



MARRYING MY

Billionaire
HOOKUP

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NADIA LEE

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Marrying My Billionaire Hookup

Nadia Lee

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To everyone who's doing their best during the pandemic.

Picking out a twenty-thousand-dollar dress? Piece of cake.
Picking out Mr. Right? Now, that's the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question.

–Jo Martinez

Love is like alcohol. Too much of it destroys clarity and impairs judgment.

–Edgar Blackwood

Chapter One

Jo

“Thank God you’re here!” My brother Pablo looks at me like I’m the cure to high cholesterol and blocked arteries as I step into his apartment.

“Believe me, you aren’t the only one thanking God when I show up.” I lay down the huge collection of rather heavy glossy bags hanging from my arms on his dining table.

It’s big enough for six, but everything in this home is too much for a bachelor, and none of it was a deliberate choice on his part. When he first moved into this place at the beginning of his residency, he bought whatever was on sale and first to pop up on the furniture store websites.

Now he’s a board-certified pediatric cardiologist at UCLA, but he’s too busy to redecorate or update his closet to ensure he looks like an actual doctor. But I still love him, and it isn’t just because he’s my brother. He’s got a big heart, and kind brown eyes that show nothing but compassion and understanding for his young patients. If my childhood doctors had been half as nice as Pablo, I wouldn’t have worried about going to see them so much.

“Can you bring them with you, please?” I say, rubbing the red marks the bag straps left on my arms. Normally, I’d have had the garments delivered, but this is an emergency. Very time-sensitive.

“Yeah, of course. Your arms okay?”

“They’re fine. Won’t even notice after a while.” I just need the marks gone for the party I’m going to attend later.

He grabs the bags and lets out a breath. “My God, what are these made of? Lead?”

“Just a little of everything. I don’t know what’s in your closet, although I can guess.”

“Supergirl probably wears these to protect herself from Kryptonite poisoning,” he grumbles. But he picks them up and follows.

I move to his bedroom, which is sparse—just a king-sized bed and a dresser—and quickly examine his wardrobe. Work clothes: button-down shirts and Dockers. Casual stuff: cotton T-shirts and shorts. Some ties. One makes me pause, and I pull it out. It’s Daffy Duck on a field of yellow and orange.

“Really?” I hold it in front of him like a strip of shame. “Looney Tunes?”

“The kids love it,” he says.

“Yeah, well, a woman who’s old enough to date won’t. Especially if you wear it to a restaurant like Virgo. And especially not on a first date!”

“Which is why you’re here. You’re the fashion expert.”

True enough. I haven’t earned a fancy medical degree like Pablo. Actually, I don’t have a degree of any type—the only one in my family *not* to have one—but I’ve still managed to create a successful career.

I shift into job mode. “Tell me what kind of impression you want this woman to have.”

“Fun. Nice.” He thinks for a moment. “Sweet.”

“That works. But you also want to look successful, right?”

“You going to cover me in Gucci?”

I laugh. “No, but every man should have a pair of Italian loafers in his closet.” I dig into one of the bags and pull out a pair of Pradas. “These have your name on them. But try them on, and if you don’t like them, you don’t have to keep them.” But I know he’ll love them because they’re classic and comfortable. Except for the ridiculous ties, he’s pretty conservative when it comes to clothes. Flamboyance makes him uncomfortable. He thinks his accomplishments make him stand out, not his outfits.

Pablo sticks out his lower lip and considers. “They look nice enough.” He takes them from me and puts them on. Walks around a bit. “And comfortable, at least so far. Don’t know how they’d feel after a shift.”

“They’ll just get better as you break them in. And I also have a pair of Guccis for you, because I’m nice like that.” Feeling like a fairy godmother to my Cinderfella brother, I hand him a silk dress shirt in pale cream, a dark blue sports jacket, also silk, and matching slacks. “Classy and simple. No tie. Leave the top two buttons undone. Keep your jewelry to one solid ring or nothing at all. *No cartoon characters*. Those can come later when she knows you well enough to not run screaming in the other direction.”

“Thank you,” he says sincerely.

“You’re welcome. Now you know she won’t ding you for clothes.” And that makes me happy and proud. Pablo’s a great guy. He’s smart, loving and protective—really, a ten out of ten. He just needs a little help so this date of his will have a chance to see his amazing heart.

He laughs, then says, “You look good,” because he knows that complimenting me is the first step in thanking me properly for rescuing him from committing a fashion faux pas.

“I do, don’t I?” I grin. “I spent some extra time today because I have a party to go to after I dress you.” The burgundy silk Dior I’m in isn’t exactly *tight*, but it clings in all the right places, emphasizing my breasts and butt. You can’t wear any underwear with it, but I’m quite confident my fashion-ignorant brother hasn’t noticed...nor will he.

“What party?” he says, suddenly straightening his shoulders and back, like he’s about to punch somebody out, probably some guy I’m going to meet.

“An heiress from Korea invited me to a party at Anthony Blackwood’s mansion. I couldn’t say no, especially since it’s to celebrate Kim finally getting her work bonus.” My best friend has slaved for five years for it. She deserves an awesome party.

“Oh.” Pablo deflates a little. “Well, okay. That’s good. Kim’ll keep you safe.”

By “safe,” he means “away from sex.” He, just like my eldest brother Rafael and all my cousins, either doesn’t understand or refuses to accept that I’m not a virgin. Haven’t been for ages.

But it’s easier to just let him have his delusion than argue. Not to mention I might as well *be* a virgin at the moment. Depressingly enough, I haven’t slept with anybody in months, not since I broke up with Aaron. He was fun and laid-back when we first met, but then morphed into a clingy mess within a few months of us starting to date. He still keeps calling and texting, saying he knows I haven’t been with anyone and it’s time we get back together. Ugh. I need to find a way to get myself out of this state of dickpression. Maybe that’ll make Aaron realize it’s really over.

“Gotta go,” I say, waving at Pablo.

“Hey, don’t you want to take the rest with you?” He gestures at the bags on the floor.

“Keep ’em. You’re going to need something for your second date... assuming you can get one.” I wink to take the sting out of the comment. “Good luck!”

Then, before he can try to give me “safety” tips—and maybe a can of Mace he bought just for this kind of occasion—I rush out and hop into my Lexus.

Normally I’m not this excited about parties. I’ve been to my share—a big chunk of my clients are celebrities, and many of them have become friends. But I’m hyped up about this one, and it isn’t just because of Kim’s professional success. It’s also because I’ve been unbearably curious about the brand-new mansion Anthony Blackwood built for his wife.

How they met, fell in love and married made the headlines. And I’m certain none of the publicity was by choice, because Anthony is so private that nobody knew why he left his family in Louisiana to move to Los Angeles...until all the articles about his family scandal came out.

The media probably didn't report everything truthfully, though. They always try to make stories as sensational as possible, and if omitting a few facts can enhance the sensationalism, they do exactly that. Probably half my clients complain about it.

And even though I got to work for Anthony's wife Ivy twice, introduced through Elizabeth Pryce-King, I never got to go to the mansion. That's unusual; my clients generally prefer that I go to their homes because it's more convenient for them. But not Ivy. I can't decide if it's because she's a private person too, if she just isn't used to bossing people around, or if there are secrets in the mansion. Then I laugh, because of course there aren't any secrets. They just built the place...and this isn't some messed-up fairytale.

The security panel at the edge of the estate accepts my guest code, and the wrought-iron gates part majestically to let me through. I park my car to one side, where other vehicles are, and climb out. The air smells of fresh flowers from an impressive garden, and the breeze is refreshing.

I take my time and admire the gorgeous landscape, complete with a huge water garden with mini tea candles floating on the calm surface. So many small lights glow in the evening, making the home look like a castle for fairies. It's really lovely.

At the main door, I run into Yuna Hae, the party's hostess. Her auburn hair is down, and she is in the cutest Chanel dress and shoes. I've never seen her look or dress badly—not that I've known her for long—and nothing hides her bubbly personality.

She hugs me. "Hey, you made it!"

"I wouldn't miss this for the world!" I say, hugging her back. "Is Kim here yet?"

"Nope. She's being fashionably late, no doubt. But that doesn't mean we don't get to hang out and have fun! Come on, let me introduce you to some people." She gestures, pulling me toward the center of the foyer. "You have no idea how

thrilled I am because all of my favorite people are here, even Edgar.”

“Edgar?”

“Edgar Blackwood. Tony’s older brother. He spends almost all his time running the family business in Louisiana, you know. But I bet he wanted the special treat I prepared!” She waggles her eyebrows.

“A special treat? Like...a cake or something?”

“Oh, you’ll be amazed. It’s awesome.” She taps the back of a tall, dark-haired man. He’s talking with someone, but he turns around, green eyes sharp with interest.

I recognize him instantly. *Anthony Blackwood*. He’s pretty famous—and infamous—and not only due to his family scandal. He owns some of the best and most popular clubs in the world, including Z here in L.A.

He doesn’t seem as cold as his reputation would suggest, although he’s just as well dressed as the pictures I’ve seen. He’s very handsome, his features finely carved. If it weren’t for the firm lines of his lips and jaw, he’d be pretty.

“Tony, say hello to my friend, Jo Martinez. Jo, Anthony Blackwood.”

He shakes my hand firmly. “Anthony. Pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s mine,” I say.

“Ivy’s talked about you. She always appreciates your help.”

My smile grows more genuine. “She’s so lovely.” It’s true. She’s one of the nicest people to work for.

“Have you met my brother?” He gestures at the man he was talking with, who comes half a step closer.

Anthony is certainly handsome enough, but his brother is...

Wow.

Normally I think clothes make the man, wielding the presence he needs if they have the right combination of color, material and cut. But in this case, clothes seem to be an afterthought. He's tall, with magnificently broad shoulders that signal power and dominance. He stands with perfect posture, his back straight, his head angled just so to show the bold lines of his facial bones. His features aren't as elegantly carved as Anthony's, but there's rawness to them that's utterly masculine and hot. And his eyes... They're green like Anthony's, but different. Darker, deeper and completely controlled without being cold.

I wonder what they'd look like when they aren't so controlled...

Suddenly, the place feels too hot.

My "no" to Anthony's question comes out a near-breathless whisper. I clear my throat and add, "I don't believe so," then extend my hand. "Jo Martinez."

"Edgar," he says, with a hint of a Southern drawl. "Edgar Blackwood." *Dios mío*, that voice that should be illegal. It brushes over me, as decadent as velvet, and I suppress a shiver as sensation seems to pool between my legs. How in the world is he making his name sound like my dirtiest fantasy? My grandmother would say he's sold his soul to the devil.

He takes my hand in a soft fingers-only grip and gently pumps it twice. The contact sends a tingle up my arm, making my neck heat.

"Charmed," he says.

"Ooh, how nice. Is that what Louisiana gentlemen say when they meet a lady?"

The green eyes crinkle slightly. "Depends on the lady."

Oh my God. I bet tons of women sigh over him and make fools of themselves. I don't want to be a cliché he won't even remember two seconds from now.

But then I feel it... The soft, slow drag of his fingertips as though he loathes to let me go. And although he's looking at me calmly enough, I can see a glimmer of heat in his eyes.

So this is a two-way street. And I can see that he knows it. We share a moment that Anthony and Yuna are not privy to, even though they're standing right beside us.

Solemn and somber is *not* my type. Usually I date men who are easygoing and don't take themselves or anyone else too seriously.

But maybe he just takes his responsibilities seriously. If I remember correctly, he's the eldest Blackwood brother. Rafael acts like the weight of the world rests on his shoulders, so that makes sense. I wonder what Edgar's like in bed. Is he still serious, even when he's naked and hard? Does he direct all that serious attention to licking and stroking and fucking?

I try to tamp down a vivid mental movie of Edgar doing exactly that, but desire sparks anyway. I don't get it. I'm not the type to mind-strip a man I just met and fantasize about him. I've had plenty of hot male clients, and none of them made my hormones spin out of control.

"Would you like to get a drink?" he says, holding my eyes.

If you ask me in that voice, the answer will always be...

"Yes."

Chapter Two

Edgar

I lead Jo to the huge open area where Yuna had her team of caterers and servers set up the food and drinks. And the entire time, my heart is pumping a little bit faster and my blood is growing a little too hot, pooling in my dick.

For a second I wonder if the finger of scotch I had on the plane was laced with some illicit chemical compound. Why else would I get turned on by a handshake? It's weird. Maybe even deviant.

Perhaps I've been celibate for too long. *When was the last time I had a woman?* I rack my brain, but come up blank. It was either a really long time ago, not that memorable, or both.

But if that's the sole reason, why didn't I get turned on by the cabin attendant? She was certainly pretty. Even shot me a flirty smile every so often. But the only thing I wanted from her was my meal and drinks, and then to be left alone to go over some work emails.

Come on. Jo is so much hotter than the cabin attendant. There's no comparison.

That is true. Her dress reminds of a flame, red and irresistible. It shows off her curves—from breasts to waist and that gorgeous, amazing ass. But the display isn't blatant. It's more of a seduction, a lure—a softly whispered *Come closer and discover more.*

And God, do I want to.

A server in a crisp uniform passes by with a tray of drinks, and I snag two flutes of champagne. Need to test and see if this spark is real or I'm just imagining things—which means I need to try to replicate it. I hand a glass to Jo, making sure our fingers brush.

My heart goes erratic again, like somebody pushed a button. So it isn't a fluke. I try to swallow, but my mouth is dry.

“Thank you,” she says with a smile, then takes a sip. Her dark brown eyes sparkle with pleasure. “Mmm. This is so good.”

I try to imagine how those eyes would look when she's writhing on twisted sheets. “So good...” Would they glitter with lustful greed? Would they lose focus? Would she be demure or demanding? How would she taste on my tongue? How would she feel around my cock?

Half a drop of bubbly wine clings to her plump lower lip. An urge to lick it off grips me, but I forcibly push it away and put my own flute to my mouth. As the vintage fizzes in my throat and nose, I wonder if it'd be better from her lips. Sweeter. More potent...

Jo is looking up at me expectantly. Does she want me to kiss her? Did she leave the champagne there on purpose?

But if that's the case, the angle of her chin is wrong. She should've shifted more invitingly...

Sudden clarity cuts through my lust-hazed mind. She isn't hinting to be kissed. She's waiting for an answer to something. The only problem is: I have no clue what the question was.

Can't tell her the truth, so I opt for the second-best option—a lie. “Sorry, I was just thinking about something from work. Could you repeat that?”

“I asked if you come out here a lot. I mean, don't you run Blackwood Energy? Do they have an office in L.A.?”

“No. And you're right, I don't come out that often.” Coming to Los Angeles today was an impulsive decision that I made when Yuna texted me about the party and how she missed me. But much as I like her, the trip had more to do with my argument with Dad, the kind we wouldn't have to have if he weren't stuck in the past, rather than thinking toward the company's future.

And there's some family stuff that I might have to tell my brothers soon. The question is the timing. There will never be a really good opportunity to tell them our divorced parents might be getting back together, since divorce was the least Mom deserved. She's lucky she isn't rotting in a jail cell.

"Maybe you'll have a reason to visit more when your brother has babies," Jo says, peering at me.

"Doubtful," I reply. "Blackwood Energy keeps me very busy."

Playing the power game with Dad sucks up a lot of my time. He wants to maintain the status quo—a focus on oil, the old boys' club, centralized offices, that sort of thing. I want to shake things up. Diversify into green energy, place an emphasis on actual achievement rather than connections or gender, and rethink our place in the future of the energy sector. Unfortunately, Dad still has a lot of influence within the company. Most of the top executives were his picks.

"Oh." Jo nods, looking down at her drink.

Her expression reminds me of something Tony's best friend Ryder said, that I'd have made a terrible best man at Tony's wedding because I'm more suited for somber occasions like funerals. It's true I'm not exactly the fun Hollywood playboy type—like Ryder—because to me, life *is* serious. And responsibilities matter.

At the same time, I don't want Jo to think I'm dull.

"But corporate talk is boring," I say, trying to recover. "What do you do?"

She looks like she wants to contradict me, but says, "I'm a fashion consultant and personal shopper."

"Sounds interesting. Women love to shop, right? You must be exceptional to get paid to do it."

"Mmm, yes," she says. But she doesn't look happy.

"What? Has the excitement gone out of it? Just a job now?"

"Just a job?" She looks up at me. "What do you mean?"

And the sheer interest in her warm brown gaze starts to undo something inside me that's been wound tight ever since I can remember. "I remember reading a porn star interview—a guy—where he said sex took on some distinctly chore-like qualities once he started having to do it for money."

The second I finish saying it, I want to bite my tongue. What happened to good manners and propriety? If my brain was functioning right, I would've said something more... neutral. Perhaps the "treat" Yuna mentioned is some kind of hallucinogen in the drink I'm having.

Jo laughs. "Did he actually say that?"

"Yes." *No choice now but to continue.* And it's dangerous, because thinking about the porn star makes me think about porn, which then makes me think about sex.

"He must not love his job as much as I love mine, then." The corners of her lips lift, and humor sparkles in her eyes. Why does the sight of that smile make me feel a hundred feet tall?

"I absolutely *adore* my work," she continues. "What I do isn't just shopping, it's helping people realize their true potential."

"How so?"

"Well, just to give you a corporate example, would you hire somebody who didn't dress right for the job, even if he was, I don't know, the Einstein of the energy sector?"

"An energy Einstein? I'd hire him."

She arches an eyebrow. "Let's say it's before he became famous."

"Well... I'd like to say yes, but most likely no. He wouldn't even get an interview."

"Exactly. And I like your honesty." She beams. "Some people like to pretend they're beyond such superficial things, but of course they aren't. Besides, you can tell a lot by the way somebody dresses."

“Like how rich they are?” That should be easy. All you’d have to do is catalogue how much they spent on clothes.

“Well, yeah. But also about their personality.” She leans closer and lowers her voice conspiratorially. “Of course, if they hire *me*... Well, they can project whatever they want.”

“What are you trying to project right now?”

She winks. “Don’t know, do you?”

I have to admit that she’s got me. I’d say she’s going for sexy, but I doubt there’s anything that could hide that simmering sexuality. So that’s out... “Soigné at the soirée?”

“Oh, humor. And cultured humor at that.” She gives me a small, silent clap, but still waits for my assessment.

I can’t think of anything else. Fashion isn’t my forte, but maybe I can turn this around. “Okay, I haven’t hired anybody to pick out my clothes, so tell me what you think I’m like.” Even as I say it, I wonder why. It isn’t like me to care that much about what people think. Or ask a woman I just met how she views me. It’s too much like begging for approval, or worse, affection.

I, Edgar Henry Clayton Blackwood, do not need or seek out affection.

“You?” Jo pulls back a bit and gives me a slow once-over from head to toe.

Since I can’t think of a good way to take back my question, I just stand and wait for her verdict. Her gaze sweeps over me again, and it feels tangible. Like gentle strokes. My skin prickles.

Shit. Don’t get hard—or, more accurately, don’t get any harder.

“Hmm.” She taps a finger against her lips.

I take a long swallow of my drink. I might as well be drinking water, though, since I can’t taste a thing. Why does it feel like the fate of the world rests on her opinion?

“Responsible,” she says finally. “Dependable. Controlled.”

I nod. “Perceptive.” They’re all good qualities. And I’ve done my best to embody them. But her saying that about me makes me feel flatter than a forgotten glass of Coke. I wanted her to say...what?

Sexy?

Fuckable?

Hot?

Before I can decide, Yuna clears her throat loudly for attention. “Thank you all for coming. I wanted to host this party to congratulate my amazing roommate Kim’s bonus. Apparently she was perfect at her job for the last five years, so it is well deserved.”

Jo makes a fist with her free hand and pumps it in the air. “Yeah!”

“Do you know her?” I ask in a low voice.

“She’s one of my best friends. This is super exciting. I’m so happy for her.”

The joy in her eyes sparkles like sunlight; my breath catches in my throat. She’s absolutely mesmerizing, and makes me feel like I’m standing on a cloud.

But Yuna calls my name, breaking the spell. “Thank you, Edgar, for coming. I didn’t think you’d make it, since you spend almost all your time in Louisiana. And do get him to talk, ladies. He has the nicest voice ever.”

Talk? I don’t want to talk to anybody except Jo. But it’d be unpardonably rude to say that, so I wave Yuna’s suggestion away instead. “Stop. You’re embarrassing me.” Hopefully this will make it clear I’m not interested in speaking to other women.

Jo leans closer. “You *do* have a nice voice.” The pink of her cheeks turns more intense, her eyes brighter.

“Thank you,” I say, liking this better than the earlier “responsible, dependable, controlled” stuff. I don’t want to be any of those things tonight. I want to be like her—brilliant, gorgeous and enthralling.

Yuna continues to speak. I'm barely paying attention. If she's saying anything important I need to know about... Well, she can debrief me later.

Right now, I'm more interested in the way Jo's dress clings to her mouth-watering body. The material is fairly thin... Is she wearing any underwear? If not, those breasts really are hers, not helped or shaped by anything. On the other hand, female lingerie can be seamless...

Either way, I want to drag the dress off her and find out. It isn't the most convenient desire to have at the moment, however, because it's making me harder than a steel pipe.

Two uniformed waiters bring in silver pushcarts with trays laden with elegant white plates. It wouldn't be like Yuna to do anything without quite a bit of flourish. Small, flaky, strudel-like pastries are laid out, two per plate. Servers carry more bubbly drinks in.

"How did you manage that?" Ivy asks. "I thought your mother froze your account for running away."

Obviously Yuna is smart enough to sock away some money, I think, then take another champagne for Jo. She accepts it, mouthing, *Thank you*.

"She didn't cut it all off," Yuna says. "I can still charge up to five thousand a day, in case of emergency."

"Where can you find a chartered plane that cheap?" someone jokes from my left.

"You can't. So I had it charged to my brother's expense account." Yuna grins shamelessly. "He loves me, hahaha. Now come on. Enjoy!" She gestures.

I pick up two plates and hand one to Jo. "If Yuna had these flown in from Japan, they're either really good or really unusual."

Jo gives me a small smile. "That sounds more like a legal disclaimer than an endorsement."

"Being upfront is important." Almost all disputes occur because people aren't fully honest with each other, but I keep

that part to myself so she doesn't add "dry" to the qualities she's picked up about me.

I take a small bite of one of the pastries. It's filled with a thick cream that tastes like rich cheesecake. Not bad. But it could be sweeter.

Jo nibbles on one, looking slightly dubious. But I know the moment she hits the cream inside because her eyes widen, and she grins with pleasure.

"What are they called?" Ryder says around his bite. "I need to make sure my assistant can get me some."

He's probably going to send a plane over to grab them all. How he can be such a glutton and still maintain his movie-star physique is beyond me.

"They're called otona no kuriimu pie," Yuna answers.

"Otona...what?" Ryder asks.

"Otona no kuriimu pie."

"What does that mean?" another guest asks.

Yuna turns to her with a bright, happy smile. "Adult cream pie."

Laughter and the sound of people choking fill the room. I stare at the creamy white filling. *Adult cream?* What voodoo do you need to perform to make it taste like cheesecake?

"What's wrong?" Yuna asks, her perfectly shaped and drawn eyebrows pulled together.

Tony gapes at her. "Did you just say what I think you said?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. What do you think I said?"

"Adult cream pie," he says, his face slightly red.

"Yeah. It's a special pie, made to suit adult tastes."

"Ohh," Ivy says. "So it's more like 'a cream pie for adults.'"

"You could say it like that, but the direct translation is—"

“We like Ivy’s version better,” I say quickly. I’m not going to enlighten Yuna, and I’m also not going to continue to call the pastry I just had “adult cream pie,” of all things.

Yuna shrugs again. “Okay. But it’s really a mouthful to say it that way.”

Jo raises an eyebrow. “Oh, adult cream is a mouthful either way.”

A mouth isn’t the only thing it can fill.

The thought pops into my mind, unbidden and wholly unexpected. But it isn’t any less arousing. I’d love to fill her with my cock, then my cum, although realistically the second part would be a bad idea with potentially undesirable consequences.

That’s why God gave men brains. So we could invent condoms.

I dispose of my flute and plate as a server comes by. Then I lean toward Jo. “Want to finish the rest of the pie?”

“What are my other options?” Mischief gleams in her eyes.

“A tour of Tony’s mansion? He put a lot of work in designing the place.”

“I think I’d like that.” Jo gives me a very direct look. “Is it...big?”

“Much larger than you’re probably thinking.” I extend a hand in invitation.

She holds my eyes, then puts her plate and champagne flute down on a coffee table and links her fingers with mine. “Let’s just go see.”

Chapter Three

Jo

My mouth is dry, and heat is slowly spreading in my veins like a cat stretching. It has nothing to do with the champagne. It was good, but I've had good stuff before.

It's this man.

When Edgar seemed distracted and was giving me short answers, I thought I might have made a mistake—that the attraction was only one-way. He must've been with thousands of wealthy, sophisticated women before, and even though I look damned sophisticated, I don't have the kind of wealth and education his previous girlfriends undoubtedly did.

Then he asked me what I do for living, like he was genuinely interested. He didn't react like my job was frivolous...unlike a lot of guys. I was even a little flattered that he seemed to care what I think about the way he's dressed. I hope he isn't too bothered by the fact I fibbed a little. I couldn't bring myself to admit he projects a power that makes me want to strip him and lick him all over. So I had to spend some time to come up with something more socially acceptable.

Edgar takes me through a huge, deserted hall, saying something about the floor material, then up the stairs. I follow him, anticipation cresting like a wave about to break. When we hit the top step, I turn him around. I don't want to wait. If we don't do what I know we're about to do, I'm going to combust *right now*.

He's obviously on exactly the same page, because his lips come swooping down, crashing against mine. I moan against them, reveling in the firmness. His mouth is surprisingly hot and carnal. The controlled demeanor he was projecting earlier in front of everyone was a lie.

And I love this—the intensity, the *greed*. He devours me like a man starved, uncontrolled and savage. And his need is driving me crazy. I can't remember a time I was desired like this—like having me is the only thing that matters to him.

I wrap my hand around the back of his neck, and he pulls me closer. I gasp at the thick erection pressing against my belly. Then, because I can't help myself, I sneak my free hand between us to feel him.

A low, rough groan tears from his throat. “You're hard,” I whisper.

“Been that way since we shook hands.” He buries his head in the crook of my neck, his rough breath tickling me. “I wanted to lick the champagne off your lips, see if it tastes better than from the glass. Then I thought about tasting *you*.”

His words, that low, smooth voice...they shoot right through me. Talk about an aphrodisiac! Liquid heat gathers between my legs, and my God, it physically *aches* to stand here instead of doing something about the raw desire in his voice.

When he lifts his head, those malachite eyes nearly black with lust, I know he's thinking about more than just getting a taste. And I want that. I want every dirty thing that's going through his mind.

His gaze stays on mine, but he doesn't make a move. The air between us crackles. I realize then he's actually waiting for consent.

“Yes,” I say, and drag his gorgeous, all-too-serious face down for a kiss.

His tongue sweeps inside. I stroke it with mine, then whimper when his large hands grip my ass. I wrap my legs around his waist with ease, mentally blessing both this dress with its thigh-high slits and Kim for getting me started on barre a few years ago.

My hands on his shoulders, I rock against him. He might be able to tell I'm not wearing anything under my dress, but I

don't care. He's going to know soon enough anyway, and I'm too lost in him—the hot sensations he's making me feel.

I sense him moving, carrying me, his mouth still fused to mine. Excitement spreads with every pounding beat of my heart. I've never wanted a man this badly. There's something about Edgar that pushes all the right buttons.

The lighting changes—I can feel it going dim through my closed eyelids. I open my eyes and note we're in a huge bedroom.

“My room,” he explains. “I stay here every time I'm in town.” He hooks the door with his heel and shuts it.

Finally. We're alone, free to do whatever we want, while the crowd can do whatever they want downstairs. He puts me down and reaches behind himself to lock the door, his eyes on mine.

Jittery, with need crackling at my nerve endings, I undo the side zipper on my dress and let it fall to the floor, revealing myself completely to him.

He lets out a rough sigh, his facial features growing tauter as he lets his gaze roam over my body.

“Fuck. You weren't wearing anything underneath.”

I smile. “You can't really wear lingerie with that dre—”

Then he's on me, kissing me hard, his fingers tunneling into my hair, pushing me backward until I hit the bed and fall onto the cool, silken sheets. His mouth moves down my body, ravenous and greedy. I twist the sheet with my fingers, waiting with breathless anticipation to see where he's going next. Then I feel it—his searing lips closing around my hard, beaded nipple. Before I have a chance to gasp at the blissful sensation, he sucks hard, making my back arch.

“Oh my *God*,” I moan.

He scrapes my nipple with his teeth, enough to produce a definite thrill but not so hard that it hurts. My blood is hot to the point that I can't believe I'm not melting into a puddle of honey.

He lavishes the same unrestrained attention on my other breast, while moving his hand lower. His fingers brush the sensitive skin where my thighs come together, and I cry out softly, widening my legs. I'm so turned on that when he glides a finger between my folds, I can hear the wetness. But I'm past the point of embarrassment. I'm going to die if he doesn't continue.

He pulls back, his hands on my knees, stares at the heated flesh and growls. "You're so pink and pretty." Then he moves me until my pelvis is resting on the edge of the mattress, my legs dangling.

I prop myself on my elbows so I can see him better. I'm totally nude except for my shoes and jewelry, while he's fully clothed. His eyes are feral, raw with hunger, and he pushes my legs wider apart. Then he goes on his knees, presses his head closer and inhales. "You smell so good, too. Let's see how you taste."

Then his face is buried against me, his mouth on my most sensitive flesh. There's something unbearably erotic about having a fully dressed man who exudes power and control kneeling on the floor and tonguing you like his very existence depends on it.

My toes curl, my vision going dim. The pleasure building inside me is overwhelming; I can hardly even draw in air. Dizziness overtakes me, and I whisper his name like a mantra as every inch of my skin grows tight and hot.

Then I arch my back and try to contain a scream as he pushes two fingers deep inside. Without giving me a chance to recover, he starts thrusting them in and out, driving me higher to another mind-shattering peak.

Only then he's moving me to the center of the bed and devouring my mouth. I kiss him desperately, tasting myself on him and loving the taste of us.

"I can't wait," Edgar says, his voice tight.

"Then don't." Then, in case he doesn't have a rubber, I add breathlessly, "I'm on the pill." There's no way either one of us

is leaving here without my feeling him inside.

I don't think he heard what I said about the birth control. He reaches into a drawer next to the bed and pulls out a few condoms. His belt buckle comes undone, the zipper hissing. He doesn't even undress himself fully before putting on the condom. And I don't care, because I can't wait to have him inside and come around his gorgeous cock. I'll strip him and have my way with him later.

“Now,” I say, panting. “Put your cock in me.”

He obliges, driving into me, and it feels a million times better than I imagined. He's so big, pulsing and throbbing, and his face is tight above me, control and sexual need battling for dominance.

“Come inside me,” I demand, wanting him to move, desperate to see him lose control.

“I want to feel you climax ag—”

I bring his face down for a kiss. “Edgar.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up and fuck me hard. We have all night to do it again and again.”

And he does. A rough growl catches in his throat as he drives into me over and over, each thrust more powerful and pleasurable than the one before.

I wind my legs around him and match his movement, losing myself in the fiery rhythm. When I come again, he joins me with my name on his lips.

Chapter Four

Jo

I don't know what wakes me up, but I blink, then rub my tired eyes. I turn my head to see the bedside clock.

Five fifty-six.

Oh no. The time rips the drowsiness from my mind. *It's so late.* I must've dozed off. Edgar was insatiable, taking me over and over again. It was like he heard my thought about wanting to do everything he was fantasizing *and* what I said about having all night to do it. I didn't expect him to take it so literally...or have the energy to go for so long.

As I sit up, my muscles protest. *Ow.* Here I was thinking I was in good shape, but Edgar's stamina is...phenomenal. If I hadn't explored every inch of his body, I'd swear he was hooked up to some kind of Viagra IV—assuming the drug even comes in that form.

I look down at the bed—and the stunning man in it. He looks so relaxed and peaceful. I wish I could kiss him, but I'm afraid to wake him up because it'll mean letting him have his way with me again. And I really need to get going before he opens his eyes. Both of us awake means talking. Awkward goodbyes. Pointless, empty promises, such as “Keep in touch” and “I'll call you.”

He made it clear he doesn't visit L.A. very often. He certainly isn't going to start doing so just because we had a great night together. And I'm not interested in a long-distance relationship. Not with my romantic history. No matter how much I might wish the man I'm with is The One, it never works out that way. Romance always fizzles within a few months, regardless of how well suited we were at first. So what's the point if I can't even enjoy it to the fullest until then?

And there's no way I'm moving to Bugwressel, Louisiana or wherever he's from, either...even if I believed this relationship was going to be different. From what I've heard, bayou mosquitos are so big they carry their own ticks. And Los Angeles is where I have my life and all the people I love. Nothing's worth giving that up.

Where are my damn shoes? I think Edgar flung them away sometime last night. I look everywhere I can think of. *Where the hell...?* Well, if I lose them... Irritating, but not the end of the world. I don't actually *need* them to leave. I just need...

My dress. On the floor exactly where I left it.

I pick up the wrinkled outfit and put it on. Then I take another long look at the man who gave me more pleasure in one night than any of my exes did the entire time we dated.

If circumstances were different...maybe we could've had some fun together.

Wistfulness flows through my heart, making me feel reluctant and sad, which is *so not me* to feel over a guy. *It's just...*

I sigh softly. He just made an impression.

Finally, I blow him a goodbye kiss...and leave.

* * *

Edgar

My phone rings and I open my eyes. After a few moments, I slowly roll my legs off the bed and sit up. My head feels like it's full of soggy cotton, and I gently knead my temples. It feels like I had less than four hours' sleep, and now I've got a mild headache to show for it. But a cup of strong coffee will cure that.

My jacket is on the floor in a heap. I dig my phone out and answer it. "Yes?"

"Hey, you coming down for breakfast?" Tony says.

"Uh. What time is it?"

“Nine,” he says. “I thought you might be tired from the trip, old man, but Ivy and Yuna have requested your presence.”

“Yuna’s here, too?”

“Yup. She spent the night.”

Makes sense. Yuna’s tight with Ivy. “I’ll be down there with...” I look back at the bed and note it’s empty. I place a hand on Jo’s side and feel none of her warmth, just the cool sheets. Disappointment mixes with mild resentment. “I need to shower, but I’ll be down soon.”

“Okay. I’ll tell the chef to make extra for you. French toast good?”

“Yeah.” I hang up and search around in the sheets, under the pillows and on the other nightstand, looking for a note. Nothing. Not even an *It was fun, bye!*

However, I do find her shoes. One heel is sticking out from under the bed and behind a pillow that got knocked off sometime during the night. She must’ve been a hurry to leave. Does she think I turn into an ogre during the day? I’m always the same Edgar: responsible, dependable and controlled. Surely, that’s a cause for at least some attraction.

Annoyance starts to simmer. I can’t quite decide yet if I’m upset with her or myself. The emotion doesn’t sit right, but I do my best to put a lid on my feelings and get into the shower. The hot spray hits me instantly, and I run through a quick full-body scrub. I don’t bother to shave.

I wish Jo were here to join me for the brunch. She didn’t have to sneak out like she did something wrong. We’re both consenting adults. I made sure to protect both of us, and all those empty condom packets are proof.

At the same time, I accept that I’m being perverse. Normally I don’t care for women lingering afterward, wanting me to make promises or lavish them with affection and undying devotion. So I should be relieved that Jo left on her own.

But what I *should* feel and what I *am feeling* are two very different things. There’s nothing I can do about it, except be

irritated.

I put on a button-down shirt and pair of dark slacks I keep at Tony's place and make my way down the stairs toward the airy breakfast room. One wall is made of solid glass that shows the impeccably maintained garden. Sunlight is pouring in, and the round table has a couple of pitchers—one with grapefruit juice and the other with mineral water. I also note a silver thermos pot, which hopefully contains coffee.

But before I walk in, I stop and study everyone. Tony's in a T-shirt and shorts, while Ivy's in a loose dress, her strawberry-blonde hair pulled up into a topknot. He hands her the juice. Yuna's dressed like... Well. Yuna. Some fancy designer dress, a wide-brimmed hat and double chains of platinum around her neck.

So what does that say about them...? Tony appears casual, even though he's really not. Ivy's...obviously pregnant. Yuna is... She looks like she's rich and enjoys designer items.

Okay, never mind. This is pointless. And why am I trying to do what Jo does, anyway? So I can tell her the next time I see her? Is there even going to be a next time, given how our night ended?

I school my face to appear calm and in control. After all, I'm supposed to be constant. "Good morning," I say, and walk in.

"Hey." Tony smiles, gesturing at one of empty seats. Looking at him can be startling at times because he takes after Mom so much. Not the hair color, because he got that from Dad, but the shape of his eyes, the high, thin bridge of his nose and so much more. "I hope you don't mind that we started without you."

"Not at all. I got up late." I smile back, then pour myself a huge mugful of coffee and start sipping. My head begins to feel better.

"How are you, Edgar?" Ivy asks.

"Fine. How're my nephews doing? Or nieces?"

“Ooh, you haven’t told him yet?” Yuna is practically bouncing.

Ivy laughs. “Not yet.” She turns to me, one hand on her bump. She’s carrying twins, although her belly doesn’t seem big enough for one baby, much less two. She’s too delicate a woman. But looks can be deceiving. She survived so much, and there’s strength in her that most people never catch. “One of each.”

“Well, well, listen to that. You always were an overachiever. Congratulations,” I say, genuinely pleased for her and Tony. If anybody deserves a fairytale ending, it’s my brother and his wife. They fought so hard to be together, almost died for the happiness they share now.

But guilt soon follows. Dad is seeing Mom again. She did terrible things trying to keep Tony and Ivy apart, and even if our legal system says she didn’t do anything wrong, I still find her actions grotesque. I should tell Tony about it because he deserves to know. On the other hand, I don’t know how to bring it up without ruining the joy radiating from him and Ivy.

The best course of action is for me to take care of the matter with Dad. It’s the least I owe Tony, because I didn’t protect him like I should have when we were younger. I’m the oldest, and it was my responsibility.

“Everything okay at home?” Ivy asks, because she knows, as well as I do, that Tony won’t.

“Of course,” I lie. But from the glance Tony gives me, I can tell I didn’t fool him, even though Ivy and Yuna look relieved.

After the breakfast is over and Yuna and Ivy go off together to play some duet on the Bösendorfer Imperial concert grand piano, Tony stays behind and has another cup of coffee with me.

“Edgar...you sure everything’s okay back home?”

“Blackwood Energy’s doing fine.” Not telling him the entire truth isn’t the most honest move on my part, but it’s better. Or so I try to convince myself.

He nods slowly. “Okay. You know, if you need anything...”

“Thanks.” But even as I say it, I know I won’t ask. How can I demand anything of him? He wants nothing to do with the family business, and I wouldn’t blame him one bit if he wanted to strangle our mother. She was so cruel to him for so long, and I’m sure, to this date, she’s convinced she did nothing wrong.

And Dad will accept that because he loves her, I think with an inward jeer. He’ll use it to justify everything, and never accept that love has blinded him and compelled him to do foolish things—things no man in his right mind would do.

Finishing my coffee, I vow—again—that I’ll never be like him.

Chapter Five

Jo

The ringing of my phone wakes me up. I fumble around for it and stare blearily at the screen. One fifty-six p.m. And the caller is...

Someone from an unrecognized number.

I debate, but it might be one of my clients. “Yes? This is Josephine Martinez.”

“Man, you’re a hard woman to get a hold of.”

There’s only one voice that slimy. *Aaron*. I immediately hit the red button to hang up, then block the number. I’m not encouraging him by talking to him. He needs to accept we’re over, especially when we’ve been over for... My sleep-deprived brain can’t think. But it’s been months. Long enough for him to move on.

Besides, I do *not* want to talk to him, especially not when my body’s pleasantly sore from being with Edgar last night.

God, he was so good. I probably won’t find another man like him for a while. Maybe ever. The orgasms he gave me were mind-blowing. It was like being on some kind of drug, like crack or something. *Crackgasms*. That’s what they are, because even now, I want him again.

Just to ensure I don’t have any fashion 911s from my clients, I check my texts. But there’s only one from Hilary asking me if I got home okay because she didn’t see me at the party and is worried. Then she asked me what I thought about Yuna’s adult cream pies.

It wasn’t bad, but I had *real* adult cream, har har har. I send a short text to Hilary to let her know I’m fine and Yuna’s treat was tasty enough, then put the phone down next to my pillow.

I start to drift back to sleep, then suddenly jerk awake. *Oh shit! Shopping date with Kim!*

I try to generate some motivation to get up, but completely fail. I'm just too damn tired. I hate to do this, but...I'll have to cancel. Hopefully, she won't be too unhappy about it. She has her next-door-neighbor-cum-nemesis-cum-wedding-date to keep her busy.

When she picks up the phone, I say, "Hey, I'm really sorry, but I don't think I can go shopping today."

"Uh...are we supposed to?"

Huh? She forgot, too? That makes me feel marginally better. "Aren't we? It's the thirteenth."

"Jo. It's the sixth."

What the hell...? How could I get things so confused? "Really? Shit. Okay, sorry. Brain fart."

"Are you okay? You don't sound so good."

I love her so much. If I say I'm not feeling well, she'll bring me chicken noodle soup because she's that kind of friend.

But I need sleep, not soup. "Um. I'm fine. Just tired. I'm still in bed."

"You are? You sure you aren't sick?"

"Just worn out." I clear my throat. Time to lay it out. It isn't like I can keep something like this a secret from her. Besides, I need to explain why I didn't get to see her last night. "I had a bunch of sex."

She laughs. "So that's why I couldn't find you last night at the party. Good for you! So. Who was it? Somebody from the party? Was he good?"

"Ooh yeah." I stretch my torso. "That man's like sex crack. I wanna start breaking into people's houses and stealing their TVs to support my habit."

"Wow. You've never said anything like this about a guy. Who was it?"

“Edgar,” I say, feeling still stupidly goofy and happy about last night.

“Edgar *Blackwood*?”

“Yeah. I usually think men sound like lobotomized monkeys when they’re doing it, all that huffing and groaning. But not him. The sounds he makes are hot.” My toes curl at the memory of how we met. He didn’t even have to come up with anything particularly witty or sexy to seduce me with his voice. Just his name rolling from his lips was enough to make my lady parts light up. “First time I’ve had aural sex.”

“So are you going to see him again?”

“Doubt it,” I say, trying to be upbeat even though small part of me is a bit...glum.

“What? Why not? He sounds like a winner, unless he belches when he comes.”

I laugh at the ridiculous image. “No. It’s just... He can’t leave Louisiana. His company’s there. And I’m not leaving L.A., not even for crackgasms. All my friends and family are here.” I heave a yawn that feels like it started in my toes. “Anyway, I gotta go. I need to sleep.”

“It’s two in the afternoon.”

“Yeah, but he kept me up until the crack of dawn. I need my beauty sleep. Bye!” I hang up, then close my eyes.

But instead of falling asleep, I end up just lying there, staring at the ceiling, reliving the memory. It’s weird. I’m wishing he were here right now, even though I know ending it the way I did was the best way to go.

Chapter Six

Jo

I cross my arms and stare at one of my favorite Chanel bags, which is sitting like a queen on my coffee table. It might as well be hiding radioactive uranium inside. My heart is pounding and sweat is slick on my palms. The muscles in my legs are twitching worse than lights flashing on a Dance Dance Revolution pad.

Come on, Jo.

Pregnancy test kits are not radioactive. Or dangerous. You buy them over the counter, no prescription required. Nobody looks at you funny when you lay it down on the counter in front of the cashier either.

They just assume you're late. They might even congratulate you inwardly, thinking what other reason there could be for you being late other than...a baby.

Except that's not my plan. It's supposed to go like—I find the love of my life just the way my high-school-sweetheart mama and papa did, get married and *then* have babies.

But let's not jump the gun. There are billion reasons I could be late. Aaron's repeated calls, and his refusal to accept the fact that we are one hundred percent *over*. Stress from working enough hours to violate a good chunk of the labor code. Somehow, half my clients can't seem to pick out their own underwear recently, much less put together an outfit.

But that's not all! I could've lost too much weight. Aren't my yoga pants a bit loose around my waist? I look down, sucking in and pulling at the elastic at the same time. Yeah, I think it is. Tía Bea is right—the Guacamole Diet works, even if you're not trying to diet and eat other things.

Sex with Edgar a month ago has nothing to do with anything. Nope. Nothing at all.

And eight days isn't *that* late. My period's going to start anytime now. I slept for twelve hours last night. I feel well rested, and I'm enjoying a beautiful late morning in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Just look at the Los Angeles sky. It's a pure, cloudless blue.

Besides, birth control does not spontaneously fail. The CDC says the pill is ninety-nine-point-seven percent effective. Condoms are ninety-eight percent effective, which isn't quite as good, but still good enough. I mean, we had a *lot* of sex that night, but we didn't do it ninety-eight times. The odds are with me.

Plus... Since I'm on the pill, and Edgar used condoms, we should be... I pull out my phone for the math. Ninety-nine point seven plus ninety-eight is...one hundred and ninety-seven-point-seven percent protected! My eggs might as well have been surrounded by a twelve-foot-thick titanium shield.

The doorbell rings, and I check the monitor screen to see who's visiting. It used to be that only my family came by on my days off, but in the last few years, some clients have decided to drop by because they felt their fashion problems were so immediately critical that they didn't need to make an appointment. And it isn't like my address is a state secret. Anybody with access to Google can find it.

If it's one of my special snowflake clients, I'm not here. Not because it's my day off, but because I do not see clients when I'm not ready. Curlers in my hair with no makeup and an old PJ shirt and yoga pants do not inspire confidence in my abilities as a fashion consultant. I always meet my clients at their places *after* I'm fully made up and decked out. Or some other public place. I don't even let my significant others come by, ever, not even to pick me up for a date.

But actually, it's Hugo standing at the door, smirking and mouthing, *I know you're in there*, at the camera. Out of my seven cousins, he's the youngest—and the only one younger

than me, although he emulates his brothers and tries to boss me around.

But it's sort of my fault too. Two years ago, one of my clients, who was barely twenty-seven, keeled over for no apparent reason and went into a coma. Being so young, and with no will or other end-of-life planning in place, her estate got tangled up in a huge mess. I got spooked watching the clusterfuck unfold and gave Hugo a power of attorney to handle my affairs, just in case. I thought he was the best choice because he's younger than me and not quite as overbearing as my older cousins and brothers...

Except that turned out to be an error in judgment.

Thankfully, Hugo's attitude has improved recently because I helped him get a job—indirectly, but help is help.

I open the door. His smile widens.

His dark hair is too long for an assistant to a high-powered law firm partner, but I guess his boss hasn't told him to chop it off yet. I might be a little biased, what with him being my cousin and all, but he's a nice-looking guy with bright, intelligent brown eyes and a dimple on his cheek.

I sweep my gaze over him, taking in the outfit. A bright yellow T-shirt that says *Manny's Tacos*, jeans frayed in an aesthetically pleasing fashion and comfy sneakers. Definitely not professional.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. “Shouldn't you be at the office?”

Hugo works as an assistant for Samantha Jones, one of the meanest and most sought-after divorce attorneys in the state. It's a waste of his law degree from Columbia, but he's infatuated with the older woman and wants to be in close proximity to woo her.

Hugo's heart works in mysterious ways.

“It's Saturday.” He walks inside with a big bag full of something that smells divine and nudges the door shut with his elbow.

I eye the bag, trying to sniff inconspicuously. “Doesn’t your boss make you work anyway?”

“She’s taking time off. She works too much.” The smile on his face dims a bit. “I worry about her.”

Oh, please. Samantha is one of the most capable human beings on earth, and a woman doesn’t maintain beautiful skin and a size-two body at her age by neglecting herself. “You’re probably the only person in the city who worries about her.”

“Because people are blind.”

Not people. *Love.* And it isn’t just making Hugo blind. It’s making him blind, deaf and *definitely* dumb. But I keep that to myself. He’s so into her that the only way he’s going to get over this unrequited love is by realizing on his own that she isn’t the one for him.

Still, I have to at least try and plant a seed. “Samantha is fine. She’s good at taking care of herself, you know?” I reach for the bag. “For me?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

“Yeah. Mama told me to bring it over for you.”

“Thanks.” I smile, taking it from him.

“Beef tacos and guacamole,” he explains. “She said your clients don’t feed you enough.”

I laugh. “I don’t have that kind of job. Or those kinds of clients.”

“Yeah, but you know how she is. She worries anyway.”

We weave through the piles of purses, shoes and racks of clothes to reach the dining table. Hugo shakes his head. “Your place is even messier than before.”

“So? Just because I have more stuff doesn’t mean my apartment grows bigger to accommodate it.”

He looks at the glossy, high-end designer boxes dubiously. “Do you really need that many... What the hell are they, anyway?”

“Shoes. And yes, I do.”

I open the bag and inhale deeply. The smell of fresh flour tortillas and grilled meat and smashed avocados with the family's secret blend of spices comes out like ambrosia. *Oh yeah.* Tío Manny and Tía Bea make the best tacos in the city. And her guacamole could probably be sold for its weight in gold.

"I can't believe you're a shoe hoarder. I mean, you get them for free," Hugo says.

"Don't judge. I appreciate them too much to get rid of them. They're part of my fashion harem." I sit down at the table. "You want some of this? I'm willing to share the beef tacos because I'm a good person, but you can't have the guac."

"No, thanks. Mama fed me already. Told me I shouldn't diet." He sighs, the sound more affectionate than exasperated.

That's Tía Bea. She's convinced that Hugo's anorexic and that her son simply doesn't eat enough. She doesn't seem to notice the breadth of his shoulders or the thick biceps bulging on his arms. I note that she's packed me *six* tacos. And she'll going to call later tonight to make sure I ate them all. And as usual, I'll lie and say yes, while saving at least three for tomorrow.

I bring out a bottle of virgin sangria. Hugo reads the label and looks around my kitchen, which is as disorganized as the rest of the apartment. "Didn't Tío Felipe send you a few bottles of Pinot noir? You could mix them."

Tío Felipe is my other uncle. He owns a vineyard in Napa called Sombrero Valley, so named because even though the place doesn't get much shade, it's shaped like a hat. He likes to ship us wine every so often. It's his way of expressing love.

"I'm out," I lie. I can't drink when there is a tiny—even if it's a *very* tiny—chance I might be pregnant. "I need to go shopping later."

"You should've told me. I would've brought you a bottle." Hugo can be sweet when he isn't overbearing.

"Still wouldn't have been able to have it," I say. "I might need to go out, and I'm not driving after drinking." Miss

Responsible, that's me. It has nothing to do with the pregnancy test kit in my purse, nope, nope, nope.

We share the sangria while I also enjoy a taco. I haven't seen Hugo in a while, so I ask him how his job is—anything to avoid thinking about the test kit.

“It's amazing,” he answers, his eyes shining. “*Samantha* is amazing. There's no custody case she can't fix, no soon-to-be-ex she can't crush.”

I wonder if my cousin's emotionally deviant. There's nothing really adorable about crushing people...

“But it can be heartbreaking for some of the clients. I didn't realize the extent of the problems a poorly done custody agreement can create. Or not having one at all. The kids always end up getting used as pawns. Seriously, if you're going to divorce, you have to do it right to avoid a real mess. And the cost!” His eyes defocus for a moment. “*Samantha* deserves a Nobel Prize.”

I almost choke on my taco. “A *what?* In what?”

“Peace, of course.” He looks slightly offended.

“Divorce profiteering deserves a Nobel Peace Prize?”

“She's saving people's lives. Your friend Kim would've been SOL without *Samantha*.”

Okay, I have to admit that part is true. But that doesn't mean I'm going to join Hugo's cult of *Samantha* worship. I make a neutral noise in my throat.

“Don't you agree?” Hugo asks. You'd think I was a witness being cross-examined.

Thankfully, my phone rings. I reach for it, placing a finger to my lips. The ID shows it's one of my clients, Sonia Rosenstein. Her dream is to find success as a model or an actress. Until then, her mega-rich hedge-fund-manager daddy finances her lavish lifestyle in Los Angeles.

“Hello, Sonia. What can I do for you?” I say in my most professional voice.

“Oh my God, Josephine!” she sobs. “You have to *save* me!”

Oh dear. It’s the same thing she told me, in this exact same tone, when she broke a nail an hour before a Hollywood party. I gird my loins. “What’s wrong?”

“You remember the gala I have tonight?” She’s hyperventilating. “The dress I was going to wear is ruined!”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. We spent three interminable hours picking it out. “How?”

“Poochie knocked red wine over it.”

Shit. Poochie is her toy poodle, a dog as neurotic and crazy as its owner. “Don’t you have something similar in your closet?” I ask, mentally flipping through what I bought her in the last few months. “You should have at least four ivory dresses.”

Sonia loves white and cream. Says they make her look ethereal and angelic. Which is true...as long as she keeps her mouth shut.

“I can’t wear any of *those*! People have already seen me in them!” She’s wailing louder, like being seen in the same dress twice is the worst thing that could happen to her. Well, it probably is, in her myopic world.

“Okay. Give me two hours, and I’ll be at your place.” That should give me just enough time to make myself presentable and drive over. Asking her to wait any longer than a couple of hours is not a possibility because she has the patience of a three-year-old who skipped her nap.

“Actually, no. Meet me at my favorite Starbucks. I need some coffee to soothe my nerves.”

Somebody should point out that drinking caffeine might not be the most soothing thing for nerves. But whatever. Not my job.

I hang up and jump to my feet. “I gotta get ready to go out,” I say to Hugo.

“What’s going on?”

“Client emergency. She can’t be seen in the same dress twice.”

He laughs. “Seriously?” Then he looks at the racks of dresses I have. “Why don’t you give her one of those?”

“Because...” I give him a cool, pointed look. “They’re mine, and her breasts are, uh, highly augmented. They won’t fit.”

“Huh. Okay, well, you want some help?” he says, eyeing the curlers in my hair and my yoga pants.

“Yes,” I reply as I run toward my bedroom. “Can you grab me my concealer and lipstick? They’re in my purse.”

“Got it!” he calls after me.

Unlike most guys, Hugo knows what they are, having spent a lot of time with me while we were growing up. He often came by to get help with the English assignments my dad, who is a high school English teacher, gave him. Afterward, he’d hang out and see me play with makeup. In retrospect, he’s actually been a pretty accommodating cousin. None of my brothers wanted to be near me when I did girly stuff.

I pull out all the curlers and finger-comb my hair. It looks good enough, bouncy and full around my head. After swiping my face with rosewater toner to get rid of excess oil, I apply some fast makeup.

Hugo comes over and places the concealer and lipstick on my vanity.

I flash him a smile. “Thanks.”

He says, “You’re welcome,” but seems distracted, kind of staring at the vanity. Maybe it’s my brushes. I bought seven more last time I went shopping. Maybe he’s wondering if he should get some for Samantha. A woman can never have enough makeup brushes.

“Sorry I can’t spend more time with you,” I say, dusting my cheeks with blush.

“No problemo. I understand.”

I give him a grateful smile. “Thanks. Next time, I’ll treat you to something nice.”

“It’s fine.”

“I insist.” I swivel around and bump into him. I look up. Is he going to leave, or...? “Is there something?” Maybe he really does want to buy brushes for Samantha and needs some help.

His face turns red. “No. Uh... Nothing. I...” He clears his throat.

I smirk. “What, did you grab a tampon in my purse before finding the concealer and lipstick?” He can get so uncomfortable about certain female products.

“No! That’s not... Anyway.” He clears his throat again. “I gotta go.”

“Okay. Bye!”

He shows himself out, and I change into a blue Dior dress and matching Gucci pumps. I drop the lipstick and concealer back into my Chanel bag, hoist it over my shoulder and leave.

For once, Sonia is early and waiting inside the Starbucks. She has a huge iced coffee... maybe a latte. This is her favorite place because it’s relatively uncrowded, so she can enjoy her java in peace. Her bleached hair is curled and loose around her plastic-surgery-sculpted face and she’s wearing a pair of giant sunglasses. She’s convinced people will recognize her otherwise and harass her. And by “people,” she means the inconsequential type who can’t give her the break she deserves. I do my best to resist the urge to point out that nobody cares enough to bother her. This is Hollywood. She just isn’t famous or important enough.

At least the pale peach Givenchy I picked out for her makes her look good, like she’s a normal human being and not a filler-stuffed snob. Man, I’m good at my job.

“Thank God you’re here,” she says. “You have to save me. I’m serious.”

“Okay, calm down. There’s still time before the gala,” I say, sitting down across from her. I don’t bother to get a drink. My job is to soothe her. I’ll drop a twenty-dollar bill in the tip jar on my way out to make up for not ordering anything.

“Right,” Sonia says, staring over my shoulder with anxiety.

Is there a movie director behind me? A casting agent? Someone who will never hire her if she wears the same dress twice?

Not my circus, not my monkeys, I think with a mental shrug. My problem is her ruined dress.

“Your shoes are okay, right? Poochie didn’t try to eat them?” Poochie hasn’t been broken of that habit despite the fact that he’s two.

“No,” she says with a heaving sigh. “He’s a perfect dog.”

I nod because she’s right. It isn’t the dog’s fault that she left red wine near the dress. And it certainly isn’t his fault that his owner refused to train him any better.

“Jo.”

I tense at the smarmily smug voice coming from behind me. *Shit. Aaron.*

“I’m sorry,” Sonia says, her gaze on her hands on the table. She stands up.

What the hell...?

Suddenly everything clicks. “Did you set me up?” I demand.

“I didn’t want to, but he made me. I had no *choice*.” Her voice is a wail, and she’s actually holding the back of one hand against her forehead.

“He *made* you?” Nobody can make Sonia do anything, not even her father. I’m tempted to point out she should’ve punched Aaron. But then, what, oh *what* would she do if she broke a nail?

Sonia runs away dramatically, back arched and hair bouncing like a tragic heroine in a cliché-ridden movie. I

watch her disappear with narrowed eyes, then start to get up. I don't have time for this, and I'm going to bill her for making me come out for this bullcrap.

"Sit down," Aaron says, grabbing my wrist.

As if. "You want to make a scene here? Is that what you want? White man harasses Hispanic girl? How do you think that's going to play?"

"Come on, sweetheart." His tone turns condescending and cajoling.

Irritation spikes. Why does he insist on using an endearment when I've made it clear as the Palm Springs air that we're through? "I'm not your *sweetheart* anymore. We broke up months ago. It's over."

I try to yank my arm out of his grip, but he holds me firmly. Maybe I should talk to Angel. He's one of my brothers, and an amateur kickboxer. Surely he can give me some pointers on ball-busting.

"I won't *accept* that it's over," Aaron says, recycling a line all the stalkers in history have used. But I know better than to expect originality.

I sigh. "Look, we're *done*. Finished. Kaput. Bye-bye land. You can't make me date you again. You're lingering like a guy two hours after the last course has been served. The restaurant is dark, the kitchen is closed. It's time for you to go home. *Alone.*"

"But I need you to marry me."

I can't help it. I snort, and then start laughing. We dated for four months. In the beginning, I was entranced by his dance moves—he's an excellent dancer—and he made me laugh with silly jokes. But we were never in love. The sex was just okay, at least on my end, even though he groaned and grunted like a pig in mud. The memory, in retrospect, makes me wonder if those sounds were the reason I got over him so fast. My experience with Edgar says *yes*. Because when *Edgar* groaned...

Stop, stop, *stop*. My lady parts are clenching hard, trying to ease the empty ache.

“I’m serious.” Aaron’s whiny voice cuts my Libido Express off like a katana through a bra strap. His face is turning a dull red.

No longer laughing, I squint at him. “Did you get hit by a car or something?”

“No, I—”

“Fall off a ladder? Some kind of head trauma?”

“My grandpa wants me to prove I’m good and settled, or he’s giving all the money to my brother. Why should that little weasel get everything?”

“No idea, but it’s not my problem.”

“Grandpa likes you! Says you’re a nice girl. He never said that about any other girl I dated.”

That makes me feel slightly warm and fuzzy, because while Aaron might be a dick, his grandfather is a gentleman. I blame Aaron’s mother for the way he turned out. She’s a piece of work. The only reason Aaron’s younger brother grew up to be an upstanding citizen is that he’s actually Aaron’s *half*-brother and was raised by his own very normal and nice mom.

“So?” I say carelessly. “You aren’t my type. Not anymore.”

He looks around and then pulls his phone out. He clicks a few buttons and then pushes the screen toward me. “Look at this. You think you’re in control here? You’re not.”

“Get that thing out of my face.” I’m too pissed off to give a damn now. I can’t believe I’m wasting my time here when I could be eating Tío Manny’s tacos along with Tía Bea’s guacamole.

“Oh, you want to see this,” Aaron says. “After all, you’re the star...”

Huh? I squint at the screen. It’s a video of two people... having sex. After a moment, I realize it’s me and Aaron. The

camera is angled on my face enough that you can tell. And the setting is familiar enough—those blue sheets and the black metal furniture. Aaron’s man-cave condo.

For a moment I stare, my brain working to put things together. Obviously, there were cameras hidden in his bedroom. Fucker!

Then another thing strikes me. I look sort of...bored and disengaged. So it wasn’t just me overanalyzing and nitpicking after the fact. He really wasn’t that good in bed, even before Edgar ruined me for other men.

“See?” Aaron says smugly.

“Yeah, I see. So what?”

“It’s a video of you having sex!”

“If you think you can turn me into some kind of puppet with this, you’re wrong. I was born and bred in Los Angeles, and it isn’t like a sex tape is some novelty these days. Nobody hires me for my virginal image. Besides, if you do release this, you’d better leave the country. My brothers and cousins will turn you into ground pork, and Tío Manny will turn that into tacos for his neighbor’s dogs.”

At the same time, a terrible guilt and concern writhe in my chest. My parents could see this. But I can explain that I couldn’t let Aaron blackmail me into marrying him. I want what my parents have—a loving, devoted marriage—and no way am I letting Aaron ruin that for me. Mama and Papa won’t like the situation, but they’ll understand, especially since I’m going to tell them it wasn’t my idea to make the stupid video in the first place.

It’s his. All his. Totally his.

Yeah, but you dated him, so you’re, like...a little bit responsible? Maybe one percent at least?

Shut up.

“*And* I can sue you for violation of privacy,” I say.

“Go ahead. See if I care. It’ll be too late. I already thought of everything, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. If

you serve me with court papers, I'm going to let everyone see it. If you go to the police, same thing."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, so everyone will see it. And that will prove...what? That you suck in bed?"

"What are you talking about?" He flips the phone so the screen's facing him. His complexion is now more reddish purple. "You're such a bitch. How did you fake...like you weren't into me?"

When I roll my eyes this time, I can almost see my hairline. "Aaron, boredom isn't what women fake in bed. It's orgasms, and they're just trying to get you to stop whatever it is you're doing. Here, I'm not even bothering. It's really for your own good that you don't release this thing. I mean, unless you want everyone to know how good you *aren't* in bed."

Now even the tips of his ears are scarlet. "Yeah, well... I'm going to anyway, unless you marry me. I have no choice. I'm entitled to the money!"

I shake my head. I'm never dating a guy because of amazing dance moves again.

"And I'll make it look like your dad sent it to his students. And the loudest, bitchiest mothers in the PTA. I can do that, you know! Make it look like the video came from his email address."

Hot anger shoots through me, and I finally yank my arm free. "You can't do that! It's not possible."

Aaron can probably guess what my papa's email address is, but he doesn't know the password. Or how to access the server.

"Sure I can. Haven't you gotten spam from your own address telling you to send a couple of Bitcoins unless you want your porn-watching habits to be revealed to everyone on your contact list?"

My body seems to chill a couple of degrees. I *have* gotten a few of those. The first time it happened, I panicked and called my cousin Diego, who's an IT consultant. He laughed and told me anybody can mask their email address to look like

it came from some other account. He even said it was pretty easy, but the rest of the explanation sort of flew over my head because it was too technical.

But one thing's for certain—Aaron knows how to do what Diego talked about. And he's rich enough to hire a PI to get PTA and student email addresses.

“Isn't your dad up for a teacher of the year award?” Aaron continues. “And retiring soon? Be a shame to go out on that note.”

Papa's not only dedicated, but spends lots of money and hours of his free time helping his students. If anybody deserves the award, it's him. Even if the school district can prove that it wasn't him who sent the video, the publicity could affect the award.

And that's not all. I'd bet all my Givenchy shoes and dresses that it'd make the news, because some asshole PTA member would go to the media about it instead of waiting for the outcome of the investigation. It'd be deeply humiliating for my parents. High school kids can be insensitive jerks, and the comments and whispers might be too much for Papa to bear, much less angry phone calls and conferences with irate parents and administration.

This is Papa's last year teaching. He deserves to retire with honor and dignity.

“You are *such* a dick,” I say, trying not to show my panicked anxiety. I refuse to give Aaron the satisfaction.

“Well, you know. When you give great dick, eventually it just...takes over.” He does a pelvic thrust with a smirk, then straightens. “Look, I'm being nice here.”

“Uh, I don't think secretly filming someone having sex—or blackmailing them—counts as being... Wait a minute. Did you also record Sonia?”

“Yeah. So?” He scowls and loses focus for a moment. Maybe he's wondering if Sonia looks bored in her video, too. “She's sweeter than you. She caved when I told her I'd send it to her dad.”

Sweeter. Her dad isn't funding her five-figure-a-month lifestyle so she can be a porn star. But that explains her behavior. I close my eyes for a moment. "Look, I can't just up and marry you. My family's going to wonder, and everyone will grill me. You know one of my cousins has a law degree, right?"

"Yeah. So I'm going to be nice because I'm not a bitch like you." His tone says he's doing me a huge favor. "I'll give you a week to convince your family you're in love with me."

It'd be easier to convince them I was going to help the Virgin Mary open a high-tech whorehouse in Amish country. "I don't even have a ring," I say sarcastically.

He pulls a sapphire ring out of his pants pocket. "Here. It was my mom's. You can have it."

Be still my heart. The setting is ugly and the stone so small that I don't think even a pawnshop would take it. It's got to be one his mother doesn't want anymore.

"Put it on," he says. "Unless you want me to go through with Plan B."

"What Plan B?" He never said anything about another "plan."

He sighs, full of exasperation. "Sending the video from your dad's account. Weren't you listening?"

"I thought that was Plan A?"

"No! Plan A is getting married. Geez!"

"Oh. Well, still. It's called a threat, not 'Plan B.'"

He looks pained. "*Threat* is such an ugly word. So crass. I'm not a thug."

Lord, have mercy. I wonder if killing this man would be considered justifiable homicide. Now I wish I'd studied law like Hugo. But since I didn't and I'm not sure about my options yet, I need to buy myself some time to figure out a countermove, something that Aaron hasn't thought of.

“Whatever,” I mutter, shoving the ring on. It’s too big for my ring finger, so I put it on my middle finger. That’s the one he deserves anyway.

“You should put that on the right finger,” he complains.

“The band’s too big. Unless you want me to lose this, you need to shut up.”

His mouth tightens. “All right, all right. Don’t take it off, because I’m not buying another ring if you lose it. Anyway, one week! And don’t ignore my texts! I’m your man now.”

More like my curse. I wonder if I should go to Mass... which I haven’t done since...I can’t even remember when... and pray for a small plane to fall on him. Or maybe a military drone could make a mistake and drop a small, one-person-sized bomb right over his head.

The sapphire winks on my middle finger, and I feel my face scrunch with distaste. How the hell am I going to convince my family I like Aaron when I can’t even stand his ring? And what *are* my options here, really?

Chapter Seven

Edgar

Instead of reviewing the report on Blackwood Energy's finances like I'm supposed to, I stare at the photos on my phone. The PI I hired sent them to me this morning with a note that they were taken yesterday.

Dad looks good in the pictures. The dark hair with a hint of silver at the temples. The green eyes. The solid, oaklike frame. The relaxed "the world is my oyster" attitude that can only come from not just being born to wealth but to power.

But what concerns me the most is the emotion on his face—so full of love and longing.

He shouldn't wear that expression when he's gazing at Mom.

The old resentment and anger resurface. Dad said he was sorry about the role Mom played in Tony and Ivy's near-deaths, but perhaps he wasn't *that* sorry. Or perhaps, for some bizarre reason, he still honestly does love Mom. The divorce was a show, designed to prevent the brewing gossip and scandal from damaging the family's reputation.

When I approached him about it a month ago, he said, "What do you expect me to do? I'm lonely." His gaze flickered briefly, then he looked me in the eye. "I love her."

"Have you forgotten what she did to this family? To Tony and Ivy?" I demanded.

"It was a long time ago. It's time we let bygones be bygones and forgive her."

"*Forgive* her?" I asked. "What happened to the guilt you said you felt when Tony and Ivy nearly died because of what Mom did?"

“I *do* feel guilty, but what’s that going to accomplish now? They’re fine. It worked out.” He looked at me. “Don’t you love her? She’s your mother.”

I walked away from the argument because I didn’t want to stay and lose my temper. He understood. My father and I do not believe in losing control.

Still, I thought he’d do what was proper after a couple of weeks and stop seeing her. He isn’t a complete idiot, nor is he impulsive. He knows how much this is going to hurt the rest of us—his three children. He might think it’s time we all forgive the past, but I can’t. How could I? How could Tony or Court... or Ivy, for that matter?

Mom did her best to constantly remind all of us about Katherine, the little girl she lost. But that wasn’t enough; she made it crystal-clear that it was our duty to tiptoe on eggshells around her. I don’t think she ever stopped to consider the fact that the daughter she lost was also our sister—and that we grieved, too. And I’ll never forget the way Dad condoned our mother’s emotional abuse and neglect. No, it was worse. He *participated* in the mistreatment because of how he felt about Mom.

Love, indeed.

I put the phone on my desk, screen down. Then I lean back in my chair, looking around my sparse and functional office, trying to gather my thoughts and emotions so they don’t spiral out of control. I loosened the reins four weeks ago, and I can’t afford to do it again so soon.

What do I expect Dad to do?

I expect him to do the right thing. The *honorable* thing—cut Mom out of his life completely. Salvage what’s left of the family. Think about us—his remaining children—for a change.

And he needs to quit whining about love.

“Edgar, you have a meeting in three,” comes Susan’s voice over the intercom.

“Got it.”

Putting my game face on, I head to the presentation our CFO called for. Dad is at the head of the table, calm as ever in his fancy suit. Jo's right about being able to project whatever you want with your outfit. From the way he's dressed, you'd think he was a nice businessman with a sensible mind, which is a terrible lie. I try to ignore him because I don't want to stew on my disappointment and resentment at work. He and Mom spending time together is a family matter.

A family matter that when you found out made you confront Dad...then drove you away to Los Angeles.

Well...not exactly *away*. Yuna texted me about the party she was hosting and I went because I needed to clear my head, out of the Tempérane pressure cooker. It was ridiculous and silly...

You didn't think Jo was silly.

Heat surges at the sudden reminder. No, Jo wasn't silly. She was fun. Sexy as hell. And...she cried my name underneath me like I was the only thing that mattered to her in that moment, her body pliant and hot and...

I shift in my seat. It's really not good to be sporting an erection while the CFO is discussing... *What is he talking about?* Oh, right. The slide says, "Supply Glut and Its Impact on Our Profit Margin." It's a serious issue for Blackwood Energy, and my meeting wood should settle down...except it doesn't because Jo's "more, harder...please" is echoing in my head over one of Dad's sycophants' decidedly unsexy, yet overeducated voice.

Jo was amazing, and the sex was shattering. If I were younger and more idealistic, I would've thought myself in love.

We stayed up until just before dawn, and I couldn't get enough of her. Even now I wish she were here so I could lose myself in her.

But I'm not going to see her again. She's in Los Angeles, and she made it clear she didn't want to have a relationship.

On top of everything else, she's just damn inconvenient, distracting me way too frequently.

I do *not* allow women to derail me from what I should be doing. I'm not weak or blind like Dad. A woman is like a good wine. You appreciate a glass, maybe two...and *then you're finished*. You don't keep imbibing until you're drunk—or worse, let the taste consume you and pull you away from your duties in life. Such as being there for your children. Protecting them. Caring for them. Let them know they aren't on their own...

But my body doesn't understand my stance on the matter. Lust lingers in my blood, my cock refusing to accept that it won't get to experience Jo's tight, supple body again...

Still, despite my initial annoyance, it's good that she left without a word when she did. No phone number, nothing. A clean, simple ending. An ideal outcome, really.

You could always get her number. It wouldn't be difficult...

But she didn't leave it, so I'm not going to. If I don't have it, I won't be tempted to call.

When the meeting finally ends, I stand up to leave for my office, leather portfolio strategically positioned to hide my condition.

My assistant gives me a funny look. Does she notice? But it wouldn't be like her to act like she notices.

“Yes, Susan?” My tone is coolly polite.

“You have something from a lawyer in Los Angeles.” She gestures at a brown envelope. “It came via special courier.”

“Give it to legal.” She knows it isn't my job to review legal documents.

“I would, but...it's marked private.” She points at the front of the envelope. Sure enough, it has a big stamp that says PRIVATE.

“All right.”

I take the envelope, carry it to my office and shut the door. The sight of my cell phone lying on the desk reminds me of the pictures I saw earlier. My jaw tightens until I feel like I'm about to break my molars.

Annoyed and restless because I still don't know exactly how I'm going to deal with Dad and Mom dating—and because I apparently can't *not* think about Jo—I rip the envelope open with more force than necessary, almost tearing the document inside.

My heart almost stops when I read the first paragraph.

Jo wants me to give up the rights to...*our baby*?

I stare at the paper for a moment. What the hell is the meaning of this? We practiced safe sex. She said she was on the pill, and I used my own condoms. Not expired. Not tampered with.

There's no way I got Jo pregnant, even if I came inside her more times than I can remember. Rubbers don't leak, and even if one sperm somehow managed to escape, her pill should've egg-blocked it.

My mind in turmoil, I pick up my phone and call the number on the stationery.

"Jones & Jones. Samantha Jones's office. How can I assist you?" comes a placid male voice.

"I need to speak to..." I look at the bottom of the letter to see who signed it. "Hugo Martinez."

"Speaking."

Interesting. Do lawyers answer calls for their bosses? I thought law offices had assistants for that sort of thing. Maybe Jones & Jones is one of those "law firms" that you find in strip malls.

Regardless, I push aside my distaste and maintain a cool and unapproachable tone. "This is Edgar Blackwood. I just received a letter sent on behalf of Josephine Martinez." I frown, suddenly realizing this Hugo guy and Jo share the same

last name. Perhaps they're related. Or perhaps it's a coincidence. It isn't like Martinez is rare.

"Oh, good. I was wondering when you might respond." His voice is as eagerly aggressive as a boxer climbing into a ring with his worst enemy.

"I believe you have the wrong man. You—or Josephine—must've made a mistake."

"Are you saying you didn't make a baby with my cousin?" he demands, outrage palpable. "She's a virgin, you know!"

So they *are* related. That explains the attitude. I look up at the ceiling. "If she's a virgin, how can she be pregnant?"

She was most definitely *not* a virgin. And even if she had been, she certainly isn't now. She and I debauched each other quite thoroughly, not that I'd share that with this pit-bull cousin of hers.

"Immaculate conception," he answers promptly. "With your sperm."

For God's sake. I can't believe I'm wasting my time talking to a man this devoid of the most fundamental understanding of human biology. "Is that what she said?"

"She didn't have to say anything. I found a pregnancy test kit in her purse." His voice is torn between indignation and embarrassment.

"Do you often go through your cousin's purse?" If so, he should see a therapist, rather than harassing me.

He sighs. "She asked me to get something from it for her, and that's when I saw it at the bottom, and I was like whoa, because she doesn't have a boyfriend or anything, you know, so I had to ask around, and then her best friend Kim told me she hooked up with you about a month ago, and *I knew it*," he says in one tumbling stream. He takes an audible breath. "So I'm saying," he continues at normal speed, "that you're the only person who could be her baby's father, and you need to do the right thing."

Of course. The child needs a father. A positive male role model. But...marry Jo? Goosebumps break out at the thought. I don't want to get married. Or at least not in this fashion. It isn't like I've been looking for love. Far from it.

I always imagined that if I ever got married, it'd be to a woman who was calm and pleasant as a mild spring day. My gut says *that's not Jo*. And my gut is almost never wrong.

But the child... I need to do the right thing for the child. I simply will not neglect my own child, no matter what. I'm not my father.

"So you need to sign that paper and give up your rights to the kid," Hugo says. "And you can pretend you never made a baby. Ever."

What the hell? "How is that the right thing?" I demand, suddenly outraged he's treating me as though I were some kind of...vermin. What's next? A restraining order to keep me away from my own child?

"Do you how messy and expensive unsettled parental rights and custody battles can be? I'm not letting Jo go through that. She deserves better."

"I suppose marriage never occurred to you?" I bring up the most logical possibility, and the one this lawyer should've thought of if he had a functioning brain cell in his skull. Perhaps I should retain a decent attorney for Jo. She deserves better than some joker who's incapable of identifying the most obvious and sound solution. "Or don't they do that in California anymore?"

He chokes out a laugh. "You think I'm doing this to get you to marry her?"

"Aren't you?" I'm rich. So is my family. And we're well connected. Why wouldn't a woman want to marry me?

The horrible scandal? Remember the conspiracy and all that? a small voice in my head whispers.

Yeah, but I wasn't really part of it. Or so I tell myself when I'm feeling ashamed and responsible for what happened within my family. The Blackwoods are dignified. We do not air our

dirty laundry. We pour bleach over the stains, patch up the rips and pretend we're above everything.

And it usually works...as long as we avoid tabloid writers.

"Look, I'm sure you're a great catch," Hugo says, his tone mildly conciliatory. "But Jo doesn't love you or plan to marry you. If she did, she would've told you about the bun in her oven, right?"

He has a point. And it's pissing me off. My child deserves a father. Jo should've told me, instead of having her cousin do this...notification.

My estimation of her drops a notch or two, but that doesn't dim the hotness of our night together. As a matter of fact, anticipation streaks along my spine. What's wrong with me? How can lust trump good sense?

"I'll handle this personally," I say finally.

"You can consult a lawyer of your own if you like, but this is a good deal for you."

I almost snort. I'll be the judge of what's good. I hang up, then ask Susan to come into my office. "Clear my calendar for the rest of the week and arrange for the earliest flight out to Los Angeles."

"But your meetings—"

"Cancel or reschedule. If not, tell them it's going to have to be done via teleconference. No exceptions."

She hesitates for a moment, then nods. "Yes, sir."

Chapter Eight

Jo

Elizabeth and I let our gazes roam over the endless rows of shoes. They're all nice, but... *Hmmm. That pink pair looks stylish...*

Wait, no. I pause, thinking about the dress she's going to wear to the gala next month. There's nothing really *wrong* with the pink stilettos, but she could do better.

I could do better.

Everyone at the gala is going to know I put her outfit together. As the head of the Pryce Family Foundation, Elizabeth King is one of the most high-profile women in the country for her charitable work. Not to mention she's model-beautiful, with long, glossy golden hair and warm, compassionate eyes that never fail to put people at ease. Making her look even more striking is going to further my career, especially since she's always made sure I got the credit for her impeccable fashion choices.

I give her another once-over, taking in her height, coloration and a thousand other details. "What do you think about these?" I say finally, picking up a pair of glittery silver sandals with thin heels. Dolce & Gabbana shouldn't disappoint.

Her eyes brighten. "Ooh! They're so cute!"

"And perfect for your royal-blue dress."

"I know!" She takes them from my hands and lovingly strokes the straps. "Oh my. I have to get these." She sighs. "I'm so glad you're here. I would've picked out something nude-colored, but I need more pizzazz."

A staff member of the luxury boutique brings over a tray of drinks. Elizabeth and I each take a glass of freshly squeezed

organic orange juice off the silver surface. As I sip the sweetly tart beverage, it suddenly occurs to me that Elizabeth has no reason to take the OJ. She drinks vodka like water, and she usually prefers champagne or a mimosa when she's shopping.

I tilt my head and regard her. She's not showing or anything...but the woman exercises and eats healthy food. She snapped right back after her first child—a son. Her smile is too happy, and... Is that a little extra glow on her face?

I lower my voice and lean closer. “Are you pregnant?”

She freezes, then glances down at her stomach. “Oh my gosh, how did you know?”

“The drink gave you away. And you're already glowing.”

She pulls her lips in, but can't hide a smile. “I just found out this morning. I haven't told Dominic yet, but we have a date tonight. He's going to be thrilled.”

That must be so nice. A small pang reverberates through me. I have no one who's going to be thrilled about my pregnancy. Not that I'm *necessarily* pregnant, of course. I still haven't used the test because...well, I don't really want to know. Not knowing means I can pretend everything's fine.

Besides, even if I do know for sure, what am I going to do about the situation? Tell Edgar? Keep things to myself and raise the child alone? My head is hurting again, and I can't begin to process that right now. I'm still debating what to do about Aaron's threat from two days ago.

I bet nobody makes threats against Elizabeth. Of course, she's probably too smart to let some asshole ex-boyfriend make a sex tape without her knowing.

And she has that terrifying assistant. I take a quick peek over her shoulder at the Russian man. He's just standing there, but still looks like he would rip the spine out of anybody who dared to bother her.

She eventually buys the silver sandals and a set of cuff links for her husband. After Elizabeth and I are done, I head to the barre studio to join Hilary, Kim and Yuna for a session. We

exercise there two or three times a week. It's a great way to decompress and burn some calories.

Except I'm late by forty minutes, thanks to the terrible traffic. So I sneak into the studio and wait for my friends to finish so I can join them for a drink—although I'm not going to be drinking, because I could potentially, possibly, *maybe* be pregnant. If anybody asks, I can just say I'm dieting. Or have a headache.

Maybe you should just take the test and be done with it.

Yeah, but then I'd know for sure.

Nobody goes this long without a period unless she's pregnant.

Maybe it's cancer.

Let's be more optimistic here.

What would make me optimistic is a good, strong drink... which I can't have, so I can't be optimistic.

Sure you can. It might just be menopause.

Why the hell am I arguing with myself? I hate it when my internal thoughts get extra sarcastic. Menopause before thirty? Come on.

Like cancer is more realistic?

Argh. How much longer before the barre session's over?

My three friends wave once they notice me, and I wave back. Then I thumb through my phone, trying to distract myself, even though my focus is totally not on what's on the screen.

My mind keeps going back to Elizabeth's pregnancy...my *possible* pregnancy...and Aaron's demand that I marry him so he can get money out of his grandfather. I wish I could just talk to old Mr. Korvid myself, but I can't risk Aaron ruining Papa's final year of teaching. I'm certain the weasel's anticipated the possibility of me running to his grandfather and already has a contingency plan in place. He's thought of everything else.

Still, he's no genius, not like that Chinese dude who wrote *The Art of War*. Aaron must've overlooked something. I just have to figure out what. And that calls for a brainstorming session with the girls.

When the barre class is over, I put away my phone, glad to escape my own headspace. I start toward my friends, then stop short and blink a few times, convinced my eyes are conjuring images that don't exist, like...*Edgar Blackwood coming up the stairs?* He's in a dark suit, wearing a serious expression, and no amount of blinking makes him disappear. Actually, the more I blink, the clearer I can see him.

I sense the girls approaching from the left. "What are you looking at?" Hilary says.

I turn my attention to her, hoping maybe it'll make the vision of Edgar vanish. Hilary wipes sweat from her bare neck, her long red hair twisted into a bun with a few tendrils around her face.

"Someone who shouldn't be here," I respond.

Yuna bounces over. "A stalker?"

She sounds somewhere between outrage and excitement, a drama shark scenting fresh blood. She seems to thrive on new incidents, and some of the antics she pulls make me think she's trying to outdo the characters from that *Crazy Rich Asians* movie. And if anybody can, it'll be her, as the only daughter of a family that owns an obscenely wealthy Korean conglomerate.

"No," I murmur, then turn my focus back to Edgar. He still hasn't vanished.

Kim looks over as well, pushing her hair out of her face and squinting. "Is that Edgar Blackwood?"

Yuna's head swivels fast. "Oh yeah, it *is* Edgar." She waves like a shipwreck victim spotting the coast guard. "Hey!"

Edgar nods at her once as he walks up. "Hello, ladies."

That velvety voice with a hint of Louisiana heat caresses me, and I swear my ovaries just shivered and released more eggs. An utterly futile move on their part, since I have no plans to listen to my hormones, now or later.

“How come you didn’t tell me you were coming?” Yuna gives him a faux pout. “I would’ve planned a party!”

“That would’ve been an imposition.”

“So...are you here to do barre?” I ask, absolutely refusing to entertain the possibility that he might be here to see me, because...why would he? It was just one time, and we haven’t been in touch since that night. Developing a sudden desire to put on leotards and come to L.A. for his daily exercise is actually a more likely possibility. He didn’t get that hunkalicious body from sitting behind a desk and signing off on big projects.

“Actually, I’m here to see you,” he says, his eyes coming to rest on mine.

I manage an outward calm that impresses even me. “Well, I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Before Yuna can invite him, I put a hand on her arm. “We have a girls’ night out planned.” That part is true. We always have a drink and hang out after barre.

“I can put on a dress if that’s what it takes,” Edgar says.

I stare at him. If anybody else had said that, I might’ve laughed, thinking it’s a joke. But he said it with such somberness that I can’t dismiss the possibility he’s actually serious. And I don’t want to star in another scene. I’ve already hit my drama quota for the year.

“Ten minutes,” I say, then turn to my friends. “You guys go ahead. I’ll catch up soon.”

They drag their feet to the changing room, walking sideways and then full-on backward. Yuna in particular is craning her neck at an angle that I didn’t think was humanly possible.

“I saw a Starbucks downstairs,” Edgar says.

“That works.”

I hoist my purse and march forward. I figure if I walk in front of him, it'll be better for libido control because I won't see that gorgeous ass that I gripped so hard...or admire those wide, strong shoulders that I clung to as orgasms exploded like fireworks.

But having him behind me isn't that helpful. Not seeing him only makes me hyperaware of him in other ways—the even sound of his shoes hitting the stairs, his shadow stretching and shortening as we move under the stairwell lights. Besides, my back keeps tingling, and I wonder if *he's* checking *me* out. He did love my ass. My right cheek prickles, memories of his teeth grazing over the sensitive skin warming my blood.

I walk faster.

The Starbucks is crowded. The cool air is replete with the smell of coffee, tea and pastries, and I inhale deeply to shake off the unwanted lust gathering inside me. My mouth waters at the scent of pure, unadulterated carbs and sugar, but I restrain myself. I didn't even work out today, and I should save my calories for later.

Edgar places a hand on my elbow as we move toward the smiling, eager barista. If it were anybody else I might pull away, but I can't. His gesture is incredibly gentlemanly, almost old-world. I wonder if he's the type to lay down his jacket over a mud puddle, then shake my head. What am I thinking? *He's wearing Armani*. Nobody mistreats Armani like that.

He gets a cappuccino, and I order a decaf iced tea. He makes a “both of those” gesture with his finger and reaches for his wallet; I start to put a hand on his arm to stop him, then catch myself. Touching him more is a bad idea. I need to be clearheaded.

“You take care of your drink, and I'll take care of mine,” I say.

“It's no trouble.”

“It kind of is to me.” Especially when I’m not sure why he’s here.

He must’ve done some homework if he tracked me down at the barre studio. Does he want to hook up again? But flying out to L.A. and hunting me down is too much work for sex, isn’t it? Even amazing sex? Even for a guy? I am, of course, completely awesome in bed...but I’m not delusional.

He looks like he wants to argue for a moment, then shrugs, the gesture small and clearly stating that this isn’t a battle he cares to wage.

“If you insist.” Then he uses a black AmEx to pay. Feeling like a peasant, I swipe my lowly, nothing-special Visa card.

He locates an empty table with two stools. I hoist myself up on one and hook my heels on the thick rung.

“Okay. So what are you doing here?” I take a few sips of the tea. I might not have worked out, but I still need to hydrate.

He puts the coffee to the side, utterly uninterested in the brew. “I’m here to do the right thing.” He pauses, his lips firming.

I wait, wondering what he means by “right thing” and what that has to do with me.

“You’re pregnant with my baby.”

I snort the tea, and holy cow, it hurts like hell. Tears form in my eyes, and I swear, I can feel the tea in them from the way my eyes sting.

“I’m not pregnant,” I gasp, then start coughing a bit to clear my throat and nose. It isn’t a lie...exactly. I don’t know for certain yet, even if my period is late. Really late. I squirm. The unused pregnancy test kit seems to be buzzing in my bag, screaming, *Use me, use me now!*

Edgar hands me a handkerchief, but I wave him off. I might do something stupid, like try to keep it so I can smell it later. *Jo the hanky perv.* Instead, I pull out some tissues from a small packet I carry in my purse.

He sighs and puts away the handkerchief. “That isn’t what I heard. Your cousin sent me a letter.”

“My cousin?”

“The strip mall lawyer.”

“My strip mall lawyer cousin?” I scowl. “Which one?” I have my suspicions, but I want Edgar to confirm so I strangle the correct cousin. All of my cousins are really good at playing the dumb, unassuming ignoramus when it suits them.

“Hugo. You didn’t have to hire him, by the way.”

Hire him? Strangulation is too good for that, that... “He most certainly is not a lawyer, mine or otherwise.”

Edgar raises an eyebrow. “The letterhead he used suggests otherwise.”

“He doesn’t know anything,” I say between clenched teeth.

“He knew there was a pregnancy test kit in your purse.” Edgar’s tone’s calmer than a placid lake, but still firm. “You’re a personal shopper, Jo, not a personal assistant. You have no reason to carry one around, unless carrying pregnancy tests for no good reason is in vogue now.”

Oh geez. I do my best not to give in to the urge to bang my head against the table. So that’s why Hugo was acting so weird in my apartment. *It wasn’t a tampon he saw, it was the test kit.*

Edgar continues, “Contrary to what you presume, giving up the baby is not the right thing for me to do.”

Just what the hell did Hugo say to Edgar? “Okay, look. Number one, I don’t know for sure that there even is a baby.”

Oh, yes you do. The sarcastic voice is back.

“Was the test inconclusive? If so, we’ll go see a doctor.” Edgar speaks as though it’s not only the most natural next step, but he’s insisting on it.

What’s going on here? Shouldn’t he be relieved he doesn’t have to “do the right thing”?

“No, that’s not what I meant. I haven’t used the test yet.”

“Oh.” Edgar looks at me for a moment, assimilating this new information. “Well, in that case, go ahead now. I’ll wait.”

I give him a look. There’s no way I’m heading to the bathroom here. And a restlessness is growing inside me. I want to talk to my girlfriends, figure out what to do about Aaron so I can avoid hurting my papa, not debate parental rights for a baby, whose existence I haven’t confirmed yet, with a month-old hookup. I can only handle so many big personal crises at once, and I still have to work, trying to dress my clients while ignoring Sonia, who’s sent me like twenty-eight texts begging me to take her back because she can’t look like a hag in public.

“Well...?” Edgar prompts when I don’t move.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s too late.” I reach into my purse, pull out Aaron’s foul ring and shove it on my middle finger. Then I show him. “See this?”

The skin around his eyes creases as he frowns. “That’s unnecessarily rude.”

I heave a sigh. “God, you’re so serious. Not the finger, the ring.”

“What about it?”

“I’m engaged.”

One of his dark eyebrows jumps up. “You keep your engagement ring in your purse? And wear it on your middle finger?”

“Yes.” *For reasons you can’t even imagine.*

For a shamefully weak moment, I’m tempted to unload everything on Edgar. His even, unperturbed demeanor adds to his solid quality, making him appear more dependable than gravity. I feel like there’s no problem he can’t solve, no unwanted creep he can’t flick out of his—or my—life with ease.

But I can’t. He and I shared a single hot night. No man wants to get involved in a one-night stand’s drama.

Besides, what can Edgar do? Break all of Aaron's fingers so he can't use his computers or phone? Ship him off to a deserted island with no mobile coverage? Edgar's too proper and responsible. He'd likely get a lawyer or go to the cops, like a good citizen. And those aren't the solutions I need.

Sighing, I stand. "Edgar, I don't know what Hugo told you, but I don't want your money or anything. *If* I'm pregnant, then I'll figure things out on my own. If you want a legal statement attesting to that fact, I'll be happy to provide one. But for now, I really need to figure out this engagement problem."

He looks at me, blinking. And before he can recover, I pick up my purse, weave quickly through the crowd gathered near the cash register and leave.

Chapter Nine

Jo

It takes exactly zero time to locate my friends at the bar, because Yuna rushes toward me the second I open the door.

“Tell us *everything*,” she gushes, taking my arm and pulling me none too gently toward the table where the rest of the girls are. “I’m still a little sad you didn’t tell Edgar to put on a dress.” She sighs forlornly. “I’ve never seen a white man in a dress before. Much less a CEO. I was going to lend him my lipstick.”

Despite my less-than-stellar mood, I laugh and take an empty seat.

“Okay, spill it,” Kim says, leaning forward.

Hilary pushes a drink in my direction. “Your favorite martini. I figured you’d need it.”

In any other situation, she’d get an A+ for helping. She’s assistant to a guy who has more money than the gods, and she knows exactly how to anticipate everyone’s needs. Her husband is a lucky man.

But since I might be—okay, I’m probably *most likely* pregnant—I have to turn it down. Being in denial and procrastinating doesn’t mean I get to be irresponsible. “No thanks. I just want some water.”

Kim stares at me, concern filling her gaze. Hilary blinks blankly, and Yuna is giving me a “Did you get hit on the head?” look.

“I might...could maybe be...pregnant.” I push the words out with a great deal of effort and pain. “It’s so...muddled.”

“Edgar’s baby?” Kim asks, leaning forward.

“Wait, you slept with him and didn’t tell us?” Hilary’s jaw slackens. Her tone says she’s hurt and left out. “When?”

“Is he here to do the right thing?” Yuna demands, obviously going for what she considers the most important point. And why is she using the same phrasing Edgar used? Is marriage the only “right thing”?

I raise a hand. “Okay, stop. In order: Yes. Yes, at the adult cream pie party. And...it’s really complicated.”

“What’s really complicated about doing the honorable thing?” Yuna asks, bristling. “The baby deserves a father! I’m giving him a piece of my mind.” She whips out her phone.

“No, don’t!” I wave at her to put that thing away. I’d die of humiliation if Edgar thought what I was really angling for was marriage after leaving him the way I did at Starbucks. “I told him no. I can’t marry him.”

“You *can’t*?” Kim purses her lips. It’s the same expression she has when her boss asks her to do something impossible. “How come? You said he was great in bed. Crackgasms, remember?”

Dios mío. I place a hand over my face because I can’t look at Hilary and Yuna right now. Even if it weren’t for Aaron’s threat, I can’t marry Edgar. We’re great in bed together, sure, but marriage is a lot more than that. Like love. True affection. If God asked me to choose between my favorite Dior or a man to take to a deserted island, the immediate choice better be the man or I’m not tying the knot.

“Even if he was only average...or below average in bed, he still needs to do the right thing and marry you. He can always practice to improve his technique,” Yuna says firmly.

“When did you become so conservative?” I ask. Yuna’s many things, but I never expected her to be this old-fashioned. Plenty of single moms raise kids just fine on their own.

Yeah, say that to your mama and papa and see what they say.

I could maybe explain the sex tape, but I can’t explain a baby. Mama and Papa both told me to avoid getting pregnant

by someone I can't see anything long-term with, and I should've been more careful. Maybe full-body armor around my eggs. Besides, two crappy blows back to back like this? I'm going to become a hashtag of shame—#DaughterFail.

Argh. I really need a strong drink!

Yuna is looking at me. "It has nothing to do with being conservative," she says, dead serious. "You simply *do not* turn your back on your own flesh and blood. Besides, do you know how hard it is to raise a kid by yourself?"

"I still can't marry him," I moan. "I'm being forced into this ridiculous engagement." I show them the ring, still on my middle finger because I forgot to take it off after leaving Starbucks.

"Wow," Kim says. She and Hilary look at me in unified concern.

Yuna tsks. "The stone's too small, and the band is too big." Her words drip with derision. "You should tell him you changed your mind. Not even true love can survive a man who doesn't care enough to get a properly sized and proportioned ring."

"I didn't say yes because of the ring." And then I tell them about the threat Aaron made and how stuck I am.

"A *sex tape*?" Kim stares at me, then sucks down her drink like she needs a filter for reality.

"Oh, shit," Hilary says softly. "What are you going to do? You can't let him win."

"Can't he just...disappear?" An evil gleam sparks in Yuna's dark eyes. "Maybe go for a delightful hiking trip in North Korea? I'll be *happy* to foot the bill. I hear it's lovely there this time of year."

"Ha!" I laugh because it's better than crying. Tears would worry my friends. "I wish. Anyway, I need to fix the Aaron situation before I can deal with any baby. At least a baby won't arrive for nine more months."

“Can you just prolong the engagement as long as possible? You don’t want the stain of having married a rat like him,” Kim says. “It isn’t like his grandfather wants him to marry right now, right?”

“She’s right.” Hilary nods. “Your dad’s retiring this year. So all you have to is hang in there until then.”

“Exactly. What’s the roach going to do? He can’t drag you to the altar, especially if the whole point is to make his grandfather think you’re into him,” Yuna says. “Nobody’s good enough to fake that.”

I think it over. “You’re right. What’s he going to do when my dad’s retired? I don’t care if he releases the video, then.” Okay, I do, but not enough to the point that I’m going to let Aaron endlessly control me.

Yuna shakes her head vigorously. “No, no. That’s not the point.”

“It’s not?” I ask, confused.

“You have to make him *pay*! Bankrupt him. Maybe even make him impotent.”

“Yeah,” Kim says. “Then *he* won’t come for nine months.”

Hilary high-fives her, and we all laugh.

“I promise I’ll think of some way to make all that happen later,” I say, “but for now, I need to ensure my dad can retire without a scandal or any embarrassment.” I sigh, staring at my friends’ drinks. I really need some alcohol.

Chapter Ten

Edgar

Perhaps I should've had Susan book me a room, I think as I drive my rental to Tony's mansion. Of course, staying at a hotel would upset Ivy because she's big on family, and she doesn't want me to feel any guilt or responsibility for what Mom has done. As far as Ivy's concerned, I should stay with them every time I'm in the city. And Tony would be upset for the same reason.

Restlessness churns in my gut. What I should've done was go after Jo and sort everything out back at the Starbucks. That way, I could fly back to Tempérane tonight. But when she said *engagement*, it was a real shock. It never crossed my mind she might've been with somebody long enough to be engaged, yet still spent the night with me.

The notion is distasteful. I do not poach, and I have better judgment than to roll around with someone who's involved long-term with someone else, no matter how hot she is.

But...

Something about that ring bothers me. I didn't notice it on the night we slept together, and I definitely would have, especially since I kissed every inch of her body.

But that isn't really it. The ring just doesn't seem like something a man would buy to propose with. It doesn't fit her finger properly, and she deserves something more...fiery. A large ruby surrounded by diamonds, perhaps. Or garnets. Brilliant or princess cut...

I shake my head. It's pointless to dwell on that. She's engaged...and...

But she called her engagement a "problem."

Would a woman in love say that?

Perhaps she's suffering from some kind of...love-induced madness. Love makes people do unreasonable, illogical things, things that are often against their own interests. Not only that, pregnancy hormones are pumping through her veins. Regardless of what she said, I'm convinced she's expecting. Otherwise, there was no reason to buy the pregnancy test kit in the first place. Besides, now that I think about it, every word out of her mouth and her evasive behavior indicated she isn't just pregnant, but pregnant with *my child*. Otherwise she would have just told me it was her fiancé's baby. And why else would she have used a word like "problem" to describe her engagement?

Bitter disappointment and rage bubble in my gut, and I clamp down on both. Hard. It's ludicrous for me to feel these emotions. It isn't as though I care about her. It'd be illogical for me to do so. I haven't known her long enough. Fun and sex are not solid foundations for matrimony.

Since marriage is out of the question... I exhale harshly, my hands flexing around the steering wheel.

I'll sort things out with her tomorrow—let her know I plan to provide acceptable child support so she doesn't have to be solely responsible for what we both created. I'll also be involved in the child's life as much as possible. My child will never know what it's like to have a parent who doesn't care about it.

Then, once the situation with Jo is settled, I'll return to Tempérane. We'll keep contact to a minimum. I can hire a reliable nanny to bring the child to Louisiana when it's my turn, then take the child back to Los Angeles when it's her turn. A practical solution. Clean. I can arrange for a first-tier private preschool as well. The child will never lack opportunities, regardless of Jo and her soon-to-be husband's financial circumstances.

A vise clenches around my chest at the picture the plan creates. Furious dissatisfaction thrums in my veins. I breathe in slow and deep. It's got to be the stress. The damn business. Fighting with Dad over the future of Blackwood Energy. That and trying to figure out how I'm going to stop him from

reuniting with Mom. This isn't about Jo. Or the baby. Or Jo's engagement.

I go through the gates to Tony's mansion, using the passcode he gave me, then park my car in the driveway. I notice a Maserati: Court's car. Is he here, too?

Damn it. He's going to want to know how I'm doing and why I'm in Los Angeles. Bad enough I'm going to lie to one brother; now I'll have to do it to both.

I'm enormously tempted to turn around and find a hotel, but I don't.

Tony hides his shock well when he finds me on the doorstep. Ivy, on the other hand, does not hide her reaction at all.

"Edgar...! What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in Tempérane?"

"Just..." I pause and search for an acceptable term. "A personal matter." Jo and my baby in her womb definitely qualify.

"Come on in. We're having a late dinner," Tony says. "Court and Pascal are here."

They lead me to the dining room, where, sure enough, my youngest brother and his fiancée are at the table, divvying up some takeout food. Like Tony, Court resembles Mom in his appearance, except for his hair, which is dark like Dad's. Thankfully, Court didn't get any of her temperament or judgment. Because of Dad's relentless insistence, Court is in charge of Blackwood Energy's charitable foundation, which he can do while living in L.A. He doesn't want to move back home, where good memories are so few. So far Dad has let him be because Dad thinks Court will eventually do what's right—that is, devote himself to the family business and furthering our reputation and influence.

But I doubt that's ever going to happen, because Pascal lives in L.A. and she's the new anchor in his life. She's a pretty enough brunette, but that isn't the main reason Court

likes her. The woman has a sharp mind and an emotional warmth that I don't believe Court experienced until he met her.

Pascal favors me with a bright smile. "Hello, Edgar. Good to see you! How's life?"

"I'm doing well. And you? My brother still treating you like a queen?"

"Of course I am. And don't even think about offering to set her up with someone who'll treat her like an empress," Court warns me with a baleful look. He wasn't too thrilled with my joking offer last time, and I guess he's still holding a slight grudge.

But he gets up and we exchange a brotherly hug, slapping each other's backs. He hits me with a little more force than necessary.

"Hope you're in the mood for Thai," Tony says. "If not, we can order something else for you."

"Thai is fine." I don't have much appetite anyway. I turn to Ivy. "Are you okay to eat this? It isn't going to upset your stomach?"

"Actually, it was my idea," Ivy says, patting her bump. "I've been dying for some green curry and pad thai." She licks her lips as Tony pulls out a chair for her.

We all sit down. Court is giving me a curious "so what are you *really* doing in L.A.?" look. My brothers know that, much as I love them, running Blackwood Energy keeps me busy, and I don't stop by unannounced without a reason.

I ignore Court, not wanting to discuss the Jo situation when we're just about to eat. Tony concentrates on his food, content to wait for an explanation.

Pascal takes a sip of her tea, then clears her throat. "So, Ivy, when is the baby shower?"

"I'm not sure yet. Yuna's insisting on hosting it herself. Probably soon, though," Ivy says.

"I thought she was on the run from her mom?" Or so I remember hearing the last time I was in the city. On the other

hand, she's a clever girl. So perhaps she'll find some sneaky way to host it anyway.

"I think they'll come to some sort of understanding," Ivy says. "Her mom knows she can't make Yuna marry someone she doesn't want. It's only going to make Yuna pull away more."

"Is there a man who can handle that girl?" Court asks with a small sigh. "She's impossible. I mean, in a good way. But still impossible."

I nod. She was born to money and power. Her father adores her and lets her do whatever she wants. And it doesn't end there. He dropped a project with an American company once because she asked him to. Her influence over her father is what makes her formidable. And...impossible.

"So, what are you doing out here?" Court asks finally. "Have a fight with Dad?"

I should've known he wasn't going to be able to suppress his curiosity for long. And being subtle isn't his forte. "We had a...disagreement."

Court rolls his eyes, but I'd rather avoid the term "fight." It's too messy and emotionally ugly. Dad and I were both very controlled. As a matter of fact, we didn't even raise our voices.

"How come?" Tony asks, the reluctance in his tone making it clear that he doesn't want to get involved in what's happening in Tempérane. The town represents nothing but a painful past to him.

Well, let's see. There are so many points Dad and I disagree about. I pick the most neutral, the one least likely to bore everybody. "He wants to pass Nora over for promotion. Again. And that's unacceptable, because she's worth a lot more than Paul Fontenot, and she's been with the company longer as well."

"He's going to promote that tool?" Court demands, his face twisting into outrage.

"What's wrong with him?" Pascal asks.

“He’s never seen a woman he didn’t want to make sexist comments about,” Court says, his nose wrinkling in distaste.

Pascal’s eyes flash. “Sexism is ugly.”

“He’s clinging to the way things were, rather than what the future could be,” I say.

“You should stage a coup.” Court snaps his fingers. “Take control of the company.”

“Easier said than done.” I let out a frustrated sigh. I need something stiff, but it would be rude to ask for anything, considering Ivy can’t drink. “He’s in with the good ol’ boy gas-and-pipeline network in the South, especially Louisiana and Texas, and most of the board doesn’t merely think he’s the best thing since sliced bread—he *is* the sliced bread.”

“I’m sorry,” Ivy says softly. “But feel free to stay here as long as you want. Forget about the problems in Tempérane.”

I smile at her. “Thanks. But I’ll eventually have to go back to handle the situation.” As soon as I sort out the Jo problem. It shouldn’t take that long.

When dinner’s over, Pascal and Ivy decide to linger over cups of decaf tea to consult each other on baby stuff. I head to Tony’s study, where he keeps some excellent liquor, and pour myself two fingers of scotch.

Before I can toss it back, the door opens and my brothers walk in. They’re wearing frowns so identical that it’s almost comical. But then they look alike, while I do not. I have Dad’s wide, solid frame, along with his rougher, less polished features.

“Shouldn’t you be with your women?” I ask, keeping my tone casual. I sit down on a plush leather armchair and prop one ankle on my knee.

“Cut the bullshit,” Court says, shutting the door.

“You didn’t fly out here just because Nora didn’t get promoted,” Tony says.

They join me, taking the other armchairs.

I sigh. My brothers know me too well. I take a healthy swallow of the scotch. “It’s a personal matter.”

“Are you dating?” Court stares at me like I’ve announced I enjoy fornicating with unicorns.

And that incredulous expression offends me in a way I can’t quite put my finger on, even though I know he isn’t doing it on purpose. “What if I am?”

“Who?” I can almost see the names of women I’ve been involved with—or could be involved with—cross Tony’s face.

Ignoring both of them, I knock back the rest of the drink.

Tony blinks. “Wait... *Yuna*?”

The scotch gets caught and goes up my nose. I cough and sputter, trying to clear the burn in my sinuses.

“Okay, maybe not her. So who?” Court asks.

They aren’t going to quit until they know. I can’t even get angry, because they’re just worried about me, and I’m already feeling guilty about the family secret I’m hiding. “I got a letter from a lawyer. A guy from a firm called Jones & Jones.”

Then I tell my brothers the broad strokes of what happened between me and Jo. They don’t need the details of our night together.

Court whistles. “So what you’re saying is, she doesn’t want to be...Jo mama.”

“Har, har, har. At least she didn’t leave me fifty dollars on a hotel nightstand.”

“Yeah, but my woman isn’t going to hire a famous divorce law firm to get rid of me.”

“Famous divorce law firm?”

“Jones & Jones. It’s one of the best in the state...if not *the* best,” Tony says.

Huh. So it’s not some strip mall outfit, which is something of a relief. Jo and her cousin aren’t totally incapable, even though they shouldn’t have bothered.

“Are you going to let her marry her fiancé?” Tony asks, leaning closer.

The idea is revolting, even though I’m not certain why it bothers me so much. It isn’t like Jo and I professed undying love for each other. And if she’d tried to use the baby to squeeze money out of me, I wouldn’t have reacted well. But she didn’t... And perhaps that’s why her engagement turns my stomach.

Along with the fact that I want to be a proper father to the baby.

You don’t have to marry the mother to be a good father, my mind whispers.

Perhaps not. But I detest the idea of *my* child calling some other man “Dad.”

“Is there another option? Drag her away, kicking and screaming?” I ask with a calmness I don’t feel.

Tony shrugs. “That’s what Court did. Of course, you want to make sure it’s the right girl first...”

Court ignores him. “It’s your baby.” He points at my stomach, as though I’m the one with an occupied oven.

I shrug, not wanting to discuss possible solutions with him. He’s too young and idealistic, and he isn’t going to understand. He thinks love matters, happiness matters, and the world can generally be a nice, bright place if you just try. And I’m happy he believes that, because I’ve done my best to shield him from the influence of our parents, especially our mother.

But that doesn’t mean *I’m* blind to the truth of how the world truly works.

Love makes people crazy. They do terrible things in its name.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out, grateful for the interruption. It’s Yuna. What could she possibly want? She isn’t inviting me to another party, is she? Or does she plan to grill me about my meeting with Jo at Starbucks?

On the other hand...didn't she already interrogate Jo?

"I have to take this. Business." I get up and leave my brothers in the study, heading toward the room I always stay in when I'm in L.A.

"Edgar speaking," I say in my most professional tone, in case anybody's eavesdropping. You never know.

"Edgar Blackwood!" comes Yuna's stern voice. "You have to save Jo! Or I'm sending ninjas after you!"

Chapter Eleven

Edgar

Save Jo? Ninjas?

Jo was perfectly healthy and safe when I left her. I doubt that changed at her girls' night out.

I raise an eyebrow at Yuna's dramatic threat, then enter my room and shut the door before I answer it. "Aren't you Korean?"

"Of course. What does that—"

"Ninjas are Japanese."

"I can wire money to Japan. I have yen!"

I'm sure she has lots of yen. "So why don't you just hire the ninjas to save Jo?" I say with faux carelessness. My feelings about Jo are too volatile for my liking. I need to get a hold of them before I see her again. "Cut out the middleman?"

"Because you're not a 'middleman'! You're the only one who can fix this!" She lets out a frustrated sound. "Do you know she's engaged?"

I sit down on the bed, resting my back against the headrest. "Yes. She showed me her ring." Even though I know it's snide, I can't help but add, "Unfortunately, it wasn't a very good one. I hope her fiancé is capable of providing for her."

Speaking of which... Would it be wise for me to just hand over child support money without any strings attached? Perhaps I should demand that she and her fiancé adhere to certain conditions. After all, I'm not in the habit of paying for others' lifestyles...especially not ones they haven't earned.

"Forget the ring! She's marrying him because of a sex tape!"

My vision goes hazy red for a moment. She might as well have punched me in the gut. “*What?*”

“Her fiancé filmed them having sex without her knowledge! And now he’s threatening to release it!”

Another wave of rage surges, and my hands clench. If he were here, I might communicate how I feel about his behavior with my fists. Not because I’m out of control, but because certain things are better communicated that way. “Bastard.”

It’s one thing for a woman to film herself and her partner having sex, but it’s something else when it’s without explicit consent and, worse, used for blackmail. It’s revolting that anybody who feels like it will be able to watch Jo in bed with another guy, whether she likes it or not.

No one should *ever* see her like that—uninhibited, wild and hot.

She should only be that way with me.

“That even isn’t the worst.” Yuna’s voice cuts through my thoughts. She’s close to hyperventilating. “His plan is to make it look like it’s her father who leaked it to his students and the PTA! He’s a high school English teacher, you know. Her dad, I mean. Jo can’t let that happen.”

I grind my teeth, trying to control my temper. If I want to solve this, I need to think clearly. “Who is this man?”

“The blackmailer? Aaron Korvid. I already looked him up. Some loser who’s set to either inherit a big trust fund or else go scrub toilets. He’s good for nothing.”

The name is vaguely familiar. Where have I heard it before?

“Can you bring napalm?”

Napalm? “For what?”

“So we can give him a fiery death, duh. Doesn’t your company make it?”

I stiffen, wondering what she’s implying. “Blackwood Energy is *not* a weapons manufacturer.”

“Yeah, but come on. You only need gasoline and those Styrofoam peanut things to make napalm, right? At least, that’s what Google said.” She huffs. “You guys have gas.”

I run a hand over my forehead. “You don’t have to have gasoline from Blackwood Energy. Any gas station will—” I stop, not wanting to encourage her. She might actually do it. “But don’t do anything. Let me handle this.”

“I knew I could count on you!” Yuna says with an audibly relieved sigh.

“I’m glad you called.” If she hadn’t told me, I wouldn’t have known. This changes all my earlier plans. I’ll be damned if such a morally reprehensible man is going to come anywhere near my child or Jo.

You’re feeling awfully possessive of her.

I am not. This isn’t about her, but the wrongness of the entire situation. I’d do it for anybody.

Absolutely anybody.

Chapter Twelve

Jo

Although I have a game plan and want to get it rolling, I don't call Aaron to let him know what I'm going to do. He's playing a power game, and I'm not going to have him believe I've been stewing, wasting my life, thinking about his blackmail. The critical point is to appear serene and in charge, even if I'm feeling anything but.

Knowing him, I'm certain he isn't going to wait the full week, like he said at Starbucks. He isn't capable. I expect him to call either today or tomorrow about my "progress." He doesn't understand what he's asked for is impossible. Give me a lifetime, and I still wouldn't be able to convince anybody in my family I'm in love with him—at least not enough to want to marry him.

So I sit on my hands. More precisely, I sit on the toilet to do the pregnancy test. Avoiding it is silly. It's about time I face the truth. And I could very well not be pregnant. *It is possible...*

You might as well pray that your latest Dolce & Gabbana sandals come with a winning lottery ticket.

Hey, I might get lucky. Some nice person could've stuffed the box they came in with the ticket...

But no such luck! The test kit shows two vivid lines. I sigh, an oddly empty acceptance spreading through me. I knew this was probably going to be the outcome, no matter how many other possibilities I entertained. At least it's not cancer or menopause.

I dump the kit in the trash and wash my hands while checking my reflection in the mirror. I look like my usual homebody self—curlers in my hair, a comfy, loose T-shirt and yoga pants, no makeup or jewelry. My cheeks are a bit paler

than usual, probably because half my nutrients are going to the baby.

I look down at my still-flat stomach. What am I going to do about the baby? Edgar has to know I'm pregnant—the man's not stupid—and even if we don't get married, he has certain rights and responsibilities. And I don't mean money. The baby needs to know that he or she is unconditionally loved by both parents.

But how's that going to work? I'm here, and he's in Louisiana. That's, like...two time zones away. We'll need to stop and think before even calling each other.

My phone rings. I check the name and sneer. *Aaron*. I knew it.

Plopping myself on the couch, I count to three with the speed of a snail on tranquilizers, then hit the green button. "Yes?"

"Hey. So you did it, right?" he says, excitement making his tone slightly high-pitched. "Told your family we're gonna get married?"

"Nope."

"What do you mean, no? You know what I'm going to do to your dad if you fuck with me?"

That's the only reason you get to speak to me, dumbass.
"Look, they just aren't going to be convinced that easily. Besides, I need a long engagement to make them think I'm serious."

"What are you talking about? We're in love, remember? We can't wait to be married and start our life together."

I gag silently. "Mom's never going to believe everything's fine if I tell her I want to elope or go for a quickie wedding. She knows I want the most perfect wedding gown and the most perfect venue."

"How hard can it be to buy a white gown?" He sounds genuinely confused.

This is why you own a denim tuxedo, and I don't. “A long time. Years, in some cases.” I infuse extra sarcasm, but I don't think he notices. Aaron never does.

“Shit. Well, you better hurry it up. I can't wait forever. I need to show I can be responsible before my grandpa gives everything to my brother.”

“It's going to be expensive, too.” Most men realize this, but it's impossible to underestimate Aaron's knowledge. “And you're going to pay for it.”

“Why?” The word is shaky with outrage. “It's the bride's family that pays!”

Oh, for God's sake. “Not when the groom is blackmailing the bride into marrying him!”

“But—”

“Do you want me to tell your grandfather you're denying me the ceremony I deserve?”

That shuts him up.

I wish I could use the grandpa card all the time, but it'll lose effectiveness if I do. I inhale deeply. “Anyway, a long engagement is a must. And one more thing you should know—I'm pregnant.”

A stunned silence. Then Aaron explodes. “What the *fuck*? We haven't had sex in months!”

Please, Lord, give me strength to survive this idiot. “Aaron, there *are* other men in the world. You don't have monopoly on my vagina.”

“You bitch! You *cheated* on me?”

My jaw drops. The gall. But wait, maybe he'll dump me for cheating and get himself a new girl. But then I remember that he said his grandfather never liked his other girlfriends. Ugh. “We weren't even dating. Actually, we still aren't dating! And don't even *think* about making our ‘marriage’ real. There will be no conjugal activities.”

“What? But you'll be my wife!”

His indignation sounds so genuine...and he sounds so lost that I'm tempted to hire a therapist for him. But... Nah. There are better uses for my money. Like that cute purse I saw in *Vogue* a couple of days ago.

"Get rid of it!" he demands.

A murderous, protective rage surges inside me. I place a hand over my belly, willing the tiny new life to not hear the appalling evil coming out of Aaron's mouth. *My dear baby, you are totally wanted. Don't listen to the psycho.* "Aaron, listen to me very, very carefully. I've put up with you for Dad, but there's a point beyond which I will not go. Threaten my baby again, and I will tell every one of my brothers and cousins what you're trying to do. You might release the video, but you won't live to gloat."

"Fine!" he shouts like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum. "But this is bullshit! I'm telling everyone it isn't mine, you ho!"

"Yeah, that'll go over real well with your grandfather," I shoot back. If Aaron thought I'd be a pliant, yes-woman blackmail mark, he has another think coming. "Why don't you show him the porno video you made of us, too, while you're at it? I'm sure he'll appreciate the cinematography."

"You can't talk to me like that!"

"I can talk to you however I want. If you don't like it, go get yourself another bride!"

With that, I hang up, panting with anger and adrenaline. That bastard. How dare he! Did he never learn how to persuade people? Step one would be making himself less hateful.

To be fair, he wasn't this terrible before. He could be charming when he put his mind to it. The greed to get his grandfather's money must be trampling what little decency and judgment exist in the cast-iron vault he calls a heart.

I place both of my hands over my belly protectively. *Get rid of it.* As if. The denim in his tuxedo must have colonized

his brain. If he comes anywhere near my baby, I'm going to skewer his dick with a stiletto. That's the least he deserves.

Chapter Thirteen

Jo

With the unpleasant talk with Aaron out of the way, I put on my best “don’t fuck with me” dress and “mess with me and you’ll die” stilettos. My makeup is what I call “my supreme bitch face.”

I study the power ensemble. Red, black, platinum with a touch of teal. The last one is essential. It’s what keeps everything from looking like a cliché. Now I project dominance radiating from an adamantium core. Not even my oldest brother Rafael would try to boss me around.

Tossing my hair over one shoulder, I grab a black Lady Dior lambskin bag and head to Jones & Jones. My baby cousin and I have a lot to discuss, including the document he apparently sent to Edgar. Actually, we have to talk about why Edgar thinks Hugo’s my lawyer...or any lawyer, for that matter. He hasn’t passed the bar exam yet.

Amazingly, the first person I run into on the law firm’s floor is Samantha, Hugo’s object of desire. She’s in a stern-looking black suit, which nonetheless manages to flatter her spectacular body. Her dirty blonde hair sits perfectly around her flawlessly made-up face, and she’s carrying a few accordion files, probably returning from court or something. She smiles when she sees me.

“Hello, Josephine.” She smiles. It’s not sharp enough to cut, which means she bears no ill will. Her “I’m going to rip your face off” smile can give you nightmares, or so I’ve heard. Hopefully, I’ll never have the opportunity to know for sure.

“Hi, Samantha.”

“We don’t have an appointment, do we?” She sometimes hires me for consultations. She’s a big believer in looking her best. One of her many mottos is that people who don’t look

their best can't win at life. I don't know how true that is, but it helps keep me employed, so I approve of the attitude.

"I'm actually here to see Hugo."

"Ah. He's right at his desk." She waves and disappears into her office, walking past said desk without a glance.

Hugo stares after her the way a starving dog would gaze at a prime rib. Then he sighs worse than a forlorn Romeo in a high school theater production.

"Hugo." My voice is cool and flat.

He finally turns to me, then blinks, like he can't believe it. "Hey, Jo. You didn't tell me you were coming by."

"Yeah, this was sort of unscheduled." I shoot him a saccharine smile.

He blinks, lets his gaze roam over my face, my outfit, then back to my face. Feverish calculations are taking place in his eyes.

His Adam's apple bobs. "Can we talk in a conference room?"

"What's wrong? Don't want your coworkers overhearing?" I say innocently. Then I bend forward. "Did you by any chance do something you shouldn't have? Like pretend to be a lawyer and send a letter to my hookup?"

Looking around, Hugo gets up and takes my arm. "Come on. This way."

He herds me into a small room, probably reserved for a potential client fuming over how their spouse is trying to steal their money, their house and their kids. I cross my arms and wait.

Hugo shuts the door and turns to me, his eyes going all puppy-sweet and pleading. It never fails to work on his mama, but he forgets I'm not Tía Bea. Or maybe he doesn't even notice because he's so preoccupied with trying to soothe my temper.

“I don’t know what you heard, but I didn’t do anything a good lawyer wouldn’t do. Edgar can’t possibly claim that I did. If you want, you can ask Samantha to review the document for you. I’ll pay for it.”

I keep my arms crossed, looking vaguely displeased.

So he goes for his biggest gun. “I did it for you, Jo.” He puts his arms out. “I love you, cousin.”

Damn it. I want to stay angry, but I can’t deny he acted out of good intentions. No matter how obnoxious and overbearing he can be, he’s a sweetheart deep down.

I let out a long sigh. “Hugo, I’m engaged.”

He drops his arms. “That’s Edgar’s answer?” He rakes his hair. “I mean, I didn’t think he’d go that far, but... That’s great, right?”

Wistfulness washes over me. It would be much better if I were engaged to Edgar. Okay, so we aren’t in love, but at least I wouldn’t be with someone who let his moral compass swing to the lowest bidder. Plus, he’s fantastic in bed. “I’m engaged to Aaron Korvid.”

Hugo looks at me like the name doesn’t ring a bell.

Maybe I should lay it on thick and convince Hugo I’m in love with Aaron. On the other hand, he knows me too well to believe that lie. If I were in love with my ex, I would’ve never slept with Edgar, no matter what. I should just lay it out straight and hope that Hugo keeps his mouth shut and helps me later today when I make the grand announcement to the family.

I inhale. “Remember that guy who was a really good dancer? The one I complained about because he was too clingy, calling and texting all the time?”

He frowns. “Uh... You said something about wanting to sic Angel on him if he didn’t quit? That guy?”

“That’s the one.”

“So...the baby is *Aaron’s*?” Hugo’s face twists in distaste. “How could you, Jo? I thought you had higher standards.”

His disapproval and rebuke raise my hackles. “Everyone has at least one mistake purchase in their closet. It’s the same thing.”

“Yeah, but an ugly dress can be donated! You can’t donate Aaron. Nobody would take him.” He shakes his head. “Never did like that guy.”

I sigh heavily. “It doesn’t matter. I’m announcing the engagement tonight at the family dinner.” It’s really an *extended* family dinner, with my mama, papa, uncle and aunt, plus all the children joining. We try to have one at least once a month, and tonight’s the night. I just have to put on a happy face and convince everyone I’m in love. It’s only for a few hours.

“You can’t! You slept with Edgar!” Hugo’s so outraged that he’s forgotten that I’m a “virgin.”

“I can and I will.” I’m not ruining Papa’s last year at his beloved school. “And if you want me to forgive you for contacting Edgar the way you did, you’re going to look happy about my engagement tonight, got it?”

“*Happy?* You gotta be kidding! You want me to look *happy?*”

“As. A. Clam.” I emphasize each word with a poke in his chest.

“Okay, fine. That can be arranged. I’ll punch that fucker in the face and smile.”

I laugh humorlessly. “He won’t be coming tonight.” Not because he didn’t volunteer, but because I texted him not to. I’m not a good enough actress to manage a radiant bride-to-be with him standing next to me.

“You’re making a mistake,” he says, wagging his finger and shaking his head.

“Stop. You look like one of those bobblehead dolls people stick on their dashboards.”

I wish I could tell him the whole truth. But if I do, he’ll try to run Aaron over with one of Tío Manny’s taco delivery

trucks and ask his brothers to be his alibi. Guilt and love mix in my heart, and I give Hugo a tight hug.

“Don’t worry,” I say, more a prayer than reassurance. “It’s all going to work out.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jo

I stop in front of the original Manny's Tacos location, which still stands proudly in downtown Los Angeles. Of course, it's gotten bigger over the years as the business has grown, taking over a patio and space that used to belong to a small café that shut down after the owners retired. Tío Manny and Tía Bea not only make the best Mexican food in the world, but they're shrewd businesspeople.

I've been to most of the taco restaurants my uncle and aunt own, but this is my favorite. It holds some of my best memories from childhood and adolescence, having hosted so many family meals and celebrations. It's where we sang "Happy Birthday" on every birthday and toasted to another amazing year to come. My brothers and cousins showed off college acceptance letters and fist-pumped over job offers and career opportunities.

Some of the events were for me, too—when I landed my first big client...when I had enough clients to turn a profit...and when I started to make so much that I could begin to help fund the college scholarship my family started ten years ago to help others who are less fortunate.

I'm definitely going to star in...something...tonight. I doubt we'll be celebrating much, though. At least I won't, not in my heart, where it counts.

Inhaling deeply, I push the door open and step inside.

Becky the hostess smiles at me. She's been with the restaurant since the day it opened, and I adore her.

"Hi, Jo! Everyone's here. In the private party room, as usual." Her gaze drops to my feet, and she sighs. "You have the hottest shoes. So in-charge and sexy."

Normally a compliment like this would send a zing of pleasure through me. But right now, I'm too tense to feel anything but a grim determination to get through the evening—and hopefully convince everyone I really, really want to marry Aaron. That's why I'm still in my super power ensemble that radiates “Don't question my decisions.”

Still, my private issues aren't her problem. I manage a smile. “Thanks, Becky.”

I weave my way through the packed restaurant. The air smells of spices, meat and fresh tortillas. Even though the restaurant name makes it sound like it only serves tacos, it has everything Mexican, and the absolute best margaritas.

The party room is enclosed in frosted glass. I push the door and step inside, ready for exuberant hugs and kisses, lots of comments and questions about how I'm doing. My family's greetings wouldn't be complete without them.

Mama sees me first, and—sure enough—she envelops me in a huge hug, placing kisses on my cheeks. I let her hold me in the comforting embrace, inhaling her soap and shampoo. She's dressed in a gorgeous pink Armani I bought to congratulate her on becoming regional manager at the jewelry store chain she's been working at since forever. The sight makes me happy. Mama deserves pretty clothes, but she's always reluctant to spend the money on herself, preferring to do so on us—her children—or sock everything away for retirement.

“How's my baby?” she says, finally pulling back, her dark eyes warm and inquisitive as she looks at me.

I'm pregnant with Edgar's baby, who also happens to not love me, while being forced to marry Aaron, who I despise, but other than that... “I'm doing great.”

“You're so skinny, Jo!” Tía Bea says, hustling over. She and Tío Manny are in Manny's Tacos T-shirts and jeans, their unofficial uniform. She pulls me tight against her soft body. “You gotta eat some food. We have plenty of your favorite guacamole.” She kisses my cheeks. “And I've been meaning

to say thank you for the hair spray you got for me! No more frizz!” She turns her head this way and that, showing off.

“I’m glad it helped.” Battling frizz is her thing. She says her hair hates her, but I think the curls look super cute.

“Jo!” Papa kisses me on the cheeks, then hugs me. His thinning hair neatly combed, he’s in a plain button-down shirt and slacks, looking very much like your typical high school teacher.

“Papa!” I hug him hard. Unlike Tío Manny, Papa is as slim as a number two pencil. But there’s a resilient, ropey strength to him, and no matter what, he’s the rock of my world. He never once said he was disappointed I wasn’t going to college. Instead, he encouraged me to find what I was really passionate about. Without his support, I wouldn’t have the career I adore.

And now I’m going to keep him safe. If I have to lie, so be it. He *will* finish his last year teaching high school with the dignity and respect he deserves.

Once Papa lets me go, it’s Tío Manny’s turn to hug and kiss me. Then my brothers—Rafael, Pablo and Angel—and my cousins—Jorge, Diego, Rinaldo and finally...Hugo.

He hugs me extra hard. Then he angles me away from the family and whispers into my ear, “Don’t do it, Jo. It’s a huge mistake.”

“Shut up,” I whisper back, then push him away, but not hard enough that the others notice. I know Hugo’s concerned, but I have no choice.

I take an empty seat between Pablo and Angel. Tía Bea shoves a huge serving tray of enchiladas in my direction. “Your favorite! Chicken!”

I smile at her, even though I’m too anxious to eat. Rejecting her cooking would earn me suspicion and stares. “Thank you.” I place a portion on my plate.

“Want some Merlot? Felipe sent a case,” Mama says.

“No, thank you,” I say. “I had a drink already and need to drive home.” A total lie, but it should go over well.

“I miss him.” Papa sighs.

“I do too,” I say, making a mental note to arrange for a weekend getaway for my parents to Tío Felipe’s vineyard. Papa will love that.

“We should ask him to come down. His boys can man the vineyard just fine,” Tío Manny says. “They’re smart kids.”

Seated opposite me, Hugo pours me water from a pitcher on the table, and Pablo places it near me. I nibble on my food.

“So, Pablo was just telling us about this girl he’s crazy about before you showed up,” Rafael says.

“Apparently his Bugs Bunny ties haven’t scared her off yet,” Angel adds with a grin.

“I’m not that bad.” Pablo gives me a wink. “Besides, Jo gave me some new clothes to wear. Not a cartoon tie in the wardrobe.”

Well, that’s nice. At least somebody’s on the right track with their relationship. Pablo deserves all the happiness.

“Maybe you should start a new service—dress to romance.” Tío Manny passes me a bowl of guacamole.

Mama nods vigorously. “Some men are clueless. Like today, I had to help pick out this customer’s engagement ring. He said he wanted to be unique and picked out a pearl ring, which would’ve been great if he were trying to propose to his grandma.”

I surreptitiously put my left hand under the table, suddenly extra self-conscious about the ugly ring from Aaron. I can only imagine what Mama’s going to say about it.

“What were you doing in a store? Didn’t you work from the office today?” Papa asks.

“Sometimes I visit the stores to see how things look. Reports are fine, but there’s no substitute for an in-person inspection.”

“She’s right,” Jorge says. “I do that too to keep my crew on their toes.” He’s a general contractor and does tons of

luxury home construction.

“There’s no one our little Jo can’t make look great, eh?”
Tío Manny says with a jovial laugh.

My phone pings.

“Excuse me.” I check it, in case of a client emergency. I almost wish somebody ripped their Versace, so I could leave without lying to everyone. But it’s a text from Hugo instead.

–Hugo: I’ve been thinking.

–Me: Please don’t.

–Hugo: Kim told me she’s 100% certain you never slept with Aaron after you broke up with him.

–Me: OMG, you spoke with her?

–Hugo: I had to. She told me you slept with Edgar Blackwood, which is why I thought it was his baby.

Well. That explains where he got his info. And he isn’t wrong, but Kim shouldn’t have told him anything. Ugh.

On the other hand, I never told her it was secret, so it isn’t exactly her fault. Right now, Kim and her man are working with Samantha over some custody issue, and she has no reason to hide things from my cousin. Hugo can be very sneaky about getting information he wants. He just flashes his puppy eyes and dimple, and women spill everything. He really should’ve been a trial lawyer, specializing in cross-examining female witnesses.

“Is everything okay?” Mama asks.

I jerk my head up and shove the phone back into my purse.
“Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

Conversation buzzes around me. I pick up my fork again and look at the food on my plate. My appetite is nonexistent. Not even Tía Bea’s cooking seems tempting.

Just get it over with.

I really should. It’s like pulling a Band-Aid off—the anticipation is worse than the actual pain. Besides, I only have

to make this disgusting announcement once.

I take a sip of water to give myself time to marshal some composure. Then I clear my throat loudly. “I, uh, have something to say to all of you.”

Everyone quiets down one by one. Hugo’s lips are pulled in tight in disapproval.

I ignore him. “It’s about...” *Engagement. I’m engaged to Aaron.*

My mouth opens but refuses to form any words.

Hugo’s shoulders start to relax.

Since I’ve suddenly gone mute, I raise my left hand. The sapphire ring glitters under the restaurant lights. It’s still incorrectly sized because I’m not wasting the effort to get it fixed, but since Edgar pointed out my “rude gesture,” I extend all of the fingers rather than just the middle one.

“See this?” I croak out.

Everyone—except Hugo—looks confused. Tía Bea squints, and Mama shakes her head.

“Not really your style, is it?” Mama says hesitantly.

The man isn’t my style, either, Mama. I wonder when she’s going to put things together, because the announcement is stuck in my throat for the moment.

“The stone is too small,” Hugo grouses.

“Do jewelry stores take stuff back?” Tío Manny asks Mama. “If you bring it with a receipt, you know...?”

“The ring looks old. She probably got it secondhand.” Tía Bea turns to me. “Don’t worry, dear.” Her tone is positively consoling. “Everyone buys bad jewelry sometimes. Just ask your mama. Why don’t you pawn it? Recoup some of the cost?”

Oh, if only I could send it back to the asshole it came from!

“I can’t,” I say. “It’s...” God. It physically hurts to say it.

Angel cocks an eyebrow. “It’s...?”

Hugo makes a cutting motion across his neck, shaking his head.

Too late, cousin!

“It’s...” I inhale deeply and arrange my facial muscles into what I hope is a happy smile. “It’s an engagement ring. I’m engaged.”

“Engaged?” Papa looks around. “To whom?”

“Are you engaged to yourself?” Hugo’s brother Rinaldo booms. I bet that’s the voice he uses to put God’s fear into slothful staff members at the Aylster Hotel, where he’s the director of rooms. “Where’s the guy? He has to be here to introduce himself to the family.”

“Rinaldo’s right.” A scowl carves deep lines on Tío Manny’s face. “This is...disrespectful.”

Shit. I should’ve seen this coming. Of course they’re insulted that Aaron isn’t here to say hello, leaving me to do the announcement alone. On the other hand, if he were here, I might’ve been tempted to stab him with my fork. I don’t know where all the major arteries are, but I can always ask Pablo before making an attempt.

Suddenly, there’s a commotion outside. I can hear Becky saying, “Sir? Sir! You can’t go in there. It’s a private party!”

There’s only one private party today—ours. We took the party room for this dinner...which means...

Oh shit. Is Aaron here?

But why? I told him not to come!

Stop him, Becky! Hit him with a chair, like a pro wrestler!
The chairs at Manny’s are sturdy. They won’t break.

But apparently she’s no match for the intruder, because the door starts to open.

Oh my God. It’s going to be exponentially more difficult to fake happiness now. Maybe Hugo is going to follow through

on what he said earlier and punch Aaron in the face. Bad for Aaron...but it would help me project some bridal delight.

However, it isn't Aaron's smarmy presence that invades our get-together. It's...

Edgar...?

I blink again. Why does he keep popping up where he's not supposed to? Did he put a tracker on me? How else would he know where I am? And why is he dressed in a pinstriped navy three-piece Brioni suit, like he's a law firm partner ready to face a particularly difficult jury? Manny's Tacos isn't the kind of place where you put on a fifteen-thousand-dollar suit, no matter how delicious it makes you look.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"To do the right thing," he answers calmly.

Papa clears his throat. Disapproval twists his lips. His gaze moves back and forth between me and Edgar like he's debating which one of two naughty school kids he ought to give a tongue lashing to first. "Is this the fiancé?"

"No," I say quickly.

Edgar frowns at me.

I tilt my chin belligerently. He can frown until he gets permanent wrinkles, but I have to do this, at least until Papa retires. To make up for it, I'll refer Edgar to a great cosmetic dermatologist in the city who specializes in filler and Botox.

"Then who is he?" Pablo asks.

This time, Edgar speaks before I can. "I'm the father of her baby."

A jolt goes through my family and relatives. He might as well have thrown a live wire into a swimming pool. Everyone's face turns red and furious in unison, except for Angel and Hugo. Angel has already accepted that I occasionally have sex. The only thing he asked me is to not get pregnant by a guy I don't like, and if somebody mistreats me, to let him know so he can shove the guy's leg up his ass. As for Hugo...

Well. He's the one who told Edgar about the baby. And he looks contented and pleased.

After a lot of huffing and other miscellaneous sounds of outrage from the family, Rafael finally says, "Jo? Pregnant? Ridiculous! Jo's a virgin!"

"Yeah," Pablo says with aggression more suited for a pit bull that had its favorite treat stolen than a cartoon-tie-wearing pediatric cardiologist. "Total slander. Jo's not that kind of girl."

My cousins all nod, even Hugo. What the hell... He's so ridiculous. They all are.

I take a glance at Edgar. He's watching them all with impassive green eyes. Underneath the calm mask, he's likely rolling those eyes. Or even sneering the way the born-rich do when they're confronted with what they believe to be time-wasting foolishness.

Flee, Edgar! My cousins and brothers are crazy, so flee!

Papa looks sternly at Edgar. "How do you explain this, young man?"

Edgar grows as serious as a bishop about to announce that without penance there can be no salvation. "Immaculate conception with my sperm."

I gape at Edgar. Hugo has a coughing fit. I can't decide if Edgar is joking or serious, like when he offered to put on a dress to join me and the girls at the bar.

My parents and uncle and aunt look vaguely impressed—although it's hard to tell if they're impressed with Edgar's solemn delivery or his balls. Regardless, I can see the room swaying in Edgar's favor. He has an ability to make people think that his way is not only sound but inevitable. It must be the solid, rocklike quality he radiates. You can't argue or be flexible with rocks.

Suddenly, Angel says, "What makes you think you're good enough for her?"

The hostile question seems to break the spell, making everyone start, including me. I'm curious what Edgar will say.

"I thought Jo said he wasn't her fiancé," Tía Bea says.

"But he's the father of her baby. Who else is she going to marry?" Tío Manny says.

"Exactly!" Hugo says with near desperation. "Let's talk about the baby!"

A desire to strangle Hugo and the need to put hands over my ears and pretend I'm not here tug at me from opposite directions.

"Imagine!" Hugo continues. "The first grandchild! So exciting!"

"Not right now," Papa says. "The baby isn't going anywhere, but the fiancé situation is convoluted. Bigamy isn't just immoral, it's illegal."

Translation: *We'll talk about the pregnancy when only the family is present.*

Mama purses her mouth as she looks at Edgar. "That's an ugly ring you gave my daughter."

The urge to bang my forehead against the wall behind me bubbles inside me. Why can't I make a simple disagreeable engagement announcement without an incident?

"Ma'am, that is *not* my ring." Edgar looks at the pathetic hardware on my finger with the contempt and disgust he probably reserves for poop stains. "I would never lower my standard that way. It'd be an insult to the woman I planned to marry."

Papa raises both eyebrows.

Edgar pulls out a small black velvet box. All the air in my lungs goes still. And it's not just me. The whole room holds its collective breath.

I try to rein in my fluttering heart. Knowing him, I can imagine exactly what he bought—something really expensive but too conservative for my taste. Edgar just doesn't know me

well enough. He only got a ring because it's the proper thing to do and that's who he is.

He pops the lid open. The most gorgeous brilliant-cut diamond sparkles on a platinum band. Small rubies surround the stone, creating an effect like a burning sun.

And I immediately fall in love with it. It's exactly the kind of ring I would've picked out for myself.

My family and relatives crane their necks. Some even stand to see better.

"Oh my," Mama says softly.

"Now, that's a ring," Angel says, two thumbs up. He winks at me.

He's right. If this were any other situation, tears of joy would be heating my eyes as I got ready to say, "Yes."

But this isn't a normal situation. It's so messy and complicated. I wager nobody in this room, except me and Edgar, knows that even if Aaron's blackmail weren't a factor and Edgar and I happened to love each other, marrying Edgar would mean moving. Half a continent away, where I would know nobody except my husband-to-be.

Edgar grows even more serious, which is surprising, since I didn't think that was possible. He looks at me with gaze so intent that it seems to bore straight into the core of my soul.
"Jo—"

"Wait!" Tío Manny says, raising a hand.

Maybe my dear uncle is going to come to my rescue. Yay!

"Before you propose... You haven't even introduced yourself!" he says with a deep frown.

Ugh, come on! I prefer nobody knows who Edgar is, but my family and relatives start to grumble. But there's no point in hiding his identity. Hugo knows, and he'll crack like a watermelon when his mama gets around to questioning him.

"You're right, Manny. We don't even know his name," Papa says disapprovingly.

“It wasn’t his fault. We never gave him a chance,” Mama says, probably because she loves the ring.

Edgar’s spine stiffens. “You’re entirely correct, and I beg your pardon. My name is Edgar Blackwood. Pleased to meet you all. May I continue now?”

“No. Not yet.” Papa crosses his arms. “Other than that ring—which, okay, is really nice—what do you bring to the table, young man?”

Chapter Fifteen

Edgar

What do you bring to the table, young man?

The question is actually a bit stunning. Nobody has ever asked me that. Ever since I was a small child, I was welcomed, if not on my own merits, then for my family—the wealth and power they represent.

I take a slow look at the people in the room. Some of them are dressed in designer outfits, others in T-shirts and jeans. Some of the men have ties, some don't. A few seem curious, but the rest are outright disapproving or even belligerent.

But what unites them all is that they care for Jo. They want to make sure I don't hurt her.

A knot forms in my belly, hot and not entirely uncomfortable. Perhaps it's more like longing or approval at seeing a whole family unite to shield one of their own, not because they need to protect their reputation, but simply because they care about the well-being of the person.

I've grossly miscalculated things. I can see that now. When Yuna heard about this dinner from Kim and told me the details, I thought I could impress Jo and her family by putting on a Brioni suit and bringing the best ring I could find in the short time frame I had to work with. I was thinking about what Jo said when we first met—about projecting the right image for this encounter. But obviously I'm badly overdressed and didn't bring everything I need to convince them, because they're demanding more.

What do I bring to the table...

For a fraction of a second, my family—what the Blackwood name represents—flashes through my mind, but I dismiss it almost immediately. Wealth and influence, yes, but

they're tainted. And the last thing I want is drag Jo into the mess that is my family back home.

So what else is there?

After short consideration, I settle for the main benefit most women who might want to marry me would place in the plus column. "Last time I spoke with my accountant, I was worth about two billion dollars. If you'd like, I can have him provide you with an updated number."

There. Practical, and should provide them with peace of mind. What parents wouldn't want to be reassured that their daughter is going to live in material comfort? My bank account proves I'm not a deadbeat and I'm capable of giving Jo the lifestyle she deserves and should become accustomed to.

But Jo doesn't seem too impressed. She's just chugging down water. Or perhaps she already knew my net worth, which wouldn't be a surprise. After all, she's in Yuna's circle, and who knows what that girl shares?

The large, muscled man next to Jo scoffs. "That's just money, *ese*."

I almost cock an eyebrow at the tone. Perhaps he's wealthy, too, although I thought Jo's family was upper middle class. If it weren't for the family resemblance, I might've assumed he was Jo's other suitor—that Aaron Korvid guy.

It strikes me again how familiar that name is, and I make a mental note to look him up as soon as I'm done here.

Another man, this one in a suit and a Daffy Duck tie, of all things, says, "Angel's right. Anybody with a lucky lottery ticket can get it."

Does he not know you're more likely to get hit by lightning? Perhaps he knows a lot of extraordinarily *lucky* people.

"Or earn it yourself." A woman in a pink dress, seated next to the man who demanded to know what I bring to the table, is giving the previous two speakers a stern look.

“Who cares about money? What else, man?” From the voice, I recognize it’s Hugo who just spoke. Was it not enough for him that I recognized his—and apparently the other men’s—need to cling to the irrational belief that Jo’s still a virgin?

Fine. I’ll give them another plus. “I’m also fairly well connected.”

“So you network really well, so what? I network well too. I network all the time with my customers,” an older man in a Manny’s Tacos shirt says. There’s a comfortably rounded woman next to him in an identical shirt.

Jo buries her head in a guacamole bowl, her fork moving. Her face is cast downward, so I can’t see her expression, much to my annoyance. She’s probably hungry. She’s eating for two. I do wish she’d speak up on my behalf. But realistically I’ve accepted she won’t, not after what happened at Starbucks... and especially based on what Yuna told me. We’ll have to talk privately after I get her family’s approval.

The man who burst into outrage first at my announcement that I got Jo pregnant sneers, “Everyone likes to brag how they know a guy who knows a guy, but really, they don’t know shi—uh, anything.”

Are they serious? I need to prove I actually know people, too? I refrain from exhaling harshly. I’m here to win them over, not annoy them. Yuna said the family is half the battle, and I agree. If I can convince them, it’ll be easier to convince Jo.

Yuna’s advice flashes through my head. *They’re going to want to see you do the right thing, so show them you’re the perfect choice for their darling daughter.*

“I’m friends with at least twenty governors, among other people. Does that clarify things for you?” I say.

Mr. Duck Tie shrugs. “Hey, when I write to my congressional rep, she writes me back. So what?”

“Do you have your congressional rep on speed dial?” I ask. “Are you on a first-name basis with her spouse?”

Duck Tie looks away.

“I train the mayor’s wife in the gym,” Angel says dismissively. “You aren’t impressing us much. Anybody can say they know governors. Woohoo. So what? How do we know any of it is true?”

They want proof? I’m not calling a state governor just to make these skeptics happy, but I know a simpler way that I can actually prove it’s true immediately. “My brother owns Z, and I can get you all in through the VIP lane.” The bouncers and security there know me, and they’re used to seeing me show up now and again.

“And have us take one of the VIP lounges on top?” Hugo asks, his eyes wide.

“Of course,” I say, wondering where else he thinks my guests would go after entering through the VIP lane.

“Wow. That’s awesome.” Angel nods slowly. “That’s totally cool.”

“No kidding. That club’s the bomb,” another man says.

“Has the best music, the best liquor and definitely the best girls.”

I study their faces, not quite believing what I’m hearing. These people are more impressed with the hookup to Tony’s club than me knowing heads of state or the fact that I’m worth a couple of billion dollars. Not that Z isn’t an amazing club, but...*really?*

Before they get derailed, the older man who demanded to know what else I bring to the relationship clears his throat. Given his age, he probably doesn’t go clubbing, and he probably doesn’t care about the VIP lounge. “That’s nice and all, but I’m afraid I’m not satisfied.”

“All due respect, sir, but this isn’t about your satisfaction. It’s about Jo’s.” I say it calmly, despite mounting irritation. Screw winning her family over. I’m just going to win her over. That’s going to be easier, based on their irrational reaction.

He gives me a cool look. “You’re right, but as her father, I believe I deserve to have some say.”

Damn it. If I'd known he was her dad... But now it's too late. All I can do is maintain control and try to salvage the situation.

"Of course you do," I say, keeping my voice extra smooth.

"I want a man who loves Jo and is going to treat her right, not someone who just has some money and connections. That club isn't even yours."

"No, sir, it isn't." I direct all my focus on him. He's the one whose feathers I need to unruffle to move forward. According to Yuna, Jo adores her dad, and if he objects to me, she's going to use that to deflect me. She already ran out on me once. Actually twice if I count the night we made a baby together.

"Do you love her?" His voice is quiet, but no less strong for it.

Hell of a question to field in front of audience. It isn't something I thought I'd be expected to answer. In my experience, people don't ask such questions. They want to know about social status, how the families' lives would change for the better after the marriage. For God's sake, they'd be considering prenups and which high-priced attorney they should hire to draft them.

Her dad quirks an eyebrow at me, a silent challenge.

What I'm feeling for Jo is novel in its intensity, but I know for a fact it isn't love. I haven't experienced any impairment in judgment. My overriding concerns revolve around ensuring she's safe and that she and our baby are provided for. Acceptable and worthy wishes for any responsible father-to-be.

Although lying might help in the short run, I have no desire to deceive anybody. I've seen lies—no matter how small and innocent at first—beget more lies and destroy everything.

I keep my eyes on the man. "No, sir."

Jo's dad's eyebrows pinch together. He looks displeased... and disappointed. Did he *want* me to lie?

“I thought not,” he says finally, then sighs. “Otherwise you would’ve said you loved her before you mentioned your money and network.”

He seems let down by my honesty, which isn’t unusual. I’ve disappointed lots of people by giving them straight answers—turning down their proposals, rejecting their ideas and so forth. That’s never bothered me, but Jo’s dad’s reaction does.

I don’t often feel a need to explain, but I’m compelled to defend myself in this case. I’m not the bastard here. “I thought you deserved the truth.”

“I do.” Then he turns to Jo. “And you... You aren’t in love with him, are you?”

She looks up from the guacamole bowl. “No, of course not,” she says, like it’s a foregone conclusion.

Her answer should thrill me. There’s nothing more tedious than a woman who thinks she’s in love and becomes needy. Besides, I would prefer a wife who’s capable of having clear thoughts and good judgment. And how is Jo going to be that if her mind is clouded by love?

A painful pang pierces my gut, forcing me to place a hand over it.

What could’ve brought that on?

Perhaps it’s indigestion. I haven’t eaten anything odd, but sometimes stress can do it. And I have been under a lot of stress. The situation at Blackwood Energy, Dad dating Mom again, and Jo’s pregnancy... More than enough.

“Well, that settles it,” the woman in the Manny’s Tacos T-shirt says.

“Absolutely.” Daffy Duck Tie nods, his mouth grim.

“It looks like you’re hungry.” The taco T-shirt woman’s eyes are on the hand I’m holding over my stomach. “You can sit down and join us. We’ll put an empty chair *there*.” She gestures at a spot far from Jo, which I’m quite certain is no accident. “It’s dinnertime, after all.”

Her Manny's Tacos T-shirt partner says, "But he's not family, so he has to pay."

Chapter Sixteen

Jo

The dinner resumes reasonably well, considering the bombshell. Nobody asks me about my absentee fiancé or the ugly sapphire ring, which I took off and put in my purse. I'll be damned if I lose it and have to replace it for Aaron.

The excitement—or shock—of learning I'm pregnant seems to have made everyone forget about the ring and what it means. That's good, because I don't want to think about Aaron, although I know I need to eventually tell them about the distasteful engagement. Edgar can't stay in L.A. forever. He's going to be heading back to Louisiana, which means he won't be interrupting me again.

But my family remembers that they didn't introduce themselves to Edgar, so that takes some time. He remembers everyone's name at once, something I've seen the born-rich do when they want to show the other person how much they value an introduction and possible friendship.

And I think it impresses my family somewhat. They probably expected him to be a snob. A lot of my clients are. It's good they're forming a favorable impression of him. He *is* the father of my baby, after all, and there's going to be interaction in the future. This will make all of that less awkward.

"So. Edgar, how long do you plan on staying in L.A.?" Hugo asks. I'll bet he's much happier with Edgar right now than he would've been otherwise. Barging in on my announcement has delayed the inevitable.

"As long as necessary." Edgar's gaze slides in my direction briefly.

Why did he look at me like that? It wasn't seductive or sexy, but more...considering, as though I'm a huge factor in

his decision. And what does he mean *as long as necessary*? Necessary for what? I hope he isn't banking on changing my mind, because I already told him no, and Papa's made it clear he won't be giving his blessing. That's two strikes against him. Plus he doesn't really have a reason to stick around. He said it in front of everyone—he doesn't love me.

The pain from that announcement lingers. Not that I expected him to profess undying devotion on his knees. We don't know each other well enough, and I wouldn't have believed him anyway. But I expected him to at least say he cares about me. Well, as much as a man *can* care about a one-night stand who accidentally got pregnant.

So when Papa asked me the same question, I gave the only answer I could without humiliating myself even worse—no. Of course I don't love him. He doesn't love me, either!

On the other hand, I shouldn't be too morose about the fact that he doesn't love me. I should be happy he didn't lie about it. As a matter of fact, he should get extra credit for his honesty when it couldn't have been easy to tell the truth with my family hanging on to his every word, ready for something to object to or nitpick.

Stop obsessing about Edgar! He's going to go back to Louisiana soon enough.

Besides, just because he said he's going to be in the city as long as necessary doesn't mean I need to spend time with him. I should focus on catching up with my family instead. That's why we have these dinners in the first place. Fortunately, nobody's grilling me about my pregnancy after Papa's announcement that we'll talk about it later.

"Would you like some wine?" Tío Manny asks Edgar, taking a bottle from Rafael. Even though he said Edgar needed to pay for his dinner, my uncle is too much of a professional host to be anything but hospitable. To him, ensuring that his guests are happy is one of the most important things in life, which is why Manny's Tacos is the success that it is.

"I could use a glass, yes. Thank you," Edgar answers, the picture of manners.

Mama and Tía Bea nod in unison approvingly, their eyebrows raised as though in surprise. They aren't reacting like this because my previous boyfriends were uncivil savages. Edgar is polished and controlled in ways that none of my exes were. Not to mention, he doesn't seem uncomfortable surrounded by my family, even though most of them are overbearingly protective males.

To be honest, if the situation weren't so messy, I'd be pleased he was fitting in so well.

Tío Manny pours Edgar a glass of Tío Felipe's Merlot and hands it over. Then my uncle watches Edgar's face like a chef waiting for a reaction from the first person they feed a new recipe to.

I sigh inwardly. It's a test, one he's given many times before. And none of my exes ever said the right thing. Ever.

Edgar seems unperturbed. He swirls the vintage, sticks his nose in the glass for a good sniff, then takes a sip as though he's at some fancy wine-tasting event in Paris rather than a family Mexican restaurant. His tongue comes out lazily to lick his lips, and I almost moan at the motion. Even though he probably did it without meaning to be seductive, it's hot anyway. My body is suddenly remembering all the ways he licked me that night, and the muscles down there clench. A nice but very unwelcome heat suffuses me. Am I having a female equivalent of a public erection? All because Edgar flashed his tongue? This is crazy. I've never gotten turned on by something so common before.

But that's no common tongue. It's an extraordinary one, one that can give pointers to all other tongues.

Well... Yeah... I squirm in my seat to relieve the uncomfortable ache between my legs. Then I freeze. He did it again! His tongue just darted out right after he took another sip of the Merlot.

Is he doing it on purpose?

I stare at him hard enough to put a hole in his gorgeous face. But he's too relaxed and proper to be trying to turn me

on. Besides, he wouldn't do that in front of my dad and brothers, not to mention all the other male relatives, not unless he took out a huge life insurance policy and has a death wish now.

“How do you like it?” Tío Manny asks eagerly. An unholy glimmer in his eyes betrays his excitement. He has a speech of disapproval ready to go, no matter what Edgar says.

“Yeah, why don't you tell us what you think?” Rinaldo adds lazily.

Et tu, Rinaldo? He's never joined in with Tío Manny like this before.

Edgar swirls his glass again. “Surprisingly full-bodied and mellow. Has a nice oak finish.” He considers for a moment. “Also a hint of black currant, which is a pleasingly delicate note. Does that satisfy your curiosity?” His smile is polite.

Huh. That's pretty...thorough. My exes always said, “It's good,” or some such with a vapid, ingratiating grin. To be honest, they would've had nothing but praise even if my uncle had poured them a glass of vinegar.

“But do you like it?” Tío Manny demands.

“Yes. It's delicious. What vineyard is it from?” Edgar asks.

“Sombrero Valley,” Hugo answers. “The best place for wine.”

“My other uncle owns it,” I add, wanting to end this wine inquisition...and also because I want to see what Edgar says next. My exes were usually effusively complimentary—too complimentary—about the wine. “He sends us some bottles every year.”

“I'll have to get in touch. Get some for my brothers,” Edgar says, then takes another sip. Unlike some of my exes, it's obvious Edgar means it.

Tío Manny grins suddenly. “You've got good taste.”

Of course. He thinks his brother's wine can cure cancer.

“Are you okay?” Mom peers at me. “You keep fidgeting.”

Oh, great. Is it that noticeable that I'm squirming to relieve the pressure between my legs? Now I feel a smidgeon of sympathy for men.

Tía Bea says, "It's the lower back. When you're pregnant, it always hurts." She gives me a significant look. "High heels don't help, either, sweetie."

Dios mío, how could she draw such a ludicrous conclusion? I don't even have a visible bump. As a matter of fact, the baby might still be in its egg form with a sperm wriggling inside. On the other hand, I can't tell them the *real* reason.

"Is there a cushion to support her back?" Edgar asks, the picture of solicitousness.

None of your exes were this considerate. He's as good as it's going to get.

Probably so. But I don't want to acknowledge it. Not while Aaron's "Plan B" is still hanging over my head.

"Good idea. Hugo, go get one from my office," Tía Bea says.

Hugo leaves the room and Papa turns to Edgar, his gaze extra probing and vaguely judgmental. "You know an awful lot about making a pregnant woman comfortable."

Oh my God. Does Papa think Edgar has been impregnating women left and right all over the country? Even if he does, he could be a bit more subtle.

"My sister-in-law is expecting," Edgar replies easily. "I've seen how my brother takes care of her."

The dark aura of judgment around Papa subsides, and I relax in my seat.

Hugo returns with a cushion, which I dutifully place behind my back. There isn't really any alternative, even though it doesn't do a thing for me, of course.

"Better?" Edgar asks.

I fake a smile. "Yes. Thank you."

Mama nods approvingly, exchanging knowing glances with my aunt, and I know what they're doing: writing a fantasy wedding novel starring me and Edgar. Although I told Aaron I'm the one planning a fancy ceremony, Mama is into it too.

Mercifully, dinner continues without any more awkward questions or embarrassing probing or observations. I focus on the food, even though it's hard. Edgar's tugging at my attention like a puppy wanting to play.

By the time all the dessert plates have been scraped clean and the conversations have died their natural deaths, it's after nine. I'm tired from the excitement of the day—of finally confirming my suspicion that I'm pregnant, negotiating with Aaron and confronting Hugo, plus dinner—so I'm the first to get up to leave. I really need to exit stage left before my parents stop me to discuss the fertilized egg in my womb. I wasn't planning on talking about it, and I'm still not ready.

"Jo, can we speak to you for a moment?" Papa says.

My heart sinks. He isn't smiling, and neither is Mama. Technically they can't ground me or take away my allowance. But I still hate the idea of disappointing them. And an unwed pregnancy? Definitely on the list of things that will disappoint my parents.

One by one, my brothers hug and kiss me, then step out of the private room with a sympathetic look in my way. My cousins do the same, along with my uncle and aunt.

Edgar, on the other hand, lingers, then moves to the empty seat next to mine. I hope he doesn't think he's going to convince my parents into giving their blessings. The right order in their world is marriage, then baby, not vice versa.

"You can go, too," Papa says with raised eyebrows. "I don't have anything to say to you."

"Sir, if you are going to be upset with Jo, I'd rather stay. It isn't her fault she's in the condition she's in."

Edgar reaches over and threads his fingers with mine on the table. The gesture is a surprise for a fraction of a second,

then the nerves in my gut settle. I can't think of the last time a boyfriend defied my papa, much less flaunted our relationship. Papa isn't a particularly tall, but he has a way of staring down at you, a skill he's honed over decades of teaching high school. And it has the power to make you feel about a quarter of an inch tall...if you're lucky.

Papa is directing that look right now at Edgar. And Edgar meets it square, unblinking and more serious than the latest Givenchy collection.

"Jo, it's best we talk privately," Mama says softly.

Translation: They really don't want Edgar here, and having him as a non-family observer is only going to make what's to come more awkward.

I squeeze Edgar's hand to let him know I got this.
"They're right. I'm okay. Really."

"But—"

"I'm sure you have important things to do. You have a company to run." He's been away for at least a couple of days. I'm sure the board wants him back. Or at least wants him to check his email. Everyone needs instant responses to email. And he hasn't checked his since he entered our private room. His company could be bleeding money as we speak.

Edgar frowns. "The company is important. This is more so."

My heart does a little backflip. He's acting like he didn't mean it when he announced to my family he doesn't love me. And it's pushing all my gooey "aww" buttons, even though I know I'm being silly. He's just being himself—dependable, responsible and controlled. Didn't I think those solid qualities were underneath his sexy self when we first met? He's just proving I wasn't wrong.

"Please...?" I say sweetly. Edgar is a good man and doesn't deserve to be chewed out by my parents. It isn't his fault that we've created a surprise baby and Hugo contacted him before I could put a stop to it.

After a moment, Edgar nods and leaves, placing a kiss on the crown of my head. It feels oddly intimate, like something he might give a woman he cares about. Or I might be giving it more significance because we slept together.

Once the door swings closed behind him, the room feels emptier. Inhaling deeply, I turn and face my parents.

“Jo. What happened?” Papa asks quietly.

I want to squirm under his gaze. This is *not* how I envisioned gifting him with the grandchild I know he wants. Although this is the twenty-first century, and women are raising children on their own, my family is more traditional. We are to be married before declaring ourselves pregnant.

I rub my lacquered thumbnails. “It’s complicated.” My shoulders pull together, and I wish I could shrink down so small nobody could see me. “I’m sorry, Papa.”

“Whatever for?” He sounds surprised.

I can’t decide if he’s being sarcastic or not. He sometimes wields it like a knife when he’s dealing with unruly high school kids. “I’ve disappointed you,” I say, hating the words and embarrassed beyond description. “Both of you.”

“Oh, baby. Jo, I’m not disappointed. I know you’re always trying to do the right thing.”

“You’re a good girl,” Mama adds warmly.

If they’d yelled at me, maybe I’d be able to keep it together. But this support and love? The deepest affection wells in my chest; I’m the luckiest person ever to have these two people as parents. Tears gather in my eyes, and I swear, I’m going to break down and sob like a kid. I blink hard to dry them up. Big girls don’t cry. Growing up with three older brothers and four male cousins taught me that.

“It’s okay, Jo,” Mama says, coming around and putting an arm around my shoulders.

I blink harder and faster as tears come in greater quantity. “I always wanted to make you proud.” My voice is wet.

“We *are* proud of you,” Papa says. “We couldn’t have asked for a better daughter. So yes, okay, in a perfect world maybe you’d be married first, but it isn’t like you’re some teenager unable to take care of herself. You’re a successful career woman. You shouldn’t have to marry someone who isn’t right for you just to make us feel better. We don’t want that.”

“Your papa’s right.” Mama squeezes my shoulder and pulls me closer until our heads touch. “Husband, no husband, there are plenty of positive male role models for the little one, Jo. Don’t worry about anything. We can help you raise your baby, but we can’t help you find the other half of your soul. And you should never settle for less than that.”

All the weight on my shoulders vanishes. And I dab at my eyes and look at her, feeling light and grateful. I honestly had no idea how my parents would react, but I never thought they’d be this supportive and understanding.

Papa nods. “Your happiness is what’s important. As long as you remember that, you can’t ever let us down.”

The biggest and thickest lump gets caught in my throat. My parents are the best. My family is everything.

We all hug together, and I close my eyes, relieved and happy in their love.

Then, as I leave, I put my left hand over my belly protectively. Abruptly, the sight of my empty middle finger reminds me of the announcement I didn’t get to make—and the threat Aaron made against my papa. I’m going to do everything I can to help him maintain his dignity until he retires.

Chapter Seventeen

Edgar

I'm not happy about being kicked out of the meeting. Jo's parents are likely less than thrilled with the botched proposal—that initial “no” was not a good sign—and obviously plan to talk to her about it without me present.

They seem like reasonable people. I pray they aren't like my own parents and blame her behind closed doors. I meant what I said. Jo didn't do anything wrong.

I see the hostess who tried to stop me from barging into the private party room as I walk out of the restaurant. She flushes a bit as I walk up.

“Sorry about that, sir. I didn't realize you were a friend of the family.”

“Not your fault. I should've been clearer.” Remembering what Manny said, I hand her a hundred-dollar bill. “For my food and drink.”

“Oh my goodness.” She lets out a surprised laugh. “This is way too much. We don't have anything that'll set you back a hundred dollars. Besides, Manny and Bea never charge their guests.”

I don't have the heart to shatter her illusions about her boss couple. “Then let the waitstaff split it. I don't mind,” I say, as my gaze skims over the hardworking crew carrying trays heavily laden with food.

“Thank you! That's very generous.” She beams.

“My pleasure.”

Then she leans a little closer and lowers her voice. “Do you want to go out the back way?”

“Uh...not especially. Why?”

“Jo’s brothers and cousins went out.” She jerks her head in the direction of the parking lot. “They seemed...determined. I’m sure they’re going to want to have a talk. They always do with all of Jo’s boyfriends.”

Ah, *that*. Not surprising. They’re overly protective and in denial about Jo’s sexual activity. They would have believed she was just gaining weight when her bump started showing.

“Thank you for the warning, but I’ll be fine,” I say.

“Okay. But watch out for Angel. He does kickboxing. He’s usually not violent, but he isn’t shy about getting physical.” With that, she waves goodbye.

Her concern is sweet, but unnecessary. I know how to take care of myself. Tony isn’t the only one who frequented the boxing gym in Tempérane. And I’m not bothered by violence. I just don’t consider it necessary in most cases.

On the other hand, if Angel disagrees and wants to get physical, that’s fine with me as long as it clears the air. I’d prefer not to have to go a few rounds wearing Brioni...but I have more suits in my closet.

The city air is cooler than Tempérane. And the lack of humidity is refreshing. Louisiana is always sweltering—unbearably or tolerably, depending on the time of the year.

I start toward my car. I take only a few steps before seven men stuffed with excellent Mexican food and wine surround me. Mean, testosterone-heavy aggression pours from their wide, vibrating bodies. I suppose the myth about full bellies making men happy is false.

“Hello, gentlemen,” I say calmly. Then I turn to Rinaldo as something occurs to me. “I wanted to ask but forgot with all the excitement at the dinner. Why are you named Rinaldo? It’s a bit unusual, isn’t it?”

Jo’s cousin’s belligerence deflates a bit. “Oh. Yeah. I got named after a pastor who was real nice to my parents.”

“Rinaldo.” Hugo pins him with an evil look.

“Oh, right.” Rinaldo glares at me, raising his belligerence level back to where it was. “Stop trying to distract us. Our parents can pick whatever names they want!”

“Of course,” I say. Perhaps her brothers should get one good swing at me and get it over with. I might do the same if I still had a sister. Pain stabs into my heart at the thought, but I shove it away fast. This is about Jo and her family.

Diego rolls his neck and breathes out heavily. “I can’t believe you got her pregnant.”

“She’s a good girl, you know,” Jorge adds.

Pablo jabs his index finger in my direction. “That’s like taking candy from a baby.”

“What are you going to do?” Rafael demands.

Her oldest brother’s question surprises me. Were they not paying attention earlier? “The right thing. I’ll marry her and provide for our child. I’ll be a good father.” I’ll do everything in my power to do exactly that.

“Forget it, man. She doesn’t love you,” Hugo says, shaking his head.

“And you don’t love her, either.” Angel moves as though he’s about to spit at me, but stops short. “*Dick.*”

I swallow a sigh and refrain from shaking my head at how they’re muddying a perfectly good offer with emotion. “It’s better we aren’t overly emotionally involved. It would complicate our lives.”

“*Complicate?*” Rinaldo says, bristling.

“I’m gonna spell it out for you, bro,” Rafael says with the entitled authority typical of an oldest sibling. “You better *fall* in love with her and marry her. Jo deserves a good man who worships the ground she walks on.”

Dramatic much? How much did he really drink?

“Yeah. What he said.” Pablo places his hands on his hips and thrusts his head forward. But the tie ruins the effect.

Angel cracks his knuckles. “We’re going to postpone the ass kicking for the moment. I’m sure our parents want more than one grandkid.”

I almost laugh at the ludicrous logic. I suppose nobody told them that people are perfectly capable of procreating without a functional ass. No wonder their immediate first response when I said Jo was pregnant was that she’s a virgin.

Still, I keep that to myself. Required for procreation or not, I’m rather fond of my ass as is, and I’d rather not be limping when I speak to Jo after her parents are finished with her.

Chapter Eighteen

Jo

I walk through the restaurant, past all the happy diners and cheery Mexican music. Becky smiles.

“Heading home?”

I muster a smile in return. “Yeah. Have a good night.”

“You too!” She leans closer. “When you get a chance, you have to tell me about that hottie in the suit. He’s the best guy you’ve ever brought here. You shoulda told me he was your man, so I wouldn’t have tried to stop him from joining the dinner.”

My smile grows wan. I don’t want to discuss Edgar with Becky, so I just give her a noncommittal nod and head out before she can add anything else.

What would she think if I told her I didn’t invite him to the dinner? That he just barged in to announce he got me pregnant? Would she gasp at his balls or sigh and tell me to go for him because he’s a “hottie”? Becky seems very good at picking men. She’s engaged to her college sweetheart.

I don’t have a college sweetheart because I never went, but my high school sweethearts didn’t work out. Things always fizzled within about four months, at the most.

Wow. Put that way, I realize we didn’t even last a semester. Actually, forget high school...none of my exes lasted that long, period.

The night air is cool and full of the smell of the city. My beloved Los Angeles. This is where my family is. Home. My people, my place.

My phone pings. *Hugo again?* I check it and see a text from Aaron.

–Aaron: How did it go?

Ugh. I drop my phone back into my purse. Communicating with him is about as fun as licking a gas station toilet bowl, and I'm not going to end my day on such an unpleasant note. He needs to wait until I'm ready to tell him it went sideways because he is too cheap, has the worst taste in jewelry and is too stupid to live. What loser imagines that blackmailing a woman into marrying him is going to end well?

I start walking through the lot toward my car. I should get some sleep and think about how I'm going to deal with Edgar. Avoiding him is just immature and won't solve anything. And my parents are right: we shouldn't get married simply because of a baby. Besides, what if Edgar meets somebody else—the other half of his soul—later? Wouldn't divorce be more traumatic for the child? And what about me?

My mind fills with a short clip of Edgar telling me he's in love with somebody else and he'd appreciate it if I'd just go along with a divorce. Of course, he'll provide for me and our child, as that is the responsible thing—the *right* thing—to do. And he's going to say all of it in his solemnly serious and hot voice that never fails to put sparks of joyful lust in me.

Something bitter and ugly fills my mouth—jealousy of the hypothetical woman of Edgar's dreams. I close my eyes and exhale roughly. *What's wrong with me?* I'm jealous of a person who doesn't even exist?

“Jo.”

I start, then stare at him. Did I manage to conjure up the man because I've been thinking about him so much?

No. He's still in front of me, in the lot. He looks like a modern, urban warrior in that suit. His face is carved into an unsmiling façade. And I have the most absurd urge to have it relax into a grin. Have his green eyes light with happiness.

Stop fantasizing. Your ovaries can't handle it, and your womb is already occupied.

“Edgar, what are you still doing here? I thought you went home.” My voice is calm, which is good. I don't want him to

know he affects me when he has no feelings for me.

“I wanted to speak with you.” He hesitates for a moment, his eyebrows pulling tighter. “Sorry if your parents yelled at you.”

I shake my head. “They didn’t.” They just made me cry with their love.

But Edgar seems skeptical. He scrutinizes my face in silence.

Oh geez. Is he going to notice I have tears in my eyes? “My parents wanted to let me know they’re one hundred percent behind me, no matter what I decide to do.”

“And your decision?” His expression’s impassive, but something in his tone indicates that my answer isn’t just critically important, but he won’t be budging until he hears it.

I sigh. He isn’t making this easy. I should’ve added “persistent” to the list of qualities about him. “I already told you at Starbucks.”

“Giving in to your ex-boyfriend is a mistake.”

His quiet statement freezes me with shock. “What? How do you know about that?”

“Yuna told me. She specifically said if I don’t save you, she’ll send ninjas after me.”

I snort, then let out a laugh despite my less-than-fantastic mood. That’s so *her*. She’s all about friendship and wanting to help. “Then you know what’s at stake and what I have to do.”

“Marry your ex?” Edgar’s voice turns rougher. “That’s the best solution you can come up with?”

Damn it. He doesn’t have to say it like it’s the stupidest thing he’s ever heard. Embarrassment heats my face. Edgar’s opinion of me seems to matter an awful lot, and it pisses me off.

“It’s only until my dad retires,” I say sharply.

“It won’t be only until then.”

I tilt my head. What does Edgar know that I don't?

He continues, "Your ex is going to get a taste for controlling you."

"So what? He knows releasing the video on its own is going to get his face permanently rearranged and all his limbs broken. The only reason he can threaten me at all is because of the damage he's going to inflict on my dad."

"He'll find some other person you care about and threaten them next. People who like to manipulate others don't quit unless you make them stop."

I didn't think about that. But I don't want to believe it can happen. Defensiveness and self-recrimination mingle together, fueling my anger. Whether that emotion is directed at me or Aaron or Edgar—or even all of us—I can't say. "Come on. You don't know that."

A bleak pain flashes through his eyes. For a moment, I feel like a jerk for putting that look in them. He's not the enemy here.

"Actually, I do," he says. "There are people who'll dangle a hope that if you'll just do this one thing, everything will get better. But it never does. There's always one more thing you need to do. People who control you like that are never satisfied. And your ex—Aaron—will find a way to abuse you like that over and over again."

There's so much rawness in his voice that I'm pretty sure he's speaking from experience. Just what happened to him and who hurt him like that? It seems impossible, given how solid and strong he is now. "I'm sorry, Edgar. It sounds painful."

An impenetrable shutter comes down. "No need for sympathy. I was making a point, Jo. You should've told me the whole truth when I came to see you at the barre studio."

"Why? Didn't you understand what I meant when I left Anthony's mansion without a word? It was supposed to be one time only. And I planned to keep it that way until you popped back in my life, thanks to my meddling cousin. Actually, I still

prefer to keep it that way, especially when our circumstances haven't changed since that night."

You said you didn't love me, and I don't love you either.

"We slept together—made a baby." He's saying it so firmly that I shouldn't have wasted my breath explaining all this.

"The sex was just one time. And the baby doesn't mean I'm going to spill all my problems out to you on our second meeting. We don't have that kind of relationship."

Edgar pauses and stares at me like he's trying to look straight into my heart.

My pulse throbs. My nerves are unsettled, but it isn't an entirely unpleasant sensation. It's just too vulnerable—like a hedgehog without her quills.

"Am I that disagreeable?" he asks finally. "I know I'm not the most...entertaining person, but I thought I could at least be someone a woman could depend on."

I shake my head, not wanting him to think there's anything wrong with him. That was never my intention. "You're perfectly fine. It's me. I'm just terrible at picking the right man."

The moment I say it, I know I screwed up. *You're fine, but I suck at picking men...?* Why don't I also add that he's on par with a fashion failure not even the Salvation Army could give away for free?

Edgar's face is glacial now, although he's doing a remarkable job of restraining his temper. He shoves his hands into his pockets, probably to ensure he doesn't strangle me. I am pregnant, after all.

"What was the initial attraction between you and your ex?" Edgar asks.

The question surprises me. I thought he'd yell at me for insulting him. On the other hand, didn't I think he's one of the most controlled men I've ever met? It probably takes more than what I said to get him riled up.

“Um.” I clear my throat. “He was a great dancer. And he didn’t take himself seriously and made me laugh with a few jokes.” Silly, corny lines that seemed funny with a few drinks in my belly.

Edgar’s expression grows more serious...almost thoughtful. “I see.”

I hurriedly explain, “But it ended pretty quick. Romance in general doesn’t last for me. The average is about four months.”

“And?”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance even though I’m feeling a growing urge to shift my weight. “And then...either I realize I’m not in love with the guy, or I fall out of whatever infatuation I was in.”

“I see. And where do I stand?”

“Uh...” This is worse than an algebra pop quiz. No one’s ever asked me this. The guys I dated didn’t want to know or care enough to want to know. But I can’t quite put Edgar into a neat category like I did with my exes.

He arches an eyebrow. “Well...?”

“You’re...” I lick my dry lips. I can list a hundred different shades of yellow, but I can’t come up with anything to properly describe what I’m feeling for him. “I don’t know. Maybe infatuation?” I shrug helplessly.

“Infatuation.” His tone is calm, but terribly flat.

I nod, although my mouth is so dry that I’m afraid I’m going to need a saline infusion soon. “You seem like a great guy. I’m sure you’re a fabulous catch too. You said so yourself in the restaurant. I know there are probably tens of thousands of women in Louisiana alone who want you.”

“But...?”

“But I live here. And you...live there.” I gesture behind me.

“Actually, Louisiana is that way.”

“Fine. There.” I fling my arm in the correct direction because apparently it’s important. “The point is, *you need to go back*. Your company needs your leadership. Your family needs you there.”

The muscles in his jaw flex. Argh. Soothing a bruised male ego really isn’t my strength.

He takes a long, slow breath and then exhales. “Let me summarize your objections. One, you’re worried about Aaron hurting your father. Two, you’re worried what you’re feeling is mere infatuation and, within four months, you’re going to wake up next to me feeling nothing but disgust. Three, I live too far away. Anything else?”

“Well...maybe not *disgust*.” I’ve never felt disgust for my exes—except when they get needy and stalkerish or pulled an Aaron. It was just simple indifference and wonder—how and why did I pick them? “But...yes. Close enough. That about sums it up.”

“Very well. Thank you for...confirming.” He sounds like he’s signing off on a work project.

“You’re welcome.” If he’s going to be polite and professional, I can be the same.

Now that he understands that nothing more is going to happen, he’ll head back home. It should make me happy, but somehow I feel like I just lost a war.

He reaches out and caresses my chin before turning and slowly taking a couple of steps away.

“Bye,” I whisper, hating the contradictory emotions pulsing in my veins.

Abruptly, he stops, then spins around, striding back toward me. Before I can react, he cradles my face, his large palms hot against my cheeks. His mouth is on mine, and oh my God. My whole body explodes, the kiss nuclear to my heightened senses. All the nerve endings that have been wound tight since the moment he crashed the dinner snap, sending shock waves of bliss through me.

I whimper as he licks me, and I lick him back. He's as good as I remember—no, better. My head swims, and I clutch his shoulders, my long nails digging into his lean, steely muscles.

We devour each other like tasting and getting drunk on us is the only thing that matters. My heart is pounding like a drum at a rave. Need and pleasure entwine and coil around me.

I press myself against his tall body, feel the hard length of him pushing against me. It's so hot how his reaction to me isn't controlled, no matter how self-possessed he appears in public.

Just as abruptly as he started the kiss, he pulls back. His eyes glitter like dark emeralds, his lips slightly swollen and wet. The pads of his thumbs brush the upper curves of my cheekbones. His breathing is rough, and a sharp longing for him—the need—clogs my throat, making it harder for me to draw in air as well.

“I'll take care of everything, Jo.” His raspy voice moves over my sensitized skin, and I shiver. “Everything.”

Then, before I can gather my wits and process what just happened, he places a kiss on my forehead. “See you around, pretty girl.”

And he's gone.

Chapter Nineteen

Edgar

I twist and turn in bed. Again. I check the time. A little after five.

I'm not going back to sleep, though. My blood is simmering again. Kissing Jo felt good—and right. But in retrospect, it was an unplanned and uncontrolled move on my part. If I'd given myself some time to think about it, I might not have done it.

But when she whispered, “Bye,” like that, as though we'd never see each other again, my restraint broke. She needed to understand that not only will we see each other again, I'll make sure the objections she raised are dealt with.

Regardless, the kiss contributed to my insomnia. My cock's hard and throbbing still. Even my hand wrapped around it doesn't do much, because it isn't Jo's hand. Hers is smaller, more delicate...slightly cooler than my own. When she held me—

I should stop thinking about it. Otherwise I won't be able to get my body under control. I'm not joining Tony and Ivy for breakfast with morning wood.

I lie back, staring at the ceiling. To calm myself down, I mentally recite all the places Blackwood Energy has offices, then our figures from last quarter, and what our projected earnings look like for this quarter...

My phone rings, and I scowl at the name on the screen. What's Dad doing, calling at this hour?

Then I remember he's still in Louisiana, which is two hours ahead.

“Yes?” My voice is slightly rough.

“Where have you been? You missed all the meetings yesterday.” His tone is quiet but no less forceful for that.

This is just like him. Blackwood Energy is critical. But a small part of me objects to his tone and words. If he were anything like Jo’s family, he would’ve asked if everything was okay *with me*... Wouldn’t he?

On the other hand, why am I trying to compare Dad to Jo’s family? They’re totally different people.

“I’m in Los Angeles.”

“Why? Is Ivy... No. She isn’t due yet.” He pauses. “Did something happen to her?”

Indignation sticks in my chest like a knife. How can he ask that while dating Mom behind everyone’s back? The divorce was an olive branch—a token of his good will and remorse for the way he looked the other way while Mom trampled all over Tony and Ivy’s lives. Actually, that wasn’t all that he overlooked. She mistreated me and Court as well. But he let her because he loved her too much. Still does.

“She’s fine.” My tone says I don’t know why he gives a damn.

However, it obviously goes over his head.

“Is this because Nora isn’t getting promoted this year?” Dad demands. “Stop being passive-aggressive. You know how much I hate that. Such emotional pettiness and manipulation has no place at the company.”

He doesn’t say it, but I can hear it anyway. *Don’t act like a woman.* And the larger issue: he won’t promote the women I put on the promotion list because they are women. In his universe, not having a penis means prone to being emotionally petty and manipulative.

“I have some personal matters I need to attend to,” I say coldly, refusing to have this argument over the phone. “I’m not sure why you bring up Nora when you feel there’s nothing wrong with the board’s decision not to promote her. Again.”

There is a pause. “When are you going to be back? There are meetings you can’t miss.”

I stare at the jacket I left on an armchair last night. To be honest, I don’t want to go back. Not for a while, not while he’s dating Mom. If I tell him so, is he going to accuse me of “emotional pettiness and manipulation”? I’m tempted, but that wouldn’t be appropriate. “I don’t know yet. We can teleconference for anything essential.”

“You need to be here in person! You’re representing the Blackwoods.”

“Surely not. The head of the family is you.” Something I’ve been reminded of regularly. Dad likes to pull that card every time he feels he’s being attacked or criticized, especially by me.

He lets out a deep sound of displeasure. “I see. Very well. Keep in touch and I’ll have Susan update you.”

He hangs up before I can tell him not to bother. Susan already knows how to do her job without his micromanagement.

I make a mental note to give her a bonus.

I start to put the phone down, but it a text message comes in. *What now?* I glare at the screen, but my mood turns slightly lighter. It’s Yuna. Doesn’t she sleep? It’s a little after six right now. On the other hand, I should’ve known she’d want an update.

I call her number. “Hello, Yuna.”

“When is the wedding? And where? Does she have a dress in mind? Color scheme? I don’t want to wear anything that’s going to clash. And when does she want the baby shower?” The questions come like a machine gun.

“I...don’t know.” If she was truly curious about all this, she should’ve called Jo. Even if Jo had accepted my proposal, a wedding gown and color schemes aren’t something I’d ever get involved in.

That stops Yuna cold. “You don’t...? *What don’t you know?* She’s pregnant! You have to hurry before she starts showing.”

I make a noncommittal noise. I know about as much about maternity wedding gowns as I do about lipstick shades.

“She said yes, right?” Yuna asks.

No. “It was...inconclusive.”

“What do you mean, ‘inconclusive’? It was a yes-or-no question.” She inhales audibly. “Oh no. You forgot flowers and cake, didn’t you?”

“I needed flowers and cake? I was trying to propose, not sing the woman happy birthday.” Wait... *Was it Jo’s birthday?*

No. It couldn’t have been. If it had, her family would’ve sung the song.

“Edgar, it’s about the *mood*. You have to create the right *mood*. Flowers and cake always do the trick.”

“I’ll be sure to let your future husband know, but believe me, that wasn’t the issue.”

I tell Yuna what happened last night. She isn’t going to get off the phone until I do, and maybe she has some pointers—other than cake and flowers—that I can use. Given that it would be preferable to get the ceremony done before Jo shows too much, my plan needs to be solid.

“You should’ve told her you loved her.” Yuna says it with an uncharacteristic hovering quality, as though she can’t quite settle between disapproval or respect. “I mean, it was good you didn’t *lie*, but marriages are like mergers and acquisitions, Edgar. Some sweet, empty words wouldn’t have hurt.”

I cock an eyebrow. Corporate daughter or not, Yuna is a pianist. I’m quite certain she hasn’t executed a single M&A in her life. “When I do mergers and acquisitions, I don’t offer up empty words. I negotiate. I give them X and they give me Y.” In this case, I deal with Jo’s objections, and she marries me and we raise the baby together.

“Right. Of course. That isn’t so terrible. Solid foundation.”

“You’re not even trying to hide the placation in your tone, are you?”

“Not really.”

“Well, don’t worry. I have my next moves figured out.”

“Okay. I have faith in you. Just remember to crack a few jokes and make her laugh. It’s hard to hate a man who can make you laugh. And you have to invite me to the wedding.”

“Of course. I expect a lavish wedding gift,” I say, trying my hand at a joke. Yuna has a point about not hating people who can make you laugh. Jo also said she initially fell for her ex because he was funny.

“Ugh. You Westerners and your obsession with *gifts*. Cash is so much better.” Yuna hangs up.

Hmm. Didn’t work. But then, she probably didn’t get it because she isn’t American.

Instead of putting my phone away, I text my PI. Linda works for *me*, not the family, which is a significant distinction. Jere Schiro, a bald ex-cop who works for the family, answers to Dad. I don’t need that kind of conflict of interest.

I instruct her to get some background on this Aaron Korvid guy. A man that pathetic and morally reprehensible will have some skeletons in his closet. Perhaps even dinosaur fossils. I’m going to find them and beat him with them until he goes away, permanently.

While Linda’s working on her task, I’m going to start tackling Jo’s second objection—whatever feeling she has for me fizzling in four months. Obviously if she’s used to dating someone like that Aaron guy... Well, she’s been living on Grade D hamburger. I’ll be her steak. No problem.

Actually, this might turn out to be easier to deal with than I thought.

Afterward, I’ll tackle her third objection, about our respective cities of residence. She most likely doesn’t want to give up her career, and I can’t imagine Tempérane having a lot of demand for her services. On the other hand, I can’t stay in

L.A. indefinitely. Dad's going to retire soon, and I need to be there to lead Blackwood Energy.

But I can work in Tempérane from Monday through Thursday, fly to Los Angeles, then work remotely on Fridays. That will give me, Jo and our child three days a week together, plus holidays and vacations. It's the most logical solution. Private jets are wonderful things.

A vast amount of optimism glows through me. I swing myself out of bed, shower, put on a dress shirt and slacks, and join Tony and Ivy for breakfast.

Tony pours a new cup of coffee when he sees me. Ivy's digging into the French toast in front of her like a woman who hasn't seen carbs in decades, which I know is untrue, since she had a huge tower of pancakes for lunch yesterday.

Tony hands me the coffee, which I take with murmured thanks. I sit down and grab some bacon from the platter in the center of the table.

"How did it go?" Ivy asks around her food. "What did Jo say?"

I should've known she'd want to know. Tony probably told her everything I told her in the study. And Ivy saw me walk out to get into my car to head to Manny's Tacos yesterday. I'm surprised she didn't jump on me the moment I walked in last night. Tony probably dragged her to bed to get some sleep.

"He's not crying," my brother says with a wide grin.

"Oh!" Her eyes sparkle. "When's the wedding?"

No wonder Yuna calls Ivy her soul sister. They both want to know the same things. "There's no wedding," I say. "Yet."

Tony frowns. "Did you forget the ring?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I had the ring." Which is infinitely superior to the horrible sapphire ring Jo had. She should've accepted based on jewelry alone. Contrary to what Yuna said, cake and flowers are optional, and probably not even all that helpful. I've never heard of women bragging about

engagement cakes or engagement flowers. “I need a realtor. Tony, I’d appreciate a recommendation if you have one.”

Ivy’s eyes grow round. “She wants an engagement *house*?”

I shake my head. “No. She wants me to convince her that this relationship can last longer than four months. I can’t have her move in with me if I don’t have a place of my own.”

“So you’re going to be in L.A. for four months?” Tony tilts his head. “What about the company?”

“Dad’s still in Tempérane, and we have teleconferencing,” I say, instead of telling him one of the biggest reasons I don’t want to be there—Dad dating Mom, perhaps even intending to remarry her... I’m *still* unsure how to bring it up without upsetting Tony and Ivy. “There’s no reason I can’t handle the business remotely. Besides, I can fly back every so often to check up on things.”

Ivy’s eyes grow soft. “You must really love this woman. It’s so sweet.”

Love? “She’s pregnant with my child. I’m trying to do the right thing.”

Ivy looks at me balefully. “I hope you tried to make it sound more romantic than that.”

“I’m trying to be practical and responsible.” Those two traits should matter more than romance, which is as useful as used toilet paper.

Tony grows serious. “Did you tell her who you were? What you’re worth and the kind of future you can provide for her and the baby?”

“Of course. I said it front of her family.”

“Oh. So they should be—”

“They’re not at all impressed,” I say, knowing where he’s going with it. We’re both used to people caring about our family’s wealth and connections. “They were more interested in the fact that I’m related to the owner of Z.”

“Z? Are you serious?”

“No accounting for taste, but yes. I believe they want to get in through the VIP lane and hang out in one of the upper lounges.”

“Well, that’s...unusual.” Ivy rests her chin in her hand, a bemused smile on her face. “So what’s the new plan?”

“There is no new plan,” I say firmly. “I’m going to marry her and provide for her and my baby.”

Tony looks confused. “How? You said she wasn’t interested.”

“That’s why I asked you to recommend a realtor,” I point out dryly. “So. Do you have a name for me?”

Chapter Twenty

Jo

I roll over in bed, still in my pajamas. It's so nice to have a day off. I even got to have my lunch—leftover Chinese from yesterday—in bed, watching Netflix.

It's not like me to be so lazy. But I'm pregnant, damn it. I'm entitled to some relaxation and pampering.

I put a hand over my belly. Still flat. I don't feel any different, either. Shouldn't I be running to the toilet and throwing up? One of my clients puked after a sip of water. She said it tasted funny, which was weird because it was her favorite mineral water. She also whined about her husband's hair wax, saying it made her nauseated.

At the same time, I shouldn't complain about the fact that I'm not throwing up constantly. Some of my clients had an easy time. Maybe I'll get lucky. Maybe the baby will know I'm doing this alone and want to cooperate.

My responsible little baby... A lot like its father.

A tingling sensation prickles over my lips. I lick them. If I'd had extra-spicy tacos, they might be to blame, but I didn't. And sweet and sour chicken shouldn't leave your mouth feeling like this.

It's the memory of Edgar. Or, more precisely, his kiss last night.

Thinking back on it, I realize I shouldn't have kissed him back, not after saying goodbye. What kind of message was I sending, right? I needed to show him this isn't going anywhere.

But oh my, what a kiss. Every time he touches me, my logic melts down and my hormones take over.

Okay, no more Ms. Hormones, I decide. I'm going to be Ms. Responsible for my baby's sake. And that means thinking about stuff I need to buy. I don't need baby things right now, but maternity clothes? Most definitely. Maternity shoes? Probably. I won't be able to fit into my stilettos once my feet start to swell and I develop cankles. Even the ever-perfect Elizabeth got them.

I should start buying them now, while I'm still my normal self and morning sickness isn't making me run to the bathroom at the drop of a hat—or the smell of hair products.

The intercom buzzes. I roll off the bed, perking up. It must be one of my brothers stopping by with Mama's cooking. She likes to make a huge batch of soup about once a month and share. Says it relaxes her, and nothing makes her feel homey like bubbling soup.

Anticipating something fabulous and home-cooked for dinner, I hit the speaker button immediately. But then I see that it isn't Rafael, Pablo or Angel at the main entrance. It's Edgar! Now I can't even pretend I'm not home! Ack!

“Can I come up?” he says.

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by.”

“How did you know where I live?”

He looks away for a moment. “It isn't exactly a secret, Jo.”

That's true. Hell, Hugo might've told him to save me from Aaron.

The intercom turns off. It does that after a certain set time. Maybe Edgar will get the hint that I'm not into seeing visitors today and get going with whatever he's doing in the neighborhood. There's a very nice café. Excellent coffee and chocolate chip scones.

But nope. The intercom buzzes again.

“Yes?” I say.

“Can I come up?”

“No!” My place is the same mess it was when Hugo visited. Actually, slightly worse, because I have even more clothes and purses. But it isn’t my fault that all these Dior bags were screaming my name.

Then, from the raised eyebrows on the intercom screen, I realize my “no” was too emphatic. Maybe even slightly psychotic or panicked.

I inhale deeply, calming myself. No need to make him think I’m hiding something, because I’m not. It’s only going to want to make him come up more.

He looked up where I lived and made an effort to come all the way here. He isn’t going to go away when he knows I’m home. I’m going to have to see him to get rid of him.

You can do it, Jo. Just make sure he doesn’t surprise-kiss you again.

Right.

“Give me about an hour.” I haven’t even showered yet. I need that much time to get ready. “I’ll come down.”

Now he’s outright frowning. What did I say?

“There’s a café next door. Why don’t you have some coffee while you wait?”

There. That’s as nice as I can get when I’m ambushed by non-family. I hit the off button on the panel and run to the bathroom. Must. Wash. Now.

I take a super-fast shower, then blow-dry my hair. Why, oh why did he have to show up unannounced like this? Not even Kim or Hilary have been inside my apartment. It’s too messy, and I’m too lazy and usually too tired from work to clean it for company.

Besides, if I want to see somebody, there are Starbucks, shops, boutiques, all kinds of options. It doesn’t have to be my place.

I do my makeup. This I don’t rush. How I look is the best advertisement for my business. I grab a hot-pink halter-neck Versace dress, pair it with a modern and elegant silver metal

belt and slip my feet into my beloved Chanel stilettos. They look fantastic on me and have never led me wrong. I'll need to find a maternity go-to set soon, though. It's an art form to look fabulous and in charge when you're sporting a watermelon-sized belly and puking your guts out.

Since my hair isn't curled, I twist it into an updo, then pin it in place with sparkly butterfly pins. A pair of glittery chandelier earrings and a matching diamond tennis bracelet later, I'm ready.

Fifty-five minutes. Hell yeah.

I grab my purse and head out. By the time I reach the café, it's going to be exactly one hour. I'm so good.

Smug and satisfied, I take the elevator to the lobby then walk out to go to the café. Instead of enjoying a cup of coffee like I asked him to, Edgar's standing outside the door, his hands shoved into his pockets. When he sees me, he checks the time.

"One hour. Impressive." His voice is too even to be sarcastic.

"Told you," I say primly.

"I can never tell with most women."

"I'm not most women. Why are you out here instead of at the café?"

He isn't the first person to pull this move. I'm not going to be made to feel bad about the fact that I didn't invite him into my home. It isn't my fault he didn't take my suggestion.

"Breaking and entering isn't really my style."

"I didn't ask you to rob the place, just—"

"It's closed."

Oh shit. Is today the third Sunday? The owners shut down early on third Sundays.

I sigh. "Sorry. I didn't realize." Guilt wriggles its way into me. "You didn't stand here all this time, did you?"

If he says yes, I'm going to feel awful. But not so awful that if I'd known, I would've rushed through my prep. A woman needs as much time as she needs.

"No. I had a few calls in my car."

I nod, pleased he is capable of using his time effectively without being petty. I broke up with a guy over that once.

"So. What are you doing here?" I scan his outfit closely. He isn't in his fifteen-thousand-dollar suit anymore, but his clothes are still exceptional. The pale blue dress shirt is made of silk and the slacks are perfectly creased and black. And I approve of his Italian loafers.

On the other hand, he does look a bit too conservative.

I tap my chin thoughtfully. "Do you need my help varying your ensemble?"

"I'm capable of dressing myself. I'm here about your second objection."

"My second objection?"

"You're worried what you're feeling is mere infatuation and, within four months, you're going to wake up next to me with nothing but disgust for my presence."

"I told you it wasn't really disgust... But okay. Right. That." I clear my throat. "What about it?"

"I'm here to deal with it."

"You are? And how do you plan on doing that?" Unless he has the power to fundamentally change me or make time stay still so we never hit the four-month mark, I don't know how he's going to "deal with it."

"We're going to start our four months now. Let's hope you don't show too badly during your second trimester."

My head spins. "Why?"

"Your wedding gown. Or are there maternity wedding gowns?"

Is he serious? Of course he is. And he's obviously lost his mind. I stare at him with my mouth open. I'm sure I look ridiculous, and I try not to look ridiculous, but this...? I can't even process.

Edgar seems oblivious to my reaction. "Perhaps I should leave those up to you. They're your area of expertise."

"Was I not clear?" I ask finally.

"You were very clear. But I'm going to show that you're wrong. A woman capable of selecting the right dress can surely pick out the right man. You just have to consider all your previous boyfriends as practice for the right one." He pauses. "Which would be me, if I have to spell it out."

Self-assured much? On the other hand, a man who has enough panache to dominate a fifteen-thousand-dollar suit and remain unperturbed among my brothers and cousins after announcing he got me pregnant... Yeah, he's got to be extra alpha.

I cross my arms. "So...is this a date?"

"Actually, I'm here to get your opinion on some places my realtor picked out."

"Why me? I'm not an interior decorator."

"Because we're going to live there. Don't you want to have some say?"

Okay, *what?* This is moving from extra alphaness to extraordinary presumption. "Refresh my memory here. When exactly did I decide I was moving in with you?"

"It's for the four-month experiment."

"I don't think living in sin with you is a good idea. I doubt it'll change anything." Besides, he's going to be in Louisiana because that's where his company is, so we won't even be really living together. And there's another reason, something he might find more convincing. "It's really for your own health and longevity, by the way. Angel might kick your face in, and that'd be a shame. You're too gorgeous to have your cheekbones broken."

“No need for sin. I’m ready to make an honest woman out of you right now.” And he says it so seriously, without a hint of distaste, it’s like that’s what he really wants to do.

Which only adds to my confusion and surprise. He doesn’t love me, and I’m not demanding that he do anything. Most men wouldn’t insist like this. “Edgar, look. I still have to deal with Aaron. I don’t have time to deal with you, too.”

“Have you forgotten what I told you last night? You don’t have to deal with Aaron. I’ll make sure he never bothers you again.”

“But the video—”

Edgar’s expression grows harshly frigid. “If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll destroy everything. I’ll see to it.”

“But how?” I peer at him. “You aren’t going to pay him off, are you?” That isn’t his style.

“That’s the worst way to get rid of a blackmailer.”

True enough. Maybe I *should* let Edgar deal with Aaron. I’ll take it as an early baby shower gift.

“Let’s make a deal,” Edgar says. “I get rid of the Aaron problem permanently, and you move in with me for four months.”

It’s so tempting, but something makes me hesitate. It isn’t that I think Edgar has any evil ulterior motive, but it’s hard to trust men in general after what Aaron pulled. I never thought he’d go that low.

Before I can fully process everything, Edgar adds, “Besides, *I’ll* feel better if I’m around.”

“Why?”

“In case you need things.”

“Like what?” I’m not sure what Edgar can possibly get me. I can do my own shopping. And I have cousins and brothers if I need to have something heavy moved or furniture assembled.

“Midnight cravings? What if you want to have ice cream, but don’t want to get out of bed?”

“Oh.” Hadn’t even thought of that, but then, I’ve never been pregnant before.

“Anyway, shall we go? We’re going to be late for our appointment otherwise.”

Edgar starts to put his hand on my elbow. The gesture is attentive and firm at the same time. A man who isn’t just a gentleman, but a gentleman who won’t take no for an answer.

“Besides, think of it as showing warm hospitality,” he says, his breath tickling the sensitive skin near my ear.

I suppress a shiver. Or at least try to. “How so?” My voice sounds annoyingly breathless.

“What if this real estate guy takes advantage of me? I don’t know this city. He could try to get me to lease the most expensive home. Or worse, he might stick me with something in an undesirable location he wasn’t able to offload on anyone else.”

“Are you serious?” Edgar’s so self-possessed and sharp, I don’t know who would dare try to screw him over.

“Very. I asked Tony for recommendations, but he didn’t have any. His place was custom-built. And obviously, we don’t have time for something like that. So I picked out the first person that popped up on Google.”

Well. At least the realtor’s popular. “Did you check the reviews?” When you’re either buying or renting the kind of property people like Edgar is used to, you need to make sure the realtor’s good and conscientious.

“I didn’t see any,” Edgar says. “His listing was an ad. Those always show up first.”

No. Way. “You can’t possibly be this bad at hiring people. You run a company!”

He shrugs. “Blackwood Energy has an HR department. I don’t.”

If anybody else said this, I’d laugh. It’s just too ridiculous. But it’s Edgar. And his voice is so, so grave. Even his expression matches the tone.

Maybe, just maybe, he really is terrible at hiring people when left to his own devices. I can't let that happen, can I?

Even though I'm unwilling to marry a man who declared to my family that he doesn't love me, I'm curious about seeing another facet of him. It might even help me find a cure for the jittery flip-flops my heart does every time he's near me.

A gold Mercedes stops in front of us. And I realize I made the right decision as the driver's-side door opens.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jo

“Hi, Josephine!” Rick says cheerily, climbing out of the car.

His gold ring winks on his finger. And I’d wager the brand-new red Gucci sandals I haven’t worn yet that he consciously positioned his hand just so to ensure people would notice the sign of his success. He adjusts his Chanel sunglasses with a wide smile, blindingly white against his artfully tanned skin.

He’s in a suit made of slightly textured linen in light khaki. If he thought he could get away with it, he’d wear a gold suit. But he can’t, so he’s settled for a close shade instead. It wouldn’t work if he were someplace like Boston, but SoCal is another matter.

I’d say he’s overcompensating for the fact that his last name is Bronze. The man wants to be nothing but first and stay there.

He turns to Edgar. “You must be Mr. Blackwood.”

“Edgar.”

“A pleasure.” Rick extends his hand, clasps Edgar’s and pumps like he were reuniting with a long-lost friend. Someone who’s never met him before would think he’s a nice, affable fellow. The kind of man you want to be pals with.

But I know Rick. He’s a pretty well-known character in the city for his talent in finding expensive homes that make a statement. That means his services are in high demand among a lot of rich people. He’s done work for Kim’s boss and his family. Unless I’m mistaken, he’s also working for Kim and her man Wyatt to find them a suitable home.

However, not everyone knows about his amazing ability to push clients into decisions *he* wants them to make. Combine

that with a high amount of avarice, and he's the kind of realtor you have to be careful around. Otherwise you'll end up with something that's too expensive even if it makes a statement you like.

"So. I understand you're looking for a nice place for the two of you." Rick looks at me and Edgar.

Shit. That must've come from Edgar. I'm still in *no* territory, but I'd rather not argue in front of Rick. The man gossips worse than a retired church lady...unless discretion can get him money.

On the other hand, I don't want him telling everyone I'm moving in with Edgar. So I settle for a neutral, non-argumentative response.

"Edgar is mainly the one making the decision," I say with a thin smile. "He doesn't have a place in the city."

At the same time, Edgar says, "Yes."

"Perfect." Rick's expression doesn't change. He knows which one of us has the money. "I've prepped a few properties. I'm sure you'll be thrilled with any of them." He opens the back door with a flourish.

Edgar and I slip inside, and Rick slips behind the wheel and drives off. I lean over and whisper, "You found him on Google, really?"

Edgar nods gravely.

"Well, that's funny. Because Rick doesn't advertise." He doesn't need to. People who need to Google to find a realtor are not his clientele. All his clients come to him through referrals.

Edgar starts to open his mouth, then immediately schools his features so they're back to being calm again. Well, at least he isn't good at covering up lies. That's a plus, as far as I'm concerned.

"You know, I was thinking that security is going to be paramount with a beautiful young woman living there," Rick says.

Oh, for God's sake. He shouldn't even try to butter me up. He knows I'm not going to be flattered, and I know him too well to fall for it.

"Of course," Edgar says, turning to Rick a bit too eagerly. "A gated community, with tall walls and maybe even barbed wire on top. Preferably with private security."

Ugh. That sounds like Ryder Reed's fortress. I've been there a few times to help with his wife's wardrobe.

"No moat. And no K9 security patrols. I like it quiet," I add with sarcasm.

"Most certainly." Edgar's placidly agreeable. "Noise pollution is bad for pregnant women, and I wouldn't want anything to upset you in the next nine months."

Oh shit. Rick glances at me in the rearview mirror. By the end of the day, everyone in the city's going to know.

"You're pregnant?" he asks.

"Why did you say that in front of him?" I hiss.

"There's no way to hide the bump. Everyone's going to know." Edgar isn't being petty or passive-aggressive. He actually seems confused by my question. "Besides, shouldn't he know so he can recommend something suitable?"

But he said four months, not forever. How long is he planning to stay in L.A.? And what if his attempt at dealing with my second objection fails? He's going to be stuck with an expensive piece of real estate in a city he doesn't even live in!

"We need a place that's safe for a young child," Edgar says. "I won't accept anything less."

Rick licks his lips in a nervous gesture. "Of course."

"And I expect you to be discreet," Edgar adds.

"Most certainly. Discretion's my middle name." Rick shoots us his best "You can count on me" smile.

I roll my eyes.

The first home he takes us to is a nine-bedroom house. It's called a house only because the lot isn't quite big enough to be categorized as a mansion, at least not in L.A.

Edgar walks with me. Rick hovers, gesturing and explaining.

"The pool is intimate and comes with a cottage that you can use for guests if you'd rather not have them in your home," he says. "There's a tennis court as well if you enjoy the sport." His gaze flicks to my belly. "Although you should consult a doctor first before you exercise. Never can be careful enough..."

"Thank you." He couldn't care less about what happens to the baby. I'm certain he's afraid of a lawsuit if it looks like he recommended I play the sport.

We walk inside. The place is large and airy, with lots of sleek modern touches. Chrome and glass and huge tiles and marble. The colors are neutral and inoffensive. It won't be too terrible if Edgar gets stuck with it because he should be able to dispose of it fairly quickly.

Then we reach the master bedroom with a recessed tray ceiling. I check out the overall feel of the room, while Edgar goes to look at the bathroom and the walk-in closet. Very nice. Soothing greens and blues. The light fixtures are contemporary, with minimalist aesthetics. Given Edgar's preference for understated and serious, this is perfect.

"What are you looking for?" Rick whispers to me, instead of tagging Edgar to impress him with all the amazing things about this particular house.

I point at myself. "Me? What makes you think this is about me?"

"Come on. When a man is looking for a place with the woman he plans to live with, it's always about her. Unless he's an asshole, but you're too smart to move in with an asshole. So, what's your dream home?"

Wow. Rick is smarter and more insightful than I thought. No wonder he's so good at his job. And he deserves my help

for not acting like my presence is an afterthought. But *dream home*? I don't know what that would be, not on a scale that's going to fit Edgar's social standing.

What I've always envisioned is that I'm going to have the kind of life my parents do. And they live in a normal middle-class home with five bedrooms, a den and a small yard with a one-car garage. So I thought I'd have something like that, not this nine-bedroom structure with a pool, a cottage and a tennis court. I'm sure there's also a multi-car garage.

Picturing myself here is... Well, it's beyond me at this point. Especially when the man who wants me to move in with him has told everyone in my family he doesn't love me.

"Whatever Edgar likes is fine," I say finally.

Rick groans like I've stabbed him in the belly. "Oh, come on."

"I'm really not that picky."

He snorts. "I've seen the way you dress. You're not low-maintenance enough to accept whatever he picks out. You're going to object at the very last minute, denying me—"

Before he can finish, Edgar walks out of the closet. Rick immediately shuts his mouth and shoots both of us a radiant smile that seems one hundred percent genuine.

He's really good.

"So." He clasps his hands together. "What do you think?"

"Unacceptable," Edgar says instantly. "We'll go to the next one."

Huh. What's wrong with the house?

"May I ask what you don't like about this place?" Rick says. "It's a bit small, but it has a lot of great features I haven't shown you yet."

Edgar cocks an eyebrow, the gesture the definition of pure arrogance and authority—*how dare you question my decision*.

Damn, it's sexy in a domineering way. Which is weird because usually I don't like it when guys get overbearing.

Must be the hormones.

Rick's smile falters for a second, but he recovers. He's a pro. "It'll help me narrow your options."

"The closet's too small, and there's no connecting dressing room. Jo is a fashion consultant. She's going to need more space for clothes, shoes and accessories. They're important for her work."

My heart does a little pitter-patter and throws flower petals in the air. Lots of people think my job is just...silly. Not that important. After all, I'm somebody who dresses others who can't dress themselves. Even some of my exes were dismissive, which is why I broke up with them so fast.

But here's Edgar, easily the most accomplished of all the men I've ever dated. Who runs a multibillion-dollar company. And he isn't throwing out some platitude. He's showing real respect for the career I've worked so hard to build.

It makes me unbelievably hot. I wish we were alone so I could kiss him on the mouth. Just to let him know how much I appreciate his support.

"I see," Rick says, giving me a sidelong glance. *I told you that you were a factor in his decision.* "I have just the thing, but...it's not for rent. Sale only."

"That isn't a problem," Edgar says.

Wait, he shouldn't be buying something that suits me. "But ___"

He pats my hand. "If we decide we don't like it later, we can always put it back on the market."

He says it like it's no big deal. And I've been around enough wealthy clients to know that it isn't—not for him and people like him. But it's one thing for flipping a multimillion-dollar home to be the norm for them, something else to realize it's going to become the norm *for me too*. And it isn't really happiness or joy I'm feeling. More like I've been dropped into the middle of a Dali painting. *Surreal.*

No wonder Hilary struggled at first to fit in with her husband's family. Hilary grew up poor, and her husband was born into one of the richest families in the country. Kim is with a billionaire, too, but he didn't make his money until recently, so he's more like us, except...hundreds of thousands times richer now.

Am I going to be able to fit in? Ivy and Tony seem nice, but there's a difference when you become part of the family. How about Edgar's parents? I haven't met or heard from them at all. I only know what's in the sensational scandal articles. But reporters are after clicks. And tabloid writers have the morality of spit slime.

Do I have to get along with his mom? Does Edgar expect me to? In my experience, men tend to be closer to their mothers. Just look at my brothers and cousins. They act like big grown babies around their moms all the time.

Why are you already worried about it when you know you aren't going to marry him? He doesn't love you, remember?

Right. I shouldn't be thinking about that. Besides, his parents live in Louisiana. Too far for any sort of regular contact. I should just...help Edgar pick out a place. Even though he rejected this one because he didn't approve of the walk-in closet and the lack of dressing room, I decide to keep it on the "possibly okay" list.

The next place Rick shows us is a three-level penthouse residence with its own separate entrance and elevator. The inside of the elevator is mirrored and polished to such a sheen that I could do my eye makeup in it.

"A model used to live here," Rick explains. "It's a lovely home, but I wasn't sure, since you mentioned a baby. You'll definitely want to have housekeepers and so on to wipe fingerprints off the surfaces. But as you can see..."

The elevator car comes to a stop, and we step into a huge foyer that stretches into a gigantic living room and kitchen. The walls are paneled glass that soars high above us. Blinding afternoon sunlight pours in, and I shield my eyes, wishing I'd brought sunglasses.

Edgar does the same.

“The floor plan is very open. If you have staff, you won’t get much privacy,” Rick says.

He goes over to the panel by the kitchen and hits a few buttons. The glass instantly turns darker, filtering out a good amount of the light.

He lets out a soft sigh, then grins at us. “Pretty nifty. It’s on all the windows here. It also filters out UV rays, which the previous owner wanted. Being a model and all, it’s important for her to look as young as possible. And don’t worry about anybody looking in. They can’t. Special coating.”

I nod. It is a nice feature, and the privacy coating is quite neat. If this were a suite at Aylster, I can totally see myself asking Rinaldo to hook me up. The view alone is worth it.

Edgar says nothing, but he looks around the kitchen and the living room, his expression impassive. I walk with him, my heels clacking on the marble floor. The whole penthouse is unfurnished, but also very modernist in color and design, with lots of polished stone and glass, which makes the place feel almost museum-cold.

But I can visualize how it could be made into a warm, inviting home with the right furniture and some texturing. Rugs. Pillows. Pictures. Plants. Yup. It could work. Besides, the kitchen is a huge plus. It has eight stovetop burners, a huge griddle and three ovens. I’m not big on cooking, but Tía Bea would love it. And the wine cooler with temperature and humidity control? Perfect for storing wines from Tío Felipe’s vineyard.

Oh man. For the first time, I’m tempted to move in with someone. And the feeling surprises me. I’m not a real estate girl or a Martha Stewart type. Ever since I moved out, home is where I rest, recuperate and make myself presentable for work. That’s it.

“The building has its own gym and pool for residents, but you have your own on the second level. People who can afford this shouldn’t have to share. Shall we see the owner’s suite?”

Rick says. "I know you're concerned about the walk-in-closet and dressing room, so let's get that sorted first."

Edgar nods.

Those must be pretty impressive for Rick to sound so confident. On the other hand, he's not a fashion guy, so I'm curious to see what they're like.

We go upstairs. Edgar places a hand at the small of my back. It's a protective gesture, and sexy as hell. I glance at him, wondering what's going on behind the gorgeous, inscrutable face of his. He said he doesn't love me, but everything he's done is considerate and caring. If he hadn't said what he said, I might've thought he liked me a lot, at least.

Maybe he's nice and polite to everyone, and he's just treating me the way he'd treat any other woman. Although I should be happy he's not a jerk, part of me is vaguely irritated. I want him to treat me just a tad more special. Okay, maybe a lot more if he wants me to move in and eventually marry him. It's an irrational annoyance, but I can't seem to stop myself from feeling it.

Must be the baby hormones. I'm usually more levelheaded.

"If you get too far along in your pregnancy," Rick says, "the elevator will take you to the upper levels too. The original owner thought of everything."

"Were they pregnant, too?" I ask.

"No. Late parties, if you know what I mean."

I know exactly what he means.

On our way up, I see the gym and the pool. Holy... It has everything you'd find at a commercial gym, except without duplicates of the same machines. And, of course, it has the ubiquitous windows and mirrors.

We reach the top level. Rick opens the double door at the end and gestures for us to go.

Edgar and I step inside. I crane my neck, looking around. Holy cow. The bedroom alone is bigger than my entire apartment. It has a tray ceiling too, like the one we saw before. But unlike that one, it has a huge art deco smoked-glass mirror in four different shades of gray in the center. The previous owner must've really loved to look at herself to put those in.

Two adjacent walls have multiple large smoked-glass mirror panels in gray with gold veins. The walk-in closet is just as big as the bedroom, and the dressing room is sizable as well. The en suite bathroom boasts a huge, round sunken tub and a sizable walk-in shower with nine shower heads. I cock an eyebrow at a fireplace near the tub.

"Extravagantly luxurious and modern. It had four other suites, but smaller than this, of course," Rick says, somehow reminding me of a pleased sea lion after a particularly difficult trick.

"Do they have a lot of mirrors, too?" Edgar asks, his tone inscrutable.

"No. They're just normal."

Edgar and I go to make sure, but of course Rick is right. They're just your standard rooms with normal walls. Edgar looks relieved. "At least there's nothing for a baby to hurt herself on."

"Might be a boy," I say, hoping he isn't going to be weird about the baby's gender. Some men are.

He gives me a long, steady look that makes my pulse accelerate. "I'd prefer a girl who looks like you."

Air catches in my throat. It's gotta be illegal for him to say things like that in such a serious voice after he told my family he doesn't love me. It's exactly the kind of thing a man who loves his woman might say. But my heart is a foolish thing, because it's doing overexcited cartwheels.

"What a great sentiment." Rick voice cuts into the moment. "So. What do you think?"

"It's nice, but feels too cold and sterile," Edgar says.

I would have used almost exactly those words. The man has an excellent taste.

He adds, “I don’t want a dull and boring home.”

Even though his tone is as even as always, I’m sensing just a small bit of vulnerability there. Do a lot of people call him dull and boring? If so, that’s terrible, since Edgar is anything but.

“I agree, but I think the place has potential,” I say. “With some color—art prints, rugs, pictures—the place could look sophisticated and welcoming.”

Edgar looks skeptical.

“I’m not an interior designer, but I’m good with colors. You have to admit that, right?”

He nods.

I gesture at walls and floor, really getting into it. I visualize the whole thing as I talk, the way I can see exactly how my clients are going to look after I’m done dressing and accessorizing them. “All you need is some cream, pale yellow, royal purple and dark cherry for the owner’s suite. The other rooms can get their own themes, but believe me, it’s going to look amazing after you’re done. The place has everything except some accessories and embellishment.” And it’d be a lovely home, not the museum-like, ultra-modern moneyed showcase it is right now.

Edgar rolls his weight on the balls of his feet. His eyes roam the walls and ceiling, then settle on mine. Something hot sparks in their depth. Suddenly my mouth is too dry, but I can’t look away.

“I think her idea is brilliant. I can recommend a few good designers if you’d like,” Rick says, interrupting the moment again. Either he’s oblivious to the thick, sizzling tension or he’s too eager for commission to let us get distracted.

Edgar blinks, and his face returns to its impassive state. He plucks a card from his pocket and hands it to Rick. “Call my assistant and work out the details.”

Rick takes the card like it's a map to a pirate's treasure. "Most certainly. I'll get in touch with her right away." He puts the card away and says, "I'll give you more time to chat about possibilities. I'll be in the foyer."

He turns and starts walking downstairs. He undoubtedly already has the number memorized and is too eager to make the call to hang around with us now.

I shake my head. Then something suddenly pops into it. "Did he tell you how much this place is? I only remember him saying you had to buy it, but he didn't say the asking price, did ___"

"No." Edgar places a hand at my elbow and gently leads me out of one of the guest rooms we're in.

"Shouldn't you ask before you buy it? What if it's too expensive?" Luxury homes aren't my area of expertise. I wish I had Kim's experience. She knows so much about the billionaire lifestyle, having worked for Salazar Pryce for over five years.

Edgar shrugs. "You didn't look too closely at the price tag on your purse, did you?"

Is he seriously equating my shopping habits to his? "It's not a piece of real estate," I point out, in case that critical distinction has escaped his notice. "It's just a purse."

"Dior." His tone says he knows it's no cheap purse.

"Yeah, but that's part of my job. A business expense. You know, because I have to look good."

"It's part of my job to provide for you and the baby. And you seem to like this place. So that's enough for me."

I stare at him, unable to compute what's happening. This place has to be worth millions, maybe tens of millions, and he doesn't care about the price because it's his job to provide for me and the baby?

He also said you liking it was enough for him.

Yeah, but let's not dwell on that too much. It's making me slightly breathless, and I don't want to hyperventilate. I refuse

to believe I'm reacting this way due to surging emotions, a sense of being cared for. He couldn't have been clearer about zero love for me last night.

Rick takes us back to my apartment complex, fighting to hide a wide grin the whole way. Clearly, the place is filthy expensive.

By the time we reach my place, it's six. I realize my fridge is empty, and I haven't bought anything for dinner.

"Thank you for coming along," Edgar says when Rick's gone.

I shift my weight on the sidewalk. "No problem. Glad I was able to help," I say, feeling a little awkward. This is normally when a woman asks the guy to come up to her place, especially when he just plunked down a mind-numbing amount of money on a penthouse she likes.

But we aren't a normal couple, and my place is a fashion war zone. For a second I wonder if he'd run in horror if he were to see my apartment. But I'm unwilling to take the risk. His opinion matters. I want him to think highly of me, consider me as sophisticated and interesting as the kind of women he undoubtedly dated before. I tell myself it's because men should genuinely respect the mother of their children, not because of anything else.

"I should get going," I say.

At the same time, he says, "Have dinner with me."

I'm not sure if spending more time with him today is a great idea. My heart is already too fluttery. It's probably the shock of seeing him drop an insane sum on a place he says we should move into together, after he takes care of the Aaron problem. It can't be anything else... Can it?

He looks super yummy. Smells yummy, too.

I'm probably just hungry.

You didn't think Rick was yummy.

I wasn't hungry then.

I clear my throat. “I want to have French toast, and I was going to make it myself, since nobody serves it now.” That’s a pretty weak excuse, but now that I said it out loud, I do want French toast. Maybe the pregnancy is putting me on a say-food diet.

“It’s not a problem. The baby should have whatever it wants.” He extends a hand, just like he did at the party.

I should really say no and go up to my apartment and try to pin down my emotions. But somehow I can’t bring myself to do it. Not when Edgar looks torn, like he’s regretting asking because he thinks I’m going to turn him down anyway. But that isn’t what I want. If I’m being honest with myself, I want to spend more time with him.

When did you become so hesitant? You always went for what you wanted. That’s how you became so successful so young, remember?

I place my hand on his palm. It’s warm against my bare skin. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Edgar

The second our hands touch, an electric zing shoots from my fingers all the way to my dick. Even as a new wave of libido churns in my body, I regret asking her to dinner.

The afternoon didn't go exactly as anticipated. It was impossible to keep my hands off her. We were in public, so of course I behaved. But every chance I got, I put my hands on her—on her elbow, her shoulder...the small of her back. All seemingly innocent and gentlemanly.

I've been educated since I was a small child about how to treat ladies. It was considered basic knowledge for a man to have, like how to use the right utensils. But I've never felt such an irresistible compulsion to touch someone before. I'm certain I've been more solicitous with Jo than was strictly required.

But she tugs at me. Every time I try not to think about her, obsess about her, she drags me back in.

And now we're going to have dinner together. It would've been more prudent to give myself time to recover from the effect she has on me, instead of adding more time with each other.

Regardless, it's too late now. So I close my hand around hers. Her fingers are long and slim, and her hand is so soft and feminine, much smaller than my bigger, rougher one. The difference in our size and strength elicits protective instincts in me, ones that urge me to shield her, coddle her and make sure she never lacks for anything. If I didn't know better, I might even label the emotion—

No. This isn't something as ludicrous and irrational as love. It's only natural that I want to take care of the mother of my child and the woman I'm planning to marry.

I stop my car in front of the Aylster Hotel. Ivy once said its bistro, Nieve, has some of the best French toast she's ever had.

A uniformed doorman rushes over and opens the door for Jo, while a valet takes my key. Jo smiles at him and says hello.

"Are you here to see Rinaldo? He hasn't left yet, as far as I know," the man says.

Rinaldo's here? I feel my lips tighten. If I'd known, I would've picked a different restaurant.

"No. We're here for dinner," Jo answers.

I put a hand on her back. The gesture is possessive, radiating *back off*. I also hope the man understands he better not go bring Rinaldo from wherever he is. I don't want to have her cousin shooting death rays at me or group-texting his relatives to let them know what we're doing.

She waves bye, and we head toward the bistro on the first floor of the hotel.

The maître d', resplendent in a starched white uniform, greets us. "Good evening, sir. Mada—Jo!" A huge grin splits his face.

"Hey, Dave!"

They exchange a quick hug. So the maître d' knows her too. Hopefully he isn't Rinaldo's spy. What exactly is Rinaldo's position, anyway? I should have Linda look into her whole family. I wasn't planning on doing that because I assumed they'd want me to get to know them gradually. But I don't like surprises. The last thing I need is to have Angel or some cousin show up at our new home as our interior decorator because I didn't realize sooner what he does for a living.

"I didn't know you were coming," Dave says. "You weren't on the reservation list for today."

"But you have a table for me, right?" She gives him a friendly wink.

"Of course! Always the best table for you. You're like family."

I watch the two of them. If Dave were two decades younger, I'd say he was flirting with her, but his manners are more fatherly than sexual.

“And you brought a dinner companion.” Dave smiles at me. His expression's more affectionate than the polite hospitality that top hotels' staff excel at. “Mr. Blackwood. This way, please.”

I'm not surprised he knows who I am. My brothers have been in L.A. for a while, and I've been visiting relatively frequently. Once you're at a certain level at an establishment like this, you make it your job to know who certain people are.

At least my lack of anonymity isn't going to be so obvious to Jo, if it matters to her. She's been greeted profusely by everyone we've encountered at the hotel so far.

Jo and I follow Dave into the bistro. Nieve is done all in white. Its cool elegance is soothing, but it also reminds me of Mom. She would approve of the sophistication inherent in the simple design and color scheme.

The question about whether Dad is still seeing her pops into my head, and my mood plunges. I know he is. What I don't know is how far he's willing to go. Remarry her? Ask that we forget what she's done for decades because she's old and alone now?

She seemed a bit more fragile in the photos Linda sent. But I can never let myself forget that Mom employs her beauty and fragility like scythes, mowing down people who don't give in to her wants.

Our server pulls out a chair for me, while the maître d' does the same for Jo. I forcibly shove the unpleasant thoughts about my parents out of my mind. I didn't bring Jo here to brood about that.

After the maître d' is gone, the waiter hands us white leather-bound menus. I take a glance at mine. A grass-fed Angus beef burger sounds about right.

Soon our server returns with two pitchers—one with ice water and the other with complimentary iced jasmine white

tea, which he announces in a slightly self-important tone. Then he pours both into glasses.

I look at Jo. “Ready to order?”

She nods, then turns to the waiter. “Can I have French toast, maple syrup on the side, with extra berries?”

The young man blinks. “Uh. We don’t do breakfast at this hour. How about our grilled salmon? It’s really good.”

Jo purses her mouth, her brows pinching together. Salmon is a poor substitute for French toast.

The waiter turns toward me. “Sir, I can take your order while she’s having another look at the menu.”

Something about his attitude grates on my nerves, the slightly condescending implication that she didn’t look at the menu correctly in the first place. It’s the same kind of snobbery Mom would use to cut someone down, except she’s slicker and more subtle. My irritation surges. I’m furious that he made me think of my mom again after I evicted her from my mind just moments ago.

I pin him with my coldest and haughtiest stare. “She doesn’t need to look over the menu again. She told you what she wanted.”

“Uh...” He licks his lips, and the white pen he’s holding starts to vibrate slightly. Obviously this isn’t going according to his mental script. “It’s just that—”

“I’ll have your beef burger—medium rare—with steak fries and a Coke. Classic.” I turn to Jo. “What do you want to drink?”

“Sparkling pear juice.”

“We don’t do medium ra—”

“Yes, you do. Go ask the chef.”

He clicks his mouth shut. “Yes, sir.”

Holding the menus like a shield in front of him, he retreats. I dismiss him from my thoughts and turn my attention to Jo.

She leans across the table, her brown eyes sparkling.
“Okay, that was hot. And hilarious.”

“Was it?” I ask, unsure what’s so amusing.

“Oh yeah. I didn’t think you had it in you. You’re always so proper and polite. But I do enjoy watching men who are very alpha.”

The half-teasing, half-admiring tone makes me want to preen, which is highly uncharacteristic. I make a noncommittal noise. I don’t want to explain the real reason I was much shorter with the waiter than I would’ve been otherwise.

“He’s going to spit in our food, you know,” she says. But from the way she’s grinning, she doesn’t seem too worried about the possibility.

“Then we’ll have Dave fire him.” Rudeness bothers me, but generally not to this degree. But my mood isn’t exactly charitable at the moment. “If I thought the service would be this lacking, I wouldn’t have brought you here.”

“Oh no. It isn’t bad here, trust me. It’s just that waiter.”

“It’s the lackey who’s lacking?”

She laughs. “I think he’s new. Otherwise he would’ve known who I was and wouldn’t have said no when I asked for something special. Rinaldo—one of my cousins you met last night—he works here as the director of rooms. I’ve been here with clients a few times, so most everyone knows me.”

So, he’s in management. “Is he going to join us? Perhaps hover for an hour or two?”

She chuckles. “He’s not that bad.”

“Isn’t he? He hasn’t sent a spy in to watch us? Perhaps even record our conversation?” I keep my tone light to show that I’m—mostly—joking. But I wouldn’t put it past him, based on his behavior last night.

She rolls her eyes. “Please. His people are busy.”

Our drinks arrive, and the food comes soon after. The waiter is much more subdued now. I can see Dave, looking

displeased in the background. So the maître d' set the man straight.

Jo's French toast is exactly as specified—maple syrup on the side, fresh berries in small mounds on the plate. Powdered sugar tops the fruit and toast like fresh snow. My burger also looks fine, with a long pickle spear and steak fries cooked to crisp, golden perfection.

Jo digs into her food. "God, this is *so* good. No, wait. *Life*. *Life* is so good."

Her obvious enjoyment is contagious. My dark mood dissipates, replaced by a light pleasure. For some reason, I think of the sun breaking through clouds. I take a bite of my burger.

"How do you like it?" Jo asks.

"It's good." I don't get the kind of happiness from our meal that she does.

Perhaps she senses the unspoken part of my reaction. "If it you don't like it, you can send it back."

"It's fine. Food is fuel. Or a social opportunity—to create an occasion to network, to mingle, to be polite," I say, revealing more than I'm comfortable with. But I don't want her to think I'm suffering through some inferior dinner for her. I despise playing the martyr and manipulating everyone around me with it. That's Mom's game, not mine.

"Wow." Jo stares at me. "That's kind of...bleak. You thought that about the food at our family dinner, too?"

Tread lightly. She adores her uncle. "No, it was excellent. But the main goal was to see your family."

"Well, of course we wanted to see each other, but we love food too. My mom and aunt ply us with it to show us how much they love us. They always say we're, like, emaciated." She laughs softly.

For a moment, I can't breathe. Jo is so beautiful, so bright. If joy were a person, it would look and shine like her.

An excruciating longing follows at the image of what her family is like. How they look out for and care for each other. How her parents and aunt and uncle still shelter and protect her.

“If you think eating is a chore, marrying me isn’t the best idea,” Jo adds.

“It won’t be a chore,” I say, thinking back on the dinner last night. She needs to do better if she’s trying to scare me away. “I promise.”

She returns to eating, and then suddenly scowls at a spot behind me. I turn around, but I don’t see anything that would cause her to react like that.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Ugh. It’s Rinaldo’s assistant.”

“And?”

“She’s spying on us.”

“Is she?” I start to crane my neck, wondering what I should do to scare the spy away.

“Don’t bother. She isn’t somebody you can shame. She only listens to him, and he probably told her to report back.” Jo’s knife-work grows more aggressive on the toast. “I don’t want you to feel pressured into anything.”

“Oh?” I dip a fry into ketchup and offer it to her. It seems like the thing to do here. “What do you think I’m being pressured into?” Perhaps she’s been missing the dynamic between us. I’m trying to convince her to marry me.

She takes the fry and bites the ketchup-dipped part off. “My family doesn’t expect—or require—you to marry me because of the baby. To them, marriage has to be about more than just kids.”

She obviously doesn’t know them as well as she thinks she does, although she’s right about the second part. “Maybe the older generation. But your brothers and cousins disagree.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We had a little chat in the parking lot. It was quite illuminating.”

She buries her face in a free hand. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I should’ve known.” She straightens. “They didn’t... um...hurt you, did they?”

It’s cute how she’s worried about me. “No. They were quite civilized.”

Her shoulders visibly relax. “Good.”

Because she’s simply too adorable, I can’t help but do something I rarely do: tease. “They wanted to ensure we could gift your parents with multiple grandchildren.”

Her cheeks turn bright red as she lets out a loud gasp. “They—did—not.”

It’s all I can do to swallow a laugh. “They did.”

“I’m going to murder them!”

From the rage glinting in her eyes, I’m pretty sure that if her brothers and cousins were here right now, she’d stab them with her fork. “Difficult and time-consuming. There are seven of them, and just one of you. Much easier to simply accept that they did it for you and leave it at that.”

“Just to be clear, I didn’t tell them to do that,” she says, her tone full of embarrassment.

“The possibility never crossed my mind. And your face shouldn’t be that red over what they did on their own. You aren’t their mom.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“They care about you. They just want to protect you.”

“Yes, I know, but please. Just ignore them. *Please*. They think they know best, but they don’t.” She stabs a piece of toast and points it at me. “Overbearing men!”

“I don’t want to.” When she gives me a blank look, I add, “Ignore them, that is.”

“What? Why not?” She stares at me, the toast momentarily forgotten.

I take the fork from her hand, turn it around and feed it to her. She’s eating for two. “I won’t turn my back on my child, Jo.” Not the way my parents did. I’m going to be best damn father there is, no matter what the cost.

Jo scrutinizes me, a little too intently for comfort. I don’t think I’m being overly obvious in my thoughts and feelings. I’ve spent so much of my life hiding them because I learned very early on that revealing them could make things worse.

“What happened to you?” she asks, her voice almost a whisper.

I pull myself together, exerting even stronger control and putting on my most placid face. “I’m being responsible and dependable, like you said when we first met.”

Jo looks away. Something I recognize as disappointment crosses her face, then she inhales and exhales softly. But why is she unhappy? Because I’m not going to unload my sterile and boring childhood on her? She should realize it’s better this way. The family history is boring and not worth retelling. The tabloids have covered enough already, even if none of them got it totally right. I’d be surprised if she hasn’t read those so-called articles.

Finally, she says, “My parents don’t want me to be married. They want me to be happy.”

Perhaps they knew I wasn’t very good at protecting my own brothers...and wondering how I could be entrusted with their precious daughter. On the other hand, she hasn’t said what *she* wants. “Would it make you happy to have me disappear, then?” I ask quietly, needing to know exactly what she’s thinking.

If she says yes... Well, then I’ll have to redouble my efforts. Show her that having me around is infinitely better than the alternative.

But I want her to say no. I want her to tell me she wants me and my protection.

Instead of answering, she cuts her French toast into neat squares. What's this? *I want him gone, I want him here*, only with food because there aren't any flower petals she can pluck with each option?

The longer this goes on, the tighter my gut becomes. I wish I hadn't eaten the fries. I take a sip of Coke.

Finally she puts her knife down. "No."

Tension dissipates, and I drag in the air that was stuck in my throat. This is an excellent step. Completely in the right direction. I smile. "Then cheer up. I bring advantages other than money and connections."

She looks confused. "You do? Then why didn't you list them at the dinner?"

"It...wouldn't have been prudent."

"Okay, so...?"

"I don't snore. And I believe my performance in bed meets your satisfaction."

Her mouth parts, her dark eyes glazing a bit. Gratification suffuses me as my body grows taut. Sexual need begins to thrum in my veins.

"After we move in together," I say, "I'll devote a considerable amount of time and energy to ensuring you enjoy the full benefit of both."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jo

I walk into my apartment on autopilot. My brain's spinning at double speed to process the fact that I'm here alone. Edgar paid for dinner, drove me home, then got out to open my door and didn't even try to come up. He didn't even try to kiss me. And I was so sure he would.

So why didn't he? Am I suddenly not hot? Or isn't he going to do anything until I actually move in with him?

Maybe I gave out some kind of "you aren't coming up to my place so don't even think about it" vibe...?

Ack. Edgar's so confusing!

But my reaction to him is even worse. My body's buzzing, not with happy anticipation, but with a huge let-down. I realize I've been primed for...something...ever since he brought up sex. Our night together was perfect. It couldn't have gone any better. Maybe I wanted him to not only kiss me but have an encore in one of the Aylster's rooms.

Every muscle in my body clenches in frustration.

I slap my hands against the kitchen counter and let out a rough breath. I'm behaving like a nympho. I bet Edgar is driving back to his brother's place, all calm and composed.

Pull yourself together, Jo. Sex is just sex.

But sex with Edgar is different. It's more. A wall-toppling intimacy that's simply...incredible. The raw, lust-sharpened expression on his face when he was naked in bed with me...

I push away from the counter and start fanning myself. I should check my phone for anything urgent and then just go to bed. Maybe even use my vibrator to scratch the itch. It'll be

like settling for a burger when you want a steak, but it'll have to do.

Nothing pops up from my clients on my phone. But... Wait. I have numerous texts from Aaron demanding I tell him what happened last night. *Pssht. Whatever.* I don't want to ruin the few hours I have left in my weekend talking with him.

Instead, I turn to group texts from Hilary, Kim and Yuna.

–Hilary: Where are you?

–Kim: Aren't you joining us for barre?

–Yuna: And the bar. I know you can't drink, but I'm sure we can get something virgin for the non-virgin. And why do Americans call non-alcohol drinks "virgin" anyway? So weirdly sexual.

The texts came almost two hours ago. Crap. I totally forgot about it. I *knew* I had something to do today.

There are more an hour or so later.

–Kim: Are you coming to the bar?

–Yuna: Hilary got a big announcement. You're going to miss it!

–Hilary: Don't worry about it if you aren't feeling well.

So like Hilary. She probably thought that was the reason, because I've never missed barre—or at least the post-barre bar—until now.

Feeling slightly guilty that it slipped my mind, I text everyone.

–Me: Sorry! I totally forgot, and no, I'm not sick. What's Hilary's big news?

–Hilary: It's something better done via video chat. Are you free now?

–Me: Yes!

–Kim: Hold on. I'm setting up a Zoom chat now.

I move to the bedroom, toe off my shoes and prop my back against the headrest because it's the cleanest part of the

apartment. Soon Kim texts us the meeting link.

I'm the last one in, so I wave. "Hi there!"

"We have everyone now," Yuna says, a towel around her wet hair. Her face is freshly scrubbed, but you wouldn't know from the flawless skin.

"So." Hilary smiles, her eyes bright. I don't think I've never seen her looking so excited. Well, she was this excited when she told me Mark proposed, but I doubt he's proposed again. "Mark and I are expecting."

"A *baby!*" Yuna squeals.

"Wow!" I say, truly happy for my friend. "Congratulations. Decided it was about time, huh?"

Hilary and Mark have been married for a while, but I thought maybe she didn't want to have kids because of her career. If even a quarter of the stories I heard about her boss is true, he's a demanding and difficult man to please.

"How she found out she's pregnant is hilarious," Kim says.

I position myself so I'm more comfortable. This is going to be good. "Do tell."

Hilary laughs. "Well, we decided to go for it a couple of months ago. But I've been busy at work so I sort of lost track of my cycle, you know?"

I nod.

"Okay, so yesterday Mark made lobster bisque."

I wince inwardly. Mark Pryce owns some of the best restaurants in the city, but his cooking is atrocious. "You didn't *eat* it, did you?"

"No," Hilary says, affection and resignation in her voice. "The smell was so... I had to run to the bathroom and throw up."

I give her a sympathetic look. "That bad, huh?" I say, pretty certain it wasn't your run-of-the-mill morning sickness.

“He decided I must be sick, so he called the family doctor to come over.”

“It never occurred to him that maybe it was the horrible smell?”

Kim and Yuna are laughing.

Hilary rolls her eyes. “Of course not. He was convinced the bisque was fantastic. Anyway, that’s when we found out. Mark’s insisting I see Dr. Silverman later this week to make sure...but I’m sure.”

I realize I haven’t made an appointment to see a doctor about *my* baby yet. I confirmed the pregnancy on Saturday, but still... I should make a list of the things I need to do for the little life growing inside me.

And I wonder if that’s the difference between me and Hilary. She has a husband who’s there with a checklist—or something like it that he probably got from his brothers who’ve gone through this before—to ensure she gets all the care she needs. I’m flying solo...and blind. For a moment, my mind goes back to what Edgar said about being there for me.

And I wish things were different. That I had a loving husband like Hilary and that I wasn’t worried about Aaron or any “Plan B.” Just the small life growing in my womb.

“You want me to refer you to her? She doesn’t take new patients without a referral,” Hilary says. “I mean, unless you already have a doctor in mind.”

“Actually, I don’t. I’d love that. Thank you.” I smile with relief and gratitude. My doctor retired earlier this year. Although she gave me a list of new ones, I haven’t had a chance to check any of them out yet. Dr. Silverman is one of the best, and I’d love to give that to my baby. To make up for being distracted and everything else.

“So. Are you going to finally marry Edgar?” Yuna asks. “And go to all the doctor’s appointments together and take photos and stuff?”

Of course Yuna won’t give up. “It’s complicated,” I say.

“He didn’t try to convince you?”

Her urgency is kind of puzzling. Is she fishing for something? “Well... He came by.”

“You *let him in*?” Kim sounds stunned. “You never let anybody in.”

“I let some people in,” I say. Kim and Hilary used to tease me about it, until I told them I didn’t want them to be lost in the pile of clothes, shoes and purses. Now they just accept it as a weird quirk.

“Yeah, like your family.” Hilary is studying me curiously.

“Oh my God,” Kim says, “she’s treating him like *family*!”

“I *knew it*!” Yuna crows.

“No, no, no, no. Look, Edgar didn’t come inside. We went out.” But I might as well be chumming a pool full of hungry sharks.

“A *date*?” Kim asks, her eyes wide.

Yuna snaps her fingers. “Totally a date! Tell me you did fun stuff.”

“Where did he take you? Someplace romantic?” Hilary is sitting up straighter.

“Tell us the details!” Yuna is nearly breathless.

“*Everything*. No wonder you look so gorgeous right now. I bet you made Edgar crazy.” She lowers her voice dramatically.

“He. Wants. You.”

“Was it sort of impromptu?” Kim asks. “Or did you—”

“You guys, *stop*.” You’d think I’d never had a date before from the way they’re going on. “Okay, so...he supposedly wanted my help finding a place to live. Apparently he had a talk with my brothers and cousins.”

“How many brothers and cousins?” Yuna asks, her eyes bright. “And are they older or younger? That’s important.”

“Uh...three older brothers. And three older cousins, plus one younger—all guys,” I say.

“Are they cute?” Yuna asks, then shakes her head. “Of course they are. They share the same DNA as you.”

I laugh at that. “Why, thank you.”

Kim grows thoughtful. “When did they talk?”

“Edgar crashed our family dinner. Somehow, he knew about it.”

Kim looks down, her lips pursed. Yuna, meanwhile, is giving me the worst “innocent smile” in the history of innocent smiles.

So. Kim told Yuna, who then told Edgar. Figures. Edgar was probably very convincing. And since Yuna wants me to marry the father of the baby—she’s pretty set in her ways about this point, for some reason—she’s bound to be on his side, and Kim’s no match for those two.

Since I know my friends won’t let me go without spilling everything, I tell them about the dinner and what happened today. They ooh and aah and gasp at all the right places.

“And so...now I have to decide what to do,” I say, spreading my hands.

“Can you just trust fate?” Hilary asks. “None of your exes were that great in bed, and none of their, uh, sperm warriors could smash through a condom plus your birth control.”

Yuna nods. “They were probably couch potato swimmers, who loved chips and soda.”

I laugh at the crazy analogy.

Yuna grows more serious. “Edgar is prime beef. Like grass-fed hanwu—that’s Korean beef that’s super delicious. If you ever come to Korea, let me know and I’ll feed you an entire cow. And you’ll understand what I mean.”

I nod, unable to decide if I should be amused or touched at her earnest offer of a cow. “Thank you. But no matter how prime his beef is, don’t forget—he told everyone he doesn’t love me.” *Doesn’t hurt for me to say it because I don’t love him back. Right? I don’t.*

“Boo!” Kim and Hilary say in unison.

“What are you booing about?” Mark Pryce sticks his head into Hilary’s camera view. The man’s handsomely dark, as all the Pryce family members are.

“A man who should be worshipping the ground Jo walks upon says he doesn’t love her,” Hilary explains.

“Men can be slow about their feelings. They only notice when emotions run them over like a semi. Maybe a tank,” Mark says, then places a kiss on the crown of her head.

The gesture is so natural, but also intimate because his love for his wife shines through even on the tiny phone screen. And a longing to have that for myself grips me so hard that I almost gasp. I’ve never felt something this intensely. Is it because I’m pregnant and the baby wants me to have a loving husband and a doting father for my child?

“I need to go over some numbers, but I’ll check in with you later. Don’t stay up too late. Gavin works you too hard, and you need your rest,” Mark says, before waving us goodbye and vanishing.

Hilary sighs, her eyes all gooey as they follow her husband.

It’s Kim who speaks up first. “Mark’s right. His dad got divorced for it.”

“My boss almost got divorced too,” Hilary adds.

“My parents are okay, but Dad’s smart enough to take Mom out for a fancy dinner and a show once a month. And buys her purses. She has the best collection,” Yuna says.

“When you talked about Edgar, it sounded like you want him too,” Hilary says.

“He’s good in bed,” I say, trying hard to sound like I don’t care that much. Except I think I’m doing a bad job, like I’m passing by some really cute shoes and declaring they’re just okay.

Hilary’s giving me a long, probing look.

“Okay, he’s good at other things, too,” I admit. If he didn’t live so far away or hadn’t said he doesn’t love me so baldly, I might be open to the possibility of more. Falling in love, even.

Kim grows thoughtful. “So the only real problem here is: he thinks he doesn’t love you.”

“Make him admit he loves you,” Yuna says. “I’m sure he’s in denial. Nobody does what this man is doing unless he cares. I’ll get you a dossier on him if you want.”

“A...dossier?”

Yuna shrugs. “If you want to find a good angle to get him to understand what he’s really feeling and admit it out loud...I can get you a very thorough background report.”

Hilary is frowning, but Kim nods. “I’ve seen one. They’re *really* thorough.”

“Edgar probably already looked you up anyway,” Yuna says. “I would, if I were him.”

Thankfully, she isn’t. “Oh my God. Did you look me up too?”

“Well, yeah.” She laughs. “But don’t worry. Everything was complimentary!”

“Really?” Am I supposed to believe her and get offended or just accept that somebody in her position needs to be careful? She’s a wealthy heiress, and I’m sure she’s had experience with people trying to take advantage. It would be foolish *not* to be careful. But her going through my background feels vaguely...violating.

She shakes her head. “Just kidding. God, people have no sense of humor these days.”

Hilary smiles a diplomatic smile. “Regardless, Jo, you’re totally adorable. And I’m telling you as a person who’s working for a boss who likes to buy extravagant gifts for his wife. No matter how rich, men don’t buy multimillion-dollar homes for women they don’t care about. Rich people don’t become—or stay—rich by being stupid with their money. Think about that.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jo

Thinking about it is the last thing I should've done. I balefully glare at my tired reflection in the bathroom late the next morning.

Dammit, he shouldn't have said what he said at Nieve. Not if he wanted me to have a good night's sleep.

Sleep and sex, indeed. And me enjoying the full benefit of at least one, if not both.

I'm pretty sure I know which one I'll be enjoying to the fullest. I've already experienced his stamina and skill.

Besides, the level of his technique made me wonder about his past relationships. He must've had a *lot* of women. Were they sophisticated and well educated? Cultured? Did they fit in with his social status?

Although he didn't say anything about it, I wonder if he'll expect me to move to Louisiana eventually. It's probably not possible for him to relocate his company's headquarters here. The logistics alone... And I don't want to be the one responsible for workers losing their jobs.

If I tell him I'm not moving, is he going to give up? The possibility bugs me like poorly coordinated jewelry.

It isn't like me to waffle like this, though. I should meet with Edgar and hash it all out.

My phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize, but at least it won't be Aaron. He quit getting new burner phones after his successful blackmail at Starbucks.

"Hello, this is Josephine Martinez," I answer in a calm, professional voice.

“Hi, this is David Darling. You came recommended as a fashion consultant, and I’m hoping to hire you to dress a young woman.”

Hmm. The name sounds familiar, but I can’t quite place it.

As though he senses my confusion, he adds, “I was at the party. The one with those pies from Japan.”

“I don’t remember meeting you.” I didn’t meet anyone once I was introduced to Edgar.

“We didn’t, but I met Hilary Pryce and Yuna Hae, and they both said you’re the best when it comes to fashion. So I’m calling. Are you available today?”

It’s either this or think about Edgar forever. And luckily for David, I don’t have anything today, which is sort of unusual. “As it happens, I am free today. I can tell you my rates if—”

“Money isn’t a problem. Her looking good is, though.”

“Okay. Who is she and how does she need to look?”

“My assistant. Erin. Nice girl. Really great, but she needs to look a bit, um, sleeker, if you know what I mean. But she also needs to look like a homebody.”

A homebody? This man has no clue what he’s saying.

“Actually, that’s not quite the right word…” he adds after a moment.

“You need a look that implies sophisticated wholesomeness.” He isn’t the first person to mangle what he needs, and I’ve become very good at cutting through superfluous words to the actual meat.

“Yes!” he says, brighter and excited. “Exactly! Wow, you *are* good.”

I resist an urge to blow on my nails. “It’s nothing. Just my job.”

“She needs to look like the kind of girl that makes you think of home and hearth. Mother Earth. Just, you know, in designer clothes.”

I raise an eyebrow. Nobody slaves over a stove in a Chanel dress, no matter what his female experience has shown him. If anybody tried to sell that to him, it was totally fake.

“What time and where? I’ll need to see Erin in person before I can decide how I’m going to transform her.” Every outfit and accessory is fully customized based on the person’s body type, height and coloring. And this woman might need some help with makeup and hair, too. “Also, what’s your budget?”

“I told you, there’s no budget. How about noon at the Sweet Darlings’ new office? I’ll text you the address. Ask for Erin Clare when you get here. She’ll be at her desk.”

“Got it. I’ll see her then.”

I hang up then start to get ready. Since I’m pregnant, I drink a bottle of sparkling water rather than my usual coffee. Then I munch on a handful of baked bagel chips and guacamole. *Can’t skip breakfast anymore.* I should probably buy something healthier than the bagel chips, but guacamole is super good for you, so I figure it’s a wash.

Since I know nothing about Erin, I decide to go for friendly but firm authority. Some clients can be very set in their ways, and refuse to accept that in order for them to look better, they need to listen to my advice.

A cream-colored Armani dress, Prada heels and a pink Lady Dior bag later, I’m out the door. I shove a pair of huge sunglasses over my eyes in the bright sun as I make my way toward my car.

Then my step falters and sheer disgust surges as I notice... *Aaron?* What’s he doing, loitering in the lot?

He’s staring inside my Lexus through the driver’s-side window, one hand against the glass to reduce the glare. His distressed black denim jacket is too big for his frame, and the kindest thing I can say is that it sort of matches his shorts. He looks ridiculous, actually. He has a sun-faded Dallas Cowboys cap on backwards, probably going for some kind of *cholo*

cool, but I know for a fact he's never set foot in Texas. Red Jordan high-tops complete the look.

His sense of style has deteriorated significantly since we broke up. If I didn't know him, I might think he was a lowlife trying to steal my car.

"What are you doing?" I demand. My voice is less than hospitable and vibrates with impatience. I have no time for him this morning. I need to get going.

He straightens immediately, then shoots me a smirk he undoubtedly thinks is sexy. "There you are! Just wanted to make sure you were home."

"By looking inside my car?"

"Figured if it's here, you're here. I was just checking to see what you got in there."

"Unlike you, I don't have a hidden camera in my car, if that's what you were wondering."

He sticks his chest out, all big, proud man. "I'm not scared of you filming me."

Well. There goes my sarcasm...flying right over his thick skull. "Aaron, move out of the way. I've got a client to see."

"You can't." He scowls suddenly, like he just remembered something important. Hopefully, it's that his doctor told him he's going to suffer from a case of permanent erectile dysfunction if he gets married. "We gotta deal with something."

"Well, make an appointment. Didn't you hear me say I have a client meeting?"

"It can wait. It's not like you're curing cancer."

His sneering hits me like a slap. Not like I've never heard before, but it still hurts to hear the disdain and disrespect for the career I'm so proud of. "Maybe if *you* had some help, you might actually dress like an adult."

"What?" He glances down at himself. "I'm fine." He shakes his head. "Look, this isn't about my clothes. You can't

avoid me forever!”

“What are you talking about? Your texts?”

“You never sent me anything back!”

“I would have if you’d texted me again this morning. I just didn’t want to ruin my weekend by dealing with you.” I add an empty smile at the end in case he misses how I really feel... again.

He bristles. “A little bird told me that you didn’t talk to your family about us.”

“There is no *us*. Just blackmail,” I point out. “In case you forgot that detail.” But he’s right about me not talking to my family about the “engagement.” How the hell did he find out? My family wouldn’t have spoken to him. As a matter of fact, Hugo might’ve beaten him up if he’d tried.

Aaron waves his hand. “Yeah, whatever. The point is, you didn’t tell them. There was no engagement announcement, no celebration, and I’m tired of waiting, Jo!”

“How would you know? You weren’t even there!” I bluff, praying he’s just guessing here.

“I can be real generous with people when they have certain information. Bartenders, for example. They love to chat.”

Crap. Totally didn’t think about that. And it isn’t like the bartenders knew what kind of scumbag Aaron is.

“You aren’t even wearing my ring!” he thunders.

“I told you it’s too big. I didn’t want to lose it!” Even if it fit perfectly, I wouldn’t be wearing that thing. I’d rather put on *eau de skunk*.

He points at my left hand accusingly. “You were supposed to wear it on your middle finger!”

“It looks stupid that way. Nobody does that.”

“It’s not like your family’s going to notice,” he scoffs.

“Are you insane?” I blink at him. “My mom’s been working in jewelry all her life! Not to mention my family is

more traditional than you think.”

“Look, I know what you’re doing, so quit stalling. We need to get married now.”

What the hell? “Did you get hit by a truck this morning?” It would explain his deteriorating sense of fashion and this brand-new bout of lunacy.

“No, my brother just got married out of the blue because he got his girl knocked up. Grandpa is all excited about the baby.” He makes a disgusted face. “Like it’s going to be good for anything but drooling and poo.”

At least babies don’t spew annoying nonsense like him. But that’s beyond his understanding. “We can’t get married now,” I say as calmly as I can manage. “I told you, I need a long engage—”

“Forget the engagement! We’re going to get married.”

“No,” I say flatly, nerves jittering in my gut. There’s no way. “Our plan is a long engagement,” I say in a nicer voice, trying to get him to see how unreasonable he is. “Your grandfather might think it’s weird if you just run off and get married right after your brother did.”

“I don’t give a shit!” He smiles evilly. “Don’t even think about contacting you brothers and friends. Remember Plan B.”

I grind my teeth. “You mean you’re going to destroy the only leverage you have over me?”

“Oh, there are other ways I can hurt you.”

Looking at his smug face, my heart grows heavy. Edgar was right about Aaron. This was never going to be a one-time deal. Instead of trying to figure out a way to placate and manipulate him, I should’ve found a way to permanently stop him.

He grips my wrist hard and starts pulling me toward his red Ferrari.

“Ow! Let go, you’re hurting me!”

“I don’t care! We’re going to the courthouse! And don’t even think about calling or texting your brothers...unless you want Plan B!”

“I have to tell my client I can’t see her,” I say as he shoves me into his car.

“Do it later. I don’t trust you. And give me your phone,” he says, hand out.

“No!” My entire life is on it. I’m not giving him anything more he can use to manipulate me. He already has enough.

“I’m just going to keep it with me. And that’s only so you don’t do anything stupid.”

He’s only confident this is going to work if I don’t do anything that deviates from his script. But there’s no way I’m letting him keep my phone.

“Why don’t I turn it off?” I say. “That way, I can’t just call or text somebody.”

He scowls. A textbook look of deep contemplation.

“Look, it’ll take a while to turn it back on. You’re too smart to not notice that.” Laying it on thick. I hold my breath.

He gives me an “it’s all cool because I’m all cool” shrug. “Fine. Do it.”

I turn it off in front of him, show him the phone and put it in my purse.

Aaron starts driving. I look out the passenger-side window. I underestimated him. I should’ve known he was going to be proactive, especially when it came to his inheritance.

What should I do to stop him? Plan B has to be avoided at all costs. I start praying that the courthouses are shut down today. Maybe everyone’s on strike. Or out partying. I don’t care. I just don’t want to marry this idiot.

No such luck, though. The closest courthouse is not only open, but a smiling clerk in her late fifties is happy to take our information to issue us a marriage license. She’s blonde, has a twinkle in her eye and looks like she should be playing the

mother in a nineteen-fifties family TV series. For the first time in my life, I wish for a surly, unhelpful clerk who loves to hurl insults at anybody who bothers her.

After Aaron's finished, the lady looks at me kindly. "We need your data, dear."

"Yeah. Um..."

He leans closer. "Come on, baby." He takes off his cap and rearranges his wet-looking hair.

The scent of his cologne mixes with his breath and hair wax. The combination is like raw sewage I smelled once when the old apartment I was in had an unfortunate backup. I start gagging. The breakfast I had churns dangerously, and I can taste acid in the back of my throat and nose.

"We don't have all day!" he hisses.

The clerk frowns at him, disapproval rearranging her face into tight lines, then turns to me. "You all right, hon? You look a little pale."

I shake my head. "I think... I think I'm... I'm going t— HyaaAARRGHH." I turn and projectile-vomit all over Aaron's shirt. The disgusting mixture drips down to his shorts and Jordans.

"Aggh! What the *fuck*?" he screeches, jumping back. He starts flapping his arms and stomping around like he's covered in toxic nuclear goo, all the while screaming at the top of his lungs. "So fucking *gross*! I can't wear these again!"

My ears hurt, and my stomach and throat feel raw. But underneath is a petty satisfaction. Serves him right. Besides, the puke didn't spoil his outfit. I'd say it's actually an improvement. Based on my experience with him, I know he'll end up tossing the clothes.

The clerk comes clicking out in her sensible heels with a wad of Kleenex, which she hands to me. "Oh my goodness. Are you all right? Should we call 911?"

I place the tissues over my mouth. "Just some morning sickness." I eye Aaron, who's practically sobbing now.

“Certain odors make me really nauseated.”

The clerk clucks her tongue at the way he’s going on and on. “Are you sure about this marriage?” she asks in a low voice. “He shouldn’t be acting like that to the mother of his child.”

His child? I open my mouth to correct her, then stop. Maybe I can use this to my advantage. “No. But he’s rushing me. I’d rather raise the baby alone than have a father like that around.” Then I move my arm so she can see the red mark on my wrist from him dragging me to the car earlier. I doubt it’s going to bruise, but it looks impressively raw.

She gasps. “Are you *sure* you don’t want me to call 911?”

I shake my head. I need to find a way to neutralize Plan B first. “Just find a way to delay this wedding.”

She gives me a conspiratorial wink. “I’ll see what I can do. I remember going over the schedule this morning, and you know what? It doesn’t look like anybody can marry you today.”

“*Thank you.*”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jo

Since Aaron refuses to drive me back, I call for an Uber. On the way home, I call David Darling back and apologize profusely for not making the appointment. This is another black mark against Aaron. Professionalism is my middle name, and I've never stood up a client and called after the fact before. Ever.

Since I can't tell David the truth about my humiliating drama, I invent a family emergency. I offer to take care of Erin now, but he asks me to come back later after dealing with my family issues.

"Family is everything, Josephine," he says. "Erin can wait a day or two." His understanding tone intensifies my guilt for having lied to him.

When the car stops in front of my building, I climb out, my legs still a little shaky. I realize I haven't eaten anything since whatever breakfast I had came back up. My mouth is still astringent and overly minty from the mouthwash I used back at the courthouse bathroom. Thank God I keep a travel-sized one in my purse, just in case. Personal hygiene is very important, but who would've thought I'd be using it after puking all over a grotesque ex-boyfriend-turned-faux-fiancé?

Even though I'm hungry and slightly lightheaded, I giggle a little at the memory of Aaron's disgust and horror. He ranted and raved like a loon, and that helped me get even more sympathy from Wanda the fairy god-clerk. But even with her help, I could only delay the ceremony to tomorrow. And Aaron swore he'd bring his own officiant and witness.

The reminder sobers me up. I need to figure out my own Plan B. If I'm not going to marry Edgar, I'm *certainly* not going to marry Aaron.

Come on. Think. There has to be a way.

My mouth pursed, I start walking slowly back to my place, a hand over my forehead. I focus on breathing because I know when I freak out and panic, I get stupid. I can't afford to be stupid now.

Maybe I should ask the girls what they suggest. Yuna might offer to hire me a hit man...although I'm not sure if you can hire anybody capable on such short notice. Or even volunteer to shove four jars' worth of jalapeños in him. Neither is practical. And what can Kim and Hilary do? If I ask my brothers and cousins for help... Well, they'll beat Aaron until every bone in his body is broken. But that still won't stop Plan B.

What about Edgar?

He said he'd take care of Aaron. Maybe he can do it faster than planned. But I hesitate. I feel like if I ask him, he might...

On the other hand, I have less than twenty-four hours. Edgar said he wouldn't pay Aaron off. So what can he do that isn't as drastic and illegal as contracting a hit man or beating the stuffing out of Aaron? Kidnap him? There isn't enough time to hire a hacker to destroy all the data on Aaron's phone and cloud storage, is there? Either would still be illegal, but at least wouldn't involve bodily harm.

I don't want Edgar to commit a crime on my behalf. I've read the articles about his mother and all the morally reprehensible things she did. I don't want to put him in a position where he might feel tempted to compromise his ethics.

I press my temples. My head hurts, and trying to solve the Aaron problem is making it hurt even more. Is aspirin safe for pregnant women? I could use a few.

My phone pings, and I pull it out of my purse. It's a text from the super—stuff for me to pick up from her office.

Normally, mail delivery people leave things in the lobby, but stuff I get costs thousands of dollars. Haute couture is not

for the faint of heart. So I negotiated the privilege of having my packages sent to her office instead.

But the message confuses me. I haven't ordered anything recently. Well, not recently enough for it to be arriving now.

Maybe I just forgot. I make my way to the office because that's better than spinning my wheels on Aaron and what to do about him. I should probably order Chinese or something, too. Can't forget I'm eating for two.

"Hi, Nelly," I say.

She beams at me. "Hey, Jo. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay. You look fantastic."

"Thanks. The lipstick you recommended is fabulous. Never smudges!" She smiles widely, showing off. "The one I used to use always came off within an hour."

"Awesome. Happy to hear that."

"Anyway, your things." She reaches down and lifts up a big black paper bag with Z written in gold.

That's the club that Anthony Blackwood owns. *Why would somebody send me anything in that bag?*

"You didn't tell me you were dating a hottie."

"What?" I blink, my mind still on the bag.

"The man who brought it here. Honey, he's a keeper." She sighs dreamily. "If I were ten years younger—and single—I'd give you a run for that man. That voice was wonderful, made for pillow talk."

That's Edgar for sure. But why did he come over? I peek inside the bag and see a pair of thermoses, a few Tupperware containers and a note on top. I take the note and look at it. The handwriting is neat and strong, just like the man himself.

Dear Jo,

Heard you don't stock your fridge often, so I thought I'd drop these off. Some soup and food for today and tomorrow. I wish I could say I made them, but actually my brother's chef

did, so they should be excellent. Ivy said that women's appetites change when they're pregnant, but I hope you like them anyway. I was told they're your favorite. Take care and I'll see you tomorrow.

–Edgar

P.S. You don't have to wash the dishes.

P.P.S. You should get extra sleep. Cut back your hours if you feel the need.

P.P.P.S. If you don't feel well, call me. Actually, call any time you need anything.

A phone number is written below. His insistence that I get in touch when I need something reminds me of him trying to convince me to move in with him because I might have midnight cravings.

For some bizarre reason, the gesture makes my eyes hot with tears. It's so damn sweet. Nobody ever brought me food like this except my family, but that's what family's supposed to do. Damn it. If he doesn't love me, he shouldn't be acting like family.

The number is like a neon light on the Las Vegas Strip. I want to call and tell him everything that happened today. Then I want to ask him if he can fix it before tomorrow.

Inhaling deeply, I text him.

–Me: Got the food. Thank you!

After a few seconds, he responds.

–Edgar: Hope you like it.

–Me: I will love it.

Part of me says to tell him. But I don't. And I don't call my brothers or cousins or friends, either. I take Edgar's bag up to my unit and sit at my dining table with a deep sigh.

It's about time I was honest with myself. Despite my angry bravado at Starbucks when Aaron showed me the sex video, there's a deeply seated kernel of shame inside me. I wish there weren't, but...

The thing is that I can't believe I trusted Aaron enough to have sex with him. It feels like such a stupid thing to do in retrospect. Just date him and sleep with him because he was a great dancer and seemed like a fun guy? What was I thinking?

In my own defense, I couldn't have known how my relationship with him was going to turn out. But Rafael seemed to. He didn't care for Aaron and made it abundantly clear what he thought.

And Rafael doesn't have any crazy exes making sex tapes and trying to blackmail him.

I need to face the fact that I haven't had any luck picking decent guys. Need the perfect outfit, shoes and accessories? Sure. Piece of cake. But I can't do the same with men. The dudes always become duds, culminating with this Aaron mess. What's wrong with me that I have such a broken radar?

The horrified pity I normally feel for the fashion-challenged wells inside me...but this time it's directed at myself.

I fold my arms on the table and rest my forehead on them. I'm a victim of Aaron's illegal filming. So yes, technically I shouldn't blame myself. But thinking that doesn't make me immune to a horrible sense of humiliation and embarrassment. And it's made even worse because I can't figure out how to get out of the situation I'm in.

And maybe that's why I can't seem to pick up the phone for the rest of the day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Edgar

I head to the steakhouse Tony recommended. He said the food was great, but the live music could be iffy, depending on who's playing their piano. Ivy confirmed as much with a small grimace.

As long as the food is decent, I'm fine with subpar music. I have a special lunch planned, but it doesn't require a pianist of Ivy's caliber. When I bring Jo, I'll make sure the pianist is competent.

When Linda finally sent me the info on Aaron Korvid, I understood exactly how I needed to approach the problem. I also realized why his name sounded so familiar. My father and I are good friends with his grandfather, Charles Korvid. Actually, I'd say he feels as though he owes us. Without the Blackwoods' investment, he would've never made his fortune and joined the ranks of the *nouveau riche* in the last decade. He knows it too, and acts accordingly. Unlike his grandson, he's a respectable man who doesn't forget his debts.

I'm going to use that leverage to crush Aaron and make sure he's never seen around Jo again.

The maître d' takes me to my table. Charles is already here. I believe in being punctual. He believes in being five minutes early.

We shake hands. His grip is surprisingly strong for his age and slender frame. Silver streaks his thin, sandy hair, and his brown eyes are warm and friendly. It's a great mystery that a man this affable is related to someone as repugnant as Aaron.

We sit down and glance at the menu. It's perfunctory on my part, but Charles gives the food some thought. We order a bottle of red to split. There's no need to make him think it's anything but social. His grandson should be joining us soon as

well. I asked Charles specifically to bring his grandsons. And he was thrilled, obviously thinking it would be a great opportunity to introduce them to me. Unfortunately, one is apparently out of town on his honeymoon after his hasty wedding, but that's okay. The one I'm really interested is still in the city, according to Linda's update.

"I had no idea you were in Los Angeles," Charles begins after the tasting is satisfactory.

"Some personal business. I'm in the process of convincing a woman to marry me," I say lightly, then sip my wine. It's nicely full-bodied, but I think the one from Sombrero Valley is better.

Charles gives me a look. "Who wouldn't want to marry you?"

"You'd be surprised. Some women aren't too impressed with my family."

Charles raises his eyebrows high enough to carve deep lines into his forehead. "We must know different women."

"She'll be my wife soon enough." I shoot him a calm "there can be only one outcome" smile. "I plan to be very persuasive."

"Well, who could deny a persuasive Blackwood?"

"No one." *Especially once I crush your grandson like the worm that he is.*

Our waiter comes by for our order. Charles grimaces. "I'm sorry Aaron's late. Don't know what could be keeping him."

"It's all right." My estimation of his grandson drops another notch. At the rate things are going, he'll soon rank below road kill. "Let's wait a bit longer."

The waiter nods and vanishes.

"How's your father these days?" Charles asks.

"He's doing well," I say, my tone extra placid. My feelings about my parents are my own.

"It's a shame... All that stuff that happened..." He sighs.

I merely look at him, pitying him for being so misinformed. But he only knows what he's read and seen on the news. What's truly a shame is how my parents neglected and emotionally tormented us, but I keep that to myself. Certain things aren't up for public discussion.

Just then, the maître d' brings Aaron. I already know what he looks like from the photos Linda attached to the report. He appears respectable enough, especially in a suit. But he picked the wrong size. It's too tight around his hips and thighs and too loose around his shoulders. Either he borrowed it or he's an idiot who can't dress himself. Perhaps both.

"Hi, Grandpa!" he says to Charles.

"Hello," Charles says evenly. "You're late."

"I know. I'm really sorry. Bad traffic." Aaron turns to me and flashes a helpless smile. "You know how it is in a big city. I apologize for keeping you waiting. I'm Aaron Korvid." He extends a hand.

I shoot him a smile that reveals nothing. "Edgar Blackwood."

Unlike his grandfather, he doesn't seem to understand that he isn't here to impress me with his grip strength. If he wants to play this game, I can accommodate him with extra pleasure. I exert more strength than necessary, the meaningless smile still on my face.

Finally, he lets go and takes a seat. "You've got some grip there, Eddie." He's looking at me like we're best buds.

I raise an eyebrow at the presumption. Not even my brothers call me Eddie.

Charles turns red. "Aaron, it's Edgar."

"Right. Edgar. I thought Eddie sounded friendlier. Aren't people from Louisiana less formal?"

"There is that stereotype." Irritation is starting to turn into anger. No wonder this pathetic weasel has to make sex tapes. He has very little charm, and he's too superficial. He might've

fooled Jo for a while at first, but I doubt he's ever had a girlfriend who could stand him for more than a few months.

Our server hands Aaron a menu. He smiles at me and Charles. "So. What did I miss? Anything important?"

"I was just telling your grandfather about the woman I'm going to marry soon."

"Oh really? Congratulations." He leans forward, beaming. "Talk about a coincidence. I'm about to get hitched myself!"

If this is his attempt at establishing common ground, he's failing badly. I let myself smile, not bothering to hide the mean pleasure coursing through my veins. "You might actually know her, since she's from around here. Josephine Martinez? She's a fashion consultant and personal shopper."

Aaron's smile seems to freeze in place. "What?" he says faintly.

"Well! That's wonderful!" Charles gives me a warm smile. "I hope I get invited to the ceremony. Is it going to be in Tempérane?"

He's being so genuine that it's hard to tell if he knows that Jo is Aaron's ex. Or that his grandson gave her the ugliest ring in the history of human civilization. "We haven't decided yet," I say. "Still a lot of planning to do. Her family's in business as well, and we're considering which place would be most advantageous."

"Oh, I completely understand," Charles says. "With families like ours, there are always extra considerations." He glances at Aaron. "Probably make quite a few new connections at an event like that."

"Exactly. Opportunities to meet new investors, all sorts of things."

"Hold on a minute," Aaron interjects. "Jo's *my*—"

Charles lays a hand on his grandson's elbow. "I know I speak for both of us in wishing you and your future bride the utmost happiness."

"Thank you, Charles."

“But...” Aaron’s gaze darts between me and his grandfather.

“Yes?” I say it easily enough, but there’s an edge to my tone you’d have to be even stupider than Aaron to miss.

Charles clears his throat. “I believe they do know each other. He’s just surprised.”

“Of course.” I hold Aaron’s eyes long enough for him to swallow and finally drop his gaze. I smile and turn to Charles. “Shall we order lunch now?”

* * *

Edgar

After lunch I make a brief stop in the men’s room, then leave the restaurant. Aaron is waiting outside.

“Edgar, my man. I need to say something to you.”

I note Charles is gone. “Yes?” I say in my coldest and most aloof tone. It’s a skill learned from my mother—probably the only thing she ever bothered to teach me that’s occasionally useful.

“Look, uh, I don’t know how to say this diplomatically, so I’m going to just say it, know what I mean? I don’t like playing games.”

I merely stare at him. What does he call what he’s been doing with Jo? Earnestness? Sincerity?

“There’s been a mistake,” Aaron continues. “See, Jo’s actually *my* girl. If she’s acting interested, she’s just messing with you, man. Stringing you along. I thought I’d let you know so you don’t end up getting fu—uh, screwed over. Just sayin’. But look, don’t worry. I’m going to tell her to cut it out. But if she doesn’t, if she keeps bugging you, then you can tell her you know what’s up.”

I inhale deeply. Losing my temper would mean giving up dominance over the situation. I pin Aaron with a gaze sharp enough to make him bleed. “Josephine Martinez is mine. *You* stay away.”

Sweat beads along his hairline, but he suddenly lifts his chin defiantly. “I hate to break this to you, buddy, but she’s actually marrying me this afternoon. Guess she didn’t tell you that, huh? We already have the courthouse picked out and everything.” He recites the exact address. “If you want, you can be a witness at the ceremony. Since you know her and all.”

The taunt hits its mark. I grit my teeth at the hot anger exploding in my gut. *Why the hell didn’t she tell me?* Didn’t she think it was important enough to let me know? Doesn’t she trust me to take care of the problem? I don’t want anything to happen to her dad any more than she does. I’ve seen how much he cares for her, and that makes the man worthy of my respect and protection.

But first things first. I need to deal with Aaron Korvid before confronting her.

“As a matter of fact, she didn’t,” I say icily. “The reason being that she isn’t marrying you.” I take a step forward and crowd him with my much bigger frame. “Now listen carefully. You’re done with Jo. Don’t go near her. Don’t threaten her or anyone in her family.”

“What? Threaten? I didn’t do anything! She’s lying!” His words are flying a tad too fast, betraying his panic.

“I know you made certain videos.” My hands itch to clench into fists. But that’s a bad idea. He’d try to sue me or cause a massive public scandal, and I don’t need that kind of negative publicity...or the fine and civil settlement I’d have to offer. I’ll be damned if he gets a penny of my money.

“But I didn’t...” He trails off, then swallows so hard that I can see his prominent Adam’s apple jump up and down on his skinny throat.

“If any of them leaks, I’ll be displeased. And when I’m displeased, I don’t stop until I’m pleased again.”

“What are you gonna do?” His voice shakes, even though he’s doing his best to look tough, to maintain some scraps of pride. “Beat me up?”

I give him the soulless smile my mom used to use when she was lording it over someone. “If you’re that curious...try me and find out what brings me satisfaction when somebody fucks with me and my woman.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jo

This is *not* how I envisioned my wedding.

It isn't that the Versace I'm in isn't fashionable. It is. Plus it's from the latest collection. But it's red, the skirt ending above my knees, not what I ever thought I'd wear to my wedding. I only need to sew an "I" in a matching scarlet shade on my chest for "Idiot," but at least my Jimmy Choos are ivory, with elegantly slim stiletto heels.

The room the local courthouse designated for civil ceremonies is bright, but not exactly bridal. It doesn't even have flowers. Maybe the local politicians found a better pet cause to support than putting a token vase in the room.

The officiant is looking at his phone, then at me. From the barely trimmed beard to long, messy hair, a pair of slightly scratched reflective sunglasses and ridiculous, mismatched, sun-faded tropical shirt, shorts and flip-flops on his lanky frame, I'm certain he's a beach bum who's doing this for some extra spending money. Or maybe he was an officiant before he decided to become a beach bum. Hard to say.

"Duuuude. Your man's late," he says.

I give him a thin smile. *Like you have someplace to be right now.*

That damned Aaron.

I should've dumped him the instant I saw that denim tuxedo. Then I would've never slept with him. And I would've never been forced into this situation.

It's all I can do not to bury my face in my hands and start screaming. But I don't because I don't want to smudge my makeup, and unlike Aaron, I know that appearances count.

I've given this a lot of thought. I'm already coming up with ways to murder Aaron without getting caught. Poison, probably. Or accidentally pushing him in front a speeding semi. Or maybe I could put him in utterly hideous clothes and ship him to Italy, where some fashion-conscious local will kill him for the betterment of humanity. He'll never see it coming.

"I'm hungry," the witness for the ceremony says, his voice nerve-gratingly nasal.

"So is the baby in my belly," I say with growing annoyance. The ceremony was supposed to start at one. It's already a quarter past, and I haven't eaten anything because I don't want to barf again. But maybe I should. Puking on Aaron was the most fun I've had in weeks. And a repeat would be so satisfying.

After a lot of thought yesterday, I've come to realize that the reason I pick bad men is because I find them at bars, clubs and parties. It's like street shopping for formalwear in Bali. You simply don't have a decent pool of goods to choose from. I once bought a magenta-pink business-casual outfit with an orange flower print. It looked all right when I was handing over my hard-earned money, but once I sobered up and got over the vacation high, I realized I couldn't even donate it to a homeless shelter.

"I'm hungry," the witness repeats.

I finally swivel my head in his direction. He could be the officiant's identical twin, except for his age. His skin is smoother and less wrinkly, so I presume he's younger. He sways like a toddler who's torn between the desire to nap and the desire to stay awake and whine.

Something is glittering in his unbrushed hair. As some of it falls from his hair and lands on his shoulders, I realize its grains of sand that caught the light.

"Hey, can you buy me lunch?" he says.

"Ask the guy who told you to be here." I'm not going to be responsible for these two clowns when it was Aaron who hired them. God. You would think he'd at least try to make the

ceremony more...dignified. But then he's probably going to show up in a pair of sparkly bellbottom pants, trying for Elvis, so maybe I'm expecting too much.

I start imagining all the ways I can stab Aaron for being late. It's free therapy. Stilettos, yes, especially if they're from last year—wouldn't want to get blood on this year's shoes. Hair sticks—probably okay, so long as they're made of metal and I can dip them in bleach. I have a few I bought on a trip to Japan. Maybe grow my fingernails out and sharpen them.

The more I fantasize, the angrier I become. Aaron isn't even paying me to do this. He's blackmailing me, like the bottom-feeding parasite that he is. Actually, I take that back. I shouldn't be so unfair to bottom-feeding parasites.

I'm going ahead with this farce. Then as soon as I find out where he keeps the videos, I'm going to destroy them all and push him out an open window. His condo's on the fourth floor. He might live. Not even Satan wants him in—

The door opens. *Finally!*

Sarcastic, cutting words ready to fire like missiles, I turn around. They get caught in my throat.

It isn't Aaron. The man striding in is much taller. He wears that signature serious, solemn expression like a bespoke suit from Savile Row. And his suit is... Well, it probably did come from Savile Row.

His black hair is mildly wind-blown and sexy as hell. His green eyes are intense under the slightly slanted eyebrows.

But there's more. An aura of sheer anger clings to him like cologne. It isn't something I've ever seen. He's usually too controlled to let his emotions show.

I blink a couple of times. I must be seeing things because I'm so desperate.

But nope. He doesn't morph into Aaron.

My breath clogs in my chest. Is my blood flowing faster and hotter? My heart is definitely racing. Can you feel such visceral reactions in a dream? Because this can't be real.

Edgar has no business being here, in this particular chamber, in this particular courthouse in Los Angeles! I didn't tell him. I didn't even tell my friends, afraid they might run to him to ask him to do the impossible and rescue me.

"Is that the groom? I thought it was that other guy." The officiant whistles. "You're one lucky bish. For that face and body, I'd forgive him for being late."

"He's not the groom," I say.

"Can *he* buy me lunch?" the witness asks plaintively.

Edgar stops a foot from me. I take a whiff and almost whimper. He smells *sooo* good. A hint of musk and male mixed with some kind of body wash. Without meaning to, I lick my lips. I only realize when his gaze drops to my mouth, making it tingle like nobody's business.

To hide my embarrassment and try to gain control of the situation, I place my hands on my hips and look up at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Preventing you from making a mistake." That voice cracks like a silken whip.

I swallow. His voice is still hot as hell, but there's an edge to it that I find utterly dangerous...yet sexy. Like "my ovaries are ready to burst" dangerous yet sexy.

My emotions and hormones are just plain deranged when it comes to Edgar.

It's tempting to simply walk away. Aaron's late anyway. But I can't have him hurt Papa. And Aaron would. He's vicious, amoral, devious... He'd blame me for his tardiness and carry out Plan B.

I heave a sigh. "I appreciate your concern. Really. More than you know. But it isn't necessary. It's too late."

Edgar's expression grows harder. "It most certainly *is* necessary, and it isn't too late. You're carrying my baby."

The officiant and witness gasp in unison.

"You cheated on your *groom*?" the witness says. "Whoa."

“Shut up,” I snap.

At the same time, Edgar says, “Stay out of it.”

We continue to stare at each other, engaged in a contest of wills. Edgar should give up. I’m good at this.

“Forget it,” Edgar says finally.

Ha. I won. I knew it!

But instead of making me happy, it makes me slightly sad and unwanted. What’s wrong with me? Must be the pregnancy hormones. They make you crazy. Everyone I know says so, including my very single brothers and cousins.

Suddenly Edgar dips his body, then shoves me over one of his broad shoulders. The world tilts, and I slap his back as he straightens and carries me out like a sack of potatoes. So. Undignified.

“Hot *damn*,” the officiant mutters.

“Where’s my *lunch*?” the witness whines. “The groom said I was getting a roast beef sandwich with horseradish mayo!”

“Put me down!” I say. If I loved my shoes less, I might consider kicking Edgar a few times, risking scuffs.

His steps are firm and implacable. He’s moving like I weigh nothing. “I told you I wasn’t letting you do something you’ll end up regretting.”

“You don’t understand!”

“He doesn’t need to marry you,” Edgar says.

What does that mean? I need answers, but I refuse to have a conversation while folded over his shoulder, with two beach bums as our audience.

“I’m getting dizzy.” I fake retching noises. “I’m going to barf!”

The threat works. Edgar stops abruptly. “Pardon me. I should’ve been more thoughtful.”

“Exactly,” I say triumphantly as he puts me down. If I’m going to be dragged away, I’m certainly not going to be treated

like a flour sack. I'm in Versace, for God's sake!

I start to walk away, crooking a finger at Edgar. If he wants to talk, we'll talk, away from the idiots Aaron got for the ceremony.

But before I can take even two steps, Edgar catches up and stops me. One strong arm goes under my knees and the other supports my back.

I blink up at him. Is he carrying me like a Disney princess?

Wait. I can't even blame him one hundred percent for this. When did my arms wrap themselves around his neck?

"Better?" he asks.

My mind blank, I nod. He starts walking away. The officiant and the witness are demanding to know who's going to pay them, but Edgar and I ignore them. They're Aaron's problem.

I hold on tight. I'm not doing this because I approve of what Edgar's doing or because he feels so solid, warm and awesome. I'm doing it because I don't want to land on my ass. The floor is hard and would hurt. *My God, though. Edgar smells so good.* If they could, my ovaries would be flooding my womb with eggs.

A small sigh wells within me. My life—which used to be pretty good—is now a complete mess. When did it derail so fast?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jo

I need to talk to Edgar about what he meant when he said Aaron doesn't need to marry me anymore. But right now, I don't have the courage. Not when I'm beginning to realize how tense he truly is. And it isn't because he's worried about dropping me.

I steal a look at him as he literally puts me into his car. For a moment, I consider mentioning I have my own wheels, but then change my mind, since he's still tense.

He drives to God only knows where. I should probably ask, but the muscles around his jaw are bunched. His eyebrows are slanted tight in that furious line men get when they're trying to figure out what to say to express their anger without making the woman cry.

Maybe I should let him know it takes a lot to make me cry. Simply yelling isn't enough. Having three older brothers tends to leave you with a thick skin.

On the other hand, I don't want Edgar screaming at me. It isn't like him to do that, because he's so controlled at all times, but when someone like him loses it, it's the worst. I know because my papa is the textbook case.

"The ring," Edgar says, showing me his palm. His voice is so flat that shivers go up my spine.

Wordlessly, I dig into my purse and find it on the bottom, under the piles of emergency tampons, lipsticks, compacts, breath mints and a small packet of Kleenex. I place it on his hand.

He makes a fist. The window on the driver's side slides down, then he flings the ugly thing out.

“Oh, shit!” I swivel around, looking back. I can visualize the ring bouncing on the concrete...then getting run over by a semi catching up to us on the next lane. It’s a fitting ending, but...

“Aaron might want that back,” I say, torn between worry over the loss of the jewelry that isn’t mine, and the intense desire not to have Edgar become any more upset with me than he already is.

“Have him call me.”

“You aren’t going to give him money for it, are you? That thing isn’t worth much, but he doesn’t deserve a penny.” It would’ve been more satisfying to feed it to him, but I don’t say it out loud, not wanting to sound like I’m criticizing Edgar. I should tell him later, when Aaron wants the ring back.

“I’m only going to ensure that he wishes he had never bothered you.”

From the barely leashed violence in the tight lines of his neck and shoulders, I’m sure he would do exactly that. Aaron is a wimp who tucks his tail between his legs when he’s faced with somebody bigger or stronger than him. And Edgar is not only both of those, he’s probably meaner, too. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to make Aaron give up so easily.

I sigh, then sit up straight, my eyes forward. This day isn’t going well. Maybe I should’ve checked my horoscope for the week. It might’ve said something like: *You’re going to be screwed with sandy lube, so you better leave town for at least a year.*

Edgar pulls into a mall and stops the car. I tap my fingers on the straps of my purse. He’s going to say something now. I can feel it.

Instead of speaking, he gets out and comes around to my side of the car. I frown. *What’s going on?* There’s no way he’s not going to let me know how he really feels about the mess of the courthouse ceremony. I’m braced for “You should’ve called me!” or something similar.

He opens my door. “Let’s go.” His normally controlled voice is vibrating with seething emotion.

My mouth goes dry. “Where?”

We’re definitely not here to shop, but I don’t think he’s going to strangle me and bury my body somewhere. It’s difficult to shovel hard concrete and asphalt. But why are we here?

“You need to have lunch.”

“Oh.” I totally forgot. But isn’t he planning on yelling at me? Maybe not enough to make me cry, but maybe enough to get me to understand how furious he is? I don’t think I misread his expression during the drive.

“Did you already eat?” he asks when I don’t move.

“No.”

I step out of the car. One hand on my upper arm, he leads me to an Italian bistro near the mall entrance.

The interior of the restaurant is cool. The lunch rush is over, so it’s relatively empty. But the aroma of garlic, olive oil and tomato sauce lingers in the air. I realize I’m starving.

The host seats us in a booth and hands us menus. Since I’m hungry and I’d rather be eating if I’m going to have an unpleasant conversation, I study the offerings for the day.

Our server shows up almost immediately. I order the pescatore lunch special that comes with seafood pasta, garlic toast and salad, plus a tall glass of lemonade. Edgar only asks for a glass of Coca-Cola. It’s late, so he’s probably already had his lunch.

When we’re alone again, I sip the water quickly, then switch to lemonade when our server brings it. Edgar doesn’t touch his Coke. He’s merely looking at me like he can’t decide between kissing me or strangling me, so I decide to satisfy my curiosity first.

“So. What did you mean when you said Aaron doesn’t need to marry me? He was so insistent yesterday. I don’t think my puking on him changed that.”

“You’re having morning sickness?” Edgar asks, immediately concerned.

Is that what he got out of what I just said? “No. I’m pretty sure it was the way he smelled. I felt fine after breakfast and dinner yesterday. My stomach’s fine right now, too.”

He crosses his legs, taps his fingers on the table a few times, then abruptly stops. “I thought we had an understanding. I take care of him; you move in with me for four months.”

Now I wish I were a turtle so I could pull my head into my shell. He doesn’t sound angry, exactly, but I’m nervous about this overly calm reaction—nervous and slightly ashamed that I decided to go ahead with the ceremony without telling anyone. In my defense, I didn’t think Edgar would be able to fix things so fast...or that he could do it at all. My plan was to delay the wedding until Papa retired, then dump Aaron. Or just improvise as Aaron changed his mind about things, that fickle bastard.

“Were you going to tell me about your decision to alter the plan?” Edgar asks.

His tone isn’t particularly accusing. But it’s making me feel worse. I wasn’t trying to lie or anything, although from his expression, I might as well have defrauded him.

My defenses go up like the Great Wall of China. “Look, he ambushed me yesterday.”

“And I gave you my number so you could get in touch anytime,” he says. “An ambush would be an excellent reason to call.”

I purse my lips, feeling guilty and stupid. Edgar’s surprisingly good at yelling without raising his voice.

Since he deserves the full truth, I tell him what Aaron did—and how rapidly he decided to jump to Plan B if I didn’t do as he asked. “I didn’t think I had a choice. My situation isn’t something most people can solve overnight, and I didn’t want you to do anything illegal and get into trouble.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Illegal...?”

“You know...like beating him up,” I say. “Or, I don’t know, breaking into his home and stealing his phone, laptop and tablet and...and things. Anything he could’ve used to back up the video.”

Edgar stares at me like I’m mentally challenged. “You should’ve had more faith in me.”

Maybe I should have. Edgar has continued to surprise me with things I didn’t expect him to do. He even managed to not get killed by my brothers and cousins after telling everyone how he got me pregnant, which is saying something. None of my exes would’ve survived something like that.

“How did you do it?” I want to know if the solution was something utterly obvious that I missed.

“I have connections.”

“Connections?” I repeat, confused.

“Yes. They’re surprisingly useful, even if they did fail to impress your family.”

Wow. Overly sensitive much? Who would’ve thought Mr. Control holds on to grudges? I start to open my mouth to tease him, then shut it when our waiter shows up with the food. I start eating, but then something else occurs to me.

“What kind of connections do you have with Aaron?” I ask. “You didn’t act like you really know him.”

“I had lunch with his grandfather,” Edgar says. “He and my family have had some business dealings. I made sure Aaron attended as well. It wasn’t that difficult to convince him to stop bugging you after I preemptively announced that you’re the woman I plan to marry in front of his grandfather.”

My jaw drops, but I shouldn’t be so shocked. He’s been saying he’s going to marry me. And I have to admit—and even admire—how easy and elegant his solution is. “Wow. I didn’t even think about that as an option.”

“Sometimes the best solution is the simplest.”

It certainly is. I might agree—even praise him—if he weren’t wearing that superior “I’m always right” expression.

Since I don't want to make him even smugger, I lean forward. "How about the video? He can still release it or try to hold it over me somehow."

"It won't be a problem. Unless he enjoys getting his meals out of dumpsters."

Edgar's green eyes are narrow and glinting with menace, and shivers run down my back. If he showed even a quarter of that at his lunch, Aaron isn't going to do a thing. And I realize this is the most effective way to deal with my ex. Once a video is made, you can never unmake it. And I'll never know how many backups he has—or where they might be—even if I were to have him delete it from his phone or computer. But a threat of eating out of dumpsters? Yeah, that'd make him behave. Enduring any sort of hardship is not his forte.

"So." Edgar takes a sip of his drink. "The move."

My stomach feels fluttery with nerves.

I'm reminded of how my brothers and I often had bets. Well, more like ridiculous dares. Like that time Rafael told me he'd climb the Golden Gate Bridge, and I told him if he did, I'd help him get a date with Bettie Hansen, the hottest girl in school. And the thing is that he never did it, and I forgot all about it.

And that wasn't the only time. Pablo told me he'd help me get ready for my Algebra I final, but never did because we could never find a time. He was always busy with math club and other geeky activities. So I studied on my own and did okay. Certainly better than if I'd waited for him.

So when Edgar talked about taking care of Aaron and me moving in with him, I didn't really expect he'd do it. Or if he did manage it, it would take months and months...even possibly after I had the baby.

How wrong I've been. *One day. That's how long it took him. One day.*

And now what?

I've never lived with a boyfriend before. I always felt the need to maintain my own place—my own independence. It's

ingrained in me from having to put up with overbearing brothers and cousins. Otherwise, they run all over me. If they had it their way, I'd practically be a nun.

"Anyway, I'll hire movers to help today," Edgar says.

"What? Already? Don't you have to close on the penthouse first?" I ask, desperate for any excuse to delay this. To give myself some time to really think about—

"That's all taken care of," he says. "We can move in today."

"Whoa. How did you manage that?"

"Cheap. Fast. Best. You can only have two out of three."

"And you chose fast and best."

Edgar inclines his head and smiles, smug as the first person to snatch up the latest Louis Vuitton purse.

And why wouldn't he be? I bet Rick bent over backward to make everything happen on Edgar's schedule.

"So. The movers. What time?" he asks.

"Wait, just...*hold on*. That isn't necessary."

He regards me, obvious calculations taking place in his head. "I don't think you can manage on your own. Don't you have a lot of clothes? Not to mention shoes and bags and accessories."

He isn't wrong, but there's gotta be a way to stop all this. *Think!*

"I need to tell you something," I say to buy some time.

He waits patiently.

My mind seems to be frozen, so I finally just go for blunt. "I need to...um...think about it."

"You do?"

"I didn't think you'd actually follow through or that you're this serious about living together. Do you always do this with women you slept with?"

“No, I’ve never moved in with anybody,” he says. “But you’re different.”

A small bit of hope stirs. Is he realizing he has some feelings for me? It’s a big deal for a guy to want to move in with a woman for the first time, ever, isn’t it? “How?”

“Jo. You’re carrying my child.”

I swallow a sigh. Of course. How could I have forgotten that critical point? “Okay, fine. But why do we have to get married? It’s the twenty-first century. Couples don’t have to be married to raise children successfully.”

Edgar picks up his Coke and takes a slow sip, like he’s at some wine-tasting event and sampling priceless vintage rather than a sugary carbonated beverage. He takes so much time that I start to think maybe he’s not going to answer the question.

Just as I open my mouth, he says, “Because.” He exhales heavily, a man pulling his darkest secret out from the recesses of his mind. “I’m not like my father.”

I blink. His parents didn’t divorce until recently, according to the gossip mags. And I thought the family scandal was about his mom’s behavior, not his dad’s. “Uh... Can you elaborate?”

His eyebrows pull tight, his lips pressed together. He couldn’t look any unhappier. “I won’t abandon my child or neglect him, only providing food and shelter as I see fit. I’m going to give it protection and love. And I won’t tolerate anyone behaving badly toward my child, even if it’s his own —”

He doesn’t go on.

There’s definitely a story here. Edgar hasn’t acted like he grew up deprived of anything. His self-assurance and air of command speak volumes. He’s so accustomed to getting his way that he can’t even bother to raise his voice most of the time. And money—both having it and using it—has obviously never been a problem. Just look how quickly he managed to close on the penthouse!

“A child needs both parents. It’s a combo deal, Jo. And I’m a greedy man. I want my child to have everything.” Edgar leans back in his seat, his expression starting to close off. Maybe he’s decided he revealed too much. “You can be a little greedy too. Ask for more.”

It’s ironically tragic that he’s asking me to be greedy with such a guarded look on his face. He’s presenting me with things, nothing more.

“Love is all I need,” I say, wanting him to know he hasn’t yet offered the only thing I want. “It’s all I’ve really ever dreamed of. I’m just a normal person who grew up in a normal middle-class home. Materially speaking, I have everything I could want.”

“Love...” He gives me a slightly wistful smile. “People have misguided ideas about love. They think it’s this wonderful drug that can cure whatever issue you have...except it comes with a huge list of side-effects that someone spends a minute reciting breathlessly and at three times the normal speed.”

“That’s so cynical and sad. Who hurt you?”

He laughs. “I’ve never let anyone get close enough to hurt me. My life is no clichéd romantic tragedy.”

He’s deliberately misunderstanding me, although it’s obvious I’m not competing with any of his exes. But I realize he doesn’t trust me enough to let me get close. I guess I didn’t do a great job of convincing him that I’m a woman of great judgment by withholding what Aaron threatened yesterday. But that doesn’t mean Edgar’s refusal stings any less.

“Look, I need to think about this.” I repeat myself, feeling too deflated to come up with anything clever and decisive to change his mind. “It’s just too...sudden.”

“What’s so sudden about all this? You were planning on living with Aaron Korvid.”

Is that censure? “‘Planning’ is a funny word to use. You think that’s what it was? A plan of mine?”

“I thought you’d keep your end of the bargain,” Edgar says.

“Bargain’s another funny word. I never said I’d do it.” I think back on our interactions furiously, but I’m quite certain that I didn’t make any promises. “You’re the one who came up with the deal.” But even as I say it, I know he only bothered with my mess because of the baby. This is about him being a father, no more, no less. “I’ll think about it and let you know later today.”

“What time?”

His persistence is starting to irritate me. It’s like he’s a creditor after a deadbeat. “Sometime this evening. Now I’m going to eat in peace. The baby wants the rest of his lunch.” I pat my belly meaningfully, and, thankfully, Edgar shuts up.

Then I pick up a piece of garlic toast and bite into it with more viciousness than necessary.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jo

After lunch, Edgar answers a text with a dark scowl, then takes me back to the courthouse. We quit talking to each other after my announcement that the baby wanted food.

“This evening,” he says as I climb out of the car. It’s a reminder, an extraction of a promise.

“Okay.” I shut the door, then trot toward my Lexus.

Seated behind the wheel, I remain still, breathing and trying to untangle the thoughts churning in my head. But it’s no use. They become messier and more convoluted until it feels like the only way forward is to toss everything out and start over.

But then Mama’s words slice through my mind like a knife. When I complained about how overwhelming it was to start out as a newbie fashion consultant and personal shopper, she told me to look up people who’d accomplished what I wanted to accomplish and seek their advice. And right now, what I want is what my parents have—a loving home, a close-knit family and a wonderful life with the man who loves me.

Feeling silly I didn’t think of it sooner and giddy because it’s going to be so much easier to ask Mama for a minute of her time, I drive toward her office. She should be in. It’s not even three yet.

The regional corporate office is downtown, housed in a sleek but not ostentatious skyscraper. I park my car and check in with security in the cool lobby. I’ve been here a few times, but mostly to have lunch or coffee with Mama. I don’t buy jewelry from the chain she manages. They cater to middle-class people, providing excellent value. I’ve seen the pieces, and they’re well priced. But my clientele prefers pieces that make a statement: *Look at me. I’m important. And amazing.*

I take the elevator to the sixth floor, where the doors open to pale gray industrial carpet and frosted-glass partitions and walls. The receptionist is new, and I sign in with her and make my way to Mama's corner office.

Her assistant Maggie is staring at her laptop, clicking her mouse furiously. She's a slight woman, with a bob the color of pale steel and her makeup perfect. She's sixty-six, but hasn't retired yet because Mama hasn't been able to find a suitable replacement. I also suspect it's because Maggie likes the generous employee discount. A simple strand of white pearls circles her neck, a pair of pearl and diamond earrings sparkles on her earlobes, and a classic square emerald ring winks on her finger. They're all things the chain would sell.

She looks up and smiles. "Hi, Jo. I didn't know you were coming."

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by. See if my mother's around," I say, hoping I sound casual and carefree. Then I frown, realizing that Mama could be visiting one of the stores or in a meeting. *Crap*. "Is she available?"

"Yes. She just got done with a call with some buyers. You can go in." Maggie gestures. "Her next meeting isn't for another hour."

I flash her a grateful smile. "Thanks."

I push past the frosted-glass door, inhaling to control my nerves.

Mama's at her desk, her hair pristine and her blue skirt suit basic and corporate. Although she has a corner office with a view of the city, her working space is plain, with the focus on productivity rather than proclaiming success. Her modern desk holds a laptop, a phone, a few pens and a yellow legal pad. There are an armchair and a couch with a low table in case she needs a space to hold a small meeting.

Mama sees me, gets up and comes around the desk to hug me hard. "Hi, baby. What are you doing here?"

"Um, you know, this and that," I say, suddenly unsure how to start.

Should've figured out a good opening on my way here. *Hey, how much can I screw up and still have the happy ending that you have?* isn't the best.

When she raises an eyebrow, I clear my throat and add, "I just...want to talk to you."

"Uh-oh. Sounds serious. What's it about?"

She leads me to the sitting area. I plop down on the couch. Instead of taking the armchair, she parks herself next to me.

"It's not that terrible," I say.

Really? A sex tape isn't so bad?

I ignore the judging voice in my head. Instead, I take a deep breath to calm my hammering heart and start with how I met Edgar, then to the one-night stand—glossing over the details, obviously—and then Aaron's Plan B and how Edgar took care of it. I leave out the part about Hugo's involvement. He did it to try to help, and I don't want him to get into trouble.

"And now Edgar wants me to move in with him for four months. And I don't know what to do," I say to my thumbs, then shrug to hide the discomfiture. The judging voice is right. A sex tape is a big deal, even if it's been taken care of. I can't even meet Mama's eyes out of embarrassment.

"Oh, baby." She reaches over and squeezes my hand. "You should've said something."

Her sympathy soothes the jagged edges of my shame, but at the same time, it makes me feel about an inch tall. I totally made a mess out of everything, now that I laid it all out. "I didn't want to disappoint you."

She gently tucks a wayward tendril behind my ear, making me look up at her. "You can never do that. We love you too much."

"But wouldn't that make you more disappointed?"

"No." She shakes her head, her eyes soft. "We'll be sad and anxious for you, but not disappointed. We'll always rally

behind you, and if you're in trouble, we'll get you out of it together."

"I wanted to protect Papa," I whisper, relieved that she isn't upset with me for the mess I've made.

"I know, but he wouldn't want you to sacrifice yourself that way for him. He's retiring anyway, sweetie. It's the father's privilege and prerogative to protect his baby girl."

The unshed tears in my eyes grow hot. Shit. I blink fast, not wanting to cry. If we were home, maybe I wouldn't fight so hard for control, but this is her office. I don't want her coworkers gossiping about why I wept. "What should I do?"

She pats the spot between my shoulders. "What does your heart tell you?"

That's a great question. The thing is, I can't hear what it's telling me, assuming it's saying something in the first place, over all the cacophony of thoughts. "I don't know. He's just so"—I flail around with my hands—"complicated."

"How so?" she asks.

"He's too old money. Too rich. And too set in his ways."

She raises both of her eyebrows in her classic *Mama doesn't believe you* expression. "Is that a problem?"

"Yes."

"How come? You work with lots of rich people. Actually, all of your clients are wealthy. And pretty stubborn, too, from what you've said."

Put that way, what I'm saying now just sounds like whining. I push my hair out of my face and sigh. "It's not the money, really. It's simply that I've always wanted what you and Papa have, and I've always imagined it'd come with a nice suburban home with a two-car garage, a couple of kids and...maybe a dog."

Mama smiles. "That sounds so lovely. So what's wrong with Edgar's money?"

“He wants a mansion...or at least a really expensive penthouse,” I say with utter bewilderment. “A place like that was never what I visualized for my future. And I just never thought I’d marry somebody like him.”

Something that looks suspiciously like amusement sparks in Mama’s eyes. “Do you think you can still be happy in a mansion rather than a suburban home?”

I think about that for a moment, then clear my throat. “Well, uh... Yeah. I guess...?”

“And is there something wrong with Edgar’s personality? Other than being set in his ways, that is?”

“Not that I can see. I mean, he’s too serious, but...” I shrug helplessly.

“Being too serious isn’t really a flaw, unless he takes *himself* too seriously. Does he?”

“No. He takes his promises and duties seriously.” As I say it, I realize with abrupt clarity that Edgar would rather not commit to anything than to break his word. *Holy shit*. That means his insistence we ought to get married is a *much* bigger deal than I thought.

“That’s a very desirable trait in a man,” Mama says, interrupting my thoughts.

I nod slowly. “Yeah, it is.” But if he’s vowing to marry me and be a good dad to our child... “The thing is, Edgar says he doesn’t love me.” The admission is a little embarrassing, but more than that, I’m confused. How can he want to commit to a woman he doesn’t love? It doesn’t make *any* sense. In my world, people ought to marry for nothing less than love.

“It’s still very early in the relationship. You said you didn’t love him either, but it looks like you care for him.”

My breath shudders out of me as uncertainty and fear grow bigger. “Yeah. I think I do. And that’s what’s so scary.”

Mama pulls me close and kisses me on the forehead. “Jo, you’re a lovely young woman. Why would he insist on doing the right thing if he didn’t feel anything for you? Marriage

isn't the only option these days. He could've just offered to pay you and the child some money and been done with it. Seems like he's got enough.

“You have to be open to possibilities if you want this relationship to evolve into something beautiful. It might surprise you. Besides, based on what I saw of Edgar at the restaurant, he seems overly in control of his emotions. Maybe he doesn't even realize what he's feeling for you. Some men are like that, you know.”

I know exactly what Mama means. Some men are just clueless about what's going on in their own hearts. It's possible Edgar is like that.

In fact, it's even likely. I already know he isn't hung up on some other woman. Maybe he's never experienced love and doesn't know how to recognize it even if it's smacking him in the face.

“If this is what you want, you have to go for it,” Mama says. “Otherwise, you'll regret it for the rest of your life.”

She's right. If I tell Edgar no and end it now, I'm going to regret it. And so what if my man-picking track record sucks? My luck's got to change sometime, right? Besides, Edgar is nothing like any of my exes. He's stable, solid and responsible. And he makes my pulse flutter, my heart beat faster. He pops into my head when I least expect it, and he's proven himself capable and caring.

He could be the one. I just have to be open to more.

I hug her. “Thanks, Mama! You're the best.”

Chapter Thirty

Jo

After I come home, I send a quick email to Hugo. I need his SUV and his strong back, and he's the easiest to coerce and cajole into doing what I want. I could ask my brothers for help, but they'd insist on a wedding ceremony first. They can be so modern when it comes to dating, except when it involves me. Then all of a sudden it's like we're back in Camelot or something.

That done, I text my friends about my decision to move in with Edgar. It isn't something I can hide. Besides, I'd rather talk about that than the Aaron thing.

Hilary immediately starts a Zoom chat with Kim and Yuna, and since it's easier for me to multitask that way, I join the call but leave the camera off. No need to traumatize my friends with my messy home.

"What happened to Aaron? Isn't he going to freak out and embarrass your dad with the video?" Yuna asks, not letting me get away with omitting the incident. She'd make a great interrogator for some clandestine government organization.

"It doesn't matter." I put all my latest clothes into boxes. I should've brought more so I could take the rest of my Dior and Chanel. Having to decide which ones to take and which to leave behind for the moment is both cruel and unusual. It's like being forced to decide which one of my parents is my favorite while they're dangling over a precipice. "Edgar took care of him."

"And the sex tape?" Hilary asks.

"Also apparently taken care of," I say.

"I wish my family was in the weapons-contracting business. Then we could've launched a drone strike against

Aaron.” Yuna sounds positively mournful.

I laugh. “You can’t do that, and even though I love the idea of him getting his ass kicked, I don’t want him dead.”

“Maybe a very small drone...”

I try not to laugh. It’s only going to encourage her. She might even ask her dad to buy her a drone manufacturer, and he might say yes.

“How come your camera’s off?” Kim asks.

“Because I’m packing. I’m moving in with Edgar, remember? And my apartment is a war zone, worse than it normally is.”

“Do you need help?” Hilary asks.

“And we should do a housewarming party!” Yuna adds quickly.

“I have a cousin who’s coming by, thanks. And I really don’t need a party,” I say hurriedly. I don’t want to presume, especially about Edgar’s schedule. He might have to leave town to attend a meeting or conference.

“You sure? It’s such a tradition,” Yuna says with a forlorn sigh.

“*I’m sure.* Besides, I’m really too tired these days to move *and* plan a party. I sleep way too much, and I can’t seem to make myself get up at my normal time.” This is a pretty ridiculous way to pull out the Pregnancy Card, but nothing less is going to thwart the bulldozer.

“Maybe you should take a couple of days off,” Hilary says.

“And hang out with us,” Kim adds. “So we can take care of you.”

Yuna looks off into the distance. “I should book us a session at a spa.”

“No, no. It’s fine,” I say, not wanting to impose. *Although a spa does sound lovely...* Maybe later. I make a mental note to check my calendar.

“My mom told me she got a three-hour-long prenatal massage every week. She said it worked wonders. You should, too,” Yuna says. “Makes for a healthy and happy baby.”

“I’ll look into it.” I need to placate her quickly. I can’t quite afford to spend three hours a week on prenatal massages, not when I don’t know how much time doctor’s visits are going to suck out of my life. I’m pretty certain regular medical checkups trump massages.

“Let me know when you’re going to do it,” Kim says. “I’d love to join you for some pampering.”

“Me too,” Hilary adds.

Yuna raises a hand. “Me three.”

“Okay, then. We’ll have a ladies’ spa day soon,” I say with a big grin. “Anyway, I need to get back to packing.”

“If you need anything, let us know!” Kim says.

“Most definitely,” Hilary says.

“Thanks, girls.” I hang up, feeling better after talking with them. They can get a bit nosy at times, but I know it’s because they care.

I look at all the taped-up boxes. Since there’s no way I’m leaving any of my Chanel and Dior behind, I go to a craft store nearby. A teenage cashier with too much mascara and eyeliner pops her bubble gum and tells me I can take all the boxes I want because she’d rather not return to the back alley.

“That dumpster’s disgusting.” She leans closer, a posture of someone about to share classified intel.

Of course it is. But that’s where Aaron’s going to be dining if he does anything he shouldn’t with the video he made. Dumpster dining. The idea makes me smile. *Thank you, Edgar.*

The girl continues, “And I heard a body got left there once.”

“Really?” I raise my eyebrows and nod. “Good to know. I’ll be sure to avoid it.”

She glances out the front windows. “Yeah. Who wants to get caught up in that shit, right?”

I load the boxes into the trunk of my Lexus and go back home. I need to finish packing everything up before Hugo comes. But knowing him, and the fact that he works for one of the most infamous workaholics in the city, he won’t darken my doorstep until at least six.

Hands on my hips, I peruse my purses, assess my accessories and survey my shoes. How can I have so much *stuff*? But at the same time, how can I throw anything out?

Marie Kondo says to hold an item and see if it brings joy to decide if you should keep it. But I don’t have to hold anything. Just thinking about my wardrobe brings me joy.

All right, I’ll just take them all. Or at least all the latest from each designer, plus my favorites. How else am I going to look fabulous? No client wants fashion advice from somebody who doesn’t look like she’s ready for a *Vogue* photo shoot.

When I get to my home clothes, I hesitate. Old but comfy yoga pants and ratty T-shirts. I love them to pieces, but should I wear them in front of Edgar? It’s already bad enough he’s going to see me without makeup or perfectly styled hair.

Only my family gets to see me in my comfiest clothes. Edgar is...

Well. He’s not. I’m not sure about letting him see me like that. It’s entirely too...casual. And naked. Well, not really naked, because I’ll be in clothes, but I might as well be from the level of vulnerability and bareness I’m going to feel.

Okay. So my old, comfy home-wear stays here.

When I’m almost done packing, the intercom buzzes. I see a mildly annoyed Hugo on the screen and let him in.

“Do you know how busy I am? I’m working for one of the most important people in the world,” Hugo whines the second he walks into my apartment.

“When did a divorce attorney become so important?” I say.

“When it’s Samantha Jones!” I can hear the unspoken *duh*.

“Uh-huh. You mean she’s important because she’s the hottest woman in the world in your mind.”

“That too. And she’s working late today. Do you know how low I felt, asking if I could leave early?”

“As low as a summer cloud? As a satellite? You didn’t leave until at least five!” I gesture at the clock on the living room wall, which is reading five after six.

“*She* doesn’t go home until ten,” he says like he’s trying to explain the simplest fact of life to a four-year-old.

“So?”

“So I should’ve stayed.”

“Somebody should forward her a copy of the labor laws. Apparently, that’s something she really needs help with.” I put a hand over my still-flat stomach. “Now stop whining. Do you want me to carry heavy stuff when I’m pregnant?” *Take that knife of guilt to your gut!*

Hugo’s mouth tightens and flattens into a stubborn line.

Time to twist. “What would your mama say?”

“Argh!” he growls. “Fine, fine. She’d want me to help you.”

“And flay you alive if you didn’t.”

“You suck. Samantha’s working on a really important case today. She needs all the help she can get.”

I grit my teeth and give him a sweet, reassuring smile. “I’m sure she can find a way to crush her enemies without you lurking around, bringing her more coffee and snacks. She did it countless times before you popped into her life.”

“Yeah, but it’s different now.”

“I’m sure. Well, you shouldn’t have contacted Edgar if you didn’t want to get dragged into things like this.” I’m not upset with Hugo about that anymore, but it’s a convenient little stick to swing from time to time.

“So you’re really serious about him? You aren’t going to go back to Aaron?” Hugo crosses his arms. “If I’m going to help you with this, I need to be sure.”

I roll my eyes. Thank God we’re only cousins and not siblings. “Yeah. Edgar took care of Aaron permanently. And moving in is serious. Obviously.”

“Mm.” He runs his tongue over his upper teeth, contemplating the situation. “You’ve never done that with anybody else.”

“Never got pregnant with anyone’s baby, either.” I sigh. Edgar and I would never be moving in together if it weren’t for the baby. Then I remember what Mama said and shake myself. I can only focus on the present, not all the other possible choices. And why shouldn’t I take advantage of the fact that Edgar wants to be with me? People have fallen in love with much weaker ties than that. Hilary and Mark fell in love while fake-dating. So did Kim and Wyatt, for that matter, now that I think about it.

“Don’t sigh and frown like that. It’s not good for the baby.” Hugo hugs me. “Look, Jo. I think you’re a great gal. The best chica out of all my cousins.”

I laugh. “Geez, thanks.”

“Got you laughing, though.” He grins. “But seriously, Edgar only said he doesn’t love you because he hasn’t spent much time with you. Once he gets to know you better, he’s going to realize how perfect you are and fall in love. I’m sure of it.” He gives me a warm, reassuring smile.

Oh my God, Hugo. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. And if he wants you to sign a prenup or anything like that, just forward it to me. I’ll take care of it for you. We’re family.”

“You’re the best.” I hug him because he deserves it. I’m lucky to have family whose support and love I can always count on. Then I realize that Edgar hasn’t said anything about a prenuptial agreement. Maybe he hasn’t drafted one yet. He probably hasn’t had time to see a lawyer when he was working

remotely and looking for a way to stop Aaron as soon as possible.

But a prenup has to be coming soon. A billionaire would absolutely want to have something like that before tying the knot. Hilary's husband didn't, but he literally followed her around the country to woo her. He couldn't exactly wave a legal document while screaming, "I love you, Hilary. Marry me!"

"So. You want to take everything with you?" Hugo asks, looking around at the mountains of stuff in my apartment. Despite all the heartwarming things he said just moments ago, he looks pained now. "There's no way I can do it by myself."

"Don't worry. I packed what I need over there." I gesture at a pile of boxes.

"Okay. What about the rest? Donating them?"

"Don't even think it! They're just staying here for the moment."

Hugo raises both eyebrows. "You aren't getting rid of this place?"

"Nope." It's my backup plan, in case things don't work out after four months. I know I shouldn't think like that, but I've never had a relationship last longer. Though I can't exactly tell Hugo that. "I just renewed my lease two months ago, so I can't break it already. Even if I wanted to, I'd have to pay the entire lease amount."

"Seriously? Did you talk to your super about it?"

"He was adamant." Then, before Hugo can lecture me, I raise my hand. "I know I should've read the contract more carefully, but I honestly didn't think this would happen. So it's not really my fault. Besides, the location's great." I gesture around the apartment. "It's fairly central, so I can just stop by and nap or relax if I'm tired while consulting with some difficult client who doesn't care that I'm pregnant." Most of my clients are okay, but when they feel panicked about what to wear, they can get a little crazy.

Hugo shrugs. "Okay, if that's what you want."

“I do. I mean, I have to pay no matter what, so why not keep the apartment and use it for the next ten months?”

“Makes sense. All right, let’s get going.” He grabs a box and grunts while lifting it. “What the hell is in this? Lead?”

“Fabric weighs a lot.”

“Good thing you called me,” he says, wheezing slightly. “I’m taking it downstairs. Don’t touch anything.” He leaves the door propped open and leaves.

Despite his overbearing attitude and being full of unsolicited advice, he’s a sweetie who means well. I should buy him dinner, whatever he wants.

Then I realize I haven’t even offered him something cold to drink. Ugh. Mama taught me better than that. I open the fridge to see what’s in there.

The door creaks behind me, and I hear footsteps.

“Hey, do you want something to drink? I have some OJ and…” As I turn around, my voice trails off.

Edgar is standing in my living room, his jaw slack.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jo

Edgar is different. He isn't in a hideously expensive—but sexy—suit. He's in a T-shirt that says "Hollywood Stole My Heart" and artfully faded jeans. No creases. And his feet are in a pair of Chuck Taylors.

I've never seen him this casual, and it's all I can do to stare for a moment, trying to decide if I'm hallucinating. I didn't buzz him in through the intercom. And the building has a rule to not let strangers in for security reasons. He isn't even in his Brioni, which would at least make him look unquestionably respectable.

"What are you doing here?" I try to sound firm and in control, but my voice comes out squeaky and breathless.

My question pulls Edgar's gaze to me. He frowns for a moment, probably needing time to get over the shock. He looks a little like he just bit into a fresh jalapeño.

I try to see my place through his eyes. Clothes are piled over the back of my couch, the chairs, even on one of the lamps. They're the ones I decided I don't want to take after all. And shoes... They're everywhere on the floor. If they were landmines, nobody would survive.

Towers of boxes also loom haphazardly all over the living room, like so many cardboard stalagmites. If I didn't know better, I might think somebody'd detonated an haute-fashion bomb.

"I ran into Hugo," Edgar says finally.

Hugo. Of course! He probably let Edgar in.

I'm going to murder my cousin.

“Been really busy packing,” I say hurriedly. “Didn’t have time to clean up yet.”

“I see.”

His voice is too serious. Too smooth. Probably he’s judging without appearing judgmental. I’m pretty sure it’s one of those things you learn in finishing schools in the South...

Except—do guys go to finishing schools?

Should I ask to be sure?

“Normally, it looks better than this,” I lie, hoping it sounds convincing.

“Of course.”

He says it the way you’d say it to a used car salesman when he claims there’s no better car on the lot, and if you walk out, some other lucky person’s going to snatch up the five-year-old, pea-puke-green Buick.

“This apartment is entirely too small to store all your things,” Edgar says. This time, he’s smoother, like actually he believes what he’s saying. “Are you throwing away things you aren’t taking with you? I can arrange for that so we don’t have to spend time on it.”

“No. I’m keeping everything.” I sigh. “I tried to Marie Kondo my stuff, but it didn’t work.”

“They all brought you pleasure when you held them?”

“Basically,” I say, surprised he knows about it. Most men aren’t into Japanese-style downsizing. And I can’t imagine Edgar as the type to stuff his closets to bursting with clothes, shoes and accessories. Based on what I’ve seen, he’s more likely to have a few really good, very expensive classic pieces that he rotates around.

“So I suppose this means you’re moving in with me?” he asks.

“Yes.” Isn’t that obvious? I’m not in the habit of packing my things. I don’t suppose most people are.

“I was wondering. You didn’t call.”

Oh. Crap. I told him I'd let him know this evening, but it slipped my mind while I was busy sorting through my stuff. Then a thought occurs to me. "Are you here to get my answer?"

"Yes." He frowns a little. "And if your answer isn't what I want, I was planning on making a case."

His determination sends a small, hopeful thrill up my spine. I smile.

"And also to help you move, since you declined my offer to hire a crew," he adds. "So I can just load them into a car, right?" He gestures at the boxes.

"Yes."

Just then, Hugo walks in. "Hey, Edgar."

I turn on my cousin, ready to unleash my wrath. "*You!*"

"What?" He blinks, the picture of innocence.

I walk up to him while Edgar picks up a box. "Why do you think I don't let people into my home?" I say under my breath so Edgar can't hear.

"Because you're a private person. But he's your fiancé, right?"

What? Am I dreaming here? Or did the word "fiancé" suddenly gain an alternate meaning when I wasn't looking? "When did Edgar become my fiancé in your mind?"

"Just now, when I was carrying your things to my car. You would've never agreed to move in with him otherwise. I know you." Then he frowns. "Why are we whispering, by the way?"

Mr. Columbia Law School is awfully slow today. "Because I'm trying to talk about Edgar without him hearing about it."

Hugo nods. "Isn't that rude? And he walked out with a box a moment ago, so I don't think we need to keep whispering."

Argh. "*I didn't want him to come in.*"

Hugo shrugs. "Look, you have way too much stuff, and I honestly can't do all this by myself. If he can't even carry your

boxes for you, you're moving in with the wrong guy."

"He's really busy."

"So am I," Hugo points out. "That didn't stop you from dragging me here."

"Where are your brothers?" Edgar says as he walks in again.

"I didn't call them," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because I know their schedules, and they can't come. And it's the same for my other cousins."

That's partially untrue. They're all busy, but if I asked them, they would've come, except maybe for Pablo because he needed to save some kid's life. I contacted Hugo because... Well, if I'm really being honest, I've been feeling slightly petty about the fact that he contacted Edgar behind my back when he found out about my pregnancy, rather than talking to me about it.

"I don't mind, really," Hugo says. "My mom would kill me if she heard I let Jo carry a bunch of heavy stuff. She's in a very delicate condition."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. He sounds so medievally overprotective all of a sudden.

Edgar stretches his shoulders. "True. Now let's get this done."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Edgar

I don't let Jo carry anything except her purse. Hugo and I pack the vehicles with her things. Jo's hovering, obviously worried about rough handling on our part. She should have more faith in me. As she should've had when I was taking care of Aaron.

I realize the thought is uncharacteristically begrudging. Perhaps I'm more annoyed than I expected about her near-wedding.

Actually, my reaction since finding Jo at the courthouse has been anything but normal. Hell, I didn't want to be away from her since dragging her away from the farcical ceremony. If I hadn't received Susan's text about an emergency teleconference this afternoon, I wouldn't have let Jo go home by herself after lunch. But I had to be at the meeting to deal with the mess Dad made in the morning by handpicking only his favorites for a coveted project. Of course, none of them were women, even though we'd agreed to put two on it. They earned their spots.

When I confronted Dad, he sounded genuinely confused. Said the job's too dirty and hard for women.

Perhaps he believes every woman is a delicate, fragile flower. He certainly thinks Mom is. But I've yet to see a woman who is less capable simply due to the fact that she has breasts.

Just look at Jo. From what Linda dug up, Jo's created her own success with hard work and by taking calculated risks. And when a woman shines as brilliantly as Jo, she starts to attract undesirable attention.

Like Aaron Korvid.

There's a darkly possessive side of me that's still angry that Aaron almost made her his today. If I'd been even a day later, she would've married that bastard.

But I'm also furious at myself for not having foiled him sooner. I should've cut him off at the knees the moment I learned he was blackmailing Jo.

"How many cars do you have?" she asks as I put the last box in the Escalade. "You had a Mercedes last time."

"I borrowed this from Tony. The Mercedes wouldn't have been big enough. Do you know how to get to the penthouse?" I ask.

"Yeah. I'll meet you there," Jo says.

"I need the address," Hugo says.

"I'm texting you now." I send it to both of them. Although Jo's been there once before, she might not remember exactly.

The drive is uneventful. I check the rearview mirror a few times, just to make sure Jo's behind me. She's a complicated woman who reacts in ways that I can't quite fathom. She isn't impressed with my money, and she isn't keen on trapping me into marriage with the baby. As a matter of fact, I have a feeling that if I left it up to her, she'd buy me a thank-you dinner for helping her today and that would be that.

It wouldn't shock me if she changed her mind. Or went off on her own somewhere.

Perhaps I should've insisted she ride with me, I realize with a slight degree of worry. I might have if we hadn't needed the space in her trunk too. The woman has a lot of stuff.

But Jo follows me to the penthouse. As I turn into the garage, I see Hugo's SUV behind her as well.

The penthouse comes with six reserved and ten guest spots. I park the Escalade and text the concierge and security desk so they don't tow our cars by mistake, since we don't have parking tags yet.

That done, I climb out of the SUV, eager to move every box into my and Jo's new home as soon as possible. Once she

starts seeing her things in the space, she'll start to get used to the idea of living here with me.

“This the place?” Hugo asks, coming out of the Tahoe and looking around.

Jo steps out and closes her car door. “Yeah.”

“Let's get going,” I tell Hugo. Then I turn to Jo before she reaches for her trunk. “Just carry your purse.”

She sighs and rolls her eyes, but she does as asked.

Hugo and I take various boxes. Jo trots ahead of us and hits the button for the elevator.

Hugo looks around the lobby, taking in the security cameras, access-key security panels, and a pair of guards at the desk. Finally, he grunts. “At least it's safe.”

“It was a critical consideration,” I say.

We take the elevator up to the penthouse. The furniture is already arranged and in place. A giant TV hangs from the wall. So the interior designer I hired came through in time, as I expected. She was concerned about the tight deadline, but like I told Jo earlier today, money can speed things up.

Hugo whistles and makes a slow circle, the box in his arms temporarily forgotten.

I stay back to observe Jo's reaction. I'm hoping she likes the furniture enough to use it until she can find something that suits her taste better. And hopefully she isn't so picky that she refuses to sit because the color of the couch doesn't match her dress. I actually dated a woman while attending Harvard who seemed normal—initially—but did exactly that when I took her to my apartment. I dumped her on the spot. My patience and tolerance have limits.

But obviously I can't just dump Jo. She's a set deal that comes with my baby.

“Holy... This is sweet!” Hugo says, propping his box on the breakfast counter. “It's, like, better than Samantha's place.”

“You’ve been to your boss’s home? And you didn’t tell me?” Jo asks, her eyes narrow, as she places her purse on the couch and leans her hip against the armrest. I relax a bit.

Hugo shrugs. “You know. I just went over to drop a document off. Didn’t really go inside. I just got to see the inside for a few minutes. From the foyer. No biggie.”

He’s barely meeting Jo’s gaze, and couldn’t be making it clearer that he has feelings for his boss. I silently wish him luck, although I hope it’s a passing infatuation. Interoffice dating never ends well in my experience. And when it’s over, it’s always the more junior of the couple who ends up getting hurt professionally.

“So, uh... We should get moving,” Hugo says. “If we want to be done before it’s too late. I need my beauty sleep.” He pats his cheeks dramatically.

Part of me wants to tease him a little, but then I decide maybe it isn’t the most appropriate thing. Although he let me know about the baby and he’s less hostile than his brothers and cousins, I’m not yet sure where the line is.

“You’re right,” I say. “Jo, why don’t you check the fridge and see if it has everything you need?”

“You already did grocery shopping too?” Jo looks at me like I’m either a freak or a god.

“I hired a housekeeping service to stock us up for a day or so. But I didn’t know exactly what to ask for, since I don’t know what you like. If something’s missing, we can go grocery shopping or have it delivered. Hugo, let’s take these boxes to the bedroom.” I start leading the way.

Hugo follows, leaving Jo behind in the kitchen. The master bedroom suite has a huge bed, covered with soft Egyptian cotton sheets. Jo can pick out furniture for the sitting area later. Something that will make her feel at home.

“Holy shit, man,” Hugo says, putting the box on the floor. “This is better than a suite at the Aylster.”

Well. At least *something* is impressing her cousin. I should hire someone to take pictures and make a scrapbook. That

way, the next time Jo's dad asks me what I bring to the table, I can show him.

Hugo walks into the closet. "Plenty of space for her things, too. And she going to *love* these mirrors." He flashes me a dimple as he grins. "Not that she'll look super glamorous. It's going to be hilarious to see her in here once you're done decorating."

Hilarious? "What do you mean?" I've never seen Jo less than perfectly groomed and dressed.

"She just likes to be comfy at home. You know, old shirts and yoga pants. Can't blame her, though. She always needs to look perfect to everyone outside. Fashion is like her armor."

Except in bed, I think. In bed, she's disheveled and uninhibited. Probably more politic not to mention that, though.

Hugo continues, "But with the family, she's different." He smiles fondly.

The possessive part of me is dying to see her when she's relaxed, with her guard down. I want her to know we can be good together—a family that has each other's back.

We go downstairs. Jo declares the fridge has everything she wants. I make a mental note to give an additional tip to the crew that came in today.

"Hey, can I order Chinese or do you want something different?" Jo asks. "I'm starting to get hungry."

"Chinese works for me," I say. "I want sweet and sour pork."

"Me too," Hugo adds. "Plus some shrimp fried rice."

While Jo takes care of ordering dinner, Hugo and I bring in all the boxes and put them in the closet. We don't try to unpack anything. Hugo says Jo has a way of organizing things so she can find what she needs quickly. After having seen her place, I have a feeling his definition of "organization" is different from mine, but...

By the time we're done, the delivery guy arrives. Jo signs for it before I can, tipping the man.

“I was going to get that,” I say with a frown.

“It’s the *movee*’s job to feed the *movers*. Ask anybody,” Jo says lightly.

“Totally. How else are we to score free food?” Hugo starts to sit down at the table. Then his phone beeps, and he checks the screen. “Oh man. I gotta go. Samantha needs me.”

Jo gives him an annoyed look. “She knows you’re done for the day, right?”

“Yeah, but she texted me. Wants me to pick up a latte.”

I shake my head. She should’ve gotten her own coffee instead of making her assistant come back. Unless *latte* is a codeword for office quickie.

Jo stares at Hugo. “Who are you and what did you do with my piggy cousin?”

He laughs and gives Jo a quick hug. “You two lovebirds have fun. I’ll take a rain check on the dinner.”

“Hey, at least take some food with you.”

“Samantha doesn’t like Chinese.” Waving goodbye, he leaves.

She looks at the food on the table, hands on her hips. “Ugh. Now we have way too much.”

“It’ll keep.”

Her nose wrinkles. It’s oddly cute. “You sound like a typical man.”

“Because I am a man,” I say, amused by her reaction.

I put some General Tso’s chicken on her plate, then beef on mine, plus one broccoli floret. My doctor told me I need to do better with vegetables. Apparently ketchup and herb sauces don’t count.

She takes her plate with murmured thanks. “Yeah, but you’re rich. You’re supposed to be all like ‘I don’t eat the same thing twice’ and snobbish.”

“What do you think I eat when I’m working late at the office?”

She thinks for a moment. “Takeout filet mignon topped with caviar and gold flakes?”

I laugh until my stomach hurts and tears form in the corners of my eyes. And when the mirth starts to fade, I realize the annoyance that’s been simmering from the shit show of the day is gone.

“Clearly, your laughter is an acknowledgment that I’m right,” Jo says.

“How does that work?” I ask, biting into my food.

“You’re laughing because you have nothing to say.”

I snort, then laugh again.

Her phone rings. She goes to her purse and digs it out. Her face falls when she sees the screen.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“It’s my dad.” Her shoulders tight, she bites her lower lip like a kid about to get into trouble.

“I can talk to him if you want,” I say. Her dad seemed like a conservative guy who doesn’t shy from saying what’s on his mind.

“No. I should.” Inhaling once, she answers with an overly bright smile on her face. “Hello, Papa.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Edgar

Jo listens for a moment, her lips pulled in.

Is she getting reamed?

The urge to intervene grows stronger, but I know inserting myself in the situation won't solve anything. I've learned that over and over again with my family.

"Yes. Okay," Jo says finally, then puts the phone on the table and sits down.

Her dad's voice comes loud and clear through the speakers.

"Edgar, are you there?" he demands.

"Yes, sir." Perhaps he'll yell at me instead. I'm okay with that. I make a better—and sturdier—target than Jo anyway.

"I heard everything from Jo's mother. Both of you should know better than to try to keep the problem hidden until you solved it. You should've told me as soon as there was an issue."

I cock an eyebrow. He wanted to be involved? Whatever for? Isn't it better that I took care of it so he and Jo are spared of any embarrassment?

Jo cringes. "Sorry."

I highly doubt Jo would've appreciated me ratting her out to her parents, but I keep that to myself. Her dad's not in the mood to hear it. "I apologize, sir. I hope my solution was acceptable to you."

He harrumphs. "Someone like him won't just go away so easily."

“He has a bigger thing to worry about, like his inheritance, Papa.”

Jo’s attempt to placate her dad doesn’t seem to work. I can still hear his breathing.

“He won’t be a problem anymore,” I add. If he remains a problem, I’ll make sure Korvid regrets having ever been born.

“You’re that determined to marry my daughter, is that it?”

“Of course.” Surely he doesn’t think I’m doing this for less than marriage.

Whispers come through the speakers. Jo mouths, *That’s my mom*, to me.

We wait for her parents to finish their little conference. They weren’t that impressed at the dinner, but I only had a ring and some answers as to what I bring to the table. This time I’m showing them, which hopefully will be enough to nudge them in the right direction.

“If you’re so insistent, why don’t you come to the family dinner this weekend? We can talk in more detail,” Jo’s dad says.

Further inquisition. But I’m fine with that. A second-round interview is a step closer to the goal. “Yes, sir.”

“Jo, you bring him, okay?” her dad says as though he’s worried I didn’t mean what I just said. “Your uncle’s going to serve something new.”

She fakes a smile, not that he can see it. “Yes, I will.”

“And Jo, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Her shoulders scrunch together tighter.

“And by that,” he continues, “I mean don’t try to solve everything on your own. Family exists for a reason.”

Even though he’s speaking to Jo, his words create a small pang in my heart. I can see my own father saying something similar, although not out of love. It’s always about the family reputation. And power.

Her dad continues, “We’ll see you on Sunday. Now I need to go finish grading some quizzes.”

“I love you, Papa.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

The line goes dead.

Jo sighs, her whole body relaxing like heated wax. “That went better than I thought.”

“Does your dad yell at you often?”

“No. I just thought he’d say he was disappointed. I hate disappointing my parents.”

Don’t we all...until we start to wonder if it’s worth the mental energy, and then eventually quit caring. “Do you do that a lot?”

“Do what?”

“Disappoint them.”

“No. I mean, I sometimes do things that I think might be upsetting for them, but they’ve never said they were disappointed.”

I reach over and hold her hand. “Then perhaps you should consider the possibility that you can never disappoint them as long as you try your best.” Her parents seem too nice to want the impossible.

She gives me a small smile. “Maybe I should.”

Since I want to change the topic from her anxiety about not meeting the expectations she set out for herself, I say, “Is the family dinner at the restaurant again?”

She shakes her head. “It’ll be at my parents’.”

“Should we bring something? Wine or liquor, maybe?”

“Nah. We have plenty of great wine and beer.” Her eyes start twinkling. “And you caught the part about my uncle serving something new, right? My dad didn’t say that for no reason.”

“What’s the reason, then?”

“Tío Manny loves to experiment in the kitchen, even though my dad would prefer to just hang out and drink beer and watch soccer.”

“I can do that with your dad,” I offer. “I’m sure nobody wants me in the kitchen.” I can do some basic cooking, but I’ve seen the elaborate Mexican food served at Manny’s Tacos. That’s far beyond my limited abilities.

“I’m sure my dad would like that, but I gotta warn you. The food is not going to be like what you had at the restaurant,” Jo says. “That ‘something new’ means they’ll be feeding you experimental food.”

“As long as it’s not Soylent Green, I’m fine.”

Jo goes dead silent, staring at me with wide eyes, and I suddenly have the sinking feeling that my little joke didn’t work. *Maybe I should just stay away from humor. It simply isn’t my forte.* But then she snorts and chuckles.

“Oh man, I can’t wait to use that, especially when Tío Manny gives me a mystery recipe with a lot of avocado,” Jo says. “Soylent guac!”

I smile and join in her laughter. Thank God the joke wasn’t a total bust.

The dinner conversation switches to more neutral topics. I tell her I’m working remotely, and the company can handle it.

Then, as we’re finishing up, I realize we’ve never talked about doctor’s appointments. She’s bound to have a lot of them, and she should have me with her for every single one. “Jo?”

“Yeah?” she says, picking up her plate to take it to the sink.

“Can you tell me when your next doctor’s appointment is? I’d like to be there.”

“Um. I actually don’t have one yet. My doctor retired last year, and I haven’t gotten a new one yet. Hilary said she’ll see if she can hook me up.”

I frown. I don't know much about pregnancy, but I'm pretty certain regular checkups are important. Tony and Ivy went all the time, and he never missed an appointment.

"Don't look so worried," Jo says, running a thumb over my brow as though she's trying to iron wrinkles off my forehead. "It's still early enough that it's okay. I'm taking my vitamins and eating all my veggies."

I take her hands and kiss the fingertips. "If she can't fit you in soon, how about Dr. Silverman? She's Ivy's doctor, and Ivy really likes her."

Jo looks surprised. "That's the doctor Hilary was thinking of, too! She said her husband insisted."

There's a slight note of wistfulness in her voice, as though she wishes she had somebody to coddle her like that. *But you don't have to feel that way. You have me.*

"Let me take care of the details," I say, brushing the back of my fingers along the bridge of her nose and enjoying the soft flush suffusing her cheeks. "Send me your availability for the next few days."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jo

I run my brush mechanically through my hair while staring at my reflection. I've already double cleansed. Multiple layers of serum and cream are sitting on my face and neck. I even peed twice.

But I've been in the bathroom for over half an hour. Delaying more is going to get ridiculous.

But the debate I'm having with myself won't die. Wearing makeup to bed is stupid. It ruins your skin and possibly causes breakouts. But I can't seem to just...be comfortable. I care way too much about Edgar's opinion.

I feel like I should at least put on lipstick. But I can't do that for four months. I'm probably being silly. Intellectually, I understand we are our worst critics. But emotionally, it feels vulnerable. I've not only never lived with a guy before, but I've never even spent an entire night with one.

It'll be okay, I tell myself. Pregnancy is supposed to make you glow, right?

Squinting, I lean closer so I can examine my face better. *Am I glowing?* It's hard to tell. Why doesn't the glow come with a halo or something so it's obvious?

Sighing, I put on a pink silk nightgown. I bought it last month on a whim. It isn't something I'd ever wear at home, but it was on sale. And pink.

Maybe some precog instinct knew I'd need it. If I didn't have it, I'd have to go shopping.

Come on, Jo. It's not a big deal.

Besides, Edgar's nice. Considerate. Thoughtful. He even volunteered to take care of the doctor's appointments, *and*

he'll go with me. Until he brought it up, I didn't realize I would've been a little forlorn about going alone, especially when I know Hilary is going with her husband. And Elizabeth, too, probably. It isn't that I'm envious or upset with their circumstances. It's just that I want what she has.

Wait, that's envy, isn't it? Damn it, I *am* envious.

I rub my cool hands together to warm them a little. Does Edgar go to bed naked? Is he already nude? Do I want him, like, totally bare?

Doesn't that also mean sex?

And why in the world am I so nervous about it? It's not like we haven't been together before, and it was *amazing*. It only makes sense we do it a lot if we're going to live together. And let's be honest here, I'd be sad and disappointed if he didn't show interest now.

It's just the *living together* part that feels new. I'm a cohabitation virgin, that's all.

Okay, stop overthinking this. It's going to be fine. It won't even hurt or be messy like when I lost my real virginity.

Inhaling deeply to calm my nerves, I step out into the bedroom. My mouth dries as I spot Edgar in bed. But my anticipation almost immediately turns to disappointment.

Why is he in a thin white T-shirt, the kind you might expect your platonic friend to wear to bed with you?

I was ready for him to be topless...at least. Maybe even nude. And if I have to be one hundred percent honest, I was hoping to see the outline of a hard cock under the sheet.

When he was trying to convince me to move in, he said I'd get the use of his body...and treated to lots of great orgasms. It was one of the benefits he specifically listed. Or is he thinking I should just settle for a good night's sleep? I mean, he promised that, too...

Maybe he changed his mind after seeing my place. He did seem a little stunned. *Ugh. This is why I don't let people inside my apartment.* They judge.

Then I feel Edgar's gaze on me. This is a beautiful gown with a plunging neckline. It molds to my body, skims over my breasts and waist and hips.

He should at least think I'm hot in it. And seriously consider pouncing on me.

Instead, he's frowning. His white teeth dig into his lower lip. A man torn and conflicted.

Shit.

My mood plunges. Maybe I'm one of very rare women who don't glow during pregnancy. He might be debating how he should say he's no longer interested in jumping my bones. I hate it that I care so much about his opinion of me. But it matters *so much*.

Now I wish I hadn't agreed to honor our understanding. I want to be home right now. Or maybe with my parents. I'd love a hug from Mama.

I stiffen my spine. Edgar's the one who insisted on this. It's his bed, and he's going to lie in it, no pun intended!

I walk toward my side of the bed and slip under the sheet. Then I pull it all the way to my nose, like a super shield.

"Are you okay?" Edgar asks, like he's trying to figure out all the hidden meanings of life with that one question.

"I'm fine." I want to pat myself on the back for sounding so calm.

"You don't sound fine."

Argh. Is he kidding?

"Are you feeling nauseated?"

Am I looking green? Is that why he's been staring at me like that? "I'm fine. Really." This didn't sound as good as earlier.

Maybe you shouldn't have said it between gritted teeth.

He studies me for a moment. "Let me know if you need anything."

“Okay. Can you turn off the light?” I say.

“Yeah.” He hits the switches on the control panel on the stand next to his bed.

The room plunges into darkness.

I lie there. Sleep eludes me. I count. Then I think about sheep. Lots and lots of sheep. Then I count the flock. It doesn't work, though. It only makes me think of that *Silence of the Lambs* movie. Much as I admire Anthony Hopkins, him as Hannibal Lecter isn't very relaxing.

I start to turn, then I note Edgar isn't sleeping either. His breathing is too shallow for slumber. Besides, I can sense palpable tension radiating from him.

“What's wrong?” I whisper. It sounds much louder in the dark.

“Nothing,” he says. “Go to sleep, Jo.”

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

I pause for a moment. Maybe it's the intimacy of the dark, but my filter quits working.

“About the advantages to living together... I can't seem to fall asleep, even though a good night's sleep seems to be all I'm getting.”

The moment all the words leave my mouth, I want to smack my forehead. Why am I doing my best to project a needy nympho? Him seeing my apartment wasn't enough?

Edgar reaches out. Runs a hand along my hair.

I close my eyes and sigh. It feels so good.

“I'd rather not do anything that might put you and the baby at risk.”

“What do you mean?” I say, surprised.

“I want to wait until we see Dr. Silverman.”

I tense. Is he expecting a problem? As far as I know, my side of the family is healthy as a horse. But his family might

not be.

“I’m not saying that you’ll have issues,” he adds, “but it’s always best to be on the safe side.”

That’s so sweet. I start to relax. Then, since I hate to sleep separated, even though we’re in same bed and because it’s dark and I feel like whatever I’m doing now doesn’t—and shouldn’t—count, I inch closer until he pulls me into his arms.

Sighing quietly, I relax against his body heat and scent.

Then, as I start to slip into sleep, I imagine him whispering, “I know why you’re like this, and I’m going to change that in the upcoming months.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Edgar

My eyes open automatically, as usual. I don't have to check my phone on the stand next to the bed to know it's around five in the morning.

I should get up, but Jo feels too good wrapped around me. Her arm is draped over my chest, and her leg is twisted around mine. She's still deep in sleep, her breathing slow and even.

As much as I love that nightgown on her, I wish she'd worn something comfy, like Hugo said. The way he spoke of it didn't indicate that her "relaxing at home" outfit is anything as thought out as what she's wearing. If I didn't know better, I might've thought she was trying to seduce me, but she was a bit too tense last night for that.

She probably doesn't see this place as her home yet. Once she puts her own stamp on it—with colors she likes, furniture she picks—she'll be better.

I give myself ten more minutes to hold her, then, reluctantly and very carefully, leave the bed. I tuck her in, pulling the sheet tight around her, then take my phone and head toward one of the extra bedrooms. I've set it up as a temporary office with a desk and rolling chair.

After hitting the button to boot my laptop, I go to the kitchen and make a cup of coffee. Hmm... The place *is* rather large and empty. Perhaps I should hire a live-in housekeeper. We had a few growing up in Tempérane. It's such a pampered pleasure to wake up to coffee and breakfast. Jo would probably enjoy the perk.

I take the coffee to the office and check my email. Susan sent me a couple messages with summaries of what's been going on at Blackwood Energy HQ since the unpleasant meeting yesterday.

My phone rings. Dad. My muscles tighten instantly, like a well-trained police dog when it senses something wrong.

Do I want to answer it when I haven't even finished my first cup of coffee?

And is he calling me as my father, or as head of the board of directors?

If I don't handle it now, he's going to try again. Sighing, I pick it up.

"Edgar." My voice is rough.

"Did you just get up?" Dad says.

"I *am* still in California."

"When are you coming back?" Impatience vibrates like a poorly tuned violin in his tone, grating and annoying.

"I don't know."

"Why not? You should be here by now. You have a duty to the family and business. We employ all these people. We have a responsibility to the town."

My lips twist. I don't need to finish my coffee to understand what he's really saying.

We employ all these people.

Our responsibility to the town.

They're socially acceptable phrases to say the family cannot and *will* not loosen its control over Tempérane and its people. The company has always given us enormous power. It provides so many jobs, so much money for every organization. Even if somebody hates us, they don't dare show it out of fear.

The economic benefits the company brings to the town are, of course, a big plus. It's how Blackwood Energy should be, and the people work hard for their pay. But I resent Dad's attitude that it entitles us to be more—a sort of untouchable aristocracy.

"Are you being petty because of the project yesterday?" he asks when I don't respond.

“Do you think you did something to make me react pettily?” My tone is utterly controlled, even though resentment is surging back at the reminder.

“I put your favorite boy on the team after we spoke.”

Let me kiss your feet in gratitude, then! “Heath earned it.” I hired him four years ago because he’s a literal genius. “Why did you reject Nora?”

“Her again?” He breathes out loudly enough for me to hear it over the line. “Are you screwing her?”

So like him to assume her sole merit exists between her legs. “For the tenth time, no. I simply think that she’s good at her job and deserves better.”

“One of her kids is in a drama club, and she’s busy with that. She doesn’t have the time to do it,” Dad adds, sounding mildly conciliatory. He isn’t totally oblivious to my mood.

“Why not let her decide that? She asked me specifically for the opportunity.”

“Because she overestimates her ability to manage her time!” I can hear the eye-roll in his defensive tone.

“Nora was supposed to mentor Heath on the team,” I point out.

“There are others. Actually, he’ll be more comfortable with men.”

I almost snort. “The same men who call him ‘boy’ or ‘kid’?”

“So? He’s barely thirty. Who cares?”

“I do. And he does. It’s disrespectful.”

He scoffs. “Loosen up, Edgar. You’ve changed ever since you started spending so much time out in California with your brothers. Is this Court’s doing? I told him he should’ve studied economics or engineering.”

“Leave him out of it.”

Despite the fact that he has a great deal of aptitude for financial management, Court majored in gender studies to spite Dad. He assumed that having a degree in what Dad considers a worthless liberal art would keep him away from the drama of the family and Blackwood Energy. And who could blame him?

“And I’m not spending much time with Tony or Court. I’m busy with other things,” I say, not wanting Dad to blame my brothers. They’ve put up with enough family bullshit. Dad would be careful about approaching Tony, but he isn’t so circumspect with Court.

“Like what?”

“I bought a penthouse in the city.”

“An investment?” Dad throws it out immediately, apparently refusing to entertain any other possibilities.

“No. I met the woman I’m going to marry.” I might as well tell him now. He’s going to find out sooner or later.

Stunned silence. Then he lets out a strangled sound as though he’s been unable to breathe for a while. “Then why are you buying property in California? You should be bringing her home. To Tempérane! This is where you both belong. She’ll need to take her place in the family and the town.”

I thought I’d take Jo to Tempérane at some point, before our wedding ceremony, provided her doctor clears her for travel. But not now. Dad couldn’t have turned me off from the idea any more effectively or permanently. Mom assumed her place in the family and town, for sure, and how did that turn out?

I’ll be damned if I let Jo become a cold, heartless shell of a woman like my mother. She’s too vibrant and beautiful to be wasted that way.

“She has a career here in Los Angeles.” I keep my voice mild but firm. “She isn’t going anywhere.”

“Is her career more important than her station in life?”

“If it can help her avoid becoming another Margot Blackwood?” My lips twist. “Yes.”

“You’ll show some respect. She’s your mother!” he thunders.

It isn’t like him to react so strongly. We both try very hard to be civilized. We have certain images to maintain.

“Is she there with you?” I ask. My phone screen said “Dad,” but that doesn’t mean he’s in the office...or alone.

“What if she is?”

“How could you let her back into your life? You owe it to Tony and Ivy to keep her as far away from the family as possible,” I say, my voice tight with anger and shame. Anger that he forgot, and shame that I didn’t do more for my brother and Ivy. “What Mom did almost cost them their lives. People *died*.”

“Those people deserved to die!”

“Is that what Mom whispered in your ear to get you to take her back? How about the girl in the car? Did she deserve to die too?”

“That had nothing to do with your mother!”

Of course not. She never did anything wrong. Not after Dad has decided his loneliness matters more than anything she did, all the people she hurt.

“I love her, son. She’s the only woman for me. Don’t you love your own mother?”

“Used to.” I hang up before he can ask more asinine questions, and I become so furious that I throw my phone against the wall. That won’t solve anything.

I get up and pace to get rid of the surging anger, then, when that isn’t enough, drop and do some push-ups. I don’t want to face Jo while I’m still upset over the call from Dad. She deserves better.

When I finally feel calmer, I stop and get up. Jo is looking at me through the doorway. From her sleepy expression, she

probably just got here, which is good. It means she missed my argument with Dad.

She's so adorable, her long hair tousled, her dark brown eyes drooping a little. A robe is wrapped around her, and it's made with the same silky pink material as the nightgown.

"You move quietly," I say, smiling.

She steps inside. "Bare feet. And this place doesn't creak. You getting in a little early-morning exercise?"

I go to Jo and wrap my arms around her, placing a kiss on the crown of her head. She smells like warm, well-rested woman and expensive floral and citrus perfume. Holding her soothes my temper, and I tighten up for a second before letting her go. "This place better not creak, not for what I paid."

"Jorge would approve."

"Really?" Jorge is Hugo's oldest brother, if I'm remembering right.

"He's a general contractor and builder who deals mostly with luxury construction." She looks at the phone I left on my desk. "Oh, and Dr. Silverman's office contacted me just now."

"They're up this early?" I know city people like to stay busy, but this is a bit much. It's barely seven.

"It was from an automated system. She has a cancellation and can see us today at ten if that's okay with you."

"It's fine with me. But what about your schedule?"

Jo shrugs. "Client emergencies can wait, and I can reschedule today's consultation for later."

I reach out and hold her hand in mine. Even though she said it casually, I don't think it's her general policy to ignore client emergencies. The PI's report said her professional reputation is stellar.

Jo's life is changing because of my baby in her womb. I'm going to do all that I can to ensure she's always happy and taken care of.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Jo

After a simple and rather lazy breakfast of yogurt and berries for me and a bagel and lox for him, Edgar drives us to Dr. Silverman's office. He's put on a suit. It's dark navy, tailored to fit his body perfectly. I couldn't have picked better for a conservative, masculine look.

I'm in a white top and a pale blue skirt with matching pearlescent azure stilettos. Must enjoy my favorite clothes and shoes before I get too big for them.

I look at my ankles closely. *Are they a little swollen?* It's impossible to tell. Maybe I should start tracking my ankle size with a tape measure.

"What's wrong? Shoes uncomfortable?" Edgar asks, when I run my hand over my ankles again. "We can stop by a store to get you a pair of flats."

"No," I say, horrified. "This isn't the kind of dress you can pair with flats. I was just wondering if my legs look swollen."

The car stops at the red light. Edgar's gaze skims my calves. My bare skin prickles, and shivers go up my spine.

Oh my.

"They look fantastic to me. Not at all swollen." A pause. "Do you want me to feel them to be sure?"

Any other guy, I'd think he was just flirting. But with Edgar...

When he says it so somberly, I can't decide if he's just being mildly salacious or making a serious offer. And if he is serious, and wants to feel my legs... Well, I like his hands on me. I loved the way he hugged me and kissed me this morning. It was just a peck on the head, but it felt so

affectionate and sweet. Something you give family—someone you care deeply about.

Does this mean our relationship could evolve into something more soon?

Then I wonder if I should do something about his level of seriousness. He's probably so grave all the time because he's the oldest and has certain obligations that come with that. I should tease him into relaxing some more. Like he might with someone he's emotionally close and intimate with.

I wink. "Don't you remember how they felt back at the party?"

"I remember everything about you at the party."

Okay, still too somber. This is going to take more effort. Hm. I wonder what I can say to make him laugh. But my mind isn't sharp enough at the moment. Slept well...but should have had some coffee. Some articles on Google say one cup of coffee a day is okay during pregnancy, but others say it's not. I'd rather err on the side of caution. Hopefully Dr. Silverman will say a cup is okay.

Of course, with my luck she'll say I can only have a shot of coffee so watered down that I can see the bottom of the glass.

My phone pings. It's a text from Rafael, and he's sent it to Pablo and Angel, too.

–Rafael: Hugo says you moved in with Edgar. Does this mean you changed your mind?

Ugh. Hugo and his big mouth.

–Pablo: He needs to fall in love with you. Make sure that happens.

–Angel: You need to invite us to the housewarming party. I need to check out this place he got for you. Hugo says it's nice, but he's easily impressed. Look at who he's in love with.

Okay, this I can agree with, because Hugo should've fallen for a nice, sweet girl, not a shark like Samantha.

–Me: We haven't even furnished the place yet, so nobody's invited until then.

There. Neatly avoided Rafael's question and ignored Pablo's advice.

Then, before my older brother can follow up, I type up a total BS excuse, because if I tell them I'm going to see my new doctor, they'll never let me go.

–Me: I gotta go. Client emergency.

Since I'm feeling slightly guilty about lying to my brothers, I text David and let him know I'm available any time his assistant is.

I get a response from a new number, who introduces herself as Erin.

–Erin: David told me to coordinate with you directly. How about 11:30 next Monday? I'm really swamped this week.

I check my calendar, then text back that it's fine.

She asks me to message her when I arrive, so she can meet me in the lobby.

I enter the appointment in my calendar. I'm going to make this one even if a column of lava spews out of ground.

I put my phone away. Edgar gives me a sidelong glance.

“What's that?”

“A new client appointment, plus my brothers. They want to see the place.”

He shrugs. “Invite them any time you want.”

“I told them not until it's furnished. Believe me, they're coming to nitpick and judge.” Even if Rafael and Pablo behave, Angel won't. He's probably already made a checklist of features he expects the penthouse to have. They really need to get some serious girlfriends so they can use all that testosterone-laden overprotectiveness on someone other than me.

“Judge what? Our home?”

The natural way Edgar says “our home” makes the air still in my lungs. I like the sound of that entirely too much. But I’m not going to admit to anything until I’m sure our feelings are mutual.

“Yes. To see if it’s good enough.” I shrug to feign nonchalance. “Just so you know, even if we aren’t done furnishing, they’re going to find a reason to come over. Most likely with food from either Tía Bea or Mom.”

“That’s fine.”

“It doesn’t bother you?” My brothers’ protective nosiness bugged my exes. All of them.

“No. They just want to watch your back. I’d do the same if I had a sister.”

There’s a hint of sadness in his voice. He lost his baby sister when he was very young, and it must’ve been incredibly painful. Probably still is; such a close loss would hurt forever.

But he doesn’t say anything further, and I don’t probe.

Edgar parks the Mercedes, and we make our way toward Dr. Silverman’s office. My heart flutters, and sweat slickens my palms. This is a whole new level of reality. I mean, I had an “Oh my God, I’m pregnant” moment when I did the test in my bathroom. *But this?* It’s like being bludgeoned with the knowledge. Because it won’t just be a line or two on a small rectangle, it’ll be an ultrasound picture. And the doctor is going to tell me if the baby in my womb is okay or not.

The office is spacious and elegant, with a lovely sage and pale lemon color scheme. A small water fountain gurgles soothingly in a corner. The chairs are covered in leather, and look to be soft but with excellent back support. It’s nothing like my previous gynecologist’s office, with its functional vinyl-covered low-back benches and plastic chairs and slightly scuffed white walls.

No wonder so many people want to be Dr. Silverman’s patient. I lucked out. I’m already calmer, the mild anxiety I felt earlier dying down.

I fill out a new patient questionnaire that asks about allergies, my monthly cycle and more. Edgar's checking email on his phone and not looking in my direction, letting me fill out my medical data in privacy, which I appreciate. We'll have plenty of sharing moments when the doctor does the ultrasound. TV shows always have expectant moms getting black-and-white photos of their fetuses. I should probably start a scrapbook to document this, just like my parents did.

Whether this pregnancy was planned or not, I love this baby, and I want to make sure the child knows just how much. My parents' love and support have meant everything to me my whole life, and I want my kid to have the same sense of emotional security.

Once I hand over the completed form to the receptionist, it only takes five minutes before the doctor is ready to see me—a first in my experience. Must be a perk of being Dr. Silverman's patient.

Edgar and I stand up. He puts away his phone and places his hand at the small of my back. The contact feels so good. Nervous excitement throbs in my belly. Soon we're going to see the baby on screen.

The nurse takes us to a room labeled Consultation and Examinations. Edgar and I step inside a spacious chamber with three chairs and a basic bed—probably for ultrasound. There are two big monitors above the bed, which confirms my suspicion.

Dr. Silverman is at her desk. Although she's seated, I can tell she's short from the length of her legs from knees to feet, which are encased in sensible pumps. She looks to be in her late forties and is sporting a stylish bob that sits perfectly around a friendly face. Her green eyes are so warm that I'm certain when she looks at her patients, they tell her everything. Maybe going into TMI territory, even for an ob-gyn.

"I'm Dr. Silverman," she says, extending a hand. "So you're Josephine Martinez... and you must be Edgar Blackwood. Very nice to meet you. Please have a seat." After

waiting until we're seated, she glances down at the file in front of her. "So you're pregnant," she says with a smile.

"Yes," I say.

"Your last period was..." She looks down again. I jotted that down on the questionnaire. "Well. You're fairly early."

"Yes," I say again, trying not to squirm like an excited kid at a candy store.

Edgar lays a hand on my shoulder, and I relax, feeling anchored and reassured by the contact.

She starts asking more questions, about my specific moods, cravings and things like morning sickness. She takes notes on her computer, easily typing fast enough to keep up with my answers.

"Everything sounds about normal," she says.

I exhale and slump a little with relief. Those four words are *exactly* what I've been waiting to hear. Edgar squeezes my shoulder.

Dr. Silverman adds, "Not every woman has morning sickness, and sometimes you have it early in your pregnancy and then not at all later, or vice versa. We should do an ultrasound, though, just to rule some things out, see where the baby is and estimate the due date."

This is it! My little baby, you don't get to see your mama yet, but I'll get to see you! "Sure." I start to move toward the bed.

"Actually, we need to do this in stirrups," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"It's transvaginal."

"Uh... Trans what?" *What does that really mean?* Best not to assume when it comes to medical terms.

"Transvaginal," she repeats. "We have to do it through your vagina."

She's speaking in a matter-of-fact tone. But I'm just inwardly cringing anyway. I did *not* see this coming, especially with Edgar watching us so seriously. I don't think he's even blinking.

"But on TV, they always do it on the belly," I say faintly. How the hell do you do transvaginal ultrasound, anyway? On TV, the ultrasound equipment looks sort of bulky. I don't know if they're going to fit down there, even with lube.

Somebody ought to sue Hollywood for misrepresenting a very important medical procedure.

"Yes, but that's for later. This one will show us potential risks."

I inhale sharply. I know it's her job to bring them up, but I still hate hearing the word.

"What kind of risks?" Edgar asks.

"Could be anything, really, including some that could potentially cause miscarriage. Early detection can help us plan the best course of action."

That snuffs all the objections I have about the transvaginal ultrasound. But I'm disappointed anyway. I thought Edgar and I would see the baby together on the monitor. But there's no way I'm having him watch me in stirrups.

Dr. Silverman smiles, clearly having dealt with this issue before. "The examination room is next door, but the monitors here can receive images. So you'll be able to see what we're seeing there, Mr. Blackwood. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have afterward."

Edgar nods, the picture of calm and control. "Thank you." The fact that he's so unperturbed helps settle my nerves a bit.

She turns on the monitors and hits a few buttons on her computer and the monitor. Then she leads me to an adjoining blue and teal room. Another soothing color combination. It makes me feel like I'm snorkeling.

"You don't have to be completely naked or anything," she says. "It's going to be just like a pap, but takes a bit longer,

obviously. Just remove the bottom half of your clothing. Or, if you prefer, you can put on a disposable gown. There's also a small blanket to use if you'd like. I'll be in the adjacent room. Just hit the bell here when you're ready," Dr. Silverman says, gesturing at a button near the stirrups.

Since I'd rather not put on the paper gown, I just take off my skirt and underwear. I hurry, since I'm too impatient to meet the baby. I want the doctor to tell me how big—or small—the baby is, where he's situated and when I'm going to know for sure if it's a boy. Call it a mother's intuition, but I have a feeling it's going to be a boy.

After placing a blanket over my lady parts—no need to flash the world for God knows how long until the doctor returns—I hit the bell and wait, slightly nervous about the whole situation. Obviously, TV shows have lied to me, so maybe nothing too big is going in down there.

Dr. Silverman walks back in, her expression serene. She hits a few buttons, and my seat starts to angle backward and the monitors to my right come on.

My palms grow a little damp. I'm more nervous than I was when I had my first pap smear. Oh my God. *The baby!*

I brace for the impact, so to speak, but I don't even feel anything, except something slightly warm and slick between my legs. And the monitors show the images I've been waiting for.

But there are so many white dots things in the picture. I stare hard, trying to locate the baby.

"The baby's right here." Dr. Silverman uses the track pad, moving a red pointer to the correct white smudge out of all the smudges. "Let's see..."

She hits a few buttons and manipulates the ultrasound.

My mouth dries. I can't believe how tiny he is.

She makes a few noises under her breath.

"Everything's fine, right?" I ask.

“Mm-hmm,” she says distractedly. She clicks a few things on her computer, then returns her attention to me. “It’s perfect. Absolutely beautiful.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. My eyes grow hot, and I realize I’m about to cry.

I blink away tears, embarrassed to be so emotional. Dr. Silverman gives me an understanding look. “I’ll go to the other room where Edgar is. Just come on over when you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

I take some time to make myself presentable and compose my feelings, not wanting to look like a mess when I face Edgar again. He’s probably as calm and placid as ever, and I don’t want to be the only blubbery one.

When I make it back to the consultation room, Edgar turns his head to look at me. I start to smile, but my facial muscles freeze. His eyes are brilliant with undisguised emotion. Gratitude, relief, joy, happiness and a hundred others compete for prominence.

And suddenly it hits me how much he wants this baby. This isn’t just a duty or something he has to deal with because birth control accidentally failed one night.

My fluttery heart does an odd cartwheel and arabesque and leaps around in my chest, making me achy and unable to speak.

“She’s brilliant, so beautiful,” Edgar says, his voice raw.

“I told you it’s a boy.” That’s so much easier to say than telling him how much his reaction means to me. How it’s creating a deep connection between us.

I take the only empty seat left in the room. Edgar reaches over and threads his fingers through mine, our palms touching. I swear I can feel his pulse through his warm, bare skin.

Dr. Silverman laughs. “Well. We won’t know the gender for a while, although it looks like you two have different ideas about what you want.”

“I’d prefer a girl who takes after Jo, but I’ll be perfectly happy with a boy.” Edgar smiles.

I’ve seen a lot of smiles in my life. Friendly smiles. Fake smiles. Protective smiles. Maternal and paternal smiles. But this one from Edgar is so bright and beautiful that it feels like sunlight after a long, dark storm.

And I can’t even take a breath over the hot emotions churning inside me.

Dr. Silverman grins. “Good. I put everything in a handbook, including your due date.”

I accept a gorgeous green and yellow binder from her. It’s fairly small, but has lots of photo album pages to put in your ultrasound pictures. She’s already put in the first one with today’s date and the due date. I do some quick math. Eight months and two days.

When I got the result from the pregnancy test kit, it didn’t quite sink in that I was going to have a baby. Not for a while. But seeing the picture and dates makes it all too real.

Edgar places a kiss on my temple. “Thank you.”

Nodding, I put a hand over my belly. There’s a life growing inside me for the next eight months or so at least. And it’s my job to nurture it and ensure he’s safe and sound.

Dr. Silverman folds her hands. “Do you have any questions?”

“Can you tell me if Jo’s cleared for regular activities?” Edgar asks.

My cheeks heat. I know where this is going.

Dr. Silverman doesn’t seem fazed. She looks at me. “You’re cleared. And regular, moderate exercise will be good for the baby, so I recommend that. Eat healthy—protein, carbs, some good fat. There’s a section on nutrition in the notebook, but if you have any questions, please call or text me. My information is on the first page.” She glances at Edgar and smiles. “And yes, you can have sex. Just don’t get too...rough or experimental.”

The way she says “rough” makes me curious. “Do a lot of pregnant couples indulge in, ah, rough sex in your experience?”

“You’d be surprised.” She makes a whip-cracking noise and snaps her wrist. “You know.”

I stare, torn between laughter and horror. The doctor’s so proper, and has such a sweet, conservative appearance, one that implies she was a very studious girl in high school and college. But that gesture, and the sound effect... They’re so incongruous that it actually leaves me speechless.

Edgar closes his eyes briefly, but doesn’t say anything. Maybe he’s been stunned into submission as well.

She adds, “One woman was paddled during her second trimester. Then put on her stomach for intercourse. Not the best combination, especially when the husband was lying on her. Just...use common sense.” A bright “move along, nothing to see here” smile.

I probably shouldn’t probe, but I can’t help it. “Was the baby okay?”

“Yes, but the activities caused some bleeding and a little scare. Not good for the mother to be stressed like that. Stress hormones have negative consequences for the mother’s health, and the mother’s health is paramount for the health of the baby, obviously.”

Edgar clears his throat. “Well, then—”

“Of course, people who are into that sort of thing report that a good paddling can normally be great for stress relief. But with a baby in the picture...”

“Right. Yes, thank you.” Edgar stands, placing a restraining hand on my shoulder. He’s probably afraid I’ll ask another question.

“Please make a follow-up appointment with the receptionist on your way out,” Dr. Silverman says. “Congratulations again.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jo

Back in the car, I pull out the binder from the clinic and flip to the baby picture, while Edgar shuts my door and walks around. I can't help touching the tiny dot.

My baby. Mine and Edgar's.

He climbs into the car, closing the door. Then he leans closer, looking at the picture. "She's amazing."

"You aren't going to accept that it's a boy?" I tease.

"Nope. I know in my heart it's a girl."

I tilt my head, look at his handsome face. There's a soft gentleness in his usually somber and serious gaze. The man's glowing like he's the one carrying the bun.

This child is going to be spoiled rotten. I can feel it.

Although everything inside me says it's a boy, I want Edgar to get his wish, too. He seems so determined to have a girl. If we do, she's going to look adorable with his green eyes and black-brown hair. Maybe she'll inherit his grave temperament, too.

Is she going to be as stubborn and alpha as him too? That's going to be handful, especially when she'll have her daddy wrapped around her little finger.

My mind is already showing me a video of a small girl with an adorable scowl, demanding her daddy to do it her way or else.

Just—too—damn—cute!

I start laughing, and Edgar lifts his gaze from the picture. "What?"

"Just...the idea of utter dominance in a small package."

I wonder if her cheeks are going to turn tomato red as well. Mama told me mine used to when I was mad. She also said my cheeks swelled like a blowfish because I'd suck in air and try to hold my breath to scare everyone. Apparently, I threatened to not breathe until people did what I asked them. I don't remember any of that, but my parents have pictures from my toddler years.

Edgar nods. "The whip cracking? Yeah, you never know."

"Huh? What whip?"

"You know. What the doctor said."

That makes me laugh harder. "No. But...that was funny. In a bizarre way."

He imitates her whip-cracking sound, complete with the wrist flick. "I wonder what kind of impression I must've made to have her say that."

"I'm sure it's a standard pregnancy disclaimer," I say, happy to see him relaxed and laughing. He should do that more often. "Besides, I did ask for clarification."

"You did." He laughs again. "But she could've skipped mentioning the rough part."

"What, and get sued?"

He flicks the tip of my nose with the back of his index finger, his brilliant green eyes impossibly warm. "I guess we'll just have to control ourselves for the next eight months or so. No tight bondage corsets for you."

I blink at his light, flirty tone. Is he teasing me?

Oh my goodness. *He is*. Just look at the humor on his face!

And I like this side of him as much as I love his serious, controlled side.

I stick my tongue out. "Ha. I know whips aren't your thing."

"True." He lowers his voice dramatically. "I prefer paddles."

Oh my God, he sounds even sexier when he does that.
“Whatever. If that was your thing, you would’ve tried to at least spank me our first time. You didn’t.”

“Maybe I just didn’t want to risk having someone in my brother’s house hear the smacks.”

I pat his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m easily satisfied. Your vanilla missionary game isn’t bad,” I say, doing my best to ensure my lips aren’t twitching. And hopefully my nose isn’t growing ten inches.

Until Edgar, I’d never had the kind of orgasm that made my vision blur and my eyes cross. And it didn’t matter what position we were in. It was like magic.

And from the way my blood is humming in my veins, I know the magic’s still there. And I want to feel it again. *Now.*

I start to lean in, but before my lips can touch his, my phone rings.

Crap! Who is it?

I want to ignore it, but the moment’s broken. Edgar blinks, and my phone keeps ringing over and over. Clearly, whoever it is isn’t going to give up.

“This is Josephine,” I say in a tone that is, thankfully, professionally brisk.

“Oh, thank God! Help me! I don’t have a purse or any shoes for the gala this weekend!”

I pull the phone back and check the number. Maria Gomez. Figures. The woman only worries about her shoes and purses, even when she doesn’t have anything to wear—like actual dresses and matching underwear.

“I thought you were in Spain,” I say.

“Supposed to be, but then I changed my mind. I dumped Luciano.” She pauses.

It’s a cue. I make a sympathetic noise. “Oh *no*. That’s... *awful.*”

“Yeah, but he was getting boring. Like last year’s Valentino.”

I know for a fact that some of the purses in her closet still have tags on them. But I keep my mouth shut.

“Anyway, it’s to honor exceptional Mexican Americans who are making a difference. And I have to be there because Patrick’s going to be there.”

“Patrick?”

“My new boyfriend. It’s good to show your new man some support, especially early in the relationship.” She pauses again.

I say nothing. I don’t want to encourage her to dump more of her relationship stories on me.

“Don’t you agree?” she prompts me.

“Yes.”

“So can we meet in an hour? At my place? I’ll treat you to lunch.”

I hesitate. I want to say no and just hang out with Edgar for the rest of the day. Before I can give in to the impulse, a small voice in my head stops me.

When did you become so irresponsible and careless about your career? Maria is a good client. Okay, so she’s a little self-involved, but she pays on time and gives you a lot of referrals. And Edgar isn’t like many of your boyfriends who were fun but lacked substance. He actually has to manage a huge company, and he’s already spent a lot of his morning with you, rather than working.

Shame slowly courses through me, and I fidget as my neck and face grow warm. I shouldn’t just be thinking about what I want. When did I become so cavalier? If I already had an appointment, I’d reschedule Maria for sure...but I don’t.

I’ve already blown a meeting with David Darling’s assistant Erin, and I shouldn’t be ignoring Maria.

“Sure. I’ll see you then.”

“Thank you! You’re God’s gift to me!” she says before hanging up.

“What was that?” Edgar asks.

“A client. She has a purse emergency. But she did call me God’s gift.” I shake my head at her theatrics.

“At least she’s a good judge of character.” He smiles.

My heart does a dozen cartwheels as I wonder if he thinks I’m God’s gift to him as well.

“When are you going to be back?” he asks, driving toward the penthouse so I can get my car.

“Before dinner for sure. Want me to pick up something on the way?” I ask. “There’s a great pizzeria I’m going to drive past.”

“Great. Then grab a pizza. Whatever you want is fine.”

He takes my hand and kisses the fingertips. Somehow those kisses reach all the way to my heart, making my toes curl. And I know I’m going to carry this feeling with me all through the day.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Edgar

After dropping Jo off, I return to the penthouse and instruct one of the interior designers Rick recommended to bring her proposals over so I can review them later with Jo. Then I go into the home office and spend the afternoon reviewing reports, sending instructions and attending teleconferences. Late in the day I get a call from Heath, who wants to know if Nora is joining the project. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“I’m not sure,” I say, a mild headache developing.

“I see.” He pauses for a moment. “Okay, well... I, um, might turn down my position in the new project.”

This is unexpected, and a frustration I don’t need with someone who I thought had great potential. *Did I misjudge him?* “Why? It’s a great opportunity for you.”

“Not enough to put up with Paul Fontenot.”

Fuck. I didn’t see that coming. Dad and I agreed Paul wasn’t a good fit for this project. When did he change his mind? “When did he get added to the team?”

“Today.”

My teeth grind together. “I see. Well, don’t turn anything down just yet. Let me look into it first.”

“Okay.”

We hang up. I really don’t want to have another call with Dad...but now I have to.

Why is he doing this, anyway? We agreed on the team members yesterday.

I hit the button and put it on speaker.

“Lane Blackwood.”

“When were you going to tell me you put Paul Fontenot on the exploration project?”

“When you were back in town.”

He isn't even trying to hide the fact that he's being manipulative. And he has the gall to call women emotional and passive-aggressive.

“But now that you're calling, I guess I can tell you,” he says like he's about to discuss the weather in Tempérane.

I keep my tone level. “We agreed not to put him on the project.”

“He came by this morning and made a convincing case. The man only wants a chance to prove himself.”

“He's been with Blackwood Energy for over ten years. If he doesn't think he's proven himself, he should've resigned, instead of taking a promotion he doesn't deserve.”

“Paul has a child in college.”

“A son he had by his own choice. The company didn't issue him that child, and it isn't our responsibility.”

The words are unnecessarily cold and harsh, but I'm tired of this bullshit. If I'd had it my way, Paul would've been fired years ago when he was mouthing off at a manager—a woman—he didn't like. She eventually resigned, and she didn't have to spell it out for me to know she left due to the hostile work environment. It still pisses me off that we lost a great talent because of his attitude, and I resent that Dad has been protecting him. Paul would watch his mouth more if he knew he's worth about as much as a pen to me.

Something moves in my peripheral vision. I turn and see Jo standing at the door, her eyes wide.

Damn it. Did she hear what I just said?

“Well, if you'd been here,” Dad says, “maybe we could've discu—”

“Gotta go.” I hang up and get out of my chair. Anxiety is tightening its grip. Paul deserves every bit of my contempt, but

Jo doesn't know who he is or anything about the situation.

For some reason, Jo's opinion of me matters at the most fundamental level. The way your parents' opinion mattered when you were a child, or your first girlfriend's.

"Um...pizza's here," she says.

I search her face, her open expression. There doesn't seem to be any condemnation. Perhaps she's gotten over the shock and decided to hide her feelings.

Somehow that makes it worse. It reminds me of my family. We simply didn't discuss anything that doesn't make the family look good and in control.

But I've seen Jo and her family. They're nothing like us Blackwoods. They talk things out, react honestly.

Shivers run through me. I feel like I'm being pushed out of that circle of warmth.

"Jo..." I pause, unsure how to explain it all. *My dad is a genteel sexist, who believes he's helping women with his subtle discrimination. If that isn't bad enough, he's trying to get back with my cold, amoral mother because he's decided he loves her after all and despite the divorce. Meanwhile, I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you away from them. I don't want you anywhere near the toxic ugliness of my family or to turn into someone like my mom.*

But the words get stuck. A lifetime of conditioning is a bitch to overcome. *The Blackwoods do not discuss certain things.*

Even if the other person is the mother of my child, the woman I plan to marry.

"Look, you don't have to explain." Jo comes over and runs her fingers across my forehead. The touch feels amazing, and I let out a sigh. The throbbing in my head lessens. "You should frown less," she says. "It's not good for you. Makes you tense."

That's all she has to say? "Did...you hear what I said on the phone?"

She nods.

“Weren’t you...” I hesitate, suddenly feeling ridiculous and needy. I shove my hands into my pockets.

She shrugs. “It wasn’t all that nice, but it wasn’t the worst thing I’ve ever heard. You should hear what Rafael, Jorge and Rinaldo say to their people when they slack off or give excuses for poor performance.”

“But you seemed surprised.”

“Because it’s a little weird that you can maintain such control even when you’re mad. I could see the tendons in your neck. But you didn’t raise your voice, not even once.”

The knot in my gut eases. “It doesn’t do much good to raise one’s voice on the phone.”

She smiles. “That’s right. Besides, it might hurt your throat. And I’m very partial to your voice, Mr. Blackwood.”

Her playful tone makes me almost smile, and the day’s irritation melts away. “Are you, now?”

“Uh-huh. You’re totally hot, don’t get me wrong, but it was the voice that sealed the deal for me.”

She isn’t the first to compliment me on it, and I never once cared one way or the other. A voice is a voice, and it isn’t like I ever dreamed of having a singing career. But I like it that *she* likes it.

Man, it sounds like you are starting to fall for her.
Suddenly, it’s like Tony and Court are whispering in my head.

“Come on. Let’s have the pizza before it gets cold,” Jo says, tugging at my hand. “I got a sausage mushroom and a pepperoni with pineapple.”

I link our fingers together and kiss the soft skin on the back of her hand. “That sounds positively appalling.”

I let her lead me downstairs to the kitchen, since she’s right about us needing to eat. It’s dinner time.

Her cheeks flush as she laughs. “I know, but when I saw the pineapple on the topping section, I couldn’t help myself. It

was calling my name.”

“The way a well-made purse calls your name? Is pepperoni a new Italian designer?”

She stiffens in shock, her eyes wide. “Oh my God... Was that a *joke*?”

Perhaps I’m becoming better at this. At least she realized I was making an attempt...although she still didn’t laugh. Must come up with a line that’s going to make her at least giggle.

I nod. I don’t like the sensation I’m feeling—as though I’m back in high school and scored a B on a test I needed an A on.

“Wow!” She grins. “Well...it was a *designer* pizza...”

My emotions shift, an unseen earthquake that only I can sense shaking me up. *She joking with me. We’re...bantering.* Since I can’t label exactly what I’m experiencing and can’t think of how to respond, I merely smile at her and start toward the dining table.

The intercom rings.

“Did you order something?” Jo asks.

“No. Did you?”

“Nope.” She goes to the intercom and squints at the screen. “I think it’s Ivy and your brother. And a couple of other people...”

“What?” I join her to see, and sure enough, Tony, Ivy, Court and Pascal are all staring into the fish-eye camera. I added them to the approved guest list, along with Jo’s family, but didn’t realize they’d visit so soon.

I hit the speaker button. “What are you doing here?”

“We aren’t lost, in case you’re wondering,” Court says. “Thought you could use some dinner.”

“We brought Thai,” Ivy says.

“From your favorite place in the city,” Tony adds. “It smells really good.” Then he sniffs the air exaggeratedly.

“I already have dinner,” I say dryly.

“Oh, come on. We just want to see Jo!” Court says. “If I wait for you to get around to it, I won’t see her until the wedding.”

Sighing at my family’s caring but slightly embarrassing theatrics, I look at Jo. “Sorry about this.” And she was worried about *her* family invading our home.

She smiles. “I don’t mind. I want to meet your other brother. And I do love Thai.”

I hit the button and let them in. I knew Court and Pascal would want to meet Jo sooner or later. Today’s just as good a time as any. Hopefully, nobody does or says anything too cringe-worthy. I trust Ivy and Pascal, but Tony and Court?

They’re brothers.

A few moments later, they pile into our home. Tony and Court look particularly proud of themselves, while Ivy and Pascal are studying the penthouse with avid curiosity.

“You should’ve called,” I say.

“You would’ve ignored us.” After placing two huge paper bags on the table, Court goes to Jo and extends his hand. “I’m Court, easily the best looking and the most talented of the Blackwood brothers.”

Jo laughs, taking his hand and pumping it firmly. “Is that the consensus?”

“In his dreams,” Tony says.

“Hi, Anthony,” Jo says.

“Call me Tony,” he says. “We’re family now. Well, almost.” He smiles.

Good. He’s obviously accepted Jo, which makes things easier. Only his closest friends and family can call him Tony.

“I’m Pascal, Court’s fiancée,” Pascal says. “Just so you know, he calls me Skittles.”

“Skittles? Like...the candy?” Jo asks.

“It’s a long story.” Her cheeks flush a bit, and she smiles.

“Are these Chianti?” Ivy says, sitting down at the dining table and looking at a couple of bottles of wine next to two boxes of pizzas. “I thought you were pregnant, Jo.”

“Jo, there wasn’t any reason to get wine,” I say, not wanting Jo and Ivy to feel left out. Jo undoubtedly loves a good vintage. Otherwise her uncle wouldn’t be sending cases from his vineyard.

“Don’t worry,” Jo says. “It’s not a real Chianti, just a virgin version.”

“Virgin wine? Isn’t that just grape juice that’s been corked?” I pick up the bottle. It even has a fancy-looking label. I shake my head inwardly.

“Probably. But again, it looked interesting, so of course I wanted to get it.”

Tony and Court come over to study the label with me.

“Never heard of it,” Tony says with a deep frown of a concerned connoisseur. I can tell he wants to say more, but is restraining himself to avoid upsetting the women.

“We’ll need a corkscrew for this. Way too much work for juice, if you ask me,” Court says.

I agree silently. I don’t even like grape juice that much. Too sweet.

“Don’t judge. I haven’t had wine in forever,” Ivy says with mock sternness, her hand over her large belly.

“And you still won’t have after you drink this bottle,” Tony says.

Jo shrugs and drapes an arm over Ivy’s shoulder. “Hey, more for us if they don’t want any. Right? It’s going to be fun.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Jo

I smile with satisfaction when Edgar and his brothers finally give up grumbling about the wine and sit down at the table with us girls. I'm glad I have the virgin Chianti to distract him. When I told the pizzeria owner I was pregnant, the nice lady threw in the bottle to celebrate. It was sweet of her, and she said she likes hearing good news from her regular customers. So I bought an extra bottle, just in case I like it. The pizzeria is a bit out of the way.

Although I couldn't hear the other side of Edgar's phone conversation earlier, I knew it was nothing good from the way his expression darkened. So I'm doubly happy his brothers and their women are here. It's obvious he loves them from the way his eyes glow. He's smiling more easily too.

It's a relief. After reading articles about his family, I thought maybe there'd be some undercurrent of tension. I didn't sense anything particular between him and Tony at the party, but then, they hardly had any interaction.

He splits the pizza, giving me a slice of the sausage and mushroom and taking a piece of pepperoni and pineapple for himself. Court and Tony get busy, spreading out the Thai food they brought and handing out paper plates, bowls and plastic utensils to everyone.

I pour the "wine" into six glasses, hoping it tastes better than just plain old grape juice.

Edgar picks his up. Everyone else is watching, waiting for the guinea pig's reaction. He swirls it around gravely, eyes the way it cascades down the inside of the glass and then sniffs it ostentatiously. I sense my lips twitch. It's cute to see him looking so serious about cheap non-alcohol wine. Finally, he takes a sip.

“How is it?” I ask.

Tony squints with exaggerated intensity. “A worthy vintage?”

“Huh.” Edgar lifts his eyebrows.

Ivy’s looking at him, undoubtedly willing him to say it’s good. Tony and Court appear dubious, and Pascal maintains a polite smile.

“That bad?” I tease when Edgar doesn’t volunteer more information.

“Actually... It’s fruity.” His tone is serious as he studies the glass. “Very fruity. Sweet, but not overly sweet. Some tannins in the finish.”

I have to laugh. He might as well be talking about a Bordeaux from Château Ausone. “So you’re saying it passed?”

“It’s certainly drinkable. And better than just juice.”

“I’m glad you approve,” I say with an exaggerated sigh of relief.

“Awesome,” Court says, obviously happy he doesn’t have to drink grape juice.

“Hold on a minute,” Tony says. He goes through the same process Edgar did, then takes a sip, holding it in his mouth a few moments longer than usual before swallowing. “Damn. It *is* pretty good.”

We clink glasses.

“To Jo and Edgar. May you be happy and in love forever,” Tony says with a wide grin.

At the mention of love, my heart constricts a bit as confusion and surprise flood through me. Didn’t Edgar tell them about how he feels about me? Or is it something that Tony just assumed?

From Court, Ivy and Pascal’s pleased expressions, it’s obvious that Edgar’s family believes that Edgar and I are together out of love. And Edgar’s looking at the four with a fond smile, like he’s grateful for their acceptance of our

relationship and he has nothing to correct about what Tony just said.

With more control than I thought I could muster, I maintain my cheery face. I don't want anybody to think anything's wrong. And maybe, just maybe, Edgar didn't correct Tony because he's starting to have some feelings for me. He's been much more open about wanting our relationship to become permanent—marriage and all. So it is possible that even though he initially said he didn't love me, he's starting to come around.

It puts me in an optimistic mood.

We start eating. As soon as food hits my belly, I realize I'm actually really hungry.

"So tell me what you do. I've never worked with a fashion consultant," Pascal says.

"You want to hire her?" Court asks.

"I might, if I knew what it entailed."

"Nothing complicated. I just make sure you look your best for whatever occasion you need to be at," I say.

"And she handles fashion emergencies," Edgar adds.

"Emergencies?" Ivy asks. "What would constitute a fashion emergency?"

In between bites, I tell them about the Maria drama I had to deal with today. Of course, I don't mention her name. "She'd go around naked if I didn't stop her, because she honestly doesn't understand she needs to buy more than purses and shoes."

"Can't she just wear what's in her closet? That'd be better than going nude," Tony says.

I shudder. "I can't even *imagine* what she'd do if I were to suggest such a thing. Probably carve my eyeballs out, then immediately go see her manicurist to fix her nails. She would literally rather die than be seen in the same thing twice."

“I hate to say it, but she sounds like a bit of a diva,” Ivy says, waving her fork.

I nod, because as much as I love Maria, she is *totally* spoiled.

Edgar shakes his head. “You don’t charge her enough, Jo.”

“You don’t think so?” I try to hide how absurdly pleased I am with that assessment. Most men say I get paid *too* much... especially my exes.

“You put up with a lot of nonsense to spare your clients the public embarrassment they’d suffer without you. That’s got to be worth quite a bit, especially to people who care so much about their image.”

Does he know what he’s saying is sexier and hotter than him whispering I’m beautiful? A lot of people try to flatter me about my appearance, but not many tell me things that validate what I do.

“What he said.” Ivy swallows a bite of pad thai. “And I swear I will never be that client. Ever.”

“Seriously. And I thought *I* had some weirdo clients,” Pascal says.

“What do you do?” I ask.

“I work at Omega Wealth Management.”

What a small world. That’s where Hilary works too. “Gavin Lloyd’s company, right?”

Pascal blinks. “Yeah. Are you a client there?”

I laugh. “I wish. I’m not rich enough for Gavin. One of my best friends is his assistant.”

“Oh, Hilary Pryce! She’s so wonderful,” Pascal says.

“And soon, you’ll be rich enough for Gavin, too. Then you can have Pascal manage your money for you.” Court beams at his fiancée, his entire body glowing with pride. Then he leans over toward me and lowers his voice in mock conspiracy.

“She’s *rrreally* good.”

I almost drop my virgin Chianti at how easily he mentions my new wealth status. I didn't even think about it. I mean... Yeah, I live in an incredible penthouse I'd never be able to afford on my own. And I know that Edgar is rich. But the notion that *his* money is going to become *my* money isn't something I'd ever really considered.

"That's true," Tony says. "Pascal's good, and I'm not just saying that because she's going to be my sister-in-law. She's worth ten million times what Court is."

"That only makes it half a billion," Court jokes. "Surely she's worth at least ten billion."

Pascal and Ivy both shake their heads, rolling their eyes in unison.

Hmm. I feel like I'm missing something.

Edgar leans over and whispers, "Pascal left Court fifty bucks after their first time together. That's what they're talking about."

She paid him to sleep with her...?

"...Tempérane, Jo?"

I swivel my head. Court's looking at me. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I was asking if you're going to relocate to Tempérane."

Oh. My eyes dart to Edgar. We haven't really discussed this. I brought it up once in the parking lot after the dinner at Manny's, but we never got to talk about it.

"I mean, it isn't like Edgar can just quit his job," Court says. Then he winces. "Ow."

"Sorry," Tony says. "Leg twitch." He gives the table a forced smile. "Obviously, it's up to Jo to decide what she wants to do, and there's no reason for us to be nosy."

What's all this about? Was Court not supposed to bring up Tempérane, or...?

Before I can answer, Edgar waves his hand dismissively. "Don't worry. I won't be asking Jo to go."

His firm, decisive tone makes me pull back. What does it mean? And when was all this decided? How is this living arrangement supposed to work if I'm here and he's...over there?

"You won't...?" I say finally.

"No. Tempérane isn't for you. You should be here, in L.A."

Edgar's telling me what I've been thinking. What I hoped I could do. If I stay, I don't have to start over—or worse, give up the career I love so much. But at the same time, there's a part of me that hates this dead-set stance. Shouldn't he at least try to convince me Louisiana isn't so bad? That we should live together? He said he wanted to marry me, but did he mean we'll be married in name only?

If so, why did he look so damned pleased just moments ago when Tony made that toast?

I realize my unease stems from the fact that he's talking like I'm never going to Tempérane. Ever. But that doesn't make any sense. His parents are there. If he wants to marry me, shouldn't he at least introduce me to them? I just can't imagine hiding the person I'm about to marry from my parents, unless I was ashamed of him. Like with Aaron.

Oh my God. Does Edgar think I'm a female version of Aaron?

"But that doesn't mean I don't want to visit," I add, my tone overly casual to hide my unhappiness and confusion.

"Perhaps later. It's probably not good to fly while pregnant," Edgar says.

His answer is like a slap. He knows all we have to do is call Dr. Silverman to ask if I'm healthy enough to travel if he's that worried. Besides, she cleared me for "all activities." Doesn't that include flying?

Court looks down at his wine. Ivy starts to open her mouth, but the intercom rings. I get up, not out of a particular desire to answer it, but to escape from the awkwardness that just fell over the table and give myself some time to regroup.

I can hear furious whispers behind me. *Crap*. Now—somehow—I feel like an outsider in what’s supposed to be my own house. If there are some...things about Tempérane, they can just tell me. It’s not like I’m going to scream and run.

On the intercom screen is a man I’ve never seen before, although something about him seems familiar. He’s angled slightly away from the camera, so it’s hard to figure out. About the only thing I can tell is that he’s in a dark suit.

“Yes?” I say.

A polite male voice comes from the speaker. It isn’t the man shown on the screen, though. “Sorry to bother you, Ms. Martinez. This is Jake from the security desk. A man claiming to be Mr. Edgar Blackwood’s father is here. You should be able to see him on the monitor. He isn’t on the guest list, so I wanted to confirm before I allow him up. I already verified his ID, and his name is Tulane Blackwood, if that helps.”

The man finally turns around to face the camera, and the resemblance is unmistakable. I stare at the screen in surprise. *Isn’t he supposed to be in Louisiana?* On the other hand, maybe he just decided to drop by, like Edgar’s brothers.

If I weren’t feeling like Edgar is trying to hide me from his parents, I’d probably say something to him first. But rebellion and pride urge me to let this man in...and see what Edgar does. He must really be determined to keep me away from his parents if he didn’t bother to put his father on the guest list.

Ashamed of me or not, buddy, I’m going to at least meet your daddy.

“Sure,” I say with a sidelong glance back at the table. “Let him up.”

Chapter Forty

Jo

“Who was that?” Edgar asks when I turn away from the intercom.

I give him a bland smile. “Your father.”

A mix of shock and annoyance crosses his face like lightning. “What? Are you sure?”

I nod. Why is it such a big deal that I get to meet his dad?

But Edgar isn’t the only one reacting oddly. Everyone else at the table freezes. Tony and Court exchange a glance. Ivy is staring at her plate like a winning lottery number is hidden in the sauce patterns left on it.

Hmm. Maybe I shouldn’t have let him in.

Too late now, though. The private elevator dings as the car arrives on our floor.

All the men stand. Tony and Court move next to Ivy and Pascal. Edgar comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

They’re standing like warriors guarding hard-won treasures against an intruder. *But it’s their father.*

What the hell is going on?

Finally, the elevator doors part and Tulane Blackwood walks in. In person, he looks a lot like Edgar. The same dark hair, the same green eyes. And the same imposing physical presence. Even his outfit is similar—a pinstriped navy Brioni suit and Prada loafers. A conservative tie and a discreet but expensive diamond and gold bar is pinned to the strip of silk.

But that’s where the similarities end. Edgar can come across as cold because of his control. This man *is* cold. I

always thought green was a warm color, but Tulane's eyes are like emeralds under a sheet of ice.

His gaze sweeps over Tony and Ivy with inscrutable aloofness mixed with a tinge of shame. A sliver of disappointment fleets through his eyes when he notices Court... And is it resentment I sense when he glances at Pascal?

Shit. I really shouldn't have let him up.

He regards Edgar with the disapproval a parent might reserve for a wild child he doesn't know how to manage. But I must be mistaken about that. There's no way Edgar is unruly.

But finally Edgar's dad turns his focus on me. He studies me from head to toe, then back up. I feel like a returned purse being inspected by a shop clerk from the careful attention he pays to me. Do I have popped stitches along my neck or a stain on my fabric?

When he's done, he seems mildly surprised.

I guess that means I passed the inspection...? Except it doesn't make me feel any better.

"Father," Edgar says coolly. "What are you doing here?"

"Since you're refusing to come back to Tempérane and resume your responsibilities, I decided to come see what's been keeping you here." Edgar's dad's voice is flat but smooth and cultured, with Louisiana as thick as frosting on top. *Heah*. "And now I see. Aren't you going to introduce us?"

Edgar looks like he'd rather jump out a window. "This is Josephine Martinez. Jo, this is my father, Tulane Blackwood."

"The woman you're going to marry," Edgar's dad says.

"Yes."

Edgar's dad turns to me, his expression polite but probing. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Josephine." *Plezhah*.

"Jo's fine. The pleasure's mine, Mr. Blackwood," I say neutrally. I want him gone, but I can't be rude now after letting him up.

“You may call me Lane.” His tone is coolly arrogant, and his attitude says he doesn’t care that he comes across that way. Or maybe he just doesn’t realize.

Maybe he’s going to hold a hand out so I can kiss his ring. He’s wearing a square one on his right ring finger.

“Hello, Ivy. I see you’re quite large now,” he says.

“She’s expecting twins,” Tony says. He’s tense. Way, way too tense.

“Ah, yes.” Lane turns to Pascal. “And you must be Pascal. So when are you and my son finally going to tie the knot? It’s not good to drag out an engagement. Makes people wonder.”

“When we get around to it, Dad,” Court says. “I’m sure your social circle has better things to worry about than our engagement-to-marriage timeline.”

Oh, wow. Court seemed like such an easygoing guy. I would’ve never thought him capable of delivering such a cold response to his own father. If one of my brothers said something like that, Mama would beat him with a wooden spatula and kick him out without dinner.

On the other hand, I can’t even imagine my family talking to each other this way.

Lane looks at him dispassionately, then goes to the sink to wash his hands and dry them with a paper towel. That done, he gestures at the table like he’s hosting a grand banquet. “Let’s eat, shall we? I’m famished.”

Tony, Ivy and Court look away. It’s obvious they want to leave but don’t want Edgar and me to deal with Lane by ourselves.

Anxiety slowly unfurls within me. It isn’t like I’ve never met a guy’s parent. I met Aaron’s family, including his grandfather, and I was fine with the entire event. But this feels like a job interview.

We all settle back down, our earlier easy mood replaced by an awkward tension. I’m not sure how we’re supposed to eat without getting indigestion later.

But all the Blackwoods, including Ivy, start eating. Maybe they're used to this. After looking around, Pascal shrugs, finishes her drink and takes a slice of pizza. I nibble on my food only because my baby's going to need the nourishment.

"I think she'll do well in Tempérane," Lane says between bites of pepperoni pizza. At least he's picking it up with a hand to eat it, rather than getting a knife and fork to cut it into perfectly square pieces. It wouldn't have surprised me.

"She might enjoy a very short visit, if she feels up to it, but she's very busy," Edgar says.

I have a feeling he's being circumspect for my sake, and I keep my mouth shut, since the last thing I want is to get in the middle of whatever's going on between the two. Edgar cares about what happens to me, but clearly Lane doesn't. I can see that now. I don't know his real objective for being here, but I'm sure he'd gladly walk right over me to get it.

"Nonsense." Lane turns to me with a smile. "I'm sure Edgar has told you all about your new role as his fiancée and...wife."

My role? Does he want a résumé?

Since that's not an appropriate response, I say nothing and smile back. I also don't mention the baby, because I'd bet every Chanel purse I own that the role Lane's talking about doesn't involve making babies.

"She doesn't need to worry about all that," Edgar says. "She's staying in Los Angeles, where her job is."

"Plus, she won't fit into Louisiana high society anyway." Court looks at me. "See, down South, we know if you're related by both blood *and* marriage, it's twice as good." He winks, then says, "Ow!" very loudly.

Lane ignores him, still focused on Edgar. "Are you saying she won't be carrying on the legacy?" He gives me an assessing look. "A bit of polish and she should be fine."

What's that ringing sound I hear? Oh yes, must be the endorsement. No wonder Edgar didn't want me to meet his parents. This is embarrassing—for everyone involved.

“Can we have dinner without discussing the family legacy?” Edgar says flatly. “Jo isn’t interested in that.”

“You can’t just enjoy the benefits without taking on any of the responsibilities,” Lane insists. “Look at Court.”

The temperature in the room seems to drop ten degrees. I wish the floor would open up, swallow Lane and spit him out in China...

I don’t even know what “family legacy” entails. It might be something simple, and agreeing to it might ease the tension between Edgar and his dad.

“Edgar’s right,” Ivy interjects before I can say anything. “Why don’t we postpone the discussion for later? Tension isn’t good for digestion.” She lays a hand over her stomach with a small frown.

“We wouldn’t want you to feel bad,” Lane says immediately. His response is sincere, but I have a feeling it isn’t out of love or concern. “Your babies are so important.”

“One girl and one boy,” Tony adds. His blue gaze is so piercing that I don’t know how Lane can hold it.

“One girl. Well...” Lane sighs. “Let’s just eat.”

He doesn’t bring up the family legacy or responsibilities for the rest of the evening. But I can’t help but think he’s going to try to talk about them again, if not with both Edgar and me together, then at least with us separately.

He didn’t come all the way to Los Angeles just to be thwarted. I’ll be damned, though, if I let him use me to hurt Edgar.

Chapter Forty-One

Jo

Thankfully, Lane leaves when Tony, Ivy, Court and Pascal do. Not because he wants to, but because Tony puts a hand over his shoulder and gestures at the door with his chin. The tension drops to normal as the elevator doors close behind them, and I let out a relieved breath.

Edgar and I toss all the paper plates and plastic utensils, then put the leftovers in the fridge. I nibble my lip, debating if I should ask Edgar about the supposed “role” his father was talking about.

But Edgar said it wasn’t something I needed to worry about. And the tension in his shoulders and neck is finally beginning to ease. If I bring up the topic now, it’ll only ruin the rest of the evening.

Also, I’d rather not waste more of my time on Lane. He’s oddly unpleasant man. It isn’t because he can’t make good conversation—he was actually somewhat charming once he quit trying to talk about me and this legacy business. He told some funny stories and he was solicitous toward Ivy. But something just felt off about his interactions with everyone. Like there was nothing genuine behind them.

So I’m not going to worry about him, especially after his somewhat snobbish attitude toward me.

“About what my father said about the family legacy and all that,” Edgar begins, his words deliberate. “I don’t want you to worry about any of it.”

“I know. He can ask me to come to Tempérane all he wants, but I’m not going until you and I decide we should. And I’m sorry I let him in. I didn’t realize he was going to be so...odd,” I say, settling on the nicest word I can come up with for Lane.

Edgar smiles, although it isn't the bright version I saw at the doctor's office. "It's not a problem. You would have had to meet him at some point."

"Anyway, let's not waste the evening talking about him. I have to do some admin work to wrap up tonight. How about you?"

"I have a report I can go over," he says.

I sit on an armchair and send invoices to clients for half an hour. I always try to send them as quickly as possible, but sometimes my schedule is such that I have to wait until I have some free time.

Once that's done, I go to the bathroom and get ready for bed.

I skim my hand over the brand-new magenta-pink silk nightie I bought on impulse today when I was out and about with Maria. But tonight isn't going to be just about sleeping.

Sex.

It's been in the back of my mind. There's no way Edgar and I aren't doing it. The crazy pull we felt for each other the night we met was still there today after the appointment. We would've kissed—and done a lot more—if Maria hadn't called.

I even bought a pair of crotchless panties to go with the nightie. The spaghetti straps are tied so all Edgar has to do is tug and the luxurious material will slide down my body... caressing my bare skin...

I start feeling hot and flushed just thinking about it.

When I come out of the bathroom, Edgar's on the bed, topless like he too is aware we could be doing more than just sleeping tonight. I smile with anticipation until I notice he's frowning at the tablet in his large hand. Business?

He said I wasn't relocating, but how would that work for him? I can't imagine having him only on weekends because he has to be in Louisiana all the time. But his job is obviously important as well.

We should probably talk about it in detail soon. Our situation isn't something that's going to be resolved with one person carrying all the burden. But not tonight. Not when I'm in the sexiest nightie I own.

"Hey," I say as I climb on the bed next to him. "Anything wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a minor report. I'm done."

He puts the tablet away on the stand on his side, his gaze roaming over me, head to toe and back. His eyes are moving slower with each passing moment, then finally stop at the knots on my shoulder straps.

I wait, my heart hammering. It's critically important that he likes what he sees. Now I wish I'd spent more time looking over what was available at the lingerie boutique. I might've found something better. This need for approval from a specific person is unfamiliar and slightly uncomfortable. I pride myself on being able to pull off any look I want, and I didn't care too much as long as I could project the image and mood I wanted.

Edgar finally places a finger under one of the knots. "Do these come undone?"

My mouth is too dry. So I nod instead.

A smile slowly spreads over his gorgeous face. It isn't one of his somber smiles. It's light and brilliant, full of wickedness and heat.

The impact hits me like half a bottle of tequila. I feel nearly dizzy—drunk. How can he do this to me, so easily, so effortlessly?

My heart knocks against my ribs harder. I lick my lips...

...and his mouth takes mine, his hot hand cradling the back of my head. He's kissing me like he can't wait—that he's been waiting for too long.

I kiss him back, our tongues sliding against each other. My God, the man tastes delicious—dark and decadent, with a hint of honey and something that's uniquely Edgar.

My eager lips locked on to his, I run my hands along his bare torso. There's such corded strength in his lean, muscled body, such need in the rapid thudding of his heart against my palm.

Heat prickles along my nerve endings, goosebumps breaking out. The flesh between my legs, already slick, throbs, like it remembers what Edgar can do to me—and how much I crave that experience again.

His mouth leaves mine. I whimper at the loss. I need more. So much more.

I reach out, trying to bring his head down again. But he moves, turning me around and positioning me in front of him, his knees spreading my thighs wide. The air on my pussy feels cool, reminding me I'm in crotchless panties. With my back against his chest, I can feel his thick, steely erection pressing against my ass.

“Open your eyes,” he says, his breath hot against the side of my neck.

I do. And see our reflection in the smoked mirror on the wall opposite us.

My lips are swollen and red, mouth parted. The thin material of my nightie can't hide the outline of my pointed nipples. I look scandalously indecent with my legs apart, the pink folds glistening.

I raise my gaze and seek Edgar's face in the mirror. Every plane is hard and stretched tight, his dark eyes even darker and hotter.

Air catches in my throat. Helplessly, I watch his lips on my neck, his large, searing hand on my breast.

“When I saw the mirrors, I thought they'd be perfect for you—to make sure you look the way you want the world to see you. But I also realized they'd be perfect for this, too.”

“Did you give it a lot of thought?” I say, trying to tease, but failing. I sound too breathless with anticipation.

“Way too much, although I tried not to, not until the doctor checked you out first.”

With his teeth, he tugs at the strap on my shoulder. It comes apart, and the triangular fabric covering one of my breasts falls forward, exposing the beaded tip to his hungry gaze. He pinches the nipple between his thumb and index finger, then rolls it gently.

Pleasure streaks all over, until my clit starts tingling. It’s one thing to feel what he’s doing to me, but something else to watch it. It seems filthier, somehow more wicked.

I can’t tear my gaze away as he plays with my breast, lets his free hand skim along my body. Electric excitement builds as his fingers travel lower...lower...

His hand hovers over my exposed flesh. He nips my earlobe, making me gasp.

“You’re so damn wet for me. Just look.”

He pulls my folds apart. I look, my breath uneven and panting. Even in the smoked mirror, I can see the glistening between my legs.

My face is so hot—partly with embarrassment and partly with anticipation. I’ve never seen myself down there like this.

“You’re so pink and pretty.” He digs his fingers between the folds, gliding over my clit and making me cry out as blissful pleasure cuts through me. “So responsive.”

I moan, half going out of my mind.

“All mine.” He slips a finger into me.

My groan grows louder. My senses are overloading. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping it’ll restore some control.

“Uh-uh. Open your eyes,” he commands.

“I can’t. It’s too much.”

“Yes, you can.” He stops moving.

“No, no, no. Don’t do that,” I beg.

“Then keep your eyes open. Watch what I’m doing to you and how you’re responding.”

With an effort, I open my eyes again.

And he resumes. He’s kneading my breast, then tweaks and tugs at my nipple, until all I can do is dig my nails into his hips behind me and whimper.

Then I see—and feel—his fingers moving in and out of me, filling me, bumping into my G-spot. His breath, rough and harsh, fans the sensitive skin at my neck. Intense focus pulls his eyebrows together. I see my chest rising and falling rapidly, my eyes glazed over.

I don’t even look like me.

I look like a shameless sex goddess, my hips moving greedily. Ecstasy builds, tension unbearable.

“Come.” Edgar bites my shoulder, hard enough for me to feel the sharp edge of his teeth, but not hard enough to break the skin.

The pain pushes me over. I climax so hard that my vision blurs. My whole body goes limp in Edgar’s arms. I vaguely register him murmuring sweet nothings—not the words, but the soft cadence in that amazing baritone.

I twist around so I can cradle his face and kiss him, gradually becoming aware that his cock is pushing against me insistently. I want to see him drive into me. And I realize the best way to do that is for me to get on my hands and knees and have him take me from behind.

Once the dirty image pops into my head, it won’t leave. My body grows more heated and needier, like I didn’t just come hard enough to nearly black out. I yank the nightie off, so I’m in nothing but the matching crotchless underwear.

His eyes flaring with heat, Edgar takes off his boxers. His cock juts out, hard and thick. The head glistens with precum, and I lick my lips. Maybe later I’ll take him in my mouth and suck him until his eyes roll back. But for now, I want him inside me.

He dips his head, closing his mouth around my nipple. At the same time, he pushes me back until I'm lying down. I cry out at the delicious sensation, my toes curling. My spine arches, every cell in my body striving for more.

"You're so sweet," he says against my breast. "Every time I look at you, I just want to..."

He trails off as his mouth starts moving downward, and I know exactly what's on his mind. As much as I want him there, I want him inside me more.

"I want you to take me from behind."

I hear myself say it, and I can't decide if I'm stunned or turned on. I'm never really explicitly demanding in bed. But for some reason, with Edgar, I feel safe and comfortable enough to tell him. I know he won't judge. No, he'll give me exactly what I need because he gets off on my pleasure.

And that's hot as hell.

"Whatever you want, baby," he says, his eyes aflame.

Excitement sparks along my spine. I roll over, then raise myself on my hands and knees and turn my head so I can look at our reflection.

Edgar positions himself behind me. "Tell me if anything feels wrong," he says, caressing my belly.

His concern for me and our baby touches me. I arch my back, silently urging him.

He pushes forward. I watch his thick cock gliding into me. Holy God. It's more erotic than I ever thought possible. Shivers run through me.

"That feels amazing," I say. "More."

Hissing softly, he starts to thrust. With every drive, a little bit of his control slips. I can see it on his face—the way his eyes glaze, the hunger blazing.

And as the veneers of civilization and control start to erode, he seems to become more animalistic. Raw. Immediate. Power vibrates tightly in every line of his gorgeous, lean body.

And I couldn't want him more than I do now.

"Yes, yes!" I say, moving to the rhythm he sets.

It feels like I'm drowning in a pool of carnal delight. I moan as I sink deeper and deeper into the pleasure, words devolving into just sounds... Until, with a scream, I come hard, clenching around him.

He curses, his breathing rough and fast over the sound of his skin slapping against mine. The muscles in his arms and ass tighten, and he grips my hips hard, his head thrown back as he empties himself into me.

Pulling me closer until I'm cradled in his arms, he lies down. I wrap my arms around him...listen to his racing heartbeat...

...and start to slide down into sleep. For some reason, I think I hear him whisper, "I'm never taking you to Tempérane..."

He says something more, but I don't quite catch it. The words coming out of his mouth are important, but I'm too exhausted.

We can talk about it later.

I let myself go.

Chapter Forty-Two

Edgar

The next morning, I'm up early. Jo's curled against me, her warm weight sweet under the sheets. It's tempting to stay in, maybe kiss her awake. My dick's certainly eager enough.

But there's work to be done. The more I can convince everyone—and myself—that I can be effective away from Tempérane, the more time I can spend in Los Angeles.

I don't know what Dad thought he would get out of barging into my home last night, but now I want to be in Louisiana even less. He tries to call, but I ignore him. He should go back if he's that concerned about being hands-on.

When I'm done with the status meeting, I hear Jo yawning as she pads down the long hall.

Smiling, I get up from my chair to join her.

“Good morning.” I place a kiss on her forehead, then wrap my arm around her waist as we walk down the steps.

She flushes. “Morning. How can you be so cheery? It's early.”

She's adorable when she grumbles with those sleepy eyes. “Because I have my arm around a beautiful woman.”

“You had coffee, too, didn't you?”

“Yup.” I pat her consolingly.

“It's not fair,” she whines.

“Why don't we text Dr. Silverman and ask? She might say you can have a cup or two a day.”

“Hilary said she isn't drinking coffee. If she's not drinking it, then I can't either.”

“How come?” *Hilary?* Does she have a medical degree or something?

“Because she’s more of a coffee addict than me. If she can give it up for her baby, I should too. Otherwise, what kind of mom does that make me?”

“One who really needs caffeine to function?” I offer, hoping it makes her feel better.

She shakes her head morosely. “It’s okay. I’ll just try to get extra sleep.”

We have toasted bagels and cream cheese. I offer her some lox, but she turns it down with a face. “Ugh. No having fish first thing in the morning. It’s disgusting.”

I laugh. “Salmon fat is good for the baby.”

“I think giving up coffee is enough.” She bites into her bagel with more grumpy aggression than necessary.

But as more of the food disappears into her, her eyes start to regain focus and clarity. She finishes her juice, then says, “By the way, Edgar?”

“Yeah?”

“What did you mean last night when you said you were never taking me to Tempérane?”

“Exactly what I said. There’s no reason for you to go just because my dad came by yesterday.”

“But he was talking about your family legacy and stuff. What was that about?”

Turning you into a cold, brittle shell like my mom.

“None of that matters at all?” she asks.

I give Jo a placid smile. *Over my dead body.* “He’s a traditionalist. He basically wants a grandson, and especially one from me, since I’m his firstborn. But we don’t have to be in Louisiana to have kids.” Then, to end whatever argument she might have, I go for the things I know she can never give up. “You don’t just have a career here. You have friends and family. And we both like Dr. Silverman.”

“That’s true.” She nods. “But what about your work? Isn’t it hard to do it long distance?”

“Don’t worry about it. Communication is cheap and instant these days. And if I have to physically be in town, I can pop up, no problem. We have a private jet for that, you know.” Besides, it is less of a priority now. Before, Dad and I fought over the difference in our vision, and I was becoming disillusioned and frustrated. Jo and the baby are showing me where my energy might be better spent.

“Okay.” She smiles.

I kiss the back of her hand, pleased that the point Dad brought up got resolved so easily. And I’m grateful Jo isn’t impressed with my family’s status. It was annoying at first when I couldn’t use it to get her marry me, but long-term, it’s better this way.

Over the next few days, Jo and I settle into a routine. I get up hours earlier than her to deal with Blackwood Energy business. With the time difference, the office in Louisiana is already humming by six thirty Pacific Time.

She usually gets up between seven and nine. I let her sleep as late as she wants. I remember hearing from Tony that Ivy was exhausted all the time, especially during her first trimester. And Jo’s schedule is still very full with appointments.

I’m glad she isn’t overly stubborn about hiring a decorator. Some women want to do it all themselves, then get angry that they’re so exhausted. Jo said she doesn’t have the time to go furniture shopping or work on color schemes. And it isn’t like she and I don’t have better things to do.

Like sex.

I’m getting hard just thinking about it—the way her nipples bead up and how she gets wet so fast. She seems almost embarrassed by how easily and profusely she gets aroused, but I love her responsiveness.

It’s our first Sunday together. But no matter how much I want us to spend the rest of the day in bed, I need to get ready

for lunch at her parents' home.

Crashing her family dinner at the restaurant was my way of trying to assert myself—and stopping Jo from announcing her engagement to Aaron. Yuna was convinced she was going to do it soon.

But being invited to her parents' home is a whole new level.

“Are you sure I don't have to bring anything?” I ask.
“Some wine, or...?”

“For the tenth time, no. But you can bring flowers for my mom and aunt, if you want. That'll make them happy.” Jo picks out a pale gray shirt and jeans. “Here you go.”

“I *can* dress myself, you know.”

“Yes, but I'm a professional.” She sticks her tongue out. “And I don't want you putting on a fifteen-thousand-dollar suit. I don't understand how you could've thought it would be the thing to wear to a Mexican family restaurant.”

I sigh. “It just seemed appropriate. I wanted to make a good impression. Most women want their men to look good.”

“You looked amazing.” She lets out a sigh, her eyes soft. “But you'll also look great in what I picked out.”

I grumble a bit, even though I'm pleased to hear she thought I looked awesome.

Jo's in a casual yellow and cream sundress with a lavender floral pattern and silver heels.

“I thought we were dressing casual,” I say.

“I need to get some use out of my favorites before I get too big. And I need to go shopping for some cute maternity clothes and shoes.”

“Here.” I hand her my credit card. “Use this.”

“I have money,” she says.

“I know, but it's my baby too.”

She grins. “Okay. I’m not turning down shopping money when it’s fair.” She winks, then takes the card and puts it in her purse.

Pulling her close, I kiss her on the crown of her head, loving her good humor and looking forward to seeing what she’s going to get for herself and our baby.

On the way to her parents’ house, we stop by a florist. I buy two large bouquets—one for her mother and one for her aunt.

The lunch isn’t just about food. I suspect it’s going to be more like an audition, and I’m not above bribing some of the more susceptible judges.

Jo gives me directions, and eventually we turn in to a cul-de-sac with three homes. “Right there. The one in the middle.”

The driveway and curb are packed with sedans, a couple of SUVs and a truck. I park my Mercedes.

“Looks like everyone’s already here,” Jo says.

“Are we late?” Being late to an audition is a bad idea.

“No, because Tío Manny hasn’t started serving food yet. Otherwise, Angel would’ve texted me to hurry up.”

I get out and go around the car to open the door for Jo. But she’s already stepping out. “You don’t have to do that, you know,” she says.

“I want to.” I wish she’d just let me. I see curtains in the house move. Most likely some of her brothers and cousins, watching to see how I treat her.

“You’re such a gentleman.” Then she leans closer. “Except in bed,” she whispers, her breath hot against my ear.

My blood heats, then pools downward. *Shit*. I can’t face her family sporting an erection.

“Behave.” I try to sound stern, but somehow it comes out soft and growly instead.

“Are you *sure* you want that?”

Shaking my head, I grab the bouquets and we start toward the squat, two-story building. The yard has an herb garden. I recognize a few plants because the gardener at the family mansion in Tempérane grows them for the cook. Jo's parents have also planted some lavender, and the air is replete with the soothing scent.

But my nerves are a bit too taut to enjoy the natural fragrance. I'm bracing myself for harassment from Jo's cousins and brothers. They thought Jo was a virgin until I met her, and that I should marry her. So moving in with her first, even when it's necessary to push her to the altar, might be considered a slap in their collective faces.

"My mom loves lavender," Jo says as we walk past purple flowers. "She likes to make potpourri with it." She stops in front of the door and turns to me. "Relax, Edgar. This is just lunch, not a firing squad."

"Your family's important to you."

"Of course."

And her parents' opinion of me will matter to Jo, while what my parents think of Jo is about as consequential as news of a new house being built in the Maldives.

"That's why I'm nervous."

"My dad wouldn't have invited you if he didn't want to. He never invited any of my exes."

"You never brought any of them home?" Perhaps there was a good reason for her brothers and cousins to believe she was a virgin all this time.

"Of course I did, but my dad never asked to see them. Ever. He must approve of you."

Or not. Still, it's nice of her to be so optimistic.

Jo pushes the door open, and I follow her in. The house smells like spices and herbs and sizzling meat and vegetables. It's nothing like the meals at the Blackwood mansion in Tempérane, where you wouldn't smell anything until the meal

is served and everyone exchanges polite greetings and sips some rare vintage. I think I like it better this way.

“We’re here!” Jo calls out.

“Finally!” comes an unidentified male voice from a different room.

“Saved the best for last!” Jo calls back.

Her family piles out.

Jo’s mom comes over and hugs Jo. Her dad hugs her too, then kisses her cheeks. Her uncle and aunt and cousins and brothers all hug and kiss her, exchanging ebullient *how are yous* and *you look so goods* with an occasional Spanish phrase thrown in.

I stand and watch it, feeling slightly awkward. Not quite an outsider, but not yet part of the family, either.

“Edgar,” Jo’s mom says, turning toward me. “You look very nice. Can I take the bouquets?”

“Please. One is for you, and one for your sister-in-law,” I say, as Jo’s mom takes the flowers from my arms.

Jo’s aunt beams. “You’re such a sweet young man.” She hugs me.

After handing the flowers off to Rafael, Jo’s mom hugs me. “Thank you. How did you know I love hyacinths?”

“Just a lucky guess. They seemed like your flower.”

I hug both of them back, relieved I passed with the ladies at least. Her dad and uncle shake my hand, asking me how I’m doing, and her brothers and cousins take turns too for man hugs.

“Jo, you gotta come to the kitchen and check out this new thing I’m making,” her uncle says. Based on the state of his poor apron, I hope whatever he’s making is worth it.

“Sure,” Jo says, then turns to her brothers and cousins. “Be good,” she says with mock severity.

“We’re angels,” Jorge says.

Angel smiles beatifically. “Well...one of us is.”

Jo laughs, and I can feel myself smiling despite my tension. It’s impossible to keep my guard up around people this happy and loving.

Jo’s dad goes to the living room to park himself in front of their TV.

I start toward the living room to join him, but her brothers and cousins pull me to the side to the den. It only has a couch big enough for two people and an armchair. We ignore them, as though sitting down is an admission of testosterone deficiency. We all stand, our arms crossed, sizing each other up. Actually, it’s more like me versus the rest.

“So. You and Jo moved in together,” Rafael says.

Here it comes. “Yes.” I brace myself for a punch—literal or figurative. At least my back is to a wall, so nobody can get behind me. And this way, I can also see the kitchen where Jo is and the living room too.

Pablo steps forward. Today, he doesn’t have a kiddie tie around his neck. But there is a blonde princess in a blue dress on his black T-shirt with a caption that reads, “Let it go.”

“That’s a step in the right direction. Jo never lived with anybody else before,” he says.

Oh. So perhaps this means he won’t be the one throwing the first punch...

“Yeah. It’s a big commitment,” Angel adds, looking pleased.

Won’t have to fight with him either... Perhaps her brothers are realizing I’m not Jack the Ripper.

“It’s because none of them had a place like Edgar’s,” Hugo says. “It’s freakin’ awesome. Hell, *I’d* live with him.”

“Thank you, Hugo,” I say. “But I’m taken.”

“Just as well. You aren’t my type.”

“So when’s the ceremony?” Rinaldo asks.

“We don’t know yet.” Jo and I agreed to live together for at least four months. I don’t want to rush her after mentioning the timeline myself, although if it were left up to me, we would’ve been married by now. “Not exactly.”

“Don’t want to wait for too long.” Diego grows serious. “She’s going to be bigger than a house soon and won’t fit into any traditional wedding gown.”

“A woman who doesn’t get the wedding of her dreams isn’t forgiving,” Rinaldo says. “Seen it I don’t know how many times. Impossible to reason with. And you want to add pregnancy hormones on top of that?” He looks at me with pity.

Hmm. He must’ve seen a lot of botched ceremonies at his hotel.

“She’ll hold it over you forever.” This time it’s Rafael. “She doesn’t just let things go. Trust me.”

Pablo laughs. “She’s still mad you broke her makeup from Korea five years ago.”

“Seven,” Rafael says.

That’s a long time, and I’m surprised by this new side of Jo. The makeup must’ve been something special. So how long would she be mad about a wedding not being perfect?

“Rafael!” Jo’s dad calls out from the living room. “Get me a beer, will you? And get Edgar something to drink, too. We taught you better!”

Rafael sighs. “A beer good?” he asks. “We’ve got some Dos Equis. And Pacifico, I think.”

“Either would be fine. Thank you,” I say.

He goes to the kitchen with Hugo tagging along.

“You should all come here. You’re missing some good analysis of yesterday’s game,” Jo’s dad calls out.

We all obediently move to the living room. A couple of talking heads are discussing some soccer match in animated Spanish. Rafael and Hugo rejoin us with enough ice-cold beer for everyone.

“You.” Jo’s dad tilts his bottle in my direction, then pats the empty spot next to him on the sofa. “Sit here.” He isn’t smiling.

Uh-oh. “Yes, sir.”

He gestures at the TV. “That was a good match.”

I merely smile, since I don’t watch soccer, and I don’t understand what the analysts are discussing on TV. I speak some Spanish, but know very little about soccer or terms used for the sport.

“You don’t follow it, do you?” Jo’s dad says.

“No.” I know better than to lie. Fans know everything. They can sniff out a phony faster than a dog can smell a steak.

“You gotta start watching. It’s family tradition,” Angel says helpfully.

“I’ll be sure to do that.” Or at least watch some highlights, so I can talk about it if that would please Jo’s dad.

“Jo doesn’t get it. Not like we do.” Jo’s dad sighs.

“She’s a girl,” Diego says in that “what can you do?” tone. “And Tía Gwen likes gymnastics.”

Jo’s dad extends and curls his fingers at Rafael. Jo’s eldest brother grabs a red leather-bound volume from a bookshelf. It also contains other unmarked leather-bound books in different colors, as well as some classic literature. Makes sense. Jo said her dad is an English teacher.

“Since you don’t get soccer, maybe we can do this instead,” Jo’s dad says as he takes the book from Rafael. “It’s Jo when she was a little girl.”

That piques my interest. I’ve seen childhood pictures of my exes before. Their parents were always eager to show them to me—beautiful posed studio shots designed to maximize cuteness. But I have a feeling Jo’s family doesn’t do monthly studio shots.

And I’m right.

The album contains candid photos of Jo. She looks adorable in pink, red, yellow, blue... Actually, she looks adorable in every color, her innocent eyes wide, her lips soft and curved into smiles.

A hot fist clutches my heart. I feel as though I'm seeing what our daughter will look like. Contrary to Jo's misguided belief, I'm certain we're going to have a daughter who's a carbon copy of her mom.

"She loved clothes even at that age," Jo's dad says, gesturing at various dresses she's in. "She had so many dolls, and she was always dressing them in different outfits. My mother made doll dresses for Jo's birthday and Christmas. They were always her favorite presents."

Then we reach a page where the toddler Jo's glaring at the camera, her face redder than a boiled crawfish and cheeks puffed out. Her hands are clenched into fists, and stubbornness glints in her eyes.

"What's this picture?" I ask.

Pablo looks down then starts chortling. The other men quickly glance down and burst out laughing.

"That's Mad Jo," her dad says fondly. "She used to threaten that she'd hold her breath until we did what she wanted."

"Except she could never hold her breath for long," Rafael says, giggling.

"She cheated." Jorge inhales some air, then puffs his cheeks out and closes his mouth stubbornly...and starts breathing through his nose.

"Until she realized screaming is harder to ignore than silent self-suffocation," Hugo says almost mournfully.

"Regardless, she was perfect as a little girl, and she's perfect as a young woman." Jo's dad's eyes grow soft. "And she'll be perfect as a mom, too."

I look down at the Mad Jo, and a grinning Jo in a pink tutu next to it. Her family's in the tutu picture, surrounding her,

laughing, smiling, happy.

An unbearable longing for something I can't identify cuts through me, and it feels like my heart actually aches.

Laughter from the kitchen catches my attention. I lift my head and see Jo giving her uncle a thumbs-up, a bit of red sauce in the corner of her mouth. Her eyes are bright, sparkling with joy. The sunlight coming in through the windows catches her, making her glow.

Her mom and aunt are smiling, and she says something to them.

They break out into laughter again, and the ache in my chest intensifies until my entire body is rigid. I wish I could name what's making me yearn with such intensity. If I could just identify it, perhaps the universe, perhaps life itself, would start making sense.

Chapter Forty-Three

Jo

The lunch goes well, and I'm happy with the way my family seems to accept Edgar's new role in my life—and the fact that we're living together. The sonogram picture helps. Everyone lets out a long sigh. Then they become immediately convinced that the baby is going to be the most gorgeous thing ever.

But the picture wouldn't have been enough if my family was dead set against Edgar. I'm pretty sure Mama had a lot to do with it. She's the diplomat.

Another factor is Tío Manny's new tortilla soup, which is so, so good. You just can't get upset or stay grumpy when you have his amazing food filling your belly.

Tía Bea packs most of it for me to take home. "You gotta take care of the little one, *chica*. Nothing like home-cooked soup for that."

"What about us?" Jorge says.

"When you bring me a baby, we'll talk." She points at her sons, giving them the evil eye one by one. "I told you I want grandbabies!"

They groan in unison.

My brothers go to the kitchen to help clean up. Edgar starts toward it too, but my dad stops him. "You should probably take Jo home. She looks tired."

"I'm fine," I say, even though I do feel the tiniest bit sleepy.

"Don't lie to your father, Jo. I know you. Your eyes are getting droopy."

I blink hard and open my eyes wide. "See?"

“Your father’s right, Jo.” Edgar holds my hand. “You should get some rest. You were up late last night. All those invoices you sent out.”

I stare at him, torn between laughter and respect over *his* lies. I was up late last night not because I was busy sending out invoices, although I did some of that too, but because *he kept me up*.

But I can’t tell my parents the truth, so I just laugh. “Fine, we can go. You carry the soup.”

“Of course.”

We hug and say goodbye. It takes a good fifteen minutes. Once I have the baby and bring him over, it’ll take half an hour because everyone will need to hug and kiss the baby. Just thinking about it makes me smile. The little bun is going to know he’s the most beloved baby of them all.

“What are you looking so pleased about?” Edgar says as we climb into the car.

“Oh, the baby.” I tell him what I was thinking.

He smiles. “Your family’s great. She’s going to be lucky to have grandparents like your folks.”

“He. It’s a boy.”

“We’ll see,” Edgar says calmly.

When we’re home, Edgar gets a call as I’m putting the soup away in the fridge. His serious face grows even more somber, and he starts scowling.

“Got it.” He tosses the phone on the counter and sighs.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I have to be in Tempérane for about a week.” His dark expression says he’d rather not, and whoever’s dragging him home will pay. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? I know you have a job in Louisiana. Honestly, I’m surprised you’ve been able to get away for this long.”

“I hate leaving you alone.”

I put my fingertip on the furrowed skin between his eyebrows. “I won’t be alone. I have the baby. And my family and friends. I’m going to be fine. And the baby isn’t even due for, like, eight months!”

To be honest, I’m a little sad he has to go, but he’s already so unhappy about it that I feel like I need to be upbeat as a counterbalance. He’s supportive about my career, and I should do the same for him. Otherwise, this isn’t going to work.

“So when are you flying?” I ask.

“Tomorrow morning. As early as possible. I’ll be gone before you’re up,” he says.

“Okay.” I give him what I hope is an understanding smile, although I hate it that he has to go so early.

And sure enough, when I wake up the next day, Edgar’s side of the bed is empty and cool. Disappointment blooms, even though I knew he wasn’t going to be here.

I reach over and see a note on his pillow.

Jo,

I’ll try my best to be back as soon as possible. Be sure to take care of yourself. Call or text if you need anything.

Yours,

–Edgar

It’s a short note, but given how serious and somber he often is, I’m pretty sure this is the closest thing to a love sonnet I’m going to get. And I’m okay with that. I’ve had enough empty, pretty words to last a lifetime.

Maybe I’m turning into a pragmatist. A baby probably does that to a person, I decide. I rest a hand on my belly, feeling pretty wise about it all even without my coffee.

I check the time. A little after nine. I slept in later than I wanted. Since I have an appointment to see Erin today—which I absolutely *refuse* to miss again—I get out of bed, munch on some fruit salad and yogurt from the fridge, then take a shower. This place has one huge advantage over mine—instant

hot water and multiple shower heads. I never understood why anybody would want to have so many heads until I moved in with Edgar. *But now I know*, I think as the water sluices down my body in rivulets, gently massaging my muscles. It's such a pampered way to start the day.

An hour of fussing over my hair, makeup and outfit later, I'm ready. I put on a pale lemon dress with blue and green accents. I want to appear friendly and in charge but not overly bossy. My makeup is also on the muted side, except for my lips, which I coat with an apple red.

That done, I drive to Sweet Darlings Inc.'s office and park my Lexus in the company garage. Before getting out of the car, I text Erin to let her know I'm here, so she can wrap up whatever task she's been working on.

I take my time walking into the building. It's tall and impressive, lots of marble, stone and chrome in a slick contemporary design. The lobby has a ceiling that has to be at least three stories high. Smart architecture to make the air inside much cooler.

I sign in with security at a huge desk. A young guard in a starched and perfectly fitted black uniform gives me a visitor's pass.

"First time in the building?" he asks, looking me up and down.

"Yeah. I'm just going to be here for a few minutes. Meeting a client." *Here it comes.*

"Cool. Hey, I get off in half an hour. You got a little time after your visit? Wanna grab a coffee? Our café over there is way better than Starbucks."

I give him a pat smile. "Thanks, but I have a"—I fumble for the word—"a..." What *is* Edgar? Not quite a fiancé, but a boyfriend is a kind of...insufficient. "I'm in a relationship," I say finally, giving him my patented *I'm so flattered you asked, but really, it won't be happening because...it's me, not you* smile.

"Oh, I get it." He nods, clearly not buying it. "Boyfriend?"

“Something like that.”

The guard smiles, revealing blindingly white teeth and a dimple that probably kills at the nightclubs. He’s well built, too, like a track athlete, with biceps that pop out like baseballs under his short sleeves. “Well, you know...he’s not really invited,” he says, laying on the charm. “Just you.”

I lean over, indicating with my body language that he should lean in as well. He does. “I’m really flattered, but see, there’s this other thing...”

“Yeah?”

“I’m kind of pregnant.”

The guard straightens up immediately, his eyes widening. “Oh! Oh, uh, I see. Well, uh, in that case...”

“Yeah.” Not wanting him to feel too bad, I finger-wave him goodbye. Can’t blame a guy for trying. I walk toward the elevator, checking the time. Score one for my punctuality!

“Um... Josephine Martinez?”

I stop and turn to see a blonde in her twenties. She’s got her hand up about shoulder-high, like a kid who can’t decide if she should raise it and answer a question or not. “Yes?”

“Oh, good.” She blinks large blue eyes. “I’m Erin. Erin Clare?”

“Hi. Nice to finally meet you.” I shake her hand. “You didn’t have to come down here to meet me. I could’ve gone up.”

Her cheeks flush. “I thought this would be easier.”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with.” I do what my clients prefer, with only two exceptions: letting them come to my home, and wearing ugly clothes.

I scan her quickly to see what I’m working with. She’s medium height. Her features are even and fine, pretty, but not stunning like the most celeb clients I have. On the other hand, her small, delicate build is excellent, with a narrow waist and hips flaring out to create a surprisingly sexy silhouette.

But her outfit is so...businesslike and boring. A plain ivory sleeveless top and knee-length black pencil skirt. Black Mary Janes. No accessories except for a pair of solitaire earrings. Given the cheapness of her clothes—I'd bet my favorite Jimmy Choo sandals that she got them off clearance racks at an outlet mall—they're probably cubic zirconia or something similar.

Erin fidgets, shifting her weight. "Do I look okay?" she asks finally, her voice small.

Oh, honey... I smile sympathetically at her sweet uncertainty. Erin is the type of client who requires a delicate touch. "There's nothing wrong with the way you look. The only question is, are you happy with it?"

"Uh..." She looks down at herself, then at my dress, then back at herself. "I guess?"

So she doesn't know for sure. No wonder David gave me such detailed instructions. "Let's walk to my car. We have a lot of ground to cover."

She gulps audibly. "Okay."

I drop the visitor's pass off in the bin next to the security desk, where the guard gives me a perfunctory nod, then lead Erin out into the garage. She lowers her voice like she's confessing a grave crime.

"I've never hired somebody like you, ever. I didn't even know people like you existed."

"It's okay." I smile. "So. What do you wear when you go out with friends?"

"I don't really go out much."

"But you have friends in town." It's unimaginable that a young woman like Erin doesn't have friends she can hang out with.

"I moved here not too long ago," she explains, but her tone says she's a little bit embarrassed about her lack of friends.

"Okay." This is like pulling teeth. "What did you wear when you went out with friends before you moved?"

“Um...I don’t know. Kind of like what I’m wearing now?”

Oh dear. Clean-cut. No personality. Bland business casual. That is so *not* what people need to see, especially when David said “home and hearth.” Besides, he and I agreed on sleek sophistication as well.

When I don’t say anything, she adds, “I just want to look normal and neat. Stable.”

Huh. That’s an unusual combination of adjectives for a pretty young woman to apply to herself, but whatever. Maybe Erin’s just too shy to experiment.

“I don’t want to shock Mrs. Darling,” she adds.

“Mrs. Darling...?”

“David’s mother. She’s coming soon. And David and I want to look nice for her. I mean, we both want me to look nice. I’m even going to bring cookies, since I heard she likes them,” she says, then stops abruptly, flushing.

“That’s fine,” I say. “Uh...baked goods are fantastic icebreakers.” Now she’s making *me* feel awkward.

Regardless of what Erin wants—normal, neat and stable with a plate of cookies—I have my orders. David’s the one who’s ultimately paying me, so it’s my job to figure out a tastefully expensive look that can enhance her good-girl appearance and make men think of marriage and babies, although I wonder why he needs that in an assistant. If he needs a date to a function and doesn’t have a woman he can ask, he can just dress her pretty. It’s not difficult, and it’s easier and cheaper than hiring me.

On the other hand, it’s not my job to be curious...and Erin and I aren’t close enough to gossip and chat. So I’m going to take her to my favorite boutiques. Time to play Fairy Godmother and turn this drab girl into a princess that every prince wants to marry.

Chapter Forty-Four

Jo

Three hours later, Erin and I are back in the Sweet Darlings lobby. She was reluctant to pick out anything, especially when she realized nothing had price tags. But after a couple of complimentary mimosas—which I had to cajole her into drinking—she was much more agreeable.

“Thank you,” she says. “By the way, do I look like I’ve been drinking?” She puts her hands over her cheeks. “My face feels a little warm.”

Her cheeks *are* still slightly pink, but I’m not going to tell her. Not when I know it’ll just make her nervous. She must be suffering from some kind of anxiety disorder that makes her tense up every time she thinks she’s being bad. I’m tempted to introduce her to Yuna. If anybody can loosen Erin up, it’s a crazy, over-the-top Korean heiress.

“Nah, you’re fine. And you’ll look even better once you put on the clothes we got.”

“Oh.” She flushes. “Well... Thank you.”

“No problem. I’ll see you later, okay?”

She stops. “You will? We’re going shopping *again*?”

I almost laugh. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen that shocked look from some of my...less enthusiastic clients. Or the ones dressing really well for the first time in their lives.

“We might need to, depending on what other looks your boss wants you to pull off.”

She starts nibbling her lower lip. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Of course it is. Come on, nobody hates free clothes and shoes.”

She looks like she's about to faint. I wink at her, then turn around to leave.

I probably shouldn't tease Erin, but it's so easy. I wonder if she's from a small town. That might explain her unease. A previous client, Evie Parker, was like that, and she was an assistant dressing up for her boss, too. Evie got lucky and ended up marrying one of the most eligible bachelors in the country.

Maybe I should introduce Erin to Evie. That way, Erin can get some pointers. David is definitely a highly sought prize, according to the gossip sites.

I check the time. Manny's Tacos isn't too far. Maybe I'll stop by and grab some enchiladas to go. Say hi to Tío Manny and Tía Bea if they're working today.

As I walk toward the elevator to the garage, I see a blonde woman stand up from a bench. Something about her seems familiar, but I can't quite place it. Maybe I saw her at a party...? Or an event hosted by one of my clients...

Regardless, I slow down to admire her perfect French twist and blue Ralph Lauren dress. She's wearing diamonds and sapphire earrings and necklace, her heels high and stylish. A very elegant look. I approve. Everything she's wearing adds to her fragile and vulnerable air. Not an easy effect to pull off.

"Jo Martinez?" she says. Her voice is soft, but strong enough for me to hear.

Jo? She must've met me at a social function with friends, then, because my clients always call me Josephine.

"You're Jo, right?" she asks again, coming closer.

"Yes." An expensive floral perfume wafts over me. This close, I realize her eyes are different colors—one blue and one green. It's like her eyes couldn't decide on a single color, so they decided to be greedy and take both. "Can I help you?"

Surprise crosses her face but quickly vanishes, replaced by a friendly smile. "I'm Margot Blackwood."

Margot Blackwood...? *Edgar's mom?*

I blink. What is she doing here? Is she stalking me? Or—

“I know, it’s sudden. I thought I should travel here to see you, and I was told you’d be here today.”

Did she have somebody follow me around? That’s...more than a little creepy.

She continues, “Edgar’s not interested in bringing you to Tempérane, although Lane asked more than once.”

The awkward dinner, the one Lane crashed, flashes through my mind. Warning bells go off and every muscle in my body tightens.

“I’m comfortable where I am,” I say carefully.

“Of course. Los Angeles is a lovely city. And most especially if you’re from a multi-ethnic background.” Her smile grows more gracious.

Everything she’s saying clashes with my preconceived notions. Although I try not to form opinions based on tabloid articles, I thought she’d be colder...even harsh. But the woman in front of me is incredibly warm and sweet.

But why does it feel like that warmth and sweetness are like accessories she can discard any time?

“I don’t want you to be put off,” she adds. “I’d just like to get to know the woman my son seems determined to marry.”

“Oh. Well... I see. It’s awkward to talk here in the lobby. Do you want to go to a café?” I gesture at the place the security guard said was good.

She smiles. “That sounds lovely.”

We walk over to the café. Although I’m doing my best to be polite and open-minded with Margot for Edgar’s sake, I’m a bit uneasy. I don’t know why she’s here when she has to know Edgar’s isn’t around, especially when it’s obvious she’s been in touch with her ex-husband. I also don’t know why she was waiting for me in the lobby, rather than calling to set up an appointment. It’s not like my phone number’s a secret. I have a website for my business, for God’s sake.

I get an iced herbal tea, and she gets a latte and we take an empty booth. She takes a sip of her coffee, then places it on the table. Her fingers are moving constantly, smoothing the napkin in front of her, rearranging and repositioning her cup.

Why is she so nervous?

“Edgar must love you very much.”

My wariness goes up a notch because what she just said isn't a statement, but a fishing attempt. It's in the way she speaks, the probing tone, her eyes searching mine.

Saying nothing, I sip my tea.

“I hope he's said as much. He can be a bit obtuse and not very communicative. Quite like his father,” she says, tittering a bit. “And an oldest child can be overly responsible. Edgar's been... Well, he's always been very serious. We girls have to figure things out from what isn't being said as much as from what they tell us.”

“I'm sure.” I still don't know the real reason she's here. I doubt it's just to see me. I'm not that important. Besides, she hasn't said a word about the baby. *Does she even know about it yet?*

On the other hand, she's acting like she's on my team, although...against who? From some of the things she's saying and the way she's saying it, if I didn't know better, I might assume she thinks we're a team—me and her against everyone else.

The thing is, I don't want to be on her team. I already have a team of my own consisting of my family and friends. And I don't like people who stalk me to client sites like Margot has done. That speaks to the motive and the general tactics they like to use—sneaky and underhanded.

“Margot, may I speak frankly? You didn't travel all the way out here just to say hi. Can you tell me what you really want?” I can play pretty word games, but I don't want to in this case. Too much is at stake.”

“Just for us to attend a family dinner. To get to know you. And to extend a personal invitation for you to come to

Tempérane. I can teach you everything about being a proper wife to someone like my son.”

Did she just imply that I wouldn’t make a proper wife to Edgar on my own?

Yes, she did, I decide, remembering what Lane said about the “family legacy” and my role. Did he send her to convince me I need to be properly schooled?

“Much as I’d love to, I can’t drop everything and go,” I say with fake sweetness. I can’t get sarcastic with Margot because...well, because my parents taught me better than to sink to her level. Besides, no matter what, she’s still Edgar’s mom. Some level of respect is required for his sake, even if she’s being insulting.

She seems genuinely confused. “But you’re going to be Edgar’s wife. There are certain expectations.”

“Such as?” I say, feigning rapt interest. This is going to be good.

“Oh, my dear, there’s so much. Running charities. Hosting social events. Attending galas. Being seen. Networking. To do all that—and do it well, of course—you need a certain polish and poise. And a certain incisiveness as well. It pays to understand everyone’s motives.”

“Are you telling me Edgar picked a woman who can’t be on his side as is?” I wonder for a moment if he feels the same way, then dismiss the thought. I’ve given him so many outs. He wouldn’t have insisted on marrying me if he thought I wasn’t suitable. But none of the things Margot brought up are anything I’ve ever pictured myself doing.

“Dear, he picked you because you aren’t like anybody he’s ever met. His life has been very regimented. Private schools. Harvard. Managing Blackwood Energy. It doesn’t leave him much time to meet people outside our social circle.”

Wow. I don’t know what kind of ballsy self-centeredness it takes for someone to heap insults, sympathy and pity at the same time. “What do you get out of ‘helping me’ and turning me into this polished and poised creature?” I ask innocently.

“I get to help my son. That’s all that a mother can ask for.”

She’s shooting me a smile sweet enough to go on a St. Mary statue, but I know better. She isn’t here for Edgar. She’s here for me, because she thinks I can give her what she wants.

But...what? No matter how much I rack my brain, I can’t think of anything.

And then she gives me the answer. “Edgar and I have had a...falling out. It’s partly my fault, partly his, but he won’t even talk to me these days. I think if I help you, he’ll take it as the olive branch that it is. I only want to mend things with my son, Jo.”

Oh. Well, that’s an understandable motive, although I don’t like the way she’s going about things. I don’t really want to get in the middle of a mother-son drama I know nothing about, but the distress Margot is showing seems to be genuine. And I can’t imagine how hard it must be for Edgar. I’d be devastated if Mama and I got into a fight and didn’t talk to each other anymore.

“Can you help me?” Margot asks.

“I...” I sigh. “I can’t promise anything. And I need to talk to Edgar about it first.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t expect you to do anything that might upset him,” she says quickly, the picture-perfect concerned mother. “Thank you, Jo.” She reaches out and places a frail hand over mine.

But instead of making me feel better, my unease only increases. I pray I’m doing the right thing.

Chapter Forty-Five

Jo

After my awkward visit with Margot, I end up going to the barre studio because my phone reminds me. I could use some exercise to work off the nervous tension.

Hilary, Kim and Yuna all show up for the session. I take it much easier than I normally would. Then we all go to the bar for our post-workout drink. Hilary and I get virgin margaritas. Kim and Yuna, on the other hand, order very real martinis.

We chat. Kim talks about her house-hunting expedition with Wyatt. Yuna shares that her mom's in town to help plan Ivy's baby shower this coming Saturday. Apparently, she and her mother have declared some kind of truce about discussing marriageable men.

Hilary shows us her sonogram picture. It's very much like mine. As a matter of fact, our dots look so similar that I don't know how anybody would be able to tell theirs apart without the patient's name and date on it.

"Show us yours," Yuna says, her eyes bright with excitement. "You saw a doctor, right?"

"Yeah, I did. But it's at home. I forgot," I say. There's a chorus of boos around the table. "Sorry. Next time. I almost forgot about barre today, too."

"How come?" Kim asks. "I thought you were planning to join us."

"I was, but there was this new client meeting, and then I was going to grab some tacos from my uncle's restaurant and come here, right? But guess who I ran into?"

My friends lean forward. "Who?" Hilary says.

"Edgar's mom. Margot Blackwood."

Kim and Hilary show mild curiosity. But Yuna recoils like she's seen the proverbial snake.

"Are you kidding?" she says, her face scrunching. She reaches for her drink and empties half the glass.

"What?" She and Ivy are close, so she undoubtedly knows more about Edgar's family than me or any of the tabloid writers.

"Jo, seriously. Stay away from her. She's an absolute bitch."

My jaw slackens. I don't think I've ever heard Yuna cuss. She says outrageous things, but calling Edgar's mom a bitch somehow seems like a step beyond the pale for her.

"I know," she says. "But it's true."

"What did she do?" There has to be a story here.

Hilary and Kim lean slightly toward Yuna.

"She's the reason Ivy and Tony wasted a decade, and she's the reason the entire family is a mess. What did she want from you? Spying on Edgar, maybe?" Yuna asks me.

"No," I say, surprised that Yuna's first thought would be spying. Margot didn't even hint at anything like that. "She asked me to come to Tempérane so she could teach me how to be a proper wife to Edgar."

Kim and Hilary exchange a glance. "Talk about freakin' rude!" Kim says.

Yuna snorts. "Tell her to go to hell. The best thing you can do for Edgar is be the exact opposite of his mom. Her number one talent is making people miserable. I've never seen any of her kids look happy when the topic of their mother comes up. Including Ivy. Margot Blackwood is a piece of human trash who only loves herself, no one else."

There's a lull in the conversation for a few minutes. What do you say after a declaration like that? But eventually we start talking about Ivy's baby shower. I'm only half listening, though. Margot Blackwood must be something truly awful. Much worse than what I suspected after meeting her.

Ugh. And I sort of agreed to help her reconcile with Edgar. I don't have to go through with it, though. She wasn't fully honest with me, so why should I help her?

Later that evening, when I'm in bed, I get a text from Edgar.

–Edgar: Did you have a good day?

–Me: Yeah. You?

–Edgar: It was fine.

He's saying fine, but I sense that there's more. Is it because of my less-than-great mood?

–Me: Are you coming back soon?

–Edgar: Yes. Friday. I want to wrap things up faster, but everything seems to take ten times longer than it should.

Somehow I can't stop myself. I type, *I miss you*, and hit send.

–Edgar: I miss you too.

I bite my lip, wondering if I should mention meeting his mother. Then I remember what Yuna said—that Edgar's never happy when people bring her up.

In the end, I decide not to. He's going to be back on Friday, and it isn't like his mother and I are going to be seeing each other before then. I don't plan on calling her, and I can just ignore her calls and texts. I can tell him at some point if it becomes necessary, and in the meantime, there's no reason to pick at old wounds.

Chapter Forty-Six

Jo

When I open my eyes on Saturday, I'm in bed...which is weird. The last thing I remember is staying up to wait for Edgar, while watching some comedy show on Netflix and updating invoice statuses. Obviously, I fell asleep. But I don't remember moving to the bed...

I twist around. Edgar's pillow is dented, his side of the bed ruffled. So he came back last night after I dozed off.

Disappointment that I didn't get to see him pools inside me. It's only been five days, but I've missed him terribly.

I'm becoming used to having him around, I realize. I don't know when it started. It hasn't been even a week since we started living together. Our first meeting and him coming to barre to see me... They don't count, do they?

I get up to go find him, then realize that I should visit the bathroom first. My bladder's full, and I should have fresh breath when I see him.

A few minutes later I come out, bladder relieved, face washed, teeth scrubbed and finger-combing my hair.

"You're awake."

Edgar's smooth voice is the best kind of surprise, like a song from my childhood. Already showered and dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks, he's at the doorway with a small smile and holding two mugs.

A happy warmth suffuses me. Suddenly the penthouse feels more like home.

Our home.

"Hey! Good morning." I smile. "When did you get here? I tried to wait up for you."

“I know, but one of my meetings ran over, and I arrived very late last night. But I come bearing presents.” He kisses me. “Well...*a* present.”

He tastes like mint and Edgar.

“Mmm. That’s a great present,” I say.

“That wasn’t the present. You can have that anytime.” He hands me one of the mugs, then pulls me down so we’re sitting on the bed together. He gestures until I’m upright with my back supported by the pillows piled against the headrest.

He nods toward my mug. “For you. Caffeine-free ginger and herb tea. My assistant said it’s great for settling your stomach and making you feel more focused and energized when you’re pregnant.”

I perk up, since I need something to substitute for coffee. “Thank you.” The tea is a clear orange and smells amazingly refreshing—like ginger and flowers. I take a sip. *Yummy*. “It’s sweet.”

“I put a tablespoon of honey in. Otherwise it’s too bland.” His tone says he’s worried he put too little honey.

“It’s perfect. Thank you.” I kiss him. “I should thank your assistant, too.” I thread my fingers through his and squeeze. “So how was work? Everything okay?”

He nods. “Nothing that couldn’t be fixed with some face time. Dad and his people just wanted a few in-person meetings.” His expression is calm. Too calm, actually.

And I’m beginning to figure out that means he’s displeased. When he’s upset, he grows impassive, like he has to be in control of himself. That probably makes him a great executive, but it can’t be good for him emotionally. My family vents freely. If we can’t do it at a particular time due to professionalism, we let it out during our dinners and lunches.

But Edgar doesn’t have any of those outlets. I’d bet my Lexus his parents aren’t the type to indulge themselves or encourage members of the family to let it out. And if you aren’t used to doing it, you aren’t going to start now all of a sudden.

On the other hand...venting to your family isn't the only way to decompress. I smile, running my fingertips along his palm, just the nails scraping his skin.

"Ivy's baby shower is today," Edgar says regretfully. "We need to get ready if we don't want to be late."

"What time is it?" I ask, surprised.

"Ten."

"No way," I say.

"Yeah."

I put the unfinished mug on the night table, then take his and place it next to mine.

He raises an eyebrow, a corner of his mouth twitching.

I straddle him. "Then we'd better hurry."

"I don't know if we can rush through what I have in mind," he says, his eyes going dark.

"I didn't say rush. I said hurry." And I kiss him before he can try to put in the last word.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Jo

Despite my best efforts, we're late. When we both came the first time, I thought we were finished and should start getting ready. But then Edgar got hard again almost immediately, and we had to go for round two. Life tip: it's difficult to say no when a man's erection is still lodged inside you, and you're still so wet you're dripping.

But it was worth it to see Edgar so relaxed and happy. And I'm feeling pretty awesome, if I do say so myself.

And late or not, we have gifts for Ivy's twins... Although as we get closer to Tony's mansion, I start having second thoughts.

"Do you think they're enough?" I ask for the third time, worried about the mini-tux and mini-dress.

"Yes," Edgar says.

"But she's a billionaire." I've never been to a billionaire's baby shower. What if I'm expected to bring something more extravagant than Armani?

"Actually, she isn't. Tony is. And this is just a party to celebrate their twins and give some thoughtful gifts. No big deal. Just don't be surprised if it's a bit unorthodox, though. Yuna's mother is in charge."

"Is her mom...weird?" If Yuna's mom's half as over-the-top as Yuna...

"She's from a very wealthy family, as you know, and she's...set in her ways."

That must be a polite way of saying Yuna got her attitude from her mom.

“She decided to informally adopt Ivy as her own child a little while back, and she’s been acting as Ivy’s mother since Tony and Ivy reunited. Just...don’t be surprised at anything you see today. Yuna was worried because Koreans don’t usually do baby showers, and her mother is going to do whatever she feels is appropriate.”

“Got it,” I say, grateful for the warning. Knowing Yuna, her mom might’ve hired an entire circus—or something similarly outrageous.

By the time Edgar pulls into Tony’s driveway, we’re half an hour late. Security men in black suits, sunglasses and earpieces are everywhere. They’re all Asian and all look extremely fit—probably Yuna’s mom’s people.

Edgar uses his own code for the security pad at the gates. The guards look us over but don’t stop us.

“Wow. This feels like a foreign dignitary function,” I whisper. “I went to a party hosted by a Chinese ambassador once. It was pretty intense.”

“How were you invited to something like that?”

“I was helping his wife look perfect.” The woman wanted somebody to make her look fashionably American.

Edgar nods. “Well, whatever Yuna’s mother originally had in mind has probably been toned down with Ivy’s objections.”

Edgar parks, and we go to the main entrance together. The cars are all fancy—and expensive. Collectively, their value is probably enough to buy a mansion.

Edgar leads me into the house. A uniformed staff member—another Asian in a black suit, also fitted with an earpiece—smiles and gestures in the right direction.

We walk through a corridor. Some classical music comes from the end of the hall.

Two women in black suits open the door for us, and we enter the room.

Whoa.

Sunlight pours in through the huge windows, and everything glitters like gemstones. A grand piano shines like polished onyx, and a string quartet is set up next to it. Giant ice sculptures of twin cherubs sit in the center. One is holding a sword, and the other is holding a...

...a wad of cash?

I squint. It must be cash; there's a faint dollar sign carved into the ice. I don't get it. But then, art isn't my area of expertise.

Behind the ice sculptures stand what looks like a lot of pink and blue... *turrets*? It almost looks like they're pieces of a miniature castle.

Next to them is a buffet table, but the waitstaff is also circulating with trays laden with finger foods and drinks.

People are already seated on sectionals, armchairs, benches and more. Some are standing around in threes and fours, chatting. I recognize quite a few of the guests—Court and Pascal, Yuna, Elizabeth and her so-called assistant, who looks like he'd rather eat glass than be here. And Paige and Ryder Reed... I swear the man's even better looking than before, which has to be from some kind of sorcery. Or maybe God just really loves him. They're chatting with Nate and Evie, who has a hand resting on her small bump. She's showing, despite her empire-waist dress.

Tony and Ivy occupy a white loveseat with fleur-de-lis patterns in gold. Ivy glows, happiness and contentment obvious in her relaxed pose and smile. Her royal-purple empire dress is feminine and pretty and fits her well.

Edgar and I go to her and Tony to say hello first.

"You made it," Tony says with a big grin. "Thought you were stuck in Louisiana."

"Nothing will keep me there over a weekend," Edgar says as Tony stands and they exchange a man hug.

Ivy starts to stand, and I shake my head. "Don't." I bend down to hug her. "How are you feeling?"

“Fantastic. The twins are very energetic right now.”

“They’ve been kicking all day long,” Tony explains with pride. “Strong kids.”

“They know it’s a special day. Babies always know,” an Asian woman says, walking up to us.

Although I’ve never seen her before, I immediately notice the similarities between her and Yuna—the shape of their eyes and mouth. Yuna’s mom has aged very well. I would’ve never realized she has a child in her twenties if we’d met under different circumstances. Her red-brown hair is twisted into an elegant updo held with a couple of pearl and diamond pins. A purple Gucci looks fabulous on her slim frame, and her glittery blue stilettos are to die for. The chandelier earrings dangling from her earlobes are huge—overwhelmingly so. But she pulls them off with confidence and pizzazz.

“Lady Min, meet Jo Martinez,” Edgar says with a warm smile he didn’t show his own father. “The woman I’m going to marry.”

I beam at the label. It just seems so fitting he says that. And I like the way it sounds on his lips.

Her dark eyes focus on me. “How lovely.” She extends a hand, and we shake. Amazing. Her skin’s softer than silk. “You have excellent taste in men.”

“Thank you,” I say, noting how deftly she flattered both me and Edgar. Is this the kind of polish Lane and Margot said I need?

I frown slightly. Why am I thinking about them now?

Then I realize—*they aren’t here*. And they should be because they’re Tony’s parents. Ivy’s carrying their grandchildren.

On the other hand, Yuna did call Margot a bitch.

“It’s always so exciting when a baby shower has lots of babies. I mean, there’s Ivy, but Elizabeth and Evie are expecting, too!” Lady Min says.

“So am I,” I say with a big grin.

She claps with a gasp. “Oh my goodness. Even more perfect! Congratulations. Are you having a boy or a girl?”

“We don’t know yet,” Edgar says.

“Evie was just telling us about her baby.”

I look at Evie, who has a plate laden with food and is swallowing an appetizer. “Yeah. A boy.”

“We’re so relieved,” Nate says.

“How come? Isn’t Barron pressuring you to name the kid after him?” Elizabeth asks.

“Yeah, but Barron isn’t *too* bad. He wanted Ethel if it’s a girl.” Nate rolls his eyes.

Lady Min looks a little pained. “Ethel isn’t an easy name to pronounce. That *th* and *l*...”

I almost laugh. “The problem is, it’s basically a name for suitable for someone’s old auntie,” I whisper.

“Oh.” Lady Min blinks.

A waiter comes by with a tray of fizzy drinks and cupcakes. The little chocolate decorations on the cupcakes read *Katherine* in pink and *Sebastian* in blue.

“Please take them,” Lady Min says. “It’s just ginger ale, nothing alcoholic here today.”

“Katherine and Sebastian?” I ask as I grab a drink and cupcake. “Are those your babies’ names?”

“You missed the announcement,” Tony says. “But yes.”

Edgar’s eyes grow exceptionally soft. Emotions fleet through them, his reaction too strong for the occasion. “Katherine. That’s beautiful.”

“I know,” Ivy whispers, then links her fingers with Tony’s.

My eyes flick from Edgar to Tony to Ivy and back. Clearly, something’s going on, but I don’t know what.

Edgar leans over. “Katherine was our sister. She died very young.”

Now it makes sense. “I think that’s beautiful,” I say with a smile, then put an arm around his shoulders and kiss his cheek. I can’t imagine the pain of losing a sibling, and I hope what Tony and Ivy are doing gives him a measure of comfort.

An Asian woman comes over and whispers into Lady Min’s ear. She checks her slim, diamond-studded watch, then goes to the front of the room. She clinks on a glass to get everyone’s attention.

“Hello, everyone. I hope you’re enjoying yourselves. This is my first time at a baby shower and my first time hosting one, so hopefully everything is acceptable,” she says with a smile.

“This is amazing!” Ivy calls out. “Thank you!”

Lady Min beams at her. “You’re very welcome. Anyway, I thought it wouldn’t be complete without a slideshow.”

A slideshow? Of what?

“Miss Kim, can you start?” she says.

Edgar and I sit down next to Yuna on a big sectional. The room goes dark and a projector shows a series of Ivy’s sonogram pictures against one wall. They start out as dots, but as the weeks and months go by, they start to look more human.

I place a hand over my belly. The life inside me is going to transform like that too. And the emotion it stirs is... overwhelming. I swallow, feeling a little silly that I’m so overcome, but at the same time so happy for the little baby in my womb.

“My mom’s probably dabbing her eyes, thinking about the baby I’m not giving her,” Yuna mutters. “See?”

She’s right. I bite my lip so I don’t burst out laughing. “She could just be happy for Ivy.”

“Well, that too. She bought them a life-sized dollhouse for the twins. Actually it’s a custom-made doll-*castle*, but big enough for kids to actually go inside and play. Tony said she could set it up in the secondary atrium.”

Oh, wow. So that explains those turrets. I look at the presents Edgar and I brought. Pretty blasé by comparison.

Yuna sips her drink, then waves at her mom with a big smile.

“So. You get everything resolved with your mom?” I ask.
“She still trying to marry you off, or...?”

“Yes. Our agreement is that I’m supposed to go on a hundred blind dates.”

“A *hundred*?” I whisper.

“She’ll run out of men by the tenth date. Twentieth at the most. There aren’t that many that meet her requirements...and can pass the screening.”

Requirements? Screening? Lady Min must be incredibly picky.

The slideshow ends, and the lights come back on. I blink, adjusting to the sudden brightness.

Then the door opens. And Margot Blackwood walks in.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Edgar

My entire body freezes at the sight of my mother. What the hell is she doing here? How did she get past security?

Tony is livid and starts to stand up. Ivy is pale but has placed a restraining hand on his arm. I look around to find Court, who simply looks stunned.

Jo's staring at Mom, her eyes a little too intent. And Mom's staring back at Jo...expectantly.

They've met, I realize. Why didn't Jo say something? If Dad came out here to force a meeting with Jo, so could Mom. I should've thought of that and anticipated it.

"What are you doing here?" Yuna's mother asks coldly.

"Why, I'm here to celebrate the birth of my first grandchildren, of course. I'm entitled."

No, you aren't. The only thing you're entitled to is a lifetime of being by yourself. You don't get to be here. You don't get to pretend you care. About us. About your grandchildren.

Mom looks around. Everyone's staring at her in utter silence. She smiles as though she isn't bothered by the awkwardness of the moment. But then, she only ever cared about herself.

"I brought a present," she says calmly and graciously as she extends a box. It's beautifully wrapped because she would never give a gift that isn't pretty to look at.

When nobody makes a move, Miss Kim steps forward to take it. Lady Min says nothing. I suspect her restraint has very little to do with her approval of my mom's presence here, and more with the tension in the room.

A waiter walks past Mom, and she reaches out and takes a cupcake. She never did lack for audacity.

Tony removes Ivy's hand from his arm and starts to stand.

Suddenly, Mom gasps and drops the cupcake. Her face turns white, and tremors go through her.

"Katherine..." she whispers, then looks at us—her children—for answers.

"That's one of the babies' names," Ivy says tautly.

Mom's gaze zeroes in on Jo, who stiffens next to me. Something passes between them.

My hackles rise. *What the hell does Mom want?*

"It's best you leave." Tony gestures at the door. "You aren't welcome here, Mother. Security should've been notified earlier. This won't happen again."

Mom flinches, her cheeks reddening as if slapped. I don't understand why she's acting so hurt and shocked. She spent over two decades turning Tony's life into hell. She didn't care who else got hurt in the process, even if the collateral damage was her other children. She should've known her presence would be rejected—that nobody would stand up for her.

"I'm your *mother*," she says, her voice trembling. Unshed tears glitter in her eyes.

Tony's shoulders grow rigid. I move to stand next to him to let her know that whatever he does, he has my unconditional support.

"That's the only reason security isn't dragging you out," he says coldly.

"Very well." Pulling in a shaky breath, she turns and walks out, her head held high.

The door closes behind her, and everyone in the room seems to exhale.

Tony stalks toward Miss Kim and takes the present Mom brought. Then he strides to the closest window, opens it and

hurls the present out into the water garden. There's a faint splash.

Jo gasps, the sound small, but audible because I'm so close to her. I rub her tense back. A small part of me wants to take her aside and explain, but a bigger part is too embarrassed, especially when I recall how warm and close-knit her family was last Sunday.

Even if you try to tell her, she won't understand, a voice in my head whispers. It's best not to say anything. Maybe she won't ask. She's a smart girl. Discreet. She'll know it's not something you want to talk about.

My gut is usually right about stuff like this. And I'm trying to convince her to marry me, not repel her with scandals and the moral depravity of my mother.

Lady Min smiles. "Well. Now that that little interruption has been taken care of, why don't we open the presents? Ivy?"

"Yes, let's," Ivy says.

That seems to jolt everyone back to our earlier cheery mood. The quartet starts a new piece, something light and fun.

I watch Ivy open one gift after another. And pray that Jo doesn't ask me about Mom or what just happened.

* * *

Jo

Once Margot Blackwood is kicked out, the shower goes well. Everyone pretends like nothing ever happened. I'm wondering if I'm the only one who's curious about her behavior. I'm still kind of stunned. And the fact that she kept looking at me like she expected me to jump to her defense...

But I don't want to bring her up and ruin everyone's mood again. Maybe Edgar will say something once we're alone and on our way home.

Except he doesn't.

My curiosity is churning, and I'm dying to know. I wonder if I should ask him, but then the memory of his expression stops me. He was staring at his mom like she was something filthy he never wanted to see again. He actually looked relieved when she left.

What could make a man behave that way toward his own mother?

My brothers would've been thrilled and hugged our mama if she were to show up. Even if she was interrupting, they wouldn't be so rude or cold.

Maybe everything the gossip articles said about Edgar's mother is true. Or maybe the reality is even worse.

All the way home, through the rest of the evening and up to when we go to bed, Edgar remains mute. I finally realize he's going to pretend his mom never crashed the baby shower.

Should I bring it up now, after some time has passed?

But he looks relaxed and at ease now, propped against the headboard and checking some work email. If I mention his mother, that good mood is going to vanish.

It doesn't have to be now, I tell myself. I can always ask later. Or ask Yuna privately.

I got lucky in the family department, and he obviously didn't. Trying to extract an explanation feels like a kind of subtle nastiness. Like a kid who got an A on a test asking a kid who obviously did poorly how he did.

So I keep all the questions swirling in my head to myself, even though a small voice is telling me that's not the best move if I'm planning on having something lasting with Edgar.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Jo

Something tickles my forehead. I wave my hand, trying to brush it away.

“Hey.” Edgar’s mellow voice is as sexy as always...but the hour is not.

“Go away,” I say, utterly grouchy. “I need sleep, you beast.”

Edgar chuckles. “You need to get up.” The tickling sensation returns, but this time on my cheek.

“No. I’m tired. You kept me up late.”

“I restrained myself, given your delicate condition,” he says like he’s proud of himself.

“Restraint? You call that restraint? You think you got an A, when it’s really an F.”

“Hmm... For fantastic fornication?” There’s laughter in his voice.

I can’t believe he’s actually making jokes when I’m this sleepy. “You’re being unfair. Go away. Wanna sleep more.”

“It’s already ten thirty.”

Did he just say...? “*Ten thirty!*” I shriek, jackknifing up.

Edgar’s reflexes are superb, because he jerks back quickly enough that we don’t crack skulls. “Yes.”

“Oh my God, I have an appointment! In less than two hours!”

More like an hour and a half. Ack! And I haven’t showered yet! I hop off the bed, then stumble toward the bathroom.

“You have to eat breakfast! My daughter’s hungry!”

“It’s my son, and no, he’s not! He’s an understanding baby!”

I shut the door behind me and jump into the shower. Why didn’t the alarm go off? Did I forget to set it last night? It’s certainly possible. I was distracted by the fact that Edgar wouldn’t volunteer information about his mom...and then he started to take advantage of my body.

Okay, so it was more like mutually taking advantage, because I rolled him over and rode him, which was fun. But I need to focus now. I can’t be late to this meeting!

I blow-dry my hair, put on makeup in record time, then shimmy into a black and silver tube dress. Still looks fabulous on me. When am I going to start showing and developing cankles? I know they’re coming. I just wish somebody in the medical community would find a way to stop it. If we can land spacecraft on Mars, surely we can cure cankles.

Hoisting a purse over my shoulder, I head downstairs. If I hurry and there’s no traffic, I might make it a little early. And by a little, I mean five minutes.

Cutting it way too close, I think. You never know with L.A. traffic.

“Here, take this.” Edgar hands me half a bagel laden with cream cheese and a tumbler full of ginger and herb tea, from the way it smells.

“Seriously? I’m going to be late.”

“Have it on the way.” Then he adds, “But only when you’re stopped at red lights.”

I give him a smile. He’s just worried and being sweet. I kiss him. “Okay. Thanks.”

“I wish you didn’t have to work today. It’s Sunday.”

“I know. I’ll review my schedule and see what I can do to take some weekends off. See you this afternoon.”

I step into the elevator and hit the button for the garage, munching on the bagel. It’s quite good. Maybe I’m hungrier

than I thought. I polish off more than half by the time the elevator arrives.

Quickly, I move toward my car. Then I stop when I see the familiar figure of Edgar's mom moving toward me.

How did she get in? I thought this building had great security.

But maybe she snuck in after somebody. She's a woman and richly dressed. Nobody would stop her, thinking she doesn't belong in the building.

I pretend not to see her. I know it's not the best move—and rude to boot—but I don't have time to talk with her even if I wanted to. And I don't, not after what happened yesterday and not until I know more about what's going on in Edgar's family.

“Jo!” she calls out.

Argh. Just feign deafness.

“Josephine Martinez!” she says, louder.

Her heels start clicking on the concrete floor at an accelerated pace.

This must be how a deer feels. She's just minding her own business, munching on some grass in a forest, and all of a sudden somebody's trying to hunt her down.

No way to ignore Edgar's mom now. I stop, paste on a smile and turn around. “Oh, hello, Margot. I didn't hear you.”

She's breathing like I just made her run a marathon. “I need to talk to you.”

“Actually, I'm on my way to an appointment,” I say, taking a step toward my car. It's only a few yards away. “I'm going to be late if I don't leave now.”

Her lips curl in a hint of disdain. “Let's be serious. You? Work? You're with my son now, who's worth billions.”

Ooo-kay. What tiny crumb of pity I might've felt for the way she was treated at the party evaporates.

“Well, I’m a professional who seriously does take some pride in her career,” I say, although I know I should get going rather than wasting my time talking with her. Traffic better be perfect. “And how did you know that I would be working today, anyway? It’s Sunday.”

“My husband doesn’t employ incompetent PIs, my dear. The value of good information is something you learn when you have money.”

“You’ve been spying on me? And *hacked my email*?”

She doesn’t even try to be coy like she was at the café. “Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to be tossed out by your own child? And all over a misunderstanding?”

“If there’s a misunderstanding, you need to work it out with whoever you’re having the problem with, not me. I can’t help you.” I start walking backward toward my Lexus.

“Edgar cares about you.”

“And I care about him. But I’m not getting involved in your drama.” I hit the button on my fob, and my car unlocks. “I’m going now.” I start to get in.

“Then I’ll release the video.”

I go still, my brain stuttering and going white in an instant of panic. I turn my head toward her. “What?”

“The sex tape you made with your former boyfriend. I’m going to release it.”

Fury erupts over her lie. There’s only one such video—the one Aaron made. But Edgar said he took care of it, so there’s no way she can have it. “Stop trying to play games. You don’t have anything.”

She pulls her phone out from her purse, taps the screen a few times and shows me the video.

Air seems to solidify in my lungs. I don’t have to see more than two seconds of it. It’s the same damned thing Aaron held over me.

“How the hell did you get that?” Edgar sounded so confident when he said it wouldn’t be a problem anymore.

“I have connections.”

Shit. Edgar said his family and Aaron’s did some business together. She must know Aaron and somehow got him to hand it over.

“Don’t you think it’ll be embarrassing? What father wants to see his daughter like that?”

“Shut up,” I reply, because I can’t think of anything better to say over the shock and rage churning inside me like jagged glass.

She raises an artfully arched eyebrow. “Is that how you speak to your elders?”

The delicate, elegant air slides off her like a snake’s skin. *Yuna’s right. She’s a complete bitch.* And I’m so pissed off that Edgar didn’t really take care of it. If he had, Aaron would’ve never given it to Margot. I don’t want my parents seeing that trash after I told them the video won’t be a problem. It’s like double the humiliation—once for the video and again for incompetence.

“Well?” Margot says.

“I’m going to work.” It’s all I can do to refrain myself from slamming the door shut, but I don’t. I’m not giving her the satisfaction.

I’m going to do my job. And do it well. Then, after I get home, Edgar and I are going to have a talk.

Chapter Fifty

Edgar

While Jo's gone, I sit in my home office and review the project reports from Blackwood Energy. Everything's a hot mess at the company, and under any other circumstances I would've stayed in Tempérane. However, Dad had Paul botch a deal on purpose to pull me back into town. He thinks I don't know. But the stunt is so ridiculous, I'd have to be a lobotomized idiot to not realize what he's done.

I wonder if this is how things are going to be. Dad trying to drag me and Jo to Tempérane, no matter what. But why? He wants to get back with Mom, and he knows I don't approve. It would be a hundred times easier for him and Mom if I stayed in Los Angeles indefinitely.

Reputation.

Appearances are everything to Dad. If all of his children leave—and not even the wealth of Blackwood Energy is going to be enough to keep us in town—people are going to wonder. And then they'll gossip. They remember what Mom did. They remember a girl died, and Mom denied her family the closure they deserved for a decade. They also remember Tony was exiled all his life, and Court left soon after to be in L.A. to be closer to Tony...and away from Mom.

I send my notes on the reports to Paul, keeping my communication short and to the point. Reaming him isn't going to accomplish anything. Every organization has at least one rat. If Paul had said no, Dad would've found somebody else.

My phone rings. I tap the Bluetooth earphone automatically, thinking perhaps it's Jo.

“Edgar,” I say.

“I can’t believe you humiliated your own mother!” Dad’s voice thunders in my ears. “And in front of all those people!”

I sneer, even though he can’t see me. “Did she run to you and cry prettily?” I say, controlling my temper. It’s a waste of effort to show him how I really feel, because he doesn’t care.

“She didn’t run to anyone! I asked!”

He means she manipulated him into asking. It isn’t that hard. All she has to do is sigh, sniffle...perhaps shed a tear or two. “Did she mention that she showed up at Tony’s home uninvited?”

“She’s his mother! She doesn’t need an invitation.”

He’s blustering. He knows he’s being unreasonable. What she did to Tony and Ivy is unforgivable. Isn’t that why Dad divorced her in the first place—to show Tony he wasn’t a total monster?

“Of all the people in the world, she *is* the one who needs an invitation,” I say, my voice frigid. “She doesn’t get to come to any of our homes.”

“So that’s how you’ve decided to treat your own mother? And is that why you’re trying to marry a girl who won’t speak up for her either?”

Jesus. Did Mom complain about Jo too? Then I remember the expectant look Mom kept shooting at her. Did Mom hope she would intervene on her behalf? “Leave Jo out of this.”

“Even though she isn’t from our social class, I thought she was a reasonably well-bred girl,” Dad says. “I expected better!”

“Yes, well... I guess you’re just destined for disappointment,” I say, suddenly too bitter to care.

He knows he’s being illogical, but he’s doing this anyway because he wants to maintain the right appearance. *Husband and pillar of the community backing his mate*. He also wants Mom back and wants me to be happy about it. Not because she’s done anything to deserve a place in our lives again, but simply because he loves her.

Fuck love.

“And I’ll tell you something. Jo is perfect, precisely because I’ll never love her. Ever.” *I’ll never let myself be blind and stupid like you.*

A loud gasp comes from the doorway. My entire body freezes as horror shoves icy fingers into my gut.

Jo’s standing there, her complexion so white that it almost looks gray. Her lips are stark red with lipstick; they look like a bloodstain on her colorless face. She sways a little.

I jump to my feet to catch her.

But she puts one hand on the doorframe for balance, then pushes the other out in my direction as though I’m some kind of evil she has to ward off.

“Stay away,” she croaks.

“Jo.” I know I have to fix this. Say something to put the color back in her face. Make her smile.

But my mind is blank. Words jumble in my head, but won’t line up to create a convincing argument to let her know that what I said wasn’t as bad as it sounded.

But my damned mind, which gave me “Jo is perfect, precisely because I’ll never love her. Ever” is struggling to come up with the perfect line to fix it.

Assuming it can be fixed.

Dad’s still booming in my ears, yammering about the family legacy, my responsibility to the name, to the company, to all that we stand for.

And what *do* we stand for, except misery? This terrible look on the mother of my child’s face?

“We’re done. I quit,” I say to Dad.

“What—”

I rip the earphones away and toss them on the desk before moving slowly toward Jo. She’s breathing too shallowly. I’m afraid she’s going to grow hysterical and pass out.

“Jo—”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Don’t. You’re such a liar.”

I don’t think I’ve lied to her. Even when I was at my most mindless during sex, I never promised I’d love her.

On the other hand, what she overheard has to seem like a betrayal to her. I need to address that, rather than arguing about whether I’ve lied or not.

“Let me explain,” I say, my voice tight and hoarse.

“What is there to explain? I heard every word. I’m perfect because you’ll never love me.”

Her voice breaks toward the end. The skin around her eyes is red, but she isn’t crying. She has too much pride.

It cuts me until I can’t breathe. The icy fingers are twisting in my gut.

I start to reach out, needing to hold her and comfort her.

But she recoils like she can’t bear the sight of me. “You said you took care of Aaron’s video,” she says bitterly.

Why is she talking about that now? But at least it’s something I know I’ve done right. “Yes.”

“Then how come your mother has it?”

Furious shock explodes in my head, and I stare at her, unsure if I heard right.

“She’s blackmailing me to fix the broken relationship between you and her. What I don’t get is why any of this is *my* problem. If your family is a mess, you guys should fix it and leave me out. It isn’t like I matter.”

Panic tightens its grip around my throat. “Of course you matter.”

“Right. You care about a woman who you can’t even love. The only thing you care about is the baby. I should’ve known better than to think this”—she gestures between us—“could become more—like something my parents have.”

The warm, happy scenes from her family lunch play in my mind like a movie reel. A yearning for what I found among her family pulses through me. But as the longing grows deeper, the fear grows icier.

She picks up her purse and stands straight. She's putting on a brave face, but I know she's only a breath away from shattering. She's even paler now, more unshed tears glinting in her bloodshot eyes.

She's walking away. I have to stop her, but for the first time in my life, terror immobilizes me. What if I cause more damage with a wrong move? I've made too many mistakes. I can't harm us any more than I've already done.

"Wait!" I say, my brain finally sputtering to life again. "Don't go. You should stay here."

Most of her things are here. Although she didn't bring everything from her apartment yet, she has what she needs to be comfortable in the penthouse, which means her apartment doesn't have it.

"No," she says, her voice thick. "I can't be with you."

"I'll leave, then." I grab my phone and laptop and walk past her. Part of me wants to reach out and touch her, make sure she's okay. But I know I don't have the right to touch her, not right now.

She doesn't stop me. She stands there like a hurt and wary creature, her wounded eyes following me.

Walking away is the hardest thing I've ever done. Every step I take from her makes me colder and colder, until I feel like I'll never be warm again.

Chapter Fifty-One

Jo

When Edgar's out the door, I drag myself to the bedroom and collapse on the bed. Now that I'm alone, the tears flow freely, wetting the soft sheets that smell like us.

The reminder of what we had is slicing me to ribbons.

I was so mad after dealing with Edgar's mom, but I eventually realized it wasn't really all Edgar's fault. The woman's obviously devious and mean. The tabloid articles probably went easy on her because they were afraid of getting sued.

But I wanted to talk about it with Edgar. The sex tape is a problem that still hasn't been resolved, and I want to know what to do about his mother and her persistent stalking to get me to fix things between her and Edgar. I was going to tell Edgar that I prefer he inform his mom I don't clean up other people's messes, and if she burned a bridge, she can rebuild it herself.

Instead of all that, though...

Jo is perfect, precisely because I'll never love her. Ever.

I don't know who Edgar was talking to. I only heard his voice, and couldn't make out what he was saying until I got closer to his office, where the door was ajar like always.

Does it matter who was on the phone with Edgar? He said what he said. He was dead serious, too. And contempt and disgust vibrated in every word. I couldn't find my balance, like I was in the middle of an earthquake.

How could he have acted and spoken so much like Mr. Right? I can't believe he faked the hot lust I felt when we made love. Or the warm friendliness he displayed toward my family.

Maybe this is just more proof I'm terrible at picking men.

People with bad fashion sense can go to the most exclusive boutiques and somehow still manage to leave with clothes that are all wrong for them. Maybe I'm the same way. There's something fundamentally wrong with my man radar. I could be in the middle of anywhere—among homeless bums or the most eligible bachelors. I'll still leave with somebody totally wrong.

Edgar being different from my exes doesn't matter. Actually, it's worse that Edgar's so unlike any of the men I've ever dated. I had such high hopes, and now that they've been dashed, it hurts. Like my heart's breaking into tiny pieces I might never be able to put together again.

Oh my God. I love Edgar even if he doesn't reciprocate the emotion. And I feel like the most unlovable and stupid woman in the world to have fallen for a man who will never love me back.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Edgar

Instinct and habit are scary things. Instead of wondering where I should go, once I relinquished the penthouse to Jo, my lizard brain must've taken control, because I find myself in front of Tony's mansion.

I sit in my car. Stare at the warm light glowing through windows. Wonder if Tony's happy. He must be. He's with Ivy, and they're going to have babies. And she doesn't look at him the way Jo looked at me.

Fuck.

I wish I could turn back time. I wish I'd never said what I said to Dad. I wish I'd never picked up his call in the first place.

I wish I'd resigned earlier and cut all ties with the goddamn *family legacy*.

All my money. All my influence. All my control. They should've been enough to put me in charge of my life.

But instead, what I have is a mess I can't seem to figure out how to fix.

What a shit show.

What's Jo doing now? She must be furious. Is she crying? Screaming? Does she have somebody who can be with her? Make her feel better? She shouldn't be alone when she's upset, but who is there to contact...?

Hugo? He'll try to rip my balls off first, but he's a good guy. He'll have his cousin's back, even while telling her I'm a bastard who doesn't deserve her. I'd prefer not to expose Jo to an "Edgar is unworthy" diatribe, but it's better than her being alone.

I pull out my phone, then pause. There's a text from Yuna earlier that I miss—

Yuna! She won't try to rip my balls off. And she knows all the details of the Blackwood family scandal. She can be Jo's ally, but also perhaps convince Jo that I'm not a total bastard. That I deserve a second chance. Even if it comes with lots of conditions, exclusions and other fine print.

My mind made up, I call her.

"Hey, Edgar," she says cheerily. I hear a piano in the background.

"Hi, Yuna. Are you with Ivy?" I didn't consider the possibility she might be in the mansion right in front of me.

"Yeah. We're playing some Schumann together. Why? Wanna bring your woman over to hear us? We won't charge you." There's laughter in her voice because she doesn't know how badly I messed everything up.

Yuna loves spending time with Ivy, and I feel guilty about interrupting her evening. But not guilty enough to make me stop.

"I'm actually at Tony's front door. I'll be in in a minute."

Taking a deep breath, I get out of the car, walk over to the mansion and head inside to the room where Ivy's Bösendorfer Imperial is. Tony had it made specially for her, the side embossed with a tiger lily, which is her favorite flower.

Tony's sitting on a couch with a bottle of water, watching Ivy and Yuna with a small smile. They're sharing the bench in front of the piano. It's longer than normal, but that's by design. Tony and Ivy play Schubert's *Fantasie for Four Hands* together often, and he refuses to get a separate bench for himself.

"Hey," Tony says, but the smile on his face slips when he sees my expression.

"Are you okay?" Ivy asks, rising from the piano.

"Where's Jo?" Yuna asks, without giving me a chance to answer Tony or Ivy.

“No, it’s...” I start to respond to Ivy, then stop because it’s not something “fine” or “no” can answer. “Yuna, would you mind going over and spending the night with Jo?” I ask.

She frowns, coming around the piano. “How come? Do you need to be out of town?”

I want to lie and say yes because the truth is...awful. But I’m not in the habit of lying, especially not to my friends and family. Their concerned gazes seem to bore into me. My sense of failure triples.

“I messed up,” I start, then sit in armchair, wishing I could drink something stiff. But I don’t think Tony keeps alcohol in the piano room, and I don’t feel like hunting down a drink in this castle.

“It can’t be that bad,” he says slowly, automatically reaching out to hold his wife as she sits next to him.

Ah, Tony. I run both my hands over my face, then through my hair.

“Stop ripping your hair out,” Yuna says, sitting on a bench to my left. “Bald isn’t a good look for a man your age.”

I know she’s trying to make me laugh, but it doesn’t work. After dragging in a deep breath to gather myself, I tell them what happened, wincing inwardly every time I hear how ridiculous my actions sound.

Tony’s jaw sags, while Ivy is staring at me like she doesn’t recognize me anymore. Yuna is the one who recovers first from her shock.

“Oh my God! That’s horrible. But you told her you didn’t mean it, right? You told her you love her already, didn’t you?” she demands.

“No.” The admission comes slow, a Herculean effort to drag that word out of me because it’s gradually dawning on me that I screwed up worse than I thought.

“No you didn’t tell her you didn’t mean it, or *no* you didn’t tell her you love her yet?” Tony asks.

“Both,” I say, sitting rigidly because I want to squirm, and I refuse to allow myself to do so. I need to regain some semblance of control before this brewing panic overtakes me.

Ivy shakes her head. “Edgar—”

“Edgar Blackwood, you’re an idiot!” Yuna shrieks. “I can’t *believe* this!”

Her piercing tone is enough to make me wince. “What’s so unbelievable? Did you think I was in love with her?” Love wasn’t something I ever sought out, and I assumed that was obvious to everyone.

“Of course! I thought you just hadn’t figured it out yet because you’re a man.”

Tony looks like he might want to object, but keeps his mouth shut.

“I never told anybody I loved her. I was honest,” I say. I don’t play games—that’s Mom’s forte—and I try to be upfront about what I can offer whenever I start a relationship.

Ivy has a peculiar look on her face, like she’s watching a poorly plotted high school drama. “Ed—”

“*Edgar.*” Yuna shakes her head. “Do you know why I haven’t gotten married yet, even though my parents are trying their best to set me up?”

“Because you don’t like merger marriages?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all. It’s just an easy reason to throw out.” She sighs the sigh of a weary, wise woman ready to explain the ways of life to a clueless and rather slow-witted youngster. “My parents respect and love each other. They put each other first, and they have a happy life together. The men my mom sets me up with? They’re fantastic on paper. Rich and ambitious. Well connected. Handsome, even. The kind you might introduce to your single girlfriends.”

“So what’s wrong with them?” I ask.

“They’ll never love me. They’ll never make me their priority. I’ll always be an afterthought—just somebody they married because it was good for business.”

“I’d never do that to Jo,” I say.

“Really?” Yuna grows thoughtful. “People either want what their parents have, or reject it outright. Which one is Jo?”

“She wants what her parents have.” Hell, even *I* want what her family has. And I thought I could have it while staying levelheaded.

“Then she won’t have you if you can’t give it to her. And based on what you said...you can’t.” Yuna looks at me sadly. “Maybe you should let her go.”

“I’m not abandoning my child!” How can Yuna even think that I wouldn’t be there for my kid?

“Why not?” Yuna shoots back. “Because you want a Father of the Year Award?”

I stare at her, insulted. Is that what she thinks this is about? “I don’t give a damn about that!”

She snorts. “Look, that kid’s going to know you don’t love his mother. He’s going to know your involvement is out of duty. Jo’s a great girl. She deserves better than what you’re offering. She deserves a man who loves her, and her baby deserves a father who’s around *out of love*.” She grabs her purse. “Anyway, yes, I’ll go check on Jo. And I’ll do it because I *like* her, not because it’s some kind of duty.”

Jesus. If this were a football match, she just scored the game-winning touchdown.

She hugs Ivy and Tony, then walks out. There’s the extra point.

“She probably didn’t mean to sound so harsh,” Tony says.

“Definitely not,” Ivy says. “Edgar, we know you care about the ba—”

“And you stay by your phone,” Yuna says, sticking her head back into the room. “In case I need to call you.” She vanishes again.

“I’m tired. I think I’ll head to bed early.” It’s only six, and what I’m saying is ludicrous, but they don’t try to stop me.

I walk into the guest suite that Tony has set aside as mine. It's empty now, since I moved everything to the new house. It's odd to be back here now, under these circumstances—sad and emotionally drained.

After kicking off my shoes, I lie on the bed, my arms folded behind my head and phone on the nightstand. What Yuna said keeps circling in my head.

People either want what their parents have, or reject it outright.

I never wanted what my parents have. Ever. The coldness. All the roles we had to play to make sure we look fine on the outside, even as the inside rots away.

But the excuse for the effort has always been the same.

You took away who I love the most, so I'm going to behave monstrously because that's what you deserve.

Mom never said that out loud, but we all knew what's what she was thinking.

I love her. We all do. She deserves our understanding.

Dad said that all the time. It didn't matter that we were just kids. That we were all suffering. So long as he and Mom were fine, whatever happening to us was something we had to bear. Hell, the consequences were still something we suffer through.

Love rots people, confuses them and clouds their judgment. That's been my experience, because that's what my family's life has been.

But...

Jo's family isn't like that. They're warm. Caring. Protective.

They love each other.

And their love didn't feel bad. Or twisted. It made me yearn for something similar.

So what's the difference?

Your parents are fucked up, Yuna's voice says in my head. And you grew up around those fuck-ups for so long that you're conditioned to look at the worst side of love.

What if I'd had what Jo had growing up? Would I have seen more clearly?

And if I could see more clearly...

I suck in air as sudden pain stabs my chest. I'm a moron. A selfish bastard of the worst kind.

To avoid making the same mistake Dad made, I'm hurting both of us by taking away what Jo wants—what her parents have. I'm punishing her, making her pay for my parents' sins.

Yuna's right. I should let Jo go.

But I can't. Not when I just realized the reason she's perfect isn't because I could never fall in love with her...but because I'm already in love with her.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Edgar

I get up early the next morning. I made a plan last night.

Project Convince Jo I'm Not a Fuck-Up.

It's going to require a lot of work. More honesty and vulnerability than I've ever thought I'd show anybody. But I'm okay with that. What I can't tolerate is losing her.

When I'm out of the shower with a towel around my waist, I realize I don't even have a change of underwear. Shit.

I should order them delivered immediately. I pick up my phone to place a same-day order and spot a text from Tony.

–Tony: Left you a new set of underwear outside your door, plus some clothes. My suit won't fit you, so just a T-shirt and shorts.

True. Tony's slimmer than me. I text him a *thank you*, open the door, grab the clothes and change.

My phone rings. I check the screen instantly, wondering if it's Yuna, although hoping it's Jo. But no. It's Susan.

“Yes?” I say, surprised my assistant's calling me.

“Good morning, Edgar. You have a meeting in half an hour. Did you get my executive memo about the agenda? There's been a change.”

Huh. She should've been in the office for at least an hour by now. “Didn't you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“I quit.”

“You *what*?”

“I quit. I told Father yesterday. Didn’t you see him?” It isn’t like him to skip work.

“I did, but he didn’t say anything about you quitting.” She sounds bewildered. “On the contrary, he asked me to make sure you didn’t miss the meeting because it’s important.”

I grit my teeth. Typical Dad. “I’m sending in my official resignation.” And I’ll make sure to CC everyone on the board so he can’t pretend I never left.

“But...this is so sudden.”

“It really isn’t. I’m sure the board will do a great job whether or not I’m there,” I say, doing my best to keep sarcasm out of my voice. The staff doesn’t need to be aware of the family drama. I’m doing the right thing for me and Jo and our unborn baby.

“I see...”

I sigh. “I’m sorry to tell you like this, Susan. If you were local, I’d ask you to work for me, but I don’t think you want to uproot your kids.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I don’t.”

“You have stellar evaluations, so you shouldn’t have any problem transitioning to whoever’s going to replace me. And if you ever need a reference...”

“Thanks, Edgar.”

After we hang up, I type a quick and concise resignation email and fire it off. Then I go over the information Linda sent me about Aaron Korvid. I didn’t read it too closely, but I remember she had a section on scandals and more in the back of the report on him. It’s about time I get myself up to speed on Korvid’s...*activities* in detail.

My phone rings again. I don’t have to check the screen to know it’s somebody from Blackwood Energy.

“Edgar,” I say, still skimming the report to find the dirt Linda put at the end.

“What the hell is the meaning of the email you just sent!” Dad is actually hissing. And that means he’s furious enough to consider physical violence.

“I thought I used very simple English words,” I say calmly. “Besides, I already told you yesterday.”

“You were emotional.”

I laugh, the sound cold and brittle.

“You’re walking away over a woman you don’t even love!”

My jaw tightens, but I have no one to blame but myself for the hateful way he speaks about Jo. “You’re wrong. I do love her. I just didn’t realize until now.”

“Is this her idea?” he demands.

“No. It’s mine. I’m tired of you trying to rope me and Jo into your idea of what family legacy is. I don’t care about it. Neither does she. And neither of us appreciates Mom stalking her and threatening to blackmail her.”

“Blackmail her? Is that what your girlfriend claimed?” Outrage bristles in every syllable.

“Oh, yes. Apparently, Mom got hold of a sex tape from an ex-boyfriend of Jo’s. I would never have thought that your wife, Margot Blackwood, pillar of the community, would go that far.”

He makes a strangled sound because he wants to disagree with me, but can’t. It *is* beneath us to use tactics so crude and insulting.

“She shouldn’t have done that,” I say, my voice frigid. “If she gets in my way like she did Tony, I won’t be so nice. Unlike him, there’s no way she can claim that I took something from her.”

“She just wants to reconcile!”

I laugh mockingly. “If she wanted that, she should’ve apologized, not tried to manipulate Jo behind my back.”

“Edgar...”

“Dad, you’ve made it clear that Mom is everything to you. You don’t care about anything else. So be with her and be happy. But don’t expect my blessings.” I hang up, then block his number.

I go back to Linda’s report. I have more urgent matters to take care of.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Jo

Yuna comes over only hours after Edgar leaves. Then she moves in, claiming she's worried about me being alone when I'm in a "delicate state." Since I can't drink, she does double shots and gets drunk, and we trash-talk stupid men. Men who make you wish for things they were never planning to let you have.

I didn't know Yuna was so good at disparaging people... and without using a *single* nasty or vulgar word.

Now that it's a new day, I feel kind of bad about all the things Yuna and I said about men. But as the day goes on, and I see one client after another, and Edgar doesn't make any attempt to contact me, I start to feel less guilty. Maybe I should've been meaner.

I tell myself he's going to try to text me, because that's the easy cop-out some of my exes used. Just text *Sorry*. Maybe add some idiotic excuses. He might even try to tell me I heard wrong.

Just like a store clerk at a boutique shop who tries to tell you you're wrong to return an item for not looking right because there's nothing wrong with the brand.

But Edgar doesn't text. He doesn't try to get the penthouse back or take his things.

And with every passing hour, my heart seems to deflate like a ball with a small hole in it. Why? I was so angry and upset when I overheard him. But with more time and better emotional stability, maybe I want to yell at him. Tell him what I think about his "she's perfect because I'll never love her" bullshit. Get my closure.

Because even though I'm telling myself I'm done with him, there's a part of me that says it's not quite over. And I have to agree. Unsettled feelings churn in my heart. My life at the moment is like a murder mystery that doesn't reveal who did it. Or a romantic comedy where the couple doesn't get back together after a fight.

But I'll be damned if I contact Edgar first. I know whoever makes the first move is going to be at a disadvantage.

So the rest of the week passes. I look at my calendar app. I have an appointment with Dr. Silverman next week. Should I ask her assistant to gently nudge Edgar about it so he'll have to show up?

Or would he ignore that, too?

After a client appointment on Saturday, I head to Manny's Tacos for a family dinner. Mama asked me to bring Edgar, but I haven't told him because I don't want to see him at the dinner when we haven't hashed everything out. Also, I don't want my family finding out about our separation at the dinner.

Normally Mama would be the first person I'd run to if I needed to talk. But I'm so reluctant at the moment. After her encouragement and conviction that I could do it, admitting out loud that I screwed up again is just going to make my failure unbearable.

And I'm terrified of the possibility that I might never have what I want in my personal life. Edgar seemed so perfect, the kind of solid, great guy I could build a life with. My brothers will probably all find the loves of their lives and get married and live happily ever after before me. Hell, I might even become a cat lady, who has twenty tomcats because they're more reliable than men she dates.

But at least I have the baby. I place a hand over my belly. I'll give him all my love, and maybe that'll be enough. If Edgar tries to start a custody battle, I'll sic Samantha on him.

When I walk in, everyone except Hugo's already in the private room. We hug each other, exchanging kisses.

“You look so *skinny!*” Tía Bea says, running her hand along my arm. “If you hadn’t told us, I would’ve never thought you were pregnant. You gotta start eating better.”

I smile at her as we sit around the table. My family makes sure to leave an empty chair next to me for Edgar. My sense of guilt and shame intensifies. He won’t join us, ever.

I forcibly brighten my smile. “My clothes still fit the same, so I don’t think I’ve lost weight. You just think I did because you keep expecting me to turn into a mountain.”

“Not a mountain,” she says. “Just a very fashionable hill.”

“I promise I’ll get big soon enough.”

“Where’s Edgar?” Rafael asks.

My breath catches, even though I knew someone would ask. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him all day.”

It’s not exactly a lie...just not the whole story.

“You want to text him?” Mama asks as she settles down next to Papa.

“Uh...” I slowly reach into my purse and pull out my phone. The battery’s charged, and the unit shows all four signal bars. I frown. “Crap. My battery’s dead.”

“Uh-oh. What if your clients call?” Jorge says. “Wanna charge it in my car? I have a charger.”

“Thanks, but it’s okay. I doubt anybody’s going to have their dress spontaneously combust in the next two hours or so.”

Everyone stares like I’ve shown up in a potato sack. I’ve never said anything like that about client emergencies. They’re probably all remembering the number of dinners I missed or had to leave early because of a client.

“Are you sick?” Papa turns to Diego, who’s seated next to me. “Check her temperature.”

Angel’s faster. He leans over and puts a hand on my forehead. “Feels okay.”

“I’m fine.” I roll my eyes at my brother, doing my best to act naturally. “I just don’t want to work too hard when I’m pregnant. I need to consider the health of my baby.”

My family collectively nods, and the tension around my shoulders and neck eases.

“Diego, give her something to drink. She’s tired,” Tía Bea says.

“Just water,” I say to Diego when he looks at me.

The doors open, and Hugo walks in. “Sorry I’m late,” he says. His business-casual outfit is a bit rumpled. Probably spent all day in the office.

“Your boss making you work on Saturday again?” Rinaldo says.

“Hey, what can I say? She needs me.” Hugo gives a shit-eating grin.

Bet he works overtime for free just to be around Samantha. She could be using his attraction to her. But at least she hasn’t treated him like he’s special, all the while thinking he’s perfect because *she’ll never feel anything genuine for him*.

Stop being so bitter. It’s for myself that I need to let this go. Clinging to resentment and anger will only hurt me. If Edgar doesn’t care enough to think he can love me, he certainly doesn’t care how I feel about him.

We all hug Hugo. He sits down next to Angel and pours himself a margarita.

“You didn’t hear it from me,” Hugo begins. “But I heard Aaron Korvid is looking for a lawyer.” A gloating grin splits his face.

I make a face. Aaron’s probably trying to sue his grandfather for his inheritance since his “blackmail a former girlfriend into marrying me” plan failed. He said he’d do anything to stop his brother from getting all the money.

“Didn’t you date that guy?” Rinaldo says, looking at me.

“Yeah.” Papa is scowling. He has every reason to hate Aaron.

Mama is also looking less than pleased. “What does he need a lawyer for?”

Hugo leans closer. “Apparently, a few newspapers published articles about him embezzling from his family charity and sexually harassing the female employees. His grandfather got so mad, he fired him on the spot.”

There’s a collective gasp. “What?” I blink. “No way. Were the articles in legit papers or just some tabloid?”

“No, no. Real papers.”

“Huh.” I believe Aaron is more than capable of groping and inappropriate talk. He secretly recorded sex with some of his exes, so what’s a little touching and some words?

Hugo continues, “And he got served by at least half a dozen of those women he’s been harassing.”

“Wow. Why would they just decide to sue him now?” I ask.

“Does it matter? He’s going to get justice. Hope he gets the meanest judge in the country,” Mama says.

“Did he do anything bad to you?” Angel’s eyes have gone flat.

Filmed us having sex and then threatened me with the recording. Then gave it to Edgar’s mom. “No.” Not that I want to protect Aaron, but he isn’t worth Angel getting into trouble. If I say anything, he’ll use Aaron’s face for a punching bag.

Papa purses his lips. Hugo is squirming, but I give him a look. He’d better keep his mouth shut. I’m going to have to figure out what I’m going to do about the video Edgar’s mom got.

“I heard rumors that the women are being funded,” Hugo says finally.

“*Funded?* Somebody’s paying them to sue?” Tío Manny says.

“No, I mean somebody’s paying their legal fees. They’ve got some real sharks representing them, and Aaron’s having trouble finding a good lawyer to take his case.”

Somebody must really hate Aaron, not that I’m particularly shocked. But I wonder why he’s having trouble getting a decent lawyer. He has the money. And his family has the connections to hook him up. His mother will certainly try.

“I hope he represents himself,” Hugo adds with an evil gleam in his eyes. “It’s going to be hilarious.”

The door opens again. Ooh, maybe the servers are going to bring out some food. I’m hungry, and we can talk about something other than my shitty ex.

Edgar walks in.

Frozen in shock, I stare. His eyes are slightly red, as if he hasn’t been getting much sleep. Maybe he’s just been busy with work. He’s in a Brioni suit, just like the first time he came to the restaurant.

Mama’s eyes light up. “You made it!”

“Excellent,” Tía Bea says with a wide grin.

I watch my family stand up and greet him with hugs and handshakes, feeling surreal. Nobody seems to notice anything wrong in my reaction. Probably because they figure Edgar and I are saving our greeting for last because we plan to kiss.

Why is Edgar here? Because of the baby?

Baby or not, he knows we’re over. He’s accepted that. Otherwise he would’ve tried to contact me. Coming here isn’t going to do anything except make a bigger mess. Does he really want to hash it out here?

“You look good,” Edgar says, coming around to me, his voice solemn.

“Of course,” I say. I don’t want him to know how much time I spent thinking about him. Or that the reason I look so good is makeup. Yuna gave me some great pointers for hiding signs of fatigue.

“We saved a seat for you, Edgar,” Mama says, gesturing at the empty chair next to me.

But he remains standing, facing the room. “Actually, there’s something I need to say to you all first.”

Shit. He’s going to announce we aren’t together anymore.

I give him a sharp look full of disappointment at his poor judgment. This is *not* the time or place.

“When I first came here and met you, you asked me what I brought to the table. My answer was: money and connections.”

This isn’t the opening I thought he’d go for. *What’s he trying to say?*

My family is watching him closely, like they can sense he’s about to reveal something very important.

“What I didn’t tell you is that I also bring a lot of ugly, messy baggage,” Edgar says. “To put it plainly, my family is broken. There are so many articles written about us. But what they don’t always mention is that one of my brothers, Tony, accidentally shot our baby sister in a hunting accident. She... didn’t survive.”

A collective gasp goes up in the room. Air clogs my throat. The magnitude of the tragedy is staggering. Hearing it from Edgar’s lips is so much worse than reading about it on my phone screen.

“He was only twelve at the time. Our mother blamed him, and he was exiled from the family soon after. He became a forbidden subject—we weren’t allowed to think of him, speak of him or have pictures of him around. Defending him would earn you a swift punishment. To her, the only thing that matters is that she lost her daughter. And our father let her do whatever she wanted because he loves her.”

Jesus. She abused her sons. Just because she didn’t smack them around doesn’t mean she didn’t leave scars with her neglect and emotional brutality. This explains a lot about Edgar’s excessive seriousness. And his desire to be a good father to his kid. He doesn’t want to be like his parents.

Shock, grief and sympathy tangle in my heart, and I hurt for the younger Edgar and his brothers.

Edgar continues, “When Tony came back to Louisiana after graduating from college, he met and fell in love with the woman who is now his wife, Ivy. But our mother didn’t want him to be happy.

“When someone purposely drove Ivy off a bridge, our mother looked the other way. She refused to report it to the police...even though she knew who did it. She also knew Ivy didn’t die, but she hid that too, purely to torment Tony.

“When it was brought to light, she blamed him again. People died because of her actions.”

I put my hand over my aching heart. This is terrible. Edgar’s unembellished, emotionless tone makes the tragedy of the story worse. It’s like the events are already so horrific that you don’t need anything other than the facts.

“Is she in jail?” Papa asks softly.

A corner of Edgar’s mouth dips. “No. Regardless of how reprehensible she is, nothing she did was illegal. I looked.”

“Well, that’s good, right? I mean, at least she’s not in jail,” Hugo says.

No, it’s not, I realize, looking at Edgar’s face. He’d rather have his mother pay for what she did.

“Our father didn’t like the scandal,” he answers in the same flat voice. “He also didn’t like being painted as a villain, even by association. He was complicit the entire time by looking the other way, no matter what she did, but this time he divorced her. He had to show something to the people in our town, especially those who knew more than they let on. The family’s position and tradition demanded we maintain a certain...moral superiority over the town.

“But public divorce or not, he still loves her. And now he wants her back. He believes it’s safe enough to try, since it’s been a while and the family reputation is going to stay intact if he couches it in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation. He doesn’t care how we feel about the situation or that it might

hurt us.” Edgar’s gaze slides in my direction, but he doesn’t look at me for long, like he’s afraid I’ll reject him. “I didn’t grow up like Jo. I don’t know how to be a warm person. I’m terrible at being a member of a family as supportive and wonderful as yours, even though I want to be very badly.”

I feel tears form in my eyes. I wish he’d told me all this earlier, then maybe I would’ve understood him better. And realized there was more to his “Jo’s perfect because I’ll never love her” talk.

“Every time my father did something he shouldn’t have, he always said he did it out of his love for Mom. So to me...love is what makes people blind and foolish. And I never wanted it...or even wanted to feel it.” He looks at me helplessly. “I’m sorry, Jo.”

His apology soothes the pain the words I overheard caused. *So it wasn’t about me.* But at the same time, I’m sad that he’s never going to learn what it’s like to love and be loved in return. “Me too,” I say.

Pablo bristles. “So does this mean you’re not going to marry Jo?”

Mama and Papa look concerned and let down. I’m sure this isn’t what they ever thought to hear from Edgar.

And my uncle, aunt, brothers and cousins all wear identical scowls, their eyebrows pinched together, mouths pursed tight.

“I want to,” Edgar says, answering Pablo.

“But you don’t want to love anybody. I’m not marrying for anything less,” I say, needing to clarify what I require from Edgar in case he doesn’t understand it yet.

“I know. And I realized I was being unfair to you. I was denying both of us a chance to be happy because of what my parents did.” He turns to face me fully. “You bring joy to my life, brighten my day and make me want to be a worthy man. And a worthy man—a man worthy of you—would be brave enough to say that he’s been wrong all along. And he’d tell you that he was too stupid to realize he’s already in love with you until it was too late.”

My throat constricts with emotion, and I stare at him as shock, hope and love all surge within my heart.

“Josephine Martinez, I do love you. Will you take me back?” Edgar asks.

I nod, unable to speak as tremors run through me. My family nods in approval. Angel adds a grunt.

Edgar moves around the table until he’s next to me. Then he takes out a small box and drops to one knee. I see the gorgeous ring he brought last time to propose to me with—the one that struck me speechless with admiration.

“And will you marry me?”

Tears finally fall from my eyes. I blink them away so I can see his beloved face better. The serious set of the bold lines, the bright, tender light in his green eyes.

He isn’t asking it lightly. *This is a true commitment.*

Tía Bea makes an impatient sound in her throat. “Just say yes!”

Tío Manny pushes her shoulder. “He’s not proposing to *you.*”

I laugh and put my arms around Edgar. “Yes. Of course, yes!”

The tension in his mouth eases, and he finally gives me a small smile. “So you forgive me?”

“Yes. Everything’s fine as long as you love me.”

He grows a bit concerned again. “I forgot to mention one more thing,” he says quietly so only I can hear it.

“What?”

“I quit my job. So I’m...unemployed now.”

I giggle. “Well, you did say you bring a lot of money to the table, so I’m sure we’ll be fine. If not, I’m still working. I’m sure we’ll find a way to manage to maintain the awesome life you’ll become accustomed to.”

“Deal.” He puts the ring on my finger. The diamond winks as if to say, *You’re going to have the most awesome life ever with the man of your dreams.*

My family breaks out in applause as Edgar and I kiss.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Edgar

—four years later

Tío Manny is mashing ripe guacamole in a bowl. He calls it toddler-friendly guacamole for his favorite girl.

Gwendolyn Willow Beatrice Blackwood is watching her grand-uncle slaving away in her grandparents' kitchen. Her hair's done in complicated braids, and she's in a forest-green dress that brings out her wide eyes.

She's the most precious thing in the world to me, along with her mom, who's sitting next to me on a loveseat, her head resting on my shoulder and soaking in the scene.

"Unca, your food is the best," Gwen says in that sweet voice of hers.

"Of course!" Manny booms with a laugh. "Because *I'm* the best. Wait until you taste my super-special cake, birthday girl!"

"Who reads the best stories, though?" Jo's dad says, in a transparent bid to get Gwen's attention and adoration.

"You, Grandpa!"

She claps her hands and runs to a bookcase in the living room. Gone is all the classic literature for high school kids. It's now full of children's stories. Above it is a shiny Teacher of the Year award plaque he received upon his retirement. She pulls out a book and brings it over to Jo's dad.

"Read me a story!" she demands like a princess that she is.

He picks her up, puts her on his knee and starts reading.

Jo's brothers and cousins haven't arrived yet, but there is already a huge pile of presents for Gwen in the living room.

Unlike most kids, she isn't all that interested in gifts. She prefers spending time with her grandparents and grand-uncle and -aunt. I'm grateful she sees and understands how valuable love is. She's smarter than I ever was.

My phone buzzes. I glance at the screen.

-Unknown Number: Happy birthday to Gwen. Did she get my presents? I hope she can visit this year. - Dad

He got a new phone, just like he does every birthday and Christmas. I block the number, just like always, and ignore him. If he wants to make a genuine gesture, he knows what he needs to do. But he's not going to, because he can't imagine a world where he has to give something up. I hope he's happy with Mom and the choices he's made.

"Who's that?" she asks.

"Nobody important." As the words leave my mouth, I realize it's true.

I pull Jo closer, feeling her softness against my frame. I look at our surroundings—the smiles, laughter, the smells of amazing food coming from the kitchen, Hugo walking in with a huge box of gifts and a tight hug for Gwen and everyone else...

All the love and joy and happiness overflow in my heart.

I press a kiss to Jo's forehead. I have everything I've ever dreamed of and more.

Thanks for reading *Marrying My Billionaire Hookup*! I hope you enjoyed it. If you want to get a bonus peek at how Edgar, Jo and Gwen are doing, join my VIP List at <http://www.nadialeee.net/vip> to get an exclusive second epilogue. You'll also receive other extras, sneak peeks, new book announcements, sales information and more!

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New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Nadia Lee writes sexy, emotional contemporary romance. Born with a love for excellent food, travel and adventure, she has lived in four different countries, kissed stingrays, been bitten by a shark, ridden an elephant and petted tigers.

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To learn more about Nadia and her projects, please visit www.nadialee.net. To receive news about Nadia's upcoming releases, sales and promotions, giveaways, exclusive epilogues, bonus scenes and more, join [her VIP List](#) at www.nadialee.net/vip!

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