



FINDING
FOREVER

J.L. PERRY

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Books By J. L. Perry

Finding Love Series

Finding Him
Finding Forever
Finding Us
Finding Love

Bastard Series

Bastard
Luckiest Bastard
Jax

Cocky Hero World Series

Bossy Bastard
Sexy Bastard

Standalones

The Boss
Saviour
Nineteen Letters

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This book is dedicated to my little boy ...

My heart.

My soul.

My life.

My everything.



Nobody said it would be easy, nothing worth having ever is.

At first glance, she stole all the air from my lungs, and a year later, nothing has changed. There's no doubt in my mind Brooke's the *one* I've been longing for. She's awoken something inside me ... something that's been lying dormant for ten long years.

Life for her had been hard, but she has me now, and not only am I one hundred percent committed to this woman, I am also prepared to move mountains to see her happy.

However, life has a way of screwing you over when you least expect it; and we'd soon find out that the universe had other plans. What lay ahead has the potential to destroy us, but my *forever* girl, and our future are worth fighting for.



Logan Cavanagh was the answer to all my prayers ... a man who came into my life when I needed him most. He owns my heart, and with *him* by my side, my future looks bright.

I've been knocked down many times in my past but continuously managed to dust myself off and forge forward. My strength and resilience are something I've always prided myself on—they are traits I inherited from my mother.

But I'd soon realise, even the strongest person has a breaking point.

Chapter 1

Logan

I lean back into my chair and release a long, frustrated breath when I see my aunt's number on the screen. I've been waiting for this call, but this is not how I wanted my Friday afternoon to end. She must have just been served with the court papers and is seeking retribution.

"What do you want, Kathleen?" I snap the moment I answer the phone. I know my greeting is harsh, but this isn't a cordial call. She's not stupid. She knows I'm the reason behind my uncle's change of heart. Like him, I'm over this woman and her constant mind games. This bullshit needs to stop.

"How rude," she quips, and I roll my eyes. "I shouldn't have expected anything more." She's been anything but affable with me throughout my life. She epitomises rudeness and indifference.

"That's rich coming from the likes of you."

She pauses briefly before releasing her attack. "I'm disgusted by your behaviour. How could you treat your own flesh and blood this way? I ... I demand you stop representing that man and filling his head with garbage. So help me god, if you don't put a stop to this ridiculousness, you'll feel my full wrath."

I pull the phone away from my ear. She is yelling so loud Rose can probably hear her in reception.

"I can't do that, I'm afraid."

"Ugh!" The pure frustration in her voice makes me smile.

After everything she's put my poor uncle through over the past few months, it gives me a sense of satisfaction. I cannot be manipulated like John and my father and that gets under her skin.

"John has been more than compliant with your demands up until now, but

no more. You've gone too far this time."

She is quiet for a moment before deciding to take a different approach. "You have no idea how hard this is on me, Logan," she says, changing her tone to sweet and adding in a sniffle for extra effect. "I'm all alone now. I'm devastated that I don't have your support. We're family, after all."

"Save the crocodile tears for someone else, Kathleen. They won't work on me."

"You're a heartless bastard."

"And you're a cold-hearted, manipulative bitch. You don't fool me for a second."

"Nobody messes with me; do you hear me? Nobody!" And just like that, her true colours return.

"And nobody messes with the people I love and care about, which unfortunately is a category you no longer fall under."

"Don't push me," she threatens.

"Look, I don't have time for you or your idle threats. I have two companies to run and a wedding to plan."

"Your father told me you are marrying that gold-digging whore. You're a bigger fool than I thought."

She's baiting me, and as hard as it is, I try my best to keep my cool. I also need to remind my old man not to tell her anything about my life. What I do is none of her fucking business.

"I have nothing further to say to you. I'll see you in court, Kathleen. Goodbye."

"I'll make you sorry you were ever born!" she screams down the line as I'm ending the call.

Her threats don't scare me. John only wants what's rightfully his so he can move on with his life, but she's fighting him every step of the way. It's wearing him down to the point that both Brooke and I are extremely concerned about him.

Dropping the phone onto my desk, I pinch the bridge of my nose. John didn't want to take this route, but unfortunately, it was the best solution. It took me weeks to convince him this was the only way to go. He was hoping they could settle this amicably, like two adults, but deep down we all knew my aunt wasn't going to make this easy for him. She's greedy, materialistic, and completely self-centred. The only person Kathleen cares about is Kathleen.

“Your four o’clock is here, Mr. Cavanagh,” Rose says, buzzing my office.

“Okay, just give me a few minutes, then send them in.” My eyes scan the desk. When I don’t find what I’m looking for, I press the intercom. “Rose, is there a file?”

“It’s a new client, but I’ll get one made up for you now.” I hear her giggle before she releases the button and my jaw ticks. I’m in no mood for this.

Sitting back in my chair, I run my fingers through my hair. I don’t want to be here today. I want to be at home where I can lose myself in my girl and not deal with this crap.

A few minutes pass before Rose knocks on my door and enters. I turn to look at her, but instead of my receptionist, I find my beautiful fiancée standing just inside the doorway.

“Brooke.”

“Hey, Hot Stuff.”

Standing, I round the desk as she approaches. She’s a sight for sore eyes. Her presence is just what I need. Pulling her into my arms, I bury my face in her hair and inhale her familiar scent. It instantly calms me.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you until tonight. Shouldn’t you be at the studio?”

“Michelle is holding down the fort,” she says, encircling my waist with her arms. “I’m your four o’clock.”

“What? You don’t need to make an appointment to see me. You know I’ll always make time for you, no matter how busy I am.” Tucking her hair behind her ear, I bring my lips to hers. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad I am too. Our time together has been limited lately, and as much as I miss you, I’m actually here on official legal business.”

“Really?” Releasing her, I guide her towards the chair opposite mine and gesture for her to take a seat. As Brooke sits down in front of me, I lean against the corner of my desk, before crossing my legs at the ankles and giving her my undivided attention. “I’m intrigued, Miss Ryan.”

She inhales a sharp breath before speaking. “Hot Stuff,” she says, scooting forward and placing her hand on my leg. “I may as well just come out and say it. I want you to draw up a prenuptial agreement.”

I stand quickly as my temper goes from zero to a hundred in a millisecond. That was the last thing I expected her to say.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m deadly serious,” she says, her face dropping.

Pushing away from the desk, I walk towards the floor-to-ceiling windows and gaze out over the city skyline. This day is going from bad to worse.

“That’s not happening, Brooke. I can’t believe you’d even suggest such a thing.”

“Hear me out,” she says, coming to stand beside me.

“Nothing you can say will make me change my mind.”

“Please, Logan.”

She rarely calls me by my birth name, a point that only manages to make my irritation grow. Turning my head, my eyes meet hers. “Don’t do this,” I plead.

“Don’t do what?”

“Sabotage our marriage before it’s even begun.”

“How am I sabotaging our marriage?” she asks as her pretty face screws up. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re setting us up for failure.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Really? You wouldn’t even be suggesting a prenup if you didn’t have reservations about it working out.”

“That’s not it at all,” she says, reaching for me. “There are valid reasons why we should do this that have nothing to do with us, or our marriage.”

“Give me just one.”

“Okay ... I’m a realist. I’ve been through enough in my life to know that things can change in a blink of an eye. Look what happened between me and Jake. When I married him, I thought it was forever too.”

I scrub my hand over my face. I hate that she was once married to that dickhead. “What we have doesn’t even compare to what you had with Jake. You said so yourself.”

“It still doesn’t change the fact that I never saw it coming.”

“It’s irrelevant.” I flick my hand, dismissing it completely. “Our circumstances are nothing like yours were with him.”

“But don’t you see? Things happen sometimes that are completely out of our control. We can’t even pretend to know what the future holds for us.”

“A beautiful life,” I snap as I rub the heel of my palm over my pectoral muscles in an attempt to relieve the sharp pain in my chest. “That’s what our future together holds, Brooke.” I refuse to consider anything less. “Let’s just drop this nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense. I’m doing this for you. To protect everything *you’ve* worked hard for.” She pokes me in the chest to emphasise her words, and I have to hide my amusement. She’s sexy as hell when she’s mad. “I love you, not your bank balance. I don’t want you, or anyone else, for that matter, thinking I’m doing this for the money.”

“I know you’re not marrying me for my money. Christ, you won’t let me buy you anything without questioning it.”

“But you still do.”

“What?”

“Buy me things, even when I tell you not to.”

“Because I love you. I want to give you nice things. Is that so bad?”

“No,” she replies, bowing her head. “But as beautiful as all those things are, none of it is as important as you are to me. It’s you that makes me happy, not your gifts.”

“I know.” I place my finger under her chin, drawing her eyes back to mine. “It’s just one of the many things I love about you. As for worrying about what everyone else may think, I don’t give a flying fuck about that. When this marriage happens, *and it will happen*, it’s going to last. End of story!”

“I want that too, but how can you be so sure?”

“Because my life without you is unimaginable. Don’t you see that? This,” I say, gesturing between us, “is *forever*. I’ll fight until my fucking death to make sure that happens.”

Her hands fist my dress shirt as she moves her body closer to mine. “I want forever too.”

“Well, then that’s settled.”

“I still think a prenup is a good idea.”

“I swear on my life if you don’t stop this madness, I will sign over every cent and every property I own ... including this company, into your name, which, in turn, will negate any prenup.”

Her eyes narrow. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

“You’d be a fool to do that.”

“A fool who is in love with his fiancée and refuses to do life without her.” When she blows out a puff of air I know I’ve won. Gathering her in my arms, I crush her body to mine. “So, we’re in agreeance?”

“Ugh, fine, you win. No prenup.”

“That’s my girl,” I say, resting my chin on top of her head. “You’re stuck with me for life.”

“I can live with that. There’s nothing we can’t get through as long as we face it together.”

“Exactly.”

Her words should be calming, but instead I’m left with a sense of foreboding. The truth is, *she’s right*—who knows what the future holds for us?

Chapter 2

Brooke

Today is my last day as Brooke Ryan. The past four months since Logan proposed, have been a whirlwind, to say the least. With planning a wedding and finally getting my dance studio up and running, I've barely had time to scratch myself.

Most people have a year or more to organise their big day, but Logan wanted us to get married right away. I'm just as eager to become his wife, but I'd be lying if I said the past few months haven't been stressful. Thankfully, Michelle and Patricia have helped lighten the load somewhat and tomorrow, we will see the fruits of our labour.

I take a bite of the apple in my hand, as I lean up against the door frame and watch my gorgeous future husband pack an overnight bag. Someone told him it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, so he is heading to his parent's place.

"I'm going to miss you tonight, Hot Stuff," I say, pushing off the wall and walking towards the bed.

He reaches for me when I'm within arm's length, pulling my body into his. "I'm going to miss you too babe, more than you know." This will be the first time we've spent the night apart since getting together. It will be weird not falling asleep in his arms, I've become accustomed to it. "I wish it didn't have to be this way, but I'm not taking any chances where you're concerned."

"It's just a silly superstition," I say trying to get him to change his mind.

Jake and I never spent the night before our wedding apart, but seeing how things turned out for us, maybe there is some truth to it.

"I'm still not risking it." He cups my face in his hands, as his lips meet mine. When I moan into his mouth, he draws back. "Christ, don't make those

noises ... you know what they do to me.”

He juts his hips forward, and I can feel his growing erection pressing against my stomach. It makes me ache. It’s been two long weeks since we’ve been intimate. It’s nearly killed us both. There have been so many times we’ve come close to caving, but I’m grateful we managed to remain strong.

“I want you so much,” I confess.

“I want you too. I have a severe case of blue balls.” His comment makes me laugh. “But it’s going to make it all the sweeter tomorrow when I finally get to have you again.”

“I can’t believe this time tomorrow I’m going to be Mrs. Logan Cavanagh.”

“Say that again,” he demands.

“Mrs. Logan Cavanagh.”

“It suits you.” He plants a soft kiss on my nose. “I want no barriers between us tomorrow night, I want to feel all of you, the way nature intended.”

“No barriers?”

“Condoms,” he chuckles. “You’ll be my wife, so we’ll no longer have to practice safe sex.”

“We’ve had unprotected sex before.”

“I know, but I’ve always pulled out.”

“Oh,” I say when I finally catch on to what he’s saying.

I bow my head because this is not a conversation I planned on having today. But maybe it’s for the best if we get it out in the open, especially before we take our vows.

“Hey.” He places his finger under my chin, raising my gaze back to him. “You don’t want that?” I lift one shoulder. It’s not that I don’t want it, I’m just not sure if I can give him what he’s asking. “If you’re not ready to start a family yet, we can wait.”

“It’s not that I’m not ready, but what if I can’t have children?”

“Why would you think that?”

“I’ve never been regular, I’m lucky if I get my period twice a year. I know the doctor told me that it was because of all the exercise I do, but what if it isn’t, what if there’s more to it? Don’t forget I only have one fallopian tube now.”

“Don’t stress, babe. If it’s meant to be, then it will be. If not, it doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” I say getting choked up.

“No, it doesn’t. The only thing that matters to me, is you.”

“You’ve always wanted kids.”

“That may be true, but I want *you* more.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “I want to have a family with you, *I want that so much.*”

“If we can’t do it the natural way, there are other avenues we can take.” He brushes a few strands of hair from my forehead with the tips of his fingers. “I don’t want you worrying about this now, we’ll face this if, and when we have to. Okay?”

“All right.”

“The only thing you have to worry about is getting to the church on time. We’re going to have a beautiful life together regardless of what happens in the future.”

“I’m looking forward to growing old with you, Mr. Cavanagh.”

His lips meet mine and he groans into my mouth when I clutch each side of his face, deepening the kiss. *I’m desperate for this man.*

He draws back, and I immediately feel the loss. “No more of that until tomorrow, my boys are suffering badly, babe.” Biting my bottom lip, I reach down to cup his crotch, giving it a light squeeze, which has him retreating further. “Oh no you don’t, you little minx.” Turning back towards the bed, he puts the last of his things into his bag. “I need to get out of here before I relent and have my way with you.”

“That reminds me, I have something to give you before you leave.” He glances over his shoulder, with a look of scepticism on his face. “Don’t worry party pooper, it doesn’t involve sex.”

I hear him chuckle as I head towards our walk-in-robe. Reaching up to the top shelf I retrieve the gift. When I turn around, I find him standing in the doorway watching me.

“What are you up to?”

“Here,” I say as I hand him the small box.

“What’s this?”

“Something for you to wear tomorrow.”

He smiles as he takes it out of my hand. “You got me a gift?”

“Yes, I had them hand-made for you.”

“Babe,” he says when he lifts the lid and sees what is inside.

“They are monogram cufflinks, see the L and B ... our initials. I was

originally going to get a C for Cavanagh, but at the last minute decided on the B instead.”

“I love them. I love that you went with the B. I’ll treasure these,” he says, reaching for me. “Thank you.”

Engulfing me in his big strong arms, he places a soft kiss on the top of my head.

“You’re always doing nice things for me, so I wanted to get you something special.”

“Tomorrow will be the first day, of the rest of our lives together.”

“I’m looking forward to spending my life with you, Hot Stuff.”

“Ditto, babe. I guess I should get going.”

“I wish you didn’t have to leave.”

“I know. What time are Michelle and Lara coming over?”

“They should be arriving soon.”

“At least you won’t be on your own tonight.”

With Logan staying at his parent’s place, I asked Michelle and Lara over for a girls’ night. Michelle agreed to be my maid of honour, and Lara is going to be our flower girl. Logan is having Craig as his best man. He has friends outside of work, but I’ve noticed he keeps them at arm’s length. If my best friend betrayed me the way his ex-friend did, I’d be left with trust issues too.

Logan scoops his bag off the bed and reaches for my hand. “Walk me down.” When we reach the lift, he drapes his arm over my shoulder and kisses me one last time before pressing the button. “Why is it always so hard to leave you?”

“I feel the exact same way.”

“I love you so much,” he says.

“I love you more.”

He groans, tilting his head back. “You’re never going to win that argument, babe, so you may as well stop saying it.” Once the doors open, he reluctantly steps inside. “I’ll see you at one tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“I’ll try not to be.”

He blows me a kiss as the doors are closing and I reach out pretending to catch it.

Wrapping my arms around my body, I stand in the foyer for the longest time ... *I miss him already.*



I'm in the kitchen helping Jill prepare our feast for tonight when I hear the lift ding. "They must be here," I say, wiping my hands on a tea towel.

Jill is so excited about having Lara here tonight that she made a chocolate cake for her. It is a shame she never had kids; she would have made an amazing mother.

I round the corner, expecting to see the girls, but I find John instead. "Hi, sweetheart."

"John."

"I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this, but I probably won't see you until the church tomorrow, so I wanted to wish you luck."

"Thank you," I say, stepping forward and wrapping my arms around him. We've become closer over the past few months. I've yet to call him Dad, but my heart has finally accepted that he's my father.

John places a kiss on my cheek before I release him. "Are you all organised for your big day?"

"As much as I can be." So much work has gone into tomorrow, I can only pray everything goes as planned.

"Logan said Michelle and Lara are spending the night."

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it. What about you? Are you going to Robert and Patricia's?"

"No," he says, looking down at his feet. "I don't go there much anymore. Kathleen gives them a hard time when I do. It's easier if I stay away."

"That woman is infuriating."

"I honestly don't know how I put up with her for as long as I did."

He shakes his head, chuckling, but I know he's not amused. Kathleen has been making his life a living hell. Logan and I are extremely worried about him.

"Why don't you join us for dinner tonight?"

"That's sweet of you to offer, but I wouldn't want to intrude."

"You wouldn't be. We'd love to have you."

"Thanks, sweetheart, but I'll let you girls have your special time."

My heart goes out to him, he's always putting on such a brave face, but the sadness I see in his eyes is unmissable.

"Come for breakfast then, I insist."

“Breakfast?”

“Please. It would mean a lot to me if you did.”

I’ve tried to include him wherever I could. Logan’s family have helped so much, I feel bad that he was not as involved. The Cavanagh’s might have accepted me as one of their own, but in reality, John is the only blood relative I have attending tomorrow.

“Okay, since you put it like that, I’d love to.”

“We’re having a chicken and champagne breakfast.”

“It sounds wonderful. I look forward to it.” He pauses for a moment, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small worn box. “I wanted to give you this before tomorrow. I know your wedding dress is new, but I wasn’t sure if you had something old, something borrowed, something blue ...”

John knows my dress is new because he insisted on paying for it ... he actually wanted to pay for the entire wedding, but Logan refused.

Taking the box from his hand, I open the lid. Inside I find a ring. A large, oval-shaped blue sapphire sits in the centre and it’s surrounded by equally stunning white diamonds.

“It belonged to my mother ... your grandmother,” he says.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe.

“I had it cleaned for you, but don’t feel obligated to wear it, I just—”

“I’d be honoured to wear it,” I say as tears well in my eyes.

“You would?”

“Absolutely.”

“I wish my mother got the chance to meet you, she would’ve worshipped the ground you walked on.” His voice cracks as he speaks. I would have loved that too. My mother’s mother died before I was born, and her father wasn’t in the picture ... I never got to meet any of my grandparents. So, wearing this ring tomorrow will be special.

For the past few weeks, there’s been something weighing heavily on my mind. One of those should I, or shouldn’t I conundrums. This gesture from him has brought me clarity, making me realise I most definitely *should*. In my heart I know it’s the right thing to do.

“I know this is short notice—and I’m unsure why I didn’t ask you sooner—but will you walk me down the aisle tomorrow ... Dad?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he says, pulling me into a crushing embrace. “You have no idea what this means to me. I’d be honoured to give *my girl* away.”

You've made an old man very happy.”

When he finally draws back, the pure joy I see on his face warms my heart. He gently places the palms of his hands on my cheeks, as tears fill his eyes.

I wasn't expecting his reaction. When I married Jake, nobody gave me away. I thought about my father that morning when I was getting ready to walk down the aisle. I felt the loss of not having a father so much that day.

“I feel like I've waited my entire life to hear somebody call me dad. Thank you for giving me that. I'll cherish this moment until I take my last breath.”

Chapter 3

Brooke

Although I had the best time tonight with Michelle and Lara, Logan was never far from my mind. I kept finding myself wondering what he was doing and if he was missing me as much as I was him. It's silly, I'll be seeing him tomorrow, but that knowledge didn't help fill the void of not having him here.

After brushing my teeth, I grab one of Logan's t-shirts out of his drawer. Bringing his shirt to my nose, I inhale deeply, taking in his familiar scent, before slipping the shirt over my head.

Yawning, I pull back the covers and climb into bed, instinctively, reaching for Logan's pillow and dragging it towards me. I can smell the expensive aroma of his shampoo on the fabric. I wrap my arms tightly around his pillow and sigh. It's not the same as having him beside me, but it's the closest thing I have right now. Hopefully, it will help me sleep. I don't want to be tired on my big day.

I lean over to switch off the lamp, and as I do, I notice a small package sitting where his pillow had been lying. I smile as I sit up and reach for the parcel. He must've put it there before he left.

I cross my legs, opening the small card attached, and tears rise to my eyes as I read his beautiful words.

All you are is all I'll ever need.

I chose you, and I'll continue to choose you over, and over again.

Without pause, without doubt, and in a heartbeat, I'll keep choosing you.

Because together, with you by my side, is a beautiful place to be!

See you at 1 pm. xx

With my heart bursting at the seams, I read the card once more, before wiping the tears from my eyes. I'm blessed to have a man like Logan Cavanagh by my side. Not a day passes that I'm not thankful for him, or his unwavering love.

Opening my gift next, I gasp when I see the exquisite necklace inside. Its continuous line of heart-shaped diamonds matches the tennis bracelet he gave me the morning he proposed. As beautiful as the necklace is, Logan's heartfelt words mean so much more.

I look over at the clock beside the bed and see it's almost midnight. Rising, I cross the room and take my phone out of my bag, typing him a message.

Brooke: Just when I think it's impossible to love you more than I already do, you prove me wrong.

Hot Stuff: Babe, it's almost midnight, you can't be talking to me. It's bad luck.

I throw my head back and laugh. Him and his silly superstitions.

Brooke: It's bad luck to see your bride before the wedding, not talk to her. Trust me, I googled it.

Hot Stuff: You did not google it!

The smile on my face is huge as I frantically type.

Brooke: If I had, I'm positive that's what it would've said.

Minutes pass and I get no reply. When I look over at the clock, I see it's now 12.02 am. Gah! He's taking this superstition more seriously than I thought.

12.10 am comes and goes ... still nothing. He never ignores me, so I click on the safari app, and type in: *Why is it bad luck to see your fiancée before the wedding ceremony?* I burst out laughing when I read the answer. I quickly copy and paste it into another message.

Brooke: OMG! I really googled it this time. You have to read this: Back when marriages were arranged, the bride and groom weren't allowed to see or meet each other at all, not until they were at the altar. Parents of the bride feared that, if the couple met each other before marrying, the groom wouldn't find the bride attractive and would decide to call off the wedding. They were so careful, in fact, it's part of the reason why the bride wore a veil down the aisle. It was to prevent the groom from knowing what she looked like until the very last second—when it was too late for him to back out.

I jump a few seconds later when my phone starts to ring. I smile when I see *Hot Stuff* on the screen.

“You’re fucking kidding me?” he says the moment I answer his call, making me giggle.

“Nope.”

“So, you didn’t make that shit up?”

“Of course not. That’s the kind of shit you can’t make up.”

“Great, so I’m lying here in my childhood bed, missing my fiancée like you wouldn’t believe, and listening to my dad snore like a damn freight train, all because a bunch of underhanded fathers started a stupid tradition, for the sole purpose of marrying off their ugly daughters to some poor unsuspecting fools?”

“Yep,” I reply through my laughter.

“That’s seriously fucked up!”

“I know. Come home,” I plead.

He blows out a long breath. “Babe, I’d give anything ... *anything*, but Mum has planned a big breakfast for us in the morning, and it would break her heart if I wasn’t here.”

“I guess ... I just miss you.”

“I’m missing you too.”

“I found your gift under the pillow. Your card made me cry.”

“I meant every word.”

“I know you did, and I agree; together is a beautiful place to be.”

“I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.”

“Me either,” I reply. “I’m not even nervous, just excited. Excited and extremely horny.”

“Jesus, don’t say shit like that.”

I’m grinning because I purposely added in the horny part, as a last-ditch attempt to get him to come home.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you more, now get some sleep. I don’t want my future wife looking all haggard when she walks down the aisle. Besides, you’re going to need the energy for tomorrow night.”

“I can’t wait. I’ll try my best not to look haggard,” I say laughing.

“At least you’ll have your veil to fall back on if you do.”

I’m not wearing a veil, but I don’t tell him that. I want to surprise him. I haven’t told him that John is walking me down the aisle either, but I know that will make him happy.

Walking towards the bed, I slip back under the covers, reaching for his pillow once more and dragging it against my torso. “I’m hugging your pillow,” I tell him.

“You are?” I might not be able to see his face, but I can tell his smiling.

“Yes. And wearing one of your t-shirts.”

“Just thinking about you dressed in my clothes is making me hard.”

“I need you so much right now,” I say because it’s the truth. I ache for him.

“I need you too.”

“We should have phone sex.”

I hear him sigh again. “Are you trying to kill me, Brooke?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Well, you are. My boys have reached their full capacity, and they’re ready to burst.”

“Aww. Poor baby. I could always kiss them better for you.”

My smile grows when I hear him growl. “On that note, I have to say goodbye. Any more talk about being horny, having phone sex or ball kissing, and I’m going to have to hightail it over there and have my way with you.”

As hard as it’s been, I’m glad we have abstained. We even made a pact not to self-gratify. I have a feeling the sex tomorrow night is going to be off the charts.

“Goodnight, Hot Stuff.”

“Goodnight, babe. I’ll see you tomorrow at one sharp.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me you won’t be late.”

“I promise,” I say. “Cross my heart.”

“Sleep well, my love.”

“You too.”

I place my phone on the bedside table and hug his pillow a little tighter. Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.



I’m placing my earrings in my ear when I hear a knock on the bedroom door. “Brooke, it’s me,” my father says.

I’m wearing the necklace I found under my pillow last night, the matching bracelet, and the ring that belonged to my grandmother.

“Come in.”

We’ve had such a nice morning together, I’m so glad I insisted on him coming here today. I could tell he enjoyed himself too. He seemed happier, and a little lighter. He really hasn’t been himself lately.

Taking a step back, I admire my beautiful dress in the mirror. It is strapless with a straight neckline that sits just above the swell of my breasts. The white, silk bodice fits my torso like a glove and is covered in thousands of tiny hand-sewn beads, giving the dress a sparkling elegance. It tapers in at the waist before descending into a soft flowing skirt of multi-layers of tulle, with a chapel length train. It’s so feminine. I feel like a princess that’s been plucked right out of a fairy tale.

I catch my father’s gaze in the mirror’s reflection and turn around to face him. “I can’t even put into words how beautiful you look, sweetheart,” he says, opening his arms as he approaches me. “You’re going to knock Logan’s socks off.”

“I hope so.”

Leaning in, he places a soft kiss on my cheek. “I can guarantee it.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

The corners of his mouth curve up as he draws back and makes eye contact with me. “I’ll never tire of hearing you call me that.” I reciprocate with a smile.

To be honest, I’m still getting used to it myself, but it feels right. He’s a

good man, and he's been wonderful to me these past few months. In the beginning, I struggled, but I'm now grateful to have him in my life.

"You look very handsome in your suit," I say, reaching up to straighten his tie.

"Thank you. It's been a while since I've worn one, but I had to be looking my best since I'm giving my little girl away. It will be the proudest moment of my life."

"I'm glad I have you to hold onto as I walk down the aisle."

"You're not nervous, are you?"

I shrug. "A little, but more excited than anything."

"You two are going to have a wonderful life together, you were made for each other."

"We are," I say, nodding. I've never known such happiness.

"I came up here to tell you the cars have arrived downstairs, are you almost ready to leave?"

"Yes."

Walking towards the dresser, I pick up my favourite perfume, spraying a small amount on my wrists, and behind each ear. I hear my father inhale through his nose, and I know he's relishing my mother's sweet scent. She's with me today, I can feel it. She's been on my mind since the moment I woke. I pick up my bouquet of yellow roses, before turning to face him once more.

"I love your choice of flowers," he says.

"If I can't have her here, at least I can surround myself with some of her favourite things."

"She'd be so proud," he says. "Just like I am. I only wish she could be here today to celebrate with us."

"Me too." I place my hand over my heart. "But she's in here, she'll always be in here." I swallow hard, trying not to cry.

"It may have taken me twenty-five years to find you—and I know I could never replace her; I'd never want to—but I have the rest of my life to make up for everything we've lost. I intend to treasure every second of it."

Reaching out, I wrap my fingers around his. "We got off to a rough start, but I'm thankful to have you in my life."

"I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too."

Chapter 4

Logan

My leg is frantically bouncing, as I sit on the pew at the front of the church. I'm a tad nervous, but, I'm more wound up by the anticipation of seeing my bride. I look down at my watch and note she should be here any minute. Brooke promised me last night that she wouldn't be late.

I'm riding on only a few hours of sleep, but I'm too buzzed to notice. Today all my dreams will come true when I marry the love of my life. I'm a lucky bastard—she's turned my once grey world into a myriad of colours.

"How are you fairing?" Craig asks, taking the seat beside me.

"I'm doing okay." I look down at my watch again and smile when I spy the cufflinks Brooke bought me.

"By the looks of that jittery leg of yours, I'd say you're about to crap your pants."

"Fuck off."

He sits back into his seat and chuckles, so I stand, shoving my hands into my trouser pockets. "Brides are never on time," he says. "If you remember, your sister was almost twenty minutes late."

"Brooke will be here on time," I reply.

There's a smug smile on Craig's face when I glance down at him. He's getting pleasure out of watching me squirm, but I know my girl, she'll be here at one.

"Don't hold your breath." I ignore his comment. "While we wait, I can give you some marital advice if you like. I feel it's my duty as not only your brother-in-law but as your best man."

I roll my eyes. "Thanks, but no thanks."

“Well, it’s your lucky day because I’m going to give it to you anyway.” He sits forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. “The secret to a happy marriage can be achieved by always remembering to say either of these two things when your wife speaks.”

I arch an eyebrow; I’m intrigued. “And what would those two words be?”

“I understand, and you’re right. Whichever one fits the moment. I’m telling you; it’s foolproof and works every time.”

“Remind me again what my sister sees in you?”

“Apart from my devilishly good looks you mean?”

I shake my head. “You’re a dick.”

“Well, there’s that too.” He holds his hands out in front of him, a good two feet apart. “It’s huge,” he mouths.

“Dream on, buddy,” I say, chuckling.

“True story.”

“That’s not what Michelle told Brooke.” I’m making that up of course.

His eyes widen as he jumps to his feet. “My wife talked to Brooke about the size of my dick?”

Throwing my head back, I laugh. “Amongst other things.” If nothing else, this ridiculous conversation has distracted me.

“You’re lying,” he says, playfully pushing my shoulder.

“Am I?”

Our exchange is interrupted when the priest signals for us to approach the altar. “I told you she’d be here on time,” I murmur as Craig takes his place beside me.

My hands fidget by my sides when the music starts to play. Turning, my eyes move to the double doors at the entrance to the church. Brooke chose the song she is walking down the aisle to. It’s called ‘Destiny’ and it’s a duet sung by Jim Brickman and Christina Aguilera. She said the moment she heard it, it spoke to her heart, which of course made me laugh. She says the cutest things.

A smile graces my face the moment Lara appears in the doorway. She looks like a princess in her long white gown. There’s a lemon sash wrapped around her waist that matches the halo of yellow flowers adorning her sweet head. She’s eight years old and I’m only just realising now how fast she’s growing up.

She’s beaming as she walks towards us and when my eyes dart to Craig, his smile matches hers. I can clearly see the love he has for his little girl, and

I envy him. One day I hope Brooke and I can start a family of our own. *I want that so much.*

Michelle comes into view next. Her silk dress is long and tight-fitting, it suits her tall, thin frame. It's a pale yellow, matching Craig's cravat. Mine is white, to pair with my bride.

"Hubba, hubba," Craig mumbles from beside me, making me chuckle. "You look sexy, honey," he whispers to her as she passes and takes her spot beside Lara. Although we give each other shit all the time, I could not ask for a better man to love my sister or a better father for my niece.

Through all of this, my eyes remain glued to the doorway, eagerly awaiting Brooke's entrance. The moment my bride comes into view, my breath hitches. I knew she would look stunning, but I'm in no way prepared for just how much. Her long brown hair is piled up on the top of her head, in a large bun. She is not wearing a veil, opting for a small jewelled tiara that curves around the base of her bun. It allows me to admire her full beauty. Unlike that stupid tradition, there is no need for her to hide her pretty face.

My gaze briefly moves down to her wedding gown, causing a lump to rise in my throat as I take her in. The top half of her dress hugs her sexy-as-hell body, and the strapless design pushes up her spectacular rack, accentuating it further. The bottom half of her dress reminds me of a floor-length tutu, making her appear ballerina-like.

The sheer desire I hold for this woman is insurmountable. I'm going to eat her alive the second I get her alone.

She takes a step towards me, and I'm so overcome that I can feel tears stinging the back of my eyes. I blink a few times, attempting to will them back. I knew today would be an emotional one, but I never anticipated this.

Although the church is packed with our family and friends, it feels like it's just the two of us, as she continues her descent down the aisle. The beautiful smile lighting her face makes my vision become cloudy.

Clearing my throat, I briefly bow my head, trying to pull my shit together.

When I look back up, I do a double take as I notice she is holding her father's arm ... she never told me he was giving her away. He looks so proud. It fills my heart with joy knowing how much this would mean to him.

My focus moves back to my girl now that she is only a few metres away. She places a small kiss on John's cheek as they come to a stop in front of me, and I extend my arm reaching for her hand.

"You look gorgeous, babe," I say drawing her closer. Although that word

hardly does her justice.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

Now that she’s near, I feel calmer. It’s been less than twenty-four hours since I’ve seen her, but I’ve missed her. I can’t believe she’s about to become my wife ... Mrs. Logan Cavanagh has a nice ring to it.

Brooke tightens her grip on my hand and there’s no doubt the love I see in her eyes, is mirrored in my own. And I know with all certainty, I’ll cherish this woman until I take my last breath.



Extending my arms, I pull my beautiful wife down onto my lap. “As stunning as you look in that dress, babe, I can’t wait to strip you out of it.”

She turns her body to face me. “And I can’t wait to remove your suit,” she says grasping my cravat and pulling my face towards hers. “I’m aching for you, Hot Stuff ... *aching.*”

“I’m getting hard, just thinking about being inside you again. Can we skip the rest of the reception?”

“As much as I’d like to say yes, we can’t.” She reaches for my wrist and pulls it towards her face, looking down at my watch. “We’ve made it this far, I’m sure we can get through another two-and-a-bit hours.”

“Two-and-a-bit hours,” I groan. “That seems like an eternity.”

“It will go fast.”

I tighten my grip on her waist, drawing her closer. “Not fast enough.”

“Good things come to those who wait, Mr. Cavanagh,” she says, resting her forehead against mine.

“And you’re worth the wait, Mrs. Cavanagh ... although I’ll always be incredibly needy when it comes to you.”

She places her lips on mine, and whispers, “I love you so much.”

When I reply, “I love you more,” she draws back and rolls her eyes, making me chuckle. She’s given up trying to beat me because she’ll never win. As she goes to stand, I hold her tight. “You’re going to need to give me a few minutes.” I jerk my hips forward letting her know I’m still hard. When she bites her plump bottom lip, I rest my head on her shoulder and groan.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“You should be more concerned about what I’m going to do to *you*, once

I get you home.”

“I’m not concerned in the slightest, I’m eagerly anticipating every second of it.” She arches her perfectly sculptured brow, and I can’t help but smile. Of course, she is, my *little minx*.

We’ve decided to spend our first night as husband and wife at the Penthouse. Tomorrow morning, our family will join us for brunch where we will open our wedding gifts, before flying to Italy for two glorious weeks.

“Has today been everything you hoped it would be?” I ask. I still can’t believe I get to keep this woman *forever*.

“It’s been the best day of my life.”

“I seem to give you a lot of those,” I say.

She places her palm on the side of my face. “You do. I have a feeling you’ll be giving me many more in the future.”

The Master of Ceremonies approaches. “Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Cavanagh, I’m sorry to interrupt, but we’re getting ready for the bridal waltz.”

That instantly has my nerves kicking in. I wanted this dance to be special, so I asked Brooke for lessons. In true Brooke style, she choreographed a routine for us both instead. Nothing fancy, just a few turns, and a dip at the end. I’m still incredibly anxious nevertheless.

“Okay,” I say, tugging at the collar of my dress shirt.

“We’ll do the cake and speeches before serving the last course.”

“Sounds great,” Brooke chimes in. She’s got this dancing thing in the bag, me on the other hand ...

“I think I’ve changed my mind,” I say the moment the MC leaves us. “I’m not sure I can go through with the dance routine. Can I just hold you instead? I’ve mastered that part. I’m going to screw up the rest, I know I will.”

“No, you won’t, you nailed it in rehearsals.”

“I nailed *you* in rehearsals ... against the wall if my memory serves me correctly.”

“Hmm,” she hums, biting her bottom lip again. I know exactly where her mind has just gone.

“I feel comfortable with you. These other hundred and fifty people,” I say glancing around the room, “not so much.”

“You’ve got this. Just focus on me. And if you do mess up, who cares.”

I care. I want this to be perfect for her.

She brushes her lips against mine before standing and reaching for my hand. I no longer have to worry about my hard-on, it went soft the moment the bridal waltz was mentioned. It's the only part of tonight I've been dreading.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the MC announces over the microphone, "please welcome the newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Cavanagh onto the dancefloor, as they take their first dance together as husband and wife."

I have the same overwhelming compulsion to run and hide like I did the night of my sister's wedding, but when I see the hope shining in my beautiful wife's eyes, I know I can't do that.

The moment we reach the middle of the dancefloor, she stops and faces me. I take a sharp breath as I pull her into my arms. We considered a few different songs for this dance, but in the end, we chose the one from the night I proposed. 'Can't Help Falling In Love With You,' by Andrea Bocelli and Katharine McPhee. I contemplated flying both of them here to sing it live, I have the money and connections to make stuff like that happen, but I know my bride, she would have thought that was overkill.

The lyrics to this song resonate with us both ... because the moment our hearts became involved, neither of us could've stopped the inevitable.

"Relax Hot Stuff, you've got this," she whispers. I wish I had her confidence.

My eyes lock with hers, as I pull her body closer to mine, and an instant calm settles over me. She's like my safety blanket. As long as I remain focused on her, everyone else in this room will disappear.

Brooke starts to move and I follow suit. She's such a skilled and graceful dancer, she could make anyone look good, *even me*. We come to the first spin, and I instinctively hold my breath as she does her flawless twirl.

The smile on her face is bright as I draw her body back to mine. "You're doing great," she whispers.

"I had an amazing teacher." Even if I'm eagerly awaiting the end of the song, I'm actually enjoying this more than I thought I would, because I know it makes her happy.



We're on the home stretch. The dances and cake are done, now it's just

the speeches and dessert to go. I look down at my watch as my best man stands.

“Stop looking at your watch,” Brooke whispers from beside me. “Anyone would think you’re in a hurry to get out of here.”

She reaches under the table, giving my crotch a little squeeze, instantly making my cock swell. I growl under my breath. In just over an hour we will be heading home, or sooner if I can swing it. I have two weeks’ worth of abstinence to make up for. My bride will be lucky if she can walk by the time I’m through with her.

I reach for her hand, removing it from my dick, watching the smile play across her lips as our eyes meet. I still remember the first time I looked into them and felt my entire world flip. Nothing’s changed, she still gives me butterflies.

Craig clears his throat, and I begrudgingly peel my gaze away from my beautiful wife, to focus back on him. He better not make me look like an idiot.

“The groom specifically asked that I don’t talk about any of his mishaps, mistakes, or ex-girlfriends in my speech,” Craig says, which is bullshit, I never uttered those words to him. Although the thought did cross my mind. He shrugs his shoulders before continuing. “So, that’s it for me, he’s left me with nothing else to say. Thanks for listening.”

Brooke claps her hands together, as she throws back her head and bursts out laughing ... along with the rest of the room. I on the other hand, just sit there dumbfounded. He told me last night he’d been working on his speech for weeks, *fucking liar*—more like a second.

He goes to put the microphone down, before lifting it back to his mouth once more. For a split second I think he is going to elaborate, but I should have known better.

“Please excuse me, I forgot about the toast. Ladies and gentlemen, please raise your glasses.” He reaches for his bottle of beer, holding it high in the air. “To the best decision Logan’s ever made.” He looks over at Brooke and winks, and I hear her giggle from beside me. “There’s something special about these two, they go together without forcing it, they love each other without fighting it, and they care for one another without thinking about it. She was his *one* from the very beginning.” His gaze moves back to us. “I wish you both a lifetime of love and happiness as husband and wife.”

Despite the fact that he kind of redeemed himself in the end, I still shake

my head as he retakes his seat. On the plus side, he kept it short, so that means we can leave a little earlier.

I lean my body towards him. "You're a prick," I mumble.

He laughs, slapping me on the back. "But you still love me. Admit it, I'm an awesome best man." He shakes his head, chuckling to himself. "I seriously missed my calling; I should've been a comedian."

It amuses me that he finds himself so funny.

Chapter 5

Brooke

I feel jittery as the lift doors close behind us. There's a predatory look in my husband's eyes as he backs me into the wall and crashes his lips to mine. This is no soft or loving kiss, *it's primal*, one of pure desperation. It only serves to make my raging libido hit boiling point.

My fingers move down to the waistband of his trousers as I fumble with the zipper. "I need you."

Logan's hand quickly covers mine, halting me. "I'd take you right here and now if it wasn't for those damn cameras," he grumbles.

I'm glad he has the willpower to stop this because I'm so desperate for him; I honestly don't care who's watching.

The second the doors open on our floor, he scoops me into his arms, carrying me over the threshold. Once he steps into the foyer, he places me back on my feet, swiftly turning me around. He wastes no time reaching for the zipper on my dress and dragging it down. He growls the second it pools around my feet.

"Jesus Christ!" I'm wearing a white satin and lace bustier corset with a suspender belt. I had to get Michelle to help me put it on this morning; it does up from the back, with hook and eye fasteners. I never considered the time it would take him to remove it. "Turn around?" I do as he asks, and the expression on his face tells me he likes what he sees. He reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone. "As desperate as I am to have you, I need to get a photo of you in this before I rip it from your body."

Normally I'd protest the ripping part, but not tonight. My needs far outweigh my wants.

Logan stalks around me, snapping images from different angles. I've

never let anyone take pictures of me like I let him do, but I trust him implicitly. He wouldn't want another man to see these any more than I would.

When he moves back around to stand in front of me, he zooms in on my chest.

"Your tits in this ..." His hand reaches out, as he grabs a handful of my breast, freeing it from its confine. He pinches my nipple between his forefinger and thumb, and it sends both pleasure and pain, radiating throughout my body. I throw my head back and moan. "I could come just standing here looking at you, that's how much you turn me on."

Leaning in, he swirls his tongue around the hard nub before sucking it into his mouth, and the throb between my legs is so intense, I could possibly orgasm too.

"I need you, Hot Stuff," I whimper. He shoves his phone back into his pocket before slipping his hand down the front of my underwear. My back arches as I push my pelvis towards him. "Yes ... don't stop." I've been craving his touch for two long weeks.

Logan's eyes roll back in his head the moment he comes into contact with my sensitive flesh. "So wet for me."

"I need more," I beg, widening my stance. I've never craved an orgasm so much in my life. Our eyes are locked as he pushes a finger inside me, followed closely by a second, but still it's not enough. "More."

"Fuck," he growls as he adds another digit and uses his thumb to circle my clit. "You drive me wild." He thrusts his fingers deep inside me, stretching me in the most glorious way. My hands grasp his shoulders, and my head tilts back as I bask in all the sensations coursing through my body. I've never experienced anything this intense. When Logan licks a path from my collarbone to the base of my chin, I fall over the edge. "*Fuck ... that's it, babe, come for me. Yes, just like that ... good girl.*"

"Hot Stuff," I moan as my hands move down to fist the lapels of his jacket in an attempt to keep myself upright.

My legs are trembling, threatening to give way from underneath me as my inner walls clench around his thick fingers. Wave after wave of pleasure seeps through me as multiple orgasms crash into me like whiplash ... over and over again, to the point I may even pass out.

My grip on him tightens as he slowly withdraws his fingers, and a final tremor runs through my limp body. He has one arm wrapped around my

waist, and my hooded eyes follow the other as he brings his hand to his mouth.

“Mm, delicious,” he groans as his tongue swirls around each of the three digits that were just inside me. “I’ve missed your taste.” I want to tell him how hot that is, but I can barely get air into my lungs, let alone speak. “Turn around,” he commands, “and place your hands on the wall.” He slides his knee between my legs when I do as he asks, spreading them wide. “This is not how I wanted our first time as husband and wife to be, but that will have to come later.” His warm breath caresses my skin as he whispers into my ear, “I’m going to fuck you so hard right now, and then I’ll take you upstairs and make love to you.”

“Bring it ... I can take whatever you dish out, Mr. Cavanagh.” He rests his forehead against my shoulder, chuckling at my response.

“I don’t doubt it for a second, Mrs. Cavanagh.” I faintly hear the familiar sound of fabric tearing over my erratic breathing as he rips my lace underwear from my body. “They’re too pretty to tear,” he breathes, as his lips trail a path up my neck, “but I want you too much to care.” He unzips his trousers, freeing himself, before sliding the head of his penis between my legs and moving it back and forth through my arousal. “You drive me fucking wild,” he groans as he thrusts his hips forward without warning, filling me completely.

“Yes,” I scream.

He stills for a moment like he’s savouring the feeling, or maybe he’s just giving me time to prepare for what’s about to come. “You feel so good, so *fucking good.*”

“Fuck me, Hot Stuff.”

When his grip on my hip increases and his fingertips dig into my flesh, I brace myself for the onslaught I know he’s about to bring. “*Babe.*” He withdraws to the tip before slamming back into me. “Keep talking like that, and it will be over before it’s even begun.”

“Harder,” I whimper.

“Fuck, Brooke,” he groans, giving me exactly what I asked for. My fingernails claw at the wall in an attempt to get some traction.

The noises we’re both making are almost feral as his unrelenting savage assault on my body continues. The sound of our flesh slapping together echoes through the foyer. He’s pounding into me so hard, it’s almost lifting me off the ground, but never in my life has my body felt such pleasure.

I lift one of my arms, wrapping it around his neck, as I tilt my head back to rest on his shoulder. He grasps my cheeks between his fingers, turning my face to meet his, fusing our mouths together. Our kiss is just as ferocious as the sex. We're like wild animals. We can't seem to get enough of each other.

When he releases my face, his hand moves down between my legs, circling my clit. I'm already climbing to that blissful place of no return, as his touch only spurs on my orgasm.

"Come with me, babe."

"I ... I am."

He flings back his head and roars as he releases, spilling himself deep inside me. I'm spent. I can't take another second. My body goes limp, and my legs finally give out, but Logan's hand quickly slides around my waist, keeping me upright.

"Are you okay?" he asks through his panting.

"Yes," is all I managed to get out. I'm just exhausted.

He slowly withdraws himself from me before scooping me into his arms.

"Are you sure?" His concerned eyes scan over my face.

I nod my head. Leaning in, he gently kisses my mouth before carrying me through the apartment and upstairs to our bedroom. When he places me down on the bed, his body hovering over mine, I can see the worry etched on his handsome face. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all. You just wore me out."

A smile tugs at his lips as he pushes off the bed and stands to full height. Reaching for my hand, he pulls me into a sitting position.

"Let me undress you. I want you to rest up before round two."

As appealing as round two sounds, I need to regain my energy first. I'm not sure if it's the long hours I've been putting in at the studio, on top of organising the wedding, or just the huge day we've had, but now that the high has worn off, I'm struggling to keep my eyes open. I've never felt this fatigued.

He unclips the suspenders before removing my heels and rolling the white lace-capped stockings down my legs. He's observing me the entire time, becoming more unsettled as my eyes grow heavier.

"Are you sure you're alright, babe?" he asks, cupping my chin and raising my face to meet his.

"I'm just really tired."

He crawls onto the bed, manoeuvring himself behind me to unfasten the

line of hook and eyes down the back of the corset. When it drops forward onto my lap, I intake a large breath filling my lungs, only now realising how constricting it's been. He removes my jewellery next, but not my engagement and wedding ring. I don't usually sleep with my rings on, but I will tonight if that's what he wants.

“What about your hair?”

“Just leave it,” I say, reaching up to slip off the tiara. I'll worry about the bobby pins later.

“Lay down.” When he draws back the covers, I climb inside. He makes quick work of his clothes before sliding in beside me. I'm already drifting off by the time he pulls me into his arms and places a soft kiss on my forehead. A contented sigh falls from my lips as I snuggle into his warmth.

“I love you so much, Mrs. Cavanagh.”

Chapter 6

Logan

I'm studying my wife as she sleeps beside me on the plane. She slept through the entire night, and round two didn't come until late this morning. I was okay with that, she obviously needed her rest, but she's now out to it again. She was fast asleep before the plane even took off. That's so unlike her. She usually has boundless energy.

This morning I took it easy on her; I was so lost in the moment last night I hadn't realised how rough I was until after the fact. Sometimes she brings out a side of me that I never knew existed. I'm like this unrecognisable, savage beast. She seems to enjoy that side of me, but the last thing I want is to hurt her.

Even when our family joined us for brunch, I caught her yawning numerous times. Our guests probably thought nothing of it, I'm sure they assumed we'd spent our wedding night doing what newlyweds usually do, but I knew better.

Reaching out, I softly run my hand down her beautiful face. Marrying her yesterday was a dream come true for me, but for some reason I couldn't shake the sheer panic that settled over me last night as I lay beside her.

So many fucked up things ran through my head. What if something was to happen to her? What if I lost her? I know I couldn't cope with that. I never knew it was possible to love another human being as much as I do Brooke. She's become the centre of my universe.

Settling back into my seat, I try to push those thoughts from my mind. We have two long weeks together, just the two of us. This is Brooke's first time overseas, so I'm looking forward to showing her Italy. My family holidayed there often when I was growing up.

“Can I get you something to drink, Mr. Cavanagh,” the air hostess asks, bringing me back to reality.

“Please. A scotch on the rocks.” If nothing else, it may help me relax.

“And for your wife?”

“She’s fine for now,” I say.

“I’ll be right back with your scotch.”

“Thank you.”

I unbuckle my seatbelt and stand, grabbing the blanket from the small compartment in front of Brooke. After reclining her seat, I drape it over her. She doesn’t even stir.



“Babe,” I say, gently shaking her.

“Huh.” She opens her eyes, and the first thing she does when she sees me is smile. She has no idea how much she unravels me.

“We’re going to land soon, and you haven’t eaten anything yet.”

Apart from a few toilet breaks, and a glass of water, she’s slept for most of the flight. She clearly needed it, but it still perturbs me.

“Oh, okay.” She puts her seat into the upright position before rubbing her eyes. I love her sleepy face when she first wakes. “I didn’t mean to sleep for so long. You should’ve woke me earlier.” As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. She reaches for my hand. “I’m sorry I haven’t been the best company.”

“Don’t be sorry. You obviously needed the rest.”

“I guess all the long hours I’ve been putting in have caught up with me.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to unwind in Italy.”

The corners of her lips curve up. “I’m looking forward to spending two glorious weeks with my incredibly sexy husband.”

“Incredibly sexy, huh?”

“You better believe it. I don’t call you Hot Stuff for the fun of it.”

Her words make me chuckle. I secretly love her pet name for me.

I pull her hand up to my mouth, kissing her knuckles. “I’m also looking forward to this time with you.” I hand the menu to Brooke. “What do you feel like eating?”

She shrugs. “What are you having?”

“I’ve already eaten, but the hostess said she’d get you something to eat when you woke.”

“Oh.”

“I had the chicken. It was okay.”

Even though I only travel in business or first class, where they offer a variety of chef-prepared courses, I’ve never been a fan of airline food.

She scrunches her nose as she reads over the selection, which makes me grin. “I might just have the soup.”

“You need more substance than that.”

“I’m not that hungry. I just want something light.”

I hold my hand up to signal the hostess. Soup is better than nothing.



After placing our bags in the bedroom, I return to find Brooke standing in the great room, with her arms wrapped around her torso, as she gazes out the window of our hotel. We’re spending the first five days in Milan, to do some sightseeing and shopping, before driving across the Italian countryside to Tuscany.

Closing the distance between us, I slide my arms around her waist, resting my chin on her head.

“The city looks so beautiful lit up. I can’t wait to see it in the daylight,” she says.

It was some ungodly hour in the morning when we arrived at the hotel, so it’s still dark outside.

“You’re going to love it here.”

“Thank you for bringing me,” she says, turning in my arms and looking up at me with a smile. She appears happy, but her pale skin and the dark circles under her eyes concern me.

“How are you feeling now?” I ask.

“Better. I just need a shower. Do you want to join me?” She raises an eyebrow suggestively.

I’m relieved she’s feeling okay. Just before we landed, she thought she would throw up, but thankfully that passed, and she managed to keep her meal down.

Releasing her, I reach for her hand. I’m dead on my feet, but after a

shower and a nap, I'm sure I'll be feeling like my old self again. I want to squeeze as much as we can into this trip while we are here. Being Brooke's first time out of Australia, there's so much I want to show her. This city was established in the sixth century, so it's seeped in history.

"Our hotel room is so luxurious," she says as I guide her through our bedroom and into the main bathroom."

It's Armani, so of course, it's luxurious. We are staying in the presidential suite, which is over eleven thousand euros a night and comes complete with a private chef. I chose this place because it's right in the heart of the shopping district, which Milan is renowned for.

"Only the best for my wife." Dropping her hand, I reach into the shower stall and turn on the water. "Lift up," I say, gripping the hem of her top.

Like the good girl she is, she holds her arms high in the air. She's wearing a simple white sport bra underneath, but it's still enough to arouse me. I moved down to the waistband of her jeans as she starts to work on the buttons of my shirt.

Once we're free from our clothes, I lead her into the shower and manoeuvre her under the spray. I reach for the body wash, finding any excuse to have my hands on her.

Closing her eyes, she tilts her head back into the water as my soapy palms massage her breasts. "Mmm, that feels good. You have incredible hands, Mr. Cavanagh."

My fingertips glide down over her toned stomach, slipping between her legs. "Incredible, huh?"

She grasps hold of my shoulders. "Yes, *incredible*." She emphasises the last word, and her breath hitches when I come in contact with her sensitive flesh. I grin when I see her eyes flutter close and her sweet mouth part. Bringing my face forward, I place my lips on hers. With that, all the lingering feelings from the flight over vanish instantly. We're going to have a long and beautiful life together, that I am sure of. I back her into the tiles and I slide two fingers deep inside her heat, crooking them slightly to reach her G-spot. "Hot Stuff," she breathes, and that ever-present need to be balls deep inside her takes over.

After working her over a bit longer, until she's panting and begging for more, my hands slide under her armpits, and I lift her off the ground. "Wrap your legs around me, babe."

I use my torso to keep her body in position and slowly guide myself

inside her little piece of heaven. I tilt my head back and groan as the kind of pleasure only she can give takes over. This woman undoes me in so many ways.

Chapter 7

Brooke

I slide my hand through the crook of Logan's elbow, grasping it tight. "I'm having trouble believing we're on the other side of the world," I say in complete wonderment. "It's such an odd feeling."

He leans in, placing a kiss on the side of my head. "Well, believe it."

I nestle my body into him as we walk down Via Montenapdeone, which Logan tells me is the key shopping street in Milan. Although I can already tell this place will be way out of my price range, I'm excited to see all the beautiful things the stores offer.

After a few hours of sleep, Logan had our private chef cook us a light brunch before we headed out. I've been feeling queasy ever since I woke, but I kept that to myself. I struggled to get through the food, but he watched me so intently I pushed through it, and by some miracle, I managed to keep it down. There is no point worrying us both.

Our first stop was Giorgio Armani. Logan wanted to purchase some new suits. He already has a walk-in-robe full of them at home, but I guess it's justified in his line of work.

I knew they'd be expensive, but I wasn't prepared for just how much they would cost. The suits ranged from a few thousand to over ten thousand euros. My husband didn't even bat an eyelid as he gathered up everything that took his fancy. Even the dress shirts were overpriced. He can afford it, but five hundred euros for a plain button-up shirt is kind of ridiculous. I ended up going outside for some air, when it came time for him to pay. I didn't want or need to know how much he spent in that one store alone.

My head is spinning as we make our way to Gucci next. I was hoping to pick up a gift for my dad and Michelle whilst on this trip, but now I'm

concerned. Where are the normal stores for everyday people like me? Somewhere where I wouldn't have to sell a kidney just to be able to afford something.

I eye a beautiful handbag only moments after entering the store. "Oh, this is pretty," I say, but as soon as I see the four-thousand-euro price tag, I immediately place it back on the shelf. Yikes! My current bag was purchased on sale from Strandbags for a pricey sum of sixty-nine dollars. That felt extravagant to me.

"If you like it, I'll get it for you." When Logan reaches for it, I grab his arm to stop him.

"Please don't," I say, feeling my cheeks flush. "I was just admiring it. I never said I wanted it. Besides, it's way too expensive."

I could buy a handbag for every day of the week back in Sydney for that price, including outfits with matching shoes, and still walk away with change. The thought makes me laugh. I'm sure these products are handcrafted and made with the finest fabrics money can buy, but at the end of the day, you're just paying for the brand name.

"Babe."

"Hot Stuff ... No!" I slide my arm through his, guiding him further into the store.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" I ask.

"Stop me from buying you nice things."

I shrug. "I have plenty of nice things."

"You're my wife, and as much as you don't want to hear this, what's mine is now yours."

I tilt my face towards him and smile. I appreciate the sentiment behind his words, but I don't want or need his money. Even though my studio is going well, I'd never pay such an exorbitant price for a handbag. I can't fault him for loving the finer things in life, it's what he's used to, but I'll never see sense in it. I grew up shopping at thrift stores. Material things have never been important to me. It's just how I am, and you can't change that.

"As long as I have you, that's all I'll ever need."

His frown evaporates as he leans down to brush his lips with mine. "You're all I'll ever need too."

We head to Burberry and Dolce & Gabbana next, and like the other stores, he spends big. As much as I've enjoyed watching him and listening to

him speak fluent Italian to the sales staff—which is sexy as hell and had me swooning all over the place—I’m tired. I’ve had to turn away a few times to hide my yawn. He’ll only worry more if he notices. I’m not sure if it’s exhaustion or something else, but I’ll admit I’m becoming a little unsettled.



I’m dragging my feet by the time we make it back to the hotel. It’s mid-afternoon, and after a late lunch in a cute upscale café and some more retail therapy, we’ve finally called it a day.

As soon as we enter our suite, I kick off my shoes and plop down on the lounge with a sigh. “Are you feeling okay?” Logan asks.

“I’m good. Just worn out. Who knew shopping with you could be so exhausting.”

I don’t even want to know how much he spent today, but I’m guessing somewhere in the tens of thousands ... possibly even as high as six figures.

Logan sits beside me and drags my legs onto his lap. I dip my head back and moan when he uses the pads of his thumbs to massage my feet.

“God, that feels amazing.”

Chapter 8

Logan

“**W**hat’s this?” Brooke asks as we exit the hotel and approach the fire-engine-red Ferrari parked by the kerb.

“Our ride for the next week.”

“It’s a little on the extravagant side, don’t you think?”

“Not in the slightest,” I reply. “It was a toss-up between one of these, a Lamborghini and a Maserati.”

“Of course it was,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“We’re in Italy, babe. It would be a crime to come here and not drive one of this country’s iconic cars.”

“You could’ve rented a Fiat.”

“Very funny. How would we fit our luggage into a Fiat?”

“You mean the luggage you’ve already had transported to our hotel in Tuscany?”

“Semantics, my love.” I flick my hand. “Besides, your handbag would be lucky to fit inside one of those minuscule cars.”

“You mean this ridiculously expensive bag I told you not to buy me, but you did anyway?” she says, swinging her arm in my direction and playfully slapping me in the stomach with said bag.

Brooke was pissed when she saw every object, she’d either picked up or eyed long enough to let me know she liked it, was amongst the things delivered to our room. She’s my wife, and I don’t want her to go without. She’s had enough of that growing up. I want to give her the world. Hopefully, one day she’ll get used to me spoiling her because I have no plans on stopping.

Rounding the vehicle, I open her door. It’s only a three-and-a-half-hour

drive from Milan to Tuscany, the next leg of our journey. But we're in no rush. I've booked a quaint little Italian restaurant where we'll stop for lunch on the way before arriving at our luxury private villa for the duration of our stay.

So far, our honeymoon has been everything I hoped it would be, from long lazy mornings in bed to dining at some of Italy's most renowned restaurants. We've visited so many beautiful places, including Duomo di Milano, Italy's largest church, and Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, this country's oldest shopping gallery, with its stunning four-storey high glassed, domed ceiling. We even attended the ballet at Teatro alla Scala, a magnificent theatre built in 1778. Brooke didn't disappoint with her responses. I spent the entire performance with my eyes on her. I'm pretty sure that has been the highlight of her trip so far. Yesterday we did a couple's spa, which left us feeling relaxed and rejuvenated.

When I was a boy, my family always spent a month somewhere in Europe over the Christmas break. It was the only time my father took off work. So, while I may have lost count of how many times I've visited this country, I'm happy knowing my wife has enjoyed her first time in a foreign city; I've loved getting to experience it all again through her eyes. I'm so glad I was able to give her this.

I look forward to travelling the world with her over the coming years.

After starting the engine, I rev the car a few times—because I'm like a big kid with his new toy—before pulling into traffic. As we drive down the main street, I reach over and place my hand on Brooke's leg. I wish we could stay longer. I know we have the rest of our lives together, but our honeymoon is going way too fast for my liking.

"You good, babe?" I ask.

"I'm great. I've had the best time here with you."

"Me too," I say, lifting her hand to my mouth. The last few days seem to have done her good. She's back to the old Brooke and obviously just needed some time to recoup.



We're just over halfway into our journey to Tuscany, and for the first leg, Brooke didn't stop talking. I love how she finds pleasure in the simplest of

things. She's so animated as she speaks about our trip so far, the landmarks, quaint villages, the people we've met, or the beautiful countryside we pass. But for the last ten minutes, she's gone quiet. My eyes keep darting in her direction ... to the fidgeting hands in her lap and the deep frown marring her forehead. The pale colour of her skin is what concerns me most.

"Babe," I say, placing my hand on hers. "Is something wrong?"

When her wide eyes meet mine, and she swallows thickly behind her tightly clenched lips, I know things are anything but okay.

Flicking on the indicator, I pull over to the side of the road so I can give her my undivided attention, but the moment I do, she reaches for the door handle.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"Jesus, Brooke." Quickly removing my seatbelt, I exit the vehicle. By the time I round the front of the car, she's already bent over, emptying the contents of her stomach. "Shit."

I race to her side, reaching for her ponytail that's hanging over her shoulder, holding it out of the way. My free hand lightly rubs her back. Although she seemed better the last few days, I swore I heard her heaving in the bathroom this morning. When I asked her about it, she brushed it off. I'm kicking myself for not pushing further now.

Straightening, she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "Thank you," she whispers when I let go of her hair. Her voice is so soft, I barely hear her.

Placing my finger under her chin, I gently turn her face towards me. Despite having mascara running down her face and brows tightly pinched together, Brooke's ashen complexion has my heart sinking.

"What's going on?"

When she rests her forehead against my chest and sighs, I wrap her in my arms. "I don't know. I haven't been feeling well lately."

"Since when?"

I feel her shoulder slightly lift. "A week or so."

My hands move to her upper arms, drawing her body back. "A week or so?"

Her thumbnail is now wedged between her teeth, which I've noticed she does when she's nervous. "I thought I was rundown, but now I'm not so sure."

"You're not so sure? What the hell does that even mean?"

Her bottom lip starts to quiver. “Can we just drop it?”

“If there’s something going on with you, I’m not going to drop it.”

“It’s probably nothing ... it’s just—”

“Just what?” I snap. I didn’t mean to say it so abruptly, but she’s freaking me the fuck out.

“My mum—”

She’s not making sense. “What does she have to do with this?”

“Before her diagnosis, she was tired and nauseous all the time.”

My eyes search hers as I try to make sense of what she’s saying, and when the penny finally drops, it feels like the bottom falls out of my world. “You think you have ...” I can’t even bring myself to say the word.

“No. God, I ... I don’t know. Maybe I’m overthinking it? It’s just ... I’ve never felt this sick before, and it reminded me of how she was back then.”

I take a step backwards as I let her words settle in. “Fuck.”

My hands clutch the side of my head, my elbow spread wide, as I turn away from my wife. My mind is racing. Yes, I’ve been concerned about how much she’s been sleeping. Just now, I thought she might have been suffering from motion sickness—but *never* in a million years did I contemplate anything this serious.

“Hot Stuff.” Turning to face her, I slide my hand into my pocket to retrieve my phone. “What are you doing?” she asks when I pull up my contact list and start scrolling.

“Calling Claire so she can organise our flights home.”

“No, you’re not,” she says, plucking the phone from my hand. “You’re not cutting our honeymoon short because I vomited.”

“I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but if something is going on with your health, that’s exactly what I’m doing.” When tears rise to her eyes, I exhale a long breath. “Fuck, babe, don’t cry.” Reaching for her, I pull her into my arms. “You need to get checked out.”

“I will when we get home. I shouldn’t have brought up my mum. I was just thinking out loud. It’s probably a virus or a stomach bug. Since my mother’s diagnosis, I’ve had regular check-ups and they always come back clear.”

“Either way, I can’t stand by and do nothing. You’re my world. I don’t want anything happening to you.”

She looks up at me and smiles. “I love that you care so much, but I want to continue our trip. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner, but this is exactly

why ... I knew you'd freak out. Apart from feeling lethargic and a little nauseous, I'm honestly okay. And if at any time that changes, I promise to let you know."

"Brooke!" I have a hard time saying no to this woman.

"Please, Hot Stuff."

When she pouts her lip, I cave. "Fine, for now, we stay, but I'm reserving the right to change my mind if I feel it's warranted."

"Have I told you how much I love you today?"

"You have, and like always, I love you more."

"You're the best husband ever!"

I lightly slap her arse before opening the passenger side door so she can climb back in. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Mrs. Cavanagh."

Chapter 9

Brooke

“**J**ust one more spoonful,” Logan pleads, bringing the utensil back to my mouth. He’s been hand-feeding me chicken soup which he had delivered.

I playfully roll my eyes as I part my lips, but I secretly love how he cares for me. He hasn’t stopped fussing since we arrived in Tuscany. He even had a doctor come to our villa to examine me yesterday. He seemed to think I had food poisoning, which Logan immediately dismissed before abruptly paying him for his time and telling him to leave. To be honest, I don’t think it’s that either. I’m not violently ill; I’m just feeling off. And even that seems to come and go.

Placing the bowl on the table beside the bed, his hand moves towards me, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” I answer, flinging back the sheets. I want to get up, our honeymoon is almost over, and I don’t want to waste another second of it. “I think I’ll go for a swim. Want to join me?”

The place where we are staying is so nice. It has a full-size, heated swimming pool in the backyard with unobstructed views of the beautiful Italian countryside.

“Are you sure you’re up to it?” he asks, standing, so I can rise from the bed.

“It’s a swim, not a marathon.”

“Don’t sass me,” he says, grabbing a handful of my arse as I pass.

When I emerge from the bathroom, I’m naked with a towel slung over my shoulder. Logan’s eyes follow me as I cross the room.

“Coming?”

He quickly closes the distance between us and slides his arm around my waist, halting me. “Where is your bikini?”

“In my suitcase.”

“Are you going to put it on?”

“No.”

“There may be no neighbours nearby,” he says, dragging the towel off my shoulder and wrapping it around me, “but leave this on until you get to the edge of the pool, just in case. Your luscious body is for my eyes only.”

“Okay, caveman,” I reply, slipping out of his grip.

A sly grin curves on his lips. When he reaches for the neck of his t-shirt and drags it over his head, I know he’s going to join me in the water. I’m certainly not complaining.



“Good morning, my beautiful wife,” Logan says the moment I stir. Has he been lying there waiting for me to wake?

Lifting his head off the pillow, he leans over me and smiles as he rains kisses along my shoulder before burying his face in my neck.

“Morning, Hot Stuff.”

The hand around my waist slides south, moving between my legs. I capture my bottom lip with my teeth when his fingertips lightly circle my clit.

The second part of our honeymoon has been all about rest, relaxation and eating plenty of delicious food. We’ve hardly left the villa. I felt a little seedy yesterday, but I managed to keep down everything my husband fed me, which I know, pleased him.

“I love these lazy mornings with you,” he says, sucking my earlobe into his mouth and biting down. “Sliding inside you is the perfect way to start the day.” I can feel his erection pressed into my backside, as he grasps my inner thigh and lifts my leg, draping it over his hip.

His fingers return to my clit as he spears his hips forward, penetrating me in one swift move. Despite how sickly I’ve been feeling, my appetite for this man has only grown. It doesn’t matter how many times we have sex; I still want more.

Withdrawing all the way to the tip, he drives back in, making me moan.

“Fuck, I can’t get enough of your tight pussy,” he growls. “You feel so

good.”

He continues to move in long, languid strokes, and as amazing as it feels, I need more. My orgasm is building, but not fast enough at this pace. Widening my legs, I rock my pelvis forward towards his hand. No words are needed. He knows exactly what I want. Logan’s fingers add more pressure to my clit, as his movements quicken.

“Yes,” I cry out as my hand reaches up to grab a fist full of his hair. Turning my head, I drag his face towards mine because all I need now is his lips.

It doesn’t take long for him to bring me my first release for the day. Once I’ve ridden out the last wave, he flips me onto my stomach and pushes himself up onto his knees before grasping my hips and dragging the lower part of my body up to him.

My arse is now in the air, and my face is buried in the pillows. He reaches for my hair, wrapping my long locks around his wrist, tugging my head back slightly as he enters me again. His other hand grips my hip so hard; it’s probably going to leave a bruise.

The majority of the time, he’s gentle with me, but when he loses control, like now, it’s incredibly hot. I love seeing him come undone. There’s nothing languid about his movements now as he pounds into me hard and fast; just the way I like it.

“Don’t stop,” I say, rocking my body back towards his.

“I have no plans of stopping,” he grunts.

“That feels so good.”

The ferocity of his movements has his balls slapping against my clit every time he drives in. “Come for me, babe. I can’t hold back much longer.”

The moment my inner walls clench around him, his actions become jerky as he throws his head back and calls out my name, spilling himself deep inside me.

As soon as we collapse onto the mattress, Logan rolls off and immediately tugs my body to him. We’re both breathless as I rest my cheek against his chest. I can hear the rapid beating of his heart as I lie here.

Minutes pass before either of us speaks.

“Are you hungry?” Logan asks, stroking his fingers through my hair.

“A little,” I lie because I don’t feel that great now that I’ve come down from my high.

“How about we drive into town and grab some coffee and breakfast at the

little patisserie we passed yesterday? We can come back here and spend the rest of the day in bed. How does that sound?”

I swallow as the urge to vomit takes over. “Hold that thought,” I say, throwing back the sheets and leaping from the bed. My hand is covering my mouth as I run towards the bathroom. I’m already heaving as I flip open the lid.

Logan appears behind me, gathering my hair into his hands. I haven’t eaten yet, so the only thing I bring up is bile. By the time I’m done, my throat and stomach muscles hurt.

“I can’t stand seeing you like this,” Logan utters, moving over to the sink to wet a cloth. I can see his pinched brow in the reflection of the mirror.

“I hate feeling like this.”

After gently wiping my face, he places a soft kiss on my forehead. “Are you okay now?”

“I think so,” I say, running my hand across my abdomen.

Reaching into the shower stall, he turns on the water. “Will you be alright in here by yourself?”

“Of course. Why? Where are you going?”

“To pack our things, we’re heading home.”

Chapter 10

Logan

Chris is waiting for us at the airport when we touch down. “Welcome home Mr. and Mrs. Cavanagh,” he says, taking the rolling suitcase from Brooke’s hand.

“Thanks, Chris,” Brooke replies before disappearing into the back of the limousine. She tried her hardest to talk me out of leaving Italy, but my mind was already made up. In hindsight, I should’ve brought her home the second she vomited by the roadside.

“How was she on the flight home?” Chris asks as we move around to the rear of the vehicle, so I can help him load our luggage into the boot. I called him from the airport in Italy to let him know we were coming home.

“Okay. She slept most of the way.”

He must see the worry etched on my face because he places his hand on my shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. “Don’t overthink this. She’s probably run down. With the wedding and the studio, she’s been run off her feet. She’ll be okay.”

“I hope so,” I say before joining my wife in the back seat.

I feel like an asshole for placing so much pressure on her. Granted, I was eager to have her as my wife, but I should’ve waited instead of demanding we tie the knot as soon as possible. She was already putting in long hours trying to get her studio up and running. The last thing she needed was to plan a wedding on top of that.

“Are we heading to the penthouse, Mr. Cavanagh?” Chris asks once he climbs into the driver’s seat.

“Please.”

Claire has already called my doctor and scheduled an urgent appointment

for Brooke. He's coming to the penthouse to examine her this afternoon. Something isn't right here, and I need to get to the bottom of it.



We showered and changed as soon as we arrived home, and while Brooke opted to lie down, I grabbed my laptop and moved to the leather wing-backed sofa in our bedroom. I felt the need to stay close, but I've got a lot of work to catch up on since I've been offline since the wedding. To be honest, I could use the distraction.

It's mid-afternoon when the doctor finally arrives. Brooke is sound asleep, so when Jill escorts him up to our bedroom, I step out into the hallway to chat with him first.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice, Doc," I say, extending my hand to him.

"Not a problem at all. My receptionist said your wife fell ill overseas. I didn't know you were married. Congratulations."

"Thanks. We were actually in Italy on our honeymoon."

"Right, well, that's a shame. Was she seen too over there?"

"I had a doctor look at her ... no offence, but he was a quack."

The doctor chuckles. "None taken. I know a few of those myself."

"I'm sure you do."

"Do you want to explain what's happening with your wife, or would you rather me discuss it with her directly?"

"She's been feeling unwell since the wedding. Sleeping a lot, feeling nauseous ... struggling to keep her food down."

"I see."

"Her mother succumbed to breast cancer." I want to make him aware, just in case Brooke doesn't mention it. She's completely backtracked since bringing it up on the roadside, but it's definitely something that needs to be investigated.

The doctor's eyes widen when I say that. "Apart from being fatigued and nauseated, does your wife have any other symptoms? Like any unexplained weight loss or a lump in her breast?"

"No, not that I'm aware of. She said she gets checked regularly, but she mentioned her breasts being tender while we were away."

“I’ll keep that in mind. May I see the patient?”

“Of course.”

I lead him into our bedroom, and he remains just inside the doorway as I move towards the bed to wake Brooke. “Babe,” I say, gently brushing the hair back from her face. A smile tugs at my lips when her pretty eyes flutter open. “The doctors here.”

“Oh.” Sitting up, she yawns as she pulls down the t-shirt of mine that she put on after her shower.

Plumping the pillow behind her, I get her comfortable as the doctor approaches the bed.

Stopping beside me, he holds out his hand. “Mrs. Cavanagh, it’s lovely to meet you. I’m Dr. Kirby.”

“Please call me Brooke.”

“Okay, Brooke. Logan tells me you haven’t been feeling well.”

She side-eyes me before answering. “Umm ... yes, I’ve been feeling a little off.”

The doctor clears his throat as he places his leather bag at the foot of the bed. “Would you give us a moment, Logan?” he asks, bringing his attention to me.

“You want me to leave?”

“If that’s okay with Brooke.”

“I’m okay with it,” she says as her gaze moves to her lap.

Well damn.

I wasn’t expecting to be kicked out of my own bedroom. If it were anyone else, I’d flat-out refuse to leave my wife alone with him, but if she’s more comfortable without me here, then I’ll go. I turn and walk towards the door.

“I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”



“Kiddo,” John says the moment he answers my call. “How’s Italy? I didn’t expect to hear from you until you returned.”

I’ve been sitting in my office for the past hour just staring at my computer screen because I couldn’t sleep. “We’re actually back in Sydney. We arrived yesterday.”

“Sydney? I thought you were spending two weeks in Europe.”

“Brooke got sick, so we flew home.”

“Sick? What do you mean she got sick?” he asks, concerned.

“We don’t know what’s going on. She’s been unusually tired and nauseous.”

“Have you taken her to the doctor?”

“Yes. My doctor came to the penthouse yesterday afternoon.”

“And what did he say?”

“He’s running some tests. Hopefully, we’ll get some answers today.”

“Shit. Did he give any indication on what it might be?”

“He said he had his suspicions, but he wouldn’t elaborate further.”

“Hopefully, she’s just come down with a bug.”

“I don’t know, maybe.” I pick up a pen and start to doodle on a piece of paper. I hope that’s all it is, but my gut tells me it’s something more. “It’s been over a week, and there’s been no improvement. The dickhead we saw in Italy said it was food poisoning, but I knew that wasn’t the case. We’d eaten the same things.”

“I see. Does she have any other symptoms?”

“Why do you ask?” I’ve struggled not to let my mind go there, but Brooke’s words haunt me.

“Her family history.”

My heart drops. *Christ, not him too.* “With her mother?”

“She wasn’t the only one to have breast cancer; Brooke’s grandmother did as well.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I don’t mean to alarm you, but I did some research when I found out how Maree passed, and I’ve yet to bring it up with Brooke, but there are tests she can have to find out if she has that gene.”

I scrub my hand over my face. “If I knew you were going to go there, I wouldn’t have called.”

“I’m sorry. Do you want me to come over?”

“No... no. I haven’t even told my parents we’re home. My mum will come straight here and fuss all over Brooke; she wouldn’t want that. I just want her to rest up until we get the results back.”

“I appreciate you letting me know, and I’m sorry about what I said. I probably should’ve kept my thoughts to myself.”

I clear my throat instead of replying. “How are things with you anyway?”

I ask, trying to change the subject. “I hope Kathleen has been leaving you alone.”

“I refuse to take her calls now, so things have been quiet here.”

“That’s good. When I return to the office, I’ll look into it and see if there’s any response from her side.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to check on Brooke. I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

“I appreciate it. Give her my love.”

“I will.”

“And chin up, kiddo, there’s no need to worry until there’s something to worry about.”

That’s easier said than done. “I’ll let you know what the doctor says when we hear from him.”

“Please do.”

I exhale a long breath when I end the call and slide my phone into my pocket before burying my head in my hands. I called him because I thought it would help somehow, but now I’m even more messed up than I was before.

Pushing on my desk until my chair rolls back enough, I stand. I came down here so I wouldn’t disturb Brooke, but I need to be close to her now in light of that conversation.

I take a few deep breaths before entering our room, but I find the bed empty. I hope she’s not vomiting again.

Heading into the bathroom, I feel immediate relief when I find her soaking in the bath. “How are you feeling?” I ask, approaching her.

She opens her eyes, turning her face in my direction. “Hey, my incredibly handsome husband.” She holds an arm out to me, so I clutch her hand as I sit on the side of the bath. “I woke up, and you were gone.”

“I had to make a few calls and didn’t want to disturb you. Jill will be here soon; she’s dropping off some soup.”

I’m not going to mention the conversation I just had with her father. The last thing I want to do is alarm her further.

“You shouldn’t have bothered her, but thank you.”

Reaching out, I run my fingertips down the side of her face. “You need to eat to keep up your strength. And Jill thinks the world of you. She was more than happy to do it.” My eyes move down to her breasts as John’s words swim around in my mind. From here, they look perfect; I can’t see any abnormalities. “Are you still feeling nauseous?”

“A little,” she says. “But I’m fine, don’t worry about me.”

“You’re my life. I’ll always worry about you.”

“You’re the sweetest,” she says. “The best husband a girl could ask for. I appreciate how well you’ve been looking after me; you’ve been wonderful. I feel awful for ruining our honeymoon.”

“You didn’t ruin anything, babe. We can always go back when you’re feeling better.”

“I’d like that.” She leans forward in the bath when she hears her phone ringing from the bedroom. “That’s my phone.”

“Stay here. I’ll get it.”

It’s an unknown number. Hopefully, it’s the doctor with some answers. “Logan Cavanagh speaking,” I say, answering the call.

“Logan, it’s Dr. Kirby.”

“Hey, doc. Any news?”

“Yes, that’s why I’m calling. I have your wife’s pathology results,” he says.

“And? Did they show anything?” I brace myself for his answer.

“I’ll need to discuss that with Brooke, I’m afraid. You know, doctor-patient confidentiality and all that.”

“Oh, right, of course.” I turn to head back into the bathroom, only to find Brooke standing in the doorway with a towel wrapped around her body. Walking towards her, I hand over her phone. “It’s the doctor.” I mouth.

She smiles, putting on a brave face, but like me, I can tell she’s anxious to hear what he has to say. *I feel sick to the stomach.* My conversation with my uncle is still on my mind and I don’t know what to do if he’s right. One thing is for sure, as obsessed as I am with her tits, I’d have them gone in a heartbeat if they were threatening her life.

“Dr. Kirby,” she says, placing the phone to her ear. “Yes, I’m doing okay ... I’m still feeling a little queasy.” I can only hear her; I wish I had put the call on speaker. She walks further into the room and takes a seat on the side of the bed. I instinctively hold my breath as I observe her every move. “Okay ... uh huh ... oh, I see.” Her eyes dart to me briefly, and this one-sided conversation makes me incredibly restless. “Are you sure?” Her thumb nail is now wedged between her teeth and her eyes are cast downwards as she listens to his reply. “Of course, yes, I’ll make an appointment to see you again once I’ve had the scan. Thank you ... Goodbye.”

Scan? I don’t like the sound of that.

My attention is still focused on her as I stand there frozen. I want to know everything the doctor said, but on the other hand, I'm not sure I'm ready for it. I don't say a word as I wait for her to speak. After ending the call, she places the phone on the mattress beside her, before her eyes finally meet mine. Her face is void of any emotion, making my heart sink. I immediately cross the room, pulling her off the bed and into my arms.

“Whatever it is, we'll get through it together.”

When she doesn't say anything, I draw back so I can see her face.

“I'm pregnant, Hot Stuff.”

Chapter 11

Brooke

“**A**re you sure you don’t want to come with me?” Logan asks. He’s been called into the office to sort out some chaos with one of his clients.

“Positive. I’m thinking of going into the studio for a few hours anyway.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise under the circumstances.”

“Under what circumstances? I’m pregnant, not contagious.”

“It’s just—”

I place my finger over his lips, halting him. “I swear to God, if you try to wrap me in cotton wool, we’re going to have issues.”

“Issues?” he says, arching a brow. “I’d never wrap you in cotton wool ... I’m more of a bubble wrap kind of guy.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I say, poking his rock-hard abs, which only amuses him further.

“Until we get your scan results, I’m not making any promises.”

Because of the complications I had with my last pregnancy, the doctor wants me to have an ultrasound to make sure the foetus is where it should be.

“If I promise not to overdo it until then, will you chill?”

“If you promise not to overdo it for the next nine months, then yes.”

Ugh.

I place my hands on my hips. “Let me rephrase that ... for the duration of this pregnancy, I won’t do anything the doctor says I shouldn’t be doing. You’ll have to live with that whether you like it or not.”

“You’re incredibly sexy when you’re mad,” he says, sliding his arm around my waist and tugging me to him.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not. I’m just stating a fact.” He thrusts his hips forward. “Can you feel that? That’s all you, babe.”

Sliding my hand between us, I give his semi a gentle squeeze. “Don’t go there, or you won’t make it into the office. This pregnancy is already playing havoc with my libido.”

“I’ve noticed, but I’m not complaining; neither is my dick.” I roll my eyes, poking him again. “On that note,” he says, chuckling, “I really have to get going. I’ll send Chris back to get you?”

“I can drive myself to the studio.”

“Humour me, Brooke.”

“Fine, bossy boots.”

“Promise me if you’re feeling unwell, you’ll come straight back here.”

“Stop fussing. Now that I know what’s wrong with me, there are things I can take to help with my nausea.”

“Drugs?”

“God, no. Ginger, peppermint tea ... stuff like that. I googled it.”

This time he rolls his eyes. “Fucking google.”

“What? Don’t hate on google, she’s my friend.”

He shakes his head before leaning in to capture my lips.

“Have Chris stop by the store to get what you need. I’ll meet you at the clinic around midday.”

“Okay.”



Michelle does a double take when I push through the doors. We still haven’t told anyone we’re back. We’ve decided to wait until we get the ultrasound results, and then we’ll call a family meeting.

“Brooke,” she says, standing and rounding the front desk. “I thought you guys weren’t back until the end of the week.”

“We came home early.” When she reaches me, she pulls me in for a hug.

“Is everything okay ... did something happen?”

“I got sick when we were in Italy.”

“Sick, how?”

I blow out a puff of air. I know we agreed not to say anything, but I trust Logan’s sister. She’s going to find out eventually, anyway. “I’m going to tell

you something, but it has to stay between us for now.”

“All right.”

“You’re going to be an aunt.”

Her eyes widen. “What?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“You’re pregnant?” she squeals.

“Shh,” I reply, laughing as my eyes dart towards the studio doors. There’s music coming from there, so I know we’re not alone. “But yes.”

“Oh my god!”

“I know.”

“I can’t believe it,” she says, pulling me in for another hug. “Congratulations ... geez, my brother works fast.”

“He does.”

“Lara is going to freak.”

“You can’t tell her. Not until after we get the ultrasound results.”

“When will that be?”

“I’m having the scan today.”

“Eep.”

“You know my mum is going to flip her lid?”

“In a good way, though, right?”

“Yes, of course. But be forewarned, she’s going to drive you bonkers for the next nine months. When I was pregnant with Lara ... oh, boy, don’t get me started,” she says, waving her hands around. “Her heart is in the right place, but Craig and I even contemplated moving abroad until the baby was born.” I throw my head back and laugh because I can totally picture that. “At least it might get her off my back. She’s been pestering me for another grandchild for years.”

“You guys don’t want any more children?”

Michelle lifts one shoulder. “Some days yes, other days, not so much.”

“I want at least two. I hated growing up as an only child. With my mum gone so much, it was lonely at times.”

“Understandable.” Hooking her arm through mine, she guides me further into the room. “It’s good to have you back.”

“It’s good to be back.”

“Come, I’ll show you what I’ve been up to while you’ve been gone.”



I'm sitting at the clinic with Logan, waiting for my name to be called. I've barely let him get a word in since he arrived. I'm blown away by what Michelle has accomplished.

When she first mentioned an interest in coming to work for me, I snapped her up. Even though Logan had already laid out the foundations, there was still a lot to do before I could open the doors to the public. Michelle's been a stay-at-home mum since having Lara, but she worked in marketing before then. Her knowledge in that area is vast, so she's an asset. She's also someone I can trust, and the studio's success is something she's striving for as well.

The first time we sat down to discuss ideas, she asked me what I wanted most from the studio, so I told her my story. Unbeknownst to me, she's been working on that while I've been away.

"She reached out to the local women's shelters, community centres, schools, and churches in the area. She even designed some pamphlets for us to hand out and is in talks with a guy who drives a community bus ... we'll need someone to bring the girls or boys to and from classes. How amazing is that? That reminds me, I need to order more uniforms."

"If these kids are disadvantaged, do you think they'll be able to afford uniforms?"

"Oh, they won't have to pay. They'll be free of charge for them. My mum could never afford that for me—what little dance gear I had was all second-hand, not that I minded—but there was this one girl in my class who had the best of everything and used to tease me often. She called me rags. I'd never want my students to go through that. I want everyone taking my classes to feel equal." My eyes dart to Logan, and he's looking at me with a goofy smile on his face. "What?"

"I fucking adore you," he says, bringing my hand up to his mouth. "You have such a kind heart, babe, and I love doing life with you."

His words are so sweet they get me all choked up and have me fighting back the tears. Apparently, it's not only my libido that's running rampant; my hormones are out of whack too. I feel like I've been on an emotional rollercoaster for days.

"I love doing life with you too."

“I’m so proud of you. You’re going to be the best mum.”

I place my hand on his leg, squeezing it. “You’re going to be the best dad too.”

Our moment is broken when my name is called. Logan and I stand in unison. I’ve been distracted talking about my studio, but now that it’s time to find out if my pregnancy is viable, the butterflies are back. I feel like so much is riding on this appointment.

Please let everything be okay.

By the time I change out of my clothes and into the paper gown, I notice Logan’s leg bouncing as he sits in the chair beside the bed. I’m gathering he’s just as nervous as me. He was there the night I haemorrhaged, so he knows what’s on the line.

Once I’m lying down, the sonographer lifts my gown and squirts the gel onto my stomach while I reach for my husband’s hand. He grasps it instantly, squeezing it to let me know he’s here. No matter what this scan shows, we’re in this together.

When the shock of being pregnant wore off, I sobbed in Logan’s arms. It was a combination of so many different emotions. Relief because my sickness wasn’t what I feared it was, concern that I might lose this baby like I did my first, and pure elation that I was getting a second chance with a man who I knew would love and protect us both with everything he had ... he shed a tear or two himself.

“Here we go,” the sonographer says, placing the probe against my lower abdomen. The moment it makes contact with my skin, I tighten my grip on Logan’s hand.

She rolls it back and forth over my stomach a few times, tilting it to the left and right before pausing. “Can you see anything?” Logan asks, sitting forward in his seat.

The room falls deathly silent. I’m holding my breath as I await her answer.

She buries the probe a little deeper before she speaks. “Yes.” I exhale when she points to the small blob on the screen. “That’s baby right there.”

“Is it where it should be?” Logan asks. “Does everything look okay?”

“This is the gestational sac inside the uterus,” she says as her finger runs around the edge of the black circular image on the screen. “Inside the sac ... right there, is bub.” Turning the monitor, she wheels it closer towards the bed. “If you look closely enough, you’ll be able to see the baby’s tiny heart

beating.”

Logan immediately stands and leans over me to get a better look at where she’s pointing. “I see it,” he says with a huge smile. His attention darts to me. “Do you see that, babe?” Tears cloud my eyes as I bite my lip and nod my head. Leaning down, he rests his forehead against mine. “Our baby has a heartbeat.”

“Would you like to listen to it?” the sonographer asks.

Logan places a soft kiss on my lips before standing to full height. “Please.”

I start to cry when we hear our baby’s heartbeat for the first time. It’s the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard.

“It’s a nice strong heartbeat,” she says.

My gaze moves to Logan, and I see him wipe his eyes with the back of his hand, and I realise how lucky this baby is going to be. They are going to experience the same intense, unfailing love this man gives me.

He pulls his phone from his suit jacket and looks down at the screen. “Would you mind if I record that?”

“Of course not.” The sonographer wheels her chair back slightly as Logan moves his phone closer to the monitor. I love how invested he is.

“Can you tell how far along I am?” I ask.

“I can take some measurements and give you an estimated due date. Do you know the date of your last period?”

“No, they haven’t been regular for years. I was tested for endometriosis a long time ago, but the doctors think my irregularities are from all the exercise I do. I’m a dancer and run most days.”

She’s quiet as she clicks around on the screen. “By the size of bub, I’d say you are approximately eight weeks. That would give you a due date around mid-November. Would you like a printout of the image?”

“Please,” Logan and I say at the same time.

“Can we get two copies?” he adds. “I’d like one for myself.”

I reach for his hand again. I love this man so much.



Logan is sitting on the edge of the sofa in our penthouse. His legs are spread wide, and his elbows are resting on his knees. In his hand is the image

the sonographer gave him. The smile on his face as he stares down at it is so big. He's been like this for the past twenty minutes. I've even witnessed him pull out his phone twice and hold it to his ear to listen to the recording he took of our baby's heartbeat. He's so damn swoony. If I wasn't already carrying his child, my ovaries would burst. *Poof!*

We are waiting for our parents to arrive. Logan called them and requested an emergency meeting. His mum freaked out when he told her we'd cut our honeymoon short, and instantly started peppering him with a barrage of questions, which he refused to answer. "All will be revealed when you get here," was all he said.

The moment he hung up from her, she called my phone, which Logan refused to let me answer. I'm nervous to see their reaction. Talk about a shotgun wedding—we've been married for less than two weeks.

The butterflies take flight as soon as the lift dings, alerting us that someone has arrived. The second the doors open, Patricia comes rushing out. "Oh, Brooke, thank god you're here." She makes a beeline towards me, engulfing me in her arms and squeezing tight. "I was worried you two may have broken up."

"For christ's sake, Mum," Logan says, standing and sliding the image he's holding into his pocket. "I told you the morning of my wedding—when you were blubbering as you straightened my cravat—this marriage was *forever*. I meant it then, and nothing has changed."

"She blubbered all the way over here just now," Robert adds, rolling his eyes.

"Aww," I say, patting her back. I find her so sweet.

She draws back slightly so that her eyes can scan over my face. "Look at you. You're practically glowing, sweetheart. Married life certainly agrees with you."

"Thank you." After kissing my cheek, she moves over to her son.

"Hi, Mum," he says, returning her hug.

"How was Italy ... are you going to tell me why you came back early?"

"In good time," Logan replies, releasing her and extending his hand to his father. "Hi, Dad."

"Son."

"Logan Marcus Cavanagh!" Patricia scolds. "I'm an old lady. My heart can't take the suspense ... what is going on?"

"You're not even sixty yet, Mum. I'd hardly call that old."

“Come sit, love,” Robert says, taking her arm and guiding her towards the sofa.

I cover my mouth with my hand and bow my head to smother my laugh. Poor Patricia.



Half an hour passes before my dad arrives. He lives much closer than Logan’s parents, so I’m surprised it took him so long to get here. When he steps out of the lift and into the foyer, the first thing I notice is the sullen look on his face. It’s a stark contrast to his usually cheery one. Does he think we’re having marriage problems too, or has his wife been giving him more grief?

Rising, I walk towards him. “Hey, Dad,” I say, greeting him with a hug.

“Hi, sweetheart.”

He holds me tighter and a little longer than usual, which only heightens my concern. “Are you okay?” I ask, soft enough that only he can hear.

“Are you?”

I draw back, studying his face. What a strange thing to say. “Of course.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. If you’re concerned that we brought you here to give you bad news, don’t be.”

“Ignore me,” he says, forcing out a smile. “I’m just being a silly old man.”

“Come.” I hook my arm through his and lead him to the others. It’s time to tell them our news and relieve their misery.

Jill brings out some more refreshments, and we all take a seat. We’ve already told her, as well as Chris. It was impossible to keep it from them since they were around us all the time.

“Brooke and I have something to tell you all.” Logan smiles at me from the other side of the sofa. I reciprocate and nod my head for him to keep going. I’m too nervous to say anything. “Firstly, I want to address the ludicrous assumptions that our marriage might have a problem.” He side-eyes his mother when he voices that, and I bite my bottom lip. “We are both extremely happy and more in love than ever.” He clears his throat. “Now that I have that out of the way, we brought you all here tonight to inform you that

we are expecting.”

The room is silent for three-point-five seconds until Patricia asks, “Expecting what?”

Logan exhales a long breath as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “A baby, Mum.”

Her large eyes move from Logan settling on me. “Your pregnant?”

“Yes,” I answer, nodding. “I had my first ultrasound today.”

“I’m going to be a grandfather?” My dad’s words are spoken so softly that I barely hear him. I notice the tears in his eyes when my attention shifts in his direction

“Yes ... you are.” He’s expressed a sense of loss for missing out on my childhood, so I’m hoping this baby will be like a second chance for him.

The next few minutes are a blur as the room erupts into a frenzy. Patricia jumps to her feet, throws her arms in the air and squeals. More reserved than his wife, Robert stands to congratulate us both, but my attention remains focused on my dad.

“Hey,” I say, rubbing his back.

He wipes his eyes before engulfing me in his arms. “You have no idea how happy this makes me.”

I think I do.

I’m grateful I get to share this with him ... with this entire family. *This baby is going to be so loved.*

Chapter 12

Brooke

I'm finally nearing the end of my first trimester, and hopefully, that will mean no more morning sickness. I've already seen an improvement this past week, and apart from a queasy stomach in the mornings, I'm feeling great.

Michelle was right about her mum; she calls me daily for blow-by-blow updates, and even gave Jill a detailed list of all the things I should and shouldn't be eating while pregnant. Patricia has also dropped by the studio several times, forcing me to sit and elevate my feet if I looked even the slightest bit tired. On one occasion, when she took things a little too far, Michelle pushed her out the door and locked it behind her.

I'm not bothered by it. I love that my mother-in-law cares so much. A mother's love is irreplaceable. You don't realise what you had until it's gone ... it's the mundane things I miss the most.

"I'm heading out to pick Lara up from school," Michelle says. "I'll be back soon."

"No rush; drive safe."

I look down at my watch and notice it is 2.50 pm. The community bus will be arriving at 3.30. Today I run my free classes for the disadvantaged. So far, things are going great.

Last week I had a new student start. Her name is Jacinta, and she weighed heavily on my mind after she left. She's such a tiny thing, with long blonde hair and the prettiest blue eyes, but that's not what stood out the most; it's how shy and skittish she was. When I fit her for her uniform, she seemed almost paralysed with fear. It broke my heart.

But once that class started and we went over what we've learnt of the

routine so far, she came alive. She picks things up so fast; that kid can dance. Although I try to give my time equally to all my students, I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was that good.

At the end of the class, she went back to the way she was when she arrived. She was also the only one who changed out of her dance gear and back into her school uniform. I watched her remove every item from her backpack, roll her dance gear inside a towel, and stuff it down the bottom of her bag. Her mother was the one who called and signed her up for these classes, so I'm not sure why she was hiding her things. It set alarm bells off in my head.

I'm hoping she comes back today.

Michelle is back behind the desk by the time the community bus arrives. Lara's upstairs practising a piece we've been learning on the piano, and I'm holding open the front glass door, greeting everyone by name as they file inside. I chose Tuesdays for this class because it's our quietest day.

Most of the girls bring their mums or guardians with them on the bus, but a few come alone. I love how they're all wearing their uniforms with pride. Each student has tights, a leotard, leather dance shoes, and our signature yellow and black fitted tee and matching bomber jacket with the studio's logo on the back. They even have a Brooke's School of Dance water bottle. This way, you can't differentiate one student from the next, which was my goal. They all deserve to feel like they belong.

Last to enter is the child I was hoping to see. I feel immediate relief when I see her. "Hi, Jacinta," I say. She's wearing her school uniform again and clutching her backpack to her chest.

"Hi, Miss Brooke," she replies in a small voice, bowing her head.

"Do you have your dance gear in your bag?"

"Yes."

Innocently, I go to reach for her shoulder, but she immediately recoils when I do, so I drop my hand by my side. Something is going on with this little girl, and it concerns me.

"Do you want to run into the changerooms and get dressed? We'll be waiting for you in the studio."

"Okay," she whispers, scooting past me without making eye contact.

The next hour flies by, and again the transformation I see in Jacinta when she's dancing is profound. It's a beautiful sight to see her so carefree and happy. She's quickly becoming the poster child of why I'm doing this.

Everyone can become a good dancer with enough practice, but few have the gift—a raw talent—and can easily execute even the most difficult moves. Jacinta is one of them. I'd love to work with her more.

I'm standing outside the changerooms when Jacinta comes barrelling out. She halts as soon as she sees me waiting. "Can I have a quick word with you?" I ask.

Her eyes immediately go wide. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, of course not," I say, bending down to her height. "Do you like coming here?" She nods her head before focusing on her feet. "I'm glad. You have the potential to become a great dancer. I'd love to spend some one-on-one time with you. Do you think your parents would allow it? I can call your mum and ask?"

"We don't have a phone."

"Your mum called here to sign you up for classes, though, right?" I know that because I was the one who took the call.

"She called from the phone box near my school."

"I see. Well, I'd be happy to come to the house and talk to her."

Her head snaps up, and her wide eyes lock with mine. "You can't come to the house. My dad doesn't know I go here. He'll get angry at my mum if he finds out."

Hello, red flag.

"I wouldn't want you or your mum to get in trouble. Do you think she would meet me somewhere?"

"She doesn't leave the house much. Only to walk me to and from school."

"I can come and talk to her there. Do you think she'd be okay with that?"

Jacinta lifts one shoulder. "Maybe."

"Why don't you talk to her, and you can give me an answer next week when you come back to class."

"Okay."

I stand there and watch her run towards the bus, and my concern for this child has just escalated tenfold.

Chapter 13

Logan

“**Y**our quiet this morning,” I say to Brooke over breakfast. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m feeling fine. The nausea is getting less and less.”

“I’m glad, so why the long face?”

“I’ve just got stuff on my mind.” Brooke says, averting her gaze from mine.

“Like?”

“Stuff.”

“Babe,” I say, reaching across the table for her hand. I don’t like it when she keeps things from me.

Sitting up straighter in her chair, her eyes meet mine. “There’s this little girl that’s been coming to the Tuesday free classes, and there’s something about her?”

“What do you mean about her?”

“I think something is going on at home.”

“And why would you think that?”

“She’s so timid. I went to put my hand on her shoulder yesterday, and she flinched.”

A smile tugs at my lips, my sweet wife and her big heart. “That doesn’t mean anything. You’re practically a stranger to her; some people don’t like being touched.”

“It’s not just that. She’s a great dancer—a natural—I asked her if she’d liked to do an extra class, *a private lesson*, and she kind of freaked out. She said her dad didn’t know she was coming to the studio, and her mum would get in trouble if he found out.”

“That proves nothing.”

“My gut tells me something isn’t right.”

“Well, your gut needs to mind its own business.”

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t mean for that to sound as harsh as it did. Everything you’ve just told me is purely an assumption. You have zero evidence that anything sinister is happening. I love that you care so much about others, babe, truly, I do, but the only child you should be focusing on now is the one growing inside you. I don’t want you getting involved in this.”

“Right,” she says, pushing back her chair and collecting her plate.

“Brooke.”

“You’ve made your point,” she says, standing.

As she rounds the table, heading for the kitchen, I snag her around the waist and pull her onto my lap. “I don’t want to fight with you over this. Stress isn’t good for you or the baby.”

She blows out a puff of air. “Fine.”

“Promise me you’ll let this go.” I bury my face in her neck as I speak, and when I get no reply, I ask, “Did you hear what I just said?”

“I heard you loud and clear.” With that, she pushes herself off my lap and storms away.

Fuck my life.



My morning goes from bad to worse by the time I arrive at the office. Rose has been away all week; she snapped her Achilles tendon and is in the hospital waiting for an operation. It will be a while before she’s back. Claire has been standing in for her even though she has enough work of her own to do. However, she called me on the ride here to tell me her mum slipped in the shower this morning. They’re currently sitting in the emergency department at the hospital, waiting for an X-ray.

Although I rely on my girls a lot, I’m far from incompetent, so normally, this wouldn’t be much of an issue. But my Aunt Kathleen and her solicitor are coming in at midday for mediation. John and I know how long property settlements can drag out, especially when one party—namely my aunt—is making things difficult.

My uncle wants to move on with his life, and for that, he needs his settlement. Kathleen withdrew all the money from their joint account the day he asked for a divorce and changed all the locks at the house. And although the property is in both names, the police informed us that he couldn't access the home with forced entry, which would be his only option without a key. My aunt is such a cunning bitch.

So, in a last-ditch attempt, we offered to bring in a mediator in the hopes of coming to some form of agreement as soon as possible. I was shocked when Kathleen agreed to our proposal, but I have a lot of last-minute things to go over before they arrive, and I don't even know where Claire left the file. I've turned my damn office upside down, looking for it.

I hate to interrupt her; I know she's stressing about her mum, but without it, I'm screwed. We can't afford any more delays.

Logan: Claire, do you remember where you left the Sanderson file?

Clair: On your chair. I left it there last night in case you got to the office before me. I thought you'd find it when you went to sit down.

I storm towards my desk and pull out the chair. "Fuck." I've wasted an hour looking for this damn thing.

Logan: Thank you. Let me know how things go with your mum.

Clair: Will do. FYI, I know you have a lot on this morning, so I called a few agencies while I've been sitting here waiting. I'm so sorry I'm not there to help. I found one with a temp available to cover for me until I can get there. Hopefully, I will make it in before mediation starts.

Logan: You deserve a raise.

Claire: And an all-expenses-paid trip around the world.

Logan: That can be your Christmas bonus.

Clair: I'll make sure to pencil that in your diary when I get there.

Logan: Already done.

Claire: Ha!

She thinks I'm joking, but it's exactly what I just did. I'd be lost without that woman. She continually goes above and beyond her job description. Every Christmas, I give her a hefty bonus, but this year I'm also going to add a luxury holiday into her stocking.



I'm pouring over John's file and frantically taking notes when there is a knock on my open door.

"Come in."

I look up to find Rochelle standing just inside the doorway. She's the company's receptionist, the face of the building, you might say. Her desk is downstairs in the lobby, and she greets everyone when they arrive. Rochelle also operates the switchboard, filtering all incoming calls to the right department.

"Is everything okay, Rochelle?" I ask because she never comes up to my floor.

"Hi, Mr. Cavanagh. I'm sorry to bother you. I have a girl from an agency here. She was told to ask for you. I gave her directions to your floor, but she still managed to get lost ... twice, so I thought it would be easier to escort her up here myself."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. You can send her in."

Rochelle gives me a dubious look before turning to leave my office. I don't think anything of it, until I look back up and find the temp standing in front of my desk. I'm pretty sure my mouth gapes open as the pen in my hand drops down onto my notepad. Is this a joke?

"Hi," she says, smacking her lips together.

"Are you chewing gum?"

"Yeah, why?"

I lean down, pick up the wastepaper basket below my desk and hold it out to her. She stares at me dumbfounded until I nod my head towards it. When she finally realises what I'm silently asking, she steps forward, and I inwardly cringe when she leans in and spits it out, straight from her mouth.

The gum is the least of my worries. Where did Claire find this woman? Or should I say, child? She looks barely legal despite the outlandish amount of makeup she has caked on her face. Her sky-high heels, and the way-to-short, skin-tight, fluorescent green dress she's wearing would be better suited for a nightclub, not my law firm.

"What agency are you from?" I ask. When she rattles off the name, I jot it down. I'll make sure not to use them in the future. "Do you have any office experience?"

"Umm, no, but I worked at McDonald's for a few weeks when I was at school."

"McDonald's?"

"Yes."

"And when was that?"

"Last year."

"And your employment only lasted a few weeks?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did you leave, or were you fired?"

"Umm ... I left ... all that oil wasn't agreeing with my skin. I kept having breakouts."

I cock an eyebrow. "Breakouts?"

"You know, pimples. Like eww. Totally gross, right?"

"Hmm. May I ask how old you are?"

"I'll be sixteen in September."

"So, you're currently fifteen? Shouldn't you still be in school?"

"Nah. My dad let me leave because the girls at my school were total bitches."

I clear my throat. "I see."

"And how long have you been with the Agency?"

"A week. This is my first gig."

"Gig? You mean placement?"

"Umm ... yes, that."

There is no way I'm going to let this child take my phone calls, I have a good mind to send her back where she came from, but I have so many things that need doing before midday. Hopefully, Claire will be here soon.

"Do you know how to use a photocopier?"

"Nah, but I'm a fast learner."

I exhale a long-drawn-out breath as I gather up the paperwork I need to

be copied. “Follow me. You can put your things in the bottom drawer of that desk,” I say as we pass through reception.

“Will they be safe in there?”

“We are the only two on this floor, so I can guarantee they’ll be fine.”

She rounds the desk, and I quickly turn away when she bends to open the drawer. That dress is so short it’s bordering on indecent.

“Can I bring my phone with me?”

“No,” I say, still giving her my back.

I start moving down the long corridor towards the lift. I know she’s trailing me because those ridiculous heels are clunking loudly against my marble floor with each step she takes.

When we arrive at level three, I exit without saying a word. Thankfully she follows. Once we enter the copy room, I place the pile of papers on the shelf beside the photocopier.

I wait until she’s beside me before I pick up the first page and place it on the glass. “Make sure the front of the page faces down and is flush to the top corner.” My gaze moves to her. “I’m sorry, I forgot to ask your name?”

“Oh, it’s Kaylee, but everyone calls me Kay-Kay.”

Lord, help me.

“Okay, Kaylee, once the paper is in place, you close the lid, type in the number four—for four copies—and press start. Did you get all that?”

“I think so.”

I reopen the copier and remove the page and hand it to her. “Let me see you do it.”

Thankfully, she follows my instructions perfectly. “I need four copies of each page, and I’ll need them collated when you’re done. You can lay them on the table behind you as you go.”

“Okay.”

“When you’re finished, bring them back to the sixth floor.” If Claire were here, she’d have them professionally bound, but that won’t be happening today. “Any questions before I go.”

“Nah, I think I’ve got it.”

Once I’m satisfied she knows what she’s doing, I leave her to it.



Claire didn't make it back. The X-ray showed her mother had badly broken her arm, and she needed an operation. Understandably, Claire didn't want to leave her. Even though I was desperate for her help, I told her to take as much time off as she needs, but she assured me she'd be back in the office tomorrow.

"How are you feeling?" I ask my uncle as we step into the lift. Rochelle just called to say the mediator, my aunt and her solicitor have arrived, so I asked her to escort them to the conference room on the fifth floor.

John and I have spent the last hour reviewing their combined list of assets. I got him to write down everything in two columns: his ideal outcome from the property settlement, and the least he's willing to agree to. Knowing my aunt, she won't want to play ball if we ask for a fifty-fifty split, which he's entitled to. If it were up to me, I'd fight her for every cent, but I can understand John wanting to take less just to be free from her.

"I'd like to say I'm optimistic, but this is Kathleen we're talking about."

"I tend to agree, but she's going ahead with the mediation. That's a positive."

I let John out on the fifth floor, but I remain in the lift. Kaylee still hasn't returned with the photocopies I need for this meeting. I knew it would take a while, but she should've finished by now.

When I pop my head into the copy room, I find her still standing at the copier. She's swaying her hips and humming as she works.

Lifting my hand, I knock on the door. She jumps before swinging around to face me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Are you almost finished? I need the paperwork for a meeting that's about to start."

"I'm nearly done," she says with a smile.

"May I ask what's taking so long?"

"The copier ran out of paper, and I didn't want to disturb you, so I went looking for someone who could help. It took me a while to find somebody that knew how to reload the paper tray."

"Okay, good. I need those papers ASAP. Can you bring them to level five as soon as you're done? We will be in the boardroom; you'll be able to see us through the glass."

"Okay, Mr. Cavanagh."

For some reason I'm grinning as I walk back towards the lift. I underestimated this girl. *There is hope for her yet.* I'm still less than impressed with her attire, but she's still a kid and has a lot of growing up to

do in her future.

I stop smiling when I enter the boardroom and lock eyes with my aunt. With her renowned resting bitch face firmly in place, and an unnaturally straight posture, she looks like she has a rod in her back in place of her spine. I can't stand this woman.

I walk over and introduce myself to the mediator, shaking his hand. I don't offer the same cordial greeting to the man representing my aunt. He's an absolute prick. I've had the displeasure of running against that snake in court a few times, so I'm not pleased to be working with him again.

"Spencer," is all I say, nodding at him as I take my seat next to John.

"Cavanagh," he grumbles.

The mediator explains the proceedings to John and Kathleen and then asks for the combined assets list so they can go over them one by one.

"I'm having copies brought up as we speak," I state.

No sooner are the words out of my mouth, a bright green flash zooms by the window. I'm impressed she can even run in those death traps she's wearing on her feet. A few seconds later the door opens, and Kaylee comes barreling into the room with the stack of papers clutched to her chest.

"I've finished," she pants. She looks extremely proud of herself.

Of course, my aunt snickers as Kaylee approaches the table and slams down the pile of papers with a thud.

"This place has certainly gone downhill since your father handed you the reigns," Kathleen quips at me, and my disdain for her grows. Under normal circumstances, I'd never let one of my employees dress like that in the office. Still, I'm not about to defend my choices to this woman. It's none of her damn business.

Ignoring her comment, I lean forward and reach for the paperwork. It's not until they are in front of me that I realise Kaylee hasn't done what I asked; she's kept the four copies of each page bunched together.

"I asked you to collate these," I say as my attention moves to Kaylee.

"Umm ... yeah, about that ... I couldn't do it because I have no idea what that word means."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I tilt my head back and stare at the ceiling, counting to ten as I try to remain calm. What I really want to do, is bang my head against the table.

"I asked you before I left the copy room if you had any questions. That would've been the perfect time to mention that."

“Umm ... I know, but I didn’t want to sound dumb on my first day.”

“But delivering the opposite to what I asked,” I say, flicking my hand towards the paperwork, “in front of all these people was the smarter option?”

When her shoulders deflate and she bows her head, I feel like an asshole. “I’m sorry Mr. Cavanagh,” she whispers. “If you tell me what collate means, I’ll do it for you now.”

I was about to send her home, but I’ll feel bad if I do that now. “Never mind, why don’t you take your lunch break.”

“Okay.”

Once Kaylee leaves, I clear my throat and start sorting the papers in front of me. I hate that this happened in front of my aunt, of all people; I’ve always prided myself on my professionalism. When my eyes quickly dart in her direction, I’m not surprised to see a smug grin on her bitchy face.

“You know what,” Kathleen says, placing her flattened palms on the table and standing. “After the circus I just witnessed, I’ve changed my mind; I’ll see you both in court.”

Fuck.

Chapter 14

Brooke

“**H**ot Stuff,” I say as I push through the studio doors and see my very frazzled husband standing in the reception area. When his eyes land on me, he stalks towards me and wraps me tightly in his arms. “Are you okay?”

He buries his face in my neck and inhales deeply. “I am now.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, bringing my hand up and running it soothingly over the back of his hair.

“My day has been a complete clusterfuck, and I just needed to see you.”

Drawing back, I study his face. “What happened?”

“What didn’t happen would be a better question. Firstly, are we okay?”

“Of course, why would you ask that?”

“You were upset with me this morning when I left.”

“Is that what this is about?” Because if it is, I feel terrible now.

“Yes ... no, not really. I absolutely hate when I upset you, and after I left for work, my day seemed to go from bad to worse.”

Removing his arms from around my waist, I step back and lace my fingers through his. “Come,” I say, leading him towards the staircase at the back of the room.

Once we’re inside my private sanctuary, I lock the door behind me and push his suit jacket off his shoulders and down his arms until it lands on the floor by his feet. I reach for his tie next.

“What are you doing?” he asks, arching a brow.

“Getting you comfortable.” As soon as his tie is removed, I drop it next to his jacket and undo the buttons on his dress shirt.

“Are you taking advantage of me in my vulnerable state?”

“Maybe,” I say, biting the corner of my lip as I look up at him through my lashes.

His arms capture me around my waist. “I knew coming here was a wise move.”

Our mouths collide as my hands slide over his shoulders and down his muscular back, taking his shirt with me as I do. My fingers move around to unbuckle his belt, and I fall to my knees the moment I have it undone.

His erection is tenting his trousers as I pop the button and drag down the zip. “Fuck, babe,” he groans when I free his cock and circle the head with my tongue. The moment I take him into my mouth, he grips both sides of my head and rocks his hips forward until he hits resistance. “Relax your throat, babe ... *yes, just like that ... good girl.*”

I’m yet to find out what brought him here or why he’s so uptight, but by the time I’m finished, he’ll be lucky if he remembers his own name.



“Are you going to tell me what had you so stressed earlier?” I ask, reaching across the centre console and placing my hand on Logan’s leg.

We stayed locked away upstairs at the studio for over two hours, but apart from some whimpers, moans and muffled screams from me—and a string of profanities from my husband—we didn’t discuss his rotten day.

“I’m feeling very chilled now,” he replies with a lazy smile as he places his hand on top of mine.

“Ditto. You need to come and visit me at work more often.”

“I plan to,” he says, lifting my knuckles to his mouth.

“I’m gathering the mediation with Kathleen didn’t go as planned.”

“My aunt is a cunt.”

I gasp. “Logan.”

“Well, she is ... and no it didn’t. The mediation was a total waste of time, but my day was shit before she arrived.”

“Why?”

“Claire’s mum fell in the shower this morning and broke her arm.”

“Oh no.”

“She needed an operation, so Claire couldn’t make it to the office. I had a shitload of prep to do for the mediation, so Claire arranged for a temp to

come in and help.”

“That was nice of her.”

“I thought so too, until she arrived.”

“She wasn’t any good?”

“She was a fifteen-year-old disaster in sky-high heels and a mini dress.”

“Oh.”

“I got her to photocopy some documents for me, but she even managed to fuck that up, which, in turn resulted in Kathleen getting the shits and leaving. A compromise is now off the table, and we’re going back to court.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “I doubt we would’ve come to an agreement anyway. She won’t be happy until John hands over everything.”

“I hope he doesn’t agree to that.”

“He won’t. I’ll make sure of it. He’s been nothing but fair, but if she wants to play things this way, we’ll take her for whatever we can get.”

“What a mess,” I say.

“I know, but I don’t want you worrying about this, Brooke. It will all work out in the end.”

“I hope so. And what about the temp? Is she coming back tomorrow? If you’re stuck, I can come in and help out.”

“I know, babe, and I appreciate the offer, but Claire should be back tomorrow. As for the temp, I doubt I’ll see her again. I think I upset her?”

“How?”

“I told her if she wanted a future working in an office, she’d need to dress more conservatively. I wasn’t trying to be malicious, but if I wasn’t so desperate this morning, I would’ve sent her packing the instant she arrived. She looked like she was going to a nightclub, not work. I was only trying to prepare her for her next placement.”

“You’re one of the good ones. I know you would’ve had her best interests at heart.”

“She obviously didn’t think so because this afternoon when I went to ask if she’d run to the deli and get me a sandwich, she was gone.”

“What do you mean by gone?”

“She wasn’t at her desk, the filing I asked her to do was still sitting there untouched, and when I looked in the bottom drawer where she’d left her handbag, it was gone. I called Rochelle to see if she’d left the building, only to be told she’d run through the lobby twenty minutes prior, bawling her eyes

out.”

“Oh my god.”

“I know, I feel terrible. I’m going to call the agency tomorrow and explain.”

“Aww, Hot Stuff, I’m sorry.”

When we drive down the incline to the underground car park of our complex, I lean down for my bag that’s lying at my feet, placing it on my lap. I’m exhausted. I need a shower, some food and an early night.

Logan reaches over to the glove compartment to grab the fob that opens the roller door just as someone knocks on the driver’s side window, startling us both.

When he winds it down, he finds a policeman standing there. “Evening, Officer.”

“Can I see your licence, please?”

Removing his seatbelt, Logan reaches into his back pocket for his wallet, handing over his licence.

The officer only glances at it before handing it straight back. “Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle?”

Logan complies immediately. “Is there a problem, Officer?”

Instead of answering his question, he says, “Turn around and place your hands on the roof of the vehicle.”

I’m confused. He definitely wasn’t speeding. He’s always cautious when I’m in the car.

“Am I under arrest?” Logan asks as the officer proceeds to pat him down. “I’m a lawyer. I know my rights.”

“I know who you are,” the officer quips. Removing my seatbelt, I exit the vehicle just as Logan’s arms are dragged behind his back. “I’m placing you under arrest and taking you down to the station for questioning.”

“On what grounds?”

“For the sexual assault of a minor.”

Sexual assault of a minor? Those words have my legs buckling from underneath me.

“What?” My confused eyes meet Logan’s over the roof of the car. There must be some mistake.

“Call my dad,” is all Logan says as he’s handcuffed and led towards the patrol car that’s parked behind us.

I watch in horror as my husband is bundled into the back of the vehicle

and driven away. *What in the hell is going on?*

Chapter 15

Brooke

After I empty the contents of my stomach on the sidewalk, my trembling hands reach into the car for my bag, where I proceed to call Logan's parents. His father told me to go upstairs and he'd sort it out, but there was no way I could do that. So, after speaking with Robert, I dial my dad's number.

Two agonising hours have passed since Logan was arrested. I'm currently sitting in the waiting room at the police station, wrapped in my father's jacket. He and Robert are in the interview room with my husband while he's being interrogated. My mind is racing a hundred miles an hour. Patricia has called me twice in tears, looking for an update, but I'm just as clueless as she is.

I know my husband, and he'd never do something like that. But as much as my heart believes this, a part of me is paralysed with fear. *What if he did?*

Another hour passes, and the longer it takes, the more frightened I become. When a weary-looking Robert and my father finally emerge, I jump up from my seat and rush to them.

"Where's Logan," I ask.

"They've taken him downstairs for fingerprinting."

"What! Why?"

Robert pulls me in for a hug. "I'm sorry, honey, he's going to be charged. But I've posted bail, so he should be out soon."

I feel faint as my brain goes into overdrive. What does that mean? Is he guilty? "Why would they charge him?" I ask, confused.

"What it boils down to is it's his word against hers. I know my son; he'd never do something like this. We'll fight it. I won't rest until the truth comes

out and I've cleared his name."

My gaze moves to my father, and the concern I see on his face has my heart dropping into the pit of my stomach. He takes the two steps separating us and wraps me in his arms as I bury my face in his chest and break down.

"Who?" I manage to ask through my tears. "Who would accuse him of something like this?"

"A young temporary receptionist he had working in his office today."

The girl that ran out of his office in tears? That knowledge only confuses me further as I rack my brain, trying to remember exactly what Logan told me about her.



My dad is still here with me, but Robert has left by the time Logan emerges. He looks frazzled, and so beaten down; it hurts my heart to see him like this. Rising from the chair, I race across the room and straight into his arms.

I'm unsure what to make of the allegations against him, but he needs me right now. I've been through a lot since we met, and he's always been there for me; now it's my time to do the same for him.

A sob escapes me as Logan crushes my body to his. "I didn't do it," he whispers into the crook of my neck, which only brings more tears. He draws back, cupping my jawline and swiping the tears from my face with the pads of his thumbs. "I'd never do anything to jeopardise what I have with you; please believe me." He tilts my head back slightly when I say nothing, forcing me to look into his tormented green eyes. My heart breaks in two when I see the confusion and pain etched across his face. "I can't lose you over this."

"You won't," I say. "I believe you." Until I have proof to state otherwise, I'll remain by his side every step of the way.

Wrapping me in his arms again, he holds me tight as if his life depends on it. "Thank Christ for that. I couldn't think straight in there. All I could see was the devastation on your face when they arrested me. *Fuck*, it almost broke me. I could lose my licence to practice law and my company, over this. Still the possibility of losing you is the only thing that concerns me. Life seems pointless without you in it."

When we arrive at the Penthouse, my dad pulls up to the kerb outside our building. It's the middle of the night, and there's nobody around. Not a word was spoken by any of us on the drive here. We were stuck in our own heads, trying to make sense of it all.

Turning in his seat, my father reaches into the back of the vehicle and places his hand on Logan's knee. "Have faith. We will get to the bottom of this, kiddo," he says. "You can bet your life on it."

Logan nods but remains sullen.

As dire as this situation is, my dad's words give me some peace. With both our fathers on the case, and the best legal team in the country at his disposal, I'm confident they'll beat this. The alternative is unimaginable.

Removing his hand from Logan's knee, he reaches for me next, wrapping his fingers around mine and giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "Try and get some sleep. I'll meet you both at the office first thing tomorrow."

Chapter 16

Logan

Brooke is still in bed as I descend the stairs and head into the kitchen. I haven't slept a wink; I'm pretty sure she didn't get much sleep, either. She tossed and turned all night, which only added to my worries. This is the last thing she needs in her condition.

My mind won't stop turning as I try to make sense of everything that happened yesterday. I'm tired, pissed off and extremely concerned. Accusations like this could ruin not only my family but also my career and company. I've never experienced the humiliation of being arrested before, and I hope to never go through it again.

I'm confused as to why Kaylee would say I assaulted her when it's not true. Was she that offended by me calling her out on her dress sense that she'd stoop to this level? Or is there something more to it? *Financial gain*? Either way, any compassion I felt for upsetting her is gone, leaving behind the bitter taste of contempt.

I've had my fair share of women before Brooke, but never in my life have I forced myself on anyone, nor would I. I intend to fight this with everything I have. My entire future is now hanging in the balance because of her lies.

She couldn't possibly have any evidence of an assault, apart from a fabricated story, *because it never fucking happened*.

Today, I plan on subpoenaing anything she has on me. I'll be able to hold my license to practice law for now; if I'm convicted, though, that will all change.

I come to an immediate stop when I enter the kitchen and see Jill's shocked face as she scans over the newspaper headlines in her hands, and my heart sinks.

“Mr. Cavanagh,” she says, wide-eyed, as she quickly moves the paper behind her back.

“Let me see that.”

She pauses for a moment before reluctantly handing it over. “Who would say such terrible things about you?”

I ignore her question as my eyes peruse the front page. There’s a large headshot of me with a sickening headline that reads, *Logan Cavanagh arrested over an alleged sexual assault and attempted rape of a minor*. My eyes move down to the story printed below.

‘Billionaire lawyer, Logan Cavanagh—and one of Australia’s most eligible bachelors until he recently married dancer Brooke Ryan in a whirlwind wedding that reportedly cost millions—was arrested last night for the alleged sexual assault and attempted rape of a minor. His father, Robert Cavanagh, posted bail ...

I know it’s not true, but I still can’t bring myself to read the rest of the article. In the eyes of the world, I’m now a creep. Even if I prove my innocence, I’m no fool, that kind of shit sticks.

My heart is racing from the adrenaline pumping through my body as I stalk towards the bin and forcibly shove the entire newspaper inside. I’m livid that Brooke’s name was mentioned, and the last thing I want is for her to see this.

One thing is for sure, *Kaylee Miller will be sorry she ever crossed me by the time I’m through with her.*



When we approach my building, the first thing I notice is the paparazzi hanging around the entrance. My first thought is to drive straight past, but this clusterfuck isn’t going away anytime soon. Running away is cowardly; I have to face this head-on, no matter how hard it’s going to be.

I never expected the media to be awaiting my arrival when I stupidly agreed to let Brooke accompany me to work in a show of support. The last thing she needs is any more stress in her life.

She was quiet at breakfast this morning and barely touched her food. Granted, neither did I, but I’m not with child.

“Would you like me to keep driving?” Chris asks.

“No, pull over outside my building.”

I can see the deep frown lines on Chris’s forehead as he glances at me through the rear-view mirror. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I turn my attention to my wife. “Why don’t you stay in the car? Chris can take you to the studio from here.”

“No.” She reaches for my hand and laces her fingers through mine. “We are in this together, remember.”

“But—”

“No buts, Hot Stuff. I will get out of this car with you and show the world that I support my husband. You’d do the same for me.”

I raise our conjoined hands to my mouth, placing a chaste kiss on her knuckles. I’m thankful to have her on my side; I just pray it stays that way.

The cameras start going off the moment I exit the vehicle. My first instinct is to bow my head and shy away from all the attention, but I remain strong, holding my head high as I round the rear of the car.

Questions are thrown at me left and right, but I ignore them all as I open the back door and reach for my wife’s hand. As soon as she’s on her feet, I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her head into my chest to shield her from this pack of hyenas.

Most of what’s being asked goes in one ear and out the other until one fucker calls out, “How does it feel to be married to a rapist, Mrs. Cavanagh?” Those words stop me in my tracks. *I’m no rapist.* But it’s the next question that almost brings me to my knees. “Are you concerned about your husband being around your child when it’s born?”

Turning, I lunge straight for him, fistin’ his shirt in my hand and getting up in his face. “Don’t you *ever* speak to my wife like that again, and how dare you make insinuations against my unborn child, you sick fuck.”

Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?



My dad’s already hard at work by the time we make it to the boardroom. He has a copy of Kaylee’s interview transcript and photographs that were taken when she arrived at the police station yesterday afternoon with her father.

There’s an image of a small tear near the shoulder of her green dress, but

the other photo shocks me the most ... the one of her cut and bloodied lip.

“Claire, can you call security and get the footage of her leaving yesterday afternoon?” I ask.

She’s here to help in any way she can, as well as John and two of our top criminal lawyers. Claire hugged me the moment Brooke and I stepped off the lift. She didn’t even have to ask if it was true; she’s worked with me long enough to know I’d never do anything like that.

“Already on it,” my father says.

“Rochelle said Kaylee ran out, supposedly in tears, but there wasn’t a mark on her face last time I saw her, so hopefully the cameras will show that.”

The only CCTV I have on each floor are of the corridors and the lift. The entire foyer, however, is under surveillance.

“We’ve already got security combing the entire footage from yesterday.”

I nod and take a seat, reaching for the transcript of Kaylee’s initial interview with the police. My anger rises with each sentence I read. She’s accused me of leering at her from the moment she arrived, although her exact words were, *‘being, like, all creepy with his eyes, and stuff’*.

Kaylee: *He took me downstairs, and on the way, he told me that my dress was sexy and it was making him hard ... you know, down there in his pants. He even grabbed it.*

Officer Riley: *He grabbed what?*

Kaylee: *You know ... his ... umm, willy. (Victim points to her crotch area)*

Once we were alone in the room where I had to copy stuff, he deliberately knocked some of the papers onto the floor. He demanded I bend over and pick them up one page at a time. He stood behind me and watched. Every time I bent over, he’d say really rude and disgusting things to me. He even grabbed my butt cheek and squeezed it.

Officer Riley: *What kind of rude and disgusting things was he saying to you?*

Kaylee: *Umm ... I can’t remember his exact words, but he was talking about sex and stuff. It made me feel really uncomfortable. He’s nice looking and all that, but he’s old enough to be my dad ... so, like, eww.*

I was like so relieved when he finally left me alone. I copied the papers really slowly because I was scared to go back upstairs. When he came back down to see why I was taking so long, he got mad and screamed at me. He said if I didn’t go faster, he’d have to punish me.

Officer Riley: *Did he say how he was going to punish you?*

Kaylee: *No, but he had those creepy eyes again when he said it. Oh, and he was licking his lips like he wanted to eat me or something.*

I lean back into my chair and exhale a long breath. Is she fucking kidding me?

Officer Riley: *Tell me what happened when you got back upstairs.*

Kaylee: *He sent me to lunch because he was in a meeting.*

Officer Riley: *What happened when you returned from lunch?*

Kaylee: *That's when things got really bad.*

Officer Riley: *How did they get worse?*

Kaylee: *He called me into his office and told me to lock the door.*

Officer Riley: *Did you do as he asked?*

Kaylee: *No. I pretended to lock it, but he was still sitting behind his desk, so I don't think he noticed.*

Officer Riley: *Then what happened?*

Kaylee: *He told me to come closer. When I didn't, he got up and came over to me. He said I'd been a bad girl and that it was time for my punishment. He grabbed my boob and squeezed it really hard. It hurt. When I tried to push his hand away, he grabbed my dress and ripped it.*

Officer Riley: *Where did he rip your dress?*

Kaylee: *Here. (Victim points to a small tear near the right shoulder of her dress – see attached image)*

Officer Riley: *What happened after he tore your dress?*

Kaylee: *He was really mad now. He put his hand up my dress and said he was going to rape me. I like freaked out and started to cry. That's when he hit me and told me to shut the fuck up.*

Officer Riley: *Where did he hit you?*

Kaylee: *Here, in the mouth. (Victim points to her bottom lip where it's cut – see attached image)*

Officer Riley: *What happened after he hit you?*

Kaylee: *Umm ... nothing. I ran away.*

Officer Riley: *Ran where? Out of his office?*

Kaylee: *No, out of the building. I just kept running. That's when I went home and told my dad, and he brought me here.*

Officer Riley: *Did he chase after you when you ran?*

Kaylee: *I don't know. I don't think so.*

Officer Riley: *Did you speak to anyone else in the building before you*

left? Or ask for help?

Kaylee: *No. I was too scared. I thought they might take me back to him.*

“Did you read this?” I ask my father, dropping the paper onto the desk and scrubbing my hands over my face.

“Of course.”

“And your thoughts?”

His eyes dart up as he studies me over the top of his glasses. “Do I even have to answer that? How old did you say this girl was?”

“Fifteen.”

“It shows.”

“What in the hell are creepy eyes, anyway?”

“Beats me,” he says, shrugging as he returns to writing on his notepad.

“The only truth in this statement is that I *innocently* took her down to the copy room to show her how to work the photocopier and sent her to lunch. The rest is all lies.”

“Don’t worry, son. We’ll pick her statement apart later. For now, let’s try and gather all the evidence we can ... anything that can help us dispute her claims.”

“And what if we don’t find anything?”

He doesn’t look up from the notepad as he continues to write. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose; I just want this whole thing to go away.

“What if we offered her a settlement to admit she lied?”

My father’s head snaps up, and his eyebrows pinch together in a frown.

“No!”

“Why?”

“Because she *is* lying, and I’ll be damned if she gets one cent of our money for what she’s done to you.”

I rarely have nice things to say about this man, but I see him in a different light now. For all he knows, I could’ve done the things she’s accusing me of ... there’s no proof to state otherwise. But my father just showed he wholeheartedly believes me, regardless. Over the years, he was tougher on me than he was my sister, and a part of me hated him for it, but maybe he was just moulding me into a man *the person I am today*. Whatever his reasons were, I’ve just realised something ... I respect him.

Chapter 17

Brooke

“**H**ey,” I say to Michelle, hugging her.

“How did everything go this morning?”

I lift one shoulder. “As well as can be expected, I guess.”

“Poor Logan.”

“Yeah, I feel for him. It’s his word against hers, and unless they can find some evidence to prove otherwise ...”

“Hey,” Michelle says when my eyes well with tears. “Don’t underestimate my dad, he’s like a shark, and if there’s something, he’ll find it.”

“I hope so. How has your morning been? I’m sorry again for leaving you alone.”

“Don’t be. My brother needs you, and I’m so grateful you’re standing by him.”

“I believe him when he says he didn’t do it.”

“Thank you. And as for my morning, you don’t want to know,” Michelle says.

“Oh god, please don’t tell me something else has happened.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.”

“Michelle!”

She blows out a puff of air, and those butterflies that seem to have taken permanent residence in my stomach since last night, take flight.

“We’ve had a few calls from concerned parents. The story has been frontline on the news all morning.”

“What are their concerns?”

“They don’t want their daughters coming near a sex offender.”

“But he’s not.”

“I know that, and you know that, but the news outlets seem to be running with it like it’s a fact, not just an accusation.”

“Bloody hell. I hate this for him ... for all of us.”

“Me too,” she says, rubbing my arm.

“So, are the students pulling out in droves?”

“No, you’ve only lost two so far. The others I was able to talk around ... for now.”

“How?”

“I pleaded his innocence, but I also informed them that he won’t be coming anywhere near the dance studio until he can prove it.”

“Michelle, I can’t tell him not to come here. He bought this place.”

“For you! Leave him to me,” she says. “I know Logan wouldn’t do anything that would put you or your studio in jeopardy.”

“It will still hurt his feelings.”

“It won’t. I know my brother; he’s very understanding.” That may be the case, but I still don’t like it. “You also had a call from Jacinta’s mum.”

“What did she say?”

“Something about meeting with you this afternoon at 2.30, outside Jacinta’s school. Here’s the address,” she says, handing me the piece of paper she’s written it on.

Jacinta must’ve spoken to her mother about what we discussed on Tuesday. With everything going on at the moment, the last thing I want to do is deceive Logan by going behind his back. He told me, in no uncertain terms, to butt out.

An innocent face-to-face meeting about her daughter taking an extra class isn’t getting involved in any potential family drama. Seeing her may help me understand her little girl better.

I look down at my watch, and it’s just after one. I have time to get some things done around here before I leave.



When I pull up outside the school, I see a woman sitting on a small brick wall near the office. I have no idea what Jacinta’s mother looks like, but this woman has long blonde hair, so it may be her.

Getting out of the car, I cross the road, and the moment she sees me approaching, she stands. She's thin and short in stature, like her daughter, and looks a lot younger than I thought she would. I'm guessing not much older than me. I can't see her eyes because the majority of her face is hiding behind a pair of large black sunglasses, but what facial features I do see, I can tell Jacinta gets her looks from her mother.

"Hi, are you Jacinta's mum?" I ask.

"I am."

"I'm Brooke," I say kindly, extending my hand to her.

She gives me a small smile, and I don't miss the tremble in her hand as her fingers wrap around mine, or the edge of the dark bruise on her wrist that's peeping out from under the sleeve of her jumper. "I'm Grace."

The alarm bells are going off in my head already.

Those bells ring louder when she quickly darts her head around, surveying our surroundings like she's scared. Logan may have told me to mind my business, but in less than a minute, I already know my gut instincts were spot on. Something definitely isn't right here. Everything in me wants to say something—to offer my help—but I'm liable to scare her off if I do; she doesn't even know me. Hopefully, once I've gained her and Jacinta's trust, they'll open up.

"It's lovely to meet you finally," I say, trying my best to ignore the obvious.

"You too. Jacinta's really enjoying your classes."

"I'm enjoying having her. She has a real talent."

"She does?"

"Yes, she's one of my best students."

The smile on her face grows. "Really?"

"Yes. Jacinta comes alive when she dances, and it's such a beautiful sight. Hence why I offered to do a one-on-one lesson with her; she has so much potential."

"I would love that for her. We don't have a lot of money, so she doesn't get to do much of anything outside of school."

"The private lesson will be free like the other one."

"Yes, Jacinta mentioned that. She wouldn't be able to do this if it wasn't for your generosity. I'm extremely grateful ... and for her dance uniform. She was so excited when she brought it home to show me."

"I'm glad," I say. "I grew up in a single-family home, so I know what it's

like to do without. I want my girls to feel like they're equal."

"That's very kind of you."

I look down at my watch. I told Michelle I'd get Lara from school while I'm out. "Well, I need to get going. I have to pick up my niece. Would Monday be a good day for Jacinta's private lesson?"

"Any day during the week is okay. Will the community bus be picking her up?"

"No. That only runs on a Tuesday."

"Oh, I don't have a car."

"I'm happy to come and pick her up from school myself. I can have her back home by, say ... 4.30."

Jacinta mentioned she needed to be home before her dad, and the last thing I want is to cause any drama for them.

"That sounds perfect."

"Wonderful. Will this coming Monday be alright for you?"

"Yes. She'll be so happy when I tell her. She's been nagging me to call you."

"I'll pick her up from here?"

"Yes, that gate right there. She gets out just after three."

"I'll make sure I'm here waiting. It was lovely to finally meet you, Grace."

"Likewise. And thank you again for everything."

"You're very welcome."

I get to Lara's school just in time, and she's so excited when she sees me. "Aunty Brooke," she screams, running across the playground and straight into my arms.

"Hi, sweet girl."

"Where's Mummy?"

"I had a meeting with someone, so I told her I'd pick you up while I'm out. Is that okay? She's minding the studio while I'm gone."

"Yes," she says, reaching for my hand as we start walking towards my car. "Can you pick me up tomorrow too?"

"We'll have to ask your mum."

"Can we get a milkshake on the way home? Mummy usually gets me one."

"Of course." I could go for a milkshake myself. I've barely eaten today.



“Can I get a chocolate milkshake and a banana and mango smoothie, please?” I ask the girl behind the counter.

“Regular or large?”

“Large,” Lara says, jumping up and down on the spot.

“Make that two,” I reply with a laugh.

Lara’s arms are wrapped around my waist, with her cheek resting against my hip as we wait. It has my heart squeezing in my chest as I gently skim my hand over her long hair. Is this what it’s going to be like when my little one comes along?

When our drinks are ready, I pull some money out of my purse to pay. “Aunty Brooke,” Lara says, tugging on my top. “Is that mean old Aunt Kathleen over there?”

God, I hope not.

“Where?”

“Over there,” she whispers, pointing towards the back of the room.

I glance over my shoulder and feel my body tense the moment I see her. She’s sitting at one of the tables in the far back corner. This is the first time I’ve seen her since she slapped me.

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Why is that lady with her crying?”

I quickly glance back over there; Kathleen is leaning over the table, berating the young woman sitting opposite her. Given our past interaction, it honestly doesn’t surprise me. “I don’t know, sweetie.”

Reaching for our drinks, I hand Lara hers. I want to get out of here before she spots us.

I hold her milkshake while she climbs into the car and buckles her seatbelt. After closing her door, I turn to head around to the driver’s side when I see the girl from the café walking towards me. She’s clutching her bag to her chest as she wipes the tears from her eyes. My heart immediately goes out to her. I’ve been on the receiving end of that woman’s vile behaviour.

“Are you okay?” I ask as she passes.

She nods her head and keeps walking. So, I quickly get in the car before Kathleen comes out. I don’t need any more trouble in my life.

Chapter 18

Logan

I'm holding the remote out in front of the television, mindlessly scanning through the channels. I'm still headline news, which sickens me. I can't bring myself to watch any of it. Ignorance is bliss, so they say. I've worked hard throughout my life to maintain my good reputation. Yet, one baseless lie has questioned my integrity in a blink of an eye.

This media circus is only adding fuel to the fire. I feel like my life as I know it is over. I can't walk out of the house without being mobbed. My company has lost clients over this; Michelle called me yesterday afternoon to say the same thing is happening at the studio. The parents don't want their daughters coming near the paedophile. *If* I were guilty, I'd wholeheartedly agree.

If I can't clear my name, the sad truth is, I *will* end up on the sex offenders list. How fucked up is that? Will that jeopardise my relationship with my child when it's born? Can we even live under the same roof? Will I be subjected to supervised visits?

My mind is so messed up; I can't see straight.

It's affecting not only me but my entire family. Poor Brooke couldn't even go for her usual run in the Botanic Gardens this morning. Chris had to pick her up in the basement earlier and drive her to another location. *I fucking hate this.*

Raising my hand, I throw the remote across the room. It hits the wall with a loud bang and lands in pieces on the floor ... just like my life right now.

"Is everything okay, Mr. Cavanagh?" Jill asks, entering the room.

"No, Jill, it's not."

I should be working on my case with my team at the office, but I am not

motivated to go anywhere, especially after yesterday turned out to be a total bust. The CCTV footage proved nothing. Kaylee had the sense to cover her mouth as she ran from my office and out of the building; it would've proved I never hit her if she didn't. My overall opinion of her was ditzy, and boy, was I wrong! She is smarter, and more cunning than I gave her credit for.

My eyes follow Jill as she silently crosses the room towards the now-broken remote and gathers up the pieces. I feel like an asshole for not helping, but I have zero enthusiasm to move.

Jill's been wonderful with me, just like everyone else in my inner circle. I'm extremely grateful for that. They could've doubted my innocence or turned their backs on me, but they've remained steadfast.

When the lift dings, I turn my head in that direction. My beautiful wife steps out as soon as the doors open, and my heart rate picks up. I don't like her running in her condition, but the doctor said it's safe since it's something she's been doing for many years, and given everything that's going on right now, I know she needs it. She told me once it cleared her head. If I didn't hate it so much, I'd try it again myself. There's nothing I wouldn't do to shut my mind down.

"Hot Stuff," Brooke says, surprise written all over her face when she sees me lounging on the sofa. "Shouldn't you be at the office?"

When she left for her run, that was my plan.

"I can't be fucked going anywhere right now." As she moves further into the room, she spots Jill gathering the pieces of the remote. "Don't ask," is all I say.

"Jill, Chris is downstairs waiting to drive you to the shops whenever you're ready," Brooke says.

"Thank you." She rises to her feet and hurries from the room.

My eyes take in my wife as she makes her way towards me. She looks so damn sexy in those tiny shorts and crop tops she wears on her runs. Her body is perfection, just like she is. Any other day I'd be all over that, but I can't even muster the motivation for her.

Brooke straddles my lap and tenderly runs her fingers through my hair as her eyes scan my face with concern. My hands instinctively glide up her outer thighs, resting on her hips. *Her skin is so soft.* I'm so thankful she's here, that she's stuck by me so far. The alternative would most definitely send me over the edge.

"Did something happen while I was gone?"

“Nope.”

We both turn our heads when we hear the ding announcing the lift’s arrival. Jill has her handbag slung over her shoulder as she steps inside. Her head remains bowed as she presses the button to take her down to the ground level. I’ll make sure I apologise to her for my outburst when she returns. She’s never seen that side of me before.

“Then what’s going on? You seemed okay when I left.”

I wasn’t. I was putting on an act because I didn’t want Brooke worrying.

I lift a shoulder, shrugging. “I don’t know. I’m just—”

“I want to hug you so bad right now, but I’m all sweaty.”

“I love you when you’re sweaty,” I reply because it’s true. Getting hot and dirty with this woman is my favourite thing in the world.

She gets off my lap and stands, extending her hand to mine. “Come.”

“Where are we going?”

“To shower, you need an escape and I know just how to achieve that.”

“How?” I ask, taking her hand.

“A blowjob. I still owe you a few thousand ... as per the contract for my studio.”

That statement brings the first genuine smile to my face for the day. I adore this woman, and despite everything that’s going on right now, I still love doing life with her. Deep down, I know as long as we have each other, everything else will be okay.



The day ends up being another fruitless one. We’re still no closer to finding anything concrete against Kaylee. We’ve even got Mike, my private investigator, on the case now. But as the hours’ tick by, I retreat more into myself. I’ve never been on the other side of the fence before, so seeing things from this viewpoint gives me a new respect for my clients. Speaking of clients, I lost another big account today, and Brooke lost three more students.

I’m stressed beyond belief by the time I arrive home. I should’ve stuck with my original plan and avoided the office altogether. It feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders when I step out of the lift. So the last thing I expect to find is a room full of people waiting for me when I do.

“Uncle Logan,” Lara squeals, rushing towards me and launching into my

arms. I only just manage to drop my briefcase in time to catch her. Everyone is here: my parents, my sister and her family, and John. I swallow the lump in my throat when my niece places her tiny hands on either side of my face and pouts her bottom lip. “Mummy said you’re sad, so we came to cheer you up. I don’t like it when you’re sad, Uncle Logan. It hurts my heart.” *This kid.* “Are you happy now that we’re here?”

A smile tugs at my lips. “I am.”

Although I was looking forward to coming home and losing myself in my wife, I’m blessed to have an amazingly supportive family. They’ve really rallied around me the past few days.

I place Lara back on her feet and wrap my arms around Brooke when she steps up to me. “Did you organise this?” I ask, burying my face in the crook of her neck.

“It was your mum’s idea. She wanted you to know you’re not in this alone. We all love you, and will stand beside you through it all.”

I clear my throat, blinking back the tears. “Thank you.” It’s times like these that I realise how lucky I am.



Everybody I truly care about is here. We’ve spent the night sitting around the dining room table, eating, drinking and laughing. Jill, with the help of my mum, prepared a feast. They cooked all my favourites. It’s exactly what I didn’t know I needed. It’s been a while since we’ve all sat down for a meal together, and this dinner puts things into perspective for me.

For tonight at least, everything that’s going on outside this room is just white noise.

“Can I get you another beer, Dad?” I ask, standing.

“Please.”

“Craig?”

“Nah, I’m good, mate.”

Brooke and John are no longer seated with us. I’m guessing they’re in the kitchen, so I’m surprised to find a completely different scenario when I enter.

My uncle has Jill in an embrace, and she’s smiling up at him as he skims the back of his knuckles down her cheek. It brings an instant grin to my face. I certainly didn’t see that one coming, but it doesn’t disappoint me in the

slightest. Quite the opposite, actually. These two have lived solitary lives for too long and their union pleases me. They're perfect for each other.

I'm leaning against the doorframe, just observing how happy they look.

"Well, well, well," I eventually say, because I need to get these beers and go and find Brooke.

Jill's shocked face snaps in my direction before she quickly steps away from John. "I'm sorry Mr. Cavanagh." She opens one of the bottom cupboards and retrieves her handbag, slinging it over her shoulder. "Will I be seeing you in the morning?"

She's leaving? "Hold on," I say, walking further into the room. "Where are you going? Of course, you'll be seeing me in the morning, Jill. Why would you even ask that?"

She bows her head. "What you witnessed just now was very unprofessional of me." Her eyes meet mine again. "This was never planned ... when John was staying here, we became close. While you and Mrs. Cavanagh were at work, we spent a lot of time together. Not in the way you may be thinking," she quickly adds. "We were just friends then. I helped him when he moved into his apartment and—"

"Jill, stop," I say, cutting her off. "You don't have to explain anything to me. If you think seeing you two together upsets me, then you're mistaken."

"See, I told you he would be okay with this," John states before turning his attention to me. "I've wanted to tell you both for a while now, but Jill was worried she'd lose her job."

"Never. Now put that bag back in the cupboard and come and join us at the table."

They share a smile as John reaches for her hand.

"Did you see where Brooke went?" I ask.

"Upstairs."

I reach into the fridge and grab a beer. "Can you give this to my dad please?"

Bounding up the stairs two at a time, I go in search of my wife. I find our room is empty, but the bathroom door is closed. "Brooke," I say, knocking. "Are you in there?"

"Yes."

"Is everything okay?"

"Umm ... I'm not sure."

Reaching for the handle, I open the door. I find Brooke sitting on the

toilet with her underwear around her knees. “What’s going on?” I ask.

“I’m spotting.”

“Spotting?”

She’s biting her thumbnail when she answers. “There’s a spot of blood on my underwear. It’s tiny, but it’s definitely blood.”

My heart drops. *Is she losing the baby?* Images of her haemorrhaging in my arms the first night we met flash through my mind, and I immediately spring into action.

“What are you doing?” she asks when I slide my arm behind her legs and scoop her off the toilet.

“Taking you to the hospital.”

“Put me down,” she snaps.

“No.”

“I’ll call the doctor in the morning.”

“It might be too late by then.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Logan. I saw something about spotting in one of the pregnancy books I’ve been reading. It might be nothing.”

“And it could be something.”

“Okay, I’ll go to the hospital, but can I at least pull my pants up first? We have guests downstairs, remember?”

“Right,” I say, gently placing her back on her feet.

We bend at the same time, accidentally bumping heads. “Jesus.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, quickly pulling her underwear up and her dress down. I’m trying to act cool, but inside I’m panicking. This is the last thing either of us needs.

Once she’s decent, I scoop her back into my arms again.

“I can walk.”

“Brooke, humour me. I’m not taking any chances with either of you.”

“Do you plan on carrying us around for the duration of this pregnancy?”

“If I have to.”

My mum is the first to notice us when I descend the stairs with Brooke in my arms.

“Did something happen?” she asks.

“She’s bleeding.”

Brooke rolls her eyes before affirming, “It’s a tiny spot.”

“Oh, my goodness,” my mum says, placing her hand on her chest and rising from her seat.

“I’m taking her to the hospital to get checked out.”

“You’ve been drinking,” my father chimes in. “You can’t drive.”

“I haven’t had any alcohol,” John says. “I’ll take them.”

Brooke’s thumbnail is back in her mouth, so although she’s playing this down, I know she’s worried. She’s been under a lot of stress these past few days, which could be the reason for the bleeding, but I’m not going to let my mind go there. I’m already racked with guilt.

“By the way, babe, Jill’s dating your dad.”

“What?” Brooke screeches.

“I know, cool huh?”

She’s still in my arms as we enter the lift, but I’ve successfully distracted her with that news.

“Dad, is that true?” she asks, reaching out and placing her hand on his shoulder. The smile on her face tells me she’s hopeful it is.

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“Oh my god,” she mouths, making him chuckle. “How long has this been going on?”

“A few months,” he confesses.

“A few months? Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“Jill was worried she’d lose her job,” I say.

“That’s nonsense; we love her, Dad. Do you love *her* too?”

“Brooke!” I chastise.

“What?” she says, returning her attention to me and frowning. “It’s a legitimate question.”

“I’m very fond of her,” John answers. “She’s become an important part of my life. She makes me happy, sweetheart.”

“Aww. I’m glad,” Brooke says, turning her face towards him. “Does this mean she’ll be my stepmother one day?”

“Babe!”

“What?”

“You can’t ask that! Am I going to have to ban you from hanging out with my mum?”

Chapter 19

Logan

I'm currently facing the stark white hospital wall, with my fists clenched in my lap. Brooke is in the process of having an internal examination by a *male* doctor, and I can't watch. He's poking around in an area that's mine. The rational part of my brain knows he's helping, but the irrational side doesn't like it one bit.

"Your cervix looks fine," he eventually says, "but I'd like to do an ultrasound to be on the safe side." The doctor stands to full height, and removes the latex gloves he's wearing, tossing them in the bin. "You can pull your dress down; I'll go grab the transducer."

It's not until he's left the room that I rise from my seat and walk towards the bed where Brooke's lying. Reaching for her hand, I pull it towards my mouth, kissing each fingertip softly.

"How are you feeling, babe?"

"I'm okay ... a little worried, but I'll feel better once I see the baby's alright."

When the doctor comes back into the room, wheeling the machine, I grab the chair and move it closer to the bed. This part of the examination I can stomach. I'm eager to see how much the baby has grown since the last ultrasound. Although it didn't resemble a human the first time, I still carry that image around in my wallet and look at it often.

According to my online research, our child was the size of a kidney bean at the last scan. Brooke's thirteen weeks now, so the baby should be roughly the size of a peach.

My grip on her hand tightens when the wand touches her stomach; I'm holding my breath as the doctor moves it over her lower abdomen.

Once a clear image appears on the screen, I'm blown away. I can clearly make out the arms and legs and even see the profile of the baby's face. "Is the baby okay?" I ask.

"I'll let you listen for yourself," he replies. The relief is instant when I hear the strong, woosh, woosh, woosh of the baby's heartbeat. "Everything looks good."

"Are we able to get an image?"

"We don't do that here at the hospital," he says, "but you're welcome to snap one with your phone." I do just that.

My wife's hand is clutched in mine as we make our way towards the exit that leads to the waiting room where John is. We've been given the all-clear, but for some reason, I still can't breathe easily. I haven't been able to shake this nagging feeling since I found out Brooke was pregnant. Maybe it stems from the trauma surrounding the night we met—I hope that's all it is.

Brooke has to rest up for the next few days, and if she experiences any more bleeding or pain, I have to bring her straight back to the hospital. I know I promised not to smother her, but if I could lock her away for the duration of her pregnancy, I most definitely would.

As we push through the doors, we both freeze. It's not only John sitting there waiting; our entire family is here. They all stand the minute they see us, and I can tell my mum's been crying.

Lara runs straight for us, throwing her arms around Brooke. When she tilts her head back and looks up, I see tears pooling in her eyes. The despair on her face tugs at my heartstrings. "Is my baby cousin okay, Aunty Brooke?"

"Yes, sweetie," she replies, stroking her hair. "The doctor said everything is fine."

"Would you like to see a picture?" I ask, slipping my hand into my pocket and pulling out my phone.

"Of my baby cousin?"

"Yes."



Things for me have been hectic for the past few weeks. Judgement day is approaching—the preliminary hearing—so we've been busy getting all our

ducks in a row.

This hearing will decide whether this matter will be heading to trial. Kaylee and I will both take the stand at the prelim, which will be interesting. I've memorised her statement word-for-word, and I'm curious to see if she can remember her lies under pressure. My father will cross-examine her, and I've seen him in action many times; *he'll eat her alive*.

We are reasonably confident it won't go to trial; the prosecution doesn't have any concrete evidence to prove their case, only Kaylee's word, but on the flip side, we don't have anything to disprove it. I just want this over with, so I can hopefully put it behind me and move on with my life.

If we go to trial and I'm found guilty, I'll have to front the tribunal where I'll likely be struck off the roll for professional misconduct. Which means I'll be stripped of my license to practice law. I'm also looking at potential prison time. So, there's a lot riding on this outcome.

I haven't discussed the ramifications of the court case with Brooke because I don't want her to worry. She wants to attend in support of me, but I will see to it that she doesn't. It will only upset her, and I don't want that. I've been sheltering her as much as I can.

A month has passed since the scare with the baby, and so far, all is going well. There's been no more spotting, and I want it to stay that way. Brooke's seventeen weeks pregnant now, and her baby bump is starting to show. It's tiny, but she looks so fucking beautiful swollen with my child.

I'm sitting at my desk, staring off into space, when there's a knock on my door. My head swings in that direction to find Rochelle standing there. It's like déjà vu because she is the one who brought Kaylee up to my office that fateful day.

"I'm sorry to bother you Mr. Cavanagh," she says, "but would it be possible to have a moment of your time?"

"Of course, come in." There's a stack of papers clutched to her chest, so I sit up straighter in my chair as she approaches.

"Firstly, I just want to say I'm sorry."

"For what?" I ask.

"For bringing that terrible girl up here that day."

"Don't be silly. You have nothing to be sorry about. You were just doing your job."

"I know, but still ..." She clears her throat. "I'm going to go on a rant, but please hear me out. Since I work downstairs in the main reception area, I see

everyone coming and going. So, in the four years I've been working for you, I've made a lot of friends in this building. Sometimes we even go out for drinks on a Friday night. On one such night a few weeks ago, your situation came up in conversation."

"I see," I say, not liking where this is heading.

"Nothing bad was said about you. Everyone loves you here. I want you to know that none of us believe Kaylee's lies."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. That's actually why I'm here. Marcy from accounting said something that night that stuck with me."

"What did she say?"

"If all the women in this office could take the stand in your defence, they'd see how ludicrous these allegations are. Nobody in this building would have a bad word to say against you. You are such a great boss, and we respect you greatly."

"That's very sweet, I appreciate it."

"Marcy's words got me thinking ... you have fifty-three women that work in this building. So, over the next few days, I made a point to approach each and every one of them with my idea. It's not plausible, or probably even allowed, that we take the stand at your hearing, but I told them if they wanted to contribute to your defence somehow, they could write you a character reference. Something about their time and experiences working for you. Honestly, I thought maybe a handful would actually do it, but I was wrong." She places the papers she's holding down on the desk. "All fifty-three of them did."

"Wow," I say, reaching for the stack as she pushes it in my direction, briefly skimming over the ones on top. What little I do read chokes me up. Tears sting my eyes as I move my attention back to Rochelle. "Thank you for taking the time to do this; it means more to me than you'll ever know."

Chapter 20

Brooke

Once Jacinta is seated in the passenger seat of my car and buckled in, I pull away from the kerb and into traffic. “How was school?”

She shrugs her little shoulders. “It was okay.”

“Are you looking forward to learning more of this dance?”

“I guess.”

She’s staring out the side window as she answers me. She’s come around a little in the past month, but we still have a long way to go.

“I brought an apple juice from the studio for you,” I say, grabbing it from the centre console and holding it out.

Her gaze moves from the juice to me, and I may be mistaken, but she looks like she’s on the verge of tears. “Thank you, Miss Brooke.”

“Is everything okay?”

She nods her head and turns her face back towards the window.

I decide to stop peppering her with questions and just leave her be. If she wants to talk, she will; the rest of our drive is silent.

“Why don’t you go get changed into your dance gear while I set everything up,” I say once we arrive at the studio.

“Okay.”

We get straight into it once she’s ready, going over what she’s already learnt before starting on the new steps. When we get to a part where she has to bend one knee and bring it up towards her chest while stretching her arms over her head and tilting her body to one side, her face contorts with pain.

I let it go the first time, but I shut off the music and approach her when it happens again. “Does it hurt when you do that move?” I ask.

Staring down at her feet, she shrugs. “It’s nothing.”

“Jacinta, if you have an injury, I need to know. I don’t want you doing anything that could aggravate it.” Her eyes remain downcast, so I take a step towards her and crouch down. “Where does it hurt?”

“Here,” she answers, putting her tiny hand against her ribcage.

“Can I take a look?” She gives me a small nod, so I gently lift up the side of her dance tee and gasp when I see the dark bruise against her fair skin. “Jacinta.”

“It’s nothing,” she says, pulling down her shirt and stepping backwards. “I just fell.”

“Sweetie.” My hands reach out to cup her face. “If something is going on at home, you can talk to me.”

“I can’t,” she says with tears in her eyes. “I’ll get in trouble if I do.”

“Did your dad do this?”

The moment her eyes widen, I know my suspicions are correct. “How did you know it was him?”

“I saw a bruise on your mum when I met with her.”

She’s openly crying now. “You can’t tell anyone, Miss Brooke, you can’t.”

Wrapping her in my arms, I run my hand down her back in a soothing motion. My heart breaks for this little girl and her mother. “I won’t say anything, I promise. Whatever you tell me stays between us, okay? You can trust me.”

I have no right to make a promise I know I can’t keep, but I can’t help them if I don’t know what’s happening.

When the tears finally subside, I reach for her hand, leading her into the reception area. She can’t be dancing if she’s injured. I’d like to take her to a doctor and get her checked over, that’s the right thing to do, but that’s only going to lead to questions. Besides, it’s not my place; it’s her mother’s.

“Does your mum know you’re hurt?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “I wasn’t lying when I said I fell. I was trying to stop my dad from hurting my mum, and when he shoved me out of the way, I lost my balance and hit my side on the corner of the chair.”

“Does he hurt your mum often?”

She turns her face away. “I’ve already said too much.”

That in itself is the answer I feared. “Can you do me a favour?” I ask. “Can you show your mum the bruise? It might need to be seen by a doctor.” It also may prompt her mother to speak out if she knows she’s not the only

one getting hurt by that monster.

Jacinta draws her bottom lip into her mouth and nods. Will she show her? I have no idea, but I hope so.

I reach for my handbag behind the desk, rummaging inside until I find what I'm looking for. I've been carrying this around in my bag for the past two weeks, just in case the opportunity ever arose.

"Go get changed. We can continue the lesson next week when you feel better." Once I have her alone, I sit down on the bench and hold out my hand. "I bought this for you; it's a phone. Is there somewhere at home where you can hide it from your father?" She takes it from me and nods. "If you ever need to, you can call me, okay? I've programmed my mobile and the studio's phone number into it."

Logan will be furious if he finds out I've gone against his wishes and done this behind his back, but I can't stand by knowing what I now know without doing something.

Despite my protests, I usually drop Jacinta off at the corner of her street. She always tells me it's only a few houses up, so I don't push it. I gather she's scared her father might see us, and the last thing I want is to make their situation worse.

But today, I hang back, watching her through my rear-view mirror. Her house is further down the street than she alluded to, and once she disappears inside, I make a U-turn and do a drive-by. The tiny, white weatherboard home is rundown and in dire need of repairs, but I didn't do this to judge; I simply feel better knowing where she lives.



"Please, Brooke," Logan says, cupping my face. "Today is going to be stressful enough without having to worry about you on top of everything as well."

"Do you think I'm going to worry less if I stay here ... I'll probably worry even more because I won't know what's happening. I'll get inside my own head and dramatise everything tenfold."

Logan chuckles as he leans in and places his lips on my forehead. "What if I get mum or Michelle to call you throughout the day with a running commentary?"

I gasp. “There allowed to go, and I’m not? How will it look if your whole family is there to support you, but I’m MIA? The press will have a field day with that one.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what the press thinks, or anyone else for that matter. All I care about is your well-being, and our daughter’s.”

My eyes narrow. “Or son.” He’s adamant I’m having a girl. “It’s not fair. I want to come.” Reaching up, I grasp the lapels of his suit jacket. “I need to be there, Hot Stuff. Please don’t keep me from going.”

I know I’ve won when he sighs and tilts his face towards the ceiling. He may not realise it, but he needs me there. Whatever the outcome of this hearing is, it will affect me just as much as him. *We’re in this together.*



As we peruse past the front of the courthouse, I’m shocked by the number of cameras awaiting our arrival. Thankfully, given Logan’s high profile in the community, his father has organised to have us ushered in through the back door, saving us from having to run the media gauntlet. This case has been gathering steam since his arrest, with extensive news coverage both for and against him. Kaylee’s statement was also somehow leaked to the public, but in a small way, it helped. A lot of people have come forth in support of my husband since.

I’m in no way playing down her allegations, even though I don’t believe them, but the media has been alluding to something far more sinister than what was actually reported to the police.

Logan reaches for my hand and leads me down a long hallway to a room where our fathers are waiting. He didn’t speak a word on the drive here, so I know he’s nervous.

I kiss Robert hello and move over to my dad. “I thought you weren’t coming today,” my father says, gathering me in his arms.

“She strong-armed me,” Logan replies as he sits at the table beside Robert.

“How are you feeling this morning, Son?”

“Sick to the stomach.”

Robert places his hand on Logan’s shoulder, comforting him. “Same, but I’m going to get you out of this, one way or another.”

If any good has come out of these allegations against my husband, it's the relationship that has formed between him and his father. I've seen them grow closer, and I only hope it continues.

I sit quietly and listen as Robert goes over the happenings of the day, and I can feel Logan's leg bouncing beside me. Sliding my hand under the table, I place it on his knee. I hate this for him.

When the bailiff knocks on the door, telling us it's time, we all stand. My arms snake around Logan's waist. "Good luck, Hot Stuff."

"Thank you."

I tilt my head back to make eye contact. "No matter the outcome, I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

I've told him this many times over the past few weeks because I know what he fears most is losing me.

He swallows thickly and nods his head. "I love you."

"I love you more."

That would usually get a reaction for him, but he lets it go. He has far more important things to worry about right now.

Once we enter the courtroom, the men head towards the bar table in the middle of the room. I sit directly behind them. I'm in the front row of the public gallery, beside Patricia, Michelle and Craig. They look just as nervous as I feel. I can only pray that this mess will come to an end soon.

"How was he this morning?" Patricia asks.

"Worried."

My eyes dart to the prosecution table, and I find it empty. I have no idea what this girl looks like, but I'd like to put a face to the person who's thrown our lives into chaos.

Logan and I have gone over everything that happened that day, step-by-step, from the moment she arrived until she fled, and none of it makes sense. Even when he got frustrated with her in the meeting, in front of his aunt and the others, it still doesn't come close to justifying what she's done. Or why she'd accuse him of such horrible things.

When the door at the back of the courtroom opens, I swing around in my chair. If it's Kaylee, I want to look her in the eye, woman-to-woman, and silently plead with her to stop this nonsense. Not that it will do any good.

The prosecutor enters first, followed by a young girl and an older man, who I presume is her father, by the jeans and t-shirt he's wearing. He also has a baseball cap clutched in his hand, so there's no way he's part of her legal

team. Logan, and our fathers are all dressed in three-piece suits.

I take her in as she approaches. Her head is bowed, but she's in a long flowery dress, with her bleached blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail that only highlights her dark roots. From what I can see, there's not a stitch of makeup on her face, making her appear far younger than her actual age. It's a stark contrast to what Logan said she wore into the office that day, and I'm instantly annoyed by it. At least she had the sense to dress more appropriately for court.

It's not until she passes that I get a good look at her face; the moment I do, my heart drops. When I gasp, her eyes dart to me, but I get no reaction from her. I don't think she recognises me, but I know exactly who she is.

I stand, leaning over to tap my dad on the shoulder. "Can I speak to you for a second?"

"Are you feeling alright?" Logan asks.

"I'm fine, Hot Stuff," I reply, giving him a reassuring smile. "I just need a quick word with my dad."

Logan's eyes follow me as I leave the room. I know he's concerned, but he'll find out what this is about soon enough.

Chapter 21

Logan

I know I can't leave, but I'm struggling not to go out there to find out what the hell is going on. When John re-enters the courtroom, sans Brooke, he whispers something into my dad's ear. My dad then follows John back outside without even a glance back at me. Neither of them bothers to tell me what is going on. I'm going out of my mind trying to work it out. *What is happening?*

I've almost lost my battle to remain seated by the time my father returns. "What was that all about?"

"A development in the case."

"What kind of development? Is Brooke alright?"

"Your wife is fine, Son." His words say one thing, but his demeanour says something completely different. I've been around my old man enough to know when something has made him angry. His red face, pursed lips and the way his jaw ticks are telling signs.

"What's going on then?"

He opens his mouth to speak just as the bailiff says, "All rise."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I mumble under my breath, getting to my feet.

"Watch your language," my father angrily whispers.

It's not until the official proceedings are underway that I get to question him again. "Are you going to enlighten me, or would you prefer, I guess?"

"Don't be a smart-arse, Logan. It doesn't suit you."

"What's the development?"

"I've got John looking into it now."

"Where's Brooke?"

"Helping her father."

“Whatever you have her doing, it better not be stressful.”

“For Christ’s sake, stop mollycoddling her. She’s pregnant, not terminally ill.”



Kaylee is now on the stand, and it seems, just like I did, she’s memorised her statement word-for-word because she hasn’t missed a beat.

She looks nothing like the girl that fronted my office that day, scandalously dressed with a face full of make-up. Today she looks her age, if not younger, and that floor-length floral dress she’s wearing screams innocence. All of which is concerning; none of this looks good for me.

When the prosecution is finally finished making Kaylee look like mother-fucking-Teresa, it’s my father’s turn to cross-examine. It has me sitting up straighter in my seat. If this fails, we’re screwed, but I have every bit of confidence in him. I’ve watched him in action many times, and he’s ruthless.

“Miss Miller,” he says, approaching the witness box. “Is it okay if I call you that, or would you prefer Kaylee?”

“I’d prefer Kaylee.”

“Kaylee, it is then,” he says, giving her one of his rare charming smiles. I know what he’s doing; he’s preparing his prey for the kill. “Kaylee, do you know a woman by the name of Kathleen Sanderson?”

Why the fuck would he ask her if she knew his sister? This isn’t something we ever discussed. Kathleen may have been in the boardroom that day, but they were never introduced. They didn’t even speak to each other.

“Who?”

“Kathleen Sanderson.”

This time when he says her name, my eyes are fixated on Kaylee. There is panic in her eyes as she stammers, “N ... no.” My gut tells me she’s lying.

“You do realise you’re still under oath, Miss Miller?”

“Objection,” her counsel calls out.

“On what grounds?” my father retorts.

“She’s already answered his question, Your Honour. He’s badgering the witness.”

“Sustained.”

My father clears his throat and, to my utter disbelief, says, “No further

questions, Your Honour.” I have to stop myself from leaping over the table and throttling him. Has he lost his mind? This was our only chance to get her to slip up, and he blew it.

“You may step down,” the Judge tells Kaylee, giving my father a side-eye. Even he can’t believe he did that.

The look I give my dad when he re-joins me at the defence table is murderous.

My father ignores me, making eye contact with the Judge as he speaks. “Your Honour. We had a further development in the case this morning, so if it’s okay with the prosecution, I have another witness I’d like to call?”

Another witness? Who?

When Kaylee’s counsel agrees, the Judge says, “Very well, call you next witness, Mr. Cavanagh.”

“I’d like to call Kathleen Sanderson to the stand.”

My head snaps to my father before the commotion at the back of the room draws my attention. Glancing over my shoulder, I see a very pissed-off Kathleen escorted through the door by the bailiff.



I’m sitting on the couch with my feet propped up on the coffee table. I’m three scotches in, and my beautiful wife, *my saviour*, is curled up on my lap, fast asleep. It’s been a big day.

After we left court, my family and I went out for a celebratory dinner. I had no clue how this day would pan out, but the reality was far sweeter than I had ever imagined.

We didn’t get back to the penthouse until after 8 pm, so I’m now sitting here with the television on mute, waiting for the late-night news bulletin to air. My phone has been ringing off the hook all afternoon, but the only call I’ve taken is one from Claire. I’ll deal with the rest tomorrow.

This afternoon was all about basking in the divine intervention called karma with the people who stuck by me through it all.

The only dampener on my win, was my concern for my dad. He celebrated right alongside us with a smile plastered across his face, but deep down, I could tell he was suffering. Despite everything, he loves his sister, so the truth behind today’s revelations would’ve been a hard pill to swallow.

Personally, it didn't surprise me in the least. That woman is pure evil.

I was so proud of him, though; he had my back every step of the way. I watched him tear her apart on the stand, eventually managing to wrangle the truth out of her, and it was a glorious sight. He stayed professional throughout it all, well, for the majority of the time anyway. When Kathleen said, "I'm sorry, Robert, please forgive me," he lost it.

"He is my flesh and blood, Kate," he screamed, beating on his chest. "*My flesh and blood*. You paid someone ten-thousand dollars to ruin my son's life. I'm sorry, but that's unforgivable. You've done some pretty nasty, fucked up things in your time, but I stuck by you regardless, and do you know why? Because you're family, that's the right thing to do, but no more. I'm tired of your toxicity. I'll never forgive you for this. *Never!*"

When my mother stood up and clapped her husband, the Judge brought down his gavel and demanded "Order in the court." But I knew, like me, my mum had been waiting a long time for this day to arrive.

As soon as I see '*Cavanagh framed*' on the television screen, I reach for the remote and turn it up.

"In a surprise turn of events," the news anchor says, "Logan Cavanagh was exonerated of all charges today after it was revealed that a family member had paid his employee thousands of dollars to fabricate the claims against him. Full details, coming up next."

Dipping my head, I place my lips against Brooke's hair. She really came through for us today. The moment she recognised Kaylee, the wheels were set in motion. She worked with Mike, gathering whatever information they could with such short notice. John tricked Kathleen into meeting up with him for the sole purpose of serving her with a subpoena.

If I had succeeded in stopping my wife from attending today, we never would've known the lady Lara saw crying in the café weeks ago when they stopped to get a milkshake was, in fact, Kaylee Miller.

"Babe," I say, gently running my hand down the side of her face. She looks so peaceful I don't want to wake her, but I know she wanted to watch the coverage from today. "The news is about to start."

Her eyes flutter open, before she yawns and stretches. She's so damn sweet. When she goes to move off my lap, I tighten my grip on her waist. "Stay."

We both listen as the news anchor gives a brief rundown of the court case without embellishments or speculation, just facts. I've struggled with some of

the fabrications the mainstream media have reported since this mess started. I'm a big believer in freedom of speech, but there should be a law against publishing lies.

"We're crossing live now to Amelia Randle, outside Surry Hills' Police Station, where Kathleen Sanderson and Kaylee Miller were charged earlier today."

"Yes, that's right, Ann," Amelia says. "Miller was released shortly after, but Kathleen Sanderson remains behind bars tonight. She'll go before the magistrate first thing tomorrow morning."

"What an extraordinary turn of events."

"Most definitely. It's a shocking plot twist that I'm sure the Cavanagh family didn't see coming. Miller gave a brief statement to the press when she left the police station late this afternoon, accompanied by her father. Here is what she had to say."

When a close-up of Kaylee's face appears on the screen, a part of me feels sorry for her. I know what my aunt's like. She'll stop at nothing to get her way, but at the end of the day, this girl tried to ruin me with her lies, and that's hard to forgive.

"I ... umm ... want to apologise to Mr. Cavanagh. He was, like, nice to me and stuff when I worked there and didn't do any of the things I accused him of doing. I feel really bad for what I did to him. Mrs. Sanderson was in a meeting with Mr. Cavanagh the day I first saw her, and when I left to go to lunch, she cornered me in the lift and asked me to lie and say he did bad stuff to me. I didn't want to do it, I knew it was wrong, but my dad had recently lost his job, and we really needed the money ..."

With that, I pick up the remote and turn the television off; I've heard enough.

"Are you all right, Hot Stuff?" Brooke asks, turning on my lap to face me.

"I will be." It's still fresh, so I'm feeling a little raw, but I hope to put this whole mess behind me in time.

"Her apology was half-arsed, but I'm glad she spoke out."

"Me too."

Brooke cups my face, brushing her lips with mine. "I hate this, but I'm glad the truth came out in the end. I want to strangle your aunt, though. I can't believe she was behind this all along."

"Makes two of us. I'm glad she's been remanded in custody; she has nobody to bail her out."

“Will they keep her there?”

“Nah, babe. The magistrate should let her go home tomorrow, but she’ll end up doing time for this, and she has nobody but herself to blame.”

“I’m sorry she did this to you, but you’ve got to admit, your dad was pretty awesome today.”

“He was, and so were you.”

What my aunt did was fucked up, but I’m done talking about it. The buzz from the scotch is wearing off, and I’m starting to get a headache.

Leaning in, I place my lips on Brooke’s, and when she deepens the kiss, my hands slide down to her arse, drawing her body closer. She’s exactly what I need right now.

Whimpering into my mouth, she frantically grinds her pussy against my hardening cock, and my fingers slip under the hemline of her top, gliding upwards over her silky soft skin until I reach the clasp of her bra. The moment I have it undone, my hands move to her front, so I can palm her breasts. My girl’s pregnancy hormones are running rampant, no matter how many times we fuck lately, it’s never enough, but I’m not complaining.

“Come,” I say as I go to stand. “I want to take you upstairs and lose myself in your body.”

“Don’t you dare move. We are doing this right now.” I chuckle when her hand slides between us, and she fumbles with my belt buckle.

“Babe, I want to strip you naked and lay you out on the bed so I can devour you.”

“That sounds great, but the bedroom is too far away,” she says, popping the button on my trousers and sliding down my zip. I love how desperate she is for me.

“It’s a two-minute walk, tops. I could probably get us there in one.”

Ignoring me, she frantically frees my cock from my pants and pushes herself up onto her knee’s so she can hike up her skirt and pull her underwear aside. She’s red fucking hot when she’s like this. The moment she impales herself with my cock, sinking herself right down to the hilt, she throws her head back and moans.

Seizing her hips in my hands, I hold her in place as I try to bring my own raging hormones under control. If she moves right now, I’m going to blow.

“I need to move,” she whines.

This woman is going to be my undoing.

I slowly withdraw her to the very tip before dragging her back down my

length ... repeating it over and over until she's withering in my arms. She may have been the one to instigate this, but I'm still in control.

"I think this pregnancy has turned me into a nympho."

I bury my face in the crook of her neck and laugh. I think she may be right, but I'm good with that.

Chapter 22

Brooke

I'm in the middle of my afternoon class when Michelle enters the studio with my phone in her hand. "It's rung three times in the last few minutes, so I thought it might be important."

Taking it from her, I flip it over to look at the screen. My heart drops the moment I do. I have three missed calls, and they're all from Jacinta. Two months have passed since I gave her that phone, and this is the first time she's ever reached out to me.

I glance up at my students. "Sabrina, you're in charge until I get back. I want you guys to run through the routine while I'm gone."

"Is everything okay?" Michelle asks as she follows me out of the room.

"Yes, I just need to return this call."

I leave her in the reception area as I step outside. I'm yet to say anything to anyone about what's going on. I promised Jacinta I'd keep it between us, and so far, I've managed to do that.

When I dial her number, it only rings once before Jacinta answers, and her immediate sobs tell me something is very wrong.

"Jacinta."

"Miss Brooke," she cries down the line.

"What's going on, honey? Has something happened?"

"It's my mum ... she won't wake up!"

"What do you mean she won't wake up?"

"My dad hurt her ... I keep shaking her, but she's not moving."

"Is she breathing?"

"Yes, but there's blood everywhere."

"Have you called an ambulance?"

“No ... I’m scared. I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“Is your father still there?”

“No. He usually goes to the pub when he gets like this. He probably won’t be back until later.”

“Okay,” I say, turning and heading back inside.

Grabbing my bag from behind the desk, I slide it over my shoulder. “Is everything alright?” Michelle mouths as she follows me towards the door.

I hold the phone out in front of me and press mute. “I’ve got to step out for a while. Will you apologise to the girls for me?”

“Of course. What will I tell them?”

“Just say I was called away on an emergency.”

Turning, I rush towards the exit. “What kind of emergency?” Michelle calls out. “Is there something I can do to help?”

“I can’t talk now, but I’ll fill you in when I get back.”

I unmute the phone as I jog towards my car. “Sweetie, listen to me. I’m on my way. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Stay with your mum and keep an eye on her ... if anything changes, call me straight back.”

“Okay.”



From Jacinta’s call I knew things weren’t good, but I’m not expecting the carnage I find when I enter the house. Furniture is upended, with large holes in the gyprock, smears of blood on the wall, and multiple broken items littering the floor. I protectively place my hand over my stomach as I navigate the ruins.

Shards of glass crunch under my feet as I cross the room. Not thinking straight, I didn’t even knock. I just let myself in.

“Jacinta?”

“In here, Miss Brooke.”

I round the corner and follow the droplets of blood, and the sounds of her whimpers down the hall. When I enter the small kitchen, I find them. Poor Grace is lying unmoving on the floor near the back door as her daughter rocks back and forth beside her. Unlike the front room, this one is pretty much intact, apart from a few toppled chairs. It looks like she was trying to flee her attacker when he delivered his final blow.

As soon as Jacinta sees me, she leaps to her feet and wraps her arms around my waist. “Please save her ... I don’t want her to die.”

My hand runs soothingly down her back as my eyes assess her mother. She’s lying on her side, but I can see the rise and fall of her chest from here, so I know she’s still alive. *Thank God for that.* There’s a pool of blood beside her head.

I squat down in front of Jacinta. “I’m going to have to call an ambulance, sweetie. Your mum needs to see a doctor. Can you get me a clean towel so we can try to stem some of the bleeding?”

She nods once before running from the room. I can only imagine the horrors this poor child has witnessed in her lifetime.

I kneel beside Grace and lift her wrist to check her pulse. Tears cloud my vision as my eyes move over her face. She is so battered and bruised that she’s unrecognisable.

Pulling out my phone, my hands are shaking as I dial triple zero. As I talk with the dispatcher, Jacinta comes running back into the kitchen, clutching a towel to her chest.

“How long has your mum been unconscious?” I ask.

“I don’t know ... a while. My dad came home from work early and started screaming at her the moment he walked in the door. My mum makes me lock myself in my room when he gets like this ... I have to stay there until she comes and gets me when it’s safe. Everything went quiet, and then I heard the front door slam. I knew he’d left, but I waited and waited, and my mum never came. I finally found the courage to leave my room, and that’s when I found her. Is she going to die?”

Fat tears roll down her cheeks as she explains, and it breaks my heart. “Help is on its way,” I tell her, reaching out to stroke her blonde hair. “She’s going to be okay.” I have no clue if that’s even true, but I feel compelled to comfort this poor child.

“I’m not sure how long she’s been unconscious,” I say, moving my attention back to the dispatcher and answering her question. “I’d say at least twenty minutes, possibly longer.” I managed to partly wedge a towel under her head, but it was the best I could do since I was instructed not to move Grace in case she has neck or spinal injuries.



I step out into the hall when I look down at my phone and see Hot Stuff on the screen. *Great*, I was hoping to make it home before I had to explain this situation to him.

“Hot Stuff,” I say, answering the call.

“What the fuck is going on, Brooke? Michelle said you left in the middle of a class for some kind of emergency and never returned. She called me because she was worried about you.”

Damn it. I should’ve called her.

“I’m at the hospital.”

“The hospital?”

“Before you start freaking out, I’m okay. I’m here with Jacinta and her mother.”

“Jacinta?”

“Yes, she’s one of my students, you know, the one I was concerned about?”

“You mean the one whose business I told you to stay out of?”

I roll my eyes as I feel my temper rise. “Listen, she called me and said her mother wouldn’t wake up. Her husband had beat her until she was unconscious. She needed my help, I had to go there.”

“Wait, what? You went to their house alone, where a maniac was on the loose ... you’re six months fucking pregnant, Brooke. What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t know what else to do?”

“You call the police, me, your dad ... fucking Chris, anyone. What if he hurt you too?”

“He’d left by then.”

“What if he returned? Are you that naive, or just plain fucking stupid,” he bellows down the line.

“You know what, fuck you!” With that, I hang up.

When my phone instantly starts ringing again, I reject the call, flick the switch to silent and shove it back in my bag.

“Sorry about that,” I say, forcing a smile when I re-enter the room. “It was my husband wondering where I was.”

I retake my seat by the far wall. Jacinta is sitting on the side of the bed, clutching her mother’s hand. We’ve been here for almost two hours. Grace had regained consciousness by the time we arrived at the hospital. Despite her many injuries—including multiple broken bones, a fractured skull and a

missing front tooth—the doctors say her condition is serious but stable, which is a huge relief. I wasn't sure if she would make it when I first saw her at the house. They've put her on a morphine drip, and she's sleeping peacefully now.

I drove here with Jacinta in my car, she initially wanted to travel in the ambulance, but I thought it best to let the paramedics work on her mother uninterrupted. Plus, I knew Grace would be having a lot of tests and scans when she arrived at the hospital, and I didn't want Jacinta left alone.

"There are two officers here to talk with you," the nurse says, entering the room and approaching the bed to check on Grace. My eyes move to the doorway, and I see them standing in the hallway. They arrived at the house alongside the ambulance and took down some information from Jacinta about her father. They said they'd come to the hospital to get a full statement shortly.

I reach for Jacinta's hand when she slides off the bed. Her large, blue, terrified eyes move up to mine, tugging at my heartstrings. "It's okay," I tell her. "They're here to help, and I won't leave your side. I promise."

This little girl is going to need extensive therapy after this; *they both will*.

Jacinta's tiny, trembling body is standing in front of me, with my arms looped around her neck as she recounts the incident that brought us here. She was locked in her room for the duration of the attack but told the officers everything she heard. The screams, crying, things breaking ...

"Does your father do this often?" the officer asks her.

She tilts her head, looking up at me for guidance. "It's okay, you can tell them. You won't get in trouble."

They have already informed us that her father is in custody, so thankfully, he won't be able to hurt them anymore.

I do a double take when I look to my left and see an extremely hot, very pissed-off-looking man in a suit stalking down the corridor towards us. He better not start on me here. I should've known he wouldn't stand by and just wait for me to arrive home.

"Officers," he says, extending his arm when he stops beside me.

"And you are?" one of them asks.

"Their representation."

I bite my bottom lip to suppress my smile because despite how angry he is with me, he's just inserted himself right in the middle of this mess. I know he'll do whatever he can to help Jacinta and Grace going forward.

“Who is that man?” Jacinta asks me.

“My husband.”

“I presume they’ll be pressing charges?” the officer asks.

“We—”

I’m about to say we haven’t discussed that yet, but Logan cuts me off with a very confident, “Yes!”

“Child services will need to be contacted. If the victim decides against it, this child will not be able to return to their home. Under these circumstances, it’s not safe.”

“What?” Jacinta says as her wide eyes once again meet mine.

“That won’t be necessary,” Logan chimes in. “We’ll be pressing charges, and the child will remain under the care of my wife and I, until her mother is well enough to look after her again.”

My head snaps to him, and the steely look he’s giving the officers is one that says, *I dare you to tell me differently.*



We were informed Grace’s husband could only be held for a maximum of eight hours without charges being laid. Given the seriousness of this matter and the severity of Grace’s injuries, they are applying for an extension via a detention warrant.

The officers will be coming back in the morning to speak with Grace, which Logan stated he wants to be present for.

I’m now sitting beside Grace’s bed, with Jacinta perched on my lap. My brooding husband is standing by the far wall with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes keep flicking back to Grace, and every time they do, his frown deepens. Grace’s husband really did a number on her; she’s lucky to be alive.

When she finally wakes and is alert enough to communicate, I bring up the matter we discussed with the police.

“I don’t want to press charges,” she says. “It will only make things worse for me.”

Logan has remained quiet until now, but he steps up to the bed the moment she says that. “Are you prepared to lose your child over this?”

“What?”

My eyes narrow as they move to him. “Logan.”

“It’s a fact. You heard what the officers said. If she doesn’t press charges, child services will remove Jacinta from her care.”

“Mummy,” Jacinta cries. “I don’t want to be taken away from you. Please, you have to press charges, *please*.”

“He almost killed you today,” Logan says. “If you press charges, he’ll go to prison for a long time for this. You and your daughter will finally be safe.”

“You and I both know that won’t be forever. Who’s going to protect us when he gets out?”

“I will,” he simply says. I know he means every word.

God, I love this man.



Grace agreed to let Jacinta come home with us, she didn’t even consider the alternative, which I’m grateful for. She’ll be safe and cared for with us. Being with strangers will only traumatise her further.

Jacinta and her mother cried when it was time for us to leave, but we assured her we’d be back first thing in the morning. As we left the hospital, Logan walked ahead of us, so I know I’m still in trouble.

I side-eye him as we exit the car park. He’s driving my car because Chris dropped him off earlier. He’s holding the steering wheel so tight; his knuckles have turned white. I’ve never seen him this angry before. I’m going to cop an earful once we’re alone, but I’m thankful he has enough sense not to berate me in front of Jacinta. The poor girl has been through enough today.

“We need to stop by Jacinta’s place and pick up some of her things,” I say.

“I’m not taking either of you back there. We can buy her whatever she needs.”

“I think she’ll feel more comfortable with her own stuff, at least for tonight. She’s had a traumatising day and will be staying in a strange place.”

He clears his throat before exhaling a long breath. “Where does she live?”

As we drive, I give him directions to the house, but he remains silent. I pull Grace’s keys out of my bag when we get there. After the ambulance left with her, the police got us to lock up the house before we followed them to the hospital.

As soon as we step inside and I turn on the light, I ask Jacinta to go to her room and grab whatever she needs for the next few days.

My eyes move to Logan as he scans the front room. When his jaw ticks, I know he's close to losing his shit.

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching for his arm, but he shrugs it away.

"I'm so fucking angry with you, Brooke." I bow my head when he aggressively runs his fingers through his hair. "You walked into this," he barks, gesturing his hand around the destroyed room, "and after everything you went through with that fuckwit ex-husband of yours, you didn't once consider your own safety or that of our unborn child?"

Everything he's saying is true, it was reckless coming here on my own, but I still reply with, "I knew he was no longer here."

"And what if he had come back ... huh? What in the fuck would've happened then?" he yells.

"Please, can we talk about this later?"

His furious eyes scan over my face for a moment before he shakes his head and storms towards the front door. "I'll wait for you in the car."

I go in search of Jacinta and find tears streaming down her face as she takes various items of clothing out of her drawers and lays them in neat piles on her bed. Her room is modest but sweet. All pink and frilly, with a few stuffed animals lining the foot of her bed.

"Do you have a suitcase to pack these into?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "There are plastic bags in the cupboard in the kitchen."

"I'll go and find them."

I enter the kitchen and start opening random doors. Everything inside is meticulously arranged, and I eventually find what I'm looking for. This humble little home reminds me a lot of the one I grew up in with my mum.

Heading back into the bedroom, I help Jacinta pack. "Are you going to bring any of your stuff toys?"

"Can I?"

"You can bring anything you want."

"Okay," she says with a small smile tugging up her lips.

"When we're done here, we can pack a few things for your mum and take them to the hospital tomorrow."

"Oh, I almost forgot," she says, running out of the room and dragging one of the kitchen chairs back in. When she climbs up, I watch her move a few

boxes to the side and reach for a bundled-up towel in the corner. “My dance uniform.”

My heart breaks for this little girl and the horrors she’s had to live with, but I hope she’ll finally get the life she deserves moving forward.

Chapter 23

Brooke

“**A**re you almost ready, sweetie?” I ask Jacinta as she eats the last of her breakfast.

“Yes, I just have to run upstairs and grab the picture I drew for Mummy.”

She’s been staying with us for over a week now and seems to be settling in nicely. It’s amazing how much a safe living environment can help. She still has a long way to go, but she’s really come around with me the past few days.

We’ve put her in the spare room that used to be mine. I ended up sleeping with her the first night, and although Logan wasn’t happy with my decision, I knew he’d get over it. Jacinta needed me more at that moment.

Jill loves having her here and is spoiling her rotten. Even Logan has been wonderful now he’s calmed down. He bought a doll home for her last night, which was super sweet of him. Jacinta, on the other hand, is still a little skittish with him. I’m sure that has a lot to do with her trust in men after the life she’s led at the hands of her father, a person who should’ve protected her.

Two whole days passed before Logan forgave me. It was the longest forty-eight hours of my life. He was never once mean or rude towards me, but chose only to speak when spoken to. He’s never been so frosty towards me before, and I didn’t like it one bit.

My pregnancy hormones eventually won out, and I broke down in tears. That’s all it took for his bravado to crumble. He instantly wrapped me in his arms and peppered kisses all over my face, all the while apologising for making me cry. “*Seeing Grace’s injuries were bad enough, her face was so swollen and bruised she didn’t even resemble a human being ... and when we*

got to the house and saw the damage in the front room, I almost burst an artery. The most fucked up images ran rampant in my head. This whole mess could've ended badly for you. I don't think you understand how much I love you, babe ... you've been through so much in your life, and I couldn't bare it if anything happened to you ... to either of you."

Logan's anger wasn't directed at the fact that I helped Grace and Jacinta but rather at the thousands of *what-ifs* running rampant through his mind. It still hurt, though. It was our first big fight, and I hope it will be our last. He did, however, punish me for acting foolish and not in a pleasurable way. He barred me from going anywhere unsupervised for the duration of my pregnancy, even going as far as confiscating my car keys, which was ridiculous and annoying, but I didn't dispute it. He needs to keep me and the baby safe, so I know it's coming from a good place. I can't fault him for that.

When Jacinta takes her cup and plate into the kitchen, then dashes past me on her way to her room, I pull out my phone and text Chris.

Brooke: We are ready to leave whenever you are.

Chris: I'm already downstairs waiting.



I stayed at the hospital for the first hour, but I'm now sitting with Chris at a coffee shop down the street. I want to give Jacinta and Grace some time alone together.

Jacinta is taking the next few weeks off school, I think Grace and her need time to heal, and the best way for them to do that, is together. We've been picking up work from her teacher every few days so she doesn't fall behind. When visiting hours finish at 1 pm, Jacinta and I head to the dance studio. While I'm working, she does her schoolwork.

Chris and I have been brunching together all week, and it's been nice to get to know him on a more personal level. I'd like to think we've become friends in my time with Logan, but I hardly know anything about him outside of work.

"So, what do you do when you're not working?" I ask Chris.

"Not a lot. I'm dedicated to my job, and I've recently had my mum move in with me; she's no longer able to live alone. I didn't want her going into a

nursing home.”

“That’s sad but really sweet. Between work and your mum, do you have any time for yourself?”

“I catch up with my army mates when time permits.”

“You were in the army?”

“Yes, for fifteen years.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “It’s not something I like to talk about.”

“That’s understandable. There’s no special woman in your life?”

“Nah, I came close to getting married once, but—”

He drops his gaze to the table, and I can tell that question upsets him. I reach for his hand. “I’m sorry ... I shouldn’t have pried.”

“That’s fine. It was a long time ago. There’s been others since, but nobody could measure up.”

“Aww, you must have really loved her.”

“I did. Her name was Victoria; we were high school sweethearts. I was going to propose to her the day I left for my first deployment, but I worried she’d think I was doing it for the wrong reasons, so I decided to wait. I carried that ring with me while I was on tour, with plans to slip it on her finger the second I returned. A week before flying home, I received a Dear John letter ... she broke up with me. She’d met someone else.”

“Oh my god, that’s awful.”

“Honestly, I don’t blame her; I’d been gone almost eight months. It’s a lot to ask of someone.”

“Did you ever try to talk to her when you got back?”

“Nah, there was no point, she’d already made her choice.”

“How sad,” I say, flopping back into my seat. “I can’t believe she broke up with you via a letter, that’s pretty crummy.”

“Shit happens,” he says, bringing the cup of coffee to his mouth. He places his mug on the table when his phone rings in his top pocket. “I bet it’s Mr. Cavanagh. On the drive to the office this morning, I told him that we’d been having brunch together. I don’t think he was impressed; he got a bit grumbly with me after that.”

I laugh. “You stirrer. I love it.”

Chris looks down at his phone and frowns. “Oh, it’s not him. It’s my neighbour,” he says, standing. “Excuse me; I need to take this.”

While waiting for him to return, I slip my hand into my bag and retrieve

my phone.

Brooke: Hey, Hot Stuff. My brunch date just stepped out to take a call, so I thought I'd send you a quick message before he gets back.

I'm smiling the entire time I type.

Hot Stuff: Someone is a comedian today. Why did I only find out about these brunch dates this morning? You know I don't like it when you keep things from me.

Brooke: Technically, it's not a date. On day one of our visits to see Grace, I sat alone in the hospital cafeteria eating a muffin that was so stale I almost chipped a tooth while Chris waited outside in the limo for us. So, the following day I asked him to take me somewhere where the food was at least edible, and I was lonely, so I invited him to join me. Is that a crime?

Hot Stuff: No, it's not a crime. I'm a lawyer, remember?

Brooke: A very sexy one too.

Hot Stuff: Flattery will get you everywhere, Mrs. Cavanagh.

Brooke: Oh, what am I going to get as a reward?

Hot Stuff: Your car keys back. I've been thinking and have decided I was a little harsh when I took them away. You're more than capable of driving yourself around, so you'll no longer need Chris to chauffeur you during the day.

I throw my head back and laugh. As if I didn't see that one coming.

Brooke: Okay, caveman!

Hot Stuff: Do I need to punish you when I get home?

Brooke: Most definitely!

I squirm a little in my seat when I write that. This pregnancy has made me insatiable. I can't seem to get enough of that sexy man of mine. The past week has been hard having Jacinta staying with us. I can no longer jump my husband's bones whenever the need arises. We've been limited to late-night

rendezvous' in our bedroom, but even then, we must be quiet since Jacinta is staying in the room next to us.

With my baby bump now getting in the way, we are limited to two positions, me on top or him taking me from behind. Last night I had to bury my face in the pillow and bite down on it to mask my scream as he brought me to orgasm.

Hot Stuff: Minx!

I look up when Chris comes to a stop beside the table. "I need to duck home for a minute. Do you want to stay here and wait, or would you like me to drop you back at the hospital?"

"Is everything okay?"

"My mum has wandered off; I have to go find her."

"You don't like her leaving the house?"

"She has dementia."

I reach for my bag and stand. "I'll come with you."



As soon as we pull up in Chris's driveway, a lady comes dashing out from the house next door with a baby in her arms and two small children trailing behind her. She points down the street. "She went that way."

"Thanks, Jess," he says, immediately throwing the car into reverse.

"Does she do this often?" I ask.

"This is the first time since moving in with me, but once a stranger found her over a kilometre from her old place, she was dazed and confused. She moved in with me shortly after that. I have carers drop in during the day, and I call in between jobs, but sometimes she's left alone. I hate that I can't be there twenty-four-seven, but I have other responsibilities. I need to work."

"Have you spoken to Logan about this?"

"No."

"You should."

We peruse to the end of the street, with no sign of her. He comes to a stop at the t-intersection, looking left and then right. "I don't know which way to go."

"Do you want me to get out and walk down that way," I ask, pointing out

the passenger side window, “and you can go right?”

“No. I’m not letting you out on your own.”

“Go left then. The footpath follows that direction, and hopefully, she didn’t cross the road.”

“Good thinking.”

We only drive around a few hundred metres before we see her. She’s pushing a walking frame. Bless her heart.

“Thank Christ,” Chris mumbles, pulling up a little further down. We both remove our seatbelts and exit the car. I stand back and watch as he tentatively approaches. “Mum,” he says, stopping in front of her. Her confused expression tells me she doesn’t recognise him. My heart aches for them. “Jess called and said you wandered off. I was worried you wouldn’t find your way back home.”

“Do I know you?” she asks.

When Chris dips his head, I approach. “Hi,” I say, holding out my hand. “My name is Brooke.”

“I’m Marjorie.” There’s a sweet smile on her face as she takes me in. “Oh, look at that cute baby bump. When are you due?”

“November,” I say, placing my hand on my stomach.

“How lovely. I have a son. I named him Christopher James after his father. God rest his soul.”

“What a lovely name.”

“Yes, he’s such a sweet boy too, never gives me any trouble.”

“Mum, that’s me ... I’m Christopher ... your son.”

Her gaze moves back to him as her eyes scan over his face. It takes her a few moments, but I feel an immediate relief when recognition lights up her features. It must be heartbreaking not to be remembered by your own mother.

“Oh, look how grown up you are. Where did all that time go?” Reaching out, she places her shaky hand on his face. “You look so much like your father.”

“Yes, I do,” he says, smiling. “Come, it’s a long walk back. Let me get you in the car.”

When we return to the house, I help Marjorie out of the car while Chris retrieves her walker from the limousine. “Oh, how lovely, you’re expecting,” she says, looking down at my stomach. “When are you due?”

“November,” I say, giving Chris a sympathetic look. She’s forgotten again already.

After getting her settled in front of the television, Chris goes into the kitchen to make her a cup of tea, and I follow him.

“I’ve just ordered an uber to take me back to the hospital.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“No, stay here and spend some time with your mum.”

“Mr. Cavanagh won’t be happy with you catching an uber.”

“Leave him to me. I know he’ll understand.”

“Thank you,” he says.

Reaching out, I place my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry you’re going through this; you should’ve told us. We care about you, Christopher James.”

“Oh god, please don’t.”

“What?” I say, laughing. “It’s a nice name. It suits you.”

“She only ever called me by my full name when I was in trouble.”

“Ha ... my mum did that too.”

“I think it’s a universal thing. Using our full name carries more weight. When I was walking to the car the other morning, I heard my neighbour, Jess, scream, *“I swear to God, Emily Maddison O’Malley, if you poke your brother in the eye one more time, I’m sending you to your room.”*”

We both have a chuckle at that.

“My ride will be here any minute, so I better get going, but promise me you’ll speak up if there’s anything we can do to help.”

“I will, and thanks for your help with Mum today.”

“There’s nothing we wouldn’t do for you; you know that, right? You’re like family to us.”

Nodding his head, Chris swallows thickly. “I appreciate that.”

Chapter 24

Logan

Once the girls are checked in, I reach for my wife's hand as the four of us head towards the departure gates.

A month has passed since Grace was admitted to the hospital. She was released four days ago and has spent them at the penthouse with us while we formulated a plan.

After a little convincing and a few tears, we finally talked them into moving to Melbourne, where they could start fresh. As Grace said, her husband won't be locked up forever, so moving out of state was an ideal solution for them.

I've organised for Jim Maloney, my Chief Operating Officer, to give Grace a job once she's fully healed. She was concerned because she's never worked; her husband forbade it, but I told her not to worry. Jim will find her a position within my company. The important thing is that she has a steady income to support herself and her daughter going forward.

When we reach the point where we can't go any further, we stop walking. Brooke immediately bundles Jacinta into her arms, and they both start crying. They've become extremely close whilst she's been staying with us. My wife has been an emotional mess all morning, but she knows this is what's best for them. It's not like we're never going to see them again.

"Thank you for everything," Grace says, turning her attention to me.

"There's no need to thank me. I hope you two find happiness in Melbourne."

"We will," she says, smiling. She's been doing a lot of that lately. Brooke even got her in to see our dentist when she was released, so that he could replace her missing tooth. She looks completely different to the battered and

bruised woman I first met. She still has the plaster on her arm, but otherwise, she's healed nicely.

"I have this for you." I reach into my pocket and pull out a white envelope.

Grace's eyes widen when she lifts the flap and sees what's inside. "I can't take this," she says, pushing the envelope back towards me.

"You can. You'll need money for the bond when you finally find a place to live ... and for furniture."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Jim's card is in there also, he's expecting your call."

"I'll definitely be calling him."

Brooke has booked them into a hotel for the first two weeks of their stay in Melbourne. It will give them time to find a new school and it will be the perfect place to settle into their new hometown. Grace may not know it yet, but being in control of her own life and finances for the first time ever will do her self-worth and self-esteem the world of good. She's been held prisoner from her own independence for far too long.

Once the goodbyes are made and Grace and Jacinta head for security, I drape my arm over Brooke's shoulder. She's still sniffing as we head towards the exit.

"They are going to be fine," I say. "Jim will look out for them. I promise once they're settled, we can fly down for a visit."

"I saw that envelope full of cash you gave Grace."

"She's going to need money to get by until she's on her feet."

"How much did you give her?"

"Ten grand."

"You're the sweetest, Mr. Cavanagh."

"Do you know what the sweetest thing is?" I ask, as my hand moves down to palm her right cheek. "Your arse in these tights. You can't even tell you're pregnant from behind, although the waddling slightly gives it away."

"I *do not* waddle," she screeches, elbowing me in the side.

"I hate to break it to you, babe, but you do."

"You suck."

"While we're on the subject of sucking," I say. "I gave Jill a half day, so when I get home from the office tonight, I want you waiting for me naked."

"That sounds promising."

I lean down and whisper in her ear, “I’m going to fuck you on every surface.”

“Oh god,” she groans, tilting her head back. “That’s hours away, you tease.”



“How are things going with your mum?” I ask Chris as he helps me strip the sheets off the bed in the spare room next to the master. Brooke has only six weeks to go until her due date, so today, we’re setting up the nursery to surprise her.

He lifts one shoulder. “Okay, I guess.”

“You’re not going to want to hear this, but she’s at a stage in her life where she needs around-the-clock care.”

“I know. But all the aged care facilities I’ve looked at—the one’s in my price range anyway—are dreadful. I can’t in good conscience put her in a place like that. She’d hate it.”

“Let me help then.”

“I appreciate the offer, boss, *I really do*, but I can’t allow you to do that. This is my problem. I hired a nurse to come for a few hours throughout the day while I’m at work, but the nights are killing me. My mum gets up at all hours and wanders around the house. I have to deadlock the doors when I go to bed so she can’t escape.”

“That’s concerning.”

“Tell me about it. The other day I had to disconnect the landline because she’d gotten up at 2 am and started calling everyone in her address book. She was looking for my dad, who’s been dead for twenty years. She told everyone he’d gone to work that morning and hadn’t returned home. When my cousin, *the dick*, told her he was dead, she started screaming hysterically. It’s fucked up. It was like she was hearing that news for the first time. It took me hours to calm her down.

“Shit.” I drag the mattress towards me and flip it on its side.

“This disease is the worst, but on the flip side, she had no memory of that call when she woke the next morning ... where are we putting all this furniture anyway?”

“In one of the spare rooms for now. I’ll move it down to the storage space

I have in the basement another day. We need to get some paint on the walls if it's going to be ready for Brooke when she gets home tonight.”



I'm sitting at the dining room table with Chris eating lunch. Jill made us a platter of wraps. He's currently on the phone getting an update from the nurse caring for his mother, he looks so tired, and I hate that he's going through this.

I slide the phone out of the pocket of my sweats, pulling up Claire's number.

Logan: When you get some free time, can you look up and see if there are any reputable dementia care facilities in the area? Cost is not a factor; I need somewhere great.

Claire: I can certainly do that for you, boss. Is this for Chris's mother?"

I hope I'm not overstepping my mark, but Chris can't continue doing this on his own; it's too much. He's burning the candle at both ends.

Logan: Yes.

Claire: Has anyone ever told you what a good boss you are?

Logan: Not today, no.

Claire: Well, let me be the first. I'm honoured to work for a man like you. You have a heart of gold, Mr. Cavanagh.

Logan: Thank you, Claire.

Claire: How's the nursery coming along?

Logan: We need to do one more coat of paint after lunch and put the furniture together.

Claire: Please don't tell me they're flatpacks. Remember that shelving you tried to put together for Rose?

Logan: The instructions were in Chinese smart-arse.

Claire: But the self-explanatory images were not. How long did it take you? Three days and an entire box of superglue?

I swear this woman takes pleasure in riling me up.

Logan: It was a few hours and two tubes of superglue. If you mention the part where I ALLEGEDLY glued my fingers together, I'm going to fire you!

Claire: Bahahaha! I forgot about that part. I'm pretty sure I have a photo of it on my phone somewhere.

Logan: That's impossible because it NEVER happened! Besides, that was three years ago, I was an amateur back then. I'm a pro now.

Claire: Ha! Of course, you are. How many flat packs have you put together since then?

Logan: None of your business.

Claire: I'm guessing that means zero. Tell Chris I need video footage.

Logan: Don't you have work to do?

As I slide my phone back into my pocket, I observe Chris yawning for the second time since he ended his call with the nurse. "Why don't you head home? I should be able to finish things here."

"Nah, I'm good. The nurse said my mum's been asleep all morning ... which means she'll probably be up half the night."

For his sake, I hope not. "All the more reason you should go home and get some rest too."

"I'd rather stay if that's okay."

"Fair enough. Are you ready to get back into it then?"



"Ugh. Are you fucking kidding me?" I scream in pure frustration. "I have

a law degree, for Christ's sake, I should be able to decipher basic furniture instructions." I run my hand through my hair, tugging on the strands. "I feel like I'm playing a game of charades with an illiterate piece of paper! How hard is it to put written words to go alongside the pictures, you fucking morons? I should sue this company for emotional distress ... I reckon if I looked on reddit I'd find forums on this shit. I should definitely do that ... I can guarantee I'm not alone here. We could team up and do a class action against these fuckers."

When Chris cracks up, my head snaps in his direction, only to find him holding his phone out. "You better not be filming me!"

"Claire texted me and told me to have my camera ready."

"I swear to God ... I should fire you both." That only makes him laugh harder as he wipes tears from his eyes.

"That's a little unfair, boss. We had nothing to do with those instructions."

"That's because they were created by a blind man who was more than likely high at the time."

He points to the piece I'm holding. "I think that one goes over there."

"I know what I'm doing," I lie.

"Clearly."

"Can you go and ask Jill if we have any superglue?"

"Would you like me to take a look at the instructions?"

"Be my guest," I snap, flicking the stupid instructions in his direction.

"*Fucking superglue,*" he mumbles under his breath as he scoops the booklet off the floor.

When he has the first piece of furniture together in less than five minutes, I want to punch that smug look right off his face. "How?"

"I was in the army remember; I can do this shit in my sleep."

"Show-off."



I'm pacing back and forth in the main room while waiting for Brooke to get home. I'm not sure why I'm so nervous. Technically, she unknowingly picked out all of the things in the nursery. We shopped together last week, and I took a mental note of everything she fawned over and went back the

following day and purchased it all.

She seemed to gravitate towards white furniture, so I painted the walls a buttery yellow because it's not only a neutral colour, it's her favourite. I could've got all cocky and gone with something more girly, like pink, but there's a fifty-percent chance I'm wrong, and we're having a boy. I'm confident it's a girl, though.

Chris left soon after all the furniture was together. How he can make sense of that bullshit is beyond me. When I called my mum and told her what I'd been doing, she rushed over to help me style the room. I may be biased, but the nursery turned out amazing.

My mum got all emotional when we finished and stood back to take it all in. "*I can't believe my baby boy is going to be a daddy.*" Hearing those words, and seeing the nursery completed, choked me up ... it suddenly felt so real.

In a matter of weeks, Brooke and I will be parents and responsible for the tiny life we created. That's both terrifying and mind-blowing. *I can't wait to meet our little girl.*

When the lift dings, announcing my wife's arrival, I shake out my arms before heading towards the foyer.

Her face lights up when the doors open, and she sees me standing there. "Hot Stuff!"

I'll never tire of that look she gives me. It's one of pure devotion. Nothing is more gratifying than being in a relationship with someone who adores you just as much as you do them.

She steps out and straight into my arms. "How are my girls?" I ask, running my hand over her growing stomach. We can feel the baby kick all the time now, and it's astonishing. I talk to Brooke's stomach often because our child will have a natural bond with its mother when it's born, so I'm hoping by doing this, she'll know who her daddy is too.

"Plural? You have to stop saying that. I'm worried you'll be disappointed if this baby turns out to be a boy."

"Never. As long as our child is healthy, the gender is irrelevant."

"How was your day?" she asks.

"Busy, you?"

"Same. The concert is coming around fast, and there's still so much to do."

"Remember our deal?"

“How can I forget, since you keep reminding me ... in three more weeks, I’m being forced into maternity leave.”

“Forced?”

“Yes, my husband is a brute.”

I chuckle as I place my lips against the top of her head. “A brute, huh?”

She draws her face back and smiles up at me. “Yes, you’re lucky you’re so hot, or that would be a total turn-off.”

“Nothing about me turns you off, my dick can attest to that. He’s going to need a vacation once this baby is born. You’ve worn him out.”

“Well, he’s going to get one. Remember what the doctor said, no sex for six weeks after the birth?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. *Six fucking weeks*. I barely survived two weeks of abstinence prior to the wedding.” I raise my hand and trace her lips with the tip of my finger. “At least I have this sweet mouth to get me through and a plenitude of unpaid blowies to cash in.”

“A plenitude?”

“Yes, it will take at least a few more years before your studio debt is paid in full.”

“Right,” she says, laughing.

Releasing her, I reach for her hand. “Come, I have a surprise for you.”

“Let me guess; it’s in your pants?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Mrs. Cavanagh. It’s not that type of surprise.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m plenty fun. I’ll let you play with my dick later. I have something else I want to show you first.”

My stomach churns as we climb the stairs. I hope she’s not disappointed I did this without her. She’s been stressing about the nursery, but she has no spare time with things being so hectic at the studio

When we reach the door of the old spare room, I manoeuvre her body in front of mine until my front rests against her back.

She glances up at me from over her shoulder. “Why are we standing here? You’re not moving me back into this room, I hope?”

“Never. Open the door.”

I hear her gasp the moment she does, and I’m now wishing I was in a position where I could see her face. “Hot Stuff,” she breathes. “When did you do this?”

“Today.”

“You hired someone to do this?”

“No, I did it.”

“By yourself?”

“With some help from Chris and my mum. What do you think?” She turns around, buries her face in my chest and bursts into tears ... that’s not the reaction I was hoping for. “You don’t like it?”

“I love it.”

I cup her face, slightly tilting her head back. “Then why the tears?” I can’t stand it when she cries.

“Because these pregnancy hormones have turned me into a horny psychopath, that’s why.”

Her comment makes me laugh. “I’m not going to dispute the horny part, but you’re far from a psychopath, babe.”

“Well, I feel like one. A man cut me off on the way to the studio this morning, and do you know what I did?”

“What?”

“I wound down my window, called him a cocksucker, and when he flipped me the bird, I threatened to gouge out one of his eyeballs.”

I throw my head back and burst out laughing. “Please tell me you didn’t.”

“I know, right? Who does that?”

“My wife, apparently.”

“See what I mean? I’m unhinged. Later, when I’d calmed down, I felt terrible for calling him that and threatening him with violence.”

I use the pads of my thumbs to gently wipe the tears from her cheeks before placing a soft kiss on her nose. “You’re not unhinged; you’re hormonal ... there’s a difference, but no more road rage, okay? Next time you might threaten the wrong person and end up being the one with a gouged-out eye, *or worse*. Although, I can’t imagine having your eyeball ripped from its socket would be pleasant.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

I bite down on my knuckle, trying not to laugh. “Never.” The word is barely out of my mouth before I’m releasing a whoosh of air as her closed fist connects with my abdomen. “Jesus, Brooke,” I say, rubbing my hand over my abs.

“See ... one minute I’m a blubbering mess, then the next I’m all stabby.”

I fold her in my arms. “You’re almost at the end, babe. You’re already in

your third trimester. In a few more months, you'll be back to the sweet and loving person I married."

I chuckle when she pinches my side, but I also make a mental note to hide all the knives just in case.

Releasing her, I rest my hands on her shoulders, turning her around to face the room. "Go see the nursery."

Everything our baby will need is here: a cot, a changing table and even a rocking chair. A large, fluffy, white, cloud-shaped rug decorates the floor with a chest of drawers lined up by one wall. Boxed shelving sits directly opposite, perfect for books, toys, and knick-knacks. I've left those bare, so Brooke can put her own touches on the room.

Mum and Michelle are throwing her a baby shower at the studio next week, so I'm sure the shelves will fill up quickly.

"Everything is perfect," she says. "I love the colour you chose for the walls."

"Your favourite colour. The bedding matches, but mum took that home to wash; she said everything needs to be sterilised."

"Yeah, I read that in one of the baby books." She moves over to the mobile that I hung above the cot. "This is sweet."

"I picked it out myself." It has several yellow and gold stars hanging from different lengths, a couple of white, puffy clouds that match the rug on the floor, and in the centre is an Angel ... for my little Angel. "Listen to this."

When I turn it on, the mobile slowly turns in a circle as the lullaby, *Rock-A-Bye Baby*, softly plays.

"Oh my God," she whispers as tears fill her eyes again. I blink a few times, trying to hold back my own.

I can't wait for the day we get to bring our baby home from the hospital.

Chapter 25

Logan

I pull out my phone when it chimes, and smile as soon as I see it's from Brooke. I only just left her.

Brooke: I'm bored out of my brain already. I should've come with you.

Logan: Brooke, it's only been 10 minutes.

Brooke: Really? Because it feels like at least an hour.

Logan: Do you want me to get Chris to turn around?

Brooke: No. You said yourself you have back-to-back meetings ... I'm just going to be bored there too.

She's only in her first week of maternity leave, and she's already struggling.

Logan: Babe, you only have a few weeks to go. Take the doctor's advice and get some rest while you still can. Once the baby arrives and wants to be fed every few hours, your sleep will be limited.

Brooke: At least I'll have something to monopolise my time. There's nothing left for me to do here. I've packed and unpacked my hospital bag twice, disinfected the nursery, washed and ironed all the baby's things, and put away all my gifts from the baby shower.

Logan: Why don't you put your feet up and relax ... binge Netflix? I'm sure you can find something on there to watch.

Brooke: Boring!

Logan: How about giving yourself a facial, or you could paint your nails? A little pampering might make you feel better.

Brooke: Paint my nails? Yeah, right! I would if I could still see my feet ... or reach them, for that matter. I need to get out of the apartment, Hot Stuff. I want fresh air and sunshine.

Logan: I don't want you traipsing all over the city alone, in your condition. When I get home tonight, we can walk along the harbour front and maybe grab some dinner while we're out?

I wait a few minutes, and when I get no reply, I send her another message.

Logan: Are you still there?

Brooke: Yes, I'm here. I'm just pouting ... give me a few more minutes, please.

I chuckle when I read her reply.

Logan: I love you.

Brooke: I love you too, Hot Stuff. x

Logan: I'm almost at the office. I'll give you a call later.

Brooke: Okay. I might go bake three dozen cupcakes and eat them all myself.

I bark out a laugh.

Logan: You better save at least one for me. You know I love your cupcakes.

Brooke: No cupcakes for you! (And yes, I typed that in the same accent as the Soup Nazi from Seinfeld)

I shake my head as I slide my phone back into my pocket. "Can you do

me a favour once you've dropped me off, Chris?"

"Sure, Boss."

"Can you head back to the apartment? Brooke's restless, so she will likely disobey me and try to sneak out."

"That doesn't sound like something she would do," he snickers.

"It sounds *exactly* like something she'd do."



Chris: You were right.

Logan: I'm always right.

Logan: Remind me again what I was right about?

Chris: Your wife is trying to sneak out.

I fucking knew it. I glance down at my watch and see it's just before eleven. It's been almost three hours since we were texting, so she lasted longer than I thought she would.

Logan: Did you march that sweet arse of hers back upstairs.

Chris: I tried; you know how stubborn she gets. She said she wanted to walk off the seven cupcakes she ate. I think she referred to it as comfort eating.

Although I'm annoyed that she defied me, I'm still grinning as I read his replies.

Logan: Where is she now? I'm just about to head into a meeting. Do you need me to call her quickly and pull her into line?

Chris: No, she's safe. She's with me. It took some convincing, but I coaxed her into the back of the limo. I'm taking her to visit my mum at the nursing home. That should keep her out of trouble for the next few hours, at least.

Logan: Thank you! I owe you for this.

Chris: After everything you did for my mum ... you don't owe me a thing. I'll never be able to repay you for that.

I'd never expect him to.

Claire ended up finding the perfect place for Marjorie, Chris's mother. It's a small facility in Mosman that specialises in Dementia care. When I first broached the subject with him, he was a little upset, but after we visited the place together, he couldn't deny she would get the care she needed there. Handing over a loved one to a bunch of strangers wouldn't be easy, but in the end, I feel like he made the right decision.

Mosman is an affluent suburb on the North Shore, and Chris would never have been able to afford a place like that, but I could. He's been a loyal employee of mine *for years* and has gone above and beyond countless times. He deserved a break. But first and foremost, he's a friend who was suffering. I couldn't stand by and do nothing.

Chris: I've got to go; Brooke's looking over my shoulder and reading my messages. Wow. She just clocked me on the shoulder and called me a low-down-dirty-snitch.

I throw my head back and laugh. This woman amuses me to no end.



I'm currently in my last meeting for the day, and I'm anxious to get home. I've had no word from Chris since his earlier messages, and I've been too busy to call. But I'm not concerned; I'm sure he would've let me know if there were any issues. I trust him with my wife and I know he'll keep her safe.

I lift my head when there is a knock on the boardroom door and I find Rochelle standing there. "I'm sorry to bother you Mr. Cavanagh. I called Rose, and she said I could find you here."

"Is there a problem?"

"I'm not sure. There are two police officers down in reception asking for you."

"Police officers?"

"Yes."

"Did they say what it was about?"

“No, but I ... umm, didn’t feel comfortable sending them up here, so I thought I’d check with you first.”

“I’m glad you did.” Thoughts of my last run-in with the law flash through my mind, and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. “I’ll come down and see what they want.” I stand, buttoning my jacket. “Excuse me for a moment, gentlemen.”

When we reach the lobby, I head straight for the officers. I have no clue what this is about, but I guess I’m about to find out.

“Officers,” I say, when I come to a stop in front of them.

“Logan Cavanagh?”

“Yes, that’s me. Can you tell me what this is about?”

“I’m Officer Graham, and this is Officer Smith, I believe you’re the owner of a Black Chrysler Limousine, registration number NBY62H?”

“Yes, is there a problem?”

“Your vehicle was involved in an accident earlier today.”

“An accident?”

“Yes, I regret to inform you that the driver ...” the officer looks down at the notepad in his hand “... A Mr. Christopher James Brown was pronounced deceased at the scene.”

“*Deceased* ... Chris is dead?” I ask as all the air leaves my body.

“Unfortunately, yes. We’re still trying to track down his next of kin.”

“That would be his mother,” I say “She’s in full-time care, but I can get those details for you.” My head is spinning. I can’t believe this is happening.

“Would you happen to know the identity of the passenger he was travelling with ... we couldn’t find any identification on her?”

“Passenger?”

“Yes, a female in her mid-twenties with long brown hair. She’s heavily pregnant.”

I hear Rochelle gasp behind me, as my knees buckle. I reach for the reception desk to keep myself upright. “Is she ...” I can’t even bring myself to say the words.

“She was unresponsive at the scene and had to be cut from the vehicle. She was taken to the Royal Prince Alfred hospital via ambulance. Last we heard she was in surgery. Do you know her identity so we can contact her family?”

“Brooke ... Brooke Cavanagh ... she’s *my wife*.”

Chapter 26

Logan

My ride to the hospital, in the back seat of the police car, was a total blur. I'm pretty sure I'm suffering from some form of shock because I'm numb. It doesn't stop me now from pacing back and forth in some tiny godforsaken room, waiting for someone to give me an update.

I feel like I'm losing my damn mind.

When my phone chimes in my pocket, I pull it out—I'm on autopilot—and look down at the screen.

Claire: Rochelle just told me what happened. OMFG! I'm so sorry. Is Brooke alright? Let me know if there's anything I can do. Anything!

Tears cloud my eyes. I have no fucking clue how my wife is? Or my child, for that matter. All the nurse said when I arrived was that she was still in surgery and a doctor would come and speak with me soon. I need answers, but a part of me is scared to get them.

Logan: Can you contact Brooke's father and let him know what's happened? I'm at RPA. Still no news.

As soon as I hit send, I turn my phone off. I can't deal with anything outside this room right now.

I'm devastated about Chris—absolutely crushed that he's gone—but I can't even grieve for my friend when my entire life ... *my future*, is hanging in the balance.

I'm unsure how much time has passed when a nurse leads John into the room, I'm doubled over and sitting on the edge of the seat, elbows on my

knees and my head hanging between my wide-spread legs ... I'm staring at the floor, seeing nothing.

"Kiddo," is all he says. I raise my face to meet his. When he crosses the room in three long strides, I manage to hold up my hand before he makes any contact. "Don't." I know if he touches me, I'm going to crumble ... I need to keep a level head, and more importantly, remain strong for my girls.

He stops dead in his tracks. "What happened? All Claire said was that Brooke had been in an accident and that I needed to get to the hospital ASAP."

"She was in a car accident. That's all I can tell you."

"Was she injured? Is the baby alright?"

I jumped to my feet. "I don't fucking know," I say, clutching the sides of my head between my hands. "She's been in surgery for hours."

"Surgery?"

"Yes."

"What type of injuries does she have?"

"I said, *I don't know.*" I don't mean to snap at him, but the unknown is what's freaking me out the most. "All the police could tell me was Chris died at the scene. Brooke was unresponsive when they cut her out of the vehicle." I tilt my head back and stare up at the ceiling as I struggle not to break down. I can't believe this is happening.

"Chris is dead?"

Ignoring his question, I intake a sharp breath. "What is taking them so long?"

I push through the door and step out into the corridor, rubbing the heel of my palm over my chest as I do. *I need air.* I'm not sure if it's that tiny room making me feel claustrophobic or John's questions.

Bending at the waist, I place my hands on my knees, as I struggle to get air into my lungs.

"Logan." I look up when someone calls my name and see my parents further down the corridor. My mum breaks away from my dad and rushes straight for me. The moment she's within reach, she engulfs me in her arms. "John called and said Brooke has been in an accident ... I can't believe it. How is she?"

I stand to full height, and dig the heel of my palms into my eye sockets, trying to stop the tears from falling. "I don't know. Nobody has told me anything. She's been in surgery for hours."

“Oh, my goodness, and our grandbaby?”

“Mum ... I don't know.”

“Leave it with me, Son,” my dad says, reaching out and touching my shoulder. “I'll see what I can find out.”

He turns and starts marching back the way he came.

“What happened?”

“I don't know that either. She was in the car with Chris ... that's all I know.”

“How's Chris? Have you spoken to him?”

“He's dead, Mum. He didn't make it.” She gasps, covering her mouth with her hands. “I heard on the radio that Spit Road at Mosman has been closed most of the day due to a double fatality. Was that the same accident?”

That knowledge makes me want to hurl because my last interaction with Chris was at 11 am ... it's now almost 7 pm.

“The last contact I had with them; they were heading to Mosman to visit Chris's mother.”

“Dear Lord.”

When tears spill from her eyes, I reach for her, folding her in my arms. “I can't lose them, Mum,” I say as my voice cracks. “*I can't lose them too.*”

“You won't, sweetie,” she sobs, clutching me tighter.

“You don't know that.”

“Have faith ... life couldn't be that cruel.”



Half an hour passes before my father returns. The tiny waiting room is now overcrowded, making it feel even more suffocating. After hearing it on the news, Michelle arrived. I'm furious; the media shouldn't be able to release names until all family members have been contacted.

Michelle and Mum are sitting in the far corner crying, John has his face buried in his hands, and I'm leaning against the wall, barely holding on by a thread.

“I finally found someone who can help,” my father says, bursting into the room. “I can't believe how many incompetent people work here.”

“What did you find out?” I ask, pushing off the wall.

“I lost my cool and demanded to speak to the person in charge. There is

someone on their way here now.”

A few minutes pass before the doctor enters the room, and the moment he does, I brace myself. As much as I need answers, actually getting them terrifies me.

“Hi,” he says as his eyes scan the room. “I’m Dr. Wainwright.”

“How is my wife?” I ask.

“She’s in recovery and will be moved into intensive care shortly. We were able to repair a lot of the damage while she was under ... but her injuries are extensive. The swelling on her brain is causing us the most concern. We’ve placed her in a medically induced coma to give her body a chance to heal, but she’s still listed as critical at this stage, I’m afraid. The next forty-eight hours are going to be crucial.”

His mouth continues to move, but after he said *swelling on the brain* nothing else is registering for me.

“The baby?”

“The baby was in distress when your wife was brought in, we had to perform an emergency c-section.” A small smile tugs at his lips before he continues. “Your daughter is doing great, but because she was born premature and her lungs haven’t fully matured, she’s been placed in the neonatal intensive care unit.” *My daughter*. “Despite your wife’s injuries, it appears your daughter was miraculously unharmed in the accident. Would you like to see her?”

I shove my trembling hands into my pockets. “When can I see my wife?”

“Soon. I can have one of the nurses take you to her when she’s moved out of recovery and into ICU.”

My girls are alive, and although that news is an indescribable relief, I can’t shake the dread churning inside me.



I follow the doctor to the NICU. He leads me past the front desk and into a small room off to the side. “I’m going to have to get you to remove your jacket and watch; they can be placed in one of these lockers. You’ll also need to roll up your sleeves. Being free of any clothing from below the elbow is a requirement.”

Doing as he asks, I unclip my watch and slide it off my wrist, placing it in

my jacket pocket before shrugging out of it and shoving it into the boxed compartment. My cufflinks are next, and a lump rises to my throat as I stare down at the small L & B monogram in my hand. They're the only cufflinks I've worn since Brooke gave them to me the day before our wedding. Those go into the pocket of my trousers for safekeeping ... they are too precious to lose.

I'm rolling up my sleeves as we head out of the room. The doctor washes and gels his hands at the basin and then steps aside for me to do the same. "You'll need to do this every time you come up here." When I'm done, he uses his elbow to push the green button on the wall that opens a set of double glass doors. "Since your daughter was over thirty-two weeks gestation, she's been placed in the special care unit."

My eyes scan the large room once we enter. It's divided into eight cubicles, four on each side, which are separated by small partition walls.

"Will my daughter suffer any complications being born prematurely?"

"Babies born after thirty-two weeks rarely do."

"My wife would have been thirty-seven weeks this coming Friday."

The doctor looks over at me and smiles. "Your daughter is going to be fine, Mr. Cavanagh; save your prayers for your wife."

That statement is like a stab to my heart. "What are my wife's chances, doc?"

"As I said, the next few days are crucial. If she can get through that, then I'm optimistic she'll pull through."

"And the swelling on her brain?"

"It should go down over the next few days."

"Is there any other damage?"

"To her brain? We won't know that until the swelling goes down, we'll do more scans then. My advice would be to take each day as it comes. Know that she is getting the best care and will be monitored very closely."

"How long will she be in the induced coma?"

"How ever long is needed."

He holds up his hand and motions with two fingers, signalling one of the nurses. "This is where I leave you. I have to get back down to recovery and check on your wife. I'll have someone come and get you when she's moved to ICU."

I extend my hand to him. "Thank you for saving my girls."

When my voice cracks, he places his hand on my shoulder. "Stay strong

for them. They're going to need you." When the nurse approaches, he hands me over to her. "Mr. Cavanagh is here to see his daughter."

My stomach churns as we walk towards the cubicle in the far back corner. "I've been looking after your daughter since she was moved in here ... she's such a precious little thing and so placid. I haven't heard a peep out of her yet."

I can hear a few of the other babies in the room screaming their lungs out. "Is it normal for her to be so quiet?"

"Every baby is different. The doctor gave her a thorough check over, don't worry. She's perfectly healthy."

We stop in front of the small, clear plastic bed. My breath hitches in my throat as I gaze down at the tiny baby inside. She's dressed in only a disposable nappy, and a little pink beanie is on her head.

"Is she cold without any clothes on?"

"No." She holds out her hand, hovering it over the bed. "Feel." When I do, I can feel the heat from the unit above her. "It's called a radiant warmer, it keeps the baby at a perfect temperature, and the open top allows us to give your daughter better care. The sicker or more premature babies are placed inside a closed incubator."

"I see."

So many emotions are flowing through me as I stare down at my little girl. This isn't how it was supposed to be; Brooke should be here with me, experiencing this moment together. She was so looking forward to meeting our child—that's all she's been talking about the past few weeks—and I hate that it's been taken away from her.

"She's so tiny."

"Babies put on most of their weight in the last few weeks of pregnancy," she says. "We'll fatten her up in no time, you'll see. I was actually just about to get a bottle ready when you came in. Would you like to feed her?"

"Please."

"Great, I'll be back in a few minutes." That's another thing that Brooke will miss out on. She was looking forward to breastfeeding.

I reach inside her cot when I'm alone, and my hand looks giant next to her small body. She looks so fragile that I'm afraid to touch her. Tears rise to my eyes as I gently stroke my fingertip against her clenched hand. When her tiny fingers extend and then clutch onto the tip of mine, holding tight, something inside my chest cracks open.

“Your daddy’s here, baby girl,” I whisper as a tear rolls down my cheek. “Everything is going to be okay now ... I’ve got you.”

The nurse seats me in a chair when she returns, and the baby starts to cry as she’s being swaddled into a pink blanket, but the moment she’s in my arms, she stops. She’s so light; from here I get a close-up look at her sweet face. *She’s flawless.* With her tiny turned-up nose and plump heart-shaped lips. She’s a miniature version of her mummy, and I already know she’s going to steal my heart, just like Brooke did.

“Do you have a name picked out for her?”

Brooke and I tossed around a few, but she said she wanted to wait until the baby was born, so we could pick a name that most suited her. And after everything that transpired today, I have the perfect name for this little miracle.

“Angel,” I say, getting choked up. “Angel Maree.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

I watch the nurse shake the bottle in her hand before testing the temperature of the milk on her wrist. I remember seeing my sister do the same thing when Lara was a baby.

“Have you fed a baby before?”

“No, but I watched my sister feed my niece ... that was a long time ago, though.” The nurse smiles as she hands me the bottle. “Tilt the bottle slightly and place it against her lips. If her mouth doesn’t open right away, gently run it back and forth and her instinct to suckle should kick in.”

I follow the nurses’ instructions, and when Angel’s little lips finally part, and she eagerly starts sucking on the teat, I feel my lips curve into a smile.

The nurse reaches for my hand and adjusts the position of the bottle. “You need to hold it vertically so no air gets in. She’ll get a pain in her belly if she sucks in too much air.”

I lean down and place a gentle kiss against her forehead. I’m completely mesmerised as I watch her guzzle down her milk, and when she opens her eyes to gaze around, the smile on my face grows. They’re dark, like Brooke’s.

“Hello,” I say, and her eyes follow my voice.

“She probably recognises your voice from her time in her mother’s stomach.”

“I’m your daddy, and I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” She

continues to stare at me as I talk to her. “Your mummy can’t be here right now,” I say, and my voice cracks as I speak. I take a few deep breaths and give myself a moment before I continue. “But you’ll get to meet her soon. She’s going to love you just as much as I already do.”

The nurse reaches out and places her hand on my arm. “The doctor told me about your wife. I’m so sorry. I hope her recovery is a swift one.”

So do I, but I honestly don’t care what condition I get her back in ... *I just need her back.*

When Angel finishes her bottle, I have my first lesson in burping and changing a nappy. The nurse allows me to hold her a little longer before I need to leave. Brooke is now out of recovery, and it’s time to go and see her. The thought makes me feel sick to the stomach because, in my heart, I know what I’m about to face will probably bring me to my knees.

Angel’s sound asleep when I lie her back in her cot. Leaning down, I kiss her forehead softly before doing the same to each cheek. “Daddy will be back soon,” I whisper.

“Would you like me to send someone down to get you when Angel is due for her next feed? I know you have a lot going on right now, but it’s important that your daughter forms a bond with you over the coming days.”

“Please. Are my family able to come up and see the baby?”

“I’m afraid not. Only parents are allowed in NICU. But you’re welcome to snap a picture of your daughter on your phone.”

I slide it out of my pocket, turn it on, and take a close-up image of her sweet, cherub face. My phone sounds as countless messages and missed calls pop up on the screen. I quickly flick it onto silent so I don’t wake my little girl.

“We might even try to do some skin-on-skin when you come back?”

“Skin-on-skin? I have no clue what that is.”

“It’s something we usually encourage with our mums. It’s a great way to bond with your child and can help promote breastfeeding.” I raise a brow when she says that. “I know you’re not able to breastfeed, but under the circumstances with your wife, I think it would be good for you and your daughter. Those first few days of bonding with a parent are very important.”

“If you think it will help, I’ll do it. It breaks my heart that her mum can’t experience this with her.”

“They’ll get time to bond when she’s well again.”

I nod. I want that more than anything.

I know my family are downstairs waiting for news, but my wife is my priority right now. I pull up the image of Angel from my camera roll and attach it to a text message. I add John, my parents, Michelle, Jill, and Claire, and when I go to search for Chris's number my stomach drops, but again I have to push those feelings aside. *I'll grieve for him later.* I also need to find the time to go and see his poor mum, but I have to get through today first.

I want to write something profound or heartfelt in my message to go along with the image, but my heart is not in it right now, so I type three words and press send.

Group message: Angel Maree Cavanagh!

After I do, I turn my phone back off. I'm not ready to deal with anything else right now; I will need every ounce of strength I can muster just to be able to enter my wife's room.

Chapter 27

Logan

When I arrive at intensive care, I'm led towards Brooke's room. It's situated right outside the nurse's station, and I can see the large glass viewing window out of my peripheral vision, but my gaze remains forward. I'm too scared to look.

"She's right in there," the nurse says, stopping by the door. "If you need anything, you can come out here to us or press the buzzer by the bed."

"Thank you."

My hand is trembling as I place my palm on the door. I pause for a moment and take a few deep breaths, trying to get my racing heart under control. When I finally push through, I only manage to take a few steps into the room before fear stops me once more. I knew coming in, what I'd be facing wouldn't be good, but I'm in no way prepared for the reality that lies before me.

Brooke is hooked up to so many machines, with lines coming out of everywhere, including a breathing tube lodged down her throat.

My eyes frantically scan over the room as bile fills my mouth. When I spot a small plastic bin in the corner, I rush in that direction. I only just manage to bring it to my face as I expel the contents of my stomach.

When I place the bin back on the floor, I remain hunched over as I rest my hands on my knees and take a few deep breaths.

I tentatively look over my shoulder, focusing on the foot of her bed. *She needs you—I tell myself—you can do this.*

Standing to full height, I turn and slowly make my way to the right side of the bed, and a strangled sob rips from the back of my throat when I get a good look at her. From here, the left side of her face still looks like my

beautiful wife—the one I saw this morning when I kissed her goodbye—but the swollen, angry-looking bruises and the numerous knicks and cuts to the opposite side of her face tear me up inside. She’s barely recognisable from this angle.

I close my eyes and picture the last image I have of her. She was standing in the foyer, smiling at me as the lift’s doors closed. She was wearing a simple, white loose-fitting dress to accommodate her heavily pregnant belly. Her long hair was down and hanging over one shoulder. There wasn’t a stitch of makeup on her face. She was glowing, and looked positively radiant ... I remember thinking that exact thing at that moment.

If only I could go back to this morning, bundle her into my arms and take her with me to the office. She’d be safe-and-sound, and not lying in this godforsaken hospital fighting for her life.

My eyes move down her body. She’s under a sheet, but her arms and shoulders are exposed. That’s when I see her right arm is plastered and bent into a sling. What other injuries does she have that I can’t see? I need to ask the doctor about that so I know what we’re dealing with here.

I round the bed and grab a chair on my way. It’s too heartbreaking to look at her from the right side.

Once I sit beside the bed, I reach for Brooke’s hand and bring it to my mouth. The tears are flowing freely now, and I’m powerless to stop them. “You have to keep fighting, babe. I can’t do this without you.” I rest my cheek against her hand and give myself a moment to release some of this heartache. Only allowing myself a few minutes of despair, I take a few deep breaths and wipe my eyes as I sit up straighter in my chair. I need to remain strong for my girls. Once I’ve pulled myself together, I continue talking. “I’ve just been to see our little girl, *she is so beautiful ... so perfect*, and she looks just like you. You have to hurry up and get well so you can meet her ... she needs her mummy just as much as I need you.” I have no idea if she can hear me, but I feel compelled to keep speaking just in case.

“I chose a name for her; I hope you don’t mind. The nameplate on her cot said baby Cavanagh. I don’t know how long it will be until you’re awake, but I’m sure if you could speak right now, you’d agree she needs her own identity. I didn’t choose any of the names we discussed because I know how important it was to you that our children be called something that suited them. Given everything that happened today and seeing her sweet little cherub face, I decided to call her Angel. Her middle name is Maree ... after

your mum.”

There isn't the slightest movement or reaction from her. Even the machine that monitors her heart rate doesn't change. I press my lips against her limp, cold hand as my tears return. “I love you so much, babe. Please come back to me. *Please*. I'm so sorry I wasn't there to protect you today.”



I don't leave her side for the next few hours, but I know I need to go when the nurse comes in and tells me Angel is ready for her next feed. I feel torn, but as hard as it is to leave, our little girl needs me too. I know Brooke would understand.

“Can my family sit with my wife while I'm gone? I don't want to leave her alone.”

“We only allow one visitor at a time in intensive care, but they are welcome to take turns.”

“Great, I'll let them know. Can you let the neonatal unit know that I'll be there in a few minutes?”

“Of course, Mr. Cavanagh.”

I rise from my seat and lean over the bed so I can place my lips against the corner of Brooke's mouth. It's all I can do with the breathing tube in the way. There is nothing I wouldn't give for her to throw her arms around my neck and kiss me back.

“I've got to go and feed Angel, babe, but I'll get someone from our family to come and sit with you while I'm gone.” I straighten up and gently brush a few strands of her hair from her face. “Keep fighting while I'm gone. Don't you dare give up on us.”

By some miracle, I managed to find the waiting room where I last saw my family. I'm not even sure if they are still here, but when I open the door, they all rise to their feet. It's been hours, and I shouldn't be surprised that they stayed. They're amazing like that.

“We've been going out of our minds,” my mother says. “How is Brooke? Oh my goodness, when you sent us that picture of Angel, we all burst into tears. She looks just like her beautiful Mumma ... and her name, it's perfect.”

“I didn't know you were naming her after Maree,” John adds.

“We didn't either.”

“I’m glad you did. It’s a beautiful tribute to her grandmother,” he says.

I hope my wife thinks so too. “Listen, I can’t stay, Angel is due for another feed, but I need someone to sit with Brooke while I’m gone. I don’t want to leave her alone. She hates hospitals.”

Michelle and John both step forward. “I’ll go,” they say.

“They only allow one visitor at a time in intensive care.”

“You go first,” Michelle says, looking at our uncle. “She’s your daughter.”

“They said you can take turns.”

“Okay, we can do that.”

“It’s almost eleven,” my mum says. “Your dad and I might head home, but we’ll come back first thing in the morning.”

“All right.”

“I’ll stay,” Michelle says. “Craig is with Lara, and I want to see Brooke before I go.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you guys to sort it out. I’ve got to get back upstairs.”

My mum steps forward, wrapping her arms around my waist. “How are you holding up, sweetie? I’m so happy about Angel and heartbroken about Brooke. That poor girl has been through so much.”

I clear my throat when I feel tears sting the back of my eyes. “I’m okay, Mum. I have to be, for both of them.”

Tears pool in her eyes as she reaches up to cup my face. “Call me if there’s any change or if you need me. I’ll come straight back.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

My dad steps forward and wraps his arms around me, tapping my back a few times. “Take care of yourself, Son. We are here if you need us.”

He’s been different with me since the arrest, *nicer even*; I’m not sure if he’s finally starting to mellow with age or if having his toxic sister out of his life is changing him for the better. Either way, I like this side of him.



When I return to the neonatal unit, a young nurse stands in Angel’s cubical, bouncing a pink bundle in her arms. She’s crying, and that has me lengthening my stride.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” I say, reaching for my daughter. “I had to

go downstairs to my family before coming here.”

“That’s okay. I take it your dad?”

“Yes.”

“She’s only been crying for a few minutes.” *A few minutes too long.* I know babies cry, but I hate seeing her upset. “I’ll go get her bottle ready. Will you be okay with her while I’m gone?”

“Of course,” I reply, frowning. I don’t claim to be an expert—I’m new to this whole parenting thing—but my daughter will *always* be safe when she’s with me.

“It’s okay, princess, Daddy’s back,” I whisper, cradling her tiny body against mine, and lightly tapping my open hand against her nappy-covered backside. Bringing my face down, I place my lips against her forehead. “I’m sorry I had to leave you earlier, but I went to visit Mummy.”

Once she’s been fed and burped, *without a hitch*, I lay her back down to change her. My confidence has grown since my first interaction with her; I’m acing this ... well, that’s what I’m telling myself as I remove Angel’s nappy. “Jesus Christ!” I say, raising my arm and burying my nose in the crook of my elbow. The first thing I notice is the smell; it’s so revolting it has me retreating a step, but when I get a good look at what’s causing that stench, my stomach recoils. How can something so disgusting come out of this sweet little girl?

I hear the nurse giggle from beside me. “Those first bowel movements aren’t pleasant ... actually, most aren’t, but I felt just like you when I changed my first newborn. Wait until she has a poop explosion.”

“A what?”

“A poop explosion ... when there’s an abundance of wet faeces, and it leaks out of the nappy and halfway up the baby’s back.”

“That’s gross. Does it happen often?”

“It depends. A lactose overload usually causes it, or if the baby gets a lot of milk, really quickly,” she says, handing me a baby wipe.

“What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Clean her.”

“I’m going to need more than that ... do you have some gloves I can put on? Possibly a gas mask hiding around here somewhere?”

She laughs as she plucks a disposable latex glove from the box and hands it to me. I remove my face from where it’s buried in the crook of my elbow, and my eyes start to water as I’m yet again hit with that dreadful stench.

My ungloved hand wraps around Angel's tiny ankles as I lift the bottom half of her body. I gag the moment I do my first swipe with the wipe. This is a part of fatherhood I wasn't anticipating.

I wash my hands when Angel is clean and in a new nappy. "The nurse that was here earlier said something about doing some skin-on-skin time."

"Absolutely. Do you want to do that now?"

"Yes. She said it's important for the baby to bond with a parent in those first few days ... since my wife can't do it ..."

I untuck my dress shirt from my trousers and start undoing the buttons. I had planned on removing it completely, but when my gaze darts to the young nurse, and I see her biting her bottom lip as her eyes follow every movement of my fingers, I change my mind. I'm here for the bonding, not the ogling.

Sliding my hands under Angel and supporting her head, I take a seat. Pushing my shirt front to the side, I lie her tiny, naked chest against mine. As I look down at her, I'm overcome with a love I can't explain, and it's a feeling I know I will cherish forever.

Within seconds she starts to dose off. I'm exhausted too, but I know sleep won't come easy for me tonight. I'm not even sure if I'm allowed to stay at the hospital overnight, but I'm going to. I'm not leaving either of my girls.

Reaching up, I gently rub my thumb back and forth over Angel's cheek. "Sleep well, baby girl," I whisper. When I hear the nurse sigh beside me, I ignore her. "Next time I feed you, Daddy wants you to drink your milk a little slower, okay?"

There will be no poop explosions on my watch!

Chapter 28

Logan

I haven't left the hospital since the accident five days ago. My family have gone to the apartment numerous times and gotten me some fresh clothes, so I've been showering here. The staff have been amazingly supportive, but I feel like I'm running out of steam.

Brooke is still in her induced coma, but she's here, and for that, I'm thankful. Her most recent scans show no sign of permanent brain damage, but the doctors won't know for sure until she wakes. I'm trying my best to remain optimistic for now; it's all I can do.

I'm exhausted from the constant uncertainty surrounding my wife and the broken sleep from Angel's two to four hourly feeds. Still, I make sure to show up each day, regardless. The nurses have offered to step in for the night feeds so I can get some rest, but I feel like I need to be the one doing it. I'm trying to give our little girl the extra love she's missing out on with Brooke absent from her life. She had her first bath a few days ago, which was an experience. Who knew babies were so slippery when wet? My nerves were shot by the time I was done.

Angel has now put on enough weight that they are releasing her from neonatal care. And although I had to jump through numerous hoops to make it happen—considering our extreme circumstances—the hospital is allowing me to bring our daughter down to Brooke's room, so I can care for her here. It is a relief. I've felt sick to the stomach every time I had to leave her. It made me feel like I was letting her down somehow. She's too little to understand that her mummy needs me too.

My family is eager to meet Angel finally. They've been wonderful throughout this whole ordeal, and there's always someone here to sit with

Brooke while I'm off tending to our daughter.

I've been taking photos whenever I can, but it's not the same. I want Angel to know she has more than just me to love and adore her. There's a long line of people in her corner, and no matter what happens with Brooke, my daughter will always be cared for.



Of course, tears are streaming down my mum's face as she holds her granddaughter for the first time. Both my parents are here, as well as John. Michelle is going to bring Lara in this afternoon so she can finally meet her baby cousin. She's been pestering her so much that Angel and I ended up facetimeing with her yesterday afternoon. Lara squealed so loud and high-pitched the moment I held the screen in front of Angel's face, it made my little girl cry. But once I settled her from the fright, her cousin told her everything they would do together when Angel could come home from the hospital, which was incredibly sweet. I only hope Lara realises it's going to be a few years before Angel is old enough to do some of the things on her extensive list.

When my mum stops hogging the baby and finally hands her over to John, she comes and wraps me in her arms. "You look tired," she says.

"I am."

"Now that Angel is down here, why don't you let your dad take you home so you can get a few hours sleep? John and I will look after Angel while you're gone."

"I don't want to leave either of them," I say.

"I understand that, but you need to look after yourself as well. You are no good to them if you burn yourself out."

"Your mother is right," my father says. "Come, getting some fresh air will do you good."

"Please, Logan, I'm worried about you." I open my mouth to protest, but when I look at my mum's face and see her concern, I cave.

"Okay, I'll go, but only for a few hours tops."

"We'll look after everything here, honey ... you know we will."

"I know, Mum," I say.

"I promise to call if there's any change. Go home and have something to

eat and take a nap. We'll see you back here after that."



Someone obviously tipped Jill off because she was already preparing my favourite seafood pasta dish by the time we arrived. The last thing I want is food, but I know I need to eat. I've barely been able to stomach anything in the past five days. My mum has been bringing me plates of food from home, but most of it has gone untouched.

My dad and I head into the kitchen to greet Jill, but when she turns to face me, I see tears running down her cheeks, and immediately leave the room. It's not because I don't care about her feelings; it's just that I can't deal with them right now. She loves Brooke, and I know she loved Chris too. They became extremely close during their time working for me. Both of them travelled with me everywhere before Brooke came into my life.

I cross the main room, heading towards the windows that look out over the harbour. It's bittersweet being back here alone without my girls. This place was once my sanctuary, but it's nothing without them. It's empty and cold. I should've stayed at the hospital.

"I know this is a difficult time for you, son," my dad says, standing beside me. When he reaches up and places his hand on my shoulder, I struggle to keep it together.

"This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Brooke was so looking forward to being a mother ... Angel is almost a week old, and she hasn't even met her."

"That time will come. All the signs show Brooke's improving."

"But the doctor said we won't know if there's any permanent brain damage until she wakes ... *if she wakes.*"

"You need to have faith. And if, by chance, things are different when Brooke does come out of her coma, I know you'll do right by her. You're a good man, Logan. I'm proud of the person you are."

"You're proud of me?" I ask, turning to look at him because they're words I never thought I'd hear from his lips.

"I've always been proud of you, and I'm sorry if I ever made you feel otherwise. I know I was tough on you at times—"

"At times?"

My father clears his throat. “When you were a boy, you had a softness about you—you get that from your mother—and I used to see that as a weakness, but I know better now. You are a good man, a kind man ... *an honourable man*. You’ve done an amazing job with the company, and everyone you work with respects you. When I sat down and read all fifty-three character references your staff wrote for you ... let’s just say it made me extremely proud. I may have even shed a tear or two, but if you repeat that to anyone, I’ll deny it.” We share a small laugh at that. “It also made me realise I’d been going about life all wrong. That’s a hard lesson to learn at my age. My father was a brutal bastard ... growing up, he ruled our household with an iron fist. I was brought up to believe that instilling fear in others gave me power, but in reality, it just made me an asshole. You’re a better man than me, Son. Don’t ever lose sight of who you are.”

I dig the heels of my palms into my eye sockets to stop myself from crying again. My father and I have never had a conversation like this. The words usually exchanged centred around work or the company, but I like this side of him. It’s nice to be acknowledged. It’s only taken thirty-three years, but I finally feel seen by the man who tried to make me believe I was never enough.

“Thanks, Dad.”

He taps me on the back a few times, which is his equivalent of a hug. But I’m okay with that. If he wrapped his arms around me now, I’m pretty sure I’d break.

“Why don’t you head upstairs and shower while Jill cooks your lunch?”

“Okay.”

I purposely keep my head trained forward as I walk past the nursery. I’m already missing my little girl, and I’m feeling too emotional to go in there.

Walking into the room that I share with my wife is no better. As soon as I step over the threshold, I freeze. There are pieces of Brooke everywhere. The scent of her perfume in the air, a discarded top strewn over the chair, her hospital bag propped up against the wall near the walk-in robe, and her slippers on the floor.

I stare over at our bed, and as tired as I am, I won’t be lying down while I’m here. So many beautiful memories of Brooke and I together in that bed flash through my mind. The amount of love shared between those sheets is innumerable. I can only hope there’ll be more times like that in the future.

I’m tempted to pick up Brooke’s pillow and bring it to my nose like I

know she does with mine when she misses me, but I can't bring myself to do it. I grab the neck of my t-shirt and drag it over my head as I force myself to keep moving, and when I enter the en suite, I'm assaulted with more glimpses of her. Her hairbrush and face cream on the counter, her pink toothbrush sitting in a cup next to mine. *It's all too much.*

Everyone keeps telling me to be strong ... *I'm trying*, I really fucking am, but it's hard when you feel like that perfect life you've been living—the one you loved so much—is falling apart before your eyes.

With tunnel vision, I stalk towards the shower stall and turn on the taps. Once I've removed the rest of my clothes, I step under the spray. Only then do I finally allow myself to succumb to the tears.



“This pasta is delicious, Jill,” my father says as he shovels another fork full into his mouth. “You’ll have to give the recipe to Patricia.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cavanagh. I’ll pass it on to her.”

I usually devour this dish when Jill makes it, but I’m pushing the food around my plate today. I can’t stomach anything right now.

“Chris was always such a careful driver; it just doesn’t make sense.”

I’m thinking out loud, but it has been troubling me since I first heard about the crash. I know he lost his life in the accident, and I’m heartbroken by that, but a small part of me is angry with him, which is incredibly selfish on my part. The rational side of my brain knows it was an accident. Chris would never purposely put Brooke or himself in harm’s way.

“It wasn’t his fault.”

My eyes move from my plate to my father’s face “How do you know that?”

“The story has been all over the news for days. It even made it to the front page of the newspaper. I’ve kept it for you ... if you ever feel up to reading it.”

“What did it say?”

He puts down his fork, wipes his mouth with the napkin and sits up straighter in his chair. “A drunk driver hit them. He was four times over the legal limit, a patrol car was in pursuit for evading a random breath test when the accident happened. He ran a red light. Chris was unrestrained and was

thrown from the vehicle on impact.”

Unrestrained? Chris always wore a seatbelt. He’s a stickler for the rules.

Every word my father speaks makes my fury grow, and by the time he’s finished, my hand swipes out, flinging my plate of food across the room, where it smashes into pieces against the wall.

Poor Jill comes rushing out of the kitchen, and when she sees the mess I’ve made, she immediately goes over to clean it up. I feel like a colossal asshole, not just for that but for allowing myself to think this may have been Chris’s fault.

“The drunk driver was also killed in the accident, but I’ve looked into it, and we may have a case against the police for the pursuit, considering the time of day and that it was in a residential area.”

“That won’t bring Chris back or help my wife.”

“I know.”

I get up from the table and walk towards Jill. “I’m sorry,” I say as I squat down beside her.

“It’s okay,” she sniffles. “I understand what you’re going through.”

When I see a few tears spill from her eyes, I reach up and place my hand on her back. “Thank you for lunch, I know I didn’t eat much, but I appreciate the thought behind it ... I’m grateful for everything you do for me, Jill.”

I can only hope Chris knew how much he meant to me too.

Chapter 29

Logan

My heart feels heavy as I enter the hospital ... I'm emotionally spent. I've promised not to return to the penthouse until I bring my girls home; however, today, I left them for a completely different reason—*Chris's funeral.*

Five days ago, when I left the hospital for the first time with my dad, we visited Marjorie, Chris's mum, before coming back here. It weighed heavily on my mind that she would've had no visitors since losing her son. When we got there, however, we found she was oblivious to the carnage that was surrounding us all. In situations like this, her not remembering would be a blessing.

The care facility informed me that the mortuary had contacted them—since Marjorie was Chris's next of kin—enquiring about the funeral arrangements. That's when I stepped in. It bothered me to know he was lying unclaimed in a morgue like he meant nothing because that was far from the truth. His life mattered ... *he mattered.*

Claire contacted the Department of Veteran Affairs so we could include a military component in his send-off. I knew his service to our country meant something to him, and it was only fitting he be recognised for it.

I once asked him how he could be content being a driver after all the heroic and noble things he'd done. His answer was a humble one. "*I've seen enough excitement, death and destruction in my time, and now I'm just craving a simpler life.*"

His funeral service was sombre, without all the fanfare, but that's who he was and what he would've wanted. A couple of his old army mates got up to speak about their time serving alongside him, with a few of the stories

making the attendees laugh. Still, there were other times when I struggled to keep my emotions in check. It's hard to believe I'll never see him again. Everything seems so surreal to me right now, but I know I will feel his loss terribly when and *if* my life ever returns to normal.

I attended today with Jill, John and Claire. The funeral home arranged for Marjorie to be accompanied by a nurse from the care facility. Only around twenty people came, but that was Chris; he was loyal to the ones in his life and wasn't much into socialising, choosing to keep his circle small.

I don't think Marjorie knew what was happening half of the time until a fellow veteran presented her with the Australian flag at the conclusion of her son's service. She clutched the flag to her chest and cried. It broke my heart. I promised myself then and there, that I would ensure she was well cared for and not forgotten. I'll even find the time to visit; Chris would want that.

When I enter Brooke's room, I'm surprised to find my dad sitting in the corner, holding Angel in his arms. "Where's Mum?"

"She had a specialist appointment, so I've been filling in whilst she's gone."

"Is everything okay with her?" I ask because I don't need another worry to add to my ever-growing list.

"She's fine, Son. She just had to wait three months for this appointment and didn't want to reschedule it."

After approaching the bed and kissing my wife, I walk towards my dad to retrieve my daughter. I've been missing her dreadfully, and I need to hold her. "You managed okay here on your own?" I ask, taking Angel from him. "Daddy missed you today," I whisper.

A smile immediately tugs at my mouth when I look down at her sweet face. Leaning in, I place my lips against her cheek.

"I managed fine," my dad answers, standing. "You do realise I have two kids of my own, right?"

"Of course, it's just—"

"I may have worked long hours when you and your sister were babies, but I can assure you, I helped your mum out when I was home."

That surprises me, but he's been doing that a lot lately. "Thanks for looking after Angel while I was gone."

"How was the funeral?"

I shrug. "Hard."

"The doctor came in earlier and said they're going to start the process of

bringing Brooke out of her coma tomorrow.”

“Really? That’s great.” I’m desperate to have her back, but my stomach churns with that news because deep down I’m scared. What condition will she be in when she wakes?

“He said he’ll call back later to discuss it with you further.” He glances down at his watch. “Now that you’re here, I’m going to head off. I want to swing by the office and check in.”

“How is everything going there?” I feel bad that this is the first time I’ve asked. I know he’s stepped up since the accident and is trying to fill the void with the company while I’m gone.

“We have it handled, Son. You have a great group of people working for you.”

“I know.”

“I fed Angel about an hour ago, so why don’t you take this time to get some rest yourself.”

“I’ll try.”

“You do that.”

“Did you burp her after her bottle?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes.” The corners of my lips curve up when he leans in and kisses his granddaughter’s cheek softly. “I enjoyed my special time with you today,” he whispers.

Hearing him say that chokes me up, I can’t say why, but it does.

Once I’m alone with my girls, I walk over to the bed and gently lie Angel across her mother’s chest. I’ve been doing this daily since she was released from the neonatal unit. They may not be able to do the skin-to-skin, but I hope in some way this helps kickstart their bonding.



I’m jolted from my sleep when Angel lets out a tiny cry. She has a distinct sound, like a baby lamb. It’s kind of cute, but I still don’t like it when she’s upset. I adjust the recliner into an upright position—which has become my makeshift bed for my stay—and stand. I’m dead on my feet and yearn to sleep in a proper bed again.

Leaning over her cot, I gently scoop her into my arms, cradling her to my chest. She’s such a good baby. “Daddy is here, and I know you’re hungry,

baby girl,” I say through a yawn. My confidence in being a hands-on dad is growing with each passing day. It’s given me a newfound respect for mothers because this job isn’t as easy as most men think—especially the sleep deprivation. I grin when Angel opens her little mouth wide and lets out a wail. *She’s so sweet.* “Your bottle is on its way, little miss piggy.” She’s put on more weight and is even starting to develop a few small fat rolls on her upper legs, which are completely adorable. “I’ll get the nurse to make it for you now,” I tell her.

I exit Brooke’s room with my daughter in my arms, and as soon as the nurse behind the desk hears Angel’s cries, she rises from her seat. “Someone sounds hungry?” she says.

“Yes.”

“I’ll heat up her bottle now and bring it to you, Mr. Cavanagh.”

“Thank you.”

My eyes dart to the clock on the wall behind the nurse’s station. It’s just after 4 am. Today is going to be a big one for our family. The doctors are going to start bringing Brooke out of her medically induced coma first thing this morning.

The doctor explained that her type of coma is a state of unconsciousness brought on by administering anaesthetics and barbiturates such as propofol and pentobarbital. The process of bringing her out is the reverse. The doctors will gradually withdraw the drugs while monitoring her brain activity and other vital signs. It will take at least twelve hours before we see any signs of Brooke regaining consciousness, but I’m told in some instances it may take longer.

There are a million things I’ve missed about my wife over the past eleven days—the way she loves me being at the top of my list, but even the simplest things I look forward to—like seeing the sparkle in her pretty eyes and that radiant smile of hers.

“You are going to meet your mummy today, finally,” I whisper as I bounce Angel in my arms. “She’s the best, and so beautiful ... just like you. Your mummy is so sweet, kind, funny, and a little sassy at times. *She’s going to love you so much.*”

When my vision becomes blurred, I tilt my head towards the ceiling and blink my eyes a few times. I’m looking forward to stepping off this damn emotional rollercoaster.



It's just after 9 pm, and I'm dozing off in my seat beside Brooke's bed, with her hand clutched in mine. It's been a hectic day, with the doctors and nurses regularly coming in and out of the room to monitor her progress. As soon as we hit the twelve-hour mark, which was around 8 pm, I sat motionless as I stared at her waiting for any signs she was coming too, but as the minutes continued to tick by, my hopes started to diminish.

By the time 8.30 pm came and went, desperation was setting in. "It's been over twelve hours, doc. Why isn't she waking?"

"As I told you last night, it may take longer. In some cases, it can take as long as seventy-two hours. Why don't you try and get some rest? We will continue to monitor your wife throughout the night, and if there is any change, I'll make sure someone wakes you."

So that's where I am now. I'm trying my best not to fall asleep, but the exhaustion is taking over. Every time my head drops forward, I'm jolted awake, but within seconds my heavy lids have my eyes closing again.

That's when I feel it—a squeeze of my hand—I'm not sure if it's real or just a dream. But when it happens a second time, my eyes spring open, and then I hear the most glorious thing ever: "Hot Stuff." I leap to my feet; fuck, how I've missed those two words.

"Brooke!"

"Hot Stuff ... where am I?" Her voice sounds croaky, but that's probably from the tube that had been down her throat for eleven days. It was removed earlier this morning.

"You're in the hospital," I say, reaching for the buzzer hanging on the side of her bed so I can alert the staff that she's awake.

"Hospital?"

"Yes, you were in an accident, but everything is okay now ... *everything is okay.*"

"Accident?" She tries to sit up but then reaches for her shoulder and groans.

"Don't move. You dislocated your shoulder and broke your collarbone and arm."

Her face screws up. "I don't remember." When her eyes widen, I think she's recalling what happened, but then her hand moves down to her

stomach. “The baby!”

“The baby is fine.” I let go of her hand and stand. “There is someone that’s been waiting to meet you.” Turning, I step towards the cot I positioned right beside the seat where I’d been sitting. I’m smiling as I reach down and slide the band onto Angel’s head; it has a large pink bow in the centre and matches her little jumpsuit. I gave her a bath earlier, and dressed her in the new outfit that Michelle bought her in preparation for this reunion, and damn, does she look cute in it.

Brooke’s mouth gapes open as I turn back towards the bed. “I had the baby? When?”

“The doctors had to perform an emergency c-section when you were first brought in, but she’s fine ... perfectly healthy.”

“She? You were right. It’s a girl?”

I lay our sleeping daughter down on Brooke’s chest “Her name is Angel Maree.”

“Oh my god,” she whispers as tears rise to her eyes. “She’s so beautiful.” Her hand comes up to stroke the side of Angel’s face. “You’ve named her already?”

I’m sure this is a huge shock to her, and I don’t want to go into too much detail about what happened, not right now, anyway. “You’ve been in a medically induced coma for eleven days.”

She gasps. “Eleven days? Who’s been looking after our daughter?”

“Me.”

“I just ...”

“I know this is a lot to take in.”

“It is. I can’t believe the baby is already here, and I missed her birth.”

When a tear rolls down her cheek, I reach out and swipe it away with the pad of my thumb. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to experience that, but the doctors didn’t have a choice.” I lean down and place my lips against hers. “You have the rest of your life to love her, just like I have the rest of mine to love you.”

“I love you, Hot Stuff,” she whispers.

“I love you more.”

“No, I think I love you more.” When I draw back, I find her grinning.

Tears instantly rise as an indescribable sense of joy filters through my entire body. I have no intentions of arguing with her because I honestly don’t care who loves who more. I’m just thankful she’s awake, she’s okay, and

most importantly she still remembers that her heart belongs to me.
“You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, babe.”

Chapter 30

Brooke

The last twenty-four hours have been a whirlwind. I'm still trying to wrap my head around all of it. I don't recall the accident, and maybe that's a blessing.

My room looks like a florist. Everybody that's been to visit since I was moved out of intensive care, and into a regular ward, has brought me flowers. Logan said a lot more were delivered to the hospital when I was first admitted, but they don't allow flowers in intensive care, so he removed all the cards and kept them for me. He had the floral arrangements sent to other patients throughout the hospital that don't get regular visitors.

I have a pile of cards, and letters from my dance students, that I still need to read, but I will when I'm feeling up to it.

My doctor told me that I'd probably remain in the hospital for at least another week for monitoring, which didn't please me. But I want to get well again so I can be the best mother to my daughter.

I was able to get up and shower earlier, aided, of course—by Logan and one of the nurses. It was a shock to see how unsteady I was on my feet when I first stood. The dizziness was so bad for a moment I thought I would pass out, but the nurse said that was to be expected considering everything I'd been through.

The concern on my husband's face once I slipped out of my hospital gown was evident. Although I still have a tiny bump visible, even I could tell I've lost weight. He ended up leaving the room while the nurse washed me. I thought it was because he couldn't bear to look at me, but the moment I was dressed and stepped out of the bathroom, I found a smorgasbord of all my favourite foods waiting, compliments of my husband.

The physical therapist came by earlier, and I had some light physio on my arm and shoulder. My movements are limited, but he said my treatment would become more extensive once my bones heal. He has every confidence, in time, I'll regain full use of that arm. The pain medicine I'm on is doing a decent job, but when it starts to wear off, it's a struggle. My entire right side is messed up, and the headaches I've been getting aren't pleasant.

"Hey, sweet girl," I say when Logan lays Angel down on the pillow that's been propped on my lap. I'm totally head-over-heels in love with my daughter already.

Logan sits on the edge of my bed and places his hand against Angel's back to stop her from rolling off. I love how protective he is, and I've been swooning all over the place, watching them together throughout the day. There is something so sexy about seeing my husband dote on our little girl; *he's amazing with her*. I can already tell she has him wrapped around her little finger.

I'm grinning when Logan checks the temperature of the milk with his wrist before passing the bottle to me. I knew he'd be the best daddy.

This is my second time feeding our daughter, and although I'm sad that I've missed the first eleven days of her life, I'm grateful to be here now. I'm lucky to be alive from what little I've been told.

I'm smiling as I watch her gulp down her milk. "She's so sweet," I say.

"I know," Logan replies as he runs the pad of his thumb back and forth across her cheek.

"Thank you for taking such good care of her when I couldn't."

"Babe," he says, "she's my daughter too. I'll always take care of her, of both of you."

"We are lucky to have you. Things wouldn't have been easy for you ... with everything going on."

"It was tough, I was so worried I was going to lose you, but Angel gave me the strength to keep going."

"Where was I heading when I had the accident?"

His thumb movement against Angel's cheek stills as his eyes move up to meet mine. "Don't worry about that now."

What a strange thing to say. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Of course not. It's just ... the last few weeks have been hard, and I don't want to relive any of it just yet. When you're better, we can talk about it."

The visible pain on his face is palpable, and I can only imagine what he's

been through, so I let it go. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"It was nothing compared to what you went through, babe."

When Angel finishes the last of her milk, Logan picks her up and lays her against his shoulder. He places a soft kiss on the side of her head as he gently taps her back. "Are you going to give Daddy a big burp, Princess?" he whispers, and it makes my heart flutter in my chest.

There goes my ovaries again ... *poof*.



"Miss Brooke!"

"Jacinta," I say, surprised when I see her rushing towards my bed. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Maloney flew us here to visit you."

"Mr. Maloney?"

When my eyes dart up, I see Jim, Logan's COO from his Melbourne office, in the doorway of my room with Grace beside him.

Logan stands from where he's seated beside my bed and walks towards them. "Jim," he says, extending his hand. "What a surprise."

"The girls were worried about your wife, so I thought bringing them up here to see her might help."

"I appreciate that."

My husband moves to Grace next and places a kiss on her cheek. "It's nice to see you again, Grace."

"You too, Mr. Cavanagh."

"Connor," Logan says when a teenage boy steps out from behind Jim.

"Hi, Mr. Cavanagh."

I smile when Logan reaches out and ruffles his hair.

"That's Mr. Maloney's son," Jacinta whispers as her cheeks flush pink.

"Oh." I didn't know he had a son. "How are you, sweet girl? I've missed you." Although we speak on the phone regularly, this is the first time I've seen her since they moved to Melbourne.

"I've missed you too," she says, climbing up to sit on the side of my bed. "I was so sad when I heard you were in the hospital."

I reach for her small hand and wrap it in mine. Although she's twelve years old, she is such a petite little thing. "How's the new dance school

going?”

“Good, but I miss your one. I made a friend. Her name is Cassie, and we are BFFs now.”

“Aww.” It warms my heart to see what this move has done for her. She’s like a different girl. “Are you still enjoying your new school?”

“Yes.” She leans closer, and her pretty blue eyes widen as she whispers, “Connor goes to the same school as me. His mum died, *poor thing*. Mr. Maloney didn’t kill her; he’s a nice Dad, unlike mine.”

Out of the mouth of babes.

My gaze darts to Connor, and he’s leaning against the wall with his hands shoved into his jeans pockets as he observes Jacinta. Thankfully he can only see the back of her head from where he stands. I’d hate for him to know we’re talking about him.

“Do you want to meet Angel?” I ask, trying to steer the conversation away from this subject. Although I didn’t know Jim had a son, I knew his wife had passed.

“Yes!” Jacinta’s head darts around the room, and when she spots the baby’s cot, a smile bursts across her face as she jumps off the bed.

Logan walks over to the cot and picks our daughter up. “Do you want to hold her?” he asks.

“Yes, please.”

He gestures towards the recliner lounge. “Come sit over here.”

“Oh, she’s so tiny,” Jacinta says when Logan gently places Angel in her arms.

“Support her neck ... yes, like that. Good girl.” There goes my husband making me swoon again.

Jim, Grace and Connor make their way over to where Jacinta is sitting, and the three of them surround the lounge. I watch as Jacinta smiles up at Connor. “Look how little her hands are, Con.”

“She’s cute, Jaz,” he says.

My eyes move to Grace, and she grins up at Jim as he speaks to her. I’d think these four were a happy family if I didn’t know better *God, I wish that for them*. It would please me so much.

Chapter 31

Logan

“So, how are things going?” I ask Jim as we sit at a table in the hospital cafeteria. The coffee here isn’t the greatest, but I’ve slowly grown accustomed to it over the past few weeks.

“Good. I was so sorry to hear about the accident. How tragic; Chris was a good guy. I tried to get in touch with you when I heard ...”

“I kept my phone off. I didn’t want to deal with the outside world while it felt like mine was falling apart.”

“Understandable. I’ve been there.”

Jim lost his wife not long after I took over the company. It was a tough time for him, especially with Connor still so young. I have a newfound respect for him after what I’ve just been through. I, at least, got a happy ending.

He has many responsibilities being my COO at Cavanagh and Associates, but he always puts his son first. I admire that about him.

“I’m surprised to see you here.” While it may be the truth, it’s also my attempt at changing the subject. Even with Brooke being awake and doing well, I still feel emotionally fragile.

“Grace was apprehensive about flying back to Sydney with just the two of them, so I offered to come along.”

I briefly touched on Grace’s situation with Jim when the girls first moved down there, and I knew he’d look out for them, but it seems like he’s really stepped up to the challenge.

“That was nice of you. I appreciate you bringing them here.”

“Grace is such a lovely woman ... my heart went out to her the first day we met. She was a nervous wreck. I honestly can’t understand why someone

would want to hurt her like that. Her husband sounds like a real piece of shit.”

“He is. You two seemed to have formed a friendship?”

“Yes. Connor and I took them on a tour of Melbourne when they first arrived in Melbourne, and now it’s turned into a regular thing. On Sunday, we usually get together for lunch or go to the movies or the zoo ... stuff like that.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Hmm.”

“Honestly, I enjoy my time with her,” he clears his throat before continuing, “with both of them. Jacinta is such a sweet girl. Life has been pretty lonely since I lost my wife. Connor is a great kid, but he’s fifteen now, and his head is mostly buried in his phone. On the odd occasion I get to converse with him, let’s just say his vocabulary has become somewhat limited. It’s diminished to a few words at best: yep, nah, I guess, and I don’t know. I’m enjoying having some adult conversation again.”

Is there more going on here than he’s letting on?

“Teenagers,” I say, chuckling. “I’m happy you’ve taken the girls under your wing.”

“It’s been a pleasure. Jacinta’s attending the same high school as Connor, although she’s in her first year, and he’s in his fourth, I’ve asked him to look out for her.”

“Doesn’t he go to a private school?”

“Yes, I spoke with the principal and told him the situation, so he generously made a place for Jacinta.”

“How can Grace afford those kinds of fees?” I know she gets a wage from my company—enough to give her and Jacinta a comfortable life—but not for that kind of extra expense.

“You could say she gets a watered-down bill.”

“You’re paying for Jacinta’s schooling?”

“The majority of it. I can afford it. It’s honestly not that much. You pay me well.”

“You earn every cent. I’m happy to cover the cost of Jacinta’s schooling.”

He flicks his wrist. “I’ve got it covered.”

“Thank you ... that’s very nice of you.”

I reach for my mug and take a sip of my coffee. “While we are on the subject, there is one small issue I want to discuss with you,” he says.

“And that is?”

“The ‘*No fraternising with the staff policy*’.”

“What about it?”

“Does it apply to me?”

I sit up straighter in my chair; my suspicions are correct. “Of course, it does ... it applies to everyone that works for my company, including me.”

“I figured as much,” he says, bowing his head, “but it was worth asking.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”

His eyes flicker back to me. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Don’t play coy, Jim. It’s beneath you. Are you fraternising with Grace?”

“No, of course not, it’s not like that ... yet.”

I arch my brow again. “Yet?”

“I know she’s still healing, but *if* and when the situation arises, I’d like to ask her out ... on a real date. Something more than friends.”

“I see.”

“I’m probably getting ahead of myself anyway. I know Grace enjoys my company, but any more than that, I’m not sure. I wanted to know where I stood if something did develop in the future.”

I like the idea of these two together. Jim is just the kind of man Grace needs in her life, but despite that, I can’t make exceptions for him. It’s unfair to my other employees, especially since I fired Jake and Jenny for the same thing a few years back.

“Let me throw something out there, okay?”

“I’m listening.”

“*If* and when that situation does arise, there is something you could do if you want to pursue a relationship with Grace.”

“And what’s that?”

“*Fire her.*”

“Right, I guess there’s always that,” he grins.



I’ve been lying beside my wife for the past hour. She’s curled up into my side with her plastered arm resting on my stomach. Angel is asleep on my chest, and I’m in my element. When Brooke’s visitors left, she scooted over and tapped the mattress beside her. It’s the first time I’ve laid alongside my wife in a bed since the accident, and although it’s not the most comfortable, I

wouldn't move for all the money in the world.

It's how I envisioned things were going to be after the birth. Both of us together enjoying our new life with our daughter. I'd happily go through all the uncertainty, anxiousness and worry I've experienced over the past few weeks if I knew it would lead me *right here*, to this moment. Brooke is dozing off beside me when more visitors arrive.

"Well, isn't this the perfect picture," Jill says as she enters the room with John. "Seeing the three of you like this makes my heart sing."

I'm not thrilled that our moment as a family is broken, but I know there will be many more times like this going forward, especially once I'm allowed to take my girls home.

Brooke groans in pain as she tries to sit up. "Jill!"

John takes the baby from me so that I can help my wife. "Poppy has missed you, my sweet girl," he whispers, placing his lips on Angel's forehead. He's relishing his time as a grandfather.

I slide to the side of the bed and slip back into my shoes. Once I'm standing, I adjust Brooke's bed so she's sitting up more and fluff the pillow behind her head.

Jill steps up to the bed and reaches for Brooke's hand. "It's so good to see you, dear. I've been so worried, and I'm absolutely heartbroken about Chris."

"Jill," I snap. *Fuck*. I should've warned everyone not to mention Chris's death. Not until I found the right time to break the news to her.

"Chris?" Brooke asks, confused. "What happened to Chris?" I'm staring at Jill, and when I see her face drop, I know she realises what she's done.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cavanagh ... I ... I didn't realise Brooke didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

I exhale a long breath as my eyes meet my wife's. She has a right to know what happened, and I would've told her when I felt she was well enough to cope with the news, but that's not today.

My attention moves to John. "Why don't you two take Angel for a walk." I flick my head towards the stroller in the corner.

Once they have left, I drag the seat closer to the bed and take a seat. "What is going on?" Brooke asks as I reach for her hand.

I swallow as I prepare to tell my wife news that I know will break her heart. "There are some things about the accident I haven't told you yet."

"Oh my god, I was with Chris when it happened, wasn't I?"

"Yes." I feel tears sting the back of my eyes.

“Was he hurt? How bad are his injuries?”

“Babe,” I bow my head as my grip on her hand tightens. “He ... umm ... didn’t make it.”

When I hear her gasp, my head snaps up, and I can already see the tears brimming in her eyes. “Chris is dead?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Her hand comes up to cover her mouth. “I can’t believe it,” she says through a sob. “How come he didn’t survive, but I did?”

Reaching out, I gently brush the hair back from her face. “Babe, you can’t think like that. It was an accident. The car was hit by a drunk driver that ran a red light. Chris wasn’t wearing his seatbelt and was thrown from the vehicle.”

“Chris always wore a seatbelt.”

“I know. I’m not sure why this time was different.”

Kicking off my shoes, I climb onto the bed and fold her in my arms as she cries into my chest. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

I hold her for the longest time until her tears finally stop, and she says something that immediately concerns me.

“Would you mind giving me some time alone?”

I draw back so I can see her face. “You want me to leave?”

“Yes. Please, I have a bad headache, and I want to go to sleep.”

Everything in me wants to protest, I don’t see why I can’t hold her while she sleeps, but I know she is fragile right now, and the last thing I want to do is upset her more. “Would you like me to get the nurse to bring you something for the pain?”

Brooke shakes her head. “No. I just want to be left alone.”

Reluctantly, I rise from the bed and slip my shoes back on. “Okay. I’ll go downstairs and grab a coffee.”

“Thank you.”

Leaning down, I place a soft kiss on her forehead. I’ll give her enough time to fall asleep, and then I’m coming right back here. I’ll sit on the chair in the damn corner if I have to. I want to be close in case she needs me.

Chapter 32

Brooke

The tears immediately return the moment Logan leaves. I'm struggling to comprehend that Chris is gone, and I'm feeling guilty I survived and he didn't. He was a sweet man and didn't deserve to go like this. Who will be there for his Mum now? He was all she had.

Even though my body aches, I roll onto my good side and curl myself into a ball, closing my eyes. I don't know how long I lie there, but I eventually cry myself to sleep.

"Mrs. Cavanagh!"

I swing around and see Chris closing the limousine door before breaking into a jog to catch up to me. Ugh. Of course, my husband sent him back here to snoop, so I couldn't go traipsing around the city in my condition—Logan's words, not mine.

Facing forward, I put some extra swing in my arms as I keep walking. It's not like I'm going for a run. I want a little exercise and fresh air. I don't see what the big problem is.

"Brooke, wait."

"I'm not going back upstairs, Chris. I've been comfort eating for the past half an hour. I need to walk off the seven cupcakes I just ate."

"You ate seven cupcakes?" he asks, falling into stride beside me.

"Yes. As I said, I was comfort eating. I'm going out of my mind cooped up inside that apartment."

"Mr. Cavanagh doesn't want you walking around—"

"In my condition, I know," I say, cutting him off and rolling my eyes. "I'm not going back upstairs, so he will have to deal with it."

"He's not going to like that."

“Tough!”

“What if I had an idea to keep us both out of trouble?”

I stop walking. “I’m listening.”

“Would you like to go and visit my mum with me? That’s where I was heading before your husband sent me here.”

“Right now?”

“Yes. It would help kill some time, at least a few hours of your day. I know my mum would be grateful for the visit.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes, I’ll go with you.”

“Wow, that was easier than I thought.”

“Don’t sass me, Christopher James Brown,” I say, making him laugh.

“Sure thing, Brooke Joanna Cavanagh.”

I gasp. “How do you know my middle name?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets and smirks. “I have my ways.”

We reach the limousine, and Chris opens the back door for me so I can climb in. When he doesn’t get into the driver’s seat, I side-eye him through the window as he pulls out his phone and frantically moves his thumbs across the screen. He’s probably reporting back to my jailer.

A few minutes pass before he finally opens the door and gets in. He reaches for his seatbelt just as his phone dings. Letting the belt go, he retrieves his phone again, so I scoot forward in my seat and spy over his shoulder.

My suspicions are confirmed when I read the thread of messages on his screen.

Chris: No, she’s safe. She’s with me. It took some convincing, but I coaxed her into the back of the limo. I’m taking her to visit my mum at the nursing home. That should keep her out of trouble for the next few hours, at least.

Logan: Thank you! I owe you for this.

Chris: After everything you did for my mum ... you don’t owe me a thing. I’ll never be able to repay you for that.

Lifting my arm, I lightly punch Chris’s shoulder. “You low-down-dirty-snitch!”

He's chuckling as he finishes what he's typing before slipping his phone back into his pocket. I slide back in my seat and reach for my seatbelt, clicking it into place before crossing my arms over my chest.

"I'm sorry," he says, turning his body to face me. "You know how he is."

"Hmm."

"It comes from a good place. Mr. Cavanagh cares for you, so it's only natural, he'd worry."

I blow out a puff of air. "I know."

"So, am I forgiven for foiling your escape?"

"I suppose ... I know you're just doing your job."

"Thank you. Does that mean I can have one of your cupcakes when we get back?"

A smile spreads on my lips. "Yes. Logan asked me to save him one, so you'll need to help me eat them all before he gets home."

"I can do that," he says, laughing.

"Let's get out of here. Your mum is waiting."

Smiling, he salutes me before facing forward and starting the car. "Aye aye, captain."

My eyes spring open as a pivotal part of the puzzle clicks into place. I'm to blame for Chris being unrestrained.

Chapter 33

Logan

Today Brooke is being discharged, which should be a momentous occasion, but sadly it's not. I've been looking forward to the day I could take her home, but over the past seventy-two hours, she's regressed further and further into herself. I knew she'd take Chris's death hard, but I never thought I'd get shut out during her grieving.

I spoke to the doctor about it yesterday, and he said considering everything Brooke's been through, it's not unusual for something like this to happen. He arranged for a counsellor to come down and talk with her, but she barely uttered a word. She just laid there looking completely crestfallen. It broke my heart. The counsellor gave me a card for someone I can contact once we leave the hospital, but if this morning's meeting was anything to go by, I'm not feeling confident.

Even Angel hasn't managed to bring a smile to her face. I'm still doing all the night feeds because I want Brooke to get all the rest she can—her body is still healing—but even the day feeds are uneventful. Once Angel is finished with her bottle and I take over to do the burping, Brooke closes her eyes and pretends to be asleep.

Whenever I broach the subject and try to get her to open up, she says, *"I've got a headache. I don't want to talk about it."*

I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what to do.

I asked Michelle for advice when she brought something for Brooke to wear home today. She told me to give her time and that she would come around, I hope my sister is right. I'm not used to seeing this cold and distant side of my wife. I don't like it one bit.

"Are you looking forward to getting out of here?" I ask Brooke as we

wait for our lift to arrive.

Brooke is sitting on the side of the bed, gazing down at the floor. She shrugs instead of answering.

John is picking us up because I no longer have a driver or limousine. My sports car is in no way suitable for a baby. I've ordered a black Range Rover, which I have organised to pick up over the coming days. I went with that car because of its five-star safety rating. I'm having one custom painted in yellow for Brooke, but hers won't be ready for a few weeks. The doctor said it would be at least a month before she could drive anyway. I know she has the mini her father bought her, but it's not practical for Angel's car seat.

When our lift arrives, I push the pram with one hand and wheel the suitcase with the other. John takes care of Brooke in the wheelchair. It's a sombre walk to the car. One can only hope being back in familiar surroundings will perk her up. Either way, I will make some calls when we get home and organise the best care I can find for my wife. She needs help before this gets any worse.



Jill is waiting to greet us when we get to the penthouse. "It's so good to finally have you back home, dear. This place hasn't been the same without you," she says, placing her hand on Brooke's arm.

"Thanks, Jill," she replies with zero emotion.

"I've made lunch for you all."

As soon as Jill says that, Brooke bows her head. "I'm not hungry. I'm going to go up to my room and lie down."

That statement instantly deflates me. I guess being home isn't going to improve her mood.

I puff out a long breath when Brooke walks away, heading towards the staircase. "I'm sorry, Jill. She's struggling right now."

"I can see that. I feel dreadful for blurting out the news about Chris as I did. I would never have brought it up if I'd known."

"You've already apologised numerous times. You weren't to know." I reach down into the pram and gently pick up my sleeping daughter. "I'm going to take Angel to the nursery. I'll be down for lunch soon."

When I reach the doorway of the nursery, I pause. My gaze moves from

Angel to her room. Taking her in there for the first time alone doesn't feel right. It's a moment Brooke and I should be sharing. Something we both talked about before the birth. Given her circumstances, I'm unsure if she'd be interested but I have to try at least.

Turning, I take a few steps towards our room. When I enter, I see Brooke sitting on the side of the bed with her head cast downwards. "Babe." She raises her face and makes eye contact with me, but her features remain blank. I desperately want to pull her into my arms and squeeze all this sadness out of her, but I know that's not how these things work. "I'm going to lie Angel down in her cot."

"Okay."

"You don't want to join me? It will be her first time in the nursery. I know how much you were looking forward to that."

She rises from the bed and follows me out, but I can already tell she's not invested in participating. I'm trying so hard to be sympathetic, and although I hate she's shutting me out, it breaks my heart to see her doing it to Angel.

Folding back the small yellow and white quilt, I lie Angel down. She looks so tiny in this big cot compared to the small one she was in at the hospital.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Brooke standing just inside the doorway with her arms wrapped around her body. I try not to react. Turning my attention back to our daughter, I gently stroke my fingertip across her chubby cheek. Despite the turmoil brimming inside me, I smile.

I give Brooke a moment to see if she's going to approach, but when she doesn't, I turn on Angel's mobile, and when *Rock-A-Bye Baby* starts to play, I swallow down the lump that rises in my throat. *I fucking hate this.* We have been through enough, is life ever going to go back to how it used to be?

Reaching for the camera mounted at the foot of the cot, I switch it on and grab the video monitor from the dresser.

Brooke's still standing in the doorway when I approach. My hands are itching to touch her, and I eventually give in to the temptation as I tenderly tuck some strands of hair behind her ear. "Will you come downstairs and eat something? You barely touched your breakfast."

"I'll have something later," she says, retreating a step before turning around and leaving the nursery. She returns to our room, and everything in me wants to follow after her, but I don't. Instead, I head back downstairs. After lunch, I will make some calls and get my wife the help she clearly

needs.

Chapter 34

Logan

I'm sitting at the breakfast bar when the doctor arrives. I went up to the room to check on Brooke after I made a few calls, but even without a word spoken between us, she managed to make it clear she didn't want me around. I understand she is going through a lot right now, but her frostiness towards me stings.

"Hi, Doc," I say, meeting him in the foyer when he steps off the lift.

"Hi, Logan. I got the letter from the hospital that you faxed to my clinic. I looked over Brooke's scans online. She was very lucky, considering the extent of her injuries."

"She is lucky. But, her physical injuries are the least of my concerns right now."

"What do you mean?"

"It's her mental health, Doc. When she first woke from the coma, she was her normal happy self, but a few days later, Brooke found out that our driver was killed in the accident, and she's gone downhill since then. She's withdrawn and is shutting everyone out, including me. She won't talk and is barely eating."

"With everything she's been through, it's understandable she'd be feeling down ... she may even be suffering from survivor's guilt. It's quite common in these situations. It could even be a hormonal imbalance from the pregnancy."

"The hospital gave me a card for a therapist, but I'm not sure if she'd be on board with that. I made some inquiries, but she already refused to talk to the counsellor at the hospital."

"I'll talk to her. If we can get her started on some medication to help with

her depression, she may be willing to open up to someone down the track.”

“I appreciate this, Doc,” I say. I’m willing to give anything a go. I want my wife back.



A week has passed, and there has been no change. Brooke clammed up with Dr. Kirby as well. She allowed him to examine her, but that’s as far as he got. He prescribed her some antidepressants before he left, which she is refusing to take. Before leaving for work each morning, I place a glass of water by the bed with a tablet, and two paracetamols. When I get home in the evenings, the pain medication is gone, but the antidepressant is still there.

Either Jill, John or my parents are here during the day. So, there is always someone at the apartment to keep an eye on her and Angel while I’m gone. I’d stay if I knew it would help, but Brooke is still shutting me out. There’s a part of me that doesn’t look forward to coming home anymore. Yes, I get to see my little girl, but seeing my wife’s continued decline is tearing me apart. At least at the office, I can bury myself in work.

When I go to bed, Brooke hugs the corner of the mattress so tight, leaving as much distance between us as she can. On our first night home, I moved over to her side and tried to wrap her in my arms, only for her to shrug me away. I haven’t made that mistake since.

After slipping into my suit jacket and grabbing my briefcase, I lock my office and head towards the lift. It’s just after seven, and I’m usually home by now, but today has been shit. It started before I even left for work. I leant over the bed to kiss my wife goodbye, only for her to grab the sheet and pull it over her head. That move gutted me.

I’ve spent the last hour sitting in my office, staring at the wall, procrastinating because I don’t want to go home.

As I exit my building, I feel like I’m dragging my feet as I slowly walk down the street towards the garage to collect my car. There’s no parking at Cavanagh and Associates; that’s why I had Chris. I’m now driving myself to and from work because I don’t think I’ll ever be able to replace him.

There are still those odd occasions when I forget he’s gone, and I reach for my phone to text or call him. Those moments are hard.

Maybe I should look into buying another building that has underground

parking, but I seriously can't be fucked with the hassle that it will bring. I have zero motivation for such a mammoth task. I barely have the energy to get out of bed most days. These night feeds are killing me. I haven't slept through a full night since Brooke's accident.

I stop at the traffic lights and press the button, waiting to cross. My eyes move to the Irish pub on the adjacent corner. Claire dragged me in there once, not long after she first started working for me. It was a Friday afternoon, and some of the people from our office were going there for drinks. She told me it would be good for me to get to know some of my staff outside of working hours. Although it was against my better judgement, I went. Everyone seemed to be having a good time until we arrived. It was like they were scared to be themselves in front of their boss. I only stayed for one drink. It was awkward and not something I ever did again. My Christmas parties are the only out-of-office things I attend now.

Today though, I find myself crossing the street and entering the establishment. It's a Tuesday, so I'm hoping I won't encounter anyone I know.

With my head down, I head straight for the bar and sit on one of the rich dark mahogany stools. There is a game of soccer playing on the flat screen television hanging on the wall, but I'm not here for the sports.

"Can I get a double of your best scotch ... on the rocks, please?"

I know my car is here, but I can always leave it in the parking garage overnight and get a cab home.



I'm not sure how many drinks I've consumed, but I haven't been this drunk since I attended university. I've been lost in my own head for weeks now, and I needed this escape. I'm letting my family down by being here, but I'm too far gone to care.

At some point in the evening, I ended up in a booth in the back corner of the pub. I asked the waiter to keep the drinks coming, which he happily obliged. Two busty blondes are sitting on either side of me. Don't ask me their names because I wasn't even listening to them when they introduced themselves. I only moved away from the bar to escape their constant chatter; I hadn't wanted or planned on the blondes following me.

One is running her fingers through the side of my hair, while the other is stroking my silk tie with her long red nails. I want to tell them to fuck off and leave my sorry arse alone, but I'm so fucked up I can barely string two words together.

My phone rings in my pocket. When I unsuccessfully try to lift my arm to get to it, one of the blondes plucks it from my pocket and answers the call, putting it on speaker.

"Hi, John," she coos, and I can only presume she saw his name on the screen.

"Who is this?" John asks.

"Katrina."

He clears his throat. "Can you put Logan on?"

"Logan? Do you mean the sexy hunk sitting next to me? I don't know his name, because he wouldn't tell us when we asked. But if you're looking for a gorgeous green-eyed man with thick black hair with a cute dimple in his left cheek when he gives you one of his panty-melting smiles, then yes."

"Never mind, can you tell me where you are?" John asks.

"P.J. O'Brien's on King Street."

"Katrina," he says, "can you do me a favour? Make sure Logan doesn't leave until I get there."

"Oh, goodie, you're coming to join us? I hope you're as good-looking as your friend."



When I open my eyes the next morning, I feel like death. A bucket sits on the floor beside the sofa. The sight of it makes my stomach recoil. I hear someone clear their throat nearby, so I lift my head as my eyes move around the room. I find a very pissed-off-looking John standing a few metres away, with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I hope you're feeling as awful as you look," he says. "You will get no sympathy from me. I understand what you are going through right now is tough, kiddo and my heart goes out to you, but what you did last night crossed the line. What would have happened if I hadn't called you or turned up there when I did?"

I have no clue what he's talking about. "You came and got me last

night?”

“Yes. If you ever disrespect my daughter like that again—”

“Wait, what?” I say and immediately regret sitting up so fast. I clutch the side of my throbbing head and groan. *I’m too old for this shit.* “Did I say something hurtful to Brooke last night?”

“It’s not what you said but rather what you did.”

“Which was?”

“When I turned up at the pub last night, you had two women fawning all over you. Neither of them was as intoxicated as you, and they were clearly trying to take advantage of you in your vulnerable state. If I hadn’t gotten there when I did.” He shakes his head in disgust. “I don’t even want to think about what may have happened. What the fuck were you thinking? You could’ve lost it all. Next time you want to drink yourself into oblivion, do it here, where we can keep an eye on you.”

“I would never cheat on Brooke.”

“You were in no position to control anything last night. I practically had to carry you to the car. By the way, you owe me a new pair of leather loafers.”

“Please tell me I didn’t vomit on—”

“You did,” he says, cutting me off. “I’ll be sending you the dry-cleaning bill for my trousers. I suggest you go upstairs and have a shower and a really strong cup of coffee because you are on your own today. Jill and I were up half the night with your daughter, so we are going home. I’ve already told Claire you won’t be coming in.”

I bow my head in shame.

Chapter 35

Logan

I enter our bedroom, and surprise, surprise, I find my wife in bed at 4-fucking-pm in the afternoon. She hasn't left the house in three weeks. I'm not even sure if she's bathing; her hair looks like it hasn't been brushed in days. There are no more morning runs or visits to the dance studio. She gets up during the day to feed Angel while I'm at work or when her physical therapist arrives to exercise her arm, and to eat occasionally, but that's it. She remains locked away in this damn room the rest of the time.

She's still distant from me, and continues to sleep on the far-right side of the mattress, as far away from me as she can. *It fucking hurts.* I've even contemplated moving into one of the spare rooms because I'm obviously not wanted in here. I know if I do that, it will be the final straw for us. Despite my hopelessness, I'm still not ready to give up on her *or our marriage.* I'll continue to fight until there's nothing left.

I came home early from work today, hoping to convince her to come with Angel and me to my parent's house for dinner. The longer she remains in this state, the harder it's going to be for her to climb out of this big black hole she's fallen down.

I've had the doctor back to the house twice since his initial visit, and she still refuses to take the antidepressants he prescribed. He told me she has a chemical imbalance in her brain and she would not improve without treatment. I'm worried if this goes any deeper, she may even consider doing something stupid. *Fuck.* I need to try harder because the alternative is inconceivable.

Slowly approaching the bed, I sit on the side of the mattress. Her back is to me like always. From here, I can see her eyes flutter open, but she doesn't

turn around. This is fucking killing me.

“Babe,” I say, reaching out and placing my hand on her side. “My parents’ have invited us over for dinner tonight. Will you please come with us?” My voice cracks as I speak.

“I want to stay here,” she says so quietly I almost don’t hear her.

Realistically, I knew she wouldn’t come, but I had to at least try. “You can’t stay locked away up here forever, Brooke. This isn’t living. If you don’t want to do this for your daughter or me, do it for yourself. *Fuck*. You survived the accident for a reason, and you need to make the most of the second chance you’ve been given. Unfortunately, Chris doesn’t get that luxury.” When she gasps, I know I’ve crossed a line, but it needs to be said. I’ve tried everything, but maybe tough love is what she needs because kindness and compassion have got me absolutely nowhere.

When I see her hand come up to swipe under her eye, I know she’s crying. As much as I hate seeing her upset, it’s something. I haven’t seen her show any emotion in weeks; she’s usually just zombified. I’ve even woken a few times during the night to find her missing from the bed, and when I’ve gone in search of her, I’ve found her in Angel’s nursery, with our daughter in her arms as she rocks her on the rocking chair. That pleased me, but instead of staring down at our little girl with all the love, like she did when she first came out of her coma, she was looking straight ahead, staring blankly at the wall.

Slipping out of my shoes, I climb onto the bed and lie down behind her. “Babe,” I say, placing my hand on her arm. This is getting out of control. I’m scared even to hug my wife because I’m petrified she’ll reject me like she’s done so many times over the past few weeks.

“Don’t,” she whispers.

“Don’t what? Touch you? Lie next to you? Comfort you? Love you? What is it you *don’t* want me to do exactly, Brooke, because I’m at my wits fucking end? I’m not sure how much more I can take.”

I stay where I am, but my anger rises as the minutes tick by, and I get nothing from her. Rolling over, I move to the side of the bed and slip my shoes back on. I feel like a heartless bastard when I stand and move towards the door. Even more so when I grip the handle and slam it closed behind me. I feel like I’m headbutting a brick wall. I can’t help her if she refuses to help herself.



I'm sitting at the dinner table at my parent's house, pushing my food around my plate because I have zero appetite. I'm tired, hurt and downright fucking irritable. I don't know where to go from here. It feels hopeless. I think this whole situation is starting to give me a touch of depression too, I can't remember ever feeling this down.

When my phone starts to ring in my pocket, I ignore it. I already know it's not my wife calling, and I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone else.

My eyes dart up to my father when he clears his throat. His fork is suspended halfway to his mouth as he arches an eyebrow at me.

"It can go to voicemail."

My gaze moves to my mum when she says, "Honey." She's feeding Angel her bottle. I was going to do it, but she insisted I eat.

I hold up my hand, "I don't want to talk about it, Mum."

"We are worried about you."

"I'm okay," I mutter, which is a total fucking lie.

When the home phone starts to ring, my mother goes to stand. "I'll get it, love," my father says, placing down his fork and rising from the table. Plucking the receiver off the charger, he brings it to his ear. "Cavanagh's residence. Yes, Shell, he's here." He turns, heading back towards the table. "I'll put him on." Extending his arm, he holds the phone out to me. "It's your sister."

I blow out a frustrated breath as I take it from him. "Michelle."

"Logan, I just got a call from security. The alarm at the studio was activated a few minutes ago. They said they tried to call both you and Brooke, but neither of you answered."

I slide my mobile out of my top pocket and find the missed call on my screen was from the company that installed the security system at the dance studio.

Pulling up the app for the cameras, I scroll through them, freezing at the one that shows someone inside the studio; *dancing*. Pushing back my chair, I stand. "It's Brooke. I just checked the camera footage."

"Brooke is at the studio?"

"Yes, I'm going to head there now."

"Do you want me to meet you there?"

“I’ve got this,” I say. *Well, I hope I do.* I end the call and place the cordless phone on the table. “Mum, can you look after Angel?”

“Of course, sweetie. What is going on?”

“The alarm was activated at the studio. It’s Brooke, she’s there.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone.”

“Just leave Angel here for the night. You can come and get her in the morning. Is there more formula in the baby bag?”

“Yes.”



My stomach is churning as I park around the back of the building. I sped all the way here because I didn’t want to miss her. Thankfully, her car is still here, so I know she’s inside.

I unlock the front door and step into the reception area. I can hear the loud music pumping through the walls of the studio.

Moving towards the front desk, I fire up the computer and turn on the large flat screens. The adrenaline is pumping through my veins as I approach one of the large flatscreen televisions mounted on the wall.

It’s been just over six weeks since the accident, and even with a half cast on her arm, she’s dancing her heart out. The bubble wrap side of me wants to tell her to take it easy, she is still healing, but my logical side sees this as a good thing. She left the house on her own accord, and she drove to a place she loves, to do something that has always made her happy.

A new song starts as soon as the first song finishes, and she slips straight into another routine. I’m not sure how much longer she can go at this pace, but she has a lot of pent-up emotion that needs to be released. So, as long as she keeps going, I’ll stand here and let her.

Brooke doesn’t make it far into the third song before she stops, bends over and rests her hands on her knees. I can see by the rapid rise and fall of her chest she’s puffed. I’m holding my breath as I await her next move. Everything in me wants to go in there, but I’m scared of being pushed away or rejected *again*.

Something in my chest cracks open when she falls to her knees, covers her face with her hands and starts to sob. My feet are moving before my mind

even registers.

When I reach her, I bend, scooping her into my arms. “I’ve got you,” is all I say. Her arms immediately wrap around my neck as she buries her face into my chest.

I don’t even bother turning off the music or the lights. Pushing through the studio doors, I move straight through reception and towards the staircase at the rear of the building.

Once we reach her private sanctuary, I pull back the covers on the bed and lay her down. I remove the dance shoes from her feet and slip out of my own before shrugging out of my suit jacket.

As soon as I’m lying beside her, I pull her back into my arms, and for the first time in over a month, she lets me hold her.

Fuck I’ve missed this.

Chapter 36

Logan

I got a full night's sleep for the first time since this whole ordeal started. I'm pretty sure if I slept for an entire week straight, I still wouldn't catch up on what I've missed out on, but despite that, I wake feeling refreshed.

No late-night feeds or lying there for hours worrying about my wife. Brooke slept soundly too. I couldn't help but smile when I opened my eyes this morning and found her still wrapped up in my arms. No words were spoken once we got up to her room last night, but she continued to let me hold her until we both fell asleep. I feel like we've made some headway, and for that, I'm grateful. I'm prepared to take baby steps if needed as long as it leads her back to me in the end; I don't care how long it takes.

Lifting my head off the pillow, I place a soft kiss on top of Brooke's head. Her hair is still pulled back into the ponytail she was wearing when I got here last night. I intake a large breath through my nose, inhaling the scent of her shampoo; I've missed that smell. *I miss everything about her.*

I lie here unmoving, just savouring having my wife in my arms again, and when she eventually stirs, she lifts her head from my chest and looks up at me. The first thing I notice is the now familiar blank stare. I no longer get that breathtaking smile she used to give me, and it makes my stomach drop. I thought things would be different this morning.

Lifting my hand, I gently run my knuckles down the side of her face. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Emotionally drained."

Makes two of us. "Are you ready to talk?"

She pushes off my chest and rolls onto her back, staring up at the ceiling. "I have nothing to say," she says.

Wow.

“So, that’s it. You’re going to push me away again, so we’re back to where we started?” I hear her sigh, but she remains silent. It pisses me off. “If you’re going to continue to shut me out, I don’t know what else I can do for you, Brooke. I’ve tried to be understanding, but my patience is running thin.” Moving to the side of the bed, I sit up and bury my head in my hands. Will this nightmare ever-fucking-end? I thought last night we may have gotten somewhere. I guess I was wrong. “I have no clue how to help you ... or save this marriage.”

“I killed him,” she says in such a small voice I almost don’t hear her.

I raise my head and glance at her over my shoulder. “What did you say?”

“It’s my fault. I’m the reason Chris wasn’t wearing his seatbelt.”

“Christ, babe. Is that what this is about?”

“I’m responsible for his death.” Tears rise to her eyes, and her fingers frantically swipe over her face to catch them as they fall.

Twisting my body around, I lean over the bed and cup her jaw. “You are *not* responsible for what happened, do you hear me?”

“I am. After you told me he died, I dreamt about that morning. I remember everything leading up to the accident. *If only* I’d listened to you that day and stayed inside the apartment or, at the very least, not distracted him before we drove off, he’d still be here.”

“You can’t live your life on what-ifs, babe. Besides, I could say the same.” Her eyes move to me, and I think she’s listening to what I’m saying for the first time in weeks. “If only I hadn’t sent Chris there to keep an eye on you ... or if I just let you go for that walk, chances are neither of you would’ve been in the car. That could even apply to the piece of shit who *is* actually responsible for this fucking mess. If only he had stopped for the random breath test. What if the police decided not to pursue him? Maybe he wouldn’t have run the red light. See where I’m coming from? There are a million fucking *what-ifs* if you let your mind go there. The reality is it was just one of those unfortunate things. You were both in the wrong place at the wrong time. The limousine was t-boned with all the impact to the driver’s side door, so even *if* Chris had worn his seatbelt, chances are he still wouldn’t have survived. If you put that aside, I can guarantee *if* Chris were still here, he would never hold you accountable for something *he* neglected to do. Distracted or not.”

When a strangled sob rips from her throat, I climb back onto the bed and

gather her in my arms, crushing her body to mine. I knew she was struggling with his death, but I had no clue she was blaming herself for it.

I wait until her tears stop before I draw back. It hurts my heart to see her like this, but I'm glad she's finally letting it all out. Bottling it up has only been making things worse. I lift my hand and use the pad of my thumb to wipe away her tears.

"Everything will be all right; you are not responsible for any of what happened. That burden falls on the shoulders of the man who decided to get behind the wheel when he was four times over the legal limit."

A sad smile tugs at her lips, so I lean in and place my mouth on hers. I'm relieved when she doesn't turn her head or try to pull away. Our kiss is nothing more than a union of two mouths, but it's enough. I'll take whatever she's willing to give.

My eyes stay closed when we part. Resting my forehead against hers, I whisper, "I've missed you so much. I need you back. I can't keep going on like this. My world is miserable without you in it."

"I've missed you too, Hot Stuff."

Hot Stuff.

I often wondered whether I'd ever hear those words again. I pull back so I can see her face. "Please don't ever shut yourself away from me. You once said there is nothing we can't get through if we face it together. You should have spoken up. I hate that you've been carrying this around on your shoulders for weeks."

"I felt so guilty and scared to tell you ... I thought you'd hate me."

"Fuck, Brooke. I could never hate you. Don't ever underestimate the depth of my love for you. Even if you were responsible for someone's death—and let me make it perfectly clear that is not the case here—I would be there for every visitation, every fucking one. Even the conjugal visits."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "How noble of you."

"Babe, my boys ... they've been suffering badly. You know how they were when we abstained for those two weeks before our wedding."

When she releases a small laugh, it's like music to my ears. "I'm sorry," she says, gently running her fingers through my hair. I close my eyes and savour her touch. "You have been through so much lately, and I feel terrible for adding to your burdens."

"Just promise me you won't shut me out anymore. Life is dismal without you in it."

“I want our old life back.”

“Together, we’ll make sure you get it.”

My mouth instinctively moves back down to hers, and this time she parts her lips and allows me to deepen the kiss. I groan when her arms wrap around my neck, dragging me closer. Everything in me wants to take this all the way, *I’m craving her*, but I’m not going to rush into anything just in case she isn’t ready. She’s still fragile, so I’ll let her set the pace.

For now, I’m so thankful to be here with her. I’ll make out with her all damn day if that’s what she wants.

It doesn’t take long for our kiss to turn combustible; it’s how we are and *how we’ve always been*. Affection is a huge component of our relationship, but between the sheets, the love we share is on a whole other level. *It’s off the charts*.

Brooke’s hands travel down my back until she’s tugging at my shirt. “I need you,” she whimpers into my mouth.

That’s the go-ahead I was waiting for. Placing my flattened palms on either side of her body, I push myself up onto my knees.

Sliding my hands under her arms, I pull her into a sitting position and reach for the hem of her top. She starts undoing my shirt buttons as I drag her fitted tee over her head. My fingers move to unclasp her bra, and I growl the moment her tits pop free of their restraints. She’s borderline too thin from her lack of eating, but my cock is still rock hard for her; I’m surprised it doesn’t burst through the zipper of my trousers.

When I pinch one of her hardened nipples between my forefinger and thumb, Brooke throws her head back and moans through her parted lips. I lean in and lick a path from her collarbone to the base of her chin.

Moving down to the end of the bed, I stand. Reaching over for the waistband of her tights, I drag them, along with her underwear, down her legs. Just seeing her naked and spread out on the bed has my cock throbbing. If I don’t get this show on the road soon, it’s going to be over before it even starts. It’s been more than six long weeks since I’ve had her, and I’m already dangerously close to blowing my load in my pants.

Making quick work of the rest of my clothes, I kneel on the bed and slide my hands over her shins. When I reach her knees, I wrap my fingers around her legs, spreading them wide. I can already see her pussy glistening with her arousal. I’m running red-fucking-hot, and I’m pretty sure I’m going to embarrass myself here.

Even with all the bullshit we've been through lately, I still know I'm one lucky bastard to be able to call this woman mine.

My eyes travel up her body as I crawl between her spread legs, hovering over her. Leaning in, I kiss her with everything I have, and when she parts her lips, I plunge my tongue into her mouth. My cock jerks, I'm aching to be inside her again, and even though I know we have the rest of our lives together, I still want to make this one count. This is the longest we've ever been apart; somehow, it feels like the beginning again.

I break the kiss to move my lips across her jawline and down her neck. Bringing my face lower, I suck one of her nipples into my mouth as my hand palms the other.

"Hot Stuff," she whimpers, arching her back off the bed.

As I go to move further south, she fists a handful of my hair in her hand. "You can do that later; right now, I need *you*."

Settling back between her legs, I use my elbows to take the weight of my body. I know she's mostly healed, but I'm still scared I'll hurt her.

Wrapping one of my hands around my dick, I stroke it before sliding it through her slick heat. As I line myself up, my eyes lock with hers.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?"

I need to fuck her. I'm desperate for the release, and when we're done, I'm going to do it again and again. By the time I'm through with her, she'll never forget she's mine.

"If you don't put your dick inside me, I'm going to scream."

I chuckle. *Fuck, I've missed her sassy mouth.* If she wants to scream, she's come to the right place. Without warning, I roll my hips forward and bury myself right to the hilt.

"Yes," she moans as her eyes roll back.

I'm so deep, and she's so tight, *so hot*, I can feel my cock pulsing, or maybe that's all her. Dipping my head, I rest it against her shoulder as I try to rein myself in. I already feel like I'm on the edge.

"I need you to move."

"Give me a minute, babe ... it's been a while."

Brooke places her hands on either side of my face, dragging my lips back to hers. When our mouths mesh, I tilt back my hips before quickly sinking in balls deep.

Fuck, I groan as the weight of a thousand bricks lifts from my chest.

"Don't stop," she pants.

“I have no plans of ever stopping.”

There was a time I wasn't sure if we'd ever be here again, but I know, with all certainty, I'll never let her go.

Chapter 37

Brooke

I rub my growing stomach as I step into the lift. I'm currently six months pregnant with our second child. I've decided to have a drug-free natural birth this time. I want to experience everything I was robbed of when Angel was born.

We've recently surpassed the one-and-a-half-year mark since the accident. Although I'm doing much better, I still have the occasional off days. I've remained on the antidepressants and still go to therapy once a month, which has helped a lot.

My therapist thinks that my mother's death, Jake, and the situation with my father all contributed to my declining mental health after the accident. She said, "*A rubber band can only be stretched so far before it breaks,*" which made a lot of sense. I still sometimes struggle with Chris's death, but I no longer feel responsible for it.

Although we talk a lot about my past in my sessions, I try not to dwell on anything after I leave. I have too many wonderful things in my present that I'm thankful for. My husband and sweet little girl are at the top of that list.

I step out and move through the foyer when the doors open to the penthouse floor. I freeze when I see my husband and daughter together in the great room. I'm already fumbling in my bag for my phone as I approach them.

"Don't say a word," Logan grumbles when he spots me.

I bite my bottom lip to hide my smile. They are sitting at Angel's small table, which is dwarfed by Logan's large frame, and he has a tiny plastic teacup in his hand, but as sweet as that sight is, that's not what I'm finding amusing. It's the silver tiara sitting lopsided in his hair, the pink feather

bower around his neck, and the bright red lipstick haphazardly smeared around his mouth.

I laugh as I hold up my phone and press record on the camera. “You better not be taking a picture of me.”

“Why? It would make a great profile pic on Facebook.”

“You wouldn’t fucking dare.”

Angel’s eyes widen to saucers as she gasps. Placing down her tiny teacup, she stands and rounds the table to where Logan is seated. I laugh when she frowns and puts her little hand over his mouth. “Naughty, Daddy.”

“I’m sorry, princess.” Stopping the video, I quickly upload it and start typing on my phone. “If you post that on Facebook, I swear to god I’ll sue you,” he warns. “I’m a lawyer, remember.”

When I ignore him, he stands, quickly closing the distance between us in a few long strides, and snatches the phone out of my hands.

“Relax, Hot Stuff. I just sent it to our family group chat.”

He growls, then mumbles, “Fuck my life,” as he looks down at the screen. When he hands me back my phone a few minutes later, he stalks across the room and disappears upstairs. The moment he is out of sight, I read the replies to my video.

Craig: Hahaha. That’s pure gold. That colour suits you, pretty boy.

Michelle: Lol. You look gorgeous, big bro!

Patricia: I think he looks sweet. Leave him alone. You’re such a good daddy, Logan, but I don’t appreciate you using that kind of language in front of my granddaughter.

Robert: ...

Robert: I’m disappointed in you, Son.

Patricia: Robert David Cavanagh!!! What a dreadful thing to say. You take that back.

Robert: Not a chance in hell, Patricia. He’s got bright red lipstick smeared all over his damn face and pink feathers draped around his neck ... don’t even get me started on the princess crown in his hair.

I throw my head back and laugh. God, I love this family.

Craig: This made my night. Thanks, Brooke, you're an absolute gem. I can't wait to show this to the guys in my office tomorrow morning.

John: I feel you, kiddo. I'm still trying to get the pink glitter polish out of my fingernail cuticles.

Robert: John, I expected better from you.

My dad and Jill come here during the week and babysit Angel while Logan and I work. My daughter has her grandfather wrapped around her little finger, just like her daddy. Neither of them can say no to her.

Although we can afford to buy Angel whatever she wants, I try not to spoil her. Logan and I have talked about this at great lengths. He may have grown up with money, but I didn't, and there is nothing wrong with having to wait for the things you want. When we're at the store, and Angel asks for a new toy, I say things like, "*Maybe you can get that for your birthday, or we can ask Santa to bring that for Christmas.*" But she only has to look up at her daddy and pout her bottom lip, and he immediately caves.

Bending down, I scoop Angel into my arms and kiss her cheek. "How did you get my lipstick? I put my makeup in a place you couldn't reach."

"Daddy," she says, and I roll my eyes. I rest my case.

I carry her upstairs, going in search of my husband. I find him in the bathroom, frantically rubbing a wet cloth over his mouth.

"It's not coming off," he says, with a look of panic in his eyes.

"It's colour stay lipstick?"

"What does that even mean?"

"Basically, it's going to stain your skin."

His eyes widen. "Permanently?"

"It will fade over the next few days."

He groans, tilting back his head, causing the tiara to slip out of his hair and fall down to the tiled floor with a ting. "I have court tomorrow morning! What am I going to do?"

"You could always get Angel to paint your nails to match."

"Very funny," he growls.

Chapter 38

Brooke

I'm grinning as I watch Angel's tiny legs run across the small room. She looks so cute today in her white frilly dress and pigtails.

"Mama Marjee," she squeals, which translates to Grandma Marjorie in toddler talk.

"Goodness gracious, aren't you the sweetest," Chris's mother says when Angel climbs onto her lap and kisses her cheek.

Our little girl is growing fast. She's already two; where has that time gone?

My daughter is my greatest accomplishment, she brings us all so much joy. She has the kind of life I wished for as a child, surrounded by a large family that adores her.

We try to come and visit Marjorie every week; on rare occasions, she even remembers us, but that's not often.

Logan and I move further into the room and place the flowers I bought on the side table. "Are they for me?" she asks.

"Yes."

"How lovely, and look at that baby bump; it looks like you're almost ready to pop." She says that every time we come.

"I am," I say, touching my stomach. "My due date is next week."

"Oh, how wonderful."

"I have a son, Christopher James ... I named him after his father. He's in the army now and currently stationed overseas. I'm not sure where; it's top secret, but he called me last night and said he'd be coming home soon."

My eyes dart to my husband, and he gives me a sad, tight-lipped smile.

"You must be very proud."

We still miss Chris and talk about him often. Logan never hired another driver. He said it didn't feel right. He's irreplaceable.

"Oh, I am. Christopher is such a good boy. He never gives me any trouble." Her attention turns back to Angel. "Now, who do we have here?"

"I, Angel," she says, pointing to her own chest before moving her chubby little finger in Marjorie's direction. "You, Mama Marjee."

"She's trying to say, Grandma Marjorie."

"I'm her grandmother?" When Logan opens his mouth to correct her, I shake my head. We've been coming long enough to know she will forget this conversation soon enough, and why not let this sweet lady have a moment of joy? "I can't believe it," Marjorie says, looking down at Angel with the biggest smile. "When Victoria broke his heart ..." She shakes her head. "I honestly thought he'd never get over it. After what she did to him, he didn't date anyone else for such a long time."

Logan gives me a strange look because I'm sure he has no idea what she's talking about.

"Yes, he told me all about her," I admit.

Arching a brow, Logan mouths, "Who is Victoria?"

"I never really liked that girl," Marjorie says.

"Me either. What an awful thing breaking up with him via a letter. They were high school sweethearts, and he deserved better." When my husband's eyes widen, I have to roll my lips and dip my face to mask my laugh. He'd never admit it, but he secretly loves the gossip.



I grab the other flowers I bought from the back of the car while Logan unstraps Angel from her car seat.

This, too, has become our weekly ritual. After we leave Marjorie, we come here to the cemetery to visit Chris.

My heart feels heavy as I walk towards the gravesite. His large black marble headstone stands out amongst the others. When you compare it to the tiny metal plaque on his father's grave, you can tell my husband played a hand in Chris's burial.

"We miss you, Christopher James Brown," I say, squatting to place down the arrangement. A smile tugs at my lips as I think back to our last day

together. I never did find out how he knew my middle name. “We’ve just come from visiting your mum ... she’s doing well.”

I spot another single rose lying on the grass. It’s identical to the one I found here a few weeks ago.

I roll my eyes when I pick it up and read the tiny card attached.

Love always, Victoria xx

“Too little, too late, sister,” I mumble under my breath.

This is the second one I’ve found here. Like last time, I’m tempted to toss it aside, but I can’t do that.

That woman had over two decades to make amends for her poor behaviour. At the very least, she owed Chris a face-to-face apology. So, it deeply offends me that she would have the audacity to come here now. She missed out on a life with a beautiful man who I know would’ve loved her with everything he had. He was just that kind of person.

“Who is that rose from?” Logan asks as he extends his hand to help me stand.

“Nobody important.”

When it’s time to leave, Logan drapes his free arm over my shoulder, pulling me into his side. “You good, babe?”

“Yes. Did Chris ever ask you what my middle name was?”

“No, why?”

“No reason.” I tilt my head back and look up at the sky and smile. I guess that’s a secret he took with him to the grave.



As we head back home, I feel the gush of moisture between my legs. I’ve been getting niggly pains all morning, and I had a feeling something was beginning to happen. Although my due date is next week, the doctor said the baby was engaged, and the labour could come on at any time.

I side-eye my husband as I grab my phone from the centre console and pull up our family group messages.

Brooke: Is anyone available to watch Angel this afternoon? My water just broke.

Patricia: Oh, my goodness.

Michelle: OMFG! Any contractions yet? How far apart?

Craig: I bet the old boy shit himself. LMFAO

Brooke: I haven't told him yet, and no, Michelle, no contractions yet, just some small pains. I want to go to the hospital just in case.

Patricia: Yes, you need to go to the hospital, honey. Do you want me to come?

Michelle: We are at netball, but we should be done here soon. We can swing by the hospital and get Angel on the way home.

John: Oh, sweetheart. We can take Angel for you.

Robert: John, I think it's our turn to have her since you get to watch her during the week.

Patricia: Robert!

Robert: What? He's hogging her. She's our granddaughter too.

John: That's fine. You two can watch her.

Patricia: John, why don't you and Jill come here for dinner tonight? We can share her.

Robert: ...

Jill: That sound's lovely, Patricia. We'd love to come. And don't worry, Robert, I promise we won't hog Angel.

Brooke: So, are we bringing her to your place, Patricia?

Patricia: Yes, sweetie.

Craig: Have you told Logan yet?

Brooke: No, he's driving.

Craig: Wise move. He's liable to pull over and call for the Westpac Rescue Helicopter.

Craig: Or order a police escort!

Patricia: Craig Mark Bernard Powers!

Craig: Sorry Mum.

Robert: Bernard?

John: Do you want me to meet you at Patricia and Robert's and drive you two to the hospital?

Brooke: We'll be fine, Dad. But thank you.

John: I'll be thinking of you, sweetheart. Call if there's anything you need. Love you. x

Brooke: Love you too. x

"Hot Stuff, can we take a right up here?"

"Why?"

"I need to drop something off at your parents' place."

"What?"

Our daughter. "Just something."

He reaches over to grab my hand. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," I lie because Craig is right. He will freak out when I tell him I'm in labour.



When we pull into Logan's parent's house, they are already waiting out the front. Patricia makes her way towards the passenger side with a few towels in her hand. Robert heads for the back door behind the driver's seat to get *his* granddaughter, that apparently everyone else has been hogging.

"Papa."

"Hi, sweet girl."

"What the hell," Logan says when his father starts unstrapping Angel in her car seat.

As Patricia opens my door, she hands me the towels. "Do you need to

come inside and clean up; I can lend you some clothes?”

“Again ... *what the hell!*”

“Relax, Hot Stuff—” Before I get a chance to finish what I’m saying, my dad and Jill, pull up beside us.

Jill winds down the passenger side window. “We thought we’d go via the penthouse and grab your bag for you.”

Logan’s attention moves to me. “What the fuck ... what bag? Where are you going?” he snaps.

When I hear a horn honking, I turn in my seat and glance over my shoulder as Michelle’s car pulls in behind us. She jumps out of the car and runs around to my side, shoving her mother out of the way. “I left Craig at netball with Lara. Her game wasn’t far from here, so I had to come and check on my bestie. How exciting,” she squeals, grabbing my hand and bouncing on her feet. “You’re having a baby!”

I rest my head against the back of my seat and blow out a puff of air. I seriously love this family, but they are sometimes a little nuts.

“What’s going on? It’s like my family have lost their fucking minds.” I laugh when Logan says it because that’s exactly what I was just thinking.

“We are just excited about the baby,” Michelle says.

“What baby?” he asks.

“Brooke’s silly.”

“You realise she’s been pregnant for almost nine months, and none of you has acted like this.”

“She wasn’t in labour then.”

“What?!”

Logan’s eyebrows pinch together as his head snaps to me. “You’re in labour?”

I lift one shoulder. “I think so. My water broke.”

“Your water broke? When?” he yells.

“About ten minutes ago.”

“Ten fucking minutes ago?”

“Yes.”

“You were right beside me ten minutes ago! Will someone please explain how the entire fucking world knows *my* wife’s water broke and I didn’t?”

“Watch your mouth, Logan Marcus Cavanagh!” Patricia scolds. “I let the first few go because I knew this was a stressful situation for you, but you’ve dropped the f-bomb four times in the last few minutes.”

I reach across the centre console and place my hand on his. “Relax, Hot Stuff.”

“Relax! How do they all know, and I don’t?”

“Our family group chat. I didn’t say anything while you were driving because I didn’t want you to freak out.”

He shakes his head. “I hate that stupid group.”

“It’s a great group.”

“It’s dumb, and I’m removing myself from it tomorrow.”

“You won’t, and you know it. You like to keep in the loop.”

He doesn’t dispute what I said because he knows I’m right. Instead, he wraps his hand around mine. “I can’t believe you’re in labour.”

“I know,” I say, smiling.

“Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine ... honestly.”

“I guess we better get you to the hospital.”

After everyone takes turns coming to my side of the car to kiss me and wish me luck, and my dad places my hospital bag in the back, Logan puts the car in reverse.

“Daddy,” Angel screams. She is still in Robert’s arms.

He winds down his window. “Be a good girl for Grandma and Grandpa.”

“My kiss?”

He places his hand against his mouth and blows her a kiss. Angel reaches out to catch it, but she frowns when she looks down at her dress and realises she doesn’t have a pocket. Logan and I both laugh when she spots the one on Robert’s shirt and shoves her little hand inside it.

When she pulls her hand out, she brings it to her mouth and says, “Mwah,” blowing her daddy a kiss in return.

Logan catches it and slides it into the pocket of his shirt.

These two together melt my heart.

One morning when Logan was leaving for work, Angel mimicked me and blew him a kiss. When he caught hers and put it in his pocket, she asked him why he did that. His answer was simple.

“I’m saving it for later.”

From that day on, it became their special thing.

Chapter 39

Brooke

My contractions are now coming thick and fast. Oh my god, what was I thinking contemplating having a natural birth?

Poor Logan's face is as white as the hospital sheet I'm lying on, and if he squeezes my hand any harder when I have my next contraction, I think he's going to break some of my bones.

It's been two hours since we arrived at the hospital, and the last time the doctor checked, I was six centimetres dilated. This baby is coming, but not fast enough for my liking. I want this pain to be over.

"How are you feeling?"

"How do you think I'm feeling? I have a kid with a head the size of a basketball moving down my very narrow birth canal."

"Angel's head was no bigger than a baseball when she was born."

"That's because she takes after me ... this one obviously takes after you."

"My head is perfectly proportioned with the rest of my body, Brooke."

"Really? Because I think you kind of resemble one of those bobbleheads you see at the souvenir store."

"Babe, why are you being so mean to me?"

"Because this is all your fault." I throw back my head and groan when another contraction hits. "I'm in this position right now because of you."

"I hate seeing you like this. What can I do to help?"

I fist a handful of his shirt in my hand, dragging him closer. "Get me some drugs ... all the fucking drugs."

"But you said—"

"I lied when I said I wanted to do this drug-free. I want to be high as a kite."

Logan chuckles and I want to punch him. “I’m pretty sure the drugs they give you help with the pain, not make you high.”

When another contraction hits, tears cloud my eyes. “I ... I can’t do this. It hurts too much. I need drugs, Hot Stuff. I’ll take whatever they can give me. I just need something.”

This pain is obviously making me delirious because, under normal circumstances, I’d never consider this. I spent my entire pregnancy doing everything right. I even cut out all sugar, caffeine, and fats from my diet, only eating the healthiest foods because I wanted to give this baby the best chance, especially after what I went through last time.

“Babe, fuck. Let me go get the doctor.”

“Offer him a million dollars ... no two,” I say to his retreating back. “I want the good stuff.”

When he comes rushing back into the room less than a minute later, he has a doctor and two nurses in tow. They obviously took the bribe.

The three of them approach the bed, but my eyes narrow when I notice my husband hanging back.

“Did you offer them the money?” I ask.

“Money?” the doctor asks as he lifts the sheet that is covering the lower part of my body and any other time I’d feel self-conscious showcasing my vagina to a room full of strangers, but in this moment, I don’t care who’s looking at my bits, I just want this baby out of me.

“Yes, for all the good drugs.”

He glances up from between my legs with a frown on his face. “We don’t sell drugs here Mrs. Cavanagh, this is a hospital not a street corner ... and I’m afraid all the money in the world won’t help you now because the baby’s head is starting to crown. It’s almost time for you to push.”

I extend my arm towards Logan and wiggle my fingers—because I need him with me for this—and like the doting husband he is, he comes hurrying back to my side. Just as his hand wraps around mine, another contraction hits, bringing out my bitchy side again.

“First thing Monday morning, I’m filing for a divorce.”

“Babe!”

As soon as the pain subsides, I feel dreadful. “I’m sorry, Hot Stuff. I don’t want a divorce.”

“Good,” he growls, “because I wasn’t going to give you one.”

He lifts my hand towards his face and softly kisses each fingertip. God, I

love this man.

“Are you ready?” the doctor asks.

“No, is it too late to back out?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Can you at least put me back in a medically induced coma, so I can’t feel anything?”

“What?”

“Long story,” Logan answers the doctor before his attention moves back to me. “I’ve got you, babe. You can do this.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. Just think, you’ll get to meet our son in a few minutes.”

“Son? So, you’re calling this one too?”

“I was right last time. I have a gift, it’s just one of many talents.”

I roll my eyes.

“When the next contraction hits, I want you to start pushing,” the doctor says.

I bare down and do as he asks, and the burning sensation between my legs is almost unbearable. I feel like my vagina is being ripped to shreds, like I’m literally splitting in two. I throw my head back and scream.

“I’m sorry,” Logan says, looking down at me with tears in his eyes. “I’m going to get a vasectomy when this is over ... there’s no way you’re going through this again.”

“Good!”

After two more pushes, the doctor says, “The head is out. You’re doing great. You are almost there.”

Logan leans over the bed to look between my legs. “He has chubby cheeks just like Angel did.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I pant, “those cheeks obviously go with the baby’s giant head.”

Minutes later and a few more profanities, I hear the most glorious sound ... our baby’s first cry.

“You did it,” Logan says, leaning down to place his forehead against mine. “I’m so proud of you, babe.”

“Congratulations ... it’s a boy.” The nurse lays the baby on my chest, tears filling my eyes the moment I see him.

“He’s beautiful,” I cry.

My gaze darts to my husband, and I see him swipe the back of his hands

over his eyes. “Does he suit any of the names we picked?” he asks.

“No, but I have the perfect name for him ... Christopher James Cavanagh.”

“Babe,” he says as more tears leak from his eyes.

“What do you think?”

“I think I’m the luckiest man in the world to have a wife like you.”

“I love you, Hot Stuff.”

“I love you more.”

“That’s debatable ... and for the record your head is normal size and perfectly proportioned with the rest of your body.”

He rests his forehead on my shoulder and when his body shakes with laughter, I know I’m forgiven for all of the mean things I said earlier. “I know, babe ... *I know.*”

Chapter 40

Logan

The last three years with my beautiful wife and our two children have been the happiest of my life, until today, that is. Today I feel like my heart is being ripped out of my damn chest. After kissing me goodbye, she turns around and skips off without a backward glance. Honestly, I'm crushed.

I thought she would find it hard to leave me, but she doesn't seem to mind at all. Every fibre of my being wants to chase after her, bundle her in my arms and take her away from this place. I'm not ready to let her go, but I know I have to. That feeling makes my stomach churn.

I thought this morning would pan out differently. I was expecting tears, tantrums and the possibility of me caving and bringing her back home because I didn't have the heart to walk away. I should've known she was excited for today when she came running downstairs, already dressed in her uniform and smiling. On the other hand, I got all choked up as soon as I saw her. She looked so grown up. Where did my baby girl go?

"Angel!" I call out, and she stills, glancing at me over her shoulder. "I love you, Princess."

"I love you, too, Daddy," she yells back, blowing me a kiss. I catch it and tuck it into my shirt pocket for later. Her face lights up when I do it. Her smile is just like her mother's—*breathtaking*.

I blow her a kiss back. Like me, she catches it and mimics my actions before disappearing around the corner. I stand there for a few minutes, possibly longer, unable to move. My heart is heavy; it feels like bricks have settled on my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. Who knew letting go would be so fucking hard?

Tears sting the back of my eyes as I try to swallow the golf ball-sized lump that has formed in my throat. I dip my face towards the ground and shove my hands into my trouser pockets. A sea of parents surround me, and while a few of the mothers are crying, I'll be embarrassed if the other fathers see how emotional I am.

Turning, my shoulders slump as I walk back to my car. Today is my baby girl's first day of 'big school'. She may only be five years old, but I already feel like she's slipping through my fingertips. I wish Brooke could have been here with me this morning. I needed her so much.

Unfortunately, our son, CJ, has the flu. We tried to leave him with Jill, but he wanted his mummy. He is definitely a mama's boy. Poor Brooke can't go anywhere without him.

He's her little shadow and my cock-blocker. He went through a stage where he couldn't even sleep unless his mother was beside him. I knew how he felt because I don't like being away from her either. She missed out on so much with Angel, so letting her have this special bonding time with our son was important.

For weeks, I was forced to come home during the middle of the day to get a bit of action with my wife. Jill would distract the kids by taking them down to the beach so we could sneak off to our bedroom. Thank god he's finally sleeping on his own again, and I have my wife back in my bed, where she belongs.

I stayed true to my word and had a Vasectomy a few weeks after CJ's birth. There was no way I would put Brooke through that pain again. She has been through far too much in her life. I'm still haunted by what she went through. It gave me a newfound appreciation for my own mother.

We both wanted more children but are happy with our pigeon pair. I have my precious little girl and a son to carry on the family name. He is such a good boy, too. Angel adores him. She is a great big sister.

Even though he is a mama's boy, we're still close. He's a mini-me; maybe that explains his obsession with Brooke. He already has all the teenage girls at the dance studio falling over him, and he's only three years old. Brooke thinks it's hilarious. He is definitely going to be a heartbreaker when he grows up.

Once I'm seated in the car, I rest my head against the steering wheel. I'm supposed to head to the office now, but I can't bring myself to drive away.

When my phone dings in my pocket, I slide it out.

Brooke: How did she go? Or should I ask how did you go?

Logan: It went absolutely shit!

Brooke: OMG! Why?

Logan: Because she didn't even shed a tear. She just gave me a wave and skipped away without a care in the world. Could she not see her daddy's fragile heart was breaking?

Brooke: LMAO. I mean ... aww, I'm sorry I wasn't there to kiss your boo-boo better, Hot Stuff. Did you cry?

Logan: Pfft, no!

Brooke: OMG, you did!

Logan: Why are you so mean to me, babe? As we backed down the driveway, I saw you wipe the tears from your eyes.

Brooke: I'm sorry. I knew this was going to happen, but I love your soft heart. Don't ever change.

Logan: There is nothing soft about me, and I'm heading home right now to prove it.

Brooke: I thought you were going into the office?

Logan: I changed my mind. My wife needs to be punished.

Brooke: Ooh! That sounds promising.

Logan: Where is CJ?

Brooke: Sound asleep.

Logan: Good! Be prepared for a pounding when I get there. I'm going to fuck you into submission.

Brooke: *Rubs hands together in preparation.

Her comment makes me laugh.

Logan: Minx!

I pull up Claire's number next.

Logan: Change of plans. I'm not going to make it to the office today. Can you reschedule my appointments? I'll need you to file the Chambers brief at the District Court before noon.

Claire: Is everything okay?

Logan: No. I just dropped Angel off at school.

Claire: You cried, didn't you?

Logan: You might want to start looking for another job while you're at it.

Claire: Bahahaha!

What is it with the women in my life constantly busting my balls? Men have feelings too.

Sliding my seatbelt over my shoulder, I start the car. Last year, we moved out of the penthouse. I have tenants living there now. As sad as it was to leave that place and all the memories we created there, Brooke and I both agreed the kids needed a yard to play in. It is on the north side of Sydney harbour and backs onto our own private beach. Even though the penthouse is closer to the office and the dance studio, we are much happier now.



Brooke is waiting on the front porch when I pull into the driveway. As soon as I exit the car, she crosses the lawn heading straight for me. The moment she's within reach, I pull her into my arms and bury my face in her neck.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fucked up," I say with a sigh. "I didn't think it would be so hard."

I feel her body shake with laughter as she soothingly rubs her hand over my back. "How will you cope when she gets married and moves out of the house?"

I groan against her skin. “I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t allow her to get married?” she asks, laughing again. “You know, once she’s an adult, you won’t have much say in that?”

“If Angel insists on getting married, they will have to move in here with us. Why do you think I built such a big house?”

“You are going to have to let her go one day.” That comment earns her a dirty look as I lift her off the ground, and she squeals when I toss her over my shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you inside so I can deal out your punishment.”

“Just think, when the kids are all grown up and moved out of the house, we can start walking around naked again. We can have sex wherever and whenever we want.”

And just like that, the idea of the kids moving out suddenly doesn’t sound so bad.

“Is CJ still upstairs asleep?”

“Yes! I gave him his medicine not long ago, so he’ll probably be out for a while.”

“Good.”

As I step through the front door, I lower Brooke to her feet and back her against the wall. “How about we start practising for when the kids move out?” I ask, raising my eyebrows at her.

“I like the way you think, Mr. Cavanagh.”

She smiles before grabbing either side of my face and pulling my lips down to meet hers. My hands slide around her waist before moving down to cup her tight arse. She wraps her legs around me when I lift her off her feet.

Turning, I bring her with me as I move through the foyer and towards the back of the house. I want to take my wife upstairs to our room and spread her out on our bed, but we will be too loud, and I don’t want to wake CJ up. That’s something I’ve learnt over the past five years: you’ve got to take whatever you can get, whenever you can, as our kids have severely affected our sex life.

Entering the kitchen, I gently place Brooke down on top of the long kitchen island. I take a step back as I reach for the waistband of her tights, dragging them and her underwear down her legs. My eyes dart up to her face to find her bottom lip captured between her teeth. After all these years, this woman still manages to undo me.

Shrugging out of my suit jacket, I toss it over one of the barstools and

reach for my belt buckle and make quick work of freeing my cock from my trousers.

My hands grip her hips as I drag her body to the edge of the counter, groaning as I stroke my cock and run the head through her wetness.

“Fuck, babe,” I growl as I propel my hips forward, thrusting myself balls deep inside her piece of heaven.

Brooke arches her back off the marble benchtop and whimpers when I withdraw before plunging back in.

This is exactly what I needed. The heartache I was feeling earlier is quickly forgotten as I lose myself in my wife.

Leaning over her, I tenderly brush the hair off her face as I seek out her lips. Our bodies move in perfect rhythm as I drag her hands above her head and lace our fingers together. Brooke is and will always be my happy place.

We went through so much in our first few years together. They were tough times, but that is all behind us now. It not only made us stronger as individuals but also as a couple. It taught us to appreciate not only life but each other.

The undying love we share is unbreakable. Our bond is stronger than ever, and nothing or nobody will ever change that.

We are forever.

Chapter 41

BONUS CATCH-UP

It was just after Michelle gave birth to their son, Isaac, that Craig and I bought the blocks of land—where we’re now living—right next door to each other. We are situated on the northern side of the harbour and have our own private beach on our doorstep. It’s a majestic place and the best decision I could’ve made for my family. We are now living a quieter pace of life being outside the city hub.

It took over a year for the plans to be approved by the council, and the houses to be built, but in the end the wait was worth it. It’s great living next door to your best friends. We do everything together. I’ve even bought a boat and spend a lot of my free time on the water.

Lara is all grown up and in high school now and is currently training to become a part-time dance teacher at Brooke’s studio. Michelle’s still working there, too, and has finally agreed to let Brooke make her an equal partner, which is something Brooke has wanted for a long time. They make a great team, and the studio is so successful they have a long waiting list for students that want to attend.

Brooke’s dad and Jill got married last summer. They’re extremely happy together. After their lonely lives, it’s great to see them so in love. Jill’s still working for us, but only for a few hours a day. They ended up getting married in Fiji, and we all flew over for the wedding and stayed on for a two-week holiday. The kids adore all of their grandparents. Jill is known as Nanny Jill, and they call John Poppy.

My parents are still going strong. Surprisingly, I’ve become very close with my father over the past few years. He is a different man from the one I grew up with. My father loves all his grandchildren, but Angel has him

wrapped around her little finger, just like she does me.

My aunt was sentenced to five years in prison for her part in my arrest, and only six months into her sentence, she had a stroke. Unfortunately for her, she wasn't found until the following morning, so she didn't receive the vital treatment she needed in time. She is now permanently paralysed down the left side of her body and is living in a nursing home as a result. We don't have any contact with her, although my father did visit her once. All he said was, "*She hasn't changed ... I feel sorry for the poor nurses that are looking after her.*" That one sentence said so much. It's sad that Kathleen will live out her life all alone, but you reap what you sow ... she brought this on herself.

As for Kaylee, I wrote a letter to the judge asking for leniency for her. Time had diminished the anger I'd been harbouring towards her. She needed to be held accountable for her part, but I also knew how ruthless Kathleen was and the extent she was willing to go to get her way. Kaylee was just a young, impressionable and naive kid when this all happened. My involvement in her case, resulted in her getting a six-month suspended sentence and three-hundred hours of community service.

Cavanagh and Associates is thriving, and Claire is still my P.A. ... hopefully it stays that way; I'd be lost without her. Jim Maloney continues to oversee my Melbourne office. He ended up marrying Grace. Jacinta is flourishing living her new life and seems to adore her protective big brother, Connor. They are a beautiful family of four, and after everything they went through, they deserved a happily ever after.

We continued to visit Chris's mother a few times a week up until late last year, when she lost her battle with Dementia and died peacefully in her sleep. She loved seeing the kids when we'd go there, and we were all sad when she passed away because we'd grown very fond of her. We buried her next to her husband and son; it gave us some peace to know she was back together with her boys.

FINDING US

Keep reading for a sneak peek of Finding Us (Book 3) ...

A life lived in fear, is a life half lived.

When I decided to follow my step-brother and move interstate, I still carried the scars from my past. Due to my violent upbringing, at my father's hands, my trust in men is limited. So much so that I'm twenty years old and I've never had a boyfriend.

When my best friend Cassie convinces me to have a one-night stand—with a hot, tattooed, Harley-riding stranger—on my twenty-first birthday, it would change everything. Even though I snuck out of his house while he was still sleeping, I had zero regrets. Not only did *he* rock my world *multiple* times, he woke up something inside me, a part of me that I never knew existed.

I'll treasure those memories because they're all I'll ever have. I'm far too damaged for a serious relationship.



I've never been a commitment kind of guy; some may even call me a player. That's probably how I found myself in the situation I'm now in—a single dad to a sweet kid who has a severe case of Mummy issues.

When that poor excuse for a human dumped him on my doorstep, it didn't take me long to become attached. That's when I decided it was time to stop living the party life and get my act together. This broken little boy deserved at least one decent parent, and since that would never be his mother,

that job was left up to me.

I was content doing life with just the two of us ... until I hooked up with *her*. She was different to all the others; sweet and innocent, with a sassy mouth that turned me on. For the first time *ever*, I contemplated more—that is until she did a runner in the dead of night.

I didn't even know her real name, so I had no way of tracking her down, or so I thought. I had no idea that little temptress was actually my best friend's baby sister.

Jacinta

I follow my mum through the front door, she's just collected me from school, and I love this time of day—it's my calm before the storm, you could say. These few hours in the afternoon that I spend with her are my favourite moments. This is when I feel safe, and it's the only time me and my mum are free to be ourselves. Everything changes around 6 pm; because that's the time my father gets home from work.

I'm sitting at the table doing my homework, chatting and laughing with my mum while she cooks dinner. It's one of the few times I see her smile. She's a different person when my father's not around. She's always jumpy and anxious but it escalates when he's home.

My father acts as if he hates us, and I can assure you—as far as I'm concerned—the feeling is mutual. I've never understood why he doesn't love us. I try my best to be a good girl, but nothing I do is ever good enough for him.

There have been times I've prayed for something to happen to him, which sounds terrible, I know, but I've truly wished for that. My father is cruel, and he's always hurting my mum.

A sudden loud *bang* echoes through the house, as the front door slams closed. My mother and I both jump because we know what's coming. My eyes dart up to the clock hanging on the wall; *he's here early*. I hate this dreaded feeling I get in the pit of my stomach when he gets home. That carefree feeling I experienced only moments ago is now replaced with fear.

I look up at my mum from where I'm sitting. Her hands are violently shaking as she stirs the sauce on the stove. The look on her face breaks my heart; she looks terrified. I wish I could protect her from *him*, but she never

lets me. She's scared that he will hurt me again. He's lashed out at me a few times in the past when I've tried to come to her aid.

My stomach churns as I hear his heavy footsteps approaching. When I glance over at my mum, she quickly motions with her eyes for me to leave the room; that's our secret code. It means that shit's about to go down. She told me years ago whenever she gives me that signal, I'm to go straight to my bedroom and lock myself inside. I'm not allowed to come out under any circumstances. No matter what I hear, or how scared I am. I have to stay there until she comes to get me.

The waiting is torture.

This has been my life for as long as I can remember, and I truly hate living here with that man. *I hate all men.* I may only be twelve years old, but I've seen enough in my short life to know that men are horrible and mean. I don't trust them—at all!

I'm never, ever getting married. I'm not even gonna have a boyfriend.

Once I'm in the safety of my room, I make my way over to the corner beside my bed. I always go to the same place because it's the furthest position from my bedroom door. I sit down, and like so many times before, I pull my legs up against my chest. Wrapping my arms tightly around my knees and dropping my head, I start rocking back and forth.

I hear what sounds like someone being slapped. He's hit Mum so many times before the sound is firmly embedded in my brain. The sound of metal clanging on the tiled floor quickly follows; it's probably the spoon she was holding. I want to put my hands over my ears, so I can't hear them, but I don't. *I never do.* It would make it so much easier for me if I didn't have to hear him hitting her. But I have to listen. I don't have a choice.

What if my mum calls out to me? What if she needs me to save her?

“You fucking stupid, lazy, good-for-nothing bitch!” he screams. “You can't even cut the grass properly, you useless piece of shit.” My breath hitches in my throat as I clamp my eyes close. ‘*Slap ... Slap*’.

“I'm sorry, please don't hurt me,” my mum cries. It breaks my heart when she begs like that. I wish I was stronger; I want to hurt him like he hurts her.

The trouble for my mum began yesterday afternoon when she was mowing the lawns and the lawn mower stopped working.

“Please no,” I heard her plead, as she desperately tried to get it to start again, but to no avail. When her shoulders sagged, I knew she was petrified

at the thought of going inside to tell him.

My eyes followed her as she hesitantly walked across the backyard. Her body trembled violently as she slowly climbed the stairs before disappearing into the house to receive her fate.

I ran towards the back door and came to a stop when I entered the kitchen. I watched on in horror as she lowered her head before speaking. She always does this. I don't know if it's because she's scared to look him in the eye or because she doesn't want to see what we both know is coming.

"I can't get the mower to start," she whispered.

"Whack" It earned her a backhand across the face, followed by another hit to the side of her head. The hatred in his eyes as he towered over her, made my stomach churn. It wasn't her fault the lawn mower broke down, but logic never mattered to him.

As we sat down to dinner, the silence was deafening. Neither of us were game enough to speak. My mother was now sporting a swollen eye and a fat lip, that I knew from experience would be black by the morning. They've almost become a permanent fixture on her pretty face, hence why she's always hiding behind those ridiculously large sunglasses when we're in public.

When I side-eyed my dad, I saw his face was red with anger, and the way his nostrils kept flaring told me he was still fuming. I knew this wasn't the end of it.

A short time later, he snapped again while my mum was doing the dishes. He'd been outside trying to fix the lawn mower, and when he couldn't, he came back inside to take his frustration out on her.

He grabbed a pair of scissors out of the drawer in the kitchen before stalking over to my mum. He fisted a chunk of her long blonde hair in his hand and tugged on it hard. She stumbled as she was dragged back towards the door. Aside from a tiny whimper, she remained quiet. I could tell she was scared by her large terrified eyes, but she'd learnt a long time ago never to fight back. Never! It only makes him rage more.

The fear on her face made my heart hurt. The tears were already streaming down her beautiful face, and as she passed me, the signal was clear. Go to your room, and stay safe. But I couldn't move. The panic running through my tiny body kept me planted on my chair. My eyes were drawn to the scissors in my father's hand. Will today be the day? The day he finally goes too far and actually kills her.

She stumbled again as he dragged her down the back steps, her legs grazing the wooden treads. She tried to regain her footing and stand, but he didn't give her a chance. He continued to pull her across the yard by her hair. Bastard! I willed my body to move and when it eventually responded, I hadn't gone to my room, I needed to know mum was going to be okay. I was petrified he was going to use the scissors to stab her.

My body trembled and I protectively wrapped my arms around my waist, watching on in horror through the kitchen window.

He threw her to the ground before kicking her in the stomach. She instinctively put her hands up to protect her face. It was the only thing she could do. His next kick was a vicious one to her leg before he threw the scissors down beside her.

"Cut the grass by hand, you dumb, fucking whore," he yelled. He struck again with his boot, and mum yelped, screwing up her face. She'd been hurt, bad.

He stood, hands on hips, legs spread apart. He was intimidating her. She folded herself into a ball on the ground because his intimidation always worked. He's a bully and knows we're both petrified of him. The sick, perverse monster that he is seems to revel in the fact he can terrify us both. I can always tell by the sadistic smile plastered all over his evil face as he hurts her.

Mum unfolded herself and with shaky hands reached for the scissors. They shook so much she couldn't grasp them, so he stomped on her hand. I gasped as a tortured cry of pain escaped her lips. With tears flowing freely down my cheeks, I watched on, and I felt immediate relief when she finally managed to pick them up.

I hate him so much!

My mum wiped away the blood from her nose with the back of her hand, pulled herself onto her knees and began cutting the grass by hand. Blade by blade. It was going to take her forever. He stood there, a cruel smile curling his lips, before turning around and heading back towards the house. I dashed to my room and locked the door before he made it back inside.

I desperately wanted to go outside and help my mum but I knew she wouldn't want that. It would have sparked his rage, seeing me help. She's often told me she can take the beatings as long as he leaves me alone. Sometimes though, I wish my father would hit me instead, just so she could have a break from it.

I lay awake in bed for hours, listening and waiting for her to come inside. I finally heard the back door close with a familiar click, and my mum's footsteps padding down the hall towards her bedroom. I glanced at the clock on my bedside table. It was almost two in the morning. My poor mum had been cutting the grass, with scissors, for nearly eight hours.

"I love you, Mummy," I whispered into the dark. I knew she couldn't hear me, but I felt compelled to say it. I need her to know that someone loved her, that somebody cared.

What happened last night must be why Mum's receiving another beating right now. My father's obviously unhappy with the way she cut the grass. He'll justify his behaviour in any way he can. The man is insane!

She had been forced to use scissors, for Christ's sake! It had been dark outside. How can you possibly cut the lawn perfectly with a pair of scissors in the damn dark? *He's such an arsehole.* I hate him so much.

In his mind, there is always an excuse for his psychotic behaviour. "My dinner is too hot." *Whack.* "My dinner is not hot enough." *Whack.* "What did you put in the gravy? It tastes like shit." *Whack.* "Did you buy a different washing powder? My shirt smells like fucking flowers." *Whack.* "I had a bad day at work, and it's all your fault." *Whack.* I could go on forever.

No matter what she does, he always finds something to complain about. She tries so hard to ensure everything's perfect, to keep him happy. It's a waste of time; nothing she does is ever good enough in his eyes.

He's a monster!

I rock back and forth in my bedroom. Things are smashing as my father screams at her. The only sounds from mum are cries of pain. This beating is bad they don't usually last this long. The sound of things shattering filters into my room. That monster must be throwing her around the house!

I can't bear it any longer. I turn my head and glance at my wardrobe. It's where I hid my phone, the one Brooke, my dance teacher, gave me to use in case of an emergency. Standing, I open the double doors and stare up at the shelf. I can't reach it without a chair.

Suddenly everything goes quiet. I listen, but there's nothing but silence. I tip-toe towards my bedroom door and place my ear against the wood. When I hear the front door slam, relief floods through my body.

Finally, it's over! I begin to relax.

He always slams the front door as he leaves the house; it indicates it's over, *for now, anyway.* He'll leave for a few hours once he's done with her.

Unfortunately, he always returns, reeking of alcohol and full of remorse that never last long. I asked my mum once where he went after he hit her. She thinks he goes to the pub to have a few drinks and calm down.

I wish he'd drink so much that it killed him.

I wait quietly. Mum will come and get me any minute. But as time passes, I grow anxious again. Every part of me desperately wants to go to her, but she's told me over and over, *never leave until I come for you*. She will only come once it's safe.

I'm pacing back and forth by the door as I impatiently wait. *She never comes*. My mind starts to race, and all sorts of images flash through my imagination. What if she can't come to me? Maybe *this time* my father killed her. Without thinking, I unlock the door and fling it open.

"Mummy," I'm so scared, my voice comes out like a whisper.

My hands shake as I step into the hallway and I freeze for a few seconds, listening intently but there is still no sound. Panic sets in as I run down the hall, rounding the corner that leads to the front room. The destruction I see has me stopping in my tracks. It's completely trashed and my heart drops when I see blood smears on the wall.

"Mum," I scream. Turning, I start running back down the hall. "Mummy, where are you?"

As soon as I enter the kitchen, I see her crumpled on the floor. *She's not moving*. Blood flows down her face and into her beautiful blonde hair. I can hear the erratic beating of my heart in my ears as I step tentatively towards her. My body is trembling with fear.

"Mummy," I whisper, dropping to my knees beside her. *Nothing*. Why isn't she moving? Why won't she answer? Tears burn my eyes.

Blood flows from her nose and mouth. Her beautiful face is already swollen and the bruises are starting to show. I shake her softly.

"Mummy, wake up," I cry as I hesitantly reach out and place my hand on her arm. I'm desperate to know she isn't dead. "Please wake up," I beg as I lightly shake her. "Please, Mummy, don't leave me here by myself, I need you." I'm crying hysterically now. "Please open your eyes."

Jumping to my feet, I grab one of the kitchen chairs and drag it towards my bedroom. I have to get my phone and call Brooke, I don't know what else to do, but I need to do something.

I hear a male's voice calling my name, but it sounds far away. When a hand grasps my arm, panic sets in, and I begin thrashing my body around.

“Jaz ... Jaz, wake up. You’re having another nightmare.”

I recognise the voice immediately and know I’m safe—only then do I open my eyes.

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