

The
**TEMPORARY
WIFE**



He didn't want
forever with her

MAYA ALDEN

The Temporary Wife

An Age Gap, Arranged Marriage Romance

Maya Alden



MAYA ALDEN BOOKS

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Edited by Patti Berman patti@pattiberman.com

"In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."

Albert Camus

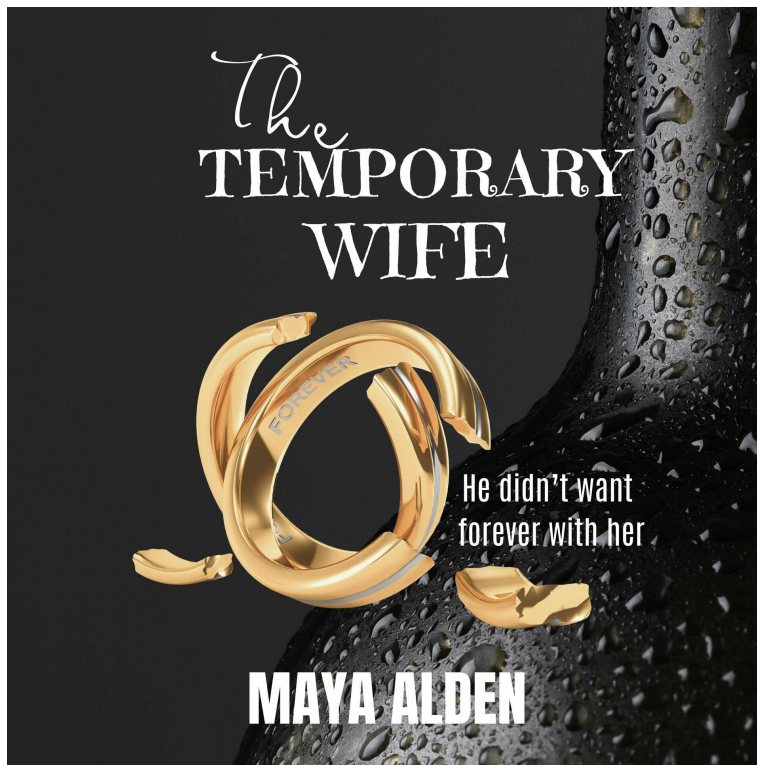
"Love is an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired."

Robert Frost

"The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing."

Blaise Pascal

Playlist



- *You and Me* by Lifehouse
- *Save Me from Myself* by Christina Aguilera
- *Tenerife Sea* by Ed Sheeran
- *Gravity* by Sara Bareilles
- *The Scientist* by Coldplay
- *Collide* by Howie Day

- *Art Deco* by Lana Del Rey
- *Vice* by Miranda Lambert
- *Deep Red Bells* by Neko Case
- *Hold My Girl* by George Ezra
- *Tangled Up* by Parade of Lights
- *Promises* by Sam Smith, Calvin Harris
- *Magic* by Coldplay
- *Fine Line* by Harry Styles
- *If The World Was Ending* by JP Saxe, Julia Michaels



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TEMPORARY WIFE on Spotify.

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Prologue

SERAPHINA VINE



Once upon a time, there was a young maiden called Liesel Brooks who came to Everwood to become the temporary wife of a reluctant prince, who thought he wanted another.

Now, Liesel would never have agreed to marry the prince if she'd known. But her father, who was dying, insisted that he wanted her safe after he was gone. You see, Liesel had an autoimmune disease that wouldn't kill her but hurt her nearly every day. She bore the pain gracefully and created magical

paintings that turned her agony into beauty.

So, Liesel arrived in Everwood, a beautiful wine country where her future husband owned Callahan Vineyards. He was handsome. He was smart. He didn't quite know what to do with her. She was a slight, dainty, almost fairy-like woman with a face that would not launch even one ship.

But then Atlas Callahan didn't see her heart, which would have launched thousands. Kind, wonderful, big-hearted Liesel married her prince, and...no, they didn't live happily ever after. How could they when Atlas was sure Liesel was his temporary wife?

And even though I was a fairy godmother, I couldn't magically make Atlas love his unwanted wife. But I knew that when he got to know Liesel, his heart would beat only for her.

I am Seraphina Vine, the fairy godmother of Everwood. I bring lost souls and broken hearts together, so I wave my magic wand and tell you the story of a little match girl who brought light into the life of her reluctant prince.

Chapter 1

LIESEL



“You don’t have to marry me,” I told my future husband.
He looked up at me with piercing blue eyes. Angry eyes. “Yes, I do.”

I was going to say something when the woman who ran the wine bar where we had met floated up to us. *Float* was the right word to describe how she moved. There was an innate gracefulness to the woman with raven hair streaked with silver, and eyes of the most unusual shade of amethyst,

reflecting hues of a purple Cabernet Sauvignon.

“Atlas, *darling*, how are you?” My maybe-could-be future husband rose and kissed the woman on both cheeks.

“Seraphina, meet my fiancée, Liesel Brooks. Liesel, this is Seraphina Vine; she owns this establishment.” When he looked at me, his easy smile vanished. This man did not like me.

“You’re engaged?” Seraphina cooed and turned to me, her eyes flashing with something...ah...magical. “Liesel. What a beautiful name. Are you Enzo Brooks’ daughter?”

“Yes.” I stood up and held out a hand to shake hers.

“You have the same stunning gray eyes.” She took both my hands in both of hers. A little electricity went through me, something like a zing. “I’m so thrilled to meet you. When is the wedding, Atlas?”

“Next week,” he said coolly like I had just not told him we needn’t get married.

“I don’t have an invitation.” Seraphina let go of my hands and turned to Atlas.

He shrugged. “We’re getting married in the hospital chapel. Enzo is...not well.”

Seraphina gave me a comforting look. I turned my head away to hide my tears. I was like a water faucet these days. And I hated it.

“Why don’t I get you some wine? What do you like to drink, Liesel?” she asked me.

I couldn’t drink much alcohol because of all the medications I was on, but I loved wine. “Something red...a Pinot.”

Seraphina grinned. “They call me the Wine Whisperer. I always know what someone will like. And how about you, Atlas?”

“I’ll trust the Wine Whisperer,” he said charmingly.

Seraphina *floated* away, and we sat down again. I looked around the wine bar and was pleased with its intimate charm. The bar, though small, felt like a different world, one that held secrets and stories within its cozy confines. The wine glasses hanging above the counter caught the dim lighting that made the room glimmer, while the scent of oak and aging wine mixed harmoniously with the faint aroma of food from the kitchen.

The long bar counter was made of smooth polished wood. With only ten stools, it was often a race among the regulars to grab a seat there. The twenty other seats were plush and inviting, set against walls adorned with old maps

of vineyards from distant lands. Here, people would lose themselves in conversations, their voices a soft hum that added to the wine bar's ambiance.

But it was obvious that wines were the soul of Whispering Vines. Bottles from France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, South Africa, New Zealand, and other exotic locales lined the rustic shelves behind the bar. Their labels were invitations to embark on a taste journey beyond Everwood, known for its local wine in the Santa Barbara wine country.

"Atlas, you don't like me," I murmured, looking at my hands and fidgeted with my bangle.

"And how did you come to that conclusion?" he asked harshly.

I looked at him and tried not to think about the pain in my hands and feet. I had Rheumatoid Arthritis, technically young-onset rheumatoid arthritis since my disease began seven years ago, and my immune system began to attack the lining of joints, causing pain, swelling, and stiffness. Stress exacerbated by condition, and I knew that if I wasn't careful with myself and my medication, I could have permanent joint deformity. For now, I managed with drugs and physical therapy.

"The way you look at me." I tried to smile. I was a plain-looking girl who used to be a sickly child. I braided my dark wavy hair, so it stayed away from my face, so it didn't get in my way when I was painting. I didn't wear makeup...when you grew up the way I did, going in and out of hospitals, you didn't learn to dress up and make yourself pretty; you were fighting to be pain-free.

"How do I look at you?"

Now, Atlas, on the other hand, was chiseled to perfection. He was a tall man, nearly a foot taller than me. His blonde hair, with dark and light streaks, suited his tanned face well. His cheekbones were sharp and could probably cut glass. His mouth...I liked his mouth best *when* he wasn't looking at me with such disdain.

"Atlas, I know you feel you owe my father, but you don't have to marry me for that. We can just tell him we got married so he'll...you know...go away happy."

Atlas's jaw tightened, and I thought he'd throw something at me. Seraphina came back with two glasses and two bottles of wine.

"Now, let's taste."

She poured a tasting measure of wine into my glass. I smelled the wine, swirled the glass, and then swooshed the liquid in my mouth. "Oh my god," I

whimpered. “This is amazing. I could bathe in this.”

“It’s a Volnay from Burgundy. Very sensuous. I knew you’d like it.” She poured me a full glass and then turned to Atlas.

She poured him an ounce and looked at him speculatively. He grinned like he’d done this before with her. He smelled the wine. “Raspberry, cherry... some mineral.” He tasted the wine and sighed. “Beautiful. It packs a punch. I’d say it’s from Pommard...vintage 2019 because of the tannins.”

“Well done,” Seraphina exclaimed and then looked at me. “Your future husband has a super palette. He knows his wine, as he should, of course. Enjoy, and if you need anything else, let me know.”

She went away to take care of other guests who were spread out in the wine bar. This was my first time in Everwood, and I liked it very much. It wasn’t what I’d expected, but it had a small-town quaint charm that enveloped you. I had checked-in for the night at an inn on main street and had asked to meet Atlas somewhere close to where I was staying. He’d suggested Whispering Vines.

My father didn’t know I was here. I left Napa Valley last night and arrived midafternoon in Santa Barbara. Atlas had been surprised when I called him and asked him to meet me, but he’d agreed as I’d hoped he would.

“How about—“ I began.

“Liesel, I don’t understand your problem,” Atlas snapped. “Your father told me you wanted to marry me.”

I took a deep breath, feeling nausea run through me. I bit my lower lip because his anger and pain brought me close to tears. “I said yes to him for the same reason you did. I love my father, Atlas. But marriage? I thought I’d say yes, and we’d wait...until...you know.”

My father had little time. A few weeks. He’d insisted that we get married while he was alive, and that’s when I knew I had to do something.

“We’re getting married,” Atlas spit the words out. “If you love Enzo, stop fighting it.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. I knew how much Atlas cared for my father. I’d seen it all my life...from a distance. My parents had divorced when I was young, and I’d primarily lived with my mother. Only after high school, when I started university and my mother passed away, I rebuilt my relationship with my father. While alive, she’d have been hurt if I’d approached my father.

After university in San Francisco, I moved to Healdsburg to be close to

him. My father had sold his vineyard a few years ago to Callahan Vineyards—as he'd been unable to care for the vines and run a business. That's when he moved in with me. I was his primary caregiver, and when the doctors told me that the cancer had spread to the point of no return, I'd agreed to let him stay in the hospital so his pain could be managed.

"How long would we stay married?" I asked, taking a sip of the wine.

He looked at me like I was out of my mind. "What do you mean?"

"I mean if we get married to please Papa, when can we divorce? Or can we just get an annulment or—"

"Seriously? You know why we have to get married, right?"

"Because my father is being bullheaded?" I said with an uncertain smile.

He didn't smile back. It looked like my future husband did not smile, laugh, or loosen up. I lived life to the fullest, tried to be happy, and enjoyed every minute because I knew it was fleeting. Marrying a man who disliked me would be painful, and I was already in enough pain.

"Because that's the deal he's made with me. He still owns a substantial percentage of Callahan Vineyards, and if we don't get married, he will sell that to my competitor."

I gasped. "That's blackmail."

Atlas's eyes flashed at something. "He doesn't have to blackmail me, Liesel. Enzo helped my family when I needed him. I'd do anything for him. Marrying you is just fine by me."

"So, you get your percentage of your vineyard back when Papa...you know..."

"No. You do. Have you even read Enzo's will?"

I couldn't understand why he was so impatient with me. I was trying to help both of us. But if I called him on his behavior or stooped to being rude and intractable, as he was being, where would that leave us?

"No."

"You'll own his percentage of vineyard after two years of marriage to me."

I frowned. "I can't believe my father did that. So, after two years, I can sell that part of the business back to you, and we can get divorced."

Atlas ran a hand through his hair. "Liesel, I can't afford to buy the fucking business back."

I nodded gravely. "Fine, then I'll give them to you."

He again gave me that *are you out of your mind* look. "Give them to me? Do you know what they're worth?"

“Not my *whole* life for certain,” I mused. “I don’t need the money. I’ll be fine.”

“Your father wants you to be taken care of, Liesel,” his voice softened. “He wants me to take care of you.”

But you can’t, Atlas Callahan. I take care of myself just fine. But I didn’t want to belabor the point with him.

“And I don’t want anyone to know why we’re getting married,” he added.

I raised my eyebrows in query.

“It’ll ruin my reputation, and we can’t afford it. The past two vintages were tough with the weather and fire. I don’t need any scandal if I want to keep my vineyard.”

I took a sip of the beautiful wine and felt my insides settle. “Tell me how this will work.”

Chapter 2

ATLAS



She was not beautiful. She was nothing like Daphne, the woman I'd been seeing for the past year and had to break up with so I could marry Liesel Brooks, twelve years my junior, waif looking, if with an interesting and intriguing face, and big green eyes that seemed to twinkle, and nothing like the wife I'd thought I'd have.

There was a delicacy how she moved, how she talked, and how she smiled. There was a quiet elegance about her. Her best feature were her lips. Full and

pouty. I guess one would call her *cute*. She was slender, small, and *cute*.

Enzo mentioned she painted, which sounded very much like one of those fake careers girls waiting to get married had. She obviously didn't spend money on clothes. She was dressed simply in a dark, full-sleeve long dress that didn't hide the fact that she did not have a lot of curves. She wore boots with the dress. When she'd walked into the wine bar, she'd been wrapped up in a big coat, a scarf, and a hat. Everwood got cold in the winter, sure, but this was still Southern California. It didn't get fucking big coat cold.

When she'd shaken hands with me, her hands had been chilled, and I almost had wanted to take them in both of mine to warm them. She'd told me she'd taken the train, and I wondered why she didn't just drive. It was not that far and more convenient. But I didn't pursue it. How she lived her life was her business...until we got married, and then it would be my problem.

What surprised me was how adamant she was to not marry me. I was delighted that she wanted a divorce because after looking at Enzo's will from fifteen different ways, including getting advice from my friend Tej Nair who was a named partner for a law firm in Santa Barbara, the conclusion I had come to was that Enzo was a wily son of a bitch who'd constructed a will that ensured I'd have to stay married to Liesel for *at least* two years. But even after that, he'd have known that I wouldn't be able to buy the shares from Liesel. The only option would be that she'd keep them once she got them. But if she wanted to sell them...I was fucked.

Finally, as I was about to lose my temper with her, she seemed to settle down and agree to getting married. She took a sip of her wine and asked in her soft voice, "Tell me how this will work."

"We'll sign a prenup. What's yours is yours. What's mine is mine. We'll get married next week at the chapel in your father's hospital. And...then you move here, to Everwood."

"And after two years?" She set her glass down and I saw a tremor in her hand.

Christ, she was twenty-three, a baby, and I was bullying her like this was her fault. I drank some of my wine and immediately felt soothed. "You inherit a part of Callahan Vineyards. I won't be able to buy them from you, Liesel. It's...maybe in a few years, but..."

"That's fine." She didn't seem to care about the money. Maybe she had a lot. "I'll just sign them over. Make sure that's in the prenuptial agreement. So, now we have a timeline for this marriage. What if we don't tell anyone.

We could live separate lives and—“

“No,” I interrupted her, again. I needed to stop doing that. She was in many ways quiet and submissive, and it brought the dominant out in me. Daphne gave as good as she got with me. We worked together. She was my VP of Marketing, and we went head-to-head and argued. We had some amazing makeup sex after.

“People will find out. The wine community is small. I can’t afford it. Will it be so difficult for you to live here for two years?”

She looked at me as if thinking. “I need a studio,” she whispered.

“I’ll make you one.” We had plenty of space at the house. She could have two fucking studios if she needed.

“Thanks.” She looked grateful and it made me feel like a jackass. What the fuck was I doing? I got to not let Callahan Vineyard be sold to Andersen Wines. but what did she get out of it? *She gets to keep her dying father happy, asshole.*

“And I can’t just take your share of Callahan Vineyards. They’re worth a lot and...”

“I don’t care.” She smiled at me and then put her small cold hand over my warm large one. “Please. I don’t want you to worry that a part of your family’s legacy could be given to someone unworthy. I don’t need the money. I’m *very* comfortable. I earn a decent living painting. I don’t need more.”

“What do you mean, you *earn* a living?”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“I thought Enzo had a shit ton of money.”

She sighed. “I’m afraid Papa may have invested in cryptocurrency and got his ass handed to him.”

She didn’t seem upset by that at all.

“All his money?”

She twisted her lips and nodded. “Yep. That’s why he’s living with me and.... The one thing he would not part with was your vineyard. He loves you and loves your wine. I know he’s being...so foolish to force this marriage, but...please forgive him. And I promise I won’t interfere in your life. In two years, you can get back to...whatever, whomever...”

“Whomever?”

She looked down and as if realizing her hand was still on mine, she took it away as if scalded. “I...I was on the train with the woman who owns the

bookstore. Mrs. Crenshaw? She mentioned you were *hot and heavy* with a woman called Daphne who worked with you, but that you'd suddenly broken up with her. By the way, *everyone* is talking about it."

The way she talked, tinged with humor, made me stop growling at her. Two years with this woman would not be so bad. She seemed to be self-aware and confident, able to take care of herself.

"And that's another reason I need everyone to think we have a *real* marriage. My family cannot know, Liesel. It'll hurt my brother and sister. I don't want the community to know that Callahan Vineyards is in trouble. And I don't want Andersen to find out what was in your father's will." There, I'd laid it out for her.

She seemed to consider what I said and then looked worried about something. "Will you continue to see Daphne when we're married?"

"No."

"No?"

"I won't cheat on my marriage vows," I snapped. She pushed my buttons, and I didn't know why. Sure, I was always demanding and bossy as Daphne liked to say, but I was never short-tempered. My to-be-*bride* was bringing out the fucking idiot in me. "How about you? Do you intend to cheat on me?"

Laughter bubbled out of her, and that annoyed me some more. "Cheat? Come on, Atlas, we won't even have a real marriage. I don't think it would be cheating. However, you needn't worry about that account."

"Real or not, the vows are real and...I won't have my wife—"

"Stop." She raised her hand that shook slightly, but she was smiling. "I won't hurt you, Atlas, or disrespect you. I won't embarrass you by cuckolding you. We can build a friendship. How about that? We both like wine. And...if I can help you in any way, I will."

I hadn't expected her to be this mature. I had thought she'd be a spoiled brat, but this woman was confident and...*charming*. Yeah, and I was charmed despite myself. Usually, I liked women like Daphne, strong, charismatic, with a brain the size of Montana.

"This is a small town. Everyone knows everyone," I informed her. "You'll have to be careful to not let anyone know about...well, anything. We'll pretend that we're happily married."

"As long we're happy, we don't have to pretend," she beamed. "I believe in being happy, regardless of what life throws at me."

She gave generously, and for the first time since Enzo had begged me to

marry his daughter, I truly felt grateful. “Thank you, Liesel. I am in your debt.”

She waved a hand. “Nothing to it. Just make sure I have a studio and I’ll want for nothing.”

“Will you keep your apartment in Healdsburg?”

“I’ll rent it out, I think. That way, it won’t sit empty.”

I couldn’t believe Enzo was leaving her with nothing *and* the one thing he was leaving her, she wanted to give away. I couldn’t understand her motives.

She finished her wine and closed her eyes. “And now, I need to get to my bed before I turn into a pumpkin.”

I looked at my watch. It was a little over nine. She saw the movement and winked at me. “Sleeping on the train was...well, not very soothing. So, I’m tired.”

I rose with her and, on instinct, leaned and brushed my lips against hers. She gasped as if stung but didn’t pull away when I went back for another brush. She smelled of orange blossoms—like the nose on a young Riesling.

“May I see you tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I have a train in the afternoon from Santa Barbara, so it’ll have to be before that.”

I frowned. “How did you get here from SB?”

“Uber.”

“Why didn’t you drive from Healdsburg? It’s faster and more convenient.”

“I don’t drive,” she said mysteriously and then added, “I don’t have a driver’s license.”

“What?” Everyone had a driver’s license.

“I know I need to get one,” she said in self-deprecation. “Thank you so much for meeting with me, Atlas. I look forward to our wedding next week. I know my father is grateful and happy for what you’re doing.”

“Wait. Let me walk you out. You’re staying at the Grape Escape?”

“I love that name,” she chuckled.

The Grape Escape was a block down from Whispering Vines, so I wasn’t worried about her getting lost, but I wanted to walk with her. She intrigued me, I had to give her that. And it had been a long time since I’d had any woman want me to know her more or better. Daphne...well, she’d become a habit because we worked well together and knew each other for several years.

She wrapped herself back in all her gear as I paid the bill.

“I like her, Atlas.” Seraphina’s amethyst eyes twinkled. “Much better than

that other woman you had on your arm last time you were here.”

If it was anyone else, I’d ask them to mind their own business, but this was Seraphina Vine, an Everwood institution. It was her grandmother, Lunaria Vine, who during the prohibition had opened Whispering Vines as a speakeasy. Then it had been Seraphina’s mother, Lyria, who had taken over.

“Thank you and goodnight, Miz Vine.”

She laughed and I swear I could hear bells tinkle. “Goodnight, Mister Callahan. You keep that bride of yours warm. She looks like someone who gets cold easily.”

I hurried to Liesel’s side and opened the door for her. Sure, it was past harvest in wine country and the air had a little nip to it, but I was comfortable in my suit. I’d come straight to see Liesel from the office, where I’d met with restaurateurs interested in adding Callahan wines to their wine lists.

Pumpkin spice was already in the air even though Halloween was not quite around the corner. But that was Everwood for you. We celebrated every holiday with gusto. I would prefer a little tempering of the holiday spirit, but no one was asking me.

“You could’ve stayed at my place.” We walked on the brightly lit main street. Most of the stores were closed, but the restaurants and cafés were open, music, and conversation filling the space between us.

“I couldn’t impose on you.”

“We’re getting married, Liesel. My home will be your home.”

She stopped then and turned to look at me. “Do you live alone?”

“Yes...well, my sister is living with me these days. She moved back home. She used to live in New York, but...she’s figuring things out.”

“Where do you live?”

“On the vineyard.”

She started walking again. “The views must be amazing.”

“Yes.”

“I might paint outside when the weather is nice,” she murmured, as if to herself.

“What do you paint?”

“This and that.” She didn’t seem to want to talk about it.

Before I could prod her, we’d reached the entrance of The Grape Escape.

“Thanks for walking me.” She looked even paler under the harsh entry light in her black coat and hat.

“Are you really very cold?” I asked because she was hugging herself close.

She gave a shaky laugh. "I get cold very easily."

"We'll keep the house warm for you, then." The words slipped out before I could think about it. Sometime in the past two hours, I'd started to think of her as my wife, as a member of the family, as someone who'd live in my home.

She came up to me and went on tiptoe. She brushed her lips against my cheek. Her lips were cold, but I felt a prickle of electricity go through me, shoot straight through to my cock.

I stepped back as if stung.

She looked horrified at the rejection. "I'm so sorry...I..."

"It's fine. It's fine." I tried to wave it away. "You take care. I'll see you around...nine? Will that work?"

"Yes. They have a nice breakfast at the Inn, I'm told."

"They do," I agreed. It was hard to get the words out. I couldn't believe that waif-like Liesel could...well, arouse me with a kiss on the cheek? I was shocked that I was attracted to my future wife.

I turned around and left, walking fast to get to my car.

I got a call from Orion as I drove home.

"Sorry to disturb you. Didn't want to break up the love fest," he teased.

I'd lied to my brother and my sister. I never lied to them, but I didn't want them to feel that I was sacrificing for the family business. I'd told them I'd gotten close to Liesel while Enzo was sick, and we were engaged to be married. The rush to get married was because Enzo was dying.

"No love fest," I muttered. "She's staying at the Inn."

"Why?"

Yeah, why? I should've thought this through.

"Ah...she's...you know, conservative." *What the fuck are you saying, Atlas?*

"Atlas, you've actually had sex with this girl, right?"

"What?"

"Atlas? Are you marrying her because of Enzo?"

There was enough truth in that. Enzo was determined to see Liesel and me married. I'd tried to dissuade him, but he was certain that we were a match made in heaven. I couldn't see it. I barely knew his daughter because she'd been with her mother; and I'd only barely gotten to know her in the past year while I'd gone to see Enzo, which hadn't been too many times. I had a business to run, and going back and forth to Napa hadn't been easy for me.

“Of course not,” I lied easily. I was doing it for Enzo but...I was also doing it for Callahan Vineyards. I’d been furious when his lawyer had called me to share Enzo’s will. He’d always promised me that the percentage of Callahan that I’d sold to him years ago when the vineyard was in trouble, and needed resuscitation, would come back to me. Now, to make sure that I’d marry his daughter, he’d played dirty.

“I don’t want her alone, Atlas. I didn’t take care of her and her mother...I knew that wasn’t easy for Liesel, but she never complained. I need to know she’ll be taken care of.”

“I can take care of her without marrying her.”

Enzo had shaken his head. “Marry her before I die or...Andersen will have fifteen percent of your vineyard. I’m sorry, Atlas but...I have to protect Liesel.”

But this was Enzo, and he’d apologized in a hundred ways to me, but admitted that he would not change his will. Then I’d met Liesel, and I was shocked *and* annoyed. He wanted me to marry this quiet listless fawn. He was buying his daughter a husband, one...I’d just discovered she didn’t want.

I ended the call with Orion after agreeing that he would join Liesel and me for breakfast at the Inn.

Chapter 3

LIESEL



The flare began as we walked back from Whispering Vines. It started as a dull ache, an old but familiar enemy in the small joints of my fingers and wrists. As I reached the door of my room, the stiffness intensified, making it hard for me to even grip the doorknob.

When I was in my room, my fingers throbbed as if my heartbeat had taken residence there. The simple act of removing my clothes was agony, and I could see the slight swelling of my knuckles. My feet hurt with every step,

and a deep fatigue, another companion of Rheumatoid Arthritis, washed over me.

I remembered the conversation with Atlas, his distressed expression, and how trapped he felt. My father's manipulative tactics weighed heavy on my mind, the stress fueling the RA flare. The weight of Atlas's burden, losing his vineyard to a competitor, mixed with my pains, made everything feel twice as intense.

Pulling out the painkillers from my bag, I fumbled with the bottle, cursing under my breath. My hands just wouldn't cooperate. After an eternity, I managed to down two pills with a glass of lukewarm water. The water felt harsh against my parched throat, another result of the flare and stress.

I drew a warm bath, as the heat could provide some relief. I sank into it and winced as the water embraced my aching body. I felt tears prickling at the corner of my eyes. Not just from the pain but from the realization of the future that awaited me: a marriage out of obligation, a dying father, and a body that betrayed me at every step.

Slowly, my muscles relaxed and, while the pain didn't leave entirely, it became more bearable.

As the night went on, I bundled up in blankets and threw a few pillows behind me for comfort. Every move I made took effort.

My phone beeped then, and with shaking fingers, I read the message from Atlas. His brother, Orion, would join us for breakfast. *He doesn't know, so please keep that in mind. I assumed this was code for, behave like a real fiancée.*

As sleep claimed me, I couldn't help but wonder what life had in store for Atlas and me, two strangers bound by circumstances beyond our control. Would we navigate this storm together, or would it drown us? The thoughts weighed heavy on my mind, a silent lullaby leading me into a restless sleep.

I got to the Inn's restaurant early, hoping that I'd be able to handle my flair-up better if I was already seated and had a cup or two of tea inside me. I hated RA. I was a twenty-three-year-old woman who sometimes moved around like an old woman. I'd taken my medication, but a flare-up was a flare-up, and it would take at least another twenty-four hours before I would be stable again.

The sharp sunlight streaming in from the Inn's windows made the polished wooden tables gleam. My hands ached as I tried to steady my tea cup, and every time I moved, my body screamed in protest. The subtle scent of freshly

baked pastries mixed with the tang of orange juice did little to ease the pounding in my head.

Orion and Atlas came, and even through my fuzzy brain, I could see why women fell all over these men. They were...*oh my god*...beautiful. Blonde, tall, well built, and in jeans and black dress shirts, like it was their uniform, they were undeniably brothers. Orion was the farmer, and his face had a ruggedness about him, and so did his hands, which I shook when we met.

Atlas brushed his lips against mine, and I couldn't suppress the shiver that went through me. The jagged ends of my nerves screamed in protest.

He frowned at my pinched face but sat down across from me. His chiseled features were set in a stern expression, and next to him, his younger brother, Orion, had an air of curiosity about him. His eyes darted between Atlas and me, trying to piece together a puzzle I wished he didn't have to solve.

"Surprised to hear about the two of you. Why the rush?" Orion asked with a forced chuckle, probably trying to lighten the atmosphere. "I mean, you two just met, right? You don't have some...ah...as they say *good news*."

Good news? Oh my god, he wondered if I was pregnant.

Before I could answer, Atlas interrupted, his voice cold. "I told you about Enzo's health."

Orion looked at me, and I gave him a bland smile. I wanted to lie down. The fatigue was hammering nails inside me, and my eyes hurt to stay open.

"How is Enzo?" Orion asked me.

"He's good under the circumstances." My voice was hoarse.

Our food arrived, but I couldn't eat. A flare-up always affected my appetite, which made me weaker. I usually forced myself to eat, but my nerves were too frayed this time.

The conversation remained stilted, and with every passing minute, I could feel Atlas's anger and Orion's dislike for me settle on me like little pricks, not enough to make me bleed, but they hurt all the same.

Orion excused himself to use the restroom, and I felt Atlas's eyes on me, heavy and accusatory. "What's going on? No one will believe we're a *happy* couple or even a couple. I was hoping you'd at least try."

I bit the inside of my cheek. I'd thought my father would've told him about my RA, but it was clear from Atlas's disappointment that he didn't know. Those who knew asked about flare-ups first when they saw me off. It was always what dimmed my light, as my father put it.

"It's just... I'm not feeling my best today," I murmured, remaining vague.

It wasn't a lie, after all.

When Orion returned, I knew I looked as bad as I felt.

Orion looked concerned. "You okay? You look pale."

"Yes, under the weather," I replied, trying to manage a weak smile.

The meal continued in a tense silence. Every so often, I'd catch Atlas glancing my way, a mixture of confusion and irritation in his eyes. Our impending marriage was going to be a struggle. We weren't on the same page about anything.

After what felt like hours, Orion finally broke the silence, "I just want both of you to be happy. That's all."

"Thanks, Orion." I put my hand on his, his warmth seeping into me, comforting me. "I'm going to take good care of your brother."

He looked surprised then, and his lips unfolded into a smile. "I believe you will."

His words were genuine, but they hung in the air, a reminder of the intricate web in which we'd all been ensnared. I appreciated his sentiment, even if happiness seemed a far-fetched dream for Atlas and me.

Amid the pain and the impending reality of a coerced marriage, I fought to stay afloat. This breakfast was just a taste of the many hurdles to come. I hoped that in time, Atlas and I could find some common ground. But right now, that did not look like a possibility. He was livid when he drove me to the train station.

"What's it with you? You blew hot last night, and now you're cold. My brother is already suspicious, and now...he's probably thinking...god knows what he's thinking."

He drove a Subaru, and I wished he had one of those smooth electric cars because his van picked up every slight surface inconsistency on the asphalt.

"I'm sorry, Atlas. I don't feel well. I promise I'll do better next time." I knew my words were hesitant, and my eyes were closing off their own accord, but the pain wouldn't let me sleep. I was fatigued, over-tired, and stressed, and now my future husband was pissed off.

"Fine, whatever. I'll see you next week." He parked right by the station and waited for me to get out. I clumsily did so. I didn't know how to get my suitcase out, but he did that.

"Why the hell don't you have a driver's license?" he asked as he rolled the suitcase to my side.

Because I have RA and don't know when I'll have a flare-up.

“Maybe I’ll get one now.” I put on my bravest front. “I’ll do better next time.”

He shook his head and came up to me. “I’m sorry. I just...I don’t want Orion to worry about me.”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t.” I needed the train to come so I could sit down and sleep for the next ten hours as the train slowly wound its way to Napa. Hopefully, by the following day, I’d feel better.

Atlas nodded and then looked at his watch. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“Okay. Thank you for everything.”

“Ah...my brother and my sister will be at the chapel. Anyone from your side?”

My doctor and her daughter. But that sounded sad and pathetic, so I simply said, “A couple of friends.”

Atlas put his arms around me as the train barreled down. I moaned in relief because I could lean into him and let his warmth soak into me.

He looked down at my face, confusion written all over his. “I don’t understand you at all, Liesel.”

“Why?”

“You burn hot and cold. It’s...fuck it.” He put his lips on mine, and for a moment, I floated away from the pain, away from my body and just felt. His tongue gently entered my mouth, and I let him, his tongue dueling with mine.

“Wow,” I gasped when he lifted his head.

He smiled. He carried my suitcase onto the train and kissed me again, this time a light brush stroke instead of the thick glossy layer it was the last time.

“Take care.”

“You too,” I whispered.

I watched him for as long as I could. He stayed, I knew, until the train was out of sight.

Chapter 4

ATLAS



Selfishly, I'd hoped that Daphne would quit. I couldn't afford to lose a vice president of marketing as good as her, but it was awkward and uncomfortable, mainly because I knew she was struggling with my ending the relationship.

I wasn't happy either. I was probably less enamored than I'd thought because, as difficult as it had been to have the conversation with her about how I'd fallen for another woman, I wasn't heartbroken that it was over.

Did I still desire Daphne? Sure. But not as much as I used to. Because when I closed my eyes I saw the amused gray eyes of a waif-like creature. She'd cast some spell on me because Liesel Brooks was not my type, but here I was, remembering that kiss in the train station, the one that went instantly south of my body. I was a grown man. I understood this was ridiculous. It didn't change a damn thing.

Daphne and I sat at the conference table in my office as we went through the marketing campaigns for the next quarter, our most important. A significant percentage of our annual sales were from wine given as corporate gifts and other holiday presents from October through January. This would not be a good time to lose Daphne, marketer extraordinaire.

She was a gorgeous woman. Smart. Beautiful. Everything I'd ever wanted in a woman, a wife, a partner. I had thought I would propose to her over Christmas. Instead, I was marrying Liesel Brooks.

Daphne wore one of those skirt suits I loved to peel off her with high heels. She had legs to her fucking armpits, and everything in between was luscious. She kept in shape by working out religiously at the office gym. I'd worked out in that gym and had sex with her in the showers.

Her blonde hair was loose around her shoulders, perfectly coiffed. I was reminded of Liesel's loose braid, curls framing her pale face.

Daphne finished her presentation and smiled at me. She shrugged out of her suit jacket, and beneath, she wore a silk shell, showing off her muscular arms.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Fabulous," I said sincerely. "This might be our biggest holiday season yet." *And we needed it.*

She leaned against the table next to me. In the past, I would've pulled her toward me, lifted her onto the conference table, and...I closed my eyes. I could smell Daphne, the familiar Gucci Flora perfume wafting off her. Usually, it would go straight to my dick...but now, it was as if my brain patterns had changed. I was another woman's fiancé; I belonged to someone else. I didn't cheat, apparently, even emotionally. Go figure!

"Atlas, babe, are you *really* marrying this woman?" she asked.

I looked her in the eyes; I didn't want any doubt in her mind. I wasn't a dick who gave false hope to women. "Yes."

"She's twenty-three," she exclaimed. "A fucking baby."

"Daph, *please*." I didn't know what else to say. I walked to the windows to

look at out the vines in the dark.

Daphne walked behind me and turned me, so I'd face her. "Is this what turns you on? Young pussy."

"Stop."

I should've listened to Orion when he said, *don't shit where you eat*. Nothing good came of it. But I'd been sure that Daphne and I'd be married, so it had mattered little that we worked together.

She put her hands on my chest, her blue eyes filled with tears, her red lips trembling. It broke my heart to break hers—not because I loved her as much as she loved me, I knew I didn't, but I'd never meant to hurt anyone, least of all a woman who'd been with me for a year, shared my bed and had been my partner at work.

"I love you. I thought you loved me."

I never told her that I loved her. But I knew she assumed, and I'd let her. The truth was, I didn't know what that word meant. I only knew duty and obligation. Ever since I turned eighteen, when my parents died, I'd taken over the business, raised my brother and sister, gone to school...survived.

"I'm so sorry, Daphne."

"I don't understand how you could fall in love with her. You *just* met her."

I never told her I was in love with Liesel either. She was assuming, *again*, and I didn't disabuse her of that false notion. Maybe it would make it easier for her to forget my sorry ass.

I nodded and stepped away from her. I didn't want intimacy with Daphne—it would confuse her and hurt her more, and...it made me feel like an asshole.

"When it happens, it happens, Daph." *I didn't believe it, but I had to sell it.* "She's...she's amazing." *Amazingly confusing.* "And I didn't *just* meet her; I've known Liesel her whole life." *True. White lie territory, actually.*

"What does she do?"

"She's an artist." *Fuck, I needed to find out in better detail what she did so I wouldn't sound like a moron when I talked about the woman I was engaged to be married to.*

"You broke my heart, Atlas."

"I know. I'm so sorry. If you want to resign, I fully understand."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why should I give up a job I love because you couldn't keep it in your pants?"

"I don't want you to leave, Daphne. I'd be lost at work without you. You're

one of the best marketers in the wine business, and Callahan is lucky to have you.” *That sounded professional and all that. Right?*

“We were meant to be,” she whispered. “I thought you loved me.”

She moved to my desk; a step closer to me. I stepped away, putting distance between us, because I wanted to reach out and hold her. Comfort her. But that would help no one, especially her; she’d start hoping, and that would destroy her.

“I never said I loved you, Daphne.” I had never said those words to anyone except my siblings. I had never felt that way about anyone except my family and maybe Enzo before he manipulated me.

“Is that it? You knew I thought you were in love with me,” she cried out and flung a paperweight across the room. Her aim was off. I didn’t even have to duck. It banged against the glass behind me and felt with a thud. I looked absently at the glass, relieved it wasn’t damaged Good glass. Bad paperweight.

But, hell, this was neither professionally nor personally acceptable to me.

She’d just crossed a line; I could see she knew it from her face. Violence of any kind was...well inexcusable.

I took a deep breath. “I’d like to not discuss this matter again, Daphne. I know what happened has been tough on you. I’d like to keep our relationship only professional from now on.”

“What the fuck does that mean, Atlas?”

“That means I won’t discuss this with you again. And if you ever throw anything at me ever again, I’ll fire you with cause.”

I walked to the door of my office and opened the door, indicating, I wanted her gone. Enough was enough. We’d been having this same conversation repeatedly for the past month since I’d ended it. It had reached a point where I didn’t want to have one-on-one meetings with her, which wasn’t sustainable and not conducive for business.

I could hear Orion’s lazy voice, “I told you so.”

She looked at the conference table, and we both remembered the time we’d made love on that very table during a meeting. It would be much better if she quit...might hurt the business, but this couldn’t continue.

“Please, Daphne.”

“I’m sorry, Atlas,” she moaned. “But...it hurts so much.”

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I had tried my whole life not to hurt anyone, and here was a woman who’d been good to me, damn it, and I’d just crushed her heart.

“I understand, but we have a job to do here,” I used my CEO tone of voice now, which did not allow for arguments or excuses. “I need your assurance, Daphne, that you will keep it professional from now on.”

She nodded. “Okay. By Monday, I’d have shed this...whatever this is.”

“Thank you.”

After she left, I plopped on a chair, feeling emotionally wrung out.

There was a knock on the door and my sister Ariel walked in. She’d moved back to Everwood a month ago from New York. She didn’t say why, just that she wanted a time-out. While Orion and I were wine people—Ariel was a lawyer. She’d been practicing immigration law in New York, and I didn’t know what happened, but something *had* because this Ariel was quieter and more subdued.

“I saw Duck Face walk out of here all angry and weird.”

Yeah, so my siblings didn’t think Daphne was *all that*. While I had dated her and pondered marriage, they’d both been clear that they thought she was possessive and prone to drama—true things—and they didn’t like her. But if she made me happy, they’d embrace her.

As Ariel said after she met her, “I’ll never let her know we call her Duck Face.”

“From Four Weddings and a Funeral?” I asked.

She laughed. “No, because of Daphne Duck, but now that you say that... she looks like a blonde duck face, doesn’t she, Orion?”

“I never look at women. It causes problems,” Orion smoothly prevaricated.

I looked at Ariel and sighed. “She hates my guts.”

“Orion liked your Liesel.”

My Liesel?

I frowned. “He did? I thought he didn’t. She was quiet...not feeling well. I don’t know.”

“He’s convinced you’re not in love with her. I concur. Will you tell us what the fuck is going on, Atlas?” Ariel asked.

I didn’t look her in the eyes, not when I was lying my ass off. “What does that mean?”

“You’re not in love with Liesel. You were not in love with Duck Face, but at least you were fucking her. Orion got the feels that you haven’t had sex with your to-be bride *and—*“

I raised my hand to silence her. I knew this would happen. These were my

siblings; they'd see through me. "Let's meet for dinner in the house, and I can tell both of you at the same time."

Ariel grinned triumphantly. "I knew it. Orion almost fell for it, but I knew it."

I rolled my eyes. I knew when I was being played...but the fact was, these were the people I was closest to in my life, and I wanted to tell them the truth.



"You've got to be fucking kidding me," were the first words from Orion's mouth once I told them about Enzo's will.

We'd finished dinner and sat as we did since we were kids on the front porch. Unlike when we were kids, we'd opened a bottle of a 2005 Mermaid Whisperer, a Pinot Noir, which I'd pulled out from our personal cellar. I was getting married. It called for good wine to ease the pain.

Every sip of wine reminded me of Liesel. I swear I could smell orange fucking blossoms. *How had she so quickly gotten under my skin?*

"And she'll just hand over her inheritance to you? No money? What's wrong with her?" Ariel wondered, her finger tracing the edge of her wine glass. "You know what, I need to look at all the documents here. Are you sure you've checked and rechecked for loopholes?"

I hated to do this to my little sister, but I had no choice. "Tej looked through all of it."

Ariel had my mother's green eyes, while Orion and I had blue eyes, which became bluer when the sun was shining, and the sky was blue. Hers went frosty fucking green when I mentioned Tej.

"Well, then, I'm sure everything is in order." She took a sip of her wine. And then she drank everything in her glass and held it out toward me. I filled up her glass, saying nothing.

Did she still love him, I wondered? Tej and Ariel had been the "*it*" couple a long time ago. He had been and was still one of my closest friends—Ariel was four years younger than us. But boom, Ariel turned eighteen, and they became a couple and had been inseparable. They dated for six years, but one day, she left for New York, and he stayed in California. That was nearly a decade ago. In the meantime, Tej had married *and* divorced.

Ariel dated but never anyone whom she brought home. I always suspected she was still in love with Tej. Ariel didn't talk about him, ask about him, or mention him. Which to me meant she was still hung up on him. Tej asked

about Ariel and seemed pretty relaxed about the whole thing. But then as the saying goes, women love longest while men are fickle.

Orion cleared his throat. “How does Daphne feel about your fake marriage?”

“I didn’t even want you guys to know, you think I’d fucking tell Daph?”

Ariel grinned suddenly. “I kinda like that it burns her ass you’re marrying someone you just met.”

“You have a mean streak,” Orion protested, but he was smiling too.

“Daphne is a lovely woman,” I retorted.

“With a very fine ass,” Orion agreed. “And tits like...well, let’s leave at it tits. She has tits.”

“What’s it with men and tits?” Ariel muttered. “Are you a boob guy, Orion?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I like boobs.”

“What kind?” Ariel wanted to know. “Big? Huge? What?”

Orion raised his hands, palms up. “All boobs. Big, small, medium. I like boobs. Don’t you like boobs, Atlas.”

I sighed. I was used to it. I was the oldest, not by a lot. I was thirty-six while Ariel was thirty-three, and Orion, our baby brother, was thirty-one *and* the cutest. When our parents died, I’d been eighteen, and taking care of a sixteen-year-old Ariel and thirteen-year-old Orion had seemed impossible—but thanks to people like Enzo, we’d managed.

“I understand why you feel obligated to Enzo.” Orion left the boobs behind and became severe. “She seemed alright, Atlas. She didn’t seem mercenary or...I don’t know; she seemed fairy-like.”

Ariel sputtered her wine out. “Fairy-like?”

I nodded. “She sort of is. She’s petite and...frail. Delicate. And she’s cold all the time.”

“Maybe she needs some meat on her bones,” Ariel decided. “We’ll fatten her up when you bring her home. Oh...do I have to leave after she moves in?”

“Why? Please don’t.”

Ariel laughed. “You’re afraid of being alone with your own wife?”

“Maybe. I don’t know what to do with her. By the way, she wants a studio. She paints. Probably dabbles in it, but that was one thing she wanted. I said I’d build her one but have no clue how to go about it,” I confessed.

“Why don’t I ask Seraphina,” Ariel suggested. “She supports the art

festival here, so I'm sure she knows someone who knows someone."

"Seraphina always knows someone." Orion filled his glass and smelled the wine. "This was a damn good vintage."

"The best." Ariel closed her eyes and inhaled. "The orange blossom is really distinct in this one."

I'm glad Liesel isn't haunting me; the wine has orange blossom notes. Relief!

I raised my glass, and my siblings did the same. "To Callahan Vineyards."

"To good vintages," Orion toasted.

"To Atlas, who's the best big brother in the whole world." Ariel clinked her glass with mine.

I didn't feel like the best anything.

I was marrying a woman I didn't know or love to save my family vineyard and let an old man who'd helped me when I needed it most die in peace. I had just rejected a woman I'd spent a year with, hoping to marry, who'd set her heart and hopes on me.

And then there was my wife-to-be—an enigma, a mystery, that I couldn't fathom. She attracted and intrigued me. If I'd wanted to marry Daphne...how could I have so quickly changed my mind? What kind of man was I? *Not the best of anything, that was for sure.*

Chapter 5

LIESEL



The room was washed in muted hospital green, its walls bearing the weight of countless whispered prayers and quieted tears. Dim evening light leaked through the blinds, casting soft lines over the white sheets of the bed. Every beeping sound from the machines, every hum from the AC overhead felt like an assault on my senses. It's funny how one becomes attuned to these sounds in a place meant for healing yet echoing with the inevitability of the end.

There, lying amidst a tangle of tubes and wires, was my father. His once vibrant face, which crinkled into laughter at the smallest of my jokes, now seemed sallow and drained. The sharpness of his illness, pancreatic cancer, had rapidly stolen his vitality. His eyes, however, remained the same—deep and soulful, brimming with love, concern, and traces of old mischief.

“I just want to see you settled, Liesel,” he whispered, every word an effort but laden with a desperation only a father’s love could explain.

I wanted to cry out, scream even. I wanted to tell him how I felt, about the fears that gnawed at my insides, the dread of being married to a man who had affections for another. But one look at my father’s pleading eyes, I couldn’t. Instead, I mustered all the courage and conviction I could and replied, “I’m excited, Papa. I believe Atlas and I’ll have a good marriage.”

A tear slid down Enzo’s face, his brittle hand reaching for mine. “I’m sorry, my love,” he murmured. “I didn’t want to leave you alone. Your health... I just needed to know you’d be cared for.”

Every fiber of my being wanted to crumble; the weight of the impending loss, coupled with the uncertainty of the future, threatening to break me. Yet, in that moment, all that mattered was this frail man before me, wanting to believe his daughter would be taken care of after he was gone. My grip on his hand tightened, conveying all the unspoken words and emotions that sat heavily in my heart.

In that hospital room, amidst the humming machines and the ever-encroaching shadow of grief, love held us both, even if just for a fleeting moment.

I fell asleep on the chair and was woken up when Navya came into my father’s hospital room. Navya was my closest friend. We’d become friends a few years ago when I moved to Healdsburg and Dr. Rao became my doctor.

“Hey,” she whispered. “He’s sleeping?”

“Yeah.” I sat up feeling groggy. The RA flare up had sucked some of my energy, but I was slowly getting it back by eating well and doing yoga to stay limber.

“I have something for you in Mama’s office. *Come.*”

I rose, wincing slightly and followed Navya. “Wait here.” She shoved me into Dr. Rao’s office. Meena Rao immediately came up to me and gave me a hug.

“How are you feeling? Has the flare-up subsided?”

“Good and yes. I’m back to eating well and doing yoga. Do you know what

Navya is on about?”

Meena winked at me. “Have patience, little princess.”

“Hardly a princess. Look at me.”

“Liesel, you’re gorgeous.”

I laughed, but I didn’t believe her. My to-be-husband definitely didn’t think I was *gorgeous*. He thought I was...cold and unpredictable. I knew I hadn’t been looking my best when I met him. I knew my face was pale. Fatigue did that and made me look gaunt. Not that when I was not having a flare-up, I was Miss Universe material or anything—I just looked better.

The sterile scent of the hospital was briefly replaced by the soft aroma of fresh fabric when Navya burst into her mother’s office, her arms laden with garments. The swishing of fabric announced her even before her bright voice did. “Liesel! I’ve brought you options.”

I gasped. “What is all this?”

Dr. Meena Rao grinned. “You’re getting married. We thought you needed a wedding dress.”

Four dresses hung from hangers. They knew I couldn’t go shopping, not with Papa in the hospital so they’d...my eyes filled with tears. “You’re the nicest people in the world.”

“I think it’s you who is nice,” Navya assured me. “You do so much for everyone. This is a small gift from us.”

The dresses cascaded down like waterfalls of delicate fabric, each one distinct yet bearing the free-spirited boho touch, which was my style. They ranged from soft ivories to muted pastels, some adorned with intricate lace patterns, while others had delicate floral embroidery dancing across the fabric.

One caught my eye immediately. It was an ethereal blend of tulle and lace, reminding me of a fairy princess from those stories I’d lost myself in as a child. The V-neckline was decorated with gentle flower embroidery, which seamlessly flowed into a soft, airy skirt. It felt like it was plucked straight from a woodland fairytale.

Navya caught the direction of my gaze and grinned, “I knew you’d like that one.”

Gingerly, I touched the dress, the fabric soft and cool under my fingers. “It’s perfect, Navya. Like a dream.”

But beneath my appreciation for the dresses was an undercurrent of melancholy. Navya didn’t know the truth about Atlas and me. She saw the

wedding as a grand romantic affair, unaware of the deception that lay beneath. I couldn't tell her. Not now. Perhaps, never. I just wanted this one day, when I could pretend to be a princess.

Living with RA, the pain, and uncertainties made me anything but the perfect wife of fairy tales. And then there was that silent question of children, which I probably could not have.

Navya's gentle hand on mine pulled me from my reverie. "You're going to be the most stunning bride this hospital has ever seen."

I grinned, grateful for her boundless enthusiasm and humor.

Maybe this wasn't the grand love story I hadn't dared dream of, but it was *my* story. And if this was to be my only dance with matrimony, I intended to enjoy every twirl. It was like playing dress-up again, a playful escape from reality. Even if just for a little while, I'd allow myself this fantasy.

I was excited when I went home from the hospital that day. Usually, as soon as I got home, I had this burning desire to paint, to relieve the unhappiness of my current life onto a canvas but not this day when I had my wedding dress with me.

I was getting married! I was excited about the act of getting married even if the man I was marrying and the reason I was marrying were unconventional.

I'd never thought I'd get married and have a happy-ever-after. That I was being given this opportunity felt like a miracle, and I was thankful to the universe for its kindness.

The soft hum of classic jazz in the corner of my room was barely audible over the rustling of dresses and the clinking of jewelry boxes. I stood amidst a chaos of shoes, clothes, and all the little accouterments that made a bride feel like a bride.

I was going to be a *bride*.

Picking up the dress I'd chosen, I marveled at how it cascaded down, like a delicate waterfall of fabric. It was a lovely blend of soft ivory and muted pastel, and my fingers traced the intricate lace patterns and danced over the floral embroidery. As I pulled the dress over my head, the weight of the fabric felt both comforting and daunting. Slipping into it felt like wrapping myself in a dream, one I'd never allowed myself to have, especially with my RA casting its looming shadow.

I looked into the mirror and wondered what Atlas would see. Would he see the young woman who always tried to be brave in the face of pain, or would

he see brightness I hoped to radiate on this special day? It wouldn't be special to him. He didn't even like me. I could feel that. He resented me even though he knew what my father was doing was not my fault. And then there was that *other woman* who he'd broken up with to marry me.

I'd been curious about Daphne Stone and had looked her up online. She was accomplished, with an MBA from Stanford and a bachelor's degree in oenology from UC Santa Barbara. She was blonde and absolutely stunning. I watched a YouTube video of her presenting Callahan Vineyards at some event. She wore a tight black dress that made her look like a sexy siren despite the professional suit jacket. She had a husky voice, one of those that women who looked like Daphne had, because the universe was sometimes an unfair bitch.

There were photos online of her standing with Atlas and they looked beautiful together. A proper couple. How would we look? He tall and handsome and me short and pale.

Well, he could go back to her in two years or even earlier if he wanted. I felt bad that my father had manipulated him. I didn't want to make Atlas's life difficult, I wanted to make it easier as a way to make up for what my father was doing.

I saw his photos online. He'd been on the cover of *Wine Spectator* magazine a couple of times. He was movie-star handsome, the kind that you couldn't help but have a crush on. I was marrying him, and while that seemed surreal, I couldn't deny the flutter in my chest every time I thought of him.

I remembered the kisses and everything inside me woke up. I'd never had sex. I'd bought a vibrator and given up on it after trying *and* trying *and* trying until my fingers hurt. I didn't know my sexuality. I didn't know myself.

Since I was getting married...would Atlas...I shook my head to clear the image of a naked Atlas in bed with a naked me. *No one needs to see you in the nude, Liesel.*

I began trying on shoes, discarding pairs that seemed either too flashy or too plain, until I found the ones that were just right. Then came the jewelry. The necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, each telling their own story, each holding their own promise.

As I fastened a delicate silver necklace around my neck, I whispered a silent wish. Even in a hospital chapel, I wanted him to think I was beautiful, that amid all the uncertainties, there would be a moment of perfect clarity.

I'd never allowed myself many dreams, but standing there, draped in a

dress that felt like hope, I dared to have one. I dared to dream of a future and of a life where pain did not define me.

Chapter 6

ATLAS



The gentle lull of Healdsburg was exactly what I needed a day before the wedding. We were meeting Liesel for dinner at a Spanish tapas place she'd recommended.

We were staying at a hotel nearby. One of those quaint small-town boutique hotels that even had a honeymoon suite. *I did not book the honeymoon suite* since there wasn't going to be any fucking honeymoon.

Ariel and I took a stroll before dinner. My sister and I'd always been close,

our bond resilient through storm and sunshine. Orion was coming later in the evening, driving on his own. I was glad my siblings were there with me for the wedding. I needed their support, and I was glad that they knew the truth, that there was no subterfuge. I hated lying to them.

“Just what you needed before the big day, huh?” Ariel nudged me, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“The calm before the beautiful storm,” I replied dryly.

“Are you worried about how this will turn out?” She tucked her hand into my arm. It was mid-October and Northern California wine country was cool in the evenings. No wonder, Liesel had all those coats and wrappings, I thought.

“She signed all the paperwork, so what’s there to worry about?” I’d been surprised that she had followed through. A part of me couldn’t believe she’d just hand over 15% of Callahan Vineyards back to me for nothing. Maybe the two years of marriage to her would be the payment, who knew.

“You know what I mean. Live with a stranger for two years,” Ariel cajoled.

“I hope we can live our lives respectfully without getting in each other’s way.” But could we? *And did I want that?*

A gallery caught my eye. From the window, I could glimpse paintings that beckoned, promising stories told through strokes of brilliance.

“Let’s check this out,” I suggested, partly because I was intrigued and partly because I didn’t want to continue talking about my impending marriage. I didn’t have answers about my bride. Liesel Brooks with her curly hair, big gray eyes, wide mouth, and cold hands had been on my mind more than I was comfortable with. And tomorrow I was marrying her. *Fucking getting married!*

We ventured inside the gallery, the bell tinkled overhead, signaled our entry. There were several local artists being presented at the gallery but there was a wall with six paintings that were, in a word, *mesmerizing*.

Ariel and I stood rooted in front of the paintings. “Wow,” she whispered. “Not what I expected from a local gallery in Healdsburg.”

The canvases had an ethereal aura, blending shadows and light, pain and hope, into art that resonated with emotion. One showed a silhouette standing at the edge of a cliff, the vast sky painted in hues of twilight, a solitary star gleaming above. The figure, though surrounded by darkness, seemed to reach out to that lone star, a symbol of hope amidst despair.

Another depicted a frail hand, marred with signs of suffering, holding onto

a vibrant, blooming flower. The juxtaposition of pain and beauty, fragility and strength was incredibly poignant. Every piece spoke of a journey, one filled with trials, but also triumphant moments that were life affirmative.

“These are... incredible,” Ariel murmured, equally captivated.

The gallery owner introduced herself as Clara. “Ah, you've taken an interest in the works of Lila Evergreen. She's a local artist, and trust me, she's an up-and-coming superstar. She's won several awards. There's such depth in her work.”

Ariel looked at me with raised eyebrows, clearly impressed. “Lila Evergreen, remember that name, Atlas.”

It felt strangely intimate, looking at Lila Evergreen's paintings. As if I was peeking into someone's soul, feeling their pain, their hope, their dreams.

“You want to buy something?” Ariel wondered.

Amid the collection of breathtaking pieces, one painting particularly ensnared my attention. Titled, *Whispered Hopes*, it was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

The canvas was dominated by a stormy seascape; turbulent waves crashing against jagged rocks. The moon, hidden behind thick clouds, allowed only the faintest glimmer of light to pierce the intense darkness. But what truly caught my heart was a small, frail boat amid that tempestuous sea. The boat's sail, tattered and torn, bore an intricate pattern of patchwork, each piece telling a tale of its own. In the distance, just beyond the storm, the first blush of dawn was breaking, casting a soft, golden hue upon the horizon.

It was as if the artist had captured the very essence of resilience, portraying the trials and tribulations one faces and the unyielding spirit it takes to keep going. The juxtaposition of despair and hope, darkness and light, was portrayed with such raw emotion that it felt as if the painting was alive, whispering its tale to anyone who'd listen.

The painting was grand in scale, spanning about five feet in width and almost seven feet in height. Its size only added to its majestic aura, demanding attention from anyone who laid eyes upon it. The intricate details of the boat, the waves, and the distant horizon were all more pronounced because of its magnificence.

“This one.” My voice barely above a murmur. There was something undeniably personal about the piece, something that resonated deep within.

Clara smiled, a knowing glint in her eyes, as she began the process. “*Whispered Hopes*. It's one of my favorites too. It speaks to the soul, doesn't

it?”

I turned to the gallery owner. “How much for this?”

“Fifty thousand.”

A part of me wanted to buy it but another knew I couldn't afford such luxuries, not yet. Once we were on stable footing again, maybe after the holidays I could come back.

I nodded. “Maybe another time,” I regretfully said. I'd never had an impulse like this to grab something off a wall and make it mine. It was disconcerting.

Ariel looped her arm through mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “You always had an eye for beauty,” she whispered.

As we left the gallery, the world seemed a bit more vibrant. The paintings, like silent sentinels, had left an indelible mark, a reminder of the beauty that lay in every moment, every pain, every hope.

Chapter 7

LIESEL



The ambient lighting of the Spanish tapas restaurant bathed everything in a soft, golden hue. I could hear the faint strumming of a Spanish guitar in the background as I approached the table where Atlas and Ariel were seated. They were deep in conversation, their heads close together, animatedly discussing something. I had all my life wished I had a sibling. But my mother, after she left my father became bitter, and my father...well, he was obsessed with his vines and didn't have any more children.

I loved how close Atlas was to both his siblings. My father had told me that Atlas had become responsible for them when he was eighteen after his parents died in an accident. No wonder they were so attuned to one another.

I removed all my outer layers and gave them to the hostess. I had dressed carefully for dinner.

The soft autumn breeze always had a knack for sending chills down my spine. I got cold easily, so dressing for the dinner was as much about comfort as it was about style. As I'd rifled through my wardrobe, my fingers brushed against the soft fabric of a boho chic dress I'd recently added to my collection.

I pulled out the ankle-length dress, its dark blue base beautifully juxtaposed with a symphony of autumnal colors, burnt orange, deep red, and golden yellow. The pattern was reminiscent of falling leaves, swirling in a gentle dance. It had long, flowy sleeves, perfect for keeping the cold at bay with no jacket that might hide the dress's details.

I paired it with brown leather ankle boots that had a slight heel, giving me a touch of height. Around my neck, I chose a chunky, vintage-inspired silver necklace that hung gracefully just above my chest, drawing attention to the dress's V-neckline. To combat the October chill, I wrapped a soft, oversized pashmina shawl around my shoulders, its beige color complementing the dress and adding an extra layer of warmth.

Checking myself in the mirror, I'd felt a rush of confidence. The outfit made me look mature and healthy. The flowing nature of the dress hid the slight frailty of my frame, giving me a vibrant appearance. My makeup was minimal, just a touch of mascara and a subtle shade of lipstick.

As I stepped out, I hoped that this carefully chosen ensemble would make the right impression on Atlas and Ariel. The evening ahead was important, and I wanted every detail, including my attire, to echo the strong, independent, and hopeful woman I was striving to be.

"Hi." I came up to their table and Atlas immediately rose. He kissed me on my cheek and introduced me to his sister.

I was about to extend my hand to shake Ariels when she wrapped herself around me in a warm hug. "It's wonderful to meet you. Come have a seat. I want to know everything about you. Did Atlas tell you that you're going to have put up with me at home? I'm living with him for a while."

I was overwhelmed by her easy affection. I wasn't used to people just enveloping me in their embrace. But I was so happy that she was this open

loving person, especially since we'd be living together.

After we ordered, the conversation meandered to what they'd been doing in Healdsburg and what they thought about my little town.

"You wouldn't believe the paintings we saw today," Ariel gushed, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "They were breathtaking. So filled with emotion and depth."

Atlas nodded in agreement. "There was this one piece, *Whispered Hopes*. It was magnificent, profound. I wanted to buy it...but the price tag. Maybe next year."

A flush of pride washed over me, but I kept my face neutral, not wanting to give away my secret. Inside, though, I was dancing with joy. "Sounds nice," I murmured, taking a sip from my water glass.

Ariel patted his hand. "It's all going to work out, you know that, right?"

Atlas nodded.

"According to my father and Wine Spectator magazine, Callahan Vineyards produces some of the best Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays in the world. A couple of bad vintages won't take that away," I tried to reassure him.

"Researching me, are you?" His eyes flashed something...unpleasant, like he didn't like me voicing my opinion about his business.

"Well, it's what my father says." I fidgeted with my water glass, feeling dismally unprepared for a man who was so much older than me and more experienced. I felt like a gauche ingenue.

Thankfully, the server approached, presenting us with an array of dishes. There were *patatas bravas*, crispy golden cubes of potatoes drizzled with spicy tomato sauce and aioli, *gambas al ajillo*, plump shrimp sizzling in a pool of garlic and chili oil, and *albondigas*, succulent meatballs drenched in a rich tomato sauce.

A bottle of Tempranillo, which Atlas had chosen was uncorked, its rich, deep red hue shimmering in our glasses. As the evening progressed, I noticed that while everyone else refilled their glasses, I had limited myself to just a glass.

"You're not much of a drinker?" Atlas noted, raising an eyebrow.

"I want to have a clear head for tomorrow," I replied quickly, avoiding his gaze. The truth was the medications for my RA didn't mix well with alcohol. But I didn't want him to see me as someone with a condition. I wanted, even if for a short while, to be a regular person, enjoying dinner with friends,

without the weight of my diagnosis hanging over me.

As the evening wore on, my connection with Ariel grew. She was easy to talk to, and we found shared interests. But as the conversation shifted, I was taken aback to discover that Atlas had shared the true nature of our upcoming marriage with his siblings. It hurt that he hadn't given me a heads-up, but I decided not to let it ruin the evening.

However, the weight of the realization that my father had only a few days left, and soon this man, whom I barely knew, would be my only legal family, cast a shadow on my heart. The enormity of it all threatened to consume me. But I took a deep breath, trying to savor the flavors of the food, the company, and the music.

After dinner, Ariel left, giving us time alone, and she hadn't been subtle about it.

"How are you?" Atlas asked.

"I'm good."

"I saw Enzo today. You were away then."

"I know. The nurse told me. Thanks for seeing him. He was thrilled and... felt positive about...everything."

"I'm so happy, Liesel, so happy that you'll be taken care of. Atlas is a good man. The best man I know. You'll be safe with him."

"Thank you for signing the contracts. Your lawyer was comfortable with everything?" He sipped his wine, and I couldn't resist taking him in.

When I'd walked into the restaurant, my eyes had immediately sought Atlas. And there he was, unmistakable amidst the clatter of dinner conversations and clinking glasses. He looked like he'd stepped straight out of a GQ magazine, exuding an effortless charm that commanded attention.

He was dressed sharply, a far cry from the casual attire I'd seen him in before. He wore a tailored charcoal-gray suit that hugged his well-built frame perfectly. The crisp white shirt underneath contrasted strikingly with the suit, and a thin, silver tie added a touch of elegance. His blonde hair, usually tousled, was neatly combed back, and the ambient lighting of the restaurant seemed to give it an almost golden sheen.

Even though we'd met before, seeing him in this business executive mode was different. The confidence he radiated, combined with his natural good looks, left me momentarily breathless. The sharp angles of his jaw, the determined set of his mouth, and the piercing blue of his eyes—everything about him screamed sophistication and poise. Everything about me

screamed...the exact opposite.

I realized I was staring, probably longer than was polite. But I couldn't help it. There was an allure about Atlas tonight that was hard to ignore. I felt a blush creep up my cheeks, hoping he hadn't noticed my lingering gaze. As our eyes met, a playful smirk appeared on his lips, and I knew he had caught me.

Pulling myself together, I took a sip of my wine, acutely aware of the beating of my heart. I had a crush on my future husband, and I didn't quite know how to feel about it. When was the last time I'd had a crush? University. I was madly in love with my literature professor at UC Berkeley where I'd majored in fine arts. Maybe I had a thing for an older man...a *daddy* complex? *Yeesh!*

"Lawyer?" I asked vaguely. "You ran it by a lawyer, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said patiently, a veil over what I could see was irritation. I annoyed him. Great way to start a marriage, Liesel, absolutely great.

"Then did I have to as well?"

"Yes," he ground out, "to fucking protect yourself."

"Would you cheat me?"

He looked surprised. "No, of course not."

I shrugged and smiled at him. "Then it's okay."

He sighed. "Liesel, you can't just sign documents without reading them."

"I read them," I assured him. "I just didn't feel I needed a lawyer to look at them as well. I trust you, Atlas." I put my hand on his, he was warm, and I felt heat seep into my cold hand.

"Your hands are so cold," he murmured. He took my hand in both of his and rubbed it to heat it up.

Everything inside me tingled. Between my legs, heat pooled, and my breathing became erratic. He looked up at me and his blue eyes went dark. He brought my hand to his mouth and as he looked at me, blew warm air on my hand.

I whimpered, wanting to pull my hand away but Atlas didn't let me. His mouth was set in a sensuous curve like he knew that he was seducing me...*oh so easily*. I licked my lips, and he looked at my mouth like it was a painting he'd never seen before.

"Give me your other hand," his voice was gruff.

I gave him my other hand. This was too much, I thought as he cradled my hands in his and then dropped his mouth to warm them with his lips. He

kissed my hands, and I felt at that moment I'd never be cold again.

His eyes didn't leave mine and then as if something snapped inside him, he took a finger inside his mouth and sucked it. No one had ever done that to me and the electricity that ran through me made me pull both my hands away.

The server came then ask if needed anything. Atlas asked for the check, but he didn't look away from me.

"I want to talk about sex," his voice was soft, gentle, like a butterfly.

"What?" I croaked.

"Sex. Between us."

"Why?"

He smiled then and his face lit up like a Christmas tree. *Oh my god!* I was so smitten with this man that I was going all sappy.

"Because we'll be married, Liesel."

The way he said my name, made me shiver and not because I was cold. When he looked at me that way, I didn't think I could get cold because everything inside me was flush, boiling, heated.

"Right. Of course. Married people have sex." I wanted to sound sophisticated, but my voice was squeaky.

"Regardless of the kind of marriage we have, I won't cheat on my marriage vows. And I'd prefer not to be celibate for two years. How about you?"

I'd been celibate for twenty-three years what was two more. But urbane Liesel would not say a thing like that, she'd say, "I'd prefer not to be celibate either."

He nodded. "So, you're willing to have sex with me?"

Willing? Tell me where to sign up, baby and I'm all yours.

"Yes." I kept my voice cool like this was a conversation I had with men all the time. Like they said, *let's have sex, babe* and I was, *oh, let's do it, big boy.*

Mental head slap!

"We can take our time, Liesel. We don't know each other very well and there's no rush."

I am a twenty-three old virgin with Rheumatoid Arthritis, dude, I want to rush. Take your clothes off now!

"Of course."

I wished I could record myself and see if I looked as cool and composed as I hoped I did because inside I was panting like a dog, wondering if he wanted to come to my apartment tonight and get it going. Because if he could get me

here by just sucking on one finger...*oh, yeah, big boy, let's do it.*

Chapter 8

ATLAS



The hospital chapel, with its stained-glass windows, was a quiet refuge from the world outside. Sunlight filtered through, painting rainbows on the wooden pews and illuminating the faces of the few guests present. Fresh flowers and burning candles added to the serene ambiance.

The double doors opened, and Liesel entered, guiding her father's wheelchair. She looked ethereal, like a vision straight from a dream. The silence was broken only by the soft murmur of admiration from our very

meagre guests.

“Look at her,” I heard Navya whisper to her mother and Liesel’s doctor, Dr. Meena Rao. “She’s absolutely beautiful.”

Dr. Rao nodded, her eyes moist. “She’s been through so much. She deserves every bit of happiness.”

Ariel leaned over to Orion, and murmured, “She looks like a bride.”

Orion chuckled softly, “They are sort of getting married.”

“They certainly are.” Ariel sounded so happy that I wanted to snap at her, *it’s not a real marriage.*

As Liesel approached, I could feel my heartbeat louder, every thud echoing my growing apprehension. She looked like a bride as Ariel had said. I didn’t feel like a groom.

Father Vincent began the ceremony with a warm smile. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today....”

The ceremony progressed with traditional rites, punctuated by moments of deep emotion. “Who gives away this bride?” the priest asked.

“I do,” Enzo whispered. He was drooping in his chair and my heart broke for him. This giant of a man, this big, big man was dying. I took solace in the thought that I was making him happy during his last days.

When it was time for the vows, I took a deep breath.

“I, Atlas, take you, Liesel, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, for better or for worse...”

Liesel’s voice, when she spoke, was soft but unwavering. “I, Liesel, take you, Atlas, to be my lawfully wedded husband. In sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live.”

The weight of our words hung in the air, making even the most pragmatic of promises sound profound.

When we exchanged rings, I placed a simple gold band on her finger. “With this ring, I thee wed,”

I bought the wedding band a few days ago in Santa Barbara. I was asked if I wanted to buy an engagement ring and I decided against it. People would expect an engagement ring. My mother’s was sitting in my lockbox in my office and I’d decided to give that to Liesel. I didn’t have thousands of dollars right now to spend on an engagement diamond ring for a fake fucking marriage.

Her eyes locked onto mine as she responded, slipping a ring onto my finger. I hadn’t expected it. I was stunned by the ring. It was an exquisite

piece of craftsmanship, made of gleaming white gold, featuring a continuous, intertwined design that resembled the twisting vines from a grapevine. Each vine was delicately etched, showcasing the intricate detailing that brought to life every tiny leaf and tendril. Here and there, small, shimmering diamonds were embedded, representing dewdrops on the vines, catching the light at just the right angle, and adding a touch of elegance to the ring.

“The intertwining vines on your ring stand for unity and growth, while the diamonds are a testament to the beauty that emerges from life’s challenges. Every curve and twist of the design tells a story of endurance, resilience, and hope. The ring is an homage to Callahan vineyards and encapsulates the essence of the journey we’re embarking on together.” Her voice was firm as she spoke and I was taken aback by her choice of words, her depth of emotion clear.

As Father Vincent pronounced us husband and wife, the room burst into soft applause, but it was Liesel’s father’s tear-filled eyes that held my attention.

Ariel, eyes moist, whispered to Orion, “It’s so beautiful.”

Orion put an arm around his sister. “You always cry at weddings.”

Liesel’s father, a voice filled with emotion, spoke up as we stepped away from the altar. “Take care of her, Atlas.”

I crouched in front of Enzo and put my hands on his. “I promise I will.”

“Thank you, Atlas. You gave me peace.” I nodded and then he grabbed my hand. “Let nothing happen to her.”

I blinked, not sure what he meant. “I’ll always be there for her.” And that was a vow. Whether or not we were married, I’d be there for Liesel in any way she needed me.

“I know you will.”

Enzo let go of him and leaned back on the wheelchair as if all his energy had been drained from him.

“I’ll take him to his room,” Navya offered, taking the handles of the wheelchair away from Liesel.

“I can do it,” Liesel protested.

Navya kissed her friend on her cheek. “You just got married. Stay, spend a minute to soak it all in. And, did I tell you, you are the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen?”

Liesel flushed.

“Isn’t she, Atlas?” Navya demanded.

“She certainly is,” I replied promptly.

We talked to Dr. Rao and Ariel and Orion hugged Liesel and welcomed her into the family. We were going to celebrate with a small dinner arranged by Dr. Rao in her home. I could do without it. I didn’t want to celebrate this sham marriage, especially when it looked like Liesel was probably taking it seriously.

I walked with her to my car as I was driving her back to her apartment. Once in the car, I looked at the woman who was now my wife. This elfin-like graceful girl...yeah, she was a girl—and I felt both concern and shame.

“Liesel, you understand this isn’t a *real* marriage, don’t you?”

“I know.” Her eyes twinkled with happiness, and I knew it was better to crush her hopes and dreams now rather than let them flourish. She’d get hurt eventually. She was a nice woman, and I found her attractive, but we would not have a fairytale ending. After what I had put Daphne through, I didn’t want to go through this with another woman.

“It’s just that you put in a lot of effort into your outfit, and you’ve got fucking flowers in your hair.” My voice had risen because I felt cornered by her.

“Do you like my dress?” she asked without guile as if unaware of the havoc she was causing within me.

“Yeah, I like it. You look like a fucking fairy princess.”

She laughed. She put her cold hand on mine that was on the steering wheel. She met my gaze, her eyes a mix of amusement and sadness. “I know this marriage is temporary, Atlas. But it was *my* wedding, no matter what the circumstances. I wanted to feel like a bride. I may never get married again. This is probably my only chance. So, I dressed up. Is that so bad?”

Yeah, it was bad because it meant she may want to remain my wife after the two years were up. I didn’t want that. I didn’t need that.

“You’re not my choice of a wife, Liesel. But for your father’s machinations, I’d never marry a woman like you.” There, I said it.

The light in her eyes dimmed, and I felt like a giant asshole. But it was important she understand the situation and me. And then I wondered if I’d ended up giving her hope myself by talking to her about sex the previous evening.

“Is all this because we discussed sex yesterday? I find you attractive, Liesel, which is a good thing, right? But that’s all it’ll be. Some recreational fucking. Nothing more.”

The light didn't come back into her eyes, but amusement did. "I understand. I promise you I'm not weaving dreams of until death do us part. Think of today as dress up." She looked out of the window and then spoke like our previous conversation had not taken place. "I have a lot to do to with packing everything up. My new tenants will take over the apartment in a few weeks."

"I though you wanted to stay in Healdsburg until your father...you know."

She nodded sadly. "I will. I just got lucky with finding tenants soon. He doesn't have much time, Atlas. A few days. I'm going to stay with Navya in San Francisco or Dr. Rao here if need be."

I felt like I had whiplash. We'd gone from talking about emotions and feelings into logistics. This woman was nothing like I thought she'd be. There was a dream-like quality to her but under the ethereal pale vision she presented, I was certain that this was a woman with a spine of steel.

Chapter 9

LIESEL



I didn't invite him to my apartment.

I felt drained and wanted to lie down. *And* I wanted to be alone to sort through my emotions which were jumbled. It had been an eventful day, and I didn't want to invite another flare-up by getting too stressed.

Atlas had been angry throughout our wedding and even now as he drove me home. Why couldn't he just let it go? He kept hammering at me that I needed to know he didn't want me.

Oh my god! The man is such a smooth talker!

“I get it, *big boy*, I’m not your type,” I said out aloud as I lay down on my couch and looked at the ceiling with intricate molding. “Talk about rubbing it in.”

What annoyed me was that he was only thinking about himself and not me. I had to leave my cozy life here and move to another town. I had to give up my studio, which I loved and...I didn’t even know what kind of studio I’d have in his house in the middle of a vineyard. I loved Healdsburg and loved living downtown and now I’d be stuck in the ass-end of nowhere.

“And my father is dying, you moron,” I yelled at the ceiling. “I wanted to look nice for me *and* him.”

I sighed and rose, feeling frustrated and angry, both with my father and Atlas. They were both responsible for screwing me over to the point that I was furious, and I was never furious. I was easygoing and calm. I had to be. Anger was a futile emotion, an energy sucker. I didn’t cave into it. But now I had.

And now that I had. The sharp sting of anger, directed both at Atlas and my father, bubbled beneath my skin. This wasn't the life I had envisioned for myself. I certainly hadn't dreamed of being tethered to a man I hardly knew, no matter how infuriatingly handsome he was.

Seeking refuge, I retreated to my studio, a space that had always been my sanctuary. It was a spacious room, awash in soft, natural light from the large windows that overlooked a grove of trees. The walls were lined with shelves carrying paints, brushes, and various other art supplies, while completed and ongoing works dotted the remaining space.

I set a record on my old turntable—I was a traditionalist when I was in my studio.

Psycho by Asking Alexandria was just the hard metal music I needed to channel my emotions, especially when I was feeling this intense and rebellious. The song's powerful rhythms, intense guitar riffs, and passionate vocals were the perfect backdrop to fuel me. The lyrics were poignant, touching on themes of life, death, and questioning, which resonated perfectly with the complex emotions I was experiencing.

Pulling on an old, oversized shirt that I reserved for such occasions, I felt its familiar softness, the front splattered with remnants of previous painting sessions.

I began without a clear picture in mind. Grabbing a palette, I squeezed out

deep reds, tumultuous blacks, and shimmering golds, representing the mess of emotions I was feeling. The beginning was always frenzied. With broad, angry strokes, I splashed color onto the canvas, not caring about the drops that missed and stained the wooden floor below.

The movement was therapeutic. My hand flowed with a mind of its own, guided by the turmoil inside me. I worked with fervor, sometimes using brushes, other times my fingers, blending, smearing, and layering. Hours seemed to pass in mere minutes, the room filled only with the symphony of music and the rhythm of my breathing.

As I stepped back, my arms ached and my face was streaked with paint, mirroring the chaos on the canvas. What stared back at me was a swirl of dark and light, anger and hope, love and resentment. The piece was raw and unfiltered, a testament to the conflict tearing at my heart.

The studio was a mess when I finally set down my brushes, an embodiment of the chaotic whirlwind of emotions that raged within me. The canvas before me bore the fruits of my labor, a tangible record of my tumultuous feelings.

In the center of the canvas, a fierce tempest raged, dark clouds swirling and twisting, threatening to engulf everything in their path. But just beneath them, a tree stood tall, its roots buried deep within the earth, and its branches reaching out, as if in defiance of the red and black storm above. Each leaf was painted with meticulous care, shimmering in shades of gold and bronze against the backdrop of the storm, representing hope and resilience amidst chaos.

To the left of the tree, a shadowy figure loomed, its form undefined, capturing the uncertainty and ambiguity of my relationship with Atlas. But on the right, radiant beams of sunlight broke through the clouds, symbolizing hope, a brighter future, and the possibility of love and understanding.

I scrutinized my work and felt a raw connection to it. The painting extended my innermost thoughts and feelings, a silent scream, a yearning, and a proclamation of my inner strength.

I titled it, *Emergence from Chaos*. It was, I decided, a reflection of my journey, my struggles, and my undying hope for a future filled with understanding and love. It differed from the more soothing art that I created when I was feeling peaceful. This one...well, Clara my agent and gallery owner in Healdsburg, would love it because she always wanted me to bring some heat to my art.

Well, Clara considering how well my wedding day turned out, I think we

can be rest assured that my art is going to be black, red and all the shades of rage for the next two years.

I looked at the time and groaned.

Ah, Dr. Rao's dinner.

Navya was bringing my father over as well. Probably his last dinner out with people. I couldn't not go, no matter how much I didn't want to be with Atlas right now.

The evening sun filtered through my window as I dressed for the dinner. Despite what Atlas had said I wanted my appearance to clarify that I was celebrating. Every brush stroke, every accessory, and every fold of my dress carried a purpose: *defiance*.

I carefully selected a boho-chic chiffon dress that flowed gracefully, hugging my body in all the right places, while making sure it looked like I actually *had* some right places. The dress, with its soft pastel hues and intricate floral patterns, shimmered in the twilight, making me feel like I had stepped out of a dream. The airy fabric danced around me, mirroring my newfound spirit of rebellion.

Taking my time, I applied a delicate touch of makeup—highlighting my eyes to make them pop and choosing a soft pink shade for my lips. I wanted to look like myself, only bolder, more radiant.

Finally, I braided my hair to one side, intertwining it with fresh jasmine flowers that I'd gotten for the wedding. Their fragrance mingled with the perfume I spritzed, creating an intoxicating scent trail that pleased me.

As I gazed at my reflection, I felt a surge of confidence. I wasn't the timid bride who had donned a wedding dress for a marriage of convenience. I was Liesel, luminous and fierce. Tonight, I intended to let loose, to enjoy myself, and most of all, to show Atlas that I was my own person, and no one, not even a husband in name, could dim my shine.

Atlas, Orion, and Ariel came to pick me up in Atlas's green Subaru Outback.

"Hi." I brushed past Atlas to enter the car. I sat in the back with Ariel. Since his siblings knew about our fake marriage, I felt no compunction in indulging in any pretense of being lovey-dovey. Also, I didn't feel exactly loving.

"You look amazing," Ariel announced.

She did as well in a little black dress that showed off all her many *actual* curves, and I told her so. She blushed. "It's been five years since I've been

able to fit into this,” she confessed. “You know, as the saying goes, I’m just one nervous breakdown away from my ideal weight goal.”

I laughed. My problem had always been that I didn’t eat enough, and I needed to so when I had a flare up and lost my appetite, I had some meat on the bones to get me through it. Eating well also helped ward off fatigue, which was a constant companion of RA.

Atlas watched me on the rearview mirror as he drove. I could feel his blue eyes on me, but I ignored him and focused on Ariel.

“Orion and I working with Seraphina to make sure we set up your studio in one of the barns. You’ll love it. And...I’m going to make sure it’s well insulated so you’re not cold. Atlas said we needed to make sure you don’t get cold.”

I was touched by her love and affection; and ignored the Atlas didn’t want me to get cold comment. “Thank you. Seraphina...she’s the woman who owns the wine bar on main street.”

“Yes. She knows everything and everyone, so we asked her because she knows artists. Orion is getting the last things done. He’s great with wood.”

I looked at Orion with gratitude and he winked at me. “It’s my pleasure,” he said before I could thank him. “You’ll have a nice set up with a work-table and all that. If you need anything else, we can get that for you.”

“I’m grateful,” I whispered. “This is very nice of both of you.”

“Well, it was Ariel’s idea,” Orion murmured, looking sheepish. “We just... he’s busy, and we had some time. Since harvest I’m not running around like a chicken without a head...though it will begin soon enough with all the spring prep I need to do.”

Dr. Rao didn’t live far away, and we got to her place quickly.

The golden hues of the setting sun painted a breathtaking panorama as we arrived at Dr. Rao's magnificent cliff-side home in Healdsburg. It was as if the universe itself was setting the stage for a memorable evening.

Dr. Rao had been my guiding star since I moved to Healdsburg, and Navya, her vivacious daughter, was like the sister I never had. Their home was a testament to their refined tastes, spacious, elegant, and cozy, with large windows framing the endless horizon.

The aroma of Indian spices greeted me as I entered, making my stomach growl in anticipation. I recognized the rich scent of buttery naan, the tang of tamarind, and the comforting aroma of simmering curry.

“Liesel!” Navya called out, rushing to hug me. “We’ve got all your

favorites.” She dropped her voice, “Your father is sleeping in the guestroom. He got tired. But he really wants to join us for dinner.”

I nodded and looked at Dr. Rao who smiled sadly and shook her head.

Yeah, he was going to be gone soon.

I went to check on my father while Navya and Dr. Rao welcomed the Callahan siblings. He was in a restful sleep, which I was grateful for. I leaned down and kissed him on his forehead. “I love you, Papa.”

I went back to the party, soaking in the house's warmth, the tantalizing scents, and the soft strains of classical Indian music playing in the background.



We all settled at the dining table, the ambiance thick with both joy and a palpable undercurrent of sadness, knowing this would be my father's last meal with us. But he, in his ever-resilient spirit, sat with us, a valiant effort.

“Meena,” he exclaimed, “I swear, if I'd tasted your cooking earlier, I'd have proposed to you ages ago.”

Dr. Rao laughed heartily. “Oh, you flatterer! But be warned, my curries come with a fiery temper.”

As the evening progressed, Ariel and Orion chimed in with their stories and jokes. “You know,” Orion began, “the first time I tried Indian food, I thought the green chutney was guacamole. Let's just say, my mouth had never been that surprised.”

We all burst into laughter, even Atlas cracked a smile. But as the night wore on, I noticed him growing more distant, lost in thought.

Ariel, ever the concerned sister, tried to draw him out. “Come on, Atlas. What's on your mind?”

He shook his head, not meeting anyone's gaze. I felt a twinge of annoyance but decided he wouldn't cast a shadow on our evening.

“You know what this party needs? Dancing!”

Navya instantly turned up the music. The soulful rhythms of Bollywood beats filled the room. Ariel, never one to back down from a challenge, jumped up, attempting to mimic the moves from a famous dance number.

“You're doing it all wrong!” Navya teased, demonstrating the correct steps. Soon, all of us, including my father in his wheelchair swayed to the music.

The night was filled with laughter, dancing, and memories that would last a lifetime. Atlas's mood was a minor blip in an otherwise perfect evening. And

as I twirled around, the world a blur of colors and sounds, I felt a deep sense of contentment, cherishing the precious moments with the people I loved.

Chapter 10

ATLAS



It was as if the wedding dinner was his last hurrah, and he knew it. By the time we drove Enzo to the hospital, we knew that his time was much closer. His breathing was erratic, and he was frailer than he'd ever been. He was also happier than I'd ever seen him.

"I'm going to stay with him," Liesel told me. "When do you leave?"

We were supposed to start driving to Everwood the following morning, but I couldn't just leave my *new* wife with her dying father. I'd already sent a

note to my assistant that I'd work from Healdsburg the following day.

"Orion and Ariel leave in the morning. I'll stay with you...and Enzo."

She looked surprised by that, and her eyes filled with emotion. "You don't have to, Atlas."

I put a hand on her shoulder as we watched her father. "I know. I want to."

In her almost bridal outfit, she looked like an angel sitting next to her father in the dim hospital lights. The nurses had given him all they could for the pain and Enzo's doctor didn't think he'd make it through the night.

"The saddest and most horrible thing is that I want him to go," Liesel whispered as she stroked her father's hair off his forehead. "He's in so much pain."

The weight of the world seemed to settle on her shoulders. I pulled up a chair close to her.

"Do you think my hands are too cold for him?" she asked me with such tenderness that my heart constricted.

"Let me warm them for you." Unlike the last time which had been sexual, this time it was about comfort. I blew on her hands and rubbed them to warm them; and then placed them on Enzo's forehead.

"Thank you." She smiled weakly at me. "He's all the family I have."

"You...have me now...and you have Ariel and Orion."

She chuckled. "For two years."

"No, Liesel. Forever," I promised.

She turned to look at me, her luminous gray eyes shining with wonder. "You don't have to say—"

"I mean it. I will always be there for you no matter where we are and no matter what happens. I'm your person, Liesel."

She put her head against my shoulder, and I wrapped my arms around her.

"Thank you, Atlas."

I kissed her gently on the side of her forehead. "That's what husbands are for, Angel." The name came from deep inside because she looked and felt angelic.

We watched Enzo's life quietly fade away.

Liesel eyes were eclipsed by a tidal wave of grief. I had known loss before, and it felt like an all too familiar sting watching Enzo go, the man who had been like a beacon of light for me when my own parents passed away.

Enzo wasn't just Liesel's father; he was my mentor, my guide. At eighteen, when I was most vulnerable, he had stepped in, offered me guidance, support,

and comfort. Now, it was my turn to repay that kindness and look after Liesel.

The somber echo of the doctor's voice recording the time of death seemed to hang in the air. The sterile room was filled with an overwhelming silence, save for the soft, mournful sobs of Liesel. Watching her crumble was like watching a dam break, releasing a torrent of pain and grief.

Without thinking, my arms went around her, trying to offer comfort, some strength in this heart-wrenching moment. Every sob, every tear she shed made my chest constrict with a pain that was both empathetic and deeply personal.

I gently led her out of the hospital room, navigating the corridors, each step heavy with the weight of Enzo's death. The world outside felt distant and blurry, but I was determined to provide a refuge for Liesel, even if just for a moment.

Arriving at my hotel room, I guided her to bed, holding her close as she continued to cry into my chest. Her grief was raw, unfiltered, and my heart ached for her. I whispered words of comfort, my hand gently stroked her hair, and I tried to be the anchor she needed.

As we lay in bed, the surreal nature of our situation became all too real.

This woman, still a mystery in so many ways, was now my wife. The weight of that responsibility, paired with the emotions of the moment, was overwhelming. A protectiveness, one I hadn't expected, surged within me. Liesel needed someone to stand by her, to be her rock, and I silently vowed to be that person.

Holding her close, the world outside seemed to fade. All that mattered was the woman in my arms, her pain, her loss, and the newfound bond that was forming between us. In that moment, amidst the tears and the sadness, the foundations of a deeper connection were being laid.

The days following Enzo's passing were a blur of responsibilities. The immediate need was to provide comfort and solace to Liesel, ensuring she had everything she needed. But she had strength within her. Even in her grief, there was a resilience that shone through, an unyielding spirit that I couldn't help but admire.

We both worked together in planning Enzo's funeral, opting for a small, private ceremony. But we also decided that Enzo's legacy deserved a broader celebration, given the tremendous influence he had in the wine business and the countless lives he'd touched. The reception at Callahan vineyards was set

for the following week.

“Are you sure?” she asked me several times.

“Yes. It will also be a good way to let people know we’re married.”

A week after Enzo died, we left Healdsburg for Everwood.

Everything from Liesel’s closet—she was a clothes horse with a penchant for boots, shoes, and bags—was packed by movers. She was bringing everything from her studio, even the easels.

I was disappointed that all the canvases had been wrapped before I had seen them. I wanted to witness her art, see what she created. I tried to talk to her about it, but she was hesitant and vague. She’d paint in Everwood, and I’d find out then, I decided.

Packed carefully by the movers was Liesel's vintage record player, a true relic from a bygone era, embodying both grace and nostalgia. Nestled in a wooden cabinet with a deep mahogany finish, it showcased the intricate craftsmanship of its time. The grain of the wood had soft swirls, giving it a rich, warm appearance, with subtle inlays in a lighter shade creating delicate patterns around its edges.

The turntable itself was a classic design with a metallic arm that had a slight gleam, showing minimal signs of wear. The stylus was fine tipped, designed to capture every nuance from the vinyl. Above the turntable, hidden behind a beautifully crafted mesh, was the speaker. While the mesh had yellowed slightly over time, it added to the record player's authentic vintage appeal.

A collection of dials and knobs sat on the front, each labeled with worn, gold lettering. They controlled the volume, tone, and speed of the player. The choice of speeds indicated its age—it could play 33 $\frac{1}{3}$, 45, and even the older 78 RPM records.

“Wow. This is a piece of art,” I told Liesel.

“It’s so charming. I have a Bose speaker in my living room, which is great but with this, every scratch, every tiny dent tells a story. It helps me paint.”

It was easy to imagine Liesel, lost in her art, with music from this beautiful piece of history filling her studio, grounding her in a rich tapestry of sound that connected the past with the present.

As we got her home ready for the renters, our bond grew. Not just the bond of two people mourning a mutual loss, but also one of mutual respect. The more I got to know Liesel, the more I appreciated her strength and positivity. She wasn't the fragile, helpless girl I'd presumed her to be. She was strong,

and she carried her grief with grace.

Standing beside her as the moving truck drove away, I made a silent promise, both to Enzo and to myself. I would be there for Liesel, not as a crutch, but as a friend, one she'd never lose.

Chapter 11

LIESEL



I fell asleep for more than half of the six-hour drive from Healdsburg to Everwood. It had been several long tumultuous days with the wedding and then Papa passing away.

Stress and lack of sleep were always my undoing. Even though my Rheumatoid Arthritis was under control, these triggers had a cruel way of reminding me of its relentless presence. After several restless nights, my body felt like it bore the weight of a hundred anchors. Every joint subtly

ached, a dull, constant reminder of the battles being waged beneath my skin. The stiffness was the worst in the mornings. Each finger protested as I tried to clench them into a fist, each toe felt like it had been replaced with a wooden peg.

The exhaustion wasn't just physical. Mental fatigue enveloped me, making every decision seem like a monumental task. My brain felt foggy, making concentration a challenge. The world around me seemed slightly blurred, out of focus.

But it wasn't just about the physical symptoms. Stress heightened my anxieties about the future. *Would I have a flare-up? Would I be able to manage my responsibilities?* The worry became a vicious cycle; the more I fretted about my RA, the worse my symptoms seemed to get.

I'd often have to remind myself to slow down, to breathe. To accept, that with RA, some days were harder than others.

I woke up as the car bumped along a winding road.

I looked at Atlas, who'd been driving but had also been on the phone, in meetings and talking to people. He'd taken several days off, and his work responsibilities had piled up to the point, as he told me, he couldn't ignore. I'd fallen asleep to his soothing voice. He had a commanding tone when he talked business, but he also joked and laughed with people.

"Almost there," he murmured when he saw I was awake. I looked out of the window and took in the mesmerizing landscape of the region. We passed a gate with the sign *Callahan Vineyards*.

Atlas shot me a sidelong glance, a small grin playing on his lips. "Impressed yet?"

"It's big and beautiful."

He chuckled. "It's a mid-size vineyard. Just a hundred acres of vine but the property is nearly five hundred acres."

"Papa always said that the best Pinot Noir is grown in Santa Barbara."

"Yes. We are just a few miles east of the ocean, so the area is colder than in the north. It never gets warmer than 80 degrees here, whereas it can go up to 110 in Napa. But we'll make sure you're kept warm," he assured me.

I leaned back and watched Atlas. He was casually dressed in a button down and jeans. He was beautiful, and I had to curb the desire to touch his face.

The vast expanse of grapevines stretched out before us, neatly lined up on rolling hills, dancing to the tune of the gentle breeze. The main house emerged from the horizon, an embodiment of rustic charm. It had an old-

world wine chateau look that instantly warmed my heart.

“You weren’t exaggerating when you said it’s a chateau-style house,” I remarked, my voice carrying a touch of awe.

“It’s home,” Atlas replied simply, parking the car.

It took me a minute to get out of the car and I hid my wince from Atlas. I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to sleep for a hundred hours.

As we walked towards the entrance, he gestured towards the office building. “That’s where most of the wine magic happens. We have a wine tasting room here and in the Funk Zone in Santa Barbara. And that,” he pointed to an open space, “is where we plan on building a restaurant someday.”

Inside, the house was everything I hadn’t dared to hope for. Large, airy rooms with wooden beams and simple furnishings. No pretentious art or cold modern lines. It felt welcoming, like it had witnessed countless warm memories.

“The kitchen,” Atlas boasted, “is the heart of this home. During harvest season, it becomes a bustling hub. We cook, eat, and share stories here with the seasonal employees who help get the grapes from vine to cellar.”

I glanced around the spacious kitchen, imagining the laughter and camaraderie. “It feels...lived in.”

“That’s the idea. And wait till you see your room.”

Atlas led me into what would be my room, and the sight that greeted me was utterly heartwarming. The bedroom exuded an old-world charm that reminded me of the chateaus described in classic novels. Large wooden beams ran across the ceiling, their aged surface telling tales of years gone by. A grand four-poster bed, draped with soft, muted linens, took center stage, and an ornate wooden armoire stood tall in one corner, its intricate carvings hinting at craftsmanship of a time long past.

A beautiful antique rug sprawled across the wooden floor, its faded patterns and warm hues lending an additional touch of coziness. A hearth sat at one side, complete with a carved mantel. I could imagine curling up in one of the plush chairs next to it, a book in hand, while the fire crackled and warmed the room.

“The view,” Atlas pointed out, pulling back the heavy drapes to reveal a large window. The sight was breathtaking, a panoramic view of the rolling vineyards, turning gold in the setting sun.

And then there was the bathroom. Stepping into it felt like transitioning

from one era into another. Ultra-modern and sleek, its centerpiece was a vast, freestanding bathtub positioned in front of floor-to-ceiling glass panels. I could already envision soaking there, the world outside providing a serene backdrop.

“You like it?” Atlas asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

“It’s perfect,” I murmured, lost in the embrace of this new sanctuary. The blend of old and new, rustic charm and modern luxury felt right. It felt like home.

I stepped onto the balcony, taking in the panorama. “Wow!”

He nodded, a hint of warmth in his eyes. “Welcome home, Liesel.”

I turned to face him and threw my arms around him. He laughed and hugged me back. “This is so wonderful,” I sighed, snuggling against him.

I felt his chin nuzzling my hair. “I want you to be happy here.”

His hands stroked my back and the air between us heated. His hands went from comforting me to flexing on my hips.

I couldn’t help myself, my lips kissed the bare flesh at his shirt collar.

“Liesel,” he hissed.

I licked his skin, not knowing why I did that. His hands around my hips moved and clasped my ass, held me as he thrust against me. We both moaned at the contact. I didn’t know what was happening to me. This heat was new, very different from when I read a steamy novel or watched porn. This was more potent.

I lifted my face to look at him and there was something animalistic about how he looked. His blue eyes were dark, and his mouth was curved in a way I’d not seen before.

He bent his head and touched my lips with his. I wanted so desperately to taste him I let my tongue out and licked the seam of his lips. He pulled away as if I’d stung him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

But I didn’t think he was listening to me, his eyes seemed to be mesmerized by my mouth. He bent his head and this time, angled his face, and devoured my mouth. There was no other way to describe it. He tasted like an earthy old wine, smooth and elegant with all those delicious tertiary notes.

My fingers hurt as I clenched hard to hold on to his arms, but the rest of me felt boneless. His hands moved from my back and streaked up to the side of my breasts. He filled his hands with my small breasts and groaned.

He kneaded them, as if testing them. “You taste like orange blossoms,” he murmured, his lips now tracing a path across my jaw to my ear.

I was wearing a pair of linen pants and a matching linen blouse. His hands went under the blouse and goosebumps sprouted everywhere he touched my skin. My bra had a front clasp, and I felt it give under his fingers and then...*ah!*

“Atlas,” my voice was thready.

And just like that he pulled away like I’d thrown a cold bucket of water over him. He looked at me and shook his head.

“Dinner...I’ll make sure there’s something to eat in an hour or so.”

“Atlas.” I took a step toward him, but he held his hand up.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

I smiled. “I thought we’d have sex in this marriage.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, Angel. I see stars in your eyes and you’re...inexperienced...just a child...and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I felt like he’d slapped me. In one sentence he’d called me inexperienced, a child and someone who was foolish enough to fall head over heels for him and end up with my heart broken.

“I’m not hungry,” I told him even though I knew it was childish. “I’m going to take a shower and go to bed. Can you bring my suitcases up?”

Atlas nodded. “Yes.”

He turned to leave and then stopped. “Liesel—“

“Please, Atlas, just go. I don’t want to deal with our marriage right now.”

He left then, and I had an overwhelming urge to cry.

Chapter 12

ATLAS



I want to fuck my wife.

I went into the kitchen and opened the fridge to see if there was something I could put together for a light dinner. She'd said she wanted to go to sleep, but I knew what had happened. I'd hurt her. I'd rejected her, and she hadn't liked it. Neither had my dick. She'd got me hard, hot, and heavy in seconds. She'd licked my chest with that delicate little tongue of hers and I couldn't control myself.

But she was twenty-three years old. I was thirteen years older than her. It was half a lifetime. She looked like she was eighteen. She was petite and...*fuck*, so responsive. As soon as I touched her, she blossomed. Her skin, which was usually cool, was suddenly hot, and I wanted to devour her, *all of her*. I wanted to see her skin flushed when she came. I wanted...I rubbed a hand over my face and jerked, almost dropping the bottle of water I'd pulled out of the fridge when I heard a sound behind me.

"Just me." Ariel raised her hands in a peace offering.

I set the bottle on the kitchen counter and kissed her on her cheek. "Hey, sweetheart, how are you?"

She shrugged. "I'm okay. I'm sorry about Enzo. You sure it was okay with Liesel that we weren't there?"

I nodded. "Yeah, you were already halfway home. And we'll have the reception here...so you and Orion will be there for that."

Ariel looked around. "Where's the young bride?"

"In her room. She said she was tired and would go to bed."

Ariel's forehead creased, and she looked at her wristwatch. "It's early. What did you do?"

I bent down and got a bottle of Callahan Pinot Noir from the wine fridge. "Why do you think I did something?"

I held the bottle up and Ariel nodded. I poured two glasses of wine. We enjoyed the nose of the wine and then clinked our glasses before taking a sip.

"I was going to cook something for dinner." I sat down on the kitchen counter feeling exhausted. The wedding, Enzo, the funeral, Liesel...it had all been a lot of emotional pressure and I was feeling it now, all at the same time.

"Seraphina sent some *Carne Guisada* over." Ariel's eyes twinkled. I loved Seraphina's Latin-style beef stew. "She said it was both for the wedding and the funeral. Why don't I heat the stew and set the table? You go make up with your wife and bring her down."

I nodded.

"Oh, and Seraphina also sent a very nice Rioja that she believes you and Liesel *must* have."

I leaned against the counter and looked out at the vineyard, only a few rays of the sun still gracing them with gold. "Seraphina is wine whispering again, is she?"

"She believes that wine is magical, and it heals from within."

Ariel walked around me and opened the oven, bringing out a cast-iron pot.

“I like her, Ariel,” I whispered what was in my heart.

“Who? Seraphina?”

“Liesel.”

Ariel smiled. “She’s damn likeable.”

“But she’s thirteen years younger than me...*and*...” I turned to look at Ariel. “How did I get over Daphne so quickly? I was thinking of marrying her.”

Ariel lit the stove and set the cast-iron pot on the fire. “You didn’t love Duck Face.”

“No,” I agreed. “Do you think I can love...*anyone*?”

Ariel came up to me and went on tip toe and kissed me cheek. “You love me. You love Orion. You have friends who you care about. You’re loyal and kind. Yes, Atlas, I believe you can love.”

“And I just haven’t found the right woman as the cliché goes?” I asked cynically.

“Yes.”

I looked into her eyes. “Are you still in love with Tej?”

She didn’t look away. Her eyes filled with tears. “Yes.”

“And it still hurts after all these years?”

She smiled sadly and nodded.

“Well, then I’m glad I’ve never been in love. Thanks for heating the food up, sweetheart. I’ll go get Liesel.”

I softly knocked on Liesel’s door and opened it to go inside before she could tell me not to come in. I should’ve waited. She was asleep in bed, the moonlight filtered in through the windows and balcony door. She was naked—completely and beautifully naked. She lay on her side, one knee bent, curving her body so I could see that pert ass and her pussy. Her arms almost covered her breasts, but one rosy nipple peeked through. She’d kicked her duvet off of her and it was tucked in under her knee.

Her hair was spread over the pillow and her delicate face was peaceful. I walked up to the bed and brushed some errant strands of hair on her cheek. She nuzzled against her pillow.

It was a breach of her privacy to be here. To see her like this, but I couldn’t help myself. She was beautiful I thought...not conventionally like Daphne was but there was something else here, strength, poise, elegance and...just something *good* that shined.

I eased her so I could put the comforter over her. The skin I touched was

cold, and I took solace because what I was doing was to keep her warm. I tucked the comforter around her, and she moaned. The sound sent blood south to my cock.

She shifted in her sleep, and I stepped away. She turned under the comforter to sleep on her back. I smiled at her and bent down to brush my lips across her forehead.

“Sleep well, Angel,” I whispered.

I ate dinner with Ariel and Orion, but my attention was on my wife upstairs in the bedroom. She was my wife. *Wife?*

“Ah, guys, I’m going to give Liesel mom’s ring. Is that okay?”

They both nodded without paying much attention. I knew they wouldn’t care, and I had a feeling that regardless of the circumstances of my marriage, they were treating Liesel like family, which she was now. We were the only family she had. I knew what it meant to be an orphan.

“I’ll show Liesel her studio tomorrow.” Orion rose to leave. He lived in one of the cottages on the property and not the main house because Orion was an introvert and loved his privacy.

“The movers will be here tomorrow. So, if you have spare time, you can help with her painting and studio stuff,” I suggested.

“Sure.” Orion looked at Ariel. “You sure you’re good on planning the reception with Liesel? I can help if you want—“

“No, it’s fine. I’m unemployed...and having nothing to do. It’ll be a nice diversion,” Ariel remarked.

Ariel and I cleaned up the kitchen and then went onto the front patio with our glasses of wine.

“How much trouble is Callahan Vineyards in?” she asked.

I wish I could lie to her and say, we were fine, but we were not. The last two vintages we lost a lot because of fire and bad weather. And they were hurting us this year and probably would next year as well. It wouldn’t have been a problem, but I’d been trying to expand and get into restaurants around the country, which was putting pressure on us.

“If we have a good holiday season, we’ll stabilize.”

“Will we have a good holiday season?”

I sipped some wine. “I think so. Daphne put together a really strong marketing plan. We’re going to be fine, Ariel; and I wouldn’t say that if I didn’t believe it—even if I wanted to make you feel better. But until then we’ve put down austerity measures. We’re never going to super wealthy.

That's the wine business for you.”

“And we love it.”

“Yeah, we do.” Even though Ariel had left to practice immigration law in New York, wine was in her blood. “Sweetheart, I love having you here, you know that, right?”

She drank some wine. “I'm not ready to talk about it, Atlas. I just want to...enjoy the vineyard and not think about the past or the future.”

I nodded. “Take your time.”

We sat in companionable silence for a while and then went up to our bedrooms. I checked on Liesel one more time before I went to bed, because I wanted to make sure she was okay, like she was a child and not a grown woman.

I lay in bed and remembered how good it felt to hold her, kiss her, taste her. Fucking orange blossoms. My hand found my erect cock and, remembering her gasps, I came. I wiped myself clean and felt like an idiot and not a thirty-six-year-old man with a woody he needed to take care of.

Chapter 13

LIESEL



I woke up late. By the time I came down only Ariel was there, and she offered me both coffee and tea, and I went with tea.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to sleep for so long. But this is the best sleep I’ve had in a long time. And that bed...that bed is, wow.” Liesel sat down at the big redwood table in the kitchen with Ariel.

“Croissant?” Ariel pushed a basket of pastries toward me.

“Don’t mind if I do.” I was feeling great, and it promised to be a fantastic

day. I'd taken my morning medication before I came down and I had no aches or pains. It was amazing, and I had a feeling Everwood was going to be good for me.

"Thank you for the tea. It's delicious."

"Seraphina brought it. She and Orion have been setting up your studio." Ariel's eyes brightened, and I felt even more guilty for sleeping for so long.

"The movers were here. Why didn't anyone wake me?"

Ariel waved a hand. "Don't worry about it. Atlas and Orion put all your stuff in the main room. They'll help bring it up. They didn't want to wake you so left it down here. Orion took your studio stuff. When you're ready, we can go."

I drank my tea feeling tremendously grateful. "Why are you all being so nice to me?" I asked. "When you know...you know about Atlas and me?"

Ariel put a hand on mine. "You're family now, Liesel. It doesn't matter why and how you married my brother, you're one of us."

I felt tears moisten my eyes. I could see why my father wanted me to be part of the Callahan family. I just wished he'd found another way to make this happen. Because now I was stuck married to a man who didn't want me.



As I followed Ariel through the vineyard, my curiosity piqued. The crisp morning air brushed my face, and the tantalizing scent of fall filled my lungs. We approached a barn that sat slightly away from the main house. It was quaint, with weathered wooden slats and a charming gambrel roof. It looked like a piece of history preserved amidst the sprawling vineyard.

Ariel knocked on the door and Orion slid open the heavy barn door. My heart skipped a beat as I peeked inside.

The space inside was nothing short of magical. The room was spacious, with high ceilings exposing the original wooden beams. Large arched windows let in generous beams of sunlight that danced on the polished wooden floor. There were flood lights placed around the room, so I'd have the best light when I worked at night.

One end of the room had a grand easel, surrounded by shelves meticulously organized with paints, brushes, and other art supplies I recognized as my own. My beloved vintage record player sat on a table in one corner, alongside a comfy armchair draped with a soft blanket. There was a beautiful green velvet day bed that reeked of Victorian glamour. The studio was designed

with such thoughtfulness; every detail was catered to inspire and facilitate creativity.

The magic of the place was almost tangible; there was an ethereal glow, and the air felt alive. *Floating* nearby was Seraphina Vine. She smiled warmly, “Welcome to your studio.”

“I can’t believe you all did this for me.”

“I had a small part to play,” Seraphina continued, her eyes twinkling. “You’ll find that your colors will blend more harmoniously, and your brushes will move with a will of their own if you let them.”

I was speechless, overwhelmed by the beauty and love that filled the room. Orion, looking proud and slightly bashful, spoke up, “Consider this a wedding present. Welcome to the Callahan family, Liesel.”

I hugged him, my eyes misting with gratitude. This was more than a studio; it was a sanctuary, a testament to the unexpected warmth and affection I was finding in my new family.

I stepped away from him and found Atlas at the doorway. His smile was broad, and I knew he’d made this happen. I walked up to him, and he opened his arms for a hug, as if making up for last night and understanding what I needed today, to give him affection, to show him my gratitude.

I was a foot shorter than him and found myself swept off my feet. He kissed my forehead and set me down. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

Seraphina walked up to us in her flowing copper colored clothes. She almost looked like she was shimmering, her amethyst eyes glittering.

“I’m so happy to see you both so...hmmm...together,” she said, laughter in her voice. “Orion, darling, I’m going to head back to Whispering Vines. You be good now and I expect you to come over tonight to meet my new employee.”

Orion sighed. “Do I have to?”

“She’s a miracle. Has an excellent palate for wine. I think you should hire her here at Callahan Vineyards. She’d be excellent for running your tasting room.”

Ariel laughed at the not-so-subtle machinations of Seraphina. “Orion, stop fighting her and do as she asks, *please*.”

“Fine, I’ll be there. Will you feed me dinner?”

Seraphina looked at all of us. “Why don’t you all come for dinner at Whispering Vines? Let’s say seven?”

“Thanks, Seraphina.” I walked up to her and gave her a hug. She was warm, and I felt heat shoot through me, a cleansing heat, and I felt my joints loosen. I stepped away feeling confused. Every time I was in this woman’s presence there was...pixie dust in the air.

I watched her leave and looked at Atlas with narrowed eyes. “There is something about her...I feel—“

“Electricity?” Ariel offered.

“And the inability to say no,” Orion suggested dryly.

“She’s magical,” Atlas commented.

I looked at all of them. “Like...*magical*? Like Harry Potter magical?”

Atlas laughed then and stroked my cheek. “You’re precious, Angel. No, Seraphina is just a wonderful person and we’re lucky she’s in our lives.”

Atlas offered me his arm, and I slid my hand through it. “I’m taking my wife home. Could you both not join us?”

They hooted as we walked back to the main house.

“How do you feel?” Atlas asked once we were back in the kitchen’s warmth.

“Wonderful. I’m sorry I slept in this morning, and you had to deal with the movers.”

“You were peaceful, and I didn’t want to disturb you.” Atlas made himself coffee and sat down across from me at the dining table. “I want to apologize for last night.”

“What part exactly?” I asked, a smile widening my lips. I couldn’t help it. He looked so cutely contrite.

“The part where I stopped kissing you and...I want you to know that I find you very attractive.”

“You do?” That warmed my heart and well, maybe warmed the flesh between my legs a little too.

“Yes.” Atlas drank some coffee, and his eyes were that same color again as they were the last time he was aroused.

“Do you want me now?” I asked more daringly than I had ever felt before.

He grinned. “I’ve got to get back to work, Angel *and* I don’t want to rush you, either of us. Let’s spend some time together. I just don’t want you to feel or think that I pushed you away because I don’t want you.”

I cleared my throat and sat up. “What if I say you won’t be rushing me?”

He set the coffee down and took a deep breath. “I’m very tempted to take you to my bed right now and...*stop licking your lips*, Liesel.”

I stopped mid lick and then smiled. “Does that arouse you?”

“Liesel, let’s focus on—“

“I’ve never had sex before,” I blurted out, “And I want to. Very much. I’d like to have it with you. I find you very attractive.”

He looked stunned and didn’t speak for a long moment. “You’re twenty-three years old.”

“Yes.”

“Why the fuck haven’t you had sex?” he demanded, almost angrily.

I didn’t want him to know about my RA, especially now when he saw me as a desirable woman and not some weakling who was always battling pain.

“I just...it didn’t happen. I’ve been busy.” It was not a lie. I bit my upper lip. “You have a problem with inexperienced women?”

He shook his head and grinned at her. “How many boyfriends have you had, Liesel?”

“None.”

“How many boys have you kissed?”

“By kissed you mean mouth to mouth or the stuff we did?”

He seemed to be amused and annoyed at the same time. “Yes and yes.”

“Then you were probably one of the few. I kissed boys in college and stuff but...you have to understand, I was in a fine arts program. We’re all nerds and geeks. You know, artistic minds, not...” I stopped talking because I was blathering.

He seemed to think about it and then as if he’d decided, he spoke. “How about we date, you and I?”

“Date?”

“Yes,” he smiled, and I fell *hard* for him. “We’ll go out. Hold hands. Make out in the car.”

“We’ll kiss,” I asked eagerly and immediately felt embarrassed.

He came to my side of the table and held his hand out. I took it and stood up. He kissed me then. I knew what to do now and opened my mouth, letting him in. His tongue dueled with mine and he used his hands to bring me closer to him.

“Like that,” he whispered.

“Yes.” I moved my mouth to his again, I didn’t want to let go. I wanted him to keep kissing me, keep making my insides feel warm and toasty.

He pulled back and sighed. “And now I need to get back to work, Angel. What will you do?”

“Unpack and—“

“No unpacking. You wait until I’m home in the evening and I’ll bring your things up and we can unpack together. Okay?”

I nodded.

He pulled my hips against his and I moaned softly.

“And we’ll go out to dinner at Whispering Vines.”

“A date?”

He chuckled and gave me a sweet kiss. “No, Angel. A date is when it’s just and you me, even if it’s we’re enjoying a glass of wine on our own patio.”

“I like that kind of dating,” I whispered. “So, not a date tonight.”

“No. Not with my whole fucking family and all of Everwood there to check you out. Seraphina probably had let everyone know that we’re going there for dinner tonight.”

“Are you so important around here?”

“No, it’s a small town that survives on wine and gossip. But maybe after dinner we could slip away, just us.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

As he was leaving he stopped and came back to me. “I have something to give you.”

He pulled out a ring from his pocket. It was a beautiful diamond ring. An old ring. A breathtaking artifact of bygone romance and elegance.

“This is my mother’s ring.” He took my hand in his and slid the ring to nestle against my wedding ring. “It’s old...it was old when my father gave it to her. She was into antiques.”

The band was made of gleaming rose gold, which had over time acquired a slightly muted patina, adding to its vintage allure. The centerpiece was a stunning old European cut diamond, a predecessor to the modern round brilliant cuts. It carried with it a soft luminescence rather than a harsh sparkle and was nestled in an intricate bezel setting, surrounded by smaller, delicately cut diamonds in a halo pattern.

“This is beautiful,”

“It’s yours,” he told me and kissed my hand, right above the ring.

“But it’s your mother’s,” I protested.

He smiled. “And now yours.”

He left after that and I hugged myself close, excitement racing through me. My husband had given me his mother’s engagement ring and was going to take me out on a date. It was so very exciting!

Chapter 14

ATLAS



My wife is a virgin.
Fuck me!

I was Atlas Callahan who had gone through most of the female population of Santa Barbara and my wife was a virgin. The universe had a sick sense of humor.

My wife was also sweet and delicate, loving and beautiful. The way she'd hugged Orion and how she'd already become part of the family was a

testament to who she was. Ariel was wide open but Orion, he was a tough cookie. An introvert. He kept to himself. That he'd offered to set up her studio and had wanted to make her happy was proof of how much he liked her.

The thing was...I liked her too.

She was nothing like I'd thought she'd be like. The way Enzo talked about her, I'd expected a hapless teenager who'd be a burden. Instead, she was definitely *not* helpless. She was remarkably well put together for someone her age. She was mature and yet there was an innocence about her. The way she kissed me, opened her mouth, and let me in. It was erotic as hell.

Now, I wasn't the man who wanted his woman to be virginal. *Fuck no!* Give me experience every day. But here she was, and I was having no trouble getting aroused around here. I was like a teenager, a walking talking erection.

"Does that work for you, Atlas?" Nalini Shah, my CFO asked me, and I blinked. *Talk about being distracted.*

"Yeah. Sure. We can move that order to next quarter."

"What's up with you today?" Esai Corrales, my assistant asked.

"He got married," Orion told the team, and I saw Daphne flinch. Orion had done this on purpose because I'd been reluctant to bring it up at the meeting today. But it was the right thing to do.

"Married?" Nalini gasped and then walked up to me. I rose, and she gave me a hug. "Congratulations. I thought you just got engaged."

"Her father was...well, he passed away, and we wanted him at the wedding." I deliberately didn't look away from Daphne. I was married. She needed to know whether she liked it or not, whether I liked it or not.

"You didn't even tell me, man." Esai thumped me on my shoulder and gave me a hug. "Happy for you. When do we meet the new bride?"

"Soon."

Daphne smiled tightly. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

Our cellar manager, who worked for Orion, Louis Sincini, gave me a hug. Louis had been with us for a long time, since before I took over. He was almost as old as some of the wine in the back cellar. We were lucky he'd stayed after my parents passed—another person who was almost family in so many ways.

"I heard about Enzo." He patted my back. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks. We're going to have the reception here in the tasting room."

“Good. Lots of winemakers from Napa to Temecula were helped or influenced by Enzo. I’m glad you married his daughter,” Louis said appreciatively.

“You know Liesel?” Orion asked.

“I knew her when she was little before Atlas’s wife took her away. Tough on the family. Tough on Liesel especially. Rebecca didn’t want Liesel to have anything to do with Enzo. It wasn’t easy.”

I’d heard some of this but had not delved into it. Now I was married to Liesel, and I’d have to learn more about her childhood. Okay, I *wanted* to get to know her better, despite myself.

After the meeting I went back to my office and Daphne joined me. She looked good in a dark blue skirt suit that in the past I’d have ached to remove so I could see what she was wearing underneath. But not anymore.

I was a genuine asshole. I’d thought I’d marry this woman because it would be good for business and my life—but I’d never loved her. We’d been together for a whole year. She’d say the three little words often. I never dissuaded her but never said them back to her either.

“Ariel came by today and asked me if she could run the Christmas Bazaar this year.”

Callahan Vineyards hosted a Christmas bazaar for two weeks in December. It was popular in the local wine country, and we sold a lot of wine; and it also supported small businesses from the area who set up booths on our property.

“Yeah, she mentioned something, and I told her that was your responsibility so she should talk to you.”

“Your sister is a lawyer, babe, do you think she knows anything about running an event like this?” Daphne dropped her laptop and some files on my desk.

I didn’t like the *babe*, not at all. But I said nothing. I didn’t want to make a fuss. It was habit. Maybe she slipped. *Like hell!* But I could pretend if she could.

“Ariel can do anything she wants to do. Don’t underestimate my sister, Daphne. If you feel this is something you don’t want to give to her, that’s your decision.” I went back to my computer screen as it beeped with a message. It was my calendar alert, telling me I had fifteen minutes to get home, or I’d be late for dinner at Whispering Vines.

I rose and put on my suit jacket that I’d hung on my chair. “Just tell Ariel whatever you decide. She’s a big girl. I think she wants to feel useful while

she figures out what to do with her life.”

Daphne stepped in front of me as I was about to walk to my office door. “You got married.”

“Yes.”

“You gave me no head’s up.”

“I didn’t know I had to.”

“Really?” she demanded, her eyes spitting fire at me.

“Daphne, please.” I didn’t want to hurt this woman any more than I already had. I’d treated her abominably and I wish I could fix it somehow, but I knew I couldn’t. I’d been as honest as I could be with her. I’d never cheated on her or told her lies. And now that I thought about it, I might have thought about marrying her, but I wouldn’t have done it. No. When it came to crunch time, I’d have found a way to end the relationship. *Because that was the special kind of asshole I was.*

She put her hands on my chest, her heart in her eyes. “Babe, I miss you.”

I closed my eyes. *Fuck!*

“I’m so sorry, Daphne.” I put my hands on her wrists to remove them from my body, when my office door opened, and my wife walked in. *Could this get any worse?*

She stopped when she saw my hands on Daphne’s, and she walked back and shut the door. *Apparently, it could get worse.* Now I had an upset ex-girlfriend and wife.

Good work, Atlas.

I walked away from Daphne and opened my office door. Liesel was standing close to where Esai, my assistant sat and grimaced.

“I’m so sorry. I should’ve knocked. I wasn’t thinking. Ariel said I should surprise you and...I guess I got surprised. And—“

I stopped her words by kissing her softly. “You can always surprise me, Angel.”

I took her hand in mine and walked her into my office. Daphne was collecting her laptop and files.

“Daphne, this is my wife Liesel. Liesel, this is Daphne, the Callahan Vice President of Marketing.” *And my ex.*

“Lovely to meet you,” Liesel said a bit too enthusiastically. I knew she knew who Daphne was and yet, there was no malice in her, no distrust, no asking me what the fuck was this woman doing with her hands on her husband.

Daphne nodded. “Ah, same.”

“We’re going to dinner at Whispering Vines, would you like to join us?” Liesel surprised me by asking her. *What the fuck was my wife doing?*

Daphne was taken aback. “Ah...”

She looked at me and I smiled. “You’re most welcome. Seraphina has promised some excellent food and wine. Orion and Ariel will be there as well.”

Daphne seemed to consider it for a moment and then shook her head. “Not tonight. But thank you for the invitation.”

“Maybe another time,” Liesel said easily.

Once Daphne left, she walked around my office, examining things, looking out of the window.

“You know who Daphne is?”

“Your ex. Yeah, I know. I think Ariel sent me in to make sure that she wouldn’t compromise you. Apparently, Daphne is taking it hard that you married me.” Liesel picked up a photograph of me with Orion and Ariel a few years after my parents had died. “God, you’re a good-looking family.”

“Angel.” I came up to her and turned her, so she’d face me. She automatically put her hands around my neck.

“I like that you call me Angel.”

“There is nothing going on between—“

She went on tiptoe and kissed me, softly first and then with some heat. Before I knew it, I’d set her up on my desk and standing between her legs, my heart pumping blood south. “You get to me so fast.”

“I’m not worried about Daphne or anyone else. You know why?”

“Why?”

“Kiss me again and I’ll tell you.”

So, I kissed her again, slowly this time. She was so sweet and lovely. Innocent and...sexy. Yeah, Liesel Brooks was sexy as fuck.

“If you want to sleep around, you will. I can’t and won’t stop you. *But* I know you a little now and the man you are, you won’t lie. It would go against your values to have sex with another woman while you’re married to me.”

I kissed her softly. “We better go, or we’ll be late.”

“Ariel said that they were going to go ahead, and we should take our time since we’re newlyweds.”

I laughed. “Ariel would say that.”

“I told her but we’re not *that* kind of newlyweds. And she said, something

on the lines of maybe we're not fucking like rabbits...but give it time."

She normally never swore and her saying *fucking* was a serious turn on because she said it almost primly.

"Rabbits?"

"Or minks."

I touched her face, slowly traced her jawline and then her lips. She kissed my finger. She was doing something that was...well, making me behave differently than I did with most women. I had sex. I was affectionate in and out of bed but not like this, not like...teenagers in love. Heck, I hadn't even done that when I was a teenager.

"Have I told you're exquisite?"

She giggled then. "I'm not beautiful. I'm okay...my nose is too small, my eyes too wide, my mouth is...according to Navya—"

"No, Angel, you're beautiful. You shine from the inside out."

Her eyes went cloudy with desire again and I resisted the idea of using my couch. I couldn't have sex with my virginal wife on a piece of furniture where I'd had sex with another woman. Speaking of which, I'd had sex with several women in my bed at home. Maybe I needed a new bed...or at least a new mattress ...maybe I could have sex with her in her room.

I'd open the balcony door to let the air in...maybe one day I could bend her over the balcony and—.

"Atlas, I'm happy to be here with you."

I snapped out of my salacious thoughts and kissed her nose. "I'm happy you're here as well." And that was the truth, and I did not know why she was making me feel this way.

Chapter 15

LIESEL



“Who is she?” Ariel asked as she peered at the woman talking to Seraphina by the bar counter.

Orion sighed. “That’s one of the Raj sisters.”

Ariel frowned. “The ex-supermodel?”

“No, she’s the ugly sister,” Orion remarked as he looked at the menu.

Ariel punched him on the shoulder. “You can’t say shit like that.”

I looked up at the young woman and she had heard Orion because there

was a stiffness in her that came upon suddenly. I felt bad for her. It was insensitive of Orion, but he'd never meant for her to hear her being addressed as the *ugly* sister.

Orion shrugged. "I didn't mean it like that. Seraphina wants me to see if we can hire her to run the tasting room at Callahan."

"She knows wine?" Ariel wondered.

"She does," Atlas interjected. "She got a bachelor's degree in oenology from Cal Poly SLO."

Orion looked up then, his interested piqued. "Really? What is she doing working here?"

The woman we were discussing came up to our table. She was taller than me, but then everyone was. Probably, five six, five seven. She had golden brown skin. Her thick wavy hair was tied up in a messy ponytail. She wore glasses. But there was a freshness about her that was charming.

"Hi, Atlas."

"Hey, Hansa. Glad to see you working here." Atlas rose and gave her a quick hug. "You know my brother, Orion. And this is Ariel, my sister. And my wife, Liesel."

Hansa shook hands with all of us.

"Seraphina has a set menu for your table, but she wanted me to talk to you about what you'd like to drink." Hansa looked nervous, and I felt bad for her.

I was about to say something to ease her when Orion pointed to a wine on the menu. "Tell me about this wine."

She cleared her throat and peered at his finger.

"The Xarel-lo is from the Parés Baltà estate, which is in Catalonia," she whispered.

Orion leaned back and looked at her speculatively. "What's so special about it?"

She licked her lips and I wanted to hold her hand and tell her it would be alright.

"It's fermented in an amphora, which is made of red clay found on the Parés Baltà estates. It's a complex wine...notes of peach and...ah apricot... and almond." She looked like a student who was being tested.

Orion went back to the menu.

"I'd like something—" Ariel began but was interrupted by Orion.

"Tell me about the Francesco Cirelli," Orion demanded.

Hansa adjusted her glasses and looked at the wine menu. "Ah, that's a..."

Molinara?”

She obviously didn't know the wine and my heart sank because Orion quirked an eyebrow. “It's an Abruzzo, so what would it be? It's not Venetian. If it was, *then* it would be a Molinara.”

She nodded, and I knew she wished she could sink into the ground. “Montepulciano,” she whispered.

“Right,” Orion said dismissively. “Do you know anything about this wine?”

She shook her head. “Just...just that it was fermented in amphora.”

He nodded. “I'll have a taste of the wine.”

She looked around at all of us and we smiled uncomfortably at her. She left us and Atlas rebuked Orion for his rudeness.

“Oh, come on, Seraphina wants me to hire her. This is a fucking interview and Hansa knows that,” Orion protested.

“So, you do know her name,” Ariel snapped.

“Hansa? That's a beautiful name. It means swan in Sanskrit.” I looked at Orion keenly and wondered why this soft-spoken and gentle man had such a reaction to Hansa.

“Good for her,” Orion quipped. “The menu looks good.”

“I thought we'd open a bottle of sparkling wine,” Atlas pondered.

“Sounds good,” Orion agreed and held up his hand to get Hansa's attention.

She came running with the bottle of the Italian wine she'd misidentified the grape varietal of and two glasses.

She poured the wine for Orion, and he tasted it and nodded. “Now, you taste it and give me notes.”

She poured herself a taste. She took her time with the wine, and I saw a smile as she took in the wine's flavors. Hansa had a passion for wine, that much was obvious.

“It's got a rich cherry color. It's got high intensity on the nose and palate. It's got a long finish and is complex. This is a very good wine,” she recited. “The nose and the palate match. It's got distinct spicy notes, reminiscent of clove, pepper, cinnamon, and star anise. It's fresh on the tongue, juicy and with lots of fresh dark fruit, a stimulating acidity, and an invigorating tannic structure.”

Orion nodded appreciatively. “Good. We'd also like a sparkling wine. What do you recommend?”

She smiled. “Since you’re celebrating, you can never go wrong with Champagne. We have a very nice Henri Giraud Esprit Nature Brut from 2014. It’s a beautiful—”

“That’s a two-hundred dollar bottle of wine. How do you know we can even afford that?” Orion demanded.

“Ah...I was going to say that the Henri Giraud Esprit Nature Brut NV is just a little over sixty dollars and...” She trailed off and turned to see if Seraphina was around.

I put my hand on Hansa’s. “The NV sounds perfect. Thank you.”

She seemed so flustered that I wanted to knock some sense into Orion for being a complete jackass.

Hansa went to get the champagne, and I picked up the Italian red that she’d left on our table. “Orion, why are you being a perfect asshole to that poor girl?”

Orion seemed taken aback. He smiled. “Asshole? Now, now, Liesel, I didn’t know you used language like that.”

“When appropriate. Stop scaring her. You can interview her without humiliating her,” Atlas ground out. “I like Hansa. She’s a good girl. Works damn hard. Her parents and sister don’t support her choices. She paid her way through university because her father said either she studies business or she was on her own.”

Orion didn’t look contrite. “Fine. I still need to know what she’s made of if I’m hiring her to fucking *run* our tasting room.”

“You don’t like her, why?” Ariel demanded. “Do you even know her?”

He shrugged. “I don’t dislike her. I barely know her and only through Naina.”

“The supermodel sister?” I asked.

“*Ex* super model. She works for BBC now. Manages their fashion desk.” Orion looked supremely uncomfortable. “Naina and I are friends. We keep in touch.”

Thankfully, Seraphina took over our table while Hansa cared for other guests. The kitchen was busy as the locals had come by for the French Prix Fixe dinner, and apparently to check out Atlas Callahan’s new wife.

There was an intimate air about Whispering Vines, and I couldn’t help but feel a little vulnerable, especially with Atlas sitting so close. Every time our hands brushed, or our eyes met, a thrilling current ran through me.

“Orion, did you give my girl a hard time?” Seraphina demanded, but she

didn't look angry.

Orion grinned. "Ask her to come by next Thursday at nine. I'll walk her through the tasting room and HR will get her contract in place."

"You're hiring her?" Ariel was aghast.

"Yeah. She kept her cool and then because I was being an asshole, she nicely got Seraphina to manage our table. I like that. She knows how to serve and how to talk about wine. She'll do fine. But she's not *running* my tasting room, Seraphina until she gets some more experience."

"Deal." Seraphina gave him a smug high five.

Our dinner begun with *Gougères*, delicate cheese puffs that melted on the tongue. It was paired with a crisp Chablis, which danced with mineral freshness on my palate. "It's like a prelude," Seraphina said mysteriously, "A hint of what's to come."

Next, we were served Boeuf Bourguignon. The beef, tender and succulent, had been slow-cooked in a rich red wine sauce until it was pull-apart perfection. The earthiness of the mushrooms and the sweetness of caramelized onions balanced the dish exquisitely. The plate was paired with a glass of Pinot Noir from Côte de Nuits, its complex layers of cherry, raspberry, and clove complementing the dish flawlessly.

For dessert, we indulged in *Crêpes Suzette*, delicate pancakes drenched in a zesty orange sauce, the subtle hint of Grand Marnier making them utterly divine. The sweetness of the dessert contrasted wonderfully with the slightly tannic finish of a Beaune Premier Cru, which Hansa poured with a grateful smile. Seraphina had told her she now had a job at Callahan Vineyards.

Throughout the meal, I felt Atlas's gaze on me more times than I could count. Our conversations were light, filled with laughter and banter, but beneath it all, an electric charge buzzed. It wasn't just the wine. It was us. Every whispered word, every stolen glance, the very air around us was charged with an intensity that was impossible to ignore.

"I thought that, after dinner, we could go for a drive," Atlas whispered, his mouth so close to my ear that I couldn't suppress a shiver.

"Yes."

He put a hand on my thigh and stroked gently.

"What are you doing?" I breathed.

"I'm seducing you, Angel."

"Oh," I smiled. "Then...please continue."

He chuckled.

By the end of the night, Seraphina's wine and her carefully chosen menu had indeed brought magic into the evening. But more than that, it seemed to have opened a door, a possibility of what could be between Atlas and me. As we left *Whispering Vines*, I felt both elated and nervous, excited about going for a *drive* with Atlas.

Chapter 16

ATLAS



“Where are we going?” Liesel asked nervously as I drove beyond the house in Callahan Vineyards.

I was holding her hand as I drove. *Like a fucking teenager.* I liked it. Her small hand in my large one felt right. “Have you ever made out in a car?”

“What?”

“Have you ever made out in a car?” I repeated.

“Ah...no.”

“We’re going to make out.”

She leaned back on the leather seat but didn’t let go of my hand. “What does that mean?”

“We’ll do stuff...but we won’t have sex.”

“But why won’t we have sex?” she sounded so sad that I chuckled.

“Angel, trust me, I want to be inside you...*badly*. But I think we should take it slow.”

She sighed. “I’m going to die a virgin.”

I laughed then and parked by a tree. Moonlight shimmered over my vineyard and the hills watched us lazily in the dark.

She sat up straight once I stopped the car and I could make out from her profile that she was nervous and excited.

What the fuck are you doing with this innocent woman, Atlas? You should keep your hands to yourself.

My hands were not listening to me as they stroked her arm, and I felt her response through the chiffon long sleeves of her dress. I liked how she dressed: feminine and elegant. Long dresses, delicate chiffons, and soft wool.

She turned to look at me and licked her lips. “I...I want to say something.”

“Okay.” I took her hand and brought it close to my mouth. I kissed her fingers.

“You’re distracting me,” she muttered.

I put one finger inside my mouth and sucked it softly; and was rewarded with a gasp. I smiled and kissed the finger.

“What did you want to say?” I set her hand down.

Instead, I let my hand wander over her thigh and squeezed.

“I may disappoint you,” she whispered, her eyes closed.

The advantage of driving an SUV was that the backseat was big and roomy. I jumped out of the SUV, and she looked around, flustered. I opened the passenger door and pulled her out.

“Are you cold?”

She shook her head.

“Good. Because we’re going to start here.” I pushed her against the door of the SUV and leaned into her, thrusting my hips against her, resting my erection between her legs.

“What will we do?”

“We’ll kiss, Angel...until we’re both out of our minds.”

I angled her face slightly and marveled at how lucky I was that this woman had agreed to marry me and save my vineyard; and she was here, *wanting me*.

I nibbled at her lips slowly and her hips thrummed against mine. I didn't think she knew she was doing it, showing me she ached for me, wanted me. It spurred me on.

I gripped her hips hard for an instant and then slowly let my hands wander over her slim body. Her mouth was sweet, and she was so eager that I wondered if it would such a bad thing to take her in the car's backseat or on the fucking hood...or...*fuck, she felt good*. And then there were the soft mewling sounds she made, which hammered anvils of desire through me.

She played with my tongue like she'd discovered something new and fun. She sucked on my lips and touched her lips to my jaw. She kissed with abandonment and, because I couldn't resist it any longer, I kneaded her small breasts. I wanted desperately to taste her. Wanted!

I pulled away and looked down at her face, flushed. I took her by the hand and pushed her into the backseat of the car. I lay her down and crawled on top of her. I continued to kiss her as my fingers undid the small buttons at the front of her dress. Beneath she wore a band of cloth shaped like a bra.

"That's different," I mused.

"It's a bandeau. I don't always like wearing a bra," she mumbled.

"How do I—"

She twisted her body and pulled the bandeau up and over her head. I lost focus as her breasts spilled out. I groaned and found the tips with my mouth. I suckled. Bit. Tasted.

Her hands were in my hair, forcing me down, showing me how she wanted to be tasted. She liked it when I bit her, *pain and pleasure*.

"Atlas," she moaned, her thighs moving restlessly.

"I know, Angel," I whispered, aware that I was as desperate as her.

I slid a hand under her dress and found that she her panties were damp. The air within the car was warm and smelled like her, aroused, earthy and like fucking orange blossoms.

"You're wet."

"Yes," she whimpered as I moved her panties so I could run a finger down her slit.

"Angel." I slid a finger inside and we both moaned. "Christ, you're tight."

She arched against me, and I was just about ready to come in my pants. I

wanted to ram inside her like I was eighteen again and desperate for pussy in the backseat of a car. Liesel was potent.

God, did I have a virgin kink that I didn't know about it? That thought sobered me but not enough. I brought her juices up to my mouth and her eyes watched me taste her.

“How do I taste?” she asked curiously.

I bent and kissed her. “You tell me.”

She seemed to think about it. “I thought it would be icky...you know...eww.”

I grinned, couldn't help myself. “Yeah, I know. Is it?”

“No. It's exciting.”

“Oh no, Angel, this is the tip of the proverbial excitement iceberg.”

“Show me.”

I stroked in and out of her, first one and then two fingers. By the time I got a third one, she was writhing against me.

I decided I better end this make-out session sooner than later because it was driving me up the wall and in need for release. Her clitoris was swollen, so I stroked it until she was wheezing and then suddenly, her eyes opened wide, and she clenched around my fingers. Her surprise was palpable, and I couldn't resist kissing her again and again.

“Wow,” she laughed out loud, “my first orgasm.”

“You've never had an orgasm?”

“I tried with a vibrator and clitoral stimulator and...nothing. And you did it with just your fingers.”

She made me deliriously happy, I realized, carefree and joyous. “Imagine what I can do with my tongue.”

“Oh my,” she whispered. “When can we try that?”

I sat up and helped her sit as well. Her hand stroked the bulge in my pants. I took her hand from my crotch and brought it to my lips. “Not right now, honey because I'm likely to embarrass myself by coming all over your hands.”

“I'm okay with that.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Okay with what exactly.”

“Both you being embarrassed and you coming all over my hand.”

I leaned back on the seat and laughed. “Angel, you're priceless.”

Chapter 17

LIESEL



We had to postpone Papa's memorial twice. Once because there was an event in the tasting room and the next because I wasn't well. Atlas and I hadn't been on a date since that night when I had my first orgasm. He'd been busy and traveling back and forth from Santa Barbara where Callahan Vineyards had a tasting room in the Funk Zone.

The few times he'd been home, I had holed up in my room because I was battling a mini flare-up. Atlas had tried to talk to me about it, as had Orion

and Ariel but what could I say?

I felt helpless and just crawled into myself.

Dr. Rao had referred me to an RA expert at UC Santa Barbara medical but, since I didn't drive, I hadn't gone yet. I could ask one of the Callahans but then I'd have to explain why I needed to go see a doctor. I could take an Uber, but I didn't want to go alone. So, I was waiting for Navya to come down for the memorial reception a couple of days before the event so she could take me.

It had been a relief when Navya was in the house because then I had an excuse to not let Atlas see how terrible I was feeling.

"Tell him," Navya insisted. "It's crazy to live with someone and not tell them—"

"I don't want to," I cut in adamantly. "He'll treat me like a fragile person and I...*no*. Just no."

"So, instead he's walking around wondering why you suddenly shut down? Yeah, that sounds super mature." Navya walked around my room and then glared at me. "Also, explain the separate bedrooms."

I sighed. His siblings already knew the truth and so I told Navya about the marriage contract Atlas and I had signed.

"You know in India people have arranged marriages...this feels like that," she'd said shocked.

"It's my father...he...he was worried about my health and, instead of believing I can take care of myself, he shoved me onto a poor unsuspecting man. Now...Atlas thinks I'm a cross between a wanton slut and Snow Queen."

Navya burst out laughing. "Wanton slut? You?"

"Yes," I confessed, feeling terribly embarrassed. "I've been trying to lose my virginity, you know that. And now I have this big strapping gorgeous man...it's perfect, right? *No*. He wants to date. Take it slow. The last date was three weeks ago, Navya. I'm going to die a virgin."

Navya sat down next to me on my bed and put an arm around me. "Do you like Atlas?"

"Yes," I acknowledged. "I think he's...hot and nice and...if I were to have chosen a husband, you know, Indian arranged marriage style, I'd choose him. I just know that I have to be careful. This ends in two years. Then I'll go back to my life in Healdsburg."

"And that makes you sad?"

I looked up at Navya feeling confused. “I think I fell in love with him but saying that makes me feel like I’m a twenty-three-year-old ingénue who fell in love with the first guy who gave her an orgasm.”

Navya made a face. “I’ve had several guys give me orgasms, but I never fell in love with *any* of them.”

“That’s the point,” I cried out. “You’ve had experience, so you don’t get smitten by the first guy who knows what to do down *there*.”

Navya was just the person I needed with me. And since she got along well with Orion and Ariel as well, we had fun. Until Atlas came along, looking sour and tired. I wanted to be a good wife and make him feel better, but the stress of the previous days meant I was falling asleep at eight in the evening.

“You’re up late,” he muttered when he saw Navya and me in the living room. It was eight thirty in the evening.

He gave Navya a perfunctory hug and sat down next to me. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes.”

“You have any plans for tomorrow? I was thinking maybe we could have lunch—”

“I can’t,” I blurted. I had my doctor’s appointment, and no way could I miss that since Navya was here *with* her car.

He sighed. “Right. You and Navya have plans.”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

He ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. “I’ve been gone for a week so I thought maybe...anyway, we can do something after the memorial reception.”

He left us alone after that and Navya looked at me with disappointment. “You’re being unfair to that man. He’s trying.”

“I can barely open my doorknob,” I protested, holding up my swollen hand and tears rushed into my eyes.

“Then tell him,” Navya pleaded.

“Just be there for me,” I begged, and Navya relented.

“Fine. I’m here. We do this your way.”

Chapter 18

LIESEL



The tasting room was abuzz with energy, alive with the melodies of a soulful blues band. Papa would've loved it, the rhythms, the hearty laughter, the clinking of glasses. It felt less like a memorial and more like a joyous reunion of friends.

I had met with my doctor who'd told me he had to up a few of my doses and change one medication based on my blood tests from Healdsburg. He warned that I'd have to be extra careful during the time my body got used to

the new dosages and change in chemicals.

Navya had taken notes, so I'd have all the instructions with me if need be. This was something she'd done in the past because I used to live alone. But the fact was since no one in the Callahan household knew about my RA, I was alone with it. And that was fine. *Really. Fine.* No one needed to know that I was damaged goods.

Navya wrapped me in a warm embrace. "Liesel," she murmured, "Your father was an extraordinary man. I remember him teaching me about the magic of wine. He'd said there was a story in every bottle."

"Thank you," I replied, holding back tears. "He would've wanted it this way."

Seraphina moved gracefully, overseeing the catering, ensuring that each dish complemented the wines perfectly. The aromas of roasted garlic, fresh basil, and simmering sauces mingled with the rich scent of oak barrels.

Orion, with his characteristic charm, played host alongside Ariel, greeting guests with a warmth that was genuine.

A tall gentleman with a silver beard approached me, extending a hand. "Liesel, I'm Dominic from Crest Winery. Your father was a mentor to me. I wouldn't be where I am without him. This world, the wine community... we've lost a legend."

Another winemaker, a lady with a striking presence and deep-set eyes, joined in. "Liesel, I'm Estella from Moonlit Vineyards. Your father's wines, especially the '97 Pinot, inspired me to take risks in my vineyard. He was a pioneer, a visionary."

I nodded, my heart swelled with pride and sorrow. "Thank you. He loved Moonlit Pinot and said it was even better than his."

The evening flowed smoothly, a harmonious blend of remembrance and celebration. Yet, amidst the laughter and stories, I couldn't ignore Atlas's restless energy. Every so often, I'd catch him in deep conversation with a group of wine buyers, his enthusiasm clear.

"Is everything alright?" Ariel whispered, noticing my distant expression.

"Just realizing that life and business don't pause, even for grief," I murmured, watching Atlas hobnobbing with the wine elite. This was a memorial reception, and I felt slightly resentful that he was using it as a business opportunity. He'd said as much when he'd seen the RSVP list.

Ariel nodded, her gaze following mine to where Atlas stood. "For Atlas, everything is a fine line between honoring the past and building the future."

The music swelled, a poignant blues number filling the room. I took a deep breath, letting the notes wash over me. Papa was right; it was always about the journey, the highs, and lows, the bitter, and sweet. Tonight, I felt it all.

The evening had started off beautifully, but as it wore on, a familiar ache began to set in. It was subtle at first — a dull throbbing in my joints, a heaviness in my limbs. By the time we reached the third hour, my energy waned, and a sense of fatigue clouded my vision. The relentless chatter and laughter, which earlier filled the room with warmth, now felt like a cacophony that was hard to bear.

Atlas approached with a group of potential buyers, his face lighting up with anticipation. “Liesel, I'd like you to meet Gary Stevenson and Angela Montgomery. They're interested in a partnership with Callahan Vineyards.”

I tried to smile, *genuinely* tried, but the effort was monumental. “It's lovely to meet you,” I murmured, but my heart wasn't in it.

“I knew your father,” Angela gushed and talked about Papa.

I could barely stand straight but I valiantly listened to them. But it was obvious I was restless and not interested. I could feel their slight resentment. They were probably thinking I was too high and mighty. I'd been told that in the past when I was hiding my RA symptoms.

As they left to mingle with other guests, Atlas's brow furrowed, his excitement turning to annoyance. “Liesel, can I have a word?”

I nodded, following him into a storage room off the tasting room. I could sense the tension, feel the weight of his disappointment.

“Why do you keep doing this?” he hissed. “One moment you're the life of the party, and the next, you're distant.”

Tears threatened to spill, but I held them back. “Atlas, I need to leave. I can't...”

“You can't what? Handle a simple gathering? Take responsibility?” His voice rose in frustration.

Each word was a dagger, sharpening the pain I already felt. “You don't understand,” I whispered.

“No, Liesel, I don't,” he shot back. “And I'm tired of trying.”

The dam broke, and tears streamed down my face. “I'm sorry. I really am. But I don't feel well.”

Atlas looked at me, his eyes cold. “Yes, I can see that. You never seem to be well when it's something to do with the vineyard or me. I won't bother you again.” Without another word, he walked away.

Navya came inside the room. “I saw him take you in here.”

I leaned against a wall, all my energy abandoning me. How could I be so weak when I wanted to be strong?

Navya rushed to my side; her eyes filled with concern. “Liesel, are you okay?”

I shook my head. “A flare-up is coming.”

She held me tight. “Why don't you tell him? Let him know?”

I sighed. “I want to be more than my condition, Navya. For once, I want someone to see me, not my illness.”

She stroked my back. “You are so much more, Liesel. But you can't hide from your truths.”

After the altercation with Atlas, my studio became my sanctuary. I told Navya that I wanted to be alone, she understood. This was normal for me—I liked to heal without an audience.

The soft daybed that Orion had found at an estate sale beckoned, but I felt an itch in my fingers, an urge to put brush to canvas. With trembling fingers, I put a record player on my turntable, the haunting melodies of a hard, relentless song played, echoing the tempest inside me.

I stood before the blank canvas, my vision blurring from exhaustion. I could see it, the pain, the isolation, all the things I felt needed a form, an outlet. With every brushstroke, I tried to capture the raw intensity of my emotions. The painting evolved into a stormy sea, waves crashing against dark, jagged rocks, reflecting my tumultuous heart.

The familiar ache in my joints worsened, intensifying with every motion, but I kept pushing through. It wasn't about the art anymore; it was about defiance. Defying my body, my past, my present. The melody from the turntable became increasingly brutal, every note echoing my internal battle.

As the canvas filled, memories flooded back. The first signs of RA as a teenager, the confusion, and then the crushing weight of realization. My mother's face, filled not with compassion but with disappointment, loomed in my mind. “Why couldn't you be normal?” her voice seemed to whisper.

And now, Atlas's voice joined the chorus. I shook my head, trying to banish the thoughts, to focus solely on the painting. But the fatigue, the pain, the emotional exhaustion converged, pulling me down.

I tried to take a step back, to admire what I'd done, but my legs gave out, and I crumbled to the floor. The last thing I heard before darkness took over was the relentless music from the turntable, a mirror of my tumultuous heart.

Chapter 19

ATLAS



The dim lighting of the reception area seemed to reflect my own muddled emotions. As I faced the crowd, the murmurs, and the quizzical expressions, I braced myself for the inquiries about Liesel's absence. I could sense Orion and Ariel close by, their presence comforting.

A wine merchant, his cheeks flushed from the evening's indulgences, clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Atlas, where's your bride? We're all so eager to meet her."

I forced a smile, the lie coming easier than expected. "Liesel needed some time. She's still grieving."

He nodded sympathetically, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "In time, my friend."

Orion appeared by my side, subtly guiding me away. "There's a distributor from New York who's interested in a deal. Wants to speak with you."

As we moved through the crowd, Navya, fielded a few inquiries about Liesel. Her poised demeanor, her kind words about Liesel needing time and space put people at ease and I was grateful for her presence. However, my resentment for Liesel built and I once again was confronted with how young she was. An older woman, a woman like Daphne would have been able to hang in there and get through the night.

"Hey there," Seraphina floated next to me.

"Hey." I leaned against a wall and sighed.

"You look tired."

"It's been a long week...it's been a series of long weeks."

"Atlas," she chided, "you carry a weight, one that's not just about wine or business."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I'm exhausted. And I was hoping Liesel would be here. I mean it's her father's fucking memorial reception. But she bailed."

"Bailed? Is she alright?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. She blows hot, then cold. One minute she's all in...the marriage, the life and the other, she's goes to bed at fucking eight in the evening. I've married a goddamn child."

"She seems mature to me," Seraphine took my hand in hers and as always it soothed me. There was a magic about her, an allure that wasn't just about her beauty or her impeccable taste in wines. I'd never been able to place it, but she had a way of smoothening things.

"Then she'd be here. Then...for the past three weeks I've been traveling, and she's been avoiding me. I mean...we're married and..." And what? I kept telling Liesel it was temporary and that she shouldn't build any fairytale dream castles and she was doing that, wasn't she? Then why was I so pissed with her?

Seraphina's eyes sparkled mysteriously, as if she held the universe's secrets. "Women are mysterious creatures, aren't they?"

"Not really," I replied. "I understood Daphne just fine." I closed my eyes. I

was comparing the women again, the one from the past and the one in the present—there was no future right now, not one I could see.

“Daphne is shallow. Liesel has depth.”

I chuckled. “She’s a baby, Seraphina. She’s twenty-three, a decade younger than Daph. What the fuck was I thinking?”

“That you had to save your family’s legacy?”

I looked at her with narrowed eyes. “How do you—“

“Ariel,” she finished for me.

Yeah, it would be Ariel. She and Seraphina were thick as thieves. I didn’t blame Ariel. Seraphina was family in so many ways.

“The evening is winding down. You should go find Liesel and have a conversation with her. Tell her how you feel.”

“*And* how do I feel?”

I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. For a moment I’d thought I’d have some support. A wife who’d make the evenings better, hold my hand and share my problems. Not this wife. This wife was a child. Good thing, I just had two years with her. And then what? Back to someone like Daphne? Even as I thought about it, I knew Daphne didn’t do half of what Liesel did for me. She didn’t call to my heart the way my young bride did.

What a fucking cluster fuck!

“You’re afraid of getting close, of feeling too much. But sometimes, the heart needs to be opened, even if it risks breaking.”

I gazed at her. “I don’t know what that means.”

She touched my arm, her touch almost electrifying. “The past is a shadow. Step into the light, Atlas. Let your heart guide you. Go, find Liesel. Talk. Marriage is all about communication.”

“It’s not a real marriage,” I protested.

“Two years is a long time to be in a fictitious relationship. It’ll eat at you and her. Go. I’ll handle everything here.” I kissed her cheek. “Thanks.”

As I walked home, regret wormed its way into my heart. Had I been too harsh with Liesel? She just lost her father, after all. I should’ve been more understanding.

She wasn’t at home. I went to her room, and it was untouched, as was the rest of the house. I stepped out of the house and the notes of a haunting melody guided me. Following the sound, I ended up at the studio. I slid the barndoor open and my heart sank.

Liesel lay motionless on the floor, paint smeared on her clothes,

surrounded by a chaos of art supplies. Panic coursed through me, and I rushed to her side.

“Liesel!” I cried. My voice thick with fear. “Can someone help?” I shouted, the plea echoing through the open door.

Lifting her, I carried her to her room. She seemed so light, fragile, and far too young.

I lay her on the bed and texted Orion to get help. “Liesel,” I whispered, touching her forehead. She was cold. Freezing. I tucked the duvet around her. I turned on the fireplace in her room and made it as warm as possible.

I reached for my phone, ready to call a doctor, when Navya rushed in, a storm of controlled urgency.

“Hey, I’m going to call our family physician and—“

“She’s fine and...we already saw a doctor yesterday.” Navya’s face was tight with worry.

I looked at her and darkness bloomed inside me. Navya didn’t look surprised. “What do you mean?” I bit out.

She shook her head and sat down next to Liesel. “This happens when she pushes too hard.”

Liesel moaned. “Yeah, babe, I’m here.” Navya kissed Liesel’s forehead. Then she went into the bathroom and came back with three bottles labeled with prescription information.

“Can you get some water?” she asked me.

I went downstairs and brought back a carafe and glass. I set it on the bedside table. Navya looked away from me and gently woke up Liesel. She gave her three pills, made her drink a glass of water and let her lie back again.

“You want to tell me what the fuck is going on?” Navya sighed. “She doesn’t want you to know.”

I picked up a prescription bottle. I read the term *adalimumab*. It sounded familiar like I’d heard that word on television in some commercial. I was about to run a search on my phone to get more information when Navya spoke softly, “She has RA, Rheumatoid Arthritis. In her case YORA, Young Onset Rheumatoid Arthritis because it started so early for her. Usually, people get RA after they turn thirty. Stress can lead to flare-ups.”

The revelation staggered me. “Why didn’t she tell me?” I felt a swirl of emotions: guilt for not noticing, anger at her for keeping it a secret, and an overwhelming sense of protectiveness.

“Because for the first time in her life someone wasn’t treating her like she

was fragile and...she liked it. She wanted to be *normal*. Can you blame her?"

"She should've fucking told me?"

"Would you have seen her differently?" Navya asked, her gaze steady.

Of course, I would have, I wanted to shout.

I would have pigeonholed her, just as I had so far, dismissing her youth and inexperience. I realized perhaps Liesel had wanted, even if for a short time, to be seen for who she was and not her condition.

However, her omission made me see her once again as someone young... too young to handle the burdens of life and marriage. It solidified in my mind the notion that our relationship was temporary. That when the marriage contract was up, so would our time together. Yet, as I looked at her fragile form resting on the bed, an unfamiliar ache formed in my chest, an emotion I wasn't ready to dissect. Not just yet.

Chapter 20

ATLAS



Navya and her mother assured me that Liesel just needed rest and then she'd slowly get better.

I stayed the night with her. I slid into bed with her without compunction.

I thought back and wondered if she'd had a flare up when she'd been here that first time. Probably. It explained so much. Why the fuck didn't she tell me? I could've helped her. All of us would have. I fell asleep, feeling drained.

Liesel's room was awash with the gentle golden glow of morning sunlight. The curtain billowed softly, carrying with it a hint of the vineyard's fragrance.

I watched her sleep, body tilted against me. I liked it very much. How she fit so well with me. I stroked her hair gently and her eyes fluttered open. And then her eyes widened.

"Shh," I whispered and dropped a kiss on her mouth. "You collapsed."

She looked stricken. "I was tired."

I nodded. "And you have RA."

Her body went slack. "She told you."

"I intended to find out. I saw the drugs, Angel. What the hell? Why didn't you tell me? If I'd known, lashing out at you, I should have taken care of you."

She sat up propped by pillows. "Water?" she asked.

I filled a glass for her, and she drank it. Her eyes were clearer than last night. Those gray depths held no anger, only an earnest need to communicate.

She began, her voice even and determined, "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. I...worried that you'd feel my father married you off to an invalid you needed to take care of. I can take care of myself. Really. I've been doing it for years. I don't want to be a burden to anyone."

She was twenty-three years old, what the fuck did *doing it for years* mean?

I lay back and pulled her into my arms. She laid her head on my shoulder. I kissed her forehead. "I would never feel that you're a burden. But I would have had more fucking compassion than I've been showing you. Tell me about RA. I read up on it, but I want to hear from you because they say everyone has unique symptoms and triggers."

"First things first. Rheumatoid Arthritis isn't life-threatening, but it is chronic. Sometimes I'm too weak, where every movement feels like a mountain to climb. But," she smiled gently, "I've learned to live with it, to appreciate the good days and be patient during the tough ones."

I nodded, trying to keep my emotions in check. "Yesterday was a bad day?"

"The past two weeks have been...not a flare up but I've been on the edge. I think the stress of Papa and the marriage, the move...it all coalesced," she said guiltily.

I hated that she felt guilty, that I was the person who made her feel she needed to do better and perform *normally*.

"I wish I'd known, Angel. I wish you'd told me."

“I’m sorry. I just...didn’t want you to handle me like something fragile. I was enjoying us so much...and then I messed it up with the RA.”

“You messed nothing up,” I stated firmly and hauled her up a little, so we’d be face to face. “You did nothing. This is just the way it is, and we’ll manage it. Got it?”

She nodded, but she didn’t believe me. I wouldn’t believe myself. I didn’t know how to handle any of this, but what I knew was that I had to be careful with her. This woman lived with pain—I didn’t want to add to it.

“Your father obviously knew. What did he do to help you?” I asked, stroking her back.

She shifted, and I took one of her hands in mine. I noticed her fingers were slightly swollen. I had to monitor these things—this would be the signal that RA was affecting her.

“He was not feeling great by the time my mother passed away—so...,” she trailed away which meant that she took care of Enzo rather than the other way around.

“And your mother?”

She moved again, as if trying to distance herself from me but I held her tight. Flesh against flesh. Seeing her lie listlessly on her studio floor had shaken me up. I wanted to hold her, touch her, keep her close.

She looked at me and I waited. “She was disappointed that I was not *normal*. I had some great doctors. First in San Francisco and then in Healdsburg.”

As she spoke, my respect for her grew. Her resilience was incredible. “You’ve been fighting this all by yourself?” I asked, my voice a touch harsher than intended. I was angry with her parents for letting her battle this alone. For not being there for her. For wanting her to be something she wasn’t.

She chuckled lightly. “Well, not entirely by myself. I had great doctors... always. I have Dr. Meena, Navya, and now,” she looked pointedly at me, “I have you.” She said those last words like a question.

My heart clenched. Her vulnerability, her strength, and that tiny flicker of hope in her eyes left me feeling exposed. “Liesel,” I began, the weight of my feelings pressing on my chest, “I’m... I’m in uncharted waters here and I’m going to need you to guide me. That means, you need to communicate with me. Got it?”

She took my hand, the touch sending a jolt through me. “Got it.”

I drew a deep breath, “I want to be there for you, Angel but you’re going to

have to ask for help when you need it as well. I'm not a fucking mind reader."

She squeezed my hand reassuringly, and I knew that cost her because she winced. "I promise I'll do my best."

I fed her some avocado toast for breakfast and orange juice; after which she went back to sleep. Navya was going to leave late in the evening to avoid traffic, so she said she'd spend the day with Liesel.

"She just sleeps, and you should let her," Navya advised me. "There isn't much for you to do."

Yeah, I'd figured that much out. There simply wasn't a lot I could do for Liesel. *Talk about feeling helpless!*

As I left my wife's room, my emotions churned in a whirlwind. I was undeniably drawn to Liesel. The challenge now was to navigate these unexpected depths of feeling without losing myself, or her.

Chapter 21

ATLAS



I gazed out of the window, the vineyard stretching as far as the eye could see. Liesel's words from earlier still echoed in my mind, her calm explanation about her condition. It wasn't life-threatening, she'd said, but my heart told me it wasn't just about that. She'd lived her life in limbo since she turned sixteen. This was why she didn't date. That's why she kept her circle small.

I don't want to be a burden on anyone.

She was twenty-three years old and for the past two years she'd taken care of her father. Before that, I'd bet she'd taken care of her mother before she died. Here I was thinking she was a kid who didn't know how to take responsibility, but she'd been winning a war her body was waging against her.

A part of me was in awe and another was resentful. Here was one more person in my life who needed me, who I had to take care of.

Orion knocked softly on the door and entered, a look of understanding in his eyes. "Heard you and Liesel talked," he began, taking the seat across my desk.

I turned my attention to him, leaning against the window, my back to the vines that were our lives. "Navya told you?" He nodded. "And Liesel talked to Ariel, and me, explained why she was...well, you know."

I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. "I don't know how to deal with this, O. One minute, it felt like we were finding common ground, and the next... everything's flipped on its head."

Orion looked thoughtful. "Ever since our parents passed, you've shouldered every responsibility."

I took a deep breath. "I know I didn't want to marry her but in the past few weeks...she's been like a breath of fresh air. Like the cliché goes, she makes me feel young. I thought...hoped that the next two years would be easy, fun. We'd have some good times and then move on."

"You don't think you'd be able to make a *real* connection that would go beyond the two years?" Orion wondered.

"Not anymore."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Orion smirked. "I do. You thought this would be fun and games. Easy. She could be someone you could let loose with. No responsibility, no obligation. And now, you feel you're backed into a corner, having to be *her* protector.

I frowned, taken aback by his insight. "It's not about protection," I argued. But deep down, his words resonated. It wasn't just about Liesel's RA. It was the burden of responsibility, of always being there for others. I was tired of it.

Orion leaned forward. "You're scared, aren't you? Not of Liesel's condition, but of being stuck in this loop of caregiving. You're wondering if there's ever going to be someone to take care of you."

I looked away, the truth of his words pressing down on me. "It's not like

that,” I muttered without conviction.

Orion rose, walked up to me, and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay to want someone to hold your hand, Atlas. To wish for a partner who supports you as much as you support them.”

“She would never be *that* partner. That’s who I thought Daphne would be.” I sighed. “I may never have loved Daph but...we clicked. She’s a grown up and she knows the business. She takes care of herself and...she took care of me.”

I thought back to our year together. That was the attraction, wasn’t it? Daphne took care of me. She helped me with my business and didn’t make demands on me. She planned every date, every night out. She didn’t mind if I was busy. She asked for nothing and just gave. She took nothing from me. And it had been a relief to be with someone who I wasn’t supposed to look after, who was there for me.

Now that I understood better how I felt, I was glad that we didn’t end up together. It would’ve been unfair to Daphne to be with a man who only wanted to take from her. I wondered what she got from me. The sex was good. Absolutely. She was a vivacious and exciting woman with a great body and a lot of confidence. We spent a lot of time together because we worked in close proximity. How many of our workdays had ended with us sleeping in the main house? So many that she’d asked once if maybe we should move in together. I’d dodged the question, and she hadn’t pushed me. On weekends, I didn’t see her, not really. I spent time at home or the wine tasting room in the Funk Zone. The times we had gone out on weekends was for wine-related events or gatherings. A few of her things had been in my home—in the closet, in the bathroom. She never left much behind and when we ended, the sad truth was that it all fit in a small box, which I’d handed to her.

Our relationship had been easy. Worse. I think it had been convenient.

Fuck. I’d never *really* dated Daphne. We worked together and fell into the sack...and that was it. I knew little about her childhood, her parents, what made her who she is. I knew about her professional life because I’d hired her, read her resume, interviewed her.

God, I was an asshole!

I’d almost destroyed Daphne’s fucking life by marrying her. She’d have married me because she *thought* she was in love with me. Sooner than later, she’d have figured out that I wasn’t in love with her, and I would never be.

Never? How was I so sure about that? And why did I feel that Daphne only

thought she was in love with me? Because I never let her in. She didn't know me so how she could love me? She saw the CEO persona—she didn't see the man with his insecurities, his worries, the weight of it all. Not because she didn't want to know me, oh no, she'd tried. But I didn't let people in. Since my parents died, I'd let very few people in. Enzo had gotten through but that was during a time when I'd desperately needed guidance to save Callahan Vineyards.

I was friends with Mateo Silva, who'd also invested in Callahan Vineyards. He and I had gotten to know one another because of his love for wine. I knew several of the farmers and winemakers in the Santa Barbara and central valley. I was friends with many of them, and close with only a couple, one being Alejandro Santos, the CEO of Golden Valley, an organic farm and the other was Seraphina Vine.

I had acquaintances. Several of them. If you asked anyone, they'd say Atlas Callahan is an extrovert and has many friends. My single-minded focus on raising Orion and Ariel and saving Callahan Vineyards had propelled me to have transactional relationships with people. You do this for me, and I do that for you. I'd never fallen in love with a woman. I was thirty-six years old, and I'd never gone past infatuation and lust.

“Do you think I can fall in love?” I asked Orion.

He looked quizzically at me. “Of course. We're all capable of falling in love.”

Even though Orion and Ariel were now adults, they were still in some ways my children. I'd raised them and I'd always feel responsible for them.

“I sometimes feel like I've used up all my quota of love.... I just... I'm tired,” I confessed, a rare admission of vulnerability.

“Do you think you could fall in love with Liesel?”

I laughed. “No, I'm pretty sure that won't happen. She's a kid, O. And... now I find out that she's a sick kid.”

Orion smiled gently at me. “Liesel is more than her disease. And you, brother, are more than your responsibilities.”

Chapter 22

LIESEL



My husband avoided me for a month after he found out that I had an autoimmune disease. *Yeah, I am going to die a virgin.*

This was my one chance at sex and that too with a hunk, a man I felt safe with, and he was ruining it by treating me like a fragile child who lived in his house and under his care.

Have you eaten? You have to eat well to keep your strength.

I'll take you to your doctor's appointment next week.

Do your fingers look swollen? Are you in pain?

Have you taken all your medication today?

I didn't have a husband; I had a father. Maybe I could call him *Daddy*. Wasn't there daddy kink in porn? I needed to check it out though I was pretty sure if I called Atlas, *Daddy*, he wouldn't ask if I wanted a spanking, he'd *run* for the vines. And also...eww!

I spent time in my studio and with Ariel in the house. I was feeling isolated, so when Ariel came to ask if I'd like to join her for a drink at Whispering Vines, I couldn't get out of the house fast enough.

"In downtown San Francisco and even in Healdsburg, I never needed to drive, but here, everything is spread out," I complained to Seraphina who promised us we'd love the Merlot she served, which we did.

"Is it because of your RA that you never learnt to drive?" Ariel asked.

"Partly...I worried that I'd get stuck somewhere with a flare up and then what will I do?" I admitted. "The disease hit me when I was sixteen and...I never got a permit and...then it just didn't matter."

"I think it's time for you to take some risks," Seraphina announced. "You should ask Atlas to teach you."

No! Not when he was Mr. Grumpy.

"He's so busy," I quipped. "How about you, Ariel?"

Before Ariel could respond, Seraphina barked, "No. No one should learn to drive from Ariel."

"Why?"

"They all say I'm a bad driver but I'm...just misunderstood." Ariel stuck her tongue out at Seraphina, who laughed. "Ask Orion. He's the most patient of us all," she suggested.

The next evening as the cool air of November wrapped around me, I went to the wine cellar. Inside, the sweet, musky aroma of aging wine enveloped the space, evidence of the harvest and the meticulous craft of winemaking. There, amid rows of oak barrels, I found Orion, a pipette in hand, drawing samples to test the developing wine.

His presence was always soothing. In the dim light, his silhouette stood out, tall and lean, with a quiet strength that contrasted with the chaotic world outside.

I cleared my throat. "Orion?"

He looked up, a small smile forming on his face. "Hey. What brings you down here?"

I hesitated for a moment, feeling the weirdness of my request. “I need to ask you something,” I started, wringing my hands nervously.

He set the pipette down, turning to face me fully. “Of course. What is it?”

I took a deep breath and admitted, “I don’t know how to drive. And with life here in Callahan Vineyards where everything is so...big and with no public transportation, it’s becoming a necessity. Would you teach me?”

There was a pause, during which request seemed to hang in the air between us. Then, he nodded slowly, “I’d be happy to.”

Relief washed over me, because I’d worried that he’d ask me to talk to Atlas and I just didn’t want to deal with my cranky husband right now. “I should warn you that I’m probably going to be a terrible student.”

Orion chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “I have experience with Ariel, and no one could be worse. We’ll take it slow.”

For a moment, we just stood there, surrounded by the cellar’s gentle hum and the wine’s subtle scent.

“This is a beautiful space.” I looked around in awe at how being here made me feel like I was in an old wine cellar somewhere in France and monks were going to walk by anytime.

Sensing my curiosity, he offered, “Would you like a tour?”

Eagerly nodding, I followed him deeper into the heart of the cellar. As we weaved through rows of oak barrels, the air grew cooler and the scent of aging wine more pronounced.

He stopped beside an old wooden rack, cradling bottles covered in a thick layer of dust. “These,” he began, gently lifting a bottle to examine its label, “are some of our oldest vintages. This is our family history...I guess now *your* family’s history as well.”

I traced a finger over the label, captivated and ignored his comment about how I was now a Callahan. “Your family’s legacy.”

Orion’s eyes shimmered with pride. “Our grandparents started it. They had a tiny piece of land, not more than a few acres. They poured their heart and soul into every bottle, and over time, the name Callahan became synonymous with quality. My parents expanded the business, bought more land.”

As he spoke, the appreciation of his legacy was palpable. There was a deep sense of responsibility and respect for the past mixed with hope for the future.

“But,” Orion continued, his tone changing, becoming reverent, “It’s Atlas who truly transformed this place. He made Callahan Vineyards the force it is

today.”

“Atlas carries a lot on his shoulders.” My husband may ignore me, but I knew he was immersed in his work. I wondered if he was *immersed* in his VP of Marketing as well. But I shook that thought away.

No, you will not indulge in jealousy. Life was short, and I didn’t want to be consumed with the lives of others. I’d had to work through my feelings as a teenager when I used to feel jealous of the other girls in my class who were healthy, who didn’t have bad days.

There was admiration in his voice as he spoke of his brother. “Despite the challenges and the struggles, he never gave up. He’s put in so much hard work. I’ve seen him make sacrifices, difficult decisions, and face hardships head-on. He’s the reason we’re still standing, the reason we’re poised to succeed.”

It was obvious that Orion deeply respected and looked up to his brother.

“The world sees the brand, the success, the wine,” Orion mused, placing the vintage bottle back onto its rack. “But behind it all is Atlas’s determination and vision.”

We stood there for a moment, enveloped in the legacy of Callahan Vineyards. The story wasn’t just about wine; it was about family, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to a dream. And as I looked at Orion, with the weight of history surrounding us, I felt an even deeper appreciation for the place and the people who had brought it to life.

“Come on, I’ll walk you back to the house.”

“When do we start my driving lessons?” I asked.

“How about noon tomorrow? I have some work in the mornings but I’m free in the afternoon.”

“I can’t wait.” I felt giddy as I went into the house with Orion.

I wished my father was still here, he’d be so proud of me for taking the first step towards driving. Papa would have loved that I was not letting my disease dictate my life.

Orion leaned against the patio door as I went inside the house to bring out a bottle of wine with two glasses. I knew some of the Callahan rituals and one was a glass of wine in the evening, together, on the patio as they watched their vines.

Ariel was away, meeting friends in Santa Barbara and would not be back until the next evening, and Atlas was...god knows where. Orion and I got comfortable on the big wooden sofa with the outdoor fireplace turned on

high.

I pulled the blanket I'd started leaving on the sofa to cover both him and me. We sat close together, huddled.

"How are you settling in?" he asked, an arm stretched behind me. "It's been...what two months now?"

"Nearly three. Thanksgiving will be here soon." I felt relaxed as I always did around Orion. He didn't cause an upheaval of my senses at Atlas did.

"Wow! Yeah. You came here when we were harvesting."

"You were busy then and yet you came to Healdsburg for the wedding?"

"Of course. It was my brother's wedding," he replied. "September and October are busy for me, but things settle around this time. After Christmas it picks up again—as we get ready for spring and budding."

"What do you do for Thanksgiving?" I asked.

"We cook, *together*, and spend the day watching the game. Taking a nap on the couch. Seraphina joins us once in a while. She will this year, she told us. Sometimes she travels, so I keep Whispering Vines open during Thanksgiving for her. She has friends everywhere. Louis Sincini, our cellar manager joins us. His wife passed away several years ago and his kids live in Europe, so if he's not visiting them, he's in charge of the pies. This year he's going to London so we're on our own for the pies."

I loved listening to him talk about the Callahan traditions. I didn't grow up with many...or any. My mother worked a lot and most Thanksgivings we went to a restaurant. My father and I spent Thanksgiving with Dr. Rao and Navya for the last couple of years. Navya's parents were divorced, and she hardly saw her father who'd moved back to India.

"I was wondering," I said as a thought emerged. "Do you think Seraphina needs more help at Whispering Vines? Maybe once I learn how to drive, I could work there a few times a week? I need to get out of the house and do something."

"What did you do in Healdsburg?" Orion asked as he refilled his wine glass.

"I helped out at the gallery...speaking of which I need to get back to my agent. She wants to visit and also pick up some of my art. It's a quiet time for me as well. Usually, if I'm on commission then I have a deadline...but now, I'm just doing what I feel like." I drank some wine and felt relaxed. It was nice to have someone to talk about the mundane.

"We're all very curious about your art," Orion chimed.

“Come by anytime,” I invited. “I’ve wondered why no one comes into the studio.”

“Strict orders from Atlas,” Orion told me. “He doesn’t want you to be disturbed. He wants you to have the peace and quiet you are used to.”

The boring silence? Atlas really needed to put some effort in getting to know me.

“Please come by. I don’t need peace...I mean I do but I want people around me. What the hell does Atlas know about me to pass such an order?” I sulked.

Orion put an arm around me and chuckled. “He wants you to be happy. We’re all grateful to you. We know this is a sacrifice and—“

“No, it’s not,” I implored and took Orion’s free hand in mine. “Please. I get so much out of this. I just lost my father and being here with all of you...it’s healing.”

Orion smiled at me. He leaned and brushed his lips across my forehead. “I’m glad we make you feel better.”

Footsteps alerted us and I knew it was Atlas. I immediately felt self-conscious. How was I dressed? Did my hair look okay? Would he continue to ignore me?

Chapter 23

LIESEL



“Hey, A.” Orion raised his glass to his brother. Atlas had just come back from work. He was still in the suit he’d left home in, but he’d taken his tie off and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. I could see the red silk peek out.

“You look cozy,” Atlas replied, an edge to his voice.

Orion took his arm from around me to look at his watch and sighed. “It’s late. How long were you working?”

“I had a meeting with a distributor in China.” He looked at me, his blue eyes piercing in the fire’s light.

“Sleep well, Liesel.” Orion gave me a quick hug, he picked up his glass, and I took it from him.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take it inside.”

Orion left after putting a hand on Atlas’s shoulder. My husband stood where he’d been, unmoving.

“There’s dinner if you haven’t eaten.” I drank some wine to calm my nerves.

“I ate...we ordered in because of the meeting.”

We? I got up then, unable to stand it any longer. Jealousy was eating at me. “Who was in the meeting with you?”

“Colleagues,” he offered unhelpfully.

I took the bottle and glasses and walked into the house. I heard him following me.

“You seem to get along well with Orion.”

“He’s more my age,” I retorted to provoke him. “And he’s actually around and has time for me.”

I set the glasses and bottle on the counter, feeling anger surge through me. I turned around to face Atlas, and he pulled me against him. “Am I too old for you?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. You leave early, come back late, and have no time for me. And when you come back late, you go straight to bed.”

Oh god, I sounded like a nagging wife.

My hands were on his forearms as he held me, an emotion I didn’t recognize vibrating through him, into me. This was the first time since our *date* that he had touched me. I felt the zing of it, the heat.

Did he feel it too?

“Are you waiting up for me?” he demanded.

“No,” I replied shakily.

“You like Orion?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want him?” he snarled.

I blinked. And unexpected laughter bubbled out of me. “Excuse me?”

“Do you want my brother, Angel? Do you?”

“No.”

“You want me?” he pulled me against him, cupped my ass and ground

himself against me. “Do you?”

I could smell his cologne, the fall weather, the vines...and him.

“I want you,” I whispered.

It was fascinating to watch the dam break, his control disappear, and his mouth crash against mine. He kissed me like a starving man, and I responded, my hands stroking him, holding him close all at the same time.

“You want me?” he asked again.

“Yes,” I whimpered and planted my lips at his throat, where a pulse beat. I licked him and he groaned.

He lifted me and set me down on the counter. His hands moved over me, removing my sweater and then my blouse. He cupped my breasts through the bra and then as if losing a battle, pulled the cups down and bent his head to suckle me.

My hands immediately found his hair, and I held him close, feeling the thrill of his mouth on me. My heart banged against my ribs.

“I can’t get enough,” he cried out as he raised his head and kissed me again. And then again. His lips rough against my skin. I welcome it. “I missed you. I missed this.”

Yes!

“I missed you too,” I told him shyly and smiled at him.

His eyes blazed with something I’d never seen before but recognized. *Hunger*. He opened my legs and stood in between them. I wore tights with Ugg boots, and he cupped me through them. I moaned; my eyes closed.

“No, Angel, keep your eyes open,” he pleaded.

He peeled my tights along with my panties down my waist and I helped him as he got them down to my ankles. I felt trapped, unable to move. He yanked my Uggs off and removed my tights. I sat naked, but for my bra that was pulled down, exposing my breasts.

He cupped me again, and he moaned. “You’re so wet and...” he slid a finger inside me, “tight. So tight. I go mad thinking about how it will feel to be inside you. Feel your pulse around me.”

Now that he said the words, I wanted to feel him inside me. I wanted...I gripped him when he pumped his finger in and out; and then added another and then another. I felt intolerably stretched and extremely aroused. He knelt then, and I almost leaped off the counter.

“No, stay,” he commanded.

I knew what he was about to do, and I felt shy, wanting to close myself but

he wouldn't let me. He held my thighs apart and then his mouth was on me.

He licked me and stuck his tongue inside me. "You taste...exactly like I knew you would. Fucking orange blossoms."

His fingers were back pumping in and out. I felt suspended in space. Unable to think because the physical had taken over. I was only flesh and sensation.

"Atlas," I shivered. "Yes, baby. Come for me." He gently bit my clit, and I did exactly what he wanted me to do. I came.

He kissed my pussy as my tremors subsided. He stood up and looked at me, shaking his head. "I said I would not do this and.... I'm sorry."

I felt tears spike my eyes. "Why? I want you."

"And I want you," he laughed in self-deprecation. "I want you so much that I can't sleep at night. But I don't think it's a good idea. I...I don't want you to think that this could be more than what it is. That you could be more..."

"More?"

"You're a temporary wife." He stepped away from me.

His words hurt. While his family was making me feel like I was one of them, Atlas was telling me I wasn't, and I could never be.

"Atlas." I got off the counter, feeling conscious of being naked. I pulled my sweater on and it covered me to mid-thigh. "You said we could have sex. If you don't want that, I get it. But we can be friends, can't we? How will this work if you keep ignoring me?"

"If I don't ignore you, I'm going to fuck you," he said almost desperately.

"I don't understand—"

"No, you don't because you're a fucking child. I should know better and... damn it! I'm sorry, Liesel. This will not happen again. I'm going to bed."

I watched him as he walked away from me. He stopped and then turned around.

"You don't have to do my laundry. We all do our own fucking laundry in this house."

I smiled. "Atlas, I'm at home all day. It's not like I take the clothes to the river and beat them clean. You have a washer and a dryer."

"And you don't have to cook and clean...we—"

"Atlas, I know you have a cleaner who comes once a week. I do very basic cleaning. Just the dishes we use. And I have to eat as well,"

He shook his head then as if unable to explain himself. I walked up to him and put my hand on his chest. "I live here too. I can contribute."

“You’re not the help, Liesel.”

“I know. I’m your wife. And this is now my home, even if it’s temporary. I’m allowed to take care of it.”

Atlas stuck his hands in his pockets as if stopping himself from holding me. “I’m tired and I have a long day tomorrow.”

I let my hands drop away from him. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Stay away from me, Liesel. Just stay the fuck away from me.”

“Fine,” I muttered. “And...just to be clear, you’re the one who ate me out on our kitchen counter. I didn’t *fucking* ask for it.”

I walked past him and went up the stairs to my room. That night I couldn’t sleep and spent it in my studio, my art becoming bolder and darker, a reflection of my turmoil.

Chapter 24

ATLAS



I was distracted at work. My young bride was a fever inside me. I wanted her. I couldn't have her. I worried about her, all the fucking time. Was she okay? Did she take her medication? Would she have a flare up?

Remembering her lying on the floor of her studio, still made my pulse gallop with fear. I wanted her safe. I wanted her happy. I wanted her in my bed. I wanted her out of my life.

I didn't know what the fuck I wanted!

“Babe, are you listening to me?” Daphne interrupted my thoughts.

I wish she’d stop calling me babe. It felt like I was cheating on Liesel when she did that. But bringing it up would just start the whole conversation about our breakup and I didn’t want to go there. I didn’t want to go anywhere with Daphne. I wanted to go home and be with my wife. I wanted to lie down with her, hold her. Maybe if I did, I’d finally get some sleep. She’d been here for three months and now I couldn’t remember my life without the smell of fucking orange blossoms in the house.

She cooked and cleaned. Like a goddamn housewife. Like the cutest, most alluring housewife. She did my laundry. I’d come home and find my clothes in my closet. It took me a week to figure it out, when I discovered my laundry basket was empty. I had a cleaning service that came by once a week to vacuum, clean, and change the sheets.

But she took care of everything else.

There was breakfast. She’d eat with me...in silence because I’d be on my phone, on purpose so I didn’t have to talk to her beyond saying thank you for whatever she’d made. She was a good cook. I was being spoiled with blueberry pancakes, Spanish torta, eggs Benedict...and always with fresh orange juice. She made sure the fridge was stocked and insisted I go through the Instacart cart before she ordered anything so I could add whatever I needed. It was all too fucking domestic.

I liked it.

That was the problem. I liked it, and I liked her, which is why I did everything in my power to keep my distance from her.

On the weekends, Orion usually took care of the tasting room in the Funk Zone, but to avoid Liesel, I’d started doing that. Hansa Raj was working out very well in the tasting room on the vineyard—and Orion grudgingly thanked Seraphina, who demanded his gratitude.

Hansa was hardworking and knowledgeable about wine. I was confident she’d grow into an excellent winemaker, which I knew was what she wanted to do.

Her parents ran the dental practice in Everwood, which meant they knew everyone in our small town, and were aware of our dental hygiene habits. Dr. Karan Raj, her father, lamented that his younger daughter had little ambition—and my saying she wanted to be a winemaker didn’t invoke confidence. He didn’t think there was much money in the wine business, and he wanted more for his daughter. Well, hell, I couldn’t blame him. The wine business was a

tough one—but I wouldn't want to do anything else.

"You are distracted these days," Daphne mused. "Everything okay at home?"

I sighed. She wasn't overt about how she felt anymore but the subtle jabs were...well, they were irritating me because everything was not okay at home. I had a wife who I wanted naked and under me. She was thirteen years younger than me, and I worried about her health like a mother hen.

"Yes." I got up and looked at my watch. "I'm going to go home for lunch and work from there for the rest of the day."

I packed my backpack while Daphne watched and walked out of my office. Esai, my assistant wasn't at his desk, so I left him a note, telling him I was going to be out of the office for the rest of the day. What I was planning to do with my day I had no clue about, but it was going to have to do something with getting my wife out of my mind.

I walked to the house and as I was, I heard the rumbling of Orion's truck. I turned to see him and instead found my wife driving with my brother sitting next to her. She stopped the truck, and I walked up to find out what the fuck was going on. My temper was on the fritz, and I was pissed as hell because I was jealous, stupidly jealous of my brother.

"Place your hands on the nine o'clock and three o'clock." Orion guided Liesel's hands on to the steering wheel. "Feel the weight of the car and move with it. Let's start slow."

I knocked on the window and Orion rolled it down. "Hey. I'm teaching Liesel to drive."

"I can see that."

"What's wrong?" Orion asked.

I could feel the leash on my anger slipping. "Angel, if you're going to learn, you learn from me." *Where was this coming from?* I was feeling possessive of Liesel. I hated my brother's hands on her. For pity's sake, my own brother who I knew saw her as a sister. I was truly losing my fucking mind.

"What?" Liesel looked confused.

"Get out," I said to Orion who looked amused.

"It's up to Liesel." His voice was neutral.

Liesel looked at him and then me. "Okay. I'd like you to teach me. I just didn't think you wouldn't have time and—."

"Drop her off at the house. We'll take the Subaru." I turned around and

walked home brusquely, trying to calm myself. She was making me lose my mind.

My temper did not ease when we got into the Subaru ten minutes later. My impatience was evident the moment I sat beside her in the passenger seat. “Turn the car on,” I commanded, and when she hesitated, I raised my voice, “Just do it!”

“You have a terrible passenger-side manner,” Liesel threw back at me. “Orion was patient and—“

“Well, he isn’t here now, is he? I am.” I’d taken her to the extended parking lot of the office, which was empty because the wine tasting room got little traffic on weekdays.

She struggled and I knew it was because I was being the epitome of an asshole.

“Don’t jerk the wheel.”

“You’re pressing the gas too hard.”

As we drove around the tasting room parking lot, I could see her anxiety grow. “Let’s do some parking. Just line the car up and turn,” I ordered.

“You’re not helping! You’re just yelling at me!” she snapped. “You know what. I’d rather learn from Orion.”

Anger and hurt warred inside me. “You’re my wife,” I retorted, “You should learn from me.”

“We might be married, but you don’t own me. And our marriage is temporary! Remember that! Because you make sure I do at the drop of a hat,” she shot back, fighting back tears.

The car went silent, the only sound being our heavy breathing and the distant chirping of crickets in the vineyard. After what felt like an eternity, she spoke, “I think driving class is over.”

“You bet.”

I watched her leave and walk back to the house.

Chapter 25

ATLAS



She was in her room, sitting on her bed, tears rolling down her cheeks when I found her. I regretted my behavior.

“Hey, Angel.” I sat down next to her and picked her up, so she was on my lap, and held her. “I’m so sorry for being an asshole.”

She sniffled and cuddled against me. “Are you back with Daphne?”

“What?” I pulled away from her so I could see her face.

“Are you? Is that why you’re...pushing me away?”

I smiled then because it was amusing how she was jealous of Daphne, and I was jealous of my brother. Quite a pair we made. “Did it look like I was pushing you away when I made you come last night?”

“You pushed me away after,” she accused me.

I kissed her nose. “I know. Trust me. I didn’t want to.”

“I don’t understand. Is it because I’m inexperienced? Is that it?”

“No, darling. I’m thirteen years older than you.” I sighed when she rolled her eyes. “I am and nothing can change that. Got it?”

“Yes, I got it. But have you? I don’t care how old you are. Why do you care so much about how young I am?”

“So young and so wise,” I murmured and rubbed my lips against hers. “I can’t sleep. I’m distracted at work. You’ve done something to me.”

“You think it’s different for me? I can’t sleep. I can’t paint. I keep...I don’t know... thinking if you’ll—”

I kissed her then because we were both on the same page, that much was clear. I wanted her. Desperately. She wanted me just as much. We were both panting when I pulled away. I lay her down on the bed and looked at her.

She wore a long dress, one of those boho style ones that made her look like she was something from the sixties.

“Are you sure you want this?” I asked her as I slowly unbuttoned her dress. She nodded.

“It’s your first time. We’ll take it slowly.” I hoped I could. I’d been wanting her for so long now that I didn’t know if I’d have the patience. But this was her first time. I wanted it to be memorable. I wanted her to feel safe. I wanted her to...feel *loved*?

I undressed her slowly, languidly, taking my time. The afternoon sun gleamed through the windows and the balcony doors. She glowed in the light.

“Are you shy?” I asked when she tried to roll, to hide from me.

She nodded. “A little.”

I got up and took my clothes off as she watched. I couldn’t look away from her nude body. She was delicate...but strong. Frail but indomitable. Afraid but full of courage. My wife was a mass of contradictions. *My wife!*

“You look fantastic.” She raised herself on her elbows to look at me, her eyes on my erection. I stroked myself and heard her gasp.

She sat up and held her hand to me. I took her hand and touched my penis. I jerked, her cool touch somehow incendiary. She closed her small hand around me, and I tried to control my breathing. She was inexperienced—she

was experimenting, and I didn't want to stop her.

"You're hard."

"Yes," I whispered.

"And yet...smooth." She stroked me and I groaned, not wanting to spill myself in her hands. Not wanting to embarrass myself.

I took her hand and sat down on the bed. I kissed her hand and pushed her to lay back down. I ran a hand over her body, from forehead to toes. She shivered. Goosebumps erupted over her skin.

"Why didn't you have sex before?" I asked.

"Ah...just...didn't."

I touched a hardened nipple and then the other. I squeezed each gently, and she whimpered. "Like driving?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm the one who will teach you to drive; and to make love."

I parted her thighs and touched her. She was wet, warm, and wanting.

"Atlas."

"Yes, baby."

"Please."

I looked at her face, contorted in need. I smiled and bent to kiss her. I didn't want to rush this, no matter how much she heated my flesh. I wanted to take my time with her. Enjoy her. Let her enjoy me.

I wandered down her body with my mouth. Feasted on her breasts until she was crooning with pleasure, vibrating with hunger.

"Did you like my mouth on you?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

"I'm going to do it again." Hell, I'm going to do it every day. If all I have is two years with this fascinating woman, then I'm going to make love with her every day, every chance I get.

I parted her thighs and groaned when I smelled her arousal. No other woman had enamored me so much either.

I tasted her and licked her the way I now knew she liked, the way I could taste her best. Her hands clutched my hair, and she ground her hips against me, to get more of me. I let her drive herself to orgasm and when she came, I knew I was out of patience.

"Are you on birth control?" I asked as I came up and lay on her, my weight on my forearms.

"Yes."

“It doesn’t affect your RA?” I rubbed my erection between her thighs.

“No. Birth control improves RA activity and severity...Atlas.” Her hands grabbed my ass, and she pushed me against her.

“Are you okay if I don’t use a condom?” I asked.

“Yes...can we...”

I stilled her. “This is important.”

“I know,” she said sensually. “I trust you. Now, could we get on with it?” I grinned and kissed her. “Yes. But slowly. We’re going to do this *very slowly.*”

“Are you big?”

I looked up and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I haven’t seen a lot of penises except when I watch porn...is yours average or big?”

No one, but no one had made me laugh out loud during sex. But she did. I kissed her forehead, her nose and then her mouth. “It’s just your average-sized penis.”

She looked down at my dick and I tried to not feel too self-conscious as I imagined her measuring me. *Christ! She was a package.*

“So...you’ll fit.”

I nudged the tip of my penis into her. “Yes, Angel. We’ll fit beautifully.”

I pushed in slowly even though everything inside me wanted to ram into her, take what I needed, what I wanted, But I couldn’t and wouldn’t rush her. There would be time for urgent love making, the kind where we could consume each other. But not this time. This first time.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked when I was half-way in, the effort was all but killing.

“No,” she wailed. “*Please...do something.*”

I pushed and was seated inside her. I felt her shake. “Did that hurt?”

She moved languidly and rolled her hips. “No.”

She looked satisfied. She opened her eyes and smiled. “Give me more, husband.”

I pulled out and pushed back in. I was slow at first, but she urged me to move faster, demanded it, first with her body and then with words.

“Atlas, for god’s sake, make me come.”

For an inexperienced ingénue, she was demanding and a delight in bed. I pushed against her and as I did, I found her clit with my fingers. I stroked her as I moved. I wanted us to come together, but I knew it was a tall order. This

was her first time. I was lucky she'd come once.

"Atlas," she moaned, her eyes closed.

"No, baby. Open your eyes." I wanted to see those expressive eyes of her that showed everything she felt.

Her eyes opened just as she started to spasm around me. There was wonder and unmitigated delight in her eyes. I kissed her mouth and poured myself into her, feeling for the first time in a long time a sense of rightness.

"You've bewitched me," I moaned as I felt my release thunder through me.

"I'm glad," she whispered. "Because you have me under your spell as well, Atlas."

Chapter 26

LIESEL



It was official . *I was in love with my husband.*

I watched him sleep as sunlight streamed into my room.

My beautiful room, the one Atlas had set up for me so I could be comfortable. Would this mean we'd now be a normal couple who sleep together, *every night*? The thought made me both excited and shy. I had lived a mostly solitary life, and now I had to adjust to having someone in my space, my bed, my life.

For the past months we were living like cordial roommates but now... everything had changed. At least I hope it had. I wouldn't be able to stand it if we went back to ignoring me.

I ran a finger down his sharp cheekbone and traced his lips; as I did, he smiled in his sleep and my heart raced. Last night was amazing. *I was now unvirginally yours!*

For someone who'd waited as long as I had to have sex...not by design but by default, it had been everything they said it wouldn't be. *First times are messy*, Navya had warned me, and it takes a while to figure out how to orgasm.

PSA to all virgins, try Atlas, he knows how to make you come!

"Good morning, Angel," Atlas whispered, his eyes still closed. "What's the time?"

He stretched and then pulled me to him, so my head rested on his shoulder. "A little past six."

"Good. Then we have another hour before I need to get ready for work." His hand stroked my back, dipping further down, finding the crease between my legs. My heart quickened. *He still wants me!*

I boldly let my hand wander over his chest and go down his stomach. And then slowly, I went further down and found him, hard.

"Yes, baby," he breathed.

"Show me how to please you."

He opened his eyes, lazy with desire, and he kissed my mouth. His hand covered mine as he gripped himself hard and pumped.

"Like that?" I asked.

"Yes," he moaned. "Like that. Harder, baby. I love your hands."

As I pumped him, his fingers entered me. Our height difference meant that his hands seemed to be everywhere. On me, inside me.

"I have a question."

He rolled me under him and entered me. I whimpered.

"Are you sore?" he asked as he moved in and out, his eyes not leaving mine.

I shook my head. I was stretched and...yes, a little sore but it was the good sore, the kind you got when you worked out and not when you had an RA flare up.

"You're so tight and...so beautiful when you're flushed like this, aroused. Wet." His breath was coming in short gasps as he moved within me and I

rolled my hips to take him in, enjoying him. “You have a question?” he prompted.

I bit my lower lip, and he smiled. “Tell me,” He insisted.

“I...I read about this and...” I closed my eyes then, feeling shy, embarrassed, naïve. *God, why did I open my mouth!*

“Liesel.” He stopped moving, and I moaned. “If you don’t tell me, I won’t make you come.”

My eyes snapped open. “That’s not nice.”

He flashed his white teeth in a feral smile. “I’m not nice, baby.”

I swallowed. “Well...you know....” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “I can’t say it.”

His fingers moved to my breasts, and he rolled a nipple between fingers. “You’re so responsive. Don’t be shy. It’s me. You can tell me anything.”

“Anal,” I choked out, my eyes shut tight.

He slammed into me. “Open your goddamn eyes when I’m inside you,” he muttered.

I did, wondering what I’d find. I found a fully aroused man.

“You want to try anal?” he asked, lifting my hips, and pumping inside me.

“I don’t know....” I moaned as he gripped my ass and stroked between my buttocks.

He dipped a finger inside, just the tip and my body bucked as everything inside me came together and I exploded. He chuckled. “I think we know you’ll like it. And we will try it. I promise.”

“We will?”

“We’ll try anything you want, Angel. Everything you want.”

I held him tight as he made love to me and emptied, crying out loud. It was the best feeling ever, to have this man inside me, with me, for me. I aroused Atlas Callahan, and I’d never felt this powerful before.

While he took a shower, I went downstairs. The morning sun cast a golden hue across the kitchen as I set about preparing breakfast. I decided on fluffy blueberry pancakes, crispy bacon, and freshly squeezed orange juice. It felt right to make something special after the intimacy we had shared the night before.

Atlas wandered into the kitchen, his hair tousled from sleep, a soft smile playing on his lips. He wrapped his arms around me from behind, planting a gentle kiss on the nape of my neck.

“Good morning,” I whispered, leaning into his embrace. His warmth felt

reassuring, grounding.

“That smells amazing,” he murmured, nodding towards the sizzling bacon.

We ate in comfortable silence, the connection between us palpable. The previous night had shifted something between us, ushering in a new ease in our relationship.

“When’s our next driving lesson? I think I’m ready to take on the vineyard roads.”

Atlas chuckled, “How about today after work? I’ll try to get home early. And I promise I’ll do better than last time.”

I arched an eyebrow, “What happened last time?”

He looked a little sheepish. “I got temperamental. It’s just... I was jealous of Orion. Sounds foolish, right?”

I hesitated for a moment before confessing, “I was jealous too, of Daphne.”

Atlas paused, setting down his fork. He reached across the table, taking my hand in his. “Liesel, there’s nothing left between Daphne and me. And I’d never cheat, not on you or anyone else.”

A warmth spread through me. For the first time, our relationship felt almost normal. And in that moment, amidst the clink of plates and the hum of the morning, I’d never been happier.

I called Seraphina after Atlas went to work. “Are you looking for someone to help at Whispering Vines?” I asked.

“Yes, since Hansa abandoned me. Orion is taking her on full-time. After all the drama he put her through when I asked him to hire, he’s now all about Hansa only working at Callahan,” Seraphina scoffed. “Why do you want to work here?”

”I need to get out and do something. And I want to learn more about wine. You know...because...” I didn’t finish, I couldn’t be bold enough to say, because now I’m a Callahan.

“How are the driving lessons?”

I flushed. “I had one yesterday and Atlas is going to...well, he’s going to teach me.”

Seraphina chuckled. “Didn’t like it, did he, that Orion had his hands on you?”

“Seraphina, did you set this up?”

She laughed. “Maybe. I know how he looks at you. A little jealousy is good for the soul and a relationship. Why don’t you come by today at noon, that’s when I open the bar. We can discuss how many hours and all that. Do you

need a ride?”

I thought about it and decided that I'd figure it out. “I'll ask Orion or Ariel.”

“Actually,” Seraphina paused, “Ask Hansa. She's in the tasting room there until eleven and she can drive you over. It's her last week with me. Will be good for her to train you.”

Seraphina texted me Hansa's contact information and set me up with a ride. I was excited to do something else beyond painting. I couldn't wait to tell Atlas all about it.

Chapter 27

ATLAS



The sun was brighter and the air tasted cleaner today. I felt lighter, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. The time with Liesel last night was fucking incredible, hands down the best sex of my life. And I've had my fair share of sexual encounters over the years. This was on another level though. I wanted to tear that pretty boy Orion a new asshole for giving her driving lessons. He was just trying to help her out, I know, but still, she was *my* wife now.

I couldn't wait to get home and get Liesel naked again. If not for the team meeting, I would've taken the day off to spend it in bed with her. I had to stop thinking about her at work though, or I'd be walking around with a hard-on all day. Not very professional.

Orion fell in step with me as I headed to the conference room. "You're looking relaxed, A," he said with a knowing glint in his eye. He could tell I'd finally sealed the deal with Liesel.

"Mind your business," I told him gruffly.

Orion just chuckled. "Liesel seems to be in a good mood today too."

I stopped short. "And how the hell would you know that?"

"She asked Hansa for a ride to the vineyard. Wants to start working there, surprise you with it."

I raised an eyebrow. She hadn't mentioned anything about that to me. Sneaky little minx.

"Don't worry, she just wants to learn more about wine now that she's a Callahan woman," Orion assured me.

A Callahan woman for two more years, I reminded myself. Couldn't let great sex cloud my judgment.

The conference room was abuzz with energy as I walked in, the expansive wooden table covered with spreadsheets, charts, and samples of holiday campaign materials. The leadership team: Orion, Daphne, Esai, and Nalini, were already in discussion, their enthusiasm clear.

"Hello, all," I greeted them, my voice light, mood buoyant. It didn't escape me that their chatter dimmed for a moment as they turned to acknowledge my greeting, exchanging subtle glances with one another.

"You look like you're in a good mood, boss," Esai remarked. "You did something good with your afternoon off yesterday?"

"I deserve a break from time to time." I set my laptop down on the table and took my seat.

"Wait, who are you and what have you done with Atlas?" Nalini teased.

"Very funny," I quipped.

Orion quirked an eyebrow, "Someone woke up on the right side of the bed."

Daphne snorted, trying to cover it up with a sip of her coffee

Nalini smirked. "You're positively glowing, Atlas. What's the secret?"

I chuckled, leaning back in my chair. "Good wine and a good night's sleep?"

Numbers looked good. Holiday campaigns were getting positive feedback. I was damn pleased with how hard everyone was grinding.

After we wrapped up, Orion hung back as the others shuffled out. He had that shit-eating grin on his face. The kind he'd give me when we were kids and he pulled one over on me.

"I like Liesel a lot," he stated.

I gave him a wary look. "Yeah? What's your point?"

"She's good for you, A. I'm glad you decided to hit that."

I scowled. "The hell are you talking about?"

Orion laughed. "Come on, man. You really think I didn't know seeing me with Liesel would light a fire under your ass? I was hoping it'd make you realize what you were about to lose."

I stared at him, stunned. "You sneaky fuck. You played me."

"Hey, it worked though, right?" He slapped me on the back.

I couldn't help but chuckle and shake my head. "Alright, but two can play at that game."

Orion smirked. "Bring it on."

I headed back to work in high spirits. For the first time in forever, it felt like the clouds had finally parted and the sun was shining on me. And it felt damn good.

Used to be that work was my escape, the place where I got lost. But as the winter sun started setting earlier, I felt a pull to get home. I had a driving lesson to supervise, and more importantly, I had Liesel waiting for me.

I was in a hurry as I packed up, the office shutting down for the day. People were talking in hushed voices, doors were closing, lights dimming. And then there was Daphne, lingering by her office door with this contemplative look on her face.

"Leaving early?" she said, voice neutral but with an edge that hinted at her true feelings.

I grinned, still riding high from my incredible night with Liesel. "Gonna teach the wife how to drive."

"She doesn't know how to drive?"

Shit, slipped up there. I shrugged, playing it cool. "Yeah."

"Your child bride doesn't even know how to drive?" Heat in her voice now. I took a deep breath, reining in my temper.

"I won't discuss my wife with you, Daphne," I said firmly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, lips pressed tight. When she looked at

me again, her green eyes were clouded. "You're right, I'm sorry. Your marriage is none of my business." She hesitated before continuing. "After the holidays, I'm quitting, Atlas."

That surprised me. Part of me felt relieved, part guilty. "I'm sorry to hear that—"

She cut me off, voice wavering slightly. "It's not you. It's me. I always knew you'd never love me the way I loved you, even though I hoped otherwise. I thought maybe if I loved you enough..." She trailed off, not meeting my eyes.

I took a step toward her, emotions churning in my gut. "I never meant to hurt you. I valued our friendship. If I ever made you think there could be more, I sincerely apologize."

Had I not been careful enough? Had she caught on to my thoughts about proposing?

She finally looked up at me, eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You're not to blame, Atlas. You never gave me hope. That should have told me something. I built those fantasies, not you. I just need a fresh start, away from all this. Away from you."

I nodded slowly, swallowing the lump in my throat. "If it means you finding happiness, I fully support your decision. You deserve the world, Daphne."

She gave a sad smile. "Thank you, Atlas. For everything." With that, she turned and left, disappearing into the growing darkness.

I stood there awhile, reflecting on past mistakes and hopes for brighter futures. But when I got home and saw Liesel waiting on the porch, I left all that behind.

"I got a job!" she announced, eyes dancing with laughter.

Had I ever been that young and carefree? She found joy every day despite her health struggles, while I dragged myself around burdened, and I had everything. I needed to learn from her, learn the art of making life happier, no matter what.

I went over and kissed her hard. "Tell me about it while we start those driving lessons."

She threw her arms around me. "I'm going to learn about wine! And sell it too, at Whispering Vines."

I put my arm around her as we headed inside. "It won't interfere with your art?"

"Just ten hours a week. Friday afternoons and Tuesday afternoons until six. Do you think you could drive me until I get a license? Hansa took me today and..."

She chattered on eagerly. I felt an enormous sense of peace and relief. No drama with Liesel, just openness. My wonderful wife didn't play games.

"One of us will take you, don't worry," I assured her.

"I don't want to be a burden—"

I stopped her, looking into her eyes. "You are never a burden, okay? Never."

She stretched up on her toes to kiss me. "Okay. Do you think I could learn stick shift someday? Seraphina said a real woman drives five gears."

"Let's start with automatic. We'll work our way up to that."

She leaned against me, and I smelled the orange blossoms in her hair. "I love my life right now, Atlas. I never thought it could be this good. I have my studio, you're teaching me to drive, I've made friends. It's wonderful."

I held her close, soaking her in. Yeah, it really was wonderful. She was wonderful.

How the hell would I ever be able to let her go?

Chapter 28

LIESEL



The morning sun painted the landscape in warm hues as Hansa’s car pulled up in front of the Callahan main house. I had met her a few times before, during my visits to the Callahan Vineyards’ tasting room. She had an earnest air about her, with a hint of vulnerability that I could relate to.

“Ready for your first day at Whispering Vines?” Hansa asked with a smile as I climbed into the passenger seat.

Taking a deep breath, I replied, “As ready as I’ll ever be. I just needed

something different, you know? Painting is my solace, but with everything changing, I needed something more. And I want to learn more about wine.”

Hansa nodded understandingly. “New experiences help us grow. Seraphina’s wine bar is a great place to start.”

We drove in companionable silence for a while, the vineyards rolling by. Then, cautiously, I ventured, “I’ve heard stories about Seraphina... about her wine having some sort of...magic?” This had been a hot topic of discussion between two women at the wine bar when I’d visited last.

Hansa chuckled softly. “Oh, those tales have been around for ages. People swear that there’s something enchanting about her wines. But between you and me, I think it’s her ability to find excellent wine and a dash of showmanship.”

I laughed. “But every time I talk to her, I swear I feel better. It’s like she’s a warm blanket. Do you know, she helped Orion set up my studio?”

“Orion mentioned something,” Hansa mumbled as she slowed for traffic. “I’d love to see your paintings. What do you paint?”

I shrugged. “Abstract...I think is the best way to describe it.”

“You sell your paintings?”

I nodded but wanted to change the topic. It always made me uncomfortable to discuss my art, rather how well it sold. I still had trouble wrapping my head around the amount of money Clara sold my paintings for. And even weirder, people paid for Lila Evergreen’s art. In the past four years since Clara discovered me, I’d been able to pay off my student debt, buy my apartment and take care of my father. It had reached a point last year that Clara had forced me to meet with a financial advisor like people who had actual money did. Apparently, I now had actual money. Ever since Lila Evergreen won the Chelsea International Fine Art Competition—her art had become hot property.

One of my pieces was at SF MOMA—which still seemed unbelievable. I’d refused to let Liesel Brooks be associated with Lila Evergreen. I liked the anonymity and the freedom it gave me.

“How long have you known the Callahans?” I asked.

“Long time.” Hansa changed lanes to pass a very large green Audi that looked like it was almost vintage. “That’s Uncle King. He refuses to stop driving. He’s seventy something and is an accident waiting to happen. We all drive around him.”

I grinned. There was something cozy about a small town where everyone

knew everyone and their business, even if it was a little intrusive.

“Uncle King?”

Hansa grinned. “Well, we all call him Uncle...don’t quite know why. He comes by the tasting room and Orion says give him all the tastings he wants but take his keys away.”

“You like working at Callahan?”

“Yes,” Hansa exclaimed. “I want to be a winemaker, like Orion. I want to learn from him. He’s amazing, you know. He knows so much about growing vine and making it. Winemaking is both science and art; and anyone can pick up the science but the art, that’s just...and Orion is wow!”

I grinned. “You have a crush on Orion?”

She froze as she stopped at a red light. “No. Not at all. I respect him. And anyway, he’s into my sister.”

“Your sister? The super model?”

Hansa grimaced. “Yeah. No surprise. I mean, look at me and look at her. Who would look at me?”

“I haven’t met your sister. Does she live here?”

Hansa parked in front of Whispering Vines. “No. She’s in San Francisco. She comes by...and Orion goes there. They both say they’re friends but even my mother thinks something is going on.”

She looked so forlorn that it broke my heart.

“She’s always been the star,” Hansa sighed. “The supermodel turned high-powered BBC executive. While I... well, you’ve seen the ugly duckling comparisons.”

I reached over, squeezing her hand. “Hansa, we all have our insecurities. I may not have a sister to compare with, but my illness constantly makes me feel inadequate.”

“Orion mentioned you have RA. I’m sorry to hear about that. I can’t imagine how you...do all the things you do.”

Our eyes met, and in that moment, a bond formed between us. Two souls, both grappling with feelings of not being enough.

“Well, you’re married to Mister Hot and Handsome...and you look the way you look.”

I frowned. “How do I look?”

“Like a fairy queen,” Hansa chuckled. “And Atlas is smitten by you. I wish...someone would look at me the way he looks at you.”

“How does he look at me?” I asked, feeling breathless, thinking about

Atlas. Mister Hot and Handsome!

“Like he can’t look away,” she grinned. “You have a great day at Whispering Vines.”

“I thought you were coming in.”

“Can’t...have stuff at home...the parents...it’s a whole thing. We have some relatives over, and my parents become extra Indian. Seraphina knows. She’s going to train you,” Hansa informed me.

I was still smiling when I stepped into Whispering Vines and the bell on the door chimed behind me. The atmosphere captivated me. There was the familiar warmth, from the honeyed glow of the hanging lights to the rich aroma of the wines. It differed from any other place I’d been.

Seraphina, with her vibrant energy and infectious smile, was the heart of the establishment. “Liesel! Ready to dive into the world of wines and hospitality?” she greeted, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

I laughed, “Absolutely, if you think I can handle it.”

“Oh, you’ll do more than just handle it,” she assured me, guiding me behind the bar. “This,” she gestured, “is where the magic happens. Think of it as the helm of a ship. From here, you’ll steer the course of a guest’s experience.”

She then swiftly showed me the ropes: how to manage the bar, take orders, and relay them to the kitchen. Every detail was essential, and yet Seraphina’s approach made it feel light and fun.

Speaking of the kitchen, she introduced me to Milo, the chef. A tall, burly man with tattoos adorning his arms and a twinkle in his eyes, he had an unmistakable passion for food and a thick French accent.

“Don’t worry,” he grinned, “I’ll make sure every dish that goes out is perfect for your tables.”

“And this is Jamie,” Seraphina gestured towards a younger guy, probably in his early twenties, stacking clean glasses. The bus boy. He had a shaggy mop of hair and a mischievous grin. “He’s got a knack for being everywhere at once. You’ll see.”

Jamie winked, “Best bus boy in Everwood.”

As the day progressed, the bar started filling up. I’d expected the usual first-day jitters, but with Seraphina’s crew, everything felt seamless. There was laughter, playful banter, and a rhythm to our work that made it feel like a dance rather than a chore.

“You’re doing great, Liesel!” Milo called out from the kitchen during a

brief lull, a plate of his signature dish in hand.

Jamie nudged me playfully, "Told you it'd be fun!"

As six o'clock approached, I realized that my first day had flown by. The atmosphere at Whispering Vine was intoxicating in the best possible way.

As I hung up my apron, Seraphina came over, a bottle of wine in hand. "For a job well done."

I smiled, taking the bottle of a Pommard burgundy. "Thanks, Seraphina. Working here is truly a joy, and the wine is...wow!"

"Don't get used to it. It's only because it's your first day." She winked, "See you Tuesday?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," I replied. And I meant every word.

"How are you getting home?" Seraphina asked and as she did, my man stepped through the door. His tall frame and unmistakable presence caused a momentary pause in the conversations around the bar. Though he tried to maintain a casual demeanor, I could sense a hint of anticipation in his eyes.

Seraphina, always the observer, leaned over to whisper in my ear. "Why not serve him a glass of that Shiraz we opened today? On the house."

Approaching Atlas, I greeted, "Fancy seeing you here. Are you meeting someone?"

He smirked, that familiar playful glint in his eyes. "Perhaps. She's supposed to be having her first driving lesson."

"I heard she's a fast learner." I couldn't stop smiling. Just looking at him made me happy.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me lightly at first and then harder. He let me go when there was a spate of clapping around the bar. Atlas said hello to the people he knew and came to the bar.

I poured him a glass of the rich, velvety wine Seraphina had suggested. "But first, a drink. To calm your nerves?"

He raised an eyebrow but accepted the glass. "To new beginnings," he toasted, taking a sip.

The atmosphere in the bar shifted subtly. There was an energy, a palpable connection, which hadn't been there a moment before. Perhaps it was the ambiance of Whispering Vines, the wine, or just the anticipation of our impending lesson, but the space between us seemed charged with possibility.

"You know," Atlas began, placing the now half-empty glass on the bar, "I don't usually go for Shiraz, but this feels right."

I looked into his deep-set eyes, understanding what he meant. He wasn't

talking about the wine. He was talking about us. “Seraphina’s wines have that effect,” I whispered, suddenly feeling bold.

He grinned, setting the glass aside. “Are you ready?”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We held hands as we walked out of the bar to his car. I’d never felt this safe before and it was more intoxicating than any wine served in Seraphina’s bar.

Chapter 29

ATLAS



She pulled her mouth off my cock, gasping for air. “Giving head is harder than it looks,” she complained.

Sure, I’d gotten my fair share of blowjobs, but my wife had this playful charm that made it sexy as hell. The fact that she was trying to learn how to suck me off just made it hotter.

“Well, it takes some practice,” I said, grabbing her arms and pulling her up for a deep kiss. Her lips were so soft and pouty.

“And how would you know, mister?” she quipped, her chin resting on my chest as she looked up at me with those big eyes. “Have you ever gone down on a guy before?”

I chuckled, running my fingers through her hair. “Baby, can’t say I’ve ever sucked another dude’s dick.”

She sat up, perky tits on display. “Alright, break time’s over. Back to work!” She started to lean down again when I flipped her onto her back in one smooth motion.

“How about I put in some work too?” I kissed along her jawline, working my way down to her hard little nipples. I took one between my teeth, giving it a gentle nibble. She let out a gasp. “Have to keep my skills sharp, right?”

I don’t think I’d ever enjoyed having sex with someone as much as I did with Liesel. She was gorgeous, funny, and curious. A firecracker in the sheets.

“Oh, Atlas,” she whispered as I slid into her, feeling that tight silky warmth envelop me.

“Yeah, Angel?” I grunted, thrusting steadily as I looked down into her pleasure-filled eyes.

“Is it always this good between us?” she breathed. “So intense, so perfect?”

“Never been like this before, baby,” I told her, emphasizing it with a deep stroke that made her moan. “This here is our own magic.”

I would have loved to spend the whole morning in bed, lazily fucking her over and over. But duty called, and I had to drive up to Santa Barbara to check on the tasting room there. Used to dread those long solo drives, now I found myself wishing I could pawn the responsibility off on Orion so I could stay in bed with my sexy wife.

“Gotta hit the road soon,” I mumbled as Liesel snuggled up against me, her warm supple body pressed against mine. Felt too damn good.

“Can I come with you?” she asked, perking up. “Unless you think I’d get in your way?”

I tilted her chin up so I could look into those luminous eyes of hers. “You would never get in the way. Are you sure?”

“Well, I’m practically a pro at pouring wine after working at Seraphina’s place. I could help charm your customers for you.”

This minx fascinated me to no end. I gave her firm ass a light slap. “Then get your fine self in the shower, sexy.”

We got a late start thanks to showering together, which led to a second

round of steamy shower sex. I felt like a rebellious teenager as we finally rolled up to the Santa Barbara tasting room to find people already milling around waiting for us to open.

But Liesel smoothed things over in her bubbly, charming way. “So sorry to keep you waiting! Please, come in and let me start you off with our new Callahan Blanc de Blanc? It’s a great sparkling wine. Lots of green apple and citrus.”

“And orange blossoms,” I added and to my delight, she blushed.

I unlocked the front doors, pride swelling in my chest as I stepped into tasting room. Its sleek, modern design, combined with the legacy of our wines, created an ambiance that was both sophisticated and inviting. Glass walls offered an expansive view of the busy streets outside, and a long polished oak bar ran the length of the room. The gentle glow from pendant lights overhead illuminated the displayed bottles, each one a reflection of our family’s dedication to the craft.

Liesel circulated with customers like she belonged there from the start, lighting up the whole damn room. This girl was a natural.

“Work your magic on them, baby,” I said with a grin, handing her a bottle opener.

She laughed, giving me a wink. “I’ll have them eating out of the palm of my hand.”

The day went by in a delightful blur. Liesel, with her genuine interest in each visitor and her knack for conversation, turned every tasting into a memorable experience. And me, usually all business, I loosened up. Found myself laughing more, genuinely enjoying the customer interactions for once instead of going through the motions.

Liesel took our four guests to one end of the bar and talked to them.

“No, really? I lived in the Dogpatch,” she exclaimed. “I miss it so much.”

“Have you been to Serpentine?” one woman asked.

“Love their brunch.” And then without missing a beat, she poured them each the Callahan 2022 Blanc de Blanc sparkling wine made the traditional way. I knew she’d done a couple of wine tastings with Orion in Everwood, and she was emulating him.

The women and the couple signed up for Callahan Wine Club membership, still one of the best ways to sell wine without going through distributors—and I knew that was thanks to Liesel’s charm. With her radiant energy, she was a new addition to this familiar scene, and to my surprise, she fit right in.

My buddy Alejandro Santos stopped by midday with his fiancée Maria. I was proud to introduce them to Liesel. While Maria was discussing wine with Liesel, Alejandro gave me a questioning look. He was one of my few friends who knew the circumstances of my marriage with Liesel.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t make Enzo’s memorial service. We were traveling and Aurelio was dealing with a crisis.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured him and turned to find Liesel beaming at me. I smiled back and blew a kiss at her.

“I must say, you two don’t look like you’re in some short-term marriage contract,” he remarked, as we settled down at the table at the far end of the wine bar. He got his favorite, our Library Pinot Noir from 2015 and since we had opened a bottle of the wine, I joined him.

“We’re making the most of the situation,” I replied easily, my gaze straying back to Liesel. She was positively glowing today.

“Admit it, bro. You are smitten,” Alejandro chuckled, clapping me on the back.

I shrugged, not bothering to fight the smile tugging at my lips. “Nothing wrong with being into your wife, man. Speaking of wives, how are things with you?”

Alejandro looked at Maria as she talked to Liesel. “I don’t think life has ever been better.”

“Ah...a man in love.” I sat back surprised. I’d seen them together and knew that they were dating, but I hadn’t expected my cynical “one or two-night stands are enough” friend to be completely enamored by a woman, even if she was as remarkable as Maria.

He pulled out an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and set it in front of me. “I wanted to pick up some wine and also invite you and Liesel to our wedding in the Spring.”

“Is Isadora going all out planning it?”

“Fuck, yeah.” He couldn’t stop looking for his woman as he talked with me, I noticed...a lot like I kept seeking Liesel whenever she was around.

Maria joined us as Liesel took care of a couple of customers. I enjoyed watching her take over. She was doing it so effortlessly. It seemed like a long time ago that I’d thought she was too young and irresponsible.

“You know everyone in the Santa Barbara and the central valley is talking about your marriage to Enzo Brooks’ daughter.” Alejandro stroked Maria’s shoulder as he spoke. It was an absent gesture, something he did without

thinking.

“I heard at a restaurant in Santa Barbara last week that you were the *it* couple,” Maria laughed. “People complain that there are no photos and there was no announcement.”

“Enzo died right after so...it seemed vulgar to celebrate. So, we had the memorial reception for him at Callahan’s and...” I shrugged, I wasn’t sure if Maria knew about our marriage and right now, I didn’t want to discuss it. I was getting good at pretending the future would not be here and the present was all there was.

Liesel came up to us and brushed a kiss on my cheek.

“You need help?” I asked as three women came into the tasting room. They were Santa Barbara locals, and I waved at them.

“No. Hang with your friends. I got this.”

I put my hand on her waist and stroked her ass. “You sure?”

“Yes,” she stifled a gasp when I squeezed a tight cheek.

The hours flew by, and as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with shades of crimson and gold, I realized that this had been one of the most enjoyable days of my life.

“Thank you,” I kissed Liesel softly after we finished tidying up. “I don’t think I’ve ever had this much fun being here.”

She smiled, her eyes reflecting the remaining daylight. “I need a foot massage for all my work though.”

“How about a full body massage?” I offered, playing with a curl of hair that rested on her cheek.

“Would I have to be naked for that?” She put a hand on her chest dramatically.

“Well, I’ll be naked too, so you don’t feel self-conscious.”

She went on tiptoe and hugged me. I loved this about her, this disarmed affection. No one woman had given it to me...I had never let a woman this close.

As we drove home, I watched her profile as she slept and felt a profound sense of gratitude, not just for the successful day, but for the unexpected joy Liesel had brought into my life.

Chapter 30

LIESEL



I was in the middle of adjusting a canvas when the barn door to my studio was pushed open. Ariel strode in with her usual confidence.

“I need help with this fucking Christmas thing and...,” she paused when her gaze landed on one particular painting, “isn’t that...?” she began, her eyes widening in recognition.

I followed her line of sight and felt a pang of panic. It was like the piece I had displayed in Healdsburg; the one Atlas had been so taken with. Almost as

big as *Whispered Hopes*, this painting, which I was planning on calling *Whispered Desires* was also dominated by a stormy seascape, however, at the horizon where the sea met the sky, there was a break in the clouds, revealing a radiant, almost otherworldly golden light. The waves, while still powerful and turbulent near the rocks, transitioned to calmer, undulating patterns as they drew near the light, suggesting a journey from chaos to serenity.

In the foreground, instead of jagged rocks, I had just painted a lone figure, perhaps a silhouette of a woman, standing with her hair flowing with the wind. She'd look toward that distant light with yearning, hope, and anticipation. The contrast between the tempestuous waves and the tranquil horizon would encapsulate the duality of struggle and hope.

"You're Lila Evergreen!" Ariel exclaimed.

I looked around uncomfortably, wiping my hands on my drop cloth. I stepped away from the canvas and sighed. "I don't want anyone to know."

"Why? I want to show off to the world. You know what? We should have a gallery of sorts in the tasting room...oh wait, we can have a painting exhibition at the Christmas bazaar and maybe we can auction a painting off for charity?" Ariel was full of ideas as she walked around, looking at the various canvases.

"Ah...I don't want Atlas to know...*please*."

"Why?"

I smiled shyly. "Because I'm making this painting for him. A Christmas present."

Ariel looked from me to the painting and back, her surprise giving way to delight. "That's brilliant! He went on and on about that piece. Wanted it, but it was out of his budget."

"I know but before I could get that painting for him, Clara at the gallery sold it. So, you think he'll like it?" I asked, my voice tentative.

"He'll love it." Ariel's eyes sparkled with a new idea. "How about giving me the painting *and* making a mural in his office?"

I paused, considering the idea. "That would be a nice and big canvas. But he's there all the time. How would I keep it a surprise?"

"We can send him away for the weekend," Ariel suggested, enthusiasm bubbling in her voice. "I'll handle the alibi. You have two full days. Think you can do it?"

I hesitated for a beat, contemplating the logistics and the challenge. "It would be tight, but I think I can pull it off."

The grin Ariel shot me was infectious. “This is going to be legendary.”

I sat down on the daybed, flexing my fingers. I’d overdone it the past week with working at Whispering Vines and pushing hard at the studio. Atlas had been traveling, which apparently was routine right before Thanksgiving, so I had little to do—so I overworked myself.

I would have to slow down or risk a flare up.

“You okay?” Ariel asked as she saw my fingers.

I stopped clenching and unclenching my fist and nodded. “It’s fine. I know how to manage my RA.”

“No doubt but if you ever...end up...” Ariel shook her head, her eyes filled with emotion, “It terrified the living daylights out of us when Atlas found you here on the night of your father’s memorial.”

I leaned back on the daybed. “I know. I’m usually careful but that was a difficult time. Papa died and moving here. But now,” I smiled, “it’s different.”

Ariel leaned against a wall, her arms folded. “Is it now?”

I nodded. “I...I know Atlas keeps saying this marriage is temporary, but it doesn’t feel like that, you know? I...feel married.”

Ariel nodded, her eyes kind. “And in love.”

I took a deep breath and released it. “Foolish of me when he thinks this is for another year and a half at best.”

“A year and a half is a long time,” Ariel interjected, “anything can happen.”

“Has Atlas ever been in love?” I rose and walked up to the canvas. I dipped my finger in some blue paint and brushed against a wave to add nuance to it.

“No.” Ariel came up to stand closer so she could watch me paint. “Atlas has been taking care of us since we were kids. I was fifteen and Orion twelve when our parents died. Atlas had to take care of us, the vineyard, the business and go to school. He had help...your father was a big help. There were others. But somewhere along the line he lost his ability to...I don’t know, just have fun. And he’s afraid of responsibilities, he feels he has plenty.”

“And a wife or girlfriend would be a responsibility?”

Ariel nodded sadly.

I wiped my hand on my apron and pushed out scarlet paint onto my palette. I dipped a brush in it, mixing it with some yellow that was already there and added fiery hues to the skies.

“And a sick wife an even bigger responsibility,” I added.

Ariel put a hand on my shoulder. "Give him time."

I closed my eyes for a moment as disappointment stabbed through me. I was here painting my dreams, while Atlas had set an expiration date on our marriage.

"Will you give him time?" Ariel persisted.

I turned to face her and felt a calmness suddenly. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"I love him. I'll be patient and try to show him that I'm not a burden, but his partner, like you and Orion are. The vineyard is a responsibility, sure, but it's also his legacy and passion. I'll give him as much time as he needs...or at least the next eighteen months and beyond."

Ariel relaxed. "Your paintings are amazing. There is such pathos. Atlas is going to flip when he finds out you're the artist of the painting he fell hard for."

"I hope so," I beamed. I couldn't wait to see his surprise when he saw the painting or the mural, which I'd already planned in my mind. "You came in saying you need help with the Christmas bazaar."

Ariel made a face. "Yes. Daphne has dropped it on my completely. You know, she quit. She's leaving the end of the month."

Atlas had told me Daphne quit, which I was happy about but didn't say out loud. I felt bad for her too. She had loved Atlas, but he didn't love her back. My situation with him was no better than hers had been.

"What do you need me to do?"

"We have lots of different booths at the bazaar, local artists, winemakers, food vendors. I need help designing them. This year's theme is *Wine & Wonderland*, combining winter wonderland with wine. Snowflakes, twinkling lights, frosty vines to make it festive, blending the cold of winter with the warmth of wine. Can you help with the booth designs?"

I thought about it and nodded. "That could be fun. I can come up with some renditions."

Ariel raised an eyebrow, "You know how to do that?"

"Yes. I have a degree in fine arts, which included graphic design. Just get me in touch with your booth builders and I'll take care of the rest," I assured her.

Ariel threw her arms around me. "*Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.* I'm so late with everything. We need the booths delivered by mid-December so... we need to hurry."

I'd already spotted posters all over Everwood for the big bazaar and heard everyone at the vineyard raving about this beloved local tradition. I was over the moon to help make it happen this year. I used to be such a wallflower with hardly any friends. But ever since I moved here, my little circle of family and buddies had blown up. I felt like I was really part of the community now and I loved it.

Chapter 31

ATLAS



I stepped into the conference room to find Nalini, Orion, and Daphne already gathered around the table, their faces taut. The mood was tense as hell.

Nalini was clutching a report, lips pressed thin. “Atlas, the damage to the cellar is bad. Repairs will cost almost a hundred grand easy. And that’s not even considering the wine we might lose. Some of those bottles are irreplaceable.”

Orion’s eyes were glued to the numbers. “She’s right. Close to six figures

in repairs, and the potential lost wine revenue...” He trailed off, jaw tight.

Daphne chimed in, lacking her usual pep. “With the Harvest Festival coming up, this couldn’t have happened at a worse time.”

Earlier in the month, we’d gotten word of a big opportunity, the renowned Harvest Festival wanted Callahan as their exclusive wine provider next year. Huge chance to showcase our stuff to buyers, critics, everyone. Put us on the international map in a big way.

But now, with a major cellar failure jeopardizing our stored wine and demanding immediate repairs, we were stuck between a rock and a hard place. The cost to fix the damage and prepare the volume needed for the festival would tap out our funds.

I sank into a chair, the weight of it hitting me like a punch to the gut. “How the hell did a cellar just collapse out of the blue? It was fine a month ago!”

Nalini took a deep breath, adjusting her glasses. “Age, primarily. We’ve discussed repairs before, but other investments took priority.”

Daphne drummed her nails on the table impatiently. “This festival is our ticket into bigger markets. The timing couldn’t be worse.”

Orion looked conflicted. “It’s a big opportunity, no doubt. But can we swing it right now with the repair costs?”

No one spoke for a minute. The gravity of our situation hung thick in the room. Risk versus reward.

“I know there’s a lot to consider,” Nalini said gently. “But we need to decide soon.”

I rubbed my temples where a wicked headache was brewing. “Give me everything we’ve got on the damage and festival contract. Let me look it over.”

Nalini hesitated like she wanted to say more, then just nodded, determination in her eyes.

Orion clasped my shoulder firmly. “We’ll figure this out. We’ve taken hits before.”

When it was just me and Orion left, I slammed my fist on the table in frustration. “How the hell did we end up in this clusterfuck?”

“No one’s to blame,” Orion replied evenly. “We knew that cellar needed work.”

I shot him a look. “Then why wasn’t it fixed already?”

“Other investments took priority.” He held my gaze.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, feeling the weight pressing down. The rest

of the day was a blur of circular conversations and contingency plans. Repair estimates, insurance policies, loans. My head was spinning trying to find a solution.

As I walked home, my mind churned over angles, options, sacrifices. I'd been in tight spots before but this one threatened to choke the very lifeblood of the vineyard.

The sun was already low when I got home, the vineyard problems feeling like a damn anvil on my back. As soon as the door closed, Liesel's infectious spirit greeted me. "Hey! I was thinking we could—"

"Not now, Liesel!" I snapped, the day's stress making me curt.

She recoiled, her face falling. "What's wrong?"

I sighed, immediately regretting my outburst. "Fuck! I'm sorry... I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

Liesel looked at me, her eyes searching. She took the backpack and put it down and led me to the patio. "Sit," she instructed.

She came back with a bottle of wine and two glasses. She sat down next to me on the outdoor couch and waited for me to pour wine in the glasses.

"*Sante.*" I clinked my glass with hers.

"What happened?"

Taking her hand, I told her everything— from the damaged cellar to the golden opportunity of the Harvest Festival.

She listened, her face a picture of concern and understanding. "You'll figure it out, Atlas."

"But how?" I asked, feeling defeated.

Liesel paused, taking a deep breath. "Maybe... maybe I can help."

Her kindness, her unwavering belief in me, was my anchor. And as we sat there, plotting a way out of the mess, I realized once again just how lucky I was to have her by my side. "Angel, that's very nice of you but we need nearly half a fucking million dollars to get through this. I'd cancel the fucking Christmas bazaar, but everything is already paid for, so we'll just lose money."

Liesel put her glass down and then took mine and put it away. She turned to straddle me. I loved how she gave her affection easily. I held her, feeling a measure of peace. How had I lived all these years without her, without this?

She put both hands on my face and kissed my lips. "I know your investors get a yearly return on investment. How about if we don't give Papa his share this year?"

I grinned and dropped a kiss on her nose. “That won’t help me today, Angel.”

“Okay, how about I invest in Callahan Vineyards.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You have half a million dollars?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

I narrowed my eyes, my hands on her hips. “You have that kind of money just lying around?”

“Not in my pockets...but yes. I can talk to my financial advisor, and we can...what? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“How much money do you have?” I asked seriously.

She smiled. “Now if that isn’t a rude and mercenary question.”

“*Liesel.*”

“Ah,” she groaned and tried to get off me, but I wouldn’t let her. “Fine, I have money. My art sells well. That’s how I could pay off my school debt and Papa’s debts after he sold the vineyard. I can invest in Callahan Vineyards, and we’ll draw up a new investment agreement. This will be *my* investment and not Papa’s.”

Now I lifted her off me and set her down. It surprised me she had that kind of money. How little did I know my wife?

I walked to the porch railing and leaned against it. “You can’t just invest your money, Liesel. Look at all the contingencies and make sure this is a sound investment. You can’t—“

“I trust you,” she said simply. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” I did. It shocked the living hell out of me I did. I barely knew her but, yes, I trusted her, implicitly.

She came to me and put her arms around me, leaning her head on my chest. “Then let me do this.”

“Angel.” I tilted her head, so she’d look at me. “It’s a lot of money.”

“I have a lot,” she replied cheekily.

“Why the fuck did your father not tell me?”

“He didn’t know. It’s not like I go around announcing my stock portfolio. It’s...private and...” she trailed off, obviously uncomfortable with talking about wealth.

“And here I thought I had to take care of you. Looks like I could be a kept man,” I teased, brushing my lips against hers.

“Oh, will you be at my beck and call then?”

“I already am,” I told her, and it was the god’s honest truth.

Chapter 32

LIESEL



I was knee-deep in flour and butter, while Seraphina, the ever-graceful chef, seemed to dance around the kitchen with ease, juggling multiple dishes at once.

“I think I’m breaking the golden rule of cooking...I’m not cleaning up as I go,” I grimaced as I kneaded the bread dough.

Seraphina chuckled, sending a sprinkle of herbs into the roasting turkey. “Well, it’s not every day you host a Thanksgiving dinner. Trust me, once you

get the hang of it, it becomes an elegant dance of flavors and timing.”

It was my *very* first time hosting...well, anything. I didn't know enough people to invite for things. But now I had friends *and* family. Dr. Meena Rao and Navya had come from up north to celebrate Thanksgiving with us, and I was so glad that I could repay them with a little getaway in Santa Barbara wine country.

I smiled, gratefully accepting a sip of wine from her. “Thanks for helping, Seraphina. I'd be lost without you.”

“Anytime, darling. But,” she paused, looking up and glancing around at the others busily setting up, “you've got quite the team here. Atlas, especially. He might not say much, but the way he's fussing over the table settings...? And that says it all.”

I blushed, stirring the gravy. “I don't know. He still talks about our arrangement being temporary.”

Seraphina arched a brow, sipping her wine. “Darling, actions speak louder than words. The heart knows, even when the mind denies.”

I pondered that, distracted momentarily by Orion's cheerful banter with Ariel as they selected the perfect playlist. “I have fallen in love with him.”

Seraphina smiled softly, touching my arm gently. “Of course, you have. And he loves you.”

I shook my head. “No. He...won't let himself.”

“Just trust your heart, Liesel. Don't doubt what's real, especially when dark clouds gather.”

That gave me pause. “Dark clouds?”

She sighed, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Life isn't always sunshine, darling. But remember, after every storm, there's a rainbow. Just make sure you're holding hands with the right person when it appears.”

Our little moment was interrupted by Atlas's booming laughter from the other room, soon joined by others. I looked over, warmth filling me at the sight of him, genuinely happy.

“I'll push all the dark clouds away,” I whispered, feeling more confident in my feelings, the festivities, and the future that awaited.

She winked, turning back to her dishes. “Now, let's get those pies going, people!”

The aroma of roasted turkey and spices wafted through the house, but in the cozy corner of the kitchen, our focus was squarely on creating the perfect pumpkin and apple pies. Navya, Ariel, and I huddled around the kitchen

island, aprons on, each with our designated tasks.

“Okay, I’ve got the crust,” I declared, rolling out the dough carefully.

Ariel grinned, holding up the pot where she’d collected the roasted pumpkin puree. “And I’ve got this!”

Navya was expertly measuring out the spices. “And I’ve got the magic touch. Now, Liesel, just make sure you don’t roll that crust too thin.”

I stuck out my tongue playfully. “Yes, *chef*. I’ve learned from my past pie disasters.”

The atmosphere was light and chatty, and as we worked, the conversation naturally turned personal.

“So, Ariel,” Navya began, adding a pinch of nutmeg, “Why’d you leave the bright lights of New York to come back here?”

Ariel sighed, collecting her thoughts. “New York was... intense. And lonely. You’d think surrounded by millions, you wouldn’t feel alone, but sometimes, that makes it worse.”

I nodded in understanding. “The crowd can sometimes be the loneliest place.” I had always been alone...and maybe sometimes also lonely. It becomes a habit. But if I had a loving family like Ariel did, I’d never leave.

She smiled weakly, “Exactly. I loved being a lawyer, the hustle of the city, but it all just became too much. I needed home, family, open spaces.”

Navya nudged her gently, “And maybe a dashing winegrower?”

Ariel rolled her eyes, laughing. “Getting laid would be nice, but this is Everwood...if I slept with anyone here, *everyone* would know.” She gave me a pointed look, and I blushed.

“I’m married,” I protested.

“And I sleep two doors from you guys,” Ariel said blandly.

“Oh my god.” I bit my lower lip and Ariel burst out laughing.

“This is an old house. Trust me, he could murder you in there and I wouldn’t hear anything. He isn’t murdering you, is he?”

My eyes immediately looked for Atlas as I remembered how he’d woken me up this morning, his mouth on me as I drifted from sleep to wakefulness, fully aroused. I caught his eyes, and he smiled. My heart beat faster. *I had it bad!*

“Look at her,” Navya said in mock disgust, “making gooey eyes at her husband.”

I focused on the pie, my cheeks heated. How was this even possible? I just had to look at him and I wanted him. Was it the same for him?

Speaking of romance, Navya had plenty of stories. “So, Navya, who’s in your bed these days?”

She posed for an instant and said in a made-up posh voice, “Did I tell you about my new beau? He plays for the 49ers.”

My eyes widened. “You’re dating a professional football player?!”

Navya shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Oh, you know. Just the *usual*.” But her grin betrayed her excitement.

Ariel grinned. “Please tell me he’s introduced you to the team. And that you can introduce me to the team as well.”

“Got any good stories?” I asked because Navya was a consummate storyteller.

Navya leaned in, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Alright, but you didn’t hear this from me.”

Ariel and I nodded, fully engrossed.

“After one of their big wins, they had this lavish party at a swanky place downtown. My beau, Dion, invited me, and I was incredibly nervous. I mean, it’s not every day you get to mingle with top-tier athletes.”

I smirked, “Oh, come on. You’ve dated a rock star and a tech billionaire.”

Navya waved me off. “The rock star was B-list, and the tech billionaire has been indicted for insider trading. Anyway, there was a karaoke machine. Dion, trying to show off in front of his buddies, told them about my hidden talent.”

Ariel raised an eyebrow, “Which is?”

I chimed in, already grinning, “Navya can perfectly mimic Shakira.”

Navya groaned. “Yes, and guess who got up on stage to shake his ass?”

Ariel gasped in mock horror, “No!”

“Yes!” Navya exclaimed. “And Dion didn’t just stop there. He sang the male part of *Hips Don’t Lie*. Now, imagine a six foot four two-hundred and fifty-pound linebacker singing and dancing like Wyclef Jean.”

We burst into laughter, and I gasped out, “Please tell me there’s a video.”

Navya smirked. “There might be one. But you know what made that evening truly rock? The entire offensive line joined in as backup dancers.”

She pulled out her phone and showed us the video.

Navya nodded, still chuckling, “It was an unforgettable night. Dion might be this tough guy on the field, but he’s a complete goofball. And let’s just say, he won’t be joining the music industry soon.”

Chapter 33

ATLAS



The Callahan dining room was lit up in golden hues, the candles casting gentle glows on the meticulously set table. Hearty aromas wafted from dishes that had been hours in the making: a glistening, perfectly browned turkey took the center stage, surrounded by bowls of creamy mashed potatoes, vibrant green bean almondine, fluffy dinner rolls, and the zesty scent of cranberry sauce. The wine flowed freely, as it ought to on a Callahan Thanksgiving, with choices ranging from our crisp whites to the deep, full-

bodied reds.

Orion started the family tradition of giving thanks during the meal, raising his glass. “As always, I’m grateful for this family. We’ve had our trials this year, but we come together strong, every single time.”

Dr. Rao who was sitting next to Orion, clinked her glass with his. “I’m grateful for health, friends, and new beginnings. And for this *magnificent* spread!”

“To the chefs.” I held up my glass and everyone toasted, “To Liesel and Seraphina.”

“And Navya who made the pie,” my wife added.

Navya, with her vivacious energy went next. “I’m thankful for every single twist and turn life has thrown my way. Oh, and for football players who can’t sing!” Her laughter was contagious, and the room erupted into laughter.

Ariel, with a soft smile, shared, “This year, I’m grateful for homecomings. For realizing that sometimes, the very thing you’re searching for is right where you left it.”

When my turn came, I cleared my throat, trying to articulate the whirlwind of emotions swarming me. “I’m grateful for this family, for Callahan Vineyards, and for the legacy we’re creating together. But most of all,” I paused, my eyes finding Liesel’s, “I’m thankful for the unexpected blessings and the warmth I’ve found in surprising places.

Liesel’s eyes glistened as she caught my gaze. “Life has a funny way of showing you paths you never knew existed. I’ve found friends that feel like family, a home here in Everwood and moments I’ll cherish forever.”

I put my hand on Liesel’s thigh and she smiled at me. My heart felt lighter.

Soon, a lot of food disappeared from the table and we were all just this side of tipsy.

“Thanks for the amazing meal,” I whispered into Liesel’s ear, feeling her react to my closeness. The way she looked at and responded to me, as if I was the greatest thing ever, was intoxicating.

“You’re welcome.” Her face was flushed, and I knew she was aroused. I’d been working her up all evening with a hand on her thigh, her arm, discreetly nuzzling her breast.

“Are you wet, Angel?” I whispered.

She turned to look at me, her lips parted, her eyes moist with arousal and I got hard instantly. I was a grown man, sitting at a dinner table with friends and family, and like a teenager I had a fucking boner.

“Are you?” I demanded huskily.

She nodded but looked away.

“Go to your room,” I commanded softly.

She looked at me scandalized and I chuckled. “You know you want to.”

She cleared her throat and turned to listen to the conversation Orion and Ariel were having. I rose from the table then and walked toward the stairs.

I walked into her bedroom and waited.

As soon as the door opened, I pulled her in and slammed her against a wall. I kissed her with a violence I didn’t understand. I *needed* to taste her.

“Atlas, we have people downstairs,” she protested, moaning as my hands lifted her skirt and cupped her tight ass.

“I know. We’ll be fast.” *Because we’ll do it again and again, because I can’t get enough of you.*

I turned her around and placed her hands on her dresser. “Hold on, Angel.”

I unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, pulling myself out, her ass delectably lush in front of me. “Atlas,” she whimpered when I pulled her panties down.

“You need to be quiet. Can you be quiet?”

She nodded, her body bent, her ass being offered to me. I gently stroked the rosette in front of me and she flinched, then relaxed as I slid a finger in slowly.

I rubbed her pussy with the same finger and coated her juices on her rosette. “We’ll have to slowly stretch you out. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Spread your thighs, Angel. I want inside you.”

She did as I asked and I slammed into her, feeling every confusion in my mind clear. There was nothing but Liesel. The smell of sex, orange blossoms combined with something musky and elemental, which was all her.

I stroked her clitoris as I pumped into her with more ferocity than I’d expected. But it had been a long lunch, and I’d been wanting her ever since she’d left our bed this morning. I’d never been like this, a randy, horny man consumed with a woman.

“Come for me, Angel. Please, come for me because I can’t hold on any longer.” I pinched her clit, harder than I ever did and felt her cry out and spasm around me. That’s all I needed, to follow her over the cliff.

We stood there, her body resting against the dresser and me leaning against her, still inside her, pulsating slowly.

I pulled myself out and patted her ass. I pulled her panties up and her dress

down. She turned to look at me, her breath still coming out in gasps.

“Feeling better?” she asked, the smile of a siren gracing her lips. She knew what she did to me.

“Enormously.” I kissed her roughly. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

Every time we had sex, I had this insane desire to hold her forever. It confused me. This was not who I was. I’d never had time to indulge and yet now, I found all I did was indulge. I was late to work, early to leave the office, and kept her in bed or next to me wherever I was.

The evening had drawn to a close, the golden hues of the candles now waning as the wax melted away. The room was filled with the hum of conversations, laughter, and the clinking of wine glasses. But amidst the chatter and festivities, a gnawing concern had been growing in me. Liesel seemed so integrated, so...happy. I couldn’t shake the feeling that she might hope for something more permanent. I didn’t want to hurt her but once the excitement of sex abated, we’d...what? We’d end the marriage as per the contract. But did I want that?

Seraphina, with an intuitive gleam in her eyes, beckoned me to join her by the porch.

The night outside was chilly, a stark contrast to the warmth of the room we’d just left. “You’ve got that brooding Callahan look,” she remarked, her tone light, but her eyes searching.

Taking a deep breath, I began, “I... I’m concerned. Liesel is getting attached. And given our relationship, I don’t want her to get hurt.”

Seraphina took a moment, her gaze fixed on the distant vineyards bathed in moonlight. “Atlas,” she finally said, turning to face me, “sometimes in life, we think we’re shielding others, but we’re actually putting up barriers around our own hearts.”

I looked away, feeling a little defensive. “God, the way you talk. It’s not that simple, Seraphina. This arrangement is temporary. And, as much as I appreciate the time we’re spending together, I know the realities of our situation.”

Seraphina studied me for a moment, a knowing smile on her face. “Oh, Atlas, it’s always been hard for you to believe in the unexpected, hasn’t it? Vulnerability scares you.”

“I’ve lived long enough to know how these things play out,” I countered, my voice sterner than I intended. “I can’t offer Liesel more than what we have now, and I won’t let her hope for something that can’t be.”

Seraphina sighed, her eyes softening. “All I’m saying is, don’t run away from your feelings, whatever they might be.”

I nodded slowly, considering her words.

As we walked back inside, I resolved to have a conversation with Liesel, to lay everything out, even if it might hurt in the short term. It was the best I could do for both of us. But first things first, I had to stop bending her over every fucking surface in the house like a horny teenager who’d just discovered sex. I’d never had this problem before. And it didn’t help that she was always touching me, always hugging, kissing, straddling. She showered me with affection, and I *loved* it. One more day, I thought every day. I’d soak in her warmth one more day. We had plenty of time for recriminations. For now, I wanted to enjoy her and let her enjoy me. It was like an affair, I told myself. It would eventually end but that didn’t mean we had to keep thinking about it all the time or bring it up again and again. We’d just live in the moment.

Chapter 34

LIESEL



The joy and hustle of Thanksgiving had been like a sweet melody playing through the rooms, evidence of bonds formed and strengthened. However, with every high, there was a low waiting in the shadows, and I felt it creeping in as the flurry of Black Friday passed and the hustle of the following Saturday with the tasting rooms packed with people drew on my last nerves. By the time Sunday rolled around, my joints were aching, a dull throbbing pain that I knew all too well, a flare-up from my rheumatoid arthritis was

here.

In the past, I would retreat to my room, bearing the pain alone, curling into myself with a heated blanket, some painkillers, and waiting out the storm. I didn't want to be a burden on anyone, and I'd gotten used to dealing with it solo. But I wasn't alone now, I had Atlas with me, watching, paying attention,

I tried to be discreet, but my stiff movements caught Atlas's eye. "Hey," he whispered, his tone filled with concern, "you okay?"

I tried to muster a smile. "Just a little tired," I lied, but the grimace on my face as I tried to move gave me away.

He was by my side in an instant, an arm wrapping around me for support. "Are you having a flare-up?" he asked, his voice gentle.

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. "It happens sometimes when I'm stressed or overly tired. I'll be okay."

Atlas looked at me, a determined expression forming on his face. "Let's get you comfortable," he said, guiding me to the couch.

He took great care, helping me lie down and piling soft cushions under my legs. He disappeared for a moment, only to return with a warm compress which he gently placed on my aching joints. The heat felt comforting against the throbbing pain.

"Been reading up on RA have you?"

He nodded. "They say cold and hot compresses help."

I nodded and felt an overwhelming feeling of love. "You're too nice to me."

"No such thing as too nice, Angel, not for you. I'll get you some tea," he murmured, heading to the kitchen.

Returning with a steaming mug, he handed it to me, his fingers brushing against mine. "This should help and if you need anything, just let me know."

He let me lean against him as he read something on his iPad. We sat there in silence, the only sounds being the rhythmic ticking of the clock and the distant hum of the world outside. The pain was still there, but with Atlas by my side, it felt more bearable. It wasn't just the physical comfort he provided, but the emotional support, the understanding, the unwavering presence. It made all the difference.

That day, I realized something profound. Pain, though inevitable, could be tempered with love and care. And in Atlas's gentle gestures, I felt an undercurrent of something deeper, something that gave me hope for the days

ahead.

But as the hours passed, the weight of the flare-up pressed down on me, making every joint scream out in agony. It was a familiar pain, a deep-rooted monster that gnawed away at me from the inside out.

Atlas's arms cradled me, his strong frame acting as my anchor amidst the storm of pain. His grip was gentle yet protective as he lifted me from the couch, carrying me to the bedroom. Every movement made my joints cry out, but Atlas's murmured words of comfort were a balm, helping me get through the journey.

Once in bed, he lay down beside me, pulling me close. The warmth of his body acted as a comforting barrier against the cold bite of the pain.

"I'm here, baby," he whispered, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead.

He kept at it all night with the hot and cold compresses. Of holding me.

"You should go get some sleep. You have work tomorrow," I protested.

"Shut up and let me take care of you."

During the night, he shared his past as I prodded him with questions.

"My father told me how you lost your parents when you were just eighteen."

"Yeah, everything changed overnight. I had to become a parent to Ariel and Orion. Ariel was just fifteen, and Orion? Only twelve."

I shifted slightly. "How did you manage? The vineyard, Orion and Ariel, everything?"

He sighed, "It was... tough. Many sleepless nights. Man, I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. The vineyard was suddenly my responsibility. And I had to be the man of the house before I truly knew what that meant."

I could hear the pain in his voice, the memories still fresh despite the years. "Papa helped?"

Atlas's eyes softened as he spoke, "Your father was great. In the toughest times, when I felt like drowning under all the responsibilities and the grief, Enzo was there. He showed me the ropes. Without him, I don't think Callahan Vineyards would've survived. He made sure we didn't crumble."

As he spoke, Atlas shifted from time to time, applying warm compresses on my aching joints, then cool ones, easing the pain.

The hours trickled by his voice acting as a lullaby, leading me into a world where pain took a backseat. I clung to his stories, feeling them meld with the rhythm of my heart, feeling an emotion that was both profound and unsettling bloom within me.

That night, despite the pain, despite the flare-up, was one of the most intimate and profound moments of my life. It was a night where two souls, each carrying their own burdens, found solace in each other's company. It was a night that changed everything.

I now knew I would not let Atlas go, not without a fight. He may think this was temporary, but he was going to find out very soon that his temporary wife was permanently by his side.

Chapter 35

ATLAS



Lying there with Liesel, I listened as she told me about her past. Her words painted a picture of a tough woman who'd been through hell, just like me. But as she kept talking, I realized our paths were similar but different.

While we'd both dealt with crap, Liesel had walked a lonely road.

"After the divorce, my mom went off the deep end," she said, her voice low. "She refused to let me see my father. I became the one taking care of her, trying to hold her together."

I squeezed her hand, wishing I could erase her pain. “What about the art?” I asked. I’d always wondered how she got into that.

“Art was my escape,” she said with a faint smile. “When life was too much, I’d sneak away and paint. It was the only way I could breathe.”

I kept massaging Liesel’s sore joints, letting her take me back to when art came into her world.

“Believe it or not, art wasn’t a big deal to me growing up,” she said. “I just doodled like any other kid.”

I raised my eyebrows. “When did that change?”

“First year of high school. I had this art teacher, Mrs. Elaine Robertson.” Liesel got a dreamy look on her face. “I walked into her class expecting just another elective. But she saw something in me that I didn’t.”

I grinned. “She spotted your talent.”

But Liesel shook her head. “It was more than that. She saw my pain and told me to put it all into my art. Whenever life overwhelmed me, she said to paint it out, let the canvas take the burden.”

Liesel traced patterns on the sheets, lost in memory. “So, I did. I painted all those feelings and fears. It kept me going through the roughest times with Mom.”

Made sense why art meant so much to her. It had saved her. “When did you...ah...start make bucket loads of money with your art?”

She punched me lightly on my shoulder because she didn’t like to talk about the money. “That was when I was nineteen. Everything changed. I won this award and...I had an agent, and it was...amazing. I could make a living, selling art. So many artists struggle for so many years—so I’m *very* grateful for my success.”

I brushed strands of hair off her face. “Happy you found your path. I’ve seen some of your work, but not much.” I’d kept my distance from her studio, wanting to give her that space. But now I wished she’d let me in more into that part of her world.

Liesel gave me an accusing look. “I heard you told Orion and Ariel to stay out of my studio.”

I stroked her cheek, noticing how tired she was. “You were already giving up a lot for me and the vineyard. I wanted that studio to be your place.”

But now I wanted in. I wanted her to open up that part of herself.

“For me, art is like breathing,” she said. “What I have now means more than anything.”

I kissed her forehead. “Did your mother respect your art?”

Liesel stared into the distance. “She didn’t know. She had her own issues. Then she got really sick, sepsis. I managed it all, hospital, bills, last rites, while finishing school. It wasn’t easy.”

I felt a pang, hearing of her pain and loneliness. “So, you moved to Healdsburg after?”

“To be closer to my father, yeah. But just when life stabilized, he got sick too. I became a caretaker all over again.”

“That’s a heavy load to carry alone,” I said.

It hit me then how different our roads had been. I’d had my siblings to share the burden. Liesel had taken it all on her own shoulders. I respected her strength for coming through all that, not to mention feeling even closer to her now.

“It was hard,” she admitted with a groan. “I hate this pain. I want to feel alive but this *fucking* disease...”

She didn’t cuss much, so I knew she was frustrated. To have your energy and excitement drained away was hell. But maybe it was the disease that made her seize life’s joys with both hands, like she was now teaching me.

“How long does a flare-up last?” I asked.

“Couple of days if I rest.”

“Oh, you’ll rest,” I said. “I order you to stay in this bed with me.” Work was busy but I’d manage from home. No way was I leaving her alone.

“Too bad we can’t have any fun.” She snuggled against me. I held her hand, rubbing her swollen fingers.

“When you’re better, we’ll make up for it.”

She yawned. “Promise.”

I kissed her softly. “Promise.”

Chapter 36

LIESEL



Ariel and I had taken over a meeting room in the Callahan Vineyards office, sprawling out all our notes, sketches, and samples across the vast oak table. Between cups of coffee, giggles, and brainstorming, the room was filled with an infectious energy.

Atlas came in, grinned. “Ladies. How’s it going?”

I was on the floor, working through the plans as the workers were going to be here in a few hours to set the booths up. I wanted to make sure we were

setting everything up in the best way possible.

He crouched, looking devastatingly handsome in a suit and kissed me. We both ignored Ariel's snort of *get a room, guys*.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good."

"Yeah." His eyes twinkled.

"Yeah. You promised we'd make up...you know for lost time."

"Right." He kissed me again like he couldn't help himself. "Let's see what we can do about that this evening."

"Late in the evening," I countered. "Ariel and I are busy with this whole bazaar stuff."

"You having fun?" he asked, stroking a finger down my arm.

"Yes," I breathed. *Was it because I was young and inexperienced that he had this effect on me?* And he knew the impact he had on me and exploited it to both our delights.

"Atlas?" A voice came from the door.

Atlas turned, still crouching. "Daphne."

"We have a meeting," her voice was clipped.

"I'll be there." He turned to me and kissed me again, this time slow and long. "Tonight?"

"Yes."

After he left, Ariel fanned herself. "For a contractual marriage, you both certainly know how to raise the temperature of a room."

I smiled. I couldn't help myself. "It's not a contract for me," I confessed.

Ariel's eyes softened. "That much is obvious. And not for him either, even if he doesn't admit it."

I pointed at the bazaar layout front of me. "I think we should place the art stalls near the entrance," I mused, "It'll catch people's attention right away."

Ariel laughed, "You're just saying that because you're an artist!"

I smirked. "Maybe. Or maybe it's a genius marketing move."

After an hour of planning, we were ready to get to the grounds and instruct the contractors of any last-minute changes.

"This is going to be the best Christmas bazaar ever," Ariel declared.

"You're just saying that because you're organizing this one."

"No shit."

Just as we broke into another fit of laughter, the door opened sharply. In stepped Daphne, impeccably dressed with her sleek auburn hair. Her poised

demeanor felt like a stark contrast to the room's playful atmosphere. Ariel's laughter died instantly.

"Hey, Daphne. What can we do for you?"

"I just wanted to check up on progress. The contractors have been complaining about the delay," her voice was clipped.

"It's all under control." Ariel's hands went on her hips. Fight pose!

"I hope you understand the importance of this bazaar for Callahan Vineyards," she said icily and then turned to look at me. "It's not *just* a fun event."

I nodded, sensing the underlying tension. "Of course. That's why we're putting in so much effort. We want it to be both successful and enjoyable."

"The bazaar is going to be fantastic. You don't need to worry about it."

Daphne's gaze was unwavering as she looked between us. "I expect nothing less." With that, she turned on her heel and left.

I let out a low whistle, "She's... intense."

Ariel sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Yeah. But don't worry, we've got this."

"I'm not worried." I felt a pinch of guilt. "Did he love her?"

Ariel came up to me. "No. Atlas never looked at her the way he looks at you."

I nodded. "I feel bad. But for my father...he may have ended up marrying her."

"No," Ariel laughed. "He would never have married her. I know Atlas. He married you not *just* because of your father's will. He married you because of you. I know this in my heart, and he knows it in his."

I shook my head, feeling a touch of sadness. "He doesn't even know me, Ariel."

"Yes, he does. Maybe not all of you but he knows what's important. In a short time, you've become a part of all our lives." She gave me a quick hug. "We all love you. You're family, Liesel."

I smiled, feeling determined. "Enough of this mushy stuff. Let's go make this the best bazaar Callahan Vineyards has ever seen."

"Yeah, better than anything Daphne ever did," Ariel remarked, and I laughed, silently agreeing with her.

Chapter 37

ATLAS



“**Y**our wife is one hell of a bartender,” Nalini declared. “She knows her wine.”

I’d taken the leadership team to Whispering Vines for Daphne’s farewell dinner on the last Friday before the Christmas Bazaar, after which we’d be too busy for company dinners until the New Year.

Maybe it had been insensitive of me to bring the team here where Liesel worked but I wanted to be close to her. Daphne would just have to deal. Our

relationship had now ended over six months ago and I was glad she was leaving Callahan Vineyards, moving on.

“She knows the Callahan wine list and knows how to sell it,” Orion murmured. “It’s impressive.”

“I taught her,” Hansa declared.

Orion shrugged. “You barely know enough about our wine...so, I think you can’t take credit for her.”

Hansa’s face fell, and I narrowed my eyes at my brother. He was being a dick to her, and I didn’t know why. It was obvious she had a crush on Orion. Didn’t he see it? Everyone else could.

Daphne leaned toward me. “Our last dinner together and it had to be here, Atlas?” she asked, her eyes moist, her words carrying only to me.

Guilt pierced me but I shoved it away. I was a married man, and I’d never lied to Daphne. I wasn’t rubbing my marriage in her face...I just wanted to spend the evening watching my wife. *Fuck!* I was one pathetic little love-sick puppy.

“Daphne, the last course has been served. You’re welcome to leave.” I’d given her a lot of space and now I was done. Compassion and understanding only went this far.

She looked away from me and took a sip of her wine.

Liesel came by the table, her effervescence lifting the spirits of everyone around her, especially mine. Liesel had *quickly* become an exceptional bartender, and her extensive knowledge of wines never failed to impress guests. Part of it was Enzo and living in Healdsburg, I knew but the other was Liesel and her ability to immerse herself into anything she wanted and soak it in. She mesmerized me.

Thankfully, Daphne left early and with little drama but the rest of us stayed, enjoying some R&D before the Christmas rush began.

As the conversation flowed, the restaurant’s door swung open, revealing Naina Raj in all her splendor. Tall and poised, her years as a supermodel and now a high-ranking BBC executive, shone through every inch of her. Her long, sleek hair flowed with grace, making a stark contrast to her designer dress. As she walked in, the air in the room shifted.

Orion’s eyes widened ever so slightly, clearly impressed by Naina’s beauty. But it wasn’t his reaction that caught my attention, it was Hansa’s. She seemed to shrink, her posture becoming more reserved, her face adopting an uneasy expression.

“Hey, Naina,” Hansa said, her voice almost a whisper.

Naina smirked, her eyes scanning our table. “*Choti*,” she acknowledged, her voice dripping with a mix of amusement and condescension.

She said hello to Nalini, me and Orion, her gaze lingering a bit too long on my brother.

“*Choti*?” I questioned.

“Means little in Hindi,” Hansa informed me dryly. “I’m called that at home. It’s my...ah...pet...nick...name.”

“Join us, Naina,” Orion ventured, his tone reverent.

Naina considered for a moment before smiling. “Why not?”

The asshole had a crush on Naina, and it looked like she wasn’t giving him the time of day. Naina was a couple of years older than Orion. She’d been the *it* girl, especially with that face and fame.

As Naina gracefully took a seat next to Orion, her presence dwarfed Hansa. It didn’t help that Naina turned every compliment directed at Hansa into a veiled insult. From belittling her knowledge about wines to criticizing her choice of attire, Naina was relentless.

Orion seemed oblivious to the dynamic, enchanted by Naina’s beauty. But the more Naina pressed on, the more I felt a surge of protectiveness toward Hansa.

Trying to redirect the conversation, I asked Hansa about her latest achievements at Callahan Vineyards.

“How’s my little sister doing? We’ve been so worried about her performance at Callahan Vineyards.” Naina sounded concerned but it was a definite put down.

“Hansa is doing an exceptional job,” I asserted, hoping to offer her some support.

“She absolutely is,” Nalini added. She didn’t like how Naina was treating her sister. We all liked Hansa. She had become an integral part of our team.

Naina merely raised an eyebrow, sipping her wine nonchalantly. “You have quite the cheerleading squad, Hansa.”

The tension was palpable. Orion, lost in Naina’s spell, missed the entire under...no, overcurrent. Naina wasn’t even pretending to like her sister. She was subtle as a chainsaw.

The evening ended with Naina leaving with Orion to check out the new bar on Main Street that opened a few months ago.

“I go there a lot,” Orion told her. “I can make sure you are not led astray by

their distinctive cocktail menu.”

He was *flirting* with her, and she flirted right back. “Well, I’d hate to make a mistake. I’ll follow your lead.”

She left as gracefully as she came, but not without casting a shadow on the night. As the rest of us got up, I gently placed a hand on Hansa’s shoulder, offering silent comfort.

She pretended she was fine and reminded me of Liesel’s quiet strength. I’d always liked Hansa but now I liked her a little more. If only my little brother would get his head out of Naina’s perfumed ass, he’d treat Hansa better. I intended to have a talk with him.

I said as much to Liesel as we...no, *she* drove home. She had her learner’s permit, and she was proud of it. Also, I’d had had a few glasses of wine.

“Hansa is wonderful. I can’t see why Orion is chasing after Naina.”

Liesel grinned. “Come on, Naina is gorgeous.”

“So, she looks good in lingerie. Big deal,” I commented.

“How do you know how she looks in lingerie?” she teased.

I laughed. “I walked into that one. I guess most of the country knows. She did that Victoria’s Secret angel runway thing. It was a big deal in Everwood when it happened. That was...a decade ago?”

“You know I always wanted siblings. But if they’d be like her, I think I’m happy I was a one and lonely.”

I stroked her cheek with the back of my hand. “You’re not lonely anymore.”

“Stop touching me when I’m driving. It’s distracting and I’m being *very* careful.”

“No shit, there are three cars behind us who’re pretty tired of your *care*.”

“If they want, they can pass me,” Liesel said primly. “I’m driving the speed limit.”

“No one drives the speed limit.”

“Uncle King does.”

“Uncle King is special. He’s allowed to drive however he wants.”

“Why am I not special?” she asked.

“You are special...*specially* slow at driving.”

We bantered all the way back home.

I’d never thought that marriage could be like this, fun, easy, and relaxed.

Chapter 38

LIESEL



The air was crisp and carried a hint of pine, a herald of the impending snowfall.

The Christmas Bazaar stretched out in front of me like a dream, as if a page from a fairy tale had been brought to life in the heart of Everwood. It was a canvas painted with hues of red, green, gold, and white. The lights strung from one end to another shimmered, reflecting on the layer of frost that covered everything. The collective effort behind the bazaar was palpable, but

Ariel's touch stood out. She'd done a fantastic job, and I was incredibly proud of her.

The sound of laughter and chatter filled the air, mixing with the melodies of Christmas carols. Almost everyone from Everwood was there, wrapped in scarves and mittens, their breaths forming little puffs of mist in the cold air. Children ran around in their puffy jackets, their rosy cheeks visible from the cold, while adults shared warm greetings and laughter.

The night was illuminated with countless fairy lights, strung between booths and trees, casting a warm golden glow over the snow-covered ground. I could hear the soft melodies of Christmas carols playing in the background, blending seamlessly with the laughter and chatter of the bustling crowd.

Nearby, children lined up, their eyes wide with wonder, at a stall selling Christmas-themed toys and trinkets. There were wooden nutcrackers, snow globes capturing tiny winter scenes, and delicate hand-painted ornaments.

Vendors called out, showcasing their roasted candied almonds, mulled wine, and other festive delights. Children ran around with candy floss, their laughter echoing the sheer joy of the season.

On the right, a massive pine tree towered, adorned from top to bottom with twinkling lights, shimmering tinsel, and an assortment of ornaments. Beneath its boughs, kids sat cross-legged, deeply engrossed in a storytelling session around outdoor fireplaces. An elderly man, with a beard as white as the snow and a twinkle in his eye, spun tales of Christmas magic, of Santa's adventures and far-off North Pole wonders.

Atlas and I wandered past a game stall where both adults and kids tried their luck at *Pin the Nose on Rudolph*. The joyous shrieks and playful banter filled the air as participants were blindfolded and spun around.

Further down, a stall showcased Callahan Vineyards' finest wines. People congregated, glasses in hand, sipping and discussing the flavors. Next to it, a booth offered mugs of steaming hot cocoa topped with whipped cream and sprinkled with cocoa powder, and mulled wine, providing warmth against the biting cold.

An artisan booth displayed handcrafted jewelry, winter scarves, and other intricate keepsakes. I admired a pendant that seemed to capture the very essence of winter—a delicate snowflake set against a backdrop of deep blue.

As Atlas and I continued our stroll, the scent of roasted chestnuts wafted through the air.

Towards the corner, a makeshift ice-skating rink had been set up. Some

skated gracefully and some not so gracefully; their silhouettes looking ethereal under the canopy of lights.

We ran into Orion, his tall stature easy to spot in the crowd. Beside him stood Ariel, her face lit with pride and excitement over the bazaar she had worked so hard to bring to life.

I greeted them with a broad smile and hugs. “This is incredible, Ariel! It’s like you’ve woven a spell over Callahan Vineyards.”

Ariel’s cheeks flushed a rosy hue. “I just wanted to capture the spirit of Christmas, and I’m glad it’s resonating with everyone.”

Atlas, eyeing a booth selling roasted almonds, chuckled, “It’s not just the spirit she’s captured. My wallet’s already feeling lighter.”

I laughed. “That’s the charm of Christmas, isn’t it? A little indulgence, a lot of joy.”

Atlas, his arm around me, nodded in agreement. “True, but more than the gifts and the food, it’s the people that make it special.” His gaze rested on me, making me feel ridiculously warm.

Orion raised an eyebrow, teasing, “Getting sentimental, brother?”

Ariel nudged Orion playfully, “Oh, let him be. Christmas has a way of bringing out the poet in everyone.”

“You’ve really outdone yourself,” Atlas told his sister.

“Much better than what Duck Face did last year,” Orion commented.

I frowned. “Who’s Duck Face?”

“Daphne the Duck?” Ariel offered.

“That is so mean.” I looked up at Atlas. He just smiled and kissed me on my cold nose.

I pointed towards the ice-skating rink, “Have any of you tried that out yet?”

Ariel grinned, “Orion nearly did, but I saved the people around from witnessing a potential disaster.”

Orion feigned offense, “Hey! I’ll have you know, I’m quite the skater. It’s just been... a while.”

Atlas chuckled, “Perhaps we should all give it a go. If nothing else, it’ll make for a memorable evening.”

I squeezed Atlas’s hand, “I’m game if you are.”

Amidst the revelry, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. The bazaar wasn’t just about festivities or commerce; it was about community, togetherness, and the magic that binds us all during the holiday season. As snowflakes began their gentle descent from the heavens, I took a deep breath,

capturing the essence of the moment, and held it close to my heart.

Taking a deep breath, I soaked in the sights. “It’s beautiful,” I whispered to myself.

“Isn’t it?” Atlas’s voice echoed my sentiments, and I turned to find him beside me, his eyes mirroring my wonder.

We continued our stroll, hand in hand, like two people on a date, amidst the revelry. We stopped at a stall dedicated to festive food. Mini mince pies with a dusting of confectioners sugar, gingerbread men with colorful icing detailing, candy canes, and steaming mugs of mulled wine and hot cocoa with whipped cream and a sprinkle of cinnamon on top. The aroma was intoxicating.

Atlas’s eyes twinkled as he remarked, “Everything looks delicious. I wonder if anything tastes like orange blossoms here.”

I flushed and smiled. “How about we make do with cinnamon and spice for now?” I picked up a gingerbread man, holding it out for Atlas.

He took a bite from one end, and I playfully took a bite from the other.

Shaking his head, Atlas teased, “Always making things interesting, aren’t you?”

I winked at Atlas. “Life’s too short for ordinary gingerbread moments.”

As we strolled towards the game booth, Atlas gestured at the *Ring the Reindeer* game. “Think you have the aim for it?” he challenged.

I raised an eyebrow, “Are you doubting my precision, Mr. Callahan?”

Atlas chuckled, “Not at all, Mrs. Callahan. Just curious to see it in action.”

My heart thundered. This was the first time he’d called me *Mrs. Callahan*. Was he warming up to the idea of this being a *real* marriage?

Feigning confidence because I had terrible aim, I replied, “Prepare to be amazed.”

“I am amazed,” Atlas said dryly after I was done. “I’ve never see anyone throwing the rings do this badly.”

I punched him playfully on the shoulder. “This bar in San Francisco I used to go to banned me from playing darts after I hurt a couple of the servers.”

“I have no doubt.” Atlas wrapped an arm around me and kissed me right below my woolen hat on my forehead. “You may have terrible aim but you’re good at *many* other things,” he whispered huskily.

And just like that, I was aroused. I looked up at him and he smiled. “You want me?”

“Always,” I replied honestly.

He was still for a moment and then he grinned, “You’ll have to wait, Mrs. Callahan. Because now, it’s time for us to try the merry-go-round.”

Atlas led me to a carousel, its lights blending seamlessly with the surroundings. Children gleefully rode on reindeer and sleighs, their laughter harmonizing with the familiar jingles playing in the background.

We joined them on a sleigh, amusing the children and the adults.

By the carousels, we bumped into Seraphina at the artisan booth. She was eyeing a handcrafted snow globe, her fingers tracing the delicate patterns. As we approached, she glanced up, her eyes sharp and insightful, always observing more than she let on.

“She brings out the child in you,” Seraphina said to Atlas when we hopped off the sleigh laughing.

“She does, doesn’t she?” Atlas’s glance was warm and loving. “Why don’t you stay here with Seraphina, and I’ll bring us some mulled wine.”

“Liesel,” she greeted, her voice soft and thoughtful, “You look lovely today. There’s a glow about you.”

I smiled, albeit a tad nervously. “It’s the Christmas spirit.”

Seraphina chuckled, “Or perhaps, it’s the Atlas spirit?”

She tapped the snow globe thoughtfully, “You know, when he looks at you, it’s different. There’s a spark.”

“But what if that spark isn’t enough? What if he’s not ready?” My concerns were genuine. The fear of unrequited feelings was daunting.

Seraphina smiled gently, raising her hands as if holding an imaginary wand, “Should I wave my magic wand and make all your worries disappear?”

Despite the gravity of our conversation, I chuckled. “Even magic can’t make someone fall in love with you.”

Seraphina put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “True. But maybe it can help someone see what’s already there.”

Atlas came back then with mulled wine, and I let my worries fall away. Leaving Seraphina at the artisan booth, we stumbled upon a photo booth where families and friends donned Christmas props, Santa hats, reindeer antlers, and oversized elf shoes.

Atlas and I couldn’t resist. He wore a Santa hat while I chose reindeer antlers, and we posed, capturing a moment amidst the magic.

Nalini, the CFO of Callahan Vineyards, came up to me, her confident stride unmistakable even in the crowded bazaar. She stood tall, her dark hair pulled back into a sleek bun, revealing sharp, observant hazel eyes framed by

elegant glasses. Her attire was always impeccable; that evening she wore a crimson sweater that contrasted beautifully with her caramel skin, coupled with a silver pendant that caught the fairy lights' glimmer.

"You've done something to him," she started, her voice firm but not without warmth.

"What?" I asked, panicked, my thoughts racing as I tried to decipher what she was hinting at.

She chuckled lightly, an amused glint in her eyes. "Made him happier than I've ever seen him."

Relief washed over me, and I couldn't help but blush. "Oh, I don't know about that. Wasn't he always happy?"

Nalini raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. "I've worked with Atlas for years. The change in him is obvious to all of us. He seems lighter."

"It's the season to be jolly," I crooned.

Nalini nodded, studying me with an approving gaze.

Atlas looked ridiculous wearing a Santa Hat with a clown nose. "What's he doing?" Daphne, Duck Face said from behind us.

I turned around and braced myself.

"Having fun," Nalini commented.

"Christ, he's the CEO of a company and he's behaving like a..."

"Man, who's keeping up with the season," I cut in.

I joined Atlas and put on some props. We took photos, cracking ourselves up.

Chapter 39

ATLAS



Towards the end of the clearing, a grand Christmas tree stretched upwards, its branches adorned with twinkling lights and gleaming ornaments.

Feeling a surge of emotion, I squeezed Liesel's hand to capture her attention. "Can you believe this?" I murmured, drawing her closer.

She looked around, admiration clear in her eyes. "Yes. I love this Callahan tradition."

Turning her to face me, I wrapped her in my embrace. "Thank you for

helping with...everything. You've been... remarkable, Liesel."

I could see her eyes glisten, hinting at emotions she didn't voice. I realized then just how deeply I cared for her. "You bring a kind of warmth and light to everything," I confessed.

She looked up at me, momentarily lost for words, just as the first snowflakes fell, casting the bazaar in a magical, ethereal glow. The spirit of Christmas was alive in Everwood, and the entire scene felt surreal.

Finding a quiet corner, we sat down on a bench, taking in the view of the bustling bazaar. I felt a swell of pride, not just for the event, but for the partnership Liesel and I had forged.

"You know," I began, breaking the silence, "I can't thank you enough for the money you provided for the Harvest Festival and for fixing the cellar."

She brushed it off with a modest smile. She looked at me, waiting for more. Taking a deep breath, I blurted out, "I'll really miss you when our contract ends."

The words hung in the air between us, and I instantly regretted them. *Why did I say that?* I knew why I did. I could feel the pressure of our closeness and the only way to dispel it was to break the bubble. This was a transient marriage. I had to remember this no matter how alluring and awesome my wife was. She was a temporary wife.

She didn't seem upset by what I said. She took my hand in hers and kissed my cold knuckles. "Do you know when I first met you, I thought you were the most handsome man I'd ever seen."

She had a way, didn't she, of just letting the bad go and focus on the good. "I thought you looked like a fairy princess. Petite and delicate."

"Papa told me you wanted to marry me. I was shocked. I told him he was out of his mind, but he insisted. He didn't want me to be alone, and that you were the best man he knew." She leaned into me and closed her eyes. "I miss him."

"I know, Angel. I miss him too."

I saw tears roll down her cheeks and wiped them gently.

"He made sure I had a new family as I lost my old one...him."

I hadn't seen it that way, but it was true. Enzo knew how close I was with my siblings. He'd have wanted my Angel taken care of. He'd have wanted her to have people in her life who cared for her.

"And you have a family," I assured her. "Even when we're not married, Liesel, we'll still be family."

I felt her stiffen. “You okay?”

She nodded and then sighed. “I don’t like being reminded all the time that this is a temporary arrangement. I feel that as soon as I settle in or enjoy myself too much, you bring it up as if telling me, *don’t get too attached, Liesel.*”

She didn’t sound angry as she spoke, just matter of fact. Liesel was the calmest person I knew. I realized then that I’d never seen her pissed off. But she was angry...I could feel it beneath the surface. In a short period, I’d gotten to know my wife well.

“But *it is* temporary, Liesel. We both need to remember that.”

“Why?”

“Because if we don’t, we’re bound to hurt each other. I already have a lot of guilt about Daphne. I was always honest with her and yet...I hurt her. I don’t want to do that to you.”

She gave me a smile and kissed my cheek. “Let’s go home. I can’t feel my finger tips and my feet feel like ice blocks.”

Chapter 40

LIESEL



Dr. Rao went to India for the holidays, so Navya joined us in Everwood a few days before Christmas. She needed a break she said, and she wanted to attend the bazaar, which she fell in love with. I was glad to have my friend with me. She got along well with Orion, Ariel, and Atlas...and even had Seraphina wrapped around her finger, which was a sight to see.

The chilled winter air slipped in as Navya entered, momentarily dimming the cozy warmth of my studio. The soft, melancholic notes of Lana Del Rey's

Young and Beautiful spun gently from the turntable, filling the room with an ethereal atmosphere.

Navya paused, her eyes wide as they darted from one painting to another. Gone were the delicate, pastel fairytales I once painted. Now, my canvases were storms of emotions, raw and unfiltered. One depicted a ship being tossed amidst turbulent, inky seas, its sails splattered with gold, representing fleeting moments of hope amidst despair. Another showed a lone woman, a silhouette against a blood-red moon, her feet hovering above a jagged abyss, held up by gossamer threads of light. The recurring theme was a dance between darkness and magic, reality, and fantasy.

“These are... incredible, Liesel,” Navya whispered, her fingers dabbing the edge of a canvas that depicted intertwined hands—one shadowed and fading, the other vibrant with intricate patterns of love and longing. “Has Clara seen these?”

I nodded. “I sent her pictures. She’s coming by next month and is going to take the paintings I’ve made so far with her. Well, except for the one that I made for Atlas.”

“These are stunning.” Navya touched one of the four canvases I’d completed since I moved to Everwood. “It’s still you...but...more.”

“Love changes things,” I murmured, a lump forming in my throat.

Navya turned to me, her expression a mix of surprise and realization. “Yes, it does,” she whispered, her voice barely above the gentle croon of the music.

I nodded, my eyes blurring with unshed tears. “Every brushstroke, every shade, every contour, it’s all him,” I admitted. “His distance, his reluctance, it’s all there, intertwined with my feelings, my desires. I used to paint to escape pain, but now I paint to feel it, to embrace it.”

She wrapped her arms around me, her warmth contrasting the coolness of the room. The room fell silent, save for the haunting melody from the turntable. Navya held me close, understanding the depth of my feelings and the transformation of my art. In that moment, amidst my canvases and the soft glow of the studio lights, I felt both the weight of my unspoken love and the comfort of a friend’s embrace.

The studio’s ambiance seemed to shift as Navya’s confusion clouded the room. She ran a hand through her hair, her brows furrowed in thought. “Liesel, why does it have to be this way? Why can’t you both just have a real marriage?”

Sighing, I leaned against my worktable, my fingers absentmindedly tracing

the rough wooden surface. “I wish it was that easy,” I began. “Atlas has these... walls, barriers that he’s constructed around himself. Ever since his parents died, he’s chosen caution over passion, security over vulnerability.”

Navya sat down on the stool near my easel, her eyes softening with understanding. “But surely he sees the real you, the love you have for him?”

I chuckled bitterly. “I know he feels more for me than when he’s letting on. There’s this... intensity in his gaze whenever he looks at me, these fleeting moments of genuine affection. But he’s so terrified of admitting it, even to himself.”

She considered this for a moment, her fingers tapping a soft rhythm on her knee. “Liesel,” she finally said, “you need to talk to him. Lay everything out, bare your soul. Even if he doesn’t respond immediately, at least he’ll know how you feel.”

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. “You’re right,” I murmured, determination flooding me. “But what if he rejects me?”

“Liesel—“

“Yes, he may, Navya. But then at least I’ll have no regrets.”

Navya squeezed my hand in encouragement. “That’s the spirit. Whatever happens, remember that you are deserving of love, of being seen and cherished.”

It wouldn’t be easy, but I would lay my heart out for Atlas to see, hoping against hope that he would finally let his guard down and let me in.

Ariel joined us in the studio and lay down on the day bed.

“I’m exhausted. I did immigration law in New York, and I was never this tired,” she exclaimed. “This Christmas Bazaar has taken everything out of me.”

“And we still have a few days to go.” I patted her on her shoulder.

“Speaking of Christmas being here sooner than we can plan for, we need to get Atlas out of his office so I can get in and paint his Christmas present,” I reminded Ariel.

“What are you painting?” Navya wanted to know.

I told Navya about how Atlas had fallen in love with one of my paintings and I was making something similar for him on canvas, but I loved the idea of leaving my art in his office, a reminder of me. Especially after I was gone, which he seemed determined to make happen.

Chapter 41

ATLAS



Since I had a meeting with a wine distributor at Raven's Claw, a café on Main Street, I went to see Seraphina before I headed back to Callahan Vineyards.

Whispering Vines had always been one of those places where time seemed to pause, enveloping you in a warm embrace of ambient lighting and the delicate hum of quiet conversations. As I stepped inside, I scanned the room and found Seraphina seated at the far end, a half-empty glass of red wine

beside her.

The bar was busier than usual, with familiar faces scattered throughout. The dimly lit ambiance was enhanced by the soft chatter and occasional clinks of glasses.

To my right, near the window sat Raphael Edwards, the town's librarian. He was engrossed in a novel, a glass of red wine by his side. "Raphael," I greeted with a nod as I passed by his table.

He looked up, his eyes crinkling in a smile behind his glasses. "Ah, Atlas! Happy holidays. And," he added, "your wife is a true talent. Loved what she and Ariel have done for the bazaar."

"Thank you," I replied, feeling a warm surge of pride. "I'll let her know you're enjoying it."

Further in, seated at the bar counter, was Celeste, a business associate I'd worked with on a few vineyard deals. Her platinum blonde hair was hard to miss. "Atlas!" she exclaimed, waving me over. "*Joyeux Noël!*"

I gave her a hug and kissed on both cheeks, French style since Celeste was a transplant from Loire Valley. "*Merci, joyeux Noël!. Ça va, Celeste.*"

"Absolutely," she replied in her French accent. "I met Liesel yesterday at the bazaar and went to her studio. She's an amazing artist. And the bazaar? What an amazing job she and Ariel have done. The best one we've ever seen in Callahan Vineyards."

I still hadn't *really* seen any of Liesel's pieces. I'd been to her studio a few times and had caught glimpses of what she was working on, but she'd never invited me in, shown me her work. And the one time I'd found her there unconscious on the floor, I'd been too busy taking care of her than looking at her art.

The fact was that she seemed to be fine with everyone going to her studio except me and I wasn't sure why. It bothered me. She shared everything with me but this important part of hers she wanted to keep separate. I hadn't pressed her. I didn't want her to feel that we were a normal couple who had to know each other's *everything*. But it hurt that she didn't let me in.

I chuckled, "Liesel and Ariel have a way of making Christmas come alive."

With wishes exchanged, I finally made my way to Seraphina. I was taken aback by her appearance. There was an almost ethereal quality about her that was hard to miss.

Her hair, usually a rich shade of auburn, cascaded down her shoulders in loose, shimmering waves, giving the impression of liquid gold under the

muted lighting of the wine bar. But it was her attire that captured most of my attention. She wore a flowing dress in a shade of deep emerald, the fabric soft and gossamer, moving as if it had a life of its own, shifting and dancing with every subtle movement she made.

I knew some in Everwood suggested that there was a little *Practical Magic* about Seraphina, and that she was a card-carrying witch. When I looked into her deep, soulful eyes, which held an otherworldly charm, I concurred. They seemed to carry a hint of the cosmos, shimmering in shades of amethyst, reflecting mysteries I felt I could drown in. They had an intensity, a depth, which made you feel as if she could peer right into the very core of your being.

Around her neck hung a pendant, a delicate silver chain holding a crystal that refracted light in a spectrum of colors. The stone pulsed softly, or at least it seemed to, adding to the mystical aura around her.

“Atlas,” she greeted, and her voice, usually warm and comforting, had a melodic lilt to it that day, like a soft whisper carried by the wind.

I sat down next to her and took a sniff of her wine. “Another Shiraz?”

“This is from a very special South African vineyard,” she told me. “Want a glass?”

“Maybe a half glass...I have to get back to work.”

She poured me half a glass and looked around to see if any of her guests needed anything before focusing on me again.

“You look a bit frazzled. What’s on your mind?”

She always knew, I thought amused. I didn’t know how she did it, but she could look into your soul. “I want to get Liesel something for Christmas... something she’ll love. But...” I trailed off.

“But you don’t want her to get the wrong idea?” she suggested.

I sighed and dropped my voice to a whisper. “She’s getting attached to all of us.”

“All of you are getting attached to her as well.”

I nodded. And wasn’t that the cluster fuck of it all. “She deserves something...great. Our marriage maybe temporary but she’ll always be part of our family.”

Seraphina took a sip of her wine, her eyes studying me with that familiar intensity. “Why not gift her an experience that would inspire her art further?”

I thought for a moment, playing with the wine cork in front of me. “Go on...”

She leaned in, her voice soft yet excited. “How about a retreat to an artist colony? There’s one in the heart of Tuscany, where artists from all over the world come together, sharing ideas, techniques, and drawing inspiration from the picturesque landscape. She can paint, learn, and be among her peers.”

The idea felt right, but I’d have to look at our budget to see if I could make it happen. “Thanks, Seraphina, I’ll look into it.”

Seraphina’s smile widened, her hand reaching out to pat mine. “Sometimes the best gifts aren’t things, but experiences. She’ll cherish it, Atlas. More so because it’s from you.”

I didn’t like where that was headed. I didn’t want Liesel placing too much value on me. *But how couldn’t she?* I was her first lover and legally, her husband. We’d known each other a short time but already we were deeply entrenched in each other’s lives. It worried me she’d get hurt when this was over. It scared me that if she was already in my blood...what would she do in the next several months where we were stuck together being married?

Chapter 42

LIESEL



The moment I'd decided to bare my heart to Atlas, Seraphina came to my aid, proving once again why she was Everwood's fairy godmother. With a flick of her wand and a touch of her magic, the Whispering Vines was transformed from a bustling wine bar into an enchanting escape, reserved just for Atlas and me.

The soft glow of candlelight bathed the interior of Whispering Vines in a golden hue. Seraphina, ever the orchestrator of dreams, stood by the entrance,

her smile radiant against the backdrop of twinkling fairy lights.

“Everything is set, darling,” she whispered, handing me a small remote. “For the music, when you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Seraphina,” I replied, my voice choked with emotion. “I can’t believe you did all this. And you closed the bar down for us.”

She brushed it off with a wave. “For love, darling? Always.” She winked.

I laughed nervously. “Do you think he’ll like it?”

She leaned closer, her voice soft and reassuring. “He’d be a fool not to.”

I clutched the remote tightly. The scent of our favorite dishes wafted from the kitchen.

“Now, go get your man.” Seraphina ushered me outside.

Atlas smiled at me when he saw me. “I was wondering where you were. So, where are we going for dinner?”

I’d asked him to meet me outside Whispering Vines and told him where we were eating was a surprise.

“In here.” I held my hand out to his and even though he looked confused, he placed his hand in mine.

As we stepped inside Whispering Vines, the warm glow from the lanterns cast golden hues on tables covered in pristine white clothes. Centerpieces of wildflowers and cascading ivy adorned each table, their petals shimmering and dancing in the soft light, making the whole place feel like it was pulled from the pages of a fairytale.

As the door to Whispering Vines closed behind us, Atlas’s eyebrows shot up in amazement. “Liesel,” he began, his voice hushed in awe, “did you do all this?”

I felt a blush creeping up my neck. “With a little help from Seraphina. Do you like it?”

He took a moment, surveying the scene, his eyes landing on the array of Spanish dishes. Tapas were arranged meticulously on porcelain platters: *patatas bravas* drizzled with a spicy tomato sauce, *albóndigas* that were rich and aromatic, wafting invitingly. Golden croquetas sat next to delicate slivers of *jamón ibérico*. But what caught my eye the most was the tantalizing paella, its saffron-infused rice glistening with an assortment of seafood, its aroma heady and inviting.

“It’s perfect.”

Beside our table stood a bottle of Burgundy Pinot Noir, its delicate ruby hue promising a world of depth and flavor. It was one of Atlas’s favorites, its

taste reminiscent of strawberries and vanilla, with a touch of earthy leather.

We sat down and I poured us both a glass of the wine. “To memories,” I proposed, lifting my glass.

He clinked his against mine, “And to making new ones.”

Soft music floated in the air as I used the remote, and a fusion of classic Spanish guitar strumming and contemporary melodies set the mood for a dance. As if on cue, Atlas stood up, offering me his hand. My heart raced as we glided on the makeshift dance floor, losing ourselves in the rhythm, the music, and each other’s embrace.

Everything was perfect. The ambiance, the music, our synchronized heartbeats. It was the right moment to tell him everything. As the song ended and our foreheads touched, the weight of my confession pressed against my lips. But I hesitated, the words lingering on the brink of being spoken.

Instead, I rested my head against his chest, listening to the comforting thud of his heart, wishing it would guide me, give me a sign. But the evening passed, and the words remained unspoken, trapped in the night’s magic and the hope of what could be.

“Are we alone?” he whispered.

“Yes. It’s just us.”

He lifted my face with a finger on my chin and kissed my mouth. “This is a wonderful evening. Thank you so much for planning it.”

I love you. The words were bubbling inside me.

His hands moved to my hips, and he pulled me close. “You sure we’re alone,” he asked again, his lips on my jawline, working their way to the erogenous spot behind my ear, which he knew made me moan.

“Yes.” My voice was strangled.

Was this normal? This physical and emotional need for a man? Did everyone who falls in love feel like this? Weightless while being full of love?

His hands pulled my dress up as he swayed to the music with me, and he cupped my ass. He made short order of my panties and the wispy lace fell at my feet, tangling around my boots.

“Atlas, the windows,” I protested. Anyone who was looking in could see us. He left me for a minute and turned off the lights. We were now bathed only in the warm glow of the distant candles.

“Better?” He kissed me.

“Yes.”

“Not an exhibitionist then?” he teased.

I shook my head, somberly. “What we do together is ours. Only ours.”

“Yes,” he muttered. “Only ours.”

His movements were suddenly jerky as he all but carried me and put me on one of the tables. I lay down, a feast in front of him. He removed my boots and then my panties. “I want you all the time.”

He pushed my dress up and I lay like an offering. He went on his knees and pressed a kiss on my pussy. “You’re aroused, Angel.”

Yes, helplessly, always around you.

He swiped his tongue over my clitoris, and I shuddered. He edged me closer to an orgasm and then pulled away.

“Atlas,” I whined.

He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. “We’ll come together. I want us to come together.”

When he entered me, everything inside me stilled, calmed. The peace, the fullness, the love. Did he love me? He must. No one, but no one looked at me the way he did. No one had ever touched me this way. I was inexperienced, but I wasn’t stupid. It might be my first time and not his; but I knew he’d never had this intimacy with anyone else.

His fingers were on my perineum. Since I’d wondered about anal, he’d kept at it, widening me, preparing me. He pounded into me as he inserted one and then two fingers inside me. I felt stretched, unbearably full. His mouth was on me, his tongue inside me. His fingers were in me, and his erection was filling the empty voids. His grunts, his promises that I was the most precious thing in his world, filled my heart with courage.

As I came and took him with me, I whispered what was deep inside me, waiting to be expressed. “I love you.”

Chapter 43

ATLAS



The night air was crisp, with a bite that matched the tension between Liesel and me. We stood just outside the Whispering Vines, the atmosphere from our date still thick around us.

I'd heard the words. I tried to ignore them. But they were there between us.

The minute the words were out I'd immediately taken several emotional steps away from her. What scared and surprised me was that when she'd said those three little words, there had been a call in my heart to respond in kind.

But I wasn't in love with Liesel. How could I be? I barely knew her. Sure, I found her attractive, but that was lust, wasn't it? She was sensuous, funny, smart and...young. She was *so* young. She deserved a full life with... someone else, didn't she?

But the idea of her moving on didn't sit well with me either. I couldn't imagine how my house would feel without her. It would be empty, wouldn't it? My life would be empty. I'd only ever been close with Ariel and Orion; but now Liesel was part of our family.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," I said because I knew I was hurting her by pulling away.

Love? No. This was a mistake. I should never have brought her to Everwood. I should've kept my distance from her.

But why? A voice inside my head demanded. *Why can't you be with her? So, she's in love with you. Isn't that great? Why can't you be in love with her?*

I knew and understood love. I had and still loved my parents. I loved Ariel and Orion. I didn't feel that way about Liesel... did I? *Fuck!* I should never have had sex with her. I'm her first lover. She was confusing sex with love. I was older, smarter, and wiser. I knew the difference.

Liesel took a deep breath, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Atlas," she began, her voice soft but steady, "Did you hear what I said earlier?"

I shifted uncomfortably, sensing the weight of what was about to come. "Yes," I murmured.

"I've fallen in love with you," she confessed, her gaze unwavering, searching my eyes for a response.

She said the words again and the ground felt like it had been pulled from beneath my feet. Panic surged through me. "Liesel," I began, my voice rising in disbelief, "we've only known each other for a few months. It's too soon."

Her eyes flashed with hurt, but also a touch of defiance. "Love doesn't have a timetable, Atlas. It's not about the duration but the depth. Just because it's quick, doesn't make it any less real."

My breathing became ragged. Her confession, while sincere, felt like a cage closing around me. "This is exactly what I was afraid of. You're rushing into feelings, getting swept up in emotions without truly understanding them."

She stepped closer, her voice firm. "I understand them just fine. What I see is a man who's built so many walls around himself that he's terrified of

anyone seeing through them. But I have seen through them. I see you. I see your fears, your pain, and even your love.”

That stung. My chest tightened, and anger bubbled up. “You think you’ve got me figured out? This isn’t a fairytale, Liesel. Just because you’ve painted a picture of us in your mind doesn’t mean it’s our reality.”

Liesel’s voice trembled with emotion. “I’m not asking for a fairytale. All I’m asking for is a chance. A real chance. Without barriers.”

But the more she pushed, the more I recoiled. “You’re deluding yourself,” I spat out, my tone harsher than I intended. “I can’t give you what you’re looking for.”

“Atlas?”

“Let’s go.” I all but hauled her into the Subaru. We drove in silence the dim light from the streetlamps casting long shadows on the roads, mirrored the growing chasm between us.

When we got home, I told her I had to go back to the office.

“Atlas,” she pleaded.

I held my hand up. “I need you to think about this and I need space as well.”

“Let’s talk about this.”

“What the fuck is there to talk about?” I demanded angrily. “This is a fucking temporary marriage. How much clearer can I get?”

“Are you saying, you have no feelings about me?” She looked forlorn under the moonlight in the front porch. The same porch where we’d sit in the evenings, drinking wine, talking about our day.

“I don’t think you know what your feelings mean.” I tried to be reasonable. “You’re twenty three and I’m thirty six. We don’t know each other very well.”

“You know me, Atlas,” her voice was wobbly.

“Do I?” I bit out. “You don’t let me into your studio. That’s a big part of you, your art, isn’t it? You don’t want me there. I respect that.”

She bit her lower lip. “That’s not it. I just...oh, Atlas. That’s—“

“And I don’t let you into many things that are important to me.” *Like what?* I didn’t know. She knew everything now. I’d shared with her more about and of me than anyone else. What was I doing? This beautiful woman was in love with me, and I should say, the hell with contracts, let’s make this work.

But I couldn’t. I didn’t want a wife...not like this. Not *this* wife who I hadn’t chosen. She was...*fuck!* I was tempted to accept her love and say,

"Let's do this." But I wasn't sure if I understood what love is or if I could give it to her; and not being honest about my feelings would be unfair to both her and me.

"Have you not enjoyed our time together so far?" There were tears flowing down her cheeks. I wanted to hold her, but I didn't dare touch her. If I did, then I'd fall into her spell.

"Yes. We're having fun, Liesel. It's just a good time." *The best time.* But could it become a serious relationship? I didn't want a wife who needed me. I wanted...I wanted a partner. Liesel was a child and a sick one at that. I felt like an asshole for thinking that, but it was how I felt. I couldn't change that.

"Atlas—"

"I have to go."

I left her and walked to the Callahan Vineyard offices. I couldn't be in the house with her, the house she'd made ours. It used to be *just* mine but now her things and her charm and her heart were everywhere. She'd made small changes, but she'd made my house a home. *God damn it!*

I pushed the door open to my office and the last person I expected to find was Daphne, writing something on my conference table.

She looked up, startled. "Atlas? What are you doing here so late?"

"What are *you* doing in my office?"

She looked sheepish. "I packed up most everything in my office today. I was...writing.... I thought I'd email but.... It's old-fashioned to write a letter, isn't it? I wanted to tell you some things."

My frustration bubbled to the surface. "I need space, Daphne," I muttered, collapsing into the chair across from her. "Do you mind?"

Daphne studied me for a moment, a slight frown marring her brow. "Something's wrong," she observed quietly.

Sighing deeply, I rubbed my temples, feeling the weight of the evening's revelations. "I want to be alone."

"Atlas?"

I sighed. "Liesel told me she's in love with me," I began, watching as Daphne's eyes widened in surprise. "I panicked. I didn't handle it well."

"What?"

I took a deep breath. "Fuck!" She was leaving, so how did it matter if she knew the truth. So, I told her about Enzo's will.

Daphne leaned back in her chair, the hurt in her eyes was devastating. "Why didn't you tell me? We'd have found a way around it."

“Enzo was dying, Daph. I could not disappoint him.”

“So, you married *her*? What the fuck is wrong with you?” she was screaming now.

I held up a hand. “I can’t do this now. Leave, Daphne. Goodbye. Have a good life.” I walked up to my window and looked outside at the dark vines.

“Atlas, this *temporary marriage* charade is going to end up hurting someone...hell, it has hurt me. Liesel, for sure.”

“I never meant for things to get this complicated,” I admitted, my voice tinged with regret. “I thought I could keep everything controlled, under wraps.”

I saw Daphne’s reflection in the darkened window. “Atlas, if you truly believe this is a temporary arrangement, why is she living here with you? You’re muddying the waters. If you’re not committed to this relationship, it might be best for her to live a separate life. Back in Healdsburg. Give her space, without being tethered to a man who doesn’t share her dreams.”

I swallowed hard, the truth in Daphne’s words stinging. “You may be right. You think I’m being unfair to her?”

“I know you are being unfair to her *and* me.”

“Christ, I’ve made a mess of things.”

She put her arms around me and leaned her head against my back. I put my hands on hers to remove them, but she held on tight. “I knew it. I just knew it. I knew you didn’t love her.”

I felt her tears dampen the back of my shirt. It was the second woman who was crying on my clothes today.

I peeled her hands off me. “Please go.”

“No,” she said adamantly. “I thought you fell in love with her. Well, I didn’t believe it, but you kept saying it.”

“I never said I was in love with her.”

She laughed harshly. “You said you’ve met someone else, and you got married. What the fuck else was I supposed to think? It was all a ruse. A temporary marriage?” she spat out, her voice dripping with anger and bitterness. “And here I thought you had genuinely moved on.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “Daphne, I have—“

She interrupted, her voice quivering with a mix of anger and desperation. “There’s a chance for us. We could try again.”

I could see the hope in her eyes, a hope that gnawed at me. I never wanted to hurt her, but I also couldn’t lie to myself or to her.

“Daphne,” I began carefully, choosing my words. “What we had was special. I won’t deny it. But it’s over. We were never meant for the long haul.”

She looked away, tears forming in her eyes. “But if this marriage with Liesel is just temporary, why can’t we give it another shot? Why can’t we fix what was broken?”

I took a deep breath, memories of our time together flashing in my mind. “Because not everything that’s broken can be fixed. No matter what happens with Liesel. You and I were over. I never loved you.” This much I knew was true.

She looked at me like I’d struck her. I was truly fucking up with women today. First my wife and now Daphne. *Universe, give me a couple of puppies so I can kick them as well and call it a fucking day.*

Daphne’s face crumpled, and for a moment, I felt a pang of guilt. But I also knew that leading her on would only hurt her more in the long run.

As she spoke, a niggling thought crept into the back of my mind. Liesel and I may have started on a false note, but the moments we shared felt more genuine than anything I’d felt with Daphne. Could it be possible? Could Liesel and I have something real? The idea both excited and terrified me.

Daphne’s voice brought me back to the present. “I just... I thought there was still hope for us.”

I reached out, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I wish you all the best, Daphne. Truly. You deserve happiness, but it’s not with me.”

She nodded slowly, wiping away a tear. “I hate you so much right now.”

I deserved her disdain. Her hate. I watched as she left my office, her silhouette gradually disappearing into the night.

As the door closed behind her, a whirlwind of emotions took over—regret, confusion, hope, and an undeniable longing for Liesel.

Chapter 44

LIESEL



Seraphina texted to ask how the evening went. I called her back, wanting her warmth and comfort to soothe the emotional storm I was weathering.

“He left. He just...” I burst into tears.

“Liesel,” she began, her voice soothing. “Tell me what happened.”

Between sobs I told her, and she sighed. “He can be such a little ass, can’t he? He’s running scared.”

“What should I do?” I asked.

“Go confront him. He can’t just run away. The little twerp.”

I chuckled. “Little twerp?”

Seraphina laughed. “Go get the son of a bitch.”

“Really?” I sniffled.

“Really.”

I ran to the office building and used my key fob to get in. I took to stairs two at a time and was about to open Atlas’s office door when voices drifted out. I paused, recognizing Atlas’s deep tones and then Daphne’s softer cadence.

“... might be best for her to live a separate life. Back in Healdsburg,” Daphne was saying.

“You may be right. You think I’m being unfair to her?” I heard Atlas say.

“I know you are being unfair to her and me.”

“Christ, I’ve made a mess of things.”

“I knew it. I just knew it. I knew you didn’t love her.” There was a joy in Daphne’s voice.

I couldn’t listen any further.

I felt as though the ground had been ripped from beneath my feet. Clutching the wall for support, I went back down the main door and pressed my forehead against the cold glass, my eyes stinging with unshed tears.

A knot of pain tightened in my chest. Here I was, prepared to fight for our love as that silly song went, and he was contemplating sending me away. The reality of our *temporary marriage* slammed into me with brutal clarity.

I took a shaky breath, turning away from the window. I couldn’t continue in this limbo, tethered to a man who might never be ready to love me as I deserved. I’d go back to Healdsburg, to my old life. I’d heal, rebuild, and find a love that didn’t require convincing.

Chapter 45

LIESEL



We didn't really have to worry about planning on getting Atlas out of the house and his office. All I had to do was tell him how I felt and off he went, *running*.

I'd wanted to be petty and leave for Healdsburg right after I overheard his conversation with Daphne, but I didn't want to. I loved Atlas and I wanted to...well, stay and see how it worked out. He was pretending everything was *normal*. He'd slept with me as he'd been since we first had sex. But he lay on

his side of the bed to the point that, if I'd touched him, he would have rolled off the bed and land on the floor. I contemplated kicking him and decided against it. If he broke his nose or something, I'd have to drive him to the ER. Though it had been tempting.

A part of me was worried that he wanted to go back to Daphne. But it was a small part. I trusted Atlas, and he'd never made feel like he was interested in Daphne. A bigger part of me believed he loved me even if he didn't want to admit it.

With that tug of war playing inside me, I moved my studio to Atlas's office with Orion and Ariel's help. We covered the floor with plastic so the hardwood floors wouldn't get damaged by paint splatter.

I could smell Atlas in the office, and it was both a comfort and annoying because I was furious with him. I was twenty-three years old, young, as Atlas put it. Would I move on from Atlas if we ended? Or would I spend the rest of my life pining for him?

I picked up a brush and poured my feelings onto my new canvas. The wall of Atlas's office had once been a plain, muted shade, but now it was alive with color and emotion. I'd chosen a backdrop of deep burgundy and rich greens, reminiscent of the very heart of Callahan Vineyards.

As the day progressed, vines meandered, intertwining, their leaves vibrant against the darker backdrop. Grapes hung like jeweled clusters, shimmering in shades of purple, blue, and deep red.

By the end of the first evening, amidst the vineyard scene, there were my signature whimsical touches: ethereal, translucent wings on some of the grape bunches, as if they might flutter away at any moment, and hidden, mischievous eyes peeking out from a few of the leaves, hinting at magical creatures that lived within the vineyard. The moon hung large and golden in the top corner, casting an otherworldly glow upon the scene, with silhouetted fairies dancing beneath its light.

There was a knock on the door and Seraphina peeked in. "Hey?"

"Come on in." I was exhausted and sat down on the couch. I had painted for nine hours straight, and I could feel the strain on my body.

Seraphina eyes took in the wall's transformation. "Liesel, this is... breathtaking."

I gave her a half-hearted smile, my hands stained with paint. "Thanks. It's a *parting* gift."

"What?" Seraphina had not been expecting that.

I sighed. “I followed your advice and chased him down. But he was with Daphne.” I told her what I overheard.

I bit my lip, trying to keep my composure. “And then he came to bed late. I pretended to be asleep, and he pretended he didn’t know I was awake. He left before I woke up this morning. He left me a note that he was going to be in the Funk Zone *all* weekend. I don’t even know if he’s coming back tonight.”

I went back to the wall, looking at it critically, with the eye of an artist and not a woman who was creating a parting gift for her lover.

She came closer, her eyes reflecting genuine concern. “Liesel, do you really believe Atlas wants to go back to Daphne?”

I shrugged, my brush stroking the canvas in agitated movements. “I have no fucking clue. Sorry...for the language.”

Seraphina grinned. “I’m used to swearing, darling. You know you’re painting a fascinating world here, one of magic and mystery. Love is much the same. It’s not just about the past; it’s about the present, the possibilities of the future.”

I looked away, tears stinging my eyes. “What if I’m just a temporary chapter in his story?”

“Liesel,” Seraphina said softly, tilting my chin to meet her gaze, “you’re not a chapter. You’re a turning point, a plot twist.”

I swallowed hard. “But what if he doesn’t want the same story?”

Seraphina smiled, a glint in her eyes. “Oh, darling, believe me when I say that man is in love with you. But sometimes, we all need a nudge to see the magic that’s right in front of us. Don’t run away from this. Not when you have so much at stake.”

I walked Seraphina out of the building and watched as she found her way to the Christmas Bazaar. Soft snowflakes were falling, and I felt a thrill. It was going to be a very unusual and white Christmas.

I’d asked Orion how snow would impact the vines and he’d said that *his* vines would be fine, and the cold would only push bud break back. “It’s going to be better for the vintage because later buds mean avoiding spring storms and we can push harvest beyond Labor Day. And we need all the precipitation we can get.”

I’d come to Everwood just a little before harvest and I looked forward to experiencing the full vine season at Callahan Vineyards. Having lived in Healdsburg, which was prime wine country close to Napa and Sonoma, I knew all about bud break, canopy control, and harvest—but here it would be

closer to me.

I was about to go back into the office when Daphne came out. She stood tall and regal, her silhouette accentuated by a tailored business suit that hugged her in all the right places. A stark contrast to my free-flowing, boho-chic dress adorned with intricate patterns, and my mismatched earrings that dangled and caught the light with every move. Daphne's high heels only accentuated the height difference between us, making me feel even smaller.

I knew these were her last days and the box she was carrying was evidence of her cleaning up her office.

"Liesel."

"Daphne," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady, but the cold was making me shiver, or perhaps it was the sheer intensity of her presence, the knowledge that she wanted me to go back to Healdsburg, leave Atlas, and the *little twerp* had agreed with her.

"How are you?" I asked

She set the box down at her feet. "I'm leaving. It's my...well, last few minutes at Callahan Vineyards. I'd hoped to see Atlas before I left. Do you know where he is?"

Running away from his wife who told him that she was in love with him.

"He's in the Funk Zone tasting room."

She looked at her watch. "At this hour?"

I shrugged. "I really don't know, Daphne. Why don't you call him?" I turned to leave when she held up her hand to stop me.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Look, I won't beat around the bush. Atlas is... complicated."

I tightened my grip on my door handle, sensing where this was going. "Isn't everyone?"

Daphne smiled thinly. "True. I've known him for years, tried to get close, tried to understand what makes him tick. But he's always held back, always kept a part of himself hidden. You might think you're different, that he's opened up to you. But don't mistake his affection for love."

My heart felt heavy, and I wanted to object, to defend the love that had blossomed between Atlas and me. But Daphne's words and the resounding insecurities they ignited held me back.

Daphne took a step closer, her perfume wafting around us. "You're a lovely person, Liesel. Talented, kind, vibrant. But don't lose yourself trying to win a man's heart, especially if it might never truly be yours."

“Were these the same warnings you gave to yourself?” I left the door handle and turned to face Daphne.

Snowflakes settled on her raven-black hair, contrasting against the dark strands. The sight was almost poetic, like a scene from a tragic romance.

“I speak from experience.”

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “I appreciate your concern, Daphne. But whatever happens between Atlas and me is our business.”

She smirked. “He doesn’t love you, Liesel. He’ll never love you. He wants a partner, someone who can help with the vineyard, his life. Do you really think that could be you?”

“Again, Daphne that isn’t any of your business.”

She gave a harsh laugh. “You’re a kid, Liesel. A fucking child. Atlas is a man—“

I held up a hand. “Please, stop.”

She nodded, her eyes hardening a touch. “At least my relationship with Atlas was *real*. What is it you have? A temporary marriage?”

I was about to hit back but stopped. I took a deep breath and smiled. “Daphne, this is beneath you and me. I’m not going to fight with you for a man. No man is worth that.”

She sighed as if realizing what she was doing. She shook her head. “You’re right. I’m...sorry.”

“Have a good life, Daphne.”

“You too, Liesel.”

With that, she turned, her heels clicking against the cobblestone pathway, leaving me amidst the swirling snowflakes, the distant hum of Christmas cheer, and the shadows of doubt she’d cast upon my heart.

Chapter 46

ATLAS



After I closed the tasting room, I went to see my friend Alejandro in Golden Valley, the farm his family owned. The journey to one of California's largest farms was always a comforting one, a route that took me away from the bustling streets and deep into the heart of nature's canvas. A canvas, which was gradually being transformed into a winter wonderland, made even more enchanting by the approach of Christmas.

The distant Sierra National Forest, its tall pines and firs blanketed in fresh

snow, stood sentinel against the winter sky. Those same peaks, which were green and teeming with life during my spring visit, now wore crowns of white, and the air had an unmistakable crispness to it.

I had slept with Liesel the night before. I had ached to hold her, but I didn't want to confuse her...or myself. At this point I wasn't sure who I was protecting. She loved me. It was a fucking miracle. But she was twenty-three, what the fuck did she know about love?

Approaching the valley, the expansive farmland of the Santos family took on a different hue than I remembered. Though I had been awed by the riot of colors during springtime, there was an undeniable beauty in seeing the snow-kissed orchards. The citrus trees looked like they wore little snow caps. Strawberries and blueberries, now asleep under a blanket of snow, waited patiently for warmer days.

Golden Valley was truly a place of magic during winter. It was as if the farm, the forest, and the very earth had conspired to create the perfect backdrop for the holiday season. I should bring Liesel here. We could stay at the Golden Valley Inn. The thought came unbidden, reminding me how integral she had become to my life. She was *always* on my mind.

I drove straight to Alejandro's house, bypassing the main house where I knew that Alejandro's parents Paloma and Arsenio would welcome me.

Silvano, Alejandro's son opened the door. He was twelve and had a *very* high IQ. The kid was a charmer and gave me a hug as soon as he saw me.

"Papa said you were coming over. You missed dinner. Maria made the best posole."

Maria, his fiancée was cleaning up the table after dinner and gave me a hug. "How's Liesel?"

I shrugged and Alejandro gave me a hug, followed by a glass of wine. I used to meet Alejandro in Santa Barbara most of the time but since Maria, I met him at his place. They were both CEOs, Alejandro of Golden Valley and Maria of Caruso Investments, an investment bank that specialized in biotechnology. But here they were a family. It warmed my heart to see how well Maria and Silvano got along.

"I hear I missed a delicious dinner," I said.

"You want me to make you a bowl?" Maria asked.

I shook my head. I couldn't stomach food right now, not when my heart had sunk down to it.

Maria nodded at Alejandro and like all couples who were close they had

their own silent language. “Silvano and I are off for Hallmark Christmas movie night with Isa in the main house.” She gave me a quick kiss.

Isadora was the youngest Santos and had a penchant for movie nights in the Santos family home theater with Arsenio and Paloma. In the past I’d attended a couple of movie nights.

Once they left, Alejandro led me to the living room that was warm from the heat of the fireplace, and the soft glow of candles.

After pouring us each a glass of wine, he leaned back in his chair, studying me. “You look like hell.”

I sighed, taking a sip. “Liesel.” Her name left my lips with a mixture of affection and exasperation. “She told me she loves me and...I didn’t handle it well.”

“How did you handle it?” Alejandro asked.

I frowned. “I ran.”

“Typical. I did the same with Maria,” Alejandro chuckled, though there was a hint of past pain in his eyes. “I pushed her away so many times, thinking she was just a passing fancy. That I could never fall, *truly fall*, for someone. I’m lucky she agreed to marry me after all the crap I put her through.”

I looked at him, trying to find answers in his story. “And now that she has agreed to marry you?”

Alejandro’s face broke into a smile, the kind that only comes from true contentment. “She’s my *everything*. My fiancée, my best friend, my confidante. She’s Silvano’s mother. I’d been so scared of admitting my feelings, of allowing someone to see the real me. But Maria... she saw past all the walls, all the defenses.”

I downed some more wine, the warmth of which did little to soothe the storm inside. What he was saying sounded a lot like what I’d been thinking.

Alejandro leaned forward, his tone earnest. “How do you feel about your wife?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t kid a kidder, Atlas.”

“I think she’s great. She’s beautiful and fun. She’s attractive and—“

“You fucking moron, you’re in love with her. Why the hell is it so hard for you to admit that?” He was visibly frustrated. I knew he wanted me to learn from his mistakes but he and Maria, were not Liesel and me.

“What the fuck does it mean to be in love? And don’t give me that

nonsense about you'll know when you're in love." I poured some more wine into our glasses.

"I'm guessing you're staying the night." Alejandro picked up his glass and raised it.

I nodded. I was a few glasses down and in no shape to drive. I had to open the wine tasting room in the Funk Zone again on Sunday and at this rate, I knew I was going to have to do it with a hangover.

"Let Liesel know you're here," Alejandro ordered.

I nodded. I picked up my phone and walked out to the porch. It was cold and the air bit into me, but it also air felt great on my heated skin.

"Atlas?" Liesel immediately answered the phone.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm fine. Are you okay?"

I walked around the porch, looking at the snow-covered mountains in the dark. "I'm at Alejandro's place in Golden Valley. I had a few glasses, so I'll stay the night here."

She was silent for a long moment. "Okay. Will you be home tomorrow night?"

"Yes."

The day after was Christmas Eve and Liesel was planning on having everyone over for dinner. I remembered Thanksgiving and how we'd slipped away from dinner to make love. Fuck me! I couldn't think about anything without her invading my head.

"Liesel...I'm sorry."

"Why?" her voice was wobbly.

"Because I ran."

"You did."

"Give me a little time," I pleaded. "Please."

"Goodnight, Atlas."

She hung up, and I felt helpless. I put my hands on the porch railing and waited for inspiration to strike.

The night wore on, and as the wine bottles emptied, our conversation delved deeper into relationships, vulnerabilities, and fears. I'd always respected Alejandro's perspective, and tonight was no different. But my doubts and insecurities were stubborn foes.

Chapter 47

ATLAS



I called Liesel in the morning on my way to the tasting room in the Funk Zone, but she didn't pick up. I didn't blame her. She was pissed with me as she should be. I was a thirty-six-year-old man accusing her of being a child, but I was the one who was behaving like one.

The day was chaotic.

The festive rush had brought in more patrons than I'd expected, and by the time the sun set, I was looking forward to a moment of quiet. As I was

clearing up the last tables, the door chimed and in walked Seraphina.

“Busy day?” she asked, glancing around the nearly empty tasting room.

I ran a hand through my hair. “You have no idea. It’s been good for business though. Signed up ten new wine club members.”

With a smirk, she placed a bottle on the counter. “Figured you could use this,” she said.

Raising an eyebrow, I inspected the bottle. It was a 2020 Patrimony Caves de Lions from Daou Winery in Paso Robles. It was an expensive and exclusive bottle of wine. “Special brew?” I joked.

She shrugged, her lips curving into a half-smile. “Someone gave it to me as a present and I knew I had to open it with you.”

I uncorked the bottle, pouring a small amount into a glass. With an inky ruby color, the nose on the wine was chocolate-covered espresso beans with nuanced layers of blueberries, savory notes of charcuterie, pipe tobacco, and woodsmoke.

On the palate the wine excelled with notes of fresh fruit, cayenne pepper, plum jam, and pomegranate. There was something about the wine that felt grounding, bringing a sense of clarity.

“Amazing,” I remarked, genuinely impressed.

Seraphina leaned against the counter, her gaze sharp. “Sometimes a good drink helps you think straight.”

I swirled the wine in my glass, considering her words. “I’m guessing you’re here to kick my ass?”

“She tells you she loves you and you run?” The disappointment in her tone made me feel small.

“I need to sort things out with Liesel,” I admitted.

She nodded. “Then go do it. It’s Christmas, after all. Good time for new beginnings. Take the rest of the bottle with you. Drink it with her.”

I appreciated her straightforward advice. “Any advice on how to sort things out besides drinking this wine with her?”

“Do you even know what you want?” Seraphina asked, her amethyst eyes amused.

“I’m figuring it out.”

“In a marriage, it helps to figure things out as a couple,” Seraphina suggested.

After Seraphina left, the clinking of glassware as I washed up and soft echo of footsteps outside were the only sounds in the dimly lit tasting room. I was

shutting everything down when the door creaked open, and Daphne walked in, her silhouette cutting against the ambient streetlights.

“You’re leaving pretty late,” she observed, glancing around the mostly empty space.

I looking down at the rag in my hands. “Yeah, well, the grapes don’t pour themselves.”

She hesitated for a moment before speaking again, her voice softer this time. “I saw Liesel earlier today.”

I froze. Something about the way she said it. Alarm bells started ringing in my head. “You did.”

“Yeah.” She paused, her fingers playing with her purse strap. She looked guilty as hell. “I’m sure she told you. I’m so sorry.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, feeling a tension that wasn’t there moments before. “What exactly are you sorry about?”

She sighed, looking genuinely apologetic. “It’s not so much what I said, it’s how I said it. I gave her the impression that...maybe there was something still between us. And I shouldn’t have. It was wrong of me.”

I stared at her for a long moment, my mind racing. Thoughts of Liesel consumed me, wondering if she had taken Daphne’s words to heart. The idea of losing her crystallized, and an unsettling weight settled in my stomach.

Daphne cleared her throat, her gaze averting from mine. “Look, I’m sorry. I really am. I just...I guess I wanted something that was never there.”

A sarcastic chuckle escaped my lips. “Join the club. I’m pretty well-versed in wanting things that are out of reach.”

“I am sorry, Atlas.”

I leaned against the counter, feeling the cool wood against my back. “Be well, Daph.” My voice was distant, my mind grappling with the revelation. Daphne’s words stirred something inside me—clarifying feelings that had been lurking just beneath the surface.

“You deserve happiness, Atlas,” she breathed.

The door jingled as she left, her heels clicking softly against the pavement outside. Alone in the dim room, I let out a long breath, the weight of the conversation settling in.

You deserve happiness.

It took Daphne’s parting words to make me see it clearly—I didn’t want to lose Liesel. Not now, never. I wanted our marriage to be real.

Chapter 48

LIESEL



The rich scent of paint mixed with the background notes of the alternative rock playlist I had playing on my Bose speaker. The rhythm was both mellow and soulful, enough to keep my mind occupied, but not enough to drown out the wandering, annoying thoughts.

With every brushstroke, my irritation grew. Of course, Atlas would decide to have a soul-searching night with Alejandro right in the middle of my most significant painting, I thought sarcastically. *So convenient.*

I dipped my brush into a deep shade of purple, trying to capture the exact hue of the Pinot Noir grapes. But with my current mood, they probably looked more like grapes on the verge of a major existential crisis. *Great.* My irritation was bleeding into my art.

I paused, stepping back to study the almost-finished mural. I was proud of it, really. The vineyard scene felt alive, bursting with hints of magic and mystery. Grape bunches adorned with delicate wings looked ready to take flight. The mischievous eyes in the leaves were undeniably a reflection of my current mood, peering with a mixture of challenge and intrigue. The fairies, dancing under the light of the golden moon, seemed free and unburdened, a stark contrast to my current state of mind.

Isn't it funny? I mused to myself, a smirk forming. Here I am, painting fairies who have their shit together, while I'm the one floundering in a storm of emotions.

I wiped a smear of paint off my cheek, probably making it worse. I was so annoyed with Atlas. *I had a few*, he'd said. So, he drowning his worries in alcohol while I was wrestling with my emotions on a 10-foot wall. *Life's little ironies.*

A rebellious thought popped into my head. *Maybe I should add a little drunken fairy in the corner, just for Atlas. A tiny, tipsy creature, wine bottle in hand, lost and confused.*

Little twerp!

I sighed, pushing away the sarcasm and focusing on finishing the mural. Atlas had his way of dealing, and I had mine. We were both adults. We could handle this. Right?

As I painted, I let the music wrap around me, hoping it might drown out my doubts and worries, even if just for a moment. But deep down, I knew those feelings would wait for me, once the last brushstroke dried.

Chapter 49

ATLAS



“Have you seen her?” I shook Ariel awake.
“What? Who?” she mumbled.

It was eleven at night when I returned home to find the house quiet. Liesel wasn't in her room, my room or even her studio. Worse, her studio was empty of paints. Had she already left? She'd take her paints with her. But her clothes were still in the closet. Her smell permeated my...*our* house. Where the fuck was she?

“Ariel, I’m looking for Liesel,” I said loudly.

“Good for you.” She put her comforter over her head and burrowed.

I knocked on Navya’s door. Fortunately, she was awake, reading. Unfortunately she had no clue where Liesel was.

“Did she go back to Healdsburg?” I demanded.

Navya raised her eyebrows. “On which broom?”

I sighed and turned to see Ariel in her pajamas, shaking her head. “Why are you waking the house up? It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s not even midnight,” I snapped. “Where the fuck is she?”

Navya and Ariel looked at her each other and I felt a cold shaft run through me. She was gone and my sister, my own fucking sister, seemed to know more than she was sharing.

“Ariel?” I put my hands on her shoulders. “Where the fuck is she?”

“Maybe...maybe she’s with Seraphina?” Navya offered.

I looked at her. Yeah, that could make sense. If she was upset with me— not *if*, she *was* and then Daphne obviously had thrown some gasoline into the fire—she’d be with Seraphina.

I called Seraphina and Ariel groaned. “You’re waking her up too?”

I ignored her and without preamble asked Seraphina if she knew where Liesel was.

“You lost her?” Seraphina demanded in amusement.

“I don’t know,” I muttered. “The cars are all here, but she isn’t. And...I...”

“She’s not with me, Atlas. I’m sorry. She’s probably around.”

My heart hammered with fear. No, she wasn’t around. She’d fucking left me. She’d left me before I could tell her the truth, that she wasn’t alone. I’d fallen in love with her as well. I’d been afraid to admit it, because...I hadn’t even known I was in love. I hadn’t known what it meant.

“*Fuck*,” I bellowed after I hung up.

“Goodnight,” Navya said and shut her door.

My sister, who I thought would have more compassion just sighed. “You know, she tells you she loves you and what do you do? You vanish.”

“Did she talk to you about it?” I demanded.

Ariel shrugged and walked down the hall to the stairs. I followed her into the kitchen where she filled a glass of water from the fridge and drank it in one go.

“Yes. She was upset. She was crying. What the hell did you think you felt for her?”

I sat down on the barstool at the kitchen counter. “I didn’t know. I...I’ve spent my whole life taking care of people and I wanted someone to take care of me for a change.”

Ariel guffawed. “And you think she doesn’t? She gives you money...a big pot of money when you need it. She makes sure you have a homemade breakfast before you head to work. She’d ready to give you, at no cost, all the shares for Callahan Vineyards that her father owned. What the hell else does she have to do to take care of you? Polish your fucking shoes?”

She was right. I was so caught up with how young she was and...I had to shamefully admit, her RA, that I had not recognized that she was already my partner. She’d become one by simply being herself.

Fuck! Had her RA struck again? Was she lying somewhere in the dark and cold unable to take care of herself?

“I need to find her.” Panic slammed into me.

Ariel waved a hand. “She’s fine. She can take care of herself. Give her time to cool off...like you did last night. Which by the way was a dick move.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Tell me something I don’t know. I drank too much and...yeah, I wanted to stay away from home.”

I looked out of the window and saw that the light was on in my office on the second floor of the Callahan Vineyard’s building. It wasn’t unusual for that to happen because the cleaning crew sometimes left the lights on, but I wondered if Liesel had gone in there.

“Where are you going?” Ariel demanded as I walked out of the kitchen.

“The office. Maybe she’s there.”

Ariel all but came to stand in front of me, blocking my path. “Why would she be there?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Ariel? Is she there?”

“No. I don’t know.”

But I knew my sister. She was lying her ass off and not very well.

I flew out of the house with Ariel calling out to stop. I ran across the parking lot and used my key fob to open the main glass doors. I took two steps at a time to get to my office.

I opened the door and found Liesel on the hardwood floor, lying on top of some plastic. She looked so small and frail. She lay on her side, her body pulled together like she was in pain.

There was red spatter over her. Blood? I rushed to her, my hand immediately going to her wrist to check her pulse, I brushed her hair from her

face with the other and thankfully her eyes fluttered open.

She saw me, pushed me, and sat up. “What are you doing here?”

“This is my office. What are *you* doing here?”

“Damn it, Atlas.” My sister walked into the office in her pajamas, Ugg boots, and my coat that was too big for her.

Liesel glared at her. “One thing. You had to do *one thing*, keep him out of his office for two days and two nights. That’s all you had to do.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I looked from Liesel to my sister and then I realized that my office felt different. I turned to see my white wall...my white wall now transformed into the most beautiful swirls of paint. It was magical and reminded me of the artist who’s painting I’d admired and wanted to buy in Healdsburg.

Now, I’m probably not the sharpest pencil in the box. That’s Ariel. I’m also not the most perceptive. That’s Orion. Slow as I was, I finally put two and two together.

“You are Lila Evergreen.” I stared at Liesel as if I was seeing her for the first time.

She stood up. She wore her painting apron and there was paint all over her, even on her cheeks.

“You are *that* artist.”

“Oh god, Liesel, I’m so sorry.” Ariel came into the office. “She was painting you a Christmas present. It was supposed to be a surprise, and you ruined it by barging in here.”

I looked at Liesel confused. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What part of *supposed to be a surprise* are you having trouble with?” she demanded. She was irritated. And she looked absolutely gorgeous. *Perfect*.

“Is this why you haven’t shown me your art?” I was incredulous.

She shrugged. “Yes. I wanted to give you a Christmas present, a surprise and...wait, wait. *Fuck the painting*. I’m angry with you.”

She hardly ever swore, which meant I was in a lot of trouble. It made me giddy with joy.

“I was so scared you left,” I confessed. I took her hands in mine and looked into her irritated...beautiful *and* irritated gray eyes. “I’m so sorry for being an ass. I was lost and confused.”

“Why would I leave?” she snapped.

“Daphne told me what she said to you and...” I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tight.

“Like I care about what Duckface has to say,” she muttered.

“Aww,” I heard Ariel say, and I was sure she had a hand on her heart.

“Ariel, do you mind getting out of here so I can have some privacy with my wife.”

I heard the door close behind me. “You didn’t leave.” I thanked the universe that she was still here.

She gave me a withering look and extricated herself out of my arms. “I thought about it but then decided I’d wait until you got your head out of your ass.”

“The head is way out of the ass,” I promised her.

She folded her arms and looked stern. “Explain to me why you have been so absolutely stubborn about our marriage being temporary. You’ve been driving me up the wall with that.”

“Can I hug you again first?”

She sighed. “You’re not being fair, Atlas. You know if you hug me I’ll be all gooey.”

I smirked. *Yeah, I did know that.* But she came to me anyway and hugged me, her head resting on my chest.

“I’m so sorry. I...have all my life had responsibilities and somewhere down the line I forgot to have fun, live my life. Then you come along and I’m thinking she’s a waif like thing—“

Her lower lip trembled as she looked up at me. “You didn’t think I was pretty when we first met?”

Fuck! I was screwing this up. “No, baby. I just...I was attracted to you. Come on, you know that. I kissed you at the train station. I found you irresistible...please don’t cry.”

She grinned mischievously. “Fine! I was just giving you a hard time.”

I shook my head, equal parts exasperated and relieved.

“I know what it was.” She poked my chest with a finger. “You didn’t want to be attracted to me.”

I nodded. “You’re right. I was, despite myself, attracted to my elfin waif-like wife.”

“Waif has a negative connotation to it.”

“Angel, there is nothing negative about you. You make the day brighter. You have taught me to have fun, enjoy my life, be happy. Live and not worry about working all the time. I love sleeping with you. Spending time cooking with you. I love how we spend our evenings together with a glass of wine on

our patio and—“

“Best dates ever,” she said, her eyes moist with emotion.

“The very best. I don’t deserve it but, can you forgive me? I promise to make it up to you for the rest of our lives.”

“What exactly am I forgiving you for?” she asked cheekily.

“For calling our marriage temporary.” I kissed her forehead. “For pushing you away when you said you love me.” I kissed her right eyelid. “For not holding you tighter to me.” I kissed her left eyelid. “For not opening my heart to you.” I kissed her nose. “For not admitting to you that I love you, more than I have ever loved anyone.” I kissed her lips gently, softly. “I can’t imagine my life without you. I want forever with you, Angel.”

She rolled her eyes, but it was half-hearted effort because she had tears in them. But that was okay because my vision was blurry as well.

“Fine. I forgive you.” She pulled her mouth away when I was about kiss her again, “I have a lot invested here. Money. Remember my money?”

I smiled as I looked down at her. “Yes, I remember the money.”

“And…” she trailed off.

“And your heart,” I finished for her.

She smiled. “Yes, and my heart.”

“I love you, Angel.” The words that I had never uttered before to a woman slipped out of me with no effort.

“Took you long enough.” She went on tip toe, her hands looped around my neck.

“Took me long enough?” I repeated her words.

“I’ve known you’re in love with me for *months*.”

“Darling, we’ve only been married for months.”

“Potato *poh-ta-to*. Kiss me, Atlas.”

So, I kissed my wife and sealed our promise to love and to hold. And this time, it was forever.

Chapter 50

LIESEL



“Am I hurting you?” Atlas’s voice sounded strangled as he entered me. It had taken a while, but for New Year’s Eve, we’d decided that we’d experiment with things like butt plugs and nipple clamps. *Yep! I said the words butt plug and nipple clamps.* Good and nice Liesel Brooks was having dirty sex with her very gorgeous husband.

When I’d first made the purchases online and showed them to Atlas, he’d looked at me like I’d asked him to put the butt plug on himself, *for the love of*

everything holy.

“Are you finding our sex life boring?” he asked with a touch of nervousness that amused me.

“Well...it’s been the same old vanilla, vanilla for the past...what? Four months?” I said as seriously as I could.

He’d looked stricken. “Baby, I...I...sure, we can experiment. I don’t want you to be bored with our sex life. Just...are you sure about these?” He held up the nipple clamps. “These can hurt, I’m told.”

I looked as innocently at him as I could manage. “You’ve used these before?”

He shook his head, and I could see the confusion on his face. We were in bed in *our* room. Atlas had had some weird notion that because he’d slept with other women in his bedroom, it was tainted. I didn’t care. Those women were not in his bed right now. I was.

When I first entered Atlas’s master bedroom, I knew it was the beating heart of the house. The sheer expanse of it had taken my breath away. Each wall boasted floor-to-ceiling windows, presenting the vineyards in a continuous, panoramic embrace. The room seemed to float amidst the verdant expanse, the vines stretching out like green veins under the golden Californian sun.

The centerpiece was the massive bed, previously covered in minimalist charcoal linens. I changed them to a richer palette—deep burgundies and golds that reflected the hues of the wines Callahan Vineyards were known for. As if mirroring the change in our relationship, the room transitioned from solitary splendor to intimate warmth.

The original hardwood floors were now covered in a mixture of plush rugs in deep purples and greens. To the side, a vintage armchair was replaced with a chaise lounge, upholstered in a beautiful sage color. It sat beside a reclaimed wood coffee table, on which lay some of my favorite art books and sketch pads.

But the *pièce de résistance* was undoubtedly the balcony. It seemed to jut out into the vineyards, commanding a 360-degree view that was nothing short of breathtaking. I’d placed a wrought iron bistro set out there, perfect for sipping coffee and watching the vines come alive in the mornings.

Subtle touches of me were sprinkled throughout. Artwork—some of mine, some by artists I admired—replaced the generic prints that once hung there. Delicate fairy lights were strung around the room, their soft glow casting a

whimsical aura come nightfall. This had been a bone of contention for about ten minutes before Atlas had caved when he saw how they transformed his bedroom from a blah room to something magical.

Atlas's practicalities remained—his oak wood desk, his collection of wine books, his tech gadgets. But they now shared the space with fragrant candles, ceramic vases filled with fresh flowers, and delicate trinkets I'd collected over the years.

I wanted to strike a balance, to fuse his robust pragmatism with my ethereal whimsy. To make a statement that this wasn't just *his* sanctuary anymore—it was ours.

"I thought the nipple clamps were for you," I said studying the sex toys.

He looked at his nipples and then at me. "Ah...I don't think so, Angel."

"So, is this for me as well?" I held up the butt plug. "I thought it was for you. They said that men like things...you know...up there. To massage the prostate."

He looked so stricken that I burst out laughing. He frowned at me for a moment and then understanding dawned. He pushed me down and lay on top of me.

"Teasing me, are you, Angel?"

"You should've seen your face." I laughed and then stilled, gasping as he entered me.

"Vanilla is it?"

He slid in then out, and I moaned. Wrapping my ankles around his ass, pushing him within me.

"Yes."

He leaned to open a bedside table and without pausing his movements, he administered something cold between my ass cheeks. I whimpered, knowing what he intended to do. We'd been *practicing* for several days now.

He entered me slowly, patiently, constantly asking if he was hurting me.

"No," I moaned. "Atlas. Please."

He kissed my mouth. "Am I not pleasing you?"

"Not enough." I arched toward him and felt all breath leave my body when he was fully inside me.

"Christ, you're tight," he groaned.

He looked down at me as he moved slowly, languidly and I felt an orgasm barrel through me. His fingers strummed at my clitoris, filling me in a way that I'd never felt before.

“Look at me, Angel,” he pleaded.

And I did. I saw nothing but love in his eyes.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you too.”

He drove into me then and I orgasmed, with him following me shortly after.

As we lay in bed, holding each other, watching the dance of fireflies outside the windows, I kissed his chest.

I thanked my father for his foresight, for sending me this man when neither of us knew we were meant to be together. I thanked Seraphina for guiding us. And Ariel, Navya, and Orion for keeping us together, building a family with us.

“I don’t know if I ever told you, Atlas, but vanilla is my favorite flavor.”

He laughed, one of those big laughs, one that told me he was happier than he’d ever been.

Epilogue

SERAPHINA



And so, as the golden hues of Everwood's sun painted the skies and the sweet aroma of ripening grapes wafted through the air, our tale found its way to its destined finale.

Liesel Brooks, the maiden whose ethereal essence and boundless heart had mystified the residents of Callahan Vineyards, had transformed the realm with her touch. Each stroke of her paintbrush brought forth life and magic, turning pain into portraits of splendor. Yet, amidst her artistic wonders, the

most remarkable metamorphosis had been that of Atlas Callahan's heart.

For Atlas, who once gazed upon her with perplexity, now beheld Liesel with eyes that sparkled with recognition, reverence, and resolute love. It had been a journey, not without its trials and tempests, but a journey that had sculpted them, chiseled away doubts, and forged a bond that was unbreakable. He had learned to see beyond the façade, to discover the treasure that was Liesel's indomitable spirit.

They stood now, surrounded by friends and family, in the heart of Callahan Vineyards, under a canopy of twinkling stars and amidst rows of vines, their hands entwined, their hearts in harmony as they welcomed the New Year. The once reluctant prince had found his true north in a maiden who was anything but ordinary.

"To forever," Atlas whispered, pulling Liesel into a gentle embrace, sealing their promise with a kiss that spoke of endless tomorrows and eternal love.

From a distance, watching over this tapestry of love, joy, and destiny, I whispered to the winds, "Love is the most potent magic of all."

I am Seraphina Vine, and I am the fairy godmother of Everwood. I bring lost souls and broken hearts together.

Soon, I will wave my magic wand and bring you the story of an ugly duckling and a prince blinded by surface beauty, because sometimes love is ugly.

THE END



Continue the story with a [bonus chapter about Liesel and Atlas's Tuscan Vacation](#). You can also access all bonus chapters on my website at www.MayaAlden.com.

Coming soon UGLY LOVE, book two in the *Once Upon a Time* series. Orion Callahan and Hansa Raj's story is a holiday romance based on the fairytale classic *The Ugly Duckling*.

If you liked *The Temporary Wife*, you will love [The Wrong Wife](#), the first book in Maya's Golden Knights series.

Keep in touch with Maya! Sign up for her [newsletter](#).

Excerpt from "Twisted Hearts"

ENEMIES TO LOVERS SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE

**Our love story is one laced with shadows.
Etched in scars and bathed in past betrayals.**

River Knight, a fearless war photojournalist, risks it all to capture the raw truth of conflicts. His lens takes him to the world's deadliest zones, unveiling the hidden agonies of war. Enter Sunny French, once a fierce CIA agent, now a skilled security expert. Sunny and River's bond soured after a passionate encounter during university days.

River's abduction by merciless mercenaries changes everything. Sunny is given a mission by her employer: *rescue River Knight*. She's the best person for the job, having had experience with the mercenary group that is holding her old lover captive.

Enemy lines evoke memories of their fiery past, and River, saved by Sunny, battles with warring emotions of gratitude and resentment. As danger rages and Sunny gets badly hurt, their feelings resurface. They must trust each other to survive and respect each other's strengths. Barriers crumble, kindling a dormant spark.

Twisted Hearts is a story of forgiveness, bravery, and love in adversity—where enemies become lovers. If you like your stories with plenty of action, lots of banter, and just the right amount of steam, this is a book you should

not miss.

Chapter 1

RIVER



I woke up drenched in sweat, and my cock was standing up like a pike. Fuck! I dreamed of *her* again. I couldn't understand why I continued to dream about a woman I knew over a decade ago. Sunny French was *many, many* women ago. Dreams are nothing but neurons firing off at night, I told myself. It means fuck all. Because by the time Sunny and I were done, we had had nothing but hate and a good dose of disgust.

I got out of bed and looked around my fairly decent hotel room in

Damaturu. I'd stayed in worse. I picked up my phone and quickly reviewed my email to see if anything was urgent. There was a message from my mother. I deleted it without reading it. Since my brother, Judge Forest Knight, had cut her out of his life, she was trying to reinstate herself into mine, even though I'd kicked her out of it a long time ago.

There was a message from my sister-in-law Daisy with a photo of my six-month-old nephew Kai and a question: *When are you back?*

My brother still carried a Nokia flip phone, so Daisy and I kept the communication by text. Forest believed in phone calls. I replied: *Still in Nigeria. Two more days here and then catching a flight home.*

I had given my notice to *The Times* a few months ago. I wanted to complete this last assignment with my partner, journalist Quincy Galvis, who was working on a story about how villages in the Yobe State of Nigeria were caught between insurgents and the Nigerian military. We'd worked together for several years and had found ourselves in a variety of dangerous situations in Afghanistan, Iran, and recently in Ukraine. He'd joked that this last gig in Nigeria was tame compared to where I'd been for the past decade, working as a photojournalist.

I looked forward to returning to the States and staying in Forest's beach house. I'd seen too much death and horror and, as the cliché went, I was burnt out. I needed some beach, peaceful ocean, a life where I didn't always listen for bullets or bombs going off.

I took a shower and got ready to go to a village two hours away from Damaturu, the capital city of Yobe. What was the point in showering, I thought grimly, as I put on shorts, a t-shirt, and hiking boots. It was fucking August, which meant the minute I stepped out of the air-conditioned hotel, I'd be drenched in sweat.

I ate breakfast at the buffet the chain hotel provided. And while I did, I scrolled through Twitter. Some discussions on the platform were excellent sources for more information, while a lot of it was complete rubbish. I went to Threads next and did the same.

And then, as I always did, even though I knew it was unhealthy, I went on Facebook to Sunny's page, one she hadn't updated in about eight years. She had two or three posts on the page, a forgotten account. I should have downloaded the photos from there, but that felt too desperate, so I cyber-stalked her instead. She was beautiful. Blonde. Blue-gray eyes. Delicate.

Quincy looked as tired as I felt when we got into the jeep that would take

us to Kajara. “Good morning, Jelani.” I handed a cup of coffee to our driver and translator.

“Thanks, man.”

“I’m going to sit in the back and get some shuteye,” Quincy announced. He was in his early fifties and had recently been dealing with high cholesterol and an ulcer.

Yeah, I didn’t want to end up like him. I was leaving now while I still had my looks and health.

“Man, you looking forward to going back home? You got a girl back there?” Jelani drove on the reasonably new roads of Damaturu, but soon enough, we’d be pounding the rough village streets, and good luck to Quincy getting any asleep.

“No girl at home,” I told him as I went through my backpack to check my equipment.

“You look like the kind who’d have a girl.” Jelani’s white teeth flashed against his dark skin. He was a good-looking man in his thirties and had been journalists’ go-to guide and translator.

“There was a girl,” I mused because she was still fresh in my mind.

“What happened?”

“The usual.”

“Cheated on you? But you’re such a pretty boy. You a bad lover, River, that your girl needed someone else?” he joked.

I laughed. I could laugh now. *Then*, I’d been in pretty poor shape. “She did not cheat on me. It was...something else, and it was a long time ago, Jelani.”

“You still think of her?”

“Sometimes.” I grabbed the side of the jeep as Jelani hit a few bumps. *I dream of her.*

“Maybe you should look her up when you get home?” he suggested.

She snagged some rich guy, for sure. That, after all, was what she was after. “She’s probably married with two kids, living in suburbia.”

Chapter 2

SUNNY



The staccato rhythm of gunfire pierced the silence, snapping our immediate surroundings into high alert. Instincts honed by years of military drills surged into action, muscle memory dictating each calculated maneuver. Rounds passed uncomfortably close; their passage accompanied by the acrid scent of burnt propellant. My rifle's retort provided an odd sense of comfort, its kickback a stark reminder of reality.

"Advance! Advance!" My voice was a steely command through the

comms, cutting decisively through the cacophony. “Glitch, I need intel ASAP!”

“Roger that, Lima Charlie,” came Glitch’s swift acknowledgment.

“Rebound, sitrep on tangos?”

Rebound, poised with his Barrett M82, its menacing form just visible beyond the foliage, responded crisply, “Three tangos in the open, two holed up. Phoenix, our HVT is in that structure. Ten more hostiles inbound, fast.”

“What’s your play, Chaos?” I barked, as a volley of fire announced another enemy position. Chaos, the maestro of high explosives, was setting up to leave our signature destruction in our wake.

“Setting charges,” Chaos’s voice crackled back, ever efficient.

“Confirm, HVT inside?” Glitch’s clarity cut through again. Our target, Matthew Oldenburg, a bigwig from a global oil magnate, was a high-value prize in these parts.

“Greenlight,” I confirmed, M4 raised, Phantom and I breaking cover to approach the holding point. As the perimeter neared, three tangos dropped - victims of Rebound’s impeccable aim.

In the heat of combat, Sun Tzu’s teachings echoed: warfare thrived on deception, knowing when to strike and seize opportunity. Amidst the fallen, the ambient noise faded, replaced by distant gunshots. Phantom’s gaze met mine, our silent communication unwavering.

We breached the shabby structure. Using a tactical fiber-optic camera, I scoped the room: Oldenburg chained, two distracted tangos engrossed in some mobile diversion. In sync, Phantom and I neutralized the threats.

“Can you move?” I questioned our HVT, as Phantom secured him.

Oldenburg nodded, face weary but unharmed.

“Extract now!” Rebound’s urgency crackled in my ear. “Insurgents half a klick out, ETA ninety.”

Amidst Rebound’s deadly marksmanship and Chaos’ orchestration of pyrotechnics, we navigated the treacherous terrain. Phantom guarded our principal while Glitch provided overwatch, ensuring our egress.

Once ensconced in Glitch’s armored mobile HQ, I signaled the all-clear. As we exfiltrated, the echoing roars of Chaos’ handiwork underscored our exit. Yet, our escape wasn’t easy.

“New tangos inbound!” Glitch warned.

“Pedal to the metal,” I snapped.

Rebound, ever the opportunist, quipped, “Just another day in paradise.”

Safely distanced, we paused to regroup. Oldenburg looked us over, bemusement in his eyes. “You’re US Special Forces?”

“No. We’re Steel Rain. Call me Phoenix,” I introduced the crew following suit.

He chuckled. “Feels like a scene from Top Gun.”

I smirked, “If channeling Cruise helps, be my guest.”

Phantom retorted, “I’m the real Cruise here.”

Chaos snorted, “Who wants to be old man Cruise?”

Gazing at Oldenburg, I grinned. “See what you started?” He’d held well, I thought.

He grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

My senses blurred for a moment, fatigue battling with the need for momentary reprieve. The anticipation of reaching and decompressing at the Abuja Continental was tantalizing. Visions of a refreshing shower, a therapeutic massage, and some decent chow beckoned. A full week, hot on the heels of the mercs responsible for the snatch job, navigating through Nigeria’s unforgiving green hell.

“Phoenix,” Glitch’s voice sliced through my thoughts. “Priority comm from Command,” he relayed, offering me an encrypted earpiece. I synced it up.

“Phoenix, status?” The voice belonged to none other than Steel Rain.

“Inbound to Abuja, sir.”

Steel Rain’s chuckle did little to ease my tension. “You’ve got a T-minus four-hour window to R&R in Abuja. New extraction op on the horizon.”

“Sir, we’re still wheels down from the last mission. We’ve been running dark for days,” I countered, catching Phantom’s questioning glance.

“Listen up, Sunny,” Steel Rain began, invoking my real name, a rare gravity. “Top-level brass just pinged. We’ve got an American journalist KIA in Kajara, alongside a local guide. Another journalist’s been snatched, with a ransom demand on the wire.”

“Civilians,” I hissed. “Who’s pulling strings at the top?”

“A contender for California’s governorship. The KIA’s sibling is Judge Forest Knight. This has gone personal, and they want our best on it. It’s the Hausa Brigade and...”

The blood in my veins froze. “River Knight?”

“That’s a roger. Pulitzer Prize-winner River Knight. We’re on the clock here, Phoenix. Intel suggests Aminu ‘Bloodhawk’ Dahiru’s involvement.

Ransom is a non-issue; we'll wire it through intermediaries. Your objective: secure and extract, no casualties."

Static filled my ears as my mind raced. Dahiru. That name spelled bad news. "Send Glitch all you've got on this. We'll rendezvous."

Damn River Knight. The very man whose teachings forged my armor of skepticism was the same I was tasked to recover. Irony was a cruel mistress.

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Author's Request



Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *The Temporary Wife*, the first book in the [Once Upon A Time](#) series. I hope you enjoyed Atlas and Liesel's journey to find love as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd love to keep in touch with you beyond this last page.

Interested? I have a [newsletter](#) and am on social media ([Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#)) where I share updates, sneak peeks of upcoming work, and occasional giveaways. It's a great way to stay updated.

I appreciate your support and would love to continue this journey with you. Hope to see you around.

Happy reading!

Maya

P.s. Please do not forget to [*rate and review The Temporary Wife*](#), as this is how other readers can find my books.

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An Ugly Love

An Ugly Ducking Holiday Romance
Orion & Hansa's Story

About the Author

MAYA ALDEN HAS A PASSION FOR WEAVING TALES OF LOVE AND DESIRE.



*Maya Alden
Books*

With a background in literature and a heart filled with hope, Maya pours her emotions onto the pages of her novels, capturing the essence of true love and the power it holds to transform lives. Combining unforgettable characters, sizzling chemistry, and heartfelt emotions, Maya's stories will whisk you into a world of passion and enchantment.

Maya invites you to join her on a journey of love, laughter, and happily-ever-afters that will leave you with a sigh and a smile.

You can contact her via email at maya@mayaalden.com or via social media on Facebook ([@authormayaalden](#)) and Instagram ([@mayaalden_romance](#)).