



HE LOVES ME

Lots

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FLORA FERRARI

CONTENTS

[He Loves Me Lots](#)
[NEWSLETTER](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Top Reads](#)
[NEWSLETTER](#)
[A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS](#)
[BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS](#)
[LAIRDS & LADIES](#)
[RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD](#)
[IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS](#)
[INKED BY LOVE](#)
[TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME](#)
[Collaborations](#)
[About the Author](#)

HE LOVES ME LOTS

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 316

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

HE LOVES ME LOTS

**He stops by for flowers on the regular. A gift for his wife or girlfriend?
Turns out he's on the hunt for a certain type of flower. My flower.**

It's my dream come true—a little flower shop and plant nursery all of my own. I've got the perfect name, Jasmine, regular customers, but there's a new customer in particular.

Not only is he insanely good-looking, and older, he causes my heart to flutter and my blood to warm.

Then I find out he's single, one of the most eligible bachelors in the city. So who is he buying all those flowers for?

It just so happens he's on the look out for the perfect flower. And that flower is me. But will he only pluck my petals and discard me or help me bloom?

** He Loves Me Lots is an insta-everything standalone instalove romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Jasmine

I don't know, but I don't think I'm the only florist who does this... or the only girl.

He loves me... He loves me not.

He loves me... He loves me...

I'm plucking the wilting or wayward petals from the dozens of bunches of flowers and plants I have for sale in the store.

My store.

It still blows my mind it was just a pipe dream last year.

He loves me... He loves me?

Not.

"So, which is it today, Jaz?" Iris asks as she comes into the store with the steaming morning coffee she always brings me. She is trembling with age, and I know a touch of rheumatism gives her problems in cold weather like this.

"Not," I announce firmly, giving a little shrug after making it seem like I have to think about it. My answer drew a click from Iris' tongue as she rolled her

eyes to the heavens.

She gives me such a strange look, almost as if she's genuinely disappointed, that I have to giggle.

"Thanks," I squeak, lifting the takeout cup from her hands to mine, blowing on the piping hot brew.

"That man..." Iris sighs with feigned bitterness. "He doesn't know *what* he's missing," she says to herself, still shaking her head.

As if there is such a thing as a real man... as if anyone ever would fall head over heels in love with a girl like me.

I don't have three heads or anything, but I'm not built like the regular, prettier girls—the girls who go to the gym every day.

And these days, I'm so busy with work that it would have to be one special guy to grab my attention. That's what I tell myself, anyway.

"Well, it's already past nine," I echo back to her, keeping the charade going.

"Why, he could walk through that door at any moment," I exclaim, giving a look of mock expectation. I flutter my lids and press a hand over my heart as I look longingly at the empty doorway.

The dull gray of the early winter's day outside only makes it look more unlikely. I could use the scenery from an artsy, but depressing, black-and-white photograph to sum up my life in one image.

I'm grateful when Iris creases a smile only people who've lived through so much can give.

"He will, honey. He will," she promises me, shifting her gaze to the bunches of yesterday's flowers I have bundled up on the counter.

"For me?" she asks, her face lighting up as if I'm trying to sweep *her* off her feet. It's nothing like that.

"They sure are," I pronounce.

This dream-come-true store of mine couldn't have happened without Iris. She owns the building and runs a tiny coffee place next door with her elderly

husband living upstairs.

I was getting a coffee one morning, and we got to talking. Iris mentioned she had always dreamed of being a florist, and she wished she had the time and energy to have plants and flowers in her coffee shop.

With the offer of free rent for six months (or until I could afford to pay it) and a promise of all the unsold flowers that she wanted to decorate the tables in her little shop, the idea became reality.

Without telling me, she also put up her building as security on a small business loan in her name that is to be repaid when I can afford it, like the rent on the place. Iris also gave me the only checkbook for the business account, which she later put into my name.

“Just in case you have a quiet spell,” she reasoned when I tried to refuse her kindness.

“If it’s still there in five years, we give it back, and you pay the interest. Remember, it’s there, and I’ll be mad as hell if I find out you haven’t used it if you need it,” she reminds me every time I bring it up, always giving me a disarming wink and a little squeeze of her arm around my shoulders.

She is warm as a grandma but also as shrewd as an uptown lawyer.

Business is good—way better than I’d hoped. Without the hassle of high rent in the city center, it was easier than I thought to pay my way after just a few months.

The shrill buzz of her coffee shop’s door alarm interrupts us, meaning she has a customer of her own. Without needing to explain, she leaves quickly. Knowing she’ll come back for the flowers later, I sip my latte and feel my heart swell a little as I watch her go.

What a woman!

I hope I’m as kind and active as she is when I’m her age. She could run circles around me, I’m sure. I really like Iris. She’s the closest thing to family I have and a genuine friend. It is nice to know I have someone to count on, and she knows she can count on me.

I get back to work, turning around and bending over to unpack this morning's delivery.

The brass bell on the green glass-paned shop door clangs, and I call out, head down, ass still up in the air.

"False alarm, huh?" I ask, figuring it's Iris that had a want-to-be customer who decided against it.

"Did you want some of this?" I add, still bunched over, sorting through the elongated box, noticing I have way too many of her favorites... again.

Oops.

But when I stand and turn, I nearly scream with shock.

The embarrassment of being seen bent over is one thing. When it registers who's standing in front of my counter, I see spots in front of my eyes and feel woozy for a moment. I think I am going to faint.

I'm brought back to earth by the firm, deep, resonant voice of my first customer of the day.

"I'll take some of that..." he says firmly, answering my original question. I flush crimson when his eyes leave mine as he studies my chest and hips under my denim apron.

"I thought you were..." I start, but the words get stuck in my throat.

He curls his lip into a grin, shamelessly looking me over like I'm something he's about to buy—like a rancher about to run his huge hand up the inside leg of a cow to see for himself just how much it's worth.

I should be flipping him the bird, reminding him of his manners, but the way he's looking at me isn't creepy. He's not grinning because he thinks it's funny to see a thick-set, younger girl bent over in front of him. No.

He looks like a man who knows what he wants. And despite the cursory glance at the purple Iris flowers I'm holding in my hand, my older friend's namesake, I can see at once that he's not here for just flowers.

"I... I thought you were someone else," I smile sheepishly, finishing my

original statement.

Feeling another part of me flush so intensely, I almost wonder if I've wet myself.

A man like this? He could bring a girl into estrus at twenty paces without even knowing it.

He's twice my height and practically fills the entire store. Not a guy I'd want to make angry, but his deep eyes aren't flashing with anger.

There's a lot of green in the store, but there's a glow in his clear eyes, and I can't quite make out if they're green, brown, or dark blue.

Looking into his eyes is hypnotizing, just like the rest of him.

I watch the figure of Iris out of the corner of my eye, making her way back over. The cloudy gray of her old eyes lifts as she sees him in the bank of mirrors behind the counter—mirrors her husband Phil installed when I started out, making it look like I have more flowers than there actually are.

Iris' brow lifts, and she makes a tiny "O" shape with her mouth, spinning on her heel and doing what any good friend would do. She leaves me to my once-in-a-lifetime chance encounter with a God come to earth.

A real man.

She shoots me her trademark wink before she's gone again. I know she'd be as dumbfounded as I am right now.

We've been playing the "someday my man will come along" routine for ages now, but I never thought one existed. Imagine a man like him even coming into the store.

"Can... can I help you?" I rasp, seeing my hands tremble as I set the flowers down, wiping them on my apron. It's all I can do to remember how to be a florist.

He hums a low growl. It feels like there's an earthquake or a heavy roll of thunder coming from somewhere, thumping like a heavy hand on a door inside me.

Wanting to come in.

Needing to come in out of the rain.

I tell myself it's my imagination that a successful-looking, older man like him would ever look twice at a younger, curvy girl like me, but some things aren't imaginary.

The biological effect of this man *on me* being one of them.

"Jasmine," he says in a low tone before growling another low hum of satisfaction.

"Uhhh... we don't have any jasmine," I reply instantly and apologetically.

He leans over a little at first, then all the way down, craning his thick, muscular neck until he holds his head an inch from my already stiff left breast as he examines my name badge.

"I think I see some... right here," he says in that tone again—that smokey, deep, and powerful voice with a firm edge to it.

He's used to giving orders, not taking them. I can see that.

And if he wants this sprig of Jasmine? Then I'm all his.

Instantly agreeing with myself that I'll do whatever he wants.

I'll help him with whatever he wants.

Buying flowers, I mean.

CHAPTER TWO

James

She wouldn't have seen me. At least, I don't *think* she saw me.

A guy my size is kinda hard to miss. I'm taller than I am wide, so maybe she did notice me?

When I see her up close for what feels like the first time, she doesn't have a flash of recognition in her eyes. It's something way better.

Her wide, blue eyes dilate, and I can see her ample chest stiffen under equally stiff denim and a sweater underneath.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Even thinking about her, let alone talking about her, has me going on and on in my mind about how fucking beautiful she is—how perfect she is.

It's only been one day, and I haven't slept a wink yet, either.

I couldn't.

I can't.

Not until she's in my bed next to me.

But don't get me started on *that* either. I'm having enough trouble already,

trying not to obsess over her perfect body. The way her hair moves when she walks.

And I'm still failing.

Walking home from the office yesterday, which is unusual for me, I broke all the rules and ventured to a side of town I never knew existed. It was as if something was pulling me there. Once I spotted her in the crowd, I knew I'd found what was calling me.

That ole blood-in-the-water sensation that I used to get as a former ambulance-chasing attorney when I was fresh outta law school hit me like a foaming red wave, but it has nothing to do with work, blood, or ambulances.

The only law this brings into question is the law of probability.

How on earth could someone so perfect exist, and why wasn't I told?

It's as though a biological switch flicked on inside me. With her, it's been dialed up to eleven.

I followed her, forgetting about everything else except the dull ache in my pants.

Consciously I know I live in a city of millions, and as unreasonable as it sounds, I'm still kicking myself that I never noticed her before.

But how could I? I'm from a different side of town altogether. A different world, too.

I set up my own law firm, James & Jones. It's become the go-to firm for clients with more money than real legal problems. So life's been good, financially.

The fact I'm both the James *and* the Jones in the firm's name is only known by a select few in the business. I don't want to appear pretentious.

Plus, the firm is very hands off for me these days, so when I do go to the office, it's really only to kill time.

Wandering the empty rooms of my quiet uptown penthouse gets stale after a while. There is always something missing.

And once I spot her?

I completely understand.

I know who it's all going to be for.

For her... and all the little James Jrs., Jeanettes, and Jaxon Joneses.

I already know the names of the babies that I want and the thought gives me an instant urge in my loins to fill her with my seed... again and again and again.

So I followed her. Losing her in the evening foot traffic and then spotting her again. I hung back some in case she saw me, although there was no need.

Between the moments when I lost her and then spotted her again, I saw a new part of her with every step she took.

Those hips are made for gripping—made for carrying babies.

That ass made me gulp so hard, I reached a near fever pitch by the time she got to her building.

The whining growl in my chest was obvious when I ducked into a laundromat across the street from her home—a place to wait and watch.

I thought it sounded like a wild animal was in the building until I realized it was me. I was doing more than just a little heavy breathing over the sound of tumble dryers, and not because I was out of breath from walking.

The place was empty. I knew if she stayed home, it would be a long wait until I would see her again. I waited all night, but I didn't need coffee to focus. Knowing I was this close to her kept me beyond alert and hypervigilant, and it would remain that way for as long as it took me to see her again.

I've spent so many nights lying awake staring at the ornate ceiling in my penthouse suite, my arm reaching out to the empty space beside me. Never really understanding there's only been one thing missing from that side of my bed and my life.

There she was. The one. All I need to do is reach out and claim her as my

own.

My eyes never leave her building's entrance. My mind barely registers the antiquated architecture. The cast-iron railings and stonework would have been *the address* to have about a century ago.

It's on the side of town that has a colorful and, no doubt, checkered history.

Now, like the rest of this side of town, it's outdated. Old. A part of the city where not everyone enjoys the kinda life I guess I'm guilty of taking for granted.

But it wasn't handed to me. I worked very hard for twenty years that I forgot how to live. I forgot what really matters.

And for what?

The answer lives right across the street from the laundromat, and the thought makes me smile like a maniac.

The evening crowd thinned on the sidewalk, giving way to the streetwalkers—different than people coming home from work. The kind of folks I instantly feel the need to protect her from.

Before I even knew her name, I vowed that as quaint and “hip” as living down in this part of town might be, she wouldn't be living here much longer.

Not if I have anything to do with it.

It was dawn until I saw her again.

More than one person changed their mind about laundry day when they saw a six-foot-eight guy in a two-thousand-dollar suit... with no laundry.

I stood by the giant window with faded pictures of giant suds and the letters of the word “laundromat” that were just high enough to cover my insane arousal.

It should've been a long night, but everything that happened in the moments until seeing her again is like white noise, static.

The world is only real when I know that she's in it and time stands still when I'm waiting for my next fix—my next dose of her, which I already know is

going to be a forever thing.

It's the kind of thing I need on tap, always by my side.

In my mind and in my eyes, whoever she is, she's already under my skin.

So deep inside me, it only seems right to want to return the favor.

Either she's an early riser and has someplace to be, or both.

Taking more care to stay out of sight as I tail her, I see that "someplace else to be" for myself.

A flower shop.

And unless she's getting paid the big bucks for opening and closing, I'm guessing it's her own business... something I should mind more of my own. However, it's too late for that now.

I'd never be able to go back to my usual life after seeing her. Not knowing where she is or what she's doing suddenly feels like I should have been here for her all along.

But as much as my instinct is to just go grab her, throw her over my shoulder, and explain everything on the way to our bed in the clouds of my penthouse, I'm fully aware it doesn't work that way.

Try telling that to Mr. About Fucking Time in my pants here...

With no laundromat across the street, and rain on the way, a high-arched doorway to an empty building is my best vantage point.

And boy, is it good to watch her instead of the outside of her building.

Her strawberry blond hair is back in a tight ponytail. Those curves I've been etching into my mind are finally covered with a thick denim apron.

Seeing her lift her arms as she hooks the apron over herself, I moan shamelessly. Those heavy breasts almost look like they're sighing. They need as much attention as the rest of her. And I know I've got plenty to spare.

But to my satisfaction, there's enough of her to look perfect either way. Apron or not.

I'm already picturing her out of all her clothes, though, with that ponytail swishing for a different reason—bouncing on the end of my cock, which I have to keep adjusting through my pocket.

But fortunately, nobody else can see. The rain's heavy, and everyone passing by has their eyes front and down.

Someplace else to be.

Me? I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be. But I need to get closer. To fucking talk to her.

How can I claim her, give her the life I know she deserves from across the street?

She has one visitor, an old lady who looks like the owner of the coffee place next door.

After what feels like seconds but is actually hours, the rain slows and then stops. I know I have to do something, and if buying flowers before nine a.m. is what it takes, it's as good a reason as any.

My instincts shift into overdrive.

Getting the perfect view of that fine ass when I go inside her little shop... it takes everything I have not to march right over and claim her on the fucking spot.

Once she notices she has a customer, I finally get to see my little flower up close, and I get a name.

Jasmine...

Finally! A word for this feeling. A single sound that can now reverberate in my mind, body, and soul forever.

Jasmine.

You are the reason for everything. And I'm going to make you mine.

My everything.

Forever.

CHAPTER THREE

Jasmine

“Jasmine and James, how about that!” he exclaims, lifting his neck and standing taller than ever. His brows lift as he gives a knowing smile.

He studies me again, but with that intense look as his smile fades into a serious expression.

I hear myself make an involuntary sound.

I’m not even sure whether I’m here or not anymore. This must be a dream, there’s no other explanation for it. I cannot wrap my mind around what I’m feeling.

“James,” I echo back to him. I’m trying hard not to sigh, but I’m pretty sure I do, along with that other weird noise I make.

Giving voice to the instant and overpowering urge he gives me to...

Well, let’s just say that a man like James has a certain *effect* on a girl.

All of her. Every inch. Inside and out.

James comes to my rescue, sensing my pending loss of control over the power of speech and reality. Holding out his huge hand, I feel mine gravitate toward his like iron fillings to a magnet.

“James Jones, Attorney,” he says with a serious expression. I half expect him to whip out a business card. He draws another squeak from me, followed by a mew when he leans down again.

Doing something I thought no one did anymore, he presses his lips tenderly to the back of my hand, giving just enough pressure with his own to make sure I can't snatch it back.

As if I'd even want to.

He can hold, kiss, suck and lick my hand all day if he wants. Then maybe work his magic over the rest of my body. *A girl can dream...*

Maybe he's just eccentric or trying his best to set a nervous girl working alone at ease once a man his size comes in.

And so early too.

Many of my customers don't come in until their morning break. Most come in the evening on their way home from work.

If someone wants flowers or to promote their legal business, he's an early riser.

“Flowers?” I hear myself saying softly in a faraway voice.

I'm someplace else, another dimension already—that realm where six-foot-plus, insanely attractive men who smell like something you want to rub yourself with roam freely.

Plucking chubby girls' hands at random and holding their sweet, sweet lips to them...

“Uhhh...,” James suddenly says, breaking my reverie once he eases his hand back to his side of the counter.

He shows the closest thing to slight embarrassment on his chiseled features once he realizes maybe he should start at the beginning, perhaps explain how I can help. Tell me what he's really doing here rather than turn me into a living puddle of arousal this early.

And on a Monday, too.

I clear my throat and feel myself blinking way too much, smoothing my apron first, then my hair.

The heat from my face feels like it could warm the homeless for a week. That same heat he's generating a little lower down could warm the whole city.

Hot soup, Joe? Nah. Heading to the flower shop to get warm. Hear that Jasmine girl's really putting it out today.

As soon as I feel my body move, I notice his gaze focus on me again. Any trace of uncertainty in his eyes is gone. The curled edge of his lips broadens into a wide smile of satisfaction, making me half wonder if he's a) completely crazy or b) might actually like what he sees.

Sees something in me? Ha! That would be the world's first.

"Flowers," I say a little louder, taking a firm breath.

"Is there a special occasion? Did you have anything in mind?" I ask, trying hard to sound like I know what I'm saying, but he can see exactly where my eyes are going.

All over that equally chiseled frame of his that matches his perfect face. He knows I am totally NOT thinking about flowers.

He's rocking a tailored suit. A watch made of a metal I've never seen, but it costs a squillion to buy I'm sure. His cologne makes every flower in the place smell like ass.

As if nature isn't trying too hard anymore. She missed a few beats, and now she's made the most perfect man alive...

James.

His huge shoulders and chest taper down to what is the ideal V-shape in a man.

Arms strong enough to lift even me.

His waist is just big enough to wrap yourself around and lean enough for me to know he has the ass to match.

Sigh...

But flowers, Jasmine. Focus!

“What’s *your* favorite?” he asks after thinking without taking his eyes off mine for what feels like a full minute but is only a few seconds.

“I mean,” he adds swiftly, “what makes you...? Do you have anything I might like?”

It sounds more like a command than a question. And as much as my mind instantly fills with reflex recommendations...

Do me right here over the counter... then over there by the window. Ah, hell, just do me right here on the Goddamned floor.

I figure it’s safer to stick to flowers.

I feel my mouth silently open and close like a trout. I know I’m blinking again too—something I do when I get nervous.

Or horny, which is like never, by the way. That well dried up ages ago. At least, I thought it had.

Now I think I might need to change once this guy leaves.

That’s not a thought I enjoy having. He just got here.

He’ll buy flowers and then leave. Please don’t leave, James!

“Jasmine?” he asks, lowering his head again so his eyes can meet mine, breaking up the mini pity party I was about to have in my mind.

The darkness in his stare is like the feeling of being in bed after you switch off the light.

Warm. Cozy. Safe.

And he says my name like he enjoys hearing it. He sounds like he actually cares.

“You okay?” he croons, the subtlest hint of mischief in his voice.

“You can have anything you want,” I wheeze vacantly. I begin to sound way blonder than I am.

I feel like I am flushing harder than ever and even feel the room spin a little as I press my thighs together—feeling them slip with how wet he’s already made me. Hopefully, I have dry clothes here.

All he’s doing is trying to buy some flowers.

He hums with pleasure before chuckling to himself, shaking his head as he takes in a lungful of air, sighing with happiness.

He creases the edge of his mouth before opening it to speak again.

There’s the clang of bells, and I half fancy they could be the wedding kind.

No. It’s the brass bell over the door.

“Oh, hi, Jasmine!” another familiar voice calls out.

It’s Theo, the courier I use for deliveries.

“Going to be a wet one today!” he exclaims, shaking off his heavy parka. It’s the one place where I don’t mind if it gets wet.

The store, I mean.

The plants and all.

I move to get the orders I have ready, but I sense the change in James in a flash.

I’m sure some meter just went off somewhere, like the kind they use to measure earthquakes.

My eyes dart to his, hoping for more of that fire that’s been pouring off him. His brow is creased. His eyes narrow, and it sounds like there is a low rumble of thunder from somewhere outside until it is clear it’s coming from him. Definitely sounds like a storm is brewing.

He’s gone from Prince Charming to, I don’t know... an angry side of beef in a second.

I’m torn between focusing on him and getting the deliveries out for Theo. I know he’s on a tight schedule. However, if my new favorite customer’s about to snap, crackle, and pop, then maybe it’s better if Theo sticks around.

“Hey, Theo,” I shiver, sensing that this could go bad fast. I am not exaggerating how upset James is.

“Hiya!” Theo says cheerfully, addressing James with a nod of his head.

“I was here *first*,” he snarls in reply, saying each word like he’s loading them into a firearm and about to have some target practice with Theo.

I feel my heart freeze, and Theo’s face falls, confused and sorry. He’s sorry he’s upset my customer, but even sorrier that my customer happens to fill half the store and could snap him like a twig.

Theo’s sweet, but he’s not exactly a manly man. Not like James, maybe-must-be-psycho-after-all, here.

My heart’s not jammed because I’m scared. It’s stuck on “what the fuck?” because I don’t know what I did to make him so unhappy. Now for some unknown reason, I only want to make James happy—as if that is my new goal in life.

Call it “florist’s intuition,” but every part of me just wants him to be satisfied—knowing he’s the kind of man to return the favor, in every way possible.

I need to see that smile on his face and light in his eyes again. “I’ll just be a second,” I hear myself stammer awkwardly.

My lids flutter like my heart. My brain is screaming at me to calm down. My heart is pounding out of my shirt.

My insides broadcast the intense need for that mouth to be on me. I want that huge body of his to be someplace else instead of standing upright in my store.

All while I try to focus on lifting some cartons from one end of the counter to the other.

“I’ll be out of your hair in a second,” Theo gulps, grimacing a sorry face and then looking away.

I’m trying not to focus on the other type of intense stare I’m noticing James can give when he’s mad about something. His look is burning holes through Theo.

He's glad to get his cartons and leave. When Theo does go, he doesn't even bother to say goodbye or shoot the breeze for a minute like he usually does, even when he is in a hurry.

Leaving me with the same stabbing ache of confusion that's grappling with my now waning arousal.

Come back... I need you.

CHAPTER FOUR

J ames

Jasmine does her best to act natural, but I can tell I've already made a bad impression.

Just a courier picking up some flowers.

That's what I try to tell myself. It's true. I can see it for myself.

The parts of me that want her, the parts drawn to Jasmine to claim her as my own... they're not parts that have good reasoning or even accountability.

It's my inner animal. The beast in me... call it what you want.

And when it senses another male within spitting distance of what I know is mine? Well, how else am I supposed to act? I totally lose control.

But having "known" her for less than five minutes, it doesn't take a genius to see I've gone too far. It's not a line I mind crossing at all. Just a pity it's a line in the wrong direction.

"Ummm... that was pretty rude," Jasmine finally says sharply, after taking a moment to collect her thoughts.

She crimps her mouth, doing her best to look stern with me. Seeing anything less than a smile in her eyes cuts me like a knife, and knowing I put that

frown on her sweet face makes me madder at myself than I could ever be with whatever the fuck his name was.

Courier guy.

The thought makes me growl again. And I can see my behavior isn't just out of order. It's probably frightening Jasmine, which is the last thing I want to do.

Her eyes widen and dart to the door. I'm not mad at her. I know I never could be, no matter what she said or did.

When I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirrored wall behind her, I see how crazy I look, giving a face to how insane I sounded.

My hands have balled into fists, and my chest is heaving like I've just run a marathon. My eyes look like they could gut, skin, and filet twenty Theos without me even stopping to notice.

But these swimmers I've got inside...

The seed I want to plant. Pollinate *her* flower with.

That's the fuel I'm running on now, and too bad for me. It stops my mouth from checking with my brain first before it goes and makes things worse.

"How long has that been going on?" I clip, feeling the rising alarm inside when I hear the tone of accusation in my voice.

Jasmine's shoulders drop. Her expression that reads "*really?*" says it all.

I'm acting and sounding like a maniac. Worse than a maniac.

I look like a man whose been up all night staring at an apartment building, thinking of her.

Thinking how perfect it would be if I followed her or spoke to her.

Or... I could just run my mouth like a psycho, accuse her of something between her and her courier of all things, and ruin any chance I might have at conversation, let alone what I know is destiny between us—basically, do everything wrong.

Dammit!

I've blown it. I see the hurt anger it's generated in her eyes. It's a hurt that matches the size of my instant regret. I can't bear to be the one to cause her sadness.

Her baby blues are hard and serious, eying the door again, but not looking for a way out. They're signaling me to leave.

I've had my fair share of tough clients, cross-examining witnesses, and dealing with the worst of the worst of humankind when I was doing that thing I do so well in a courtroom.

But nothing's stopped me in my tracks quicker and harder than the look Jasmine gives me.

I know whatever I say or do will just make this worse.

Against every instinct, against every fiber of my being, I turn on my heel and leave. I don't look back.

I can't.

Seeing the look I know she's wearing would be too much to bear. And as sure as I've blown it once, I'd only blow it open a little wider with any attempt to backpedal from the lunatic all-star cycling team I just joined.

I get halfway down the street when I start to curse myself. Under my breath at first, still shaking my head, but by the time I reach a crosswalk, I'm having a full-blown argument with myself and out loud.

All those people you see on the street? The so-called "crazy" ones who talk and swear to themselves?

They're just reliving that one time they had a chance in their life. That one second out of the years they waited.

And they fucked it up like I just have.

I'm not too far from beating my own brow by the time I cross the street.

Foot traffic and cars are moving out of my way as I stagger in disbelief. A man my size looking and acting the way I am? People are going to move.

Amazed but bitterly sore, I just acted like such a total and complete ass.

It must be a dozen or so blocks before I realize I have no idea where I am. In an instant, I stop and check myself. I then remind myself that James Jones, the hotshot attorney turned shameless success story, doesn't get rattled by anything... until today.

I groan because I know it's a day of firsts, and lasts, too, by the look of things.

Jasmine hasn't just rattled me. She's turned the whole machine upside down and shook out the insides.

Everything I thought I was. Everything I thought I had is nothing compared to that feeling when I looked into her eyes—that feeling of peace and calm as though I'm right where I need to be.

And it sure as hell isn't something I can walk away from.

Great time to realize that, champ. You must be five miles from her by now. Oh, and she thinks you're nuttier than a bag of squirrels...

Shit.

"James... James!" someone calls out. There's the honk of a horn, and I look up.

Only then do I notice how hard it's raining.

As I realize I'm soaked, I put a name to the face calling out from across the street.

Larry Finkelstein. Used to work with me years ago. We fell out of touch, and by the time he knew what a success I'd made of the firm, he's kinda "bumped into me" so many times I wondered if he was camped out in my crawl space at home.

He's not. I checked.

He's done all right for himself without my help. Ordering me to stay put, he cuts across four lanes of traffic to pull up in front of me, urging me to get out of the rain.

“Jesus, James!” he exclaims. “What on earth are you doing walking in the rain... and on *this* side of town?” he asks, still shaking his head in disbelief and looking back at the bank of traffic honking at him.

He swivels his large head like he’s watching a tennis match before negotiating a way back into the capillary action, the osmosis that is downtown traffic.

I’m still smarting over the morning I’m having. And don’t feel like telling Larry anything that’s none of his business.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I remark dryly. I catch his gaze long enough in the rearview mirror, letting him know I suspect he is following me around.

Not like I followed Jasmine.

That’s different.

Larry just... *appears* more often than anyone else—more than people who know me better, and he’s the only one I know who refuses to call me Mr. Jones. Nobody calls me James except Larry.

And Jasmine. Ugh! I’m such a shit! She must hate me by now.

“I was on my way to see a client, probate case...,” Larry says with an air of smug confidence.

His eyes are too small for his huge head, as though added at the last minute. It makes it hard to stare at him for long, but his ugly mug and creepy eyes are the last things on my mind.

“Say, you know a good florist around here? I really need something to take, ya know? Grieving widow and all. Worth a fuckton if I get the damned case, so I’m thinking...,” he rattles on, thinking aloud.

But I’m already feeling a little better. Already feeling like the hand that’s guided me to Jasmine is just dragging me straight back.

Though I messed up my first chance, I see another one opening up, and already hoping it extends to Jasmine doing the same. Opening up for me and soon... and giving me a second chance.

“Matter of fact, I do,” I drawl. “It’s a few blocks, though... straight up. Do you mind dropping me off there,” I tell rather than ask Larry, not caring if he does mind.

“I kinda think I left something there that belongs to me.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jasmine

Iris wastes no time in darting back over to my store once she sees James leave. And I know it's only because she's worried about me.

A case in point is when she reads how upset I am after he leaves, but not for any of the reasons she might think.

I'll be honest. It's a rough neighborhood. We've had more than our fair share of wackos between our two little storefronts.

Someone who's as well dressed, as obscenely handsome and professional looking as James in the store would normally be cause to celebrate. To have our "one day my man will come along" routine we both enjoy goofing around with so much.

I walk Iris through what happened, and only after I assure her I'm not hurt or scared.

Just confused. And already regretting letting him leave.

"A man like that? It's either grief or love to make him act so crazy," Iris muses aloud.

I know what she means.

I think.

Floristry isn't all flowers and plants, tissue paper, and ribbons. We've got to read people and their reasons for flowers.

We've got to have a bag of options as well as being a good listener sometimes.

"You think it's...?" I start to ask Iris. But she already seems to know.

"Definitely," she nods firmly, making my heart sink.

I knew it was too good to be true. The man's just in...

"Grief. Probably a wife if he went full fruit and nut on ya," Iris murmurs suddenly, shaking her head.

She pulls me closer to her with her bony arm around me, asking me again if I'm sure I'm okay.

"I thought you were going to say he's in love," I remark with feigned sarcasm, trying to laugh but only making a dry, cracking sound.

Voicing my own thoughts only because I don't want to believe it, even if it is true. Somehow, the idea of James being with someone else just hurts.

"Love? Grief...? They're the same, kiddo," Iris says dryly.

"It's *because* we love someone so much that we grieve," she adds.

She cements the idea by her own say so that James Jones is the grieving widower. Somehow, as much as I'm ashamed to admit it, the thought makes me happy in a way.

Whoever she is... *was*. She's dead now.

Good.

Bitch.

"He didn't say anything about anyone dying, though," I say once Iris finishes comforting me and moves for the door.

"If he *was* in love, why would he care what Theo was doing here?" Iris

challenges me, shaking her head with conviction.

“No. It’s grief that makes people fly off the handle sometimes and for no reason,” Iris says in her wisest tone.

“*Love*, on the other hand...,” she adds cryptically, rolling her eyes to the ceiling and smiling to herself, deliberately leaving me hanging before she gives me a sly wink and disappears back to her coffee shop in silence.

What would love make a man like James Jones do?

I’m left wondering that myself, apologizing to the man upstairs for feeling happy that someone might have actually died, but only because it would mean James is single now.

As if I’d stand a chance.

But *I* don’t think he’s grieving.

Iris is right about a lot of things, but she didn’t feel the man’s lips on her hand. Didn’t see that look in his eyes, and I’m sure as hell hoping a woman of her years wouldn’t have felt the same in her granny panties as I did in mine.

Plus, I didn’t exactly tell her just how James was acting before he went off the rails. How happy he looked.

How... *flirty* he was?

Nah.

No, Jasmine, don’t even go there. He was not flirting with you, so just stop it. A man like James will never be interested in a girl like you!

I close my eyes with a sigh. The memory of him still makes me flush between my legs.

The insanely good cologne he wore was still hanging in the air.

The buzz of his touch, those lips still lingering on my hand. My whole body was aching for that again, and everywhere, not just the back of my hand.

I have a mini daydream—the three- or four-second kind, picturing it all. The

mental imagery is never enough to match the feelings.

The man. The things he'd do to me. The things he'd forgive me for when I tried to do them for him in my own clumsy way. The little castle in the clouds I afford myself before I heave my lids open.

Ready to try and forget it all, telling myself I have real-world problems and actual work to do, which is true.

I can dream about the perfect man later. I can also drown my sorrows about what will never be in a gallon of mint choc chip later if necessary.

Right now, this delicate flower is in work-to-be-done mode.

Once the phone rings, another customer comes in, picks out some flowers, and leaves. I remember I have a to-do list a mile long. I almost kid myself that my life can continue.

I can survive post-James Jones trauma syndrome and move on. But in reality, I know I cannot. Time stood still with James nearby.

A dark car pulls up silently out front, and I see a guy with a big head and beady eyes get out. I'm almost there. Almost back to my not-so-boring-after-all life.

Jasmine. Florist. Young business owner. A girl doing it on her own for and by herself.

Life goes on... I can live without...

Oh, my God...

Mr. Potato Head has a passenger. I see the profile through the window—the drizzling rain is like static against those chiseled features.

Huge guy. Well dressed. Regular shaped head, unlike his buddy.

Before he steps out, I know it's him. Before he even locks eyes on me, I know.

It's James, stepping out of the massive car and making it look like a toy. The rain looks like sparks arcing off him like I'm watching the most perfect man being made anew and coming back to me. Am I imagining this because I

want it to be happening? I am so confused.

His friend bustles into the store as if the rain is acid, which it probably is, come to think of it, but James strides coolly, moving slowly into the store behind him. If that grin he's sporting is anything to go by, he's not grieving either.

His pal is quick to get down to business. Glancing at a cheaper version of the watch James wears, he announces rather than asks, "I need a bunch of the best looking, most expensive flowers. And quickly, I'm already running late," he clips, giving a little tilt of his head to see if James picks up on it.

But James, like me, isn't paying much attention to his friend.

He meets my eyes with that same intense look. Moving his open hands, he ushers his friend forward so I can serve him first, showing me he is capable of acting sane. Proving in a second what I knew deep down.

He got crazy before because of Theo interrupting.

Maybe he was in a hurry or busy with an appointment, or maybe he just really didn't like the guy.

And if he is in love? If he really has come back to buy flowers like his friend here? I want to know all about whomever they are for.

What does she have that I don't? Though I could list a dozen things without having to think about them.

"Miss?" the big-headed guy clips again louder. He snaps his fingers in front of my eyes, and I feel James tense up all over again. Whatever he has going on, he keeps a lid on it this time.

I serve his friend. The choice is easy. Because he's been so nice so far, I wrap a little tissue paper around one of the display vases and slide it across to him.

"Awesome!" the guy says. "How much?" he asks, yanking a thick billfold from his pants pocket.

"Three hundred dollars," I somehow manage to tell him with a straight face, but his tiny eyes don't even blink.

He slaps four on the counter and makes an anxious groan as he looks at his watch again. He spins to rush out, bumping straight into James, who hasn't moved from the spot.

His lip curls with a stifled smile.

And me? I'm wondering what the hell I just did.

"I got to run, James. Leave ya here, that okay?" he puffs, trying to edge past the man.

"Sure," James says without taking his eyes off me.

"I got something to pick up anyway... might be a while," he adds, making me blush again, and I don't even know why.

"Whoever she is," his friend says before he goes, "she's one lucky lady." He studies the plastic flowers I've just sold him for more than the whole store's worth, and he frowns.

But looking up with a smile after smelling them, he gives me fresh hope.

"James Jones here is the most eligible bachelor in the city! But I got to go."

With a final pleading look up at James, who finally moves out of the doorway, he's gone.

And it's "take two, act one, scene one" all over again.

A re-shoot because... well... I don't know who made it worse—James for acting psycho or me for telling him off.

Either way, James *is* single, and I've just made enough profit for the week!

Once we're alone, and just before I have an attack of the guilts and want to chase his friend down to apologize and sell him a twenty-dollar bunch of roses, James' deep, hearty laughter rings in my ears and vibrates through the whole store, passing through me like a bass bomb that tickles me just right in so many places, I have to let out a little squeak before I join him.

"I wouldn't worry about overcharging him for plastic flowers," James eventually says, reading my thoughts clearly, so easily.

“Larry can afford it. Trust me. He’ll add eight hundred to his client’s bill for the privilege.”

I make a puzzled face. James must think it’s about what happened earlier.

“Listen, Jasmine?” he says, stepping forward to the counter in one stride. All the laughter was gone from his face.

“Can we...? I mean... Can I...? he stammers. His eyes blaze for an instant as he wrestles with something inside himself, trying to get the words out.

“I’m sorry I acted like a dick before,” he finally says. “I just... I don’t know... I’d just like to buy some flowers, please,” he says in a theatrical tone.

He makes me giggle because it’s an impression he does so well of the guy who just left that I could swear it was him.

“But not the plastic kind,” he’s quick to add.

“And not four hundred dollars!” I gasp, not sure what I should do and less sure what made me do it in the first place.

I think the answer, the ultimate distraction in my life, is staring at me right across the counter. I’ve never felt so relieved to see anyone.

He came back, but he didn’t have to. He could’ve gone to any florist in town.

“So... just the flowers, then?” I hear myself ask, hoping it doesn’t carry the same sinking feeling I’m getting inside.

Maybe, like his friend, he might just need some flowers right now.

Hey, it happens.

He gets a pained expression, only confusing me more when he looks as lost as I feel.

“Just the flowers,” he echoes back. And I really can’t tell if it’s a statement or a question.

Men!

Grrrrr.

If only he'd just say exactly what he wants.

If only I had the courage to do the same.

CHAPTER SIX

James

Flowers?

She thinks I'm here to *just* buy flowers?

Well... that kinda *was* the idea at first.

After knowing how it feels to see her upset, and after I acted like such a moron earlier, I struggle to say anything when she asks me.

I feel tongue-tied for the first time in my life and blurt out that I'd like some flowers. Usually, I speak plainly and clearly to everyone I meet. I know what I want and have no problems stating my case. I am an expert at verbalizing my thoughts.

Usually.

But with Jasmine... ah, shit. I don't know. She turns me to mush inside. All I want to do is reach out and hold her... and never let her go.

Tell her things I've never felt about anyone. Tell her what I feel like doing to her, but more than just tell her.

I'd prefer to show her what I mean.

But to start over *now* by telling her how I *really* feel? That would make me

look and sound way crazier than I acted a while ago.

So how about it, Jasmine? I whisk you away to my penthouse in the clouds. You bounce on my cock for a year and I stick a baby in ya. I look after you forever and ever, so you never have to worry about anything ever again.

It's how I feel.

It's what I want, but if I come out and say it now, she'd probably call the fucking cops.

I mean, what kind of girl wants to hear that from a guy like me?

Especially someone who must be half my age.

I'm already at risk of screwing this up for the second time today if I don't do or say something. Just opening my mouth, I hope for the best.

I have to find out if she's interested in a guy like me. I mean, she could have her pick of any guy she wants. Look at her! Men probably hit on her all the time.

But the clang of that brass bell followed by the sound of a crowd at the tiny florist shop breaks my moment.

It doesn't break my mood, though, and Jasmine, being the quick-witted girl she is, lets the few new customers know she'll be right with them.

After she's finished with me.

Good girl.

Now. Keep a lid on things, James. Don't go acting all funny again because of people near Jasmine.

I feel my jaw tighten. And glancing to my right, I see a group of older ladies in tracksuits and plastic coats as they file in noisily. Some kind of neighborhood elderly walk-in-the-rain club, I guess.

But they're making for the reduced-price plant rack, so I have some time to present my case.

I watch her, almost spellbound, as she deftly selects the best flower from each

bunch she has. She arranges them quickly in a way that brings out the best in them, or is it because I'd think it was amazing if she did absolutely anything?

Jasmine could belch in my face, and I'd still get a freakin' hard-on.

Everything she does is just like her... perfect.

"There we go!" she says aloud, admiring her handiwork with a little nod and a small smile of satisfaction.

I can feel my already pounding pulse quicken some more, knowing it's almost time to reach out and take the flowers, anxiously anticipating to chance a touch from those fingers against mine.

Now, it feels like that's all it would take to make the volcano in my pants erupt and get down on all fours with her. Right fucking here in the store and howl like a wild animal in front of these elderly rain walkers.

But my overprotective feelings for her are matched by the need to go slow. I almost ruined it once. There's too much at stake to risk it again.

"How much do I owe you?" I hear myself ask, noticing that her own look and tone are different somehow. Like she's all business or something.

Or maybe really just not interested. She's a people person, and I see that.

Maybe I'm just having some midlife crisis, wanting to be twenty again because my hormones are all outta whack. I read about it somewhere recently.

"Oh, these are on the house," she says quickly, making me give her a sidelong glance.

Glad to see that smile of hers again, but I didn't come back for flowers. If I have to buy her entire store out every day just to get to see her, I will. However, I won't be expecting a handout either.

"It's fine," she assures me, signaling to the line of ladies who've picked their dollar plants that she's coming.

"Your friend's bunch kinda paid for these, I'd say..." she shrugs.

She holds them out to me, but I miss her hand somehow as she passes the

bunch to me.

One final brief look from her tells me I've blown it again somehow. How did that happen?

She looks strong, though. Nothing wrong with that. It's the kind of brave face someone puts on when they don't want to show their true feelings.

Which leads me straight back to the "you're just too old for her, James" theory I've had buzzing in my frontal lobe since I first set eyes on her.

I watch her move to the other end of the counter. Those three feet feel like a thousand miles.

And hopelessly, shamelessly staring at her fine ass and body from behind, I stand and look as long as I can before it's clear I'd be making a scene if I stayed.

Again, it's that big guy thing. A gigantic man just standing staring at people? They don't like it. And I can tell Jasmine's intentionally avoiding my eyes. I'm not sure why.

But I can feel her body calling... loud and clear.

She needs me, even if she doesn't want me. I do know she needs me as much as I need her, but that's not a decision I can make for her.

Not many twenty-year-old boys would have that thought. But age, wisdom... call it whatever you want. I still need to respect Jasmine's decision about whether she's interested in me.

Maybe I did just get the wrong end of the stick? Easily enough done with someone so perfect.

Seeing how bright and cheerful she is with her customers, it's clear she's in a league of her own—as a person, not just a florist, either.

Using the flowers to cover what I know is going to be a problem, I leave the tiny florist shop for the second time today.

It's still raining cats and dogs, and the last place I feel like being is farther away from Jasmine. So, noticing the little coffee place right next door, I feel

a little stirring of the legal professional in me. I need to grab a mug and do what I should've done while watching her building last night.

Get clear on how to go about this. Formulate a plan. Arrange my briefs.

How can I present a case, let alone win one with Jasmine, if I don't even have one?

And speaking of arranging my briefs... I wonder if this place has a bathroom...

Someone needs to adjust a few things, so I don't look like I've got a canoe stuffed down my pants.

I squeeze into a wooden chair by the door and notice how empty the place is. I shift more of myself under the table, trying to conceal the problem in my pants.

I replay the whole day so far over and over in my mind, absent-mindedly finding myself plucking a few petals from the bunch of flowers that I'm gripping as hard as I want to hold Jasmine.

Remembering that thing some people do. Mostly in cheesy movies or books. Surely nobody actually does it, least of all a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound slab of man.

But I can't help it.

It's the one thing burning my brain as well as my balls right now.

I'm not kidding when I say I need to know and fast.

She loves me. She loves me not.

She loves me. She loves me...

"You look like a man who could use this," a friendly but cautious voice says, popping the thought bubble in my mind. A steaming mug of hot cocoa slides in front of me.

My eyes drift left, and I could swear it was my Aunt Rose for a split second, but no, just another friendly-looking old lady. I'm guessing she's the coffee shop owner. Aunt Rose passed about ten years ago, so it's been that long

since I had the luxury of a wise, older person listen to me ramble on.

I hear caution in her voice because it just makes sense to be wary of a big, wet man in your store gripping a bunch of flowers and plucking at 'em.

“Thanks,” I murmur, scalding my mouth a little, but it’s the first thing to pass my lips since God only knows.

The old lady hovers, studying me, only speaking when I shoot her a look that asks if there’s anything else. I’m good with the cocoa if that’s what she’s worried about.

“Well?” she asks with a little grin, lifting her hands to her hips and cocking a brow. “Does she, or doesn’t she?” she asks.

“I’m not sure...,” I start to reply, suddenly stopping once I wonder how the hell she’d know what I’m thinking. How come Jasmine can’t see for herself what I’m thinking if my mind’s so easy to read.

My Aunt Rose always said the most when she hardly said anything. Whoever this old lady is, she reminds me of her so much. I feel a pang of guilt for not thinking of her more often.

“Some things take time,” she murmurs, leaning in a little, at ease with me now. It’s as if she’s telling me a secret. The smell of baked cookies and warm milk coming off her make me feel like I’m five years old all over again.

“If she loves you, you can bet your bottom dollar that whoever she is, she’s feeling just as crazy as you right now.”

Creasing a smile, she pats my hand. Disappearing through the little curtain that leads out back, I half wonder if I haven’t just seen a ghost.

But I know she’s right.

And Jasmine sure acted weird when I asked for flowers, but I wouldn’t say she was down on all fours, barking crazy like I’ve been since yesterday. I definitely picked up her vibes.

But until I hear it from her own mouth, I don’t want to speculate. That’s the attorney in me.

The professional man in me wants to speculate. Calculate.

The beast in me wants to procreate. Ejaculate. Inseminate.

Mate for life. With Jasmine. The one.

And soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jasmine

Okay. So maybe I am nuts after all.

The man of my dreams comes into my store twice in one day, and I still don't know how to feel about it.

Is he crazy, or just driving me crazy?

One minute he's making eyes at me. The next, he's going to tear the courier a new one. Now, for round two, he just wants to buy flowers... said so himself.

Sure, I gave him a freebie after I fleeced his friend. However, that would've been the perfect time to say something if he was interested. I guess I could've spoken up, too. But seriously? A twenty-year-old florist asking out Mr. Big Stuff? Doesn't seem right.

I give up.

I can't deny the effect he has on me physically. If an older guy like that, successful as hell and used to giving orders, not taking them, really wanted me, he would have said or done more than buy flowers and leave.

So, I do what I always do when I feel the hurt monster rearing its ugly head. I turn on my charm and bubble up to eleven, and I get on with what needs doing. In this case, it's a flash mob sale of old ladies picking the dollar plant

rack clean.

I force myself not to watch James leave. I tell myself for the hundredth time I'm probably just overtired or hungry if I think a man like that would travel to this side of town just for me. Me, of all people.

I push it all down, having a long, animated chat with the group of seniors who've made the most of a rainy day.

With my clearance rack cleared, I set about my usual chores all over again. I focus on what I know rather than what I don't regarding men, and what needs doing.

Tying myself into a knot over James would be stupid. As much as I probably need "doing" right now as my little store, I can't afford to waste energy on fairytales. Dreams don't always come true, especially in my world.

But damn. If, after an hour or so, I get a steady trickle, then a definite flow... one after the other, well-dressed, executive-looking types. Each one pulling up out front and ducking in long enough to buy a bunch, or a plant, or whatever's left before they pay cash and leave without more than a nod or a shrug...

Weird.

Maybe there's a success conference nearby, and they have to bring flowers to mourn everyone who doesn't earn twenty grand a month.

It distracts me from feeling hurt about how I know I acted with James and his strange antics, and puts more money in my register than I've ever seen. I sell out of everything for the first time ever, and it's not even lunchtime.

With the money from big head's plastic bunch, I could even do something I've never done since opening. I could take a day off—the rest of today *and* tomorrow, if I really wanted to.

I feel a different kind of guilty thrill at that idea.

Safer than trying to figure out James, and why stay open if I have no flowers or plants left to sell? It's settled, and I'm out of my apron in a flash and off to see Iris before calling it a day.

The closed sign on her little shopfront door doesn't surprise me. She often closes up or doesn't officially open some days. But closing before lunch is kinda unusual, even for Iris. She doesn't need my permission, but it would have been nice to spill my guts to her after the day I've had.

She's like eighty-something, so if she wants a nap or just doesn't feel like it, she closes up. Most times, it's because of her husband, Phil, who has health problems, and Iris is always the first to put love for her man way before work in her own store.

Maybe I should take on that habit more often. Minus the love for my man part...

Once I can afford to, though. If business stays this good, I could easily take a day off without feeling stressed.

Plus, it's a bit more realistic than convincing myself every Prince Charming has me in their sights. Ha!

Feeling a little alien outside my usual routine at this time of day, I open my umbrella after double-triple checking everything's locked up and start to walk home.

At home with free time isn't something I've had a lot of since I started my business, so it should be the one thing I'm craving. It should put a smile on my face. Lord knows my own little garden of houseplants needs tending to. I've longed to get in there and do a ton of work.

I get the most satisfaction from plants and flowers, which is what I'm actually good at.

Dammit! I can't stop thinking about James and the craziest day of my life. He's still having a huge effect on me even hours after he's left. For a guy I'm telling myself isn't interested in me, he's doing a bang-up job of making me feel just a little more than *something*, and in places I never have the time or energy to even think about.

Every time I scold myself for thinking about it, I only want to think about it more. My brain is in a James Jones holding pattern. It's a feeling I've never known, despite my reaction to tell myself otherwise.

If he is interested, why not ask me out for coffee or whatever it is normal people do?

But James isn't normal. Anyone can see that.

If I'm honest, half the neighborhood I live in isn't "normal" either—many people with many problems. Not exactly the safest place for a girl to be wandering around any time of day.

It usually doesn't faze me, but by the time I notice how few people are out and about because of the rain as I get nearer to my street, I get the unnerving feeling I'm being followed.

Watched.

Again.

I felt it last night, too.

It sounds crazy in a city of ten million people. There's always going to be someone behind or in front of you, and *someone* watching you, even if they're just on their way home or staring absently on the subway.

But this is different.

I turn and look maybe a dozen times on the way home, but there's either an empty sidewalk or people doing what people do. Today it is trying to stay out of the rain.

The feeling follows me all the way home and into my little apartment. The building's secure. I feel safe enough when I draw the bolts on my front door and check the windows.

Sheesh. Now would be a good time to have someone James' size around. It might send a message to whoever's been following me that there's a man twice their size waiting to teach 'em a lesson if they keep it up. Especially if he had another one of his mood swings. I'm assuming he can deliver the goods as well as just look scary when he's mad.

Dozens of people live in my building, but apart from Iris and Phil, I don't really know anyone here. I moved to the city from nowheresville right before I met Iris, and that brought me to where I am today.

No family or friends back home either, so when I feel like a big, little girl in an even bigger city, I realize I have absolutely no one to turn to. I feel alone and isolated in this world.

I could call Iris, but I'll see her in the morning.

Just keep busy. Think about anything except being followed.

Or James.

I shower and change into my around-the-house clothes, feeling a little better pattering around in my not-so-little-anymore garden, taking up most of the apartment.

I get it looking pretty nice by the time my stomach's groaning for food. Being cashed up, it's a no-brainer to order pizza and ice cream, resolving to spend the rest of the night binging on some shows I haven't had time to catch up on.

But that feeling of being watched lingers, even way past my usual bedtime.

Peering out the shutters into the dark, I see the rain-soaked streets below. I can't see anything, let alone if anyone's lurking in the shadows. I reason if there was some kind of homicidal maniac stalking me, they'd either have got me by now or gone home because it's just too damned wet to be out doing anything.

James is still there, bubbling under the surface of my mind until I can't keep my lids open a second longer.

The pizza I ordered will go cold and be tomorrow's leftovers, and the little pool of ice cream left at the bottom of the carton is no big loss.

Despite my best efforts, and still unsure if I want to go to work tomorrow, I slip into a dreamless sleep. The only thing I can see before darkness takes me is the same man who started my day. His blazing eyes with that suggestive, mischievous look are the last thing I see before I fall into a deep sleep.

Part of me decides that tomorrow might be the day I do a little stalking and find out all I can about this mystery man, James Jones, for myself.

Missing all my alarms and waking up to the sound of my phone buzzing, I can't help but feel panic. The only person who'd call me on this phone would

be Iris, so I pick up immediately.

However, it's not Iris. It's Phil. Iris isn't feeling so good. I know if Phil's calling, it must be serious.

CHAPTER EIGHT

James

It hits me like a wave.

Maybe it's the energy hit from the cocoa, or maybe it's just my old dynamic self making a comeback after a couple of heavy hits I took in the early rounds with Jasmine.

Either way, I have a plan to buy more flowers and help her business without buying every single bunch in person. That would take ages, and I'm two for two proving that if I let myself anywhere near her, I'm such a fucking waste of space that I'll never be able to tell her how I feel. So, I'll show her instead.

I send a message to my head of staff, outlining the memo I want every employee, associate, and janitor in the building to read, and right now. I inform them to make their way down here asap and buy a bunch of flowers, a plant, or whatever's left and pay cash. They'll be reimbursed for the costs and get a cash bonus if they can do it within the hour.

What are they going to do with all these flowers? There's no point telling people to get something and leaving no instructions once they have it.

Thinking for a moment, I remember the old St. Mercy Hospital a few blocks away. I add instructions that the flowers are to be taken there and given to whoever needs 'em. I'm sure someone there will know what to do with a few

dozen bunches of flowers turning up. There's always someone who needs their day brightened.

I don't usually send memos. The firm kinda runs itself without my interference. However, when I do, people take notice.

There are a ton of interns and attorneys convinced they will make partner one day. I hinted at it years ago, but that was before today... before Jasmine.

She's the only one I want to partner with. And I don't mean at a legal firm, either.

Seeing her has cemented the idea of early retirement in my mind. I've got enough for ten lifetimes, and she's the only one I want to share every second with from now on. Once I learn to control myself around her, that is, and tell her how I feel.

My plan is to have the flowers bought by staff, who should look like regular customers.

I can watch from across the street... and then... then I can...

Yeah? And then what, Einstein?

Okay, so it's a kind of on-the-fly sort of plan. I'll play it by ear and see if I spot another opening to go see her.

Three times in one day? It's a bit of a stretch, I know. Surely, she can see what she's doing to me by now.

Just ask her if she's busy after work. She should finish early if she sells out of flowers, right? Hmmm. Not such a dumb plan after all. We'll see, and whatever you do, slick, don't go acting all fucking crazy possessive again.

Chicks hate that. Don't they?

I'm already itching to see Jasmine again. I decide I can watch from across the street again. I look around for the old lady so I can pay, but the place is empty. I call out after lingering by the "private" sign above the curtain she disappeared through, but nothing.

Reaching over, I leave a fifty under the mug I've drained. No more "free" or

“on the house” for me today. I can pay my way, and if everything goes according to plan, I’ll have a hefty florist bill by the end of the day.

I keep out of sight, walking down the street before doubling back to my original vantage point.

A groan escapes me. Seeing her again, even from across the street, makes me feel a sense of urgency. The constant rain and gray skies only make Jasmine look all the brighter from where I’m standing.

I am impatiently checking my watch and then my phone. I’m wondering what the holdup is with my instructions. I’ve seen these people. They’re not exactly busting a hump sitting at a desk all day exchanging emails. Hell, I used to be that guy. I know how NOT very hard it is.

The coffee shop I just left closes its door. The “closed” sign swings left and right like a plastic hand waving goodbye. Strange time of day to close up, but if it’s just that old lady on her own, I can’t blame her. That’s hard work I’m looking at—normal, respectable people doing what it takes to make a business they can be proud of.

I’m proud of Jasmine already. Without knowing her story, I can see she’s made of the stuff people would hire if they could. People like her and the little old lady in the coffee shop have too much of their own steam to bother playing to someone else’s tune.

I just hope that same feisty attitude doesn’t apply when it comes to certain older men asking her out on a date.

The first car pulls up after I’ve waited for what feels like forever, but is really just long enough for people to make it to this side of town. I recognize a few faces as more arrive. They’re doing exactly as they were told. Sure, it’s a cushy job they’ve got, but *this* is what lets me run it with such a loose hand on the reins.

Although they don’t know I’m watching, I’m proud of them, too, in a way. Doing what they have to do so they can live their own dreams, but smart enough to play the game when they have to. Doing what they’re asked to, especially when it’s coming from me.

My dream is right in front of me, and I feel the glow of satisfaction with each

bunch or bush she sells her sudden run of new customers.

My plan to head back over might not be the brightest one, but I can't play cat and mouse like this forever. I guess I just need to know if she's into me or not, once and for all. Otherwise, I'll never sleep again. Though I don't think I could sleep, regardless of her answer. She's the kind of girl that keeps a man up at night, in his bed or not.

I'm so lost in trying to keep my eyes on her, then finally getting my reward once it's clear she's sold out of everything. It doesn't register that she's closing up for the day.

She goes to the coffee place next door and sees the closed sign. She sinks a little before heading down the street.

Every last petal in the place is mine now, and there's only one flower left to pluck.

So, will you just watch her ass walk away, or will you talk to her?

Snapping to my senses, I take off after her, keeping my distance because the few times I get close enough, I can feel it. That thing she does. However, she does it, or whatever it is, it only makes me want to do one thing, and I'm sure as hell not going to try that in public.

It's last night all over again.

She hasn't gone to see anyone or done anything. Just straight home.

The word "home" doesn't match the building, though. The thought of her seeing that place as home churns my stomach. She's got something way better waiting for her. Someplace I know she'll love when she sees it.

So, I watch for a while. The sky turns into a dark gray tone before night falls. I could look at her or anything to do with her for hours without stopping.

Not knowing what floor she's on or when she might appear again, I decide to just go for it. I can make up a reason for turning up at her door on my way over. I can find a way in once I cross the street. I make up all the plans on the spot, willing this to happen right now.

Getting a whiff of my pits through my soaked jacket and shirt as I start to

move, I hesitate, feeling and hearing the squelch of my rain-soaked Italian leather shoes. The tailored pants had already shrunk from the wetness, making me look and feel like a success story who went bust during the afternoon crash.

I know I should really make a better impression on her. Jasmine deserves the best, not some underslept, underfed man who smells like gym socks. I should get myself cleaned up and changed.

It'll mean leaving her unattended, though, and that bothers me.

A lot.

Seeing as my staff seems so flexible, I don't see why that shouldn't apply to more than just buying flowers. With a direct call to the security desk from my phone, I instruct them to have a detail sent to the building across from the laundromat.

"Keep it low-key," I inform the head of security, John Lipton. "If an insanely attractive strawberry blond leaves the building, I want to be the first to know," I tell him firmly, hanging up.

I wait and watch just long enough before a dark car parks in the alley opposite me fifteen minutes later. I see the familiar face of Lipton, the head of James and Jones security, chomping at the bit to do something other than sit at a desk.

They look more like CIA agents, too, which sets my mind at ease. They have no authority here, but I don't think anyone is going to ask them any questions.

Lipton spots me and nods curtly, signaling they're on it. I couldn't be doing a better job of it myself, and if they've spotted me, I figure I'm doing a crap job at hiding.

I hail a cab and keep my eyes on her building as long as I can before it disappears, swallowed up by the city. I head for home—our home soon.

My phone was in my hand the whole way. Waiting for the call I kind of want but don't want. I want to find out where she's going if she does leave, but I'd really like her to stay put while I get ready.

I don't want anything in her life but me from now on, and not having her right by me in mine? That's not something I want to last much longer, either. It's about twenty-four hours already, and me going home alone without her just feels wrong.

I must be slipping in my old age. Whenever I see something I like or something I want, I just take it, but this *is* a little different. There's our whole future playing out over and over in my mind. I want Jasmine's hand shaping it, too. Those same hands I picture running over me when I'm finally standing under the jet streams of hot water in my penthouse shower. The sight and feel of my own arousal are so constant now I may as well call it my "Jasmine."

It's just one of the things she does to me, even when she's not around, and a constant reminder of her as I dry off and slip into some track pants. I feel like I'm overdressed, but this is according to my "Jasmine."

I easily devour the contents of my refrigerator. A day with nothing but a mug of cocoa for a guy my size is not healthy, but it all kinda tastes the same, as filling and delicious as it is.

What I really want in my mouth is something else.

The scent and taste of her hand on my lips are still etched in my senses, and I hum and grunt at the memory as I eat. I'm satisfied knowing I will have a new world of flavors, scents, and sensations to explore soon.

If she's playing hard to get, she's doing a bang-up job of it. I mean, what happened to powerful, independent young women? I thought they didn't like that old-fashioned stuff where the guy has to take the lead, but I've only got myself to blame there.

I've got a ton of corny, but very horny, ideas for romance. If it's what she wants as bad as I need it, I don't care who takes charge once we're right where we should be—in our bed, getting to know each other in the best way possible. The idea makes me grin like a maniac as I look at the clothes I've laid out, sitting on the edge of the bed I know I'll be sharing with her soon.

My phone is still in my hands as I stare at the screen until my eyes itch and burn, even to focus.

I figure I can just rest them for a bit.

Just a... few... minutes...

CHAPTER NINE

Jasmine

That feeling of being watched?

I think I just picked up on the undercover agent convention they're having in the side alley. Not real cops by the looks, but maybe something else. Who knows these days?

In this neighborhood, nothing surprises me. Then one of them zooms in on me through those wrap-around shades. He's talking with his finger to his ear, so I start walking faster.

By the time it hits me they're actually following *me*, I hail a cab. I know, right? They'll never catch me now. I'm in a cab!

After yesterday, last night... nothing surprises me anymore. I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation for some guys in suits with earpieces driving the same way I'm going. That's what I tell myself after trying not to look back every second block we pass.

It's extravagant, I know. A taxi ride to work, and it's my first official day off, too, but Phil sounded cut up about Iris. If she closed up early yesterday, she *must* be unwell. A nanna nap here or there is par for the course for Iris, but if it's Phil ringing me, I know it's got to be bad.

I've never had grandparents or even parents to worry about. It's always been just me or whoever was the foster family for that year. Kinda got old after a while, but I like to think I treat everyone the same way. Being nice isn't hard, and most people are nice right back.

Iris is like the queen of nice. So if she's sick, then I'm going to go see if there's anything I can do to help.

Don't go thinking you-know-who's not on my mind the whole time. That damned "*loves me, loves me not*" line has been on an endless loop in my brain, even while I slept, like a sound you hear so often you barely notice it anymore. When you focus on it, it's all you can hear again.

I pay the cab fare with wide eyes, instantly deciding that walking is healthier and cheaper, even though I am flush with cash. I wouldn't want to waste it *all* on cab rides, but that short ride a few dozen blocks feels like it's already put a dent in it.

Phil's lingering in the coffee shop doorway. The look on his face matches the tired, rain-soaked exterior of the ancient building. The little bit of sunshine peeking through this morning is someplace else right now.

I feel a sick sensation of my own, somehow just knowing that today might be crazier than yesterday, but in very different ways. Maybe not ones I'm going to like.

If anything happens to Iris, I don't know what that would mean for me. I don't want to sound selfish, but Phil's not well either. I suddenly see, from looking at Phil, that the whole life I've made for myself could go *poof!* at any minute. I suddenly don't feel so in control, so clever, and go get 'em with my little business.

I gulp hard, almost slamming the cab door. I'm numb inside and creasing a smile for Phil's benefit. I know he's probably thinking the same things I am, but for different reasons. Without Iris, he's lost too. And without them both, I know I'm... well...

I'm here for Iris right now. I ask Phil how she is.

“She’s sleeping now,” he sighs, a tremor in his tone. His eyes are wetter and weepier looking than usual. I think I might be overreacting a bit, but I can’t just ask him if she’s going to die now, can I?

“Oh, I got your flower delivery in this morning. Put it in the chiller for ya. You must’ve slept in?” he asks, forcing a smile that turns natural when I return it, blushing a little.

“Is Iris going to be okay?” I ask, watching his face fall before he sighs again.

“None of us know how long we’ve got, Jasmine,” he murmurs thoughtfully, almost as if he’s reminding himself—training himself for the day it comes.

“But Iris is a trooper,” he says suddenly, sounding more optimistic. Happier from seeing a friendly face in me, I hope.

“I’ll let you know when she’s up,” Phil offers. “I got you down here because... well... I don’t know... I thought she had a fever or something. Iris wanted me to tell you something,” he says. His eyes look past mine as if the words he needs to remember are printed on the sky behind me.

“She said, ‘I got it wrong. Tell Jasmine I was wrong. He’s not grieving... he is in love,’” he recites, looking pleased with himself he could remember it all.

Then he looks to me for something that tells him I understand what she means, which right now, I don’t.

At first, I think I agree with Phil. Sounds like Iris needs a doctor or a hospital if she’s raving like that. Or maybe it’s Phil who’s having a turn of his own. He’s been unwell since the day I met him and Iris. I could press the point and ask to see her, but I’m not a doctor. If she’s asleep, I don’t want to bother her.

“I’ll open up, I guess,” I shrug, eyeing my own little shop front, returning Phil’s vacant look when I don’t have an *aha!* moment once he tells me what Iris said.

I absently scan the street both ways. There is no sign of any James Bond types following me, so I think I might have a slight case of whatever I am catching today.

“I guess I’ll stay closed today,” he sighs, his shoulders sagging to the point of

looking painful. He refuses my offer to pitch in and help him today instead.

“We could do both shops between us?” I feebly suggest.

Phil’s old enough to know his limits, and running between a coffee shop and a florist shop all day isn’t high on his bucket list. So I remind him I mean it when I tell him to come get me if he needs anything.

“Thanks for coming down, Jasmine,” Phil says, creasing a smile as he goes back inside. “You’re the closest thing to family we’ve got now... means a lot,” he adds, heading inside before he shows too much emotion.

A man of few words whose actions could fill volumes... that’s Phil in a nutshell.

Iris too, but she’s hardly a woman of few words, unless she’s ill, I guess.

So my day off is in full swing. I find myself right back where I started a day ago. Ass in the air and head down, sorting through flowers in kind of a hurry, I notice the familiar feeling of one customer after another coming in, buying anything I have ready and leaving without saying more than a polite thank-you.

Once I sell out of flowers before I’ve even unpacked them, literally making up bunches straight out of the box, I have to ask the next customer what the hell’s going on.

A professional-looking, almost sour-faced woman in her thirties flashes a brief smile, opening her mouth to say something. It’s as though she’s reminded herself not to say anything and only gives a little shrug.

“Some people would be grateful for the extra business without twenty questions,” she remarks in a friendly tone, so genuine that it’s clear she must be a lawyer. Nobody else in their right mind could act so passive-aggressively and expect to have no one raise a brow, especially in this part of town.

I try a different tactic with the next and final customer waiting behind little Ms. Passive-aggressive here. He’s much nicer about it all, and it’s the last bunch sold. He’s no suit, but something tells me they’re all in on this somehow, and it’s a reason I’m going to find out one way or another before

today's done.

"My condolences," I murmur thoughtfully, giving my best "florist who knows your pain" face.

"Oh no," he's quick to tell me. "Just uhhh... just something our boss said we have to do."

"Have to?" I ask him straight back, the tone in my voice intensifying and my hand still gripping what he wants and not letting go until he spills his guts.

He glances around as if those guys in the dark glasses might still be lurking, but I'm sure that's a totally different thing.

"I'm just the janitor. So when the boss sends a memo to *all employees...*," he says hurriedly.

He looks like a man who's already said too much, but it only makes me need to know more.

"Look, forget I said anything, okay? I've got a wife and three kids. I'm just doing my job."

He gives me a pleading look, and letting go of the flowers, I add his money to the pile so high in the register I can barely close it.

I keep an eye on him as he crosses the street, wishing I had a pair of wrap-around shades myself and a car. I see it as my only chance to get to the bottom of this. Perhaps a clue to where he might be going with these flowers everyone's buying, courtesy of some mystery boss.

I groan involuntarily at the thought.

No. It... it couldn't be.

Then everything Phil told me Iris said comes flooding back.

"I got it wrong. Tell Jasmine I was wrong. He's not grieving... he is in love."

If that means what I think it means, then I need my legs to stop wobbling like jelly at the thought and move my ass. Follow Mr. Janitor and see for myself if he'll take me to who or whatever's really behind all this.

Although I kind of have an idea just who...

Iris reneging on her earlier statement about James hits me so hard I feel dizzy. Like I need to lie down, but there isn't time. Pulled by a level of excitement and fear I've never felt so strong before, I hail another cab, breaking rules of my own I just made because this is a life or death situation.

If I don't find out if it's James doing this flower thing or find out that he loves me after all I've put myself through... then I know my life won't be worth living.

Deep down, I knew it. But up top, that little place everyone else likes to call the real world? It just doesn't add up that a guy like James...

Jasmine! If you don't move that moneymaker, you'll never go. He's getting away!

"Follow that car!" I bark at the cab driver, who gives me a passive look before cocking his brow. Putting the car into drive, he even makes the tires screech for effect, zooming at speed. Taking me to find out for sure who loves me and who loves me not.

We sit at a set of lights two cars back from the guy we follow. It's where we follow him that I would never have seen coming.

Not in a million years.

CHAPTER TEN

James

Snapping awake, I figure I must've just been dozing. The cotton mouth I become instantly aware of and the light shining through the windows makes me groan aloud.

Sitting up, I fight the urge to get mad at myself. Guess pulling two all-nighters in a row was kinda expecting too much.

Before I can get too hard on myself, my cell rings. I stand up to search for it on the bed, growling like an animal when I can't see it, even though I can hear it. I know it has to be a call about Jasmine, and here I am, sleeping beauty, and I can't even find my damned phone. The sensation of it peeling off the side of my ribs and thudding to the floor tells me I've been asleep on it.

So much for keeping an eye on my little flower.

Dammit!

I bark in answer, and my security guy Lipton fills me in, cool as a cucumber.

Jasmine's left and is at the flower shop. Big surprise there, but I am glad she hasn't gone anyplace else.

I let him know I'm on my way down, impressing upon him the need for him

to keep eyes on her until I get there, something I already regret doing. Having someone else watch her for me, but I can't be everywhere at once. It's why I need her here with me all the time.

I'm almost at the door, keys in hand, when Lipton calls again.

"She's on the move. Sold out of flowers and looks like she's following one of ours. You want us to do anything?" he asks meaning, do I want them to intervene?

But if she's headed where I think she is, then I'll be there to meet her.

"Just follow her and keep me updated," I clip. I feel the smile edging its way back onto my face as I head down to the private parking area via my personal elevator.

Lipton was signing off. The thrill in his voice is nowhere near the one I feel inside myself. He's got a hard-on because he's been let out of the building to play, doing what he does best for one night.

I've got an all-day hard-on because I know what I'm heading toward is a forever deal, not just fun and games for one night. I don't plan on any more games. These past twenty-four hours have been a wild ride, sure, but it's time to come clean with Jasmine. Time to lay my cards on the table and speak plainly for once.

Having had some much-needed sleep and food, I'm able to think clearer now. I'm able to see the best way forward is to be honest and tell her exactly how I feel, and hope like hell she feels the same.

Otherwise?

I shake my head at the thought.

There is no *otherwise* anymore. I'm going to do what any sane man would've done the moment he saw his *perfect woman*. I'm going to ask if she wants to go grab a coffee or a bite to eat. If she's busy, I'll give her my card.

If she doesn't call, I know where she lives.

If she doesn't open the door, I know there's a fire escape I can climb up.

Common sense tells me I should have run with the simple stuff from the get-go instead of acting like a lunatic.

I know the way to the hospital well. It's been a while since I've been there in person. They looked after my Aunt Rose before she passed. I make a point of reminding them with a sizeable check or three every year.

The drive-through, post-peak hour sure beats a cab ride. I think I'm done walking in the rain from now on. Caressing the leather steering wheel of my European sports car, I smile wider, knowing Jasmine's figured out where all the flowers she's been selling have been going.

At least, I hope she finds out. She does an amazing job, and I know those flowers and plants will brighten someone's day.

Mine is getting brighter by the minute, and my pulse quickens when I see the hospital. It's a thumping roar by the time I park and make my way to the entrance.

I spot Lipton before he sees me and, returning the favor of being spotted by him last night, I move wide. I take a path behind him, surprising him in a way he only tolerates because I'm paying him.

"Mr. Jones... you startled me," he says with gritted teeth.

I'm not here to play a game of hide-n-seek. I want what's mine, so I'm hoping Lipton can point me in the right direction. I've wasted enough time already. I can see that now and need to get Jasmine where she belongs today.

"She went in after the janitor..." Lipton murmurs, updating me by reflex and keeping his eyes peeled on the entrance.

"The janitor?" I ask, paying attention as he details Jasmine's last customer and the likelihood of her joining the dots about the flowers, which is what led her here, straight to me.

Not something I would have come up with off the bat, but like everything having to do with Jasmine and me, I know there are bigger wheels turning. Making sure we're together. Making sure we make lots of little Jasmines and

Jameses, too.

“Alright, Lipton,” I tell him, cutting him short before he starts telling me a bunch of stuff I don’t need to know. I know where Jasmine is. He’s kept an eye on her, and now he can go.

“I’ll take it from here,” I say aloud, not meaning it for anyone’s ears but my own as I stride toward the entrance.

I spot Jasmine in an instant. That strawberry blond ponytail of hers shines in the foyer lights. Those hips and ass from behind look better every time I see them.

The perfect view from behind was broken only by someone walking in front of me—toward me with a look of what I guess I’d call terror on his face.

“You must be the janitor?” I ask him, cocking a brow but shifting my eyes from his to see Jasmine again.

She’s talking with her hands along with her mouth, and I’m sure she’s trying to find out something. A private hospital means people don’t just walk in off the street and look around.

“I didn’t say anything, Mr. Jones. She must’ve followed me,” the janitor says in an almost pleading tone.

I feel my head shaking, but it’s not in a bad way.

“I think everyone’s done a great job,” I assure him, clapping his shoulder and moving straight past him. I had no idea people thought I was such an ogre.

I never mentioned anything about a secrecy clause. I just asked them to go buy some flowers and drop them off here—something I might make a regular thing if it’s been a hit.

Zoning in on Jasmine like a laser beam, I know this is the time to do it right. To get her and me out of here to someplace we can do more than just talk if she’s up for it.

I move closer behind her. I shift my crazy smile to a more professional one as the staff behind the counter recognizes me. Jasmine follows their eyes, turning her head and then her whole body when she sees it’s me.

“Jasmine...,” I rasp. It’s the only thing on my mind, and the only word I want to hear right now.

Once she recovers from her momentary shock at seeing me, I can tell she’s not impressed. It seems out of character for her, but she looks furious.

Whatever she was talking about just now looks to have been replaced with something more serious. Her eyes narrow, and she crimps her lip.

My instinct is to find out who or what’s upset her and then have a quiet word with them, but there’s something in her look that tells me it’s me she’s angry with.

“You...,” she says in an accusing tone, taking a firm step closer and looking right up at me. I can see she’s not faking being angry right now.

I should be feeling my smile fall, but damn... if she isn’t the sexiest thing alive when she’s angry. If I didn’t love her smile so much, I know she could be this mad at me and I’d still be crazy about her.

She seems to be waiting for me to say something, narrowing her eyes and trying to seethe with rage. All I’m broadcasting is how glad I am to see her again.

“Hi,” I finally manage to get out from between smiling and feasting my eyes on her curves.

It seems to disarm her rage, though, and her shoulders suddenly slump. Her lower lip quivers, and the look in her eyes asks more questions than I could answer in a hospital foyer.

“It’s all right. She’s my florist,” I call over to the staff, who are shifting nervously behind the glass like worried lab rats.

“You...,” Jasmine says again, all the fire gone from her voice as I move closer, slipping my hand under her elbow.

“Can we go someplace and talk?” I hear myself ask, but my body’s already guiding her outside, past the curious eyes and out into the open. Right where my feelings for her belong.

“You sent people to buy all those flowers?” she asks, struggling not to sound

emotional.

I nod, but I'm not sure why that's such a bad thing. "You *are* a florist, right?" I ask, unable to stop my smile from creeping back in.

"I thought you might like the extra business," I add, which is part of why I did it, too, but it doesn't have the effect I thought it might have. Most people would be glad to have extra sales, and Jasmine looks like she's about to get sick from hurt. I really don't understand her anger.

"And I was doing such a bad job of... well... I...," I stammer.

I feel like a living example of why I had to send all those people to her store. Trying to explain myself but knowing I'm just opening my big mouth wider by the second so I can put my foot in it again.

Just tell her, dammit!

"Jasmine, I bought them because it was a chance to see you," I tell her slowly, making sure I get this out right, once and for all.

"And every time I got near you. I... well... you saw for yourself. I acted like a bit of a..."

"Crazy asshole?" she tells me, making an observation, not asking a question, and with more than a little fire returning to her voice.

"Yeah, you could say that," I agree. I'm trying not to look wounded, but actually I'm getting a thrill from hearing her call me names. It's refreshing to have someone say what they really feel for a change instead of kissing my ass like my employees. She obviously has no reservations about speaking her mind. I like that in a woman.

Her eyes are wider now. Expectant. And her hands move to her hips as she holds her ground in some super-hot show of defiance that I can't help but groan with satisfaction.

That damned smile keeps playing at the edge of my mouth, not helping me any, and it only seems to make her want to be mad again. Making me wonder if she even heard what I said.

I want to see her. I want her. She seems determined to give me some kind of

dressing down, even though I thought it was pretty obvious. Much to her annoyance, it only makes me smile wider. I want her more than ever when she really starts to tear strips off me.

“I mean, you just came out of nowhere and scared my courier half to death. Then you say you just want flowers...”

She’s trying hard to focus on being mad. She knows full well there’s really no sense in what she’s trying to scold me over.

“And then I find out you’ve got other people buying flowers, and for what? Because you feel sorry for me? Is that it?” she finally huffs, taking a deep breath so she can fire round two. She seems hurt, which is the last thing I intended to do.

I think I’ve heard enough out of her mouth. Time to put something in it that should explain things way better than I could with words. I lean down, cupping her face in my hand. My eyes are on hers as I figure this is what I should have done at first. My lips get so close to hers I can almost taste her—the heat from her body as well as her mouth like a current pulling me under.

Deeper, wanting to breathe her in.

Wanting to drown in her...

Slap!

The sudden sting of her firm hand against my face should make me recoil, but it has the total opposite effect.

It’s the hottest thing I’ve felt.

Not just her touching me, but making it sting.

Whatta girl!

She looks shocked by her own behavior, but noticing my grin, I think she gets how hopeless this is to fight.

“Again,” she commands me, making me give her a quizzical look.

“You want to slap me again?” I ask, figuring I’m up for anything by now. I’m just following orders at this point.

“No,” she says firmly. “That other thing. Do it again. I wasn’t ready,” she says impatiently.

“Are you going to hit me again?” I murmur, watching all the fight go out of her eyes.

All the fear. The uncertainty. All the doubt, too, I’m hoping.

“Damn you, James Jones,” she says, her voice breaking with emotion. “Damn you for being so fucking... perfect.”

I kiss her properly, and for a long time.

Her body melts into mine as the world around us disappears, both of us having our first taste of forever.

That thing between us just became something more than that.

It’s *us* now.

I feel like I can breathe for the first time in my life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jasmine

I suppose now would be a good time to list hysteria and violence when nervous to my growing list of semi-psycho behaviors.

Slapping James isn't something I'd planned on. Neither is having a tantrum once I find out what he's been doing.

But I just don't get it.

There's just no way a guy like him could ever...

But his mouth does more than talk, answering every question I've had for twenty-four hours in a second once he kisses me.

So when I panic and slap his sweet face, it's only nerves.

I've never even been kissed by a boy, let alone a real-life man who is as handsome and amazing as James. So I want to make sure I get it right. Asking him to do it again.

Properly... so I'm ready for it.

He doesn't even seem to mind that, either. If anything, I'd say he was kinda happy I did slap his chops. Happier than when I was trying to tell him off.

For what? For being interested in you...? For maybe caring?

It's just all so left field. Slapping his face is more of a way of pinching myself—making sure I'm not dreaming or haven't been sucked into some simulation where I believe everything I see is real... like some kind of virtual reality.

One thing's clear, though. I'm no great kisser, and James is only too accommodating, making up for whatever I'm missing by kissing me like I never knew anyone could be kissed.

That kiss made all my previous feelings, arousal, and tremors whenever in his presence seem like nothing by comparison. I'm panting for breath when he moves his mouth from mine, and I open it wider—ready to ask one of the million questions I have, but his thick finger presses softly on my lips, silencing me.

He makes me blush hard as he towers over me, making me feel so small but so special. Like I am the only other person in the world apart from him.

“If you're going to stay mad at me, at least let me take you someplace you can slap me around without humiliating me in public,” he says in a hoarse whisper.

He turns my flushing emotions into embarrassment, making me realize how insanely childish I've been acting.

For the same reason I followed the sold flowers to the hospital, I nod my head without even having to think about it, already feeling like I want to stay glued to the man forever. I can't get close enough to him. He feels and smells way better up close.

He holds me with what I can only describe as tenderness as James does his best to finish everything he was trying to say.

“I don't have anyone, Jasmine. Never have. But when I saw you yesterday and followed you home, I knew there was something between us.”

Finding out it was him who's been following me should shock me. It should make me madder than I was a second ago, but somehow, it only makes everything he's saying ring true. Makes everything I'm feeling inside seem real... not just something that happens to other people.

My first instinct is to want to ask why.

Why me? What have I got to offer?

Looking into his smoldering eyes, I can see the time for questions is over, in his mind at least.

“Just say you’ll grab a coffee with me, or maybe we could grab something to eat?” he asks with that winning smile—an impossible smile being worn by an impossible man. *My impossible man?*

I can’t say no because it’s perfect, and I can’t say yes without feeling like I’m some puppet on a string, which I am right now.

“I’ve got to warn you, though,” he adds with mock seriousness. “I’m going to ask you to come back to my place, as cheesy as that might sound.”

I’ve gotten used to doing things a certain way, and avoiding people outside of work is probably my greatest skill next to flower arranging. So when it comes time to try to be my old self with James, the box is empty. Full of nothing but space for the new life that’s us I can already see flickering in his eyes as he rubs the sides of my arms with his huge hands, stroking the stray hair back from my face as if he already owns me.

Not that creepy “do as I say” ownership. More like finding something he lost, and now it’s come back to him. His only plan is to make sure he never loses it again.

“Those flowers all went to the Ruby West Ward,” he says proudly. “An order I’d like to make permanent if you let me,” he adds.

He shifts his expression to something so innocent, so kind that I can’t help feeling lightheaded.

“I didn’t know... I mean... I...,” I stammer, and James asks me if I’m going to slap him every time he kisses me, making me shake my head in a definite no before he does, a kiss slower and softer than the first.

If this new life of mine that has James in it has a welcome mat, it’s shaped like his mouth and feels like heaven every time he presses it over mine. If he’s trying to shut me up with kisses, it’s working.

So when he observes that we're both finished with "work" for the day, I can't help but follow his lead when he takes my hand in his, and we start walking.

Never talk to or get in a car with strangers. That's what we're told, right? Somehow, I must've skipped the one where that stranger is tall, dark, handsome, and as good a kisser as James. I'd go anywhere with him right now except maybe back to my apartment.

Apart from him barely being able to fit inside it, I'm already cringing internally at the thought of my still-to-do dishes piled up and the unfolded clothes I have lying around. That never-quite-finished mountain of laundry I affectionately term "my wardrobe," but James looks and feels like the kinda guy who's thought further ahead than I have.

"We could skip the coffee part," I hear myself squeak.

The feelings inside me are as big and tall as he is, so my tiny voice kind of surprises me. It's music to James' ears, and he grins wide, squeezing my hand.

"I kinda hoped you'd say that." He smiles, pointing out his car with a jut of his chin, making my eyes go wide.

The suit. The watch. The car.

Guy's not faking it, and anyone who has that much debt could never be as laid back as he is.

Now he knows he's got what he wants.

"What is it you actually do again?" I ask, trying not to swoon as he holds the passenger door open, helping me into the car like I'm some kind of princess, and he's my Prince Charming.

As if the car and everything else I'm about to experience are all for me.

"I'll do whatever it takes to keep that smile on your face," he says knowingly, leaning over to buckle me in and pecking my lips, making me sigh.

I leave the smart-ass sarcasm and feisty, independent girl feeling well behind once the powerful sports car rumbles out into traffic.

The puddle of mush between my legs is already convulsing in time with the motor before we've gotten three blocks. I know coffee is the last thing on his mind, and the only thing I feel like seeing him eat is a part of myself I haven't had a decent look at for a long time.

The thrill I feel inside wavers as I wonder why a real man would want to take me straight home, which should be a red flag, but not with James.

Because really, I know deep down it's not just what I want to do. It's what I *need* more than anything right now. It's something I've never done, yet I fantasized about it. Being a virgin sometimes has its drawbacks, but if you wait for the right someone, it has to be worth it. Right?

I think James Jones, whatever he does, is just the man to do it.

He takes a turn that leads to a side of town I've only ever heard about and never seen. James is quick to remind me of one thing, reading my mind before I even finish the thought.

"And no," he says, "I'm not in the habit of bringing beautiful, young women home."

I feel my face redden again. Nobody's ever referred to me like *that*.

"I've never gone home with anyone..." I start to say, wanting to tell him something else I've never done before, either. From the grin he's been wearing since he kissed me, I think he's figured out a lot more about me than I have about him so far.

The rain's done a good job of cleaning the city streets. Or does everything just look brighter because I'm with James now? It's as if I am wearing glasses that make everything look brand new, like me and James. I'm not sure, but the older buildings and pot-holed streets give way to a more modern, sleek, and shining part of town where the buildings are as tall as he is.

There's no real small talk between us, and I don't feel the need to fill the silence. It's as if we've known each other for years, though it's been what? Less than a day?

Both of us know that although there's plenty to be said, there's plenty to be

done. By that, I mean James has more than just kisses in mind when it comes to what happens next. That thought makes me gulp, shiver, and want to squeal all at once.

I don't know how he can act so calmly and in control, navigating the streets and traffic as though he designed them himself. It feels and looks like James Jones is a man of the world, and this whole world, including me, is all for him.

"This is us," he murmurs, looking the closest to shy I think I'm ever going to see.

I get it, though, once he pulls in and swipes a security pass to enter the underground garage. The way I don't want him to see my dirty dishes and piles of clothes, I'm guessing he has his own version of that like every guy must.

Right?

If the outside of the steel and glass towering building is anything to go by, I don't think so. Probably more of a case of James not wanting to look like something from another planet living in a place like this.

It makes the five-star hotels downtown look cheap. Put it that way. Even the air in the underground car park smells clean.

Pulling up right out front of a steel-doored elevator, I shoot him a questioning glance, but he only shrugs.

"Let me guess," I almost groan, not meaning to sound sarcastic. "Private elevator?"

James chuckles, "Yup, and I can park right out front of it all day if I want," he informs me, still smiling, but the other look is creeping back in.

The kind of look I should have... wondering.

The "if I'm as into him as he's into me" look. I guess there's only one way to find out.

"C'mon," he says suddenly, "I hope you don't mind heights."

CHAPTER TWELVE

James

For a man who's so close to having what he knows he wants, I feel strange. Awkward almost, which is not my usual style.

Not because I'm worried Jasmine might think I'm just some rich asshole trying to have his way with her, either. I'm sure she wouldn't be here if she didn't want to be.

Okay, so I kissed her when I maybe should have just talked some more, but now I know she can see how I feel about her.

I'm actually worried now we're here she might not like the place. I mean, I like it, but it's what Jasmine wants that matters to me. I decide in one second that if she doesn't like it, she can pick another place. I have to remind myself she hasn't even seen inside yet.

She sure does *look* at home already. I mean, she already completes the place by being here. My whole life looks better now that she's in it.

Tactfully keeping a little distance between us, even though I could mount and stuff her right here and now, I usher her, ladies-first style, into the elevator and study her as we zoom up. I think she's going to like it.

I know she does already, if her smile is anything to go by. Or is that because

she can sense what I really want to show her? Glimpsing my own expression in the mirrored elevator, I think anyone could see what we're both really thinking about.

When the elevator stops and the doors slide open, we both stand there looking at each other until Jasmine shifts on her feet, signaling me it's okay to take the lead. To show her inside, I mean.

"Is this the only way in?" she asks, shivering a little as I guide her with my hand on the small of her back.

The entrance to my place comes straight out from the elevator.

"There are a couple of regular front doors... and a back way from the stairs," I answer.

"Not looking for a way out already, I hope?" I try to joke, feeling it fall flat before I even finish saying it.

Jasmine creases an awkward smile but is soon distracted by the place, especially the view.

I never get sick of seeing the world from this high up, but watching her move over to the huge floor-to-ceiling windows, gasping in awe... she steals the show, hands down.

"Oh, my God! I can't believe how high up we are," she exclaims, standing on tippy toes as she cranes her neck to see all the way down. Her hands grip the brass railing, and I hear myself groan softly. I move up behind her, my eyes glued to the only thing I'm interested in looking at from now on.

The dark clouds seem closer up here, but a single shaft of light breaks through them all as I get closer to her, shining through the thick glass like a spotlight guiding me to her.

"It's just so...", she trails off, turning suddenly and jumping a little when I move my hands onto her waist.

"Beautiful," I tell her, ignoring the view outside and pulling her close enough to me so she can feel just how much I mean it. That all-day hard-on of mine has kicked up a notch, and I'm glad when Jasmine's eyes widen as she feels

it pressing into her.

Happier still when she shudders a breath, and I feel her hands resting on my forearms.

“You’re not a slow mover... are ya?” she asks, blushing and looking down at her feet.

“Not when I know what I want,” I answer instantly.

“And what do you want, exactly?” she asks after chewing at her lip and looking up at me.

“I think you know. But here’s a refresher course...”

Leaning down to kiss her again, I slide my arms around her, and feeling hers hook around my neck, it’s like springing a steel trap. Our bodies are closer than ever, locking tight before I lift her right off the ground, making her squeak.

Her legs instinctively wrap around me, and I shift one hand to grab some of that fine behind I’ve been dreaming of for what feels like forever.

She mews and shudders again, receptive to my every touch. She hums a low groan of her own when I start to press my aching stiffness into the heat between her legs.

I groan louder, turning to make my way to the nearest soft surface to set her down on. I could hold her like this all day and all night... until the end of time.

The tour of the place consists of me turning and making my way to one of the huge white leather sofas finally earning their keep after all these years. Like most other surfaces in the place, they’re sure to get a workout if Jasmine’s as ready as she feels.

“James... James,” Jasmine gasps between my mouth over hers. Her voice gets shrill as my roaming hands discover her full chest.

“Hmmm?” I ask, shifting my attention just long enough to cock my brow in question.

I figure question time can wait until after show-and-tell, but I don't mind.

"I've just... I mean... I've never..." she wheezes, suddenly stiffening in my arms and then relaxing into a deep purr.

My own low growl joins in as my shins feel for the edge of the couch, easing her down gently as I get on my knees in front of her. No second prizes for guessing what I want to do next.

But hearing her say my name again, I give her my full attention. "What is it?" I murmur.

Half guessing her answer already, but knowing I couldn't be that lucky... I mean, finding her is a once-in-a-lifetime thing. There's no way she'd be...

"A virgin, James," she says with some force, focusing her energy on her words just long enough to get them out before she swoons backward, moaning with a mix of frustration and even a little annoyance.

I slow down, but just enough to keep her little honey pot simmering. My hands look huge as they move slowly over every inch of her I can access, gravitating to her chest and squeezing her ample breasts, not even wanting to say anything in reply. It seems like a sore point with her, and gripping my forearms again, she asks if I heard what she said.

By now, I've already moved my attention to those track pants of hers, thanking the gods silently for two things: making her pure and giving her pants that I can just slide off.

"James?" she asks, looking like she needs some reassurance.

"It... it doesn't bother you?" she asks. "I mean... I'm a lousy kisser, so I..." she tries to say, but my thick fingers pressing her sodden mound through her sweats give her my thoughts on the matter.

"I told you already," I croon. "There's only one flower I want, and it's called Jasmine," I remind her.

Watching her expression shift to *aww* before it becomes an *oooh* again. Her eyes are wide, and her tiny mouth opens and closes before she surrenders to it. This feeling we both share inside. This feeling I'm about to show *her*

inside.

She swears and then grunts loudly, already starting to buck hard from my hand against her sex, making me wish I had more hands, more arms.

Her own hands run over my neck and chest as she yields to her own arousal.

Suddenly she lifts herself enough so I can slide her pants off, gasping another moan when I take half her panties down with them, making me groan in disbelief. I've never seen anything so fucking perfect. Her smooth, creamy skin. Her thick thighs. Those magic hips look like they were made for my hands. Her whole body is like a playground I need to explore, but it's that sweet, virgin flower of hers that arrests my attention.

I watch her tense when I seize her panties hard—feeling her relax when we both hear the flimsy elastic tear under my grip.

Her hands automatically shift up to my face and then my head, gripping my hair hard as she pulls down. Not needing to, but guiding me where we both need me to be right now.

Breathing her in for a moment that I know I'll never forget, I watch up close as my fingers part her pussy lips. The sheen of her essence is like a glass I want to drink from forever. Her already quivering little sex, winking at me, begging me to help her out of more than just sweatpants.

Helping her swollen, stiff bud with one finger, I bury myself in her flower, tasting her for the first time. The hum of my groans buzzes through her whole body under me, a live current from a circuit that's about to be complete.

If I'm honest, though, I've never liked my name much.

James.

Until I hear it from her lips.

Slow at first, but as I explore her more with my mouth, it's like a beacon, letting me map her pleasure centers one by one.

I feel warm inside, the cobwebs blowing off my heart. It makes today and Jasmine even more special because I know it's real. She's real, and this magic between us is real. Everything else I've been doing has just been

killing time, waiting for her.

Waiting for this moment.

And “James” has never sounded so fucking hot, either.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jasmine

“Oooohhh, James, I...!”

Oops. Too late.

I thought it was maybe just a guy thing. The whole finishing early bit?

Every second of the car ride. Every fraction of a second in the elevator on the way up. Every millisecond of his fingers, hands, and tongue on me could only end one way.

That face. That sweet, handsome face buried tonsils-deep between my legs.

His thick fingers are like damned cocks themselves, double-jointed, stiff dicks probing me and stroking me, touching me just right and in places I never even knew could feel so good.

I still have no real idea what the man does all day, but seriously?

Who cares?

If James Jones only did *this*. If he only had his face and mouth right where I need 'em most, I couldn't care less if he was the Boston Strangler.

His deep, guttural grunts and groans make him a two-hundred-twenty-pound vibrator, and something tells me he's only running at low speed right now.

Not that I'd know anything about vibrators. Just things a girl reads about from time to time...

But damn. His mouth and I'm sure a little nibble from his perfect teeth on my aching clit is like pulling the pin on a grenade. I try to warn him, but he's only lapping harder, slurping louder. His fingers knead my entire pussy just right as his lips dial "O" on my swollen nub.

It feels so hard it might break, but then my first climax with James just... comes.

No other way to put it.

I don't know what it's really supposed to feel like, but the sound of someone screaming James's name doesn't even stop me from enjoying the ride of my life. His huge hands grip me harder. Squeezing me and pushing his face into me further, making everything spin.

His groans assure me he's enjoying himself, too, but I'm guessing not quite as much as I am.

I have more of the same when it feels like it couldn't get any more intense. Then a sudden release.

I feel something inside me literally disappear. The deep sounds of James and the room coming back into focus make me feel all those emotions come flooding out. I need to come back to reality.

It isn't long before I yank James' face up to mine.

I need him down there, sure, but right this second, I just need him to hold me. Hug me and kiss me.

Without even needing to say a word, that's exactly what he does.

Kissing me so I can taste myself mixed with him. His huge arms are cradling me like a giant blanket, keeping everything good in, like the feel of him against me. His smell.

It's only when I try to say something after he's held me for a while, I realize

I've been crying. Those emotions? Uhhh, I think I had a few sets of matching baggage there.

The "me" from yesterday would feel stupid, but the post-orgasmic me, courtesy of James here, is okay with it. Emotions and feelings, real ones... they've never been something I could show. I've never stayed anywhere long enough to get close to people, and the ones who did always ended up hurting me.

I don't think James is different because he looks like a god and can make me come just by looking at me. I know he's real because he senses how I feel, just seems to know what I need exactly when I need it, even if I'm not aware of it.

Like he does now.

Just holding me while he strokes my hair. He gives little approving sounds whenever I shift or let his hand move over me.

Suddenly, I realize he's still fully clothed, and I'm in a pretzel shape with my pants down. I jump with a start.

"Jesus, look at me! James," I gasp with an attack of shyness, but looking at him, looking over me, and judging by the thick line of his own arousal through his pants, I don't think it's bothering James too much.

"I am looking at you," he reminds me, letting a hand slide right up between my legs.

My voice gets higher as I try to say something that turns into another moan.

"Get used to it, Jasmine," he says matter-of-factly, with just a hint of smugness in his voice.

He has the confidence of a man who knows his instant power over me, but someone who's also man enough to know how to wield it. Right now, he's swinging it like a wrecking ball.

"I told you already. I want all of you, all the time," he says in a softer tone.

His stiff digit is already circling my greedy sex again, changing my mind in a second about one orgasm for the day being enough.

Even if it was my first, I don't think James is going to mind.

It isn't long before we're right back where we started. His fingers from one hand are holding my pussy wide open. His index finger traces a figure eight all the way around my trembling sex, pressing firmer on my time bomb clit with each pass.

Whatever spell he's casting, it works. Coupled with that fire in his eyes, my hands begin clawing at his pants to release that hot, fat dick. I hear myself begging him to fuck me, pleading by the time I feel another quaking orgasm start to rise.

James' growls and groans get deeper. His look and the tension in his body make him feel and look superhuman.

"I'm going to make you mine, Jasmine," he rasps, only adding to my insane need for him to be inside me.

"But I need you to understand," he explains calmly but firmly. "I'm going to put a baby in you. This is a forever deal. I only want it if you want it as much as I do."

I'm past begging for it now with honey like that dripping from his mouth. This girl wants it, and she wants it now.

Call it whatever you want, hormones, or just plain common sense. When a man like James gives you the forever speech, even if it is your first time, you know you're never going to get that offer again, and you say yes.

There's no reason to say no. What man could even try to take his place?

I've never thought about kids, but a baby... with James?

"You better not be kidding me," I tell him, surprising myself but making James grin ear to ear as he stands up, only so he can undress. He grins wider, watching me watch him for a change.

At first, he's tearing at his suit, itching to get naked. Keeping the delicious tension of anticipation going, he urges me with his chin to do what he's doing.

"Take off your top," he murmurs, loosening his tie. Keeping my eyes on his,

I have no problem lifting my top over my head and unhooking my bra. James' hand goes straight to his zipper as he orders me to open my legs and commands me to play with my tits for him.

"Mmm," he growls, stroking the swollen head of his cock through his pants, making me feel like going cross-eyed again already.

My teeth are etching a pair of valleys on my lower lip. My whimpering breath makes me feel like I could...

"Feel that little pussy of yours," he coos.

"Touch yourself for me, Jasmine. Show me that little pussy getting so wet I can see my face in it," he orders me.

Both my hands shoot south as if his eyes have them on strings.

I open myself for him, feeling myself properly for the first time ever. Every low groan and growl from James only makes me want to show him more.

His jaw clenches, and all that control he's had for so long is slipping along with his zipper.

I feel my eyes widen, and two of my own fingers shamelessly start to fuck myself as I watch James free his towering erection from his pants. His head rolls back with a deep moan before his penetrating eyes snap back to mine.

"James," I whisper, needing him so much it hurts inside, but able to see now why he wants my little virgin pussy to be ready.

He's got it all. Put it that way.

And I'm not just talking about the house, car, and money.

I mean. The man. Has. It. All.

And everywhere that counts!

He's pleased with my reaction as I begin to whimper again, my fingers thick with my essence.

James' own precome is pouring from his swollen helm like a gossamer thread, pulling my insides closer to it with every second I stare open-

mouthered.

“I... I want it, James,” I gasp, my head starting to shake and my whole body quivering. “I need it!” As if I’ll go mad if he doesn’t put that beautiful thick dick inside me.

“Take me... put a baby in me. But James... just... fuck me... pleeeaaasse,” I finally beg him, but he doesn’t want me to beg. He just wants to be sure I’m sure.

Yeah, I’ll be the first to admit I might not be in the best frame of mind right now to make lifelong decisions. However, in my heart of hearts, in my soul, I know James is the one. This is my one and only chance to make two lonely people happy forever.

In a single movement, he leans down and scoops me up.

“Not on the couch,” he rumbles as if he’s scolding himself for even thinking it.

“I’ll give you the guided tour of our bed,” he says in answer to my puzzled look that’s got more climax than questions in it right now.

That thick erection of his prods my rump with each firm step he takes across the stadium-sized penthouse, but we could be anywhere, and it would feel the same. Anywhere and anything with James is perfect.

I thought anything that made you feel this good was supposed to be bad for you.

Ha!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

James

I think we're good on the "she might be interested in me" angle, and a virgin to boot. Who wants this more than me?

No.

Needs this more than me.

Jasmine and I don't just *want* to be here. It's a pressing need, and I've never been more certain of anything in my life.

It's all falling into place so perfectly. Laying her down on the four-poster in our bedroom, I notice how small this place makes her look. Everything I have is so... big.

She squirms and purrs on the spot, watching me take off my clothes, doing her own version of the way I look at her. Yeah, it makes a man feel good to have some eyes on him, especially her eyes. The way they're rolling and the rate at which my seed's rising, I think we both know it's time.

I move over her and feel like the beast about to claim the lion's share. I also know that I'm bringing the two of us together for good—forging my line, our family line. Starting right now.

Jasmine's arms are quick to pull my whole weight onto her, which is

something I thought I should be mindful of, me being so big and all.

Once I see how much she likes it and I feel those soft curves slotting like pieces of a perfectly matching jigsaw puzzle, I know we're going to be a good fit. It isn't long before we're spun together like human spaghetti.

Mouths locked, and the size difference between us, like the age thing, just seems to vanish with the other laws of physics.

I end up on my back, with Jasmine hunched over me, pinning my wrists to the mattress, both of us panting like wild beasts. Our eyes lock, and I can feel the wet heat of her sex dragging down my stomach, thumping with a pulse rate to match the hardness that's waiting for her.

She takes her time once she feels my smooth helm pressing into her, eclipsing her tiny virgin entrance. Her eyes grow wider until that look of determination that's carried her through life shows itself to me.

Loosening her grip on my wrists, her palms slide up against mine, and our fingers curl together.

I smile and flex my organ, both of us gasping as she eases herself onto me slowly. Her body shivers and trembles. Her heavy chest ripples in waves that spread over her, inch by inch, as she takes some more of me.

There's intense pressure, and she squeaks with a wince that becomes an instant smile, groaning low and loud as she impales herself on everything I have for her. She makes me swell up inside her instantly, gripping her hips and helping them to rotate slowly at first until it's clear that Jasmine knows how to drive a stick.

"Mine..." I hear myself murmur, whispering repeatedly until it's a deep growl mixed with her squeals, shrieks, and moans once she discovers just how much more fun having more to play with really is.

I'm watching her hair dance from side to side. Her ample chest bounces until I squeeze it, then marvel at all of her as I slide my hands down her hips, kneading her ass as she pumps up and down my slick shaft like a greased piston.

I feel like I'll go insane if I don't come inside her. Her maddening grin meets

mine. The beads of sweat from her brow show me just how hard she's making this work, willing me to come inside her so she can come again as well. It's not a contest, and I know her first time certainly won't be her last.

So when I see her head shudder a nod and feel her tight, not-so-virgin sex starting to spasm on my volcano cock, I feel our future rising from deep inside me. Her head falls back as she arches her back. My hands grip those hips, knowing now why they're made so well.

"Jasmine!" I growl, grunting and snarling like a mad animal. The sound of her body hitting mine so hard as her whimpering gains a fever pitch until her whole body stiffens.

I groan aloud, certain that this is what heaven is. Knowing for sure that it's what love is. More than anything else, I know I've put a baby in her. Maybe a couple, if that rocket blast is any sign, but Jasmine ain't done just yet. The swelling of my organ to insane levels inside her sees her come harder than ever. Bouncing and shaking so much, I have to secure her to me—lashing her to safety by roping my arms tightly around her.

I pull her close as she keeps pumping my cock, determined to feel all there is and more, and making my mind as well as my balls explode.

We collapse into each other in a completely different way—totally spent for now—but I'm far from exhausted. I've never felt so alive.

Jasmine's new favorite hobby slowly winds down, and once it's down to a few shivers and some minor aftershocks, I pull the covers over us both. Holding her to my front and stroking her hair, I feel our hearts slow until it feels like one heart shared between us.

"And you've *never* done that before?" I ask her with mock sarcasm, my body rocking with silent laughter when I feel her shrug.

I know she hasn't, and just like everything with her, she's done it perfectly.

"Is it... is it like that every time?" she asks after a long silence.

"I sure hope so," I let her know, blowing air out from my cheeks, amazed anything could feel so good.

More than anything, I'm relieved she's not going anywhere from now on. I'll make sure of that. This thing we have between us? It's not the kind of thing I want to lose a grip on.

"I want you so bad, Jasmine," I hear myself murmur, making her look up at me with a strange expression.

"You've got me, James. I'm not going anyplace," she assures me, nestling back into my chest, stifling a yawn after a while as I trace my fingers through her hair. Her own fingers make circles in my chest hair that tickle then catch, making me wince until I smile.

It isn't long before we both fall asleep, still fully aware of the kind of sleep I guess only true lovers can know.

The best dream will be knowing I'm going to wake up again and still be holding her in my arms. I will do the same every time we go to bed for the rest of our lives. It's the kind of feeling that makes staying in bed all day seem like it should be mandatory. I think it will be for us. For the rest of today, at least.

I only move to make her more comfortable now and then. It looks like Jasmine likes to run in her sleep, but I don't mind.

It's having her here. That's all I need.



Every thought I have now is about our future.

That and something to eat when I feel my belly grumble with hunger after the light outside turns gray again. The rain is still running in silent silver rivers down the massive panes of glass as I ease myself out of our bed, scratching my stomach and yawning with sleepy contentment as I make my way through to the massive kitchen. The whole place suddenly feels brand new now that she's here. Wide open spaces and rooms aplenty, it has all the makings of a busy, noisy, and productive home.

I smile to myself as I try to keep the noise down, so I don't wake her, already knowing that it won't be long before silence like this will be a rare thing. It'll

be bottles, diapers, and babies filling every corner, and soon if I have my way.

For now, it's some leftovers that I gnaw on, standing naked by the fridge, still shaking my head. I really am the luckiest man alive. I can't take all the credit. My new lifelong teammate is only feet away, and I'm already planning a dinner for us both that'll be light-years from leftovers.

Anything she wants and a ton of stuff she doesn't need are already hers.

And that flower shop of hers? She doesn't have to do another day's work as long as she lives if she doesn't want to.

I get so excited. I feel like waking Jasmine up to tell her all this—really spell it out for her. The thought of how happy it'll make her plays on my mind like a surprise gift I can't wait to open.

I scoop up the tangled remains of our clothes when her phone drops out, and I figure the least I can do is rearrange everything, so it doesn't look like a crime scene before I go back to her.

I fold her clothes and set them on the bed with her phone on top before I sit on the edge of the bed. I could watch her sleep forever, but I'm already craving those baby blues staring back at me. I'm not sorry when I hear her mewling in her sleep and rolling over.

She lifts her lids slowly at first, and then I watch them widen as she smiles and purrs.

"Hi," I rasp, already feeling my greedy organ pulsing to life at the sight of her.

If she's awake, it means we can do things...

"Hi," she whispers in a husky tone, clearing her throat and signaling me to pour her some water from the glass pitcher on the bedside table.

"Thanks," she murmurs, holding the tall lead crystal glass with both hands and draining it in a way that makes me stifle a groan.

Is there *anything* she does that isn't a fucking turn-on?

“I needed that,” she smiles, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and letting herself fall back onto the mountain of pillows behind her. I wonder if she means the water or the large deposit of my seed I made in her earlier.

Her eyes move to her clothes and phone, drawing a little sound of approval. “You didn’t have to do that,” she murmurs, reaching for her phone out of habit. My hand reaches for hers, stopping her for a moment.

“I got something else for ya,” I whisper, leaning in and kissing her long and hard.

The phone in her hand pings, and I ease back on the throttle. I tell myself to let her wake up properly and do what girls do before I lay out the plans I’ve made for the rest of today and every day from now on.

She checks her phone, and her expression shifts to a look I don’t like. I feel a jolt in my gut that spells trouble. She scans the message twice before her eyes widen. She hurries to get out of bed.

“What is it?” I ask, hating whatever’s happened already because it’s made her look so worried.

“I got to go,” she says hurriedly, slipping out of my grasp when I try to grab hold of her, not even looking at me.

“Just... I got to go.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jasmine

This day has given me so much. I feel like a princess or maybe a queen now that I'm officially not a little girl anymore. So, I was shocked but not surprised when I got Phil's message.

Iris is in the hospital. She took a bad turn after I left, and he wants me to go see her. At her age, any illness most people soldier through could be life-threatening, so I feel myself springing into action.

Leaping out of James' bed and rushing to dress, I get a sick feeling in my stomach as I shake my head, kicking myself for thinking that someone like me could have something good happen for once. But no. Life always seems to want to balance out those good times with a cruel serving of bad whenever something nice happens to me.

That's what it feels like, anyway.

As for James? I wish I had the time to sit down and explain everything. Tell him how much Iris means to me and how she's more like family than a friend.

Iris needs me. I need her, and I know Phil needs all the support he can get right now. So, with a million emotions running through my body and brain, I rush to go.

James' calm and deep voice eventually brings me back to reality. His huge naked body blocks the doorway as he instructs me to tell him what's happening. I figure I owe him some sort of explanation, at least. He's quick to remind me of something when I give him the quick version of events—filling him in on not just where Iris is, but how much she means to me and why.

“How are you going to get to the hospital?” he asks, creasing his brow and looking annoyed. Not because I'm leaving, but because I'm trying to do it without his help.

“I'll catch a cab,” I reason, feeling all my adrenalin fade and my knees feel weak. The pleasant ache between my legs, courtesy of James, as well as the need to have him hold me, lay with me, and talk about nothing instead of dealing with this right now, hits me like a nine-pound hammer.

“I'll take you there myself,” he says matter-of-factly.

I feel relieved because he doesn't think I'm abandoning him and actually makes me smile when he reaches for his key, holding open the door.

“Uhhh... you forgetting something?” I ask, cocking my brow and scanning his nakedness.

“Hmmm... suppose I could make myself decent,” he murmurs, shooting me an apologetic look, promising he'll only be a minute after ordering me to relax.

“Everything'll be fine,” he assures me, moving swiftly to dress, amazing me as I automatically follow him.

I watch in awe as he transforms from a naked beefcake into a sharply dressed professional in what feels like seconds. It's kind of like watching a superhero transform but in reverse.

In moments, we're in his car again. He drives assertively but safely, weaving in and out of traffic, fully aware of how anxious I am. He's doing everything he can in his power to get me to Iris quickly and safely. I think he gets how important Iris is to me.

“Thank you,” I hear myself shiver, almost crying when his huge hand reaches

out for mine—squeezing it without a word but telling me everything with a single touch.

The same hands give me so much pleasure and know how to comfort me when I need it, making me realize how special James really is. All with the same powerful, in-control presence that he carries so naturally. I've always doubted that "a real man" existed, but I was wrong.

It's getting dark by the time we reach the hospital. The same one we left earlier today looks foreboding in the light drizzle. James parks near the entrance. I know by now to wait for him to open the door for me.

Forever the gentleman, he lifts me out of the car by my hand and gives me another reassuring squeeze. His huge arm is around my shoulders as he guides me inside. Making his way to the glassed-off reception area, I feel like Iris is in safe hands already when he explains the situation to a nurse, who's quick to buzz us through.

A doctor appears, and recognizing James, he gives him an update once James tells him why he's here.

"Iris' condition is stable," the doctor reassures him, turning his gaze to me. "Is she your grandma?" he asks in a soothing tone.

I feel my head shake. "She's more than that..." I stammer, feeling that wave of emotions rising up to crash over me again. James' hand on my back is holding it at bay as if he can absorb bad stuff just by being present.

I want to hug him for being here, for understanding. Most of all, I'm relieved Iris is okay.

"What happened?" I ask the doctor, who crimps a smile, glancing at his watch.

"You can go through," he says, moving his eyes to an open doorway. "But no excitement," he cautions us both, making me blush for some reason.

I think if I told Iris what I've been doing with my day, I might be pushing it. But I'll see how she's feeling. She's the one person I don't have any issue talking to about James, and it's going to shock her enough to see him here with me.

“I’ll wait out here,” James says.

I want James with me, but like the doc said, no excitement.

James is the kind of guy to raise a woman’s blood pressure, so I reluctantly go without him. Phil is coming out of another doorway, his ashen face lifting a little when he spots me.

“Jasmine, you came!” he sighs, and for the first time since I’ve known him, I give him a hug, comforting him as he shakes with emotion. He tells me how scared he’s been.

“How is she?” I ask him, making the man catch himself before he shows too much. He eases himself away from me and casually wipes his eyes.

He puffs some air out of his cheeks before smiling. “Go see for yourself,” he says, sounding brighter already. “She’ll be okay. Just her heart,” Phil says. The words were catching in his throat. “I got to get some air,” he murmurs, and I follow the sounds of beeping machines once he’s gone.

Iris is propped up in a bed that looks enormous because she is so tiny and frail.

“Hey, kiddo,” she croaks, holding up both arms with an effort, flapping her hands to signal me over to her, giving me just what I need to feel from her when she hugs me. All my reserves falling away, I end up blubbering like I’m already at her funeral.

I know what the doctor just told me, but I’m having all the “excitement” once my emotions finally spill over.

Iris is as kind and understanding as ever, hushing me and stroking my hair. She assumes I’m broken up because she is where she is, which I am, but my bawling is so unlike me. I can usually detach from everything, even Iris, when I feel things are getting too big on the emotional front.

I know in a second it’s because of James. He’s done more than claim me. He’s made me feel something I never thought I would in this life.

“You’re not crying a river over some man, I hope.” Iris teases me, making herself laugh and then coughs until I sit up to make sure she’s all right.

“I’m okay. I’m fine,” she says impatiently, waving off my concern and giving me that steel-eyed look.

The Iris I know and love is alive and well. She sees a lot more than I think.

“What happened, though?” I have to ask, wondering how she went from feeling fine to the hospital so quickly.

She huffs a sigh and lets her hands fall into her lap. “I guess the old heartstrings got a shock, is all,” she murmurs, giving a little shrug before frowning at all the tubes and wires hooked up to her frail body.

“What do you mean?” I ask, almost cautiously.

“When I saw that man this morning... ya know? Mr. Incredible... and then I saw him later again, tugging petals off some flowers,” she reflects.

I feel my stomach start buzzing with nerves—excitement, sadness, and a whole new set of feelings for James if Iris’s story is going where I think it is.

“I told you he was grieving. That nobody acts that crazy...,” she says, breaking off to cough again and setting off some alarm. A nurse appears and gives me a special look. I know I shouldn’t be talking to Iris about this. Not now.

“I think that’s enough action for a while, eh Iris?” the nurse croons, helping her with an oxygen mask and adjusting a drip line until Iris calms and nods, settling back into her pillows.

Her thin, frail hand reaches for mine.

“I got it wrong... Jasmine,” she whispers through the mask. “Man like that... the right girl... he’d do anything to keep her. Guy looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders, wondering if she loved him back.”

She trails off and closes her eyes, still awake, but just tired and obviously still weak. This is what she wants to tell me. She needs me to know.

If she wasn’t so ill, I could tell her everything. Tell her how James and I...

Well... that’ll have to be a story for when her heart can handle hearing the juicy details. Nothing gross, just I’m already dying to tell her about James

and me. I want to tell her how much I've fallen for him.

Now that I know what he was putting himself through earlier, I couldn't fall much harder or faster for the man. I know I'm in love, and it's the forever kind, just like James was saying.

More a man of live-action demonstrations, James has certainly opened my eyes and a few other places to show just how he feels.

"I'll come to see you in the morning," I whisper to Iris, getting up to go and pecking the top of her head gently as she nods.

"I'll be okay. Promise," she assures me. "And tell Phil to go home, will ya? He's a pain in the ass when he sees me like this."

I stifle my laugh and promise her I will tell him right away.

"Now get outta here," she murmurs. "Go get what's his name and make him buy you a steak dinner. And whatever you do, Jaz, don't let him out of your sight. He's a keeper."

I smile at the thought and feel like she will be fine.

It isn't until I'm back out in the corridor and spot James that it clicks. Iris *does* know. Of course, she does. She always knows everything before I tell her. If I know her, she would've been so mad at herself for not seeing what was so obvious between James and me, she probably did give herself a turn.

James looks more like he's standing guard than just waiting for me, and I rush into his arms as soon as I get close enough.

"Everything okay?" he asks, making me feel safe and comforted in a way that only he can.

I give a nod and look up at him, smiling. "She said you have to take me out for a steak dinner," I tell him, making him chuckle.

"Oh, she did, did she? And what else did she say?" he asks, holding me close as he walks us both out toward the exit.

I think I'll save the last thing Iris said for later. That whole "never let him go" thing.

Because she's right. James is a keeper. And I'm never letting go.
Not even for a second.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

James

“I guess I should’ve taken you out on a date before I *had* you all to myself,” I tell Jasmine, after helping her into the car.

She pouts a little. Then, before being able to stop it, she smiles.

“I think I know which I prefer already,” she croons, meaning it, too, by the tone of her voice.

Jasmine and I smashed straight into each other, and that’s what makes this so amazing.

“I just hope you don’t think... I mean...,” I try to explain.

I’m not sure I need to, but I want to be clear. I want her like nothing else, and if I had to go through another day without doing what we both need so badly? It would’ve been a very short date. We were destined to be bunk buddies long before choosing salad or soup and an entrée.

“I kinda did suggest we go straight to your place,” Jasmine tactfully reminds me, not letting me take all the credit for claiming her.

I think she’s done a bit of claiming herself. My heart. It bursts every time I look at her. It’s only been a day, but I already feel like I could...

“Married sixty years,” Jasmine says aloud thoughtfully, breaking my own thoughts as I have to do a double take.

“Huh?” I ask, confused.

Here I am, thinking about how fast things are moving, and she’s talking sixty years?

“Iris and Phil,” she chimes, crimping her lips and sighing to herself.

I watch her eyes move out the window, reminding myself to keep my own on the road. It’s still wet outside, and apart from wanting to take her home, I’d love to show Jasmine a good time in another way.

I just hope she likes food as much as I do. I eat. A lot. The suggestion of food at any hour is going to get my attention.

“I’m not exactly dressed for dinner, though,” she says, suddenly wincing to herself. “Maybe we could swing by my...,” she starts, but stops herself.

“You want to get changed? You look great,” I remind her, craving her whatever she’s wearing. Especially now that I know what’s underneath and just how good it feels.

I can see she doesn’t want me to see her apartment. This leads me to make a confession of sorts.

“I followed you home, Jasmine... twice,” I tell her, feeling her head snap around and focus on me while I keep my head straight. Ten and two on the wheel and eyes front—my go-to confessional pose.

“Twice?” she asks in a rising tone.

I expect her to get mad or have second thoughts, but she finally sighs loudly again and throws herself back deeper into the soft leather of the sports seat.

“Iris was right,” she says softly to herself. “Why didn’t you say something to me in the store or buzz my buzzer? I would have let you in,” she says, batting my arm and scolding me playfully, making me feel dumber than I already do for acting like such a bonehead instead of just doing it as she says.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you want me to go to your place now?” I counter,

pulling up at a stoplight and casting a look to challenge her.

I'm only playing, but I can see straight away it's hit a nerve.

"Or... we can go do a little shopping," I suggest.

"I'm not exactly dressed for dinner either," I remark, backpedaling again.

It feels like every word's just digging me into a deeper hole when I notice Jasmine's face falling. It's hardly the time of night to go clothes shopping. I don't blame her. It's going to take time to show her how different things can be for her—for us both if she'll let me.

The light changes, but there's no one behind me, so I turn to tell her, taking her hand.

"I meant every word, Jasmine. I'm a forever guy, and I want to spoil you rotten, okay? If I want to take you clothes shopping and take us to an overpriced restaurant, humor me."

She seems to like that explanation, pecking me on the cheek before someone finally honks at me, and I keep driving.

"We can go to my place anytime you want," she says after we drive in silence for a while.

"I guess it's no secret where I live or what I do. And you're right," she agrees. "But it's going to take some time to adjust," she adds. "I do have work in the morning, so I don't want to be up all night..."

Pulling across two lanes and stopping by the sidewalk, I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"*Work?*" I stammer, the word and her name never matching up in my mind and not matching my plans for her. Not matching my plans for us.

Yeah, it's cute. She has a flower stall, but I'm sorry. No woman of mine is going to be on her feet all day for lunch money. No way.

I want to say it a thousand different ways—to have it tattooed on my forehead if I need to. She's mine now, and that means *us*. It means everything I have is hers. There's no goddamned *need* to be standing in a freezing flower

shop all day.

She gives me a confused look. I remember how concerned she was about her friend Iris just now. I know what it feels like to start something from nothing—to watch it grow, to make it.

I don't want to deny her those things if that's what she really wants.

"James, what's the matter? You all right?" she asks.

I notice how hard I'm clutching the wheel. My eyes in the rearview mirror are wide and blazing. My mouth is set in some crazed grimace.

"I think I'm just crazy," I admit—my second confession for the night.

"Crazy?" she echoes back, giving me a sidelong look, making me relax.

"Crazy for you, Jasmine," I tell her softly. I feel my whole body relax hearing her name and seeing her sweet face only inches from me as she sits with me in my car, right where she belongs.

She flushes with embarrassment, but the good kind as I rephrase everything I'm thinking to her, so I don't come across as a total control freak.

"I guess I'm just old-fashioned. I'm already thinking about you spending your days living the good life, not slaving over a bunch of hothouse flowers in a refrigerated shop," I almost groan, pained at the thought of it.

"Ummm... I actually love my job," she says firmly in a deep voice, making a funny face and shaking her head a little.

She makes me laugh out loud because she reminds me of myself always acting so serious.

I feel my mouth open, and the words just come out.

"I... I love you, Jasmine. I just want to provide for you and make you happy," I tell her, watching her face get serious once she sees and hears that I'm not kidding.

I've never told anyone I love them. From the look on her face, I'd put money down betting nobody's ever told Jasmine they love her, either.

Not the way I do.

They couldn't. Nobody can.

I've said my piece, though, for now.

Noticing how quiet she gets so quickly, I figure it's best for me to let it sink in.

I don't need her to tell me the same back because I said I love her. I say it because it's true. One thing I know already is I'll never have a problem telling her.

In fact, I kinda like the way it sounds when I'm looking at her, like the words were meant just for her. It comes out so naturally.

"Maybe we *should* eat," she finally says, keeping it light and widening her eyes as she fans her face with her hand. "I think I'm starting to hallucinate from hunger."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jasmine

He loves me. He loves me!

I'm in a state of shock of the best kind when James says it so calmly.

There's no tone of being casual in his voice.

It's not a command, and it's not a question, either.

He says it so matter-of-factly, and when I least expect it. Then I babble some nonsense about needing to eat, as if I hear things because I'm so weak from hunger.

Once James starts driving again, it's a few blocks until I realize I haven't said it back to him. My reflex is to tell him—tell him I love him back because I do, more than I can ever say with words.

It's the words that stick in my throat, and only because I've never heard them, let alone said them back to anyone.

Ever.

I don't know he can see its effect on me because James is always so... James.

He is so damned perfect he can tell me he loves me after one day and not even mind when I don't say it back.

The car pulling up near a brightly lit restaurant jolts me from my emotional reverie. I don't know where we are or how long we've been driving. It's as if the words "I love you" are still ringing in my ears.

James beats the doorman to my side and helps me out of his car. He tosses the keys to a valet and hooks his arm through mine. He leads me up a red carpet before a set of low and wide stone steps takes us inside. I literally hear my breath catch.

It's the most elegant, beautiful-looking restaurant I've ever seen. From the glances we get from the diners who can see us, I look up at James, wondering if there's been a mistake.

I'm not dressed for takeout drive-thru, let alone five-star dining. James squeezes my hand as he's greeted by the maître 'd. I'm kind of ignored as if I'm some accessory or man-bag that James happens to have on his arm.

He's instantly recognized, and they arrange the best table for us with a group of people in the middle of their dinner looking more than annoyed when they're asked to move.

I can feel my jaw hanging open, noticing all the beautiful women at other tables, and here I am in my sweatpants, but they're looking at James, not at me. He could take any one of them, right here in the restaurant.

As I'm seated and look over at him, James' eyes are locked on me, even in my sweatpants. That dark, brooding look gives way to a new blaze in his eyes. His smile makes them shine, and the candlelight from the table flickers in them.

He loves me, alright. Even in a fancy restaurant in my sweatpants, he still has that intense look that makes me shift in my seat. I instantly want him to give me the same look while he fills me with more than just dinner, but he will. I know it. I can see it in his eyes.

"I figure we can go clothes shopping anytime," he finally shrugs, dismissing the waiter's attempt to give us menus.

Casually, he moves his intense gaze, but I can still feel it burning intensely into all of me long after he looks away. Instead, James orders for us both, speaking Italian fluently and drawing a low, quiet moan from me.

He can speak Italian, too? Holy crap! I think my next orgasm's going to put a hole in the bed.

“It’s an Italian restaurant,” he explains with a puzzled look, noting my expression, curling his lip and cocking his brow once he understands just how horny it makes me when he speaks such a sensual language.

“I mean...,” he continues, “it’d be a waste,” he muses, forcing me to concentrate. I’ve already skipped dinner in my mind, and I’m wondering if the restaurant has a hotel nearby. I need him that much already, but he’s somehow able to keep himself together while I melt into a puddle as he speaks.

The other diners have resumed their meals, and it’s almost as though they’re just extras in a movie—white noise in the background so I can focus all my attention on James.

My man...

The thought, mixed with how damned horny he’s making me, must be showing, and it pleases James.

“A new outfit tonight only means I’d tear it off you,” he says aloud, almost defiantly. I feel a jet of heat flush from my core to the top of my head.

“After dinner, I’ll be picking up right where we left off,” he adds in a husky tone, reading my body as well as my mind.

“If you think you’ll be able to walk straight enough by the time I’m through? Well... see how you feel about going to work in the morning,” he promises me, as if he can see the future *and* read minds.

Something in me hopes he’s right. Another part of me knows he is, and I feel myself shuddering already, practically scrunching up fistfuls of the tablecloth and grinding my teeth by the time our first course arrives.

James looks happier than ever. I know he’s as hard as I am wet right now, but he seems to like this game of dine-in foreplay, driving me wild just by sitting here looking at me. Anyone else looking can only see a couple at dinner.

I’ve got to say, I don’t mind it either, but I’m already hoping it’s not like a

ten-course meal.

“Challenge accepted,” I shiver, composing myself enough to start eating.

I watch James observing me bumble my way through a plate of the most delicious pasta, smiling to himself without even getting a drop of sauce on his chin. I look like a marinara finger painting and knock over the finger bowl, then the whole candle arrangement as I struggle to clean myself up.

James smiles wider, straightening everything and looking hungrier with every mouthful from the seemingly endless plates of food they bring out.

Maybe it feels that way because I think we’re both ready for the bedroom by dessert, but James insists we share the cheesecake, scooping up mouthfuls of it on his fork and feeding it to me. My hands and fingers grip his huge digits, knowing they’re capable of serving me up a hell of a lot more than just dessert.

In hindsight, sweatpants are probably the best thing to wear when dining out with James. I’ve never eaten so much in one sitting, and I see that James would have no problem devouring the same all over again.

He calls for the check, snapping his fingers like a magician and making the whole restaurant turn to see. I’m sure I hear a few of those perfect, stunningly beautiful women sigh, or maybe it’s just my own. I see the men creasing their mouths and looking down. All of them are as much in awe of James as I am.

I watch a few of them as we leave, narrowed eyes over the tops of huge menus, or flat-out stink eye for me being on his arm from the women.

James’s eyes have been glued to me all night, and apart from driving back to his place, they stay on me all the way up to where we left off. Just like he promised, he makes it crystal clear where he wants me from now on. For a little while, at least.

“Here with me... this is where you belong, Jasmine,” he croons. He slowly undresses me at first until even his steel resolve crumples in the face of our need for each other, tearing the clothes off both of us between locking his firm mouth over mine. Those strong, thick hands are ready to spoon me fuller than cheesecake ever could.

I hate to admit it. I can't believe that's even true, but it is.

"James..." I gasp, swooning as he lays me down, ready to claim me all over again.

"I... I love you."

He growls low, and his lip curls. His grip on me tightens, and I feel his instant reply.

Easing the full length of his stiffness into me in one slow movement, I moan like I never have before and grab hold of his buns of steel so tight it makes him growl deeper.

"I love you, Jasmine," he reminds me.

He starts moving in and out of me slower, saying something in Italian until I feel my eyes rolling back in my head. He could be reciting the menu for all I know, but who cares?

He's a man who knows what he wants, but James Jones knows how to care for it once he has it.

You won't hear this little florist complaining. Not one little bit.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

James

I think it's safe to say I give Jasmine at least a half dozen reasons why she doesn't need to go to work, each one of them courtesy of me filling her with my seed. I hear her call my name until she's purring like a kitten.

Leaving her so satisfied, I'm curious to see if either of us will be walking straight by morning. She's up and about before dawn, determined to prove her point.

I've been watching her all night between kidding myself I can sleep now that she's here with me. It only feels natural that I'd want to keep her here for more of the same.

I can see how much her store means to her—Iris, too.

“You want to grab breakfast on the way?” I ask her, propping myself up on my elbow, watching her struggle to find her clothes and pretend like she can move around properly.

“Uh huh,” she says absently, the sheen from everything I put in her last night trailing down her thighs as she bends over right in front of me.

Reminding me of the first time I saw her up close, which was only a day ago.

I clear my throat loudly without taking my eyes off what I know is mine now,

curling my finger in a come hither motion to summon her over to me. All four feet from where she's bent over.

"You never got your good morning kiss," I inform her, patting the space in the bed next to me.

"Oh no, you don't!" she cautions me, raising a finger herself and trying to avoid the inevitable.

"James... James," she says with feigned authority.

But we both know it's useless.

Falling back into my arms, I kiss her good morning again and again for every moment I didn't get to while she slept, making sure she knows that this is how it is now. How I want every morning of our lives to be from now on.

"I'll drive you to work," I eventually sigh. "But if you really want to run your flower store, then I'm going to be hanging around there an awful lot," I warn her.

She seems to like the idea, but I have to promise not to act weird in front of her customers.

"I won't," I tell her confidently. "I've got you now. You're mine," I sigh again, feeling like I'm on a cloud hearing myself say it. I fall back onto the pillows and hold her until she growls with mock annoyance.

"It's my baby, James," she says suddenly, making my heart leap. Hearing her say the word "baby" just gives me an instant thrill, like I've won a jackpot.

I do know what she means. The store is her baby. At least it is for now.

She'll have a real-life baby of our own growing inside her very soon if she doesn't already.

"I know it is," I tell her, pecking her lips and holding her face in my hand.

"Just let me be a pain in the ass and spoil you rotten in the meantime, okay?" I suggest.

"In the meantime?" Jasmine asks with a puzzled look.

“Sure,” I remark, “Because soon, real soon, I think we’ll have a different kind of baby to get up for at all hours, don’t you?” I ask, cocking my brow.

“I never thought about that,” Jasmine murmurs, as if she’s suddenly torn between the idea of one over the other.

“Then there’s you moving in here. We’ll probably have to redecorate. Or would you prefer to live someplace else altogether?” I ask casually, even though I can feel my heart and mind racing at the idea.

All of it.

All of her.

All to myself every day from now on. What’s not to get excited about? Who wants to go to work, anyway? I know I don’t.

Her look goes from determined to unsure to overwhelmed in a moment.

“Alright, alright,” I soothe her, rubbing her back with my hand.

“I’m just giving you the heads-up, and this is what I mean about you just letting me be a pain in the ass,” I remind her, noting her suspicious look, which only makes me smile wider than ever.

“James... what have you done?” she asks ominously.

“You’ll see. Then you can decide... about work, I mean.” I tell her, leaving her hanging, but it’s just for a little while.

I really want her to see that she can have a business and not have to be there the whole time. Hell, I know all about that. It’s only fair I show her just how easy it can be.

She’s more determined than I figured and not just getting herself ready for a day at work after the night we just shared. Jasmine asks me repeatedly to explain what I mean, and I almost cave in, but that would ruin it. I want her to see for herself.

“Let’s get ready and get to work, eh?” I reply at least a dozen times before she notices the time and realizes we can’t sit around all day talking about it.

She’s a strong, independent woman—her own boss. I feel prouder of her than

ever once we pull up in front of her little store.

Iris' husband, Phil, is waving to us from the coffee shop, but Jasmine's attention is on her store. The store already has a couple of early bird customers, and someone else is serving them from behind her counter.

"What the-?" she says hotly but snaps her eyes to mine and watches me smile and then shrug. I can only give her a "see, told ya..." expression.

She looks back into the store and, squinting her eyes, she makes out who's serving.

"I heard through the grapevine that somebody who bought flowers yesterday was a little less than polite," I explain in a low tone.

Jasmine peers again at who's serving in her store before I watch her expression shift into a satisfied smile. "Well, well... but how did you...?" she asks, turning back to face me.

"I have my sources," I explain cryptically. "Janitors hear everything, and good ones report everything back to their boss when asked," I add.

"But when? How?" Jasmine asks, still wanting all the details, but I only shrug, urging her with my chin. "We should go see how Phil's doing. Your store's in capable hands," I assure her.

Laura might be a passive-aggressive bitch, but she's a fine attorney and one with a secret passion for floristry it seems. I thought sending her to work for Jasmine might teach her a lesson in manners, but it looks like it's done more than that. I might've just lost one of the best attorneys we have. But, ah, well... plenty more where she came from, I'm sure.

Perhaps if Laura does well, Jasmine could interview her as a prospective employee to help out so she can spend less time standing in her store and more time enjoying herself in other ways.

Jasmine gasps suddenly, as if she's just remembered something critically important. "Iris! Oh, my God, I totally forgot. I was supposed to go see her this morning," she groans, closing her eyes tight, beating herself up again.

"Hey," I croon, taking her hand. "We're going to go visit Iris once we've had

some breakfast, okay?”

“It’s still early. We’ve got all morning to go to the hospital. Let’s ask Phil how she’s doing, huh?” I suggest.

Glad when she smiles and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, I see again how much Iris and Phil mean to her.

“Iris is doing fine,” Phil tells us, ushering us in and surprising me, but not Jasmine so much, when he slides two full plates of bacon, eggs, and toast with roasted tomatoes between us with a pot of fresh coffee nearby which he uses to fill two giant mugs.

“I was going to head down after breakfast,” he adds, and I give Jasmine a knowing look.

“Mind if we join you?” I ask.

“I think Iris would like that,” Phil says, smiling as he looks from Jasmine to me.

I guess we don’t need a sign or T-shirts made up. Anyone with eyesight can see that Jasmine’s mine now, and that I’m hers.

A couple... and all in one day. Most people only dream about this kind of romance, but it does happen.

Phil leaves us to have our breakfast, letting Jasmine know her store’s in great hands as he takes a mug of coffee next door for Laura.

Jasmine absently plucks the petals of a wilting bunch of flowers on the table, most likely out of habit than anything else.

“This is you being a pain in the ass, right?” Jasmine interrogates me once we’re alone.

I think for a moment, hamming it up before smiling a big yes.

“Get used to it,” I remind her. “Because whenever you need something, and every time you don’t, I’m going to be there... spoiling you, helping you,” I continue.

Jasmine suddenly looks shy. Embarrassed. She glances down at her lap as a

knowing smile plays on her lips. Her fingers pluck gently at the flowers now.

“What are you thinking?” I ask her after watching her for a while, eating like a starved man as I sit across from her.

Knowing I’ll never be full when it comes to my flower.

My Jasmine.

“*He loves me... He loves me not...*,” she hums in a low whisper, plucking petals and giving me a dreamy-eyed look.

“*He loves me... He loves me...*”

“Lots,” I tell her, putting my hand over hers and gazing intently into her eyes until she forgets all about the flowers.

“He loves you *lots*,” I remind her in a gentler tone, leaning over to kiss her.

And he always will.

Forever and ever.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

Jasmine

Iris' recovery was miraculous once she saw James and me together that morning when we visited her in the hospital. Even the doctors said by the way she practically leapt out of the bed, hugging James and me until we couldn't breathe, it was as though her heart was instantly healed. It's like seeing me so happy was all she needed to forgive herself for thinking James was anything but madly in love with me.

She still brings me my morning coffee, and I still have flowers set aside for her coffee shop. Not the unsold flowers from the day before, though—there never are any. No, it isn't James doing his thing where he gets people to buy them because he pays them to.

Business is booming and having Laura here most days means I can keep James happy and still get my hands dirty in other ways—with flowers. Something I'll always love doing, but there's really no contest when it comes to James. He wants me to have whatever makes me happy and running the store part time now makes me happier than ever.

This morning, Iris is carrying the coffee in one hand with a little paper sack pinched between her fingers and a stool from her shop in the other. My instinct is to rush and help her, but she playfully scolds me, looking me up and down before moving behind the counter and setting the stool down.

“I... brought you... a... stool,” she puffs, waving off my concern and rallying herself before scanning me again.

I open my mouth to tell her she didn't have to. If I need something to sit on, there are plenty of crates, but I don't come to work to sit on my ass all day.

“Girl, in your condition, you should be sitting down more... and eating more,” she adds, passing me the paper sack.

“Eat,” she commands me, and I already know it's one of her giant chocolate muffins, the kind she always sells out of as soon as they're out of the oven. I'm not going to argue with her, and taking a seat, I devour the baked treat, groaning with pleasure that isn't just for show, either.

Iris' food is always the best, and this morning, more than ever.

“What do you mean by a ‘girl in my condition?’” I finally ask, licking my gooey fingers and taking a sip of coffee.

Iris shakes her head and gives me a sidelong look.

“Have you told him yet?” she asks me in an almost accusing tone, making the pit of my stomach jolt.

“No, not yet. Hey? How did you know?” I ask her, catching myself and wondering if maybe I did tell Iris.

About the baby.

I have been pretty absent-minded lately.

If it's so obvious to Iris, how obvious is it to James? He hasn't said anything. Just tells me to keep eating and stop whining about the few pounds I've put on.

He still tells me I'm a ways off from being what he considers a healthy weight for a girl of my height, as he likes to put it. When I stand next to him or lie on top of him, I kinda have to agree. Next to him, I feel tiny, even at three months.

“Just when were you going to tell me?” Iris adds with a feigned offense, breaking into a warm smile instead and hugging me.

“I’m so proud of you, Jaz. So happy, too. You’ve made me the happiest old lady in the world this past year. And now a baby!” she exclaims.

“But... how did you know?” I ask. I have to ask.

Iris creases her brow. “You kidding me?” she shrieks.

“A man like that asks you to move in with him, *and* the fact you can’t even walk straight most days, Jasmine. Jeez, I may be old, but I’m not stupid!” she says loudly, slapping her thigh and laughing until she chokes.

I flush red at first, but she’s right. Before long, we’re both howling like maniacs. Iris is doing her best impression of me trying to act “normal” after a night of James after dark.

Suddenly, the sound of the brass bell above the door makes us both stop.

“What’s so funny?” James asks, his deep voice silencing both of us in a second, with Iris suddenly needing to go back to her store. She stops just long enough to squeeze James’ forearm before she does what she always does best—walks back over to her coffee shop. She shoots me her sly wink as she passes the window.

“Everything all right?” James asks, noticing the change in my mood.

I’ve gone from crazy laughter to a bundle of nerves, knowing I should’ve told James and Iris, too, but I only found out last night.

Although I had kind of figured I was pregnant, I never found the right moment to bring it up. With James on tap, it is pretty easy for a girl to get distracted.

“Jasmine?” he asks, moving over to me and taking my hands in his.

I’m still on my stool, which is just as well. I have a dizzy spell, which I have been getting lately, and James squats down in front of me, telling me firmly to let him know what’s wrong.

Nothing’s wrong. Everything is just perfect.

Okay, here goes...

“Remember how I said the store was my baby?” I ask, watching him consider

it and nod before he gives me a blank look.

“Well...”

I try to find the words but reaching for James’ hands, I hold them over my belly, pressing them gently but firmly. It takes a moment, but once I see James connect the dots, I see just how happy it makes him. I already wish I’d told him sooner.

It feels like the one thing I can give him that he can’t get anyplace else. All his money and influence... all that charm he oozes. It takes two to make a baby.

“Our baby,” he murmurs. His lips form a crooked smile at first, and then he hugs me so tight I feel the stool disappear from under me. He lifts me up into his arms and spins me around.

“A baby!” he calls out. “I’m going to be a daddy!”

I watch his face keep moving long after he stops spinning, making me way dizzier than I was a minute ago, but it’s the best feeling.

“Then just tell me yes. Right now,” he says, smiling so wide I think his face might actually peel off his skull.

I feel my expression going blank, my mind wandering as I watch him.

“Yes to what?” I ask, sounding way blonder than I am.

“Just say it,” he pleads in a softer tone. “Make today the happiest day of my life, Jasmine. Tell me I’m going to be a dad, and then tell me you’ll be my wife.”

It’s the last thing I expect to hear him ask me, and here in the store, of all places—me in my grubby denim overalls and track pants.

Him in his thousand-dollar leisure wear.

James Jones, a man with the world at his feet, wants me to be his wife.

“Yes... Yes.” I tell him calmly, saving all the shrieking and hollering for when Iris creeps back over in a few minutes. It’s as if she already knew that James would ask once he found out I was carrying his child.

Our baby.

The instant family neither of us ever had. I can tell from the look in his eyes that whoever they are, they're going to need a little brother or sister to play with... and as soon as possible.

EPILOGUE

FOUR YEARS LATER

James

“Nervous?” Iris asks me, helping me with the flower on my lapel.

I feel my head stabbing a nod as I ask her the same.

Iris and Phil are renewing their wedding vows as part of our own little anniversary ceremony we have every year.

We do it all again—the dress, the flowers, the big church with an organ playing, and our family.

Iris and Phil, plus the James Jr., Jeanette, and Jaxon Jones I only ever dreamed of having once.

All here and together every year to celebrate.

Just us.

To celebrate our family and the bond with my wife. Today is also about Phil and Iris always showing Jasmine and me just how long true love lasts.

“Wait sixty-three years, James. Love her like you do a little more every day. Grow old together. Laugh and cry together, and yeah, even get a little nervous,” Iris tells me. Her voice fills with emotion, and her eyes are a little misty, but they’re not sad tears.

“I’d be nervous if I wasn’t nervous,” I add, hearing the tremor in my own voice.

Knowing I’d never forgive myself if I forgot, even for just one day. For one second, even, but I know I never could forget—never forget just how amazing Jasmine and our three beautiful babies are.

The life we have together now... I’d be nervous if I took it for granted, is what I’m saying.

“Well... shall we?” Iris asks, and I offer her my arm.

Helping her slowly but surely to the altar, joining my wife, who is right by Phil in his wheelchair. His withered hand reaches for Iris’s and squeezes it in a way I guess only sixty-three years of loving someone so much could.

My own hand finds Jasmine’s, looking down at her, mouthing the words “I love you” to her for the twentieth time today. I know our love will last just the same. When you find the one, many problems you may have disappear because nothing else matters.

Iris knows it. Phil knows it. Now Jasmine and I know it.

My eyes feel a little itchy. Must be the A/C in the church or something, but looking down at the kids... Little James Jr. in his tuxedo. In their most formal onesies, his brother and sister, Jaxon and Jeanette, gurgling and kicking in their strollers.

It’s quite a sight, and one I’ve never been prouder of or more fulfilled to be a part of.

Our family. Us.

Jasmine and James Jones. Renewing our vows every time we touch or say I love you. Or when we make love in other ways.

For now, it’s with words, and I feel more than just one tear rolling down my cheek once Jasmine and I exchange the vows we make anew every year.

It’s Little James Jr. who really undoes me and everyone else as he reads a poem he wrote about his mommy and daddy who get married every year, and his grandma and grandpa as he calls them. The kind of thing that only a

three-year-old could come out with. It melts all our hearts because it's just like him and all our little babies. It's real, and it's from the heart.

After Jasmine and I say "I do" all over again, Jaxon groans, then claps when we kiss. Now it's Iris and Phil's turn.

Jasmine lifts the babies up, and all of us huddle closer, watching and listening, learning really. Two people who've shared so much and still do after so long. It only makes Jasmine and me feel like we've just begun the most amazing journey of our lives, and I can't wait.

I hope the next sixty years are slow, long, and as great as the past four. It's made me feel four years old because my life only started the day I met her—the day I plucked my favorite flower.

My Jasmine.

Mine.

EPILOGUE

THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

Jasmine

“Can you just go have a word with her?” James asks, giving me a crazed look.

I guess any dad with a teenage daughter who thinks she’s in love would act the same.

Gnawing my lip, I act like I have to think for a moment.

“I don’t know. He could be *the one*,” I tease him, knowing how bent out of shape James gets whenever the subject of his first daughter, our oldest, and boys comes up.

“She’s just a little *young*, is all I’m saying,” he hisses in a whisper, making sure Jeanette can’t hear us as she sits at the dining table, plucking petals from a flower. She sighs to herself before starting over with another one from the vase.

“Alright, alright,” I drawl, moving to pass him in the kitchen, shaking my head a little, rolling my eyes and stifling a giggle.

Jeanette’s got a crush on a boy at school, and her dad here thinks... well... I don’t know *what* he thinks, but if James being overprotective of me is any indicator, I think Jeanette might be better off joining a convent.

At least until her old man's satisfied she's old enough to look at a boy, let alone have a schoolyard crush on one.

I can feel James' eyes lingering on me, and his ears peeled as he spies on us from the kitchen. Jeanette doesn't seem to notice me, and I smile, feeling kinda proud as both mom and florist to see her following in my footsteps.

"He loves me... He loves me... *not*," she murmurs, plucking the last petal and noticing me, tossing the flower down in disgust.

"Flowers are stupid!" she growls. "Boys are stupid!" she snarls with greater intensity, and not just for effect.

She's really upset.

"Hey... hey baby," I coo, kissing the top of her head, putting my arms around her. "It's okay. Everything's all right. You want to tell me what's goin' on?" I ask, pulling up a chair next to her.

I hear my darling husband moving noisily in the kitchen, making himself a sandwich, no doubt in celebration of hearing his eldest daughter proclaim that boys are stupid.

One to team dad. Boys, zero.

It takes some doing, but I get the full picture from Jeanette. She likes a boy, but he's in a different class, and she's not sure he even knows she exists.

Kinda rings a bell somehow—the whole wanting to know but not knowing thing.

Thirteen years. Feels like yesterday.

"Sweetie," I explain to her, "if he's right for you, it'll just happen. You don't have to force things. True love? That kind of has a way of taking care of itself."

Thinking of my man and the life we have together, I figure this is pretty solid advice coming from mom right now. Right?

"Mom, what the heck are you talking about?" Jeanette says curtly, screwing up her face.

“Who said anything about true love? I just want to know if he *likes* me or not. Why do you have to make everything so... so gross? You’re worse than dad,” she whines, rolling her eyes and giving me a pained look.

Okay, maybe not everyone has the same experience as James and I did. Do. I mean, are.

“When’s dinner, anyway?” Jeanette asks, flipping from one topic to the next, forgetting how upset she was just now. She’s suddenly hungry for anything else.

It’s kind of weird to see so much of her dad and me in her, but that’s what kids are.

“Dinner’s soon,” I announce, making her groan loudly with shameless drama.

I don’t mind one bit, though. I love seeing Jeanette and all our kids get to be themselves, no matter what. It’s what makes being a mom so great.

I know my daughter, and she’s hurting over this whole boy crush thing. I get it. She just wants to know if he likes her or not. I guess boys and men sometimes have trouble expressing their feelings.

“Honey? One day, the right man will come along, and you’ll just know. Anything before that is filling time until they do,” I tell her, bunching my nose when she rolls her eyes.

“Jesus, Mom, you sound like Grandma Iris,” she groans.

The deep, rumbling tone of James’s voice booms from the kitchen, full of the sandwich, by the sounds of it, but carrying the authority that only dad’s voice can.

“Language, Jeanette. That’s a dollar in the swear jar!” he calls out, making her shoulders sag a little further.

“I miss ’em, Mom... Grandma and Grandpa,” she murmurs.

I can tell she’s not just dealing with a crush and teenage angst on top of being a dollar down. She’s going through a lot right now.

“I miss them, too, sweetie. I miss them, too,” I console her, hooking my arm

around her shoulders and giving her a big squeeze. I promise her I'll put a dollar in the swear jar for her.

"Where do you think they are?" she finally asks, breaking my own little reverie in my mind about Iris and Phil.

They wanted to leave the stores and the whole building to James and me in their will, but James wasn't having any of that. He offered to buy it off them instead, at triple the market value, so they could have the kind of life we have. That was right before they left us.

Both of them just... gone. Just like that.

"Mom? Where do you think Grandma and Grandpa Iris are?" Jeanette asks me again as I wipe my eyes.

I miss Iris so much...

"Italy, by the looks," James answers her, coming out from the kitchen through the swinging wooden doors, a huge sandwich in one hand and flapping a postcard in the other before he passes it to me.

"Came just now..." he adds, and both Jeanette and I get wide-eyed and open-mouthed, always loving it whenever Iris and Phil drop a line.

When they sold us the building, they decided to do what they've always wanted to—travel the world together. Their new lease on life is nothing short of awe-inspiring, and sometimes days, even weeks, pass when we don't hear from them at all.

Jeanette reads their little message before looking like she's had all her problems solved. She races off to show her brothers and sisters the postcard from Iris and Phil.

James offers me a bite of his sandwich, which I take if only to have another chance to hold his hands as he helps put meat in my mouth.

"Italy, huh?" I ask him, speaking with my mouth full as he leans over, murmuring something in Italian in my ear. His hand slides up my thigh under the table, helping me translate instantly.

"She can have a boyfriend when she's twenty-one," he rasps, putting in his

final two cents with Jeanette's little boy problem.

I've got a boy problem of my own right now—the man of my dreams holding a giant meat sandwich. The perfect life with my dearest friends and family living their own dreams.

Kids all occupied in another part of the house, and now he starts with the Italian talk?

I catch a glimpse of the flowers my daughter's picked clean, scattered on the kitchen table as James scoops me up, turning like a man on a mission and marching me straight to our bedroom. I smile to myself like it's our first time every time.

Because I don't need flowers and rhymes to know if he loves me.

I already know that today, like every day of our lives. He loves me... He loves me lots.

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[Book 116: Possessive Rider](#)
[Book 117: Dad's Ex-Biker Buddy](#)
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[Book 134: Taken By The Thief](#)
[Book 135: Curves Ahead](#)
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[Book 143: Attending Her Curves](#)
[Book 144: Maid for the Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 145: Priest](#)
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[Book 147: His Curvy Office Obsession](#)
[Book 148: Easter with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 149: Veterinarian's Obsession](#)
[Book 150: Curves For Her Older Boss](#)
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[Book 156: Russian Mountain Man](#)
[Book 157: Possessive Italian Doctor](#)
[Book 158: Dad's EMT Best Friend](#)
[Book 159: Claimed By The Publisher](#)
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[Book 162: Claiming His Reunion Obsession](#)
[Book 163: Claimed By Dad's College Friend](#)
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[Book 171: Claiming Her Sweet Curves](#)

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[Book 174: Possessive Neighbor](#)
[Book 175: 4th of July With Dad's Best Friend](#)
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[Book 255: His Shooting Star](#)
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[Book 258: Trapped with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
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[Book 285: Mr. Judge](#)
[Book 286: Developing Her Curves](#)
[Book 287: The Love Boat](#)
[Book 288: My Sister's Man](#)
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