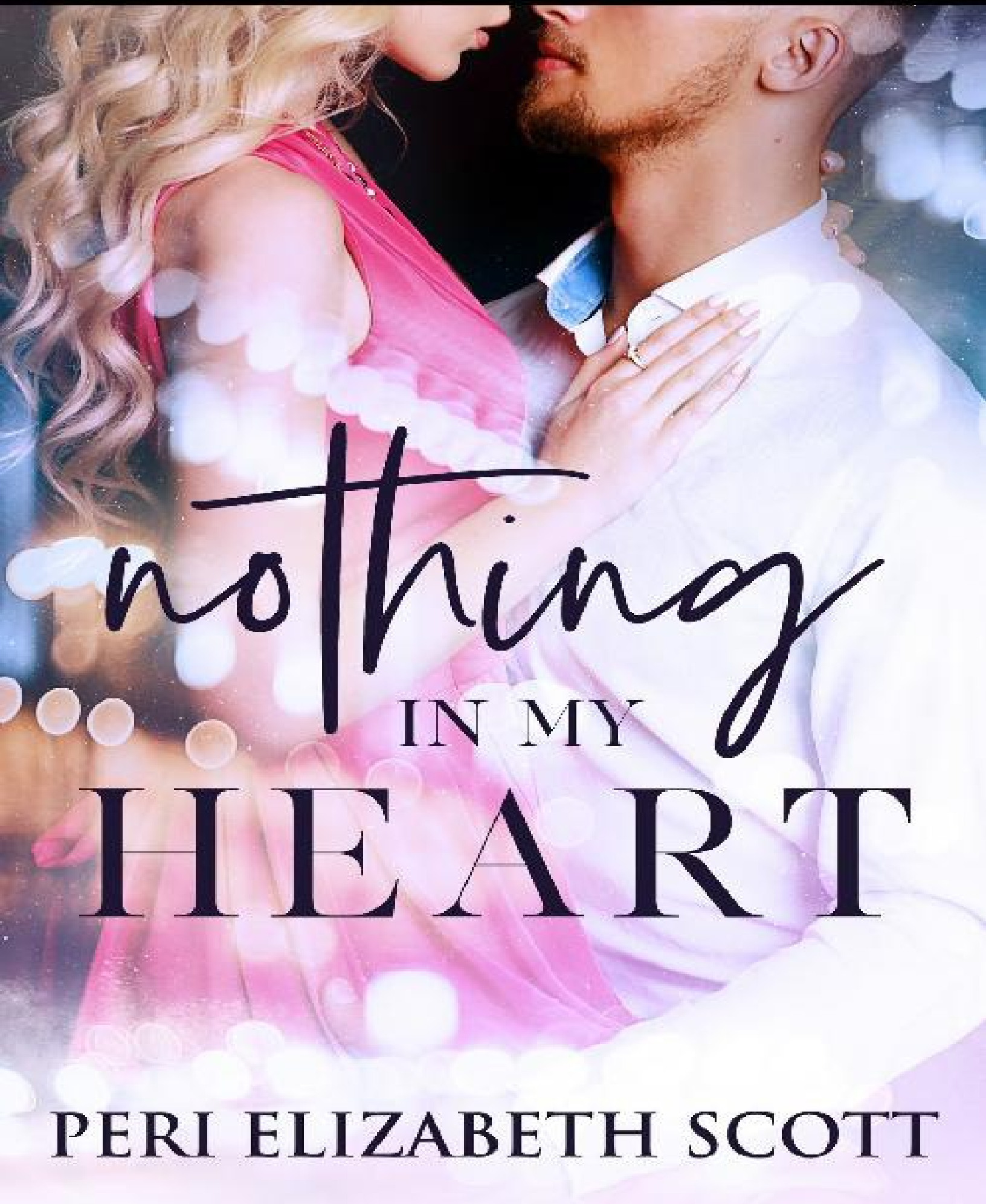


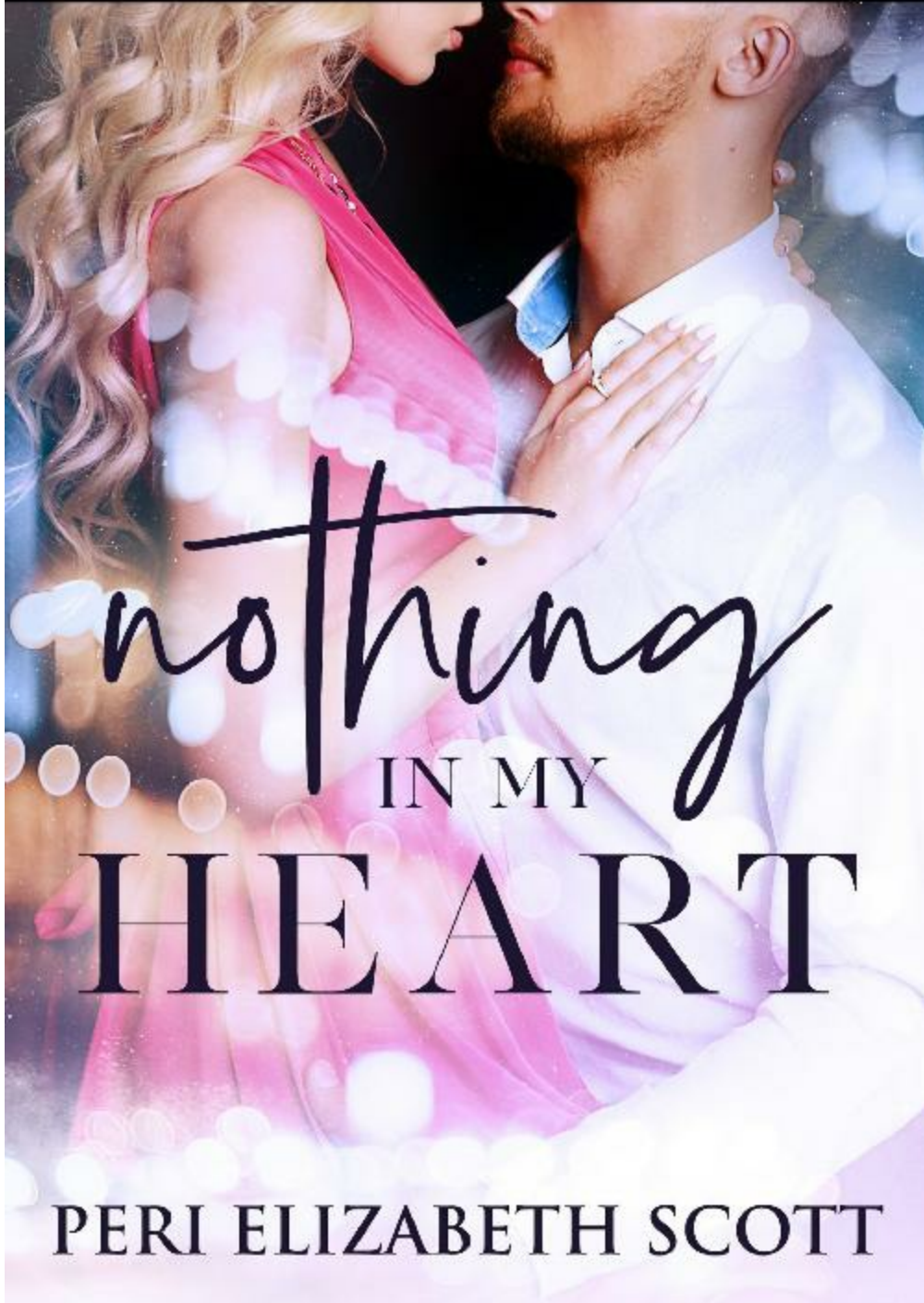
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NOTHING IN MY HEART

Peri Elizabeth Scott

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Chapter One

Beckett's big form blanketed her far smaller one as he increased his thrusts, driving her toward that cliff of mindless insensibility her orgasms always conferred. He braced his weight on his forearms, head tucked into her throat, lips tight against the sensitive juncture of neck and shoulder.

He'd slipped into bed, naked and urgently erect, stripping off her nightgown with a muttered imprecation before bestowing a hard kiss that caused her to open to him, his mastery of her senses chasing away the last vestiges of sleep.

Her body instantly responded, the flush of arousal dampening her core, nipples tightening with desire as his big hands cupped and molded her breasts. There was no need for additional foreplay although he tested her readiness with a finger before settling between her thighs and entering her.

It was a vastly familiar, nightly routine, one she desperately anticipated—to her shame—and their coupling tonight should have culminated the same way. With a climax, the sensation giving her the connection she craved, however fleeting, because that was all Beckett would give her.

But this time, the raw, torn center of her chest that was her excuse for a heart somehow rallied and hardened, pain and heartbreak numbing the physical delight her husband consistently drew from her, and Grace lost sight of that climax.

The magic of Beckett's body, those long, smooth muscles of his shoulders beneath her clutching hands diminished in allure and her thighs loosened from around his sinewy flanks. She shuddered, finally accepting her legal servitude for what it was and her channel spasmed in concert around his thickness. Her husband groaned deep in his throat, a curious sensation against her skin as he came, her involuntary clench drawing out his seed.

As he'd done countless times before, he pulled away from her to drop onto the mattress, withdrawing the flesh that was both the source of physical delight and a cruel reminder of her only role in his life. The space he put between them was immeasurable, though in truth she could feel the heat of his body radiating but a mere inch from hers.

Rather than close her eyes in the darkness and seek the oblivion sleep afforded as she did all the other times, Grace slipped from their bed and made her way to the attached bathroom. Closing the door quietly, she flipped on the light and ran water into the basin. As it gently steamed, she found a cloth to

saturate and used it to wash her husband from her body.

A white visage stared back from the mirror, long, pale tangles of hair flowing over narrow shoulders, big gray eyes smudged with pain and resignation. She blinked and her reflection changed, now blank, mouth set in a thin line, those same eyes shuttered and empty, as her outside appearance caught up with her ravaged inside. Her belly was the last to protest the death of whatever intense emotion she'd felt for Beck, the acrid taste of acid burning up the back of her throat, and she gagged.

The sound echoed back from the tiles and she hurriedly turned on the faucet back on to muffle it. Dipping her head to sip at the cold water, she welcomed the shock against her cheek and lips. She swallowed and soothed her nausea enough to straighten and dash the droplets of moisture away.

A tap on the door made her whirl to face it, her breath stuttering in her lungs. Beck was never tentative, never respected closed doors, and that too seemed to be a sign. Something had changed, whether for the better or not to be determined. She found she couldn't answer, couldn't find her voice, and so tugged the heavy wooden panel open.

"What's wrong?" Her husband stared into her face, blue eyes a shade darker as he narrowed them.

"Nothing." She was surprised at how normal she sounded—her new normal. And equally surprised he displayed any concern when it came to her.

"What are you doing in here?" His gaze swept down her body, his cock stirring against his thigh.

Ignoring the flutter of interest—sex had never been their issue—she forced a tiny smile, one that didn't feel like it fit. "Whatever people usually do in a bathroom. Take your pick."

Sarcastic humor wasn't something she used or was proficient at, and Beckett's eyebrows climbed his forehead. He said, "I thought I heard you being sick."

And if that were a symptom... Wouldn't that fall in with his plans? As well as his father's and hers. Outnumbered... "I wasn't sick."

Another assessing stare, like a probe of her brain. "Then come back to bed."

Or what, she mused? She didn't recognize this Grace, or at least, this side of her, and thought to sleep on it, the better to deal with Beckett another time. She slipped past him, his firm belly coasting over her arm, drawing an unwanted awareness, and went to her side of the bed that was the only place

they'd connected since before their marriage.

His lamp was on, the bulb casting a warm, amber glow and highlighting her husband's sculpted chest and abdomen. Ignoring the way he drew her, she scooped up her nightgown and dropped it over her head, the silky fabric soothing as it enveloped her from head to toe. As armor, it was flimsy, but she was learning to take advantage of every little thing.

"There's no need to wear that." Her husband's voice was quiet but implacable as he climbed onto the mattress. The covers whispered as he drew them up and she focused on the thread of sound as it spoke to something deep within. A tiny whisper of rebellion.

Ignoring him, she lay down and pulled the sheet over her, her back to him, listening to the sudden silence.

It stretched out for an eternity before there was movement. She tensed, but a click sounded and the room plunged back into darkness. He kept his distance, as always, now their nightly ritual was over.

"If there's something going on with you, let's hear it." His tone was tense, annoyed to her tutored ear.

She supposed the darkness invited confidences, if reluctant ones, but she'd never again give him something to use against her. Maybe she was slow to learn but had painfully absorbed the essential lesson when it came to Beckett. He had the power to hurt her, whereas she had virtually none to retaliate. Except perhaps to take refuge in silence.

No, she wasn't yet equipped to win even a war of words, not without a plan, and seeing as she'd only just come to recognize she was worth more than her current status as a pawn, she required some time.

Beckett didn't press the matter, doubtless writing off an aberration with ease. After all, wasn't she the malleable, meek, and mild young woman he'd reluctantly married?

She drifted along the edges of slumber, no longer yearning for the man she once loved with all the agonized intensity a star-struck girl might feel toward a handsome, virile male who'd swept her off her feet. The same man who had pursued her with single-minded intent, wooing and charming her, promising her such wonders in broadening her horizons.

It had been nearly thirteen months of tension and bewilderment, married to a man who'd become a stranger—if she'd ever really known him during their brief courtship. Courtship. Ha. Beckett didn't want *her*. He'd only wanted to have sex with her, the thrill being in the chase, the prize being

the debauching of his competition's daughter. Except he'd lost in the end, forced to marry her, and all because of faulty birth control.

If Grace had a heart any longer, it might have winced at the irony. Her hand eased down to rest on her belly—her empty belly. She clenched the material of her nightgown tightly and fought the memory of her loss. That child wasn't meant to be, but Beckett was now bound to her and determined she produce an heir... *That's why we married, Grace. So we'd better make the old men happy.* His oft-repeated, sarcastic reminder, even after the miscarriage... But she wasn't going to think about that.

She fell into the kindness of sleep, her fingers relaxing their tense hold, her cheeks free and dry of tears for the first time since their wedding night.

Fingers laced behind his head, Beckett considered the change he'd sensed in his little bride. Whatever it was, it had unsettled him enough to follow her to the bathroom, and then, curiously, he'd been loath to face her. Had to force himself to request admittance, to face ... what?

One of these things is not like the others, he mused, something atavistic pricking his senses. Grace looked so fragile, bereft, and the feelings he harbored for her, walled off by the blow to his ego and pride, had scrambled to scale that barrier.

He'd shoved them back with an effort, the memory of the hint of sarcasm in her voice giving him pause. And then she ignored him? It tasted like his own medicine and he didn't care for the scald on his tongue. Or the shame.

He really didn't like where this was going, this soul searching, like there was an upheaval of the status quo in his future. His bride might skitter around, avoid his direct stares, but she'd never ignored him. A smirk pulled at his upper lip. Bride. Grace Langdon, now Kilmer, none of that hyphenated bullshit, was indeed his wife. And whatever colored her thoughts, it would make no difference to their relationship. She didn't have the spunk, nothing to force him to deviate from the path directed by bitterness and resentment.

Even the thought of the 'r' word caused him to shudder, and he shook it off. Whatever they had, it wasn't a relationship. An arrangement perhaps, a business arrangement. Turning on his side, he peered toward his wife, who curled up as far from him as their big bed allowed. His palms itched to pull her up against him, strip that ridiculous piece of fabric from her sweet body, and take her again. He'd readily admit to craving her physically, the hard

kernel of his resentment and betrayal forgotten when he wrapped her in his arms. Giving way to softer emotions, the way he'd regarded her before marrying her for the greater good.

He'd been so drawn to her, past everything he'd felt for other women in his life, and there had been a lot of them. Her youth, her sweetness smoothed his rough edges and brought out certain emotions he'd shelved when his mother died and his father ruled their home. He'd desired her too and thought she was the complete package until she betrayed him.

He was sure he'd heard her being sick earlier, and of course, the idea she was pregnant again had leaped in his mind. Grace had proven to be fertile, after all, and apparently, he was no slouch either. One freaking time without the protection he faithfully employed. One. He'd trusted her when she insisted she had taken additional measures, and without trust...

Knowing sleep would elude him, he checked the digital clock and swung his legs over the side of the mattress, his feet landing soundlessly on the soft nap of the rug Grace had placed on either side of the bed. She was always doing those little things, as though to see to his comfort.

Dispatching the errant thought, he dragged his briefs on and padded out of the bedroom and down the hall, assured by the soft inhalations behind him that his wife was deep in slumber. A hitch threw off his stride when he considered she'd likely cried herself to sleep yet again, but he powered forward, having locked all those softer emotions down again. Maybe it was shameful of him to be so careless of her feelings, but he'd grown a callus over his honor.

Gaining his study, he booted up his laptop and video-called Kalim. His friend was likely just getting home from a night of carousing, the lifestyle Beckett had been forced to moderate in recent months. Because he'd been trapped into a marriage. He ignored the inconvenient little voice reminding him that it took two to make a child. And he definitely pushed away the awareness that he'd chosen to stay with Grace when she wasn't ... with child anymore. Maybe his honor was still intact, honoring his vows because he hadn't stayed for love. He'd never risk that.

"Beck!" Kalim's delighted voice cut into the quiet and Beckett hurried to tone down the volume, even as he surveyed his friend's familiar features.

"You're home," he said as if it wasn't obvious.

"A few minutes ago. What's up?" A faint, feminine giggle sounded behind him.

“Nothing.” And wasn’t that sad? Truly, nothing, as though he was in limbo. “You have company. I won’t keep you.”

“No worries, man. Becky’s in no rush.”

His own carnal needs recently assuaged, Beck chose to take Kalim at his word. Besides, anticipation made things sweeter. Lord knew his thoughts of having Grace at the end of a long, difficult day kept him on his mettle.

“Have you thought any more about my proposal?”

“Business? C’mon, Beck.”

“We’re in such different time zones. The old man wants an answer for the board meeting tomorrow.”

Kalim ran a hand through his jet-black hair and rolled his eyes. The motion looked cartoonish on the screen and Beckett fought a smile. His handsome friend was substantively vain.

“We’ll take the glamor line. Not much call for business wear here.”

“That works. I’ll send a formal contract after the meeting.”

“Sure. In fact, I’ll come over to sign up. It’s been too long since I’ve seen you.”

“That’s great. We’ll hit a few clubs.”

“Anywhere I might find a woman,” Kalim replied. “How’s married life?”

Kalim was one of the few people who knew the actual circumstances of his marriage—a shotgun wedding, in this day and age! Bemoaning his fate under the influence of a couple of shared bottles of his friend’s secret stash, Beckett told Kamil how neatly he’d been trapped. He’d also met Grace, if briefly.

A long breath huffed through his nose as he considered his answer. Grace had definitely drawn him like no other, a slight, almost waif-like young woman, hovering on the peripheral of her father’s sphere. George Langdon, the patriarch of an old family business, and one his own parent coveted. He thought back, considering.

Not his usual type, there’d been something about her, her virgin status notwithstanding... A quiet, sweet beauty with simmering depths. Depths he had to plumb and cultivate, as possessive as he’d ever known himself.

Realizing he’d been silent for some time, he mentally snorted. Why would he hide his thoughts from his friend? “Married life is about the same. Living with the enemy.”

“Enemy, Beck? That’s harsh. And whose choice is that?”

Fuck, he didn't need a lecture. He'd been well and truly caught in a trap only partly of his own making because his father saw the pregnancy as a bloodless manner of assimilating old man Langdon's business. Beck had grudgingly married Little Miss Innocent No Longer. Furious and feeling powerless for the first time in his twenty-six years, he sought reassurance in the fact Grace would bear the child and then be set aside like brides in arranged marriages of old, while he lived his life. Carried on as the carefree bachelor. He'd been that pissed.

His conscience twinged again as the memory of Grace's miscarriage surfaced in his head, something else he dispatched instantly. It fucking hurt—he gritted his teeth. So not going there, not even with his best friend, how he'd looked forward to being a father once he'd become accustomed to the idea.

They might have reconnected over the tragedy if it wasn't for the repeated interference of the fathers. All he could fathom was his value as a stud and Grace's as a broodmare, fueling his resentment. He decided he wasn't going to forge a connection, other than a sexual one, with the woman who'd orchestrated his confinement in this ... this prison. He'd been there for her, helped her through the loss of the child—as she'd helped him—but it wasn't grounds for an actual marriage.

"I'd say it's probably an equal choice. We're making the best of the situation. She does her thing. I do mine." His thing included long hours at the office, followed by appearing at any events his father deemed appropriate for his heir. Then coming home and finding his bride in their bed and slaking his need, refusing to admit to himself that thoughts of her had been continually flirting along the peripheral of his mind. He had no idea what Grace did during the day and was determined not to cultivate an interest. He sought her out for sex, the only time they spent together of late.

His brow creased at that realization. How long had it been since they'd even shared a meal or spoken in passing? His confounded conscience twinged louder.

"Is your father still pressing for an heir?" Kalim leaned forward in his chair, his features slightly distorted by the proximity to the screen.

"Of course. And hers as well." It was his turn to pass his fingers through his hair. "The idea of a grandchild seems to have drawn both the old men together. They've formed some sort of strange partnership, even outside of the business."

“Much like the drawing together of families via the arranged marriages we have here.”

Beck barked a strangled laugh. “Indeed. And maybe it diverts them because I’m essentially running the business.”

“Not the worst thing then. And your wife is lovely. She’s sweet and charming, regardless of ... what transpired to bring about your union.”

Beck couldn’t argue. Having sex with Grace was no hardship, and he took pride in his skills in bed. Never left her unsatisfied, and if anything was true, it was the old adage that sex leveled the playing field, because his wife definitely met his physical needs. Another lick of shame lashed him when he thought about how he’d shamelessly used her desperate need to please him. Teaching her—he clamped down on that thought. “I suppose she is. She *is*.”

“And you appear to have your cake and eat it too.”

“Excuse me?” That faint lecturing tone was back in his friend’s voice, atop of the idiom.

“You are continually photographed in public with beautiful women on your arm. Women who aren’t your wife.”

Beckett shook his head. “Smoke and mirrors, Kamil.”

“As you say.”

It was true. The public perception be damned because he was faithful to Grace, monogamous. His father accepted his contention when he’d inquired and presumably passed it on to his wife’s father because he hadn’t been given any grief from that quarter. Though old man Langdon ascribed to the idea of having a mistress—if one could guarantee discretion, of course.

One might think that even as a married man Beck would sample the buffet of willing women, but he hadn’t. He wasn’t that kind of guy anymore. *Nope, just one who avoids all the responsibilities of marriage, other than the physical ones.* Shit. Those vagrant thoughts and pricks of conscience were coming more and more often, and he resented the hell out of them. He scrambled to shore up that figurative wall.

“You know the business, Kalim. It’s expected of me to have those models out and about. And I, too, have honor.” He did. Maybe he didn’t always exercise it with Grace, but he wasn’t a cheat.

“I know that about you, Beck. But one must consider the optics. How does Grace feel about you squiring all those women?”

He shrugged, shockingly aware of a shard of anxiety in his gut. “I have no idea. I told you, we live quite separately. And she’s never expressed any

interest. I doubt she has any idea.”

Silence stretched out and Kalim’s face tightened. “Women seem to know far more than we foolish men understand. But as you say. However, we should discuss your perception of the future, my friend.”

“What?”

“I fear you’re stuck in the present, and quite miserable.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t want to think past tomorrow. Grace would hopefully conceive again soon, and he’d be free of expectations. Then maybe he’d pick up his life where he’d left off. Except he wanted a child and he wanted the mother of that child—sexually, anyway.

“I enjoy my current situation and all its opportunities, Beck, but you seemed so happy about Grace in the beginning. Perhaps your wounded pride has spent enough time railing at the situation. Especially if you were to become a father.” Kalim was the youngest son, and as such, his father’s expectations were less clear, and his friend did indeed enjoy the bachelor life.

But further to his pointed comment, did pride have a place in parenting? Was Kalim suggesting Beck was acting in a juvenile manner? *If the shoe fits...* With that sudden realization, all the implications of his current situation washed over like an icy surge of water. At the forefront was his reluctant acceptance that he’d been acting like a total asshole. A vastly immature asshole.

It had obviously taken this long for him to get past feeling trapped while ignoring the truth, but it kept popping up to stare him in the face. Kalim’s insightful questions and comments were falling on fertile ground.

Regardless of how his marriage had come to pass, the familial expectation was that he and Grace were to produce children, and he hadn’t bothered to consider the impact on those children. Immersed in his resentment of feeling manipulated, he’d been selfish. She hadn’t called him on it, instead, reaching out, trying to forge a connection, so who was the injured party here—

“Beck?”

“We should have had this talk months ago,” he muttered.

“We did. And you did nothing but rant and rave about your ... situation,” Kamil reminded him, confirming the fact he was only now seeing the forest for the trees. “And you most certainly weren’t open to considering anything other than gaining your freedom without impacting your business interests. Until tonight.”

“Is that a polite way of telling me I’ve been an idiot?” Infusing some humor didn’t ease the sting of the truth.

“Outrage at being snared and forced into a union not of one’s choosing, feeling so powerless, is difficult to swallow, my friend. At least in my country, both men and women are raised to expect an arranged marriage, though usually without the circumstances of a child on the way. But one must make the best of any situation, and you’ve had considerable time to come to terms with it. And you might want to consider your wife’s perspective. She, too, may well feel trapped.”

Beck considered his friend’s words. It wasn’t optimal, but Beck could now admit to the likely possibility Grace could have been his forever girl, had their connection progressed normally and she hadn’t lied about being on birth control. If he hadn’t known differently, he might have thought his father-in-law had put her up to it, catching a guy that way.

Despite his anger with her, it was apparent to anyone with eyes in their head how George Langdon perceived women in general, even his daughter. Keeping a mistress aside, the man saw his daughter as a means to an end. Beck’s own parent wasn’t much different. The glass ceiling in both of those men’s businesses was thick and impervious to the female gender, something Beckett was subtly addressing. His hypocrisy made him flinch.

Manning up, he said, “Maybe you can hang out your shingle, Kamil.”

“My shingle?”

“Marriage Counselor. Grace and I can be your first couple.”

Kamil laughed. “Unlikely, but professional input might not be such a bad idea. From everything I understand, trust is intrinsic in a marriage, much like having a business partner, and you might give a thought to repairing that breach.”

Grace *was* his business partner, now that he thought about it, one with benefits. Not the worst way to approach the future—a framework to resurrect a marriage on. He’d broach the subject with her tomorrow and hammer out an agenda by which they might move forward. He needed to forgive her or divorce her because both of them deserved a life different from the one he’d imposed.

“I’ll be in touch, Kamil.”

“You can name your first born after me.” His friend’s handsome features sobered. “I apologize. That was insensitive.”

Beckett mastered a flinch. “No problem, buddy. Rebecca awaits.”

“Becky. She’s rebelling. She thinks the diminutive makes her more Western.” With a smile, Kamil reached out and the screen went blank.

Beck stood, lowering the lid on the laptop and closed his eyes. He felt resolute, determined, and hoped it carried over to the morning. Grace loved him—she’d told him often enough, and had tried hard to connect with him in the beginning, after the betrayal. And when he’d established the boundaries in their marriage, she accepted them, ghosting around the place, never causing a hint of difficulty. She’d doubtless welcome any effort on his part to improve their ... relationship. He wasn’t a total asshole. Or at least he wouldn’t be from this point forward.

Chapter Two

Grace woke with a start. The faint rays of early sunshine skittered through the leaded panes of the crescent window cut high in the east wall as she established her husband's absence.

There had been a few times in the past when she'd awakened, finding herself plastered up against his solid chest, his spicy scent enveloping her, muscled arm holding her close. But he'd always moved away within moments of waking, without a word, leaving her adrift with an acre of bed between them. A silent reminder—and a reproach—of the true state of their marriage.

Whatever possessed her the night before still held sway that morning because she didn't experience that horrible wash of pain at the memory of rejection.

Normally, she would hear him get up, leave their bed to shower and get ready for the day. In her usual, pathetic, passive way, she'd watch him choose his clothes and get dressed, shooting covert glances at him from between her lowered lashes. Yearning for a kiss goodbye that was never offered. He never kissed her anymore, not even in the throes of passion, at least not on the lips, and she had no difficulty interpreting *that* message.

She'd gotten up with him during the first months of their marriage, heading to the kitchen to make his breakfast, doing her best to send him off to work with as much cheerfulness as she could muster. But Beckett had disdained her efforts, ignoring her for the screen of his phone or tablet, until she finally gave up.

After she lost the baby, he'd been kind and supportive, like the man she remembered, and she'd been grateful, past the shock and numbness. But, back home, he'd reverted to type and she had no energy to pretend any longer, and he never asked her to join him for the morning meal. Nor any other. The number of dinners she'd prepared, only to learn he hadn't planned to eat them, coming home to change and leave again. To take other women out. The callous disregard by the two men in her life had been her lot, but that was all in the past. Something had changed deep inside of her and she welcomed it with a fierceness she'd never experienced.

Clambering off the mattress, she hurried to the bathroom and moved quickly through her morning routine. The shower was still damp from Beckett's use, his towels tossed carelessly on the floor. Stepping over them,

she smiled at her own daring and entered the tiled enclosure, turning on the water. Time for the man to pick up after himself.

Drying off, she bundled her hair into a ponytail, grimacing as it dripped down her back before she squeezed a thick towel over the unruly curls.

Even thinner than before her marriage, she viewed her small breasts dispassionately as she fastened a bra, although they hadn't shrunk that she could tell. She somehow carried a little weight on her backside—junk in her trunk, if she recalled her friend Charity's words correctly—but the matching panties covered her buttocks without revealing any of that flesh.

Beck had loved her shape, or so he insisted, despite the sexy and beautiful women he spent time with, past and present. He still seemed to like her body and that made everything worse because he most certainly didn't like what it contained.

She ran her fingers over a motley supply of makeup, hesitating before closing the drawer of the vanity. Looking like a ghost wasn't attractive, but then who was she hoping to impress? Maybe she'd get a makeover, too. A whole new start. Her belly roiled uneasily, as if in protest, and she reminded herself to grab an orange or a banana on her way out the door. Coffee was her norm, but she didn't want to wait for the maker to brew. Besides, she had lost her taste for it, along with so many other things in her life.

Donning a pair of jeans and t-shirt, she then ran down the steps, taking a moment to grab that banana, and then snagged her purse from the hall closet. She checked for her keys and her fingers brushed her phone and her wallet. *All set.*

After disarming the security system, she opened the door, leaving it ajar before punching the code back in and then slipped outside and shut it. Feeling like a giddy child, she hustled to her car, backing it out of the drive with newfound confidence, heading down the street. Beck had purchased the mid-size import without any input from her, but she liked the pale-blue color and the way it handled.

After driving for several miles, she saw a likely sign, finding a parking space within easy walking distance, not that she objected to exercise. It was just that her knees felt strangely weak... Perhaps anyone going into the battle of their lives experienced the same sensation.

Upon entering the foyer of the office, she walked up to the desk where a motherly looking woman sat, a headset clamped to her white hair.

"May I help you?" The woman's eyes were anything but motherly,

summing Grace up in a quick glance.

“This is a divorce lawyer’s office?” The ‘d’ word tasted foul on her tongue, but she spat it out.

“Divorce and family law.”

“I’m only interested in the former.” She amazed herself with how crisp and confident she sounded. Determined.

Head tilting to the side, the speculative glint increased in the other woman’s eyes. “Mr. Harper won’t be in until nine thirty and he has court at ten.”

She should have made an appointment. Aware the receptionist was staring avidly at her wedding ring set, Grace eased her hand behind her purse, battling with a sense of deflation. “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

A warm smile replaced the glint. “No bother, Mrs....”

“Kilmer. Grace Kilmer.” Soon to be Langdon again, she hoped, although perhaps she could choose a new surname, something indicative of the status she craved. That of freedom and new beginnings, a clean break from both Beckett and her father.

“If you can come back this afternoon, he can see you at three.”

What was she going to do for the next five-plus hours? But finding another lawyer who could see her right away would probably mean a wait time too. She nodded her head and accepted the card with the appointment inked on it. “Thank you.”

She ate her banana on the way back to the car, dropping the peel into a handy trash can, fighting the absurd impulse to throw her rings in after it. Instead, she worked them off her finger and zipped them into a compartment in her purse. Her gaze scanned the area and a bright pink sign caught her eye. She moved in that direction, drawn steadily by the promises written on it.

When she entered the premises, unlike the lawyer’s office, no motherly woman with hard eyes greeted her, but rather, an amazingly beautiful blonde gave her a welcoming smile.

“Good morning! How can I help you?”

“I’d like ... the works.” She sounded like a baked potato or a hot dog, but she had a lot of time to kill.

“Uh, can you be more specific?”

“Your sign says manicures, pedicures, waxing, makeovers, hair styling.”

“The works.” The blonde winked and giggled. “When would you like

to schedule the works?”

“It said walk-ins welcome.”

“So it does. Let me check.” Flipping through a large calendar, the other woman made notations on various pages and treated Grace to another smile.

“We can even squeeze you in for a massage.”

“I need to be finished and out the door by two forty-five.”

“We’ll make it work.”

Grace decided she liked the blonde, whose name was Sophie, according to the name tag affixed to her large left breast—or at least the fabric covering said breast. And the right one was just as large, for balance. She choked back a pained chuckle. Sophie possessed a tall, slender frame and her body and those big boobs reminded her of all those women Beckett was seeing—minus the sweet smile.

She followed Sophie into the back and obligingly removed her clothing before slipping into a robe to prepare for the full body wax. The other woman advised her she’d get a soothing body wrap and massage immediately thereafter. Followed by a mani-pedi and then given the attention of the stylist who also did the makeovers. The works. It sounded exhausting but she needed distractions and the company of others.

She placed an order for a sandwich and iced tea for later, in that a lunch break was out of the question, and settled in to wait for her waxing. Closing her eyes and willing her body to relax as she lay on the narrow table, she drew in deep breaths and released them, focusing on the soothing music that filled the room. Thinking about exactly nothing but a future she’d carve out on her own.

A few hours later, fortified by her light meal, she sat in the stylist’s chair and tried to forget about the trauma of having her legs, underarms, and brows waxed by a determined older lady—call me Wilma—and definitely decided not to focus on the “tidying” of her nether regions. Dear Lord, but that hurt, even if it did feel intriguing now. Kind of exposed. An awareness... Too bad Beckett wouldn’t be getting near her again or she might have explored that awareness.

Her artfully painted finger and toenails in a winsome, pinky coral were far easier to contemplate, as was the silkiness of her feet and hands. The massage had also helped to reduce the tension that she carried within her entire body.

“I’m Sherry.” A curvy redhead lifted Grace’s pale mane with practiced

hands. “You have a ton of hair here. And a lot of natural curl. I haven’t seen a true ash-blonde for years.”

So that was what the color was—Grace just thought it was drab. “I know. But I wear it long so I can tie it out of the way. If it’s short I can’t do anything with it.” *And I look like Bozo the Clown minus the red shade.*

“When did you last wear it short?”

“Grade seven?”

“Huh. Well, haircuts for curly hair have come a long way since then. What, about seven years?”

“Eight.” She’d married right before her twentieth birthday, but she hadn’t spared Beckett a thought all day—not really—and she wasn’t going to start now. It was as if she’d evolved into some kind of shiny creature, all surface. One that fit in with waxes and wraps and polish.

Sherry showed her pictures and made promises Grace wanted to believe and told the stylist she would hold her to before agreeing to a cut. Her mane was drawn into a tail on her neck and a crunching of scissors dispensed with several inches of it. She wanted to vomit but sipped her iced tea instead.

She stared dubiously at the thin strips of foil the stylist wrapped around pieces of hair, Sherry telling her the highlights would be subtle and “lift” her natural color. One could only hope the current alien look would transpire into something attractive.

“I’m not letting you watch. You’ll just worry,” Sherry advised, following the washing and conditioning.

After the incredible scalp massage, Grace would have agreed to anything. “Okay. But I have to leave in just over an hour.”

“No worries.”

The stylist danced around the chair. There was no other way to describe it. Grace wasn’t facing the mirror but she felt the drafts of air as Sherry passed by and circled her, hands and scissors flying.

“There. Never use a blow dryer on your hair. Let it dry naturally.” Sherry daubed some shiny stuff on her hands and worked it through Grace’s locks. The scent was lovely, like coconuts.

“Can I buy some of that?”

“Sure. And the matching shampoo and conditioner. Curly hair is thirsty hair. Come back for a trim every five weeks, no later.” She fluffed Grace’s new do.

That was another minus of having short hair, regular haircuts, but

Grace would make up her mind once she actually saw it. Her head felt markedly lighter and people were smiling at her as they passed by, giving nods of approval. Even other customers. After feeling like an afterthought much of her life, and sometimes like something stuck on the bottom of a shoe, it felt pretty darn good.

Beckett's face flashed behind her eyes as she closed them so Sherry could apply yet another "sweep of color" to her face and the enormity of what she was undertaking crashed down before she could push it away.

"Hey! What's wrong? Are you okay?" Sherry patted her cheek and looked anxiously into her face.

Sucking in air, Grace got herself under a modicum of control. She wanted to slide to the floor and weep, but if she did, she'd never stop. She bit her lower lip until it quit trembling. "Sorry. I got a bit lightheaded there for a moment."

"Geez. You scared me. You went so white."

"It's been a long day," she replied, trying for a smile. She was so tired of late, and her sleep had been broken last night. Beckett had snuck out of the room, waking her from her sex doze, and of course, she couldn't go back to sleep until he returned to bed. And then she'd fretted, second-guessing herself before womaning up—planning for the morrow.

"Another couple of minutes and it'll be over," Sherry promised. She applied a drift of mascara and a hint of lip gloss, standing back to survey Grace. "You look freaking amazing."

Cautiously, she swiveled the chair and risked a look in the mirror. A stranger looked back, someone with shiny, artfully tousled locks that complemented beautiful skin and mysterious eyes. Even the plain, blue t-shirt looked less drab. "Oh."

"I know, right? I mean, you're a really pretty girl but you don't do anything with yourself. Like you're hiding yourself away. The hair will be easy to manage, I'll give you a quick lesson. And the face—the kit is included and you have good bones to work with. I'd probably hit a boutique if I were you, get some clothes that fit and make the most of what you have."

Willing back the images of all those beautiful models she'd seen with Becket on the 'Net and in magazines, she studied herself. She'd never measure up, but she looked okay. And it didn't matter who he broke his marital vows with any longer. She had an appointment with Mr. Harper in under thirty minutes to fix that.

It might be a long time before she shared a bed with another man, if ever, but her need for her husband felt corralled and subdued as if someone else had taken charge of it. So, it no longer controlled her.

“If I have time, I’ll go shopping.” Funny how her father’s company produced the most amazing fabrics in the world and she was like the poor relation when it came to wearing any. But then, she didn’t have the body for the outfits produced from those fabrics, not like the models Beckett’s company hired to showcase their on-staff designers’ outfits. Now, that was a marriage made in heaven, Langdon, and Kilmer. She hoped they were happy together.

Slipping from the chair, she followed Sherry to the till, wincing a little when her jeans rubbed her waxed parts. The bill was probably astronomical, but she didn’t look at the amount, telling the stylist to add a twenty percent tip and handing over her card.

“Beckett Kilmer. Kilmer Designs, right?” Sherry’s eyes lit up. “I know the name. I wish I could afford even one of his lines.”

Grace smiled and held it on her face with an effort, punching in her PIN. “Thanks.”

“Are you his...”

“No relation at all. Just part of the team. And a lowly one at that. This is a ... bonus.” That reference made her want to scream with laughter, and she saw Sherry watching her with confusion creasing her brow.

Grace quickly accepted her receipt and shoved it and the card into her purse, heading out with a wave. “Thank you! I’ll call for an appointment. Five weeks.”

“Great.” Sherry’s voice echoed out into the street.

Checking the time, Grace strode toward the lawyer’s office. Strode. She hadn’t thought she was capable of striding, and her pace faltered before she got a grip. She had a little time and there was a boutique...

Who was she kidding? Like clothes would make this woman. Even her new look didn’t cheer her anymore. It was all fake, superficial, and wouldn’t withstand scrutiny. Except it had to because she wasn’t going to let him—or her father—treat her badly any longer. Damn it.

Her emotions were up and down like a yo-yo and she’d better pull things together if she was going to see it through. She sought out that core of determination and drew on it. Why would she continue to be treated in a fashion she would personally never confer on anyone else?

“Mrs. Kilmer?” The receptionist greeted her, evidently puzzled. Probably a good thing she hadn’t changed her clothes. The older woman squinted and gave her head a tiny shake. Maybe she wrote the change in appearance off to the vagaries of today’s woman. “Mr. Harper is free now.”

The lawyer rose to a crouch behind his desk when she entered his office, and the receptionist shut the door firmly behind her. He offered his hand. “I’m Steven Harper. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Kilmer.”

“I’m here to get a divorce.” She projected the Grace she’d come to be. He blinked, as if such frankness wasn’t usual. “I see.”

“As soon as possible.”

Pulling a legal pad toward him, he asked for identifying information, jotting it down. “May I ask what grounds you are basing your request upon?”

“Irreconcilable differences.” She’d heard that on a legal show and knew it applied.

“I see.” He paused, then asked delicately, “Was there ... abuse involved?”

“What? Abuse? Oh, no. Nothing like that.” Beckett never raised a hand to her and how did one describe callous neglect? Though she supposed his words were abusive, used like weapons. But that didn’t matter anymore, being in the past. “I ... we simply don’t get along, have nothing in common.”

“Any children?”

“No.” She swallowed. “No.”

“What have you considered for financial support? I know your husband’s name. He’s a wealthy man. We should work out alimony per month or as a lump sum—”

“I don’t want anything.” She didn’t need it. Didn’t want anything from Beckett aside from the one thing he’d never give her. The stress of not thinking about him all day, focusing on the inane grooming and transformation of her physical self, rose up and smacked her in the face.

“Mrs. Kilmer?” Harper got up and rushed around his desk when she put her hand over her mouth, willing her stomach not to revolt.

She had to stop losing her shit like this, to quote Charity. Waving him away, she fished in her purse and powered on her phone. She’d call her friend after this appointment and ask her to meet up. She should have asked her to come along today. “I’m fine. Long day, and this is ... difficult.”

“Of course.” The lawyer returned to his seat and took up his pen. “You’re financially stable, then?”

“I am.” Her mother had seen to that, undermining Grace’s father at the last. She’d never be rich but could live comfortably, if simply, and planned to find a job in any event. “I’ll have no problem covering your fees.”

“Then a divorce can be quite simple as long as your husband doesn’t demur.”

“He won’t.” She could envision him punching the air with glee, right before he informed his father—and hers—that Grace had once again met all expectations. Fail army. But the companies would move forward, her father and his having ironed out the vast majority of their differences. They appeared something close to friends now, and there was no longer a need for a pawn. Plus, Beckett had lots of years left to make a baby, just not with her.

He could legally take up with one of those models, without any censure, not that her father had taken any issue. If her mother had lived, would Grace had made the same mistake, or would Mom have cautioned her, having chosen an unavailable man herself? And a cheater too.

Mr. Harper outlined a process that should free her from her marital prison within the space of several months and she listened numbly. “I’ll prepare the papers and once you sign them, I’ll file them in court. Shall I mail them to you for signature or will you want to pick them up?”

“Mail is fine.” She’d leave them for Beckett on his desk in the den so he could peruse them and get his lawyer to take a look, but it seemed pretty cut and dried.

“What address?”

“I gave you the address.” She froze. How stupid. She wasn’t going to be staying in that house for much longer. That big, empty, cold house. “Oh. Come to think of it, I’ll come here to sign them. Then they can be mailed. To my husband. Where he lives. And I’ll leave you a retainer today.”

Harper named a figure she barely raised a freshly waxed eyebrow at. Freedom at any price. She wouldn’t use his card—it was childish to use Beckett’s account for the makeover, if satisfying—she’d pay for her own divorce. She’d write a check from the slender stack she kept tucked in her wallet.

Beckett was indeed a wealthy man, and he probably didn’t even know about her small trust fund. They’d built nothing together since their marriage—that house wasn’t even on her radar—and he’d have no claim on her money as she wouldn’t have on his.

While his receptionist prepared an invoice and receipt, she went to her

contacts to call Charity, stilling when she noted the number of missed calls and texts. One was from her father, but the majority from Beckett.

She approached the screen like a rabbit eyes a snake and read a few.

Where are you? Call me.

Grace, I'm getting worried. Call me!

For Christ's sake, Grace, call me.

Honestly confused, then worried, she blinked and scrolled through the rest. Her father's message was disgruntled and as peremptory.

I expect you to call your husband.

A wave of relief made her belly hollow. Her father was her only surviving relation if one didn't count some distant cousins, and she didn't, but obviously, Beckett's calls weren't related to something going wrong with her dad.

She dialed her voicemail and nearly dropped the phone at the tirades. Beckett never phoned her. She might receive a brief text if it was compulsory for her to accompany him to an event that required his actual wife on his arm. But she'd never heard his voice on the line since the period of time when they ... dated.

The last call advised her he was notifying the police and she fumbled to a chair in the waiting room. The cell chimed and she squeaked before she recognized the name. "Hello, Charity."

"Good grief, woman. I get off work and my phone lights up. That husband of yours wants to know where you are."

He'd called Charity? Grace would have doubted he even knew her friend's last name. But her father did... He disapproved of her friend but Grace grimly defied him, the other woman a hint of sanity in her otherwise unbalanced world. "I was at a spa."

"Oh. Well, that's good then."

It was. Women went to spas all the time. Even women who were married to someone who despised them and never talked to them anymore aside from in bed during sex. And then only because passion apparently made him chatty. A chatty horndog, because the man had sex with countless women yet still had it with her. "I had my phone turned off."

"And you're surprised he called." Charity didn't know the fullness of Grace's humiliation but was aware she wasn't happy. It was impossible to hide her feelings from her friend, but she hadn't revealed all her shame.

"I am. I was also at a lawyer's office. I'm still there. Here."

Seconds ticked by, and Grace felt them pulse in her temples until Charity asked, “Does he know about the lawyer?”

“Not yet.”

“We should get some dinner.”

How like Charity not to interrogate her over the phone. “I’d like that.”

“You’d better call him first.”

She didn’t want to, but she wasn’t a child either. She’d always been a thoughtful, considerate person and this new, resolute Grace still retained those qualities. She hoped. Just not to the extent where people trampled over her at will. Those days were over. “I’ll call.”

They settled on a place for dinner and decided to meet shortly, despite the early hour, but Grace knew they had a lot of talking to do—over drinks. She might have to take a cab home but unburdening oneself required considerable lubrication.

Charity lived on the opposite side of the city, near the hospital where she worked as a tech in the imagery department. A full-bodied, black woman with an irrepressible sense of humor and a tendency to slip into what she termed “rapper” with a smirk, she’d have been a far closer friend if Grace had allowed it.

After making her way back to her car, she sat inside and stared out the window, gathering her courage, yet wondering why she needed to do so. It was ridiculous to feel guilty about not being available for a call from her husband, such a new development, and equally ridiculous to hesitate to call him back. She tapped his contact number and waited.

Once upon a time, she’d stored it under a romantic label, her prince charming, but now the contact simply read: Beckett Kilmer. Formal and stark. The way their life truly was.

A recollection of her one and only call to his office assaulted her and she warred with the gut-wrenching sensations called up by the memory.

Why are you calling me at work, Grace? Anything you have to say to me can wait until I get home.

“Grace?” Beckett’s voice sounded loudly in her ear, filled with impatience and frustration. For an instant, she remained caught in the past before curbing her cursed reminiscence.

“It’s me.”

“Are you ... all right?” Concern, twice in two days. How odd.

Confusion furrowed her brow. “I’m fine.”

Heavy breathing filled her ear and she wondered if the faint creaking sound was Beckett setting his jaw. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“Excuse me?” He’d never sworn at her before, with the exception of once saying she was a conniving little bitch. That too had been over the phone, a clearly drunken Beckett venting his spleen. As far as humiliation went, that took first prize.

“I’ve been calling.”

“I see that. I’m returning your call. Calls.” She heard her prim, proper tone, even as her hand shook. *Strong, resolute. No longer his wife. No longer under his thumb.*

“Look... Just come home. We need to talk. In person.”

Did she want to talk to him? She did not. Certainly not right now. “I’m going out for dinner.”

“What? No. Come home.”

“I’ll be home around eight.”

“Jesus Christ, Grace. I want you to come home now. You’ve been gone all day and no one knew where you were.”

She couldn’t help it. A dry cough of a laugh rasped into the phone.

“What’s so funny?” His incredulity echoed in her ear.

“No one ever knows where I am. What’s changed?” Put bluntly like that, it made her irrevocably sad and she swallowed a lump in her throat before dismissing the self-pity.

“Jesus.” Beckett cleared his throat. “I came home early and you weren’t here. I had no idea where you might be.”

And didn’t that sum up the nature of their relationship? He knew nothing about her. Hadn’t wanted to learn. Rebuffed all her overtures until she gave up. “I do things. Go places.”

She didn’t go far, the one interest she pursued kept close to her chest because she had no idea what Beckett or her father might say. Actually, she did. And she didn’t have the energy to stand up for herself back then when they disparaged it.

“Grace, something has to change. I... Things have to be different.”

The new Grace shouldn’t feel anything in response to his statement. Nothing. If Beckett wanted change, so be it. It didn’t matter to her. It didn’t hurt. Why would it? Their marriage was a sham and he’d obviously had enough. She’d gotten out in front of him, in any event, a hollow victory. “I know. And I’ve taken the initiative.”

The lightheaded feeling was back, and she was so glad to be sitting, even if the car was getting stuffy.

“Initiative?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you later.”

“Just come home. I’m serious.”

As a heart attack? Because she could hardly breathe for the ache in her chest. She somehow moved past it, taking slow, deep breaths. “I’m having dinner with Charity, Beckett.”

“She said she didn’t know where you were.” His tone was accusing and full of suspicion.

“She didn’t. She called me just as I turned my phone back on.”

“Why was it off?”

“Because no one calls me and I didn’t use it earlier today.”

Silence echoed through the airwaves. “What if your father needed you? Or if I did?”

“For what?” She was suddenly overcome with the bizarre desire to laugh and bit her knuckle to suppress the sound, tears pricking at the back of her eyes.

“Fuck. This is going no place.” She could visualize him raking his long fingers through his hair in frustration. She’d seen that emotion often enough, been on the receiving end of it at the beginning of their marriage, and decided she was done talking.

“I’ll see you around eight.” She tapped the hang up icon on his protests and ignored the phone when it rang again. Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the case and fought the desire to throw it out the window.

He likely wanted to start the divorce first with his own lawyer. Funny how great minds had thought alike. Ha. Ha. She should feel pleased she beat him to the punch but was overcome with tiredness instead. With a glance at the time, she sighed and switched on the ignition, plucking the parking tag from the dash.

She paid the attendant a hefty amount, using Beckett’s credit card once again, and cruised out of the lot. Her phone chimed intermittently but she let it be, driving single-mindedly to meet Charity.

Beckett carefully set the phone down on the nearest flat surface before he chucked it against a wall, only to snatch it up again and dial a saved number. “George?”

“I assume you located your wife.” His father-in-law’s patronizing tone was likely directed at both him and Grace, but Beckett found himself feeling defensive only for her.

“I did. Wanted you to know so you wouldn’t worry.”

“I wasn’t worried. Grace has always done as she’s told and obviously you need to figure that out. Give her clear direction. Set your expectations. That way you won’t be looking for her or have any other issues with your wife.”

Anger warred with shame as Beck sought an appropriate response, managing not to point out George’s own spouse had defied him in the end. Leaving her daughter to deal with him alone. He clenched his other hand. Had Grace moved from one autocratic household to the other? Indeed she had. He was no better than her father. Worse. Because he paid little to no attention to his wife aside from their physical connection, and yet expected her to follow some sort of nebulous relationship rules. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

George grunted. “You do that.”

Beck was tempted to call Kamil again, maybe under the pretense of sending over the contract and seek a little input. He threw himself down on the couch, noting how uncomfortable the damn thing was. Grace had accepted all of his designer’s choices, her tentative suggestions dismissed by the older, elegant woman and he hadn’t given her input any regard either. Left it up to the discretion of someone who wasn’t even living in his home. Their home.

The place was too big for two people, too big for two people and a baby. Even more than one baby. It was austere, unwelcoming with its six bedrooms and barren, vaulted rooms downstairs. Grace hadn’t demurred, though he somehow knew it wasn’t something she would have chosen, but he hadn’t been inclined to think about her likes and dislikes at the time. Even now, he was wondering at his change of heart, second-guessing himself and Kamil’s truths. Like the couch, he felt damned uncomfortable and he didn’t care for the experience.

It looked as though he’d have to wait until his wife deigned to return home, in any event. Regardless, they were going to have a long talk. She’d said some things that made him uneasy... And there was that weird feeling last night... With a quick shake of his head, he crossed to the sideboard, another must-have according to the designer, and unearthed a bottle of

scotch.

He noted that everything was spotless, free of dust and any smudges, and cast a look around the room. Spending the little time he was at home in the bedroom and attached bath, and sometimes the den, he paid minimal attention to the rest of the place.

They had no housekeeper, Grace quietly asserting she could keep up with the house, and he hadn't cared. If they'd entertained, it would have made sense to hire staff, but... But no one came to visit, not for a dinner party or otherwise.

He tossed back his drink and cursed Kamil for pricking his awakening conscience. Did Grace rattle around in here all day, alone and lonely? He poured another ounce. Probably not. After all, she had that friend. Charity. Who worked during the day.

But they were going out for dinner. At least that was what Grace said. His eyes narrowed as he stared at his phone. No, he wasn't going to call Charity and check up on his wife. She likely hung out with her friend most nights of the week, and he wouldn't know because he was never home until late. She wasn't out with another man. That wasn't her.

Grace had to eat. And come to think of it, he was getting hungry himself. Carrying his drink, he paced to the kitchen and surveyed the contents of the fridge. Pure basics. Milk, cheese, eggs, and a paltry selection of greens. The pantry didn't offer much else, aside from a box of crackers and some cans of soup. Jesus Christ. No wonder his wife looked as though a stiff breeze could blow her away. She'd clearly stopped cooking when he ignored the meals.

Making another drink, he toured the house, pausing in the guest rooms, meticulously appointed by the designer, but hardly welcoming, despite Grace's obvious efforts to introduce some color and soft fabrics. Everything sparkling clean. Did she spend her days dusting and vacuuming? Scrubbing?

One of them had been converted to an office, and he studied the small laptop on the table by the window, the files neatly stacked beside it. He reached out to open one before allowing his hand to fall away. He'd insisted that Grace respect his privacy, so he would hers. Find out from the source what she did all day, what she was interested in, what was in those folders.

If he could let the past go, then surely they could build something of a personal connection and she'd return to that adoring, sweet young woman who had welcomed him without artifice. It was what he'd wanted at the time

and relished it—and belatedly accepted how precious it actually was. How precious *she* was. Before he'd stomped on her. He hated feeling like a shit.

The little room next to the master suite presented a tightly closed door. Beckett forced himself to open it, the knob curiously stiff in his hand. For a moment he thought it was locked, but it was his own reluctance to enter that impeded his touch.

Stepping inside, he flicked on the light to dispel the gloom cast by the tightly drawn curtains. The cheerful scene mocked his mood, soft yellow walls with teddy bear appliques along the moldings, an area rug designed in playful, concentric circles, a terry-swathed change table, and a small rocking chair setting the tone. He made himself look at the centerpiece, the pure white crib with its printed mattress and fuzzy green blanket tossed over the rail.

Soft toys were propped along a ledge on one wall, and prints in primary colors decorated the others. He spotted the toy chest in the far corner, knowing that there was a vast number of age-appropriate items tucked away in its depths.

Grace had embraced her pregnancy, despite his reaction, and this room was the battle she'd won against the designer, won it with dignity and ... grace. He'd forgotten, or at best suppressed the memory of how his young wife had carved out a special place for the child she'd conceived, no matter the circumstances of that conception. With his grudging support—or lack thereof.

And now it stood, mute testimony to a baby never destined to be. Did Grace think of filling it with another child? He thought about what Kamil said. How his focus was on the present without regard for the future. And the present was getting old. Lord knew how it felt to Grace.

He strode from the nursery, turning off the light and shutting the door behind him. Taking the steps with deliberation, he made his way back to the living room and took the bottle of Scotch over to the coffee table. Giving up all pretense of a casual drink, he filled his glass, over and over. By the time Grace came home, he'd be thoroughly, insensibly drunk, his well-laid plans prior to that fucking talk with Kamil, in shambles. His new one? Stalled.

Chapter Three

The restaurant was nearly empty, given how early they were for dinner, but her friend was waiting. Dressed with her usual style in a fitted sundress and sky-high shoes, Charity rushed toward her and gathered her into a hug.

“You’re too damn skinny,” she scolded, as she stepped back, blinking in the gloom. “Oh, my God. Look at you.”

“The spa,” Grace murmured.

“I’ve been trying to get you to lose that ‘just out of high school’ look for some time and you finally did it yourself. You look gorgeous.”

“Thanks. You, too.” Charity was a few years older and had used every one of those years to build her confidence.

“I’m dead on my feet. Busy day. So let’s get a glass of wine and order an appy so you can catch me up.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t give up on me,” Grace burst out. “Before.”

“What? You mean when your father tried to get me to back off? Ha. I came into that hoity-toity school, with all those white faces, and you were the only girl to make an effort to notice me. And it wasn’t like you were an outcast or anything.” Charity motioned her over to the table.

It was true. Grace wasn’t wildly popular, but something about her let her fit in and get along with everyone, even the mean girls. Most all had money with the exception of a few, like Charity, who were on scholarships, and there was a definite divide between the two.

“I was behind in grades and you tutored me, as well. I don’t forget things like that.”

It was an age-old litany and Grace bit back the automatic protest because what her friend said was true. But she didn’t require payback and still thought it shameful so many other girls hadn’t stepped up. “You’re welcome.”

Charity blinked. “Wow. Listen to you. And here I thought the change was only on the outside. What the hell happened?”

Grace considered the question, not precisely sure what her answer was. She accepted a glass of red wine from the server, thanking him politely, and took a sip while he set a glass for her friend. She’d never been capable of accepting a compliment, blown away when one was offered, praise being a foreign entity most of her growing up years—and highly suspect.

Well, school was a bit different. Her teachers touted her grades,

something even her father had to accept, though he saw education as being worthless for a mere female. Hence his refusal to support her college applications. She might have found a way to attend on her own when she gained access to her trust fund—except she fell in love. And got knocked up. And then she wasted much of what was left of her energy on trying to forge a connection with Beckett.

“Grace? Gonna tell me?”

“Oh.” She took another sip, then pushed the glass away, the taste souring on her tongue. “I’m divorcing Beckett.”

“I gathered that. What’s he done?” Her friend looked so fierce Grace wanted to tell her everything and let Charity take care of it. Silly, but true.

“Irreconcilable differences.”

“Excuse me?”

“We have nothing in common.”

Charity narrowed her large, almond-shaped eyes. “You had sex in common.”

Wincing, Grace pleated the cocktail napkin and wished the server would come back for their orders. Summoning her courage and moving past her innate shyness, she said, “We still do, but it doesn’t make up for...”

Leaning forward, face set in unforgiving lines, her friend said, “Is he beating on you?”

A huff of laughter scraped up her throat. “The lawyer asked me that too. I must look like the proverbial abused woman.”

“Well, you’ve always been quiet and shy. Reticent. But that ... that light you had... I can’t put it into words, exactly, but you’ve always had this glow of kindness or something. It’s gone. And you flinch.”

“What?” She stared at her friend. “I do not.”

Gripping her wine glass, Charity swirled the ruby-red liquid. “You do. Whenever we get together and talk about anything close to your life, you flinch. And your spark’s gone.”

“I see.” Maybe that dead feeling inside wasn’t so surreal after all. How long had it taken to kill it? She couldn’t count all of the blows...

“What can I get you ladies?” The handsome young server smiled at her, warmth in his eyes.

Grace had no idea, still chewing on Charity’s stunning observation. “Chicken Caesar, please. Dressing on the side. No garlic toast.”

Charity snorted audibly. “I’ll have the filet, medium, twice baked. And

her toast.”

“Thank you. Is there something wrong with your wine?”

Grace shook her head. “Can you bring some water, please?”

He flashed her a smile and she blinked at the admiration. “Certainly.”

She watched him saunter away from the table. He’d be about her age, maybe a year older and definitely had *spark*. She knew she’d shut down—in self-defense—upon marrying Beckett when he so obviously despised her, but flinch? Did deadened spirit flinch?

Facing her friend, she said, “He’s never home because he works long hours and then dates other women.”

Charity didn’t look surprised and Grace—flinched. “Did you know that, Charity?”

“Honey, I’d have to be blind not to know it. I read the tabloids, subscribe online. Keeps me entertained and serves as a reminder of what not to do, how *not* to behave. I wondered if *you* knew but didn’t know how to ask, or tell you.”

“I knew. I’ve known. For months.” The skin around her lips felt numb and she choked a fake laugh. “He gets it out in the world and at home. I’m married to some kind of a stud horse.”

“Oh, honey. He’s an asshole.”

Grace couldn’t disagree, but hadn’t she thought he was perfect and wonderful in the beginning? She hoped she could trust her judgment now. “He certainly changed.”

“I know. It surprises me. You were so happy and he looked at you as though you were everything in the world to him.”

“Until he had to don the old ball and chain. Against his will. Beckett can’t stand for anyone to tell him what to do. That was imminently apparent from the moment I met him. He chafed under his father’s rule and was steadily moving to bring the company into the twenty-first century. I found it exciting.” A strong, confident man. Handsome and virile. Everything she dreamed of...

“So you’re divorcing him for cheating.”

Having shredded one napkin, she filched Charity’s, nearly spilling the other woman’s drink. “Partly.”

“Okay...”

She wasn’t sure if humiliation was good for the soul, but maybe letting it all out would drain the poison and shore up her resolution. “He hates me.”

“Grace—”

“I never see him until late at night, almost always. That’s because he rebuffed every effort I made to connect with him, talk with him, anything. And when I persisted... He’s so skilled with words. Like my father. No lectures, just abrupt, derogatory comments that cut me off at the knees. Dismissed.” It was true that people you loved had the ultimate power to wound.

“Honey.”

She hung her head and studied her pinky coral manicure, turning her hand to catch the dim light, noting the absence of her rings. Her thumb rubbed idly at the underside of that finger. “It’s even harder because he didn’t use to be like that. Not in the beginning, before I got pregnant. He listened to me, talked with me. He shared. He made me feel special ... and beautiful.”

“I remember how happy you were, newly in love. I didn’t know how bad it got.” Charity grabbed her hand and squeezed.

“Of course you didn’t. How could I tell you? You’ve always liked me and I didn’t want you to see the real me and lose your good opinion.” Her shame coated her very being.

“The real you?”

“The worthless me.”

“Are you kidding?” Her friend somehow shouted in a whisper. “Are you saying he ... that he set out to deliberately make you feel worthless?”

What did her friend think when she’d compared Beck to her father?

Charity shut her mouth and breathed heavily through her nose.

Grace watched anxiously as the other woman’s eyes burned with rage.

“That fucker. You listen to me, Gracie, and you listen good. If your asshole father couldn’t convince you that you were nothing, then asshole Beckett can’t—”

“Charity. Hey.” Grace cut her off. “I’m sorry. I sounded like a heroine in a historical romance novel. That’s why I couldn’t tell you before, because it felt like that and I was ashamed. I started to think I was worthless because Beck’s opinion mattered so much. More than my father’s. But it doesn’t matter anymore. Something changed. I woke up.” *Last night, as a matter of fact, in the middle of marital relations.* “I know I deserve better and recognized when a cause is useless. And this time I can do something about it.”

“Okay. Okay.” Charity gulped wine. “Okay.”

“I was just trying to explain.”

“You came to your senses in time, Gracie. I swear. You kept saying marriage wasn’t easy but I didn’t know... I mean, I figured he was cheating but you were so in love. It was killing me, being a shitty friend and not telling you, but...”

They sat in silence for a moment, the sounds of other early diners filtering into the space a slight distraction.

“I’ve thought about it a lot. I’ve had nothing but time to think, once I got a little past losing...” She grabbed for her water, the nice young waiter having set it down sometime between her confession and Charity’s diatribe, and slunk away. She would never get past losing her baby, but at least she’d come to think and process clearly. “You know, the older guy sweeps girl off her feet. I understand now it was infatuation—on my part. Beckett was just playing around.”

“He knocked you up.”

It sounded as crass coming from Charity’s lips as it did when she thought it. Grace winced. “He did.”

“Was it some deal about the woman being responsible for birth control?”

“No. I mean, he asked. Because we were ... well, things were pretty interesting and ... he didn’t have a condom. Said he didn’t want to presume. That I was different.” She felt her cheeks heat, absurd because her early confession was so much more humiliating.

In a voice as dry as the Sahara, her friend said, “You were overcome with lust and did the deed.”

“Yes.” Not exactly. Beckett was overcome with lust, especially since he’d clearly set his sights on removing her from the ranks of virgins, but she was overcome with love. She’d wanted him desperately, secure in that love. Or so she thought. Infatuation seemed more likely, now. “But I was on the Pill, and he promised that he was ... clean. That he used condoms with everyone ... before.” She fervently hoped that was still the case, although her follow-up doctor visits after losing the baby hadn’t detected any diseases. It was a measure of her cowardice she hadn’t asked...

“Lord, Grace. You’re lucky you didn’t end up with a disease as well as a baby.”

The room darkened as a mist rose to veil her vision, and her head spun. So not past the miscarriage. “No disease. And no baby.”

“Fuck me. Damn it.” Charity grabbed for her hand again. “I’m useless as a friend. Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

It struck her that her friend and Beckett were both such passionate people. They certainly had the same foul mouths. She was probably attracted to them because she was such a mouse. “It was months ago. It’s... I’m doing okay.” She waved her other hand. A fifteen-week fetus probably didn’t qualify as a person in lots of people’s opinion. Just another failure on her part, her father’s interpretation notwithstanding.

“It’s not okay. Not for you. And how about Beckett?”

“Hmmm? Beckett?” She considered, trying to remember past the haze that had overtaken her back then. “He took me to the hospital. After. Stayed with me and brought me home.” She recalled that day as if it had happened to somebody else, the ER doctor’s cold hands, and her own doctor’s kind, but brief explanation.

These things happen. The placenta either didn’t securely attach or your body rejected the fetus.

What a thing to hear, that she’d dispatched her own child. And she suspected she had, considering how lonely and miserable she’d been, living in that cavern Beckett bought for them, pretending everything was just fine.

“And you stayed married?” Charity’s question saved Grace from dwelling.

“You mean, even though there was no reason to any longer?” Another strange laugh heralded her answer. “I heard him and my father talking. His was there too. They urged Beckett to try again as soon as possible. It was like a chat in medieval times. Produce an heir and unite their businesses for generations to come.”

“Jesus.”

Her salad was set before her with a flourish, the handsome server searching her face before sending another smile. “Enjoy.”

She added some pepper and halfheartedly pushed around the crisp greens, adding a little dressing.

“Grace, did you just ... go along with it?”

“I did.” She avoided Charity’s stare and sliced a piece of chicken. “I didn’t know what else to do. I was ... bereft. I had nothing left inside of me then to gain strength from to do anything else. And honestly, Beckett was quite kind. For some time.”

“Bereft.”

“Uh huh. It’s an interesting word, isn’t it? It came to me when I was lying in our bed last night, wondering how in hell my life had come to this.”

“I wish I’d known. I mean, I knew, but I didn’t.”

“I’m telling you now,” Grace said gently. “Because I know you’re my friend, pretty much my only friend. And I’m going to lean on you a bit now, I expect. Fair warning.”

Charity huffed a laugh. “I don’t need a warning. I’m here for you. I always have been but you’re so reticent, independent.”

Maybe that was what saved her. That strange ‘click’ in her head last night while in Beck’s arms, his body invading hers in what should have been a loving act but was merely just for pleasure. No longer enough to prolong the hope he would change. “I think I reached my saturation point, however it came about and despite how long it took. The final straw, whatever.”

They ate in silence. Well, her friend did. Grace pushed food around her plate and sipped at her water. She waited for Charity to process everything she’d shared.

“Something wrong with the salad?” her friend asked.

“No. I’m not really hungry. I’ve been feeling off for weeks, maybe building up to this strange mood. Probably leading up to my dash for freedom.” She smiled at the thought, even if it hurt the corners of her mouth.

“Did Beckett do something outrageous to precipitate this?”

Forking a piece of chicken into her mouth, she chewed and reflected. “Nothing more than usual.” Though the recent picture of the sparkling brunette on his arm, the one gazing up at him like he’d hung the moon and the stars, had really shaken her. They’d been photographed together a number of times and Grace wondered if this woman would be the one he’d throw her over to pursue.

“He’s lucky he didn’t marry me,” Charity growled. “I’m a bitch even when I’m not PMSing.”

Grace chuckled. Her friend would have killed Beckett, although Charity wouldn’t have gotten pregnant either. “I asked the doctor why my birth control failed, you know, and he told me it was a mild dose to regulate my cycle, and not actually to prevent a pregnancy. Mother took me when I couldn’t get out of bed for days every month. I thought I was protected.”

“Why wouldn’t you think that? But you know differently now. What are you using?”

“Nothing.”

“And he’s screwing around?” Incredulity and concern laced her friend’s tone.

“I asked him to use a condom and he ... well, he was convincing against it.” She couldn’t force herself to confront him with all the other women. Pride before a fall. So stupid.

I told you I’m clean, Grace. And the doctor said you’re okay now.

“So you were willing to fall in with the ‘producing an heir’ deal?” Charity made quotation marks with her fingers, rolling her eyes.

“I wanted a baby,” she admitted. “I did and I didn’t. Not to replace the one I ... lost. But someone to love and eventually love me back. I was selfish, thinking about decades of an empty marriage with Beck.” *And harboring a hope that a child might draw us together.*

“That’s not uncommon.”

“But selfish and wrong. Babies don’t deserve to have that kind of expectation placed on them.” She should know. Talk about following in her mother’s footsteps...

“That’s deep, Gracie. And true.”

She picked at her salad while Charity sliced more of her steak. The smell of grilled meat made her mouth water and then her stomach rebelled. Setting her lips tightly, she shoved back from the table and bolted for the restroom.

Banging into a stall, she dropped to her knees and vomited, all the stressors of the day leaving her body. As she hung over the bowl, panting and blinking away the moisture in her eyes, she heard water running.

A wet paper towel filled her peripheral. “Here.”

She accepted it and wiped her mouth, then stood, a little shaky on her feet. Charity took her elbow and eased her to the sink. After filling a little paper cup, she offered it and Grace sipped.

“That was harsh.” Charity’s face was strained with worry.

“I’m sorry. I just... I guess everything was just too much.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She faced the mirror and was relieved not to see any visible destruction of Sherry’s hard work with the exception of a mascara smudge under one eye. Dabbing at it with one fingertip, she said. “Am I vain?”

“What?” Her friend tilted her head. “Oh. No, not vain. I’m relieved you’re taking interest in your appearance. Makes me feel normal.”

Laughing, they traipsed back to the table and settled in. Grace averted

her eyes from Charity's meal and pushed hers aside.

"Uh, Gracie? Could you be...? You know..."

"What?" She looked around for the server, having a strong urge for dessert.

"Pregnant."

She knew she was gaping. Her mouth dried at the back of her teeth and her jaw cracked. With an effort, she closed it and licked her lips. "Of course not. The doctor said it could take time before I'd conceive again."

"Okay. It's just you said you weren't using protection and you're moody. Off. Tired. And you puked."

"I'm stressed." But she was frantically perusing a mental calendar and comparing previously known symptoms.

Reaching into her purse, she fumbled out her phone. Charity told their server to go away, ignoring his inquiry as to the suitability of their meals.

Scrolling through her info, she checked dates and stilled in her seat. Little hints lined up and fell neatly into place. The mood swings, losing weight but not on her breasts or bottom, the intermittent threat of nausea, tiredness, no period for *seven* weeks ... she quit cataloging and stared, horrified, at her wine glass. "I drank alcohol."

"A sip," Charity soothed, leaning toward her. "A really tiny sip."

"I had highlights done. A body wrap. Waxing!"

"Shhh. Maybe the highlights were organic."

Grace closed her eyes and considered the brochure. She breathed again. "They were. Everything in the salon was touted as being green. Oh, God. What else have I ingested?"

"Knowing you, nothing bad. And you can't be positive. You need to do a test."

She was positive. Deep in denial, another self-protection gambit, she'd avoided what was staring her in the face. Even her revelation about falling out of love with her husband, relegating her intense feelings into the proper category of infatuation was no doubt connected to what her body was telling her. Protecting her and her child. She drifted into a strange fantasy of the baby telling her to cut and run.

She finally found her voice, her friend staring at her anxiously. "Will you come with me? To do the test?"

"Of course." Charity grabbed for her purse, seeking out her wallet.

"Dinner's on me. I insist. We'll let Beckett pay."

Her friend looked at her and nodded. “Backbone. Got it. Let’s go.”

Paying for their only partially eaten meals, she tipped the server handsomely and waved away his concerns.

At her car, she said, “I’ll meet you at the mall on McAllister. Outside the south entrance.”

Forcing herself to focus on the drive and not her suspicion, she gripped the steering wheel tightly. She signaled well in advance of any turn and watched her mirrors as she drove exactly the speed limit until the sprawling mall came into view. Pulling into a parking spot and coming to a stop, she sighed before unclenching her hands and removing her seat belt.

The test was but a formality. She accepted the truth. Terror made her weak as she tried to swing her legs out of the car, dreading that something would go wrong with this pregnancy too. She thought back over the past weeks and was relieved to acknowledge no alcohol use and other than a few over-the-counter headache remedies, nothing else occurred to her that she knew could harm a fetus.

“Hey.” Charity stood beside the open door. “Are you all right?”

“Long day,” she muttered, clambering from the car.

They made their way into the building and turned right to take the hall toward the pharmacy. The ubiquitous sign beckoned and Grace thought about the other signs she’d responded to today. Divorce, makeover, pregnancy test. One of those things didn’t go with the others.

The array of home pregnancy tests was bewildering, but in the end, she chose one guaranteed for quick results and high accuracy. Charity snagged another and handed it over.

Her friend shrugged. “Never hurts to do it twice.”

Grace paid cash, not wanting to jinx anything by paying with Beckett’s card this time, and then stood uncertainly back outside the store.

“Where do you want to take the test?”

“The washrooms outside the food court.” There was one marked ‘family’ and she thought it apropos.

Closing herself inside the large bathroom, she read the instructions and completed first one test and then the other. She set the paper and plastic sticks on the back of the toilet tank, and then let Charity in.

They waited in silence, although her friend shifted her weight from foot to foot, stare glued to the test sticks. Grace crumpled the cardboard boxes and stuffed them in the trash, washing her hands again.

At the prescribed time, they hunched forward to view the tests. The plus sign on one and the double lines on the other bled into clarity. Charity wrapped her arms around Grace and hugged her tightly.

“Congratulations, honey. I can’t wait to be an honorary aunt.”

Her voice muffled against her friend’s shoulder, Grace said, “Godmother.”

“Even better.”

Easing out of Charity’s hold, Grace wrapped the evidence up in a tissue and carefully stowed them in the side pocket of her purse. Her rings jangled beneath her fingertips and she winced, quickly transferring the strips into a different place.

“Can we get a cup of tea?”

A worried look tightened Charity’s features. “You’re freaking out.”

“I want this baby. Badly. But I don’t want to be married any longer.”

“Jeez.” Her friend pulled open the door. “C’mon. I’ll treat you to some herbal vintage. And some honey. Maybe a cracker. Gracie, we’ll figure this out.”

Over two cups of decaf Earl Grey, she and Charity discussed her options. In the end, she knew she had to tell Beck. Regardless of the divorce, he needed to know he might become a father.

Grace surreptitiously touched the wooden railing beside their table on the edge of the food court. She couldn’t get her hopes up, at least not until she saw a doctor. And certainly not until she made it well past the first trimester.

She doubted Beckett would be terribly interested in a baby, except as a sop to his father, but she wouldn’t deny him access as long as he behaved appropriately. A surge of determined protectiveness washed over her and she set her teeth. He’d damn well better, and that meant not bringing any of those women around if they didn’t adore children.

“What if he doesn’t want a divorce?” Charity asked. “I mean, he’ll be under pressure from the parents.”

She felt her eyebrows climb her forehead and stared at her friend. She really hadn’t considered that. “I’d say it’s too bad. I’ll raise our child by myself before I’ll expose him or her to a marriage like ours. Let alone grandparents like those men.”

“It’s like you’re possessed,” chortled Charity. Then her face smoothed out. “He sounds formidable, though.”

A frisson of anxiety wormed its way into her belly, but she stamped on it. “He is. But not this time. It’s more than just about me, now.”

“I believe you, honey. But no matter what, I’m behind you. Don’t forget that.”

“Maybe we can be roommates. I’ll find a place big enough for all of us.” Grace stopped, wincing. Like Charity would want to live with her and a baby.

“That sounds fine. My lease isn’t up for nine or ten months, but nothing to say we can’t find something beforehand.”

Gratitude beat back the negative emotions and she beamed at her friend. “One step at a time. I told Beck I’d be home around eight, so I’d better get going. Wouldn’t want him to blow up my phone again. Twice in a lifetime is too much.”

Charity rolled her eyes. “Are you telling him tonight?”

“I’ll see. He was going on about needing to talk. I expect he wants a divorce—how’s that for a coincidence?—and I’ll let him lead with that, and then offer up my visit to a lawyer today. Once we’ve established that middle ground, I’ll tell him, and he won’t have some misplaced sense of honor to stick with me.” She was proud of her way of thinking and ignored the dull ache in her chest.

“And there’s the Grace I remember from school.”

The quietly resourceful, well-liked, sheltered girl from school. She’d hoped some of that had transferred into adulthood...

Chapter Four

Making her way home, she rehearsed a variety of scenarios in which she would state her case. Her foot faltered on the gas as she drew up to the house. Light blazed from almost every window, hardly the dark visage she was greeted with on the rare evening she ventured out. Returning long before Beckett did. Funny that he always came home, unless he was away on a business trip when he could have stayed over at his girlfriends'. Mistresses. Was that still a term? She felt a pang someplace inside and ignored it.

Locking the car, she took the steps and tried the front door. It opened, the security panel blinking 'unarmed', and she moved into the foyer. Music filtered from the living room and she frowned in that direction. She hardly expected Beckett to be in bed at this early hour, but couldn't remember the last time he'd been in that room, let alone had any music playing.

Pausing to set the alarm, she turned off her phone again and put her purse back in the closet. She made her way to the living room, gathering her thoughts—and her courage. Stupid, really, because she hadn't done anything wrong.

She stood in the archway and stared at her husband, who was sprawled on the dreadful couch. He'd doffed his suit jacket and removed his tie, but still wore his white button-down, now open at the neck. His pants were surprisingly wrinkled and he'd taken his socks off.

Viewed objectively, his classic good looks would appeal to any straight woman and any man with an interest in the same sex. Couple his gorgeous features with a tall, lean, and muscled body, broad shoulders and chest straining the fine fabric of his shirt, and he had it in spades. She'd certainly fallen at his handsome feet, offered up her heart, soul, and body without a qualm.

"You're home." His greeting was slurred, and her gaze dropped to the glass on the coffee table, its contents dark amber. Beck wasn't a big drinker, she didn't think, but the nearly empty bottle beside the glass said he'd deviated from the norm tonight.

She hesitated, uncertain what to say, and he squinted. "Holy shit. Who are you and what've you done with my *bride*?"

The snarky emphasis on 'bride' fit with all his sniping and careless comments over the past months and her anxiety vanished before her anger. "You're drunk."

Probably not the wisest thing to say to somebody who was obviously in an uncertain mood, *and* intoxicated.

Beckett heaved to his feet and glowered. Disheveled clothing and tousled blond hair—he was still an amazing specimen. For someone else. “I had a few drinks while I waited for my *wife* to come home.”

“I have a name. It’s Grace.” She nearly said he wouldn’t have to call her his bride or his wife much longer, but erred on the side of caution. He looked intensely belligerent.

He blinked, then blinked again, a slow, sensuous smile curving his full lips. “Do I detect a bit of rebellion? *Grace?*”

“I thought you wanted to talk.”

“Come and sit down.”

She ignored his gesture at the couch, instead choosing a chair that put the coffee table between them. Perching on the edge, she waited.

He slumped back down and studied her. “You’re ... gorgeous. You always were, but there’s something even more so about you now.”

Right. The booze was clearly blurring his perception. She said nothing.

“I had a talk with Kamil last night. After you went to sleep.”

And after he’d had sex with her—for the last time. “Okay.”

“He likes you. Thinks you’re sweet. And pretty. I can’t disagree. I always thought so.”

What he thought hardly mattered, but she’d liked Kamil too, his dark-brown eyes warm and nonjudgmental as he stood up for Beckett at their wedding. Maybe the guy hadn’t known about the reason they’d married. Or that Beckett blamed her.

What do you mean, you’re pregnant? We had sex once without a condom! Once. Your first time. And you told me you were on the Pill. Did you have it planned from the start? His reaction still lashed at her when she allowed herself to think about it. And he’d thrown his hands up, walked away before she could explain.

In the end, she supposed it was her fault because ignorance was no defense, not when it came to the law—or Beckett. And then came the phone call, Beckett apparently privy to some information she lacked. That was when he’d drunkenly cursed her. She closed her eyes momentarily at that pang of hurt.

“Kamil seems nice.” She was hedging, but she had no recent experience in dealing with Beck at the best of times, let alone when he was

drinking.

“He’s my best friend. Smart, and I don’t mean just book smart.” Beckett stared off into space and she wondered what he was thinking. “I’d been thinking about things, about you and me and he said something that made me reconsider ... my behavior.”

He stumbled over the last few words, but she deciphered them. She wondered what behavior Beck was referring to. There was a variety to choose from, and she wasn’t sure what to ask.

Shoving his hand through his hair, he stared at her again. “What he really did was clarify everything that had been bothering me about you. And how I’ve been acting... That is, I ended up having a new plan in my head. For the future. Our future.” He laughed and picked up the bottle. “Seems I can’t put it into words.”

Great. He’d gotten drunk to announce the end of their marriage. She was tired and so over this. And she certainly wasn’t sharing her recent news with him in this state. “We can talk tomorrow.”

“Sure. Okay. That makes sense.” He pushed up to stand again. “How was dinner?”

“Good. Fine.”

“With Charity, right? Not like you did this whole ... makeover thing for anyone else.” With surprising agility, considering the low level in the bottle, he skirted the coffee table and loomed over her.

“With Charity.” Who else? She had no other friends and Beck never introduced her to any of his.

A big hand reached out and trailed fingers through the ends of her hair. “I liked your long hair. It was so feminine.”

Leaning back, she gazed up at him. “It’s my hair.”

“So it is.” He cupped her face. “You do look even more gorgeous, Grace.”

She pushed his hand away and wiggled sideways, getting to her feet and stepping behind the chair. Beckett’s brow creased and his eyes narrowed, the blue of his irises darkening, becoming turbulent.

“Are you ... afraid of me?”

“No.”

“Then why are you avoiding me? Or maybe you had dinner with someone other than your friend. Maybe it wasn’t dinner. Maybe you—” He snapped his mouth shut but his glare said it all.

Nasty Beckett was back, although he'd never accused her of cheating before. She supposed she should be grateful he hadn't wanted a paternity test. He'd probably demand one now, once he found out... *A skunk smells his own stink first.*

"Glass houses," she murmured, refusing to look away.

"What?"

"You're throwing stones, Beckett, and it's unwarranted. It's not like I'll ever trust a man again." She hadn't given that any thought, in actuality, but it emerged as the absolute truth.

The startled fish look wasn't attractive, not even on her gorgeous, soon-to-be ex-husband. "Did an alien take you over or something? And you're one to talk about trust. What the fuck is going on, Grace?"

"I'm going to bed. We can talk tomorrow." *When you're sober.*

His features smoothed and lightened. "Great idea."

As she headed toward the hall, he caught up to her with his longer strides and slipped an arm around her waist. She whirled and came up against his chest. His heat and bulk against her sensitive breasts nearly overwhelmed her new intentions, a true Pavlovian response, but the Scotch overwhelmed his familiar scent.

Her stomach rebelled and she shoved at him. "Don't."

Fish face again, no doubt because she'd never refused him, being so stupidly desperate for any kind of attention, something that made her vastly disappointed in herself now.

"I'm not *that* drunk, sweetheart."

The endearment cut deep, a flashback to before the marriage, to the happy times. Grace sneered. "Drunk or sober. Don't you touch me."

"Whoa." Beckett stepped back and raised his hands. "What the fuck, Grace? What's wrong?"

Of course, he'd be confused. This—sex—was all they had together. Well, up until now. She swallowed, suddenly terrified about her pregnancy status. "I want a divorce."

They stood at the foot of the stairs, little figurative distance separating them. Beckett's features tightened and any sign of inebriation vanished, his focus steady, eyes clear. She tried to control her breathing, schooling her features and staring back.

"A divorce."

"Yes." She was grateful to hear the steady clarity of her response.

“I don’t think so.”

“What? You told me earlier, on the phone, that you wanted things to change. I saw a lawyer today. Things are in the works.”

He shook his head, slowly, without taking his gaze from hers. “Serves me right for not paying attention,” he muttered.

Exhaustion struck without warning, something she recalled from her first pregnancy, and she swayed. She was past deciphering riddles, past attempts to please everyone. She just wanted to be left alone. Beckett grabbed her arm and she allowed it until she found her feet again.

“You’re tired.” He peered at her. “Go to bed, Grace. I’ll turn off the lights. We can talk tomorrow.”

Surprised at his decency, she took advantage, nevertheless, and hurried up the stairs, grasping the banister. *He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.* Veering into the master suite, she scooped up her nightgown and a fresh pair of panties before rushing down the hall to the second guest bedroom.

She had washed her face and stripped off her clothes, and was slipping into the nightgown when Beckett marched in. “What are you doing in here?”

“Go to bed, Beck. Please. Just go.” She pushed a hand against her temple. So she hadn’t thought out the sleeping arrangements. Sue her. She’d stupidly envisioned a civil, grown-up discussion where she wouldn’t be belittled or talked down to. Where she’d keep her backbone stiff and grant Beckett his freedom with equanimity and ... grace. She nearly giggled as tears threatened.

He huffed a deep breath, the smell of alcohol he’d imbibed making her stomach roll uneasily. Stepping into her space, he dipped low and straightened with her over his shoulder, arms flailing helplessly.

She somehow managed not to vomit as he strode back to their room, but when he dumped her on the bed, she lost control. Lunging to the side, she set her face near the little trash can and coughed up bile. Her belly didn’t care if there was nothing in it other than a cup of tea, as she wracked several times.

“Jesus Christ.” Beckett put a hand on the nape of her neck and smoothed her hair back with the other.

When she was finished, he helped her lie back and then carried the can away. She didn’t care where it went, as long as the evidence was gone. Water ran in the adjoining bath and he brought her a glass. “Here.”

A couple of swallows went a long way before she set it on the nightstand and closed her eyes. "Thank you."

"So damn polite. Always. Doesn't matter if I'm shitting on you or ... fuck, when was I last even decent to you?" He stomped away, saving her from formulating an answer, and she heard him brushing his teeth and then using the facilities.

This was a new Beckett and one she couldn't begin to fathom. He was unhappy, just not with her. She didn't think. The mattress dipped and she stiffened so she didn't roll over to his side. Maybe if she kept her eyes closed he'd just go away.

"Grace."

Or not. She looked at him, willing him not to ask.

"You were sick last night."

"No."

"I heard you." Despite his accusation, his words were quiet, measured.

"I gagged. It had nothing to do with..."

"With the fact you're pregnant again and want a divorce?" His face was stony, his eyes chips of blue ice.

"No. Although I won't deny either of those facts."

He blanched. "Then what?"

Why did he want to know? Why not interrogate her about the relevant thing? Grace went for broke. She had more than herself to stand up for now. Hauling herself up so her back was against the headboard, she drew up her knees for extra distance and said, "Last night I'd just come to the conclusion that I was done with this marriage." *Done with you.* "And I had a ... physical reaction."

"No wonder."

She felt her eyebrows draw together at his response. She'd expected, at the very least, some shock she had gagged because of him. "Excuse me?"

"I've been an asshole. Even despite ... everything."

"Everything? What does that mean? Everything? C'mon Beckett, seeing as we're putting it all out there, I'll say it. I'm also done with being your whipping boy." She heard herself and was amazed but hung onto her determination.

"You're hardly a boy, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that. Don't burden me with any fake endearments or snide references to being your *wife*. Or your *bride*. And don't you try to

smooth things over with your particular brand of humor.” Her voice rose, becoming shrill, and he blinked.

“Okay, okay. I’m trying here, Grace. I’m trying to make things better, despite everything.”

She stared at him, feeling her features stiffen, clenching her hands. “This *everything*. What else is included in there, past feeling forced into marriage? With me.”

Tipping his head back, he took a deep breath. “I’ll be honest. I was pissed at you, back then. And the way I felt took on a life of its own. One I couldn’t seem to step back from. No man wants to be trapped.”

Trapped. Like a predator having his way of life changed forever. Like *she* hadn’t felt trapped. She channeled her own hurt and resentment. “I’m sorry your father wielded such a big stick that you found yourself tied down. But I’ve had more than a taste of being powerless too! And I’ve paid and paid and paid for something I didn’t do deliberately.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and his mouth set in that thin line she dreaded. “Grace, your father told me.”

“Told you what?”

“That you were never on birth control. You lied to me. I trusted you and you lied.”

Her mind reeled at the revelation and she linked her fingers around her shins. It was more a barrier to keep him safe from the raging need to smack him than to hide behind.

With effort, she kept her tone neutral. “And how would my father know?”

“Uh, well he knew you didn’t have a boyfriend before me.”

“Before you seduced me?”

“If I recall, you didn’t put up a lot of resistance.” Beck raised a palm. “Sorry.”

“I was nineteen, Beckett. Fresh out of private school. An all girls’ school. And you came along. Impressionable virgin meets manwhore. Connect the dots.” It was like Charity was in her head, cheering her on.

His eyes widened and he whistled. “Man, when you throw off the traces you do it up right. You’ll be saying ‘fuck’ next. I’ll give you manwhore, so maybe I did seduce you. But I was really attracted to you. I still am.”

With a snort, she said, “Sex was never our problem. But you’re wrong

when you say I lied to you. I *was* on the Pill. Had been for years. What would my father know about it? Did you ever stop to think about that? Or was your ego so bruised?"

He huffed loudly and set a hand on the back of his head. "I assumed—"

She summarized what she'd told Charity. "I was on the Pill. The dosage wasn't sufficient, but I didn't realize. It wasn't to prevent pregnancy but as a teenager—a sheltered teenager—I had no reason to inquire." *And maybe, because I kept taking it before I found out I was pregnant, I killed my child.*

Silence spilled out to fill the room and a myriad of emotions chased one another over Beckett's face. "Shit."

Grace found herself wishing to turn back time and force this conversation on him. Wishing it wasn't too late, though he probably wouldn't have believed her back then, refusing to speak to her, spend time with her... And then it had been like living in an armed camp where nothing vaguely related to the circumstances of their marriage was raised.

"Look, it doesn't matter," she said. "Whether premeditated or not, I screwed up your life. I get it. Sorry. But the past year hasn't exactly been a treat for me, either." And it wasn't like he'd been totally curtailed. Hardly at all, in truth. He'd lived a pretty darn full life, the jerk. Wow, she was exhausted, yet energized. Putting it out there—because of this baby.

"Grace..."

"I can't do this tonight, Beck. Just go away."

"I'm sleeping here. With you. But I won't bother you. I promise."

No different than any other night, minus the sex. She was too tired to fight anymore, let alone possibly uncover other unpalatable revelations. Damn her father to hell. "Whatever."

He pulled the covers back. "Settle in."

She obliged, sliding down and over onto her side, tucking her hand beneath the pillow while he lowered the sheet over her. A faint press against her temple, his minty breath whispering through her hair, made her shiver. The affection she'd so badly craved, that she would have sold her soul for... Wait. Hadn't she done precisely that? She bit her lip against a whimper and felt him move away, a vast, cool space opening between them.

Her earlier exhaustion returned with a vengeance, and her brain ran down like an old spring, thoughts whirling into nothingness. Sleep pulled her under, a toad licking in a fly.

Chapter Five

Morning was heralded by the muted shades of a gloomy day. Rain pattered against the windows as Beckett ran through today's agenda, deciding to cancel his entire work schedule. He had something far more important than business meetings that could easily be rescheduled or handled by someone else.

He hadn't slept much, despite the scotch. Thinking. Grace wanted a divorce. She was carrying his child and still wanted out of their marriage. He choked on a bitter laugh and rubbed a hand over his face, dragging it against the stubble. He'd felt something the night before last from her, something that alerted him to this... Well, he hadn't known exactly what was coming, but he'd sensed it. Probably what drove him to the discussion with Kamil.

Wanting to scoff at such a thing, supernatural mumbo-jumbo, he found he couldn't easily dismiss it. Their closest connection had been through sex after all, and he'd own that. Grace had reached out for months and months, for something more, to encourage that something they'd been growing while dating, before conceding defeat in the face of his reserve. His unkind reserve.

He shut down all her attempts to talk until she'd simply drifted away, withdrawing and carrying on without him. What if she'd been able to share that important piece of information back then? He shook his head. He'd been only too ready to believe George, willing to believe that the sweet, charming woman who was Grace had pulled one over on him. Beckett Kilmer, the guy who always had the upper hand in his personal relationships. How had that even been possible?

Nope, he'd told Grace the truth last night when he said he hadn't trusted her. He didn't trust any woman, not since his mother, his father's influence marking him in a manner he hadn't recognized—until now. And he and his wife hadn't had enough time together before he got her pregnant to build that rare commodity. He felt sick to his stomach when he considered the mess they were in.

She slept soundly beside him, curled into a ball, the bedclothes barely moving with her breathing. The hairstyle and expert makeup made the very most of her appearance, although her transformation wasn't precisely caterpillar to butterfly. He always thought she was beautiful, if in an ethereal, innocent, and unformed way. She'd lacked polish was all, something he could have provided if he'd been so inclined.

He could drown in self-recrimination or figure out a way to fix this. One thing for sure, he was going to include Grace and wasn't above trading on her feelings for him. She loved him and he'd thrown that fine emotion back in her teeth. Grace was a class act and he was shit. His inexcusable behavior over the past many months might be irretrievable, but he wasn't going to think about it that way. He'd come to the startling conclusion he didn't want to live without her, and not only because of their physical connection. And it wasn't going to be a case of too little, too late.

After pulling on a pair of pajama pants, their sharp creases mute testament to lack of wear, he stumbled to the bathroom and threw water on his face. The effects of the scotch remained, a faint throbbing behind his eyes, but Grace's response had sobered him up damn fast. Of all the times to drink...

He scrubbed his teeth and poked at his hair, then checked to see if she was awake before heading downstairs. Her pale face with those feathery lashes stroking over her cheeks stayed with him as he gained the kitchen. While unaware of the stage of her pregnancy, he knew she couldn't be more than a month or so along. If things were the same as before, it meant she'd be struggling with appetite and feeling pretty tired. Two things he could address.

Fighting against the sick sensation of her possibly losing this child as well, he located his phone and texted his PA to cancel his day, and to make an appointment with Grace's doctor as soon as possible. Jenna might raise an eyebrow, but she wouldn't noise the news about. Then he turned his attention to putting together a light breakfast. The paltry choices somehow lent themselves to a decent meal.

He put everything on a tray unearthed from a cupboard that appeared to be made specifically for items of that shape and size. Everything was in its place and the kitchen was surgically clean, as sterile as the rest of the house. He winced at the inference. Grace should have a home, not this mausoleum. As he picked up the food to take it upstairs, he felt her.

She hovered in the doorway, wearing a fluffy robe, her shorter hair a loose cloud around her head. He spoke as she turned to flee, her intent evident on sleep-softened features.

"Morning." He tried not to give the appearance that he'd noticed her intention.

She appeared to hang in space, on the balls of her feet before she settled. "I thought you'd left. For work."

“I told you we’d talk today.”

“I thought you meant after work. *When* you got home.” He didn’t need to work hard at deciphering the inference there. Except, there was no real accusation, but the stating of a simple fact.

“I’m home today,” he said, watching her soft mouth set. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

“Not feeling sick?”

“No.”

“I made breakfast. Something that shouldn’t upset your stomach.” He pulled out a stool from the island. “Will you sit?”

“O ... kay. Though I’m not really hungry.”

“But you came down for something.”

“A banana.”

“I have one on the tray, sliced, in milk with a little raw sugar. Plain toast. Herbal tea.”

She ducked her head, but not before he saw her eyes well with tears. “Grace? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Probably hormones.”

“I remember. From before.”

She stared at him from troublesomely now dry eyes. What had he said? Done?

“Right.”

He’d pissed her off in reminding her, but he wanted her to know some part of him had been invested back then. “I paid attention, Grace. No matter how things ... unfolded afterward, I noticed.”

Lifting the spoon, she nibbled on a piece of banana, and he could almost see her thoughts coalescing. “You were ... decent for a while. After the baby—”

Decent. As a man that would be faint praise, as a husband? Abysmal. “I wasn’t the most amenable groom,” he agreed.

“I don’t really remember.”

He knew she was lying if only to herself. The quick, civil ceremony hadn’t been a joyous occasion, with only his father, hers, Kamil and her friend, Charity present. It was tense and echoed with blame and misery. Her hand had been cold to the touch when he’d slipped the ring her finger, all the while avoiding her pleading gaze. He’d brushed her cheek with a brief kiss.

“I remember.”

He'd been pissed off to the maximum while he watched his life narrow down to instant wife, instant family before he was ready. Before *he* made the choice. The fact that in all likelihood he would have chosen Grace, given more time, curdled his guts with shame. Who had been the adult? A twenty-six-year-old man or a nineteen-year-old girl?

And speaking of rings... Her left hand was conspicuously bare and his possessive, caveman side flexed and roared. He bit back a comment and maintained silence. Behaving like an ultimate asshole wasn't going to win him any brownie points.

She crunched a bite of toast and took a sip of tea. “I'll just go and get dressed. And then we can talk. We should ... finalize things.”

Staring after her retreating form, he grimaced. Whatever had changed for her, his gut clenched at the realization his sweet, complaint bride was no more. It wasn't that he decried her spirit and independence, he'd discovered he didn't want to lose any part of her and fixing things just got harder.

He cleaned up and headed to the master suite to shower and dress. Grace perched on the chair by her dressing table, tugging a pair of socks on. She gave him a vague smile, her mind clearly elsewhere and he wondered what she'd do if he stripped her out of that pedestrian outfit and tumbled her back into bed.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face or in his demeanor because she tensed, watching him through narrowed eyes. With a shrug, he commenced his morning routine, albeit without his wife pretending to be asleep in their bed. How many times had he thought about starting the day with something different than picking up coffee on the drive? But he hadn't because he didn't want to change the status quo. And it suited him to punish her with his withholding. *Asshole*.

Swallowing a savage curse, he finished his shower, breathing in the mingled scent of his and her grooming products. Grace always smelled of lavender and some unfamiliar flower. Verbena, maybe. The strange name popped into his head out of nowhere. Which was precisely where he appeared to be when it came to her.

With a towel around his hips, he eschewed a shave but brushed his hair into submission. He strode into the now empty bedroom and found some jeans—designer—and a vintage t-shirt.

The other side of the closet was hung with a mishmash of garments.

Dresses and outfits from the Kilmer line for Grace, when she was required to attend events, and clothing of her own taste. He fingered the fabrics and grimaced. He hadn't even taken an interest in her clothes, his bread and butter.

Making a mental note, he went in search of his wife, finding her back in the cold and elegant living room, curled up in a chair by the fireplace.

“Want it switched on? It's going to rain for days.”

“All right.” She pulled a shapeless sweater around her and stared toward the street.

After flicking on the gas, he took the remote with him to the couch and tried to get comfortable. A carafe of coffee and a big mug sat on the coffee table.

“Thanks, Grace.”

One shoulder lifted in a dainty shrug. “You made breakfast.”

“You aren't having any?”

“I can't have caffeine. And I've lost the taste for it anyhow.”

“Right.” No caffeine—which meant her giving up her beloved chocolate—no alcohol, no OTC drugs, aside from a specific few, and a host of other things to remember. “How far along are you?”

“I'm not sure. It's been seven weeks...”

“When did you find out?”

“Yesterday.”

“And yet you went to see a lawyer?”

“I found out afterward.”

That didn't make it a whole lot better. The news hadn't changed her mind about leaving him. “Optimally, a child needs two parents.”

Her big silver eyes shone, her lovely features marked with incredulity before she schooled them. When had she learned that skill? He knew why.

She said, “Optimally, a child needs at least one parent who loves them unconditionally. And is raised in a home free of stress—as much as possible.”

He decided to circle around. “Did you want to marry me?”

“I didn't see any option, either.”

Considering the pressure from her father, and his, he supposed that was true. Still... “Will you answer my question?”

She watched him, big eyes focused, her full lips set. She looked, even more, the wood sprite or elf he remembered when he first saw her. So

different than the other women...

“I wanted to marry you. I thought we could get past...” A faint, bitter laugh scored the distance between them. “I thought wrong.”

“Was it only because of the child or did you marry me because you loved me?”

Her lids slammed shut and a big breath lifted her torso. For a moment he regretted the bald statement but Grace was shoring up some pretty impressive defenses. He thought to breach them as quickly as possible with a reminder.

“I thought I loved you,” she said in a near whisper.

“Sweetheart.” She threw him a dagger of a look and he swiftly backpedaled. “Grace, you told me I had your heart. I regret I didn’t take care of it better. I swear.”

Her head tilted, but he couldn’t read her. “What’s this leading up to, Beckett?”

“I don’t want a divorce.”

“But you said... When you called me you said you things had to change.”

“They do, but not with a divorce.”

“You can still be part of the baby’s life. I won’t try to stop you, as long as you, uh, behave.”

He should be offended, but he wasn’t. That would take a really big pair of balls and even he wasn’t that arrogant. “I plan to be part of his life. And part of yours. I planned that before I knew you were pregnant.”

She didn’t bother to hide her confusion, pursing her lips, her brows lowering. “Why?”

“Because you’re my wife and it’s time I worked with that.”

“Worked with that...”

“Poor choice of words, Grace. I meant—”

“Oh, please, Beck. Give it up. What’s this really about? Is it my father? Yours? Their bromance?” She dropped her feet to the floor and waved a slender hand in the air. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled.

He was fascinated by this side of her and turned the fuck on. His cock had no honor or appreciation for the circumstances. Willing his libido under control, he said, “Our fathers would be upset. For sure. But it’s not about them. They’ve bridged whatever gap or issue that held them back before, anyhow. It’s been some time and business is booming.”

“Then, what?”

“I’m not giving up on this marriage,” he said, stubbornly, unable to come up with anything else that sounded believable. Where was his vaunted charm and gift of convincing speech? *Buried with that muddle of feelings for her I locked away so I could take proper umbrage and exercise my outrage.*

“Not a quitter,” she scoffed. “I know that’s always been your motto, but I told you. I’ve initiated it. I’m not giving you any choice.”

“I won’t sign,” he replied.

“I’m moving out, of this.” She gestured around the room. “Charity and I are finding a place.”

“Bullshit.” He was suddenly faced with the very real possibility she was going to walk away.

“Cursing at me won’t change anything. Is there anything else?” She frowned at him and stood, turning toward the door.

“Tell me why.”

“Why I’m leaving? Are you...” She bit her lip, even upset with him she didn’t name-call.

“I’m not stupid, Grace. I just want to hear what the grounds for divorce are.”

“Irreconcilable differences.”

“That’s not truthful.”

“What?” She paced past the fireplace and back, glaring at him. “What would you call it?”

“Emotional cruelty, neglect. I don’t know if the law has a name for promoting distance? You didn’t do anything to contribute to the failure of our marriage. If I recall, you made every effort to make it work.”

She stared at him, so many emotions flitting over her pretty face he couldn’t keep up. “I was too ashamed to tell the lawyer those things. I told him you didn’t abuse me and I didn’t mention the ... women.”

Something grabbed his belly and twisted as hot shame lanced through his chest. She’d never believe he wasn’t doing those models, not in her frame of mind. “I won’t let you shoulder any of the blame.”

“I want a divorce, Beckett.”

“Then you’ll have to be honest about the grounds for it.”

“All right. Okay. I’ll have my lawyer draw up a new set of papers to incorporate the ... infidelity. I can withstand that humiliation.”

Fuck. He had to correct her misunderstanding—but he was struggling

with how he'd humiliated her in his own mind. Humbled, shamed, demeaned, degraded, and belittled—the list ground into his conscience.

“I’m going to make things right,” he insisted, grabbing at straws.

“You can’t.”

He had to make the effort, tell her about his fidelity. “I can, Grace. But first of all, look at me.”

She had been looking, but with his demand, her stare focused and he winced at the judgment contained there. Manning up, he said, “I have never been unfaithful to you. Not one single time.”

Her eyes widened and disbelief radiated from every inch of her slender body. “It’s out there for everyone to see, Beckett.”

He shook his head. “No. People see the models I escort to events that promote both the fabrics and clothing lines of the businesses. I took you whenever possible at first, but ... well, you hated it. And the clothes. I thought it was a kindness not to make you attend.”

She watched him more closely, silvery eyes intent on his face as if to see into his head. “So, you’re saying none of those beautiful women...”

He noticed she ignored his brownie point. And it had been one, probably the only one. Grace despised the socializing, the shallowness of it all and it bothered him to insist and watch her struggle. Maybe he wasn’t a total asshole, merely ninety-five percent. “Not one. I always came home. To you.”

An expression of distaste twisted her features and she swallowed. “God.”

“I didn’t develop an appetite and satisfy it at home if that’s what you’re thinking now,” he said quietly.

“Sure.”

“I’ve never lied to you, Grace. Have I?”

“By omission.” She nearly spat the accusation before looking away.

“Please explain. I’m putting it out there, and I wish you would. Say it.”

“You sought me out to... You said you cared about me, that I was special. But it was only to get me in bed. And I found out your dad wanted my father’s business.”

Fisting his hands, he set them on his knees and leaned forward to look up at her. “The latter part’s true, but I’m not my father. Never will be. I don’t work like that. Sure, I met you because he orchestrated it, but I mean, you and... Well, I meant everything I said back then. Including how beautiful you

are. And how sexy. And of course, it was to get you into bed.

“I’m not a hearts and flowers kind of guy, sweetheart. I wanted you and set out to have you. But I made sure you wanted it too. If that’s seduction, I guess I’ll have to own it.”

“My father said you used me.”

“And he effectively led me to believe you trapped me.”

After dropping back into her chair, she rested her chin on her hand.

“Rehashing all this isn’t helping. And it doesn’t change anything. I want out.”

Desperate, he said, knowing he was begging and caring less, “Doesn’t the fact that you love me mean anything? When I’m promising to fix this, to make it up to you and have our marriage become a real one?”

Her voice a mere whisper, she replied, “I have nothing in my heart for you, Beckett. Not anymore. And you’ve never said you held anything for me in yours.”

Out of time, out of ammunition, he grappled with a horrible sense of loss as she pushed to her feet and hurried from the room. He listened hard, willing her to return, until he could only hear the faint hiss from the fireplace and an ominous ticking of the stupid brass clock on the mantle. *Nothing in my heart.* What was in his? He couldn’t find the words.

His coffee cooled as he stared into the fake flames and reflected on the shambles his life had become. Was he one of those men who only wanted something when he couldn’t have it anymore, as she’d intimated? The truth smacked him up alongside the head. He’d wanted Grace from the moment he laid eyes on her, wanted her forever, and his stupid, fucking macho attitude had squandered nearly a year of that forever.

His cell chimed and he grabbed for it, grateful for the interruption. Jenna had come through with an appointment for that very afternoon. Shoring up his courage, donning the mantle of testosterone, he went, once again, to find his wife. One battle didn’t win a war, even if one combatant felt mortally wounded.

Chapter Six

Grace sat, rigid on the chair in her doctor's waiting room, Beckett lounging at her side. Women in various stages of pregnancy alternately looked his way in overt curiosity or slid sideways glances before returning to their phones or leafing through worn magazines.

She was furious, and really shouldn't be, because in making the appointment he was looking out for her and the baby. How could she argue? Except he'd taken over, established himself as part of her life despite her honest, but callous final salvo that morning. And here she was, with him tagging along, like a do-over.

"Your face could freeze in that expression if you aren't careful and our son will think all women look like that."

She glared at him and went back to ignoring his presence. The woman beside her made a muffled sound she suspected was laughter and she gritted her teeth. She was having a girl, so there.

He'd marched into the far guest room she was been using as a makeshift office, his glance sweeping the space and doubtless cataloging everything, before announcing he'd arranged for her to see Dr. Gibson.

She'd protested, insisting she be in charge of her pregnancy, but he calmly pointed out his concern, stymying her. Without sounding petty and a total witch, she grudgingly agreed, and then lost the next skirmish when he decided to drive her. After all, he'd taken the entire day off for their "talk", something unheard of.

A surreptitious glance determined no visible impact of her claim that there was nothing between them aside from sex, and she told herself she could live without even that piece. She casually rested a hand in the middle of her chest, pressing lightly to assuage the unwelcome ache that had started up in there again. Started that morning. She thought she was past it but the feeling was coming back.

She was stupid, thick as a brick as her long-passed Irish Nan would say, along with so many other antiquated sayings that still made sense. Hope springs eternal and all that nonsense. Beckett had treated her horribly, and no quivering sense of infatuation was going to erase all the intervening months of being treated like a toy left on the shelf until he took her down to play. Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked them back. She refused to allow him the opportunity to hurt her again.

“Mrs. Kilmer?” The same nurse—Rhonda—who had provided the little specimen bottle earlier, smiled at her.

Surging to her feet, her vision swam and she took a little stutter step until a big hand grasped her elbow. “Easy, sweetheart.”

Wrenching her arm free, she marched toward the nurse, fixing a smile on her face. “Grace.”

“Right, Grace. Come this way. We need to weigh you, take your height...” The other woman’s voice trailed off as Grace realized Beck was following closely behind her.

Turning in the narrow hallway, she hissed, “What are you doing?”

“Coming to meet with Dr. Gibson.” On the surface, he looked and sounded reasonable but she caught the wary flash in his blue eyes.

“Why?” He hadn’t accompanied her the last time, listening to her updates at home with blank features and what she deemed a marked lack of curiosity. Making her heart sink to her shoes. And yet hoping and believing that the minute he saw their baby born he would become the man she’d fallen in love with...

“I learn from my mistakes, sweetheart.”

Forgetting where she was, she leaned forward. “Do not—”

He raised a placating hand, close enough she could scent him, familiar and spicy and she nearly missed his reply. “Grace. I know your name. I apologize.”

Rotating back to see the nurse watching them with interest, she heard him mutter, “I just don’t know who you are.”

Huh. Well, neither did she. The new Grace was forged in fire and now had a cause to rally behind. The urge to punch Beckett right in his perfect mouth made her clench both fists, one tucked by her side, the other around the strap of her purse.

She breathed slowly through her nose and entered the small room that served as Dr. Gibson’s examining area. He clearly hadn’t spent his money on size, but the space was painted in a soothing shade of teal, and while clean, it lacked the austerity of a clinic. She never minded coming here. The hospital was a whole different story.

Rhonda passed over a soft gown in pale pink. “Everything off.”

All the times Beckett had seen her naked, touched every square inch of her exposed flesh seemed irrelevant in that moment. Too intimate. She didn’t care what the nurse thought. “Give me some space.”

Quirking a brow, Beck stepped out into the hall and shut the door. The nurse peered at her. “Is something wrong?”

Maybe she did care about her personal life being front and center. “Hormones. I’m in a foul mood.”

Features softening, the other woman nodded. “I remember you, Mrs. Kilmer. Grace. I expect you’re a little anxious. I’d like to suggest, though, that you allow your husband every opportunity to be part of this pregnancy. *If* you’re pregnant.” A hectic flush stained Rhonda’s cheekbones.

“I’m pregnant.” She discarded the nurse’s advice, wondering what the other woman had surmised, not seeing Beckett during the few visits here for her first pregnancy. Did Rhonda think she’d excluded her husband the way she was trying to do now?

Her flat assertion distracted the woman, and she smiled. “Well, then the test results won’t be a surprise. If you’d just change...”

While the nurse typed on the laptop on the desk, Grace slipped out of her clothes and into the gown, tying it off at the back. It was cool in the room and she shivered.

“Here.” The nurse urged her to sit on the table and pulled a sheet over her lower half. “The doctor will be in shortly.”

As Rhonda left, Beckett returned, dropping onto a chair by the desk. She glared at him. “Your arrogance knows no bounds. You may have convinced me that you’re within your right to ensure I get proper care, but that doesn’t mean inserting yourself into my life.”

He flinched, a slight ripple of the skin around his eyes and on his forehead. “Let me help you, Grace. Please. I ... I want this to go well.”

“Because I failed the last time.” Six bitter, revealing words, and she wished to call them back.

Big body suddenly rigid, he stared at her. “You didn’t fail. It wasn’t your fault. And ... if something happens this time, it won’t be your fault.”

Fear clutched her by the throat and her mouth went dry. Nothing was going to happen this time. Nothing.

“Jesus, Grace. Don’t look like that.”

She swallowed, a dry scrape. “I don’t need your help.”

“You don’t *want* it,” he said quietly, gentleness coloring his tone. “And I understand why. I do. A blanket apology won’t cover how I treated you. My behavior ... it was like something that fed on itself. I was stung by betrayal and then felt powerless. I just let it roll along and wouldn’t let myself

consider you. In fact, I wanted you to pay... I've been an idiot."

"Betrayed. Powerless." She tasted the words and hated the way they fit. "Pot, meet kettle. We've already had this discussion."

"Shit." He visibly winced. "Of course, you felt the same."

"I'm divorcing you, Beckett, so accept that. Move on." Wrapped in a sheet, wearing a stupid pink hospital gown, she might have laughed at the setting for the continuing dispute, but it rang true. He looked away.

After a moment, he said, "Grace, I'm not going anywhere."

"You—"

The brisk rap on the door was followed by the appearance of the tall, skinny frame of her doctor, balding head bent over the sheaf of paper in his hand. Dr. Gibson strode in and tossed the notes down, giving her a warm smile. "Grace. It's so good to see you again, and so soon. Let's see where things are at."

Beckett offered his hand. "Beckett Kilmer."

Dr. Gibson gave a perfunctory shake. "I don't think we've met."

"We haven't. Something I'm rectifying this time."

Grace closed her eyes against the familiar sensation of being swept aside, her personal wishes ignored or discounted. The miscarriage had been dealt with by an ER doctor, so these two men had never met. That didn't mean they should become familiar. She took a breath. "My husband and I are divorcing, Dr. Gibson."

At his startled look, she tried to explain, but Beck spoke over her. "Grace is upset with me. She has every reason to be. I'm trying to be there for her—and the baby. She's pushing me away when she needs me most."

"Mothers-to-be can act in ways that others find difficult to understand."

What. The. Hell? She opened her mouth to unleash the pain and frustration, the humiliation and fury of years of biting her tongue, of feeling less than, of being a disappointment, now surging to the fore with a vengeance, when the doctor gave her a grave stare.

"But while Grace will struggle with hormones, my experience with her is that of an intelligent, grounded young woman. And I'll respect what she wants, Mr. Kilmer."

Overwhelmed by her doctor's astute kindness, Grace ducked her head to hide her tears. A tissue was tucked into her hand and she used it, dabbing at her eyes before wiping her nose.

"Do you want Mr. Kilmer to leave?"

She didn't. And how insane was that? She didn't want to be married to him any longer, but if he wanted to follow the pregnancy and appropriately parent their child... She looked at him, and for the first time in a long time saw open and honest emotion on his handsome face—aside from the agonized pleasure he got from having sex with her.

He looked vulnerable. Worried and anxious. She searched for any sign of warmth and affection, past his assertion of wanting the best for her and his baby, and decided she saw none. He'd reminded her that she'd professed to love him, yet hadn't said he felt the same.

It struck a shard of agony through her chest but nothing she hadn't felt before, so she weathered the pain. People who didn't love one another raised children. What was important was the way they treated one another. She was deadly serious about not bringing up a child in a negative environment, one filled with stress and nastiness.

“He can stay. If he's being honest about his motives. We're still getting divorced, but I won't deny him this.” It went without saying she wouldn't hesitate to change her mind if Beckett reverted to type. Dr. Gibson might have only assumptions about the true nature of their relationship but he heard the unspoken implication from the way his eyes narrowed.

He nodded to her and spoke to Beckett. “Sir?”

“I'm being honest.”

He didn't reference the divorce, but she didn't care. Grace Kilmer, soon to be Langdon, had prevailed. Funny how her sense of victory withered in the face of her exhaustion.

“Well, then. The sample confirmed your pregnancy in the old way. I'll still take blood and also perform an exam today.” Dr. Gibson helped her to lie back on the table. “It'll be too crowded in here for Rhonda to join us, but I don't require her for this. And Mr. Kilmer can be our chaperone.”

Reflecting on the things about to unfold, Grace cringed, but she'd agreed to Beckett being there, so she forced a smile at the doctor's attempt at a joke.

“You're pregnant, but we want to confirm the heartbeat and measure for gestational age. How far along do you think you are?”

She supplied the date of her last period, and Dr. Gibson nodded. “So up to seven weeks, give or take. A tiny pea. But never too soon to follow up, considering your history.”

He took her blood pressure and tutted. “A bit high, but then you're

upset.”

Beckett shifted in his chair. “I’ll be the poster boy from now on. I promise.”

The doctor frowned as he checked the readout. “I don’t think she believes you. Grace, it’s important not to stress.”

She and Beckett needed to hammer out some ground rules. “My life is upside down right now. Beckett and I will talk things out.”

“See that you do.” The older man rolled a device out from under a countertop and then donned a pair of gloves. “We’ll do a transvaginal ultrasound this time around. I want to rule out a molar or ectopic pregnancy. It might be a bit early to detect placenta previa.”

God, she hadn’t thought about that, familiar with all those terms. She’d tortured herself after losing her child by reading about everything that could go wrong. A warm hand sought out hers as Beckett crouched by her side. She focused on a vision of everything being perfectly fine as she assumed the position that felt so horribly exposing despite Dr. Gibson’s professionalism.

In truth, it wasn’t terribly uncomfortable, if a bit intrusive, and Beckett kept his eyes on her face. She saw the pure-blue iris each and every time she risked a covert look. He squeezed her fingers and muttered that everything was going to be okay. She wasn’t above taking even false reassurance from his touch and his presence.

“All right.” Dr. Gibson stared at the screen for long moments. She held her breath. He nodded and said, “Nothing where it shouldn’t be.”

Her breath rushed out and Beckett’s fingers trembled around her hand.

After the doctor released her, he rolled the machine away.” He drew blood from her left arm, probably because Beckett didn’t relinquish her right hand, and patted her shoulder. “If everything looks good in the blood work, come back in two weeks.”

“And if not?” Beckett’s voice thrummed with worry.

“I’ll schedule a more immediate appointment in that event, Mr. Kilmer. To discuss whatever we need to do, but I’m staying positive. Grace doesn’t have any physical issues that would loan themselves to another miscarriage. It was simply one of those things we wrestle with. Not that I want her to take anything but the most possible care. Rhonda will give you both some written information.”

He made a note on his pad. “Prenatal vitamins, consult me before you take anything else.”

She nodded. "Same drill."

"Precisely. Except, this time around I'm sure we'll have an excellent result."

He patted her again and shook hands with Beckett, giving him a look that probably only men could translate, but Beck stiffened. She watched the doctor exit, the door closing firmly behind him.

"Need some help?" Beckett gestured toward the table and then offered his hand. She let him aid her to a sitting position and her belly rumbled loudly.

"Get dressed and I'll take you out for something to eat," he offered.

She wasn't sure she wanted to take part in such a novel experience, before dismissing her bitchy attitude. They could have a good discussion in public, without crass displays of emotion. Maybe better than closeted at home. "I won't take long."

He hesitated, but she wasn't getting naked with him around ever again, and he seemed to accept it. "I'll be outside the door."

"I won't try to escape, Beckett."

"I wouldn't put it past you." He tempered his words with a smile, but she heard the uncertainty.

"Just go."

When she was alone, she cleaned up with the aid of some tissues and then pulled her clothes back on. Pausing to rest a hand on her belly, she thought about shopping for different items, not too far down the road. Positive thinking was her new mantra. Charity would be delighted to come with.

She stilled, the files full of sketches in her makeshift office coming to mind. Why not? All those Internet courses she'd taken, even telling herself they were a poor substitute for a degree, should be put to the test. The idea of being any kind of competition for Beckett made her huff with suppressed laughter, but she was her own person now and it felt like something she could do. Besides, his business didn't deign to include pregnant women.

He was leaning against the wall, checking his phone when she emerged from the exam room but put the device away instantly. Was that a hint of guilt on his face? She shoved her curiosity aside. It was none of her business, he had never been.

"Delmonico's okay?"

"I don't want a big meal, Beckett."

“They have lots to choose from and I want you to eat something quality. And I’ve ordered groceries, too. They’ll be delivered. Jenna—my PA—will meet the driver.”

The reaction to being managed was instantaneous and she warred with it. Before, she would have simply acquiesced, but no more. In the past, he had alternated between flat out ignoring her and citing his expectations whenever she was required, however few those occasions were. Not including sex.

“I’m not trying to be the boss of you.” He urged her down the hall. “But there’s nothing in the house to speak of, and it’s something I can do for you.”

She wasn’t letting him chip away at her wall. Even a month ago she would have jumped at his involvement and interest, but... *Do it for the baby. And remember you have interests to pursue other than the mundane.*

“Don’t overdo it,” she said, giving in to her mental chiding. “There will be no one there to eat it.”

The sharp intake of his breath told her he understood her point, but he said nothing.

Delmonico’s hadn’t changed significantly since the last time she’d been. The familiar surroundings reminded her of Beckett in the early days, intimate dinners... Maybe she’d come to recall those times with fondness, her first actual interaction with a man. She deserved some memories that didn’t gut her.

Placing their orders—a full meal for him and soup and salad for her—she drew a finger through the condensation on her water glass. He broke the silence first and she cursed herself for losing the advantage. Except this wasn’t going to be a battle. She’d already won and they were negotiating terms of surrender. His surrender.

“Can we talk about the divorce without you getting upset? Dr. Gibson was pretty clear.”

She was still processing how sad she felt when thinking of his surrender but set it aside. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“It takes some time for such a thing to find its way through the courts. I propose we live together until we get to the end stage.”

“That’s ... unusual, I would think.”

He laughed, no humor in the sound. “Our relationship’s unusual.”

“Charity is willing to live with me. She’s on a yearly lease, but she

won't renew it. I think it runs out in ten months."

"Seems like the timing is perfect."

"I plan to find a place, before. Get it ready."

"Look. I don't want to come across as being autocratic. But shouldn't you have someone around during upcoming months?"

He had the grace to look away from her disbelieving stare. "Like, who?"

"Okay. I know I haven't been home much. But that'll change."

Their meals arrived, and she remained silent while the plates were set in front of them. She much preferred the comfortable, relaxed milieu she'd shared with her friend last night, even considering the content of their discussion.

When they were again alone, she said, "It's fine, Beckett. I'll be fine."

"I want you to live in our house."

Our house. Not, our home. That place was a prison, not a refuge. "No."

"Then I'll help you find a place—suitable for you and Charity when she can move in—and I'll stay with you. Until everything is okay."

The rich aroma of the French onion soup soured in her mouth. "You want to stay with me?" She'd barely accepted him accompanying her to doctor's appointments. "Why?"

"I don't want to think of you alone. In case."

"For heaven's sake, Beckett. How will that make any difference? You have a job. And a life."

"I can work from home a lot of the time. And the evening events will get farmed out to some of the VPs. Time they stepped up."

The reality that he hadn't actually had to absent himself all this time should have slain her, but she bore it with a mere pang. It wasn't a surprise, other than he'd admitted to it. She shook her head. "Don't change anything. Let's just part ways—"

"There you are." Her father approached the table and tugged out a chair. "Sorry, we were delayed. Alfred is right behind me."

She stared at Beckett, whose guilt was very apparent. He shrugged and offered a faint smile. "I wanted to share the great news."

Her father was beaming, and her father-in-law's visage was no different. Grace wondered if she'd landed in the Twilight Zone.

Alfred would have taken her hand if she hadn't kept a grip on her spoon and a napkin. "Congratulations!" he cried.

She forced a nod and a smile, considering how Beckett would look with a fork in his throat.

When both older men were seated and their orders placed, George said, “How are you, girl?”

Outnumbered. “Fine.” She tried the soup and managed to swallow.

“Grace.” Her parent wasn’t looking so pleased any longer, but then he hated anything other than her total attention when he honored her with his presence. “Beckett tells us you were at the doctor.”

“I had an ultrasound. I want to make sure things are okay.”

Alfred said, “I’m sure there won’t be a repeat of last time.”

“For God’s sake, Dad. You make it sound as though Grace is in control of that,” Beck chastised his father.

Alfred blinked. “I didn’t mean to infer—”

“Of course he didn’t.” Her father frowned at Beck. “I’m just glad you told us.”

“It might be a premature celebration,” Grace said, apologizing mentally for the jinx, but now she wanted to stab Beckett with her butter knife. Too bad she hadn’t ordered a steak like Charity’s. Her stomach rolled uneasily and she turned her attention to her soup again.

“It isn’t.” The certainty and worry combining in Beck’s voice made her look up. He stared back with an apology simmering in his eyes. “It *will* be fine.”

If Beckett thought he was putting her in a corner to force her to change her mind, he had another think coming. No time like the present to tell the other players. She drew on her simmering anger. “Did he tell you we’re getting a divorce?”

Closing her ears to the expected reactions, she waited until George and Alfred expressed their shock, aversion, and surprise loudly, and in no uncertain terms. Their chauvinism knew no bounds, and she pondered that she and Beckett came from such similar backgrounds. Except he’d inherited the XY chromosome and subsequently adopted the attitude.

“Nonsense.” Her father glared at her. “Your brain’s addled.”

“George is right. Kilmers don’t get divorced,” her father-in-law chimed in.

“Nor do Langdons.”

The older men exchanged a glance she could only label as mutual satisfaction and her lip curled. Her mother died to escape the old man, and

Beck's mother was also passed, maybe for the same reason. Two shriveled peas in a pod, turning a salad bitter.

"First time for anything," she said.

"You aren't allowing this, Beckett." George shook his head.

"Grace feels she can't live with me any longer, George, and I can't say as I blame her."

Confusion flickered at his response. Like these men would care about her. Excuse Beckett, more like it.

"Why on earth not? She has a home, is well provided for."

"And is miserable," she threw in.

Two sets of eyes looked incredulous. Beck's were full of regret. She'd seen more of a variety of emotions from him over the past twenty-four hours than she had for months. And a more palatable variety at that. Not that it mattered.

"So I suppose you think you'll go on and be a single mother." Her father's sneer rolled off her back and Grace refused to reply.

Beck intervened. "She won't be a single mother, George. I'll be involved in my child's life."

Rolling his eyes, her father said, "Utter nonsense. You're actually supporting her in this?"

Her relief was unprecedented. Beckett on her side? She dared to hope their future interactions would be as amicable. "I'm fine, financially. I have my own money, Father."

A calculating look she knew all too well crept over his face. "Your trust fund."

"Yes."

"You won't have unrestricted access to it until you're twenty-five."

His certainty threw her off her stride, and she tried to remember the legal mumbo jumbo she'd perused when her mother's will was read. "It came to me when I turned twenty."

"And your spending is at my discretion."

She bunched her hands so she didn't punch him in his smug face, struggling with the violent urges these men were raising in her. "I'll have my lawyer look at it."

"Your lawyer," he scoffed. "What? A mediocre legal beagle against our firm?"

"George." Beckett's ominous tone froze the older man, and his own

father stiffened. “Grace isn’t to be stressed. I’ll hold you accountable if something happens.”

George glared at them both, then stood, dropping his napkin on the table. “I’m not releasing any of your trust fund, Grace, until you come to your senses. Deal with it.”

Her power once again stripped away, Grace stood and faced him. Her knees trembled and it took considerable effort to steady her voice. “Get out of my life, you miserable old man. Stay away from me or I’ll get a restraining order.”

He reared back, eyes popping wide, and then glancing around at their audience. “You wouldn’t succeed.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll make sure the world knows why I’ve applied for one. They’ll know all about you. Some enterprising journalist—or blogger—will make your life a living hell.”

“If you think you can threaten me...” But his bluster didn’t hide his pallor. George Langdon feared being under a microscope more than anything in the world, and she had a key to his private life. There wasn’t a PR firm around that could spin his secrets if she spilled them.

Beckett moved in front of him, urging him toward the door. Alfred shot her a glance full of bewilderment and followed. She sank back down and struggled with despair. Had she ever hated her father so much?

“Sweet—Grace.” Beck took Alfred’s chair, pressing close. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” She couldn’t look at him, never wanted to see him again.

“I am.”

“You just had to tell him. Invite him.”

“My father called while you were getting dressed after the exam. I ... I told him. Because I wanted to share the good news. I didn’t know it was a secret, Grace.”

Setting the heel of her hand between her brows, she massaged at the threatening headache, screwing her eyes shut. What options were left?

“It’s not a secret. It’s a wonderful thing.” And it was. She just had to figure out how to move forward.

“We’ll figure it out.”

“I can’t pay for the divorce, let alone first and last month’s rent on an apartment. Not without my trust fund. The furniture...” The headache triumphed and beat at her brain.

“I won’t pay for the divorce, but I’ll give you the money for an

apartment.”

He made no sense. “Why?”

His explanation was interrupted by the arrival of the server, who didn't miss a beat in returning the food to the kitchen for a take-out box, at Beck's request. She hoped she didn't come across as so entitled.

“I want to go ... home.” Where else *could* she go? Charity was at work and she didn't dare dip into the money she had in her account for a hotel. Not unless she used Beck's credit card. Tears threatened again and this time she couldn't dispel them. They flowed down her cheeks as she cried silently, adept at keeping her pain quiet.

“Fuck. Don't. I...” Beck threw his card at the server and snagged a napkin to press into her hand.

“Is the lady all right?” The older man peered at her.

“She's not feeling well.” Beck signed the receipt and helped her up, awkwardly balancing the take-out containers under his arm. “Grace, this way.”

She let him lead her past the other patrons, curious faces turning toward them, blurry behind the wash of moisture. Beck piled the food on the roof of his car and then eased her into the passenger seat.

“I'll take you to Dr. Gibson.”

“No.” She cleared her throat. “No. I'm fine.”

“You are not fine. You're upset and crying. Fuck.”

“Stop swearing at me. And I don't need Dr. Gibson.” She hiccupped.

“Sorry. If you stop crying I won't take you.”

“I will.”

He slammed her door and crossed in front of the vehicle to climb in beside her. She mopped at her face with the purloined napkin and grimaced at the traces of makeup she'd carefully applied earlier. Her hair was probably standing on end too.

They drove to the house in silence as she brought her tears mostly under control. It was like a tap had turned on and the washer needed replacing because her eyes still leaked.

“You cry so quietly that I can deal with it if I can't see you.”

“You're a jerk.”

“I know. And I'm sorry. I'll be apologizing for the rest of my life.”

“Which might not be that long.”

She felt his gaze on her and faced him. His eyes were wide, startled.

“Oh, get over yourself. Like I’d kill you or something. Watch the road.”

Intellectually, she knew her predicament was her father’s doing. If not today, then when he found out she was seeking a divorce. But by then she’d have accessed some of the money. Maybe. And it was Beck’s fault, ultimately. She ground her teeth against certain things she’d like to say, again wondering what had come over her.

“Why would you pay for my apartment?”

He heaved a sigh. “Because I owe you. I can’t believe I acted the way I did. Like some spoiled kid.”

“So, why not the divorce? I can pay you back.”

“I am not divorcing you, Grace.”

“I’m divorcing *you*.” She knew her tone was petulant, her lower lip pouting. Who was the child now? It was like she had a new toy and was determined not to lose sight of it.

They pulled into the drive, avoiding the sedan parked on one side.

Beck jumped out and came around to open her door. His face fell.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“The carry-out containers...”

If she laughed, she’d cry again, so she bit her lip and clambered up, sidestepping him to head toward the house. The front door opened as she neared it and a beautifully dressed woman stepped out. She smiled at Grace.

“Jenna. Does this mean the groceries arrived?”

“Arrived and put away.”

“Grace, this is my PA, Jenna Mathews. My ... wife, Grace.”

Wondering if this was the woman who had put her call through to Beckett that one time, and probably overheard his response, she made herself smile back. “Hi.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Kilmer.” Jenna offered a small hand.

“Grace.” She thought Jenna seemed like a nice person.

“I have to head back to the office, Beckett.”

“Right. Thanks.”

“Someone has to work,” Jenna teased.

Grace watched the exchange, on the outside looking in. The casual camaraderie hurt more than the thought of him having sex with all those beautiful models, and she turned away.

She let herself in and trudged upstairs. She had some thinking to do.

Chapter Seven

“It’s like he’s a different person. I mean, he’s closer to the Beck I first met, but he’s ... more serious or something.”

“You live like a mouse for months and then it’s like you’ve stepped into an alternate reality and your life has gone insane.”

As a description of the past few days, it fit. Grace told her friend, “I’m still trapped.”

“Why don’t you let him pay for your place? It’s the least he can do.”

“I don’t want to owe him anything. And it feels bizarre.”

Charity laughed. “He owes you big time. Take the money and run.”

“I don’t know. It feels underhanded. And Beckett is treating me like a person. Not that I’m changing my mind,” she added hurriedly.

“You’ve leveled the playing field. He sees you as an equal, would be my guess.”

“A poor equal,” she retorted. “I’m dependent on him, and even if he pays my rent, I’m still dependent.”

“But you’ll be living separately. And you can always get divorced once you get your money.”

She lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, tucking her phone between her chin and shoulder. “That’s nearly five years away. And I wanted to implement an idea.”

“What kind of idea?”

“I’ve been dabbling with a clothing line.”

“No kidding. That’s great!”

“I’m dabbling, Charity. Key word. I’ve done some online courses and have the feel for design, I think. Probably comes from hearing all about fabrics growing up.” And hanging on Beckett’s every word—in the early days.

“What’s the line?”

“Maternity.”

“Oh, honey. I guess I thought maybe infant or toddler wear.”

“Not high fashion?” Grace was under no misapprehension as to her style—or lack of it. But she had strong opinions on comfort, versatility, and looking nice while your body changed in ways one couldn’t imagine—for a reasonable price.

They laughed together before she sobered. “He’s downstairs, now.”

Working in his study. Jenna brings stuff that he needs but it seems he really can deal with most things from here. The job was more of a way to avoid me.” When he wasn’t wanting to have sex with her. She idly wondered if he’d actually been faithful but dismissed it. Beckett was sexual enough to have it off with her and three other women on the same day.

Charity was quiet for a moment, no doubt hearing the pain in her voice. “So he’s serious about making sure you don’t spend long periods of time alone.”

“Too little, too late,” she muttered. “He hid away from me in his office for months.” *And spent the evenings doing God knows what.*

“What was that?”

“I said Beckett can’t make up for lost time. I needed him a long time ago. And I still don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Well, I still want to go down for a nap like a toddler every afternoon, food repels me unless it’s a certain color, texture, or chocolate, which I can’t have, and I cry at the drop of a hat, but I’m good.” The ultrasound had established nothing to worry about, and her due date was calculated to be just before Christmas. She refused to allow a glimmer of worry about another miscarriage to bother her.

“Are you, uh, sleeping with him?”

“No.” She was, but not the way Charity meant it. She started out every night in the guest bedroom she’d fled to the night of the big divorce reveal, but woke up in the master suite. Sometimes Beckett was still in bed, sometimes he was downstairs already, either making breakfast or working, but mostly he was still in bed. With her.

When she challenged him, asking why he persisted in carrying her back into the master, he simply told her he meant what he’d said. He wasn’t leaving her alone. He didn’t encroach on her space, didn’t touch her, but he was *there*.

It had only been a few days, and Grace knew better than to believe a leopard changed his spots. She could admit to sleeping better and eating better, but she was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Beckett to revert to type. The type she abhorred, and now that she didn’t love him anymore, she didn’t know how she might react. “I’d better go.”

“Okay, but let me know where you’re going with this, okay? I’m happy to come look for new places with you. And I’d be picking up half the rent.

Later.”

“Not a half, Charity. There will be three of us.”

“Honey, I can already tell we have some disagreements ahead.”

She spent a couple of hours sketching out some designs for sleepwear, taking into consideration the tendency of some mothers-to-be to become overheated, as well as for easy disrobing when one’s bladder was compromised for space. With all her research, she thought she’d covered off everything.

It was one thing to reach this stage, the next was to pick the fabrics and find a seamstress to mock up the outfits. It had been a long time since she had sewn anything and she didn’t even own a machine anymore.

“What’cha doing?”

She started, checking out Beck leaning against the door jamb. Maybe it was because she’d been immersed in her designs, her guard down, but the sight of him in worn-in jeans and tight t-shirt made her belly heat. Quashing the warmth, she reminded herself that her infatuation was over.

“Just looking at a few things.”

He sauntered in, and she slid the sketches back into the file folder.

“Can I see?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Grace, you shut yourself up in here for hours at a time. I’ve figured out you spent time in here when you weren’t cleaning this behemoth of a house. I have to believe it’s something special.”

“It’s not. Just something I filled my time with.”

He perched a thigh on the corner of her desk, fabric stretching over the thick muscle and the folds of denim cupping his crotch. Her stare kept wandering to that area, but to be fair, he was sitting in her line of sight.

Hormones. Infatuation. She tamped down her interest.

“Let me see,” he cajoled.

No way was she giving him the means of additional humiliation. “No.”

Straightening to his feet, he smiled, though it didn’t brighten his eyes.

“Maybe another time. Would you like to help with dinner?”

“I’ll make it.”

“We’ll try together. Like an adventure.”

“Beckett. We need to figure this out.”

“Let’s talk while we throw together a meal. I’m starved.”

Agreeing on poached salmon and steamed vegetables, Grace dealt with

the asparagus while he prepared the salmon.

“I don’t feel right about taking your money,” she said.

He looked up from the pan, adjusting the heat. “It’s your money too.”

“It’s not.” She poked at the greens. “I’m not going to be one of those women who sponge.”

“You didn’t sponge. You aren’t. It’s not your fault I wouldn’t let you do more than you did. I never even considered what you might want to do. I thought maybe you’d fill your days the way my mom did. You know, lunches and events and stuff.”

He kept owning his past behavior but it was like ripping the bandage off of a slowly healing wound. His regret and apologies might have made an impact if she cared. Which she didn’t.

“I don’t know what to do.” It was stupid to confide even that much because a shark always smelled blood in the water. Although Beckett had been more like a dolphin of late, funny, charming, and trying to lure her into his circle.

Setting the lid on the pan, he lowered the heat. “Stay here. Live here. I’m trying, Grace.”

“You won’t even let me sleep by myself.”

“I didn’t say I was going to roll over to all your demands. Especially the ones that don’t make any sense. You needed me in the night the ... other time.”

Her grip tightened on the handle of the steamer. The memory came flooding back. Woken by cramping like she’d never experienced, the ominous wet warmth on her thighs, calling out for Beckett—who’d been there. Not out on the town, but home. He’d instantly responded, keeping her calm with his stoicism, yet being so kind, gentle. And then took to staying away from home even longer hours after she miscarried and was back on her feet. Her conscience prodded at her—was that his way of dealing with grief?

She couldn’t think about that. “I’ll drain these. Is the fish done?”

“Pretty much. Grace? I filled my days with work and promotion, not just to avoid you because I was pissed off. I was a mess and didn’t know what to do. And I felt useless after we lost the baby. And ... I couldn’t help but hurt so I tried not to think about it.”

“So you ignored it.” *And me.*

“Ignoring and avoiding are different. Guys aren’t great at talking about feelings and we... Well, you and I weren’t exactly on good terms. My fault.

Like I said, the whole thing took on a life of its own.”

Was he looking for absolution? He was laying out the facts, making no excuses, but she couldn't find it within herself to forgive him. Maybe he hadn't broken her heart—she refused to think he had—but he'd crushed her pride, humiliated her, and she'd given him a chunk of her life, all based on stupid infatuation. He'd responded like a trapped animal while she'd been imprisoned by the chains of what she thought was love.

She breathed in deeply and released it slowly. “It's not a good idea. Except I can't see any way out of it. I guess I really know what it's like to feel trapped.”

He yanked the salmon off the heat and moved to her. She steeled herself against the proximity.

“You can't find it in yourself to cut me some slack?”

“As in forgive you?”

His face tightening and hurt flashing in his eyes, he turned away and crossed to the cupboard, pulling out plates. “Where are the fish forks?”

“Second drawer on your left.” She didn't like the fact that she'd hurt him, at least she thought she had. Like when she told him she felt nothing in her heart for him.

He set the breakfast bar, and she was relieved not to have to eat in the cavernous dining room with an acre of table between them. She drained the asparagus and set it in a serving dish with some butter.

Beckett plated the fish before saying, “Maybe you'll hate me less in time.”

Her appetite fled, but she picked at the salmon. “I don't hate you.”

“This is young asparagus. Tender.”

“Beckett, I don't hate you. But I don't love you and I can't let go of ... everything when things have changed so recently.” *And how can I trust it will last?*

“I haven't changed all that much. I still want you.”

Sex. Great. She shoved her reaction away. “We keep avoiding the crux of the matter.”

“What's that?”

“We continue to live together, if without it feeling like an armed camp, and bring a baby into our lives, to parent together.”

“That's what I hope for,” he interrupted.

“And if one of us—or both—meets someone else? I want a real

marriage, Beckett. I want to find someone who will love me and who I'll love back. I don't want what my parents had, even if we can get along. Like ... friends."

For the first time in days, she couldn't read him. He closed himself off and her spirits sank. This was the cold, unreachable Beckett. She shook her head and stood to take her plate to the sink.

She was scraping the contents into the garbage when he replied, "We'll take it one day at a time, then. I take it you won't be out looking for that potential husband before you have our baby?"

Lord, she must have sounded deranged. No wonder he shut down. "Of course not. But I was looking to the future. I wanted to be honest with you."

"And I appreciate that." He put his plate on top of hers and offered his hand. "Shake on it?"

"What am I shaking on?"

"One day at a time. You'll live here, have the baby, and let me help."

"And you'll respect my stance on our ... relationship?"

"I will, although I still consider you my wife."

She wasn't certain of Beckett's actual perception of a wife, but it hardly figured in the equation, so she found herself taking his hand. Hers disappeared into his hold and he squeezed it gently. It occurred that he deserved to meet the love of his life as well, and she told herself she'd be happy for him. The miserable churn in her belly had everything to do with the fact that eating was still a challenge.

Chapter Eight

“She merely tolerates me.”

Kalim shrugged a shoulder. “Better than hatred, I’d say.”

“Maybe not. At least there’s passion in hatred. She’s not even angry.”

Leaning back in his chair, his friend studied him. “Beck, I have no idea what you think I can say. I’m single, remember? Hardly an expert on relationships.”

“You clarified things for me.” Was that nearly two months ago? It felt like a lifetime since he’d faced up to his sins.

“Timing. Honesty. I’d like to take credit, but you were looking for that clarification.”

“I felt something from her that night,” he confided. “Like I’d pushed things to the limit and pushed her away for good. Or she pushed me away. Maybe my psyche or something warned me.”

“If she wasn’t pregnant, do you figure she’d be gone?”

It was his turn to shrug. “Her father would probably have tried to stop her, withhold her trust fund in that event too. The old man has freed up some of it—for incidentals. He saved face by saying she was still living with me, so obviously wasn’t serious about a divorce. She won’t even acknowledge him unless there is virtually no choice. Calls him Mr. Langdon. Talks about changing her name to her mother’s birth name.”

“She hates *him*.”

“She does.” He forked a hand through his hair. “I should count my blessings because at least she’s not cold with me.”

“So, being tolerated isn’t the worst thing after all,” his friend teased.

“Maybe not. But aside from her friend, the one she plans to live with when her lease runs out”—his throat tightened thinking about it—“she has no one else. She maintains no father is better than the one she has.”

“She has you, Beck.”

A harsh huff of laughter scraped his throat. “I doubt she believes that. We live together and the only time I see her is at meals and bedtime.”

“No different than before.” Kamil’s observation grated and Beckett felt like punching him.

The spurt of adrenaline made him think. “A bit different. Maybe. We’re more relaxed and we talk. Well, I talk. About work, mostly. She listens and seems genuinely interested. Makes intriguing suggestions and asks a lot of

questions. I hired a housekeeper and she didn't fight me on it, so that's a bonus."

"What does she do with herself? Women seem to fill their hours and I confess I have no idea what they do, even considering those who are employed. Not that I know many who work."

"I might be getting closer to finding out." He didn't say the number of times he had slipped into that spare room and stared at the files placed neatly on the little desk. He wanted Grace to share with him openly, whatever it was she increasingly occupied her time with. "I overheard her arranging for some samples to be brought by."

"Intriguing."

"Indeed." He wondered how he might encourage her to share sooner than later. Grace clearly didn't value his opinion, although maybe it was more that he'd been so dismissive in the past. Not any longer.

"You're sleeping together?"

"We are. Sleeping. Period." And it was killing him. He'd become intimately familiar with his right hand in the shower, twice a day. Like a damn teenager. Watching Grace's slender body begin to change, her breasts a little bigger and the slight swell of her belly...

"Beck?"

"What?"

"You zoned out."

"It's killing me."

Kamil laughed, a smug, complacent sound that spoke of getting laid often—and well. He again wanted to punch him. "So, seduce her."

"She'd hate me."

"Get over yourself. If she shuts you down, so be it. But every woman needs to know she's desirable, especially one whose body is changing. I have sisters, remember."

He'd been reduced to relying on Kamil the bachelor for marital advice yet again. A rueful smile made his mouth hurt, even as he acknowledged how much sense his friend made. And was it such a difficult task for a *manwhore*? Grace's assessment of him rankled a little. *The truth hurts.*

"Maybe I should call it Operation Seduction." This time his laughter felt easier.

"Let's wrap this up so you can get back to your not-so-willing bride." Kamil shuffled the files together.

“Want to crash a dinner?”

A thick brow arching, his friend asked, “Whose?”

“Grace is meeting her friend, Charity. We can stop by. You can shield me from mean women comments.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like more.”

Now, there was friendship. Beck well knew his buddy had lots of opportunities for a hookup locally, not to mention the clubs. “We should get moving then.”

To say dinner was an interesting experience was downplaying the entire event. Two sets of eyes, one dark and one silver, had stared their way as they sauntered up to the table. Well, Kamil sauntered. Beck was already rethinking his plan to intrude on Grace’s privacy.

He noted surprise and shock on his wife’s face, the only one he really cared to assess, but her friend’s gaze wasn’t warm and welcoming either. Speculative might have coined it.

But, with her good manners, Grace had welcomed Kamil and his friend was his usual charming self, so much so both women relaxed and softened. Charity, someone he hadn’t seen since the wedding, positively glowed before Kamil’s attention and Beck made a mental note to warn his friend off. The situation was complicated enough without his friend orchestrating a one-night stand.

“What is it that you do, Charity?”

“I’m a cardiovascular interventional technologist.”

Kamil drew her out, effortlessly, learning far more than Beck thought possible about the subject, and he took the opportunity to focus on his wife.

“Are you mad?”

“At you showing up for dinner?”

“Yes.” And anything else he might have done. The day wasn’t over and the past still loomed large no matter that she’d said she didn’t hate him. The line between love and hate was blurred, or so he’d heard, and maybe it was better she had a passionate response to him.

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. It’s nice to see Kamil again.”

He caught the server’s eye and ordered another round of drinks—juice for Grace. He did his best to ensure she ate well, pleased the morning sickness had been fleeting and aware he watched her like a hawk. Refraining from smothering her with attention had been a test of his fortitude. “He’s

only here for a few days. Maybe he can come by the house?”

“It’s your house, Beckett.”

She spoke the truth and there was no snark in her voice, but he still grit his teeth. “Dinner tomorrow? Or the next night?”

“Oh, you want me there?”

“Yes, Grace. I want you there. You like him and he likes you. He’s my best friend. I was thinking maybe we could ask him to be our baby’s godparent.”

Color flushed her cheeks. “That would be ... nice.”

Again he was struck by how alone she actually was in the world. He’d teased a few details from her about her growing-up years and thought he’d figured out the rest. He’d had every advantage as a man and look how he’d turned out. “I think it’d be okay, even if he has different religious beliefs. Have you thought about asking Charity?”

Ducking her head, she nodded. “I did. But we haven’t discussed it since. I want to wait and be sure.”

“Everything is going fine, Grace.” He willed it to be so. “You’re just past that ... other time.”

“I know. I’ve been counting.”

Of course, she had. They both had, and that was one thing they hadn’t discussed. Charity and Kamil ceased their intense conversation and the talk turned to recent movies and current events. Beck knew Grace waited for new films to come out on pay-for-view, disliking the noise in the theater and reminded her of one coming up. She smiled his way and he promised they’d watch it together, enjoying her consent, if accompanied by a startled look in her eyes.

He capitalized on their proximity to ease a bit closer and was gratified when she didn’t try to put space between them. She was wearing a simple dress in a shade of pink that emphasized her ethereal look, though her newly trimmed hair and subtle makeup loaned itself to the more mature woman she was becoming. He gave a rueful twitch—Grace had acted far more maturely than him.

“You look beautiful.”

She blinked, and her pupils dilated. He longed to kiss her until those soft pink lips turned rosy red and puffed from his attention. Mark her slender neck with his stubble. Sexual tension crackled between them and then dissipated when she looked away and he recalled the reason he’d denied her a

kiss. Shades of fucking *Pretty Woman*. He was an ass. Had been. No longer. Never again. He prayed she'd let him in.

It then became apparent that her friend and his—theirs—had most definitely connected, if now looking their way, and when the women went off together to the washroom, he said, “Really, Kamil? Grace’s best friend?”

“She is gorgeous.”

“Not your usual type.”

“The women at home have fallen prey to starving themselves in order to meet magazine standards. In order to wear the clothing your company designs. Charity owns her form. It’s refreshing.”

The woman was definitely full-figured, voluptuous, and Beckett could admit that she exuded an earthy sensuality. Not that he really took note, seeing as she was Grace’s best friend. He thought she was intelligent and big-hearted and was grateful Grace had her in her life. He didn’t want anything to interfere with that. “Tread softly, buddy.”

“Are you protecting Charity or your wife?”

“Both?”

Kamil laughed. “Grace is an angel. She requires your protection. Charity, on the other hand, does not. I assure you.”

Why had he suggested this dinner? Then he compounded it. “Come to the house the night after next. For dinner. Bring Charity.”

“I’ll come. And perhaps she will bring herself. I doubt anyone can influence that beautiful woman.”

Grace was already in bed, curled up in her usual position when he emerged from the attached bath. “Are you asleep?”

“No. But I’m tired. It’s been a long day, and I have... I have things to do tomorrow. I wish I had more energy.”

He climbed in beside her and eased closer, as he’d done in the restaurant. She smelled of the same fresh flowers and he inhaled deeply. He’d respected the distance between them physically, but time was passing and he thought Kamil’s suggestion that he reach out and hint at his interest was a good one. That sounded better than seduction. “What’s on the agenda?”

She stiffened and he risked placing a hand on her upper arm. Immediately, she rolled to her back and came up on her elbows. “Excuse me?”

“Tomorrow. What are you doing?”

Indecision warred visibly on her face and he held his breath. She said, “The thing I’m working on... I have someone coming by tomorrow. She won’t be in your way.”

“First of all, you live here. It’s your house too, Grace. You can have visitors.” Lord knew there had been a parade of people from his work coming and going unless it was a meeting that was required, whereby he went into the office.

“Okay.” She nibbled her bottom lip and he badly wanted to kiss away the imagined hurt.

Instead, he gently tapped her mouth. “Don’t.”

Maybe it was his proximity or his touch, but, as earlier, her eyes dilated and she took in a deep breath. She wasn’t immune to him, no matter her protest. He might have dwelled on the difference between love and lust but instead, he focused on the way her breasts swelled behind the fabric of her nightgown. He knew better than to suggest she sleep naked. He admired their shape, noting the faint peaking of the nipples.

She tipped her head away. “I’ve always bitten my lip. Bad habit.”

“You don’t do it so much now.”

“I suppose I don’t.”

“Get a good night’s sleep, sweetheart. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help with tomorrow.”

Chapter Nine

What was that about? Grace stared into the darkness, viscerally aware of Beckett's slumbering form, well over onto the middle of the bed. He'd respected the distance for weeks now, though she'd woken early many days to find herself encroaching on his space, cuddled close. And sometimes he'd been tucked up behind her, his arm lying heavily over her waist.

But she'd been able to extricate herself or move away before he awoke and reprimand her body for its interest. She was at the stage in her pregnancy where her hormones were fueling an insane interest in anything sexual. Okay, sex with Beckett. Her husband. Past memories of their physical connection tormented her with evil intent because her brain was losing the battle.

Oh, she somehow kept a cool façade around him—at least she thought she did—but he was so darn *present*. Last night at the restaurant felt like a date or some such stupid thing, maybe a double date. Her past longing for that normal kept surfacing.

She'd become so accustomed to having breakfast with him, and lunch most days if he was working from home. He was always home for dinner, either with take-out or to help her prepare their meal.

The evenings, of late, had become a subtle torture. Beckett got rid of the uncomfortable couch, taking her to choose one she could curl up on to watch television or read. But he shared it with her and while he kept his distance there, she could scent him, aware of his every move. There were overtones of friendship as they came to know one another better, but overshadowed by what she knew to term as lust. She huffed a breath at the idea of normal. They'd never have that. Too much of the past lay between them, and she'd do well to remember that.

Sometimes she wondered how he managed his newfound celibacy, because unless he was somehow getting some on the side during his infrequent absences from home... He'd been such a sexual man... In any event, she wasn't managing hers very well, and masturbating in the shower, despite him respecting her privacy, felt sneaky and unfulfilling.

Moving in with Charity felt a long way off, and in truth, she wasn't nearly as anxious and determined, now Beckett had turned out to be ... a nice guy. For now. She daren't get her hopes up. All they had connecting them was their child, and she hadn't forgotten her impassioned speech about wanting a life someday with a man who loved her. And Beckett should have

the same opportunity with another woman.

Her libido poked her harder, suggesting some hot, satisfying sex wouldn't be amiss—friends with benefits. She poured ice-cold water on the idea, knowing herself too well. Her heart had reluctantly accepted the farce that she'd been infatuated and not in love with Beckett, but she wouldn't fool it twice.

So, instead, she turned her thoughts to the screaming chemistry between her friend and Kamil and hoped the guy didn't get hurt. Charity tended to chew men up and spit them out.

Probably because she'd laid awake into the night, wrestling with unseemly urges and thinking about Charity and the seamstress bringing her samples, Grace woke up later than usual. Beckett's warm breath teased the hair at her temple and the hot length of him heated her back. Something hard pressed against the softness of her buttocks and her breath hitched in her chest as she registered the fact her nightgown had ridden up and there was little between them. He was back to sleeping nude, the jerk.

She knew the instant he woke, a certain stiffness entering his relaxed body, and waited for him to roll away. She forced herself to remain calm, keeping her eyes closed and regulating her breathing.

Instead of moving back to his side of the bed, his hips flexed and his erection nuzzled into her pliant flesh. She knew if she dropped her leg forward he'd work his way inside her, eased by her embarrassing wetness. She could pretend she was still asleep and just let it happen.

His hand stroked down her arm. "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"I'm getting the message you want this, sweetheart."

She didn't have to look at him, she could pretend this was merely ... servicing. She most certainly wanted *this*. She craved it. But she couldn't say it, wishing he'd just do it.

With a sigh, he pressed a kiss on her hair and pulled away. "Can't do it, Grace, as much as I want to. As much as I think about fucking you senseless each and every day. But I won't reduce what we might have to a faceless quickie."

She wanted to scream at him and maybe beg him to come back and get it done, but fortunately, the bathroom door closed behind him and she didn't humiliate herself. With some strict self-management, she got herself under

control and staggered down the hall to the guest bathroom. When she showed her face a little later, there was no sign of Beckett and she applied some makeup and chose her clothes with care, finding an outfit from Kilmer that flattered her.

She'd obviously lost weight since being fitted for it because the skirt zipped closed with only a little encouragement, and the loose blouse and light jacket concealed her larger breasts and belly. Even the slate-blue tones suited her, Beckett's eye for clothing excellent. It was probably why she shopped at lower end places for herself, some kind of passive-aggressive retaliation. But she wanted to look professional today when the seamstress came.

He was making breakfast with his usual eye to her finicky appetite when she went down to the kitchen. It seemed most of their interactions centered around food and she tamped down another, carnal appetite.

Thankfully, he didn't talk about their little interaction upstairs, merely asking her to make toast. She organized that task and poured a cup of herbal tea, taking her vitamin. A curious flutter flickered through her midsection and she frowned, writing it off to Beckett's impossibly sexy appeal, attired as he was in low-slung pajama pants and absolutely nothing else. The man even rocked bed hair and a stubbled jaw.

"What time is your ... company coming?"

Dragging her stare away from his backside, she said, "Who?"

"You're expecting someone today. And you're dressed already. You look great, by the way."

"Oh. This afternoon. And thanks." Crap, now he'd guess she put clothes on as armor against what they'd nearly done.

"I can head out to the office, give you privacy."

It all became too much, his thoughtfulness and insight, the comfort she'd come to find in living with him without their past baggage—minus the more recent, incessant arousal. Why was she hiding her plans from him? So what if he disparaged them? He'd only show the true colors she kept expecting, something deep inside of her never believing he'd changed.

"You don't have to leave. Although I need the dining room. For the space."

He set a perfectly poached egg on a slice of dry toast and passed it to her. "That's no problem. Dinner with Kalim and Charity isn't until tomorrow night."

She perched at the counter and cut a tiny slice of her breakfast while he

filled his own plate. "It'll probably take a few hours."

"Okay."

"I'm designing a line of maternity clothes." Silence reigned as she chewed another bite, her gaze on her plate.

"You're designing clothes?"

"Maternity clothes. Nothing like your lines."

"Grace. That's amazing. I'd like to see your sketches."

"I'm not like those experts you and your father hire." Her stomach felt tight.

He touched her hand, his warm fingers scooping it up. "Hey. No self-criticism."

She tried to ignore the way his thumb traced tiny circles over her pulse point. "I've been studying online. And finally found someone to sew some mockups." She'd had to scrimp, seeing as her father had yanked the trust fund strings tight.

"Are you going to be the model?" His tone was light and she risked a look at his face. He stared back with interest all over his face.

"Me? I ... I hadn't thought about it." What if she jinxed this pregnancy?

"You'd make a lovely model."

"Maybe." He never stopped telling her she was beautiful to him.

"Finish your breakfast," he urged. "And maybe you'd show me your work?"

Her heart in her throat, she passed over the folder holding the completed drawings and specs. He scanned them carefully, turning each page over as he went, setting them carefully to the side. She couldn't read anything from his face or body language and her belly clenched. If anyone knew design, it was Beckett.

When he turned to face her, she was ready to laugh it off and say it was a mere hobby. He said, "Very promising. A complete line, too."

If he'd come across all complimentary and sweet instead of cautiously approving, it would have been worse than his disdain, and she could barely breathe through the relief. "Thank you. I wanted to ensure there were adequate choices for any event."

"You succeeded. Though I want to see how the fabrics you chose will hang and if they'll stand up to movement and look good."

Wait. “Excuse me?”

“Your father’s company manufactures those types of fabrics and we buy them, remember?”

“I didn’t show you to ask for your help, Beckett. The seamstress I found chose fabrics from what I could afford. I know they aren’t high end but I think they’ll work.”

“Let’s see how they look. This afternoon, right?”

“You’re saying that if the designs work out but not the fabrics—”

“I’ll see that you get them.”

This was her project. Hers. She wanted to continue with it, having started the marketing campaign already. In fact, she’d been casting about for a model and his comment earlier made her wonder if she could do that as well. Save a little money. “I’m not sure I want to be affiliated with the company.”

He winced and his features took on the look she recognized as his business face. “Right. You want a divorce and you’re estranged from your father. You don’t want any help from this quarter.”

She didn’t—and she did. She wanted to see all those beautiful fabrics utilized in her designs, to make them come alive and flatter all pregnant women, regardless of size or shape. But she hated feeling even a hint of obligation to the men who had essentially overpowered her life. So she told a partial lie. “I want to make this line available to women who don’t have deep pocketbooks. *I* want to be able to afford them.”

He looked into her eyes and she wondered if he read her. She clutched at the edge of the desk when she considered that there was nothing stopping Beckett from running with her idea and barely kept herself from blurting that out. If her father was standing before her, there would have been no doubt. But not Beckett. She relaxed, somehow knowing he wouldn’t do such a thing.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. It’s been hard to share, is all.”

“Thank you for that, Grace. I know I haven’t given you any reason in the past to think I’d be supportive.”

“You’ve been supportive, Beckett. We’ve carved out a truce.” And she’d been willing to fraternize with the enemy that morning, her face flaming as she thought about it.

His eyes darkened and he stepped closer. “But you still don’t trust me.” She really didn’t want to lie about that, so took refuge in silence.

Beckett clearly interpreted that correctly, because he gave her space, saying, “We have an enormous amount of offcuts. One of the things we look for is either a venue or entrepreneur to utilize them. Your designs are quirky and mix colors and textures. We might be able to work something out and keep the cost of your product down.”

Tempted, she replied, “I don’t want to get ahead of myself. I’ll wait to see what the mockups look like.”

“Can I be there?” He laughed, a rueful sound. “I should have asked, not assumed.”

Suddenly needing to share the experience with him, she nodded. “Okay. But as an observer. We’ll talk privately afterward.”

“Deal. Unless you think differently. Just say, okay?”

He was blown away. His sweet, little wife had talent. He wondered if her thwarted plans for college had involved design and could only imagine what she might have accomplished if she hadn’t been forced to take online courses with no actual mentoring or hands-on work.

The sketches were amazing but his eye told him she needed help with fabric choices, not that he wanted to come across as being superior. His years of experience, working in the business from the ground up had loaned itself to that kind of knowledge and he was determined to help Grace find her way while not threatening her independence. His bitter comment about divorce and her father had escaped before he could help himself, feeling rejected once again. Time he thought of her first, always, though he thought he’d been doing a better job of late.

While Grace was downstairs organizing the dining room space, leaving him to get ready for the day, he laid out all her designs and took pictures of them. His phone was a good one, the resolution crisp, so he figured he’d caught the feel and flair. He hurriedly sent them off to Jenna with instructions to have them printed onto better paper in varying sizes. Surprising Grace with them at a later date, as well as a format for a marketing campaign, would be his pleasure.

He then toiled at the paperwork his business produced and fielded several calls from suppliers and distributors alike, putting out a couple of fires along the way. Having forbidden Grace to move the heavy furniture to accommodate the samples, he helped with that while she made lunch.

Their domestic situation felt settled and workable to him and if his

libido was chastising him for walking away from some morning delight with his wife, well, he had to believe that time would also come. He wasn't going to reduce their renewed sexual connection to scratching an itch. Grace didn't yet fully trust him and he had to accept that.

When the doorbell rang after they'd cleaned up the kitchen together, he impulsively drew her in for a hug. Relishing the feel of her petite form in his arms, thrilled she didn't resist, he said, "No need to be nervous."

"How did you know?"

"The jittery knee and teeth chattering gave it away."

"I was not." Tipping her head back, her pretty mouth then set in a mutinous line before she smiled. He'd been making it his mission to have her smile and as usual, it melted his heart.

"Go let her in, sweetheart."

He'd never seen the people who assembled the designs his talent put together, so the sight of a middle-aged, rotund woman with a mass of steel-gray hair was a bit of a surprise. But her warmth with Grace eased his concern.

"Theresa, this is my..." Her silvery eyes blinked as she clearly wondered how to introduce him.

He was still her husband and intended that to be true forever, so he said, "Her husband. Beckett Kilmer."

"Theresa Dobbs. I didn't know Grace was related to the Kilmers."

So, she'd used a different name. He smiled and helped Theresa with a trolley and several cases. "Is this all of it?"

"It is." The other woman didn't press the point with him, instead, turning to Grace. "I'm not sure I'm on a par with Kilmer/Langdon."

"I'm not sure I am either," Grace replied.

"Ah. I see."

Beckett thought she did, indeed, and went ahead with the luggage to the dining room. "Grace is set up in here."

The seamstress efficiently set out her tools of the trade and unveiled garment after garment. Even as samples, he knew quality tailoring and said so.

"Thank you. Your wife, that is, Grace and I have connected very positively."

"Have you signed a contract?" He remembered he wasn't supposed to be front and center but it was too late and Grace seemed okay with it.

“I have. And an NDA, in fact.” She winked at Grace.

“I was following a business plan.” Grace bit her bottom lip and he wished he could ease her anxiety.

“Don’t apologize, dear. You want to protect that hard work. Why don’t you try on the first outfit? We’ll see how things fit and get Mr. Kilmer’s learned opinion.”

He and Theresa chatted as Grace changed into the sundress, stepping behind the trolley to do so. He established she had a small team working with her, capable of turning out at least the first batch of clothing.

“I have a tentative commitment from a small maternity boutique,” Grace advised, her voice muffled by the fabric she was tugging over her head.

“Mind the stitching,” Theresa said, before moving to help.

The dress fit beautifully and he could see it in varying sizes and at least three colors and patterns. He took advantage of the opportunity to set the straps properly on Grace’s shoulders and smoothed the material over her hips. Seduction 101. Cautiously invade her space and find ways to touch her—appropriately. Or something like that.

He might have pushed it a little with the hands on her hips deal, but aside from heightened color, she didn’t protest, and she felt so good.

They discussed fabric with the remainder of the outfits, beautifully cut slacks with a clever way to release the waistband to afford more room, and relaxed tops, shorts and matching tanks, floating nightgowns and cozy pajamas, a more formal dress, a coat, and a couple of jackets, and his favorite, a flirty bathing suit.

As with everything she tried on, he checked the fit and fall and enjoyed the feel of Grace’s smooth skin and burgeoning figure. Her breasts pushed against the material and the curve of her belly swelled sweetly against his hand. He resolved to gain her permission to feel their child grow on every possible occasion.

Theresa appeared oblivious to the increasing tension as he invaded Grace’s space, making notes and suggestions and asking good questions.

“Um, Beckett has suggested an option for fabric.”

His pleasure that Grace was considering his offer made him smile, and he dropped a kiss on her nose. She was clearly flustered by his attention but hesitant to say anything in front of Theresa, confining herself to the occasional glare and arched brow—that he ignored.

He explained about the offcuts and the seamstress jumped on the idea. She agreed to have the material delivered to her shop, signing a quickly drafted promise to protect Grace's proprietary interest. Grace insisted on input in assigning the fabric to each garment and Beckett had the impression a fledgling partnership was born between the two women. He was content in an advisory role if it meant his wife would succeed.

"She's wonderful." Grace leaned against the door. "Don't you think?"

"Indeed she is. You're making a good start."

"I know. And I want to start out small, build my name. That way, if it flops no one will know."

"You won't fail, Grace." He'd see to that. "Will you ask me for help?"

"I... Maybe."

He supposed he had to be content with that. "I'd better get back. Kalim's contract is calling me."

"What's he buying?"

"An expansion of our glamor line. It's extremely limited."

"I doubt there's any call for my line in his country." The teasing note in her voice made him smile. It reminded him of their first times together when they actually talked and he wasn't actively trying to get her into his bed. Not that he wasn't now—okay, so she was in his bed, just not *in* it.

He hurried to answer her. "I expect not. Modesty is judged differently there. That bathing suit would set off a storm."

"That's true."

Passing close by her, he dropped another kiss on her hair, feeling her stiffen before he headed to the den. He resolved to stoke the building connection between them while not slaking his need unless Grace was all in. It promised to be a long, hard slog.

Chapter Ten

“So, you and Kamil?” Grace kept her voice down, even if the men were in the living room pouring drinks after dinner and she and Charity were upstairs in her bedroom turned office.

Her friend’s generous mouth curved into a glowing smile. “Indeed.”

“But he’s... I mean, he’s from a conservative country and you’re not...”

“Conservative?” Charity laughed out loud, a rich, earthy sound. “I’m definitely not, and I think he likes that.”

“He’s leaving tomorrow.”

“Grace, don’t look so worried. I’m not ass over heels. He’s hot and we have chemistry. I’m a big believer in grabbing the good things in life while I can.”

Grace could admit Kamil both looked and seemed like a good thing. “I guess I’m concerned you’ll get hurt. I mean, at first I wondered if you’d put him in his place, but then I’ve seen the two of you together.”

“I’ll be his woman overseas when he comes to visit. At least until one of us isn’t interested anymore.”

The designs and pictures she’d been showing her friend blurred before her eyes. If only she was built that way.

“What’s wrong?” Charity’s tone was sharp and she moved in close. “Is it the baby?”

“What?” She realized she’d pressed a hand against the swell of her baby bump. “Oh, no. Baby’s fine as far as I know. In fact, I think she’s moving.”

“Really?” Her friend reached out a tentative finger.

“Nothing to feel, Charity. Not yet. It’s like butterfly wings in there, very faint.”

“And you didn’t have that ... before?”

“No. My first baby was probably ... gone sometime before that and I didn’t know.” It still hurt to speak of it but she wasn’t going to dwell. Not when this child was with her.

“Does Beck know?”

“Not yet.”

“Are you withholding?” There was no censure in the other woman’s tone, merely curiosity.

Was she? “I don’t think so. It’s very new and... Maybe. I still don’t trust him.” It made her feel vaguely ill to admit that.

“Well, he was a prick for a long time. A couple of months of being nice to you—”

“It isn’t that. Well, some of it. But it’s more that my feelings for him are returning.” *If they ever really left.*

“Ah. Not surprising. You, honey, were ass over heels for your husband. I get that you thought it got killed off, but the heart wants what it wants.”

“And you’d know that how?” She winced. “Sorry. That was bitchy.”

Charity laughed and drew her to a chair. “Sit. You look like it’s past your bedtime. With that sexy man of yours.” Grace blushed and her friend pounced. “Maybe sex is rekindling your love?”

“No. Though it’s tempting,” she mumbled.

“I can imagine. But with you, it’s strings attached.”

“Probably, though I’d just like the sex right now.”

“The advice I have for you on that front wouldn’t suit, so I won’t offer it. Instead, let me say that you’ll follow your heart and if Beck puts a foot wrong he’ll answer to me.”

Looking every inch the Amazon warrior in her golden, wraparound dress and bangles, a pair of heavily strapped sandals on her feet, Charity blazed with determination. Grace nodded and felt her spirits lift. “Good to know.”

“In the meantime, I’m so excited for you about the maternity line moving forward. Beck supporting you can’t be the worst thing.”

“It isn’t. And he also seems to understand how important it is for me to do this on my own. I’m not adverse to, say, having him as a supplier, but that’s it.”

“Slow and steady, Grace. And we’d better get back downstairs. I have plans for Kamil later and dining and dashing is rude.”

A giggle bubbled up at her friend’s blatant honesty, not that it distracted her from her own ... needs. As they descended to join the men, it occurred to her that Charity hadn’t answered her query about knowing how “the heart wants what it wants”.

Both men rose as they entered the living room and her gaze settled on Beckett. Dressed in dark slacks and a pale-blue button-down shirt, open at the neck, he exuded casual elegance and sexuality. Her body tingled and her feet carried her to him, his stare sweeping over her from head to toe.

What did he see? Her body was changing, as was her demeanor. Confidence was a wonderful attribute and she was feeling more and more of that. Whatever he saw, he liked, and that need pulsed in her core—hard. Her brain, fortunately, caught up and whispered a reminder that he was capable of destroying her...

True to her word, Charity spirited Kamil away after a suitable time of two couples hanging out in a relaxed fashion if one didn't count the escalating sexual tension, and not just between her friend and Beckett's.

Beck had been consistently invading her space, finding reasons—valid and otherwise—to touch her. Even those casual kisses dropped on her hair and one on her nose were full of promise as they put her in the proximity of his well-made body and treated her to his spicy scent. And now she was going to be alone with him while they cleaned up after the dinner party.

Resolving to ignore her body's interest, she bade the other couple goodbye and once they'd left, busied herself picking up glasses to carry back to the kitchen.

"I'm glad I hired someone to clean, seeing as you're going to be busy with the clothing line."

Her first instinct had been to protest, seeing as how she'd managed the cleaning in addition to the coursework. But he was right. She'd be hard-pressed to keep up, especially as her pregnancy progressed. Except then she wouldn't feel like she was contributing. "I'll pay whomever."

"You won't." He was stacking plates in the dishwasher, his back to her, but his tone was implacable.

"I feel obligated. Not paying my way."

"Grace." All the good humor of the evening was gone from his face and tone as he faced her. "You're not a roommate. This is your home too, as austere as it is."

She wanted to say it was only for a few more months but remembering his hurt when she'd resisted his help with the fabric kept her silent. And the truth was, the place wasn't feeling nearly as cold and unwelcome, not with Beckett home more often than not and with the influx of odds and ends of furniture and accessories. Though, it was more because of the difference in the people filling it.

As each day passed, she could admit to entertaining the idea that living in the same house with Beckett could be a good thing, for the sake of the baby. Unless he met someone else and wanted her. Fell in love... She

focused on washing the crystal, refusing to consign it to the dishwasher as she shoved that thought away. Right now he seemed content with their living situation, determined to be there for his child and she'd cross the other bridge when they came to it. Or he would and she'd be left behind.

Blinking at the sudden rush of tears, twice in one day wasn't unheard of, she was hormonal, after all, she rinsed and set the glasses to drain. *If you willingly invited his attention he'd have no reason to look elsewhere.*

That evil little voice sounded far too much like her father's and sufficed in drying her tears like magic. She straightened from the sink and looked around to see if there was anything left to do—besides Beckett. She needed to keep reminding herself what he'd been capable of, like Charity said, for nearly a year. And while he'd indicated a desire to repair their relationship before he learned about the baby, she had only his word for it. Trust was a commodity she couldn't—and wouldn't—do without.

The flutter in her belly froze all her maudlin thoughts and she stilled, the better to focus in on it. A kind of swishing sensation, a drift of butterfly wings entranced her and she carefully splayed her palm across the area. *I feel you, little one. I love you.*

"Grace?" Beckett was in her space, staring down at her, concern etching his handsome features. "What is it?"

How long had she been standing there, turning inward? "The baby's moving."

"What? For real?" To her astonishment, he dropped to his knees and paid rapt attention to her midsection. "Can I?"

"You can't see it, Beckett. And you can't feel it yet. It's just a flutter. She's still really small. I'm surprised I can even feel her, except apparently second-time moms can."

His gaze drifted up to meet hers and having him at her feet did curious things to her insides, the baby's movements notwithstanding. "Is this the first time?"

"I think maybe the third. I'm not sure about the first one. Maybe wishful thinking."

He rose to his feet in one lithe movement. "Will you keep me updated, Grace? Please?"

Maybe she had been withholding. His fascination soothed her and she acknowledged his continual interest in everything she did so as not to take any risks. Regret pinched. "I will. I promise. I ... I was thinking about

childbirth classes. With Charity's shifts, she can't commit."

His face lit and he gave her a smile. "Count me in. Doesn't matter when they are. I'll be there."

She hadn't thought that far ahead, to him being there when their baby was born. She'd gone from withholding to total involvement. Hopefully, it was the right choice. And, if he backslid, she'd rescind her offer. For now, it felt curiously like relief. She really didn't want to go through this alone.

"The real deal ultrasound is in five weeks, right?" he asked.

"Yes." She was secretly terrified.

"Do you want to know the gender?" He'd obviously been poring over the same information she had.

"No." She had no idea why that was, but maybe it was because she didn't want to jinx anything.

"Okay. Do you have a preference?"

"Do you?" She held her breath. What if he wanted—?

"No preference, Grace, aside from him or her to be healthy. And for you to be okay."

Air whooshed out of her lungs. If he had no preference then she couldn't fail him. "Oh, that's good then."

"What was that about?" Amusement danced in his blue eyes. Eyes that looked at her the way they had in the beginning. "Why would it matter if we have a little girl with her mother's gentleness or a boy with her good heart?"

"I can't guarantee the sex, Beckett."

One big hand swept over his hair as the humor vanished again. She was obviously forcing mood swings on *him*. "Don't you dare think you'll disappoint me, woman. Besides, *I* determined the gender. All that crap about men historically chastising their wives for not giving them sons..."

Her mood instantly lifted. She'd forgotten that nugget of information, sinking back into that old habit of feeling less than and blaming herself. Something she needed to be cautious about because no child of hers was going to be exposed to that kind of thing as long as she could help it.

"Hey." He clasped her hand, that devilish thumb unerringly finding that sensitive place on her wrist. "Your old man did a number on you. And then I fucked up. Sweetheart, I'll be apologizing for the rest of my life, trying to make amends. If the day comes when you'll look at me again the way you did in those early days, I'll be the happiest man alive."

"You don't need to keep apologizing, Beckett," she said quietly, trying

to ignore the whisper of his thumb against her skin. “Actions speak far louder than words.”

His big body stilled. “And am I any closer to convincing you?”

“I... I want to believe you’ve changed—for good.” And, if she was honest with herself, she did. “But I can’t go through that again, not any of it.”

“I know.” He drew her in for an embrace and she allowed it, soaking up his heat and breathing in his scent. In moments, the comfort and reassurance morphed into something less staid, her sensitive breasts pressing against his solid chest, the sensation of his muscled thighs against hers highlighting the hardening of his flesh at her belly.

Perhaps soothed by the hug and lulled by his behavior for the past while, her body snapped awake into instant lust and her core dampened, a tiny moan building at the back of her throat. Beckett’s hand slipped up her back, his fingers working into her hair in a familiar way that upped her response. He tugged her head back and stared into her eyes, slowly lowering his mouth to hers, giving her time to resist—if she chose.

She chose him, and the instant his lips took hers, she melted, on fire with the passion she’d been stoking for weeks. Their first kiss in forever and the reminder didn’t change a thing about how she was feeling and what she wanted. Opening against his questing tongue, she pressed closer and let him steal her breath and what remained of her senses.

He kissed her for an eternity, a deep drugging sensation interspersed with tiny nibbles along her bottom lip and sweeps of his tongue. And she took it all as fully as it was offered.

Somehow, her top came undone and slipped from her shoulders, dispensed with by Beckett’s talented hands, and her own fumbled inside some hastily undone buttons on his shirt to explore the planes of his chest and belly. His skin was like velvet, smooth and heated, and he groaned into her mouth as she touched him.

“We’re not doing this here,” he muttered, his voice strained.

Looking into his eyes, she fell past his wide pupils, knowing her own were dilated with arousal. He grimaced. “We *are* doing this, Grace?”

She’d kill him if he walked away with some reasoning about having sex being more than scratching an itch. Though her higher synapses bleated a faint warning, she whispered, “We are.”

He scooped her up, something she didn’t ever recall and carried her through the dining room to the living room and the new couch. Laying her

down, like she was some kind of fragile treasure, his stare zoned in on her breasts. “You’re gorgeous.”

Men and boobs. She dismissed the niggling inadequacy on that subject even as she wondered if her more voluptuous top half would remain after the baby’s birth. The fleeting thought vanished as Beckett leaned a knee between hers to press a kiss to the swell of her left breast, his mouth tracing a path above her pounding heart and downward to drift over where their child grew.

“Silky smooth,” he murmured. “You have the most intriguing swell.”

Her skin tingled in the wake of his lips, his faint stubble a decidedly pleasant rasp. Her fingers lifted to his hair, teasing through the thick strands as he nuzzled lower. “Beckett.”

He interpreted her need without further words—non-verbal communication when it came to their sexual connection had never been an issue—and lifted up to strip off his shirt, her hands tugging loose from his hair. She feasted her eyes on his broad chest and shoulders and let her gaze wander downward over his defined abs.

“The way you look at me,” he said, shoving his pants over his narrow hips, the zipper having made a loud, tearing sound in his haste.

She’d hidden her avid interest for a long time, fearful of rejection, afraid he’d mock her. Their coupling had taken place in their bed upon his return home, using his hands and mouth to arouse her, and then driving them both up through mutual pleasure with heated, desperate sexual congress. How many nights had she laid there, waiting?

“Grace. Don’t. Stay with me. Let this be the start of something even better,” he urged, slipping his arms around her to draw her close.

Was he reading her mind now? The hot length of him swept away her darkening thoughts and she abandoned herself to his questing lips and clever hands. The rest of her clothing was stripped off and Beckett descended on her, taking a nipple into his mouth and sucking, teasing the beaded tip until the arrowing sensation direct to her apex made her whimper.

“Too much, sweetheart?” He eased up and turned his attention to her other breast, more gently but with equal intent as his shaft pulsed faintly against her thigh.

“It’s fine. Good,” she panted. Squeezing her eyes shut, she gave over to the mounting pleasure as he teased and nibbled over every square inch of her torso, returning to her swelling breasts, and then licking over the hollow of her throat. “You taste so damn good.”

She had one hand splayed over the back of his head and the other exploring the play of muscles in his back, her legs parting around his lightly furred thigh as she sought pressure against her throbbing sex.

He chuckled, the sound vibrating against her skin, sliding down her body to pause at her mound. "You're bare."

She'd returned to the salon, where she was greeted with warm familiarity, for haircuts and a facial, but eschewed the waxing, instead, making judicious use of a razor. "I was waxed and liked the way it left me. There."

His hot breath against her skin made her squirm. "I think I like it too."

Big hands widened her thighs further and she swallowed against her usual reaction to his mouth on her sex. There was a twinge of embarrassment even as she craved the act. Once again, she stopped thinking as he parted her folds and lapped at the sensitive flesh.

The tip of his tongue was everywhere, teasing and exploring, tasting her. He rimmed her opening and lanced inside as she writhed, uncertain if she wanted to retreat or get closer. Her belly tightened and she tensed against the building flare that signified an orgasm. "Please, Beckett."

It seemed like forever before he found his way to her apex and closed his mouth on the throbbing knot of nerves there. The subtle pressure and lash of his tongue pushed her over the edge and she shuddered as she came. He didn't immediately relent and another, smaller climax followed close on the heels of the last and her thighs clamped hard around his head, her hands scrabbling at his hair.

Withdrawing, he pressed a kiss on her belly and eased upward to blanket her. He reached between them to notch himself at her gate, something she doubted she had the coordination to manage at that moment. She lay beneath him, lax and sated, savoring the orgasm.

"Grace. Open your eyes."

She blinked and focused on Beckett's strained features and heated stare. "Hmmm?"

"I want you to see who's fucking you."

"Who else would it be?"

Something almost like relief softened his face for an instant before his tip pressed past the initial stricture of her opening, a feeling that never failed to take her breath, making it hitch in her throat. The width of him stretched her as he pushed inside, his mouth setting in a thin line and then twisting with

pleasure. He dropped his forehead to hers. “There’s no one who feels like you.”

She tensed and he paused, his eyes widening. “No one, Grace. Not since we met. I swear.”

As a lie detector, she supposed it was a good one and welcomed him deeper, her eyes drifting shut again as he filled her to the hilt. His arms wreathed about her, pulling her close and she lifted her legs around him, her heels sliding to his calves, as close as two people could be. Physically.

If she’d decided to believe he’d been faithful, it naturally followed she might trust him to continue to treat her as a beloved wife. Her heart exposed, she whispered, “If you hurt me again, there’s no coming back.”

He lifted his head and stared at her, so close she could nearly trace the irregular flecks of green in his eyes. “I can’t promise not to hurt you, Grace. I’m a guy and stupid at times. But I’ll never deliberately treat you badly again. And I won’t allow anyone else to, either. I’m in for the long haul.”

She let his promise wash over her and sink in to soothe her vulnerable heart. She suspected he was hanging on by a thread, his shaft throbbing inside her, but he waited. He hadn’t said he loved her, but it was like when they first met, only better. More refined. Mature. Was it enough?

“All right,” she murmured.

With a groan, his hips flexed and he drove deeper, finding that place inside that made sparks pop behind her eyes and her toes curl. They rocked together, her meeting him thrust for thrust, though his strength and position soon outmatched her efforts, taking her over and up yet again. She let the climax take her out of her head, clamping down hard around him.

He plunged a few more times, his movements faltering as he moaned and panted against her neck. “Jesus,” he breathed.

Their skin damp with effort, they eased apart and he took some of his weight from her. “Okay?”

“Okay.” It took energy to speak. She didn’t ask him, taking a feminine sense of satisfaction in knowing the sex had been great. She thought about making love and wondered if there was any difference...

“We should head up to bed, maybe grab a shower.”

“Maybe.” She was content to stay right where she was.

“C’mon, sweetheart.” He got to his feet and drew her up.

Shivering, she reached for his shirt and he helped her don it, his eyes flashing with male interest. “What?”

“I like you in my shirt.”

Good to know. She flashed him a demure smile, slightly surprised how good it felt to ... flirt. Tease. “I’ll see you upstairs.”

He followed close behind, her clothes and his tucked under one arm as he turned out the lights. When she entered the bathroom, he was on her heels, his carnal interest apparent, seeing as he hadn’t pulled his boxer briefs on.

“I’ll wash your back,” he offered, his eyes intent.

Her libido was piqued but pregnancy tiredness suddenly caught up and she sagged. “That’s all you’ll do. I’m done in.”

“Shit. Was it too much? Are you really okay?”

“Beckett, I’m fine. It was ... fine. Better than fine,” she hastily amended. “But I am tired.” All that waiting and the anticipation took certain energy.

He bundled her into the shower, hardly giving her time to tie her hair up and out of the way. Gentle hands lathered her body wash over her from head to toe, very nearly not lingering over certain spots. The intimacy was unsettling. While he hadn’t had any use for modesty during their marriage, he’d never showered with her and she understood it was to keep her at arm’s length, like all the other things he avoided.

Sadness weighed her down, despite her attempt to focus on the present and she fought those damn tears again. Fortunately, her location allowed her to hide the telltale moisture, turning her face into the spray to rinse.

Beckett helped her out and drew a fluffy towel around her, rubbing her dry. “I wasted a lot of time. Though I’ll admit there’ll be more than cleansing in the shower at some point, I hope.”

That made her feel a little better, and reflect on all the other ways he let her in and tried to get closer of late. And she’d put her trust in him, once again, so she made herself smile. “A fantasy, Beckett?”

“One of many.”

She could expect more variety in bed too, she thought. “We’ll see,” she teased, willing her sadness far away.

He half carried her to the bed, the towel left on the floor where someone—her—would pick it up in the morning. Tucking her into bed, he kissed her temple and then her nose. “Forget the nightgown, sweetheart. I want to feel you.”

She’d become used to wearing one but would concede for now. “Can you set my robe by the bed? I have to get up in the night sometimes.”

“Shit. Of course. I’m being selfish.” He brought both the robe and a modest nightgown.

“Leave the robe. We’ll see how it goes.”

He climbed in and clicked off the light, immediately moving toward her, dropping an arm over her waist and hauling her close. “There.”

Wiggling to get comfortable, she relaxed against his heat and drifted off.

Chapter Eleven

He breathed in the scent of his woman, a combination of the soap she used and something uniquely Grace. A bouquet he'd know anywhere. She had taken him back.

Cautiously, he thought it through again. Did women make that kind of statement, promise, in the heat of passion? There was that old joke about men agreeing to anything if they were about to get laid... Maybe she'd rethink things and wonder if he was one of those men.

But still, he thought she'd taken him back. Somehow forgiven him for all the shit he put her through, his juvenile antics and bruised ego. Was there anything more amazing than this woman, the one curled naked and trusting in his arms? He hadn't been sure of ever gazing upon her nude body again, let alone possessing it. And possessed it he had, just as she'd engulfed him.

The sex tonight had been the same but very different and he wondered if she'd marked it the way he had. The dry spell had nearly caused him to shame himself like an over-anxious teen, but she'd never felt so good. More importantly, he'd felt *complete*, wrestling with his brain to find the word that described it.

Complete. And if he worked at not being an asshole, he'd have her forever and feel complete forever. He bit back a groan at that intervening year. Stupid. Arrogant and stupid. But enough going down that path. He'd taken a different fork in the road and he had a wife he was crazy about and would soon be a father. He refused to consider anything different.

The doctor had assured him that sex wouldn't cause any problems for the baby but he resolved to be a little less ... enthusiastic the next time. And to constantly check with Dr. Gibson. Grace's burgeoning body drove him insane with lust, so he needed to be careful.

She murmured in her sleep and hitched closer and he smiled. She hadn't kept her distance most nights—or he hadn't—and letting her slip away in the morning while he pretended to sleep even though it had been difficult, but the right thing to do. Non-threatening, that was him. His possessiveness and inner caveman was on high alert when it came to anyone else who might be a threat to her, though. Like he'd told her.

His cell chimed from his pants pocket, his clothing in a pile across the room. He ignored it. It wasn't late, not past the time where most people didn't call or text out of respect, and normally he'd be up. Grace was the one with

the early bedtimes and another smile lifted his lips. He'd just lie there and hold her.

It chimed again and then buzzed, the ringer turned to vibrate. Whoever it was, was persistent and a frisson of worry made him ease away from Grace and tuck the covers securely around her.

Crossing the room, navigating by the faint illumination from the bathroom nightlight, he fished the phone out and peered at the screen. Kamil.

Moving down the hall, he walked into the room Grace used as an office and called his friend.

"Sorry to call so late."

"It's not late. What's up?"

"I'm heading back tonight."

"Okay?" Their business was complete. Kamil had stayed longer because of Charity.

His friend huffed a strangled chuckle. "I've made no secret of my interest in women, Beck. Marriage, as a son considerably down the pecking order in my family, hasn't been on anyone's radar, at least not yet. And not for a long time. So I've ... um, sampled, I suppose you might say."

"I was a sampler too, buddy."

"Until you met Grace."

"Right." And even if he hadn't knocked her up, he knew now for sure he'd have been done sampling and locked her down. His teeth ground at his stupidity and he forced himself to let it go. Grace had forgiven him or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

"Charity is my Grace."

"Kamil, you just met her."

"And spent every possible minute with her. Most of them in bed, I grant you, but all the same..."

"Yet, you're going home. What? Are you taking her to meet your family?" Holy fuck, he had to work to get his head around this.

"I'm going home because Charity pointed me in that direction."

"Wait. She showed you the door?"

"Is that like kicked me out of her bed? Told me it was fun but over?"

"Shit."

"I hope I was as gracious to the women to whom I've conveyed the same message."

His friend sounded ... raw. "I'll come see you off. When's your plane

leave?”

“Get back in bed with your wife, man. I expect that’s where you were. At least I hope so. The jet is waiting for me to board. I didn’t want to wait any longer in case you were in bed. And you were, weren’t you?”

“Yes.” He felt like he was rubbing salt on Kamil’s wound.

“Good. As insanely randy as I was for Charity tonight I couldn’t help but notice the chemistry between you and Grace. I could only hope you’d follow up.”

It was bad timing and maybe bad taste, but he had to say it. Who better than to Kamil, who’d waved some weird marital counseling wand only a few months back. “She took me back. I think she’s forgiven me, somehow, and now I can make it up to her.”

“Good man.” There was nothing but sincerity in his friend’s voice. “Don’t screw it up again.”

“From your lips to anyone’s Deity’s ears,” he said.

“I need to go.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. Really. Are you sure?”

“She was sure, and that’s what matters. It’ll pass, whatever it is.” Now his tone reflected rueful acceptance.

Beckett didn’t know what else to say. “We’ll talk soon.”

“Certainly. Take care, my friend.”

Shaking his head, he made his way back to bed, dropping the phone on the nightstand. Did he tell Grace? Or let Charity call her? He’d decide in the morning, and with a sigh, some of the joy of the evening rubbed off and he got into bed.

Spooning up against his wife, reveling in the way she snuggled her sweet ass against his hopeful cock, he again dropped an arm over her and cleared his head of anything but their new beginning.

He woke to the sound of the doorbell, a still unfamiliar noise because he’d never been home long enough to really hear it used. Grace’s spot was cool to the touch and he blinked at the bedside clock. Nearly nine, long past when he usually got up. Last night had taken more of a toll than he imagined, and he wondered how his wife was feeling.

Passing up the shower—his brain served up a tasty memory of having his hands all over Grace in there—he dragged on a pair of sweats before hastily brushing his teeth, and throwing some water on his face. The tousled,

stubbled look would have to do, though he circled back for a t-shirt in the event it was company easily offended.

As he gained the top of the stairs, he heard raised voices—Grace and a man, two men—and took the treads two at a time. He skidded into the dining room, faced with his wife pale and trembling, her slender form wrapped closely in the robe he'd set out for her. The scent of coffee filled the air and he realized she'd come down to start breakfast.

Her father and his stared his way but he only had eyes for Grace. “What’s going on?”

She opened and closed her mouth, eyes sheening with moisture and he hustled over, putting his arms around her. “Sweetheart, what is it?”

Stiffening in his hold, she freed a hand and pointed wordlessly at the table. He looked to see a number of papers there, some flattened and some still rolled. Squinting, reluctant to let go of her, he recognized her designs, blown up to a much larger size. How had they gotten there?

His father said, “I saw these on your desk. Not that you’re ever there nowadays. I don’t hold with executives working from home, Beckett, but anyway, I didn’t recognize the name. Your secretary said you’d ordered them. I showed them to George. Figured you found a new designer, but he said the signature was Grace’s. Using her mother’s maiden name.”

Langdon blustered, “Nonsense, that. Pseudonyms. But I can admit there’s raw talent there. So we came over. Time I mended some fences, seeing as Grace is taking an interest in the business.”

“I’m not doing any such thing. I told you.” Grace tried to extricate herself from his hold but he tightened it, knowing that if he let her go, he’d never fix this.

“She’s an independent,” he said, staring both older men down.

Her father shook his head. “Absolutely not. Alfred agrees. You’re offering offcuts.”

“As a distributor. Grace hasn’t accepted.” He was relieved to feel her cease her efforts to put space between them, though she still held herself stiffly.

“We have a say in that.”

“Then I don’t accept. I don’t need your help.” She glared at her father, who looked away.

He murmured against her hair. “You do what you want, sweetheart. It’s your choice and I’m behind you all the way. But he’s trying to save face.

He's reaching out."

For a moment, her face set in mutinous lines, hurt flashing in her silver eyes. Then, she said, "There will have to be a formal agreement. Because I'm not becoming part of the company."

His father took a step forward. "You have talent, Grace. Our company has a lot to offer you. And you, to the company. We don't have a maternity line."

"No."

"Is this because of the quick wedding? Not going to college? You trying to assert your independence?" Langdon asked. "You were pregnant, girl. Beckett did the right thing and you weren't shamed."

Beckett couldn't control himself. "The wedding was a mistake, George." Grace gasped and he sent her a reassuring smile, squeezing her tighter. "At least the reason for it. But only because of me and my ego. My arrogance and hatred of being told what to do."

"Pah. You have to make the best of things. And you're still under the same roof. Expecting my grandchild."

"After putting your daughter through a year of misery," he said quietly. "Treating her in much the same fashion as you did, with coldness and casual cruelty. To my everlasting shame." So much for mending fences, but he could care less at that moment.

Langdon's face drained of both color and bluster, his mouth setting in a thin line.

Before he could respond, Beckett continued, "I couldn't see what was in front of me through my sense of entitlement. I had no idea I had exactly what I wanted, though fortunately some part of me did, and I respected one of my marriage vows. I fell down on the cherish and honor piece and pretended I didn't know what love meant."

His father-in-law blustered some more, "Beckett, you are insinuating ___"

"That you didn't provide anything close to what fathers should offer their children? I am. And if you hope to have any sort of a relationship with Grace, you'd better figure it out. Start with respect. Appreciate her and her qualities. I'll give you a list if you like. Find it in your heart to love her. It's easy."

His father shuffled in place, looking everywhere but at him or Grace. He said, "Perhaps we should leave, George."

“Right.” Langdon forced a thin smile.

They showed themselves out and when the door closed, Beckett released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. He cautiously loosened his grip on Grace and looked into her face. “Are you okay? I wanted the designs to be a surprise. I planned to pick them up today and get them framed.”

“You love me?”

He knew his mouth dropped open and struggled to close it. Wrenching his thoughts into order and away from explaining how her designs came to end up in their fathers’ hands, he replayed her question. He told her the truth. “I love you, Grace. Insanely. So much that I can’t believe I could deny it for so long.”

“You said lots of sexy, exciting things when we dated. And then you didn’t say those anymore unless we were ... having sex.”

Fuck. Why would this woman want his sorry ass? “I think I fell in love with you probably the second date we went on. In that little Italian restaurant when you wore that blue dress with the full skirt. I longed to put you in something that would show your slender body and those surprising curves so I didn’t have to struggle with my imagination. Except you already gave me a permanent hard-on. The same restaurant where that baby screamed and you were so nice to its mother when the rest of us wished she hadn’t brought the kid. I knew you were special. And I hadn’t even gotten to second base yet!”

He paced away, turning to stare at her. “I’m sure I didn’t say anything nice after we married. In fact, I know I refused to acknowledge that you loved me. I’ve tried to make up for that these past months by being honest about how I feel about you, but I wasn’t. Not totally.”

Her silver gaze searched his, staring into his soul. “Until now?”

“Until now. You told me you had nothing in your heart for me any longer. But I couldn’t give up hope, even if I was too shit scared to put myself out there. I’m saying it now. I love you, even if you can’t love me back. Forgiving me is enough. Staying with me and having our child is more than enough.”

“I never stopped loving you, Beckett. I thought I could do it, and maybe I could have if I moved out. And I wanted you to be happy, find someone else you weren’t forced to be with. But you asked me to stay.”

He couldn’t fill his lungs with enough air to traverse the distance between them, but he did it. Cupping his hands around her face, he said,

“You make me happy. And if you’d left, I’d have followed. Got myself branded as a stalker. Fuck me, Grace, the terror and despair I felt the night you announced you were leaving me. I’d just convinced myself I’d be all noble and shit, apologize to you and trade on your feelings to start anew instead of owning my crap.”

Her bottom lip quivering, she said, “Tell me again.”

“I love you. Forever. I’ve never been more certain of anything now that I’ve come to realize you’re by far the most important person in my life.”

She sagged against him. “Thank you for standing beside me against our fathers. For understanding.”

Holding her close, he said, “Hey. I figured it out. And for all the other times ahead that I don’t, I’m sure you’ll help me.”

“I will.”

“C’mon. Let me feed you.”

Over a cup of tea—reheated coffee for him—he said, “Kamil went back home last night.”

“I thought that was today.”

“Apparently Charity showed him the door.”

She sipped her beverage and carefully set the cup down. “She knows what she wants. I guess that didn’t include Kamil. Was he ... upset?”

“He was. And aware of the role reversal.”

“Ah. He’s used to doing the walking.”

“Maybe you can put a good word in for him.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I’m not getting involved. If Charity wants to talk about it, that’s fine. But otherwise, no. I’m hardly an expert on relationships.”

“Me neither,” he admitted. “But Kamil was instrumental in making me take stock and owning my shit.”

“You can’t curse around the baby.”

It was his turn to blink. As a distraction, it felt effective. “Grace. I guess I do curse.”

“Frequently.” She smiled into her cup as she lifted it to her lips.

“I’ll work on it. And Kamil and Charity will have to meet again, seeing as they’re godparents.” He figured he’d won that one.

Chapter Twelve

He walked her from the car, one arm around her waist, clutching a humongous pillow in his free hand. Now that she'd taken him back, he was free to put his hands on her at any time—whenever she welcomed his touch, and that was often.

“Tired?”

Her light laugh drew a smile. “I’ve spent the last couple of hours either sitting or lying down, Beckett. I’m feeling strangely energized and content, all at the same time.”

Birthing classes did loan themselves to the mothers-to-be reclining on floor mats, supported by their partners or a pillow. Taking some different positions to facilitate giving birth. He thought he had the breathing exercises down pat, pushing away the reason for them. Women might have been having babies since the beginning of time, but he wanted to spare this one even a hint of pain.

Drawing his hand across her belly, where the baby stretched her soft skin so taut, he reluctantly released her to open the front door. Ushering her inside, he tucked the pillow on a top shelf in the closet, emptied just for that purpose, and took her purse to hang up. “I’m surprised you aren’t tired, seeing as she wakes up when you try to sleep and vice versa.”

“You’re fascinated with seeing her move,” she said, teasing him, a light in her gray eyes.

“And feeling her, but that’s another excuse to feel you.”

She sashayed away, toward the stairs, and he soaked in that sexy walk, delighting in her confidence that she had his complete attention. From behind, aside from a fuller ass, she didn’t look pregnant at all, until seen from the front or side.

Their child featured prominently, weighing down his wife’s slender frame, her breasts full and rounded above the bulge at her midsection. He wasn’t sure what he studied more often. Her face had filled out a little, detracting from her waif-like appearance, her mouth soft with what he was certain was contentment, as she’d said. Maybe satisfaction.

“Where are you going?”

Pausing at the foot of the stairs, she threw him a look over her shoulder that made him instantly react, hardening for her. “I might be a little tired. I was thinking I’d take a nap.”

He was tired too. It just came over him, and he hustled in her wake.
“I’ll help.”

“Thank you, Beckett.” Her sweet voice was full of laughter.

The silky top caught on the roughened skin of his fingers as he lifted it over her head and tossed it on the bench at the foot of the bed. Her bra, pale pink and appearing insubstantial, somehow restrained and supported her breasts. He popped the clasp and replaced the support with his hands, cupping the heavy mounds.

Grace moaned deep in her throat and tipped her head back, her eyes drifting shut. She worried at her bottom lip and he leaned in to kiss her.

“Nervous?”

“Sensitive.”

“Hmmm. I’ll be gentle.” He moved his mouth to her nipple, laving it into a harder point, enjoying her pleasure-filled whimpers.

Her fingers worked through his hair, pressing him closer, their child embraced between them, and he ministered to her other breast. Lifting his head, he then gathered her up and carried her the short distance to their bed. He picked her up at any opportunity, having learned how it made her feel, and she bestowed a sultry smile on him.

She tilted her hips to facilitate the removal of the clothing covering her lower body and he stared down at her, her breasts rising with each breath, their tips reddened and still damp from his mouth. The rounded shape of her belly rested above her mound, framed by her milky thighs.

“You’re so pale,” he said. “Perfect.”

She blinked up at him, eyes hazy with need. “I was cautious in the sun. Hurry.”

There was no embarrassment reflected in either her demeanor or words of late, open and confident before his gaze and he held that fact as precious as any treasure. He’d never abuse it. Stripping off his own clothes, he nearly preened before her heated stare, glad his appearance appealed to her as much as hers did to him.

He sprawled over her, careful not to have her take too much of his weight, rubbing his nose against hers. “How do you want it, sweetheart?”

It had become a game of choices of late—lady’s choice—depending on Grace’s comfort. She murmured, “On top.”

He obligingly rolled over and she followed, somehow flipping to her side before he could help, despite her center of gravity being out of whack.

She slipped to the edge of the mattress and to the floor, kneeling in the same motion.

Lifting up on his elbows, her stare tracking the muscles in his abdomen, he said, “You don’t have to do that.”

“I have a craving.” One silky brow arched and she shook her hair back.

No sane man ever refused that offer and he hitched closer, his knees folding over the edge as Grace nestled between them. She looked fucking gorgeous and he said so, without the profanity.

She ran her cheek over his thigh, her breath stirring against his skin and his cock jumped, begging for attention. Flicking her tongue over the crease where his leg joined his body, she steadily drove him insane, especially when one small hand came up to cradle his sac.

“Grace. Please.”

Lifting her head, she regarded him with amusement colored with passion. “Anticipation, Beck. Remember.”

Tit for tat. He remembered and laid back with a groan, resolving to enjoy the experience. Grace wouldn’t be rushed. After an eternity of exploring the flesh all around where he craved it the most, she drew the flat of that tortuous tongue up the underside of his cock to flirt with the tip before engulfing him. Her lips closed tightly and she pressed downward and back up to ever increasing depths until he felt the back of her throat.

He somehow didn’t move, didn’t jerk his hips or grab her hair and take over, leaving her to her own devices, dying from the torment. He couldn’t contain his groans of enjoyment and clenched his fists in the bedding to keep from coming.

When he knew he was about to lose control, he eased her away. “I want to make love with you, sweetheart.”

A radiant smile lifted the corners of her swollen mouth and she leaned into his hold as he lifted her to her feet and lowered her on him. Her knees pressing beside his thighs, she took him inside, his girth stretching her wide on that tiny gasp she always made when he entered her. The one that stroked his male ego.

He kept his hands on her hips to ensure she didn’t go too deep, restraining himself at the same time. She rode him in tiny increments, much in the same way her mouth had lovingly encompassed his cock, trusting him with her safety.

It was her favorite position of late, allowing her to come on her own

terms, and he watched her face as she dropped her head back, her torso lifting, her hair a cloud around her shoulders.

She stilled and clenched around him, a tiny moan announcing her climax. He let himself follow, riding the wave, his cock milked by the ripples of her channel.

As she slumped forward, he caught her close and held her as he softened, their bodies cooling as their breath slowed. “Ready for that nap now?”

“Mmmm.”

Taking that for a yes, he stood with her in his arms and swiveled to lower her down, shoving back the covers with one hand, something he’d become accomplished at. Multitasking, Grace called it. “Sweet dreams.”

Her lids lifted in a languid movement he never tired of seeing. His sated wife. “Love you.”

“Love you back.”

Moving quietly to the bathroom, he studied himself in the mirror, searching for the father he knew he could be. Worthy of their child’s mother. Thinking he recognized him, he cleaned up and found some pajama pants to pull on. Hardly what a CEO wore on the job, but he made his own rules—to suit what Grace needed, grateful he had the freedom to choose.

It wouldn’t be too many more weeks before she gave birth to their child, most probably a little girl with her mother’s sweet temperament and mass of hair. Maybe with his eyes, although Grace’s silvery gray orbs would be just fine, too. He wasn’t as anxious with Grace this far along, but the labor and delivery would be another mountain to climb, feeling his wife’s moods as keenly as he did now. He could admit to dreading that part for her sake.

He was totally prepared however, book smart, and would face and overcome whatever came next.

Chapter Thirteen

She'd felt crappy all day, not really sick, but out of sorts. Vague aches and pains and an upset stomach. The baby was effaced and far less active, yet there was no other sign she was ready to enter the world. Where were those famed Braxton-Hicks contractions so she could get a taste of what was to come? All the books in the world and the classes couldn't really explain, although in Beckett's vivid imagination, apparently they did.

Despite the changes to her body and the discomfort, Grace wanted to remain pregnant. Sure, her belly resembled a ripe watermelon and preceded her like a reputation, making it a trial to tie her shoes and creating a challenge to sleep comfortably, but carrying a child seemed representative of the wonderful change in her marriage. Maybe she wasn't ready to embrace yet another change.

Beckett was a wonderful husband, his habit of leaving wet towels on the floor, notwithstanding. He continued to manage the business primarily from home while she worked on the floor above. They saw one another at meals—and any other time they simply wanted to connect. Her face flushed when she thought of the frequent sexual trysts, christening most every room in the house.

Her sexual appetite hadn't waned and Dr. Gibson repeatedly reassured her husband it was safe, even healthy. That was a bonus in being pregnant and she wanted sex all the time. Well, maybe she wasn't interested in anything today. In fact, she thought she'd lie down for a while.

"Sweetheart?" Beckett bounded up the stairs, intercepting her on the way to the master bedroom. He halted. "Are you done for the day?"

He'd quit fussing to a large a degree, stopped demanding what was wrong when she so much as sighed, was entranced when he could actually feel the baby moving, and often poring over the sonogram pictures. She caught him squinting at them, trying to determine the sex, alternately shopping for a boy and then a girl.

When she teased him, he'd laugh it off. "It'll keep for our next."

When he'd said he was all in, he'd meant it. She was taking it one baby at a time. She answered his question, "I'm doing the final approvals on the spring line."

It was crazy how well her clothing had done, but she was staying small and keeping to boutiques run by women like her—entrepreneurs.

At some point, she'd look at the bulk market but didn't feel confident, not even with Beckett's support and her father's fabrics. That man had dialed back his attitude over the past months and they'd forged an uneasy truce. But, unlike her husband, he never assumed responsibility for the way he'd treated her and she'd never trust him with her child. It didn't help that he hinted she'd gotten her talent from him.

"Theresa still hiring staff?"

"A few." She stopped dead, her breath catching as her entire lower body seemed to seize.

"Hey." Beckett stepped to her side. "What's going on?"

A rush of heated fluid raced down her thighs and for a moment she was transported back to that horrible other time, but a quick glance verified it wasn't that at all. "My water broke."

"Your due date is a week away."

Resting a hand on the wall, she said, "Are we going to argue dates when this baby has picked hers?"

"Fuck. I mean, damn." He'd cleaned up his language for the most part but clearly, this wasn't one of those times. "Here, let's get you to the bathroom."

With economical movements, belied by the wild look in his eyes, he scooped her up and bore her there. She accepted his help in removing her soiled clothing and smiled when he pressed a kiss on her belly. "Give Dad a moment," he muttered.

He had her quickly dressed in one of her own creations, a swingy dress with its own built-in bra, and a pair of underwear that he dithered over.

"Let's go, Beckett," she urged, her back suddenly aching and her belly clenching.

Her case under his arm, he wrapped the other around her waist to help her down the steps, where she braced herself on his side to toe into her shoes. All the while, he kept muttering about schedules and lists. He blurted, "Wait. My phone."

After retrieving it from the den, he returned to guide her out of the house and toward the car, stopping while she breathed through what was obviously a non-Braxton-Hicks contraction. She hoped other lessons from prenatal class soon kicked in. The classes Beckett attended with her and reviewed with her ad nauseum. Now, she was glad he paid such attention.

"You might have been off on your dates," he announced, climbing in

on the driver's side after he'd gotten her settled and seat belted in.

"Or baby's tired of waiting," she managed, rethinking this whole giving birth thing. Wasn't it supposed to be a gradual process? Give her some time to adjust and work up to the main event?

"That too." He reversed onto the street and sped away, his big, capable hands on the wheel giving her something to focus on. "Do you think you've been in labor all morning?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know." Another one gripped her, this one like a giant hand squeezing, and she couldn't suppress a moan.

"Jesus. Start taking deep breaths. More oxygen, less pain, remember?" He commanded the vehicle to call Dr. Gibson, and the disembodied voice confirmed the name and number.

She pressed her head back against the seat and breathed in and out as he'd suggested, long, slow breaths and felt better until the next contraction hit. Vaguely hearing the conversation with the doctor, she left that all up to Beckett. She had her own job to do.

They arrived at the hospital and were met by a nurse and an orderly at the door who bundled her onto a gurney. "I'll park and be right back," Beckett promised.

It killed her to see him out of eyeshot, but she was soon distracted by an increase in contractions and exorbitant pain. Screaming felt optimum but she moaned instead.

The nurse directed them behind a drape hanging from the ceiling and helped to ease her legs up, checking between them. "You're well along. Your husband was succinct and I expect Dr. Gibson should be in the delivery suite by now."

"It hasn't been long," she protested. And then whimpered.

"Some women are just lucky, dear. Quick labor. Hard, but quick. No point in hanging around for days."

Days? She'd die. She might die anyhow. "Beckett?"

"Here. I'm here." His deep voice and familiar scent soothed her.

"Good," she gasped. "I can't do this without you."

"She's ahead of schedule," he explained to the nurse.

Laughter in her voice, the woman said, "Whose schedule? Babies don't tell time, I've found."

As they rushed into another room, this one cold and dominated by what looked like a huge chair and a ton of equipment, she spied her doctor through

a pain that made her squeak and nearly drive Beckett to his knees as he stumbled beside her.

“I arranged this suite just in case,” Dr. Gibson said.

They’d discussed her narrow pelvic girdle at length but a C-section hadn’t been in the cards. Grace felt herself being efficiently moved onto the chair and her panties again whisked away, the cool air washing over her. Beckett was almost as accomplished at removing underwear and she shot him a glare.

“I’m not doing this again,” she hissed and then bit her lip against the hurt.

“You’re not,” he agreed. “We’ll just practice.”

Threatening one’s husband apparently wasn’t uncommon, according to the stories bandied around in the childbirth classes, but his eyes widened at her reply and he actually flinched. But he took his place by her side when she next demanded the right to push.

Everything went so quickly after that, she barely understood, but it seemed like but a moment of desperate pushing and a sense of relief before they placed a crying bundle of humanity on her belly, her dress shoved up and out of the way.

“A healthy baby boy, Grace.” Dr. Gibson patted her leg.

Beckett stared and stared, as she looked from him to their son. His face seemed hewn in stone, his skin pale, sweat on his brow to mirror hers. She reached for their child and the nurse helped her position him at her breast.

“Beckett?”

“He’s... I thought he’d be a girl. You said... He’s... I want to say beautiful.”

“Boys can be beautiful.” *You’re beautiful.*

“He’s perfect. And you’re amazing. Jesus, Grace. That was like, under two hours. I can’t even imagine. I love you so much.” He set a gentle hand on the baby who had latched onto her nipple—that had been in the classes too, most babies figuring it out. And after the initial shock, she found it soothed her.

“Grace? What are we calling him?”

“Mason James,” she offered.

“Your mother’s maiden name. The name on your designs.”

“Her birth name. And I like James.”

He kissed her nose. “Great names. Nothing to get him teased at school.

Two syllables to make it easier for him to hear when you're cross."

She laughed. "Beck. Ett."

Dr. Gibson interrupted. "We'll put you on the ward overnight. Everything looks fine, but that was startlingly quick and we'll keep an eye on your blood pressure and the little guy."

Beckett paced alongside the gurney, one hand still on Mason, his thumb pressing against her skin, right about where her heart was. She felt it swell, as exhausted as she was, room in her heart for both her men. And any other child they might be blessed with.

"I won't let him fall," she said.

"I know you won't. And I won't let either of you fall."

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

A FAR CRY FROM HOME

Peri Elizabeth Scott

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Chapter One

The lawyer's pronouncement hit her like an actual blow, the shock of his words coming way too soon after her father's untimely death for her to process rationally. The room grayed out and she had to grasp the arms of the uncomfortable client chair to keep her seat.

"Miss Ferguson?"

Old Mr. Murphy peered at her over his wire-rimmed glasses, his pale-blue watery eyes reflecting concern.

"How..." She cleared her throat. "How could this happen?"

"My dear, your father wasn't exactly ... worldly, when it came to business matters."

And didn't she know that, having taken on the bulk of the running of The Inn since she turned sixteen, hell, even earlier. Yet the loan was something she knew nothing about, had never seen any paperwork pertaining to it. "But this seems medieval!"

Even as she announced the proclamation, she recognized the absurdity, but having her power wrested away made her feel in the middle of a historical romance.

The man sitting on the left bent an assessing stare on her. He'd already been in Mr. Murphy's office when she arrived, a tall, broad-shouldered male in the prime of his life. Despite the circumstances of her visit to the lawyer—reviewing a will had unspoken implications—Regan had taken in his handsome appearance.

Even seated, he radiated a presence, and at first, she thought he was a lawyer. Learning he was a *Ferguson* had thrown up a huge, red flag, overriding her involuntary feminine reaction to such a specimen. A cousin she'd never heard of?

His dark gaze collided with hers and she wondered what he saw. Regan was fit. She had to be, what with the amount of physical work required of her. But being in shape didn't negate her size. She wasn't a dainty, anorexic example of her gender, her breasts were more than a handful, and her hips and ass made a statement. She'd taken some pains with her appearance that morning, pulling her boring, brown hair up into a semi-formal twist, donning clean, pressed khakis and the only floaty, feminine top she owned. Shades of blue to maybe match her eyes. But her scratched and calloused hands loudly proclaimed she made her living at difficult physical work.

A spark of something flickered in his eyes for an instant, too quick for her to read it, and then his whiskey-smooth tone filled the room. “It’s not like property being handed down to the first son. It was a business loan, if between families, as I understand it.”

“Did you know about this?” She wasn’t normally demanding, but she wanted to turn her shock and ire on someone.

His stare blanked before he shook his head. “I didn’t. I didn’t know about *you*. Not until Mr. Murphy called me.”

“I had to call, Regan. It was in your father’s papers, listed as a debt. I recall urging him to make the loan a priority...” The elderly lawyer shuffled those damning papers on his desk.

“You aren’t responsible for Dad’s affairs,” she quickly reassured him. Mr. Murphy looked so distressed her instinct was to soothe him. Then she got to the matter at hand—best to rip the bandage off quickly. “So, what’s the expectation?”

“You own half of The Inn. Mr. Ferguson, the other—he inherited his father’s estate. David Ferguson, your father’s older brother, and his only sibling.”

A deceased uncle she’d never met either. Uncle David. Yet her father had gone to his brother years ago to borrow money for the only place she’d remembered as home—and apparently hadn’t ever paid it back.

“Why now?”

“Excuse me?”

She faced her cousin, Maddox Ferguson. His name was as remarkable as his appearance but she focused on the immediate. “Why are you here now? If you didn’t know, haven’t missed the money...”

She trailed off, her comment lingering unpleasantly in the room. How stupid, and ... and unprofessional. People simply didn’t leave money on the table, especially not when it was theirs, free and clear. It was just that he didn’t seem to need it and she had no way of buying him out. And she was grasping at the proverbial straw.

Her throat burned with shame and grief. “Excuse me. That was ... irrational.”

Maddox nodded gravely, dark eyes gleaming with sympathy. “You’re under pressure.”

He spoke so kindly and was so handsome with his impeccably barbered hair and heavily lashed brown eyes that her turmoil was momentarily eased

before she unwillingly told him the truth. “I don’t have the money.”

A slow nod acknowledged her confession. “Perhaps I can buy you out.”

She stilled, her nails digging into the arms of the chair again. Leave her home? Move to where? The Falls? What would she do there? What about Oscar? The questions tumbled through her brain, overlapping one another. The edges of her world crumbled inward and she struggled to take a full breath.

“Of course I’d want to see the place, get an appraisal,” he continued, watching her closely.

She wondered how he’d see The Inn through his big city eyes. Rural Vermont was a long way from Boston. She could admit her home was a little shabby, even to her biased appraisal. It all became too much. She had to get out of there.

“Is there anything else I should know?” She eased her chair back. Maybe her father had left additional horrid surprises in store.

With an embarrassed glance toward Maddox, Mr. Murphy said, “The bank account is freed up, my dear. I’ve filed the necessary paperwork. I imagine you have bills to take care of.”

She only hoped there was enough to cover them, grateful her father had prepaid his funeral expenses. Maybe around the time he’d borrowed enough money to put her in this untenable situation. Forcing her trembling fingers to gather up the proffered paperwork and shove it in her bag, she gained her feet.

“Thanks, Mr. Murphy.” With a hesitant lift of her shoulder, she managed another glance toward Maddox before stumbling toward the door. “I’ll ... um, I’ll call you, cousin.”

“Can I follow you?”

“Excuse me?” She turned to find him right behind her. His scent enveloped her and she instinctively inhaled deeply. His fragrance suited him, a confident bouquet of spice and leather that sparked a flutter in her belly, a flutter that vied with all her other confused emotions. She caught herself—her future was in this man’s large, presumably capable hands and it was not the time or place for fanciful thoughts.

“If you’re heading back to The Inn, I’ll follow you, because we need to talk.” A rueful smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “And you don’t have my number.”

A minor detail. “Leave it with Mr. Murphy.”

“Perhaps we can get some lunch first?”

Regan shook her head. She should be thinking of him as the enemy and hardly wanted to break bread with him. “I need to get home. Oscar will be waiting.”

A curious expression passed over his features. “Your husband? I’d have thought he would have accompanied you.”

Despite the fact they were on opposite sides, she couldn’t help but laugh. Waving her work-roughened left hand, ring finger conspicuously free of ornamentation, she said, “Oscar’s my cat. But he missed breakfast. I left before he came home from his morning tour, and an unimpressed Oscar is a difficult Oscar.”

“Are you going to make lunch there? As well as feed your cat? I’d like to see the property.”

His persistence felt out of place, but it would be petty to refuse him a meal, and she had to eat too. She made herself ask, wondering at the way her perception of him kept changing. “Would you like to come for lunch?”

“Thank you.” His smile became a thing of beauty if one could apply that adjective to a man. It certainly appealed to her, even as her mind jumped to inventorying the pantry. He probably was accustomed to five-star meals...

The light pressure of his hand on the small of her back as he walked her to her vehicle felt proprietary and curiously comforting, at least until he gave the car the once over. Her small SUV had a lot of years and many miles on it, but it was what she had. She bit her lip to avoid apologizing for it, a wave of resentment shoving him back into enemy territory.

The door cracked open before his determined grip and made the usual creaking, wrenching sound. Thank goodness the front seat was clean. The rest of it, not so much. She hauled stuff in the back because the U in SUV stood for utility. Hers wasn’t like the four-wheel drive vehicles city folks bought, maybe imagining themselves in a situation where they’d need one. Like driving through a lump of mud and snow left by a semi on the freeway.

He waited until she settled herself and fastened the seat belt before he shut her in. She kept an eye on him as he strode toward his own vehicle. His suit fit admirably and moved right along with his fluid stride, the expensive fabric showcasing his muscular frame.

Regan sighed. She was so outclassed. And of course the Mercedes he unlocked and slid into made her American-built Ford look even shabbier. She was glad he didn’t hear how rough the engine ran, but a tune-up simply

wasn't affordable right now.

True to his word, he followed her back to The Inn, pulling up beside her in the wide drive. She chose to use the front door, the back being a trifle muddy after the recent rain and the plugged downspout.

Studying the façade, forcing herself to see it through outside eyes, she winced. If a house could look scruffy, this one did. Not the greatest first impression for her guests—or for her cousin. She told herself there were good bones behind the cosmetic and knowledgeable people would see it, but right now it appeared clunky and unkempt.

When Maddox met her at the foot of the stairs, his stern visage gave away nothing but she sensed his assessment wasn't at all favorable. Was it her imagination or did the porch floor feel a bit soft? The repairs never ended.

Working the big key into the lock, she pushed inward and felt the cool, welcoming interior envelop her. She hoped Maddox experienced it as well, and that it made up for the outside. Thank goodness she'd cleaned only yesterday. The woodwork gleamed from the care lavished on it, and the scent of the wildflowers she'd cut for the entrance table filled the air.

Of course, once a person got closer to the furniture, the age and wear were apparent, but antiques should look old, even if they weren't particularly attractive antiques. That was her story and she was sticking to it.

"You're very proud of it." His tone was conspicuously free of any inference.

She thought she was, but in trying to view it through his lenses, objectively, it wasn't as impressive as say, it would have been a hundred years ago. "It's home."

A caterwaul emanated from the direction of the kitchen and Maddox stared. "Mountain lion?"

"Maine Coon."

"Ah, an admirable breed."

And she was back to feeling comfortable with him, regardless of the fact they'd only just met and the fact he held the fate of The Inn in his hold. Perhaps it was the familial connection. Or maybe she was coming to accept the inevitable—except she wasn't a quitter. Shrugging at her ambivalence, she led the way to the heart of the home.

It too showed signs of wear, but the huge butcher block island, scarred surface and all, was mute testament to countless meals prepared there over the years. She hustled to the corner cabinet and found a tin of cat food, Oscar

fixing her with a malevolent stare.

His wealth of gray and silver fur made him look even larger than he was, although he was a hefty armful without it. “We have company, animal. Try to remember your manners.”

To her astonishment, the big cat turned his attention from the food container and sauntered over to Maddox and sniffed his shoes. Likely it was a case of two alpha males positioning, but her cousin allowed the scrutiny and didn’t seem to mind the careless sweep of Oscar’s tail over his pant cuff. Regan made a mental note to find a fabric brush.

“He doesn’t care for people much, so aside from the sunroom and in here, he doesn’t go where the guests are. If anyone’s allergic they don’t stay at The Inn.” She knew she was shooting herself in the foot, but since her father died, Oscar had been the only living thing in her life—until today. She searched for another accolade. “He takes care of the mice. And he never goes on the counters or the table.”

Maddox merely nodded, and she thought he saw more than he let on.

She set out the food and her cat fell to, clearly ravenous. The mighty hunter tended to turn his nose up at his fresh kills, preferring the slop she provided. Washing her hands, she crossed to open the huge fridge, speaking over the smacking and gobbling noises. “He eats a lot.”

“I can imagine.”

“A sandwich or an egg casserole?” She brandished a loaf of bread in one hand and held out a dozen eggs in the other.

He slipped his jacket off and laid it over the back of a chair. Rolling his sleeves up, he said, “What can I do to help?”

Dragging her stare away from his thick, tanned forearms, she stuttered, “Um... Depends on what you crave.”

Had she made a double entendre? She looked away, but not before she caught the quirk of his brow—and a flare of interest in his eyes.

“There are a few things I crave, Regan, but we don’t know one another well enough to discuss those.” He flashed her a smile. “If we put together an egg thing you can take me for a tour while it bakes.”

We. A gorgeous, sexy man who was at home in the kitchen, talking about *cravings*. Under other circumstances, she might be seeing this as some kind of sign. But she had to keep her eye on the prize and not be diverted by something as mundane as ... lust. Somehow, she had to find a way to persuade Maddox to let her keep The Inn, and that meant not treating him

like the enemy, but not as an ... object of interest, either.

Out of necessity, her libido had been in hibernation for a long time. The Inn being her love concern, it was trying that this man—her cousin—had piqued her interest in that regard. Inconvenient and bizarre, though she'd have to be blind not to notice his appeal.

He efficiently chopped scallions, peppers, broccoli, and mushrooms while she heated butter in one of the big copper skillets. Her father had been the chef, if without the letters to his name, who kept the paying guests happy with his food, but she could put together a tasty breakfast and cook most basic meals well. If she had the time.

She softened the vegetables in the hot pan while she beat several eggs with a hit of cream and seasonings. Maddox grated sharp cheese at her request. A few slices of country ham lined the bottom of a glass baking dish and he layered the mushrooms and scallions over them before she poured in the eggs. They worked well in tandem, like a pair of horses newly harnessed, and it fed her sense of unreality.

As the cheese alternately sank and floated in the mixture, she dotted in some breadcrumbs and surveyed the results. Maddox loomed beside her and she felt, more than saw him nod, intensely aware of him. "Looks great."

The dish went in the oven and she set the timer. An hour seemed an eon away, seeing as Oscar wasn't the only one who'd missed breakfast. Except hers had been skipped because of a tightly drawn stomach. And hadn't she been right to be concerned?

Adopting a formal tone, trying to build a little distance, she said, "I'll show you around."

She started with the sunroom, off the kitchen. There was a seating area for guests, but she used it primarily to dry herbs and such from the vegetable gardens, and the air was redolent with their aromas, from savory to earthy. The afternoon sun slanted through the old glass panes, the heat absorbed by the flagstone floors. Somehow, all the glass had survived but the frames sagged, and the floors dipped in the center of some of the slabs.

"Do your guests spend a lot of time here?"

He was trespassing into her space again. She could feel the heat of his body, smell his fragrance, and she hastily stepped away before she did something rash, like stroke one of those firm forearms. "A few. Mostly older guests. They like to read out here."

He didn't have a clipboard or notepad but she knew he was making

notes. She hoped there were more pros than cons.

Next was the dining room, all dark wooden paneling, and heavy furniture. It was an imposing room with the tapestry-like draperies drawn back from the tall windows, their wavy glass freshly washed, but maybe it looked depressing to him. She could admit it was dated and not in an appealing, historical way. Maddox looked around but said nothing.

The stairs creaked as they climbed them and she hoped he didn't feel the tremor in the banister.

"There are six guest bedrooms up here. Four have their own baths. The others share one. My father's room can easily become another guest bedroom with a private bath." She showed him each one, proud of the size and brightness, never mind that the linens were a bit dated.

"I haven't told you I'm sorry for your loss." He stared into her eyes and she blinked.

"Thank you. It was a shock." Having the police turn up mid-afternoon during a deluge had been discomfiting, and their news about her father's car accident spoke to them being bearers of bad news. It had been over a month ago, but it sometimes felt as if it had happened only yesterday.

"It takes time."

His quiet response felt like a balm, accepting and certain, and she managed a smile. Until he turned on taps and flushed toilets and the plumbing rattled in the walls and two toilets made ominous, gurgling noises. Any sense of comfort faded rapidly.

When he flicked a switch in one of the bedrooms, the overhead light flickered before settling into a warm glow. Unfortunately, while everything was well maintained, the age was apparent.

"What's the state of the wiring?"

"I'm not sure..." Her first lie couldn't make it past her lips.

"Knob and tube?" He made it sound like a death sentence and it could well be.

"Up here, yes. We've rewired downstairs. We have lots of smoke detectors and emergency exits."

His silence spoke volumes as he moved to a closed room. "What's in there?"

"My room." She wasn't opening that door and kept walking. Her narrow bed and sparse belongings made it look like a monk's cell, though nothing about this man had her thinking celibate thoughts, damn it. Despite

his obvious antipathy for the state of The Inn, all she had, and he was making her feel more threatened by the moment.

They made their way downstairs to the sitting room and he stood in the middle, like a lion surveying his territory. Or maybe a panther. And it wasn't *all* his. She still owned half. Maybe the top half with the crappy wiring and suspect plumbing.

More roiling resentment coursed through her and she fought the urge to tell him to get the hell out. The Inn was still her home, as old and worn as it appeared, and no good-looking man was worth a change in her opinion.

She got herself under control, aware Maddox was observing her, giving her time. Was he watching her with something other than familial interest? Her experience with men left her guessing. She only knew the air in the room felt thicker when he was in the space and it confused her.

She gazed around. This area was brighter than the dining room, with more windows and gossamer curtains. Various arrangements of furniture dotted the large area and invited—to Regan's eye—a person to sit and relax. To read or simply look out on the views.

"This is pleasant." He moved to the big fireplace anchoring the room and tapped on the chimney breast.

Regan held her breath against any of the stone falling free, and she was in luck. The chimney itself needed cleaning before it could be used this winter and a thorough check of the mortar had to be undertaken. She'd been setting a few dollars aside, just for that purpose.

"Can we sit down? But not in that dining room." His distaste came through loud and clear, evident in the furrow in his brow and his set lips.

"We can sit in the kitchen, at the island. I'll make tea while the casserole finishes."

Maddox winced, slightly, but she caught it. "Would you prefer coffee?"

"I don't suppose you have anything stronger."

She had a bottle of wine stuck in the back cupboard, a full-bodied red, but she wasn't sharing. So he didn't love The Inn the way she did. He was doubtless used to big city extravagance. Didn't matter. He wasn't getting her wine. "Sorry."

"Coffee's fine."

He checked out cabinets while she set up the brewer and located plates and silverware. He set the island with the place settings close together and she casually moved them so they were facing one another with the width of

the island between them. She wanted to keep it appearing businesslike, away from his intriguing scent.

That meant not changing into more comfortable clothing, and she decided to view her dressed-up look as armor. She didn't really want to sit down and talk, certain what he had to say was nothing she wanted to hear, so she bought a few more minutes by locating some cream and sugar.

Pouring him a large cup of coffee, she doctored her own, smaller version and sat on a stool where she could keep an eye on the stove. Sometimes the pilot light went out unexpectedly.

"Black's fine," he said when she slid the cream his way.

Of course, he drank it black, all sophisticated, no-frills—unless he favored those bistros. He was out of luck in The Falls. The best he'd get would be one of those frothy, chemical drinks from the units at the gas station on the outskirts, although Sally at the bakery was making noises about stocking fancy coffees. She sipped at hers and nearly moaned at the flavor that burst over her taste buds. Her belly was glad of the sustenance too.

"So, we're cousins." Not actually, but she debated whether or not to share that fact. "Who knew?"

Those dark, mysterious eyes regarded her, set deeply in his strongly featured face. She knew she was staring but couldn't seem to help herself. Besides, she didn't want to hear his take on The Inn. It seemed far more important to decipher what message he was conveying at the moment. Unless she was imagining things.

"Our fathers must not have had any relationship, at least not since I can recall," he said. "I knew he had a brother, I saw a family bible in his effects, but nothing to indicate they'd been in contact."

And he hadn't been interested enough to find out. That chapped her a little. Chances were they'd never have connected if it hadn't been for those damn loan papers. "So, no contact over the past few decades."

Nodding, he drank his coffee and she had the sense he was choosing his words. "My mother's alive, and I have a sister."

Regan blinked. She cautiously explored the idea of actually having living family—if pseudo-family members. "Is your sister older or younger?"

"Younger. Her name is Naomi. Married and with two kids. Expecting another." He drank more coffee. "My mother became a bit of a recluse when my father died some time back. Heart attack."

"I'm sorry. You must worry about her."

“She lives in a gated community and prefers her own company, though I do try to stop by often.”

She didn't have a lot to offer about her family. “My ... mom passed from cancer some time ago and Dad and I rubbed along okay. We had The Inn to keep us going.”

“Again, I'm sorry for your loss.” And he looked sorry, his mouth slightly pursed and his eyes warm with sympathy. She supposed he knew what it was like, having lost his own father. He likely knew that time was the only thing that helped a little.

“It's been difficult,” she admitted. “But life goes on.”

They sat in relatively comfortable silence, broken only by the sounds of the appliances and the ticking of the clock. A faint drip in the sink reminded Regan to change out the washer when she found a moment.

“This place is a money pit.”

Wow. So much for a little bonding. Straight for the jugular. “There are some repairs outstanding,” she allowed.

“Regan. Please don't minimize.” He watched her with those dark eyes. Deep set beneath sooty brows, the lashes were swoon-worthy and complemented the now charcoal-black irises. She admonished herself to quit writing sonnets to them. He was saying things she didn't want to hear!

Exasperation tightened the skin over his cheekbones, and his handsomeness nearly made her speechless. How was he so familiar to her? She'd known him maybe two, three hours and she could read him, or at least sense his moods. Not that it made his assertion any easier to swallow.

“We've been holding our own,” she argued.

“But now there's only you,” he said, his tone gentle and understanding.

Her heart twisted at the reminder. She tried hard not to think about her father, torn between sadness and anger, both over his careless driving and careless financial acumen. “I can do it.”

The oven timer buzzed, a welcome distraction, so she hopped up and carefully removed the egg dish. It steamed and the aromas it gave off were fantastic. She breathed them in, craving the momentary comfort, and then set it on the island. A spatula would work as a serving spoon, so she dug one out of the utensil drawer.

“Do you have the capital to fund the repairs?” Maddox watched her over the rim of his coffee cup.

Shoveling egg mixture onto their plates, giving him an extra heaping

spoonful, she shook her head. “I have to do everything in stages.”

He waited for her to be seated before matching her enthusiasm for the meal, his utensils flashing as he placed eggs onto his fork. “It’s a shame you don’t have siblings to help.”

Taking a deep breath, she told him the truth, knowing someone would eventually spill the beans. “My ... parents couldn’t have children, Maddox. I’m adopted.”

Something took place in that instant. He stilled, his fork midway to his mouth, and this time she couldn’t read him, although something inside of her leaped to interpret the message. It was over as quickly as it transpired and he took another taste of the meal.

“This is really good. I haven’t had something like this since I was a kid and our housekeeper baked stuff for me and my sister.”

Curiosity pricked her interest hard, what with that strange reaction, but his praise seemed honest. He actually did like it, she supposed, even if it was lowbrow. He didn’t reference her adoptive status, so he was either trying to avoid the subject, spare her, or it didn’t matter.

Her appetite wasn’t as sharp, what with his less than stellar impression of The Inn, but she took a few bites. He didn’t seem to mind sharing with her so she asked, “Are you married?”

“No. Still single. How old are you?”

“Twenty-five, nearly. You?”

“Thirty-four.”

“What do you do for work?”

“I have a finance company in Boston and some subsidiaries.”

He had a company. Didn’t run it. He *owned* it. An idea niggled in the back of her brain. She thought it through, using the food and drink to give herself a little time.

Gathering her courage, she put it out there. “Could you ... loan me the money to make the necessary repairs? With the appropriate interest, of course. I’d pay you back. I don’t owe the bank too much.”

A moment passed before he said, “Have you approached the bank for additional funds?”

She ducked her head. “I have. But they weren’t really willing.”

“Did you have trouble making payments in the past?”

It killed her to admit it, but if he checked things out—and he had a right to—he’d find out anyhow. “We got behind sometimes.”

A tiny silence stretched out and she forced herself to look at him. Now, his eyes were like melted chocolate, warm and soft, somehow. “Regan, I wonder if you shouldn’t take a step back and really look at your situation. Perhaps I can help you—”

“The Inn is important to me,” she hurried to say, effectively cutting off whatever help he might offer outside of a loan. She couldn’t let him tempt her, driven by the need to hang onto something familiar.

“I understand that. But have you considered the fact The Inn is far off the beaten path? And the other little things?”

“Like wiring and plumbing?” she asked, bitterness coloring her tone.

“And the fact people don’t like sharing bathrooms. And there’s little for people with children to do. That means you’re catering to an older group. And those who are still traveling have money and will expect so much more.”

How did he know all of that to be able to throw the facts out there so blithely? She hardly knew how to respond. “There are still people who appreciate historical charm.”

He was kind enough not to challenge her assertion that The Inn and its contents had a claim to historical. “Enough to make it worth your while? And make you a living?”

Her lack of bookings probably meant he was right on the money, but she was stubborn and this was all she knew. “If I had the money to fix things up, it would be different. And you haven’t even seen the grounds.”

“Then, if you’re finished, show me.”

With a final sip, she wiped her lips and squirmed off the stool. Maddox’s gaze swept over her once again and that spark flared. She blinked, and it was gone, leaving her wondering if it had even happened. Whatever it was. A fire lit in her belly and had nothing to do with the peppers in the omelet.

At this rate, the way her emotions kept flipping she’d never keep her head straight.

End of sample chapter.

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