A broken gold ring is the central focus, surrounded by a variety of flowers including blue and white blossoms, and small blue berries. The background is dark and filled with more floral elements, creating a romantic and somewhat somber atmosphere.

THE FAITHLESS DUET PART TWO

FORGIVENESS

SKYLER
MASON

FORGIVENESS

A DARK MARRIAGE IN TROUBLE ROMANCE
NOVELLA

THE FAITHLESS DUET

BOOK TWO



SKYLER MASON



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To Rachel, who chose not to forgive him, and that's okay

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CHAPTER 1

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3 years ago

Mark

“YOU FORGOT to mention that you’re married.” Lauren holds her phone up as she pulls the sheet over her tits. When I glance at her screen, the “about” page of Walker Industries is pulled up. Two faces smile back at me from the picture. Mine and Whitney’s.

The picture was taken almost five years ago, and yet my wife looked just as beautiful yesterday morning when I left the house.

An aching heaviness pulls at my chest. Where has the delight gone? I used to enjoy thinking of Whitney while I was in the arms of another woman. I sometimes even called her face to mind in the peak of ecstasy. The resulting rage made my orgasm much more potent. But lately, that rage has cooled, and I know what awaits me.

Despair.

I’ve been fighting it off since that December morning twelve years ago when Whitney confessed her affair. It’s

always lingering in the distance, ready to pounce when I let my guard down. It jerks me awake in the middle of the night, ready to wrap its wiry fingers around my throat.

I knew this day would come, and yet I'm still unprepared for it. A part of me wants to head home right now and throw myself at Whitney's feet.

"This is the first time you've ever looked me up?" I ask, able to keep my voice even.

Lauren grunts. "I have a lot going on in my life."

I tug the sheet up over my hips, for some reason not wanting to talk about Whitney with my dick in full view. Am I finally growing a conscience at forty-five years old?

"I'm not really married," I say. "Not in that way. My wife knows I'm... She knows I see other women."

Lauren snorts. "Sure she does. Is that what you're doing right now?" She twists around to face me, and her gaze drops to my bare chest. "Seeing me?"

I can make out the shape of her perky tits underneath that sheet, and coldness fills my gut. I don't want to fuck Lauren again, even at the sight of her beautiful body.

This feeling had better pass. I'm not ready for it.

"You're an idiot," Lauren says, snapping me out of my daze.

I swallow. "It's much more complicated than it looks on the surface."

"Obviously. You're working through something and using me to do it." She twists around to lie on her back again. "How like a man. You can't deal with your emotions, so you go out and fuck over your marriage. I hate to state the obvious, but

ruining your life isn't going to make you feel better. You're going to feel just as shitty, but you won't have a wife anymore."

Her words hit me in the chest, and the breath leaves my lungs. She said it like it's nothing. Like it's inevitable.

No. I can't lose Whitney.

I won't lose her.

Even if she'll never love me, she's all I've ever wanted in a wife. It makes me want to scream. I want to beg her forgiveness for letting my rage consume me, for letting it turn my ability to reason into ash.

She's paid enough. Any reasonable person would say she's paid enough.

As if by the hand of God, that email flashes in my mind. The one she sent to her lover all those years ago. The one I printed and keep tucked under the metal divider in my top desk drawer. The one I pull out every few months.

It's become a ritual when I need a fresh fix of euphoric rage. I always wait for an evening when I'm at the office late and almost everyone has left. I pour myself a glass of whiskey and down it fast. I wait for the warmth to settle over me, and I pull out that email.

As I read it, the heat of the whiskey turns to fire in my gut, and my teeth clench. By the time I get to the end—that final line—my rage is so big it could obliterate the world.

My love for you has never wavered. It's always been you.

I grab Lauren by the hips. As I lean forward to kiss her, she shoots me a scowl.

“I don’t want to kiss a married man. Go shower and get your pathetic ass back to your wife. I’m not ever doing this again.”

I hop out of bed and head into the bathroom, following Lauren’s first command by turning on the shower. But I won’t be fulfilling the second. My beautiful, faithless wife can go to hell.

WHITNEY

THE FRONT DOOR opens and my stomach jolts. Mark’s hard footsteps sound over the tile before he enters the kitchen.

I brace myself before turning around. He’s been with another woman. I know that for a fact after the DM I got this morning. Why am I afraid I’ll see evidence of her on his body when I’m finally able to look at him? I’ve never seen the cliché lipstick stain on his collar. Never smelled perfume. I’ve never even seen his hair wet from one of the showers I know he must take after he fucks them. Mark is indiscreet but not brazen.

The difference is always in me. Any time I am sure he’s been with someone else, the sight of him is painful afterward. Somehow knowing the specifics makes the chasm between us grow excruciatingly deep. The DM I got this morning wasn’t my first, but it somehow hurt the most. Why? The answer still eludes me. Maybe because she was so young. Even her wording was youthful, like she could be friends with our son.

Your husband told me you’re in an open marriage. I’m sure you can guess why, so I won’t go into details. I got a liar vibe from him, so I felt like I had to reach out to you. You’re

insanely hot, btw. Way hotter than me. He's a dumbass. I don't mean to be insensitive. I've never been in this position before. I really don't know what to say except I'm sorry. Lauren.

I didn't know what to say either, so I replied with a "thank you", and that was that.

Now I have to face him.

When I turn around, chills ripple over my skin. My God, he's such a beautiful man. It's not fair that younger women find his lean body and salt and pepper hair so conventionally attractive. I have to work like a dog to "age gracefully" without nearly the same prospects.

The world is unfair.

"Hey, honey," Mark says with a smirk, and my stomach plummets. He only ever calls me pet names as a taunt. Since Mason is sitting at the kitchen table a few feet away, I'm forced to play nice.

It's as though Mark is silently telling me this is what I signed up for. This is what it means to stay together for the kids.

It's my payment. He doesn't think I've suffered enough for what I did all those years ago, so he takes payments of pain. His infidelity is worth more if it hurts.

"Hi." I don't say any more, but I let my expression tell him everything. I stare at him with my jaw clenched and accusation in my eyes.

I know where you've been.

His brow furrows in confusion. I guess I'll have to be more blunt. "I got an interesting DM this morning," I say.

His jaw clenches, but he doesn't seem surprised. "Did you?"

I swallow. "Yes. Apparently, one of your..." When I glance over at Mason, he's staring at his phone and shoving a forkful of spaghetti into his mouth. I pin Mark with a glare. "One of your *clients* had some information for me."

He looks away from me for a long moment, probably to collect himself, and I expel a shaky breath. When he meets my eyes again, his expression is hard. There's no remorse in those dark eyes. "I don't know why one of my *clients* would reach out to you." He takes a step in my direction. "My work has nothing to do with you."

My body grows cold. My God. Could there be a clearer sign that things will never change between us? He doesn't even think I have a right to be concerned about his affairs.

It takes everything within me to hold his stare. "You're right." My voice is a little breathless. "I don't know why I brought it up."

His eyes widen minutely. Was he expecting something other than resignation from me? He walks in my direction, stopping only a foot away, and his scent washes over me. Longing clenches my chest.

God, I want to hate this man. I don't want to crave his touch.

"Is there a reason you brought it up?" His voice is gentle.

When his eyes bore into mine, my throat grows tight. What is this intense look of his? Does he really need more evidence that I'm breaking inside?

"No," I say. "Just forget about it."

His jaw clenches. He doesn't like that I'm brushing him off. After glancing at Mason, he looks back at me, and a small smile tugs at his lips.

I don't like this look of his. There's cruelty in it.

"Can I have a kiss?" Mark's smile grows. "I missed you."

The breath leaves my lungs in an instant, as if I've been knocked to the ground. How could he do this? Does he think I have no heart, that it won't be devastating to kiss those lips when I know where they've been?

I ought to tell him to fuck off, but maybe that's what he wants. Maybe he wants me to lose my cool in front of Mason and regret it afterwards.

It's time to prove my strength.

I lower my head and smile up at him from under my lashes. "Sure, honey."

His dark eyes flash, but I don't let it deter me. I lift up onto my toes and press a soft kiss on his mouth. His jaw tenses, but he doesn't move. Before pulling away, I nibble on his bottom lip.

When I finally have the courage to look at him, his eyes are burning.

My smile grows as I turn and walk away with a sway in my step.

You want me to pay, Mark Walker? I'll make sure I'm not the only one.

CHAPTER 2



*P*resent Day

Mark

IT WOULD BE HEAVEN to kiss her.

She glances at the window as she delicately presses a napkin against her lips. Her face is bathed in afternoon sunlight, making her golden-brown eyes sparkle.

Why didn't I kiss her every day when I had the chance? Why did I only do it in those rare moments when I wanted to show her I owned her?

As if sensing my gaze on her, she looks at me suddenly. I don't even make an effort to hide my longing, which I know must be all over my face, because her eyes grow remote.

She's resurrecting the wall between us.

I deserve it. The only reason we're even having lunch together right now is because I blackmailed her.

"This is delicious," she says, glancing down at her broccoli cheddar soup. "You've become an excellent chef since you moved out."

I smile slyly. “I had a lot of motivation.”

When she flutters her eyelids, I chuckle.

It was a cheap trick locking her into spending time with me for six months after I moved out of the house, but I was desperate.

I knew Whitney wanted our Tahoe cabin. She’s extremely sentimental when it comes to the kids, and we’ve spent almost every Christmas there since Cole was born.

Thankfully, it’s exclusively mine in the eyes of the law since it’s been in the Walker family for generations. Whitney can’t take it unless I give it to her.

Which I have, under one condition...

Six months of weekly lunches with me and one Christmas Ball at the end of it, at which time I’m planning to ask her out on a real date.

Just one date. Not an end to our separation. Not even a relationship. Just one date.

A modest request considering in my darkest moments, I’ve thought about kidnapping her, taking her away to a remote cabin and showering her with affection until she understands that my twisted obsession with her will never lead to cruelty again. I’ve learned my lesson.

Her mouth tightens. “I don’t like it when you look at me like that.”

I grin. “How am I looking at you?”

She narrows her eyes playfully. “Like you’re scheming.”

I lean forward, setting my elbows on the table. “As a matter of fact, I was thinking about kidnapping you.”

She rolls her eyes. “You really would, too. If you could get away with it, you’d do it. You have no conscience.”

“Of course I would. I’d take really good care of you. It would be a vacation for you, really.”

She snorts, shaking her head, and I grin back at her. I love this easiness between us. I worked hard to achieve it.

She was disdainful of my trick at first, but as she witnessed my brokenness in the weeks after our separation, she softened considerably. My wife is an angel, and she can’t stand it when people are in pain.

Even if the person in pain is the bastard who cheated on her for fifteen years.

Yet, even after all that I’ve done, I truly believe that over the last five and a half months, I’ve made progress in winning back her heart. I’ve been devoted to showing her how much I love and need her. How I’ll worship her from now and for the rest of her life, because there’s no other way. I can’t survive without her, and she can see it. I’ve probably lost ten pounds since I moved out of this house, and I was already lean. Every morning, my eyes are puffy from using whiskey as a sleeping pill. I look and feel like walking death.

Even if she takes me back out of pity, I don’t care. I’ll make it worth her while by devoting my life to making her happy.

The Christmas Ball is two weeks away. It’s now crunch time. I can’t be coy any longer, or else I might spook her when I ask for my date.

Before I leave here today, I have to at least drop a hint about my intentions.

Oh God, I just hope she doesn't shoot me down. I'm not sure if I'd be able to take it. I've become achingly fragile since I moved out of this house.

"Are you okay?" Whitney asks. "You look pale."

I laugh humorlessly. "I look like this all the time now. Looking like shit is my post-separation makeover."

Meanwhile, she looks as beautiful as ever. Even now, with her hair in a knot on her head and no makeup, she looks like an angel. Anyone in their right mind would want this woman.

I'm so lucky she's shy and skittish. She'd never in a million years start dating right after separating from her husband of twenty-three years, which is why I gave myself six months.

But six months is the bare minimum. She probably has divorced men in our circle falling all over themselves trying to get a date. Eventually, she'll give in to someone out of the goodness of her heart.

I have to get my date before that happens.

She shakes her head, frowning as her gaze drifts over my body. "You look especially pale."

I'm startled when she stands up and walks over to my side of the table. Before I get the chance to process what's going on, she sets her hand on my forehead, and the warmth of it spills over my whole body like a tropical rain. That little brow of hers is furrowed in concern.

It's blissful agony having her this close. Having her take care of me like she always used to.

After removing her hand, she purses her lips. "You don't feel feverish, but I think you should have a routine checkup."

I nod. "I'll do that."

She narrows her eyes on my face before turning around and walking back to her seat. "You'd better not be humoring me."

"I wasn't humoring you when I said I'd get therapy, was I?"

Her expression softens. "I guess that's true."

She sounds surprised. Is it just now occurring to her how uncharacteristic it is of me to seek therapy, even at her urging?

I hope so. I need her to know that her every thought and desire matter to me, that they always did, but now I will heed them. I can't make up for all that I've done, but I can show her through my actions that from now on, it will be different. I will be different.

"How is therapy going?" she asks, spooning around the remainder of her broccoli soup.

I smile faintly. "I hate my therapist, but I figure that's probably normal."

She frowns as she sets the spoon on the table, as if to give me her full attention. It's the same scolding look she gives either me or the kids when we've disappointed her, and oh God, it's so sweet and soft and characteristically Whitney. I wish I could capture it in one of the mason jars I used to scoop up tadpoles in as a kid. I wish I could keep her warmth stored with me all the time.

"That's not normal at all," she says. "Trust is essential if you're going to make progress."

I shrug. "Maybe hate is too strong of a word."

“If you feel anything close to dislike, you should look for someone else. You need to find someone you feel easy with.”

“How can I feel easy with anyone when I know they’re all going to tell me the one thing I don’t want to hear?”

“And what is that?” she asks, but she looks like she already knows.

“That I need to accept your decision to get divorced.”

She shoots me a prim little frown and looks away, and I can’t help but smile. Even though she does this often—blow off my attempts to steer the conversation toward reconciliation—I still feel her softening.

She’s going to take me up on my date. I can feel it.

“I thought maybe I could help you with your Westmont application when we’re done eating,” I say.

She smiles sweetly, and my stomach flips. During one of our lunches a few weeks ago, she mentioned that she wanted to go back to college, but she had no idea how to go about doing it. She felt overwhelmed. I assured her that I would help her with anything she needed. These last five months, I’ve gone out of my way to show her that I want her to be okay without me, that I’m no longer afraid of her breaking out of her shell and no longer needing me.

Even though it secretly terrifies me. Selflessness does not come easy to a selfish bastard like me.

“Cole offered to help me with it,” she says, “and the process is fresher in his memory, but that’s kind of you. It’s mostly just the technology part of it that’s hard for me. I’ve already written my application essay...” She smiles. “It’s about the difficulty of becoming a single woman in my forties.”

Her words are like a knife in my chest, but I manage a smile. “I’m proud of you, Whit. You have an inner strength I’ll never have, and it shows. Look at you. You’ve been taking care of Maddy and Mason, while they’ve been practically taking care of me on the weekends. You’re getting your education and planning your new career. You’re beautiful as hell. Look at me.” I smile deprecatingly. “I look like I’ve aged twenty years since I moved out.”

Her smile fades. “No, you don’t. You’re a little pale, but you’re still handsome as ever.”

My breath catches. The air grows thick with something... Does she miss me physically? I ache for her warmth every moment of the day, but during these last five months, she’s never so much as hinted at—

I flinch when her phone rings. She glances down at the screen, and her whole expression changes. “I need to get this,” she says, her cheeks growing pink.

A prickle of foreboding spreads over my skin as she steps away from the table and heads to the living room. When I hear the slider door open, my heart stops.

She doesn’t want me to hear this call.

Oh God, it’s a man. It has to be a man.

After leaping out of my seat, I rush to the front door and walk outside. I creep around the side of the house. If I’m quiet enough, she won’t know. Even if I don’t get back inside on time, I can tell her I went to my car to get something. Just as I reach the edge of the back patio, I start to make out her voice. When the words grow clear, I halt my step. I don’t even breathe as I strain to hear what she says.

“Oh, you know,” she says. “Just the usual divorce stuff.” She laughs, and the blood rushing through my veins turns to ice.

I know that laugh. It’s been years since I’ve heard it, but I know it.

It’s the laughter I used to hear in bed with her.

The laughter of a lover.

The silence that follows tells me the caller is now speaking, and I want to get closer, but I’m right at the corner of the house. If I move, I’ll be within sight.

“That sounds good. I’d much rather... I’d like it if we did something low-key. Could we do coffee again?”

Her voice fades from my ears, and the world around me blurs and buzzes.

Coffee.

Again.

She has a date. And it isn’t the first.

The next thing I know, I’m sitting at the table again. How did I get here? I don’t even remember the walk. The world is as fuzzy and far away as a dream.

She’s already dating.

How could this be happening?

The slider door opens, and I take a spoonful of my now-cold soup, straining for nonchalance. I nearly gag when I try to swallow.

“Everything okay?” she asks, her tone wary.

She knows. She knows I was eavesdropping, and it somehow doesn't matter. Nothing is as I thought it was.

I haven't made progress with her. This whole time, she was only humoring me. Her soft heart made her tread lightly because she didn't want to crush me.

"I'm fine," I say quickly.

She takes her seat across from me, but I can't look at her yet. I don't want to see her expression. I don't want to see the ghost of a smile left after talking to the man who might be her future. I don't want to see those cheeks still flushed from when he made her laugh.

I want to haul her over my shoulder and carry her upstairs into *our* bedroom. I want to show her with my cock who still owns her. Who will always own her.

Except I don't own her. In my stupidity, I'd assumed she'd never leave, and I let my rage and agony consume me.

This is the consequence. I'll be watching her move on. Watch another man take my place.

"I have to go," I say, nearly jumping from my seat. My thigh knocks the table, making my bowl clatter. "I'm not feeling well."

She frowns, and I catch a flash of pity in her eyes. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

I'm only able to shake my head. I'm afraid my voice might break if I speak.

CHAPTER 3



Whitney

“HE SAID HE WAS SICK?” Lisa asks as the manicurist sets her feet in a small bubbling tub.

Getting pedicures together has become our weekly routine since Mark and I split up. One of the many luxuries about being newly single is that I get to vent to my best friend in public about my soon-to-be ex-husband without the fear of stirring town gossip.

It’s exhilarating to think about how something like that used to terrify me. Mark is well-known in Santa Barbara because of Walker Industries. The humiliation of everyone knowing about his affairs used to haunt me.

No longer giving a fuck makes me feel like a queen.

“He said he wasn’t feeling well and left without a goodbye.”

Lisa narrows her eyes. “He was listening by the door.”

I frown. “I didn’t see him in the family room. I think he might have gone outside to listen.”

“Creep.”

The manicurist hovers over my feet, massaging in lotion. I lean back into the cushioned seat and hum. “If he did, I’m glad. The sooner he realizes I’m moving on, the better. We have only two weeks before the Christmas Ball.”

“Speaking of the ball.” Lisa grins. “We should start looking for dresses. I want him to eat his heart out.”

I sigh. “It’s weird... I thought I would, too. When he first locked me into this agreement, I thought it would be satisfying to force him to see how well I’m doing. I saw it as his punishment for manipulating me.”

“Are you saying it’s not satisfying? Because it’s the most entertainment I get every week.”

I shut my eyes as the manicurist massages the ball of my foot and sends pleasant tingles up my leg. “It’s not anymore. It’s just sad. He’s really not doing well.”

“Good. Don’t feel guilty. It’s not your fault he threw away your marriage. Don’t let anything get in the way of your self-care.”

I smile. “Speaking of self-care, I’ve added a new item to my list.”

Her eyes grow wide. “What is it?”

I glance down at my manicurist, and her eyes are fixed on my feet. What do I care if she’s listening? There’s no reason to be shy about these things anymore.

I’m becoming a new woman.

“I’m planning on...having sex. Soon.”

Lisa squeals. “Yes! Finally. Stephen must be getting sick of coffee dates.”

She's probably right about that. It's been a whole month since he officially quit being my divorce lawyer. After some mild flirtation during one of our meetings, he told me he had an unconventional request. He asked if he could refer me to another excellent lawyer so that there wouldn't be a conflict of interest if he asked his client out on a date. He said it with a sweet little smile, but I got the sense he was nervous.

He likes me. I can feel it every time we're around each other.

I wince. "I'm not sure if I can do it with Stephen. I like him too much. I'm afraid I might be too self-conscious."

"So you're planning on having sex with a random guy? You really think that will make you less self-conscious?"

"This polish, please." I hand my manicurist the deep-red bottle before turning to Lisa. "I do. I've gotten a flood of texts since Mark and I announced our separation. It wouldn't be difficult to find someone, and I think I'll be able to let loose with someone I don't care about. I really just need to get laid."

She giggles. "I support any form of getting laid, but it should be Stephen. Just my two cents. The sex would be better since you really like him."

"Probably, but I don't need spectacular sex. I just need to get this over with."

Lisa turns to me, a mischievous smile quirking at her lips. "Mark will lose his ever-loving mind if he finds out."

"He won't find out."

"Oh yes, he will. He's a psychopath when it comes to you. I'll bet you anything that the first thing he did after he eavesdropped yesterday was hire a private investigator."

My skin grows hot. Oh God, I just want this all to be over. Even though I know he deserves all of this, I can't stand seeing him in pain.

I somehow manage a lazy shrug. "Maybe I can get another ten-million-dollar home out of it."

Lisa turns to me with an open-mouth grin. "Look at you! Stone cold fox. I seriously used to fantasize about the day you'd make Mark Walker pay for everything he's done."

"So did I. I can't believe I'm actually doing it. Or that he actually cares this much."

"I always knew he would lose his mind when you left him. He was always—"

My phone chimes, and Lisa's eyes grow wide. "Stephen!" she says, reading the name on the screen. "You have to let me read it if it's good."

Stephen: I have a question for you, but I don't want to seem presumptuous...

My stomach flutters. What is this? It seems serious, and so far we've kept our coffee conversations fairly light. In the three dates we've had, the deepest we've gotten is talking about the strangeness of dating again after divorce.

"What did he say?" Lisa asks.

"He says he has a question for me."

"Ooh," she hums. "Maybe he wants to get laid too."

A moment later, another text appears.

Stephen: It's nothing too big. I have a friend's wedding coming up, and I want you to be my date. It's three weeks away so I hope you still like me then ;)

My pulse speeds up. “He just asked me on a real date.”

“Whitney!” Lisa squeezes my arm. “This is a sign. He needs to be the one to give you your first post-divorce sex. Don’t pick a random guy. Think of everything he gave up just to date you. A man like that will probably worship you in bed.”

My stomach flips over at the thought. She’s right. She’s absolutely right. Mark and I have a lot of assets, and Stephen gave up his commission just for the opportunity to get to know each other. It’s wonderful being wanted for a change.

I can do this.

Me: That sounds wonderful. I can’t wait :)

I smile at Lisa. “I have three weeks to prepare for my first post-divorce sex.”

CHAPTER 4



Mark

“WHAT’S UP, DAD?” Cole says when he picks up the phone.

His tone is open and friendly, and it eases the tight coil that’s been wrapped around my chest since I overheard Whitney’s conversation yesterday morning. Cole and I have mended our strained relationship since Whitney and I split up, and it’s the only thing that’s kept me sane during these miserable months.

There’s hope. There’s always hope.

“I have...” I glance down at my whiskey glass. Fuck, why am I drinking whiskey in the middle of the day? I’m such a cliché.

“I have kind of an uncomfortable question to ask you,” I say, my skin heating.

“Is it about Mom?”

I sigh. “It is.”

“Nope. I’m sorry, but you know I can’t talk about her with you. It wouldn’t be right.”

I scratch the back of my head. “I just need to know if she has a boyfriend.”

“No, Dad. I can’t talk to you about it. It’s not my place.”

My pulse starts to pound. “So she does.” I can’t keep the anger out of my voice. “She has a boyfriend, and you’ve all met him.”

“I got to go. Love you.”

The line goes silent, and I shut my eyes. I let my temper get the better of me, and it’s not a good look. I have no right to be jealous after all I’ve done. It must make Cole sick to his stomach to hear me complain about this after he caught me fucking another woman all those years ago.

I can’t help it. I’m losing my grip on my sanity.

I need my wife. I’m not ready to give up.

In the meantime, I have to know who I’m dealing with in terms of competition. I have less than two weeks left, which means only one more lunch together before the Christmas Ball. I have to up my game if I’m going to have a prayer of winning that date.

Finding out who she’s dating will guide me on whatever course of action I need to take. If he’s a family man, I can work on showing her how things have been different between me and the kids, how much closer I’ve gotten to them since my life fell apart.

It might not be a family man, though. Gorgeous as Whitney is, she could get anyone. He could be a young man. It would be just my luck if she found a sensitive guy from Cole’s generation who’s comfortable being vulnerable and talking about feelings.

But then again, I've been much more open with her since we separated. I've been too weary to put on a show for her, and it's led me to reveal things I didn't even know were buried within me.

God damn it, I need to know who this man is. How can I find out?

Whitney couldn't have told many people if she really is seeing someone. She's far too private, and she couldn't possibly have been seeing this guy for very long. Outside of her best friend Lisa—who would never tell me anything—Cole is probably the only other person who knows. Whitney wouldn't have told Maddy or Mason, and I can't imagine Cole telling them either. He generally keeps things to himself with the exception of...

Livvy.

Cole would have told Livvy everything, and she's so open and compassionate, she'd probably tell me too.

I only hope Cole doesn't hate me for what I'm about to do.

* * *

AS SOON AS I step inside Starbucks, I catch sight of Livvy at the corner table. She smiles warmly, and I walk to the counter to buy myself a coffee so that I don't seem too eager, even though it will probably taste like hot dishwater in my present turmoil.

No wonder I've lost so much weight. Nothing tastes good since I moved out of that house.

I'm hopeful that Livvy will take pity on me today. The last time I saw her was when she and Cole came over for dinner.

She said if I ever needed someone to pray for me, she would be there, that I could reach out to her any time.

I'm a bastard for taking her up on her offer, but I'm too desperate to regret it.

When I sit down with my coffee, Livvy's expression grows stern. "Cole isn't very happy with you."

"I know. He texted me." A smile quirks at my lips. "He called me a sneaky bastard."

Her mouth tightens. "He thinks you invited me here to get information about Whitney. He didn't want me to come, but I told you I'd be here to pray for you, and I meant it."

I sigh before taking a sip of my coffee. As predicted, it tastes like hot mud. "I imagine that's all I'll be getting. A prayer."

"No." She leans forward and sets her elbows on the table. "I can see that you're having a hard time. If you want to just talk, we can do that too."

"You mean you'll listen to me while I talk about how awful my life is?"

Her brow furrows. There's so much pity in her expression, I ought to be embarrassed. It's crazy that I'm not.

God damn. This is the power Whitney has over me. Without her, I have nothing left.

"Is it really that bad?" Livvy asks.

I laugh humorlessly. "You mean you can't tell? I get asked daily if I'm doing alright. I have to assume I look like shit."

Her gaze drifts over me. "You look sort of pale. Are you sleeping alright?"

“No.” I lean back into the stiff wooden chair. “I make up for it with lots of caffeine. And whiskey has been my bedtime story.”

She frowns. “Whiskey is not a cure for insomnia. Alcohol makes sleep worse. You might want to look into antidepressants.”

I shake my head sharply. “I don’t want to dull the pain. I need all the motivation I can get if I want to win her back.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard. Becoming a healthier person makes it more likely you’ll win her back.”

I lean forward. “So you think I could? You think there’s a chance?”

Her lips close, and she looks away. “There’s no way I could know that.”

“But you do know if she’s seeing someone.”

Her posture grows stiff. “It’s not appropriate for me to answer that.”

“Livvy...” My voice trembles. “This whole thing isn’t appropriate. I never should have invited you here, especially when Cole and I are just starting to...get close again.”

Her head jerks up. “Exactly. Why would you do this to him?”

I sigh. “He’ll forgive me. This is different than...what I did before. I’ve finally woken up. Livvy, I can’t...” When my voice cracks, I take a deep breath through my nose. “I need her. Please tell me if she’s seeing someone. Please just... I don’t want to be caught off guard. I don’t want to find out at a

really inopportune moment. I'm broken right now. Do you understand?"

Her expression is full of compassion, and a bit of the tension eases in my throat. My son sure found a good woman. I see why he loves her. He's built just like me, and she reminds me of Whitney in a way. There's so much kindness in her you can almost feel it, like warm afternoon sunlight.

"I do understand," she says. "Back when Cole and I were just friends, I found out that he...slept with a friend of mine, and it crushed me. I found out when we were all out at In-N-Out Burger, and he was sitting right across from me. It was awful, because back then, I didn't want him to know how I felt, and it was hard for me to hide it."

I wince. "What did you do?"

"I kept my head down and pretended like I was looking at my phone. I did that for a long time until I calmed down."

I grunt. "I don't have that much self-control. My son is just like me. What would Cole have done if he found out you slept with one of his friends?"

Her eyes grow huge. "Oh goodness, I don't know. He might have beaten him up."

I chuckle. "Exactly."

Her mouth falls open. "You wouldn't really go beat him up, would you?"

My blood runs cold. "Does that mean she has a boyfriend, and you know him well enough that you're worried about him?" When she doesn't answer, I add, "I wouldn't beat him up. Or contact him in any way. I promise."

She sighs. “I already told you it’s not my place to say anything, but I understand how hard it is to be in your shoes. To love someone and have no control over what they do. It’s torture waiting for things to happen. Waiting for them to fall in love with someone else or get engaged.”

I imagine Whitney in a white dress, her hair hanging in waves around her shoulders, her golden-brown eyes adoring as she stares up at...

“Fuck.” I flinch. “I would die.”

She licks her lips. “I know that anxiety of waiting to find out, so I’m going to tell you the little that I know about her dating situation.”

I exhale a long breath. “Thank you.”

She nods. “Last week, Whitney told Cole she has a new divorce lawyer, because...” She purses her lips.

“Because why, Livvy? Don’t leave me hanging.”

Not that I don’t already know what she’s going to say. I want to throw my coffee across the room, watch it crash and splatter on that white stucco wall.

“She didn’t say too much, but she implied that...her lawyer is interested in spending time with her. He couldn’t if he stayed her lawyer. It’s a conflict of interest, I think.”

Rage flares through my veins. Stephen Garcia. The fucker. I saw he wanted my wife at that party months ago.

“I’m going to kill him,” I mutter.

Livvy’s eyes flash. “No, you’re not. If you betray my trust like that, I’ll be very hurt. And you know Cole won’t like it. He’ll be even more angry with you than he already is.”

I exhale a heavy breath. “I’m not really going to do anything. It wouldn’t be the right move, anyway. I want Whitney back. I have to work very hard to be...even tempered.”

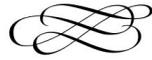
“If you’re anything like your son, that’s probably very hard for you.”

“It is.” I run my finger along the cardboard sleeve of my coffee cup, and a ball of ice forms in my gut. “This is fucking awful.”

“I know. Love can be really hard on the heart.”

That’s an understatement.

CHAPTER 5



3 years ago

Mark

MY BLOOD IS PUMPING.

That kiss.

My body is on fire over just the memory of it. How could one little kiss from my wife of twenty years have the power to send me into a frenzy? It happened three days ago, and yet every time my mind drifts back to it, the memory holds me by the throat. I've been staring blankly at my laptop screen for probably the last half hour.

The worst part is that I don't even want to fuck my wife. That wouldn't quench whatever this is. One of our hate-fuck sessions might make this feeling even more potent.

I want to hold her. I want to nuzzle my face against her skin and call her my darling girl. I want one of those moments from years ago, from before she betrayed me.

We'd lie snuggled together, and she'd give me one of those sweet, post-sex sighs. My love for her was so big I could have

squeezed her to death with it, absorbed her body into mine. Made her love me by sheer closeness.

Even then, I had an inkling that the intensity of my obsession with her was toxic, and I didn't care. Introspection would have been fruitless, because it wouldn't have changed anything.

It still hasn't changed, even after all these years. Even when I tell myself how deeply she betrayed me, it makes no difference. I still crave her love.

Love that I'll never have.

There's a light knock on my office door. "Come in," I shout.

My assistant's eyes are huge when she walks through the door. Lily stands in front of my desk, silently staring, and I shoot her a questioning frown.

"Camden Hayes," she whispers. "He's here to see you."

I frown, searching my mind for that name and drawing a blank. "Remind me who he is."

Her blue eyes somehow grow even bigger. "You weren't expecting him?"

"Is he on my calendar?" The question is rhetorical. I want her to get to the point.

"He's a musician. A celebrity. I thought maybe you were planning on having him play at the winter gala."

"I don't have anything to do with event planning." I shake my head slowly, my mind fuzzy. "What the hell would he want to see me about?"

“I have no idea.” She glances at the door. “He’s standing outside. Should I send him in?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

She nods and exits. A moment later, a tall, dark-haired young man strides through the door. His stony expression sends a prickle of alarm down the back of my neck.

Oh, Christ. Please say I didn’t fuck his girlfriend or something. He wouldn’t be the first jealous boyfriend I’ve encountered over the years since Whitney destroyed my life, and it’s never ended well.

He sits down on the couch across from my desk. When his gaze settles on my face, his expression grows somehow more hostile.

“What can I do for you?” I ask, though I already know. It’s written all over his face.

I *definitely* fucked his girlfriend.

His eyes flash. “Stay away from Lauren Henderson.”

I could almost laugh, but I keep my expression carefully blank. “I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

His nostrils flare. “She doesn’t. Not that it would matter to someone like you.”

Someone like you. It’s said with so much disdain I have to keep myself from pinning him with a glare. I don’t want the situation to get any more hostile than it already is, but fuck him for making assumptions about me.

He’s a kid. He could never understand the agony of loving a woman like Whitney Walker for twenty years. Two decades of momentary ecstasy, excruciating longing, and bone-deep despair.

“My wife knows—”

“She knows you fuck twenty-two-year-old women.” He waves a hand. “I’ve heard.”

I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes. “Did Lauren send you here?”

Uncertainty creeps into his expression. “No... She doesn’t know I’m here. She’s my brother’s friend. He told me everything about your little affair with her.”

Ah, so he’s a jealous suitor, not a boyfriend. The tension leaves my shoulders. I can deal with this kid.

“What would she say if I texted her right now and told her you came to my place of work to tell me to stay away from her?”

His eyes widen before averting from mine. “Don’t...” He shifts in his seat. “I’d prefer we keep this between us.”

I lean back into my chair. “So you’re here to demand that I stay away from her, but you want me to keep your embarrassing little secret. Is that it?”

His jaw clenches. “Yes.”

I shake my head as I lift my phone from my desk. “I don’t think so. I don’t see anything in it for me.” I pull up Lauren’s name in my texts. “Ah, look at this. A week ago, she sent me a titty pic. Do you want to see it?”

When his eyes grow huge and his nostrils flare, I wish I could pull the words back into my mouth. The last thing I need is for this so-called celebrity to pop me in the face in the middle of Walker Industries’ corporate headquarters.

“I saw a picture of your wife,” he says, his voice eerily quiet. “Gorgeous.”

A chill skitters over my skin.

He leans forward and sets his elbows on his knees. “I wonder what she would think if a younger man like me reached out to her. A well-known musician. What if I sent her a DM and told her I saw her picture on Instagram and was instantly smitten. So smitten I’m willing to fly out to Santa Barbara just to meet her. Here she is, bored and ignored. Her husband’s out cheating on her with twenty-two-year-old girls.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Even a good woman like her would probably be tempted.”

The rage in my veins is so heady it makes the world around me buzz. Holy fuck, I’m going to make a scene. Walker Industries’ reputation be damned. “If you go anywhere near my wife, I’ll kill you.”

His eyes flash as he stands up from the couch and walks to the front of my desk. He sets his hands on the surface and leans forward. “If you ever so much as text Lauren again, I promise you I’ll make it my mission to fuck your wife.”

CRACK!

I hardly even know what happened, but then a sharp pain shoots into my arm, and Camden stumbles back. God damn it, I didn’t mean to do that. I don’t think I’ve hit anyone since the day I tracked down Whitney’s lover.

Camden rights himself and lifts his hand to his jaw. “Holy shit,” he mutters.

Lily rushes through the door. Her eyes grow huge as she glances at Camden. “Everything okay?”

“Everything is just fine,” I say with a bland smile.

She freezes for a moment, as if not knowing what to do, but then she nods and silently leaves the room.

“Take that as a warning,” I say after she shuts the door behind her. “If you go anywhere near my wife, it will be much worse.”

To my surprise, he nods. I frown at him as he stares at my desk with unseeing eyes, rubbing his palm over his jaw. “I can’t believe I’m here. What the fuck has gotten into me?”

He clearly doesn’t need an answer, so I stay silent.

He shakes his head slowly. “She makes me crazy.”

A smile tugs at my lips. Looks like he and I understand each other better than I thought.

Camden frowns. “I feel like I’ve been in a fugue state since my brother told me about your affair with her.”

“Do you want some whiskey?” I ask. “It might help your...fugue state.”

“You have whiskey here?” He glances around my office.

“Of course.” I smirk as I walk to the cupboard at the corner of my office. “What’s the point in owning a business if you can’t take advantage of being able to do whatever the fuck you want?”

I grab the bottle from the high shelf and grab two glasses. By the time I bring Camden his drink, his eyes have that glazed quality again. I hand him his drink. “You couldn’t really call what I had with Lauren, an affair. We just—”

He lifts a hand. “Don’t give me any details.”

I chuckle. “I won’t. You said you guys aren’t dating... I’m guessing you wish you were?”

He rolls his eyes. “Absolutely not. She’s not good for me. Obviously.” He gestures at his chin, which is already starting

to swell.

“Do you want me to get you something for that?”

When he shakes his head, I sigh. “If it’s any consolation, I also love a woman who’s not good for me.”

He stares at me for a long moment. “Your wife.”

I nod, and he frowns.

“Why do you do it?” he asks. He doesn’t have to say any more. I know exactly what he means. Why do I constantly seek solace in the arms of other women when that perfect woman is my wife?

“Like I told Lauren,” I say, “my relationship with my wife is complicated. Whitney knows I see other women.”

He narrows his eyes on my face. “Does she see other men?”

Ice shoots through my veins as Jason’s pretty face flashes in my mind. How could that spineless piece of shit hold my wife’s heart? The day I showed up on his doorstep and knocked him to the ground with one punch told me everything I needed to know about him. He said he was so sorry, that he’d never meant to hurt anyone. When I made him promise never to go near her again, he consented readily.

What a twat. If I had Whitney’s love, I’d never let a jealous husband stand in my way, however murderous he was. I’d die to keep her.

“Not anymore,” I say. “But she did.”

“I see.” Camden smirks. “Men your age are strange. Why don’t you just divorce her?”

I huff. “It’s not men my age. It’s me. I should divorce her, but...” I exhale a heavy breath. “But I can’t. I can’t let her go.”

He nods slowly. “I understand. I really do... Fuck.” He flinches. “This can’t go on forever. I have to get over this.”

“I wish I had good news for you, but I was about your age when I met Whitney.”

He shakes his head. “It’s been much longer for me. I’ve been obsessed with Lauren since I was a kid.”

A chuckle erupts from my chest. “You’re definitely fucked.”

“Probably.” He stares unseeing at the calendar on my desk. “I don’t even know why I cared so much about what she did with you. What difference does it make if she’s fucking a married man? I sometimes just...lose my mind when it comes to her.”

“I know what you mean,” I say. “I know I should stop fucking twenty-two-year-old women. I’ve been punishing my wife for so long...” I shake my head. “It’s honestly pathetic.”

Camden frowns and stares at me for a long moment. “You can’t stop thinking about it, huh?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“You can’t stop thinking about...what she did.”

The memory washes over me. Its effects are sensory at first. That tingling heat over my skin and coldness in my gut. Then the words drift into my mind.

My love for you has never wavered.

Nothing she could do could ever be enough. Her pain could never match mine, no matter how many years I keep

doing this.

“No,” I say. “I can’t.”

Camden leaves shortly after, and that dull warmth of whiskey makes my hands itch to pull out that printed-out email hidden in my desk. I open the drawer, and in a moment, it’s unfolded in front of me.

I have a confession to make. I shouldn’t be saying this. This whole exchange is wrong. I’m married. I shouldn’t be rekindling a friendship with the man who broke my heart.

But since we’ve reconnected, it’s on my mind. In some of our phone conversations, I’ve felt myself on the verge of saying it. What does it matter now if I tell you? I’ve already betrayed Mark. I already hate myself. So here it goes...

Jason, I’ve thought about you every day for the last six years. Even in the moments when I’ve been happiest with Mark, I couldn’t help but wonder how it would have been with you. What kind of father would you be? What would it be like to grow old with you?

My love for you has never wavered. It’s always been you.

A coil wraps around my lungs and squeezes until I find myself gasping for breath. I read every single one of her emails. I demanded it after she made her confession. This was the one that killed me. This was the one I never got over. These words echo on a loop in my head in quiet moments.

I pull up my phone and scroll through my contacts. Casey is almost always available when I text her.

Me: Having a shit day. Want to meet for drinks?

Casey: It's 5 o'clock somewhere :)

I'm in a fog as I make my way to my car and drive to the restaurant. It's okay. I'll break out of it soon. Rage always takes over eventually.

It feels so much better than despair.

CHAPTER 6



*P*resent Day

Mark

LILY WALKS into my office with a stack of papers in her hand. I grit my teeth, bracing myself for what she's about to tell me.

It was probably a futile effort having her research Stephen. What kind of useful information could she find on social media anyway? It won't tell me what Whitney sees in him or if they're fucking already, which I'm trying desperately hard not to think about.

This last week has been absolute hell. If I don't take action now, I'll waste away.

I'm getting lunch with Whitney today—our last one before the Christmas Ball, which means I have only seven days to get her to agree to that date.

I have to know who I'm dealing with. I have to know what kind of man she's dating, and how close they've gotten.

Lily sits down in the chair across from my desk. "What's the verdict?" I ask her.

Her eyebrows come together. “The verdict?”

I sigh. “I mean what did you find?”

“Oh.” She lifts her papers up. “Well, a lot of it you probably already know.”

“I know nothing about him, other than that he’s a lawyer who might be fucking my—” I flinch. “Sorry. I haven’t been sleeping well, and it’s loosening my tongue.”

“It’s okay.” A small smile tugs at her lips. “I’ve heard you say worse.”

Yes, she has. I’m not usually one to hire family, but I knew when I started fucking over my life fifteen years ago that I would need an assistant I could trust. Lily is only a distant cousin, but she cares enough about the Walker name to be discreet.

Plus, I pay her extremely well.

“Anyway,” she says, “he’s divorced and has two kids.”

“How old?”

“Seven and ten.”

I nod. “That’s right. He’s younger than her.”

“He’s thirty-nine, and he’s been bar certified since 2009. He opened his firm in 2015 from what I—”

“Is he wealthy?”

She sets down a paper on my desk and pushes it toward me. “I printed this from Google images. I’m pretty sure it’s his house, but I can’t know for sure.”

I exhale as I lift the paper. The Spanish style house is elegant but nothing extravagant. I’d estimate it’s probably worth four million or so on the current market.

Not that it matters. Whitney doesn't seem to care about money at all anymore. Once she was assured that our divorce wouldn't affect the kids' trusts, my financial bribes and threats no longer worked.

"Alright, Lily." I set down the paper and lean back in my chair. "I need to know about their relationship. Don't hold back."

She swallows, nodding. "There wasn't much on Facebook or Instagram. Whitney's still not that active on social media."

"But there's obviously something." I gesture at the paper in her hand.

She looks wary as she sets it down. "This was a comment he left on one of her Instagram pictures. It's the only one I thought you'd...want to see."

As I scoot the paper toward me, the picture of Whitney comes into focus. She's wearing a tight white dress with a cocktail in her hand. Lisa's arms are wrapped around her as she kisses Whitney's cheek.

"This was one of their girls' nights," I mutter. "I saw pictures on Lisa's Facebook, because at least *she* hasn't blocked me." Unlike my beautiful wife.

Lisa probably would block me if she knew how often I checked her Facebook, scouring her comments and pictures for information about Whitney. Those girls' night pictures made me crazy. If she'd posted them while they were still out instead of the following morning, I probably would have gotten in my car and searched all the bars in Santa Barbara until I found the two of them.

"Have you read Stephen's comment yet?"

I shut my eyes. "No, I'm bracing myself."

“It’s not too bad. I just thought it had kind of a...hint, I guess.”

I hold my breath as I let my gaze drift to the writing underneath the paper.

@stephen.garcia: No wonder you seemed so “happy” last night ;)

My jaw clenches. “What the fuck does that mean?” I can’t keep the rage out of my voice.

“I’m thinking he meant that she seemed like she was in a good mood because she was drunk.”

“How did he know? Did she go to his house? Did he fuck her?” I crumple up the paper and toss it across the room. “God damn him.”

Lily sighs. “He’s probably just talking about a drunk dial. I highly doubt he’d talk about sleeping with her on Instagram, not with as shy as Whitney is.”

Fire rushes through my veins. “Of course he would. He wants to claim her. He wants me to see it.” I shut my eyes and run both hands through my hair. “What do I do? How do I win her back?”

When I open my eyes, Lily’s expression is piteous. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll do anything. What would you do in my situation?”

She stares down at her lap for a moment. “I think sometimes you’re...”

“What? Don’t hold back. You’re not going to hurt my feelings.”

“Sometimes you display a little...toxic masculinity, I guess. It’s not your fault. You probably learned it from Grandpa, but I don’t think it’s going to help you with Whitney.”

I bite the inside of my lip. “Can you give me an example?”

She gestures at the paper in front of me. “Even having me research her boyfriend is a little toxic. I know you’re not going to do anything to him but...it’s like you’re trying to control something that you can’t, and being controlling isn’t a good idea given your history with her. I think you’d be much better off showing her your softer side.”

“Fuck.” I expel a heavy breath. “You’re right.”

WHITNEY

A SEMI RUSHES BY, and the burst of wind pulls a chunk of hair into my face. I tuck the thick strand behind my ear to get a better look at my back tire, and sure enough, it’s completely blown out.

Damn.

I pull out my phone and find Mark’s name in my contact list. He’s religious about our Friday lunches. If I don’t show him how distressed I am over my flat tire, he’ll probably demand that I make it up to him.

No. The old Mark would do that. The new Mark...

Jesus, am I thinking of him as “the new Mark”, as if the kindness he’s shown me recently is permanent? He really wants to save our marriage, and that’s made him work hard.

Mark picks up on the first ring. “What’s going on?”

I glance around the area. “I’m going to have to miss our lunch. The Range Rover has a flat.”

“Where are you? I’ll come pick you up.”

“I’m too far away. You won’t make it back in time for your meeting.”

“You mean you’re not in Santa Barbara?”

I glance up the highway looking for a sign, but I see only black road stretching up the mountain. “No. I’m not sure where I am, actually. Somewhere on the 101. I was on my way back from San Luis Obispo.”

“So you’re in the middle of fucking nowhere, you mean?”

“Yes. Good thing I brought my Kindle.”

“Your Kindle?” Now he sounds angry. “You mean you’re going to sit on the side of the road and read?”

I laugh at the bite in his voice, as if it’s the craziest thing in the world. The Walkers don’t believe in doing anything tedious, and when tedium can’t be helped, they rage against God for the injustice. The luxury of the wealthy.

“I plan to sit in my car. I can probably finish a novel by the time the tow truck gets here.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re going to wait on the side of the road for a tow truck? You’re going to get hit by a car.”

I smile. “I’m a country girl. I don’t mind being in the middle of nowhere, and I’m not going to get hit by a car. Besides, I don’t have any other options.”

“The fuck you do. I’ll be there in a half hour.”

“Mark, D&B Farms is too important, and you know Dale will throw a hissy fit if you aren’t there. There’s no way you’ll be here in a half hour, and I won’t even be able to get lunch with you. I have too much to do today.”

“I don’t give a fuck about lunch or Dale’s hissy fit. I’m coming to get you. Send me your location.”

The line goes quiet, as if his command is the final word on this subject. Just the thought of him missing that meeting makes my skin heat. I really shouldn’t care. His schedule isn’t my business anymore, and yet...

I can’t reason away the fluttering in my stomach. He’s making me a priority.

It takes him exactly thirty-five minutes to arrive, which means he must have been speeding. After parking in front of my car, he hops out and strides in my direction. His expression is hidden under his sunglasses, but that square jaw is clenched.

I look away to hide my smile. Even at the peak of his disdain for me, I could always command his emotions when it came to my safety. In my most childish moments, I’d stay out extra late during girls’ nights or ignore his texts when I was gone for the day, just so I could see this angry clench of his jaw when I came home.

He removes his sunglasses, and those dark-green eyes are blazing. “Why the hell did you park here? There’s barely any shoulder. You could have been clipped by another car.”

“I couldn’t move any farther.”

His scowl deepens as he glances at the flat tire. “Yes you could have.”

“I was scared to move.”

He raises both brows. “You should have been scared of getting hit by another car.”

I shoot him a cheeky smile. “I don’t think the tow truck driver would have scolded me like this.”

Mark walks toward me, his expression softening. “I’m sorry for being grumpy. I was just worried.”

Worried. The liquid word warms my skin. This is exactly why I used to worry him on purpose. It feels so good to be worried about, to be cared for, even by a man who disdains me.

Although...he doesn’t seem like he disdains me anymore. Maybe it took five months of being separated for him to finally forgive me.

No. I can’t think that way. It’s fruitless. I don’t want to be with him anymore, even if he has forgiven me.

I haven’t forgiven him.

A while later, we’re driving silently along the highway, and I use the opportunity to take in his appearance. I keep my head directed at my phone so he hopefully won’t notice.

My throat grows tight. His skin is drawn, and his eyes are sunken. He’s gotten so thin since our separation. Almost gaunt.

I hate seeing it.

“Mark, you don’t look good.”

He huffs out a laugh. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

“Have you scheduled your doctor’s appointment?”

“Not yet, but I don’t need a doctor.” He smirks. “I need my beautiful wife back in my arms.”

I snort. “You mean, you need your beautiful wife in your home while you’re out in the arms of other women?”

He chuckles. “What a fucking cliché I am, huh? I cheated on my wife for years, and here I am, at death’s door now that she’s gone. I’ve kind of become my dad, in a way.”

“You’re not like your dad.” I soften my voice. “You were at least aware of what you were doing. Your dad thought infidelity was just what men did, like he was entitled to it for all of his hard work. And I don’t like you saying you’re at death’s door. I think I’m going to schedule your doctor appointment myself. I’m still technically your wife.”

He sighs heavily, and the air grows thick with silence. I shouldn’t have said that. Whenever I’ve tried to take care of him these last five months, he becomes almost despondent.

I understand. He’s losing the person who took care of him for half his life. I never felt more adrift than when I lost my mom, even after decades of taking care of myself.

“I’ll be honest,” Mark says. “I’ve been having a really tough time since I found out...” He lifts a hand and scratches the back of his head. “I found out you have...a guy you’re seeing.”

The brittleness in his voice makes an uncomfortable heat break out over my skin. He never used to talk this way before our separation. I knew he was hurt over what I did, but he never admitted his feelings like this.

Anger was so much easier to deal with than this aching vulnerability. I want to reach out and touch him, comfort him, but I can’t. It would give him hope.

It would confuse me too.

I swallow. “Cole told you?”

“Not voluntarily.” He huffs out a humorless laugh. “I kind of weaseled it out of Livvy, to be honest. I asked her to meet me at Starbucks so she could pray for me, and then I begged her to tell me.”

“Oh, Mark. I can’t imagine Cole is very happy with you.”

“No, he isn’t.” He smiles. “He actually sent me a picture of his friend Zac yesterday and asked what I thought of him as his new stepdad. He said Zac’s always thought you were hot.”

I burst into laughter, and Mark joins me. The lightness between us feels as natural as the air. Why is it so familiar?

I guess we did laugh quite a bit over the years, though only about the kids, but those moments were precious.

There’s nothing as warm and tender as the shared joy over children, and I’ll never have this with anyone else.

It makes me want to weep.

Oh God, I can’t think this way. I’m moving on. In two weeks from now, I’ll be having sex with my third ever sexual partner, and who knows? Maybe he’ll be my last.

If I’m going to start something with Stephen, I need to maintain the wall between Mark and me.

“I appreciate that you’ve told me you’re having a hard time,” I say. “I know it’s hard for you to talk about things like this. I know it’s probably...embarrassing telling your soon-to-be ex-wife.”

He’s quiet for a long moment. “No, you’re actually the easiest person to tell.”

I shut my eyes, fighting the wave of tenderness threatening to stop my breath. “I’ll be honest with you,” I say when I’m able to find my voice, “dating has been really hard for me. I’m

having a tough time knowing what to say to men who aren't you. I'm out of practice."

His jaw clenches. "You've been doing a lot of dating?"

I repress a smile at the shift in his mood. How quickly he went from listlessness to fiery jealousy. Even in his brokenness, he can't fully restrain that hot temper of his.

"No, not really," I say, "but I did have quite a few men approach me after we announced the separation."

"Who?" he nearly shouts, and I strain my muscles to keep my lips from twitching.

"I really shouldn't tell you."

After a few seconds, he shrugs, but the movement is jerky. "I'm not going to do anything. I'm just curious. I probably know some of them."

"You know all of them, which is why I can't tell you. They're business acquaintances. I don't want to cause any problems."

He clenches the steering wheel, his knuckles growing white. "Who, Whitney? You have to tell me now. You can't drop something like that and not tell me."

I gulp back a laugh. Oh, this is too much fun. What a nice change to have him worried about who I'm sleeping with.

"Let me guess," he says. "Anthony Mariano has to be one of them."

I stay silent for a moment to draw out the suspense. "He's one of them."

"Son of a bitch," Mark grits out, and I grin. "I knew he wanted to fuck my wife."

I jab a finger in his direction. “None of that, Mr. Walker. I’m soon to be Ms. Whitney Silva.”

“I can’t believe it.” He shakes his head, seeming like he didn’t even hear me. “Who else, Whit? You have to tell me. They’ll probably be at the Christmas Ball next week, and I need to be prepared.

I sigh. “You have to promise you won’t punch any of them in the face like poor Jason.”

“*Poor* Jason,” Mark huffs, smirking. “He was lucky all he got was a punch in the face.”

I giggle, and a strange lightness tugs at my limbs. Are Mark and I really teasing each other about Jason? I never thought this day would come. The idea of Jason and me always loomed as large and desolate as a blackhole.

“Have I done anything like that these last few months?” Mark asks. “I wanted to kill your ex-divorce lawyer, but I didn’t do a thing.”

“How noble of you.”

“I really won’t do anything.”

I set a hand on his arm. “I know you won’t, which is why I’m going to tell you one of the men who you were right about when you thought he had a crush on me.”

“Who?” His voice is full of curiosity, and it makes me smile. He’s going to love this one.

“Well, he’s more of a boy. At least in my eyes. I’m surprised Cole hasn’t sent you a picture of him as a candidate for his stepdad, since he’s one of his friends.”

Mark turns to me, his eyes wide and fierce. “Parker.”

“Keep your eyes on the road.”

He grits his teeth as he turns his head back. “The little fucker. Parker the *grad* student. Remember how he kept reminding us? Like being in graduate school made him less of a little weasel. Ready to fuck my wife under my own roof.”

My voice is choked with laughter. “You were in a terrible mood that weekend. When he visited with Cole, I mean.”

“Of course I was. Some twenty-eight-year-old kid was ready to run away with my wife, and here I was cheating on her right and left. What could I have done to stop you? I was so jealous I was near panicking.”

Laughter drifts up and out of me like champagne bubbles. “I know you were. I enjoyed it very much.”

Mark turns to me for a moment, playfully narrowing his eyes, and I laugh louder. After being so lost in conversation, I didn’t notice that we’re already back in Santa Barbara, now driving on the windy road up to the house.

We haven’t been this comfortable together in years.

Has he really changed over these last six months, or is this just part of his ploy to win me back? I never thought he could go a day without some form of passive aggression or outright spite. He never did in our marriage.

He’ll be much better for the next woman, and that’s a good thing, for both him and the kids.

Even though just the thought of it breaks my heart.

“I guess the next time I see you will be for the ball,” he says after walking me to the front porch.

I swallow. “Our last date.”

He shuts his eyes, but I can't let it deter me. He needs to know. I have to crush his hopes, even if it will also crush me.

I set my hand on his arm. "Mark, I think you should start dating. After next week, I mean."

He flinches as if I hit him, but I force myself to proceed. I'll always love him, but he's not for me. Not anymore. Too much damage has been done.

"I don't mean you should look for casual sex like you did in our marriage," I say. "You need to find meaningful connections with women who aren't me. That will help you heal."

When his lips tremble, I want to die. Oh God, why does this have to be so hard?

"I'm not saying the thought of it is easy for me," I say. "You were my partner. You were mine. Of course I feel a little jealous of the thought of another woman taking care of you. But it's in your best interest. You need to actively work on moving on—"

"Stop." His voice is just above a whisper.

I swallow. "I just—"

He shakes his head once, but it's enough to halt me. I've said enough. If he shows any more emotion, I might break.

He looks at me, and the pain in his eyes is so tangible I could touch it. "Please don't say any more. You can tell me you're done with me. You can tell me you never want to see me again." He inhales a shaky breath. "But don't tell me to move on. Moving on is like death to me."

My heart in my throat, I reach out to touch him, but he steps back to evade me.

“I’ll see you next week,” he says, and I look away as I nod so that he doesn’t see the hovering tears.

Even a year ago, my heart would have been so soft after an afternoon like this, he could have squished it beneath his heel. I guess I should be thankful he made me pay for so long.

I don’t have anything left to give.

CHAPTER 7



3 years ago

Mark

My love for you has never wavered. It's always been you.

I THROW BACK MY WHISKEY, enjoying the burn as it trails down my throat. It's the best they have at this dive bar, and it's about as smooth as gasoline.

A bell tinkles just before Casey walks through the entrance of the bar. After glancing around the area, she makes her way over to my table. She frowns at my empty glass. "You ordered without me?"

"I couldn't remember what you usually get."

Her eyes grow narrow. "A vodka soda. That's what I've ordered every single time we've hung out."

"Ah, yes. Now I remember."

No, I don't. She's one of probably fifty women I've met at this bar, and based on her still-narrowed eyes, I don't think she bought that her drink was on the tip of my tongue. I'm too weary today to feign sincerity.

God, I wish it were possible to care about her favorite drink. I wish I could find a woman who is just a little bit special to me.

This is the problem with rage. I don't see people when I arrange these little meetups. I see weapons.

It's always been you.

I can delight in those words when I'm fucking other women.

"So you said you had a bad day." Casey's gaze drifts from the top of my head to my chest, as if looking for physical evidence of my bad day on my body. "What happened?"

I smirk. "A celebrity came to see me, and I punched him in the face."

"Oh, did you?" Her tone is playful. Of course, she assumes I'm teasing. "Who was the celebrity?"

"Camden..." I narrow my eyes as I search for his last name. "Hayes, I think. He's a musician."

Her mouth drops open. "Are you being serious?"

"Of course." I keep my tone light. "He threatened me, so I punched him in the face."

She stares at me silently. "I seriously can't tell if this is a joke or not."

I smile lazily. "I'm teasing. He did come to the office today, though, and I got to meet him."

"Are you friends now?" She cocks a brow. "Could you give him my number?"

I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes. "Do you want to come over here so I can spank you?"

She giggles. “You said you had a bad day. Meeting Camden Hayes doesn’t sound bad to me. What happened?”

Jason, I’ve thought about you every day for the last six years.

That bubbling rage rises to the surface. It’s always a bad day when you love a woman like Whitney Walker.

I lean forward. “What if I just made it up because I wanted to see you?”

No, not you, Casey. Anyone at all. Anyone who will let me fuck the rage out of my system.

“I’d be okay with that.” She smiles slowly. “Did you book a hotel?”

“I did. The Ritz-Carlton.”

And I’m going to fuck her real sweet. Call her my darling girl.

Even in the moments when I’ve been happiest with Mark...

I’m going to imagine my whore of a wife watching us.

Casey’s mouth drops open. “The Ritz! So fancy.”

I smile at her. It’s actually quite a bit less “fancy” than the hotel I generally book for these rendezvous, but words like “ritz” sound expensive to young people like Casey.

“Do you want to get out of here?” she asks.

I nod once before pulling out a hundred dollar bill from my wallet and setting it on the table. “Let’s go.”

Casey rubs my back as we head out of the bar. “What does Camden Hayes look like in person?”

I narrow my eyes as an image of that kid comes to mind. I wasn't really paying attention to his appearance, but he had the look of a person who rarely smiles.

He had an aura of melancholy. I recognized it because I live in that world too. He loves a woman he can't have.

It doesn't have to be that way. He could have Lauren if he really wanted her. Everyone has a price. Maybe she'd never love him. Maybe that aura of melancholy would always hover somewhere in the distance, but he could ward it off if he had her close...

But I don't have Whitney close. I don't even get to enjoy the benefits of owning my wife.

Fuck, why am I here? Why do I always do this? It doesn't help. I reached this exact conclusion a few days ago, and yet here I am again.

It never works.

Just as we make it to my car, I turn to Casey. "I just remembered something I have to do. It's urgent."

She frowns. "That's okay. I can come with you. I'll wait in the car."

I shake my head. "I can't hang out with you today. We'll have to rain check."

She pouts, and I set my hand on her arm. "I know you were looking forward to staying in the Ritz-Carlton. I'll call the hotel and give them your name. Bring whoever you want. It's yours until eleven tomorrow."

"I wanted to stay there with you." Her voice is faint.

"Another time?"

“I guess so.”

There's hurt in her voice, but I don't have time to console her. I'm practically flooring the gas pedal and tapping my thumbs rapidly against my thigh at every stoplight.

I'm going home to my wife today.

CHAPTER 8



*P*resent Day

Mark

I TUG on the loop of my tie after ringing the doorbell.

This is my home. I spent the last two decades building a life here, and everything that's ever mattered to me was once contained within these walls.

Now here I am, standing on the porch ringing the doorbell, waiting to be let inside.

Maddy opens the door, and typical of her capricious teenage moods these days, she turns around and walks back to the living room without even a nod of acknowledgment.

"Miss me?" I call out to her.

"No," she says, and a smile tugs at my lips. She's been a mama's girl ever since she was a fussy little baby. We didn't tell her and Mason the reasons for our separation, but they both seem to intuitively know it was my fault.

It's how it should be. Part of my penance.

A moment later, footsteps sound at the top of the stairs. I look up, and my breath hitches. Whitney's wearing a white dress that clings to her lithe body. Her hair is swept to the side and hangs in waves over her shoulder.

There she is. My beautiful angel of a wife. This might be the last time I ever see her this way. A year from now, she might have a different man waiting for her at the bottom of these stairs.

A sharp pain stabs into my chest, and I take a deep breath through my nose. I had such lofty hopes when I locked her into this agreement six months ago. I thought we'd be announcing the end of our separation at this ball, giddy that the misery was behind us.

The misery is already behind her, while I'm only just starting to feel the cold of the misty storm in the distance. This was always our fate, and I refused to see it.

I'm a fool.

"Daffodils," she says when she gets to the bottom of the stairs, her gaze fixed on the flowers in my hand. "I hope you're not trying to remind me of our first date."

I force a smile as my chest tightens. Oh God, if only I could go back. If only I could go back in time and become a different man. One who would give her gentleness and patience instead of bulldozing determination. One who would wait quietly for her heart instead of bullying her into marrying me before it had healed.

I shrug. "It was one of the last dates I went on. I'm out of practice."

She snorts. "You went on plenty of dates while we were married."

My chest grows so tight it's hard to take a breath. "I never really went on dates," I say with effort. "Those were only for you."

She rolls her eyes. "What did you do? With the women you *saw*, I mean."

I flinch. "You really want to go into this?"

She's never asked me questions about specifics. I assumed it was too distressing for her, which filled me with an unsettling mixture of triumph and regret.

"I do." She grabs the flowers from my hand and turns toward the kitchen. "It doesn't hurt like it did when you were smug about it. Seeing how uncomfortable you get when I ask you makes *me* feel smug."

Even in my turmoil, I can't help but smile. She's gotten a lot cheekier with me since we separated. "I'm happy to make you feel smug anytime you need me to."

"Alright, then." She places the daffodils in a glass vase, lovingly arranging them with her graceful fingers. "Tell me, what did a typical hookup look like for you?"

A lump forms in my throat. "I usually just asked them to meet at a bar."

She places her hands on her hips as she examines the flowers. "And you don't consider that a date?"

"I don't. It was only a preliminary to..."

"Sex."

I wince. "Yes, and I never would have taken you to a bar for a date. Ever."

She turns to me, smiling lazily. “Maybe you should have. It might have been good for you to let me down off that pedestal.”

“You’re probably right about that, but that had nothing to do with putting you on a pedestal. The bar meetup was a sign of my intentions. It told my hookups that my emotions weren’t available, because another woman already had my heart.”

She brushes her fingers over one of the daffodils. “Little good it did me.”

Since her face is turned from mine, I shut my eyes, letting the stab sink into my chest instead of resisting it. Oh, if only I could go back to the beginning.

If I’m going to have a chance of winning her, this has to be a new beginning. Like Lily said, I need to be softer.

“Whit...” I say, my nerves whirring at what I’m about to do.

Her brow furrows. “What?”

“I want to be open with you tonight. I want you to be totally at ease. You can ask me anything you want, and I’ll tell you the truth.”

“You mean I can ask you literally anything, like who your favorite mistress was, for example, and you’ll tell me.”

My ears buzz. “Yes.”

Her lips lift slightly at the corners, and the tension leaves my shoulders. This was the right decision, however damning my confessions might be. I never would have made this offer even a few weeks ago. I would have thought it too dangerous.

Now, I have nothing to lose. I’m on my way to the executioner, holding on to a prayer that she might take mercy

on me at the final moment.

WHITNEY

AS WE WALK inside the ballroom, the scent of the gardenias washes through my senses. I'm brought back to a Christmas ball years ago. Back then, Mark had his firm hand on my lower back throughout the night. Now, his hands rest at his side as we make our way through the crowd

It's silly that I miss his touch when it wasn't out of affection. He wanted to show our social circle that he owned me, even though everyone knew what went on in our private life.

I never understood why he chose the Esposito's yearly Christmas Ball as our final date in his drawn-out attempt to win me back. Why would he surround me with the people who witnessed my humiliation these past fifteen years?

A couple approaches us, and my stomach sinks. David and Gemma. David has worked for Walker Industries since Mark and I were newlyweds. He and his now ex-wife, Emily, were one of our closest couple friends years ago. Until Emily told me that Mark and David went to strip clubs together and knew all about each other's infidelity. They were partners in crime.

I couldn't stomach being around David after I found out. If only I had been as wise as Emily and divorced Mark years ago. If only I hadn't stayed under some misapprehension that it was better for the kids. And that I deserved his infidelity.

"Whitney." David's gaze drifts up and down my dress. "Is she a vampire?" he asks Mark. "How is it possible that she hasn't aged in two decades?"

I force a smile at the disguised jab. He's reminding me that he's known me for two decades, while his new wife is probably two decades younger than him.

"It's the post-divorce glow," Mark says, smiling tightly. "She doesn't have a cheating husband to weigh her down anymore."

Small gasps fill the air. My God, did he really just say that?

David laughs awkwardly. "Speaking of which—" he licks his top lip "—I have to say, I'm really impressed to see you two here together. It seems like you're... Like you're both doing really well considering...everything."

"I think so, too," Gemma says. "It's wonderful that you're able to come to events together."

Just as I open my mouth to smooth over the awkwardness, Mark speaks. "*She's* doing well. My whole fucking life is falling apart." Mark chuckles—a brittle sound—and both David and Gemma jerk back. They look almost bewildered, and heat suffuses my face. What is Mark doing? He's going to make them think he's losing a grip on his sanity.

"I'm..." David swallows. "I'm really sorry, Mark. Divorce is hard."

"It is," Mark says, his tone light. "It's especially torturous when it's your fault. When you threw everything away, and for what?" He shakes his head. "Nothing."

Now David's cheeks are bright red, probably because he knows exactly what Mark means by throwing away his marriage for "nothing". When I glance at Mark with wide eyes, he's wearing the ghost of a smile, and finally it clicks into place what his strange behavior is about.

He's humiliating himself on purpose.

This is all for me.

These parties used to be agony for me. I had to endure the piteous stares and condescending pleasantries, and at the end of the night, I'd be as exhausted as if I'd just reached the summit of Half Dome.

Mark is taking the attention off me by stepping into the spotlight.

The next few conversational exchanges only confirm my assumption. Each time he's asked how he's doing, he gives some version of "not well". He says he's hardly sleeping. He even tells the CFO of Esposito that he's had to see a therapist just to get out of bed every morning.

"Mark," I say when we're finally alone. "You're scaring people."

He smiles faintly, shrugging. "They all know my life is falling apart. Why not just come out and say it?"

I set my hand on his arm. "You don't have to do this for me. I don't need it. I'm doing just fine without it."

His green eyes blaze. "Well, whether you need it or not, I'm giving it to you."

My vision grows misty, and I swallow to ease the lump in my throat. I'm too damned soft for this, and I hate it. Watching him bludgeon himself makes me want to wrap my arms around him.

I can't be affectionate with him tonight. I can't give him false hope when I'm planning on having sex with Stephen next week.

But damn, it's tempting.

A while later, we're sitting at our table. Mark has his gaze fixed on his water glass. He's not drinking alcohol, which only adds to the strangeness of the night. His signature whiskey on ice is so well known in our circle, a server typically brings it to him before he even orders.

I take a sip of my wine. "I was thinking about our honesty agreement tonight."

Mark looks up, frowning. "Oh, yeah?"

I nod. "I want you to be able to ask me anything, too. Even about Jason if you want."

He glances at his empty glass, which shimmers under the soft light of the chandelier. "You don't need to do that. You don't have nearly as many sins."

"I think it's sort of cathartic if we both divulge secrets. We were never open with each other in our marriage, even during the good years."

He's quiet for a moment. "Do you think we had good years?"

I jerk back. "Of course we did. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, I was in heaven in the early years." He licks his bottom lip. "But I thought you were always thinking about Jason. Even during our good times, you were thinking about him."

The words send a prickle over my skin, and a familiar sickness fills my gut. I know those words. How do I know those words?

Oh God. I wrote them.

"My email," I say breathlessly.

Mark's eyes grow unfocused. "Jason, I've thought about you every day for the last six years. Even in the moments when I've been happiest with Mark, I couldn't help but wonder how it would have been with you."

I shut my eyes, and my stomach fills with cold, twisting shame. Oh God, how could I have written that? How could I have been so heartless and stupid?

I don't even know the woman who had that affair.

"I'm sorry," Mark says. "I didn't mean to upset you. I paid you back a hundredfold for what you did. But I have that whole damn thing memorized. I can't seem to forget about it."

"Oh, Mark." I swallow. "It must have been so hurtful to read that for the first time."

"It was agony."

The expression in his eyes is like a knife in my chest. He looks so young, like a sad, lost little boy.

"What did I do wrong?" he asks, startling me.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... I thought you were happy. I tried my best to give you what you needed. I tried to be attentive and show you how much I loved you, but you still... You still thought about him."

The brokenness in his voice clamps around my chest, making it hard to take a breath. Maybe it wasn't the right decision to have this little confessional. My heart is breaking, and I thought I didn't have a heart for this man anymore.

"I didn't think about him every day," I say. "My postpartum depression clouded my memories. I was insecure. It was as simple as that. I thought you would get bored and

leave me eventually. Having Jason fawn over me soothed the fear that I was unlovable. It was selfish and despicable.”

He purses his lips as he stares down at his glass. “I knew that was part of it, but still... There were times in our marriage when... When you felt sort of far away. It made me wonder if maybe you were thinking about him.”

“I did think about him sometimes. I won’t lie, but certainly not every day. And I wasn’t unhappy. It took losing you for me to realize how warped my thinking was. You were a wonderful husband before...”

He smiles deprecatingly. “Before I became the worst husband who ever lived.”

I smile. “Yes.”

Silence descends over the table. Now is my chance to ask him a question I’ve always wanted to ask. Had we had this talk even a few months ago, he wouldn’t have given me a real answer. But something tells me that he will tonight.

I lift my chin and meet his eyes squarely. “Why did you do it for so long?”

His eyes widen minutely before settling on the table. “I’ve never been good at dealing with my feelings, and the affair broke me. There were times...I wanted to reconcile, but I didn’t know how.”

I nod jerkily, clenching my jaw to fight the hovering tears. “You came to me...that one time, and you told me you chose not to sleep with that woman.”

He exhales heavily. “I know. I did it all wrong. It just shows how fucked up I was. I felt like you owed me something, when all along, I should have been crawling on my hands and knees to win you back.”

“Mark, it’s not about wi—” I don’t have the opportunity to finish, because the speaker takes the stage, and the murmur of conversation around us fades into silence.

CHAPTER 9



3 years ago

WHITNEY

WATER SLICES down my legs as I scrub my feet. The sun is just starting to break through the fog, sending a haze of soft light through the opaque window.

Footsteps pound along the hallway, and a moment later, the bedroom door opens. I pull the wash rag over my chest just before Mark appears in the bathroom doorway.

“Sorry,” he says, but he doesn’t look sorry at all as he lets his gaze rove over me. “You look beautiful.”

A jolt of electricity shoots into my groin, but I try to keep my expression placid. “What do you need?”

His eyes flash as he walks toward the tub.

Oh God, I don’t like this expression of his. It’s wild and determined. It’s the same one I saw the morning I confessed my affair.

“I was just at a bar with another woman,” he says.

My chest squeezes. Did he come in here to torture me?

My gaze falls to a patch of bubbles at the center of the tub. “I don’t need to hear about it.”

“You do need to hear about it.” He rests his hips against the counter. “I had a hotel booked.”

I flinch, sickness filling my stomach like molten lead. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I canceled on her. We were just about to leave. I canceled our...meetup and came straight here.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. Thoughts float through my head like dust particles under the sunlight. I’m naked in the tub. He’s standing there with that strange expression. Why did he come in here to tell me this?

The answer occurs to me suddenly like a punch in the gut.

He’s proud of himself. He was about to cheat on me, but he decided not to. He’s here for my congratulations.

My payment.

I huff out a humorless laugh. “What a lucky girl I am.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his jaw tightening. “What I just told you doesn’t matter to you, then. You’d be just as content if I went back to that hotel and fucked her. Is that what you’re implying?”

Rage shoots like arrows through my veins. “What I’m implying is that it doesn’t matter if you chose not to fuck her today. Your fidelity should be my right, not my privilege.”

“I’ve never done this before. I’ve never decided to do the right thing.”

I would probably laugh if my heart weren’t breaking. “Yes, and the moment you decided to *do the right thing* you came

marching in here wanting a reward for it. Is this how little I'm worth to you? Do I owe you now because you chose to do the absolute bare minimum of not fucking someone else when you're married?"

His nostrils flare. He walks over to the tub and sets both hands on the copper edges.

That fire is raging behind his eyes. He's back to being that Mark from that sunny December morning when I confessed. "Yes." The word is delivered through clenched teeth. "This is your privilege after what you did. I'd take it if I were you."

I hold his gaze. "No. I don't want it."

The rage behind his eyes dies in an instant, as if wiped out by a deluge. He stands up and glances around the bathroom as if he's never seen it before.

A moment later, he walks out of the room and shuts the door quietly behind him.

CHAPTER 10



*P*resent Day

Mark

WHITNEY'S wide eyes are fixed on my face, her lips parted. I'm addicted to this expression of hers—the sign of her rapt attention.

My honesty pledge turned out better than I could have hoped. We've been so absorbed in conversation these last few hours that the Christmas Ball passed in a dreamy haze. Who knows how long we've been sitting here in my parked car, with our family home looming on the hill in the distance.

“And then he walked over to my desk,” I say, “leaned down so he could really look me in the eyes, and said something like, ‘I promise I’ll fuck your wife if you don’t stay away from Lauren.’”

Her doe eyes grow somehow wider.

“You’ll never guess what I did,” I say.

“What?”

I smile slowly. “I punched him in the face.”

She scowls. “No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

She shakes her head. “This story has Mark Walker glory days written all over it. Like your baseball stories.”

“Glory days? It was three years ago. And it was far from glorious. I was an old man and this young celebrity kid was threatening to steal my wife from me.”

Her expression remains skeptical. “Why doesn’t anyone know about it if it happened in your office?”

“Only Lily knew, and I think she was so terrified, she never told anyone else.”

She turns away, adjusting her position in her seat. “Well, even if it has a kernel of truth to it—and knowing you it would only be a small kernel—it’s not flattering to me. He was just trying to piss you off because you slept with his girlfriend.”

“Oh, believe me, he meant it. He said you were gorgeous. It terrified me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Mark, don’t patronize me. I would have been almost forty when it happened. I hate how you always pretend like I’m just as attractive as the young women you slept with. You didn’t just do it to punish me. You enjoyed it. Any man would.”

I lean forward—not close enough to spook her. “I hardly paid attention. I was only thinking of you.”

She raises her brows. “For fifteen years? You fucked countless women and only thought about me?”

I shrug. “I’m obsessed with you. I always have been.”

She leans back into her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. “That’s not flattering.”

“I’m not trying to flatter you. This is our honesty night. I’m confessing.”

She doesn’t look convinced, so I lean a little closer. “Do you want me to tell you something twisted?”

Her eyes grow wide again—that expression I adore. “What?”

“This one might hurt. I’ll only tell you if you think you can handle it.”

She snorts. “If it’s about your affairs, tell away. They don’t hurt anymore.”

A slice of pain shoots into my heart at her dismissiveness, but I do my best not to flinch. “I used to think about you when I fucked them. I imagined you watching us. I pictured you horrified and hurt. God, it turned me on like nothing else.”

Her grimace is so dramatic, a chuckle erupts from my chest. Talking about our dark and twisted past with lightness loosens something deep inside me.

“You’re disgusting.”

“I am. You should pity me.”

“I do pity you.”

I sigh heavily. “The most disgusting thing I did was trick you into marrying me too soon. It’s one of my biggest regrets. I think we could have avoided all the pain if I had only been a little more patient.”

She stares down at her lap for a while, fiddling with a loose white thread on the seam of her dress. “You didn’t trick

me.”

“I did.”

“I knew what I was doing.” Her voice is quiet.

“You didn’t have all the facts.”

“What do you mean?”

My gaze runs from her side-swept hair to the bodice of her dress. God, she’s so beautiful. I’ve felt this ache in my chest since the moment I laid eyes on her, like there’s always been this inkling there that she would someday destroy me.

“Remember that weekend in San Francisco,” I say, “when I told you I wouldn’t be able to see much of you for six months, that work was so busy I wouldn’t be able to arrange many visits?”

She nods slowly.

“You started crying, and twisted fucker that I was, I loved it. It meant you cared. It meant I had you where I wanted you. Right after that, I asked you to move in with me.”

“And I told you my parents wouldn’t like it.” Her voice has a faraway quality.

I reach out and grab her hand. “That’s how I got you to marry me. It was all a lie. Work wasn’t too busy for me to see you. Nothing could have kept me from you. I only said it because I wanted to lock you in. I hated that you were so far away with Jason in the same town. I thought it was only a matter of time before he’d come around and beg for you to take him back. I had to get you away from him.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, and I take the opportunity to stroke her hand with my thumb. It’s heaven to touch her.

“I knew you were lying.”

I blink once. “You did?”

“I did. I also knew it was a sign you were impatient that I wasn’t moving fast enough for you. I never understood why you wanted me so much. I always thought eventually you would get bored.” She looks up at me, her eyes wistful. “In a way, I was locking you in, too.”

I swallow. “You already had me locked in. The moment we met, I was yours. Forever.”

Her gaze drops to my mouth, and electricity pulses through my veins.

I trail my fingers from her hand to her thigh, and she lets out a soft little gasp. She seems as sensitive to my touch as I am to hers. Maybe she hasn’t done very much with...

No, I can’t think about him. Not when she’s looking at me with those Bambi eyes nearly shut. That soft pout of a mouth lifted toward me as if in supplication.

I press my lips against hers, and she hums. She lifts her hands to my head and pulls me against her mouth. Good God, she must be buzzed.

I hope she doesn’t regret this.

Her fingernails run along my scalp, sending tingles down my spine. I break the kiss and start trailing my mouth along her soft neck.

She arches her back, letting out a whimper as I slip my hands into her dress. Our bodies have always been as in tune as if they were made just for this. She pulls away suddenly, and we’re both panting and flushed.

Now is my chance. I'm at the edge of the precipice, ready to leap off, even if it's to my death.

"I want a date. Not an obligated time that you have to spend with me. A real date. I want you to spend it with me because you want to."

"Mark..." She sighs. "I knew I shouldn't have—"

"Just listen," I say, my heart in my throat. "All I want is one date. I'm not asking for any more than that. Don't give me anything unless I work for it. No promises. No commitment. I can never make up for what I've done. I can never do anything to deserve your love, but I'm willing to work for you for the rest of my life. I'll let my actions speak for me."

She stares at her lap for what feels like an eternity, and my heart pounds like a hammer against my throat. Finally, she looks up, and I can read the answer in her eyes.

I want to die.

"That's not how love works," she says. "At least, not the kind of love I want."

My head grows so heavy, I could fall over. With effort, I keep my eyes level with hers. "What do you mean?"

"You're trying to earn me."

I shake my head. "I know I never could. That's what I'm saying. I'm willing to pay for the rest of my li—"

"Pay." She lifts her brows. "That word says everything about what went wrong between us. Our relationship was always transactional. I messed up big time, and I had to pay you for it. My payments were in pain."

I flinch. "It was wrong. It was despicable. I'll never do it ag—"

“You’re doing it now. You’re offering me a payment, and that’s not how it should be. Love can’t be earned.” She sets her hand on mine. “Back when I had my affair, you either had to forgive me or let me go. You weren’t able to do either, and that left us in limbo for fifteen years.”

I try to stifle the sob that erupts from my chest with little success. She squeezes my hand.

“I don’t want to leave you in limbo. I don’t want you to pay eternally because I’m not willing to let you go.”

I let the tears fall, and she rubs my back. Even if I could find the words, what more could I say? She’s right that it’s always been transactional between us.

I’ve never known how to love any other way.

CHAPTER 11



Whitney

I SPIN in front of the mirror, letting my baby-doll dress flare around my hips.

My wedding date with Stephen is this evening, and I've been a bundle of nerves all day. I desperately want to let loose and enjoy myself, but I can't push away the memory of last week.

Those glistening tears rolling down Mark's face. The brokenness in his deep voice as he sobbed.

I refuse to let my emotions get the better of me. I'm going to have sex tonight, whether I'm ready for it or not. It's time.

When I walk out of the closet, Livvy looks up from her phone. "Oh my goodness! You look amazing."

I smile at my adorable, probably future daughter-in-law. I've always found it so endearing that she uses the word "goodness" instead of "God".

"You look great, Mom," Cole says. "Seriously. You could be a teenager for how fit you are."

I shake my head sharply. “I don’t want to be a teenager. I’m happy being a forty-three-year-old woman. I don’t even have to date if I don’t want to. I’ve already lived my dream of raising a family.”

Livvy nods. “I like that perspective. Now you can just have fun.”

I force a smile.

Fun. Nothing about the last week has been fun.

Damn Mark.

“So do you think that’s the one?” Livvy asks. “Or do you want to show us another?”

“I think I’ll try one more,” I say. “Cole, can you take a picture of me so I can compare when I’m done?”

He nods, lifting up his phone and snapping the camera. Just as I turn around to walk back into the closet, his voice halts me.

“Oops,” he says blandly. “I accidentally sent it to Dad.”

My stomach plummets to the ground. I whip around to face him. “You’re joking right?”

He smirks. “Nope.”

I place both hands on my hips. “Cole Benjamin Walker, you’d better be joking, or else I might disown you.”

Livvy scowls at him. “Why would you do that?”

He squeezes her thigh. “We both know he deserves it after what he pulled.” He turns to me. “Mom, he invited Livvy out to coffee so he could wrangle information out of her. About you and Stephen. And he did it after I told him to mind his own business.”

I clench my teeth. “I already know he did that. And—” I turn to Livvy “—I’m very sorry that you were put in that position, but your dad is going through a really difficult time right now, Cole.”

“Yes.” Livvy punches his shoulder. “Especially after he spent his birthday alone.”

A chill ripples over my skin. His birthday.

I forgot. How could that have happened?

“He spent it alone?” I ask Cole, my voice brittle. “Why didn’t you go see him?”

He winces. “I forgot. We all forgot. Mason finally remembered a few days ago and texted us.”

Because I forgot to remind them.

I grimace, unable to control the flood of emotions washing over me. Oh God, divorce is hard. Mark was once my whole world, and someday he’ll be akin to a stranger.

He’s already becoming a stranger. December sixth came and went, and I didn’t even notice. A day that once meant so much to me.

Why does the thought make me frantic?

“It’s okay, Mom.” Cole’s voice is gentle. “I don’t think he was upset. He says he doesn’t want to be reminded of how old he is, anyway.”

“And Cole and I went over there on Thursday night,” Livvy says. “Cole made a really nice spaghetti dinner, and I baked a cake.”

“He had a really good time,” Cole says. “I promise.”

The gentleness in his voice makes me realize that warm trickles are running down my cheek. No, I can't be crying. Not when I'm going to take such a big step tonight.

If we can't forgive each other, we have to let each other go.

CHAPTER 12



*M*ark

Cole: Mom's dress for her big date tonight.

Cole: Oops. I meant to send that to Livvy.

I'VE HARDLY TAKEN my eyes off the picture of Whitney for the last ten hours since Cole sent it to me.

She looks demurely back at me, shy as usual when photographed. Her eyes are wide and hesitant. That purple dress hangs loosely over her delicate curves.

My angel of a wife.

There's nothing I can do. My fate is in her hands. If she can't forgive me, I'll be like this forever. Watching her from afar.

Watching another man touch her, love her, care for her. A couple years from now, I'll probably see them together at Cole and Livvy's wedding. She'll be sitting next to him, gripping his hand throughout the ceremony. He'll be with her when she holds our first grandchild. After she takes the baby in her arms, she'll turn to him, smiling with all of that warmth and love that I wish I could capture in a mason jar.

But it will be for him. Not me. All of her joy will be his—even for *our* children.

No part of her will be mine anymore.

Oh fuck, I can't bear this.

I glance over at the clock. 11:36 pm. For all I know, she might be lying naked in his arms right now.

I have to know.

I have to know if I've already been replaced.

What if I went over there? I'll just check and see if his car is outside. Ultimately, I'd be hurting no one but myself.

Fuck, I'm losing my mind. I shouldn't even be considering something this unhinged. I shouldn't do anything to jeopardize the small chance I have and yet...

A part of me knows that I have no chance. It won't matter if she catches me spying on her. I have nothing to lose.

I've already lost her.

WHITNEY

IT WAS TOO SOON.

Stephen wraps his arms around me and pulls my back against his chest. His warm breath brushes against my ear. "I've been thinking about this since the day you first walked into my office."

"Me too," I say, tears prickling behind my eyes.

I can't let him see my inner turmoil. I twist onto my back, straining to keep my expression languid and dreamy, like it

should be after having sex with a man like him.

He can't know that it was too soon.

"I don't mean to kick you out," I say, "but Maddy is set to be dropped off at midnight..."

"Oh." He licks his lips and glances around the room. "I didn't realize how late it was. I'm sorry."

I set my hand on his cheek. "You have no reason to apologize. It was impulsive of me to invite you in."

He smiles. "I'm glad you did."

"Me too," I lie, somehow able to keep my voice from breaking.

After throwing on a T-shirt and sweats, I walk with him downstairs. A prickle runs over my skin as I glance at the kitchen window. We're in full view of the drive. If Maddy's friends happen to drop her off right now, she'd see a strange man with her mother in the middle of the night.

It was too soon. I wish I had waited until I was ready to have sex, instead of trying to prove to myself that I don't need Mark.

Mark

ADRENALINE PUMPING THROUGH MY VEINS, it doesn't take much effort to hop over the iron gate. I walk as quietly as possible behind the trees along the perimeter of the drive. As I get closer to the house, a sweet voice drifts into my ears.

"I had a great time at the wedding," Whitney says.

As if I'm pulled by an omnipotent force, I walk slowly forward until her small form comes into view. She's standing in the drive, and Stephen's tall form is hovering over her. Close.

Too close.

"I had a great time *afterward*," he says, his head tilting to the side. Even in the darkness, I can make out his indulgent smile.

He fucked her.

That's what he meant. His tone and body language—everything implies it. Plus, Whitney is practically in pajamas. He fucked her, and now he's getting his goodbye kiss.

Oh God, I want to kill him.

I take a deep breath. I need to get my temper under control. If I walk any farther forward, one of them will see me.

Stephen takes a step and sets a hand on her shoulder, rubbing his thumb along her collarbone.

Get your fucking hand off my wife.

"I want to take you out again. What are you doing Friday afternoon?"

Whitney frowns, and her gaze grows unfocused. "You know... I think I'm free. I don't have my weekly lunches with Mark anymore.

"I don't want to talk about Mark."

Whitney lifts a hand and tucks a strand of hair behind her ears. "I'm sorry. It's a habit."

My jaw clenches. How dare he make her feel uncomfortable for talking about me in such a perfunctory way.

Of course it's a habit to talk about me. I'm her fucking husband. We were each other's world for twenty-three years.

"It's okay," he says. "I want you to be able to talk to me about anything. Even him. Just not...when I'm about to kiss you."

I intake a sharp breath when his mouth presses against hers.

He's kissing my wife, and my vision grows blurry.

It's his right to touch her. That's what happens when you throw your marriage away. Someone steps in and steals your whole world from you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

You can only stand and impotently watch.

After what feels like an eternity, he finally pulls away. He steps back and lifts his head heavenward. "God." He runs his hands through his hair. "You make me crazy."

"I never thought I would feel this way again," Whitney says, her voice wistful.

My heart stops.

My head grows so foggy I sway forward. Why am I letting myself watch this? This is torture.

I've lost her. She's gone.

The next thing I know, Stephen is driving away. Whitney lingers for a moment before walking to the porch. I'm pulled toward her. I can't stop myself. I have nothing to lose.

I never thought I would feel this way again.

My footsteps must catch her attention, because she suddenly whips around. "What are you doing here?"

I wince. “I just... I had to know...”

She crosses her arms over her chest and marches toward me. “You didn’t have to know anything. This was a huge invasion of my privacy. God!” She shuts her eyes. “I’m going to kill Cole for sending you that text.”

“Don’t blame him. This was good for me... I... I can’t...”

The despair descends over me suddenly. It’s so potent I fall to my knees and wrap my arms around her thighs.

WHITNEY

HIS EYES SHINE AS he stares up at me. The mixture of adoration and despair on his face is so overwhelming I want to run away.

But I can’t. I’m locked in place.

“Please, Whitney.”

I swallow to loosen the knot in my throat. “Mark...”

“Please. Oh God. I’m begging you. I’ll do absolutely anything.” Streams of water fall down his cheek, glistening under the porch light. “I can’t bear this. It will kill me.”

Mist rises to my eyes at the brokenness in his voice. “No, it won’t. You’ll be okay. It’s better this way. I don’t want to keep you in limbo.”

“Let me stay in limbo! I don’t mind being in limbo if I can have some part of you.”

I swallow. “You deserve more than—”

“No, I don’t!” He squeezes my thighs so tightly, I nearly fall forward, but I brace myself on his shoulders. He doesn’t seem to notice. “This is all my fault. I should have worshiped you. I should have let you have whatever you wanted. If you come back to me, I will. Anything you want. You can even keep fucking him. Or anyone you want. As long as you come home to me. As long as you’re mine, you can have whatever...”

His face falls against my thighs, and the sound that comes in next sends a chill down my spine. It’s a cry of despair. A cry of grief. Oh God, I can’t bear this. He’s losing his mind.

“Mark.” I swallow. “I know you’re upset, but you don’t mean any of this. You wouldn’t be happy like that.”

He shakes his head against my thigh, and wetness seeps into my sweats. “I wouldn’t be happy. But it would be enough. Anything would be enough compared to this.”

He pulls away and looks up at me, and the sight is like a knife in my heart. His face is so full of longing and misery. “Please, Whitney. Take pity on me. I’m not a vengeful, punishing man. Not anymore. That man is dead. The man in front of you right now will do anything to keep you.”

I inhale a shaky breath. “Can you let go of me?”

His arms immediately drop to his sides, and my thighs tingle at the loss of pressure. I take a step back, and his eyes are full of anticipation.

“I’m going inside. It’s time for you to go home. Maybe take a walk on the property first, to clear your head.”

He nods jerkily, but his eyes are still full of...mournful longing. Oh God, this is misery. This is the worst pain...

As I turn around and walk briskly inside, something akin to panic descends over me.

No, not this. Please not this.

CHAPTER 13



Whitney

I CAN'T BEAR THIS. It will kill me.

Mark's words from three weeks ago echo on loop in my head.

God damn this anxiety. I've been working so hard on self-care since the separation. It doesn't make any sense that this is happening now.

"Mom!" Maddy calls from upstairs. "I can't find my Converse."

"I'll help you in a minute," I shout.

When I stand up from the couch, the world goes black. It's only when my head jerks up that I realize I had a fainting spell. A cold electricity skitters over my skin. This isn't good. It wouldn't be safe to drive Maddy to school right now. I could faint at the wheel.

Without giving myself a chance to reflect, I lift my phone and press Mark's name on my contact list. He picks up on the first ring.

“What’s up?” he says, and my chest seizes at the sound of his voice. So broken. So brittle. As if no time has passed since that moment on the porch. Blackness descends over me.

A loud thud sounds on the floor, and I stumble to catch my balance. When I glance down, my phone is sitting face up. I take a deep breath as I crouch down and pick it up.

“What was that?” Mark nearly shouts.

“Nothing.” I try to keep my voice smooth. “I’ve just been having some dizzy spells this morning, and I was wondering if you could come pick up Maddy for school.”

“Are you telling me you just fell down?”

“No, I dropped my phone. I’m fine, but it probably wouldn’t be safe to—”

“You’re not fine,” he grits out. “Dizzy spells could be serious. It could be your heart.”

“It’s not my heart. It’s just anxiety. I’ve had this bef—”

“We’re not taking that risk. I’m coming over now.”

Just as I open my mouth to tell him I need him to take Maddy to school, the line goes silent. Great. He’s going to insist on taking me to the emergency room, and Maddy will be late. He’s always been so high-handed when it comes to my health.

I won’t let him this time. It’s not his place anymore.

Less than five minutes later, a pounding reverberates from the front door. “Maddy,” I call upstairs. “Your dad is here to pick you up.

My head is clear when I stand up from the couch. Good. I can use this as evidence when Mark tries to take me to the ER.

As soon as I open the door, Mark storms inside and grabs me by the shoulders. “Look at me,” he says.

I roll my eyes before meeting his gaze. Those dark-green eyes frantically roam my face. “Your color looks good,” he mutters.

“See, I told you I’m fine.”

He scowls. “I’m still taking you to the doctor. I already called Dr. Leigh.”

Heat washes over my skin. “I did not give you permission to call my doctor. She’s going to think I’m a lunatic, and Maddy’s going to be late for school.”

“Cole will be here any minute to take her.”

I raise my chin. “I’m not going to the doctor.”

His nostrils flare. “Yes, you are. We’re not taking risks with your health.”

“There is no *we* here. This is my health. *My* decision.”

His stern expression doesn’t waiver, and when he opens his mouth, likely to insist, I jab a finger in his face. “Don’t bulldoze me.”

His eyes soften, and I can almost see the thoughts racing behind them. He knows what I mean. I won’t have my choices taken away from me anymore.

His gaze falls to the floor. “Alright, but I’m staying here for the next hour to keep an eye on you.”

When I open my mouth to protest, he speaks over me. “This is for our children, not for me. Cole told me not to leave you alone. If something happens to you because I left you, he’d never forgive me.”

His words are warm, and yet they knock the breath from my lungs.

He's the only person who will ever truly understand my love for my children. Not just any children, but those three achingly perfect human beings who embedded themselves into my soul when they grew inside of me.

We're a family. *He's* my family.

"Okay." My voice is just above a whisper, because it's all I can manage.

Mark

"IS THE XANAX KICKING IN?" I ask.

She's lying down on the couch, as I requested, with her Kindle perched above her. "Not yet," she says, "but I'm feeling more relaxed knowing that it will soon."

"Do you want me to get your knitting needles?"

"No, I'm enjoying my book."

"Have you eaten anything?"

A long silence follows. "Mark, stop hovering over me."

I smile. "I'm sorry."

"Go find something to do."

I nod. "What do you have going on today? I'll take care of it."

"Nothing that can't wait," she says. "Why don't you use your old home office and get some work done?"

I shake my head. “You’ll stress if you don’t get your stuff done, and you’ll be more likely to have another panic attack.”

Her jaw ticks, and I can’t help but smile. She’s been exasperated with me since I insisted on staying here and monitoring her, but my wife has the patience of an angel.

“My mental health is my responsibility,” she says. “I have to figure out how to take care of it myself.”

“And you are taking care of it yourself by accepting help when you need it.”

When her stern expression falters, I know my point hit home. I glance away to hide my gloating smirk. She always used to let me “hover” over her before our separation. One of the biggest changes over the last six months was her refusal to let me do a single thing for her.

It killed me at first. I saw it as a tangible sign that she was slipping out of my grasp.

Now I’m starting to see the value in it. If she’s ever able to forgive me, we’ll have to start over.

Fuck, it’s painful to have hope.

“I hate being so weak,” she says.

I scowl at her. “Weak? Are you out of your mind? Look at you. You’ve started a brand new life for yourself while I’ve been falling apart. You’re the furthest thing from weak.” Guilt grips my chest when a memory surfaces. “It’s my fault that you feel that way.”

She sets her Kindle on her chest and frowns at me. “How is it your fault?”

“I criticized your mental health.” I drop my gaze to my lap as shame washes over me, sinking into the pit of my gut.

“Right after I found out about the affair. It’s one of my biggest regrets.”

She gulps back a laugh. “*That’s* your biggest regret?”

I lick my bottom lip. “One of them, yes. It was the cruelest thing I could have done. I wanted to hurt you for hurting me, but I never wanted to scare you, and that’s exactly what I did. I threatened to take the kids from you because of your mental health. It was reprehensible. You have no idea how much pain it’s caused me over the years when I reflect back on it.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her sit up. “Come here.”

I frown, shocked that she wants to be anywhere near me when we’re talking on this subject, but I do as I’m told. As soon as I sit next to her, she takes my hand. The warmth of her skin radiates through my whole body, like stepping into a hot bath.

“Don’t torture yourself over that,” she says. “I knew you would never do it. Even in the moment. I wasn’t really scared.”

I shake my head, squeezing her hand. “I think you’re remembering it wrong. I saw the fear in your eyes.”

“I was afraid of losing you. Not the kids.”

I frown. “Even back then, when you still loved Jason?”

Her expression grows incredulous, as if she can’t believe I would ask such a silly question. “Do you really still think that?”

My gaze drops to her tiny hand with those long, thin fingers interlocked with mine. “I guess you were starting to love me then, huh?”

She sets a hand on my cheek, and I want to close my eyes at the contact, but I force myself to hold her gaze. “I realized I loved you from the beginning,” she says. “It’s always been *you*.”

Whitney leans forward and kisses my cheek, making me hiss in sweet anguish. My head jerks back. “What are you doing?”

“I’m kissing you. Is that alright?”

I gulp. “Where is this kiss going?”

She smiles a little shyly. “Do you mind taking the edge off of my anxiety?”

I let out a long, low groan before crashing my mouth against hers. “Not at all.”

She grabs me by the shoulders as she lies back on the couch and pulls me over her.

“Can I touch you too?” I ask, ready to explode at the warmth of her little form underneath me.

“Of course you can touch me.” Her smile grows cheeky. “I’m hoping you’ll touch me a lot.”

Her hand slips into my pants, and arrows of pleasure shoot in every direction throughout my body. “Oh fuck.” I hiss. “I don’t think I can be gentle. It’s been too long.”

She frowns. “When was the last time?”

“In June. The night of the Walter Johnson party. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t mean the last time with me, but the last time you’ve had sex, period.”

“That was it.”

Her jaw slackens, and her eyes grow unfocused. “Are you saying...” Her voice is just above a whisper. “You haven’t had sex since we separated?”

“Of course not. When I told you there was no one for me but you, I meant it.”

CHAPTER 14



Whitney

COULD HE REALLY BE CHANGING?

I never thought it was possible. I always assumed he was too arrogant and self-indulgent, but what would he have to gain from celibacy? He has every right to sleep with other women.

His hands roam my body, exploring every inch of my skin. Electricity surges through my veins at his familiar touch.

God, I've missed this.

This is probably a mistake, but I can't stop myself. With my nerves so stretched and raw, I need his touch. He can make this aching anxiety go away, if only momentarily.

I lift my head and nip at his neck, and he hisses. "Oh fuck, Whitney. You'd better slow down if you want to get any kind of satisfaction from this."

His shoulders tremble beneath my hands, and his jaw is so tight it looks like it might shatter into pieces. I love that I'm pushing him to the edge of his restraint.

“I’m already satisfied,” I say as I unfasten his belt, shivering with anticipation.

After yanking his pants off, he lowers his body over mine. His hard cock against my skin makes me gasp. I run my hands up his back, pulling him closer.

But it’s not enough. I need all of him.

“I want you inside me.”

He growls. “You’re going to kill me, darling girl.”

Warmth washes over me at the sound of his familiar endearment. Even a few months ago, this pleasant squeeze in my chest would have been followed by a stab of pain.

What’s happened? Have I changed too?

He pulls away and positions himself at my entrance. In one thrust, he slams inside me. I whimper at the sharp sensation, and he stills. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

His voice is shaking, and I smile up at him. “It’s okay. I like it when you’re rough.”

He shuts his eyes. “You’re so tight and hot. I’ve been dreaming of this for so long.”

I lift my mouth to his ear. “Me too.”

He groans as he pulls away and shoves himself back inside me, and I meet him thrust for thrust, savoring the feeling of his cock inside me.

He rolls us over, his hard fingers cutting into my skin. “Ride me. I want to look at you.”

I sink down on his shaft and moan as I rock back and forth. My fingers skim from his shoulder to his stomach, and he sucks in a breath. Those hungry eyes are fixed on my face.

“You’re the most beautiful woman in the world, Whitney Walker.”

The reverence in his voice drifts over my body like a warm waterfall. I’m about to burst into pieces. I rise up and slam down on him again and again. My world blurs and spins, and electricity shoots from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes.

Mark mutters something under his breath, and at first I can’t make it out. At the next swivel of my hips, he says it louder. “I love you.”

An emotion too complex to name simmers under my veins.

My body begins to quake as he grips my hips. I rise up and down rapidly, frantic for my release. Every nerve within me seems to be on fire, and before I know it I’m screaming.

My body clenches around him as my muscles contract. “Mark,” I shout. I know he’s about to come. I can feel it. His body is trembling beneath me. He yanks my hips against his, jerking forward as he releases a roar and explodes inside me. I cling to his shoulders as he pulls my back to the couch and collapses on top of me.

He buries his face in my neck, panting. His body is warm and heavy on mine, and his heart is pounding against my skin. “Holy fuck.”

I laugh softly. “I know.”

“I needed this. Oh my God, I’ve missed you. I don’t know how I’ll ever... How I could live without—”

When his voice cracks, I squeeze him tightly. His chest heaves, but he doesn’t make a sound. He snuffles. “I’m sorry,” he chokes out. “I’m just overwhelmed.”

“It’s okay.” I kiss his cheek. As he cries silently, certainty drifts over me like morning sunlight.

I’m not ready to forgive him.

But I’m also not ready to let him go.

A long while later, we’re still lying snuggled together, my back against his bare chest. He’s been quiet. Thoughtful.

“You can have that date,” I say, a smile tugging at my lips. “If you still want it.”

“No.”

A chill runs down my spine. “You’ve changed your mind?”

“About that date. Yes.”

Tears cloud my eyes, making the world around me grow murky and dull.

It’s okay, Whitney. This will pass.

You got over him once. You can do it again.

“I took care of you because you needed me,” he says. “Not because I wanted something. I’m never going to do that again. If you want to go on a date, it needs to be because you want it. Not because you feel obligated to me.”

My throat grows tight. “What if I do want it?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I want you to think on it for a bit. Make sure it’s what you really want. Why don’t you give it a week? If you still want this date a week from now, it’s yours.”

I nod jerkily.

“I don’t need forgiveness, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

It’s not, but I don’t need to tell him that.

“All I need is a beginning,” he says, “even if it’s a short one. Even if you decide after one date that our new beginning should end. But I need you to be sure you want that beginning. I need you to be sure we aren’t repeating our same miserable patterns.”

I’m somehow able to hold the tears back while he dresses himself and walks away. As soon as the front door shuts, I unleash the sobs.

CHAPTER 15



*M*ark

HOPE IS AGONY.

I've spent the last week trying to distract myself from thinking of today.

But the images remain vivid—the warmth of her skin under my fingertips, her soft moans as I moved within her, her beaming face as Cole entered the world, her rapt expression as I told her stories to impress her on our first date.

A whole world exists between us.

That world will end if she doesn't choose me.

My heart pounds as I turn onto the winding road that leads to the house where we raised our children. The moment is almost here.

I hate that I'm bursting with joy. My first thought when she told me she wanted to meet at her house during our old Friday lunchtime was that it must be a sign of a new beginning. She wouldn't invite me over to crush me.

Then again, she has such a soft heart. Maybe she feels like she has to tell me in person so that she can console me if I

break down.

I would break down. I'd probably even resort to begging again.

My self-control the last time I saw her amazed me even in the moment. A part of me screamed at myself for taking the risk that she'd change her mind after a week's reflection.

I did it for her. I can't rush her like I did twenty-three years ago.

I can't make any of my old mistakes again.

When I pull up in front of the house, she waves from the kitchen balcony. It's a clear day, and the ocean is sparkling.

This is a good sign. She wouldn't choose a romantic spot like the balcony for our conversation if she didn't have good news to share. She'd bring me inside her private sanctuary, where I could sob against her chest in the dim light of her knitting room.

I'm right. I can feel it in my gut.

I wish I could feel it in my heart.

After stepping out of the car, I close my eyes, gathering my strength.

She's waiting for me, leaning over the balcony railing. Her smile is soft, and her eyes are warm.

She's perfect. She's my wife.

She'll always be my wife, even if she divorces me. In my heart, it will always be her.

After I walk up the stairs to the porch, she gestures for me to sit down, but I stay where I am.

“Do you want coffee?” she asks, taking a step back towards the kitchen.

Is she out of her mind?

“No,” I nearly shout. “I need you to give me an answer, and don’t talk around it, please.” I flinch at my tone. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be an ass. It’s just... I’m suffering.”

She sighs, and my gut roils.

“I guess I’ll get to it then. You were right to give me a week. Now that I’ve come to a decision, I feel much more at peace than I did when I first blurted out my request.”

I have to force myself to stay silent. My hands shake, and my heart pounds so hard in my chest that it hurts.

She turns to me, smiling with quivering lips. “I do still want that date. I want to at least...try a new beginning.”

My heart soars into the afternoon sky. “Oh.” My lips part, and I try to breathe, but I can’t. I’m shaking, and my eyes are filling with tears. “I just... That makes me...really happy.”

She smiles with her eyes this time, but then her expression grows serious. “I don’t know if I can forgive you. There’s so much...” She shuts her eyes, shaking her head. “There’s so much. Our beginning might end as soon as it starts. Are you okay with that?”

“I told you I was okay with that.”

She nods. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

I laugh breathlessly in my joy. After taking a step in her direction, I set my hand on her cheek. “That you would even care about hurting me after all I’ve done shows what an angel you are.”

She rolls her eyes even as she leans into my touch. “We’ll need to work on the ‘angel’ thing.”

I step closer to her, drinking in her heavenly scent. “Why?”

“I can’t be on that pedestal.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t mean you’re on a pedestal. It doesn’t mean I expect perfection. It means you’re my home. You’re my heaven. My heaven isn’t perfect.”

When her eyes grow misty, I crash my mouth against hers, letting the vestiges of my agony crumble and fall away.

Now there’s only hope.

EPILOGUE



Six months later

WHITNEY

HE STROKES my hair with the tips of his fingers, and I inhale deeply. I love the warmth and scent of him. He sighs, his big chest moving up and down.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

“Forgiveness.”

His body grows stiff. “You mean...in general or...”

I laugh at the nervousness in his voice. “In general.”

I turn over and look at him, setting my hand on his hard chest. In the cool light of the moon, I can just make out that furrow in his brow. “I think you’ll want to hear it.”

His heart pounds underneath my hand. “Tell me.”

I press a soft kiss against his jaw. “Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling of certainty.”

His swallow is audible. “And what does that mean?”

I smile. “It means I want you to move back in.”

His breath rushes out, and then he laughs. The sound is so loud and full of glee that my heart grows as quiet as the night surrounding us.

This is right. This is exactly where we're supposed to be.

A split second later, I'm flipped onto my back, and his hard body covers mine. "You might want to think twice about that." He presses a trail of hard kisses down my neck. "You won't be getting very much sleep."

He nuzzles my neck, and I giggle. "How is that any different from now?"

"It'll be worse when you're my wife again."

"I've always been your wife."

He stills, and the air grows thick. "Yes." His voice is a rasp.

The next hour passes in a heavenly blur. His movements are slow and almost reverent. He understands as well as I do that this commitment we're making is a beautiful risk.

It's impossible to reassemble the shattered pieces of our hearts, but we can fill the empty spaces with this exquisitely imperfect joy.

THANK YOU FOR READING! Want more Mark and Whitney right now? Sign up for my newsletter by using the link below, and you'll get a FREE second epilogue with a peek in their future!

[Forgiveness: The Second Epilogue](#)

ARE YOU CURIOUS ABOUT COLE AND LIVVY'S STORY?

Purity: A Friends-to-Lovers College Romance

Tropes: virgin/bad boy, jealous/possessive hero, teach me to be naughty, “good girl”, and groveling hero

Cole is very similar to his dad, both in his dominating tendencies and his perception of the woman he loves. He sees his kind, gentle, and tiny best friend Livvy as an angel who he needs to protect. Part of his journey is learning to stop hovering over her and let her make her own decisions.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you again for reading part two of Mark and Whitney's story! I'm a new indie author and reviews are really helpful in getting exposure. If you enjoyed *Forgiveness*, I'd greatly appreciate it if you went to Goodreads or your favorite social media platform and tell the world what you think.

If you want more content, go to skylermason.com and sign up for my monthly newsletter. You can expect to receive exclusive bonus content about my characters as well as info and excerpts from future books.

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