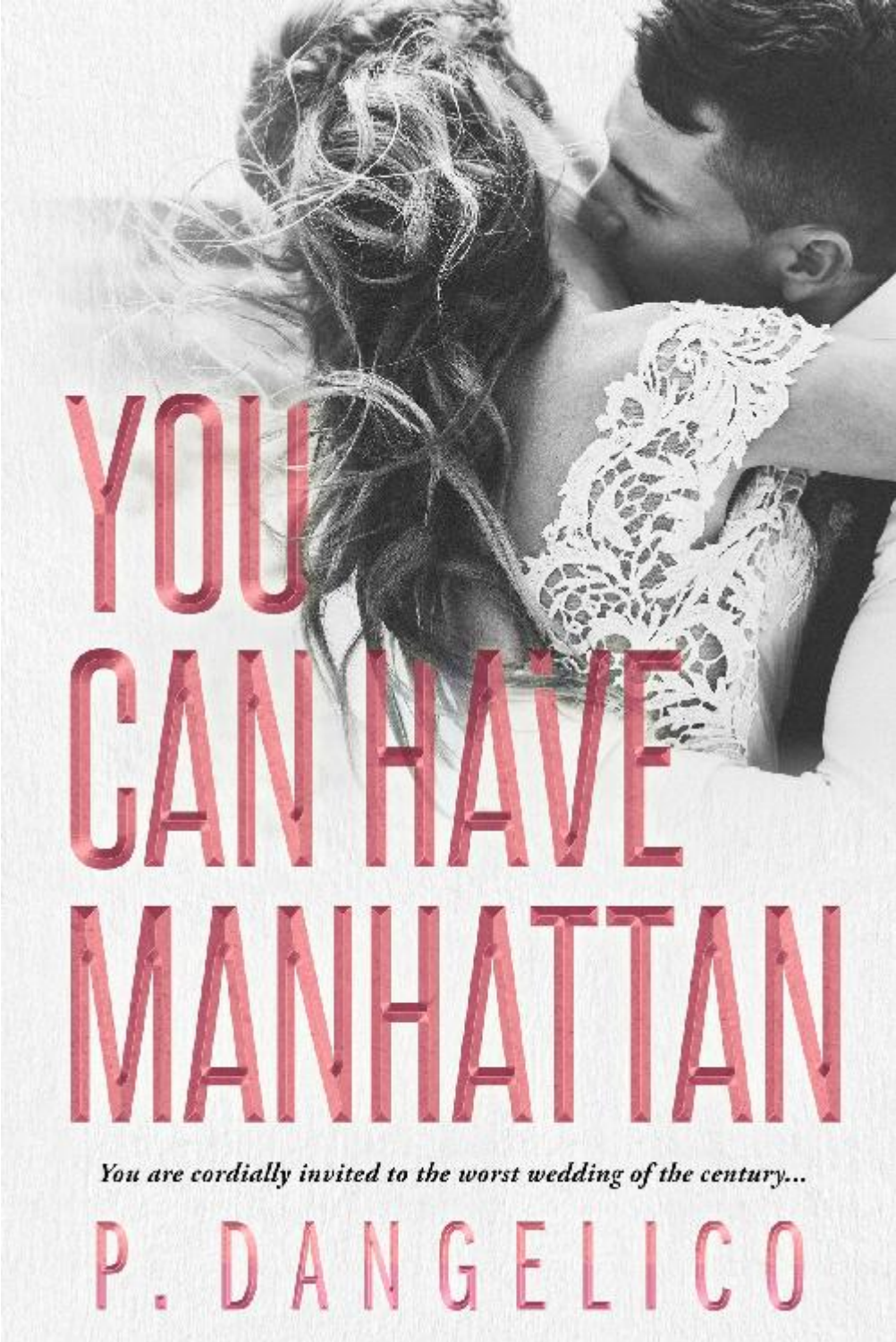




YOU
CAN HAVE
MANHATTAN

You are cordially invited to the worst wedding of the century...

P. DANGELICO



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ISBN: 978-0-578-52919-6

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Cover: [Najla Qamber, Qamber Designs](#)

Proofreading: Judy's Proofreading

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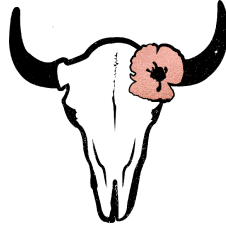
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CHAPTER ONE



SYDNEY

LIFE-CHANGING MOMENTS RARELY ANNOUNCE THEMSELVES. They prefer to sneak up and sucker punch you in the face by way of greeting. That’s how it happened to me. It started as a day like any other. Until it wasn’t. Until it turned into both the best and the worst day of my life.

“Look at me, Sydney,” Frank calmly ordered from across his desk.

Frank Blackstone was always calm and always giving orders which was why I ignored the request and continued typing on my smartphone. A small snag in a contract for a property we were acquiring—and what I mean by “we” is Blackstone Holdings—needed my immediate attention. In all likelihood, it was going to keep me working throughout the weekend once again, but such was life as general counsel of this company. Frank was always either buying or selling something, and I’d known what I was getting into when I took the job. Not only did it not bother me, but I relished it.

“I said look at me, Sydney.”

Holding up an index finger, I continued to type one-handed. I'd tried to reschedule our usual Friday morning meeting only to be told in no uncertain terms to get my butt over to his office pronto. So here I was—butt in the chair across from him *pronto* even though the contract snag had to be untangled before the end of the week.

“Wilson & Bosch is trying to sneak in a last...minute... clause...bastards...”

Being a woman in a male-dominated business meant I was often underestimated and seldom given the respect I deserved. It didn't bother me. On the contrary, I used it to my advantage and laughed all the way to the bank. I was accustomed to this nonsense and had remarkably thick skin when it came to business. This eleventh hour BS, however, was a downright insult to my intelligence and they were about to find out who they were dealing with.

“I'm dying.”

“Just give me *ooone* more minute, Frank...”

“Put it down, Syd. I'm not going to ask again.” The impatience in his voice told me to wrap it up. Frank was not the type you wanted to keep waiting.

Hitting **send**, I placed the phone on the antique walnut desk that separated me from my boss and glanced up, my eyes meeting the dark eyes belonging to the man I worshipped and adored. Sighing, he leaned back in his chair. Like the man, Frank's office was eclectic. The furniture American Colonial antiques, the art on the walls from the surrealism period, and the rugs Persian.

“Done. You were saying?”

He adjusted the white French cuffs of his signature Turnbull & Asser shirt, laced his hands together, and placed them on his trim midsection. “I said I’m dying.”

My smile dropped as I processed the claim one letter at a time. This had to be a joke. “Is this one of your pranks? Because I have a long day ahead of me and I really need to get some food before I go through the updated proposal and make sure they didn’t booby-trap it.”

I couldn’t keep the skepticism off my face, nor out of my voice. And I wouldn’t have asked if the man in question wasn’t famous for pulling pranks. Frank once threw a ridiculously lavish party for a thousand of the world’s richest people, then sent them a bill for their share of the cost. True story. When they refused to pay, he threatened to publicize it in his newspapers. Frank owned three. Everyone promptly wired the funds and Frank donated the ten million dollars to Child Find of America.

Was I privately pleased? Damn right, I was. Needless to say, Frank’s pranks were hilarious when I played accomplice. Not so much when the joke was on me.

“With a little luck I could live another twelve months...” He sighed. “...but I’m not betting on it.”

I couldn’t wrap my arms around all the feelings I was simultaneously experiencing. Whatever force was holding me up vanished. Slouching in the leather wing chair, I began to sweat in my black Jill Sanders suit while my mouth ran dry. Mostly because I knew Frank better than I knew myself and his expression told me he wasn’t fooling around.

Frank Blackstone was not only my employer, but a many other things as well. Mentor. Friend. Father figure. The closest thing to a father I’d ever had. And most importantly, the only

person who had never let me down. I loved him. He'd taken a barely-out-of-law-school graduate and given me every chance to succeed. And succeed I had thanks to him, quickly climbing up the ranks at Blackstone to become Frank's right hand. Being named general counsel of Blackstone Holdings at age thirty-four was an accomplishment few people could speak of and I would eternally be grateful to him.

“How?” Mired in shock, my voice sounded hollow.

As we stared at each other, the silence thickened. So many unspoken truths hung between us. Neither of us wanted to acknowledge that moments like this one, with the two of us sitting across the desk from each other, like we'd done for years, would soon go extinct.

“Melanoma.”

Frank cut an imposing figure. He was large-framed and big-boned, a Mt. Rushmore of a man with the gravitas to match. Standing an easy six foot three at seventy-one meant that Frank had been even taller at one point. And not beyond getting his hands dirty. I'd once watched him change a flat on his Rolls-Royce Phantom in under half an hour on the shoulder of the FDR—during rush hour. Even his driver, who had thrown out his back, was amazed.

And yet he looked smaller to me in that moment.

For the first time since I'd met him, sitting in the oversized custom chair made to accommodate the bravado of a man who had built a global company from the ground up with a mere fifty thousand dollars, Frank Blackstone looked his age.

“But...you beat it...”

His attention wandered out the floor-to-ceiling window, the Manhattan skyline gray and soggy. Only roofs were visible

from this height. He'd purposely designed the executive suite on the top floor to make sure his adversaries knew he would always look down upon them. I had thought the story over-the-top, dramatic as fuck, but that was Frank in a nutshell.

"It beat back."

Seeing him look so calm and accepting of the situation bothered me, made me feel powerless. And that was one emotion I didn't handle very well. "Frank..."

He looked at me and his expression shifted, the change in him lightning quick. I wasn't sure what triggered it, but stone-cold resolve replaced the vulnerability he'd worn only a moment ago. It was a look I'd come to know well, the same one Frank donned when he was going for the nuts on a business deal. I didn't know what to make of it, my own emotions being on a rollercoaster and I hadn't strapped in for the ride yet.

"I want you to do something for me."

The inflection in his deep voice shook me out my heavy thoughts and sparked a heightened sense of awareness. Frank's requests routinely ranged from *just short of committing a felony* to *fetching him a glass of water* and you never knew which one was coming because he delivered both in the same innocuous tone. "I need to know that Blackstone will stay in family control. I don't trust the board to do right by Marjorie."

Marjorie...my heart broke for her. Marjorie and Frank were inseparable. They still held hands at public events. Frank's wife was one of the kindest ladies I'd ever met.

"Does she know?"

"Yes...we've known since September."

It was the first week of December. My confusion quickly switched to anger and betrayal. Frank never withheld anything from me. At least, he hadn't until now.

“You've known for months and didn't tell me—your general counsel? I gotta say, I'm kind of pissed.”

The chair squeaked as it tipped back a fraction, Frank's stare flat. “I needed time.”

It was as cryptic a reply as he'd ever given me.

“Time for what? What did the doctors say? And why aren't you at MD Anderson right now? You need to fight this!”

The best defense was a great offense. Frank had taught me that. And yet he didn't look like he was gearing up for a fight at all. “Attack first worry about the consequences later. Remember? You filled my head with that junk for years. *Years*, Frank. And now you're just going to go quietly into the night?”

“Calm down,” he softly admonished. “I don't have a lot of time left and I'm not about to spend it arguing with you.”

That knocked the fight out of me. With it went my frustration and my strength. “I'm sorry. I just...I can't believe it.”

“I'm going to miss you too, kid.” A heavy dose of sympathy filled his eyes. An understanding passed between us. Bittersweet nostalgia. Neither of us was the type to emote and here we were, both emoting as all get out. “I want to make sure the line of succession is clear, that it won't end up in court once I'm gone.”

Wallowing in my own grief, already mourning the loss of the one person I could always count on, I absently nodded.

There wasn't even a question—anything Frank wanted I would grant. Anything in my power to give was his to have.

There was only one heir available to step in. His son, Scott. Whether he deserved it or not didn't matter. Devyn, his daughter, was happily married to a tech wunderkind and living in Silicon Valley. A mother to four girls, she had less than zero interest in Blackstone Holdings. I had little to nothing good to say about Scott because...well, to put it bluntly, Scott Blackstone was a loser. As much as I hated the word, it was properly awarded in this case.

I'd met the heir apparent over a decade ago, at Frank's daughter's wedding, and had thankfully seen little of him since. Scott was a walking cliché, a proud club-carrying member of the caveman association, addressing every woman—whether he knew her name or not—as babydoll. I mean really, who did this in 2019 the year of our Lord?

Basically, he was a rich asshole who spent his time fucking and fighting, traveling the world in search of the latest party and the next adventure. The opposite of everything I deemed good. Not to mention the oversized ego on him, which was record-breaking.

According to Scott, every woman who had the good fortune of crossing his path fell at his feet in a puddle of overwrought hormones. He'd even accused Frank's longtime secretary, Diane, of "fondling his package" once. Right before, God rest her soul, Diane passed away of a heart attack at the tender age of sixty-nine while sitting at her desk.

Yeah, the man was unbearable. But I would bear him—for Frank. I'd help Scott transition into the role of Blackstone's honorary CEO. And that's all he'd be because no one on that board was going to allow Scott to do anything other than

decide which restaurant the company holiday party should be held at. And even that was iffy due to the very real danger of Scott choosing an upscale strip club.

“Have you spoken to Scott?”

“I haven’t been able to reach him.” Frank’s lips thinned and the lines around his eyes became more pronounced. He exhaled tiredly, which often happened when he spoke of his only son.

“How’s this going to work? Is he going to handle day-to-day decisions?” It was intended as a joke and Frank knew it. Scott had not done an honest day’s work his entire worthless life. Frankly, I had my doubts about how long he’d last in an honorary position. And it wasn’t even for lack of intelligence. The only thing Scott lacked was character.

“I’m giving you controlling interest, to act as Marjorie’s proxy...I want you to take my place.”

There was a loud buzzing in my ear, then a pop. Like my brain had overheated and shut down. I started laughing. Partly relieved, partly nervous. “Now I know this is a prank. Woosh.” I gestured a swipe of my brow because no one loved drama more than Frank, so I gave him some. “What a relief. You got me, Frank. But seriously. I have a shitload of work to do—”

A paw-sized hand landed on the desktop, the slap exploding throughout the office. Surprised, I flinched, the amusement draining out of me all at once.

“This is not a prank.”

“Okay...okay,” I said, backpedaling as fast as I could. “I apologize...” A deep breath later, I tried again. “You know I love you, Frank, and I’m flattered. I would do anything for

you. Anything. But putting me in charge will guarantee this ends up in court.”

“Correct. Which is why you’re going to marry Scott.”

The buzzing was back. I couldn’t possibly have heard him correctly. “Come again?”

“You’re going to marry my son.”

Had the cancer traveled to his brain already? That’s the only plausible excuse I could think of. “You can’t be serious.”

“As serious as melanoma.”

“Frank—” I said as gently as I could. The word tippy-toeing out of my mouth. One could only push Frank so far. Then he transformed into something akin to *Juggernaut*, complete with a head made of metal he liked to bludgeon people with.

“Sydney,” he countered, cutting me off. “This is a business arrangement. You will marry Scott. You will stay married to him for three years. During that time the two of you will behave as a married couple in public. You will *not* do anything to besmirch the Blackstone name. You will manage this company successfully thus ensuring the board will shut the fuck up about it. After which you two can do as you please. Get a quiet divorce. Whatever your heart desires. Scott can go back to doing whatever the fuck Scott does and you will continue to helm this company as a Blackstone. Have I made myself clear?”

He hadn’t been kidding when he said he needed time—and he’d spent that time drawing up the plans from hell. Frank, however, had always valued my opinion and my metaphorical balls. He would’ve never made me second-in-command

otherwise. I had never shied away from giving it to him straight before and this time was no different.

“I...can’t.”

Frank frowned. More a puzzled look than one of disapproval. After a meaningful pause, he asked, “Are you in love?” Doubt softened his tone. As if it only now occurred to him that I could be unavailable. Then again, in all the years I’d known him I’d never brought anybody to any of the numerous company events I’d attended. And he had no idea about Josh.

“No.”

“Dating anyone worthwhile?”

I almost laughed. Dating? What was that? I hadn’t had time for a date in double-digit months. Working seventy-hour weeks wasn’t exactly conducive to a kick-ass social life. “No, of course not—”

“Then what’s the problem?” he said, jumping in. “Or is it the marriage you take issue with? Do you consider it sacred?”

That pulled a smile out of me. “No.”

“So there’s no ideological reason you’re refusing to close the deal of the century?”

Frank and his hyperbole. I had to put a stop to this thing before it gathered steam. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Permission granted.”

“How can I put this nicely...Scott’s a pig. I wouldn’t marry him if I had a gun to my head.”

Frank chuckled. “He’s rough around the edges.”

Understatement of the century. “I’ve always loved your ability to look on the bright side. He’s the worst misogynist

I've ever had the displeasure of meeting.”

His grin widened. “He’s a man’s man.”

“C’mon, Frank. Even you know—”

“Fine. He’s not your type. I get it.” He leaned forward in his chair. As if everything he was about to say next was going to be of the utmost importance. “He doesn’t have to be, Syd. He only needs to be your husband for enough time to show the board that you’re more than capable of taking charge of this company. And for that to happen without them trying to undermine you every step of the way, you have to have Scott at your back. He’ll be a powerful ally.”

Scott—an ally? He was barely awake during the day, but whatever. I wasn’t about to quibble over details. My resolve was fading fast, however. I didn’t want much. Outside of my career, I didn’t expect anything out of life. My childhood had taught me that the hard way. Wanting led to disappointment and *that* I’d had plenty of. But this...this I wanted, this made my blood hot and my pulse quicken. Running Blackstone Holdings would be the crowning achievement of my life.

Sinking further into the chair, I tipped my head back and studied the original René Magritte painting on the wall. A business man with a window to a cloudy sky for a face. I was pretty sure there was heavy meaning in there somewhere. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure. You can contemplate it on the way to Wyoming. The Blackstone jet is on standby at Teterboro.”

Frank was railroading me, and I was letting him. He’d had a way of sucking me into his schemes from day one.

“But...”

“Sydney...” Frank’s expression was suddenly grave. “You’re the son I never had. I won’t rest in peace knowing anyone else will take my place.” The heartfelt sentiment wrapped its fingers around my throat and squeezed. “You’ll have status, money, the front cover of *Forbes*, possibly *Time* magazine, in exchange for a mere three years of your life.”

If I did this—and it was still a big IF—I wouldn’t be doing it for status (which I didn’t give a flip about) or the cover of *Time* magazine (which I did) or money (which I had already). I would do it for Frank.

“What’s in Wyoming?” I sourly muttered.

A slow smile spread across Frank’s face. “Your husband.”

“My husband...” I repeated, head shaking at the absurdity of it all. This was shaping up to be a perfectly normal Friday until this. “Does Scott know—about your illness? And this cockamamie plan?”

“Not yet.”

Weighty sigh. My eyes fell shut as I rubbed the throb developing between them. “What makes you think he’d even consider going along? He could be in a serious relationship for all we know.”

A bark of dry laughter shot out of him. “Scott? In a serious relationship?” It was more than a reach. It was a last-ditch attempt to derail this runaway train. “He’ll go along with it or I’ll cut him off without a red cent to his name.”

Scott was married to money. How else could he live the life of a profligate wastrel. The only hope I had of disentangling myself from this arranged fake marriage was if Scott flat-out refused, but under that threat of disinheritance there was no question he’d capitulate—and quickly.

“What about the Wilson & Bosch deal?” I was stalling and we both knew it. Still, I had to try. Every bone in my lawyer’s body told me so. For the first time in my life I felt in over my head.

“Hastings can handle it,” Frank casually replied, not knowing it was anything but casual to me. Damon Hastings was my “arch nemesis” in the company if you will. The one person who had been actively campaigning to steal my job the moment I got it. “You won’t be gone more than a few days anyway. By the time you get to Wyoming, I’ll have everything worked out with Scott.”

“Then why am I going?” I said, already stewing over the Wilson & Bosch deal.

“Proof. Otherwise he’ll think this is one of my pranks.” I had to agree with his logic. “And, Syd?”

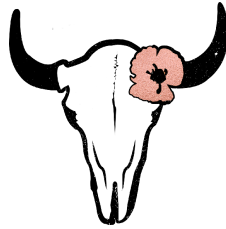
“Yeah?”

“Don’t mention the cancer. I don’t want him to do this out of some misplaced sense of duty.”

I had no clue what Frank meant by that. And I’d given up trying to make sense of the off-beaten paths his mind took a long time ago. He seemed to think extorting his son was fine but having him act out of duty wasn’t. Whatever. Who was I to argue?

“Anything you want, Frank.”

CHAPTER TWO



SCOTT

“SCOTT! PHONE CALL FOR YOU!” LAUREL SCREAMED AT THE top of her lungs.

Squinting, I glanced up from the injured calf one of my guys had brought in to be patched up and watched her approach. The sun was out today, and even though winter had set in, on a day like this it could cook you to well-done.

You could see the scowl she was wearing from a mile away. She’d hauled her tiny butt all the way across the football field–sized parking lot to get to the round pen near the stables and looked none too happy about it. Throwing the reins of my buckskin mare to one of my ranch hands, I went to meet her halfway. The farther she had to walk the more she’d complain about it later.

“Are your fingers broken?” she barked. I was almost one hundred percent certain it was a rhetorical question, but one never knew with her.

Laurel Robinson was a large, loud person stuffed into a pint-sized female body, petite all over with the exception of her double Ds. Top heavy would be the best way to describe

her. Also, the best office manager anyone could wish for. Without Laurel walking me through the day-to-day of running a cattle ranch when I first bought this place, I wouldn't have lasted a New York minute.

“...well, are they?”

The shell-covered snaps of her flannel shirt were in imminent danger of bursting wide open. Behind me, I heard some of the ranch hands taking bets on exactly when that would be.

“No, ma'am,” I replied with a half-cocked grin. I'd learned early that a well-placed “ma'am” in addition to one of my dimpled grins went a long way to smoothing her ruffled feminine nerves.

Jogging ahead of her, Romeo and Juliet greeted me with a tail wag, their wet noses nudging my hands. As much as I loved Laurel, having her work for me was sometimes a fate worse than having to work for my old man. She'd raised five boys, the last two still living at home, so maybe that had something to do with her attitude. It was also probably why she ran such a tight ship.

“Then why aren't you answering your cell? Your father's on the landline *again*.”

My smile moved aside for a grimace. My father had been blowing up my phone for days and that was never a good thing. Which was why I wasn't answering.

“I got bad knees. I can't be chasin' you around this property because you're a sullen boy with daddy issues.”

At the ripe old age of thirty-eight, I was neither a boy nor did I have “daddy issues.” The sullen part was debatable, but I wasn't in the mood to debate Laurel. Not when I had one

waiting for me on the phone in my office. It would go better for me if I kept my trap shut anyway. I'd learned that early too.

"Didn't I say that if he calls to tell him I'm out checking the fence line?" The question came out harsher than I'd intended, the impending phone call making me irritable.

"I told him that the last *three* times he called. He's no fool, Scott, and I don't like to lie. He's your father. Just speak to him. Swallow your medicine and be done with it." Laurel loved nothing more than to dispense wisdom that I had no use for. Regardless, I'd swallow my medicine.

The sound of jeans-clad thighs rubbing together told me she was struggling to keep up. I slowed down to let her catch me. There would be hell to pay if I got to the office before she did. Then I'd really never hear the end of it.

The HOLD button on the phone that sat on my desk flashed. Looking over my shoulder, I glared at Laurel who was watching me with her hands on her hips and her mommy face on. I kicked the door shut.

Things had been strained between me and my old man for a while. Basically, since I'd cleaned up my act, bought the Lazy S Ranch, and turned it into a profitable investment. Which was weird. We'd gotten along perfectly well when I was partying my life away. And yet lately, we could barely exchange two words without arguing. I'd become the man my father wanted me to be, had pushed me to be, and then it had gone to shit between us. Go figure.

He was pissed that I hadn't come home and taken my rightful place working beside him at Blackstone Holdings—everyone in the family knew it—but he'd never come out and

said it. And knowing my father, it was his pride that wouldn't allow it. I was under no false illusions, however. It was only a matter of time before that showdown happened, and it would be an ugly one because I wasn't going back to New York—not ever if I could help it.

I hit the button I'd been staring at for a full minute. "What's up, Dad?"

"I don't know what's more surprising, the fact that you finally took my call or that you remembered you have a father."

Gritting my teeth, I answered with the truth. "I've been busy."

"Still carousing? I had my share of fun before I married your mother, but this is shameful. Even for you."

"Carousing? Is that old-timey speak? Next you'll accuse me of *chasing skirt*."

"Quit the shit, Scott. I'm being serious."

"What do you want, Dad?" I asked, exhaling tiredly. I could sense the conversation was going to quickly escalate into yet another argument. "I'm working. I've got my hands full day and night managing thirty thousand head of cattle. I wish I had time to chase skirt. Now, unless it's important I need to get back to it."

"It's important."

There was no escape. If I brushed him off, he'd only get more persistent and my father could throw his weight around better than any prized Angus bull. Putting my feet up on the corner of my desk, I tipped back my chair and hunkered down for a longer conversation than I'd hoped for. "I'm listening."

“It’s far past time you came home.”

And there it was...

“I am home. Going on eight years now.” I glanced out the picture window, at the Grand Tetons. At the powdered sugar-capped peaks. At the miles of open snow-covered land. It was winter now, but in the summer the mountains would grow brilliant green, and in the fall the autumn aspens would turn every shade of gold.

I’d made mistakes in the past, paid the price, and found my feet again. This place had given me a second chance. An opportunity to redeem myself. And I had.

Wyoming had saved me. It had sunk its claws into my bones and leaving would be like ripping out what held me together. Nothing and no one could pry me away from this place.

“I’m not getting any younger and neither is your mother.”

My father’s voice trembled, and the first pang of guilt made its presence felt. In truth, it was always there, eating away at the lining of my stomach. This conversation was inevitable. My parents were in their seventies. And although Dad was built like a brick shit house and had an army of people working for him, it was only a matter of time before his age finally caught up to him. I couldn’t ask Devyn, my sister who lived in California, to uproot her family and move back east. Which left me—the bachelor son.

“I know.”

“I’m retiring...” Part of me breathed a sigh of relief—he couldn’t go on dominating the world forever without it taking a toll on his health. The rest of me was in a state of high

anxiety for what came next. “I’m going to hand the reins over to Sydney.”

I sat up abruptly, the heels of my boots hitting the wide plank flooring with a loud thud.

Sydney Evans...

I’d met her over a decade ago—at the height of my party days—and vaguely recalled kissing her at my sister’s wedding. I also recalled it being pretty damn good before she kneed me in the nuts. I was trashed out of my mind that night, but no man forgets a woman that almost made a eunuch out of him. Yeah, I remembered her. She was a cold, uptight bitch. Pretty if you liked nondescript vanilla blondes. Which I didn’t. Curvy brunettes were more my style. Ones with blood rather than antifreeze in their veins. Ones that enjoyed sex as much as I did.

My father had sung her praises for years. She had a head for business and a thirst for blood equal to his. I never cared for it—the blood, the kill. The art of the deal. I preferred open land and clean air.

“Good,” I said, a major weight being lifted off my chest. I wasn’t being asked to step up and that’s all that mattered to me. “She’s more than capable.”

“Yes, she is. Unfortunately, the board won’t see it that way. They’ve been waiting to install their person for the past decade. They’ll fight her tooth and nail.”

“You’ve never backed down from a fight.”

“I’m glad you remember that.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up straight. I could almost underscore the pronounced evil glee in my father’s

voice with a pencil and being intimately acquainted with it I knew it would only spell trouble for me.

“I need you to do something for me, Scott. I need you to marry Sydney.”

I couldn't possibly have heard that right. My father couldn't have asked me to marry a woman I could barely tolerate. He couldn't have asked me to marry anyone. That only happened in bad romantic comedies and my life wasn't fodder for anyone's entertainment.

“I don't have time for your jokes, Franklin. It's been fun. Say hi to Mom for me.”

“This is no joke. The only way to ensure the board won't tie this up in court for years is if she's a Blackstone. And aren't I a lucky son of a bitch—here I am with one past-his-prime son in need of a wife.”

I wasn't buying it. My old man was a notorious prankster. “Who you calling past-his-prime, old man? And the last thing I need is a wife.”

“Frankly, I don't care what you need, Scott. You'll do this for me, or I'll write you out of the will and the tap gets turned off. You get me?”

“Well played, *Darth Vader*, but we're all stocked up on funds here. The ranch has been turning a nifty profit for some time now so go ahead and write me out.” Which was the absolute truth and something I was damn proud of.

“What about your pet project?”

The threat left a chilly silence in its wake. I knew that tone. It was quintessential Franklin Marshall Blackstone going for the kill. “You love that land, don't you? All the millions and millions of acres you've had me buy up over the years. The

ones you want turned into a national park. I'll break it apart and sell it off."

Adrenaline and a heap of anger burned through my veins. I shot out of my chair and marched to the window, the phone cord stretching as tight as my nerves.

Land preservation was the only thing I truly gave a shit about, and he knew it. My ranch was run responsibly in respect to the environment, an expensive endeavor that required very careful management. Most operations couldn't afford to work that way. They encroached on federal land which forced wildlife to either retreat or be slaughtered. Buying up the land, placing it in a trust, and turning it into a national park ensured that it remained wild for generations to come.

It was the only leverage he had over me. It was the only thing I'd ever asked of him. A little at a time my father had managed to accrue more open, virgin land than cable giant John Malone, an accomplishment he loved to brag about.

"You bastard—"

"I'm only protecting what's mine. My family. My business—"

"Do you hear yourself? C'mon, Dad! This has nothing to do with you protecting family. This is you playing God with other people's lives to suit your needs."

As much as my father had mellowed over the years, his first inclination was still to subjugate something or someone. It didn't matter which or who as long as he got what he wanted. That's who he was in essence. Despite the white hair, he would always be that man, and I didn't hold any illusions to the contrary.

“Whatever it may be, you will marry Sydney and stay married to her for three years. That’ll give her enough time to prove to the board that she’s the right person to run this company successfully. With the Blackstone name attached and you to back her up, they won’t have a legal leg to stand on.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I exhaled slowly, an exercise I’d learned in an effort to control my emotions and “become a better person.”

“This isn’t the tenth century, Dad. I’m not marrying someone I hardly know to satisfy your hunger for world domination.”

“Have I ever asked anything of you?”

And there was the knockout punch. My parents had never asked anything of me. I’d been left to do as I pleased since graduating business school and pleased myself I had. Panic shifted into a familiar feeling of inevitability. My palms began to sweat knowing he had me by the throat. When my father set his mind to something, not even Atlas himself could move him.

“No,” I conceded, swallowing my pride. “Don’t make me do this.”

“Jesus Christ. Don’t sound so fucking devastated. Marriage is not the worst thing in the world. You might actually like it if you let yourself—”

“I’ll like it as much as I’d like getting gored by one of my prized bulls.”

I rubbed my face, trying to restore feeling. If there was one absolute truth I knew about myself, it was that I had terrible judgement in women. I’d begun to suspect it shortly after growing fuzz on my peaches, and a string of disastrous

relationships in my twenties confirmed the notion. I'd pretty much accepted that I was never going to have what my parents had and I was okay with that. Then Charlie and Meghan happened, and the proverbial coffin was nailed shut.

“Do what you will in your spare time, but hear me, son—you have to sell it. All outward appearances must say you're a happily married man. That means no skirt chasing and having the pictures end up on the cover of the New York Post.”

What the hell did that mean? That I'd have to keep all future hookups a secret? I knew for a fact that Sydney Evans would sooner see me dead than let me within arm's reach of her, and celibacy for the next three years was out of the question. So where did that leave me?

Sitting on the window ledge, I considered begging. It'd be worth it if it meant I'd get to keep the millions of acres intact and myself free of this mess.

“Tell me this is another one of your pranks.”

“I can't do that.”

Shutting my eyes, I pinched the bridge of my nose. An involuntary reaction. Much like the urge to get in my truck and make a run for the border at the mere thought of marriage. “Sydney hates me—”

“Good news, Sydney wants the job more than she hates you. Your part is to convince her you've changed. That you're not the same degenerate fool you were when she met you. And fair warning, that may be an insurmountable task.”

Something didn't feel right—apart from the fact that I was being blackmailed into marriage. A stretch of silence continued with no end in sight. With it, my unease grew. “Dad, you okay?”

“Hmm.”

The noncommittal answer did nothing to allay my suspicion. I pushed it aside and chose to focus on the disaster-in-the-making I had on my hands. The walls were closing in; I could feel them bearing down on me. “And if she decides against it?”

One could hope.

“I love the girl. I’m not about to willingly torture her to make a point. If she can’t tolerate you, give her a divorce.”

I hadn’t realized how deep my father’s affection for Sydney ran until this moment. Or how little faith he had in me, which, frankly, was a letdown. “What about the living arrangement? How’s she running the company from here?”

“She’ll do two weeks on and off for now. Unless you’d like to move back to New York and take the job yourself?”

A humorless bark of laughter rose up my throat, edged with scorn and sounding like defeat. “You’ve thought of everything.”

“I always do.”

“I stay here, or you can forget it.”

“Fine. She’s boarding the company jet as we speak.”

“For shit’s sake, don’t I get any time—”

“To do what?” my father cut in. “Change your mind? You should’ve thought of that when you didn’t return my calls. One more thing. Keep your hands to yourself, Scott. This isn’t one of your bimbos. Don’t fuck this up.”

The soft click of the call disconnecting might as well have been as loud as a shotgun blast. The quiet peaceful life I’d

built was over.



SYDNEY

A four-hour plane ride wasn't exactly how I'd planned to spend my Friday afternoon. It did, however, offer me the opportunity to hammer out all the issues with the Wilson & Bosch contract and more importantly thwart any plans Damon Hastings had to steal my thunder. Short of bringing him the heads of his competition, Hastings had been doing everything to get into Frank's good graces, to replace me as Frank's second-in-command. No bigs. Damon was just one more in a long line of testosterone-jacked bullies I'd dispatched over the years.

Frank had emailed me that the conversation with Scott had gone according to plan. It was anyone's guess what that meant and calling Frank to clarify didn't hold any appeal. I'd know soon enough anyway. Despite what Frank believed—that the marriage was a done deal—it wasn't. I needed to gather intel on the enemy. To get a firsthand assessment of what I was dealing with. If Scott was still as horrible as I remembered, I'd be forced to decline. Nothing was worth my mental health. Not even the job opportunity of a thousand lifetimes.

By the time the Gulfstream touched down in Jackson Hole, I had a room booked at the Four Seasons. Clean sheets, a comfortable bed, a hot meal. These were the things that made me happy, gave me pleasure, and since I could afford it, I never went without. And going without was something I was intimately acquainted with. My grandparents had seen to that, the memories still as fresh as a third-degree burn.

The ranch where Scott lived was located half an hour out of town. That nugget of information was met with some serious freaking side-eye. Because...Scott? On a ranch? C'mon. This was the same Scott Blackstone who had beauticians from Frederic Fekkai come to his penthouse apartment to style his hair. The same Scott who didn't launder his Tom Ford boxer briefs. He threw them out and wore new ones at seventy-five bucks a pop.

The same Scott who I had loosely agreed to marry—God help me.

I knew all this because I'd hired his cleaning lady when he moved out of town and Thea and I had hit it off. Over the years we'd become friends, and Thea loved nothing more than to share "Scott stories" over cocktails. At some point I'd asked her to stop because the more I learned about Scott, the more it turned my stomach.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I stepped into the hotel lobby wheeling the overnight bag I always kept at the office for emergency trips and headed for the front desk. My head was spinning from all that had transpired, and a hot shower and cool sheets would go a long way to fix that. A good night's rest would give me the strength to face...whatever it was I was facing.

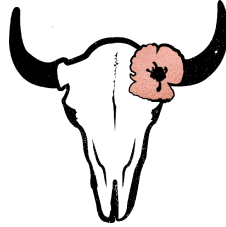
And whatever it was, it was going to be handled either way. How could I possibly convince the board of directors that I was the right person to fill Frank's considerable shoes, able to run a Fortune 500 company with subsidiaries all over the world, if I couldn't manage one overgrown, spoiled manchild.

The back of a very large cowboy caught my eye as I strolled past the lobby bar. He must be a cowboy. Who else would wear one of those corny checkered shirts with a tooled

belt? Despite the fashion emergency, I couldn't help admiring broad shoulders that tapered down to a lean waist. A muscular butt that perfectly filled out the faded Levi's he wore. This man did not neglect his squats.

It had been a long time since I'd admired a man's body. Too much work. Not enough time to daydream. Maybe it was the crisp clean air clearing out my clock that made me notice. Maybe this three-day trip would do me some good. Minutes later I was sliding my keycard in the door of my south-facing room. The bed was a fluffy masterpiece that put a smile on my face. I had a feeling I'd be dreaming about cowboys tonight.

CHAPTER THREE



SCOTT

SHE STOOD AT REGISTRATION LOOKING AT HER PHONE AS SHE spoke to the girl who worked behind the desk. She was taller than I remembered. More beautiful too. Bringing the IPA bottle to my lips, I tried to act casual about spying, to be as inconspicuous as much as any guy measuring six foot three and two hundred and ten pounds could. Though, I didn't think she'd recognize me that easily. Last time she'd seen me, I was carrying party weight, the telltale sign of too much booze and too little exercise. No facial hair either.

Jimbo had called from the airport as soon as the Blackstone company jet landed. I had eyes and ears everywhere. The permanent residents of Jackson Hole were a close bunch. After that, it didn't take much to track her down. There was no doubt where Little Miss Junior League would be staying. Which is how I ended up in the lobby bar of the Four Seasons, doing recon on the wannabe Mrs. Blackstone.

Sweet Jesus, was this really happening? Darth Vader's voice clamored in the back of my mind and a clammy chill rippled over my skin.

“Hey, handsome.” A familiar female voice yanked my attention forward. Misty’s smiling dark eyes met mine while she wiped down the bar. Misty with her curves for days and laughing eyes and curtain of black hair. My kind of woman. We’d hooked up a few times, but she was more wary of repeat performances than I was, so it never went past a few casual encounters.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” she said, smiling coyly.

Misty had always been an easy read for me and right now her eyes questioned whether I was there for a hookup. The last time had been several months ago, seven to be exact, when calving season started at the Lazy S. I’d barely had time to shower and sleep from March to September. And with the new turn of events, I definitely was not here for that purpose now. Another wrinkle that needed to be ironed out with my new bride. I figured we could come to some agreement; both get what we needed elsewhere as long as we kept it discreet. Regardless, I liked Misty a lot and treating the situation with care was paramount.

Finishing my beer, I placed the bottle down gently and leaned forward, elbows on the bar as I rubbed the lingering shock and confusion off my face. “Ryan wanted to meet for a drink, but I’m getting the impression I’m being stood up.”

I hadn’t told a single soul yet. Not Laurel. Not Ryan Sutter, my best friend and ranch manager. Not even Devyn. Though she’d be my first call tomorrow. First, I needed to talk to Sydney, feel her out. Then I’d decide how to proceed.

In the marked pause, Misty jumped in without any prompting, “I’m seeing someone.”

As her bright gaze held mine, I felt a stitch of discomfort in my chest. I wasn’t jealous. That’s not how I rolled. But I’d

be lying if the look on her face didn't needle me because for the first time since I'd met her eight years ago, Misty looked... vulnerable. She'd never looked that way over me. And that's when the lightbulb went on. There went any chance of a future hookup.

"You really like this guy." No need for questions when I could see it for myself.

Her brows drew together. Misty had never liked being such an easy read. "What makes you say that?"

I shrugged, the answer a foregone conclusion. "Your face."

Exhaling roughly, she leaned back against the counter of the bar with her hands tucked under her ass. The black tank top she wore showcased her athletic biceps, her strong thighs stretched taut her gray jeans. Misty had sex appeal in spades. "I guess so."

"Don't look so happy," I teased, and chuckled when a dishtowel hit me in the face. She smiled awkwardly, reluctant to accept this strange new condition.

At the opposite end of the bar, a new customer motioned for service and we both glanced over. "Gimme five," she said.

"Take ten," I told her.

As soon as Misty walked away, I stole another glance over my shoulder. Wearing a severe black coat over an equally severe black suit, my soon-to-be wife stood out like a sore thumb. Nobody in Jackson Hole wore suits unless they were going to a funeral. And, hey, it wasn't too far from the truth. You could say the death of my carefully constructed life was certainly cause for one. I was certainly in mourning.

The physical changes were noticeable. The Swiss milk maid thing she had going on a decade ago had transformed

into cold elegance, her beauty unapproachable. Not a drop of sex appeal to speak of. She'd lost the fullness to her cheeks, highlighting sculpted cheekbones and a stubborn chin. It made me curious to find out if her personality had changed just as notably—softened, with any hope—then reminded myself that curiosity could kill, not to stir shit up or meet the same fate as the cat.

The fact remained that she hadn't cracked a semblance of a smile since walking through the sliding glass doors, her expression blank and faraway. So still a major buzzkill one would have to determine. For a fraction of a second, I even considered packing up my truck, loading the dogs, and tearing out of town.

She crossed the lobby on her way to the elevators, stride assertive—like the rest of her. An image of her goose-stepping crossed my mind and I had to swallow the urge to laugh. The different shades of gold of her neatly parted blonde hair caught the overhead flickering light of the chandelier. Damn shame that a woman so beautiful could have such an awful personality.

Oblivious to being watched, she marched past me with her small bag in tow, the heels of her Manolo Blahniks click, click, clicking annoyingly against the marble flooring. Each one a stab to the sac. I'd give her a few minutes before knocking on her door. I'd be nice about it. But that's all I'd be nice about. Time to put the plan in motion.



SYDNEY

A loud banging on the hotel room door jolted me out of bed. One minute I was lying spread eagle in my fluffy hotel robe, staring at the ceiling while contemplating the lunacy of my life choices—specifically my impending marriage—and the next I was practically hanging by my short fingernails from the pickled oak beams on the ceiling.

“Who is it?” I called out, clutching the top of my robe closed in a false sense of security. Dashing to the door, all I could see through the view hole was a blue and white checkered shirt.

The cowboy? Had he followed me up and I hadn’t noticed? How creepy. I looked again and this time a dark blue eye peered back...surrounded by a set of thick paintbrush black lashes. *Oh*. My stomach sank. I knew those lashes. Those lashes left an impression on a woman.

“Damn,” slipped out. On the tail end of it, a wince. Not even a night’s reprieve. “What do you want, Scott?”

A low masculine chuckle seeped through the door. “Let me in, wife.”

I cringed. I physically cringed at the sound of his husky voice. Who was I kidding? I couldn’t possibly go through with it. Within a week, I’d end up on *The First 48* for making pie out of my new groom.

“Go away. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“We need to talk now, Sydney.”

“I’m tired. Tomorrow.”

A sigh. “Please.”

Please? I would’ve bet good money that Scott’s vocabulary did not extend that far. And yet I’d heard it

distinctly.

“Ten minutes. Then you leave without me having to call security.”

He chuckled. “We’re off to such a great start.”

I was surprised to feel a smile grow on my face. Ripping the door open, I was even more surprised to find what was standing in the doorway. This Scott Blackstone was not the same Scott Blackstone I’d last seen at his sister’s wedding strip down naked in front of seven hundred guests, get in the pool which was decorated with lily pads, and then emerge from said pool with only a few of those poor unfortunate lily pads held to his privates. This was a different man.

I always thought Scott handsome. Was he intolerable? Of course, he was. But empirically speaking, there was no denying he’d been gifted with beauty. Now though...holy hell.

If only the changes extended beyond the physical.

My eyes took in all the changes one piece at a time. The broad muscular chest under the checkered shirt, the thick thighs encased in worn jeans. The longish black hair and short beard. The tan made his eyes look an unnatural shade of indigo. The lashes, though, they were the same. It was the first thing I’d noticed about him all those years ago. Mine were so blonde that if I didn’t have them dyed, they disappeared off my face. His had mesmerized me, invoked envy even.

His smirking expression gave little away other than to find humor in the way I was examining him. “What’s up, babydoll,” he said as he shouldered his way into the room without invitation.

Ugh. Maybe not so different. Those were the exact same words he’d said to me more than ten years ago and that night

ended with me almost de-nutting him. Although to be fair, the kiss that preceded the almost de-nutting was a perfect ten.

Walking to the middle of the room, he turned abruptly, his gaze raking up and down my person without an ounce of shame. He paused when he reached my face and something strange passed between us, something indescribable that made my cheeks burn and want to look away. I didn't, however. I'd sooner live with my grandparents again—a fate worse than living in the Hermit Kingdom—than let Scott Blackstone believe he intimidated me. Exhaling, he looked away first. Turns out, to gather himself up for some big pitch that started with *yet another* intense staredown.

“You’ve gotta tell Darth you can’t go through with it.”

His tone grated. It was harsh and bossy, and I was tired and cranky. Not a good mix. “Darth?”

“Franklin—the sooner the better. Tonight works for me.”

The eye roll couldn't be helped. Imperial jerk. I was too tired to even pretend at cool indifference. I tapped my ear. “I’m sorry, I must be getting an ear infection. I could’ve sworn I just heard you issue an order.”

“You want to be married to me less than I do you.”

“True,” I agreed, nodding. Probably the only time we would ever agree on anything.

“Then what’s the problem? Make the call. Free us from this bullshit arrangement. He’ll only agree to it if you do it.”

This situation was complicated by many factors. The job I desperately wanted. The promise I’d made to Frank. And if there was one rule that governed my life, it was that I would never do anything to betray Frank’s trust.

Arms crossed, I drew myself up and clutched at the robe for reassurance. “I gave your father my word.” That’s when my voice faltered. A suffocating sadness came over me whenever I thought about Frank.

“Sydney...” Scott’s stare was intense. The kind of intensity you find on the faces of trapped animals. He looked willing to chew off a limb to be free of this trap—of me. For unknown reasons, that burned a little. “You don’t want to be married to me. Trust me, you don’t. I swear and drink and stay out till all hours of the night...”

I already knew this about him and more. Plus, Scott’s ability to shock me with his antics had waned over the years. When my expression didn’t waver from mildly displeased, he continued.

“...I bring home strange women.”

He’d thrown down the gauntlet, issued a challenge. At least he thought he did. Silly fool. I continued to stare blankly. Thea had told me (over one too many happy hour cocktails) that he’d once brought home a woman in a clown costume. A bona fide clown costume. With her, she had a miniature donkey wearing a tuxedo on a leash. A miniature donkey...a tiny ass, for heaven’s sake. For weeks, whenever Frank mentioned his name, I was haunted by the image of Scott, the woman in the clown costume, and the miniature ass boarding the elevator to get to his penthouse apartment. I hadn’t been worried for the welfare of the donkey because I knew Scott to be a devoted animal lover. The clown I wasn’t so sure about. After the clown slash donkey incident, “strange women” was conservative by his standards.

“...at all hours of the night,” he continued. His eyes flashed desperation, his color high. “Sometimes I have

orgies...at the house.”

That one garnered a surprised widening of the eyes, in morbid curiosity more than anything. Had it been anyone else I would never have believed it. But this was Scott.

“Really? People do that in real life?”

Scott’s hands went to his hips and his jaw pulsed with tension. He looked angry. Which grated some more. What did he have to be mad about? Considering the circumstances, I thought I was being very understanding.

“Yes, Sydney. They really do.”

“Like...with other men?” Because this I had to know.

His face pinched. “Yes—” A headshake. “I mean not like that. I don’t have...” He exhaled sharply. “Forget the orgies. Are you going to call him or what?”

Suddenly boneless with fatigue, I moved to the foot of the bed and sat on the end. Only then did I realize the mistake because Scott looked ten feet tall, looming over me like a grumpy Paul Bunyan. A sexy one...unbelievably fit and, well...virile. Pushing all wayward thoughts aside, I stood back up.

“As long as you choose people who can keep their mouths shut, I don’t see why you can’t carry on with your...orgies. I can even draw up an NDA for you if you’d like...” My words faded to silence when Scott frowned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Why are you whispering?”

“Oh—” For a moment there, I’d forgotten that Scott wasn’t like other people. He had no shame. I mean, literally—no

shame. I doubted he'd ever once experienced the emotion. It wouldn't even occur to him to try to keep his orgies low-key.

“Right,” I started again in a regular volume. “My point is that I'm not here to get in the way of your personal life, Scott. I'm fully aware that you require a lot of...entertainment. Is it going to take effort to make this work? Yeah, sure it is. If we're going to live together, concessions need to be made. But if it benefits Blackstone, what's a mere three years? And when Frank...” Emotions piled up in my throat. I swallowed, and after a deep breath, started again, “When your parents...well, you know. Blackstone will be yours and Devyn's. You benefit from this arrangement too.”

He continued to stare at me with a mix of skepticism and irritation on his face, and the tension thickened. Oddly, he seemed more upset about the marriage arrangement than his father's diagnosis. He hadn't even mentioned it.

“Have you spoken to your father?”

His expression turned guarded. “I've spoken to him.”

Ooookay. Then again, everyone had their own way of grieving and I respected that. That he showed no outward appearance of it didn't mean he wasn't struggling. If anything, I could sympathize since I tended to bottle stuff up as well. It wasn't my place to pry if he wished to keep his feelings private.

“What about you?”

I didn't like the tone he used, or the attitude he was suddenly giving me. “What about me?”

“No boyfriend? Fuck buddy?”

The last was said with too much sarcasm to ignore, the question nothing short of a taunt. I'd almost forgotten whom I

was speaking to there for a moment. How callous he could be. It instantly cooled whatever sympathy I was feeling for him.

“No. None.”

His eyes narrowed. Like he was making a great effort to get to the bottom of something. A beat later, without explanation, he abruptly moved past me, headed for a quick exit.

“Where are you going?” I heard myself calling out. Before I could even work out what the heck I was doing or saying, which was par for the course whenever he was around.

“We’ll talk more tomorrow,” he said, facing the door, hand paused on the handle. “Put the security latch on.”

The door banged shut, leaving behind a charge in the air. My head swam in confusion. Mostly over the very real possibility that I may have talked Scott into marrying me.

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Scott

“I’m getting married.” It sounded strange, even to my own ears.

There. I’d done it. Announced it to the world. And still, it felt wrong. Brushing a palm over my face, I exhaled tiredly. A nuclear meltdown was developing between my eyes and it was not something a strong cup of black coffee could cure. Regardless, I tried anyway. Sitting in one of the club chairs across the couch in the office, I drank my third cup.

Meanwhile, two very blank expressions stared back at me. One belonging to Laurel who peered around her desktop

monitor. The other to Ryan who looked barely alive lying next to Romeo on the leather couch in the office. The information took a moment to clear away the early morning brain fog. Once it did, Laurel's blonde brows lowered over suspicious gray eyes while Ryan's shot up to his hairline.

"Who's the baby mama?" Laurel sounded put out. Like it was her job to clean up this mess.

Ryan's response was less concerned. "I need coffee for this." Expression unfazed, he dragged himself across the room to the kitchenette as if the mess was not his to clean up.

"There's no baby mama and no baby," I told her in a somewhat offended tone. My life might've officially gone to hell, but at least I'd managed to remain childless over the many years I partied hard.

Laurel took off her reading glasses and placed them on her desk. "What's going on, Scott? Seriously."

The conversation was making me restless. Standing, I walked to the picture window. "Neither of you can breathe a word of this to anybody else—" I stared pointedly at Laurel. "That means if you tell Pete and a word of this gets out, I'll know it was him."

Laurel rolled her eyes. "Stop being so dramatic. Pete can keep a secret."

"Pete cannot keep a secret," both Ryan and I responded in unison. Laurel's husband, the ranch's assistant manager, was well-known as the town crier. Everyone agreed Pete had missed his calling as a gossip columnist.

"I mean it, Laurel. There's a lot at stake here."

"Top secret. Got it." She made a locking motion over her lips.

“My father is retiring and has chosen someone to take his place as CEO of Blackstone.”

“Oh my gosh! You’re going back to New York?!” Laurel looked stricken, her tiny hand falling over her chest.

“Now who’s being dramatic?”

“Well then, get to it.”

“A woman. Her name is Sydney Evans.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Ryan cut in. Yawning, he ran a hand through his shaggy dark blond hair.

“The problem is the board of directors. There could be a legal battle. One that could last for years—unless she’s a Blackstone. Which is why I have to marry her. It’s either that or move back to New York to fill the position myself and I would sooner cut my throat.”

Laurel nodded as if it all made perfect sense. “I saw something very similar to this on the Hallmark Channel the other day. *Alicia Witt* was—”

“Laurel—” It was either cut her off or let my tension headache explode into a full-blown migraine.

“Fine. Continue.”

“Nobody can know the marriage is not legitimate. Nobody. You get me?”

Laurel nodded like this was all perfectly ordinary.

“It’s gonna get out,” Ryan remarked. “Mark my words. Somehow, this is gonna blow up in your face.” Ryan Sutter was as straightforward and sensible as they came. It was one of the things I admired most about him. The truth of his words hit home.

“Not as long as you two keep your mouths shut.” But the thought continued to nag. Between smartphones and social media, secrets were nearly impossible to keep these days. And, whether it was New York City or the wilds of Wyoming, people were the same everywhere—meaning nosy. “We haven’t hammered out the details yet, but she’ll be living here part-time.”

“So it’s not only on paper?” Laurel asked. “You have to live together? Like it’s a real marriage?”

“Not real. But we’ll be living together.” The words tasted bitter.

“For how long?”

“Three years.”

Laurel’s eyes went wide. “Goodness gracious.”

“Is she hot?” my closest friend questioned, which was not out of character.

“She’s my wife, asshole. No hitting on the soon-to-be Mrs. Blackstone. Nobody’s supposed to know it’s a sham marriage, remember?”

Ryan smiled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

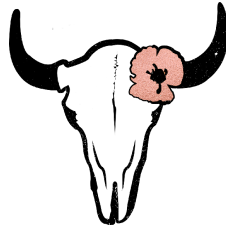
“More importantly whatever I do or don’t say in front of her, I expect you two to go along with it.” My attention darted back and forth between the two of them, driving my point home. “Are we clear on that?”

Laurel got the same expression she got when the dogs farted in the office. “What is that supposed to mean? Am I being forced to lie again?”

“The entire thing is a lie, Laurel,” I explained, exasperated. The land constantly on my mind. My father had, to my

knowledge, never once issued an empty threat. It's what made him so effective in business. "A worthy white lie. What's a few more for the greater good?"

CHAPTER FOUR



SYDNEY

“ARE YOU SURE THERE’S ROOM IN THERE FOR ME?” I ASKED the man standing next to me—the same man who was sporting a suspiciously neutral expression.

Scott had knocked on my door at 7 a.m. I’d opened it to find him leaning against the doorframe wearing a bitter smile and a black Henley shirt that clung to his chest like white on rice. “I’ve come to collect my wife,” he’d drawled, reticence all over his face. “You need to get a good look at what you’re signing up for.”

It was the first semi-wise thing he’d ever said to me.

My eyes traveled back to his vintage baby blue Ford pickup truck, the one parked in front of the hotel. Two gray dogs the size of elephants stared back at me from the interior.

“What’s the problem? You don’t like dogs?” the grouchy one asked.

“I like dogs,” I replied sharply. I loved dogs as a matter of fact and resented the snide look he gave me. “I just don’t think there’s any room for me to sit in the cab—unless you’d like for me to ride in the flatbed?”

“Listen up, babydoll. If you plan on living with me, you better get used to them. Now, are you getting in or not? I’ve got work to do.”

Had he said work? I would’ve sworn on a Bible that Scott did not have that word in his vocabulary either.

“What kind of dogs are they?”

“Irish Wolfhounds. C’mon, in you go.”

With a hand on my lower back, he nudged me forward while holding open the door of the truck. I took a few more reluctant steps, glanced inside again, and noticed that the top of the dogs’ heads grazed the ceiling of the cab.

“Are they friendly?”

“Romeo and Juliet are lapdogs.” Then, turning to the dogs, “Kids, meet your new stepmonster.”

I mean, really? I threw a glare askance and squeezed onto the bench seat of the truck with a tiny flutter of fear in my belly. Not for nothing but the dog’s head was bigger than mine. “Nice, doggo. Sweet, doggo.”

The dog next to me—the one practically sitting in my lap—panted in my face, a pink tongue as long as a tube sock hanging out the side of his mouth. And then the smell hit me. I’d bet a hundred bucks they hadn’t been washed in months.

“What’s that smell?” I asked as Scott climbed behind the wheel. There were so many competing pungent odors I couldn’t say which one was worse.

“That’s the sweet scent of ranch life, Mrs. Blackstone,” he shot back with a cynical smirk. “Better get used to it.”

Smelled like bullshit to me, both literally and metaphorically, but I kept the commentary to myself.

He tore out of the Four Seasons' driveway like his ass was on fire. The dogs slammed into me, I slammed into the door handle. There'd be bruises later but I didn't make a sound. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Scott Blackstone had no idea who he was dealing with. I'd let him discover it in due time.

“This is the southern pasture. We graze our cattle by rotation method, try to raise our beef to leave the smallest footprint on the environment as possible...”

I leaned forward, to get a direct line of sight on him since the dogs were in the way, and found a perfectly bland expression on his face. He'd been talking for hours. *Hoouuurs*. He'd shown me the barn, the stables, the storage buildings, the pastures, the pens. He'd explained that the Lazy S Ranch was named for the Lazy Snake River that ran through the property and not Lazy Scott as I'd assumed. An honest mistake when one knew the owner. He'd described every freaking blade of grass he owned.

There was no denying the drop-dead beauty of the place. God had pulled out all the stops with Wyoming. But it was early afternoon and we hadn't stopped for a cup of water yet. Not even a potty break! Thus, my appreciation for the magnificence of Mother Nature was hidden under a thick coat of resentment and a truckload of low blood sugar. I was starving and it was dropping faster than Kong off the Empire State Building.

The truck dipped and bounced. “...getting car sick?” he shouted over the music blasting from the radio. *Kelsea Ballerini* was singing something about some guy never

growing up, calling him *Peter Pan*. Which basically summed up the man sitting two dogs down from me.

We'd driven over muddy land and ditches, over hills, and bushland. It was a miracle we hadn't gotten stuck yet, and I was starting to wish we had because I'd be going Kong on him soon if he didn't cease this obnoxious game he was playing.

"...hello?"

Was he still talking? I'd tuned him out an hour ago, when my bladder started to speak up.

"Did you say something?" I absently queried as I glanced down at my phone for the umpteenth time, the coverage still spotty. That had to be remedied immediately if I was going to live here for any length of time. The work was paramount. Wouldn't it be the cruelest fate of all if I married the manchild and then was vetoed as CEO because the quality of my work fell off? That would definitely be grounds for spousal homicide.

My phone finally rang and one glance at the screen told me it was the lawyer representing my grandmother's estate, not the office as I was hoping. I sent it straight to voicemail. He'd been trying to get a hold of me for weeks, since my grandmother passed, and so far, I'd done my best to avoid him. This was after I'd explained in a lengthy email that I wanted nothing from her—from them. And yet the phone calls hadn't stopped.

"You want to get out and walk?" I heard him shout over the music.

"Sure." I was more than ready to walk back to the hotel at this point. No less had I finished speaking than the truck hit another pothole, and in an attempt to save my phone from

flying into the windshield, my forehead crashed against the dashboard.

“Heads up.” He was struggling to keep the humor out of his voice, the bastard. I looked over as I rubbed the sore spot and found him suspiciously pressing his lips into a forced straight line.

Twenty yards away, a log cabin appeared. It had a wraparound porch, a stone chimney, and was surrounded by grass as far as the eye could see. Scott pulled over and parked the pickup. Under my long black cashmere coat, I had on skinny jeans and running sneakers. Not the best outfit for traipsing through pastureland wet from a thawing layer of snow. Then again, I hadn’t exactly anticipated an Outward Bound excursion when I packed the bag I always left at the office. Most emergency trips took me to cities like Rome, Dubai, Tokyo. Not...the middle of nowhere.

As soon as my right sneaker hit the ground, it sank up to my ankle. Powerless, all I could do was watch it disappear into the muddy abyss. At least, I hoped it was only mud. By then, Scott had already walked around to my side of the pickup and stood there watching me try to extract my foot without losing my now ruined brand-new ASICS. The pretty neon orange and black shoe was indistinguishable from a pile of dog doo-doo. My gaze rose to meet Scott’s.

“Watch your step,” he said, lips twitching. Before I could respond, he turned and headed for the cabin.

You’d never be able to guess that he was getting under my skin though. I had practically invented poker face, wore calm indifference so effortlessly it had become second nature. And over the years, it had served me well. I’d been trained by the best after all. My grandparents.

There were a handful of things I could count on growing up in their house. Steady punishment for sins I hadn't committed, strict rules, and Sundays at church—the one day of the week the beatings stopped. Everything else was a myth I read about in the books I found at the town library. Scott and his antics were child's play in comparison. If this was a competition in determination and discipline, he was fighting way out of his class. I'd won the heavyweight title in my teens.

A sharp chill made me shiver, the temperature cooler than it was in New York. As I flipped up the collar of my coat, I watched Scott walk ahead with his elephant dogs trotting after him. Then I noticed the knee-high muck boots he wore, his jeans neatly tucked inside. A few minutes later we both stood before the cabin with the wraparound porch. Scott with a smirk on his face. Me with a wrinkle between my brows.

“Home sweet home,” he said, and my back stiffened.

This was his home? Impossible. Scott was a hedonist in the truest definition of the word. He loved his creature comforts. That he drove that old jalopy of a truck had initially surprised me, but then the smell and the dogs had stolen that sentiment away. This couldn't be his home. No way.

“How...quaint.”

Knocking the mud off his boots on the side of the steps, he glanced over his broad shoulder and grinned. A full-blown one with dimples and everything. Even under the neat scruff, they refused to stay hidden. It was the first time since I'd arrived that he looked like the Scott I used to know. Tilting my head, I offered him a fake one instead. The retaliation brainstorm, I'd conduct later. Possibly frame him for murder. It was worth

considering. Not before he signed that marriage certificate, though. And not before I was named CEO.

“Leave your shoes there.” He jerked his chin at a copper mud tray lying next to the front door he pushed open. It wasn’t locked and why would it be? There wasn’t anything other than cow shit, solitude, and wildlife in the hundred-mile radius.

I toed off my now brown sneakers and peeled off my muddy socks, entering with a strong dose of dread swirling in my gut. Judging by the exterior, there couldn’t be more than three full rooms in the cabin. I looked around; an exercise that took all of a second to determine I was wrong. Only two full rooms—the living area and a single bedroom across the way.

“It’s not much but it’s comfortable.” He gestured, sweeping his arm from the stone wood-burning fireplace to the kitchen located on the opposite side of the room, a handful of feet away. Shamefully, the first thought that occurred to me was...*this is where he hosts his orgies?*

Because the place was small. Shabby and small. The furniture was, hmm, best way to describe it would be bachelor-on-a budget. It reminded me of my college days. The leather couch was worn out. The square table in the corner with four mismatched chairs looked second-hand. The giant flat-screen television that hung on the wall seemed to be the only item purchased in this decade.

This was so odd. So very un-Scott like.

He waltzed in, cutting across the living room to enter through an open door on the other side, which was technically, only a few feet. With great reluctance, I followed. His bedroom was so small two people could barely move around in there. No orgies in this bedroom. There wasn’t much in the way of furniture. A sad wooden chair sat next to a dresser with

a few missing knobs. A king-sized bed with a cheap navy-blue comforter and two lumpy pillows. Thea had once mentioned that he slept on a fifty-thousand-dollar handmade mattress imported from Sweden. This was definitely not the one. He'd made the bed though. That was something.

“So, um, where will I be sleeping?” The question was begging to be asked because no way, no how were we sharing a bed.

“On the couch,” he suggested. And that’s exactly what it sounded like—a suggestion. Although it was obvious by his expression that his choice would’ve been anywhere outside the state of Wyoming. “I have an inflatable mattress if you prefer. Stacked washer/dryer is in the kitchen,” he continued with a completely straight face. It wasn’t even an exaggeration. The washer/dryer was located right next to the stove. Little did he know I’d slept in worse places.

“And where should I set up my computer? The printer? My work area?”

I’d be video conferencing with all the department heads at least once a day. Not to mention Frank and the board members and my executive team. A work space was more important than where I slept.

“The table.” He shrugged and crossed his arms over bulging pecs. If he was waiting for me to lose it and run screaming from this cabin, he’d be waiting forever. I nodded and went to check out the electric outlet instead.

“What’s the cable and WIFI situation out here? I’m getting spotty coverage on my phone.”

“It’s not the best.”

“You don’t mind if I get my tech guy out here to look at it, do you? I know you wouldn’t want to jeopardize company business,” I asked with a jaunty smile.

His blue eyes narrowed a fraction. “Knock yourself out.”

“No need. I’ll just get my tech guy out here.” More smiling. “Now, if you don’t mind. I’d like to use the bathroom.”

Scott motioned with his head and frowned when I walked by, our shoulders brushing. As soon as I made it past him, I caught a trace of his scent. Sandalwood, a touch of bergamot...musk.

It was the same scent that had claimed my attention earlier that morning when I’d opened the door only to be harassed by his virility. He’d crossed into my personal space, as he’s wont to do, before I had a chance to retreat. One sniff was all it took for the memory to come flooding back. I’d been cursed with a highly developed sense of smell, and the same way I couldn’t tolerate the smell of lavender candles or cigar smoke—because it invoked memories of my childhood—Scott’s scent brought back memories of one stolen kiss in a dark coatroom all those years ago.

Closing the door, I leaned back against it and released a sigh that emanated from the bottom of my tired soul. Absently, I glanced around the bathroom. It too was small and cramped. Faded navy blue towels hung neatly from a chipped towel bar. A gallon-sized bottle of Listerine sat on the rim of the sink keeping company with a toothbrush and toothpaste in a drinking glass.

Again, all very un-Scott like.

Where was the man who valued opulence and luxury and his own comfort above all else? Where was the happy-go-lucky loser? Maybe he'd found Jesus, I thought. Maybe the open space and clean air had driven him mad. He certainly never displayed a tendency to brood before. I didn't believe people could change their nature, but maybe Scott had channeled all of his worst qualities into something more productive and yet (unfortunately) infinitely less congenial.

My gaze fell on my polished crimson toes. Mud and flecks of grass stuck to my right foot. I'd promised Frank I'd bear Scott. For how long I could do it was yet to be determined.

"Still wanna marry me?" Scott asked as soon as he pulled the pickup truck into the Four Seasons' driveway. He shut off the engine and turned to look me squarely in the eyes. Was he trying to purposely intimidate me? If he was, I had news for him: it wasn't working.

My thoughts ran back to New York. What did I have to lose by doing this? Sadly, nothing. There was literally nothing waiting for me at my apartment other than a few condiments and a jar of cashew butter. No family. No boyfriend. No Josh. Just a whole lot of loneliness. And even Scott the Grinch was better company than a jar of cashew butter.

I could do this. My resolve had only hardened throughout the day. This new grumpy, outdoorsy version of Scott was better than the degenerate, constantly intoxicated playboy he'd once been. How or why that change had happened didn't concern me. As long as the change was *mostly* permanent—and I had good reason to believe it was—I was willing to give this arrangement a chance.

“Am I willing to marry you for the opportunity to become CEO of Blackstone?” I held his steady midnight blue gaze rendered even more intense in the darkened cab of the pickup as I spoke. He needed to see that I meant business. That I was willing to see this arrangement through to the end. “Yes.”

After a heavy pause, Scott’s eyes returned to gazing out the windshield. “It gets below zero in winter sometimes.”

“I’ll buy a North Face jacket.”

“For weeks.”

“I’ll buy snow pants.”

His jaw pulsed, his frustration bubbling to the surface. It was clear he was doing this under duress. I knew Frank was holding his inheritance over him, in which case he could’ve simply grown a pair and refused to be bought. But he hadn’t. So here we were.

“You could get stuck here. Weather’s unpredictable.”

“I’ll video conference.”

“On the property, I mean. Sometimes I can’t get into town for days. We get snowstorms well into April.”

“We’ll stock up on frozen vegetables.”

Scott drummed his thumbs impatiently on the steering wheel. “Have it your way.” He looked downright despondent, and for the first time since I’d agreed to this plan, I felt guilty.

The Ford’s engine sputtered on.

“What about holidays?” I jumped in. He seemed determined to leave and the details hadn’t been discussed. “We can’t spend holidays apart. I’ll be spending two weeks here

and two in New York for now, but you'll have to make an effort too. Otherwise the board will catch on."

I didn't know why I mentioned holidays in particular. I hadn't celebrated a holiday since I'd moved out of my grandparents' house at seventeen and even their holidays hadn't been a celebration, just another excuse to atone for sins I hadn't committed.

"Holidays?" He seemed genuinely confused by the question. Not for long though. Less than a second later it cleared to make room for an entirely different sentiment, a less neutral one. Resentment. "This is straight-up blackmail—" He shook his head in disbelief. "I'm willing to spend as little time as possible with you to make this farce appear legit and not a second more. Let 'em think we've had a rocky start. With my reputation, it shouldn't be too much of a stretch."

On the inside, each word made me recoil while on the outside there was barely a ripple on the surface, the flush on my face and neck thankfully hidden by the shadows in the cab of the pickup.

"Look, Scott...if you really can't handle it—"

"I can handle it," he shot back acidly.

I'd given him an out and he seemed even more incensed by it. No good deed...

"I'll be in Manhattan for New Year's," I started after another uncomfortable pause. *New Year's? The hell was I thinking.* My mouth had gotten ahead of me and backtracking was going to be tricky. "I usually go by your parents' place for cocktails before going to my friend's house for dinner." That wasn't entirely true, but he needn't know how truly lacking my life was.

Scott put the truck in **drive** and let it idle. “You can have Manhattan. Tell my parents I said hello.”

After giving him a quick nod in understanding, I slid out of the pickup and watched him drive away. There was a bitterness to him I didn’t quite understand. He’d changed and not entirely for the better.

A minute later I was striding barefoot across the lobby of the hotel. My ruined sneakers in one hand, the other dialing my cell. Passing a trashcan, I dropped them in and continued to the elevators.

“Miller?” I whisper-hissed into my cell.

“The one and only,” my snarky assistant chirped without missing a beat. Miller was insolent to the nth degree. He was also the best assistant I’d ever had, and that was saying a lot since I had gone through one every three months until Miller Smith applied for the job five years ago. He was also the closest thing to a friend I had. Neither of us had ever come out and said it, but both of us knew that half the time we spent together was personal rather than work-related.

“I’m in Wyoming.”

“Somebody finally grew a pair of legs and walked away from her desk. Good for you.”

“Get real, I’m here for Frank.”

A heavy sigh filtered through the phone, then a dry, “Of course, you are.”

“I need you to go to my apartment, pack up a bunch of my stuff, and FedEx—actually, I need you to bring it to me.”

“Sydney, I’m on vacation...in Miami. You remember that, right?”

“It’s an emergency.”

This time the sigh that blasted through my phone was a touch more dramatic. “Remember when you said, ‘Miller, you’ve been a model employee, completely indispensable. Therefore, not only can you finally take a fucking vacation, but after all the years you’ve served me tirelessly while I took advantage of your impeccable work ethic, I’ll even pay for it.’ Member when you said that?”

“I don’t have time for drama. I’m sending out an SOS.” I couldn’t be bothered to hide my agitation. It was finally sinking in that I was really doing this—marrying a man I barely knew. Not to mention, the little I did know I didn’t like. And it goes without saying that he definitely did not like me.

“Paul will officially divorce me if I tell him I need to get back to New York.”

“Which is why I’m going to offer you two first class tickets to Jackson Hole and a three-night stay at the Four Seasons.”

“Hmm. I don’t know...”

“I’ll throw in one of those freaking wine tasting thingies you guys like!” An older couple waiting for the elevator glowered.

“And a couples’ massage.”

“Fine.” My molars were getting a workout.

“Done. See you in a few days.”

“I’ll email you a list of things I need you to bring.”

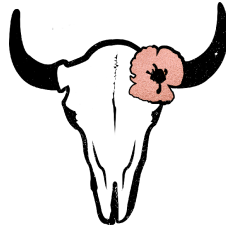
“What’s the emergency, anyway?”

“I’m getting married,” I told him, matter-of-fact, after which a meaningful moment of silence ensued. No point in acting like a victim. I knew what I was doing when I practically challenged Scott to call it off: baiting his larger-than-life ego. It had been way too deliciously easy to pass up.

“Are you kidding?”

“I’ll explain when I see you.”

CHAPTER FIVE



SCOTT

“I’VE BEEN CALLING YOU ALL MORNING,” I BARKED AS SOON as my sister answered. If anyone could talk some sense into my father, it was Devyn.

“I’ve got a major crisis on my hands right now, Scott. Chocolate Chip and Cheddar Cheese are missing! Hold on... Fallon, did you look in the pantry? Okay, keep looking.” In the background, I could hear my nieces shouting.

I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to know who or what the fuck “Chocolate Chip” and “Cheddar Cheese” were but I really needed her help, so halting the mare I was riding, I motioned to Ryan to go on ahead without me. We were rotating some of the cattle onto a different pasture and it wasn’t the kind of work you could do if your head wasn’t in the game. I always preached safety with my employees and held myself to the same standard.

Dismounting, I leaned a hand on the saddle. “I’ve got a crisis of my own to discuss.”

“Do you know what happens when the little asshole that works at the pet shop assures you that the hamsters he sold

you are both female and it turns out they aren't? No need to answer that because I'm gonna tell you—you end up with eighteen fucking hamsters in eighteen separate cages. They need constant cleaning, Scott. *Constant*. And I can't put them together and risk begetting more hamsters. Hence, Cheddar Cheese and Chocolate Chip are now missing and probably fucking their brains out. I'm living the movie *Gremlins* and it's terrifying."

Chuckling, I pinned the phone between my ear and shoulder, took off my Giants cap, tunneled my fingers through my hair, and slapped it back on. "Why don't you give them back to the pet shop."

"They won't take them!"

As much as I'd like to say that I felt sympathy for her predicament, my situation definitely trumped hers. "Have you spoken to Dad?"

"No. Why? Is he okay?"

"He's fine." I stared out at the landscape, the valley peppered with my cattle, and pride filled my soul. Everything I had was invested in this ranch, money I'd earned through stock trades. It had taken years to get in the black and I'd done it all on my own, without a penny from my parents. "He's decided to blackmail me into marriage, but otherwise he's fine."

Devyn snorted. "Really? To whom?"

"That's your reaction when I tell you I'm being blackmailed?"

"Yeah. Who's he making you marry?"

A pause before I begrudgingly answered. "Sydney Evans."

What started as quiet chuckling quickly gained strength. In between the laughter she gasped for air. Was it too much to ask for a little solidarity?

“I don’t see what’s funny about this.”

“She hates you,” Devyn barely managed to push out between a fit of laughter. “Hold on a minute, I gotta text John. He’s going to piss himself laughing.”

“I thought I was calling the last sane person in the family. Nice talking to you, Dev.”

“Aww, c’mon, little brother. Honestly, this may not be such a bad thing. It’s not like you would’ve gotten around to it on your own, and I like Sydney. It might even do you good.”

I’ve always thought of myself as a man of principles, even when I was acting like an asshole. And there were a few unequivocal truths I embraced with every cell in my body. One: I loved my country. Two: meatless burgers were a spawn of the devil. Three: the environment needed to be protected and preserved. And four: marriage to Sydney Evans would never ever “do me good.”

“Good luck with your rat infestation, Dev. Love you.”



SYDNEY

A text came in at 5 a.m. the next morning. I picked up the phone off the nightstand, glanced at the screen.

Scott: Vegas today. Be ready by 4.

I texted him back without having to think twice. It was now or never. Intuitively, I knew that if I stalled, it would never happen.

Me: I'll be ready.

By the time the Blackstone jet landed in Vegas that evening I was a bundle of nerves and I didn't understand why. Hadn't I been the one who had insisted we go through with it? Now that the plan was put into action, however, I was feeling a strong urge to run and fast. My female intuition screamed that the price for this hoax was going to far outweigh the benefits and that's what worried me most. In the past, it had seldom failed me. It also didn't help that Scott's brooding had hit an all-time high.

The short plane ride had been eerily silent as both of us worked on our respective laptops. As soon as the plane had finished climbing, he pulled it out and started typing. Floored, I couldn't stop watching him, hiding my *holy shit* face behind my computer screen. Witnessing Scott do actual work was like catching sight of a unicorn among a herd of wild horses—as impossible as it was amazing.

“You didn't invite anyone,” I said, finally breaking the silence. I couldn't take anymore and coming from someone who'd learned to control all her emotional reactions to avoid getting beaten that was saying a lot. “Don't you think it'll look shady that we didn't have any family and friends with us?”

His eyes remained directed on the screen of his MacBook Air when he drawled in as dry a delivery as I'd ever heard, “No. I don't. We're so hot for each other we couldn't wait.”

Small talk had never been my thing. I'd never excelled at idle chitchat. Generally, men loved talking about themselves and I encouraged it. In business, I stuck to my repertoire: asking about the wife, the children, and the latest vacation. I even dabbled in sports talk but not because I liked it, purely as a negotiating ploy. Problem was, I couldn't do any of that with Scott. We weren't friends, or acquaintances. We weren't even business partners. In his mind, we were adversaries and he treated me as such, with barely contained hostility.

Sighing, I stared out the small oval window over his shoulder. "Who's taking care of the dogs?"

"Drake," he'd said without further explanation.

Shut down once again, I didn't utter another word and went back to checking out the specs on a building in Kuala Lumpur Frank was considering purchasing. I could do silence. I could do silence better than anyone.

"Scott Blackstone. I have a reservation," he said to the receptionist, a pretty brunette with a coy smile. Glancing up from her screen, her doe eyes widened. So did the smile, and it was directed at Scott with the intensity of a thousand suns.

He'd turned more than a few heads the moment we'd walked into the Wynn. Dressed in a perfectly tailored navy blue suit that hugged the contours of his new muscles and expensive shades on his face, I could see why. He looked like the millionaire he was, and women dug that. It just wasn't my thing. I had no doubt that Scott had shot out of his mother's womb stunning the doctors and nurses with his Instagram-model-level masculine beauty. But to me, he was ten times

more appealing with his rugged tan and scruffy face and *body like a back road* than when he'd been getting his nails buffed.

“Yes, the ambassador’s suite. Welcome back, Mr. Blackstone,” the receptionist replied.

Of course they knew him here. I kept my disapproval to myself, however. It was none of my business what Scott did with his time—whether we were married or not.

The receptionist slid the keycards across the marble counter, and in the process not-so-accidentally bumped fingers with him. The harsh look he gave the woman didn’t escape me. It did, however, seem disproportionate for such an insignificant lapse in professionalism. Then again, I’d given up trying to make sense of him. He was just as unpredictable as his father. Which was why when he handed me one of the keys and took off without a word across the casino, I simply followed. His demeanor screamed *get away from me*. So I did, falling back.

“Scott,” I called out, slowing to a full stop while he marched ahead without any regard. I actually thought he’d forgotten about me. “Scott,” I reiterated louder, and a few men playing at a black jack table turned to watch us. Stopping, he turned and stared blankly. His animosity was a palpable thing.

“I’ll see you later...” When he didn’t speak and didn’t break eye contact, I continued. “I have some stuff to do.”

Like buy a dress. Getting married hadn’t been at the top of my to-do list this weekend. I hadn’t packed a dress suitable for a wedding.

“We meet at the Graceland Wedding Chapel at nine. Don’t be late.” With that, he turned and headed for the elevators, leaving behind a bunch of unanswered questions and one

soon-to-be wife who stood there contemplating whether I would live to regret this decision as early as tomorrow.



Where the fuck is he?

The screen on my phone read 9:30. No texts. No missed calls. Standing at the altar, I smiled nervously at Elvis, the man who was supposed to be officiating my wedding. *Supposed to be* being the operative words—meaning if Scott hadn't already fled the country, subsequently jilting me.

This was not how I saw my wedding day going. I'd stopped overindulging in fantasies of happily ever after when I came to terms with the fact that I was never going to find Josh. After thousands of dollars spent, I was no closer to knowing where he'd gone than I was six years ago when I'd hired an ex-NYPD detective to look for him. But I'd done it. I'd sucked it up and accepted it. And with the help of copious amounts of Ben and Jerry's and Grey Goose, I pulled myself out of a deep dark hole and let him go. Still...every girl has a dream she keeps tucked away in the back of her mind of what that day will be like and this was not it.

"Five more minutes and we'll call it quits," I told him through a tight smile. I'd been hoping for '50s Elvis and got '70s Elvis instead. Just my luck. He wore a gold pleather suit and the black dye he used in his hair had begun to drip down his temple, riding a bead of sweat.

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," Elvis said in a cringey bad Elvis impersonation. "I get paid either way."

Groovy. Jilted and I'm the one paying for it.

I glanced at my phone again. 9:35. Scott had bailed. It was official.

The disappointment hit me hard. The thought of returning to my empty apartment made my chest ache. And then there was Frank to consider. I hated to let him down. As I rearranged the layers of transparent ivory silk chiffon billowing around my legs, I worried over how to explain to him that I'd failed—not a conversation I was looking forward to having.

The Stella McCartney dress would go to waste. Walking past the boutiques in Aria, I'd seen it in the store window, and it had stopped me in my tracks. The high ruffled neckline made my skin glow and the length hit below the knees, which covered up the scars. I'd gotten caught up in the moment and dropped three grand on it—something I'd never done before—because in all likelihood this was going to be my one and only wedding. It had been silly to get excited about a dress, but it felt good to want something again when I seldom did.

“To want is to sin, Sydney. And we aren't going to stand idly by and let the devil take you the same way it took your mother and father. This is for your own good.”

I can still recall my grandfather's voice as if I'd heard it yesterday and not seventeen years ago for the last time. For years, I honestly believed he'd beaten “the want” out of me. Until I met Josh. With his easy smiles and long yearning stares, it was easy to want something—or someone again.

I glanced around, the chapel growing shabbier by the minute, the stem of the bouquet in my hand soggy, the blue food coloring on the cheap carnations staining my palm. I wanted to cry. Probably because every time I dared to be optimistic about anything reality strangled that inclination in its crib.

A loud bang signaled that someone had walked in. My head jerked up just as the bright red double doors fell shut. A tall lone figure stood before them. Actually, rewind, “stood” is a major exaggeration, swayed is more like it. He stumbled forward and grabbed the back of the pew for support. His hair was mussed, his suit wrinkled. There was no question what he’d been up to for the past three hours.

The music started immediately. *Can't Help Falling in Love* by none other than Elvis. My heart sank when he started to approach, slowly coming down the red carpet in an unsteady gait. Was I the first bride to stand at an altar waiting for a reluctant groom to drunkenly walk down the aisle? Probably not. And yet I was devastated, nonetheless. I argued with myself that I had no right. This was a business arrangement after all. We’d made no promises to each other. We’d both made promises to a third party—Frank. So why was I upset? With each wobbly step Scott took, the answer revealed itself.

Because I had actually started to believe he’d changed. I genuinely nurtured an embryo of hope that Scott had become a better man than the train wreck he insisted he was—that he wasn’t the person I’d met thirteen years ago—and this stunt wiped away any illusions I harbored on that front. He stumbled once again.

Hope does not reality make, and party whores are gonna party.

When he finally reached the altar, he took his place beside me. No question he was good and soused. One: I could smell it. Two: the goofy, one-sided smile he gave me was proof enough. His teeth were blindingly white, the front two slightly longer than the others. Funny how I’d always thought it was attractive on him and now I just wanted to knock them out.

“You’re late,” I told him in a tone that brooked no more nonsense. Had I set myself up for this? Yep. And I took full responsibility. But the heaping portion of self-respect I’d gained over the years dictated I put him in his place. I couldn’t just let him set this kind of precedent, to run roughshod over me. To a guy like Scott, it would be free license to keep doing it, and I wasn’t about to spend the next three years being treated like my time was worthless.

“Am I? Hmm. Sorry.” He chuckled darkly. The smile didn’t reach his eyes. The resentment was still there. Softened by large quantities of alcohol perhaps, but still there.

I turned, facing the makeshift minister, and nodded for him to begin. If Scott was angling for a scene, for me to call it off, he’d be sorely disappointed. Elvis gave his spiel and before long it was Scott’s turn to say his vows, ones he delivered with a laughing smirk and a hooded gaze directed at my lips. Then came my turn.

I was about to speak when something strange came over me. Yes, this marriage was a fraud. Yes, he’d divorce me as soon as he could without jeopardizing Blackstone Holdings. But for some reason I could not bring myself to take those vows lightly, to speak them in jest the way Scott had. So as I stared at Scott and promised him I’d be a good wife to him for as long as he’d have me, in my heart I meant every word—even if I’d never admit it to him.

Watching me closely, Scott fished a small signature robin’s egg blue pouch out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket. I held my breath and offered my hand palm up as was my custom. I never wore colored nail polish, never wore rings—never flaunted my hands. The pale silver hatch marks were

still there, my history written across my fingers. Lasers had removed most of them, but not all.

Taking my hand, Scott emptied the contents of the pouch in my hand.

A band of blindingly perfect round diamonds, the weight of it heavy. The stones caught light and returned fireworks. So pretty my heart stopped. My eyes lifted to find Scott's expression as serious as I'd ever seen it, his gaze unblinking. And in that suspended moment, I forgot all about hiding my scars. I slipped the ring on and admired it, shutting out the voice in my head screaming that I was a fraud, that it didn't belong to me, that it would cost me dearly.

It was loose, too big for my finger, and fearing it would fall off, I closed my hand into a fist.

Elvis handed me the simple gold band I'd purchased in a hurry from the hotel jewelry store. Scott hadn't given me time to ask what his ring size was before he'd walked away so I'd guessed. Umm, wrongly, as it turned out.

When I failed to get it past his knuckle, he took it from me, and with more than a little effort (and his face screwed up in pain) jammed it on. We both stared at it. His knuckle abraded. The ring choking off the blood supply. If that wasn't a sign, I didn't know what was.

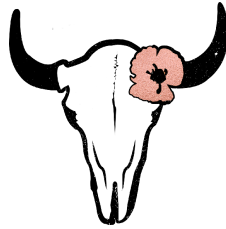
"I now pronounce you man and wife," Elvis exclaimed. "You may kiss the bride."

Scott moved fast, gunning for my mouth, but I was faster. We once had crazy chemistry and I wasn't in a hurry to find out if I'd imaged it or if I'd been right. There was no place in this arrangement for chemistry.

Turning my head in time, the kiss landed on the side of my neck, his lips softly brushing back and forth. Goose bumps rippled over my skin from my hairline to the tips of my toes. Resisting the urge to sigh in pleasure, I dug my fingers into his biceps, crumpled the fine wool of his suit in my fists. Whether to push him away or pull him closer, I wasn't sure anymore. It was as good as I remembered, and he hadn't even touched my lips. An unexpected bout of fear rose up. What if I had to live with this thing between us, this *distraction*, for the next three years?

That's when the camera flash went off.

CHAPTER SIX



SCOTT

THE SUITE AT THE WYNN WAS LARGE ENOUGH FOR AN extended family of ten. Two separate bedrooms bracketed the communal living area in between. It was so big I shouldn't have been able to hear the conversation Sydney was having in the other room. And yet, I could. Clearly. Painfully. Like firecrackers going off between my eyeballs.

"It's done," I distinctly heard.

No mystery whom she was speaking to—Franklin. They sounded like two mobsters discussing a hit job. Which was about right. My old man had already called twice, and I'd let it go straight to voicemail. The numbness had finally worn off and I was itching to give him a piece of my mind. I'd square up with him later though. Now I had a battle plan to execute.

"Stay here...for how long?" She sounded bummed. Good. She deserved everything she had coming. "Hmm...yeah..."

Groaning, I buried my head and my hangover under the pillow. If I bypassed my annoyance for a brief moment, I would admit that I liked the sound of her voice. It had body to it, a soft rasp. It was the kind of voice a man sought out,

wanted to hear murmuring in his ear at dawn when he rolled over and pushed himself between her legs, rocked his hips, and shot off to pleasureland.

Not now though. Not when it felt like she was jumping up and down on my head.

“Yeah...but I...yeah, okay...did you look over the Wilson & Bosch proposal? Okay. Got it. Bye, Frank.”

Kicking off the sheets that were tangled around my legs, I got out of bed and grabbed the first piece of clothing I could reach—my suit pants off the carpeted floor. After shoving those on with more aggression than they deserved, I stalked out of the bedroom.

And came to a hard stop.

Wearing gray running tights and a white sports bra, Sydney stood at the window bent forward at the waist with her palms flat on the glass. The tights left nothing to the imagination. The sports bra even worse. She took turns stretching one leg, then the other. My dick stirred and it shocked me so profoundly I actually looked down to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

Hadn't I determined only a few days ago that she had no sex appeal to speak of? And yet here I was with a blistering headache and a hangover, getting hard at the sight of my fully clothed, vanilla blonde wife. None of this made any sense.

Tell that to the kickstand in your pants, dipshit.

She turned and surprise briefly flashed on her face as she took me in. Then her gaze slowly lowered. No doubt she'd spotted the wood.

“I was trying to sleep,” I bit out.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I was being unfair. It wasn't her fault that, despite the hangover, my body was responding to her. Regardless, I couldn't seem to tamp down the anger surfacing. "You couldn't wait till noon for the postgame analysis with your new father-in-law?"

Man, did that sound odd. This woman—this *stranger*—was my wife. That hadn't been a nightmare. A throb of pain brought my hand up and made me grimace, my finger raw and swollen around the gold band. Jesus Christ, I had to get it off before I lost a finger to gangrene. If this wasn't a sign, I didn't know what was.

"It's three o'clock in the afternoon..." She blinked, an innocent look on her face. Her voice just as blank. Sweat glistened on her chest and ran down between her breasts to her flat stomach. My gaze got hung up there, on her breasts, my motor skills having a delayed reaction due to the absurd amount of very expensive whiskey I'd ingested the day before.

"I just got back from a run...I thought you'd be awake by now."

My gaze lifted off her body to meet hers. Rust-colored eyes held steady on me. Behind her, a cloudless sky showcased a sun riding low.

I had slept the day away.

My gaze cut back to Little Mrs.-Know-It-All who continued to stare at me blankly while she fixed her ponytail. Her calm demeanor was driving me batshit crazy. Somebody needed to shake her loose. Somebody other than me.

"I guess I overslept." I sounded apologetic. Why the fuck did I care what she thought of me? I shouldn't. I didn't. Besides, I hadn't overslept in ages. Not since I'd left New

York. I was usually out the door by five. Sometimes earlier, depending on the season. But all I could see was the veiled judgement in her eyes.

“You must have,” she returned drily.

The air-conditioning clicked on and my gaze flickered to her nipples. Hard, perfect. Damn. This was swiftly turning into a problem.

“Get dressed. We’re leaving in an hour.”

Someone who hadn’t spent the last three days observing the cold austere beauty of her face would’ve missed it—the flash of disappointment that broke through the surface calm for the briefest moment. I didn’t. Her chin tucked and her gaze fell on her hand. The one with my ring on it. That’s why I wasn’t surprised when she spoke again.

“Shouldn’t we pretend to be on a honeymoon? At least for a day or two?”

The ring was too big, a Band-Aid wrapped around the bottom to save it from coming off. She played with it, twisting it back and forth. I’d walked into Tiffany’s planning on buying the cheapest one I could find and was all set to purchase a simple silver band when some misplaced sense of pride hit me. The sales person practically screamed when I told him to swap the silver for the flawless six-carat band. What was even stranger was seeing it on her now didn’t make me want to jump out the window headfirst.

She shrugged, stretching out her sun-kissed shoulders. Her chest thrust out. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t spend any more time in close proximity to her. The hangover was making me more cantankerous than a bull in heat. Or maybe it was the

wicked case of blue balls. That wasn't helping my mood either.

“Can't. I've got work to do.”

Bottom line, the only way out of this rat trap was if *she* asked for a divorce. I'd planned to make life uncomfortable for her until my dick got involved. Attraction hadn't even crossed my mind. That plan needed to be supercharged now because I had no intention of walking around with a semi for the next three years.

“We can pretend back in Wyoming.” With that, I turned and stalked back to my room. I needed to get home. But mostly, I needed to get as far from her as this hoax of a marriage would allow.



SYDNEY

There was a chill in the air back in Jackson Hole and it wasn't just because a snowstorm had rolled into town while we were in Vegas. Scott had shut me out. We hadn't exchanged a single word the entire plane ride. With his dark aviators on, he'd stared out the window brooding for hours. By the time the jet landed, I wasn't sure he could sustain the pretense of this marriage for a week let alone three years.

After we shared wedding vows and a near kiss that had set my body on fire, he'd said, “Back to the honeymoon suite, wife,” with a dry bark of laughter. With his arm hooked around my neck, I somehow managed to get him back to the hotel without collapsing under his considerable weight. More than once, as I dragged him down the endless hallway on our

floor, I'd mentally thanked my trainer for forcing me to deadlift as part of my workout routine.

I glanced at the quiet man in the driver's seat of the smelly pickup truck that we'd left at the airport, his profile unforgiving. He seemed to have no recollection of the events of the night before. After getting him back to his bedroom, he'd begun stripping before I could make a hasty exit. And yes, maybe I did move a little slower than I should have. But he'd ripped off his shirt, exposing the cut muscles of his chest sprinkled with dark hair and a V adjacent to hip bones pointing to parts unknown, and my compass broke. I couldn't tell you which way was up, down, left, or right anymore. The last image I saw before I closed his door were those blessedly naked buns of steel of his. One had to wonder what he did to get muscles like that.

The scratching of claws on a hardwood floor and doggy whines could be heard on the other side of the front door of the cabin. Scott pushed it open and motioned to the far side wall. "The inflatable mattress is in the closet. Sheets and towels too."

What a gentleman.

The elephants danced around us, almost knocking me off my feet. Scott practically got on all fours to greet them. He spared not a single word for me, but for the dogs he frolicked like a six-year-old. That irked.

"Can you give me a ride into town tomorrow?" I dared to speak, hating to be at his mercy until I figured out what I was going to do about a car. Normally, having to rely on anyone gave me hives, but I was good and stuck. I hadn't anticipated Frank asking me to stay a while, to lend the story credence. "I need to buy a few things before my stuff gets here."

First order of business was to purchase a pair of Hunter boots. I walked to the vintage refrigerator and opened it. A few bottles of water and ketchup. Second order of business was groceries.

“Take the truck. I’ll have one of my guys pick me up.” It was more than he’d said all afternoon. “You get the bathroom first.” Without sparing me another glance, he walked into his bedroom and slammed the door shut. Welcome to marriage.



SCOTT

“What in sweet Jesus’s name happened to your finger?” Laurel called out from somewhere behind me.

I hadn’t heard her walk into the office, too busy inspecting the finger in question. The one looking worse by the hour. I turned away from the coffee pot I was about to reach for and held up my left hand. By the looks of it, if I didn’t get the godforsaken thing off soon, I’d have to have it surgically removed.

“Don’t just stand there, Laurel, help me get this off.”

She gave me a brisk nod. “Hold on, I got this.” A minute later she returned with a big jar of Vaseline, slathered a glob of it on my finger, and twisted the ring back and forth until it slipped off.

“I don’t wanna know why you have a tub of that in your desk drawer but thank you.” Flexing my hand, I groaned in relief. “You’re an angel.”

“Remember that when I ask for a raise,” she shot back.

Grabbing the coffee pot, she poured two cups and studied me critically while she drank hers. I didn't like it.

“So...how'd it go?”

“I'm married,” I told her, adding a shrug while I wiped the excess Vaseline away with a paper towel. I couldn't muster even the slightest bit of fake enthusiasm. “It went.”

“When do I get to meet her?”

Best I could do was a noncommittal grunt. I didn't want Sydney involved in my life any more than she already was which was too damn much already. As if on cue, the woman who wore my ring waltzed through the door of the offices of the Lazy S wearing a pair of running tights—black this time—and a matching fleece that she must've bought in Vegas because it had the Wynn logo over her heart.

She turned her head, ponytail bouncing, and smiled when she saw me. It was immediate and reached her eyes, making her look about ten years younger and the opposite of the uptight bitch I kept mentally accusing her of being. That tentative smile punched me in the chest. Which naturally made my face look like I'd eaten bad shellfish.

“Good morning,” she said, addressing both of us.

“You must be Sydney,” Laurel exclaimed in a chirpy voice and left me in the dust to shake my new wife's hand. She never sounded chirpy when she spoke to me. I made a mental note to speak to Laurel about an attitude adjustment.

Crossing the room, I sat at my desk, and from behind the screen of my desktop, studied Sydney as she shook Laurel's hand. *Shit*. My wife was beautiful I belatedly realized. Karma was laughing in my face and screwing with my best-laid plans.

I'd checked in on her when I snuck out at four in the morning. Buried under three blankets, she was sound asleep on the inflatable mattress on the floor with the dogs surrounding her like two parentheses. I'd been around women like her all my life. Rich, pampered, used to getting what they wanted at all costs. And I was certain the ice princess would've had her small bag packed, sprinting to the hotel by now. Or even better, back to New York. And yet here she was in my office, invading my space, unbothered by it all.

The two women smiled at each other as they talked. Then Sydney turned sideways, and I nearly swallowed my tongue. Skin. I could see skin. A transparent stripe of material ran up the sides of her tights.

Chrissake, had the guys seen this?

As a general rule they missed nothing where a woman was concerned, especially a beautiful one walking around the property in see-through leggings. If she was going to spend time here, I couldn't have her running around distracting my men with revealing clothing. Ranching was dangerous work. Someone could get killed if their attention lapsed because of a pair of long sexy legs and a blue-ribbon ass.

My dick stirred and I bit back the urge to swear out loud.

"What is that?" a regressive Y chromosome impelled me to say out loud. Both women turned to look at me. Laurel glared while Sydney's forehead wrinkled, my tone clearly knocking the poise out of her. Sadly, only for a brief moment. A beat later she shook off the confusion and leveled a flat stare on me.

"What are you wearing?" I clarified.

“Leggings...and a fleece,” she said, announcing it slowly—like she considered me an idiot.

“Your *pants* are see-through. I can see skin. You can’t wear those here.” My jeans were growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“That’s New York fashion, Scott,” Laurel cut in, having appointed herself my wife’s attorney less than a minute after meeting her. “Or have you forgotten already?” Then, turning to Sydney. “Those are real cute.”

“I could bring you a pair when I get back from the city,” my wife offered with a smile. I didn’t like it.

“Oh no, sweetie. You gotta have long legs to wear those and I’m barely five feet.”

“Scott, that old sunavabitch bull...” Ryan walked through the door and stopped short at the sight of Sydney standing in the middle of the room, his voice fading to silence as his unblinking eyes openly appraised her.

Removing his work gloves, he stuck his hand out. “Ryan Sutter. Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Blackstone.” The last was said with a teasing note in his voice and a good-for-nothing, one-sided grin. I didn’t like it, my temper sparking.

Smiling, Sydney shook his hand. “Call me Sydney.”

I didn’t like that either.

Ryan’s smile grew wider, the right side lifting to mirror the left side. “Will do.”

“Ryan—” I finally barked because I didn’t like any of this shit.

Ryan’s attention reluctantly turned to me. “Tiny is giving us trouble again. Won’t breed and won’t let any of the younger

bulls near the ladies. I gotta take him out.”

“Take him out?” Sydney suddenly spoke up, a concerned look on her face.

That look called to all the reasons she didn’t belong here. Why she didn’t belong with me. “Babydoll, look around you. This isn’t Woketopia. If having animals ethically put down is an issue, you’re not going to like living on a working cattle ranch.”

Silence. Both Laurel and Ryan frowned at me. Sydney simply stared. Not even a vague semblance of a reaction to my microaggression. Could I have said it with a little more delicacy? Maybe. But I was fresh out of patience—my erection being the primary cause, an erection that I was too damn old to be having in the middle of the day.

Ryan gave Sydney a sympathetic smile. “I meant put him in a smaller pasture by himself. Problem is, he gets harder to handle when he’s all by his lonesome. Gets meaner—like most males.” My best friend aimed an accusing glare my way. “But we don’t have a choice at this point. He hurt one of the younger bulls pretty bad.”

“Let’s give him another week to see if he’ll breed,” I told him. “If not, we’ll have to get rid of him.” I put my head down, went back to pretending to check out the inventory spreadsheets. If I continued to stare at my wife, I’d embarrass myself. Meanwhile, Ryan crossed the room to pour himself a cup of coffee.

“Pete and I would love to have you over for dinner this week,” I heard Laurel jabber on. “Tomorrow night, Scott?”

I looked up from my computer screen to find both women watching me.

“Can’t tomorrow.”

Laurel’s face pinched. “Wednesday then.”

Lips pressed tight, I scratched under my chin. “I don’t know. I’ll have to see.”

“Friday,” Laurel tried once again, her lips thinning.

“I’ll let you know.”

My gaze flickered over to Sydney. She was wearing her go-to blank expression while Laurel and I went at it.

“Sydney—” Laurel started when her impatience with me reached critical level. “Why don’t we go to lunch on Friday. I could show you around town. Would you like that?”

Relief spread on Sydney’s face and an uncomfortable feeling parked itself over my chest.

“That would be great. Should I meet you here?” she said.

“Works for me,” Laurel cheerfully replied. What the hell was there to be so cheerful about? “The drive will give us time to get to know each other.”

Fuck. I had to put a stop to this. “Don’t we have the feed delivery coming that day?”

Laurel leveled me with the same expression she gave little Pete when he misbehaved and was close to crossing the line that would earn him a whooping. Little Pete was ten.

“No, Scott. It’s comin’ on Thursday. And Imma tell you right now that I’m taking an extended lunch on Friday.”

Before we could exchange another barb, Sydney stepped forward. “I’m actually here to let you know that the water heater’s broken.”

I expected her to be overwrought about it. Instead, I got indifference.

“I had to take a cold shower this morning,” she added, not even mildly upset.

She didn’t say anything about the furnace. I’d jimmied that too. And barely slept. First, the mattress was arguably the worst on the planet. Second, as it happened, we had our first serious cold snap last night. I’d snuck out early, to take a shower back at my place, but how long could I sustain that before she caught on? This plan was already starting to backfire and I was only on day one.

“Send Drake to the cabin to check on the water heater,” I told Ryan.

“The cabin?” Ryan echoed, the question edged with confusion.

“Yeah, the cabin. Tell him to go check on it.” My tone said no more questions. So did my face.

Sydney made for the door. “I’m going grocery shopping. Can I get you anything?”

Then she hit me with that single malt whiskey-colored stare of hers, the type a weaker man could get drunk on and turn amenable to persuasion. Good thing I wasn’t that guy.

“No.” Jan, my housekeeper, did all the food shopping. I wouldn’t know where to begin.

“Okay, well, text me if you think of anything later.” Then, after directing a, “Nice to meet you both,” at Laurel and Ryan, she walked out.

The silence didn’t last long.

“I like her!” Laurel jumped in as per her usual, her face lighting up as if she just hit triple diamonds on a slot machine. Whether her opinion was wanted or not didn’t factor. “She’s real sweet and pretty.” An examining, squinty look came my way. “You didn’t say anything about her being so pretty.”

“She’s gorgeous,” Ryan spat out around a mouthful of doughnut. Sinking onto the couch, he exhaled longingly. That earned him a glare. “What? She is. And don’t pretend you don’t agree. If you two weren’t married, you’d be all over her.”

And wasn’t that a kick in the head. Because Ryan was right. Had I not been forced into marriage I could’ve maybe dated Sydney. Explored this attraction. It was a moot point now though. She was my father’s accomplice in this injustice done to me.

“That woman’s a shark,” I told them in no uncertain terms. “My father says she’s the best legal mind he’s ever known. You know what that means? That she’s a master manipulator. Don’t let her fool you.”

“Damn, you’re worse than Tiny.” Ryan shook his head with an expression that said he pitied me. He could keep his pity and I would keep my dignity. “If you don’t want her, I’m happy to take her off your hands. She can manipulate me all she wants.”

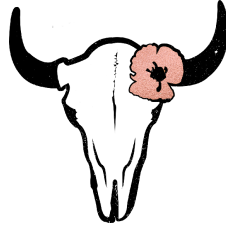
Another uncomfortable feeling. This one crawled over my skin, but I schooled my reaction. Any evidence that I was feeling even the smallest amount of possessiveness over my wife would only incite more taunting. “We’re not keeping this one. I’m sending her back to where she came from.”

“For ef’s sake, she isn’t a rescue dog.” Laurel was back to glaring at me.

“I don’t wanna know what you’re cooking up,” Ryan jumped in. “Keep me out of it.”

Picking up the phone on my desk, I dialed my sister’s number. While it rang, I placed a hand over the mouthpiece and fixed Laurel with a pointed stare. “Don’t get attached.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



SYDNEY

AS I DROVE THROUGH TOWN, PASSING THE FAMED ELK ANTLER arch on my way to the grocery store, a splash of color in a store window caught my eye. Something about Jackson Hole pushed my boundaries. Back in Manhattan, my life was structured down to the minute. My position at Blackstone, with its immense responsibilities, required it. Even my spare time was carefully planned down to the minute. Exercise, bills, grocery shopping. There wasn't much room for anything else. But for once, in this place that seemed both foreign and familiar, I didn't ignore the urge to drift, to indulge. To just be.

I parked the pickup and wandered around, window shopping the art galleries on E. Broadway. My eyes reveled in the colorful large-scale abstract paintings, the impressionistic depictions of classic cowboy culture, the statues, and handblown chandeliers.

My old friends guilt and shame followed me around. I could always count on them to show up whenever I didn't have my nose to the grindstone. I doubted they would ever go away. Having been trained at such an early age to believe that anything that made you feel good was inherently evil was

impossible to completely root out. About as easy as straightening a bone that had grown crooked. Any attempt to fix it was unlikely to succeed and with the trying would come a lot of pain.

“Would you like to come in and take a closer look?” a man in his mid-fifties with a bushy red beard and a happy twinkle in his hazel eyes said to me. He stood in the doorway of one of the galleries, hands in the pockets of his khakis leaning against the doorframe. Either the owner or manager, I assumed.

My eyes drifted back to the surrealist painting in the window. It was large, spanning the entire storefront. The background was a collection of scenes painted in sparkling jewel tones—a jungle scene, a city, a beach, and more. The naked female figure, however—the one in the middle suspended amongst the colors—was painted in shades of gray. The skin on my arms broke out in goose bumps. The image hit way too close to home.

Most of my life up until the day I left Pennsylvania had been a black hole of anything that remotely resembled pleasure. The food my grandmother cooked was purposely bland and tasteless. Boiled chicken with no seasoning. White rice with no seasoning. She made sure to only buy the pieces of beef at the local supermarket that nobody wanted even though we could afford better; my grandfather owned a local car dealership. She’d then cook it until it was as tough as shoe leather and serve it up with a smile as if it were Michelin-rated fare.

“*Find pleasure in uprightness, Sydney,*” she’d say over and over.

Most of the time I choked it down only to avoid a beating.

And the clothes? The ones my grandmother bought me could've come from an Amish fashion catalogue, if there was such a thing. White long-sleeve blouses and black pants. Wool for winter and cotton for summer. Calf-grazing dresses. I lived in a pretty remote town. My high school was relatively small and not at all on the cutting edge of pop culture. But even in a town where some guys routinely came to school dressed in deer hunting fatigues I stood out as "one of the weird ones."

"Come take a closer look," he urged.

"No...I..." I glanced over and met the patient gaze belonging to the man in the doorway. "It's beautiful but I...I wouldn't know what to do with it." A pressing need to get away, to get back to the safety of routine, had my feet moving before I'd finished speaking.

By late afternoon I was back at the cabin and immediately started on dinner for the both of us. A peace offering of sorts, let's call it. I was determined to show Scott that there were a few perks to this marriage.

So we didn't get along. So he held a grudge. I'd dealt with worse. Much worse. How hard could this be? What were three years in the grand scheme of things?

As soon as I'd moved out of my grandparents' house, I developed a rabid interest in all things food related. Having been denied the good stuff for so long, I made it my mission to learn how to cook, teaching myself how by watching YouTube videos and reading cookbooks. And since it had more to do with my palate and less my stomach, it resulted in piles and piles of food my roommates and neighbors were more than happy to take off my hands. By the time I was working full-time for Blackstone, cooking had become my happy place, a safe way to turn my brain off and act on impulse, my way of

decompressing from all the stress of the corporate culture Frank fostered.

“People are at their best when pitted against each other, Sydney. They either excel or break.” Frank’s exact words. I didn’t agree, but I wasn’t about to argue with a man that had already built a global empire by the time he hit fifty.

Aside from my house being overrun with sweets and baked goods—baking was my favorite by far—there was very little downside.

Scott walked in around early evening already freshly showered. Which, frankly, at first got some serious freaking side-eye. Then I figured it would make sense for him to have a shower in the office, right? Thinking about the odors he would pick up working cattle on a hot summer day made me nearly gag.

His wet hair was swept back and as black as sin. His eyes a startling deep blue against a fresh spot of color on his strong cheekbones. His flat stare migrated to the small table pushed up against the wall. Over the two place settings of mismatched plates and cutlery. Sky blue asters I’d bought at the supermarket sprouted out of a glass Coke bottle in the center of the table. The snow had thawed enough for me to rummage out back and I’d found it amongst a pile of discards: a rusted red wheelbarrow, a weathered wood planter, shovels, and old chicken wire. I’d also discovered a relatively new four-wheeler in a small attached shed.

My make-believe husband frowned. This was not looking good.

“I made dinner. I hope you like risotto.” I’d taken special care to julienne the squash and zucchini angel hair thin. I’d even added a touch of nutmeg—something I’d freestyled.

After all the years of following cookbooks, I'd finally started putting my own personal touches on my favorite recipes. What was inconsequential to most people was a big deal for someone as structured as this girl.

Before he could speak, or more specifically decline, I filled one of the bowls with a chipped rim and held it out for him. Scott took one look at the zucchini risotto I'd lovingly slow-cooked, stabbed it with his fork, stuck it in his mouth, and said, "It's missing something." After which he marched into his bedroom and emerged ten minutes later dressed in dark jeans that hugged his ass like they were custom made for him and a white dress shirt that played up his tan—no doubt meant to make all the women in the county fall back with their legs spread apart. All with the exception of his wife.

My stomach sank.

"I'm going out," he announced, avoiding eye contact.

One day into the marriage and he was already ditching me. "Is that a good idea?" I asked, voice trained low in a desperate attempt to hide my rising anxiety. If the press caught wind of this, they would "out us" as frauds immediately. "I mean... technically we're supposed to be in the honeymoon stage."

His indigo eyes met my brown ones without a shred of remorse in them. "Probably not." He shrugged and jammed his wallet into the back pocket of his jeans. "Then again, I'm known for my bad ideas." Grabbing the dusty blue pickup's keys off the counter, he stalked to the door. But he wasn't done. Nope. Right before he stepped over the threshold, he made sure to give me one last swift kick in the teeth. "Don't wait up."

As the door shut behind him, I wondered if clowns were common in this neck of the woods.



SYDNEY

He'd told me not to wait up and I hadn't. Not the first night, not the second, not the third, and so on and so on. Once again, sandwiched between his big hairy beasts, I'd slept like the dead and awoke early, ready to hold my daily video meetings with New York. The dogs stank to high heaven—a condition that was going to be remedied as soon as Amazon shipped the dry dog shampoo I'd ordered. The inflatable mattress was lopsided. The sheets scratchy. And yet I couldn't remember getting a better night's sleep. Despite the odors, particularly their feet which *strangely* smelled like Doritos, I even adored Romeo and Juliet. Partly because they were the only company I had, and partly because they were the sweetest goofballs.

All in all, I was beginning to enjoy the quiet. The stillness. It wasn't the forced kind I'd learned to use as a safeguard against the beatings, but rather the type the soul craves. Somehow, Jackson Hole had readjusted my axis. Here, I was an alternate version of myself, an unscripted one who could relax for more than sixty seconds.

“Don't let him get to you. He's just a surly kinda guy.” Laurel's tone was genuinely sympathetic. “He don't mean nothin' by it.”

It was the day of our lunch date and I'd gotten a super early start that morning. Which was followed by yet *another* cold shower. The furnace hadn't been fixed either. And as always, Scott was already gone when I woke up so I couldn't ask him about it. And to add insult to injury, my texts usually went unanswered.

Whatever good Wyoming had done me: slowed me down. It had done the exact opposite to Scott: it had lit a fire under his ass. His work ethic had improved tenfold. Secretly, this fascinated me. There was hardly a trace of the old Scott left... well, with the exception of his whoring around at night.

I glanced over at the woman sitting in the driver's seat of the fully loaded cherry red pickup. Her perfectly manicured, short mint green fingernails drummed on the steering wheel keeping beat with Lennon Stella's *Bitch*. Laurel was a petite woman with a big bust and short spiky blonde hair. Her small sharp features were covered in distinct strawberry blonde freckles that gave her a girlish appearance even though I assumed she was in her early fifties, the fine web of lines near her eyes the only evidence of her age.

My thoughts ran back to Scott, to what had happened the night before. What Laurel claimed wasn't entirely true. First, he certainly *did* mean something by it. Second, Scott was not a "surly kinda guy." He never had been. Not until he'd moved to Jackson Hole apparently.

"He never used to be."

"He's got his panties in a bunch over his father. You know male ego—" Looking over at me, she smirked. "It's a delicate creature, meant to be handled with care. Look at it the wrong way and it goes soft."

"Are we talking about ego?"

"Mostly."

An image of Scott walking into his parents wedding anniversary black-tie party at the Rainbow Room wearing a shit-eating grin and his arms dangling around the necks of two razor-thin models, his tuxedo shirt pulled out of his pants, and

red lipstick smeared on the bottom of it flashed before my eyes. Laurel didn't know her boss as well as she thought she did. His ego was more than healthy. Which naturally prompted me to wonder if Laurel knew about the orgies. Unlikely, judging by her expression.

“How long have you two known each other?” she asked with a super sleuth twinkle in her round gray eyes. My ability to read even the smallest change in demeanor or facial expression was fine tuned in a house where you either learned and evolved or face the consequences at the end of a stick. So yeah, Laurel didn't stand a chance.

“Over ten years. I've been working for Frank—Mr. Blackstone—since I graduated from law school. Before that, I interned for him.”

“And he wasn't like this when you met him?” Laurel's skepticism was all over her pixie face.

“Nope. He used to be the life of the party.”

This seemed to be news to Laurel. A foreign sense of loyalty kept my mouth from spilling any more secrets. If Scott wanted to keep his past in the past, who was I to upset his plans. I certainly wouldn't take kindly to someone doing it to me.

“Scott. Scott Blackstone—a party animal?” The bewildered doubt that colored her tone pulled a slow smile out of me.

“Yep.”

Sighing deeply, Laurel stopped drumming her fingernails on the steering wheel. “Real talk?”

“Sure,” I said, but instinctually the guardrails went up. I didn't have any close friendships outside of Miller. I'd spent

most of my adult life competing, outsmarting, and generally seeing human nature for what it really was: selfish and self-serving. Which was why it was hard for me to trust anyone.

“I know about your arrangement with Scott. He told me and Ryan.”

I suspected as much, and if Scott trusted them then I assumed I could too. “Then you know it’s important we keep this to ourselves.”

“Scott’s been real good to me and Pete. The prior owner was a gigantic prick. He cut all our salaries and put the money in his pocket. Gambling habit. That’s why he was forced to sell, praise Jesus—” Laurel gestured with raised hands, briefly taking them off the steering wheel. “I’d never do anything to betray Scott.” Her gaze shifted back and forth between me and the road. “I pride myself as a good judge of character and I can tell you’re gonna be good for him. That boy is clueless when it comes to women. He thinks he’s smart, but he ain’t.”

Boy? I tamped down the urge to smile at the memory of how Laurel had handled Scott in the office the other day.

“It’s only business... We’ll eventually get divorced.”

“He thought it was casual with Misty, but I saw the way she looked at him—” Laurel continued right over me as if she hadn’t heard a word. I, on the other hand, had heard Laurel perfectly.

“Misty?” It’s not like I was jealous, of course I wasn’t, we didn’t have that kind of relationship. Still, the news that Scott had someone needled me regardless.

“Someone he was datin’ a while back.” Laurel sneaked another glance. “Like I said, nothing serious.”



On Monday, Miller arrived. We were to meet in front of the office of the Lazy S. The cabin was impossible to find unless you knew your way around the property, and I wasn't about to lose the best assistant I'd ever had and the closest thing to a best friend to wildlife. Though I shouldn't have worried on that front. In his usual brutal efficiency, Miller arrived at the ranch safe and sound in a rented fully loaded pickup truck.

The sun was out full blast that day, the weather remarkably warm for December. I was leaning against the powder blue Ford, sipping my coffee, when he pulled up with his arm hanging out of the open window of a silver pickup, his angular features arranged in a wicked smirk.

“Do I look mega-butch or what?”

Miller was hardly a bruiser. More on the refined side of handsome, with wavy chestnut hair and hazel eyes. He had a preppy frat boy quality to him despite his twenty-nine years on the planet.

“Very macho,” I remarked with a wry grin. “Even in your Burberry collection tartan puffer jacket.”

When Miller began working for me, I caught him on more than one occasion flirting his ass off with my secretary. And two accountants. And a paralegal. All women. So it never occurred to me that he was gay. Not until Miller—in typical Miller fashion—started openly gabbing about his love life, or lack thereof. He'd said it was a product of having grown up gay in a particularly tough section of Pittsburgh where you could attract a world of trouble if you didn't stay hidden in plain sight and grow eyes in the back of your head.

The hiding in plain sight had struck a chord. Some hid behind beauty, some behind humor, some outrageous behavior. I hid behind the tight control I exerted over myself, a product of my childhood, and Miller behind his all-American-guy routine. Maybe Scott was hiding too.

Hopping out of the vehicle, Miller scanned the parking lot and the stables off to the side. It was lunchtime and a bunch of the ranch hands were sitting at a picnic table stuffing their faces, their interest fixed on the new Mrs. Blackstone and her guest.

Arms crossed, he leaned against the Ford next to me. “I’m getting a serious *I wish I knew how to quit*chu vibe.”

I smiled around the rim of my travel mug watching a large figure on horseback approach while Miller threw a coy look at the men watching us.

“I hate to break hearts but I’m a happily married man.”

“How is Paul?”

“Enjoying the hot tub in our room with a *Brokeback* mountain view.” His attention turned on a dime. “Okay, where is he?”

I knew exactly where *he* was. My attention had been split between my assistant and my husband since Scott had trotted up to the barn. I motioned with my head at the man on the buckskin horse across the parking lot. “The tall one getting off the pale horse.”

Scott was obviously a skilled horseman, handling the animal as if it was second nature, and something about that both surprised and impressed me.

Where the heck was the man I’d once known? The one who never got out of bed before noon. The one whose idea of

being outdoors meant hanging out on the Blackstone yacht sunbathing. Which made me wonder if the drunken wedding debacle had been an anomaly.

“You should let him go down on you,” Miller said, studying my husband.

Grimacing, I took another sip of my coffee. “We’re not sleeping together.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I’m married to him.”

“Sometimes you’re so heteronormative.”

Snickering, I told him, “It’s probably all hype anyway. He probably sucks in bed.”

He gave me a look that said *yeah, right—get real*. “That mouth could suck a watermelon through a straw. I’d bet my balls it’s not hype.”

I nearly choked on my French roast. “Miller...”

He patted my back until the coughing fit slowly subsided. “Trust me, I’m an expert on the subject.”

“I’m not sleeping with my fake husband.” I’d explained the ruse to my friend because there was no way Miller was going to buy the lie. Knowing me as well as he did, he’d never believe that I’d fallen in love with a stranger and done something as rash as get married within a week—or ten for that matter. It would be so out of character for me as to be inconceivable. “That would be the absolute dumbest thing to do.”

An image of Scott’s hard body moving over mine flashed in my mind’s eye and I swallowed, my hand automatically going to my throat. “Worse than marrying him to begin with.”

While Scott took the saddle off his horse, I checked him out. I studied the way the soft fabric of his jeans hugged the swell of hard muscle beneath. The way the thermal shirt pulled against his traps and shoulders. It wasn't the first time I'd caught myself enjoying his body from afar. The man shed pheromones like fleas off a junkyard dog. Was it any wonder I was catching an inconvenient case of lust for my husband? I was only human after all.

Last night was a particularly embarrassing example. My face flashed with heat just thinking about it. I'd been working late on a contract revision and, needing to stay awake, I decided to take a cold shower around midnight. Not that there was any choice with the water heater still on the fritz.

I'd opened the bathroom door to find Scott—who looked to have recently come in from his nightly tomcatting—in the hallway naked, save for his underwear. At first, both of us stood there frozen, unsure what to do. Then his gaze slowly lowered, and his eyes claimed every square inch of exposed skin my bath towel couldn't hide as if it were his right...as if he wanted to touch me. And I hadn't fared much better. While he was busy doing his thing, I practically pulled an eye muscle trying to keep my gaze above his waist.

This unwelcome sexual tension between us had all the subtlety of a one-ton Angus bull, and as such, I was sure it was going to start breaking shit soon.

“Besides...” I watched the network of his back muscles flex. “He likes me as much he likes...” My voice faded to silence when Scott turned and spotted us leaning against the parked blue pickup—and he didn't look at all happy about it.

His flinty gaze moved from my face to the red running tights I was wearing in a slow deliberate manner. The heated

examination was no doubt meant to intimidate me. It failed in that regard (I mean, really?) but it did, unfortunately, have the unintended consequence of setting my body on slow burn.

“Hello, daddy,” I heard Miller mutter under his breath. I heard it despite the incessant drumbeat of need throbbing between my legs and the blood rushing in my ears. He wasn’t even my type, for heaven’s sake! I’d always kept men like him—the ones driven by emotion and instinct—at a safe distance. They tended to be volatile and unpredictable and I had no room for that BS in my life. My childhood was one unpredictable moment after another. Which was why I had always been attracted to mellow guys, the ones ruled by reason and intellect. Ones you could talk to. Guys like Josh who were sweet and kind and humble. None of which described the man who was presently glowering at me.

Scott said something to the ranch hands that I couldn’t make out. They all suddenly found something else to gawk at, so it wasn’t too difficult to surmise what that could be. Then he set off across the parking lot heading straight for us. His loose-gaited stride ate up the ground like he owned the stuff beneath his feet, and in Scott’s case, that was true most of the time, which made it a wholly eye roll-worthy experience for the rest of us who didn’t.

“Didn’t we have a discussion about your clothing?”

He glared at my leggings as if I’d worn them to personally offend him. I was going to do it one of these days, pin a murder on him, maybe even a heist. Why did every exchange between us feel like a challenge to a duel?

“If you could take a breather from being a royal pain in the ass for two whole minutes”—I gestured with a hand—“this is Miller, my assistant.”

“Yeah, nice to meet you.” He jerked his chin, barely spared Miller a passing glance before his disapproving expression returned to me. A shaft of sunlight hit his face, highlighting the hard angles of his face, his eyelashes casting shadows. A handsome royal pain in the ass. There was no denying it.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Miller returned, and I bit the inside of my cheek because I knew what that tone meant. The sarcasm got Scott’s attention too—and Miller closer scrutiny. Scott turned on him again, openly assessing my friend. This time with an expression meant to put Miller on notice.

“How long are you in town?”

Miller Smith had an I.Q. of 148 and a gift for reading people. He was wasting his life away as my assistant and I often told him so. Despite the sordid stories I’d told him about Scott over the years, he knew Scott was not someone to be trifled with.

“Only a few days. My husband needs to get back to work.”

One word was all it took to magically transform Scott’s aggression into dispassionate acceptance. Without further remark, his attention returned to me.

“Your clothes are distracting my men. That’s dangerous for them. Don’t wear those”—he stabbed an index finger at my tights—“around here again.”

Ignoring his behavior was the only way to go. Any sign that he was affecting me would only encourage more of it. “We’re going into town. I need to buy a pull-out couch. I was hoping you could help us pick it up?” Nothing. I got nothing but a flat stare from him. “Perhaps...at some point?”

He smirked. “If you’re looking for a beast of burden, look elsewhere, babydoll. I’m a rough ride and you’ll end up black

and blue.”

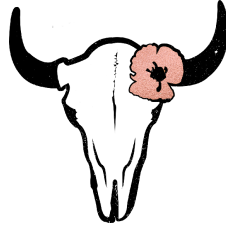
If it had come from anyone else, I would’ve laughed. But this was Scott. He may have been serious. “So you fully admit that you’re a jackass?”

“Nice meeting you,” he said to Miller. Then he marched past us, up the steps, and disappeared into the office. I glanced over at my one and only ally in this cluster of a situation.

“Isn’t he dreamy?”

“You should definitely let him go down on you.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



SYDNEY

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS MILLER AND I WORKED NON-STOP. Essentially, I had to take the two secretaries, two phones, countless files, a laptop and a desktop, fax, printers and scanners I had at my disposal 24/7 in my Manhattan office and condense it all into a mini home office built on an unreliable thrift store table that was more appropriate for hobby jam-making than serving as the satellite office of a Fortune 500 company. Regardless, we did it. We also purchased new linens, pots, pans, and the infamous pull-out couch—which I had delivered for obvious reasons.

Something had to be done about the living situation, however. I couldn't continue to sleep in the living room indefinitely. Problem was, I hadn't been able to pin down Scott long enough to discuss anything with him. The last time I had mentioned it he shrugged it off.

“This is where I live,” he'd said. End of conversation.

It was like trying to reason with one of the bison I'd seen roaming the property.

On Miller's last day in town, we decided to hit the Handle Bar at the Four Seasons for lunch. I walked in, glanced around, and what I found might as well have slapped me across the face.

Scott was sitting at the bar dressed in dark jeans and a navy sports jacket with a white dress shirt underneath. The only time I ever saw him in something other than flannel and worn Levi's was when he went out at night doing God knows what with God knows whom. But that wasn't even the worst part. That wasn't what made a deep sense of disappointment settle low in my gut.

He was smiling broadly at the bartender, an attractive woman with a waterfall of black hair and a heart-shaped face. It was a genuine smile that reached his eyes, making them wrinkle at the sides, and put his dimples on full display. It was a smile I recognized because it was the same one he'd given me right before he'd kissed me in the coat room at his sister's wedding.

Coming to stand next to me, Miller glanced around. "Syd, what's..." His voice petered out when his gaze tracked mine across the room to the bar. Without a word, I made a sharp right, walking in the opposite direction to the hostess stand, and Miller followed. We were seated in direct line of sight of the bar, and for the rest of the meal a dark cloud settled over us.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" Miller finally broke the stalemate. We'd both done our best to not discuss the elephant in the room, the one sitting at the bar laughing it up with the sexy bartender. Because she was. She was everything I wasn't: cheerful, sexy, uninhibited.

Miller glanced over his shoulder, at my new husband who looked like he was enjoying himself going by the looks of his shoulders shaking with laughter. “No job is worth being humiliated by an overbearing fuckboy.”

One look at my friend and I knew there was no getting out of this discussion. And a lie was not going to cut it here. Miller was too perceptive.

“The company line or the real answer?” When Miller didn’t speak, I exhaled and continued, “Remember what it was like for you before you met Paul?”

“Mmm,” he said, nodding. “There was a hole in my life.”

“I’ve always felt that way...always.” Nervously, I splayed my hands on the table top, an old trick I’d often used to keep from fidgeting. “I don’t know how to feel any other way and I guess I wanted to try.”

Reaching across the table, he squeezed my hand which had been lying as flat and motionless as my face. “You can do a lot better than that asshole.”

I glanced up and caught Scott watching us from over his shoulder. He tipped his beer bottle at me and turned back around. He didn’t pretend to be anything other than what he was.

“I could do a lot worse too.”



SCOTT

I rolled down the window of the shitty Ford I kept for the ranch hands. God did I miss my brand-new Ram 1500. I missed my house too. And I sure as fuck missed my mattress.

Time to face the fact that I might've been torturing myself more than I'd inflicted any pain on her. Lack of heat or hot water hadn't sent her packing. Neither had the sleeping arrangements. Or my demeanor, for that matter. She was winning, I had to grudgingly admit to myself. Sydney Evans was made of tougher stuff than I was. Sydney Blackstone, I meant. Damn, that still sounded strange.

A storm was approaching and not just the metaphorical kind. The air had bite to it and was as crisp as the gunmetal gray, late afternoon sky.

I felt bad. I shouldn't. I argued with myself that I owed her nothing. Zero. Zilch. And yet I couldn't help feeling a nagging sense of shame for getting caught having a good time with Misty.

A meeting with one of my biggest clients had run overtime. Last winter we lost a couple thousand head of cattle to the bitter freeze and I was forced to raise prices. The client had to be finessed. After the meeting, I swung into the Handle Bar for a quick bite to eat, and Misty happened to be working the lunch shift. Pure coincidence. She never worked lunch. And even though there was absolutely nothing going on between us—nor would there ever be again—it still felt somewhat...wrong.

But, hey, more than likely Sydney didn't give two shits whom I kept company with. She'd even offered to draw up a pro bono NDA as I recall. Meditating on that seriously pissed me off. Who would've ever thought that the idea of an open marriage would piss me off? Not me. That's life, I guess. You never stop learning.

It turns out I was a lot more conventional than I thought I was, the blame resting entirely on my parents' shoulders. I

didn't agree with them on much, but their marriage was something to be admired. They were a team, partners-in-crime, loyal to each other above all and anyone else. Even their children. I was a married man now and whether that was by choice or not didn't factor. I felt married down to the marrow of my bones. The thought of cheating on my wife turned my stomach. The thought of her cheating on me made me want to break things, specifically the other guy's skull.

In the distance, a flash of color caught my eye. The image sharpened into a familiar pair of red running tights and my foot fell heavier on the accelerator, an unfamiliar *proprietary* feeling rising up. Go figure.

I pulled a U-turn when I passed her and coasted alongside, the pickup keeping pace as she jogged with her earbuds in. Rolling the window down, I waited a bit, determined she was going to purposely ignore me, and decided I didn't like being ignored. "Can you please turn down the music?"

No answer. She refused to acknowledge my presence. Nor did her brisk jog break rhythm. Interesting. Maybe she wasn't as down with my extracurricular activities as she'd suggested. Warmth spread in my chest.

"What are you doing?" I tried again.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Yep, she was mad. Satisfaction joined the warmth. My mood improved markedly. "Trying to become lunch meat for any of the black or grizzly bears that routinely step out of the park. There are still a few around that haven't gone to bed yet."

Sydney stopped cold in her tracks and pulled her earbuds out, and I hit the brakes on the rust bucket Ford. She wiped the

sweat beaded on her brow with the sleeve of her black jacket and tilted her head as she inspected my face.

“Are you kidding?”

“No, babydoll. I am not. And as much as I don’t want to be married, I want to be a widower even less.” All this with a straight face. Her already flushed face turned beet red.

“Would you stop calling me that—*sweet nuts!*”

Sweet nuts? A chuckle broke out of me. Somebody had finally lost her cool and it was about damn time. A genuine grin split my face. It must’ve disoriented her because hers went blank for a moment, but only for a moment because almost immediately she shook the stars out of her eyes and a killer glare took its place. “Stop what you’re doing at once.”

“What am I doing?” My grin automatically grew bigger.

“Your mental warfare is not going to work with me.”

“I have no idea—”

“One minute you’re on your period—the next you’re trying to charm me with a pair of dimples and those *damn* eyelashes.”

This had me legitimately confused. The fuck did eyelashes have to do with anything? “Again, I don’t—”

“So unfair!” Her arms flailed as she paced in circles.

This was too much fun. Even more than I’d hoped for and vowed to redouble my efforts to make her lose her cool more often. I was trying to sort out why she took issue with my eyelashes when she started ranting again.

“I’ve worked my *ass off* my *entire* life for this and I won’t *allow* you to spoil it for me!” She was really steaming now.

The new Mrs. Blackstone went savage when she was angry. “I’m not one of your groupies, Scott. I’m not a *clown*! I’m a first-rate negotiator and a damn good lawyer!”

A clown? The last thing I would ever consider Sydney was a clown. Reminding me she was a bloodsucking lawyer, however, did put a dent in my amusement.

“Don’t remind me.”

“Apparently, I have to!” She stopped pacing, stared. “You know what, I’m done being patient with you.”

As I watched her take off down the road at a hard run, her blonde ponytail swinging back and forth, a feeling of helplessness wiped away my amusement. She might very well be the next CEO of Blackstone, but out here I was the expert. It was my job to keep her safe and I’d be damned if she was going to get herself hurt on my watch. It needed to be made crystal clear to her that I was in charge, and I was just the guy to do it. Jumping back in the truck, I tore down the street and cut her off.

“Go away, Scott.” A moment later she was in my arms. “Have you lost your—ahhhh!! Put me down!” Hauling her over my shoulder like a sack of feed, I walked around to the passenger side, opened the door, and gingerly placed her on the bench seat.

“I wasn’t kidding.” I wedged my body between the passenger door and the open road to block her escape while she glared at me. “If something happens to you out here, no one is coming to the rescue.” And I meant it. Mother Nature was fierce and had to be respected. A cavalier attitude out here could get you killed.

She straightened in her seat and stared out the windshield, face smooth, the subtle tightness of her jaw the only indication of her temper tantrum. “Take me back to the cabin please.”

She was back to doing her favorite impersonation of an ice sculpture. So be it. I slammed her door shut and climbed behind the wheel of the pickup. I was in the right. I knew I was, and yet I couldn't shake this feeling that once again I was being framed as the bad guy. Still, amends needed to be made for my behavior lately.

“Don't run at dusk. Bears are more active then, and with the warm spell we're having, more are hibernating late. Late morning is safer. Don't run without your phone, keep the music on low volume, and have bear spray with you *at all times*.”

I reached over her legs, popped open the glove compartment, and my arm inadvertently brushed the top of Sydney's thigh. She exhaled sharply and moved her legs aside. Not fast enough for me to miss the reaction though. Briefly, I entertained the possibility that she wasn't as immune to me as she'd led me to believe.

“You're crowding me.”

Maybe not. Wishful thinking. The ice princess was about as likely to be sexually attracted to me as I was to Bigfoot Jojo—one of the ranch hands. Jojo was called Bigfoot not for his size but rather his abundance of body hair. So yeah, zero chance.

“Misty's just a friend,” I began. It was the best I could do considering I'd never had a wife before...or a girlfriend in nearly two decades. She started humming a vaguely familiar song. “What song is that?”

Send In The Clowns and don't insult my intelligence."

"It's the truth."

"You sure were enjoying yourself."

"Sometimes I enjoy the company of the women I've slept with—past tense."

Fuck. I shouldn't have said it. Not like that, anyway. Like I was trying to stick it to her. I knew it was wrong the moment the words left my lips, and yet I was incapable of controlling myself around her. The colder and more controlled she became the more I lost it.

Grabbing the spray can, I handed it to her. "Don't get eaten."

Why did that sound lewd?

This woman had a knack for throwing me off my game. I hardly recognized myself these days. When I left New York, I vowed to make changes, to be a better person. A better man. And yet lately I was routinely acting like a dick. I glanced sideways at my wife. With any luck, she hadn't noticed, probably didn't care either. She was in it for a job.

Slamming the glove box shut, I made a U-turn onto the deserted road.

"What made you like this, Scott? You were never bitter before."

I kept my eyes on the road ahead. There went that theory.



SYDNEY

“What the hell is this?”

I glanced up from the Greek yogurt I was eating on the couch, my furry compadres seated next to me, and innocently tilted my head as I inspected the framed painting Scott was holding up. Tugging my rainbow-colored knitted trapper hat lower, I sighed. If it wasn't for the hat and fingerless gloves Miller had sent me as a wedding gift (cheeky bastard) my teeth would've been chattering.

“I asked you a question. What happened to my bedroom?”

Revenge decorating. It's a thing. Look it up.

Basically, I was fed up and not going to take it anymore. He'd humiliated me not once (with the scene at the Handle Bar) but twice (by picking me up like I was one of his chattels and throwing me in the truck). Enough was enough. His nightly escapades. The cold. The solitude. I was close to cracking. Something had to be done. And so I did it. He wanted to get under my skin? I could get under his skin too. His skin would become my favorite thing to wear and I didn't mean it in a dirty way.

“I thought I'd spruce up the place a little.” I licked the spoon. A lot of eyelash batting.

To call his expression bewildered would be doing the look on his face a disservice. For a moment there, I thought his head was going to explode. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from out-and-out guffawing.

Thank you, Amazon Prime.

“You thought hanging these hideous paintings of clowns in my bedroom would qualify as ‘*sprucing up the place*’? Are you trying to give me nightmares?”

My eyes fell on his bare chest, his jeans hanging low. Sigh. His body was playing tricks on my body. Despite the cold, I gushed like broken pipes. I needed to feel the touch of another human body, stat. Before I really lost it.

“Well?”

He'd waltzed in a little after 1 a.m. and did a double-take when he saw me sitting on the couch—wide awake. I'd made it a point to wait up because I had to see his reaction for myself.

“You don't like them? They're originals...painted by orphaned children in Chile.”

Lie. They were embellished prints from China. They were butt ugly and spooky as shit. I think one of the clowns may have had fangs.

“Have you seen the movie *It*, Sydney? Because I have. No, I don't like them. I don't like clowns.”

“Couldafooledme.”

“What?”

“I said, I'm sorry. I thought the room looked a little...*drab* and needed a little, you know, *joy*.”

His eyes narrowed. He strode back into his bedroom and returned with all three paintings stuffed under his pits. Then he went to the front door, opened it, and pitched each one out into the deep dark of night. The front door slammed shut.

“You shouldn't litter. That's like...environmentalism for beginners, dude.”

“Don't do any more sprucing!” Back into his bedroom he went.

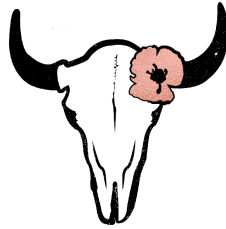
“It’s my house too!”

He strode back out, holding a silver picture frame. His color high, his jaw pulsing. “Why is there a picture of a donkey on my nightstand?”

“I thought you’d like it.” I shrugged—innocently. “You like horses...and cows.”

He blinked, walked to the trash can in the kitchen, slammed his bare foot on the pedal. The top popped up and he dropped the frame in. Back into his bedroom he went. The door slammed shut. I fell asleep with a smile on my face that night. A few days later, things escalated.

CHAPTER NINE



SYDNEY

“THIS IS BULLSHIT!”

Romeo barked and climbed onto the couch next to me. My eyes veered off the contract on the MacBook Air I’d been staring at for the last half hour, and onto my furry friend.

“You agree, right?” I asked my bud, yanking the thick wool beanie down over my ears. The cabin was freezing *again* even though the furnace was *supposedly* working. I begged to differ. I even tried to build a fire in the fireplace. Yeah, that hadn’t gone so well. I almost killed us by asphyxiation.

“Wanna watch *Poldark*?”

Juliet barked and climbed up next to me, jammed her big butt against my hip. “I know we’ve seen it a thousand times, but there’s nothing else to watch.” Juliet’s ears perked. “Don’t look at me like that. *Demelza* got a hall pass because he cheated first. Fathered a child, no less. Cuz men are dogs—no offense.” Another bark-like sound, this one from the only male in the room. “What? *You know I don’t speak Spanish, Romeo.*”

This was what my life had come to. For the next three years, this was going to be a typical Saturday night for me. And I'd done it to myself.

My so-called husband had, once again, deserted me and taken the pickup truck with him. My mind kept drifting to Scott—as it often did. He'd apologized for Misty. In a manner of speaking. And he'd particularly said “past tense.” I surmised that meant he was no longer sleeping with her, but what about the rest?

With the rare exception of our wedding night, he'd been out every single night since we'd returned from Vegas. Exactly twenty days. Within that time frame, I'd read ten books. Which was not a good ratio and said a lot about the state of my marriage. It was a pretty good bet we wouldn't make it to the end of the year, let alone three. Not to mention, neither would my e-reader. It was ready to spontaneously combust from overuse. Inevitably, it would catch fire and burn me alive.

Woman Killed by E-Reader! the headlines would say. *And Loneliness.* But they'd leave that part out because nobody wanted to be reminded that everybody was at least a little bit lonely.

I was flying back to Manhattan tomorrow for my two-week stint at the office, the glossy onyx-colored Blackstone jet already waiting for me at the airport. And sadly, it was a relief. I'd gotten married, had uprooted my life, put up with cold showers and lack of heat, endured the unpredictable mood swings of a cranky millionaire playboy-turned-cowboy, and yet nothing had changed. I was as alone as I'd ever been, with the exception of his two hairy beasts who I was going to miss desperately while I was away. Their master—not so much.

Romeo planted his big head on my lap while Juliet kicked me. “Girl, stop kicking me with your cheesy feet.” I stroked Romeo’s wiry fur and inhaled the scent of baby powder. “Dry shampoo, a modern age miracle.”

Yeah, this was bad. Except I had a nagging suspicion that returning to Manhattan, to the life I had before Frank had talked me into this crazy scheme, was going to be worse. Because what was I was going back to? A sterile apartment and some bottles of condiments. Not exactly a warm welcome home. Still, this wasn’t much better. Cabin fever is a real thing.

An image of the four-wheeler in the shed flashed before my eyes.

“*Ask and ye shall receive, Sydney.*” It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell my grandmother that the few times I’d asked God to grant me some mercy and spare the rod, he hadn’t listened. I never did though, couldn’t risk another rap of the wooden spoon on my knuckles.

I wasn’t going to let Scott shut me out anymore. He was angry. Got it. Message received. It wasn’t like I was imposing rules on him. I’d made allowances for him. Tried to sympathize. I’d even given him the green light to pursue his... hobbies. Or whatever it was that he did at night when he hightailed it out of the cabin. He didn’t want this. Fine! I was done being painted the villain. My motives may have been unclear—he thought I was doing it for the job, which was only partly true. His motivations, meanwhile, were purely mercenary. Who was the real bad guy? And why should I stay cooped up while he was out gallivanting?

I jumped off the couch. Twenty minutes later, dressed in black skinny jeans, a tight black cashmere sweater with a

down quilted vest over it, and my motorcycle boots, I stomped out to the shed, a woman on a mission. I mean, really, I'd graduated valedictorian of my Yale law class. I'd driven a Vespa that summer I backpacked through Europe. How hard could riding an ATV quad be?

A pair of goggles hung from the handles. I slapped those suckers on, mounted the vehicle, and turned the ignition key, ready and willing to make that quad my bitch.

An hour and a half later...

For the record, an ATV quad is really hard to ride. What was a comfortable thirty minute car ride was an uncomfortable ninety minutes of uninterrupted shaking between my legs in an off-road vehicle. Which, in hindsight, was probably why it was labeled *off-road* and where it should have stayed. The first ten minutes had been fun. After that, it swiftly went downhill. I was already halfway there when I realized I'd made a serious miscalculation. By then, it was too late to turn back.

When the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar finally came into view, I was ready to fall to my knees and thank God for the first time in decades. Parking between two muddy pickup trucks, I dismounted the vehicle from hell and stumbled, my ass hitting the frozen sidewalk, a silent scream shaping my lips.

A pair of cowboys walked by and examined me curiously without breaking stride. "You need help, ma'am?"

"Nope. Just chillin', but thanks for your concern." I waved and they walked into the bar.

Ripping off the dirty goggles, I tossed them aside. I could barely see through all the gunk. In fact, I was covered in it. My clothes. My hair. Thus far, this outing had been an unmitigated

disaster. Nothing, however, not a four-wheeler, not even a mud bath, was going to stand in my way of having fun. So I did what I always did when life got messy—I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and pushed on.

Inside, the bar was wall-to-wall people. Tyler Rich's *Leave Her Wild* pumped through a large room. The decor was wild west meets Hollywood, the crowd equally eclectic. Most of the locals were dressed in classic western attire—checkered shirts, tooled belts, and pressed Wranglers. The out-of-towners from L.A. and New York were easy to spot in their designer, off-the-runway clothes.

I found an open seat at the bar and heaved a sigh of relief as I settled on a stool. Just being among people felt good. The bartender, an attractive guy around my age with olive skin, dark eyes, and a nose that looked like it had been broken one too many times came over and placed a napkin with the bar logo in front of me.

“What can I get you, ma’am?”

It had to be said that there was something panty-melty about being addressed as ma’am in that sweet drawl. The big smile didn’t hurt either.

“What do you recommend to take the edge off as quickly as possible?”

Attractive bartender nodded. “I have just the thing.” He started grabbing bottles. Meanwhile, the guy sitting in the stool next to me, a big burly redhead with bloodshot blue eyes and ruddy cheeks, tipped his chin in greeting while he unapologetically checked me out. His gaze paused on my diamond wedding band while he brought a bottle of Budweiser to his lips and sipped.

“Randy—” he said by way of greeting. “How long you been married?”

Smiling tightly, I gave him the only honest answer I could. “Not long.”

Enough to be sitting here with you, I thought to myself.

In an alternate reality I had a real husband who couldn't keep his hands off me or my privates and we had great friends and took fun vacations. Not in this one. In this one my husband had orgies that didn't include me. He touched other people's privates.

Whatever. Randy didn't need to know there was trouble in paradise.

An hour later, after getting a detailed blow-by-blow of all three of Randy's divorces, I was starting to regret ever coming out of the cabin.

“I woulda gone to counseling....” Randy croaked, expression completely befuddled. “I woulda if she gave me half the chance...” Burp. “...but she didn't, said she needed someone that *shared her interests*...” He air quoted. “Maybe she coulda *shared* that her *fucking interest* was gettin' double teamed before she decided to marry me...” Burp. “Bitch.”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. Glancing to my right, I found a cowboy staring right back. And not just any cowboy, nooo, this was the kind of cowboy a bad, lonely wife could drown her sorrows in. In theory, I mean. I could indulge in fantasies of playing bad lonely wife, but in real life I could never betray anyone—not even a man I had no claim on and who didn't want one on me.

Principles are a bummer. Stay away from them, kids.

My eyes widened as I took in impossibly gorgeous cowboy's face. Tilted green eyes under winged dark brows, a deep tan, a jaw that could cut diamond into ribbons, and a mouth made for sinning. How this guy's face wasn't on a Times Square billboard was a mystery. He was young too. Early twenties, I estimated by the fresh face and tall lanky build. As my gaze ran down his body, I took back every disparaging remark I'd ever thought about checkered shirts and tooled belts.

Impossibly gorgeous cowboy pulled out his phone and typed. Then he showed me the screen.

How's the water heater working?

The guardrails went up. "How do you know about my water heater?"

He typed again.

I'm Drake Wayland

Drake. An uncommon name that sounded familiar. Then I recalled Scott mentioning a Drake.

"Yes! Oh my God, thank you so much for fixing it." He stared at my mouth as I spoke, which got me thinking... "Are you deaf?"

He nodded, then typed.

I can read lips. You should take my number in case it breaks again.

And then he smiled, a wicked smile. One that could wreck a woman or two.



SCOTT

“I’m already at the end of my rope and I’ve only been married three weeks.” I glanced up from my tumbler of whiskey at Ryan who looked distracted, his gaze aimed over my shoulder. I was sick of sitting at home watching games and thinking about my wife. Correction: thinking about what I wanted to do to my wife. So I’d called Ry to grab a beer and Ry seldom went anywhere without his adopted little brother in tow. “I’m leaving. Where’s Drake?” I checked my phone. Was it late enough? Had Sydney gone to bed? I couldn’t risk seeing her walk around half-undressed again. I couldn’t risk seeing her at all.

“Trying to pick up a smoking hot blonde, I think,” Ryan absently answered.

“Good. She can drive him home.” I downed the last of the Macallan 12 and pushed the glass forward on the table. That’s when Ryan gave me a look I didn’t like.

“What has Sydney been doing while you’ve been hanging at your place?”

“Working. Making plans to take over the world...” I shrugged. “Perfecting her ice princess expression in the mirror.”

Reading cookbooks and figuring out new ways to make my dick hard without even trying, I mentally added. It wasn’t for Ryan’s consumption. Nobody needed to know that I was

softening toward my fake wife. My heart was—everything else was as hard as steel.

“She talks to the dogs a lot.” Was it weird that I envied the dogs? Probably.

“I don’t think she’s cold.”

“Yeah, maybe you could stop having a thing for my wife.”

“Can’t help it.” Ryan raised his beer bottle to his lips and stopped short. “Have you even considered that maybe she’s cold to you because you’re a dick to her?”

“No. I haven’t.”

That was a lie. Sydney wasn’t half as bad as I wanted to believe. Save for the cabin being clean and the aroma of food worthy of a five-star restaurant permeating the air, I wouldn’t have known she was there. Well, that and the perpetual erection. Can’t forget that. Worst case of blue balls I’ve had since I was thirteen.

Which I chalked up to not having gotten laid in far too long. And yet I felt disinclined to go looking for it—a sentiment I wasn’t ready to examine because entertaining the idea that my vanilla wife was the only woman that did it for me was out of the question. That would make me screwed and not in the way I wanted to be.

Needless to say, I hadn’t gotten much sleep. Every night I went to sleep hard. Every morning I woke up that way. I was a thirty-eight-years old, grown-ass man. I paid my taxes on time. I’d slept with models and movie stars in my sordid past, even a genuine princess once. And I couldn’t even jerk off in my own cabin because I didn’t want my *fake wife* on the other side of the wall to hear me. Three weeks and this arrangement had already become unsustainable.

Also, it had to be said that she had terrible decorating skills, but I couldn't hold bad taste against her. I wasn't that petty.

"You sure she hasn't been out?" Judging by Ryan's flat expression, something was up.

"Sydney? Out?" A bark of dry laughter shot out of me. "No. Even if she wanted to, I've got the truck."

Ryan nodded, his mouth twitching. "So she couldn't...let's say, go to a bar if she wanted to?"

I didn't like this line of questioning. Whether it was bogus or not, Sydney was my wife, *my wife*, carried my name, wore my ring, and I didn't take kindly to anyone speaking ill of her. Even my best friend.

"No."

"I found Drake, by the way." Ryan tipped his chair back on two legs and took another pull of his beer.

"Yeah?" Craning my neck left and right, I scanned the room. "Where is the little hustler?" Loved the kid, but Drake had earned the nickname Cowboy Casanova for good reason.

"At the bar, talking to your wife."

My head cranked around just in time to catch Sydney making eyes at my twenty-one-year-old ranch hand.

The fuck?

I stood and charged without a second thought to consequences, to how it may or may not look. How the hell did she get here? And while I was busy contemplating that mystery, what else had she been up to while I'd been at my place, parked on the couch watching games?

Drake saw me coming before Sydney did. When she finally did notice me standing behind her, she swiveled around on her barstool. A smile lit up her face and an unfamiliar feeling of joy slammed into my chest, briefly disarming me. I'd been living under a dark cloud for so many years I'd forgotten what it was like to feel good, and this woman with her rare sunshine smiles reminded me of what I'd been missing.

Problem was, she almost never smiled at me. With everyone else, she doled them out frequently and indiscriminately, but not her husband. Much later I'd admit that I both liked it and it also scared the crap out of me. Mostly because I wanted to bask in those smiles, hoard them. In the moment, however, fear made me act like an asshole.

"Hey, look who I finally met." She tipped her head at Drake who smiled like the cat that had eaten the canary and licked his fingers clean.

Are you fucking kidding me? Go find your own wife, I signed.

Drake signed back, *I'm too young to get married. Still sowing my oats.*

Which prompted me to immediately reply, *Then go sow them in someone else's wife, you little shit.*

Drake laughed.

"What is he saying?" Sydney asked Drake while Drake's attention remained on me. "Scott, what are you saying to him?" Drake's focus swung back to Sydney. Lifting her hand to his lips, he placed a kiss on the back of her knuckles and Sydney beamed.

Watching her get played by the ranch's resident manwhore-in-training got my blood up. Before I could break it up, Drake dropped her hand and walked away.

"How did you get here?" I barked, rounding on her. It came out way harsher than it should have, but I didn't like surprises and finding Sydney out and having a grand old time was definitely an unpleasant one.

"It's nice to see you too." She smiled again. Mrs. Blackstone smiled with her whole face, not like the Botoxed beauties I was accustomed to. Her grin stretched from ear to ear, her teeth were even and white, and her eyes became crescent moons. I needed to see it again and often—directed at me obviously—and resolved to make her smile more.

"I asked you a question."

Maybe that wasn't the way to do it because her smile faltered. Then she erupted in laughter. That's when it dawned on me. The smiles, the giggles. She was drunk.

Spotting Tony behind the bar, I signaled him over. "Did you serve my wife?"

Tony looked surprised. He should. I hadn't advertised my new marital status.

"Uh, yeah, man," Tony warily admitted, his deep-set brown eyes shifting between me and Syd.

"What exactly did you serve her?"

"Tony—" Sydney cut in. "Don't listen to him. He's not the boss of me. As a matter of fact..." She giggled some more. "...as a matter of fact, I'm the boss of him." She aimed another bright grin at me. "Technically I am, Scott. Or I will be."

Her laughter was infectious. It chipped away at my vow to keep her at bay and I found myself almost smiling back.

“Three Long Island Ice Teas,” answered Tony.

“They were yummy. Thanks, Tony.”

While Tony smiled at my wife, a meaty hand slid into the small space that separated her and me. “I’m Randy. Pleased to meetcha.” I glared at the outstretched hand. Then I glared at the man attached to the hand because...what the fuck, seriously? The hand retreated.

Sydney hooked a nonchalant thumb in the general direction of the guy seated on the barstool next to her. “This is Randy. He’s been divorced three time.” She held up three slender fingers in my face. Taking them gently in my hand, I lowered them, not letting go once they were out of my line of sight. Touching her felt good. Too good.

The humor melted off her face as her warm brown eyes held mine. Unguarded. Earnest. The vulnerability I saw there cut me wide open. Her lips pursed a little before she spoke.

“I don’t wanna be divorced, Scott...not even once.”

In one breathless suspended moment, I simultaneously wanted to give her anything she asked of me and take away everything she cared about. I didn’t think she was capable of being vulnerable and something about it called to me. Which made me mad. Because I hadn’t forgotten what this was about—a promotion. She was a world-class manipulator, and I was nobody’s mark.

“Are you here alone?” she asked in a quiet voice.

I shook my head and she tucked away all the emotion she’d let me see. She’d misinterpreted what I’d implied—that

I had female company—and I did nothing to correct her. It was better this way. For both of us.

“Mrs. Blackstone,” Ryan intoned. I glanced over my shoulder to see Ryan wearing an indulgent grin meant for me. My mood took another downturn. “Always good to see you.”

“Mr. Sutter,” my drunk wife drawled in return as Ryan ambled closer. “Likewise.”

I leveled the bulk of my annoyance at my best friend. “Are you done? She’s drunk and I need to get her home.”

Ryan’s hands went up. “Just wanted to tell you that we’re taking off. See you tomorrow.” He winked at Sydney and left.

Sydney’s attention was back on me, where I liked it. Reaching over, I plucked something out of her hair and inspected it. Dirt. Which prompted me to examine the rest of her clothes. The tight black jeans that hugged her athletic legs were covered with it as well. Without thought, I brushed some away on the inside of her thigh and heard her breath catch. Our eyes met and the tension expanded. It seemed to have a life of its own.

I hadn’t anticipated attraction. Yes, I’d felt desire for her all those years ago. But back then I could have said that about any number of women. This, whatever it was that was going on between us, was different. Now my brain controlled my actions instead of my balls. Which was why I couldn’t understand the strong visceral reaction I was having to a woman I should’ve despised for upending my life.

“I’m taking you home.”

She didn’t argue. In easy compliance, she slid off the stool and waved at Tony. Taking her hand in mine, I dragged her out

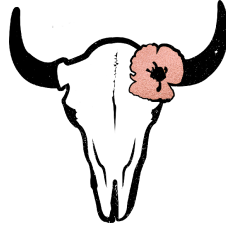
of the bar before Randy could start in again. Two minutes later, we stood in front of my mud-covered ATV quad.

“In this?” I had to ask. I wasn’t sure if I should be impressed or worried about her reasoning skills. “This is how you got here?”

She smiled at me again, all proud of herself. “That’s how I got here.”

Damn, she was cute when she was drunk.

CHAPTER TEN



SCOTT

THE DRIVE BACK TO THE RANCH WAS TORTURE IN MORE WAYS than one. First and foremost, my jeans were feeling more than a little snug. Second, I was shook. The further we drove the more I thought about her late-night excursion and the million terrible things that could've happened to her while I was busy congratulating myself. And the more I thought about it the worse my mood got.

“What you did was dangerous and stupid.” I didn't have it in me to finesse it. And yeah, when the hell did I start sounding like my mother? “I have another pickup you can drive. I don't want you walking, running, or riding anything off this property.” Her eyes were closed, a soft smile shaped her lips. “Syd? You hear me?”

“You didn't seem to be worried the last few weeks.” She lowered the window and tipped her head back, the cold December air whipping her hair in every direction.

Where was the woman who had arrived in Jackson Hole without a hair out of place? Where had the ice princess gone? She looked laid-back and carefree. She looked like she

belonged here. I'd done everything to make her miserable enough to beg for an annulment and she hadn't. Every attempt I'd made to make her as uncomfortable as possible had blown up in my face. Trying to convince her to call it off sure as shit hadn't worked. All I'd accomplished was to put her life in danger. Shame washed over me and held my head under until I was choking on it.

“Have you been out in that ATV before tonight?”

“No...tonight was a first. I finally hit my quota of boredom. But rest easy, I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm off your hands for a couple of weeks.”

I hadn't realized it was time for her to headed back to New York. Probably a good thing. We needed to cool it, stick all the hot feelings growing between us in a freezer. At least I did. Maybe when she returned, we could work out a compromise. It wasn't her fault I was attracted to her.

“Look—”

“It's okay, Scott,” she was quick to interrupt. “I told you I wouldn't interfere with your social life and I meant it.” She started humming a vaguely familiar song. It took me a while, but when the chorus hit, I recognized it was *Tears of a Clown*.

“You're humming again.”

“Am I?”

The woman had a weird obsession with clowns.

I stole another glance at her. Slouched on the Ford's bench seat, long legs parted with her face tipped back, her fingers tapped on the door handle. She wasn't classically beautiful and that made her all the more compelling. Her lips weren't full, the bridge of her nose was a little bit wide, and she had a soft cleft in her chin. Still, it all came together to make her more

than beautiful. She was so damn attractive she made me want to stop and stare, to discover what else I'd missed.

She turned to face me, and a lazy content smile spread across her face.

I wanted to kiss her. I'd never wanted to kiss a woman more and that said a lot since I'd been kissing women since the tender age of thirteen. And yet I couldn't because I was married to her. Because it would *complicate* things. That piece of illogical bullshit annoyed me to no end but there it was, reminding me that I was an adult now and no longer making decisions based on the wants and needs of my dick. All this I told myself while the jeans I wore strangled a fast-growing hard-on.

"Home sweet home," she murmured, her raspy voice laced with humor.

The cabin was suddenly before us. I parked and turned the engine off. In the dead of night, out in the middle of nowhere, every sound in the cab seemed amplified by ten. The mingled sound of our breathing, the soft hum of Maren Morris's voice drifting from the radio. The tension was back and escalating quickly, so were the longing-packed looks. Something had to give.

"Forget it. We're not having sex. It's a bad idea." My lips formed the words before I could think twice.

She sat up straight, stiffly. "Who said anything about sex?"

"Your eyes, Sunshine. You keep looking at me like you want me to slowly peel away every piece of clothing on your body, kiss a path from your ankles to your sweet pussy, and worship your perfect breasts." She inhaled sharply, her chest

rising and falling. “Then, if you asked nicely and *only* if you asked nicely...I’d fuck you.”

The pale skin of her throat caught a ray of moonlight, the tendons moving as she swallowed. She wasn’t as immune to me as I’d first thought. Good. Why should I be the only one to suffer from unrequited lust. God knows, I was suffering. I watched her fight to get herself under control, to tamp down her reaction to me.

“I don’t recall you ever playing hard to get. Quite the opposite actually.”

A slow smile grew on my face. “Is that an invitation?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re not my type.”

“What’s that? Barely legal?” The chance that Sydney might like men as young as Drake made me want to snap a two-by-four in half.

Her lips turned up in an insolent curl. “Deeper than a spray-on suntan.”

I hadn’t been this turned-on in ages, or had more fun arguing, and I didn’t want it to end. I didn’t want to crawl into bed alone. I didn’t want to listen to her talk to the dogs on the other side of the wall. I didn’t want to imagine her naked. I wanted to *feel* her naked. Under me. Over me. Any way I could get her—I’d take it as long as I got to touch her.

“The second time I’d take you rough...” My mouth started running on its own again. “From behind. I’d sink into you hard and deep and leave bite marks on the curve of your shoulder. Slap your ass a couple of times just in case you forgot who you married and started entertaining thoughts about a ranch hand who’s too young to know that you don’t shit where you eat.”

Her nostrils flared and her lips parted, the lower one glossy from where her tongue had darted out. A primal thrill shot through me. This was going to happen and maybe, just maybe, I'd get this dangerous urge out of my system. Then we could put this inconvenience behind us and go on as business partners.

“Am I the only one that recalls what happened last time your ego got ahead of your common sense?” was her reply, voice low, the rasp so pronounced I felt it in my balls. It made me wonder if she was doing it on purpose to drive me crazy.

“I think we both know what happened that night. Stop kidding yourself.”

The image of how she'd looked up at me all those years ago, all soft and willing when I'd pinned her against the wall of the coat room with my hips, came rushing in. Whether she was too embarrassed to admit it or not, she'd wanted me as much as I'd wanted her that night. I'd been watching her, biding my time, and when she excused herself from the dance floor and headed for the restroom, I made my move.

She hadn't pushed me away then, hadn't said no or made any gesture of refusal because she'd been watching me all night too. I kissed her gently and she kissed me back. Then I called her Shelley and her knee came up, barely missing my future kids. It had been a simple case of wounded pride. That's what she wouldn't admit.

“This may come as a surprise, Scott—I'm well aware of how distorted your opinion of yourself is—but I'm not interested in sex with any man who's given more rides than Disneyland.”

She could pretend all she wanted, but the throbbing pulse on the side of her throat said otherwise. “Sunshine...” A smile

split my face. "...that should tell you how much fun the ride is."

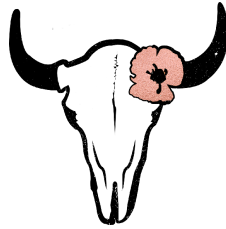
I was seconds from leaning over, yanking her closer, and kissing her until she forgot about rides and Disneyland and that I wasn't her type. Until I forgot that I was angry at her for backing me into this marriage, and even angrier that I wanted her more than the next breath of air in my lungs.

Then I remembered that she had too much to drink.

She might wake up with a nasty case of buyer's remorse, and I wasn't dumb or horny enough to risk having to live with a resentful wife for the next three years. Especially not one that argued for a living.

Pulling back, I straightened in my seat, my attention returning out the windshield to the moonlit landscape. "Go inside, Sydney...Go before I change my mind."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



SYDNEY

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE UP WITH A RAGING HEADACHE, A hankering for twenty gallons of water, and a vague idea of how close I'd come to humiliating myself. Three Long Island Ice Teas had laid me low. I'd been seconds from leaning in and kissing him when he sat back and ordered me to go inside. *Ordered.* How humiliating. He'd pulled out the floor beneath me, sent me face-planting right into desire, and want, and need with his hot words and long stares and then left me high and dry. Alone again. Alone again!

No sooner had I shut the door to the Ford than the engine started, and he peeled away to parts unknown. That bothered me more than it should've. I shouldn't have cared where he was sleeping or with whom—and yet I did.

But as someone once said, *if that was wrong, I didn't want to be right.*

I cracked an eye open to find my breath had mass. Little white puffs hung in the air, evidence that the furnace was broken again. Searching around for my phone, I located it under one of the dogs, both of which had graduated from

sleeping next to me on the inflatable mattress to sleeping with me on the pull-out couch.

The screen read 6:30, and judging by the quiet, Scott was undoubtedly long gone. How he managed to be out of the house without waking me every single morning was a mystery. Then doubt reared its ugly head and smacked me between the brows. Maybe he hadn't made it home.

A shiver rocked my entire body, reminding me how sore my legs were. Now was not the time for the furnace to be acting up. Thinking about Scott having to spend the Christmas holidays alone in a cold cabin didn't sit well with me. He might've been an unmitigated jerk, but I'd suffered too much in the past to stand idly by while someone else suffered. I made a mental note to talk to Laurel about it. Luckily, Drake had given me his number, so I fired off a text.

Me: Furnace broken again. Please help. I'm freezing.
Frozen emoji face.

Fifteen minutes later, after I'd washed my face and brushed my teeth, there was a knock at the door. In a hurry, I threw on black leggings, a chunky white cable sweater foregoing a bra, draped a few blankets around my shoulders, and made for the door. Drake stood on the porch just as gorgeous and sexy in the stark morning light as he looked in the moody dimness of the bar the night before. Even better, he was clutching a large monkey wrench in his hand. He'd come prepared.

"Thank you for coming so quickly!" I nearly screeched I was so damn happy to see him. "I have homemade pumpkin muffins and freshly brewed coffee." I'd baked the muffins yesterday, before the unfortunate ATV ride into town. A quick

glance at the tray on the counter revealed that a few were already missing. Someone had come home. My chest got warm.

Drake nodded and motioned that he'd take his payment later. Then he stepped back, indicating to the furnace and water heater located in the shed attached to the cabin.

“Drake,” I said, touching his arm before I was out of his line of sight. Facing me, his soft gaze fell on my mouth. “Have you seen Scott?”

Let's be real, Scott had basically won. I couldn't continue to live like this. I hated that he'd gotten the best of me, but my comfort was more important than my pride. My work was critical, and I couldn't perform under these conditions. Not for much longer. Definitely not for three years. I was leaving today and needed to give him a heads-up that, upon my return, the living arrangements had to change. I was even willing to rent something in town and he could stay with me.

The confused, questioning look Drake returned was downright adorable. I, however, was too damn cold and hungover to delve into what it meant. Drake retrieved his phone out of the back pocket of his jeans and typed.

At his house

Blink. Blink. Blink. He might as well have dropped a bull on my head. I tried to measure my breathing, doing my best to control my reaction as I always did. Damn proud of myself too 'cause I was near to blowing like a Yellowstone geyser. Nevertheless, I couldn't stop the heat that marched up my neck and covered my face.

My mind flipped through snapshots of Scott from all those years ago. My instincts had been right. This cabin wasn't his style. He'd been gaslighting me all along. I was going to be sick—or homicidal. Not sure which yet. Probably both.

“Riiight,” I said, all breathy. It was hard to make the word come out when my thoughts were on a loop. That loop being unfit for public consumption.

“How do I get there again?” I asked.

He typed.

Follow the dirt road over the hill, make a right at the aspens, and keep going up. You can't miss it.

I forced myself to smile at him. “Thank you.”

Drake tipped his chin and walked around the side of the cabin. The second he was out of sight, my smile dropped and I jumped into action. The blankets wrapped around my shoulders flew off, and I slammed on my purple Hunter boots. Then I marched straight for the shed with Romeo and Juliet trailing after me. I'd seen a mountain bike in there yesterday.

Straddling the bike, I glanced at my loyal fur friends. “Let's go fuck some shit up.”

Twenty minutes later...

His home was magnificent. Around ten thousand square feet was my rough estimate. Natural stone, glass, and high-polished wood. It looked like a living thing growing out of the stunning scenery. And yet I couldn't quite appreciate it. Not yet, anyway. Much, much, *much* later I would. At the moment, however, my lungs felt blowtorched, my hams and quads were on fire, and I still had a man to make pie out of.

Huffing and puffing, I pedaled up to the front door which was covered by an enormous overhang of wood and stone and dropped the bike in the driveway. In serious pain, I stumbled, my lungs burning worse than my quads. Grabbing a medium-sized stone, I weighed it in my palm and deemed it big enough to do some serious damage. Then I hurled it with all my might at one of his gigantic floor-to-ceiling windows, screaming in hollow satisfaction. It hit dead center, made a plunk sound, and dropped back to earth without even leaving a scratch. Which, of course, made me want to scream again.

Adrenaline and a hunger for justice willed my legs to move. Crawling up the stairs to the front door, I pressed my thumb on the doorbell and didn't let up until a woman's voice could be heard on the other side.

“I'm comin', darn it!”

If that was a clown, I was going to murder his ass for sure.

The front door flew open to reveal not a slinky wannabe model, but a very tall woman, nonetheless. This one, however, was on the Rubenesque end of the spectrum. She was middle-aged with short red hair, wide shoulders, and eyes an interesting shade of periwinkle blue. The dogs loped past me into the house like they'd done it a million times and my blood pressure shot to the moon and back.

Periwinkle blue took in my bedraggled appearance—the bedhead, the flush of overexertion, the wild-eyed expression—and her glossy pink lips quirked.

“Who are you?” I snapped because—manners? Yeah, I'd left those back at the cabin.

“Who the fuck are you, sweetie?” the tall woman returned. Although she smiled amusedly and used a decidedly sweeter

tone than I had. Then again, she hadn't been subjected to cold showers and mood swings of a manchild.

"I'm Scott's wife." I tried to look around the woman to no avail. Tall Red kept moving in my way. "Where is the two-timing son of a bitch?"

"Ahhh, yes, the new wife." Red thrust a perfectly manicured hand out. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jan, Scott's house manager."

Whatever points Scott earned by hiring a trans woman paled in comparison with all the points I deducted for all the crap he'd put me through.

After a brisk handshake, I stepped closer. "Nice to meet you. I need to see him now." When Jan didn't budge from the doorway, I went for broke. "Jan, is it? I've been living in a cabin for three weeks with no hot water or heat because Scott *lied* to me. He led me to believe that the cabin was his home, not"—I gestured to the mansion we were currently standing in—"this."

Jan blinked her bright blue eyes. "He's in the master suite. Down the hall and to the right. Boots off. Don't get any blood on the carpets please. They're Tibetan." Jan stepped aside.

Jan and I were going to get along perfectly well.

Kicking off the muddy Hunter boots, I made a beeline for his bedroom and barged in without knocking. It was empty save for the expensive designer furniture. The simple dark wood softened by natural materials in shades of gray and beige. An enormous bed dressed in imported Frette linens and a Scandia goose down comforter.

Let's not forget the famous Hästens mattress I'd heard so much about—there it was, chuckling at my expense. All those

cold nights hunkering next to the dogs for warmth. All those cold showers...

Ironically, it was the sound of a shower running that threw a monkey wrench in the wheels turning in my head. Crossing the room, I blasted the bathroom door wide open...aaand regretted it instantly.

On the opposite end of a very large bathroom with a heated stone floor (A heated floor!), Scott stood in the shower rinsing his shampooed head. Water sluiced over an intricate tapestry of muscle and bone. Not a spare inch of fat to be found on him anywhere. I'm ashamed to admit my attention went straight to the forbidden. His penis lay thick and long amongst neat dark hair until it started to harden under my seriously thorough examination.

"Had a good look?" he said with way too much sarcasm in his voice.

My gaze climbed until it reached his narrowed indigo eyes. His lips shaped into a smug little smile.

"If I was a dude, I'd knock your teeth out!"

He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. Without thought, I rushed him, got in his face. Oops, bad idea. I was forced to backpedal or risk getting plastered to his wet chest. Which wouldn't have been such a terrible idea if I wasn't so enraged.

Stepping forward, he invaded my personal space as he reached for a towel hanging on the hook, inches separating us. Eyelashes beaded with water, lips moist, gaze...full of trouble.

"If you were a dude, I'd be gay." He smirked, his eyes glazing over with lust as he took in my flushed face and the

nipples poking at my cable sweater. My arms automatically crossed.

“If you were gay, I might actually like you!”

“If I was gay, I wouldn’t be tempted to do this—”
Dropping the towel, he took hold of my face, cradling it gently but firmly in his hands, and kissed me.

Kissed me like he was into me. Kissed me like I was his to kiss.

I was too shocked to do anything other than stand there and let him, my anger neutralized by ah, well, a litany of different emotions—none that I was very proud of.

Water-soaked, he pressed his body against mine, his hips pinning me against the edge of the counter, and I melted against him, let him tease my lips apart and slip his tongue into my mouth because everything about him felt so good I wanted to cry tears of joy. It was as good as I remembered. Better, actually. Resisting didn’t even cross my mind.

Unable to hold back any longer, my hands lifted slowly searching for a place to land. They slipped from the hot moist skin of his collarbone to the curve of his powerful shoulders, finally coming to rest on his biceps. Wedged between us, his erection, now at full throttle, pushed against the inside of my thigh. A hand dipped under the hem of my sweater. Broad fingertips skated over my hard nipples and I went up on my toes practically begging for more.

If I moved to the left just a little—

“This what you want?”

He rocked his hips against mine and I almost went into a full-body shudder then and there. In some distant part of my brain, I knew this shouldn’t be happening. That it was

madness and I should be trying harder to dismember him and hide the body parts in the vegetable garden. I just couldn't make myself do it when his lips were so soft, and his hands stroked my breasts so tenderly, and the thick, hard length of him pressed between my legs at the right angle. I couldn't think of anything other than having him inside of me.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he muttered, sighing like I'd granted a starving man his favorite meal. “You have no idea how much I've wanted to do this...” He took hold of my butt cheeks and picked me up, placing me on the marble counter without once breaking the violent delight of his kiss. And once he sensed that I was all in and in no mood to stop him, the gloves came off.

He pressed right into my sweet spot—in case I'd misunderstood what he intended—and I completely forgot why I'd come over in the first place, not to mention all the reasons this was the worst idea ever.

“We shoulda been doing this from the start. That mattress was killing my back...” he groaned in my ear. Which was basically equivalent to a cold shower. I mean...wtf?

Reality came charging back to pop the bubble of lust we were floating in. Stiffening, I shoved at his chest and jumped off the counter.

“Sydney—” he said, shaking the desire off his face. His gaze alert and unwavering. He took a step forward, and I automatically retreated two more.

Breathing hard, we stared at each other. “I knew you were immature and selfish, but I never, *ever* imagined you to be this...this shady.”

His shoulders fell and he briefly glanced away. It was as close to an apology as I'd ever get, indicating some level of genuine remorse but not nearly enough to appease me. Then again, I could be wrong. He'd fooled me one too many times already and I wasn't about to give him another opportunity.

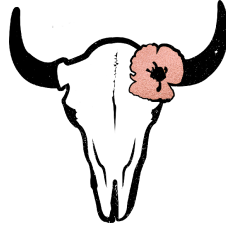
“Syd, wait—”

“I gave you every chance to back out...” I shook my head in disgust. “Who are you, Scott?”

I watched him pull it all back—the desire, the remorse. He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, his features defaulting to neutral. “The man you blackmailed into marriage.”

I walked out of the bathroom, bid Jan goodbye as I exited the house overlooking the valley, and never once looked back when the Blackstone jet went wheels up two hours later.

CHAPTER TWELVE



SCOTT

“HOW ’BOUT A BURGER?” LAUREL SHOUTED FROM BEHIND HER desk.

I barely heard her. I was much too busy staring blindly at the desktop computer screen in my office and thinking about my wife. At least, I hoped she was still my wife. She could very well have been filing divorce papers. My gaze slid to the iPhone resting on my desk. I owed her an apology. I picked it up, put it down. I’d been doing a lot of that lately.

“Scott! Burger?”

I hadn’t slept in ten days. Ten days that felt like a goddamn eternity. Remorse was a heavy weight to bear. I was practically suffocating under it. Moreover, my house was too quiet, it didn’t smell like freshly baked muffins, and there was no one waiting at home for me at the end of a long day. Even Jan was giving me the cold shoulder. The last made no sense and I made a mental note to get to the bottom of it as soon as possible.

Christmas and New Year’s had come and gone without a word from her. Not even a text. I had no idea where or whom

she'd spent them with and it bothered me, constantly nagging my conscience, a feeling which kept company with the restlessness that kicked in the moment Jimbo phoned to say the Blackstone jet was safely in the air.

Undermining her had been a crappy thing to do. With some distance, I could see it for what it was: petty and childish. Because, had my life changed for the worse? No, it hadn't. My ego had taken the hit and it could sustain plenty without incurring any permanent damage. And she was right. It's not like I hadn't been given a choice. I could've turned my father down, let him sell off the land. And yet I hadn't. Instead, I'd taken my frustration out on the one person who didn't deserve it.

“Scott! You deaf? What do you want for lunch?”

I had no intention of apologizing for what had happened in the bathroom. Hell no. I wasn't the only one swept up in the moment. Whatever was going on between us was definitely mutual. In hindsight, it shouldn't have been a surprise. It had been that way from the start, since Devyn's wedding all those years ago. It made even more sense now. We were two hard people constantly striking against each other. Sooner or later we were bound to cause a spark. All I could hope for was that I didn't catch fire. She could deny it all she wanted but chemistry of that magnitude didn't come around often and deserved to be explored. Now if I could only convince her of that.

My finger hovered over the **messages** icon.

“I swear if I didn't know better, I'd say you were pining for her,” Laurel's voice cut in. That brought my head up. I shot her my customary *have you lost your mind* look, and as usual, it did nothing other than encourage her to continue. “Oh my

gee oh dee, *are* you?” A divot formed between Laurel’s brows. “I think you are.”

“He’s pining for her,” Ryan casually claimed while he dropped his ball cap on the coffee table and sank onto the couch. I hadn’t even heard him come in. He stuffed the last of the muffins Sydney had baked in his mouth while I struggled to contain a bout of possessiveness. “Damn, she can bake,” he muttered around a mouthful of my fucking muffin.

Twelve-year-old girls pined. I didn’t *pine*. “The only thing I’m pining for is some silence and employees that mind their own damn business.” I pointed to his face. “And those were for me.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

Smirking, Ryan turned to face Laurel. “He’s definitely pining for her.”

“Don’t you two have something better to do other than worry about my love life? Like maybe some actual work?”

“Interesting that you call it a love life,” Laurel mused.

“I caught that too,” Ryan added.

It wasn’t enough that I was losing sleep over what had happened, that I felt bad enough to consider getting on the next flight to New York, I had to take shit from my friends too.

“Is somebody going to go pick up lunch or what?”

I wasn’t pining. I mean...maybe, I...well, no other way to put it—I missed my wife. I missed seeing her face. I missed knowing she was there at night, just beyond the wall, even though I couldn’t touch her. That being a particularly problematic aspect of the situation. I missed the wife I’d been

trying to get rid of. God had a sick sense of humor, but there it was.

My cell rang. The Star Wars main theme played. I had little doubt that an ass chewing was coming for the way I'd treated Sydney and I deserved it.

“Hey, Dad.”

“On the second ring. I'm flattered. I'll make this brief. I'm throwing a party next weekend to announce my retirement and celebrate your wedding. The entire board of directors will be there and so will you—needless to say, on your best behavior. The Public Library. Eight p.m. Don't be late.”

Under normal circumstances I would've argued, which always led to an eventual albeit reluctant capitulation. I didn't bother this time. I needed to see Sydney, wanted to see her, and Franklin had just handed me the perfect cover. Though I'd never admit it to him. Just because I loved the old man didn't mean there wasn't a constant struggle for the upper hand between us. I was still mad at him for muscling me into this arrangement and I wasn't ready to concede defeat. Not yet anyway.

“I'll be there.”

First time in years those words felt good on my lips.



SYDNEY

“BLT or turkey club?”

I glanced up from the park bench in Bryant Park I was huddled on to find Frank standing over me looking as elegant as ever in his long navy cashmere coat. I needed to get out, get

some fresh air even though it wasn't particularly warm. Wyoming had spoiled me and being stuck inside all day had become nearly intolerable. I'd been back in New York for two weeks, and between all the work I had to catch up on and the holidays, we hadn't had a single private conversation. And we desperately needed one.

He held up two sandwiches wrapped in wax paper.

"Turkey club," I answered with a smile. Taking a seat next to me, Frank crossed his long legs and handed me the sandwich.

"Thank Christ—" He unwrapped his and bit into it, moaning. "I didn't know what I was going to do if you said BLT."

"I knew you wanted it." Side-eyeing him, my smile grew wider.

"So...you haven't said much since you got back. How did it go?"

This conversation needed to be handled with care. For better or worse Scott was a Blackstone and he would always be, and Frank loved his family more than anything. Even more than the company he'd built from the ground up. Despite what Scott thought.

I'd had time to cool off. To regroup, if you will. It had been a silly fantasy to believe that Scott would've eventually come around, that maybe we could've made a *go of it*. But as evidenced by reality, people don't change.

Case in point, I spent yet another Christmas eating Chinese takeout and watching *It's A Wonderful Life*. New Year's was pizza and *Wedding Crashers*. Same as I'd done the last ten years in a row. People didn't change. Still, a girl could dream.

“Not great.” I sighed. “He’s fighting me tooth and nail. This after I gave him the opportunity to back out.” Embarrassed, my face pinched. “He made me believe a five-hundred-square-foot run-down shack was his home.”

A bark of laughter shot out of him. “And you fell for it?”

“Umm, yeah.” Frank’s shoulders shook in mirth as he ate his sandwich. “I just spent three weeks living with no heat or hot water, Frank. It’s not funny.” Though a faint smile was forming on my face. “He’s a jerk.”

“You knew that when you married him.”

“I was hoping he’d changed...he has moments of decency,” I grumbled. “Did you know Scott can sign?”

Frank turned to examine me. “My son knows sign language?”

I nodded. “One of his employees is deaf and they sign.”

There *were* moments when Scott surprised me—in a positive way. That’s maybe why I’d kept hope alive as long as I had. The way he treated everyone who worked for him. His love of the land he had stewardship of. The dogs. Then I remembered that I was at the bottom of that totem pole.

“How’s the ranch?” Stuffing the last bit of sandwich in his mouth, he balled up the paper and threw it in the trash can a few feet from the bench. Nothing but air.

“Nice shot.”

“Played basketball with Jordan a time or two.” Frank winked at me. I didn’t doubt his claim. He had the pictures in his office to prove it.

“I don’t know much about raising cattle, but from what I’ve gathered from speaking to his assistant and ranch

manager, his profit margins have been growing every year. He's doing well, runs it tight."

Frank's face transformed. The mild amusement melted away only to be replaced by soberness. He looked tired all of a sudden.

"He loves it, Frank," I said as gently as I could. It was obvious he was disheartened by the news. Whatever suspicion I had about Frank hoping for the return of the prodigal son was confirmed. "And it suits him. He doesn't even look the same."

He stared ahead, lost in thought.

"You haven't told him you're ill," I said, hands flat on my lap, perfectly still. "I don't feel right about keeping it from him. It feels like a lie...like I'm deceiving him." With each day that passed, it bothered me more. It wasn't right to withhold such information. And my gut told me it would eventually blow up, most likely in my face.

That seemed to shake Frank out of the trace he was in. "I need more time. Once I tell him, everything changes." I didn't understand "needing time," but I wasn't about to deny a dying man his wish.

"I'll tell him soon. Promise me you won't say anything, Syd."

As much as it pained me, I nodded. I could never betray him. "I promise."



Before I'd even decided how to deal with Scott—murder unfortunately not being an option—Frank's party was upon us. At this point I figured if he wanted to continue being an ass, he could dig his own grave and Frank could bury him. I had neither the time nor the willingness to play games with him.

Moreover, I was going to do my absolute best to pretend “the bathroom” never happened.

I stepped out of my building across from Central Park and into a sharp January chill. It had me wishing I’d worn something heavier than a cashmere wrap over the garnet-colored Carolina Herrera one-sleeve gown I’d bought for the occasion. If my grandparents could see me now.

“Ladies are demure, Sydney. Harlots like your mother wear jeans and see-through shirts.” My grandmother had imparted this wisdom on a shopping expedition to JC Penny. The trigger had been a pair of OshKosh B’gosh pink denim culottes I’d picked out and a t-shirt with a rainbow on it. Because I loved rainbows. I was eleven at the time.

A black Mercedes 500 was parked at the curb, Scott leaning against it with his hands shoved in the pockets of his tuxedo pants and his face tipped down like he was inspecting the shine on his shoes. Freshly shaved and with his hair parted and slicked back, he looked more like the playboy he’d once been than the rancher he’d become. Sensing me standing a few feet away, he glanced up abruptly and his expression put me in mind of an errant schoolboy who’d been caught doing something very naughty. Like gaslighting his new wife, perhaps? *Jackass.*

I hadn’t seen or spoken to him in a little over two weeks and it felt like we were starting from scratch. Or worse. With a heavy amount of suspicion and distrust between us. He stepped away from the car and began to approach, but the look on my face brought him up short.

“Hi,” he said, tried for a smile and gave up when he saw my reaction or lack thereof.

“Hello.”

Well, this was awkward. I rubbed the goose bumps on my arms, unsure whether they were caused by the bitter cold or by the way he was looking at me. His blue eyes roamed with abandon from my hair to the dark painted toes poking out from under my dress. It made me feel seen, exposed. Like he was slowly peeling away my armor, trying to get past my defenses. As if I would ever allow that to happen again.

“You look...” A gust of breath, an expression of near defeat on his face. A genuine one. “Beautiful.”

Then I remembered that my husband was a con artist. “Let’s get this over with so you can go back home.”

Opening the back door, Scott helped me in and followed.

“You’re still mad.” Gazing ahead with a sulky frown, he was devastatingly handsome, I begrudgingly had to admit. So I locked it down, kept my eyes trained ahead, and tried not to look at him unless absolutely necessary because this jackass and his drop-dead sensuality made a woman forget to protect herself. And now that I knew what it was like to kiss him, feel him, I was smart enough to know I was in twice as much danger.

“No...not anymore.” I shrugged, blasé as all get out even though I didn’t feel blasé in the least. What I felt was a heaping portion of disappointment. I’d get over it, though, just like I got over everything else. “You’re not used to being inconvenienced. I get it. It was asking too much to hope you’d changed—”

“I *have* changed...look, Syd—”

I almost snorted. God help me, I was close. Moreover, he sounded genuinely offended which aggravated me further. “Growing a beard and shedding a few pounds does not

constitute character growth, Scott,” I cut him off before more BS could spill out of his mouth. “But whatever. It’s fine. You do you.”

The car pulled up to the New York Public Library, *Patience* and *Fortitude* (something I lacked at the moment), the two lion statues, watching over it. A long string of limos and Town cars filed in behind ours. Not waiting for the driver to come around, Scott jumped out first and offered me a hand. Then he threw his arm around my neck and tucked me as close as two people could be while fully clothed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I tried to nail him in the ribs with an elbow, but the snake adroitly grasped and pinned my arm between us.

“Acting like a man in love, Sunshine.”

“Save the pet names for your women.”

His mouth dipped close to my ear, the brush of his lips making my pulse race. “I don’t have *women*. I have one woman—an angry little wife. And this one’s just for you. Now be a good girl. We have a show to put on.”



SCOTT

My wife hated me. Which was a real bummer because I was starting to really like her. Leaning against a column, hiding away from critical stares of my parents’ friends and business acquaintances, I nursed my whiskey.

Across the room, Sydney was talking to Devyn and my brother-in-law, John, who had flown in from California for this godforsaken dog and pony act. The booze was top shelf, the

food was five-star rated, and the flower arrangements ostentatious—rare out-of-season blooms pouring out of every available crack and crevice. This party had my father's fingerprints all over it.

Speaking of the man, he was seated at a main table up front with a bunch of his cronies congregated around him. He looked a little worse for wear, which worried me, but I dared not bring up the subject. Dad detested any sign of weakness and would deny anything was wrong anyway.

I watched Damon Hastings approach Sydney and pull her aside. I didn't like the way Hastings was looking at her. Like Sydney was chum and he smelled blood in the water. If he so much as moved a hair follicle closer to her, I was going to get up close and personal with the son of a bitch and make it clear he needed to go hunt in different waters.

"Hiding?" a voice called out from somewhere behind me, one that had the magic power to make my nuts crawl back into my body. I'd succeeded in avoiding any unpleasantness from my past all night. Unfortunately, it had finally caught up to me.

Meghan looking almost exactly the same as she did the last time I'd seen her eight years ago. Her long chestnut hair swept to the side and draped over her shoulder. Her dark eyes smokey. Her pupils as big as nickels. Yeah, exactly the same.

"What are you doing here?"

"Your sister and my husband went to business school together. They're friends." She sipped her champagne.

"Consider yourself disinvited to any future Blackstone events."

"Eight years and you're still a prick."

I turned to face her because I didn't need anyone to overhear what I needed to say to her. "What do you want, Meghan?"

"I want you to stop blaming me."

"Why wouldn't I blame you? What you did—" My words fell away when I noticed my voice getting louder. Shaking my head, I turned back around and swallowed the urge to verbally eviscerate her. I wouldn't be goaded into making a scene that would embarrass Sydney.

After all these years, the anger and resentment was still there. This city did that to me: brought them up, opened old wounds and made them feel fresh again. I hated Manhattan. It reeked of dissipation to me, reminded me of all the promises I'd broken and bad choices I'd made. Of my past, of the man I was, the man I wanted to forget I'd been.

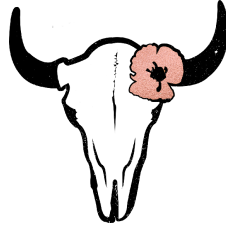
Sydney stood in the middle of the crowded room watching us with a frosty expression, Hastings still by her side. I'd left her alone tonight, and maybe I shouldn't have. I still owed her an apology. She'd shut me down in the car and I didn't push it, didn't want to upset her right before the party, but it still had to be done.

"How long before she figures out what a selfish asshole you are? You think getting married is going to make anyone believe you've changed?" She smirked. "Not likely, Satan. Probably not ever."

Bile rose up my throat as I watched her walk away, back to the poor son of a bitch who had married her. Pushing off the marble column, I headed across the room. Sydney stood next to her assistant and a tall Asian guy with tattoos on his neck barely hidden under a royal blue suit that looked straight off the runway. Our eyes met and she turned her back to me,

exposing an abundance of naked flesh from the waist up. I nearly ran face-first into a group of people. It brought a smile to my face. As much as she fought it, the ice princess had a thing for me. Good. Because I had a thing for her too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



SYDNEY

A HEAVY ARM LANDED AROUND MY SHOULDERS. SCOTT PULLED me close while I pushed him away, struggling to put space between us. Eventually, I had to give up or risk making a scene.

“Miller, right?” Scott said, thrusting out a hand. “Good to see you again.”

“Really?” Miller said, tone dry, expression more than a lot suspicious. Meanwhile, I chewed on my bottom lip to school a smile. Last thing I wanted to do was encourage Scott to do... whatever he was doing.

“Yes, really.” Scott’s outstretched hand shifted to Paul who stood next to Miller. “Scott Blackstone, Sydney’s husband.”

Miller’s hazel eyes narrowed as he scrutinized my husband. He wasn’t buying the husband-of-the-year act for a minute and looked like he was seconds from calling Scott out. I shot him a *don’t even think about it* glare. Every member of the board of directors was here and watching us closely. Meanwhile, Paul smiled, amused by Scott.

“Paul Smith, Miller’s husband.” Paul shook his hand.

“You guys mind if I steal my wife away?” It wasn’t a question. Scott intended to do whatever the hell he wanted (as he always did) and we all knew it. “We have something to discuss.”

“We have nothing to discuss.”

“Of course we do, Sunshine. Like...what the names of our five little Blackstones will be. I’m drawing the line at Thanos, so don’t get any ideas.”

Obligatory eye roll coming. And yet if I wasn’t still smarting from his mistreatment of me, I’d probably be hiding a conspiratorial smile. “You’re in luck then because there won’t be any little Blackstones—”

“Fine. Evans-Blackstones. You feminists and your labels.” He smiled, one of his pregnancy-inducing, dimpled ones, and I’m sorry to say that I succumbed like all the rest. I felt it between my legs and just about everywhere else, which then earned him a jab to the ribs. The grunt that came out of him was equally satisfying.

“Nice to meet you, Paul. Excuse us, guys,” Scott said as he began to tug me away.

“Only if you return her unharmed,” Miller shot back, all pretense of humor gone.

It sucked all the fun out of the last exchange. I watched Scott sober immediately, his face shifting to his customary default neutral. “Promise,” he replied, as serious as I’d ever heard him sound. Then he guided me away.

“Ladies and gentlemen—” Frank’s voice rose over the din of the crowd, the sound resonating against the marble walls, the shrill of an amplifier at the tail end of it. The announcement stopped us in our tracks.

Standing in the middle of the dance floor in a crisp tux, holding a mic in one hand and the opposite arm wrapped around Marjorie's slender shoulders, Frank looked larger than life—like the magnate he was.

“Thank you all for coming to help celebrate something I never thought to witness in my lifetime...my impending retirement.” Chuckles from the gallery. “Oh, and some of you may have heard that my son's a married man.” The band hit the punchline with a drum roll and Frank smiled broadly. “He married one of my favorite people in the world.” Gaze searching, the crowd parted and he found me. Our eyes locked. That's when I understood what he was silently imploring...*you promised*. He raised his champagne flute and nodded.

“Raise your glasses, folks. I paid a mint for the Cristal so let's not let it go to waste...” Everyone obediently acted in accordance. “To Scott and Sydney.”

“To Scott and Sydney,” all three hundred (give or take) people in attendance joined in. Everyone other than me and Scott.

“May you have as happy a marriage as Midge and I have had.”

I felt like a fraud, my conscience dragging me down, and gave Frank a wobbly smile. I could feel Scott's attention on me, searing the side of my face, and glanced up to find a speculative look on his. I was the last person on the planet to get weepy and right now I was near to crying, something I hadn't done in decades. Over a fake marriage I wanted less and less to be a part of? It didn't take a genius to sense that something felt seriously off. It wasn't adding up for him and I could see he was working hard to figure it out. It was only a matter of time before he did.

“Thank you for forty-five wonderful years, Midge,” Frank continued. “They’ve gone by way too quickly, haven’t they?” He glanced at Marjorie and kissed her briefly on the lips. And in turn, Marjorie wiped her own tears away.

“Kiss!” someone in the crowd yelled.

The spotlight fell on me and Scott. Caught in the collective stares of all three hundred people, we looked at each other knowing there was no escape.

“Steer clear of the family jewels,” he murmured close to my ear, a sneaky smile parting his freshly shaved face, dimples showing. “Can’t have a bunch of little Blackstones if you maim me.”

“There won’t be any little Blackstones—” I hissed behind a cemented smile. People were watching and I was forced to give them the show they expected. He tipped his head slowly giving me time to stop him if I wanted to, but I didn’t. It was exhausting, fighting this beast of an attraction between us. And I was done trying. This time the kiss was everything a kiss should be. Sensual, possessive, drawing me deeper and deeper until the edges started to blur, and we got lost in the moment. This thing between us was irrational and without a doubt doomed to end badly, and yet there was no reasoning with chemistry. It either created an explosion, or it fizzled. The problem with explosions is that they tend to leave destruction in their wake.

Whistles and shouts broke the spell, driving us apart. I tried to gently extricate my hand from Scott’s, but he had no intention of letting go and I couldn’t very well make a fuss with a majority of the board of directors watching us.

“Let’s get out of here,” he muttered under his breath. Saluting the crowd in a patronizing gesture, he pulled me in

the direction of the stairs.

“Where are we going?”

“To settle a score.”



SCOTT

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded to know.

I’d been craving Sydney’s mouth the moment she’d left Wyoming. Her mouth and, well, frankly, everything else. Kissing her again only supercharged this driving hunger I’d developed since that day in the bathroom. Which sucked because I was pretty certain it was not reciprocated.

Pulling away far enough to look into her eyes, I’d murmured, “One more. And try to act like you’re enjoying yourself this time,” knowing I was playing with fire and that it was only a matter of time before she got fed up and delivered swift physical retribution. Which I more than deserved.

But then I’d caught it, the momentary loss of control over the emotions she held in check with a steel grip. There was a lot going on in that big brain of hers. Reluctance, desire, pride. You name it and I watched it flash across her face. Then worry joined the rest, and my chest got tight and guilt made me look away. She’d thought I was playing her again.

“Somewhere private.” I led her down the marble stairwell of the library and found an alcove out of the direct line of sight of guests coming and going, shielded her body with mine.

“Enough, Scott. I’m tired and I want to go home.”

Her voice was quiet, subdued. I almost wished she'd give me some attitude, even her ice princess impression would've made this apology easier. Straightening, I shoved my hands in my pockets.

"I owe you an apology...for what happened back in Wyoming." I could probably count on one hand the times I'd apologized to anyone in my entire life and this was proving even more difficult than I'd anticipated. Her non-reaction compelled me to continue. "But you had to know what was coming—"

"Excuse me?" she jumped in, her face blanketed with confusion.

"You blackmailed a man you barely knew into marriage. How did you think it was gonna go?"

Her face twitched almost imperceptibly. You wouldn't have caught it if you didn't know to look for it. But I did. I knew every slight nuance of her expressions now.

"This is you trying to apologize? Is that what you *think* you're doing?"

I was about to explain it to her when she swapped her favorite neutral expression for an indignant one. "You know what your problem is, Scott—you're a rich asshole who's always gotten his way. Money has bought you a free pass your entire life, and for the first time it's cost you."

I scoffed, almost laughing at the hypocrisy. "You're lecturing me about money? You—Miss Junior League—lecturing me about privilege?"

"You don't know anything about me." She was getting the wrinkle between her blonde brows, the one I'd learned meant she was gearing up for a fight.

“I know you enough.”

Then it hit me. Belatedly, it occurred to me that she hadn't introduced me to anyone. The room behind us was filled with my father's people. *My* family, friends, and acquaintances. Where were hers? “Where's your family? Why didn't they come tonight?”

“I don't...” She looked off for a moment, huffed, returned with a glare. “Why do you care?”

“Call me curious.”

“I don't have any family, Curious.”

Under normal circumstances I would've laughed. Mrs. Blackstone had a sharp sense of humor and the willingness to wield it as a weapon. But these were not normal circumstances. And, more importantly, I was getting a strong sense that the shit was about to hit the fan and end up all over me.

“You don't have family?” I couldn't have heard her right. She had to have family, a big white one. Presumably living in Old Greenwich or Darien and they all spoke with lock jaw and vacationed in Martha's Vineyard on their sailboats. The ice princess an orphan? Nah, not possible. Those two things did not jive.

She exhaled like she was growing tired of me. It wasn't the first time I'd heard it and if I was a betting man, which I was, I'd say it wouldn't be the last either.

“What about friends? I wasn't introduced to any of them.”

“Yes, you were,” she replied, subdued once again and standing absolutely motionless. I didn't like it. What I liked even less was the sinking feeling in my gut. An ominous indication that somewhere along the way I'd fucked up again.

“No, I’m pretty sure I wasn’t. I was introduced to your assistant and his husband...” My voice faded as the pieces of the puzzle came together and the answer punched me in the sternum. “He’s your assistant, Sydney.”

“He’s also my friend. Are we done with the inquisition? Because I’d like to go home now. Thanks for the apology, by the way. I’ll treasure it forever.”

I was speechless. She’d robbed me of all my words. She’d also managed to make a liar, a fool, and a bully out of me. Not gonna lie, it was a personal low. I couldn’t seem to do anything right by this woman. In stunned silence, I stepped back, and Sydney didn’t waste any time putting as much distance between us as possible. I watched as she marched down the stairs with her head held high and her steel spine perfectly straight.

Ten minutes later, in shock and off-kilter, I walked down the same library steps. As soon as I hit the sidewalk, I turned left and headed uptown. In the skyline I could see the Blackstone Building, better known as the Death Star in the family. My large loving family. With all our faults, we were tight. We were there for each other. If I started with the basic assumption that Sydney and I were strangers, I’d have to admit that I knew nothing about her. Only what I’d presumed to know, which was turning out to be off the mark by a mile.

I flipped up the collar of my tux, my shoulders hiked up as the cold air slapped me in the face. The restlessness was back and I needed to walk it off. But mostly, I needed to figure out what to do about my wife.



“What are you doing here?” she immediately said upon seeing me in her doorway. What was I doing here? I wasn’t

absolutely certain. Only that my feet had carried me to Sydney's place without conscious thought. Before I realized where I was or what I was doing, I was standing before her doorman and demanding he call her even though it was well past midnight. It was a miracle she'd let me up.

"I feel duty bound to point out that we are, in fact, married."

As openers went, maybe not my best one. I'd fumbled my last attempt at an apology and really needed to score on this one and judging from her expression this was not the way to start.

Looking torn, she cocked a hip and scrutinized me. The red dress was gone, replaced by a faded Yale Law sweatshirt with the neck cut out and long pajama pants covered in tiny rainbows. Her hair was piled up on her head in a messy bun and she wore no makeup. It should've killed my boner for her—the rainbow pajamas alone should've done it—but then the sweatshirt slipped down her bare shoulder, exposing the absence of a bra, and my body said otherwise.

"Married people tend to live together," I added. She still wouldn't budge. "We could stay at my place if you prefer."

Dragging her feet, she moved aside to let me enter. Her place was nice. Whoever had decorated her apartment did a nice job. We had the same taste in furniture. Comfortable oversized pieces, natural materials, soft neutral tones. It had a large living room and an open kitchen, a wall of windows that overlooked Central Park.

"No paintings of clowns done by Malaysian blind kids?"

"Chilean orphans, thank you very much." Crossing the room, she turned off the TV. "I see being a patron of the

Guggenheim hasn't taught you anything about art."

"That's Midge's thing. I prefer my art living. The Tetons... a night sky with no light pollution...a woman's body." She frowned and a smile stretched across my face. "Nice place."

"One bedroom. I bought the smallest apartment in the best building I could afford."

This night was looking better and better. "Verse and chapter from the Bible by Frank Blackstone?"

"Yep."

Placing the remote on the coffee table, she turned. Her arms crossed, chin tilted up. An angry queen with rainbows on her pjs. Technically, my queen. Damn, she was beautiful. Unconventional. Unique. I discovered something new about her face every time I looked at her and the more I looked the more I found something to like.

"I'm sorry," I stated, tone matter-of-fact. If she was expecting me to get my knees dirty, she'd be waiting forever. I didn't grovel. Not in the past, not now, not ever.

"What exactly are you sorry for? That you exchanged a few years of freedom for your inheritance?"

"I deserved that, but you're wrong. I didn't do it for my inheritance. In fact, I told him to keep it when he tried that angle. I did it for the land."

Her brow got a cute little wrinkle. "The land trust? That's Frank's baby."

"Wrong again. That's my baby. I asked him to set it up. And he threatened to break it apart and sell it if I didn't fall in line...and you know, Dad doesn't make empty threats."

The look she gave me said she agreed. A beat later she crossed her arms and exchanged the commiserating expression for an accusatory one. “And?”

“And it was a stupid thing to do regardless...I apologize—I don’t respond well to blackmail.” Her face went blank again. Not a good sign. “And I’m screwing this up again. Let’s just say I’m sorry and that I regret what I did.”

Without remark, she marched past me into the kitchen and I followed.

“Want something to drink?”

A smile stretched across my face. “Sure.”

At the threshold, I leaned against the doorframe and watched as she reached up to grab a couple of glasses from inside the cabinet, her bare stomach getting my attention as the sweatshirt rode up. Then I spotted three trays overflowing with baked muffins and whatnot sitting on the counter.

“Ryan misses your muffins.”

That sounded grossly suggestive. Not what I’d intended, but she did that to me. Mixed me up, turned me inside out... Turned me on and had me questioning everything I thought I wanted. Like maybe my old man was right. Maybe I would enjoy marriage if I gave it a fighting chance.

Bending at the waist, she examined the contents of the refrigerator while I took my time appreciating the view. She bent lower and a different image slammed into me, an image of her sitting on the counter with her legs spread apart and her feet on my shoulders as I ate her muffin.

Jesus...

Straightening, I rubbed my face. This was not a good time for my dick to get hard. And yet they kept coming, wave after wave of sexual images, sounds, and smells. My mouth on a soft patch of blonde curls. The scent of woman filling my lungs. The soft skin on the inside of her thighs brushing my cheeks. I wondered what she sounded like when she came. If she was loud or quiet. I wondered if she—

“Beer or wine?”

I needed to get a handle on this. “Uh, beer. Beer’s good.”

“Glass?”

“No, thanks,” I mumbled, incapable of taking my eyes off of her.

I stepped closer and she handed me a bottle of Sam Adams, told me where to find the bottle opener. “Third drawer on the left,” she said.

I liked knowing that about her house. I wanted to know more. I’d been fighting her—or maybe it was myself I’d been fighting, who the hell knew anymore—for so long it felt good to just go with it. To let myself enjoy her company. It felt natural.

She opened one for herself, leaned her hip against the edge of the white marble countertop, and stared at me while she brought the bottle to her lips.

“You know...” I started, incapable of holding back anymore as the sexual tension between us reached fever pitch. There was every chance she’d shoot me down and yet it didn’t stop me from running my mouth. I had to have her and that’s all I could think about. “This marriage could be mutually beneficial in more ways than one.”

She blinked. “Are you for real? Or is this another one of your pranks? You and your father are so much alike sometimes it’s spooky.”

Warmth spread in my chest as I edged closer to her. “No more pranks. Scout’s honor.”

“Oh spare me, Scott. You were never a Boy Scout.” She huffed, chin tucked, staring at the bottle as she ran the pad of her thumb along the rim. Her voice grew softer. “I haven’t even forgiven you yet”—her gaze snapped up—“for being a dick.”

How did arguing with this woman become the highlight of my life? “Well...do you forgive me?”

She gave me a half-hearted stink eye. “Maybe...yes, I guess. I didn’t lose any fingers to frostbite so there’s that—anyway, it’s already beneficial enough.” She took a sip of her beer. I hadn’t pegged her as the beer type. Then again, I hadn’t gotten anything right about her.

“We’re married. You’re not seeing anyone else and neither am I...three years is a long time, Syd.” She searched my face as I moved closer, got in her personal space, put my hand on the counter and not-so-accidentally brushed my fingers against hers. “Don’t tell me you don’t feel it. You know I want you. I think I’ve made it pretty clear...and I have a hunch you want me too.”

She didn’t argue my points, only got this hard, recalcitrant look on her face that was so damn cute I almost bent down and kissed her until the lowercase v between her eyebrows disappeared.

“You have some brass balls on you—”

“I prefer to think of them as golden.”

She rolled her eyes, which of course induced another grin.

“And the orgies?”

I resisted any more unrepentant smiles. It would only piss her off and ruin my seduction plans. “Small fabrication.”

“Mmm. Well, in case you’ve forgotten this is a marriage of convenience, and that convenience is business-related.”

“I got news for you, Sunshine. The world’s been populated by *business-related* arranged marriages.”

She shook her head, muttering to herself as she stalked out of the kitchen into the living room. I followed and she nearly crashed into me when she abruptly turned. I wanted to touch her, needed to kiss her until she couldn’t remember her name or mine, but I needed to go slow. Once bitten twice shy. As soon as her stubborn gaze climbed up, I knew this was not going to go my way.

“I can’t be casual about this, Scott. It’s not...” She exhaled roughly, frustrated. “I can’t jump into bed with you one night and see you with someone else the next. I can’t do it. Go exercise your sexual frustration elsewhere. I’m sure you have a virtual cloud filled with names and numbers of women who would love to let you treat them like gym equipment.”

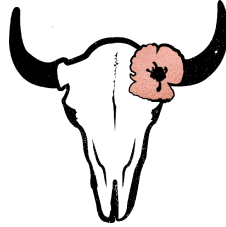
That was the point though, wasn’t it? I didn’t want to “exercise elsewhere.” I wanted to exercise those frustrations out on her, work out with a wife who was proving hard to convince.

She left the room only to return a moment later with an armful of pillows and a blanket she threw at me. “Bathroom is to the left. Have a good night.”

Which was more than I’d ever said to her when she was my guest. Her bedroom door slammed shut. The night had

officially gone to shit.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



SYDNEY

“WE’RE ABOUT TO LAND, MRS. BLACKSTONE.”

The flight attendant’s voice yanked me out of some very deep thoughts, and it was the woman’s use of my married surname that did it. It was still jarring, hearing someone address me as the wife of a man I was only beginning to know.

Speaking of husbands, I hadn’t spoken to Scott in over four weeks. Complications at work had kept me in Manhattan. Due to a pending lawsuit, which was commonplace in our business, I couldn’t leave until the middle of February. And honestly, I was a bit relieved because I had no idea how to continue in this arrangement. One thing I did know was that the attraction between us wasn’t going away. Distance and time certainly hadn’t stopped him from claiming all my attention.

He could claim a lot more if you’d only let him.

I squirmed in my chair. That voice had been growing louder each day. Not for nothing, but the man had been making women wet between the thighs since he’d learned how to walk. It was inevitable I’d succumb like all the rest. I didn’t

even want to fight it. He was right. Neither of us would be dating anytime soon. When was I ever going to have sex again—with another person, I mean. Between my workload and a husband, it'd be tricky.

The night he'd slept at the apartment, I'd gone to bed all proud of myself for turning down his offer of sex. The self-congratulations lasted for all of a nanosecond. Then it started to sink in that I'd essentially told Scott to sleep with other women. After which, panic set in and I spent the rest of the night staring up at the ceiling, eyes wide open with my blanket pulled up to my chin, fighting off horrifying images of Scott having sex with a bunch of women in clown masks.

The next morning, I'd awoken early, ready to put my pride aside and issue a retraction, only to find his blanket neatly folded on the couch and the pillow resting on top, Scott nowhere to be found. Had he left in search of a more willing partner as soon as I'd suggested it? Who knows? And I wasn't even sure I wanted to know anymore.

Rationally, I knew that I'd probably dodged a bullet. Sleeping with him would definitely complicate things and not for the better. And yet I couldn't deny that the thought of Scott in the arms of another woman made my blood curdle.

I'd gone out for coffee later that morning and caught the headline splashed across *The New York Post*. On the front cover, a full color picture of the two of us locked in a passionate kiss. The headline read: **True Love**. The byline: *Heir to the Blackstone Empire Meets His Match*. Judging by the picture, I would've believed it too if I hadn't known better.

Thus, the deep thoughts.

The jet powered down and the stairs unfolded onto the tarmac. The cold hit me like a brick to the face as soon as I

took my first step out of the plane. I'd forgotten how much harsher the weather was here. It had a biting quality you didn't get in New York. Pulling my knit hat down over my ears, I walked down the steps and glanced up. A brand-new black pickup truck with chrome trim sat idling a few feet away.

Scott jumped out. He was dressed in a black down jacket and a dark knit hat covered his head. His long legs encased in worn jeans and boots carried him to me in a determined stride, devouring the distance between us. The scruff was back. Looked like he was growing the beard again. In one glove-covered hand, he held a bouquet of black magic roses. That's not what made my lonely heart skip a beat and my stomach feel swampy, though. What did it was the hard resolve on his face and the spark of interest in his eyes.

God help me, I was developing a serious crush.

My feet stopped. My brain too, powering off at the sight of him. I swear I was seconds from looking over my shoulder to see if it was actually me he was eating up with his eyes or someone else was standing behind me.

Marching up, he pressed a quick kiss on my lips, grabbed my carry-on bag from me, and shoved the bouquet in my hand.

"These are for you," he announced as if this was completely normal behavior for us. "The dogs wanted to come, but I didn't want them crowding you." He turned abruptly and started walking back to the pickup while I remained frozen in place, as still as the ice sculpture we'd had at our wedding celebration.

When he realized that I wasn't following, Scott glanced over his shoulder and seeing me look disoriented, walked back and took my free hand. "C'mon," he said, pulling me along.

“I’m freezing my nuts off and it looks like we’re getting more snow tonight.”

Did the plane travel into a parallel universe where this Scott was competing for husband of the year, or was this another one of his pranks?

Opening the passenger door, he helped me in and still I said nothing, too dumbfounded by the change in him to form an articulate thought, let alone voice it out loud. The pickup smelled good. New leather and a faint trace of him. Sexy, sophisticated, and just a little bit spicy. He climbed behind the wheel. Both of us sat quietly for a minute. Eventually, I found my voice. “What’s going on?” Because well, frankly, Scott was acting like a real husband, and I didn’t know what to make of it. Moreover, blind trust? Yeah, no. That ship sailed after the cabin incident.

Looking out the windshield, he exhaled. “I want a do-over.” He looked at me. “Can I have a do-over?”

The pathetically earnest look on his face laid waste to my defenses. I was so tempted to trust him. “Is this another one of your pranks?”

He smirked. “No.”

I nodded and he put the pickup in **drive**.



SCOTT

“So...you’re gonna date your wife?”

Ryan side-eyed me like I’d lost my goddamn mind. The horses we were riding set their feet to go downhill, the ground made slick from the six inches of snow that had fallen

overnight. We were supposed to be checking the herd in the lower valley. Instead, it had turned into a third-degree interrogation from my best friend over the state of my marriage.

My marriage.

That word no longer made me desperate to find the bottom of a Macallan bottle. On the contrary, it had me considering how to improve it and no one was more surprised than I was.

“Yeah,” I said, more than a little proud of myself and feeling good about it. I’d flown out early the day after the wedding party, and with each mile I’d put between me and Sydney, the more I’d felt the urgency to see her again.

The same woman who’d told me to sleep with other women...

Real nice. She thought I couldn’t keep my dick in my pants, and she was about to get schooled on how wrong she was about me. I was as disciplined as I was determined to get what I wanted, which was my wife under me and over me. Any position that got her naked body touching mine would do.

“How the fuck does that work exactly?”

“I take her out to dinner, and we get to know each other better?” It didn’t sound convincing. Not even to my own ears. But what the hell did I know, anyway? I’d never been married before. The last semi-serious relationship I had was in business school. I was doing this backwards when I barely had any experience going forward.

“Maybe you can get her a friendship bracelet with both your names on it. Or a gemstone promise ring—those seem to be popular these days.”

I flipped him the bird and Ryan chuckled.

I'd done my best to make her feel welcome. The dogs did their part. They'd jumped all over her as if Christ had arrived for her second coming. Then I'd shown Sydney to the guest room and the spare one I'd converted into an office for her. Introduced her to the new computer, desk, ergonomic chair, and so on. I'd bought the best equipment money could buy. Jan had even stocked the refrigerator and pantry for her in case she wanted to cook because I knew how much she enjoyed it. God knows, I enjoyed eating her cooking.

She'd wandered around aimlessly, staring at everything as if searching for a landmine that could blow up in her face any minute. I didn't like it. I hated seeing her look uncertain and had to forcibly stop myself from kissing her senseless just to wipe that look off her face.

“Is she cool with that, you know...dating?”

She didn't trust me—that much was true. Did I blame her for the skepticism? No. I had a long way to go to make amends and I was going to. I'd do anything to gain back her trust. “Shit, I don't know, Ry, but I have to try.”

We rode on for a while in complete silence.

“I'd try too if I were you.”

Reaching the south pasture, I scanned my stock with pride. “Where's Tiny?”

Black and twice as big as the cows, it was generally easy to spot the old bull in the crowd. And yet I couldn't see him anywhere—not even against the white landscape. I hadn't gotten around to getting rid of him because he'd most likely be sent to slaughter due to his age, and after all the years of giving me beautiful babies I kind of felt like I owed the old guy.

Ryan pointed to a break in the fence line. “There.”

Pure unadulterated fear rushed up on me, my pulse racing with it. All I could think about was Sydney. Wheeling my horse around, I took off at a dead gallop.



SYDNEY

Small puffs of air trailed after me as my legs ate up the paved road that stretched before me for miles, a straight black line cutting the snow-covered landscape in two. It had already been cleared of the snow which had fallen overnight. Above me, the sun shone brightly in the clear cerulean sky. So brightly I could feel a sunburn developing on my nose.

There wasn't much that surprised me anymore, but Scott had. The office he'd organized had me close to weeping in gratitude. Then he'd gone and handed me a set of car keys, the Mercedes symbol winking at me from the palm of my hand.

“For you,” he'd said quietly. “It has deep-tread tires so you don't have to worry about...” Gazing down at me, he seemed to lose his train of thought for a moment. “...bad weather.”

I was developing a *thing* for my husband. This was not a good thing, but I had never been a big believer in denial, and now was not a good time to start. I'd developed a very soft spot for the man I'd coerced into marriage. There'd be hell to pay for that.

Also, I was under no false assumptions. The only reason he was going out of his way to be so accommodating and thoughtful was that he'd been sleeping with other women—per *my* idiotic instructions—and maybe he felt a certain degree

of guilt over it. So what? It didn't mean he was going to stop. Like he'd said, three years was a long time and men like Scott couldn't go three days without it. Meanwhile, it was eating me alive. All because my big fat mouth had gotten in the way.

I picked up the pace, anything to stave off the empty ache I'd been feeling since stepping off the jet. My lungs stung and my limbs burned. The bear spray Scott had given me banged against my ribs. Being back here, running in the clean crisp air, felt good. Moreover, it felt right.

On the white horizon, two people approached on horseback at a fast clip, their hooves kicking up snow. As they rode closer, I recognized the riders as Ryan and Scott. Ryan waved both arms like the dickens. Slowing to a jog, I popped out my earbuds and waved back.

"Hands back on the steering wheel, Sutter," I hollered between my cupped hands and chuckled. I could see Scott yelling, his lips moving, but couldn't make out what exactly.

Until I did.

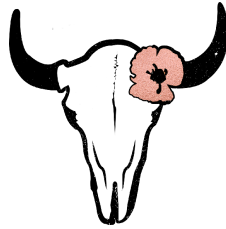
"Behind you!"

I glanced over my shoulder and my knees almost buckled. Charging after me, approximately fifty feet away and closing the distance quickly, was a black bull the size of an SUV. Ribbons of smoke curled out of his nostrils as his small beady black eyes had me squarely in his crosshairs....and all I had on me was a freaking can of bear spray.

I'd never really understood the term fight or flight before this very moment. A shot of adrenaline propelled me forward, legs churning as fast as they humanly could, my feet slapping against the frozen macadam, and the sound of blood rushing in my ears. Then my foot hit a patch of ice and I went flying

headfirst. The landing wasn't pretty. Although my hands broke my fall, my shoulder got the worst of it. Then my head. The blast of a gunshot echoed in the distance. That's the last thing I remembered.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



SCOTT

“I HATE HOSPITALS. CAN WE GO?”

I was pissed. First, at myself because it was my fault Sydney was in the hospital with a mild concussion, a bruised shoulder, and a banged-up knee. Second, at the invisible monster in the room. Had I not been standing right next to the gurney when the doctor cut away Sydney’s running tights, I wouldn’t have believed it. My wife’s thighs and hamstrings were covered in countless scars; long, pale, and silvery against her natural skin color. They were faded but discernible. Even the doctor was taken aback.

I wanted to hurt someone. I wanted to tear the world in two looking for whoever had done that to her, and I’d do a lot worse if I ever found the son of a bitch.

“Earth to Scott, come in, Scott.”

My attention snapped back to her. “Not until the doctor says it’s safe.” I barely managed a civil tone and she gave me a speculative look in response. Which basically summed up every exchange we’d had since she’d returned from her MRI.

“Whatever.”

I felt a smile rise up. My wife was a terrible patient. As soon as she'd awakened in my arms as we entered the emergency room, she began demanding to leave. Right in the middle of me shouting at nurses and ordering the doctor to treat her immediately. If there was any doubt that I was my father's son, that scene dispelled it.

I fixed the twisted IV line coming out of her arm.

"Thanks, *Nurse Ratched*, but I'm good. I'd be even better if we went home."

She smiled wryly at me, trying to coax me out of my bad mood. Yeah, it wasn't happening. Every time I glanced at her—at the bandage around her head—a flood of emotions came over me and none of them good. I couldn't stand to see her look so small and frail sitting up in the gurney. Less the invincible, high-powered attorney she was. More mortal, and therefore, prone to injury or worse.

"The doctor said you need to be supervised."

"Supervised not suffocated. You're making me dizzy with all the moving around."

That brought me up short. The last thing I wanted to do was to add insult to her injury. "Really?"

"No, not really. Just chill for a minute..." The delicate features of her face shifted, her expression becoming pensive. "How'd you find me anyway?"

"Red running tights." She was silent as she processed my answer. It made me wonder what she was thinking.

"I can't believe how lucky I was..." she absently remarked.

Was she kidding? I had a hard time keeping a lid on my astonishment and not overreacting. “Lucky? You could’ve been killed,” I said, close to shouting. How could she see it as anything other than a stroke of *bad* luck? “I should’ve gotten rid of that bull months ago.”

“I mean, lucky that you found me...what are the chances?”

I’ll always find you. The words rang loud and clear in my head, a truth so absolute I felt it down to the marrow of my bones.

She sat up straighter and winced, and I felt the pain as acutely as she did. Seeing her lying unconscious on the road with a one-ton bull bearing down on her took ten years off my life.

I’d dropped Tiny with one shot and there hadn’t been time for another. Not to mention that it really had been dumb luck that she’d worn those red leggings I hated, making it easy to spot her from a distance against the white backdrop.

“You look green, Scott. For heaven’s sake, I’m—”

The curtain of the ER bay moved aside. “Ready to be discharged,” the doctor, a tall woman with brown skin, sharp eyes, and short black hair, said upon entering. “But only if your husband promises not to let you out of his sight.”

Sydney smirked. “He did save my life so I’m guessing he won’t let all that effort go to waste.”

There was no way I was letting her out of my sight for a minute. My heart couldn’t survive it.

Trailing after the doctor, a male nurse entered and removed Sydney’s IV.

“Take it easy for the next two weeks, okay?” the doctor said, leveling Sydney with a pointed look before walking away.

Gathering up her clothes from the chair (minus the tights), I handed them to her along with a pair of scrubs I’d lifted earlier. “Let me help.”

“I can handle it,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m going to put my jacket on over this anyway.” She motioned to her light blue hospital gown.

“You could get dizzy and fall over. Stop being such a pest.”

That brought a smile to her lips. Her hand came to rest on my shoulder as I held the pants for her while she slipped one leg into them, then the other.

Yours, a distant voice called out.

However it had happened didn’t matter anymore. Life had intervened and brought us together. And now she was mine to keep safe. No one and nothing would ever hurt her again. I’d make sure of it.

A foreign sense of calm stole over me. It brushed aside the residual anxiety of having almost lost her. That’s when I knew. I’d never felt this way before, not for anyone, and immediately recognized it for what it was. I was falling for my wife.



SYDNEY

Scott knew. He’d seen the scars. The look on his face—the horror—as the doctor had cut away my leggings, could be seen from a mile away. I’d dated some in the past, not a lot, and I’d

warned them all, prepared them for the inevitable. It's not like I could go my entire life hiding my thighs.

I'd told them I was in a car accident when I was three and didn't correct their assumptions. It *was* partly true; I had been in a car accident. Except that's not what had caused the scars. Without context, however, they looked like what they were—battle scars.

I glanced over at the man in the driver's seat and found his face closed for business. Inscrutable. He hadn't uttered a single word since breaking me out of the hospital. We'd been in the car for twenty minutes and it already felt like twenty thousand, the quiet growing more oppressive than my headache.

“Nice car,” I finally blurted out because...fuck it.

A grunt. That's all I got in reply. So much for small talk.

With no recollection of how we'd gotten to the hospital, I was surprised when he pulled up to the entrance of the ER in a black-on-black AMG 500 S. Turning into his driveway, he parked in the garage and came around to the passenger side. “You don't have to carry me. Just let me lean—” Flatly ignoring me, he scooped me up in his arms. “Whoaokay, never mind.”

Not even a crack in that hard façade. Somebody was in a mood.

The dogs went crazy at the sight of me being carried, hopping around Scott's legs and barking as he marched through the house headed for my new bedroom. I'd missed them terribly when I was in New York. Who knew the smell of cheesy feet could inspire longing.

“Quiet!” Scott shouted, and the dogs, sensing Scott the Grinch was back, ceased barking immediately.

“Neat trick. I’ve gotta try it sometime.”

I looked up into his chiseled features as he gently placed me on the bed and his lack of response stole my smile away. The Grinch was not amused.

“Romeo. Juliet. Out.” As soon as the dogs were ushered out of the room, he slammed the door shut behind them. “What can I get you to eat?”

“Nothing. I need a shower. I smell like Windex.”

His gaze softened, sympathy there. “Shower is too dangerous. How about a bath?”

“Okay.”

He walked into the attached bathroom, and I heard the water running. When he emerged, he leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. Despite the pain, despite the possible brain damage I may have incurred, backlit with the white Henley clinging to every curvy muscle of his upper body and his thighs filling out the worn jeans, he looked like a living sex fantasy. One I wanted to explore in real life.

“I have to stay in the bathroom while you’re in there...for your safety.”

“Please tell me most women don’t fall for that.”

He gave me a dimpled smile for the first time all day. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Mrs. Blackstone. You could pass out in a hot bath.” At this point, that smile could’ve pretty much made me agree to anything. Heck, I’d put on a clown costume if that was his kink.

He scooped me back up and my arms automatically wrapped around his neck, holding on like he was the last fixed point on the planet. He felt steady and solid, smelled so good I wanted to sniff his neck and lay my head on his shoulder. In the dimly lit bathroom, he set me on the edge on of the tub and turned off the water. “Get undressed and I’ll help you in,” he said, volume low, tone serious. Then he handed me a towel. “Use this to cover yourself.”

Truth was, I didn’t care if he saw me naked. The cat was out of the bag already—he’d seen the scars, witnessed me at my most vulnerable. Laid bare, exposed, I had nothing else to protect.

Turning, he assumed a position. Legs splayed apart and arms crossed. His back muscles bunched and flexed. Which, Lord help me, had me close to drooling. Had I not been seriously injured I would’ve jumped him. It had to be the concussion. The concussion had to be the reason for this over-the-top reaction I was having to him. Yes, I’d always found him attractive, but that didn’t justify the drumbeat I could feel between my legs at the sight, sound, and smell of him now.

Slowly, I slipped off the hospital gown and the pants Scott had pinched from the ER. My sports bra had been removed in the hospital. All that was left was to ditch my underwear and draped the towel over my bits. It covered my breasts to the very tops of my thighs. Good thing I’d kept my waxing appointment when I was in New York.

“Ready.”

Turning, our gazes locked. He’d shed any pretense of indifference, just as I had. Undeniable interest lurked in his eyes. Picking me up once again, he held me above the water. As a general rule, I hated the feeling of being at someone

else's mercy—out of control of my own destiny. But as it turns out, Scott was more solid than I'd ever imagined. More reliable. Not just in size and strength, but also in character. I was beginning to discover he was the kind of person I could lean on.

Mischief shined in his eyes. “Scared I'm going to drop you?”

“No,” I lied, as I dug my fingers into the thick part of his bicep. “I'm assuming these aren't a product of your personal trainer.”

He shook his head as he stared at my mouth. His knees buckled a fraction, pretending to falter, and I screamed. Clutching his neck tightly, I inadvertently jammed his face against my barely covered breasts and laughed, the sound bouncing off the high barreled ceiling and marble walls.

“Asshole!”

“I thought you said you weren't scared?”

My laughter died as he lowered me into the water. No regard for the sleeves of his shirt. The towel floated away, but my smile remained.

“Too hot?” he asked, his voice as sweet and rough as rock sugar.

“It's perfect...feels good.” The heat worked its magic, getting into my muscles and bones and soothing all the aches and pains brought on by a high-impact crash on frozen ground. I sank under and dunked my head. When I came up, he was sitting on the floor with his back against the side of the tub. One leg bent, a thick sinuous wrist resting on top of his knee, the other leg straight. For the next few minutes, the only sound

to breach the silence was the sound of water moving, the standoff fraught with tension.

“Are we going to talk about it?” he finally said in a quiet voice.

Sighing, I swallowed down the embarrassment and pushed aside the shame. “What do you want to know?”

“Who did that to you?” His voice was underscored with so much palpable fury I debated how much to tell him.

I’d never talked about it with anyone other than my therapist for a number of reasons. Most of which were all on me. The number one reason: I didn’t want to be perceived as weak, as a “survivor.”

I didn’t survive anything. I thrived despite my history.

“My grandfather...my grandmother’s weapon of choice was a solid wooden spoon she liked to use on my knuckles when I was really young—”

“How young?” The words sounded like they’d been pushed through a grinder. The tendons on the side of his neck were painfully taut. I wanted to kiss him there, kiss away the pain and turn it into pleasure. Let him give me some in return.

“Five...around five. He started in with the broken fishing rod when I was ten. Only the tops of my legs so no one would see. Didn’t want anybody at church talking. You know—because that was important.”

“Sick fucks. Was that how they justified it?”

“No. I’ve met plenty of religious fanatics and some were perfectly nice people. My grandparents hid behind religion, but they were standard-issue abusers. Told me repeatedly it was for my own good.”

“And your parents?”

“They were teenagers. My mom got pregnant at sixteen. Dad was seventeen. They ran away and were killed in a car accident in Oregon—outside of Portland. I was three at the time and somehow survived. My grandparents on my dad’s side didn’t want me so Bill and Claire Evans took me in. Tried to fix all the ways they went wrong with my mother.”

Scott reached into the tub and fished out my hand. I gave it to him willingly. Later, I would see it for what it was, his tender heart offering to share the pain. In the moment, however, all I knew was that it felt good to tell him. We’re not built to be alone. We need to connect. We’re designed to seek common ground, to hold each other up, to nurture one another. And he did that for me instinctually.

Holding it gently, he scrutinized the scars on my knuckles, where the skin was paler than the rest of my hand.

“Lasers. Bleaching cream. Alpha hydroxy. Lanolin cream...I’ve tried it all.”

“Are they dead? Because if they’re not—”

“He’s been dead for ten years. She died two months ago.”

He turned back around, facing the wall. “How can you be so cool about it?”

That induced a cynical smile. He was angry on my behalf and wanted me to be angry too. But I couldn’t meet him there. Anger hadn’t served me. It had only managed to keep me closed off. My past was more barren than not, the rest was littered with the carcasses of so-called relationships that never lasted more than three months—if that.

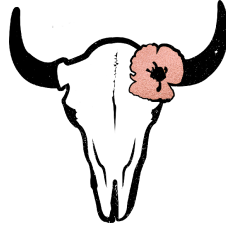
“I’ve been processing it all my life, Scott. I’ve got a head start.” He got quiet, head bowed, and I began feeling

increasingly uncomfortable, the water turning cold, telling me I'd overstayed my welcome. Maybe I'd said too much. Maybe he'd see me as weak now. My mind went straight to all the negative stuff. "I don't want your pity, Scott."

That was the last thing I wanted or needed.

"You don't have it," he said softly. "You have my admiration."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



SCOTT

“CAN YOU PLEASE LEAVE?” LAUREL GLARED AT ME FROM above the rim of her reading glasses. “You’re being very annoying, Scott. Hey, I got an idea—why don’t you go home and annoy your wife?”

Laurel went back to doing payroll.

A few days after Sydney’s confession and I still hadn’t recovered. That and her brush with death. Rationally, I knew she was out of danger, but I couldn’t get the rest of me to accept it. I couldn’t silence the voice that said it was my fault she’d almost been killed. That I’d been seconds from losing her because I’d been, once again, caught up in my own bullshit.

Consequently, I’d been cutting my workday shorter and shorter since the accident—anxious to get home and see for myself that she was alright—when what I really wanted to do was stay home altogether. But, no, she’d demanded that I not *hover*, so I’d physically gone back to work while my mind remained elsewhere not doing anybody any good.

“All I asked was a simple question.”

“And the simple answer is the same one that I’ve given you the last four times in the last half hour—no, the doctor has not called. Take it from a woman who’s raised five boys. If the doctor doesn’t call with an MRI result right away, then it’s good news. It’s when they call that you should worry.”

We’d had a few days of sun and mild weather, and the snow was beginning to melt. Out the picture window of my office, I could see a few crocus blades coming up. Spring wasn’t too far off and so was our busiest time of year: calving season.

“You know what, I’m going home.”

Laurel glanced away from her computer. “What a great idea. Tell Sydney I said I’m sorry, but I’m no saint.”

“We’re going to have a long discussion about your attitude when I’m thinking right,” I said, walking through the door.

“Sure thing, boss,” I heard her reply with a chuckle.

The call came in on my ride back home, the Star Wars theme filling the cab of my Ram pickup.

“Hey, Dad...so are we doing that now, texting?”

As soon as Sydney had fallen asleep the day of the accident, I’d called Dad to tell him what had happened. The call had gone straight to voicemail, but that wasn’t what got my attention. It was that I received a text in return, wishing her a speedy recovery. My father hated texts. He once chewed out Charles Barkley for texting instead of calling.

“I’ll make this brief,” he said, ignoring my question. Then he coughed. It sounded wet, and a soft rasp remained even after he’d cleared his throat. To say it concerned me would be an understatement. My father wasn’t a young man and walking pneumonia could sneak up on anyone.

“You don’t sound good, Dad. Have you seen a doctor?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You sound like you could be getting pneumonia.”

“Listen to me, Scott. I’m talking to the board about appointing Sydney as acting CEO at the end of the month. They’ve had enough time to get comfortable with the idea of your marriage.”

I nodded as he spoke, but my head was still on the cough. I’d lost people I loved in the past because I hadn’t paid close enough attention, hadn’t pushed the subject when I should have, and I’d lived to regret that decision. I sure as fuck wasn’t going to let it happen again. “I’m calling Mom to make sure you go see a doctor.”

“Call your mother because she’s your mother and she misses you, but leave me out of it...” It was easier to convince one of my bulls to behave. “How are things with Sydney? She told me you were giving her a hard time.”

His tone was relaxed, which meant he was good and pissed and wished he could beat my ass the same way he had when I was twelve and he caught me throwing all of Devyn’s underwear in the pool because she wouldn’t let me play with her brand-new Macintosh Color Classic.

It was the first time I’d smiled all day. “I’ve apologized so you can stop sharpening the knives.”

He grunted in approval. “I’m asking you one last time before I make the announcement—are you sure you don’t want to come home and work for the company I built for you.”

My smile sank. Frank Blackstone was a hall-of-famer when it came to dishing-out guilt, and I can’t say it didn’t

strike a chord. Of course it did, but that did not mean I was going to swap a life I loved for one I didn't out of some sense of duty.

“You built that company for you. Don't kid yourself.”

When he didn't argue, the worry kicked up again. “Dad, I'm worried about you.”

“Yeah...okay,” he said, “Sydney it is then.”

He sounded so damn disappointed I found myself wanting to give him some hope even though I knew I had no intention of ever going back. I never got the chance. A beat later the call dropped.



SYDNEY

One day bled into the next. Mornings faded into magic hour which turned into brilliant sunsets. It was like Fourth of July fireworks every night outside the enormous cathedral-style windows of Scott's house.

My body healed faster than even I had anticipated. Four days after my showdown with the bull, my shoulder was only sore when I used it too much and my knee was almost a hundred percent. The scab on my forehead would take a little longer.

In the meantime, we fell into a routine of sorts. Scott worked. I worked. We ate dinner. We spent nights on the couch. He watched basketball while I worked on the laptop. Each night, alone in bed, I'd inevitably end up staring up at the ceiling wanting him.

We'd reached a stalemate on that front. I wasn't going to make the first move and he hadn't tried again. It had all the earmarks of a real marriage. Without one perk, of course. Which fed the tension. It grew into a big lumbering creature, the third roommate in the house who we both pretended didn't take up too much room, and didn't make a racket and knock stuff over, and didn't insist on making it awkward.

The dynamics between us had shifted drastically since our heart-to-heart in the bathroom. He was literally tripping over his own feet to help me any way he could. It felt unnatural and awkward at first—to let someone do for me—but once I started to lean into it, I never wanted it to end.

The night before I was set to leave again, I couldn't sleep. I also didn't want to leave. Which was the first time that sentiment reared its head. Around one, I gave up trying and decided maybe a little warm milk spiked with brandy was in order. As I shuffled through the dark house, on my way to the kitchen, the enormous windows revealed heavy snowfall with flakes the size of quarters, painting an absolutely magical picture.

Hearing me mucking about in the kitchen, the dogs appeared. I didn't mind having them sleep with me—I kind of missed their warm bodies, to be honest—but Scott had forbidden it while I was still injured, and my shoulder had agreed. One false move and I would've been back to square one.

“Hey, guys.” They danced around me, tails wagging. “Wanna keep me company while I try to get my drunk-on? Yes? Okay, good.” They looked at me like I needed to get my head checked.

I poured a second shot of brandy into the milk, grabbed the mug, and walked into the den, my attention consumed by the snowfall. The security floods had been turned on, backlighting the show Mother Nature was putting on. I turned a little, ready to plop down in one of the massive down-filled chairs in the living room, when I realized there was a body on the couch.

“Jesus!” My hand went over my heart and he smirked. “What are you doing up?” I barked, sounding affronted to find him lounging in his own house. It’s safe to say the sexual tension was making me as edgy as a cat on a hot tin roof. It was either that, or the straight-up lack of sex.

“Couldn’t sleep...you?” He rolled off his back and went up on an elbow, head in hand, chest bare and his jeans unbuttoned. I’d never seen a sexier sight, so handsome my eyeballs got wet. Among other things.

Trusty mug in hand, I settled in the chair across from him. “Me neither.”

We sat in silence for a while, and Tension, our third roommate, decided to join us. I could feel his eyes on me while I kept my attention on the snow. “It’s so pretty.”

“You won’t think that once you’ve seen it a few more hundred times.”

“But you don’t mind it? I mean, you choose to live here.”

“I love it here. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be...this is home.”

“It suits you.” I sipped the warm milk, hiding the hot flush of my cheeks behind the mug.

And it did suit him. He always walked in wearing a soft smile at the end of the workday, his expression relaxed. He wasn’t the type of man you could keep cooped up like an

exotic flower in a hot house. Scott needed the outdoors, the elements, the challenge.

“Do you...like it here?” I heard a few seconds later.

“More than I thought I would—stampeding bulls aside.”

“I warned you.”

“Yeah, that bear spray sure came in handy.” I stifled a grin. I loved giving him shit. It shouldn’t have been this much fun and yet it was.

“Yeah, well”—he smiled one of his dimpled ones—“I’m teaching you how to shoot a pistol as soon as the snow clears.”

I made a face, not at all happy with that news. “Do I have to?”

“You live here now. You should know. I can’t handle another heart attack and I have a feeling I can’t stop you from running.”

“What about you guys?” I said to the dogs sprawled out at my feet. “Wanna play bodyguards?” The dogs stared back like I was too stupid to understand that they lacked the power of speech.

My eyes lifted to find Scott’s gaze laser focused on my chest. The long t-shirt I’d worn to sleep had slipped off my shoulder and exposed my cleavage. I pushed it back up. “How did you wind up with these two?”

The small smile Scott had been wearing up until this moment slowly melted away. “I...” My smile dropped as well. Whatever the story was, it wasn’t a pleasant one. He sat up and leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, absently running a thumb back and forth over his lower lip. He did that

a lot when he was thinking something over. And right now I could see he was considering how much to tell me.

“Do you remember my friend Charlie Hewitt? He was at Devyn’s wedding.”

I racked my brain for a face to attach to the name and it finally dawned on me. “Didn’t he work at Blackstone for a short while? In property management?”

Scott nodded.

Then I recalled the rest of the details. The dude was never on time. Never. We had to assign someone else to follow up on the properties he handled because we were getting so many complaints. I only knew this because Frank had cursed up a storm when he’d been made aware. Then he showed up to work drunk one day, which was obviously a *fireable* offense.

“He had a substance abuse problem, didn’t he?”

With a pained look on his face, Scott nodded. “Charlie and I had been best friends since the fourth grade. And yeah, in hindsight he probably did.” His gaze flicked away briefly. “We both partied hard back then.

“He was infatuated with this girl I’d gone out with a handful of times. I had no interest in her so...I...I set them up, thinking I was just helping a brother out...”

The sinking feeling in my stomach said I was going to regret asking about the dogs. Scott looked off, into the snowfall as if he could escape his own memories.

“I thought I was doing a good thing...For a while, they seemed happy together—I mean, he was still partying a lot, but we all were...”

His gaze met mine again.

“We were at a wedding in the Hamptons...at some point in the evening, I ended up on the beach, drinking. Meghan found me and started coming on to me.”

I sucked in an audible breath.

“Charlie caught her trying to kiss me, but he also saw me push her away, so he started in on her immediately, calling her a slut, a whore, you name it...It wasn't the first time I'd seen them fight. And it usually got ugly fast. But this time it got even uglier...she told him she'd settled for second best, that she'd always been attracted to me and only went out with him to kill time until I was ready to settle down. Which...was a ridiculous fantasy.”

His Adam's apple quivered as he swallowed.

“What happened?” came out a rough whisper.

“Charlie pulled out a ring box, said he was going to propose that night but he couldn't find the right moment. I had no idea. He hadn't said a word to me—probably because he knew I would've tried to talk him out of it.

“Anyway, I left them on the beach yelling at each other and figured they'd work it out like they always did. Next morning, I got a phone call from his brother. The housekeeper had found Charlie hanging from the pipes in his loft.”

I felt sick, close to throwing up the milk I'd savored only minutes ago.

“He'd bought these guys from a breeder in the UK. When he told me he was on a waiting list for two puppies, I told him he was a dumb fuck who could barely take care of himself... They were delivered the day after his funeral. His brother didn't want them, so I kept them.”

Cupping both furry faces between my hands, I planted a kiss on each one of their big heads. “I’m sorry, Scott.”

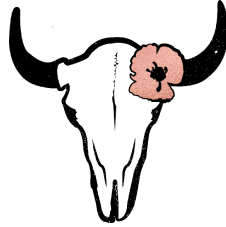
“Yeah,” he said with a faraway look on his face I didn’t like one bit. “Me too.”

I watched the snowfall, digesting everything he’d told me. The picture was finally coming together.

“Is that why you left? Because you didn’t want to be reminded?”

He took his eyes from the snow and placed them on me. “Because I didn’t want to wind up like him.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



SCOTT

I HEARD THE MUSIC BLASTING THROUGH THE HOUSE AS SOON as I stepped into the hallway attached to the garage. *Aretha Franklin*, by the sound of it. Which was why the dogs weren't at the door to greet me. She'd been gone two weeks and it felt like a hundred years. I was beginning to hate this house when she wasn't here.

Shucking off my jacket and work boots in the mudroom, I followed the trail of music and the scent of vanilla into the kitchen. My wife was home. At the threshold, my feet stopped and my pulse raced.

Sydney was dancing with the dogs. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, hanging to the side. The ubiquitous Yale Law sweatshirt, which my dick and I had seen too much of, was falling off one shoulder, her legs bare. She'd stopped hiding them from me the night we returned from the hospital.

She held a wooden spoon to her mouth like a microphone and lip-synched *I Never Loved A Man*, her face animating every syllable, while Juliet barked and Romeo pranced around.

"You're a no-good heart breaker"

You're a liar and you're a cheat

And I don't know why

I let you do these things to me

My friends keep telling me

That you ain't no good

But oh, they don't know

That I'd leave you if I could."

Sheer awe filled my chest. I would've sworn on a Bible that I'd never seen anything more captivating. And it wasn't that she was having the time of her life, or that she was drop-dead sexy in nothing but an old faded sweatshirt. It was so much more than that. Something that went deeper than skin and scars.

Despite what she'd suffered—something so fucking horrendous it had left a reminder on her gorgeous body—she believed that she was lucky. *Lucky*, for shit's sake! She laughed like life was not only good, but good *to her*. The depth and breadth of strength my wife possessed astounded me. Not because of what she'd suffered, but because of her willingness to meet each and every day as if she hadn't.

"Ready...here comes the second verse," she said to the dogs, unaware of my presence. I curled my lips around my teeth to stop from laughing at the weird, jerking moves she made while she danced. On the plus side, the knee seemed to be completely healed by the looks of it.

"Don't ya never, never say that we were through

Cause I ain't never

Never, Never, no, no...loved a man

The way that I, I love you

I can't sleep at night

And I can't even fight

I guess I'll never be free

Since you got, your hooks, in me." Aretha's voice drifted out of the sound system loud and clear.

I wanted to go to her. I wanted to be part of this...this feeling. Anybody who got near her got sucked into it. I saw it with Laurel, Drake, and Ry—even my father had gotten caught up in her orbit. I'd been living under a cloud since Charlie died. Eight long-ass years. I just hadn't known it until something bright and shiny walked into my life, lighting me up and making me see what I'd been missing.

I love this woman. The realization punched me in the chest. The one that followed was even scarier. I wanted her to love me back.

Romeo finally noticed me standing in the doorway and trotted over, Juliet joined him shortly after, their tails whipping back and forth. Sydney's eyes met mine, wide and full of surprise, the wooden spoon frozen in place near her mouth. I was done playing games, pretending I wasn't up all night thinking about her, jerking off every morning to fantasies of what I wanted to do to her.

"I missed you."

Her face softened. "I missed you too."

Brushing the dogs away, I walked up to her, took the wooden spoon out of her hand, and chucked it over my shoulder. The dogs went chasing after it. Then I took her face in my hands, cupping her cheeks, while hers came up to gently

cover mine and her thumbs brushed against the inside of my wrist.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” I warned, my gaze roaming indiscriminately over her face, one that I’d come to know better than my own. “Then I’m going to peel away this ugly fucking sweatshirt, and worship every inch of your body with my mouth. And when you think you can’t come anymore, that I’ve wrung you dry, I’m going to fuck you and prove you wrong. If you have a problem with anything I’ve just said, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

She blinked, her mouth quivering. “This sweatshirt is not ugly.”

“Is that a yes?”

She nodded once, one chin jerk, and I pressed my mouth to hers, giving it everything I had. Moving forward, I backed her up against the kitchen island covered in cooking supplies while our mouths searched for the right angle, tongue meeting tongue, my dick painfully hard pushing into her belly.

Hands under her ass, I picked her up and dropped her on the counter. Utensils and pans fell off the edge with a loud clattering sound, and still, we didn’t stop kissing, the chemistry as explosive as it had always been. Cupping the back of her head, I stepped between her legs and made love to her mouth—to my wife’s mouth. *My wife*. That sounded pretty damn good to me.

“Wait!”

I pulled far enough away to get a look at her face. “What?” My gaze went straight to her swollen lips, made that way by my kisses.

“Have you slept with other women?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Never mind.”

I kissed her hard. “Your faith in me is touching, Mrs. Blackstone, and no, not since I married you.”

She kissed me harder. “Carry on.”

Grabbing the edge of the sweatshirt, I yanked it up and over her head, threw it away.

“No more Mr. Nice Guy,” I muttered against her lips and she started giggling.

“When have you ever been—”

The words died as soon as my mouth latched on to her nipple. Then she moaned, clamped her legs around my waist, and her head fell back in satisfaction. Hooking two fingers over the top of her shorts, I pulled them down and off and took her panties with them. They dropped to the floor, done for the day.

Next to her hip, there was a bowl filled with sliced strawberries and another with cake batter. I dipped a finger in the yellow stuff and painted it on her tummy, the strip of light blonde curls below taunting me. My dick was more than eager to get to the main attraction, but I’d be damned if I was going to be rushed to the finish line when I’ve been waiting for months to savor this moment.

“What are you doing?” she said in a weak voice that made me smile.

“Making living art.”

With the flat of my tongue, I licked off the vanilla-flavored batter and heard her suck in a ragged breath, her fingers sifting

through my hair and closing around a handful. Her legs lifted, her heels dug into my shoulders.

“Scott...”

“You like this?” I blew on her and watched her body bow, her teeth dig into her bottom lip. More batter, this time tracing the seam of her pussy.

“Stop teasing me!”

Stifling a laugh against the sensitive skin on the inside of her knee, I pushed two fingers inside of her and kissed her there.

“Scott...”

I would’ve done anything to hear her say my name like that. Like she was about to blow past her self-control and I was the cause. To that end, I dripped more batter on my wife’s already sweet body. Some on her belly. Some I let slip down between her thighs. Then I cleaned it up with my mouth, savoring each lick, kissing every square inch of exposed skin. She was close. I could sense it, her body drawing tight. I added my fingers, sucked, and she screamed. Her hand in my hair tightened then relaxed.

One thing was for damn sure—I’d never taste vanilla again without thinking of my wife. Vanilla had just become my favorite fucking flavor.



SYDNEY

The hype was real. In the privacy of my mind, his name was forever going to be BHB: Believe the Hype Blackstone. He feasted on me like he was getting paid top dollar to do it...like

he was a master freaking artist. And do it right, he did. I couldn't even keep my eyes open. The onslaught of pleasure made me fall back onto the cool marble countertop of the kitchen island like I was offering myself up for sacrifice, my hands scrambling for purchase, fingers hooked around the edge.

Why did I ever not like him? What the hell had I been thinking? I could've been getting this for months, I thought. Ignorance is not bliss. Whoever came up with that is a moron—probably a man. Sex with Scott, on the other hand... *that* was bliss.

More stuff went crashing to the ground. His arms cinched like steel bands around my thighs to keep me from falling off as well. With his mouth and fingers, I came not once but twice so hard I actually screamed. He was right, I was so wrung out I was ready for a nap.

As I labored to catch my breath, he began placing kisses on my thighs and my eyes snapped open...he was kissing my scars. Gently, deliberately. A surge of emotion jammed in my throat, my eyes glassy with it. I expected skill. I expected sensual fireworks. I didn't expect tenderness.

"Scott..." I forced out, the sound rough and vulnerable, begging him to stop but hoping he wouldn't. He'd said he missed me. I'd missed him more.

His head lifted. He pulled me up off the island and picked me up. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, his solid strength, his steady presence, his big heart, as he carried me into his bedroom.

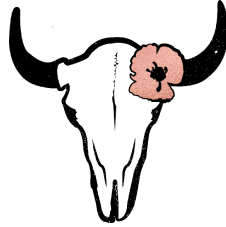
Laying me down gently, he let go long enough to pull his thermal shirt over his head, revealing blocks of muscles I couldn't wait to worship as thoroughly as he'd done to me.

Then he pushed down his jeans and took his Tom Ford boxer briefs with them.

Seeing them brought a smile to my lips. But that smile dropped in a hurry when I got a good look at his erection. This was a man made for “sinning” and if that was true then I wanted to be a sinner too. I was suddenly sweating from how turned on I was. As if I hadn’t come twice already—a certified record for me.

Watching me closely, never taking his eyes away from mine, he lowered himself over me. Words got lost, sentiments saved for another day. There’d be time for that later. He pushed my knees apart and entered me in a single solid thrust. Not gentle. A claiming one that announced his intentions as clearly as his words had done back in the kitchen. I came three more times that night. Scott was a man of his word.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



SYDNEY

THE NEXT WEEK WAS BLISS LIKE I'D NEVER EXPERIENCED before. An underlying whisper of a voice kept telling me to be careful, fairytales belonged in children's books, not in real life, and this one had begun on shaky legs at best. Regardless, I didn't listen. I dove headfirst into it—and so did Scott.

I cooked him my favorite meals and he taught me how to ride a horse—better yet, a pony. We took trail rides around the property whenever the weather permitted, and Scott showed me all the reasons he loved Wyoming.

I worked. He worked. In the meantime, I was growing extremely uneasy about Frank's secret. He'd been missing more and more days at the office, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that it sapped some of the sweetness out of this new and improved marriage.

One day Scott surprised me at noon. He said he had something to show me. We drove to a high point with an unobstructed view of Upper Falls, the famed waterfall of Yellowstone while my stomach did somersaults. When I'd

asked him what the rush was, he'd said, "You consider yourself lucky, right?"

He gave me a sexy smirk and I kissed him, pouring everything into that kiss, hoping he could feel what I felt for him. Every feeling felt like a first with him. And in many ways that was true.

"Very lucky," I told him, looking into his eyes. Lately that sentiment had grown roots. One look at him and no one would argue.

Sure enough, twenty minutes later, a sun shower started and shortly after a rainbow appeared across the sky.

"How did you know?" I asked, dumbfounded, in awe.

His mouth shaped into a lopsided smile, his eyes dancing with mirth. "It's my job to know."

I'm not prone to flights of fancy, but the man made a rainbow appear. Was it any wonder I was falling in love with him?



"Just stand still for five more minutes..." Romeo scooted away and started running in circles around me, his entire massive Wolfhound body covered in shampoo.

It was high time these two got a bath and the weather was finally cooperating. I'd found a spray nozzle out back and went to work.

"Romeo! Get over here! Stop it." The more I chased, the faster he ran, tongue hanging out, tearing up the lawn because *this was the best game ever!* Then Juliet got in the mix, barking loudly, and it all went to hell. Romeo suddenly hit the

brakes and shook, sending suds flying everywhere—and me screaming when some hit me in the face.

“What’s going on here?” an amused man inquired. Behind me, Scott was grinning. Taking off his ball cap, he adjusted his hair and slammed it back on.

“They smell like cow shit is what’s going on,” was the obvious reply.

I wiped my brow with the back of my wrist and watched Scott’s gaze track up and down my body, taking his time to thoroughly evaluate my wet t-shirt covered in dying suds, my hair falling into my face, and my bare legs shoved into my Hunter boots. He was so distracted that he missed Romeo coming at him like a heat-seeking missile. Before he knew what hit him, Scott was on his back, lying spread eagle on the ground.

Oh sweet, sweet vengeance. I still missed my orange ASICS.

I doubled over in laughter while he blinked, trying to ascertain what the heck had just happened to him. Stepping over him with my legs straddling his body, I bent to get a better look and tipped his ball cap off his head. “You okay there, Sweet Nuts?”

Next thing I know, I’m lying on top of him. Eyes hooded and aimed at my mouth, he murmured, “Better now, Sunshine.”

We kissed and touched and got covered in mud. He stood, and with pure muscular power, took me with him. We peeled our clothes off even though it was only March and still a little nippy out. Then he grabbed the spray nozzle and hit me in the

chest with the cold water. The look of pure shock on my face—

“Oh, you’re gonna get it now.”

He chuckled darkly. “And I’ll happily take it. This is better than a Girls Gone Wild video.”

I snatched the hose out of his hands and aimed for the jewels, but he turned in time to save “future generations of Blackstones.” His exact words. I was also labeled a “genocidal maniac,” for my actions. Which was a bit extreme, if you ask me.

After we’d rinsed the mud off, he wrapped his warmth around me, chased away the chill, and kissed me as he backed me up to the side of the house. His restless hands moving over me possessively, with the authority and conviction of a man who knew all my secrets and still wanted me.

Reaching between us, I guided him inside of me, my legs instinctively circling his waist. He wasn’t rough, he wasn’t fast. He pressed his face into the curve of my neck and made love to me. Two people moving as one, seeking absolution for the sins of the past and gaining acceptance for having repented. And once we were both wrung out and satisfied, legs trembling, holding each other tightly, he said, “I never want to be divorced, Syd...not even once.”



“Who keeps calling?” asked my lover, the same man I happened to be married to. I was lying in bed, enjoying the view when yet another call from my grandmother’s lawyer came in. The husband had neglected to put on a shirt as he packed his duffel bag, and he wasn’t going to hear any complaints from me.

“My grandmother’s lawyer. He’s been badgering me for months...I told him I don’t want anything.”

Stepping out of the walk-in closet, he searched my face, his brows bunched with concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied and meant it.

He was heading to Houston for two days on cattle business, and I was scheduled to return to New York. I was dreading it—no exaggeration. I was falling hard and fast in love for the first time in my adult life, and I wanted the feeling to last as long as possible.

I wasn’t sure what awaited me back in Manhattan. All I knew was that it wasn’t going to be pleasant. Not with Frank’s condition hanging over my head. More than a few times it was on my lips to tell Scott, but I couldn’t get the words out. Couldn’t betray the other man I loved.

Scott threw on a white dress shirt, and I got up to button it for him. “I’m gonna miss you,” he murmured while he brushed his fingers through my hair and looked at me the same way I was looking at him.

“Me too,” I returned.

Twenty minutes later, he was on his way to the airport.

Two hours later, I was on a flight to Philly.



“Your best room please.”

The pimple-faced young woman with long brown hair manning the desk at the motor inn stared at me dubiously, jaw hanging loose showcasing crooked teeth and a desperate need for braces.

“We only got one type ’a room.”

The Four Seasons this was not, but there was also no getting around it. I needed to take care of business and be gone as quickly as possible and driving an hour to stay in Philly would only slow me down.

“Then your cleanest room, please.”

More blank staring. “They’re all clean, Mrs.”

“Whatever,” I snapped, exhaustion getting the best of me. “Just...can I have a room, please?”

After making arrangements for Drake to stay with the dogs, I caught the first flight out of Jackson Hole. Six hours and two stops later, I landed in Philly at midnight, rented a car, and drove another forty-five minutes to reach the only hotel (or whatever you want to call it) anywhere near my old hometown.

Rural is the only way to describe where I grew up. And although it had some benefits—we never locked our doors at night, and the biggest issues were hunting accidents in the fall and drunken teenagers tearing up the public golf course in the summer—there was a lot of downside too. It was rural and remote.

Not to mention, the boogeymen were already living with me.

My heart was in my throat as I drove over the town limits. I could feel the stitches in those old wounds unraveling and what would spill out was anybody’s guess.

I’m a thriver not a survivor. I’m a thriver not a survivor. I’m a thriver not a survivor. The mantra played on a loop.

In the past, it had helped me climb out of a panic attack whenever I was alone in a dark room and it was a little depressing to see it resurfacing now, after all the years of therapy I'd been through. Then again, I hadn't had to face my demons until now.

Seventeen years ago, I drove out of here and never came back. The day I graduated high school I packed up the used Jetta I'd bought with the money I'd made working summer jobs and headed to Connecticut. It felt like my story was coming full circle. High time to cut the last cord binding me to this place—long past time for closure. My only regret was that Josh wouldn't be a part of it.

With each red brick row house I drove past, an avalanche of memories came tumbling back. Most of them snapshots. Most of them unpleasant with the exception of the ones that included the boy I once loved. The library where I worked the summer before my senior year looked smaller than I remembered, weathered by years of neglect. The hardware store where Josh worked was long gone, replaced by a Subway.

I'd gotten so good at compartmentalizing my life it was almost as if I'd been a third-party observer instead of a participant. Everyone has their own method of coping. Some people turn to drugs and alcohol. My crutch was to go emotionally offline and bury myself under my work—as my therapist has repeatedly pointed out. And it had worked. Maybe a little too well.

I didn't call or text Scott to tell him that I needed to leave. He'd find out soon enough from Jan when he returned from Houston. I knew I should've called. This thing we'd been building slowly, block by block—call it trust or whatever,

maybe more—was still fragile, and I didn't want to bring it all down. But something stopped me. I couldn't get my fingers to work, to push the **send** button.

It just felt too personal. Maybe I was afraid to be let down. That this would be where he drew the line and deemed me more trouble than I was worth. I'd told myself a lot of crap like that over the years. It was easier to be alone. Nobody to keep score. Nobody to answer to. At least it had been before I married Scott.

As much as I'd already shared with him, I hadn't gone into detail. Nor would I. He didn't know the depth of it, and I was still too guarded to let anyone see the shame attached. That's the thing seldom talked about—the shame most victims of violence and abuse suffer. It's tattooed into your psyche. It might fade over time, but the damage is done. That thin voice whispering that maybe, just maybe, you deserved it, that you invited it, that it's your fault, long after the scars heal...it stays.

Motel girl's big brown eyes widened when I handed over my Platinum Amex. In turn, the girl handed me an actual key with a big green plastic fob attached. My eyes widened.

I mean...an actual key? I was pretty sure I'd never seen one. Not even in Europe. If that wasn't a sign, I didn't know what was. I needed to get the fuck out of this town as quickly as possible.



The first of Scott's texts came in a little after four the next morning and kept coming, and coming, and coming every half hour until I replied. Didn't matter. I hadn't slept a wink all night anyway. The bed lumpy, the smell of mold, the sheets scratchy. Too many ghosts hanging around.

Scott: Where are you?

Scott: You left without a word. I'm getting worried.

Scott: Sydney. Call me now.

Scott: Can you please call me? This isn't like you.

Me: I'm in Philly. Taking care of some family business.

I typed...*I'm fine*. And erased it.

Typed...*I'm sorry*. And erased it.

I meant the second not the first.

I took a shower with nonexistent water pressure, got dressed, and drove over to the farmhouse with bile churning in my gut. My head scrambling for a foothold on composure. My heart searching for bravery. I found neither.

My grandparent's house was exactly as I remembered it. Standing on the curb, looking up at it, my heart thumped double time, my palms sweat even though there was a chill in the air. It was a little more weathered—the white clapboard siding in need of a fresh coat of paint, the black shutters missing a few slats, some cobblestones of the circular driveway missing—but essentially the same. An idyllic farmhouse by all outward appearances. House of horrors if you knew what had happened on the inside.

My grandmother's lawyer had mentioned that a family had bought the place. Two dentists with three young kids. I could

only hope they would replace those old ugly footprints with new happy ones as soon as possible.

“Mrs. Blackstone?”

The moniker still threw me off. I turned to watch a man, around late sixties, exit a silver Honda Pilot and approach with a manila envelope in his hand. He wore a green Philadelphia Eagles knitted hat, an almost completely white beard, and a tweed blazer.

“Tom Linklater.” He extended a hand and I shook it. “I’m sorry about your loss.”

“I’m not in mourning, Mr. Linklater. I haven’t spoken to my grandparents in decades.”

“I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God: so turn and live.”

My grandparents had never repented. I’d never really lived. So there you have it.

Linklater nodded, lips pressed together in discomfort.

“Which is why I’m confused about this stipulation to the will,” I continued. “As I’ve told you already, I don’t want anything from them and anything they did leave me should be donated to a local women’s shelter.”

Linklater exhaled. “I’ve made arrangements for the proceeds of the sale of this house and the car dealership to go to two separate shelters. Needless to say, they are extremely grateful for your generosity. Unfortunately, I can’t close escrow until you remove your grandmother’s belongings from the attic.” He shrugged. “She was adamant about that. I’m merely carrying out her wishes.”

I almost couldn't believe the depth of my grandmother's depravity. I say almost because she was pretty terrible—even worse than my grandfather in some ways. To be forced to come back here and clean out the personal belongings of a woman who used to take pleasure in physically abusing a five-year-old was some sick shit. Especially since whatever stuff she did leave was destined for the trash anyway. Then again, it seemed in character.

“So here I am,” I stated, my throat dry, mouth parched. My tongue felt thick and useless.

Linklater smiled awkwardly, searched my blank expression, as the two of us engaged in a staring contest. I was getting the notion that Linklater knew more about my family history than he was letting on.

“Here you are,” he echoed, then opened the envelope and produced a key.

The house was warm. Somebody had left the heat on. Linklater, I figured. I removed my cashmere scarf and gloves and draped them on the finial at the bottom of the staircase banister. The furniture had been removed. The entire house was empty. Other than that, nothing much had changed on the inside either. Same yellow paint on the walls and white eyelet curtains, though weathered by time and dusty from disuse. A heaviness sat on my chest as I looked around. The furniture was gone, but the ghosts remained.

Blades of sunlight crisscrossed the weathered oak stairs leading to the second floor. My gaze followed them up. I'd forgotten how well-lit the house was because my memories were dark and dingy. They were of the basement concrete

floor where my grandfather forced me to stay kneeling in prayer for hours in a dark so deep and disorienting, I welcomed the pain in my knees because I was afraid I'd float away. Of the wet cold that seeped into my bones in the dead of winter with only my cotton pajamas to keep me warm. Of the way I'd learned not to cry, or he'd make me stay there longer. I'd never dared to disobey. He'd once told me he had cameras watching me. Years later, in my teens, I realized that it couldn't have been true because it was pitch black down there, but at the time I'd believed him.

Every muscle in my body was shaking by the time I finished climbing the creaking stairs on unsteady legs, my heart clashing inside my chest as if I'd just run the NYC Marathon, which I'd done once with mediocre results and vowed to never do again. I had no intention of strolling down memory lane and went straight to the cord hanging in the hallway, tugged on it, and watched the stairs that led to the attic unfold.

Dust bunnies and a single small white document box were the only items in the space with a low-hanging ceiling. It was sitting in the middle of the room, my name in big black block letters written on top, seemingly waiting for my arrival. I would've laughed at the drama if the story wasn't so freaking sinister. It was a good thing I was a runner too because the jolts my poor heart was sustaining would've ended a less fit person.

Lowering myself to the dusty floor, legs crossed, I raised the lid and peered inside the box. It was half-filled with large manila envelopes. I reached for the one on top, opened it, and out slid a decade' old edition of Martha Stewart *Living* magazine. This was beyond odd. I mean, I liked the magazine for its recipes but I'd never subscribed to anything while I was

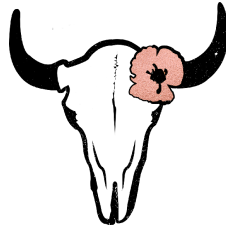
living with them. They would've most likely decided it was a "bad influence" somehow and confiscated it. Puzzled but curious, I flipped through the first copy and a letter fell out.

The white envelope was addressed to me. The return label read: Josh Martin, 355 Morning Ln, El Paso, TX 79835.

My heart flat-out stopped beating and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stood erect. In a frenzy, I ripped open the rest of the manila envelopes, and from within each magazine, a letter from Josh slid out. Ten in total. After all the years I'd spent looking for him, it had never occurred to me to search under his mother's maiden name. The next moment a slow realization pushed the shock aside.

He'd been looking for me too.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



SYDNEY

THE SOUND OF AN INCOMING TEXT WOKE ME OUT OF A FITFUL sleep. My mind scrambled for purchase when my eyes, dry and painful, cracked open. Above me there was an unfamiliar popcorn ceiling, the walls were an awful shade of dark green, and the air smelled musty.

The hell am I?

It took a moment before I remembered what had happened and where I was. Squinting at the screen, the phone read a little past midnight. Then I saw the text.

Scott: I'm outside. Open the door.

He was here. He'd come for me. A strong dose of pure joy shot through my veins, making my head spin like I was tripping.

No one had ever come for me. But Scott had—a man I'd once thought to be the most selfish creature on the planet. I'd been wrong about him just as much as he'd been wrong about me. He wasn't selfish. On the contrary, he was an unexpected

hero, a reluctant good guy in disguise. Too bad I was already married to him. If things had been different, we might have had a fighting chance. The knowledge sat heavy on my chest.

A reckoning was coming as clearly as the part in every horror movie where one of the dumbass characters says, “let’s get back to the cabin,” instead of getting in their car and driving away at the first sign of danger. Any day now, Frank’s secret was going to be revealed, and when that happened, I would inevitably lose Scott’s trust. And there was nothing I could do about it other than stand by and let it happen.

Jumping out of bed, I hurried to the cramped bathroom, splashed water on my face, and glanced in the mirror. After gathering all the letters, I’d driven back to the motel and holed up for the rest of the day reading and crying and chugging Mountain Dew (the only soda left in the hallway vending machine) like it was nectar of the gods. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d shed a single tear. Frank’s news had pushed me to the brink many times, but never over the edge. And now I couldn’t stop them from falling.

“Yikes.”

I looked like Don King. My hair was a tangled, combed-back mess. My eyes were nearly swollen shut, the left more than the right, and the skin around them raw. Under the florescent overhead light, I looked like I’d mopped the floors with my face and there was nothing to be done for it. Not now that he was at the door.

As I reached for the doorknob, I remembered that I was wearing a stained threadbare t-shirt and baggy sweatpants and debated changing for all of a minute. I was tired of hiding, tired of pretending that I was so much more put together than I really was.

At work, I was a rock star. Everywhere else in my life I was rock bottom. This was it. All I was. Full of holes, emotions worn out, nerves shot to hell from keeping everything bottled up. It was either going to send him running back to Jackson Hole or he'd stick.

I wanted him to stick, though. I really *really* wanted him to stick. Scott was turning out to be the most wonderful surprise of my life. I'd been an outlier since birth, searching for somewhere or someone to belong to, and with Scott, I'd found it. Even if it was only for a little while.

The motel was built in a horseshoe shape, my room on the ground floor. So when I opened the door to an empty sidewalk I was a little surprised. It was March and yet no one had told Pennsylvania. The cold hit me all at once, the damp kind that gets into your mended bones and makes them hurt. As the stitch on the left side of my rib cage liked to remind me.

A clap of thunder boomed overhead, a storm imminent. Shivering, I wrapped my arms around myself and took a small step out, looked left and right, found not a soul in sight. Then I spotted him, a tall lone figure exiting a parked SUV and my heart sighed. He marched toward me wearing an inscrutable expression. Blank but stern? That's the best way to describe it. His mouth set in a straight, uncompromising line. His eyes hawkish, sharp. I didn't know what to make of it, but I didn't have long to wonder.

The minute he reached me he opened his jacket and wrapped me in it, his heat wiping out the chill in my bones, his scent soothing my shattered nerves. I'd never been so happy to see someone. Walking forward, he carried me inside while I wrapped my arms around his waist and held on for dear life. I

tipped up my face and he dropped kisses on the corner of my mouth, the sensitive skin on the side of my throat, my temple.

“How did you—”

He snatched the rest of the words from my lips with a kiss. And he didn't stop. Not when he placed me back on my feet and kicked the door shut behind him. Not when he slipped his jacket off and draped it around my shoulders to warm me up. I hadn't even noticed how violently I was shaking until he began to rub my back and whisper sweet reassurances in my ear.

“...I'm here...It's okay...I've got you...I've got you, Sunshine...” His body heat clung to the jacket. His scent too. And safety, and comfort, and the rest of the good stuff. I had never felt more cared for in my entire life.

The tears started all over again. Stinging tears. So thick and viscous I could barely see through them. Scott's face became a handsome blob.

Taking my hand, he dragged us over to the foot of the queen-sized bed, sank down on it, and placed me on his lap. His arms wrapped around my waist, mine around his neck. We sat in silence that way for a while, anchored to one another. Like he knew what I needed to gain back my composure.

“How'd you find me? I don't mean to imply you're a scary stalker, but you are exhibiting stalker-like tendencies.” I knew he was resourceful. This, however, was next level.

He snorted and nuzzled the side of my neck, planted a few quick kisses there before speaking. “My father knew where your grandparents lived. This is the only...” Frowning, he glanced around. “...hotel in town.”

“I’m impressed,” I told him in all honesty, my gaze drawn to that soft sensual mouth of his like a millennial to Twitter.

My favorite mouth in the world curled up. “Because I found you?”

“Because you came...” I tunneled my fingers in his hair and he sighed. “...and because it feels like I’m sitting on a speed bump.”

He grinned wide and bright. “That happens by rote whenever it’s near you...I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

He breathed deeply and his expression sobered as if he were preparing himself for something unpleasant. His arms tightened around me. “Tell me what happened.”

I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to think about Josh, or my grandparents, or the horrible memories this place evoked. My brain felt crowded and I needed to clear my browser history. I wanted to feel good and Scott knew how to do that better than anyone.

Wrapping my hands around his prickly face, I kissed him hard. “I don’t want to talk,” I whispered against his lips. “Not now...not yet. Just make me feel good. Can you do that?”

For a beat, he searched my face. Then he nodded. The jacket was gently pushed off my shoulders, sliding silently to the ground. Slowly, the ratty t-shirt I was wearing was lifted over my head and tossed to the carpeted floor. With supreme concentration, his calloused fingertips traced the lines of my collarbone so gently a shiver wracked my entire body. I couldn’t wait any longer.

While our mouths melded, he stripped me bare, laid me down on the crappy motel bed, and undressed himself slowly

as I watched him with undisguised glee in my eyes. It was better than any Christmas present I'd ever unwrapped. Gray sweater? Boom, gone. Designer Italian boots? Atta here, kicked off. Jeans? Bye-bye.

“No underwear?”

His brow folded in worry. “I was in a hurry to get to you.”

“Have I ever told you that you're perfect?”

“No. But you have called me a royal pain in the ass.” He smiled broadly.

“Same thing. Come here.” I opened my arms to him. Because he was. With all his faults, Scott Blackstone—sensualist, reformed playboy and dilettante, lover of a good time, environmentalist, and newly minted king of the cattle business—was perfect for me.

He stood naked and proud. And proudly showing off each delineated line of muscle meeting muscle. His erection jutted out from the rest of him, leading the charge. An instrument of God. A work of art created to give pleasure and take pleasure.

I thought about what my grandparents would say to that and chuckled. Maybe I was just like my mother after all, a creature of passion and pleasure, a sinner...a hopeless romantic. My grandparents had done everything in their power to beat it out of me and it hadn't worked. It had gone into witness protection, hiding, waiting for Scott to come along and draw it out in the open.

“You're laughing at me?” my dream lover said with a half-cocked grin. God bless him, Scott had such healthy self-esteem it would never even occur to him to be offended. I loved that about him. Gloriously naked, he placed a knee on the bed and stalked up my body.

“I was just thinking that I must be a lot like my mother because I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than your body—”

Or your heart...

I couldn’t say that out loud, though. I was seventy five percent certain that I was one hundred percent in love with him, and I couldn’t risk losing him by letting it slip out in a moment of weakness.

Truth was, I didn’t know how Scott felt about me. There was care there, a lot of it, sure, I wasn’t blind, and he’d always been a very expressive guy. But love? I was fairly certain Scott had never been in love before. In addition, he was definitely the type to wear his emotions on his face, so wouldn’t I have known if he was? Wouldn’t I have sensed it?

No, I didn’t think he was in love with me. Not the way I was in love with him.

“Living art?” he said smugly.

“The Guggenheim’s got nothing on you, babe.”

“And all yours, Mrs. Blackstone,” he declared in a husky voice. “Do with me what you wish.”

Locked on mine, those deep blue eyes of his held steady as his head slowly delved between my legs, his beard sending fireworks shooting across my skin as it scraped the inside of my thigh. My fingers curled into the sandpaper sheet and fisted, my legs stiffening at the feel of his hot breath on me as my heels dug into the mattress.

By the time his mouth latched on to my sweet spot, I was already halfway to coming. There is something to be said about a man who knows his way around a woman, and not just her body. Before long I was writhing in pleasure, the events of

the last forty-eight hours fading into distant background noise while I was having the best sex of my life.

With his lips and his hands he wrenched a grand total of not one, but two epic Os out of me. Then he went up on his knees and crawled over my body, marking points of interest with his kisses. Pushing my legs apart with his, he settled between them, made a place for himself like it was his right. Scott moved decisively, with the confidence of someone who knew how to give pleasure and ask for it in return.

Our hips kissed. His erection pressed against me and he rocked his hips back and forth until he'd driven me mad with wanting. Grabbing him, I guided him onto his back and straddled him. He groaned in satisfaction as I slowly sank down. Eye to eye, my body bowed over him, I placed my hands on both side of his head and paused to admire him.

Scott was devastatingly handsome. I'd watched women fall at his feet for years, but that wasn't why I found him irresistibly sexy, why I hadn't pushed him away when he'd kissed me at his sister's wedding. It was the unencumbered love of life that shone in his eyes. He was unapologetically himself, a fun-loving sensualist. And that I envied. It was contagious. He made me want to have fun too.

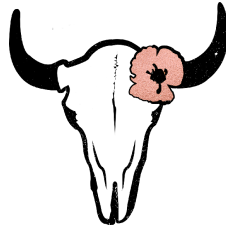
"I'll always find you," he murmured, lids heavy, gaze filled with longing.

Maybe it wouldn't last. Maybe it would. I wasn't sure Lady Luck was on my side this time, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not yet anyway.

"Who are you?" I said, staring into the face of the man I loved.

"Your husband."

CHAPTER TWENTY



SYDNEY

“I KNOW YOU’RE NOT ASLEEP,” HE DECLARED, VOICE HUSKY due to being up most of the night having sex. Not that anyone was complaining. Still, the letters kept me awake. “Syd?”

“Yeah.”

It was almost dawn. I was big spoon and he was little. I placed a kiss on his bare back, and he turned to face me, searching, no doubt for a sign of distress. He ran the pad of his index finger down my cheek and traced my lips, tapped once.

“Tell me what happened.”

It felt insurmountable, this story. But I knew I had to tell him. Scott wouldn’t have accepted my silence any more than I would’ve in his place. There was also the added complication that I was desperately in love with him, and now Josh was suddenly and seemingly back in the picture.

Did I want to right that wrong? Definitely. Was I going to give up Scott to do it? Definitely not.

“The summer I turned sixteen I volunteered at the town library. I did pretty much anything to stay out of the house

back then. Worked at the Dairy Queen, babysat the neighbors' kids. The store next to the library was under construction, soon to be a hardware store. I would eat lunch in the alley that separated the two every day...that's how I met Josh. He was working the remodel. I'd never seen him before because he'd grown up in the next town and I didn't go out at night unless I was babysitting."

I paused, and Scott cupped my face, thumbs brushing lightly against the edge of my jaw, encouraging me to continue.

I loved this man. I loved him with an intensity that frightened me. I wanted him above all else.

"He liked to read fantasy. That's how we started talking—books. He was older, eighteen, and smart but couldn't afford college, single mother, food stamps...We fell in love." I breathed deeply. "Long story short, I'd never done anything to disobey my grandparents, but Josh gave me hope. It was like...my love for him opened my eyes to the world. That I could get out of this town. That I could get out from under their control..."

Some people believe living in fear is the worst existence, but I'm here to tell you it's not. Hopelessness is far worse. Fear urges you to keep fighting. Hopelessness tells you to give up.

"My grandfather randomly came to pick me up one afternoon—although he probably suspected because I couldn't help the smiles on my face. He saw us sitting together, laughing. He saw Josh kiss me. It was so innocent. He barely touched me."

I swallowed, pushing all those ancient feelings back down.

“My grandfather dragged me home, told me to get rid of him or he was going to report Josh to the authorities and have him brought up on charges. I was a minor—he explained it to me and I believed him. I was petrified for Josh. He was a gentle, sensitive soul. He couldn’t...

“Anyway...the next day I told him all kinds of things, that I didn’t love him, that he would never be good enough for me. That I knew all he wanted was my virginity and my grandfather was going to have him arrested. It nearly killed me to do it, but I was a pretty good actress. My grandparents had trained me well.”

Hearing it said out loud made me cringe. Not something I was proud of. Then again it had helped me survive.

“He was heartbroken, walked out on the construction job that day...a few days later, I lost it. I was heartbroken too. The only good thing that had ever happened to me was gone, and I had no way of finding him. I got into a fight with my grandfather, the first time ever, screaming and yelling that I was leaving. He pushed me down a flight of stairs.”

Scott’s entire body stiffened, the cords of his neck under my fingertips going taut.

“Broke two ribs. Otherwise I was fine...that’s when I started using my wits. On the way to the hospital, I told him that I was going to press charges, go to the police and show them all the scars. I was going to make sure he went to jail—”

Scott’s face was granite hard, his attention rapt. “And?”

“And then I told him he could buy his freedom. He had to place my college tuition in an account with my name on it—two hundred thousand. I wanted to go to Yale, and he was going to pay for it. I had no intention of living at home and

commuting like they wanted me to. He agreed...He never touched me again after that. A year later I was gone for good.”

I learned an invaluable lesson that day. If I could make a deal with that devil, I could make a deal with anyone. A bittersweet smile shaped my lips.

“My grandmother’s lawyer has been after me for the past few months. He couldn’t close escrow on her house until I came to get the last of her things out of the attic—it was a stipulation in the will.”

The look he gave me almost made me laugh.

“I know. I wish I was making this up. Anyway, I found a bunch of letters inside a box. They were from Josh. He’d hidden them in magazines he’d sent me, but my grandmother had found them back then and she’d saved them...his return address is on the envelope.”

Scott’s expression altered in understanding. “You want to go find him.” I could sense he was holding back even though his voice gave no indication.

“I want to make sure he’s okay. I...I know it was a long time ago, but I feel like I owe him an explanation. An apology. That I never thought I was too good for him. That—”

Scott stroked my cheek in comfort. “You should go see him. Go find him.”



I caught a flight out of Philly to El Paso the next morning. Scott had walked me all the way to the gate and kissed me like it was the last kiss we would ever share before I boarded the plane. My chest felt tight when he’d pulled away. I’d begun to miss him before he was even out of my sight. I’d also been seconds from blurting out that I loved him, that I would talk to

Josh and be home by dinner, but I'd learned not to make promises I wasn't certain I could keep.

Life had taught me that lesson the painful way.

Sitting in my rental car, I glanced one last time at the envelope with the address on it and double-checked the number on the small four-family building. I was already drawing a few curious stares, so I got out, took a deep breath, and made my way up the steps to the porch. On the third ring of the doorbell, a woman in her mid-fifties opened the door. She wore a stained oversized t-shirt with a large POLO logo written on it, and a suspicious frown as she checked me out.

"Can I help you?" she said in an irritated tone.

A redheaded boy, maybe nine, poked his head out to get a look at me and my gaze dropped. Was this Josh's son? They didn't look alike but that didn't mean anything.

"I hope so. I'm looking for an old family friend. His name is Josh Martin, and this is the last address I have for him..." Reticence clung to her face. "...it's kind of important."

She gave me another once-over with her hard brown eyes. "He's my landlord..." At some point, she must have determined that I wasn't a threat because she added, "He lives on the nice side of town. On Maple Street. White house on the corner."

My face lit up and my stomach flipped. After all these years. After all the money I had spent looking for him. I was one step closer and all the more nervous.

Five minutes later, I was parked across the street and sat in the car summoning strength. The house was beautiful. A white ranch-style home with dark blue shutters and a wraparound porch. There was an enormous oak tree off to the side with a

tire swing and a white fence edged with rose bushes. It was out of a fairy tale. Josh had done well for himself. *This could have been us.*

Scott: Call me when you can. Just want to make sure you're okay. xx

As soon as Scott's text came in, the thought made me feel disloyal. He'd given me the best gift one person could give another—he'd given me the gift of selflessness. He was prepared to give me up if making me happy meant I would leave him for Josh and he hadn't balked. It's then that I realized I'd never loved anyone more. Nor would I ever love like that again.

I started the rental and put it in **drive**, took one last look at Josh's house. I'd hoped he was happy, hoped he'd forgiven me. As I eased my foot off the brake pedal, the front door opened and a woman stepped out. She was tall and pretty, with long auburn hair and a runner's body. Behind her was a boy in a baseball uniform, nearly a teenager.

"Can we get pizza tonight?" he said to his mother. His voice carried into my open window.

"We had pizza two nights ago," his mother reminded him. "Dad's grabbing burgers and chicken wings on the way home. Which do you want?"

The boy was staring at his phone while she hit the security button on her Expedition. "Cameron, I said which do you want?"

"Burgers," he absently answered, his attention consumed by whatever was on his phone. He smiled and his braces glimmered in the sunlight.

Sensing the scrutiny, she glanced over at me, her brow bunching in question. I pulled the car away from the curb. I'd gotten the answers I came for. I'd worried needlessly for years. Josh was more than fine...he was thriving. A huge weight lifted off my chest and took the corners of my mouth with it.

On my way to the airport, I stopped to get gas in town. In the meantime, I called Scott. It went straight to voicemail.

"I'm on my way home. I'll see you soon," I said with a goofy grin and a deep sense of peace settling in my chest. It was such a unique feeling I couldn't equate it to anything else I'd ever felt. I placed the pump back, screwed the lid back on the gas tank.

"Sydney," a man called out. I looked up, looked across the roof of my rental car, and met Josh's stunned expression.



Scott: We're at the Million. It's Drake's birthday tomorrow but we're celebrating tonight.

"Mrs. Blackstone," Ryan intoned upon seeing me walk through the door of the bar. I'd come straight from the airport. Wyoming was probably the only place you could leave a Mercedes G-Wagon in a lot and not worry it would be there when you returned. I threw him a big smile and scanned the packed-to-the-max bar.

"Everybody's in the back, near the pool tables"—he hooked a thumb in that direction—"I've gotta make a call, but head over."

Pushing through the mass of bodies, the table where all the Lazy S employees were seated came into view. Everyone looked to be having a good time, the tabletop littered with

empty glasses and bottles. Spotting Drake, I walked up and wished him a happy twenty-second birthday. He tapped his lips, asking for a kiss.

“Boy, you better hope Scott didn’t catch that,” Pete, Laurel’s husband, remarked.

Chuckling, I planted one on his cheek instead.

“Pete, have you seen Scott?”

“Playing pool,” he said and went back to arguing with another guy over whether Carson Wentz was going to make it through the entire NFL regular season schedule for the Eagles.

I headed for the tables, anxious to see Scott and tell him all about my conversation with Josh, rounded the corner, and stopped short. He was leaning against the wall with a pool stick in his hand, smiling while Misty set up for a shot. Neither of them noticed me standing a few feet away.

“So...how’s married life? You’ve been strangely coy about it.”

His smile dropped and a hole opened up at the bottom of my stomach, a trap door that led to an abyss.

He scratched the back of his head and left his hand resting on top. “It’s amazing.”

Misty turned and gave him her full attention. “Really?” she said, sounding skeptical.

“Yeah...I love her. I’m in love with her. Best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

The bottom fell out. *He loved me?* He hadn’t even told me.

I stepped closer and Scott’s head snapped in my direction, Misty’s followed. Scott’s face broke into a grin and his eyes

got that soft look in them, the same look they got when he was about to kiss me. Pushing off the wall, he reached me in four strides, the pool stick forgotten. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me until I softened and molded my body to his.

“Did you hear?” he murmured. I nodded and he smiled. “It’s true.” He swallowed and I watched a bit of uncertainty flash across his face. “I do. I love you. I’m in love with you... wanna get out of here and you can tell me about your trip?”

Words eluded me. I was still processing everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours and all I could manage was a slow nod while a mirror image of his smile grew on my face. Taking my hand, he glanced over his shoulder and waved at Misty. Then he led me out of the bar.

We drove to Old Faithful Road and parked. The geyser blowing at night was downright magical while the inside of the truck was dark and cozy.

“I was going to tell you before you left,” he said staring out the windshield, “but I didn’t want that to—”

“You didn’t want to influence what happened in El Paso?”

He looked at me, nodded.

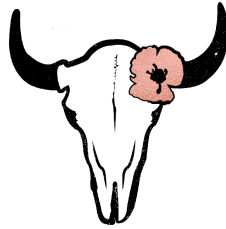
“I love you, Scott. Nobody has the power to change that but you. Not Josh. Not anybody else.” Crawling over him, I straddled his lap, took his face in my hands, and kissed him. “I’m crazy in love with you, and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you this morning before I left.”

We went home after that and Scott made love to me. And once we were done and eating potato chips in bed, then I told him about Josh. How I drove away from his home satisfied, knowing he was doing well in spite of everything that had happened. I told Scott about the strange coincidence of seeing

him at the gas station. How Josh had told me that what had happened with my grandfather had shaped him, had inspired him to want more for himself. How he often thought about me and hoped I was happy and loved.

Then I told Scott what I said to Josh. “I’m in love and I am loved. And that’s all I’ve ever really wanted.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



SYDNEY

THE SUN WAS OUT THAT DAY AND TREES HAD BEGUN BLOOMING all over the property. It was early afternoon when Scott walked into my office looking lost, half-catatonic. I'll never forget it. His face drawn tight, as immovable as the Tetons he loved. He must've come straight from a ride because he was sweaty, his shirtsleeves were rolled up, and flecks of hay were all over his jeans.

My stomach folded like a cheap tent, a major sign that something was very wrong. I should've known, though. I really *should* have known it would go this way. But a girl can dream, can't she?

This wasn't the first time fate had intervened to set fire to the fantasy I was fostering. This time had been different, however. For one hot minute, I'd actually believed Scott and I were going to make it, defy the odds and live somewhat happily ever after. The prospect of losing him for good made my entire body ache.

"What's wrong?" I said, standing abruptly, my chair crashing backwards from the sheer force of it.

“My dad...” His guttural voice withered away.

I knew then that everything would change and not for the better. I’d been dreading this day for months. While Scott had been blissfully unaware of the situation, it had been slowly consuming me.

Tears began to stream down my face. I came around the desk and threw my arms around him, planted my face between his pecs. His arms hung limply at his sides at first. But as the numbness wore off, they slowly began to lift and wrap around me, squeezing so tightly I thought I felt a rib snap.

“How?” I had to ask. Even though I’d known what was inevitably coming, I hadn’t imagined it would happen this quickly. Well under the twelve-month time frame Frank had been given to live.

“My mother said he collapsed at home and hit his head.”

It was time to come clean and the knowledge sat as heavy in my gut as a bag of rocks. It had to be done, though. Was I terrified of Scott’s reaction? Yeah, I was. I loved him. I didn’t want to lose him and there was a very good chance that I would.

“Pack a bag. We’re leaving for New York in an hour,” he said and placed a kiss on my forehead before pulling away.

“Wait...”

Almost at the door, he turned to face me. I paused to drink him in—to commit to memory the soft, sweet, vulnerable look on his face. Like he cared. Maybe the last time I’d ever see him look at me that way again.

“Did your mother mention anything else? Why he collapsed?” I pushed the words out despite my tongue feeling swollen and useless, and my lips tingling.

He gave me a quizzical look. “No,” he said. “I’m assuming a heart attack or stroke.”

Preparing for the worst, I took a few steps back, shifting uncomfortably on my feet, my knees shaking. A lifetime’s worth of habits, every trick I’d used in the past to keep an iron grip on my reactions flew out the window, taken from me when I needed them most.

“He had cancer, Scott.”

Scott blinked, no sign in his expression that he understood. In his eyes, I could see his mind searching for answers that weren’t there, explanations—anything to make sense of what I’d said.

“Cancer?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“He told me.” His brow wrinkled and I curled my shaking hands into fists.

“He told you? My father told you he had cancer?” His voice began rising and any hope I had of him understanding the position I was placed in evaporated. It was starting to sink in and I knew what was coming next. It was going to be brutal. Like standing tall on a shoreline in the face of an approaching tidal wave. I knew when it finally hit it could very well kill me, but there was no escaping it. Frank, God rest his soul, had robbed me of any chance of resolving this peacefully.

“He told me...he told me back in December.”

“In December...” he echoed softly, his expression constantly shifting with a turnstile of emotions appearing on

his beautiful face. He went from being mystified, to being angry, to disbelieving...all the stages of grief.

Meanwhile, I felt only one thing: rock-bottom horrible.

“You’ve known since December that my old man had cancer?” As the dots began to connect, his anger started to overcome all the rest.

“Yes. He told me not to tell anyone and as his lawyer—”

“Don’t!” His face twisted in disgust. “Don’t say it, don’t fucking make excuses.”

His head tipped all the way back, eyes fixed on the ceiling. His hands went to his hips and he sucked in a lungful of air, his chest rising and falling. For a moment, I worried he was going to hyperventilate.

When he finally faced me, it was with a look of undiluted hate. “Start from the beginning. He told you in December that he had cancer. What kind of cancer and why didn’t he seek immediate medical attention?”

I was shaking from head to toe at this point. Even my voice. There was no pretending I wasn’t petrified. He’d peeled away my armor, the callouses I’d developed over the years to guard against such things with his gentle persistence, and this is what remained—a mess.

“Melanoma. He said it was terminal. I begged him to fight it, to fly to MD Anderson, but he wouldn’t listen.”

With each word I spoke Scott’s scorn for me deepened, seeped under his skin and took root in his bones. I could see it on his face. In his posture. It was a worst-case scenario.

“And you didn’t feel the need, the responsibility, to share this news with anybody—like...maybe me!”

I flinched. “Your mother knew.” It was a Hail Mary, a pathetic attempt to deflect all the attention on me, but I would’ve tried anything to stem the flow of resentment coming from him.

He nodded, ominously, slowly. “December...when this entire fucked-up arrangement happened—”

I didn’t think I could feel any worse.

“When he decided to hand the entire company over to you. And you took it willingly, didn’t you? You kept his secret because that meant you got the promotion you wanted.”

“No. No, Scott.” Head shaking, I tried to interrupt. “That’s not how it—”

“Yeah,” he said, talking over me in an eerily calm voice. “It all makes perfect sense now. I’m flying back to New York alone.” He paused, ran a hand through his hair. “I want you out of this house by the time I return.”

He walked out, slammed the door shut with so much force it bounced back open.

A girl could dream. And sometimes those dreams turned into nightmares.



“Philanthropist, real estate magnate, naval officer, prankster...” The crowd overflowing the Central Presbyterian Church on Park Avenue chuckled along with the priest. “... Franklin Marshall Blackstone was many things, but the roles he most cherished were husband...”

There had to be five hundred people in the church and every one of those heads turned toward the first pew where Marjorie sat elegant as ever in a simple black suit, expression

stoic, and her hands folded neatly on her lap, her son and daughter flanking her on both sides.

“...father, grandfather. Franklin Marshall Blackstone valued family above all else...”

The priest carried on while I stole glances at the back of Scott’s head and watched John comfort Devyn as she cried in his arms. A portrait of Frank looking majestic rested on an easel next to the shiny maple coffin covered in white flowers. The entire place was covered in white flowers come to think of it.

I loved the man smirking in the portrait more than anything, but I was also angry at him. Angry that he had a hand in destroying the relationship he’d basically forced me into. I wondered if he could hear me cursing him out as I sat amongst the people who were here to genuinely mourn him and the rest that had come to get their picture in the Times and the Post. That said a lot about Frank. Usually the people that read those two papers didn’t mix, but Frank mixed with everyone.

After Scott had left me standing, strike that, after he’d left me crumpled on the floor in tears, I’d texted Drake to come get the dogs. Then I packed all my belongings, every single item in that house, and dropped off the boxes at the FedEx in town.

I’d caught the next flight out without even dropping by Laurel’s place to say goodbye. I cried the entire two-leg trip. Caught an Uber. Cried the entire ride into town. When we hit traffic in the midtown tunnel, I was sure the driver was going to chuck me. I unlocked the front door to my apartment. Burst into tears. I was pretty sure I was all cried out. You never know, though.

Sensing eyes on him, Scott's head turned a fraction. He scrutinized the mourners behind and to the right of him with cold calculating precision. He'd shaved and his hair was perfect again. He looked unfamiliar, like a stranger I'd once had a dream about.

Somehow, he found me in the crowd. Our eyes locked for a brief moment, and his expression turned downright arctic. I wasn't sure which was worse his hot temper or his cold disdain.

"What the fuck's with him? What's with the serial-killer look he just gave me?" Miller whispered on my right.

It had taken me a good ten minutes of heavy breathing out on the sidewalk to gather the courage to walk up to them. Marjorie had given me a faint, sympathetic smile that gave me hope, but one eviscerating glance from Scott told me to find someplace else to sit. If I was ever considered family before, it was abundantly clear I was now *persona non grata*. Which was why I was sitting elsewhere, on the opposite side of the aisle from the family, next to Miller.

And earning speculative stares from everyone wondering why I wasn't sitting with my husband.

"That was meant for me," I whispered back. "I think he may have even blocked me."

An elderly woman wearing a Chanel suit, a snow-white bob, and a look of superiority seated in the pew directly ahead of us shushed us.

Miller leaned into me. "Give him some time to cool off... he'll get over it."

"I'm not so sure about that."

I didn't voice out loud my fear that when Scott finally did get around to speaking to me it would be to tell me he wanted a divorce.

I wanted to believe Miller, though. I was down, but I wasn't out yet.



“What can I do?” Miller asked for the millionth time this week.

Picking my eyes up off the screen of my desktop computer, I stopped typing and aimed a flat stare at my one and only friend these days.

“Put a pillow over my face and smother me?”

Miller placed the hard copies of the contracts I'd asked for on my desk. “What about a few cocktails instead?”

The clock read 7:30 p.m. and I still hadn't finished going through all the deals Frank had initiated before he'd passed away. My career was the only thing keeping me propped up, which was why I poured everything I had into it. I was fairly certain that, if I stopped moving, I would die of a broken heart. With one stone I'd lost the two men I loved most. With the exception of Mr. Smith.

“Can't. I'll be working late for the next few weeks until I'm officially named CEO.”

The will had apparently been read and the board made aware of Frank's wishes. Because of this, the process was pretty cut and dry. The only complication was Scott who hadn't returned to Wyoming as I'd expected. Instead, he was here, at Blackstone Holdings every single day holed up in Frank's office going over Frank's files. The atmosphere in the office was tense and everybody was feeling it.

“Give it a rest for an hour, at least.”

My eyes went right back to the ROI figures on a commercial property in the Cayman Islands.

“Can’t.”

He gave it a moment before speaking again. “Have you spoken to him?”

There was only one *him*.

“He won’t speak to me. I ran into him in the break room and he looked right through me...it’s like he blames me for Frank dying. He’s not thinking rationally.”

Miller nodded in understanding. “Let me tell you about the male ego, Syd—”

“Yes, yes, I know—delicate thing. You look at it the wrong way and it goes soft.”

Miller made a face. “Are we still talking about ego?”

“Mostly?” I answered, somewhat confused myself.

“My point is, you made him look bad. His ego took a direct shot and it needs time to heal. He’ll come around eventually.”

All I could do was keep hope alive.

Miller left shortly after, and half an hour later I powered off my computer, gathered my bag and my jacket, and headed for the elevators.

The entire floor was empty save for the cleaning staff. The fluorescent lights casting a singular shadow on the carpeted floor. At the elevators, the bell chimed and the doors directly in front of me slid open. The next thing I knew I found myself

on my butt being trampled by two hairy beasts, their enthusiasm infectious. I laughed for the first time in weeks.

Whining and crying, Romeo nuzzled me with his wet nose, leaving damp streaks on my white silk blouse while Juliet's tongue was all over my face.

A pair of Italian handmade lace-up boots came into view. My eyes followed the dark denim-clad legs up to a black leather motorcycle jacket and a dispassionate expression. He looked so handsome and unapproachable I wanted to cry.

"Off, c'mon," he said to the dogs pulling on their collars.

Slowly and ungracefully, because I was wearing a pencil skirt with an uncompromising hem, I picked myself up off the ground and faced him, making it a point to hold his opaque, unblinking gaze. He made no move to help me, the jerk.

"I forgot my keys..." His voice faded to silence as he stared at me.

The dogs continued to nuzzle my hands and I bent to kiss them on the head. God, I missed them. Not as much as I missed the man I loved, though.

"How's your mother?" I asked, forcing myself to stand tall in the face of his palpable resentment. I could literally feel it coming off of him in waves.

"Coping...we all are."

I nodded, looked away for a beat. "Scott, I—"

"I was going to call you," his gaze dipped down, "but, um, since you're here—" Knowing he wanted to talk made my heart ache in relief. I was about to reach out and touch him when he spoke again. "I'm filing for divorce."

My heart no longer ached because it ceased working altogether. I was on the verge of tears again. I could feel them coming up along with the bile in my throat.

Divorce. Divorce. Divorce. It went on and on in my head as a hollow echo.

“Can’t we just talk before you decide?” I begged. I had no pride left. This was it. Negotiating was my thing and I instinctually knew when the other party was ready to concede as well as I knew when they were getting ready to walk away from a deal. When they’d determined that the cost-to-benefit ratio had tipped in the wrong direction. Scott had the look of a man ready to cut his losses.

“What about? How you lied to me for months?” he calmly retorted. “You must’ve had a real good chuckle at my expense—”

“No,” I cut in. “No, I felt terrible—”

“—what I did to you pales in comparison. Were you waiting for the right moment to stick it to me? Was that the plan?”

“Your father insisted I not tell you!” I shouted, unable to control myself anymore. “I asked him over and over and he kept saying—soon. He said his doctors had given him twelve months. I’m sorry he’s not here to explain it himself. I’m sorry he did that to you, but I couldn’t betray his trust. Frank gave me everything, *everything*, Scott...I...I couldn’t do that to him.”

Heat infused his cheeks. Color high, eyes hard, he started to walk away, passing me by.

“Scott!”

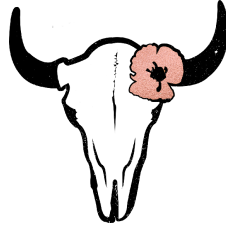
“Get a lawyer,” he said turning, “and don’t get your hopes up. I’d rather burn it all to the ground than see you walk away with any of this.” Walking backwards, he raised his arms to indicate the office, the dogs jogging after him.

“I don’t want any of it...” I brushed away the tears running down my cheeks as I fought to keep my voice steady. This was my one and only chance, and I was going for broke. “I love you...all I want is you.”

He stopped short. His jaw pulsed, his eyes flashing with barely pent-up fury. “Really? You could’ve fooled me. Oh wait, you did—you did fool me.”

He turned then. Walked away. Never looked back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



SYDNEY

I HAD NOTHING LEFT. I WAS DOWN AND OUT, GOING THROUGH the motions of my life with no taste for it. All that remained was a shell of a person. For the first time ever, my work gave me no satisfaction, no pleasure. He'd taken that from me too.

Without invitation, my nemesis waltzed into my office the following day. He headed straight to the wall of windows that overlooked Fifth Avenue and took a seat in the armchair with his knees splayed apart like he owned the place. This was not new behavior for Hastings, and I bore it as I did every other time—with the patience of a saint who desperately wanted to roll her eyes but refrained.

“Something on your mind?” I said without taking my eyes off the spreadsheets on my computer screen. “I mean, besides being grossly disappointed that you weren't named CEO.”

In the periphery of my vision, I watched his lips quiver. “From a lesser man, I would've taken that as an insult.”

That prodded a smile out of me. Chin tucked, my attention lazily moved over to him. Damon was handsome by anyone's definition. He was black with light brown skin, sharp

cheekbones, a strong chin, and piercing almond-shaped eyes that made you think twice about crossing him.

I just never warmed to him because he'd never warmed to me. Your basic case of one top dog recognizing the other. Frank fostered that kind of atmosphere, pitting employees against each other. He loved that shit. He was convinced it made everyone work better.

"I've never liked you, Evans," he casually admitted, his New York accent barely discernible.

I snorted, on the verge of outright chuckling. "I'm glad we got that cleared up."

Glancing at his gold Rolex, he sighed. With his thick muscles and brute swagger, he wasn't at all the company type. He was, however, an excellent lawyer. One of the best. The story was that Hastings, on behalf of his client, outmaneuvered Frank on a Fifth Avenue townhouse he was purchasing for himself. Upon realizing he'd been had, Frank hired him on the spot. Which was why I knew this visit was not without purpose. Damon was a master strategist.

"Say what you came to say or get out. Some of us have a company to run."

"Always playing teacher's pet..." he mused out loud. "For years, I thought you were fucking Frank—"

Now that got my full attention. My head snapped up at his sheer freaking audacity. I'd heard the rumors too and figured time would eventually put them to bed (figuratively speaking) when everyone finally realized there was nothing to them. But no one had the balls to say it to my face. No one but Damon.

"Are you trying to get me to fire you?"

“—until I realized how good you are at your job... Remember the building in Dubai, back in 2011?”

I nodded, recalling the details. “They changed the zoning laws the last day of escrow.”

“No one else caught it. There were five of us working that deal and you were the only one to check before the funds were wired.”

“As much as I appreciate this stroll down memory lane—is there a point you’re trying to make?”

“I’ve never liked you, Evans, but I’ve always thought you deserved to be general counsel. You earned the job.”

I was too wrapped up in ascertaining where he was going with the conversation to correct his use of my maiden name for the second time.

“Am I happy Frank left you in charge? Nah—I’m far from thrilled.” Shaking his head, he leveled a flat stare on me. “But you’re a fuck load better than Scott and ten times more qualified.”

Standing, he adjusted the cuffs of his custom-made shirt. “Watch your six. I don’t know what happened between you two, but I know you’re barely speaking and I have a feeling Scott’s working to have you removed as acting CEO.”

The news slammed into me. Damon was a strategist, but he wasn’t shady, or full of it. He wouldn’t be telling me this if it wasn’t more than a hunch. Scott, on the other hand...I wasn’t certain what Scott was capable of anymore, what lengths he’d go to punish me. I wasn’t sure I could trust my own husband anymore.

“What...makes you say that?”

“Solid intel from a reliable source.”

Which, for Damon, meant he was sleeping with the source.

I kept my composure, measured my breathing. Always in control. I thought I’d retired that crutch for good, that I’d gotten beyond it, and yet it came roaring back with a vengeance under the slightest provocation. Which was a real bummer.

“I don’t have time for drama, Hastings. Either explain or drop it.”

He gave me a cryptic look. “Don’t let him muscle you out.”

I desperately wanted to doubt him, and yet I knew there was a very good chance he was right. That after everything Scott and I had shared, we were right back where we started—as adversaries.

Hastings walked out in a lazy stride, hands tucked in the pockets of his suit pants like he was going for a leisurely stroll.

“Damon...”

Glancing over his shoulder, he gave me a questioning look. An understanding passed between us. Then he nodded and left.

Frank always did have an eye for talent.



The following day I barely had time to step into my office when Michelle, my secretary, greeted me with the news that Scott wanted to see me in the conference room for a meeting. This was met with a mixed bag of feelings.

First and foremost, resentment for being summoned. I wasn’t his employee or at his beck and call, but I wasn’t going

to allow him to bait me into a reaction. We'd already played this game once before. He could do his worst. Eventually he'd either tire of the antics or his anger would cool—whichever came first was fine with me. Then we could have a rational discussion about what had happened and he'd see that I had no choice. That I couldn't betray Frank's trust. That it hadn't been my call to make.

Next was relief because I actually nurtured a kernel of hope that he'd come to his senses. Perhaps he wanted to clear the air. Secretly, I was praying that he missed me as much as I missed him. Last was a small bit of suspicion over what Hastings had claimed.

I stepped out into the hallway, headed to the meeting, and shot Michelle a *do you know what's going on* look and my secretary simply shrugged. Business was business, however, and regardless of our personal differences—differences that had kept me up every night since Frank had died tossing and turning—I was going to make sure he understood that there would not be any more “meetings” without him running it by me first. I was acting CEO and this was bullshit.

When the room came into view, my steps faltered because what I saw confirmed my worst suspicions. Through the glass-paned wall, I could see the entire board of directors seated at the conference table, Scott standing at the head of it. Any hope I had disappeared, and my stomach sank. Hastings was right. There wouldn't be any heartfelt reconciliation. He didn't want to discuss business, or our marriage. Whatever it was—it wasn't good.

I entered, grasping my cell phone with an iron grip, my diamond wedding band painfully digging into my skin. Anything was preferable to feeling the collective stares of all

the people in the room. Well, all with the exception of the one I still loved.

Scott spared me only the briefest of glances before his attention returned to the board members seated around the table. He looked the part. Nobody would've mistaken him for a spoiled playboy. And it wasn't just the expensive suit, or the neatly parted and swept-back hair. It was his demeanor. He looked hard, formidable. He looked like vengeance incarnate. Everything Frank wanted him to be.

I'd felt his love. Even now, even though he was fighting it tooth and nail, I knew he still loved me the way I loved him. After everything he'd done and said to me, I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and bury my nose in the warm skin at the base of his throat. I'd never wanted to touch him as badly as I did in that moment, ironically, when he was most out of reach.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," he began without addressing or introducing me. He hadn't even asked me to take a seat. No acknowledgement of my presence. It was the worst insult he could have leveled at me and he knew it.

He owned the room already. One glance around confirmed it. Nobody was looking my way for guidance. After dedicating my life to this company, having known most of these people for a large part of it, I'd suddenly become not only invisible, but dispensable.

"The five of you on speakerphone, please acknowledge who's present." All five board members on the phone spoke up. He pursed his lips before speaking. "Losing my father so unexpectedly has been a tremendous blow for me personally, for my family, and for this company..."

The “unexpected” remark was entirely for my benefit, aimed at shaming me once again.

“Had I been made aware of the state of my father’s health, this transition would’ve gone smoother. Unfortunately, I wasn’t and now we’ve got what we’ve got.”

His gaze dropped for a brief moment to the table, and in turn I held my breath, sensing the imminent danger I was in as acutely as I’d felt it standing before that charging bull back in Wyoming.

“As of today, I’m removing my wife as acting CEO—”

I hadn’t wanted to believe Damon. I needed to believe that Scott still felt something for me, for what we’d had. Respect, whatever. That he would’ve at least given me the benefit of telling me in private rather than to humiliate me in front of the board of directors. In front of the world, really. It was only a matter of time before the Wall Street Journal broke the story. Somebody was probably texting them right now.

And despite him being a raging asshole, I still loved him. The same man who wouldn’t even look at me. The same man that had kissed every square inch of my skin and every silver scar refused to meet my eyes.

“The decision to install her as CEO was made by my father while he was unsound of mind and body—influenced by my wife...It should be noted that I’m seeking a divorce as soon as possible.” He wasn’t pulling any punches. No mercy granted for a woman he once considered a friend and a lover.

I didn’t move a muscle. I couldn’t. It’s like my limbs wouldn’t cooperate. I stood stock-still near the door and took every shot, all his anger and frustration. My arms hung limply

at my sides, my expression as neutral as ever. I wouldn't let them see, and I certainly wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

My eyes worked around the conference table, taking in each and every disapproving glare and smirk, each shake of the head and disdainful frown. I'd known most of the members of the board for the better part of ten years, but they were all strangers now. With a few choice words, Scott had destroyed my reputation, my connections. All my hard work.

"Regardless, no harm's been done and I'm ready to take my place as CEO of this company." His voice sounded firm, remorseless. "I've consolidated power, spoken to my mother and sister. Devyn has signed over her shares, giving me controlling interest in case any of you get ideas." Heads turned left and right, some of them quietly murmuring to one another.

I gave it one last chance, but no matter how much I willed it Scott refused to look at me. So I took one last look at him, at the man I'd fallen in love with. Then I turned and quietly walked out. There was nothing left to say. Nothing left for me in that room period.



"You should sue his ass," Miller announced from his seat in the armchair in my office. I glanced up from the stack of papers I was sifting through and met his disgruntled expression.

"Can you please hand me the blue file," I said, motioning to a stack of files resting on the side table. Miller did as I asked and went back to sipping his latte like he was at Sunday brunch and not at work in the middle of the week.

If leaving was only as easy as walking out. There were too many important contracts and proposals I needed to personally

go over with the new general counsel to simply quit. Besides, I could never do that to Frank.

In the break room, I'd overheard the whispers. Scott had hired someone from an outside firm, thus ensuring that person would be loyal to him and only him. Smart move I'd tell him if we were talking. Which we weren't.

It had been five days since my public humiliation and there would be nine more. Nine more days of people watching me as if I were a reality TV show and whispering behind my back. Nine more days of seeing him day in and day out. Of him ignoring me—or worse, treating me with the same cordial indifference he reserved for strangers. He was a good actor, my soon-to-be ex-husband. He didn't even look mad anymore. Just far away, remote...cold. The bright side was that it couldn't get any worse.

It was time to throw in the towel, to admit that my Scott was gone and a younger, more ripped version of Frank had taken his place. The tailored suits. The groomed-to-death appearance. The dead careless stare. The party whore was long gone. This Scott was all ruthless efficiency. I wondered what Laurel and Ryan would think if they saw him now. I'd tried to explain it to Laurel the other day on the phone and failed.

“What do you mean he's not coming back to Wyoming? He's a rancher not a CEO.”

“Not anymore, Laurel. He fired me and announced to the board that he'll be running Blackstone. And you should see him. He reminds me so much of Frank...his father would be proud of him.”

Ironically, the pain of losing my dream job had turned out to be no pain at all. It was Scott's betrayal that cut to the bone.

The job I would eventually get over. The man I was still very much in love with—not so much.

“Have you thought about staying?” I asked my soon-to-be ex-assistant while my attention remained on the piles of paperwork on my desk. “Hastings wants you on his team.”

Hastings had been a surprise, and I wasn’t used to good ones.

Miller sighed. “No. It’s time for a change. Paul wants me to work for him, on the business side of the restaurants, but I’d like to stay married...so I’m thinking about going back to law school.”

My head jerked up, hoping that I’d heard him correctly, and an uneasy smile grew on Miller’s face. “It’s about damn time. Anything you need from me—anything—”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” he muttered.

“Miller...” I sighed. “...you’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever met. Don’t be stupid about this.”

Miller’s attention fell on his nails. He drummed his fingers on his thigh. For all his tough talk, Miller was a sensitive soul. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“It’s not a compliment it’s the truth.”

“What about you? Plans?”

“For the first time in my life, no...I’m going to pack a bag, grab my passport, and head to the airport. I’ll buy a ticket when I get there.”

“I should sue him,” he sneered.

That brought an unexpected smile to my face. The workings of Miller’s mind were always good for

entertainment. “For what?”

“Sexual harassment.”

As much as I wanted Scott to hurt, to taste a little bit of his own medicine, taking down Blackstone Holdings in the process wasn't my idea of fun. “Stop it.”

Female laughter drew our attention out the glass-paneled wall of my office and across the cubicle-littered floor. Scott stood near reception with an attractive redhead in a sharp gray pantsuit, and judging by the smiles, they were clearly enjoying themselves.

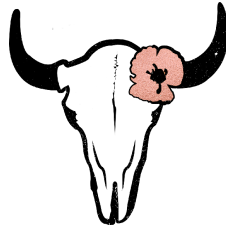
“Who's that?” I asked as my stomach knotted and an ominous feeling came over me. The redhead gazed at Scott with unmistakable lust in her eyes. I knew that look. I'd worn that same look on my face not too long ago.

When Miller didn't answer right away, I cut him another glance. That's when I knew I wasn't going to like his answer. “Who is she, Miller?”

“New general counsel—the woman that's taking your place.”

My gaze returned to the attractive woman. There was no mistaking that she was aiming to take my place in more ways than one. Things had just gotten worse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



SCOTT

TEN DAYS. TEN DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE I'D TAKEN CONTROL of this company. Since I'd essentially ended any chance of a reconciliation with my wife. In the meantime, I'd done a great job of burying my head under Blackstone Holdings. Figuratively speaking, of course. Although some days it felt literal. Then again, I would've done just about anything to drown out all the feelings

I was still reeling from. Betrayal. Disappointment. Powerlessness so acute it made me want to smash things. The last one particularly devastating. Worse yet, I was trying desperately to hold on to my righteous anger, but it was hard when the person I wanted to be angry at wasn't making it easy.

Sydney had been nothing but helpful, facilitating the transition every way I asked and even going the extra mile when I didn't. There was no resentment, no bitterness, no threats of lawsuits coming from her. No tears either—which annoyed the fuck out of me.

She didn't seem all that upset about being fired. I'd feel a little better about the situation if she was at least a little angry

in return. Nothing would feel better than unloading on her. But, no, she'd shown me nothing but kindness and hard work.

For the past three nights, she'd stayed late to help Katherine Daly get up to speed. With no small amount of satisfaction, I'd hired her away from one of my father's competitors. Maybe the one thing I'd done right since returning to this garbage dump of a rat-infested shit hole city.

I wondered what the old man would say if he could see me now, occupying his office, trying to fill his shoes. He was dead and I was still trying to get his attention. How fucked was that?

As I drummed my fingers on the keyboard of my computer, my bare ring finger caught my attention. Today I'd check to see if Sydney still wore hers. At some point, I'd get around to divorcing her, but not any time soon. I had a company to run after all.

"Scott, a word?" Katherine Daly marched right in without waiting for a reply. Which, of course, irritated me. Although almost everything did these days.

She took a seat in the wing chair stationed on the other side of my father's desk and crossed her legs. Funny how I still thought of it as Dad's.

"Did you see the game last night? We need a better DH."

She was talking about the Yankees game which I had absolutely no interest in discussing. I tore my eyes away from my desktop screen, ready to tell her I didn't have the time nor the inclination for idle chitchat, when I noticed her black skirt gapping open. It had spilt up to her thigh, revealing the lace band of her thigh high stockings.

There was no question she'd worn it on purpose. I'd been the victim of so many female schemes of seduction over the years I could teach a class on it.

Inappropriate, I thought, and discarded the sentiment just as quickly. I wasn't about to grant her any more mental space than was absolutely necessary and even negative interest could fuel the fire. Her come-ons had grown bolder over the last week. I was trying my best to pretend it wasn't happening.

"Did you need to discuss something—other than the game?" I remarked with as much irritation as I could pack into one sentence. My expression said more of the same.

"I thought we could have dinner tonight and go over the files Sydney sent me last night. The Tokyo project in particular may be problematic."

"No." My attention moved back to the computer screen.

"No?" She chuckled.

My patience with her, the little I had left, had officially run out. "Look...Katherine. You came highly recommended and I appreciate you hitting the ground running with all the turnover Blackstone has suffered since my father's death, but make no mistake, this is a working relationship. I don't know how Campisi runs his office, but I don't fuck my employees. I'm not interested. Am I making myself clear?"

Somewhere between the death of my father and the end of my marriage I'd lost all capacity to be diplomatic. It would've been lost on her anyway. I was getting the impression that this one needed blunt force to get through to her.

Katherine sat up straighter, her legs uncrossing. After easing shut the gap in her skirt, she laced her fingers together on her lap. "We're clear."

Exhaling tiredly, I continued, “Good. Now tell me what Sydney said about the Tokyo property?”

As if summoned, Sydney appeared in the open doorway to sucker punch me in the gut. The dogs shot up from a dead sleep on the couch and ran to greet her, circling her legs, whining and crying as she fussed over them. I hadn’t seen her in a few days. I’d tried to stay away, but it was getting increasingly harder instead of easier.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked with a soft smile, her gaze shooting back and forth between me and Katherine.

“No,” I shot back immediately. She’d just granted me the perfect cover to get rid of Katherine.

She wasn’t in work clothes, I noted. She wore a black sweater and black jeans that hugged her long athletic legs. Her hair fell loosely around her shoulders.

Fuck, I miss her, was my first and last thought. I almost laughed bitterly. Rather inconvenient to have a beautiful almost ex-wife that I still loved. And I did...despite everything.

“We were discussing the Tokyo property, but that can wait.”

“Oh. If you have any questions I can—”

“Not yet...maybe later.”

She stepped further into my father’s office and stopped halfway. That’s how I thought of it—all of it. My father’s company. My father’s office. My father’s desk. None of it felt mine. Not like the Lazy S did. None of this felt real.

The woman who stood calmly watching me a few feet away was real...and she’d been mine not so long ago.



SYDNEY

“Thanks for the notes, Sidney,” Katherine said, standing. There was only genuine gratitude in her voice. I had to give her credit for that. “They’ve been quite helpful.”

I tore my eyes away from Scott’s intense expression to take in Katherine’s appearance: the white blouse and black pencil skirt, the bee-stung lips and Disney-princess eyes. Very sexy. No doubt about it. Katherine was a beautiful woman and a really good lawyer. It was the latter that rankled.

At least Scott was speaking to me. He’d said more in the last five minutes than he had in the last three weeks combined. That was something to be grateful for.

“We can go over the files later, Scott,” Katherine said to him. More flirtation followed, and I almost rolled my eyes. Everyone in the office knew she was after him. Some were even taking bets on how long before they got caught fucking in the supplies closet. It gave me a panic attack every time I heard someone whispering his name.

“I’ll give you guys some privacy,” she said.

Scott didn’t bother replying and his attention didn’t waver from me. I didn’t know what to make of this new attitude, and quite frankly, I was too exhausted to even try. Sensing she wasn’t going to get another word out of him, Katherine made for the exit.

I glanced over my shoulder and made sure Katherine was gone before speaking.

“I came to give you this.” From the back pocket of my jeans, I extracted a white envelope and approached. I’d almost lost my nerve when I found her sitting in my chair, the one I’d sat in for years across from Frank. For all his faults, his meddlesome ways, I missed him desperately.

By the time I reached the desk, Scott had already risen from the chair and was half sitting on the corner of the desk as casual as anything. His demeanor said he wasn’t breaking a sweat. Not like I was. This was it. Probably the last time I’d see him other than on a television screen. I held out the fat white envelope for him and waited. He stared at it for a while. Then, taking it from me, he dropped it on the desk like I’d doused it in a contagious disease.

“What is it?” he said, resentment filling his eyes. For a second, I thought I saw fear, but that had to have been a figment of my imagination coupled with lack of sleep.

Reaching in the tight front pocket of my jeans, I pulled out the diamond Tiffany wedding band and placed it on top of the envelope. *Deep breath.*

“Divorce papers. Don’t worry, they’re clean. I don’t want anything.” Once again, I waited for him to say something, do something, but his face remained completely inscrutable. “You can send those back to my lawyer...I’m...I’ll be out of town for a while.”

“What do you mean?” He looked genuinely perplexed. His brows drew together and stayed there.

I wasn’t going to explain it to him. Nor did I have any energy for an argument. I had no fight left in me. Maybe that’s what it took, for all hope to be lost before I could finally see beyond the fog of pain and grief, to come to the conclusion

that we were essentially as wrong for each other now as we'd been over a decade ago.

“I mean, I'm done...this is my last day.”

“You gave two weeks' notice—or have you forgotten? That's two more days.”

“I'm done, Scott. I was here till midnight last night tagging each property with any pertinent information Katherine will need. You heard her, she's got it all under control.”

Disbelief popped up on his face, then it changed to panic. “I may need you to answer questions when I go over them.” He gave me his best glare, which didn't work. “You owe it to this company. At the very least to Frank.”

Shoving my hands into the back pockets on my jeans, I began to slowly back away. “Good luck with everything...I...I wish...”

“Where are you going?”

“I don't know yet...” Fighting tears, I forced my lips to curl into a semblance of a smile. I shrugged. “You can have Manhattan.”

“Sydney...”

“I wish things could've been different...and...” My chin trembled. “And I'm sorry,” I forced out, my voice on the verge of cracking. As soon as I stepped out of the open doorway, the tears broke free and slid down my cheeks. I did what I'd come to do. I'd said goodbye.



SCOTT

Clutching a wine glass filled to the top, Devyn walked into the family room and fell into the oversized armchair next to mine. My parent's townhouse was comfortable. Not my taste; my mother was partial to prints. But it was a home meant to be lived in. All the furniture custom made to accommodate my father's size. Nothing the kids couldn't play on. Besides the collection of surrealist art my mother had been accumulating for decades, nothing that couldn't easily be replaced.

Dev stretched out her long legs and crossed her ankles. We'd both gotten our height and dark hair from Dad, but Devyn had my mother's bright green eyes and sharp feline features. Smirking, she gulped her red wine.

“Mom said you won't sign the divorce papers.”

Across the room, seated at a small table, my mother stared at her hand of cards with a mischievous smile. She was playing with Fallon, my oldest niece, while Carly, Jessie, and Lola watched TV. As if she'd heard us, her head moved to the left, her chin lowered, and her bright green eyes examined me from over the rim of her chunky red eyeglasses. I'd seen that look before. That was pity in her eyes.

We hadn't said much since the funeral. That was two months ago, and we still hadn't spoken about Dad being sick, hadn't discussed my impending divorce, hadn't fought over the fact that she'd known. I was still fucking bitter about it, but I wasn't going to take it out on a seventy-year-old grieving widow. Even if she was a battle ax.

Still, I felt cheated. Out of time. Out of closure. Out of saying good bye to my father. Had I known, I would've been here. Had my wife told me, I wouldn't be carrying around this guilt with me now. It was like Charlie all over again. I'd done right by the old man, though. He wanted me to run Blackstone

and here I was, running Blackstone. The Lazy S was under Ryan's care now and seemed to be doing fine without me.

Problem was, I wasn't doing so hot without it.

I tore my eyes away to get a good look at my sister. She'd flown in with the kids for the weekend. Both of us had stayed close to home since my father had passed, both worried about Mom adjusting to life on her own. On that front, we needn't have. Midge was handling it better than I was.

"When's John flying in?"

When she didn't answer right away, I threw Dev a sideways glance. A few rogue gray hairs along her hairline were the only hint she was older by five years. And the responsible one now. That hadn't always been the case. Not so long ago she was the wild one, going from one boyfriend to another—something that used to drive Franklin batshit crazy—until she met John. Until she ran him over with her bicycle on her way to class and broke his arm. It so happened he was the TA of that class.

"Late tonight. They're going public in a few days and he's working out the kinks on the latest update."

John had engineered his first app and sold it when he was still in grad school at Stanford. By the time he hit twenty-five, he'd made a fortune and was on his way to making more. My father had always been disparaging of John's success because, according to Mr. Subtlety, most Silicon Valley success stories were "*total bullshit*" and would eventually be revealed as such. I'd liked John from the get-go. He was a decent guy who loved my sister and put up with her family. Mostly, I liked him because he didn't give a precious fuck about earning my father's approval.

“How does Mom know?”

Devyn hooked a lock of chin-length hair behind her ear and sipped her wine. “She spoke to Sydney.”

Not the answer I wanted, but the one I was anticipating. I returned to gazing at the bottom of my tumbler of Macallan.

“I didn’t know they were close.”

“You didn’t? How surprising.” Her delivery was so dry it forced me to take another drink. “Remember when Mom found the breast lump four years ago?”

I vaguely recalled it, but nodded nonetheless.

“I can see by the blank stare you don’t. Anyway—” my sister chided. “Carly had the chicken pox. It was bad, too. So nasty. Much worse than when Fallon had it, so I couldn’t leave her with John. He’s hopeless when it comes to illness. And Dad is...was—” she corrected, catching her mistake. She made a face, like remembering Dad hurt. “Dad was worse. He couldn’t stand to see Mom look vulnerable. So it was Sydney who went with her to get the biopsy. She took her to all her doctor’s visits.”

The news sunk down to my gut and threw a party. I felt sick. Even worse, it sounded like something Sydney would do. Quietly. Without fanfare or needing to take credit.

“It’s been a load off my mind to know she was here for them—” In the pause I could feel my sister watching me, the side of my face burning from her examination. “You know I love you, little brother—”

Here it comes, I thought and smiled bitterly. Those words never preceded anything good.

“But if you can’t forgive and forget, you have to cut her loose. You have to give her a divorce. It’s not fair to her.”

“Why aren’t you mad?” I pinched the bridge of my nose where the pressure was building.

“Who is there to be mad at? Dad? I mean, let’s be real, I loved him to pieces, but he was an asshole most of his life. It makes sense he’d be an asshole right up to the end. This is so like him—”

That got a chuckle out of me.

“—I don’t get you. Mom knew and I don’t see you upset at her. You’re not threatening to never speak to her again.”

I glanced at my mother who was still heavily immersed in her game of cards with my thirteen-year-old niece.

“I can’t believe you guys taught Fallon how to play poker.”

“She taught herself, dude.” Dev shook her head. “It’s a strange new world out there. Be glad you don’t have kids.”

An image of Sydney dancing in the kitchen in Wyoming with a baby in her arms slammed into me so hard and fast it made my heart brace. I sat up stiffly and ditched what was left of my drink on the coffee table while Devyn eyeballed me.

“You alright?”

“No.” Placing my elbows on my knees, thumb running along my bottom lip, I let the idea sink in. It felt right. It felt so right I wanted to hold onto the image with both hands and never let it go. Sydney with a baby. Then I thought of her having a baby with someone else and I nearly lost my mind.

Heat spread from my chest, up my neck, and down my legs. It made me realize how cold I’d been the past month. Not

seeing her, not talking to her, not touching her had left me cold and on the verge of going numb.

The image lingered, taunting me. Sydney smiled and a sharp pain pushed against my sternum. I missed her. I missed her so much it was painful.

I had no idea what I was doing anymore. No clear grasp on why I'd insisted on staying angry. Why I'd torpedoed the best thing that had ever happened to me. Why I'd set out to hurt her in the first place. My inability to keep a heavy hand on my pride was screwing up the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Devyn was right. I held no resentment toward my mother, and she hadn't done anything different from Sydney. She'd never picked up the phone and told me my father was dying and time was running out.

“What if I love her?”

“Yeah, you love her so much you singlehandedly destroyed her career in a matter of days. You're a real life Prince Charming.”

Now that the fog of war had cleared, hearing it stated plainly made me feel like a dirtbag, made me cringe in shame. I'd known exactly how to hurt her—take away what she held most dear, the only thing she had left: her career. And I'd gone after it with everything I had, hadn't I? It was a maneuver straight out of the art of war by Frank Blackstone.

My eyes fell shut. The truth did hurt. My lungs could barely function with it. “Thanks. I didn't think I could feel any worse.”

My sister chuckled darkly and shook her head. “Men.”

“I'm serious, Dev. I love her. I'm in love with her.”

“You have a funny way of showing it. You know what love is, Scott? I’ll tell you what love is—John was willing to uproot his entire business to move back to New York if I’d told him that I wanted to work for Dad. I have a law degree and master’s in business and I haven’t done anything with either one—”

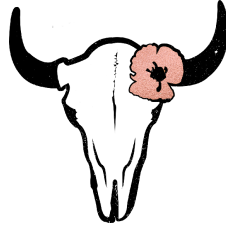
“You have four great kids.”

“Yeah, because I have an amazing husband who gave me *the choice*. Who would’ve sacrificed for me the way I have for him—that’s love. What you feel is remorse.” She took another sip of her wine. “You’re just starting to figure out that you have a genuine gift for hurting people without even trying.”

I winced. “Don’t hold back.”

“You’re a big boy, you can handle it...I thought this marriage would do you good, but I can see now it’s only done her harm.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



SCOTT

PANIC BEGAN TO SET IN SHORTLY AFTER DEV'S "PEP TALK." I knew I needed to fix things, but I had no idea where to begin, or how. Or if it was even possible. That's what worried me most. That I was too late.

Every time I thought about that day in Sydney's office—the day I told her to pack her shit up and get out like she was yesterday's trash, and she started crying—I just about died inside. She hadn't cried at her grandmother's house. Or in the hospital. Or when she told me about all the other horrible things that had been done to her. And yet I'd made her cry.

Meghan was right. I was the fucking Anti-Christ. And my old man would be proud. Both of those statements were true, and I didn't care about either one.

Miller passed me in the hallway without making eye contact. He'd been giving me the silent treatment since Sydney left a month ago, which was fine by me. I was in no mood to make nice.

"Cocksucker."

My feet came to a hard stop and I turned, ready to take all my frustration out on him. “Excuse me?”

He faced me wearing a phony as fuck innocent expression. “I said coffee, can I get you some?”

Punching an employee in the mouth would’ve earned me a nice fat lawsuit so I settled for glaring. “I’m pretty sure that’s not what I heard.”

“Then maybe you should buy a company that makes hearing-aids.”

My temper spiked. It was already on a hair trigger and this guy was pressing all the wrong buttons. “Are you trying to get fired?”

“It’s my last day. So I’m afraid that ship called satisfaction has sailed, *Evil Ken*.”

Evil Ken?

I turned and walked away before things got ugly, stepped into my office—my father’s office—and found my mother directing two men to take down the surrealist painting hanging behind the desk, a painting that had hung there since my father had bought the building.

“What are you doing?” I asked with barely leashed irritation.

My mother glanced over her shoulder briefly. “Oh, hi, honey. Taking my painting.”

“That painting stays in this office—with the rest of the stuff that belongs here.”

My mother took one look at me and whispered something to the men who grabbed the painting and left the room. Taking off her chunky red eyeglasses, she dropped them on the desk.

Her green eyes steady on me. “This painting is mine, and it belongs with the others, in a museum for everyone to enjoy.”

“You’re not giving the collection away.”

She shook her head. “Sometimes you are just like your father. He didn’t want me to donate it, either. Did you know that?”

“No. I didn’t...but I can understand why.”

“It’s funny that you understand so much. You understand why your father wanted to hold on to a bunch of stuff, but you can’t understand why he didn’t tell you he was dying.”

That was a bodyblow I wasn’t ready for.

“Is there something you’d like to say to me, Scott? Because you look upset and I think you need to talk about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!”

“Because he asked me not to. Because he was my husband and I loved him despite his many, many faults. Because you make concessions and agreements, you incur debt and carry credit when you’re married for forty years. It was his business, his decision to make, and I owed it to him to carry out his wishes. Your father was used to winning, but you can’t beat death, and he couldn’t stomach looking weak. Not in front of his children. Not in front of anyone.”

“What about Sydney?”

“He trusted her to understand him. And she did.”

I fell into the wing chair across what used to be my father’s chair, all the fight draining out of me.

“All you see is how Sydney betrayed you. What you can’t see is her loyalty to your father. She made a promise and she

kept it knowing she'd lose you and probably lose the job she loved. That's character," my mother eyeballed me pointedly, "and there's not a lot of it to go around these days."

Walking over, she pushed the hair off my forehead, something she hadn't done since I was a teenager. Taking her hand in mine, I kissed her palm.

"What are you doing here, Scott? Are you happy?"

I couldn't get a single word out. Only thing I could do was shake my head.

"He's gone. Hopefully to a better place. Stop trying to get the upper hand. It's already yours. I'm taking the painting. I'm selling the townhouse. If there's anything you want, let Bernice know and she'll pack it up for you. Or come by and take me to lunch. I could use the company." She kissed me on the forehead. "I love you, bubby. But you don't belong here any more than that painting does."



"Miller. This is Scott Blackstone. Please call me back."

A day later...

"I haven't heard from you. I'm trying to find Sydney and her number keeps going straight to voicemail. I need to speak to her, and Human Resources doesn't have a forwarding address or number. Please call me."

A day later...

"I get that you hate me. Fine. But I really need to talk to my wife. I need to make sure she's alright and...*sigh*...can you please return this phone call."

A day later...

Bam. Bam. Bam.

“Who is it?” came from the other side of the steel industrial sliding door. I glanced around impatiently, amped from the need to act. The Smiths lived in Chelsea in a converted loft that cost a mint by the looks of it.

“Pizza delivery,” I said lowering my voice. And almost laughed for the first time in months.

The door slid open. “We didn’t...ah fuuuck.”

Sydney’s little friend scowled. I gave him the most supplicating look I could muster. “You didn’t return any of my calls. You left me no choice.”

“How did you get into the building?” he shot back, looking more than a little suspicious. “You didn’t buy it, did you?”

I schooled the urge to smile. “Chick in 2E was walking in at the same time. She let me in.”

“Giullermo, that mutherfucker—”

“Look, I get that you’re mad at me—”

“Mad at you? Nah, man. I’m not mad, bro. I was just in the middle of making a wax figurine of you and sacrificing a chicken in your name. If your balls start to itch, you’ll know why—”

“I’m trying to fix this, damn it.” Teeth gritted, I forced out, “I’m trying to make amends if you would only give me a clue where she is. I’m begging you. I know I fucked up. I know I have and...I...I just need to try...please.”

He studied me for a minute. “She’s out of the country.” A begrudging admission.

I exhaled in relief. I was finally getting through to him.
“Where?”

“Blackstone tried to buy a residential property in Singapore last year and got outbid by a Chinese quadrillionaire or some shit. He was impressed—she’s interviewing with him. She’s staying at the Ritz.”

I was running before he’d finished the sentence.



SYDNEY

Hitting the security keypad, I unlocked the front door and walked into my brand-new townhouse, heading straight for the kitchen. On the way, I walked past the painting I’d seen all those months ago—the grey female form floating in the midst of all that color. I bought it to remind myself not to settle for grey anymore, to let the color in even if the last attempt hadn’t gone so well.

Out of the refrigerator, I pulled out a bottle of Vitamin water and gulped it down as sweat dripped down my face and chest. Seven miles and it was hot as blazes today. The cell rang and Miller’s gorgeous face appeared.

“When are you guys coming out?” I asked as soon as I hit the **accept** button,

“First week in August...but that’s not why I’m calling.” I didn’t like the sound of his voice. He sounded guilty.

“Why am I getting a funny feeling in my gut?”

“No biggie. Just a little heads-up that your ex may be coming your way, and he may or may not be a little pissed.”

“You mean the man who’s not yet my ex because he refuses to sign the damn divorce papers? What did you do?”

“It’s all on him, Syd. He asked for it. He kept calling, wanting to know how to get a hold of you, and when I didn’t call him back he showed up at my apartment.”

“What did you do?”

“I told him you were in Singapore...and I may have made and canceled a reso at the Ritz in your name. Then I told him you were in Dubai. And I may or may not have made another reso under your name—”

“And he believed you?” I snorted.

“I was very convincing.” Pride in his voice.

“I’m sure you were...and?” I prodded, biting the inside of my cheek lest I encourage this behavior by laughing.

“And he just spent the last week traveling the globe like Anthony Bourdain without the food in search of you and when he called to threaten my existence, my husband’s existence, and my future children’s existence I felt compelled to tell him the truth.”

“Wise choice...how much time do I have.”

“If he flew private? A few hours at best.”



“Mama, I want cotton candy,” little Pete said to Laurel. With a face full of freckles, a tiny upturned nose, and spiky blond hair, little Pete was the carbon male copy of his mother.

“Finish your burger first.”

After Miller’s phone call, I jumped in the shower and got ready for my night out. Laurel and I had planned to attend the

open-air Concert on the Commons. *Ben Sparaco and the New Effects* were playing, and nothing was going to stop me from enjoying the music. Not even the knowledge that I was going to come face-to-face with the man who had ripped out my heart and ate it with a *side of fava beans and a nice Chianti*.

On the plane ride over here—during which I spent intermittently crying my eyes out—I came to a difficult decision. Hope and Love does not reality make. So even though my love stood strong, my heart couldn't stand to be knocked around anymore. I had to let Scott go.

“Is he here? Do you see him?” Laurel scanned the crowd in the commons. Jackson Hole, it turns out, is jam-packed with fun stuff to do in the summer.

“I'm not looking, Laurel,” I told her, keeping my eyes on the stage and losing myself in the music. “I'm not interested in his comings and goings. This town is big enough for us to avoid each other.”

Close to the stage, I spotted Ryan making eyes at a woman he was talking to. He caught me watching him and made a face, and in return I winked and gave him a thumbs-up. I'd seen a lot of him and the rest of the Lazy S crowd since I'd moved back. I'd made friends here, ones I wanted to keep. I'd been looking all my life for someplace to belong and I'd finally found it. I wasn't about to give it up because my husband decided to make an appearance now and then.

“Not likely, sweetie. I think he just found you,” Laurel said, breaking into my happy thoughts.

My head whipped around, and my eyes crashed right into Scott's. On the other side of the crowd, standing on a picnic table, he was staring at me with a harried expression. His hair disheveled, his white t-shirt wrinkled, jeans too. He looked

like he hadn't shaved or slept in days. He was a hot mess. And still so fucking beautiful it was physically painful to look at him.

"Oh, oh, here he comes," Laurel muttered. "Baby, you want that cotton candy now?" she said to Pete.

"Yeah," little Pete chirped.

"Yes, *ma'am*," his mother corrected.

"Yes, Mama," Pete teased.

"No, Laurel!" I hissed. "You can't leave me—"

"Yes, I can. Look at that face." We watched Scott jump down from the picnic table and elbow his way through the crowd. "That boy ain't right in the head, and I'm not getting killed in friendly fire."

Not long after Laurel dumped me like an unwanted pet, Scott walked up. "I'm not doing this with you," I told him and took off at a brisk walk, heading away from the concert.

"Sydney, please," he said, voice stressed, dogging my every step. "I've been trying to text and call you for weeks."

"I blocked your ass."

"I thought so," he muttered to my back.

I stopped at an ice cream cart, near a bunch of mothers and their kids so he couldn't talk. A little girl, maybe six, kept looking at my cotton dress.

"You like my dress?" I asked her.

Smiling, she nodded. "You look like a rainbow."

The white poplin skirt was covered in rainbow-colored pinstripes.

“Rainbows are my favorite,” I told her.

“Me too,” a deep voice to my right interrupted. “Especially when you’re wearing them.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to the kid manning the ice cream cart. “A double scoop of cookie dough ice cream, please.” He handed me the cone while Scott watched, plenty annoyed to have his stump speech interrupted. Naturally, I took my time paying. Once done, licking my ice cream, I walked off. “Leave me alone.”

“I can’t...I love you, Sydney. I love you, and I’m so fucking sorry.”

I wheeled around and nearly crashed my ice cream against his chest. “What is it, Scott? The job too much for you? What are you even doing here?”

“I’m miserable! I’m so fucking miserable without you.” His voice fell. “And it’s not the job...it’s you. I felt the same way every time you left for New York—before Dad died.”

A quick glance around told me we were drawing more and more attention.

“I’m going to be straight with you even though you don’t deserve it because you sure didn’t give me the same courtesy...after which, we won’t speak again.”

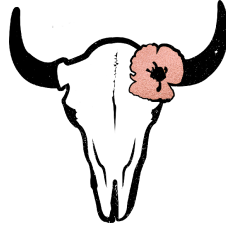
My gaze veered to the side. People everywhere. Families. Young couples. Children. I wanted that. I wanted joy in my life and I damn well deserved it. My eyes returned to his face.

“You hurt me worse than any of the countless beatings I’ve taken.” Expression despondent, he jerked as if I’d hit him. “I loved you like I’ve never loved anything or anyone”—tears stung my eyes—“but you used that love against me. You used it to hurt me on purpose without even giving me the chance to

explain...and I'm sorry you were in pain, I am. I loved him too. I mourned him too." I wiped a tear away. "But I'm done crying over this and I'm done hurting over you. I don't trust your love. It's as deep as a suntan and I need someone to love me to the bone. I want a divorce, Scott. I want to move on with my life and you should too."

I left him standing there, in the middle of a magical concert, on a picturesque summer night. I left him and walked home and cried my eyes out. It was much harder than I made it look. I was a good actress after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



SYDNEY

“I SWEAR ALL MEN ARE DEAF—” LAUREL SQUINTED AND TOOK another gulp of her margarita.

“Too bad they don’t all look like Drake Wayland,” one of Laurel’s friends said.

“Too bad,” another friend chimed in.

“—and if I’m wrong...well, then we’re all fucked. Because that would mean they’re just plain stupid.” Laurel had started to slur her words an hour ago and I was laughing like a hyena. We were all equally hammered. But hey, I was taking the summer off from work.

Everybody had gone to Laurel and Pete’s for barbecue bonanza, something the locals had started when summer hit. It was the Robinson’s turn to host this week.

“You ladies good on food? Syd? Want another burger?” Pete asked.

“I’m stuffed. Thanks, Pete.” I started drinking shortly after arriving, when I thought Scott might make an appearance. These were his people too, after all. But halfway through the

evening, I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized he was purposely staying away.

A letter and a bouquet of black magic roses had been delivered the other day. The letter basically laid out what he believed, that Frank had set the entire thing up. That knowing Scott the way he did, he knew what his reaction would have been once he'd found out. That it was Frank's last, best maneuver to get Scott to take his place as CEO.

In all honesty, it didn't sound so farfetched. As a matter of fact, it sounded exactly like something Frank would do. I didn't want to believe that, all along, Frank's master plan had been to get Scott to take the position of CEO, but it made sense. It was a classic Frank Blackstone move. Sacrifice the pawn to save the king. Regardless, it didn't excuse Scott for how he'd treated me, a person he purported to love.

"Hey, man. Good to see you," some guy I didn't recognize said. I glanced up and watched him clasp hands with Scott.

"Time for a graceful exit," I said to our picnic table, a bunch of Laurel's friends who had welcomed me into their group with open arms.

"Aww, sweetie. Don't let him run you off. He can stay over there with the rest of his kind," Laurel said pointing to the men around the drinks cooler.

No sooner had Laurel spoken than Scott turned and looked straight at me with an expression so broken it actually hurt me to see him look that way, my stomach getting tangled up in knots. There wasn't even a glimpse of the man he used to be.

Breaking eye contact, I planted a kiss on Laurel's cheek and got up. She'd been mother-henning me since I moved back. "See you in a few."

With Scott busy saying hello to the guys, I ordered an Uber and tried with as much stealth as possible to slip out to the front yard without being noticed.

“Where are you going?”

No such luck. He’d caught up to me in the shadows of the side of the house, where the only source of light was the moon and the front yard landscape lights.

Stiffening, I turned. “Home. I think it’s best.”

His gaze cut down before returning to me. “I’ve been thinking about what you said—”

“Scott—”

“Please...just hear me out,” he said, close to begging, voice rough.

This was torture, loving someone and driving them away. Seeing them in pain and not doing anything to soothe it. I didn’t agree, but I didn’t walk away, either.

“Maybe you’re right...”

Not what I was expecting to hear.

“I put my pride ahead of you. Of us. And I’m more sorry about that than anything else I’ve ever done...but you’re wrong about me not loving you to the bone. I do. I have from the start. It’s changed me and there’s no changing back... you’re in my bones forever. The way I’m in yours...”

“I’ve gotta go,” I mumbled standing stock-still as he took a lock of my hair between his fingers.

“For better or worse—isn’t that what the vows are? We’ve been through the worse. Gimme a chance to show you the better.”

Bending his head, he kissed me on the lips, the touch whisper light. I closed my eyes and pretended we were strangers and there wasn't a world of history standing in our way. And in spite of all the reasons it was plain wrong to kiss him back, I did it anyway. The kiss turned white-hot in a matter of seconds, had us clinging to each other like it was excruciating to be apart.

“What can I do?” he whispered against my mouth, molding our hips together, his erection pressed against me. “How can I prove it to you? I'll do anything, Sydney, just say the word.”

I forced myself to step out of his arms, away from the warm comfort of his big body. “You can listen... You can give me a divorce.”



“Hi, I'm Cody. Anybody ever tell you that you look like Blake Lively?” the *boy* standing to my left slurred. I cast a glance in his direction, and he returned a drunken cocky grin.

Straight ahead, behind the bar, Tony smirked and hid a chuckle by turning his back to us and pretending to sort some bottles, the traitor.

All I wanted was to have one little drink in peace. I wasn't in any mood to be in public—Scott's sudden reappearance in Jackson Hole being the main cause. Three weeks and he was still here. How Blackstone was faring without him was a serious cause for concern, but I tamped down the urge to dig around. Blackstone Holdings was no longer mine to worry about. It never really had been.

Laurel had called and insisted I come out to meet her and the girls (her group of friends) for a quick drink and she

wouldn't take no for an answer. Which was why I was here, at the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar getting hit on by a bunch of toddlers instead of drowning my sorrows (baking muffins) back at my townhouse.

I was failing at not loving him. I tried. I really did. I tried to stay mad, to resent him. I just didn't have it in me. Scott was still the man who had kissed every single scar. Who had understood what I needed before even I had. Despite what he'd done to my career and my heart, I was still in love with him. That thread between us hadn't broken. And as much as I wanted to move on, I wasn't ready to see him with someone else. It would've probably killed me.

I tore my eyes away from the screen of my iPhone where five new voicemails remained *unlistened*—all from one man—and glanced over at the toddler in question. He and his cohorts were dressed in full rodeo regalia. “Cody” had pale blond hair and eyebrows, the florid complexion of someone who spent a lot of time in the sun and drank too much. More of the same from the other two who hung over his shoulder like he was the one chosen as tribute.

“Not anybody sober...or with twenty-twenty vision.”

I received three blank stares in return. Then, “Oh, I get it. No, but really—” he started again with boldness only a barely legal and, frankly, stupid man could possess. One look at my demeanor and anyone could tell I was in no mood for him to get his flirt on. In fact, I was seconds from texting Laurel and telling her I had to bail for obvious reasons.

“Cody, is it?” I turned to face him. “I'm flattered. But I'm here to meet my girlfriend for a drink. I'm not here for a hookup.”

“You're gay?” he said with the most tragic expression.

Blink. Blink. Blink. “Yes, Cody. I’m gay.”

“You haven’t called me back.” The voice coming from over my right shoulder was much deeper and much huskier than Cody’s.

My entire body tensed. This was reason number two I hadn’t wanted to go out. I spared him the briefest of glances.

“That’s generally what happens when someone doesn’t want to speak to you. Laurel will be here any minute.”

“Laurel’s not coming.”

Great. A setup. I was going to kill her.

“I thought you said you were gay?” Cody chimed in.

“Bi. Move along now, Cody and Cody’s friends. Trust me, you want no part of this.”

“But—”

Scott’s scowl rounded on Cody. “Are you as stupid as you appear or just hard of hearing? Fuck off, kid.”

Cody puffed himself up and squared his shoulders. He was tall and skinny. As tall as Scott minus approximately thirty pounds of muscle. “Who the fuck you calling kid, dude?”

“Okay guys, c’mon,” Tony finally spoke up.

“Enough,” I added, slid off the barstool, and got between the two. “Scott, let’s go.” I grabbed his wrist and he came willingly as I dragged him away toward the exit. It didn’t stop him from keeping his narrowed threatening gaze on the boys.

Outside the warm air blew my hair back, the cloudless night sky glistening with stars. We walked in silence toward my townhouse. When we finally reached my address, I stopped and faced him. Despite that he’d lost a few pounds

and dark shadows hung under his eyes, he was so handsome it made me ache.

“Whatever you came to say. We can say it out here.”

He nodded in understanding, but no less dejected.

“I’ve done a lot I’m not proud of, but you...this...this marriage, being your husband...It’s the only wrong thing I’ve ever done right. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I was the lucky one.”

Pulling out a thick white envelope, he handed it to me, and as I stared at it sitting in my hand, he said, “Divorce papers. I made a few changes, but it’s all there...what you wanted.”

I glanced up and found his face turned away, his profile hard, and the sharp line of his jaw clenched tightly.

“I’m leaving.” His voice was as rough as sandpaper, the words practically forced out. “I know you’re not happy I’m here so I’m going back to New York...giving you some space—”

My chest ached like my heart was breaking all over again, tears threatening to make a scene.

“—I love you and I’m in love with you. I don’t even know if I can fix all the shit I’ve done, if you can ever forgive me—that’s for you to decide. But...but I’ll wait for you. Doesn’t matter how long—I’ll wait. Doesn’t matter where—I’ll find you. Just say the word and I’ll be there...That’s all I came to say—that and goodbye.”

His eyes finally met mine, packed with so much love and longing they were near bursting with it. He leaned down and pressed his mouth to mine, a brief tender brush of the lips I’d come to know so well before he pulled away and cast those eyes in the direction of his truck.

“Take care of yourself.”

Then he walked away, crossed the street, got in his truck without looking back, and drove off. All the while I remained perfectly still on the sidewalk in front of my townhouse letting the tears I didn't want him to see slide down my face.

Hands trembling, I opened the envelope and recognized the hard slashes of Scott's signature. I was officially divorced. Then I recognized something else, a handwritten letter attached.

You were right. I should've given you the benefit of the doubt. I should've trusted you not to hurt me and I didn't. All I can do now is apologize and tell you that I do. With everything. Even my heart.

I love you, Sunshine.

Yours.

S

I unfolded another document. He'd signed over to me all his shares of Blackstone Holdings.



One of the most important aspects of the art of negotiating a deal is something which, in my opinion, can't be taught. Something that operates on instinct but can be improved upon with effort. And that's timing. When to pause and when to push. When to chase after something you want with abandon, and when to retreat. When not to let it slip through your fingers because you hesitated.

“Are you sure, Laurel? He’s not at security!” I barked into my phone as I frantically looked around.

I’d dumped the car at the curb and ran to catch his flight before he left. Unfortunately, today of all days, it looked like my timing was off. “Are you sure he didn’t catch an earlier flight.”

“I’m pretty sure?” Laurel replied with mediocre conviction at best.

“Ugh, okay, I’ll call you back.”

The security line that funneled to all gates was packed. I stood at the back, on my tippy-toes, scanning the crowd for a tall man with dark hair and killer dimples. Dimples that I hadn’t seen in a long time.

I’d almost lost all hope when I spotted him just beyond the checkpoint, Giants ball cap pulled low over his eyes as he grabbed his designer duffel bag off the security conveyor belt.

“Scott!”

Every single person in line, every TSA officer, even the dang TSA dogs turned to examine me. So did Scott. His head lifted and his pointed gaze cut through the crowd and found me, his dark blue eyes softened, letting so much love shine through my chin trembled. They turned me inside out, those eyes, tumbling headfirst into love every single time he looked at me, and I couldn’t remember a single reason not to let him love me back.

People stepped aside, more than a little curious to see what all the commotion was about as I pushed through the crowd to reach the head of the line.

“Ma’am, you can’t—” TSA officer chided.

“Coming through—” Scott spoke over him while I waited anxiously on the other side. He walked through the scanner going the wrong way and the alarm went off.

“Sir!” TSA was not happy.

Scott dropped his bag in time to catch me jumping into his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist. I tipped his ball cap off his head and planted a loud quick kiss on his lips.

“Word...I’m saying the word,” I breathlessly told him, all that empty space inside my chest filled with groovy feelings, with peace for the first time in months.

For a beat, he looked confused. Then he threw his head back and laughed.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER...

“THIS DAMN TRAIN IS GONNA BE THE DEATH OF ME,” LAUREL griped from behind me on her hands and knees, the seams of the bodice of the little black dress she wore getting seriously tested. In the floor-length mirror, I watched her try to straighten the train of my wedding dress.

“It’s okay if it wrinkles, Laurel. Who cares?”

We did everything the unconventional way in this family. Like having to get divorced before we could get married. An errant train of a dress? I was not sweating it.

But Laurel wasn’t having it and I’d learned that arguing with Laurel Robinson was a no-win situation. If she wanted to fuss, I wasn’t going to stop her.

The Zuhair Murad dress was indeed perfect for the occasion. It was made of silk organza, had a simple strapless bodice that hugged the new curves on my body and fell into a waterfall of fabric. The color a pale tint of lavender. Because, let’s be real, wearing white would’ve been a joke and Scott and I had vowed honesty above all else.

I slapped on some gloss, flicked the white lily attached to my low bun, and headed for the door of my bedroom. Out back, one hundred of our friends, family, and employees were waiting for me to get the show on the road.

“You’re gettin’ that train covered with lint!”

“It’s fine, Laurel, c’mon.”

As I came down the stairs that led to our backyard, through the wall of windows, I could see the explosion of flowers my soon-to-be mother-in-law had chosen for the occasion. She was dying to organize this wedding and I was more than happy to let her...I’ve been busy with more important things.

The flowers were nice, but the Tetons were better. Scott had been right. Nothing more beautiful than living art and in that category were the people in the backyard. I’d been looking for somewhere to belong all my life, someone, and I was one of the lucky ones—I’d found my place amongst a patchwork of people that worked for Blackstone and the Lazy S, the friends we’d picked up along the way: Ryan, Jan, the Robinsons, Paul, Miller and baby Soledad Smith, Marjorie, Dev, John and the girls.

I want to believe that Frank is looking down at all of us saying *I told you so. All you needed was a little push in the right direction.*

More like a shove, but I’m not complaining. I’d found my person, the one I wanted to belong to for the rest of my life.

Along with his shares of Blackstone as part of our divorce, Scott gave me Manhattan. We started dating as soon as the ink was dry on the divorce. Because, really, I wasn’t about to give up on the best surprise of my life. And I wasn’t going to give up running Blackstone either. Frank taught me that.

“Syd, if you remember anything, remember this, when your gut and your heart agree—take action.”

And I had. I did. Best decision I ever made. Apart from marrying him the first time.

There was a lot of travel involved as I ran Blackstone Holdings and he managed the Lazy S. And it wasn't easy. No question we were often tired and overworked, but in the end neither of us would have asked the other to give up the work we both loved. So back and forth we went.

And now the time had come for me to pass the torch. I'd been feeling the need to slow down. I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do.

Hastings had been the second surprise of my life. As my right hand, he'd spearheaded international acquisitions and handled most of the overseas traveling. It was time for him to take over. Blackstone Holdings would undoubtedly prosper with him at the helm. Frank always did have an eye for talent.

Ready? I signed at the handsomest man in the world as I came down the staircase. It was a slow process, but I was learning. Wearing a dark gray suit and smiling his million dollar smile, Drake looked up at me and placed a hand over his heart.

Run away with me, he signed back.

“And risk gettin' your balls handed to you by Scott?” Laurel stepped between us. “Come on, Casanova, time to give the bride away.”

As we reached the threshold of the French doors that lead to the backyard, we all went to put our boots on; my shiny new purple Hunters waiting for me by the door.

We had an unexpected summer rain shower last night and the ground was still wet. I'd stepped in the brown stuff so many times I had no intention of repeating it on my wedding day.

The music started, *Can't Help Falling In Love* by Kina Grannis, and Drake and I, arm in arm, stepped out of the house. All one hundred seated guests turned to watch us. All of them wearing Hunter boots and broad smiles.

My attention was elsewhere, however. It went straight to the man standing under the arch covered in white lilies holding a fussy one-year-old who wore a tiny gray suit that matched his dad's, and a rainbow-colored tie. I still like rainbows. They still make me feel hopeful.

We didn't plan for Jack Franklin Blackstone to come so soon, but you can't exactly call it an accident when neither participant did anything to prevent it from happening.

If anyone ever tells you that you can't have both, tell them to keep their opinions to themselves. Running a global company and dealing with the changes to my body and mind was hard, but we managed. Thanks in large part to a partner who supported my decision and helped.

Regardless, I didn't have it any harder than any single mother having to make the money she earns at her two jobs stretch to the end of the week *and* find a way to buy school supplies for all three of her children. Or the divorced dad who struggles to pay rent, child support, and find the extra cash for new hockey equipment. They'll never get the cover of Forbes or Time but they are every bit the CEOs that I am. Some of us run Fortune 500 companies. Some run a household.

Smiling at the beautiful man waiting for me, Drake and I made our way down the soggy aisle, my feet sinking a few

inches with every step I took, the strange sounds of suction making me giggle.

Catching sight of me, my son started bouncing in his father's arms, babbling, and throwing his arms up. With Scott's attention focused entirely on the bride, it was only a matter of time that one of those animated little fists would eventually connect with his daddy's eye.

Scott swore under his breath. The dogs started to bark. And laughing, Ryan took the little bruiser from him. Jack had taken his first steps the other day and to be completely honest we were bummed. He was already a handful when he could only crawl.

Reaching the gazebo, Drake handed me off to my one-eyed groom. He turned forty last month, and even maimed, he was still the handsomest man I'd ever had the pleasure of meeting. I stroked his face and kissed his eye while everyone watched us. Some laughing. Some clapping.

Because this was us—messy, ungraceful, full of good intentions, but winging it most of the time. Squinting, Scott started to laugh. Holding hands, we glanced over at '70s Elvis. This dude was our good luck charm. The wedding ceremony wouldn't have felt right without him.

“Y'all ready?” Elvis asked once the laughter died down.

“I was born ready for this,” Scott answered, beating me to it.

Elvis started his shtick while I stared into the eye of the one I loved, in awe at my good fortune. “Who are you?” I murmured.

“Your mate, your best friend, your ex-husband,” he smiled broadly, then it slowly melted, “the man madly in love with

you, Mrs. Blackstone.”

A bark drew both our attentions down, to where Romeo stood a few feet away...covered in mud.

“No, Romeo. No!”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story began as a pet project and gained so much steam—these characters taking up so much of my attention—that I felt compelled to push it to the top of my publishing schedule. Regardless, as some of my bookie friends know, it was a rough ride for a while.

To that end, I have many people to thank for nudging me in the right direction. Nina Grinstead for always making my dreams come true. Chanpreet Singh for your friendship and support. Pavlina, Roxie, and Irene for your friendships, advice, and tireless encouragement. You guys and your friendships are the bright side of this business.

To all the fabulous bloggers and reviewers who set aside precious time to do this (often thankless) job—I'm in awe of your skill and your dedication to this business. I say it all the time, I'd rather write a novel than a single review. The ability completely escapes me.

Najla Qamber, the most patient creative person I've ever met. Thank you for putting up with me and making my babies look beautiful.

And lastly, to all the wonderful readers who buy and enjoy my books. You guys make it all worthwhile. Every time I get

an email telling me how much you enjoyed my book I
remember why I do this.

xo,

Paola

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



P. Dangelico loves romance in all forms, pulp, the NY Jets, and to while away the day at the barn (apparently she does her best thinking shoveling horse poop). What she's not enamored with is referring to herself in the third person and social media but she'll give you the links anyway.

- [Facebook Reading Group](#) (P. Dangelico's Mod Squad)

Or find me here

www.pdangelico.com



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