

Secret Baby
FOR
DR. BILLIONAIRE

LEAH MAHON

Secret Baby for Dr. Billionaire

An Enemies to Lovers Age Gap Romance

Leah Mahon



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Prologue

CHLOE

The bartender slid another Cuba Libre my way. Oh, no. I was already on my fifth one, and if I had one more, I wouldn't be able to take myself home.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't order this," I told the bartender as he wiped a glass with a towel. The speakeasy was quiet and classy, with its dark mahogany bar and violin tunes playing in the background. When I looked around the first time, there were more men in suits than teenagers who were swaying their hips.

Tonight, I was wearing a spaghetti-strap Bodycon dress I never thought I'd picked up at the back of the closet and black heels from a thrift shop downtown. My dark hair was tied up in a ponytail, showing some skin on my neck and chest.

Drinking on a Friday night wasn't a very Chloe Kennedy thing to do. Not only was I trying to save money, but I was also trying to live as healthy as I could. I hadn't had a severe asthma attack for years, only mild ones that could be easily managed with my trusty old inhaler. After I was rushed to the

hospital six years ago and thought I was going to die from lack of oxygen, I knew I needed to change my lifestyle. But when my students decided to throw paint at each other earlier in class today, I knew I deserved a drink. Or six.

“The man at the end of the bar bought it for you,” the bartender pointed out.

I slid my attention to the guy he was talking about, and sure enough, there was a sexy man there, leaning against the bar in a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, showing his corded forearms. I squinted in the harsh light of the bar to see his face, which apparently wasn't a good idea because the man chuckled, shook his head, pushed himself off the bar, and started walking in my direction.

Shit.

I followed the man with my eyes, and I tried to be as sexy as I could be in my state. His eyes didn't leave mine either, except when he was close enough to check me out. His gaze went down, taking in my long, bare legs, and went back up to meet my dark, alluring eyes.

“You squinted,” he pointed as he took up the empty space beside me. He looked gorgeous—like a Greek god, maybe six-foot-three, with the most beautiful hazel eyes I'd ever seen. He was definitely older than me just by the way his eyes looked—like they'd seen so much. Regardless, he was in remarkable shape. A light stubble painted his chin, and he smelled so good. The scent was expensive and included something clean, woody, topped with smoky notes.

“This got you where I wanted you,” I joked, taking the drink he had bought me. Oh, what the hell.

“I've never seen you here before...” He's clearly waiting for me to tell him my name. And this led me to the reason why I don't go out drinking

frequently.

“Stranger danger,” I said in a sing-song voice, “but you can call me Bonnie in the meantime.”

“Very good,” he praised, chuckling to himself. The vibration of his laugh made my skin tingle and my core clench. I didn’t know him, but my body wanted this charming, elegant man. “Clyde, then,” he added, pairing his nickname with mine. I hoped I’d be able to sleep with Clyde, have the best night of my life, and never see him again.

“So, what brought you to my little bar tonight, Bonnie?” Clyde asked, staring into my eyes with so much intensity that I felt like he was going to suck my soul in.

“You own this place?”

“And five others on the block.” He licked his lower lips and smirked at me like I was some treat he couldn’t wait to taste. My stomach flipped, and my heart rate escalated. I wouldn’t mind being feasted on tonight by this man. “I know that you’re not a regular here, Bonnie. If you were, I would know.”

“Just here to get my mind off things.”

“I hope you’re not having boy issues.”

“Kids,” I corrected. “Thirteen of them, all under the age of twelve, who think it’s fun to throw paint around the classroom.”

“Ah,” he agreed. “I get what you mean.”

“You’re a teacher, too?”

“No,” he shook his head. “But I have a seven-year-old at home who thinks up the same kind of things sometimes.” Fuck. Is he married? Was I about to mess with a married man? I shot a glance at his ring finger but didn’t see the mark of a wedding ring there. “Don’t worry,” he added when he saw me

studying his hand. “Never been married. I’m just here to have fun like you clearly are.”

“So, you happen to own six bars on the block, you’re a single father, and yet you’re not married?” *How did I get so lucky*, I wanted to add but didn’t. He was rich and could raise a child—it ticked all the right boxes, yet no woman had tamed him down. Surely, there was something wrong with that, right?

“I also open people up for a living.” Clyde took a sip of his amber drink and studied me once more. This time his eyes turn dark, sparkling with lust. Suddenly there was tension in the air, and it made me sweat.

“Like a serial killer?”

“Like a surgeon, Bonnie,” Clyde corrected with a chuckle, and my pussy contracted in approval at the sound. “I save lives for a living.”

“That must mean you’re very good with your hands then, Clyde,” I breathed softly, hoping he would take the hint. He turned to face the bar, drinking the last of his drink.

“Only one way to find out.”

Clyde suspended my hands above my head with one hand and cupped my chin with the other as his lips devoured mine.

We had left the bar ten minutes ago, and he gave me a ride in his sleek, black Bentley to a fancy hotel a few blocks from his bar. I had no recollection whatsoever of how we got safely in our room after being a hot, sexy tangled mess in the elevator.

The alcohol in my system gave me enough courage to let me playfully bite his lower lip as he pulled away from our kiss.

“You’re very eager, Bonnie,” he murmured, his voice deep and breathless. It sent a shiver down my spine.

He leaned his forehead against mine as his free hand went down my body, to my neck, and my breasts, caressing the gentle curves of my hips, and he stopped abruptly as his hands reached the end of my dress, just a few inches above my knees.

“Did I tell you that this dress makes you look sexy as sin?” Clyde’s breath smelled like mint and the whiskey he drank earlier in the bar. His hands softly brushed the skin on my thigh, making my skin crawl. “And these goddamn legs. I want to fucking see them spread wide for me.”

I agreed with a moan, and Clyde’s lips moved towards my ears. His hands moved my dress up until I could feel the coolness of the air in the hotel room against my butt cheeks. Thankfully, I was wearing the only lace thong I owned. “If I touch your pussy, will it be wet for me, baby?”

“Yes,” I whimpered, praying to whoever God was listening to make this man fuck my brains out already.

Clyde moved his hand higher, and before I knew it, my dress was at my waist, and my lower body was exposed. I felt the warmth of his hand before he pulled the thin fabric of my underwear to the side, playing with my folds and finding my clit without any hiccups. My body was suddenly hyper-aware.

“Is this wet pussy for me, Bonnie?”

With how overwhelmed I was, I just nodded my head against his.

“Say it.”

“My pussy is wet for you, Clyde.”

“Good girl.” And then his hands above my head were gone, and I would have fallen forward if it wasn’t for him supporting my body.

Clyde kneeled in front of me, planted a kiss on my navel as he pulled down my thong, and he directed my right leg to rest on his shoulder, giving him better access to my pussy. He planted a kiss on my shin and my calves, then on my knees and my thighs. He looked up at me with hooded eyes before finally reaching the apex.

“Oh my, God,” I moaned, grabbing his soft, dark hair. I closed my eyes and let his expert tongue devour my soaking pussy.

“There’s no God here, Bonnie. Just me,” he said in between kisses.

His tongue circled my clit slowly with alluring pleasure. A noise escaped me when his hands squeezed my ass. I was in heaven just due to the way he sucked my clitoris, and when he chuckled, the vibration of it sent my body into overdrive.

He finally inserted his two fingers inside me and found my G-spot within three seconds. My knees buckled from the sudden delicious sensation, but he kept me steady. He was anything but gentle with his fingers. He curled them inside me, increasing the pace. In and out. In and out. The sensation was going to make me lose my mind. I could hear how wet I was for him. It was over for me when his tongue on my bud matched the pace of his fingers inside me. I whimpered from the building pleasure, my body hot and perspiring.

Clyde stood, his fingers still in me. He kissed my lips again, and I tasted myself salty and almost sweet from his mouth. “You wanted to see how good I am with my hands, baby?” He tucked a strand of loose hair behind my ears and leveled his nose to mine until our faces were touching.

“Please,” I begged, my knees shaking.

“Please, what?” His hands started to slow down from inside me, and I ground my hips against his hand in protest. “Tell me what you want,

Bonnie.”

“Show me how good you are with your hands. Please.”

And, God, he did. He found the hair on the nape, and he tugged back before sucking the skin on my neck, and I didn’t care if I found myself with a hickey tomorrow morning. Then he added another finger inside me and increased his pace. I curled my hand around his neck.

“This pussy is fucking mine, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Listen to how your pussy is wet for me, baby. Do you feel how tight you are around my fingers?”

“Faster,” I begged, and he thankfully obeyed. My pussy contracted around his fingers as the tsunami of pleasure started to hit me. But the asshole stopped. My body objected, and I rubbed my hungry pussy against his hand.

“That’s right. Ride my hand like a good girl, baby.”

“I’m going to come.”

“Come around my fingers,” he instructed. And I do. Fuck, I do. My legs shook from the powerful orgasm, and my body hummed with pleasure. I allowed my body to lean against Clyde’s, our heads touching, my breath shaky.

“Good girl,” he praised as he removed his fingers from inside me and brought them to my mouth. “Suck.” And I did, like the good girl that I am.

I stared into his lustful eyes as I sucked the juices of my pussy from his fingers. It was so fucking hot. I didn’t think anything could be this good yet so forbidden, that is, until he removed his fingers from my mouth and brought them to his. And fuck, it was a sight to look at. A man oozing with power and sex was sucking what was left of my release from his expert hands. His gaze didn’t leave mine as he moaned in ecstasy.

“We’re not done, are we?” I challenged as my hands proceeded to unbuckle his belt. But Clyde stopped me, shaking his head.

“On the bed. On your back.” I didn’t need to be told twice.

I strutted towards the bed, my ass swaying from side to side, completely removing my dress and unclasping my bra, and throwing them on the floor. Still in my heels, I lay on the soft mattress and waited for Clyde.

“Do you trust me, Bonnie?” He was so close, and I wanted him to touch me already.

“I do,” I answered. There was something about Clyde and his praises that made me feel safe. I watched him take a condom from his pocket, and he tossed me the foil packet with a silent instruction to open it. Then he removed what was left of his clothing. When his boxers were off, I swallowed. My breath caught at the sight of his dick.

Holy fucking shit. He was big. I didn’t think I could take him. I wouldn’t call myself an expert when it came to sex. I knew I had a lot of things to learn. But I wasn’t innocent either. I knew when a cock was going to ruin sex for me forever. And his looked exactly like that.

“You’ll tell me when it’s too much, all right?” He took the open condom from me and rolled it down his length.

“Yes.” There was no such thing as too much with this man. Clyde spit in his hand and used his saliva to lubricate my folds. Oh, my Lord, I was going to go feral. I felt his hard dick hovering from my entrance, and my stomach got excited. I panted, my face sweating. He leaned down, pressing his forehead against mine, and he slowly entered my pussy. I could only gasp at how big he felt.

“Clyde,” I moaned. “So big.”

“You can take it,” he promised as he continued to push in, and I pushed

back to meet him halfway, earning me a kiss on the lips and a peck on the shoulder. When he stood, his thumb circled my clit as he gently pushed himself all the way. “There you go. You’re such a fucking good girl for me, Bonnie.” He grabbed my waist and pushed me away before slamming back home, hitting my sweet spot.

Clyde groaned from the tightness of my pussy around his massive dick, pushing himself in deeper every time he pulled out like he couldn’t get enough. “You’re so fucking tight, baby.” He grabbed my thighs and used them to press further into me. “Look at you, spread wide for me.”

He increased his pace, his dick hitting my walls. I knew that I would be sore in the morning, but God, it would all be worth it.

“Fuck me harder, please.” He didn’t have to be told twice. He groaned as his eyes caught my dark ones in the room's dim light.

“You have no idea how fucking good your pussy feels wrapped around my cock like this.”

I felt a chill in my stomach. My ears went hot, and I closed my eyes, arching my neck, moaning as I told him to fuck me faster and harder. And every time he praised me with my fake name, it took all of my self-control not to tell him my real one.

My hands gathered the sheets from beside me. It was like I didn’t even know my own body. I didn’t know that I’d be enjoying fucking a stranger like this. I didn’t want this night to be over.

Clyde brought both my legs up on his shoulders, and he bent down to get a hold of my lips. And he fucked me like this, my legs in the air, and my hands spread at my sides.

“Clyde,” I cried.

“Bonnie,” he moaned, reaching for both my hands before he intertwined his

fingers with mine. “Fuck.”

“You’re so fucking deep inside me. I’m going to come.” Our heavy breathing and moans filled the room, and Clyde’s manly grunts and whispers of praise only made me climax even faster.

Clyde let me go free, and in one sudden move, he was on his back, and I was on top of him. I brought my hands to his chiseled chest and ground myself on top of him.

“Jesus Christ, Bonnie.” *Chloe*, I wanted to correct him but didn’t. “Ride me like that. Fuck!”

And I rode him like a good girl. The position only brought his cock deeper inside me, and I could feel the wave of orgasm coming.

“I’m going to come, Clyde.”

“Faster, baby.” I went faster; my breath labored, my moans loud. “You feel so fucking good!”

“You’re so fucking deep.”

“You want to come around my cock, Bonnie?”

“Please.”

“Say it.”

“I want to come around your cock, Clyde. I want you to come inside me.”

“Fuck.” Clyde sat up and pulled me into an embrace. “Ride me, baby. Ride me good. Just like that. Don’t you fucking stop until I say you stop, you hear me?”

And I fucked him with what was left of my strength. We thrust into each other, skin against skin. The orgasm came out of nowhere, and I threw my head back, holding onto his shoulder as he fucked me as I came.

“Clyde!”

“Come on me, baby.” I felt my pussy tighten around his shaft as his dick

pulsated, squirting his cum in the condom.

When the wave of orgasm lulled to a halt, my body went limp against his, and I wrapped my arms around him, waiting for my breath and my heart to calm down. But my breath turned into soft wheezes, and I fought through it, trying to control it. Inhale. Exhale. I was not going to have an asthma attack after this, not in front of this gorgeous, sexy man.

“Are you okay?”

“Shh,” I said between breaths. “Just a sec.” God, please, no. I felt Clyde stroking my back, sensing I was in a dilemma I didn’t want to talk about, and I closed my eyes to sync my breathing with each touch. It felt so good and so intimate; it was scary. It was almost like Clyde had memorized my body after one orgasm.

By some miracle, my breathing evened out, and I could pull myself away from Clyde. His eyes, although still filled with lust, had concern in them, too.

“Good?” he asked.

“Good.”

“Very good. Because we’re not done yet, Bonnie.” He kissed me, his cock still inside me, still hard and alive. “On your knees on the floor.”

Then I sucked him on my knees on the floor. After that, he gave me four more orgasms, one on the floor on all fours, one against the wall, another on the bed, and the last in the shower. His praises made me go insane, but his soft words were nothing compared to how good and rough he fucked me with his hands and cock. Just like how I wanted it. We didn’t stop until the soft light of sunrise peeked through the window. I fell asleep in his arms, naked as the day I was born.

When I woke up the following morning, he wasn’t there anymore, which was expected. The emptiness of the bed beside me disappointed me, but I told

myself there was no meaning to whatever happened last night. Even if it might just be the best sex I had had in my life. Even if there was something so intimate about how much he took care of me after.

When I turned towards the bedside table, I saw the purple Post-it note stuck on the lamp.

I had an amazing night, Bonnie. Call me. –Clyde

His number was written underneath.

That clearly didn't mean anything, right? I'm sure he told all his one-night stands this and gave them a fake number. Right?

I paced in the living room of my cheap, uptown apartment, chewing on my nails. My period was late, and at first, I thought it was just because I've always had irregular periods, but when I started throwing up this morning, I ran to get three different pregnancy tests from the pharmacy. When I peed on them five minutes ago, I realized how tender my breasts were recently and how I finished three boxes of Reese's Puffs in just two days.

"Please, no," I whispered a prayer as I walked towards the kitchen to grab a fresh box of chocolate and peanut butter cereal from the pantry, hoping it would calm my nerves.

When my phone alarm went off after the ten-minute timer had elapsed, I halted., The sound made my palms sweat and my stomach turn. I was going to throw up. I had to face whatever the results of the pregnancy tests were, and I was just hoping that it wouldn't require me to look for that purple Post-it note in my purse and dial an almost forbidden number.

Spoiler alert. I didn't call Clyde again after that amazing night. I told myself that if we were going to do it again, I'd crave him even more. And that didn't sound healthy to me.

Once I stepped closer to where the results were lying on my counter, my heart pounded in my ears.

Fuck.

The first one had two lines, the other had a plus, and the last one simply had the word I'd been dreading to read.

Pregnant.

My body trembled as my body collapsed on the couch.

I was pregnant.

What was I going to do? I couldn't even have three meals on a good day, and now I had to take care of a baby? I'd have to baby-proof this tiny-ass apartment and add diapers and formula to my grocery list every week. And the hospital bills. Fuck the hospital bills. Tears started to roll uncontrollably like waterfalls down my cheeks. I blamed it on the hormones, being pregnant, and all.

My first initial thought was to call Frankie.

Frankie and I grew up in the foster system together, and we broke the rules, snuck out every chance we got, and we always ended up at the beach in Coney Island. I may not have found a family in the system, but I had found Frankie, who became my brother, even though whatever he feels for me is anything but platonic. But then I remembered that he was in Connecticut to secure a contract or something. Also, I didn't want to call him right now because he'd drive back immediately for me and ruin the deal he was trying to close.

So, without another choice, I found my wallet in my purse on the coffee

table, and with shaky hands, I unfolded the purple Post-it that had clearly seen better days. I dialed the number into my phone. The tears were not stopping. The phone rang. And rang. And rang some more. And then it didn't.

“Hello?” His voice made me sit up straighter. He was so hot, even on the phone. The sound of busy people behind him told me I might have caught him at the wrong time or he was somewhere in public. “Hello? Who is this?”

“Uh... Hi. It's Bonnie.” I didn't recognize how frail and tiny my voice was.

“Bonnie, baby!” The smile on his face was audible from his voice. “I can't believe you waited a month to call me back.”

“Hello, Clyde.”

“What's the matter? Are you okay?” Fuck, he must have heard the distress in my voice. He always knew when I was in a tough situation, didn't he? Suddenly the noise behind him seemed to go quiet, telling me he's moved somewhere secluded. “Bonnie.”

“I... I'm pregnant.”

Three years of silence seemed to follow my revelation. I could clearly hear his breath stop as my stomach swirled, my gut in my throat.

“Is it mine?”

“Yes.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I haven't fuck anyone aside from you for the past month.” Now I was just pissed. It was one thing to have his super sperms surpass the condom, it was another to question my integrity. I didn't want this to happen, either.

“Fuck,” he cursed. “Is this some kind of sick joke, Bonnie? Because it's not funny.”

“Why would I joke about something like this, Clyde? Do you think I’m over the moon with this pregnancy? It sucks.”

“Do you think I don’t have women calling me every day telling me they have my kids? What do you want? Fifteen minutes of fame in some tabloid? Money? I can send you a check—”

“Listen to yourself, Clyde.” God, this was ridiculous. I didn’t even know this man’s real name, and now I was carrying his child that he clearly wanted no part of. “I don’t want your fucking money. If you don’t want to do this with me, I’ll gladly do it myself.”

“Great,” he challenged. “So why the fuck did you have to call me then, huh?”

“I-I don’t even know.”

“Thought so. Goodbye, Bonnie.”

“Goodbye, Clyde.”

He hung up without another word.

I’d been in the foster system my entire life, and I grew up without a family aside from Frankie, yet I’d never felt loneliness like this before. So I allowed myself to weep the entire afternoon. By night, I tried to call Clyde again, hoping he might listen to me this time. But when I realized he’d blocked my number, I allowed myself to finish another box of Reese’s Puffs.

When morning arrived, I developed a sense of responsibility, and I promised myself that I was going to raise this child on my own and give him or her the loving family I never had. Even if I had to do it myself. Fuck Clyde, or whatever his name was.



CHAPTER ONE

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light gray, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, oval shapes. The pattern is set against a white background.

Chloe

TWO YEARS LATER

“**Y**ou know you didn’t have to do this, Frankie.”
“It’ll go to waste anyway, Chloe.”

Frankie dropped the last of my boxes in the furnished living room of the penthouse I’d be residing at for the next three months. He was in a plain black tee and worn denim jeans, making him look like the sexy next-door neighbor girls liked in films.

Frankie, my best friend, my ride-or-die. The only person I trusted with my life.

Right now, this young man was one of the most requested models in the world. They said his tan skin looked good with all the camera flashes, and his smile made the ladies go crazy.

He was supposed to have a gig in the area when he booked this beautiful penthouse with a view of the beachfront, but when his client called him a month ago and said they had moved their venue overseas. Frankie offered me the penthouse for free, knowing that I had plans to move out here in Miami.

The penthouse was everything I could ever dream of, but something I could never afford. Hardwood floors and a kitchen with white marble countertops and glass windows from the floor to the ceiling gave me a panoramic view of the ocean. Everything in the penthouse was white and gray, minimalistic and beautiful simultaneously. Not to mention, it was huge, with three bedrooms, a Roman tub, and walk-in closets. There was hot water in the shower and a TV with cable, which I knew Sofi would enjoy. Everything felt like a fever dream.

The building had two penthouses on one floor facing each other, and whoever lived across from me had access to their own personal infinity pool that overlooked the beautiful horizon of South Beach.

“Besides, Sofi will love it here, won’t you, baby girl?” Frankie made his signature baby voice as he playfully approached Sofi in my arms.

Sofi was one, and thankfully, she was as healthy as they came. Her baby teeth were already growing, and her molars were starting to hurt, which I prayed wouldn’t be a nightmare because I was sharing a living room wall with my new neighbor.

Despite Clyde ghosting me after I broke the news of my pregnancy to him, I was proud of what I had done to keep Sofi happy and healthy. I clearly didn’t need the man. But it wouldn’t hurt if I got a little help in the money department, seeing as diapers and formula didn’t come cheap.

Sofi squealed in agreement with Frankie, even though she had no idea what we were talking about.

“Won’t this be too much if we stay here?”

“Stop it already, Chlo,” Frankie argued. “There’s no refund, okay? You staying here is a good thing. You get a head start on things, and I get my money’s worth.”

“Frankie—”

“It’s not a big deal. I love you, and you know that.”

Frankie had made it clear that he loved me when he had confessed. He had feelings the moment we walked out the door of the foster care system. But I made it clear that he was more like the brother I never had, and I couldn’t reciprocate whatever he felt.

“I’d do anything to help you and Sofi. Besides, aren’t you happy to live near a beach?”

I was! I loved the beach. The beach had no bad memories for me. All the good memories I had ever had took place at a beach. When Frankie and I left the foster system, we celebrated by getting drunk at the New York beachfront. When I was discharged from the hospital after having Sofi, Frankie drove us to see the beach.

And now, as I was planning a new start, we were near the coast again. And to me, that was a good sign. There was just something about the salty air and the warm sand on my feet that gave me comfort and clarity—it was almost therapeutic.

“If it makes you feel any better, I can’t stay and help you unpack. My plane leaves for Vienna in a couple of hours.”

“Go,” I urged. “Me and Sofi have got it from here, right baby?” Sofi babbled and tried to put her fist in her mouth, perhaps feeling her molars.

“You’ll call me when you need anything, right?”

“I never call you for help, Frankie.”

He narrowed his eyes at me as he grabbed his duffel bag from the floor. It was true. Although I knew that I could, I didn’t call Frankie for help most of the time because it felt like I was taking him for granted if I did. I knew he still had lingering feelings for me, and I knew that if even if I called him to

help me move the couch, he'd be on a plane immediately, even if he was in the middle of an important shoot.

“But tell me, anyway.” He gathered Sofi's peachy cheeks with his hand and showered her with many smooches. Sofi shrieked in delight, trying her best to push Frankie away with her plump arms.

Then Frankie kissed my cheeks and squeezed my shoulder in...what? Reassurance maybe? I didn't know, but it gave me a little bit of comfort, knowing that I might be on my own, but I'd always have Frankie.

He left, and I waved little Sofi's hand at her favorite uncle before he could close the door behind him. And then, just like that, Sofi and I were alone again.

“Guess it's just you and me again, baby girl.” I set her in the living room crib I got off of Facebook Marketplace last July for a very low price. Frankie had offered to buy Sofi a new one, but the crib was clean and in good condition.

She stood in the crib, her purple dress covering her chunky legs. I turned on the TV and let her watch her YouTube show, which had helped her say her first word, “sticky,” thanks to Ms. Rachel's *Icky Sticky Bubble Gum* song.

Sofi bounced on the crib in joy when Ms. Rachel greeted her from the screen, and that was my signal to start unpacking before she'd lose interest and screamed at the top of her lungs due to boredom.

I jolted awake, disoriented and confused. Where was I? The hazy surroundings looked nothing like my Queens apartment. But the heavenly soft mattress against my back reminded me I was in my new penthouse—my new *temporary* home. I was about to doze off again from exhaustion from

unpacking our things when I heard Sofi clamoring in her room beside mine. Immediately, I was wide awake.

Sofi wailed even louder, and alarm bells rang in my head as I jumped off the bed groggily. What was happening? Was she hungry? Was it her molars? All the possible things ran through my mind. What if she had climbed out of the crib and fell? What if she hit her head on the floor?

But when I arrived in her room and turned on the lights, she was not on the floor, nor was she hungry. In her blue dolphin onesie, Sofi was standing in her crib, holding the frame as support, her cheeks wet and flushed. As I stepped closer, I saw her bottle was half full on the bed counter, and she had her dolphin stuffed animal wrapped around her arms—both essential things for Sofi to go down.

She sniffled when she saw me and raised her arms, telling me she wanted up. So, I picked her up and wondered what had startled her to tears. She was usually such a heavy sleeper that I could vacuum around the house or max the TV volume, and she'd still be asleep.

“What’s the matter, Sof?” I wiped her damp cheeks with my thumb, and the little girl nuzzled her face against the curve of my neck, not letting go of her stuffed toy.

And that’s when I heard it—the loud, muffled noise of what sounded like a barking dog.

What the actual fuck?

I glanced at the clock on Sofi’s wall. It was barely two in the morning. Why was the neighbor’s dog having a meltdown in the middle of the night?

The dog’s enthusiastic bark made Sofi jump, and that’s when I realized that she was startled because she started crying in my arms.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” I stroked her back, hoping it would soothe her. “We

have a loud neighbor, don't we, Sof?"

I picked up her pacifier from the crib, and she gladly took it and put it in her mouth like it was her life support. Then I turned on the lullaby machine on her small nightstand, hoping to block the noise from the neighbor's side of the hall.

This seemed to calm Sofi down a bit. So I returned her to her crib, leaving her be for a moment. I stepped out of her room, closed the door behind me, and marched towards the living room with shared walls.

I could hear the growl and whimper of my neighbor's dog and the steady hum of a vacuum cleaner.

Was I fucking dreaming? Is this what this was? Because who in their right mind vacuumed at one in the morning?

The dog barked again. Once. Twice. And I cringed at how loud it was in my living room. Thankfully, this didn't seem to freak Sofi out anymore due to the lullaby playing in her room.

I debated whether or not I should march right to my neighbor's door and give them a piece of my mind, but then I realized that I just got here and didn't want to make a bad first impression. Besides, my oversized shirt and pajama shorts didn't actually scream decent right now.

Instead, I marched towards the wall, pounding it with both hands with what was left of my strength, praying that my neighbor took the hint. I just hoped that they were not wearing headphones while cleaning at this ungodly hour.

I pounded the wall again when the vacuum didn't stop. And on my third attempt, a muffled click came, and the machine stopped humming. The barking dog fell silent as well.

The stillness of the night wrapped around me, and I stood near the wall, my hands on my hips, waiting to see if my unruly neighbor would continue to

vacuum their penthouse.

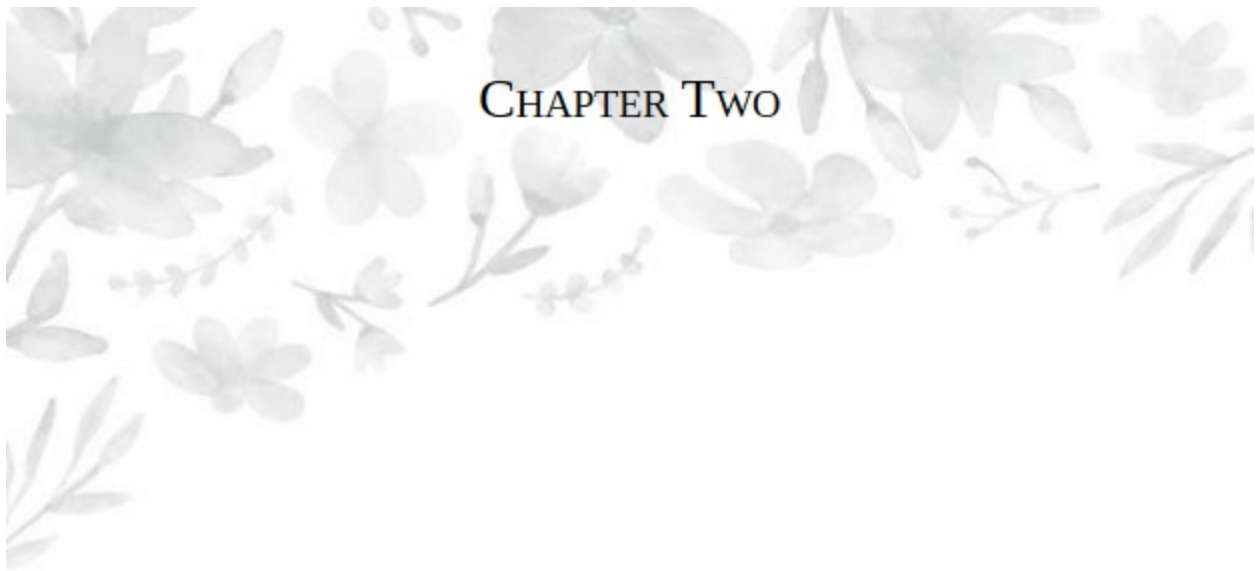
I could hear the muffled, hoarse voice of my neighbor, maybe blaming the dog for barking at the vacuum. But thankfully, my neighbor didn't continue.

Walking back to our rooms, I checked Sofi in hers to see that she was asleep again, her pacifier now discarded. I tucked her in, set her stuffed dolphin beside her, and bent over her crib to kiss her forehead and cheeks.

“I love you, Sofi.”

Then I tiptoed out of her room and left the door ajar before heading back to mine to get back to sleep again, hopefully.

With how soft the pillows were and how heavy the duvet was, it didn't take me five minutes before sleep consumed me again. I could get used to this.



CHAPTER TWO

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, watercolor-like style. The name "Ben" is centered within this floral pattern.

Ben

I killed my car's ignition after finding a parking spot just in front of Billy Anne's school building.

It was a very tiring day at the hospital earlier but rewarding nonetheless. I had three surgeries today, a hernia repair and two appendectomies, all of which I completed without any complications. By now, I could perform these surgeries with my eyes closed, but one could never be too cocky when it came to a patient's life.

I stepped out of my car and put on my sunglasses, debating whether or not I should pick Billy Anne up from homeroom or wait for her here. She always told me to stay in the car, but I liked pushing Billy Anne's buttons sometimes because it helped with her shyness.

I leaned on my newest black Bentley and took out my phone to answer some emails from our clients at Hayes PharmaCorp. The multimillion-dollar company that I happened to own was one of the fastest-growing pharmaceutical companies in the United States. I was planning to go international by next year.

Bright Heights Academy suited Billy Anne when it came to gently cracking her social skills open. I knew I was partly to blame for my nine-year-old daughter going through this intense social anxiety that made her refuse to talk to other people except her family, a few friends, and two of her teachers. In return for them taking care of her, I funded everything the school needed material-wise. Just this year, my company anonymously donated over a thousand books for their students in daycare.

I got a text from my sister, Maggie, who lived in a beach house by the coast. She was two years older than me, with two boys and a doting husband, Ralph, who was the most cutthroat lawyer in the state and who happened to be my company lawyer. She loved hosting sleepovers almost every other weekend, which meant unlimited beach time for the kids. It was a good way for Billy Anne to work on her social skills again with her cousins.

Maggie: *The boys are looking for Billy Anne. Where are you?*

Ben: *Be there in ten.*

On cue, I heard soft footsteps approaching me, and I didn't have to look up to know it was Billy Anne.

My daughter might be the quietest kid in the state, but her big hazel eyes spoke for her. Right now, she had a frown on her face and an adorable wrinkle of frustration on the bridge of her nose.

"Hiya, sport." Billy Anne carried a pink backpack and held her Bratz lunch box with the other hand. A white bow adorned her high ponytail, the only hairstyle I could pull off besides Elsa's braid. I always took time to learn things for Billy Anne, especially the things a mother should be doing, like hairstyles and dress shopping. But to heck with stereotypes and gender roles.

My hands saved lives every day. Why couldn't they braid my daughter's hair?

"Tough day?"

"We're late," she said, her voice low and soft. Billy Anne had no problem expressing herself with her aunt and me, which I was thankful for. Last night, I learned that it bothered her that her art teacher would be gone for a while, and she was worried that the new substitute after spring break wouldn't like her.

She also liked being punctual just like me, a habit I'd developed since medical school because being a minute late could cause a person to lose their life. Billy Anne was never late when it came to things that mattered. She was always at least fifteen minutes early to school every day. She'd arrive a day before for her weekend sleepovers if she could.

"Aunt Maggie just texted. She said they're just about to start," I lied. I grabbed her bag from her and put it in the trunk, the pink standing out against the sleek, black interior of my car.

"Is Trish there already?" she asked, walking towards where I was, cocking her head to the side, her long brunette curls cascading over her face.

Trisha was Ralph's niece, about the same age as Billy Anne. While Billy Anne was brunette, soft-spoken, and shy, Trisha was blonde, blunt, and feisty. They were made for each other and complemented each other well, and Billy Anne seemed to be really fond of her.

"I'm sure she's there already, honey." Billy Anne pouted, so I added, "But that's because she lives across from them. Don't worry; the party won't start without you."

I opened the back door of my car to help Billy Anne get into her car seat. She hopped in, and I waited for her to settle before buckling the belts. "Did

you pack my toothbrush, Daddy?”

“I did.”

“How about the toothpaste?”

“I’m sure Aunt Maggie has toothpaste in her house.”

“But mine’s ‘Elsa Mint.’”

She was proud of the fact that she had mint toothpaste and not the flavored ones kids her age usually get. She said the flavor of these tasted artificial and icky. I should probably credit Maggie and Ralph for the vocabulary they were always teaching to my daughter.

“I packed your toothpaste as well, Billy Anne.” She smiled at me and swung her dangling feet. I gave her a peck on her cheeks, and she stretched out her arms to hug me by the neck.

“How about my iPad?”

“You’re there to have fun with your cousins and Trisha, sweetheart.” She frowned but didn’t complain. I didn’t tell her I hadn’t wanted to pack her iPad because she was supposed to enjoy socializing, not sit in the corner and play Roblox. But she still needed something to call me with if she needed anything.

Aside from her weekend backpack, I also packed her small carry-on filled with her painting materials. Her therapist had suggested before to let Billy Anne try out a painting to express herself. She hadn’t stopped painting since I brought her first canvas and a set of acrylic paint a year ago,

When she was all set and ready to go, I closed her door and rounded the car towards my seat. Our drive on the way to Maggie was quiet, just how Billy Anne liked it. I stole a glance at her brunette hair in my rearview mirror while she was eating her Pringles. I couldn’t help but think about Tonette, her

biological mother, and how she'd caused so much hurt and trauma for Billy Anne.

I met Tonette at the hospital when I was just about to finish my residency. Her friend was about to get surgery and she was just there to visit. She had caught my eye instantly with how beautiful and smart she was. We hit it off instantly and started going out.

Two years into our relationship, she got pregnant with Billy Anne. She insisted on keeping the baby, and with my work and PharmaCorp at the peak of its success, I knew I can raise the baby with her. I bought a house far away from the beach because she hated how sunny it could get in the summer. I bought her a car because she said she hated commuting.

Things started to change when Billy Anne was one and a half. I had come home two hours early from work, only to find an empty house and Billy Anne alone crying her lungs out in her crib with an empty bottle and a full diaper. I confronted Tonette that day and stupidly let things slide because I wanted to make things work. We were good for a year after that.

When Billy Anne was two, a co-worker informed me that she saw Tonette at the park with some random dude, and Billy Anne wasn't there. I didn't think twice about hiring a private investigator to find out what Tonette was doing the entire week while I was at work. What the PI came up with startled me to my bones.

Tonette had a cocaine-addicted boyfriend of ten years when we were together, and when she got pregnant, she and her boyfriend decided to milk money from me through child support. I could have simply broken up with her. But then I learned that Tonette would leave the house the moment I'd leave for work, leaving Billy Anne on her own until late afternoon. I knew I wouldn't let things slide this time.

I immediately filed for full custody, knowing that Tonette would not win because she had associated herself with a drug addict and had no job. Filing for a restraining order against her was just a bonus; one Ralph offered because she'd put Billy Anne's life at risk by neglecting her.

I could vividly remember the fight we had that night.

"You're out of your mind if you think you can steal my child from me, Ben!" Tonette said. A storm had been raging that night, the thunder almost making the place I once called home shake.

"You lied to my face and left our daughter to fend for herself all day to what? To fuck some cokehead on the side?"

She had just come from her little rendezvous, and she didn't know that I had been home since lunch when I confronted her. The blood drained from her face when she saw me playing with Billy Anne in her room, and she had made some excuse about visiting the post office that she had just left a few minutes ago. I wasn't going to buy that shit again.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I grabbed a handful of her clothes from our closet and threw everything, hangers and all, into the open luggage on the mattress. I couldn't stomach seeing her right now and letting her sleep in the same house as Billy Anne.

"Don't give me that bullshit, Tonette. I know you've been sneaking off every day to see your boyfriend for fucking ten years!"

I saw how Tonette flinched at my voice, but I couldn't feel any guilt or regret. I didn't even want to hear her truth. Right now, I just wanted her out of my sight.

"I was going to break up with him. This is my home now—you're my home, Ben. And Billy Anne."

“Stop it, Tonette!” The unexpected sting in my eyes forced me to blink the building tears away. “Jesus Christ. I have a private investigator, and I know your plan to milk money from me. And to use your own fucking daughter to do it!”

“Ben, please.” Tonette tried to grab my arms to stop me from packing the rest of her things. But my mind was made up to throw her out. She’d just end up with her boyfriend. I was done with her.

“You need to think this through. You can’t let Billy Anne grow up without a mother.” And I paused, my ears burning in rage. She had no right to manipulate me into her traps again.

I grabbed her by the shoulder and seethed in her face, praying that the words would cut deep enough for her to make sense of what she had done wrong. “I’d rather have my daughter live motherless than have you for her mother. You’re irresponsible and careless.”

“You can’t do this to me, Ben!”

“Oh, I can, darling,” I gave her a cold, cynical chuckle before letting her go. “I’m filing for full custody for Billy Anne and a restraining order against you. So I suggest you start looking for a job to find yourself a suitable lawyer. Otherwise, you can live happily ever after with that powder junkie you call your boyfriend. I hope it’s all worth it, Tonette.”

Then I dragged her things out of the house and into the pouring rain. When she resisted after I told her to leave my house, all I had to do was stare her down. She knew that she had no other choice but to do as she was told.

When she left with nothing but the clothes she had brought along with her into my home a few years ago, it was the only time I could think clearly. It was then that I heard that Billy Anne was on the stairs, hugging the railing, her sobs thick and loud.

Cursing at myself, I approached her and picked her up in my arms. She asked me what had happened with her mommy, and I told her that she had to leave for good. It broke my heart to see Billy Anne devastated like that, and I had vowed that she wouldn't ever have to cry or be neglected again. Not while I was around.

Before I went to bed that night, thanks to a sleeping pill, I called my secretary to set up a credit card for Tonette because I wasn't so heartless that I could live with myself if something happened to her. Five grand. That was it. She could get a good lawyer for herself. She could start over. Fuck, she could get therapy or go to rehab or whatever the fuck she needed.

Then the trial came, and she didn't even make an effort to get a good attorney. She had been high as a kite every time she'd show up in court. And it was all the court needed to see in order to give their verdict.

The next thing I knew, I had Billy Anne all to myself at home, and I didn't give two shits where Tonette was and what she was doing to ruin her life further.

I should have been happy. But I wasn't.

I saw the signs that something was wrong with Billy Anne when she was three. She'd refuse to make friends at daycare, and then she'd tremble in fear when she was at the park. After that, she stopped talking to kids her age and some family friends she didn't know very well. Maggie and I decided it was time to see a therapist when she turned four. She'd have solo sessions, and sometimes we'd go together.

I sold my house and Tonette's car, then moved to one of my penthouses, having no news about or interest in the woman who had ruined everything for me and Billy Anne.

And now, after five years of therapy, Billy Anne was getting better, but there was still a long way to go.

My thoughts about our dark past were chased away when Billy Anne piped up from the backseat.

“Do you think Aunt Maggie will paint with me tomorrow?”

Maggie didn't know how to paint to save her life, but she did it so she could spend time with Billy Anne. Billy Anne didn't seem to mind that her aunt didn't know the difference between an easel and a palette.

“She will,” I assured her, just as I stopped in Maggie's driveway. I honked twice, letting them know we were there. The door slammed open, and three kids came running towards the car. Billy Anne waited for me to kill the engine before unbuckling herself, but she already had a wide smile on her face as she peered out the car window to see her cousins.

I grabbed her backpack and paint supplies from the trunk just as Maggie appeared behind me in her two-piece turquoise athleisure suit, her hair tied in a high ponytail. She had been an aesthetic nurse when she was younger, but after she and Ralph had kids, she decided to stay home, a change she had had zero problems with.

“You know you can stay with us for dinner, right?” she said, taking the bags from me.

“I know, but I have so many things to do.” It was mostly a lie. Being alone in my apartment meant I got to clean the house the way I couldn't when Billy Anne was at home. She and Charlie, our golden retriever, hated the sound of the vacuum.

“You need to see someone for your cleaning obsession, brother.”

“It's not an obsession, Maggie. Hygiene is essential, and I can't do much when Billy Anne is at home.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she waved her hand in the air before turning to get back inside. “If you change your mind, you know where we are.”

“Billy Anne wants you to paint with her tomorrow again, by the way,” I called, seeing Billy Anne stay back to wait for her Aunt. She hugged her by her hips before running into the house with the kids.

“At least Billy Anne knows a great painter when she sees one.”

“Bye, Daddy!” Billy Anne yelled over her shoulder, waving her hand at me.

“Bye, baby, love you!”

Two hours later, as I walked out of the private elevator to my penthouse, I noticed the door across from me was ajar. Nobody had stayed in that penthouse since I moved here, and I usually had the entire floor to myself. Just the way I liked it.

Deciding against the idea of meeting my new neighbor and suffering through small talk, I headed to my side of the building and unlocked the door with my keycard.

Charlie, my sixteen-week-old golden retriever, wagged his tail as he greeted me by the door. He was a present from Maggie to Billy Anne on her birthday—a gift she didn’t tell me about in advance, saying that it was the perfect thing to teach Billy Anne about responsibility. And it did. Teach her that is.

She was expected to be hands-on with scooping Charlie’s poop and helping me feed the puppy each day. Beach walks were also part of our routine. I could leave them both on the beach the entire day, and they wouldn’t complain. If only Charlie didn’t shed and had occasional zoomies, I’d be one hundred percent cool with him.

Charlie stomped by my feet, his tail wagging as he waited for me to rub behind his ears. I did this after I placed the grocery bags filled with dinner ingredients on the kitchen counter.

“Just you and me tonight, bud.” Charlie was sporting a red bandana around his neck, his wagging tail softly tapping the hardwood floor as he heard his dog bowl clatter, knowing it was time for his dinner.

After I stored the food in the pantry, restocked the fridge, and cooked my dinner, I grabbed Charlie’s leash from behind the door, and we went out for a potty break.

By nine p.m., I was in my home office, answering all my emails for the day, reading contracts for PharmaCorp, and doing an hour-and-a-half meeting with a potential investor.

Despite the fact that I had a cleaning lady come by twice a week, having to clean up after my kid and the pup was a daily task I had to do. Besides, me and Maggie were raised to take care of ourselves regardless of having help.

At ten p.m., while washing the dishes, my phone rang for a patient who needed an emergency appendectomy. I was stalled at the hospital for another hour before coming home by eleven to return to what I had been doing.

I put Billy Anne’s old clothes into storage, a chore that I had been pushing back because I didn’t want to face the fact that she was growing this much. Now, here I was, at almost two in the morning, grabbing the vacuum cleaner from the storage room in the hall. This chore was last on my list before heading into the shower and hitting the hay.

But when I plugged the thing in the socket, and it did its usual hum, Charlie got up from his bed by the living room door and started tiptoeing around the machine like he did at least once a week. Then the hair on his back started to

rise, and then it was chaos. Charlie barked at the vacuum, his voice booming in my penthouse. I had to turn off the machine.

“Charlie, no!” Charlie paused to look at me, tilting his head to the side. When I turned the device on again, all my commands went out the window. This fucking pup was unhinged. I was thankful that Billy Anne wasn’t here to hear all this commotion. But the neighbor was.

After about five minutes of me cleaning my floor and Charlie barking nonstop, I heard pounding on the wall despite my noise. It took me a moment to realize that I had a new neighbor. I had gotten so used to being alone on this floor that I had forgotten being loud was a problem.

Switching off the vacuum cleaner, I heard my neighbor pound the wall again.

“See what you did there, Charlie?” I wrinkled my nose at the dog, who was now sitting on his butt, panting in joy, thinking that his bark had saved us from the machine. “Now our neighbor hates us before I even had the chance to drop by and say hi.”

Deciding that I could vacuum at some other more reasonable time, I unplugged the thing and returned it to the closet. Maybe it was a sign that I needed to call it a day anyway.



CHAPTER THREE



Chloe

I stepped back, tilted my head to the side, and studied the purple note I had posted outside my new neighbor's door.

I'm sorry I pounded at your wall, neighbor. I didn't mean to sound rude. Truce?

When I woke up this morning, I knew I needed an extra cup of coffee. I've always tried to limit my caffeine intake daily. I've also been on a one-year streak of living a healthy life to prevent another life-threatening attack like six years ago. Thankfully, Sofi wasn't showing any signs of having asthma because it would ruin me if she went through what I did. Thank God for Clyde's genes, I guess.

Contented with the note, I skipped back to my apartment on my tiptoes because I didn't want my neighbor to catch me by their door like an idiot. I was determined to make a good first impression, so I decided to let the dog and vacuum debacle slide.

Today was going to be a busy day. I was going to visit the nearby school to apply, and it'd simply be a bonus if they had a daycare so I could bring Sofi with me without having to pay for a babysitter.

Speaking of my child, Sofi was in her highchair, munching on her breakfast, which consisted of scrambled eggs, sliced apples, and blueberries. She had a bib around her neck, so her white t-shirt and tiny black leggings wouldn't get stained.

"You want water with that, Sof?" I cooed, grabbing her sippy cup from the counter. Sofi was a good water drinker, which I was proud of because hydration is essential. "Big day today, Sofi, yes?"

"Yes," she squealed, and my heart filled with joy. She knew lots of words and was quick to learn new ones, even though she couldn't properly pronounce most of them yet. She knew the words '*mama*,' '*yes*,' '*no*,' and '*water*,' and if she wanted a bottle, she'd yell '*baba*.'

I let her finish her breakfast, and I finished packing her things to bring with me for the day—diapers, extra bottles, clothes, and cleaning supplies in case she went number two.

Ten minutes later, I buckled Sofi in her car seat and gave her a binky and her dolphin stuffed animal. I prayed that they'd keep her busy for our ride.

The car wasn't, well, mine. It was Frankie's. He'd be gone for a while, so he decided to leave me his car until he got back. At first, I told him it was unnecessary and would only mean I needed to spend money on gas. Then he told me that the South of Florida was a new place and reminded me that I still didn't know the commute system yet. He also Venmoed me enough gas money for three months before leaving for Vienna.

I hated that Frankie felt obligated to look after me because we had suffered from the same predicament while we were in the foster system. I'd told him

countless times that he didn't need to, that he should enjoy his life wherever his job took him, and that he didn't have to worry about me. Frankie kept saying I might still change my mind about how I felt. I knew for a fact that I wouldn't.

Rounding the front of Frankie's gray Bugatti Chiron, I buckled myself in my seat, and we were away and rolling.

It was my first time driving a luxury car in my entire life, and a sense of awe washed over me when my back settled into the leather seat. I bet the steering wheel alone cost more than my Queens apartment. Even the engine's purr was exquisite. I made a small prayer not to crash the vehicle because not only was my life's daughter at stake but also because Frankie might officially hate me for doing so.

I saw Sofi's reflection in the rearview mirror sitting in her seat. She looked at me with curiosity, perhaps wondering why she was all buckled up in a moving thing.

About twenty-five minutes, two wrong turns, and a quick diaper change later, we arrived at Bright Heights Academy, a private school by the beach with a spacious parking lot, a two-story L-shaped building, and a small playground facing the beautiful blue ocean and white sand. God, I'd love to work here simply because of the view.

The parking lot was empty when I took the turn at the entrance. This made sense given that it was spring break, and the students were likely in their beds, still asleep.

I killed the ignition before hopping out and unbuckling Sofi from her seat. I put on my sunglasses as we marveled at the ocean in front of us, smelling the salty sea breeze.

A teacher in her early thirties, with blonde hair and gray eyes, wearing a

pair of skinny jeans and an orange blouse, jogged towards us. A smile of excitement painted her face.

This must be Savannah, the person I talked to last night after looking for job vacancies around the area. She said that I could drop by personally so we could talk. She didn't give me much over the phone but an address and a time.

"Oh, you're Ms. Kennedy, right?" Savannah reached us. An awkward one-handed hug was all she could manage with me carrying Sofi.

"Please, just Chloe."

"And who's this little pumpkin?" She softly cupped Sofi's cheek, and the latter giggled from the attention. See? Even Sofi was in a good mood just by being near a beach.

"This is Sofi," I introduced myself. "And you must be Savannah, yes?"

"Just Savv. It's so nice to meet you, Chloe. And you, Sofi." I liked Savv already. She was perky and full of sunshine. "So I'm the school's secretary slash HR, and I'm so happy that you called last night because we need a faculty member."

Savv led us to her office at the left end of the hall when you enter the building's entrance. The building had a few lockers in the hallway with streamers on blue and white on the ceiling.

An ocean-themed bulletin board caught my eye just outside her office, and I caught a glimpse of an image of little kids with their small trophies plastered there, along with memos and club sign-up sheets for spring. From the looks of it, the school was a tightly-knit community.

"The principal just called and asked if someone answered the ad we posted on our website," Savv said as we entered her office. It was as bright as she was. It was a small space with a desk in the middle and two adjacent chairs.

Everything, like the bulletin board outside, was ocean-themed. There were paintings of sea animals in frames on her walls, a seashell windchime hung by the window behind her desk, and small trinkets and figurines of mermaids decorated the top of her shelves and filing cabinets.

“Lucky for you, you’re the only one who inquired.”

Savv motioned for us to sit on the chair by her desk. I propped Sofi on my lap, letting her play with my bracelet to keep her from stirring.

“Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming?” I asked.

“*But*, it’s only a substitute position. As far as I know, anyway.” She murmured the last part.

Substitute? That meant the salary wouldn’t be steady. I needed a regular salary if I wanted to feed my daughter.

“You see, our fourth-grade art teacher, Mrs. De Vega is on a trip to Georgia to see her sick daughter. She said she would be gone for a while but didn’t specify how long. But rumor has it that she might finally transfer there for good to be close to her daughter.”

“What does that mean for me?”

“You get to sub for Mrs. De Vega until she comes back from her trip. But if she decides not to, you can work here permanently. Your resume in art instruction is good. The principal thinks so, too.”

It was a risk. To take the substitute job and wait until Mrs. De Vega returns or not? If she did return, that would mean looking for another job and worrying about where I’d leave Sofi.

“You don’t have to make a decision now, of course. We gave Mrs. De Vega two weeks to let us know her plans. This means that after spring break, you can sub for a week until she comes to a decision. If she decides to come back,

we'll let you stay for another week and give you a list of job openings for art teachers around the area to help you get on your feet.”

That sounded promising. I knew it sucked for Mrs. De Vega to have to change workplaces for her daughter, but it would be a double win if she stayed in Georgia. She would be closer to her daughter, and I would get a permanent job.

Savv waited for my reply, her eyes hopeful.

“Okay,” I answered, and Savv sagged in her chair in relief. Her squeal made Sofi squeal in reply on my lap.

“You’re in good hands, Chloe. We have a wonderful daycare program, and it’s usually free for our faculties and staff who have children. Sofi will love it here. And so will you.”

I really hoped so.

Sofi fell asleep on our car ride back home from the grocery store after I accepted the substitute position at Bright Heights Academy.

I always hated grocery shopping because I’d stay countless minutes in aisles to look at things I wanted but didn’t need. Like today, I was in the cereal aisle for about ten minutes, debating whether or not I’d spoil myself with a box of my favorite Reese’s Puffs. But Sofi’s needs always came first. *Always*. I’d rather crave that fucking cereal than give up her frozen fruits. As I returned the box of sweet cereal to the shelf, I promised myself I’d reward myself when I got my first paycheck.

I set Sofi down in her crib with her dolphin, dimming the lights in her room.

Finally having time to myself, I changed into casual clothes and resumed unpacking the groceries sitting on the counter and some boxes of my clothes in my room.

I knew planning to move to a new place would be difficult financially, but I didn't want Sofi to grow up where everything was expensive, and all she could see were buildings. I wanted her to grow up in a nice place where the beach was accessible, where she could play in a yard in a nice neighborhood with her friends.

I was grateful that Frankie had offered this penthouse to me. When we got here the other day, and we were driving from the airport, just seeing the beautiful waves kissing the sun and the smell of the salty breeze, I knew immediately that this place was where I had to make a home for myself and Sofi.

Even if it meant me having to work twenty-four-seven. For Sofi? I'd bend backward and move mountains. But that didn't mean that I didn't wish things were easier.

The phone in my pocket suddenly felt heavy, as if it were telling me to try and dial Clyde again. But I had promised myself that once I was here in Miami, things needed to change, and among those changes was the promise to stop dialing Clyde's number in the hopes of him answering. What would I say if, by some miracle, he did answer? I didn't know yet.

So, instead, I finished unpacking the rest of our things to keep my mind off all the what-ifs. I was not going to worry about the things I had no control over. Not anymore.



CHAPTER FOUR



Ben

Billy Anne wrapped her tiny arms around my neck as we stepped out of the elevator. Her purple dress had a popsicle stain and me carrying her things back to our place.

Maggie had dropped her at the hospital four hours ago since her sitter, Sam, was out of town and wouldn't be back until tomorrow. For now, she was stuck with me in my hospital office. Thankfully, Billy Anne can busy herself with a book or her iPad for hours. I let her have as much screen time as she liked because that meant her not interfering with my work. When I had needed to scrub in for two hours of surgery for a kidney transplant earlier, she'd been good and stayed in my office the entire time with an intern.

Now, at nine o'clock, after we'd had dinner outside, I could see the exhaustion in her tired eyes. She had been fighting sleep in the car, and when I saw her almost swaying on the elevator ride up, I gathered her in my arms. It didn't take long before she was sound asleep on my shoulders.

When I entered using the keycard and opened the penthouse door, Charlie's soft whimpers and barks greeted me by the door. Today he was wearing his

pink bandana for Billy Anne. Too bad she wouldn't be able to see it until tomorrow morning when she was up. The pup stood on his hind feet and put his paws on my leg. His nose stretched to smell Billy Anne's rainbow-colored toes.

"She's asleep, bud." The golden retriever growled softly in protest.

I walked towards Billy Anne's room to tuck her into bed. There was usually a quick bath for her before bed, but tonight was one of those nights where I'd change her clothes, let her sleep, and worry about the bath tomorrow. She was exhausted from the wait in my office.

Billy Anne had been a strong little girl despite what she had gone through. The thought of her alone in my old house, hungry and covered in snot, made my chest ache like no other heartbreak. I couldn't believe that Tonette had been willing to leave her like that, unsupervised. But then again, she really didn't have a maternal bone in her body. She was only in it for the money.

Me? God knows what I was willing to do for this kid. She had taught me so many things and brought me so much good into my life despite what happened with her mother. I thought she'd hate me for allowing a woman like that to stay in our lives—for letting the first mistake slide.

Although I felt guilty that she was now motherless and didn't have a mother figure in her life as she grew up. Still, I'd rather she had none of that than have one who would recklessly hurt and neglect her.

Charlie followed me into her bedroom, sitting on the floor, his eyes on me and still complaining at my feet. His loud bark and growl didn't faze Billy Anne, but I still led Charlie outside her room when she was all tucked in.

This pup was still relentless, barking, growling, and howling as I closed Billy Anne's door behind me.

"No, Charlie," I commanded, and usually, on a good day, he'd obey. "Billy

Anne can't play tonight, bud. We'll go to the beach tomorrow morning to compensate." Unfortunately, the sound of the word "beach" only made him more enthusiastic. He thought we were going to the beach, and his excitement made him lift his butt and tail in the air, activating his zoomies. He ran around the house, nails tapping on the hardwood floor and his voice booming in the stillness of the night.

The noise made my ears tingle, and I scolded Charlie to stop. To no avail, of course.

The pounding at the door that followed made me realize that I had a neighbor now and didn't have the liberty of making as much fuss as I wanted anymore. Fuck! The realization immediately showered me with guilt.

I had read my neighbor's note when I left for work, apologizing for pounding the wall and calling a truce. They were the ones who had apologized first as if they were the ones who had inconvenienced me.

The loud knock came again, making Charlie stop on his feet to listen to the sound. He barked at the door when my new neighbor banged on the door once more. This time, I picked Charlie up from the floor and hugged him into submission, gently holding his mouth shut.

"What?" I called from the door.

"Look," the voice called from the other side. It almost sounded familiar from where I was, but that was impossible. I'd know if someone I had met before rented the penthouse in *my* building. Although it was slightly muffled, I could tell it was a woman. A furious woman. "I know I called a truce and all, but man, you're really pushing my buttons here."

"This is all your fault, Charlie," I hissed at the pup in my arms. "What do you want?" I called to the woman outside my door. *Really Ben? What do you want?* God, that was stupid. I cringed internally at how badly I was handling

this situation. Then again, I'd been so used to being alone on the floor that I forgot about my neighbor.

"What do I *want*?" she repeated, audibly scoffing. She pounded the door again, insistent that I open it. It should freak me the fuck out that she was mad like that and was knocking on my door like some lunatic when I had a child sleeping in the house, but if anything, her rage almost...amused me.

"I want you to open this door, and you're going to talk to me like a man about what you're going to do with that dog of yours because it's really getting kind of annoying."

I narrowed my eyes at Charlie, who was still wagging his fucking tail as if he didn't put me in this situation.

"Or what?"

"Or what?" the disbelief in her shriek made me chuckle. Fucking shit. I probably shouldn't be this happy to tease the stranger by the door. "What do you want me—*Ugh!* Open this door!" More pounding, more thumping.

"And if I don't?" I jested, but I was already walking towards the door, waiting for the right moment to catch her off guard before opening it.

"I-I'll tell the landlord you have a dog in the house, which the contract says is prohibited."

It wasn't. But she didn't need to know that I knew it was not forbidden, and she didn't realize I owned the building. So, I give her the benefit of the doubt.

"By all means," I said while twisting the doorknob and opening the door, excited to see the shock on her face. "Be my guest."

The world stopped for only a quick moment, but it seemed to pause longer than that. I blinked my shock away and tightened my jaw, praying that the surprise on my face wasn't as apparent as the surprise on hers.

She was as beautiful as the day I met her at my bar that night two years ago.

Bonnie. But instead of a sexy black dress, she was wearing a tie-dye shirt that was probably three times more than her size. Her long, sexy legs were showing under it, and her dark hair was loose, cascading down her back. Her alluring lips were slightly parted as she stared at me with a startled look. She was glued to the floor, forgetting the fact that we were in the middle of an argument.

She shook the expression off and was back to her feisty-looking self in a blink of an eye. It set weird alarms in my head, which then sent signals down to my fucking cock.

I couldn't help but remember the night we spent in the hotel, probably one of the best one-night stands I had had in my life. It was not frequent that I slept around, but I did when I was out of Florida without Billy Anne. That New York trip I had last two years was for the bars I'd opened there, and God seemed to know that I needed a good lay. I had met *Bonnie* there when I wasn't looking for any kind of hook-up at all.

I remembered her looking so out of place in the bar in her sexy, tight outfit. I knew even then that she was young, so it intrigued me that she was in some boring ass bar rather than in a loud club, swaying her sexy hips that would probably leave some people spellbound.

"I know I'm new here and all," *Bonnie* said. She no longer looked surprised or mad. I couldn't put a finger on what she looked like. But her dark eyes were as soulful as ever, sucking everything out of me like a black hole. "But you have got to control that dog, man. I have a kid in there who's trying to sleep."

And my world shattered into a million little pieces. A kid. *My kid?*

I remembered how *Bonnie* called me that afternoon, one month after we slept together. I was ecstatic when she called, at least for a moment. I was

willing to see her again, maybe have dinner together. I had just landed in New York when she called, and when she said her nickname, I was over the moon. That was until she said she was pregnant, and everything came crashing back—Tonette, Billy Anne being neglected, and me being played for my money. Since then, I have blocked her number, scared that she might have been pulling the same tricks as my ex.

It hit me then, looking at her in front of me. I studied her—*really* studied her. Then I saw her worn-out eyes revealing the tale of long awake hours. Although fatigue surrounded her porcelain face like a soft shroud, her charm still cut through.

I knew that the guilt building up inside me would probably eat me alive, but right now, I needed to gather myself and plan my next course of action. I couldn't think straight when a siren was outside my door, who might also actually be my baby momma.

“I apologize for Charlie here.” I still had Charlie in my arms. I should probably put him down. But, like Bonnie, I was glued to the spot and couldn't seem to do anything about it. “It won't happen again. Have a good night, *neighbor*.”

And I did the worst fucking possible thing to the woman who allegedly had had my kid. I slammed the door shut in her face before she could say anything more. Letting go of Charlie, I listened at the door, waiting for what my Bonnie would do next. I expected her to knock again, but when I heard her curse under her breath and walked away, there was resentment in my stomach.

Fuck!



CHAPTER FIVE



Chloe

My gut was in my throat when I slammed the penthouse door shut behind me. Heaving, I leaned against it as if the door would protect me from Clyde if he'd come knocking to ask questions. My thoughts were in a frenzy as I tried to register what the fuck had just happened back there.

It was him, right? My hazy, sleepy head couldn't possibly be making that shit up because I'd know those hazel eyes anywhere. The same eyes stared back at me every day while drinking her baba.

Clyde. My Clyde. Sofi's father. The New York City DILF who had given me at least five orgasms and the wildest night of my life. He was in Miami. And he was my neighbor.

He was still as gorgeous as I remembered. In fact, after two years of not seeing him, he looked even hotter. If that was even possible, he didn't look a day older. He was sporting a flow haircut, longer, a tad bit darker than before, and he was still fine as fuck even though he was wearing a plain white shirt and blue basketball shorts and was holding the little beast that had been waking up my daughter in the middle of the night for the past two days.

I was taken aback when the doorknob of his penthouse had jiggled. I hadn't expected Clyde, of all people, to walk out that door. What bothered me most, though, was the fact that he didn't even seem to recognize me. If he did, he didn't care. And if he *did* care and was also taken aback, he was good at masking his surprise.

Now, my palms started to sweat, and my hands began to shake.

Fuck. Okay, remain calm, Chloe. He wouldn't make a move or anything. He made it clear that day that he didn't want anything to do with me and Sofi. I'm safe. And Sofi's safe. Sofi belongs with me.

I knew that there was no reason for me to freak out because I wasn't the one who denied my responsibilities. I had been present for Sofi her entire life. I had been responsible. I juggled two jobs on the weekdays and three during the weekends when I was still in New York. I stopped drinking, and I stopped sleeping around. In fact, I hadn't actually had sex since Clyde. I was perfectly happy with my battery-operated boyfriend in my bedside drawer.

But somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that Clyde had the power and the right to demand custody. He could pay off a judge and get Sofi. He could turn tables and bribe people with his money. And it would be the day I'd die.

Fuck. He wouldn't do that, right?

All of a sudden, my worry shifted into anger. Anger at the fact that Clyde had been in Miami, living his best life while I had been on my own in New York. He didn't have the right to swoop back into my life and demand things as though he had not implied that I was a gold digger. He didn't have the right to Sofi. Not to meet her, not to breathe the same air as her. God, he didn't even have the right to look at her if it were up to me. Because what I went through was not easy.

My frustration was temporarily thrown out the window when I heard Sofi crying in her room. I had been lying on my bed, listening to that dog—Charlie—bark its head off. I was waiting for it to stop so that I didn't have to march up to my neighbor's side of the building, but Charlie had been barking for a good ten minutes and when I realized that he had no plans of stopping. I knew that I needed to do something before Sofi woke up. Too late, I guess.

Sofi was standing in her crib when I got to her room, her pacifier discarded. "Mama," she sobbed, and I picked her up. Sofi usually slept through the night but since moving in here, she hadn't been. With her molars growing, she was extra cranky in the morning. And when Sofi's upset, I'm upset.

"I'm here, baby." I stroked her back the way she liked as her shoulders shook from crying. Her lullaby machine was still humming on the nightstand, emitting the *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* melody as I rocked her in my arms.

"I just came from the neighbor's, Sof. And you know who opened the door? Your daddy."

Of course, Sofi didn't reply, but sometimes it helped when I talked to her. And times like this made me wish that I had someone to actually talk to who didn't wear diapers and didn't need a binky to go to sleep.

"Can you say that? Da-da." Sofi sniffled as she pulled away from me, inspecting me with curiosity and wonder. "Da-da."

"Da-da." Holy fuck! She said it. I didn't think that she would pick it up that fast. The hair on the back of my neck rose. I wasn't ready for Sofi to say those words. In fact, when it came to Sofi and getting to know her father, I didn't expect it to be this soon.

"Very good, baby." I showered her with kisses, her cheeks painted with tearstains. But at least she had stopped crying now.

I remembered how helpless I'd felt the first few months Sofi and I spent

together, and she would cry her lungs out at night.

Sofi was teething. I was sure of it. She was drooling nonstop, and her skin was flushed from the spike of a fever that developed overnight. She had been crying nonstop for the past hour, and it was starting to get to me.

“I know. I know,” I whispered, rocking her in my arms as she belted out her lungs in sobs. “We’ll get you a teething ring tomorrow. I promise you.”

My paycheck wouldn’t arrive until the end of the month, and I still hadn’t started looking for other jobs. The teething ring didn’t cross my mind as essential for Sofi because she was only four months old. Now, I was suffering the consequences of my casual attitude.

“C’mon, Sof,” I begged, even though I knew that it wouldn’t help. I kept on rocking her, hoping that the sensation would lull her to sleep. Thankfully, my neighbors in my tiny Queens apartment hadn’t complained yet today. I lived beside an elderly woman who had trouble hearing and a call center agent who worked until the late hours of the night.

It was only six p.m. on a Saturday, and I was ready to call it a day. Times like this always made me want to call someone for help. And it was always Clyde who’d cross my mind.

I would fantasize about what would have been Sofi’s life if her father had stepped up. He didn’t even have to stay for me. I imagined I had someone here doing the dishes while I consoled my daughter. I imagined not having that guilty feeling when I bought something for myself because that tube of lipstick should have been a pack of diapers for Sofi, and the money spent for that bottle of perfume should have been added to buy Sofi’s formula.

I didn’t know how single mothers did it. How they’d survive a day of their babies crying in their arms, not knowing what they needed, having zero clue

how to console them. If I counted how many times I had broken down since my pregnancy, I could fill a damn river.

What was even worse, was that not only was I not providing enough financially for my daughter's needs and wants, but my body decided not to participate either. My doctor said I had insufficient glandular tissue, limiting my milk production. Meaning I only breastfed her for two months before we switched to formula. The transition took a toll on me, and Sofi's stubborn attitude about accepting the bottle only made me feel more worthless.

I couldn't help the tears from rolling down my cheeks and the thick sob that came from my chest. I couldn't even call it a night because I had broken down.

Sofi sucked at her fist, trying to find comfort from the sensation of it on her gums. And when it didn't comfort her, she only cried even louder.

"I should've taken the check from your father if I'd known you'd be this stubborn, Sof." It was my greatest what-if. What if I had taken that check from Clyde when he offered it? What if I had just swallowed my pride and my self-worth and gone along with it? But I was Sofi's mother, and she got her stubbornness from me. My pride wouldn't have lived with the fact that Clyde thought of me as a gold digger he met at the bar. I didn't want his money. But I could sure use some of it right now.

Sofi had gone silent in my arms. Her loud cries turned into soft sobs and mewls. And I continued to swing her in my arms as I debated whether or not I should pick up the phone.

My eyes spotted the silver thing on the dining table by my purse and the small 7-Eleven paper bag that consisted of my dinner—lasagna and two pieces of stale garlic bread.

It had been two weeks since I last attempted to call Clyde. I knew that he'd

blocked my number because every time I dialed, it would go straight to voicemail. But I'd always hoped that by some odd miracle, he'd answer and say he was sorry. Which was why when times with Sofi got hard, a relapse would always happen, and that moment of weakness always ended with me picking up the phone.

When Sofi was asleep, I set her back in her bassinet, closed the door to our room, and, with tears still trickling down my cheeks, grabbed my phone and redialed the number.

"Hi. You've reached my voicemail. I'm not available at the moment. Please leave a message or call my secretary."

It was the same voicemail message I'd been listening to since I announced that I was pregnant. And the sound of his voice only made me weep even harder.

Now, as I was cradling her back to sleep in her arms, my anger at Clyde bubbled back up. It's not that I completely blamed him because of how hard it was for me, but he could've simply softened the blow if he told me to fuck off nicely.

If he was scared of the fact that he had gotten me pregnant, imagine how I was feeling. I had to actually carry the baby inside me and push it out of my vagina. It couldn't have been worse for him, and I could think of a million reasons why.

I put Sofi on her feet when we got out of the elevator, and she gripped my finger as she started walking towards our penthouse door the following day.

Sofi was sporting a dolphin beach hat, and her white swim diapers peeked out along the sides of her blue and white striped bathing suit.

Sofi had woken up at the butt crack of dawn and I decided that it would be a good idea to check out the sunrise. Thankfully the weather was warm, and Sofi didn't have a problem splashing on the shore and playing in the white sand with me.

The sunrise was breathtaking, and the feeling of the warmth of the sun in my skin gave me more courage to get through anything. It was a new day after all, and I could start fresh again. That's the greatest thing about a sunrise. It always reminded me that, while the past might have been a shit show, I now had a clean slate to start again. And if today decided to be horrible, I could always start again tomorrow.

When I left my penthouse earlier, I was careful not to make a sound, and my constant checking at the peephole helped me make sure that I wouldn't bump into Clyde in our shared lobby. So far, the universe had my back. But not for long.

I halted dead on my feet when I spotted the thing on my door. My eyes grew wide in horror, and I didn't know how to feel about the fact that Clyde had made contact.

There it was on my gray door. A purple Post-it note. The same kind he had used to leave his number on back in New York.

I took a step closer to the note with caution, scooping Sofi up as if the note would explode at any second. My heart was racing, my throat going dry as I frowned at the neatly written words. Sofi was pulling at my gold necklace without a care in the world. Baby, your father just made contact.

I'm sorry about last night –Clyde.

So the asshole did remember me.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized flowers and leaves in a light, muted green color. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, elongated shapes. The pattern is set against a white background.

CHAPTER SIX



Ben

In my dreams, it was a one-year-old Billy Anne crying in her crib with an empty bottle and a full diaper, snot running down her nose. When I jolted off the bed, the cry was distant—muffled. It wasn't Billy Anne because Billy Anne didn't cry like that anymore. She'd usually barge into my room and throw a pillow at me to wake me up.

Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I sat up in my bed and listened to the cry of the child next door—who was probably *my* child. I yawned and waited for my senses to wake up as I glanced at the white glow of the digital clock. It was three a.m. I was sure that even if I tried to go back to sleep and ignore the sound of a toddler bawling, I wouldn't be able to.

It had been a week since I left the Post-it note outside Bonnie's penthouse because I didn't know what to say to her if we'd come face to face again. In my line of work, confrontation was second nature, and I wasn't afraid of it. But there was something about facing my Bonnie that scared the living shit out of me. It was maybe because I was guilty, and to confront her meant I'd get to see the child I basically abandoned.

For the past seven days, I would be standing at my door and peering through the peephole with the hopes that I'd get to see Bonnie and steal a glance at the child who was allegedly mine. Every morning, Bonnie left the penthouse with her child, who had the same hair as her mother's. Although I couldn't take a good look at what the child looked like, she looked to be about a year old. She had plump cheeks and chunky limbs, and the rolls of baby fat in her arms jiggled every time Bonnie would put her on her feet.

I reckoned that they were always at the beach, given that every day, the toddler had on a different bathing suit and the same light blue beach hat with dolphins printed all over it. I'd always make sure that I'd leave the penthouse immediately when Billy Anne's babysitter, Sam, arrived so that Bonnie and I couldn't catch each other in the lobby.

On both weekends, I caught them leaving at four in the afternoon or when it wasn't too hot. With the lightweight stroller Bonnie carried, I knew they were going for a walk. They'd come home sometime after sunset. I looked like a fool standing at my door every time I'd hear the soft ding of the elevator, but I had developed a fondness for seeing Bonnie with her child, and I couldn't help myself.

Occasionally, I'd catch Bonnie looking over her shoulder at my door. Was she also thinking about me? Did the night when she confronted me bother her, too?

I peeled myself from the warmth of my bed, slipping into the plain white shirt I had discarded on the vacant chair in my bedroom to head to the kitchen to make some coffee.

It was Monday, which meant that spring break was over, and Billy Anne had to go back to school, which also meant I needed to get her things ready early today.

Switching on the light, I saw Charlie blink the sleep away and follow me from his bed in the living room to the kitchen. He yawned, stretching his front paws forward, extending his body into a long, elegant curve.

“Morning, bud.” I bent down to rub behind his ears, and he relaxed his face against my hands, his feet thumping softly against the floor. Billy Anne had helped me train Charlie to master the ‘no’ command after Bonnie came pounding at my door. And I was in the process of teaching him not to freak out when the vacuum was on. So far, we were going nowhere on that front.

I washed my hands and gargled after I filled the water tank and put the capsule in the coffee maker. I could still hear the muffled cry of Bonnie’s child in my living room, which was immediately followed by Bonnie’s unintelligible murmurs, perhaps trying to console the child.

For the duration of the week since I last saw the sexy vixen, her child had woken me up three times. Something was making the baby upset, and I hoped that it wasn’t health-related.

The doctor in me told me to go visit and check if it was colic. Then I could tell Bonnie, or whatever her real name was, that her child probably needed probiotics, or I could refer her to a good pediatrician in the hospital.

Typical Asshole Ben wanted nothing to do with the crying child or the distraught mother. In fact, pounding at the wall to give her a taste of her own medicine had crossed my mind. But Respectful Ben said that a crying child was not a nuisance. In fact, caring for a child alone was hard. Trust me, I knew.

But I didn’t know if Bonnie was raising her child alone anyway, and it was yet to be proven that she was indeed mine.

When I checked the rental ledger the other day, that penthouse was registered to someone named Franklin Hollis, who had paid three months in

advance to rent the penthouse. He had booked the place months ago. The gray Bugatti Chiron in the garage that was parked in their allotted space told me that Franklin Hollis was well off. Was Franklin Hollis Bonnie's husband? Maybe he was the father of the child that's been crying nonstop for the past twenty minutes.

So why were the child's distraught wails slowly getting into me? It was physically hurting my chest. Maybe it was the call to help, or maybe the cry reminded me of Billy Anne, but I found myself turning on the camera feeds of my penthouse in my phone, making sure nothing was amiss and that Billy Anne was safe in her room before I marched towards the door.

Fuck, I was going to regret this one, but I knew that I could help because of what I did for a living. The oath I had made was stronger than my fear of confronting Bonnie.

After what seemed like two strides, I was standing outside my neighbor's door, scratching the back of my head. I could hear them behind the door as I glanced at my phone to check the camera feeds one last time.

"Fuck it," I whispered, before finally knocking on the door. I heard the footsteps and the cries coming closer, and the knob turned down before it opened.

Time moved in slow motion as her face came into view. The bright light of the living room illuminated the back of her dark hair like a halo. Well, fuck. She was gorgeous.

When I first met Bonnie two years ago, I knew that she was stunning, even though we had met in a dimly lit bar and we had fucked with the lights off. But I never thought that she would look this breathtaking up close.

Her skin was flawless, pale, and glowing. Delicate, thin strands of hair escaped her loose ponytail, framing her face softly. She was wearing another

oversized shirt, but this time it was gray with the words, “*Life is a Highway and I’m Cruisin’ in Style*” printed on it. Her long legs were exposed, and it took every ounce of self-restraint to draw my eyes from her as I looked at the toddler that she was holding. She was the carbon copy of her mother, except for her eyes.

Billy Anne had the same eyes and the same nose. She had my nose. A sense of joy washed through me as I studied them both. It took me too long to realize that the kid’s nose was red, and her cheeks were wet, painted with tearstains. And when I returned my gaze to Bonnie, I saw that her eyes were rimmed red. She was crying, too. Great. The first time I decided to help them out, and I’ve been faced with two crying ladies. I deserved it, I guess.

Bonnie’s eyes grew wide in surprise when she saw me standing outside her door.

“Did we wake you up?” she asked as she sniffled, her voice softly trembling. “I am so sorry.” She didn’t need to apologize, especially not to me.

“Hello, Bonnie.” The greeting was not supposed to threaten her, but her subtle flinch and the momentary pause hinted that she was indeed taken aback by my words.

But within the blink of an eye, she was able to shake off the momentary weakness and square her shoulders. “Clyde.”

“It’s Ben, actually,” I stated. I wanted her to call me by my name. I had wanted her do to that since the moment I saw her at the bar. No more “stranger danger”.

“Chloe.” *Chloe*. The name sounded sexy in my head, and the sound of it from her lips did something to my cock. Fuck. I shouldn’t be thinking about

that right now. “I’m sorry if we disturbed you. She’s usually a good sleeper but—”

“Can I come in?”

She hesitated.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just thought that I could help. She’s been crying for twenty-five minutes.”

“I—”

“Is she in pain?” I asked. Chloe opened the door wider and stepped back, inviting me in. And I stepped inside, surveying the place.

Our places were identical, but while I had installed some Duette blinds in mine, she had kept hers bare. The windows overlooked the dark ocean and the city views on the side. Her place was a little more scattered given that she had a young child; baby toys were everywhere, and a few boxes labeled “kitchen” were on her countertop. I noticed the place wasn’t yet baby-proofed, and with the way the kid was walking, an accident was bound to happen.

“I don’t think that she is,” Bonnie—*Chloe* answered, the child still crying in her arms and trying to fit her tiny fist in her even tinier mouth.

“How old is she?”

“A year old.”

“She might be teething.” With the amount of drool running from her mouth and down her arms, she was indeed. Molars maybe.

Without waiting for her to say anything, I invited myself deeper into her penthouse and walked toward the kitchen to wash my hands with the antibacterial soap by her sink. Her kitchen was clean, with not a single item out of place, aside from the unpacked boxes. When I passed by the fridge, there was a single picture hung there with a starfish magnet. I could see that it

was a photo of them by a beachfront. The familiar Ferris wheel in the background told me that they were in Coney Island.

Then I walked back to the living room, where she was still rocking the baby in her arms, hoping that tiredness would eventually wear her down. She looked at me with a dumbfounded look, probably asking herself what that fuck was I doing.

Extending my arms towards them, I said, “Can I see her?”

Chloe didn’t do anything. She stared at me for a long moment, and I saw the wheels turning in her head. She was debating whether or not to trust me.

“Stranger danger,” she whispered, hinting that she remembered the night at the bar. But right now was not a good time to pull that stunt because I knew in my bones that I could help her soothe her child.

“I’m not going to hurt her, Chloe,” I assured. “I’m a doctor, remember?”

“You said you cut people open for a living.”

“I also said I save lives.” We could joke about our night at the bar, but I was starting to feel bad for the both of them just due to the way this child was crying. With how red she looked, I was afraid that she was going to explode any minute now. If that was even possible. “So, please, let me have a look at her.”

With a sigh of courage, Chloe handed me the child. The latter didn’t give two shits about us. All she wanted to do was to wail. I whispered a shush, positioning her to lie on her back in my arms. When she was perfectly settled, and her back was supported, I slipped a clean finger into her mouth.

“What are you—”

“Her molars are starting to grow,” I said before she could finish her sentence. Looking up, I saw the horror in her eyes. But it quickly evaporated when the baby in my arms started to mewl and eventually went quiet, her tiny

hands gripping mine. My heart skipped a beat. “Massaging her gums helps alleviate the pain.”

Chloe didn’t say a word, only nodded her head at the information. She was studying us, perhaps feeling strange about a complete stranger who was holding her child. I felt so bad putting her in this position. Then a single tear rolled down her cheeks. I wanted to shoot myself due to how much regret I was feeling.

“What’s her name?”

“Sofi.”

“Just Sofi?”

“Just Sofi.” Her voice was soft as she hugged herself. She looked so tired, but I could tell that she was more worried about her current predicament. Me, the man she basically hated the most, holding her child after he had decided to ghost them for two years.

I didn’t want to put her on the spot, but it was killing me not knowing. I finally decided to address the elephant in the room. The look of pain on her face was like no other.

“Is she mine?”

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CHAPTER SEVEN



Chloe

“Is she mine?”

I didn't expect Clyde—*Ben*—to come knocking on my door at three in the morning. After he put the Post-it note on my door and revealed that he was indeed *my* Clyde, I did everything in my power to avoid him. Sometimes, when we arrived at the same time in the garage, I'd let him go first, and I'd wait fifteen minutes until I could go back up to my penthouse. I didn't know what I'd say if I met him in the lobby.

But tonight, there was no running. He was here in my penthouse. And he was holding *my Sofi*. I should've gone ballistic, maybe yelled at him to get the fuck out, to question him why he had abandoned me. But it seemed like my brain had short-circuited, and I didn't know what to say or what to do. It freaked me out even more when he had jabbed his finger in my daughter's mouth.

I should've complained, but the silence that followed made me want to jump for joy and kiss the man. The joy was short-lived, though, because he decided to ask me *the* question.

I hadn't actually planned on what to say to Ben when the time came because, one, I thought he was back in New York, and two, I didn't think that we'd see each other this early. I guess the universe really wanted to fuck me over.

My legs went weak when he asked the question, and I wanted to go on my knees to weep from...I don't know. Relief maybe? Because Sofi finally was quiet. Or maybe from the overwhelming exhaustion brought on by Sofi not sleeping through the night anymore and Ben coming over.

"She's yours, Ben. Just like I told you a couple of years ago."

Ben took his time answering. He studied Sofi in his arms, which I admit was not a horrible sight to see.

I'd longed for the day that I could have a complete family for Sofi, something I didn't have growing up. But seeing Ben and remembering how quickly he had dismissed me made me feel the pain all over again. He didn't have the right to enjoy this moment. I wasn't going to let him off the hook that easy. I went through hell to get here.

"Give me one reason why I should believe you, Chloe."

The sound of my name on his lips made me shiver. I'd longed for the day he'd call me by my real name. But instead of bliss, I felt furious with his question.

"I don't have to give you anything, *Ben*. You don't have the right to ask me things when you chose to abandon us. I never lied to you. And I was never in it for the money. I've made peace with the fact that I have to do this by myself."

I had been doing this all on my own. I owed it to Sofi to give her a good life and provide for her needs. Ben could do whatever the fuck he wanted, but he

had no right to barge into my life and assert dominance. I didn't suffer so much just for this.

"Who is Franklin Hollis?"

Ben was pissing me off, and I could tell that he, too, was getting agitated. But neither of us dared to raise our voices, not when Sofi's eyes were finally getting heavy.

"You say you've been doing it on your own, but who the hell is Franklin Hollis? Your husband? How do I know that the kid isn't his?"

"Frankie is not my husband. And if he was, it's none of your damn business," I hissed at Ben, crossing my arms on my chest, feeling small from his accusations.

"It is if this child is mine. How do I know that Franklin is not a dangerous man?"

"He's not," I whispered through gritted teeth. "Frankie's twice the man you'll ever be. And how do you even know Frankie?"

"I saw his name in the rental ledger."

"You dug through the building records?"

"I didn't dig", I said.

"You can't do that," I pointed. "It's an invasion of privacy. The landlord will hear about this."

Ben went silent, and I saw the way his jaw clenched. From the look on his face, he wasn't planning on going down without a fight. So I pressed him even more.

"Look at her." I gestured towards Sofi, whose eyes were getting drowsy. "Look at her and tell me she isn't yours."

Sofi was his, all right. They had the same eyes, and they had the same fucking nose. And every time that child wrinkled her little button nose at me,

I wanted to cry because it would always remind me of him.

“She looks like you,” Ben pointed out, but it wasn’t to disarm me. It was just him stating the fact like he was fucking dreaming. Sofi had my skin and my hair, but to me, none of those things mattered because she had been staring at me with Ben’s eyes her entire life. “Her eyes...”

Ben didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he shook the daze from his face and returned his gaze to me.

“What are you doing here, then, Chloe?”

“You were the one who knocked on my door, Ben.”

“I mean here. In Miami. Aren’t you supposed to be in New York? Don’t you have kids to teach?”

Okay, fine. It was kind of attractive how much he remembered things about me even though two years had already passed.

“I could ask you the same thing. Don’t you have business there?” I noticed the way Ben swayed Sofi in his arms like it was second nature. Like he was used to it. Then I remembered that he said he also had a child.

“I have business everywhere. I was on business when we met in New York.”

“Are you on business here now?”

“No, I live here. Which leads me back to my question: What are *you* doing here?”

“I live here now, too.”

“How did you know my address?”

Was he serious right now?

I shook my head in disbelief. It had been for ages, and Ben hadn’t gotten over the fact that I didn’t have a vendetta against him. It should probably hurt me that he was so untrusting, and because of this, he had neglected us.

Noticing that Sofi was fast asleep in his arms, I stretched out mine and gathered Sofi from him. A jolt of warmth spread through me as his arm lightly brushed against mine. The electricity in the air was palpable. But I ignored it as I shifted Sofi in my arms and marched towards her room to settle her on her bed. I didn't care that Ben was left dumbfounded in my living room.

After I tucked Sofi in her crib and turned on her lullaby machine, I grabbed her teething ring from one of her drawers and walked out, closing her door behind me.

I headed towards the kitchen, and I could still see Ben in my peripheral vision. His gaze was like an invisible touch on my pale skin. I didn't know what to say to this man right now. But I was glad he was still here because now I could say what I wanted to say without worrying about Sofi.

Opening the freezer, I slid the teething ring in, hoping that by the time Sofi woke up, she'd have something to bite on to soothe her gums.

"Not the freezer," Ben called from the living room. "You just need it chilled."

Of course. Because frozen rings can injure her gums, I hated that he was right.

With a groan, I removed the ring from the freezer and transferred it to the top of the vegetable drawer instead.

I took a deep breath before turning to face Ben.

God, he was exquisite. If only he was hard on the eyes, it would've been easier for me to hate him. He was wearing a plain shirt and pajamas, and he still looked handsome. This was fucking torture. But I wasn't letting my guard down.

We hate Ben, I thought to myself.

“I didn’t know.”

“What?”

“You asked me how I knew your address. I didn’t know.”

“Yet here you are, Chloe.”

“Yet here I am, Ben,” I echoed. “If I would’ve known I’d be living across from you, I wouldn’t have taken this place.”

“Because you wanted to hide from me after all your lies?”

“Because I wanted to hide Sofi from you.” That hit a nerve. I could tell.

“You’re clearly not doing a good job. Just admit that you’re following me, babe.”

“And why, pray tell, would I be following you?”

“Because you want my money. The first time you called me two years ago was because you wanted money. Now, here you are, in *my* building, across from *my* penthouse. That can’t be a coincidence.”

That hit a nerve in *me*. It wanted to throw a plate at this man. His money? If I wanted this man’s money, I would’ve done something about it years ago. If I wanted his money, I shouldn’t have waited these years, wasted sleepless nights, and cried myself to sleep countless times. It would’ve been so easy to track this man down if I had really wanted to. A simple Google search of who owned that bar would’ve done it.

I walked toward where Ben was, forcing a laugh, but my eyes stung from the unwanted tears trying to break through.

“Who hurt you, Ben?” It was a genuine question that visibly caught Ben off guard. “Why would you think I’m after your money? You told me goodbye two years ago, and you haven’t heard from me since.” I didn’t tell him that I had been calling his number nonstop for over a year. And that I knew for a fact that he had blocked me.

“And if I was following you, trust me, it wouldn’t take me too long to hunt you down.”

“Chloe, how am I supposed to trust that you are telling the truth when you couldn’t even answer why you called me that afternoon.”

“How are so dense, Ben?!” *I called you because I didn’t have anyone else.* I wanted to add but didn’t. I couldn’t help but raise my voice, which I immediately regretted because Sofi was finally down, and I didn’t want to be the person responsible for waking her up again.

The tears escaped this time, but they weren’t because I was hurt. I was fucking frustrated. And with the lack of sleep, my emotions were heightened.

“For the last time, I’m not after your money. In fact, I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“Good, because you’re not getting a single penny from me, Chloe.”

“Good, Ben,” I repeated with a nod. “Because I’m not expecting anything. You can pretend that you don’t know me. You can pretend that Sofi’s not yours. You want me to get out of your hair? Fine. I’ll only be here for three months anyway, and then we’re gone. We’re going to be okay without you.”

Ben was lost for words. He stared at me in complete awe, shock, and something that resembled guilt. I sniffled, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand.

“Thank you for helping me with Sofi. I appreciate it. Truly. Now please, get the *fuck* out of my living room.”

He walked out without saying anything more, and I closed the door after him. A huge weight seemed to have evaporated from my shoulders when Ben was out of my sight.

Finally, I could think and breathe more clearly. I let the remaining tears roll down my cheeks as my body began to tremble. I had to cover my mouth to

stop the sobs, and I prayed that the heavy weight of emotions wouldn't cause an attack.

Ben didn't want anything to do with us. I didn't know why I had expected something different this time. I told myself that Sofi and I were going to be okay. I'd been doing this on my own all along, and I could continue doing it.

Daddy dearest could go fuck himself.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



Ben

Sofi's hazel eyes haunted me the entire morning. They stared at me every time I blinked, even if I was in the shower or changing my clothes. She was there when I flipped the pancakes.

And when Billy Anne had woken up and had breakfast with me, Billy Anne's identical eyes twisted my guts. Sofi had the same eyes. It was eerie. It was so eerie I thought I was in a fever dream.

I had done a very shitty thing earlier today. I knocked on her apartment to help her, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I wanted to confront her, too. Hurting her was not part of the plan. And the look on her face when I left her penthouse told me that I had succeeded in hurting her. It made me a fucking jackass.

It got to me when she asked me who hurt me. It was Tonette, of course. What was happening with Chloe was almost the same as what had happened with Tonette. A child, an unknown man, and a great opportunity to steal from me.

Most people would say that I was a greedy bastard with the way I talk about the things that I've earned. But honestly, I couldn't give two shits about the money. I could give fifty people a million-dollar check, and I wouldn't bat an eye. The thing was, I was sick of opening myself up to someone when all they wanted was to get to know how much money I could give them. No one could blame me for keeping my guard up.

With that said, I didn't mean to hurt Chloe. And I sure as hell didn't want to neglect Sofi.

Fine, that child was mine. There was no doubt. The eyes told me everything I needed to know, and the age checked out. I didn't need a paternity test to find that part out. I could do it, but I knew that it would only push Chloe away, and I didn't want to do that. If I wanted to get closer to Sofi, I needed to please her mother.

"Daddy, are you listening?" Billy Anne chirped from her booster seat, leaning forward to poke my head.

"What were you saying, baby?"

"I said I have a new art teacher today. Do you think she will like me?"

"Who wouldn't like you, Billy Anne?" Billy Anne was the most lovable kid on this planet, even though she was a little high-maintenance at times. And I wasn't just saying that because she was my kid.

"What if she's mean?"

"You tell me if she's mean to you, and I'll kick her butt." This earned a giggle from Billy Anne, and just hearing her laugh eased up my burdens a little bit. But when I looked at her from my rearview mirror and spotted her eyes, the burden was back.

It was a fact that I had neglected Sofi because it was hard for me to trust. But Chloe did make a lot of solid points. If she *was* in it for the money, she

would've done something about it earlier. With the help of the internet, she could've fucking found me in mere minutes. She could've ratted me out to the press. I wasn't exactly a mysterious man. My face was all over the internet, thanks to Hayes PharmaCorp.

Her last words struck me the most, and they kept on echoing in my ears since I walked out her door.

“We’re going to be okay without you.”

It's not that I didn't want them to be okay, I fucking did. I just didn't want Sofi to grow up knowing that her father was a deadbeat, especially when I bent heaven and earth for Billy Anne not to be neglected. That would make me a hypocrite. And I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

I'd be the same exact person as Tonette. Only worse. Because Tonette had nothing, and she clearly had problems. While I had everything—the money, the resources, the fucking power. I could give that child everything she needed, just like what I did for Billy Anne. I had no reason not to.

The look on Chloe's face still flashed in my mind as I turned into the entrance of Billy Anne's school.

Like always, Billy Anne was the first student to arrive. Aside from the familiar parked cars of her teachers, mine was the only one at the drop-off area.

As I stopped the car, Billy Anne unbuckled herself. She was wearing her blue plaid frock uniform with a white polo underneath. Her hair was down today, and only a white headband held her hair in place and away from her face. I left the car with her, grabbing her backpack and lunch bag from the trunk. Billy Anne waited patiently for me like she always did, surveying the vicinity, perhaps waiting for the unfamiliar face of her new art teacher.

“Are you panicking?”

“What’s panicking, Daddy?” She frowned up at me. She knew what artificial meant but didn’t know what panicking was.

“Are you worried? Is your heart beating really fast?” She brought her tiny hands to her chest to feel her heartbeat and studied the beating organ for a quick minute.

“It’s beating fast.”

“In a bad way or in a good way?”

“I’m excited to see my friends.”

“In a good way, then,” I nodded, setting her bag on the ground and handing her lunch bag. “You’re not worried about your new art teacher?”

“Well, you said you were going to kick her butt if she’s mean.”

“That I will.” Which, in a way, was true. Because if this new teacher decided to even raise her fucking voice at my daughter, she was out. And good luck to her finding another job in the area.

I crouched down to level my eyes with my child, and I swear to God, all I could see was Sofi.

“You know I love you, right?”

Billy Anne beamed. “I know, Daddy.”

“And I’d do anything for you.” I was saying this to Billy Anne, but I felt like I also needed to say this to Sofi. And actually make it happen.

“Anything?” Oh, fuck. The smirk on her face told me that she had thought of something mischievous. I was one step ahead of her.

“Well, except going to Disney World.”

“Why?” she whined, stomping her foot on the concrete.

“Because it’s three hours away. I have work, and you have school.”

“Fine,” she pouted, crossing her arms. I hoped she’d have this sass in her classroom every day. She grabbed her bag from me to indicate that our

conversation was done.

“Make good choices today, Billy Anne.”

“I will,” she answered as she started to walk toward her classroom. And as I stood, I heard her say. “You, too, Daddy.”

My first good choice didn't happen until Billy Anne and I arrived home.

Our drive to the penthouse was quiet, and it had given me ample time to decide what to do with Chloe and Sofi.

I didn't want to hurt Chloe even more by demanding a paternity test. I was aware that Chloe wasn't the issue. *I was*. Because trust and I weren't exactly best buddies at the moment, and with my history, it was clear why trust was difficult for me.

Sofi was my child, and I didn't care what Chloe's plans were or if she wanted to make my life a living hell. I deserved it, and I was willing to take the blow. But I would provide for my daughter in all the ways I could, regardless. I needed to find a way for Chloe not to hate me as much and to allow me actually to see her.

I knew that she wouldn't let me off the hook that easily, so forcing my way in was not the right move.

The first right move, though, was unblocking her number from my phone. And I did exactly that as I prepared a meatball sandwich for dinner.

Billy Anne was in the living room, watching a cartoon show with Charlie on the couch. The latter's head was on her lap, enjoying the little scratches his owner offered.

“Dinner's ready, Billy Anne.” I didn't have to call her twice because she was up and off the couch in a second, leaving Charlie. Her tiny feet thudded

against the hardwood floor.

Billy Anne was still wearing the same headband from school, but her hair was a mess already. She was wearing a pair of pink cotton shorts and a ruffled orange top her grandmother had gotten her for Christmas last year.

I waited for her to round the counter, and she took her spot on one of the stools. I watched her carefully from behind in case she fell backward, but when she was up and sitting, I took the spot next to her.

“How was school?” I asked before taking a bite of my sandwich. It was not special or anything but it was a lazy night and I was sick of cooking pasta. It was either this or pizza. And pizza was usually for Fridays.

“It was good,” Billy Anne answered nonchalantly, opening the sandwich and poking one of the meatballs with her finger, curious about the texture.

“Don’t play with your food, baby.” She obeyed and finally gathered the sandwich with both hands before taking a big bite. At least as big as her small mouth could manage. “How’s your art teacher?”

“She was nice, I guess.”

“Was she scary?”

“No, she was actually really...sublime.”

Sublime. Jesus Christ. It sounded like a word my sister knew.

“Maggie taught you that word?”

“Nope,” she shook her head. “Ralph did. He told me that Aunt Maggie was *sublime.*”

“And what does sublime mean?”

“Very, very, *very* beautiful.”

“And you believe your new art teacher is very, very, very beautiful?”

“Very. And she was nice too. She whispers when she talks to me, like she really wants me to listen. She told me she liked my flowers.”

Billy Anne had a talent for painting flowers, and I wasn't just saying this because she was my child. The way she painted them was actually breathtaking. I'd framed a few around the house. Maggie did the same. Even Billy Anne's grandmother, who had niche taste when it came to hanging paintings on her walls, had a few of Billy Anne's flower paintings hanging up in her living room.

"Did you talk to her?" I asked.

"No."

"It's okay."

"But I think I will." This was new. Billy Anne was not an easy nut to crack when it came to talking to new people. She had only met this teacher once, and she already wanted to talk to her. That meant something.

"Yeah?"

"I like the way she teaches art. It's not boring. And she told me she'll give me a reference tomorrow. What does reference mean?"

"It's like a guide you can follow when you paint."

"Maybe she'll bring me flowers tomorrow. I'd like that."

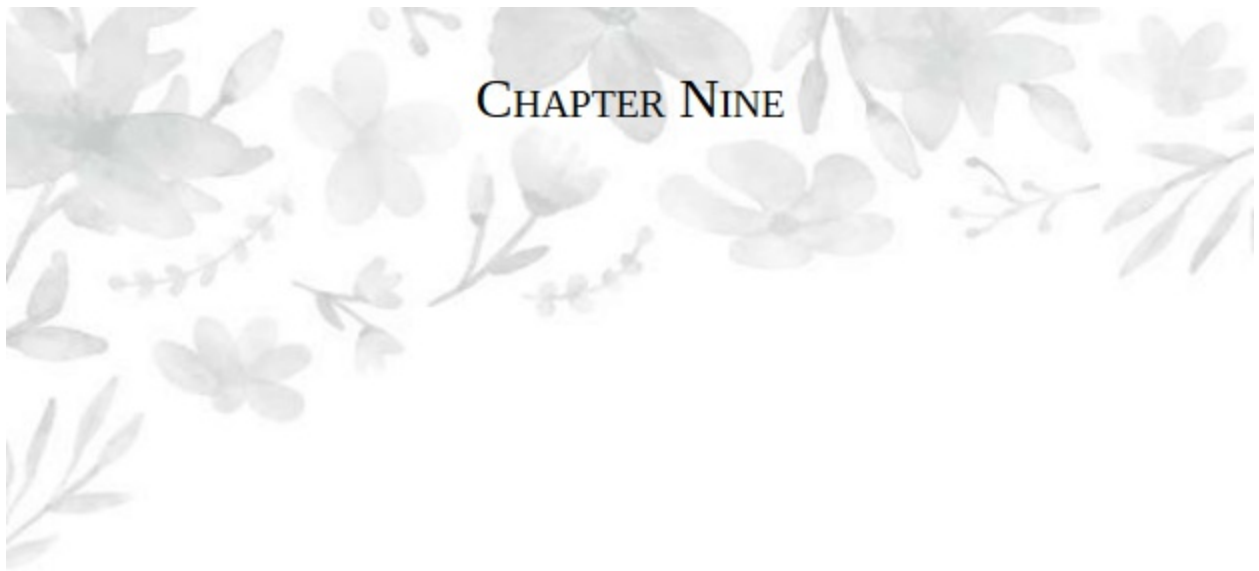
"You'd like to get flowers?" I could get her flowers. She didn't have to go to art class to get them.

"I think so. So I can paint them."

Done. I'll get her flowers tomorrow. And the next day after that. And then the next and then the next. And I wouldn't give a fuck if this penthouse would be filled with clashing colors from a wide variety of flowers. If Billy Anne wanted them, she'd get them.

Would it be bad to send Chloe flowers, too? Maybe a vase full of red roses. But she didn't look like someone who could be easily swayed by such things. If I needed to step up, flowers wouldn't do it.

But I already had a plan in mind. I just needed to make a call.



CHAPTER NINE



Chloe

The elevator pinged when I reached the highest story of the building. With a bag of groceries in my arms and Sofi in the other, I sent up a small prayer that Ben wouldn't be in the lobby when the elevator door opened. I knew I should be glad about the fact that I was spared another round of conversation with him, but I didn't expect the small wave of disappointment that washed over me when the elevator doors parted, and the floor was empty.

It had been over a week since Ben and I had confronted each other in my penthouse, and I hadn't seen nor spoken to him since. Still, that man had been running my mind every day nonstop.

Sofi had stopped crying herself to sleep after I went back to chilling her teething rings. Ben had been right. Sofi was teething. Her molars were starting to grow, and the pain was making her upset.

It had also been a week since I started at the school as the substitute art teacher, and I didn't think I could love teaching any more. The kids in fourth grade were so focused on their art and were actually pretty talented when it

came to painting. One student had stood out from the rest, even though her silence was meant to hide her in a crowd.

One of the teachers told me that Billy Anne had always been a star student in her fourth-grade art class, but despite her beautiful paintings, she was the quietest child I had ever met. She was painfully shy, and painting was her compulsory therapeutic activity in school. She did them twice as much as the regular students.

Billy Anne hadn't spoken a word to me since I started, and she'd always have her head down when she passed her work, avoiding eye contact. It broke my heart to see her that way, but I made it a personal goal to crack her open.

After I discovered that she was fond of painting flowers, I brought her flowers every day to paint. The first time I brought her a big sunflower, her eyes grew wide in awe and joy. The corners of her lips started to stretch, and it was the first time I'd ever seen her smile. It made my heart joyous just seeing her smile like that. It's always the little things.

That following day, I gave her a nosegay of chrysanthemum, then three tulips. Every day was different, yet her excitement and enthusiasm to paint these flowers on her canvas only grew. Although she hadn't spoken a single word to me yet, her smiles were progress.

"Baba?" Sofi babbled in my arms as I set the grocery bags on the floor to retrieve my keycard from my pocket.

"You're gonna get your baba, honey." The door beeped green, confirming my access.

I pushed open the door and switched on the lights. I'd never get used to the fact that I had been living in this place for almost a month. Every time I'd open my door, I'd still get overwhelmed with joy that I was living in this beautiful penthouse.

Tonight, though, as the room illuminated, I was glued to in place. The penthouse was still beautiful. Sofi's toys were still scattered, and everything seemed to be where I had left it this morning.

But I couldn't possibly be making up the Duette blinds covering my glass walls. I was sure that *they* weren't there when I left. They were there all right, and they were blocking my evening view of the waves kissing the shore.

"Mama," Sofi complained in my arms once more, breaking the trance I was in. "Baba." God, sometimes this child was sassy to no end, but I couldn't hate her because she got it from me.

"Yes, baba." I walked further into the house and set Sofi in her crib in the living room, filled with an array of toys to keep her busy as I prepared her bottle and unpacked the groceries.

It was when I was about to put the carton of milk in the fridge that I noticed the white horizontal latch keeping the refrigerator door in place. I swallowed, putting the milk on the counter instead to study my surroundings.

When I looked around my kitchen, I saw that there were more locks on the cabinets under the sink, covers on the stove knobs, and there was a transparent door guard against my oven.

Someone had entered the penthouse and baby-proofed the place. This had Ben's name written all over it.

And it was not only the kitchen. As I walked around the house, I saw that every nook and cranny of the penthouse was proofed. Every corner and edge of the place had guards and bumpers, outlets were covered, and all the appliances were latched. There were even anti-slip mats in the bathroom and by the sink, and when I entered Sofi's room, I saw the new baby monitor on her nightstand, something I had been contemplating buying for a while.

I knew I should be grateful and thankful for the fact that the penthouse was

baby-proofed and Sofi could walk around without me having to worry about her that much, but I felt like I'd been invaded and been told that I was irresponsible for not having them installed in the first place. Well, it wasn't really budget-friendly to child-proof, was it?

The self-control I'd been trying to keep up for the past week not to approach Ben went up smoke because I was steaming mad, and the next thing I knew, I was marching towards his side of the building, and like *deja-vu*, I was pounding on his door.

"Jesus Christ!" I heard him complain on the other side, but I was relentless and banged at the door some more. Then it burst open and the sight of Ben in black pants and a black ribbed shirt made me momentarily forget what I came here to say and just simply melt on the floor in front of him. "What the fuck, Chloe?"

"Did you have someone come into my penthouse?"

The accusation in my tone was clear, and I didn't give two shits if he'd thought I was a crazy woman. The fact that Ben had the power to invade my personal space meant he could do so much more. And the idea that he could influence people to help him take Sofi away from me scared me to death. I needed to make this sperm donor realize that he didn't have any right to decide things for Sofi, or for me for that matter. He was a stranger to us.

"No," he answered nonchalantly, crossing his hands against his chest. "Why would I waste my money to make someone do that?"

The sense of relief I felt at his reply made me feel almost embarrassed that I had marched into his place like some kind of lunatic. Fuck. Maybe I was just the crazy next-door neighbor. But then the relief quickly evaporated when he added, "I did it myself."

"You went in my penthouse? You know that's trespassing, right?" I

narrowed my eyes at him. “You can’t just barge into my home, violate my privacy, and call it a night.”

“Even if I was doing it for Sofi?”

“Sofi is safe without you, asshole. We don’t need your help.”

I could tell that the words struck him deeply because the look of confusion in his eyes was replaced by irritation.

“The last time I checked, not proofing your home for your kid’s safety is considered child neglect.”

“The last time *I* checked, you leaving me pregnant with your daughter without honoring your responsibilities is child abandonment.”

That shut him up, and the sense of pride that blossomed in my chest was like no other. Ben was not going to win this war with me. I wouldn’t let him.

He had made his decision not to help out, and if he thought dangling the fact that he baby-proofed the penthouse in my face and calling it parenting was going to make me forget the way he easily discarded me, he could dream on. Fine, I was bitter about it, and I had every right to be because while Ben was out here living this extravagant life with his daughter, I was standing at the bus stop with an infant drenched in the rain because I had to close the restaurant, I was waitressing at on the weekends.

“I’ll speak with the landlord about this, Ben.”

“You’re going to tattle about me?”

“First your dog, then digging into Frankie’s record, and now this?” I pointed. “What’s next? Creeping in my house in the middle of the night?”

Ben let out a cold, frustrated scoff. “Have you even met the landlord, Chloe?” I admit, that caught me off guard.

“No.” But that didn’t mean I could call Frankie and ask him for contact information.

“Well, nice to fucking meet you. And by the way, my building is pet-friendly.”

Well, fuck me.

“You own this building?”

“And the next two beside it.”

Of course, he owned it. Just like he owned the bar I was at two years ago. Whatever I did and wherever I went, it seemed like I was stuck with this man.

“Still. You didn’t have any right barging in there without telling me.”

To my surprise, Ben took a deep breath, one that told me he was raising a white flag. He looked tired, almost defeated, like he wanted this to be over. Well, me too, honey.

“Look, Chloe,” he started. “I know that I messed up with you and Sofi, all right? I genuinely thought you were fucking with me, and I could’ve handled it differently. I had no excuse for that. And I didn’t expect you to be here, to be the damn person to live next door. When I held Sofi in my arms and looked at her, I knew that you were right. What I said to you last week, all those accusations, it was an asshole move. And I’m sorry for that. I get that you don’t trust me and you don’t want me, but I’m going to be there for Sofi. I *want* to be there for her.”

It was the best thing I had heard from him since we met for the second time. I’d longed for the day Ben finally stepped up. But still, the doubt was there, and so was the fear. Because let’s face it, I didn’t know a single thing about Ben, and the only thing I had in common with this man was his child and maybe a heart full of anger. Other than that, he was a complete stranger.

“And you think coming into my home without my permission is the way to do it?”

“I should’ve told you before. I’m sorry.”

He was really apologizing, wasn't he? The look on his face seemed genuine. Though, I needed time to digest all this and find the courage to trust this man with Sofi. But I couldn't, for the life of me, not let Ben help because, at the end of the day, Sofi really was his, and I owed it to Sofi to introduce her father to her. I was willing to put my issues aside only due to this.

"You tell me ahead of time what your plans are with her, but I'll supervise, meaning you can't take her without me. If you want to buy her things, buy her food, save up for her fucking college, fine. But I call the shots here, Ben. Not you."

"Understood." Ben looked like he had just won a million bucks. I hated it. It took everything in me not to keep my daughter away from him to punish him. But punishing him meant punishing Sofi, and I didn't want that. For now, I'd take Ben's decision to do the bare minimum as a win. Time would tell if he really was in it for the long game. "Anything I need to know about her?"

"She'll put anything and everything in her mouth, so if you're watching her, *really* watch her. And don't feed her strawberries, she's allergic to them."

"You won't have a problem with that," he pointed. "I haven't had strawberries since I was two, after I almost died of anaphylactic shock."

Of course, because what other way to punish me than to let my daughter have inherited her allergy from the man I despised the most?



CHAPTER TEN



Ben

“*P*aulina Herrera. Time of death: 18:12.”

I recalled my words from earlier, a high-pitched tone emitting from the machines by the patient’s head. She was the youngest patient I had cared for, who had died in the middle of surgery.

She was twelve years old, but she was so tiny and so malnourished that she looked years younger. Like Billy Anne. And maybe that was the reason why it was bothering me so much.

As a general surgeon, I rarely saw kids as my patients—that was Pedia’s work. But Paulina had been my patient before. I had removed a tumor from her lungs two years ago, and I didn’t think that she’d be back in the hospital so soon with a completely different diagnosis.

She had had a tear in her artery and Doctor Lola Wilson, our chief of Cardiothoracic surgery, did the Bentall procedure to remove the damaged section of her aorta and replace it with a synthetic graft.

She had called me mid-surgery to check the patient’s lungs and to advise about possible post-op complications that could develop because she started

bleeding on the table. Thankfully, Doctor Wilson had the bleeding under control, had fixed the tear, and closed her up. Although she was still unconscious, her labs were fine.

That was until four hours later, when her skin started to turn blue, and her heart rate became so slow she was bradycardic. The next thing we knew, she was flatlining, and when we tried the defibrillator, she wasn't responding. I had to call it.

"Hello?" Maggie called at the other end of the line. I was at home already, and Maggie had called earlier to let me know that she'd picked Billy Anne up from school because the boys missed her. It was a Friday, so I let her. "Ben, are you listening to me?"

Honestly, I wasn't. Paulina had been bugging me, and that thought led to Billy Anne. I couldn't imagine her dying like that. I didn't know if I could survive the aftermath—a world without my daughter.

I thought of what could have happened if I'd given Tonette another chance, but I shook that off before it could do some more damage to my mental state. Tonette was out of our lives for good, and I wasn't going to let her compromise my peace of mind.

"I'm sorry." I sighed, discarding the pen I was holding to lean back in my desk chair and massage the bridge of my nose. "What did you say?"

"I said, Billy Anne is staying for the night." Of course, she was. It was Friday anyway, and it was better for Billy Anne to spend time with as many people as possible. The more that she exposed herself to her family, the better. At least, that was what her therapist had said.

And it was better that I'd spend the night alone, especially when it was clear that this deceased patient of mine was going to haunt me.

"I know I said I'd take her back before dinner, but we were playing

volleyball by the beach, and she said she wanted to stay.”

“You’re keeping my child from me, Margaret.”

“It’s not my fault she loves me more than you.” It was supposed to be a stupid joke, but I couldn’t ignore the strange feeling in my gut. My silence must’ve alarmed Maggie because she added, “It’s a joke, Benedict.”

“As long as she’s safe, Maggie.”

“Hey,” Maggie started, her voice low and serious. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just a patient of mine died today. She was twelve.”

“Oh, Ben.” Maggie understood how death worked when you were in the medical field. We were a family of doctors after all. In fact, Maggie was an ER nurse before she went into aesthetics. It was the reason she had changed specialties. She couldn’t stomach a patient dying. She always felt like it was her fault. “I’m sorry.”

“What I said was stupid,” she added, and the laughter of her husband and the kids disappeared from the background. “You know Billy Anne loves you, right? She can’t stop talking about you. I wish *my* kids talked about me that much.”

“Your kids are lucky to have you, Maggie.”

“Damn right, they are.” Her laughter made me smile. She always knew what the right things to say, and I was lucky to have her growing up. “I’ll have her call you before bedtime, okay?”

“All right.” I was about to hang up and continue wrapping up my email so I could start prepping dinner when she yelled my name so loud I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “Jesus, Maggie. What is it?”

“Did you receive the invitation from Mom?”

“What invitation?”

“For her annual charity gala.”

“Doesn’t she do that at Christmastime?”

“I don’t know. She might be doing it early this year. I’m personally sick of wearing Christmas colors to it every year, so I’m excited to mix things up a bit.”

“I’ll look for it in my inbox.”

“It came in the mail, Doc.” That explained it. I hadn’t checked my mail at the reception desk for months. I didn’t think that people would still opt to send real mail, especially when everything was electronic. “I gotta go. Ralph’s calling me. Bye, Ben.”

“Good night, Maggie.”

I made to leave my penthouse really quickly to grab the mail from the cluster of mailboxes. Grabbing my keys and phone, I shut my laptop and headed out. I risked a glance at Chloe’s side of the building only to see that the door was shut.

She hadn’t initiated contact after I had told her that I’d be more present for Sofi. And honestly, I hadn’t exactly made an effort, too. It’s just that I didn’t know where to start.

Fifteen minutes later, I was holding the red and gold invitation in my hands. When I saw that the rest of the mail left in the box was junk and unimportant, I threw it all in the nearby bin. I grabbed the only letter that mattered and ripped through the paper as I got into the elevator.

Next week? I checked the information in the envelope and saw that the invitation was sent a month ago. Why did Maggie just inform me of this now? Great, now I had to clear my schedule and miss seeing some patients.

Janice Hayes knew how to throw a party. They could rival some of Hollywood’s greatest events. And not only did she love going overboard, but

she knew the right people to invite and the right press members to include who'd make sure her message would be received by the right donors.

The gala she hosted each year was great in every sense. It was for charity, it had booze and people got to dress up. Socializing was not my favorite thing in the world, but because it was for a great cause, the least I could do was show up and donate the same amount every year.

But since Tonette and I had broken up, my mother, bless her heart, had been berating me to find a date—a wife really—to bring along to her gala. She told me that it was sad at this point every time I'd show up alone. And every year, when I came without someone in my arm, she'd play matchmaker with some of her friend's daughters.

The ladies were beautiful, of course. Most of them were professionals—lawyers, engineers, even fellow doctors. But they never piqued my interest. Sure, their jobs were a big deal, but they would get dull every time they'd talk about their work as if I'd be more interested in their work than their personalities. I wanted to know them as people, not learn about their damn clients.

This year, though, I was determined to change things up. I was not about to waste my time with one of the ladies my mother would introduce me to and pretend that I'd ever let them in my life. My trust issues simply wouldn't let me and right now, I was not in a position to choose them over Billy Anne.

Opportunity showed itself when the elevator pinged and the double doors opened on my floor. The opportunity was wearing a white crop top that hadn't seen an iron all its life and a pair of gray sweatpants.

A subtle amount of skin on her stomach showed, and I could see the delicate curve of her waist. She was barefoot, too, her toenails painted a bright shade of orange that I could see all the way from the elevator.

I probably shouldn't be staring her down, given that she looked like she was in a dilemma. Her sweatpants had wet marks on the ankle, her temples were beaded with sweat, and locks of her midnight black hair adhered to the side of her face.

She was walking back towards her open penthouse door, and it looked like she was coming from my side of the floor.

"Thank God you're here," she said, halting on her feet and sighing in relief when she saw me walk out of the elevator. A sense of caution echoed in my mind, and my initial thought was Sofi. Has something happened?

"Are you okay? Is Sofi okay?"

"She's fine." She frowned at my reaction. "But remember that you said you'd help out more? Well, I kinda need your help right now."

She needed something, and as long it wasn't about Sofi or anything urgent, I had to play my cards right. The lightbulb in my head was glowing with the idea it was brewing. I needed a plus one, and I was looking at her right now.

"No crying child, nothing seems to be on fire." I pointed out the obvious. "I'm kind of in the middle of something important, and I think you're doing a splendid job at whatever it is you're doing."

"I wouldn't have knocked if it wasn't serious, Ben." The way she wrinkled her nose made me smile, and the jolt of electricity that had been hovering in the air of our floor struck me right in the chest, grabbing my cock's attention. I loved feisty Chloe.

"Look, my kitchen is a fucking ocean right now. Maybe some of the pipes busted, I don't know. But water is everywhere, and I can't seem to fix it."

"Like I said, I'm in the middle of something." Her jaw dropped, and the look of disbelief on her face was priceless.

"Aren't you my landlord or something? Isn't it *your* responsibility to fix the

pipes?”

“I’m not a plumber.”

“C’mon,” she whined. I never pegged her to be the whiny type. She always seemed to be collected and mature. “The more we’re wasting time arguing, the more we’re wasting water.”

I couldn’t grasp the fact that she was more worried about wasting water than the fact that she would have to clean the entire kitchen floor, and with a child that shouldn’t be left unsupervised, that was tiresome.

“How about I make you a deal.” Yes, because I was a jackass, and instead of helping her, I had to get something out of it first. But, hey. I wasn’t putting her life in danger or anything.

Besides, I think it would be a good idea to bring her to see my family. If they liked her, it meant that introducing Sofi wouldn’t be a problem.

“I’m not getting naked for you again.” Chloe. Naked. Now, that was a lovely idea. But as much as I wanted her writhing underneath me and screaming my name, I wasn’t the type to blackmail someone for sex. I could get that consensually if I made the right phone calls.

“Tempting. But that wasn’t what I had in mind.”

“What is it then?”

“I have this gala I need to attend next week, and I need a plus one.”

“You want me to find you a plus one?”

“No, I want *you*. To be my plus one, that is.”

“Are you sick? *No.*” She didn’t even think about it. She just downright rejected me. It stung, but I liked my women smart. Not that Chloe was my woman or anything. Maybe not yet. But I knew that at this point, I wanted to sleep with her again.

I didn’t know how I was going to do it or if she’d even let me, but I kept

that idea at the back of my mind, regardless. I just needed to figure her out first.

“Then, no to the pipes. Good luck trying to fix it. It’s quite complex, the plumbing.”

“You think you’re so smart, huh? I’ll call someone then and maybe write a horrible review about this place. How about ‘*rude neighbor, obnoxious landlord, and horrible indoor plumbing*’?”

“It’s adorable that you’d take the time to actually write that. And good luck trying to find a plumber on a Friday night.” She’d actually be surprised to discover that there were a lot of services available around here regardless of the day. That is if she actually picked up her phone.

I started walking to my door, purposely jingling my keys loudly to remind her that I was still there and she could change her mind, but the clock was ticking. Then, a smirk grew on my face when I heard her curse under her breath.

“*Fine*. I’ll be your plus one to this stupid gala. But I don’t want any funny business, Ben.”

“Great. And it’s not stupid. The gala is for a good cause.” I pocketed my keys, and we walked into her penthouse. It was clean compared to the last time I was here. There were no boxes that needed unpacking, and the toys were kept to a minimum. “Besides, I would’ve fixed it regardless if you agreed or not.”

“Yeah, well, if you wanted to spend time with me, you could’ve just asked. No need to go through so much theater.”

I did want to see her. And Sofi, of course. The latter was busy trying to stack the colored blocks in her crib, sitting comfortably, her adorable chunky legs forming a delightful circle underneath her. She was wearing a white

bodysuit with the words “Momma’s Girl”, and I mentally reminded myself to pick something that said the opposite.

“Hi, baby girl,” I cooed, approaching her crib. I caught her attention, and she threw a block away like she wasn’t focused on it a second ago. She stood with ease like she’d been working those chubby legs all her life. One hand gripped the edge of the crib for balance, and her other hand reached out for me. “Can’t, honey. Dada’s gotta fix the pipes.”

I didn’t know how Chloe would feel about the nickname, but I couldn’t help it. When I checked to see Chloe’s reaction, though, she stared at us like it was her least favorite show.

Sofi tried her best to climb up the playpen, but the mesh material of the side was stopping her from going up. She was stuck there. Which was good because the way Chloe’s kitchen looked, it was dangerous for her to be running loose.

“I was making dinner when I heard the drips. The next thing I knew, there was water everywhere.” Chloe walked towards her flooded kitchen before squatting down to examine the pipes with a flashlight. “I could fix it if I wanted to, but I couldn’t find the switch to stop the water supply.”

“You know how to fix a busted pipe?”

“Do you think I could’ve survived Queens if I didn’t?” She gave me a forced smile. I wasn’t expecting anything less from this woman. She could build a whole house for all I cared; I was just in awe that she took the time to learn these things.

And then it hit me that Chloe learned these things, not because she wanted to, but because she *needed* to.

It didn’t occur to me what Chloe’s life was like when she was in New York. I didn’t know who this Franklin person was or what role he played in her life,

but I knew that he had money. I didn't know if Chloe did, too.

But Queens, New York? That neighborhood didn't exactly scream like luxury to me. In fact, it was a relatively affordable neighborhood compared to other New York City boroughs. Was that the reason why she moved to Miami?

Don't get me wrong, New York was beautiful, but the cost of living there was very expensive compared to here, and the view of the beach was terrific compared to the streets of NYC.

"The water supply switches are under the bathroom sink. The green one is for the kitchen," I directed, and Chloe didn't waste any more time before carefully running towards the bathroom to switch it off. And all I could do was watch as her hips sway from side to side. God, this woman had a beautiful ass on her.

Focus, Ben.

Shaking my head, I studied her kitchen. Aside from the water on the floor, there was a slice of salmon on a skillet that had yet to be cooked. There was also a pack of mixed salad greens, and the way it was condensing on the counter told me that she had gotten it out of the fridge quite some time ago.

Finally, the water stopped coming out of the pipes.

"Did it stop?" Chloe yelled from the bathroom.

"Yes!"

"Yes." The tiny squeak of Sofi answering made me jerk my head towards her, and a sense of delight showered me. She was in her echolalia stage when children mimic words they hear, and it made me smile. It meant I could teach her to say my name.

"You're one smart kid, aren't you?"

"She got it from me," Chloe chirped, announcing her return. She didn't

spare me a look, just strutted back to where I was with the flashlight still glowing. “Now, can you please hurry up and fix it so I can finish making dinner? I’m starving.”

“Yes, ma’am.” No more dilly-dallying. I wasted no more time sitting on my haunches to inspect the kitchen sink. Chloe, without any instructions, crouched beside me and shone the flashlight on the connected pipes. The steady way she was holding the light screamed that knew what she was doing, and just by the way she was studying the tubes, I could tell she knew what she was looking for.

But all I could think about was the smell of coconut in her hair and the way her shoulders were touching mine. She was so close that my mind was in shambles, and it told me to move away. But my cock told me to embrace the scent of her hair instead.

For a moment there, I couldn’t even recall what I was doing here in the first place, and my heart was beating so fast I thought it might explode.

I didn’t know if Chloe was oblivious to the sudden charge of energy circulating us because she was too busy looking for the pipe in question. She looked so focused it almost seemed like she was passionate about fixing it.

“I don’t see any busted pipes,” she complained, pushing herself up. Thank God. I didn’t know what I would’ve said to her if she stayed. “Maybe it’s not a busted pipe.”

“Give me the flashlight.” I ignored her comments because they had stopped registering the moment she squatted next to me. With my shoes now wet, I shone the flashlight around the area, and sure enough, it didn’t look like any pipes were broken.

“You know, I could just call for a plumber tomorrow morning,” she said, and when I looked up at her, she was chewing her nails, and a look of

hesitation painted her face. She looked like she felt bad for inconveniencing me. “It won’t be a problem.”

“It’s okay.”

“It might be something at the back we couldn’t see. The lighting isn’t very good anyway.”

“Can you just please turn the water back on and reduce the water pressure here?”

“Didn’t you say you were in the middle of something important?”

“I am now.” Chloe raised an eyebrow at me but said nothing before walking towards the bathroom to follow my instructions.

The water came back on, this time, a gentle trickle of it flowed out of the three connected tubes. Chloe was right. There wasn’t anything busted here. The pipe fittings were loose, and it had caused the flow of water.

“Well?”

“Found it!” I answered. “I need a wrench.”

Just as I thought that Chloe couldn’t get any hotter, she came back holding a yellow toolbox. For Christ’s sake, and she held that thing like it was an expensive handbag. This woman came prepared. I reminded myself not to push her too much because she knew how to handle a hammer.

She bent down, set the box on the wet floor, and produced a wrench. She handed it to me and studied the pipes once more. I didn’t have a choice but to get on my back on the floor.

“You don’t need to get your clothes wet,” Chloe protested. “Tell me what to do, I could do it. Here, I’ll hold the flashlight.” I didn’t doubt her one bit. But the way Chloe was handling this, all the embarrassment and reluctance, I could tell that she had been taking care of everything herself for a long time

and that she wasn't used to others doing it for her. Had anyone ever taken care of her?

"I got it," I insisted, positioning myself on my back. I felt the coldness of the water seeping through the thin material of my white shirt as I bit the flashlight between my lips, aiming it at the loose pipe fittings.

"Does Sofi like salmon?" I probably shouldn't have started the small talk because not only did I detest it, but there was also a foreign thing in my mouth. Since Chloe wasn't planning to leave my side, and with the way my crotch was positioned behind her, I realized that it was better than leaving my thoughts to myself.

"What?"

"I saw the salmon in the skillet. I thought you were cooking dinner."

"Oh." Realization filled her tone, and I listened to her answer as I twisted the wrench. I swear, I heard Chloe whimper. It was low that I barely heard it. But it was there because she cleared her throat nervously after. "Sofi doesn't like eating solid food at night. Her stomach gets upset. It's just usually a bottle for her."

"So dinner for one, then?"

Chloe was quiet for a moment but answered, "Yeah. When she's a little older, maybe we can have dinner for two."

I grunted as I twisted the last fitting into place. I sat up, and I didn't give two shits that my shirt had basically absorbed all the water on the floor. "All done."

Chloe smiled and returned to the bathroom to switch the water supply back on. When she came back, I turned on the faucet, and thankfully, the pipes had stopped leaking.

"There you go," I said, returning the wrench back in the toolbox. "Good as

new.”

“Thanks, Ben.” I didn’t know if it was just me, but there was something in Chloe’s eyes. The way she looked at me with an intense gaze filled with clear admiration and some hesitation. Electricity danced in the air around us. I wanted to push my luck, and I asked the universe one more time to make it work.

“Hey, Chloe?”

“Yeah?”

“How about we have dinner for two at my place tonight?”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves. The design is dense and spans the width of the page, with some elements extending slightly below the main border line.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Chloe

Ben looked so fucking hot twisting that wrench. The way his muscles flexed with every move made my core tingle in excitement. Not that I was getting anything from him tonight, but the thought of having to sleep with someone this handy and good-looking was a very pleasing idea.

I knew that it was over for me when he decided to lie on my floor, and let me tell you, the hardwood surface wasn't the only thing that got wet.

When he lifted his hands to adjust the wrench, his shirt lifted up a little. And my position beside him had a front-row seat at the chiseled curves and the subtle V-line on his pelvis. I didn't want to be caught staring at his pants like an idiot, so I needed to control myself.

But it seemed that Ben didn't have any bad angles. In fact, wherever I turned, I saw his muscles and it took a lot of self-control not to jump this man.

“How about we have dinner for two at my place tonight?”

It was not a good idea. The last time I was stuck in a room with Ben, I got pregnant, and although I didn't regret Sofi, I couldn't lie about the fact that it

had been hard for me. The good, responsible girl in me told me to run as far as I could from Sofi's father, but the horny me –the one who hadn't had sex in two years–told me that there was nothing wrong with giving in.

Fortunately, tonight, Ben was tolerable and didn't say anything to piss me off. That and I felt like my secret fantasy had just come to life wearing an almost-sheer white shirt.

"I don't think it's a good idea." I grabbed the wrench from his hand. It was the wrong move because the moment my skin came close to his, my nipples tingled, and a chill ran down my spine.

"Why not?"

"You know why."

"It's just dinner. You can't cook in this situation. You might slip, break your skull, bleed to death. I could go on."

"It's a wet floor."

"It's a death trap."

It was attractive seeing him this stressed about my well-being because I had never really had someone worry about me like this.

"I have cooked in under worse conditions."

"You don't have to right now," he pressed. "C'mon. Take Sofi to my place. I'll whip up a quick pesto pasta, and then we can call it a night." He must have read the hesitation on my face because he added, "You know I won't hurt you, Chlo. You trust me, right?"

"I shouldn't. But I do,"

"Good enough. Now, let's go. I can hear your stomach growling." My cheeks turned red. My stomach had been growling the whole time. I had skipped lunch earlier today because Savv had called a meeting for me to

share the good news that I was officially a regular teacher at the school.
“Grab Sofi, and I’ll grab her crib.”

Ben’s place almost felt like a completely different world. Although we had the same penthouse layout, his was adorned with darker neutral shades. It was a man’s penthouse, alright, because the throw pillows matched the charcoal color of his kitchen countertop and cabinets.

I had set up Sofi’s porta crib and prepared her bottle while he was changing his clothes. Now, he was bending down near the refrigerator, trying to find the basil leaves he said he had purchased a while back. If he was gorgeous lying down on my kitchen floor, he was intoxicating with his chiseled arms reached gently out on top of the icy surface of his fridge.

Sofi was in her crib drinking her baba, and I had invited myself to go into his clean kitchen. The first things I noticed were the matte personalized stools at the kitchen island and three slim cone pendant lights hanging over the top. It was cozy and masculine.

Charlie, the golden retriever, had positioned beside Sofi’s crib after he had sniffed the equipment multiple times until he deemed it safe. They were adorable together like that. I couldn’t help but snap a picture on my phone.

I cleared my throat, and Ben’s head cocked towards me in attention.

“So tell me about this gala we’re going to.” I leaned on the cool marble surface and studied him as he grabbed a jar filled with water and basil covered with a clear plastic bag.

“My mother hosts a gala every year. It’s a fundraiser to help people with prostate cancer.”

“Why prostate cancer?”

“It’s her way of showing love for my late father,” Ben pointed. “He was one a surgeon, the best in his days. He mostly did medical missions and did surgeries for free. He died of prostate cancer when I was sixteen. It was a long, excruciating process. Very emotional. They were each other’s soulmate.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“They were each other’s soulmates. So when he passed away, my mother did this gala in his memory. Proceeds go to research facilities and people suffering from prostate cancer.”

I gave him a smile, knowing that the talk about his father was a serious topic. So I changed the subject.

“Your mother? You mean to tell me I’m going to meet your mother at this party?” Then, it kind of made me nervous that I would meet his mother. I wouldn’t have agreed if I had known this detail before. I mean, everything was happening so fast.

“And my sister’s going to be there, too.”

“Your *sister*? Is this your subtle invitation that you want your family to meet Sofi?” I couldn’t help but wonder what they might ask me and what kind of impression it would make that I had a kid with Ben. This was uncharted territory for me, and the anxiety it brought didn’t sit well.

“I think that it’s best if we keep Sofi between us for a while. I don’t want you to freak out. When you’re ready for them to meet her, you tell me. The ball’s in your court.”

Ben laid out the ingredients for his pesto pasta on the island and readied the stockpot, filling it with water and turning the stove on. He turned back to me, picking basil from the jar and putting it on a plate with the garlic cloves.

“Okay.”

“Hey, Chloe.” The warmth of his hand on mine sent tingles down my back. I didn’t realize that my fingers had been tapping the surface of the island until he put a hand over them. “Relax. They’re going to like you.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.” He turned and put the food processor on the countertop, plugging it into one of the sockets.

“Do you mind grabbing the pine nuts and the olive oil from the fridge?” he asked, putting the basil in the appliance. I hopped off the stool and headed toward where the fridge was.

“So, tell me about yourself, Chloe.” His statement slightly took me aback.

“Well, what do you want to know?”

“For starters, I want to know who this Franklin person is.” His tone didn’t sit well with me. I understood he was protective of Sofi and hadn’t met Frankie yet, but his prejudice didn’t sit well with me.

“You need to calm yourself down about Frankie. He’s my best friend, and that’s it.”

“And the penthouse?”

“He rented it because he thought he’d be doing work around the area. When his client changed the venue, he couldn’t cancel it, so he gave the three months to me because he knew I was planning to move away from New York.”

I shut the fridge after I found the nuts and the olive oil, and then I started walking toward him. He was leaning against the countertop, his arms crossed against his body, making his biceps look bigger than ever.

“Was New York not to your liking?”

“It’s beautiful there, especially on the holidays. The entire city sparkles, lights everywhere. But it wasn’t home. At least not to me. I wanted Sofi to

grow up somewhere less...busy and less expensive.”

“The views are beautiful here. Warm. You have access to the beach twenty-four-seven.” Ben took the ingredients from me and measured them before putting them in the processor with the basil and the garlic. He let the thing rip, and thankfully, it was the quiet kind, so it didn’t bug Sofi, who was now slowly drifting to sleep.

“Yeah. Sofi and I love the beach. We have been going down there to see the sunrise each day since we arrived.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“You’re not quiet when you leave your unit, Chloe.” Oh. For a second, I thought he was spying on me through the peephole.

“How about you? Anything I should know about?”

“If you grab a handful of fettuccines and put them in the pot, I’ll be happy to tell you everything you want to know.” I followed his instructions and grabbed a reasonable amount of fettuccine from one of the pasta containers in his pantry.

I noticed that Ben liked to cook and preferred his food to be organic. He could’ve simply used a pesto sauce from a jar instead of making one.

“Shoot.”

“Are you close with your mother?”

“As close as a son will ever be to his mother. We’re not exactly best of friends, but we get along. You?”

“I didn’t know my parents. I grew up in the foster care system. Never been adopted. That’s where I met Frankie.”

“Did you try looking for them?”

“There was no point. I was content with what I got. I excelled at school,

graduated, and had a stable job. They never really crossed my mind that much. If they did, I never had the resources even to begin looking for them.”

When I was a kid, it bugged me that I didn’t know who my parents were, and I’d always get so jealous of the kids who got adopted into a lovely home. I always thought I’d look for them once I was out of the system. But when I needed to graduate and get a job to survive, they stopped being my top priority.

“It was their loss, Chloe.”

“I’m sure they had their reasons. Maybe I was better off in the system than with them.”

“Still.”

“How about you? If I remember correctly, you said you have a kid. Well, aside from Sofi.”

“I do.”

“Are they here?”

“No, she’s at my sister’s. She likes staying there on the weekends to play with her cousins.”

“Well, tell her that if she wants to have someone to play when she’s here, I’m just across the hall.” I had been meaning to ask Ben about his kid, but I noticed the way he made sure not to say her name when he was talking about her. So, I respected his privacy and did not ask questions.

“She’ll love that. But—”

“Keep Sofi between us. I know.”

There was a moment of silence when Ben turned the food processor off and took a teaspoon to taste the pesto sauce he had made. And it was impressive that he didn’t have to add anything to it like he’d made it countless times, and he knew it would taste good.

I grabbed the white serving dish he had laid out earlier on the counter once I saw him separate a ladle of pasta water before draining the fettuccine. He took it from me, and once the pasta was on the plate, he assembled it with the sauce.

The tension was palpable, and it was making me sweat. I loved that Ben knew how to cook. The little tea towel draped over his shoulder told me he knew his way around the kitchen, and the fact that he was domesticated only made him more attractive.

“I’m planning on opening a savings account for Sofi: college funds, emergency funds, health savings accounts. And since, on record, I’m not her legal guardian, I was wondering if you’d help me set it up. I’ll name you as the joint account holder until she’s 18. Is that okay?” Ben asked two minutes after he sat beside me with the plates and the pesto dish he had made. God, I was famished.

“You’d really do that?” I had been saving up for Sofi’s college, too, but it was hard because I wasn’t earning much.

“Well, yeah. She’s my daughter. It’s the least I could do. And you don’t have to worry about anything. I just need her information and yours, given that you’re her legal guardian.”

I twisted the pasta around my fork, and when I took a bite, it was like fireworks in my mouth. I wanted to compliment him, but instead, I addressed his concern.

“Are you sure, Ben? You don’t have to do that.”

“Look, I don’t know if this will sound cocky, but I can afford it, Chlo. And I’d gladly do that for Sofi. It’s not a problem. Let me do this for her—for you.”

“You don’t have to do anything for me. If you want to open a savings

account for Sofi, fine. Keep me out of it.”

“If something happens to you, we’re all affected here, babe. Sofi especially. So, health insurance for you is not out of the question. Happy wife, happy life, and all that.”

“But I’m not your wife.”

“You know what I mean. If you’re safe, Sofi’s safe. Sofi growing up without a mother is not an option. Trust me, your life is more important than money, Chloe. And I’d appreciate it if you stop arguing.”

“Fine.”

“Great.”

“Now, eat your dinner.” We ate in silence for a moment, and I felt a pang of relief for what Ben was about to do. But there was also fear because what if he’d dangled this in front of me, and then we fell apart? God, I hoped it wouldn’t come to us fighting over custody. I didn’t know if I’d survive a day without my daughter.

“I put down your number,” I blurted out of nowhere in the middle of our dinner.

“What?”

“I put down your number for her emergency contact list. I didn’t know your name then, so I wrote down your number instead.”

“And the hospital accepted it?”

“A contact person is basically a requirement. They took what they could get.”

“And Franklin?”

“Sofi isn’t Frankie’s responsibility.” It was true. Even though Franklin had offered, I didn’t want his help on this one. I wanted to be the one to provide for my kid.

“How about we take care of Sofi’s funds and then update her emergency contact information? It’s a good start, yes?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

After a heartfelt conversation over dinner, Ben and I started to clean the kitchen. Sofi was asleep in her crib, and only he and I were juggling the task in the kitchen.

We danced around, and I made sure that our skin wouldn’t touch because I feared that if we did, I’d explode and lose what was left of my self-control.

Once the kitchen island was clean and the scraps of our meal were discarded, I leaned against the countertop near the sink, and I studied him as he washed the plates before loading them into the dishwasher.

I knew he was a surgeon, and it was maybe the reason why I was loving the way he cleaned. It was precise and thorough.

Standing there, all I could think about was how it would feel to be touched again by those hands.

When all the dishes were done, and the kitchen was clean, there was a pregnant silence that followed. I should probably say my goodbyes and take Sofi back home, but something in me didn’t want to. It was maybe because Ben was looking at me with lust in his eyes. Fuck, he was feeling the spark of the energy between us, too.

“Stop looking at me like that, Ben.”

“Like what?”

“Like you—”

“Like I what, Chloe?”

“Like you’re about to do something really stupid,” I whispered, and he narrowed his eyes like he was challenging me.

“You know, when you sat beside me in your kitchen earlier, you smelled

exactly like you did two years ago. Like coconuts. I couldn't help but think about that night. And that small whimper you made-- you felt the tension in the air, too, didn't you?"

There was no point denying it.

"I did."

"So, is it still stupid if I want to kiss you right now?" My heart rate spiked, and my stomach turned with anticipation as Ben stepped closer to me and tucked the hair behind my ears.

"It's not. God, it's not, Ben. You have no idea how much I thought of you kissing me—touching me. But we can't."

"Why not? We're both consenting adults."

"Because of Sofi. She's my priority right now. I don't have time for this whole thing, and if we do this and it doesn't work out, it'll be more difficult than it already is."

"It doesn't have to be. For old-time's sake, Chlo. No strings attached. Nothing changes between our arrangement with Sofi. And after this, *if* it doesn't work out, we'll forget about this whole thing, and we carry on taking care of Sofi. You have my word."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

"Only one way to find out."

Then, the next thing I knew, Ben was pulling my chin up so his lips could meet mine. And when that moment started, I didn't want it to end.

His kiss was exactly how I remembered it. Only this time, he was more eager, and he wasn't shy about using his tongue, either.

"Jesus Christ, Chloe. Say you want this, too, baby," he said in between kisses.

"I want this. I want you."

“Very good.”

He pulled away from me, and I playfully bit his lip. It was good that he still had self-control left because I didn't. I wanted to get naked and jump this man. He grabbed me by the hand and kissed my palm before pulling me along toward his bedroom.

The room was majestic, with romantic lights and plush pillows everywhere. It smelled like expensive detergent and a tinge of his nice cologne. Like the kitchen, it was tidy, nothing out of place or scattered around.

I didn't waste any time pulling my sweatpants down, revealing my purple thong. I heard Ben curse under his breath as he examined my legs before throwing his shirt over his head. The tension and the lust hovering in the air were impossible to ignore, and for the first time in a very long time, I was allowing myself to not think of the possible consequences of us sleeping together again.

“On your back.” His voice was firm, like he wasn't giving me any room for qualms. He was in control. And I obeyed, removing my top and my bra. The cool air of the room made me shiver, and my nipples reacted.

“You like what you see?” I whispered, positioning myself on the bed. I massaged my breast to stimulate myself, and I heard him groan his approval.

“You were always a beautiful sight,” he pointed out, “and that much more when you're touching yourself.”

He lay down in between my legs, his lips finding mine and his hands roaming over my body. Then his kisses cascaded down on the side of my lips, on my chin.

He nibbled the lobe of my ear before sucking on the skin of my neck, then my collarbone. And finally, his lips found my erect nipples.

His mouth devoured them, and his other hand cupped my sensitive tits,

playing with them. I panted, my hands caressing his sculpted back, my legs going around his waist. I groaned, feeling the beautiful sensation of him worshiping my body.

“Your body is amazing.”

“Hmm...”

“Are you tired already?” He looked up at me, and I met his gaze, my eyes heavy with heat and intimacy. I didn’t know why he was still talking to me when I was going crazy waiting for him to do something.

“Shut up, Ben,” I playfully snapped. “Hurry up and touch me.” The look from him that followed told me I shouldn’t have said it because he gave an evil smirk before continuing kissing his way down my body until he reached the most sensitive part.

“You taste so sweet, Chloe. There hasn’t been a day when I didn’t think about you since I left that night. Is your pussy still as sweet as I remembered, baby?”

“Ben.” I didn’t know about how my pussy tasted, but I was sure that his tongue was as amazing and still an expert at devouring me.

He grabbed a hold of my thighs and pulled me down the edge of the bed, where he was kneeling on the floor. It gave him better access.

Thankfully, I was on my back this time because if I was standing, I might already have dissolved into a puddle on his carpeted bedroom floor.

“Answer me. If I taste your pussy, will it be as delicious as before?” He stopped eating me out, and a frustrated growl climbed out of my throat. Christ, I didn’t know I was this deprived after two years of no sex.

“Oh my God, yes,” I whined.

“Is this pussy wet for me?”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“My pussy is wet for you.”

“Very good.” With that, he returned to playing with me, his tongue circling around my clit, while both his hands reached out to mine, our fingers intertwined. And my body was so sensitive I actually thought I was going to come any second. And he hadn’t even actually touched me enough.

I arched my body as the sound of my wetness and his groans filled the room. Then he pulled away a quick second to catch his breath and lick his lips.

Our eyes met in the dim room, and out of nowhere, he spit at my pussy, his warm saliva dripping down from my clitoris and coating my folds. Jesus, that was hot.

He repeated the motion in my pussy, his tongue tracing the folds. Then he placed a kiss—two kisses there and paused, standing from his position.

“Now, here’s what we’re going to do. I want you to touch yourself. And I’m going to watch you until you come.”

“What?” Masturbating wasn’t new to me, but having to perform it in front of someone made me blush. It seemed like an intimate thing to do.

“Trust me?”

“I do.”

“Then just follow along with what I say, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I want you to spread your fucking legs for me like a good girl.” I did. I spread them wider for him, and Ben sucked on his lower lips as he studied my glistening pussy. “Just like that.”

“Fuck, Ben.” The anticipation was killing me. But I knew that if I’d just followed the rules, there would be a sweet reward.

“Touch your pussy and see how wet you are.” True enough, it was soaking wet, and I was afraid that I’d stain the bed. But given how satisfied he seemed to me, I reckoned he didn’t give a shit.

“Keep going. Play with your clit like you do when you’re alone, baby.” I arched my back, trying to catch my breath from the euphoria I was feeling. It was intoxicating being watched, and the kink of it made it even more exciting.

“Touch your cock, baby. Show me how much you want me.” I didn’t know where that came from, but there was something about having sex with Ben that made me feel safe like he would humor me and indulge all my filthy requests.

“Such a filthy mouth you have. But since you asked so nicely.” He removed his pants, and the budge behind the fabric of his boxers told me he was also excited about our little rendezvous. Thank God Sofi was fast asleep.

“Holy shit.” I forgot how big he was, and the sight of him made me want to go on my knees and suck him off. I wondered if he’d still ruin me with it.

“Did I tell you to stop playing with your pussy, baby?” I didn’t realize that I was ogling him, so I continued circling my sensitive clit, writhing under each stroke. “That’s right.”

“Your dick is so fucking big.”

“It isn’t something you haven’t tried out before.”

“You look so fucking hot stroking your cock like that.”

“I forgot how bold you are. Now shut that pretty mouth of yours and put a finger inside your pussy for me.” It was like Ben controlled my mind because I was doing everything he wanted me to.

My skin was hot, sweat dripped from my temples into my hair, and the sensation of my fingers made my knees shake. I’d never touched myself like

this before, but with him instructing me and hearing his groans, God. I could get used to this.

“I want you to fuck me. Please.”

“Your patience will be rewarded, babe. Now finger fuck that pussy of yours. Show me how wet that pussy is. Let me hear it.” I fucked myself faster, curving my fingers upwards, trying to reach my G-spot.

“Fuck, Ben. Please.”

“Faster, baby. You can do better than that. Is this how you fuck yourself when no one is watching, Chloe?”

“Yes.” I brought myself upright, my free arm supporting me as I went deeper and faster until I could feel my pussy squirting from the wetness. And Ben matched my pace, stroking his cock from where he was standing, his jaw clenching as he tried to control his urges.

“Look at how hard you make my cock, baby. You haven’t even touched it yet.”

“I’m going to come, Ben,” I whimpered.

“Not yet.”

“Please.”

“Fuck, Chloe. Fuck yourself with your finger, baby. Just like that. Listen to your fucking pussy all wet for me. Faster. Harder. Curl those fucking fingers inside. Just like that. Good fucking girl.”

“Ben, please. I can’t hold out much longer.”

“Look at me. Look at me, Chloe. You’re such a good girl. Faster baby. Look at how soaked you are.” He stroked his cock harder and faster, and I heard him curse under his breath. “I’m going to come, baby.” His dick was gleaming from his pre-cum, and the vein was building around his girth.

“Come all over me, Ben. Come on, my fucking tits.”

“Oh, baby. Look at me when you come.” He took a step closed and positioned his dick on my stomach, stroking it as he went, and I didn’t stop my fingers in my pussy as well, even though there were getting tired.

“Ben!” The orgasm was so powerful my legs shook, and I felt like someone had just punched me in the stomach. I muffled my scream by biting my lower lip because the last thing I wanted was to wake up Sofi and ruin the night.

“Fuck! Fuck! Chloe! Ugh!” Ben’s strokes slowed, but each one was harder than the next, and he ejaculated on my stomach. His cum painted the skin on my abdomen, and some got on my breast. It was a beautiful sight. He looked at me with admiration, lacing his intense eyes.

“Come here,” he instructed, rolling down a condom he got from his drawer before positioning himself by my entrance. I stared at the ceiling, waiting for him to hit home, my chest heaving and my heart pounding in my ears. “Are you sure about this, babe? You can say no.”

“I wouldn’t be able to.” I looked at him with a frown, wondering why he was stalling. I mean, it was a little bit too late to say no now after he just came all over me.

“Say it. Consent isn’t something we should leave on a vague note.”

“God, Ben, yes. Now please fuck me. I need you. You have no idea.” He only needed to be told once. He slammed into me in one strong move, and I whimpered at his size. Jesus. The size of my vibrator was nothing compared to his size. White spots glazed my vision as pain temporarily consumed me.

He cursed under his breath in apology. “Goddamn it. You’re so fucking tight. Are you okay?”

“Go slow, please. Let me get used to it.” I pulled up, trying to see his dick in me. I tried to calm my breathing. My inhaler was back at my place, and I didn’t want this to be ruined.

“No man has ever fucked you like I did, Chloe?” He tried consoling me with a deep, passionate kiss on the lips, and he slowly pulled out and thrust back, letting me stretch from his size.

“I’ve never fucked anyone since you. Like I said, you have no idea how much I need you.” There was surprise written in his eyes when his gaze snapped up to mine as if he felt honored with the information I just blurted out.

“Fucking hell. You’re all I can think about. How your tight pussy wraps around my cock. No one I fucked was as good as you, Chlo.” When my pussy was stretched and lubricated enough, we fell into a rhythm, and the pain from the penetration was long gone.

“Harder, Ben. Please. I need it.” Ben held my hands above my head as he fucked me from beneath, and I couldn’t complain because I had not felt this good in two years.

“Baby.”

“You’re so fucking good,” I panted.

“This pussy is made for me. Do you feel how perfectly we fit together? You have no idea how much I thought about you. And you were all I could think about every time I came.” I could feel the wetness oozing from me and on the mattress and all over my thighs.

“In the shower.” Thrust.

“On my fucking bed.” Thrust.

“In another woman’s pussy. Nothing compares you to anyone.” Thrust.

“Harder. Deeper, Ben. Let my fucking pussy remember your cock.” I felt the orgasm building in my stomach, and I got so excited I started to lock my legs around his waist to pull him in deeper.

“Shit. You’re gonna make me come if you continue to talk like that.”

“When I’m alone at night, all I can think about is you. And when I turn my vibrator on, I imagine it’s your cock.”

“Oh, baby.”

“I’m going to come.”

“Yes. Fuck please come inside me. Harder. Harder! Please.” He fucked me like there was no tomorrow, the sound of skin slapping against skin surrounded us, along with our uneven breaths.

“Jesus Christ, Chloe. Fuck!” He thrust deeper into me one last time, and I felt him pulsating against my tight walls. “Very good. Milk my fucking cock like that.”

Then we lay there like that for a quick minute, trying to catch our breath, our hearts beating in a synchronized thump.

“You’re so good to me, Chloe.” He showered me with kisses.

Something blossomed in the pit of my stomach when he helped me up, and we went to his bathroom for a shower to clean the smell of sex from our skin. I told myself that it shouldn’t happen again, but as I was cleaning him off, he’d gotten hard again, and we ended up fucking under the cascading shower.

Our first night together came back to me because of how identical our situation was in the bathroom.

Ben insisted I stay because Sofi was already asleep, but I knew it wasn’t a good idea. It was just one—okay, three—good fucks and that was it.


There were no strings. If I stayed and he held me throughout the night, the walls I’d built for so long might crumble. And I didn’t want that. I needed to protect my heart.

So I told him that I’d rather stay at my place. He helped me with the crib, and I carried Sofi back to my penthouse and put her in her room.

Ben was waiting for me in the living room when I closed the door behind

Sofi's room. We said our goodbyes, and he reminded me that there was no turning back from the gala. When he left, and I was getting ready for bed, my heart was still beating so fast.

Sofi's father had trouble painted all over him, and I needed to guard my heart.



CHAPTER TWELVE

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light gray, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals and are interspersed with sprigs of leaves and smaller buds. The overall aesthetic is soft and elegant.

Ben

“**T**he package has been delivered, sir.”

I was attaching the subtle red cufflinks, praying that Chloe would make the right choice and match me tonight. I knew it was a black-tie event, but I wanted us to match even though it wouldn’t matter to everyone else there.

On the other end of the phone was Nelva, my personal shopper, who had never failed to deliver on my requests.

Given that I had inconvenienced my neighbor into coming to the charity gala with me, I thought that it would be a great idea to pick out a dress for her—five dresses, to be exact, all of which would look beautiful on her and would fit the gala’s black-tie theme.

“What time?” I asked my personal shopper who was on speaker.

“The items were picked up at around seven a.m., sir. And a Chloe Kennedy signed for the package at eight.”

“All five dresses were there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And she didn’t return them?”

“Not that we know of, sir.”

“Okay. Great. Thank you, Nelva.” I ended the call before I picked up the silver Eric Clapton Rolex from my drawer and put it on as I studied myself in the mirror. I opted not to shave and leave my five o’clock shadow be.

It had been almost a week since Chloe and I slept together, and it hadn’t happened again. I could tell she was distant, but thankfully, she wasn’t cold.

Over the last week, juggling work, PharmaCorp, Sofi, and Billy Anne had been difficult. Whenever I wanted to visit Chloe, I couldn’t because that would leave Billy Anne unsupervised. And every morning, when I’d find the former about to leave to see the sunrise, I wanted to come with, but I couldn’t leave Billy Anne on her own.

I knew I needed to tell Billy Anne first so we could spend more time together, and I knew she would be stoked to know she had a sister. Maybe then she would actually like to stay with me during the weekends.

I heard a knock on the door telling me that my plus one was here, and I quickly spritzed cologne on my neck before walking towards the door. I found Charlie by the entryway, looking up at the door, his tail wagging. He was fond of Chloe like I was, and even though they started out on the wrong foot, I could tell that they were friends now.

Turning the handle of the door, I froze when my eye landed on my visitor. She had her back to me, and the material of her dress emphasized the shape of her ass.

“Chloe.” She jumped a little from the sound of my voice before she turned to face me.

She had worn the red sheath, a spaghetti-strapped satin dress that matched the color of my cufflinks. There was an almost forbidden slit along the thigh

part of the dress that ran up from the floor-length hem. Her skin looked even paler and her hair darker next to this shade of red, and when I studied her long, exposed legs, I could see she wore silver strappy stiletto heels.

Could she even walk in those? Even with how high her heels were, I still towered over her.

Her hair was loosely curled, her makeup was minimal, but her eyelashes stood out, and her lips were highlighted, too. Her jewelry was subtle, and it left her almost naturally sparkling.

“What? Is the red too much?” She looked down at herself and smoothed her dress with her hands.

“No. You look—Wow. You look beautiful.” Beautiful was an understatement. She was bewitching. I knew that the people at the gala wouldn’t be able to keep their eyes off of her, and I knew in my gut that my family would love her.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” she teased, her cheeks turning red. I was left with no words to say about what I felt except that I was also excited to remove that dress from her body.

She stood on her tiptoes, and without thinking, I met her halfway, bringing my lips to hers as she brought her arms around my neck, the center of her body pressed against me as I pulled her in by the waist.

“Hi,” I said when we pulled away. I didn’t know where that came from, but I wasn’t complaining. I knew that Chloe had mixed feelings about us, but I told myself that all of this had no strings attached. We both had different priorities, and we were exploring unknown territories with co-parenting.

One thing was for sure, though, it wasn’t a bad idea to keep her by my side tonight.

“Hi.” Her voice was low, seductive. And when she kissed me, I could smell

the coconuts on her skin again. Jesus. I had to get my hands on whatever fragrance she was using. “You know you didn’t have to get me all five dresses, Ben. You didn’t have to get me any dress *at all*.”

“I was the least I could do for inviting you to this gala.” I invited her in, opening the door wider. “I didn’t know what you’d like. But I was honestly hoping you would pick the red one. You didn’t disappoint, Ms. Kennedy.”

“I intend to satisfy you, Mr. Hayes.” She lifted a shoulder to her cheek and giggled, walking inside my penthouse.

“We leave in thirty minutes,” I said, and my head followed my guest’s exposed back. Fuck. I should give Nelva a raise starting today. If she was this good at picking up an outfit and estimating the size, then it was only fair.

“I’m so fucking nervous.” I heard her set her clutch on the kitchen island. It was silver, like her shoes, and I didn’t know what she could even fit in the tiny thing. But it looked good with her outfit, regardless. My cock did a slight twitch in my pants.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. My mother isn’t as scary as you might think.”

“What if they ask what we are? We can’t exactly tell them I’m your one-time fuck buddy.”

“One-time?” Who said anything about it being one-time?” No strings, maybe. But one-time? I’d have blue balls forever. No other woman could ever satisfy me like her.

“Isn’t that what we are? It was a one-time thing, right?”

“Sure.” Chloe was a sexy little vixen. She was shy, but she was also feisty when she needed to be. In the bedroom, though, she was as filthy as I was. Something told me that we’d have sex again. If she’d say the word, I’d go down on my knees and eat out her until she could no longer walk.

“Ben,” she warned. But even though she was implying no, her body was telling me something different. She had been shifting her legs, and she was unintentionally leaning toward me like we were magnets. And her eyes. They stared at me like they wanted to fuck me, too.

But I knew that if I pushed her, she would run. So, I decided to give her the power. I was not making a move until she did. Let’s see how long she could resist.

“The ball is in your court right now. I’m not in a position to tell you what to do.”

“This better not be a mistake.” I prayed that she was talking about tonight’s event and not us. She was tapping her nails on the marble surface again, just like she did when she had been over for dinner. I noticed that she was fidgeting. She usually did this when she was nervous.

“Relax, babe. The booze and company are good there. Nothing to be afraid of.”

“Booze sounds amazing right now.”

“Yeah? What’s your poison?” I walked around the island, grabbing two glasses from the cabinets.

“I’ll have whatever you have.”

“Brandy, it is.” I took down one of the decanters filled with my favorite brandy and poured a good amount into our glasses.

“Neat?”

“I need all the courage I can get.” I slid the glass towards her, and she took it like she had been trained to do so, but she grimaced once the brandy flavor reached her throat.

“So, how’s Sam doing?” I asked, refilling her glass.

“She arrived twenty minutes ago. I gave her my phone number and

instructed her about Sofi's routine."

I called Sam earlier today and asked her if she was available until midnight. Thankfully, she said yes. So I told her my neighbor needed a babysitter and that she was going out.

Sam was smart, and she didn't ask questions about Chloe and how I knew her or why we were both going somewhere fancy. She had one job, and she was good at it.

Billy Anne was not here, either. Maggie had called in a sitter at her house for the kids. Although my mother had asked us to bring the children, my sister had complained about having to chase down her two little heathens. She said she was planning on getting at least tipsy tonight and if her kids were there, it meant that she needed to be sober.

As for my nine-year-old, parties weren't really her favorite thing. They triggered her anxiety. Besides, if her cousins didn't go, there was no chance that she'd be going. This meant that I could bring Chloe along without having to answer a hundred questions from Billy Anne.

"Why are you still so tense? You can trust her, you know. She babysits for my kid all the time."

"It's not that I don't trust her. It's just that I've never been apart from Sofi before. Certainly not for a party. I never really had someone I know to leave her with." It must've been difficult doing everything on her own, and yet she didn't have the heart to leave her daughter to someone.

I could tell that she was a hands-on mother. And although she was struggling, she still managed to raise that kid well. I mean, Sofi was healthy, she didn't have tantrums, and she was just a happy, smart kid. It said volumes about who had raised her.

"It's always scary at first. Trust me. When I first left my daughter with

Sam, I called her every minute. The poor woman was so annoyed she asked if I wanted to do her job for her.” I welcomed the heat of the brandy in my mouth as Chloe swirled hers in the glass. I tried my best not to look down because that would mean I’d get a peek at her cleavage as well.

“And it got easier?”

“It didn’t. But sometimes you have to have a little faith and learn to loosen up a bit.”

“Easier said than done.”

“How about we show up there, stay twenty minutes tops. If you still have doubts by then, we get out of there and come back home.”

She wasn’t used to being surrounded by people, especially family. She told me that she didn’t know her parents growing up, and it bugged me that she didn’t have a parental model to look up to. Her strength amazed me in so many ways.

“Cheers to that.”

“Cheers.”

She brought the glass to her lips, and I watched her with awe and curiosity. Mostly the former. But she didn’t down the drink. Instead, she licked the edge of the glass and licked her lip, biting it.

She looked up at me through her long, delicate lashes, and it told me enough that she knew exactly what she was doing.

But I told myself I wouldn’t budge until she was ready. So I let out a chuckle and shook my head in amusement. She was starting a war she couldn’t win.

“What?”

“We won’t be able to leave if you keep looking at me like that.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she teased, taking a sip from her

drink.

“Uh-huh.” Narrowing my eyes at her, I leaned forward, leveling my eyes with her. “Stop it, Chloe. Christ.”

“You say we have thirty minutes?”

“Twenty.”

“A lot can happen in twenty minutes.” She was seducing me with her breathy voice and coy smile. I could see her rapid pulse in her neck, signaling that she was anxious.

“What do you have in mind?” *Say it, Chloe.*

“I don’t know.”

“The clock is ticking, babe. If you tell me now, we can make the most out of our twenty—no, eighteen minutes. Tell me what you want.” The thing about powerplay was that it was a double-edged sword. Especially when the person you were playing with was smart.

That was what was happening here. Chloe held the cards, but in reality, I was the one making the essential moves to get what I wanted. And what I wanted right now was her. She could have the power once she’d choose to play a little longer.

Thankfully, I wasn’t the only one aroused.

“Kiss me.”

“Thank God,” I sighed, cupping her face with both hands before passionately kissing her red, cherry-flavored lips.

There was no time for savoring the moment because we were racing against the clock, and Chloe needed to let loose a little bit. If this was what she needed, I’d happily give it to her. “I don’t have a condom here,” I added in between kisses.

“I’m on the pill. And I’ll take the morning-after.”

Great. I hurriedly grabbed her waist, twisting her before bringing my lips to her ears and whispered, “Hands on the counter. This will be quick, okay?”

I raised the material of her dress to her waist, and the lace underwear she was wearing made my cock jump out of my pants. I was usually great when it came to self-control. But every time I was around this woman, it was gone.

Unzipping my pants, I pulled them down halfway on my legs and positioned my bare, throbbing cock by the entrance of her pussy.

“Hurry up, Be—Shit! Yes. Faster.” I slammed into her without warning, and thankfully, she didn’t struggle. Perhaps her body was remembering that she was made for my cock.

“You know, the first thing I thought when I saw you tonight?” I bent against her, and my hands remained on her hips, guiding myself deeper into her pussy. I was careful not to grab and ruin her hair. So far, the only thing I had ruined about her was her lipstick and her pussy.

“Tell me,” she whimpered, her tight little cunt pulsating around my hard cock. Condoms were essential when I fucked my women, but tonight, as I said, control was absent. So, I allowed this to happen without a rubber. My trust was put to the test. I needed to take her word that she was on the pill and she’d take Plan B so we wouldn’t find ourselves in the same position as before.

“That you’re so fucking beautiful wearing this dress, but you’ll be extra stunning when I get you out of it.”

“Pushing our luck, aren’t we?” There was no luck involved. I just knew that we both didn’t seem to have the willpower to ignore each other.

The same thing happened the first time I met her at the bar. Her presence alone pulled me into a trap. And she didn’t disappoint.

“A man can hope, baby.”

“Fuck me harder, please. Don’t ruin my makeup.” She rested her cheek on top of her hands on the counter, careful not to wreck whatever she had put on her face to look extra glamorous tonight.

“Very bossy. Fuck. Do you feel how good my cock feels inside your pussy like this?”

“Like it was made for you.”

“Damn right, babe,” I grunted with every thrust, and I didn’t stop. If I could, I wouldn’t want to stop. Her cunt was made for me, and from the sounds she was making, she knew that my dick fit perfectly inside her.

“Goddamnit. I can feel your cum running down my thighs.” Jesus Christ. This woman could make me come just by talking filthy to me, and I wouldn’t be embarrassed about coming so fast like an adolescent.

“Good. So you can remember me the whole time tonight.”

“You’re so good at this. Holy shit.” Her breath was racing, and I could tell that she was close. I was, too. So I pounded into her faster. Deeper. Over and over again until I could hear her how soaking wet she was for me.

“You’re so good for me. I’m going to come, baby.”

“Yes, please. Shoot your fucking cum inside me.”

“Shit. Baby.” I shot my semen inside her, and the walls of her pussy quivered. Her legs shook, and I supported her by holding her waist upright. She moaned in protest when I pulled out, and she did the nastiest thing she could do that made my cock come back to life.

With her hand, she reached down to her bare and wet pussy, where my cum dripped down her legs. Then she brought her fingers to her lips and tasted my seed. “Hmm. That was something else.”

“Good girl.” I slapped her round, beautiful ass once, and she reached down to shimmy up her underwear. “One-time thing, huh?” I teased, kissing her

shoulder once she was standing upright.

“Shut up,” she laughed, rolling her eyes at me.

“You’re not going to clean yourself up?” We still had—five minutes, and she could go without her underwear. I had no problem with that.

“Since we’ve established that this is going to happen repeatedly, I guess you’ll have to clean me up tonight,” she teased. “You know, *after* you’ve removed this dress.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Chloe

If Ben looked handsome on an ordinary day, tonight, he looked like a God who came down from his high throne to greet the mere mortals of Earth. One of the mortals was me, and I was lucky he had the time to entertain me.

I felt there was no way I could grab a man so fine as him. And I was going to his mother's charity gala as his date, for crying out loud.

I knew I'd been distant from him after we slept together for the first time, but my body was so attracted to him that I couldn't think straight whenever he was around. And the next thing I knew, he had his cock in me.

We were in a sleek, black Bentley limousine with a light brown interior and a bottle of champagne in a bucket filled with ice. I needed more drinks if I was going to survive this night.

I was worried about Sofi. What if she was looking for me and woke up to a strange woman instead? And meeting Ben's parents wasn't exactly a stroll in the park.

"You okay?" Ben said beside me. He had been answering a few calls when his driver arrived. He told me that the ride would only be quick, but traffic

was horrible, so we were basically about ten minutes late. He assured me it was okay, but drawing attention to myself was the last thing I wanted to do.

“Yeah. Just thinking about Sofi.”

“She’ll be okay, babe.” Ben cupped my knees, so I didn’t notice I had been bouncing all this time. I wasn’t much of a fidgeter, but since he and I had started co-parenting Sofi, this mannerism had begun manifesting.

Ben was a giver in and out of the bedroom. We had gone together to the bank to set up Sofi’s account and let’s just say that Sofi would be taken care of for life with the amount her father deposited. I knew he was rich, but I was still surprised that people like him were willing to give away money like that.

The same thing could be said about the dresses delivered to my place earlier. There were five of them. *Five*. I had never gotten to choose from so many gowns for one event before. And they weren’t cheap. The red dress I wore was enough to pay for my Queens apartment for a year.

But Ben was a very insistent man, and he’d always find a way to get what he wanted. Most of the time, he tried to spoil Sofi and me as an extension. The feeling was very odd having someone take care of me like that—someone to fix something for me or cook dinner for me.

Although Frankie had been with me my entire life, he never made me this secure. I always had this thought at the back of my mind that if I asked for too much, he’d ask something in return—something I couldn’t give.

“I know,” I whispered, and my stomach fluttered at his endearment.

“Hey, Sam. It’s Ben.” I snapped my head towards Ben in attention, surprised at the small gesture he was offering. “Yeah, we’re almost there.”

A pause.

“I know. Something came up.”

The smirk he gave me told me that whatever Sam’s question was, it was

about why we were running late when I had left a minute early from my penthouse.

“How’s Sofi?”

Another pause.

“Great.”

“What did she say?” I asked, unable to hear anything. Ben covered his phone's microphone and pulled it away from his mouth.

“She said she’s been trying to stack the colored blocks for thirty minutes.” He returned his attention back to his phone and added, “Send me a picture. And send some pics to Chloe before she goes down to sleep, okay? Thank you, Sam.”

They hung up, and Ben turned to look at me, his gaze going up from my pretty shoes to my curly hair. “Sofi’s in good hands.”

“If you trust her, then I trust her, too,” I told him, but the anxiety hadn’t eased down because my leg was still bobbing, and Ben had to stroke my bare knee to get my attention and make it stop.

“There’s something else that’s bugging you. It’s the gala, isn’t it?”

“What if they hate me, Ben?” I sighed, and the worry in my tone was evident.

I didn’t actually know if I was the type of person someone would bring home to their parents, given that I didn’t have parents and I had never really had a serious relationship before.

“Look, my mother had been bugging me to bring a plus one for years. She’s going to worship the ground you walk on. Trust me.”

“What if I say something that pisses them off? I’m not exactly the most graceful person.”

“You’re not going to make a fool out of yourself.” I found solace in the

warmth of his hand on my knees and reminded myself that I had Ben for the night. “But if you need to know something about Janice Hayes, it’s that she loves her jewelry. You compliment her earrings, she’ll love you.”

“And your sister?”

“Maggie is going to complement *you*. She’s the most easy-going person you’ll know. She’s a feminist, so that she couldn’t hate you based on first impression. Just remember what we talked about. Fifteen minutes, then we’re out if that’s what you need.”

“You’ll rescue me when I need it, right?”

“I won’t leave your side the entire night.” He shifted on his seat and brought a finger under my chin to lift my face so we were looking at one another. And then he gave me a sweet, reassuring kiss. I knew it was meant to calm me down, but it only made the butterflies in my stomach wilder.

“What did I sign myself up for?” I jested in between kisses. And my partner for the night chuckled.

“This is your chance to meet Sofi’s family, Chlo. And potentially yours too.” He was right. If I looked at the bigger picture, it was up to me to make a good impression for me and Sofi.

I just prayed that they weren’t the vindictive type of family. I hoped they would be a great extended family that Sofi could grow up and spend time with.

“Come here. Sit on my lap.” He reached out a hand to guide me. The vehicle wasn’t moving fast, so it was safe. I honestly didn’t know where we were but Ben looked sure that we had time to do whatever he was planning to do with me.

“But your driver—”

“Won’t hear anything.”

My ass landed on his lap, my legs nestled between both of his. Thankfully, the car roof was high, so I didn't have to slouch much to be comfortable.

"I know you have a hard time trusting people, and I'm thankful you trust me. But my family will love you the moment they lay their eyes on you." He tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ears, and I couldn't help but kiss his luscious lips as a thank-you.

"Okay," I whispered against his lips, and I felt him throwing the slit of my dress open, exposing my legs.

"Loosen up, baby." Then he got into action, fondling my legs. Each stroke made my pussy flutter from excitement. Usually, I was a vanilla girl, but Ben had been pushing my limits, and I discovered that I loved whatever it was he wanted me to do.

Masturbating in front of him? Hot. A quickie in the kitchen? Amazing. Car sex was a big fantasy of mine, and now it was coming true. And something told me that I was going to enjoy it.

"Your skin is so fucking beautiful." He licked my neck while his hand under my dress found my underwear. "Look at that. You're still wet from earlier."

"Your cum is still there, baby."

"Oh, I know." He shifted us on the leather car seat. He positioned me so that my ass was completely sitting on his crotch. I could feel his growing erection. I ground a little against the soft material of his pants, which earned me a curse.

"Lay back on my chest," he added, and I did, finding a good spot against his muscular chest, my head resting on one of his shoulders. "Very good. Now keep your legs open while I play with your pussy, okay? And try not to make a noise."

“Ben—”

“Shhh. Relax. I got you, and I would never put you in a position you won’t like.” He raised my left leg so that it was resting against the car door, and I brought my other leg over the center console. So now I was spread wide for him, my underwear getting cold from exposure to the air.

Ben rubbed my bud against the thin layer of my lace underwear, which was basically non-existent. The warmth of his palm made me hot all over. He rapidly formed a circle by my clit, and I felt my juices oozing out of my vagina. Jesus. I hope his mother wouldn’t smell the evidence of our little shenanigans.

“You’re really good with your hands, aren’t you?” I panted, releasing a delicate moan by his ear. He smelled excellent tonight, and whatever his cologne was only heightened my libido.

“We’ve established that already.”

“Remind me.” He pushed my panties to the side and inserted two fingers inside me, curling them, and my pussy made a very loud squelching from my wetness and maybe from his cum earlier. The sound made my ears burn, but I brought my focus back to his expert fingers going in and out of me. “Oh, yes. Hmm. You feel so good. I want to touch you, Ben. I want to make you feel good, too.”

“It’s all about you tonight, baby. I don’t want you to ruin your makeup.” So in return, I rubbed my ass against his now-raging cock. I followed the pace of his fingers, and he cursed in my ear.

“Stop that,” he warned. “Or so help me, God, I will fuck here and ruin your pretty little look. Would you like that? To come in late at the gala looking like a beautiful mess?”

“No,” I cried. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

“Good girl. Now tell me who this pussy is wet for.”

“You.”

“Who else?”

“No one else. Just you.” His fingers formed a circle inside my hungry pussy, and yelped at the building pleasure every time he touched my G-spot.

“Open your mouth for me, Chloe.” I did, and he pulled his fingers from inside me and brought them to my glossed lips. I tasted myself—sweet and sharp and almost metallic. “Suck. Get it wet. Taste your fucking pussy with cum from earlier.”

I licked every surface of his fingers like it was my favorite popsicle. This was better than a frozen, sticky dessert.

He removed his hands from my mouth and returned them back inside my pussy, penetrating me without warning.

In and out and around. Curling up again and again, hitting my walls. I could hear how wet I was against his fingers, and I knew that my pussy was dripping on his pants. Thank God he was wearing something black. I just hoped the stain wouldn't be that visible.

The orgasm was close. I could feel it. And if he continued to push through my inner walls, it was going to be a very wet climax, something we both wouldn't like if we wanted to arrive there neatly.

“Are you going to squirt for me, baby?” His voice was raw and almost predatory. I nodded against his shoulder. “You're going to make a big mess. But not right now. Some other time, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to come right now?”

“Yes. Yes, please.” I grind against his hands.

“Tell me this isn't a one-time thing first.”

“What?” My brain was loopy at this point. I didn’t understand what he was talking about. Yet he was still relentlessly moving inside me and had no plans to stop until I answered him.

“You and I aren’t a one-time thing. We can never be one.”

“Shit. Your fingers feel so good inside me.”

“Answer me.”

“You and I aren’t a one-time thing, Ben. God. We’ve settled that already.”

“I want to hear it from your mouth. I want you to hear you say it.”

“I lose all my willpower when I’m around you. We could never be a one-time thing even if we tried.”

“You and me both, babe. Now come. Come all over my fingers like you did two years ago.” And I did, convulsing on his lap like a mad, heavily satisfied woman.

“C’mon, girl.” He slapped my pussy once, and I yelped at the jolt of pleasure that electrocuted my body.

As I was panting on top of Ben, I saw him bring his hands to his lips and clean off the residue of my cunt. The groan of satisfaction that vibrated in his throat almost made me come again.

I lowered my legs, finally deciding that wearing underwear to this event was pointless. So I removed them in one fast motion before folding them nicely and tucking them in one of his pockets.

“Wise little vixen.” He planted a long, hard kiss on my lips just as the car came to a halt, the murmured commotion from outside becoming audible.

Shit. We were here. And I was still a mess. I brought my ass back to my seat and tried to retouch my hair and makeup. Thankfully, when I opened my compact mirror, nothing except my flushed lips was out of the ordinary. He really was good.

“I’ll be beside you all the time, okay? Squeeze my hands if you want to leave early.” He wiped his hands with a wet wipe and offered me the pack. I cleaned my hands as well as my thighs. And as I was doing it, I felt his heavy gaze.

I threw the tissue in the bin by the center console, and I heard him clear his throat. Looking up, I saw he looked as neat as when we left our building earlier.

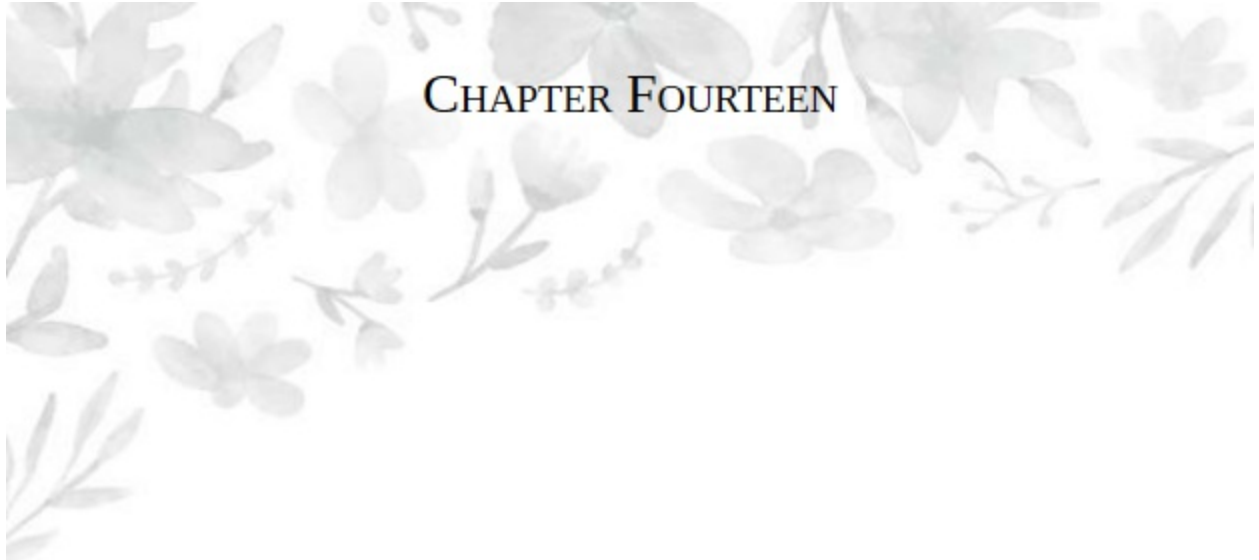
“Ready?” he asked. But when his lips moved, I saw something glisten on the corner of his lips.

“Ben.”

“Yes?”

“You have something—” Ah, what the hell. There was no point in telling him. Instead, I brought my thumb to wipe it off and sucked my thumb dry. It was mine anyway.

“Filthy little thing. Now c’mon.” Then he left the car first, and I waited until he had opened my door, his hands outstretched. And I brought out my naked legs first for the dozens of cameras flashing behind Ben. The look on his face told me he was impressed.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Ben

As always, the party looked breathtaking when we set foot in the foyer of my family home. The air was alive, oozing with refined luxury under the delicate glow of crystal chandeliers casting a warm light in the main hall. Tasteful floral arrangements adorned each corner, emitting an intoxicating blend of fragrances as the rich, velvety notes of classical music played softly in the background.

Everyone was dressed exquisitely, scattered and chattering across the polished marble floor: men in sleek tuxedos and perfectly knotted ties and women in sophisticated dresses cascading down like liquid silk.

My mother's gala was classier and more lavish this year compared to the annual Christmas-themed events she had hosted before. This time, there wasn't a giant tree decorated with all the reds and golds in the world in the middle of the dancefloor. In its place was a string quartet playing the most beautiful melodies I'd heard in a while.

Beside me, I heard Chloe's faint intake of breath as she took in the sight in front of her. I didn't have to survey the room to know that she was the most

beautiful person here, and in no time, she'd be the most talked about, too.

"This place is beautiful," she sighed, her voice sounding like she was in a daydream.

"It's breathtaking." I couldn't keep my eyes off of her tonight. I snaked my hands around the small of her back and touched the skin there. The spark flew instantly around my palms.

"Leave it to my mother to be the talk of the town for the next few weeks," I added, returning my gaze to the glistening venue. "Now come on, let's mingle."

"There's no turning back."

"Squeeze my hands when you want to get out of here." I hadn't let go of her hand since we got out of the car, and I wasn't planning to. Her palm fit perfectly in mine even though she fidgeted by stroking her thumb on the back of my palm.

She let out a deep sigh before we went deeper into the house. A few cameras were inside, and along with them came the reporters.

I knew a lot of people here. Some were family friends, but most were familiar faces. Some of the biggest names in medicine were here tonight, and even my father's old friends had flown from different parts of the world just to attend.

Smiling at the people I recognized, I noticed the way they whispered to their friends when they spotted the beautiful goddess I was walking with. Chloe's dress wasn't really something one would call discreet.

For once, I didn't care because I was sure that most of the guests here wanted to be her or exchange places with me.

I took two flutes of champagne from a passing waiter and handed one to her. She took it from me and indulged herself with a sip. Sure, it wasn't as

strong as the brandy we had earlier, but it was booze nonetheless.

If Chloe was nervous tonight, she was doing an amazing job keeping her cool. She looked so confident in every stride, her dress flowing beneath her. It was like she was where she belonged, beside me, even with the glitz and glamor.

“You know those people?” She halted beside me and pointed toward the shrub backdrop by the bar. “They’re calling you.”

“They’re my co-workers. Do you want to meet them? You can say no, don’t worry.”

One of the two people Chloe was referring to was Edward Mitchell, the youngest doctor ever to have been appointed as chief at my hospital.

“No, I’d like to meet them.” With our hands still intertwined, we started walking to where they were. Among my co-workers, Wilson and Mitchell were the only ones I hung out with outside of work.

“I told you it was him,” Edward Mitchell, our resident comedian, loudly mumbled.

“I’m right here, Mitchell.”

“Oh, I know.” He smiled charmingly at us, and I heard Chloe snicker beside me. Her thumb had stopped stoking my hand, which was a good sign.

“You owe me fifty bucks,” Mitchell whispered to Lola Wilson.

“Wilson.”

“Hayes.”

“Are you going to introduce us to the pretty lady, doc?” Mitchell smirked, the little dimple on his cheek showing.

“No.”

“Boo!”

“Did you just ‘boo’ me, Mitchell? What are you twelve?” I held my chuckle

inside. There was something youthful and innocent about him that I was fond of.

“I’m sorry about them. Lola Wilson,” I heard the female Cardiothoracic surgeon say to Chloe, extending a hand.

“Chloe Kennedy. Nice to meet you.”

“Are you and Ben together?” Mitchell interrupted.

“She’s spoken for,” I said, pulling Chloe towards me.

“Of course, she is. I’m Edward Mitchell, Chief of Plastics.” The plastic surgeon extended his hands to my guest, and Chloe took them with a giggle.

“Jesus Christ.” Leave it to Edward to announce to everyone his position.

“What?”

“You don’t need to say—”

“It’s okay, Ben. I’m intrigued, actually. I’ve never really met a plastic surgeon before.”

“Well, glad to meet you.”

“I need your opinion on something.” I knew Chloe was humoring him, but I was genuinely worried about what she’d ask and how Mitchell would answer. He didn’t really have the reputation of being cautious in conversation.

“You don’t,” I interrupted.

“Let her speak, Hayes.”

“Do you think I need to get my nose fixed?”

“What?” The surprise was so clear in my voice that Chloe looked up at me and shrugged.

“What?”

“You don’t need to get your nose fixed, babe. You’ll be fine for at least another fifty years.”

“Let the plastic surgeon speak, *babe*.”

“I like her,” Mitchell admitted, but I already knew that. What’s not to like? “Unfortunately, he’s right. Your nose looks fine. Beautiful, actually. But if you really want to get it fixed, here’s my number.” He produced a card from his coat jacket like he was expecting people to ask for his information tonight.

“Smooth, rookie.” I gave him a fake smile, and my slightly jealous response earned a giggle from Chloe and Wilson.

“It’s business, Hayes. No hard feelings.”

“I’ll keep this just in case,” Chloe took the crisp white business card and put it in the clutch she was holding.

“It’s good to see you, Wilson,” I smiled at Lola before turning to face the latter. “Not you, Mitchell. I’d better leave you to it. If you see Maggie, tell her I’m looking for her.”

“Is Maggie available now, Ben?” This kid was going places with his flirting game. I didn’t know where exactly, but he was going somewhere.

“She’s not, but even if she was, you’d be the last person she’d want. She’s out of your league.”

“You managed to grab Chloe. I say there’s still hope for the rest of us.”

“Where’s your arm candy at?” I felt a hand landing on my shoulder, and the scent of vanilla perfume told me it was my sister.

“Hello, Maggie.” She was sporting a sage green slip dress, and her hair was tied up into a messy ponytail with loose strands curled on the side of her face.

“Word has it that Benedict Hayes finally came to an event with someone. A very *young* someone.”

“Don’t start, Mags.” My sister was the last person I expected to go against my...relationship with Chloe.

“How old is she?”

“Old enough to make her own decisions.”

“So was Tonette.” Maggie knew it was a low blow to bring up Tonette, but I knew she was trying to tell me to be cautious.

“She’s not like her.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do, okay?” *I know because she was able to raise her child on her own without asking for anything from me*, I wanted to tell her. “And isn’t it against feminism to be prejudiced against other women?”

“So you’ve been paying attention.”

“You’re going to love her, Maggie. Just give her a chance.”

“Fine, where is—”

“Hi.” Chloe’s melodic voice made my knees go weak.

“Hello.” She had excused herself to retouch her makeup in the restroom ten minutes ago.

“Chloe, this is my sister, Maggie.”

“Oh! I’ve heard so much about you,” Chloe chirped, her eyes growing wide in surprise as she extended a hand.

“All good things, I hope,” Maggie jested, and I could tell she was studying Chloe.

“Maggie, this is my girlfriend, Chloe.”

The girlfriend thing came completely out of nowhere. I had planned on introducing her as my plus one to keep the mystery, but with Mitchell at the party, I knew I just needed to mark my territory.

“Lovely to finally put a face to Ben's mystery woman tonight.”

“Maggie.”

“I’m kidding. I’m actually really glad you’re here because I couldn’t watch him talk to strange women again this year.”

“Strange women, you say?” Chloe narrowed her eyes at me, amusement laced them.

“Trust me, you do not want to know.” Before my sister could humiliate me even further, her phone started to vibrate in her clutch. “I’m sorry, it’s the babysitter.”

She paused to read the text message before turning the phone to me.

“Oh look, Billy Anne fell asleep in the middle of the painting.” I could see Billy Anne sleeping in one of the chairs in Maggie’s sunroom, a streak of yellow paint smeared across her cheek as she held onto a dried paintbrush.

Before I could complain and put in a funny remark, Chloe interrupted.

“I’m sorry, did you say Billy Anne?”

“Do you know her?” Maggie asked.

“She’s one of my students in fourth grade. She’s a great painter. Is she your daughter?”

“She’s mine. Wait, you’re her art teacher?”

Chloe turned her head towards me, a confused frown painted on her face as the fact that her student was my daughter registered in her brain.

“I am.”

“Oh, you’re the one she talks nonstop about.” This came from Maggie, who was now looking at my plus-one with clear awe.

“You’re the one who brings her flowers every day?” I asked.

“I mean, it’s the only way she’ll talk to me, and she seems to enjoy painting them.”

“She talks to you?” From the sound of Maggie’s voice, I knew that she was

impressed.

“Occasionally. She likes to borrow the brushes from my table.”

“Yeah, because Billy Anne doesn’t bring her own—”

“Am I interrupting something here?” A soft, nasal voice cut in, and all of us turned to the tall and slender blonde who was wearing a pink mermaid dress that glinted with her every move.

“Hello, Gwen.”

Why was Gwen here? She didn’t usually mingle with these people.

She and I went way back when things with Tonette were too much. A friend of a friend introduced me to her, and back then, I thought she was stunning and had so much free time on her hands that I thought she was the perfect distraction.

To put it bluntly, she was my go-to person when I needed to fuck, with her consent, of course. Our little rendezvous went on for a while until I got busy with business again, and I was slowly trying to make things up for Billy Anne.

I ended things before they could escalate, but Gwen was relentless. She’d call me in the middle of the night to come pick her up. Sometimes, she’d call me on a random afternoon to ask if I was available. I had told her to stop it, and she did. But she’d relapse from time to time.

Before today, we hadn’t had a single form of interaction for over a year. That was a brand-new record, one I wished didn’t have to end tonight.

“You smell like a chimney, honey.” Maggie wasn’t shy in expressing her dislike of Gwen. She always told me she was all looks and even called her a social climber. If she was the latter, I didn’t care as long as she stayed away.

“Hello Maggie, Hello Ben. And hello...” Her seductive voice didn’t work on me, and I gave her the most uninterested look I could pull off.

“Chloe.”

“Chloe. And how do we know, Chloe?”

Jesus, I could smell the cigarettes she must have been smoking the entire night from where I was standing.

“She’s Ben’s girlfriend,” Maggie declared.

“*Girlfriend*. Wow, quite a catch there, Benny. You know Ben and I—”

“Hey, Gwen, did you see the new jewelry that’s about to get auctioned tonight?” Maggie snaked her arm around Gwen’s, and she started pulling her away from us before the other woman could say anything to ruin my night.

“No, but I—”

“Great, let’s go see.” And then they were gone. I gave Maggie a thankful stare as Gwen followed my sister.

“What was that about?” Chloe asked, looking up at me.

“She’s an old friend.” I pulled her against my side and kissed her shoulder as she wrapped her hands around my neck.

“Doesn’t look like it. Should I be worried?”

“No. She’s just a friend. Nothing more.”

“Okay, good. You wouldn’t want your *girlfriend* to catch up with an old flame of yours on the first night you went public.” I pressed a kiss on her luscious lips and moaned against her mouth as the subtle taste of cherry nibbled against mine.

“You were good tonight.”

“You didn’t leave my side.” We pulled away from each other, and she leaned her head against my shoulder. We sat like this for a while, studying the tipsy crowd around us.

“I couldn’t have dreamt of a night like this.”

“So, Billy Anne is your daughter.”

“Yeah. I can’t believe you’re her favorite teacher.”

“She said that?”

“She did. She’s a shy kid, you know. And it’s a big deal that she warmed up to you that quick.”

“Well, I just have a way with kids.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend here, son?”

Chloe practically jumped off my lap and ironed her dress with the palms of her hands when she heard my mother behind us.

“Shit,” she mumbled as I stood from my seat and kissed my mother on the cheek, her jasmine perfume invading my nose.

“Hello, Mrs. Hayes. Wonderful party.” Chloe reached out a hand, which my mother took, her eyes studying my girl from the tip of her toes to her curled hair.

“And you are?” Janice Hayes was never an intimidating type of woman, but the way she carried herself demanded respect. And even though wrinkles now showed near her eyes, age agreed with her. If anything, she was more beautiful now than ever.

“Mother, this is Chloe Kennedy, my girlfriend. Babe, meet my mother, Janice Hayes.”

It was like I was watching a horror movie, and I was waiting for something to pounce on the screen. I could tell that Chloe was nervous, but she kept her head high as she waited for my mother’s reply. Then, out of nowhere, my mother clapped her hands and brought them to her heart, a smile slowly creeping onto her face.

“Oh! Welcome! Welcome, darling! I thought I wouldn’t live to see the day Benedict finally brought a girlfriend over. You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this day, Chloe. You know, my son is quite a handful, and

he's always busy. I thought no woman would want him. Oh! There's finally hope for another grandchild. The Hayes family just keeps getting bigger and bigger."

"Mother—" If only she knew the truth.

"Oh, hush. The women are talking, Benedict. So, dear, why don't you assist me with the auction tonight? You wouldn't mind, would you, darling?"

Janice took my guest's hand and led her to the back of the house.

Chloe didn't even spare me a glance as she followed my mother and giggled.

"I'd love to."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Chloe

I hadn't stopped telling Ben how funny his mother was on our ride back home, and I couldn't help but feel a little sad over it because I never had that growing up. However, I wasn't about to let the feeling ruin our night.

To say I had had fun was an understatement. Ben was so supportive the entire night, and every time a group of people would call him, he'd take my hand to reassure me I was okay.

He'd also introduced me as his girlfriend, and I couldn't help but feel giddy.

"Hi, Sam," I removed Ben's jacket and handed it back to him. He entered the room with me, saying something about making sure Sam left safely tonight. He was fond of her, I could tell. And with the way Sam talked about Ben, she felt that way too. There was so much respect there.

"Hey." The penthouse was dim, and only the light from the television as the babysitter watched *Friends* illuminated the living room. Sam switched off the TV and sat up when she saw us coming in.

"How are things?"

“Things are good. You know, Ms. Kennedy, your daughter is by far the most low-maintenance child I’ve ever babysat.” Sam was a pretty young woman with voluminous and lush caramel curls.

“Is that a good thing? And please, just call me Chloe.”

“It is. She hasn’t shed a tear tonight. And after I did what you told me, she was out like a light. I even got to clean the kitchen and wash the dishes.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” Indeed, the kitchen was spotless. If they had had dinner earlier, all the dishes were put away, and the countertop looked pristine.

“It was no problem at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Her phone pinged in her hands, and she threw in a quick reply before returning her attention to us. “Look, it’s getting kind of late, and I have this thing tomorrow. So I better leave you guys to settle in and all.”

“Oh, what about—”

“That’s taken care of. Should I call you a cab, or should I have someone drive you home? It’s kinda late,” Ben asked Sam, who had now opened the front door.

“It’s okay. My boyfriend’s picking me up. Thanks, though.”

“Okay. Text me when you get home safe.” Ben waited for her to get in the elevator before he closed the door behind him. He studied me as I sat on the couch to remove my shoes. They might be a pretty pair of shoes, but my feet had been hurting.

“Did you have fun tonight?”

“I did. Thank you for not leaving my side.” I was grinning like a fool just thinking about the subtle touches Ben gave me tonight and the fact that Ben’s

family were all so nice. I couldn't help but feel happy for Sofi because she'd be taken care of and adored there.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Ben approached me for a deep kiss on the lips, his palm cupping my face. I could taste the Brandy he drank before we left. We were both buzzed, I could tell. "I'm so proud of you tonight. You carried yourself with so much grace."

He continued to kiss me, deeper yet slower. It was different than the ones we had shared before—more intimate.

"You said you're here for just three months?" he asked in between kisses.

"Well, yes. I couldn't afford—"

"Tell me you want to stay, and I'll do something about it."

"Ben—"

"We're past bullshitting each other about this. I like you, Chloe. It's more than just Sofi tying me to you."

"You don't know what you're—"

"I do. So tell me if you want to stay with me because I can do something about it."

The idea of leaving made me want to throw up. I didn't want to think about it right now, especially when things had just started to get better for me.

"I want to stay," I panted against his lips.

"Good. You can stay as long as you want here. You don't have to pay rent. It's yours."

"That's too much."

"I insist. I want Sofi close—I want you close. And I want to see you every day."

"Okay."

"Very good. Now, let's get you out of this dress."

Ben entered me so excruciatingly slowly that I thought it was going on forever. My stomach did an unnatural turn as his breath warmed my shoulders. Tonight, the atmosphere was different.

“Yes, baby. Harder.” I breathed when he fully entered me. He was on top of me, and tonight, he didn’t fuck me with his fingers, nor did he eat my pussy. We got into my room after I checked on Sofi, and Ben kissed me on the lips and whispered that he didn’t want to lose me.

“Nice and slow. I want to savor you, feel you.”

I arched my back as I tried to catch my breath and prevent a moan from coming out. Ben worshiped my body with his touch and his kisses.

“Ben.”

“That’s right. Repeat my name.”

My gut was twisting. I wasn’t used to this feeling. To be taken care of. His slow pace made me want him even more, and not just in bed but every day. In the almost three months that I’d been with him, my soul felt like it had known him all my life.

“Please.”

“Please, what?”

“I’m going to come.”

“Come for me.” And I did. I buckled my legs around him as my pussy contracted around his cock. Skin against skin, I could feel his chest-beating against mine. Everything in me twisted, and I wanted him to hold me like this forever, where I was safe and wanted—desired.

“You okay? Did I hurt you?” Ben wiped the lone tear that I didn’t realize was rolling down the side of my face.

“What? No. I’m okay,” I sniffed as he pulled out of me and discarded the condom in the trash.

There was a very pregnant silence that followed as I watched him take a towel from my bedside table and wipe me clean. When that was done, we lay there in my room naked as Ben pulled me into a cuddle, my back touching his pelvis.

“I think I’m going to tell Billy Anne about us. About Sofi,” he blurted out of nowhere, his voice soft.

“Do you think she’ll be okay with it?”

“I think so. She deserves to know. I mean, with all the shit she’s been through—God.”

I didn’t know what Billy Anne had been through, and I knew it wasn’t my place to ask, but I guessed that her silence wasn’t typical. In due time, I knew that Ben would tell me.

“Billy Anne is a lovely child. You raised her right. Did you know her paintings are really good? I’ve never seen a child paint hydrangeas like that.”

“She does like to paint. The flowers you give her are all over her room. One vase for each day. Then she gets sad when they wilt.”

“I hung a few of her paintings in Sofi’s room.” I didn’t have the heart to keep them in my desk drawer forever. Her paintings deserved recognition. I just hadn’t known that the world was this small and that the painting in my daughter’s room was her sister’s work.

“You did?”

“Yeah. As I said, they’re good. You can take them if you want, hang them in your living room or something.”

“No. Keep them. So Sofi has something from her.”

He traced his fingers on my skin and planted a kiss on my shoulder before

he let out a seemingly frustrated sigh.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked.

“Things wouldn’t have been so hard if I had just listened to you on the phone that day. That you were pregnant.”

“Ben, it’s okay. We’re past that. It’s time to move forward.”

“It’s not okay. I couldn’t imagine what you went through being on your own. I shouldn’t have been so crass.”

“Would you have wanted to help me if you had just let me talk?”

“I would’ve. But when you called and told me you were expecting, it was history repeating itself.”

“What do you mean?” I really didn’t want to ask because I respected his privacy. But if this was the only way I’d understand why he did what he did, then I was willing to push it.

“Billy Anne’s biological mother thought she could use her own daughter to milk money from me. When I found out what she was planning and that she had a boyfriend for ten years, I lost it, Chlo. I lost it, and I didn’t think about what it might do to Billy Anne. The fighting, the yelling, her mother neglecting her? Jesus.”

There was so much regret in his voice, so much pain. It was like he was blaming himself for why his daughter was struggling. But it wasn’t his fault for trusting someone he thought was going to be the love of his life, right?

I knew Ben had secrets, and I had been dying to ask about his daughter’s mother, but since he never opened up about her or even mentioned her before, I thought there was bad blood, or she was dead.

Right now, as I lay beside him, everything was clearer now. Ben had trouble trusting people because of what had happened to him, and me calling him that afternoon had rung the same alarm bells in his head.

“I’m so sorry, baby.”

“She was diagnosed with depression as a result of her trauma. But we’re working it out right now. She’s in therapy twice a week, and she’s getting out of her shell a little bit more.”

“That’s good.”

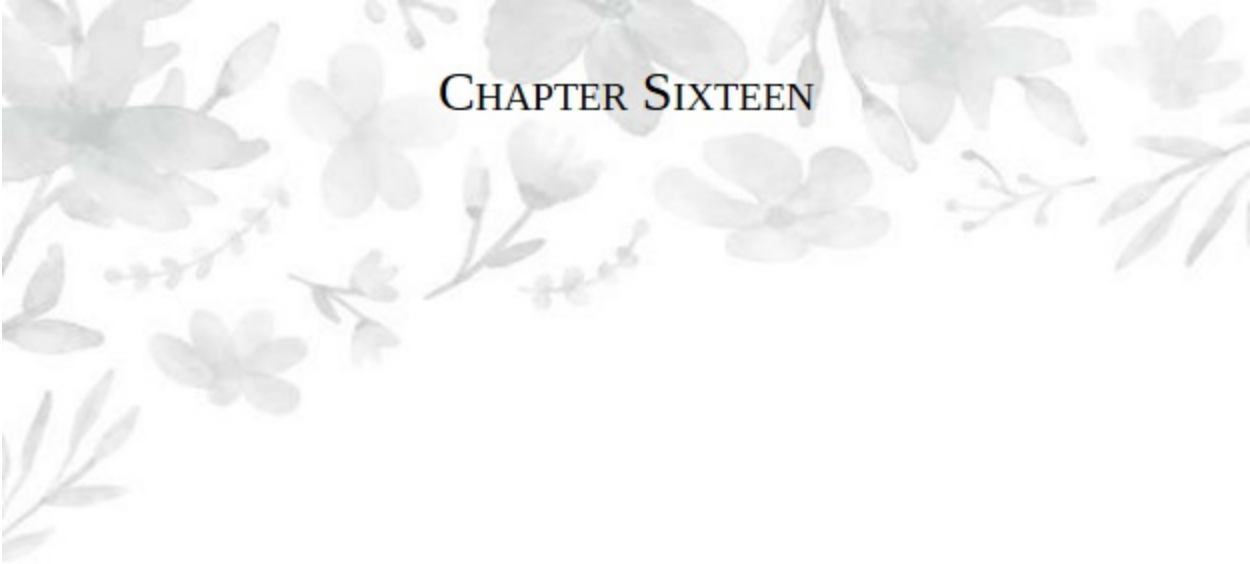
“She likes you, you know? She told me she wanted to talk to you even before you brought her flowers. She said you spoke softly. It was a groundbreaker, her therapist said.”

My heart beamed with so much joy hearing this. Billy Anne liked me, and I was glad that somehow, I had helped her overcome a personal obstacle.

“I’m looking forward to meeting her. Officially, this time.”

“And I’m looking forward to seeing all my girls together.”

I fell asleep in Ben’s arms, and for the first time in my life, I didn’t worry about what tomorrow would bring. For the first time, I was willing to live in the moment and let someone take care of me and Sofi.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves. The flowers are scattered across the top, with some showing five petals and others as buds. The leaves are simple, elongated shapes. The overall aesthetic is soft and elegant.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, watercolor-like style. The name "Ben" is centered within this floral pattern.

Ben

Chloe was wearing my dress shirt from last night, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and she was wearing nothing but underwear underneath. Her hair was tied in a high bun atop her head, and she was facing the stove, mixing something.

“This I can get used to every morning.”

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.” I went behind her to give her a hug and peck on the cheek to see that she was mixing pancake batter and that strips of bacon were frying in another pan.

“Pancakes and bacon, then.”

“I was thinking about picking you up at school today.” I was trying to find the mugs in her cupboard. When I saw them, I poured the coffee and handed her one.

“You don’t have to do that. I can take Frankie’s car.”

“No, don’t.”

“Are you jealous that I’m driving another man’s car?” she teased, and with how her legs were showing right now, I wouldn’t complain if I woke up to this every day.

“I can buy you a car if I want to. What would you want? A Benz? Maybe a Bentley like mine or the same Bugatti?”

There was no problem with me buying a car for her, and I for sure didn’t give a single shit about Franklin. I didn’t know him, and all I knew was that Chloe had chosen me.

“No, please don’t do that. I don’t need a car. The school isn’t that far away.”

“So you won’t have a problem if I drive you there and pick you up today.”

“What if the teachers talk?”

“Then I’ll fire every single one of them.”

“Please don’t tell me you own the school, too.”

“Okay, I won’t,” I teased.

“Ben.”

“I’m kidding. I’m a benefactor there, although I don’t know if I have the power to fire teachers, but I’m willing to try if that’s what it takes for you to allow me to pick you up.”

“Okay, fine. Please don’t make hasty decisions for me.”

“I just wanted to take you out to dinner tonight with the kids so we can tell Billy Anne about Sofi. And about us.”

“Oh, it’s really happening, isn’t it?”

“We can postpone if you’re not ready yet.”

“No, it’s okay. I want Billy Anne to meet her sister.”

As Chloe finished dinner, I grabbed Sofi from her room and changed her diaper before I brought her to her highchair. Her hair was a mess, but she was

mumbling something joyfully when she saw her mother.

She was the chunkiest baby I'd ever seen, and I was glad her molars weren't bothering her as much. Chloe had told me she was sleeping through the night again and wasn't throwing a fit as often.

Maybe she had sensed the shift in our situation, how her mother seemed happier, and how life just seemed to be in order. Can babies sense that? I sure hope so.

After we had breakfast together, I said my goodbyes to my girls because I was going to pick up Billy Anne from her aunt's place before school started. She didn't have her uniform there, so I needed to iron it really quick and prepare her bags and lunch for the day.

My entire day went so fast that I couldn't believe I had managed to do five successful surgeries. What can I say? Chloe was my lucky charm. Since I had opened up about telling Billy Anne, I couldn't stop thinking about how happy we could be together.

We could go to restaurants as a family, maybe go to the park when it wasn't so hot. Heck, we could go with them to watch the sunrise every morning.

Now I was waiting for my girls and my oldest daughter was the first one to show.

"Billy Anne?" I stared my daughter down as I watched her buckle herself. She halted and looked up at me like she was guilty. What did she do now?

"Did Aunt Maggie tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That I spilled paint all over her carpet?" She sighed in defeat, and a frown painted her forehead.

Billy Anne was a lovely child, and it wasn't in her nature to lie. She just didn't always tell me things. She believed that not telling was not lying. And where did she learn this, you ask? My sister, of course.

I knew that hanging out with family was good for Billy Anne's shyness, but sometimes, I wondered if my sister was a good influence.

"You spilled—on the white one?" Maggie valued her white home with light wood surfaces and especially liked her white rugs. She'd get them shipped in from Europe, and those things didn't come cheap. She'd always berate me not to step on them with my shoes. But she couldn't get mad at an innocent girl for spilling some paint on them, especially if she didn't mean it.

"Yes."

"Oh, we should get her a new one."

"We probably should."

I tugged the belt to test if she buckled it right. Her little feet dangled over the edge of the seat, and she swung them as she looked around the car for snacks. "Look, I invited someone to dinner with us tonight. Is that okay?"

"Do I know her?"

"She's your art teacher." I wish I could make her look this happy. Her eyes grew so big with joy I thought they'd jump out of the sockets, and the smile that appeared on her face was so wide it literally almost reached her ears.

"You're inviting her over to dinner? Is she going to teach you how to paint, too?" she squealed. The sound of her voice made me smile. She was so excited that she didn't care that people were listening to her.

"No. But I'm going to tell you a secret. Can you promise me that you'll be on your best behavior?"

"Is it a juicy secret?" she narrowed her eyes.

"You need to stop spending so much time with Aunt Maggie. But sure, it's

juicy.”

“Okay!”

“Good. You don’t have to talk to anyone if that makes you feel comfortable.”

“I like talking to Ms. Kenn—Oh, look, there she is!” She looked past me and pointed a finger at someone. When I turned, sure enough, Chloe was walking towards us, carrying Sofi with one arm and her bag with the other.

She looked so beautiful even after a tiring day. I didn’t know how she was able to look like that after being around so many children and teaching them how to draw when I couldn’t even sometimes handle Billy Anne.

“Hey,” I greeted. I wanted to kiss her, but I didn’t because Billy Anne was watching, and I wanted to tell her before I did anything. Otherwise, the drive to the restaurant would be nothing but Twenty Questions by Billy Anne.

“Hi.” I grabbed her bag and waited for what she’d do now that Billy Anne was here. “Hey, Billy Anne.”

“Daddy said you’re going to tell me a juicy secret.” She went there. I shook my head to contain my amusement. She was becoming a lot blunter, and I knew I needed to tell her that it was okay to speak her mind as long she wasn’t rude.

“Did he?” Chloe glared at me, and I gave her a smile. I probably shouldn’t have said it was juicy. This was serious, after all, and it shouldn’t be treated like gossip. But the look on Chloe’s face made me chuckle.

“Yep.” This was a sight I’d always wanted to see—all of them together. I knew Chloe wasn’t Billy Anne’s mother, but at the back of my mind, I knew that she’d make a good role model for her and that my fourth-grader would be fond of her, too.

“There’s a car seat for her at the back,” I instructed Chloe, and she nodded,

rounding the car so she could reach Sofi's car seat on the other side of Billy Anne.

"What's her name?" Billy Anne watched intensely as Chloe buckled in her daughter, and she beamed at the child beside her. Chloe loved the fact that Billy Anne was talking so much to her. I was proud of Billy Anne, too, and even happier with the fact that she was comfortable with Chloe. At least there would only be a few adjustments for her to make.

"Sofi."

"Daddy, when will I get a baby?" I was taken aback by her question. Chloe even paused a little. She was hiding her laugh as she looked up at me before shrugging, waiting for my answer.

"When you're a hundred, at least."

"That's as old as grandma."

"You calling your grandma old? I'm telling on you."

"Do you remember when I told you that every family is different?" Our order had arrived five minutes ago, and Billy Anne did not wait for permission to devour her shrimp pasta. She was making a happy dance as she chewed on it, and I couldn't help but enjoy the sight.

Chloe got Sofi steamed vegetables and prayed that her stomach wouldn't get upset later at night. I remembered that Sofi didn't eat solid food before bed and would settle for a bottle instead. Her mother thought that it would be good to try one more time.

I ordered the same chicken alfredo as Chloe, and I could tell she was waiting for me to break the news.

“Yeah. Like my friend Percy, who has two dads and one mommy. And like Uncle Ralph, who has an older daughter from his first wife.”

I was surprised at the words that were coming out of my daughter’s mouth. I knew that kids her age were curious, but I was afraid that mine might be an eavesdropper. With the amount of information her tiny brain could absorb, she was dangerous.

“Who told you all of this?”

“Aunt Maggie,” she answered nonchalantly, stabbing a piece of shrimp with her fork.

“Yes. Like Uncle Ralph.”

“Is that the juicy secret you wanted to tell me? I already know that.”

“First of all, you need to stop gossiping with Aunt Maggie. Second, no, that’s not what I wanted to tell you.”

Would I be able to handle this little tornado when she was a teenager? Jesus. She was only nine, and she had left me speechless so many times tonight.

“Your dad and I got together a while back,” Chloe said. I was thankful that she was here to be a buffer between us because I didn’t know that I could handle all of Billy Anne’s questions on my own.

“And we had Sofi.”

“What does that mean?” asked Billy Anne.

“It means that Sofi’s my daughter, too.”

“Really?”

“It means that Sofi’s your sister.”

“A sister? I have a sister?” Chloe was clearly a little taken aback by the excitement in Billy Anne’s voice. The latter beamed, and her smile

practically blinded us. A little giddy laugh escaped her, and the sound of it made Sofi shriek in return.

“Are you okay with that?” I asked.

“Yes. Do I get to play with her?”

“Of course, honey. We live across the hall,” Chloe pointed.

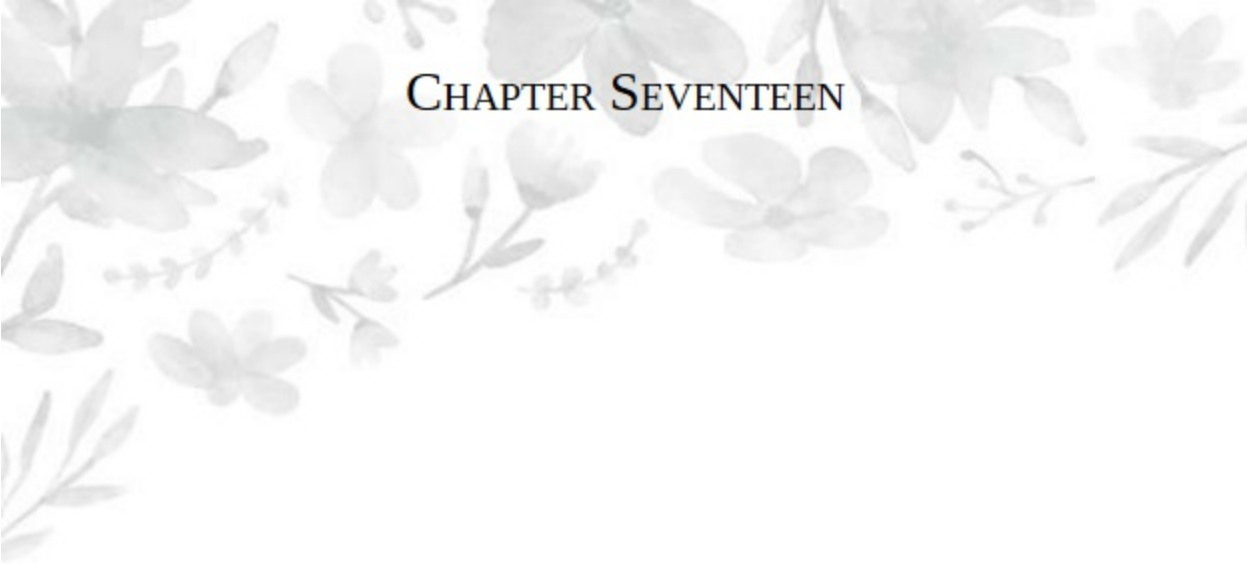
“You do?”

“If you spent enough time with me on weekends, you’d know.”

“Don’t worry, Daddy. I’m staying this weekend so I can play with Sofi.”

“There’s another thing, though. Let’s keep this between us, okay? Don’t tell Grandma and Aunt Maggie yet.”

“My lips are sealed, Daddy.” I prayed that she could be trusted. Because of the amount of time she’d been spending with my sister, I was afraid that my daughter might turn into a bit of a gossipmonger.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, muted green or grey tone. The flowers are scattered across the top edge, with some buds and stems visible. The text "CHAPTER SEVENTEEN" is centered within this floral band.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Chloe

The number of dolls and acrylic paints in my living room was impossible to calculate. Two days after we told Billy Anne about us and that she had a half-sister, she had basically carried all her toys and canvases into my penthouse.

She'd knock every day and bring a different toy. And when I was cooking dinner yesterday, and Ben was in his penthouse finishing a meeting, I would hear her speaking to Sofi with so much ease and love that I'd stopped what I was doing to listen to them play as if they'd known each other all their lives.

"If you get tired of the toys, you tell me. Billy Anne is usually good at cleaning up after herself." Ben would say when he was over and would see the toys scattered in my living room.

"She's just excited, Ben. It's okay. I like the clutter."

"You're the only one."

"Let her play with her sister, okay?"

"Sofi doesn't even know how to play pretend tea."

"Billy Anne is having fun."

“Daddy, can I bring PlayDough here tomorrow?” Billy Anne asked. We were in the living room just after dinner, and Billy Anne was helping Sofi hold a crayon so they could draw on the blank paper between them.

“No. Sofi puts everything in her mouth. We don’t want her eating clay.”

“How about when she’s two?”

“Then you can bring it.” That seemed to content Billy Anne, so she nodded and proceeded to color again.

Ben and I held each other’s hands, sneaking in secret touches as we watched them on the living room floor. I could watch this forever. This was better than TV.

The following day, I was surprised to read Frankie's name on my phone. I hadn't had a chance to call him and tell him about the major changes in my life over the past two months. I knew I should probably have called him, but I was afraid that he was going to be mad at me, especially when he found out about Ben.

“Hey. How are you?” Frankie asked when I answered the phone. It was past midnight, and he was probably in a completely different time zone. “How’s Sofi?”

“We’re good, Frankie. How about you?”

“We’re in Italy right now for a morning walk. The pictures don’t do it justice. We should go here together. With Sofi. Anyway, how are things there?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, actually.” My hands started to sweat as I lay on my bed, trying to get through a quick chapter in a book I was reading.

“Really? You didn’t miss me at all?” he jested. I didn’t think he’d joke once he heard what I was about to tell him. The guilt was heavy in my stomach, but I knew that it was better to talk to him right now than stall.

“Of course I do. You’re my best friend.”

“What’s going on?” He must’ve heard the worry in my voice because his tone suddenly grew serious as well.

“You remember Sofi’s father, right?”

“I don’t remember him because we don’t actually know the man, right?”

“Right. So weird coincidence, but he lives across my penthouse—well, your penthouse.”

“What?”

“He owns the building, Frankie. He’s Benedict Hayes of Hayes PharmaCorp.”

“And?” God, he sounded so pissed.

“And, well, he confronted me a few days after I moved in. We got to talking, and right now, we’re co-parenting.”

There was a long pause, and I was afraid that maybe the line had gone dead, but I could hear Frankie’s frustrated sigh on the line, like he was trying to take in the information I had just shared.

“Wait, seriously? After everything he’s put you through?” He sounded so mad that my cheeks started to heat up, and my heart pounded in my ears.

“It wasn’t an easy decision, but we’ve been working on it. Sofi’s well-being is my priority, and I think Ben being involved can be good for her.”

“‘You think’. I think you’re not thinking straight. I can’t believe he walked away from your life, and suddenly, he’s back. *And you took him back.* I’ve seen how you struggled, Chloe. So what changed now?”

In all the years Frankie and I had spent together, I had never heard him this

mad before.

“Everything has changed, Frankie. He wants to be in her life, and I can’t say no to that. He’s Sofi’s father.”

“Are you guys fucking again? Jesus Christ, Chloe. Have you learned nothing? It’s just another disaster waiting to happen, and when the time comes, you’re going to ask for my help again.”

I was taken aback by the way that Frankie was speaking to me. He never raised his voice and never said words that would hurt me. He would always make me feel better, even when I was the one in the wrong.

I knew that he was mad and that his feelings were valid. I understood, but it wasn't an excuse for him to talk to me like this. After all, he was the one who had offered to help me with Sofi, even when I told him that he didn't have to. I didn't want to burden him, but he insisted.

“It's in Sofi's best interest.”

“Hers or yours?”

“Frankie.”

“I was here the whole time, and you chose him because of his dick? You’re forgetting everything you’ve gone through because you’re sleeping with him.”

“It doesn’t matter who I’m sleeping with. Ben is Sofi’s father. I can’t do anything about it.”

The guilty feeling evaporated from my body and was replaced by frustration and anger at how Frankie handled the situation.

“What did he give you that I haven’t already given, Chloe? Time? Money? A roof over your fucking head? I’ve been in your life more than he ever will be.”

I hated the fact that Frankie was now counting the things he had done for

me like he was expecting something in return. Was he helping me because he was my best friend, or was he helping me because he thought I'd reciprocate his romantic feelings?

The thought made me sick. I had clarified to Frankie before that I saw him more as a brother and didn't like him like that.

“Don't talk to me like I'm a piece of work like I couldn't raise my child without you. I'm thankful for what you've done for us, but that doesn't mean I was an irresponsible and incompetent mother.”

“You should've chosen me, Chlo. I would've given you the life you needed.”

I did choose Frankie, though. I continued to be his friend even though his lingering feelings for me would complicate things for us. And whatever happened to me, I owed Frankie my life.

Was he even angry with the fact that I had forgiven Ben, or was he mad because I was sleeping with him? If the former, I could understand, and I would give him the space that he needed until he was willing to forgive me, but if it was the latter, then I couldn't do anything about it. He needed to understand that whoever I chose to sleep with was not his concern.

“Get your head out of your ass, Frankie. This isn't about you or me. This is about Sofi, and only I can decide who I want to sleep with.”

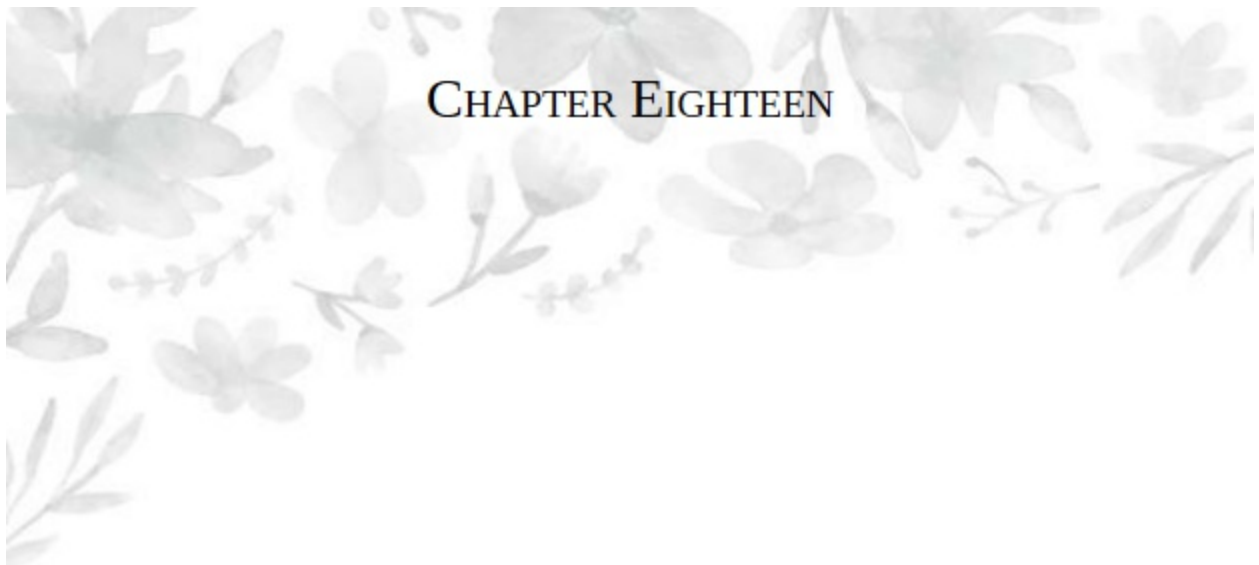
“Chloe—”

“Look, clearly, you're mad and being a jerk right now. So why don't you call me back when you've calmed down and are ready to talk.”

I hung up the phone before Frankie could say anything. I didn't want to ruin our friendship, and if I let him talk when he was this mad, I knew he'd say more harsh things. He needed to sort his anger out.

This was one of the reasons why I hadn't given Frankie a chance. I was

scared that it might ruin our friendship. I just prayed that the phone call we just had wouldn't be the thing to ruin our relationship.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light gray flowers and leaves. The word "Ben" is centered within this floral pattern in a dark, serif font.

Ben

Billy Anne was jumpy when I picked her up from school today. Her feet were swinging faster than usual when I buckled her, and when I was driving home I saw the white foamy mess on her mouth.

“Why do you have cake on your chin?”

“There was a birthday, and they gave me cake.”

“Whose birthday is it?”

“Chloe’s. The teachers sang Happy Birthday for her during recess earlier. She sneaked in a cake for me.”

Fuck. It was her birthday?

I had seen her in the hall early this morning, and she didn't say anything. I guess birthdays to her weren't as special as they were in my family. Then I realized that she grew up in the foster system, and her birthday meant that it was the day her family left her.

Something in me wanted to change things up. Starting this year, her birthday was something that she would look forward to.

“Hey, I’m calling Sam tonight, okay?” I asked Billy Anne. She was fond of Sam, and she had asked me before when she could see her again. But with the amount of time Billy Anne was spending in her aunt’s house, I never had a reason to call Sam.

“Is it okay if we go out for a walk with Charlie by the beach?”

“As long as you don’t go in the water.”

“Okay.”

When I arrived at the penthouse fifteen minutes later, the first thing I did was call Sam. Thankfully, she answered immediately.

“Hey, Sam. Are you busy tonight?” I asked. Billy Anne had just run to her room with Charlie so she could change. She was probably planning what new toy she could bring for Sofi.

“Nope. I was actually about to paint my nails for this party I’m going to tomorrow.”

“Look, something came up, and I need someone to look after Billy Anne tonight.”

“I can be there in fifteen minutes.” I was thankful for Sam and the fact that she was willing to put personal things aside for the kids. I had told her before that she could always say no. She was a university freshman and was considering getting a nursing degree. Her courses were demanding, yet she hadn’t said no to babysitting the kids.

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“I’ll leave money on the counter for your nails. It’s better you get them done by an expert. Less hassle.”

I knocked at Chloe’s penthouse twenty minutes later and was thankful that she wasn’t preparing dinner yet. I had planned the perfect gift for her. A private date. Just the two of us. No kids.

She was on the floor with Sofi when I entered, and the latter stood on her feet to wobble towards me. I caught her and tossed her up in the air, catching her in my hands before showering her kisses. She giggled in my arms, and the sound of it made Chloe laugh.

“Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

“What do you mean?” She stood up from the floor and picked up the toys scattered there. She wore denim shorts and a cream halter top that emphasized her curves.

“Didn’t I tell you I have dinner planned for us tonight? Just the two of us?” I was messing with her and enjoying the look of confusion on her face.

“No.” She frowned at the words.

“Well, we do, and you need to get dressed.”

“Are you okay?” She narrowed her eyes at me, perhaps wondering what I was talking about.

“I am.” I closed the gap between us, and I could smell coconut. It got me excited about what was about to happen. I kissed her lips and said, “Happy birthday.”

“That’s why.” She pursed her lips and wrapped her arms around my neck, the center of her body arching against mine. “Thank you. How did you know?”

“Billy Anne.” I should probably stop being so surprised that my daughter knew these things now. I just needed to tell Maggie to be careful what she shared because that kid hadn’t developed a filter yet. “For someone who’s shy and quiet, she can be a chatterbox. Gets it from my sister, I guess.”

“How about Sofi?”

“Sam’s coming over in a few minutes. We’ll be back before midnight.”

“Okay. Should I change into something fancy?”

“No, what you’re wearing is fine. Just grab a coat.”

“So you’re not taking me somewhere fancy, then?”

“If you want to go somewhere fancy, say the word.”

“No,” she said. “This is fine.”

We arrived at the beach thirty minutes later. And as I had requested, there was a round table by the shore adorned with hibiscus flowers and piña colada-scented candles. A bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and two empty flutes were waiting for us.

I knew I could’ve done better if I had enough time, maybe take her somewhere for the weekend. But I guess it’ll have to do.

There were lights on the path leading to the table, and string lights tied to makeshift bamboo poles that zigzagged above us illuminated the place.

“It’s beautiful here. How come I’ve never seen this place before?”

“We’ll be opening here to the public this summer.”

“You own this, too?” We started walking towards the table hand in hand, and I could see the awe in her eyes as she took in the view.

The building behind us had three hundred luxury rooms, a Zen lobby, and a pool at the back. It was perfect for the summer; it meant more tourists.

“No. I’m just one of the investors. With the other businesses I own, I’m not yet ready for a commitment like owning this one yet.”

“Well, thank you for taking me here.”

I helped her to her seat before I got settled into mine.

As I looked at Chloe, the lights dancing behind her, I thought there was nothing more perfect than this—the sound of the water kissing the shore, the salty scent in the air, and the sand tickling our feet.

She removed the silver cover from our dinner, which was lobster tail with mashed potatoes on the side, as I popped the white wine open.

I poured her a glass first and then mine before raising my glass in the air.

“To you.”

“To *us*.”

“Tell me your wish.”

“Then it wouldn’t come true.”

“Not if I can help it.” Chloe rolled her eyes at my words. It was true. Nothing stopped me if it was something I could make come true.

“I have everything I could ever want. I have Sofi and Billy Anne. I have you, Ben. What more would I need?”

“I’m glad that I have you, Chlo. I can’t change the last two years, but I can do something about the coming years.”

“I know you can.”

“I want you, babe.” I slid my hands across the table to grab hers.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promised. But there was a sudden shift of emotion in her face that had me worried.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.” Only it wasn’t, because if it bothered her on her birthday, it meant it was something serious.

“Tell me.”

“Frankie and I had a fight.”

“You mean Franklin Harris?” Chloe nodded. “What happened?”

“I told him about us, and he wasn’t happy about it.”

I wanted to say some rude things about Franklin, but I could tell that he was important to Chloe, and I didn’t want to upset her even more. “He thought that I let you off the hook so easily. Because I was sleeping with you.”

“Did you?”

“No,” she admitted. “I let you off the hook because I didn’t have the heart

to keep Sofi away from her father. As someone who didn't know either of her parents, it sucks. I didn't want that for my daughter."

"And sleeping with me?"

"Frankie is just a friend. And he's made moves before, but I told him I wasn't interested like that. I told him that who I was sleeping with wasn't his business. And it hit me that he was more mad about the fact that I was sleeping with you than me allowing you to see Sofi."

"He's jealous."

"He is. And I feel so bad for making him feel like that."

"Baby, it's not your fault."

I hadn't met this Franklin dude, but I already wanted to punch his face for upsetting my girl on her fucking birthday.

"You told him you weren't interested. You made it clear. You're not responsible for the jealousy he's feeling. You get to sleep with whoever you want without being busy taking care of his feelings. You're adults. You make your own choices."

"You're probably right."

"I am," I insisted. "If he is your friend, he'll understand. Otherwise, he was just someone wanting to get in your pants."

Chloe thought about it for a quick minute. But then she shook her head and said, "I don't want to think about Frankie tonight. It's my birthday, and I want to talk about us."

"I'll drink to that."

We finished our bottle of wine and enjoyed the lobster. A waitress brought us dessert when we were done.

I didn't know it was possible, but just staring at Chloe, listening to her laugh and tell her stories, made me want to worship her, spoil her, and ruin

anyone who dared hurt her.

I was falling hard for her soft smile and sparkling eyes, her courage, and her grace.

I wished I hadn't left her in New York. I owed her a lot, and I was just starting to make it up to her.

She was mine, and right now, I was hers. And I was willing to do everything in my power to keep it that way.

We enjoyed the rest of the night talking. By nine p.m., I brought her to one of the rooms in the building, and we made love everywhere—on the bed, on the floor, against the tinted window, and even in the porcelain bathtub.

By some miracle, we managed to come home by midnight. The kids were asleep, and Sam was picked up by her boyfriend.

I could live like this forever as long as I had Chloe—in domestic bliss.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves. The design is dense and spans the width of the page, with some elements extending slightly below the main border line.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Chloe

The woman in Ben's kitchen was stunning. If anything, she seemed to belong effortlessly in a life of luxury and extravagance.

She was the woman at Janice's party the other night. Gwen, the statuesque blonde Ben said, was just an old friend. But the way she said his nickname told me they were more than that.

Tonight, she wore a navy-blue camisole that accentuated her midsection and was paired with light blue, high-waist jeans. She was helping herself with Ben's brandy from the kitchen island.

Ben squeezed my hands as he closed the door behind me to reassure me that it was going to be all right. Sofi's portable crib wasn't in the living room but in her sister's room. Billy Anne had told Ben to move it there so they could have a sleepover every time Sofi was here.

I realized that it was a good thing because Gwen seeing another child in Ben's home would raise questions. And I didn't want Ben or the children to be the subject of gossip in Ben's family.

“What are you doing here, Gwen?” Ben’s words were laced with so much intensity and tension that even I didn’t dare move.

Gwen let out a low, coquettish giggle that made Ben raise an eyebrow. Sam, who was busy reading a book under the lamp on the couch, looked between us and the clearly unwanted visitor.

“Your help let me in,” Gwen pointed, bringing the glass of brandy to her rosy lips. She was a beautiful woman oozing with sex appeal. But it was clear that he didn’t want anything to do with her.

She turned her attention to me, sizing me up and assessing me with disdain, and I couldn’t help but square my shoulders. If there was anything I hated, it was bullies, and with all the years in the messed up foster care system, I had fought my fair share of them. I wasn’t going to let this woman make me feel small.

Ben snapped his head towards the woman on the couch.

“She said she knew you, sir,” Sam pointed, shutting her book and sitting straighter. The look of guilt on her face made me pity her. “She knew your daughter and said you were expecting her.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” Ben retorted, shaking his head. “Next time, Sam, call me. Okay?”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s okay,” Ben interrupted, and the pregnant silence in the room was deafening. He told Sam that he’d transfer her the money before dismissing her. I let go of Ben and helped Sam gather her things in the living room. I felt bad for her because it was clear that she didn’t mean for Gwen to ruin our night.

I saw her off, whispered my thanks, and assured her that I’d handle Ben. I didn’t know this Gwen woman, but it was clear that she wouldn’t

intentionally put the kids in harm's way. She wasn't here for them; she was here for their father.

I could almost taste the tension in the atmosphere Inside Ben's apartment. Ben was pissed, and Gwen knew, and the smirk on her face as she finished her drink told me enough that she was enjoying it.

"Why are you here?" Ben asked again, marching into the kitchen. He spotted a pack of cigarettes by her vintage Prada bag. He picked them up and threw them in the trash can.

"That was not nice," the intruder pointed out, and her lazy eyes followed Ben's movements.

It was evident that the blissful bubble we were in before coming home had popped, and the way Gwen was eye-fucking him told me that whatever thing they had in the past was not yet resolved.

Was she Ben's girlfriend? An old flame? Perhaps. Ben was allowed to see whoever he wanted to see, and he can fuck whoever he wanted. He wasn't... mine. It wasn't my place to be jealous of them—of the thought that a woman as beautiful as Gwen had maybe slept with him. But the unpleasant tug in my chest and the nauseating feeling in the pit of my stomach told me I was green with envy.

From the foyer, I stepped toward the living room and sat on the couch. I debated whether I should stay or not. The former meant I'd witness how things would unfold, and the latter meant being kept in the dark. One promised misery. One promised ignorance.

"I don't smoke in this house," Ben pointed out. From where I was, I saw Ben standing beside her, his hand crossed across his chest, looking so fine in his white shirt that didn't do anything to hide his biceps. As if I wasn't hurting enough, I couldn't help but see that they would make a good couple.

Gwen rolled her eyes at Ben's words, which the latter ignored. "You didn't answer my question."

"Can't a friend come over and say hi?"

"Hi," Ben said calmly. "Now, please, leave my penthouse."

"C'mon, Benny," she whined, and I couldn't help but frown at how nasal her voice was. It rang all over the quiet and still house. "That's not the right way to treat a friend, is it?" She placed a hand on Ben's biceps like she'd done it a hundred times.

This probably shouldn't have affected me, but it did. It was clear evidence that my feelings for Sofi's father weren't pretended anymore. If they were, it shouldn't hurt this much, right?

As if sensing my pain, Ben gave me a quick look. Under the dim lights of his kitchen, his eyes were visibly filled with regret. I pressed my lips into a forced smile, stopping the welling tears in my eyes. I told myself that the last thing I'd do tonight was cry in front of this woman.

How could I have been so stupid to think I could waltz into Ben's life again and not think there would be competition? Ben was a fine, well-off man and knew how to raise children. There were beautiful women before me and women right now who fawned all over him. Women like Gwen.

"Honestly," Gwen started, her voice feigning a sad tone. But I could read that it was all bullshit. "I came to talk to you about something."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow? Maybe over the phone? It's past midnight, Gwen. And my girlfriend and I have work in the morning."

Gwen flinched back at the word as if we weren't introduced back at Janice's party. She dared a peek at me under her long lash extensions. A look of subtle disgust painted her face.

"Right," she said, her voice dripping with disgust. God, I wanted to say

something to hurt her, but I knew better.

“Hi, Wren,” I mustered a forced greeting, faking a grin. “Lovely to see you again.”

“It’s Gwen,” she corrected, narrowing her eyes at me. She knew I didn’t like her. I ate girls like her back in the foster system for lunch. I wasn’t afraid to push when I needed to. But that didn’t mean I was going to stoop so low for her.

“Whatever.”

“Look, I need a word with your boyfriend, Chloe. If that’s okay.”

I glanced at Ben, and I couldn’t read the look on his face. But he stared back at me as if he wanted to tell me that this was nothing and that if I wanted to leave, I could.

“He’s a big boy, Wren. He can talk to whoever he wants to.”

“It’s *Gwen*, you bitch.” There it was. This felt like high school all over again.

“Hey!” Ben snapped. “Watch your mouth. You’re in my house.”

“She started it,” Gwen whined. God, who is this woman? She was acting like a child. She rolled her eyes at Ben before returning her attention to me. “I wanted to talk to him *alone*.”

“Whatever you want to say to me, you can say in front of Ch—”

“Actually,” I interrupted, pushing myself off the couch. “I’m going to check on Billy Anne and let you two talk.” I walked towards the kitchen, my gaze not leaving Ben’s. I could feel our guest’s eyes burning a hole in my head. But I didn’t give two shits about her.

I rounded the island and reached Ben, and like he was reading my mind, he turned to face me and cupped my face with both his hands.

“Good girl,” he murmured as he brought his lips to mine and kissed me so

intensely I thought I might melt in front of him. He was letting Gwen know that whatever this thing was, she couldn't do anything about it now.

I felt his hands trace my sides before bringing them down to my ass, cupping my butt cheeks.

“Subtle, Hayes,” I joked before I pulled away. I wasn't actually planning to get naked in front of Gwen. And if I kept the kiss going any longer, that was exactly what would've happened.

Walking away, I gave Gwen one more glance, only to see that she was already staring. She could kiss my ass.

I entered Billy Anne's room, and the soft melody from Sofi's lullaby machine filled my ears. Charlie was on the bed, and his head snapped up in attention when he heard me come in, but he went back to sleep when he knew it was safe.

Sam had positioned the portable crib by the foot of Billy Anne's bed, and from the doorway, I could see my daughter fast asleep with a binky in her mouth and her favorite stuffed animal on her arm.

She was wearing a pair of blue socks like her older sister, something Ben got for them on a random Tuesday when he got home.

Billy Anne was on her side, a hand tucked under her chin, her mouth gaped as she slept soundly, drool running down the side of her mouth. I covered her shoulder with the duvet and kissed her temple. I did the same to Sofi, and she stirred a little before the binky dropped from her mouth. I picked it up, snapped back the shield, and stored it in one of the crib pockets.

Gwen's perky and high-pitched voice seeped through the door, which was ajar. And I couldn't help but overhear them.

“—you never called me, and the next time I saw you, you have a *girlfriend?!?*”

I walked out of the room, shut the door behind me, and lingered in the hall to listen in. They wouldn't be able to see me here from the kitchen anyway.

"What we had is in the past now, Gwen." Ben's voice told me he was getting frustrated with her. "I told you I was done. That I wasn't going to call you anymore."

"Yeah, because apparently, someone's already warming your bed."

"That's none of your business," Ben snapped. My heart raced. I didn't like where this was going.

"How long are you going to stay with her?"

"What do you mean? She's my girlfriend, Gwen. This isn't some fucking game."

"Oh, yeah?" Gwen challenged. "So I shouldn't be expecting a call in the middle of the night for a good fuck when you decide to break up with her for me like you did the others in the past? No more push and pull game?"

"I'm not going to break up with her. And I told you two months ago that I was done."

"What if I'm not? What if I still want us to fool around? We can keep it a secret. She doesn't have to know."

Don't do it, Ben, I prayed inwardly. The revelation stung. He and Gwen were fuck buddies. They had been fooling around for... months? Years?

Gwen's words implied that Ben had a history of calling her when he needed to get laid after his breakups. If things between us went south, would he call her?

I shouldn't care. Ben was an adult. He could do whatever he wanted.

So why were my cheeks suddenly wet? Why was my chest suddenly aching? God! Here I was, falling hard for Ben like an idiot, only to know that

there was a possibility that he'd leave me for this woman like he did with his other girlfriends.

"You should leave, Gwen."

That wasn't a no. I didn't know if Ben said something or if he agreed with her. The pain in my chest was indescribable. It was like I wanted to explode.

For the past two and a half months, I'd been imagining this life with him and the kids. I was finally happy to have my own little family. How could I have been so stupid?

I returned to Billy Anne's room and gathered Sofi in my arms, grabbing her dolphin. I carefully positioned her in my arms, making sure she wouldn't wake up.

Without a second thought, I left the room just as Ben was coming inside. We both stopped in our tracks, and I prayed that my eyes weren't red because I wasn't fond of the idea of Ben seeing me this way.

"Chloe?" Ben looked up at me, then at Sofi, whose head was nestled against the curve of my shoulder. "Where are you going? It's okay if you stay —"

"Actually, Ben," I started. "I think Sofi and I will spend the night at home."

"Wh—" Then the realization hit his face. "Is this about Gwen? I told you that she and I are—"

"Are old friends," I finished. "I know." Oh, they were more than that.

"Nothing is going on between me and her. She was a friend of a friend, and we mess—"

"Ben, you don't have to explain. Whoever she is, that's your business. It's not my place to ask questions." It's not my place to be jealous, too, I wanted to add. But that would make me look more ridiculous. "This co-parenting thing, we're doing it for Sofi. And the sex, no strings attached, remember?"

I stepped around Ben when he didn't move aside, and I went for the door. I didn't know what stung more, the horrible feeling of envy in my chest or the fact that Ben didn't even correct me or stop me when I left his penthouse.

God, maybe he really wasn't feeling the same way. And here I was, about to give up everything for him.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a variety of light-colored flowers and leaves, including what appear to be cherry blossoms and other delicate blooms, arranged in a horizontal band.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Ben

“Time of death,” Wilson called, “nineteen-twenty-eight.”
“Fuck!”

I stormed out of the operation room, my face heating up from frustration as I tossed my surgical cap in the bin before removing my gown and gloves.

This week was not it for me. I had lost five patients on the operating table since Monday. And today, I lost two. That made seven. *Seven.*

It was a losing streak, and no surgeon would be happy about it.

Scrubbing my hands, I heard Wilson come out of the OR to discard her gown, taking the sink next to me to wash her hands.

“We’re not rolling well this week, Hayes,” she pointed. It wasn’t because she wanted to mock me. It was because she, too, had lost so many patients. “Must be the mercury retrograde.”

“It’s more like a curse, really,” I jested, but none of us laughed. There was nothing to laugh about when a dead body was in the other room. “The hospital reeks of death, Wilson.”

“Mitchell lost a patient yesterday, too,” she said as I turned off the running water from my side of the scrub sink. “It’s The Surge.”

“The what?”

“The Surge. The last time it happened, it was 1982.” Lola Wilson was a wise and good surgeon, and she was obsessed with everything morbid. Sometimes, I thought that one of the reasons why she chose to be a surgeon was that she could smell the blood and touch people’s organs. She was weird like that.

“The Surge is not real.” Fine, I was a skeptic. I just found it hard to believe that the lives of our patients depended on some weird phenomenon instead of relying on how good the surgeons were.

“It’s happening right now, Hayes. You cannot ignore the signs.”

“We’re trained, certified, and award-winning surgeons, Wilson.”

I watched her wipe her hands dry with a clean towel. We were in our olive-green scrubs that showed the color-coded scrub hierarchy in the hospitals. Chiefs wore dark green, while the rest wore a lighter, emerald shade of scrubs.

“Besides, they died for reasons we couldn’t control.”

“Exactly.” We left the OR, letting the other surgeons deal with our now-deceased patient as we got ready to tell the family. “*Supernatural* things we can’t control. The Surge is back.”

Would it be horrible if I told her that I wasn’t on my A-game since the week started? Maybe that was what was causing our bad luck in the OR. Maybe that was why I was having a hard time concentrating and was so easy to piss off. Perhaps it was because Chloe was giving me the cold shoulder.

And I was usually unbothered by such petty things, but right now, after a week of us not speaking, she might as well just bury me alive. I couldn’t

stand it. At night, it kept me awake.

In the morning, it made me grumpy, and when I was at work, all I could think about was her. God, if only she knew the effect she had on me.

I checked my watch and saw that it was barely eight. And I was fucking spent.

My frustration with the whole Chloe thing was really taking a toll on me. Thankfully, Billy Anne was at Maggie's again following one of many weekends when she had stayed at my place to play with Sofi.

Maggie had gotten suspicious about why her niece suddenly didn't want to spend time with her anymore. But she was good. She bribed my daughter one weekend after telling her they would be having a bonfire by the beach.

Billy Anne was a sucker for the beach, and if I'd let her, she'd spend her entire life in the water. But being a doctor and all, it wasn't a good idea to let them go in the sun for too long without risking sunburn and skin cancer.

She wanted to bring Sofi with her and had cried a good amount on Friday night when I told her she couldn't because it was our secret. She had said to me that her cousins would love her and that they'd have more girls than boys. To compromise, I told her she could take Charlie instead, which my sister didn't like. The last thing she needed was a dog making messes on her expensive carpets.

"You should probably get ready to leave, Hayes," Wilson said as we were getting closer to the waiting room where the family of our late patient was waiting. "You shouldn't even be working today."

"A patient is a patient." Although I was usually off and was only on-call for the weekends because of PharmaCorp, I would still set aside other work if I was called in for surgery. It was always my daughters, then my patients, then

my clients. But I couldn't shake the feeling that my priorities had shifted and Chloe was there somewhere.

"I appreciate you coming nonetheless." We paused before we exited the ward, and Wilson added, "I got it from here. Now get some rest, have a drink, or go home to your girlfriend."

The mention of my girlfriend twisted my gut. The thing with Chloe and I was complicated, at least to me. I knew I said no strings, but this woman had taken up space in my head no other woman had occupied. Not even Billy Anne bothered me this much when I upset her.

"Are you sure you can take care of the family?" Wilson's dark hair was tied up in a ponytail tonight, and her right arm was covered in tattoos hidden behind a black shirt. Her ears, as always, were filled with piercings. She always tried to break the norm, and I supported her in this goal.

"I can. Now go!" I didn't need to be told twice.

I rushed to my office, changing from my scrubs to my white shirt and trousers. I put on my Rolex, which I had removed because of protocol, and slipped into my jacket.

As I gathered my things, only one thing was on my mind.

Go home to your girlfriend.

Wilson's words echoed in my head. And that was exactly what I needed to do. Thankfully, Billy Anne and Charlie weren't home because I wanted to put my focus on the lovely lady across my penthouse.

Jesus, I was so stupid. I should've faced Gwen before everything exploded in my face. I knew nothing was going on between us anymore. We were old news, former friends who called each other when we needed a fuck.

But I had my shit sorted out now. I had this great thing with Chloe, and I was trying to make amends. Things were going well, she'd been so happy the

past month, and in some weird fucked up way, I was too.

My days wouldn't start without seeing her, and I wouldn't want it to end without telling her good night and kissing Sofi to bed.

There would be times when I'd find her asleep on the couch when I had just gotten home from work, Billy Anne and Sofi on the floor playing. She'd offer to pick up Billy Anne at school, too, and the three of them would grab an ice cream and visit the park, something Billy Anne never had the time to do because the adults in her life were always busy.

Chloe would text me. Sometimes, when I'd fail to reply, she'd call me. But when she'd bring Billy Anne home, she'd say a quick hello and goodbye. She couldn't even look me in the eyes and wouldn't let me touch her. It stung, of course, but I knew that she was upset about the whole Gwen thing.

She didn't want to talk. Fine, I understood. I had taken her out for her birthday, and we went home to my former fuck buddy in my penthouse, calling her a bitch.

But I was coming clean. That was the plan. I needed her to hear my side of the story. I didn't want her to assume I was still seeing Gwen when she was all I could think of every minute of the day, even when I closed my eyes to sleep.

On my drive home, I rehearsed in my head what I would say to Chloe. I had planned on telling her how I met Gwen, why I had entertained the idea of having a casual sex partner, and that I had told Gwen we needed to stop. That's when we saw her during my mother's party, I hadn't spoken to her in months despite her relentless texts.

But when the elevator pinged on our floor, the atmosphere shifted, and unease settled in the pit of my stomach. Billy Anne was not here, so that meant—

“Frankie!” Her high-pitched, muffled voice echoed in the hallway, and it was enough for me to run sprint from the elevator to her side of the building, only to see the door ajar.

My heart thundered against my chest, and all I could think of was that I wanted to see her in one piece, safe—

“No!” she yelled.

When I pushed the door open, there was a man’s body pressed against her in the kitchen. The man was almost six feet tall, in a navy blue top drenched in sweat at the back. He buried his face in her neck while she tried to push the man away, her body struggling against his.

“Let go,” she pleaded, but the man wasn’t hearing her.

Sofi was in her crib, watching something on the TV screen, oblivious that her mother was being violated in the kitchen corner. I could smell the scent of sweat, smoke, and alcohol, and I knew immediately that it was from the man because Chloe didn’t smoke or store alcohol in her home.

“Frankie, please.”

This was Franklin Hollis? The man who had booked the penthouse and her best model friend who doesn’t seem to understand the word ‘no’.

I could hear the soft sob escaping Chloe, and all I could see was red as I marched into the kitchen and pulled Franklin away from her. She stumbled forward as he was caught off guard, his rough and filthy hands trying to unbutton her top. Tears ran down her cheeks, and a breath of relief escaped her as Franklin was now off of her.

Chloe yelped in surprise as I threw a punch at Franklin's face before I could change my mind. He doubled over before his body fell to the floor, his drunken state making him unable to keep his balance.

Anger seeped through me as I straddled him against the floor, staring into a

confused pair of eyes that would be sporting a pretty shiner in the morning. The asshole reeked of booze, and it only enraged me more as I raised a hand, my fist in the air.

“Ben, no!” Chloe screamed, running to my side, and she stopped me by holding onto my fist. I didn’t even realize that Sofi had been crying her lungs out from her crib. Chloe’s breath was labored, and her lips chattered in fear.

“Please,” she pleaded as new tears rolled down her face. I sneered, knowing that if I threw another punch, I’d either end up killing him or with a lawsuit.

“Get the fuck off me—”

“She doesn’t want you, you piece of shit!” I grabbed his collar, and I pulled him to his feet. He struggled but was on his feet in a split second. I heard Chloe run to get Sofi.

“And who do you think you are, huh?”

“Shut the fuck up!” I sneered as I dragged him across the room and towards the door. “The next time I fucking see your face here or anywhere near her, you won’t have one to show. Do you hear me?”

“I’m pressing charges against you, man.” He had the audacity to threaten me in my own goddamn building? He was mistaken.

“Try me, Franklin Hollis, and let’s see if another agency would want to book a molester for their magazine cover,” I challenged as I threw him out the door. He swayed a little but gathered himself immediately, fixing his shirt and staring at me with anger and guilt. “Get the fuck out of here. And I swear to God, if you come to see her again, I’ll ruin your career right here, right now, pretty boy.”

He sneered at me but walked towards the elevator anyway, massaging the part of his face that had met with my fist. I slammed the door so loud that Sofi's screams only intensified.

Regretting it, I looked up at my two terrified girls.

Chloe was sobbing, biting down her lips to stop the sobs from escaping her as she rocked a frightened Sofi in her arms. Sofi's tiny head was nestled against her mother's shoulder. As I stepped closer, I could see the way Chloe was shaking, and I could hear the faint wheeze from her every intake of breath. Was she okay? Was she hurt?

The thought of that man touching her made me want to chase after him and bash his head against the wall. But I knew that being violent wouldn't do anyone any good.

Her words after that only angered me.

"Are you really going to hurt him?" she asked, and it made my blood boil even more. How could she still be thinking about him when he didn't even have any regard for her own safety?

Obviously, I wouldn't dare kill him, but I had my way of ruining his career so other companies would hire him. I wasn't some type of psycho. "I'm not going to fucking hurt him, Chloe," I promised, my blood still boiling.

Given the look of pain in her eyes, I might as well have stabbed her. More tears escaped her eyes at my query, but there was no guilty feeling that followed. There was only anger. Anger at Franklin for harassing her, Gwen for ruining everything, and Chloe for letting her so-called best friend in her penthouse without me knowing.

And, mostly angry at myself because I was an asshole who hadn't been here earlier for starting this whole fiasco and thinking that things would be so easy for us after making amends.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Chloe

The night was quiet—not peaceful. Quiet. It was the type of silence that made me want to scream. It was the kind of stillness that wanted me to go crazy.

Billy Anne had come earlier, right after school, to say goodbye to Sofi because she was going to spend her weekend at Maggie's. It was her first weekend away from her sister since the night we told her. She had asked me if she could bring Sofi to meet her cousins and play with them at the beach. Her lips wobbled when I told her it wasn't a good idea.

God, I hated seeing Billy Anne upset. It was like seeing Sofi upset since they had some identical features. I almost wanted to give in, to agree that maybe it was time to tell Ben's family about our little secret.

But I was still so frustrated about the whole Gwen thing that I hadn't talked to him yet. Sure, we saw each other passing, but I didn't know how to tell Ben I was jealous. What if I told him, and he freaked out, and I never saw him again? He had told me no strings, so no strings.

Sofi had eaten dinner with me that night. It was the second night she had eaten something solid without an upset stomach. She and I had just finished eating dinner when the knock came.

Was it Ben again? He had knocked on my door earlier today, but I was in the middle of breakfast and didn't know what I was going to tell him.

When the knocking didn't stop and only got louder, I knew it wasn't Ben.

"In a minute," I said, pushing myself from the floor and carrying Sofi to her crib before she could run around the house and bump her head in some random corner.

The knock came again, but I opened the door before the person on the other side could continue to pound.

"Frankie!" His presence took me aback. I didn't know that Frankie was coming home today.

"Chloe! God, you look beautiful," he had chuckled, his words slurring. I could smell the stench of alcohol on his breath and the strong odor of cigarettes on his navy shirt.

Frankie occasionally smoked, usually when he was stressed at work or had problems he didn't want to talk about. He said that too much smoking and drinking affected his skin, and that would mean hurting his career, which was why it was odd that he was showing up here trashed.

My first instinct was to tell him to leave and put Sofi to bed. The way Frankie and I had ended our conversation last time told me that we might end up in a screaming fight, and that would upset Sofi. I had reached today's quota for upset children.

But Frankie was my friend, and I didn't have the heart to tell him to leave, especially in this state. He must have taken a cab since his car was in the basement.

“When did you get back?” I asked. I didn’t want to let him in just yet. I wanted to know what he needed first. Ben wasn’t home yet, and my senses told me to keep my guard up.

“Just landed four hours ago.” He stretched out his arm against the door frame to balance his swaying body.

“Why are you drunk?” I asked, my forehead scrunching from the smell. The front of his shirt was drenched in sweat, and so were his armpits. His chin was left unshaven, his eyes bloodshot, and his sandy hair glinted with sweat in the light of my penthouse.

“What?” he snapped. “Don’t look at me like that. The guys and I had a few drinks when we landed.”

“A few drinks? You’re wasted, and it’s not even nine o’clock.”

“You need to loosen up. Live a little.” He looked at me with contempt, as if drinking this early was the new cool thing, and I wasn’t informed.

“You know,” he added, pointing an accusing finger to my face. “Ever since you had that baby, you’ve never gone out with me.”

“That baby’s name is Sofi.” I was starting to get irritated by how he talked to me. “And it’s called responsibility, Frankie.”

“What fucking ever, Chloe. I came here to see you and Sofi.”

“I don’t think it’s wise that you see her. You smell like a fucking bar.” That and he clearly wasn’t thinking straight. I didn’t want him to end up doing or saying something he’d regret when he was sober.

“She wouldn’t mind. She’s a child. She won’t remember.”

“Still.” Alarm bells rang in my head as my visitor’s eyes grew dark, and he sneered at me, taking a step forward.

“Aren’t you going to let me in, Chloe?” Frankie’s tone was sinister, and it made my skin crawl. Yet, I tried not to look freaked out. The last thing

Frankie needed was to see that he had gotten to me.

“I think you should go home. Get some rest, then we can talk tomorrow when you’re sober.” I forced a smile, slowly trying to shut the door.

“I’m at home. You know I love you, right, baby? I loved you before you met your child’s father. I was there for you when he wasn’t. I am here for you now.”

“I know, Frankie. And I’m thankful for what you—”

“So why the *fuck* didn’t you choose me, huh?” he hissed through gritted teeth, and he slammed his fist on the door just by my face, making me flinch.

Sofi. I needed to protect Sofi. I needed to knock some sense into this man, if possible. No one would hear us if I screamed, and my phone was in the living room. If I ran, he’d run to get me. Then he’d get to Sofi. No. That was not going to happen.

“Frankie. You’re not thinking straight right now—”

“Is it because he fucks you so good? Why don’t you give me a chance, huh? I’m better than he is. Maybe you’ll change your mind.”

My heart was in my throat as Frankie pushed the door open with little effort.

I stumbled back, but he was advancing toward me before I could get my balance. His rough hands grabbed my waist, and I tried to push them away. But he was a strong man.

I walked backward, hoping that it would give me a chance to free myself from his grip. But it was a mistake because he only dragged his feet forward as I struggled to step back. And I found myself being cornered against the kitchen counter, my ass hitting the marble countertop.

“Frankie!” I pleaded, trying to push him away from me. But he had buried his face in my neck and positioned his knees between my legs, forcing them

open. Thankfully, I wore denim jeans at work, the thick material protecting me from him.

Tears pooled in my eyes, and Frankie started to unbutton my blouse. I thrashed against him, his lips still sucking my neck and biting my skin.

“Come here.” I didn’t realize my breathing had gotten labored, and my chest tightened. I craned my neck and tried to intake air that didn’t reek of alcohol and sweat. A tear rolled down my cheeks when I saw Sofi, who had her full attention on the TV.

At least she was safe. Better me than her.

“No, let go. Frankie, please.” But he didn’t stop. It was as if he didn’t even hear me begging him to stop. The adrenaline in my body was the only thing keeping me upright. My hands shook, and my knees went weak as he inserted his hand in my top, cupping a breast with his calloused palm.

Frankie was thrown off of me so unexpectedly that I tripped forward from the sudden motion. But thankfully, I gathered myself up, sobbing in relief as I buttoned back my shirt.

Through blurry vision, I saw Ben throw a punch that sent Frankie to the floor. The impact made him jerk his head to the side. Ben raised his fist again, wanting to hit him. But with the bruise growing on the side of Frankie’s face and the blood running from his nose, it was clear he wouldn’t be able to take it.

So I ran towards them on the floor, Ben sitting on top of Frankie, and I grabbed Ben’s fist, praying that he was still thinking straight despite what he had just witnessed.

“Ben, no!” I screamed. My lungs weren’t going to survive this turmoil. But I was still breathing, right? That must count for something. More tears wet my cheeks as I stared into Ben’s enraged eyes.

“Please.”

I was scared that Ben might actually kill Frankie if I didn't stop them, and that was the last thing we needed.

Sofi, from the living room, must have sensed the stress and the commotion because she was now crying, the TV disregarded.

“Get the fuck off me—”

“She doesn't want you, you piece of shit!” Ben returned his attention to the drunk man on the floor, and I ran toward Sofi to console her. I didn't want to be near them in case another fight started.

Ben grabbed Frankie's shirt and pressed the latter against the floor so hard I was afraid that his ribcage might crack. I should probably stop him before it could escalate into something more. I didn't want any authorities involved.

“I'm pressing charges against you, man.” After that, I didn't hear what Ben said, trying to push away everything else and focus on the distressed child in my hand.

I cradled Sofi, and the poor baby wrapped her tiny arms around my neck. She must have sensed that I was in danger.

“It's okay. It's okay.” I stroked her back, praying that she would calm down so I could think straight. The tears only worsened from hearing my child's thick sobs.

The next thing I knew, Frankie was out the door. The look of hatred on his face was clear as day, and it told me there was no way to fix our friendship. It broke me, having to cut ties with him, but I realized a little too late. I knew now that he was a danger to me and my daughter.

I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something horrible would've happened to us because I was too blind to see it all.

I saw Frankie walk away without another word, and when the faint sound

of the elevator came, Ben came inside the penthouse and slammed the door so loud I flinched back. Sofi's cries only grew louder.

A long, ear-splitting silence followed as my body registered the shock, and post-adrenaline clarity registered the commotion that just happened.

I saw the way Ben's nose flared, and he was staring at me with rage in his eyes, his hands shaking against his sides.

For a moment, there were only Sofi's cries that echoed in the penthouse as I swayed her to sleep. My eyes felt tired, my chest was so painful, and my lungs were on fire.

With trembling lips, I asked Ben, "Are you really going to hurt him?" I didn't recognize my voice. It felt like there was cotton in my mouth.

"I will if I have to," Ben hissed through gritted teeth.

I didn't know what to say to Ben right now. I didn't even know what he was feeling. All I could think about was Frankie and how much I hated him for what he just did.

"Are you really worried about him right now? After he made a pass at you? I don't want you seeing him anymore."

"What? He's my best friend, Ben."

He was right. I knew he was right. Frankie was a danger, a ticking time bomb. But I couldn't stand that we would end things like this. At least I wanted to talk to him one last time.

"You need to find better friends because friends don't fuck friends without consent."

The week's chaos came crashing into me, and I was sick and tired of it all. I knew I needed to let it all out. I was so frustrated at Ben about the whole Gwen thing, and now I was losing the only family I had had growing up. It wasn't fair, but that was life sometimes.

“You want to talk about friends fucking, Ben, really?” I sneered, still cradling a now-relaxed baby. At least one of us was. I wanted to lay down, maybe take a seat or something. My head spun, and the ache in my lungs hadn’t subsided.

“Is this what this is all about, Chloe? Gwen?”

He closed the gap between us. He was still mad. At me? Wasn’t he the one who had an ex-fling come back, and now he tried to send my friend to the hospital? *He saved you, you dummy*, my inner thoughts retorted.

“We fucked in the past. But that was ages ago.”

“Really? Is that why she came to see you again? Because your little side hustle happened *ages ago*.”

“You can’t punish me for the things I did in the past.”

He was right. I shouldn’t. It wasn’t fair. Jesus. I just needed time to think. I wanted Ben to shut up, maybe hold me. I wanted silence. But I didn’t want him to leave me alone. But we were both so frustrated that we only used words to hurt each other.

“And at least we fucked consensually. I don’t want you to see Frankie again.”

“It’s not your business who I see, Ben.”

“It is when you’re putting my child in danger.”

“*Your* child? Did you think I called Frankie to come and put Sofi at risk to get back at you? How stupid do you think I am?”

“Stupid enough to let a drunk man in your house. What if I hadn’t come, Chloe? Would he have raped you, kidnapped Sofi?”

The thought disturbed me to no end. Because, again, he was right. So much could’ve happened if he hadn’t come to my rescue. And I knew I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if something terrible happened to my daughter.

“Frankie isn’t a dangerous person.”

“The courts wouldn’t think so.”

It was like the whole world dropped on my shoulders. It was as if my worst fears had projected in front of me, and that was when I stumbled back, the stress of the night taking a toll.

“What?” I wheezed. I couldn’t breathe, my vision doubled, and I tried and failed to get the oxygen I needed.

I sobbed because there was no air.

I sobbed because I felt so weak and so useless.

I sobbed because Ben was taking my daughter away from me. Had I failed my daughter?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Ben

I regretted the words the moment they came out of my mouth. The look on Chloe's face was like she had seen a ghost. Her stare was vacant, and she kept on shaking her head. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her breathing was shallow, and she was audibly struggling to get air as overwhelming fear consumed her. She had gone pale, and her lips shook. I could almost hear her teeth chattering.

"Chloe?" I stepped closer to her.

Her breathing was not normal. It was the same breathing she had experienced the first night we slept together. Except this time, she wasn't able to gather herself. Her face reflected helplessness as she struggled, and her eyes filled with desperation as she gasped for oxygen.

"No, no, no," she cried, hugging Sofi tightly in her arms as if she was afraid of losing her. She was. After what I said, I could only imagine what was going through her mind.

My doctor instinct kicked in before I let the guilt consume me. I looked at her, and she was gasping nonstop. She was either having a panic attack or an

asthma attack. My bet was on the latter, just by the whistling that accompanied her breathing.

“Sit down, Chloe,” I instructed her as my eyes roamed around the penthouse, looking for a purse or a first aid kit where she could’ve stored her inhaler.

But Chloe wasn’t listening to me, and she couldn’t because her thoughts must be jumbled because of the panic I had instilled in her. She felt threatened, and she was having an attack because of her fear.

I didn’t mean to say it. I was furious at our situation and felt bad for saying it to her. I didn’t plan on hurting her like this. I didn’t plan on taking Sofi from her.

“Give her to me, Chlo.”

“No!” she sobbed, turning away so I couldn’t reach Sofi.

“Look at me,” I instructed, cupping her chin so her eyes would meet mine. Her eyes found mine in an instant like they were meant to. And the panic there was indescribable. “You’re having an asthma attack, all right?”

She nodded absentmindedly. Her cheeks were red and stained with tears.

“I’m not going to take Sofi from you, okay?” I added. “But I need to put her in her crib so I can take care of you.” I extended my arm so she could give me Sofi. She looked uncomfortable at how she was positioned in her mother’s arms. But I couldn’t focus on Chloe with Sofi in her arms.

“Chloe!” I didn’t want to yell, but she needed to snap out of it. There was only so little time before she’d pass out. She flinched at my voice, but it got her attention nonetheless.

“Give her to me. Please.”

“Don’t take her away from me,” she begged, still crying.

“I’m not. I promise you that.” She nodded and handed me Sofi.

I didn't waste more time. I kissed Sofi on her cheeks before settling her back in her crib. She had gone quiet now, as did the house, and I was thankful that, at least for a moment, Chloe and I could think.

I helped Chloe to the couch, and now I was inwardly panicking as she brought her hand to her chest.

"Even breaths, baby," I instructed, and I was surprised when she threw her hands around me, her body sagging against mine in relief. Her hands fisted my shirt as she wheezed in a breath. I soothed her, stroking her back. "I need you to tell me where your inhaler is."

"Bedside. Drawer."

She drew a breath after each word. And I stood from the couch, practically sprinting into her room, and found her inhaler in the drawer. When I returned, she was still pale, still struggling, but after she'd shaken the thing somewhat and breathed through it. I gave her the inhaler, and she closed her eyes as sweet relief took over.

Her head lay on the headrest as her breathing slowly went even. She wept silently, tears rolling down her temples and hair as she brought the back of her hand to her forehead.

I positioned myself beside her, shifting my position until we were identical. Except I opened my eyes and stared at the rectangular false ceiling and the lights glowing there, illuminating the room.

The TV was still going, and Sofi had returned her attention to it.

"You're not taking her from me. I'm not an irresponsible mother. I swear to God. I didn't know that he'd come in and do that," Chloe whispered behind me. Devastation laced the words. She didn't move, didn't flinch. She didn't even dare to touch me. "Please. Don't take her away."

The way she was pleading made my heart crash into a million tiny pieces.

“Fuck, Chloe—”

“She’s all I have. I promise I didn’t mean to put her in danger, Ben.”

“I know,” I agreed.

“I did everything for her. And I thought that when you said you’d help me after I found you here, I thought all my worries would be over. I’d have someone to help me take care of her. Someone she’d know as her father.”

“I am here for you.”

“I thought you were going to help me, Ben.”

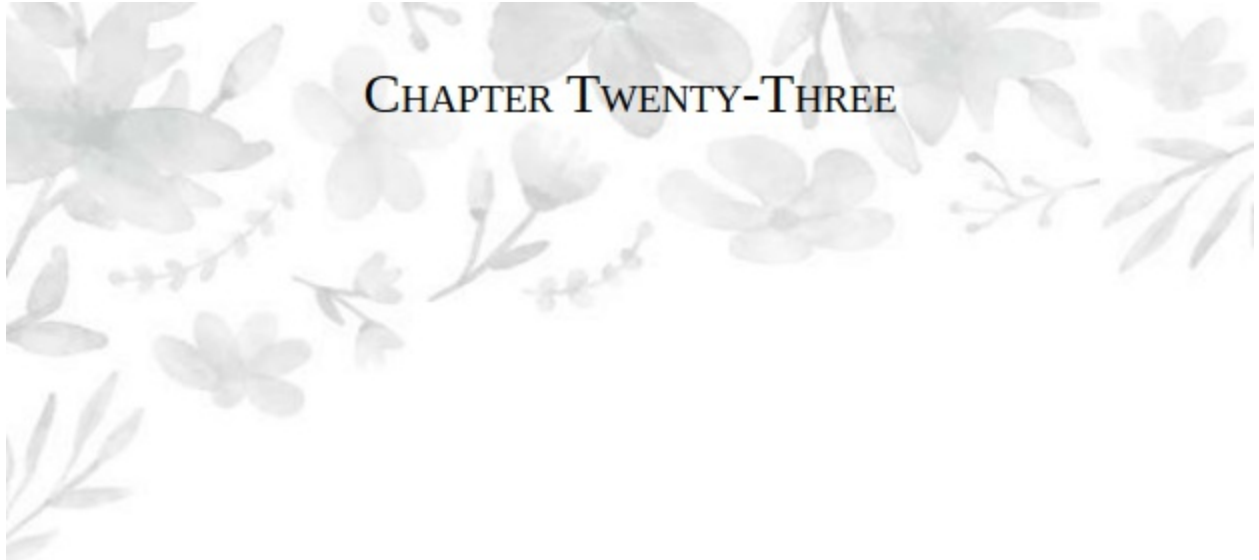
“Jesus—I am, Chloe. I’m so, so, sorry.”

She was quiet for a moment, and then she sighed deeply before sitting up.

“I think you should leave, Ben.”

Her words stung, but I knew I deserved them. I stood from the couch. I told her I was sorry one last time before departing her penthouse.

I thought I should leave, too.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Chloe

I had just come out of the elevator when I saw Sam trying to open Ben's door with Billy Anne. She was hopping up and down, patiently waiting for the former to open the door so she could go on with her day.

Charlie barked with excitement on the other side of the door.

"Oh hey, Sam. Billy Anne." The latter's eyes grew in astonishment, and she ran all the way towards me to give me a hug.

I had just gotten out of school, too. They had dismissed the entire school earlier because of some emergency meeting with the school board. I could have driven them home if I had caught them earlier.

"Chloe! Sofi!" Billy Anne raised up on her tippy toes as she stretched her arms around me before softly pinching her sister's fat leg. She was always filled with excitement every time she saw Sofi, and she'd always pinch her somewhere. Sofi liked it, and she always outstretched her arms to her sister. But with how heavy she was, poor Billy Anne couldn't carry her alone.

"Hello, honey. How's school today?" I stroked her beautiful hair with my free hand as I carried Sofi against my hip with the other.

“Good. But no art class with you,” she pouted, and it was the cutest thing in the world. Her uniform was tidy, even though it was the end of the day, and a big pink bow adorned her head. Billy Anne was adorable, and I knew for a fact that she’d grow up into a stunning young lady.

“Where’s Ben?” I asked Sam, who was now squinting at her phone, typing something. Her attention snapped back up to me when I asked her the question.

“Oh, he called me last minute. Said he had some emergency meeting until later tonight.”

“You look like you’re in a hurry. Do you need to go?” I was more than okay if Billy Anne stayed with me for the night.

“No, no. I just need to call my nephew and tell him I couldn’t come to his recital—”

“Oh, no! I can look after Billy Anne tonight until Ben comes home.” I felt bad for her for canceling family time for work. If it were me, I wouldn’t want to miss a single recital of Sofi’s when she was old enough.

There was a look of gratitude in her eyes when I offered to look after Billy Anne, and I couldn’t help but beam that I was able to help her spend more time with her nephew.

“Are you sure?” she frowned.

“Absolutely. I’m just right across the hall.”

“Can Chloe spend time with me, please, please, please.” Billy Anne did her puppy eyes, and if I was Sam, I wouldn’t be able to resist it. I bet she had persuaded her father countless times by making the same face.

“I’ll call Ben and tell him I sent you home. You don’t have to worry about anything.”

“Thank you, Ms. Kennedy. I was really looking forward to this recital all

week.”

“I’m very happy to take her from here.”

“Can I play with Sofi until Daddy comes back, Chloe?” Billy Anne looked up at me, her hands wrapped around her sister’s toes.

“Absolutely,” I nodded. “Now say bye-bye to Sam.”

“Bye, Sam! Good luck with your recital.” Sam chuckled at Billy Anne’s words before she entered the elevator, and the double doors closed before her. A smile of excitement was painted her face.

“It’s not her recital, honey. It’s her nephew’s,” I told Billy Anne as I took her hand, and we started walking towards my penthouse.

“What’s a nephew?” she asked, her face cocked in curiosity. I took out my keycard from my bag and unlocked the door.

“It’s what you call your sibling’s son.”

“Does daddy have a nephew?”

“Does your Aunt Maggie have sons?”

“Yes. Two.”

“Then your daddy has two nephews.”

I answered Billy Anne’s fifty questions about what a nephew was and what a niece was, and when she asked me how babies are made, I quickly changed the subject and asked if she wanted to change her uniform.

So the three of us walked towards Ben’s penthouse, and I was thankful he wasn’t around because I couldn’t look at him in the eye after he threatened me last night.

It had bugged me to my core, and I knew we were both overwhelmed with unwanted emotions, but I couldn’t shake the thought of losing Sofi. It sucked that he had to put that image in my head.

Five minutes later, Billy Anne changed into shorts and a simple yellow shirt

with a little butterfly in the middle. She had taken another set of her dolls from her room when we left the neighboring penthouse. And then she did another round of her puppy eyes when she begged me to let Charlie tag along.

I was a sucker for it. She'd get away with anything with that look.

So, just before dinner, we went out for a walk, and the look on Billy Anne's face was indescribable. She rushed to grab Charlie's leash after I unfolded Sofi's little stroller. Billy Anne skipped and laughed throughout our walk until we got back home.

"Hey, Chloe?" Billy Anne called. We had just finished dinner, and I had just washed the dishes we had used to eat the Filipino sweet-style spaghetti that Billy Anne devoured. She said it was better than her grandmother's. I couldn't help but be a little proud.

We were in the living room, and I had put *Tangled* on the TV when I heard that Billy Anne hadn't seen it before. And when I told her it was Sofi's favorite, she was immediately on board to watch it.

Flynn Rider was narrating the intro when she started asking me questions. Sofi lay on the floor, her head against the pillow, with a binky in her mouth.

"Yes, honey?"

"Why can't Sofi play PlayDough with me?"

"It's because she might mistake it for food and eat it."

"Because she puts everything in her mouth?" It was what Ben had told her the other time she asked about it. And the empty spot on the couch beside me suddenly felt heavy. Wouldn't it be nice if Ben was here with us? His girls watching TV and us watching with them, holding hands, and stealing kisses?

“She does.”

“She’s very lucky to have you, you know.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned.

I was combing her hair, and she wanted me to surprise her dad with a braid. She said her daddy only knew the Elsa braid, and I would try my best to compete with that. I learned a few styles back when I was younger. I KNEW I NEEDED TO LEARN because I didn’t have anyone to do it for me when I was little.

I felt bad for Billy Anne that she never grew up with someone to braid her hair like a mother should. And I couldn’t help but think that maybe we’re somewhat the same.

“It’s because she has both a mommy and a daddy. I only have a daddy.”

“You have your Aunt Maggie and your grandma Janice.” She’s lucky to have a family, period. If I hadn’t risked moving to Florida, Sofi would’ve grown up without knowing her father and half-sister.

“Yeah, but I want a mommy, too. But that’s okay, I guess. Daddy said families can be different sometimes.”

“I’m sure you’ll have a mommy someday.”

“I will?”

“When your daddy marries someone, that person can be your mommy.” The thought of Ben marrying someone else was like a bullet to the heart. I wanted a beautiful life with Ben and the girls, but if he wasn’t feeling the same way I was feeling, then what was the point?

“What if they’ll have another baby and forget about me?”

“Oh, honey. That’s not going to happen. Your daddy has Sofi, and he didn’t forget about you, did he? He loves you very much.”

“He does. He says it to me every day.”

“See.”

Billy Anne was lucky to have grown up with Ben, even if she didn't have a mother. I could see how well she was raised. She was polite and smart, and despite her selective mutism, she had a way with words on the people she talked to.

“Look, she paints just like me!” she squealed when Rapunzel was shown painting the walls of her tower. And Billy Anne was so focused on the TV screen that she didn't realize she was smiling like an adorable fool.

I wanted to point out that the evil Mother Gothel kidnapped the princess, but I guess as long as Rapunzel was painting, she was happy.

Somewhere in the middle of the movie, Billy Anne moved onto the couch with me, and I transferred Sofi to her crib. She was still awake, but I could tell she was already fighting sleep.

It was almost eight p.m. Ben hadn't arrived or replied to my messages except for a stupid thumbs up. But tonight, despite having a difficult time with Ben, at least I was having fun with my girls. That counted as something good in my books.

I lay on the couch, facing the TV, and Billy Anne lay with me, my arm warped around her like a seat belt, and she hugged my arm back. I didn't want to move. I wanted it to last forever.

But just Flynn and Rapunzel were about to finish their song with the ruffians and thugs. My eyes became heavy, and eventually, darkness consumed me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Ben

The headache I had been nursing since late afternoon hadn't subsided even with Tylenol. I was fucking suffering for what I had done earlier this week. With Gwen, with Franklin. God, even with Chloe.

It wasn't my proudest moment, but seeing that man forcing his way into Chloe's pants made me see red, and I knew I should probably have calmed down before talking to her.

My raging thoughts didn't help with my sleep—all the worst possible scenarios ran through my head. What if I hadn't gotten there in time? What if Wilson didn't tell me to go home? What would have happened to Chloe? To Sofi?

Jesus.

Because of the lack of sleep and the throbbing pain in my skull, I canceled all the surgeries I was supposed to do today and supervised another surgeon instead. All went smoothly. The Surge Wilson was talking about the other day was long gone, and we hadn't lost a patient since.

About an hour ago, I called Sam to pick up Billy Anne from school because they had early dismissal, and the hospital was packed. And to top it all off, all surgical chiefs were requested to stay for an emergency meeting about some high-profile patient that would be admitted next week. I wagered it was one of those important politicians who didn't want the public to know he had health issues.

To my surprise, my phone pinged as I was preparing to supervise another surgery. This time, one of our residents would be heading it, and I was praying nonstop that she wouldn't fuck up a simple stomach hernia repair. Otherwise, it was on me.

I read the text, surprised it was from Chloe.

I dismissed Sam. Billy Anne is with me.

You didn't have to do that.

I was honestly glad she reached out first, even if it was just to inform me about Billy Anne's whereabouts. Since I had unblocked her number, It wasn't our first time exchanging messages. I remember how surprised she was when she called me, and I answered. She said it was a miracle.

Did you know that she canceled her plans to go see her nephew's recital for you?

She didn't say anything.

Did you ask her?

No.

The three animated dots that indicated she was typing bounced. And then disappeared. And then it appeared again. I waited like a lunatic, as if the entire OR wasn't waiting for me. Then the bubble disappeared again for the third time, and when I knew she wouldn't respond, I texted her:

*Are you sure you're okay with watching Billy Anne?
I'm here for a while, and she's a handful.*

Takes after you them.

I smiled at her reply. She was jesting. Does that mean we're going to be okay? Because I didn't know how I was going to talk to her again after what happened.

*We're taking Charlie for a walk later.
Good luck with your meeting.*

I was about to reply when another message pinged, this time from Mitchell.

Dude, where are you? Your resident's about to pass out waiting for you in the OR.

"You know you should decorate your office." I jumped as I turned on the lights in my office, spotting my sister on the couch, her phone melodically jingling as she played a game with candy pieces popping and cracking.

"Jesus Christ, Maggie," I complained as my eyes adjusted to the brightness of the room. "Have you been hanging out here in the dark all this time?"

“I have.” She shut her phone off and pushed herself up. “Your couch is comfy.”

“What are you doing here?” glancing at my wristwatch, I saw it was almost eight p.m. The meeting had gone later than expected. And I feared that Chloe might complain about Billy Anne staying with her so late, but she hadn’t texted me since this afternoon.

The surgery went swimmingly well, and contrary to what Mitchell said about my resident being ready to pass out, she was amazing in the OR, and I probably wouldn’t hear the last of it for the next couple of weeks.

My sister in my office at this hour, and not spending her evening with her family was odd, though. She wore white trousers, a black top, and loafers which matched on that she got from me in Milan last Mother’s Day.

“I was just in the neighborhood. Decided to go see my brother.”

“You’re in the city on a school night? That can’t be right.” She was very particular about her schedule and wanted to be the one to put her kids to bed. “Billy Anne can’t come with you tonight. She has school tomorrow.”

“I’m not here for Billy Anne.” I could feel her eyes lingering as I walked to my desk to pack my things and go home to my girls. It had been a long day, and I was still planning to have a quick talk with Chloe. “I’m here because of what she said.”

“Is she gossiping again? You know you’re the one who taught her that. So it’s on you.” I opened my phone, wishing that Chloe texted me something. I needed to know that even with what had happened, we were okay and could finally have a chance to address the elephant in the room.

“She said she has a *sister*,” Maggie scoffed like it was unbelievable that Billy Anne could make up such a lie. But it wasn’t a lie.

“She said she plays with her every day, and she couldn’t play with clay

because she might accidentally eat it.”

What?

I paused mid-packing a small stack of papers in my briefcase as I slowly settled my eyes on my sister's. She narrowed her eyes at me and waited for me to reply.

“She said that?”

“Is it true?” She stood, her stare glazed with anticipation. Fuck. I mentally weighed the pros and cons of telling her about Sofi.

If I told her now, it would save me a lie, and at least I would have someone to talk to about Sofi and Chloe about without having to tiptoe around the truth. If Maggie was aware of Sofi's existence, that meant I only had to talk to mother about it.

But telling her would also mean compromising Chloe's trust. We had talked about how we'd tell my family when she was ready and when she felt comfortable. And with this thing with Franklin, I probably shouldn't do something to piss her off even more.

“Benedict,” Maggie called, waiting for my answer. She took a step closer to me. Fuck. There was no lying to my Maggie. She was my younger sister, and we were brought up like we were two peas in a pod. “It's true, isn't it?”

I took a deep breath, and I knew from the look on her face that there was no point in lying to her.

“Heart attack,” I sighed defeatedly, pulling out my chair before pointing at the adjacent chair by my table for my sister. We both needed to sit down for this.

“Heart atta—” The look of recognition on her face told me that she still remembered the safe word we had as children, which meant we were about to

exchange something so serious that it should only remain between us two. We hadn't used the word since we were teenagers. "Shit, Ben."

"It's not as bad as you think." It wasn't bad at all, actually. Despite the circumstances, I was beyond the moon that I had Sofi, and it was even better that I had Chloe.

"Does Chloe know?"

"Chloe's the mother."

"Oh fuck." I couldn't describe the look of surprise on Maggie's face. It was like she was witnessing one of her favorite soap operas live. I was just thankful that she wasn't pissed at the fact that I had hidden it from her. Instead, she was *amused* with my revelations.

I proceeded to tell her everything. From the time we met in my bar in New York until I discovered that she was living across from my penthouse. Maggie remained silent as I spilled everything, and she nodded, frowned, and looked at me in all the critical ways possible when she knew that I had ghosted my baby.

I told her about Franklin Hollis and how the asshole made a pass at Chloe, about Gwen and how she came into my apartment and pissed her off. I told her about our little no-strings agreement and how good Chloe was with the kid that even Billy Anne wanted to be with her.

"I knew I needed to punch the living shit out of that Gwen woman," she complained, crossing her arms against her chest and leaning back against the suede material of the chair.

"That's all you want to say after what I just told you?"

"I'm still trying to digest it all." She scrunched her nose. "But you're whipped, brother."

"Whipped?"

“Pussy-whipped,” she corrected. “Chloe has you wrapped around her little finger.”

“It’s not like that. She’s diff—”

“I mean that in a nice way. You like her, and I call bullshit on your no-strings-attached setup.”

“I don’t think she feels that way.”

“You think she got pissed at Gwen because she ruined her birthday? C’mon. You can’t be that daft. As women, we’re complicated.”

“Understatement.”

“She likes you, Ben. And she’s frustrated and jealous because of this Gwen thing. You need to talk to her.”

“We’re not really on speaking terms right now.”

“What did you do?”

“Why do you always assume it’s my fault?”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“I know that Tonette ruined things for you,” she started, her tone now sincere. “But you can’t let her dictate how you’re going to handle your future relationships. So tell me, what did you do to piss off the poor woman this time?”

“I—I kind of threatened her with a custody battle after what happened with Franklin.”

The smile on my sister’s face fell, and she scowled so deeply I thought the fire was going to come out of her ears.

“You’re an asshole, you know?” She shook her head. “Did you mean it?”

“Of course not, Mags. She’s wonderful with Sofi. I couldn’t possibly do that to her. I just don’t know how to talk to her about it.”

“She won’t care how you’re going to start the conversation as long as you do it. Tell her you’re sorry and that you don’t mean it. Assure her. God, if I were her, I’d take my child and leave.”

“Geez. Thank you, Maggie.” I grabbed my bag and switched off my desk lamp. “I need to go.”

“You gonna talk to her?”

“I will.” She retreated to the couch, where she grabbed her things so we could leave together. “Did you bring your car?”

“Ralph’s picking me up.” I let her out the door first. “And Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell her how you really feel before she thinks she’s stupid for liking you.”

Chloe’s house was dark, and the only light was coming from the TV screen, where a man and a long-haired blonde were singing on a boat.

The first thing that hit my nose was the faint scent of cinnamon, indicating that they had baked earlier.

Sofi was in her crib, sucking quietly on her binky. In her matching sweatpants and sweatshirt, Chloe was on her side on the couch, her supple lips ajar as she slept soundly. Billy Anne had on her yellow shirt and was lying her back. One leg was over Chloe’s hip, one arm outstretched, and the other on her forehead. Chloe’s mouth was also open, and she was sleeping so soundly she might as well be snoring.

I basked in the image before me before muting the TV and attempting to pick up Billy Anne without waking up Chloe. She looked so peaceful in her sleep, so beautiful.

She stirred when Billy Anne complained in her sleep as I tried to untangle her leg, and it was the only sound it took for Chloe to jump awake, alarmed by the sudden commotion.

“Ben?” she whispered, her eyes adjusting to the faint light. She rubbed the sleep from her face as she carefully pushed herself up, cradling Billy Anne with her. When she was upright, and my first daughter was straddling her and leaning her face across her chest, Chloe softly patted the empty space beside her.

“I could take Billy Anne, and we could—”

“Sit down, Ben.”

I did so after I removed my jacket and settled it on one of the chairs alongside my briefcase. I took the warm spot on the couch, and for a moment, we sat there, our eyes on the screen. But I wasn’t paying attention. Instead, my body was aware of the tired goddess beside me.

She smelled so much of coconuts it made me want to be on vacation with her where there weren’t any Franklins, Gwens, or nuisances to ruin our day. It would be us on the beach with the kids, and she’d wear the most gorgeous bathing suit. And on top of all that, I’d have her for myself.

“Chloe—”

“Just,” she interrupted, sighing so deep it told me she was mustering up the courage. “Let me speak first, okay?”

“All right.”

“Look.” Her voice was so low that she was almost whispering to my soul. “I never thought, in a thousand years, that I’d end up like this—in a penthouse, with these kids, and where I didn’t have to juggle three jobs to make ends meet. And I’m thankful to you, Ben, for everything you’ve done

for me and Sofi. But that doesn't mean that I couldn't do it all over again without you.

"I'm not a worthless mother just because I wanted things to be easier. And I know that it's stupid, but that what I'm feeling isn't pretend anymore. However, I could walk away from everything if you dangle custody over my head again."

The silence that followed seemed to stretch for centuries, and I took my chance to say my piece.

"It's not stupid, Chlo," I said, shifting my position to face her. She was still facing the television screen, and her eyes gleamed with unshed tears as she stroked Billy Anne's hair. "What you're feeling, I'm feeling it, too."

Her attention snapped at me.

"I didn't mean to say it. About the custody thing. I was mad, and I knew that it was not an excuse. I fucked up. And I'm so sorry."

Her tears won and finally rolled down her cheeks, and her expression softened.

"I hated seeing you with Gwen all touchy like that," she admitted. "I was jealous, and I got pissed. I didn't want to say anything because I thought I didn't have the right."

"You have every right. I couldn't for a second imagine a day without seeing you, hearing you laugh, and touching you. I thought I was happy. I thought my life was perfect. I didn't realize how much I was missing until you came here."

"You mean that?"

"When I saw you at the bar in New York, I knew I was going to see you again. I waited for your call every day after. When you finally called and I

got to hear your voice again, I knew that I would be stupid to let you go. But then you told me you were pregnant, and I freaked out.”

She stared at me, and a small smile painted her face. “I’m here, Ben.”

“You are. I—I love you, Chloe Kennedy. And now that we’ve found each other again, I’m never letting you go. When I foolishly do, may the gods punish me with unruly women until I have no choice but to choose you over again.”

She stretched her arm toward my face and cupped my chin, and our lips touched, and the entire set of problems from the week prior evaporated. It was like I could conquer everything as long as I had her with me.

“I love you, too, Ben. So please don’t ever let me go.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves. The flowers are scattered across the top, with some larger and more prominent than others. The leaves are simple, elongated shapes, some with small veins. The overall effect is soft and elegant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Chloe

The girls were in bed after Ben, and I decided that it was better if Billy Anne stayed in the spare bed in Sofi's room. We couldn't get our hands off each other when I closed my daughter's room after Ben tucked them in, and I turned on Sofi's lullaby machine.

I didn't realize how much I missed Ben when he grabbed my hips, pushed me against the wall in the hallway, and devoured me like he'd been hungry for my lips.

There was nothing slow in how he undressed me in my room, but he made love to me so deliciously slowly that I was ecstatic when I came the third time.

Now we laid in tangled sheets naked, his hand wrapped around my shoulder while I stroked circles on his chiseled chest. He smelled of soap and a tinge of woody scent that was so faint he must have spritzed it in the afternoon.

We lay like that for a moment, listening to each other's heartbeat, staring at the dark ceiling.

“Maggie came to my office today,” Ben said, ruining the silence that had enveloped us. I shifted my shoulders and gently stroked the sparse hair on his chest.

“Is that not a normal occurrence?”

“Her visiting me is.”

“What did she want?”

“She knows.” I didn’t know if I should be devastated with the information. But my movement halted, and so did Ben’s subtle caress on my bare upper arm. My heart skipped a beat when I looked up at Ben; his dark eyes met mine.

“About what?”

“About us.”

“Did you tell her?”

“No,” he whispered and sighed so deeply it was like he couldn’t believe it himself.

“Billy Anne did. She said she never shuts up about having a sister.”

“Billy Anne?” I doubt it.

“She’s spending too much time with my sister that she’s learning the guilty pleasure of gossiping,” Ben chuckled, and the vibration of it against my ears on his chest made my skin prickle. It was a sound I wouldn’t mind hearing every day.

“I’m sure she only wanted to talk about Sofi to someone.”

“Are you okay with it? About Maggie knowing?”

Was I?

After I met Ben’s sister and his mother, I didn’t feel any sort of tension. And on my end, I knew I was beyond ready for Sofi to meet them. My

concern, though, was their possible reaction to the fact that Ben had another child, and they didn't have a single clue.

"I think it's high time that your family know. No more secrets."

And I meant it. Ben said he loved me. And I was so relieved that he felt that way because it would've broken me if he didn't. I couldn't possibly continue living like this, with him around, and pretend like seeing him with other women wasn't killing me.

"Are you sure?"

"I am." I pushed myself up from the half embrace and straddled Ben in one swift move, planting a long, deep kiss against his lips.

"How about we get together for brunch on Saturday?"

"Are you sure this isn't too much?"

I ironed the tie-shoulder yellow sundress I picked for brunch the following Saturday. Billy Anne was wearing a blue asymmetrical peplum top and white shorts.

I thought it was a cute coincidence when we came out of the penthouse, and Sofi was wearing the exact shade of blue A-line dress her older sister was wearing. And that was when I felt a little too overdressed with the sleeveless dress.

But Ben had assured me on the drive to his mother's house that Janice wasn't the type to judge her based on her dress, and my attendance was more important than my shoulders.

"It's not. You look beautiful. Billy Anne, doesn't Chloe look beautiful?" Ben had parked the car a minute ago, and we were walking up toward the door to knock.

It looked like it was a completely different place compared to when I was here last time. Gone were the lights and fog machines from the party and glittering decorations. Now, the yard was clean, flowers were everywhere, and the lawn was trimmed so well. I could only dream of a place like this someday for Sofi.

“She looks like a Disney princess. And we have matching bracelets, too.”

I gripped Billy Anne’s hand, and true enough, we wore identical bracelets she had made in art class the other day.

“Tiful,” Sofi muttered in Ben’s arms, and that earned a laugh from the group.

“See? Even Sofi agrees with me. Mama looks pretty, doesn’t she?” My heart jumped in joy as Ben kissed Sofi’s chubby cheek.

“Now relax, babe. They’re going to love Sofi. If you’re lucky, you can still have her back at the end of the day.”

“Grammy’s going to love Sofi—”

“Benedict! Chloe!” Maggie’s sharp scream interrupted Billy Anne. The former didn’t even bother greeting her aunt before she sped past her and ran towards the kitchen to grab a cup of mixed fruit.

“Hi, Maggie.”

“Come on in.”

Maggie wore a puff-sleeved lavender floral maxi dress with a tiered skirt and short puffed sleeves. She looked so tall and so beautiful in it. We walked towards the foyer, and I could see that her eyes hadn’t left the plump child in Ben’s arms. Finally, she asked, “And who do we have here?”

“Mags, I’d like you to meet Sofi.”

Ben didn’t hesitate to hand Sofi to her aunt. Jesus. I never thought I’d even say that word. Sofi had an aunt, and I had gained a sister in some weird way.

She took the toddler in her arms, and her eyes started to water. She sniffed her neck, and I bet she could smell the coconut lotion I had put on her earlier. “Sofi! Isn’t she a little bundle of joy? She looks just like you, Chloe.” She shifted her attention to her brother and added, “I can’t believe I have two nieces and I have two boys. The world really is unfair.”

“That’s my sister! I told you she’s real!” Billy Anne yelled from the kitchen, her mouth filled with whatever treat she had started eating. I saw how she was comfortable with the people here and was happy that she felt safe enough to talk to some of Janice’s staff.

“Never doubted you, sugar!” Maggie called back.

“And mother?”

“What is all this screaming?” Janice Hayes walked down the stairs as if on cue, wearing the most beautiful red wrap dress with butterfly sleeves. She was too busy putting on her earrings and watching her steps to see the elephant in the room babbling in Maggie’s arms. “God, don’t you just love it when we’re all here together on a weekend?”

Janice looked beautiful despite her age. She was aging like fine wine.

From the stairs, she wiped her spectacles, still not looking over at us, while the three of us anticipated her reaction to seeing her youngest grandchild for the first time.

“Benedict, now that I could finally get a hold of you—goodness.” She halted mid-step, put on her glasses, and squinted at us as if what she was seeing was an illusion. *Please let her like Sofi.* “Is that a baby?”

“Is she yours, Margaret?” Surprised laced Janice’s face, confused as to why there was a toddler in her living room. “Did you finally adopt a child?”

“God, I wish, Mother.” Janice closed the gap between her and her daughter and studied the toddler, who was now extending her chunky hands toward her

grandmother.

I held back the tears. This was going to be an emotional day. I just knew it.

Sensing my emotions, Ben held my shoulder and pulled me closer to him.

“She’s ours, actually.”

Janice’s attention snapped over to her son, and then to me, then back to Ben again. There was disbelief in her eyes, but her lips were slowly stretching into a soft smile.

“This is Sofi. She’s our daughter,” I said, and Janice took her from Maggie and bounced her in her arms. Sofi squealed and hugged her only grandmother by the neck. Then, the tears were unstoppable.

I couldn’t fathom the fact that Sofi had now officially met her family. And they loved her.

“She looks just like you, Chloe. But she has Ben’s eyes. Oh, my Lord, she really is yours, Benedict. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because he left her in New York,” Maggie mumbled under her breath, but her mother heard it.

“What? That’s not how I raised you.”

“We’re good now, Mother. We’ve made our peace with everything and are ready to move forward.”

“Are you going to marry Chloe?” Billy Anne appeared behind her grandmother, the side of her lips stained with what looked like maple syrup.

“Billy Anne, the grown-ups are talking,” Ben called.

“Well, are you?” Janice asked, still bouncing a laughing Sofi.

“We’re taking things slowly right now.”

“I can’t believe I have another grandchild. You are the most adorable baby I’ve ever seen.”

“What about me, Grammy?”

“You’re not a baby anymore, Billy Anne. You’re a young lady.”

“Does that mean I get to have a boyfriend?”

“Not for a long time, missy,” Ben said to his child, and we walked toward the dining hall for brunch.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Ben

“D octor Hayes? There’s a phone call for you.”

Thankfully, I had decided against inviting the residents and the interns into the gallery to watch my surgery today. I was doing a gastrectomy, removing a part of my patient’s stomach because of a stomach ulcer. A phone call shouldn’t interrupt me. My secretary knew this.

“Gracie, I’m in the middle of surgery,” I looked up at the petite blonde who had now scrubbed in just like I had taught her. She was holding my personal phone with her gloved hand by her ear. “Tell them to call me again later.”

“Doctor Hayes, it’s an emergency.” I could hear the muffled sound of the caller from the speaker, but I couldn’t understand it. Gracie looked like she was torn between following my orders or the orders of the person on the other end. “Is someone dying?”

“I don’t know. But they said they need to talk to you ASAP.” The nurses and other doctors around me waited for my response. I raised an eyebrow at one of the attending surgeons who had accompanied me today in the OR.

“Who is it?”

“A Chloe Kennedy.” Now, that caught my attention. Chloe never called me when I was at work. My gut told me that if she had managed to convince Gracie to come get me, then it really must be an emergency. My first thought was Franklin, and my stomach twisted at what the asshole could have done this time. “Should I put it on speaker?”

“No. Could you please hold it close to my ear for just a moment?” Gracie nodded and walked toward my side, careful not to stumble over any wires and machines along the way. When she positioned the phone by my ear, I stood straight and let my hands hang in the air as I halted my surgery, blood dripping from my gloved hands.

“Babe?” I asked behind my mask, hearing her distraught tone.

“Ben! Oh, thank God! I’ve been calling you.”

“I’m doing surgery right now. What’s the matter?”

“Someone took Sofi, Ben!”

Chills went down my body at Chloe’s words. That can’t be right. Things like these weren’t supposed to happen to us. And Sofi, of all people. Little helpless Sofi.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s been kidnapped from daycare. Oh, my God!” My gut wrenched just hearing Chloe’s desperate cry. And then suddenly, the surgery wasn’t important anymore. I knew my patient should always come first, but family was family. I could give this all up in a heartbeat if that meant I was ensuring my child’s safety.

“What? Aren’t the staff supposed to watch over the children?”

“The woman breached security and pretended to be the new maintenance person. She grabbed Sofi and ran before they could catch her. Ben. She’s gone. She’s not here. She—”

“Okay. I’m on my way, Chloe.” The attending took my position, and the scrub nurses untied my surgical gown and gloves. I thoroughly scrubbed my hands before handling the phone from Gracie, dismissing her with a thankful nod. “Did they call the police?”

“Three minutes ago, but they’re not yet here. Jesus. My baby. What if something happens to her?” I ran out of the OR, into the hall, and toward my office to grab my things.

Things were so good between us. I had just told her I loved her, and she said she loved me back. I thought we were going to be okay from there. And now this had to happen? I felt like we weren’t getting a break.

“I’m leaving the OR right now, and I’m driving there immediately.” I rode the elevator to the basement parking lot and threw my bag in the passenger seat before putting the key in the ignition to start the car.

If something happened to Sofi—God, I didn’t know how we were going to bounce back. I didn’t know how Chloe was going to be okay after that, which was why it wasn’t an option.

I knew people in high places—dangerous people. And I knew I said I didn’t want to get tangled up with their bullshit, but I would if it meant saving my daughter. For now, I was going to trust the authorities.

“Please don’t hang up the phone,” Chloe begged, and my chest ached hearing her so broken like this when I couldn’t do anything about it.

“I’m not going to, baby,” I assured her.

“I should’ve dropped by earlier. This is all my fault.” Like fuck it was. Sofi’s been there for almost five months, and nothing like this ever happened before. Who could’ve done something like this? To a child. Jesus.

“It’s not your fault, okay? We’re going to find her. Is Billy Anne there?”

“She’s still in class.”

“Okay. I’ll call Maggie to come pick her up. She can’t be under so much stress. Not again.”

“She doesn’t need to know.”

Grabbing my work phone from my bag, I dialed Maggie's number. Thankfully, she picked up on the second ring. I placed the phone, Chloe was calling me, on my lap as I put my sister on speakerphone.

“Maggie.”

“Ben.” She must have heard the stress in my voice because she asked. “You okay?”

“Are you busy right now?”

“I just got done at Pilates, and I’m about to pick up the boys.”

“Good. I need you to pick up Billy Anne at school on your way.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Sofi’s been taken from daycare.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone’s kidnapped her, but authorities have been alerted.”

“Jesus Christ, Ben. Okay. I’ll pick up Billy Anne and tell Mom.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you okay?”

“It’s Chloe I’m worried about.”

“They’ll find her, Ben. Call me when you need anything and if something comes up.”

Just as I ended our call, I parked at the curb near the school’s entrance. I told Chloe that I had arrived, and we ended our call.

As I parked the car, I could see the crowd forming by the school's daycare center, and it didn’t take me long to see Chloe’s dark hair by the entrance of the building. Her shoulders shook when she spotted me walking towards her.

“Ben!” she ran, and I hugged her midsection when we found each other. She circled her arms around my neck, sobbing, her limbs weakening, and her body shaking.

“Baby. It’s okay.” I rubbed her back, and we stood like that for a moment in front of the school building. Some classes were still going on, but parents who had children in the daycare center had arrived and took their children away safely.

“Doctor Hayes—”

“How the fuck could something like slide right under your noses?” I interrupted Principal Patel as she marched toward us.

“Ben,” Chloe warned, giving the principal an apologetic smile.

“We’re very sorry, Doctor Hayes. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Our security is excellent. The person must have come in disguised.”

“It’s not good enough. Just pray that nothing happens to her. Otherwise, the school will be held accountable.”

“Ben. It’s not their fault. They couldn’t poss—”

“Ms. Chloe Kennedy?” A voice interrupted us from behind, and we turned our heads.

“I’m Chief Emily Grant from the Miami Police Department, and this is Detective Jackson Reed from the Missing Persons’ Unit.”

Officer Emily Grant looked young and efficient enough for the job. She was the youngest chief of Police in years, and despite the clamor of some about her age and sex, she’d done more in a year of her service than her two predecessors combined.

The detective looked like in his late fifties, and streaks of white hair told me he knew what he was doing.

“We’re going to need to ask you questions in the precinct, but right now,

we need to activate an Amber Alert so everyone in the area will be notified of your child's description," Officer Grant said. "But we need to do it in the station; otherwise, it could cause alarm to the kids."

"Do you know anyone who might want to harm your daughter, Ms. Kennedy?"

We were in one of the offices in the station with Officer Grant and Detective Reed. Maggie had texted me two minutes ago that she had picked up Billy Anne from school and had informed our mother about our situation.

Now, as I held Chloe's hand under the table, we answered the authorities' questions as best we could.

"No, I don't think so. I just moved here four months ago. I don't know anyone here, nor have I pissed off anyone."

"Franklin Hollis," I pointed out. I reminded myself about that man. Chloe didn't say anything about Franklin after what had happened at her penthouse, except that she had decided to cut all ties with him. But I still couldn't forget the way Chloe was cornered and helpless in her own house when he showed up.

"I don't think Frankie would go to such extremes over something like that," she said, shaking her head, a frown forming on her forehead.

"Based on the school cameras, the person's frame was petite and would most likely be a woman."

"Or a very lanky man."

"He doesn't know where I work. He didn't even text me after what happened."

“What happened?” Detective Reeds asked. And Chloe told them what had happened. She didn’t flinch, didn’t squirm as she spoke her truth, and I squeezed her hands to let her know I was proud of her.

“It’s better that we put him down as one of the suspects. You can file a complaint against him about molesting you.” This came from Officer Grant.

“I—I’ll think about it. Right now, I need my daughter found, officer.”

“How about you, Doctor Hayes? Anyone who’d want to hurt you or your family?” The detective nodded his head toward me.

“I have angry patients every day, detective. But I don’t think they’d hurt someone to get to me.”

“An ex, maybe? An angry fling?”

“Gwen?” Chloe questioned.

“Can I get her full name?”

“Gwyneth Wroblewitz.” The law enforcement officers jotted the name I had just said in their respective papers.

“We’ll get someone to visit her and Franklin Hollis and maybe get an alibi from them.”

“As vindictive as Gwen can be, she wouldn’t harm a child. She doesn’t even know I have a one-year-old.”

“Ben? Do you think it’s possible that it’s Tonette?” Chloe said beside me, her head low as she stared at our intertwined fingers.

“Tonette?” Grant raised an eyebrow.

“Why would this Tonette person want to harm your child?” Reeds queried.

“She’s the mother of my firstborn. We ended on very bad terms after I found out that she was associated with a cocaine user. I filed a restraining order against her after that. But that was years ago. We hadn’t had contact since then.”

“She might be the lurker type. Maybe she studied where and who you associate yourself with and then took the chance to hurt you.”

“You said she’s your first-born’s biological mother? Maybe she kidnapped the child out of jealousy? Maybe to spite you and Ms. Kennedy?” Detective Reeds pointed out. “But this is all an assumption, of course. We can’t exactly know that it’s her until we get a profile.”

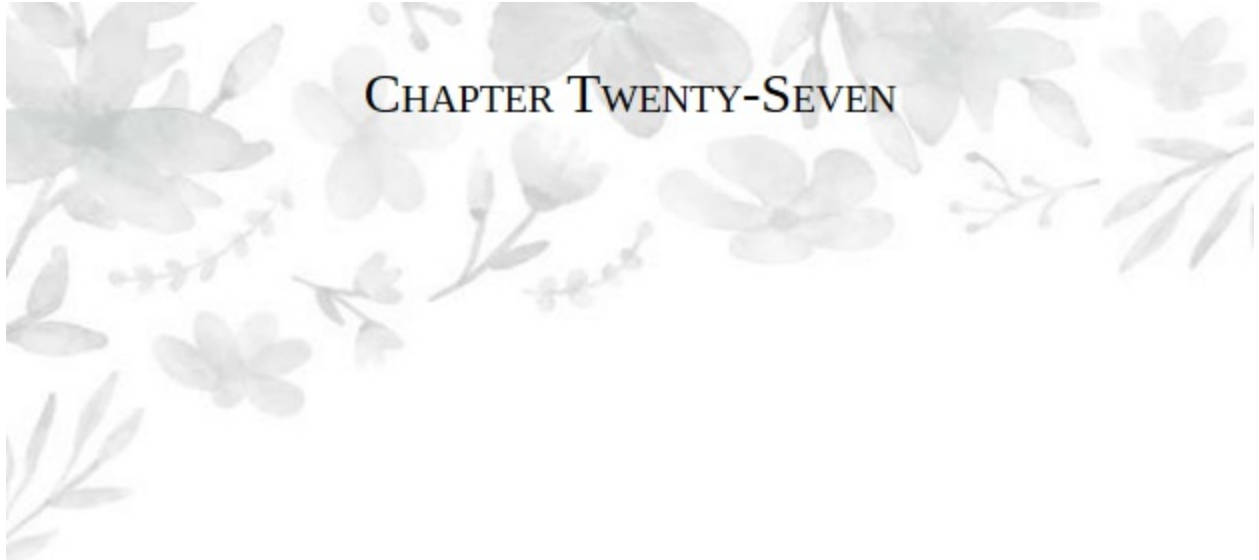
“I’ll get her complete name and run it in the system. But that could take a while.” Officer Grant stood from her chair across from us, and Chloe followed her movements with her bloodshot eyes.

“How long? What about my daughter?”

“We have officers combing the area with the description of your child and the full profile that we have of the kidnapper from the camera feeds. They’ll alert us once they find something.”

“Her name?” Grant asked one last time.

“Antonette Addams.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves. The design is asymmetrical, with more dense floral elements on the left side that gradually thin out towards the right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Chloe

“Are you okay, babe?”

I didn't even know if I was alive anymore. My brain had shut down, and I had no more tears left. I had used my inhaler three times in just an hour as stress and emotions consumed my entire being.

“Yeah,” I whispered, sniffing. My eyes were sore from wiping at them, and I could feel the heat on my cheeks from all the pent-up frustration.

Ben hadn't let go of my hand since we arrived at the station, and my eyes were so heavy that as I rested my head on his shoulder, I was afraid I was going to pass out.

“Do you want to eat anything?”

I didn't know how Ben did it. How he was able to hold things together and not fall apart. If he was internally falling apart, then he was good at masking it. He had been my rock, helping me not to collapse right here, right now. And I had kept him cool whenever he'd snap at the concerned calls he'd been receiving for the past hours.

“No. I'm fine. How long has it been?”

“Three hours.” Ben outstretched his arm to check his wristwatch. He kissed my forehead, his thumb circling the back of my palm.

We had been in the police station waiting room for over three hours, and the police had offered us food, beverages, and a cot that we could take a quick nap on. But we’d refused them except for the strong coffee they brought us. “You know we can go to the penthouse. You can rest there, and they’ll call us when they find something.”

“I can’t rest. I can’t even think straight.” We were closer here, meaning we’d know immediately if they had information about her. Besides, if I left, there wouldn’t be a point. There was no chance of sleeping when my thoughts were all over the place, worried to death about my baby. “What could’ve happened to her?”

The universe couldn’t even cut me some slack. We were on cloud nine the past couple of days after the brunch. Sofi was happy, and I was happy that Ben’s family adored the new addition to their family.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged. Then this happened—my poor baby Sofi.

“Nothing’s going to happen to her, alright?” Ben assured me for the hundredth time, and each time he’d remind me, I’d feel a little better for a short time.

“Billy Anne?”

“She’s with Maggie. She knows nothing except that she’s having a mid-week sleepover.” Ben tried to lighten the mood, but who were we kidding? Our child was somewhere in the city with a stranger. And she was helpless and alone. She must be so hungry right now. And cold.

“I’m so scared, Ben. I keep thinking that none of this would’ve happened if I had picked her up earlier.”

“We don’t know that—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Officer Emily Grant walked in with an enthusiastic look on her face. We stood, anticipating the news she was about to share. God, let Sofi be okay.

“Your child is in the hospital, Ms. Kennedy.”

“What?”

“One of our patrol officers noticed that she was having a severe rash and thought it was better that she’s taken to the hospital.”

“Can we go see her? Which hospital?” The police officer told us which hospital she was admitted to, and I was relieved to hear that it was Ben’s place of work.

“I work there.”

“You can visit your daughter, and we’ll take care of our culprit. We’ll contact you and your lawyers once she is identified and in our custody.”

“She’s going to be okay, darling.” I was surprised to see Janice in the hospital when we arrived twenty minutes later. I felt like I was going to die in Ben’s Bentley as we fought through traffic. Thankfully, it wasn’t as slow as it could be, and we got to the hospital only five minutes later than usual.

We learned that Janice had contacted all her doctor friends in Miami to inform her if Sofi was admitted to their hospitals. She got the call immediately when this hospital took in her youngest grandchild. It was one of the perks of networking, I guess.

I didn’t know how much I needed a mother until Janice hugged me in the hallway. She was a mother, too. She’d understand the heartache that no man ever could when your child was in danger.

She told me that I'd feel it deep in my bones if something horrible happened to Sofi. I didn't tell her that at this point, I didn't know if I was feeling anything at all. This all felt like I was in a horrible fever dream.

"This is all my fault. What if she's seriously sick? Jesus Christ." I cried in Janice's arms, and I knew I only met the woman twice, but she didn't complain. Instead, she hugged me tightly as my man took another angry phone call.

"It's not your fault. The doctors are doing everything they can."

"Fuck," Ben cursed, storming toward us, his nose flaring.

"What is it?"

"It was Tonette."

I felt Janice go rigid beside me, and I waited for Ben to continue because, to me, it didn't make sense that Tonette would want to hurt my child. A child she didn't even know existed.

"They got her confession. She had been stalking Billy Anne since spring. She saw me and Chloe with Sofi one time. She said she wanted custody of Billy Anne in exchange for Sofi. She pretended she worked at the school and picked up Sofi before she ran. She was on something, they didn't say what. She started crying so loud, Tonette brought her strawberry fucking ice cream, thinking she'd calm down—"

"But instead, it only got worse."

"What did the doctors say?" Janice asked.

"I don't know yet." I was shaking, and my chest tightened, but I fought through it, steadying my breath.

I knew I shouldn't judge mothers, but Tonette seemed like the wrong person all the way around. How could she have cared for Billy Anne when

she couldn't even care for herself? And she had the nerve to use my Sofi like that? She shouldn't be allowed to be around any kids.

"Hey, babe. Are you okay? Did you bring your inhaler with you?"

"It's in the car. But I don't care about any of that. I want to see my daughter!" It felt so good to yell, especially when my frustration was now heightened with anger at Tonette. I didn't want to see her face. She didn't deserve Billy Anne.

"Mother, can you please—"

"I'll go see what they have in the cafeteria." Janice stood, and Ben replaced her beside me. He circled his arms around me and kissed the top of my head.

"Baby. Look at me. Please." I did, and I saw how tired Ben was, yet he was still here by my side, assuring me and taking care of me.

"I can't lose her. I can't," I whispered. I knew I wouldn't survive it if something happened to Sofi. I'd lose my mind. What was the point of living?

"We're not losing her."

"You don't know that."

"I do. Because I know the doctors here, and I know that they will do everything they can." Ben cupped my cheeks and kissed me so softly and tenderly that I wanted to get lost in him again. "I'm sorry, Chloe. I'm so fucking sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"Tonette was *my* ex. If I had just done something about her, she wouldn't have come back to bite me in the ass. I should've gotten her help instead."

I looked up at the man I loved and saw a lone tear roll down his cheek. I returned the kiss before leaning my head against his shoulder, closing my eyes as I sent a silent prayer to whoever was listening.

"Doctor Hayes," an unfamiliar voice called before sleep could consume me.

To say that I was exhausted was an understatement.

Doctor Malik was wearing Winnie-the-Pooh patterned scrubs under his white coat. His mahogany skin glinted under the fluorescent light as he gave us both a reassuring smile.

“Doctor Malik.” Ben stood up to shake his colleague’s hand.

“Are you guys the parents of Sofi Kennedy?”

“We are.”

“She’s having an allergic reaction to the strawberry gelato she had, but she got here just in time for her not to be anaphylactic.”

“So she’s okay?” I asked. When Doctor Malik nodded, it was like I was breathing again after so long underwater. The relief was so overwhelming that my tears started again.

“For now, she just has a severe skin rash and some welts. I would recommend letting her stay overnight so we can monitor any digestive issues that could arise.”

“And how about any bruises, lacerations?” asked Ben.

“We found no trace on her of any bruises, bumps, or scratches.”

“Oh, thank God. Can we see her?”

“You can.”

I practically bolted towards Sofi’s room when the doctor said we could see her. And the euphoria of seeing Sofi in one piece was unlike anything else.

She was crying, but she was okay. She was pink from her rash, but she was breathing. That was all I could ask for. I took her from the nurse who was cradling her. She gave us a smile and promised to bring Sofi something to eat in a little bit.

“Hi, Sofi,” I cooed, and the hug that she gave me was so tight it was like she was telling me never to leave her again.

“Mama,” Sofi cried, her cheeks painted with tears, her voice hoarse from all the crying.

“Oh, baby. Mama’s here.” I rocked her from side to side and felt Ben’s strong hands circle us in a hug. Then he planted a kiss on Sofi’s head.

“We’re okay,” he whispered.

“We’re okay, Ben.”

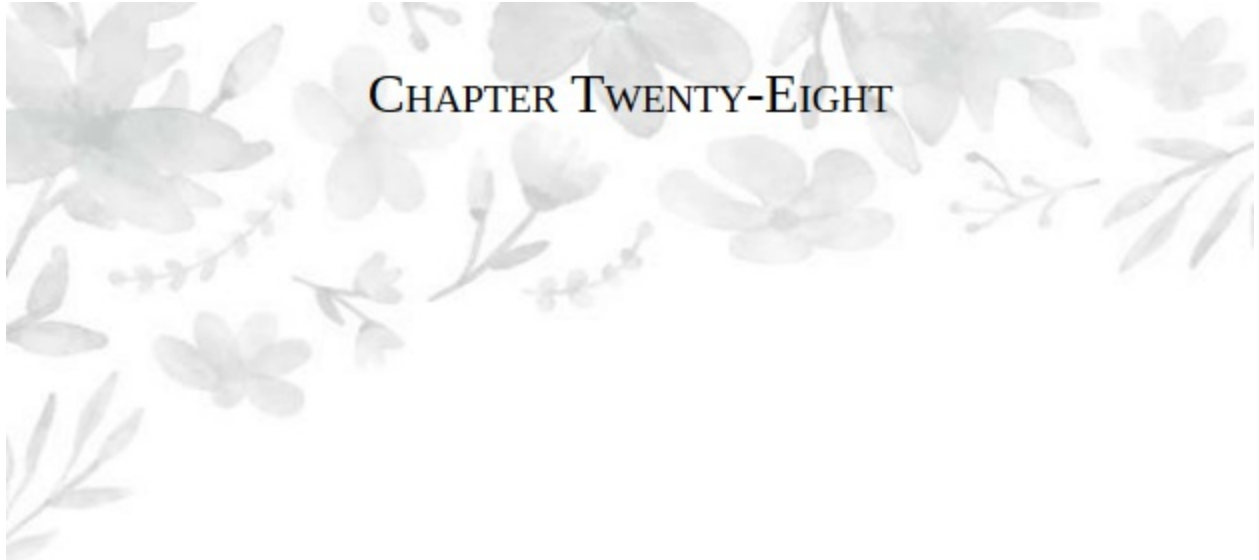
“I promise you, Chlo. I’m going to fix this all. No more Franklins and Gwens and Tonettes.”

“Just you and me.”

“Just us.”

“Dada,” Sofi complained, stretching out her arm to her father. I didn’t want to let her go, but I did this once for Ben to take a turn.

“And you and your sister, too, baby girl.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Ben

I had hated cookies and cream ice cream ever since I could remember. But I loved it because it was Chloe's favorite. I loved everything she loved, and in the process, I fell in love with her harder every day.

It had been three months since we lost and found Sofi, and although Chloe has been on edge sometimes, she had mostly been taking care of the girls with extra love since.

Right now, the kids were asleep, and Chloe and I were enjoying our pint of ice cream on the living room couch after we had sex on the floor. Charlie was in Billy Anne's room, and the pup—no, the dog—was very fond of the new addition to our little family.

“Are we going to see that therapist tomorrow?” Chloe asked. She was wearing my white shirt and a pair of her underwear, her hair in a messy ponytail.

We had talked about therapy after what happened with Sofi, and I was thankful that Chloe was on board.

Tonette was getting the help that she needed, and I made sure that she wouldn't be bugging us anymore. She needed to go to rehab for her addiction. It was the least I could do for her and Billy Anne to try and make things better. Not that I would allow them to see each other without supervision again.

I had made peace with the idea that Tonette was Billy Anne's mother. If Billy Anne was old enough to want to find or talk to Tonette, then I'd help her. But right now, she was better off with just me and Chloe.

"We did schedule a family appointment."

"We did," Chloe nodded before squinting at the ceiling. "A family. Can you believe that?"

"I can," I chuckled.

"We've worked hard for this."

"Are you okay?" I knew better days were about to come, but I was also aware that the trauma Tonette had suffered needed mending. And I couldn't forgive her for the damage that she did to my family.

"I am. I just get paranoid sometimes. There's a lot of things that could've happened."

"But nothing did."

"And we're together again."

"We are. And we're not leaving each other, right?"

"No, we're not."

"Billy Anne seems to enjoy our new setup."

"I am, too."

"I should've moved you here months ago."

When we brought Sofi home from the hospital, all we needed was one look at each other to know that it was time for Chloe to move to where she

belonged. It was the most effortless transition I had experienced. Billy Anne thought we were having the world's longest sleepover, and Charlie thought we were having guests who'd give him treats just because he was friendly.

To me, it was like Christmas. And Chloe was my forever gift. She was here with me, with the kids. It was something I didn't want to lose. Something I'd fight for.

"What makes you think I'd say yes to that?" Chloe jested.

"Oh, Ms. Kennedy. I could've made up some excuse and told you that your penthouse—*former* penthouse—is unavailable."

"You're a smart ass."

"I'm your smart ass."

"Hey, Ben?"

"Yes, baby?"

"I'm planning on changing Sofi's last name."

"You are?" She didn't need to, but I was over the moon with her news. Nothing could be more perfect than this.

"And I was wondering if you'd want to add something to her name. So she wouldn't be just Sofi."

"I'm happy that she's just Sofi. As long as she's a Hayes."

"How about we let Billy Anne decide then?"

"Are you sure?"

"Is that a bad idea?"

"Not unless you want to name her Sofi Lady Glitter Sparkle Hayes."

"Then we'll give her three chances and choose the best one."

"Sounds like a plan."

A week later, Sofi Rosemarie became an official Hayes.

A decorative background featuring a light gray floral pattern with various flowers and leaves scattered across the top and sides of the page.

Epilogue

CHLOE

I twirled my rings around my finger as I closed my eyes to smell the salty air.

Ben proposed the night we changed Sofi's name. It was the silliest yet the most adorable proposal ever. Charlie was supposed to be involved by fetching Ben the ring from under the bed. He said he trained him for so long.

But then Billy Anne found the ring when she was looking for something. We were in the kitchen preparing dinner when Billy Anne asked why there was a ring under her daddy's bed.

He wasn't mad at Billy Anne, just disappointed that his surprise was ruined. In the end, he got down on one knee in the kitchen with a messy apron on. Billy Anne felt like she was witnessing a Disney moment, and she squealed and screamed. Ben popped the question, and I told him I was going to marry him.

Five months after that, we got married in front of a judge with Maggie, Janice, and the kids as witnesses. Charlie was also wearing the fanciest bow

and the biggest smile. It was my choice to keep it intimate. I'd always wanted a family, and I was so happy that I got to marry Ben in front of them.

Now, on our honeymoon, there was nothing better than the ocean breeze of Hawaii.

It had been our family tradition to go see the sunrise every day by the beach. And it was one of the many traditions we had kept doing as a family—the Hayes.

I felt Ben hug me from behind, and he rested his chin on my shoulders. I loved the way the ocean kissed the shore. The sound of it was almost therapeutic.

“Do you think in another life I was a sea creature?” I asked, closing my eyes as we swayed a little to the imaginary music only we could hear.

“Because you love the beach so much?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't care what you were in the past life, as long as you're mine in the next.” I giggled at his words and then turned my head to kiss my man good morning.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hayes.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hayes.” I'll never get used to being called Mrs. Hayes. It was like this was all a fairytale. “Where are the kids? The sun's about to rise.”

“Billy Anne is just picking up—”

“Daddy!” Right on cue, we turned to see Billy Anne push open the beach house door with Sofi by her side. She had been such a great big sister so far and wanted to do everything for Sofi. She wanted to be the one to make her food, pick her clothes, and even change her diapers.

Ben ran towards her girls and gathered them both in his arms. They giggled

in delight as the sky slowly turned bright blue, waiting for the sun to rise on the horizon.

I watched as my husband put down Billy Anne and gave her a look that made me narrow my eyes. Father and daughter were always up to something. Then Ben gave her eldest a nod, and she ran towards me. I grabbed her hand, and she laughed.

“C’mon, mommy. Let’s watch the sunrise.”

I froze on my feet as Billy Anne’s words registered in my mind. I didn’t want to force her to call me that, especially when she had her own mother. But now she had just called me Mommy!

Happy tears rolled down my cheeks as Billy Anne pulled me to the shore. I followed her while I turned my head to see Ben walking toward us, Sofi in his arms.

“Thank you,” I mouthed.

“I love you,” he mouthed in return.

“I love you, too,” I whispered when he reached us by the shore, and we watched the sun greet our family.

THE END

If you found the book enjoyable, please consider leaving a review on Amazon. Nothing helps an author more.

Love,

Leah

Also by Leah

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