employees.”

I blinked.

“I mean, I was once one of your biggest fans, like bought every ticket to your fights or watched them on Pay-Per-View, but then you started getting super cocky and feeling yourself and acting like you were the shit.”

“I *am* the shit.”

“Turns out, a lot of other fans felt the same way, so I hosted a place for us all to get together and hate on you and it was very successful.”

“Driver, is there an asylum on our route?” I asked, but he didn’t answer.

“After seeing you lose, though...” She was still talking a mile a minute. “I realized that I was still a fan at heart because that hurt me to see, so I decided that my energy would be put to better use by making everyone fall in love with you again.”

“Okay, okay.” She let out a sigh of relief. “I feel *soooo* much better getting that off my chest now. I hope you’re not too mad about my past, I still feel kinda bad about it.”

“Kinda bad?”

“I’m being honest.”

“Tell me something. Did you step down as CEO before or after your website sold those ‘He Deserved to Get His Ass Beat’ t-shirts?”

“You saw people wearing those?” She smiled, but then she faked a frown. “I mean, oh wow, how terrible you had to see that. I am ashamed to say it was after, but we sold out in like

fifteen minutes! We had to re-stock like a hundred times, and it was amazing! Want to hear about my elaborate campaign?”

*Jesus Christ.*

“Better yet,” she said, pulling out a red folder with hearts. “Allow me to walk you through my list of potential ways that we can make everyone fall in love with The Punisher again.”

I pretended to listen to her words, and then I made a mental note to fire her the moment we returned to Vegas.



THE CAR PULLED in front of The Perfect Feather: Ice Skating Pavilion. The words “Grand Opening Today!” and “Proudly Owned by Skating Champion, Penelope Carter,” shone brightly on the marquee.

Impressed, I stepped out with Madeline trailing me from a distance.

I followed the glittering pink signs into a rink that put every other ice arena I’d seen to shame. The seats were coated in a pearly white, and sparkling chandeliers dropped down from the ceiling.

“Travis?” Penelope called out from across the room. “Is that you?”

Her eyes met mine, and she dropped a folder—sending colored papers everywhere. Then she rushed over with her arms open wide.

“I can’t believe you came,” she said.

“Nice to see you too, Crown.” I hugged her against my chest. “I didn’t know you missed me this much.”

“Wait a minute. Please don’t tell me that you’re only here to hide out from the Vegas press.”

“No, I’m here because I *think* I love my little sister.”

“In that case, she’s a lot smarter than you give her credit for.” She stood on her toes and stared into my eyes, as if she’d

find an ulterior motive behind my irises. “Hmmm. I guess you might be telling the truth after all.”

“Stuff like that is why you’ll always be seventeen years old to me.”

“Trust me, I’m aware.” She pulled a pair of shades and a baseball cap from her bag. “Here. I need you to make yourself as invisible as possible from now until you leave.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re the most famous person here, and I don’t want your celebrity status to detract from the occasion.”

“Your fiancé is Hayden Hunter, Penelope. Last time I checked, *The Cocky King of New York* still has millions of super fans.”

“Speaking of which, he’s still waiting on you to agree to be his best man, so that we can solidify our wedding.”

“He can keep waiting.”

“I could’ve sworn you were okay with our relationship now.”

“No, I *tolerate* it now.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Big difference.”

As if on cue, Hayden walked into the room and headed over to us.

“I thought we weren’t inviting your brother.” He kissed Penelope’s forehead. “We agreed it was a waste of an invitation.”

“No, we changed our minds once we figured he might be having a severe case of ‘The Sads,’ remember?” Penelope faked a frown. “I took extra sympathy on him since the entire city of Vegas hates him.”

“Plenty of people in this city hate him, too,” he said. “He’s also an *international* pariah, last time I checked.”

“You two are really pushing it.” I looked between them. “Did you coordinate your matching blue dress and suit today or is that a coincidence?”



“A coincidence,” they spoke in unison. Then they kissed as if I wasn’t standing right in front of them.

*I still need time to get used to this.*

“I’ll be back to catch up with you in a minute.” Hayden shared our secret handshake before walking away.

“Allow me to give you a tour.” Penelope looped her arm in mine.

She escorted me through multiple ballet studios, two cafes, smaller practice rinks, and a vast museum-like room that was a tribute to her and our mother’s careers.

I suddenly stilled at the sight of the massive framed canvas ahead of us.

The picture inside featured Penelope standing atop a podium with Tatiana Brave at her side. While Penelope held up their shared trophy, Tatiana clasped a massive bouquet of red roses.

Looking sexy as ever in a glimmering grey dress, Tatiana was smiling like it was the happiest day of her life.

I blinked a few times and realized that this entire hallway was filled with framed pictures of Tatiana. It was a tribute of some sort, and there were golden words etched onto the walls.

*Tatiana Brave: World Champion, Rival, Best Friend*

With every step forward, every glimpse of her gorgeous face, my chest ached.

*Shit.*

Over the past year or so, I’d made it a point to avoid coming to this city as much as possible. The moment Penelope left me an “Oh my god! You’ll never believe who my new roommate is!” voicemail, New York City became persona non grata for me.

On the rare occasion that I did visit, or in the moments when I met Penelope in some other city, if Tatiana was around, she never let on that we knew each other.

She treated me as if we’d never met.

Her acting skills were impeccable, and even though seeing her still hurt like hell, I had no problem playing a supporting role.

“You remember all my old times with Tatiana, right?”

“Yes.” I clenched my jaw. “Those times are rather hard to forget.”

“I’m so happy we found each other after all these years and buried the hatchet.” She smiled. “Aren’t you?”

“I’m still wondering how the hell that happened.” I crossed my arms. “She’s no longer your roommate, correct?”

“Unfortunately,” she said. “I offered her a guest wing at me and Hayden’s place when I moved out, but she’s stubborn like me. She insists on making her own way in life.”

“Of course she does.” I stared at her picture again.

“Can you grab the crate of welcome buttons from my trunk before you sneak out early?” Penelope handed me a set of car keys.

“What makes you think I’m not staying for the entire event?”

“Because I know you.” She kissed my cheek. “You always slip out after the first hour. There’s always something far more important that you need to do.”

“More like someone I need to avoid.”

“*Huh?*”

“I’m staying for two hours.” I looked at my watch. “Is that enough time for cake?”

“More than enough, but you might miss the ‘Rivals to Friends’ speech from me and Tatiana.”

“I’ll write you a raincheck.” I walked away before she could say anything else. Before my mind could take an unnecessary trip down memory lane.

TWO

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Manhattan, New York*

**O**h my god. I hate my life...

“Try to extend your leg a bit higher at the end, Myra!” I shouted as my client struggled in the ballet studio. “You have to nail the landing in here before we hit the ice.”

The thirteen-year-old groaned, but she corrected her pose and completed a perfect double lutz.

“Okay, great.” I paused the music. “Let’s do it a few more times.”

“Ugh, let’s *not*.” She picked up her cell phone. “I’ve been here for an hour already. That’s more than enough for the day.”

“Myra—” I held back a sigh. “I used to practice for a minimum of four hours, and that was only the ballet. That didn’t include—”

“This isn’t the old days, okay?” She snapped. “Things have changed, and I’ve won first place in three competitions this year.”

“Because you’re competing in the amateur categories.”

“So? My followers and sponsors are still impressed.”

“You have so much potential, though,” I said. “I would hate for you to go the next couple years without unleashing it.”

“So I can do what?” She crossed her arms. “Become a world champion, all to end up coaching like you?”

*Okay, screw this.* “Practice is over.”

“That’s what I thought.” She pushed past me and picked up her bag. Then she held up her cell phone.

“Just now leaving ballet practice and heading home to make a smoothie,” she said. “According to my coach, I have a real chance to make it at the elite level, which is why she also swears by Yama Smoothies.”

I rolled my eyes as she faked a smile and did some weird robot dance to a rap song.

She made two more awkward videos before finally leaving.

As much as I hated agreeing with her, things in the skating world were definitely different now.

Social media had changed everything, and I was far too slow to adjust to the times, always ten steps behind the latest trend.

After retiring from figure skating, I’d taken what was left of my endorsement money to start my dream business.

I’d bet everything on myself...and *lost*.

My business crashed and burned, and I was still recovering from the damages.

Too embarrassed to admit the truth to anyone, I kept up all the appearances. My Instagram account—@BraveBeautyMarks, still received a post a day, all smoke and mirrors about how “awesome” it was to be a successful entrepreneur.

*Please let things go my way soon.*

I made sure I had my VIP pass for tonight’s event and grabbed my umbrella before heading outside.

“There you are, Angel Face!” My ex-boyfriend, Jalen, was standing on the top step.

Smiling, he extended the same brand of cheap daffodils from when I dumped him months ago. His candy-coated Mustang sat beside the curb, its passenger door wide open.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“It’s okay.” He smiled. “I’ll be the bigger person and admit that I may have messed up our relationship.”

“You *did* mess up,” I said. “You cheated on me.”

“Allegedly.”

“With three other girls.”

“It was two and a half. That last one didn’t count.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded. “You didn’t ‘sleep’ with that one, you sent pictures of her ass to my phone by accident.”

“Exactly.” He cleared his throat. “I’m a changed man now.”

“Save it for a priest, Jalen.” I tried to step around him, but he blocked me.

“I never had feelings for any of those girls, Tatiana,” he said. “It was just sexting with the occasional bang.”

“What?”

“But I only did that because I was tired of waiting on you to let me hit it.”

“Please tell me that you didn’t rehearse this speech,” I said. “Like, there’s no way you uttered these sentences aloud and thought they sounded good.”

“You’re the best girlfriend I’ve ever had, and by far the most beautiful.” He clasped my hand. “I still think about you from time to time. No, *all* the time.”

I yanked my arm from his grasp, but he grabbed it again and held on tighter.

“It’s okay that you like to wait a while before jumping into bed,” he said. “So, I’m thinking, since I’ve previously put in lots of time, you should reset your patience timer to wherever we left off last.”

“Do you hear any of the words that are falling out of your mouth? Like, *any*?”

“I would like another chance, Tatiana.” He ignored my questions and caressed my hand. “Can we go back to the late nights talking about your beauty brand dreams with the Saturday strolls in Gramercy Park? The big brunch dates with your bestie and her billionaire boyfriend?”

“He’s her *fiancé* now.”

“Wow, really?” He paused. “Hope he’s working on one hell of a prenup.”

I stifled a groan.

“I want you back.” He got down on one knee. “I’ll do anything to make things right, and then I’ll make them even better.”

A couple of passersby stopped behind him and smiled.

He whistled, and a violin trio appeared, playing a love song under matching blue umbrellas. Unfortunately, their beautiful notes attracted more strangers to stop and stare at Jalen and me.

“Jalen, get up,” I spoke through gritted teeth. “Get the hell up and tell them to stop the music.”

“I believe in our love,” he said instead. “Back then, we had something special.”

“We’re about to have a restraining order.”

“I love you, Tatiana Brave, and I’m willing to wait however long it takes to have sex with you.”

The passersby exchanged confused looks and “What did he say?” whispers while Jalen pulled a ring box from his pocket.

I blinked a few times in hopes that this wasn’t happening. That maybe—just maybe, this was all a dream since I couldn’t feel any raindrops landing on my skin.

Jalen rubbed the edge of the box over my finger, and my flesh crawled, confirming that this was reality after all.

*Wow.*

The box hung open, revealing a ring that resembled a cheap prize at a county fair.

*Is that plastic?*

“I figured you’d want to pick out your own after you say yes.” He slid the ring over my finger. “We can go to a jewelry store after this. You can pick out anything, up to five hundred dollars.”

“I’m not saying ‘yes’ to you, Jalen.” I freed my hand amidst gasps from the small crowd. “I meant that I never wanted to see you again, and I have somewhere to be. Have a nice life.”

“I forgave you for working on your failed business and coaching practices all the time!” He scoffed as I stepped around him. “The least you can do is forgive me for being impatient!”

“Tatiana?” He called after me. “*Tatiana?*”

I picked up my pace, ignoring his pleas with every step.

When I made it to Broadway, I ordered an Uber and sent Penelope a text.

ME

Sorry I’m running so late for your big opening day. Pleaseeee don’t hate me! I’m on my way!

PENELOPE

It’s okay. I told you a different starting time because I knew you’d be late \*smile emoji\* Don’t rush. Can’t wait to share a glass of Rainy Day Wine! (Non-alcoholic for me, of course)

Letting out a breath, I leaned against the window.

I still couldn’t believe that our deep-seated animosity from the past had unraveled, giving way to us becoming temporary roommates, then the best of friends.



We were so close now that I found myself telling her everything.

Well, *almost* everything.

When the car pulled in front of the rink, a long line had formed at the entrance.

Taking out my personal key, I strolled to the east side of the building and slipped inside. Then I headed for the elevator bank.

A car arrived instantly, full of staff members singing “Sweet Caroline” at the top of their lungs, so I waited for the next one.

Moments later, the doors glided open again, revealing a ballerina troupe stretching and spinning.

I sighed and headed to the stairwell. I jogged up three flights and opened the door, stalling as someone tried to come out at the same time.

*What the... Travis?*

His eyes met mine, and he tilted his head to the side.

My heart skipped a beat as I soaked up the sight of him in a three-piece suit, of the beautiful green eyes that I used to stare into for hours at a time.

He stared back at me without saying a word.

The only sounds between us were the rain attacking the windows, the faint winds beating the glass.

*I knew I should've waited for another elevator...*

I tried to move past him, but I couldn't will my feet to move.

The sudden bout of butterflies in my stomach and the frantic flailing of my heart begged me to stay here a little longer.

Travis's gaze traveled my body, and I finally found the strength to step back.

“I um...” I swallowed. “I uh—”

“*Hello, Tatiana.*” His deep voice stopped my world. “It’s been a while.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“You look fucking beautiful,” he said. “How have you been?”

*Lost.* I bit my bottom lip to prevent that word from escaping.

This wasn’t how we handled things whenever we were forced to cross paths. He was supposed to look away, and I was supposed to *walk away*.

No conversation, no small talk, just a cordial “Hey” and “Hello” for anyone who happened to see.

A well-perfected rinse, wash, repeat.

Our memories suppressed and silenced, stuck on ‘delete,’ ‘delete,’ ‘delete.’

“You barely said ‘Hello’ when you came to Vegas for my last fight,” he said, continuing to venture off script. “Any reason why?”

“I am *so* sorry, sir.” I refused to let my heart have any input on this scene. “Have we met before?”

“I believe we have.” He smiled. “*Several times.*”

“No, I don’t think so. You must be confusing me with someone else.” I shrugged. “I’ve heard that I have a doppelgänger out there somewhere.”

“*Tatiana...*”

“No, wait.” I tapped my chin. “I think I’ve seen your face on an ad for premium whiskey or Calvin Klein before. Are you a model or something?”

“You once told me that I was sexy enough to be one.”

“I never called you ‘sexy.’ Moderately attractive, *maybe.*”

The door swung open behind him before he could respond.

A woman in jean shorts and a t-shirt stepped onto the landing, and for some reason, he didn't let her move past us.

"I've been meaning to ask you something for a while," he said. "Something I can't quite figure out."

"I'm sure Google can help."

"Of all the people in the world to become 'best friends' with, why would you pick my sister? Better yet, how the hell did you two *really* find each other after all this time?"

"Sir, please don't make me call the police."

"For asking questions?"

"For *harassing me*," I said. "I have no idea who you are and I'd hate to see you in prison."

"I still have our old pictures and videos in my phone." He stepped closer. "They won't believe anything you say once they see that you're naked in most of them."

I sucked in a breath. "You promised to delete those."

"I said I would try."

"What an interesting way to say, 'I *lied*.'"

"I'm not sorry." He made me feel as if we were the only ones in this stairwell. "How long are you staying at this party?"

"I'm here with my fiancé." I spat out the words and held up my hand. "I'm getting married."

He eyed the ring, clenching his jaw.

"I doubt he would appreciate you talking to me," I said, "given our history."

"You're finally acknowledging that we have one?"

"*Never*."

Silence.

The more I stared at him, the more I realized that he was ten times sexier than he was on the night we first met, and I needed to get—and *stay*—the hell away from him.

“Well, sir,” I said, “it was very nice chatting with you about the weather and—”

“Is your fiancé as good at kissing you as I was?”

“If you’d ever kissed my lips, which you haven’t, it clearly wasn’t memorable.”

“I’m not talking about the lips on your mouth.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “Surely you remember me kissing the other ones.”

“I...” I swallowed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I can give you a reminder while I’m in town, if you like.” He lowered his voice, and his lips grazed mine, setting every nerve in my body on fire. “I always loved the taste of your pussy...”

The woman behind him looked at us in shock, and my cheeks burned like hell.

“Would you like that reminder or not?” Travis asked, but I didn’t answer.

I pushed him away and rushed through the door without another word.

One glass of “Rainy Day” wine wasn’t enough.

I needed a whole damn bottle.

*Stat.*

THREE

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Manhattan, New York*

“Um, who the hell was that?” Madeline followed me outside. “She’s *stunning*.”

“Tell me about it.” I strolled toward the waiting town car, ignoring her question.

“I don’t remember any rumors about you having a girlfriend,” she said. “How serious were you two?”

“It’d be a lot easier to understand your words if you weren’t stuffing cake into your mouth every few seconds.”

She eyed the strawberry slice in her hand—the sixth one she’d eaten tonight—and wolfed it down.

“Welcome back, Mr. Carter,” The driver held the door open as we approached. “Miss Dawson.”

As we slid onto the backseat, Ralph looked up from his phone.

“You just lost Calvin Klein as a sponsor,” he said. “Apparently, they want to move on to someone who doesn’t visit strip clubs to solve personal problems.”

“Maybe you should show them the video of Miss Dawson dancing so they can reconsider.”

“I tried that already. They’re officially moving on from you.”

I made a mental note to burn every brief from their brand when I returned home.

“Gatorade and Nike are your biggest ones left, but I’m thinking we should reach out to them instead of waiting,” he said. “As far as the smaller sponsors, you still have twenty. Percentage-wise, that’s awful, but recoverable with time.”

I didn’t have the energy to do the math at this moment.

“Who was that woman in the stairwell, Mr. Carter?” Madeline moved across from me. “I feel like you’re avoiding my question.”

“I am.”

“Is there any bad blood between you two?”

“There’s *nothing* between us,” I said. “I’ve never seen that woman before today.”

“The conversation I overheard says otherwise.”

Ralph put on his glasses, looking between us.

“We should have dinner at Per Se before we head home.” I steered the conversation elsewhere. “I always treat my new staff members to a private dinner, and I’d like to remain consistent.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Carter, I’d like to stay on topic.” Madeline buckled her seatbelt. “Regarding the woman who was in the stairwell with us, she’s—”

“A goddamn ghost,” I interrupted, my chest aching like hell. “She doesn’t exist, we’ve never met, and if you think I’m making this up, you can turn in your resignation letter and take a bus back to Vegas. Understood?”

“But I—” She sighed. “Understood.”

“Good.”

We all sat in an uncomfortable silence until reaching a standstill traffic in Hell’s Kitchen.

“Miss Dawson?” Ralph was looking at me, not her. “Did you happen to catch the name of this person in the stairwell who doesn’t exist?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, sir.”

“I’m being serious, Miss Dawson.”

“I can’t afford to lose this job,” she whispered. “I’m betting my all on this, and Mr. Carter is clearly looking for any reason to fire me.”

“Your answer will be off the record,” he said. “Mr. Carter can step out of the car if he doesn’t want to hear it. We’ll be stuck in this traffic for a while anyway.”

I didn’t step outside.

“What was her name, Miss Dawson?”

“It was something like ‘Tina’ or ‘Tanya.’” She tapped her lip. “No, Tatiana. It was *Tatiana*.”

Silence.

“My apologies for asking.” He turned away from me. “That woman is definitely a ghost...”



# ACT FOUR

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Reno, Nevada*

TRAVIS (DON'T ANSWER HIM)

I could've sworn we agreed on nine o'clock tonight.

I've called you fourteen days in a row and I know you're reading my messages...

I have a fight at the lot behind The Underground this Saturday. You should come see me.

I shake my head as I reread the latest messages from Travis. My past four boyfriends were nowhere near as persistent as him, and if he were related to a lesser opponent, I would've picked up the first night he called.

“So, you came in second place this morning?” My stepmother, Elaine, waltzes into my bedroom, stopping in front of my recent St. Clair trophy. “People hardly ever think the person in second is as good as the first.”

“So, what does that mean for you since you're my dad's second wife?”

“What did you just say?”

“I said, second place is pretty damn good when you're not competing in a field you're used to,” I say. “It's actually quite phenomenal when you've broken tons of other records.”

“I don’t think that’s what you said at all.”

“It wasn’t.”

Silence.

We glare at each other, creating a brand-new stalemate.

I hate this woman slightly more than I hate Harlow, and she’s driven a wedge between me and my father that’s far beyond repair. At this point, I don’t even know who he is anymore, and I’m done trying to figure it out.

“Oh, Tati.” Stepmother Dearest lets out a sigh, breaking down first. “This came in the mail for you today.”

She tosses a glossy copy of *Skater’s World* onto my bed.

*I’m on the cover?*

I smile at the picture of me holding a pose in Salt Lake City. My bright golden costume is frozen mid-flutter, and there’s a smile on my face.

The headline floats high in a thick, white font.

*Golden Girl: Tatiana Brave Puts the World on Notice*

I run my fingers across the words in utter awe.

“I don’t see what you’re smiling about,” Elaine says. “You look fat in that photo and your curls aren’t properly coiffed. They should’ve picked a better angle.”

*Please go fuck yourself. Please go fuck yourself...*

“Thank you so much for pointing that out.” I barely manage. “I appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome.” She has the audacity to smile. “Anyway, just so you know, I won’t be able to take you to the airport for your competition next weekend.”

There’s no point in asking why.

“Your father is driving me to a company retreat in Montana and Harlow is spending that time with her friends.”

I nod, unsure of where she’s going with this information.

“Your father told me that you passed your driving exam with flying colors and I have nothing to worry about.” She places a set of keys on the dresser. “Make me feel comfortable about letting you drive my bonus car by completing all the errands on the fridge. As long as you don’t get a scratch on it, I’ll let you have the keys while everyone is away.”

For a split second, she looks genuinely concerned—like maybe, just maybe, she cares about me.

“I need to keep my car in pristine condition in case Harlow ever needs it.” She shatters the notion with ease. “She’s someone who knows better than to come in second place.”

“I can’t thank you enough for this, Elaine.” I swallow the words I’m really thinking since I can’t afford to ruin my chance at driving the car.

“Don’t make me regret it.”

I wait until she leaves my room, then I flip through the pages of *Skate World* until I reach my feature.

It’s my first time being selected for a singles’ edition of the cover, and I desperately wish that I had someone to celebrate the moment with me.

I resist the urge to read the full article and make a mental note to pick up more copies at the grocery store.

“Here.” Harlow steps inside the room, setting a huge vase of red roses atop my dresser. “I guess the magazine editors sent these to you, too. You’re welcome.”

“Thanks?”

She walks over to my closet and rummages through my mother’s accessory trunk. Then she takes a bracelet without asking.

I’m in too good of a mood to say anything to her about it.

Opening the card that’s attached to the roses, I realize that the delivery is not from the magazine editors at all...

*Dear Tatiana,*

*Congratulations on landing the singles' cover of Skate World  
for the first time. (Don't ask me how I know that.)*

*Is your phone broken?*

*Did your boyfriend tell you not to talk to me?*

*I'm tempted to start sending you snail mail...*

***Sincerely,***

***Your Fellow Gym-mate Who Hasn't Seen You in Two Weeks***

GRABBING MY PHONE, I check the time and type in the address for The Underground.

Before I know it, I'm grabbing the car keys and sliding behind the wheel.

# ACT FOUR & A HALF

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*A hundred miles away from Reno*

I 'm a fucking sap.

I wrap another layer of cheap tape around my fingers, wondering why the hell I used any money to send flowers to Tatiana when she'd spent the past two weeks acting like I didn't exist.

"Travis?" Penelope's voice comes through my phone's speaker, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Travis, are you there?"

"I'm here, Crown."

"I tried to pick up the UPS package you sent, but it was too heavy, so I have to go back tomorrow."

"Why don't you ask Hayden to help you?"

"He's in zombie mode for a deadline with his app. Besides, my new boyfriend said he'll help me get it, so—" She sucks in a breath. "I mean, yeah, I'll ask Hayden for his help."

"You're not supposed to be dating *anyone*," I say. "I told you to focus on skating."

"What?" She laughs. "Who said anything about having a boyfriend? You must be hearing things."

"Stop fucking with me, Crown." I shake my head. "The only thing that you should be focused on is getting twenty-eight championships to surpass our mom's record."

"That's going to take me *years*," she says.

“And?”

“And I need to make sure that I have a life off the ice.”

“No, you don’t.”

“If Tatiana Brave can have tons of boyfriends and still dominate without so much as a yawn or a misstep, trust me, I can do the same.”

I stop wrapping my hands. “Tatiana has ‘tons of boyfriends?’”

“I mean, I don’t know. I’m assuming from the way guys look at her and ask her out all the time.” She pauses. “I sent you a picture of her the other day and you never responded. She’s not all that, right?”

“Penelope, I honestly don’t want to discuss Tatiana with you ever again.”

“But—”

“*Drop it.*”

“Fine.”

Feeling slightly guilty about my ulterior reasoning, I wait for her to begin another panic rant, but she doesn’t.

“I’m worried about you,” she says. “Like, not to sound crazy or anything, but I get vibes that you’re not okay from time to time.”

“I’m fine, Crown,” I say. “I promise.”

“When is your next match?”

“In a few hours.”

“What’s the prize amount this time?”

“Five thousand dollars.” I lie.

“Wow.” There’s a smile in her voice. “That’s amazing! Mom and Dad would be so proud of your fighting.”

“They wanted me to go to college.”

“Oh, right. They’d hate your fighting.”



I laugh, and for the next half hour we drift into an easier conversation.

It's not until someone calls her other line, her "coach" supposedly, that she rushes me off the phone.

Grateful, I finish taping my hands and flex my fingers. I silently remind myself that tonight's fight can't last that long since I have to fight tomorrow and the day after.

"Humble Kid?" A guy taps my shoulder from behind. "You're up in five."

"Got it. Thanks." I follow him out of the garage and into an open space.

Unlike the Underground, where the fights somewhat resemble the ones at the professional level, this place is an utter dump.

There's a metal cage that sits at the center of the floor, and I'm pretty sure it's used for dog and cock fighting whenever MMA hopefuls aren't trapped inside.

There are no announcers, pricey badges, or excess security. There isn't even a timer for the rounds or a referee.

The cage is it, and the match starts once both fighters are locked away.

The winner is the last guy standing.

As I'm approaching it, I spot the usual bettors and enthusiasts surrounding the metal, but a glimmer of soft pink catches my attention.

Everyone knows to wear dark and dreary colors in case the cops break up this illegal operation, so I'm confused why someone would blatantly break that rule.

I squint to get a better view and stop walking.

*Tatiana?*

Wearing a skin-tight, pink dress and a beige baseball cap over her curls, she's completely oblivious to the long stares from the guys around her; they're as transfixed by her presence as I am.

Her eyes meet mine and she offers a small wave.

I smile and step inside the cage amidst a sudden roar from the spectators.

My opponent, a guy who is half a foot taller than me, steps inside and locks his door—signaling that we can start.

*I'm only getting five hundred dollars for this shit...*

He rushes toward me with a flying knee and I immediately grab it, pulling him down to the mat. I punch him in the jaw for attempting that type of crazy shit so early and hook my right arm around his neck.

Squeezing him as hard as I can, I resist all his weak punches while he struggles to break free.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I say to him. “Do you have any idea who the hell you’re fighting? How little we’re getting paid for this?”

“You’re going to kill him, Kid!” “Let him go!” “Tap out!”

The yelling outside the cage might as well be whispers; I never pay attention to them.

“You’re losing tonight,” I say to him. “Give up while I’m still being nice...”

I squeeze his neck tighter with every second that passes, demanding that he quit.

He claws at my arm before finally coming to his senses. He taps my hand three times, signaling for mercy, confirming he’s done.

I immediately let him go and stand to my feet.

Loud applause and cheers fill the air as the promoter unlocks the cage.

Tatiana stands frozen, her eyes wide in shock.

“Good job as always, Humble Kid.” The promoter hands me the cheap winner’s check. “If you want to stick around until midnight, my boss is willing to pay you two grand for a round with whoever wins the last match.”

“Your boss needs to make it three grand if he’s serious.”

“Tell you what,” he says, smiling, “if you win, I’ll personally make it a little more than three.”

“I’ll be back for that.” I leave the cage and head straight for Tatiana.

“You almost killed that guy,” she whispers. “His face turned blue.”

“*Almost* is the keyword,” I say. “I would’ve let go if I didn’t feel him breathing.”

She nods, looking as if she only halfway believes me.

“Why are you here?” I ask. “I thought you were ignoring me.”

“I am.” She smiles. “I just came here to tell you that I won’t be talking to you again after tonight.”

I raise my eyebrow.

“Thought it’d be best if I told you in person.”

“Text would’ve been better.” I can’t take any more small talk. “Are you being serious about not being interested in me?”

“No.”

“Can you please stop playing these fucking games with me, then?”

“*What?*”

“You heard me.” I glare at her. “You drove an hour and a half away from Reno to come see me—*alone*—despite not answering any of my calls or texts for weeks.”

“I was hoping you’d eventually stop.”

“*I won’t.*” I step closer. “Not only that, but I’m pretty sure you’re wearing that dress to get my attention.”

“Is it working?”

“*Yes.*”

She blushes. “To be fair, I could’ve easily worn another *Sailor Moon* shirt to stand out this time.”

“That would’ve worked, too.” I close the gap between us. “Do you really have a long-distance boyfriend who lives in Philadelphia?”

“No.”

“Are you dating anyone else at this time?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not.”

“Then I need you to keep it that way until further notice.” I slide a finger under the skate charm that’s hanging around her neck, gently rolling it between my fingers. “I’m not the sharing type when it comes to things like this.”

“What makes you think I’ll ever agree to date you, Travis?”

“Because you want to.”

“That’s not the problem, and you know it,” she says, her voice faint. “If you were someone else, or the situation was different—”

“Yes or no,” I interrupt. “I’ll accept your answer either way.”

She’s silent for several seconds, and it feels as if we’re the only two people standing outside.

“Yes,” she says finally.

“Good.” I glance at the clock. “What time is your curfew?”

“I don’t have one of those.”

I give her a blank stare.

“I have like two hours before I have to head home.”

“I thought so.” I laugh. “There’s a spicy taco truck down the street. You should let me treat you to a few.”

“I’m not having sex with you tonight, Travis Carter.” Her words come out of fucking nowhere.

“I’m sorry, *what?*”

“I’m just letting you know,” she says. “And while we’re on the subject—”

“The subject is *tacos*...”

“Most guys drop me after the first few dates because I make it more than clear that I’m not willing to sleep with just anyone.”

“The taco truck also serves nachos and quesadillas.”

“I’m aware that I should’ve lost my V-card in high school and that I should at least ‘consider’ fucking after a few decent dates with a guy, but that’s not the case, okay?” She rambles. “My first time has to be with someone I love, and if you’re only looking to have sex there’s no point in us talking past tonight.”

I blink, slowly processing the fact that she’s still a virgin. That, and she’s probably worse at making small talk than I am.

If this were anytime last year, I would’ve told her, “Thanks for the heads up. I don’t deal with virgins. *Ever*. Drive home safely,” before deleting her number.

“Should I take your silence to mean that you’re only interested in sex, Travis?”

“Not at all.” I give in and kiss her lips, silencing her rambles. The sweet taste of her mouth is enough to make me never want to try any other flavor again.

Wrapping my hands around her waist, I slide my tongue against hers, feeling her slowly let down her guard.

I kiss her until she’s damn near breathless, until she stops thinking so much. Then I whisper, “I’m still waiting for you to agree to the tacos.”

“Oh...” She sucks in a breath as I pull away. “I would like to try those. I don’t like sour cream, though.”

“Neither do I.” I lead the way and change the subject.

*Definitely a fucking sap.*

FOUR

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*One Week Later*

*Manhattan, New York*

I can't believe this show hasn't been canceled yet...

“So, Rachel’s baby daddy has a twin who is dating Carron’s sister who slept with Ryan?” Penelope stared at the television in disbelief. “Can you believe that?”

“As much as I can believe the writers are bringing back the James guy who supposedly died two seasons ago,” I said.

“There’s too many secrets and too many lies!” She tossed a pillow at the screen. “This is why I hate watching soap operas.”

“The secrets and lies are the entire point of their existence.” I sighed, beyond grateful that this week’s episode of *Love in His Grumpiness: The Dirty Bad Billionaire & His Sunshine Girl* was over.

Then again, every dreadful scene was a much-needed distraction from thoughts of Travis. Since seeing him in the stairwell last week, I was struggling to focus on anything else.

His voice interrupted my ballet sessions, stretching the barre into the memories when he made love to me against one. His smile slipped into my morning coffee, reminding me of all the late nights we spent talking and laughing on the phone.

*And his lips...*

“The writers are dragging out the secret baby reveal like they know I’ll keep watching the next episode.” Penelope was still lost in La-La-land. “They really think I’m loyal to these storylines.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Beyond loyal. I’ll never stop watching and I hope this season never ends.” She laughed and rolled over to face me. “You know, days like this make me miss being roommates.”

“Really? They make me miss the days when we hated each other, when this show didn’t exist.” I joked, standing to my feet. “More Rainy Day wine?”

“You mean, *orange juice*?”

“I’m trying not to rub it in.” I caressed her baby bump. “Be right back.”

I walked into her opulent, all-white kitchen and pulled out new wine glasses and fruit garnishes.

Ever since we moved out of our shared apartment and went our separate ways, we made a promise to keep our Sunday morning mimosa routine intact. I showed up to her new place wearing pajamas, stifled groans through her terrible soap opera, and she tried not to roll her eyes too hard while we watched a vintage episode of *Sailor Moon*.

“Do you have any deep, dark secrets, Tati?” she asked when I returned. “Like, anything you haven’t told me?”

“Yeah, sadly. You didn’t misplace your ‘I’m the best figure skater alive’ shirt.” I smiled. “I burned it.”

“That’s it?”

“I lit the matching pants on fire, too.”

“I still have the sweater.”

“You sure about that?”

“Not anymore.” She laughed. “I’m just wondering how well I really know you.”



“No, you’re not.” I plopped down on the floor. “You’re regurgitating dialogue from that ridiculous show.”

“Okay, fine. I am,” she said. “In the spirit of Elsa and Tyler’s storyline, who’s the best guy you’ve ever fucked?”

*Your brother.* “Um...”

“Tell me.”

“The muse I envisioned whenever I was skating.” I set down my glass before I slipped up and said his real name. “Mr. Perfectly Complicated.”

As always, she lit up like a kid at Christmas, and guilt gnawed at my chest.

Penelope could recite some of my best memories with Travis by heart, and I never forgave myself for revealing them on drunken nights.

I thought our stories would be discarded and forgotten—like random tales about strangers on subways—but Penelope hoarded them like sentimental sweaters. She had favorites she begged me to unravel on bad days, likening them to “reading a romance novel in the rain.”

“Have you given up on finding that guy?” she asked. “You don’t talk about him anymore.”

“Yeah, I...” I needed to change the subject. “I think it’s best to leave the past in the past, you know? Anyway—”

“I think you two belong together,” she interrupted. “Based on everything you’ve told me, that is. How many guys would drive five hundred miles every other weekend just to kiss you? To let you cry on his shoulder in the car?”

“I’m sure lots of guys do that for their girlfriends. Let’s do some light ballet in your studio upstairs.”

“We can dance right here.” She stood up from the couch, stretching her arms. “Tell me the story about how he surprised you for the best birthday you ever had.”

“It’s been so long that I can’t remember it anymore.”

“I can.” She smiled. “He flew into town after a competition without telling you, and he stood in the parking lot with a huge bouquet of red roses.”

“Penelope...”

“His career was kind of taking off then, so he used his purse money—” She paused, laughing. “I know he didn’t call it ‘purse money,’ I’m just used to hearing Travis and all the fighters use that phrase all the time.”

I swallowed, sensing that she wouldn’t fall for any diversions.

“He used his extra money to treat you to a five-star dinner, a night at the best hotel in town, and the next day he treated you to the VIP experience at an anime convention you’d always wanted to go to. And then he....”

She blinked a few times and pressed a palm against her forehead, staring into space like she sometimes did when her memory lapsed—a byproduct of the tragic injury that ultimately ended her skating career.

I waited in silence as she continued staring. My heart twisted in a mix of sympathy and agony.

“I was remembering something before, but then I...” She looked at me. “I’m so sorry, Tati. What were we talking about?”

“Mr. Perfectly Complicated.”

“Oh, right.” She smiled. “He did so many over-the-top, sweet things for you, and to have that fall apart is utterly tragic.” She fell back onto the couch. “Speaking of which, guess what?”

“You know I hate guessing.”

“I asked Hayden to add a ‘Find My Lost Love’ feature to his dating app. Then I made him promise to make you the first beta tester.”

“You did *what?*”

“It’s a super early birthday gift!” She squealed like a teenager. “I don’t think it’s fair to go another year without at least finding out where Mr. Perfectly Complicated is. What if he’s single and wondering about what happened to you, too?”

“Please tell me that Hayden doesn’t know anything else.”

“Well, kinda...I also told him how you took a one-hundred-thousand-dollar loan from me and turned it into a multi-million-dollar beauty brand in months. He’s as impressed as I am.”

“Speaking of that loan—” I paused. “I need a lot more time to pay you back.”

“No rush. Just keep my name on the ‘Investors Who Love Me’ page and pay it back when you’re beyond profitable. At the rate you’re going, you’ll be there before you know it.”

“Penelope, look. The truth about my business is...” I stopped talking.

Penelope was snoring, fast asleep.

I sighed and covered her with a blanket, vowing to serve her the truth on another day.



### *That evening*

I FLIPPED the light switch in my condo, but nothing happened.

I flipped it a few more times, and the darkness remained.

*Shit.*

Using my phone’s light to walk into the kitchen, I eyed the bills I’d become an expert at rotating and half-paying. The one on top, a final notice for the electricity, sported a due date from weeks ago.

Sighing, I opened a cabinet and pulled out candles, setting them on surfaces all over the room. I opened the living room

windows to let in the night breeze, and stared at the calendar that hung from my hearth.

An upcoming date was marred with the ugliest words I'd ever written: *Eviction process starts today if rent isn't paid.*

I didn't have a landlord to talk to—only a cold automated call system, and I'd exhausted favors from every person I knew.

Taking deep breaths, I weighed my options.

I could restart my TikTok account and try to go viral. Then again, my previous six months of crafting creative videos three times a day only netted me seventeen followers and comments like “Make \$1M in a week fast! Like this comment for a chance.” (I liked every single one of those and never heard back.)

There was the option of begging my bank for a cheaper monthly payment, but they'd already lowered it three times. Any lower and they'd assume I wanted it to be free.

Pushing my coaching services and requesting speaking gigs via skating organizations was a possibility, but those opportunities were few and far between.

Tears welled in my eyes as my latest client's words played in my mind.

*Become a world champion, all to end up coaching like you?*

I refused to allow those tears to fall.

Instead, I racked my brain for more options, and as I contemplated four more, my phone rang with an unknown number.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hey there, sexy,” a familiar deep voice said. “Miss me yet?”

“Huh?”

“It's me. Dennis. I miss you, and I hope you're missing me.”

“We haven’t talked in forever, Dennis.” I wasn’t sure why he still had my number. “What do you want?”

“To check on you and see how things are going in your life.”

“Have I somehow stumbled into an episode of *All My Ex-boyfriends* or something?”

“No.” He laughed. “It *is* cuffing season, though.”

“What does that mean?”

“Since it’s about to get cold outside, you go through all your contacts to make sure you have someone to cuff under the sheets because you’ll be inside for most of the fall and the winter.”

*What the...*

“So, are you interested in having me during the fall or the winter?” he asked. “You can’t have me for both.”

I hung up in his face.

I didn’t want to think about the ridiculousness of cuffing season or anything related to my finances for the rest of the night. I needed something to distract me, something that made me feel like my life wasn’t hanging by a thread.

In the spirit of another ex-boyfriend making a guest appearance in my life, I opened my phone’s photo gallery to revisit the only relationship I could never get over.

I unlocked a hidden folder, swiping and staring at the endless pictures Travis sent when we were miles apart, at the screenshots of naughty texts still capable of turning me on.

This slight stumble into the past should’ve been enough for me to fall asleep while dreaming of our sweetest memories, but I didn’t want those.

I wanted the filthy ones.

I continued swiping until I found a video, then I pressed play.

Travis's perfect smile appeared onscreen, forcing butterflies to take flight in my stomach. The camera slowly zoomed out, revealing more of the frame.

Completely naked, with his huge, rock-hard cock in his hand, Travis leaned back in a plush grey chair. He was staring intently at the camera, his eyes glazed over.

Stroking himself, like he did when he first taught me how to take all nine of his inches down my throat, he let out an unsteady breath.

"You should be here with me right now," he said, teasingly licking his bottom lip, "sitting on this dick."

My breathing slowed as he spread his legs a bit further apart.

"Then again, we haven't fucked in a while." He paused. "So, whenever your plane lands and you finally get here, I need you to get on all fours for me. I need you to—"

I closed the video mid-sentence and powered off my phone.

"He no longer exists, Tati," I whispered. "He no longer exists. Stop looking at this."

Opening my notebook, I forced myself to do some real work: Jotting down performance notes for my client.

For all of thirty seconds.

I restarted my phone and slid under the covers.

*Watching all his videos one last time won't hurt anything.*

FIVE

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I couldn't get Tatiana or that terrible engagement ring out of my mind.

The "jewel" was obviously cubic zirconia with a plastic band to match, and she should've been too ashamed to wear it in public.

She was still sexy as hell without even trying, still sarcastic as ever, and I couldn't believe she was serious with another guy.

A guy who clearly didn't deserve her.

"Mr. Carter?" the poker dealer asked, pulling me back into reality. "Mr. Carter?"

"Yes?"

"It's your turn, sir." He glanced at my hand.

I looked around the room in awe of how far I'd fallen. Months before my loss, I would be in a public high rollers room, winning round after round.

Now, I was sitting in my condo with a rented dealer, losing to inanimate objects.

"I'm folding," I set down my cards. "Can you deal another round for me and my friends, please?"

He nodded, and as if this type of game was normal, he dealt cards to my "friends." A pair of gloves, a pack of Ralph's cigars, and an *MMA Forever* magazine.



*Ding dong!* The doorbell sounded. *Ding dong!*

“It’s open,” I said. “You can come inside.”

Ralph stepped inside and rushed to my liquor cabinet, pouring himself a shot. He knocked it back and poured another.

“Thank you for asking,” I said. “I appreciate that.”

“At this point, you may want to consider retiring from fighting to fill out job applications.” He shook his head. “Your own whiskey company—the brand *you* helped to start—is currently having a meeting about whether they need to take your name off the bottles.”

“That might not be a terrible idea.” I picked up my new cards. “I’ve been meaning to change the packaging.”

“I’m being serious, Travis.”

“As am I.” I took one glance at the hand and folded. “If these companies want to drop my name and likeness from their brands, let them,” I said. “But once things turn around and they come crawling back like the snakes that they are, we’re slamming the door in their faces.”

“As inspirational as that sounds, *Rocky*—” He sat beside me. “You’re skipping one key component.”

“What’s that?”

“Likability,” he said. “You need to dig deep and channel the best qualities of the man you used to be so we can get back to that point.”

“Look.” I refused to go there. “I can’t turn back time and return to being The Humble Kid who lives paycheck to paycheck. You and I both know that the moment I started trash-talking and saying, ‘I’m too fucking good to lose,’ that my career changed for the better.”

“You could at least create a video for your fans. Tell them how sorry you are for letting them down with your recent behavior.”

“As long as I make it clear that I’m being forced.” I motioned for the dealer to start another round.

“You also need to pen a handwritten card and write a check to that fan you slapped.”

“For the umpteenth time—” I held back a sigh. “That fan slapped me first.”

“Well, he’s hired the best lawyer in Vegas and he’s threatening to sue you for ten million dollars.”

“Do you have an ‘I’m sorry’ card?”

“I thought so.” He pulled one from his breast pocket and handed me a pen.

“Write something from the heart, Travis.”

I wrote the first words that came to mind before returning it to him.

“I’m sorry you got what you deserved?” Ralph shook his head. “Really, Travis?”

“Okay, fine. Do you have another card?”

“Ten steps ahead of you.” He pulled out another. “Just sign your name and I’ll write the damn note.”

“Perfect.”

When I finished, Madeline entered the room with an older man at her side.

He was smiling like a kid in the candy store, and she was mouthing something I couldn’t quite understand.

“Well, here I was thinking my chance to finally meet *the* Travis Carter in person was all a ruse!” The man held out his hand. “I’m Franklin Stuart, the newest vice president at Nike.”

I immediately stood up to shake his hand. “Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said. “I happened to run into your publicist at a brunch event here and mentioned how big of a fan I am, so she insisted I come up to see you.”

Madeline looked between us. “I was also hoping to hear that Nike is one hundred percent onboard as a sponsor for Mr. Carter.”

“Well, we’re still processing things,” he said.

“What type of things?” she asked. “Anything we can address at this time?”

“Um, well...” Mr. Stuart shifted his feet. “We like to make sure we have an authentic image of our brand ambassadors. To be frank with you, the past few months have made us question everything we thought we knew about Mr. Carter.”

Ralph motioned for the poker dealer to leave the room.

“I can assure you that the *real* Travis Carter is a nice, wholesome guy who is under an immense amount of stress,” Madeline said. “The Punisher is the asshole who lashed out after the loss to Juarez. Right, Travis?”

“I’m definitely under a lot of stress...”

“Juarez is becoming quite the rising star,” Mr. Stuart said. “He’s a trash talker with rough edges, but he’s a family man who hasn’t had a single scandal. Now, of course, his career isn’t as illustrious as Mr. Carter’s.”

“He hasn’t been in this sport long enough to have an image, no offense.” Madeline interrupted him. “The real reason behind Mr. Carter’s distress is that a rematch would take away from his family time ... He even has to push back his wedding.”

*What did she just say?* I crossed my arms.

“Wedding?” Mr. Stuart raised his eyebrow.

“He’s kept his private life pretty low key, sir,” she said. “His fiancée has been more than supportive, though. Even though they’re desperately trying for their first baby—because they both want a large family, she knows that keeping certain professional sponsorships is a chief priority.”

I shot Ralph a “What the hell is she doing?” look, but he seemed more confused than me.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting to hear this at all.” Mr. Stuart looked surprised. “Our CEO, Mr. Truss, has the final say in things, so I’d love for him to see this family side of Mr. Carter before we handle negotiations.”

“That’s not a problem.” Madeline smiled. “I’ll reach out to you and set up a date for the three of them to get an intimate dinner.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “Mind if I step out of the room and call him?”

“Absolutely not.”

He disappeared, and Madeline clapped her hands.

“Well, don’t jump up and down all at once.” She looked at us. “Who wants to ask me how I managed to smooth things over with Nike?”

Silence.

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell you!” She squealed. “I bribed his secretary for his personal calendar, stalked him the moment he landed, and snuck into that private brunch to make my move.” She was officially the most unhinged person I’d ever met. “Impressive, huh?”

“Miss Dawson...” I tried to keep my voice firm. “Now is the perfect time for you to join Mr. Stuart in the hallway and tell him that everything you told him was a lie.”

“A lie?”

“Yes, as in something untrue and far-fetched, something that’ll never be real.”

“I’ve told you that I pride myself on complete and utter honesty.” She still looked excited. “Those words were one-hundred percent real, and I’m pretty sure that Mr. Truss really wants to meet you and your fiancée over dinner.”

“You can still save this moment with a punchline,” I said. “You’ve got ten seconds to tell me this is a joke.”

“There is no punchline,” she said. “As long as you bring your fiancée along to the dinner, I’m sure they’ll stay aboard

as your sponsor. Are you having trouble understanding that?”

“How the hell can I bring along someone who doesn’t exist?”

“Oh, I...” Her face paled. “I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“You’re not thinking *at all*.” I was moments away from losing my shit. “Go out there and take back everything you said. Now.”

The door swung open before she could move, and Mr. Stuart returned.

“Mr. Truss is thrilled about this development!” He smiled. “He’ll be in touch with Miss Dawson soon, and he promises to keep your secret under wraps.”

“I don’t have a secret, Mr. Stuart,” I said. “The truth is—”

“We look forward to his call!” Madeline cut me off and walked toward him. “Can’t wait!”

I watched them exchange a few final pleasantries, and my blood boiled as she escorted him to the exit.

“You should get on your knees and thank me, Mr. Carter.” She returned. “I just ensured that you won’t lose out on millions of dollars from your top sponsor.”

“No, you just *lied*.” I corrected her. “What am I supposed to say when he mentions me and my nonexistent fiancé’s ghost baby?”

“Try to throw in how much you’re hoping for a son first, since I kind of already said that.”

Ralph shook his head, and I glared at her in disbelief.

“Um, so, on another note,” she said, “ your face is super red and there’s a huge vein bulging out of your neck. Would you like me to call an ambulance for you on my way out?”

“You’re not going anywhere.” I locked the door. “You’re going to take a seat and figure out how to reverse what you’ve done before anyone else finds out about this mess.”

“Don’t hate me, but I didn’t want to put all my eggs in one basket.” She lowered her voice. “I may have called and told a few of your other sponsors the same story.”

“Define a few.”

“You don’t need to worry. They’ve all signed NDAs and they truly admire how well you’ve kept your personal life to yourself.”

“*Define a few.*” I repeated. “Now.”

“A little under forty...” She swallowed. “Are you sure you don’t want that ambulance?”

FIVE & A HALF

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Several Hours Later*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“Gatorade has officially dropped Travis Carter as their top brand ambassador.” The blonde anchor sipped her coffee. “We’re told that he was notified of this decision earlier, and his replacement should come as a shock to no one.”

The television screen suddenly shifted to an image of Juarez in a gym, sporting *my* championship around his waist.

His teeth were capped in a diamond grill that read “Forever the Champion,” and he was wearing a “Best Dad Ever” shirt. Why anyone took him seriously remained a mystery.

“How do you feel about replacing Travis Carter at Gatorade?” a reporter asked him.

“I feel like this is a sign of big things to come for me.” He smiled a bit wider. “There’s a new king of Vegas now.”

“You’ve won *one* high-profile fight versus my twenty-seven,” I muttered. “Get over yourself.”

“Have you heard anything from Mr. Carter’s camp regarding a rematch?” She pushed her mic closer.

“Not at all.” He ran his fingers along the belt. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to fight me again, if I were him. He got manhandled and embarrassed. It’s no wonder he’s been hiding ever since.”



“Those are some pretty cocky words, Mr. Juarez.”

“I can back all of them up, trust me.” He winked at her. “If his camp ever calls, I’ll have no problems beating his ass again.”

I turned off the TV and considered stopping by his gym to show him how much of a fluke his win was.

As I looked up the address, my phone rang with a new call.

Penelope.

“Yeah, Crown?” I answered.

“What did you think of the best pictures from my event?” she asked. “I emailed them to you this morning.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I haven’t checked my inbox today. Give me a second.”

I opened a new tab and clicked on her message, finding images of her addressing the crowd. Hayden stood by her side in a couple of shots, but Tatiana starred in most of them.

Still incapable of taking a bad picture, she stunned in every frame.

“I’m not featured in any of these?” I asked.

“Nope, but that’s because yours are all on the front page of *The New York Post*.” She groaned. “On the plus side, three hundred of your thirsty fangirls bought year-long memberships today. You mind stopping by again soon, so I can get more?”

“Not at all.” I smiled. “Anything else?”

“Hayden is setting up custom fittings for the wedding tuxedos soon. He would love to have you onboard.”

“Anything other than that?”

“Tatiana is planning my bachelorette party. You’re not invited.”

“I wouldn’t show up if I was.” I held back a laugh. “How does her fiancé feel about her planning something like that?”

“Her *what*?”

“Her fiancé.”

“Ha!” She snorted. “Tatiana isn’t engaged.”

“She’s wearing an engagement ring in all these photos.”

“She probably grabbed that thing from her collection or something,” she said. “None of her boyfriends have ever been worthy of marriage. Trust me.”

“Not even her current one?” I pressed.

“Especially him, since he doesn’t exist.” She laughed. “Oh, great. Ten more of your fangirls are here, so I’ll have to call you later. Want me to tell them you said hello?”

“Please do,” I said. “Bye, Crown.”

She ended the call, and I leaned back in my chair. Before I could contemplate why Tatiana lied to me, a loud “Attempted exit! Attempted exit!” alarm reverberated through my condo.

*What the hell?*

I stepped out of the room and walked down the hallway, stopping when I saw Madeline tugging on the door handle. I watched as she pushed and pulled to no avail, clearly not understanding what I meant when I said she wasn’t allowed to leave.

“Going somewhere, Miss Dawson?” I asked.

“No, I’m just hungry. I need to grab something to eat.”

“I have a personal chef on call.” I crossed my arms. “I told you that two hours ago.”

“I don’t want to bother him.” She looked nervous. “Besides, I’m not sure if it’s fair to ask someone to make sushi on such short notice.”

“He makes that every week for me.” I stepped closer. “You can let go of the handle now.”

She gripped it tighter. “How long do you plan to keep me here?”

“Until you come up with a solution for the problem you’ve caused.”

“Oh, right. Well, I have *tons* of solutions!”

“Good to know.” I crossed my arms. “Let’s hear them.”

“I think I’d be able to present them better after taking a long shower at home and changing into something more comfortable.”

“Stop fucking with me.” I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and called my housekeeper.

“Yes, Mr. Carter?” she answered.

“Can you make sure there are fresh towels and sheets in the east wing? My new publicist may need to stay a few days.”

“Right away, sir.”

“Thank you.” I ended the call and dialed my contact at Dolce & Gabbana next, requesting her to stop by and size Madeline for a week’s worth of clothes.

“What else do you need?” I asked her. “I assure you, it can all be handled here.”

“Some stuff can’t be, though.” She tugged on the door again as if it would magically give way.

“I’m waiting,” I said.

“I am, too.” Ralph appeared. “I mean, I’m fine staying in the north wing as a guest forever, but we need a concrete plan to work with ASAP.”

“Fine.” Madeline finally let go. “We have three options. One, we can...” she mumbled the rest of her words.

“I didn’t catch any of that,” Ralph said. “Can you repeat it?”

“Two—” She ignored him, then she mumbled once more. “And three, we can um...”

“Can you speak English, please?”

“We need to hire an actress to play your fiancée because there’s no way you’re ever getting out of this.” The words rushed from her lips.

“I’m so sorry I ever said anything because I was trying to do a good job and be creative. Please don’t fire me because I really tried to fix it an hour ago, but it got out of hand again, so please don’t be mad.”

I blinked, still processing the “hire an actress” line.

“How did you try to fix this situation an hour ago?” Ralph asked. “You were rocking back and forth on the sofa then, from what I remember.”

She didn’t answer him.

“As long as we can keep the press talking about Mr. Carter’s visit to his sister’s ice rink in New York, I think we’ll be—” He stopped talking mid-sentence after glancing at his phone.

His face reddened as he glared at the screen.

“What’s wrong, Ralph?” I asked.

“I think we need to call that ambulance after all.” He looked over at Madeline. “But not for you or me...”

—

## THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,

The sexiest fighter alive has finally been spotted in public!

Stepping out of Mandalay Bay in a three-piece suit that clung to his muscles, he was flanked by his former (now current?) manager Ralph Ellis and Madeline Dawson, the former CEO of the ‘I Hate Travis Carter’ website. (Hopefully, he’s suing the shit out of her for all the rumors she started over the years. Remember when she said he contracted herpes after a yacht party?)

Anyway, according to a very trustworthy source, he has been “secretly engaged” for months and is planning to get married in the very city that he “owns.”

Although we’re personally calling bullshit on him being tied down to one woman—this man is not (& has never EVER been) the monogamous type—we had no choice but to do our due diligence.

We called every wedding venue in a 500-mile radius, visited 218 high-end dress shops, and even reached out to former members of Mr. Carter’s team.

No business has anything on the books for an upcoming event for him, and his former team members refused to offer a simple “Yes” or “No” when asked if they’ve ever met this mystery woman.

It’s sleuthing time, fans!

Let's see if we can find out who she is for ourselves. Or if she even exists.

*Stay tuned for more news & updates,*

*The Snarky Glove*

SIX



PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Manhattan, New York*

**Subject: Urgent: Your Account is Past Due**

**Subject: [Important] Unpaid Charges**

**Subject: Problems with Your Account**

**M**y heart raced as I refreshed my inbox.

Not a single message held inquiries from new clients. There were no replies to my desperate requests for brand sponsorships.

Opening my drafts folder, I stared at my last resort emergency plan: Call Dad & Elaine.

That option was listed after “Die in shame,” so I knew I could never follow through.

I hadn’t spoken to my family in years, and I wanted to hold off on letting them back into my life for as long as possible.

*Time to try and figure out TikTok one more time.*

SIX & A HALF

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Caesar's Palace*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“**T**ravis, over here!” “Are you upset about losing a sponsor to Juarez?” “Are the rumors about you not wanting a rematch true?”

I ignored the photogs as they followed me through the elaborate marble hallways of the casino.

“Is Ralph Windsor back on your team?” “When is your sister’s wedding to Hayden Hunter?” “Why haven’t we seen your fiancée?”

My lead security guard kept them at a distance while we walked, offering “No comment,” with every step.

He opened the door to a private garden and ushered me inside.

“I won’t let anyone who isn’t approved through, sir,” he said. “I have a few other guys at every entry point as well.”

“Do they have a copy of the approved list?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Ryan.”

I walked down a winding pathway until I saw Ralph and Madeline standing near a water fountain.

A set of bright red weights and a custom bench waited for me on the grass.

“Glad you’re here on time.” Ralph said. “I’ve got some very good news.”

“Spill it.”

“The UFC commissioner called this morning and said he hopes to be invited to your wedding,” he said. “He’s thrilled to know that you have a softer side and he wants to discuss shooting a television special on his dime.”

“I thought you said, ‘good’ news.”

“That’s the end of it.” He sighed. “As for the bad news, *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, and every other magazine cover you’ve ever graced is practically frothing at the mouth for an interview about your new softer side. They want your fiancée to do the interview and cover with you, though.”

“I can’t believe this shit.” I walked over to the weight set and picked up a barbell.

“We’ve got auditions with top influencers, Lisa Summers, Courtney York, and Sadie Singer.” Madeline followed me with a folder. “I haven’t briefed them on the real project, but the three of us need to discuss today’s latest development before we begin their sessions.”

I waited for an explanation, but neither of them said a word.

They stood there, exchanging nervous glances.

Not in a rush to hear whatever it was, I lay back on the bench and started my resistance routine.

“One...” I exhaled as I brought the weight down to my chest. “Two...”

“This may seem like a huge inconvenience,” Ralph said, “but Miss Dawson has done quite a bit of research on how these things work, and I’m with her one hundred percent.”

“Three...” I kept my gaze on the cloudless sky. “Four...”

“Rip the Band-Aid off, Mr. Windsor,” Madeline whispered. “The quicker you do it, the quicker he can get mad and get over it.”

“Very well, then,” Ralph said. “The fiancée you pick will need to appear with you in public over the course of at least ninety-days.”

“*Excuse me?*” I immediately sat up. “How many days?”

“Ninety. That’s when most of your contract renewals start anyway.” Madeline avoided making eye contact. “It’s probably best if we plan for this arrangement to be as real as possible.”

“Ralph?” I looked at him. “Give me an alternative. Now.”

“There isn’t one.”

I tapped my fingers on the edge of the bench, weighing the pros and cons of retiring.

I’d always wanted to drop my gloves at the center of the octagon in front of my fans and give them a “Thank you for everything” speech, but I was willing to let go of that pomp and circumstance if it meant dealing with this nonsense.

“We’ve allowed a Miss Heather Woods into the garden.” Ryan’s voice came through Ralph’s walkie-talkie. “She’s being accompanied by a guard.”

Our conversation stalled as the woman’s footsteps neared, and she rounded the corner seconds later.

“*Ohmygod*, hi.” She blushed as her eyes met mine. “I’m Heather Woods.”

“I’m Travis Carter.” I extended my hand, but she didn’t shake it.

She hugged me instead.

“I know who you are.” She gushed. “I’m a huge fan of yours and I’m so grateful for the opportunity to work with you.”

I waited for her to let me go, but she hugged me even tighter.

“Okay, that’s enough, Miss Woods.” Madeline cleared her throat. “We have a tight audition schedule, so jump right into the scene whenever you’re ready.”

“Yeah, act as if we’re not here,” Ralph said.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. Then she slapped my ass, squeezing it hard. “It’s so good to see you after such a long day, honey.”

“Is it?” I moved her hand away. “Those lines aren’t in my script.”

“I was a bad bunny while you were at work today.” She winked. “When we leave this party, I want you to spank me like I spanked you last night.”

“Did we somehow get different versions?”

“If you hit me hard enough, I’ll suck your toes until you come.”

“No, really,” I said. “Can I see what you’re reading from?”

“All these people are jealous of our love,” she continued. “Let’s kiss and give them something to be jealous about.”

“Okay, cut.” Ralph finally intervened. “Miss Woods, are you mixing up this audition with something else you have planned?”

“Not that I know of. This is an engagement commercial for Tiffany & Company’s latest line of diamonds, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, I thought that the script you sent over was a little too tame and lame, if you catch my drift.” She smiled. “Whenever me and my husband go to parties, this is a little game we play, so I thought I’d infuse some realism so I could get a better feel for my character.”

“Wait a second.” Ralph said. “You’re already married?”

“Ten years and counting.” She nodded. “That’s why I’m perfect for this role.”

“The top requirement was literally a demand that you needed to be single for this.”

“How is that even legal, though?” She crossed her arms. “It’s a *commercial*. No one has to believe that I’m engaged to

him. Hell, I'd never believe Travis Carter has a real fiancée anyway."

"Miss Woods—"

"Oh my god, I can't even say those words with a straight face." She bent over, laughing. "Travis Carter. Fiancée? Bahahahaha..."

"That rumor made everyone in my office lose their minds." She held her stomach. "Whew. Fiancée? *Him?*"

The three of us stared at her until she stopped.

"Sorry about that." She cleared her throat. "Should I pick up where I left off now or what?"

"Actually, if you don't mind, can you follow the security guard through the garden, please?" He smiled. "We should've given you a complimentary tour to get a vibe for the commercial before we began. Our apologies."

"No worries!" She looked giddy as she was led away. "I'll be more than ready for take two when I return."

"I'll handle this." Ralph read my mind before I could say a word. "I'll make sure the other girls are better prepared."

"Speaking of which, do you have any secret flames or old girlfriends who you've been seen with before?" Madeline asked. "Any women your fans would vaguely remember?"

"I've never dated any woman publicly since becoming a professional."

"Privately works as well."

"No, Madeline. Never."

"Hmmm." She paced the grass. "Well, a female friend might work as well. We could make it look like a friends to lovers relationship."

"My little sister is my closest female friend."

"Yeah, I don't think adding 'incest' to your list of public transgressions is what we need right now."

“Funny,” I said. “In that case, I don’t have any female friends.”

“Well, unless you know someone who owes you one hell of a favor, we’ll have to continue weeding through the chaff. Oh, and by the way, can we go ahead and try a different location for these auditions because—”

“Wait. What did you just say about these auditions?” I interrupted her spiel.

“That we need to keep weeding through the chaff.”

“No.” I shook my head. “After that.”

“Someone who owes you one hell of a favor?”

“Yes, *that*,” I said, smiling. “We can stop the auditions now.”

“You mean reschedule them for whenever we find a new location?”

“No, cancel them,” I said. “Every single one. I have someone who can help me with this.”

“Who?” Ralph asked.

“Yeah, who?” Madeline looked worried. “We’re cutting it pretty close.”

“I’m aware.” I stepped back. “I’ll fill you in after she agrees to this.”

“How do you know that this ‘she’ will help you, Travis?” Ralph asked.

“Because she doesn’t have a choice.”



SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Midnight*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**H**ot streams scalded my back as I stood in the shower.

I'd been standing in here for over an hour, contemplating how to get what I needed from Tatiana. If there was any woman who could convincingly act her ass off, it was her.

There wasn't much room for negotiation, no space for "maybe later," because despite how things had ended between us, we both believed in keeping promises.

I never broke one with her; I knew that she'd never break this one with me. (Well, minus the one when she swore she'd never leave me. I was still learning to deal with that one.)

Turning off the water, I wrapped a towel around my waist and headed to the kitchen.

I picked up my favorite bourbon and took a long swig.

My phone buzzed on the counter.

RALPH

Who is the woman you have in mind, Travis? I've called you six times...

MADELINE

I'm still planning to audition alternatives in case your woman—whoever she is—doesn't work out.

I set my phone on 'Do Not Disturb' mode and carried the bourbon into my bedroom.

Through the windows, Sin City's lights beckoned me to come out and play, to have a reckless night on the town like I used to, but I resisted their pleas.

Pacing the floor, I guzzled the alcohol until it burned my chest. Then I opened a hidden photo album on my phone titled 'She Doesn't Exist Anymore.'

I vowed to delete it year after year, but I never fully committed. On my worst days, opening it and reliving the best moments of my past was the only thing that reminded me that I once had someone outside the octagon.

I entered the passcode—the date I first met Tatiana, and hundreds of images and videos appeared onscreen.

Tatiana skated toward me in an empty arena, slept naked against my chest, and kissed me while we walked in a private park. In other shots, we swam naked in a hotel pool, laughed in a rainstorm, and sipped slushies at an off-road 7-Eleven.

When I reached the worst part of the album, my bottle of bourbon was empty.

There were screenshots of two text messages that still set my heart aflame to this day.

TATI (MINE)

I'm so sorry for hanging up on you earlier, but I can't handle this relationship anymore & I'd appreciate it if you never called me again.

TATI (MINE)

Wait...I don't think I'll ever be able to 100% repay you for that special thing you did for me, but I meant what I said that night we were together in Tacoma. If you ever need a big favor in the future—even if we're eighty years old—I'll do it without question. It'll never be too late to redeem.

I flipped past those images and continued scrolling through our memories.

It was four o'clock in the morning by the time I finished.

Scrolling down to Tatiana's number, I hit call.

It went straight to voicemail.

"You've reached Tatiana Brave." Her voicemail sounded. "Please leave your message at the sound of the beep!"

I hung up and considered calling her from my security guard's phone.

Assuming that she wouldn't answer that either, I called her again.

"You've reached Tatiana Brave. Please leave your message at the sound of the beep!"

*Beep!*

"Tatiana, it's currently four o'clock in the morning, and I can't sleep because I'm drunk and wide-awake thinking about you."

"How I was almost yours, and you were almost mine."

"My life is currently in shambles, and my entire fighting career is hanging in the balance. So, I have to make some huge changes."

"Since you still owe me that favor from years ago, I need to cash it in now."

"I need you to pretend to be my fiancée for ninety days."

"Just ninety days."

"We don't have to talk behind closed doors, and we don't have to try to be friends again. We don't even have to kiss—

even though I can guarantee no man has ever kissed you better...”

“I can promise that we won’t touch either. Although the last time we ran into each other, you looked like you wanted me all over again. Don’t deny it.”

“Anyway, I’m just cashing in that delayed ‘I.O.U.’ that you swore would ‘never be too late to redeem.’”

“I’m not asking for much. I just want you to pretend it’s real, for me.”

I ended the call, but then I called right back and left another message.

“It’s me again, Tatiana,” I said. “As you know, I’m not big on waiting, so you have until Monday to give me an answer.”

EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Monday*

*Manhattan, New York*

“We’ve already given you an extra sixty days of leniency, Miss Brave.” Someone who hated their job at the internet company groaned over the line. “That’s far past our usual policy and way more generous than we’ve been with anyone else.”

“Please.” I begged. “I just need a little more time. I can put fifty dollars on the bill sometime this weekend, and seventy on it sometime next week.”

“And if you continue paying at that rate, you’ll get your internet back in three months,” he said. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Times are really hard for me, and I’m trying to pay as much as I can.”

“Ma’am, I get paid twelve dollars an hour. I don’t get paid enough to care.”

“Ughhhh!” I screamed as I ended the call.

Picking up the electric bill, I dialed the number and braced myself for another unsympathetic employee.

“Thank you for calling New York Lights,” a robotic voice answered. “We are currently experiencing a high call volume, but we appreciate your business. Please hold.”

A loud knock sounded at my door, so I placed the call on speaker.

“One second, Miss Lewis!” I grabbed the twenty dollars I’d borrowed last week and rushed to the door.

When I swung it open, I didn’t see my neighbor.

It was Travis.

Standing under an umbrella with his jaw clenched, he was wearing a dark grey hoodie and jeans. Instead of the devilish smile he’d worn in my fantasy last night, he looked pissed as hell.

“Your sister doesn’t live here,” I said. “Would you like her address?”

“I didn’t fly here for my sister.” He looked me over, and my nipples hardened under his gaze.

“Well, whatever you flew here for,” I said, crossing my arms, “is not in my apartment, so…” I started shutting the door, but he wedged his foot between the frame and pressed his hand on the knob.

“Your line doesn’t ring when I call,” he said. “Is my number still blocked?”

“I’m sure you’re not surprised.”

“Not in the slightest,” he said. “I left you a voicemail a few days ago, though. I’m waiting for an answer.”

“You and everyone else.”

“What does that mean?”

“That I’ve been busy and my inbox is filled with tons of other unwanted messages, so you’ll have to keep waiting,” I said. “Preferably someplace other than my doorstep.”

“I’m not waiting another second.” He closed the gap between us. “I suggest you invite me inside.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Don’t make me ask you again.”



“You haven’t *asked* me anything, Travis. Try that and I’ll consider inviting you inside, if I feel like it.”

“Okay.” He let down his umbrella and grabbed my hand, pulling me into the living room.

“I’ll make this quick,” he said. “You owe me a favor and I’m here to redeem it.”

*What the...* “Please don’t tell me you suddenly expect me to pay you back for all the spicy tacos we ate together in the past.”

“I don’t.” A slow smile spread across his lips, but he didn’t let it linger. “This is *a lot* more than that, and we’ve reached the part of the conversation where you ask me what the ‘favor’ is.”

“I only ask about things I want to know.” I inhaled the sexy scent of his cologne. “I honestly can’t help you or anyone else with anything at this point in my life.”

“My apologies for giving you the illusion of a *choice*.” He looked into my eyes, and the room was suddenly ten times smaller.

“The door is behind you, Travis.” I ignored the ditzy, desperate rhythm in my chest. “I would say ‘thank you’ for stalking me and showing up without an invitation, but—”

“I need you to marry me.”

*WHAT?*

His words hung in the air for several seconds, floating between the realms of ‘what-is-this-fuckery’ and ‘sentences-that-make-no-sense.’

“We should discuss the details,” he said, looking around the room. “Preferably with the lights on.”

“Travis, when I said I’d always owe you a favor, I was thinking something similar to what you did for me.”

“Then you should’ve been specific,” he said. “A deal is a deal.”

I glanced behind him, waiting for a camera crew to burst through the door and announce that this scene was part of a ‘Blast From Your Past Says Something Dumb’ game show.

I was about to search him for a hidden microphone, but another loud knock sounded.

“I knew it,” I said, stepping backward. “This was very entertaining, Travis.”

When I opened the door, I saw the woman I’d seen in the stairwell weeks ago.

“Oh wow.” She tilted her head to the side. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re the only woman who’s ever made my panties wet at first sight.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*”

“Your name is Tatiana Brave, right?”

I didn’t answer.

“You probably don’t remember me, but my name is Madeline Dawson, and I tracked you down from security camera footage and paid a hacker to find your address.”

She said those words with a straight face, and I was now concerned for my life.

“Contrary to what a certain someone said, I know that you’re not a ghost.” She leaned forward and sniffed me. “Is that Versace? Dolce & Gabbana?”

“Um...” I started to shut the door on her, but she pushed her way inside.

“Well, hello there, Mr. Carter.” She stepped in front of Travis. “Great minds think alike, huh?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“What are *you* doing here?” She looked between us. “Then again, sorry for interrupting. I’ll um, stand here and fly back to Vegas with you after, right? I think I’ve been spoiled after flying private, and it kills me to fly in coach...”

He shook his head before returning his attention to me.

“I need you to pretend like you’re mine for three months,” he said. “That time includes official parties and attending all my press conferences and public engagements. You’ll stay with me as well, but I have plenty of space for you to live your own life whenever you’re not helping me.”

His lips continued to move, spouting off a never-ending list of things that were *never* happening. By the time he finished, he was walking toward the door as if this was a done deal.

“Let me know what time my jet needs to pick you up on Saturday,” he said. “I’ll handle it from there.”

“You must have missed the part when I said that I can’t help you with anything.”

“I heard you loud and clear.”

“Good,” I said. “I won’t be there. I can’t afford to leave my life behind for a month of play pretend.”

“*Three months* of play pretend.”

“Same thing.” I shrugged. “Besides having no interest in doing that, I have bills to pay and clients to train.”

“Mr. Carter left out the part about payment.” Stalker Woman stepped between us. “He’s willing to pay a premium for your assistance with this. Just name the amount.”

“I’m not for sale.”

“*Name the amount*,” Travis said.

“Five hundred thousand dollars.” The words rushed from my lips before I could think them through. “Minimum.”

Travis raised an eyebrow, and Stalker Woman pulled a pen and pad from her bag.

“That sounds more than doable,” she said. “Do you have any objections to that, Mr. Carter?”

“Not yet.”

“Okay, well, I’m sure we can work out some flight arrangements for Miss Brave so she can return here and handle

her most important clients whenever she needs to. If there's nothing else, let's discuss the five hundred thousand dollar payment and other details."

"Wait a minute," Travis said. "I thought your beauty brand crossed the seven-figure mark in sales last year."

"How did you—" I paused, making a mental note to change the inflated lies on my website. "How do you know that?"

"I don't, but I'm curious why you need half a million from an old friend if you're doing so well. Seems pretty damn greedy to me."

"You and I are *not* friends," I said. "And my brand is none of your business."

"I guess there's nothing else we need to discuss then," he said. "Miss Dawson, draw up a contract for Miss Brave for the unfair and ridiculous amount she's asking for."

"Make it *two million*," I said.

"Excuse me?" Travis looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Why exactly do you need that much?"

"I forgot to calculate the cost of dealing with your assholery. This new version of 'Travis Carter' is different from the one I used to know."

"Hmmm. Good point." Miss Dawson nodded. "That's a very good point."

"Two million dollars is out of the question."

"I don't see why," I said. "You make more than that in a single fight night, and it's still far less than what your lowest sponsor pays you."

"And how exactly do you know that?" He narrowed his eyes at me.

I didn't answer.

"So—" Miss Dawson clicked her pen. "We're good at two million?"

“No,” I said, unsure of what was coming over me. “Let’s go ahead and make it four. That number sounds more fitting and official.”

“Now you’re just fucking with me, Tatiana.”

“Am I?” I asked. “Someone once told me that figure skaters don’t make that much money anyway. I might as well cash in while I can.”

His face reddened, and he looked seconds away from losing his shit. “Tatiana, I swear to God—”

“Now seems like the perfect time for a prayer, doesn’t it?” Miss Dawson interjected. “Shall the three of us join hands and see what He thinks we should do about this situation?”

We both shot her a blank stare.

“It was only a suggestion.” She cleared her throat. “I believe Mr. Carter is more than willing to pay you four million, Miss Brave. With all due respect, Mr. Carter, hurry up and agree before she increases the price.”

“I also need the money paid to me in installments starting today,” I said.

Travis crossed his arms. “You’re truly worried that I won’t pay you at the end?”

“No, but I need some of it upfront so I can get ahead of things before I venture off to make-believe-land.”

“I’ll make sure that gets handled, Miss Brave.” Miss Dawson looked between us. “Do we have a deal? Four million dollars in exchange for a ninety-day engagement?”

“Yes,” we said in unison.

“Can you shake hands on that for my sanity, please?”

Travis held out his hand, and I took my time shaking it, feeling warmth travel through my body at his slight touch.

His fingers lingered against mine for what felt like forever, and then he whispered, “I know it’s been a while, but do I need to give you instructions on how to reach a release?”

I jerked my hand back.

“Good girl,” he said. “Looks like you’re still good at letting go.”

“I learned from the best.”

“I’m glad you know that’s what I’ll always be for you .” He looked me over. “We can handle any further negotiations over the phone.”

“Why?” I asked. “Is it too hard to stay in the same room with me?”

“Yes.” He left without another word. I watched him cross the street and slip into a black town car.

“Come on, come on...” Miss Dawson hastily flipped the light switch up and down.

“The lights don’t work,” I said.

“Nonsense!” She continued flipping the switch. “I had a place like this once. You have to jiggle it the right way. The quicker they come on, the quicker we can hash out the ins and outs of this contract.”

“They don’t work because I can’t afford to pay the bill,” I said. “They’re not coming on.”

“Oh.”

I lit a white candle and gestured for her to have a seat.

“Um, no offense,” she said, “but why were you playing hardball if you’re this broke?”

“Because this is only a temporary setback.”

“Got it.” She stared at me. “Personal question, just for my sake. How long did you two date in the past?”

“We never dated in the past.”

“Right. Well, how long were you friends then?”

“I’m just now meeting him today, Miss Dawson,” I said. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re both very good at this already.” She smiled. “I think this will be a breeze. Just one thing, though. You might want to tone down the lusty look in your eyes when he comes around. Unless that’s real and you’re not pretending?”

I changed the subject before I could call off the deal.

*It’s only ninety days, Tati. Only ninety days.*

# ACT SIX



BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Reno, Nevada*

“**W**here the hell did you misplace your brain?” Miss Price pushes my leg off the barre. “Why haven’t you brought it in with you today?”

I catch my balance seconds before face-planting on the wood floor.

“You promised me no distractions this season.” She fumes. “Yet, here you are, looking like a bumbling beginner.”

Standing, I position my leg on the barre again and bite my tongue.

My coach has done nothing except point out mistakes today, critiquing the very way that I *breathe*. At this rate, I’ll never leave the ballet studio and get to the ice.

“I’m not distracted at all, Miss Price,” I say. “I promise I’m focused.”

“Then why are you applying to overseas fashion and business programs behind my back?”

“What?” I feign confusion, but I’ve long hoped she’d never find out about this.

“The director from some Russian school called me for a recommendation this morning.” Her face is redder than ever. “At what point were you planning to tell me about that, Miss Brave?”

*Never.*

“I have dreams outside of skating,” is all I can say.

“Are these ‘dreams’ the same reason why you’ve shown up late to practice six days in a row?”

“No, I...” I let my sentence die.

I’ve only been late by a few minutes each time, all thanks to talking to Travis on the phone until sunrise, but I don’t dare to mention that. The last time I answered one of her rhetorical questions, she made me run laps until five in the morning.

“I wouldn’t mind a little tardiness here and there,” she says, “but I have to draw the line at having a boyfriend, especially when he decides to randomly show up here like some teenage lover boy.”

“Wait, *what?*” I shake my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Take the rest of this wasted rehearsal off and come back as the ‘Tatiana Brave’ that I came out of retirement to coach.”

“Miss Price—”

“*Out.*” She shooed me away. “Now.”

I sigh and grab my bag on the way out of the room.

I head downstairs and make my way to the parking lot, stopping when I see Travis leaning against the hood of his car.

Wearing a black muscle shirt and dark blue jeans, he’s flexing his hands.

He smiles at me as I approach, and my brain instantly short-circuits into fantasies about the way his lips feel against mine.

“Why did you tell the receptionist that you were my boyfriend?” I ask.

“I didn’t.” He sits up. “Is that what I am now?”

“My coach just put me out and doesn’t want to see me until tomorrow. She yelled at me for being unfocused.”

“She’s been yelling at you about that long before we started talking,” he says. “You complain about it every night.”

“Speaking of which...” I adjust my leotard’s shoulder strap. “I didn’t plan on having a boyfriend this season.”

“So, I *am* your boyfriend?”

“You were,” I say, shrugging. “Today will be our last day together, because I’m officially breaking up with you. I wish you nothing but the best.”

“Okay, Tatiana.”

“Thanks for taking this so well. I didn’t think it would be so easy.”

“It won’t be.” His lips land against mine, making me forget whatever I was about to say.

Rubbing his hands against my sides, he whispers, “Get in the car.”

“Wait.” I catch my breath. “I thought you were doing a showcase for the UFC in Vegas this weekend.”

“I am,” he says. “I wanted to come see you first, though.”

I look up at the ballet studio windows, spotting Miss Price. She’s shaking her head as she sips from a coffee mug.

I’m starting to wonder if this is all a test, if I’m supposed to rush back inside and throw myself at her mercy.

She shuts the blinds seconds later.

Before I can react, Travis kisses my neck and gently pushes me onto the passenger seat. Then he moves behind the wheel and drives onto the road.

“How many ‘You’re unfocused’ lectures did she give you today?” he asks.

“I stopped counting at five.” I hold back a sigh. “Does your coach yell at you a lot, too?”

“Mr. Ralph is more of a manager than a coach, but he isn’t the yelling type,” he says. “He gets to me by being sarcastic and giving me blank stares whenever I fuck up.”

“Lucky you. I’m feeling a lot of anxiety lately, so as soon as I take the edge off, I’m sure I’ll perform better.”

“Why are you having anxiety at all?”

“Because—” I bite my tongue. I can’t tell him that his sister and me are now neck and neck in the international standings, and I’m only a few competitions away from knocking her down to where she belongs.

It’s a bit of an unspoken boundary I’ve drawn over the past several weeks: Pretend Penelope doesn’t exist whenever we’re together, no matter how badly I wish I could talk to him about my biggest rival.

“Because what, Tatiana?” Travis asks, coasting into an empty parking lot.

“Because the next three competitions are the hardest ones on my schedule.” I go with the vague approach. “I need to dominate, but I also need to relax. I can’t be at my best if I’m wound up this tight, you know?”

“Somewhat.” He leans over to unbuckle my seatbelt. Then he pulls me into his lap.

“How do you plan to relax tonight?” he whispers against my mouth before kissing me.

I can’t answer. I’m too entranced by the feel of his lips.

“Tell me,” he whispers again.

“Tell you what?”

“How—” He bites down on my bottom lip, gently tugging it forward with his teeth. “Do you plan to relax?”

“Oh...” I struggle to catch my breath. “I’ll probably take a bubble bath and read a few chapters of my favorite novel.”

“Hmmm.” He releases my lip. “Is that it?”

“If that doesn’t work, I’ll read a few chapters in my second-favorite book,” I say. “Then I’ll play chess online.”

He looks at me as if I’ve grown two heads.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“No wonder you’re so wound up,” he says. “You need to do something that doesn’t require you to think.”

“You mean, find someone to sleep with like you do?”

“You know, for a virgin, you think about sex a lot.” He smirks. “But no. For the record, I haven’t had sex in over a year.”

*Ha!* I snort. “I refuse to believe that. I’ve seen the way girls throw themselves at you.”

“Have you seen me catch any of them?”

“My stepsister said you used to take a different girl home after every fight.”

“I went with whoever offered to buy me dinner.” He smiles. “I was broke as shit, and I didn’t give a damn about chivalry when I was starving.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.” He trails a finger against my mouth before sliding his seat in reverse, sending me with him. Then he slips a hand through my curls.

“When’s the last time you fucked yourself?” he asks.

“Huh?” I suck in a breath. “What do you—”

“*Mean?*” He finishes my sentence with a smile. “When’s the last time you slid your fingers inside your pussy and made yourself come?”

My cheeks heat as he continues toying with my hair.

“I make myself come all the time,” I say. “Orgasms unravel easily for me.”

“Is that so?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah.” I shrug. “That’s technically what I was implying with the favorite book thing. I’ll reread the spiciest parts and use my other hand to envision the things being done to me.”

He looks as if he doesn’t believe a single word I’m saying.

“I’m not lying, Travis.” I’m lying my ass off. “Self pleasure is nothing new to me.”

“Okay.” He’s still smiling. “Then show me how it’s done.”

“*What?*”

“You heard me,” he says, his voice low. “Let me watch you play with your pussy.”

I swallow. “Here? Now?”

“Yes.” He nods. “*Now.*”

I remain frozen, certain he’ll laugh and say he’ll take my word on things, but no laughter leaves his lips.

Instead, he reaches behind me and pushes the steering wheel back, giving me more room in his lap. Then he slides his hands under my thighs and lifts me, positioning my ass on the edge of the dashboard.

“I’m waiting,” he says. “Is your pussy even wet yet?”

*Soaking.* “Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

I don’t answer him.

Blushing under his gaze, I push my leotard’s fabric to the side and press a finger against my dripping wet slit.

“You should use *two* fingers,” he says. “They won’t be as thick as my cock, of course, but one won’t get the job done at all.”

I oblige, rubbing my clit in a slow circle, watching him watch me.

Without warning, he leans forward and blows a kiss against my lower lips.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

“Nothing.” My breath hitches as he blows against me once more.

“That’s a bit of a problem, Tati.” He looks up and into my eyes. “You can’t fully unwind if your mind isn’t in the right place.”

My fingers stall, and he taps my hand, silently commanding me to keep going.

“You should think about me pulling you down from this dashboard and making you sit on my cock,” he said. “And while I’m sucking on your tits, you’re riding me and begging me to fuck you harder.”

“But—”

“They’re just *thoughts*,” he says, kissing my stomach. “I have those about you all the time without ever acting on them. Unfortunately...”

“Okay.” I try to envision exactly what he’s mentioned, but I can’t focus on anything else at this moment. Not when he’s rubbing his hands against my thighs and looking at me this way.

My body stills as he covers my hand with his, as he whispers, “Would you like me to help you with this?”

I nod.

“I need to hear you *say it*.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“I would like you to help me come.”

“Good girl.” He pushes my fingers out of the way and grips my hips.

Leaning forward, he presses his mouth against my pussy, swallowing my soaking wet clit between his lips.

I moan as he tastes me and I press my palms against the roof.

He slides two thick fingers deep inside me between his torturous kisses, pushing me into a realm of pleasure I’ve never felt before.

My nails scratch the panel above us, and I tilt my head back as he whispers, “You taste so fucking good...”

“Travis...” My pussy is throbbing against his mouth. “Travis, slow down...”

He doesn’t adjust his rhythm at all.

Instead, he hums against me, making this unfamiliar pleasure even more intense.

“I can’t—I can’t take this...” I moan in protest and try to adjust my position, but he doesn’t allow me to pull away from him; his grip on my hips is far too strong.

He’s devouring me like he has no plans of ever stopping, like he’s determined to render me absolutely useless for the rest of the year.

Steam fogs the windows while his kisses become longer and his fingers slide deeper.

Before I know it, I’m shutting my eyes and no longer in control of my own body.

“*Ahhhh, ahhhh...*” I throw my head back as my legs begin shaking, and then I’m lost in a sea of ecstasy.

Wave after wave of pleasure wracks through my body, drowning me under a tide so forceful and fast that I’m forced to finally let go of the roof and scream his name at the top of my lungs.

*Fuck...*

Travis holds me tight until the shaking stops, until I feel like I’m back on earth again.

“Are you still anxious?” He whispers against my skin.

I shake my head, still on a high. “No.”

“Would you like me to devour you again to make sure it stays that way tonight?”

“Yes, please...”



NINE

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*The Parker International Hotel*

*Manhattan, New York*

**90 Day Agreement**

**T**his agreement serves as a record that Travis Carter is hiring Tatiana Brave for temporary acting services ~~since she's done a stellar job at pretending like he didn't fucking exist for years.~~

She will live in Las Vegas, ~~the city that he owns,~~ for the entire term of ninety days. She will have access to Mr. Carter's private jet in the event that she needs to travel elsewhere for her seven-figure business. ~~(She clearly doesn't need four million of Mr. Carter's dollars, but he is being generous because that's the type of amazing fucking man he is.)~~

**Prompt arrival to all promotional events is required,** but under no circumstance is intimacy required behind closed doors. ~~Even though Miss Brave enjoyed Mr. Carter's bedroom skills immensely in the past and could use a reminder, he won't bring that up...~~

Both parties will sign a non-disclosure agreement upon confirming these terms and will never publicly disparage each other at the end of this deal.

I PRINTED the sixth draft of my terms and handed it to Ralph. "What do you think of this version?"

“I think you need to hold off on writing anything ever again.” He rolled his eyes. “I’ll have Miss Dawson craft a contract that we can actually use for this.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad.”

“It’s not, it’s fucking terrible.” He took off his reading glasses. “I need to ask you something, and I need you to be one hundred percent honest with me.”

“I’m listening.”

“Are you going to be able to handle this long of an arrangement with Miss Tatiana?”

“I wouldn’t be in this hotel suite sorting out the deal if I thought otherwise.”

“It’s just that...” He paused. “There are plenty of aspiring actresses who could probably use the publicity, and I can call a top Hollywood agency to pull a few strings.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why the sudden hesitation?”

“Because the last time she left you, I had to pick you up off the floor every day.”

“Not every day, Ralph.”

“You’re right.” He crossed his arms. “It was every night, too.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“I just know how much she means to you.”

“*Meant*. What we had is in the past tense now.”

“Right.” He sighed. “Well, Miss Dawson said that she seems quite serious about keeping this deal professional, so don’t forget that she was the one who broke up with you for whatever reason.”

“She didn’t have a reason at all.”

“Exactly. So, please don’t let her in, and please don’t allow her to break you again.”

“She didn’t *break me*, Ralph.”

He gave me a blank stare.

“She didn’t.” I shrugged. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Did I ever tell you how I saved all six hundred and seventeen drunk voicemails you left after she broke up with you?” he asked. “I also saved all the late-night, ‘How could she do this to me?’ and ‘I feel like I got run over by a Mack truck’ text messages you sent as well. Would you like me to refresh your memory by letting you see them?”

“I won’t let her in again.”

“Thank you.”

NINE & A HALF

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Manhattan, New York*

ME

Meet me at Whimstery Cafe once you see this.  
It's an emergency.

PENELOPE

I just met you there for another "emergency" this morning! Are you dying?

ME

No...

PENELOPE

Are you trying to tell me that you've been secretly in love with me since the day we met? (Hayden thinks so. He said we'd make a cute couple.)

ME

OMFG. No, Penelope. (Hayden is full of shit.)

clutched my coffee and rehearsed my lines for the umpteenth time.

I “We need to talk about Travis, but before that I want you to know that I’ve been lying to you about something,” I whispered. “Well, a couple things actually, and I really need to get them off my chest.”

I hesitated.

This was always the part where I struggled. The part when I was supposed to blurt it all out, to reveal that her brother was the only man I’d ever loved, and that I’d been pretending not to know him all along. Yet, I still couldn’t force myself to say the words.

The thought of her reaction and the potential pain of losing the only female friend I’d ever made hurt too damn much.

*Stop rehearsing and rip it off like a Band-Aid when she gets here...*

Exhaling, I tapped on my phone screen and focused on my ninety-day contract with Travis instead.

I ran a finger along our signatures, realizing he still hadn’t sent me the non-disclosure agreement.

Not wanting to jeopardize the payment, I called Miss Dawson.

“Well, hello there!” she answered on the first ring. “How can I help you, Mrs. Carter-to-be?”

“I haven’t received the NDA from Mr. Carter yet. Is there a problem?”

“Oh, not at all.” She paused. “He said that given your personal history, he trusts you. He’s made me sign like twenty of them, so he must hold you in really high regard, huh?”

I said nothing.

“While I have you, can you tell me what size you wear in dresses and pantsuits?”

“Depends,” I said. “I fluctuate between a four and a six. Why?”

“Mr. Carter set aside two million for me to buy you a designer-level wardrobe and I have every fashion house on

standby.” She yelled my sizes to someone in the background, and I stifled a gasp.

“We’ll do Hermes for at least ten of her new handbags!” She called out before returning her attention to me. “Anyway, if you want, I can insist that Mr. Carter send you an NDA by this evening.”

“That’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Great! Mr. Carter and his team will meet you at Teterboro Airport on Saturday.”

“Got it.” I hung up and signaled for a refill.

Penelope rushed through the doors minutes later.

“This better be life or death.” She plopped down across from me. “Spill the tea.”

“It’s about your brother.”

“Oh. What about him?”

*Just say, “I was sleeping with your brother when we were enemies in the past, and then I kind of fell for him, but then—”*

“Wait, hold that thought.” She interrupted my thoughts. “I wasn’t sure why you’ve been acting so strange today, but I promise that I didn’t forget.”

She pulled a small red gift box from her pocket and set it on the table. “Here you are. Open it.”

“I’ll have to open it later.”

“No, *now*. It’s important.”

I tugged at the ribbon and flipped it open. Inside stood a beautiful necklace with a single charm—a runway replica with red diamonds. The words ‘In memory of Reese Brave’ were etched in tiny print.

“I know today is your mom’s birthday,” she said. “She was born three days before my mom, so I’ve always remembered that.”

My heart swelled, and I drowned my pending confession under a wave of guilt.



“Thank you, Penelope.” My voice cracked. “Thank you so much.”

“Of course.” She leaned over and hugged me. “By the way, you can totally handle being fake-engaged to my asshole brother. It’s only for ninety days.”

“Wait, what?” I looked up. “*He* told you about that?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “He called me right before I got here, actually. What a stupidly brilliant plan that I can’t believe you agreed to take part in. What the hell are you thinking?”

“I…” I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I figured he’d have to do something drastic to repair his image, but I would’ve never guessed an engagement.” She snorted. “With you on his arm, he’ll look a lot better to sponsors for sure.”

“You’re okay with this?”

“I’m more shocked that you’re fine with it, since he used to leave all those mean voicemails, but—” She paused. “You did call him ‘sexy as fuck’ when we went to his last fight months ago, so maybe there’s a bit of attraction there.”

“I was drunk out of my mind.”

“I know.” She laughed. “Just don’t catch feelings for him while you’re away, okay? He’s incapable of loving anyone but himself. That, and his career.”

“He loves you more than anything, Penelope.”

“He loves me by default,” she said. “He’s always been more of a ruling tyrant than an older brother, if I’m being honest.”

“You don’t mean that.” I smiled, but her expression slowly shifted into an emotion I couldn’t quite read.

I’d seen her like this whenever we watched our old competitions together, whenever she’d say, “Another one Travis was too busy to make it to,” or “Guess what my brother’s excuse was for missing this one?”

I never guessed, though.

“He missed out on almost every skating competition when I was at my peak,” she said. “I may not have all my memories back, but I remember him being unapologetic about it because he felt his career was far more important than mine. He even pulled out of coming to see me in the Sochi Olympics at the last minute after *promising* that he’d be there. He fucking promised.”

“I’m sure he had a reason...”

“Whatever it was, he never told me or apologized, and that one still burns to this day.” She let out a slow breath. “I love him like hell, but I’m warning you, he can be a bit much to handle.”

I didn’t utter a word.

As if this discussion was as simple as the weather and the grey skies were long gone, she pulled a copy of *Skate World* from her purse.

“We were the last of our generation, Tati.” She slid it toward me. “So much is different with the competitions now.”

“You still have a subscription to this?”

“I have every issue, with the exception of five.”

“Let me guess, those are the ones where I starred on the front cover?”

“Exactly.” She smiled. “I trust you didn’t buy my editions either.”

“No, I bought every single one of yours,” I said.

“Did you rip out the pages?”

“Right before I set them on fire.”

“How mature.” She laughed. “Would you like to join me for a five-star farewell dinner before leaving me alone in New York?”

“Depends. Are you paying for it?”

“Absolutely.”

—

THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,

There is reason to believe that Travis Carter's number one sponsor—*Nike*—will not be removing him from their coveted list of athletes anytime soon.

Granted, they pay him \$27M a year to flaunt his well-oiled abs and that not-so-subtle 'cockprint' in tons of ads, but why haven't they abandoned him like the other sponsors?

What does the CEO know that we don't?

*Stay tuned for more news & updates.*

*The Snarky Glove*

TEN

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Saturday*

*Teterboro, New Jersey*

**R**aindrops tap danced on my umbrella as I waited on the tarmac for Tatiana.

She was sitting in the backseat of my sister's town car, chatting as if I didn't give her the exact time we needed to leave for Vegas. As if I hadn't made the terms of this arrangement more than clear.

The other night, I'd sent my security detail to her apartment to retrieve most of her luggage. It was supposed to be an easy pickup assignment, but she demanded a discussion about her skating clients, and our hostile negotiation ended with me agreeing to fly her students to Vegas on my dime every other week.

And just when I thought that was the end of the difficulties, she insisted on going over the contract line by line and adding minor adjustments. I was now spending far more than the amount we agreed on, and she had yet to offer me anything except stubbornness in return.

*So much for 'redeeming the favor' with no questions asked...*

The car's backdoor finally opened, but she didn't step out.

Instead, Penelope did.

Letting up her umbrella, she waddled toward me.

“Good morning, Mr. Carter,” she said. “How are you on this dreary day?”

“I’m losing my patience.”

“Well, that’s nothing new.” She shrugged. “There are some crucial boundaries I need to set before I allow my client to take you up on this endeavor.”

“Your *client* already signed the contract.” I rolled my eyes. “Tell her to get out of the goddamn car.”

“Using such foul language this early in the morning doesn’t reflect well on your character, Mr. Carter.”

“Cut the shit, Crown. What are you doing?”

“I have some terms and conditions of my own that I need to share with you,” she said. “Since Tati is the only true friend I’ve made in my life, I can’t afford for you to fuck this up.”

“Come again?”

“I didn’t stutter.” She looked dead serious. “If you hurt her in any way, I swear I’ll publicly disown you and make your life a living hell.”

I crossed my arms as she pulled a mini notebook from her pocket.

“Miss Brave is a successful businesswoman who needs ample time to focus on her work, so you need to realize that your career is not the only one that matters over the next ninety days.”

“I’ve already made plenty of concessions for that.”

“Since you have no idea what romance is,” she continued, “and you need people to believe in this nonsense, allow me to give you a cheat code. Tatiana likes long walks in the park, candlelit dinners, and ultimate gentlemen. None of that grumpy caveman, overly possessive, and alpha male stuff.”

“You must not know your best friend that well...”

“She’s allergic to parmesan, prefers to read books or watch anime on weekends instead of partying, and she’s always willing to stay up for hours and talk about anything.”

“I’m well aware of these things, Penelope.”

“How?” She tilted her head to the side.

“Because my assistant made a list of things for me to memorize.” I caught myself. “I’m a fast learner.”

“Or you’re acting like you know everything as usual.” She waved off my veiled excuse. “Take these additional notes, and please don’t be an asshole, Travis.”

“I won’t be.” I tucked her little book into my pocket. “Can you kindly ask my fiancée to get out of the car now?”

“Yes.” She hugged me before walking away.

Seconds later, the top of a dark grey umbrella emerged, and Tatiana stepped out wearing a matching dress that clung to her curves. Her red stilettos hit the pavement, and my cock stiffened as she moved closer.

I gestured for her to walk past me and up the plane’s steps, but she suddenly stalled.

“Is there a problem, Miss Brave?”

“Yes.”

“Care to tell me what it is?”

“There’s an issue with the email version of our contract,” she said. “There’s a typo that needs to be fixed before I can step aboard.”

“We’ll fix it when we land in Vegas.” I looked at my watch. “Get on the plane.”

“No.” She handed me her phone. “We need to fix it now. It’s the fourth line in the sixth paragraph.”

I scrolled to the line in question.

*Miss Brave is willing to engage in sexual activity with Mr. Carter.*

“Okay. What’s the problem?” I asked.

“There should be a ‘not’ before the word willing.”

“Is that how you really feel?”



“Yes.”

“Then why don’t I believe that?”

“Because you still think every woman on this planet wants to sleep with you.”

“Only the ones with good taste.”

“Seriously?”

I waved goodbye at Penelope as the town car reversed, then lowered my voice.

“You haven’t thought about being in my bed again since we broke up?” I asked.

“You can easily insert the necessary word into our contract without talking to me, Mr. Carter.”

“Answer the question.”

“We weren’t technically together for that long, Travis,” I said. “You weren’t mine, and I wasn’t yours.”

“Your body was.”

She sucked in a short breath. “Mr. Carter, I would appreciate it if you fixed the typo and kept things strictly professional from here on out.”

I said nothing.

I just stared at her, in utter awe that she was still the sexiest woman I’d ever seen. That to this day, no other woman came close.

“Hello?” She waved her hand in front of my face. “Hello?”

“Hi.”

“A certain someone I knew in the past was very particular about ironing every word in his contracts,” she said. “I’m sure he would be highly disappointed if I didn’t do the same.”

“There’s a major difference between those contracts and this one,” I said. “But you’re right. I’ll fix it. Anything else?”

“I would like to cover some of my own personal expenses with the advance payment.”

I arched an eyebrow, confused. “Why is that?”

“I don’t want to owe you anything else in the future.”

“Fine.” I returned her phone and pulled out my own, taking a few seconds to make the corrections. “I’ve resent it. You can get on the plane now.”

“I need to check the deal first.”

“Is one typo worth four million dollars?”

“It is if I don’t trust you.”

“*Miss Brave*—” I looked her up and down. “I need the next ninety days to go as smoothly as possible.”

“Then stop holding up the progress.”

“You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?”

“Nothing about us has ever been *easy*.” She sighed and turned away, moving up the staircase.

I followed, and the flight attendant shut the door behind us.

As she settled into a seat next to Madeline, she glanced at her phone, and her eyes widened.

“Let me off this plane right now.” She seethed. “Right the hell now.”

“We’re good to go, Captain Bryan.” I smiled and signaled to my pilot. “Please prepare for takeoff...”

ELEVEN

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



**Amended Correction Per Miss Brave:**

Miss Brave is NOT willing to engage in sexual activity with Mr. Carter.

~~*(This is quite unfortunate because it's clear that whoever she's been with over the past few years hasn't been getting the job done.)*~~

Mr. Carter IS willing to engage in sexual activity with Miss Brave (at any time) over the next ninety days whenever she wants it.

TWELVE

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**S**in City seduced me into its world at sunset, mesmerizing my eyes with mile after mile of bright flashing lights.

As we descended, “The Punisher” eyed me from the billboards that guarded the highway, tossed a cocky grin my way from the outdoor digital screens, and welcomed me with a smirk from the “Don’t Ever Bet Against Me” murals that stood all over the city.

A black binder lay open in my lap, its pages filled with “Facts About Mr. Carter” that I already knew. Under a yellow-tabbed section labeled “Memorize by Wednesday” was a novelized version of our relationship that read like a sugary sweet romance.

In this alternate love story, Travis was “instantly smitten” after our first encounter at a horse ranch years ago. He was a “complete gentleman,” who wasn’t quite ready to give me “the love he knew I deserved,” so he focused on his fighting career and vowed to find and pursue me later.

As fate would have it, we crossed paths on one random August day when my car broke down on the side of the road. After kindly requesting my phone number, he asked me out on a date. Then he wined and dined me across the country.

It was only a matter of weeks before he confessed his undying love under the stars in Italy.

*Who the hell wrote this?*

I shut the binder and leaned against the leather seat.

Travis was staring intently at a chess board, his eyes focused on the rook Mr. Ralph had moved.

I'd tried my best to avoid looking at him during the flight, but I couldn't help stealing glances here and there.

Dressed in a black suit with the top three buttons of his shirt undone, he looked like walking sex. As if he knew how much I was struggling to ignore his presence, his lips parted each time our eyes met, and he motioned for me to come sit in his lap.

Every nerve in my body was on edge, begging for space.

The plane's wheels kissed the ground, and I downed a cold glass of water.

*Be professional, Tati. Keep it professional.*

"That was a pretty smooth flight, right?" Mr. Ralph moved to the seat across from me. Then he handed me a shiny blue gift bag.

"There's a gift card from every luxury shop on The Strip in there," he said, "along with a list of highly recommended attractions, if you ever want to do some sightseeing outside of your scheduled publicity events."

"Thank you, sir."

"This was your fiancé's idea." He smiled. "I'm glad we're doing this with you since you already know him. That makes things easy for everyone involved."

"I don't think Miss Brave knows what the word 'easy' means." Travis was suddenly standing in the aisle, looking at me. "Do you?"

"Go away, Travis," Mr. Ralph shooed him. "Shouldn't you be preparing to wait for her outside?"

Travis looked like he wanted to say something more, but the plane door opened, and he walked away.

"Anyway," Mr. Ralph continued, "do you have any questions for me?"

“Is there a private ice rink I can use whenever I’m not with my clients?”

“Ten steps ahead of you.” He pointed to the bag. “Mr. Carter arranged unlimited access to Crystal Rink nearby.”

“Oh, and before I forget the most important part,” he said, pulling a red box from his pocket and flipping it open. “You need to wear this ring whenever you’re out in public.”

I stared at the elegant oval-cut diamond, sliding what had to be at least five carats over my ring finger.

“Shall we, Mrs. Carter to be?” He stood to his feet and gestured for me to exit first.

Grabbing my purse, I headed toward the steps and stopped when I saw Travis waiting on the ground.

*Why does he have to look so effin perfect all the time?*

I put on a smile and made my way down.

“Thank you for the gift cards, Mr. Carter,” I said when I reached him. “That was a nice touch.”

“Was it?” He extended his hand. “I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate since you’re insisting that this is strictly business.”

*“It is strictly business.”*

“Fair enough. I’ll consider deducting the costs from your exorbitant acting fee once this is all over.”

“I’ll hold off on redeeming them then.”

“That’s more than fitting, since you clearly have no idea what the word ‘redeem’ means.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I narrowed mine right back.

“Take Mr. Carter’s hand and smile at him, Miss Brave,” Mr. Ralph said from behind. “There could be photogs capturing this moment from afar.”

“Yes, Miss Brave,” Travis smirked. “Be a good girl and show Daddy what he’s getting for four million dollars.”

I didn’t move a muscle.



“Miss Braveeee,” Mr. Ralph strained. “Say something to Mr. Carter with a smile, or at least rub his shoulder in a seductive way.”

“I don’t see why this is so difficult for you,” Travis leaned closer and whispered against my neck. “You used to love touching me. Are you scared you might not be able to stop?”

I remained frozen. I was willing to stand as still as a statue for hours to make a point.

Travis read my mind and slipped his arm around my waist, pulling me close.

My heart fluttered at the sudden contact, and I inhaled his intoxicating cologne. *Ugh, God.*

Without saying another word, he walked me toward a waiting town car. Then he waited for me to settle onto the seat before joining me inside.

Mr. Ralph sat across from us.

“Well, well, well.” The driver smiled at us through the rearview mirror. “I never thought I’d see the day when you settled down, Mr. Carter. How does it feel, sir?”

*“Expensive.”*

“Well, the future Mrs. Carter looks more than worth it.” He winked at me as he pulled onto the road. “I’m Mr. Faber, Miss. Looking forward to being at your service.”

“Thank you.” I returned his smile.

“Would you care to share the story of how you and your fiancée first met, Mr. Carter?”

“There’s not much to say,” Travis said. “It’s not a long story.”

“So? You used to keep me involved in everything. I didn’t even know you were dating someone.”

“Neither did I...” Travis muttered before looking at me. “I believe I can speak for us both when I say the attraction was instant. She came onto me at first sight.”

“No, I *hated* you when we first met,” I said. “From the very moment you revealed that your name was ‘Travis Carter.’”

“Maybe I’m mixing my memories then, since I can only remember all the times I made you *scream it*.”

“I was faking all those screams.” *Fuck professionalism.* “Just like I’m faking things with you right now.”

“I find that hard to believe.” He hissed. “Back then, your orgasms didn’t cost me a dime. I gave them to you for free.”

“What did you just say?”

“I’m more than happy to repeat it.”

The driver rolled up the partition, and Ralph let out a long sigh.

“Jesus Christ...”

THIRTEEN

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Waldorf Astoria Luxury Condominiums*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“Welcome to Las Vegas.” A bellman reached for my hand when we arrived at Travis’s condo. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss. I love that Mr. Carter has someone special in his life.”

“He will for at least three months.” I muttered, stepping out of the car with Travis on my heels.

He’d stared at me for the entire drive, trying to bait me into looking his way.

“My name is Benny.” The bellman led me toward an open elevator. “My job is to get whatever you need, whenever you need it. In case you’re not already aware, you can access the closest casino, Mr. Carter’s private garage, and a fine dining restaurant from the elevator in the west wing. Is there anything you’d like at this moment?”

“A lobotomy would be nice.”

“A *what?*”

“My fiancée said it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Travis narrowed his eyes at me. “She tends to *slip out of character* sometimes.”

“Ah, I see.”

“The press isn’t aware of you being here yet, *Sweetheart*,” Travis said. “You should keep honing your skills and enjoy

these moments of privacy while you can.”

“Thank you for that update, *Honey*,” I said sweetly. “I truly appreciate how you look out for me.”

“You’re very welcome.”

The doors opened, and I swallowed the rest of my sarcasm at the sight ahead of me.

A lavish, cream-marbled foyer stretched toward two spiral staircases, looking as if it were plucked from the lobby of a five-star hotel.

Smiling, Benny handed me his business card before disappearing.

I gasped as I stepped forward and took in the colossal living room that overlooked the strip. From the floor-to-ceiling windows, I could see The Atria Resort and Casino and a glittering boardwalk that connected five clubs.

An immaculate grey and white kitchen stood on my left, with a grand stone wall behind me. It was adorned with framed copies of every check he’d ever received for his street fights, along with pictures and trophies from his time in the UFC.

At its center stood an empty shelf with the engraved words, “Forever a Champion: This Belt Never Leaves.”

The belt was long gone, though.

Not wanting to comment, I tried not to stare at the balcony that wrapped around his entire penthouse.

*Is that a hot tub and an outdoor kitchen?*

“Your suite is down the west hall and on the left,” Travis said. “My housekeeper is more than willing to give you a full tour whenever you like. I left a list on your nightstand with the numbers for my chef, my driver, my personal shopper, and tons of other people who make my life easier. They’re ready to be at your service, too.”

“Does your staff know our engagement is fake?”

“No.” He paused. “I don’t want them to know that.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re the only people who didn’t leave my side when shit started hitting the fan,” he said. “They’re technically like family to me, and they all seemed very happy to hear the news.”

I nodded. “Noted. Are there any events I need to attend with you over the next couple of days?”

“You have a schedule in your binder, Miss Brave,” he said. “Do I need to show you how to read a calendar?”

“I’m just trying to make small talk with you.”

“Fair enough. Are you enjoying this weather?”

I rolled my eyes, and he looked at his watch.

“Neither of us has ever been good at small talk from what I recall,” he said. “You do have something you have to do on your own today, if I’m remembering things right.”

“Yes,” I said. “Your publicist is making me take a class with a body language expert.”

“I can read your body just fine.” He looked me up and down. “It’s in desperate need of my dick.”

My jaw dropped to the floor.

“Looks like your mouth would appreciate a taste, too...”

“I’m um—” I stepped back. “I think I should go to my room now.”

“I think so, too.”

“Down the hall and to the right?”

“The *left*.”

“Don’t follow me.”

“Don’t keep talking.”

“I honestly think we shouldn’t speak to each other again unless we have to.”

“I agree.” He stepped closer. “You should start walking away from me.”

“I would like the last word.”

“Take it.”

“I won’t cross the line with you while I’m here,” I said. “I can promise you that.”

“You’ve made that clear already.”

“So much for letting me have the last word.”

“I thought you were planning to say something I hadn’t heard before,” he said. “See you when I have to, unless you change your mind. I’m very much open to giving without receiving, by the way.”

I bit my tongue.

The last word wasn’t worth it...

FOURTEEN



PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**Operation: Fake Fiancee**

**Week 1**

**Day 1:**

Miss Brave & Mr. Carter get acclimated to Waldorf Astoria Residence

**Day 2:**

Daily interview rehearsal begins for Good Morning America, Hello Vegas, MMA Junkie, The Snarky Glove, UFC: Behind the Scenes

**Day 3:**

Proposal Photoshoot

**Day 4-7:**

Miss Brave & Mr. Carter need to make public appearances at four casinos so the press can have pictures ahead of the dinner with Nike & Mr. Truss

FIFTEEN

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*T-Mobile Ice Hockey Arena*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

If anyone stumbled upon this moment, they'd assume they were seconds away from witnessing one of the most elaborate proposals of all time.

I was standing at the center of the rink with Travis, his hands wrapped around my waist as the words, "I love you, Tatiana," flashed on the Jumbotron above.

White and red rose petals surrounded us, and six-foot candles burned flames that melted pink wax onto the ice.

Travis slid his hand against my sides as he stared into my eyes. Then he got down on one knee.

He stared at me for several moments, my diamond ring twirling between his fingertips, but no words fell from his lips.

"Can you move your head a little to the right, Travis?" Mr. Ralph called out from the seats. "And like, no offense, Miss Brave, but could you look a little less constipated and a lot more in love?"

I smiled a bit wider.

"Now you just look happy about being constipated!" He snapped a few shots and made his way over to us. "You need to make me believe that this is the happiest day of your life, the day that the man you love is finally making a commitment."

“I can’t really focus with the candle flames this close to my head,” I said. “I feel like they’re seconds away from burning off my hair.”

“Nonsense!” He pushed them closer. “This is romantic, and nothing says romance like towering candles and roses. Travis, it might help if you talked through the shoot to make her more comfortable.”

“I don’t think so.” He let go of my hands and stood to his feet. “I would never propose like this. It’s not me at all.”

“That’s okay. ‘Monogamy’ isn’t you either.” Mr. Ralph shrugged. “Get back into position.”

“My engagement, if it were real, would be one hundred percent private, Ralph.” He looked up as the screen transitioned to ‘Will You Marry Me?’

Suddenly, more rose petals fell from the ceiling and onto the ice.

“What’s your point, Travis?”

“That I wouldn’t make my fiancée share our private life with the media.”

“This is operation *fake* fiancée.” He crossed his arms. “Isn’t that what your paperwork says, or did you get a different version?”

“I just don’t see the need for these pictures,” Travis said. “I know my fans, and they won’t buy this. Sponsors will see right through it, too.”

“Oh! Me! Me! Me! I have something to add!” Madeline held up her hand like a schoolgirl.

No one acknowledged her presence, but then she started jumping up and down.

“Yes, Madeline?” Mr. Ralph gave in.

“I agree with Mr. Carter about this,” she said. “If all of a sudden, he starts willingly sharing his personal life, it’ll just invite unwanted speculation about something being wrong. The fun in being part of his haters is doing our own sleuthing.”

“Haters?” Travis narrowed his eyes at her.

“Your fans, too.” She smiled, and Ralph put away his camera.

“Fine,” he said. “We’ll knock this one off the list. In the meantime, let’s get some shots of Travis watching Miss Brave skate. He would do *that*, correct?”

I shrugged and headed to the seats to pick up my bag. I slid out of my shoes and unlaced my skates while Travis and Ralph discussed other photo options.

“Holy shit, tell the crowd to be quiet!” Madeline screeched. “Mr. Stuart from Nike is calling me!”

*There’s no one else in this arena.*

“Hello, sir!” She leaned against one of the candles. “How are you?”

Travis walked over and blew out the flames before her hair could catch fire.

“I’m hanging out with him and his fiancée now actually,” she said. “We’re just skating and stuff, so that’s...No, that’s not a problem at all...Oh, I guarantee that’ll be fine. Okay, okay. Great.”

She ended the call. “Mr. Truss is in town early and wants to get dinner with all of us tonight.”

“What?” Travis said. “We’re not due for dinner with him until two Wednesdays from now.”

“Well, he’s insisting on sooner rather than later, and it doesn’t sound like he’s willing to take no for an answer,” she said. “I’m sure it’s just an introductory meeting, no big deal.”

“Okay.” Mr. Ralph let out a breath. “In that case, let’s use the next couple hours to rehearse the backstories and go over some body language. What time is he expecting us for dinner, Madeline?”

“Dinner?” Her cheeks paled. “Did I say the word dinner?”

“Yes. You did.”

“Oh, well, um...” She looked away.”I meant, he wants to meet us now. He reserved Gallagher’s down the street and he gave us fifteen minutes to get there.”

FIFTEEN & A HALF

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Gallagher's Steakhouse*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**M**r. Truss was the only person in the restaurant, and the first course had already been served for a table of five.

Instead of standing to greet us when we arrived, he gestured for us to sit while he sipped his wine.

He drank half the bottle before finally clearing his throat to speak.

“I’m not one to beat around the bush, so I’ll make this quick,” he said. “I refuse to let anyone make a fool out of me with fake ass shit.”

“Come again, Mr. Truss?” I asked.

“I just broke ties with Andrew Crane hours ago. Have you ever heard of him?”

I nodded, unsure of what the world’s top golfer had to do with anything. His brand of sweater vests, smiling selfies with his mother, and being the only man on the planet who still said, “Gee golly wow” after a win was the complete opposite of mine.

“Well, he was embroiled in a scandal last year that I won’t dare go into, but he told me that it ‘wasn’t really him’ and he was a family man with a fiancée and a child on the way.” He took a long sip from his glass. “Anyway, I just happened to think about him last month and discovered that I hadn’t been invited to his wedding like I asked.”



“So, I sent someone to ask about it, and it turns out there wasn’t one.” He knocked back more alcohol. “Then I find out there was never going to be a wedding because the so-called fiancée was a fucking fraud.”

Tatiana coughed, and I raised an eyebrow.

“He hired a fake fiancée just to get in my company’s good graces for a contract.” Mr. Truss scoffed. “How fucking insane is that, Mr. Carter?”

“*Certifiably* insane...”

“Exactly.” He looked between me and Tatiana. “So, while I hate to use one man’s sins to judge another, I won’t entertain discussions about your contract until after you’re married. I expect an invite, by the way.”

“An invite to what?” I said.

“The *wedding*.” He looked at me. “Your publicist did say that your loss and the rematch is the reason why the ceremony was originally pushed back, so it shouldn’t be that far off, right?”

Silence.

“Even though your line is one of our top sellers and it always sells out within seconds of going live, half the marketing team wants to cut you from our brand ambassador team,” he said. “I’m the one willing to give you a second chance, but not without a wedding and a *real* marriage license. We can resume contract talks after certain benchmarks have been met.”

“You’re correct about the rematch.” Madeline spoke before I could. “But you won’t be invited to their wedding, sir.”

I smiled at her, grateful she was trying to make up for her previous lies.

“I see.” He looked offended. “Well, why won’t I be?”

“Because they’re eloping tonight.”

*What in the actual fuck?*

“Is that so?” Mr. Truss smiled. “Am I interrupting that process?”

“*Hell no*,” Tatiana and I spoke in unison.

“They just don’t want to be rude to you, sir.” Madeline was getting fired *tonight*. “The press hasn’t caught on to them as a couple yet, and they don’t want to make a big spectacle about their marriage since it’s true love, you know.”

I wasn’t sure when Ralph moved next to me, but I heard him whispering, “Don’t say a goddamn thing until we leave, Travis.”

“I should’ve known the king of Vegas would want to elope in the very city that’s known for it” Mr. Truss glanced at his phone. “How late are those chapels open anyway?”

“Pretty late,” Madeline said. “Well, some of them, anyway.”

“Well, I’d hate to intrude on your nuptials any further than I already have.” He walked over and patted my shoulder. “Miss Dawson, call me after the honeymoon and let’s talk about things, shall we?”

“Gladly!” She smiled and walked him to the exit while the rest of us remained frozen.

The moment she returned to the table, I uttered the three words I’d been sitting on since the day she landed in my life.

“You’re fucking fired,” I said.

“What?”

“You heard me.” I pointed to the exit. “I’ll send you a check that covers the next two months of your no-longer-needed services.”

“Hold on a second.” Ralph stepped in front of her. “It’s still ninety days. Just get a quickie marriage and an annulment if you want to keep them aboard.”

“I’m not marrying you just because you say so.” Tatiana looked at me.

“It won’t be a real marriage,” I said.

“It sounds like it will be,” she said. “And it sounds like you’re still *assuming* that just because you snap your fingers that something is a done deal without asking the other person if it’s okay.”

“Can Mr. Carter increase the payment he’s giving you to make you reconsider?” Madeline asked. “Please?”

“By all means,” I said, “Just let her drain my entire bank account at this point.”

“I don’t want any more of his money.” Tatiana hissed.

“Then what do you want?”

“I want him to *ask me*.”

“Come again?”

“Get on your knees and fucking *ask me* to marry you, Travis.”

“We can come up with something else,” I said. “I’m not begging her for shit.”

“I’ll do it,” Madeline got down on her knees. “Will it count if it comes from me?”

“No.” Tatiana crossed her arms. “Not at all.”

Madeline and Ralph stared at me, silently demanding that I give in, but I refused. I’d given Tatiana more than enough.

“Travis...” Ralph whispered harshly. “Travis, propose. Now.”

“I’ve made enough money in my career,” I said. “Draft my retirement announcement.”

“Your ego is way too big for you to retire on the heels of a loss,” he said. “I know it, you know it, everyone in the goddamn world knows it, so suck it up so we can focus on eliminating the one and only ‘L’ you’ve ever had in your life.”

“I’ve had *two* Ls.” I looked at Tatiana. “This latest one doesn’t hurt nearly as bad as the first one.”

“Point taken.” Tatiana stood up from her chair. “I’ll catch an Uber back to your place and fly back to New York.”

She turned to walk away, but I grabbed her hand.

Squeezing it, I waited for her to face me and swallowed what was left of my pride.

I slowly got down on one knee and looked into her eyes. “You have nothing better to do while you’re here in Vegas, so I think you should marry me. Don’t you agree?”

“This is your idea of proposing?” She glared at me. “Really?”

“Last time I told you how I felt, it didn’t matter.”

She pulled her hand away, but I held it tighter and gave in.

“Tatiana Brave,” I said. “I could really use a bit more of your help for my current situation, and I know it’s a lot to ask, given our history, but will you please marry me?”

She looked at me for several seconds before letting out a breath.

“Yes.”

“Perfect!” Madeline finally stood up from the floor.” I know the perfect place where you two can go get hitched this time of night. You won’t be disappointed.”

SIXTEEN

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Fifty Miles Outside Las Vegas*

*Homer's Strippers & Liquor & Weddings*

A bedazzled Michael Jackson impersonator moonwalked in front of our town car, waving a double-sided “We Fight Child Support Here” and “Get Free Condoms” sign.

“Surely there’s another chapel we can go to, Mr. Faber,” Travis said.

“According to Miss Dawson, this is the only one that’ll give you a marriage license on the spot at this hour.” Mr. Faber put the car in park. “Otherwise, I can take you to town hall tomorrow, and we can go to a prettier chapel afterwards.”

I glanced out my window and spotted two ladies dressed in bright pink feather boas and thongs. They waved and pointed at the chapel’s “Happy Hour Pussy” marquee.

“That’s okay.” Travis unbuckled his seatbelt. “Let’s get this over with.”

He walked to my side of the car and ushered me inside a world of neon lights and rows of floor-to-ceiling poles.

“Hey there!” A man dressed in a leather jockstrap and a pink bow tie stepped in front of us. “You folks here for this evening’s chicken strip and stripper special?”

We shook our heads, and I noticed his hairy balls dangling from the leather.

“Oh. Well, how can I help you lovely folks tonight?”

“Putting on some pants first would be helpful,” Travis said.

“Can’t do that,” he said. “I’ve got a bachelorette party coming in thirty minutes, so I need to fluff my dick as much as possible.”

“We need to see the priest then. We’re trying to get married.”

“Nice to meet you.” He snapped off his bowtie and put on a white clergy collar. “Cash or check?”

“Credit.”

“Cool.” He pulled a tablet from god-knows-where and held out his hand. “It’ll be four hundred dollars and eighty-eight cents. Oh, and your credit card statement might say, ‘Vegas Children’s Charity,’ but pay no mind to that.”

We stared at him blankly, but he didn’t skip a beat.

He handed Travis a folder and pen, and then he picked up a brown bag. Opening it, he revealed a twinkling tiara with a short white veil.

“Here you are, Beautiful.” He slid it into my hair. “This brand is usually for the girls who work the poles for me, but I’ll let you have it on the house tonight.”

I had no words.

“All my ceremonies come with a complimentary flight of tequila.” He stepped behind a counter and pulled out a tray of shot glasses. “I highly recommend making a wish between each one.”

I knocked three back in succession, wincing as the liquor burned my throat.

“*Please make this guy put some pants on,*” was the only wish I could muster.

“Don’t think I forgot about you, sir.” He picked up a pair of silver pleasure balls and gave them to Travis. “These are for

your honeymoon. They're slightly used, but you can wash 'em again if that type of thing bothers you."

Travis let them fall to the floor.

"We're all set for the ceremony!" He looked over the paperwork. "Cherry will handle the legal shit while I—wait a fucking minute...You're Travis Carter? As in *the* Travis Carter?"

"No," Travis said. "I've never heard of him."

"Too bad." The guy shook his head. "You would find good work as his body double if you ever considered it."

Not catching Travis's sarcasm, he directed us to follow him inside a small white chapel. The pews were filled with oversized blowup dolls, each one donning a name tag that read "wedding witness."

Taking his place behind the podium, he opened a book that was definitely *not* the Bible and picked up a flask.

"Dearly Beloved," he said, "we are gathered here tonight to bear witness to two souls who are deeply in love. Will the soon-to-be wedded please join hands?"

We obliged.

"Do you, 'Insert Bride to Be's Name,' take 'Insert Groom to Be's Name,' to have and to hold, from this day forward?"

"Um..." I couldn't take this man seriously. "I do."

"What about for better or for worse, for richer or—Slightly pause the reading for dramatic effect." He sipped from his flask. "For poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish always, 'til death do you part?"

"I do," I said.

"How about you?" He looked at Travis. "Ditto to everything I said, plus do you take her 'til death do you part?"

"I do," Travis said.

"Perfect!" He shut the book. "You may now kiss the bride."



“I don’t think so,” “Just give us the license,” we spoke in unison.

“Legally speaking, I can’t do that until I see you kiss.”

Travis lifted my hand and kissed it. “There.”

“Funny.” He looked between us. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that you two aren’t serious about the sacred act of marriage. This better not be some type of fraud.”

“You have to be joking,” I said. “You barely read the vows.”

“So? I can’t sign off on an eternal love if you’re not willing to share it with me.” He crossed his arms. “So, if you don’t want to show it, the license won’t leave here with you. No refunds.”

I clenched my fists, prepared to tell him where he could shove his grandstanding, but Travis slipped an arm around my waist.

Pulling me against his chest, he crashed his lips against mine—serving me an instant reminder of what I missed about him. *Us*.

I wrapped an arm around his neck and submitted my mouth, letting him tame my tongue with his.

The world dissolved around us as he grabbed my ass mid-kiss and whispered, “Tell me you don’t miss how I used to kiss you...”

There was no chance for me to give him an answer.

He kissed me even harder, pushing down my guard, weakening my resolve.

As I struggled to keep up with him, his cock stiffened against my thigh. I slid a hand between us, wanting to feel how hard I made him, but he pushed it away.

“Don’t start anything you’re not ready to finish,” he whispered harshly.

I tried to pull back from his kiss, to make him slow down, but he refused to let me. He squeezed my ass harder,

dominating my mouth until I completely surrendered.

I shut my eyes in bliss, ready to let him take me higher, but he tore his mouth away from mine.

*What the...* My chest heaved up and down at the abrupt loss of his touch.

“Well, damn...I apologize for my baseless assumption.” The ‘priest’ cleared his throat and walked down the aisle. “Come pick up your license in the lobby. Oh, and treat yourself to a complimentary condom pack. I have a feeling you’ll need a lot of those tonight.”

I turned away to follow him, but Travis grabbed my waist.

“Wait a minute.” He spun me around. “You need to put the real ring on before we leave here.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” I held up my hand. “It’s fine.”

“It was only meant to be a stand-in, in case photogs caught us at the airport.”

He opened a black box and assaulted my eyes with brightness.

Diamonds twinkled inside a platinum band that featured a pair of silver skates and MMA gloves entwined on both sides. The word “Carter” was engraved on its beveled edges, with “Tatiana & Travis” etched atop in tiny cursive.

It looked like something out of a dream, something designed for the couple we used to be.

“I prefer the one I’m already wearing,” I said, still stunned at the ring’s beauty. “It seems far less personal.”

“Exactly.” He made the exchange on my finger. “Our relationship is more convincing this way. The ring looks like something the highest earning fighter in the UFC’s history would buy.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Don’t get a single scratch on it, because you’re returning it the moment this charade is over?”

“You can keep it, if you like. Consider it a souvenir from the best guy you’ve ever been with in your life.”

“That guy was someone I met long after you.”

“Then why isn’t he here marrying you instead of me?”

Silence.

“I might consider letting you take the cost of this ring out of my salary then,” I relented, admiring how it sparkled under the light. “At the end, not now.”

“Don’t be silly, *Mrs. Carter*,” he said. “That’d be a terrible business decision on your part.”

“Is it somehow worthless just because it’s personalized?”

“No, but I’m only paying you four million dollars. Your ring costs *seven*.”

“What? Why would you ever spend that much?”

“Because like I said on that voicemail you clearly didn’t listen to—” He paused. “I need this to be as real as possible...”

SEVENTEEN

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Two Hours Later*

*Fifty Miles Outside Las Vegas*

**B** *eeep! Beep! Beeeeeeep!*

Drivers honked their horns in exasperation as the desert's sweltering heat sifted through the town car's open windows.

Evening traffic was at a complete standstill, and the only movement ahead was the smattering of fireworks in the sky.

"Mr. Faber, if you had to guess, how long will it take for us to get to my condo?" Travis asked.

"Four hours if I'm being generous." He looked at us through the rearview mirror. "I forgot about Desert Fest starting tonight. My apologies."

"It's not your fault." Travis looked over at me and sighed. "Do you still have problems with insomnia at night?"

"Yeah," I said, surprised he remembered. "Why?"

"Because we should get out here if that's the case," Travis stepped out of the car. He walked to my side and opened the door.

Clasping my hand, he led me through gridlocked traffic and into an open-air mall.

He stopped inside an Ivory Sleep store and asked for the manager.

“Ah, Mr. Carter.” The man beamed. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

“My wife and I need some sleepwear for tonight,” Travis said. “As fast as possible, please.”

The man snapped his fingers, and two staffers appeared behind me, tape measures in hand.

Within minutes, they placed an elegantly wrapped box into my arms.

Travis took out a few hundred dollar bills, but the manager pushed away his hand.

“Your money is no good here, Mr. Carter,” he said. “Just mention our store whenever you have a chance. Oh, and be sure to knock Juarez the hell out whenever you fight him again.”

“Will do.”

He led me out of the store and down the street, into The Crown Hotel.

“Welcome to Sin City’s favorite hell hole.” The desk agent didn’t look up from her magazine. “What do you need?”

“A room for the night,” Travis said.

“Clearly.” She popped her gum. “How long is that?”

“I just said one night...”

“I meant in terms of *hours*, sir,” she said. “This ain’t a Hilton.”

Travis turned away without another word, and we slipped through the traffic once more, walking down the block and into Happily Ever After Suites.

Life-sized swans with long pink feathers filled the lobby and glittering pink hearts hung from the ceiling.

“Good evening!” The front desk agent smiled. “How can I assist you two lovebirds tonight?”

“Depends. What does the phrase ‘one night reservation’ mean to you?” Travis asked.

“Uh...” The guy scratched his head. “Check out is at noon tomorrow.”

“Good. We need your best suite.”

Travis took out his wallet, and I pulled out my cell phone.

ME

Hey. Crazy change of plans. Just married your brother at a chapel tonight.

PENELOPE

WUTTT? You didn't send me a wedding invite?

ME

You can host my divorce party.

PENELOPE

Sold! Call me tomorrow with all the details? I would call you now, but Hayden is coming back to the bedroom to eat me out again, and after that I'll probably return the favor. Do you think swallowing affects the baby?

I muted her for the rest of the night. Sometimes she told me a little too much.

“Mrs. Carter?” Travis cleared his throat, making me look up.

“Yeah?”

“Our room is ready.”

“Coming.”

I followed him down the hall and onto an escalator. We walked down a long winding hallway and up one more flight of moving steps.

Stopping in front of Room 2503, he slid a heart-shaped key into the door and gestured for me to enter first.

Hitting the lights, I dropped my bag to the floor in disbelief.

Every inch of the suite, from the carpet to the walls to the couch, was drenched in red velvet. The words “Just Married” stared at me from kiss-shaped windows.

In front of them, an array of flavored condoms and dental dam rubbers from the 1990s warned me not to touch.

I dug a fingernail into my skin, convinced that I was still daydreaming in the heat.

The pain was unfortunately real as ever.

“The motels I used to stay in looked better than this.” Travis ran a hand along the wallpaper. Then he looked up at the oversized mirror above the heart-shaped bed.

Too tired to complain, I slid the heels off my feet and placed my veil on the dresser.

“There’s only one bed in this suite.” Travis followed me into the living room.

“I noticed.” I sighed. “I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to share.”

“Not even on our honeymoon?”

“*Especially* not on our honeymoon.”

“Very well then.” He smiled and placed my pajamas on the coffee table.

“I’ll take the bed and you can sleep out here on this sofa,” he said. “Be sure to check for metal springs before you lay down.”

“Wait, what?”

“I guess I should be a good husband and check that for you.” He pressed his hands against the cushions, and then he fluffed the pillows.

“You’re all good,” he said. “Sleep tight, Mrs. Carter.”



“Travis, a true gentleman would let me have the bed.”

“I bet he would.” He smirked. “It’s a good thing that I stopped being one then.”

I crossed my arms, waiting for him to say he was joking.

“Do you need anything from the bathroom before I take a shower?” he asked.

“I need you to give up the bed.”

“That’s not happening. Anything else?”

“I would like to sleep in the goddamn bed, Travis.”

“If you were really mine, I’d let you.” He glanced at my lips. “Are we good now?”

That question was rhetorical.

I glared at him as he walked away, and he slammed the bedroom door shut without another word.



### *Several Failed Sleep Attempts Later*

I ROLLED over on the couch in agony, convinced that the cushions were stuffed with cheap cotton balls.

*I can't take this anymore.*

Travis was still in the shower, so I stood up and grabbed a pillow.

Pushing the bedroom door open, I moved to the bed and pulled back the covers. Then I lay dead-center on the mattress so there was no room for my non-accommodating husband.

*He'll get the point.*

I looked up at the mirrored ceiling and sucked in a breath at what was being reflected to me on its edge.

Standing with his hands pressed against the glass, Travis was staring at something I couldn't quite see.

I took advantage of the moment and let my gaze travel down his chiseled chest to his six-pack abs. Then I paced myself as I looked lower and saw the first cock I'd ever felt deep inside me.

Hard and erect, it was jutting out toward me, and I swallowed, remembering its taste.

Sliding a hand between my legs, I watched him squeeze a loofah to let the suds slide down his body.

He tilted his head back and groaned as he turned the knob, forcing a heavier stream of water to fall over him.

The steam fogged the glass, and I strummed my clit with my thumb, exactly how he taught me years ago. My breathing slowed as it swelled under my touch, and tremors of pleasure began building inside me, traveling up and down my spine.

Travis slid his tongue against his bottom lip, giving me a slow and torturous rhythm to follow, sending me over the edge.

Succumbing to the pleasure, I rolled over and screamed into the pillow.

He shut off the water, and I rolled over, positioning my back toward the bathroom.

I heard him humming, then the soft sound of a towel hitting the floor.

He hit the lights in the bedroom.

"I think we're having a misunderstanding, *Mrs. Carter*," he said, his voice deep. "You're supposed to be on the couch."

I kept my eyes shut and waited to hear him walk toward the couch.

Those footsteps never came, though.

Instead, he turned off the lights.

Seconds later, the mattress dipped as he moved into bed with me.

"Are you really sleeping?" he asked.

I didn't answer.

"Hmmm." He moved closer, pressing his chest against my back. Then he slipped a hand into my curls, gently twirling a few between his fingers.

"I still remember everything about you." He pressed his lips against the back of my neck.

I'd never been able to resist him kissing me there, and it took everything in me to lay still.

He slid an arm around my waist and held me against him, letting me feel his cock hardening between us.

"Outside of our first few times, you've never appreciated a gentleman in bed." He kissed my neck again. "Is that different now?"

I lay motionless despite my nerves running wild, despite my body begging me to roll over and let him have me again.

*Just this once. Just to get it over with, then never again.*

He darted his tongue against my skin, turning me on with each passing second.

"Funny thing you should know about this room," he said, pressing another long kiss against me. "While you were watching me in the shower, I was watching you, too."

My eyes fluttered open.

"I could've sworn I taught you how to make yourself come a lot harder than that," he whispered. "As much as I would like to finish this and test my theory on your orgasms, our contract calls for no fucking or shared beds, so..."

He moved off the mattress and walked towards the living room, leaving me beyond bereft and breathless.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Carter."

SEVENTEEN & A HALF

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Fifty Miles Outside Las Vegas*

**I** had no idea how to get through the rest of my marriage without enduring the most painful case of “blue balls” in history.

*What the hell was I thinking?*

# ACT SEVEN

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Portland, Oregon*

**W** *hat the hell am I thinking?*

I'm staring at Travis via my phone's screen, feeling more conflicted than ever. It's a little after midnight, and I'm holed up in a hotel bathroom.

"I can't talk to you right now," I say. "I'll have to call you tomorrow."

"Why are you whispering?"

"That's not the point. Hang up the phone."

"I don't want to." He smiles and lays back in a bed I don't recognize, shirtless with his abs on full display. On any other night, I would happily continue our routine of talking until sunrise, but I don't have it in me today.

"If you can't talk, what's the reason?" he asks.

"It's not a good time and I'm tired."

"Give me the *real* reason."

"That's it. Accept it."

"If you weren't such a terrible liar, I would." He sits up, looking into my eyes. "Tell me."

"It's because your sister called me a cunt on the podium two hours ago."

"You called her a bitch first." He smiles. "I read your lips on TV."

“No, I said, ‘Good job out there today.’”

*Then I called her a bitch.*

“You told her to get used to being in second place.” He laughs and tilts his head to the side, disarming me in a way that only he can. “Congratulations on winning first place tonight. You deserved it.”

“I didn’t know you were watching.”

“I always am.”

“Well…” My heart flutters. “Thank you. Goodbye.”

I end the call and shut off the sink faucet. Then I take a deep breath before returning to the suite.

Unfortunately, I’m sharing the space with Penelope against my will. All thanks to the fact that our coaches are currently fucking each other in what should be *my* room.

To make matters worse, Elaine has decided that she doesn’t trust me with her car anymore, so I can’t drive home to get away from this.

Penelope and I are giving each other the usual silent treatment, but I’m seconds away from jumping onto her bed and strangling her to death.

“I only have five more minutes, Hayden.” She groans. “Miss Satan has returned to the room, and she’s about to take over the television to watch those weird cartoons.”

I roll my eyes.

“Oh, wait, excuse me. They’re not cartoons. They’re *anime*.”

I let out a sigh and search for the remote. I’d intended to be nice tonight and watch the show with headphones, but I’ve changed my mind.

“Whatever.” She rolls over. “I might have to hang up on you. You’re starting to sound like my brother these days.”

I freeze at the slight mention of Travis and wonder what he’s ever said about me to her. If he’s ever mentioned me or



slipped up and mentioned ‘us.’

*Ugh. This situation is so fucked up!*

When I find the remote, my phone vibrates against the nightstand.

I ignore it and flip through the channels.

It buzzes again.

Then again and again.

“You want to answer that?” Penelope looks over at me. “It’s probably someone calling to say ‘Congratulations’ on your win over me today. Since I guarantee it won’t happen again, you should enjoy every bit of this rare moment.”

“You know what? You really are a straight up bitch.”

“And you’re an overrated cunt.”

“I beat you by *five* points.”

“I beat you all the time.”

“You’ll never do it again.”

“Want to bet?”

We glare at each other for what feels like forever, until I can’t stand the sight of her crazy eyes anymore.

Turning away from her, I pick up my phone.

*It’s Travis...*

TRAVIS

I need to see you.

If I sent an Uber to bring you to me tomorrow, would you take it?

Since I’m still in California for this weekend’s fight, I can drive you back to Reno on Monday.

Say yes.

MY HEART RACES at his request, and he sends me another before I can answer.

TRAVIS

I don't think I can wait that long. What if I bought you a plane ticket for this morning?

ME

Uber works if the plane ticket costs too much. As long as you're still not expecting anything sexual in return...

TRAVIS

Continuing to devour your pussy or finger fuck you while you pretend you don't love it is fine.

I just want to see you.

ME

I'll *\*think\** about coming.

TRAVIS

"Coming" is always guaranteed when you're with me...

I bought you a plane ticket for ten forty-five.

# ACT SEVEN & A HALF

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Los Angeles International Airport*

*Los Angeles, California*

*The following morning*

**T**here's a lump in my throat when I make it to baggage claim. The excitement that floated in my heart for Travis is now drowning under the weight of my father's words.

"I'm only selling one of her collections, since I know what her clothes mean to you," he says on the phone.

"If that was the case, you wouldn't sell them at all."

"Tati, look," he says. "This decision isn't personal. It's business."

"That sounds like something Elaine told you to say."

"It isn't," he says. "The potential income from your mother's first Chanel wardrobe alone would cover everything we need for the rest of the year."

"What else do 'we' need, Dad?" My chest aches. "You sold off some of her jewelry last month to supposedly cover the mortgage payments for the year. What is it now?"

"Your winning comes at a premium cost, you know," he says. "Despite the money you earn from sponsorships, the extensive travel, costumes, and elite coaching all eat into that. Miss Price's training costs six thousand a month."

"I'm aware." I shake my head. "But last time I checked, I'm covering some of that with the money Mom left for me."

“You still ask us for things from time to time, Tati.”

I bite my tongue, wanting to tell him that I do whatever I can to *not* go to him for help.

“Still, I would like to be able to travel to things that don’t revolve around your skating schedule all the time.” His words sound familiar to Harlow and Elaine’s again. “It would be nice to feel guiltless about taking weekend trips or wanting to go on small vacations here or there.”

“I honestly can’t remember the last time you showed up to a competition.”

“I just watched you skate in Portland.”

“On television,” I say. “I don’t expect you to show up to these skating *‘things’* anyway, but the least you can do is stop bullshitting me with your lies.”

“Excuse me, young lady?”

“Let me ask you something, Dad.” I can’t take his spinelessness anymore. “Do you think that if you stopped trying to fund Elaine’s over the top lifestyle that she would still be with you?”

“Tati...” He sighs, signaling that a lecture is coming, but I refuse to take notes.

Elaine’s lust for the finer things in life will never be quelled. She’ll always want more, more, more, and she’ll always get it. My father is far too smitten (and stupid) to see that she’d ask him to sell his soul if it meant she’d get a Prada bag in return.

“You don’t understand, Tati,” he says after minutes of rambling. “You’ve always struggled to make friends, and I don’t think you’ve ever seen why.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Perhaps if you ever find someone who cares about you, you’ll see how far you’re willing to go to keep them in your life.”

“Even if they drain me dry or isolate me from my own flesh and blood?”

His silence tells me all I need to know.

“I gotta go,” I say. “I’m meeting someone. I’ll be home at some point.”

“Whenever that is, we need to sit down and talk.”

“Okay, Dad.” I know that conversation will never happen with just the two of us, so I play along and give him a hollow “I love you,” before hanging up.

I’ve never been much of a crier, but hot tears are falling down my face, and my chest feels like it’s about to explode.

I feel the sudden need to get out of here and be alone.

*I can’t let Travis see me like this...*

Before I can figure out where I should go, I spot Travis standing near a baggage carousel with a massive bouquet of red roses.

Turning every passing woman’s head as always, he’s dressed in a white t-shirt that accentuates his abs and dark blue jeans. He looks perfect.

I wipe my eyes and step backward. Just as I’m preparing to turn around, his eyes meet mine, and he smiles, pinning me to the spot.

Like a scene in a romance novel, he walks toward me in slow motion, pulling me into his arms.

His lips don’t meet mine for a kiss, though, and my arms hang limp at my sides.

“What’s wrong?” He looks into my eyes. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m not. I have allergies.”

“Okay.” He wipes my cheeks with his fingertips. “What caused these sudden allergies?”

My father’s words about “struggling to make friends” are now playing in my head. Not that I want to give him any

credit, but he's right, and I *do* know why.

I keep every person in my life at a distance to protect myself. I don't want to get hurt if they decide to change personalities on me like he has or if they unexpectedly pass away like my mom. My skating career brings enough pain and stress to my heart, and I'm not a masochist.

"Tell me." Travis kisses my forehead.

"I don't think I'm in a good place for a relationship right now," I say. "I'm going through a lot and you are too. Your sister recently lost both of her parents."

"They were my parents, too."

"I can only imagine that level of pain since I've only lost my mom, but Penelope still cries in her sleep," I say, leaving out the part when I overheard her last night and couldn't help but hug her until she stopped. "I mean, that's what it seems like from afar, and you should be there for her."

"What are you trying to say, Tatiana?"

"A lot."

He stares at me, confused.

"You shouldn't be dating," I say. "Neither of us should be and there's more important things in life, so..." I can't think of a good way to wrap up this line of thought, so I stop talking.

"I'm in a shit ton of pain," he says. "And I'm there for Penelope in the best and only way that I can be right now. As far as 'more important things in life, the only thing that makes me feel like my life is worth living is standing right in front of me, threatening to take it all away.'"

"Travis—"

"For no fucking reason." He stamps his mouth over mine and kisses me, making me regret ever suggesting that we end this. When he finally pulls away, he whispers, "Are your dad and Elaine doing something reckless again?"

I nod.

"Do you want me to handle it with my fists?"

“No, Travis.” I smile.

“In that case, I’ll handle *you* with my mouth later, but can you please tell me what happened without threatening to break up with me?”

He doesn’t give me a chance to answer. Instead, he kisses me again, a lot softer this time, until all my tears have dried.



—

THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,  
It's official.

Travis Carter is (GASP) a married man!

According to our sources, he and former figure-skating champion Tatiana Brave eloped this weekend outside of Vegas.

Our most dedicated fangirls will undoubtedly recognize this woman as his youngest sister's fiercest & most-hated competitor on the ice, so we have to assume that time has thawed relations between those two.

We're also beginning to wonder if perhaps Travis and Tatiana knew each other intimately before...

What's the likelihood of this? Is anyone else curious enough to look into it?

Alas, as much as we hate to admit it, his wife is a fucking vision & we are seething with envy.

We're committed to watching their relationship like hawks.

*Stay tuned for more news & updates.*

*The Snarky Glove*

EIGHTEEN

THREE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Humble City Fitness*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I decided to write a coping guide on being married to the sexiest woman on the planet, for any other man who found himself resorting to cold showers and nights alone.

**Step one.** Accept that you’ll have a rock-hard dick that’s absolutely useless whenever you see her.

**Step two.** Avoid looking at her sexy-ass mouth, especially when she spews her special brand of sarcasm that turns you on.

**Step three.** Stay out of your house—your.own.goddamn.house.—to avoid seeing her as much as possible.

**Step four.** Repeat.

It was day three of this torture-fest, and I was running on a treadmill, miles away from my condo and Tatiana’s mouth.

I was determined to spend any free time in my secondary gym whenever I wasn’t training for my rematch.

When I reached mile ten, I stepped off the machine and grabbed a towel. I walked downstairs to the resistance area, admiring the floor-to-ceiling “No Excuses” mural my superfans painted last year.

As I was wiping down a bench, Penelope requested a video chat.

“Yeah?” I answered.

“I want a reason, and I want it now.”

“I’m in the middle of a workout session, Crown,” I said. “I’ll have to call you back about whatever this is later.”

I hung up before she could say another word.

Seconds later, her signature ringtone sounded again.

“Penelope,” I answered, waiting for her face to appear onscreen, “I told you that—”

“Tatiana hasn’t answered my texts or returned my calls since you got married,” she interrupted. “What have you done to her?”

“I haven’t done anything with her.” *Unfortunately.*

“Well, when was the last time you saw her?”

“It hasn’t been that long.” I shrugged. “Two and a half days ago.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “How is that even possible, Travis?”

“Because I don’t see a need to torture—” I caught myself. “There’s no need to see her outside of our schedule. I’m sure she’s fine.”

“It’s unlike her to ghost me.” She frowned. “So, either you’ve done something terrible and she’s mulling it over alone because she doesn’t want to make things awkward by bringing it up with me, or...No, you’ve definitely done something.”

“I’ll tell her to call you when I get home.”

“I’ll stay on the phone until then to make sure.”

“There’s no need for that. I’ll do what I said.”

“Within the next half hour?”

“No. I’d have to leave now and speed home in order to make that happen.”

“Okay.” She nodded, looking as if that was more than reasonable.

I was about to tell her that she was out of her mind, but the look in her eyes gave me pause.

It was the same look she gave me years ago, when I told her that I had to leave her behind in Seattle and couldn't give her a date for my return. The look she gave me time after time via our old video chats when she said, "I don't have any female friends, Travis. I can't even make *one*."

"I'll leave now." I walked down the steps. "How are things in Manhattan?"

"Better than expected," she said. "The rink has been busy nonstop, and I'm in talks with a few programs about long-term contracts."

"Congratulations. Did you figure out the design for the new floors you plan to add next year?"

"Yes and no. It's a long story."

"I have time on this drive home to listen to it."

I listened to her tell me the plans as I drove, but she sighed before I could set foot inside my condo.

"One of the top contractors is calling me," she said. "If I don't hear from you or Tati by the time we're done talking, I'm flying out there."

"Don't be so dramatic," I said. "You'll hear back."

She ended the call, and I unlocked the door.

The sugary scent of waffles smacked me in the face, so I strolled into the kitchen. The only sign of Tatiana was a plate in the sink and a note on the counter.

*Chef Blaine,*

*Thank you for showing me the proper way to make gourmet  
Belgian waffles.*

*I truly appreciate the lesson.*

*I will happily take you up on those gourmet lemon wings you  
mentioned for dinner. :-)*

*Much appreciation,  
Tatiana*

CRASHHHH!

The sound of glass shattering caught my attention. It wasn't coming from Tatiana's room, though.

Someone was in my master suite.

Confused, I made my way down the hall. Through the open doorway, I spotted Tatiana rummaging through the drawers under my bed.

Transfixed by the sight of her body in a black and gold bikini, I didn't say a word.

*I need a new step four for my guide.*

She flipped through box after box, muttering, "It has to be in here somewhere," under her breath.

"Good to see that you still have a love for *trespassing*," I said after several minutes.

She gasped and stood to her feet. "I thought you were going to be out all day."

"That was my original plan." I noticed a heart tattoo I'd never seen before on her hip. "My sister is worried about you, though. She claims you haven't called or texted since we got married."

"I dropped my phone in the tub," she said. "It's still not working, so I'll have to get a replacement."

"And the reason why you're in *my* room instead of yours?"

"I'm looking for something."

"Do you need help finding it?"

"No." She blushed and looked away from me. Then she bent down and picked up a pen.

"Here it is," she said. "Problem solved."

“I see.” I stepped closer to her. “The hotel gave us an entire box of those at checkout.”

“Well, good thing they did, because I lost mine.”

“All these years later, and I can still tell when you’re lying to me.” I smiled. “What are you really looking for?”

“This.” She held up the pen.

“Okay.” I looked around, noticing that all the drawers on my dresser were askew. The balcony door was hanging wide open with the handle for hot tub access pulled forward.

“The spa keys are in my bottom left desk drawer,” I said. “I forgot to make you a copy.”

Dropping her ruse, she pulled it open and picked up a heavy chain of keys.

“The red and yellow one,” I said, watching as she unhooked it. “Would you like some help with your cell phone, too?”

“No, I can handle that myself.”

“Good.” I closed the gap between us. “Then can you do me one more favor?”

“I’ve already married you against my will.”

“That’s not what I need,” I said, tugging on one of her curls. “It’s bad enough that I’ve pictured you being in this bedroom with me a million times before, but reality is far more tempting than I imagined, and I’m really struggling right now.” I was now envisioning her legs wrapped around my waist while I fucked her against the window. “Can you please get the hell out for me?”

“Yes.” She stood still. “I can do that.”

“Can you do it *now*?”

“I can.” She didn’t budge. “I mean, I am.”

I slid a hand around her neck, tilting her head up until her lips nearly touched mine.

“Start moving or I’ll never let you leave...”



She slowly stepped back. Then she rushed onto the balcony without another word.

I closed the drapes and headed into my bathroom.

It was only a matter of time before I broke the world record for the longest cold shower.

NINETEEN

FOUR DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TATIANA



*The following night*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

WICKED BIATCH

Seriously, Tati? You got MARRIED and you didn't tell your own family?

WICKED BIATCH

And since when are you dating Travis Carter?! You didn't even want to go with me to his fights/parties years ago! WTF gives?

STEPMOTHER DEAREST

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but you should be ASHAMED of yourself, Tatiana. We had to find out about your marriage ON THE NEWS.

I stared at Harlow and Elaine's text messages, torn between typing "Fuck off," or "You don't tell me anything about your lives either."

My father called before I could choose, though.

"Hey, Dad," I answered.

“Hey, Tati.” There was a smile in his voice. “I’m not imposing on your honeymoon, am I?”

“Dad, there isn’t really a—” I stopped myself. “No, you’re not imposing on anything.”

“Well, good,” he said. “Is there a reason why Mr. Carter didn’t ask for my approval to marry you?”

“I didn’t make that a requirement for our deal.” I shrugged. “It’s not in writing.”

“Come again?”

“He was too excited and got carried away by the moment.” I paused. “That’s why we eloped. We weren’t expecting it to get out.”

“Ah, I see. Well, everyone in Reno is buzzing about this news. Our church, my office, our neighbors, it’s crazy. I’m trusting that Travis will fly here and do the right thing before the wedding, so feel free to give him my phone number.”

*Right...*

“In the meantime, I hope you’ll find some time to make things right with Elaine.”

“Huh? What *things* exactly?”

“This entire situation. She’s terribly upset that her friends were the ones showing her the news about her beloved daughter.”

“Stepdaughter, Dad.”

“You know how obsessed she is with weddings and celebrity things.” He talked over me. “This could’ve been the perfect opportunity for you two to bond and become closer like I’ve always wanted. What do you think your mother would say about you behaving like this?”

I said nothing.

“Answer me, Tatiana,” he said. “Now.”

“I think Mom would be horribly disappointed.”

“I think so, too.”

“In *you*, not me.” I finished. “She wouldn’t understand how you fell for the first parasite who leeches onto you at her funeral.”

“I don’t know why I keep hoping that you’ll see the light someday and apologize for treating her so terribly—” His voice was terse—“But I won’t stand for this shit anymore. Regardless of your childish and warped emotions, Elaine has always wanted nothing but the best for you and gone far out of her way to help you.”

I set down my phone as he spoke. I couldn’t bear to listen to him rewrite a history that I knew all too well.

Grabbing my purse, I headed to the west wing and took the elevator to the casino.

I needed a drink.

TWENTY

FOUR DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TATIANA



*Paris Casino & Resort*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**T**ravis’s name and likeness greeted me with every drunken step I took on the Strip. T-shirt vendors, gift shops, and almost every tour bus boasted about being “The Home of Travis Carter.”

At a frozen daiquiri bar, I’d jokingly asked the bartender why there were no drinks called “The Punisher” on the menu, and he provided me with a separate leather folder with a special selection dedicated to Travis.

So far, I’d finished “Humble Kid Beginnings,” “The Ultimate Punish,” and an entire pitcher of “Bitch, I’m a Champion.”

I was now convinced that my blood was part rum.

Looking up at the “Eiffel Tower,” I snapped a picture and followed a group of women into the attached casino.

I’d drunkenly trailed them at a distance all night, becoming an invisible tagalong as they darted in and out of almost every building.

Boarding the elevator, I squeezed between their fluffy feather, organza, and tulle dresses.

“Did anyone notice how hot that security guard at Fat Tuesday was?” Pink Organza squealed. “I really need to get laid, so would you judge me if I invited him to my room later?”

“No!” “Never!” “*Do itttt!*” Her friends goaded.

“Don’t do it.” I slurred my words. “He wasn’t *that* hot.”

They all looked at me, serving me an array of blank stares.

“Wait a minute.” Red Silk tilted her head to the side. “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“Yeah, I feel like I know her, too.” Purple Tulle smiled. “Where have we met?”

“No clue.” I shrugged, shocked they hadn’t noticed me stalking them all night.

The doors glided open, and a half-naked guy in a Tarzan fit stepped on, taking away their attention.

I squeezed past them and stepped onto the casino floor.

Row after row of slot machines buzzed and chimed in different keys, their discordant notes blending into an unsettling symphony.

The room swayed from left to right, and I couldn’t figure out what the bright and swirly carpet was trying to say to me.

*Wait. Why is the carpet even talking?*

Steadying myself, I searched for a directory, but everything ahead of me refused to stand still.

Frustrated, I slipped inside a gift shop.

I grabbed a pair of shades from an end cap and opened the glass case, taking an orange juice. I downed it and took out another, dropping the empty bottles into the trash.

Spotting a display for “Sober Up” sweet tarts, I grabbed a box and poured half of them into my mouth before leaving.

“What the fuck, lady?” The clerk called after me. “Come back here and pay for that shit!”

I threw him a thumbs-up and boarded an escalator.

When the steps stopped climbing, I found myself on a floor full of table games. I’d won a few hands of poker at the Bellagio and MGM Grand earlier, so I decided to press my luck once more.



Taking my time, I followed the signs and plopped down at a table where three suits were already engaged in play.

“This table’s minimum is five thousand dollars, Miss,” the dealer said. “You’re more than welcome to stand and watch if you don’t have that. Otherwise—”

“I have that.” I pulled out a clip of hundreds from my earlier cash out.

“Very well.” He served me a stack of black and red playing chips and motioned for me to remove my sunglasses. “Rules of the table.”

“Sorry.” I obliged.

He dealt the cards, and I gradually lost myself in the game. I hedged my bets, called bluffs, and folded when the stakes were too high or too good to be true.

After winning six hands in a row, a small crowd formed behind the table, and they cheered between rounds.

“Here you are, Miss.” A waitress set down a champagne flute. “A gentleman at the blackjack table sent that for you. It’s top shelf champagne.”

“Please tell him I said, thank you.”

“Will do. Eight other men have bought you drinks, too, but I can only serve them one at a time.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I think I’ve had more than enough tonight.”

“One of them is a freakin’ millionaire CEO.” She smiled. “I’ll bring you his order next.”

She disappeared before I could protest.

“This woman seems to be on quite the streak,” a deep voice said behind me. “Is there room in this game for one more?”

“As long as you can afford the buy-in.” The dealer shuffled the cards. “We’re at ten thousand now.”

“Count me in.” He placed his chips on the table. “I could use a challenging opponent to spice up my night.”

“It’s just dumb luck. I’m not really—” I turned to face him and choked on my sentence.

This man *had* to be a walking advertisement for wet dreams. His deep chocolate-colored eyes complemented his silk-patterned tie, and his bespoke black suit looked as if it was custom-made for his well-toned body.

“You look like you’re having the time of your life tonight,” he said.

“It’s actually quite the opposite.”

“Sorry to hear that.” He extended his hand. “I’m Nicholas Sharp. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too. I’m—”

“Fucking beautiful.” He interrupted, frowning at my wedding ring. “And unfortunately *taken*.”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “I’m married.”

“What a shame.” His fingers lingered against mine. “Does your husband make you happy?”

“Um...”

“I’ll take that as a no.” He smiled a set of pearly whites. “I’ve always wondered why people stay in marriages if they’re miserable, especially when there’s always someone out there willing to treat them far better.”

Unsure of what to say, I turned away from him and focused on my new hand.

“I’d hate to see your hot streak cut short,” he whispered in my ear. “You may want to fold this round.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“I’m hosting a private game in a high rollers room if you want to see how lucky you can get after this.”

“I’ll have to pass,” I stole a final glance of him before the game. “I’m only here to drink and forget my worries.”

“I can help you with that, too.”

“Doubt it.”

“Trust me.” He leaned closer. “I’ve been watching you from afar since you came up here and it looks like you could use someone to talk to. Even if you don’t, you shouldn’t be alone.”

Midway through the game, he pressed his hand against my cheek. “Whatever happens after this round, I think you should \_\_\_”

“Get your fucking hand off *my wife*.” Travis roared, making everyone around us look up.

The crowd that had gathered around our table fell silent.

Nicholas jerked back and held up his hands. “I had no idea she was yours. I swear, I would have *never*—”

“Shut the hell up.” Travis stepped closer, pulling the cards from my fingers.

He looked around the table, noticing that it was my turn. Then he flipped my hand over, forcing the remaining players to reveal theirs.

“The lady wins again.” The dealer pushed all the chips my way.

“Ryan, grab Mrs. Carter’s chips,” Travis hissed.

“Yes, sir.”

“Come with me, *Mrs. Carter*.” Travis looped a hand around my waist and pulled me out of the chair.

My stolen sunglasses hit the floor, but he didn’t let me grab them.

Clenching his jaw, he led me through the crowd and past the other tables without saying a word.

“Oh my god, Travis Carter!” “When are you announcing the rematch?” “Travis! *Travis!*” “Can I get a picture?” “Your wife is fucking hot!” People held up their cell phones and snapped pictures of us.

I was far too intoxicated to fake a smile.

Travis escorted me past an “Employees Only” door and into a massive kitchen. Then he stopped and pushed me against the wall.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” He glared at me.

“No, but you clearly have.” I narrowed my eyes. “You just made one hell of a scene for no reason.”

“*No reason?*”

“Is there an echo in here?”

“We’ve been married four days—four fucking days—and instead of sticking to the script, you’re traipsing around this city with strangers and stealing shit from a gift shop?”

“I...” I was stunned that he knew anything at all about my night.

“Let me tell you about the man you’re currently married to, Tatiana.” He placed his hands on the panels above my head. “His name is Travis fucking Carter, his name is on this city’s goddamn welcome sign, and—”

“His words are currently coming out in third person...”

“When I said pretend that you’re *mine*, I meant that in every way.” He didn’t address my interruption. “You can’t be seen alone with another man, or flirting at a poker table where all the men are watching and waiting to take advantage of what belongs to me.”

“I wasn’t flirting with anyone.”

“The media won’t know the difference,” he said. “My *opponents* won’t know the difference, and they’ll bring that shit up during our press conferences as bait to make me jealous.”

“How can it possibly make you jealous, if everything about our arrangement is *fake*?”

“Stop interrupting me.” He hissed, gripping my waist. “Whenever you want a tour of my city, tell Benny, Ryan, or

any of my other security guards and they'll happily assist you with that."

"And whenever I want to drink and play cards?"

"Do it with someone who isn't trying to fuck you."

"That leaves *you* off my list, correct?"

"One hundred percent." He kissed me so hard and fast that I lost my balance.

Arching my back against the wall and grabbing onto him, I shut my eyes as he bit down hard on my bottom lip.

"I..." I rasped, digging my nails into his biceps. "I'm..."

"You're *what*?" He punished me with another hard bite, another primal kiss. "Are you sorry for letting another man get close to what's mine?"

I answered him with a loud moan, incapable of focusing.

Sliding a hand under my shorts, he pushed my panties to the side and pressed his thumb against my clit. It was soaking wet for him, ready and waiting for his touch, longing to be driven over the edge.

"Tatiana?" He slipped two fingers inside me, pushing them as deep as they could go, forcing my eyes to flutter open.

"Answer me," he said, his fingers buried deep. "Are you sorry?"

"No." I managed. "Not at all."

He immediately retaliated, pulling out his fingers and thrusting them back inside me again and again.

"You're mine..." He sucked on my neck, biting my skin and undoubtedly leaving a mark. "You'll always be fucking mine..."

There was no point in trying to be quiet. With every deep stroke from his fingers and every move of his mouth, a loud cry of pleasure left my throat.

Using his other hand to keep me steady against the wall, he looked into my eyes and commanded, "Ride my hand like you

used to ride my dick.”

He allowed me to shift my hips, and I moved my pussy against his fingers as he watched.

I was getting closer to the edge, a much-needed orgasm so near that I could—

“Alert, alert, alert!” His phone sounded in his pocket, and he yanked his fingers out of me.

The look on his face let me know that he was planning to deny me the orgasm regardless of this interruption.

“Yes, Ryan?” He kept his eyes on me as he answered the call.

“I’ve cleared a route for you and Mrs. Carter to return home without being seen by the public,” he said. “I also have her sunglasses.”

“Did you go back to that gift shop and pay for them on her behalf?”

“I did, sir. Continue through the kitchen whenever you’re ready to leave the casino.”

“We’ll be right there.” He hung up and trailed a finger down my throat. “I hope I’ve made myself clear about you and other men while we’re married.”

“You’ve made me see how much of a psycho you can be.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. My opponents think that about me, too.” He smoothed my shorts into place. “You’re still drunk as hell right now, so if I were you, I’d watch my words.”

“I don’t need to do anything that’s—Now that you’ve spoken—” I struggled to finish a single thought. Tonight’s alcohol had seeped too deeply into my veins, clouding what was left of my coherency.

As if he could tell, Travis pulled me against his side and walked me through the kitchen until we approached an exit door.

We entered an empty alley where a black and silver McLaren stood waiting for us.

Too drunk to even sit up straight, I tried to lean back against the seat, but I fell over in his lap.

He ran his fingers through my hair as he drove.

“Travis?” I asked, struggling to keep my mouth shut, wanting to gain the upper hand just once.

“Yes?”

“I’ve dated other people since we ended things.”

“Everyone has to experience disappointment at some point in life.”

“You’re not the best I’ve ever had.”

“Tell me that when you’re sober.”

“I just want you to know that I didn’t wallow when we were over.” I lied. “Plenty of other guys were interested in dating me.”

He let out a low laugh. “I’m sure they were.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Not really,” he said, “I don’t care how many guys you saw after me.”

“Why not?”

“Because as far as I’m concerned, your pussy has my signature on it and no other man will ever fuck you good enough to erase it.”

I shut my eyes and gave in to the drunken lure of sleep.

He’d won this round, hands down.

TWENTY-ONE



TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**Operation: Fake Fiancee**

**Week 2**

**Day 8:**

Miss Brave makes an appearance at *Humble City Fitness* for photogs. Mr. Carter begins intense training for the rematch.

**Day 9:**

Joint body language sessions.

**Day 10:**

Mock interviews with Mr. Carter's top ten super fans.

A joint brunch at Top of the World restaurant with the city's mayor.

**Day 11-14:**

Miss Brave & Mr. Carter will attend interviews with multiple news outlets. One will be live. Three will be taped and aired at a later date.

TWENTY-TWO

ELEVEN DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*One Week Later*

*Dolby Theatre*

*Los Angeles, California*

**M**adeline tapped her foot in the greenroom backstage, looking back and forth between me and Tatiana.

“Is there any reason why you two arrived on separate planes for today’s interview?” she asked. “Was that really necessary?”

Neither of us said a word.

With the exception of our scheduled events, we’d barely spoken to each other since the night we damn near fucked in the casino kitchen. The tension between us was far too high, the level of lust too damn palpable, and it seemed like she was attempting to avoid me as much as I avoided her.

“Um, *hello?*” Madeline asked. “Is there a problem I should know about?”

“I believe Mrs. Carter is upset with me about something,” I said.

“*Something?*” Tatiana narrowed her eyes at me. “Is that what you said?”

“I don’t believe I stuttered.” I focused my attention on Madeline instead of her; her lips were curving into that sexy, angry line that aroused me beyond words.

“It’s a good thing I have more than one private jet at my disposal,” I said. “It ensures that we’ll always be able to attend these events together.”

“He *left* me.” She seethed. “I told him I was running ten minutes late this morning, and he left me.”

“First of all, you were *an hour* late.”

“Forty-five minutes to be exact.”

“It damn sure wasn’t *ten*.” I rolled my eyes. “So, perhaps I was trying to teach you a much-needed lesson about time, Mrs. Carter. It waits for no one.”

“Okay, *look*.” Madeline stepped between us, her voice firm. “I need you two to focus. This interview will be watched live by at least seven million people, and then it’ll be broadcast as a rerun to millions more, and available for everyone via streaming after that. So, drop this petty shit and please, pretty please just pretend like we’re in rehearsal for the next half hour. Then you pick up the pettiness right after. Deal?”

“*Deal*,” we spoke in unison.

“Perfect!” She opened the door, and we clasped hands before heading to the white sofa on the soundstage.

The studio audience clapped and cheered when they saw us, and I spotted several “I love you, Travis!” “Congratulations!” and “You’re Still Undefeated to Me” signs.

“Hello Carters!” The interviewer, Catherine Bailey, gushed as we took our seats. “It’s such a pleasure to have you here in California with us today.”

“The pleasure is ours, Miss Bailey,” Tatiana said. “My husband has been looking forward to this interview ever since you invited us.”

I nodded and forced a smile. This woman was supposedly the “queen of talk shows,” but I’d always felt like something was off, and I’d rejected every single interview request for years.

“Good to hear,” Miss Bailey said. “Quick thing, though. I know we agreed on some pre-approved questions, but I hope you won’t mind me throwing in a few personal and juicy ones of my own.”

“We *will* mind.” I was still smiling, despite my tone. “That was the number one condition of you getting our first newlywed couple interview.”

“So, are you saying that you’ll leave the set in the middle of my questioning?” She arched an eyebrow. “On live television?”

“I’m kindly asking you to stick to the script that we agreed on.”

“Well, since you’re the one who is trying to get the public to see his so-called softer side, let’s see how calm you are under some fun pressure.” She smiled and snapped her fingers.

“Going live in three...” someone behind the set whispered. “Two...one...”

“Good morning, ladies of American Chat! I’m your host, Catherine Bailey. Today we’re here with Travis Carter, who is arguably the greatest UFC fighter of all time, and his wife, former world champion figure skater, Tatiana Brave!”

The studio audience applauded as my blood simmered.

“Although Travis is here to tell us more about a new charity he’s starting, along with giving us insight into his Humble City Fitness empire, I want us to get a bit more personal. This *is* L.A.’s top women’s show after all, right?”

Per our sessions with the body language expert, Tatiana slipped her hand in mine, temporarily distracting me from this blindsided betrayal.

“What was Mr. Carter like on the honeymoon, Mrs. Carter?” Miss Bailey smiled. “No photos have leaked and my book club is dying to know.”

A few scattered “Me too!” and squeals sounded from the audience.

“He was very attentive and sweet,” Tatiana said. “He treated me to a lot of sightseeing.”

“Now, you know that’s not what we’re looking for this morning.” She leaned forward, her smile widening. “We want to know if he’s as aggressive in the sheets as he is in the octagon.”

*What in the hell...*

“I hate to disappoint you.” Tatiana put on a smile as the audience squealed again. “I’m not the type to kiss and tell.”

“Of course,” she said, turning to me. “Given your reputation for playing the field, Mr. Carter, I’m sure I’m not the only woman here who was shocked to find out that you were settling down and getting married. Can you tell us what it was about Miss Tatiana that caught your eye?”

“Miss Bailey...” I took a small breath, holding back my rage at another unapproved question that had no rehearsed answer.

The room became silent, on edge for a response, but all I could do was look over at Ralph in the front row.

Reputation repair or not, this type of interview wasn’t worth my time, so I shot him the look. The “Come up with an excuse and get me out of this ASAP” wink.

He started walking toward a producer, but Miss Bailey sensed the silent cue.

“Better yet,” she said, “since we’re all just now seeing this *softer* side of you, why don’t we let your fiancée answer first. What caught your eye about your new husband, Tatiana?”

“His eyes,” she answered. “But I have to admit that I wasn’t his biggest fan when we first met.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, I was attracted to him, but he’s related to someone else I know.”

“Ah, yes, the incomparable ‘Perfect Feather.’ His younger sister.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Well, once you received her blessing and began dating, what made you fall hard for him?”

She looked at me, and I waited for her to say, “He was the perfect gentleman,” so I could interrupt and say, “It was hard not to be.”

“He was the most persistent guy I’d ever met,” she said. “He wouldn’t take no for an answer because he was determined to show me he could be a good boyfriend. He’s actually the best boyfriend I’ve ever had.”

“Oh?”

“He was always willing to do anything, and I do mean *anything*, for me.” She continued to venture off script. “I can’t count the number of times he traveled to see me on a whim, the number of times he knew just what to say to make me have a better day. No man had ever treated me like he did, and... Like I said, he was willing to do anything.”

“I’ll *still* do anything for you,” I said, completely off guard by her words. “That’ll never change.”

“Awwww!” “Ohhhh” “So sweet!” Several women in the audience swooned.

“On that note, let’s take our first break!” Miss Bailey smiled. “When we come back, we’ll dive deep into a stunning new feature that Travis is installing in every Humble City gym in the country!”

The rest of the interview went exactly as we’d rehearsed with our team, beat for beat.

When it ended, I signed autographs for the audience, until the last fan exited the studio.

“Miss Bailey?” Tatiana said once the crew began unplugging the cameras. “I need to talk to you in private with Mr. Carter.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Carter.” She smiled and shut the door. “What is it?”

“What you just did to me and my husband today was highly *un-fucking-professional*.”

“What?”

“Do I need to repeat it?” She narrowed her eyes. “There’s a reason we submitted those questions in advance and you promised not to deviate. You fucking *promised*.”

“Mrs. Carter, with all due respect—”

“Don’t use words that you don’t understand,” she said. “You can kiss that exclusive you have scheduled with Hayden Hunter later this year goodbye, as well as any other high profile celebrity ones, because once we tell everyone we know how you can’t stick to your word, you’ll be interviewing audience members about their favorite ice cream flavors and your ratings—along with your show—will be flushed down the drain.”

She paled. “I’m sorry.”

“No, but you will be soon.” She stormed off, and I followed her into the hallway.

Exhaling, she looked up at me. “I shouldn’t have said anything with all the camera crew and staff still around. I’m sorry, I just—”

“*Stop*.” I interrupted. “I was seconds away from doing the same thing. She deserved every word.”

“Okay, well, glad you agree,” she said. “About this morning...”

I raised an eyebrow. “What about it?”

“I lost track of time,” she admitted. “I stayed up too late and I overslept.”

“Is this your version of an apology?”

“I was getting there,” she said. “Sorry.”

“You’re completely forgiven.” I smiled and started to walk away. “I’ll see you at home.”

“Wait. We’re flying back to Vegas together, right?”



“No, but you’re more than welcome to ride to the airport with me and wait for your own takeoff,” I said.

She crossed her arms, looking confused.

“Since you flew here late, the pilot you came here with will take you back late. Otherwise, how will you ever learn your lesson about time?”

“Is this some type of joke?”

“Do you hear me laughing?”

She tapped her heel against the floor, pursing her lips again. “For the record, being married to you these past several days has made me hate you in a way I didn’t before. You’re a fucking terrible husband.”

“That feeling is now mutual, Mrs. Carter.” I smiled at her. “Have a safe flight.”

TWENTY THREE

TWELVE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TATIANA



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

MY TERRIBLE HUSBAND

We need to talk. Come see me.

ME

No, we don't. I'll pass.

MY TERRIBLE HUSBAND

I'm asking you nicely.

ME

ask. (verb) to put a question to; inquire of; a request in order to obtain an answer or some information.

Please save that definition to your phone and try again.

**H**e didn't respond.  
*Figures.*

I set down my phone and pulled out one of my business books. I read through the first few chapters, highlighting all

the mistakes I'd made when I built my brand.

In the middle of analyzing my profit and loss sheet, a brutal chill kissed my shoulders.

*Why is it so cold in here all of a sudden?*

Putting on a sweater, I started to call Travis's housekeeper, but the sound of *Sailor Moon's* theme song caught my attention.

Confused, I stepped into the hall and followed the notes past the living room and into a luxury theater that was fit for fifty.

On the big screen, my favorite episode from the English-dubbed version played, and a bucket of freshly popped popcorn stood between plushy red seats.

"This is a trap..." I muttered.

"No, it isn't." Travis walked behind me, a glass of wine in hand. "I've heard it's not a good thing for a husband and wife to go more than one night without talking to each other."

"How is that remotely relevant for our situation?"

"Because we need to talk." He took a long sip of his wine. "I was beginning to think I'd have to place the air conditioning on sub-zero for you to come see me."

"You turned my room into an igloo on purpose?"

"It worked." He smiled, and my heart flipped.

My brain begged me to run like hell back to my igloo.

"I assume this is still your favorite show, correct?" He took a seat. "Let's watch an episode together and have our first real married chat."

I remained frozen, glancing at a scene where Tuxedo Mask—the hero who honestly serves no purpose—appears with a rose between his teeth.

Travis and I had watched this episode plenty of times in the past, but he never *willingly* turned on this show.

He patted the seat next to him, and I took a few steps forward. Then a few more.

It wasn't until halfway through the episode that I gave in and fell into the chair next to him.

Under his gaze, I grabbed a handful of popcorn and stuffed the kernels into my mouth.

“What exactly do we need to talk about, Travis?”

“How nothing in this world is free. Except a view of the sun and the sky, maybe.”

“That's so profound and moving,” I said. “What's your point?”

“Well, given the fact that I'm being *charged* for a favor that was supposed to be free, and I'm practically paying for you to live here, I think it's only fair that you start contributing,” he said. “Perhaps it'll make you happier.”

“I'm not following.”

“You're about to.” He handed me a sheet of paper. “I'll add up everything at the end of our ninety-day deal, but I'm afraid you've already racked up quite the bill.”

Still not following, I glanced at the sheet.

Then I nearly lost it.

### **Charges for My Dear Wife**

*Use of luxury theater screen: \$20 per minute*

*Use of kitchen & special chef requests: \$50 per minute*

*Gourmet popcorn: \$25 per kernel*

*Temperature system: \$30 per degree*

*Toilet usage: \$40 per flush*

“You've got to be fucking kidding me, Travis.”

“Not at all.” He pulled out a few more sheets. “Here are the other charges since you insisted on paying for all your personal expenses via our contract, *Darling*.”

The way he said ‘Darling’ made me want to lean over and slap him.

“I just want to make sure I’m holding up my end of the deal,” he said. “I overlooked it earlier, so I’m glad I caught it tonight.”

“Fuck you, Travis.”

“Here or in my bedroom?”

I rolled my eyes and headed toward the door, but then I turned around and grabbed that bucket of popcorn.

*Two can play this game.*

TWENTY-FOUR

THIRTEEN DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I woke up at the crack of dawn with a rock-hard dick. *Again.*

There was no point in subjecting myself to a cold shower, though. Today’s conditioning session was minutes away, and my trainer always managed to get my mind in the right place.

Rolling out of bed, I pulled on a pair of shorts and tennis shoes. Then I headed to the kitchen.

To my surprise, Tatiana was already wide-awake. She was standing in front of the coffee bar, wearing skintight shorts and a sports bra. Her nipples were erect and poking through the fabric, and a faint line of caramel lingered above her lips.

Looking away from her body, I noticed a massive bell jar on my counter. Crumpled dollar bills were stuffed inside, and the words “My Husband’s Fees” were taped on its cover.

“I’m running late,” I said. “I need you to step out of the way for a second.”

“You should’ve gotten up earlier than.” She sounded nonchalant. “Time waits for no one, or so I’ve heard.”

“I said *running* late, not actually late.”

“I’m not done making my coffee yet.” She moved in front of my blender station, effectively blocking me and *making me* look at her. “I need to perfect and savor every drop, since it’s the only thing that isn’t on the charge list.”



“I’ll be sure to rectify that tonight.”

“My point still stands.” She picked up a can of whipped cream, squirting it into her mouth.

Testing my level of restraint, she tilted her head back and swallowed every drop.

“My trainer will be here any minute.” I took a deep breath as she licked the lingering cream off her upper lip. “I need to use the blender before my workout.”

“I bet you do.” She picked up a spoon that’d been dipped in caramel, then she gently dipped it into her cup before licking it clean.

“You need to buy your own fucking coffeemaker by the end of the day,” I said. “Actually, don’t worry about it. I’ll have Ryan go out and get it for you.”

“That doesn’t seem like a smart financial move on my part.” She stretched her shorts band, revealing that she wasn’t wearing panties. “Wouldn’t that increase the cost of what you’re charging me for electricity?”

“You also need to wear some goddamn clothes whenever you’re on this side of the condo. Now would be a good time to get dressed.”

“This is coming from the person who is currently wearing nothing but a pair of workout shorts?” She eyed my chest. “Is it ‘rules for thee and not for me’?”

“*Tatiana Brave...*”

“Travis Carter...”

We held a silent stalemate, the tension thickening and becoming more palpable by the second.

I waited for her to give in and submit, but the doorbell saved us both.

“I’ll get it.”

“Good.”

She walked past me and I moved to the blender station.

I peeled an orange and prepared to apologize to my trainer, but I didn't hear his voice.

"Well, good morning, Missus Carter!" It was a man with a syrupy Southern drawl instead. "I'm Henry Dillinger."

I turned around and saw Tatiana shaking his hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Dillinger," she said. "I'll get Travis."

"I'm not here for him. I'm here for you."

"Why?" She looked confused.

"I'm filming your husband's comeback documentary, and I was promised unprecedented access to his life per Miss Dawson. I'm hoping to shadow you today, if that's alright."

"Well, um, I..." Tatiana stuttered.

"Maybe we can start with you giving me a tour of this lovely home?" he asked.

"Uh—"

"I just completed some extensive remodeling as a surprise gift for her." I walked across the room and shook his hand. "You'll have to excuse her if she makes any mistakes. It's all rather new for her."

"I completely understand, sir." He smiled. "I'm looking forward to shadowing you as well soon."

"Noted." I looked at Tatiana. "Have a good day and enjoy your last free coffee, Sweetheart."

"You have a good day as well, Dear," she said.

"Be sure to ask Mr. Dillinger if he'll allow you a moment to get dressed before you begin the tour."

"I will once you finally put me out of my misery and leave..." She was whispering. "Or do I have to pay for that, too?"

"You two don't have to act awkward or hold back on the PDA because I'm here," Mr. Dillinger said. "Just be natural,

and over time it'll feel like me and my camera crew aren't here."

He looked between us. "You do kiss each other goodbye, right?"

"We do." I planted a kiss on Tatiana's neck, and she sucked in a breath. "See you later, Mrs. Carter."

"See you later."

I walked to the elevator and slammed the down button.

The doors glided open instantly, and Madeline stepped out.

"Heads up," she said. "I just hired an acclaimed documentary director, and he's coming to see you at some point today."

"He's already here." I rolled my eyes. "Thanks for the advance notice."

"You're welcome."

"Is this how you typically handle your high-profile clients?"

"I mean, you're my first one, so I guess so."

*What the fuck?* "What do you mean I'm your first client?"

"Huhhh?" Her cheeks reddened. "I didn't—I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did." I stepped closer. "I'm your *first* client?"

"First client this year." She was lying like hell. "That's what I meant."

She tried to walk past me, but I blocked her.

"You told Ralph that you studied under the best publicist in Los Angeles," I said, "and that you graduated from a special marketing program with honors."

"Okay. I *said* that, but—"

"But what?"

"I wanted to make myself seem like a big deal, to say whatever it took to get this job." She shrugged. "Everyone

exaggerates.”

“No, they don’t,” I said. “Did you really go to Cornell University, or is that an exaggeration, too?”

She looked at the ceiling, as if the answer was up there .

“Yes or no, Madeline? Did you go to Cornell?”

“I took a few tours of the campus and bought a really expensive sweatshirt from their gift shop.”

I shook my head.

There was no point in firing her at this point. Operation Fake Fiancee was too far gone.

“Do you have any more surprises up your sleeve for me?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t predict the future.”

“Just say no, Madeline.”

“Oh, sorry.” She smiled. “There are no more surprises.”

“Thank God.”

“That I know of at this time...”

TWENTY-FIVE

TATIANA



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**Operation: Fake Fiancee**

**Week 3**

**Day 15-16:**

Mrs. Carter accompanies Mr. Carter to sponsorship meetings with Tom Ford, Versace, and Audemars Piguet.

**Day 17:**

Mr. Carter shares an authentic video apology to his fans.  
(Please just read it as we rehearsed and don't add anything else)

**Day 18-20:**

Mrs. Carter attends an MMA Wives & Girlfriend Weekend Event in Phoenix, Arizona. She will SAY NICE THINGS about Mr. Carter.

Mr. Carter WILL NOT BOTHER Mrs. Carter during this time.

**Day 21:**

Mr. & Mrs. Carter will fly to Manhattan \*together\* for an event hosted by Mr. Truss. Details TBD.

**\*Remember:** Week 4 will be a rest week, but I'll be sure to schedule a dinner for press purposes at least.\*

TWENTY-SIX

TWENTY ONE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Manhattan, New York*

*“Congratulations to Mrs. & Mrs. Travis Carter!”*

*—Your second family at Nike*

I stared at the banner that hung from the ceiling in Mr. Truss’s penthouse.

He’d insisted on throwing us a wedding reception since he still “felt some type of way” about us not having a formal ceremony that he could attend.

His wife, the top wedding planner on the east coast, decorated the entire home with red and white roses. She’d also handcrafted a three-tiered cake that featured our likenesses for the cake topper. Tatiana’s clay figure wore a red skating costume, while I wore a bow tie and black fighting shorts.

A part of me thought this was creepy as fuck and completely unnecessary, but there was another part of me—a small, microscopic one—that found it slightly endearing.

*He better finally agree to renew my sponsorship contract after all this...*

I picked up a glass of champagne and sipped it slow, stealing the umpteenth glance of my wife. Today was the first time I’d seen her in three long days, and I’d sorely missed the view.

Somehow, every dress she wore was more alluring than the last, and today’s short one-shoulder pink number accentuated



her every curve, stamping itself into my memories for months to come.

“You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d totally buy this entire relationship,” Penelope whispered. “The way you and Tatiana keep gazing at each other every few minutes is top notch acting. I’m actually giddy watching it.”

“Good to know, Crown.”

“Seeing that I’m in on the truth, though—” She looked over her shoulder, making sure no one was within earshot. “Have me and Hayden done enough by showing up and giving a toast, or do you think this Truss guy expects us to stay a little longer?”

“If you leave early, I’m not saving any cake for you. It’s your favorite flavor.”

“His wife made me a separate small one.” She smiled. “She figured I’d be eating for two.”

I glanced at her baby bump. “Everything still going well?”

“Everything except my older brother holding up the progress for a certain *real* wedding ceremony. You could at least get fitted for your tuxedo.”

“You can leave the party now. Thanks for coming.”

“I can’t stand you.” She laughed and hugged me. Then she walked over to Tatiana and pulled her close.

Hayden waved goodbye from afar, and the two of them exited down the grand staircase.

“Come over here and join us, Mr. Carter!” One of the product managers called out to me. “We could use your input on this conversation.”

“Be right there.” I grabbed a water bottle from a passing waiter’s tray and moved to Tatiana’s side.

“Mrs. Carter was just telling us how she’s transitioning to full-time life in Vegas,” he said. “She says it’s a lot tougher than New York City, but we’re finding that hard to believe.”

“They don’t believe how *expensive* it is to live there.” She was clearly in the mood to start shit today. “Can you tell them just how much I’m spending to survive?”

“Why don’t we tell them how much you’re *making* instead?”

“Oh?” The manager’s eyes lit up. “Are you preparing to perform on the ice again?”

“No, she’s blessing the world with an entirely different performance,” I said dryly.

“Well, I’m looking forward to whatever that may be,” he said. “How’s the rematch training going, Mr. Carter?”

“Wonderful,” I said. “I honestly never stop training, though.”

“Ah, heart of a champion.” He smiled. “How are you making time for your wife during this intense season?”

*The same way I’m making time for this silly shit.*

“He *doesn’t* make the time.” Tatiana beat me to the answer. “He’d avoid me all the time if it were up to him.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No.” She shrugged. “But, I’m willing to play second fiddle to his career until he retires because I understand how important it is to him. It’s almost like I’m repaying him for a favor, with tons of interest.”

*What the hell is she doing?*

“Hmmm.” The manager looked somewhat confused by her answer. “Well, since he’s raved so much about you tonight, what’s your favorite quality of Mr. Carter’s?”

“I honestly can’t think of a single one.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, the list is *so* long that I can’t pick just one.” She looked up at me with a fake smile. “Then again, unbeknownst to a lot of people, he has some *amazing* accounting skills.”

“That’s...your favorite quality?”

“She’s joking.” I grabbed her hand. “Can I talk to you in private for a minute, Mrs. Carter?”

“Sure.”

I yanked her away before she could say anything else reckless. After walking past a few bedroom doors, I pulled her inside a laundry room.

Locking the door, I dropped the doting husband act.

“I would ask what the hell you’re doing, but I don’t even think you know at this point.”

“I’m being a good wife.”

“A good wife doesn’t insinuate negative things about her husband.”

“She does if she can’t think of any nice things to say.”

“I’ve always thought my husband was sexy as hell’ is a pretty easy one.”

“I would’ve said that if you hadn’t spent most of this party keeping your distance like I have some type of disease,” she said. “I’m shocked no one else has caught on, because ever since the toast, you’ve been treating me like a damn pariah.”

“Tatiana...”

“You didn’t even talk to me on the plane.” Her face reddened. “I go away to Phoenix for an entire weekend and when I get back, you don’t have anything to say?”

I raised an eyebrow. “What do you expect me to say?”

“A simple hello would’ve been nice. Hell, I would’ve settled for one of your sarcastic comments since I arrived late for takeoff.”

“Maybe it pains me to get too close to someone I want but can’t have.” I swallowed. “I personally think I’m showing some impressive restraint because trust me, the only reason I’ve kept my distance tonight is because if I get any closer, I’ll fuck you.”

“Well, I...” She stepped back. “Thank you for clearing that up.”

“You’re welcome. Now, back to what I was saying about you being a good wife—” I moved in front of the door. “I need you to go back out there and say some nice things about me.”

“Fine.”

“After you admit that you missed me.”

“What?”

“You missed me,” I said. “*Say it.*”

“I didn’t miss you, Travis. I’m still mad at you for tons of other things outside of tonight. Can we go back to the party now?”

“Say that first sentence like you actually mean it, and we can.”

Silence.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carter?” Someone called from outside the door. “We’ll be ready for you to cut the cake in a few minutes!”

Neither of us made a move.

TWENTY-SIX & A HALF

SEVENTEEN DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TATIANA



*Manhattan, New York*

All I could do was stare into Travis’s eyes, hoping he couldn’t see the denial in mine.

I hated the way he’d treated me tonight—only showing affection when someone was watching, only looking at me from afar—and I hated that I cared.

He moved closer, pressing his forehead against mine.

“So, you didn’t miss me?” he asked.

“No.”

“Okay.” He reached back to unlock the door. “You’re free to go. I’ll follow your lead.”

“Thank you.” I continued staring into his eyes. “I appreciate that.”

“Tatiana.” His voice was strained. “Why are you still standing here?”

“I’m not. I’m clearly leaving if you’d give me a second.”

He gave me a lot more than that. Then he gripped my waist.

“I’m heading toward the door at this very moment,” I said.

“I can see that.” He tightened his grip. “Now?”

“Yes. Right now.”

His lips curved into a smirk, and he lowered his voice. “It’s a shame to see that you still struggle with knowing what’s best

for you.”

“It’s never shameful to grow up and learn from a huge relationship mistake.”

“That’s what I was to you?” He didn’t look the slightest bit convinced. “A *mistake*?”

“Biggest one I ever made.” I swallowed. “And the moment I’m done faking this relationship, I’ll take great pride in erasing *this* one.”

“Then I guess we should make the next several minutes memorable.” He pressed his lips against mine and trapped me in a tight hold, sentencing my lies to a long, unrelenting kiss.

Sliding a hand under my dress, he yanked off my panties.

As they fell to the floor, he smacked my ass, and I yelped so loudly that I knew whoever was on the other side of the door heard me.

“Are you faking *this*?” he hissed against my mouth, still punishing me with his kiss.

“Yes.” I lied. “I’m fucking faking it.”

He spun me around to face the oversized window and bent me over.

Grabbing the hem of my dress, he pushed it up to my stomach.

“Don’t move.” He wedged his foot between my legs, forcing me to spread wider for him.

I slid my fingers under the frame of the washing machine to keep my balance, but he slapped my ass again. Much harder this time.

“I said, *don’t move*,” he warned.

Remaining still, I shut my eyes and listened as he unbuckled his pants behind me. The sound of him unwrapping a condom followed, and within seconds, I felt him pressing his sheathed cock against my clit.

He didn't give me a chance to anticipate him fucking me, though.

He slid into me all at once, his huge cock stretching me deep. Then he grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled me back.

"Fuckkk!" I screamed. "I hate you..."

He thrust in and out of me without mercy, keeping his firm grip on my hair.

I had no choice but to grab onto the washing machine now; I'd accept any further punishment.

"Tell me that you hate me again," he said, pounding me harder.

"I hate you." I rasped. "I fucking hate you."

"You fucking *missed me...*" He bit my shoulder, picking up the tempo. "Say you missed me."

"Yesssss." I moaned.

He slid a hand between my legs and found my clit, rubbing it with his thumb. "*Say it.*"

"Ahhhh...I missed you."

"I've missed you, too." He darted his tongue against my neck. "For *years...*"

My clit swelled under the pressure of his thumb's steady rhythm, and his cock was repeatedly hitting my spot.

The pleasure inside me rose and rose and rose, and I lost total control.

Throwing my head back, I moaned his name louder than I had all night, completely submitting and falling apart.

He held me taut as he reached his own release, but he didn't let me go.

We remained connected, struggling to catch our breath.

Pressing one final kiss against my skin, he slowly slid out of me. He pulled tossed the condom into the trash and pulled up his pants before readjusting the back of my dress.



Spinning me around to face him, he looked as if he wanted to say something, but no words came.

Instead, he sighed and pushed a few of my errant curls into place. Then he picked up my panties and stuffed them into his pocket.

I'd just broken my top rule of this arrangement like it was nothing, and given how easily it was for me to get emotionally involved with this man, I couldn't afford to break it again.

"Mr. Carter?" I said.

"Yes?"

"Please don't expect for that to happen again."

"That's fine." He opened the door. "Your loss."

TWENTY-SEVEN

TWENTY-TWO DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Days Later*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**T** *hink of something other than your wife. Think of something other than your wife.*

I shook away the endless thoughts of being inside Tatiana—a feeling I’d missed for far too long—replacing them with images of Juarez. Then I slipped into my private octagon and traded jabs with my trainer.

With every hit, I envisioned Juarez’s face bloody and bruised, his jaw breaking in slow motion, and his mouth begging for mercy as I made him eat every word he’d said about me in the press.

“*Enough*, Travis!” My trainer screamed. “Fuck, enough!”

I slipped out of my trance, realizing he was on the ground with a bloody lip.

“Sorry about that, Max.” I leaned down and picked him up from the mat. “I got carried away.”

“No worries, sir.” The fear in his eyes revealed that he didn’t mean that. “How about a protein break?”

He left the cage without getting my answer.

I took off my gloves and followed him into the relaxation room.

“You’re getting more terrifying every day, Humble Kid.” Ralph looked up from his laptop. “I might be forced to bet on

you winning this time.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “Did you file the paperwork for a rematch yet?”

“Of course.” He nodded. “The UFC wants to make an entire event out of it, so expect some significant press changes to your schedule.”

“Speaking of press—” I opened my bag and pulled out this morning’s *Vegas Times*. “I thought the purpose of marriage was to completely reverse all the bad news.”

“The purpose of *your* marriage, yes,” he said. “Us regular people typically marry for love or money.”

“Today’s front-page headline is negative as hell.”

He put on his reading glasses and recited the headline aloud. “*Don’t Believe the Hype: Travis Carter Will Never Change His Ways, Bet on a Divorce.*”

“How is this negative?” He smiled. “It’s an opinion piece from a junior editor.”

“It’s on the front page, Ralph.”

“Wouldn’t you be upset if they put you anywhere else?”

I snatched the paper from his hands, and he laughed.

“Look on the bright side,” he said. “Seven sponsors have committed to renewing their contracts with you as of this morning.”

“Please tell me that one of those is Mr. Truss with Nike.”

“Nope, but he promises he’s going to sign you after you do a few more things.”

“Don’t tell me what they are.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to know.”

I took out another daily with a less-than-flattering headline, and Tatiana stepped into the room and cleared her throat.

“Where’s the best place for me to have a private dinner on The Strip?” she asked.

“Depends on what type of experience you’re looking for,” I said, eyeing her short pink dress. “You’d have to tell me that first.”

“I’m catching up with an old skating colleague tonight,” she said. “By the way, you may want to send a heads up note to the media that he’s just an acquaintance if they happen to spot us together.”

“*He?*”

“Yes. *He.*” She paused. “Tristan Chamberlain.”

“Your former skating partner?”

She nodded. “He wants to formally apologize for what he did to me over dinner.”

“I’m sure he does, but you can’t see him.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I won’t allow you to.”

“Oh, okay, *Father.*” She rolled her eyes and walked away. Then she looked over her shoulder to Ralph. “Can you tell my husband what year we’re in? He seems to have gotten knocked back into a different century during his practice today.”

The door slammed shut, and Ralph held up his hands in a surrender.

“Leave me out of it.”

“Fine. Give me my phone,” I said to Ryan.

“Right away, sir.”

I typed “Tristan Chamberlain” into my browser and waited for the results to load.

I skimmed the information pages, discovering that his career had ended long before Tatiana’s, and he was now making a living as an influencer. He had amassed millions of followers and was hawking everything from tooth whitening strips to flat tummy tea.

He seemed harmless, but I wasn’t quite ready to write him off yet.

Clicking on his Twitter profile, I read his latest tweet.

**@TristanChamLife** Just landed in Vegas via first-class flight.  
Got a special night coming. One last chance to win back the  
one who got away...

*What the fuck?*

TWENTY-EIGHT

TWENTY-THREE DAYS AFTER SAYING "I DO"

TRAVIS



MADELINE

Please tell me that you didn't use your condo's master lock system to prevent your wife from going out last night.

ME

Okay. I \*won't\* tell you that.



TWENTY-NINE

TWENTY-FIVE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TATIANA



*Crystals City Center: Dolce & Gabbana*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“**Y**ou really don’t need to watch my every move, Ryan.”

“Those are Mr. Carter’s orders verbatim.” He gave me a sympathetic smile. “It’s for your protection.”

“Protection from *what?*”

“He wants to make sure you’re safe, to guard you from anything that could possibly happen to you in public.”

“Like the paparazzi somehow snapping pictures loud enough for me to die?”

He held back a laugh. “I’m just doing my job, Ma’am.”

“Can you do it from over there?” I pointed to the entrance. “Surely Mr. Carter wouldn’t want you following me into the fitting room.”

He looked as if he wasn’t sure about that idea, but he eventually walked away.

Thanks to Travis, the entire store was cleared out, with the exception of the attendants and the manager.

They’d waited on me hand and foot, all while serving champagne with strawberries, and showing off every item in stock.

I appreciated their service beyond measure, but the means behind it was pure control.

No matter what store I visited, the staff followed this protocol.

There was nowhere Travis's influence couldn't reach, no manager or brand that didn't owe him a favor or desire a chance to earn some of his money.

Slipping inside the fitting room, I tried on a set of lacy black lingerie and a matching cover. As I was checking out the side view, stiletto footsteps clacked nearer and nearer.

"Mrs. Carter?" The manager knocked on the door.

"Yes, Miss Turner?"

"Another security guard has arrived," she said. "He claims that his name is Benny and he's here at the request of Mr. Carter. Can I let him inside the store?"

*Oh my god!*

"Yes. You can let him inside."

"Thank you, Miss. I'll be out here when you need me."

I waited until I couldn't hear her clacking stilettos and called Travis via video chat.

"Hello, my gorgeous wife," he said, his voice far too sweet. "How are you this afternoon?"

"I'm very upset." I waited for his face to appear, but the screen remained dark.

"I'm sorry to hear that." He paused. "Before you tell me why, you should know that I'm in the middle of an important business meeting, and although I can't see you, you are on speaker mode."

"I don't care." I seethed, annoyed that he categorized grabbing a coffee with Ralph and Madeline as a 'business meeting.' "I need to get this off my chest."

"Should I clear the room first?"

“No, you should let your team hear how insanely psychotic you are about your wife’s recent security precautions.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with protecting the things that mean a lot to me.”

“You mean, you can’t handle the mere thought of another man coming onto your wife.”

“That, too.” There was a smile in his voice. “I’ll never apologize for that.”

“You weren’t like this before we went to New York.”

“You’re right.” He admitted. “I think getting a certain laundry room reminder made me realize that I need to guard what belongs to me a lot better.”

“Okay, look.” I shook my head. “It’s hard to have a true video conversation when I can’t see you, and you can’t see me. Turn on your camera.”

“As you wish.” He appeared onscreen, and I immediately realized that he wasn’t lying about his business meeting.

My jaw dropped as I saw a group of suits seated around a conference table.

Travis blinked slowly, parting his lips as he took in the sight of my lingerie.

“Miss Carter,” the fitting room attendant slid an arm through my door, showing off a dark lace bustier. “I wasn’t able to find the matching thong for this one, but I can have someone from our other location bring it over ASAP if you’re willing to wait. Just let me know.”

“I…” My cheeks burned as Travis’s business partners stared at me.

“Can you all excuse me and my wife, please?” Travis recovered, smirking. “She clearly intended for our conversation to be private.”

They shuffled out of the room, and Travis leaned back in his chair.

“Thank you for saving me from a boring session I should’ve cancelled,” he said. “What were you saying about the permanent security precautions?”

I said nothing.

“*Mrs. Carter?*”

I was still speechless, embarrassed, and *livid* that he found this funny.

“You should get that lingerie set in red, too,” he said, smiling. “That’s always been your best color. I’ll send over another guard to hold your bags since you seem to be purchasing quite a lot today.”

I hung up in his face.

THIRTY

TWENTY SIX DAYS SINCE THEY SAID “I DO”

MADELINE



*Andiamo Steakhouse*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

MISS BRAVE

Can you ask my husband to pass the salt?

“Mr. Carter, can you pass the salt to your wife?” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

Instead of working on the ins and outs of their upcoming schedule, I was playing the role of “telephone” for what had to be the umpteenth time.

The ongoing tension between them was driving me to the brink of insanity, and why they couldn’t behave like adults remained a mystery to me.

I held out my hand for the shaker, but Mr. Carter picked up his phone instead.

MR. CARTER

I will pass the salt to my wife if she uses her mouth to ask me for it. It’s been a full day and she hasn’t said a word to me.

Tell her we’ve previously agreed to at least say hello to each other from here on out.

Feel free to say, “New York laundry.” She’ll understand the reference.

I signaled for the check. Then I leaned over and grabbed the salt, sliding it to Miss Brave.

“There,” I said. “Can you both do me a quick favor and smile at each other? The people here are watching you.”

“That’s nothing new,” Miss Brave smiled in my direction instead of his. “At this point, I’m shocked Mr. Carter doesn’t have his security guards watch me whenever I go to the bathroom.”

“Don’t tempt me to start,” he said.

“You know what?” I set down my fork. “You two can drop the smiles for the night. Before this dinner hits the press, I’ll let them know this was a post-workout dinner instead of a date.”

“*Fine*,” they said in unison.

“Glad you two are on the same page again.” I clasped my hands. “Is it possible for us to discuss this week’s upcoming schedule?”

They didn’t answer.

My phone buzzed against the table.

MR. CARTER

Can you ask my wife to pass the pepper?



THIRTY-ONE

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**Operation: Fake Fiancee**

**Weeks 4 & 5**

**All the Days**

Stay the hell away from each other.

# ACT EIGHT

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Parker Hotel & Suites*

*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

“I just couldn’t stay away!” Penelope twirls in front of the camera screen, showing off a sparkling pink costume dress. “I changed my mind and bought this one at the last minute. What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful, Crown.” I smile. “What did your coach say?”

“He doesn’t want to see it yet.” She rolls her eyes. “I have a few competitions before the Sochi Olympics and he’s a stickler for focusing on one thing at a time.”

“He’s the best in the business for a reason.”

“He’s the best at sucking the fun out of everything.” She plops down into a chair. “Thank you for paying his ridiculous rate for me, though.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I bought a sweater for you to wear in Sochi.” She holds up a grey and red knit that says, ‘I’m the Best Figure Skater Alive.’

“I bought an iron-on patch that says, ‘My Sister Is’ for you to put on top of it,” she says. “You have to promise to wear it when you get here. Well, if you actually come, that is.”

“I’ve told you that I’ll do everything I can to be there. I’ve said it a million times.”

“You say that about every competition lately, and yet...” She gives me a look I’ve come to know all too well.

We’re usually mid-argument, and she calls me “the worst brother in the world” before hanging up in my face, but for some reason, it stings more when she’s calm like this.

Then again, to say that I’ve been “the worst brother in the world” lately is an understatement.

It’s far too nice.

I’ve missed every single one of her competitions by canceling at the last minute to take a fighting opportunity or a meeting with a potential sponsor.

Although I’m making more money than before and can take care of both of us a bit more comfortably, the one thing I can’t afford is spare time. Not when I’m this close to making it, this close to lifting our family’s debt off my chest.

The UFC commissioner keeps stringing me along, promising that “soon,” “super soon,” he’ll allow me a chance to fight for a title so I can enjoy more promotion, benefits, and the much-needed freedom to do the things I want to do. Alas, I’m still fighting mediocre opponents during the pre-shows and using my talents in various underground leagues.

“I’ll do my best to be there Penelope,” I say. “We should get a picture near the rings together for Mom’s sake.”

“I’m ten steps ahead of you.” Her eyes light up, and she grabs a frame of our mother when she competed at the Olympics. “She’s the inspiration behind my costume. I think she’d be proud of me.”

“I *know* she would be.”

“She’d be disappointed in your career choice, though.”

“Not as much as Dad would be.” I smile, and for the first time in forever, we laugh and share memories of our parents that don’t hurt.

The minutes pass by, stretching into hours, and it’s a little after midnight by the time we’re debating who gave our dad the most challenging time as kids.

“Shit!” She gasped. “I have ballet practice in a couple hours. I gotta nap. Love you, Travis.”

“Love you, too, Crown.” I shut my laptop.

Walking into my kitchen, I pick up my phone and see that I’ve missed a call from Tatiana.

*Shit.* I haven’t seen her in person in months.

Despite talking to her as much as possible and sending gifts occasionally, I haven’t been the best boyfriend.

*I’m fucking up with everyone in my life.*

Holding back a sigh, I return her call.

It doesn’t ring.

It goes straight to voicemail.

*Fuck.*

“Hey Tati,” I say after the beep. “I’m sorry I missed you. I’ll try again in a few hours. If I don’t reach you then—” I pause, remembering we both have a hectic upcoming week. “Good luck on your business school placement interview this week, and let me know how it goes.”

I unwrap my hands and mix a protein shake. Then I set up a makeshift weight area in the living room and order a late-night keto box for dinner.

Although the men I’m scheduled to fight this weekend are nowhere near my level, I never underestimate an opponent. I still can’t afford to lose, and I never want to know what that feels like.

Fifty bench presses later, the delivery guy bangs on my door.

“One second!” I say, grabbing a couple of twenties.

“You can keep the change since it’s...” I stop talking when I see Tatiana in the hallway.

With her hair pulled into a curly bun atop her head, she’s dressed in a bright red parka and jeans. Rain is dripping from her coat and onto the hotel’s carpet.

“Hi...”

“Hey.” She blushes, and I notice the small grey suitcase behind her.

“How did you get here?”

“I rented a car after meeting a potential sponsor in New York.” She smiles. “Since you’re the one who tends to randomly come see me and we haven’t seen each other in what feels like forever, I figure I should return the favor.”

I stare at her.

She glances behind me, her expression slowly shifting from happiness to worry. “Am I interrupting your time with someone else?”

“There’s never been anyone else,” I say. “You know better than that.”

“Then why aren’t you saying anything?”

“I’m just stunned.” I slip an arm around her waist and pull her inside.

The moment the door shuts, I kiss her lips, and her suitcase falls to the floor.

“You know...” I whisper against her mouth. “I’m starting to think you have feelings for me.”

“I don’t. You’re just a former gym mate who I talk to every blue moon.” A blush crosses her cheeks, and I kiss her again.

“How long are you in town?”

“Three days. I want to come to your fight, too.”

I let her go at the sound of the food delivery and quickly tip the driver. Then I set the boxes on the counter and uncork a bottle of wine.

“You drink wine now?” she asks.

“Only if you’re around.” I hand her a glass. “This is that ‘Rainy Day’ brand you told me about months ago. It’s not that bad.”

“You mean, it’s the best.” She walks over to the couch, and I join her.

“Can I tell you something?” she asks.

“Of course.”

“I think you might be the best boyfriend I’ve ever had.”

“What do you mean, *might be*?”

“I’ll have to wait and see who comes after you before things are final.”

“Be sure to give me his address so I can have a few words with him, too.”

She laughs, and I pull her closer.

“There’s a *Sailor Moon* marathon on,” she says.

“Thank you for telling me what we *won’t* be watching.” I shake my head. I’ve already watched every episode of that show with her, and I can only take so much.

We compromise on *Law & Order: SVU*, and midway through the episode, she lays her head in my lap.

She slides a hand into my pants and pulls out my dick. Well, part of it. Then she flicks her tongue against the tip a few times.

“Tatiana...” I hold back a laugh and tilt her head up to face me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to—” She blushes, pushing my cock back into my pants. “You know...”

“Suck my dick?”

“Surely there’s a softer way you can say it.”

“Okay.” I smile and gently push her up. “Allow me to help you with that.”

“Am I doing it wrong?”

“Not for long,” I say. “You should get on your knees, though.”

She hesitates but eventually moves to the carpet.



I loosen the drawstring on my sweatpants.

“Slide your hand inside my pants and pull it out. All the way out...”

She follows my command, and my cock stiffens under her touch.

“Good. Now, spit on it.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” I say. “Spit on my dick.”

She obliges, but it’s not wet enough.

“One more time,” I say.

She does, and then I grab her hand and use it to cover my shaft, showing her how to move her palm up and down the length.

“See how hard I’m getting for you?” I ask.

“Yes...”

I take a deep breath as she leans forward unprompted and swirls her tongue against my tip. Then she covers the head of my cock with her perfect, warm mouth.

“Fuck...” I groan. “Take me down your throat.”

Pressing her palms against my thighs, she adjusts her position and opens wide, sucking me down inch by inch.

When she’s halfway down, she gags.

“*Slowly*,” I thread my fingers through her hair. “Take your time.”

Nodding, she tries again, a lot slower this time. Fucking perfect this time.

I lean back, and she moves her mouth up and down my length, using her hands to massage my balls and leaving me utterly fucking speechless.

In between strokes, she spits on my cock a couple more times, and it takes everything in me not to pull away from her and bend her over this couch.

“I’m about to come,” I whisper. “You should jerk your head back or it’ll get in your mouth.”

She doesn’t get out of the way. Her mouth moves against me even faster.

“*Tatiana...*” I warn, but she acts as if she doesn’t care.

I slide a hand around her neck as my muscles tighten, and her warm mouth brings me to my fucking breaking point.

She leans back, keeping her mouth wrapped around my cock as I come on her tongue.

I stare at her as she swallows everything.

Still hard as hell, I grab her hands and pull her onto the couch.

“You’re fucking perfect,” I say. “Do you know that?”

She smiles, not answering that question. “Can I use your restroom?”

“Washing my taste out of your mouth already?”

She laughs and grabs her suitcase, disappearing down the hall for a few minutes.

When she returns, she’s dressed in flannel pajamas. I’ll never know why she bothered putting those hot things on when she sleeps best naked.

Then again, that’s probably for the best right now.

After she curls into my lap, we return to watching *SVU* episodes.

“Hey,” she whispers as the familiar theme song plays. “Are you still awake?”

“Yes.”

“If I said I wanted you to be my first, what would you say?”

“I’d tell you to go to sleep.” I kiss her hair. “You’ve had a long travel day and you’re just talking.”

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Anything.”

“You once said that long distance relationships don’t tend to work out.”

“I said that before getting into one with you.”

“Yeah, well...” She sounds nervous for the first time tonight. “Are you sleeping with other girls?”

“No.” I flip her over to face me and kiss her lips. “My streak of ‘no sex in over a year’ is still going.”

“If I don’t sleep with you soon, will you tell me we’re over?”

I hold back a laugh. “I would never.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like you too fucking much.” I kiss her again. “And you’re without a doubt, the only girlfriend I ever want to have.”

THIRTY-TWO

THIRTY DAYS SINCE THEY SAID “I DO”

RALPH



*Fountains of Bellagio*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**W** *here the hell are they?*

My cigar’s smoke unfurled into the wind, the toxic scent reminding me that I needed to quit this bad habit.

Yet, whenever it came to dealing with “The Punisher,” and all the things that came with managing his illustrious career, my daily dose of nicotine was the only way I could handle it.

Now that Tatiana was back in his life, my single dose was on the verge of becoming an *overdose*.

Being around the two of them for more than an hour was beyond exhausting because they refused to admit what everyone else could so obviously see.

Checking my phone, I made sure I hadn’t misread Madeline’s updated schedule for this week.

*Mr. & Mrs. Carter will go on a romantic date in front of the iconic Bellagio fountains.*

I waited a few more minutes before calling Travis.

“Yeah, Ralph?” he answered, breathing heavily. “What’s up?”

“*What’s up* is that I’m standing outside the Bellagio waiting on the Carters. Where the hell are you and your wife?”

“I’m in the gym working out,” he said. “I can’t speak to wherever she is. Call Ryan and see.”

“Are you two planning to do this photo opp a little later tonight or something?”

“Like I said, I don’t know what she’s doing and I don’t care.” He definitely cared. “We’re not talking anymore.”

I hung up and called Tatiana.

It rang three times, and while her voicemail was sounding, she sent me a text.

TATIANA

If you’re calling to talk to me about Travis, leave a voicemail and I’ll listen to it next week. If it’s about anything else, call me right back and I’ll answer.

*For fuck’s sake...*

—

THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,

It's been an entire week (no, wait. *longer!*), and there hasn't been a single sighting of Mr. or Mrs. Travis Carter!

They spent the first few weeks of their newly wedded bliss serving us look after look, day after day, and now they decide to give us nothing? Now they leave us dry?

What the hell is going on?

Until we figure it out, "Damn, Travis Carter" is currently trending on Twitter, and it has nothing to do with him being M.I.A.

Late last night, 'Red Eye' Juarez fired a shot at him with the following tweet:

**@ChampionChristopherJuarez** Dear Mrs. Carter, I want you to know that you're sexy AF and deserve a far better man than your husband. Hit me up whenever you want to fuck a real champion. #promisetodickyoudownbetter

Travis was not amused, as he quickly responded:

**@TheRealTravisCarter** Dear Mr. Juarez, my sexy AF wife appreciates the compliment, but she's not interested in your offer. If she ever wants to experience three inches instead of nine, she'll let you know. #promisetomurderyou

STAY TUNED FOR MORE NEWS & *updates*,



*The Snarky Glove*

THIRTY-THREE

THIRTY-FIVE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Grace Medical Complex*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**O**n the night I lost to Juarez, a team of medics rushed inside the octagon and carried me to a waiting ambulance. Within four minutes, I was driven from the arena to a private room at Grace Hospital while the members of my then-entourage crowded the waiting room downstairs.

I lashed out at whoever came to visit, hurling a variation of “Get the fuck out,” or “Go away,” because I was still in denial about the fight.

Although I didn’t regret losing the leeching members of my entourage, the way I’d treated one of the nurses during my stay still bothered me.

Making sure the lily bouquet was secure, I parked in the visitors’ lot and shut off the engine. I double-checked to ensure I had the correct name and carried the flowers to the trauma unit.

“Visiting hours end in about thirty minutes, sir,” the receptionist looked down at a clipboard. “Sign your name and hand over your ID so I can make you a temporary badge.”

“I called a couple hours ago about needing to speak to Nurse Hachette.”

She looked up and groaned. “So, that wasn’t a prank after all.”

“I told you it wasn’t.”

“Well, I doubt that Nurse Hachette wants to see you again. She despises you.”

“Rightfully so,” I said. “I would still like the chance to apologize.”

She crossed her arms and stared at me as if she were done speaking, and she wouldn't do anything else.

Another nurse walked inside the cubicle and gasped. “*Travis Carter?* I mean, what the hell is this bastard doing here?”

I set the flowers on their counter. “Can I get your supervisor, please?”

“Nurse Hachette *is* the supervisor,” they said in unison.

Before I could beg them to get her, someone tapped my shoulder from behind.

“Are you looking for me, sir?”

I turned around, and she stepped back, the look in her eyes still as hurt and angry as she was on the night she felt my wrath.

“Look,” I said, “I know you don't have any reason to believe me, and I'm sure you're calling security within the next thirty seconds—”

“*Ten* seconds,” she interrupted.

“I'm sorry for how I acted during my stay here,” I said.

“Which part?” She crossed her arms. “You blatantly doing the opposite of what I told you to do or all the times you lashed out at me for no reason?”

“All of it. You didn't deserve to be treated that way.” I pulled a small envelope from my pocket. “You mentioned not being paid enough to deal with ‘assholes’ and I completely agree.”

“Let me guess,” she said, taking it, “Front row tickets to your next fight?”

“No.” I raised an eyebrow. “Would you prefer that over five years’ salary?”

She ripped open the envelope and stared at the check for several seconds.

“I know it doesn’t change anything, but I really am sorry.”

“You’re still an asshole.” She was smiling. “But I appreciate this gesture. It’ll help me and my family more than you know.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Yes...But if it’s not too much to ask, I would love an autograph.”

“Of course.” I picked up a pen from the counter. “What do you want me to sign?”

“Not from you.” She rolled her eyes. “Your *wife*.”

I blinked.

“My daughter is obsessed with figure skating,” she said. “She met your sister last year, and she’s been stalking your wife’s Instagram in hopes of finding her out and about in Vegas, but she hasn’t had much luck. If you could have her sign a shirt or something she can wear, I’d be forever grateful.”

“I’ll bring that to you tomorrow.” I set down the pen. “Anything else?”

“Of course.” One of the nurses behind me spoke. “Pictures with us for our socials and you can write us some checks, too.”

I held back a laugh. “I’ll think about it.”



WHEN I MADE IT HOME, Tatiana was sprawled on my couch with a business book on her chest. A half-empty bottle of champagne rested on the floor.

Stepping closer, I pulled a blanket from a chest, and her eyes fluttered open.

“Is there a reason why you’re sleeping out here instead of in your room?” I asked.

“I was waiting to confront you,” she whispered, “about something very important. Something that can’t wait another second.”

“I’m listening.”

“You’re a terrible husband.”

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“You never talk to me when you get home from your workouts,” she said. “You go straight to your side of the condo.”

“You do realize that *this* is the first time you’ve talked to me in almost two weeks, right?”

“When we dated in the past, you would still talk to me if I was upset with you.” She slurred. “You are pretty much perfect, Travis.”

“Couldn’t have been. You broke up with me.”

“I didn’t want to...”

I waited for her to elaborate, to finally explain how she could do that to us, but she changed the subject.

“Everyone at the MMA Fangirls brunch was swooning over you today. You’re all they talked about.” She picked up the champagne bottle, but I took it from her. “I was just there for decoration, and Travis comments by proxy.”

“I doubt you’re surprised by that.”

“I’m not, but I might have had one too many mimosas and said some things about you that I didn’t mean.”

“Things like what?”

“I’m sure The Snarky Glove or Madeline will tell you all about it.”

“I’d rather hear it from you.”

“Okay.” She tried to sit up, but she fell back onto the couch.

Holding back a laugh, I slid my hands under her thighs and lifted her, carrying her inside.

When we made it to her bedroom, I pulled back the sheets.

“Do you still sleep naked?” I asked.

“No.” She blushed. “I’ve *never* slept naked.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I set her down on the mattress. “Hold your hands up for me.”

“Am I getting arrested?”

“Huh?”

“Why are you asking so many questions all of a sudden?” She swayed back and forth. “Ask me to guess how many fingers you’re holding up next. It’s been a while since I played that game.”

“Tatiana, what’s going on?”

“Four fingers.” She giggled like a child. “Is that right?”

I pulled out my phone and called Ryan.

“Yes sir?” he answered on the first ring.

“What the hell is wrong with my wife?”

“She’s drunk *and* high, sir,” he said. “She bought a huge bag of weed Krispies and brownies from a dispensary after the brunch. I got her out of the public eye once I saw her eat five in a row.”

“Thank you.” I hung up and shook my head at Tatiana.

Gently grabbing the hem of her shirt, I pulled it over her head and tossed it to the floor.

I stared at her red lace bra, trailing a finger against the silver clasp before unhooking it.

“I loved the way you used to suck on my breasts,” she said. “I still think about that when I need to get off.”

“Good to know.” I pushed her back further onto the mattress and pulled off her pants.

“What’s the meaning behind this black heart tattoo on your hip?” I asked, staring at it. “Was it something you got with someone else you dated?”

“Ha!” She laughed. “It’s an unfinished project that I’ll probably never complete. The heart was my way of fixing it.”

“Interesting.” I ran my hand between her smooth legs, gently tugging at the bow on the side of her see-through panties. Pulling them off, I tossed them on top of her pants.

I tugged on the edge of the blanket to cover her, but she grabbed my hand.

“I would like that reminder you offered to me in New York,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“When you said you loved the taste of my pussy.” She moved my hand between her thighs, pressing down on my fingers until they touched her wet slit. “I’ve always loved the feel of your mouth on it, and I’ve lay in this bed every night wishing I could feel it again.”

“Tatiana,” I said, looking into her eyes, “What did I tell you when we first got married?”

“You’re sleeping on the couch tonight.”

“Before that.” I smiled. “In the chapel.”

“You said, I do.”

“No. I said, don’t start anything you’re not ready to finish.” I pressed my thumb against her clit. “Remember?”

She nodded, spreading her legs a bit wider for me. “*Finish...*”

Without hesitation, I moved onto the mattress and pressed my palms against her thighs.

Darting my tongue against her clit, I blew against it before sucking it between my lips.



“Fuck...” I groaned. Her taste was still capable of driving me wild.

I leaned back and pulled my shirt over my head before burying my head between her legs.

“Oh my god, Travissss...” She threaded my hair between her fingers, trying and failing to control my pace, but I had no desire to go slow; It’d been far too long.

She arched her back as I devoured her again and again, loving the taste of her coming apart under my mouth’s control.

When I was certain she couldn’t take anymore, I steadied her body until she stopped shaking. Then I pressed a kiss atop her thighs and covered her body with a sheet.

Speechless, she stared at me for a long time. She looked as sexy as she did the first time I devoured her in my car.

“Are you going to tell me what you said about me at the brunch, or make me wait?” I asked.

“You asked about my tattoo, so you must know already.” She closed her eyes, leaving me hanging for an explanation again.

Opening her nightstand drawer, I took out one of her satin scarves and gently tied it around her head like she usually did at night. Then I kissed her forehead and forced myself to walk away.

“I told the tattoo artist that I wanted two Ts,” she said softly. “For Travis and Tatiana. I was planning to tell you about it back then, but he botched it, and then we didn’t make it ,so...”

I hit the lights and walked toward the door.

“Wait, Travis.” She strained to raise her voice. “I need to get two things off my chest.”

“I think you should wait until you’re not high as a kite.”

“I’m not a successful businesswoman and my beauty brand company never made seven figures,” she said. “That’s all a lie.”

*“Like I said, let’s wait until you’re not high.”*

“I’m being honest...It failed miserably and I ran up so much debt that I almost lost my condo. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone, even Penelope, because I lost the money she gave me in a horrible deal.” She let out a long breath as if she’d been waiting to spill those words for a long time. “That’s why I asked for half a million.”

“You mean, before raising it to four?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” I said. “Goodnight.”

“Second thing: Can you tell Madeline that the huge flower bouquets with the ‘Thank you for returning the favor’ and the ‘You’ll always be the best girlfriend I’ve ever had’ notes that she sent during the fangirl brunch were a great touch, and they sent the entire audience into a frenzy?”

“As long as you agree to sign a few shirts for me tomorrow.”

“Done deal.”

“Is there anything else you want to confront me about?”

“Yes, I have a list.” She started snoring.

I texted my housekeeper about getting her some orange juice in the morning and headed to my room.

I decided never to admit to her that Madeline hadn’t sent those flowers.

She didn’t need to know.

THIRTY-FOUR

THIRTY-FIVE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**T**atiana’s taste lingered on my lips, tempting me to return to her room and finish the job, but I held back.

I wanted her to be sober, to admit that her life had been as grey and dull without me, as mine had been without her.

Looking up at the ceiling, I debated the pros and cons of waking her up this morning, the door opened.

Then the lights came on.

*Tatiana?*

“We have a problem.” It was Madeline. “Like, a huge *huge* problem.”

“I can see that.” I sat up. “It’s two in the morning, and you’re in my room for no reason.”

“Is that a freakin’ *Picasso* on your wall?” she asked. “Do you know how many homeless people in this city you could’ve fed with what that costs?”

“Madeline, I truly hope you didn’t barge into my room to talk about art.”

“I’ve got some deep dive reporters on my back and I can’t shake them off,” she said. “They’re not buying anything I sell them, so I need you to throw me a bone, or this could get ugly real fast.”

“Please speak start speaking English, Madeline.”

“They don’t believe you and Tatiana’s relationship timeline.” She paced the floor. “They’re saying that they have pictures from various competitions and hotels, and hearsay from people who saw you two together years ago.”

“I don’t see how that’s a problem if we’re married now.”

“It invites speculation,” she said. “If you’re lying about that, what else are you lying about? We want sponsors to trust that you turned a new leaf and fell in love with your sister’s nemesis years later. Any deviation from that is a problem.”

“Tell those reporters to use their time to research something useful, like if Mr. Truss is going to announce I’m still on Nike’s list at his gala he wants me to attend.”

“I’m sure he will.” She crossed her arms. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m interested in knowing these details about you and your wife as well.”

“It doesn’t.” I shrugged. “If that’s all you have to say, feel free to have Ryan take you home.”

“What about what you did to get Miss Brave to agree to this arrangement in the first place? What was the favor you did for her in the past?”

“Make sure Tatiana has access to a designer for the gala, too.”

“She’s wearing Chanel.” She moved closer to me. “How exactly did she come to ‘owe’ you anyway?”

I said nothing.

“We could kill two birds with one stone here.” She smiled. “The lingering rumors about you being utterly selfish could be easily dispelled if the reasoning is—”

“*Stop.*” I cut her off. “I’ll never discuss any of that. Ever.”

“How about off the record, then?” she asked. “If I swore not to say a word about whatever this ‘favor’ was, would you tell me?”

“I’ll never tell *anyone.*”

“But—”

“It would hurt someone I love very much and potentially ruin a friendship,” I said. “Drop it. *Now.*”

Her shoulders sagged, but she quickly recovered. “Can you at least let me talk about the Picasso?”

# ACT NINE

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Tacoma, Washington*

**E**laine's parents own a beautiful property on the coast that overlooks the Puget Sound. It's two miles away from my favorite arena, and thankfully soundproof so no one can hear me crying in the guest room.

Without looking in the mirror, I know my face is puffy and I can't bear to join my "family" for dinner. Wrapping myself in a blanket, I tiptoe down to the garage and slip inside the driver's seat of my father's car.

Over the past few hours, my life's trajectory changed on a whim, and I'm still trying to process how the hell I didn't see this coming.

My future, my dreams, my everything are swirling down the drain. Just like that.

Unable to wait for Travis's nightly call, I dial his number.

"Hey," he answers on the first ring. "How's studying for that Russian business program going?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I've heard the rules for tourists are pretty strict in certain areas," he says. "Whenever you start your program, will you be able to sightsee on the weekends?"

"I'm not going anymore," I say. "I'll compete in the Sochi Olympics, and then I have to fly right back home."

"I'm confused. Why?"



“Because I don’t have...” My voice cracks. “They drained...”

My phone rings with his request to make this conversation a video call and I oblige.

When his face appears on screen, I see that he’s dressed in a suit and sitting in a well-lit office.

“You landed the Gatorade sponsorship, didn’t you?” I ask. “I knew you would. How much are they paying you?”

“I don’t want to talk about me. Why are you crying?”

I try to hold back the tears, but they fall anyway.

“They drained everything from my account,” I say. “The money that my mom left for me, everything I was planning to use to go to that program and move out after? It’s gone, all except three hundred dollars.”

His face pales.

He looks as stunned as I feel.

“It’s like they don’t even see how messed up it is, and...” My voice trails off as Elaine walks inside the garage. She moves to the driver’s side and taps on the window.

“Hold on a second, okay?” I set aside the phone and roll down the window. “Yeah?”

“Why are you out here crying instead of eating with the rest of us?”

I don’t answer.

“If it’s about our discussion earlier, you need to suck it up instead of acting like it’s the end of the world.” She has the audacity to hand me a Kleenex.

I let her offensive offer linger in the air.

“Your father and I have paid for all your costumes, transportation, and events for *years*, and it’s not fair for you to keep every dime of your sponsorship money, all while sitting on twenty thousand dollars. It’s money that you could’ve offered to use to pay us back a long time ago.”

“My mother left that fucking money to *me*. Not you, you insufferable bitch.”

“Careful.” She tosses the Kleenex into my lap. “Don’t ever let your emotions get in the way of what needs to be done. You have some pretty intense training ahead for the Olympics, and you need to use all of your energy for that.”

“I hate you, Elaine,” I say. “I hate you so fucking much.”

“Yes, well, that’s your prerogative.” She shrugs. “Be ready at sunrise so I can take you shopping to get a sweater for your next *Skater’s Digest* interview.”

“I don’t want your help ever again.”

“Sounds even better.” She walks away, and it takes everything in me not to jump out and punch her to near-death like we’re in an octagon.

I pick up my phone and see a red-faced Travis.

His jaw is clenched and he’s shaking his head.

“Why hasn’t your dad stepped in and said anything about this shit?” he asks.

“Because he can’t see it,” I say. “He’s a shell of himself. You know that.”

“How much is the tuition?”

“I don’t want to think about it.” I wipe my face. “Can you do me a favor, though?”

He looks reluctant to change the subject, but he nods.

“The director of the school sent me an email about the payment and I need to tell her that I don’t have it.” I pause. “Can you log in to my email and handle that message for me? I’ll call her personally this weekend, but I don’t want them to hold my spot...I’ll text you the password, just tell me when you’ve done it.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I don’t let him say a word. I don’t want to hurt anymore.

“Tell me the good news about landing that sponsorship,  
please...”

# ACT NINE & A HALF

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Hours later*

*Tacoma, Washington*

I've seen Tatiana cry before, but never like this.

She's lying on my chest, trying to tell me she's fine, but the sobs wracking her body every few minutes say otherwise.

"I told you not to come here," she says. "You shouldn't have come..."

I rub my hand against her back, letting her tears soak my shirt as she speaks.

The moment she said, "I don't want to live anymore," I jumped into my car and made the drive.

"I can't fathom being a figure skater past the date I told you about," she says. "Even when I was in pairs, this was never my true dream for the long-term. You know?"

"You've told me..."

"Will we still have dinner together in Sochi?" she asks. "I mean, if you're able to spend some time away from Penelope, I would love to."

"I'm not going to Sochi anymore."

"Huh?" She sat up. "Why not?"

"I can't afford it."

She furrows her brow. “Gatorade just signed you to a deal and agreed to give you a five-thousand-dollar bonus upfront.”

“They did,” I say. “But a plane ticket to Sochi costs three thousand.”

“So? You bought that months ago.”

“I’m getting a refund.” I cup her face in my hands. “Your tuition is eight thousand, so I’ll use my money for that.”

“*What?*” She shook her head. “No, no, no. Travis, don’t—”

“Don’t what?”

“Waste your hard-earned money on me.”

“It’s not a waste,” I say. “You worked your ass off to get into that program and you deserve to go. You also deserve to get an apartment away from your terrible ass family, so I’ll help you with that once you get back to the states.”

“I can’t accept your money...”

“I’ve already spent it,” I say. “I handled the plane ticket request before driving here.”

Silence.

“What did Penelope say about you missing out on Sochi?”

I say nothing. I’m not looking forward to telling her that I won’t be there.

As if Tatiana can read my mind, her eyes widen.

“She’ll hate me even more than she already does.” She shakes her head. “She’s told everyone how you’re coming as a tribute to her mom, and I mean, I’m sure her mom would want you to support your family over some random girl you’re dating.”

I press a finger against her lips. “For the umpteenth time, her mother was my mom, too. I’m doing exactly what she made me promise, hours before she passed away in the hospital.”

“I’m just saying, Travis...”

“Take care of Penelope as best you can,” I recite her last words verbatim. “And please find someone or something to help you, too... You’ll need someone to help you get through life, too. That person for me is you, Tati.”

I pause to wipe a stream of tears from her eyes.

“I’m still in pain about something I can never change,” I say. “But your situation is something that I can fix, so let me.”

She remains silent as I pull her against my chest, and we listen to the raindrops dance atop my car’s roof for what feels like forever.

“Travis?” she whispers at sunrise.

“Yeah?”

“I promise to pay you back for this someday.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Well, I’ll always owe you a huge favor then.”

“Okay.” I kiss her lips. “I’ll hold you to that...”

THIRTY-FIVE



FORTY DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TRAVIS



*Humble City Fitness*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**M**y public approval rating was tilting a full one-eighty from where it stood weeks ago.

Sponsors, new and old, were requesting meetings and second chances left and right. The UFC was offering pre-sale tickets to celebrities for a rematch without even giving the official date.

“Travis Carter” had atoned for his skid of bad behavior and was almost back on top.

The unmarried Travis Carter would’ve called his entourage and booked a yacht for a week-long party in the South of France to celebrate.

Unfortunately, the only person I wanted to celebrate this occasion with was my wife, but I didn’t have time to take her anywhere.

I was planning to suggest that we take an entire month and travel around the world after my rematch.

The moment it was over.

As I scrolled through today’s headlines, someone walked into my office.

“Whoever you are, I don’t want to be bothered for at least two hours,” I said. “Go away.”

The steps came closer.

“If I turn around and the words out of your mouth aren’t ‘Your condo is on fire,’ I swear to God...”

“Your wife is leaving you.” Ryan’s voice was loud and clear.

“What?” I immediately turned around. “What do you mean?”

“She’s leaving you, sir. For good. ”

“How do you know that?”

He tapped a tablet and held it before me, revealing a video of Tatiana standing in front of the elevator. She was clasping an oversized red suitcase.

“A crew of men came up hours ago and took out a ton of boxes,” Ryan said. “I thought it was related to her Chanel dress fitting so I thought nothing of it. If I’d known the truth, I would’ve said something far earlier, sir.”

“I believe you.” I turned up the volume and squinted at the screen.

“Come on, come on, come on...” Tatiana attacked the down button. “Hurry up...”

“Would you like me to have the engineer slow the elevator so you can catch her, sir?”

“Of course,” I said, standing up. “Do it now.”



TATIANA STOOD BEFORE ME, saying words I wasn’t wholly catching. I was responding on autopilot, too turned on by how fucking beautiful she looked.

At some point, two fans boarded the elevator with us and asked for pictures, and when they stepped off, I decided to end this back-and-forth once and for all.

“Okay, look.” Tatiana looked into my eyes, her irises full of the usual denial. “I’m saying this in the nicest way possible.

I'm not the slightest bit attracted to you anymore, and it pains me to be near you."

"So if I were to slide my hand under your dress right now, your pussy wouldn't be wet for me?"

Her jaw dropped, and she turned away. "We're going up..."

"I thought so." I entered the penthouse code, and we rode the rest of the way without saying a word.

When we stepped onto our floor, the Chanel team members were standing in the hallway.

"Ah! There you are, mademoiselle!" One of them waved from the doorway. "Let's get back to work!"

"One second." I motioned for them to hold on, looking at Tatiana. "What's changed between now and the time my face was buried in your pussy?"

She sucked in a breath. "Travis..."

"I need to know. Tell me."

"My heart can't take any more of the back and forth." Her voice cracked. "One moment, you're looking at me and kissing me and it feels so damn real, and the next, you're shutting yourself in your room until it's time for pretending again."

"Then let's stop pretending..."

THIRTY FIVE & A HALF

FORTY DAYS AFTER SAYING "I DO"

TATIANA



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**H**is words hung in the air, floating and stretching across space, searching for answers.

“Tatiana?” He cupped my face in his hands. “Did you understand my question?”

“Yes.”

“Can I have an answer?”

“Mademoiselle!” The designer from Chanel stepped into the hallway, followed by two team members. “I told you he wouldn’t be amused. Come now, Miss. Let’s make sure you look beautiful for tomorrow’s Nike gala.”

“Can your team excuse us for a moment, Mrs. Celine?” Travis asked. “I’ll have Mr. Ryan let you know our next move.”

“As you wish, sir.” She slipped inside the living room and grabbed her purse, and then she and the other women walked past us and onto the elevator.

Travis dropped his hands and pulled out his phone.

Tapping the screen, he held it in front of me as Mr. Truss’s face appeared.

“Well, hello there, Mr. Carter!” He smiled. “I hope you and your wife are ready for one hell of a gala tomorrow night.”

“Not anymore,” he said. “We’re not coming.”

“I see...Are you ill?”

“No, I’m just done jumping through hoops to prove myself to you,” he said. “I let you into my personal life, conceded to several of your demands, and now I’m spending my last free moments with my wife.”

“Mr. Carter—”

“Every line that I’ve ever launched with your brand has sold out within seconds,” he said. “You know it, I know it, and millions of my fans know it. Yes, I made a few fucking mistakes after my loss, but you’d be pretty silly to let me go as I’ll go straight to Reebok, Under Armour, or Adidas and they’ll happily do business with someone who can prove he’s moved over a hundred million dollars in merch since he joined the UFC.”

Mr. Truss said nothing.

“If I don’t hear back from you in a week, it was great doing business with you, and my wife really appreciated the engagement party.” He hung up. Then he pulled me into his arms.

“I’m not pretending to have feelings for you,” he said. “I haven’t been pretending for a while.”

“Stop it, Travis.”

“I haven’t seriously dated anyone since you left me.”

“I’ve seen you with tons of models in the tabloids.”

“It hasn’t been *tons*,” he said. “And it was never anything worthwhile.”

“I haven’t dated anyone worthwhile either...”

“I’m aware,” he said. “So, are we done pretending?”

“Yes.” I nodded, and he kissed me like he did when he first made love to me.

I shut my eyes in bliss, hating that I’d lived through years of missing, wanting, and *needing* this.

He grabbed my hips and lifted me, commanding, “Wrap your legs around my waist.”

Obedying, I smiled as he carried me inside his condo, straight to the windows overlooking the city. I moaned as he assaulted my mouth with endless rough and possessive kisses. The exact flavor I loved.

“I’ve missed you so fucking much,” he whispered, setting me down on a bench. “So fucking much...”

“Me too,” I struggled to catch my breath. “Me too.”

He kept his eyes on mine as he undressed, taking off his shirt and tie.

I leaned forward and unbuckled his pants, earning a smile from his lips. He grabbed a condom from his pocket, and I took it from his fingers, spitting on his cock and taking it down my throat a few times before sheathing it in rubber.

He laughed low and grabbed my hands, pulling me to my feet.

Pushing up my dress, he grabbed my left leg, and I lifted it around his waist, angling for him to slide his cock all the way into me.

Our lips met once more, and he grabbed my ass and fucked me against the window.

“I miss you,” “I love you,” “Don’t leave me again,” came between every stroke.

“I miss you, too,” “I love you, too,” “I won’t” came between every kiss.

After what felt like forever, we came together, our bodies writhing in pleasure at the same time.

When we came down, he slid into me again.

And again.

For the rest of the night.

THIRTY-SIX



FORTY ONE DAYS AFTER SAYING “I DO”

TATIANA



*The following morning*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I lay naked under Travis’s sheets, a fresh coat of sweat and sex clinging to my skin, a reminder that he was still the only man who could make me have multiple orgasms in a single night.

As he pressed kisses against my face, scenes of us making up for lost time played in my mind in a hazy blur. Every touch, every kiss, every word.

“You’re so fucking beautiful when you come for me.” He slid a hand through my curls. “Do you know that?”

I smiled. “What’s on our schedule for today?”

“A cancellation.” He twirled my hair with his fingers. “Tomorrow is cancelled, too.”

“Why?”

“Because we haven’t even begun to make up for all the time we wasted being apart.” He stared into my eyes. “I would’ve cancelled Tuesday’s event, but I can’t. It’s for my top fans, and I can’t afford to let them down again.”

“The private meet and greet at The Cosmopolitan?”

“Yeah, it’ll probably last seven or eight hours.” He paused. “You don’t have to go, but some of my fans do want to see you, according to Madeline.”

“I’d love to go.”

“Good.”

A weighted silence suddenly hung between us.

“Why did you break up with me back then?” he asked. “I really need to know.”

“Travis, I *had* to...”

He trailed a finger against my lips. “To see what it was like to break me?”

“No.” I shook my head. “You wouldn’t have understood.”

“Do you think I’ll understand now?”

“Not really.”

Silence.

“Are you and I going to be a problem now or in the future?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not letting you go that easily this time. We’re going far past ninety days together.”

I was still processing the past several hours; I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

As if he could read my mind, he sighed.

“We’ll discuss it later.” He slid his hands under my body, rolling me on top of him. “What can I do to make our marriage better for you?”

“You can stop charging for every little thing I use in your condo.”

“I never started,” he said. “I put prices on things, but I haven’t kept up with anything. Is that it?”

“You can talk to me when you come home every night instead of shutting yourself on your side.”

“I will.” He planted a kiss on my neck. “What else?”

“That’s all I can ask for now, given the intense promo season that comes with your rematch.”

“If you think of anything else, let me know.” He rolled me on top of him, and within seconds he was sliding inside me again.

THIRTY-SEVEN

TRAVIS



*Nike Signs Travis Carter to Earth-shattering \$100M Deal*

*Travis Carter Spotted Working Out in Gym: Remains Mum  
About Date of Potential Rematch*

*Former Bad Boy Travis Carter Reveals That His Wife is “Only  
Woman I’ve Ever Loved”*

*Prepare to Swoon! Tatiana Carter Reveals How Travis Carter  
Proposed*

—

THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,  
Stop the presses!

We have just received pictures of Mr. & Mrs. Carter from several years ago. If you zoom in past the selfie-takers and into the background, you can clearly see that it's *them*.

Standing in a hallway, Travis cups Tatiana's face in his hands while pinning her against the wall with his hips. He's seconds away from kissing her lips, seconds away from taking the keycard in her hand and swiping it against the suite next to them.

According to our source, the first two shots were taken at a hotel in Canada, while the others were snapped elsewhere. They stumbled across them while working on a video project about figure skating.

Assuming these takes aren't photoshopped (we're about to spend our entire weekend to make sure), this would imply that there's more to their love story than what they've told us.

Have they lied about never falling for each other until recently? Why is he touching her like that if they "never knew each other well until now?"

We're determined to find out.

*Stay tuned for more news & updates,*

*The Snarky Glove*

# ACT TEN



BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Sochi, Russia*

**T** *here's no way I can win gold today.*

My heart is splintering inside my chest, and I can feel each shard's impact as I complete the final two spins in my short program.

To anyone watching, my skating looked flawless the past couple of minutes, but I know better.

Despite rehearsing this routine a million times, I faltered twice in the middle of a simple axel. My speed dragged when I launched into a triple lutz, and even though I haven't made any other mistakes, there's little room for error at this level.

The music stops, and I hold my pose at the center of the rink. A thunderous applause breaks out in the arena, followed by joyous cries of "USA! USA!"

Faking a smile, I skate toward my coach and cover my blades before heading toward the 'kiss and cry' area. Hundreds of depressing thoughts are running through my mind, and I'm far too disappointed in myself to stop them.

*Maybe if I'd gotten one more week of practice, stopped staying up late to talk on the phone, or hadn't driven to see Travis last month when I lied to Coach about being sick...*

My scores appear onscreen mid-thought, and my on-ice suspicions are confirmed.

The best I can get today is silver.



TRAVIS CALLS LATER that night to congratulate me.

Then again, maybe he's calling to wish me well for the business program I'll start in two weeks or to ask if I've received the massive rose bouquet on my nightstand.

I can't bring myself to answer the phone at this moment, though.

Penelope is staying in the room across the hall, and she's been screaming, "Fuck Tatiana Brave! USA! USA!"

I desperately want to confide in Travis about the pain I'm feeling, the fear of being destined to always be second best.

Alas, I never talk to him about his sister, and I don't want to start now. But I can't pretend this part of my life doesn't exist tonight.

*Not tonight.*

# ACT TEN & A HALF

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Ottawa, Canada*

*A couple months later*

I need someone to bottle this moment and store it someplace safe and secure. The next time I doubt myself, I want to uncap it and inject the contents into my veins.

Then I want to overdose.

“And with that ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer yells into the mic, “the first ever tie for first-place in Skate Canada’s history, Tatiana Brave and Penelope Carter!”

The crowd applauds while Penelope and I take our place atop the podium. Waving in unison, we smile and take a bow.

“I don’t know why the judges didn’t catch that misstep in your second triple lutz,” Penelope whispers.

“Maybe they decided to overlook it like that slight wobble in your triple salchow.”

“You caught that?”

“I did.”

“Hmmm. How in the world did Ashleigh Lyons get third place, though?” she asks. “She fell twice and her program was more awful than usual.”

“I don’t know, but I’m getting pretty tired of that same routine every season.”

“Right? She just switches the music and copies and pastes the moves in a different order.”

“I’m starting to think the judges give her sympathy points in hopes that she’ll hang up her skates and put us all out of our misery.”

Her eyes meet mine, and we both laugh.

Then we remember who we’re talking to and roll our eyes, faking smiles for the cameras again.

When the ceremony ends, I share a few words with Miss Price and search for my dad.

“Thanks for coming.” I grab a balloon bouquet from him. “I only need an hour to get ready to hang out with you tonight.”

“I’m not staying,” My father says. “But you looked great out there. Congratulations on winning first place.”

“Wait a minute.” I stare at him in disbelief. “I reserved a room for you and Elaine so we could do some sightseeing this weekend.”

“Elaine didn’t think you were serious about that offer,” he says. “Especially since you called her a cunt last week.”

“What’s wrong with calling her by her name?”

He ignores my comment. “She and Harlow are grabbing a quick bite before heading to the airport.”

“I don’t understand the purpose of flying to Canada just to leave on the same day.”

“I’m sorry.” He pulls me into a weak hug. “Remind me to look into getting you some therapy. Elaine thinks that’s exactly what you need to get better, and her sister owns a private practice.”

I don’t hug him back. I wait for him to let me go.

“Harlow is having a party to celebrate getting into grad school next month,” he says. “I hope you’ll come.”

“It’ll depend on my schedule,” I offer, knowing I won’t be there.

*I’ll never be there.*

We stand in an awkward silence, the emotional distance bending and stretching between us, revealing how far we’ve grown apart.

“I should get going.” He looks at his watch. “I’ll text when we land, and you be sure to call and give me an update on your next competition.”

I nod because that’s all I can do, because I refuse to lie and tell him that I’ll do that.

Watching him walk away stings as lightly as a paper cut, and I know now more than ever that our relationship is done.

I don’t have a family anymore.

Just Travis.



*Later that night*

AFTER TAKING in the sights of this city alone, I walk into the Marriott and spot Penelope red-faced and crying at the front desk.

Confused, I step closer.

“I’m sorry.” The desk agent shakes her head. “We’re sold out due to the skating competition, Miss.”

“Are you sure that you don’t have *anything*?”

“One hundred percent certain.” She gives Penelope a sympathetic smile. “I think most hotels downtown are filled to capacity for the weekend.”

“I see.” She snuffles. “Well, if possible, can I just—”

“She can take my suite,” I say. “I haven’t been in it yet anyway.”

Penelope spins around, looking at me in disbelief.

“I have room 1242,” I say. “I can share a room with my parents.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I step closer and set my father’s room key in the return bin.

Penelope mouths, “Thank you,” and a part of me wants to ask how she went from being happy as hell to looking depressed as shit in a matter of hours, but I don’t.

We’re not friends, and we never will be.

I walk away and take the stairway to my suite. I shower and slip under the covers. I’m debating ordering room service when a knock sounds at the door.

I walk over and open it, finding Travis.

“You told me you had a fight in a few days,” I say. “You said that to me this morning.”

“You have a very odd way of saying, ‘I’m so fucking happy to see you, Travis.’”

“Penelope’s room is two floors down.”

“I made a reservation for us at Capitol Grille to celebrate you winning first place just in case your family flaked. Did they?”

“Penelope won first place, too.”

“After that, I got tickets to an anime exhibit at the museum down the street.”

“Travis—” My sentence ends on his lips, and he wraps his arms around my waist. He kisses me until I lose my breath, until my mind can only focus on him.

“I came here for you,” he whispers against my mouth. “Let me be here for you, okay?”

I nod. “Okay...”



AT MIDNIGHT, Travis checks his watch and stands up from my suite's couch.

"Off to see Penelope before you go?" I ask.

"Not at this hour." He smiles. "I believe she's blowing me off anyway."

"Why?"

"Because Hayden just sent me a text and he claims that she's hanging out with you all weekend."

"Ha!"

"Exactly." He laughs. "She probably has a secret boyfriend she doesn't want me to know about."

"You mean 'Hayden' *is* her boyfriend, right?"

"No, I'd kill him if that were the case."

I tilt my head to the side, confused.

I've seen the way Hayden and Penelope look at each other whenever they think they're alone. They're constantly on the phone talking and laughing about absolutely nothing, and it's obvious there's *something* there.

*How can Travis not see that?*

"Come on." He grabbed my hands and pulled me up. "Walk me to the elevator."

"Do you have to leave now?"

"My flight is in five hours, but I have to get through customs, remember?"

"I mean, is it necessary to head to the airport this many days early? Why can't you leave tomorrow?"

He raises his eyebrow. "What's wrong with you tonight?"

"Nothing. I'm only curious."

"You're acting weird." He cups my face in his hands, then trails a finger against my bottom lip. "Weirder than usual, anyway."

"I'm fine, just thinking about the airport."



“You can ride with me in the cab, if you like.”

“No, that’s not what I want..”

“Okay, well—”

“I want to have sex with you.” I’ve never been more sure with any guy I’ve ever dated, never trusted anyone with my virginity as much as I trust him.

He drops his hands from my face, smiling. “I think you had too much alcohol tonight.”

“I drank one glass.”

“Maybe *I* had too much, then.” He slips an arm around my waist. “I must be hearing things.”

“I promise that you’re not. I want you to have sex with you.”

Silence.

“You have rules for your first time, Tatiana,” he says, rubbing my back. “You want to be in love.”

“I am,” I say, my voice cracking. “I really am.”

He stares at me for several seconds, looking stunned, not saying anything in return.

I consider taking back the words, worried I’ve misread our relationship and uttered them far too soon.

As I’m thinking of a way to change the subject, he presses his lips against mine and kisses me, using his hips to press me against the wall.

My heart racing a mile a minute, I wrap my arms around his neck.

He slides his hand against my sides, whispering, “Let go and step out of your pants.”

I can’t focus on anything but the way he’s kissing me, so I don’t follow that request.

Laughing softly, he pauses our kiss to grab my hand. Leading me over to the bed, he sits on the edge and pulls me between his legs.

With his eyes on mine, he unbuttons my jeans and unzips the zipper.

I push them down to the floor, and he grabs the hem of my shirt.

“Take this off for me,” he whispers.

I oblige.

He grips my waist a bit tighter and lifts me. Carrying me to the bed, he pushes up my dress.

He kisses my nipples, sucking them until they harden in his mouth.

I moan as he takes his time kissing a warm trail down t my stomach.

He pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it across the room. Then he takes a condom from his pocket and grabs my hand, placing it on his cock, silently asking me to slide it over his length.

“Look at me,” he whispers, and I gaze into his eyes.

He entwines my hands with his, pressing his cock against me.

I bite my lip and tense as he inches into me.

He slides a bit deeper, and I can't hold back a gasp at the unfamiliar pain.

He stills. “Do you want me to stop?”

I shake my head.

“Are you sure you want me to be your first?”

I nod.

“I need to hear you say it.”

“I'm sure,” I say. “I want you.”

He fills me slowly, stretching me, letting me adjust to his enormous length.

“Fuck,” he rasps, kissing me. “You feel so fucking good.”

I'm too full, too nervous, and excited to respond.

As we gaze into each other's eyes, Travis thrusts in and out of me.

He slides a hand between my thighs and teases my clit.

Without warning, he slides out of me, grabs my ankles, and flips me over.

"Get on all fours," he says.

Out of breath, I obey, and he grips my hips.

I feel him entering me again, see him looking at me through the mirrored headboard. He feels so much better this way, so much deeper this way.

"Travis..." I tilt my head back as he slides into me faster, and he presses a kiss against my neck.

Just as I'm getting used to his position, learning to love how his cock feels buried inside me, he slips out of me again.

I damn near whimper at the loss of contact, and before I can ask why he stopped, he moves under me.

"Here," he says. "I want to make sure you come tonight, so sit on my face."

"I..."

He smiles at my hesitation, grabbing my waist and positioning my pussy right over his mouth.

I don't last long at all.

I dig my nails into his skin as tremors wrack through my body.

"*Ahhhh...*" I moan as they become more intense, until I can't help but scream his name at the top of my lungs when it's all too much.

He pulled me down against his chest and kisses my hair.

"Tatiana?" he whispers.

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

“Yes.”

“Did it feel good?”

“Yes.”

He kisses my shoulder. “I forgot to tell you something earlier.”

“What?”

“I’m in love with you, too.”



HE RESCHEDULES his flight and stays with me for the rest of the weekend.

THIRTY-EIGHT

NO MORE DAYS OF “PRETEND”

TATIANA



*Weeks Later*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**S**ore and completely useless, I rolled over in bed.

The past couple weeks of my marriage were an utter dream, a blissful never-ending scene straight from a romance.

Every morning, I joined Travis for a protein breakfast with his trainer and kissed him goodbye for the afternoon. While he endured an intense workout, I attended business seminars.

For lunch, he devoured me in the shower before an evening run while I worked on Penelope’s bachelorette party and baby shower plans.

And at night, I slept in his bed while he kissed and held me.

Today had started just like all the days before, but I was struggling to find the right mimosa glasses for Penelope’s party.

Since Madeline had insisted on helping, we’d spent most of the afternoon taking turns to make store runs.

As I held another failed glass to the light, a knock sounded at the door.

“Coming, Madeline!” I rushed to the living room. “These won’t cut it either!”

Flinging the door wide open, I stepped back when I saw Penelope.

“Hey!” She smiled. “Are you ready for it?”

“Ready for what?”

“Today.” She held up an oversized pink bag. “Please don’t tell me that you forgot.”

“Today’s not your birthday, right?”

“Funny.” She moved past me. “Since I can’t take another Sunday without you in New York, I wanted to bring Manhattan and a new season of my latest soap opera obsession to you.”

“Wow.” I stuffed the glass into a drawer. “I’d love that.”

“I figured.” She opened her bag on the coffee table, pulling out champagne flutes, custom pajama sets, Rainy Day wine, and a *Sailor Moon* DVD. “I also have the latest issue of *Skate World*. You have to read what the new chair of the ISU is saying about the new costume rules. She’s out of her mind.”

I moved to the couch and watched her pull out more treats.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to a glittery purple box.

“My memory box.” She handed it to me. “I remembered the one you made for your mom, so I decided to copy. I’m only halfway done, though.”

The images featured her standing atop the podium at all her previous competitions while Hayden sat in the front row.

Travis starred in a few. I did, too.

Her mother’s image was super-imposed next to her during her win in Sochi, and they looked utterly identical.

“You think my mom cares that I never made it to twenty-eight championships?”

“Not at all. I’m sure she’s beyond proud of you.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “She’s probably still mad at Travis for missing out on Sochi, though.”

“If I’d known ahead of time that he was going to use his money on me instead of coming to see you there, I would’ve

stopped him. I swear.”

“Well, it’s not like he ever—” She paused, tilting her head to the side. “What do you mean you would’ve stopped him from spending his money on you?”

*Shit.*

“We weren’t friends back then,” she said. “Outside of the mean voicemails he left for you ever so often, when would he have even talked to you?”

“I misspoke.” I shook my head. “I’m mixing it up with that new show, *The Grumpy Alpha Spice Diaries*. I watched a few episodes this week.”

She stared at me for several seconds, and I swallowed, selfishly hoping that her memory would falter in this moment.

“Did you say *Grumpy Alpha Spice Diaries*?” she asked. “You gave it a try?”

“I did.” I let out a sigh of relief. “It’s as terrible as the other show we’re watching.”

“It’s a freakin’ masterpiece.” She laughed, dumping the last of the snacks out of her bag. “Ugh! I forgot the plastic garnishes. I’ll be right back.”

She left, and I downed an entire glass of wine, cursing myself.

*That was close, Tati. Too damn close.*

Fifteen minutes later, she knocked on the door again.

“I forgot to leave it unlocked!” I called out. “Hold on.”

I opened it and ushered her inside, but she stood as still as a statue. Her face was beet red, and there were tears in her eyes.

“Travis told me he missed Sochi because of a Gatorade contract,” she said. “I didn’t believe that was true then, and I know it’s not true now. What do you know that I don’t, Tati?”

“Nothing.” I swallowed, caught off guard. “I really did misspeak.”



“I don’t think you did.” She narrowed her eyes. “You and I were the worst of enemies back then, so why would Travis ever hurt me to *help you*?”

I could see the wheels spinning in her head, churning in search of the truth, so I made a last-ditch effort to derail them.

“Between the scheduled UFC events and this temporary marriage, my mind has been all over the place these days.” I shrugged. “I was recently talking to an interviewer about my experiences in the Olympics, so that’s why I said what I said.”

She blinked.

“Are you going to come in so we can hang out?”

I stepped back, and she stepped forward.

After shutting the door behind her, she crossed her arms.

“You’ve always been a terrible liar, Tati.” Her voice was terse. “And the fact that you’re standing there lying to your supposed ‘best friend’s’ face speaks fucking *volumes*.”

“I really don’t want to hurt you, Penelope.”

“Your voice is shaking.” She shrugged. “Why?”

I didn’t say a word.

“What the hell am I missing?” she said. “Please spit it out because I’m not walking out of here until I find it.”

“You should sit down.” I glanced at her baby bump. “I’ll get you a chair.”

“I’d rather stand.” She was defiant. “I mean whatever it is, it’s not like you were sleeping with Travis back then, right?”

I sighed. “I was.”

“*What?*”

“Penelope, listen.”

“Are you sleeping with him *now*?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Oh my fucking God...” Her eyes widened. “Tati, how could you? How long has this been...Why have you been

pretending like you haven't known him all this time?"

"It's complicated."

"No, it's not." She shook her head. "It's as simple as saying, 'Hey, Penelope. I used to fuck your brother and I'm fucking him now behind your back.' See how easy that is?"

"If you would let me finish—"

"You have yet to start." Her face reddened. "I tell you everything, fucking everything, because you're literally my only female friend."

"You're mine, too."

"You're the reason he wasn't there for me at a lot of things, aren't you?" She wasn't trying to listen. "Was that an ulterior motive of some kind? Slip into my life any way you could to get me off my game? What did you gain from it?"

"I didn't have an ulterior motive."

"You probably saw him more than I did." She was stunned. "It's all starting to make perfect sense."

With the worst timing in the world, Travis entered the room. He must have sensed the tension because he looked between us and crossed his arms.

"What the hell is going on?"

"You are such a fucking hypocrite." Penelope seethed.

*"Excuse me?"*

"Were you ever planning to tell me that the real reason you weren't always there for me when I needed you was because you were screwing my literal enemy behind my back?"

"No." He looked at me. "And that wasn't the reason I couldn't always be there for you."

"Feel free to give it to me then."

"I don't have to." His voice was firm. "I took care of you like I promised, and that's the end of that."

"It really isn't." She was shaking. "When you told me to stop talking about Tatiana because I needed to focus on

myself, was it really because of that or because you felt guilty that you were sleeping with her?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Crown.”

“Penelope,” I said. “Let me explain.”

“*Tatiana Brave*—” She threw up her hand, saying my name in the disdainful tone she used years ago. “I don’t want to hear from you for a very long time.”

“Wait, please don’t—”

“I mean it.” Her voice cracked. “Do not call me, do not text me, and whenever you feel like you need a so-called ‘bestie’ to listen to your problems, count me out.”

“As for you,” she said, looking at Travis, “You are the worst brother in the world and I don’t even want you in my wedding anymore. Don’t bother showing up.”

She picked up her bag and stormed out of the condo, slamming the door shut so hard that a living room vase fell to the floor.

Beyond hurt, I headed to my room.

As I twisted the doorknob, Travis grabbed my elbow from behind.

“Where are you going?” He spun me around.

“I just lost my best friend,” I said. “I need to be left alone for a while.”

“You’re reading way too much into this.”

“Am I?”

“Mrs. Carter—”

“Don’t you dare call me that right now,” I said.

He grabbed my hand, but I yanked it away.

“Don’t touch me.” Tears fell down my cheeks. “I told you this would happen. I told you she wouldn’t understand.”

“She’ll get over it.”

“It’s not that simple, Travis.”

“Well, it’s definitely not as complicated as you’ve always tried to make it seem.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re with me and she finally found out. I don’t see the problem now. It honestly wouldn’t have been a problem then, and the quicker you realize that you broke us up for no reason, the better.”

I shook my head, stunned that after all this time, he still couldn’t see things from my point of view. That he honestly believed I had “no reason.”

“You haven’t changed,” I said. “You’re not a better person now at all are you?”

“I’ve been very clear about becoming worse since you left me.”

“I *had* to.”

“Because you want to be so goddamn dramatic about everything.” He narrowed his eyes. “You were making fucking excuses then, and you’re making them now.”

“You know what? This arrangement isn’t working for me anymore.”

He glared at me, but I didn’t care.

I slammed the door shut and tried to hold back tears for as long as possible.

I lasted for five seconds.

Mid cry, I packed my suitcase and made a final escape plan he’d never catch onto.

# ACT TWELVE

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“**A**nd the *new* welterweight champion of the worlddddd!” The announcer holds up Travis’s hand at the center of the octagon. “Travis ‘The Punisher’ Carter!”

The arena erupts in applause as the commissioner places a shiny golden belt around Travis’s waist.

I’m not sure what the hell I was thinking this morning, why I bought the cheapest ticket and jumped on a plane to see him, but I couldn’t help it.

He’s kept me up so many nights with talks of his dreams that it didn’t feel right to witness this moment through a screen.

Swelling with pride, I listen to him berate everyone who bet against him and smile as he thanks “the few people who believed in me, but seriously, fuck the rest of you.”

“God, he’s so hot!” “I bet he’s fucking tons of girls after this.” “I want to be one of them.” The women in the row ahead of me swoon, and for a moment, it feels like I’m back in The Underg5round all over again.

I hold back a laugh and move toward the aisle.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I spot Penelope hugging Travis outside the cage.

Travis kisses her forehead and grabs a cell from his manager. Holding it up to his ear, he turns away from the

watching cameras and walks to the other side of the octagon.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Hey.” He’s smiling. “I just beat the defending champion. Did you see me?”

“Of course, I did,” I say. “You did amazing.”

“What bar are you watching me in?”

“I didn’t go to a bar. I’m here in the arena.”

“*What?*” He turns around. “*Where?*”

“Section B.”

I watch him scan the arena until he spots me and waves.

“You look good,” he says. “We should go out to dinner tonight.”

“I’d love that.”

Before I can ask him what food he has a taste for, a suit approaches him, whispering in his ear.

“Okay, wait.” Travis shakes his head and sighs. “I have to do my post-fight presser, meet with my agent about a contract change, and I promised Penelope a dinner first, but I can come see you after.”

“Oh...Okay.”

“I hope that’s alright with you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I’m tempted to book a hotel room in hopes that he’ll drop by later, but I don’t.

I return to the airport.

He doesn’t call that night.



TWO DAYS LATER, I wake up to an inbox full of apologies from Travis and four new “I am so sorry, please let me fix this” voicemails.

In every message, he begs me for a raincheck.

Although I accept, I have a nagging feeling that he’ll never have the time to redeem it.



THIRTY-NINE

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*A Couple of Days Later*

*Manhattan, New York*

**N**ew York welcomed me home with warm thunderstorms and hugs of heated rain.

After making it to my condo, I turned off my phone and rushed into the shower.

Holding back tears, I stood under the scalding hot streams and washed every bit of Las Vegas and Travis off my skin.

*Foolish, foolish girl...*

As steam fogged the glass, a memory of Travis fucking me against his shower bench weeks ago played in my mind.

I wished it would swirl down the drain as quickly as the suds.

*“You were making fucking excuses then, and you’re making them now.”*

No matter how hard I scrubbed, the stains of our relationship remained.

I considered returning to the airport, flying back to Nevada, and breaking up with him in person, but I couldn’t.

This needed to be our final chapter, and no matter how hard it hurt to read, I needed to accept “the end.”

# ACT THIRTEEN

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Denver, Colorado*

“**S**ometimes, you’ll get everything you want in this life. But most times, you’ll have to learn to let some things go, because you can’t keep them all at once...”

My mom used to say those words to me whenever I cried about losing a competition or failing to make new friends. She’d hold me in her arms like a child and tell me to zip those phrases around my heart to protect it from disappointment.

I honestly never understood what she meant until this very moment.

Travis is standing on our hotel suite’s balcony, chatting with his assistant on the phone, demanding that he “immediately” order something for Penelope.

*Penelope, Penelope, Penelope...*

She’s still reigning at number one, and no matter how many hours I train or how much harder I practice, I’m beginning to doubt if I’ll ever reach that spot for myself.

My nights are filled with more anxiety and pain than usual, and I hate that I can’t talk to Travis about this.

I hate that I can’t even mention it.

*Maybe I should try. Maybe he would understand.*

My phone buzzes on the nightstand mid-thought, and I flip it over.

It’s Miss Price.

Sighing, I hold it up to my ear.

“Hello, Miss Price.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m still out of town,” I say. “Las Vegas.”

“With your boyfriend?”

I nod as if she can see me. “Yes.”

“I figured. Are you around a television by chance?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Turn to the skating channel.”

I oblige and see Penelope giving an interview.

Pretty as usual, she’s standing outside an arena, and the ticker below reads, “Penelope Carter Credits Older Brother, Champion MMA Fighter, for Keeping Her Going.”

“I’m very proud of my brother,” she says. “To go from being an undefeated underground fighter to taking on so many opponents at the professional level, all while never losing and breaking records is mind-blowing.”

*It really is.*

“He inked a crown tattoo on his arm for me,” she says, smiling. “It’s homage to my childhood nickname, and I appreciate him always mentioning me right after he wins and inviting me to every fight to support him.”

“Does Travis ever mention *you* after he wins, Tatiana?” Miss Price asks. “I don’t recall any tattoos on his body that are dedicated to you.”

“Our relationship is complicated.”

“I’ll bet,” she says. “Let me ask you something. If push comes to shove, who do you think he’d want to be number one in the world?”

“Miss Price, it’s—”

“He’s living his dreams, she’s living hers, and there you are, still fighting for yours, all while being his little secret,”

she interrupts. “The Tatiana Brave who I know and love told me that she was determined to do whatever it took to be number one and consistently land in first place.”

I swallow, feeling my entire body tense at the harshness of her words.

“You can be first place in Travis Carter’s sheets, I guess.” She snorts. “That’s the best you’ll get, because we both know you’ll never be first place in his life at all.”

I don’t say a word.

“When are you coming home to me so we can get to work?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer. “I bought you a one-way plane ticket with a departure from McCarran Airport. The flight leaves at midnight. Let me know what you want to do an hour before then.”

She ends the call, and I stare at Penelope’s onscreen smile through teary eyelashes.

I want Travis so badly that it hurts, but I know that now is not our time, and we can’t be. I have to cut things off now or never and the former isn’t an option.

I slip from under the covers and pull on my jeans. I make sure everything is packed into my bag and run my hands along the five-star hotel’s bedsheets one last time.

As I’m setting my room key on the nightstand, Travis returns to the room.

“Hey...” He runs a hand along my bag’s strap. “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Check-out isn’t until this weekend.”

“I know, but...” I hold back a sigh. “Something with my coach came up, so I need to go. She literally just called and has a plane ticket waiting for me at the airport.”

“Is something else wrong?”

“I don’t think so.”

He looks deep into my eyes as if he’s trying to discern if I’m lying. Our ongoing game of pretend has helped me master the art of acting.

“Were you planning to tell me goodbye?” he asks.

“No.”

“Hmmm.” He runs his fingers through my hair. “Why does it sound like you won’t be coming back?”

“I don’t know.” I force a smile, and against my better judgment, I hold onto him for a few more moments. “Would you mind driving me to the airport?”

“I insist.” He presses a hand against my back, leading me past the lobby and outside to the valet.

When the car arrives, Travis presses his lips against mine and kisses me.

It’s a perfect, soul-searing kiss that I savor. One that I’ll think about for a long time.

We have a typical conversation on our way to the airport. I ask him about his next fight, apologize for leaving so soon, and he leans over and kisses me at every stoplight.

“See you later,” he says when we arrive to the departure zone.

“Goodbye, Travis.”

FORTY



PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I couldn't believe Tatiana was still holding on to her ridiculous excuses, couldn't believe she refused to leave her silly break-up reasoning behind so we could move forward.

The first time we broke up was painful enough.

"I don't understand her logic at all," I said aloud, sending off my tenth text message of the day.

ME

Ryan said you checked into the Hilton? Come back home so we can talk.

"Um, Mr. Carter?" Madeline waved a hand in front of my face. "Should I come back some other time to discuss this week's schedule changes?"

"No, stay." I refreshed my screen again as if that would make a difference. "We can discuss things now."

"Okay, well, since you and your wife were such a hit on *Good Morning Vegas*, the producers would like to do some additional promo for your fight."

"She's reading my messages and ignoring them on purpose."

"That's it." She slammed a folder shut. "I'm calling Mr. Ralph. Maybe he can get your head back where it needs to

be.”

“He’s already here,” I said. “I just heard the elevator.”

“Well, good. Hopefully he can set you straight.”

“Come in,” I called, saving him from a knock.

The door opened, and Penelope stepped inside, glaring at me.

I rolled my eyes. “*Get out.*”

“If Mom and Dad could see the asshole you’ve become, they’d be very disappointed,” she said.

“I don’t have time for you right now, Crown.”

“*Make it.*” She slammed the door shut. “I don’t even know what to say to you, but you should’ve told me about you and Tatiana a long time ago.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s fucked up!” Her voice cracked. “You’ve always been selfish, but to put your girlfriend—the woman who your sister is constantly competing against and complaining about—before your own flesh and blood? Back when I needed you the fucking most?”

“*Penelope...*”

“You really can’t see how big of a deal this is to me?”

“No, I honestly can’t.” I stood to my feet. “Because I never intended to hurt you, and I’ve always—*fucking always*—put you first.”

“Keep lying to yourself. You have no idea how to care about anyone but ‘Travis’ and you—”

“We were going to lose the fucking house one month after Mom and Dad died.” I cut her off. “They’d missed six mortgage payments without telling us, and their whole ‘let’s take a few months and travel out of an RV to save money for Penelope’s career’ was literally their way of saving face when the time came.”

Her face paled.

“They owed a shit ton of money to title loan companies, and they were considering pawning Mom’s medals to keep us afloat because they didn’t want us to know how fucking terrible they were with money.”

I stepped closer to her, unable to hide the truth anymore. “I promised to take care of you, and I took it upon myself to clear all the goddamn debt, too.”

“Yes, I was an asshole to you every now and then, and yes, I couldn’t be there for you like I wanted to, but it wasn’t because I was too busy falling in love with your enemy...” I paused. “It was just nice having someone who took care of me, too...”

Tears fell from her eyes, and we stared at each other in silence.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that?” She asked, finally.

“You had enough on your plate,” I said. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

“I could’ve helped you with their debt.”

“With what money, Crown?”

“I would’ve quit competing and got a job.”

“Exactly.” I sighed, wiping her face with my hand. “I didn’t want that for you. You needed to focus on skating.”

“I never made it to twenty-eight championships anyway. I swear, if I’d known—”

“*Stop.*” I shook my head. “It’s okay. You didn’t.”

“Are you still mad at me?”

“Mad? No...I’m fucking *furios* with you.”

“Good,” she said. “I’m still highly upset with you, too.”

“After I make your pregnant ass some dinner and agree to be Hayden’s best man, can you leave me the hell alone so I can think about how to fix things with my wife?”

FORTY-ONE

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Several Days Later*

*Manhattan, New York*

All I wanted today was a fresh cup of miso soup, a box of spicy tacos, and an uninterrupted *Law & Order: SVU* marathon. This was the fourth day of my new routine, and I wanted to remain consistent.

I was so desperate for the food to be delivered that I stared out my front window in anticipation.

Just as I was about to call the cafe for an update, a black car pulled into a space across the street.

Swinging the door open, I held out the tip, but the woman stepping out of the vehicle was no delivery driver.

She was Penelope.

I stood frozen while she marched toward me, her expression completely stoic.

“Are you planning to let me in?” she asked. “We need to talk.”

“I don’t feel like talking to you.”

“Tough shit.” She moved past me.

“What in the...” She looked around my living room and shook her head. “You’ve never been the type to leave takeout boxes and mess everywhere. Who are you, really?”

Not in the mood for more of her judgment, I pulled a chair next to the window and took a seat.

*Where the hell is my food?*

“I still can’t believe you and Travis,” Penelope said, picking up a stack of empty takeout boxes. “The audacity, the gall, the *nerve*.”

I crossed my arms and considered telling her to leave, but she pulled a broom out of the closet and started cleaning.

“During this era that we’ve been friends, whenever I was consoling you about other guys, you were lusting after my brother, weren’t you?” She ranted. “But you know what? You did one hell of a job pretending like you didn’t know who he was all this time.”

“He’s the guy who “fucked you like no other” and served as your ‘performance muse’ when you were at your best, right?”

I knew better than to answer that.

“It doesn’t help that he’s in complete denial as well.” She fluffed pillows. “I mean, no wonder he looked so damn terrible at this morning’s press conference. He deserves a little misery, of course, but still...”

“A part of me is impressed you two kept things a secret for long, but another part of me is livid because he honestly thinks his ‘I didn’t want to hurt you’ excuse is believable.”

*I didn’t want to hurt you either.*

“Regardless of how I feel—” She paused. “I’m stuck with the both of you in my life. I just can’t believe...”

I held back a sigh and listened to her ramble through tears while she made my place immaculate. She paid for my food when it came and was nice enough to let me eat in silence.

When I devoured the last morsel, she tucked me under a blanket on the couch. Then she continued her rant while steaming my drapes.

“Can I say one last thing about this?” She stepped in front of me.

“I haven’t stopped you from talking since you got here, Penelope.”

“Good point.” She plopped beside me, brushing a few curls off my forehead. “You’ve been like a sister to me ever since we buried the hatchet. Would you agree?”

“I would.”

“And despite your backstabbing betrayal with Travis, which is practically on the level of murder—”

“It is *nowhere near* murder, Penelope.”

“Yeah, well, despite that, you both have plenty of time to apologize for your treacherous behavior in the past.”

I stared at her, waiting for her to tell me that she was joking, but she looked dead-ass serious. She looked like the young girl I loathed but secretly admired all those years ago.

“Now that I think about it,” she continued, “if I’m like a sister to you, that means Travis is like your older brother as well, and you two have technically committed *incest*.”

Silence.

“You’ve been wanting to hurl that insult my way since you found out about us, haven’t you?” I asked.

“I’ve sat on it for an entire week.” She smiled. “Was my delivery any good?”

“You should’ve drawn it out a little more.”

“Did it need one more sentence?”

“*Two*.”

“Noted.” She pulled me into her arms. “I think I’m done talking now.”

“I never thought me and Travis would end up together again, so that’s why I never told you about it,” I admitted. “I was in denial about how much he meant to me.”

“It’s honestly good that you kept it to yourself,” she said. “I would’ve hated you even more. I *still* hate you, by the way.”

“That feeling will always be mutual.” I smiled for the first time this week. “Can we please go back to being friends now? Your brother and I are pretty much done anyway.”

“Because of me?”

“No, it’s multiple things.” My voice cracked. “It’s always been multiple things...Mainly him thinking the world and everything in it revolves around him. He just can’t see past his own point of view.”

“He’s been like that since the day he was born.” She dabbed my eyes with her sleeves. “He can’t help it.”

“Our ‘marriage’ was bound to end at some point, and I needed to stop pretending like we had a true future, so I—” I choked back sobs, unable to finish my sentence.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you that he’s mad at me about how I’ve handled all this?” She rubbed my back. “That he doesn’t want to see me again until his fight?”

“No.” I swallowed. “Not at all.”

“Well, it’s true. He’s pretty pissed.”

“He’ll get over it.” I smiled. “I’d kill to have a big brother who cared about me in the way he cares about you, and he can’t hold a grudge that long.”

She looked into my eyes. “Do you plan to come to his fight?”

“No.” I felt a lump rising up my throat. “I need to let him go.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to finally put myself in first place instead of waiting for him to...”



ACT 13 & A HALF

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Miami, Florida*

ME

Hey... I've called you three times today. You okay?

ME

Call me when you get a chance.



ME

It's been days and you haven't called me back...



ME

Is there a reason my calls are going straight to voicemail now?

TATI

No, sorry. Just been super busy lately.

ME

Too busy to pick up the phone? Don't answer that. I'm calling you in five minutes. Pick up.

I step out of the octagon and head for the exit.

“Wait, wait!” Ralph calls after me, making me turn around. “Where the hell are you going?”

“You know, if one of the qualifications for retaining your UFC championship stats was texting and calling Tatiana every ten minutes, you’d never have to train again.”

“That joke lost its punchline twenty times ago.”

“Your girlfriend can wait,” he says, placing his hands on my shoulders. “If the two of you are meant to be together, it’ll work out in the end. Trust an old guy on this.”

“Do you think she met someone and isn’t telling me?”

“Travis...”

“Nothing else makes sense.” I clench my jaw at the mere thought of her ever being with another guy. “Everything was fine the last time we saw each other, but she’s not talking to me like she used to. She won’t pick up my calls, and I’m pulling teeth just to get her to text me.”

“Doesn’t she have an important competition in a couple months?” He sounds exasperated. “Maybe she’s approaching her training far more seriously than you. It could be nothing.”

“Or it could be *everything*.” I step back. “I’ll be back in ten.”

“Right.” He throws up his hands. “Let’s take thirty, everyone!”

I step under the outdoor awning and call Tatiana.

The line rings once.

Twice.

“Hey,” she answers, her voice soft. “What’s up?”

“*What’s up?* What the hell is wrong with you lately?” I can’t fake how I’m feeling. “Have I done something to you?”

“No, Travis.”

“Tell me the fucking truth, Tatiana.” I can’t take this game anymore. “Better yet, tell me where you are so I can catch a flight and talk to you about us in person.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Have you met someone else?”

“No.” Her voice cracks, the first sign of emotion I’ve heard from her in forever. “It’s a long story, Travis. I’ll call you about it tonight, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll hold you to that. I love you.”

“I’ll always love you, Travis...”



SHE DOESN'T CALL ME.

She stops answering my texts and calls altogether.

ACT 14

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Chicago, Illinois*

*Several weeks later*

“I’m seconds away from skating the best I’ve ever skated in my life,” I say to myself. “The best I’ve ever skated in my life...”

I stare at my reflection in the dressing room, ensuring every sequin on my black and red costume is hanging correctly. My heart is pounding in anticipation of today’s program, and I know I can win if I stay focused.

Even though the past several weeks have wrecked me emotionally, I’ve stunned Miss Price to silence at every rehearsal.

Leaning closer to the mirror, I double-check my eye makeup. As I add a wing with my mascara, the door swings open and hits the wall.

*What the...*

It’s Penelope.

She storms inside, opening every stall. Then she locks the door.

“Do I need to call security?” I spin around. “I hope you’re not crazy enough to fight me at a competition.”

“I don’t want to skate against sad and emotional Tatiana Brave today.” She glares at me. “I need you to bring back the perfectionist bitch that you are.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not stuttering,” she says. “Yes, you’re skating better than ever lately, but there’s no fire. No intensity. It’s like you’re on autopilot.”

“Are you on drugs, Penelope?”

“You gave me a compliment at our last meetup,” she says, ignoring my question, “and I don’t appreciate things like that from you. You’re my best rival, my number one enemy—*forever*; and I need you to fucking bring it today.”

“For the record.” I set down my wand. “Telling you that you ‘sucked ass a little less than usual’ was *not* a compliment.”

A slow smile crosses her lips, but she doesn’t let it stay.

“I notice you landed a quad during your warmup,” she says. “Is that part of your routine today?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I’ll take that as a yes, so I need you to focus and land it as well as possible.” She’s speaking like she’s my coach for some odd reason, as if I need her words of encouragement. “I need to see the level of effort you had in Sochi.”

“You mean, better than that, correct? I recall winning second place silver and messing up a few things.”

“You made one mistake in your entire routine.” She shoots me a sympathetic look. “We both you know would’ve won gold if my routine wasn’t half a point more technical than yours.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“*I* do.”

Silence.

“Not that it matters to you, but my older brother Travis is here today.”

“*He is?*” My heart betrays me by skipping a beat.

“Yes,” she says. “He hardly ever comes to these, and since he’s here and this could potentially mean that...”

The rest of her words come in muted.

*Travis is here.*

When I’m able to focus again, Penelope is standing in front of the mirror, smoothing her hair.

“I need you to make this competitive for me.” She’s still talking. “Like, make the judges’ final decision hard as hell.”

“There are over a dozen other skaters here, Penelope.”

“There’s only one I’ve ever worried about,” she admits, facing me again. “I want the best from you because you’ve always brought out the best in me.”

“You’ll definitely get it.”

“Good.” She steps back and heads to the door.

“Wait,” I say as she grabs the handle.

“Yeah?”

“There are two bobby pins sticking out of your bun in the back,” I say. “Judge Reddick is a stickler for stupid shit like that, and I’d hate for that to be the reason behind your upcoming loss to me.”

“Me too.” She smiles. “Thanks.”

She leaves the room, and Miss Price rushes in.

“Oh, thank god!” She places a hand on her chest. “I thought you two were finally fighting it out after all these years.”

“No, we were just having a conversation.”

“I hope it was about how you’re moments away from beating her today.”

“It was.”





*An hour later*

PENELOPE LAUNCHES INTO A TRIPLE-TOE LOOP, drawing stunned applause from today's audience of thousands.

She's floating on the ice, securing every spin and jump in a way that confirms her moniker, "The Perfect Feather."

There's supposed to be a double lutz next, but she deviates, going for a triple salchow and back-to-back triple lutz instead.

The arena explodes in applause, and as much as I want to ignore the hype, I clap as well.

She completes a parallel spin, and then her routine unfolds precisely how I've seen it before.

Pure perfection.

Out of nowhere, she makes another deviation. Instead of a final triple lutz, she attempts a quad, and I brace myself for another round of applause as she spins in the air.

She doesn't come down like she should, though.

She falls face-first onto the ice, and the white surface beneath her becomes bloody red.

*Oh my God...*

ACT 14 & A HALF

BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Chicago, Illinois*

I push my way through the horde of reporters clogging the lobby. Making a beeline for the freight elevator, I take one of the interconnected hallways and find Penelope's room.

Pushing the door open, I gasp when I see her on the bed. Her head is wrapped in bandages, her legs are covered in casts, and her eyes are swollen shut.

*Oh, Penelope...* My heart drops as I near her side.

"Why did you deviate from your routine like that?" I choke on my words. "We were both going to be on that podium, and I was looking forward to talking shit to you..."

The sound of nearing footsteps make me look up, and I slip into her bathroom. Leaning against the tile, I watch as two nurses assess her status.

"Does she have any family here?" one of them asks. "Has anyone contacted her parents?"

"Her parents are deceased."

"What about any other relatives?"

"Her older brother is upstairs speaking to the doctors about the care she'll need over the next several years. Given the circumstances, I'm assuming that'll last until the early evening."

"What a tragic end to a beautiful career."

*'End' of her career?*

I wait until they leave before slipping away to the gift shop. I pick out pink and grey balloons and flowers and take my time penning a short note inside a pretty ‘Get Well Soon’ card.

When I return, I set the gifts on the table and adjust the pillow behind Penelope’s head.

“I may hate you on the ice,” I whisper, “but in another life, I think we could’ve been friends.”

Her eyes flutter open, but only for a moment.

They close just as fast.

“How did you get in here, Miss?” A stern voice calls from behind. “I didn’t see you check in at the desk.”

“Sorry, wrong room.” I walk out before she can call security, rushing down the hall and to the elevator. The doors glide open, but I don’t step onto the car.

I can’t.

Travis is standing on it alone, his eyes bloodshot, his shirt and pants wrinkled. He’s holding a white bouquet while a “Family Visitor” lanyard hangs from his neck.

“Tati?” he asks, stepping off. “How long have you been here?”

“Not too long.”

“I was hoping to find you after the competition to see if you’d come out to dinner with me, but...”

“I know.” I swallow. “Well, I uh, I came here to wish Penelope a speedy recovery.”

“Thank you,” he says. “I rented out an entire floor at the hotel across the street. Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

*Yes, please.* “No. I need to go.”

“Wait.” He grabs my hand. “Did you get my voicemail this morning?”

“I did.”

“Do you plan on giving me an answer?” he asks. “Whatever I did, whatever happened, let me fix it so things can go back to how they used to be.”

“I can’t be with you anymore,” I say the words I’ve held back on saying forever, feeling an ugly ache in my chest with every syllable. “I just can’t.”

“We can at least be friends.” He cups my face in his hands and softly kisses my lips, driving my heart down a road it knows all too well. A painful dead-end.

“Just friends,” he whispers against my mouth. “You can at least give me that.”

“Friends can’t kiss each other, Travis.”

“We can, and tonight we should discuss how things will work out moving forward.”

Despite my heart begging me to stop doing this to him—to *us*, I shake my head.

“Friends don’t make long-term plans and promises to each other either,” I say. “That’s not how it works.”

“Then we’ll need to call what we have something else. This time, let’s pretend that—”

“No.” I push his hands away before he can finish. “My heart can’t take this anymore.”

“Take what?” He looks into my eyes. “If you don’t love me anymore, or if you’ve found someone else, just fucking say it.”

“It’s not that.”

“It feels like it.”

“Doctor Frayser to the O.R., please!” A voice comes over the speaker system. “Doctor Frayser to the O.R., please!”

“Look, Travis.” Tears prick my eyes as he grips my waist. “I think it’s best if we go our separate ways and pretend like we never met.”

The hopeful look in his eyes fades.

“Penelope needs all your attention now, and it’d be foolish for you to focus on anyone else for a single second. Besides, I need to work on myself and now isn’t a good time.”

“So, you’re going with the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ approach?” he asks.

“No. Stop acting like—”

“I fucking love you?” He hisses. “Like *that*?”

“Like this wasn’t always bound to come to an end.” I choke. “We can’t be right now. It’s not our time, but if we’re meant to be...”

He tightens his grip on my waist and pulls me closer, as if he’s waiting for me to finish that sentence, to serve some soothing hope.

The words never come.

Finger by finger, he loosens his hold on me.

“I’ve never wanted someone as much as I wanted you,” he says. “And I never will.”

“You don’t know that yet.”

“I do.” He walks away without another word, carrying bits and pieces of my broken heart with him.

I want to follow and tell him I’m making a huge mistake, but I don’t.

I leave the hospital and force myself to quit him cold turkey.

No Google searches.

No article reads.

No sports channels.

Travis Carter doesn’t exist.

*He never did.*

FORTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*The following afternoon*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**T**he words “Will Travis Carter Avenge His Loss?” stared at me from a giant screen in a Tom Ford fitting room, but my fight was the last thing on my mind.

*I can't believe Tatiana left Vegas without telling me goodbye...*

A tailor measured my wrists for the umpteenth time while others discussed the day's events.

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“I specifically said no visitors until I'm finished.” The tailor groaned. “I was promised a full private session.”

“It's probably Mr. Carter's handler,” someone said. “That's the only way he could've gotten past security.”

“Fine then.” He waved at the doorman. “Let him in, please.”

I glanced at the door, expecting to see Ralph, but it was Madeline.

“Yes, Miss Dawson?” I asked.

*“Fuck you.”*

The room instantly fell silent.

“Yes, I said that and I meant every word.” Her voice cracked. “Fuck. You. Travis.”



“I need everyone except Miss Dawson to leave,” I said. “*Now.*”

The staff disappeared within seconds, leaving rustling papers in their wake. The tailor left a pin stuck in my skin.

“I’m assuming that you’re having some type of mental crisis,” I said. “Otherwise, we have a problem.”

“You gave me a terrible reference.” Tears fell from her eyes. “I know I embellished my resume, but was I that terrible of a publicist for you? Did I fail your brand that miserably?”

“No, Madeline.”

“The first company literally said, ‘We don’t feel comfortable hiring you, due to what Mr. Carter told us.’ The second company didn’t give me any reason. They simply said, ‘You should talk to Mr. Carter,’ i.e., you screwed me over.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

“Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t.” She hissed. “You’re letting me go after your big fight anyway, so I don’t understand how you could do this to me.”

“Because I tend to be a very selfish person when it comes to certain things in my life.”

“This is *beyond* selfish, more selfish than what you did to Tatiana.” She scoffed. “So, if you don’t mind, when my next potential client calls—”

“I’d like to keep you on my staff and let you run the PR for my other companies as well,” I said. “I told every CEO who asked for a reference that they were wasting their time because I was willing to double whatever they offered you. I’m not the sharing type and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you.”

She blinked a few times. “*Oh.*”

“Are you unhappy working for me?”

“No, I love it.” She smiled. “I didn’t know you loved me so much, though.”

“I only like you a lot, Madeline. I don’t love you.”

“Not as much as you love your wife, but there’s *some* love there.” She hugged me. “I can feel it.”

“Madeline...”

“Shhhh.” She hugged me tighter. “Just let this emotion radiate off us for awhile.”

I sighed and returned her hug before letting her go.

“Thanks for clearing up my assumptions,” she said. “I need to make a few phone calls about your VIP guests so I’ll come back and see what you need later.”

“Wait.” I moved in front of the door. “What did you mean when you said it was more selfish than what I did to Tatiana?”

“*Huh?* I don’t remember that.” She was a terrible actress. “I was probably speaking out of anger and trying to make you feel bad.”

“It worked. What did you mean?”

“Nothing. It was angry talk, I swear.”

“I don’t think it was.” I narrowed my eyes. “Tell me.”

“Promise not to fire me first.”

“I literally just said I want to keep you.”

“You might change your mind after hearing what I have to say.”

“I won’t.” I was too desperate to get my wife back. “I promise.”

“Okay, look. Can you imagine dating a woman who is your opponent’s younger sister? Not just some *regular* opponent, but the guy who always knows exactly how to beat you? The guy who remains number one in the world, no matter how many times you’ve almost come close?”

“It’s a little different in my sport.”

“But the conflict is the same. So, no matter how deeply you love that person, how many times you try to convince yourself otherwise, the issue doesn’t go away.” She stepped

closer. “I bet she never told you how she really felt about losing to Penelope when you were dating did she?”

I said nothing.

“I bet she hardly mentioned much about her career because you were supporting Penelope. Like, before you got overly cocky and rich, everything you did and every move you made was for Penelope. Girlfriend or not.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I doubt that she—”

“I’m not finished.” She held up her hand. “She kept that part of her life back because she knew that she would always be second place to Penelope when it came to you, too.” She paused. “I heard you say it recently, Mr. Carter. You’ve *always* put Penelope first, so Tatiana still feels like she’s coming in second place.”

Silence.

I held my head in my hands, exhaling again and again.

*How the hell did I not see this before?*

Madeline moved past me and opened the door. “So um, I’m not fired, right?”

“Right.”

“In that case, can I give you a little bit more honesty?”

“Don’t push it.”

“Okay, I’ll save it for later.” She stepped into the hall. “You’re welcome.”

I remained silent as she shut the door, and for the first time since the day I met Tatiana, I rewound our memories and understood things from her point of view.

ACT 15

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Chicago, Illinois*

“**Y**our sister will struggle to regain motor functions and suffer sustained memory loss for a very long time,”  
A doctor tells me one morning. “You’ll need to be there for her during every step of this recovery.”

“I will,” I say. “Can you leave me alone with her for a while please?”

“Of course, sir.” He nods. “I’ll be back this evening to go over the methodology of her next surgeries.”

“Wait. When exactly will she be able to skate again?”

“Sir, I...” He shoots me a sympathetic look. “You’ll be lucky if your sister *walks* again.”

I refuse to believe that and move closer to Penelope. I take out the necklace I’d bought her for today’s occasion, a diamond-encrusted locket with “Congratulations on reaching number 28!” with a picture of her and my mother inside.

Laying it next to her, I press a hand against her forehead. “I’m so sorry, Crown. You’ll still be the winner of twenty-eight championships to me.”

At some point—I’m too fucked up to keep up with the time—Hayden comes into the room and insists I go for a walk.

I begrudgingly accept his advice.

I take the elevator outside and head toward the hospital's walking trail. I can't focus on much of anything right now, and I desperately need to talk to my other best friend.

My girlfriend.

Pulling out my phone, I call Tatiana via video chat.

It rings once.

It rings twice.

Her beautiful face appears onscreen seconds later, but she looks unhappy to see me.

She looks like she's been crying for weeks.

"Hey," I say. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't say anything; she just stares.

"I had a dream that you broke up with me," I say. "Isn't that crazy?"

"I *did* break up with you, Travis." She lets out a breath. "I told you that days ago."

"You were here? At the hospital?" My brain is running on vending machine snacks and lousy coffee; I can't keep anything straight.

"Go take care of Penelope, Travis," she says, tears falling down her cheeks. "We'll talk again someday."

She ends the call, and I wait a few seconds before calling her back.

It doesn't ring, though.

It goes straight to voicemail.

I call her an hour, a day, and a week later, and the result is always the same.

ACT 15 AND A HALF

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Several Months Later*

*Manhattan, New York*

**P**enelope opens her eyes for the first time today. She tends to forget that I moved her to another facility to recover and that I've never left her side, so I cling to hope that she remembers today.

"Travis?" she asks, slowly turning her head to face me.  
"Travis?"

"Yeah, Crown?"

"You can get the hell out of my room now."

"Excuse me?"

"Give me the remote before you leave, so I can talk to the screen instead of you."

"You do know that I've been here every day taking care of you, right?"

"Hayden has been, too." She shrugs. "I'm still pissed at you for missing out on my last ten or so competitions before Chicago."

*Why are you able to remember that shit but not anything else?*

"You haven't been there for me when I needed you." She blinks a few times. "Before that, you pretty much ghosted me and left me with Hayden. He's a manwhore, you know."



“Be quiet, Crown.” I fluff the pillow behind her head.

“Why did you change your mind at the last minute about coming to the Sochi Olympics?”

I stare at her, wanting to test how much she recalls. “What do you mean?”

“I refuse to believe it was because of some sponsor deal that came up.” She struggles to sit up, so I help her.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, so I know you probably were off doing something else,” she says. “You’d already bought the plane ticket and we’d made an itinerary of things to do together. Then you acted like *I* was the one in the wrong for being upset.”

“Penelope, it’s complicated.”

“Is it?” The pained look in her eyes makes my heart ache.

“Mom wouldn’t be okay with you changing your mind at the last minute,” she says. “Dad wouldn’t understand it either.”

*They both would understand...*

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you in Russia.” I kiss her forehead. “If there was any way that I could’ve made it work, I would’ve been there. Promise.”

“Was whatever you did instead *that* important?”

“I thought so at the time.”

“Like, on the level of life or death?”

“In a way, yes. Someone’s dreams were on the line.”

“You mean, mine?”

“No, Crown.” I kiss her forehead again. “I was already doing everything possible to ensure that you achieved yours.”

Silence.

“I’ll be mad at you about this for a while.” She gestures for me to pick up her memory journal. “But I’ll write a slight amendment about it for your apology, though.”

“Don’t,” I say. “I deserve your wrath on that.”

She sighs, holding her pen mid-air. “Who was on top of the podium in Chicago? I want to know.”

“They didn’t do a formal presentation,” I say. “A certain someone’s health and survival were far more important.”

“I’m sure they listed the standings on the website. I was the last one to skate, so I don’t see why they couldn’t at least do that. Can you pull them up on your phone?”

“Tatiana Brave won first,” I say, knowing she won’t let it rest. “Almost a perfect score.”

“Is she ranked number one in the world right now?”

“Yes.”

“How many competitions has she won since I’ve been in recovery?”

“I’ve lost count.”

“Well...” She sucks in a slow breath and exhales. “That’s good. Very good.”

“Good?” I raise my eyebrow. “Don’t you mean you *hate* that?”

She shakes her head, staying silent for several moments.

“Can I tell you a secret, Travis?”

“Always.”

“I’ll never admit to saying this, but Tatiana skated better than me on several occasions and I never once worried about losing my ranking until she came along...” She looks wistful. “If I ever had to lose to *anyone*, she was the only person I could accept that from, because she always made my other competitors look like amateurs.”

“That’s very mature of you, Crown. I’m glad you came to that conclusion.”

“Thanks. She’s still a terrible cunt-faced bitch, though.”

*Jesus.* “Penelope...”

“And she’s not that pretty.” She shuts her eyes. “Her skating is mediocre at best. *At. Best.* Why don’t you ever agree

with me on that?”

She drifts into a deep sleep, and I hit the lights.

ACT 16

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Reno, Nevada*

*A year & a half later*

**T**atiana is starting a brand new business called Brave Beauty Marks.

I know this because I broke down and read every post on her Instagram account in a drunken rage last night, but I don't care how pathetic that sounds.

I miss her that fucking much.

After hiring a nurse to look after Penelope for half a day, I flew to Reno to see if enough time had passed for Tatiana to come to her senses and change her mind about us.

I park my car in front of the building where she's hosting a "strategy meeting" a few hours from now and step outside with roses.

Through the cafe's windows, I watch her for several minutes. Then, because I can't help it, I call her.

She stares at her phone's screen as my name appears, and right when I think she's letting it go to voicemail, she holds it up to her ear.

"Hello?" she answers.

"How are you?"

"Travis..." She lets out a slow breath. "You promised not to do this."

“Do what?”

“Hold onto me.” She swallows. “We agreed.”

“There was no ‘we’ in that fucking decision,” I say. “You made that on your own and you know that.”

She shakes her head. “I haven’t been well. You?”

“Same.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” she says. “Your career is flourishing.”

“Yours is, too.”

A smile crosses her face, but it falters. “I can’t do this, Travis. I have to go.”

She hangs up before I can ask another question, and a guy in grey sits across from her.

He clasps her hand and kisses it.

*What the...*

Without thinking, I walk inside the cafe and approach their table.

“We need to talk.” I glare at her, keeping my voice firm. “Now.”

“Oh no,” her date says, smiling. “Are we at your table?”

“What?” Tatiana and I say in unison.

“You’re Travis Carter.” He smiles and holds up his hand in a playful surrender. “I am not trying to be a hero if this is your typical spot. I watch the UFC and I’m a huge fan of yours.”

“Oh my god!” The manager rushes over. “Can I get a picture with you?”

“In a minute,” I say, still looking at Tatiana. “I need to talk to someone first.”

“I’m a big fan of yours as well,” Tatiana says, with no emotion whatsoever. “I’m always amazed at how well you *let go* of the match when it’s over and move on to the next.”

“I wish it were that easy.”

“I’m sure it seems really hard at first,” she says, “but I guarantee the other person appreciates you doing that, so they can move on, too.”

“Are those roses for your fans?” Her date asks. “Are you in town doing some type of Valentine’s Day promo?”

“No, they’re for someone who means the world to me.” I step back. “Well, they *were*, anyway.”

“Can I get a picture with you, too, Travis?” A blonde rushes up to me.

“Me, too!” “If you don’t mind, can I?” “Please?” Other fans appear around me, and I put on a fake smile for what feels like forever.

Through their endless line of selfie requests, I catch glimpses of Tatiana avoiding me, her chatting with this other guy as if he’s even half the man I am.

I’m tempted to interrupt and tell her she’s still mine—that she’ll *always* be mine, but then the guy kisses her lips.

She doesn’t pull away; she kisses him back.

The last bits of my heart break in my chest, and I force myself to leave the cafe mid-selfie. I toss the red roses onto the street and return to my car.

If she wants to pretend like we never met, two can play that game.

ACT 16 & A HALF



BACK THEN

TATIANA

*Years Later*

*Manhattan, New York*

**P**lease be the one. Please be the one.

I'm standing outside a beautiful brick brownstone, hoping like hell that my apartment search will end today. So far, I've toured studios with rat infestations, high-rises I can't afford, and places so small that only two of my suitcases would fit.

Repeating my prayer, I ring the doorbell, and the door swings open within seconds.

*What the...Penelope?*

We stare at each other, and I look her over in disbelief.

Time has been great to her since her fall; she's gorgeous and looks like she's healed well.

Unlike the rumors I've heard here and there, she doesn't look dazed at all.

*Does she even remember me?*

"Ugh. It's *you*." She glares at me, answering that question, looking at me with pure disdain.

"*You*." I glare right back and cross my arms.

"If I had known this place was yours," I say, "I swear I never would've answered the ad."

“It’s a good thing you did.” She shrugs. “You can get a good look at a beautiful place where you’ll never stay.”

“I’ve always known that you were a cold-hearted bitch.”

“I’ve always known that you were a bigger one.”

“I’d *die* before living here.”

“Do you see me offering to let you in?” She starts to shut the door. “Good luck with your search.”

“Wait,” I say, wedging my foot between the frame. “I hate to ask, but can I please use your bathroom before I go?”

“Fine.” She opens the door. “It’s down the hall and to the left. Make sure you get a good look at my medal collection on your way there. Pay special attention to the gold one from the Olympics in Sochi.”

“Too bad you’re missing the gold one from Pyeongchang.” I can’t help but throw that jab since she wants to live in the past. “I wonder who won *that* one.”

“You have two minutes to handle your business and get the hell out.”

“It’ll take me less than that.” I find the bathroom and shut the door.

Turning around, I can’t help but gasp. This bathroom is bigger than the bedrooms in all the other apartments I’ve seen.

I take a closer look at the clawfoot tub, running a hand against its silver spigot. I check out the closet and the walk-in shower, and before I know it, I forget why I even came in here.

After washing my hands, I walk down the hall, where Penelope is fuming in the living room. She’s managed to pull on her bright pink “I’m the Best Figure Skater Alive” t-shirt that I’ve always loathed.

*So she’s still petty as hell.*

“Your bathroom is nice,” I say. “Is that the only one?”

“No, there are three. Two more you’ll never see.”

I slide my purse over my shoulder and look her in the eyes. Since she has her memory back and she’s still a cunt, I need her to know something.

“For what it’s worth,” I say, “I don’t think I’ve ever hated another person the way I hate you.”

“The feeling will always be mutual.”

Silence.

For some strange reason, I can’t bring myself to walk away.

Not just yet.

“What are you doing now?” I ask. “Like, career-wise.”

She says nothing.

“I heard that you never got all your memory back after the fall. Is that true?”

“I get bits and pieces back on some days,” she relents. “But I’m still missing a lot, and the memories are never in order.”

“Are you coaching?”

“I coach off and on,” she says. “I have a few private clients, but they’re not worth mentioning.”

“Let me guess. They have rich parents who are wasting their money since the kids can’t skate their way off the railing?”

“Exactly.” She nods. “I give inspirational speeches to colleges and sports teams, too. I have one coming up a few weeks from now in California actually.”

“Does that pay well?”

“Sometimes.” She pauses. “Not ‘living in New York’ well. Hence, the roommate thing. I doubt it pays as well as *your* career.”

I raise an eyebrow, confused about why Travis isn’t paying her rent.

“How do you know what I’m doing?” I ask.

“I hate-follow you on Instagram from a burner account. I’m the person who always comments: ‘You’re not that pretty’ and ‘Get over yourself.’”

“Good to know.” I smile. “I would say that it’s nice seeing you after all these years, but honestly—”

“It’s not.”

“Agreed.” I walk to the door. “Best of luck finding a roommate who doesn’t hate you.”

“Thank you.” I step out, and she slams the door behind me.

I turn around and stare straight ahead.

If I were sane, I would walk away now, forget this place existed, and move the hell on. There’s no way that living with the woman who’s related to the man who still owns my heart is a good idea.

I’m so close to going twelve hours a day without thinking about him.

*So damn close...*

Then again, there’s no other apartment in this city that I’ve loved at first sight, and we managed to room together in the past without killing each other, so—

The door swings open again, and I can’t help but blurt out, “I really need a place to stay, and I can pay for the first ten months in advance.”

Penelope sighs and ushers me inside.

She asks me a few questions, and I answer them on autopilot, too caught off guard by the huge picture hanging over her fireplace.

It’s her standing with Travis in a hospital room. She’s holding balloons in her hand while he smiles, and there’s a colorful banner above them that reads, “I Proved All the Doctors Wrong. I’m Walking Again, Soon to be Skating Again!”

“That’s my older brother, Travis,” Penelope says. “He’s a fighter in the UFC. He doesn’t come into town too often, now that I’m better, but whenever he has a match in Vegas, he flies me out to watch it.”

“Has he ever mentioned me?” The words fall from my lips before I can stop them.

“*You?*” She tilts her head to the side. “He banned me from bringing you up in our conversations at one point.”

“What?” I try not to look too eager for an explanation. “Why would he do that?”

“He had his reasons.” She pauses. “I used to talk shit about you all the time when we competed, and he got tired of it. He shut me down before I could even start.”

I have no idea how to react to that, and a part of me can’t help but wonder if this is the universe throwing me a fresh chance or playing another twisted joke.

“It’s crazy,” she says, shaking her head. “Talking about my opponents never bothered him until you came along. Like, if I ever said a word that sounded similar to your name, he would glare at me as if it was personal.”

I nod, still speechless.

“Maybe he thought we’d eventually see each other again and be okay.”

“Maybe.”

“Want to grab a coffee?” she asks, suddenly looking sheepish. “I meant what I said about not having any friends outside of Hayden.”

“I don’t have any friends either,” I say. “I’d love to...”

FORTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Six Nights Before the Rematch*

*Manhattan, New York*

“Answer this damn door.” I rang Tatiana’s doorbell for the umpteenth time. “Answer it right now.”

Even though the lights inside weren’t on, I was convinced she was lying on her living room couch, taking great pleasure in ignoring me while New York’s rain drenched me to the bone.

“I only need two minutes.” I rang it again. “Just give me two minutes.”

The door never swung open.

The lights never came on.

The only thing that changed was the pattern of the rain.

“What the hell are you doing in front of my house, Boy?” Someone with a scratchy voice spoke from behind.

I turned around and saw an older man holding up a cane. He looked seconds away from striking me across the face with it.

“I believe you’re mistaken, sir,” I said. “My wife lives here.”

“No, *I* live here. And if you don’t leave my property within the next ten seconds, I’ll have to handle you personally.”

He puffed out his chest like he really wanted to fight me.

“Don’t make me start counting, son,” he said. “I’d hate to whip your ass in this weather.”

I would’ve laughed if my heart wasn’t aching so damn much.

“My apologies, sir,” I said. “If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you been living here?”

“Since last week.” He let down his guard a bit. “A wonderful young lady who once coached my granddaughter is letting me rent it for as long as I want.”

“I see...” Pain assaulted my chest. “Do you have any idea where that woman is living now?”

“Shouldn’t *you* know that?” He raised his eyebrow. “Didn’t you say she’s your wife?”

“Right.” I left his steps and called Madeline.

“Yes, Mr. Carter?” she answered.

“I’m staying in New York for a few more days until I find Tatiana. Let everyone on my team know.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” Ralph was suddenly on the line.

“Completely.”

“Your fight is in six days.” He hissed. “Six. Fucking. Days.”

“We can always reschedule it, if I haven’t found her before then.”

“You have a highly-publicized, pre-fight ritual that’s due to start tonight.” He acted as if he hadn’t heard my previous words. “You will get your ass back to Vegas by this afternoon, and you will focus on fighting the man who is currently holding a press conference and talking shit about you. You will get focused, and after you win, you can work on fighting for your marriage. Clear?”

I said nothing.

“Are we fucking clear, Travis Dante Carter?”



“We’re clear,” I relented. “I’ll fly back around three.”

“You’ll fly back *now*.”

From the tone of his voice, I knew better than to risk losing him when I needed him most.

*I can’t risk losing Tatiana either, though.*

“I just want to check a few more places, Ralph,” I said. “It’ll only take a few hours and I’ll still be back in time.”

“Head to the airport now or I’m quitting.” He hung up before I could say another word.

*Fuck.*

FORTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*5 Nights Before the Rematch*  
*Manhattan, New York*

TRAVIS (DON'T ANSWER)

Tatiana, it's 4 a.m., but I know you're awake. Pick up the phone.

I really need to talk to you. Just hear me out for two minutes.

Are you still coming to my fight?

I'm sending a private plane to NYC so you can watch it from the front row like we always discussed.

Tears streamed down my face as I looked over Travis's morning messages—wondering if his heart was as broken as mine.

As tempted as I was to respond, I could no longer play the part of a masochist.

I deleted his messages and finally did what I should've done years ago, what would've spared me a love I could never keep and a heartache time could never cure.

I blocked his number.

Permanently.

—

THE SNARKY GLOVE

#1 UFC & MMA GOSSIP SOURCE FOR FANGIRLS

**D**earest Fans,

The Punisher's ritual is officially broken.

Ever since we started this blog and began following Travis Carter's career, we've been obsessed with his legendary pre-fight routine.

As you know, it always begins at The Riviera, where he treats his closest team members and friends to a private and formal brunch.

However, this is no longer the case.

Yesterday, while fans anxiously waited outside in hopes of getting a glimpse of him, the restaurant manager informed us that he never showed.

Hours later, he was spotted across town sitting alone in a coffee shop.

The other night, one of our lovely readers revealed that she saw him aimlessly wandering around a *Sailor Moon* fandom conference. (We have the pictures to confirm this.)

If you're betting on him winning this weekend, you may want to reconsider...

*Stay tuned for more news & updates.*

*The Snarky Glove*

FORTY-FIVE

PRESENT DAY

TRAVIS



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

*Two Nights Before the Rematch*

“I’m betting one hundred thousand dollars on Christopher Juarez, all day, every day,” the sports anchor on television said. “He’s got the hunger, the momentum, the scrappiness. *Everything.*”

“Turn this shit off, Harry!” Ralph called out my trainer from across the room.

“No, please leave it on.” I flexed my hands. “I’m looking forward to sending him a ‘Sorry for your Loss’ card once this is all over.”

“Good to see that level of confidence in you, sir.” Harry smiled. “Juarez won’t know what hit him.”

“Oh, he’ll definitely know.” I rolled my wrists. “The entire world will.”

“Alright, everyone!” Ralph clapped his hands. “Let’s break for dinner and reconvene in the penthouse. We’ll run through the final checklist before Mr. Carter gets his mandatory eight hours of sleep.”

When the last person left the room, Ralph shut the door.

“I’m quite pleased with what I’ve seen from you this weekend,” he said. “You’re one hundred percent locked in, and I like it.”

“I’m only sixty percent focused, and you know it.”



“Just wanted to hear you say it first.” He shook his head. “Your wife didn’t get on the private plane that you sent. It arrived empty.”

“What about my sister?”

“She came via your best friend’s plane,” he said. “No pun intended.”

“How is that a pun, Ralph?”

“She said she felt uncomfortable joining the ‘mile-high club’ in yours.”

“You could’ve kept that shit to yourself.”

“Sorry. Anyway, onto your security for the night,” he said. “Do you want two or three guards outside your place?”

“Send the plane back for Mrs. Carter, please.”

“What?” He shook his head. “I just told you that—”

“Send the fucking plane back.” I demanded. “Otherwise, I’ll be on it in ten minutes and bring her here myself.”

Silence.

“Travis, she’ll be here in some capacity for the fight.” He sighed. “Trust me.”

“How do you know that for sure?”

“I’ve spoken to her,” he said. “I doubt that she was lying.”

“When were you planning to tell me about this?”

“I wasn’t.”

“I see.” I crossed my arms. “What does ‘some capacity’ mean?”

“How it sounds, I guess.” He avoided my gaze, but I moved in front of him.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means she agreed to take some staged pictures for the press, since you’re still legally married, but she’s trying her best to move on with her life,” he said. “She wants you to do the same.”

“What time will she be here?”

“No, Travis. Focus on this match, please.” He placed his hands on my shoulders. “Your legacy is on the line, and I know that Mrs. Carter would want you to be at your best.”

I said nothing.

“If I tell you how good she looked when I saw her earlier, would that help at all?”

“Start talking.”

FORTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Fight Night*

*MGM Grand Garden Arena*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

*UFC Card 302: Christopher Juarez v. Travis Carter*

**M**y heart ached as I looked up at the billboard above the arena. Mr. Faber was standing outside the town car with his hand outstretched, patiently waiting for me to step outside.

*Breathe, Tati. Breathe.*

“You look lovely this evening, Mrs. Carter.” He served me a compliment. “I hope you’re not stalling in this car because you’re second guessing that stunning dress.”

“Thank you, Mr. Faber.” I smiled at him. “I’m just nervous.”

“Do you mind if I join you on the seat for a second?”

“Be my guest.”

He shut my door and walked to the other side, taking a seat across from me.

“I’m not one to get in my boss’s business,” he said, “but I want you to know that you mean the world to him.”

“Well, we *did* marry each other.” I forced a smile. “I would hope so.”

“I’m in on the scheme, Mrs. Carter,” he said. “Not at first, but I figured it out eventually.”

“Sorry we lied to you.”

“It wasn’t a lie at all.” He pulled a handkerchief from his blazer. “It’s obvious to anyone who spends more than five minutes around you two that you’re meant for each other.”

I dabbed my eyes.

“Years ago, whenever I’d pick him up from one of his drunken nights, he’d talk about one woman he could never quite get over.” He looked up at the marquee. “I’m pretty sure that woman was you, so since we’ve been out here for over an hour already, do you mind if I channel my boss with my next words?”

“Of course not, Mr. Faber.”

“Good.” He nodded, then he took a deep breath. “Get the fuck out of this car and get inside.”

FORTY-SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

TATIANA



*Fight Night*

*MGM Grand Garden Arena*

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“Are you sure you don’t want to sit with me and Hayden?” Penelope asked, caressing my hand in the VIP lounge.

“I’m sure,” I said. “I don’t want to jinx him again.”

“I’m sure he would love to see you this time.” She smiled. “More than me, I promise.”

I held back a laugh and shook my head. “I’ll watch from a distance.”

“Suit yourself.” She walked away with Hayden at her side, and I picked up a handful of strawberries before slipping through a side door.

I followed the signs for “Medical Personnel Only,” emerging into the arena and behind a group of doctors.

The crowd was standing on its feet, cheering as if the fight was already underway.

“And nowwww!” The announcer stood at the center of the octagon. “Here to sing the national anthem...”

I let out a breath as my heart raced in my chest, singing along to the anthem under my breath in an attempt to stay calm.

*It's only for an hour or so, Tati. Only for an hour or so...*

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The announcer roared again. “Welcome to UFC Championship fight 302!”

Earsplitting screams filled the air.

“First to the octagon, standing at six foot two, one hundred and seventy pounds, the former welterweight champion of the worldddd, Travis ‘The Punisher’ Carter!”

The lights darkened, and the right-side entry tunnel lit up in bright red and white smoke.

Travis’s signature walkout song, “Bitch, I’m a Champion,” blared through the speakers, and I glanced up at the Jumbotron.

Flanked by ten team members, Travis strutted with utter confidence, with his head bowed under a red hooded robe. With gritted teeth, he looked wholly focused and locked into the moment.

With his every step, the roars from the crowd intensified, and by the time he made it to the pre-check area, his music was buried under the cheers.

He suddenly stopped walking and slid the hood off his head, revealing his gorgeous face.

The crowd roared in approval.

As if he knew almost everyone in this room was here to see him win, he took his time waving at the crowd. Then he deviated from the path to the octagon and headed for the section designated for his super fans.

Shaking their hands one by one, he flashed his perfect smile, and the crowd lost it again.

After the Nevada gaming commissioners checked his hands and smoothed Vaseline over his face, he stepped inside the octagon to the night’s loudest applause.

He walked around the cage, smiling and waving to the fans, and then his eyes met mine.



The smile on his face slowly disappeared, and he stopped moving.

His lips parted as he looked me over, and my heart beat the reckless rhythm that belonged to only him.

Instead of moving to his corner and waiting for Juarez to complete his walkout, he stepped out of the cage.

His trainer tried to push him back inside, but Travis was too strong for him. He continued walking toward me.

“What the hell is he doing?” “Did he leave something?” “Is this a new part of his walkout or something?” The audience members behind me speculated.

With the entire crowd watching, he stepped directly in front of me.

Suddenly, the lights in the arena flickered and dimmed. It was time for Juarez’s walkout, but the screams were nowhere near as loud for him.

“Good luck tonight, Travis.” I swallowed. “I’m rooting for you to win.”

“I would hope so,” he said, closing the gap between us. He pressed his finger against my exposed chest, trailing a line down the V-cut of my black dress, sending my nerves haywire.

“I miss you,” he said, trailing a finger against my lips. “I’ve been fucking miserable without you.”

“It’s only been a couple weeks.”

“They’ve been the longest fucking weeks of my life,” he said. “You’re not planning to leave here without saying goodbye again, aren’t you?”

“Does that matter?”

“Of course it does.” His finger was still on my lips. “But do you really think I wasn’t going to chase you down?”

“Mr. Carter?” A suit cleared his throat from behind, saving me from answering that question. “Mr. Carter, you need to return to the octagon.”

Travis ignored him, looking into my eyes. “Did you really block my number again?”

“Travis.” I kept my voice low. “Your fight...”

“Fuck this fight,” he said. “Answer me.”

“Yes.” I spoke softly. “I blocked your number. You need to \_\_\_”

“Tell you that I’m sorry.” He cupped my face in his hands. “I’m so fucking sorry for not seeing how fucking conflicted and hard our relationship was on you.”

I said nothing.

“I was in the wrong and I was selfish for saying that you had no reason to break up with me.” He paused. “Given the circumstances, and how badly I always want to win, I would’ve eventually done the same thing if I were in your shoes.”

I stood still, stunned and completely speechless.

“That said, I’ve always wanted you, and I fucking love you.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and I struggled to keep them from falling.

“I don’t want to lose you again,” he said. “I can’t afford it, and I’m willing to spend the rest of my life making things up to you if you take me back. Say yes or no. I’ll accept the answer either way.”

“Mr. Carter...” an official warned. “Failure to enter the octagon within the next sixty seconds will result in an automatic forfeit.”

“Hold that thought,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Give me one hundred and twenty six seconds.”

Rushing back to the octagon, he mouthed a few things at Ralph and his trainer, and then he finally took to his corner.

The guards followed him back inside, and he slid his mouthguard over his teeth.

Ryan suddenly appeared in front of me and reached for my hand.

“This way, Mrs. Carter,” he said. “Mr. Carter has a special seat reserved where you can see the match better.”

I smiled and let him lead me to the seat in front of Penelope.

She squeezed my hand, and I squeezed hers in return.

“If you’d like to touch gloves, do so now,” the referee said as Travis and Juarez faced each other.

They reluctantly obliged, and the bell rang.

Juarez threw the first jab, a right-hand hook, but he missed.

Travis bounced on his toes. “Are you sure you don’t want a fucking trilogy?”

“Fuck you.” Juarez served two heavy leg kicks to Travis’s thighs, landing both and drawing an “Ohhhhh,” from the crowd.

Travis smiled, looking unfazed.

“Last chance.” Travis moved his fists in rhythm with his feet. “I’m being generous.”

Juarez kicked his leg again, landing the shot yet again.

“Suit yourself.” Travis suddenly threw a left hook against Juarez’s face, causing him to stumble backward. Travis threw another that sent him straight to the mat without giving him a chance to recover. He immediately moved over him and punished him with his fists, each blow coming harder and harder, each one making the crowd go wild.

Juarez attempted to escape the raining blows, but it was useless.

Travis served him a hammer fist that bloodied his eyes, and the referee finally ended the massacre by pushing Travis away.

The crowd cheered, and the words “T.K.O.” flashed on the Jumbotron.

Surprisingly, Travis didn’t strut around the octagon to celebrate the moment. He didn’t grab the closest mic and demand that the commissioner bring him the championship belt as he’d done on numerous occasions.

Instead, he climbed over the cage and returned to me.

“Now, what was I saying to you before?” he asked. “Oh, right...”

“You’re the love of my life,” he said, getting down on one knee and caressing my hand. “I don’t care about the sponsorships or my career if I can’t share it with you.”

“Travis...” I blushed as the people around us swooned. “Go get your championship belt.”

“I will in a minute,” he said, looking into my eyes. “Tatiana Carter, will you *stay* married to me?”

“Yes,” I nodded as he stood to his feet, but then I played coy. “Well, maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Since we’ve been apart, a certain issue has come to my attention and we have to address it,” I said.

“I want a fucking trilogy!” Juarez suddenly roared from the cage. “A motherfucking trilogy!”

Travis looked over his shoulder and then back at me. “Do I need to retire to keep you? I will...”

“No, I want you to complete the trilogy,” I said. “After you beat him to a bloody pulp again, you can retire.”

He smiled, clasping my hands. “What’s this certain issue you’re talking about?”

“Last night, I fell down the rabbit hole of the ‘I Hate Travis Carter’ website.”

“There are far better ways to spend your time...”

“I know that.” I smiled. “But there was a ‘*Does he have a secret girlfriend*’ thread that caught my attention.”

“Okay...” He looked confused.

“It’s dated for a time when you and I weren’t talking.”

“I guarantee whatever they wrote there isn’t completely true.”

“A few photogs caught you stepping outside of Rizzo’s, a store that only makes custom engagement rings.”

“They also make adjustments to my championship belt whenever I ask.” He kissed my forehead. “I’m not seeing how this is an issue.”

“You were carrying a ring bag out of the store when you left,” I said. “Days later, you arrived at a bar with red roses so huge that a security guard had to help you carry them.”

He said nothing.

“They have all the pictures,” I said. “I can share them with you if you like.”

“I’ll pass.”

“I just want to know who the flowers and the ring were for. That’s all.” I looked at him. “Who was she?”

“Someone I loved very much.”

“Why didn’t it work out?”

“Numerous reasons, but ultimately, she became my younger sister’s roommate and completely buried our history.”

“*What?*”

“I was drunk and missing you when I bought that ring,” he said. “I showed up to that restaurant because I had an entire conversation in my head with you about a date. Again, I was drunk.”

“I’m sensing a pattern with you, emotions, and alcohol.”

“There probably is.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “There was no girlfriend, though. It was just you. It’s always been just you.”

“Do you still have the custom ring that you bought back then?”

“I do.” He looped his fingers in my left hand and held it up before kissing me. “You’ve been wearing it...”

*The End*

MONTHS LATER



# EPILOGUE ONE



## ***The Snarky Glove:***

### ***#1 UFC & MMA Gossip Source for Fangirls***

**D**earest Fans,

After years of giving his all in the octagon and elevating the national attention of this sport to dizzying heights, Travis Carter announced his retirement from the UFC this afternoon.

At the standing-room-only event, the ‘Humble Kid from the Emerald City’ extensively thanked his millions of fans before personally addressing his wife, family, and staff.

Guests were treated to a final meet-and-greet session, where they were gifted golden charm replicas of Mr. Carter’s championship belt.

True to his forever-cocky form, he engraved a set of parting words on the back of every jewel:

*Congratulations on being lucky enough to witness my  
legendary career.*

*There will never be another champion like me.*

He declined to answer questions about his future plans, which leaves us selfishly hoping that he’ll change his mind down the line.

*Stay tuned for more news & updates.*

*The Snarky Glove*



## EPILOGUE TWO

TATIANA



*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I walked through the double doors of Brave Beauty Marks, dodging the nails and lopsided boards that jutted from the floor.

Although the ten-story building was still a major work-in-progress, I couldn't help stopping by every day. I took my time strolling through every room, hopelessly wishing that my attempt at business wouldn't fail this time.

Stepping into the space that was set to become my office, I ran my fingers along a page of blueprints. As I was admiring the rooftop's layout, heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Within seconds, Travis rounded the corner with his championship belt draped over his shoulder.

"Seriously?" I smiled. "The belt isn't a dog, Travis. It doesn't need to go for a walk every day."

"What if it desires fresh sunlight and tourists' adoration?"

I tried to think of something sarcastic to say, but all I could do was laugh.

Over the past several months, that belt had traveled almost everywhere with us. Despite his retirement, he made sure everyone knew that he was going down in history as the "best fighter to ever grace this goddamn sport."

He was also unanimously nominated for the Hall of Fame.

“You promised to finally hang that up on your trophy wall today,” I said.

“It’s *our* trophy wall.”

“Same thing.”

“Well, I was, until I heard that my final opponent was being interviewed at the hotel across the street.” He smiled. “I figured I’d walk through the lobby and let him have a good look at it from afar.”

“Please tell me that you didn’t really do that...”

“Of course, I did.” He smiled, setting it down on my desk. “I would much rather be doing Mrs. Carter at the moment, but she left my bed early this morning.”

“Because she has a new business to run,” I said. “She didn’t want to get stuck screwing you in it for the rest of the day.”

“Understandable, but I hope she knows that I plan on stopping by from time to time to screw her in this office.”

“She didn’t know that at all.”

“Now she does.” He slid an arm around my waist. “They make soundproofed walls for a reason.”

He kissed me before I could say another word, making me regret ever leaving him. Tightening his grip on my waist, he gently bit down on my bottom lip.

“I came here to ask you something,” he whispered. “Can you promise to give me an honest answer?”

Too breathless to speak, I nodded.

“Not too long ago, you said that you had ‘almost’ everything you’d always wanted in life.” He looked into my eyes. “What’s missing?”

“Nothing. I was simply saying that I was happy.”

“You promised to be honest.”

“I am,” I said. “I’m restarting my company with business advisors this time, living in a city where I’m still finding new

things to do every day, and married to a man who I somewhat love.”

“You’re somewhat *lying*,” he said. “Tell me what’s missing.”

“I could live like this forever and be happy, Travis. I promise.”

“I’m only going to ask you one more time.”

“I want a family.” The words rushed out of my mouth, unable to remain trapped inside anymore. “Preferably a big one, since I always hated being an only child and I never clicked with my step-relatives. But if that’s not something you’ve ever wanted, I understand, and I can compromise. Things can stay like this.”

“Shhhh.” He ended my sentence with a kiss and gently pushed me back against the wall. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted the same thing.”

“I want whatever makes you happy,” he said. “But now that you’ve made that clear, you shouldn’t plan on leaving our bed again anytime soon...”

**The End**

**(Again)**

If you LOVED this story and want a little bit more, like seeing Travis & Tatiana at Hayden & Penelope’s wedding, flip the page!

# BONUS EPILOGUE ONE

TRAVIS

*\*Note: All Bonus Scenes are unedited as they weren't included in the original version of this story.\*\**

*The Hunter Luxury Pier*

*Manhattan, New York*

I held Heath Hunter in my arms, smiling as he babbled.

He'd come into this world early, derailing plans for my sister's wedding and pushing it back six months. He'd also convinced Tatiana and me to purchase a Manhattan condo so we could help out with him as much as possible.

"Where is my little ring bearer?" The wedding coordinator poked her head through the door.

"Is he awake yet?"

"He is." I handed him to her. "Are you planning to make him crawl down the aisle with the rings?"

"No." She kissed his forehead. "The groom bought a custom baby Rolls Royce. It has a remote that'll allow him to ride down the aisle."

"Do I even want to know how much something like that costs?"

"At least half a million. He bought him one for when he's a toddler, too."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course, he did."

She shut the door, and I walked through the groom's suite, searching for Hayden.

When I reached the balcony, I spotted him leaning against the railing.

"For the rest of my life..." He read the last of his vows and looked up at me. "If you're trying to talk me out of this, you're wasting your time. You're also far too late."

"I came here to wish you well." I patted his shoulder. "I think you've rehearsed those lines enough. They sounded good yesterday."

"Thanks, man."

"I also want to let you know, that brother-in-law or not, if you so much as harm a strand of hair on my sister's head, I will beat every fucking breath out of you."

"You mean, *again*?"

"No, next time you won't recover, and they'll never find your body."

"I was wondering when your psychotic side would rear its head again." He smiled. "How does it feel to be back?"

"Like I never left."

"Good to know." He set down the paper. "I need to ask you something, but you have to promise to be one hundred percent honest."

"Always."

"How long is it?"

"What?"

"You heard me," he said. "How long is it?"

I blinked. "Look, Hayden. I know we've always been close and all, but I draw the line at comparing each other's dick sizes."

"Grow the fuck up, Travis." He scoffed. "I was referring to your prenuptial agreement with Tatiana. How many pages is it?"

“You should’ve worded it that way the first time,” I said, pausing, “I didn’t ask her to sign one. I doubt we’ll ever need it. How long is yours?”

“About nine inches from what Penelope’s told me.”

“Fuck you, Hayden.”

He laughed. “We don’t have one either. I love her too much.”

“Mr. Carter?” The second wedding coordinator stepped into the room.

“Yes?”

“The bride is asking for you. She says it’s urgent and it can’t wait.”

“See you at the altar,” I said to Hayden. “Congratulations.”



### *Five minutes later*

I HELD BACK a sigh as I watched Penelope twirl in front of a mirror. She smiled and adjusted the diamond tiara in her hair, and then she smoothed the lace on her veil.

It hit me for the first time in forever that she was no longer seventeen.

“Hey, Travis.” Her eyes met mine in the glass, and she motioned for me to move closer.

I obliged and pulled out a chair for her.

“I always wanted Dad to walk me down the aisle,” she said. “Even after the accident, long after the funeral, I still dreamt of him being here on my wedding day, you know?”

“Yeah.” I pulled the handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed her eyes. “I know.”

“Do you think he’d approve of Hayden?”

“Probably so.”



“What about Mom?” She shook her head. “I specifically remember her saying, that I should never *ever* date anyone like my brother or ‘that Hayden Hunter boy.’”

“She said that?”

“All the time.”

“Interesting.” I leaned against a dresser. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Absolutely.” She nodded.

“One night, during my senior year of high school, Dad caught me and two girls having sex in the back of his Mercedes. It was my very first threesome.”

“I take that back.” She rolled her eyes. “I *don’t* want to know your secret. Get out and tell Tatiana I’d rather talk to her before the ceremony instead.”

“I have a point, I swear.”

“*Tati!*” She called for Tatiana anyway, and I laughed.

“Anyway,” I said, continuing, “Dad drove both of those girls home and told their parents what we’d been up to. Then he took me to a bar with a fake ID.”

“I don’t believe that...Dad was the most straight-laced guy ever.”

“Maybe with you.” I smirked. “Never with me. He told me that he’d given up on me finding the point in monogamy anytime soon, but he was betting on it happening in my eighties.” I paused. “Since I was ‘fucking hopeless on being a good guy,’ he made me promise that I would make sure his ‘favorite child’ found one.”

“He called me his favorite?”

“You were Mom *and* Dad’s favorite.” I kissed her forehead. “Anyway, he said that he wanted me to stalk the hell out of whoever you brought home and assure him that the guy was worth it. He wanted the guy to be the complete opposite of me and my ‘terrible best friend’ in the morals department,

but in the driven and brains department, anything less than Hayden would be unacceptable.”

“You’re lying.”

“I have no reason to.” I shook my head. “As a matter of fact, six beers in, he started researching lobotomies to see if it was possible for the playboy side of Hayden’s brain to be removed since he liked everything else about him.”

“I see.” Her voice cracked. “Is that the end of the secret story?”

“No.” I pressed a Kleenex against her eyes. “Mom showed up around three in the morning to get us since we were both too drunk to drive home. She yelled at us the whole way back, and when we brought up the lobotomy thing, she said if it was ever possible for Hayden to remain the same in every other way except with girls, she’d pay for the procedure since she thought he’d be good for you.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me any of this before?”

“I never thought about it until now,” I said. “I also never thought you’d actually date my best friend behind my back.”

“You mean, in the same way you dated my worst enemy behind mine?”

“I guess we’re even on that.” I smiled. “They would both approve of you marrying Hayden, Crown.”

“Do *you* approve?”

“Yes.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, Crown.” I pulled her into my arms. “I fucking promise.”

# BONUS EPILOGUE TWO

*The Hunter Luxury Pier*

*Manhattan, New York*

**P**enelope looked like she was floating on air. She was a literal angel, dressed in a white A-cut gown with sparkles woven into every wispy feather.

Travis held her arm as she walked down the aisle, and New York City's skyline glittered in the distance.

The small crowd of guests stood to its feet and whispered words of approval with her every step.

While she stared at Hayden, Travis stared at me. When they made it to the altar, I adjusted her train.

Suddenly, the oversized screen behind them played pictures of their relationship, from her days on the ice to his early development days with Cinder. The scenes slowly transitioned into the moments when they finally realized what everyone else around them had seen all along. (Well, everyone *except* Travis.)

When the film ended, the guests applauded.

“Dearly Beloved,” the minister said, “We are gathered here today to—”

“*Wait!*” Madeline stepped into the aisle. “Wait! I have something to say.”

*What the hell?* Murmurs filled the crowd.

Hayden and Penelope exchanged confused glances.

“You’ll have your chance to object to these proceedings, Miss,” the minister said. “I’ll get to that point shortly.”

“No, no,” she said, walking forward. “This isn’t about *that*. I would’ve tripped the bride on her way down the aisle if that was the case.”

“What the hell are you doing, Madeline?” Travis glared at her. “You said you weren’t coming.”

“As if I would ever miss out on the biggest event the gossip blogs will be chatting about all year.” She smiled, then slipped behind the minister, tapping on a tablet. “There must have been a glitch because the entire video didn’t play.”

“Well, no one noticed,” Travis said. “Get back to your seat.”

“I thought you said she was becoming more sane now, Travis.” Hayden shook his head. “I vividly remember that.”

“Can you tell me why no one is stopping this woman?” Penelope whispered to me. “Is this something you and Travis planned?”

“She’s been crazy since the day I met her,” I said. “I have no idea what she’s doing.”

Before I could ask Madeline to save whatever she was doing for later, the screen came on again, this time with Penelope’s parents.

The video was grainy, and the date was marked for two years before their deaths. A small watermark was on the screen: Time Capsule Project, Center High School Reunion, Class of 1980.

*What does this have to do with anything?*

“Which of your children will get married first?” A voice offscreen said.

“*Penelope,*” they answered in unison, laughing.

“Do you think she’ll retire first or find love during her career?”

“She’s a bit too young to be dating now, and she better not be dating anyone for awhile,” her father said, but her mother rolled her eyes and stared into the camera.

“I don’t know what she’ll do, but I know that whoever she dates will be the luckiest man on earth, and he better treat her right or he’ll have to deal with this man right here.”

“You mean, our older son *Travis*.” Her father laughed, and Penelope began to cry. “He’ll have to deal with Travis.”

“Whenever we open our class time capsule years from now, can you give a guess as to what her life will be like?”

They looked at each other, and then her mother spoke.

“Well, she’ll have either broken my figure skating championship record or come very close, or decided to pursue something else that fulfills her life,” she said. “I’m sure I’ll be telling her how proud I am of her every day, and we’ll be taking trips every weekend to hang out because she’ll be *that* successful.”

I grabbed a handkerchief and dabbed Penelope’s eyes.

“You think so?” her father asked.

“I know so,” her mother continued. “She’ll probably be married by then, too. Remember, we have a running bet on a certain someone we can’t name.”

“Why’s that?” the interviewer asked.

“Because one, we’ll have to see if a certain brain surgery comes back in style. And two, he’s best friends with our son Travis and I don’t want to give him the kiss of death just yet.” She and Penelope’s father laughed, and then the screen went black.

While “Awww” and “That’s so sweet” whispers filled the crowd, the wedding coordinator moved up front and refreshed Penelope’s makeup.

Hayden pulled Penelope into his arms the moment she finished and kissed her as if they were the only two people here, as if he honestly didn’t care about the rest of the ceremony.

Madeline slipped behind me, whispering. “You think they’re still mad about my intrusion now?”

“I doubt it.” I wondered if they were ever going to stop kissing. “How the hell did you find that video?”

“A woman in one of my old ‘I Hate Travis Carter’ forums went to high school with Penelope’s mom and sent it to me last night,” she said. “It truly pays to be a hater sometimes.”

“Don’t ever change, Madeline.” I smiled as she returned to her seat.

“Okay, that’s enough, you two!” The minister finally separated Penelope and Hayden, making everyone laugh.

“Anyone else have anything they want to reveal before we begin?” he asked. “If not, let’s pick up where we left off, shall we?”



TRAVIS LINKED his arm in mine as Penelope and Hayden walked down the aisle amidst tossed rice.

“What did you think?” he asked.

“They’re really meant to be together.”

“I was talking about the wedding.”

“You’re still not used to seeing them together, are you?”

“No, but I’ve finally accepted it.” He slipped his arms around my waist. “They’ve clearly been in love for a long time.”

“They are.” I smiled. “Well, regarding the ceremony, it wasn’t as classy as the one we had. They needed strippers and blowup dolls to give it some flair.”

“I can’t believe the priest had the audacity to wear a real cloak and collar. Such a shame.” He laughed.

“Do you think we need to redo our wedding?” I asked.

“Not unless you do,” he said. “I honestly thought it was perfect.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“It was just like the night we first met. Utterly unpredictable, but clearly meant to be.” He tilted my chin for a kiss, but a photog interrupted us.

“Hey! Best man and maid of honor!” He called out. “We need you over here for the next set of photos, please!”

“Remind me where I left off later.” He kissed my forehead and walked me over.



AFTER DANCING and wishing Penelope and Hayden well at the end of the night, Travis held the door to his car open for me.

He looked as if he wanted to say something, but there was something I needed to say, too.

*Spit it out, Tati. Just spit it out.*

“I had a good time,” I said.

“I did, too.”

“Her dress was stunning.”

“Everything was perfect.”

“Are we staying in New York for the weekend or returning to Vegas?” he asked.

“Vegas. They’re flying to Italy tonight so there’s no point in staying.”

“Okay,” he said. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Something good.”

“Could you be slightly more specific?”

“I’m pregnant.” I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“What?” He stared at me. “When did you find out?”



“I wanted to tell you last week, but we both got super busy with maid of honor and best man stuff, and it’s bad manners to announce it at a wedding so...I would like spicy tacos for dinner.”

A smile crossed his lips, and he wrapped his arms around my waist. “You are fucking *terrible* at small talk, Mrs. Carter.”

“You are, too,” I said. “I really hope it’s a girl...”

“Me too.” He pulled me close, kissing me. “I love you.”

*THE END, AGAIN*

*Flip the page for even more bonus scenes!*

## MORE BONUS CONTENT

Hey there!

*\*Turn back two chapters if you missed Travis & Tatiana at  
Hayden & Penelope's wedding\**

**W**hile I was penning this series, especially book two, there were tons of scenes that I LOVED but I couldn't include them in the final draft for various reasons.

Usually, it came down to "necessary-ness," word count, and of course, "Will an awesome reader enjoy this?"

Upon releasing the final book in this series, a lot of readers wrote to me saying, "I didn't want this book to end!" "Were there any more scenes of them falling for each other in the past" & "Gosh! What happened to Tatiana's family in present day?"

So, I'm including a few of those scenes, and I hope you enjoy them.

Make sure to have some hot coffee or tea ready + if you want either of these books on your shelf, be sure to order a print copy in [The F.L.Y. Store](#).

# A MISSING PAST “ACT”

*\*Note: All Bonus Scenes are unedited as they weren't included in the original version of this story.\*\**

*Tacoma, Washington*

**T**he rain is tap-dancing on the roof of Travis's car, and I'm sitting in his lap while he rubs his hands against my sides.

"Congratulations on winning again," I say. "How does it feel to be undefeated?"

"Like I never want it to end."

"For your next fight, if it's close to—" I stop mid-sentence as his phone sounds with Penelope's signature ringtone.

He looks over at it and sighs. "Give me one second."

"Okay." I move out of his lap. "I'll grab us an Icee from inside."

Stepping out of the car, I hold back my umpteenth "You're so fucking stupid, Tati!" scream and head inside the store.

No matter how much I like him, no matter how good he's able to make me feel with a mere touch of his fingertips or slight brush of his lips, I need to let him go before I fall.

I fill a cup with blue and red slush, and head to the line.

On the magazine rack to my left, I spot a copy of MMA Fanatic. There's no athlete on the cover, only a pair of gloves

sitting at the center of the octagon and the words “Young Hopefuls to Watch,” printed in red.

Opening it, I notice the list is in alphabetical order. I flip to the “C” pages, spotting Travis’s name and a short write-up near the top.

TRAVIS CARTER. Not sure where this “humble kid” came from, or where he’s been all our lives, but he’s gained quite a cult following on the west coast. He claims to have only trained in boxing and wrestling for two years in high school, but his skills say otherwise. We’re waiting for him to fight more legit opponents, but we’re keeping our eye on him for sure.

“YOU BUYING THAT HUN?” The clerk’s voice interrupts my reading.

“Yeah, sorry.” I hand a ten for that and the ICEE, and when I return to the car, Travis is still on the phone with Penelope.

Sighing, I lean against the trunk and wish I’d bought a bigger drink.

*Tell him it’s over tonight, Tati. Tonight.*

When I’m halfway done with the slush, Travis steps out of the car and moves in front of me.

“Why didn’t you get back in the car?” He asks.

“I needed to think.”

“Okay.” He takes the slush from my hands. “About what?”

“After you take me home tonight, you should delete my number.”

He looks confused. “Why exactly should I do that?”

“Here,” I say, handing him the magazine. “Looks like people are noticing your fighting skills.”

“Why do you think I’m going to delete your number?”

“It’s a really good write-up, even though it’s short.”

“Tatiana.” He closes the gap between us. “What’s happened between ten minutes ago when you were on my lap and now?”

“I decided to date someone else.”

“Tatiana...”

“It’s slightly awkward when your sister calls.”

He smiles and hands me his phone. “You can turn it off for the rest of the night and during our next date.”

“What if she has an emergency?”

“She doesn’t know what that word means.”

“It’s still awkward that we’re dating, Travis.”

“I can understand that. It’s not awkward enough to break up with me, though.”

“She literally hates me.”

“You hate her, too.”

“You don’t see the slightest sense of ‘fucked-up-ness’ in that?”

“That has nothing to do with me and you.”

“One day you’ll have to choose.”

“I doubt that,” he says, kissing me. “I’ve never had any interest whatsoever in being intimate with my sister.”

I hold back a laugh. “You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.”

“I just think a break would be good.”

“We just had a ten minute one.” He smiles. “Get back in the car...”

# A MISSING PAST “ACT”

BACK THEN

TRAVIS

*Seattle, Washington*

“So, you can come home to randomly check on me, but you can’t fly to see me compete for a few hours?”

Penelope is standing in the doorway of our house, dressed in the ‘Once a Humble Kid, Forever a Punisher’ T-shirt that I sent weeks ago. “The *audacity*.”

“I’ve been to your last three,” I say.

“Those were expos, not competitions...” She sighs. “But as long as you’re still coming to see me in the Sochi Olympics, I’ll forget about it.”

She steps back and ushers me inside a house I can no longer recognize.

She’s painted everything taupe and turned the living room into a mirrored dance space.

“If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve warned you about the changes,” she says. “I couldn’t leave it the same without going down memory lane all the time.”

“I like your changes.” I pull out my wallet and hand her a check. “It’s for your coach and whatever you need for the next couple of months.”

“Thank you.” She hugs me. “You know that mom left me a bank account, right? It’s set up to deposit a decent amount from her savings every month.”

“I didn’t know that at all.” I force a smile, still too broken to tell her that the “decent amount” comes from me. “I’ll keep



that in mind.”

Before I can ask her to show me the other changes in the house, something clangs against the kitchen floor.

Then there’s there an unmistakable sound of footsteps.

“Who is that, Crown?”

“*What?*” Her face pales. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“It came from the kitchen.” I hear more footsteps. “Who else is here with you?”

“Nobody that I know of, unless it’s Hayden.”

“Nice try. I just met up with him at a bar an hour ago.”

“How’d that go?” She has the worst poker face of all time. “I haven’t seen him since yesterday.”

I walk past her and into the kitchen, just in time to see the back door swinging shut.

“Wow,” she says. “Looks like this house may be haunted now that you’re not living here. Maybe you should consider coming back.”

“You’re lucky I have somewhere to be.” I narrow my eyes at her. “Twenty-eight championships. That’s it. Focus on skating, not dating.”

“I don’t get to make rules about your dating life.”

“I wouldn’t follow them even if you did.”

“Do you not see how unfair that is?”

“Not really.” I smile. “You can date whenever you reach your goal. That’s all I’m saying.”

She rolls her eyes, but she doesn’t protest.

I give her one more hug and tell her that I’ll call later before leaving.

As I’m sliding behind the wheel of my car, I check Uber to see how much farther Tatiana has to reach the city.

\* \* \*

*Two hours later*

Tatiana steps out of the Uber near Pike Place Market, wearing a curve-hugging black tracksuit.

She shuts the door and waves at the driver as I approach her.

“Are you taking me on a tour of your hometown?” she asks. “Is that what you’re doing before your fight?”

“No.” I pull her into my arms and kiss her until she’s breathless, until neither one of us are able to hold on for another second.

“Whatever we do over the next few days is your choice,” I say, slowly pulling away from her mouth. “I just wanted to see you in person again...”

# A MISSING PAST “ACT”

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“**H**ow are you feeling about your first title fight tomorrow, Mr. Carter?” a reporter in the front row asks.

“Pretty good,” I say. “I’m looking forward to holding onto the championship belt until I retire.”

“The odds in Vegas have you losing by round two,” he said. “If this goes the distance into round five, will you consider that a success?”

“No.” I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “I’d never consider ‘losing’ as a success.”

“It’s not like there’s a better person for you to lose to.” My opponent, Dustin ‘Executioner’ Porter, speaks into his mic. “When I knock your teeth into your brain tomorrow, no one here will think any less of you for it, Kid.”

The room fills with laughter, and I focus on Penelope to prevent myself from punching the shit out of him early.

She shoots me a smile, but it doesn’t last long. She’s upset with me for missing her last two competitions, and as much as I want to apologize to her for it, I can’t.

Our house in Seattle is officially paid off, but my fighting expenses—combined with her new coach and physical therapist fees—leaves me stretched so thin that I’m budgeting everything even more than I was before.

But if I win this fight and become a champion at this level, I'll be able to breathe, and I can be a better brother.

*She'll thank me one day.*

“He can't even think straight during a press conference!” Dustin laughs into the mic, interrupting my thoughts. “I hope none of you idiots are rooting for this shithead.”

“We'll see if you feel that way tomorrow....” I grit my teeth and envision kicking him in the head.

As he fields question after question from the biased reporters, I break the top etiquette rule for press conferences and pull my phone out from under the table.

None of these people care what I have to say anyway...

ME

Hey. What are you doing?

TATIANA

Hey...Watching you on TV.

ME

Hmmm. How good do I look?

TATIANA

Average. I've seen far better-looking guys.

I LAUGH AND LOOK UP, spotting Penelope giving me a quizzical stare. She mouths, “Are you okay?”

I nod and mouth, “Thank you for coming.”

TATIANA

Looking forward to seeing you win tomorrow.  
Wish I could be there in person.

ME

Me too. I'll see you at your regional competition in two weeks. Well, after, since you don't want to talk to me before.

TATIANA

Thanks for remembering :-)

SKATING & THE AFTERMATH  
OF BEAUTY MARKS

TATIANA

[An alternate way of Travis finding out about the demise of  
Tatiana's brand]

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

I skated under the lights at Crystal Air Arena, distracting my mind as best as I could. With every double lutz, I thought of how many days I had left before I could return to New York, but every landing served me an image of Travis's face that made me ask, "Why can't you just stay?"

After Chopin's refrain ended, I put on my blade covers and headed to the seating area.

I pulled out a *How to Run a Business* and my notebook. Then I took out a box of Fruit Loops and tore off the "\$40 per spoonful" tag.

"I gave you my chef's number for a reason," Travis said from behind. "You've eaten nothing but cereal all week."

"I prefer to cook for myself, but my husband charges for using his pots and pans."

"He gives you a discount on the plates." He moved next to me.

"You know, I don't remember you being this petty in the past."

"Maybe you leaving me was the catalyst for change." He glanced at my business book, and his expression softened. "Is



your dream of owning a beauty brand still a thing?”

I shrugged.

“I noticed that your website isn’t there anymore,” he said. “What happened to it?”

I shrugged again.

“Tatiana,” he said, his voice more genuine than usual. “Tell me what happened to it.”

“I happened to it,” I admitted. “I didn’t do enough research, and I jumped in with other people’s money without really knowing how to put it to use, so...It failed. Miserably.”

“Hmmm.” He looked over his shoulder and signaled to someone I couldn’t see.

Seconds later, his personal chef came down the aisle and set a covered plate in front of me. Uncapping it, he revealed a stack of perfectly cut pancakes, strawberries, and a breakfast soufflé’.

He pulled a lighter from his pocket and lightly torched the soufflé’ before walking away.

“I’m not sure if I should eat this.” My mouth watered. “How much does it cost?”

“I’ll let you have it on the house this time.” He gently tugged at the spaghetti strap of my pajamas, setting my skin on fire. “I highly suggest you stop wearing these around the house like you’ve done all this week, unless you’re trying to be honest about what you really want.”

“I’ll wear a sweater.”

“Thank you.” He smiled and stood to his feet. He looked like he wanted to say something more but walked away.

“Travis?”

“Yeah?” He looked over his shoulder.

“Was our non-existent relationship in the past just sex for you?”

“No,” he said. “I vividly recall telling you that I’d stay with you even if you never slept with me. Did I not?”

I nodded.

“I also recall that I wasn’t the one who wanted us to break up.”

“I didn’t either,” I said. “But I *had* to.”

“I’ll never understand why.”

*I know...* “Goodnight, Travis.”

“Goodnight.”

SEEING TATIANA'S FAMILY  
AGAIN

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“I’ll meet you on the high rollers floor.” Travis blocked the photogs from getting close to me as we stepped in front of The Venetian. “Wait for me. Charlie, go with her, please.”

“Yes, sir.” He ushered for me to step ahead of him while more fans and photographers swarmed Travis.

We made it halfway down the slot machines when the casino manager stepped in front of us.

“Is there anything I can assist you with this evening, Mrs. Carter?”

“You can secure a room for her on the high rollers floor.” Charlie spoke for me. “Mr. Carter will join her there shortly.”

“Say no more.” He gestured for us to follow his lead.

As we neared the elevator, a familiar, high-pitched laugh stopped me dead in my tracks. It was an awful, ear piercing sound that I’d recognize anywhere.

*Elaine...*

“Mrs. Carter?” The manager was standing on the elevator. “Follow me this way.”

I turned away from him and scanned the floor, spotting Elaine with Harlow and my father.

Posing for a picture, Elaine was dressed in one of my mother's best glittering black gowns, and Harlow was wearing one of her dazzling jumpsuits, while my dad—ever the tuxedoed simp—was standing between them.

The estrangement had done little to ease the pain. Their basic “How are you?” and “Hope all is well” texts that came every blue moon were easy to delete and forget, but seeing them in person?

*I can't do this...*

My heart ached at the sight of them, the unspoken words ready to jump off the tip of my tongue.

I struggled to control my emotions as I marched over to them.

“Tatiana!” Elaine smiled as I neared. “We were hoping to run into you! You haven't answered any of our calls.”

*“Shocking.”*

“Is there any way we could grab dinner together?” she asked. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Like apologizing for being the bitch who siphoned every dime from my bank account?”

“Don't talk to Elaine that way, Tati.” My father warned. “It's silly to hold onto a grudge for this long and we came all the way here looking for you.”

*“Bullshit.”*

“Your husband told us to,” Harlow said. “By the way, I still can't believe you didn't invite us to celebrate your marriage. How selfish.”

“No use in being surprised.” Elaine shrugged. “She's been selfish for years. Where is your husband anyway?”

*“He's not interested in meeting you.”*

“Well, he clearly doesn't communicate with you,” she said. “I wonder if he knows that he's dating someone who is seriously in debt. Someone who is using him.”

“You have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

“We get notices from the banks, hun,” she said. “They call us all the time looking for you, which isn’t surprising and lets me know your life isn’t as perfect as you make it seem. You’re still incapable of knowing how the world works and you’re still so ungrateful and—

“Fuck you, Elaine.” I raised my hand—ready to slap her into another lifetime, but someone grabbed my wrist from behind.

“*Stop.*” Travis squeezed my wrist.

Too upset, I lifted my other hand but he grabbed that one, too.

“She’s not worth it,” Travis whispered. “I told you this years ago.”

Before I could tell him that she was more than worthy of being beaten into the ground, he gripped me by the waist and gently pushed me toward his other two security guards.

“Can you gentlemen escort my wife to the car downstairs, please?”

“Yes, sir,” they uttered in unison, flanking me on both sides.

I didn’t bother trying to get away.

Looking over my shoulder, I watched as Travis spoke to my family, as other security guards surrounded them from behind.



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Travis slid into the driver’s seat.

Buckling his seatbelt, he looked over at me.

“I hope you aren’t expecting me to apologize,” I said. “It’s not happening.”

“I know that.”

“You should’ve let me strike her at least three times before getting in the way.”

“I doubt you would’ve stopped at three.”

“Why would you invite them here without telling me?” My voice cracked. “How could you do that?”

“You weren’t supposed to find out.”

“You know how I feel about them,” I said. “I don’t understand how you could just let them get off scot-free.”

He raised his eyebrow. “That’s not what I did.”

“I just *saw* you, Travis.”

He leaned over, cupping my face in his hands. “The press was showing up to your dad’s house and buying some of your old things. Your family was sitting down with whoever they could for some ugly expose articles that were going to run next month, so I offered to handle them as long as they kept saying no comment. I told them to fly in so we could talk about things.”

I shook my head, my heart still reeling. “They don’t deserve to be a part of my life in any way.”

“I agree.”

“Then why did you—”

“They’re in serious debt to the mortgage company that’s over their house,” he interrupted. “They’ve refinanced time and time again, and since they’ve defaulted recently, they’re trying to refinance again.”

“I guess Elaine’s lifestyle finally caught up to them,” I said. “How ironic she threw ‘debt’ in my face...”

He wiped away my tears with his fingertips.

“What does their debt have to do with you, Travis?”

“I own the company that they owe.” He smiled. “I bought it years ago and jacked up the interest rate.”

“You did *what*?”

“I couldn’t let what they did to you and your dreams go,” he said. “No matter if we were over or not. That shit stuck with me hard.”

“I...” I was beyond stunned. “You were the one telling me to forgive them.”

“I never said that *I* would, though.”

Silence.

“Between you and me, their lives are about to get very difficult and they’ll regret hurting you forever.” He pressed a kiss against my lips. “Now, let’s enjoy the rest of our night without intrusions from people who don’t matter...”



# A NIGHT IN VEGAS

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

**T**ravis clasped my hand as we watched the Bellagio fountains dance to Taylor Swift songs. To my surprise, no one approached him for an autograph or a selfie, and for the first time since we were “married,” I felt like I had him all to myself.

And I wasn’t sure why I wanted more nights like this.

“Tell me something,” he said. “If I’d asked you to marry me back then, would you have said yes?”

“Probably not.”

“Why?” He looked at me.

“I wouldn’t have believed that you were serious,” I said. “A part of me still thought that you had an ulterior motive.”

He laughed and pulled me against his chest. “For what it’s worth, I wasn’t trying to sabotage you for Penelope’s sake. She was going to be phenomenal with or without me interfering.”

“You better be seconds away from saying something positive ...”

“She viewed you as a threat for a reason,” he said. “You intimidated the hell out of her, and believe it or not, she was utterly obsessed with you back then.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not,” he said. “She thought you were better than she was. She still believes that, but don’t tell her that I told you.”

I nod, unsure of what to say.

He lifted me onto the stone steps and kissed me as pink and blue lights danced under the waters.

“Why are you being so silent all of a sudden?” he whispered into my ear.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.” He pulled me against him again. “Tell me the truth.”

“We’re in public right now, Travis.”

“And?” He looked into my eyes. “You’ve been out of it since last night. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

“It’s really nothing.”

“Okay.” He brushed a few curls away from my face and lowered his voice. “Don’t force me to fuck it out of you...”

“I really really like you.”

“That’s good to know.” He smiled. “I’ve known that for years, though.”

“I’m not sure my heart can handle too much more of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t turn my feelings off and on at a whim, and I don’t want to get hurt,” I said. “I’m not as good at this pretending as you are.”

“I told you that I stopped pretending weeks ago.” He pressed his lips against mine. “I meant that shit. I’m not acting in the slightest.”

PUTTING TATIANA FIRST

TRAVIS

“Try not to look so mean.” Ralph brushed my shoulders. “This rematch announcement is supposed to be fun. You should be happy.”

I nodded, only halfway in the moment.

Although the past couple weeks had gone off without a hitch publicly and Tatiana was now spending every night in my bed, I couldn't get something she'd said out of my head.

*“I can't turn my feelings off and on at a whim, and I don't want to get hurt...”*

“Feel free to trash talk Juarez like you typically do, but we're still trying to keep you likable, so don't overdo it.”

*She still doesn't think this is one hundred percent real for me...*

“We need to reschedule this.”

“You want to push it back an hour or so?”

“No.” I unhooked the small mic from my collar. “I need at least five days.”

“Huh?” he asked. “Travis, the event is already set. Juarez's people have started to arrive.”

“I'm more important to the sport than he is.” I shrugged. “Tell them we need to push it back. Not the match, just the date we're announcing it.”

He pressed a hand against my forehead. “Are you suddenly feeling ill or something?”

“I’ve never felt better.”

“Okay...” He lowered his voice. “Did you smoke weed before coming here?”

“No, Ralph.” I stepped back, smiling. “I just want to spend some time with my wife.”

“She’s sitting in the front row.”

“Good to know.” I patted his shoulder and stepped away.

“Travis, we’re not rescheduling this because you want to have sex with your wife.”

“These are *dates*, Ralph.” I pushed the door open. “Big difference.”

“Travis, I swear to God...”

“Let me know how they take the news. Call me in the morning.”

“You better not walk out of the room.” He raised his voice. “You better not—”

The door slammed shut on the rest of his sentence, and I walked down the hall and into the media room.

As he’d mentioned, Tatiana was sitting alone in the front row—wearing a navy blue dress that made me stop and get a second look.

I ignored the flashing cameras as I moved closer to her.

“Is this starting earlier than planned?” she asked.

“No.” I grabbed her hand and helped her up. “You and I are getting out of Vegas for a while.”

*“What did he just say?” “Is he not making an announcement today?” “Where are they going?”* The murmurs from the crowd followed us as we left the room.

I pulled her against my chest as we stepped outside, and hoped like hell I was doing the right thing.

“Travis, wait,” Tatiana looked up at me. “Where are we going?”

“Wherever you want to go.” I kissed her lips. “Just name the place.”

# CROWN & SISTERHOOD



TATIANA

*Manhattan, New York*

“**D**id I ever tell you where my Crown nickname came from?”

“No.”

“It’s a bit of a running joke that stuck.” She fluffed my pillow. “Whenever my mom went out of town for press and stuff, my dad and Travis had no idea how to entertain me if I wasn’t skating, so as long as I promised to be quiet for at least three hours in the morning, they vowed to let me do whatever I wanted for the afternoon.”

I held back a laugh. I couldn’t picture her holding her tongue for longer than ten minutes.

“When my silent time was up, they’d take me to Burger King and tell the cashier to give me some of those cardboard crowns that came in kids meals.” She smiled. “I wore those around the house all the time and acted like a queen, making them bow down and take orders.”

“Did they actually do that?”

“All the time.” Her voice cracks. “My mom played along, too. I was Her Royal Highness, The Crown Penelope.”

“Travis has a few crown tattoos in honor of you.” I clear my throat, slipping up. “I mean, I’m assuming that’s why he got them.”

“It is.” She smiled. “You know, besides Hayden, you’re the only person I’ve ever told that nickname story. I really consider you to be a sister.”

“You’re my sister, too.” I forced a smile and swallowed more guilt.

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR + SNEAK PEEK!

**D**ear Awesome Reader,

I hope that you enjoyed seeing Travis's softer side. (He's not *that* big of an asshole, right?) I also hope you enjoyed Penelope and Tatiana's friendship coming full circle.

If you want a [signed paperback from the F.L.Y. Store, you can find it here.](#)

In the meantime, flip the page for a sample of my sexy office romance, *Two Weeks Notice!*

F.L.Y.

(Effin Love You)

Whitney G.

TWO WEEKS NOTICE

## PROLOGUE



*Tara*

“**W**inners never quit, and quitters never win ...”

If I had a dollar for every time my mother said those words to me, I would be sipping wine on my own private island off the Amalfi Coast at this very moment.

When I cried about hating ballet, she squished my feet into those ugly pink flats and made me go to practice anyway. When I told her that I wanted to change my major from Business to “something more creative,” she threatened to stop paying my tuition. And when I told her that I was seconds away from telling my first real boss to go fuck himself, she would only sigh and give me her tried and true words of advice.

She insisted that all my late-night emails were “wasteful whining,” that my screams of hatred were “misplaced admiration,” and that all the times he made me work over a hundred hours in a single week were “much-needed character building.”

After two long years of working for him, I’ve finally accepted that none of those things are true.

Preston Parker is an asshole boss. That is it. End of discussion.

My mother can call me a “quitter” all she wants, but she’ll never know what it’s like to work for a man like him. A man whose ego is bigger than all of New York and Vegas combined.

Yes, he can make any woman wet by uttering a single syllable from his perfectly molded mouth. Yes, his deep emerald and grey eyes are downright breathtaking, and the way he's able to make any suit look like it was made explicitly *for* him, never ceases to amaze me.

But I've had more than enough.

I can't take working for him anymore, and I'm finally drafting the two weeks' notice I should've drafted the very first month we worked together. (No, the very first *week* we worked together.)

I'm getting ahead of myself, though. I can't start this story from the bitter end or the miserable middle. I need to start it from the very unfortunate beginning ...

One-click here to check out the rest of [\*\*Two Weeks Notice!\*\*](#)

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to each other, until one night in college changes everything.