

NORTH BROTHERS SERIES BOOK FOUR

CRUEL NORTH



His first love is
his only weakness.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JB SALS'BURY

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To all the readers who were desperate for Hayes' story.

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PROLOGUE

AP Physics 1

Hayes

“Come on, people, we went over this yesterday.” Mr. Lewis’s voice ricochets off the wall in the back corner of the classroom, jerking me awake.

I’d finally found a comfortable enough position, forehead in my hand, face pointed toward the open notebook on my desk. I had even managed to keep my pencil upright in my free hand so that I would appear to be deep in concentration rather than drifting in and out of sleep.

Offended by the blunt awakening, I scowl toward the front of the class at our teacher as he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Lanky and pale, Mr. Lewis is the walking definition of virginity over forty. With his mouth in a tight line and eyes magnified through glasses, his gaze darts through a sea of slouching students.

“No one, huh? Not even a guess?” He must feel me glaring because his bug eyes land on me.

“Shit,” I mutter to myself.

“Mr. North.” He manages to look down his nose at me from twenty feet away. He may make decent money teaching at Burton Prep, but he’ll never

come close to the net worth of every student in his class—save for the scholarship kids. “What is the kinetic energy of the question on the board?”

Dawson, my hockey team’s left winger, chuckles beside me. Asshole.

“Eighty-two.” The answer’s wrong, but I say it with enough confidence that Mr. Lewis checks his notes before sighing in defeat. My dad always told me that if I’m ever unsure, fake it.

“Eighty-two,” the teacher mumbles with a *you’ve got to be fucking kidding me* tone. “That’s incor—”

“Six point five seven meters per second.” The confident female voice comes from the front row. Another nerd speaking nerdlish.

“Yes, Ms. Osbourne, well done. It’s nice to see at least one person is paying attention in class today.”

Of course, he’s looking right at me.

I roll my eyes and slump back into my chair with a shrug.

The great thing about paying private school tuition is it’s nearly impossible to get kicked out for something as petty as grades. Teacher salaries need to get paid by someone. Every ass in a chair represents forty grand a year in tuition. Can’t kill the cash cow.

“Thank you, Mr. Lewis,” the ass-kisser in the front row replies.

“*Nerd*,” I cough loudly into my fist. The class chuckles. Well, not the whole class. Little Miss Osbourne whirls around in her seat, sending an arc of long, shining, nearly black hair into the personal space of the person sitting behind her. Her eyes are light, I think. It’s hard to tell through the *fuck you* glare aimed my way.

“All right, let’s move on...” Mr. Lewis continues, but I ignore him in favor of the stare-down with little miss know-it-all.

I know this chick. Not personally, but she has a reputation. Vanessa Osbourne, only child to mayor Nicolas Osbourne. The man wins campaigns by touting family values and keeps his only daughter on a tight leash. She doesn’t go to parties or games, and she gets teased for milling about campus

with her nose in a book. She's a junior taking senior-level physics. Like I said... *nerd*.

As if reading my thoughts, she slings her arm around the back of her chair to face me more fully. "I'd rather be a nerd than deadbeat jock!"

The room erupts with a peal of laughter that cuts off abruptly when I scan the room to note who the fuck is laughing at me. No one wants on my shit list.

"That's enough!" Mr. Lewis's voice rises above the snickers and tension.

"Deadbeat?" I laugh through the discomfort of being called out publicly. There are only two people who have the right to talk to me like that—my dad and my coach. Not little Suzy Smartass, who shouldn't even be in this class. I'm not a deadbeat. I'm a hockey player. And yeah, education comes second, but I get good enough grades. I may pay for help here and there, but she doesn't know that. "Be nice, honey. You may need me to hire you someday, and I have a really long memory."

"Mr. North!"

Her glare gets impossibly tighter. "I'd rather lick sidewalks than degrade myself by working for you."

I lean forward and smirk. "I'll give you something to lick—"

She gasps, horrified.

"That's it. Mr. North and Ms. Osbourne, to the office now!"

Fine by me. There isn't a punishment in existence that would make me regret that little exchange. Shit, my heart's even pumping a little harder—something I never feel off the ice.

I throw my crap into my backpack while she argues with the teacher. I'm out of my chair when she loses the battle and gathers her things. We hit the doorway at the same time, and her upper arm brushes mine. I don't move. She jumps back a foot.

"Please." I prop the door open and motion with a swing of my arm for her to go ahead. "Dorks first," I whisper.

She ducks under the thick strap of a leather satchel and then stomps her high-top Docs as she marches through the door. “Thanks a lot, shit-for-brains,” she says soft enough for only me to hear.

My jaw drops open, and I stand dumbfounded for a second before I follow her out the door. This chick has balls to talk to me like that.

Call me intrigued.

I follow behind her, enjoying the view of her knee-length plaid uniform skirt, which is filled out quite nicely in the back. Her blazer is tapered at the waist, giving me an idea of the curves that lie beneath. Her long hair is straight, with not a hint of a curl or wave, and the ends sway at her lower back.

She can’t be taller than five foot five, and at my height of six foot two, my long legs help me catch up to her quickly.

I keep up with her pace easily, even though I can tell she’s trying to get ahead of me. She’d have to run to do that, but I can tell she has too much pride to run from me. Wouldn’t want me to think she’s scared. “Clearly, you don’t know who I am.”

She makes a sound like you would when your dog takes a piss on the floor—annoyed, disappointed, and offended. “Of course, you would think that,” she says dryly.

“Can I give you some advice?”

Her feet slam to a halt, and she turns to face me head-on. Her arms cross at her chest, and her chin is stiff as it angles toward me. Green. Her eyes are green.

“You’re already an outcast here.”

She tries to mask the flash of hurt my words cause, but she’s not fast enough to stop her wince.

“Don’t make things harder on yourself. Lay low, keep your opinions to yourself, and stay out of my way.”

She blinks, and for a second, I worry she might cry. That is until the

corners of her full, pink lips jump and make a slow trip upward. She catches her smile, rolls her lips between her teeth, and shakes her head. “Wow.”

I frown.

She grasps her hands together in a praying position. “Thanks *so much* for the helpful advice. How did I get this far in life without you?”

I *think* she’s being sarcastic, but—

She steps boldly into my face. “Let’s cut the shit. You know exactly who I am, and you see me as an easy target. But newsflash, fuckface—”

“Whoa, easy with the name call—”

“You.” She pokes me in the chest. “Stay out of my way.” She seems to grow taller instantly, but that’s impossible.

I check to make sure she’s not standing on her toes. Nope. Weird.

“Yes, I’m smart. I have a four-point-five GPA and plans. College plans. Career plans. And no one, not even a big...”

Okay, she must be on her toes now. I check. No. What the fuck?

“Dumb...”

Am I shrinking?

“Self-obsessed jock is going to stand in my way.”

We’re practically nose to nose now. I clear my throat, straighten my shoulders, and regain my height advantage.

“You treat me like shit because I’m one of the only girls at this school you don’t want to stick your dick into.”

I gasp in offense.

“And if being sent to the office because I defended myself against your abuse—”

“Abuse? Please.”

“—ruins my chances of getting accepted to Stanford,” she sucks air through her teeth. Her eyes are tiny shards of emerald fire. “Then I will hunt you down, destroy everything you’ve ever loved, and nothing will stop me from ruining your life. Are we clear?”

“Goddamn...” I take in her rigid shoulders, stiff jaw, and flushed cheeks. In that moment, I believe she’s capable of carrying out her threat. “What climbed up your ass?”

“You.” She jabs me hard with a blunt, white fingernail to the chest. “You did.”

She whirls around and leaves me there, rubbing my chest, which is still tingling from her touch.

Vanessa

The insulated to-go cup is set down in front of me at the same time I feel my hair get swept away from my neck. A mix of instinct and exhaustion has my head falling to the side to expose my throat, where warm, wet lips land and tease.

“Mmm, hey, sexy,” Hayes grumbles against my skin, sending a shiver through me. “You smell so good.” He runs his nose down my neck to the collar of my uniform shirt. He pushes the starched fabric aside and nips at my shoulder.

Hayes North.

Who knew the utterly obnoxious prick from physics would end up being the love of my life? Okay, well, we haven’t been dating for long, and we haven’t exchanged those three little words, but nothing in my life has ever felt so right. So intense.

The day we were sent to the headmaster’s office, Hayes took responsibility for everything. He said he purposefully goaded me, and when Headmaster Jardin asked if I took any responsibility, Hayes asked Jardin how a woman should respond when faced with misogyny. I had to pick my jaw up off the floor that day. Hayes accepted the weeklong detention with a smile, and I was off the hook.

After we left the headmaster’s office, I asked him why he did it. Why not

let me take the fall—or at least part of it.

His answer?

“You have big plans,” he said. “I don’t.”

My feminist heart hates to admit it, but Hayes North put a fissure in the solid wall I’d erected to keep myself focused on school and avoid social trappings. One week later, after he wore me down with his persistence, we went on our first date.

We’ve been inseparable ever since.

Turns out Hayes North isn’t a dumb jock. He’s smart when he pays attention, and he’s driven. An incredibly talented athlete and leader as his team’s captain. He’s funny in an unintentional way. Surprisingly loyal. And he seems to really like me.

He’s an extrovert. I’m an introvert. But somehow, it works out.

Our relationship was a surprise to us and the entire school. We were voted “Most Unlikely Couple” in the yearbook, right next to me and Roland Rochester as most likely to become President.

On paper, we make no sense, but together... we’re fire.

“Stop,” I groan softly even as I lean my head back and close my eyes. “I still have three more European monarchs to memorize before I can quit.”

The heat of his mouth disappears. “Fine.” He drops into the seat next to me at the table. “I’ll wait. But not patiently.” His grin is lazy and so tempting. He is the most beautiful man I have ever seen, in competition only with his identical twin brother, who is equally handsome but lacks the edge and danger that Hayes wears like a second skin.

I frown, wishing I could blow off studying to go back to Hayes’ house and spend the rest of the night making out. We’ve come so close to having sex, but I told him I’d only do that with someone I love, and because neither one of us has said it, well... no sex.

But I think I do love him. I love his heart, something he lets only me see. I love his drive and determination because I share the same. But mostly, I

love the way he looks at me when I catch him unaware. Like looking at me repairs something in his soul. Brings healing to something broken.

“Thanks for the...tea?” I grab the cup with both hands to keep them from looping around his neck and climbing into his lap.

“Green tea with honey.” He leans in and slides a hand up my thigh. “I know it’s late in the day, which would usually mean chamomile lavender, but you’re studying, so I made an executive decision and got the caffeine.” His smile is filled with a boyish charm that melts my heart.

“Good choice.” I place a kiss on his soft lips. “Thank you.”

“I’d say you’re welcome, but you know I bring you tea because I’m a selfish bastard that hates sharing you with books.” He grips my thigh possessively, something I never imagined would make me feel all squishy inside, but sadly, it does. I sink into the warmth of his hazel eyes and shiver.

He frowns. “Are you cold?”

Not. At. All.

He’s already pulling his Burton Prep hockey sweatshirt off over his head. He drapes the arms over my shoulders and ties them at my chest. I nuzzle into the soft, worn cotton, take a deep breath, and then sigh.

“This smells like you.” There’s a roughness in my voice.

A soft growl rumbles in his throat. “Fuck, Ness. We’re in the library. I have practice in ten minutes, and you’re looking at me like I’m a snack.”

I kiss him again, but this time I tug on his lower lip with my teeth.

Another delicious growl.

“Let me study,” I whisper against his mouth.

His whole body deflates like a sail that lost wind. He peers up at me through the longish brown hair lightened by the sun that falls over his forehead. “After practice, study session at my house.”

An embarrassingly girlish giggle bubbles up in my throat. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

His cheeks flash pink, and there is nothing sexier than a man as tough as

Hayes North blushing. “Yes.”

“Yo, Hayes,” one of his teammates calls from behind me. “We gotta go.”

He leans in and presses his lips to my ear. “Human anatomy, baby.” He kisses my jaw. “I love you.”

That’s it. That’s how he says it. Those three words.

I love you.

Spoken like the simplest goodbye, and then he’s gone. Walking away.

He dropped the BOMB and then walked away!

I’m out of my chair and running through the library before my mind can think better of it.

Hayes and his friend are nearly to the door. He saunters like the high school god he is; as if all things begin only when he arrives, and he takes his time.

“Hayes!”

A girl shushes me.

He stops and pivots, his brows pinched in concern as he takes in my sprinting form. If I had more time to think about it, I’d worry about how stupid I look running. There’s a reason why I’m an academic and not an athlete. I do not run. I pump my arms, push my legs, and when I’m close enough, I launch myself into his arms.

He catches me on the fly. Big, strong arms form bands around me. “Whoa, Ness. What’s wrong?” His voice cracks with concern, which just makes me love him more.

I bury my face in his neck, my heart in my throat. “I love you, too.”

His arms grow tighter, and he hums softly as if my confession released a pressure valve in his lungs. “Happy to hear it, baby.” A tight squeeze. A soft moan. “So fucking happy.” He sets me on my feet, keeping a hold around my waist. His eyes dance with... What is that? Joy?

I should be worried. Spontaneous is not something I do. We have a lot to consider, like how Hayes will be leaving in a few months for Harvard, where

he'll meet other women, and I'll be stuck here for another year. And if all goes to plan, I'll graduate and move across the country for Stanford. We'll be on opposite coasts. Things will never work long distance, and yet, I can't find it in me to care about any of that. Because I love Hayes North, and he loves me.

And for now, that's enough.

ONE

Present Day

Vanessa

People say there's nothing better than waking up next to the person you love.

People are liars.

Or, I suppose, I'm not doing it right.

My pounding skull, dry mouth, and aching body might not be helping. And I'm not waking up to a handsome man in the peaceful throes of sleep, but rather a masculine foot complete with toe-knuckle hair.

I pinch a couple of hairs and pull—

The foot tucks up under the too-small fleece blanket, and a long moan follows.

“It's official. You never get to pick the movie again.” I roll to my back and squint against the sun that shines through the white lace curtains. I should've gone with cotton.

“Hmmm?” Tag shifts and stretches, his foot reappearing in my face.

I tickle the bottom.

“Stop,” he groans.

“Stop putting your foot in my face.”

I hear him shift again. “What are you doing down there?”

“I don’t know.” I rub my eyes. “I think we passed out—oh, my God, my head has its own pulse.”

“Why didn’t you go to your bed?”

“Did you miss the part where I said we passed out?”

“We were celebrating the good news. It’s not officially a celebration unless you wake up hungover.”

“Yes, and nothing says *let’s party* like watching *Fault in Our Stars*. Stupid movie made me get drunk.” I rub my temples.

“That explains why my eyes are puffy and sore.”

“You cried through the credits.” One thing about Tag, as much as he appears to be a mountain man with his full beard, broad shoulders, and penchant for plaid, he’s not one to shy away from his emotions.

“I wish I could say I don’t remember that.” He moves slowly but manages to get his feet planted on the floor. “I’ll make tea.”

“Yeah, good idea. I’ll be here, ya know, until the room stops moving.”

He stands, and I see that he’s wearing the same jeans and T-shirt he had on last night. I, too, am still wearing my leggings and sweatshirt. No amount of booze could get me to sleep with Tag again. We tried that years ago, and it didn’t work out at all. I need him as a friend more than I do a lover.

He shuffles to the kitchen, and I close my eyes, hoping it helps my head.

No luck.

I need a pain reliever. Water. A hot shower.

I manage to get myself to the bathroom to do all three in that order. Dressed in sweatpants and a tank top, wet hair loose down my back because tying it up is not an option until the dull headache subsides, I join Tag in my kitchen. He’s leaned over an iPad, scrolling through the online newsfeed.

His hair is wet, and he’s wearing clean clothes that I keep on hand just for him.

“Thanks for letting me crash here,” he says as I pour myself hot water

into a mug.

One packet of artificial sweetener sits next to the teapot. Tag always manages to do these little things to let me know he cares.

“Yeah, of course. Haven’s at a friend’s house.” I stir my tea, turn, and lean against the counter. The hot, liquid energy chips away at my lethargy with every sip.

“You know,” he says, pushing away the iPad, “even if Haven was home, she wouldn’t care that I stayed.”

He’s right. I’ve been using my daughter as an excuse, and he knows it. Of course, he knows it. Sometimes I think he knows me better than I know myself.

If I left my love life up to Haven, Tag and I would’ve been married years ago.

“You’re probably right, but I don’t want her to get the wrong idea.” Mostly, I don’t want her to get her hopes up. I hide behind my mug, pretending I don’t see the flash of hurt in Tag’s expression.

I’m not stupid. I know how he feels about me. He reminds me often enough.

But he’s my best friend. My only support system. He has been my daughter’s emergency contact since kindergarten. A babysitter. And a drinking buddy, which is clear as we nurse ourselves back to the land of the living. He’s the closest thing to family that I have.

It’s funny how loneliness changes over time. I went from desperate for a companion to content in my singleness because the risk of getting involved only for the relationship to end badly isn’t worth it anymore. Not because of me—my heart is ironclad—but because I have Haven’s heart to consider now as well. Losing Tag would be unbearable, both for Haven and me.

Sex is one thing. It’s biology. A human function. Like sneezing.

But love. I only have room in the bruised and broken organ to love one person, and that will always be my daughter.

I clear my throat. “Tag, listen—”

“No, Vany.” He shakes his head and stands from the barstool. “We’re not having this conversation again, okay?” He wraps his arms around me in a brotherly hug, and, like always, I melt against him, taking all the comfort I can.

Sooner or later, he’s going to meet someone else. Someone who can love him the way he deserves. There will be no more hugs for me then. So, for now, I selfishly take them.

“I’m always here for you and Haven. Nothing in the world is ever going to change that.”

He says that now, but I know better.

His hands rub up my back before releasing me. His blue eyes are always so soft and welcoming. Safe. God, I wish I could love him in the way he deserves. The all-encompassing inferno that ignores caution and wholly consumes us both. He is the perfect man.

I’ve been broken for eighteen years. And no matter how much time passes, I can’t seem to piece myself back together.

Sensing my unease, Tag gives me one more squeeze, then backs away. “I should go.”

“Yeah. I have some things I want to get done around here before Haven gets home and locks herself in her room for the rest of the weekend.” Teenagers.

When she was a little girl, I was her whole world. Now I get text messages from her bedroom asking me to bring her food.

“She’s not hanging out with Lia again, is she?” Tag’s tone is edged with concern. The last time Haven and Lia hung out, Tag ended up having to pick them up drunk from a party.

“No. She stayed the night with Meg. Something about a scary movie marathon.” I top off my hot water, grateful for the relief I’m finally feeling in my head.

“Meg Porter?”

I nod and sip.

Tag’s brows pinch together. “The Porters are out of town. Have been for a few days now. They visit Duncan’s family every summer.”

I’m not surprised Tag knows this.

The small town of Manitou Springs, Colorado, has a population of just over five thousand. Tag grew up here and is now a park ranger. He breaks up parties in the forest and takes kids back to their parents, who he partied with in the woods years earlier.

“Maybe Meg didn’t go.”

“Shit.” I set my mug down and reach for my phone. I open the tracking app I have for Haven’s phone—or, as she calls it, my stalker app. “She’s at Meg’s.” I scroll to the time stamp. “Looks like she’s been there since yesterday morning, which is right.”

“Huh.” He shrugs.

“Do you think Meg’s parents are out of town, and they’re home alone? They could’ve thrown a raging party.” My stomach twists with worry.

“Wouldn’t be surprised. All teenagers have parties when their parents are out of town.”

“I didn’t,” I mumble as I hit Haven’s number.

I was nursing a baby at seventeen. Skipped the drinking, drugs, and sexual exploration in favor of diapers, wipes, and sleepless nights.

“Voicemail.” I set my phone down as either worry or alcohol poisoning sours my stomach. “Goddammit, Haven.”

“You want me to swing by the Porter’s on my way home and check on her?”

“No. She already thinks I’m a helicopter parent.” I rub my eyes until I see stars. “I’ll talk to her when she gets home.”

He pushes his too-long hair behind his ear. “Maybe they canceled the trip. Could be nothing to worry about at all.”

I nod my agreement, even while my gut churns.

Raising my daughter in Manitou Springs was a deliberate choice. I wanted her to feel watched over by good people. Wanted to limit her exposure to the ugliness of the big 'ole world. I'm afraid I may have been naïve to think I had the power to do any of that. There is no protection from growing up.

"I should go." Tag rinses his mug and loads it into the dishwasher. I watch his big shoulders move under his faded red T-shirt and remember a time when I wondered if we could be more.

I jump at the sound of my phone ringing.

A number with a New York area code lights up the screen.

"Are you going to get that?" Tag says curiously as I stare at the device in my hand with my breath in my throat.

I cut all my ties to New York almost eighteen years ago. I swallow hard. "Probably just a telemarketer."

The phone continues to ring, vibrate, and light up in my palm.

"On a Saturday?" He gets close, pulling my focus off the phone and onto him. "Hey, are you okay?" He cups my face and runs a thumb along my clammy cheek.

"My stomach hurts." I push away my tea.

The phone continues to blare between us, somehow growing louder with each repetition.

He slips the phone from my hand and holds it up. "May I?"

"I don't know—"

"Hello?" he says, answering the stupid thing. His gaze darts to mine and narrows. "Who's calling?" *Hudson North* he mouths to me.

I have an out-of-body experience. As if my soul hovers in the kitchen doorway, watching myself and Tag from a safe distance. Removed from the flesh and bone that hold my heart and cannot withstand another blow.

His eyes widen then, the connection being made. "Yes." His voice is

hollow. Ghostly. He holds the phone out in front of me. “Take it.”

I don’t move, probably because the part of me that controls brain activity has completely dissociated.

“Haven.”

Her name, my heart, brings me back to myself. I blink as fear and worry slam me in the gut, and all my blood rages through my veins.

Tag offers the phone again. “She’s in New York.”

I make it to the sink just in time to vomit.

Hayes

People are so fucking weird.

The whole TGIF bullshit is for losers. I’ve never understood why a person would choose to work five days a week when they could work seven. Why work forty hours a week when they could work sixty?

Football, barbecues, walks in the park, and naps—these are the pleasures of pussies.

August raised us to stay hungry. To never be satisfied with success when we could strive to be the best. The words *good enough* weren’t spoken in our home. Good wasn’t acceptable. Great was expected. There was no such thing as enough money. One could always use more. Family wasn’t enough to make a person happy. We watched as August had it all and demanded more. More kids. More women. More, more, more.

Which is exactly why I’m up at five o’clock every morning.

Saturdays are no exception.

I’m working on a revision to a contract for a huge design deal when my phone rings. I glare at the device, hoping it’ll spontaneously combust so that I won’t have to answer it. The only downside to working at home on the weekends is that I don’t have a secretary to field disruptions. My brother Hudson’s name flashes on the screen.

What the hell does he want?

I answer his call on speakerphone. “What.”

He clears his throat. “Hayes.”

There’s something about his voice that sounds off. Only I can’t put my finger on exactly what. “What happened?”

“We uh…” Another awkward second of throat clearing. “We need to talk. It’s important.”

“Okay.” I close my laptop and lean back into my office chair. The view from my home office window is a picturesque New York skyline that includes the Empire State building. The view was the selling point for the condo that demanded such a high price. I didn’t buy it for the view. I bought it because it’s the best. “So talk.”

“In person—”

“Are you whispering?”

One more throat clearing. “Maybe you should swing by.”

“I’m in the middle of something. You come to me.”

“Hayes.”

My spine stiffens at his tone.

“This is *really* important.”

That flicker in my gut sparks to a flame. “What’s going on?”

He sighs long and hard. “Just… promise you’ll come by.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Actually…”

I hear shuffling and the quiet click of a door as if he’s moving around, trying to find a safe place to talk. If I didn’t hear Lillian’s cheerful voice in the background, I’d worry my twin had been taken hostage and held for ransom.

“Come by at three.”

“Fine.”

“See you then.”

“Are you sure you’re oka—” I look at my phone screen and see he disconnected seconds ago. I set down my phone and attempt to get back to work, but my head refuses to cooperate.

My twintuition tells me something is very wrong. Hudson rarely has problems, and on the rare occasion that he does, they’re minor. And the last person he would reach out to for support is me.

Sure, my womb-roomie and I share identical DNA, but that’s where our brotherly confidence stops. He’s more likely to call Kingston or Alex if he needs help.

So why me?

Why now?

My curiosity gets the best of me, making it impossible to concentrate on work.

The walk from my office to the living room on the opposite side of the penthouse is a complete change of view. From cityscape to Central Park in the distance.

I check the time.

Ten o’clock in the morning.

I take a shower and drink a protein shake, and by noon, I’m done waiting. Refusing to let Hudson ruin my entire day by making it impossible to focus and work, I decide to head over to his place early and get this shit over with.

The sooner he spills whatever is on his chest, the sooner I can stop obsessing and get back to my life.

I pull my car up to the valet in front of Hudson’s building and toss the kid my keys.

“Mr. North, welcome back to—”

“Leave it out front,” I bark at him. “I won’t be long.”

“Yes, sir.”

I walk right past the doorman, the concierge, and security. They recognize me and must feel the vibes of irritation rolling off me because they

give me a wide berth and even punch the elevator call button for me. In the time it took me to drive here, I managed to get myself even more annoyed than I already was. This better be fucking important.

The elevator takes too long, and I wonder if Hudson ever considered demanding they upgrade the piece of shit. Probably not. The dumbass wouldn't say shit even if he had a mouth full of it.

What feels like a million years later, I get to his floor. I bang on the door, then stand back and wait.

I hear Lillian and Hudson speaking in a rush.

“I can hear you.” I roll my eyes. “Just answer the fucking door.”

Is it our birthday or something, and they planned a surprise that my early arrival is ruining? But our birthday isn't for another few months.

I bang on the door again, harder this time. The door flies open mid-knock.

Hudson greets me wearing jeans and a T-shirt, no belt, and no shoes, which is casual even for him. Even on a Saturday.

He leans into the cracked-open doorway. “You were supposed to come by at three.”

“Yeah, well, I'm here now, so what's up?”

His gaze darts to the side. “Now isn't really a good time—”

“What the fuck.” I grind my teeth together. “I did not drive over here to be sent away because you're not ready for me. Is everyone behind that door wearing clothes?”

“Of course—wait—”

It's too late. I'm already pushing the door open and stepping inside. He doesn't try to stop me.

He does, however, shift awkwardly to the side to stand in the mouth of the hallway. “You really should've called first—”

“*What the fuck is going on?*” I throw my hands out to the side and do a quick scan of his place, half expecting to see a dead body he must need help burying or gigantic bags of cash he needs me to launder. I see nothing. Just

his boring fucking furniture in his boring fucking place.

“Hayes, first calm down—”

“Calm down?” I notice he’s a little pale. He has bags under his eyes like he hasn’t slept in two days. The look should make me worry, but I only have two emotions available to me. Angry and angrier. “Talk. Now.”

He holds his hands out as if trying to calm a wild animal. “Sure. Okay. Let’s just sit down and talk like—”

“No, stop!” Lillian’s muffled voice comes from down the hallway. “Don’t go out—”

A door slams, and I look down the hallway, expecting to see Lillian.

A woman walks cautiously toward me. She’s wearing cut-off jean shorts and a crop top, and her long hair falls over her shoulders to her waist.

My mind tries to assimilate what the fuck I’m seeing. Hudson’s acting weird, and this girl-woman is eyeing me like I might blow up at any second.

Thank God for Lillian, who comes racing out behind the girl. “Haven, wait.”

Haven. The name isn’t familiar. It means nothing to me, and yet the way everyone is acting, the tension thick in the air, and the feeling that we’re all balancing on a hairpin trigger say otherwise.

“You’re him,” the girl, Haven, who looks to be maybe twenty years old, says. Her eyes narrow in a familiar way. A vision that picks at a memory so distant I can’t latch onto. “H. North.”

I look at Hudson for clarification. I mean, we’re both H. North. Although I haven’t signed my name like that since my hockey days when I thought I’d be the next NHL great.

“Do I know you?” I say to the woman.

Lillian shakes her head in disapproval, and I can hear her calling me an asshole even though she doesn’t say it out loud.

“Hayes,” Hudson says calmly. “This is Haven. She’s your—”

“Daughter.” Haven’s chin ticks up a couple of inches, and she crosses her

arms at her chest, that glare intensifying.

I snort.

Hard.

Which turns into a bark of laughter.

No one else is laughing with me.

“Daughter. Right.” I sober a bit, still grinning because, like, what the fuck?! “I’m confused. You called me here to meet some chick who thinks—”

“I’m your daughter, dickhead!” Jesus, her eyes could burn a hole through a concrete wall the way she’s looking at me.

“Listen, *Haven*, is it?” I take a step closer, but not too close as I’d like to keep my skin free of bloody claw marks.

“Hayes,” Hudson murmurs. “Don’t.”

“I don’t know what delusional woman told you this story, but I assure you she lied.”

Haven crosses her arms at her chest and tilts her head as if to humor me by listening to what I have to say.

“This isn’t the first time someone has lied about paternity to get money out of me—”

“Prick,” Lillian whispers.

I ignore her because I have more important things to do right now, like break this kid’s heart.

“Money?” Haven chokes out a laugh. “That’s what you think I want?”

I shrug because, well, yeah.

“My mom doesn’t want a thing from you.” She lifts a brow, the expression all smartass and, again, so fucking familiar. “She told me my father died of syphilis.”

Lillian laughs quick and hard and then turns red trying to stop, while Hudson just shakes his head. But—hold up—is he smiling?

“Well, there ya go. See, I’m not your dad. Still alive and blessedly STD free.” I look at Hudson. “Real funny, cockface. I can’t believe you called me

here for this.” Well played, though, I must say. “You know what they say about paybacks.” I give his shoulder a playful shove.

“Vanessa. Osbourne.” Haven watches closely as the two names hit my ears.

And just like that, my whole entire world crumbles around me.

She smirks. “Not so sure now, are you, *Daddy*.”

My head gets light, and my vision swims. I back up until I find something to hold my weight, then slump against it. “How do you know that name?” Jesus, why am I whispering?

“I think you know.”

She’s right. I do.

Visions come rushing back full size and in color. Shining dark hair, full pink lips, and a scowl that I swear had fangs. The only woman who ever stood toe-to-toe with me and won. She was a tiny thing, smart as hell, so fucking beautiful. And I loved her. I fucking loved her—

Oh God, I’m going to be sick.

I clutch my gut and fight off a wave of nausea.

The girl—my... I can’t bring myself to say it, not even in my head—steps up to the kitchen island that is keeping me from falling into a heap on the floor. She leans an elbow on the granite and props her chin in her hand. “Painful memories, huh?” She frowns mockingly.

Her eyes are hazel like mine but shaped like Vanessa’s, whose eyelids I would kiss while she slept. I turn away from the girl, hoping to rid my mind of the memories, but without any luck. They flicker in my mind’s eye with perfect clarity. Our naked bodies intertwined in my bed. We were so desperate for each other that we spent more nights making love than we spent sleeping.

My Vanessa.

“Tell me, *Dad*, how quickly did you forget all about me? Was it days? Weeks?”

Every word is a stab to the chest.

“Hm, maybe an easier question... Did you forget about me before or after *you paid my mother to kill me!*” She shoves off the island.

I cringe away from her words.

This kid is fucking brutal. Every syllable delivers a punishing blow.

She’s like...

Holy fuck...

I force myself to look into her eyes.

She’s just like me.

TWO

Vanessa

“Are we almost there? Is it quicker to walk?” I fire off more questions to my cab driver, who is currently stuck in traffic on our way into Manhattan.

As the plane descended into La Guardia, my anxiety went from a steady hum to a painful ache. I would’ve thrown up if my stomach wasn’t empty. I haven’t been able to do much more than sip water since I got the call.

From the backseat of the cab, I watch as we draw closer to the Manhattan skyscrapers that reach into the heavens, and I feel sixteen again. I am reminded of living with my parents in a Chelsea brownstone, attending the most prestigious prep school, and having an iron-clad plan for my future.

A lifetime ago.

Somehow, being here again makes it feel like it was only yesterday.

Fifteen minutes and a million more demands to my cab driver later, we finally pull up to a high-rise condominium. I check the address Hudson texted me. “This is it.”

“Yeah, I know,” the cab driver says with a thick Jersey accent. “It’s why I stopped.”

“Right.” I hop out of the car and grasp my small carry-on. I brought only enough to get me through the night. Just long enough to get Haven out of

New York and back to Manitou Springs, where she belongs.

I throw the driver some cash, way overpaying. But I'm too much of an emotional livewire to focus for long enough to count.

I just want my daughter back.

Hudson assured me he'd keep Haven safe until I got here. From what I remember, he's an honest, trustworthy guy.

More than I can say about his twin.

My stomach clenches again, which is a feeling I'm getting way too comfortable with.

"Hello, I'm here to see Hudson North." I say to the concierge, who greets me when I walk in. "I'm Vanessa."

"Yes, he's waiting for you." The woman nods toward the elevators. "Our attendant will show you up."

One of the many things I do not miss about city living is the gatekeepers to the wealthy. In Manitou Springs, you can borrow sugar from a neighbor. Hell, you could walk in and grab it yourself if they weren't home because no one locks their doors.

"Nice day we're having," the elevator attendant chats as we ascend.

"Um... sure." I can't even begin to comprehend something as non-threatening as the weather. Funny, I don't remember feeling anything by way of cold or hot since the phone call. Shit, was that only this morning?

The elevator pings, and I rush off before the doors are completely open.

Hudson's double doors are one of only two on this floor. I knock hard.

When the door opens, I nearly stumble back at the man standing before me. It's Hudson. I know immediately. The way he holds his jaw, the casual set of his shoulders, and the utter kindness that melts from his eyes. Even knowing all that, my fight-or-flight response takes over, and I take a step back. Because Hudson is the closest thing to Hayes, the man who left me alone with two thousand dollars cash and a letter.

"Vanessa," Hudson says with a tenderness that I feel in my chest. "Come

on in.”

“Where’s Haven,” I demand as I rush past him into the condo. My eyes search the space for my daughter, and if I weren’t so frantic to lay eyes on her, I’d probably take the time to appreciate the beautiful penthouse, furnishings, and décor.

Haven jumps up from the couch. “You called my *mom*?”

I drop my things and pull her into my arms. “Oh, thank God,” I say and squeeze her, noticing she’s not holding me back. “You’re okay.”

She stiffens and tries to wiggle free. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Her tone is put out and annoyed.

I back away far enough to check for bruises, cuts, or signs of discomfort. When I find none, I pull her back to me. “Why, honey? Why didn’t you talk to me first?”

She pushes out of my arms. “Because you’re a liar.”

“Haven, that’s not—”

“Hey, Ness.” That nickname. That voice.

Oh God, please, no.

I close my eyes. Make him go away. I can’t do this. I can’t handle this. Not now. Not ever. I can’t—I sway on my feet.

“*Fuck*.” Big hands grip my shoulders.

My eyes dart open in a panic. I don’t look at him, but I know it’s Hayes who has his hands on me. My body remembers what I’ve forced my heart and mind to forget. I slap his hands away and duck out of his hold. “Don’t touch me!”

“Vanessa, it’s okay,” Hudson says calmly. “You look like you’re going to faint.”

“I’m fine.” I refuse to look in Hayes’ direction. “I’m just a little dizzy.”

“She gets like this when she doesn’t eat,” Haven says, sounding bored.

“I’m okay.”

I feel Hayes step close. “Let me get you—”

“No.” I hold an arm straight out between us, still refusing to look at him.
“I want nothing from you.”

“Hayes,” Hudson says softly. “Maybe you should go.”

Yeah, get the fuck out. Get the fuck away from me and *my* daughter.

“We need to talk, Nes—”

“Don’t call me that!” I close my eyes and push back the flood of memories. “We’re leaving.” The announcement comes out in a whisper. *I’m strong. I’m capable. I need no one.* As the mantra repeats in my mind, my spine stiffens. I suck in a deep breath, throw my shoulders back, and find the safest face in the room.

My eyes land on a woman with blonde hair and eyes that reflect pain. It’s a kind of pain I know my eyes do not reflect. And I know this because I have practiced hiding the most broken parts of me under a mask of indifference.

“We’re leaving.” I find my bag by the door. “Haven, grab your things. I’m sure we can get a flight out of here—”

“I’m not leaving.”

My hand freezes on the doorknob.

“And you can’t make me.”

I turn calmly, even though my insides rage. My heart and mind scream for me to take my baby out of this godforsaken city, away from these strangers, and back home where we’re loved. Where we’re safe. We can forget about all this. Put it all behind us. Pick up right where we left off. But the slow, simmering betrayal in Haven’s beautiful face tells me otherwise.

“Listen, we can talk at home.” I sound as if I’m trying to lure a scared kitten. “I’ll tell you everything, and I’ll answer your questions. The truth. I promise.”

She crosses her arms at her chest.

I grind my teeth.

“Uncle Hudson said I can stay with him as long as I want.”

“Jesus,” Hayes grumbles from somewhere in the room.

Hudson flinches when I turn my attention to him. “Did he?” My hands ball into fists. “Well, I’m your mother, and I say *grab your shit. We’re leaving. Now!*”

She huffs out a laugh, then smirks, and, oh hell, that smirk has always reminded me of Hay—the sperm donor. “If you want to take me home, you’re going to have to drag me there, and I’ll kick and scream the whole way.”

Heels dug in. Dying on the mountain. Absolutely unmovable. Now, *this* she gets from me.

“Kiss your car goodbye,” I say through clenched teeth. “And your phone. You’re grounded for the rest of your life.”

“Yeah, except I’ll be eighteen soon so...”

This conversation is getting us nowhere, and it is far from ideal to have this talk in front of people I really hoped I’d never see again.

“Fine, Haven.” All the air escapes my lungs, but I refuse to slump in defeat in front of an audience. “I’ll be at the Marconi when you’re ready to talk.”

“Please, don’t go,” the blonde woman says. “You’re welcome to stay—”

“No.” I have to leave. I need to think. I’m on the verge of breaking, and I would rather die than do it in front of Hayes. “But...” I speak only to the woman, who I’m assuming by the way Hudson has a protective arm around her is his wife. “If anything happens to my daughter.”

She’s already nodding. “She’ll be safe with us.”

“Haven,” I say to her, even as she continues to glare. “Everything I have ever done has been for you.”

She laughs sadly.

“Whatever you’re here looking for? I hope you find it.” With that, I walk away from my baby, leaving her with the man who didn’t want her.

Hayes

Goddamn, Vanessa Fucking Osbourne.

She hasn't changed a bit. Sure, she's no longer the innocent-looking girl I dated in high school. She's older. Sexier in the way women become sexy when they grow into their beauty and confidence. Her hair is still dark brown and sleek, but instead of the long locks that would kiss her waist, she wears a sexy power bob that, combined with her unflinching attitude, makes her intimidating as fuck.

And I do not get intimidated often. Like, ever.

Her green eyes still spark with fire, and her pink lips are just as biteable as they were when we were teenagers.

Teenagers.

Holy shit... we have a daughter.

My brain feels like it's going to start leaking out of my eyes and ears, and the throbbing is so intense that I put my head in my hands and groan.

"Um, so Haven," Lillian says. "How about we go grab a bagel or a slice of pizza—"

"I don't eat carbs," she says like a snobby teenager.

I shoot her a look and recoil when I come face to face with an even fiercer glare. Good God, I should've known Ness and I would make a fierce-as-fuck kid.

"Okay, how about we grab a smoothie, and I'll show you Central Park?" Lillian doesn't give Haven a chance to say no as she ushers the kid out of the condo. "I'm sure your... um... Hayes has a lot to think about."

"Whatever."

The door closes behind them, and I finally take a full breath. The room is quiet except for the sound of Hudson's shuffling feet as he busies himself in the kitchen. Eventually, he pulls out a stool next to me and sets down a cocktail glass half filled with amber liquid.

Whiskey, scotch, tequila, rum? The answer doesn't matter to me.

I throw the half glass back in one big gulp.

“Tequila.” The word scrapes from my shredded throat.

Hudson throws back a much smaller shot. “Seemed appropriate.” He pours us two more.

I toss mine back, then swirl the empty glass on the table. “Did you know?”

The fact that he’s pouring a third shot should’ve given his answer away. He tosses the shot back and smacks his lips once before muttering, “Yeah.”

Don’t get upset. Knocking the shit out of my twin will do me no good. Although, it may feel good.

“How long?” This time, I make a fist in case I’m going to have to hit him.

“Hayes, do you really want to have this conversation right now?”

I tilt my head just enough to catch his eyes. “How. Long.”

His expression twists with regret. “The entire time.”

My teeth clench so hard that a bolt of pain spears my jaw. “You knew I had a daughter.”

He doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to. His expression says it all.

“And you didn’t think to tell me.”

“Vanessa made me promise—”

My glass shatters against the nearest wall. The bottle of tequila is next. I’m up. I toss the barstool away and hear a crash where it landed. “You’re my brother! My flesh and fucking blood!” I toss his glass next, but the burst doesn’t take the edge off.

“Hayes—”

“Don’t talk to me!” I move to the door, tossing everything that stands in my way. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

I slam his front door with a satisfying crack, punch the elevator button until my knuckles bleed, and rip my hands through my hair, waiting for the thing to get me to ground level so that I can get the hell away from all these... feelings.

Vanessa

After I left Hudson's apartment, I got a taxi to my hotel, where I checked in, ordered pasta and a bottle of wine to my room, and consumed both until the shaky feeling in my chest settled. Only then did I feel sturdy enough to call Tag and fill him in on what happened. Propped against the headboard, wine bottle in hand and reality television on mute, I spill the tea.

"I'm so sorry," he says, and the compassion that drips from his voice threatens to unsteady my insides. "I know you were hoping you'd never have to tell her about the sperm donor."

I pluck at the hem of my too-short T-shirt, trying to cover my belly button. In my hasty packing to get to New York, I managed to toss in a sleeping shirt but no pants. "She's always been so smart and curious. I should've known she'd dig into her paternity. But how did she find out?" I throw back a swig of wine. "She's been so distant lately. I thought it was just teenage shit, but I think she's known for a while now. Ugh." I drop my head back and wince as my skull knocks against the wood. "I'm so stupid."

"This isn't your fault, babe." I hear water running in the background, and I imagine Tag is rinsing dishes from the dinner he made himself and is now cleaning up. "You've always been enough for Haven. How could you've known she'd want more?"

When I don't respond because I'm gulping wine, he continues.

"How long will you two be staying in New York?"

"I don't know. She doesn't seem ready to talk to me. I'm not leaving unless she's with me."

"I used Haven's spare key to get her car back to your place."

"Thank you, Tag. You really are my best friend."

His chuckle is soft, and I can hear the frown in it. "I'm always here for you. Let me know if there's anything else I can do. And keep me posted."

"Will do."

“Give my girl a hug for me.”

“I’ll try, but she won’t let me get close enough.”

“She will. Give her some time. She’s dealing with a lot of information right now.”

“Yeah.” Fuck me, this fucking sucks. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Sleep tight.”

As soon as the call disconnects, I send a text to Hudson.

How is she?

Text bubbles pop up immediately.

Good. She’s watching a movie and eating popcorn.

I rub at the ache in my chest that comes from wishing I was there with her. I want to thank him for keeping an eye on her, to tell him how much I appreciate her having a safe place to stay, but I can’t bring myself to type the words. Instead, I text...

Have her call me in the morning.

Will do.

THREE

Hayes

It's Monday. I'm back to work, and I'm a ray of fucking sunshine.

After a night of drowning myself in liquor and trashing every breakable thing in my condo, I passed out. I woke up at four o'clock in the morning, feeling like I'd washed my mouth out with sand and jumped in front of a truck. For a split second, I forgot about how my entire world went to shit the day before. But blinking my eyes open to the devastation of broken shit in my bedroom caused reality to come rushing back with painful clarity.

Every minute since then has helped to stoke a slow-burning fury.

"Ms. Newton!" I pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping to hold my shit together so that I don't go Hulk on my office. "Why am I only now hearing that the Freedman contract hasn't been received?"

My secretary comes scurrying into my office, her iPad held in a death grip at her stomach like a shield. I briefly wonder what it would sound like shattering against the marble floor. "Mr. North, I s-sent you an email about the Freedman contract on Saturday, sir."

"No. You didn't," I spit through my aching jaw.

She blinks rapidly, her eyes rimmed with red.

I roll my eyes at her weakness. "Get out."

“Sir, I—”

“I said *get out!*”

She jumps with a squeak and scurries back to her desk and, thankfully, out of my line of sight.

“I’m surrounded by incompetence,” I grumble to myself. “Unacceptable. How hard is it to do your job?”

“Knock, knock.” Hudson stands in the doorway. He’s smart to keep a safe distance.

The sensation of falling, like when we used to jump from the high dive at the country club pool when we were kids, tugs at my gut upon seeing him. Is she with him? Haven? Has he talked to Vanessa? Is he here to tell me they’ve left New York?

“Can I come in?” He lifts his brows.

“You’ve never asked before. Why start now?” I pretend to find the document on my computer screen the most interesting thing in the room.

He closes the door behind him, then takes a seat across the desk from me, dropping into it in a casual way. Or is he tired because he was up all night with Vanessa and Haven? Were they upset?

He dips his chin toward the door. “You made Ms. Newton cry.”

“Shit,” I hiss softly.

“Figured of all days to tread lightly with you, today was the day.”

“Mmm.” I continue to stare blindly at my computer. “You here for a reason?”

“You mean a reason besides the young girl you fathered, who’s staying at my house?”

He gets my eyes then.

“Look, Hayes... I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you about her sooner. I honestly...” His face screws up with discomfort. “I thought you didn’t want to know about her. Vanessa said—”

“I’m sure I know what Vanessa said.” I don’t need the reminder. Not if I

want to keep my office furniture in one piece. “Did you keep in touch with her?”

He ducks his chin. “I’ve sent money.”

“Jesus, Hudson—”

“She was so young, and her family—”

“Her family what?”

His brows drop, and he shakes his head. “Nothing. Anyway, Vanessa never cashed the checks.”

She wouldn’t need to with her parents’ financial help.

“But I’m here about Haven.”

“What about her?” I hate the clipped tone in my voice that makes me sound like a heartless asshole. I just don’t know how to sound any other way.

He shrugs one shoulder. “Thought you’d like an update.”

I suck in a shattered breath and lean back in my seat, acting way more fucking chill than I feel. “Go ahead.”

“She likes horror movies, popcorn with extra butter, and she kills at gin rummy.”

I catch my lip twitching and force it still.

“She loves English, hates math, and enjoys sewing, something her mom taught her to do so she can make her own clothes.”

My chest aches, but I refuse to rub it in front of Hudson and give myself away.

“And that’s what brings me here. Lillian would like to take Haven to work with her tomorrow to show her Kingston’s design studio.”

“How exactly will Lillian explain who Haven is to Kingston?”

Hudson leans forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “That’s what I wanted to tell you. We won’t lie. She already feels betrayed by her mom. The kid needs honesty.”

I narrow my eyes. “You plan to take her to Kingston and introduce her as his... h-his—”

“Niece, yes. Your daughter.”

“No.”

“Hay—”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

He laughs humorlessly and shakes his head. “She’s a person, Hayes. A living, breathing, nearly adult person. You can’t hide her in a closet and pretend she doesn’t exist.”

“Fuck you.”

He exhales the way he does when he’s disappointed, then slaps his palms on his thighs and stands. “She’s in our lives now, brother. You can lock yourself in your office and deny it, or you can grow the fuck up, take responsibility, and be a part of her life. Either way, the train’s already left the station. If I were you, I’d get on board.”

“What... what the fuck are you talking about? Trains and stations? You can’t go parading my... my...”

“*Daughter.*”

My mind blanks, and all the words that were primed on my tongue dissolve so that I just sit there, staring dumbly at him.

“Lillian’s taking Haven to meet Kingston tomorrow. We don’t need your permission. It’s brotherly courtesy to let you know. You want it handled differently, then do it yourself.” He heads out and closes the door behind him.

“Shit. Goddammit, fucking shit!” I grab the closest thing to me and cock back my arm to throw it, only freezing when I realize it’s my phone.

The only thing that could make my day worse would be having to order myself a new phone. I set the thing down and stare at the screen.

Hudson’s putting me in an impossible position.

Oh, hey, you have a daughter. Here’s twenty-four hours to come to terms with that before we introduce her to the family. And hell, why don’t we put her on the North Industries board of trustees while we’re at it. I’m sure August will love adding her to his living will. *Fuck.*

“HAYES?” Ellie’s voice calls from my entryway, and seconds later, I watch her cautiously turn the corner into the living room. “What the hell happened in here?” She studies the open space, taking in the broken furniture, glass, and chaos. “Did you have a break-in?” She crosses slowly toward me, where I sit slumped over my legs in the dining room with a glass of scotch dangling from my hand. “Why is it so dark in here?”

The overhead lights surge brightly, and I duck away from the glow as pain spears through my skull.

“Sorry,” she says and returns the lights to dim.

Her high heels click against the concrete floor and grind on broken glass. She turns over a dining room chair and places it directly in front of me. Tilting her head to catch my eyes, she frowns. “Hey.”

I dump what’s left in my glass down my throat by way of an answer.

“Bad day?” She casts her gaze around the room, drawing the wrong conclusion.

“I did it.” My voice is rough, like I haven’t used it in years.

Her perfectly sculpted brows pop up in surprise. “You did this?”

“Mmm.” I pour myself another full glass. “Drink?” I offer it to her.

“Thanks.” She sips at the liquor. “I guess this is why you called me.”

She’s right.

Ellie is my only real friend. What started as a business relationship, her being a call girl and me in need of low-maintenance companionship, has turned into a real friendship that I insist on paying for. Her time is valuable, and whether she’s giving me that time as a friend or as a fuck, I pay her.

She takes a long swig of scotch, then stretches to set the glass down on the table. Her dark eyes search mine. “What can I do?”

I hang my head between my shoulders.

Her soft hand cups my cheek and brings my face level to hers. “Hey.”

Her thumb brushes my lower lip.

I catch her by the wrist and remove her touch. “Not that.”

Her brows pinch together. “No?”

I shake my head.

“Then what?”

I run two hands through my hair and tug at the strands. I’m drunk. Tired. Hurting. And confused. So fucking confused. “Can I tell you a story?”

“Of course.”

I reach for the glass of scotch, take a drink, then hand her the glass. “You’re gonna need that.”

She takes it and nods, settling in, waiting for me to spill my deepest darkest secrets, the story no one knows but me.

And so, I tell her.

Everything.

THE BOTTLE of scotch is almost gone. Before settling in for the story, we moved from the dining room table to the couch that I managed to flip upright and put back together. I told Ellie the whole tale about Vanessa and Haven.

“I don’t know what to do now.” I rub my eyes, pushing back my throbbing headache. “I can’t be someone’s dad.”

“She’s not a little girl, Hayes.” Ellie listened to me talk all night without a hint of judgment in her eyes. “She’s raised and doesn’t need a dad. Maybe you could try to be her friend.”

I stop rubbing my eyes and blink to clear the blur. “I’ve never been a very good friend, have I?” In all the times Ellie’s been there for me, she seldom asks for my help in return.

She laughs softly as if what I said is the dumbest thing she’s ever heard. “Our relationship is unique. You pay me, so that doesn’t count.”

“It does to me.”

Her smile is sad.

“Don’t feel sorry for me.” I hate the pity I see in her eyes.

“Can’t help it. You know what I think?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “This young woman has a whole family she knows nothing about. You said Hudson and Lillian already love her. Kingston will, too. You don’t have to do anything but just be there while her world opens to this whole branch of her family tree. Who knows, you may get to know her and realize you two have a lot in common.”

The corner of my mouth ticks up a little when I think of what Hudson shared with me. “She likes horror movies.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her eyes light with excitement. “Reminds me of the time you made me go with you to see *The Exorcist* and I spent the whole night hiding in my sweater.”

“Hudson says she’s into fashion or design...” I frown because that is nothing like Vanessa or me, as far as I know. Ness was a brain. Science, math, European Lit. She was set on Stanford. I frown. How did she manage Stanford with a baby?

“Ahh, so she picked up on some of Kingston’s DNA, maybe.”

“Is that possible?” Why do I feel so stupid?

She shrugs. “No clue.”

“They’re taking her to Kingston’s studio tomorrow. I asked them not to, but Hudson basically told me to join them or fuck off.”

“So what’s it going to be?”

“Huh?”

“Are you joining them or fucking off? You curious to know this young woman or not?”

I wonder what kind of music she’s into. Does she like hockey? And what about her mom? I noticed she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Did she end up a computer engineer like she’d dreamed?

“I have so many questions,” I say.

“Only one way to get answers. I think you know what you have to do.”

Ellie’s right.

“Fuck,” I groan. “Guess I’m on board.”

“Yes!” She high-fives me.

FOUR

Vanessa

When Hudson told me he was taking Haven to meet Kingston, I insisted on coming along. Haven may not want anything to do with me right now, but I'm still her mother, and I'll be damned if I'm going to sit by while the North family studies and dissects her. She's still a child and in an emotionally vulnerable place with all the new information being thrown at her.

I assured Haven that I was only going to support her if she needed me, that I would stay in the background and let her meet her biological uncle without intervening. I didn't add the part about my unchained momma bear who would take down anyone who hurt my baby and eat them alive.

I hail a cab and give the driver the address Hudson gave me. After two days in the city, I realized the clothes I had brought weren't going to be enough, so I was forced to shop. The retail therapy did wonders for my head, and I'm hoping that after today, Haven will feel satisfied enough to finally go home.

According to Hudson, Hayes hasn't been around Haven since their first meeting. I'm partly relieved and partly furious about that. How could Hayes stay away? I tell myself this is what I wanted, for Hayes to show Haven what a heartless prick he really is so she can write him off altogether and get back

to our life in Manitou Springs.

I clutch my purse to my stomach as the cab rounds the corner to Kingston's shop, Bee Inspired Designs. My breath freezes in my lungs when I see a tall, well-dressed man standing alone outside the door.

Please be Hudson. Please be Hudson.

Same medium brown hair, cut tightly on the sides, perfectly tailored suit that hugs broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Even at a distance, I can tell my prayers have not been answered. I can tell by the ridged way he holds his body, the firm set of his jaw, and the scowl that's aimed at absolutely nothing as if he's playing out a battle in his mind.

Hayes.

Shit.

Why would Hudson invite him?

I contemplate asking the cab driver to keep going. I could drive right past him and go back to the hotel and claim food poisoning.

I lean forward to tell the cab driver to do just that, then think of Haven. I'd walk through fire for her, take on armies for her, burn the world to the ground for her. Surely, I can face Hayes North for her.

He's just a man. Flesh and blood like the rest of us.

With renewed purpose and Haven's big hazel eyes and even bigger impressionable heart in the forefront of my thoughts, I push all feelings to the farthest part of my mind just as the cab stops in front of him.

Hayes' cold expression breaks when I step out of the cab. I refuse to look anywhere but directly at his eyes. A weird rush of familiarity surges hot behind my chest, so I refocus on his nose instead. "Hayes," I greet coldly. "I wasn't aware you'd be here."

"Vanessa." No nickname. Good. He shoves his hands into his pockets. "I can say the same about you."

"You planned to come here and ambush *my* daughter without me here?"

He takes a couple of steps toward me, plants his feet, and tilts his head.

“You’re saying she’s not mine?”

I lift my chin proudly. “Not in any way that counts.”

He smirks, but the look is not flirty or cute. “Biologically is the only way that counts, Ness.” His expression turns hard. “Why didn’t you tell me I had a daughter?”

Now it’s me stepping in his face. “I did tell you. You didn’t want her.”

He recoils as if my words were a slap to the face. “You didn’t give me a chance.”

“I told you I was pregnant. You told me to get an abortion. What other chance did you expect—”

“I thought that’s what you wanted!” The skin along his annoyingly perfect cheekbones flushes red, and his eyes simmer with anger. “You and your fucking *plan*.”

“You never asked me what I wanted. If you had, you’d know I wanted you and our baby more!”

He takes a few steps back, shaking his head. He looks at me as if he’s never seen me before. As if I’m a stranger.

I close my eyes, breathe in, hold it, breathe out, and repeat until I’m calm. When I reopen my eyes, Hayes’ shocked expression hasn’t changed. “Look, I’m not going to fight with you about this, okay? I’ve forgiven you—”

“*Forgiven me.*” His brows slam together, and fire lights his eyes. “For what?”

My hands fist at my sides. “For—”

“You’ve had my child for seventeen years, and you never thought one time to fucking tell me?”

“You didn’t want—”

“How the fuck would you know what I wanted? You never gave me a chance. You disappeared.” He shakes his head. “Fine, you’ve forgiven me, great. But fuck you, Vanessa. I don’t forgive you.”

My breath catches in my lungs. Heat races to my face and threatens my

eyes, but I refuse to let that feeling persist. I push it back. I push it all back and hang tight to strength.

“I can’t do this.” He takes off down the sidewalk. “I’m going for a walk.”

I cross my arms at my chest and watch his retreating form. Only he turns abruptly and stomps back toward me. “No, you know what? You go for a walk.”

“Excuse me?” I eye him from his perfectly mussed-up hair to his shiny leather shoes.

“I’m staying.” He reclaims his spot by the door. “You walk. It’s what you do best.”

“You insensitive piece of shi—”

“What’s going on out here?” A handsome man, wearing a shirt that’s sheer enough I can see his nipples, stands in the open doorway. He watches Hayes cautiously.

Weirdly enough, the man’s nipples are so distracting that I momentarily forget what we were fighting about.

“Hayes, bro. You all right?” Kingston North is a stunning human. Walking the line between masculine sexuality and feminine beauty, he’s like nothing I’ve ever seen and someone I wouldn’t easily forget. He moved in with the North family just before Hayes left for college. I remember the first time I met him, he was tan, hair bleached blond from the sun, and a mysterious smirk that made all the girls swoon. As I recall, Hayes wasn’t a fan of his new brother.

Hayes grunts his response. I’m not sure if it’s an affirmative grunt, but it seems to set Kingston at ease because his gaze swings to me—his eyes are the same color as his brother’s—and he smiles.

“Vanessa?”

“Hey, Kingston,” I say and nervously smooth my hands down the front of my dress. “It’s good to—*oomph!*”

He wraps me in a hug that steals my breath. He smells like expensive hair

products.

“I didn’t think you’d remember me,” I say against his nipple.

He releases me but keeps a hold on my shoulders as he looks me up and down with a smile as bright as the sun. “Are you kidding? How could I forget the love of Hayes’ life? Look at you...”

My whole body is blushing, whether it’s from Kingston’s open perusal or the atomic L-word Kingston dropped between us.

“Ralph Lauren.” His brows rise in approval. “Puffed sleeve midi shirtdress. I love.” He holds my hand up for me to spin.

I feel so stupid, but I don’t see I have much of a choice, so I spin.

“Gorgeous.”

A rumble comes from Hayes’ direction, and I wonder if he just said something nasty under his breath, calling me a bitch or something worse. I glare at him just in case.

“Come inside. My Bee has been dying to meet you.” He drags me toward the door.

“Bee?”

“My fiancé. Oh, and she knows all about Haven. We’re really excited to meet her. Hudson and Lillian can’t say enough about her. Is it true she likes to sew? I’d love to see her wor...”

Kingston’s voice fades into the background, and I watch Hayes as he is transfixed by his little brother’s rambling. He seems fascinated with every word Kingston speaks about Haven. Then suddenly, pain slices through his features in such a visceral way that an ache in my chest forms.

My God, is Hayes right?

Should I have given him another chance to know his daughter?

Am I the one who should be begging for forgiveness?

Hayes

“Hudson said her volleyball team made the state finals?” Kingston continues to throw out all the little facts about Haven, and each one feels like a knife digging deeper into my chest.

Captain of her volleyball team. I know she didn’t get that from her mom. The girl is an athlete. *My girl is an athlete.*

A strange feeling of weightlessness expands my chest. Maybe the precursor to a heart attack? God knows I’ve more than earned one. But do heart attacks feel... good? The closest thing I’ve felt to this before is just after a client signs a multi-million-dollar contract, but even that isn’t nearly as good as what I’m feeling now.

I’m stuck in my own head and standing at a distance while Kingston introduces Vanessa to Gabriella. Jesus, Ness looks like a fucking goddess. She drips in class and confidence, wearing a mask of polite indifference and a razor-sharp stare that doesn’t miss a thing. I wonder if it’s the politics in her blood.

Her dad’s family has been in politics since the Revolutionary War. Every generation boasts one or two government officials, from councilmen to governors, up to the Senate. Her mom’s side was steeped in the Bible Belt, turning out church leaders with every generation. Her parents’ marriage was the ultimate joining of church and state, which led to a successful family values campaign that won him a Senate seat. The Osbourne name drips with old money and reputation.

But Ness never acted like the entitled silver spoon prep school kid that she was... that we all were. She worked hard and demanded only the best from herself. She was a force at fifteen, becoming the first Burton Prep student to test out of half her high school curriculum.

Makes me wonder if the last seventeen-plus years have changed her at all. Something tells me I’ll never get close enough to find out.

She keeps me at a distance as she follows Kingston around his shop, making sure she doesn’t stand too close or look in my direction. There’s no

question she's upset with me, but fuck her. I'm not happy with her either right now.

Kingston points out walls lined with fabric, wood samples, glass, and a giant Buddha statue that is currently holding a bright purple unicorn stuffed animal. He walks her around the twenty-foot tables scattered with a chaos of colors and textures. The space could be used as a method for torture by overstimulation. I don't know how the people who work here don't live with a constant migraine.

"Sorry we're late," Lillian's voice announces from behind me.

I turn to see her walk into the warehouse with Haven on her heels. My brain registers Hudson with them, but I can't take my eyes off the girl. I watch as she notices her mom with a small lift of her upper lip. I can tell she's not happy to see Vanessa, but she's hiding it. Or so she thinks.

When her gaze swings to mine, her shoulders rise as if she's taking a big breath into her lungs.

"I'm glad you could make it," Hudson says quietly, having moved close without me noticing.

"Yeah." I don't tell him that Ellie convinced me or that I've been doubting being here since the second I pulled up.

Vanessa pulls Haven in for a hug. Haven doesn't hug her back and rolls her eyes over her mom's shoulder. "Are you okay, honey?" Vanessa cups the girl's face, but Haven jerks out of her mom's hold. Seems Ness is on both of our shit lists.

Kingston breaks up the uncomfortable embrace. He introduces himself with a hug, and Haven not only smiles but hugs him back.

Vanessa notices, and hurt slashes across her face.

Fuck, if I don't feel that shit right along with her.

But why? She lied. To me, to her daughter. She robbed Haven of a family. This is all her fault. Not mine. Not Haven's. We are the victims here.

Even as the words tumble through my thick skull, a wave of nausea tells

me I'm a fucking asshole. The emotional tangle is too much to sort out now.

When Kingston introduces Gabriella to Haven, I hold my breath in the hopes that the scars that slash Gabby's face won't be too shocking. Vanessa didn't flinch when she saw them. And to my surprise, Haven does the same. My lungs fill with air as my future sister-in-law pulls a very eager Haven into her arms for a hug. Seventeen and she's more mature than my own fucking parents who both were openly repulsed by Gabby's scars.

I shouldn't be surprised. Afterall, Vanessa did raise her.

I stand back while Kingston, Gabby, and Lillian show Haven around the place. Haven's eyes are wide and bright as she takes it all in. She asks smart questions about inspiration and how to overcome creative blocks. She's so much like her mom.

When Vanessa would raise her hand in school, the entire class would groan in unison for holding up class, but the shit that would come out of her mouth was fascinating. She saw everything from a different perspective, as if her brain was wired differently.

"How much of what you do is design versus redesign?" Haven asks while rubbing a fabric sample between her fingers.

Every face in the room carries a sense of awe as Haven unwittingly shocks us all with her curiosity. But my gaze finds Vanessa, who stands in quiet pride.

"Great question," Kingston says and rambles on about removing ego from design so that it stands on its own or something. I'm not really paying attention to him. I can't take my eyes off Haven.

Lillian holds up a mustard yellow swatch of fabric, talking about a client who ordered all the furniture in their office that color. Then, after they got it all in, they changed their mind.

"Did you do it?" Haven asks.

Lillian nods. "We kind of had to."

"Screw that," Haven shakes her head. "I'd tell them to shove it up their

asses.”

Kingston and Hudson meet my eyes with lifted brows as if to say *sound familiar?*

I bite my lip to keep from grinning.

“Customer is always right,” Lillian says.

Haven snorts. “Not if they’re shitheads.”

I clear my throat to disguise the burst of laughter that bubbles up. All eyes in the room come to me in a mix of confusion and surprise as I try to wipe the grin from my expression.

Kingston smirks. “She’s her father’s daughter.” He doesn’t seem to notice or care about the collective gasp in the room. He throws an arm over Haven’s shoulders. “Let’s go 3D print some shit.”

Haven practically squeals as they walk away, leaving us all slightly stunned. Vanessa snaps out of her stupor and scurries after them, and Hudson rocks into my shoulder.

“Go on.” He motions for me to follow Vanessa. “Get to know her. She’s so much like you, bro.”

I shove my hands deeper into my pockets and shift uncomfortably in my shoes. “You say that like it’s a compliment.”

“The best parts of you.”

I scrunch up my face because what a load of shit. “I have those?”

Hudson sighs and looks around the room that looks like a rainbow barfed and a forest blew up inside it. “Vanessa loved you once. She’s a brilliant woman. So yeah, you have best parts.”

I lift my brows.

“Not that part, you fucking pig.”

I shrug, feeling so out of place in this conversation. “Memory serves, she was pretty fond of that part.”

He laughs and shakes his head.

“This is too fucking weird,” I say, not moving a step forward.

His face turns concerned, which usually makes me want to punch it. Not so much right now, for some reason. “I can imagine. You two have a lot to talk about.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“The kid deserves answers.” He scratches his jaw. “Remember when Kingston came to live with us? Or Alexander? Imagine suddenly realizing you have a dad.”

I frown, and a sickness churns in my gut. “Jesus, I’m no better than August.”

Funny how some people grow up to be exactly like the person they hate most in the world. Not that I don’t respect August. He’s a shrewd and successful businessman. He has dedicated his whole life to North Industries. But I can respect the man and still not like him. Sure as shit don’t love him.

“Maybe,” Hudson says with a shrug.

“Fuck you.”

He ignores me. “It’s never too late to make things right. Not as long as you’re breathing.”

“What if she hates me?” The way we hate August.

“Hate is a strong emotion. At least it’s something. I’d worry more if she was indifferent toward you.” He knocks my hand away from my mouth with a horrified expression. “The fuck? Nail biting? I haven’t seen you do that since we were eight.”

I stare at my hand as if it’s some phantom part of my body and wonder how it made its way to my face without me noticing. “Me either.”

Fuck me. I’m a goddamn mess.

FIVE

Hayes

“This was great,” Vanessa says to Kingston, Bee, and Lillian. “Thanks for having us.”

They say their goodbyes and their nice-to-meet-yous and come-back-anytimes.

Vanessa leans in and says something softly to Haven.

“No,” Haven answers in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. “I want *Uncle* Hudson to take me home.” The side of her mouth tips up as her mom’s face sours.

Smartass. I would’ve done the same at her age.

“Honey,” Vanessa says in a cajoling tone. “Why don’t you give Hudson and Lillian a break and stay with me at the hotel? We can order room service and—”

“No.” She looks to Hudson to come to her rescue, and he seems truly torn between the mother and daughter.

I make eye contact with my twin, send him twintelepathy, and he nods.

“Listen, kiddo, I have some things to do at the office, so if you don’t want to go back to the hotel, why don’t you let Hayes take you back to my place? You can hang out by the pool until Lillian and I get off work. If that’s all

right with your mom.”

Vanessa looks nervous, but she seems to know better than to argue with her daughter. “Whatever you want, Haven,” she says, with a strength I’m not convinced she’s feeling.

Haven chews the inside of her mouth, thinking things over. If she’s anything like me, she’s probably considering the easiest way to torture me. “Okay.”

She knows she’ll be able to hurt me more if she lets me take her home. Hard to be proud when I’ll be the subject of her abuse, and yet I find myself tucking in a smile.

“Thank you,” I say softly to Vanessa, who looks displeased, to say the least. “Let’s go.” I open the passenger side door to my car, and when Haven climbs in, I give Hudson a chin lift, thanking him for having my back.

He nods back with a look that says I better be nice.

Fuck me. My own twin acts like I’m the enemy here. Like I’d hurt my own daughter?

I climb behind the wheel and fire up the engine, grateful for the steady hum of the supercharged V8 that cuts through an uncomfortable silence.

“Nice ride,” Haven says and touches all the buttons and knobs. “Is this real leather?” She runs her hands along the seats, and I notice that she has long elegant fingers that are exactly like Vanessa’s.

“Yes.” I force my eyes to the road, feeling oddly uncomfortable with such precious cargo.

“I have a Jeep,” she says. “It’s a piece of shit.”

I’m not great at conversation on a good day, so I grunt like a fucking caveman.

“So what’s it like?”

I see out of my peripheral that she’s facing me. “What’s what like?”

“Being a millionaire.”

I lose the battle with my eyeballs, and they dart toward her before I

wrangle them back to the road. Vanessa's family has a net worth equal to mine. I can't imagine Haven grew up without.

I clear the discomfort from my throat. "I hear you're a pretty good athlete." My tone sounds like I'm accusing her of something, and I don't know why. Maybe I should've just let Hudson take her home. I suck at this.

"I am. I'm good at a lot of things."

Confident, like her mom. Good.

"Oh yeah?"

"Mm-hm." She doesn't elaborate.

I take the bait. "Like what?"

She shrugs and looks casually out the front window. "You want the condensed version of my life so that you don't have to actually invest?"

"No," I say dryly and grip the steering wheel tighter.

The uncomfortable silence is back and goes on for so long that I start to sweat. I flip on the AC and aim the vent right at my face.

"Listen, uh... Haven... I..." I sound like an idiot who can't string two words together. "I've been thinking—"

"About how you wanted my mom to abort me?"

Fuckin' hell. "No."

"About how you abandoned her and left her to have a baby alone at—"

"Jesus, no."

"About how you're a rich selfish asshole who couldn't even be bothered to look for the woman who carried your *unwanted* child to see if maybe she needed anything like money for food or clothes or a safe place to live or—"

"Haven, stop."

"—or money so that kid could play sports and afford equipment so she wouldn't get made fun of for wearing the wrong shoes or sweatpants to games."

"What are you talking about? Your mom's family is wealthy."

"Yeah, well, thanks to you and your mighty sperm, they disowned her."

She tilts her head, just like her mother does before she delivers a brutal tongue lashing. “Ohh, you didn’t know that, did you?” She makes a tsking sound. “You would’ve if you looked for us. Ever heard of Google, asshole?”

“That’s enough.”

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted me to ride with you—”

“I get it. You want to hurt me. I’d do the same in your shoes.”

She slams her mouth closed without response. She faces forward and crosses her arms at her chest. “Whatever.”

“We need to... get to know each other. The three of us have a lot to talk about.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

I cough out a laugh. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“Are we almost to Uncle Hudson’s house?”

He gets to be Uncle Hudson, and I’m *Asshole*? My jaw ticks. “Yes.”

I use the rest of the time in the car to breathe in and out and try to calm my temper. Vanessa’s parents disowned her. I shouldn’t be surprised, and yet, I am. She’s their only child, for fuck’s sake.

I have a million questions and worry I won’t get the chance to ask Vanessa if we can’t even be in the same room without fighting. Time feels like it’s slipping away, and I don’t know how to grab onto it. But I know I have to try.

I pull up to Hudson’s building. Haven makes a reach for her seatbelt.

“I have a proposition for you.”

Her hand freezes on the buckle, and her eyes narrow.

My God, it’s like looking in a mirror. “One month in New York. Rent free, all expenses paid, you and your mom.”

She eyes me cautiously. “What’s the catch?”

Here’s where I might lose her. “You live with me.”

“Yeah, right.” She snorts. “Mom will never agree to that. I’m pretty sure she *hates* you.”

She's not exactly my favorite person right now either. "Leave the convincing to me."

Her smile is a little wicked. "You're either really brave or really stupid."

"I'm not stupid."

Her brows pop high on her forehead. "You clearly don't know my mom."

I don't respond because she's right. But she's also wrong. I got the fiery Vanessa Osbourne to care for me once. A month in New York shouldn't be too hard.

I sweeten the deal. "You'll have your own room, your own money—"

"A car?"

"A driver."

She frowns. "Like, a chauffeur?"

"Yes. New York streets are hard to navigate. I'd feel better knowing you were with someone who's familiar with them."

"I'd need a new phone."

"Done."

Her eyes narrow. "And clothes."

"Whatever you want."

"Deal." She puts her hand forward.

I hesitate to shake, thinking this will be the first time I touch my own flesh and blood. In some stupid way, touching her makes all this feel more real.

I suck in a deep breath, then take her fragile hand in mine. "Deal. I'll talk to your mom tonight. If she agrees, you move in tomorrow."

She pulls her hand away, and I let it go, wondering if she would've held my hand as a little girl. Would we have walked the paths of Central Park holding hands while she pointed out birds? I would've been a dad at nineteen. Back then, I was drinking my way through sorority houses and puking in alleyways. What kind of a father would I have been? Not the kind anyone deserves.

“Wait, where do you live?”

I point toward my building, which isn't more than a few blocks north.
“The silver high rise. Up top.”

She leans forward to look out the windshield. “The top? Which one?”

“All of it.”

Her eyes widen, and a slow grin pulls her lips. “Penthouse?”

The look of excitement in her eyes and happiness on her face have all sorts of weird shit going on inside me. She's... happy. And something I said made her feel that way. A seemingly trivial thing that feels like everything.
“Yeah.”

“Sweet!” Haven pops the car door and hops out. “Good luck convincing mom.” Her hysterical laughter is cut off when she slams the door.

“Thanks, kid. I'm gonna need it.” I watch her skip into the building, the doorman greeting her with a friendly smile that she gives right back to him, and I'm jealous that he's on the receiving end of her joy.

Vanessa

“Dry double vodka martini, three olives.”

“Shitty day, then?” Tag says through the phone.

The second I arrived at my hotel, I called him and hit the hotel bar rather than go up into my room and relive the last couple of hours, watching Haven with this whole new family. A family that embraced her as one of their own without a paternity test. Not that they'd need one. Those eyes, that smile, and her temper—she's a North through and through. And the whole time, Hayes lingered in the background, getting to know his daughter from a distance. At one point, I risked a glance his way and nearly broke at the fascination in his eyes as he watched Haven ask a million questions. I felt like I was spying on a private moment as he hung on every word. I didn't look at him again after that. I couldn't stand the guilt for keeping them apart. And when I looked at

him, I felt searing anger that he could look at her with such emotion when he didn't want her in the first place.

By the time we left, I was emotionally bruised, like I'd gone thirty rounds playing punching bag with my heart.

It was the guilt that spoke up when Hudson suggested Hayes take her home.

"Today was..." I exhale the breath it felt like I'd been holding all day. "A lot."

"You sound exhausted."

"Emotionally."

"I'm sorry. How's our girl doing?"

"Thank you," I say to the bartender and claim my drink. I take back a large part of it in one gulp. "I don't know. She seems good, but she's not talking to me much. I don't know how much is for show and how much is real. I'm worried about her."

"Is she any closer to wanting to come home?"

"I think she's enjoying having a family."

"She's always had a family in Manitou Springs," Tag says.

"You know what I mean." Blood family.

I want that for Haven.

When I found out I was pregnant, my dad was running for senator and pushing conservative family values. My parents were worried that my pregnancy would hurt my dad's campaign. Being strict pro-life supporters, the only obvious option was to send me away for nine months, where I'd have the baby and give her up for adoption. They'd tell the world I was doing missionary work in some third-world country without electricity, and I could come back without a baby and keep their campaign smudge-free.

I agreed. Until I felt Haven kick for the first time.

I knew I'd never be able to let her go. So I moved from the facility in Denver, where my parents sent me, to Manitou Springs.

The people in Manitou Springs became the only family I had. And while I'm grateful for them, I always wanted more for Haven.

I lost Hayes and my family within months of each other, and although it hurt, I turned that pain into a fire that made me determined to make a life for Haven and myself.

"Enough about my drama. What's going on at home?"

Tag fills me in on all the latest small-town gossip. I respond in all the right places, but my mind is stuck in the past, watching Haven and the North family's response to her. Their eyes shone with pride, awe, and humor at the many ways she's like Hayes.

The first time Haven smiled, I nearly fainted at how much she looked like Hayes. Weeks old, and the tiny bundle of pink skin and dark hair had the power to crush my heart with one look. I burst into tears that day. Then I toughened up and vowed never to cry over Hayes North again.

"...because the beer delivery was late."

"Hmm." I munch on my olives, the most I've eaten since the yogurt I had for breakfast this morning.

"Vanessa." Tag sounds exasperated. "Come home. You don't sound like yourself."

"I'm sorry. I know. I'm good, though. I promise."

"I miss you."

Shit.

"Both of you," he clarifies.

What do I say to that? I miss him, I guess. In that I miss having someone to hang out with, have dinner with, drinks, companionship. But I know I don't miss him in the same way he misses me.

"I'll talk to Haven tomorrow and see if we can make some decisions on when we come home."

"Do you miss me?"

Why is he doing this to me now? "You're the best friend I've ever had." I

swirl my toothpick and the last two olives around in my glass. “Of course, I miss yo—”

“Ness.”

I jump at the sound of Hayes’ voice over my shoulder. I spin my barstool, and yep, I didn’t imagine it.

Hayes is standing there with his hands in his pockets and a scary expression on his stupid handsome face.

“Tag,” I say into the phone while still looking at Hayes. “I’ll call you back.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine, yeah. Bye.”

“Van—”

I hang up the phone and turn back to the bar, where I set the device screen-down next to my drink.

Hayes takes the seat next to me, and his deep voice vibrates the air between us as he orders a scotch.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you.”

“How’d you know I’d be in the bar?”

He accepts his scotch with a nod. “Lucky guess.” He takes a gulp, which draws my eyes to his Adam’s apple.

I kissed that neck. Gave him a hickey once as a joke. That very same neck.

“How are your parents?” It’s a dumb question, but it’s neutral ground. I was the only person he ever told about the complicated relationship with his dad and how his mom always put her social calendar before her boys.

We both stay facing forward, shoulder to shoulder, without looking at each other.

“August is a bigger dick than ever, and Leslie’s on her third body lift.”

“Wow,” I say and sip my martini. “How much can a body be lifted before

her boobs become shoulder pads?”

I feel him look at me and smell the scotch on his sweet breath as he chuckles. “I assumed her personal trainer helped add that shoulder muscle, but your theory makes more sense.”

“It’s nice to see your brothers all so happy.”

He hums into his drink.

“And Alexander?”

“The man is unrecognizable. He hasn’t broken anything in a while. His wife, Jordan, she’s... well, she’s his miracle.”

“I’m happy for him.” I am, but I can’t ignore the twinge of envy. I could see the love today between Kingston and Gabby, between Hudson and Lillian, and I wondered what it would feel like to be someone’s miracle.

Basking in my own little pity party, I’m reminded of Haven. She’s my miracle. And I vowed to spend the rest of my life alone if it meant keeping her safe and happy. The sacrifice of my own happiness seems insignificant when compared to hers. She’s always come first, and no man will ever take that spot.

Raucous laughter comes from the far side of the bar, where a couple is dancing to the instrumental music that comes from hidden speakers.

“They’re having fun,” I say lamely.

“Remember when we danced like that?” Hayes is looking at me, and I feel his gaze like a warm touch on my cheek.

“Prom?”

“Not prom. The parking lot of Maggie’s Diner.”

“Oh, my God, yes.” I laugh as the memories flood in. He opened his car doors, and we slow danced to “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered” by Ella Fitzgerald playing on his car stereo. We danced on the blacktop like we were the only people in the world. When it started raining, he refused to let me go, and we swayed together under the downpour. “That was embarrassing.”

He rocks his shoulder into mine. “You loved it.”

My lungs seize at his touch.

He must notice because he mumbles an apology.

We were so young and carefree back then, back before life bared its fangs. Love was all that mattered, and we had so much of it we felt untouchable. What fools we were. What blind, naive fools. An invisible weight presses down on my shoulders. I’m worried for my daughter. Scared that the damage done to our relationship may never be repaired.

Stifling exhaustion comes over me. I prop my head in my hand.

“You have plans to see your family while you’re here?”

Another topic I don’t have the energy for. “What do you want, Hayes? Why are you really here?”

He nods and doesn’t deny he’s here for a specific reason. “I have a proposition for you and Haven.”

Hearing him say her name sends a shock through my nervous system.

He goes on to explain a plan for the two of us to stay in New York for a month. Live in New York. With him.

“Haven’s on summer break. If you have to go back home for work, I’ll fly you out on the weekends or—”

“I work from home.” I’m rubbing my temples now, regretting the double vodka.

“Haven said she’d like to. I think it’s only fair I get the opportunity to know my daughter.”

“That’s a low blow.”

He doesn’t apologize for it.

“I’m going to need to think about this. Today has been... I’m tired. Hungry.” I push my empty martini glass toward the bar. “I shouldn’t have finished that.”

He pulls out a black credit card and hands it to the bartender, motioning to my drink.

“No.” I pull out cash and put it on the bar. “I can pay for my own drink.”
The bartender looks at Hayes for permission to take my money.

That shit pushes me over the edge. Straw, meet camel’s back.

“Why are you looking at him?” I motion to Hayes with my thumb. “You served me a drink that I ordered with my own will and capability, did I not?”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

“So why look at him? Am I not allowed to speak for myself when it comes to who pays for the drink that I ordered and consumed? You’re giving this man beside me a voice over my voice just because he has a dick and balls?” I grab my phone and purse, then stand. “This is the twentieth century, is it not?” I storm away from the bar. “Fuck the patriarchy!”

Two women in the bar cheer.

I feel Hayes’ eyes on my back as I walk away. In my haste to get the hell out, my heel slips on the highly polished floors, and I wobble. I curse my horrible luck but hold my head high until I make it behind closed elevator doors. Only then do I allow the mortification to bleed fire into my cheeks.

I always imagined what it would be like if I saw Hayes again. I’d hoped that if it ever happened, I’d be dressed in a sexy red strapless dress with a slit that ran up my thigh. He’d see how unfazed I am by his presence, and it would pain him to know that I never *ever* think about him. That him leaving me behind with nothing but a wad of cash and a note was the best thing he could’ve ever done for me. I’d be charming and funny, and when I walked away, he’d watch me with a tear in his eye, thinking about how he’d fucked up the greatest thing he ever had.

Unfortunately, like most of life, our real-life reunion was a crippling disappointment.

I get to my room, change out of my clothes, and wash my face, which is still hot with humiliation and flushed from booze. Plopped on the bed, I text Hudson to please tell Haven goodnight and that I love her. Then I pull up Tag’s number, but there’s a knock on my door before I hit send.

“Who is it?” I say as I head to the peephole.

“Room service.”

What? A man in a hotel uniform with a rolling cart stands, waiting patiently in the hall.

I crack open the door. “I’m sorry. I didn’t order anything.”

“Vanessa Osbourne?”

“Yes.” He hands me a folded piece of paper with a business card inside. Hayes’ business card. On the note, written in handwriting that manages to be beautiful and masculine at the same time, it reads...

You said you were hungry.

-Hayes

PS: Think about my offer.

Let me know when you decide.

The server wheels in the food. Three silver domes and what looks like a setting of tea. My stomach growls as the scent of sweet pastry, bacon, and roasted potatoes fills the air. Under the domes are Belgian waffles, bacon, sausage, an omelet, roasted potatoes, and an assortment of bakery items. And hot tea. Lavender chamomile. Honey. He remembered.

“Breakfast.” I grin wide. I tell myself the smile is only because I’m hungry and not at all because Hayes remembered. Or that he thought of me.

My stupid, pathetic heart squeezes.

Not something a heart of stone should be able to do.

Dammit.

SIX

Hayes

Four million people in Manhattan. Four million fucking people. I look out my office window every day and never once stopped to really see.

An ocean of buildings, each dotted with windows. So many windows and every window represents at least one person. But only two people have been on my mind as of late, and no matter how much I focus on work, how hard I try to sleep, or how much I drink, I can't stop thinking about them.

My gaze skims the rooftops of historical buildings dwarfed by new builds made of steel that blink into the sunlit glare of reflective glass, and I wonder if I'm having an existential crisis. This city has been around me all this time, and I've hardly noticed it, never really thought about the humanity of it, just like I've had a daughter for seventeen years and never knew. She grew up and had a life of firsts—words, steps, school, maybe love. I missed it all.

Vanessa should've reached out and let me know she had kept the baby.

Maybe she tried.

Would I have listened to her back then? Would a nineteen-year-old me have given a shit about a child?

“Um... Mr. Um North, sir, uh—”

“Good God, Newton.” I spin around in my chair to face my secretary,

who lingers in my doorway like a frightened animal. “Words. Please.”

“Oh, well, it’s just that—”

I groan with impatience.

“Mr. North—your brother—said you’re not answering your cell.”

I lift my brows, waiting for her to get to the point in her story that actually fucking matters to me.

“Um, you were supposed to meet in his office thirty minutes ago to go over the—”

“*Shit.*” I push out of my chair and grab my coat. “You could’ve reminded me, Newton. It’s part of your job.”

She scurries backward out of the doorway to give me room to pass. “I did, sir. Twice.”

Did she? I suppose I remember hearing her voice a couple of times and absently grunting that I’d registered whatever she’d said. I’ve been so preoccupied wondering if Haven and Vanessa are talking about my proposal and wondering if there’s a way to sweeten the deal. In the world of business, everything is up for grabs if the price is right. If the reward justifies the risk. I made the offer. I need to prepare for their counteroffer. What can I offer that they can’t say no to? What kind of ROI would justify the time I’m asking for?

When I get to Alexander’s office, he’s sitting at his desk, picking through pages of a magazine as if each one offends him.

“I’m late, I know. Don’t give me any shit. It’s been a long, fucking, few days.”

He closes the magazine and pushes it away from him as if the thing is contagious.

“Why do you buy them if you hate them so much?”

Alexander is allergic to architectural magazines. His ego, though rightly earned, bristles at what most people praise as cutting-edge architecture design.

“I don’t. Mrs. Jones gets them for me.”

“Tell her to stop.” His secretary has always treated Alex like he’s one of her kids.

“I tried. She insists.”

“Well, you don’t have to look at them.”

“Feel bad if I don’t.”

Whatever. I don’t have time to try and fix my brother’s problems with my own bubbling on the back burner.

“Let’s get this over with. Walk me through the contract changes—”

“You’re a dad.”

I choke on my words. Literally. I double over, coughing and trying to clear the burn from my throat, where I breathed in saliva and swallowed air.

A glass of water comes into my frame of vision. I snag it from him with a little too much force, leaving dark water spots on my pants. Great, I’m choking, and now it looks like my dick is dripping.

The water helps to soothe the ache in my throat.

“Haven’s her name?” Alexander picks right up with the throat punches. “I remember Vanessa. Always liked her.”

I stay quiet, letting him and his strange brain work through whatever trail it’s following so we can put it behind us and get to work.

“Haven.” He stares at an empty space just beyond me. “Hayes. Vanessa. Interesting.”

Holy shit. Did Vanessa, the woman who I assume hates my fucking guts, name our daughter after me? Or rather, after us?

I make a point to ask her about that the next time I see her.

“Hudson told me she’s smart.”

I adjust my tie and shift to try and get comfortable in my seat, which feels like it’s getting hotter by the second. “Nice of Hudson to share my personal life with the whole goddamn family.” I hope my twin is smart enough to keep this shit from August. The last thing I need is his opinion on my mistakes.

Mistakes. Is that what Haven is?

My whole body revolts against the idea.

“When do we get to meet her?”

I run a hand through my hair to the back of my neck, where every muscle is coiled so tight it feels like I have golf balls under my skin. “I’m trying to get them to agree to stay in New York for a bit.”

“Why?”

I glare at him. What kind of a question is that? Why? “To get to know her. Haven.” I clarify so that Alex won’t get the wrong idea like I’m trying to rekindle anything with Vanessa.

“Why?”

“Are you fucking stupid?” Heat stirs in my gut. “Because I don’t know her. She’s seventeen years old, and Hudson and Kingston have a better relationship with her than I do.”

He frowns. “Why?”

My temper roars. “Because! She’s my daughter! My flesh and blood. I deserve to know her, don’t I?”

His mouth tips up on one side. “Yep.”

With my ass on the edge of the seat, as if I had plans to launch myself across the desk at him, I breathe hard. “You did that on purpose.”

His expression is blank.

I chuckle and relax, even though my blood still runs a little hot. “I said it. Happy now?”

“You have a daughter.” Alex’s lips twitch in what constitutes a smile for him. “Congratulations.”

I grunt and rub my temples. “Don’t get too excited. There’s a good chance I’ll fuck all this up, and she’ll never want anything to do with me again.”

“Don’t do that.”

“I’ll try not to. I tend to fuck up anything good in my life.”

“True.”

I glare at the asshole. “Can we get back to work, please? Your motivational talk is making me suicidal.”

He doesn’t answer but thankfully reaches for a folder on his desk.

I have a daughter. I have a daughter. I have a daughter.

I repeat the short phrase, letting it sink in.

Now, I have to do whatever it takes to get her to stick around long enough for me to convince her that I’m not a heartless asshole—even though that is exactly what I am.

Talk about a lose-lose.

Fuck.

Vanessa

My phone rings in what feels like the middle of the night, but the sun peeking through the edges of the blackout curtains tells me it must be morning. I slept like the dead. Filling my stomach with rich, delicious breakfast pork and syrupy sweet dough put me into a comfort food coma. Just what my ravaged nervous system needed after the day I had yesterday.

“Hello?” I answer, hoping it’s Haven, ready to go back home.

“Vanessa, hey,” Tag says. “Did I wake you?”

“Mmm.” I roll onto my back and stretch the sore muscles in my neck and shoulders. “I’m awake.”

“I didn’t hear back from you last night. I got worried.”

“I’m sorry. I ended up ordering room service and passing out.” I rub at a sticky spot of syrup on my cheek.

“That’s all right. I’m happy you’re okay. I hate the idea of you wandering around New York City alone.”

“You forget I grew up here. It’s not nearly as intimidating as you think.”

“What’s the plan for today?”

My mind cranks back to Hayes' proposition. Followed by his grand gesture of room service. The man is a master at manipulation. Although I noticed he didn't use his charm to get what he wanted like he did back in high school. Instead, he wins with intimidation and trickery. And coaxing with carbohydrates. Wicked genius.

A maddening wave of shame has me sitting up in bed. My eyes land on the food cart from last night. The tea. I'm such a sucker! I devoured his attempt to win me over to his side. Every bite.

He's hoping I'll agree to stay in New York for a month. He actually expects that I'll give up my life for an entire month just because he asks me to.

"I don't think so," I mumble to myself.

"Don't think what?" Tag says.

"Nothing," I say while pushing the food cart to the door. With my phone pinched between my shoulder and ear, I manage to get the door open and hold it with one foot while pushing the cart into the hallway. "I've decided." I grunt, shoving the offending evidence of Hayes' manipulation and my subsequent weakness as far away as possible. "We're coming home."

"That's great!" There's a smile in Tag's voice. "I'll pick you guys up at the airport. What time?"

I'm breathing like I walked up a flight of stairs. I really need to move around more. "I don't know yet. I'll book our tickets and let you know." I grab my clothes from the closet and toss them all on the bed. I'll have to buy a suitcase to get all this home.

"Vanessa, for what it's worth, I think you're doing the right thing."

"Yeah, me too." I won't stop Haven from having a relationship with the North family if that's what she wants, but I'll be damned if I'm going to give up any more of my life for Hayes.

"Yes! My girls are coming home!" Tag shouts with such joy that I wonder again why love is so cruel.

If I could just love him, things would be so much easier.

With a promise to send my flight info as soon as I have it, I hang up and go about making plans to get us home.

I LEAVE my bags in the cab and run up to Hudson's condo to pick up Haven. I called him and told him that I was coming to get her and to please have her pack whatever she's bringing home. I thanked him for taking such good care of her—I'm not a complete monster. But I'm eager to put all this behind us and pick up life where we left off.

Hudson's waiting at his front door when I get off the elevator.

"Vanessa, hey," he says sadly.

It means something to me that he's not happy to see Haven go. If nothing else comes from all this, at least Haven got to meet her biological uncle and walk away with a positive experience.

"Sorry for the short notice," I say and spot three large suitcases at his feet. She's definitely returning home with more than she came with. "Thank you for having her ready. And I'd like to pay you back for any money you spent —"

"No, please. We had so much fun spoiling her. I won't take a dollar from you."

"If you're sure—"

"I'm sure." He shifts his chin down, and there's worry in his gaze. "Vanessa, there's something—"

"Is he here?" Haven calls from somewhere deep inside the house.

Hudson frowns and stares at his feet.

"I'm here, honey!" I call back. "We need to get going if we're going to catch—"

Haven comes down the hallway, looking more disappointed than she did

when I made a donation in her name to a wildlife fund as one of her Christmas presents. She was always taking care of the squirrels and raccoons on our property, and I really thought she'd love the gesture. I was very wrong.

According to her face, whatever I've done this time is even worse.

"What are *you* doing here?" she says with a nasty emphasis on the *you*.

I eye Hudson, who refuses to meet my eyes. "I'm here to pick you up. We're going home."

"I'm not going home."

"Of course you are. Look, I'm not saying you can't stay in touch—"

The elevator door pings, and all eyes go to the man emerging through the sliding double doors.

Hayes.

What the fuck is he doing here? Did Hudson call him and tell him we were leaving? Did he come for one last-ditch effort for us to stay?

I muster up every ounce of well-honed strength that I've perfected over the past several years and stand tall. Unflappable. Non-negotiable. Unmanipulable.

"Ness, what..." A flicker of something that closely resembles hope passes across his expression.

"We're going home," I say firmly.

"I'm ready," Haven says, but she's not speaking to me. She's speaking to Hayes.

I look between my daughter and my ex. "Will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?"

Hudson steps forward. "I should've called, but I wasn't sure she'd—"

"I got this, Hudson." Hayes' glare sends Hudson back into the house, where Haven waits with a purse slung over her shoulder and her sunglasses on. "A minute. Please."

"Sure," Hudson says and closes the door, leaving Hayes and me in the

small reception area between the elevator and the door.

“I’m taking her home—”

“She won’t go,” he says firmly.

“She will go. I’ll make her go. She’s not an adult yet.”

He shoves his hands into his pockets and nods as if to placate me. “And how do you think that’s going to pan out for you, Ness?”

I close my eyes. “Don’t call me tha—”

“How long until she catches another flight back here alone? You know her better than anyone. You think she’ll go back to some one-horse town and be satisfied with her life?”

His words sound like an attack on my choices rather than a real question. “Yes, I do. Because being loved and supported and fucking *wanted* in a one-horse town is better than being unwanted and cast aside here.”

“She’s wanted here.”

I laugh hard, even while tears spring to my eyes. “Oh, how convenient. You want her now.”

His eyebrows slam together. “I didn’t know she existed until now!”

“So what, Hayes? You’re going to move her in with you and play the doting father? Do you even have the first idea of what it’s like to raise a human being? A teenage girl? Do you even have the first clue of what she might be feeling about her history? How she got here? Are you prepared to answer all those questions alone?”

“No. It’s why I need you to stay.”

“No fucking way.”

His jaw works back and forth under a five o’clock shadow, even though it’s only ten in the morning. “Please, Vanessa.”

I shake my head and feel my resolve splinter.

“This is happening with or without you. It would be better for Haven if it happened with you. She needs your support right now.” His eyes implore mine as if to say *we both do*.

I shake my head, trying to tell my heart not to fall for this shit. I'm her mom. I get to say what she does or doesn't do.

But Hayes is right. She'll just run away to New York again.

Fuckin' goddammit.

Stepping into Hayes' space, I jut out my chin. "Let's get one thing straight. If my daughter's heart wasn't at stake, I'd have already been gone."

He nods once. Short and quick.

"I'll stay for Haven. *Not you.*"

"Noted."

I can't believe I'm doing this.

Hayes heads inside to help Haven with her things, and I stand in the entryway, numb and useless. Lillian gives Haven a hug, and I overhear something about a promise to do a movie night this weekend.

We all cram into the elevator, and I feel closed in with the suffocating tension.

"When can I get a new phone?"

"I'll have one for you by the end of the day," Hayes says with little feeling.

"Sweet! I haven't talked to my friends in forever. Do you have food at your house? I'm starving. Or can we grab food on the way? Wait, do you have a private chef? Lillian says you wouldn't wipe your own ass if you could pay someone to do it."

"*Haven.*" I shake my head, even while Hudson laughs hysterically.

Hayes' expression is surprisingly blank.

The elevator dings, and I follow the two men and my daughter out into the street, where my cabby is smoking and talking with big sweeps of his arms to the valet. The twins head toward Hayes' black SUV, which has windows tinted so dark there could be an entire clown family inside and no one would ever know.

"I'll meet you there." I don't have the address, but I'll tell my cab driver

to follow the SUV.

Hayes doesn't answer in words, but he walks to the cab driver and hands him some money, then demands he pop the trunk.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting your shit.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you very much.” I close the trunk and motion to the cab driver. “You can give him the money back. I'll pay you to take me to—”

The cab driver laughs. “Lady, he gave me three bills. I'm off duty.”

“Great.” The trunk pops open again. Fucking men.

I grab my bags, and when Hayes leans in to help, I give him a look that has him pulling back his hands. Unfortunately, it also has his lips twitching.

I wheel my two bags to the dark SUV and refuse to let Hudson help me put them into the back. Am I being petty? Maybe. But the only way I'll keep from completely losing my shit is to control what little I can.

I head for the backseat of the SUV, only to have Haven close the door in my face.

That leaves the front seat with Hayes.

The door opens for me. Hayes averts his eyes, waiting for me to climb in.

“I do know how to open my doors, ya know.”

He chews on the inside of his mouth as if trying not to laugh.

What the fuck is his problem?

I climb angrily into the seat and look straight ahead, refusing to give him my attention.

Now, all I need to do is keep up my icy detachment for a month.

SEVEN

Hayes

Haven doesn't stop asking questions during the drive to my building. Incessant blabbering usually gets on my nerves, but this time I appreciate the distraction.

Vanessa is giving off some serious *don't fuck with me* vibes. I get it. She's upset. She doesn't want to stay in New York with me, but I don't see any way around it. I need her help with Haven, and the girl needs her mom. We're in a shit position, but at least we're all in it together.

"Do you have Netflix? HBO? Will we have a maid?" Haven doesn't even wait for me to answer, so I don't. I let her ramble and wonder if these are real questions or a way for her to expel nervous energy.

Joe, the doorman, jumps to attention the second we pull up to my building. He opens the doors for Vanessa and Haven. I pop the back of my SUV, and guys in uniforms scurry out to help with bags. Tossing my keys to the valet, I head around to the back of the car to find Vanessa claiming her bags and insisting she bring them up herself.

I clench my fists to resist the urge to rip the bags from her hands and force her to let the men fucking do their jobs, but instead, I give a slight shake of my head to tell the guys to back off. If the woman insists on carrying

her own bags, let her.

Haven walks by my side through the lobby while Vanessa lugs her bags behind us.

“Whoa, this place is even nicer than Hudson’s.” Haven tilts her head back, taking in the three-story lobby that is filled with modern lighting fixtures the size of sedans.

We head to the elevator banks, where there are two on each side, but I walk beyond them to a single elevator door on the far side. I press my fingertip on a pad that immediately opens the door.

Both women hesitate to follow me in but eventually do. Vanessa struggles to pull her bags inside, and an alarm goes off when the doors hit her bag while trying to close.

“Dammit.” She backs further into the carriage, dragging her bags in. The wheels of one get stuck. “Shit.”

I reach over to help her and pull the stupid fucking thing inside.

“I got it,” she says and lurches her whole body backward, bringing the suitcase with her. She falls into my chest, then quickly scrambles to regain her footing. I get a whiff of her hair, which I tell myself smells like every other woman’s hair. I resist the urge to lean in and sniff her.

Haven rolls her eyes as if her mom is the most embarrassing person on the planet. An irrational urge to jump to Vanessa’s defense has me opening my mouth, but I quickly slam it shut. Who the hell am I to get involved in their complicated relational dynamics?

In order to get the thing moving, I have to lean over Vanessa to press my fingertip to the electronic pad. My body instantly recognizes the press of her body to mine. The way she jumps to put distance between us makes me wonder if her body recognizes it too.

The door closes, and the elevator rises quickly, gaining speed.

There are no floor buttons on this elevator because it’s my private elevator, which leads directly inside my home.

The door opens into a circular foyer with treated concrete floors, dark gray walls, and black and white paintings.

Haven and Vanessa seem stuck in place. I wonder if they're waiting for an invite inside.

"Holy shit," Haven whispers.

Vanessa doesn't scold her for language, and now I wonder if she was the cool mom back in their town. The one who let her kid curse, watch R-rated movies, and sip from her beer bottle as a teen.

Though, judging by the way Vanessa's head swivels around on her neck, it's possible she's too caught up in checking the place out to notice Haven's response. I tell myself that I don't notice the long column of Ness' neck or the way her skinny jeans hug every curve. And I absolutely do not linger on her white blouse and the tiny sliver of tan lace that cups her breasts, which can be seen from my height advantage.

I force my gaze to less stimulating views and try to imagine my home through their eyes. It's so seldom that I have new people in my place. It's dark. Mysterious. Maybe even depressing. My interior design profile is minimalistic I-don't-give-a-fuck with accents of utilitarian chic. If the fucking thing doesn't serve a purpose, I don't want it in my place.

I never worried about what anyone thought of my home before. I don't have people over. I never host dinners or cocktail parties. My space is a den for a lone wolf. And it's designed to look just like that.

"You two will be down here." I open the steel-framed, glass barn doors that lead to the guest rooms of my five-thousand-square-foot home. I gesture toward three bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, their own living rooms, and floor-to-ceiling views of the city. "Take your pick."

Haven races in and out of every room until finally shouting, "This one's mine."

Silently, Vanessa drags her bags through the nearest door.

"I'm down there." I point in the direction we came from. "On the other

side of the house. My bedroom and office are there. Kitchen, dining, and media room are in the middle.”

“This is so cool!” Haven’s voice echoes from her bathroom.

I don’t know what could be so exciting about a bathtub and toilet, but then again, I haven’t been inside these rooms since I did my first walk-through of the place before I bought it. Could be a whole wet bar in there, for all I know. I frown. Maybe I should check. Seems a teenager shouldn’t be left alone with available booze.

Haven comes out of the room and back into the hallway with huge eyes. “There’s a television by the bathtub!”

Vanessa emerges from her room without her bags but looking... uncomfortable.

Her hands are clenched. She shifts on her feet, making me wonder if she’s a hairpin trigger away from changing her mind.

“I need to get to the office. You both get settled in. If you need anything, dial zero on any phone, and David will help you.”

Without another word, I leave my daughter and my ex in my home. Alone.

Fuck me. How is this my life?

Vanessa

On the plus side, Haven and I are in New York and under the same roof. On the negative side, we’re living with my high school ex-boyfriend, aka Haven’s biological father.

This is not how I saw my rescue mission to New York panning out.

The room I’ll be staying in is twice the size of my room in Manitou Springs. It has a king-sized bed on a low platform, a small couch, and a bookshelf with books whose covers are only blue, black, and brown—books clearly chosen for aesthetic reasons. There’s a desk by the picture windows

that overlook the city, and a flat-screen television is mounted to the wall in a way that makes it look like it's floating. I drag my bags to the walk-in closet that smells like fresh cedar. The bathroom reminds me of a cave with its dark tile, low lighting, and rock-like décor. A grotto seventy-eight stories in the sky.

I find Haven in her chosen room. She's on her back with a television remote in her hand. Her room is almost identical to mine.

"Do you want to grab something to eat?"

"Not hungry." She won't even look at me.

I drop down to sit on the edge of her bed, but the platform is so low that I fall onto it ungraciously. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"No." Channel flip. Another.

"I know you have questions."

"I want to wait until my dad comes home."

"He's not your dad!"

Her eyes finally come to mine and hurt flashes behind their hazel depths.

"I'm sorry. What I mean is yes, he's your biological... father. But it takes a lot more than that to be a dad."

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes.

Okay, she's not ready to ask questions, but I am. "How did you find out?"

"I found the letter he wrote you."

That letter was hidden in a shoebox in the back of my closet behind clothes I never wear and shoes that went out of style ages ago. I never wanted to get rid of it because I needed the reminder of why I had to leave. Needed to hold onto the little burning ember that could light the fire and keep me angry at Hayes and my parents. I never imagined she'd find it. Or even look for it. "Why would you go through my things?"

"Because you wouldn't tell me the truth. And whenever I'd ask about him, you'd make up some story about him going away in the war and not coming back or dying of an STD—"

“I never said that.”

“Tag’s birthday party two years ago.” She lifts a brow.

I blink as the memory of passing out on a lounge chair in the backyard floods me. “I wasn’t in my right mind that night.”

“It doesn’t matter. You lied to me, and I wanted to know who my dad is.”

“I wish you would’ve talked to me instead of taking off to New York alone.”

“Why? So you could tell me more lies?”

“How are you more mad at me than you are at him? I’m not the one who... who...” I bite my tongue.

“Wanted me dead?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” She hits the power button on the television, then rolls over and gives me her back.

I make my way back to my room and see I have a text from Tag.

How does Murray’s sound for dinner tonight?

Can’t wait to see you!

I hit his number and press the phone to my ear. Voicemail.

“Hey, Tag, it’s me. I’m sorry, but it looks like we’re going to be staying in New York a while longer.” I sigh and hate that I feel like I’m letting him down. Seems like no matter what I decide, there’s always someone who is disappointed. “I was really looking forward to getting home. Anyway, I’m really sorry. Call me. Bye.”

I call the airline and cancel our reservation. Then I take the cue from my daughter, roll over, and take a nap.

THERE ARE certain sounds a mother can pick out of a crowded room—the sound of their child crying and the sound of them laughing.

Haven's rolling laughter is what wakes me from a fitful nap. My mind takes a few seconds to catch up to my location. Hayes' place. Which makes Haven's hysterical laughter even more suspicious.

I haven't heard her laugh like that in years. Part of me wants to stay put and bask in the sound because I know once she sees me, she'll lose her good humor. Hard to laugh when you're glaring. I know because I've tried it.

The deep rumble of a man's voice fills in the empty space between her giggles. The tenor and tone don't match Hayes' arrogant droll. I scurry off the bed and follow the voices down the hallway, through the glass doors, around an enormous dining table, and into a sprawling modern kitchen with black appliances and countertops.

There, at the end of an enormous black and white marble island, I find a man... a stranger. He's dressed in a building staff uniform, but the way he's looking at Haven, or worse, the way she's looking at him, tells me he's not here on official business.

"Can I help you with something?" I say in my firmest mom-voice.

The man's eyes swing toward me. Bright blue orbs against tan skin. He smiles wide with two rows of straight, white teeth and dimples. This explains all the giggles. I curse inwardly.

"You must be Mrs. Osbourne," he says politely with a slight French accent.

I swear I can hear Haven audibly swoon.

"Ms. Osbourne. And who are you?"

"Mom, this is David," Haven says, pronouncing his name Daveed. "He brought up a ton of groceries for us." She opens what I thought was a tall, wide cupboard but is actually a refrigerator in disguise.

The fridge is stocked to the gills, which is saying something because the appliance must be twice as big as a standard.

“You work here?” I eye the handsome kid, searching for a flaw of some kind, something I could point out to Haven later. Dirty fingernails? Body odor? A booger in his nose? Nope. The man really is that pretty and shiny. Although, “man” is a stretch. He can’t be older than his mid-twenties.

“I do, ma’am.” He looks at Haven and seems just as starry-eyed as she is.

“Shouldn’t you get back to work then?”

“*Mom.*” Haven hisses.

Daveed takes the hint. “Yes, I should.” He doesn’t stop looking at Haven. “I’ll see you around?”

“Yeah, it was nice meeting you.”

The way he holds her eyes makes me roll mine. Young lust is so powerful and so fucking pointless.

He nods at me as he passes and wishes me a good day.

As soon as I hear the door close, I turn to Haven. “What was that?”

Just as I predicted my presence would, her grin melts into a scowl. “That was me making a new friend.”

“Well, don’t.”

“I thought you wanted me to make new friends.”

“Not in New York. We won’t be here long enough for friendship.”

She stomps past me and back down the hallway. A door slams.

Figuring I’ll have to make something for dinner, I check the contents of the refrigerator and nearby pantry, which is shockingly bigger than most one-bedroom apartments in New York.

North Industries obviously pays well.

I’m surprised Hayes decided to work for his dad. He used to despise the man.

I assumed Hayes would end up playing professional hockey. I might have skimmed the names of every NHL player roster for years, searching for his name, and never found it. I figured he’d probably sustained an injury that ruined his hockey career. I wonder what the story is there.

While giving myself a self-led tour of the rest of the house, I notice there's hardly any furniture. He either takes minimalism to a whole new level, or he's in the middle of redecorating. Every room opens to a yawning expanse of cold, dark concrete and natural stone. The dining room is a glass fishbowl with panoramic views of the city and a heavy-looking stone table that looks like it would seat twenty. Only two chairs, though.

The patio seems to be the only place with plenty of seating—a loveseat, coffee table, and two overstuffed chairs. Generally, I'm not afraid of heights, but walking out to the nest in the sky, even surrounded by a combination of plexiglass and iron, makes me a little nervous. It feels unnatural for a human to be this high without being in something with an engine and wings.

The plush patio furniture and lighting make me imagine intimate gatherings with good wine and great conversation. I don't have to wonder if Hayes ever indulges in such things. The furniture looks as if it's never even been sat on.

I continue to explore his space—a living room complete with a gas fireplace that's bigger than me and a media room with a movie screen and seats that recline. I come to the far side of the penthouse, where there's another set of steel and glass barn doors that I assume lead to his bedroom.

I turn away. I'll have to leave those rooms to my imagination.

If I'm going to stay here for a month, we'll both have to learn to respect each other's boundaries.

Staying out of each other's bedrooms is a good place to start.

EIGHT

Hayes

It's after seven o'clock when I step off the elevator into my home. I could've worked late and kept myself busy for hours at the office, but I hadn't heard from my house guests all day, and I started to worry they'd skipped town.

I sent David on an errand to stock the place with groceries. When he asked if I had a list, I rattled off Vanessa's favorite teas. As far as everything else? I told him that's what I was paying him to figure out and tossed a handful of hundred-dollar bills his way.

As a bachelor, I rarely eat at home, and if I do, it's usually something I order out. Grocery shopping isn't something I do. Judging by the scent of garlic, butter, and white wine coming from the direction of the kitchen, my guess is David did an all right job.

When I turn the corner to the kitchen, Vanessa's at the stove mixing a sizzling combination on the stovetop. She has a glass of white wine poured, and she's wearing loose, gray lounge pants and a tank top that's just tight enough to make out the curves of her breasts but loose enough not to give away too many details. Her dark hair is pulled back at the base of her skull to make a stumpy paintbrush-looking tail, and the makeup she wore earlier is washed clean.

This is Vanessa in her purest, most natural form. My favorite version, from what I can remember. Not that she wasn't smoking hot when she got all done up, but there's always been something about her natural beauty that takes my breath away.

"Oh, my God!" she startles with a gasp. "You scared the shit out of me. How long have you been standing there?"

I shrug because I don't want to answer honestly and admit that I've been watching her for too long.

"You're home."

"Perceptive." I pull down a rocks glass and pour myself two fingers of scotch.

Vanessa shifts uncomfortably in her spot at the stove. "I hope it's okay I made dinner. I was so sick of eating out."

"It's fine." The only reason I got food was for her and Haven to eat it. I drape my suit coat over the back of a chair, and my tie follows. Then, I pop the buttons at my throat. She tongs a bunch of thick noodles onto a plate and then tops them with sauteed shrimp and vegetables. "Where's Haven?"

"She said she wasn't hungry," she says dryly while sprinkling parmesan cheese on her meal. She grabs a fork, her wine, and a napkin and heads toward the glass doors that lead to the patio. "Help yourself. There's plenty if you're hungry."

I'm starving. I didn't realize how much until the scent hit me when I walked in.

I down the rest of my cocktail, serve myself a healthy portion of pasta and shrimp, and pour myself another drink.

Haven comes around the corner, wearing tight jeans and a top without shoulder straps. Her hair is long and shiny, and her eyes are rimmed with black, while her lips are painted pink.

"You're home."

"Yeah." I eye her outfit, wondering why she's not dressed in pajamas like

her mom. “I got something for you.” I dig the new iPhone out of my coat pocket and hand it to her. “As promised.”

“Yes! Thank you!” She pops the lid off the box and pulls the device out to power it up. “The latest version, too?”

“Your number is written on the box. I programmed my number in for you. Add your mom’s.” I can’t tell whether she heard me since she completely ignores me in favor of her phone. “You going somewhere?”

“I’m meeting David at the pool to hang out.”

“David?”

“Daveed. From concierge. I met him today when he brought in the groceries. He invited me to hang out after his shift.”

David is twenty-three years old. I know this because every year, the residents are invited to donate cash for the employee birthday bonuses.

“Isn’t he a little old for you?”

“Nope.” She holds up the phone. “Thanks for this. I don’t have access to the personal elevator thingie.” She holds up a finger, which I assume refers to the keyless access in the private elevator. “So, can I get a key for the front door?”

This is not how I saw this whole one-month-long get-to-know-ya stay play out. I imagined we’d all finally sit down and get all our questions answered while building some sort of... friendship. Or maybe just mutual respect.

“Sure, yeah.” I pull a front door key out of a drawer where I keep a spare for maintenance people. “You know how to use the public elevators?” I slide the key across the countertop to her.

Her mouth pinches upward on one side. “I’m seventeen, not seven. I have taken public elevators before.” She laughs as if she’s laughing at me. “Don’t wait up!”

I watch her walk away, thinking of how much she reminds me of her mom at that age. Hell, Vanessa was actually an entire year younger the last

time I saw her.

By the time she was Haven's age, she had a baby.

I'm thirty-six, and I have to pay people to keep a plant alive. I can't imagine having to keep a tiny, helpless human alive at sixteen years old.

I take my plate to the patio and see Vanessa there, curled up on the couch with her wine glass between her hands and her almost-empty plate on the table in front of her. Her gaze is cast out toward Central Park.

I take a seat on one of the lounge chairs to give her space. To give me space, as well. I find being close to her makes it too easy to fall into old routines. And old routines lead to old feelings.

Her body grows tense, her only acknowledgment of my presence.

She grabs her plate and moves to stand. "I should check on Haven."

"She's gone."

"What?" Hurt and disappointment work across her features. "Since when?"

I chew, swallow, then wash it down with booze. "Now?"

"She left?"

"She told me she was going to meet *Daveed*." I say the name with a flourish.

"Meet him where?"

I set my fork down and grab my glass in a white-knuckled grip. "She didn't tell you?"

"No."

"I guess he invited her to hang out at the pool."

Her eyes grow bigger. "There's a pool here?"

"And a fitness center, spa, and nutritional center."

Damn, she mouths.

"She'll be fine." I attempt to reassure her. "She's in the building, so she won't be too far."

"I didn't like the way that David kid looked at her."

“How’d he look at her?”

“I don’t know,” she says and blows a strand of hair that has fallen loose from her ponytail out of her eye. “Like he’s attracted to her.”

“Of course he is.” She’s fucking stunning.

Not that I’m surprised. I always knew an offspring of mine and Vanessa’s would be. She’s tall for a girl, maybe five-eight. Thick brown hair with waves she must get from me, and big hazel eyes with a button nose she gets from her mom. The kid has perfection in her DNA.

“I’ll talk to David. Tell him to back off.”

Vanessa shakes her head. “No, don’t. She’ll never forgive me for getting involved.”

I can’t argue. What do I know about raising a teenage girl? Not a damn thing, that’s what. But I know what young men David’s age are thinking, so I make a mental note to keep an eye on him.

“This is good.” I compliment the meal because it is *really good*. I’m surprised she could whip something up so easily. The Vanessa I knew couldn’t heat up pizza.

She cautiously watches me take a bite. “I should go clean up.” She’s on her feet and hurrying to the door.

“No, don’t.” I grab her forearm to stop her.

The plate slips from her hand and shatters on the floor.

“Goddammit!” I lean over to pick up the mess.

She drops to a squat to do the same.

“Stop.” I try to get her to let me do the clean-up. “I got it!”

“Don’t yell at me! You’re the one who grabbed me.” She grabs for the broken shards.

“I said I got it!”

“Why are you so mad?”

“I’m not mad!” I roar.

She doesn’t flinch or back away. She leans even closer to my face. “*Stop.*”

Yelling at me!”

“I’m not yelling!” As my voice echoes off the plexiglass, I realize that I am very much yelling. “Just stop touching it. You’ll cut yourself.”

She completely ignores me. “Don’t tell me what to do.” With the plate pieces collected in her hands, she goes inside.

I run both hands through my hair and pull. Jesus, this woman has always pricked at every nerve I have. Being around Vanessa is like hooking my central nervous system to an atomic energy source. Stimulating is an understatement.

With my plate and glass in hand, I join her in the kitchen, where she’s putting dishes in the sink. I have to crowd her a little to add my dish, and she holds her ground rather than ducking away from me.

“Why don’t we both say what we really want to say and get this conversation over with?” I drop my dish with a clank.

Looking straight ahead, she turns off the water and dries her hands, and only then does she turn and face me head-on.

“I think you’re right.”

“Maybe we should sit in the dining—”

“Who the *fuck*,” she punctuates her curse word with a finger stab to my chest, “do you think you are to swoop into our lives and make demands, huh? You didn’t earn the right to be here. When you found out I was pregnant, you wanted me to make it go away. Wanted us both to disappear!”

I back her up a step by pushing my height into her space, and goddamn, the woman doesn’t budge. “That’s bullshit, and you know it. You tell yourself that’s how it went down so that you don’t have to take responsibility for the fact that you ran scared rather than face me. You sent me a fucking letter, Ness. A letter that said you were pregnant. I called you for days, and you never answered. You were always talking about *your plan*, so I made a guess. A judgment call that you wanted to terminate the pregnancy. I’m fucking sorry I guessed wrong.”

“Ha! Like you would’ve dropped everything to come and support the teenage mom? Please! You had a plan too.”

“I did. And it all fell to shit after you disappeared.”

For the first time, she backs up a step. Confusion twists her features. “What does that mean?”

“Forget it.” I turn away from her to pour myself another drink and grab the Patrón. Fuck, maybe I’ll just take the whole bottle.

“No, you wanted to hash this shit out. Let’s hash. What do you mean your plan fell to shit?”

I throw back a shot of tequila. “I can’t do this with you right now.” Walking to my bedroom with tequila bottle in hand, I’m determined to put some distance between us. I want her and Haven to stay, and if I can’t keep things peaceful the first twenty-four hours she’s here, I have no hope of keeping them here for a month.

“Now, who’s running?”

My feet slam to a halt. “I’m not running.”

“Weird because all I can see is your back.”

I whirl around and step into her space. “You want to do this now? Fine.”

She lifts a challenging brow.

“I came home as soon as I could. Two, maybe three weeks after I sent you the money and heard nothing back. Your parents told me things were taken care of and that you were off doing missionary work in fucking South America!”

She recoils.

“They said you were spending your senior year abroad and that you’d be in touch if you wanted to be.”

“They sent me away so I wouldn’t upset my dad’s campaign.”

The weight in my chest plummets to my stomach. I assumed her parents, as wealthy as they were, as *family values* as they were, would’ve taken care of her. I should’ve known their dedication to family was more about political

gain. Vanessa's mom always pawned parenting duties off on her household staff. She sent the family cook to Vanessa's science fair in her place.

Nothing about that seemed odd to me back then. After all, my mom was minimally involved in our upbringing. But thinking about Vanessa as a young, scared, pregnant teenager in need of support and her parents sending her away makes me wish for things that I can't have. Like time machines and do-overs.

"I'm sorry," I say so softly even I can hardly hear my own voice. "I didn't know that."

"You're actually surprised my parents lied to you? They'd do anything to save their precious reputation."

I shrug. "I believed them. I waited for you to call. Your phone wasn't working anymore, and I fucked up an entire semester worrying about you. Lost my spot on the team. That's when I decided to give up on hockey and work for North industries."

A decision I have struggled to be proud of since the day I made it. I keep that to myself.

Her shoulders slump, and she drops her chin with a shake of her head. "God, Hayes. I had no idea."

"Of course, you didn't. How could you? You fucking disappeared!"

Rather than reprimand me for yelling, she runs a hand over her face. "Yeah."

"Where did you go? I'm assuming you didn't give birth to Haven in South America while building schools."

She shakes her head. "They sent me to a home for unwed mothers in Denver. Their plan was to have me give Haven up for adoption, then come back to New York and finish up school." She exhales, and then her bright green eyes find mine. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't give her up. I took the money you gave me and moved to Manitou Springs with Haven. I never looked back."

“And your plan? What about school?”

“Haven became my new plan.”

“You never finished.” Fuck, that hurts. High school. She never got the chance to finish *high school*.

“No.”

She was the smartest person I knew. God, she would’ve gone so far if she’d had the chance. She gave up everything for Haven. Meanwhile, I went to law school and graduated with nothing holding me back.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She lifts her chin proudly. “I have no regrets.”

“Ever get married?” I don’t know why, but I find myself holding my breath, awaiting her answer.

“No. You?”

I shake my head while releasing all the air in my lungs. “What do you do for work?”

“I did odd jobs most of Haven’s childhood. You know, waitressing, retail —”

I flinch. “What a waste of your intelligence and talent.”

She tilts her head in the way she does when she’s prepping a zinger. “How very fucking entitled of you, Hayes. There’s no shame in hard work at any level. God, you sound like my family.”

“Yeah, well, I sound like my family, too.”

“Funny, I didn’t get the elitist prick vibe from Hudson or Kingston. Must be a gift bestowed only to you.”

The strangest feeling starts in my stomach and expands into my ribcage. A surge of energy makes my heart pound harder with the force of something foreign that I can’t hold back. Without warning, a burst of laughter hits me unaware.

The sound scares Vanessa and makes her startle.

I hold up a hand in apology but can’t stop the cascade of laughter.

“What is so funny?” she asks with a hint of frustration in her voice. But I continue laughing. She eventually smiles. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” I breathe, trying desperately to catch my breath. “You’re right. It really is a gift only for me.” I keep laughing, and fuck me, it feels so weird, and I can’t say it’s a good weird. I feel exposed. Broken open. “Damn, Ness, you’re the only one who would ever call me on my shit.” I’m only chuckling now. I clear my voice and pull it together. “I suppose that’s your gift.”

“More like a curse,” she says without humor.

I swipe at my eyes, wondering why they feel wet, and finally calm enough to speak clearly. “So, you’re a waitress.” I can’t believe it. Her parents must be shitting themselves.

“Actually, I’m the CEO and developer of a pretty successful app.”

Now, that doesn’t surprise me. “No kidding.”

“The one I’ve been working on the longest just got an offer to buy. They’re sending over a proposed contract.”

“Really?” Fuck me. Little no-high-school-diploma Ness is a tech entrepreneur.

“Yes, really.” She chews her lip. “I should probably have my computer sent here.”

“I’ll take a look at the contract for you.”

Now it’s her turn to laugh. “No thanks. I’ll find a lawyer for that.”

“I am a lawyer. A corporate lawyer with years of experience in contractual agreements.”

She folds the dish towel she has clutched in her hands. “I can’t afford you.”

“I’m not after your money.”

“I got it.”

“Why won’t you let me help you?”

“I’ve made it this long without you, Hayes, and I’ve been just fine. No

reason to believe I need your help now.”

“That’s stupid.”

“God, you’re so articulate.” She tosses the dish towel at my chest and turns to walk away. “I’m going to bed.”

“Wait, Vanessa.”

She freezes but doesn’t turn around.

“Let me give you Haven’s new phone number.” I reach for my phone. “What’s your number? I’ll text it to you.”

She rambles off ten digits, and I text her the number, then save Vanessa’s to my contacts. “I can’t believe I’m having to get my daughter’s number from you.” She walks swiftly to her room.

“Our daughter,” I whisper.

I leave the dirty dishes for the cleaning service and take the bottle of Patrón to bed.

Vanessa

The man is infuriating.

Then again, he always has been.

After seventeen years, we fell right back into arguing as if it were our first language. Hayes pushes, I push back harder, and round and round we go until we fall into bed together. It was in the bed that all that fiery energy would coalesce into explosive sexual chemistry.

Those days are long gone.

The intensity that makes us argue will stay right there where it is. No matter how much I might miss him looking at me like he’s a starved animal and I’m his next meal.

I forgot how his hazel eyes would spark gold when we’d go back and forth like that. How a man can make me so angry and yet equally curious is beyond me.

I'm sure a therapist would be delighted to pick that apart. Something about my strict, image-controlling parents and never being able to have a voice. With Hayes, I've always been free to speak my mind, no matter how ugly it was. And he respected me for it.

"I'm a fucked-up mess," I say to myself in the privacy of this borrowed bedroom.

I check my phone and see I have nine missed calls from Tag and three new text messages. Guilt tugs at my chest before I've even read them.

First, I pull up Haven's new number and hit Send. No answer. I send a text.

Check in with me ASAP. I need to know your plan for the night.

Btw this is mom.

I love you.

I read Tag's text messages, and all of them are exactly what I expected. Rather than text back, I call him.

"Hey," he answers sadly.

"I know you're disappointed."

"I am, but I understand."

He's pouting. I can hear it.

"I hate to ask you for anything else. You've done so much already, but I'm going to need my computer, so I can work." I smile with all teeth, even though he can't see me. "Do you think you could send it to me? I'll Venmo you."

"Yeah, sure. Is there anything else you need?"

I rattle off a few things I need from my desk and remind him to include the power cord.

"Where do you want it all sent?"

"Oh, um..." That's a good question. "Hold on."

I take the phone with me down the hallway and into the kitchen, looking for Hayes. He's not there. I check the patio. Empty. The barn doors that lead to his side of the penthouse are open. I expect he's in his office.

"Hayes!" I call out before turning the corner into an office that is furnished in the same way as all the other rooms—dark, cold, depressing.

The door at the end of the hallway is wide open. Maybe he has an exercise room back here, too.

"Hayes?" I knock softly and pop my head into the room just as he walks in, soaking wet and bare-ass naked. "Oh, my God!" I slam my eyes closed and turn around. "I'm so sorry! The door was open, and I... I didn't see anything! I swear. I—"

"Jesus, Ness," he growls. "You ever hear of knocking?"

"I did knock!" I say in high-pitched offense. "And I called out your name!"

"Stop squawking. It's not like you haven't seen it before."

He just *had* to remind me.

"What do you want? And open your eyes, for fuck's sake."

I peek through a slit in my eyes to make sure he's no longer naked and thankfully see his lower half covered. "You know, doors have locks for a reason."

His glare says a million words.

He's right. I was in the wrong. This one is on me.

"I need the address here." I clear my throat and bolster my confidence, even though I just saw Hayes' dick, and that dick is now covered in a thin pair of heather gray sleeping pants.

My God, the man has grown up.

He was always big—tall, muscular, hung. But he's filled out in all the ways men do, from a lean eighteen-year-old with a slight sprinkling of chest hair to a solid man with dark chest hair and a happy trail. I don't need to imagine where that trail leads after the recent reminder. I wipe my forehead

with the back of my hand. Is it warm in here?

“You gonna write that down?” He smirks.

Oh no, what did I miss?

“Yeah, or I...” Why am I here again? The weight of my phone in my hand brings me back to the present. “Shit.” I press the device to my ear. “Hey, uh, do you have a pen?”

“Yes,” Tag says, sounding completely annoyed.

What are the chances that he didn’t hear that entire exchange with Hayes? Zero, I decide. The chances are zero.

Hayes rattles off the address again, staring heavily at the phone at my cheek.

“Cool,” I say to him. “And uh... goodnight.” I turn quickly and close the door behind me.

I make a beeline back to my room and close the door. My heart is beating a little faster, and I blame it on my lack of cardio. I vow to take a long walk through the park tomorrow. Maybe rent a bike.

“You okay?” Tag says.

“Fine, why?” I close my eyes, hoping he can’t hear the slight tremor in my voice.

“I’m assuming you just saw your ex naked.”

I groan and drop my face into the pillow. “You heard that.”

“I did. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just embarrassed.”

“Are you sure staying in New York is what’s best for you?”

I flip onto my back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. “No. But right now, I need to follow Haven’s lead. She really wants to stay.”

“You can change your mind anytime, you know.”

“I know.” I rub my eyes with one hand. “Thank you for being there for me.”

“Always,” he says softly, and I hear the first hint of a grin since we got on

the phone. "I'll send your things tomorrow."

"Thanks, Tag. You really are the..." *Best friend a girl could ask for.* Tag always gets twitchy when I refer to him as my friend, so I leave it at "best."

"Goodnight, Vany."

I hang up, then add Haven's new phone number to my stalker app. I check and see she's still in the building. I leave my ringer on and keep the phone in my hand in case she calls and needs me. I fall asleep with visions of a naked Hayes in my head.

NINE

Hayes

I'm at the kitchen table, doubled over the latest stock market numbers with a cup of coffee, when Vanessa comes shuffling in. She yawns and runs a hand through her hair while opening cupboards. Her baggy shorts hang low on her slender hips, and when she reaches up to a shelf, I spot the two bee sting dimples on her lower back that I used to enjoy kissing. My lips practically hum with the memory as if it were only yesterday that I tasted her skin and not more than seventeen years ago.

I was infatuated with her in high school. She brought out a primal need in me like no other woman ever could. She'd tempt me and taunt me until we collided in a mass of needy hands and ravenous bodies. The memory quickens my pulse and heats my blood.

"One more to the left."

"Fuck!" She whirls around with her hand on her chest. "Goddammit, Hayes!"

I smile casually into my coffee.

"Did you teleport or something?"

"I've been here. It's not my fault you're not aware of your surroundings." I close out the stock market app on my phone and eye her. "Small-town life is

making you lazy.”

“I am not lazy.” She goes to the cupboard on the left, mumbling something about me being a *sneaky jerk*.

God, I’ve missed her.

She pulls down three boxes of tea.

“Green, lavender chamomile, and chai.”

She spots me over her shoulder. “You remembered.”

How could I forget? I remember everything about her.

She rummages around, looking for a kettle, I assume.

“There’s filtered hot water at the sink.”

“Of course, there is.” She brings her mug to the smaller spout and fills it with steaming hot water. “Okay, now that’s cool.” She drops in a green tea bag, and I watch her dunk it three times, swirl it, and dunk it three more times—a routine I watched her do a million times before and never gets old. I could spend all day watching her move around my kitchen, move around my home, use my things—fuck. I can’t believe she’s here.

Last night, when she caught me fresh out of the shower, I didn’t miss the female appreciation that shone in her eyes. Her flushed cheeks, parted lips, and the way her breathing quickened. My blood rushed hot and gathered between my legs at the realization that I had affected her in this way. As much as we’ve lost over the past seventeen years, our mutual attraction seems alive and well.

She props her elbows on the countertop, giving me an eyeful of soft cleavage that I could drown in. “I thought you’d be gone already.”

I should be, but I don’t tell her that.

“Early worm and all that.” She sips her tea, and the thought that runs through my head is that her lips are on one of my mugs.

Nothing about this interaction should be sexual, and yet my body responds as if I’m watching my own personal Vanessa porn—her lips puckered and blowing on her tea, her ass out and high in the perfect

invitation. It would be so easy to step up behind her and slip deep inside—no! I need to get away from her.

“I was just leaving.” I stand, tuck my phone into my pocket, and grab my suit jacket. “Call me if you need anything today. I have a busy schedule, so if you can’t get me on the phone, call David and—” I catch myself, realizing that I might need to pull the kid aside and have a little heart-to-heart about respecting what’s mine. “What time did he get Haven back last night?”

“She got *herself* back at midnight. Her curfew.”

I frown, wondering what I said that made Vanessa respond with all that attitude. Who am I kidding? Ness has never needed a logical reason to throw attitude my way. Just being around her seems to be reason enough.

“Right. Don’t get into any trouble. I’ll be back late. Meeting.”

“So...”

I’m halfway across the room when her voice stops me.

“Is this how it’s going to be? Is this why you wanted us to stay? So you could leave us in your big, fancy fucking ivory tower while you go out and be productive for ten hours a day?”

I scratch my jaw, feeling itchy and irritated and very turned on. “You think we could go one fucking second without you starting shit?”

She reels back in surprise. “Oh, *I’m* starting shit?”

“I don’t have time for this.” I walk past her, heading for the elevator, only to hear her bare feet slapping the floor behind me.

“You think we do? We’re giving up everything to be here. For what? So we can *ooh* and *ahh* over all your fancy stuff? Which, by the way, have you considered getting a decorator in here? It’s like living in an empty warehouse.”

I grit my teeth, remembering how I broke most of my furniture *because of her*. “I’m in a decorative transition. And I can’t just stop working and stay home all day.” I don’t know what I was thinking when I asked them to stay. I guess I assumed we’d share a few dinners, maybe a weekend lunch. I didn’t

think much beyond that.

“That’s just great, Hayes.” She swings an arm toward the hallway. “Haven has spent more time with *Daveed* than she has either one of us since we got here.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do about that!”

Her eyes narrow. “Don’t yell at me!”

“You’re yelling at me!” Fuck, I’m staring at her mouth now. I want to kiss her. I want to grab her by the back of the neck and slam my lips against hers to get her to shut the fuck up. I want to fill her mouth with my tongue until she moans and goes limp in my arms. Then I’d tear those flimsy fucking shorts from her body and fuck her against the wall.

My heart is pounding. My dick is growing painfully hard. And she’s staring at me as if she can read every dirty thought in my mind and is daring me to try.

My lips burn with need, and my fingers tingle to touch, taunt, and claim—dammit, this is bad. This is so bad.

“I’m leaving,” my voice cracks, and before I can act on temptation, I throw my body forward to the elevator. I climb inside and refuse to look back until the door closes firmly because I’m likely to do something stupid and mess up this whole arrangement.

The door starts to close.

Vanessa throws the last punch. “Now, who’s running?”

BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL, Vanessa gave me an owl that she made in ceramics class for my birthday. She hated ceramics, hated anything related to art. She was brilliant, and she’d always say she didn’t have brain cells to spare for artistic endeavors. Her counselor suggested she take the class as it would create a more well-rounded college application.

I opened the gift that was wrapped in white tissue paper. It looked like a potato with huge yellow eyes. “Thank you for the... potato.” I’ll never forget the look on her face. She went from frowning in confusion to the realization that I was right, it did look like a potato, and then hysterical laughter.

I kept apologizing, asking her to please tell me what it was supposed to be. She couldn’t get out any words. She was laughing so hard. She finally caught her breath and told me it was an owl, which sent us both into belly-cramping laughter.

She asked me then if the bug-eyed potato was our baby, would I still love it. Such an innocent question at the time. Would I love our baby? Of course, I would.

And yet, when she told me she was pregnant during my first year in college, I assumed she wouldn’t want to keep it. If only I’d thought back to that stupid ceramic owl, if I’d picked up on the cues, how different my life would be.

Funny, I haven’t thought about that ceramic owl in forever, and yet, I wonder if that fit of laughing with Vanessa wasn’t the last greatest gift anyone has ever given me.

“...pull his head out of his ass and pay attention!”

August’s raised tone jerks me from my thoughts, and I glare at the asshole for ruining my stroll down memory lane. He lifts his eyebrows as if waiting for something from me.

I spot Alex, who’s wearing his typical blank stare. Then Hudson, who looks at me in a way that makes me think he’s about to throw his body in front of quickly approaching danger.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” I fess up.

“No shit?” August rocks back in his chair at the head of the conference table.

Five other executives shift uncomfortably in their seats and keep their noses to whatever paperwork is in front of them.

“I’ll fill him in after the meeting,” Hudson says, trying to defuse August. “You were talking about the Paloma building?”

August ignores him. “Hayes, you want to fill us in on what’s got you so preoccupied?”

“Not especially.”

Tom from Sales clears his throat as a chuckle slips out.

“Oh, come on, we’re all dying to know what could possibly be more important than the fourteen-million-dollar deal we’re discussing.”

This dickhead. He’s determined to push me. And this morning, of all mornings, I’m in no mood for his crap.

“Actually,” I scratch my jaw. “Maybe you could help me.”

Hudson shakes his head ever so slightly as if to say *do not engage. Walk away.*

Not today, brother.

I prop my elbows on the conference table. “Did you always know about Alexander and Kingston, or did you not find out about their existence until well after they were born?”

Everyone at the table grows deathly quiet as August’s face fills with blood.

“And what makes you think there aren’t more biological Norths out there, seeing as you clearly weren’t a fan of birth control? When they came back into your life, was it you who wanted to pull them into the family business, or did their mothers—who you fucked over—insist? The reason I ask—”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” he growls.

“...turns out,” I say, not watching my fucking mouth, “I have a daughter.”

All the blood drains from his face. The conference room is so quiet that I wonder if anyone is even breathing.

“Her name is Haven. She’s seventeen. And I just met her for the first time a few days ago. So excuse the fuck out of me if I’m a little fucking

preoccupied.”

August clears his throat and shuffles through the papers in front of him without seeming to have any real purpose. “I’ll have my assistant send the rest of the information in an email. You’re all dismissed.”

Everyone at the table jumps up and scurries out of the room. I move slowly as if my feet are full of concrete.

“Hayes, wait,” August says.

Alex and Hudson hang back as well. I have a lot of beef with my brothers, but one thing I can say about them is they’re loyal as fuck. Especially against August.

“Explain,” he barks.

“There’s nothing more to say.”

He grinds his teeth together. “Who is the mother?”

“Vanessa Osbourne.”

His eyes widen, recognizing the last name right away. Senator Osbourne’s daughter.

I clarify anyway. “My high school girlfriend.”

“What the hell is her angle?” He works his jaw as if searching for the right words. “Publicity? She releasing a tell-all book? She wants something. What is it?”

“Nothing.” Vanessa doesn’t even want to be here.

“Money.” He spits the word with disgust.

“That’s not it.”

August laughs mockingly. “All these years, you’ve heard nothing, and now she wants part of you? Trust me. I know the way these bitches operate.”

I lunge, and Alexander holds out an arm to keep me back.

“She probably read about you online, looked up your net worth, and now she’s after a payout.” He makes a tsking sound. “Do yourself a favor and pay her off. The last thing you need is an ugly court battle and our name dragged through the mud.”

“She doesn’t want my money,” I spit through clenched teeth.

“So naïve to the ways of women. News flash, she absolutely wants your money. These types of women are the easiest to deal with. Make her a cash offer she can’t refuse, have her sign an NDA, and you get to move on with your life.”

“You say that as if you’ve done it before.” Alexander sounds less than pleased as he gives August his signature cold stare.

“I have.” He shrugs like, duh, what did you expect.

“We have more siblings?” Hudson says.

“Don’t look so surprised,” August says with a smirk. “Everyone wants a piece of me.”

“Ugh, I’m going to be sick,” Hudson says quietly.

I’m surprised that this is news to my brothers. I always assumed August was out overpopulating the world, one vagina at a time. Narcissistic prick.

“Who?” Alex asks the one-word question we’re all dying to know the answer to.

August squints for a second, thinking, then shakes his head. “No one of consequence. Anyway, take it from me. Pay her. It’ll be more than worth the headache.”

He exits the conference room, leaving my brothers and me staring numbly at nothing.

More siblings. How many of them are girls... women now? To think Haven has more uncles and aunts. Bigger family.

“I...” Hudson blows out a breath. “I’m speechless.”

I drop back into my seat and put my head in my hands.

“I can’t believe we share DNA with that fuckin’ asshole,” Hudson says.

“You told him,” Alexander says sternly. “Why?”

I know what he’s implying. That telling August about Haven only makes her a target for his cruelty.

“Didn’t want him to hear it from anyone else,” I grumble and then look

up at my oldest brother. “And she’s not a dirty secret I want to hide. But if he messes with my kid, I’ll fucking kill him.”

TEN

Vanessa

Blueberry muffins, shortbread cookies, apple pie, and a roast in the oven, and I'm feeling like Martha freakin' Stewart.

When I'm bored, I eat. And since Hayes' kitchen is stocked more for a cook than for quick snack access, I bake. All day. Now, I have more food than I know what to do with, and I'm stuffed to the brim with all the samples I snacked along the way.

I clean my mess and take an extra-long bath in the jacuzzi tub in my room, but none of it does any good in getting me to stop thinking about seeing Hayes naked.

I rattle off the list of reasons why I hate him. We fight constantly. He's completely unreasonable. Arrogant. And hello! He wanted nothing to do with the baby we made together. Those things alone should be enough for me to think him completely disgusting, naked or not. Stupid hormones. Stupid sex drive. Hayes North is female Viagra. I believe that's why God made him such an insufferable prick. If not, he'd probably get attacked by horny women in the street.

I'm sitting in the kitchen, flipping through channels, looking for something to watch, when I hear the private elevator door ping. Daddy's

home, I say sarcastically in my head.

“What the hell happened here?” he says as he steps into the kitchen, eyeing the spread of baked goods.

“I’m bored.” I keep my eyes on the television screen.

I see him out of the corner of my eye, perusing the selection of bakery items and stopping abruptly at the oven. “You made me dinner?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I flick the channel again. One more time. I land on Family Feud. “Like I said, I was bored.”

He ignores my tone and opens the oven door. “Smells great.”

On the television, Steve Harvey announces the new category.

Name something that keeps you up at night.

Memories of Hayes.

Visions of Hayes naked.

Arguments with Hayes.

“I didn’t realize you were so domestic,” he says, a tiny grin playing on his lips.

I frown. “Funny, the things you’re thrown into when you’re a single, teenage mom.”

He cringes a little.

Good.

He takes off his coat and tosses it over the back of a chair, then loosens his tie and pops the top button of his shirt. “Haven around?”

“She’s in bed.”

His brows pinch together. “She sick?”

“Nope.” I sip my hot tea that’s now lukewarm. “She’s a teenager,” I say with little feeling.

He takes the seat next to me but pulls it a good distance out. He sits with his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles, his arms folding over his chest. “What does that mean?”

Why do I have to be the one to educate a thirty-six-year-old man on what

teenagers are like?

“You ever heard of Google?”

Silent tension-filled seconds pass between us. I get the sense that one of us is going to have to leave the room. This is his house, so it should be me.

He stands before I can. “I’m going downstairs.”

“Downstairs?”

He eyes me from my hips to my face. “The gym. You want me to show you where it is?” he says and gathers his coat.

“I mean...” For some immature reason, I don’t want to seem too eager. “I guess.”

“You think Haven would want to go?”

Seeing Hayes nervous is a site to see. Without a keen eye, the tic might go unnoticed. It’s in the way he rolls his shoulders ever so slightly as if vulnerability is a garment too small and made of raw wool on bare skin.

“No, I don’t think she’d be interested.”

His gaze moves to the hallway that leads to our bedrooms. “Should I ask her?”

“You can if you want, but I’d text her.”

He tucks his chin. “Text her. From the kitchen.”

“I know it sounds crazy. Teenagers are like grizzly bears—fairly harmless until you show up unexpectedly in their territory. You’re liable to lose a limb or, you know, get your face clawed off.”

“My face clawed off?” He doesn’t believe me.

I throw up my hands. “Hey, proceed at your own risk if you don’t believe me, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He seems to mull over my advice for a moment, then pulls out his phone and fires off a text.

“You chose wisely.”

I would think he was chuckling if it weren’t for the lack of visual confirmation. Seeing Hayes smile is a rare event these days. He didn’t used to

be like that.

As a teenager, he was always making jokes. Granted, they were jokes at the expense of others, but he wasn't allergic to laughter or joy like he seems to be now.

His phone vibrates in his hands. "She wants to come."

"What the fuck..." I say quietly to myself in disbelief.

I asked Haven, respectfully over text, if she wanted to go to lunch, get mani/pedis, see a movie, shop, go sightseeing, anything to get us both outside. She turned down every single offer, and I waited an hour for her response. She hits Hayes back in seconds with a yes that she wants to go check out the *gym*?

Swallowing my hurt feelings and petty irritation, I wait for Hayes to get changed and meet him at the elevator. Haven emerges from her den wearing a cute pair of periwinkle high-waisted leggings and a matching sports bra with brand-new black Nikes on her feet.

"Where'd you get that get-up?" I say, just as I hear Hayes' sneakered footsteps join us. "And where's your shirt?"

She curls her lip and rolls her eyes like my question is so annoying. "Aunt Lillian bought it for me." She spots Hayes and smiles at him. *Smiles. At him.* "Hey, Dad," she says in an overly affected way.

Maybe that smile was more snake than sweet.

Hayes doesn't respond to her verbally but looks as if he could burn a hole through steel with his eyes. I inwardly smirk at his brutal glare, which is pointed at the floor just a few feet in front of him as if he's trying to mentally open a portal that he can step into and disappear.

The elevator ride is tense, and my gut pushes me to fill up the uncomfortable silence with mindless chatter.

Haven beats me to it.

"So... were you guys, like, a couple, or did you bang once and tah-dah!" She frames her face with jazz hands. "Here I am."

I swear I hear Hayes growl *Jesus* under his breath, or maybe the single word came from my own mind. I gape at my daughter. “Haven.”

She shrugs. “What?” A tiny smirk tilts her lips. “I was just wondering, mom. Don’t be such a prude.”

Saved by the elevator ping, we follow Hayes into a hallway that leads to a wide-open space that smells of expensive cleaning products and fresh laundry. We see a full-service gym, complete with free weights, machines, and a row of treadmills, all facing a window that overlooks the Upper West Side. Glass-front refrigerators are stocked with sports drinks and bottled water, and an attendant dressed in the building’s uniform smiles at us from what looks like a smoothie bar.

“This is incredible,” I say, mostly to myself.

“Locker rooms,” Hayes points in one direction, then another. “Sauna, spa. Pool.”

“And it’s open to us?” It feels like stealing to accept this kind of access and use this place without paying.

He grunts an affirmative.

“Show me how to work the treadmill?” Haven says to Hayes.

“Uh...” Hayes looks at me with helplessness in his eyes.

I don’t have any workout clothes, and I don’t think anyone would appreciate me working out in my sundress and flip-flops. “Yeah, you guys go ahead.” I throw a thumb over my shoulder in the general direction of the elevators. “I need to go up and check the roast.” I’m already backing away and feeling a little guilty about leaving Hayes alone with Haven, but this is what he asked for. It’s the whole reason he wanted us to stay.

No one held my hand when I breached the waters of motherhood. I got tossed in without a floatation device. Sink or swim. Now, it’s his turn.

He shuffles uncomfortably over to the treadmills, and the vision of the two of them together makes my chest ache. I never thought I’d see this day. And now that it’s here, I worry I should’ve done more to protect her. It’s one

thing to not know your biological father. It's another to know him and be abandoned by him all over again.

Hayes could very well end up being her first broken heart.
Just like he was mine.

Hayes

Stepping into the kitchen tonight and seeing Vanessa settled into my space, surrounded by sweet-smelling food, was my undoing.

I'm not an easy man to manipulate. I see through most people's bullshit before they notice it themselves. It's one of the reasons why I never got into any serious romantic relationships. I watched the way women reacted to my brother and me, the way they'd notice a wristwatch or the fine cut of a suit and suddenly seem interested. Or the way they'd fawn over us with compliments on our looks. No one wants to be loved simply for their bone structure or bank account balance. And frankly, I was never interested in love anyway.

My parents' relationship was a nightmare, and if they were the example for marriage, I wanted nothing to do with it.

It wasn't until Alexander and Jordan that my opinion on relationships changed. Then, Kingston and Gabriella. Now, Hudson and Lillian. I'm starting to wonder if maybe I got shit all wrong from the get-go.

I show Haven how to get the treadmill moving, then hesitate before claiming a machine of my own. I had planned to run sprinting drills to burn off all the shit seeing Ness in my space made me feel, but working out with my... with my daughter... well, it feels too soon. Too intimate. I hit the free weights instead and leave her to her cardio.

I put in my earbuds and pull up my gym playlist when the device vibrates with an incoming call. My sister-in-law's name lights up the screen.

"What."

“Hello to you too, sunshine,” Jordan says dryly.

“What do you want?”

“To know why you’re an insufferable sack of dicks.”

I feel my lips twitch, and I’m grateful she can’t see it. “Is that it?”

“No, actually, I wanted to invite you and Vanessa and Haven to the restaurant for dinner on Thursday.”

Damn, I kind of like the sound of all three of us bunched together in a sentence like that. I clear my throat. “Alex put you up to this?”

“Um... do you know Grizzly?”

Good point. My oldest brother isn’t much of a social butterfly.

“Despite your shitty personality and complete lack of a sense of humor, we really want to meet Vanessa and Haven. I figured the restaurant would be neutral ground. I don’t want to spook them.”

Vanessa and Haven don’t get spooked. That much I’ve learned. The girls—women—are ironclad. I respect the fuck out of both of them for that. “I’ll ask them and let you know.”

“Cool. I think earlier rather than later. The restaurant gets busy after seven. Oh! And do either of them have any dietary restrictions?”

I eye Haven while she jogs and notice a man has taken the treadmill right beside her. Out of all the available machines, he crowds her space. My jaw flexes. “Restrictions?”

“Food allergies? Intolerances?”

Treadmill guy tries to strike up a conversation with Haven, and my blood insta-boils. “How the fuck would I know?”

“Gee, I don’t know, maybe because you’re living with them?”

“I’ll ask,” I growl. “Anything else?” I need to get off the phone and break up the little treadmill party ASAP.

“Yeah, is it true you can’t be in the same room as a Bible or you burst into flames?”

“Goodbye, Jordan.”

“Bye-eee.”

I drop my phone onto the weight bench and cross the gym to the treadmills. Haven’s laughing at something this guy said just as I step between the machines. With my back to Haven, I take a good hard look at the guy. Fuckin’ hell, he’s older than I am. Not that the Botox, fillers, and hair dye give that away. It’s the gray hair that catches the light in his facial hair that tips me off.

“Ten machines. You pick this one.”

The guy sizes me up and then checks out my arms, probably wondering if he could take me if things come to blows. He can’t. I’d love to show him that the hard way.

“Easy, big guy,” he says as if I’m a kid. Which, I guess, is indicative of our age difference. “Me and the lady here are just talking.”

“She’s a child.”

“I’m not a child!”

Mr. Plastic finally looks uneasy. “Look, man, I was just talking to her.”

I turn to Haven, who is red in the face and glaring at me. “You’re done here.”

Her spine stiffens along with her jaw, and I blink a few times at the mindfuck of seeing so much of Vanessa and me in her expression. “I just got started.”

A surge of anger rolls through me, but I try hard to keep a lid on it. The last thing I want is for Haven to be afraid of me. “You can walk out of here with me now,” I say through gritted teeth. “Or I’ll carry you out.”

“Ugh.” She throws her body off the machine in such a dramatic way that any doubt Mr. Plastic had about her age was just clarified. She stomps off in the direction of the elevators.

I lean toward Mr. Plastic. “Stay the fuck away from young girls. You’re not fooling anyone, old man.”

His mouth gapes like he’s trying to straighten out the words to a response,

but I walk away to let him stew in the truth.

Haven's not waiting for me at the private elevator. She must've gone up the public one.

Taking the private entrance, I walk into the house just in time to hear Haven yelling at Vanessa from the bedrooms. I hesitate on which direction to go. Do I leave Vanessa to handle things? Should I get involved?

"...not a slut like you were!" Haven yells.

Without a conscious thought to move, I'm down the hall and stepping into the room Vanessa is staying in. She's sitting on the foot of the bed while Haven towers over her.

"What the fuck did you just say?" I ask Haven in as calm a voice as I can muster.

"Oh, yes, please lecture me, *dad*, on why a seventeen-year-old girl shouldn't date an older man." Her brows pop on her forehead.

"Because it's statutory rape."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Vanessa drop her head into her hand.

Haven's grin turns downright feral. "So you admit you raped my mom, then."

My breath catches in my throat. Fuck, I didn't consider that angle. "That was different."

She crosses her arms at her chest and tilts her head. "Really? How so."

"I was eighteen, not forty."

"Hmm... legal adult and a child."

"We were in a committed relationship."

"Hayes," Vanessa says softly as if to imply my argument is pointless.

Haven squints. "And that's supposed to make it less offensive?"

"I loved her!"

Vanessa's breath catches.

I run a frustrated hand through my hair. "Your mom and I were in love. We were two kids, deeply in love. It's not the same as some horny old man

staring at your tits while you run on the treadmill. Tell me you fucking understand that!”

Her glare tightens, and she works her jaw back and forth before storming out of the room. I swear I hear wood crack when she slams her bedroom door.

Vanessa’s on her feet in front of me. “You okay?”

“Has she always been like this?”

She blows out a breath and nods. “Yeah, she has.” Her dark brows lift above eyes the color of spring grass. “Are you really surprised? She’s our kid.”

The tension in my chest deflates at the sound of Vanessa calling Haven ours.

“I don’t think I handled my first parenting moment well,” I grumble, because how hard can this shit be? I speak. Child listens. Isn’t that the way it goes?

“You did fine.” Vanessa reaches out and grips my forearm. The point of connection feels like a thousand watts hits my body. “Thank you for helping her out.” She squeezes my forearm. Another jolt. “She doesn’t realize the trouble she could get into by being so naive. Small town girl in the big city, ya know?”

I can’t stop staring at where her hand rests on my forearm. Long elegant fingers, short red nails, and pale skin against my dark skin. I always loved her hands. I vividly remember watching them touching other parts of me, nails digging, hands gripping and working me roughly. I was always surprised at how much power those delicate hands had.

She drops her hold, and I sway a little, as if her touch was the only thing keeping me upright.

“Dinner is ready. Care to join me? I have a feeling Haven’s going to stay hidden for the rest of the night.”

“Yeah.” I’m an idiot. Of all the times when I could say something witty,

charming, or flirty, I go with *yeah*.

I'm out of practice.

I turn away and head for the shower. If I'm going to sit across the table from Vanessa and share a meal that she made with those beautiful hands of hers, I have some handy business of my own to take care of first. If I don't, I may end up giving in to my urges and try to kiss her and touch her and ruin everything.

ELEVEN

Vanessa

“Is it just me, or is it actually cooler up here?” I ask from my folded-up position on the loveseat of Hayes’ patio.

Summers in New York City carry a balmy kind of heat that sticks to your skin, but at this height, and with the cover of night, a slight breeze manages to cut through the high temperature that seems impenetrable at street level. Another benefit of being filthy rich, I suppose.

“Mmm-hmm.” Hayes chews the last of the roasted meat, potatoes, and veggies, then pushes his plate a few inches away to signal he’s finished. “Where’d you learn to cook like this?”

Is it wrong that his compliment on my cooking fills me with pride? The feminist in me rages that I’m good at a lot of things and cooking just happens to be one of them. “Cooking’s like math. Once you learn the formula, it’s hard to screw it up.”

He watches me intently as if what I say matters, even though I’m not saying anything of importance. He’s always had this ability to make me feel seen and known. It was one of the many things I loved about him. If I was in the room, no one else existed. When I spoke, it was as if the rest of the world went mute. Funny, I never remembered any of that until right now.

“Did you name Haven after us?”

The subject change is so abrupt that I stutter a bit when I answer. “Y-yeah.” Grateful for the dim light so that he can’t see me blush, I tuck my chin and turn away to look at the city below.

I don’t want him to think that I was still in love with him when I gave birth to Haven. Or that I held out any hope that he’d come looking for us so he could apologize and grovel until I let him back into our lives.

“Why?”

I force myself to look at him now, no matter how much his inquisitive eyes make me feel raw and exposed. “Because she was the only thing we did right.”

His eyebrows pinch in confusion.

“And, I suppose, I wanted to remember that what we had, no matter how painful, served a bigger, more wonderful purpose. That the hurt wasn’t all for nothing.”

He scrubs his jaw and clears his throat. “Is that what you remember about us? Pain?”

“Mostly, yes. Because I had to hold onto it to make me stronger. The angrier I was, the more I wanted to prove I could raise her on my own.”

“Jesus, Ness.” He runs both hands down his face, pressing on his eyes and fisting his hair so much that when he drops his arms, his hair sticks up on all sides.

His messed-up, boyish looks bring back fond memories that I’ve tried so hard to forget. Ones that aren’t quite as painful.

His hazel eyes are dark and flicker under the dim light. “I’m so fucking sorry you had to do this alone.”

All the air in my lungs escapes, and I practically slump in relief. They’re words I’ve so badly wanted to hear but believed I never would.

“I can’t imagine what it was like raising her alone. I got the tiniest taste today and fucked the whole thing up.”

I find myself grinning. “I’m sure it’s terrifying to realize you’re not the best at something, but you should know that parenting isn’t something that can be measured quantitatively. It’s a lifelong fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants endeavor where you continually just hope you’re not completely fucking up a human being.”

He grunts and sips his drink.

“You did the right thing today. Haven’s made pushing boundaries into an art.”

He chuckles. “Wonder where she gets that from?”

“Right?” I laugh until I notice he’s lifting his brows at me. “Wait, you think she got this rebellious attitude from me?”

He frowns. “Who else? She didn’t get it from me.”

“Was it someone else who put dish soap in the Henry D. Penrose Memorial fountain on campus after the headmaster specifically said not to because it would ruin the water pumps? And was it also someone else who stole the key to the school cafeteria and went with the entire hockey team in the middle of the night to raid the refrigerators? Oh, and was it also someone else who broke into the biology lab to release all the butterflies—”

“That one was on you,” he says, smiling ever so slightly. “You told me to do that.”

“Nice try. You can’t blame me for that one.”

“You really think I gave a shit about butterflies?”

“Didn’t you?”

“No. I gave a shit about you.”

My whole body warms.

“You hated that whole caterpillar-to-butterfly study.”

He’s right. I did. Watching them work so hard to get free of their cocoons, only to spread wings and slam into the net walls of their enclosures, was torture. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I remember everything.” His gaze drops to my hands, which are

wrapped around a now-cool cup of tea. A breeze swirls around as if the universe is creating a pocket of space only for us.

“I’m leaving!”

Haven’s voice breaks the spell.

She’s standing in the doorway to the patio. She has traded in her gym clothes for a very short, tight tank-top dress. Her hair has been flat ironed, and she’s wearing makeup.

“Where are you going?” Hayes growls.

“None of your business,” she replies with an overly sweet smile.

“You look beautiful, honey,” I say, hoping to cut some of the tension. “You hanging out with David?” I assume she is, since he’s the only friend she’s made here outside of the members of Hayes’ family.

“Yes.” She responds easily. “He’s taking me to a movie.”

“It’s almost nine o’clock at night!” Hayes says to no one in particular.

Haven whirls toward him. “I’m seventeen. Months away from being an adult by definition of the US Constitution.”

I clear my throat. “That’s not exactly tru—”

“My curfew is midnight during summer break.”

Hayes’s shocked expression swings my way.

“I’ll be back by curfew,” she states, then walks away and out of the penthouse.

“You’re not going to stop her?” Hayes has slid to the edge of his seat as if he’s contemplating going after her.

“Nope.” I gather my plate to bring it inside, and he follows suit, doing the same. “I learned a long time ago to pick my battles. This is one I will not win.”

He’s quiet as we move around each other in the kitchen, putting away leftovers and rinsing dishes.

“The cleaning service will do that,” he says as I load dishes into one of the two dishwashers.

What kind of dinner parties was Hayes planning on having when he bought this place?

“I’m happy to do it.”

He helps by bringing me the dirty roast pan and taking the garbage to the trash shoot. I wipe down the countertops and hang the dishtowel to dry.

“When was she born?”

“July 16th. Ten hours of labor, and just after midnight, she was in my arms.”

“No one was with you? A friend or family member?”

“Haven was with me. She’s all I needed then and every day since.”

“Were you lonely?”

“I don’t know if lonely is the way I’d describe it. I remember feeling starved for something... affection maybe. When you spend every waking and sleeping minute holding on to a tiny baby, you realize how much you wish someone was there to hold you, too.”

He crosses to me in three strides of his long legs and pulls me into his chest. The moment his big arms wrap around me, I freeze up. My arms remain at my sides, but he doesn’t seem to care. “I hate hearing this shit,” he says roughly against the top of my head.

“You asked.”

“I know, and I want to hear everything. I’m just saying it’s no fucking party hearing for the first time all the ways I failed you and didn’t even know it.” His voice cracks, although I can’t tell whether it’s from anger or sadness. He sucks in a shuddered breath, and I determine that it’s sadness.

My heart hurts for the scared seventeen-year-old girl on her own, as well as the man who wants to fix everything and can’t. My muscles finally relax, and I wrap my arms around him.

“You are a phenomenal mom, Ness. Haven is lucky to have you.”

God, how much did I need to hear that from him? Clearly, very much because I sink deeper into him, hold him a little tighter, and close my eyes as

I soak in his approval.

“I mean it,” he says and pulls back enough to see my face.

We’re so close I can feel his breath against my cheek, his throbbing pulse behind his ribs. He slides his hands up to cup my face, and suddenly I’m that love-sick teenage girl who couldn’t believe that Hayes North wanted *me*.

At the time, that feeling was the only thing that came close to derailing the plans I had for my life. No one else had the power to talk me out of my goal of going to Stanford. Not my parents and their offers of money and financial freedom if I chose the right school and went into politics. Not my school counselors who told me “girls like me should aim lower” and teachers who told me I needed to be “reasonable.”

The only person who made me question leaving New York to attend Stanford was Hayes. I would’ve followed him to Harvard. Hell, I would’ve stayed in New York and gone to NYU just so I could spend a few days with him here and there and on the holidays.

I would’ve dropped everything to be with him.

And that thought alone thrilled me as much as it terrified me.

So, I never told him about Haven. He had no idea all those years ago that if he wanted me to keep our baby, I would’ve stayed in New York and waited for him. For however long it took.

“Ness,” he whispers. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Hayes

Holding Vanessa in my arms feels like holding a world that stops spinning. Time stands still. Her eyes dance, and her lips part, and in this moment, there’s no room for anger or frustration. No space for who’s right and who’s wrong. All the reasons why I’ve been upset since finding out about Haven slip my mind, and there’s just us.

I slide my hands up her back to her shoulders and around to cup her face.

My God, she's stunning. Is it possible she's grown even more beautiful? Or are my eyes so desperate and my mind so deprived of her that she blows away all expectations and distant memories?

"Hayes," she says softly. "I already have." She grips my wrists and applies pressure.

A jolt of desire floods my veins.

"We can't."

I blink through a fog and drop my hands from her. She removes herself from my personal space, and I stagger with the effort it takes to keep from chasing her down.

"I'm sorry," she says quietly.

"Don't be." I swallow through a suddenly dry throat. "I shouldn't have..." *Touched you*. Because feeling her against me only reminded me of how much I've missed her. My body recognized the feel of her, and that knowledge brought back the hunger.

"It's all right," she says, with a smile in her voice. "I think I needed that hug more than I'm ready to admit."

"I'm..." An asshole. A selfish prick. I have a short temper. I'm impossible to get close to and even harder to like, much less love. "No good at this."

"You're better than you think." She smiles sadly, and I want to kiss that sadness off her face. Is it too much to ask for one night together, where we give in to the sexual chemistry and let it consume us? One night where we're not thinking of all the mistakes? We could channel all this emotional shit into fucking, and once we're spent and useless, maybe we can finally tackle the difficult stuff.

"Goodnight, Hayes."

"Night." I watch her disappear around the corner and then take myself to bed, where I stare at the ceiling, feeling way too charged up to sleep.

TWELVE

Hayes

My weekends are usually spent in the office. If not at my office at North Industries, then here at home. After a longer-than-usual workout this morning, it's almost nine o'clock in the morning by the time I get home.

The house is quiet, but the lights in the kitchen are on, which tells me that Vanessa is awake. I was so close to kissing her last night. If she hadn't stopped me, I would've gone for it. I'm not ready to face her after that colossal embarrassment, so I duck into my office as if I don't have my ex-girlfriend and daughter in the house with me.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" I say to myself. I don't know what I'm doing.

I have not a single tool in my toolbox to handle this kind of situation. I rake through old memories of when I lived at home with my parents. I saw my dad maybe once during the week. He was always gone. And my mom was either at social events or popping pills behind her bedroom door. We were raised by chefs and housemaids, and honestly... each other.

My family is a horrible source for parenting tips. I think back to how good Hudson and Lillian were with Haven, how easy they seemed to be around her. How did Hudson know what to do? Maybe things were different

because Haven isn't his daughter? Maybe Lillian helped with—

“Knock-knock,” I hear Vanessa say from the hallway outside my office. “I’m going to stay right here with my eyes closed until you tell me that you’re fully clothed.”

Curious, I hop up from my desk and stick my head into the hallway. Sure enough, Vanessa stands there with her hands over her eyes.

“You can—”

She squeals.

“—open your eyes.”

“Dammit, you did it again!” She doubles over with her hands on her knees. “I need to tie a bell around your neck. How does someone your size make no sound when they walk?”

Fuck, she’s so goddamn cute. I want to kiss her. I’d settle for a hug. Hell, a handshake would do as long as I could touch her.

I shove my hands in the pockets of my pants.

“Lots of practice sneaking out of my parents’ house, I guess.”

“I guess.” She regains her composure. “I wanted to ask—I’m expecting my computer to be delivered today. Will someone downstairs be able to sign for it if I’m not here?”

I nod. “I’ll call down and make sure they know.” I notice then that she’s dressed in wide-leg pants the color of oatmeal and a tight short-sleeved shirt the color of her eyes. And she’s wearing slip-on walking shoes. “You going somewhere?”

“Haven must’ve had a good night because she agreed to do some shopping and sightseeing with me today.”

Some of the tension in my chest releases its grip, knowing that Haven is warming back up to her mom. I worried after the way the teenager spoke to her mother yesterday that my interference at the gym had caused some permanent rift in their relationship.

“Are you…” She leans around me to look into my office, where my

laptop sits open on my desk. “Working? On a Sunday?”

I lean a shoulder onto the doorframe. “I work every day.”

Her face scrunches up. “Why?”

Because I have nothing better to do. “Why not?”

“Um... because it’s pathetic.”

I bite my lips to keep from full-on smiling. I really missed being around a woman who wasn’t afraid to stand up to me, never afraid to tell me what she really thinks. I realize then that I don’t scare Vanessa like I do most people. I never have.

“Come with us. It’ll be good to get out, and you can show Haven all your favorite parts of New York.”

A sensation I can only describe as panic sizzles through me. “You think she’d want that?”

“I don’t see why not. And I haven’t been to New York since... since...”

I nod, understanding she hasn’t been here since she left, alone and pregnant.

“You can show me all that’s changed.”

“Yeah, let me uh...” I turn toward my bedroom as if somehow the doorway will give me the words my nervous brain is searching for.

“Take your time.” Vanessa spins on a sneakered heel.

“Ness.”

She turns, and her shiny dark hair whips around her face so much that she tucks it behind her ear. I remember when I used to be able to do that for her.

“Thanks.”

She smiles, nods, and leaves me on the edge of a cliff.

I’ve given speeches to the wealthiest, most powerful people in the world. I’ve sat at dinner tables with people who have enough money to buy entire countries, and I’ve never once felt a flicker of nerves. But spending the day with Vanessa and Haven has me shaking in my cotton-wool blend socks.

“I DID NOT!” Vanessa says through a wave of belly laughter as we sit on the patio of a 5th Avenue Cafe.

“Hold on. You’re saying my mom, that woman right there, ran topless down Broadway? At sixteen years old?” She turns her attention to her mom. “And you give me shit for skinny dipping in the North Catamount Reservoir.”

“First of all, Hayes’ memory is a little off. We were in a limo on prom night, and I popped out of the sunroof. The edge caught on my strapless dress at the same time I lifted my hands up, and boom. Boobies on Broadway.”

“That’s not at all how I remember it,” I say with a grin. Somewhere between shopping and walking in Central Park, I found myself smiling without realizing it. Whether it was in response to Haven’s commentary when we passed the old woman feeding pigeons or watching Ness and Haven tease each other, the more the day goes on, the easier smiling has become.

Vanessa snorts. “Too many hockey sticks to the head.”

“Why did you stop playing?” Haven asks as she eats a piece of cheesecake.

I share a drawn-out moment of intense eye contact with Ness, wondering how honest I should be with Haven. “Didn’t love it anymore, I guess.” It’s not a lie. When Vanessa’s parents told me she was doing her senior year abroad and she didn’t even say goodbye, I lost interest in all the things I used to enjoy. I started drinking more, partying more, in a search to fill the hole inside me that she’d left behind. Eventually, my lifestyle affected my playing. And a year later, I got kicked off the team.

“I get that,” Haven says. “I’m good at volleyball.”

“Great at volleyball,” her mom interjects with pride.

“But...” she pauses as she pushes crumbs around on her plate, “I don’t think I love it anymore.”

Vanessa's expression falls. "Since when?"

She pokes at her cheesecake and shrugs. "A while ago."

"You could've told me."

She shakes her head. "Sure. Okay. Like you wouldn't be completely disappointed in me."

"Of course not."

Haven looks at me. "She's lying. She would've been disappointed."

I shrug. "I don't think so. From what I can tell, your mom only wants you to be happy. If your sport no longer does that, she'd back you up."

"Yeah, well, you don't know her like I do."

I can't argue that. But I do know her in a different way. Vanessa never gave in to her family's insistence that she study political science and work for her father's campaigns. When they tried to negotiate with her with the promise of money and prestige, she refused without a second thought.

"Your mom's never done a thing she didn't want to, Haven. You think she'd expect any different from you?"

Haven chews her bottom lip, then shakes her head. "Guess not."

Vanessa mouths *thank you*.

I simply nod, but inside I'm wondering if that's the first real dad shit I've ever done.

THIRTEEN

Hayes

“Can we order a pizza for dinner?” Haven’s eyes light up.

“I thought you weren’t eating bread?” Vanessa says with a raised brow.

“I changed my mind. Lillian told me New York pizza is so good because of the extra minerals in the tap water or something. I want to try it.”

We haven’t been inside the penthouse for more than a few minutes when Haven asks about dinner. After spending the day walking and shopping, I could use an early dinner myself.

“That’s fine with me,” Vanessa says as she looks up from her bags that were just brought up by the valet. “Do you want pizza?” she asks me. “If not, I can heat up leftover pot roast.”

Look at us, discussing dinner like a real family. Is it right to even think? That the three of us, no matter how unconventional, somehow form a family? In the short time I’ve spent with them, what we have feels a lot more like family than anything I’ve shared with my own parents. I don’t remember a single time where dinner was agreed upon between us. Usually, the kitchen staff made those choices.

“Sounds great.” And I don’t even like pizza.

Haven pulls out her phone. “What do you guys want?”

She says “you guys” so casually. And to be lumped in with Vanessa in that way makes me feel light and—my God, when did I become such a tender flower?

“Whatever you decide is fine. I’m going to go change.” I head to my room and drop into the leather club chair while I try to sort out all the conflicting messages my body is sending my brain.

My original intent in having Vanessa and Haven stay with me was to get to know Haven. Somewhere between that choice and now, things have changed. I can’t put my finger on exactly what, but I find myself wondering about when our time here is up. How am I going to let them go?

Would they be willing to stay in New York? Is there an amount of money I could offer that would convince them to stay?

I can already see the expression of horror on Vanessa’s face if I were to offer to pay her to move here. What other options do I have?

My phone chimes with a ringtone that tells me it’s a member of the building staff.

“Yeah,” I answer roughly.

“Mr. North, you have a delivery here—”

“Fine. Bring it up.”

“Sir, this is the courier’s second attempt at delivery. He states he needs Vanessa Osbourne’s signature to hand off the package.”

Not taking any chances with her laptop, I guess.

“Send them up.”

I hit End and go to grab Vanessa and let her know her signature is required.

Her bedroom door is cracked, and I knock lightly. “Ness? Your laptop is here. I guess you need to sign for it.”

“Oh, really?” She comes out, wearing a more casual outfit than she had on earlier. Baggy yet stylish lounge pants and a soft tank top that hangs low enough at the neck to show off a strappy lace bra top.

Her bare feet slap against the concrete, and I follow her into the entryway right as a knock sounds at the door.

Knowing she'll only smack my hand away if I attempt to open the door for her, I hang back while she opens it.

"Oh, my God!" The sound that comes from her next, I can only describe as a mix between a screech and a giggle. She launches herself at the delivery person, who I see now is a tall man with a full beard who is a year late on a haircut.

"What's going on?" Haven says from behind me, but as soon as she sees the man, she does the same as Vanessa, launching herself into his arms.

He manages to hold both women with one arm around each, his head between theirs. His eyes briefly close as if he's really soaking in their embraces. "My girls."

His girls?

He presses his bearded face to kiss Vanessa's head, then turns and does the same to Haven's. "God, I missed you two."

I'm not typically a possessive man. My most serious romantic relationship has been with a working prostitute. And yet, I find myself wanting to rip this asshole's arms from his body and beat him with them.

"I can't believe you're here," Vanessa says and removes herself from his clutches.

His grin is cocky, but the fucking spark in his eyes looks sincere. He holds out a shoulder bag. "I wasn't going to trust just anyone with your stuff."

Vanessa takes it and clutches it to her chest. "You came all the way here to bring me my computer?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" He turns to Haven. "And I brought something for you, too."

Haven bounces on her toes.

He pulls out a cell phone in a bright pink case. "Figure you're probably

missing this.”

“Thank you, T-Man!” She hugs him again, and he hugs her back, lifting her off her feet.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

T-Man? Sweetheart?

He eyes me over her shoulder, and whatever he sees there makes him shrink just a little.

“Tag,” Vanessa says with an edge of nerves in her voice, “I want you to meet Hayes.”

He releases Haven and holds out a hand.

I eye his palm as if there’s a gigantic, wet dog turd in the center of it.

“Your name is Tag?” I hear myself say.

He looks at Vanessa as if to say *what’s up with this guy*.

“Taggart Dalton.” His eyes narrow.

Haven wraps her arm around the guy’s middle. “Tag’s my godfather... well, he’s really the only father I’ve ever had.”

Vanessa cringes, and Tag flashes a secret grin.

I frown, and my teeth ache from grinding. “Is that right?”

“Yep! He taught me how to fish, ride a bike, change a flat tire, shoot a gun—”

“Shoot a gun. Really.” What kind of hillbilly bullshit is this?

Haven looks up at the guy adoringly. “Really! Shot my first turkey when I was twelve.”

“Ate off that beauty for weeks,” beard says proudly.

“Lovely.” The expression on my face must be horrendous. I try to smile but get nothing except lips curled over teeth. It feels like the sun is shining directly into my eyes, burning the retinas. And a headache blooms from the tension of my glare.

“Wow, so...” Vanessa must sense the tension as she steps between us. “Tag, how long are you in New York?”

I hate the way his eyes practically sparkle when he looks at her.

“My flight’s tomorrow night. I took tomorrow off, but I need to be back to work Tuesday.”

“Yes!” Haven seems happier to see this guy than she’s ever been to see her mom or me. I mean, I’m going on a few days’ worth of information here, but she’s certainly never given either of us a look like the one plastered on her face right now. “You should stay here with us!”

“Oh, no.” His gaze comes to mine, and I have to give the guy credit for holding eye contact, considering the illogical amount of irritation I feel. “I got a room at the Holiday Inn.”

“No,” Haven drags out the word and slumps her body dramatically. “There’s a spare bedroom here. Hayes doesn’t mind.” She turns to me with pleading hazel eyes. “Do you?”

I’m Hayes now. Not dad, laced with sarcasm.

I shrug. “I don’t mind.”

“We couldn’t do that.” Vanessa cuts in, ever the diplomat, smoothing waters. “Hayes has been generous enough with us. We couldn’t ask any more —”

“It’s fine, Ness.” Easier for me to keep an eye on him if he’s under my roof. “You’re welcome to stay, Maggot.”

Vanessa’s eyes grow big. “It’s Taggart.”

“Isn’t that what I said?”

“Come on, T-Man!” Haven grabs the man’s hand and drags him down the hallway. “I’ll show you your room!”

“Really, Hayes?” Vanessa hisses the second they’re out of earshot. “Do you have to be so difficult?”

I push up from my leaned position against the wall. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Maggot?” She raises her brows, and when I don’t respond or apologize, she sighs. “At least stop looking at him like he’s just taken a piss in your

hallway.”

Funny analogy, seeing as how he openly claimed both my daughter and her mother right in front of me. He might as well have rubbed them with his scent glands.

“Are you sure this is okay? He has a hotel room. He doesn’t need to stay here.”

“Haven wants him around.” And why does that make my stomach feel like it’s full of muddy rocks?

“They’re really close. He’s been like a—”

“Father. Got it. And what has he been to you?” The question sounds more like an accusation than an honest inquiry. Maybe I intend it to be. Maybe I’m not feeling all fucking balloons and rainbows over the fact that this stranger got to watch my daughter grow up while I was here in New York, completely oblivious to the fact that she existed.

Her lips thin, and her shoulders pull back. “What exactly are you asking me?”

I step into her space and tower over her.

She steps closer, with a defiant lift of her chin.

“You fuckin’ that guy?”

The corner of her mouth tilts up. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Is that what this is? Is he your man?”

She pushes up onto her toes. “That’s none of your business.”

“You don’t think it is, huh?”

“I know it’s not.”

I grip her chin between my fingers. “Then you’re not paying close enough attention, baby.”

She jerks her head away from my hold.

“Enjoy your night. I’m going to bed.”

“What about pizza?”

“Lost my appetite,” I call over my shoulder and close my bedroom door a

little too loudly behind me.

Vanessa

I contemplate jumping on Hayes' back and putting him in a chokehold, but the sound of his slamming door knocks me back to my senses. Interesting how nothing about Hayes and me is the same as it was seventeen years ago, and yet we still manage to argue back and forth as if nothing has changed.

Hayes North has been able to push people around his whole life. I made a very conscious decision when we met that I would not be one of those people.

I head back to our wing of the penthouse and find Haven and Tag in the third spare bedroom that, surprise, looks like the other two. It's as if Hayes just gave up on decorating halfway through and said, "ditto."

"Vany." Tag crosses to me and gives me a hug. "I really don't need to stay here if it causes problems for you."

"What?" Haven chirps from her cross-legged position on the bed. "Why would it cause a problem?"

"It doesn't," I answer her, then turn to Tag. "It's nice to have you here."

He grins, baring the straight, white teeth that normally hide behind his dark beard. "Let me take you girls out for dinner. You can show me around."

"We've been walking around all day," Haven says. "We already ordered a pizza."

"A real New York pizza, huh?" He flashes a hesitant smile as if he's not all that comfortable staying over, much less eating under Hayes' roof. "Can't wait."

"MY GOD, THIS VIEW IS AMAZING," Tag says from his position at the

patio railing overlooking the city. He has a beer in one hand, something I was grateful to find Hayes had stocked in the bar refrigerator, and his other hand is hanging by the thumb in the pocket of his worn jeans. “I didn’t know people actually lived like this.”

“Right?” I hand him a plate with two slices of pizza on it. Tag doesn’t know that I come from a wealthy family. I never speak of my parents or how I was raised, other than saying that I grew up in New York.

“Tell me about this David guy.” He joins me at the patio table. “Do we like him?”

Haven excused herself five minutes ago because David called.

“He works downstairs. Seems like a nice kid. A little older than her, though.”

“This is delicious,” he says through a mouthful that he washes down with beer. “I guess it’s good she won’t be here too long then.”

I haven’t let myself think too much about getting Haven back to Manitou Springs. Mostly because she seems so happy here. I’m trying to salvage what little trust and relationship we have, so I stay away from the difficult topics for now.

“How are things with you and frowny-face?” He makes a mock frown and scowl, then grumbles incoherently.

I grin. “He’s not that bad.”

He recoils. “Tell me you’re joking. The guy has a perma-glare.”

I suppose that’s not too far from the truth. Although, today, when the three of us were out shopping and walking around, he didn’t seem angry at all. If anything, he seemed happy. And he wasn’t the only one.

When the three of us were together, I tried to control my thoughts, but it was difficult not to imagine us as a real family. Is this what it would’ve been like had I never left? If Hayes had sent me a different letter that day, would we have all ended up here? Together? Or would he resent me for all he had to give up? Would I resent him for his resentment?

“Hayes is temperamental.”

“Was he always?”

“A little, but I remember him having more of a sense of humor about it. He seems... hardened or something. I can’t put my finger on it.”

He takes another bite of pizza. “Bet you can’t wait to get out of his way then.”

I shove a bite of pizza into my mouth to give myself a few extra seconds to think about how to answer. Truth is, I’m enjoying our time here. Not that every minute has been a vacation, there are a lot of questions to answer and trauma to heal but being around Hayes again hasn’t been all bad. Tag doesn’t need to know all that, so I nod and keep eating.

“Look who’s here,” I say as I see David and Haven coming toward the patio door with pizza in hand.

Tag watches with the eyes of a protective parent. “Jesus, the guy looks like he’s twenty-seven.”

“Told you—hey, you two!” I say as they join us.

While Haven is doing the introductions, I notice something that takes my breath away.

I haven’t seen her this happy in years.

Hayes

I really don’t like people.

When I purchased the penthouse in this building, I did so with the expectation that seventy-eight stories off the street would distance me from the human race. Smart purchase, too. For all the years I’ve lived here, my home has been the only place I can escape for some solitude.

Until now.

One of the features of the penthouse is the security cameras both outside the front door and on the patio. I never thought much about why there would

need to be a camera on a patio that sits in the clouds, but I suppose it was meant as a form of insurance for the homeowner. If someone went missing from the patio, the camera could prove guilt or innocence.

Now, as I sit in my bedroom with the lights dim, I watch the security camera footage on my phone. I wish I'd torn out the device before today.

I haven't seen Ness throw her head back and laugh like that since high school. Whatever this Taggart guy is saying must be the funniest shit ever spoken because Ness is dabbing at her eyes with a napkin. Haven looks more comfortable around this asshole than she ever has around me. I didn't realize how much tension she held in her shoulders and how calculated her facial expressions were around me until I watched her interact with this fucking guy. Even David looks like he's lounging in his own damn living room rather than the usual stick-up-his-ass formality he shows me.

The images playing out on my phone screen light a fire inside that threatens to burn through me. Why don't I stop torturing myself and turn the thing off? Because the bitter anger feels like an old friend. A familiar companion. Something way more comfortable than the instability that's been plaguing me since Haven and Ness showed up in my life.

I take note of every casual touch between Ness and this shaggy-haired mountain man. Every warm glance from Haven and his equally caring gaze on her.

All at once, the scene changes, and they grab their plates and disappear out of frame. I exhale in relief at the same time my mind screams for them to come back. Because the torture of watching them happy without me is exactly what my inner masochist needs.

I shut down my spying and toss my phone onto the bed. Slumped in my chair, I glare at the bedroom door as if I could see through it. Distant murmured voices come from the other side, and I imagine this... family... the three of them plus David, moving around my kitchen and enjoying each other's company.

“What did you expect?” I growl to myself.

Ness made a life for herself and our daughter. Without me.

August always used to tell me that *men like us will never be content with an ordinary life. We're too driven. Too ambitious. Too hungry.*

I hate that the man knows me this well. I also hate that the reason he does so is because I'm so much like him.

Self-hatred replaces the anger that seeing—

A double knock on my door calls me from my thoughts.

“It's me,” Ness says softly from the other side. “Can I come in?”

I should say no. I should send her away, tell her I'm sleeping or getting in the shower. But the shitstorm swirling inside me is desperate for an escape.

“Yeah.” I'm not sure she even heard me until the door latch clicks and light from the hallway spears through the room and right into my eyes.

She hesitates when she sees me. Backlit, I can't make out her expression, but judging by her body language, she's wary of stepping into a hungry lion's den. She really is a smart woman.

Leave. I will her to turn around in my mind.

She steps deeper inside. “Why are you sitting in the dark?”

I don't answer her.

She crosses the room to the bedside table and sets something down before clicking on the light. “I brought you a slice of pizza.” She crosses the space between us and holds a glass of scotch in front of my eyes. “And this.”

I take the glass without a thank you and down it in one gulp, then hand it back to her.

“Okay,” she says, then takes a couple of steps back and sits on my bed. “What's going on, Hayes?”

I lick scotch from my lips and chew on how exactly to respond.

“You're upset.” Beautiful and observant.

“I told you I'm not hungry,” I snap. “Now get out.”

Most people I know would back out of the room trembling.

“Hmm.” She crosses her legs, settling in. “This is about Tag, isn’t it.”

“Vanessa,” I growl. Hearing her say his name makes me want to break something. “Fuck off.”

She laughs. Genuinely laughs. Though, not the carefree kind where she throws her head back and wipes tears from her eyes. This laugh has more of a *you pathetic asshole* sound. She’s not wrong. “Still so predictable.” She braces her elbow on her crossed knees and leans closer. “You know what your problem is?”

“The strange man playing dad to my daughter?”

“No. Your problem is you don’t talk about your feelings.”

“Bullshit.” I scoff. Loudly.

“You don’t even confront them in any kind of honest way.”

“And you know this about me from the two hours we’ve spent together over the last seventeen fucking years?”

“Yes. I do. Because you were raised in a family where feelings equal weakness. The only characteristics that were reinforced were success and perfection.”

“Thank you very much for the analysis, Dr. Phil. You can show yourself out now.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to talk about what you’re feeling, Hayes.”

I lean forward to get closer to her and half expect her to retreat. She doesn’t. “You want to know how I’m feeling?”

“I’d rather know than continue to guess.”

“You fucked me over!”

“What?” Finally, she recoils.

“You heard me. You robbed me of any chance I had to have a relationship with our daughter.”

“Are we having this conversation again?” She slaps her hands on her thighs. “Yes, Hayes. I did. Because you’re so good at relationships.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re an asshole.”

“Yeah, well, at least I’m not throwing myself at the first able-bodied man to help me raise my fatherless child—”

Her hand flies too quickly for me to dodge it. The sting on my cheek is vicious, and my jaw aches from the force of the slap.

“You are a tiny, pathetic man.” She stands to leave.

“Take the pizza with you. It fucking stinks!”

“Shove it up your ass,” she says, then slams the door.

I fall back into my pouting chair and rub my cheek feeling... strangely satisfied. The restless edginess has softened a tad, and I feel more relaxed. Calmer. I got the fight I so badly needed. And for that, I want to throw myself at her feet and thank her. What kind of fucked up shit does that say about me?

Nothing good, that’s for sure.

FOURTEEN

Vanessa

The next day, Haven and I take Tag on a small tour of New York, showing him as much as we can fit in before his flight. We eat bagels in Central Park, hit Times Square, and then go walking on the Highline. Haven is a few yards ahead of us, Facetiming Lia. Tag and I walk in companionable silence as we cautiously keep an eye on Haven like protective parents.

“So,” Tag finally speaks. “Hayes.” He says the name as if it’s a bad smell. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t... that.”

I bristle at his referral to Hayes as a thing rather than a person.

“Was he always so cold?”

I think about my argument with Hayes last night. How he tried desperately to hurt me, and yet, all I felt was sorry for him. My parents messed me up, no doubt, but Hayes’ parents did much worse to him. I think that’s why his outbursts never upset me. The man carries a storm inside him, one that was planted there from the time he was a child, and sometimes when life rubs him raw, we get glimpses of lightning.

“Hayes has always been complicated.”

Tag finds that funny for some reason. My hackles go up.

“I’m sorry, but he’s not complicated. He’s just not nice.”

“He’s nice,” I defend him, even while I hear an inner voice reminding me that Hayes is very much not nice. “He’s dealing with a lot.”

“So is everyone else,” Tag says. “What to do with all that money must be a *real hardship*.”

Money buys a lot of things. An unbreakable heart isn’t one of them. I know this from experience. Rather than share that with Tag, I merely nod.

“You and him hitting it off okay? Ya know, like old times?”

I gape at Tag.

“What?” He holds his hands up in defense, but he’s grinning while doing so.

“Are you asking me if I’m screwing Haven’s father?”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs. “I wouldn’t say it that way, but... yeah, I guess I am.”

“No, I’m not. And it’s also none of your business.”

He chuckles and wraps an arm over my shoulders. “I know. I’m just looking out for you.”

I hold the hand that’s fallen over my shoulder. Big, rough, and callused, so unlike Hayes’.

Tag casts a gaze around and squints from under the bill of his Manitou Springs State Park ballcap. “It’s so crowded here.”

“It’s a popular tourist spot.”

“I mean New York in general. Feels like you can’t take a step without stepping on someone else.”

“Hmm...”

He’s right. I never really thought about it like that. Maybe because I grew up in the city. As big and bustling as it is, it still carries the feeling of home.

“Do you miss the mountains?” he asks.

“I do.” I miss the clean air and the sound of wind blowing through pine trees. I miss seeing wildlife during the day and the stars at night. Although, there are perks to living in the city. The freedom that comes along with being

only one in a million people. Never running into a familiar face. Everyone not knowing every detail of my personal business.

Tag squeezes me against his ribs in a hug that makes me stop walking. “When you’re done here, come home, and I’ll be waiting for you, okay?”

There’s hope in the way he words the sentence like a question, which makes me think I’m agreeing to something. So, rather than agree, I stay quiet.

“You guys!”

Haven’s voice pulls me from Tag’s embrace.

“Lia and Meg said they can come to New York and visit me!” Her eyes are bright, and she hops on the balls of her feet.

“Oh, that’s—”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Tag cuts in. “I don’t know how I feel about you three girls running around the city.”

I look up at him, wondering why he thinks he gets a say in this. “Tag, I can handle—”

“We’d be so safe. And I totally know my way around now.” She makes praying hands and gives Tag her best puppy dog eyes. “Please...”

“Wait,” I say, interjecting because since when did she need Tag’s permission to—

My thoughts cut off as visions from the last ten years play through my head like home videos. Tag picking her up from school, coaching her soccer team, making a midnight run to the twenty-four-hour pharmacy two towns over to get her medicine when she’s sick.

Was Hayes right?

Did I latch onto the first able-bodied man to help me raise Haven?

“...promise to be safe, I don’t have an issue with it.”

Haven throws herself at Tag and wraps him in a hug. “I pinkie swear promise. Thank you.”

I’m about to launch into a lecture on how I am her mother, and as much as I appreciate Tag being so helpful, he can’t give her permission to do

anything. Only I can. But really, Hayes should be giving his permission. It's his house, after all.

"Before you get too excited, you'll have to clear this with your da—with Hayes." My cheeks flame at the near slip.

Tag looks horrified, and Haven looks smug, which tells me they didn't miss my slip either.

"It's getting hot." I take off, leading the way. "Let's keep walking."

"Hey, it's me, Haven." I hear her say from behind me. The uneasiness in her voice gives away who she's calling.

I haven't seen Hayes since our argument last night in his room. He was gone when I woke up, and I expect he plans to be gone until he calms down, which, if memory serves, could take a while.

I tense up, thinking of him unleashing that winning personality of his onto Haven and can only pray that he's not that much of a dick. However, I'm not holding my breath.

"I was wondering," Haven says, drawing out the last word. "Would it be okay if two of my girlfriends came out to stay with me for a weekend?"

I hold my breath but refuse to turn around and give away that I'm eavesdropping.

"Really?" she says excitedly. "Okay. Yes! Oh, my God, thank you!" she squeals, and I imagine Hayes holding the phone away from his ear. "You are the best! Bye! He said yes!"

I blow out a breath, grateful that the situation ended well for her. I wonder if Hayes knows how lucky he is that he didn't snap at her. Because if he had, I would've had to show up at his office and start throwing things.

"I'm calling Meg and Lia right now!"

I turn around to find she's stepped aside to call her friends. Tag meets my eyes, and I see a flash of concern there, followed by a sad smile.

He must feel her slipping away.

He's not the only one.

Hayes

The call from Haven brought the first glimpse of happiness I've felt all day.

I slept like shit last night. Vanessa got the last word, and I tossed and turned, thinking of all the ways I should've responded. I almost got out of bed and stomped down to Vanessa's room to pick up where we left off but decided I didn't need to give her not-so-secret admirer another reason to convince Ness to leave New York. I gave up on sleep and went into the office so early that I set off the building alarms. And having to explain to the security company that my fucking name is on the building was unpleasant for all involved.

Haven calling because she wants to bring her friends into our world here in New York has buoyed my spirits. It has given me a tiny sliver of hope that maybe I'm not completely fucking things up with my kid.

She called me the best.

As in, best above the other guy.

As in, better than.

I win.

And yes, I'm that petty.

"Hey, sorry to bo—*whoa.*" Hudson stumbles into my office, staring at me as if I'm a floating apparition of my former self.

It's then that I feel the tension around my mouth.

"Are you... smiling?"

"Fuck off." I force a frown that feels like a betrayal.

"Bro," he says, sounding happy enough to punch. "You're smiling. Like, a *real* smile." He looks around my office as if he might find a naked woman or a courier from Cartier dropping off a watch. "Alone. You're *alone* and smiling." His eyebrows pinch together. "Are you dying?"

"You think I'd smile if I were dying?"

"I honestly can't think of a single fucking thing that would make you

smile like that.” He smirks. “Unless... you and Vane—”

“No.” Not at all. The woman called me tiny and pathetic.

“Ah.” His grin turns mushy in a way that makes me embarrassed for him.
“Haven.”

“What do you want?” I motion to the stack of busy work on my desk.
“I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“In the middle of a *smile*—”

“*Hudson*.”

“All right, all right.” He holds up his hands. “I’ll let it go.” He sits down.
“For now.”

I swear to God, if he winks, I’ll throw my stapler at his face.

He winks.

I pick up the stapler, and he moves quickly to dodge it.

“Too slow. As always.”

“What. Do. You. Want?”

“I just heard back from the Empire Eleven team. They want to meet.”

“Fuck yeah.” We’ve been trying to get a meeting with them since last year when we found out they were opening a new base of operations in Cleveland and searching for a building design.

“I think we go casual. Make it more of a relationship-building dinner than us going in salivating for a deal.”

“Agreed.”

“Good. The Cellar has us down for a seven o’clock reservation two weeks from Friday.”

I scribble down the info to add to my schedule. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. You should bring Vanessa—”

“No.” I shake my head. “No fucking way.”

“Why not?”

“How would I explain my relationship with her? *Hey, Mr. Lovekin, this is the teenage girl I got pregnant and left alone to raise the child I didn’t know*

about.”

“Um, or you could introduce her as an old friend.”

“Absolutely not. And why would she want to go anyway? She’d be bored out of her mind.”

“Empire Eleven is one of the biggest tech companies in the world. Vanessa wanted to be a computer engineer, didn’t she?” He lifts his brows, waiting for me to respond.

The sudden reminder of her big life plan when she was in high school leaves a sour feeling in my gut. I got the freedom to live out my life however I wanted. Vanessa had the ability to make all her professional dreams come true but didn’t get to.

“You have plenty of time to think about it.” Hudson finally stands, and I want to clap with fucking glee that he’s finally leaving. “I do think you should bring a date, though. I’m bringing Lillian.”

Ellie is the perfect person to bring along to business/social dinners. She’s beautiful, charming, and says all the right things. She’s completely comfortable with high-powered elites. Vanessa, on the other hand, has strong opinions, views she’s never afraid to share, and a low tolerance for entitled assholes. The dinner could be disastrous with her there.

At least, that’s what I tell myself as I watch Hudson leave my office.

“Newton!”

My secretary pops her head into my office.

“Is there anything on my evening schedule this week?”

“Only a dinner on Thursday night at Jordan’s with your brother.”

“Reschedule it.”

“For when?”

“Two weeks.”

She nods sharply, then ducks out of the room.

I manage to stay busy through lunch, only taking breaks to drink water and stretch my neck. I lull myself into a calm kind of focus that makes the

rest of the world slip away. Which is why I nearly jump out of my seat when my office door flies open as if it were kicked.

I look up expecting to see SWAT with a battering ram but instead find Jordan, red-faced and seething.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I mumble as she stomps into my office with my brother Alexander on her heels.

“Hayes, you son of a monkey’s dick!” She braces her arms on the opposite side of my desk and leans down to eye level. “Two weeks? *Two weeks!*”

I lean back in my seat, counting this little event as the second joyous spark to my day. Why pissing off my sister-in-law is so much fun, I don’t know. “Yeah, sorry about that. Something came up.”

“Right. And I’m sorry about the toilet water you were served at my restaurant.”

“I wasn’t served toilet water.”

She squints stormy gray eyes and tilts her head. “Weren’t you?”

“It’s not personal. It’s just not going to work out.”

“Why not?”

“Because...”

Jordan waits, and Alex scowls as if to say *I better like your answer, or I’m going to punch you in the nose.*

I sigh. “Things with Vanessa and me are complicated right now.”

Jordan’s glare tightens. “What did you do this time?”

“What makes you think it was me?”

Her brows lift higher.

“We’re struggling through some communication issues that I don’t think are going to be resolved this week, that’s all.”

“Make it right, Hayes. We want to meet our niece.”

Fuck, if that doesn’t slam me in the chest.

“It’s not that easy—”

“It is. Take responsibility, apologize, and bring them to dinner.”

“You’re really fucking pushy.”

“You’re really a piece of shit.”

I smile, which totally throws her off. She stands upright with wide eyes.

“Oh, my God,” she breathes. “Are you dying?”

I frown. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Thursday. Night.” She points at my face, then flips her long hair as she walks out of my office.

Alexander stops and glares down at me. “Be there.”

I roll my eyes, even though his threatening tone makes me a tiny bit sweaty. My older brother is a loose cannon. Always has been. “Fine.”

He grunts and goes after his wife.

My family is fucking crazy.

Vanessa

It’s almost nine o’clock when I hear the private elevator door ping down the hallway. I’m in bed reading, and Haven is downstairs, keeping David company on his shift.

I take a shaky breath of relief, knowing Hayes is finally home. Even though I know he’s a fully capable adult, I wondered at what point I should start calling hospitals, which is ridiculous. He is not mine to keep track of. I don’t want to presume he stayed out all day because of our fight. But I can’t help feeling like I chased him out, which makes me feel worse about staying in his home.

My heart beats faster when I hear the rhythmic clip of dress shoes coming down the hallway and closer to my room. When they’re so close that I expect him to appear in my doorway, they stop, and he doesn’t come in. He’s standing just outside. Why?

“Hayes?”

Hesitantly, he peers into the room.

“Why are you standing outside the room?”

He takes a step inside but doesn't come any further. His shirt is open at the neck, his tie is loose, and there are dark circles under his eyes.

“Is everything okay?”

He hums. “Alex and Jordan want us to bring Haven to a dinner thing.”

“When?”

“Thursday.” He runs a hand through his hair.

I sit up and cross my legs under me. “Is that why you were lingering outside the room?”

Both hands go into his pockets, and he seems to look everywhere but directly at me. “Wasn't sure you'd want to see me.”

“And why's that?”

“You have a lot of fucking questions.”

“You avoid a lot of fucking questions.”

His inhale is so deep that his whole chest rises and falls. “After last night...”

I wait with raised brows.

“I shouldn't have said what I said.”

“On that, we agree.”

His dark gaze finally meets mine. “I'm not good at this.”

I'm assuming he means apologies. “You used to be. Remember when I got a B plus on my physics test, and you made some remark about me not being as smart as I thought? You were kidding, but I cried. Do you remember?”

He grunts and nods.

“You took the headmaster's bullhorn and stood on a table in the cafeteria and told the whole school that I was the most intelligent woman in New York and that you were the luckiest asshole in the world to be mine.”

The corner of his mouth twitches.

“That was an awesome apology.”

“I got one week of detention for that.”

“And remember the time I made you cookies? You told me you ate them all when really I saw you throw them away.”

“They were inedible.”

“That’s beside the point. You lied.”

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“You dropped to your knees in the parking lot and wrapped yourself around my legs, apologizing and swearing you’d eat anything I made from then on out, even if it killed you.” I grin at the memory.

“And I did.”

“You did,” I say softly.

“Chipped a tooth on those brownies you made—”

The pillow I throw at his head knocks him quiet.

“You chipped a tooth at hockey practice!”

He shrugs one shoulder. “Yeah, so... I may have lied about that.”

“Oh, my God, Hayes! That was from the brownies?”

“I promised you I’d eat anything you made, not that I’d never lie again.”

“What else did you lie about?”

His expression falls. “Does it matter now?”

“No, I guess not. But I still want to know.”

He scratches his jaw, his gaze back on the floor. “In that case, uh... remember when you had me watch Sir Reginald B. Fins when you went to camp for a week?”

I haven’t heard that name in years. Hayes won that goldfish for me on our second date at Coney Island. “Yes, I loved that fish.”

“He died. I replaced him before you got back.”

“And I didn’t notice?”

He shakes his head. “I brought him to the pet store to make sure I found one just like him.”

“You killed Sir Reginald?”

His lids lower. “He was a carnival fish. I don’t think they have a reputation for living long, happy lives, Ness.”

I cross my arms over my chest, feeling a little vulnerable at hearing how easily he manipulated me. “What else?”

He cringes.

“Hayes, oh, my God, what?”

“It’s nothing—” He catches the pillow I fling hard at his head. “This is dumb. Why are we even talking about—”

“Hayes!”

He grips the pillow against his chest, and I have to wonder if he’s sensing the need to protect himself. “The time you realized you’d gone to two different classes with your skirt accidentally tucked into your tights?”

I gasp and cover my mouth. “You said no one saw my butt,” I whisper from behind my hands.

He sucks in a breath through his teeth.

“Who saw my butt, Hayes?”

He grips the pillow tighter. “You want names?”

“Oh, my God!” I fall to the mattress face first.

“I couldn’t tell you the truth. You’d never show your face in school again.”

“Everyone saw my butt! And I was wearing a thong!”

“Yeah, I know,” he says with humor in his voice.

I chuck another pillow at him, this one missing him completely.

“I spread the word that if anyone, and I mean anyone, teased you or let on that they’d seen your butt, I’d make their lives so miserable they’d rather be homeschooled.”

I peer out at him from my faceplanted position on the bed. “You did that?”

A glimmer of sympathy softens his features. “Of course I did.”

“No one ever said anything.”

“See?” He tosses the pillow at the foot of the bed. “It worked.”

I chew my lip, thinking about how ridiculous I must’ve looked, going from class to class with my ass out. I believed him when he told me no one saw it because no one even looked at me funny or said a thing. “Thank you.”

“Not all lies are bad ones.”

I frown, not exactly sure how I feel about that, but right now, I can’t argue.

He takes a couple hesitant steps closer. “About dinner with Alex and Jordan, if you don’t want to go, I understand.”

“Haven has really enjoyed getting to know your family...” I frown. “Her family. But you two can go without me. I don’t see why I need to be there. It’ll only complicate things.”

His gaze falls to the floor, and he nods. Silence stretches between us, and I wonder if he has anything else to say. I’m about to ask him as much when he finally speaks up.

“Goodnight, Ness.” He slips out of the room before I can respond.

FIFTEEN

Vanessa

For the past three days, Hayes has been gone before six o'clock in the morning and home late. I've come up with a bit of a routine, which helps the days pass without me getting too bored. After a long walk and a shower, I settle into my laptop to work for a few hours, and then in the afternoon, I crack open the contract for the sale of my app. I figured I would read through as much as I could each day and highlight the things I don't understand and need clarification on.

Today, my eyes are nearly crossing with all the legal jargon. I wonder if they make these contracts purposefully confusing in order to get people to sign away more than they want. Why not word these things in layman's terms? We're buying your app for a hundred thousand dollars, and that means we can do whatever we want. Like when you sell a car. Sign here.

I've highlighted almost every paragraph and have two pages of questions. Part of me wants to sign it and collect the money, but the other part of me wonders if all this is even worth it. I make enough money to support myself and Haven with the advertising on the app. There's also the sensitive nature of the app to consider. Can I trust a corporation to do the same things I do in order to make users feel safe?

Tag calls me midday to check in and give me the contact info for a lawyer that comes highly recommended by the farming community in Manitou Springs. Haven strolls into the kitchen at one o'clock in the afternoon in her pajamas.

“Late night?” She’s been spending a lot of time with David, and although I know she wasn’t out past her curfew, I also know that once she gets in, she stays up on her phone until God-knows-when.

She pours herself a glass of orange juice. “I was up late texting Lia and Meg.”

“Make sure you check the dates with Hayes, okay? This is his house, and we need to respect that.”

Her eyes roll to the ceiling before her slippered feet shuffle back toward the direction of her room.

“Did Hayes tell you about dinner tonight?” I yell.

I hear the bedroom door close, and seconds later, my phone chimes with a new text from Haven.

Yes.

And you’re comfortable going with Hayes alone?

Yes.

She tacks on eyeroll emoji.

That settled, I decide that rather than spend another minute here alone, I’m going to take myself out to dinner. Chinatown for good Cantonese and delicious rice wine. Having skipped lunch, I decide on an early dinner. Which also means being gone when Hayes and Haven leave for their family dinner. Not at all my intent, but a welcome byproduct.

Hayes

“Mr. North, welcome home,” the valet greets me when I step out of my car.

He sounds surprised that I’m here before sunset.

“Wash the car. I’ll be leaving at six-thirty for dinner.” I toss him the keys.

“Yes, sir. I’ll have it ready.”

“No air freshener this time. Shit gives me a headache.”

He dips his chin. “Noted.”

A female throat clears. “I don’t mean to sound critical...”

My head swivels toward Vanessa’s voice. In two quick seconds, I take in what she’s wearing—a tight black dress that covers everything from her collarbone to her knees and yet somehow makes me think of her naked. Black strappy high heels that accentuate toned calves, and, fuck, she always had the sexiest feet. The toe of my shoe catches on the curb, and I stumble to keep from falling flat on my face.

“Mr. North, sir.” A valet steps in front of me, cutting off my view. He reaches as if he’s going to help me walk. “Are you oka—”

“Fine,” I growl and give him a look that promises he’ll lose a hand if he touches me.

Vanessa’s trying hard not to laugh and failing miserably.

My body flushes with embarrassment. “Can we forget you saw that?”

She finally laughs, and it’s not the throw-her-head-back kind, but I’ll take it. Hell, I’d throw my own face on the ground right now to get one of those out of her.

“Never.” Jesus, she’s gorgeous. The black around her eyes makes the green so vivid that they hardly look real. And those red lips. I’ve always been a sucker for her red lips. Watching them move does all kinds of feel-good shit to my body.

“What I was saying before you so graciously curtsied at my feet is, I don’t mean to be critical, but you could be a little nicer to the staff here.”

Those lips smirk, and I lick my own, imagining that lipstick smeared on my throat. And lower. Much lower.

“Nicer?”

“A simple thank you goes a long way.”

“Mmm.”

“Hayes.”

My gaze snaps to her narrowed eyes. “Do I have lipstick on my teeth or something?” She rubs her teeth with her finger.

“No. Where are you going...?” *Dressed like a fucking goddess.*

She holds her head high. “I’m taking myself out to dinner. I’m actually waiting for a cab now.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“You sure you don’t want to come with us to dinner?” Please, come with us.

I’ve been overthinking tonight’s dinner all day. Being alone with Haven without Vanessa there to buffer the conversation has me anxious. I don’t want to mess things up, but I can’t imagine how tonight will go well, considering I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.

“I’m sure. You two could use some one-on-one time, and I’m looking forward to spending some time alone. Motherhood doesn’t provide a lot of that.”

To think of all the *alone* I’ve had the last seventeen years. Meanwhile, Vanessa’s been a full-time single mom. I can’t even keep a plant alive, much less a human. A sense of gratitude so weighty it makes my knees wobble surges through me.

“Ness, I don’t—”

“Ms. Osbourne, your cab has arrived,” the valet says and pops the back door of the gaudy yellow sedan.

“You guys have fun tonight.” She steps off the curb with the kind of sexy

confidence that draws the attention of every female-loving being in the vicinity. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She hands the valet a folded bill and loudly announces her gratitude.

Like that, she mouths at me, then ducks into the car. I watch the cab drive away, and it hits me.

She said she’d see me in the morning.

She’s staying out late.

Alone?

I tell myself it’s none of my business as I storm into the building. I ride up the elevator, repeating the words. Once inside, I’m still telling myself to fuck off for even caring who Vanessa may or may not be meeting for dinner and staying out with until morning.

I find myself at Haven’s door, knocking.

She swings it open. “Oh, hey.”

“Um... do you know who your mom is having dinner with tonight?”

She chews on her bottom lip, thinking as she seems to study my face. “I thought she was having dinner by herself.”

“I saw her downstairs, and she looked like... she was dressed like she was going on a date.”

Her brows slam together. “She’s going on a date with herself,” she says slowly as if English isn’t my first language. “Women don’t only dress up for guys, ya know.”

“Right.” I shift my weight, feeling judgment from the eyes of a seventeen-year-old. “But she said something about being home in the morning? Or she’ll see me in the mornin—”

“Oh, my gawd, you’re jealous!”

“What?” I recoil at the screechy, high-pitched accusation. “I am not jealous. I’m concerned for your mom, who is out in New York alone at night.”

“Hashtag jealous.” She crosses her arms at her chest, smirking.

“What does that... no. What? I’m going to get showered. We should leave here by six.” I turn away and head for my room. “Thirty! Six-thirty.”

Her giggle follows me down the hallway.

Pull it together, North!

SIXTEEN

Hayes

Haven texts me that she'll meet me downstairs in the lobby. I guess she got ready early and wanted to hang out with David before we left. Which is exactly where I find her at six-thirty, leaning her elbows on David's concierge desk, chin in her hands while gazing up at him.

What the hell makes that kid so special, anyway? It's got to be the French accent.

"The car's waiting," I say by way of greeting.

"Mr. North," David says nervously. "Good evenin—"

"Are you ready?" I ask Haven.

"Yep. Bye, Daveed." She circles around his desk and lifts on her tiptoes, offering him her lips.

David hesitates as if he doesn't want to kiss her in front of me. He leans down and presses a European-style kiss to each of her cheeks. "See you when you get back."

She seems stunned, like she's processing his icier switch. "Um, okay."

I motion for her to walk ahead of me and catch David eyeing her backside appreciatively.

"Jesus," I growl and follow her. How does Vanessa do this? Haven looks

twenty-five, not seventeen. And she's wearing a designer jumpsuit that leaves her back open and on full display. She looks a lot like her mom, but my DNA gave her extra height, lighter hair, and, of course, the signature hazel eyes.

She's stunning.

A conflict arises inside me when I appreciate her beauty and want to share it with the world while simultaneously wanting to hide her away. This is something I didn't imagine I'd ever feel.

The valet waits with the door to my SUV open for her.

"What the hell was that?"

I barely have my door shut, so I take a minute to figure out what exactly she's referring to.

"He kissed my cheek like I was his little sister or something."

I point the car in the direction of Jordan's and pray like hell there's little traffic because I have no fucking clue how to have this conversation.

"I don't get it," she continues. "He didn't seem to have a problem putting his tongue in my mouth last night, but—"

"—I don't really need to hear—"

"—he won't even kiss my mouth?"

"—the details."

She huffs a few breaths into her palm. "Minty fresh." She pulls the sun visor mirror down and checks her face. Her teeth. She slams the thing closed. "Jerk. I'm never letting him touch me ag—"

"Haven, please." I grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles go numb.

"What!" she snaps.

"He was trying to be respectful." Hopefully, that'll be enough to keep her from sharing intimate details.

"That doesn't make any sense. We're totally hooking up."

See! This is why I need Vanessa here. Fucking fuck.

"In front of me," I grind out through clenched teeth. "He wanted to be respectful because I was standing right there."

“So... he has a lot of respect for you.”

“Yes.”

“Because you’re...?”

“His boss and your... father.” I clear my throat. “But mostly because of the second thing.”

“Let me get this straight. He’ll kiss me and touch me—”

“I don’t need the details.”

“Fine. We totally hook up. A bunch. But his respect is for *you*. To the degree that he will honor what *you* want over what I want?”

I open my mouth to respond. Close it. Open it again. Then decide I don’t have a sufficient response to that.

“Wow,” she says and laughs without humor. “Guess we’re right back to the eighteen hundreds. You’ve been in my life for what, like a second? And he gives *you* the respect.” She shakes her head and looks out the window before whirling back around toward me. “Can I ask you a question?”

No. Not without your mom here. Absolutely not.

“What’s it like getting all this respect just because you were born with a dick and balls? I’m genuinely curious to know what that kind of entitlement feels like.” She raises her brows, waiting for an answer.

“I uh... I’ve never really thought about it in those terms before.” I mean, she has a point. She’s the one he should be showing ultimate deference to. Not me. Or anyone else. “You’re right. He fucked up.”

As if pulling the plug from a light socket, her whole body relaxes. “Thank you. He did fuck up.”

“If it means anything, I do believe he was trying to—”

“Don’t defend him.”

I nod once and feel a surge of pride. Vanessa’s always been the strongest woman I’ve ever known. I think about how she poured that strength into our daughter and gave her the power and confidence to recognize when she was getting less than she deserved. Is there any greater gift a mother can give her

child?

“You know, you remind me a lot of your mom.”

“Oh, thanks,” she says sarcastically.

“Your mom is an incredible woman. She’s smart, brave, and self-reliant to a fault.”

I feel her studying my profile. “You loved her.”

I don’t confirm the statement because she already knows I do. *Did.*

“If you loved her so much, why didn’t you look for us?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a pretty lame answer,” she grumbles.

“That, I do know.”

We pull up to Jordan’s on the River, and the hostess takes us back to the private room, where Jordan and Alexander are already seated waiting.

As expected, Jordan fawns all over Haven. In rare form, Alexander isn’t scowling but instead carries a hint of awe in his usually cold expression as he listens to Haven ramble on about her time so far in the city.

“...seen New York subway systems in a million movies,” Haven says. “What I never expected was the smell.” Her nose wrinkles up in a way that is so Vanessa it makes me smile.

Alexander frowns. “Smell?”

“Excuse my husband.” Jordan rolls her eyes but smiles lovingly at him before turning back to Haven. “He’s never been on the subway before.”

“Is that true?” Haven asks, then looks up at me for an answer.

Embarrassment warms my neck.

Her eyes widen. “No way. You haven’t either?”

“We uh...always had our own transportation.” I hope that’s a subtle way of explaining that we’ve always been extremely wealthy without having to outright say it.

“What he means is,” Jordan says. “They’re filthy rich, so they always had chauffeurs.”

“What does it smell like?” Alexander’s brows are slammed together as if he hasn’t stopped thinking about the scent since Haven mentioned it.

“Piss, Grizzly.” Jordan gives him a placating pat on the shoulder. “It smells like piss.”

Haven giggles and the sound is new, different, and also achingly familiar.

Alexander’s expression goes from pinched to disgusted. “Do they not have facilities in the subway?”

Jordan sighs and turns to Haven. “I’ll explain it to him later. We don’t want to ruin our appetites before dinner.” She offers to give Haven a tour of the kitchen, and they disappear behind a *staff only* door.

Most of the tension that had my chest completely locked down since we left home dissolves, and I’m able to relax enough to take a full breath.

“She looks like you,” Alex says quietly.

“You think?” I sip my scotch. The one scotch I’ll have tonight since I’m driving my daughter. *My daughter*. That’s getting easier and easier to hear in my head. “I think she looks like Ness.”

“Your eyes. Your smile.”

“How would you know what my smile looks like?”

Now, his scowl is back. “Hudson.”

Okay, that actually cracked my mouth a little. “Good point.”

“Vanessa didn’t want to come.” He doesn’t word it like a question because it’s not. He’s making an Alexander observation.

“She thought she’d be a distraction.” Really though, I think she wanted to give Haven and me some time alone.

“She good?”

I blow out a breath. “She’s fucking gorgeous. More so than I remember, which is, well, a lot. She’s such a good mom. She knows when to get involved and when to step back, when to speak up and when to listen. I don’t think Haven has any clue how lucky she is to have Ness as a mom. And to think she did all this at seventeen years old?”

“Good woman.”

“Yeah.” Where is she now? Sitting across the table from some Tinder date? Laughing at all his not-funny jokes? Or is she really alone? Staring out the window of some restaurant while pushing food around her plate and counting down the days until she can finally leave the city and go back to her life in Manitou Springs?

Dinner was great. Jordan and Haven dominated the conversations, while Alex and I contributed when appropriate. Watching Haven with my family makes me wish for things I’ll never have. Too much time has passed. I’ve missed too much.

But I do wish Haven lived closer. I wish she’d stay in the city. My family—*her family*—loves her. She’s a North.

Jordan and Haven hug for the dozenth time at the car. They’ve exchanged numbers and made plans to have lunch soon.

“Jordan offered me a job as a hostess,” Haven says on the drive home.

“Did she? They make a lot of money.” I hesitate to say what’s on my mind, and I wonder if Haven is thinking the same thing.

“You know, I planned to attend community college in Denver this spring, but…” She picks at her nails. “What if I stayed here? I could work and save money.”

“What about school?”

“I don’t need to go to college. I mean, mom never went, and she’s successful.”

The reminder sends a sharp stab through me. I was out drinking myself to death at Harvard, and Vanessa was raising a whole human being.

“I think it’s important to your mom that you go.”

“*Okay*,” she drags out the word. “But this is my life. Not hers. If she wants to go back to college, she should go. Why should I have to live her dream?”

I open my mouth. Close it. Open it again. Then decide I have no adequate

response, so I keep my mouth shut.

“I could take a year off. Work, save money.”

“I know your mom wants to take you back to Manitou Springs.”

She shrugs, her gaze fixed out the window. “Maybe it’s time she starts considering what I want.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to stay with you.” She turns toward me as if to gauge my response.

I play it casually and unaffected, even while my stomach churns with unease.

I will not get into a tug-of-war with Vanessa over Haven. And yet, I feel an inevitable storm brewing.

SEVENTEEN

Vanessa

It takes me three tries to get the key into the door while holding my heels in the same hand. I had the good sense to take my shoes off in the elevator to avoid waking anyone up.

The condo is dark except for the foyer, and I wonder if Hayes left that light on for me. Even severely buzzed, I take note of the thoughtful gesture.

I tip-toe to the kitchen for a glass of water, using my free hand to feel my way there in the dark. The light from the kitchen appliances is enough for me to find the fridge without bashing against—

“You’re home.”

A scream of terror gets lodged in my throat. My shoes go flying somewhere into the darkness, and when I whirl around, I slam my hip on the countertop. “*Ow, fuck!*”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” Hayes comes into view from wherever he was hiding out. “I thought you saw me.”

I’m doubled over, rubbing my hip, surprised I can even feel it as drunk as I am. This will hurt so much worse in the morning. “Saw you? I’m not a reindeer, for fuck’s sake.”

“Reindeer?”

“Yes. Like Splitzen and Shonner and Bison... *reindeer*.” The pain subsides a little, enabling me to stand upright. “They have excellent vision.”

The entire room explodes with bright light. I squint and keep one eye mostly closed to block out half the light. Once my eyes focus and my brain catches up, I see Hayes clearly. My jaw drops open at the sight of him wearing nothing but a pair of sleeping pants. He moves to the fridge, and as if in slow motion, I watch every powerful muscle in his abdomen, shoulders, and arms catch the light as they flex and release. He pulls out a glass bottle of water, twists the cap, and hands it to me. “Drink.”

When I don’t immediately take the bottle—because, oh, my God, abs—he clears his throat. “You look thirsty.”

“Oh, I am,” I say and follow the strip of dark hair below his belly button down to—”

“Ness.”

My gaze snaps upward.

“Water.” He holds out the bottle again.

“Yeah, thanks.” I grab the bottle with such vigor that the cold liquid spills over the lip.

He watches me with a spark of humor in his eyes as I guzzle. “Careful, you’ll get—”

“Ugh!” I grab my forehead as pain spikes through my frontal lobe.

“—brain freeze.”

“Yes. So helpful. Thank you.”

He busies himself in a cupboard behind me while I take small sips of water.

“How was dinner?” I ask. “Haven’t okay? I didn’t get any texts. I assume no news is good news.”

He grips my hand and drops two pain relievers into my palm. “Take them.”

“You know, I have drunken alcohol before.” I scrunch up my nose.

“Drank. Drunked? Why do none of those sound right?”

He’s scowling but not in an angry way, more like his regular, everyday scowl. “I know. I was with you the first time you *drank*.”

The memory comes flooding back as clearly as if it happened yesterday. And so do all the feelings that came along with it. “That’s right. Raymond Keller’s house party.”

“I told you to take it easy.”

“It tasted like fruit punch!”

He chuckles softly. “You asked me to marry you that night.”

I smile sadly at the memory. I felt so sick I thought I was going to barf all over his car. He took me home, snuck into my bedroom, and held me until I fell asleep. “You said yes.”

“I didn’t think you’d remember.”

I lift a brow. “You hoped I wouldn’t remember.”

With hands on the edge of the island counter, he braces his weight, making all the round muscles in his shoulders and chest flex. “I’d planned to, you know. As soon as you were out of college, I planned to marry you.”

He told me as much back then, back before I missed a period. Back when I thought he’d stick by me through anything, even pregnancy and the birth of our child. “I believe there’s a saying about the best-laid plans.”

Silent minutes stretch between us. Not an uncomfortable silence as much as a sorrowful one. As if we’re mourning the loss of what could’ve been. I make the mistake of closing my eyes for a second and sway on my feet. I need to go to bed, but there’s something—oh, dinner.

“You didn’t answer my question about how dinner went.”

His expression softens. “It went great. Jordan and Alex loved Haven. I believe the girls have lunch plans soon.”

I nod, grateful for Haven and Hayes, but if I’m being honest, I’m a little sad too. As much as I want this for Haven, I feel like I’m losing her, little pieces at a time.

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Your...” He eyes me from my bare feet to the top of my head. “Date?”

“It was good.”

His jaw hardens, and his lips turn into a thin line.

“My date was good company, actually. Better than I thought. We like the same food and drank way too much rice wine. Went to a jazz club in a basement in Greenwich Village and completely lost track of time.”

“Where’d you meet him?” he growls.

“Careful, Hayes.” I wag my finger at him. “You sound like a jealous ex-boyfriend. And my date wasn’t a him. My date was a her, and that her is me. I had a date with myself, and it was...” I sigh. “Wonderful.”

His shoulders visibly relax. “You spent the entire night alone?”

“Unless you count a lovely eighty-three-year-old woman at the jazz club who joined my front row table, smoked cigars, and drank Hennessy all night, then yes.”

“I’m happy for you, Ness.” His eyes warm to a buttery caramel, and his gaze drops to my lips.

I know that look. It’s the exact same look that got me pregnant. I’d be smart to remember what blew us apart because the easy buzz that seeps through my body is making me forget why I shouldn’t jump Hayes right here in his kitchen.

Sex was the one thing we were great at. The one thing we could always rely on to end arguments and defuse our anger.

I wonder if we still have that chemistry. That magic we tapped into whenever we were naked together.

Would it be wrong to have a fling with my ex? People do it all the time. It would only be sex. Physical, without the added complication of emotion. That’s possible. That’s a thing. Right?

“Hayes,” my voice sounds low, and I find that, somehow, I’ve drifted

closer to him. “I was thinking...”

He reaches forward to pinch a lock of my hair between his fingers, rubbing the strand before looping it around his knuckle and tugging me closer. “About?”

God, his voice is pure velvet raked over gravel.

“Sex.”

His brows pop up, along with the corner of his mouth. “What about it?”

We’re standing so close now that I have to tilt my head back to see his face. I put my palms to the ridged muscles of his stomach and bite my lip to keep from groaning. He’s so soft, considering how masculine he is. Must be some expensive body wash. I run my knuckles over each bump to his nipple, then back down, skating my nails over his bellybutton and down the silky happy trail—

“You’re going to have to say it,” he growls. “I don’t want to misunderstand what you’re asking me for.”

I can say it. I’m buzzed. We’re adults, and it’s not like we aren’t intimately familiar with every single inch of each other’s bodies. Although, I suppose mine has changed a bit from what he remembers. Added silvery stripes on my hips and breasts. Would he be disappointed if he saw them? Turned off at the reminder of my pregnancy?

Maybe we can keep the lights off.

“I think we should have sex.” I watch his expression closely for any sign of disinterest.

He cups my face with both hands and brings us so close that his hard-on presses firmly against my stomach. “I like the way you think. One thing, though.”

“Yeah,” I say breathily and hope I don’t reek of booze.

“I’m going to want to kiss you first.”

“I’m good with that.”

He brushes his lips against mine, sending delicious jolts of pleasure down

and into my center. “I’m going to want to kiss you a lot.” Another barely-there brush of his lips.

My head falls back and into the support of his big hands.

He dips his chin and places a kiss against my throat, then drags his mouth to my ear. “And everywhere.”

“Mmm-hmm,” I squeak.

He pulls back enough to get my eyes. “You in?”

“I am so in.”

And with that, he finally kisses me.

Hayes

Fire.

The only word that can come close to what happens when Vanessa’s and my lips touch. An explosion of raw need rips through me when she welcomes me into her mouth. Was it always this earthy, this base and primal between us? Every other sexual experience I’ve had fades into the background of my mind, insignificant and forgettable.

Her short nails bite into my biceps as she holds me to her, or rather, holds herself against me. The taste of her floods my mouth—sweet wine tinged with rich cigar mixed with a deliciousness so familiar and all Ness. My dick is so hard it has its own pulse. I slip my hands down her slender hips and yank the skirt of her dress up. Her ass fits perfectly in my hands, and I squeeze as if I might never get the opportunity again. She moans into my mouth, and the sound kicks my hips in a forward grind in search of friction.

I could pick her up, prop her ass on the counter, and slip inside her right now. I’d fuck her senseless until she screamed my name, her body strung tight as multiple orgasms tear through her one after the other.

But I’m reminded that we’re not alone. And I don’t have to be a child psychologist to know that kids hearing their parents fuck like banshees is

traumatizing.

With her ass still in my hands, I lift, and she wraps her legs around me. The heat of her pussy presses against the tip of my dick, making my legs nearly give out. Her mouth on mine makes it hard to see where I'm going, but thankfully, there isn't a ton of furniture in my way. I knock my shoulder into a wall and pinball down the hallway until I finally make it to my room.

I kick the door closed and shift my hold to free up a hand so I can lock the door behind me. She kisses my neck, tugs on my earlobe with her teeth, and bites my shoulder.

I grip her hair and wrench her head back. "You're leading me to believe you want it rough."

Her lids are heavy, her mouth parted, and the cocky smile that pulls her lips almost makes me orgasm right there on the spot. "I wasn't aware we did it any other way."

She's not wrong. As much as I tried to make love to Vanessa, things between us always escalated into a crazed, insatiable need to destroy the other in the best possible way.

I toss her to the bed, and she lands with an unladylike grunt. I grip her ankles and yank her to the edge of the mattress, watching as her skirt rises higher and gathers below her breasts.

Her hips are rounder than I remember, and her thighs are shapelier. The young woman I remember is now fully woman and sexy as fuck.

She pushes up to her elbows and tugs her skirt lower to cover her stomach. "You can turn off the light if you want."

I drop my knees between her feet and slide my palms up her thighs. "Why would I want that?" I watch the path my hands take, pushing her dress higher until my hands cup her breasts. I kiss her stomach, trace her belly button with my tongue, and tug at her flesh-colored panties with my teeth.

"Um... because... uh..." Her words end on a moan as I nip at the tender flesh between her legs over her underwear.

“Because...?” I growl against her throbbing center.

“I... my stretchmarks.”

I freeze and stare up her body. She has one arm thrown over her face.

I sit back on my heels and take in her beautiful form. Did she really think a few fucking stretchmarks would turn me off?

Standing again, I lean over her and sit her up enough to unzip the back of her dress. I pull the black fabric off and toss it aside, then unhook her bra next. It slides down her arms, and she lets it drop to the bed but quickly covers her breasts.

I hate the insecurity I see shining in those green eyes.

I cover her mouth with mine, and with a knee on the bed, I crawl over her, kissing her until her hands end up in my hair. I drop to her side and watch her breasts as they rise and fall with heaving breaths.

“I’ve always had a thing for these lips,” I say and run the pad of my finger along her parted lower lip. “I remember wanting to kiss them the first time you called me an asshole.” I drag my touch over her chin, down the center of her throat, and between her breasts. “And these...” I slowly circle one nipple. Then the next. “Do you know how many times I thought about these?” Goosebumps erupt and tighten her nipples. “Years, Ness. Years.” My finger continues the journey south to her belly. I flatten out my hand, and a subtle ache forms in my throat. “I wish I could’ve seen you pregnant.”

She bites her lower lip, and I can’t tell if it’s nerves or emotions that are making her do so.

I move my hand to her hip and feel the striations of pale stretchmarks. “Your body is a fucking miracle machine, Ness. You grew a baby in here.” I press my forehead against her shoulder and mutter the words I want so badly to say. “*Our* baby.”

She presses her lips to the top of my head. The tension in her muscles slowly fades.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” I scoot closer and kiss her

jaw, silently asking for her mouth. “You’ve always been my ideal.”

She offers me her lips, and I kiss her softly for as long as our bodies will allow. She rolls into me and hitches her leg over my hip. I tuck my hand into the front of her panties and groan at how aroused I find her. Her breath hitches as my two fingers slip easily inside. She rides my fingers and swivels her hips. I’m reminded of how sexy it is that she goes after her own pleasure. I pull back and watch, which sends my own arousal to dizzying heights.

Filthy words fall from my lips, each one taking her closer, until she’s teetering on the edge. Her breathing is uneven, the sound more animal than human, and she tightens around my fingers.

“Wait.” I pull my hand free and slide down her body. On my back, I grip her hips and roll her onto my face.

She pushes up on all fours. I rip her underwear down her thighs and pull her to my mouth.

She cries out as I devour her. Then she detonates. Hips flexing, thighs quivering, I take every bit that she gives and swallow her down, taking her inside me. I hold her hips still with one hand and grip myself with the other to keep from losing it myself.

Sex was the plan. It’s what she wanted. And I’m going to give it to her the way she deserves.

I don’t stop until she’s had too much and drops to my side. Arms thrown over her head, panties locked around her knees, she looks like the sweetest wet dream.

I grab the edge of my comforter and pull it over her to keep her warm. “I’ll be right back.”

Her eyes are closed, and when I press my lips to hers, I half expect her to turn away when she tastes herself on my lips. I should’ve known better. She slides a lazy hand behind my neck, tilts her head, and kisses the taste of herself off my tongue and lips, licking and sucking.

“I need to go get a condom,” I whisper against her mouth.

“Mmm...” she hums, eyes still closed.

“Don’t go anywhere.” I press a kiss to her nose, then spring off the bed.

In my walk-in closet, I grab a condom from my hidden stash. I always thought it was so cliché to put them in the bedside table, but now I’m pissed they’re so far away that I had to leave the warmth of Vanessa’s body to grab one. I drop my pants and toss them in the hamper, and the weight between my legs is so intense that I have to support it when I walk, or it hurts.

I get to the bed and go to rip open the condom when I step on Vanessa’s panties on the floor. Then I hear the tiny snore coming from under the comforter.

She kicked her panties off and then passed out.

I take a minute to watch her sleep. Creepy, I know, but everything with Vanessa feels so fleeting. Like if I blink, I might miss it. So I soak it all in as if it’s my last chance. When the ache between my legs becomes unbearable, I head to the bathroom to take a cold shower.

I close the door softly behind me so as not to wake her. Then I take the fastest shower humanly possible and climb into bed with Vanessa and pull her into my arms to sleep.

Okay, so it’s not the ending of the night that I had hoped for.

But in a lot of ways, it’s even better.

EIGHTEEN

Vanessa

I wake up hot and sweaty, and... why does it smell like a bar?

With a dry mouth and an aching head, I crack open my eyes. As always, it takes a minute to orient myself. I'm not at home. I'm at Hayes' in his guest bed—

The night comes flooding back in flashes. Hayes on me, beside me, beneath me—oh my—I was on all fours over his face! Heat flushes through my body, and I scramble to sit up, only to feel an iron band lock around my waist.

“Too early,” he grumbles into the back of my head.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

We had sex! But wait, I don't remember the sex—oh, my God—I had sex with Hayes and don't remember it! No, no, no, no. What did I say? What did we do? I pray to the God of penthouses in the sky that she opens up a portal and spirits me out of this situation.

“Don't do that,” he says sternly. “I can feel you overthinking.”

“I'm not—” I clear my throat to rid the rasp in my voice. “I'm not overthinking.” Nope, the rasp is still there. And my mouth tastes like smoke. Ah. Cigars with Helen. “I'm trying to remember.”

His body tenses at my back. “You don’t remember.”

I lick parched lips. “I remember. I’m just trying to remember *everything*.”

“I know you didn’t forget me bending you over the chair over there and fucking you from behind.”

I stare with wide eyes at the brown leather chair that sits a few feet away from the bed and try to imagine what he’s describing. Try to pull up some memory. “Yeah.” I swallow hard. “I remember that.”

“And me fucking you against the wall in the bathroom.”

Oh. My. Shit! “Mmm-hmm.”

“I thought you’d milked me dry until we got into bed, and you rode me so hard I have bruises on my hips.”

I bring my hands to my face, roll to my stomach, and scream. Ah, now I know where the day-old liquor smell came from. Gross.

What starts as a small tremor beside me grows into an earthquake as Hayes busts out laughing.

“Stop laughing,” I say into my hands. Thinking I could get drunk off my own breath, I turn my head away from him. “It’s not funny!”

“Ness, baby.” He flips me to my back and props his head in his hand.

Damn... I forgot how hot a just-out-of-bed Hayes is. There’s something about the mornings, before the responsibilities of the day weigh on his mind, when he’s still breaking through from dreamland to reality. He looks more boyish and playful and absolutely stunning. I catch my breath.

“We didn’t have sex last night.” He smooths back my hair, which must look so attractive right now. “I promise.”

“But we...” I chew my bottom lip, remembering his kiss, his fingers, that wicked mouth.

He smirks. “We definitely did that.”

I blow out a breath, then slap a hand over my mouth. “Oh God, I’m sorry. My mouth smells like a jazz club.”

He pulls my hand away and kisses me, close-mouthed, of course. “I had

fun last night.”

Fun. Right. Fun. Because we’re not dating. We aren’t together. We fucked around. Didn’t even have sex, thank God. All I need is to be having sex with my daughter’s father.

“Me too.” I scoot sideways as graciously as possible, considering the awkwardness, and get to the edge of the bed. “I should probably get back to my room before Haven wakes up.”

His eyes narrow as if he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. I take the comforter with me as far as it will go, but when I hit the end of the bed, it goes flying out of my hands.

Standing naked in the daylight while Hayes watches, propped up on his elbows with an unreadable expression, I find my dress and panties and scamper into the closest room with a door. Ends up being the closet. Good enough.

I slip on my dress, and rather than put on a dirty thong, I wad it up in my hand.

When I step back into the bedroom, Hayes is there leaning against the brown leather chair, wearing a pair of gray joggers. The bulge between his hips is impossible to ignore.

“Ness, my eyes are up here.”

My gaze darts to his. His brows lift in that cocky way that says don’t try to deny you were looking. I ignore his non-verbal command. “I was appreciating the... fabric. Is that Egyptian cotton? Whatever, I should go.”

I head for the door with a flaming red face. “I’ll, uh, see you around.” I scurry away, down the hallway, into the entryway, and then into our hallway. I duck into my room and close the door with an exhale of relief.

“Mom?” Haven comes out of my bathroom with mascara in her hand. Her gaze drops to my dress, my bare feet, and then up to what I’m sure is smeared makeup and a rat’s nest on my head. “Hold on, did you just get home?” A slow, conspiratorial smile pulls her cheeks. “I’m catching you at the last mile

of your walk of shame?”

“What? No.”

“So... you didn’t hook up with someone last night, and you’re just now getting home.”

“I...”

“Because your bed hasn’t been touched. I thought you got up early and went to the gym or something.” Her voice is getting louder and louder. “I can’t believe you hooked up with some guy! Where did you meet him? Is he an old friend or something?”

I don’t know if it’s best to let her believe I hooked up with a random guy or that it was her dad.

“So that’s why you didn’t want to come with us last night!” She looks genuinely happy for me. Another thing I’ll need to process my feelings about once my headache goes away. “You little liar.” She holds up the mascara. “I’m borrowing this. And you look like you could use a shower and maybe a nap, so...” She opens the door. “I’ll leave you to it.”

The door closes with a snap that makes me jump. My nerves are shot. My daughter is acting more like a friend, and I hooked up with Hayes!

Yeah, a shower and nap are exactly what I need.

If I’m lucky, I’ll never wake up.

THE SHOWER WORKS wonders to wash the memory of last night from my skin, but it does jack-shit to dim the technicolor images that keep flashing through my head. Hayes’ lips, tongue, and hands all over me. My fingers in his hair, against his hard body. One thing is for sure, whatever sexual chemistry we had as teenagers has only matured and intensified since.

Work. I need to work to get my mind out of Hayes’ sheets.

I tiptoe down the hallway to the kitchen to grab the world’s biggest glass

of water and something starchy for my stomach. Thankfully, I don't hear any voices, so I make a run for it. Only, when I turn the corner, I'm met with two pairs of matching hazel eyes.

Hayes is standing at the edge of the island, wearing a sleeveless shirt that's soaked with sweat in a V-shape on his chest. Veins protrude from his biceps under glistening wet skin. Yum—No! Not yum. He's holding his phone like he was looking at the screen before I interrupted. His gaze slides from my eyes to my lips and down my throat to the open buttons of my blouse.

"Good morning," I sing and internally cringe at how obviously nervous I sound.

"I thought you were going back to bed," Haven says at my back while I search for a large glass. "Mom had a hot date last night."

I whirl around to my daughter. "Haven!"

"What?" She laughs. "This is good news, mom. You practically live like a monk."

Hayes sets down his phone and braces his hands on the counter, which somehow makes his shoulder muscles look even bigger. "Hot date, huh?"

I glare at the amusement on his stupid sexy face.

"Yep." With an elbow on the counter, Haven puts her chin in her hand. "I believe your generation calls it a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am."

"Okay," I say, having to draw the line somewhere. "I am not sixty."

"You don't say?" Hayes' lips twitch, and his eyes dance with humor. "Who is this mystery man that had you up all night?"

I turn my back to them to fill up my water.

"Yeah, mom. Tell us."

"No one. Don't worry about it."

"Don't tell me you're just hooking up with some random," Haven says, sounding a little worried.

"I'm not." I face them now but guzzle water, hoping the delay in response

will make the whole conversation go away.

The amusement in Hayes' expression tells me I'm not so lucky. "Someone from high school then?"

"Mmm-hmm. And that's all I'm going to say about—"

"What's he like?" Haven seems excited to hear more, and part of me wishes I could have this mother-daughter moment with her. She's wrong to say I live like a monk. I have gone out on dates, and I did try for more with Tag years ago, but I never told her about any of it. I know she's longed to have the talk-about-boys kind of relationship with me, but I never wanted her to think she'd come second to some guy. I didn't want to worry her, let her get attached to a boyfriend I'd just end up breaking up with, or worse, have some dude in my life start telling her what to do.

"Yeah, Ness," Hayes says. "Tell us about him."

I shoot him a vicious glare and clear my throat. "Well, he's extremely handsome..."

Hayes nods as if to say go on.

"Smart, successful, almost everything a woman could want." I shrug.

Some of the humor drops from his face. "Almost?"

"Oh, no..." Haven chimes in. "Does he have a weird kink? Like feet? Or poop-play?"

"Haven!"

"Good God."

Hayes and I respond simultaneously.

"What?" She shrugs like it's no big deal. "Lia told me about it. It's totally a thing."

"Are we sure you should be hanging around this Lia?" Hayes says, sounding like a dad.

"No, it's nothing like that." I twist my mouth, thinking. "Although I don't really know him well enough to say for sure he doesn't have a poop-play kink—"

“I’m sure he does not,” he says quickly.

I lift a brow. “He could.”

“He totally could.” Haven makes a disgusted face. “Lia once dated a guy who asked if he could pee on her.”

I groan because what the fuck is going on? Since when did my baby become old enough to learn about this stuff? So much for thinking a small town would help her grow up slowly.

“No.” He shakes his head. “Let’s give this guy the benefit of the doubt and say that he does not have bathroom kink. I’m more curious to know why you think this handsome, successful gentleman who sounds like a pretty amazing guy is *almost* everything a woman could want.”

I can’t believe he’s making me do this. But fine, he wants to play hardball, I’ll play. “He’s prideful. Really self-consumed.”

He lifts a brow as if to say challenge accepted.

“And he’s kind of rude to valet staff.”

“Oh yeah,” Haven says. “That is a turn-off.”

“Okay, hold on here,” Hayes says. “Maybe he’s not rude. Maybe he’s direct. And prideful could just be confidence. I am curious, though. You say he’s self-consumed as in only concerned with his own needs?” He lifts a challenging brow as if daring me to say last night wasn’t solely about my pleasure.

My eyes widen, and my cheeks burn. I guzzle more water, hoping it’ll cool my face as well as my insides, which are heating up at the memory of Hayes’ mouth between my legs.

He clears his throat, and as he passes by me on his way to the refrigerator, he mumbles, “That’s what I thought.”

“Anyway,” I say loudly. “Doesn’t matter. It won’t be happening again.”

I feel more than see Hayes’ big body tense beside me.

“We’ll be going back to Manitou Springs in a couple weeks...”

“Ugh,” Haven says. “Don’t remind me.”

“The last thing I need is to be getting tangled up in something here.”

The refrigerator door closes. He walks behind me to leave the kitchen but stops short before he does. “Ness, your shoes and bag from last night are over here on the floor.”

My breath seizes, and Haven’s eyes narrow. “Oh, I must’ve dropped them when I came in this morning.”

Haven looks between my things, me, and Hayes. Observant as always, I watch the wheels spin in her head and pray that this is the one time she doesn’t put two and two together.

Hayes walks out of the room, chuckling under his breath. I resist the urge to chuck my water glass at his head.

“I have a lot of work to do today.” I scoop up my shoes, purse, and water. “So busy. I’ll see you later, okay?” I keep filling up space with meaningless words, hoping it’ll be enough to throw her off the trail of breadcrumbs that I left right here on the floor. All of them leading to the very real conclusion that I hooked up with Hayes and slept in his arms last night.

Crap dammit!

Hayes

I spend the afternoon in my home office working and trying not to think about the fact that Ness is a short walk down the hallway.

Having her in my arms last night was a fantasy I never imagined I’d get the chance to live out. The explosive sexual energy that has always buzzed between us was tenfold what I remember, which hardly seems possible. I almost expected we’d leave scorch marks on the bed. My little Ness is all grown up, and, my God, what a woman she’s grown into. She takes my fucking breath away with a look. That sassy mouth churns out the sexiest moans when my mouth is on her. She’s soft, brave, strong, and feisty as fuck. I didn’t even have her fully last night, and our hook-up was the hottest sex

I've had.

My jeans become painfully tight between my legs as I swell and harden at the memories. I'm barely able to stay in my seat, fighting the urge to race to her room and seduce the shit out of her. Not literal shit. I'm not into poop play. Gross.

Haven left fifteen minutes ago to have lunch with David. That means we're alone. And every second that passes leaves me aching for her.

She said what we did last night would never happen again. As if either of us has that much self-control? The thought makes me want to test her theory. See if, unlike me, she's able to deny the pull between us.

"Fuck it." I push back from my desk, rearrange myself in my jeans so I don't look like a dirtbag, and head down the hallway. I stop when I see her at the dining room table, leaning over her laptop with narrow eyes and pursed lips. "You okay?"

Her gaze jumps, and I catch a glimpse of womanly approval as she takes me in. In seconds, it's like she's stripping me of my T-shirt and jeans. I watch as her determination to ignore the attraction goes up in smoke.

"Ness," I growl in warning because the last thing I want to do is scar Haven for life by having her walk in on me fucking her mom on the dining room table.

Vanessa blinks, and the moment is gone, and her pinched expression returns. "I'm good. Just trying to understand this contract."

"Mind if I take a peek?"

She seems to chew on that for a moment before spinning the laptop toward me and slumping back in her seat. "Have at it."

I take the seat across from her to avoid being close enough to touch. She accused me of being self-consumed. Here's my chance to prove her wrong.

"These are the questions I have." She turns a yellow legal pad my way. In her delicate script handwriting, she has pages of notes.

"Your questions are longer than the contract."

She laughs tiredly and without humor. “Probably.”

I scroll to the top of the contract and skim the first couple of paragraphs. “Swap Source?”

“Yeah. It’s an app I developed for local artisans, people who grow food, to swap goods. Say John has a few dozen chickens. He can swap eggs with Jane, who grows corn, to feed his chickens. Or Sara can swap her strawberry jam with Mike, who grows lettuce. Stuff like that.”

“This company, Sustain USA, they’re a national company.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“They’re offering you a hundred thousand.” I skim to the end of the contract. “Full ownership of design, coding... How much do you gross off this app annually?”

She frowns and scribbles a number on the legal pad.

I whistle and shake my head. “They’re lowballing you, big time.”

She sits up straight. “They are?”

“Ness, you could get way more for this app. They’re treating you like some small-town mom who doesn’t know the gold mine she’s sitting on.”

She bites her lip, then releases it. “I’m afraid they’re not wrong—”

“Let me put together a counteroffer.”

Her brows drop. “You’d do that?”

“I would be negligent not to. Can I forward this contract to myself?”

She nods.

“This is bullshit.” I click the email icon and send myself the contract. “Is this app your life’s work?”

“Um... not really. I mean, I have three others that do really well.” She tilts her head. “Don’t look so surprised. It’s insulting.”

“I’m sorry, I just... I thought with being a single mom—”

“Necessity is the mother of invention. Isn’t that how the saying goes?”

She goes on to tell me about the first app she designed called Sister Wife—a place where new mothers could go for questions and support from other

moms. Cup o' Sugar, the source for local families to support single moms in need with food and clothing donations. And Kiddo Sit, a babysitting source for teenagers that includes a course in emergency medical training, CPR, and general safety.

I blink rapidly, taking it all in. Vanessa had planned to go to college to become a computer engineer, and instead put all her effort into design and coding to help young, single mom's just like her.

Pride swells in my chest, but it's chased down by suffocating guilt. I should've been there to support her. She shouldn't have ever felt alone or in need of food or babysitting sources. She needed me... but then, she really didn't need me at all. Weird to feel needed and completely useless at the same time.

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. "Ness, I'm so fucking sorry you had to do all this. But I'm also impressed as shit by all you've done."

She blushes a little but shrugs it off like it's no big deal. "Thanks, but you don't have to be sorry. I have regrets, Hayes. But Haven and the life I made for us isn't one of them."

"Will you let me help you out with this contract? It's the least I can do."

She chews her lip—the same lip I had in my mouth last night. I want to kiss her again, so badly.

I flip the legal pad to a new page and grab her pen. "Let me get some information first."

We sit at the dining room table, working easily together as I get dates, costs, and revenue numbers for all of Vanessa's apps. Not surprisingly, she has everything in a computer program that makes getting details simple. We crack jokes, laugh easily, and I wonder when the last time was that I really enjoyed my work like this.

When the door opens, we both look up from the table to see David and Haven walk in holding hands. The humor falls from my face as I stare at their interwoven fingers.

“What are you guys doing?” Haven asks as if finding us working together is as scandalous as catching us naked.

“Hayes is helping me with a counteroffer to the Sustain USA deal.”

“Why do you look so *happy*?” Haven’s words drip with suspicion.

I feel Vanessa look at me, then turn back to our daughter. “Hayes seems to think we can get a lot more money for it.”

Haven looks suspicious. “Well, David got off early, so we’re going to hang out in my room.”

“Okay,” Vanessa chirps.

The couple walks off down the hallway.

“Shouldn’t we tell her to leave the door open or something? I feel like I heard that’s a thing parents do.”

“She’ll be eighteen in a few months. That ship has sailed.”

“I missed everything,” I say, feeling a weight in my stomach.

Vanessa goes back to scribbling down notes.

I do a little mental math counting backward nine months to... “the rooftop.”

“What?”

I prop an elbow on the table and lean closer. “That night on the rooftop. Was that when we conceived Haven?”

The night was filled with heat and hunger, but I remember it as being the single most romantic experience we had ever shared. We had pizza on the rooftop patio of her parent’s home. On a blanket under the clouds, we searched for stars and talked about our future. It was the night before I left for college, and she was worried we were going to grow apart. I tried to prove to her with my words and then with my body that I was with her for the long haul. That no woman could ever tempt me the way she did. Whispered words of love and devotion filled the air while I slid into her slowly, deeply, and with all the intention of a man completely sold out to one girl forever.

“Yes. That was the night.”

It wasn't our last night together. I came home two weeks later, and we were all over each other again, but somehow I knew that night was going to mean something. I knew whatever we were doing, whatever we were promising, would stick for a lifetime.

"Can I ask you something?" she says. "Was there ever a part of you that wondered if I'd had the baby?"

I give her honesty because it's what she deserves. "Not a single part of me believed you wouldn't terminate. I really thought you were married to your plan for Stanford."

"If you'd known I kept her..."

Jesus, what am I supposed to say? I was a twenty-year-old kid who felt like he had the entire world at his fingertips. I don't think I would've left Harvard to come home and play doting dad. I loved Vanessa as much as I was able to back then, but I wasn't ready to give up my life for anyone.

"It's okay. You don't have to answer that." The cool tinge to her voice tells me she correctly interpreted my silence.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you," she says, her eyes soft and her smile a little sad. "I think I needed to hear that."

Fuck me. Her words are a fist in my chest.

"For what it's worth? I'm sorry, too. I probably should've told you about Haven. I just didn't want to get hurt. I didn't want *her* to get hurt again." She ducks her chin and bites her lips.

Everything behind my ribs squeezes painfully tight.

Would I have responded differently had Haven come into my life ten years ago? Would I have broken both their hearts? I don't want to answer that.

"You did the right thing."

She frowns and goes back to her notes.

"I think we should probably talk about what happened last night." This

morning she said it wouldn't be happening again. Was that the truth or was she saying that for Haven's benefit? Because the thought of having Vanessa this close and not being able to touch her, kiss her, will be the worst kind of torture and a test of my self-control—something I'm not known for having much of.

"I had too much to drink," she says by way of excuse. "I wasn't thinking clearly."

"I was." I watch as the truth settles on her face.

"Hayes," she says softly. "I'll admit, last night was..." She blows out a breath, and I swear I see her shoulders shiver.

"Nothing compared to what it could've been," I finish for her.

Her eyes widen. "We can't just fool around like that."

"Why not?"

She's lying to herself if she thinks what we did last night was just *fooling around*, but that's a conversation for another day.

"Um, because we're responsible adults."

I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes on her. "Responsible adults should absolutely fool around." She looks so fucking beautiful right now. Fresh-faced and flushed, pulse throbbing in her neck as if this conversation alone is getting her hot. I'd press my tongue against her throat and lick up to her mouth right now if I thought she'd let me. "Give up the monkhood for a couple weeks."

"I do not live like a monk."

I lift my brows.

"I've had plenty of sex with people—"

I shake my head, cutting her off. "Spare me the details."

"All I'm saying is, I want to do what's best for Haven. And what's best for her is that I keep my head about myself—"

"What's best for her is you taking care of yourself, and that includes accepting an offer of unlimited orgasms."

Her lips part on an exhale. “Unlimited?”

I feel the corner of my mouth pull up.

She swallows hard, and her eyes drop to my lips. She blinks. “No. No. I... can’t. I... no.”

She’s thinking about it. Flustered. Yeah, she wants to say yes. I’ll play her game.

“Okay.” I go back to the contract on the laptop screen. “Suit yourself.”

One thing I know for sure, I’ll have Vanessa screaming my name by week’s end.

NINETEEN

Vanessa

“What do you mean he’s helping you with the contract?”

Tag’s stern tone in my ear makes me want to hit End Call and pretend like we got disconnected. As if I can’t make my own decisions about who helps me? And it’s not like Hayes doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s a corporate attorney for a Fortune 500 company, for crying out loud.

I sigh into the phone. “He’s putting together a counteroffer. I thought this would be good news. Why are you upset?”

The cab driver eyes me from the rearview mirror, and I shoot him a glare to mind his own business.

“Why him? I told you about the lawyer in Manitou Springs.”

“He’s an agricultural attorney.”

“And your app is for the agricultural community. I don’t see why this guy needs to be involved in your professional life.”

I don’t tell Tag that Hayes has offered to be involved in a lot more than my professional life. Did he really offer to let me use him for sex while I’m here? With all our history, there’s no possible way that a casual sexual relationship between us is a good idea. Although I can’t deny his offer was tempting. Really, *really* tempting.

“I’m sorry. I have to let you go,” I say to Tag, thinking the best way to avoid this conversation is to end it. “I’ll let you know how the counteroffer goes.”

“Vany, wait—”

“We’ll talk soon!” I hit End and slump into the backseat that smells like bad breath, urine, and apple-spice air freshener.

When we pull up to the high-rise with North Industries emblazoned in glass, my stomach knots up. It’s not that I’m nervous to see Hayes. I’m uneasy because I haven’t been in a professional building of this magnitude since I was a kid.

I pay the cab driver and grab my purse. Sliding glass doors the size of a two-story building open before me, and I step into the lobby, which looks and feels more like a modern museum. Voices echo off the tall ceilings, and my heels clip on the polished floor. I head to the circular desk that sits in front of a massive bank of elevators.

“I’m here to see Hayes North,” I say to the pretty young woman.

She hits a few buttons on an iPad, then smiles brightly back at me. “Ms. Osbourne? Mr. North is expecting you.” She gives me brief instructions on how to get to his office, and I repeat them as I climb onto the elevator that goes to the top.

Several suits crowd into the carriage with me, but I refuse to shrink away and make myself small in a corner, regardless of how badly I want to.

I step out on the executive level and take a left. Another pretty young woman directs me to Hayes’ office. I wonder if being a model is a prerequisite to working here.

North Industries is a modern building with glass walls that make most of the offices look like fishbowls. Some are frosted for privacy. When I make the final turn to Hayes’ office, I see that his walls are frosted.

“Hi, there. I’m Vanessa, here to see Hay—Mr. North.” I say to his assistant.

She looks like a young Cameron Diaz. Blonde, bright blue eyes, and a big smile. No wedding ring. A sick voice inside my head tells me that she and Hayes have definitely had sex. I mean, he would have to be blind not to want to see this woman naked. Hayes and his godlike good looks are impossible to ignore. Late work nights, need to relieve stress—

Her speakerphone buzzes, cutting off my train of thought.

“Newton!” Hayes barks. “If you’re not too busy doing whatever it is I pay you for—”

“Excuse me?” I say without thinking. Who the hell does he think he is?

“Ness?”

“You can go on in,” Ms. Newton says with a hint of terror in her eyes.

“Let me tell you something about this man,” I say, not sure Hayes can still hear me through the phone or not. I hope he can. “If you lay down, he’ll walk all over you. Next time he talks to you like that, tell him to eat a dick and walk out. Go see a movie, get all the snacks you want, and put it on the company credit card. He’ll think long and hard about disrespecting you again.”

She seems mortified by the idea of standing up to him. “He’d probably fire me.”

“He won’t.” I try to give her a reassuring smile. “Trust me.”

I turn to push into his office, mumbling about him being such an asshole. When I walk in, he’s standing at the edge of his desk, looking a little uneasy. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“You don’t understand—”

“There is nothing to understand, Hayes. You can’t talk to people like that. It’s mean, unprofessional, and unattractive. Don’t be such a bully.”

He frowns. “Unattractive?”

“Yes!”

He growls. “All right, fine. I’ll try to be nicer.”

“You can’t shove around anyone who doesn’t tell you to go fuck yourself.

And by the way, on behalf of Ms. Newton out there? Go fuck yourself.” I drop into the seat across from his desk and cross my legs.

He groans, and when he turns to go back to his desk chair, I swear I catch him adjusting his dick in his slacks. I guess that answers my question about whether he and his assistant have had sex. Apparently, he’d need her to stick up for herself for him to be even remotely attracted.

“You really do have a kink.”

“Only with you, sweetheart.” He winks. “Would it be inappropriate as your lawyer to tell you that you look stunning today?”

I hold my chin high, feeling the warmth of his compliment wash over me. “Yes, it would be.”

He runs his finger along his lower lip, eyeing my mouth. “Then it would really be unforgivable for me to tell you how badly I want to fuck you on my desk.”

“Hayes!” I nearly choke on his name, giving away the effect his words have on me.

Damn this irresistible sexual pull between us.

“Fine, fine...” He pulls his gaze away. “I’ll behave.”

“Thank you,” I say, even though I miss his eyes on me, the way they heat and undress me. I clear my throat.

“I put together a counteroffer with what I believe is a more than fair price.” He opens a folder and turns it toward me.

I reach for it, and he grips my wrist. “If privacy is the problem, I could fuck you in the bathroom.”

The unexpected proposition makes me laugh. “I’m going to pass, but thank you for the offer.”

He shrugs. “Sure thing.” He releases my wrist but not before rubbing a couple of gentle circles on the underside with the pad of his thumb. “You’ll notice I also made amendments stating you’ll sell the finished product but not the source code. Since you use a similar code for your other apps, you’ll want

to retain that. It'll also protect you from competitors using the code.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” I flip through the contract, noting all the highlighted adjustments when a number slaps me in the face. A number that has six zeroes after it. “Hayes, you’re asking for one million dollars.”

“I am.” He comes around his desk and props his ass on the top of it in front of me. “It’s a fair amount, Ness. Projections show you’d make as much with this app. Worst case scenario is they pass on the purchase, and you end up making that amount over time. Win-win for you.”

“This is insane—do you really think I could get a million?”

He smirks. “I wouldn’t have put it in there if I didn’t.”

“Hayes, this is…” I don’t have words.

I lurch up from my seat and into his arms. Wrapping mine around his neck, I squeeze him tightly. “I can’t believe this. Thank you so much.”

His arms slide around my waist like thick honey, and he buries his face in my hair. “You’re welcome.” I hear him take a deep inhale and feel his muscles relax. “I’d do anything for you. You know that, right?”

My insides get mushy, and I sink against his chest. What if I just give in? Let myself fall into his arms, into his bed, and get lost in the magic we experience whenever we’re together.

Like a douse of cold water from out of the blue, a flash of the letter he sent me with the two-thousand dollars cash appears in my mind’s eye. The same letter Haven found. Cold words written on expensive stationery.

Vanessa,

Get rid of it and we can move on like nothing ever happened.

Love,

H. North

I extract myself from his arms. His brows pinch together in question, but he doesn’t ask. I straighten my dress and hold my chin up high. “How do we

go about this? I approve the changes and..."

He studies my body language, my stiff shoulders, arms crossed over my chest. "I'll send it to your contact as your representative." His narrow eyes drop to my hands that are fisted under my biceps. "If that's okay with you."

"Fine, yes. That's fine." I whirl around and grab my purse. "If that's all?" He doesn't respond.

"Also, I won't be at the condo tonight." No particular reason why other than I think it's best that Hayes and I avoid being alone together as much as possible. "Your sisters-in-law are going to take Haven to see a Broadway show, so she'll be gone as well."

"You didn't want to go with them?"

I was invited, but I declined. "No, I'm not a fan of musicals." When I turn to look at him, his expression is twisted in confusion. The girl he remembers had memorized every song from *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, and *Les Misérables*. "And I think Haven should build these relationships without me. After all, she's going to carry them on without me."

He seems to be attempting a dive into my brain via my eyes with his pointed stare.

"Guess I'll catch you tomorrow. Let me know if you hear back from the Sustain USA people." I open the door and find an older man in a suit leaning into Ms. Newton's personal space so much that she rocks back in her chair for distance. If she slips and tilts forward, her lips will crash into his. "Everything okay out here?" I ask.

Her gaze slides to mine, panic obvious. "Fine, thank you." Her voice shakes.

The man, in no hurry, slowly turns, and I suck in a breath when I see those calculating eyes.

"Mr. North." It's August, Hayes' dad. "It's been a long time."

He blatantly stares at my breasts, and although it feels like a million bugs are crawling over my skin, I refuse to cover myself in front of him. "Do we

know each other?”

Of course, he wouldn't remember me. I met him a handful of times in high school, but Hayes always tried to keep us apart. He never got along well with his dad, and from the stories he'd tell, August North is a grade-A piece of shit.

“August,” Hayes rumbles from somewhere behind me. “What do you need?”

His dad seems entertained as he straightens from his position in Ms. Newton's face. She breathes a big sigh of relief once his attention is on me. “I wanted to come by and pick up the Steiner contract.”

“Come on in. I'll grab it for you.” Hayes seems to want to draw August inside his office.

August smiles like a snake. “I'm sorry I don't remember you.” He picks up my hand and brings it to his lips, but I manage to pull my hand away before his lips touch it. He frowns. “Don't be angry, honey. I meet a lot of women. I can't be expected to remember every single one.”

“Vanessa Osbourne. We met about eighteen years ago. I wouldn't expect you to remember.”

His expression turns hard and angry as if he's worried I'm here to accuse him of statutory rape or something. No thanks, asshole.

“I dated Hayes.”

His entire demeanor brightens. “Oh, you must be the woman with his child.”

My brows pinch together. “He told you.”

“Of course, he did. I'm his father.”

Not one he ever had a real relationship with. Although, maybe they reconciled their relationship over the last eighteen years.

“Vanessa was just leaving.” I feel and hear Hayes a lot closer than he was earlier.

“No need to rush off,” August says and puts his arm over my shoulders.

“I’d like to get to know you better.” He begins to lead me back into Hayes’ office.

“I really need to go.” I attempt to duck out from his hold, but his grip on my shoulders tightens.

“August,” Hayes growls in warning. “She said no.”

“Just a minute or two.” August pouts, and the site of a grown-ass man sticking his bottom lip out makes me want to punch him. “Surely you can spare a minute or two for the grandfather of your son.”

“Daughter,” I clarify with a hint of *fuck you* in my tone.

“Daughter, that’s right.” He guides me to a couch in Hayes’ office and sits down next to me, so close our thigh’s touch. I try to scoot away, get to the far side of the love seat, but he has me pinned between him and the arm of the couch.

“Tell me, what is her name again?”

“Haven,” Hayes answers for me. His body is tense, his face emotionless, and I wonder whose side he’s on, mine or August’s. Not that there should be sides, and yet I feel like August’s presence is drawing a line in the sand.

“*Haven*. I assume my son has made you a more than generous cash offer.”

I blink and shake my head. “Cash. Offer—what?”

“August, I don’t need your help with this,” Hayes grumbles.

Help with this? Help with what?

“Hayes and I discussed this recently, and he’s willing to make a cash offer so that all this unexpected news won’t be too disruptive.”

“Cash offer? Disruptive?” The pitch of my tone rises higher and higher, and anger and irritation roll through my gut. “I wasn’t aware that our presence was disruptive.” He’s the one who insisted we move in with him and stay in New York for a month. My jaw clenches so hard I swear I see stars.

“Don’t listen to him,” Hayes says, sounding more bored than angry.

“I think we can all agree that there’s no fairytale ending here for the two of you. The most we can do is send you away with enough money to buy a nice home, put little Maven through college—”

“Haven,” Hayes barks.

“And the money should take care of her until she gets married and becomes someone else’s problem, if you know what I mean,” he says with forced laughter.

He just referred to Haven as a *problem*? This guy has some fucking nerve. I wrangle in the desire to launch myself at his throat like an angry momma bear and rip his head off his shoulders. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Women.” He lifts his brows as if his response is self-explanatory.

I add misogynist to the list of August North’s disgusting attributes. “Mr. North—”

“Please, honey, call me August.”

“I’m *Vanessa*. Not honey,” I say my name slowly and over pronounced. “Like I was saying, *Mr. North*, I raised our daughter without anyone’s help for seventeen years, and I do not need North help, now or ever.”

He leans in so close that I have to lean away, just like Ms. Newton was doing at her desk. “This isn’t my first rodeo. I know what women like you—”

“Women like me? Please tell me what kind of woman I am since clearly you know me so well.”

He grins, and it’s all teeth. “I have four sons. You think you’re the first woman to get pregnant and reappear out of nowhere?”

“You do realize it takes two people to get pregnant, right? We don’t actually do that on our own. Although,” I chuckle, “talking to men like you sure makes me wish we could.”

“Enough of this.” His eyes narrow, and whatever charm he tried to use on me is gone. “I will not do this back and forth.”

I shrug. “You started it.”

“How much do you want?”

“Hmm... now that you’re offering.” I tap my chin. “I want a private island, two million dollars, one of those cute capuchin monkeys, and a unicorn.”

I hear Hayes chuckle.

“Oh! And a private jet. ‘Cause how else will I get out to my island? Duh!”

“You think this is a joke?” he sneers.

“If I’m being honest? Yeah, I do.”

He swings his head around to Hayes, who looks wholly entertained from his vantage point a few feet away. “You try to talk to her.”

Hayes shrugs. “I don’t need to. I think she was clear on her demands.”

The old man stands so quickly his knees crack, and there’s a little part of me that hopes that hurt. “If she runs to the press—”

“And tells them I have a daughter?” Hayes frowns. “You think that’s something I want to hide?”

“Reputation is everything.”

That’s when it happens. Hayes’ smile is a reminder of simpler times. Back when our biggest worries were getting caught making out in the janitor’s closet at school or passing the next physics test. Straight white teeth, the hint of a dimple, and those lips spread wide—my God, he’s still the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. “Vanessa and Haven are the only good things in my life. I’d tell the press myself if I thought they were actually interested.”

August points a vicious finger in Hayes’ face. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, boy, but you need to snap out of it.”

“Boy?” The smile dissolves into a hard jaw and thin lips. “I think it’s time you leave.”

August tugs on the lapels of his suit coat, snags a file from Hayes, and heads for the door.

“One more thing.” Hayes remains where he is, leaning against a

bookshelf, arms crossed at his chest. He only turns his chin slightly in August's direction but keeps his eyes on me. "Speak to Vanessa like that again, and I'll knock you out, old man."

"You're going to regret making threats to me." He storms out of the room.

"Doubt it!" Hayes yells, then turns his attention to me.

I stand and cross to him. "You could've jumped in sooner."

He turns to face me, only a foot or two between us. "Are you kidding? And miss watching you rip August a new one? That's the most fun I've had in years." His eyes flare on my lips. "That mouth." He groans.

Now it's my turn to smile. "Careful, your kink is showing."

"I don't deny it. Your strength has always been a huge turn-on."

"Happy to hear my stuff still works."

He grips himself between his legs, and I should be repulsed, right? I should find him handling his hard-on vulgar. Right? "Oh, it works."

My stomach tumbles, and heat blooms between my hips, then drips lower.

He slips a hand behind my neck and pulls me closer. "You feel it too, yeah? This shit between us is fucking intense." His thumb comes around to the front of my throat, and he holds me with gentle pressure. "If I kissed you right now..."

"We'd end up on the couch."

He smirks. "I don't think I'd make it that far."

I'm nearly panting. Has my body been so starved for pleasure that I'm willing to jump into bed with my ex-boyfriend and further confuse an already complicated situation?

"You said *our daughter*," he says softly. The minty heat of his breath brushes against my lips. "With August, you referred to Haven as *our daughter*." His lips twitch.

"That's because she is."

His lips crash down on mine without warning. His tongue invades my mouth, ripping the breath from my lungs. One hand in my hair, the other around my neck, he holds me captive and in complete control. My legs wobble, and my head fogs with a desire to strip down and give myself over to the pull.

I arch my back, cling to his arms, and kiss him back. Oh, how I missed this. The all-consuming need and lightning bolts of pure lust. The safety of falling apart in his capable hands.

A quick three knocks sound from the door, followed by a click of the handle. “Mr. North—oh, my God, I’m so sorry!” Ms. Newton exclaims.

I break the kiss, breathing hard, and look up into Hayes’ lusty-heavy, angry eyes. “Newton!”

I lift a brow, waiting for his promise to try harder with his assistant to kick in.

He snaps his jaw and grinds his teeth. “Ms. Newton.” He sounds a little calmer, but his voice shakes with rage. “If you wouldn’t mind giving me a little privacy?”

“Yes, of course, sir, it’s just there’s a woman on the phone. She says she’s your daughter?”

Hayes whirls around, and in three long strides, he’s at his desk phone. “Haven? Are you okay?”

I scamper to my purse and dig out my phone and see that I don’t have a single missed call or text from her.

He meets my eyes while listening to whatever it is Haven is saying. My heart pounds in my chest. “What is it?”

Finally, his focused expression softens. He looks confused but amused.

What? I mouth.

He holds up a finger. If I were closer, I’d grab it and break it. “I’ll see what I can do,” he says. Another series of mm-hmms, and he says goodbye.

“What is it? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.” He comes around his desk and takes a seat next to me on the love seat. He pulls my hand into his and absently traces the lines of my fingers. “She’s been invited to a music festival at Lake George. Apparently, she thinks she’ll have a better chance of getting permission to go if I ask you.”

“No way! That’s over three hours away. Who would she be going with?”

“I guess David offered to take her and her friends when they come to town. She said they’d camp—”

“Camp? At a music festival?” I’m already shaking my head. “Do you know what happens at these things?”

He nods. Looking at my hand, he flips it over in his and runs a fingertip from my palm to my wrist, making me shiver. “I know what happened when we went to a music festival in Camden.”

My cheeks heat at the reminder. We’d been there all day. Hayes managed to buy beer with his fake ID, and by the time night fell, I was buzzed and sweaty from dancing. His hands were all over me, and we made out in a group of thousands of people. Hands in each other’s pants, the two of us anonymous in a sea of strangers. It was voyeuristic and the sexiest thing I can remember us doing.

He frowns. “Okay, I see your point.”

TWENTY

Hayes

I wrap things up early for the day. It's not even five o'clock, and I'm grabbing my keys and phone. Haven's going to dinner and a show, and Vanessa must think I'm stupid if she thinks I don't see through her plans to be out of the house tonight. She doesn't trust herself alone with me. That much is obvious.

The chemistry between us has become unbearable. I respect the fight she's putting up, but there's only one way I know to put out a fire, and ignoring it is not it.

I snag my coat to slip it on just as Hudson steps hesitantly into the open door of my office. He turns back to Ms. Newton's desk, then looks back at me as if he's adding something up, and the result doesn't make sense.

"I sent her home early," I answer his unspoken question.

His brows pop. "What happened?"

"Nothing." I slip my arms into my coat.

He tilts his head, studying me. "What did she do?"

"Already said nothing. I'm getting out of here early. Figured I didn't need her here if I'm not here."

He frowns. "You figured."

“Hudson, you got something to say? I really want to get home.” And catch Vanessa before she sneaks out of the house.

“The only time you’ve ever sent any employee home early was because you fired them on the spot.”

“I didn’t fire her.”

“I’m confused.”

“I see that.” I push past him and head for the elevators.

He follows. “Either you’ve been given two weeks to live, or you’re having a legitimate change of heart.”

I slam my fist on the elevator button, willing it to hurry up. “Why does everyone always assume I’m dying?”

“Ahh, okay. I see what this is.” He chuckles, and the sound makes me want to shove him.

I decide that ignoring him is best.

Clearly, my twin can’t take a fucking hint.

“They broke through.”

I fake boredom at his elevator therapy, even though I know exactly what he’s implying, and he’s probably right.

“Vanessa and Haven have turned you into a human being.”

“Fuck off,” I growl. Where is the elevator?

He shrugs one shoulder. “Maybe half human.”

“Is there something I can do for you?”

“The ladies are all going out tonight, so I thought you might want to meet us at Alex’s for a brotherly poker game. Thousand-dollar buy-in.”

“That doesn’t sound brotherly.”

He shrugs.

“Can’t. I have plans.” Finally, the elevator doors open. “See you tomorr
—”

He steps into the carriage with me. “What plans?”

“Did I miss the exchange where I granted you access to my hour-by-hour

itinerary?”

“I’m just wondering who you have plans with. Ellie?”

“No, dickhead. Vanessa.”

He squints. “She’s going to the show tonight.”

“She’s not.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t fucking know, Hudson. Ask her.”

He’s frowning hard. “Huh, I thought for sure she’d want to go along.”

The elevator stops more times than I’d like, picking up people on different floors on its way to the lobby and basement parking. The mass exodus reminds me that most people leave the office at five and makes me wonder what the hell they do for the seven hours between then and sleep.

“You and Vanessa, huh?”

I glare at my living, breathing reflection. “What?”

“You two are making a go of it.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You’re together. Or trying to be. You know, a relationship—”

“I don’t think that’s what we’re doing.”

His brows pinch together. “Then what are you doing—”

“I don’t know. Hooking up, giving her orgasms, kissing her as often as she’ll let me.”

A deep voice clears from the back corner of the elevator, reminding me we’re not alone.

“Wow, okay,” Hudson says just as the last stop in the lobby lets out everyone except us. Next stop, basement parking. “I thought you’d grown up a bit since they got here. Guess I was wrong.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means Vanessa deserves better. She’s the mother of your child, Hayes, and a damn good one. A million times better than our own. She deserves to be loved by a grown-up. Not some horny dick with the emotional capacity of

a teenage boy.”

The doors slide open just in time because spending even one more second in this tiny space would mean fists flying. “You don’t know shit about shit.”

I step off and make my way to my car, refusing to engage Hudson for another minute.

“I know you!” he calls out. “If you don’t get it together, you’re going to lose them. Again!”

I spin around. “Fuck you!” But it’s too late. The doors are already closed. A woman scurries to her car, and I hear her locks click.

Hudson’s had Lillian for half a second, and he thinks he knows everything about relationships. But he doesn’t know Vanessa. He doesn’t know what we share or how we feel when we’re together.

I don’t know what the future brings, and I refuse to spend a second worrying about it. Right now, all I know is I want Vanessa. I want her smiles, her scowls, her smart fucking mouth. I want her under me, around me, all over me.

For now, that’s all I can deal with.

I POP out of the private elevator to find the house quiet. Dammit, I hope Vanessa didn’t sneak out on me. The scent of perfume permeates the air from the direction of her and Haven’s rooms, and my heart sinks.

“Vanessa?” I yell.

“I’m in here!” her voice comes from the kitchen.

Every muscle in my body relaxes.

I find Vanessa sitting cross-legged on a stool at the island, the slit in her dress cut nearly to her hip, and a glass of red wine in her hand. The perfume I scented from the hallway isn’t the same as I smell on her. That one was sweeter, fruity. Vanessa’s is something more subtle and organic.

“Haven leave?”

“Yes, the *aunties*, as she calls them, picked her up about thirty minutes ago.” She turns her phone toward me and shows a photo of Jordan, Lillian, Gabriella, and Haven standing in front of Alexander’s black Escalade. Haven is as tall as Jordan and looks just as grown up in a little black dress. “They have a chauffeur and everything.”

I tug off my coat, drop my things, and pull down a glass to pour myself a scotch. “And where are you off to?”

She takes a sip of her wine. “I have reservations at The Cellar.”

I pop the top on the bottle and lean my ass against the counter. “Reservations for one?”

“Are you asking me if I’m going on a date?”

I don’t respond, just sip my drink.

“Yes, for one. I enjoy eating alone.”

“Do you?” I don’t believe her. But I do believe she’d rather eat alone than stay here with me, fighting against the magnetic pull between us. “I could join you.”

“Did you misunderstand the part where I said I enjoy eating alone?”

I shake my head. “No. But I do know the chef. If I go with you, we’ll get the best table and a list of private specials.”

“You’re bribing your way into my dinner plans with promises of VIP treatment?”

“You could say no.”

“Private specials do sound nice...”

“Let me grab a shower. I’ll be out in ten.”

“If you’re late, I’m leaving without you!”

I light a fire under my feet because I absolutely believe she will.

WE STEP out of the car and into the muggy summer night in Greenwich Village. The Cellar is always packed, no matter the night, and I wonder how Vanessa managed to get a reservation. I meet her on the curb after handing my keys off, and I offer her my arm to walk inside.

“This isn’t a date,” she claims before taking my elbow.

I hide a grin. “Not a date. Got it.”

“Mr. North,” the hostess greets me, surprised. “I didn’t see you on the reservations tonight.” She taps frantically on her iPad.

“Reservation is under Annabella Osbourne.”

The hostess’s eyes widen. “Mrs. Osbourne, of course.” Her gaze bounces between us, probably wondering how I managed to get the Senator of New York’s wife on my arm and out for dinner. “This way.”

She guides us through the restaurant to a small table for two that’s tucked away in a corner with a view of the Old-World French bar.

I pull out Vanessa’s chair, then claim my own, making sure to inch it just a little closer to hers. “Did you want to sit somewhere else? I could have us moved.”

She’s busy taking in the hand-troweled plaster walls, exposed brick, and rugged wood beams. “No, this is perfect.”

I place my napkin on my lap. “I wondered how you were able to get a reservation.”

“The Osbourne name opens doors.” She folds and refolds her napkin in her lap. “Not for their own daughter and granddaughter, but,” she sighs, “details.”

I want to share her disappointment and rage at how her parents treated her and Haven, but am I really one to talk? I keep my mouth shut on the topic.

We order a bottle of wine, and the chef makes an appearance at our table, telling us about an array of small plates he’d like to share with us tonight. Ness looks about as excited as I’ve ever seen her. Her wide smile and enthusiasm steal Chef Jacques’ heart, and I don’t blame him. A man is

helpless against her kind of zeal.

“I’ve never seen someone get so excited about foie gras and truffle butter before.”

She grins, and a slight blush kisses her cheeks. “Two things you would never find in Manitou Springs.”

“Do you miss the city?” I sit back in my chair, casually rubbing my thumb along the stem of my wine glass, hoping she can’t sense how eager I am for her answer.

“No.”

Fuck.

To avoid her seeing me frown, I sip my wine.

“I miss aspects of it.” She tilts her head back, gazing up at an artfully rusted light fixture. “There are so many cultures to experience here. Manitou Springs, not so much. But I don’t miss the crowds or the lack of sun and nature. I’m glad I was able to raise Haven around trees and wildlife rather than cabs and concrete.”

I find myself smiling. I’m glad Haven had that, too.

“I take it you’ve been here a lot.” She swirls her wine in her glass. “The hostess seemed familiar with you.”

I nod. “I have. I like great food.”

God, she’s pretty. The way the candlelight illuminates her skin and throws golden flecks from her eyes. Her hair shines like polished glass—

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I wouldn’t usually pull out my cell while with Vanessa, but I think about Haven and take a peek.

A text.

From Ellie.

Oh my God! Is that her?

I’m still trying to sort out what the hell she’s talking about when another

text from her rolls in.

I'm at the bar!

I slide my gaze to the bar and see an eagerly grinning Ellie sitting with Mitchell Goldberg, one of her clients. She waves discreetly.

“Someone you know?” Vanessa says in a cold voice. She followed my gaze to Ellie and saw her wave.

“No,” I mumble and stuff my phone back in my pocket.

With stiff shoulders, Ness tops off her wine.

My neck is tense, and I rub the sore muscles, wondering how I can get the night back on track.

“Do you have any baby pictures of Haven?” I don't think a restaurant is the best place to ask, but I know the surefire way to put warmth back in Vanessa's eyes is to talk about Haven. “I'd love to see them.”

My plan works like a charm. I scoot closer to Vanessa, and she scrolls through her phone, showing me photos of Haven as a baby, toddler, and kid. She tells me stories about so many of Haven's firsts, and the joy those stories bring her makes me jealous that I wasn't there too. But the next best thing is watching her relive them. I only wish every other photo and every other story didn't involve that family-stealing lumberjack they're both so crazy about.

Our conversation stays light. The food is exceptional, and when the last empty plate is cleared, we're both riding a warm red wine and French butter buzz.

“I can't wait to get into my pajamas.”

I stand and pull out her chair. “I love it when you talk dirty.”

She looks up at me. “We didn't get the bill yet.”

“It's taken care of.”

“How?”

“I have a tab.”

She drops her napkin on the table and stands. “How often do you come here?”

“A lot.” I offer her my elbow. “Now come on. I need to get my date home and into her pajamas.”

She takes my elbow with a roll of her eyes. “Not a date.”

“Fine, my *not-a-date* needs her pajamas.”

We walk through the restaurant and right past Mitchell and Ellie’s table. She looks at me with a smile, and I almost expect her to give me a thumbs up. Maybe she does. I wouldn’t know. I refuse to let Ness catch me looking at her.

I say please and thank you to the valet, knowing Vanessa is listening, and on the ride home, she hits all the buttons on the radio, then lands on an old rock station and turns it up. She bobs her head and sings along, and I’m reminded of how free Ness has always been to be herself—sing loud, speak her mind, stand up for what’s right.

It isn’t until we’re in the private elevator on the way up to my place that a thick tension settles around us. Expectation mixes with nerves, and she refuses to meet my eyes.

Once the elevator opens, she scurries off to her room.

“Meet me in the kitchen for a nightcap?”

“Um... okay. I’m going to change.” She’s hesitant. That much is obvious. Whether she’s hesitant because she doesn’t want me or she’s hesitant because she does, I can’t tell.

I change out of my slacks and button-up into a pair of sweatpants but leave off a shirt because it’s warm out, and I thought we could sit on the patio. It has nothing to do with the fact that Vanessa always gets a little tongue-tied when I’m shirtless.

When I head back into the kitchen, I pull down two glasses and a bottle of cognac.

The sound of shuffling slippers has my pulse picking up, and when

Vanessa steps into the kitchen, I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“What?” she says innocently as if her play isn’t totally obvious.

I dressed to turn her on. She clearly dressed to turn me off.

Wearing black baggy pants and a matching loose button-up shirt, she’s made sure to cover every inch of skin up to her neck and leave everything to the imagination. Not a single inch of fabric hugs her form. It all looks two sizes too big. Her face is washed clean, and her hair is pulled back. And here she thinks these clothes and her dressed-down appearance are enough to turn me away?

She’s just giving me more to unwrap.

I offer her a glass, and she takes it with two hands. I don’t miss the slight tremor in her fingers. “Patio?”

Gone is the girl who was singing Billy Joel in the car on the ride home. She’s quiet as she follows me outside. I hate that she’s nervous around me. She’s never had issues speaking up before. Why now?

We settle on the couch outside, and I leave over a foot of space between us. I let her get a couple of sips in before I point out the obvious.

“Ness, it’s me. You don’t have to be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.” She sits on her hand, probably so I won’t see it tremble.

“Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Hey,” I say softly and finally get her eyes. “*Talk to me.*”

“Ugh, fine, okay.” She scrunches up her nose. “You’re wearing sweatpants.”

Not what I was expecting.

“And...” her gaze darts between my legs before jumping forward to the skyline. “I don’t know if dudes know what wearing sweatpants does to their... their...”

“Dicks.”

“Yeah.”

“We know.”

She jerks her head around. “You do?”

I smirk.

Her eyes narrow. “That’s just mean.”

“Mean? Or effective.”

Her gaze drops to my bulge. “Ugh. It’s like a magnet to my retina!”

“It’s okay to look at me, Vanessa. I like your eyes on me.”

“No, it’s not okay.” She takes a gulp of liquor and cringes. “Way too tempting. I can’t think straight.”

Thank God. “Then I suppose this is a good time to tell you your pajamas are not giving off the vibe you were hoping for.”

“Vibe? Please.” She scoffs. “I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

I tilt my head, sip my drink, and watch her cheeks flood with color. “Okay.”

She whips her head around. “Why do you say it like that?”

“I said okay.”

“I know what you said, but why did you say it like that?”

I lick my lips, feeling the flutter of erotic frustration. “You’re picking a fight.”

“You’re picking a fight!” She leans forward to set her glass down on the coffee table. “You have a tone. I’m simply asking you to explain what you mean when you use it.”

“*Vanessa.*” I’m warning her to stop tempting me with that mouth, or I’ll bite.

She turns her whole body toward me, her bent knee and thigh resting on the couch. “You know what your problem is?”

“No, but I bet you’re going to tell me.” And my dick gets hard in anticipation.

“You think you know—”

“If you want me, why don’t you stop fucking talking and come get on me.”

Her breath catches, and she reels back an inch, but her eyes drop to my chest and slide down to the growing bulge in my sweatpants, and she bites her lip when her eyes lift to my mouth. “Yeah, fuck it.”

She lunges. I catch her hips and position her over my lap. I hold her back, avoiding her mouth so I can watch as I thrust up between her open legs.

“Oh, my God,” she breathes, and her muscles turn to jelly in my hands. “We shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” I roll my hips again, coaxing a long, delicious moan from her throat. “Our bodies know what they want, Ness. Let’s give our brains the night off.” I use my grip on her hips to move her up and down my thick length until she’s practically vibrating with need.

She drops her lips to mine, and I pull her bottom lip between my teeth.

“No kissing until we’re on the same page.”

She drops her mouth to my neck and kisses me there. I slide my hands around to grip her ass, and her back arches as she grinds against my dick.

I tilt my head back against the couch while she sucks and bites at my throat, clavicle, and shoulder. If she decides this is all we do all night, I’d die happy. She works her hips in waves, deep rolls, and teasing thrusts, pleasuring herself against me. I lie there, a mere object for her enjoyment until she gives me permission to take over. When she does, *if* she does, she better hold on because I’m going to annihilate every erotic zone on her body and find ones she never knew existed.

I close my eyes and sink into the feeling of her against me. I never thought I’d experience this again. My Vanessa, the only woman I ever loved—or at least I thought I did. I wonder if I’m even capable. Her lips are wet and firm, soft as rose petals, as she drags them across my throat. Her blunt teeth bite, and her slick tongue soothes the ache. A sick part of me wants her to make me bleed. Wants her to leave a mark on me that will never fade.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Hayes.” A shaky plea from her lips. “Please.”

“I’m right here.” I put one hand on her hip and slide the other into the hair at her nape, pushing past the elastic band and gripping at the root. “Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.”

She answers by pressing her hips deeper into mine. “More.”

I hum my approval. “Are you sure? Because once we start this, you know neither of us will want to stop.”

“I’m burning up,” she says in a pained whisper.

“You want me to fix that?”

When she doesn’t answer me in words but instead speeds the downward thrust of her hips, I fist her hair tighter and pull her head back. Her green eyes spark with a mix of desire and aggression. This is the Vanessa I remember. Uninhibited. Driven by desire.

“I’m going to need to hear you say it,” I growl.

“Asshole,” she bites out.

I smirk. “That’s not nice.” I lean in and lick up the center of her throat to her lips, where I whisper, “What do you want?” I rain kisses along her jaw.

Her lips find my ear. “I want you to fuck me.”

I surge off the couch. She wraps her legs around my hips. I nearly rip the sliding glass door off its track and clear the dining room, living room, and hallway in a matter of seconds. I kick my bedroom door closed, then spin around and slam her back against it. The force of our collision makes us both moan.

Our mouths fuse together. I slide my hand up her shirt and cup her bare breast. She arches into my touch, her nipples rough against my palm. Her body is primed, flaming with a fire she’s begging me to put out. I take hold of the thin fabric and, in one tug, hear buttons bounce off the floor. The top falls open, and I lean back to take in the beauty of her top falling down her arms and her heaving chest.

“Damn.” I bite my lip to put out the burn of wanting to bite her. I don’t want to hurt her, but I so badly want to feel her flesh between my teeth.

I bury my face between her breasts and work my hand inside her pants, around her hip, and between her open legs.

“Fuck,” I groan when my fingers find her wet and ready.

I suck one nipple into my mouth, flick the tip with my tongue, and then lose the battle of control and bite the pebbled flesh.

She gasps and rides my fingers as much as she can while pinned to the door. “Hayes,” she whimpers.

So much is communicated in the sound of my name.

She wants more. I’ll need to save the playing for another time.

I carry her to my bed and lay her down on the pillows. Her top hangs off one arm, and she shakes it loose. In one swipe, I have her pants off and toss them aside.

Shit. A condom.

“Hold on.” I lean over her and press a kiss to her wet, swollen mouth. “Don’t fall asleep this time.”

I dart into the closet and grab a condom, then think again and grab three more. When I walk back to the bed, I encounter a sight that has me stumbling.

Vanessa, completely naked and propped up on her elbows. Her thighs open, knees bent, and the paradise between her legs on full display. I grasp at my racing heart, wondering if it’s possible for anticipation to give you a heart attack.

“You’re a work of art.” My voice sounds like broken glass dragged over wet gravel.

“What kind of museums are you going to?” she says, her voice as rough as mine.

Her gaze is fixed on the space between my hips, the obvious tent in my sweatpants and quickly growing wet spot. I should be embarrassed by the

evidence of my lack of control, but with Vanessa, there is never space for shame. We were always a safe space for experimentation, exploration, and sexual vulnerability.

I dip my thumb into the elastic of my sweatpants and slowly push the fabric down, revealing my erection in inches, from tip to base.

She licks her parted lips, her eyes wide and wild with what I imagine to be very dirty ideas of what she'd like to do with me. My pants still cling to my hips, only my sex exposed.

I toss her a foil-wrapped condom, and it lands on her belly. "Whenever you're ready, you let me know." Dropping to my knees at the end of the bed, I grab her ankles and yank her forward until her ass falls into my hands. I dive between her legs like a man starving.

I remember the first time Vanessa pushed my head down, silently asking for me to kiss her between her legs. The first taste of her, and I knew I'd be addicted. And nothing has changed. I kiss her as if I were kissing her mouth, lips, tongue, and teeth, deep and hard, light and shallow until she's writhing. Her hands fist the comforter, and her heels press against my back, holding me close, coaxing me deeper.

Her back arches off the bed, and she detonates. I groan into the rhythmic throbbing against my tongue as I drink down every pulse. Savor every flutter. So fucking perfect.

The sound of tearing foil brings my eyes up to her, pulling the condom from its package. Like an eager puppy, I scramble to my feet and drop my sweatpants.

"Lie down," she commands and sits up on the bed. Her hair is a mess and her eyes hooded, and my heart squeezes at the site.

I lie on my back, and she straddles my thighs. She rolls the condom on slowly, and I have to grip the base hard to keep from exploding into the waiting latex.

Crawling over me, she lays her palms flat on my pecs, then slowly lowers

herself on top of me.

“Holy shit,” I grit out through clenched teeth. Her body is liquid fire, and I curse the barrier between us that’s keeping me from experiencing her fully.

“You feel so good,” she moans as she rocks her hips back and forth, taking me deeper. I feel every inch of me inside her. “Hayes.”

The way she says my name has my abs flexing to thrust upward and split her in two. “Fuck me,” I growl.

Her head drops back. “Yes.”

And then, she moves.

TWENTY-ONE

Vanessa

Three condoms.

That's how many it took to take the edge off the sexual tension that had been building between us.

I'm sweat-soaked, breathing hard from my fourth orgasm—fifth? I lost count. I turn on the pillow to see Hayes's foot on the pillow next to me. We destroyed the bed. Nothing left but the fitted sheet and the top sheet, which Hayes draped over my hips just seconds ago.

"You have sexy feet," I say, still trembling from the orgasmic aftershock.

He wiggles his toes. "Are they still attached to my body?" He sounds like he's smiling. "I can't feel them."

I laugh, the sound low and sexy, which surprises even me. "I think so. My vision's still blurry after number four."

"Five," he corrects me.

"Right."

The room is quiet except for the sound of us breathing. Sleep reaches for me, and I want to run into its arms and fall, but I don't want to wake up sticky and naked in Hayes' bed.

"I should take a shower." I yawn.

He grunts as if he's already half asleep.

I contemplate giving myself five more minutes, but if my history with a snooze button is anything to go by, I know how that'll turn out.

Now or never.

I push my sore but deliciously sated body up off the mattress and groan as my muscles protest.

"Hold on." Hayes pops off the bed and stumbles to get on his feet like a drunk man. He disappears into the bathroom, and I hear the shower turn on.

He comes back to the bed with a towel wrapped around his waist and reaches for my hands. "Come on."

"I meant I need to take a shower in my room." I give him my hands anyway, and he pulls me to my feet, then scoops me up and into his arms.

"Nope. I'm not ready to let you go yet." He carries me easily into the bathroom, and I try not to notice how good we look in the mirror's reflection. How tiny I look in his big, strong arms.

His shower is big enough for four people, with the water coming from a rain showerhead in the ceiling. He walks us both into the glass stall, and when he lowers me to my feet, I notice he somehow lost his towel along the way.

"I don't think I can go again until after I've had some sleep."

He walks me back two steps until the warm spray falls over my head and down my body. I tilt my chin up, allowing the water to wash over my face. "I'm not here to take you, Ness. I'm here to take care of you."

He squeezes a liberal amount of body wash into his hands and rubs them together. Starting at my shoulders, he gently washes me. His brows drop as he focuses on the task. Nothing about his touch is sexual, but it's not without feeling, either. He spends extra time kneading the tight muscles in my neck and shoulders, drops to his knees to wash my thighs and calves, and sits me on the built-in bench to rub firm circles into my feet. I slump against the tile wall and watch as this big, handsome, successful man—who doesn't have to

kneel for anyone, much less serve anyone—kneels before me to do just that.

When he's satisfied that I'm clean, he does a quick wash of himself, then wraps me in a towel before he does the same.

"I should go back to my room now."

He frowns, his eyes shuttered, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. Although it doesn't take a mind reader to know he doesn't want me to go. What man wouldn't want the opportunity for sex sleeping a foot away from him every night?

"We should do this again sometime," I say playfully, trying to reassure him.

His frown deepens. "Right, yeah." He heads to his closet, and while he's gone, I find my pajamas and slip them on. Without shirt buttons, I hold the two halves together and try to make his bed.

"You don't have to do that," he says, without warmth in his voice.

"Are you sure? I can change the sheets if you—"

"Don't touch the sheets."

I recoil a little at his tone.

He's probably tired and wants me out of his space so he can sleep.

"I, uh... I'll see you in the morning." I duck out of his room and scurry down the hallway, grateful to get back into my room before Haven gets home.

I grab a clean pair of pajamas and brush my teeth. I stare at myself in the mirror. Red cheeks, swollen lips, and runny mascara. Thank God Haven didn't see me like this. I lean closer and see a red spot on my neck below my ear. I shiver, remembering the feel of Hayes' teeth. I have a bruise on my inner thigh, which, for some reason, makes me smile.

That was the best sex of my whole life.

And knowing Hayes, I'll get the opportunity to do it again. It's irresponsible, sure, but it's not like I'm hooking up with a stranger. No one knows my body like Hayes. He was the first to introduce me to sex, and I

think in doing so, he unwittingly programmed our bodies for each other. There's no other explanation for why we fit together so well, how we instinctively know what the other wants. If there's anyone I should be having guiltless booty-call sex with, it's Hayes.

Giddy with butterflies but also dead-ass tired, I crawl into bed and check the stalker app on my phone. Haven is still at the show, and she's in good hands with her extended family.

On that thought, I fall asleep with a peace I haven't felt in years.

I CAN COUNT on one hand the number of times I've slept in. And every single time was because I was sick—once with the flu, the other with food poisoning. Motherhood does that to a person. If I wasn't up early with an infant, I was up early with worry.

Which makes rolling out of bed at nine o'clock in the morning not only surprising but worrisome. And the dull ache in my muscles makes me doubly concerned. I throw on walking clothes, thinking some exercise will do me good and chase away any virus that might be soldiering up in my body. When I step out into the hallway, I hear two very distinct voices in the kitchen—Hayes and Haven.

What is he still doing here? He's usually gone early.

A nervous panic slithers through me. I knew I'd have to face him eventually after all we did last night, but I hoped I would have the day to prepare.

Act casual, I tell myself as I take a fortifying breath.

“Good morning,” I say as I join them. “Everyone sleep okay?”

“Dammit,” Haven grumbles and slaps a twenty-dollar bill into Hayes' palm.

“Told you.” He's wearing a dark blue suit, crisp white shirt, and gold tie.

His hair is combed to perfection, with that tiny bit of chaos on top that gives his professional look a dangerous edge. He's clean-shaven and looks as well rested as I've ever seen him. The whole package makes my stomach flutter.

"What was the bet?" I ask, not all that happy about them making bets about me behind my back.

"I told him you must be sick because you never sleep in. He said he was sure you weren't sick but just exhausted after all the physical activity you've been getting."

My face flames, and my jaw hits the floor.

I glare at Hayes, who's conveniently itching his jaw.

"I thought you'd come out here in your pajamas looking like death. Hayes bet me you'd be wide awake and refreshed."

"For your information, I do feel a little under the weather."

"Ah-ha!" Haven snags the twenty back from Hayes.

His brows pinch with concern. "What's wrong?"

I shrug. "I don't know."

He breaks from his position at the island and starts moving around behind me.

"I never sleep this long, and I'm feeling a little achy."

He sets a mug of steaming hot water in front of me and drops in two green tea bags. "Achy?" he says, and I swear I hear him smiling.

"Thank you," I say as he hands me the tea and I cup it between my palms. "Do you have a thermometer laying around—*oh...*"

His big body presses into me from behind. One hand grips my hip and the other slides up to rest on my forehead.

I look at Haven to see if she notices how familiar Hayes is being, but with my hip below the countertop, she can't see his possessive hold.

"Hmm..." he breathes against my temple, the scent of his cologne mixed with minty breath making me shiver.

Haven drops her gaze to her phone, texting.

“You’re sore? Where?” His hand slips from my hip to splay at my lower belly. His fingertips brush against my pubic bone. I startle and jerk my hips back. My ass presses firmly against him, and he lets out a guttural groan. I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“You feel *really* good to me,” he says in a deep voice against my hair.

“No fever then?”

All at once, he’s gone, and I sway from the loss of balance. “Nope.”

Feeling way too proud of my tiny victory, I sip my tea, holding on to a secret smile.

“You’re probably just sore from all the ah... *sightseeing* you’ve been doing lately.” Hayes reclaims his spot a respectable distance away but winks without Haven seeing.

I flush a little, remembering how my eyes roamed his naked body last night. My hands explored. I tasted and experienced Hayes North until I memorized every dip and curve. I’m not sick. I have a sex hangover.

“Okay,” Haven says to Hayes. “Lia and Meg said their parents are fine with that.”

“Fine with what?” I interject because, hello, am I not the mom here?

“Oh, Hayes said he’d let us go to the music festival if we agreed to—”

“Hold on. Since when does Hayes give permission?”

“First off, I didn’t give permission.” He lifts a brow at Haven. “I said that the only way I’d be comfortable with you going is if you had James take you and stay with you at your campsite.”

Excuse me. “Who the fuck is James?”

“I also said that you’d have to get your mom’s permission. Not mine.”

Haven rolls her eyes. “That’s what I meant.”

“James,” Hayes continues, now addressing me, “is an ex-SEAL. He drives, flies, and runs security for our family.”

“And now you’re sending him on babysitting duty?”

The sound of Haven’s stool sliding out on concrete grates against my

ears. “I’m not a baby!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Haven!” Hayes calls to her retreating back, but it’s too late. She’s gone.

“Yay, teenagers,” I whisper and sip my tea.

“Is it always like this?”

“Yes. Since she was nine.”

“I didn’t tell her she could go. She asked if I’d thought about it, and I told her with James is the only way I’d feel comfortable but that it was ultimately your call.”

“I know. She hears what she wants to hear.”

He narrows his eyes. “Like mother, like daughter.”

“What does that mean?”

He blinks. “Nothing. I need to go to work.”

That doesn’t even make any sense.

Hayes

“Mr. North.” My secretary stands at her desk when she sees me coming. “You missed your morning conference call and the meeting with legal.” She hands me a stack of messages as I reach her.

I snag them and head into my office. “Coffee.”

“One more thing—”

I toss the messages on my desk— “What the fuck!” I startle when I see my brother, Kingston, sprawled out on my couch, his head on one armrest, his feet hanging off the other.

Newton clears her throat. “You have a visitor, sir.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask my little brother, slightly annoyed that he’d just appear out of the blue like a fucking ghost. “Newton! Coffee!”

“I called three times to tell you I was coming.” He tilts his chin up and closes his eyes. “You never answer your phone.”

“That doesn’t answer my—”

My secretary is still standing in my doorway with a steely determination in her eyes.

“What is it?” I snap at her.

“You want coffee.”

My jaw tenses. Is she playing dumb, or is she really this airheaded? “You hard of hearing, Newton?”

“You didn’t say the magic word.” Her voice trembles.

Kingston’s eyes pop open, and he sits up as if he’s preparing to jump between us to protect her. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to miss the show.

The magic word? “What are we? Ten? The magic word is *now*.”

Her smile is shaky. “No, it’s not. It’s please.”

Fucking Vanessa. I find myself fighting a grin. She’s the one to blame for my secretary’s freshly grown backbone.

“Please, Ms. Newton, could you get my brother and me a cup of coffee?”

“I’d be happy to, Mr. North.” Chin held high, she spins on a heel and closes the door behind her.

“Fuck me,” I grumble and rub two hands over my grinning face.

“What the crap just happened there?” Kingston’s eyes are wide with surprise. “Hold on, I’m dreaming, right? I’m on your couch sleeping, and I haven’t woken up yet.”

“You’re hilarious.” I shrug off my suit coat and drape it over a chair.

“Oh, I get it. Joke’s over.” Kingston chuckles. “You guys are still pulling the twin fake-out? At your age? I need to talk to Hayes. Where is he?” He’s dead serious.

“I am Hayes, you fucking idiot.”

Kingston blinks and shakes his head.

“Vanessa gave Newton a pep talk about standing up for herself. She also told me I shouldn’t be such an asshole.”

My brother’s lips part.

“Don’t look so surprised.” The heat that started in my neck seems to bleed upwards. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“You just said *please*,” Kingston says. “To your assistant.”

I glare up at him. “You’re here for a reason, right?”

“Wow.” He sits in the chair across from my desk. “I need to sit down. I feel dizzy.”

“Listen, drama queen, I have work to do...”

Two knocks on my door, and Ms. Newton steps in with two cups of hot coffee. She hands one to my brother, then one to me.

“Thank you.”

Newton stumbles a bit, as if her heel got snagged on the carpet, except she’s not wearing heels, and the floors are marble. “You’re welcome.” She scurries out of the room.

Kingston smiles into his coffee. “See that? And you didn’t turn into a troll.”

I ignore him because if I don’t, he’ll never shut up about it. I crack open my laptop and sort through my email. Eventually, Kingston will tell me why he’s here, or he’ll leave, both options necessary for me to get back to my to-do list.

I didn’t mean to start my day this late, but when my alarm went off at four o’clock in the morning, I was unconscious. Exhausted from the night before and restless with memories of my body tangled with Vanessa’s.

Tiredness is an everyday man’s weakness, something I’ve always been able to push through. What I felt this morning was a whole different kind of weariness.

“Not that this is any of my business,” he starts. Finally. “But I thought you should know...”

I slide my laptop to the side to let him know he has my attention.

“Bee might castrate me for sharing this, by the way.” He sits back in the chair and crosses his legs, making the strip of sequins along the outside seam

of his slacks catch the light and practically blind me. “Haven told the girls last night that she’s not planning on going home with her mom.”

“She hinted as much to me as well.” I rock back in my chair, feeling equal parts excitement and worry. On the one hand, I’d love to have Haven stay with me. I’d give anything to have a relationship with her. On the other hand, Vanessa would be gutted to go back to Manitou Springs without her. It would break her heart.

“There’s more.” His mouth twists with whatever he’s about to say.

My stomach plummets.

“She told Gabby that the guy she’s hanging out with, *Daveed*? He said she could live with him.”

I rock forward at full attention. “What the fuck?”

“*Yeah.*”

“Why wouldn’t she live with me?”

He holds his hands up. “That’s all I know, man. As a concerned uncle, I thought I’d pass it along. I mean, who the hell is this guy anyway? And how long has he known her? A week? What kind of a scumbag tries to sway a seventeen-year-old girl he hardly knows to move in with him? He knows Haven’s a North. What if he’s after money or—”

“You sound as paranoid as August.”

He recoils as if I’d slapped him. “Low blow, man.” Eyebrows pinch. “Wait, is August giving you shit about Haven?”

“Not Haven. Vanessa. He thinks she’s after money.”

He coughs, then laughs and shakes his head. “Typical August.”

“Vanessa’s not after money.”

“That’s obvious.” His eyes narrow. “What’s going on between you two anyway? Haven said her mom hooked up with an old friend or something.”

“Is nothing private?”

“Not on girls’ night, it’s not.” He leans an elbow on his crossed knees. “Do you really know so little about how women operate?”

“I know women,” I say confidently.

“Clearly.”

“That old friend was me.”

He smirks. “Nice. So you guys are back together or what?”

If that isn’t the question of the year... “We’re just hooking up.”

“Wait, so... you’re hooking up with the mother of your kid.”

I shrug.

“So, you’re using the mother of your child for sex?”

“I’m not using her. We’re using each other.” The moment the words leave my mouth, I feel a wave of sickness at hearing them out loud.

“You sure about that?”

“If I’m honest, not that it’s any of your fucking business...”

He nods.

“I think she’s using me.” I run a hand down my face as the thoughts that I wrestled with all night last night come flooding back. “After we...”

“Fuck.”

I glare at him. “Easy.”

He waves his hand for me to continue.

“She wants nothing to do with me. Races back to her room to sleep. The next day, she acts like nothing happened.”

A slow smile tilts his lips. “I really like this woman for you.”

Yeah, I like her for me too. Unfortunately, I fear I’ve broken any chance of her trusting me again after I abandoned her pregnant. God, if I had a chance to do it all over...

“You want my advice?” he says.

“No.”

“Tell her how you feel.”

That’s the problem. I don’t know how I feel. I’m the one who offered her no-strings-attached sex. She took me up on it, and now I’m hurt that she’s not falling head-over-heels for me?

“I can see by the emotional constipation on your face that this is untraveled territory for you. Speaking as someone who lived for years without the woman I love and now has her in my arms every single night? It’s worth it.” He sets his mug on my desk and stands. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he checks the face of his Vacheron Constantin watch, “I have a snail facial in thirty.”

“That’s fucking gross.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it.” He heads out of my office, giving Ms. Newton a farewell wave as if he were a parade day queen.

Haven wants to stay in New York.

Vanessa’s counting the days until she can return to her small-town life.

I want them both to stay.

Only, I don’t think it’s fair to ask Vanessa to give up any more than she already has.

She’s made a life for herself and our daughter. One she’s proud of. One she loves. To ask her to give that up... I shake my head.

No, whatever Vanessa decides to do is up to her. I don’t want to influence her either way.

And if she leaves, I’ll have to live with that.

TWENTY-TWO

Hayes

There's no sound quite like the screeching excitement of teenage girls.

The reminder comes while standing outside of security at La Guardia with Haven as she waits for her friends. The moment she lays eyes on Meg and Lia, three high-pitched screams seem to multiply into a thousand as the ear-splitting war cries echo off the walls.

I was in the VIP terminal once when Justin Bieber arrived on a private jet to a crowd of female fans. Those girls had nothing on the glass-shattering excitement of Haven and her friends.

They smash into each other's arms as if they haven't seen each other in years rather than weeks. They're talking fast and all at the same time. A flurry of *oh my gods* and compliments and more hugs.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" Vanessa says softly at my side.

"It really is." How can they understand what the others are saying when they're all flapping gums at the same time?

"You guys, this is my dad, Hayes," Haven says and motions toward me.

The taller one with the blonde hair offers me her hand. "Nice to meet you, Haven's dad," she says with a flirty tone that makes Vanessa giggle next to me.

I really don't want to touch these girls. Something about it feels wrong. Especially the way they look at me as if I'm in their dating pool. But I also don't want to be rude, so I shake her hand quickly. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm Meg." The brunette offers me her hand as if I'd kiss it.

I shake her fingers. "Hayes."

"All right, girls," Vanessa says, sounding like a drill sergeant. "Let's get your bags and get on the road."

I snap to attention and join Vanessa as we lead the girls to the car.

"Your dad is a total DILF," Lia says loud enough for me to hear.

"I think they like you," Vanessa whispers.

"Curious," I say quietly. "Are all small-town girls this forward?"

Ness laughs, and the sound goes straight to my stomach. I want to wrap my arm around her and pull her to my side. Or slip my hand into hers and feel her palm against mine. I keep my hands to myself.

The three teenagers don't stop talking long enough to take a breath. Not when we get to the car, not on the drive home. I suddenly feel bad for James.

Vanessa ended up agreeing to the music festival on the terms I set, including James as a chaperone. He'll drive them out, keep them safe, and get them all back in one piece.

I decide to double his pay now that I know what he'll have to listen to the whole time.

As for David, I made it clear he'll have to find his own way there. I can't control whether he and Haven spend time together at the festival, but after talking to Kingston, I think David needs some boundaries.

It's late, and we skipped dinner to get the girls from the airport, so as soon as we get home, Vanessa starts pulling things out to make a meal.

"Can I help you?"

"Holy shit," one of the two girls says from the other room. "This place is nicer than Jay-Z and Beyonce's!"

She's right, but I keep that to myself.

“I can’t believe you get to live here,” another girl says.

Haven draws them back to her bedroom, where their voices become murmurs, thank God.

“Do they ever stop talking?” I ask as I take a head of lettuce from her hands.

“Only when they sleep,” she says.

“Tell me they sleep a lot.” I take the meat wrapped in butcher paper that she hands me.

“Nope.” She smiles sweetly, and I want so badly to kiss her.

Imagine a life where we’re living here together, making dinner, and I have the freedom to kiss her and touch her whenever I want.

“What can I do to help?” I ask as she pulls out a cutting board and a knife.

“Open a bottle of wine. We’re going to need it.”

I do one better and turn on some music as well. I sit at the bar, watching her slice vegetables and prepare chicken to grill.

“Are you sure I can’t do something else?”

“Grab tortillas out of the pantry?”

I hop up and grab the package of tortillas. She then hands me a block of cheese and a grater.

Within twenty minutes of being home, she’s put together a tray of vegetable and chicken quesadillas and calls to the girls, asking if they’re hungry.

They all come rushing out, each one dressed in what can only be described as strings with small triangles of fabric. They huddle around the food and manage to still talk around mouths full of food.

“David and a few of his friends are meeting us at the pool later,” Haven says to Vanessa.

“Cool, have fun.” Vanessa motions for me to follow her, and I do so gladly. There is way too much near-naked estrogen going on in there.

“This is crazy,” I say, following her to the patio. “I’m tired just being around them.”

“They’re a unique breed, that’s for sure.” She plops down on the patio loveseat, and I squish in to sit next to her. Maybe too close, but there’s no going back now.

“You’re a good mom, Ness.”

She smiles softly. “Thank you.”

“Oh, my God, you little slut!” One of the girls hollers from the kitchen, sending all three of them into a fit of laughter.

“Bitch, you have no idea!” More laughter.

I can’t tell whose voice is whose, and part of me is grateful for that.

“Ignore it,” Vanessa says. “It’s just how girls talk.”

My pulse is racing, and I’m feeling less than comfortable. For the first time since I considered having Haven live with me, I’m having serious doubts. There’s no way I could do this without Vanessa.

Vanessa

“Be safe, okay?” I kiss Haven’s cheek. “Make good choices.” I hug her. “Call me if you need me.” Another squeeze.

“Mom, relax. We have Commando Guy here to take care of us.”

The three girls, wearing tiny tops and denim shorts that are cut way too short, pile into a black SUV with windows tinted so dark the inside looks like a cave.

James, the man driving them, is wearing a white polo shirt and black cargo pants with hiking boots. He’s probably in his mid-forties, but the size of his chest and biceps gives him more of a twenty-eight-year-old marine look. He’s all business, not overly talkative, and carries an air of authority that makes me feel a little better about leaving Haven with him.

Hayes looks uncomfortable. He has ever since the girls scrambled out of

the bedroom this morning looking like, well, looking like three young, beautiful women going to a music festival. “They’ll be safe with him.”

“Are you trying to convince me or you?”

“Stay in touch,” Hayes calls out to James as the man circles the vehicle to the driver’s side.

The back of the SUV is filled with tents, sleeping bags, water, and food. If anything should happen, they’d have enough to survive in the wilderness for a week. Two days should be nothing.

I wave to the back of the vehicle as it pulls away.

“You sure you’re okay with this,” Hayes asks as if he’s almost hoping I’ll say no so we can call them back.

“I am. Haven deserves to spread her wings a little bit.”

We head back inside and into the private elevator.

“What are your plans for the weekend?” I ask him, trying to make small talk.

His gaze slides to mine. “Depends.”

“On?”

“On whether or not you want to take advantage of having the house to ourselves.”

My stomach trips and tumbles with warmth and anticipation. Sleeping with Hayes is absolutely a mistake. I should not have let things go that far, but I was helpless against the pull.

“Take advantage how?” I lift a brow, wondering if he’s brave enough to say what he’s really thinking.

He takes two steps in the small space, pinning me in the corner as he towers over me. “I could go to the office and work all weekend. Give you your space. Or I could stay in. With you.”

I press my palm to his T-shirt-covered chest. His heart pounds beneath my fingers. “Are you sure that’s the best idea?”

“Tell me why it’s not, and I’ll back off.”

“It’s not because...”

His chest is so wide. So warm. The idea of curling up against it all weekend sounds so nice. Also sounds dangerous.

“Because?” His voice is so deep, so enticing.

“I uh...” I can’t think straight. A logical reason for not having sex with Hayes all weekend? I know there has to be one. Right?

“Come on, Ness. Give me something. I’ve been dying for the chance to kiss you again, and my self-control is running thin.”

The elevator door pings and opens into the penthouse. But he doesn’t move. He holds me captive with his big body. “Running thin, huh? Pardon me for causing you such distress.” I shove past him and into the house, heading straight for my bedroom. My stomach fills with butterflies, my skin warm, but at the same time, a warning goes off in my mind that I’m playing with fire.

I throw my door closed only to hear it thud against something hard. Hayes stands in my doorway, his chin tucked and tilted, and a wicked smirk on his lips. “Distress is an understatement.”

“Not really my problem.” I flop onto the bed, my back to the headboard, and grab my phone. My fingers shake as I scroll through emails, and I hope he doesn’t notice.

He grips the top of the doorway, and I pretend not to notice the sliver of washboard abs that peeks out above his jeans. “I have an idea.”

“Good for you.” I click on a spam email about barbecue grills on sale and read it as if it’s the most valuable form of electronic mail I’ve ever received.

“Get some shoes and socks on.”

I glare at him. “No.”

“You have three choices, Ness, and I swear on my life I’ll respect whatever you decide.”

I put my phone down and wait for him to continue.

“One, you get some shoes and socks on and come with me.” He takes a

step inside my room and closer to the bed. “Two, you tell me to fuck off, and I’ll leave you alone for the rest of the weekend.” He’s at my bedside now. He bends over me, placing his hands on either side of my hips, his mouth only inches from mine. His eyes dip to my lips and flare. “Three. You keep picking fights, and we end up fucking until neither of us can walk.” He doesn’t move out of my space. “Decide.”

My heart pounds so fast that I can feel it in my neck. He smells so good, like fresh tobacco leaves and leather. And his lips so close are a temptation not a soul on earth could deny.

I swallow hard. “I’ll grab shoes and socks,” I squeak out.

One side of his mouth quirks up. “Good choice.”

With that, he pushes up off my bed, and he’s gone.

I drop to my side and blow out a steady breath. What the hell is wrong with me? Hayes is the most addictive drug, and after seventeen years of sobriety, I’ve fallen off the wagon hard.

TWENTY-THREE

Hayes

“Ice skating?” Ness says when we pull up to the state-of-the-art ice rink in Brooklyn. “I don’t have ice skates.”

“Don’t worry about it. Come on.”

She meets me on the sidewalk in front of the massive steel and mortar structure. The rink is used for NHL practices and is open to the public on select days.

I pull open the door for her, and the smell of ice and Zamboni fuel mixes with the scent of rubber mat floors and popcorn.

“Mr. North.” The manager of the arena greets us in the lobby. “Good to see you again. It’s been a while.”

“Paul.” I shake his hand. I called the man yesterday and asked if I could get the ice to myself for an hour. I wasn’t sure I’d be bringing Vanessa, but I’m glad she chose to come along. “This is Vanessa.”

They greet each other politely.

Just being in the space helps me breathe a little deeper into my own skin, my muscles slowly uncoiling around my shoulders.

“Everything’s ready for you.”

“Thank you.” I take Vanessa’s hand and lead her into the arena rink that’s

surrounded by rows of benches for spectators. “This way.”

Through the locker room doors, the air is warmer. I have a private locker where I keep my equipment, and on the bench in front of it are a pair of women’s size seven and a half hockey skates.

“These are for you.” I point to the skates. “And this...” I unlock my locker and pull out a goose-down, micro puff jacket.

“What will you wear?” She slips the jacket on over her short-sleeved T-shirt, which is tight enough to be distracting.

I threw on a thermal shirt under my T-shirt before we left. “I’m good.”

I pat the bench next to me, and we sit and start with the business of lacing up our skates.

“This place is amazing.” She tilts her head back to study the different NHL jerseys hanging on the walls, along with oversized black and white action shots of different hockey plays. “I didn’t know you were still skating.”

“Yeah, well...” I pull hard on my laces. “No one really does.”

“No one at all?”

I finish the last tie and stand up. “Just you.” I offer her my hand. “You ready to go skate?”

She takes my hand and wobbles once she’s on her feet. “I hope I remember how. I haven’t been ice skating since,” she shakes her head, “I don’t even remember.”

I don’t release her hand. “I remember the first time you went skating.”

“I bet you do.” She rolls her eyes. “That was a memorable first date.”

“How was I supposed to know you’d never been on skates before?” I chuckle, remembering how she clung to my body, so afraid she’d fall on the ice. The feeling of her against me, her hands fisting my clothes, made it impossible to stay a gentleman. And the words that came from those lips every time she fell, every loss of balance, she’d curse everything in existence, including me. “Still to this day, the best foreplay I’ve ever experienced.”

She throws her head back, and laughter peels from her throat. I stare,

stunned by the beauty as the sound envelopes me. “You’re sick.”

I tuck dark, jaw-length hair behind her ear wondering how it’s possible for her to become even more beautiful after all these years. “As I recall, you were the one who attacked me once we got back to my car.”

“That is so not true! You’re the one who...” She blinks, and her eyes become unfocused.

I wait for the memory of our first date to come back to her fully.

She frowns. “I hit the gear shift and had a bruise on my thigh.”

“You hit the gear shift hurdling the center console to straddle me.”

Her face flushes, and she covers her mouth. “Oh, God, you’re right.”

I wink. “Best date ever.” I guide her toward the door that leads to the ice, making sure to walk slowly until she gets a feel for the skates.

“*This* isn’t a date, though,” she says, her voice level and firm.

I hide a secret smile. “Of course not.”

“I’VE GOTTEN BETTER, RIGHT?”

My shirt is stretched with permanent fist marks, and the sting on the skin of my back and belly from her nails is proof that in the years since our first ice skating date, she has most certainly not gotten better.

“Do you want the truth?” I say through a smile, still happy as hell to have her in my arms, just like I was all those years ago.

She looks up at me, her chin practically resting on my sternum. “No.”

“So much better.”

She growls and tries again to get her feet under her.

“I assumed you’d been ice skating a time or two since you went with me. Thought maybe you’d taken Haven?”

“Why,” she grunts, struggling with her feet, “would I do that?”

I push off the ice and glide easily to the side of the rink, where she can

grab onto the wall. She scrambles for it. One foot has a mind of its own and slips away from her.

“Shit.” I slide my arm around her waist, and, again, she’s glued to my front. “Let’s try something. Turn around.”

With the support of my arms and the wall, she manages to turn around without her ass hitting the ground.

I come in from behind her, wrap an arm around her rib cage, and hold her against me. She grips my forearm, which is resting just below her breasts. I’ve always loved how well she fit against me. I hold her hip with my free hand and dip my mouth to her ear. “Just keep your feet together, okay? I’ll do the rest.”

I push off and start slow, letting her get used to the feeling of the blades on the ice, the steady rhythm of me skating.

“You okay?”

She nods.

I pick up the pace. Her hair blows back against my neck and jaw, and I take corners carefully as we go two, three, then four times around the rink.

“There you go. Fun, right?”

“Yes, it’s much easier this way.”

I shift a little, bringing her more to my side. She panics and nearly falls, but I keep a hold of her so she stays upright. “Remember, keep your feet underneath you. I’ll do the rest.”

She bites her lip, concentrating as I take us around and around. With each rotation, I let go a little until we’re holding hands. She doesn’t move her feet but continues to let me drag her around while she giggles with joy.

That sound goes straight to my dick.

I want her.

The only reason I brought her here was to get us both away from beds because I knew if we stayed in that house, we would end up fucking. And although I want that so badly, I want time with her like this more.

“You’re doing it!” I say, letting her out a little more.

“I am!” She pushes with one foot. The action throws off her balance, but she pulls it together and manages to push again with more control.

Another rotation and I let her go. She wobbles but stays tall. I skate backward in front of her, encouraging her.

Confidence sets in, and she really starts skating. She still looks like a ten-year-old on skates for the first time, but it’s progress, given where she started. She gets close to me like she’s seeing if she can pass me.

Cute.

When she gets close, she loses balance.

She grabs for me just as her skates come out from under her.

I wrap my arms around her, but the momentum is too much. We’re going down. I roll, taking the brunt of the ice on my back as she falls on top of me.

“Ouch.” I groan, my head aching where it hit the ice. “I didn’t think we’d need helmets, but I wonder if I should’ve grabbed a couple.”

“I’m so sorry.” She cups my face with both hands. “Are you all right?”

Her whole body stretches the length of mine, her hips in alignment at just the right spot. Her breasts are full and round against my chest, and I swear I can feel her hard nipples through the thin coat. Or maybe I’m imagining it.

“Don’t move,” I groan, feigning injury.

“Oh, God. Are you hurt?” She wiggles to scramble off me, but I hold her hips in place above my quickly hardening dick.

“Mmm.”

She reaches up and cups the back of my head, the action causing friction between us that has me biting my lip. “Your head doesn’t have a bump.”

“No?” I roll my hips beneath her.

“Hayes! You’re awful!” She rolls away and onto the ice beside me.

I’m smiling big.

“Shameless!” She’s laughing, and again, I wonder if there’s ever been a sweeter sound in the world. “You need a cold shower.”

“Hate to break it to you, but I’m lying on ice, and it’s not doing shit for me.”

She struggles to get up on her feet. “I’m so out of here,” she says, still laughing. She slips and drops to her ass.

I roll to my side and prop my head in my hands. “I think you’re stuck.”

“No, I’ll crawl. See?” She’s on her hands and knees, sliding slowly toward the rink wall.

I pop onto my skates and come in from behind her. “You sure you don’t want some help?”

“I can do this myself.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. I’ll be here. Enjoying the view.”

She lets out a laugh. “You’re the worst.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad to ask for help.”

“Never!” She finally makes it to the wall and manages to pull herself up. She’s flushed and panting but shaking her head with a smile. “My legs feel like jelly.”

“We should stop while we’re ahead.”

Using the wall, she pulls herself along the ice, one hand over the other, toward the ice’s exit. “I worked up an appetite.”

“I could eat.” I offer her my arm, and she seems to debate whether or not she wants to take it. “I promise I’ll behave.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Goddamn, this woman.

She takes my elbow, and I lead her off the ice, thinking this is the most fun I’ve had in all my life.

TWENTY-FOUR

Hayes

“Those twenty-dollar margaritas were worth every penny,” Ness slurs from the passenger seat of my car.

We went to a Mexican-Asian fusion restaurant that’s been making headlines since it opened last year. Reliving old stories over Korean beef tacos felt as natural as breathing. As if I wasn’t spending the afternoon with a woman but rather the other half of myself. I lost track of time while listening to old stories about Haven, and it made a one-hour lunch turn into happy hour.

We’re stuck in traffic on the bridge back to Manhattan. Ness has her window down, her hand hanging out to feel the moisture in the air. The sun is low behind gray clouds, and the golden light makes her skin glow. I’ve never wished that traffic would stand still forever until now.

She rolls her head my way, a dreamy look in her eyes. “I had so much fun today.”

“Happy to hear it.” I wonder if she’s buying the whole casual act or if she can sense how my heart slams behind my ribs.

“You’re not so bad, ya know.”

“Thank you?” I grin her way.

“Stupid handsome face,” she mumbles and turns away from me.

I do an internal fist pump. She called me handsome.

“I want to go swimming when we get back.” She’s facing out the window. “I don’t have a swimsuit. I could borrow one from Haven.”

“I have no problem with you going without a suit.”

She turns to me with lifted brows. “I don’t think your neighbors will appreciate that.”

“Oh, I think they’ll very much appreciate that. But I’d gouge their eyes out before I gave them a chance.”

She flushes and shakes her head. “You haven’t changed.”

“Neither have you.”

That’s not true. We’ve both changed in a million ways—we’ve grown up and have years’ worth of life experiences. But in the ways that matter? In the way I feel about her? Nothing has changed at all. I’m still crazy about Vanessa. Every day she’s in my home, I expect the feelings to fade. That I’ll learn something about her that confirms too much has gone down between us, too much water is under the bridge. The opposite is happening. And that scares the shit out of me.

“Remember the time we drove to Washington, DC for the youth in government rally?” she asks with a smirk.

“Do I? Um, yeah, I remember it. Are you kidding? That road trip still stars in some of my most erotic dreams.” I wink at her.

Her gaze drops to my lap, and she licks her lips.

“*Vanessa.*” I groan.

“What?”

“Don’t act innocent as if you don’t know what you’re doing when you look at me like that.”

“Oh,” she says, adjusting herself in her seat. “I know exactly what I’m doing.” She comes over the center console and reaches between my legs. “I just figured, since we relived our first date, why not relive another one of our

firsts.”

“*Fuck.*” My hips jerk, and I swerve enough to get honked at and flipped off by the woman next to us in traffic.

She presses her lips to my neck. “If you don’t think you can drive us safely while I do this, then maybe I should—”

“No! No, I’m fine. I’m good.” I’m nodding so hard my neck hurts.

With a sexy little grin, she pops the button on my jeans and lowers the zipper. My erection springs to attention, and she slips it from the confines of my boxer briefs.

I drop back against the headrest and try to focus on the road when Vanessa’s sweet, hot, wet mouth engulfs me.

My vision blurs. My pulse beats so hard it feels like it’s going to explode out of my chest. A tingling that starts between my hips drops down both legs until I can’t feel my feet. My hands even go numb. What the hell is she doing to me? I slide a hand into her hair, holding on as I feel her raise and lower, raise and lower. Her ass in the air in the passenger seat is enough to send me reeling.

She does some kind of voodoo magic with her tongue and teeth, and the car swerves again.

“Fuck you, asshole!!!” The guy next to me honks.

She chuckles with her mouth full, and I grip her hair so tightly she moans. The vibration sends me over the edge.

My leg muscles tense so hard they kick out, and I slam on the brakes before we hit the minivan in front of me.

“I’m sorry,” I say as my orgasm slams into me with a roar. I clench my teeth through the blinding white euphoria that explodes through me. Wave after wave, I ride out the release against her tongue and hope like hell she’s okay with this.

Eventually, the world starts spinning again, and I come back to my body. Still behind the wheel, stuck in traffic on the bridge, with a very proud-

looking Vanessa lifting her lips to mine.

“Did you say, ‘I’m sorry?’”

I grip the back of her head and kiss her. Deeply, licking into her mouth and tasting myself on her tongue. Fuck, she’s perfect. She’s always been fucking perfect. And we’ve lost so much time.

Those three little words slide in from out of nowhere and linger on my tongue. I can’t say them now, not after I just came in her mouth, and she took it all with a smile. She’ll think I’m only saying it because I’m riding an orgasm high. And maybe I am.

I moan into her mouth as I lick and suck her tongue, loving the taste of us mingled.

A honk blares, and I realize I’m holding up traffic.

“You’re incredible,” I say while easing my foot off the break to roll forward.

She sits back in her seat proudly.

“And just so you know? I plan to return the favor as soon as we get home.”

Excitement sparks her eyes. “Deal.”

Vanessa

“I don’t want to ruin the moment,” Hayes says, slightly out of breath.

We’re sprawled out naked on his bed. He made good on his promise to return the favor, which led to sex and where we are now.

“That’s what people say right before they ruin a moment.” My whole body buzzes, my muscles turned to mush, and I try to stay awake.

His low, sultry chuckle is sexy and wakes me up a little. “I hope that’s not true, but here goes...” He props up on an elbow, his head in his hand. His hair is an attractive mess, his gaze and grin lazy, and I wonder if it’s too soon to hit him up for round two. Or would it be three after the car? “You only

hook up with me when you're drinking."

His observation works like a cold splash of water. "That can't be true."

He doesn't say anything, just holds me prisoner with his eyes while I work out the truth in my head.

Feeling exposed, I pull the sheet up to my neck. "Maybe that's true."

His eyes narrow. "Why?"

I shift nervously at the direction of our conversation. "I don't know, Hayes. Why does anyone hook up after they've been drinking? Lower inhibitions, maybe?" I sit up and slide out of bed, searching for my clothes. "It's no mystery. It's just human biology."

He stays put, watching me curiously as I avoid his gaze and get dressed.

My phone drops out of my pocket, and I see I have a new text from Haven.

"Haven texted. She's there safely." I open the photo she sent. She, the girls, and David are in front of a top-of-the-line tent set-up.

"I know," he says, his voice cold. "James texted me." He makes no move to cover himself when he stands, his big, tall body on full display as he passes me into the bathroom.

And that's my cue to go.

I head back to my own room, feeling sober and thirsty. It's after six o'clock at night, and I don't know what to do with myself. Things feel awkward between Hayes and me. Do I stay in my room for the rest of the night? Should I leave and give him his house for a few hours?

I'm chewing over my options when he knocks on my door.

"Yeah?" I say from my spot sitting cross-legged on my bed.

"Let's go sit in the hot tub."

"Right now?"

I hear him sigh through the door. "No, tomorrow. Yes, right now."

"I don't have a swimsuit."

"You'll figure something out. Come on."

I chew my lip, thinking about how he acted when I left the room. He's offering an olive branch. Things don't have to be weird between us if I don't let them.

"Okay, give me a minute."

I dig through my clothes, finding a black pair of boy-short panties and a strappy black sports bra. Good enough. I slip them on and throw a sundress over it all. When I open my door, Hayes is there waiting, leaning back against the wall, wearing nothing but a pair of forest green board shorts and leather flip-flops. The guy looks like something out of an expensive cologne ad.

His eyes take me in from my toes to the top of my head, but there's little heat in his gaze. "Ready?"

I follow him to the private elevator that takes us to the gym level. I didn't see a pool here before, but I know there is one. The gym is quiet. I suppose most people are out having a life on a Saturday night in New York. He leads me out a pair of doors onto a rooftop patio, where an infinity pool stretches out to the horizon, and steam billows from a bubbling hot tub.

He grabs two large, fluffy towels and drops them on a nearby circular pool bed for two. Without a word, he slips off his sandals and steps into the hot water.

I look around to make sure no one is nearby. I'm sure what I'm wearing looks like a swimsuit, but something about knowing I'm wearing underwear makes me think everyone else will also know.

Hayes watches me slip off the sundress, and his gaze slides up my legs as I step into the water next to him. I take the opposite end of the circular space. Healthy distance seems like the safest choice right now.

His brows pinch together, but he says nothing and makes no move to get closer. Instead, he stretches his arms out on the pool deck next to him, and water rolls down his shoulders and biceps.

"This is nice," I say lamely.

He tilts his head, watching me in a way that makes me feel like I'm under

a microscope.

“My muscles are a little tight from ice skating.” I rub my hands down my thighs under the bubbles. “The warm water feels good.”

He remains still.

I blow out a breath and try to look at everything but him, which is hard to do as my eyes continually get drawn back to his impressive chest and arms.

“You come here often? After work or...?”

No answer. Only those eyes that seem to stare through me.

Okay, no talking, it is. I slump down to rest the back of my head against the deck. I tilt my head back and stare at the dark sky, missing the blankets of stars we get in Manitou Springs. I close my eyes and think about what Hayes asked me.

Why do I need liquid courage to be intimate with him?

I know why.

With my eyes closed, I confess. “I’m afraid of you.”

He doesn’t respond, but there’s a sense of surprise that electrifies the air between us. Or maybe I only imagined it.

“Afraid of what would happen if I let you in again.”

The air moves as if he’s dropped his arms back into the water.

“I know that sounds crazy because what we’re doing is just sex.” I blow out a breath. “But I think I need the alcohol to put my heart to sleep, so the stupid thing doesn’t get the wrong idea.”

I keep my eyes closed. Fearing what I’ll see if I open them.

“I wouldn’t have a problem having no-strings sex with someone else. But you...” I swallow the surge of emotion that clogs my throat. “You’re different.”

There. I said it. I put it out there.

I risk a peek across the hot tub and find him staring at me with razor-sharp focus. I can’t tell if he’s mad, disappointed, or defensive, and not knowing makes me shiver.

My phone rings from the pile of clothes behind me. The sound breaks me from my thoughts. Haven could be calling. I spin around and have to put my torso on the pool deck to reach for the phone. I hit accept before even looking at the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Vany, hey!”

Tag. My shoulders deflate, and my pulse picks up a more normal cadence.

“Hey, how are you?”

“I’m good. Did Haven make it to the festival all right?”

With my back to Hayes, I fill Tag in on Haven and that she and her friends made it to the festival okay. I also tell him about James.

“That’s a little extreme, don’t you think?” he asks. “She’s a good kid. She doesn’t need a bodyguard.”

I bristle at his tone. “She’s a great kid who took a little trip to New York without a word, Tag. Just because she’s a great kid doesn’t mean she doesn’t still make unsafe choices.”

“I guess, but it sounds to me like bio-dad is getting off on throwing his money around.”

I’ve never seen the jealous side of Tag before. Probably because there’s never been another man or woman who has threatened his place in my and Haven’s lives. I understand his concern, but it doesn’t make his little potshots okay.

“I’m not getting into this with you.” Especially because Hayes is right here. “I’ll call you tomorrow after I hear from Haven.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, pouting. “I’ll text her myself.”

I don’t know why, but his words carry a hint of threat. As if he’s out to prove his relationship with Haven doesn’t require me and that he’s closer to Haven than Hayes is.

“Goodnight, Ta—” I pull the phone away and check the screen.

He hung up on me? What a baby.

Irritated by my conversation with Tag and still reeling from my confession to Hayes, I slink back into the hot tub with my nerves on edge.

“Rough conversation?” Hayes rightly observes.

“It’s fine.” He’s the last person I want to talk about Tag with.

“Looks to me like you need to set up some boundaries.”

“If I wanted your advice, I would’ve asked for it.”

The corner of his mouth kicks up. “Never pegged you for a pushover.”

My hands fist beneath the water, and I sit up a little taller. “I’m sorry, did I miss the RSVP from the invite into my business?”

His eyes flare with heat. “I had my tongue inside your body an hour ago. Safe to say, I’m already well up in your business, baby.”

The air around us charges with sexual energy. His gaze is lazy as it settles on my lips.

Then, he moves. Like he’s one with the water, gravitating across the tub until he’s close enough to touch, and yet he holds himself back. Hovering inches from my body, he holds me captive by sheer size and proximity. If I move my leg, lift my hand, or inhale too deeply, I’d brush against him.

“That fucking mouth,” he groans. His chin dips, his lips so close. He’s going to kiss me.

Do I want that? My body screams yes while my heart freezes in the fight-or-flight response.

Just when I expect to feel the press of his lips to mine, he dodges away to reach over my shoulder. He grabs something that makes the sound of falling ice in water. A cold water bottle comes into view.

“Take it.” He smirks. “Looks like you could use a little cooling off.”

I rip the bottle from his hand. “You’re an asshole.”

His big body creates a waterfall when he stands and steps out of the hot tub. He shakes out a towel and pats himself dry. “I’m an asshole for giving you water?” he says innocently.

I glare up at him. “You know what you did.”

He wraps the towel around his waist, and his expression grows serious. “The next time I kiss you, Ness, it’ll be because you’re sober, and you want it. I might even make you beg.” He walks away. “Good night.”

The door closes behind him, and I open the water and guzzle down half of it. He wasn’t wrong. I do need the cooldown.

Beg. Yeah right.

One of us will be begging, but it won’t be me.

TWENTY-FIVE

Hayes

I fully expected Ness to sneak into my bed last night. After leaving her panting in the hot tub, I was convinced she'd give in and come looking for me. I'd planned to let her seduce me, and I'd play hard to get. But I should've known better. Vanessa is not weak, and she never backs down from a challenge. She never sought me out.

So I spent the whole night fighting the urge to go to her. If I had a way to chain myself to my bed, I would've done it. Every time I thought of her, which was all night, I wanted to throw these stupid fucking games out the window and crawl into her bed, even if only to hold her while she slept.

And that shit is wholly unlike me.

I like my space and my sleep. I wouldn't compromise either for a woman. But Vanessa isn't just any woman, is she? And that's the question that kept me up for the second half of the night.

What exactly are we doing here? Because it feels a whole lot heavier than ex-lovers living it up together for old times' sake.

"James is the worst!"

I hear Haven's distant voice as it comes through Vanessa's speakerphone in the kitchen.

I got up early and hit the gym, showered, did some work in my home office, and now, at nearly eleven o'clock, I've emerged for some food.

I find Vanessa bent over her phone, her elbows on the island countertop, and her ass propped up like an offering. She's wearing tiny cut-off shorts, and *fuck me*, she might as well be naked for all the shorts are doing to cover her up.

"I had one beer." Haven's voice calls me from the fantasy of slipping into Vanessa from behind. "One!"

"Honey," Ness says, sounding exhausted by the conversation. Or maybe she was up all night having the same conflict I was? "He did the right thing. You're seventeen."

"Almost eighteen."

She drops her forehead into her hand. "Okay, fine. You're eighteen. Still not the legal drinking age, last I checked."

"No one cares here, mom. Everyone's drinking. I don't understand why I can't have one beer."

"Go ahead. Have one. But I'll instruct James to bring you directly home if you do. Choice is yours."

I grin at Vanessa's technique.

"That's not fair!"

"You have one more night. Don't ruin it by focusing on the one stupid and very illegal thing you wish you had."

"Fine," she grumbles.

"So, what will it be? Is James bringing you home today or tomorrow night?"

She sighs, and I know the sound well enough now to know it is accompanied by an eye roll. "Tomorrow night."

Vanessa bends one knee slightly, which makes her hips shift to the side. Her ass shifts in temptation.

I groan.

She shoots upright and spins around to see me standing in the entryway, where I've been eavesdropping.

Her brows drop. "I think that's the smart choice. I love you."

"Loveyoubye." The phone disconnects.

She frowns. "How long have you been standing there?"

I eye her, from her bare feet to her flushed face, feeling my blood heat. "Not long." I scoot by her to the refrigerator, and while I'm hidden behind the open door, I adjust my erection behind my pants. "How's she doing?"

"Good. I think James deserves a raise."

I pop the top on a sparkling water. "Done."

She smiles sweetly. "How'd you sleep?"

"Fantastic. You?"

"Better than ever."

We're both liars.

"You have plans for lunch?"

Her brows pinch together like my simple question is not at all simple. "Why do you ask?"

An excuse to spend time together. "There's a place in NOHO that has the best brunch in New York."

"NOHO?" She turns her nose up. "Only the most pretentious people hang out in NOHO."

"And you're going with the most pretentious guy in New York." I wink. "We'll fit right in."

THE RESTAURANT IS PACKED. Men in white linen suits and pastel-colored shirts are coupled with women in gigantic sunglasses. The sun is high, and with a light breeze, it's a cooler day than usual, prompting all the New Yorkers who spend most of their time in the shadows of skyscrapers or

under fluorescent lights outside for some much-needed vitamin D.

I put my hand on Vanessa's back to guide her through the crowd to the host stand.

"Mr. North, great to see you again." He eyes Vanessa curiously.

"Hayes," I say, clarifying the question his eyes seem to be asking. "You're thinking of Hudson."

He presses his hand to his chest. "Oh, thank God. I thought he was here with another woman."

"Nope." This has only become a problem recently, now that Hudson's finally settling down. Up until Lillian, Hudson was hardly seen with a woman. There was rarely a reason to get confused.

"We're pretty slammed, but let me see if I can find a table for you." The host, Jake, according to his nametag, used to work at Jordan's restaurant before he took a management job here. He's hooked our family up with tables ever since. "Here we go." He motions us to follow him. He takes us to a patio table under an umbrella while other customers seem to watch, wondering how we got in and got seated so quickly and at a prime table. "Will this do?"

"Perfect." I slip a hundred-dollar bill into a handshake. "Thanks." I pull out Vanessa's chair, then claim my own.

The truth is, with cash, there isn't a restaurant in the city we couldn't walk right into.

"Belgian waffles with lemon ricotta?" Vanessa's eyes are wide as she takes in the menu. "Manouri cheese and pear sandwich? I don't know what manouri cheese is, but I want some."

I lean an elbow on the table. "Dealing with the people is worth it for the food. Trust me."

She takes a quick look around and gets a tiny nervous flicker in her eye. "The net worth of the people here combined is probably enough to buy North America."

My chest loosens as Vanessa becomes more comfortable. I order a bloody mary, and she orders a mimosa.

I smirk as I watch her bring the booze to her lips. “Don’t get your hopes up,” she says between sips.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you’re thinking it.” She holds up her menu, and her chin rises an inch. “No one’s getting lucky today. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“We’ll see,” I mumble into my drink.

She shakes her head, but the corner of her mouth ticks up.

We chat about the latest development in the area and reminisce about the sweet cakes we’d get from the food cart on Mulberry and Canal. I told her about our favorite pizza place that went out of business after the old man who flipped the dough died. Between conversation topics, we people watch. Everyone who is anyone in New York is here, making it as much a place to be seen as it is a place to eat.

“I can’t believe how much the city has changed,” she says. “And how much has stayed the same.” She smiles sadly into her champagne glass.

I can’t help but wonder if she’s talking only about the city or if she’s talking about us, too. Because so much has changed between us. We’ve grown up in all the ways that matter, and yet, nothing has changed at all. She is still every bit the feisty, beautiful woman I fell in love with.

“However,” she says with a lighter tone. “I still think the—”

“Vanessa?” The breathy sound of surprise that accompanies Vanessa’s name has us both whirling around to the table behind us.

Oh, shit.

Sitting at a table for four is Annabella and Senator Nicholas Osbourne. Vanessa’s parents. And they’re not alone. Sharing a table with them are Mayor Charles Torres and his wife, Cheryl.

“That is you, isn’t it?” Annabella drops her Dolce sunglasses to the tip of her nose. The woman has to be in her sixties, but she doesn’t look a day over

thirty.

“Hey, mom,” Vanessa says dryly. “Dad.”

Nicholas Osbourne reminds me of August. His salt and pepper hair is cut in a style meant to make him look younger, and the tan skin tells me he’s spending plenty of time on the golf course or his private yacht. “Vanessa, what on earth are you doing here?”

I bristle at the lack of warmth in his voice.

“Eating.” She laughs as if their question is the stupidest ever asked. “Same as you, I guess.”

“No, what are you doing in New York?” Annabella’s eyes have been bouncing between Vanessa and me as if she’s trying to catch up with what she’s seeing.

“Well...” Vanessa grabs for her mimosa, but it’s empty. “Um... I don’t really know how to—”

“My daughter came looking for me,” I say bluntly, then flag down the waiter for another mimosa for Vanessa. She’s going to need it.

Annabella’s lips part, and if I could see her eyes behind those glasses, I’d bet they’re huge.

“Haven’s here?” Nicholas says and looks around the restaurant. The way he does it is like he’s looking for a threat rather than looking to see his own granddaughter. My palms itch to smack his sun-stained cheek.

“No, she’s not here.” Vanessa’s eyes are tight slits as if she’s picking up the same unforgivable vibe from her dad. “She’s at a music festival with some friends.”

“Mr. North,” the mayor says. “I wasn’t aware you were married.”

“I’m not.”

I feel rather than hear the Osbournes’ collective groan. So much for the moral majority and family values politics, eh Osbournes?

Enjoying their discomfort, I add fuel to the embers. “I got Vanessa pregnant in high—”

Annabella coughs as if she's choking on her tongue, and the mayor's wife gasps.

I'm having way too much fun to stop now. "I just met Haven a few weeks ago for the first time."

Vanessa accepts her fresh mimosa from the waiter and tosses back half of it before it even touches the table.

"It is so nice to see you," Annabella says, her tone and fixed expression dripping in political fakeness. "We should get caught up while you're in town. Maybe next week before we head back to DC? Call me, and I'll see if I can make some time—"

Ness sucks in air through her teeth. "I don't know. We're pretty busy while we're here. I'll have to check and see if we can squeeze in a visit."

Her mom frowns as if she's embarrassed to be blown off publicly by her own daughter. Senator Osbourne's lips are thin and his jaw tight.

"Nice seeing you, though," Vanessa says happily. "Enjoy your lunch." She turns her back on them and hunches forward a little. Her pinched mouth and the tension in her neck tell me she's feeling a lot of things, and none of them are good.

"Do you want to leave?" I ask quietly.

"No way. I'm not giving up lemon ricotta for them. Not this time." Her shoulder straightens, and she sticks out her chin.

Pride wells in my chest at her show of strength.

Because when it comes to toxic parents, fuck them.

Vanessa

Honestly, it's difficult to enjoy my lemon ricotta waffles with the droning sound of my dad mansplaining the properties of good iced tea and my mom boosting his ego with over-dramatic responses.

I try to tune them out. To focus on what Hayes is saying, and honestly, at

this moment, I've never been more grateful for the man. Not only does he keep talking, even though he has to know I'm not listening to a word of it, but he keeps the mimosas on re-order.

We've cleaned our plates, and I've decided I've had enough of the discomfort from holding my ground, and now I want to get the fuck out of here.

Hayes drops an obscene amount of cash on the table so that we can just get up and go. I take the long way off the patio to avoid having to walk right by my parents' table.

Not until we're in the privacy of Hayes' car do I finally let the tension in my body go and slump forward.

Hayes' hand comes down on my back. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Can you imagine? One point six million people in Manhattan, and we run into them." I shake my head, blown away by the odds, and yet somehow also feeling that, of course, we'd run into them while we're here.

He grunts in agreement.

I sit back in my seat. "The best part of all that was that we embarrassed them in front of their friends."

"The mayor."

My head whips around to see Hayes fighting a smile. "Shut. Up."

"Can't. That was Mayor Torres and his wife."

An uncontrollable wave of laughter bursts from my throat. Their unwed, teenage mom daughter—now a single mom—exposed their family secrets to the mayor over iced tea and smoked salmon bagels. The news is exactly what I need to release the crazed kind of laughter that brings tears to my eyes.

It isn't until my laughter calms that I wipe the tears from my cheeks.

"Shit," Hayes grumbles when he sees me wipe at my eyes. "I'm sorry, Ness."

"These aren't sad tears." At least, I don't think they are. "I'm actually relieved we ran into them. I needed that."

“When was the last time you spoke to them?”

“I reached out a few times after Haven was born. Usually around Christmastime, when I was feeling nostalgic. I usually got their assistant, who would blow me off. I stopped reaching out about ten years ago.”

“You’re better off without them.”

“Mmm.” I watch the city fly by out the window. I hardly remember a time in my life when I had a relationship with my parents. “They never wanted kids, you know.”

I feel the tension in the car ramp up, but his response is an easygoing, “I didn’t know that.”

“When my dad saw an opening to secure his spot in politics, he married my mom because she was from a well-known religious conservative family. She never wanted kids. Not really. But I think she believed she wasn’t a real woman without childbearing. So they had me. Much easier to run a family-values forward campaign with a kid.”

“Jesus, how do you know this?”

I shrug one shoulder as I remember the nights after dinner when my mom was fed up and my dad overly stressed. They’d fight, and I’d listen.

“That’s why I worked so hard in school. I just wanted out. I felt like I was being raised by a corporation rather than parents.”

“That’s why,” Hayes says with a hint of awe in his voice. “Why you gave up your big plans to have Haven.” At a stoplight, he looks at me. “You didn’t want Haven to feel like you did. Like your parents’ plans came first. You wanted her to know she was your priority above all else.”

“Huh.” I shift to look out the window. “I never thought about it like that, but what you say makes sense.”

The light turns green, and his attention is back on the road. Silence grows between us as each city block creeps slowly by.

“Thank you.”

I turn toward him. “For?”

He grabs my hand and pulls it to his lips, placing a chaste kiss to my wrist. “For being the only one to see what really matters when it mattered most.”

I suck in a wavy breath.

“You put Haven first. Your parents didn’t. I didn’t. But you did. I’ll never be able to adequately thank you for what you did for our daughter. A lifetime of my gratitude wouldn’t be enough.”

“I would say you’re welcome, but you’re thanking me for something that was as elemental as breathing.”

“I see that now.” He’s forced to turn back to the road as the light changes. “I have an idea.”

“Sounds ominous.”

He grins. “Do you want to go back to the condo, or are you up for an adventure?”

“I’ve had four mimosas which, according to you, means we’re not safe anywhere near a bed.”

He lifts a brow. “I told you, the next time I touch you, it’ll be because you’re clear-minded and begging me.”

We both know that neither of us has that kind of control around the other, but I’ll let him believe that if he wants. “I pick adventure.”

He swerves to the side of the road and throws the car into park. We’re one street north of Chinatown. “I hate to burst your bubble, but I had dinner in Chinatown the other night.”

He’s busy typing something into his phone. “We’re not going to Chinatown.”

“A museum?”

“You can’t stand surprises, can you?” Satisfied with whatever he is doing on his phone, he sets the thing down and pulls back onto the street.

“I can. I’m just trying to prepare myself for what to expect.”

“Expect an adventure.”

I roll my eyes and look out the window so he can't see me smile.

TWENTY-SIX

Hayes

The North Cove Marina is as busy as I expected on such a nice day.

Vanessa nearly ran out of the car when she saw the string of docked boats rolling lazily on the water.

“Mr. North.” Edmond, the owner of the marina, greets us at the top of the gangway. “Happy to see you’re finally taking me up on my offer.” He shakes my hand with a smile.

“Edmond, this is Vanessa.” They shake hands, but Vanessa has a hard time pulling her eyes away from the boats. “Edmond and I went to Harvard together.”

“We were roommates freshman year.” He slaps me on the shoulder. “I owe this guy for single-handedly getting me through statistical analysis and for helping me get out of a horrible business deal years later.”

“Really?” Vanessa seems impressed by the idea that I’d selflessly help anyone.

I shrug. “I have a knack for stats and contract loopholes.”

“Come on. I have the perfect vessel waiting for you.”

We follow Edmond to the dock and down row after row of sailboats, yachts, and empty slips. I ask him about business, and he explains it’s better

than ever.

He ends up stopping at the stern of a small yacht with the name Seaduction scrolled on the back. “She’s all yours.”

Vanessa grips my forearm. “You know how to drive a boat?”

I frown. “No. The captain comes with it.”

“Thank God,” she mumbles.

Edmond directs us on board, where a young man wearing all white stands at attention. “This is Captain Harris. He’s made sure there’s plenty of food and drink on board.”

The young captain gives a curt but professional nod.

“You can tell him where you’d like to go or let him do his thing, and you two enjoy the scenery.”

“This is amazing.” Vanessa eyes the luxurious furniture and glistening polished floor. “I’ve never been on anything like this before.”

Edmond smirks. “Very few people have. The Italian yacht manufacturer, Sprezzatura, made less than a dozen of these sedan-style luxury motor yachts. I’m lucky enough to own one.”

“And we’re lucky enough to take advantage.” I offer my hand to Edmond again. “Thanks again for the hookup.”

“Like I said, man. I owe you.” He nods to Vanessa and the Captain. “Take your time out there.”

The captain gives us a brief tour and leaves us on the sundeck bow while he casts off and motors into the bay. We kick off our shoes and lay back while the sun beats on our legs with a balmy breeze in our faces.

We point out landmarks—the Battery, Liberty State Park, and, of course, the Statue of Liberty. Other than that, there’s very little conversation, and yet I feel like we’re bonding without words. Living through the same experience, side by side.

Cruising along the coastline of Staten Island, we sit in companionable silence.

Vanessa sits up, bends her knees, and wraps her arms around her shins. “I wish Haven could be here for this.” She angles her face towards the sun, and I can see her eyes are closed behind her sunglasses. “She’s never been on a boat.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Little motorboats for fishing on the lake, but nothing like this.”

I think about all the firsts I missed in Haven’s life. The thought that I could provide one of my daughter’s firsts makes me want to buy a yacht today. I make a note to ask Edmond when we get back. He’s sure to have the inside scoop on the yacht market.

“I’d love to take her some time.” My voice is a little rough, probably from lack of use. “Take both of you.”

She eyes me quickly, then lays back down. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

She chews her lip, and I imagine she’s working the words out in her head, which makes my stomach tense. “Where do you see things going from here? Like, what do you see happening—”

I suck in a nervous breath.

“—between you and Haven?”

Me and Haven. Of course, she’d want to know what my plan is and what my intentions are now that my daughter is back in my life. My thoughts spin a million miles a minute as I consider a dozen different scenarios, but I settle on the safest one because I have no clue where Vanessa’s head is at right now, and I don’t want to spook her.

“I suppose that’s up to you and Haven. I’d love if she could come stay with me from time to time. Maybe around the holidays or during summers?”

She nods but doesn’t say more.

“I’m happy to fly her out whenever she wants to visit.”

“And what if she wants to move to New York?” She turns to face me then, and although I can’t see her eyes, the firmness of her jaw tells me she

doesn't love that possibility.

"I'd do my best to take care of her."

Her brows drop below her sunglasses. "And what does your best look like? Practically speaking."

I narrow my gaze, wondering if the tone I'm picking up in her voice is her picking a fight. A mimosa buzz and a passionate fight over our daughter is a recipe for ending up behind the closest door. "I'd take care of her, Ness."

"Right, I heard that. But *how*?"

"Shelter, food, healthcare—"

"She's not a puppy, Hayes."

"What exactly are you asking me?"

"I'm asking if you think you're capable of being there emotionally for her, of helping to guide and teach her, while also backing up enough so she can make her own mistakes. I'm asking if you'll wake up in the middle of the night to pick her up if she's been drinking. If you'll make a run to the drugstore for tampons. If you'll stay up all night with her while she vents about the friend who betrayed her or the guy who broke her heart. I'm asking, Hayes, if you'll be able to put your life on hold if need be. If you're willing to drop whatever important thing is happening at work if she needs you."

Not much scares me.

But that shit? That list of basic expectations for parenting a young woman? I admit. I'm fucking scared.

"I guess I'll have to take each challenge as it come—"

"That's not good enough," she says matter-of-factly and turns back out toward the view.

Not good enough? "I don't understand. I'm being honest with you. I know I can be what she needs if she'll let me."

"That's the thing, Hayes. They don't let you. You have to instinctively know when to push and when to back away. When to fix and when to listen. When to take up arms and when to cry with her."

“I don’t...” I blow out a breath. “Know if I’ll be good at that.”

“Of course, you won’t. Because you have no experience being a father.”

I cringe away from her words. Not because they’re not true but because they hurt.

Vanessa takes in a few calming breaths. “Here’s what I think.”

I brace myself internally, not sure if I’m ready for what she thinks. “You don’t have the knowledge or the stomach to be a full-time dad. If Haven wants to stay in New York or if she wants to visit, I think you should come up with an excuse for why she can’t come. That doesn’t mean you two can’t stay in touch by phone or that she can’t come visit once a year for Christmas, but I’m telling you now, I have worked way too hard to raise a strong, resilient, self-reliant child, and I won’t sacrifice all my hard work so that she can become dependent on you.”

“Okay.”

Her gaze whips toward me. “What did you say?”

“Fine. Okay. I get it.” Haven is and always will be better off without me.

Her eyes narrow.

“Don’t, Vanessa. I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I’m not fighting.

“Tell that to your face.”

She laughs humorlessly.

“Let’s just enjoy the last hour of sunlight.”

Silence descends on us again, but this time, it’s much less pleasant than the first time. I’m flushed; my skin is hot, but my insides are cold. Sunburn maybe.

I close my eyes and enjoy the rest of the cruise around the bay, and when the captain asks if we’d like to stay out past sunset, Vanessa says that without a jacket, she’d rather get back.

The boat lulls gently in the water as the sun sets behind Staten Island.

I try to look beyond the tension between us, not focus on how quickly

Vanessa jumped from calm to hostile, and be present in the moment. I both love and hate how she puts up a protective wall between Haven and me. On the one hand, I understand and even appreciate her for keeping our daughter at a safe distance from anything that could hurt her. On the other hand, I hate that she thinks I'd do anything to hurt our kid.

Not that I've done a great job at proving otherwise.

One month together isn't nearly enough time to prove to Vanessa that I won't hurt Haven. But after the one month is up, it seems I won't get any more time to prove myself.

And I really have no one to blame for that but me.

"Ness?"

She turns to me with caution in her gaze, as if she's primed and prepped for an argument.

I have a hard time not noticing how the orange light of the sunset mixed with the slight color on her cheeks intensifies the green of her eyes. "I understand."

Her brows pinch together.

"From the moment you found out about Haven, you protected her from those who would hurt you. Went so far as to raise her halfway across the country to keep her safe." I smile sadly, thinking of her in a new city, all alone with a baby. "You've built an entire life around her. And, my God, does she even realize how lucky she is to have a mom willing to do that?"

She blinks, and her eyes fill with tears.

"I get it, okay?" I reach over and pull her hand into mine. "The time that I missed with our daughter is on me. I can't go back in time and be a better man. But I want you to know that I am so grateful that I got the chance to know our daughter. Even if only for a few weeks, it's more time than I deserve."

"*Hayes*," she says before bursting into tears.

I pull her into my arms and against my chest. "Shh... it's okay." The sun

disappears from the sky while Vanessa is inconsolable in my arms.

In the past, when she would cry, I would do whatever it took to get her to stop. I hated seeing her upset. Still do. But this time, I let her cry. Until my shirt is soaked through and until her body is spent and sags in my arms. I let her cry for all the support she didn't get. For the plans she walked away from. For the families she lost. And I let her cry for me. For all the ways I failed her.

Shortly before we pull into the dock, her muffled cries go quiet.

I kiss the top of her head. "Let's go home."

We put our shoes on in silence, and she keeps her head down, I assume to hide her puffy eyes and mascara-stained cheeks.

When I see Edmond waiting for us at the dock, I hand Vanessa the car keys. "I'll meet you at the car."

She sniffs and runs her hands through her wind-blown hair. "I should thank Edmond."

"I'll thank him for the both of us."

That seems to relax her shoulders a bit. "Thank you."

She manages to slip away to the car unnoticed while Edmond helps moor the boat.

When I join him on the dock, his head is cranked around while he watches her on the gangplank.

"What did you do?" he says with a hint of playfulness in his voice.

"How much time do you have?"

He chuckles and turns to me. His expression grows serious. "That's her, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "That's her."

I shouldn't be surprised that Edmond remembers. After Vanessa disappeared, I spiraled. He dragged me away from drunken fights and rolled me on my side so I wouldn't choke on my vomit after I'd pass out. God knows the things he heard me say. Without a doubt, it was the lowest I'd ever

been, and he had a front-row seat.

“I remember her photo you had in the dorm.” He looks after her again. “I assume you got the answers as to why she ghosted you.”

“I did. In the form of a smart, talented, and beautiful seventeen-year-old girl with my eyes and my attitude.”

Edmond’s jaw falls open. “No fucking shit.”

I chuckle. “Yep.”

“So...” He blinks and shakes his head. “Hell, man. What now?”

I shove my hands in my pockets and stare at the dock between our feet. “Now I’m just trying to hold onto them.”

“Sounds like we need to get together for a drink soon,” Edmond says.

I reach out and shake his hand. “I’d like that.”

I thank him for today and make my way to the car.

Vanessa’s in the passenger seat with her head dipped to her phone.

“Everything okay?” I ask when I get behind the wheel.

“Fine. I just had a couple missed calls from Haven, but she didn’t leave a message.”

“Did you try calling her?”

Ness gives me a look that says *what do you think?*

God, she’s fun.

“I got her voicemail, so I sent her a text.”

I pull out my phone and hit James’ contact. The sound of the phone ringing comes in through the car speakers.

“Hayes,” James answers loudly, with the sound of an electric guitar wailing in the background.

“Just checking in,” I say. “How’s it going?”

“Good. Everyone’s on their best behavior.”

Vanessa blows out a breath of relief.

“Haven called her mom but didn’t leave a message. Is she nearby?”

“She’s about twenty yards away dancing with her friends. Want me to

grab her?”

I look at Vanessa, who shakes her head. “No. It’s fine. Let her have her fun.”

“Plan to leave tomorrow at thirteen hundred.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, James.” I hang up and Vanessa seems visibly more relaxed. “Feel better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The ride home is quiet but not unpleasant. All that time in the sun has made me tired and hungry. I’m sure Vanessa feels the same.

Back in the condo, she says she’s going to take a shower and put on some comfortable clothes. I decide to take a fast shower and surprise her with something she’s never seen from me before.

I can’t buy more time with her and Haven, but I can use whatever time we have left to prove I’m worthy of her trust again.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Vanessa

Tag once told me that he noticed I never cry.

Sad movies, gut-wrenching commercials, horrific stories in the news, my eyes stay dry. I would joke that my inability to cry was in my DNA. That my emotionally detached parents passed along the gene.

That, of course, is a lie.

I never cried because I knew if I did, I'd never stop.

The run-in with my parents this morning pushed me beyond my emotional bounds, but I held it together. The reminder that my parents want nothing to do with me was hard enough, but the fact that they have no interest in their granddaughter—their only grandchild—stirred up a torrent of anger that I unleashed on Hayes while on the boat.

But his response. Rather than fight with me, he broke me. I couldn't hold back the flood of seventeen years of repressed emotion. And he took it. He shouldered that burden while I poured my soul out against his chest.

After a long shower, I slip on lounge pants and a tank top. I shuffle into the kitchen, feeling lighter after the cry but simultaneously heavier with exhaustion.

Hayes is pulling a carton of milk out of the fridge when he sees me.

“Feeling better?” He’s wearing jeans and a T-shirt. No seductive sweatpants or bare chest.

“I am, thanks.” I smile, a little embarrassed at how royally I lost it earlier.

He pours two glasses of milk. “I hope you’re hungry.”

I don’t see any takeout food bags or pizza boxes. “Did you order dinner?”

He hands me a glass of milk. “Come on.”

I follow him out to the patio, where he has candles lit on the coffee table and two plates and napkins set up. “Grilled cheese sandwiches and barbecue potato chips?”

“Used to be your favorite combination back in the day.” He waits for me to sit before taking his seat next to me. “I hope it still is.”

“You remembered.” He even remembered the milk. I pick up half of the sandwich. “Is this—”

“Sourdough bread,” he answers with a smirk.

“You made this?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not completely useless.”

We dig into our meals in silence. I wonder if food is the only thing on earth that can heal and nourish the body and soul. Because comfort food is a real thing, and as my stomach fills with cheddar cheese, buttery bread, and salty chips, my mood brightens.

Maybe it’s the fact that Hayes prepared a meal for me or that he remembered my favorite meal, but either way, with every bite, I feel... seen.

“Who taught you how to make these?” I pop the last bite into my mouth and groan. “Perfection,” I say through a cheek full of sandwich.

“Like it’s hard?”

“But to get it the perfect amount of toasted on the outside and piping hot and melted on the inside without burning takes skill.”

“I had a lot of practice in college.”

“No private chefs at Harvard, then?”

His plate clean and milk glass empty, he leans back with a content sigh.

“Nope.”

I chug down the rest of my milk. “I needed that.”

His head lolls to the side to face me. “I figured you did.”

“Thank you for what you did for me today. I’m a little embarrassed that I let the run-in with my parents affect me like that.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Ness. I’m happy I could be there for you when you needed me.” He watches me closely. “I take it you’re not planning on introducing them to their granddaughter, then?”

“Not if I can help it.”

His lips twitch with a grin. “Good. They don’t deserve her.”

“Agreed.”

We sit in silence while the city bustles below and the distant lights twinkle like artificial stars.

I wish I could adequately express how much I needed Hayes today, how much it meant to me that he was there. I don’t remember the last time I felt so comfortable around another person. With Tag, I’m always on guard to make sure I don’t give him the wrong impression. But with Hayes, I feel like I can just be. Maybe it’s our history. Strong bonds are never truly broken. Either way, I don’t know what I would’ve done without him today.

“I’ll clean this up.” He stacks the plates and glasses, and when he readies to stand, I grab his wrist.

“Wait.”

His brows drop in concern, but he reclaims his seat next to me.

I turn to face him. “I want to try something.” My gaze drops to his lips.

His eyes flare with knowledge and he nods.

Slowly, I draw closer until my lips hover just inches from his. The warmth of his breath ghosts across my lips. I check his eyes to make sure this is what he wants. All I see there is anticipatory hunger.

I press my mouth to his. A slow, gentle caress. Then pull back.

“Well?” he says, his voice low and his lids heavy.

“Kissing you sober is surprisingly thrilling.”

“Can’t say I’m happy to hear the surprising part.” He smirks. “Give it another shot, and let’s see if I can be less surprising.”

I go in for another kiss. He remains still, his hands at his sides, while I kiss and lick at his lips. He opens for me on a groan, and I sink deeper into him. My hand slides up his chest and around his neck to rest at his nape. He’s all powerful muscle and warm, soft skin. His tongue slides against mine in an erotic tease. My back arches. My body thrums. Closer. More. I climb onto his lap, straddle his hips, and hold his face in both my hands. The kiss evolves into a wild passion that has me widening my legs and sliding up his thighs until there’s not an inch of space between us. My hands rip through his hair. My breasts are sensitive to the point that every brush against his chest feels like an electrical shock. I can’t get enough. And yet, his hands remain at his sides.

“Touch me,” I moan against his mouth.

He smirks against my lips. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

The next time I kiss you, Ness, it’ll be because you’re sober, and you want it. I might even make you beg.

I’m reminded of his words from that night in the hot tub.

I pull back and stare down at him. “I won’t beg.”

“You will.”

Funny, it’s as if he doesn’t know me at all.

I scramble off his lap and back away until my ass hits the plexiglass. I reach for the hem of my shirt and pull it up over my head, then toss it aside.

He sits up abruptly. His eyes flare at my naked breasts. “What are you doing, Ness?” There’s a heavy tone of warning in his words.

“It’s hot out here.” I hook my fingers into the elastic waistband of my pajamas and shimmy them down to my ankles before kicking them aside. “Don’t you think?” Standing before him completely naked is unnerving. I haven’t overcome my insecurity about my body, but some things are more

important than my body issues.

Like winning. Winning is more important.

A victorious battle cry sounds in my head when I watch his wide eyes travel the length of my body. He's propped on the edge of his seat, the muscles in his thigh twitching as if he's ready to spring, but his hands fist the cushion.

Time to go in for the kill.

I turn around to face the city and prop my elbows on the railing. "This view is really something else."

"*Vanessa.*" The guttural way he says my name all but guarantees my win.

I peer over my shoulder to see him staring directly at my ass. He licks his lips.

"I'm sorry," I say with a grin. "Did you say something?"

He tilts his head, and I swear his eyes flash predator. "Careful."

"Oh yeah? Or what?"

He springs.

With a squeal, I take off running. Through the glass doors, I sprint through the living room, grateful now for the lack of furniture, as I make a beeline to my room.

I'm almost through the dining room when a band of steel wraps around me from behind. Hysterical laughter bursts from my lips.

His mouth is at my ear. "Nice try, beautiful." He walks me forward until my belly hits the dining room table.

"I take it you're ready to beg then?" I say breathlessly.

His lips drop to my neck, and he kisses and sucks at the sensitive skin there. "We'll see who ends up begging." With one arm still holding me against him, his other hand slips between my legs. A low growl vibrates against my shoulder when he slips his finger inside. "I knew you'd be ready for me."

My head drops back against his shoulder. "Do what you want, but I'll

never beg.”

“So much fighting in you,” he says and bites me gently. His foot comes between mine, and he slowly inches my legs wider.

My breath hitches when he adds another finger. “I think you like my fight.”

He thrusts his hips against my lower back, his erection like a steel bat against me. “Now, what would make you think that?”

A ridiculous giggle surfaces but disappears quickly when he pins me to the table with his hips. The arm holding me against him loosens, but I’m stuck in place by his big body.

I try to rock against his hand. Find the release that rides so close to the surface. But he has me held immobile from the waist down.

The palm of his free hand presses between my shoulder blades. My hands brace against the table as he firmly bends me forward. My nipples pebble when they come into contact with the cold marble table.

I’m pinned. Chest down. Ass out. His hand working magic between my legs. I can’t move. Can’t rock back against him. And as close as I am to orgasm, I still feel too empty. Too far away.

I moan. Pant. Bite my lip to keep from begging.

Hayes folds over me, his cotton-covered chest on my back. Lips to my ear. “What is it? You look like you want to say something?” The humor in his voice makes me want to scream. “I think I know what the problem is.” He teases me with those wicked fingers. “You’re desperate for release, but you know I’ll keep you here, just like this, hanging on the edge, until you beg.”

“Okay fine,” I say. “You want me to beg—*oh, my...*” my words dissolve on a moan as he rewards me with a firm, deep thrust of his fingers.

“I’m waiting.” He’s still over top of me, his weight on me, his hips holding me tight to the tabletop, and his hand working me up, then backing off.

A feral growl erupts from my chest. “Fuck you!”

His whole body freezes. Even his breathing. His lips find my ear. “Good enough.”

His weight leaves my back in a flash. In the same second, I hear the release of his zipper, I lose his hand, and I’m instantly filled. From base to tip, Hayes slams inside me from behind.

I gasp at the blunt and delicious force of it all. His bruising grip lands on my hips. I push up on my hands and rock back against him. I want to feel him everywhere—deep inside my body and staining my soul.

As if he can read my mind, he grips my leg and pulls it up to rest my bent knee on the table. The new angle draws him more fully within until I feel nothing but him.

With every punishing slam of his hips, I climb closer to the edge of release until I’m teetering. And that’s where he keeps me. Right on the cusp of orgasm, so close but not within reach. How the hell does he do it?

I’ve called him every filthy name in the book. Finally, I decide to take matters into my own hands. I reach between my legs. He snags my wrists and presses my palms to the table, his big hands over mine, keeping them in place.

“Asshole,” I moan while he continues to work me into a frenzy.

“You like it,” he says hotly into my ear. “You love the challenge. The fight. Don’t forget, I know you.”

He’s right. I do. He does.

It’s part of the reason why I could never fall for Tag. He rarely challenges me. Never fights with me. Things between us are too tame. Never a spark, much less a fire. But with Hayes, we could burn this whole building down with the inferno that rages between us.

“Hayes…” his name slips from my lips on a moan.

“That’s it.” He hears the desperation in my voice.

I bite my lip. Refusing.

He releases my hands. His palm comes to my throat, and he pulls me up

and back. His other hand grips my breast, and he taunts and tugs at my nipple. Our height difference, combined with my knee on the table, his possessive hold of my throat, and the pain-pleasure of his attention on my nipple sends my mind into a tailspin. Nothing else exists except the pleasure. I want it. I need it. And finally... I beg.

“Please,” I pant with tears forming in my eyes. “I need you.”

“You have me,” he says, then drops his hand between my legs.

One brush of his finger, and I’m gone. He sends me sailing over the edge. My orgasm rips through me. His grip on my throat, his blindingly powerful thrusts, and his mouth on mine are my whole world. I cry out my release against his tongue, and he takes it. He takes it all and doesn’t stop. His movements become more savage. His breathing ragged. I sag against him and only then does he gently fold me forward to rest my cheek on the table. His hands grip my hips so hard I swear they’ll bruise.

Then suddenly, he’s gone. He groans as hot liquid spurts on my back. His orgasm seems to go on forever. I smile to myself as he grunts while wave after wave of pleasure rolls through him.

His palm comes down on the table next to me. “You’re a fucking goddess.”

I move to right myself, but he stops me.

“Hold on.”

The feeling of soft fabric, probably his shirt, swipes against my back, cleaning up the mess he left there.

“I feel like a dick,” he says when he finishes the job.

I slowly push off the table, and my muscles ache as I straighten.

He’s bare-chested, with his shirt balled up in his hands. His jeans are open, and although he’s tucked himself away, I can clearly make out the still-swollen bulge behind his boxer briefs. “I shouldn’t have taken you bare.” He cringes.

“It’s okay. You pulled out.”

“Still.” His expression is etched with guilt. “That wasn’t cool.”

“I don’t think either of us had the patience to wait for a condom. Besides, I don’t think I’m ovulating.”

He frowns a little, and I wonder what he’s thinking. “Good.”

After a couple of beats of silence, I realize I’m standing here naked. I cross my arms over my chest. “I should get dress—*whoa!*”

Hayes has scooped me into his arms, and he’s headed toward his bedroom. “No clothes. Not yet.”

I shouldn’t. Drunk sex is one thing, but this is sober sex, which feels like dangerous territory. But I can’t deny the magnetism between us. Even after everything we just did, I feel like I haven’t yet had my fill.

“Fine, but this time, it’ll be you begging.”

He kisses me on the lips, then tosses me onto his bed. His hands are at the fly of his jeans, and he’s pushing them down his legs. His hard-on falls heavy from its confines, already warmed up for round two. “We’ll see.”

Hayes

“Please. Oh, my...” I suck in a desperate breath. “I can’t take it anymore. Just... please...” I peer down at Vanessa, who is folded over her knees between my legs, with her evil mouth wrapped around me.

She’s been teasing me for what feels like hours, refusing to put me out of my misery until I beg.

I’ve been begging! She’s still playing witch!

She pops her mouth off me and props an elbow on my thigh. “Can you speak up? I can’t hear you through all the moaning and groaning.”

I’m throbbing, painfully hard, and desperate. When I reach to finish the job myself, she smacks my hand away.

“Ah, ah, ahh. No touching.”

“What do you want from me? I’m begging! Please, I feel like I’m going

to die!” That’s possible, right? Death from withheld orgasm.

“Okay.” She climbs up my body and pries the condom out of my sweaty, clenched hand. “But only because I don’t want you to die.”

When she rolls the condom down my length, I suck in air between my clenched teeth. I’m so fucking sensitive. So ready to blow. For the first time, I’m actually grateful for the condom that’ll help desensitize things, or all this fun could end very quickly.

She straddles my hips in preparation to take me, but I’ve had enough of her torture. With a heel on the mattress, I push hard and roll on top of her.

“Eager much?” she says through her laughter.

“You have no idea.”

She runs her hands through my hair and brings my lips to hers. “Actually, I do.”

My tongue sinks between her lips just as my hips press firmly between her legs, entering her in two ways simultaneously. We moan into each other’s waiting mouths, and I slowly start to move.

What we did earlier in the dining room was raw and passionate. This here feels like something more. Something bigger. Our kiss is unhurried. Rather than a race to ecstasy, it’s a slow roll. I drag my hips back and forth in lazy strokes, feeling every ridge as it makes friction against her soft heat.

My heart pounds harder. Not faster, but somehow stronger. With every deliberate rise and fall, the tight tips of her breasts rake along my skin and leave goosebumps in their wake.

This is what it means to make love to a woman.

Something I have little to no experience with.

As much as I thought I was making love to Vanessa in the past, I was so young and stupid that I had no idea what love meant or felt like. But as I stare into her vibrant green eyes, our bodies connect in the most intimate ways, and I think I finally understand.

Love is more than physical attraction and connection. Love is wanting to

be in the same room with someone, even if they're not speaking. Love is not only wanting to be there for the victories but for the failures as well. Not only for the laughter but most especially for the tears. Love is feeling honored to have her soak my shirt in tears. Wanting to change the way I speak to other people if it makes her happy. Love isn't just seeing a future with her. Love is being willing to let go of my own dreams of a future if it's what's best for her.

That's really the key, isn't it?

Love is giving up everything that's important to me if it's what's best for her.

That's what Vanessa did for Haven.

And what better example of love is there than sacrifice?

I kiss Vanessa as if I might never get the chance again. Memorizing the feel of her lips, the taste of her tongue, the gentle sounds she makes.

Those gentle sounds turn desperate.

I rest my forehead against hers. "Vanessa." I breathe and close my eyes. I can't bear to see the shock—or worse, disappointment—at what I'm about to say. "I have always loved you." I keep rolling my hips, even as her heat flutters against me. "I will always love you."

Her back bows off the bed. I kiss her as her body detonates around me. My own responds immediately to her, my release chasing hers so that we're both throbbing and falling together.

I cup her cheek. Kiss her eyelids, the tip of her nose, her lips.

She blinks up at me, and her eyes are heavy with emotion. I wonder if I should take back what I said. If the sentiment was too soon or at the wrong time. I wait for her rejection.

"I'll always love you, too," she says.

I fall against her, smothering her with my weight. She wraps her legs around me and locks her ankles at my ass and her arms around my shoulders.

We lay like that for a while, our hearts pounding against each other.

I don't know what just happened here, but it feels significant. Like after surviving a near-death experience, a person just knows they'll never see life the same again.

I haven't a clue what the future brings for Vanessa and me. But I know that after tonight, things will never be the same.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Hayes

It's well after midnight, and I'm holding Vanessa to my chest while she tells me stories about Haven. From her digging holes on the soccer field during games to her bringing home every "homeless bug" she found in the woods. With each story, my chest expands, and my cheeks hurt from smiling.

"The teacher handed me the clay sculpture, and her face was bright red. Haven said it was a dinosaur hatching from an egg, but it looked like a big penis and balls." Vanessa's warm and very naked body shakes with laughter. "I couldn't keep it together, and we both burst into laughter."

I run my fingers along the soft skin of her back and into her hair. "Do you still have it?"

"I do. I kept all her old art projects." Her fingertip swirls around my belly button. "She's really talented."

"I'd love to see it sometime." I let the phrase hang in the air and wait for her muscles to tense or her pulse to race.

She exhales, wraps her arm around my middle, and nuzzles deeper into my side. "If you ever find yourself in Manitou Springs, I'd be happy to show you."

I try not to let her response deflate the good place we've been in tonight.

But it's hard not to feel a little bummed out every time I'm reminded that she's going back to Colorado. Is that what our future holds? Visits on the holidays or on the random chance I can get away from the office? Maybe on those visits, we have sex, that is, until she gets into a relationship, which she eventually will. And then I'll get the joy of watching her make a family with a man who will never care for her and Haven the way I do. If that's the best I can get, I'll take it.

"Haven said she's attending college in Colorado Springs in the fall?"

"She is. She doesn't seem excited about it, but I think it's a good step for her to take while she narrows down her interests."

"Where will she live?"

"On campus. The school is close. Only six miles from home."

I can see why Haven would want to move to New York. She's lived in the same little town all her life, and now her big chance to spread her wings is only six miles from where she grew up.

I open my mouth to mention Haven moving to New York—not to live with David but to live with me—but decide I'll give us a little more time before I bring up the issue.

"You know," Vanessa says. "I was thinking. What if Haven—"

The sound of the front door to the condo opening and slamming hard against the wall has us both sitting up in bed.

"Sleep on the streets for all I care!" Haven yells. "You're a fucking bitch!"

Another door slams.

Vanessa and I are up and scrambling to get dressed. I throw her a shirt and boxers and search for my jeans. I'm pulling on a shirt as I race down the hallway, Vanessa on my heels.

James stands in the foyer, the pinched expression on his face a contrast to his professional military posture. Lia and Meg are with him. Lia looks angry. Meg bites her nails.

“What the hell is going on?” I bark as we stumble out of the hallway.

James, ever the professional, doesn’t even flinch at seeing us coming from the master bedroom with our hair a mess. “There was an incident.”

“What kind of incident?” Vanessa says and steps in front of me.

I want to throw an arm around her shoulders and pull her against my chest, but I resist the urge.

She openly looks between Meg and Lia. “Are you girls okay? What happened?”

“I’ll tell you what happened!” Haven says and marches toward us from her side of the condo. “That *slut*, right there.” She shoves an accusing finger at Lia.

“Haven!” Vanessa scolds.

Haven swipes at her cheeks. Her eyes are swollen and her face red, and the crazed look in her eyes is something I’ve seen from her mother before. Pure, unbridled fury. “She had sex with David!”

“Oh, no,” Vanessa says softly and drops her chin to her chest.

“You said you guys weren’t serious!” Lia yells.

I hold up a hand toward Lia and shake my head.

“We were serious enough!” Haven rushes at Lia.

I snag her around the waist. She pushes at me and lunges, but I’m stronger and keep her locked against me.

“She’s a fucking bitch!” Haven yells and continues to fight me. “I hate her!”

“It’s okay,” I say firmly into the top of her head. “You’re okay.”

“I’m not!” What starts as shouting dissolves into a torrent of tears.

“Shhh. I know. I’m here.”

Her body folds forward and jerks with the force of her sob.

My heart instantly shatters at the sound.

I scoop her into my arms. She locks her arms around my neck and cries into my shoulder. I carry her into another room, needing to get a wall

between her and Lia. My bedroom is the closest, and I move to set her down in the leather chair, but she grips my neck tighter while soul-crushing sobs rip from her throat.

I am in uncharted territory here.

The only woman who has ever cried on me is Vanessa.

I take the leather seat with Haven still cradled in my arms. The sound of her tears makes me want to torch the entire earth so that no one will be left alive to hurt her again. I now understand why Vanessa is so protective of our daughter. Seeing her suffer is worse than any torture I could ever imagine.

I continue to hold her while she cries. I tell her she'll be all right. I remind her that I'm here. And I assure her that karma always bites back.

Eventually, she calms down enough to get a word out. "I thought she was my friend," she says through hiccups.

"What happened?"

She sniffs and sits back far enough to take in where she is. In my arms, on my lap. I scoot out from under her and sit at the foot of my bed. She swipes at her cheeks. "I saw her touch him while we were dancing. I asked her about it, and she told me I was imagining things, that I didn't see what I knew I saw. I called mom to tell her and see what she thought, but she didn't answer."

That must've been the calls she missed on the boat.

"We were at the last show of the festival, and Lia said she had to go to the bathroom and took off. James couldn't be in two places at once, so he stayed with me, Meg, and David. But then David said he should go check to make sure Lia was okay."

I can already see where this is going.

"When we got back to the tents, they were naked together in David's sleeping bag." A fresh wave of tears springs from her eyes. "Who even does that? How do two people fit in a sleeping bag?"

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"He did it because I wouldn't sleep with him. I know that's why!"

The blood in my veins ignites.

“He’s punishing me for being such a prude!”

I grind my teeth together. “He told you that?”

“Might as well have! God, why are guys so gross!”

Deep breathes. I count to ten. Then I count to ten again until I’m calm enough to speak without breaking something in my room before hunting David down to break his neck.

“Let me tell you something about guys.” Looking into her bloodshot eyes, I can hardly keep the tremble of rage out of my voice. “They’re scared. Insecure. And they’re looking for the easiest path to what they want. And then, one day, they meet a girl who doesn’t make things easy. Now, a weak boy will cower. He’ll turn his back and keep searching for the easy route. But a man, a real man, will rise to the occasion. Because he knows that to get the best out of someone, you have to give your best first. David is a boy. He’s proven that he’s incapable of putting in the energy you deserve. Only question now is are you going to listen to what he’s showing you?”

She chews her lip. “I thought I loved him.”

I frown rather than curling my lip in disgust. “You loved the person he wanted you to think he was. But he’s shown you who he really is.”

“Did you know he’s not even from France?” She scoffs and swipes at her eyes. “He’s fucking Canadian. He’s never even been to France! He’s a liar. I should just let Lia have him.”

“She’s been pretty clear on where her loyalties lie.”

Haven’s jaw hardens.

“Ball is in your court. What are you going to do?”

She seems to think that over when something out of the corner of her eye catches her attention. I turn to see Vanessa in the doorway, her shoulder leaning against the frame. The soft, watery smile on her face tells me she’s been eavesdropping.

“Mom,” Haven says and crumbles into tears again.

“Oh, honey.” Vanessa rushes to her and pulls our daughter into her arms.
“I’m so sorry.”

I watch the two women holding each other, and a weird sense of rightness hits me square in the chest. A voice in my head whispers that these two women are my whole world, which makes no sense. My world is business. Success. Money. My world is corporate law and growing my portfolio.

“Mom?” Haven’s voice cracks. “I want to go home.”

Her words are a lightning strike to my chest.

“Are you sure?” Vanessa says softly.

“Yes. I don’t want to stay in New York for another day.”

I hold my breath, waiting for her response. They can’t leave. We still have a week left. They can’t just take away the last seven days we have together because some little prick stuck his dick into someone else.

My jaw ticks. My hands fist.

Vanessa pulls back and cups Haven’s face.

I’m still holding my breath.

She kisses Haven’s forehead. “Okay. Whatever you need.”

All the air rushes out of my body in an instant. My head feels light. I stand up too abruptly and have to brace myself against the wall until my equilibrium comes back.

That’s it?

They’re leaving?

No, I can’t have that. I can’t let them go.

I storm out of my room and find James still standing at attention in the foyer.

“Hayes,” he says. “I’m really sorry. I had no idea.”

“Not your fault. Thanks for getting them home safely.”

He nods once.

“You can go. We got it from here.”

Another nod, and he disappears out the door. I head to my office and pull

up the number for the building manager on duty.

He answers on the second ring.

I can't erase what happened to Haven or fix the hurt she's feeling. But because of David, I'm losing time with my daughter. And for that, he deserves to be jobless without a recommendation.

"Mr. North, what can I do for you?"

"That kid at concierge. David. If I see his face in this building again, I'll bury you in building code and health code violations so deep that it makes more sense to demo the place than fix it."

"Sir?"

"He's been dating my daughter. He slept with her best friend. I want him gone."

He clears his throat. "That kind of behavior doesn't reflect our conduct policies. I assure you that you will not see him here again."

I hang up the phone and breathe a small sigh of relief, knowing that although I didn't get to punch David's face like I wanted, at least I gave his professional life a solid blow.

Buh-bye, Daveed.

Vanessa

That weasel motherfucker!

If David were standing here now, I'd give him a piece of my mind so fierce it would make him cry. And then I'd dance on his tears and laugh in his pathetic face.

"I hate him," Haven says, her voice muffled from being buried in my chest.

"I hate him, too."

She pulls back and wipes her eyes. "Is Lia still here?"

I nod. "Why don't you sleep with me tonight?"

“Yeah,” she frowns. “I will.”

We’re about to head out of Hayes’ room when she stops and notices the bed. The comforter and sheet are a tangled heap at the foot, and the pillows look freshly disheveled.

“What happened here?”

“Huh?” I say, playing stupid. “How would I know?”

She eyes me from my bare feet to Hayes’ T-shirt and boxer shorts.

“Come on,” I say in a sudden hurry to get out of Hayes’ room. “You need to get some sleep.”

I rush her down the hallway, grateful to see James is gone. Female voices from behind Haven’s door tell me Lia and Meg are both safe.

When I flip on the lights in my room, I head straight for the dresser to find pajamas for Haven to wear.

“Mom? What time is it?”

“I don’t know.” I pull out pants and a T-shirt. “My phone’s on the bedside table if you want to check.”

“Mom.” Her tone this time is firm.

I whirl around to see her arms crossed at her chest as she stares at the phone screen face-up on the bedside table.

“You have five missed calls from me,” she says.

“Sorry. I must’ve been sleeping when you called.” My heart pounds thunderously at the steady calmness of her tone.

“Sleeping.” She takes the pajamas I offer her, but her eyes are on the bed. The pristinely made—as in, not slept in—bed. “*Where* were you sleeping?”

“Haven, we can talk about this in the morning. Right now, you need some rest and—”

“How long have you been having sex with my dad?”

Under normal circumstances, this would be a silly question. Our circumstances, however, are far from normal.

I blow out a breath. “Hayes and I are complicated, okay?”

Her gaze narrows. “Oh, my God,” she whispers. “The one-night stand with an old friend. You’ve been lying to me this entire time!”

“You’re upset about Lia and David right now, and I feel for you. I do. But this thing with Hayes and me isn’t really what you’re mad about.”

“Don’t tell me how to feel!”

I run a hand through my hair. Haven’s fierce fighting attitude is a trait I’ve always loved about her. That is until it’s aimed in my direction.

“I’m not telling you how to feel. But remember, I’m the adult here. Hayes and I have history, and there are a lot of unresolved feelings that—”

The bark of laughter that comes from her lips hurts my heart. “You’re a liar. Just like Lia,” she ticks names off on her fingers, “and David. You’re no better than they are.”

She storms out of the room, and I follow her.

“Haven, stop—” The door to the empty spare bedroom slams in my face. I rest my forehead against it.

“Everything okay?”

I turn to see Hayes standing at the mouth of the hallway. His eyes are set into a scowl.

“Just dandy.” I push off from the door and meet him in front of my room. “She figured out that we’ve been sleeping together. Now she’s calling me a liar.” I rub my face and groan. “This is such a mess.”

“Do you want me to talk to her?”

“I think it’s best to give her a night to cool down. She’s had a lot thrown at her, and the sun’s not even up yet.”

He grunts as if to agree.

“I think staying here might have been a mistake.”

“Don’t say that,” he says, and his arms jump as if he wants to reach for me. Instead, he folds his hands under his biceps. “David and Lia fucked this up. Not us.”

“I don’t know, Hayes. My head’s all over the place. Haven’s ready to go

home, and I think that would be best.”

“Ness, please. Give her some time to think things through. I’ll take the girls to the airport tomorrow, and once they’re gone, give Haven some time to settle.”

“Yeah, okay.” I don’t tell him that the look in Haven’s eyes tonight when she said she was ready to go home was the most resolute I’ve ever seen her. “I’m going to go to sleep.”

His expression turns cold and concerned.

“Goodnight, Hayes.”

He doesn’t try to stop me or call my name.

When I crawl into bed, I know one thing for sure. If Haven and I have any chance of surviving this with our hearts intact, we need to get the hell out of New York.

TWENTY-NINE

Vanessa

Sleep didn't come easily. Sometime around four o'clock in the morning, I managed to finally pass out. When I wake up, the condo is silent. The girls must still be sleeping, or I'm sure I'd hear more yelling. I tiptoe down the hallway, and Haven's door is locked. She's asleep. Good.

I poke my head into Lia and Meg's room and find the girls packing up their things. Their flight isn't supposed to leave until this afternoon. "You girls leaving?"

Lia keeps her head down, shoving things into her bag.

"Haven's dad booked us an earlier flight," Meg says with an apologetic smile.

Hayes did that?

I nod and leave them to their packing. I find Hayes in the kitchen, dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans. His hair is wet, as if he's fresh from a shower.

He looks up from his phone, and his expression warms. "You're awake."

"You got earlier flights?"

He frowns as if not loving the change of topic. "I did. I want them gone when Haven wakes up."

My chest blooms with warmth.

“Can I make you some tea?” He crosses to the cupboard as if he’s going to do it anyway.

“No, not yet. I’m going to shower, and I have some phone calls to make.”

He drops his head between his shoulders, then angles his jaw toward me, even though I’m standing behind him. “Booking flights for you and Haven?”

I swallow the tension in my throat. I can’t answer out loud, but the truth is, yes. That was my plan.

“Can you hold off on that until I talk to her myself?”

“What’s the point? She made herself clear last night.” And honestly, I think leaving is for the best. I got way too close to falling for this man again, something I vowed never to do. I need the distance to get my emotions back in che—

He slams his palm on the countertop. “Jesus, Vanessa, give me a chance to talk to her before you rip her out of my life again!”

I suck in a breath, stunned and without a response.

His arms brace on the countertop, and he manages to sink lower into himself. “You owe me that much.”

At a complete loss, I whirl around on my heel and storm back to my room. And taking the cue from Haven, I slam my door to punctuate my departure.

Hayes

On my way home after dropping Meg and Lia off at the airport, I wish I had paid James to do it. Not only is the ride with the two teenage girls uncomfortably awkward, but I had a difficult time being polite to Lia because I see her as the reason I’m losing Vanessa and Haven. If she never came to visit, I’d be at my home with my girls, and we’d be discussing where to have lunch.

I’m breaking every speed limit where I can and am half out of my mind

while stuck in traffic, thinking that I could get home and they'll be gone.

Vanessa seems set on leaving, and after what we shared last night, I can't fathom why. I thought we'd built something. A bridge over some fucked-up issues of the past. But she jumped at the idea of leaving New York as if she couldn't get away from me fast enough.

I need to talk to Haven. She's the only chance I have at convincing them to stay a little longer.

When I finally get back to my building, I toss my keys to the valet and jog to the elevator. Seconds feel like long, painful minutes until I'm finally in my home and searching for Haven and Vanessa. They're not in their rooms or in the kitchen. My pulse throbs in my ears as I go from room to room, searching for them. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see them on the patio.

They're facing the city, side by side, not speaking.

I step out to join them and immediately wonder if I should when I sense the tension between them. It's too late to back out unnoticed, so I take my chances and grab a seat.

Vanessa seems tense, but at least she'll look at me. Haven's jaw pulses and her hands are balled up in her lap. She won't look at me.

"What's going on?" I ask gently.

"You got the girls off to the airport okay?" Vanessa says.

I nod. "It was a quiet trip."

"Good thing that whore is gone," Haven says and finally turns a very Hayes-esque scowl my way. "She'd probably try to have sex with you, too."

I scratch the back of my neck, feeling uncomfortable as fuck. "I don't think—"

"Oh, that's right. You're already having sex *with my mom!*"

Vanessa groans and drops her forehead into her hands.

I sit like a useless dumbass with my jaw hanging open because... what... how... I don't know how to respond to that.

Haven tilts her head, her glare sharpening. "You don't deny it then."

“No.”

Her brows pop above her eyes. “No more lying, huh?”

“I’ve never lied to you.”

She leans forward like she wants to claw my eyes out. “You’ve been sleeping with my mom this whole time!”

“Not this whole time.”

“And you lied about it!”

“I didn’t. You never asked. Sleeping with your mom isn’t something I’d hide from anyone.”

She blinks as if my words threw her off.

“Honestly?” I sit forward in my seat, my elbows on my thighs. “If my parents had told me at seventeen that they were still having sex, I would’ve vomited. I didn’t imagine you’d want to know what your mom and I were doing.”

Her face scrunches up. “Ew. I don’t.”

I shrug. “There ya go.”

Vanessa’s eyes are wide as they bounce back and forth between Haven and me. If I’m not mistaken, I think she appreciates what I said.

“Haven.” I try to soften my voice. “What David and Lia did is unforgivable. You have every right to be angry and want to leave New York. But can I ask you to please take a day to think about it?”

She’s still glaring at me. “Give me one good reason why I should stay.”

That’s easy. “Because we just met. We lost seventeen years. I just got you back, and I know eventually I’ll have to let you go again, but... I was hoping I’d have a little more time.”

Her expression softens. “I can’t stay here and see David every day.”

“You won’t. He’s been let go as of last night.”

Vanessa seems just as shocked as Haven.

I chuckle. “Trust me. He’s better off. If I see him again, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself from hurting him.”

Haven's mouth twitches. "You'll have to stand in line behind me."

"And me," Vanessa chimes in.

"Fair enough."

Haven heaves out a breath. "I do have plans with Jordan tomorrow. I guess we could stay." She looks at her mom.

Vanessa chews the inside of her mouth and shrugs. "Whatever you want."

Every ounce of strength and breath I'd been holding rushes away with those few words. They're staying. "Thank God." I drop my face into my hands. When I look back up, Vanessa has pulled Haven into her side. Her mouth is pressed to Haven's hair, and her eyes are closed.

I could live seeing this kind of stuff every day and die a content man. Seeing my Vanessa comfort our daughter, our nearly adult daughter, as if the kid was still a toddler. Age doesn't seem to matter when it comes to the bond a mother has with a child. It's as if Haven will always be her baby, no matter how old she gets.

"That's settled then?" I double check, making sure I didn't misunderstand somewhere along the way.

"For now," Haven says with a smirk.

Smartass, just like her mom.

I love it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. My sister-in-law's name shows up on the screen. My finger hovers to send the call to voicemail, but for some reason, I cave and answer the call.

"What?"

"Listen," she says. "I know they don't teach compassion in The School for the Damned where you went, so for the sake of my precious niece, I thought I'd toss a little advice your way."

Vanessa and Haven remain curled up together on the loveseat, and I excuse myself to take the call inside. I close the patio door behind me. "What are you talking about?"

“James told me what happened.”

Makes sense. James is a lot closer to Alex and Jordan than anyone else. I figured he'd be home sleeping after a weekend of teen-sitting and all-night driving. Guess he went straight to work for Alex.

“Two most important things a girl needs after this level of betrayal. Do you know what they are?”

I shrug. “Jewelry and a vacation?”

She groans. “You have so much to learn.”

I grind my teeth together. “Get to the point.”

“She needs to be surrounded by her tribe and lots of ice cream.”

“Tribe?”

“Friends, Einstein. For a man who can turn people to stone with one look, you're surprisingly dense.” She sighs. “Considering she was betrayed by a member of her tribe, we'll need to bring out the big guns.”

“I'm not even going to ask because I know you're going to tell me.”

“Nice of you to join the conversation,” she says dryly. “Aunties.” She drops the word like a mic. “Columbus and eighty-fifth. Scooper Dooper. ASAP.”

“Scooper Doop—”

“Hayes! Get it together! This is a crisis situation.”

“Fine. Bye.”

She hangs up without saying goodbye. I shake my head, but the corner of my mouth is twitching.

I pop my head back out to the patio. “Hey, ah...” This seems like a strange thing to ask in the middle of the day, but without any other direction, I blindly take Jordan's advice. “Would the two of you be interested in grabbing some ice cream?”

“Oh, my God, yes,” Haven groans in a way that makes me think she's needed ice cream this whole time and was just waiting for the opportunity.

Vanessa's eyes brighten for the first time since Haven's been home.

“Genius idea!”

They’re both up and headed inside to grab their shoes.

Huh... ice cream. Who knew?

JORDAN MADE it sound important to get to Scooper Dooper quickly, so I have a driver from my building drop us off out front. The small ice cream shop stands out like pink bubble gum on asphalt, its candy-colored painted exterior a beacon for a sweet tooth among the bland concrete buildings on either side of it.

When I open the door, a bell jingles, announcing our arrival, but the sound is drowned out by an explosion of voices that come from the corner.

“Haven!” I hear said in unison, and soon my daughter is surrounded in arms.

Jordan, Gabriella, Lillian, and even Kingston drown Haven in love and encouragement.

“Fuck that guy!”

“Hey, we should egg his car!”

“He doesn’t deserve you.”

“This Lia girl sounds like a real bitch!”

“Let her have him. Karma will pay them back.”

They guide her to a table, where Haven is greeted with an ice cream sundae that’s taking up half the table. In it sits just one spoon.

“This one is for you, honey.” Lillian pulls out the chair for Haven, who takes it and dives into the ice cream eagerly.

Jordan, satisfied with Haven’s contentment, comes around the table toward us. Vanessa tenses at my side. I wonder what that’s about. I make a mental note to ask later.

“I’m sorry we’re seeing each other again under such shitty

circumstances,” Jordan smiles warmly at Vanessa. “It’s good to see you again. We didn’t get a chance to talk much when we picked Haven up for the show last week.”

“No, we didn’t,” is all Vanessa says. For someone who is usually more of an extrovert, I can’t help but feel like she’s holding back in front of Jordan.

Gabriella joins us. She greets Ness with a hug that is barely returned. “How’s she doing?”

“She’ll be okay.” Vanessa watches Kingston and Lillian fawn all over Haven.

“Good thing she didn’t move in with the creep,” Gabby says, and Jordan’s eyes widen at what I’m guessing was an information slip. “I’m going to get a scoop.” Gabby scurries off.

Jordan smiles uncomfortably. “Me too.” She follows after her.

“You all right?” I ask Vanessa. “You seem a little tense.”

She looks up at me, and I catch the flicker of unease in her green eyes. “I’m fine. I’m just caught off guard. I didn’t know there would be so many people.”

I kick myself for not telling her. I guess I was too busy basking in the victory of the ice cream recommendation that I didn’t think she’d mind having my family here. “Do they make you uncomfortable?”

“No!” She shakes her head. “No, of course not. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Her response is so adamant, so over the top, that I wonder if what she means is the complete opposite.

“Why don’t you sit down, and I’ll get you some ice cream?” I watch her fidget with her hands. “Cookies and cream in a sugar cone.”

Her eyes dart to mine. “You remember my ice cream order?”

I fight the blush I feel heating behind my skin. Hooking her around the waist, I pull her against me and press my lips into her hair. “I told you, Ness. I remember everything.”

She slumps against me, and I feel her hands grip the back of my shirt.

Something is definitely going on, but I can't imagine what it could be. If I thought she would, I'd drag her outside and demand she tell me. But I know she won't share until she's ready.

"You want to sit down, and I'll—"

"No." Her hands tighten into my shirt. "I'll come with you."

I release her body but grab hold of her hand. When I look up, every single pair of eyes is on us. Even Haven seems fixated on her mom and me while she spoons a heaping mouthful of chocolate ice cream into her mouth.

I order Ness her scoop and get myself a cup of black coffee. She sticks close to my side when we come to the table and claim two seats together at the opposite end.

"We should've seen this coming, for fuck's sake." Kingston's lounging in his chair with an arm slung over the back of Gabriella's. "The guy wears Texas."

"This coming from a man wearing a pink boa." Gabby swats some of the cotton-candy-colored feathers away from her face.

Kingston pulls her in and presses several kisses to her cheek, his neckwear getting in her nose and eyes. "You love it, you beautiful insane woman." His attention is back on Haven. "And just so you know," he runs a hand with silver sparkled polished nails down the feathers. "This fabulous accessory can also be used as a weapon to choke Teva wearing liars if need be."

The tension in my chest unwinds as I watch Haven laugh as she basks in the love and support of my... *her* family.

But I can't fully relax knowing Vanessa's upset about something.

I just can't figure out what.

Vanessa

We ended up leaving Haven with her "aunties," as they call themselves, for

an afternoon of retail therapy. They invited me, all but insisted I join them, but I said no thank you and claimed exhaustion.

Not that anyone seemed to believe my lie.

I thought I had managed to get away with it, but back at Hayes' place I'm in the kitchen, grabbing a glass of water when he just comes out and asks me.

"Why does being around my family make you so uncomfortable?"

I'm standing at the island, rubbing my thumb up and down my glass and watching the condensation gather as I consider how to answer him.

"I don't know." The truth is, I'm still trying to figure it out myself. What I do know is that close connections terrify me. I'm sure I have abandonment issues, and I don't want my issues to trickle down and affect Haven. Which is why she's free to make all the connections she wants. I just can't be part of it.

Hayes frowns, clearly not liking my answer.

"Listen, um... I've been thinking. We have one week before we go back home. I think it's probably best if we make the break now."

His frown turns into a scathing glare. "Make what break?"

I lick my lips and shift nervously because I know his response isn't going to be what I want to hear. "I don't think we should have sex or anything anymore."

His expression falls. "Ness, if I knew last night was going to be the last time I got to touch you, I would've..." His words dissolve with a heavy swallow.

"We both know what's been going on here."

"I don't think we do." He rubs a frustrated hand down his face. "You choose to believe what you want without actually listening to what I say."

I reel back, offended by his accusation. "That's not true!"

"I told you last night that I would always love you."

"I remember."

"And you told me you'd always love me."

"I did, and I meant it."

He rips his hands through his hair. “Then what the fuck are we doing?!”

“We’re doing what’s best for ourselves, Hayes.” My hand grips the glass so tightly that I fear it’ll shatter. “We will always love each other because we share a child. But your life is here in New York, and our lives are two thousand miles away. Love is great, but we both know it’s not enough.” My voice cracks, and I want to punch myself for it. “Love has never been enough.”

He blinks rapidly but gives away little of what he’s feeling. “I’m not giving up. You two can come out and visit, and if I get a day or two off, I can —”

A burst of sad laughter surges from my chest. “You can what? Drop in for a day or two? Come on, Hayes, we all deserve better than that. Don’t you see? Too much time has passed. We’ve built whole lives apart from each other. You’re not leaving yours. I’m not leaving mine. I think loving each other means we accept that and respect it.”

“I can’t.” He lifts an arrogant chin. “I won’t.”

“You have to. You have no other choice.”

His brows pinch together.

“I’ll never stand between you and Haven. She’s almost eighteen and has the freedom to see you however often she likes. But my heart’s been through enough, Hayes. It won’t survive another blow.”

“Is that what this is? You’re afraid things won’t work out between us a second time?”

“I know they won’t. I don’t want to live in the city, and your entire life and career are here.” I shrug. “There’s no getting around that.”

“You’re being unreasonable. If you’d just be willing to—”

“Willing to what? Give up my life in Colorado? My home? How many more things should I be expected to give up?”

He opens his mouth, then slams it shut.

I sigh, suddenly drained. “I’m going to go lay down.” I don’t have the

energy to argue. And deep down, he knows everything I'm explaining is true. Once he comes to terms with it, then we can get back to enjoying these last few days together with Haven.

Then my part here will be done, and the rest will be between them.

The only way it can be.

THIRTY

Vanessa

Three days have gone by since my talk with Hayes. He's been going into the office later so that he can have breakfast with Haven, and he's back every night in time to eat dinner with us. His job is demanding, and I know he's been making up the hours he's missing by working in his home office well past the time Haven and I go to sleep.

We've shared old stories with our daughter and laughed and joked easily as if there weren't a thread of tension between us. I catch Haven watching us from time to time as if she's trying to figure out our relationship.

If she's paying attention, she'll pick up that we've shifted romantic love into platonic.

I booked our flights home, making our ultimate departure official, but none of us talk about that. We've made new memories of cooking dinner together, teaching Hayes how to make an apple pie, and helping him pick out new furniture for his condo.

It's now Thursday, and Hayes lets us know that he won't be home for dinner. He has a business dinner meeting that has the potential to be the biggest deal for North Industries this year. He makes us swear to wait on eating apple pie until he gets home. I promise we will.

I decide to take Haven out on a fancy mother-daughter date and make reservations at The Cellar—under my mom’s name again.

The restaurant is busy like before, but thankfully, the name Annabella Osbourne gets us right in the door. We’re seated in the back rather than up front by the bar like last time, which puts us more in the middle of the hustle and bustle.

“Oh, my God, I think that’s Kelly Graham,” Haven whisper-hisses across the table at me.

I spot a woman who looks to be in her mid-twenties, wearing a black blazer and slacks without a top. The only thing between the room’s eyes and her ample cleavage is a series of gold necklaces. Her long, bleach-blonde hair hangs loosely around her shoulders. “I’ve never seen her before.”

Haven rolls her eyes. “She was on the reality show where you date your roommate? Whatever. Anyway, she’s an influencer now. She just came out with a makeup line.”

“Wow,” I say, trying to sound impressed.

Haven’s gaze moves between her menu and the room, clearly seeking out more notable celebrities. “Is that the guy from Saturday Night Live?”

“I have no idea.”

The rest of the dinner proceeds in a similar way. We talk a bit about home and how Haven’s going to handle seeing Lia again. She tells me about the famous influencers who live in New York, and all conversation dies when we get our food.

We share bites, eat slowly, and savor the decadent meal. I can’t think of a single thing that could make the night better.

“Dessert?” Our waitress offers us each a dessert menu.

“We can’t,” Haven says and hands the menu back. “Apple pie, remember?” she says to me.

“Just the bill. Thank you.”

I sip at what’s left in my wine glass and take in the grown-up woman

sitting across from me. People always tell me to enjoy every minute because they grow up fast. I never knew exactly how fast until now, when I'm looking back on seventeen years and wondering where the hell the time went.

A peal of female laughter comes from across the room, and we both naturally turn nose eyes toward the sound. The elegant arm of a woman is thrown over the chair back of a man. Her maroon-colored nails run gently through the back of his hair while she stares lovingly at his profile. There's something familiar about her. Her high cheekbones, silky dark hair in big curls, pinned loosely at her nape. I wonder if she's been on a show I've watched before—

“Mom.”

When I turn to Haven, her face is pale and her expression stony. Her eyes are fixed in the direction of the beautiful woman, too. I follow her gaze, and time slows to a crawl.

The woman is now nose-to-nose with the man she'd been fawning over. He's looking directly into her eyes, a lazy grin on his face. His hand reaches forward, and he gently pushes a lock of hair off her face.

Hayes.

The man is Hayes, and the woman... I remember her now. She's the woman from the bar the last time I was here. The one who he kept looking at in the bar.

They could just be friends.

Then I notice they're not alone. They're at a table with two other couples. One of them I've never seen before, but the other is Hudson and Lillian.

They don't bat an eyelash as the woman feeds Hayes a bite of her food while wearing a seductive grin.

I turn away, feeling like I'm spying on an intimate moment between lovers.

“He's on a date,” Haven's voice breaks through my thoughts. “Why are Hudson and Lillian with him?” The hurt in her question makes me want to

light the whole earth on fire.

“It’s okay, honey. He’s a grown man. He’s allowed to do whatever he wants.” I can’t control the shake in my voice.

“But I thought,” Haven looks toward Hayes. “He’s holding her hand under the table.”

Oh, God, I’m going to be sick.

I count my cash three times to pay the bill and finally give up, hoping I left an adequate tip. If not, at least they’ll blame my mom for being cheap, not me.

“We should go,” I say and quickly stand.

“You’re not going to confront him?” Haven asks but follows me.

“We’re not together, Haven!”

She flinches at the fierceness in my voice.

“Besides, we’re leaving in a couple days. He has a life here. That doesn’t change just because of us.”

The driver from Hayes’ building is waiting just outside, so we’re able to walk out and get immediately into the car. The ride back to the condo is quiet, and when I look over to check on Haven, I see tears welling in her eyes.

“Mom?” she sniffs. “I’m sick of New York. I’m ready to go home.”

I pull her hand into my lap, my chest spasming while I force down my feelings to stay strong for her. “I am, too.”

Hayes

“We fucking did it, man!” Hudson shakes my hand and pulls me in for a back-thumping hug. “You sold him on design to build!”

“I don’t know about that.” I release him from the hug to accept the short glass of scotch being handed to me by the bartender. “Your pitch on sustainable wind turbines for energy closed it.”

Mr. Lovekin left the restaurant minutes ago, and we decided to have a celebratory drink at the bar.

“I still think it was about my designing the building around natural light.” Lillian sips a glass of champagne with a hoity pinkie in the air.

Ellie holds out her champagne to toast. “To a convergence of all the best ideas that just landed North Industries the deal of the year.”

We toast and drink, and I feel like so much of my life is falling into place. If only I could convince Vanessa and Haven to stay, then everything would be right where it belongs.

“Thank you for coming,” I tell my friend. “You put Mrs. Lovekin at ease with all that talk about charitable contributions. How’d you know she’s the chair for the Nature Conservancy?”

She winks, then rocks into my hip. “You pay me to do my homework.”

We clink glasses, and I throw back as much of my drink as I can. I promised Haven and Vanessa I’d be home for apple pie.

Hudson lifts a chin my way. “I thought we were going to lose the deal when you wouldn’t speak up about building permits on private land.”

“I know,” Ellie says. “I grabbed his hand under the table and squeezed so hard I thought I broke his finger.”

“Thank you for that,” I say to her. “My mind was wandering a bit.” I was thinking about how much I wished it was Vanessa by my side. Ellie and I are so used to playing a couple that it comes second nature, but tonight, everything felt off. I couldn’t fall into the role as easily as I have in the past.

All because of Vanessa.

I check the time and cringe. It’s almost eleven.

I send a quick text to Vanessa.

I’m sorry. Meeting ran late. Apple pie for breakfast?

Assuming she’s asleep, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and plan to

wake up early to serve both my girls apple pie breakfast in bed.
Tonight, we celebrate a huge North Industry victory.

THIRTY-ONE

Hayes

I check the time for the millionth time this morning.

It's almost eight o'clock, and Vanessa and Haven haven't made a peep.

When I got home last night, the condo was dead silent. A little buzzed after the celebratory cocktails, I was tempted to sneak into Vanessa's room and crawl into bed with her. But doing so would violate the feelings she made clear the other night.

She still loves me, but it's not enough.

I didn't have the heart to tell her then that she should know better than to think I'm the kind of man who gives up on what he wants.

I know we can't live like a traditional family, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to give up on changing her mind.

Pushing through my tiny hangover, I woke, showered, and called in late for work so that I could have breakfast with Vanessa and Haven and tell them all about the major deal we struck last night.

Which is why I'm sitting at the kitchen island, staring at two plates of apple pie and an ice cream scoop ready for the vanilla ice cream. I pour orange juice, put two tea bags in a mug, and make hot chocolate for Haven.

I vacillate between letting them sleep in and just waking them up, and

when nine o'clock approaches, I give up and head for Vanessa's room.

With my ear to the door, I hear nothing but the slight hum from the air conditioning vents. If she's this tired, I should let her sleep. I back away from the door and grab my laptop, then continue waiting for them to get up while sorting through emails.

I have to be in the office at eleven for a meeting with August to discuss last night's deal. I can't wait to see the look on his face.

Nine o'clock comes and goes. Nine-thirty. At nine forty-five, I start to worry that maybe one or both of them are sick.

I rap softly on Vanessa's door. "Ness, it's me. Can I come in?" I dip my chin and wait for permission. Nothing. I knock. "Are you up?"

Still nothing.

I crack open the door and—

My heart drops into my stomach. "What the fuck?"

The bed is made. The room is empty.

I throw open the closet doors, and all that's there are empty hangers. The bathroom is clean, and there's not a single trace that anyone was ever living here. Not a spot on the mirror or dab of toothpaste in the sink.

I jog to Haven's door and throw it open.

"Gone." Oh, God, I'm going to be sick.

It's as if they were never here at all!

I grab my phone and call 911.

"I'd like to report two missing women."

"Sir, who are these women?"

"My daughter and her mother. Haven and Vanessa Osbourne. Something's wrong. They're gone and..." I spot Haven's cell phone on her bedside table. Next to it is a note.

"When was the last time you saw the women?"

Dear Hayes,

*We went home.
I knew mom wouldn't tell you.
Thanks for everything.
If nothing else, I'm glad I finally got
to meet my dad.
Love, Haven*

A wave of sadness slams me in the chest.

“Sir? Are you there?”

“I’m sorry.” My voice cracks. “They’re okay. I made a mistake.”

“A mistake? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

I took for granted that they were here.

Now they’re gone.

I drop onto the bed and read the note as many times as it takes for reality to sink in. Were they gone last night? Did they sneak out this morning? Why would they go and not even say goodbye?

I fucked things up. Again.

There’s no fixing things when I’m not entirely sure where I went wrong.

Vanessa

Haven and I managed to catch a midnight flight out of New York to Denver. Tag, so relieved to hear we were coming home, met us at the airport to take us home. We didn’t get to the house until almost four o’clock in the morning. I knew with the time difference, Hayes would be waking up soon.

I expected to have a hundred missed phone calls or text messages by the time we got off the plane in Denver. But he hadn’t reached out at all. Not since his text about having apple pie for breakfast, but I got that one in the cab on the way to the airport.

Either Hayes was out all night with his date, or he hadn't realized we'd left.

I stay in bed longer than I usually would, making up for lost time. I don't know what time it is, only that the sun is out. The sound of running water woke me, although whether it was from Haven or Tag, I couldn't tell.

He insisted on crashing on the couch last night, claiming he was too tired to drive the five miles home. I know he only wanted to stay to be close to us after the long absence—and maybe protect us should Hayes show up demanding answers.

I drift in and out of sleep, but every time my eyes close, I see Hayes with the woman at the restaurant. She was everything I'd expect from a woman Hayes would fall for—stunning, kind eyes, attentive, and captivating.

Why didn't he tell me he was seeing someone?

I never would've kissed him, much less had sex with him, if I knew he was committed to someone else.

He made me *the other woman* without telling me, and that's fucked up.

If I was tempted to feel bad about leaving without a word, I no longer am. He kept secrets first.

When my mind doesn't stop spinning, I roll out of bed and take a shower. I need to head to the market, and I want to swing by the nursery for some flowers. Staying busy is the number one job for today.

I step into the living room and see Tag sitting on the couch, wearing his khaki button-up and green forest ranger uniform.

“Good morning, sleepy head.” He stands and comes toward me.

I don't want him to hug me, but I also don't want the conversation that comes after I reject his hug, so I stand still as he wraps his arms around me.

His body feels foreign against mine. Warm, sure, but my face hits awkwardly at his throat, and his beard is bristly, which has me cranking my head as far as it'll go to avoid scratches. His hands lock behind me rather than rest on my hips, and he smells like pine needles and campfires. Not a

bad scent, just all wrong.

“How’d you sleep?”

I take the opportunity to slip out of his arms. “Like the dead. Did you already leave and go to work?”

His mustache jumps with a smile. “I did. It’s twelve-thirty. I’m on my lunch break.”

“Twelve-thirty?” My eyes nearly fall out of my head.

“I checked on you multiple times to make sure you were still breathing.” He chuckles.

I turn away toward the kitchen, not sure how I feel about Tag coming into my room while I’m asleep. “I’m sure Haven is still out cold.”

“Nope.”

I whirl around. “She’s up?”

“Up and gone. I guess Meg called and wanted to have breakfast with her. Talk about what happened with that Daveed guy.”

“So you heard, then?”

He sucks in air through his teeth. “Oh, yeah.”

Is he grinning?

I’m about to accuse him of being happy about Haven’s broken heart because it ultimately helped bring us home, but his phone chimes.

“Shit. Raccoon nest under Mrs. Truman’s stairs.” He punches out a quick text. “I better go before she burns her whole house down. She hates rodents.” He pulls me in for another hug. “I regret giving her my personal cell number.”

“She’s eighty, Tag. Cut her some slack.”

He releases me and heads for the door. “Dinner tonight?”

“Not tonight.”

He frowns.

“I have a lot to do after being gone for nearly a month.”

“I’ll bring take out—”

“No, don’t. I’m going to the store, and I’ll probably crash early anyway.”

He releases the door handle. “Vany, are you okay? Because if there’s anything you want to talk about, you know I’m here to listen.”

“I know. Thanks.” Trust me, Tag, you do not want to hear about this.

He smiles sadly, then leaves.

I make tea and sit on the patio, closing my eyes and listening to the sounds of the forest. Wind through pine trees, birds chirping, lizards scattering over dried leaves. No car engines, no smell of fuel and garbage, no honking and voices yelling.

Only peace.

I really do love it here.

I think back to when Hayes asked me if I missed the city, and I said no. I’ve never felt that answer more than now.

“Good to be home,” I say to myself and the abundant nature that surrounds me.

And yet, there’s a hole in my heart that I can’t explain.

IT FINALLY HAPPENED when I flipped my phone over for the first time.

After finishing my tea, I grabbed my phone to call Haven and let her know that I was running to the market, and I saw them.

Thirty-two text messages.

Twelve missed calls.

Eight messages.

All from Hayes.

Oh, and one from Hudson.

I decide to skim through the text messages and immediately regret it.

That's it? You leave without a word? Sneak out in the middle of the night?

What the fuck? I didn't even get to say goodbye to my daughter?

What the hell happened?

I thought things were good? I thought you both were happy to stay until the end of the week?

Talk to me, please.

Why won't you answer me?

Are you okay?

Vanessa, let me know you're okay! I can't call Haven because she left the fucking phone I got her.

Her Colorado number is unlisted.

Goddammit, Ness!

I click over to read Hudson's.

Hey, Vanessa. Let me know you and Haven made it home okay so I can call off Hayes? He's blowing up my phone, so I know he's blowing up yours. Sorry about all this.

Hudson's sorry? About what? The fact that he helped cover up that Hayes is very much involved with a woman? I decide to text Hayes back and ignore

Hudson's message.

We made it home safely.

The second after I hit Send, my phone rings. It's Hayes. I turn off the device, grab my keys, and head to the market.

THIRTY-TWO

Vanessa

It's been one week since we got home from New York. Hayes finally got the hint and stopped calling and texting me a couple of days ago, so it's now safe to turn on my phone and carry it around. I didn't listen to a single message and deleted every text. A small part of me feels petty for leaving the way I did, for not giving him a chance to explain. But a bigger part of me, the part that is hell-bent on survival, didn't give me any other choice.

Haven and Meg have made up and are tighter than ever. They've been to Denver a couple of times to shop for back-to-school, and Haven's sworn off dating and seems excited about her classes.

I've spent my time working on my apps and spending a lot of time in the garden. I never realized how much having my hands in the dirt soothed my soul. Until New York.

Tag has thankfully been busy with a string of campers getting robbed. I think he's also giving me space, or rather, respecting my request for space.

I'm trying to meet new people. It's not fair to keep leaning on Tag the way I have. I've unintentionally led him on or, at the very least, monopolized so much of his time that I've made it hard for him to meet anyone else.

Donna Meyers, who owns the local nursery, has been inviting me to

lunch for years. Yesterday, when she was helping me decide between rosy sedge and false forget-me-nots to plant around my front porch, I invited her.

I clean up as much as I need to, given that we're in Manitou Springs, which means washing the soil from my hands and putting on deodorant. When I pull up to the café, there are five cars in the lot during the lunch rush. Could things here be any more different than they are in New York?

"Hey, Donna!" I wave to her when I spot her in a booth right next to the taxidermized bison head on the wall.

"I'm so glad you invited me to lunch." The skin around her eyes crinkles when she smiles. She's about ten years older than me, and she's been working and playing outside as long as I've known her, which makes her look older. Something she'd never get away with in New York. But here in Colorado, her skin is evidence of a life well and fully lived. I hope I look the same at her age. That people look at me and say, "What I wouldn't give to have lived through the same adventures she has," rather than, "Wow, she has a good surgeon."

Donna begins with, "I can't find many people in town who love to talk plants as much as you do."

"I should've done it sooner." I lay the paper napkin in my lap. "I'm learning that I've been holding people at arm's length because of some tricky relationships I've had in the past." My cheeks warm at how honest I'm being. She's going to think I'm weird for pouring out my deepest darkest over egg salad sandwiches.

"Don't I know it? Why do you think I'm so close to plants? After my husband left me, plants were the only things I wasn't afraid to get close to."

God, it feels good to know I'm not alone.

We order iced tea and move on to lighter topics. Like how the Johnsons, who own the coffee shop, called the cops on the Murphys, who own the pizza place next door, because of a shared parking lot issue. The Whitney Estate finally sold for way over the asking price, and Old Man Harvey fell asleep at

a stop light after too much whiskey. The Henson's bull got out and impregnated one of Kathy Troy's cows, and the Stoker family had a successful pronghorn hunt, and they're sharing the meat if I'm interested.

Over a slice of mixed berry pie, we talk about plants and what she's excited about getting in the nursery this fall. We make plans to have lunch again soon.

Walking back to my truck, I feel lighter. More myself than I have since before New York. And yet somehow, there's still a tiny ache in my chest. I imagine an x-ray of my body, and all I see is a black blot over my heart.

Not all love stories have happy endings.

That's why they're called endings.

WE'VE BEEN HOME for eighteen days, and things are finally starting to feel like they're getting back to normal. I move Haven into the dorms this upcoming weekend, and I can finally say I'm ready to see her spread her wings, even though I'll never be fully ready to see her go.

"Did I tell you Meg's dorm room is on the same floor as mine?" She hasn't stopped talking about her move to Denver all day. I sense the nervous excitement in her voice, and as much of an adjustment it'll be for her, going from a small town to a big city, I feel like New York helped prepare her a little. "Her roommate is from Ireland. How cool is that?"

"So cool."

"Burgers are ready." Tag walks in from the back patio, carrying a platter of toasted buns and sizzling beef.

"Oh, did I tell you guys Lia's parents sent her to live with her aunt and uncle in San Antonio?" Haven says grinning.

Tag sets down the food in front of me while I get to work on adding cheese. "Dustin Lawry was talking about that at the hardware store. I guess

she got caught with Mr. Michaelson.” He raises his eyebrows.

“Mr. Michaelson?” I say, my eyes wide. “As in, owner of Buckhorn Tavern and very much a married man, Mr. Michaelson?”

“One in the same.”

“Eww,” Haven says with a grimace. “He’s like sixty.”

“He’s thirty-four,” Tag says. “We went to high school together. But still, yeah. Eww.”

“That poor girl,” I mumble, mostly to myself.

“Poor girl?” Haven says. “Do not tell me you actually feel sorry for her.” Her eyes narrow, and I pretend not to notice how much she looks like her dad when she does that.

I shrug. “I feel sorry for her. You have to wonder what she’s so desperate for that she’s willing to break up friendships or marriages to get it.”

“Dick, mom. She’s hungry for dick.”

“Haven!” I screech.

Laughter bursts from Tag, and soon we’re all laughing.

“We shouldn’t find this funny. Lia might be a legal adult, but only barely. Darryl Michaelson is a sick bastard. He watched Lia grow up. Aren’t they old family friends?”

We continue to indulge in town gossip while we make up our plates. We eat outside under the pink sky as the sun sets and the air cools. Life is good. We have our health and friends and good food and laughter. And that’s enough.

And I keep telling myself that every time I start to miss Hayes.

I MOVED Haven into her dorm two days ago.

It’s been twenty-seven days since New York.

I wish I could say that I haven’t been counting the days. I wish I could

say I've been stoic in my empty nesting. I can't say either.

With Haven gone and no one to be strong for but myself, I've cried. A lot. Eighteen years of stored-up tears and what seems like no end in sight.

The best I can do is keep myself distracted. Stay as busy as I can. So I made plans to meet with Donna for lunch tomorrow, and Tag brought me dinner last night. He treats me like an invalid, which isn't far from how I feel with Haven gone. Not that I'd ever let anyone know.

It's not Haven's responsibility to make me happy. It's not Tag's either.

For the first time in my life, I'm committed to being okay alone. I did it throughout my nine months of pregnancy. I can do it again.

THIRTY-THREE

Vanessa

Four days since I've cried. And I've lost count of how long it's been since New York. But the seasons are changing, and I've traded in my T-shirts for sweaters. Haven's loving college. She got a job at a coffee shop near campus and really likes her classes.

Tag told me last night that he's met a woman and was thinking about asking her on a date. He asked if there was any chance at all that I would change my mind about us. The desperate, lonely part of me wanted to hold on to him, but the bigger part, the part that cares for Tag, chose honesty.

Hayes North set the bar for love.

I'll never feel about Tag the way I feel about Hayes.

And I won't settle for anything less.

The sad reality that I'm losing my closest friend is tempered by the goodness of releasing Tag. Of allowing him to find the kind of love that I know is possible.

Lightning flashes through the windows, followed by a crack of thunder that shakes the walls. The rain started an hour ago, and according to forecasted reports, it will last through the night. Stuck indoors without any work to catch up on and no laundry to do, I'm forced to reckon with my most

recent development.

I missed my period.

At first, I thought it was all the stress of New York and then getting Haven moved. Two weeks ago, I could stand the smell of wine, and after Tag left last night, I threw up after taking one bite of steak.

I'm pregnant. Somewhere around five weeks is my best guess. I took a test, but I didn't need to. I feel it in my bones. Especially the ones in my hips, which are aching and widening months earlier than they did with Haven.

I hold my phone in my hand and contemplate calling Hayes and getting the confession over with. Maybe I should go to the doctor first. Or wait until the eight-week mark, just in case.

One thing's for sure. I'm not going to make the same mistakes I made with Haven. Hayes deserves to have a role in this child's life.

I toss my phone onto the coffee table and grab the remote. Cuddled up under a blanket, I turn on the TV to *Wheel of Fortune*. Anything to take my mind off my current predicament.

What will Haven think? Will she welcome the idea of a sibling eighteen years younger than her? Worrying about that now is a waste of time. If I'm pregnant, there's no going back.

"Another feather in your cap," I answer the *Wheel of Fortune* puzzle while the contestants on the screen struggle to guess.

I'd give anything to be able to stomach something stronger than chamomile tea, but the joke's on me. Pregnant, alone, and depressed, I get herbal tea.

My cell phone rings, and it's Haven.

"Hi, honey!"

"Hey, I heard the storm's pretty bad there. Are you okay?"

"I'm the mom. I'm supposed to be worrying about you, not the other way around."

She sighs. "I know. I just hate that you're in that house all alone."

“Are you kidding?” I pull the throw blanket up to my neck. “I love it. I get to walk around naked and watch whatever I want on television and turn my music up as loud as I want.” My eyes fill with tears, but I push them back. “It’s awesome!”

She laughs, buying my fake joy. “Please tell me you’re not actually walking around the house naked.”

“I’m naked right now.”

“Okay, well, stay warm and close the drapes. Small-town gossip travels fast, and I don’t need to be defending my mom’s new nudist tendencies.”

I laugh, and damn, it feels good. “What are you up to right now?”

“I’m on break at work, and I heard someone talking about the storm in Colorado Springs. I should probably get back to the register. We’re getting the post-study-session rush.”

I frown, wishing I could talk to her longer. “Yes, mustn’t deprive those college kids of caffeine. I love you, honey.”

“Stay safe, Mom.”

“I will.”

We disconnect, and I tuck the phone to my chest as if I could hold her close that way. Which is dumb and sentimental. So much for my three-day no-crying streak.

Tears prick my eyes, and the television screen blurs.

Then it goes black.

Along with everything else in the house.

I flop to my back and groan. No electricity. Great.

Now just angry, I toss the blanket off me and go about gathering candles. If I can get it bright enough in here, I could read or knit. I dig into Christmas storage and find plenty of candles, then set them up all around the house while the storm pummels my roof.

It’s going to be a long night.

Once I get enough candles lit, I settle back under my blanket with my

knitting needles and a skein of pale blue yarn. I'm deep into my project when bright light flashes through my window.

At first, I think it's another bolt of lightning, but the light stays much too long to be mother nature.

I squint into the light and realize it's headlights.

Tag.

Probably checking to make sure I'm okay.

I shove the blanket and knitting to the side and head to the door. Pulling the sleeves of my oversized sweater down over my hands to prepare for the cold rush of wind and water, I open the door just as the headlights shut off.

That's not Tag's truck.

A shadowy figure dressed in all black comes jogging toward me. They're holding something in their hands.

I step back and close the door so that only a crack is—

My breath catches in my throat. "Hayes?"

He stops at the threshold of my door. I can't make out his expression in the pitch-black darkness. I can only see water dripping off his head and drenching his clothes.

"Come in." I stand back, and in one long stride, he's inside.

Hayes North. Inside my home. In Manitou Springs.

I expected him to look different if I ever saw him again. That the image of him I preserved in my mind couldn't possibly be as good as the real thing. His square jaw carries the shadow of a day without a razor, and his hair looks darker wet as it falls over his forehead and drips water onto his full lips. But this is the Hayes of my memories—blazing hazel eyes, dark lashes, brows that etch irritation into his expression.

I race to the hallway and grab a stack of towels. I toss him one, put the other on the floor at his feet, and then hand him the third.

"Hayes, what are you doing here?"

He hasn't spoken yet, and in the candlelight, I can make out tension in his

expression. He sets a briefcase on the floor, then runs the towel over his hair.

“Are you going to answer me, or did you come all this way to stand silently in my presence?”

He whips the towel from behind his head with so much force it snaps the air. “I’m trying really hard not to say the wrong fucking thing here, Vanessa.”

Vanessa. Whoa, he is mad.

I blow out a breath, wondering if I have the strength to argue with a fired-up Hayes.

Silently, I take the wet towels and invite him into the kitchen. Even in the dark, I can feel his eyes on me, and I’m reminded, painfully so, of the oversized sweatpants with bleach stains that are tucked into mismatched socks I’m wearing. I haven’t washed my hair in two days, and my sweater is comfortable because the neck and arms are stretched out.

“You could’ve called,” I mumble, then jump at the sound of him slamming his briefcase onto the countertop.

“You’re really going to say that to me right now? *I could’ve called?*” His jaw is hard, and his hazel eyes practically glow with anger in the dim light. “I’m getting a little sick of your voice message.”

That’s fair.

I use a lighter to fire up a burner and put the water kettle on to make tea. Although, at this point, he might want something stronger. “I don’t have any whisky, but I have a bottle of red, and I think there’s a beer in here.”

He doesn’t answer, and when I turn around, he’s glaring at me so hard I recoil. “Why have you been avoiding me?”

“Hayes, you—”

“Better yet,” he says, raising his voice to yell, “Why did you sneak out of my house in the middle of the night as if we mean nothing to each other?”

I flinch and feel the burn of tears forming in my eyes. “I—” My voice cracks, and I clear it. “I’m sorry, I—”

“You’re sorry? You’re fucking sorry?!” He slams his open palm against

his chest so hard it makes a hollow thump. “You ripped my daughter away from me without a word!”

I hiccup.

His glare tightens. “Twice now, you’ve taken her from me!”

“I’m sorry,” I cry. “Stop yelling at me!” My emotional control breaks. I double over in a soul-shuddering sob.

In seconds, his arms are around me, pulling me upright and slamming me hard against his chest. His sweater is wet, but heat radiates from underneath and against my cheek. “Goddammit, Ness.” His lips are against my hair, and I feel the heat of his words on my skin. “I’m so fucking mad at you.” The muscles in his biceps twitch as he holds me as if the rage inside him is kicking and fighting to be freed.

“I’m sorry.” The apology is breathy and spoken between breaths. “I saw you with another woman, and I—”

Every muscle in his body tenses—his chest against my cheek, his arms around me. Even his lungs cease to pump. “What?”

I struggle to find my voice through the torrent of tears. “Her. The woman you’re dating. I saw the two of you at The Cellar.”

All at once, as if he were filled with air and someone pulled the plug, his big body melts and falls around me. His head forward over my shoulder, his hands gripping his elbows folded at my back, and he squeezes me so hard that I lose my breath.

“You saw me.” Not a question, so I don’t answer. “And Haven did, too.”

He’s putting the pieces together, and as he does, he melts deeper around me until I’m nearly off my feet, with his strong body being the only thing keeping me upright.

I can’t stop crying. Hormones, hurt feelings, and the realization that I love Hayes—more than any pain he could inflict—shatter the walls I’ve tried so hard to erect around my heart.

“All this for nothing,” he says angrily. “What a fucking waste.”

He holds me for a little longer, probably planning on keeping me close until I stop crying. Although, at this point, it feels like it'll never happen.

The hot water kettle screams, causing him to let me go. He shuts off the gas and moves the kettle. He turns to face me, and we're a couple of feet apart now. Resuming my position in his arms seems inappropriate, no matter how badly I want to be there.

"Ellie. The woman you saw me with."

"Hayes, you don't have to explain—"

"Too bad. I'm going to."

"I don't want to know!" A fresh wave of emotion moves through me. "Please, don't tell me about the woman who gets to have you, okay? Spare me that much."

He drops his chin and shakes his head, and a chuckle falls easily from his lips.

The sound helps me trade my tears for anger. "You think this is funny?"

The laughter dies, and his eyes are pure fire when he brings them back to mine. "Smartest woman I know, and you can't see it."

"I don't know what that means or what you're even doing here—"

"The woman you saw me with? Her name is Ellie. She's a call girl. And a damn good one."

I hold my hand up. "I've heard enough."

He snags my wrist out of the air and presses my palm to his heart. He covers my hand with his. "She's been my best friend for years. She's like a business partner. She accompanies me to corporate dinners and parties."

I swallow back nerves and put a voice to the question in my head. "So you two haven't slept together?"

He presses harder on my hand. "Yes. We have."

I try to pull my hand away, but he doesn't let it go.

"Feel my heart beating, Ness. It's steady, right? Calm. I'm not going to lie to you."

“I’m not so sure I want the truth.” I suck my trembling lip into my mouth.

“You’re going to get it anyway. Ellie and I haven’t slept together in a few months. Haven’t been romantically involved in just as long. And every time we have been in the past, I paid for it. There are no feelings between us outside of respect and friendship, and that’s the truth.”

“I saw you, Hayes. The way you looked at each other. You lovingly pushed hair off her forehead and held her hand under the table—”

“I pushed hair out of her eye. And she squeezed my hand under the table to remind me to pay attention to the client because my brain was in the clouds thinking about you.”

“You’re lying.”

“Focus, Ness.” He steps close. Towers over me. “My heart. Feel it. Close your eyes and *feel it.*”

I close my eyes, sending a tear falling from the corner of my eye.

“What you saw was two people with a professional relationship that is supposed to appear romantic. We’ve been working together long enough to sell it, Ness. I have never loved Ellie. She’s with dozens of other men, and I have never once been jealous or even cared.” He swallows. “I’m in love with you. I’ve always been in love with you.”

I focus on his heartbeat. The steady rhythm increases in intensity but not pace.

“I should’ve asked you to come to the dinner with me. But it was planned before you showed up back in my life, and I didn’t think you’d want to be paraded on my arm to a business meeting. I should’ve told you about Ellie. That’s a mistake I will regret for a long time.”

I open my eyes and realize we’re closer than when we started, and his hand has slipped around my lower back. He said he’s in love with me. Not that he *loved* me but that he *loves* me.

He doesn’t know everything yet.

I remove myself from his hold and swipe at my eyes with the sleeve of

my sweater. “How did you find me here?”

He locks his hands under his biceps. “I hired a private investigator.”

“And you drove all the way here from New York because I wouldn’t take your call?”

“No, James drove here. I flew in.”

“In this storm?” That seems risky.

He looks past me and shifts on his feet. “Not exactly.”

“Why did you come here?”

He heads to his briefcase and pulls out a folder. “I have news on our counteroffer.” He sets the folder down and opens it.

“You came all the way here to show me the contract?”

“You wouldn’t. Answer. My fucking calls.”

I hope he can’t see the flush of embarrassment bloom in my cheeks.

He tosses a few pages in front of me.

I squint in the dim light to try and read the document.

“They accepted our offer, Ness.”

“They accepted our offer,” I repeat numbly because I’m hoping that saying the words out loud might help my brain compute what I’m hearing. I should feel something. Excitement or... anything other than a strange detachment.

“If you’re still interested in selling, all you have to do is sign.” He closes the folder, then slides it an inch closer to me. “Think about it. We have thirty days to respond.”

I pick up the contract and press it to my chest as if using it as a shield. “You’re here on official business, then? As my lawyer?”

“Is that what you want, Ness? For me to be your lawyer?”

I clear my throat. “Nothing’s changed. Your career, your family, they’re all in New York, and my life is here.”

He nods solemnly. “What if things had changed?”

I’m already shaking my head. “I can’t leave Colorado. I’m staying here,

close to Haven. Eventually, you'll have to go home, to work, and—”

“No.” He moves closer. He peels the folder away from my chest and sets it on the counter before holding my hands in his. “What if work was no longer an issue and home was closer than New York?”

“Closer...? How much closer?”

He shrugs one big shoulder. “Three and a half miles.”

My fingers convulse in his grip. My heart slams frantically against my ribs. “Three hundred and fifty miles?”

“Three miles, babe.” His gaze grows dark. “I told myself when you and Haven came back into my life that there was no way I'd let you two get away from me again.”

“Again...” My thoughts run all over to catch up. “Your job, you—”

“I quit.”

“You *quit*?!”

“Are you going to keep repeating everything I say?”

“Hold on.” I stumble to the nearest place to sit down. The storm is still raging outside, with lightning flashing through the house and thunder shaking the walls—similar to the way Hayes' words are shaking mine. “You quit your job to move here?”

“That's what I'm saying,” he slowly says as if doing so will help me to understand.

“You quit North Industries and moved to Manitou Springs, Colorado?”

“This is getting tedious, Ness.”

“Holy fuck.” I double over, breathing. “Holy fucking fuck.” Hayes. My Hayes. He's here. For good. He moved to this tiny town to be closer to Haven and me. “Oh, my God,” I breathe. I look up at him, and his expression is equal parts concerned and leery. “The Whitney Estate.”

He grunts.

“You bought it.”

“My real estate agent said it was the nicest place in town.”

I frown. “But that place sold weeks ago.” Donna told me about it selling on our first lunch date.

“Yeah, well, I would’ve been here sooner, but work had to be done to make the place livable. Did you know it didn’t have an elevator? Who the hell wants to climb up three flights of stairs to go to bed every night?”

“Oh, shit,” I cry as a wave of fresh tears fall helplessly from my eyes. There’s no stopping them. They fall unashamed, and completely uncontrollable.

Hayes pulls me into his arms. “Please tell me these are happy tears.” His voice is soft and tender. When the crying doesn’t slow, he scoops me up and carries me into the living room.

He sits on the couch and settles me onto his lap, kissing my hair and forehead and holding me close. “Shh, it’s okay. I’m here. I’ll never give you a reason to run from me again. I swear on my life. I love you. I’m here now. Forever, if you’ll have me.”

“You... don’t have... a job...” I say through stuttered breaths.

“Not yet. I was thinking Manitou Springs could really use a hockey rink.”

“You gave up everything—your home, your family legacy—to be here with us?”

He hooks my chin with two fingers and brings my gaze to his. “I gave up everything eighteen years ago. I’m here begging for everything back. My family legacy is you and Haven. I’ve never wanted for anything in my entire life. For as long as I can remember, if I ever desired anything, it was there for the taking. But for the first time in my life, right here and now, I feel like I have way more than I deserve.”

“Do you mean that? Are you really here? With me?”

He chuckles. “Let me be clear... I want to marry you, Ness. I want to make your morning tea and take out the garbage. I want to fight with you about what we have for dinner and kiss you when you’re angry. I want to sit on a porch with you and... and,” his brows come together, “I don’t know, do

what people do on porches.”

I laugh a little, and he holds me tighter.

“I want to hear a lot more of that laughter. Most of all, I just want a life with you. And if any of that doesn’t sound good? If you want to just be friends? I’m still here, in this town, with you.”

“Watch sunsets and deer graze and flowers bloom and storms roll in. Drink wine and eat dinner and play games or not speak at all. Listen to music or plan for the future or look at the blanket of stars in the sky.”

“What?”

“Porches. That’s what we’d do. And I want that. All of it, with you.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Hayes

I hold Vanessa in my lap until my legs go numb and the storm settles into a gentle rain. The electricity in her house is still out, but the candlelight creates the perfect atmosphere, and I wonder if electricity is overrated.

I was nervous she'd turn me away. Tell me that the pain I've caused her is too much to forgive. But I wasn't kidding when I told her I'd stay here anyway. What I didn't tell her is that if she rejected a future with me, I wasn't going to give up trying.

I've only been in Manitou Springs for a day, but I flew in a handful of staff from New York a week ago to help me set up the new—or rather, very old—house.

The original owners, the Whitney family, immigrated from England after the Civil War and got involved in railway development. They settled in the small town and built a multi-level French provincial-style home. Constructed from stone and brick, the house has three stories with steeply pitched roofs and more fireplaces than there are bathrooms. It's more than I need, with eight bedrooms and nine bathrooms, but the garden is picture-perfect. Surrounded by an ornate iron gate, it looks like something out of one of the magazines Alexander hates to read.

I had a designer furnish the place, my staff stock it, and a crew spruce up the landscaping. I didn't really have an elevator put in, although I did consider it. I've never owned a home on the ground level, and I've never had a yard. I won't admit it out loud, but I'm actually excited to learn how to mow a lawn and trim shit.

As my mind imagines a life in the house with Vanessa, my eyes roam her tiny living room. The space is only a fraction bigger than my closet back in New York. Although it's small and a little cramped, the sectional, coffee table, and lace curtains give off a comfortable vibe. From the framed photos on a shelf to the bowl full of pinecones, which were no doubt collected locally, not purchased from an overpriced décor store, everything in the space has a personal touch.

What if Vanessa doesn't want to leave her home? What if she wants to stay here? I let the questions settle in my chest and wait for the panic to kick in. What appears instead is a bone-deep peace. I don't care if we live in a hole as long as I have her.

"Hayes?" Her voice is quiet, rough from crying, and exhausted.

"Hmm?"

"Can we go to bed?"

I rest my cheek against her head and grin into the dark. She said we. "Sure." I stand easily with her in my arms. "Where to?"

She grabs a lit candle and directs me down the short hallway, and I squint at all the framed photos that line the walls. It's hard to make out every detail in the dark, but I can see that they're all photos of Haven through the years.

Funny, my parents never hung a single photo of us on the walls. Not even a snapshot on the refrigerator. My mom always said it looked tacky. But there's nothing distasteful about displaying photos of your child. I make a mental note to take another look when it's light out.

From what I can see, Vanessa's room is just like the rest of her house—small, comfortable, and filled with personal touches. I set her down on the

bed. She places the candle on the side table, then reaches for the waistband of my jeans.

I put a hand over her fingers, which are working the top button. “Ness, this doesn’t have to be about sex. Sleeping with you in my arms is more than I hoped for coming here tonight.”

Candlelight flickers off her green eyes, and even red and swollen from crying, she’s never looked more beautiful than she does when she looks up at me. “I want to. I’ve missed you so much.” She goes back to popping the buttons on my jeans.

I whip off my sweater and reach to free her from hers. Her bra joins her top just as she pushes my jeans down my thighs. The bulge held captive behind my boxer briefs is embarrassingly obvious as it stands proudly between us. My blood pounds, and my stomach tumbles with anticipation as she grips my hips and pulls me to stand between her open thighs. While my eyes are on her, her gaze is fixed straight ahead. She licks her lips, and I groan at the brutal tease.

“You don’t have to—” I bite my lower lip as she grips me in a tight fist.

I reach for her, my hand slipping into the hair at the back of her head, pulling her closer.

She scoots forward, her knees open wider, her tits nearly brush my thighs, and I want to fucking weep at the beauty of it. The first lick of her tongue sends a spear of pleasure up my spine. I feel her smile against my oversensitized skin before she takes me fully into her mouth.

My jaw falls open in a silent roar as she takes me to the back of her throat. “Wait, wait, waitwaitwait...” I pull out of her mouth and nearly fall to my ass. “I’m too close. I can’t. Let me... hold on.” Come on, Hayes! Get it together. I’m acting like a man who has never been touched before. This time with Vanessa feels like the first. It feels important. Like the beginning of forever. And because of that, I can’t finish in her mouth in two minutes.

Regaining my composure, I put a knee on the bed between her legs and

press her back against the mattress. I kiss her deeply and taste myself on her tongue. I slip my hand easily into the waistband of her sweatpants, and she moans my name against my lips.

The sound shoots straight between my legs.

“I’m not gonna last,” I say, feeling my release build.

She rocks against my hand, hot, dripping, and greedy. “I’m not either.”

I suck her nipple into my mouth. Flick the tip until it pebbles, then shift to the other.

She grips my hard-on and guides me between her legs.

“I don’t have protection.” The release won’t be exactly what I want, but every orgasm with her is incredible.

“I don’t care.” She writhes beneath me, arches her back, and begs without words.

I rest my forehead against her shoulder and nearly black out as she fists my cock. “I don’t think I have the strength to pull out.”

“Good,” she moans and rolls her hips, pressing herself down on my fingers. “Please.”

I close my eyes and search for reason, but all rational thinking has left the building.

Rearing back, I roughly tug off her pants and drop them, then push my jeans lower. Without a second to spare to rid myself of my boots, I come down on top of her hard. I prop myself up on one arm, then surge forward with the power of a man obsessed.

She gasps into my mouth as I fill her completely. I tell myself to slow down. I try to control my pace. But the anger at her leaving, the fear that I’d never see her again, and the relief that she still wants me creates a driving need to punish, pleasure, and leave a permanent stain on her soul.

I fuck her mercilessly into the mattress. Her nails dig into my back, and I hiss at the feeling of her marking me. She bites my lip. I suck the tender skin of her shoulder, leaving a purple mark behind. My furious pace never lets up.

And she meets me with every thrust.

Her tight grip makes me see stars, and at the first flutter of her muscles around me, I rear back to look down at her.

Our gazes locked, I brace my weight on both palms, and then I fucking explode. The bolt of pleasure shoots down my spine, and the moment she feels it, she cries out my name and tumbles over the edge with me.

The pulsing ecstasy robs me of breath, and my head swims. We don't take our eyes off each other as the throbbing at our connection slows. I move gently in and out of her and watch her float slowly back to earth.

I plant myself deep inside her and freeze. "I love you."

Her lazy grin and heavy lids make pride swell in my chest. "I love you."

Those three words suck all the strength from my body more than the mind-blowing orgasm did, and I fall against her. Wrapping my arms under her shoulders and completely around her, I crush her with my weight.

She doesn't seem to mind and embraces me back.

"I can't believe I get this second chance." I don't mean to say the words out loud, but when she squeezes me tighter, I'm glad I did. "I'm not going to fuck this up again."

"In all fairness," she grunts as if my weight is too much.

I roll off her, and we both gasp at the severing of our intimate connection. I prop my head on my elbow and tenderly push hair away from her eyes. "You were saying?"

"In all fairness, the last fuck-up was on me."

"I should've told you about Ellie." I lean down and press a kiss to her lips. I don't mean to linger, but the temptation of her mouth is too much, and I sink into the kiss. "I think we need to work on our communication," I say into our kiss.

She grins and kisses me again. "I'll start."

I pull back a little, wondering what she means.

She bites her lip, then shrugs. Blows out a breath. Closes her eyes. "I'm

pregnant.”

“*Already?*” No, that’s impossible. What... is she saying?

A very unladylike snort is followed by a peel of laughter that shakes the whole bed. “I’m sorry. It’s just you look really freaked out right now.”

“That’s funny to you?”

“A little,” she says, her laughter dying on a sigh. “Yeah.”

I lean over her, our chests touching, and while the feel of Vanessa’s bare breasts against my skin would usually have me wanting to climb inside her body, I can’t focus on anything other than that word. Pregnant.

I look down her body to the soft skin under her belly button and imagine a tiny life growing inside her. “Did I hurt you? Was I too rough—”

Her warm palm presses against my cheek, and she brings my eyes to hers. “No, Hayes. You were perfect.”

“How did this happen? We used protection every time.”

She lifts a brow. “Not every time.”

“I pulled out...” My words dissolve when I think back to every sex ed talk I’ve ever had.

“Do you want this, Hayes?” The serious tone of her voice matches her expression. “I won’t hold you to anything we discussed earlier if you—”

I cover her mouth with mine and kiss the shit out of her.

She starts laughing. “Okay, okay!”

“Does that answer your question?” Fuck, I can’t stop smiling. “We’re having another baby.”

“Yeah,” she says, and a tear rolls from her eye. “Here we go again with the crying.”

I swipe it away with my fingertip and bring it to my lips.

Her gaze flares.

“I’m here. I want to experience every second of this with you.” I kiss away a second tear. “I’m here with you, Vanessa. For our daughter and...” I hesitate because I don’t know anything about pregnant women or babies.

Instead, I hover my hand over her lower belly.

She places my hand where our baby grows.

“I...” my voice cracks, and my eyes burn. Holy fuck, am I going to cry? I clear my throat, blink hard, and try to pull it together. “I’m going to love the shit out of all three of you.”

She giggles and sighs. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Hayes

“Vanessa?” I say against the locked bathroom door that she’s been behind for ten minutes now. “Everything okay? Haven should be here any minute?”

“I’m fine,” she says, and the two words echo as if she said them into a cave, or rather, the toilet bowl.

I’ve talked to Haven every day since Vanessa and I decided to make a go of things. I explained about Ellie and told Haven I’m an official Colorado resident. We invited her home for the weekend to show her my place and to tell her about the baby.

Ness and I were in the kitchen, and I was helping prepare dinner when she pulled out the ground beef for meatballs and went running into the bathroom with her hand over her mouth.

In the book I’m reading about pregnancy, it says it’s common for women to experience food aversion during the first trimester. I wanted to punch the meat and light it on fire for making Vanessa sick. Which is something I’ve realized I need to work on. Just like it’s frowned upon to accuse a waitress of trying to murder my baby because she brings Vanessa a tuna melt rather than the chicken salad sandwich she ordered.

Fighting with Vanessa has become a lot more passionate. Pregnancy

hormones make her a little crazy. And horny as fuck. All that, combined with my overprotectiveness, ends with soul-shaking orgasms, which neither of us is complaining about.

The bathroom door opens, and Vanessa steps out, looking a little pale.

“If it makes you feel better,” I say and pull her against my chest, “I will kick that meat’s ass for doing this to you.”

She chuckles, then burps. “Oh, God, don’t say the m-word.”

I kiss the top of her head. “Maybe you should lie down.”

“I’m fine. I think I’ll let you finish dinner, though.” She must sense my hesitation because she looks up at me with raised brows. “I’ll text you a recipe. You’ll be fine.”

“You’ll text me a recipe?”

“I’m not going back in there.” Her cheeks balloon out. “The smell—”

“Don’t talk about it.” I keep a hand wrapped around her waist and walk her into the living room.

She hasn’t decided yet if she wants to give up her house for what she’s calling “the mansion.” She raised Haven in this house, and it’s full of memories, which I understand. I have plans to turn the mansion into a bed and breakfast if she doesn’t want to live there, but I haven’t pulled the trigger yet while I wait for her to decide.

“Hello?” Haven’s voice calls from the front of the house.

Vanessa and I lock eyes and smile. Just like two parents excited to hear that their child is home.

Vanessa

Hayes steps out of my way, and I bolt for the door. Haven’s setting down a duffle bag as I speed walk toward her, my arms desperate to get around her.

“You’re home!” I throw my arms around her and hug her so tight that she fakes suffocation. “I missed you.” I pull away, and Haven’s eyes are on

Hayes.

I release her, and she jumps into his arms.

This is the first time she's seen him since we left New York. Hayes holds her with her feet off the floor, and my heart melts when I notice his eyes are closed.

"Dad," Haven says quietly.

"Yeah, baby," he whispers.

"Oh, God." I fan at my face as a fresh wave of emotion slams into me, and tears quickly follow.

Hayes' eyes dart open and flash with concern seconds before he relaxes and smiles. Whatever pregnancy hormones I'm dealing with, he's dealing equally with Neanderthal hormones. This pregnancy has turned him into a reactionary brute.

He releases Haven, and she turns toward me. "This is crazy... mom? Are you *crying*?"

"Yes." I swipe at my cheek.

Hayes' smile is warm and mushy as he watches me break down. If Haven wasn't here, I'd drag him to the couch and have my way with him. This tender side of him is one I haven't seen before, and I love him even more because of it.

"What's for dinner?" She walks into the kitchen. "I haven't had a home-cooked meal in forever, and I'm starving."

Hayes comes to my side and takes my hand. "You okay?" he says, soft enough for only me to hear.

"These are happy tears." I lean against his bicep, and he holds my cheek with his free hand and kisses my forehead.

"I fucking love our kid, Ness."

I smile up at him. "Yeah, she's pretty great."

"You've made me the happiest man alive. You know that, right?"

I shrug a shoulder. "All in a day's work."

“What’s this supposed to be?” Haven holds up a bowl of raw meat, which seems to shoot the scent up my nostrils as if it were launched by an air gun.

The joint assault of nausea and stomach acid have me reaching to cover my mouth. “Oh, my...” I take off running for the bathroom and thankfully make it there in time.

Hayes

I finally take a breath when I hear the bathroom door close. Haven’s standing in the mouth of the hallway with concern etched into her forehead.

“She’s okay.” I step to the island in the kitchen, where all the ingredients for meatballs are laid out in front of me. “But I’m not. Do you know how to make meatballs?”

Haven joins me, but the tension in her body each time she turns toward the hallway tells me she’s not convinced that her mom is okay. “Is she sick?”

“No.” I scratch my jaw, wondering if I should just dump all this shit into the bowl.

“It’s so weird seeing you here.” Haven sits across from me on the island. She tilts her head. “Did this place shrink? Because it seems a lot smaller with you in it.”

“It’s small. I have the bruises on my legs to prove it.”

She giggles and then points to an egg and motions for me to crack it into the meat. “I can’t wait to see your place. I’ve always wondered what the inside looks like.”

“Oh yeah? Your mom’s not sure she wants to live there.”

Her eyes widen. “Is she insane?” She measures breadcrumbs into a cup and hands it to me. “That place is sick.”

Is it normal to feel a swell of pride when your teenager approves of your taste in something?

“Are you guys going to get married?”

I dump in the breadcrumbs. “I think we should wait for your mom—”

“That’s a yes.” She hands me parmesan cheese with a sly grin.

“Hey, I’m back,” Vanessa says, steering clear of the kitchen in favor of the living room.

“Are you sick?” Haven asks, and I watch Vanessa to see her reaction.

Her eyes widen. “Um...”

“Here, I know what will help.” Haven heads to the cupboards and pulls out a wine glass, then searches for a bottle of wine. She won’t find any. I dumped every ounce of booze in the house and swore off the stuff myself. Until Vanessa can safely have a drink again, my body is an alcohol-free zone.

Vanessa and I share a private smile.

“Where’s the wine?”

I clear my throat and start chopping an onion.

“There’s no wine, honey.”

Haven looks cautiously between us and sets down the glass. “No wine.” I watch as her eyes slowly widen and her jaw falls open. Then, her whole face lights up. “You’re pregnant!” The squeal that comes out of her body could break sound barriers.

She races to the couch and dives into her mom’s arms.

“Oh, um... be careful.”

“I’m going to be a sister!” Haven and Vanessa tumble back to the couch, giggling. And fuck me... my chest.

The unbearable tightness makes it hard to breathe.

“I hope it’s a girl,” Haven says through her laughter. “No, a boy! Wait... no, a girl! Ugh, I don’t care. I’m going to be a sister!”

Vanessa’s crying. Again.

Haven’s clapping.

And me, well... I swipe at my cheeks.

These fucking onions.

EPILOGUE

Vanessa

“Ow, fuck—fudge!”

I cover my mouth to keep from laughing as Hayes doubles over and grips the knee he just banged on our custom-made Italian baby-changing dresser.

With one month to go until our baby’s due date, this 1,500-square-foot home has turned into about 500 square feet of walking space.

To say Hayes has gone crazy buying baby gear is an understatement. He’s turned our home into a Babies R Us for billionaires. From the Gucci bib, Prada diaper bag, and Burberry booties to an eight-thousand-dollar baby wrap and a three-thousand-dollar bassinet. Oh, and I can’t forget about the Armani pacifier. Then, there’s the imported, hand-crafted crib, the luxury highchair, and the space-age baby rockers, one for every room.

“You know, you don’t have to watch your language yet.” I rub my very pregnant belly over my overalls.

Hayes’ pained expression clears, and his eyes go soft. “She can hear me.”

“She doesn’t know what fuck means.”

His eyes widen. “Her first word is going to be the f-word now.”

I giggle and weave my way through boxes of organic, hypoallergenic, sustainable diapers. I don’t even want to know how much they cost. “You

worry too much.” I pull him into my arms for a hug.

One arm goes around me and the other hand to my belly. “No such thing when it comes to my girls,” he growls against my neck. The soft fabric of his flannel shirt and the heat of his body make me want to crawl inside with him and take a nap. Hayes in a power suit was a sight that would make any woman or man melt, but him in plaid flannel, jeans, and lace-up boots is an immediate shot to the libido.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” I say as he kisses a line up my neck to my ear.

“Yeah?” he whispers hotly.

Pregnancy has amplified our sex life to levels I didn’t think were possible. Not a day goes by when we’re not hungry for each other, and we try to satisfy that hunger as frequently as possible.

“We should move to the mansion.”

His lips freeze against my throat, and he lifts his head to get my eyes. “You’re serious.”

I grin, a little embarrassed by how hard I’ve been digging my heels in that we stay in this house. He never presses the issue and claims that it doesn’t matter where we live. “Over the last couple months, I’ve been feeling like we’ve outgrown this place. And while I love and cherish all the memories of raising Haven here, I’m ready to move on and make new memories.” I catch him smiling before his lips are on mine and he’s kissing me breathless.

He lifts me as if I weigh nothing and carries me as if I’m made of glass. Laying me gently on the couch, he covers me with his body while keeping his weight off my belly. “Imagine Christmas there. We could have my brothers and their families come stay. Haven will be there.” His gaze darts down my body, then back to my eyes. “And Aviana.”

I wanted Hayes to name our daughter since I named Haven. He loved the idea of putting together two names, so he combined the two names of the people he loves most in the world while also giving her something that would

be uniquely hers.

Haven and Vanessa.

Aviana.

He kisses me again, deeper, harder until I'm desperate and grabbing for his button fly.

The dark, gritty chuckle that comes from his throat adds urgency to my desire. "I'm going to miss you greedy like this after Aviana is born." He allows me to free him from his jeans, and when I grip him in a tight fist, he drops his forehead to my shoulder with a hiss.

"Then you better get your fill while you can."

He pops the buckle loops on my overalls, throws down the bib, and yanks my thermal shirt up to expose my bare breasts. The change my body has gone through with every stage of pregnancy seems to turn him on. Hands, tongue, teeth, and lips, he worships my growing and shifting body as if it's an altar.

He strips me, and I rip at his clothes until we're both naked. He lies on his back and pulls me on top of him, my thighs wide around his hips. "You're so fucking sexy." Big palms slide up my belly to roll and tug at my nipples.

I arch my back, the sensitivity shooting arrows of pleasure to my core. "I love you."

"I know."

I glare down at him.

He bites his lip to avoid me seeing his grin and fails. Then, he flexes his hips in a gentle motion.

"You know?"

He shrugs one shoulder. "Yeah."

I smack his hand away from my breast. "Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

His hands are on my hips now, and he's moving in such a way that I have to force myself not to groan in pleasure. "I don't pick fights, Ness. You do."

"I do not!"

“You’re picking one right now.”

“You started it—oh, my God!” My palms slam down against his pecs, and I groan as he enters me in one hard thrust.

“You were saying?” he says, his voice heavy with lust but tinged with humor.

My head drops forward, and I suck in a breath at the sensation of being filled completely. I feel him so deeply, so fully, and I want more. So much more. I begin to move.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he whispers. “God, look at you. So fucking beautiful.”

I spent my whole life thinking I wasn’t enough. That I wasn’t worthy of love unless I fit into the mold set before me. Hayes was right when he accused me of running. I ran to avoid getting hurt. The pain was less if I left first. It’s why I avoided getting close to his family in New York, and it’s why I avoided getting close to him. Letting myself fall in love with him again could only have ended in a broken heart.

But that’s the risk in life. In order to experience our full humanity, we have to be willing to get hurt.

So I jumped. Two feet, whole heart, I leaped into the possibility.

And Hayes was there to catch me.

Hayes

“You want to hold her?” I hold the tiny bundle of wrapped-up baby girl.

Aviana was born three weeks ago today. It took me that long to get comfortable with the idea of anyone touching her, but now my family has all flown out to stay with us for a weekend and get to know our new daughter. We’re all gathered around her in the spacious living room that’s filled with reclaimed wood tables, overstuffed couches, and thick area rugs.

My brother Alex has his arms crossed so tightly over his chest that there’s no way those things are getting blood flow. “I don’t want to touch her.”

“This is going to cause some issues when our baby arrives,” Jordan says, eyeing her husband. She’s two months pregnant, and Alex is having a hard time adjusting to the idea of having such a fragile human under his care.

“She looks breakable,” Alex grunts.

“Give that little diva to me.” Kingston holds out his hands. “I think it’s time she learns the difference between haute couture and prêt à porter.”

With a look that says he better be fucking careful, I lay my baby daughter in his arms.

“She looks just like Vanessa,” Hudson says, smiling dumbly at Aviana’s little pink face since it’s the only exposed part of her under the tightly wrapped blankets.

Kingston tilts his head. “I think she looks like me.”

Gabby curls against his arm and looks down at the baby. “I want one.”

My kid brother’s eyes dart to his fiancé. “Now?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, why not?”

Kingston hands Aviana back to me and grabs Gabby’s hand. She pulls away laughing. “Not *right* now.”

“You said ‘why not’. I can’t think of a reason not to get started.” He scoops her up in his arms and carries her to the main staircase that leads to the room they’re staying in. Which, thankfully, is on the far side of the house.

Haven jumps out of the way of my eager brother as she comes down the steps. “Mom’s asleep.”

“Good.” Vanessa has been up nursing the baby at all hours of the night. The pediatrician said it’s because Aviana is having a growth spurt. I have the woman on speed dial and offered her an obscene amount of money to have her on retainer. I guess medical professionals don’t do that.

Haven holds up two bottles of breast milk. “She pumped, so hopefully, she can sleep through Avi’s next feeding. Hey, baby sister,” she says as she comes to my side.

I take the milk bottles, and she takes the baby.

Watching Haven with her little sister is torture in the best way. I've yet to see them together without feeling the heat of emotion prick my eyes.

I always thought the highest honor and praise a man could receive was from professional success. After all, the world respects money and power above all else.

I've recently learned that that's a fucking lie.

Because I've conquered the business world. I have enough money to live comfortably for four lifetimes. And none of that comes close to the pride I feel when I see my daughters together or when I watch the woman I love most in the world curled up on the bed with both our daughters in her arms.

Real legacy isn't the mark you make in this world.

Real legacy is the mark you leave on the hearts of those you love.

"Are you... *crying*?" Alex's eyes are as big as I've ever seen them.

"What?" I swipe at my eyes. "No."

"He's totally crying," Hudson says while looking between my daughters and me.

"I am not!"

Haven shakes her head. "He does it all the time."

My mouth opens to defend myself, but the truth is, she's not lying. So I slam it shut.

"I wasn't aware demons had tears," Jordan says.

Lillian coughs, but I don't miss the laughter it covers up.

"Okay, fine, so I cry." Happy tears. Only happy tears.

"Can't believe it," Lillian says, leaning against Hudson. "He has a heart after all."

"I do." I watch Haven brush soft kisses to Aviana's head, and my chest squeezes at the sight. "But it belonged to Vanessa, and she finally brought it back to me."

The room goes silent, and no one moves except Haven, who's slowly rocking her little sister.

Hudson blinks. "This is too weird," he mumbles.

"What's weird?"

I turn to the sound of Vanessa's voice as she enters the room. My leg muscles twitch to go help her in some way, but I force them to stay put because she hates it when I hover. Oh, that's one thing I've learned I'm great at. Overprotective hovering.

"Everyone's giving Dad a hard time about him crying," Haven says, and goddamn my eyes tear up again at hearing her call me dad.

Vanessa's perfect bow shaped lips tilt up on the corners as she settles against me. Delicate fingers swipe at the space beneath my eye. "It's adorable." She pushes up on her toes and I lower my head to reach her lips.

I could kiss her for hours. For the rest of our lives.

"Enough, you two." There's a smile in Haven's voice. "Jeez."

I pull myself away from Vanessa's mouth and tuck a lock of her dark hair behind her ear. "I was hoping you'd get more sleep."

"Not with people here. I don't want to miss out on anything." She looks around the living room, which is decorated in neutral-colored furniture that invites a person to get comfortable and stay for a while. "Where are Kingston and Gabby?"

"You don't want to know." I sneak in one more kiss before she, Lillian, Jordan, Haven, and the baby all disappear to the reading room to sit by the fire.

"Never thought of you as a family man," my twin says and pulls his gaze from the room the women went into. "But here you are. Killin' it."

"They make it easy." I shrug. "All I have to do is love them."

Alexander grunts. "You guys getting married?"

"Eventually, but I'm in no rush. I know where I belong and it's here, with them. If and when Vanessa wants to make it legal, we'll do it. I'm not going anywhere."

Kingston comes sauntering back into the room, his button-down shirt left

open.

“That was fast,” Hudson says with a chuckle.

Our little brother’s brows rise. “Yeah, well, have you *seen* my woman?”

We all nod in agreement, realizing one very real truth. We’re all sold out, tied down, whipped, and devoted to the women in our lives. The ones we didn’t see coming. The ones that swooped in and stole our hearts.

The women who showed us that life means very little without the love of a great woman.

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Her love of good storytelling led her to earn a degree in Media Communications. With her journalistic background, writing has always been at the forefront, and her love of romance propelled her career as an author.

She spends the majority of her day behind the computer where a world of battling alphas, budding romance, and impossible obstacles claws away at her subconscious and begs to be released to the page.

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