



THE *Morgans*
OF NEW YORK

Virtue

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DEBORAH BLADON

VIRTUE

THE MORGANS OF NEW YORK

DEBORAH BLADON

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CHAPTER ONE

GAINES

“HELP! HE PASSED OUT!”

Dammit.

I glance at the bag in my hand. Its takeout. A perfectly seared ahi tuna steak paired with a double serving of the best mushroom risotto in Manhattan. I ordered a side of steamed broccoli because I preach eating more greens to my patients daily, and occasionally, guilt spurs me to follow my own advice.

I look toward the door of Atlas 22. I’m less than ten steps away from exiting this restaurant in the West Village. If I do that, I’ll be home and indulging in my first good meal in a month. I plan on following that up with a solid eight hours of sleep. That’s another thing that has been sorely lacking in my life lately.

“Someone call 911!” Panic edges the same male voice that first alerted everyone in this packed restaurant to the fact that someone is in distress. “Tell them to hurry!”

Resigned to helping, I turn and drop my takeout bag on the checkout counter.

Naturally, it’s unmanned since virtually everyone in this establishment has rushed to the aid of the person who needs medical attention.

“I’m a doctor!” I shout as a warning for the crowd to part.

They do.

I sprint through the masses with a few pats on my back and a couple of people whispering that I’m a hero.

I’m far from that, but my training and experience will hopefully pay off tonight.

“Over here!” The manager waves me over with a flash of his hand. I recognize him from the countless times I’ve been here over the last few years. “He collapsed over here.”

I spot a man sprawled out on the floor between two tables, so I up my pace. This obviously isn’t as simple as a case of indigestion.

I’ve come to the rescue of a few of those at various restaurants over the years. Tonight is different. I can tell by the way the man on the floor is motionless.

“Move,” I demand to two wait staff clumsily trying to perform CPR.

“Are you sure you’re a doctor?” one asks. “You don’t look like any doctor I’ve ever been to.”

I don’t know what the hell she’s getting at, but I sense it’s a combination of my attire and the tattoo on my right bicep peeking out from under the sleeve of my gray T-shirt.

“Move!” I repeat louder so she’ll get her ass out of the way.

She scurries backward in an awkward crab walk, her cheeks blushing at my admonishment.

Her counterpart springs to his feet only to bump into the table we’re next to. A drink of something pink and sweet-smelling lands squarely on the chest of the guy on the floor.

“Jesus,” I whisper. “This is ridiculous.”

I drop to my knees, the fabric of my jeans landing in a puddle of the spilled drink.

My quiet night at home has been shot to hell, but I can’t focus on that

right now, so I drop two fingers to the neck of the guy sprawled out wearing a now pink-stained white button-down shirt.

From the looks of him, he's younger than I am.

I'd guess he's around twenty-two or twenty-three, possibly edging closer to twenty-five.

"Who is he with?" I ask as I search for a pulse.

"Me," a woman says from my left, her voice barely audible over the panicked hum of the people around me. "We're on a blind date."

"What's his name?" I drop my ear to his lips, hoping like hell I hear a breath come out of him.

"Daxton," the same woman answers. "I don't remember his last name. A friend of a friend set us up."

I barely register what she's saying before I begin chest compressions. Daxton doesn't have a pulse, and he's not breathing. There's no fucking way he's dying tonight.

"I need an AED!" I yell, searching the gathered faces for the restaurant's manager. When I spot him, I ask the question that could save this guy's life. "Do you have an AED?"

He rakes both hands through his hair. "A what?"

"An automated external defibrillator. I need it now! Now!"

"We have one!" he shouts before he pushes his way through the crowd.

"I'M THE MANAGER. TONY COLTER." The man who raced to get the AED pats me on the back. "You saved his life."

I take the compliment in stride as I watch the EMTs wheel Daxton out to the waiting ambulance. I'd accompany them, but he's stable and in good hands. I've already alerted my colleague, who is on duty tonight, to expect Daxton to arrive at the hospital shortly. I'll make my way over there and check in on him, but my first stop will be the staff locker room so I can change clothes. The sticky pink shit that spilled on Daxton and the floor is seeping through my jeans.

"You can eat on the house for the rest of your life," Tony blurts out, grateful that someone didn't die in the middle of his dining room tonight.

Some people are assholes if they don't get the service they want,

regardless of whatever emergency might have delayed the arrival of their entrée. I imagine a few possible bad reviews flashed before his eyes as the guy on the floor lay there without a pulse.

“That’s not necessary.” I scoop my phone out of my back pocket again to read a quick text from the charge nurse in the emergency department. I alerted her to be ready for our incoming patient, too.

“At least tell me your name and address so I can send you a bottle of something worth drinking.” He laughs huskily. “Name your poison and your name while you’re at it.”

A few people near us laugh right along with him.

Good on them for finding humor in the remnants of what they just witnessed.

“No need.” I finally glance at him. “I was just doing my job.”

“I insist,” he presses. “It’s the least I can do.”

Since the least I could do was get Daxton’s heart beating again, I’d say we’re even. I need to get out of here and to the hospital, so I return the pat on the back. “Seriously, we’re good.”

“What’s your name, Doc?” Tony asks directly.

“It’s Dr. Morgan,” a soft feminine voice says from behind the manager. “Dr. Gaines Morgan. He’s a cardiologist.”

The sound of that voice sends a barrage of emotions through me.

I’ll never forget that voice.

She steps into view wearing a snug little black dress that favors her petite, curvy frame. Her brown hair falls in soft waves over her shoulders. She looks every inch as tempting as she did the night we met. The night I took her into a private room at the club I sometimes frequent. The night I kissed her roughly and fucked her with my fingers before she bit my bottom lip so hard she drew a drop of blood.

That’s when she dropped to her knees and made me forget my name along with the fake one I always use at the club.

“You’re him.” Her bluish-gray eyes dance under the lighting in this restaurant. “We haven’t officially met. I’m Eloise Rehn. My cousin, Astrid, married your cousin, Berk, a few months ago. I saw you at the wedding, but you rushed off to an emergency before we were introduced. I heard someone mention your name after you left.”

There it is — the twist of fate that has haunted me for months.

Sweet, not-so-innocent Eloise Rehn has no fucking idea that I’m the man

she blew in that club. A man who realized far too late that she was too young to be in that club or to have her bee-stung lips wrapped around my cock that night a little over two years ago. It was two years and two months ago to be exact.

We were both wearing masks shielding a part of our faces since it was a requirement to gain entry to the private party that was taking place that night, but the taste of her lips, the scent of her skin, and the color of those eyes cemented a permanent spot in my memory when I took her into that room.

Now, I'll never be able to forget how my real name sounds coming from her.

CHAPTER TWO

ELOISE

“THANK you again for coming with me, Elodie.”

I glance to my left where, Penny, the woman who was on a blind date is sitting next to me. “It’s Eloise, and you don’t have to thank me.”

She doesn’t.

I should be the one thanking her.

I was on a date, too, at Atlas 22 when Daxton collapsed. There was nothing blind about it. It was our third date, and judging by Philip’s reaction to the life and death situation that transpired two tables away from us, tonight was our last date.

As soon as Daxton crumpled to the floor, Philip was on his phone, recording the entire thing.

I rushed to help, but two of the wait staff beat me to it.

While they unsuccessfully tried to revive Daxton, I kept my eyes on his date. She was shaking, and when I spotted Dr. Morgan sprinting toward us, I was stunned.

I wouldn't be surprised if my mouth was hanging open while Penny answered his questions about the unconscious man.

It was only when the restaurant manager was talking to Dr. Morgan that I finally piped up. I blurted out Dr. Morgan's name because the man saved a life.

I could tell that he didn't appreciate my butting into that conversation.

I have no idea why he wanted to keep his identity under wraps.

"I'm glad your cousin was there to save Daxton." Penny squeezes my hand.

"He's not my cousin," I correct her, but I don't blame her for not having any of the facts of the night straight.

The man she was meeting almost died before they even sat down at their table.

"Oh." She skims both her palms over the front of the skirt she's wearing. "I thought he was since I heard you say something at the restaurant about cousins and you brought his takeout here for him."

I wasn't going to do that but the restaurant's manager had shoved the bag into my hand as I was leaving Atlas 22. I assumed that Philip would accompany me to the hospital after he heard me offer to tagalong with Penny, but Philip's phone rang and, as usual, his boss lured him back to his Wall Street office with the promise of a possible future promotion.

Either way, our dinner would have been interrupted.

"How are you doing?" I lightly touch Penny's wrist.

She has my hand firmly gripped in hers before I realize what's happening. "I'm okay, Eloise."

I smile slightly when I hear her say my name.

"I've never seen anyone fall over like that before," she goes on, tucking a lock of her red hair behind her ear. "It felt life changing to me."

I know it was definitely life changing for Daxton.

I'm not sure if he would be alive if Dr. Morgan hadn't been at the restaurant.

"I should check with that woman at the desk again." Penny points toward the reception desk that we bolted to when our Uber dropped us off at the doors to the emergency department.

I tug my hand from hers because I'm reasonably sure my fingers are turning blue from lack of blood flow. Penny's death grip is a solid ten out of ten.

Shaking my head, I adjust the takeout bag in my lap. "She said she'd let Dr. Morgan know that we're here. Did you get ahold of the friend who fixed you up with Daxton? Were they able to reach out to his family to let them know what's happening?"

She looks to where her phone is poking out from the clutch purse in her right hand. "No response yet."

"I'm sure they've tracked down someone from the ID in his wallet," I say. "I think we'll hear something soon."

Nodding, she glances at me. "Is that guy you were with at the restaurant your boyfriend?"

I haven't stuck a label on what exactly is happening between Philip and I, so I shrug. "Not really. It was our third date."

"Do you want there to be a fourth date?"

I study her face, drawn to the small flecks of gold in her green eyes. "I don't think there's a spark there."

"I get that." She nods. "This is going to sound silly, but there was a spark between Daxton and I. In that split second before he keeled over, I felt something. I felt it here."

I watch as she slowly taps the center of her chest over the dark green blouse she's wearing.

"How old are you?" she asks before I can respond to her last admission.

"Twenty three. My birthday was last month," I say. "You?"

"Same, but mine was seven months ago." She smiles for the first time since we met. "Dating in Manhattan is something, isn't it?"

I laugh. "It's a whole thing."

"Don't I know it?" She lets out a long-winded sigh. "If you want to take off, I can give Dr. Morgan his food. I'm going to hang around until I can see Daxton. I don't want him to wake up and be all alone."

For some reason, I don't want that for her either, so I reach for her hand again, even though I know she'll probably put mine back in a death grip. "I'll stay. We're in this together."

Surprisingly, she squeezes my hand briefly before holding it gently. "Thanks for staying."

I open my mouth to tell her it's not a problem, but I slam it shut as soon

as I catch a glimpse of who is headed straight toward us.

Now dressed in dark blue scrubs under a white coat that easily identifies him as a member of the medical staff of this hospital, Dr. Morgan has his eyes trained on me.

I manage a small smile as I hold up the takeout bag but his gaze never leaves my face. His stoic expression makes my stomach drop like a lead balloon.

“No, “ I whisper, bracing myself for bad news. “Please no.”

“What?” Penny glances at me. “What’s wrong?”

I push to my feet as Dr. Morgan closes the distance between us with measured steps.

Penny follows my lead, searching for my hand with hers. I take it.

I should have insisted she call someone to sit with her. I barely know her. I’m not equipped to hold her up if she emotionally collapses.

“Please let him be all right,” she whispers as he slows to a stop.

He scans the waiting area. It’s bustling but I sense that it almost always is.

“I was told by reception that you two are waiting to see me.” His gaze runs over my face. “Daxton gave me permission to share an update with his date.”

“That’s me,” Penny says, patting her hand in the center of her chest. “She was on a date with someone else. I’m the one who was on a date with Daxton. I’m Penny.”

He shifts his focus to her. “Was he feeling any tightness in his chest before he collapsed? Any discomfort at all?”

She shrugs a shoulder. “He was leaning in for a hug and then, boom, down he went.”

Dr. Morgan nods. “Daxton has a rare genetic heart condition. He’s going to require a procedure.”

“What?” Penny’s voice carries over the low hum of the chatter in this crowded waiting room. “What does that mean? Is he going to make it?”

“His mother is flying to New York in the morning from Indiana.” He glances at the watch on his wrist. “She’ll be in a position to share the details with you.”

“You can’t tell me more because I barely know him? It wasn’t just a random blind date. There was a spark.” Disappointment laces her tone as she shifts her gaze to me. “ I just told you that, didn’t I?”

I nod softly. “You did, Penny, but I think it’s wise to wait until his mom is here. You can come back in the morning if you want and introduce yourself to her.”

She lets out an audible sigh. “I guess I can do that. What’s his last name again?”

The corners of Dr. Morgan’s lips edge up toward a smile but he halts that quickly. “Robinson. I’ll tell Mrs. Robinson to be on the lookout for you, Penny.”

“My full name is Penny Hartigan,” she tells him. “Can you tell her that for me so she knows who I am?”

“Penny Hartigan,” he repeats her name. “I suggest you head home now.”

“Home?” Her chest heaves. “I should stay for Daxton, shouldn’t I?”

“He’s being transferred to the coronary care unit,” he explains. “The only visitors permitted at this point are immediate family.”

“So, not me?”

“I’m afraid not.” He shakes his head. “Go home and get some sleep.”

“I’ll be back bright and early waiting to speak to Mrs. Robinson,” she announces loud enough that the woman at the reception desk glances at us.

“Noon would be a good time to circle back here.” Dr. Morgan changes her plans for her.

“Noon it is.” She tugs on my hand. “Do you want to share another Uber, Elodie?”

“It’s Eloise,” Dr. Morgan corrects her before I can. “Eloise Rehn.”

I smile, suddenly remembering the bag in my hand. “Oh, Dr. Morgan. I brought your dinner. It’s the takeout you ordered from Atlas 22 before everything happened. The manager asked me to give it to you since we kind of know each other through Astrid and Berk.”

“We do kind of know each other.” He studies my face. “I suspect the tuna is past its prime so I’ll toss this.”

“You’re throwing away the tuna from Atlas 22?” Penny’s voice once again carries throughout the waiting room. “That costs a pretty penny. If I were you, I’d bite the bullet and tempt fate. You are in a hospital after all if something goes wrong.”

He tugs the bag from my hand, not bothering to acknowledge Penny’s advice.

“Thank you for the update, Dr. Morgan,” I say to move this along because I still haven’t eaten dinner and I’m about to race home to the leftover

pizza that has been lounging in my fridge for the past two days. “We’ll be going now.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Penny reminds him. “I’ll be here at noon sharp.”

“That’s fine. I need to get back to work.” He turns so he’s facing me directly. “Take care of yourself, Eloise.”

“I will,” I assure him. “It was good to finally meet you.”

“It was good to meet you both,” he says before he walks away, tossing the bag in his hand in the nearest wastebasket before he steals one last glance over his shoulder at the two of us.

CHAPTER THREE

ELOISE

“I HEARD someone at the restaurant say he doesn’t look like any doctor she’s ever been to. I agree one thousand percent with that,” Penny says as we exit the hospital. “I’m all in with Daxton, so that’s clearly just an observation on my part.”

“Are you talking about Dr. Morgan?” I glance up from the screen of my phone. “Our ride is five minutes out. She’ll drop you off at home first.”

She nods. “Of course, I’m talking about him. He’s got those dreamy blue eyes, just the right amount of stubble on his jaw, and that thick brown hair. Talk about a good doctor, or should I say good-looking doctor. Who am I kidding? He’s scorching hot. Everyone sees it.”

I can’t help but smile. “He’s easy on the eyes.”

“That’s one way to put it.” She sighs. “All I really care about is that he

leads the charge to save Dax's life."

Dax? She's gone from not knowing the man's last name to gifting him with a pet name. Maybe there is something to be said for love at first sight.

"I hope he gets well soon so you can finish your first date and plan a second."

"He will," she says with confidence. "I want that so much."

"I'm sure it'll all work out," I say to reassure her, even though I think it's telling that Daxton's mom is racing to New York. It can't all be good news if she's hopping on an airplane with little notice.

"I want to wear something just like that on my next date with Dax." She runs a hand up and down in the air in front of me. "Where did you buy that ooh-la-la dress you're wearing?"

My gaze drops to my dress. "An ooh-la-la dress? What does even that mean?"

She giggles. "It means it fits you like a glove and almost every man who comes within a ten foot radius can't take his eyes off of you."

That's not true. Philip couldn't keep his gaze on me during our short date. "I made this. I designed it as a required part of my first semester curriculum."

"Wait. What?" Her eyes widen. "You're a fashion designer?"

"I'm studying textile design," I clarify, continuing because I'm proud of my present and my potential future. "I'm a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology."

"You go to FIT?" she shrieks. "Are you serious?"

"Very." I beam with a smile. "I actually sell some of my work online. I knit sweaters, hats, totes, all kinds of..."

"Where can I buy something?" she interrupts. "I'm all about supporting a fellow creative since I'm one myself."

I quickly check my phone again to see how close our ride is. "What do you create?"

"I paint custom pet portraits, but it's a part-time gig at the moment." She cranes her neck to get a look at the screen. "Are you pulling up your online store?"

I almost tell her I'm not, but if a possible sale is in the mix, I have to lean in to that. My rent dropped when I moved into Astrid's apartment after she moved in with Berk and his daughter. I was living with two classmates before that, but I'm still paying less per month now and I get to enjoy the solitude of my own company for the first time in my life.

Regardless, of the cost of my rent, Manhattan is not a cheap place to live.

I pop open the Etsy app on my phone and scroll through the knitted pieces that I currently have available. The prices reflect the fact that everything I sell is handmade.

“I love that one.” Penny leans in to tap a finger on the screen. “It’s like sunshine in a sweater.”

I glance at her face. “Yellow must look amazing on you.”

“It does,” she says with a wink. “I’ll tell you what, Els. You did say that we’re in this together, right?”

She pauses to jerk a thumb back toward the entrance to the hospital.

I did say that when I wasn’t sure what condition her blind date was in, but she can handle this on her own now.

“Let’s meet up here again tomorrow at noon.” She looks at my phone again. “You’ll bring the sweater. I’ll bring the cash, and we’ll talk to Mrs. Robinson together.”

As much as I need the sale, I suspect a noon meet up with Penny will morph into an all-day hangout at the hospital.

“I don’t have a lot of friends in the city,” she confesses softly. “In fact, the friend I mentioned earlier that set up Daxton and I is more of an enemy.”

I stare at her as I digest that word by word, but I still come up empty. “What do you mean?”

“My bestie from work arranged this, but we have a no contact after work hours policy.” She laughs that off. “I guess that’s why she isn’t responding to my text messages. Or it could be because I tattled on her to our boss last week, but he swore he wouldn’t divulge my identity.”

Too tired to sort through all of that, I take the easy route. “I can meet you here tomorrow, but I have to be someplace else by one.”

“An hour is more than enough time.”

She leaves that hanging so I have no idea if it’s more than enough time to exchange my one-of-a-kind sweater for her cold hard cash, or if she’s referring to talking to her blind date’s mom.

Either way, I’ll make one hundred and fifty dollars, and Penny will have some emotional support when she meets Daxton’s mom.

“We should exchange numbers.” She tugs her phone out of her clutch purse. “We’ve bonded. We’re friends now, right Els?”

“Sure, Pen,” I toss a comparable nickname back at her.

“What’s your number?” she asks with a grin.

I tell her the digits as I watch her key each into her phone.

“I’m sending you a text now so you can add me to your contact list.” She laughs. “Under Pen, of course, because I love that.”

I smile as soon as I read the text message that pops up on my screen.

To new friends and blind dates. May you both be in my life forever.

CHAPTER FOUR

GAINES

I DRAG myself out of the hospital shortly before midnight.

“Another night, another cardiologist on the loose.”

I don’t need to glance to my left to know who said that. “Go to hell, Dr. Scott.”

“Been there. Done that,” he quips. “I thought you punched out hours ago. Why are you just leaving now?”

I look to my right and the steady stream of traffic whizzing past us on the street. Lenox Hill Hospital is a hotbed of activity every hour of every day of each week of the year. Illness and tragedy never takes a minute off.

“I stumbled into the middle of a cardiac event when I was picking up my dinner,” I confess. “One thing lead to another and I had to make a repeat appearance in the CCU.”

“Is that a humble brag I hear?” He cups his left hand over his ear. “You saved another life out in the wild, didn’t you, Morgan? Jesus, you’re a goddamn show-off.”

I laugh that off. “What about you? Why aren’t you at home with Chloe and Elena?”

Evan’s wife and daughter are his world.

He shows up here to fill the role of the best vascular surgeon on staff, but his heart belongs at home with the two people he loves most.

He scrubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Emergency surgery.”

I nod. “Sounds like it was a hell of a Friday night all the way around.”

“I’m about to grab a burger.” He shakes a finger at me. “Keep your opinion as a cardiologist to yourself. I’m fucking starving and I’m guessing you didn’t wolf down that takeout because you were too busy being the hero again.”

“Fuck you.” I chuckle. “I’m in for a burger and fries.”

“You break the rules and you look like that?” He shoves both hands in the front pockets of his pants. “How the hell are you still single at what... thirty-four? Thirty-five?”

“Thirty-six,” I correct him without bothering to point out that we’re almost the same age and he’s in as good of shape as I am.

“If you pull the plug and marry the right woman you could live longer, Gaines.” He leans back. “I read an article about that somewhere.”

“Not in a medical journal.”

He chuckles. “No. It was probably in a magazine in the ED waiting room.”

“You hang out in the waiting room in the ED?”

“You should check out the snack selection in the vending machines they have in there.” He whistles. “This man could live on that alone.”

“A burger is better.” I point toward the corner. “Let’s hop on the subway. I know a good spot to grab food not far from your place.”

“Are you going to walk me home after you buy me dinner?” He bats his eyelashes. “You’re such a gentleman.”

Shaking my head I take off down the sidewalk. “It’s your turn to buy dinner and you’re on your own after that. I need to get home to bed. It’s been a hell of a long night.”

“THIS FEELS like the longest day of the year,” Mrs. Robinson says as she studies my face.

She arrived at the hospital shortly after I did this morning with her four-year-old daughter in tow. I knew who she was before she introduced herself to me. Her son has her nose and shares her eye color.

She gave me a rundown on her family history but not one word of that included the information I requested. I wanted to know if anyone on her side or her husband’s suffered from the same cardiac issue that her son is facing.

That lead to an unwanted confession about her not knowing who her son’s father is, along with a tear-filled retelling of the conversation she had with her husband about that. Apparently, Daxton is still in the dark regarding his paternity.

It seems she’s not the only Robinson family member carrying a secret. Daxton knew about his heart condition before he left Indiana months ago after landing a job at a recruiting firm in Manhattan. He was bound and determined to accept the position. He boarded a plane with the medications he needed to temporarily manage his condition, but he was aware that the pills he takes every morning weren’t a long-term solution.

His cardiologist in Indianapolis filled me in on all of that when I reached out to him first thing today. He asked me to keep him updated on Daxton’s progress, and I’ll honor that because I heard the concern in his voice.

I heard it in Daxton’s mom’s voice too when I asked her for a moment alone.

Her daughter, Saylor, is currently with one of our nursing staff in a private family gathering room while I explain to Mrs. Robinson the procedure her son is facing.

“The treatment for Daxton’s condition requires an implantable cardioverter defibrillator. The doctor on staff who specializes in cardiac electrophysiology will handle that,” I tell her.

“Cardioverter defibrillator?” Her voice shakes. “My husband is in Houston on business. I need to explain all of this to him. Should I tell him to come to New York, too?”

There’s always a chance that something can go wrong during a procedure like the one Daxton will undergo, but I can’t make that determination for her, so I offer what I can.

“I can give him a call and explain the situation directly to him.”

“You’d do that?” Her brows pinch together. “You would do that for us?”

“It’s my job to help,” I tell her.

“Thank you.” Her hand jumps to my forearm. “You’re very kind.”

It’s not the first time I’ve heard that but I understood the assignment when I was taught in medical school that a good bedside manner is at the core of success in my chosen field.

The woman in front of me is scared shitless that her son isn’t going to see his twenty-fourth birthday. It’s my job to do what I can to not only ensure that happens, but keep her calm throughout the process.

Julissa, a nurse who works in this unit, approaches us. “Dr. Morgan I’m sorry to interrupt but there are two women waiting to speak to you and Mrs. Robinson. One is named Penny I believe, and the other is...”

“Eloise?” Her name leaps from my lips before I realize it’s left my tongue.

“Yes.” She nods with a slight smile. “That’s right. They’re friends of your patient and would like a moment if you can spare it.”

Eloise somehow got roped into returning here, so the least I can do is assure her and Penny that Daxton is receiving the best care possible. I’ll keep that quick and to the point.

“We’ll be right out, Julissa.”

She starts toward the exit of the coronary care unit as I shift my focus back to Mrs. Robinson. “Penny is the young woman I mentioned earlier. She was with your son when he collapsed.”

She tugs on the gold pendant around her neck that has the word ‘*Mom*’ etched into it. “And the other woman? Eloise, you said? Is she a friend of Dax’s too?”

I have no idea how the hell to answer that, so I don’t. “I’ll let Penny explain it all to you. Why don’t we go speak to them now and then I’ll make that call to your husband?”

“Yes.” She nods. “That works. Let’s do that.”

I steel myself with a deep breath as I follow her out of the unit to where Eloise Rehn is waiting to see me.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELOISE

I CAN'T DENY a word of what Penny said last night.

Dr. Morgan is smoking hot.

Today he's wearing a pair of dark gray pants and a light pink button-down shirt under his white coat. Not every guy can pull off a look like that, but Dr. Morgan is effortlessly conducting a master class in how it's done.

"Penny," he says my new friend's name first while keeping his gaze on me. "Hello, Eloise."

Again, I can't tell whether he's happy to see me or not. I wonder if learning the art of a poker face is taught in medical school because once again he's nailing that.

"This is Daxton's mother." He touches the forearm of the woman standing next to him. "Mrs. Robinson, this is Penny and Eloise."

“I’m Penny,” Penny makes sure that’s known in a voice that is way too loud for this private family waiting area.

A little brown-haired girl and a woman dressed in blue scrubs sitting next to her both turn to look at us.

Mrs. Robinson takes Penny’s hand in hers before she reaches for mine. No words accompany that, but that’s not the least bit surprising. Her son is facing a medical crisis and she’s most likely been awake all night.

“Mommy!” The little girl suddenly rushes toward us. “Daxie. I want to see Daxie.”

I glance at the small child. She’s adorable and with the pink bow in her hair, and her matching overalls she looks like she should be in a playground, not the coronary care unit of a hospital.

“Saylor, let’s read another book.” The woman in scrubs approaches us. Her name and position are visible on the badge pinned to her top. She’s a cardiac care nurse. “I think your Mommy needs to talk to the nice ladies.”

“I want Daxie!” Saylor demands. “Please let me see him.”

Mrs. Robinson looks to Dr. Morgan for guidance. He crouches to get closer to eye level with the little girl. “Why don’t I take you to see him now? The thing is Saylor, we need to stand behind a big piece of glass and look at your brother because he’s fast asleep and we don’t want to wake him up.”

Clutching a stuffed toy close to her chest, she nods. “I can be super duper quiet. I know how. Right, Mommy?”

Mrs. Robinson manages a weak smile. “You do know how.”

“Can I go with the man?” she asks, running her fingers over the stitching on his coat that identifies him by his name and his position as a member of the cardiology team. “He’s not a stranger.”

“You can go.” Mrs. Robinson nods. “Be on your best behavior, okay?”

“If I do that can we get a donut?” Saylor laughs, tugging lightly on the stethoscope strung around Dr. Morgan’s neck. “I know there’s a place with food in here.”

“The cafeteria,” Penny says. “If you want, we can take her for a donut after she sees her brother.”

Mrs. Robinson looks skeptical as her gaze volleys from my face to Penny’s. “I’m not sure.”

“Dr. Morgan’s cousin is married to Eloise’s cousin,” Penny blurts out. “You can trust us.”

I lock eyes with Dr. Morgan and offer a small smile, but I get nothing in

return.

“Go with the doctor,” Mrs. Robinson says to her daughter. “Then the girls can take you for something to eat in the cafeteria. Something healthy before you eat a donut.”

“A banana will be just fine.” Saylor giggles. “Let’s go see my brother.”

Dr. Morgan scoops the little girl in his arms and gifts me with one last glance before he looks at Daxton’s mom. “I’ll have her back in no time. If you need anything, let one of the staff know.”

With that, he’s gone without another word.

PENNY TUGS the sweater she bought from me out of the white paper bag I used to deliver it to her when we met up almost an hour ago. Since it’s a cardigan, she puts it on over the white blouse she’s wearing.

“I really like that,” Saylor remarks from where she’s sitting next to Penny across the table from me in the hospital’s cafeteria. “Can I have one?”

I look her over. “I can knit you one just like it.”

Her cheeks blush. “Thank you, Els, but I meant that bag. Can I have one just like that?”

I laugh as I watch Penny plop the bag in Saylor’s lap. “It’s all yours, cutie.”

“My name is Saylor,” she corrects Penny.

My name is Eloise, but I’m going with the nickname flow and learning to embrace being *Els* when I’m around *Pen*.

Saylor kisses her stuffed lamb and drops it in the bag. “Night night, Piggie.”

“Your lamb is named Piggie?” Penny asks.

“Yup.” Saylor takes another bite of the donut I picked out for her. I opted for a small salad with chicken strips on the side, the requested banana and a glass of milk, too.

She polished the lunch portion off quickly before she started on the donut covered in pink icing and candy sprinkles. She’s savoring every bite of that.

“Do you have a stuffed pig?” Penny keeps the conversation on that track.

I can’t say I blame her. After Mrs. Robinson explained that Daxton has a genetic heart condition and requires a procedure to have a device implanted

to regulate his heart beat, this discussion with Saylor has lightened my mood, and I suspect Penny's, too.

She comforted Mrs. Robinson with a huge hug before we left the CCU to head here to give her a much needed moment with her son.

"Stuffed with what?" Saylor asks before she shoves another piece of the sugary treat into her mouth.

Penny winks at me before she rephrases her question, "Do you have a pet pig?"

Saylor nods as she points at her mouth. "Can't talk. Chewing."

I glance over my shoulder hoping to catch a glimpse of Dr. Morgan but I highly doubt the man eats at this cafeteria. He looks like he has at least a six pack under his shirts.

"I do have a pet pig," Saylor announces. "He's named Giraffe."

Penny laughs. "I'd love to meet him someday."

"Are you going to marry my brother, Pen?"

Penny's eyes widen as her mouth falls open.

I take the lead because promising anything to a four-year-old and not delivering is a recipe for disaster. "Penny and Dax are brand new friends."

"Like we are?" Saylor looks to Penny before her blue eyes stall on my face. "You two are my brand new friends."

"We are." I reach across the table to squeeze her hand. "If you finish up we can take you back up to see your mom."

"There's my other brand new friend!" Saylor's out of her seat and whizzing past me with the paper bag in her hand before I realize what's happening.

I'm on my feet in an instant, chasing her down.

Grateful that I'm wearing sneakers and not heels, I race after her.

I'm only two steps behind her when she reaches her destination. It's Dr. Morgan's arms.

He scoops her up so quickly that the bag in her hand falls open and her toy tumbles to the cafeteria floor.

"Oh, no!" She screeches. "Piggie fell. She fell on her head. Someone help her."

"I'm a doctor," Dr. Morgan says in a gentle tone. "I can help."

I'm drop to a knee to pick up the toy. I brush it off before I offer it to Saylor.

"That's not a pig," Dr. Morgan says gazing down at me. "It looks like a

lamb.”

Lamb.

A memory from my past washes over me like a tidal wave, sending my heart rate racing by what feels like a hundred million beats a minute.

I jump to my feet, stepping to the left clumsily before I find my footing.

“Els, are you okay?” Penny’s hand circles my elbow as she steps in place beside me. “It looked like you almost fell.”

I did. I fell into the memory of the best night of my life.

I keep my gaze on Penny’s face. “I have someplace I need to be.”

That’s anywhere but this place because my mind is playing tricks on me. Dr. Morgan uttered the same word that my masked lover called me when he brought me to orgasm with his skilled hand in a club I had no business being in.

Why did Dr. Morgan sound just like that man when he said lamb?

“I think I’ll stay with Saylor and Mrs. Robinson,” Penny says. “Unless you want me to get you home.”

“I’m fine,” I reassure her before I look at Saylor. “I’m going to go, okay?”

“Please make Piggie a sweater just like Pen’s if you can,” she whispers.

I nod. “I’ll give it to Penny to give to you.”

“Thank you.” A soft smile accompanies the words. “Can I have a hug, Els?”

I take a step forward to wrap my arms around her, acutely aware of how close I am to Dr. Morgan. I’m so close I can smell his cologne.

That cologne. That word. This man.

It’s him.

I let Saylor go with one last stroke of my hand over her forehead before I hug Pen and turn around in search of the nearest exit.

CHAPTER SIX

GAINES

“THAT’S IT, *my sweet little lamb. Just like that.*”

I’ve replayed those words over and over in my mind since that night just over two years ago. I saw the way the woman’s eyes had brightened when I first called her my lamb. That was right after I approached her at the bar in the club.

She was sipping on a cosmopolitan. Her face partially obscured by a black mask emblazoned with red and green crystals.

I’d opted for a plain silver mask to hide my identity.

She offered a name when I took the seat next to her.

“I’m Loretta Lamb,” she claimed in a breathy tone edged with the nervous delight that every person who entered that club felt.

We all knew what we were there for.

Fucking. Raw and primal. Anonymous and forgettable.

At least it always was for me until that night.

When I looked into her bluish-gray eyes I saw something I had never seen in a woman's eyes before. Promise. I knew touching her would be an experience unlike anything I'd known. I could sense that a kiss of her lips would ruin me.

I had never kissed a woman in that club before.

I'd gone down on a few, but actual kissing felt like far too intimate an act to share with someone whose face is hidden behind a veil of secrecy.

But *Loretta* was different. I wanted a taste of her lips as soon as she pursed them after taking a sip of her drink.

She asked my name, and I responded as I always do when I'm there looking for a quick fuck. "Garin."

It's the surname of a poet I'd studied in high school. A reading of one of his works had gotten me laid for the first time, so I used the name as a cover when I was in the club.

Loretta called me out on that in short order. "Garin? Like the poet, sir?"

Sir.

That stuck. It stuck like fucking glue for our entire encounter that night.

"I'm twenty-five, sir."

She offered that without any prompting from me.

"Please make me come, sir."

I had a literal hand in that one.

"I need to suck your cock, sir."

How could I possibly refuse?

And then, just as I was about to drop to my knees to taste her sweet pussy as a prelude to fucking her, she whispered the words I still curse to this day.

"I need to go, sir."

She'd run out of that room and that club with the same swiftness as she had today at the hospital.

I'd watched Eloise leave the cafeteria without a glance back after hearing me say *lamb*.

That one word had opened a vault to her memory bank. I saw it as she gazed up at me. I felt it as I watched her avoid eye contact with me.

She knows.

"Hey, daydreamer, I believe I have some good news for you."

I'm not in the mood to deal with Evan's persistent glorious mood, but I

paste a half-assed smile on my face and turn to look at him. “What’s that?”

“Good news is the opposite of bad news,” he jokes. “The good news is you get to buy me dinner tonight because Chloe and our beautiful daughter are having dinner with her dad and his wife.”

“I can’t tonight,” I lie.

“Why?” he asks. “Are you planning on hanging out here all night? I happen to know that Daxton’s procedure went off without a hitch.”

That it did.

“I have other patients,” I remind him.

“All of them are stable because you, my friend, are a cardiac wizard.”

That draws a hearty laugh from me. “You’re too happy. What the fuck is going on with you?”

“I’m living the life,” he says as he tugs off the ID badge attached to his suit jacket. He places it on the top shelf of his locker. “I’m a respected vascular surgeon. I’m married to the greatest woman who ever walked this earth, and my daughter smiles at me in this way that I can’t explain, Gaines. It’s just everything.”

I’ve seen Elena’s smile. I can’t argue with him.

“What’s on your agenda for tonight?” he questions. “Tell me you’ve got a date.”

“I don’t date.” I slam my locker door shut.

He leans closer. “Tell me you’ve got a fuck lined up.”

“How is that your business?”

“You know my story.” He leans a shoulder against his now-shut locker door. “Chloe was supposed to be a one-night stand.”

I’ve heard the story countless times, so I add to it for him, “you knocked her up and for some reason, I’ll never understand, she agreed to marry you.”

“The reason is the sex is *that* good.”

I shake my head. “Change the subject, Evan.”

“Let’s change it to the cute brunette you were talking to in the cafeteria.” He nudges my shoulder with his pointer finger.

“What were you doing in the cafeteria?” I ask to avoid discussing Eloise.

“Same thing you were.” He sighs. “Saturday is pizza day, Morgan.”

I chuckle. “I had no clue.”

“You should try it sometime.” He glances at his watch. “You should also invite that brunette to join you. I sense there’s something between you two.”

I know he won’t drop it so I send him in a direction that will kill this

conversation now. “Her cousin married mine a few months ago. That’s all we share.”

“Gotcha.” He nods. “Since you’re leaving me to fend for myself tonight, I’m going home to eat the salad Chloe left in the fridge for me.”

“Your heart thanks you.”

“Your dick would thank me if you followed my advice and went out to have some fun.”

“Don’t go there.” I warn with a wag of my finger.

“I’ll catch you on Monday, Dr. Morgan.” He pats my shoulder as he breezes past me. “I’d tell you to stay out of trouble until then, but we both know you will.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

GAINES

EVAN'S ADVICE should have been easy to follow. I intended to stay home through the weekend as I worked out a plan on how to deal with Eloise's awakening in the cafeteria yesterday.

I can't ignore the fact that I believe she recognizes me as the man she met at that club; a man who roped his hand through her hair as she took me to places I've never been before with her talented mouth.

I'll never forget how that felt. The pillow softness of her lips. The slide of her tongue along my dick and the sound she made when I shot my load down her throat.

I'd edged back, determined to shoot all over her face, but she'd persisted. She's hummed in protest when I tried to slide out of her mouth.

I gave her what she wanted then, but before I could offer her the same

pleasure, she ran out of there like a lightening bolt.

I'd paid extra attention to the women of Manhattan after that, half-hoping I'd find my lamb on the bustling sidewalk, or perhaps in a café since she didn't make a repeat appearance at the club in the months following our encounter.

Noticing the curve of the hips of every brunette I passed on the sidewalk became second nature to me. If I saw one that I suspected might be the woman from the club, I'd approach in a subtle effort to look at her eyes to see if they were the unique shade of blue and gray that had bore me into me that night.

It was shortly after Berk met his wife, Astrid, that I first saw Eloise again.

She was sitting in a bar watching her cousin perform a few songs. I was on the other side of the room but I felt a pull that I still can't explain to this day. My body knew it was my lamb before I got the confirmation when she turned to her side and I caught a glimpse of her profile. The shape of her lips, and the graceful curve of her neck made me ache inside. I stared at her, unable to move until Berk patted me on the shoulder and made his presence known.

I could tell within seconds that he knew her. He caught me staring at her and asked if I wanted to be introduced. I refused with the excuse of needing to get home,

but when I saw her at their wedding in a strapless blue dress, my cock hardened and my pulse raced.

That's when I heard her real name for the first time. Astrid had called out to her and Eloise had responded with a smile that froze time for a second or two.

I cursed under my breath when I realized she was the younger cousin of Berk's wife.

I'd branded her off-limits then since she was too close to my inner circle. A circle that I work hard to separate from what I do at Club Skyn behind a mask.

I left shortly after the ceremony, telling Berk that I was needed at the hospital.

I wasn't.

I needed a strong drink, so I indulged in a few before I fell face first into my bed. I jacked off the following morning in the shower thinking about her and then made a vow to forget her.

I broke that less than a minute later, and have almost every moment since. I shake all of that off, hopeful that my Sunday dinner plans will give me a temporary reprieve from thinking about Eloise.

I knock on the door to Berk and Astrid's brownstone on the Upper West Side. I'm here because their daughter, Stevie, offered me an invite an hour ago via the phone she was given a just over a month ago for emergency use only.

Apparently, my presence at this dinner qualifies as life saving.

The door swings open. Stevie is on the other side of it, her phone in her hand. "You took forever to get here."

I took the subway so I can see how it might feel that way. It did to me.

"What's up, buttercup?"

She smiles as she always does when I call her that. It started a few months ago when I brought her a bouquet of buttercups. She was having a bad day as most nine-year-olds do when someone breaks their heart.

I offer her a bouquet of them now since I stopped at a bodega that had an ample display of flowers waiting to be bought.

"These are for me?" She gazes up at me with her big blue eyes.

We share that trait, as does her dad, and our late grandfather.

"Just for you." I brush past her to enter the foyer. "Where are your mom and dad?"

"Kissing in the kitchen." She laughs. "I'll put these in water."

"I'll help," I say because Stevie seems to think I have a hidden talent for flower arranging. I don't.

My phone chimes in the pocket of my suit jacket. I put it on over a gray T-shirt before I left home. Paired with jeans, it's good enough to pass for semi-professional if I'm called in to the hospital tonight.

"That's probably doctor stuff." She points a finger at me. "You better check that out. Someone might have a hurt heart."

I brush a hand over her head. "They might. I'll give it a quick look, and join you in a minute."

She pads toward the kitchen on bare feet. "I'll tell Mom and Dad you're here!"

I retrieve my phone and read the text message that just came in. It's from the answering service at my office, but the patient who called in isn't in dire need of help. I'll call them shortly to check in and schedule them in for an appointment this coming week. I could leave it for my office staff tomorrow,

but a patient who is fretting for hours isn't ideal.

Just as I'm pocketing my phone, the doorbell rings.

Since Berk has two siblings who have found their life partners too, I'm used to big Morgan family dinners.

I swing open the door expecting to see my cousin, Keats and his family, or Sinclair and her fiancé, Jameson.

It's not a Morgan behind the door.

It's a Rehn.

Eloise, dressed in a red off-the-shoulder sweater and ripped, faded jeans stares up at me. "Oh."

Oh indeed.

My gaze drops to her lips before I look into her eyes. "Hello, Eloise."

"Dr. Morgan," she says my name in a breathy tone. "How are you, sir?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELOISE

THE WORD 'SIR' just slipped right off my tongue.

I'd call it a Freudian slip but it was more an '*oh-no-fuck-me*' slip.

Holding my breath I stare at Dr. Morgan waiting for his reaction. If he calls me lamb right now I may just drop to my knees.

Out of weakness, not out of a desire to do what I did to him in that club.

"Is that Eloise?" Stevie Morgan's voice carries through the narrow foyer.
"It's her, isn't it?"

"It is," he affirms with a brisk nod, never tearing his gaze from mine.

"Invite her in," Stevie suggests from somewhere behind Dr. Morgan.

He's a tall man with broad shoulders and a trim waist. I should feel claustrophobic given how he's towering over me, but I think I'm shock.

Why is he even here right now?

After Stevie invited me to dinner, I sent Astrid a text asking who else would be here. I did that with the excuse that I was bringing dessert and needed to know how much cheesecake to buy.

She claimed it would only be the four of us. I didn't question that since I've never been here at the same time as the doctor.

"Hey, Eloise." Berk appears right behind his cousin. "I hope you brought extra dessert. We just found out two minutes ago that Stevie invited Gaines to dinner."

"How could I not?" Stevie sneaks past Dr. Morgan to greet me with a hug. "I missed him, and I wanted him to see the sweater Eloise knit for me. I asked her to add something special to it, and she said she would."

I did tell her that when she texted me yesterday to request the addition of a small blue whale to the sleeve of the white cardigan I made for her. I welcomed the last minute complication because it sucked up all my time last night.

I hold up a shopping bag that is an exact match to the one Saylor had in her hand yesterday when she dropped her stuffed lamb on the cafeteria floor.

Dr. Morgan's gaze falls to it. "Let me get out of the way."

I appreciate that because he not only smells like the sin I partook in at Club Skyn, but he looks like one of those hot doctors from the medical dramas on my favorite streaming service. I avoided all of those last night and opted to watch a documentary about the origins of fly-fishing while I added the whale detail to Stevie's sweater.

"Thank you," I whisper as I brush past him.

"Wait a minute." Berk grabs hold of my hand. "You two haven't been formally introduced yet, have you?"

I can't answer that because I rode Dr. Morgan's hand to the best orgasm of my life. I did that while pretending to be Loretta Lamb. I admit the made-up name wasn't great, but the fake ID it came with was a real bargain so I embraced it.

Dr. Morgan spins to face me. "We've met."

Uh oh. My heart thunders in my chest.

"At Atlas 22 the other night," he goes on. "I was picking up takeout. There was a medical emergency."

"I was having dinner," I add. Or at least that was my intention before Daxton went into cardiac arrest.

"Let me guess." Berk crosses his arms. "Gaines shot into doctor mode."

“Dr. Morgan saved a man’s life,” I affirm.

“It’s Gaines,” Dr. Morgan directs that at me. “Call me Gaines.”

Or is it Garin?

That question stays on my lips because much like Vegas, what happens at the club on the Lower East Side stays there.

Until it shows up at the restaurant you’re at, and two days later in the foyer of your cousin’s home.

“Is Philip coming?” Stevie asks, hope in her voice. “He promised I’d see him soon.”

“Philip is Eloise’s boyfriend,” Berk tells his cousin.

Dr. Morgan nods. “I see.”

“He’s not coming to dinner,” I announce to all three of them.

Stevie sighs. “Did he have to work again?”

I nod, not able to vocally lie to her. She asked me to invite Philip too, but since I don’t know where that relationship is heading, I never bothered to reach out to him today.

“What does Philip do?” Dr. Morgan asks.

“He’s a big deal on Wall Street,” Berk answers before I can. “He’s going places.”

After what he did at the restaurant when Daxton collapsed, the chance of Philip going any place with me is slim.

“Dinner’s almost ready.” Berk pats his cousin on the back.

I study them as they stand side by side. Astrid once mentioned they were born just a few days apart. Berk is thirty-six.

Simple math adds up to me having the best sexual encounter of my life with a man who is thirteen years older than me.

No wonder he knew what he was doing. His touch made me come harder than I ever have before or since.

“Can you show me the sweater?” Stevie tugs on my hand. “I want to model it right after dinner.”

I slide the twine handles of the bag from my fist and give it to her. Berk grabs hold of the strings of the pastry box from me at the same time.

I thank him with a soft smile.

“To the kitchen.” He points in that direction. “I hope everyone is hungry.”

I glance at Dr. Morgan one last time. His gaze is already pinned to me. “After you, Eloise.”

Stevie grabs my hand and yanks me in the direction of the hall that leads

to the kitchen.

I take a deep breath in an effort to quell my nerves.

How can Dr. Morgan possibly remember a brief encounter he had at the club with me over two years ago? He was comfortable there. He knew exactly which corridor led to the private rooms.

He had been there before. I'm very sure he's been there since.

All I am is a very distant memory to him. That's all I'll ever be.

CHAPTER NINE

GAINES

THE ONE NIGHT that I want my goddamn phone to sound an alarm and it's silent. Dead silent. I haven't gotten a notification in over an hour. I checked the fucking thing twice to make sure it was working.

I glance to where Eloise is sitting next to Stevie.

She only ate half of the piece of lasagna Astrid served her and barely indulged in the decadent cheesecake she brought for dessert.

The cardiologist in me skipped it altogether.

Eloise hasn't looked my way but I attribute that to Stevie. She chatted up a storm throughout dinner keeping the entire table entranced with her stories about the kids she goes to school with and her plans to become a doctor who knits sweaters, sing songs, and publishes books.

Her desire to include the professions of every person at the table was

admirable. Stevie does her part to wrap her arms around anyone who enters her orbit, whether that's literally or by welcoming them with words.

"What color is that?" Astrid cranes her neck to get a better view of the impromptu manicure that is taking place.

Eloise lifts her left hand to wiggle her fingers. "Metallic blue."

The soft light from the chandelier hanging above the dining room table bounces off the thin silver ring on her thumb.

The link design is unique and another reminder of that night.

I can't shake the image of that hand wrapped around my cock as she took me in her mouth. The cool bite of metal circling her thumb was a sharp contrast to my throbbing dick.

I shut my eyes to will that image away.

"I can do yours next, Mom," Stevie offers.

"I'd love that," Astrid responds with nothing but love in her voice.

She's Stevie's stepmom but their bond is unbreakable. It's rooted in every moment they've spent together.

"What about you, Gaines?" Stevie laughs. "Do you want me to paint your nails tonight?"

I smile at the kid. "I would but my boss will fire me. No nail polish allowed while I'm on duty."

She pouts. "Your boss is no fun."

I can't argue that point. The head of cardiology takes the job seriously, as he should. I'm under his watch when I'm in the hospital. My private practice falls under the umbrella of my control. I'm slowly building that up.

By the grace of God my phone finally perks up, sounding a chime that lures every face at the table toward me, except Eloise.

She stares at her fingernails as if it's the first time she's seen polish on them. I know that's not a fact because they were painted a dark shade of crimson the night we met.

Without even glancing at the screen, I push back from the table, and lie, "I'm expecting an update on a patient. I'll be back shortly."

Before I can exit the room, another phone buzzes.

"Oh, that's me," Eloise says.

"Is it Philip?" Stevie asks excitedly. "If it is, tell him I said hi."

I'd suggest she tell him to go to hell, but that's envy speaking. Lucky Philip landed a spot in Eloise's life for longer than the hour I did.

"It's Penny," she announces as I round the corner and stop just out of

their view.

I lean my back against the wall and suck in a deep breath.

“A new friend?” Astrid asks as I tug my phone out of my pocket.

I scan the screen and delete the message immediately. It’s another offer from my credit card company. I have everything I need so I ignore it, as I always do.

“We met at Atlas 22 the other night,” Eloise fills her in. “She wants to meet up for a drink. Would it be okay if I…”

“Go,” Astrid interrupts her. “It’s almost bedtime for our girl and I’m sure Gaines is on his way out too. A doctor’s work is never done.”

“Right.” Eloise follows that up with a light chuckle.

There’s a hint of relief wrapped in it.

“You’ll tell Philip I said hi, right?” Stevie questions her as the sound of chairs being pushed back from the table fills the air.

“I will,” Eloise assures her. “Thank you all for dinner.”

“I’ll tell Gaines you said bye,” Astrid’s voice fades as they make their exit toward the foyer.

I step closer to the corner, hoping to catch Eloise’s reply but I can’t quite make it out.

Needing a minute to compose myself, I head to the main floor bathroom for a quick splash of cool water on my face. It’s a prelude to the cold shower I’ll need to take once I’m back home.

Being in the same room as Eloise tonight was enough to put me in a state of need. I want that gone now. I have to find a way to chase it away forever because I can’t touch that beauty again.

CHAPTER TEN

ELOISE

“I DID some research while I was at the hospital today.” Penny taps the center of her phone’s screen. “Dr. Morgan is a legend.”

You’re preaching to the choir, Pen.

Since I know (*or hope*) she’s not talking about his skills in a private room at Club Skyn, I opt for the glaringly obvious choice in my reply, “I’ve heard he’s a pretty great doctor.”

Heard translates to know in that sentence because, I also online searched the hell out of the man after I saw him sneak out of Astrid and Berk’s wedding. Who wouldn’t after spotting him across the room?

Dr. Morgan was decked out in a navy blue three-piece suit and a stunning checkered silk tie. He must have forgotten what a comb was that day because his hair looked like he’d gotten in a fight with his barber, but he somehow

won.

It was messy but sexy as hell.

“Pretty great doctor?” Pen runs her finger over the rim of her glass.

I think she’s drinking an old-fashioned, but I wasn’t here to witness her ordering it. I opted for sparkling water because I have an early class tomorrow, and a lot of work to do on a knitted piece before that.

I shrug. “That’s what I heard.”

“His contributions to medical journals have been cited by some pretty important physicians,” she tells me something I already know. “He went to bat for a patient who was denied coverage by their insurance company. He got them to change their mind about a procedure the patient needed in order to live.”

She’s got the facts a little jumbled about the insurance case, but the bottom line is Dr. Morgan goes all out for the people he treats. Some people have called him a savior on an online forum dedicated to medical professionals in Manhattan.

I take a sip of water. “He seems like a nice guy.”

“I think so too,” she agrees. “Dax’s mom is on board with that too. She bought him a thank you gift for saving his life.”

Curiosity nips at me so I ask, “What did she get him?”

“A pen.” She winks.

I laugh. “Cute, Pen.”

“It’s a beautiful silver pen,” she goes on to explain. “She ordered it online. It’ll be delivered to his office tomorrow since he’s working there. I think I’ll stop there after work with a thank you card. It’s the least I can do after he ran to the rescue in Atlas 22 on Friday night.”

It suddenly hits me that was only two nights ago. I feel as though I’ve lived a thousand years since then.

“Where do you work?” I ask.

“At an insurance company.” She sticks her tongue out. “It pays the rent, but doesn’t fuel my soul.”

I can understand that. I’ve worked part-time for years at the record store that Astrid owns. I was allowed to set my own hours and she paid me more per hour than I ever could have earned anywhere else. I still put in a few hours there whenever the mood strikes since my apartment is in the same building.

Pulling a shift there isn’t the same since Astrid’s music went viral and she

handed off the day-to-day operations of the store to a new manager.

“How’s your boyfriend?” Pen shifts the discussion with ease. “What’s his name again?”

“Philip,” I answer, not bothering to add his last name.

It’s inconsequential since I can’t imagine a scenario when the two of them will ever be in the same room again.

“Have you talked to him since your date was interrupted?”

I watch her take a gulp of her drink before I answer, “No.”

“Do you want to talk to him?”

I shake my head.

“Dump him, Els.” She grins. “If he hasn’t called to check in on you in the past two days, I say he’s now a permanent part of your past.”

As complicated as that is to follow, it’s solid advice but when I pull the plug on my relationship with Philip, I need to do it face to face.

I was dumped via text once. I know the bitter sting that comes with that, so even though Philip isn’t the guy for me, I respect him enough to show up in person to end whatever is left between us.

“I did have an actual reason for asking you to meet me for a drink.” She smiles. “Other than to enjoy your company as we build our friendship.”

I’m not sold on it being a long-term friendship yet, but I’m open to calling her a close acquaintance until we see how we mesh after at least a week.

“What’s the reason?” I tap her hand. “By the way, the sweater looks amazing on you.”

“I know, right?” She leans back a touch to gaze down. “I had two compliments on my way here. You need to charge more for these, Els. I’m talking in the two fifty to three hundred dollar range.”

Astrid and a few friends from school have said the same, so maybe it is time to revisit my pricing model. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Anyways, back to why I asked you here.” Reaching for her purse, she smiles. “I have a picture on my phone I want to show you.”

I suspect it’s a selfie of her and Dax. I haven’t asked if she’s been allowed to see him yet, but from the scant forty-eight hours I’ve known her, I can tell she’s persistent when she wants something.

Her fingers skim over the screen of her phone before she sighs. “It’s beautiful.”

I lean toward her to try and steal a glance, but she turns it in her hand so I

can easily see the image. It takes me back enough that I sigh, too. “Wow.”

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?”

Without thinking, my hands jump up. “May I?”

She hands her phone over to me with no hesitation at all. Using my thumb and index finger on the screen, I zoom in on the photo, studying each small detail.

“It’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen,” she proclaims.

I admit it rates right up there, but the best sight of my life still remains the moment Dr. Morgan let go and came down my throat.

I shake that off because *why the hell am I thinking about him again?*

“Can you duplicate it?” Pen asks softly. “I want one just like that.”

Stunned by her request, I shove the phone back at her. “What?”

“I want a wedding dress just like this.” She taps the screen as it begins to darken. “This was my grandma, Els. Her mom made that dress for her. Ever since I saw this picture for the first time, I knew I’d want a dress identical to it for my wedding.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ELOISE

WEDDING?

I repeat that word out loud because I have to, “wedding?”

“Yes,” Penny states calmly.

I assume the groom in her happily-ever-after equation is Daxton Robinson, but I feel the need to confirm that. “You’re getting married?”

“One day,” she whispers. “I want to have the dress ready to go when that happens.”

I take a breath. “Maybe you should wait to commission it until you’re engaged.”

“I know what you’re thinking.” She shakes her head. “I’ve always chased after my dreams. I knew when I was twelve that one day I’d leave Rhode Island and move to Manhattan. I had no doubt that I’d start a pet portrait

business, and that may not be the success I imagined it would be, but it's still blossoming."

I nod. "Chasing after dreams is important."

"My heart tells me Dax is my guy." She drops her shoulders. "I was allowed in to see him today since they moved him to a regular room. We held hands. There's something there."

I glance at her phone again but the screen is dark.

She taps it, bringing the photo of her grandma back into view. "Maybe fate will grant my wish and I'll marry him one day. Maybe there's another guy waiting around a corner for me. For the record, I don't see that happening, but I want the dress."

Every rational part of me wants to tell her to hold off on commissioning a piece like that. It will take hours of work. Both the knitted and crocheted elements are intricate.

"Let's make it simple," she suggests. "Can you duplicate this dress for me, Eloise Rehn?"

I nod. "I know I can."

"My budget is eight thousand," she says sheepishly. "I know it's going to be hundreds, if not thousands of hours of work, and there's the cost of the yarn to factor in, and..."

"I'll do it," I interrupt. "I want to do this for you."

Since she's hell bent on getting the dress made, I should be the one to do it. My work is impeccable. My attention to detail is second to none.

I know I can purchase the materials for it at a reasonable cost. I have a friend who can order the exact pure silk yarn I'll use.

"I'll pay you upfront," she offers. "That way you know I won't bail and leave you on the hook with a dress that's made just for me."

Something tells me, that she'd never bail on me, but the promise of that much money in my bank account is too good to pass up. "Okay, Pen."

"What's our first step?" she asks, glee bouncing in her eyes.

"You'll need to pick up a cream or white colored long slip to wear under it." I glance at the photo again. "Then we'll set up a time for you to come over to my apartment so I can get all your measurements."

"I can do that," she agrees with a broad smile. "I asked my mom if she knew where the original dress is, but it's nowhere to be found. We also don't have a pattern for it."

"I don't need one." I smile back.

“I knew you’d say that.” She wraps an around my shoulder. “I’ll send you the picture.”

“Yes, thanks,” I say. “I’ll need that.”

“I can’t wait to show my mom the finished dress.” She tilts her head as she taps on the photo to send it to me via text message. “I’ll have to invite her to New York for the unofficial unveiling.”

“I’m sure she’ll love seeing it and you.”

“She will.” She nods. “I miss her, but I’m starting to like this city more and more.”

I get that. When I moved here from Buffalo after graduating high school, I missed the people I loved back home. Thankfully, my brother, Draco, and Astrid both lived in Manhattan and worked together. When Astrid offered me a job to work alongside them, I jumped at the chance. It put money in my hand and since Astrid let me set my own schedule at Vinyl Crush, I was able to devote a lot of time to selling my knitted and crocheted pieces online.

Working with both of them was a dream come true. Draco has since moved back home, but we talk on the phone at least once a week. I do the same with my folks.

“Do you want to tag-along to Dr. Morgan’s office tomorrow when I drop off my thank you note?”

“I can’t,” I answer in a rush. I follow that up with the one word reason I have to bow out. “School.”

It’s not a complete lie. I’ll be busy on campus tomorrow, but apart from that, I’ve seen enough of Dr. Morgan this weekend.

I’m still trying to accept the fact that we had a mind-blowing sexual encounter at a private party two weeks before my twenty-first birthday.

Or at least my mind was blown by it.

He was blown by me.

“I’ll tell him you said hi if I see him,” she offers.

“No, that’s okay,” I follow that with a nervous laugh.

Her eyebrows pinch together. “Why not?”

Because I don’t need him to know that I’m thinking about him.

Since I can’t share the reason with her, I switch the subject to one I suspect she’s fond of. “When you see Saylor again, can you tell her that she’ll have the sweater for Piggie very soon?”

That does its job. Pen beams with a huge grin. “She’ll love that. I can pick it up when you’re done, or I guess if you’re close to the hospital you can

drop it off. I'm sure she'd be excited to see you again. I know she's been bored having to hang around there."

Since it would take me less than a couple of hours to knit a tiny sweater for her toy, and Dr. Morgan is apparently scheduled to be at his office all day tomorrow, I see a break from school in my immediate future.

"I'll drop it off along with some coloring books and crayons."

"You're the best, Els." She finishes the last of her drink. "I had no idea on Friday that I'd have a friend like you by the end of the weekend."

CHAPTER TWELVE

GAINES

APPARENTLY FATE HAS DECIDED to fuck me over again and again, and now, it's happened for a third time.

Ironically, repeated fucking is something I would like to be doing with the woman standing outside the door to Daxton Robinson's hospital room, but she has a boyfriend, and she's still the cousin of my cousin's wife. I've branded her off-limits and that can't change.

It doesn't hurt to look, though, so I stare at her.

Her hip is cocked in a way that speaks of the sensuality I'm not sure she knows she possesses. Two male staff members who have passed her and taken a second look get the appeal.

Eloise is effortlessly beautiful.

From this vantage point, a few feet behind her, I'm getting the bonus of

not only a clear view of her ass in a pair of faded jeans, but her hair piled up on her head in a messy bun.

“Dr. Morgan?”

The feminine voice behind me lures Eloise’s gaze over her shoulder. Her eyes lock with mine briefly before a nurse steps directly in front of me.

Her green eyes give me the once-over. She’s new, and not especially skilled in compassionate care or attention to detail.

I’ve had to scold her twice in the last hour when I was down in the emergency department for a cardiac consult.

I caught her berating a patient. She took it upon herself to comment on what she perceived as his bad attitude. He lost his wife mere weeks ago amid his own health battle. He’s on the transplant list for a new heart, but that window is closing quickly.

Add to that, she was confused when I barked out a list of the tests I required in order to offer him the care he deserves, and more importantly, needs today. I had to repeat the list twice.

“What is it?”

I don’t bother adding her name to the end of the question because I don’t care enough to remember it, and I refuse to glance at her ID badge because she’s pinned it to her scrubs so it bounces off her left tit with each step she takes.

Her gaze skips over my face, stopping to stare into my eyes. “I have those test results you wanted, Gaines.”

That perks my brow. “It’s Dr. Morgan.”

“Right?” She smirks. “Dr. Morgan.”

I tilt my hand up to show her the tablet in it. “I’ve already looked those over. You’re needed in the emergency department.”

“I thought you might need me.” She adds to that by trailing a finger over my forearm.

I jerk it out of her reach immediately.

It’s not the first time I’ve been hit on at work, but I’ve never mixed business with pleasure, and beyond that, I’m not the least bit interested in what she’s offering.

“Go back to the ED,” I order, adding what I should have said to her an hour ago, “I’m about to write you up.”

Her entire demeanor shifts in an instant. “I’m sorry, Dr. Morgan. I’m headed there now.”

“Good.” My tone is clipped, firm, and I imagine threatening enough that she’ll focus on the job from here on out.

“Will you be back down to check on Mr. Vachell before you go back to your office?” She follows that up quickly with a reasonable excuse for that query, “I’m only asking because Dr. Whitman was wondering. He stopped in to see Mr. Vachell when you left to come up here.”

Up here is to check on Daxton’s progress. He’s on the cusp of being discharged.

“I’ll speak to Dr. Whitman myself.” I jerk my chin up. “Back to the ED now.”

Her eyes flare when she hears the bite in my tone. “Yes, sir.”

Hearing that from her does nothing for me, but when she scurries away I get another glimpse of the woman whose voice still echoes through my mind when she called me *sir* repeatedly that night.

I stalk toward Eloise but before I can reach her, Saylor comes racing out of Daxton’s room. She hops up and down with what looks like a stuffed puppy in her hand.

Mrs. Robinson appears not more than a second later. Her gaze catches on mine immediately. I see the surprise in her eyes.

“Dr. Morgan?” She half-laughs. The weariness that was ever present in her voice and expression is gone now.

There’s relief there now. Her son will be fine.

“Mrs. Robinson,” I say her name as I reach the trio.

“Hi, Doctor.” Saylor holds out her hand.

It’s become our new greeting. A quick handshake followed by a high five.

We complete the routine before I turn to face Eloise. “Hello, Eloise.”

“Hi,” she says without a glance at me.

She’s missing out. I chose a navy blue button-down shirt today and light gray slacks. The color of my shirt is a close match to the short-sleeve sweater she’s wearing. Her top button is undone giving me a bird’s eye view of what looks like pink lace trim on her bra.

“I didn’t think we’d see you today.” Mrs. Robinson smiles. “I was under the impression that you’d be at your office all day.”

“I had a cancellation so I came in for a cardio consult in the ED.” I see no reason to lie. “I’m heading back to my office shortly. How’s our patient?”

I sneak a glimpse at Eloise, but her focus is squarely on the bag in her

hand.

She comes bearing gifts, again.

First it was Penny, then Stevie, and now, I suspect Saylor is in for a treat.

“Let’s go in and see him,” Mrs. Robinson suggests. “Can you stay for a second to watch Saylor, Eloise?”

“Of course,” she answers in a whisper soft tone. “We’ll go to the waiting area down the hall.”

They head in that direction. I follow Daxton’s mother into his private room and when I do manage one last glance back I finally catch Eloise looking my way.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELOISE

MY HEAD POPS up as soon as I hear footsteps on the approach.

I know it's not Dr. Morgan headed toward this waiting room. His wingtip shoes tap out a staccato beat on the floor that I recognized when he was coming at me from behind less than fifteen minutes ago.

I was waiting to talk to Mrs. Robinson and Saylor so I could hand off the care package I put together for the little girl before I went to school this morning.

The small bag contained a tiny knitted yellow sweater designed to fit her lamb, although she tugged it over the head of her stuffed dog. It served the purpose she wanted it to, so she rewarded me with a huge hug.

The crayons and coloring books I tucked into the bag brought a grin to her face as did the fruit cup that I picked up at a bodega near school before I

got on the subway to come here.

“Mommy!” Saylor slides out of my lap and dashes toward her mom as soon as she comes into view. “Where’s our doctor?”

Mrs. Robinson chuckles lightly. “Dr. Morgan had to go look after other people, sweetie.”

“I get it,” she nods. “Can we go now?”

“In a little while.” Mrs. Robinson settles her daughter with a rake of her fingers through Saylor’s hair. “Daxton will be discharged soon and then we can go back to his apartment.”

“Goody!” The little girl jumps up and down. “I can’t wait!”

I glide to my feet because this is the perfect moment for me to leave. I have a class in less than an hour that I absolutely can’t miss.

“I need to run,” I say to both of them.

“Wait.” Mrs. Robinson raises a hand in the air to halt me even though I haven’t taken a step forward yet. “Daxton would like to speak with you. Do you have a minute for that, Eloise?”

Taken by surprise, I nod without thinking, and my reply slips out, “Sure. I guess so, sure.”

A smile blossoms on her lips. “You can drop by his room on your way out?”

I’ll need to make it quick, but I’ll do it. “I can do that.”

“We’ll be hanging around Manhattan for a few weeks while Dax recovers,” she tells me. “I’m sure we’ll see each other again before we go home.”

“What?” Saylor tugs on the hem of the blouse her mom is wearing. “We get to stay here with Daxie?”

“For a little while,” she explains to her daughter. “Daddy will come visit us too.”

“I miss him.” Saylor’s bottom lip quivers.

“Why don’t we call him while Eloise goes to say hi to Dax?” she suggests. “When we’re done, we’ll go check on what time we can take your brother home.”

I take that as a cue to leave and with a single glance back over my shoulder, I leave the waiting area and set off down the hallway toward where Daxton waits.

I WAIT for a nurse to exit Daxton's private room before I knock on the doorjamb. He turns his head instantly, his blue eyes lighting up as he spots me.

"Hey! Come on in," he says, his voice at least an octave higher than Dr. Morgan's.

I have no idea why I compare them in my mind.

That's a lie, I've compared every man I've met these past three years to my masked lover from Club Skyn.

"I'm Eloise Rehn." I approach him with my hand help out.

He offers his right hand to me. It quivers slightly as it hangs in the air waiting for me to cross the room to where he is.

I fully expected to find him in the bed, but he's sitting in a chair, dressed in what I assume is a hospital issued gown and a blanket resting on his lap covering his legs. His hair looks similar to how it did on Friday night. It's cut short but has a natural wave to it. It seems it's been brushed or combed since he was loaded into the ambulance at Atlas 22.

I take his hand in mine for a quick shake. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too, Eloise Rehn." His eyes search my face. "You're Pen's friend."

I consider that a stretch, but I nod while I explain, "I'm still getting to know her. We actually met on Friday night at the restaurant."

He smiles. "She filled me in."

"I'm glad you're going to be okay," I say, before I realize that I'm not sure he's completely out of the woods yet.

I've based my assumption on the fact that everyone around him is smiling, and he's on the cusp of leaving the hospital for the greener pasture of his home.

"Me too." He huffs out a laugh. "Pen said you're a transplant to the city like we both are. You're from Buffalo."

I nod. "I moved here after high school."

"She also mentioned you go to FIT." He chuckles. "I heard you're knitting something for one of my sister's toys."

He knows considerably more about me than I know about him, but I'm sure if I hang out with Penny a few more times, I'll know Daxton's birthdate along with his favorite color.

"I made her Piggie a sweater but her dog named Billy Goat is wearing that."

"Sounds like a Saylor move." He smiles but that fades quickly. "I wanted

to thank you for coming to the hospital with Pen, and for keeping her company until Dr. Morgan filled her in on what was going on.”

“Of course,” I offer with a smile. “I couldn’t let her come here alone.”

“You’re a good person.” He points at the bed that I’m standing next to. “You can sit if you want.”

With a shake of my head, I decline. “I need to get back to school.”

“Right.” He tilts his chin, the bright overhead lights catching on the faint covering of stubble dotting his chin. “I wanted to ask you something, but fair warning, it’s lame and you don’t have to answer.”

“Ask,” I suggest. “I promise to answer regardless of how lame it is.”

That draws a hearty laugh from him. He winces slightly.

I glance over my shoulder while taking a step closer to him. “Are you all right? Should I get a nurse?”

“I’m good,” he reassures me. “It hurts a bit to move.”

“I bet,” I say, even though I have no clue exactly what procedure he had done.

“Do you think Pen likes me enough to go out with me again?”

The question tugs at my heart in a way I wouldn’t have expected. I can’t stop the small smile that slides over my lips. “I know she does.”

“Truly?” he asks. “Do you think I should do it once I’m back on my feet?”

“Absolutely.” I nod, stressing the point. “I can practically guarantee that if you ask Penny out again, she’ll say yes.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GAINES

“I THOUGHT you ran off and moved to some tropical island.” Evan’s hand meets the middle of my back as he steps in place beside me. “But here you are without a tan and with that same ‘*don’t-fuck-with-me*’ look on your face.”

I glance at him. “What?”

He huffs out a laugh. “It’s been what, two or three weeks now since I’ve seen your handsome mug around here.”

Shaking my head, I shrug. “I’ve passed you in the hall at least twice this week. You’ve had your eyes pinned to your phone. I’m not the bastard ignoring you.”

“Are you saying I’m a bastard?” The smile on his face gives away the intention of the question. I admire him and consider him a friend. I know that feeling is mutual.

“I am.” I nod, shooting him a grin. “I’ve been around, Dr. Scott. You haven’t taken time to notice me.”

He pats my back again. “I guess we’ve both been busy.”

That’s an understatement.

I’ve been buried under work for days, hell, it feels like weeks, but I know it’s not.

I’ve been faced with a host of appointments, and consultations over the past week and a half culminating in the heart attack I just attended to down the hall in the ED.

“How did that kid make out?” he questions, genuine concern in his expression. “The one you found on the floor in Atlas 22 a couple of weeks back.”

I glance at him again because that’s typical Evan. He remembers people and the challenges they face. He’s been known to stop by the rooms of the patients of his colleagues to check in on them. The man can be an ass, but he has a heart of gold.

“I discharged him early last week,” I say. “I reached out twice via phone. So far, so good. I’ll see him again tomorrow for a follow-up.”

“His little sister is a hoot.” Evan laughs. “I met her in the cafeteria after her brother’s procedure. She was there with her mom having a donut.”

Without a word, I hold out my hand for him to shake.

He goes for it and as we both raise our hands to complete the Saylor Robinson signature handshake, we laugh.

“You need to have kids.” He glances to his left to where another vascular surgeon seems to be waiting for him at the end of the corridor we’re standing in. “You’d make a great dad.”

“I’ll leave the superior parenting to you.” I smack his shoulder. “Get back to work. I’ll see you around.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for you, Dr. Morgan.” He points at me. “I don’t know how the hell I missed saying hello to that handsome face, but I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I HAVEN’T SEEN you in scrubs in years.” Berk goes in for a hug as I approach him.

I reciprocate because my cousin is the closest thing to a brother I have. “It’s a good look, no?”

He huffs out a laugh as he directs me to sit across from him in this bustling coffee shop on the Upper East Side. “You look good, Gaines, although you could use a shave.”

I could use that, a decent meal and a fuck, but cardiologists can’t be picky. I take what I get, and today that is fifteen minutes with my cousin, and what looks like a day old croissant and a lukewarm coffee.

“I’ve been here for awhile.” He slides off his suit jacket, placing it over the back of his chair. “Sorry if the pastry is dry, and the coffee cold.”

I take a bite of the croissant and wash it down with a mouthful of the bitter coffee.

He watches me chew, his gaze falling to the front of my scrubs where my name is stamped across the left side of my chest.

“It’s good,” I tell him before I go in for another bite. “How are you? Astrid? Stevie?”

“We’re all fine.” He sips from the cup in front of him. “I’d ask how you are, but you’re living a doctor’s life so underpaid and overworked?”

I’m both. Our grandfather left me enough money when he died that I could drop the career and adopt a new, much less stressful one, but medicine is it for me.

It’s always been.

A slice of the inheritance funded my education. Dutch, our grandfather, would be proud.

I knew I wanted to be a doctor decades ago. That desire intensified as I got older until I made the announcement that I was heading to medical school.

My mother cried. My dad did the same.

Making them proud has been the icing on the cake for me.

“I’ve been swamped,” I admit before I finish the croissant. “How’s work for you?”

Berk owns a publishing company. He’s made the dreams of a host of people come true. In his way, he’s changing lives, too.

“It’s been great,” he admits. “I’ve got a few projects on the go. They’re big, but nothing I can talk about yet.”

“Not even to me?”

He laughs. “If I tell you, you’ll have to tell me what was wrong with

Eloise's friend. What was the guy's name? Daxton?"

Hearing her name sits me up straighter. "You know about Daxton?"

I ask that question to keep from blurting out the one I really want to ask. I haven't seen Eloise in ten days but that hasn't stopped my mind from focusing on her.

"Eloise mentioned him when she stopped by for dinner last weekend."

I want to ask where the fuck my invitation was, but I stop myself. I've kept my encounter in the club with Eloise to myself for two goddamn years. Now, that I know she was the beauty I brought to orgasm, I need to keep that secret forever, especially since she has no idea I'm the masked man who took her into that room.

"Daxton was the guy who collapsed in Atlas 22," I explain because I have no idea what Eloise told him. "He's doing well now."

"Good." He nods.

The door is open for me to ask how Eloise is, but I slam it shut because it's none of my damn business.

"I wanted to meet up to ask a favor." He shakes his head. "If you don't have time for this, tell me, Gaines. We'll go in another direction."

Curiosity piqued, I smile. "Lay it on me."

"I thought my daughter might look to me or Astrid for help with this, but you're her first choice, so..."

"So?" I interrupt. "If it's for Stevie, I'm in."

"She needs to do a report on someone she admires." His voice wavers slightly. "She said you save lives, so you're it. She needs an hour, two tops, to interview you."

Touched, that Stevie views me in that light, I nod. "I'll make the time. Tell her to text me."

He laughs. "I'll give her phone back to her so she can do that."

Finishing the final swallow of my coffee, I chuckle. "Uh, oh. What did little Miss Morgan do?"

"She accidentally called 911 from math class." He closes his eyes briefly. "She felt horrible, but she was on her phone in class, so it stays with one of us while she's at school now."

I smile. "Live and learn, right?"

"Right." He nods. "She'll be in touch in the next day or so. If you've got time this weekend, we can do another family dinner before the interview. I'll get Keats, Maren, Sinclair, and Jameson to come, too."

Eloise's name sits on the tip of my tongue. I want to suggest he extend an invitation to her, but I don't.

"I'll see if Eloise is free too," he adds, as if he can read my mind, before he veers off in a direction I'd never venture to. "I'll get her to drag her boyfriend with her."

"Sure. Why not?" I bite out with a forced smile.

Oblivious to the bitterness in my tone, he drops his gaze to his phone when it starts to ring. "I need to take this."

That's my cue to head back to work so with a quick goodbye, I do just that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELOISE

PENNY SPINS in a tight circle in the middle of my living room. “I love your place, Els.”

I’ve come to love it too.

The two bedroom apartment I currently call home was bought by Astrid’s late mom years ago. It was a package deal with the record store two floors below where we are currently standing.

After her mom died, Astrid inherited it all. Draco was already in Manhattan trying to land a job. When Astrid offered him a full-time position at Vinyl Crush, he took it immediately.

My plans to move to New York were already in motion at the time. I’ve always considered this city the fashion epicenter of the world, so I knew I needed to be here to find inspiration and hone my craft.

I slept on the couch in Draco's one bedroom walkup in Murray Hill, until he went home to help our dad with his carpentry business.

His departure sent me into the home of two friends from school. They had an extra bedroom and needed someone to help cover rent, so I jumped at the chance.

I jumped again when Astrid moved in with Berk and handed me the keys to this apartment.

She insisted I not pay her a dime in rent. I swore I would.

I won that fight.

It's important to me that I take care of myself. I think she gets that now.

"Thanks," I say, adding more, "I rent it from my cousin."

"Is that the same cousin that is married to Dr. Morgan's cousin?"

Not that it matters, but I nod, and ask a question that I hope leads her away from the subject of the gorgeous doctor, "What can I get you to drink?"

"Vodka?" She laughs but follows it up with a much tamer answer. "A glass of cold water would be heaven, Els."

I walk to the kitchen, sliding one of the glasses from the cupboard. I fill it with tap water, stopping to drop two ice cubes from my freezer in it.

When I hand it off to Pen, she downs more than half in a single gulp. "Thank you."

I nod, waiting for the right moment to ask her if she's ready for our measurement session. We've been playing phone tag for days in an effort to find a time that worked for both of us to meet up. That time is now.

"I'll go slip into my slip." She glances toward the hallway. "Can I use your bedroom for that? Or maybe the bathroom?"

"You pick." I laugh. "My room, the guest room and the bathroom are all in that direction."

"Perfect." She plucks the Liore Lingerie bag that she arrived with off my coffee table. "I'll be back in a flash and we can get started."

Since we haven't spoken much in the past week and a half, I feel the need to check in to make sure she's as excited about the dress as she was when she first showed me the picture of her grandma.

"You're still good with this, right?" I ask just as she's about to head down the hallway. "Are you sure you want me to start working on the dress next week?"

"I'm so sure that I'll be transferring the money to you while I'm here." She grins. "I need your banking details. I'm full steam ahead on this, Els."

“Good.” I smile. “I worked up a design in my sketchpad. I think it’s identical to your grandma’s, but I did add a little extra something to the neckline that I think you’ll like.”

“I’ll love it,” she says with confidence. “Give me two minutes to change and then you can show me.”

“Deal.”

AS SOON AS the door to my bedroom clicks shut, a loud knock sounds at the door that’s less than two feet from where I’m standing.

It’s my apartment door.

I haven’t ordered takeout and I’m not expecting anyone, but Astrid knows the security code to the main door and she has a set of keys to this apartment. Sometimes when she stops in at Vinyl Crush, the record store she owns, she’ll make the trip two floors up to surprise me.

To save her the trouble of having to jam her key in the sticky lock of the door, I swing it open.

“Hey, babe,” Philip greets me with no exuberance at all even though we haven’t seen each other in almost two weeks.

The last time I was with Philip, he was headed out of Atlas 22 after he took a video of Daxton dropping to the floor.

“Philip,” I say his name with the same level of excitement he has at the moment. “What are you doing here?”

“What kind of question is that?” He barges past me, not bothering to wait for a formal invite. “I ordered us a pizza. It’ll be here in fifteen. Do you still have the beers I bought?”

Since I don’t drink beer, I nod, but stop myself and shake my head. “How did you get in the building?”

He glances in my direction before his gaze settles on the window behind me. “Castle let me in.”

Naturally, the new manager of Vinyl Crush would give Philip carte blanche to step inside the building without so much as a warning to me. They hit it off when Philip stopped in there to buy an album for his dad.

Philip taps his shoe on the hardwood floor. “The beer, babe.”

“You need to go now.”

He glances around. “Why?”

I study his face. His brown eyes still lack any depth. His blond hair is cropped even shorter to his head than it was two weeks ago. He’s wearing one of the many tailored suits he invested in when he landed his job with a well-known financial firm.

He’s everything I should want, but he’s never been what I need.

“I like you, Philip, but...”

“Philip?” Pen’s voice carries through the apartment. “Is your boyfriend here?”

Philip’s eyes widen when he gets an eyeful of Penny in a thin, silk slip. The color is the slightest shade of off-white. It’s a striking contrast to her red hair.

He takes a step closer to her. “Hey, I know you.”

She crosses her arms over her chest to shield the outline of her hardened nipples. It’s not that warm in my apartment. I can’t imagine that her body is reacting to seeing Philip since the last time we talked, she was still head over heels in love with Daxton.

“We don’t know each other.” Her gaze volleys from Philip’s face to mine. “I can come back, Els. I’ll go change.”

“No,” I say loudly. “This will only take a minute.”

“You were at the restaurant when that guy keeled over.” Philip points a finger at Pen. “I remember you.”

“How?” she asks, tilting her head. “How the hell do you remember me when there was a man practically dying on the floor?”

Whether, it’s intentional or not, Philip’s gaze trails over her body.

“Oh my God,” Pen spits out. “Did you just check me out? Your girlfriend is standing right there, asshole.”

I stifle a laugh. “I’m not his girlfriend.”

Philip finally turns to look at me. “Yes, you are.”

“Yeah, no.” I shake my head. “We’re done, Philip. You can go.”

“You’re dumping me?” Surprise drips from his tone. “Why the hell would you dump me?”

The arrogance in that question is all the reason I need, but I go with an easy answer, “I’m not happy. This isn’t working for me anymore.”

The corners of his lips fall into a frown. “What about my pizza?”

Pen and I start laughing in unison.

She answers before I can get a word out, “Consider it your parting gift to

Els. Leave now and don't bother looking back because she is done with you forever."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ELOISE

“I’M GOING to need details on this.” Penny waves something black in her hand above her head. “I’m talking all the details.”

It takes me a moment to realize she’s holding the mask I wore to the private party at Club Skyn.

I curse inwardly because I dragged the damn thing out of a box last week as a token of remembrance of what was, and what will never be again.

I thought about tossing it in the trash, but instead I rested it carefully on a chair in the corner of my bedroom, and glanced at it each day. Every time I did that, another memory of that night swept over me.

Everything from Dr. Morgan’s whiskey-scented kiss, to the way his fingers felt as they seductively slid over my inner thigh before dipping under my lace panties ran through my mind.

“Oh, that,” I try and pass it off as nothing. “I wore that to a party eons ago.”

She holds it against her face, the red and green stones that adorn it dance in the overhead light.

Dusk has set over Manhattan now, and with it, the ambiance of this apartment has changed. I rarely close the curtains in the living room because a beam of light from a streetlight shines through the window like a beacon.

I love turning off all of my lights, and watching a show with only that light illuminating the room.

It’s cozy with a touch of romantic lure. I once tried to cuddle up next to Philip on the couch with all the lights out while we watched a movie of his choosing. He flipped on the lamp sitting on the table next to him twenty-seconds into the first scene.

“What kind of party?” She asks with a smirk.

A wild sex party where I blew Dr. Morgan’s world.

That’s part truth (*the first part*) with a whole lot of wishful thinking added to it.

I’m sure he’s been the recipient of many stellar blowjobs over the years. I’m curious about whether I rank in the top five, but that’s a question a woman should never ask a man, especially one who doesn’t realize she’s had her lips wrapped around his big, beautiful cock.

It was a looker, or is a looker, but the chances of me ever seeing the doctor’s dick again are slim to none.

“A fun one,” I answer with a subdued smile.

She carefully places the mask on my coffee table. “If there’s another fun party soon, you should slap that mask back on and go.”

I snuck into Club Skyn with an invitation I received more than two years ago. I doubt like hell it would get me in the door now. I’m not even sure I have the courage to revisit that place.

“I don’t think so.” I point at the pizza box. “Are you ready to eat?”

I put the pizza in the oven on a low temperature after it was delivered. I thought it would hang out there for no more than twenty minutes, but once I started taking Pen’s measurements, we lost track of time.

Over an hour passed, before she mentioned the pizza on her way to my bedroom to change back into her white jeans and denim shirt.

Once she was out of view, I grabbed the pizza, two plates, napkins, and refilled her water glass while she was changing.

“I’m ready. I’m going to head over to Daxton’s after I eat a slice if that’s all right with you.” She smiles. “Did I tell you that he asked me for a redo of our first date? We’re going back to Atlas 22 tomorrow night.”

A smile slides over my lips. “Good. I’m really glad.”

Her gaze drops to the mask again. “Since you dumped Phil, now is the time to jump back into the fray.”

I take a seat on the couch next to the table. “I’m not ready for that leap quite yet.”

She plops down beside me, reaching for a slice of the pepperoni pie. “You do know that the best way to get over someone is to…”

“Get under someone else,” I interrupt.

“No.” She laughs. “I was going to tell you the best way to get over someone is to fuck a hot guy’s brains out.”

I laugh, too. I laugh harder than I have in a long time.

“Phil was dragging you down, Els.” She points at the pizza. “Eat up. You’re going to need to energy if you put on that mask and head to a party tonight.”

I take her advice and go for a slice, resting it on a plate. “Maybe I’ll stop by the venue tomorrow night and see if there’s a party. That’s a big maybe, though.”

It’s not a solid plan yet. It’s just an idea brewing in the deepest recesses of my mind.

“I’ll check back in on Saturday to see how sore you are.” She winks. “I’m talking sore in all the right places.”

I found courage in a few sips of a cosmopolitan the first, and only, time I went to Club Skyn. I’m not sure a half dozen shots of tequila would be enough to bury my inhibitions now, so I’d follow another man into a private room.

Penny taps my knee. “Before I forget, let’s sort out the payment for the dress.”

I want to wave it off to another time, but she’s offering right now, so I accept with a smile. “I’ll grab my phone and we can do it now.”

“Good.” She sighs. “My boss says it’s bad luck to plan too far ahead, but I know this dress is going to bring all the good things into my life. It already has. Just look at us. We’re friends. We’re good friends, right?”

It’s beginning to feel that way, so I nod. “We are.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GAINES

MY CRAVING for the ahi tuna at Atlas 22 has yet to be sated, so I'm back to scene of the crime, or more aptly, the cardiac event that occurred here two weeks ago.

The restaurant is packed. Servers are shuffling about balancing large trays with expensive entrees as guests try to gain their attention with a wave of their hands. One guy whistles in his effort to get service. It fails miserably.

One of the people working the checkout counter that doubles as a greeting station, plops a bag of food on it right in front of me.

"You, Dr. Morgan, eat for free."

The people gathered behind, waiting to be seated or anxious to pick up their dinner, ooh and ahh. I can't tell if that's in awe or anger.

I'm tempted to pull out my wallet, but a dollar saved is never a bad thing,

so I smile in appreciation. “Tell Tony I said thank you.”

“You can tell him yourself,” a blonde woman dressed in a black dress suggests. “He’s speaking with someone, but he’ll be over to say hi shortly.”

I look past her to see how far out Tony is. I’ve been standing in this spot before and watched the manager slowly snake his way past every table in the massive dining room, stopping often to speak to his patrons.

My gaze catches on the red hair of the woman at the table Tony is next to. I know her.

She knows me too because as soon as spots me, she’s up and out of her chair. “Dr. Morgan!”

Her dinner companion follows her lead and slides to his feet too. He’s more cautious with his movements, as he should be. I advised him to take it slow after his procedure.

Since he called me earlier this week to essentially ask my permission for this date, I can’t be pissed at him. He’s taking his recovery seriously, as he should.

Daxton told me he wanted to make up the lost dinner to Penny. It seems that tonight is the night for that.

Tony spins to face me, his expression morphing into a grin. He raises a hand in the air. “Over here, Doc!”

I glance at the bag containing my dinner. I’m not about to tempt fate, so I pick it up and carry it with me as I set out to greet the trio waiting for me.

Tony’s hand is outstretched before I’m within ten feet of him. I’ve got my hand in his for a quick shake as soon as I’m close enough.

Daxton lifts his right hand for a shake too. Good on him for remembering to rest his left arm until he gets the all clear. The device implanted in his chest needs time to heal, so no lifting or straining with his left arm if he wants the healing process to go smoothly.

“Dr. Morgan!” Penny’s greeting is much less subdued.

She goes in for a full-on hug. I do it gingerly, keeping my hand with the bag far enough out of reach that my dinner won’t be crushed.

Stepping back from our embrace, she laughs. “The gang’s all here.”

“Not all of us,” Daxton remarks with a chuckle. “Eloise isn’t here.”

“Or Philip.” Penny clucks her tongue. “Although he’ll never be anywhere Els is again since she dumped him.”

What now?

Fortunately, it seems Penny hasn’t shared the news with Daxton, because

he asks the question I want to ask. “She dumped him? Why?”

“He was an asshole,” Penny says with a shake of her head. “Let’s just say, she’s much better off without him. In fact, if all goes as planned, she’ll find a new man tonight.”

My head snaps to the side to stare at her.

What the fuck is she talking about?

Again, Daxton’s curiosity comes to my rescue. “What do you mean? Is she on a blind date?”

Daxton follows his question with a hearty bark of laughter, which I suspect is related to the fact that he met Penny on a blind date.

I suppose it’s an inside joke of sorts because she’s laughing right along with him.

Tony glances at me and shrugs. “Do you want dessert to go with the meal, Dr. Morgan?”

I want more details about where the hell Eloise is, so I shake my head. “No, thanks, I’m good.”

Penny finally answers Daxton’s question. “I was at her apartment last night and found this gorgeous mask on a chair in her bedroom. It’s one of those masks you’d wear to a masquerade ball, and...”

“Oh, I’m needed in the kitchen,” Tony interrupts as a woman wearing a white chef’s coat stalks toward him. “If anyone needs anything at all, let me know.”

He leaves and I look to Daxton because I need this kid to press his girlfriend for more details. From what she’s already shared, Eloise hung onto the mask she wore to Club Skyn. I need to know why the fuck Penny is bringing it up.

“You were saying something about a mask?” Daxton prompts. “Is she going to a masquerade ball tonight? Are those a real thing? I thought they only existed in fairytales.”

I stand silently, essentially listening to this couple’s entire conversation while they ignore me.

“Her mask had beautiful red and green stones on it.” Penny’s hand taps the skirt of her red dress. “This color. It was gorgeous. She mentioned that she wore the mask before to a fun party, so since Philip is yesterday’s news, she’s going to stop by that same venue and see if there’s another party tonight.”

Jesus.

Eloise is headed back to Club Skyn.

My phone chimes, luring both Penny and Daxton's gazes toward me.

I don't bother checking it before I blurt out an excuse to leave. "I'm needed elsewhere. It was good to see you both."

"It was good to see you," they say in unison before they giggle.

They're cute, but at the moment I feel like a guided missile headed straight for its petite, brunette target, so I need to get the hell out of here.

"I'll tell Els you said hi!" Penny calls after me as I race through the crowded restaurant toward the exit.

As soon as I'm on the sidewalk I shove my food into the hands of a man who often hangs around looking for a kind soul to offer him a few dollars.

"Seriously, man?" His face brightens. "I can eat tonight?"

"Enjoy it!" I yell after him as I race down the sidewalk.

"I will!" he calls after me. "I hope you have a good night, Dr. Morgan!"

I will if I reach Eloise in time. I have no idea what the fuck I'll do if I see her at that club, but I do know one thing. I don't want another man's hands anywhere near her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ELOISE

AN EMERALD GREEN DRESS, matching four-inch heels, and a fake diamond bracelet that I *borrowed* from a friend before I left Buffalo comprise my outfit for the evening.

The bracelet is the only symbol of rebellion I own. Technically, I stole it, but since she's never asked for it back, it's time to lean into the assumption that it became a gift at some point.

The mask in my hand is another reminder that I've only broken the rules in life a few times.

I picked up it up at a costume shop in the West Village after I was handed an envelope as I rushed past a restaurant.

I was on my way to blow through a fifty dollar gift card that my mom had sent me through email two weeks before my twenty-first birthday. It was for

a boutique that offers clothing that fit into her ‘*acceptable range.*’ She made it clear that she wanted me to choose an outfit that I could wear to celebrate my birthday at a nice restaurant with my brother.

Everything on the racks on the boutique involved a turtleneck, a skirt that brushed my calves, or long sleeves.

Before I could round the corner and choose something that I knew I’d alter, a handsome man in a dark suit pushed the gold envelope at me. Hopeful comedians and bands with not quite enough money to record their first song are always handing out flyers trying to entice people to their free shows.

I took the envelope under the assumption that it was another invitation to spend an evening in a bar that I was a hair too young to step foot in.

My fake ID had always worked its magic when I needed it to, so as I approached the boutique, I ripped open the envelope to find a thick piece of gold cardstock.

Written across it in raised black lettering were the words:

*You’re invited to partake in the sins that
abound within Skyn tonight.*

The address of a building on the Lower East Side and a list of requirements for those who chose to attend the club followed in a lighter shade of ink.

I needed ID to prove that I’m at least twenty-one.

Check.

I had to surrender my phone when I entered the premises.

I could handle that.

And, I had to honor the privacy of the other guests.

Definitely doable.

I debated going for an entire second before I shoved the invitation in my bag, and bounced into the boutique in search of a dress I could rework to showcase all of my best features. I found it in a little black dress with a too-high lace neckline and a hem that hit above my ankles. I saw the revised version in my mind, so I tugged it off the discount rack, used my gift card and headed straight for the costume shop down the block to grab a mask.

Less than six hours later, I was inside Club Skyn in a dress that looked

like it was made for me, because in a way it was.

I'll be there again tonight if the gold invitation in my hand is worth its weight in...well, gold.

"He won't be there," I say to myself as I take one last glance in the full-length mirror in my bedroom. "Dr. Morgan is always working. He will not be there."

For all I know, the Club has shut down, or tonight is '*show your face*' night. If that's the case, I'll be back home within the hour.

But, if by chance, it's another private party that requires a mask, I'm game to see what might be in store for me, as long as I can get inside.

"You have nothing to lose," I tell myself as I check my red lipstick in the mirror. "And everything to Gaines."

I laugh out loud. "Gain, Eloise. You have everything to gain."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GAINES

A QUICK SHOWER, a change of suits, and a rummage through a locked box of important documents in the closet of my guest room prepared me for tonight.

Each time I attended a masquerade event at Club Skyn, I'd pick up a new mask online. They were all understated, typically in a dark color, but always disposable.

After I'd have my fun in the form of a forgettable fuck, I'd discard the mask in one of a series of trashcans that lined my route home from the club.

Only once, did I tuck the mask out of sight under my suit jacket to take home with me.

My reasoning at the time was simple.

That mask held the scent of the perfume of sweet *Loretta Lamb*. I could

smell her fragrance on it, and did for days after. It was only when her scent faded that I considered tossing it out like the others.

I didn't.

I put it in the lock box one afternoon when I was searching for a document related to the purchase of my apartment. It stayed there until an hour ago, when I found it, tried it on as I stood in front of the mirror in my bathroom, and gauged how different I look now versus then.

My hair was shorter the night I was with Eloise. My jaw was shaved clean.

I was lean and fit, but hours in the gym since have honed my muscles. My workouts, when I can fit them into my schedule, are another outlet for release.

It's no wonder she didn't have a clue who I was until she heard the word *lamb* fall from my lips.

I glance out one of the back passenger windows of the SUV I'm in. I opted for a rideshare since light rain has taken the city hostage tonight. The suit I'm wearing is one of the most expensive I own.

I bought two new suits shortly before Berk walked down the aisle to marry Astrid. I wore one to the ceremony. The one I'm in now was still in a garment bag in my closet, waiting for another special occasion.

Tonight fit the bill.

"How are you doing, sir?" The driver asks in a tone that I know is reserved for his customers who look as though they hold the promise of a good tip.

I already added a substantial one to the standard fee when I ordered the ride, but I'll toss a few bills his way for taking the shorter route to where I'm headed.

"I'm good," I answer honestly. "You?"

He catches my gaze in the rearview mirror. "Can't complain."

I nod in understanding.

"Are you on your way to a date?"

The question is expected since he's driving toward a restaurant that's located on the same block as Club Skyn. The mask is inside the inner pocket of my jacket, so to him I'm just a guy on my way to a good meal.

"No," I answer succinctly because I have no fucking idea what I'm headed into.

I'm playing with fire, and I know it.

If I see Eloise there, I don't know what the fuck I'll do. If she's not there, I have no interest in taking another woman into a room.

Curiosity has gotten me this far, so I'll let it play out and see where the cards land.

"Just another block," he announces in a cheery tone. "You've been a great customer."

Since I assume I'd be a better one if that tip landed in his hand, I tug my wallet out of my pocket and slide out a few bills. I tap him on the shoulder with the money. "You've been a great driver."

He doesn't reach out and grab it. Instead, his gaze darts to the left. "I don't know how women do it. Look at that one running in the rain in those heels. Is that a mask on her face?"

I look out the car's window in the direction he's now pointing at and the woman quickly weaving her way through the pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk.

I'd recognize her anywhere. It's Eloise.

"Stop!" I yell, tossing the money onto the front seat. "Stop the damn car!"

"I can't let you out here."

My fingers are already wrapped around the door handle. "Stop the car now!"

My foot is on the street as soon as the car lurches to a stop. I slide out and dart my way through the oncoming traffic. A symphony of horns and anger-filled voices fill the air, including the curse-laden tirade directed my way from a guy behind the wheel of a delivery truck. He has to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting me.

I ignore all of it because I need to get to her.

As soon as I'm on the sidewalk, I take off in a sprint, racing around people. Eloise never glances back or slows. I have no fucking idea who or what she's running from but I know panic when I see it, and that's what I'm witnessing.

We're too close to the club for me to scream out her name, so I yell something else to get her to stop. "Hey! Slow down!"

That does nothing.

I'm gaining on her but there are at least twenty feet between us.

"Hey, stop! Sweetheart, stop!" a male voice calls from behind me.

Just as I'm about to turn around and tell him I've got it handled, she trips.

The clutch purse in her hand flies into the air, her legs give out and she

falls onto the wet pavement.

Two women race toward her to help, but she needs me.

I up my pace until I'm near her, and as soon as I can reach out to touch her, I'm down on one knee.

"I didn't mean for this to happen." The same male voice that was behind me is now next to me.

I glance up at a blond-haired man wearing an elaborate devil mask that covers half of his face. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Why the hell were you chasing her?"

"I think I know her," he explains, his voice wavering. "I saw her in line at a club around the corner from here. I'm pretty sure she's someone I used to know."

I slowly turn Eloise over.

Her eyes fly open behind the mask she's wearing. It's the same mask she had on the night I first saw her in the club.

The man next to me leans down. I push him back with a hand to his shoulder. "Back off."

"I'm trying to get a good look at her," he snaps. "We hooked up once. I wanted another round."

It takes all of the power I possess not to drive a fist into his jaw.

Eloise's gaze searches my face. A thin trail of blood disappears under her mask from a cut on her forehead.

"You're hurt, lamb."

Her eyes widen. "You...you remember, me?"

"It's not her," the guy next to me announces. "You're not Demetria. I ran all this way for nothing."

I toss him a sharp look. "Go to hell."

"I'm dressed for it." He laughs. "I'm going back to the party."

"Should I call 911?" A woman standing near us asks. "Does she need an ambulance?"

"No," I say, glancing in her direction, before I level my gaze on Eloise again. "All she needs is me."

CHAPTER TWENTY

ELOISE

I'M in shock and I can't tell if it's from the fall, or the fact that Dr. Morgan remembers our night together.

His gaze trails over me as he cradles me in his strong arms. I'm still on the sidewalk, but as soon as he announced that he's all I need, he wrapped his arms around me as if he was going to help me stand.

I winced because a shot of pain ran through my knee when I bent it.

"You skinned your knee," he whispers. "We'll have to clean that up."

I nod.

"Your hands." He looks into my eyes. "Did you land on either? Are you experiencing any pain in your hands or your arms?"

This may be a routine post-fall examination to him, but it's not that to me. I'm reveling in the spotlight that is his full attention. I haven't felt quite

like this since the last time I came to this part of the city.

That was the night he took me into the private room in the club.

“My left arm stings a little,” I admit, wanting to forgo the rest of his medical related questions.

I want to leap frog to the discussion we need to have about that glorious night when I came on his hand.

“I’ll check on it once you’re back on your feet.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Are you ready to give it a try?”

I glance around him. A few people are standing watch, most likely because I’m still wearing a mask.

It’s staying put though, because our close proximity to Club Skyn is a dead giveaway to where I was headed.

I actually did make it there, but the devil in the horrendous looking mask came at me full force as I waited in line. He insisted he knew me. When I politely told him I didn’t, he decided to bring up his dick.

He must think it’s a wondrous, unforgettable creature because he started describing it to a T, right down to a twisty vein that down the length of it.

When I stepped aside and told him he had the wrong girl, he pulled out his phone to show me a picture of said dick that he nicknamed “*his dragon.*”

Since he held the phone’s screen directly in my line of sight, I couldn’t help but notice his *dragon* more closely resembled a little lizard.

I brushed past him then, and that’s when he declared to everyone within earshot that he knew me from a dating app and we had hooked up once last year.

That felt too close for comfort because I had indeed hooked up with a blond-haired guy I met on an app.

I panicked and ran.

He chased after me, and Dr. Morgan came to my rescue.

“I’ll try, sir.”

A soft smile splits his lips, but as quickly as it appeared, it vanishes. “Lean on me.”

I do just that, using his muscular arms as leverage.

He scoops an arm around my waist as soon as I’m on my feet. “Can you walk?”

I hesitate before answering with an affirmative nod, and a murmured, “I can.”

“My place or yours?” he questions, a dangerous low tone punctuates his voice.

I gaze up at his face, the question I want to ask is stuck on my tongue.

“I need to tend to your wounds,” he explains like a responsible doctor. “I don’t see the need for stitches.”

“I have a first aid kit,” I blurt out.

“You live about the record store, don’t you?”

I’d find hope in his knowledge of that, but he’s related to my cousin’s husband. I’m sure Astrid or Berk has mentioned that Astrid owns an apartment above Vinyl Crush and I live there now.

“I do.”

“Let’s grab a cab,” he suggests as he guides me closer to the street as light rain falls on us. “I’ll have you feeling better in no time.”

I know from experience he’s speaking the truth, but something tells me that tonight I won’t be coming on his hand. He’ll be using both to dress my wounds and check me for broken bones.

As he raises a hand in the air to hail a cab headed in our direction, I stare at his profile.

Dr. Morgan is coming home with me. I’m grateful for that since my heart is beating so hard against the wall of my chest that I fear half of Manhattan can hear it.

“YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW HIM, didn’t you?” he blurts out as the cab driver winds his way through the heavy Friday evening traffic of Manhattan.

“The devil?” I ask.

A grin ghosts his mouth. “Yes, the devil.”

“I thought there was a chance he was someone I met on a dating app, not from the club.” My fingers trace the outline of the bottom of the mask I’m still wearing. I move to remove it, but he leans over to do that for me.

Hope blooms in my chest again because I want something to follow that move. Maybe a kiss, or a longing look in my eyes, but his gaze darts to my forehead.

He winces as he runs a fingertip over my skin. “You must have hit the pavement hard.”

I lean back slightly, feeling flushed from that faint touch. “I put out my arm to save my face. I think my bracelet is the culprit for the cut.”

His gaze drops to the fake diamond bracelet on my wrist.

“It’s karma,” I say with a burst of nervous laughter. “I stole the bracelet, so...”

“You stole the bracelet?” His expression softens. “It wasn’t worth the trouble. Those aren’t real diamonds.”

Why am I not surprised that he knows that?

I know fashion, to a limited degree, and the suit he’s wearing had a price tag with at least three zeroes attached to it.

“A friend back in Buffalo loaned it to me,” I explain, not wanting him to think I sneak around Manhattan committing robberies. “I forgot to give it back to her.”

He reaches toward me and I don’t move even though I know the intensity I’ll feel once his hand touches me.

His fingers brush against the clasp of the bracelet. “It looks like it’s barely hanging on. I think it broke when you fell.”

With little effort, he has the bracelet in his hand and then it disappears into the pocket of his suit jacket. “I’ll hold onto it so you don’t lose it.”

I should thank him for that and for rushing to help me tonight, but his attention is diverted to his phone when the sound of a chime fills the air.

As his fingers dance over the screen typing out a message, my gaze drifts to the window and the sights of the city as we pass through it on our way to my home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ELOISE

“YOU’RE a fan of all things lavender.”

It’s a proclamation that has no basis in truth, so I shake my head. “My mom is. She gave me all those bath products last Christmas and then came here two weeks later to unpack them and stack them on those shelves in my bathroom.”

Dr. Morgan chuckles. “Sounds like a mom move.”

I nod. “Did you find the first aid kit?”

He holds up the white plastic box with a handle attached to it. “This is vintage. How long have you had this, lamb?”

The question gets buried beneath the endearment in my mind. I stare at him.

“We’ll talk about that,” he promises as he takes a seat next to me on my

couch. "I didn't notice that in the car."

If he's talking about how my heart is thundering in my chest, I don't know how he missed it. The sound is deafening to me, but it's my heart, so maybe I'm the only one who can hear it.

"Your elbow is split wide open too," he remarks, his gaze darting to the scrape on my knee before it lands back on my arm. "That tumble was brutal."

"It hurt," I admit. "I must have slipped on the wet pavement."

"You flew by the car I was in," he admits. "I wasn't sure I'd ever catch up to you."

I smile at the suggestion that I could beat the man in a foot race.

His legs are so much longer than mine; his body more powerful.

"We need to get all of those wounds cleaned up." His eyes catch mine. "In my professional opinion, a shower would be the best approach for that."

The idea of being naked in my apartment with him anywhere within a ten-block radius, heats me from the inside out.

"You're flushed." He rests the back of his right hand against my forehead. "Are you feeling lightheaded?"

Not sure, if what I'm feeling is related to my fall or his presence, I nod. "A little, I think."

His gaze drops to my arm again and then beyond to my knee. "Maybe I should take you in to be checked. I'm worried you hit your head, Eloise."

The last place I want to go is the hospital because I'm not sure I'll get another chance to be alone with him again. "No, I'm fine."

"At least let me help you to the shower," he says with a tilt of his head. "I realize things between us are..."

"You can help me," I interrupt not wanting to hear him describe how he views things between us.

I want to hold tight to the memory of that night at the club for the rest of my life.

I can't lose that. I won't.

He grabs hold of my hand, stopping to squeeze it. "Take your time getting up."

I don't need the warning, but I listen, and allow him to guide me to my feet at a pace he sees fit. He is the professional, after all.

We walk slowly down the hallway toward the main bathroom. His hand hasn't left mine and I already know that when it does, I'll feel bereft.

Once we reach the threshold of the bathroom, he gazes down at me. "Do

you need help with the zipper?”

I don't, but I'm not about to tell him that, so I turn slightly to give him access. “Yes.”

His hand leaves mine to search for the zipper pull at the top of my dress. He pushes my hair to the side, his fingers lingering on the skin of my neck.

I shiver from his touch, and again when he tugs the zipper down.

I'm not wearing a bra tonight, but I sense the moment he catches a glimpse of the top of my black lace panties because I hear his breathing stutter for a second.

“I'll wait here for you,” he whispers. “If you need anything, just call my name.”

Fueled by the mad desire I feel, I look up at him. “I will, Garin.”

His full lips part slightly. “Touché, lamb.”

“I won't be long, sir.”

He closes his eyes as his chin rises. “Shower, Eloise. I need to tend to your wounds.”

When he opens his eyes, he finds me smiling with my dress sliding down one of my shoulders. I hold the fabric against my chest because even though I want him desperately, I can't tell if he's here strictly as a doctor, or if the memory of our night together brought him here.

He takes a full step back. “Go. Shower. Wash the wounds gently.”

“Gently,” I repeat softly. “I will.”

As soon as I back into the bathroom, he tugs the door shut leaving a wooden barrier between us.

I step forward to rest my cheek against it, certain I can hear him saying something under his breath on the other side of the door.

I can't make out the first part of what he says, but the last three words are unmistakable, “Fuck, she's everything.”

Those words will live in my memory for eternity, along with everything he said to me at the club that night two years ago.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ELOISE

I EXIT the bathroom twenty minutes later wrapped in a pink robe with my hair piled high on top of my head in a very messy bun.

I scrambled to find something to pin it up. I had to settle for two silver hairpins with crystal roses on the end of them. They must have belonged to Astrid's mom. My Aunt Becky had eclectic taste. Many of her belongings are still here, peppered in with the items I brought with me.

Astrid promises she'll clean it all out one day, but I'm grateful for the rare finds I stumble across. It makes me feel as though my Aunt's memory will always live on.

Dr. Morgan is right where he promised he'd be. He's resting his back against the wall next to my bedroom door, across from the bathroom.

"I was prepared to break down the door if I heard a bang."

I can't hold in a smile. "You thought I was going to pass out?"

"It wouldn't be the first time a woman was running in Manhattan in what — two or three inch heels - and she fell and hit her head."

"Four inch. Those shoes have a four inch heel," I correct him, tugging on the sash of the robe.

This robe was my very first purchase after I landed the job at Vinyl Crush. I saw it in a store window in midtown so as soon as my paycheck landed in my bank account, I rushed to the store and snatched up the last robe they had. It's a size too big, but it's always been like a security blanket to me. It's got me through some cold nights, and a few broken hearts.

"I'm still not convinced that you didn't hit your head." He steps closer to me. "I need to check your pupils."

I widen my eyes. "Check away."

He chuckles. "It's not that simple. Step backward into the light."

I do. He's right in step, nearing me with each step forward. When we reach our destination his hand leaps to my chin to tilt my head up.

I follow his instructions and open and close my eyes a few times, before he exhales sharply. "Any sign of a headache, Eloise."

"No, Dr. Morgan."

"Gaines," he reminds me. "I've asked you to call me Gaines."

"Gaines," I repeat, even though it doesn't flow off my tongue the way Garin or sir does when I'm in his presence.

His fingers trail over my chin toward my neck. "Any pain here?"

I shake my head. "Not there."

Without any warning, his hand drops to his side. "Back to the other room. I want to take a closer look at your wounds."

Since I'm naked under this robe, I'm hopeful he'll want to take a closer look at more than my wounds.

He waits for me to lead the way, so I do.

I swear I can feel his gaze burning through the back of my robe. I glance over my shoulder to catch him watching the sway of my ass.

"Where do you want me?" I ask as soon as we're close to the couch.

His lips curve into a small smile. "You take the couch. I'll have a seat on the coffee table."

"All right," I agree. "Do you want something to drink before we start? I have beer, or water. I'm sure I must have a can of soda in my fridge too."

"Beer." He motions to the couch. "You sit. I'll get one for each of us."

I don't bother telling him that I can't stand the taste of beer because I sense if I refuse, he'll skip it too, and he looks like he could use one.

He returns less than a minute later with one open bottle of beer in his hand. "Let's share."

I may need to give beer another chance.

I take the offered bottle and down the smallest sip before I hand it back to him. He wraps his lips around it and gulps a mouthful before placing the bottle on the coffee table.

"Take a seat, Eloise."

I do just that in the center of the couch. He settles on the coffee table, directly across from me.

"Lean forward."

I do as requested, holding my breath as he studies the small cut on my forehead. After I washed the blood off my face, I could tell the wound was small.

"This looks fine," he comments in a whisper. "I'll still bandage it for good measure."

He does that with effortless ease. Choosing a small bandage before ripping it from the package and applying it to my forehead with tenderness. He immediately follows that with a brush of his fingertips over my cheek.

"Your knee is next."

I offer my foot to him, and he smiles, placing it on his right thigh.

Since my robe is so large, everything that is supposed to be covered still is.

He touches the area around the scrape on my knee before he leans closer to get a better look. I feel his breath rush over the skin of my leg.

"This is fine," he finally says. "I'd recommend letting it breathe. You won't feel it in a day or two."

"All right," I whisper. "All that's left is my elbow."

I go to push the fabric of my robe up my arm to reveal my elbow, but his focus is still on my leg.

"Lamb."

The word, spoken in a hushed tone, feels weighted with so much need that it's palpable.

"Yes?" I somehow manage to get that out.

"I need..." His voice trails as he reaches for the beer to take another pull. "I need to think."

“Why?” I ask.

His gaze catches mine. His eyes have darkened. There’s a dangerous promise there. It’s waiting to be unleashed. “Why do I need to think?”

“Yes,” I answer, leaning forward to brush one of my hands against his. “Why think when you can just feel?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GAINES

IT TAKES every ounce of strength I possess not to lunge at her.

She must be naked under that robe. It's all I've been able to think about since she strolled out of the bathroom with her hair pinned up on the top of her head.

Strands have come loose, falling against the side of her face.

With the small bandage on her forehead, she looks like a broken doll, but she's far from that.

She's a woman that men covet. I saw more than a few stare at her in the club that night. Two passed by us tonight when we were entering this building. Neither could tear their eyes away from her.

I had a hand on my belt buckle when she was in the shower. I almost — *fucking almost* — undid the belt, unzipped my pants and stroked one out to

the thought of her naked behind the door.

I press the palms of my hands into my eye sockets, wishing in some sense that I could erase the memory of how she looked in that green dress from my memory, along with the glimpse of her bare back that I saw and those fucking black lace panties she had on.

They must be on the bathroom floor.

I drop my hands to my lap and gaze down the hallway. I can still escape this hell of my own making. I could go to the bathroom, close the door, shove the panties into my pocket and leave.

What in the actual fuck is wrong with me?

My silence is so thick it's making the air in the room heavy, as though a weighted blanket is slowly falling over us.

"I'm going to get a glass of water," she announces with a tremor in her voice.

I left her hanging far too long. I know that. I'm an asshole for that but this woman is like a drug to me. Another hit and I'll be lost to the need.

The last time I touched her, I was a mess for weeks. Months, if I'm being completely honest. When I did finally fuck another woman it left me feeling worse than before it happened.

I've fucked since when the itch has been too persistent to ignore, but it's never left me feeling as satisfied as my brief encounter with Eloise did.

She pushes to her feet. A wiggle of the toes on her right foot catches my eye. Her toenails are painted a light shade of pink.

"Stevie painted them," she whispers. "I saw her a few days ago."

I don't know if she's dragging the name of someone we both know into this moment to break the tension, but it's not working.

The desperate need that is thrumming through my veins and every cell of my body hasn't lessened at all.

She maneuvers around me. "Do you want a glass of water, Gaines?"

That lures my gaze up to her face. She's pasted a weak smile on her lips. It's there for my benefit. It's a gift to assuage the guilt I'm feeling over ignoring her proposition. "No, I'm fine."

She walks to the kitchen. I drop my head as I listen to each of her movements. It's all so slow and intentional.

The creak of a hinge as the cupboard door opens. The sound repeats when she closes it.

Running water follows and then another burst a moment later as if she's

emptied and refilled the glass.

I want to call out and ask if she's all right because she's been out of my sight for at least a minute, but I bite my bottom lip, willing myself to keep my mouth shut.

"Was it a mistake to you?"

Each word feels like a spear to my heart. The pain is real. It's so fucking real that my hand jumps to the center of my chest as I raise my chin to see her standing not ten feet from me, her hands twisted together in front of her.

"Just tell me," she pleads. "Please. I feel as though I'm stuck in some type of purgatory between reality and this fantasy that only exists in my mind. That night was the best night of my life, and I swear I thought I heard you say something outside the bathroom door right before I got in the shower."

The words are tumbling out of her so fast that I have to take a moment to process them all.

I slide to my feet. There is still measurable distance between us but it's like a fucking magnet is luring me closer to her, so I give in and take two steps forward.

When I don't say anything, she goes on, "I thought I heard you say '*fuck, she's everything,*' but that wasn't about me, was it? You were talking about someone else. You were in that part of the city to go to the club to meet someone else."

I close my eyes briefly, trying desperately to come up with the right words to say to her.

"Just tell me if you view it as a mistake." Her gaze traces every feature of my face as if she's cementing it to her memory. "Was that night a mistake to you, sir?"

That's all it takes to break the dam. My resolve melts. Every ounce of resistance I've clung to splinters into shards.

I bolt toward her and she doesn't move. She never inches back, there's not one flinch from her. The only reaction I sense is in her eyes. They widen with each step I take.

I catch her by the waist, my hands gripping her with the intensity that I feel in every part of my body.

"You want this." The words are thick with need and not framed as a question, but that's how my lamb hears it.

Her bottom lip quivers before she answers, "So much."

That's all I need.

I shove her back into the wall behind us. She lets out a small yelp wrapped within a faint moan. That's followed with the sweetest sounding request. "Please."

I kiss her with the force of all of the emotions battling their way to the surface within me. I've kept them buried for so long, but need like this is a heady thing.

Our tongues dance together, each trying to taste the other. I want more, though. I've craved so much for so long.

"Fuck me," she whispers against my lips.

"In time," I growl back.

"No," she protests. "Now. Please."

That needy plea doesn't work this time because a taste of her pussy is what I want more than anything in this moment.

I drop to a knee.

"Are you going to do that to me?" The words sound innocent but there's a sinister tone to her voice.

My hands answer for me as I tug on the sash wrapped around her waist. The robe falls open revealing beautiful tits, and a perfect pink pussy.

"Fuck." The word falls from my lips before I drop my mouth to her thigh.

I trail kisses over it, closing in on my final destination but before I reach it, I hike her leg over my shoulder and inhale her sweet scent.

She lets out a cry when I lick the soft seam, and when I dive in and suck on her swollen clit, she lets herself go.

Her hands tangle in my hair, her legs quiver and I eat my way to ecstasy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ELOISE

“TURN AROUND, LAMB.”

His voice is deep and decadent. It’s laced with the promise of more orgasms. If I have more like the two I just had, I may not be able to stand.

I’m wavering now.

After my first climax, Gaines gave me a few seconds to find my bearings, but that was short-lived because he dove back in, using his fingers as an accompaniment to his perfectly skilled tongue.

I came even more quickly the second time and after I did, he slid his finger over his bottom lip before the tip of his tongue traced that same path.

He did all that while still wearing his three-piece suit and his expensive tie.

I turn to face the wall and as soon as I rest my cheek against it, he slides

the robe from my body tossing it on the floor.

“Your ass is fucking spectacular.” He slaps it lightly. “Spread for me.”

I take a step to the side with each foot.

The unmistakable sound of a belt undoing fills the silence. Then a zipper pull follows.

Anticipation sends goose bumps up my arms. “Oh my God.”

He lets out a low chuckle as he moves behind me. “I can’t wait to feel that tight little pussy wrapped around my cock.”

I almost collapse from the sound of that.

I hear the condom wrapper being ripped to shreds, then the movement of his hand behind me.

I glance back to catch the sight of his face and the tie with its perfect knot around his neck. His suit jacket still covers his shoulders.

I’m completely exposed and he’s still dressed.

The thought of that is beyond erotic. I can’t help but squirm.

“This may hurt a little,” he promises. “But, it’s worth it.”

The crown of his cock slides over my core, tempting my ass back a touch. He lets out a deep guttural groan when he lines up at my entrance, and the first push inside sends me up to my tiptoes.

He peppers my shoulder with kisses before his teeth sink into the flesh. “Stay still, sweet thing. You need to adjust.”

I nod in understanding, adjusting my breathing so I don’t pass out from hyperventilating.

“Just like that,” he soothes. “Take more.”

I close my eyes as he fills me until he’s resting balls deep against me.

“Forgive me, lamb.” He kisses the skin of my neck. “I can’t promise I’ll be gentle.”

“Hard,” I get that out with a small moan. “Fuck me hard.”

His hands drop to my hips, his fingers digging into my skin.

Time feels frozen for a moment as he rests his lips against my shoulder, and then he thrusts.

Pain sears through me followed with a burst of pleasure.

I swear my eyes roll back in my head as a cry of need escapes me.

He ups his pace, and with each plunge of his cock into me, he lets out a shuddering groan.

“ELOISE.”

My name floats through the air as my eyes open slightly. “Yes?”

“I need to go.”

I look up to find Gaines standing over me. He’s still wearing his suit. After he fucked me to yet another orgasm against the wall, he came too.

It took me off my feet as he slammed into me.

The sounds he made will live rent free in my head for eternity. I have never heard a man let go like that. It was raw and primal.

Once I finally turned to face him, he was sweating, but still fully dressed. My gaze had dropped to his semi erect cock as he tied off the condom.

He chuckled and made a remark about having no patience when it comes to me. He amended that swiftly by saying, “*I have no patience when it comes to making you come.*”

I took that all in, including the spectacular sight of a renowned cardiologist with mussed hair, lipstick on his chin, and his pants hanging open.

He’s remedied all that now. Everything is back in place as it should be.

“I’m not on call tonight,” he explains, as I move to sit up. “I did call in to check on a patient, and there’s an issue. I’m going to stop by the hospital.”

Of course he is. He’s a doctor who cares for his patients. He’s also a world-class fuck.

“I understand,” I whisper.

The blanket he must have covered me with drops to my lap, exposing my breasts.

His gaze falls to them. “I need more time with you.”

I smile because that’s all I want. “When?”

“I can’t say.” He chuckles but there’s no humor there. “Work is brutal.”

I motion to his phone. “I’ll give you my number.”

“I have it.”

An explanation doesn’t follow that, so I ask the obvious question, “How?”

“When Stevie got her phone, I was at their house.” He smiles softly. “Astrid was calling out the phone numbers of the people she thought Stevie might want to contact, so when she got to your name, I entered the number into my phone.”

I move to stand, even though I’m only wearing a pair of white lace panties. I put those on after we fucked, but before I took a seat on the couch. I

must have drifted off after that.

“That was a while ago,” I whisper.

He nods. “I’ll explain when I see you again.”

I can’t exactly beg him to stay to offer an explanation now. Someone else needs him more right now than I do. “Okay.”

He moves closer to brush his lips over my forehead. “Keep this wound covered for a day or two. Your knee and elbow will heal up just fine as is.”

I look up and into his brilliant blue eyes. “Thank you, Dr. Morgan.”

He gifts me with a kiss on the mouth. “You’re welcome, Eloise.”

“How can I repay you for the free medical care?” I bat my eyelashes. “It is free, right?”

He reaches up to tilt my chin slightly before he coasts a fingertip over my bottom lip. “We’ll work something out.”

“We will.” I trace the path of his finger with the tip of my tongue. “Can I confess something before you go?”

“Please do.”

I close my eyes briefly to find the courage to do it. “At the club that night, I blew you.”

“I remember that very, very well.” He cups the back of my neck. “Another round of that could help pay down your medical debt.”

I smile, still clinging tightly to the courage I need to tell him my truth, “I had never done that with a boy before. I mean, a man. I never went that far with my mouth before.”

His brows pinch together. “You never sucked cock?”

“I did,” I admit as my gaze darts to the floor. “I never swallowed before you.”

He lets out a heavy exhale. “Oh, lamb.”

I look up and into his face again. “I know it doesn’t matter, but I thought I should tell you. It was special to me.”

“It matters,” he insists. “All of this matters.”

A chime from his phone fills the air.

“You need to go,” I say before he can. “Thank you for rescuing me tonight, and for the excellent medical care.”

A smile parts his lips. “I should be the one thanking you.”

With that, he kisses my forehead again, and leaves me with a million questions and an ache between my legs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GAINES

“YOU’RE FUCKING KIDDING ME.” Evan approaches where I’m sitting on a chair in the corridor outside of the cardiac care unit. “You’re in the running as a finalist for that show, aren’t you? I was sure it was Sexton.”

I point at the chair next to me. “Sit.”

He adjusts the white coat he’s wearing over his blue button-down shirt. When he sits, he shoots me a ‘*what the hell*’ look?

I lobby one back his way with another one word demand. “Explain.”

“You explain,” he volleys back like we’re two feuding eight-year-olds on the playground.

“What the hell would I be a finalist for?” I go on because the questions building inside of me are plenty, “What’s going on with Dr. Sexton?”

“That dating show.” He smirks. “I’ve heard the rumors. They were

scouting the ED for single doctors.”

I shrug. “I’ve never heard of that show or the rumors.”

“You’re not serious.” He’s staring at me like I have a third eye in the middle of my forehead. “The word around the cafeteria is that a huge production company is looking for a handsome as fuck doctor to cast as their lead in a reality show where he’s looking for love.”

I try my best to follow that, but jump when I see the opportunity to tease the shit out of him. “You think I’m handsome as fuck?”

“Who doesn’t?”

I laugh. “I have no knowledge of the show.”

“So, it’s not you?” He rubs his chin. “It has to be Sexton then. He does have those dreamboat hazel eyes and talk about abs.”

I shake my head. “Logan Sexton? The trauma surgeon?”

“The one and only.” He taps my knee. “Enough about him. Why are you dressed like you just won the lottery?”

I feel like I have. The hours I spent with Eloise tonight were like a dream; a great fucking dream.

I glance at my suit. “You’re talking about this old thing?”

“Old?” He tugs at the sleeve of my jacket. “Italian made. Custom fit, and I’m guessing at least five thousand bucks for the entire look. Although, your shoes could use an upgrade.”

I don’t bother with a response because he’s dead wrong. The shoes are worth a small fortune, too. I learned a very important lesson during my days as a resident. Comfortable shoes are non-negotiable, so I’ve never spared any expense when it comes to footwear. I can thank my inheritance for that.

“Shut up, Evan.”

He laughs that off. “You were on a date, weren’t you?”

I know he won’t drop it so I throw him a bone. “I spent time with someone tonight.”

“Let’s be clear about this.” He rests a forearm on his thigh. “You’re not talking about Mr. Torres, are you?”

I glance at the doors to the CCU where Mr. Torres is now resting comfortably. A slight adjustment to his medications and a few moments spent talking about his grandchildren slowed his heartbeat enough that he was able to drift off to dreamland.

I could have left that to someone else, but he requested a few minutes of my time when one of the nurses checked in on him, so I made the trip.

The truth is that I welcomed the opportunity to come back here. I needed fresh air and a chance to catch my breath after my night with Eloise. The intensity I felt when I had my hands and mouth on her, and my cock buried in her, was overwhelming in a way I've never experienced before.

"Did you have a look at his file?" I ask to steer this conversation in another direction.

Evan takes the wheel immediately, charting us back on the course he set. "You had some fucking fun with someone tonight, Dr. Morgan, and it wasn't in this hospital."

"True." That's all I offer, and he accepts it greedily with a grin.

"Don't read anything into it," I warn with the wag of my finger in the air. "Don't start talking marriage and kids."

He mimes locking his lips and tossing the key.

"As if you can keep your mouth shut for longer than five seconds." I laugh. "Say what you need to say."

His expression turns serious. "Don't let your job consume you, Gaines. I promise you there's a whole lot of life to live outside of this place, and your fancy office."

I can't help but chuckle. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Are you done here?" He jerks a thumb toward the doors of the CCU.

"For now."

"I need a burrito," he says with a sigh. "I've had a craving all day and I know you're going to tell me to work out or do deep breaths to get past that urge, but it's not that simple. Sometimes you have to give in to a craving."

I'm aware. I gave in to mine tonight, and plan on doing it again as soon as I possibly can.

"I know a place that it'll satisfy your craving, but you'll get the greens you need too."

"Sounds gross, but I'm in if you're buying." He pats my shoulder. "And you should be buying because who the hell can afford a suit like that?"

"I'll buy," I agree as I push to my feet. "We both know you can afford a suit just like this, but you spoil your wife and daughter rotten."

"Busted." He holds both hands up in the air as if he's surrendering. "I'd yank the moon down from the sky and paint it blue if either of my girls wanted that."

"I know you would."

"You might feel that way about someone one day." He stands, too. "I can

tell you that it feels a hell of a lot better than anything you'll accomplish as a doctor.”

That might be true for him, but it's not for me.

I made a vow to myself to devote my life to saving others, and that hasn't changed yet, and it never will.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ELOISE

“WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR HEAD, ELS?” Penny’s hand darts to cover her mouth as she stops over the threshold and into my apartment.

“I was chased by the devil.” I follow that with a laugh.

She joins in. “So, a creep chased you for your number? I’ve been there and done that.”

I motion for her to drop the bag she’s holding on my dining room table.

As she does, she sighs. “I should clarify that I was the one being chased. I wasn’t the chaser.”

“Gotcha.” I nod. “Thanks for bringing lunch, but you didn’t have to do that.”

“I may have an ulterior motive for the burgers and fries.”

I was expecting a turkey sandwich on rye, so this is an upgrade.

“I was walking past Crispy Biscuit,” she goes on, explaining the change in menu. “I smelled the burgers cooking and I couldn’t resist. You eat meat, right?”

I don’t get a chance to answer before she’s lost in a fit of giggles. “That sounded very high school of me. I was talking about actual beef, not blowjobs.”

“I figured as much.”

She winks at me. “You get me, Els. That’s why we’re such good friends.”

In my estimation, we are closing in on being friends in the broad sense of the word, but I do like being around her and when she invited herself over, I told her I’d be here waiting for her.

My only task all day has been thinking about last night.

I haven’t given any thought to the point in time when I fell on the sidewalk, but every second after that is playing on repeat in my mind.

The way Gaines touched me. How it felt when he fucked me, and his tender response to my confession is overwhelming me in the best way possible.

“Am I right to assume that you didn’t see any action because of the devil?”

I glance to where Penny is now unloading the food from the bag. “I should pay for half of that.”

She doesn’t flinch at my sudden change in subject. Instead she shakes her head. “No go, Els. I’m here to ask a big favor, so the food is my way of getting you ready for that ask.”

I laugh that off as I reach for a crispy fry. “Ask away, Pen.”

She rubs her hands together before she turns to face me. “Daxton says that Dr. Morgan is going to give him the thumbs up for strenuous activities soon.”

My brows lift in understanding. “Okay.”

“We’re going to go out for dinner first to celebrate and I want to wear just the right dress.” She drops her hands to the hips. “I want to find my own ooh-la-la dress for that.”

I smile at the reminder of what she called the dress I was wearing the night we met. “I get that.”

“If you’re feeling up to it, and have time today, can we go shopping together?”

I glance at the black sweatpants and red T-shirt I’m wearing.

She's all glam in a white button-down shirt that's tied at her waist, boyfriend jeans, and cute kitten heels.

"I'll need to change, but I'm in."

"Seriously?" She launches toward me for a hug. "You're the best, Els."

I wrap my arms around her in an embrace. This may not be how I envisioned my day playing out, but I could use a distraction and I can't think of a better one than this.

"Let's eat and then you can change," she suggests. "I've never gone dress shopping with a fashion designer before."

I bark out a laugh. "A fashion line comprised of my knitted and crocheted creations is the dream, but I'm not even close to that yet."

"Mark my words, Els Rehn." She beams with a smile. "That dream will become reality."

THE UPPER EAST SIDE on a Saturday afternoon is a busy place.

We've been to two boutiques already and even though I suggested we catch the subway and head to Tribeca to a shop that I know will have something Pen will love, she's insisted on sticking to this neighborhood.

Since we're spending her money to get her a dress to impress the guy she wants to sleep with, I need to keep my opinions to myself.

A woman knows what works on her body, and Penny has a vision.

"I think I need a dose of caffeine before we continue my treasure hunt," she says. "There's a coffee shop close to the hospital. They make a decent cup. I had a few when Daxton was being treated."

I know the shop she's talking about. The coffee isn't decent, though. It's more lackluster because it's always bitter and every time I've had a cup it's been lukewarm.

"They also have these melt in your mouth croissants." She lets out a breathy sigh. "Fair warning, Els. They are to die for."

I think she meant to say that they should come with a warning because they are so dry they're a choking hazard, which could lead to death.

"I'm still full from lunch." I pat my stomach beneath the blue sweater I'm wearing.

I paired it with jeans and low-heeled black boots that Penny found in my

closet. She spun me around twice after I was dressed before she granted her approval.

She tugs lightly on the end of my ponytail. “That’s fine by me. I can eat an entire one in ten-seconds flat.”

Lucky for her I know the Heimlich maneuver.

“Maybe we’ll stumble on a hot doctor there.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “I read online that there’s a gorgeous single trauma surgeon who works at the same hospital as Dr. Morgan. His nickname is Dr. Sexy.”

I laugh off the suggestion that I’d be interested.

“Let’s grab those coffees now.” She links her arm around mine. “Then I know we’ll find the dress of my dreams.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ELOISE

I JUST FOUND the man of my dreams, or my sex dreams. Technically, those dreams are now reality since Dr. Morgan fucked me into complete bliss last night.

“Check out the tattoos on that guy.” Penny fans her face with her hand. “He has to be a doctor. He’s wearing blue scrubs like they do at Lenox Hill.”

“That’s Dr. Morgan,” I tell her.

“What?” Her head snaps to the left so she can look right at me.

We’re standing side-by-side in the line at the coffee shop waiting to place our order.

Dr. Morgan looks like he’s picking up his, and someone else’s since he’s holding two cups of coffee.

“It is him.” Penny rubs her hand over her forehead. “His hotness level just

skyrocketed.”

She won't get any arguments from me.

“I mean in general terms.” She back pedals at warp speed. “I am still all in with Daxton. The sex is going to be great. It will be, right?”

Compared to the sex I had last night, I highly doubt it.

My number isn't high, but I've never had an experience like that when a man has been inside me.

Fucking Gaines was all consuming. I still feel sore in places I've never felt before.

“Dr. Morgan!” Penny calls out as soon as he's turned in our direction.

His gaze catches hers first before it lands on mine.

He gifts me with a small smile.

I steel myself with a deep breath as he approaches us.

Heads turn as he passes because he is seriously a sight to behold.

“Look who it is,” he greets us. “Pen and Els.”

Penny lets out a squeal. “You know our nicknames?”

Half of the hospital staff does. Penny isn't the most subdued person I've ever met. When she's in a room, everyone knows it. This café is proof of that. The heads that turned at the sight of Dr. Morgan are now focused on Penny's brilliant smile.

Dr. Morgan skirts around the nickname question with effortless ease. “What brings you two to this part of the city?”

“Dress shopping,” Penny blurts out. “I'm looking for something special for a dinner date with Dax.”

I hold my breath, expecting her to share that the date is a prelude to their first fuck, but she holds back.

“Good,” Dr. Morgan says to her while keeping his gaze pinned to me.

“You're probably wondering about what happened to Els.” Penny reaches over to tap a finger on the bandage on my forehead.

I wince.

Gaines does too.

“A devil was chasing her,” Penny informs him. “He wanted her number but can you blame him? Just look at her.”

Dr. Morgan mouths the words “*I am.*”

Penny doesn't notice because her gaze has wandered to a man in a white coat with a stethoscope slung around his neck. “That's him. I think that's Dr. Sexy.”

I tilt my head to get a better look.

He's definitely handsome. He's a couple of inches shorter than Gaines, but judging by the way the T-shirt he's wearing under his coat clings to his body, he's just as fit. His brown hair is the perfect complement to his hazel eyes.

A smile floats over his lips when he catches us looking in his direction.

"It's Sexton," Gaines corrects Pen. "Dr. Logan Sexton."

"Right," Pen responds but doesn't tear her gaze from Dr. Sexton. "That's the one I was telling you about, Els. He's hot and single."

I glance at Gaines to find his eyes pinned to me. I know he's waiting for me to respond to my friend, but before I can do that, Penny is talking again.

"Let's go say hi to him," she suggests. "We can strike up a random conversation. I know. Ask him how he takes his coffee, Els. Men love when you do that."

"They don't," Gaines says under his breath.

"It was good seeing you, Dr. Morgan." Penny tugs on my arm without a glance at Gaines. "We know you're busy so bye for now."

"Bye for now?" he repeats as I steal a glance at him.

I shrug.

His gaze darts from my face to where Dr. Sexton is now standing, his attention completely focused on Pen and I.

I can't tell what Gaines is thinking as he turns to exit the coffee shop as Penny pulls me toward the barista counter and the doctor she thinks is a perfect match for me.

HOURS LATER, a single knock on my apartment door almost sends the bowl of soup in my hands crashing to the floor.

"Give me a minute!" I call out as I race to the table to place the bowl down carefully.

I was going to skip dinner after the burger lunch I shared with Pen, but since I had a small amount of leftover takeout chicken soup in my fridge, I decided to heat it up and enjoy it while watching a show.

As soon as I'm done that, it's all in on starting Penny's wedding dress.

I skim my hands over the denim covering my thighs.

Since it has to be Castle or Astrid behind the door, I don't bother fixing the wayward strands of my hair that have fallen out of my ponytail.

My marathon shopping adventure with Penny didn't result in the purchase of an ooh-la-la dress for her, but it was still a fun afternoon.

I swing the door open with a smile.

"Oh." My eyes widen when I see who is standing there. "Hey!"

"Back up," Dr. Morgan demands. "Now."

I do as requested, taking quick steps backward on my bare feet.

He slams the door behind him as soon as he's crossed the threshold.

"Strip."

I'd ask why, but why in the hell would I do that?

I pull the sweater I'm wearing over my head to reveal a red silk bra. I keep that on as I shimmy out of my jeans so he can get the full effect of my cute matching lingerie set.

"Strip," he repeats, his hands fisted at his sides.

I take in that sight, along with the visible tattoos on his arm. He's still wearing scrubs and it's a good look for him, particularly the pants. The material is straining to contain what looks like an impressive erection.

"You're happy to see me," I whisper as I drop my bra and slide out of my panties.

"I have an hour," he tells me. "I'm going to sit on the couch. I want you..."

"On the floor?" I say with excitement lacing my tone. "Please."

A smile splits his lips. "Yes, lamb. On the floor."

I'm there before he is. He pushes the coffee table back with his shoe making room for me.

As soon as he's sitting, I'm kneeling between his feet with my hands resting on his thighs.

With a grunt, he lifts his ass and yanks down his pants and his boxer briefs far enough that his cock springs free.

"It's perfect," I say. "So perfect."

"Suck me," he groans. "Now."

I nod, dropping my lips to the crown. I trace it with my tongue, relishing in the taste and the heady scent of his skin.

I moan when I feel his fingers tangle in my hair.

"I can't control myself with you," he admits in a deep growl. "I want to fuck you again and again."

I take him then, inch by thick inch until I can't take more.

He leans back and lets his movements take over, lunging up over and over, fucking my mouth with smooth easy strokes.

“How can it be this fucking good?” His voice is a window to his need.

He ups the pace, pushing my head down with each upward thrust of his hips.

I take it all, whimpering, moaning and loving the way it feels to give him this much pleasure.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

GAINES

I'VE ALWAYS needed time between orgasms, but not now.

I came down her throat less than fifteen minutes ago, and I'm ready to go again.

"I need a condom," I tell her as she approaches me with a glass of water in her hand.

She's still nude, and judging by the way she's walking around her apartment, she's completely comfortable.

"I have some," she says. "In my bedroom. Do you want to go in there?"

I pat my thigh. "I want to fuck you like this. Get the condom and get on my lap."

She sets the glass down on the coffee table before taking off in a sprint. I watch over my shoulder until she's out of my view.

I use the brief solace to rub both hands over my face.

I feel like an imposter; a man who doesn't give a shit about anything but himself and the one woman who can make him feel things he's never felt before.

Sex has always been good for me, but this is above next level.

When I saw her at the café earlier, I hardened immediately. I couldn't stop thinking about her all afternoon. For the briefest moment, I imagined Logan's hands on her before I had a vision of mine wrapped around his neck.

I'm not territorial. I've never experienced jealousy, yet both were raging inside of me today.

"I have a condom," she announces as she comes back into my view.

The sight of those perfectly round tits bouncing as she walks, makes my cock ache.

Her body is perfect. It's everything I've always desired, punctuated with a face that could stop traffic.

"Can I put it on you?" she asks quietly. "I know how."

I hate that she's implying that she's done that before. She's sheathed another guy before he's fucked her.

I close my eyes against the images that assault my imagination.

Her on her knees while another guy's dick is being drilled into her. On her back while she's being screwed.

"Gaines?"

That lures my gaze back to her face. "Eloise?"

"Our desires are decadent," she whispers.

"The need is alluring," we say in unison.

"You're quoting Garin," I accuse. "You read him after that night in the club." She shakes her head. "Before."

I believe her. I've never met anyone else who could quote a line from one of his masterpieces by heart. I'm not surprised in the least that she can.

She settles next to me on the couch. Her hand slides over my dick before she rips open the condom package.

With ease, she has me sheathed.

She moves quickly, placing her hands on my shoulders as she readies to settle on my lap.

My hands dart to her waist. "Don't kill me, lamb."

She lets out a soft laugh. "Have you seen the size of your cock? I stand a better chance of not surviving this."

It's all in jest but the thought of her leaving this earth sends a jolt of pain through me.

Circling her in my arms, I lean forward to tug her against me.

Her hands jump to my face. She tilts my head up slightly to press her lips to mine.

The kiss is warm and luscious. Her lips part, tempting me to enter. I do. Our tongues dance as she slowly, ever so fucking slowly, slides her wet pussy along the length of my dick.

Her tiny, breathless moans fall into our kiss as she creates just the right amount of friction against her clit with her movements.

"You're going to come before I'm inside of you," I whisper against her lips.

"I know," she responds as her breathing becomes labored.

I shift her then, tugging her back so I can reach down and grab the base of my cock. "You're not. I want to feel that sweet heat grip me when you let go."

That's all she needs to hear.

She lifts herself enough that I can line up my cock, and with a sudden descent, I'm inside.

Her entire body reacts. Her bottom lip trembles as she gazes at me. "You're too big."

"No." I trace the curve of her jaw with the tip of my tongue. "I'm perfect for you."

"So perfect," she whispers as she moves slowly, inching me out and then in again.

It's the sweetest torture I've ever experienced, but all I want is more.

Dipping my head so I can take her left breast between my lips, I ask - practically beg - for what I want. "Fuck me, lamb. Fuck me."

She rocks her hips as her hands fist the back of the couch on either side of my head. Small gasps of pleasure fall from her lips. The sound is punctuated by the uncontrollable groans stemming from somewhere deep within me.

She's gone first, her release taking control of her.

Her pussy tightens around me as she flies over the edge. Her head falls back and I follow right behind her, my body shaking with the intensity of the best orgasm of my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ELOISE

I'M WEARING a pair of blue boyshorts and a black T-shirt when I emerge from my bedroom.

I wasn't sure if I'd find Gaines here still.

"I know you need to go," I offer the way out that I sense he needs.

His gaze is glued to the screen of his phone. "The patient is stable, and asleep. I'll make my way back to the hospital shortly."

I approach him with quick steps. "I think I bruised your lip. I may have bit it in the heat of the moment."

His hand darts up to float over the corner of his bottom lip. "It's a badge of honor, lamb."

I laugh. "Someone will ask where it came from."

"I'll tell that someone it's none of their fucking business."

I have no doubt that he will. He's direct when he needs to be, but I've seen the softer side of him at the hospital. I witnessed it first hand when I fell on the sidewalk and he brought me home.

Speaking of that...

"Did Castle let you into the building?"

A smirk slides over his lips. "Who the fuck is Castle?"

I can't help but smile. "He manages Vinyl Crush."

"The store was closed up tight when I got here."

That doesn't answer my question, so I press for more, adding a twist of humor to the question. "So, you broke into the building?"

He glances briefly at his phone before his eyes are back on mine. "I used the key code."

Realization floods me. "You peeked over my shoulder last night when I was punching it in."

"Yes," he says in a soft tone.

With any other guy I've brought home that would feel like a violation, but it doesn't with him.

"Because you knew you'd be back," I say, not framing it as a question.

"Over and over again."

Tugging on the bottom hem of my T-shirt, I smile. "Good."

His gaze rakes me as he pockets his phone. "I want to check your knee."

Before I can tell him that it's feeling fine, he's crouching in front of me. His fingers skim over my leg, above and below the scrape. He follows that with a soft kiss to my thigh.

My hand instinctively drops to his hair. I thread my fingers through it as he gazes up at me.

"I think I'll need to come back tomorrow for a house call to recheck this."

I shrug a shoulder. "I have dinner plans."

That brings him back to his feet. "With who?"

There's a faint tic in his jaw and his brows have furrowed, so I go for a tease. "With a trauma surgeon named Dr. Sexy?"

His hands jump to circle my biceps. He holds me in place, his gaze searing into mine. "Stay away from him."

I don't feel threatened, only confused. "Why?"

He shakes his head but it doesn't chase away the intensity in his expression. "What happened between the two of you today? At the coffee shop? Tell me what you talked about."

Surprised that this matters to him, I sigh. “Dr. Sexton was only able to introduce himself to us before Penny took over the conversation. She held onto it until he excused himself.”

The relief in his body is palpable. His grip on me lessens. “Good.”

“I sometimes talk to other men,” I try to keep my tone light. “It sort of comes with living in Manhattan.”

His eyes lock on mine. “Do you fuck other men, Eloise?”

The question sets me back a step. “In the past couple of days, no. You’ve kept me and my pussy busy, Doc.”

His gaze drops to my boyshorts. “I’d do the same now, but I do need to go.”

“Go be an awe-inspiring cardiologist.” I poke a finger into the middle of his chest. “Save a life or two tonight.”

He smiles. “This dinner date you have tomorrow night, who is it with?”

“Inquiring minds sure do want to know,” I quip.

“Tell me.” His gaze drops to his watch before it’s back on my face.

“I don’t want you to feel left out.”

He nods in understanding. “Stevie sent you an invite to dinner, too?”

I nod. “Dinner at six, and I’m responsible for dessert again.”

“Crusty bread is my assignment,” he goes on, “and buttercups for Stevie.”

“You’re good to her.”

“She’s good to me,” he counters. “I’ll see you there?”

“Gaines?” I step closer to him. “About that... do you think we should tell...”

“No,” he answers my question before I can finish it. “You know Berk and Astrid. They’ll take this and run, and Stevie will start planning our wedding. I can’t break that kid’s heart.”

I read between all those lines.

We shouldn’t mention whatever this is to any of them because it’s not going to end the way they’d want it to.

I nod. “It’s just between the two of us.”

“That’s best,” he agrees with a sharp nod of his chin.

“For everyone,” I whisper, not completely convinced that’s true.

His phone chimes. Almost immediately, a second chime fills the air. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Eloise.”

“You will.” I paste on a smile. “Thanks for the house call.”

“It was my pleasure.” He takes my mouth in a soft, lush kiss. “Literally,

lamb. It was all pleasure.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

ELOISE

“YOU’RE KNITTING your friend a wedding dress?” Stevie’s hands drop to her hips. “Hold on, Eloise. Just wait a minute.”

I exchange knowing glances with Astrid. Stevie is about to make a big ask of me. I anticipated as much when my cousin asked if I had any news to share, and I answered by telling her about my Penny project.

“Eloise, can you please...”

“Stevie?” Astrid interrupts her daughter with a soft brush of her fingers over Stevie’s cheek. “You don’t need a wedding dress.”

“Mom!” Stevie drops both hands into her palms. “Why would you say that? I’m way too young for that. Everyone knows I’m not getting married until I’m thirty. That’s forever from now.”

“It’s not that long,” Astrid says with a melancholy note in her tone. “Look

how quickly you're growing up."

Stevie peeks at her mom from between two spread fingers. "I wish I was older. I want to drive and go to college."

"You have plenty of time for that," I tell her. "Being grown-up isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Stevie finally drops both hands. "I guess not. I fell on my way to school last week, and you fell... where did you fall?"

I thought I could brush off all further discussion about the bandage on my head when I walked into the brownstone and greeted not only Astrid and her little family, but Berk's siblings and their partners.

I announced that I had tripped on a grate on the sidewalk when I was wearing heels and hit the pavement headfirst.

Astrid had rushed toward me, as had Maren, her sister-in-law, and Stevie.

They all offered hugs and when I entered the main living room, everyone else in attendance did too.

Astrid not only landed a wonderful husband and daughter, she's part of the Morgan family. Berk's younger brother, Keats, and Maren have a sweet baby boy named Weber. Sinclair, Berk's sister, is expecting her first baby with her fiancé, Jameson Sheppard. They are an incredibly kind and welcoming group of people.

My cousin has told me more than once I fit right in. I feel I do.

"It wasn't close to home," I answer Stevie's question as vaguely as I can. "I took a cab back to my apartment."

Astrid smiles at my description of the place she used to live. She has made it very clear that I can live there forever if I choose to. One day, I'll leave the security of it behind and venture into an apartment meant for me.

"That's rough." Stevie blows out a burst of air. "Are you sure you're okay? Gaines is coming. He's a doctor. He can check your head."

"I'm fine." I tap her hand. "I think you were about to ask me a question. Is it related to the dress I'm knitting for Penny?"

"Yes." She steps closer to where I'm sitting on a stool next to the kitchen island.

I offered to help Astrid with meal preparation, but Keats dove into that before he wandered off to tease his brother about the apron he found in a drawer that had '*Big Berk's BBQ*' stamped across the front of it.

I knew it was a birthday gift from his wife, but apparently, Keats hadn't seen it until today.

“What would you like to ask me?” I lean closer to her. “I’m pretty sure I’ll say yes to whatever it is.”

That brings a bright smile to her face. Her blue eyes light up. “There is a school dance in two months. A knitted dress would be divine.”

I smile at her choice of words. “I can knit a divine dress.”

“That’s light blue?” she questions, her hands moving in a diagonal downward slice in front of her. “Maybe it could have a white stripe that goes from my shoulder to the bottom.”

She emphasizes that with a tug of the bottom hem of the red dress she’s wearing.

“I can see it now.” I nod. “Maybe a crocheted whale on the belt, and a white cape to go with it?”

“A cape?” She jumps up and down. “You’re serious? You can do that?”

“Eloise,” Astrid whispers my name in a tone I’m all too familiar with.

She’s about to tell me not to indulge every fanciful whim her daughter comes up with.

“I’ve been thinking about extending the branch of my business that focuses on kids’ items,” I half-lie.

It’s been an idea that has been smoldering in the deepest recesses of my mind for months, but I haven’t given it the level of thought it deserves.

“I’ll snap a few pictures of it without Stevie’s face in view, of course.” I wink at Stevie. “Privacy is important.”

Stevie nods. “Very important.”

“I can post it on my Etsy store and take some custom orders.”

“That’s smart,” Stevie adds her two cents. “Keats would say it makes good business sense.”

“You’re sure?” Astrid asks with skepticism edging her tone. “A dress like that is a huge commitment.”

“I’m sure.” I shift my attention to Stevie. “We’ll work out a time for you to come over for a measurement session, okay?”

“I’ll be there.” Her gaze wanders over my shoulder to the entrance to the kitchen. “He’s here! My interview subject is finally here!”

I don’t need to turn to know who is standing behind me. I can sense he’s near. My nipples harden under the green cardigan I’m wearing. I run my palms over the denim covering my thighs, and then I finally glance over my shoulder.

“Hey, Astrid,” Gaines greets her first. “It’s good to see you again,

Eloise.”

The warmth that was in his voice last night is gone, but it’s there in his gaze as he locks eyes with me.

“You brought me flowers again?” Stevie asks with genuine surprise in her tone. “I wrote you a thank you card for the last time you did that. I’ll run and get it.”

She takes off in a sprint, and with a last glance in my direction, Gaines turns and follows her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

GAINES

ANOTHER FAMILY DINNER equals another opportunity for me to stare at Eloise, this time from across a much more crowded room.

The last time we were in this brownstone together, there were only five us present.

This dining room feels stifling now, with all these extra bodies separating me from the one body I want my hands on.

“Do you want some green beans?” Stevie asks from where she’s sitting next to me. “You keep looking at those beans over there by Eloise. Spoiler alert. They’re not my favorite.”

A chorus of laughter fills the dining room.

Sinclair plucks the bowl from the table and sends it down the row of people between us.

Keats gets his hands on it before Berk does, and then finally Stevie hands it off to me.

“Mom says if I eat ten that’s good enough,” she whispers. “I’ll create a distraction so you only need to shove five into your mouth. Are you ready?”

Letting that sink in, I chuckle. “Sure. Go for it.”

She clears her throat and stands. “A poem by Stevie Morgan.”

Keats shoots her a look. “So, you’re using Morgan again? What happened to you being just Stevie?”

Her hands drop to her hips. “What happened to you being polite when someone is sharing a poem?”

Their back and forth bickering is legendary. I may have earned a slice of that little girl’s heart, but her uncle will always own the majority of it.

“Ready, set, go,” Keats volleys back. “Let’s hear it.”

Stevie steals a glance my way so I fork a small bean and slide it between my lips, before I lie to the little one, “That’s five.”

“I need more time to perfect my poem.” She drops back into her chair. “Carry on with dinner, folks.”

Another round of laughter carries through the room.

I look at Eloise to find her smiling, but her gaze quickly shifts to Sinclair.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Stevie pushes the bowl of beans away from both of us.

“He doesn’t,” her dad answers for me. “Gaines is married to his work.”

That sends all eyes on the table in my direction.

“What fun is that?” Maren asks. “Even doctors need love in their lives.”

“He doesn’t need love,” Keats scoffs. “I’d bet good money on the fact that he’s having as much fun as he can handle.”

“Like playing games fun?” Stevie questions with a perked brow. “Do you still play basketball at the park?”

“Sometimes. When I find the time.”

It’s a pick up game with a bunch of people from the hospital at a community court not far from there. I’m part of a group chat that keeps us all updated on when a game is about to begin. If I have an hour or two to spare, I’m always there.

“You should find the time with Dad.” Stevie jerks her thumb toward Berk. “I’ve been playing with him. If I can beat him, I know you can.”

The sound of a phone ringing fills the air.

Almost everyone at the table drops their gaze to search for their device.

“It’s me.” Eloise is already halfway out of her chair. “I’ll take it in the other room.”

“It’s a boy,” Stevie surmises. “She told me that she broke up with Philip, so I think she’ll have a new boyfriend today or tomorrow. She’s so pretty.”

That she is.

I follow Eloise with my gaze as she disappears out of view.

I’m tempted to stand too with an excuse that I need to check on a patient, but I keep my ass where it is because Stevie has already dove into another pressing question from the list on a paper set next to her plate.

“Why did you become a doctor?”

Berk’s gaze meet mine and he tosses me a look that I’ve seen before. It’s apologetic and sympathetic at the same time.

He knows my past. He wasn’t always around to walk through it with me, but when I needed an ear, he made the time to listen, just as I did when he lost his wife and had to piece his life back together.

“He likes helping people,” he answers for me. “I was there the day he graduated from medical school.”

“You were?” Stevie’s gaze darts to her dad. “Do you have a picture from that day?”

“Plenty,” he says. “I’ve got a great one of the four of us.”

Stevie looks beyond her dad to where Sinclair and Keats are. “You were there too?”

Sinclair is a decade younger than I am, but I remember fondly her gift on the day I graduated med school. She’s a published writer now, but her love of the craft was present even then, so she prepared a mini handwritten autobiography for me of my life up to that point.

It wasn’t complete by any means because no one knows all the details of the life I’ve lived. Not even Berk.

“We were all front and center that day,” Keats tells her.

“I’m sorry,” Eloise says as she steps back into the room. “I have to run. A friend needs me.”

A look of alarm crosses Stevie’s expression. She’s up and on her way toward Eloise in no time flat. “Is it Penny? Is she all right?”

“She’s good.” Eloise skims a hand over Stevie’s head. “It’s another friend. He needs help with something.”

He.

Again, that fucking jealousy itch is back.

The only way I know how to scratch the goddamn thing is to bury myself inside of her.

She won't make eye contact with me, so I drop my gaze back to the bowl of beans. Stevie was right. They're not good.

"It was great seeing all of you," Eloise says to the room. "Dinner was amazing as usual, Astrid."

"Thank Keats for that."

Keats glances over his shoulder at Eloise. "I can't and won't take credit for those beans. Those were fucking awful."

"You owe a hundred to the fund," a chorus of voices unites to say that, including Eloise's and mine.

It's a Morgan family tradition that if anyone swears, they need to donate a hundred dollars to a charity founded by Berk in honor of his late wife and Stevie's mom.

I finally sense Eloise's eyes on me so I look up.

I want to ask where the hell she's going, but I don't own her time. We're not committed.

"I'll help Mom find a new bean recipe," Stevie announces to everyone in the room before she grabs ahold of Eloise's hand. "You'll call me about taking my measurements, right?"

"Tomorrow," she promises with a kiss to Stevie's forehead.

They share a hug then, followed by a smile before Astrid, Maren, and Sinclair trail Eloise out of the room.

"She's going to knit me a special dress for the school dance," Stevie tells Berk, Keats, Jameson, and me. "She's a pretty cool kind of aunt, or cousin. She's my friend. Eloise is my friend."

I envy the kid for finding one word to describe her connection to Eloise.

I could toss out a million of them, and not one would describe what's happening between us and, more importantly, what can never happen between my lamb and me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ELOISE

I SIT at a table in a coffee shop in midtown facing a man I didn't know had my number. That's a total of two men who have gotten their hands on my phone number without me being aware of it.

I make a mental note to ask Gaines why he saved my number in his phone when he heard Astrid sharing it with Stevie. That was over a month ago, well before I saw him at Atlas 22.

“Like I said on the phone, I'm nervous, Els.”

I look at Daxton. He's dressed similarly to the way Gaines was dressed tonight. Both men chose jeans, and gray T-shirts. But Dax has a blue hoodie on. Dr. Morgan was wearing a navy blue blazer with the thinnest pinstripe running through the fabric.

The man is always dressed to kill.

“I should mention that Pen gave me your number,” he explains without any prompting from me. “I really hope I didn’t interrupt any big plans you had for tonight.”

Before he called, my big plans consisted of avoiding looking at Gaines.

“I was just about to leave a family dinner.”

“Shit.” He shakes his head. “Are your folks in town?”

Surprised that he knows that they don’t live in New York, I shake my head. “No. How did you know...”

“That they live in Buffalo?” he interrupts with a grin.

“Yeah.”

“Pen,” he says it like it’s a foregone conclusion that I should have been aware of. “She mentioned that you were born and raised there. She said you have a brother, too? Draco, right? That’s a hell of a cool name.”

Penny helped herself to one of my photo albums when I was changing clothes for our dress shopping excursion yesterday. When she asked about my parents, I explained my journey to New York.

I don’t bother mentioning to Daxton that Pen spend a little extra time staring at a photo of my older brother.

“My dad named him.” I chuckle. “It was after a friend of his from high school I think.”

Dax nods. “Do they come to New York often?”

“No.” I shake my head, sensing that this line of questioning is related to his mom and his sister being in New York. “When’s your mom going home?”

“I’m not sure,” he says. “I like having them around. My dad is flying in for a few days at the end of the week.”

“You’ve missed them since you moved here, haven’t you?”

He nods softly, sipping from the mug in front of him. “I didn’t know a soul when I stepped off that plane a few months ago. I’ve made friends since, but there’s something about family.”

“When I moved here from Buffalo after high school, my brother was in New York, and my cousin too,” I tell him. “I was really lucky.”

“I’ll say.”

“Your brother moved back home though, didn’t he?”

Pen strikes again. She asked me that question as she was flipping through my photo album.

“He’s taking over our dad’s carpentry business.”

“That’s a specific skill set.” He laughs. “I don’t think I’ve ever picked up a hammer.”

“Same,” I quip.

He wrings his hands together. “Back to why I asked you to meet me.”

“Right.” I take a drink from my mug but the coffee is already cold so I push it aside.

“I want to pick up a special gift for Pen.” He looks toward the doorway of the café when it opens. “Something more than flowers or chocolates. Something that screams I’m glad I met you.”

It’s a sweet gesture that I know she’ll appreciate.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any ideas you could throw my way.” He tosses me a pleading look. “It doesn’t have to be expensive. It would be better if it wasn’t.”

I laugh along with him. “I hear you. New York is not a cheap place to live.”

“Exactly.” He drops his gaze to his watch. “Will you give it some thought and let me know if you come up with anything?”

“Sure,” I agree even though I don’t know Penny well enough to gauge what she likes beyond a replica of her late grandmother’s knitted wedding dress.

“You have my number.” He points to where my phone is sitting on the table. “Text me if you think of anything, okay?”

I push back from the table at the same time he does. “I’ll do that.”

“I get that we barely know each other.” He zips up his hoodie. “But, I can tell you’re a good person. I won’t say I’m glad I keeled over in that restaurant, but it could have been a hell of a lot worse than it was. I met a great girl and a new friend.”

I smile at that. “I’m glad it all worked out for you, Daxton.”

“I have Dr. Morgan to thank for that.” He grins. “Talk about a superhero. If he hadn’t been in that restaurant, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

I don’t think one word of that is an exaggeration. Gaines saved his life.

“I promised Saylor I’d read her a bedtime story.” He taps his chest. “I’m pretty lucky that I get to do that.”

“You’re very lucky.”

“I’ll catch up with you soon, Els,” he says just as my phone buzzes on the table. “I’ll leave you to that.”

I glance at the screen of my phone and the familiar number that is calling

before I turn my attention back to him. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime.”

I send my mom’s call straight to voicemail because our talks always last longer than the time I can devote to one right now. I’m also not looking forward to her asking me when she’ll finally meet my “Wall Street boyfriend.” I haven’t told her or my dad that I dumped Philip.

I glance at the bag hanging over the back of the chair I was just sitting in. I choose a larger tote before I left home to head to Astrid’s because it’s just the right size for a ball of yarn and knitting needles.

I take another look around this almost empty café before I sit back down.

Inspiration can be found anywhere, so I’ll order another coffee, and get to work on a sweater that a regular customer ordered a couple of weeks ago.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

GAINES

I DID what I promised myself I wouldn't do.

I circled the block where Eloise lives three times before I let myself into the building using the code I saved to memory after peering over her shoulder two nights ago.

I had no right to be there, yet there I was banging a fist on her apartment door, desperately hoping to find her there.

She never answered.

I tried again an hour later after swearing to myself I'd go home.

I made it an entire three blocks from her place before I stepped into a bar and downed two fingers of whiskey.

I spent the next ten minutes convincing a woman who approached me that I had no interest in going home with her.

Rewind to a few weeks ago and we wouldn't have made it past the alley next to the bar.

I would have let her blow me before I fucked her, and that rendezvous would have left us both satisfied, albeit for me it would have been a temporary fix.

Now, the thought of another woman's lips wrapped around my dick does nothing for me.

I don't know where the fuck Eloise learned how to suck cock, but she's in a class all her own.

After I walked away from a beautiful woman willing to drop to her knees for me, I went back to Eloise's apartment again for another round of the torture of not finding her there.

I'm home now with a raging hard-on and a mind filled with all kinds of 'what-if' scenarios.

What if some guy is nailing her right now?

What if she's blowing someone else at this exact moment?

What if I never know who she ran out to meet tonight?

"You're so fucked?" I whisper as I pace the hallway in my apartment. "So fucked, Gaines. You can't do this."

I can't fall for a woman.

I can't want a woman to this degree.

A knock at my apartment door sends me in that direction in record time.

It's not until I'm opening the door that I realize Eloise has no fucking clue where I live.

Berk does, though, and it's him standing there.

"You forgot this." He shoves a pink envelope at me. "That's the thank you card Stevie wrote in front of you for the flowers you gave her last week."

A light blue envelope appears from behind his back. "This is a new one. She wrote this after you left to thank you for the buttercups you brought her tonight."

I take both and step aside to let him in. "Tell her thanks."

"You could write a card and thank her yourself," he jokes. "Sure, I'd love a beer."

I laugh. "Who the fuck offered you a beer?"

"You were about to." He pats my shoulder. "You're not expecting anyone, are you?"

I scratch my head. "No."

“I know you need to sleep.” He takes off toward my kitchen. “Doctors always need more sleep, so I won’t stay long.”

Since I could use the distraction, I shake my head. “You can stick around for awhile.”

He appears again with two open bottles in his hand. He hands me the water, keeping the beer for himself. “I noticed you didn’t have any wine at dinner, so I assume you’re on call.”

I’m not, which is why I pounded back the whiskey at the bar less than an hour ago. “Thanks.”

“I wanted to check in.” He makes himself comfortable in one of the gray armchairs in my living room. “I know that question about why you became a doctor isn’t as cut and dry as everyone thinks it is.”

I don’t want to wander down memory lane tonight, so I shut him down. “I think Stevie got what she needed for the assignment.”

He takes the hint. “She did.”

We sit in silence as he takes a pull from the bottle.

“Anything new going on with you?” He glances around my apartment, which hasn’t changed in years.

I don’t spend enough time here to have plants or a pet. My fridge has the bare minimum in it and I’d be right in assuming that every box of crackers or cereal in my cupboard has surpassed its best by date by months, if not years.

I live at the hospital and vacation at my office because my work there is a dream compared to the shit I see in the ED and the cardiac care unit.

That’s my life. It will always be my life.

“You know that drill.” I chuckle. “Work, sleep, repeat.”

He takes another sip of beer. “How long do you think you can sustain that?”

I arch a brow. “Forever?”

He raises the bottle in the air. “That can’t be the life you envisioned for yourself.”

I stopped having visions of what I wanted for the future years ago. I now view life through a distinctively narrow lens. I’m arrogant enough to know that I’m one of the best cardiologists this city has, and if I can save a life, or offer someone a better quality of the life they’re living, that’s all I need.

I go for a change of subject I know he’ll welcome because he always does. “Dinner tonight was good. It was great to catch up with the family.”

“It was.” He nods. “I was glad Eloise could stop by. It’s too bad she had

to run off to meet up with that kid you saved. It's Dax, right? His name?"

I almost toss my head back in relief, but I keep it together. "That's his name."

"Astrid gave her a call right before I left to check in on her." He laughs. "You know my wife. She worries too much about the people she loves."

I don't know if it's possible to do that, but I'll take his word for it.

"Eloise's mom was trying to track her down, so Astrid filled her in. She let her know Eloise was with a friend."

Thank Christ it's Dax she was with.

He's so wrapped up in Penny that he can't see what me and half of the men in Manhattan see when Eloise is within a ten foot radius.

"She's good to Stevie." He glances at the floor before his gaze levels back on me. "My daughter has the best people in her life. I'm including you in that, Gaines."

I'd do anything for that little girl.

Berk tosses back what's left of the beer in a single gulp. "Astrid was tucking Stevie in when I left, so I need to head home to tuck my wife in."

The wink he tosses me confirms that the newly married couple won't be falling asleep early tonight.

"Go have fun," I encourage him.

"You should listen to your own advice more." He plucks the bottle off the table and takes it with him to the kitchen.

I've been having the time of my life during the past forty-eight hours. I hope to have more of that same fun soon.

"I'll stop by our favorite coffee spot this week and see if you're around," he promises, laughing because we both know the coffee there is some of the worst in Manhattan.

"Thanks again for dropping off the thank you cards." I lead the way to my door.

"Anytime." He stops just short of grabbing the doorknob. "Work has got to get heavy at times, Gaines. If you need an ear, day or night, you know how to reach me."

I pat his chest. "I'm good, Berk, but I appreciate that."

"I'm here for you." He taps my chest harder. "Don't forget that."

"The same goes for me." I take the step of opening the door. "Go home to your wife before she dozes off."

"She's eagerly awaiting all this." He skims a hand over the front of his

button-down shirt. “I guarantee she’s not falling asleep anytime soon.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ELOISE

IT'S BEEN MORE than a week since I saw Gaines at Astrid and Berk's. I've spent that time immersed in school and work. Half of my work time has been devoted to Penny's dress. The other available hours I've had, I've split between pulling two shifts at Vinyl Crush and working on a sweater for a longtime client.

I'm just finishing that up now so I can ship it to her first thing tomorrow.

A knock at my apartment door startles me enough that I drop my knitting needles in my lap.

I laugh because when I first learned how to knit in fourth grade, I would openly curse whenever I dropped a needle or a stitch. My mom remedied that quickly by taking my knitting supplies away for a week.

At that time, it felt like a punishment worse than death.

I realized it wasn't when my grandpa passed away during summer break a few months later. I knit a blue carnation for my mom to pin on his suit jacket so it would be buried with him.

The carnation was lopsided and had been soaked with tears on more than one occasion before it reached the hands of the funeral director, but it was a gift to the man who had let me sit on his shoulders whenever I wanted to see above the tall tree in our front yard. He always told me that my future was beyond that tree, and I'd know it when I found it.

Some days I still believe his words. Other days, I'm not sure if he believed them himself.

"Eloise!" Stevie calls from the other side of the door. "Let us in. We have hot dogs and curly fries!"

I set my knitting on the coffee table, and uncurl from the couch.

I changed into red sweatpants and a matching T-shirt after school. My hair is braided to the side and my face hasn't seen a stitch of makeup all day. I blame that on my almost all night knitting session.

"I'm coming!" I yell back.

"We didn't bring any of those green beans mom makes."

By the time I swing open the door, I'm laughing. Astrid and Stevie are too.

They look adorable in matching outfits of jeans and white sweaters that I knit for both of them.

"It was match your best friend day at school today," Stevie says as she hops into my apartment carrying a takeout bag. "So, Mom and me made it match your best friend at home today day, too."

She laughs at her own words. "Did that make sense?"

"It made perfect sense." I motion for both of them to enter.

I've always felt a twinge of awkwardness when I open the door to find my cousin on the other side since she owns the apartment.

Astrid shoves a tray holding three cups with paper straws in my direction. "Strawberry milkshakes for the win."

"For the women," Stevie says. "It's hot dog, milkshake and dress measurement day. That's why we didn't invite Gaines to come."

I drop my gaze to her face. "Gaines?"

"My dad's cousin," she explains. "You met him at our house, remember? He's the tall doctor guy."

Tugging the bag from Stevie's grip, Astrid chuckles. "Eloise knows who

Gaines is. I think she was asking why we'd invite him in the first place."

"Ohhh," Stevie draws the single word out. "We wouldn't, but we saw him in Vinyl Crush just now."

I turn toward the table to hide the shock I feel. Gaines was in the record store?

I expected to hear him from at some point during the last week, even if it was via text, but I didn't. I attributed that to his work schedule. The pressure he's under is something I can't even imagine dealing with.

"We saw him walking right toward us," Astrid goes on to explain, "We laughed when we reached the door to the building at the same time."

He was on his way to see me.

"Apparently, he's browsing for an album for a friend." Astrid shrugs. "I'm sure Castle will be able to recommend something perfect."

"Right." I take a deep breath to slow my racing heart.

"Maybe his friend is a lady doctor." Stevie whistles. "Sometimes doctors marry doctors."

I don't want that doctor to marry another doctor.

"Gaines may never get married, Stevie," Astrid tells her daughter. "His job is very important to him."

I spin to face them again, wanting desperately to change the subject to anything but who Gaines Morgan may marry one day, since I can't see any path that would lead me down an aisle in a wedding dress toward him.

The man made it clear that he doesn't want anyone to know about us.

"I'm going to get married when I'm thirty," Stevie reminds us. "Eloise will knit me a dress."

I can't help but smile broadly at the prospect of that. "That would be the greatest honor of my life."

Stevie closes the distance between us to hug me tightly. "You're one of my best friends, too."

I tear up as I hold her close. "You're one of mine, too, Stevie. I hope that never changes."

The words Gaines said to me about not wanting to break Stevie's heart echo inside of me. If we took things too far and it fell apart it would impact almost everyone we both love, and we can't risk that. We can never risk that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

GAINES

I GLANCE down at the album in my hand.

“Cupid Karma,” I repeat the name of the local band who financed everything they owned to make this record.

I know all of that because Castle gave me a forty-five minute lesson on the band’s history, including the fact that all three members are sisters.

I stepped right into that because I asked him to explain the band’s origins to me as if I was some fucking music aficionado.

I’m not.

I’m a guy who listens to whatever my streaming service thinks I’ll like. Their algorithm is fucked, though. I’ve run circles around Central Park listening to some classical shit, and other days, I’m bombarded with pop songs that I can’t understand the lyrics to.

I do have a favorite singer. Her stage name is Astrid Rehn. Her married surname is Morgan. Her songs always hit me hard, though, because I know the more recent stuff she's written is about my cousin.

Every track I've heard for her new album is a literal love song for the ages.

The time I spent with Castle was time wasted.

Astrid and Stevie were heading up to see Eloise when I had to duck into the store to explain my presence in this part of town.

Since Castle practically pushed me out the door just now so he can lock up, I know Eloise is still not alone since Castle is on his way up to hand Astrid a sales report from last month.

"I don't even own a fucking record player," I say under my breath.

I did have one. I inherited it from Dutch, but when Berk wanted an in with Astrid, I gave it to him. He bought some records from her, gave them a listen, then showed up back at this shop to buy more.

It was a move that a high school kid might make to get the girl he likes to notice him. It paid off in spades for Berk.

My phone chimes so I tuck the album under my arm and tug it out of the pocket of my pants.

I read the text on my screen.

Evan: Chloe dumped me for girls' night with her cousins and their kids. Want to meet up for Greek food?

I take one last glance at the building where Eloise lives.

Gaines: That depends. Do you know who Cupid Karma is?

His response is quick and not totally unexpected.

Evan: Hell, yeah, I do. I heard them at a bar in Hell's Kitchen about a year ago. Do you know how hard it is to get your hands on a copy of their album? They're not on any of the streaming services.

I use that admission to my favor.

Gaines: You're buying me a steak tonight. Meet me at Nova in an hour.

As expected, my phone rings.

I step out of the pedestrian traffic in front of the store and head toward the

curb to hail a cab, as I answer. “Evan.”

“Why the fuck would I buy you a steak?” He laughs. “Beyond that, there is a waiting list for Nova. Everyone knows that.”

“Not everyone knows the owner.”

“You know Tyler Monroe?”

“I do,” I say with pride.

Tyler is an old friend, and the current co-owner of one of the best restaurants in this city.

“Impressive, Morgan,” he drawls. “Explain the part where I’m the one buying you a steak.”

I lower the phone to take a picture of the album’s cover and then shoot it to him in a text.

“What the actual fuck?”

I laugh. “It’s all yours for a good steak dinner.”

“I’ll throw in dessert for that.” He chuckles. “You know the way to this man’s heart. You also know your way around it since you’re a...”

“Cardiologist,” I finish his sentence. “I’m the best in this city.”

“In the country, Morgan,” he says. “I’m not just saying that because of the album. You’re a great doctor, and an even better friend.”

“Meet me at Nova in an hour.”

“You’re not giving that to someone else if I’m late, are you?”

“Don’t be late and you won’t have to worry about it.”

He ends the call without another word.

I END my night where I began my day with my hand wrapped around my cock and visions of Eloise dancing in my head.

More aptly, visions of her fucking me are invading my thoughts so fully that there’s no room for anything else.

I’ll never be able to erase from memory how she looked when she was riding me.

I never want to forget that.

I stroke myself slowly as the water from my shower beats down on me.

I close in on my release, picturing the beauty with the brown hair biting her bottom lip as she does when she’s about to come.

I'm almost there and then...*fuck*... my fucking phone rings.

I shut off the shower, push open the door, and tread naked across the bathroom floor to where I left it sitting on the counter.

The name of a man I can't stand flashes across the screen.

I'd ignore it but my job is my life, and if I want to keep that I have to answer the call.

Since the jerk has an affinity for speaker calls, I take a breath and drop back into doctor mode as I answer, "Dr. Sexton? What can I do for you?"

"It's not for me," he bites back with a tone most at the hospital would attribute to all the stress he's under.

I get that being a trauma surgeon comes with its own unique set of challenges, but Logan's pissy attitude toward me has nothing to do with his job.

"I have a patient who needs a cardiac consult."

"Dr. Whitman is on call," I inform him.

"The patient requested you." He exhales harshly. "Make it quick, Dr. Morgan. He needs surgery on his back. He's suffered third degree burns in an apartment fire. His heart isn't in great shape."

"Name," I spit out. "What's the patient's name?"

If he requested me, he knows me, or he knows of me because of my reputation. I want to walk into the ED with his name at the ready so I can offer him the comfort I sense he'll need.

"Brokenshire," he says. "Bart Brokenshire. Seventy-nine-years-old."

"Fuck," I whisper. "I'm on my way."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ELOISE

A RATTLING noise stirs me from sleep.

I'm reasonably sure I was in the middle of a dream about riding a whale with Stevie. That has to be because we played one of her favorite games during dinner.

Astrid, Stevie, and I each took a turn adding a word onto a story that Stevie started. We've played the same game countless times before, but today it was especially hilarious because it centered on Stevie and I on the back of a whale while Astrid took pictures from the shoreline.

I start to close my eyes again when the same banging sound echoes through my apartment.

Someone is at the door.

Pushing my hair back from my face, I swing my legs over the side of the

bed until my feet touch the cool hardwood.

I'm only wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of pink lace panties. I tugged both on after I took a shower before bed.

I glance at the screen of my phone on the bedside table to check the time. I wince.

"I'm coming," I call to whoever is trying to break down the door to my apartment in the middle of the night.

The last time it happened, it was the building's superintendent. He ran in to warn me that the water was being shut off because of a broken line down the block. I ended up camping out in an extra bedroom at Astrid's brownstone for two nights.

It started as an inconvenience, but ended as a slumber party.

"What is it Norvin?" I ask as soon as I'm at the door.

I like Norvin, but the man doesn't need to see me dressed like this, and the door is thin enough that you can carry on a full conversation through it.

"Who the fuck is Norvin?" A deep voice growls from the other side of the door. "Let me in."

It's Gaines.

It's just past three a.m. and he's essentially ghosted me for more than a week. Obviously, he had a good reason, but how much effort does it take to punch out a two letter text saying hi?

I need to play it cool, so I swing open the door, determined to not drop to my knees the second he's inside.

Before I can do anything, he's coming at me with solid steps.

I back up with each forward step he takes, until he's slammed the door behind him with his shoe.

Since I turned on the hallway light on my way to the door, there's enough light filtering into the foyer for me to see the agony in his expression.

It's there in his eyes, too.

As desperately as I want the pain he's feeling to be related to missing me, I instinctively know it's not.

I want to ask what's happened, but I sense he doesn't want to answer any questions.

His arms are around me as soon as he's close enough to make that happen. He folds himself over me, resting his chin on the top of my head. Only one hushed word leaves his lips. "Lamb."

I let him hold me like that for moments on end. The harsh bite of the

denim of his jeans brushes against a slice of my stomach that is now exposed. My feet ache because I'm perched on my tiptoes to embrace him.

He leans back slightly to gaze down into my eyes. "It's freezing in here."

I nod because I left a window open an inch to allow the sounds of the city to lull me to sleep.

He moves quickly, hauling me up by the hips, motioning for me to wrap my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his waist.

"Second door on the left in the hallway," I tell him as I rest my cheek against his.

He nods in silence, carrying me through the quiet apartment to my bedroom.

As soon as we're close enough to my bed, he lowers me gently, trailing kisses over my cheek until our lips meet for a chaste kiss.

He undresses quickly, tugging the T-shirt he's wearing over his head before he toes out of his shoes. His jeans and boxer briefs are pushed to the floor.

I slide back my blanket enough to give him room to slide in. He does that, resting his head on the pillow I just had my head on. He grips it in his fist, inhaling deeply.

Still wearing my T-shirt and panties, I crawl in next to him, and nestle my body against his.

He tugs me closer. I can feel the steady beat of his heart thunder against my chest as he sucks in a long slow breath.

"I need you," he whispers. "Fuck, do I need you."

I press a kiss to his jaw and watch his eyes close until he finally drifts off to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

GAINES

I WAKE Eloise with a leisurely kiss to her mouth.

Her eyes open slowly before they flutter closed as she tangles her hands in my hair.

I'm hard as stone, and aching to be inside of her.

"Good morning," she whispers against my mouth.

I respond with a low growl, and a tug on the bottom of her T-shirt.

It's cotton, and the fabric is thin enough that I could make out her perked nipples when I barged into her apartment four hours ago.

I wanted to fuck her to relieve the pain inside of me, but when I saw her looking like an angel, all I wanted to do was collapse in her arms.

I did just that after I carried her to bed.

I pull the T-shirt from her and toss it on the floor.

“My bed is a little too small for you.”

I wiggle my toes as my feet hang off the end of the bed. “You’re tiny. The bed fits you.”

“It’s a queen.”

“You’re a queen,” I counter.

She leans back to look in my eyes. “Will you serve me?”

That’s been my plan since I woke up. I move quickly to slide her panties off, kissing a path down her legs as I do.

She settles on her back, but before I crawl between her legs, I flip her over.

“On your knees, lamb.”

She does it with a small whimper. “Oh, God.”

I get behind her and stare at the sight before me. “Your pussy is so beautiful.”

She squirms a bit, her ass wiggling. “Please.”

I taste her slowly. One long lick along the seam, and then I stop.

“I’m so ready to come,” she whines. “Lick it again.”

I do one better. I slap her pretty ass cheek.

That lures a moan from her. “You make me come so good.”

I trace a path over her cleft with my finger before I do the same again with my tongue. She inches back, wanting more so I give my sweet Eloise that and settle in to eat her to at least one orgasm, or more.

“IN THE NIGHTSTAND.” She points a finger toward the black cabinet next to the bed. “You’ll find them in the top drawer.”

If I had my way, I wouldn’t sheath my dick.

I want in that pussy in the purest way possible, without any barriers. I want to fill her with my release and watch her face while I do, but I can’t fucking do that.

We haven’t talked about whether we’ve been tested.

I am regularly and have never once had sex without a condom.

I sense Eloise tests too and has a backup plan for birth control, but I can’t have that discussion with her. It’s too soon. It’s too much.

“The top drawer?” I ask again.

It's hard to fucking concentrate when the most beautiful woman on the planet is sprawled out naked less a foot from where you are.

I tug open the drawer and regret hits me immediately.

I close my eyes to ward off the anger coursing through me.

"The package should be right on top," she purrs. "I bought it a month or two ago."

Before I stormed back into her life.

I stare down at the box of condoms. It's been opened, but that's not what is making my blood boil.

It's what's sitting next to the box.

It's a small silver frame containing a photograph.

It's my lamb with some guy with messy brown hair. He's wearing a blue T-shirt and white board shorts. She's wearing a white bikini.

They're on a beach somewhere with blue water behind them and bright smiles on their faces.

His arm is wrapped around her waist like it has been there before.

"They aren't that hard to find," she teases. "Grab one and put it on. I'm dying to be fucked. Hard, I might add."

I know for a fact that the guy isn't her brother because there's an open photo album on Eloise's coffee table filled with pictures of her family. I thumbed through that an hour ago when I first woke up.

One of the first photos in that album is Eloise standing in front of a guy who looks a lot like her.

'*My big brother and me*' is written under the picture in black ink alongside a black heart she clearly drew.

I scoop up a foil packet and take one last look at the photograph. If it's Philip, why hasn't she tossed the picture in the trash?

Or maybe it's someone else from her past that she can't quite let go of. For all I fucking know, he's part of her here and now and she's used one of the condoms from that box with him.

I slam the drawer hard enough that the lamp on top of it teeters slightly.

"Watch it, Hulk." She laughs.

I don't crack a smile. I sheath my dick, dropping the package on the floor.

I crawl on the bed to grip her legs. I tug on them, yanking her closer to me. I do it all without a word.

I know she's ready. I ate her to two orgasms, so I line myself up and stroke my dick as I do.

Her bottom lip trembles as she stares into my eyes.

I don't want to give a shit if she's fucking someone else. I don't want to care if she's falling in love with another guy, but I do. I care way too much.

I'm in her with one swift movement. She clenches around me. "Oh, please."

I spread her thighs with my knees, driving deeper as I do.

She responds with a low moan and a whimper. "I love this."

I need this.

I need to fuck the memory of any other man out of her system. I need to make her ache for days so she only thinks of me.

I want her to need me as desperately as I need her.

I fuck her hard. My thrusts are relentless.

She squirms beneath me, trying to cling to my biceps, but I don't want that, so I slow the fucks and take her hands in mine to pin them to the bed.

Her eyes flash with something. Maybe it's defiance. Hell, it could be surrender, but she wants more. That I know because her pussy is clenching me like it's a goddamn vise.

She confirms that with one whispered word. "Harder."

I make that wish a reality and slam in to her over and over again. Her tits bounce, her lips part and she lets out a cry that could wake the dead.

I fuck her through that orgasm and then demand another with a solid series of thrusts. I up the ante by closing my teeth around her right nipple.

That sends her right where I want her to go.

I let go of her hands. She slides her nails down my shoulder and comes harder than the first time.

Her breathing slows as I glide in and out at a slow steady pace.

"That was unreal." She manages a soft chuckle. "I think you fucked the life out of me."

"I'm not done," I warn before I pin her hips to the bed and fuck my way to the edge of pain and pleasure before I come with a growl and a chant of her name.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ELOISE

“GIVE ME YOUR NUMBER,” he says as I step out of the shower.

That’s one way to thank someone for the best sex of their life.

At least it was the best sex of my life. I can only hope that it landed at the top of the experiences he’s had.

I couldn’t tell if it did because when he was inside of me, he was staring at me with a dark intensity. His gaze bore through me as he fucked me harder than he has before.

“You have it,” I call out to Gaines.

Since I showered before him, I assume he’s on his way for his turn now.

Wrong.

He suddenly appears in the open doorway of my bathroom fully dressed with his shoes back on.

“I don’t have it,” he says.

I glance at the phone in his hand as I slide on my robe. “I thought you said you programmed it in there when Astrid was calling out phone numbers to Stevie when she got her new phone.”

I don’t stop there since this is the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. “By the way, why did you save it back then? It was weeks before I saw you at Atlas 22.”

He finally looks up. “I don’t know what happened but I texted you the other night and the response I got back wasn’t from you.”

I can’t help but smile. “Spill the beans. What did your text say and who responded?”

“Let’s just say the guy who replied made it clear that he wasn’t anyone’s lamb and that my tongue didn’t belong anywhere near him.”

“I’m genuinely sorry I didn’t receive that text message.” I sigh before telling him my number.

“Ah.” He nods. “The last two numbers were transposed.”

“Text me now,” I say.

“Why?”

“So I can text you when I want to.” I tilt my head. “If you want me to text you, that is.”

His left eyebrow perks. “What’s that about?”

“Did we just hate fuck?”

He scrubs a hand over his forehead. “Hate fuck? Is that a thing?”

“If it’s not, you just invented it.” I stab a finger in the middle of his chest before I brush past him. “It was incredible, Garin, but you were intense. It was so fucking intense.”

“Garin,” he repeats the name I called him at the club. “How clearly do you remember that night?”

Since I’ve replayed it every single day since then in my mind, the memory has only become more vivid. I can recall the color of his tie, and the way his hair fell around his ears. I remember the scent of his skin beyond the cologne he was wearing.

I know all of the lyrics of the song that was playing when he was fingering me, and the dull beat of the drum of the music that sounded through the speakers when he came down my throat.

I spin to face him. “I remember it all.”

We’re in the living room now. His gaze darts from my face to a bookshelf

behind me. It holds a collection of my most treasured reads along with a few books my aunt had, and a couple that Astrid had left behind on the nightstand when she moved.

“You have a signed first edition of Garin’s first book,” he says. “The dedication he wrote is to you.”

I should accuse him of snooping when I was asleep, but I’m not surprised he did. If I ever step foot in his apartment, I’ll do the same.

“I treasure it.” I walk over to the shelf to retrieve it. “He was in Buffalo for a poetry reading. It was at a bookstore near my high school, so I cut class and went to see him.”

I open the cover to find the blue-inked dedication and the date Claude Garin had written it.

“When you knew who he was at the club I felt an instant connection to you,” Gaines admits. “I had never met anyone before you who even knew who Garin is.”

“They’re all missing out.”

He steps closer but stops himself, as if he’s fighting a silent battle.

“It wasn’t a hate fuck,” I whisper. “It was an angry fuck, wasn’t it?”

He doesn’t say a word as his gaze wanders to the windows behind me.

“When you came here last night you were in knots,” I broach the subject I’ve been avoiding since he walked into my apartment at three this morning. “Did something happen at the hospital? Was it a patient?”

He tilts his head back. His hand trails over the front of his throat. “I almost lost a long time patient last night. It was touch and go for hours.”

I rush toward him but stop just short of him.

I don’t know how he processes that, or what he needs from me.

Maybe the sex settled whatever demons are raging within him, or it quieted the pain of what he must have endured last night.

“Will he be all right?” I ask even though the man in question is a complete stranger.

All I know is that he matters to Gaines, and I suspect that his concern for the patient reaches beyond his position as his doctor.

“He’ll survive.”

“I’m glad.”

As if on cue, his phone dings.

He checks it instantly. “I have to go.”

I nod silently.

He glances at me. "Thank you for answering your door last night."

"You would have broken it down if I hadn't." I smile.

"You don't know how true that is," he says with a straight face. "I'll text you now that I have your number."

I won't ask when or what that text might say because when he walks out my door he'll leave me with more questions than I had when he stormed in here early this morning.

He steps closer to me to plant a kiss on my mouth. It's soft and tender. "Goodbye, lamb."

I shove the book in my hands into his. "Goodbye, Garin. Keep this until I see you again."

"I will." He holds it against his chest. "Tell me the page of your favorite poem."

"Forty-two," I whisper just as his phone sounds again.

"I have to run." The words leave him as he sprints to my apartment door.

We don't exchange another word, just a look into each other's eyes before he's out the door and gone again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

GAINES

I READ over the text I just typed out and then press send.

Gaines: Her eyes are the color of the sky when the clouds have cleared.

Her response is almost instant.

Eloise: But it was her lips. Oh, those red-stained lips. They charmed him so.

I step onto the subway platform a block from Eloise's apartment with her poetry book tucked under my arm.

I didn't have to look at it to know what poem I'd find on page forty-two, or the first line of it, which I sent to her just now.

I own this book too, although mine isn't a first edition and I've never had

the pleasure of meeting the poet whose name I've adopted for what I do in the dark, and in the burgeoning light of the day as I did this morning with my lamb.

I toss my head back to chase away the lingering image of that picture tucked in Eloise's nightstand.

She didn't have time to hide it after I arrived at her place in the middle of the night so that offers a small degree of comfort. It was stuck in that drawer before that.

Still, I have no claim to her, and as angry as I was when I fucked her, it was incredible. It was so goddamn intense that my legs are still shaking.

She makes me weak in a way I can't afford to be, but the thought of never touching her again makes me fear I'll collapse.

As the train approaches, my phone chimes.

I drop my gaze to it and chuckle.

Eloise: Be honest. Did you have to look in the book to recite the first line of the poem? No judgment here, sir.

My reply is on its way to her before the subway slows to a stop.

Gaines: You know I didn't. I should punish you for questioning my love of Garin's work.

By the time I've settled on a torn leather seat amid a crowd of New Yorkers all rushing somewhere, her response has hit my phone.

Eloise: Or I could just keep questioning it and make you ANGRY because that fuck was out of this world.

My cock stirs inside my jeans as I read it once, and then again.

I was angry when I fucked her, and I sure as hell hate that whoever the guy is in that photo likely has had his hands on her, too.

"Oh, my," a woman's voice says from my left. "You must be a lot of fun."

"Jesus," I whisper.

People in this city need to keep their eyes to themselves and off of other people's phones.

I finally glance at her. She's blonde with a low cut blouse on and a leather briefcase sitting on her lap. She holds out a business card. "I don't know if this is classified as a meet cute, but I'm game to see where it goes."

I laugh that off as I wave a hand in refusal. "I'm good."

“Judging from that text, you’re better than good, and I can be bad if it involves the right punishment.”

I turn the screen of my phone toward my lap even though it’s gone dark. “I’m not looking for anything.”

She nods. “Fair enough, but do you have a brother?”

I let out a chuckle. “No brothers.”

“My loss.” She flashes me a smile. “I hope the rest of your day is as good as last night was.”

Last night was shit. Mr. Brokenshire’s heart stopped beating twice and that meant I had to scrub in and stand watch while Logan operated on his burns.

I witnessed a man I hate save a life, and then I walked away without a word of thanks to him.

The train slows as we approach the next stop.

“This is me,” the blonde announces. “Last chance to take your anger out on me, Garin.”

My head snaps to the left to look at her. “What?”

Have I fucked her? Does she somehow recognize me from the club?

“It’s that book in your hand.” She laughs. “That name sort of suits you, and you look like you could be a poet. The messy hair, the scruffy jaw, swollen lip, and those tattoos. It’s a look. It’s a damn hot look.”

I rub a finger over my bruised lip. “My name’s not Garin.”

It is, but only to one woman. I never want to hear another utter that name to me again.

She exits the train without another word or another glance from me, and I continue on to the stop closest to my apartment so I can shower and get to doing what I do best — burying the unspeakable pain from my past beneath my profession.

CHAPTER FORTY

ELOISE

SCHOOL TODAY WAS everything I love about fashion.

I got to brainstorm a new project with one of my favorite fellow designers. She's focused on textile too, but her medium is weaving. I had to work on the looms for a project months ago, but she took me to her special spot on campus today and revealed something she's been devoted to for months.

It was an elaborate piece that will eventually sit on the wall of her mom's office on Park Avenue.

Her mom plans on placing a price tag on it that is worthy of the work that went into it.

My parents have been just as supportive of my desire to create a career out of my knitted and crocheted pieces. They did offer help in the form of a

lump sum of money to help me with tuition and living expenses.

I'll repay them one day when my business is trotting along at a decent pace.

As I'm exiting the subway stop closest to my apartment, I catch a glimpse of red hair in a crowd of people heading my way.

I already know who it is.

Penny sprouts up to her tiptoes when she spots me. "Els!"

No one bothers to look because this is Manhattan. They all have their own lives to lead and unless you're a celebrity or openly propositioning someone for a date or more directly, random sex, most people won't pay attention to you.

As soon as the group of people around her disperses, she sprints toward me.

She must be coming straight from work because she's wearing a pair of royal blue pants and a matching blouse.

"Your hair." She stops just short of where I've stopped to wait for her. "What are those pins and where can I get some?"

My hand trails over my messy bun. I pinned my hair up after Gaines left this morning. I didn't have time to dry it completely, so I twisted it into a knot and used the two hairpins that used to belong to my Aunt Becky.

"They're vintage." I proudly display them as I bend my head forward to give her a clear view. "Do you like them?"

"I love them." She sighs. "I'm always looking for treasures like that, but I don't have the time to scour the vintage shops the way I want to."

I make a mental note to text Daxton later to suggest he set out on a hunt for hairpins like the ones I now own.

It would be the perfect gift for her.

"Did you want to get an early dinner?" Penny asks. "I have to work tonight."

We start in the direction of my apartment. "You have to go back to the office tonight?"

"No." She lets out a heavy exhale. "Someone ordered a pet portrait from my Etsy shop. They sent me a few pictures of their cat this morning."

She taps the screen of her phone to bring up a trio of pictures of a black and white cat. "She's cute, right?"

Nodding, I smile. "Very. I'm happy for you."

"It's my passion." She tucks her phone back in the purse that is slung

over her shoulder. “Speaking of passion, have you experienced any lately. I’m talking the between the sheets kind.”

Have I ever.

When I was getting dressed earlier, I took extra care when I slid my panties on because my pussy physically ached a little. It still does, but I can’t tell if that’s the lingering feeling of Gaines’s punishing thrusts, or if my body just wants more.

It has to be a combination of both.

I take a play from Dr. Morgan’s handbook and expertly avoid answering the direct question just volleyed at me. “Have you?”

I already know the answer since I’m one hundred percent certain that when she gets in bed with Daxton, I’ll hear about it.

“Soon,” she confirms what I suspected. “I’m booked in for a wax two days before that because smooth is sexy.”

I’ve always followed that motto, so I smile.

We walk in silence, until I say what I know she wants to hear, “I started on your dress.”

She stops mid-step to turn and look at me. “Really?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Can I see it?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. It’s bare bones right now, Pen.”

“You’ll let me know when I can see it, right?” Her eyes sparkle in the late afternoon sun. The gold flecks play off the color of her hair. “If you can’t tell, I’m eager.”

“Really?” I joke with a shocked expression.

She slaps my arm playfully. “I don’t want to creep you out, Els, but you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

My heart breaks a little at that confession because I felt that way about someone once too, and since they’ve been gone from my life, I haven’t allowed myself to make many new friends.

I consider my classmates friends, and my former roommates definitely fit that bill, but I haven’t had a very close friend, other than Astrid, in awhile.

“You don’t creep me out.” I smile at her. “I’m glad we met.”

“Same.” She glances to our right. “Do you like ice cream?”

“What kind of question is that?”

She lets out a high-pitched giggle. “Do you want to skip dinner and go straight to dessert? We can share a banana split if you want.”

“I want.” I nod. “With extra chocolate syrup.”

“You read my mind.” She grabs my hand to tug me toward the shop. “My treat since you, my friend, are treating me to the wedding dress of my dreams.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

GAINES

“A CARDIOLOGIST and a vascular surgeon walk into a bar.”

I don't wait for the punch line to laugh. “What do you want, Evan?”

“If you let me finish, you'd know.” He pats my shoulder as he takes a spot next to me in front of a bank of elevators. “A cardiologist and a vascular surgeon walk into a bar.”

I shoot him a look. “Go on.”

“The vascular surgeon buys the cardiologist another drink to thank him for that kick ass album he bought him.”

“That's not a joke,” I point out.

“Who the hell said it was?” He chuckles.

I shake my head. “I'm on my way to my office.”

“You and that fancy as fuck office.” He smiles. “You're going to jump

the ship that is this world class health facility and go all private practice on me, aren't you?"

We step aside as the elevator doors slide open. Several people step off but two remain on. I shake my head to send them on their way without us because this conversation stays between Evan and me.

Once the doors slide shut, he elbows me. "I thought you were the nice guy. You just blew off two of our esteemed colleagues."

"They'll survive."

"True." He laughs. "Back to the private practice."

I lower my voice. "I'm never leaving this place, but I can offer care there that I can't here."

"Like what?" He searches my face. "Are we talking lip injections? I've noticed yours has been swollen in that one spot lately. You may want to consult with Dr. Brentwood for some pointers on how to line the needle up correctly."

I touch the tip of my tongue to the spot on my lip that Eloise can't seem to keep her teeth from.

"It's not from an injection." I narrow my eyes. "Are you sure you're medical license is real?"

"As real as real can be." He steps back to widen his stance. "Everything you see here is one hundred percent the real deal."

"Good to know." I look up to see which elevator will make its descent first.

"A wild one did that to you." He pokes an elbow into my ribs. "It's from a woman, isn't it?"

I ignore that to circle back to the reason I'm nurturing my practice. "My granddad left me a bundle, Evan. It's a hell of a lot easier to put it to good use at my practice."

"Are you telling me that you're a real life Dr. Robin Hood?"

I bark out a laugh. "I didn't steal my fortune from anyone."

"But, you are helping people who don't have the means to get the help they require?"

That's a simple way of putting it, so I nod. "Something like that."

"I want in on this." He pats my shoulder. "I doubt like hell my bank account rivals yours but I'm willing to put in some time helping anyone who you think may need a consult."

"If you're willing to do house calls, I can use the help."

“House calls?” Confusion edges the question. “I’m all in for going old school, but I need my equipment to diagnose anything in my field.”

“I know.” I pat his shoulder. “I’m talking a few spare hours a week to visit people who don’t have access to health care. Think common colds, urinary tract infections, eczema. The list goes on.”

I don’t spell out that I’m on a first name basis with many of the people in this city who don’t have a place to call home, but he gets it. I can see that in his expression.

“You’re a goddamn saint, Gaines.” His expression turns serious. “Do people know what a good man you are?”

“The ones who matter do.” I glance over his shoulder to see Dr. Sexton on the approach. “They’re the only ones I care about.”

Logan passes us without a word to me, but he’s got a greeting for the man standing next to me. “Good afternoon, Dr. Scott.”

“Hey, Logan,” Evan responds before Logan rounds the corner.

I drop a gaze to my watch as the elevator sounds its impending arrival.

“You two went to medical school together, right?” Evan asks. “You and Logan did.”

“Sure did.”

“You must have done something to piss him off because I’ve yet to see him acknowledge you.”

He leaves out the part about me pretending Dr. Sexton doesn’t exist unless I’m forced to.

I shrug that off because I won’t dive back into that mess. It’s a closed book now. Our friendship ended in a way that doesn’t offer a path for repairing it.

“Who needs him?” Evan laughs. “So, the drink? Tonight, or…”

“I’ll let you know,” I interrupt him because I want more time with Eloise. “I’ll text you.”

“Works for me.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m heading to the ED waiting room. I heard they restocked the vending machines.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

ELOISE

I PICK up the condom package from the floor of my bedroom. I didn't notice it when I was heading out to school this morning. I also didn't make my bed.

The sheets are still a tangled mess.

They're a reminder of what happened between Gaines and I before we parted to face our day apart.

My phone chimes so I take off out of the room in search of it.

I find it resting on the couch next to my tote. I dropped it all there, along with the cardigan I was wearing when I got home from my ice cream date with Pen.

Even though I'm hoping it's Gaines, I feel no disappointment when I see who sent me a text message.

Stevie: Guess what? Guess what?

I type out and send the obvious response.

Eloise: What?

I watch the three dots bounce on the screen as she types a reply.

Stevie: I got an A+ on my report about Gaines. Mom says I can pick a treat, so do you want to go for ice cream?

The last thing I need is more ice cream, but I can't turn the little sweetheart done, so I don't.

Eloise: I'd love to. Name the place and time.

While I wait for her response, I tug my knitting project out of my tote. It's a school assignment so I'll set it aside to focus on Pen's dress tonight. That is, if I don't fall into bed early with a stomachache from eating too much ice cream.

I look at my phone as soon as it signals an incoming message.

Stevie: Gaines wants ice cream too, so meet us at his hospital in 30 minutes, K?

A slow smile creeps over my lips as I type out my reply and send it.

Eloise: K.

It's not exactly a date, but I do get to see him again, so I toss my phone back on the couch to head to my bedroom to change out my T-shirt for my favorite black and white polka dot blouse.

“YOU'RE ELOISE, RIGHT?”

I stop mid-step to greet the man approaching me. “That's right. You're Dr. Sexton?”

“Correct.” He looks me over, taking in my blouse, jeans and the three inch black boots I tugged on for this meet up at the hospital.

I give his outfit a glance but's it typical doctor attire. His blue scrubs are covered with a white coat. His name and position as a trauma surgeon are stamped across his left chest.

He's an incredibly good-looking man, but I don't feel anything spark

inside of me the way I do when I get a look at Gaines.

“I take it you’re here to see Dr. Morgan?”

For a second I wonder if Gaines confided in him about me. Are they friends? Did Gaines tell this man that he’s seeing someone? That the someone is me?

Before I can answer, he explains the question, “I noticed you speaking with him at the coffee shop the day we met.”

“Right.” I nod.

“So you are here to see him?”

“Eloise!” Stevie’s voice turns me around.

I catch her and Astrid entering the hospital. Stevie lets out a giggle when she realizes that the high ponytail on her head matches the one on mine.

“I should go,” I say to Dr. Sexton.

“It was nice to see you again, Eloise.” He glances over my shoulder. “Say hi to Gaines for me when you see him.”

“I will,” I say as he starts to walk away.

“Who was that?” Stevie asks as soon as she’s close enough to whisper the question. “He looked like one of those doctors from the shows my mom watches at night.”

Astrid and I laugh in unison, before she responds. “Daddy watches those shows too. We like learning about medicine.”

“Uh huh.” Stevie crosses her arms. “I think he wants to be Eloise’s new boyfriend.”

“Who wants to be Eloise’s new boyfriend?”

That voice spins me around, and sends Stevie running past me to greet Gaines.

When she jumps at him, he scoops her up with ease. A hug follows and then she whispers something in his ear that ends with a heated gaze in my direction.

“I told Gaines that Dr. Sexton likes you,” Stevie announces.

Astrid scoots around me to approach Gaines too. She gives him a hug that traps Stevie between them. “He does seem like Eloise’s type.”

Since Gaines stays close-lipped, I break the tension and mention the reason for our impromptu gathering. “Should we go grab some ice cream now?”

“We should.” Stevie shimmies to the floor, adjusting the skirt of her dress as she does. “I’m thinking a scoop of chocolate and one of vanilla. What

about you, Gaines?”

He takes her by the hand to lead the way. “Whatever your heart desires.”

I wish he was saying that to me because my heart desires a moment alone with him so I can show him that he’s the only doctor I want.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

GAINES

I LIKE ice cream almost as much as I like green beans, but I saw this as a way to get exactly what I wanted today, and that's more time with my lamb.

If there's a master class on how to eat ice cream, Eloise Rehn should be the goddamn professor.

The way she licked the tip of the spoon between each bite had my cock aching for a turn.

Naturally, I had to calm the bastard down with deep breaths and thoughts of everything in the world that is non-sexual since I was hosting this ice cream soir ee in the middle of the hospital cafeteria.

The situation goes from bad to worse when I spot Dr. Scott on the approach.

I envisioned finishing out my day at my office, but I was called back in at

the request of Mr. Brokenshire's son. He flew in from Albuquerque after I contacted him around midnight.

I scooted back over here to reassure him that his father would pull through. Dr. Sexton offered the same words, but in his lackluster way, so I stepped in so that the younger Mr. Brokenshire can get at least a few hours of sleep tonight at a hotel a couple of blocks from here.

Evan wastes no time in introducing himself as soon as he's within a foot of the table. "I'm Dr. Scott. Who do we have here?"

"Stevie Morgan," Stevie jumps out of her chair. "This is my mom, Astrid Morgan and my friend, Eloise Rehn. You probably already know Gaines."

"I sure as hell do."

Stevie's nose scrunches. I can tell she's about to ask Evan to commit a hundred dollars to our swear fund, so I step in and offer to cover that. "I'll transfer one hundred on his behalf tonight."

Stevie grins. "I can live with that."

"Am I missing something?" Evan asks.

I nod. "Watch your mouth, Dr. Scott."

Realization hits him. "Excuse my language, young lady."

Stevie laughs. "Don't sweat it. We all let one slip once in a while."

The table erupts in laughter.

Evan focuses his gaze on Eloise. "I saw you here a few weeks back, right? You were hanging out with Saylor Robinson and Dax's girlfriend."

"Penny," Eloise fills in that blank. "I was. It's nice to meet you, sir."

She tosses me a look along with a smirk.

If she's looking for another angry fuck, I can make that happen if she keeps teasing me. I already have a handful of questions about Logan, but that can wait because it seems our ice cream party is about to balloon in size.

"Els!" Saylor Robinson's voice fills the entire cafeteria as she races toward us.

She's holding tightly to her lamb. It's wrapped up in something that looks a hell of a lot like a sweater.

"I'm going to leave you to this." Evan pats my shoulder. "I was just passing through on my way home."

I send him off with a tap on the back after he says goodbye to everyone.

Eloise is on her feet before Saylor reaches our table. She crouches to give the little girl a hug.

Penny and Dax are just steps behind her, followed by Mrs. Robinson and

a man who bears a striking resemblance to Saylor. They share the same color eyes, and hair. The dimple in her chin matches the one in his.

Penny greets us. “Dr. Morgan and everyone else.”

Astrid laughs as she pushes to stand. “I’m Astrid. I’m going to guess that you’re Pen.”

Penny looks genuinely touched. “How did you know?”

“Eloise mentioned you were a very pretty redhead.” She smiles. “She was right.”

Dax continues the introductions, ending with me. “Dad, this is the man. This is Dr. Morgan. He saved my life.”

Stevie gasps. “You saved his life, Gaines?”

“He did.” Saylor moves to stand next to Stevie. “That doctor is a lifesaver. Just like my favorite candy.”

Stevie nods. “Mine is chocolate. Do you want some ice cream?”

The two work that out with Astrid as I take Mr. Robinson’s hand for a shake. “It’s good to meet you.”

He slips his hand away from mine to wrap his arms around me. “Thank you, doctor. You saved my boy.”

My phone chirps in my pocket. I know that notification. It’s for an email but the crowd gathered isn’t aware, so I use the excuse that has never failed me. “I’m needed in the ED.”

“Of course, “ a few voices toss that out.

I turn to Daxton. “You’re not back for a medical reason, are you? You’re still doing all right?”

“I’m good.” He nods. “We took a chance hoping you’d be here so my dad could meet you.”

It’s not the first time a grateful family has tracked me down.

“It was good to see all of you.” I circle, stopping to give Eloise an extra second of my attention. “I’ll go take care of that issue now.”

I set off toward the exit.

I hear hurried footsteps behind me but I know they’re too heavy to belong to my lamb. I glance over my shoulder to see Daxton sprinting my way.

A month ago, movement like that would have caused him distress. Today, he’s not breaking a sweat.

“I have a quick question.” He rounds me, stopping me in my tracks.

I know what’s coming, but I don’t interrupt. I simply nod.

“You’re sure it’s okay if I get...” His voice trails as he steps closer. “It’s

okay if I get physical with Pen. I've got it all planned out for tomorrow."

I glance back at the people I just left. Penny's gaze is pinned to us, as is Eloise's but I know they're for two very different reasons.

Penny is focused on her boyfriend. Eloise can't take her eyes off of me.

Jesus. I may be the luckiest bastard in this city.

"Have fun, Dax." I look him in the eye. "You're good to go."

His entire face lights up as he smiles. "It's going to be epic. I've never liked a girl this much. I'm nervous as hell, but I want this. I've never wanted a woman more."

I know that feeling all too well.

He pats my shoulder. "You've been good to me, Dr. Morgan. If I can ever do anything for you, let me know."

"Live a long and happy life," I tell him. "That's all I'll ever ask of you."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

ELOISE

“SO, LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT.” Dax points a finger at Astrid. “You’re Eloise’s cousin? Your dads are brothers.”

“They are,” Stevie steps in to answer. “It’s pretty cool, right?”

“Very cool,” Pen responds.

I glance to the entrance of the cafeteria for the third time in the past forty minutes but Gaines has yet to reappear.

I know most emergencies aren’t actually resolved in the time it takes for one of the medical drama’s episodes to stream, but I was hoping to at least stare at him for a few more minutes tonight.

As tempted as I am to text him to see if he can spare a minute for me, I fight that urge because I can’t steal his time away from someone who really needs it.

“We’re going to head out,” Mrs. Robinson says. “Thanks again for the ice cream, Astrid. I can’t believe I had dessert with the singer of Forevermore.”

Astrid smiles softly.

She wrote that song for Berk before they were married. It was the impetus for her being signed to a recording contract and once the song was released, it was downloaded millions of times.

“You’re a star,” Dax comments. “How great is that?”

“It’s so great!” Saylor laughs. “Right, Stevie?”

They may be five years apart, but the two girls bonded quickly. Mrs. Robinson exchanged contact information with Astrid so Stevie and Saylor can meet up at the park one day before the Robinsons head back to Indiana.

“We need to go home too,” Astrid says to her daughter. “It’s going to be bedtime soon.”

I’m slightly envious because I barely slept last night, but I wouldn’t trade the time I spent with Gaines last night for anything.

“Do you want to catch an Uber with us, Els?” Penny asks.

“She can go with us,” Stevie counters.

“I have to make a stop on the way home,” I tell them both. “I had a great time, though.”

Hugs are exchanged. Kind thoughts are shared, and everyone departs leaving me alone in the hospital cafeteria.

I reach for my tote that is strung over the back of the chair I was sitting in. My stomach rolls in protest. That’s what two servings of ice cream in the span of a few hours will do to me.

It’s not nearly enough to send me straight to the ED but I can pass through there on my way home, so I shoulder my tote and head in that direction.

I TAKE a seat on the perimeter of the ED waiting room. From this vantage point I have a clear view of every doctor who strolls by. I’ve given myself fifteen minutes to sit here. If I don’t spot Gaines in that time, I’ll go home.

The man next to me smiles. “What’s wrong with you?”

I smile back. “Do I look like something is wrong with me?”

He looks me over slowly. “You’re in love.”

He may be right, but it doesn't matter. Gaines isn't looking for anything long-term, and even if he were, my connection to his family complicates things, as does his to mine.

"Are you?" I ask.

"You're way too young for me, sweetheart." He adjusts the fedora on his head. "Besides that, my wife would kill me, and since she needs me to take care of her that won't work for me."

My heart aches for him because I sense he's sitting next to me while he waits for news on her.

"She's in there now." He points toward one of the corridors that lead to the exam rooms. "With a handsome fellow who told me he could mend her heart."

"Is it Dr. Morgan?"

"Dr. Whitman," he says. "He's a good guy but he needs to get a new tailor. His pants are hemmed way too short."

As if on cue, a doctor with gray pants on and visible pink socks showing beneath the short bottom hem of the pants walks past.

"Speak of the devil." He points at him. "Do you see what I mean? His tailor needs an eye exam."

I nod. "I see it clear as day."

"That means your beautiful blue eyes are just fine." He taps his chest. "That's not me flirting. I'm just making an observation."

I move slightly in my chair and let out a deep breath.

"What hurts?"

I glance at him. "My stomach, I think."

He nods. "Is the pain there, or more up here?"

I watch as he taps his chest in the center again.

"Can it be both?" I chuckle. "I had two bowls of ice cream today."

His eyes widen. "Even I know that's a bad idea. Are you lactose intolerant?"

"Nope." I shake my head.

"My professional advice is to skip the ED." He glances at the reception desk. "Go home. Drink some soda water, and don't call me in the morning. We don't want my wife getting wind of this dalliance. Even if it is just a blossoming friendship."

"Are you a doctor?"

"I once was," he confesses. "Now, I'm Irene's full-time husband. I kind

of like that job better.”

I shift again, tossing my head back because the pain shooting through my stomach has definitely moved to my chest.

The man next to me reaches for me. He rests his hand over my wrist. “Take a few deep breaths.”

I do that, but still feel discomfort, so I move to stand, but a sudden burst of dizziness takes hold of me, so I sit back down.

“You can thank me later for this, sweetheart.”

“For what?” I ask, as he pushes to his feet.

“This.” He turns toward the reception desk and yells out, “Help! We need help! She’s having a heart attack!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

GAINES

I'M NOT on duty but everyone in this ED knows that they need to get the hell out of my way when I hear someone in distress.

I'm racing around Jordan Whitman as he sprints toward the waiting area.

I easily beat him.

People are rushing toward where Dr. Otis Carnbet is on his feet. He's my mentor and one of my favorite people on this earth. His wife, Irene, is currently in an exam room. She was brought in my ambulance just as I was leaving the hospital. I stuck around to add my two cents to Dr. Whitman's diagnosis.

"I'm fine," a soft, very familiar, voice says from somewhere in the middle of the crowd. "I'm not having a heart attack."

I say excuse me twice, before I push my way through the crowd to get to

where Otis is standing.

I'm crouching immediately when I see who he's pointing at.

My Eloise.

"What's going on?" I toss that question out there, hoping someone is playing some sick, twisted joke on me.

Otis is the first to speak, "She's experiencing radiating pain from her stomach through her chest. She's flushed. Her resting heart rate is one hundred and twenty five."

Eloise looks up at him. "You were taking my pulse when you were holding my hand?"

Otis shrugs. "It's a trick of the trade."

She smiles. "I'm not having a heart attack."

He's right about her looking flushed, so I rest a hand against her forehead. "You're not fevered."

"Did you forget everything I taught you?" Otis laughs. "I didn't say she had the flu, son. I said it was a heart attack."

I shake my head and smile. "She's not having a heart attack."

"How do you know that?" he questions. "Do you have a crystal ball?"

The people who had gathered around us disperse to reclaim their seats. Jordan motions for Otis to join him. "Irene can see you now."

"She can see me whenever she damn well pleases," he responds in a gruff tone as he sets off with his cane. "Save that young woman's life, Dr. Morgan. Don't make me look bad."

As soon as he's out of earshot, I take a seat next to Eloise. "What's going on with your chest?"

She leans close to speak in a whispered tone. "You've seen it. It's pretty special, isn't it?"

She has no idea how fucking beautiful her tits and the rest of her are, but I'm not in the mood to joke with her.

"Dr. Carnbet said you're experiencing chest pain."

"For a split second. It disappeared like that." She punctuates that with a snap of her fingers. "I'm hungry for real food, and I'm super tired. I think that's all it is."

"You haven't eaten yet?"

"Just ice cream."

I push to stand. "Give me ten minutes to check on Dr. Carnbet's wife, and then I'm taking you home."

“You don’t have to do that.” She stands too. “I can get home on my own.”

“We’re not going to your apartment, lamb,” I correct her. “I’m taking you home with me.”

“HUMOR ME.”

Eloise shakes her head. “I’m not letting you take my blood pressure, Gaines.”

“What if I strip?” I try to strike a bargain. “Have you ever had your blood pressure taken by a nude doctor?”

“You do not want me to answer that.”

For fuck’s sake.

I can’t tell if she’s joking or not, so I chuckle, hoping she joins in. She doesn’t.

“Eloise?”

Her hands drop to her hips as she surveys the interior of my apartment. I’m proud of the fact that I own it, but beyond that it’s a barren space that has only ever functioned as a cocoon of sorts for me.

It’s the barrier between my job and me. I seek solace here. I don’t fuck here. I rarely eat here, but I always sleep here.

“Yes,” she answers. “Did you have another question, Dr. Morgan?”

I drop the bags in my hands on the couch, and go to where she’s still standing in the foyer of my apartment. I curl my index fingers through two of the loops on her jeans so I can tug her closer.

A smile starts on her lips but she stops it.

“Kiss me,” I say in a hoarse tone.

She greedily accepts that challenge. Cupping her hands around my face she gifts me with a slow, sensual kiss.

I swear to fuck that is all the fuel I need to get through my days.

“I’m fine,” she insists. “You can do that magic trick Irene’s husband did and take my pulse when I’m not aware.”

“He’s going to fucking love it when I tell him that you refer to him as Irene’s husband.”

“That’s who he is,” she says with a soft smile. “He told me it’s his full-

time job and he loves it.”

“He loves her.”

“Will she be all right?” Concern taints her tone. “I know you can’t share personal information, but she’ll survive, right?”

“She will,” I say that with confidence, since what brought Irene to the ED tonight was remedied with a subtle change to one of her heart medications.

Her gaze trails over my face. “How long have they been married?”

The answer is an easy one since I attended their fiftieth wedding anniversary dinner six months ago. “A little over fifty years.”

I expect that will bring her joy, but her lips dip into a frown. “That’s a very long time. They must have gone through a lot together.”

“They love each other.”

She closes her eyes briefly. “I’d like to help you cook.”

“I’m pouring takeout soup into bowls and cutting up fruit.” I keep her in place. “I think I can handle that.”

“I want to help.”

“You’re taking a bath.” I step back to push a strand of her hair back from her face. “I slipped a bottle of bubble bath into the shopping cart when you were distracted by my ass.”

Her hand jumps to her mouth. “What? I was not looking at your ass.”

“The walls in that store we were in are lined with mirrors, lamb.” I tap my ass. “Don’t tell me what I did and didn’t see when I stole a glance.”

“Your ass is quite an ass,” she admits. “It’s not your best feature, but it’s in the top five.”

“So, my cock holds the number one spot?”

“No.” She trails a fingertip over my bottom lip stopping to kiss the spot she bruised with her teeth this morning. “Your eyes do.”

Jesus. This woman is going to ruin me.

“I’ll start your bath.” I step back to find some air to breathe because I feel like my lungs are collapsing. “I skipped lavender for something vanilla scented.”

“You’re perfect.”

I want to be. I wish to fuck I was, but there’s not a man walking this earth who can claim that title.

“Strip.”

She laughs. “What is it with you and that word? Does it work with all of your lovers?”

I stop her hands with mine when she goes for the top button on her blouse. “I don’t have any other lovers, Eloise.”

“You will,” she whispers.

“Not while we’re doing…” I struggle to find the words.

She steps in to save me. “This.”

“This.” I lean down for a kiss. “I’m not taking another woman to bed. I don’t want you to fuck anyone either.”

“My pussy is yours until further notice.” She tilts her head. “All of the rest of me is, too.”

I turn around under the pretense that I’m going to grab the bubble bath out of the bag, but I use the brief reprieve to take a breath.

I want all of her, including her heart. I don’t deserve it. I could never do enough to earn it, but regardless, it’s something I’ll want until the day I die.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

ELOISE

“YOUR BATH SIDE MANNER IS IMPECCABLE.” I smile at him across the table.

“You liked that, did you?”

I nod. “The vanilla scented bubbles, the extra care you took to wash certain areas of my body, the kisses while you did that.”

He had helped me get in his claw foot tub, and then had sat next to it, reciting a few lines from different poems Claude Garin had written. The reason for that was that he was testing my knowledge.

I knew exactly what poem each quote belonged to. When I switched it up to quiz him, he knew it all, too.

He got on his knees then to wash my body, taking his time to soap a washcloth before he ran it over me. He stopped every few seconds to kiss my

mouth softly.

All of this happened with candles lighting the room, and a glass of red wine at the ready for me.

“This food is delicious.” I point at the bowl that once contained a creamy mushroom and herbed soup. The small plate to the left of it only had a few strawberry slices on it. I polished off the other berries and kiwi slices.

“I can’t take credit for any of that.” He grins. “The soup is my favorite from that particular market. Fruit is fruit.”

“You don’t cook much, do you?”

He shakes his head. “I work too much to cook.”

My gaze drops to his bare chest and the tattoo that winds around his bicep. He took off his shirt after I “accidentally” splashed him as he sat next to the tub. After he dried me and dressed me in one of his white button-down shirts, he changed into a pair of jeans.

“When did you get the tattoos?”

His gaze darts to his arm. “Med school.”

I study the design carefully, noting how the shaded gray and black ink contains a few symbols along with what looks like someone’s name.

My heart sinks as I crane my neck to try and read it.

“Rudy,” he whispers. “It says Rudy.”

“Oh.” I sit back, slightly embarrassed that he caught me trying to make it out.

“He was an old friend,” he explains.

Was.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

I want to know more about the person he cared enough about to tattoo his name on his body, but I don’t pry. I trust that he knows that I’ll listen if he wants to share.

“Thank you.” His eyes meet mine across the table. “Do you want more wine?”

Since he didn’t indulge in a glass of the robust red with me, I shake my head. “I’m good.”

He pushes to stand. “I’ll clear the dishes. What do you say to watching something on TV? I’ve got one in my bedroom.”

I can’t read between those lines, so I nod. “I’d like that.”

He reaches for my dishes, but stops to stare at me. “Say you’re feeling better, Eloise.”

“You’re feeling better, Eloise.”

He laughs. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

I laugh too. “I’m feeling much better.”

“Good.” He scoops up all the dishes, balancing them perfectly in his hand and on his forearm.

“You used to wait tables,” I assume.

“Didn’t everyone at some point?”

Not me. The only real job I’ve ever held has been at Vinyl Crush.

“I’ll put these in the sink, and then take you to bed.”

I can’t help but smile. “I can’t wait.”

HIS BACK IS against the massive headboard. My back is against his chest. I’m nestled between his bare legs as he rests a hand on my right thigh.

“Are you comfortable, lamb?”

“Very,” I whisper.

He’s cradling me in a sense. I can feel his heart beating against my back.

I feel safe and protected in a way that I don’t think I’ve ever felt before.

My gaze shifts to the bedroom window. There is no blind covering it and the sheer curtains are opened to reveal the soft light streaming in from the city.

“I like watching TV like this,” he confesses. “The city provides just the right amount of light.”

I smile because this is my perfect scenario. Everything about this moment will live within me forever.

“What do you want to watch?” he questions as he reaches for the remote. “Don’t say a medical drama.”

I lean back to rest my head on his shoulder so I can catch a glimpse of his handsome face. “How do you know I watch those?”

“Tell me you don’t,” he scoffs. “No one solves a case in that amount of time, Eloise.”

“I don’t watch for the doctors medical skills.”

Pretending to look shocked, he tosses the remote back on the bed. “Do you touch yourself when you watch those doctors do their thing?”

I laugh. “I’m never telling.”

“Show me then.”

I can feel his cock harden behind me. He’s wearing boxer briefs but the outline of his erection is pressing into the small of my back, right above my ass.

“You want me to show you?” I look up at him again. “You want me to finger myself?”

His hands jump to the front of the button-down shirt I’m wearing. He unbuttons it swiftly, pushing the fabric aside to expose my naked body.

Before I say anything, he has my right breast in his hand. He kneads the flesh, pinching my nipple. “Show me now.”

I lean back slightly, finding the perfect spot against him before I trail my right hand over thigh.

I can feel the shift in his breathing immediately. The span between his heartbeats lessens.

I moan softly when I first run my fingertips over my cleft. I’m already wet. The thought of him watching me get myself off is heady. It’s set a fire inside of me that I know will only increase in intensity until I come.

“Touch that pretty pussy,” he growls. “It’s so goddamn beautiful.”

I do just that, honing in on my already swollen clit.

My hips move with each tight circle my finger makes.

“You do that when you’re thinking about me,” he whispers in my ear as his left hand joins in and glides over my thigh.

He pinches my nipple harder, upping the pace of my finger.

“That’s it, baby,” he murmurs against the shell of my ear. “You’re going to come for me like this, then I’m going to fuck you.”

The promise of his cock is enough to send me closer to the edge. “I want that.”

“You need that,” he corrects me, his voice hitting a dangerous low that both soothes and excites me.

“I need it so much,” I agree, my head resting against his shoulder as I whimper. “You fuck me so good.”

His hand jumps from my thigh to my core. He threads his fingers through mine to take over.

My legs fall open wider, giving him more access.

“You’re so goddamn wet.” He groans. “Come for me, lamb. Come.”

I do. I break apart inside, a rush of desire storms through me, splintering my control. Shaking from the orgasm, I call out his name.

As I fall back from it, he tugs his shirt off of me before he slides off the bed.

He moves quickly. Grabbing a condom package from a drawer in the table next to the bed. His cock is covered quickly as I rest my cheek against the blanket, trying to catch my breath.

“Over here.” He pats the edge of the bed. “On all fours, ass high.”

I scramble to get there as quickly as I can. My desire for his cock dictates each of my movements.

When I’m in place, he tugs me even closer to the edge. He’s standing next to the bed, and as he lines up to enter me from behind, he trails his hand down my back until he slaps my ass cheek. “I’m not going to last long, sweet thing. This pussy owns me.”

I push back, wanting him now. “Please.”

His hands grip my hips as he slams into me in one swift thrust.

I cry out because there’s a sharp burst of pain before that morphs into pleasure. “You’re so deep.”

“Brace yourself,” he whispers into the silence of the room. “I promise you’re going to love this.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

GAINES

I DROP one of my business cards on Eloise's lap.

She drops her gaze to it, scooping it into her palm. "What's this for?"

"Turn it over."

She does just that and reads what's written on the other side of it. "Nine, twelve, seventeen, and five."

I nod.

She chuckles nervously. "I'm lost. What are these numbers for?"

"They're a key code."

"A key code," she repeats, her gaze searching my face. "A key to what?"

My heart.

I want to say that, but truth be told, she stole that key the first time I saw her at the club. I'm not a romantic. I don't claim to know how to sweep a

woman off her feet, but this woman sitting on my bed has perfected the art of sweeping a man off his feet.

I'm that man, and as much as I want to deny it, I'm falling in love with her.

Hell, I'm beginning to think I did that more than two years ago when I first looked in her eyes.

I take a seat next to her.

She's got my shirt back on and is bundled under one of the blankets on my bed. I'm back in jeans but there's nothing under them. I don't know if she'll be up for another round before we fall asleep, but I could fuck this woman six times a day and still want more.

I close her fist around the card because I want it to hold onto it forever. "It's the key code to my apartment. Use that code on the panel outside my door."

Her eyelids flutter as her gaze reaches mine. "What?"

I want to tell her that I need her here when I get home from work. I want her here to take bubble baths whenever she wants. I want her to fill this cocoon with life, with her, with us.

I'm a coward, though, so I opt for another approach. "I want you to have a place to go where Norvin won't be breaking down your door in the middle of the night."

A bubble of laughter bursts out from between her perfect lips. "Norvin is my super."

"You're super what?" I question with a perked brow. "Don't say lover, lamb, because no man has ever fucked you as good as I do."

It's an arrogant statement, but I felt how she reacts to my cock. I know how wet my tongue makes her.

She leans forward to press her lips to mine for a decadent kiss. "No one fucks like you. I'm addicted to you."

"The feeling is mutual," I whisper against her mouth.

She grins. "Norvin is the building superintendent."

I figured as much, but clarification is never a bad thing.

"Come here when you want a change of scenery." I drop my gaze to my chest and abs. "The view here is a good one."

Her eyes flash with need. "I'll say."

I laugh.

"Thank you for this." She presses her closed fist to the center of her chest.

“This means a lot to me, Gaines.”

I nod in silence, grateful that she’s accepted it with grace.

It’s the first time I’ve given anyone access to my apartment, but it feels right, and necessary. I want her to know this is a safe space for her.

I reach up to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “You passed out for a bit after the fuck.”

She laughs. “Does that surprise you? Who needs a personal trainer when Dr. Morgan is around to work a woman’s body like that? I think my heart rate topped the one twenty-five it did earlier.”

I smile. “By the time I took it on our way here it was under one hundred.”

“Oh my God.” She hits my bicep. “You took it without me knowing? You’re just as bad as Irene’s husband.”

“I consider that a compliment,” I tell her. “I took it when you were showing me your bracelet in the cab.”

Her gaze drops to the thin silver bracelet circling her wrist. “Doctors are like magicians.”

I chuckle. “We do what we need to do.”

“You do all of that very well,” she says. “What do you want to do now?”

I eye her up. I could go for another fuck but I want to know what she needs from me. “It’s up to you.”

“My best friend and I used to play this game.” She tilts her chin down. “We’d each ask a question and the other person had to tell the truth. It’s kind of like truth and dare, but no dares, just the truth.”

I’d rather have a tooth pulled, but I’ve avoided her questions long enough, so I take her hand in mine, and nod. “You go first. Ask away.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

ELOISE

I PLACE the business card Gaines gave me on the nightstand. I want to clutch it in my hand forever because it feels like the greatest gift I've ever been given. I want this to mean he's falling as hard for me as I am for him, but I don't know if that's what this is.

"You go first," he repeats. "Toss a question at me, lamb."

I have a million of them, but I blurt out the one that feels pressing now. "The night I fell, you were you on your way to club, weren't you?"

He nods. "Yes."

"Can I ask a follow up question before you ask one?"

He smiles. "You just did. It's my turn."

"Dammit." I purse my lips. "Fair is fair. Ask away."

"Were you planning on fucking someone at the club the night you came

face to face with the devil?”

“The night I fell?” I reframe it. “I’m honestly not sure. Curiosity took me back there.”

He accepts that answer with a nod, so it’s my turn. “Same question. Were you planning on fucking someone at the club that night.”

“No,” he answers without hesitation before he amends his answer, “Wait. That might be a yes.”

I raise my hand. “Permission to break the rules please.”

He takes my hand to kiss my palm. “Permission granted. You’re going to ask what I mean by that.”

I nod. “Yes.”

He adjusts his ass on the bed. “I saw Penny and Dax at Atlas 22 that night.”

“The night I fell?”

He taps his palm. “I’m keeping track of how many times you break the rules.”

“Good.” I laugh. “That will lead us into angry fuck territory.”

His blue eyes glint in the dim light of the room. “You want that again.”

“I loved that.”

He chuckles before he continues his explanation, “I saw Penny and Dax and she mentioned the mask and you going back to the place where you wore it before, so…”

“So, you came to find me?” I interrupt. “Is that why you were going there?”

“Yes,” he admits. “I can’t tell you what I would have done if I saw you in there with another guy but it’s highly likely he would have ended up in the ED and I’d be facing a prison sentence.”

The thought of him using his hands to cause harm to anyone is so foreign that I can’t wrap my mind around it.

“That’s the true story of why I was going to the club.” He traces the curve of my jaw with his finger.

“When did you realize I was your lamb?” I don’t care whose turn it is, that question has been gnawing at me for weeks.

He closes his eyes briefly before he levels them on my face. He moves in for a chaste kiss, stopping to cup my cheek in his hand. “It was shortly after Berk met Astrid.”

I’m so stunned that I’m sure my mouth falls open. “What?”

He sucks in a deep breath. “It was on a Friday. Astrid was playing a set at a bar near Berk’s brownstone. It was raining. You were there. I saw you at the bar alone. I just knew. My body knew.”

“You knew it was me?”

“Without question,” he whispers. “I saw you. Apparently I was staring at you because Berk asked if I wanted an introduction.”

“You said no,” I state the obvious.

He shakes his head. “I kept my life and what I did at Club Skyn very far apart.”

“What you do there?” I correct him.

“Did there,” he counters. “My life hasn’t been the same since we had that moment in the private room, Eloise. I searched for you. Hell, I’d stare at every brunette I passed on the street. I took a second glance if I saw a woman who had your curves, but no one in this goddamn city even comes close to resembling you.”

My bottom lip trembles. It’s an outward sign of all of the conflicting emotions ricocheting inside of me. “So, at the wedding?”

“Their wedding.” He chuckles. “I saw you again wearing that little blue dress. Your tits looked amazing. Your smile almost brought me to my knees. I couldn’t take being in the same room with you so I bolted.”

“You went to the hospital,” I correct him. “There was an emergency. Berk told all of us.”

“The emergency was I needed to jerk off while I was thinking of you.”

I want to laugh, but he gave up time with his cousin on one of the biggest days of his life because of his need for me.

“You saved my phone number,” I whisper trying to fit that piece into the bigger puzzle.

“I just needed it,” he says in a low tone. “I just wanted it. I’d pull it up and stare at it. I didn’t intend to use it. It felt like gold to me. I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t have to.” I slide closer to him so I can sit in his lap. “You knew who I was when Daxton collapsed, and at the hospital the next day when you said lamb.”

“I saw the way you reacted to that.” He kisses the side of my neck. “I knew that you figured out our connection then.”

I nod. “I did. It almost knocked me off my feet.”

“You ran,” he reminds me. “You took off out of that cafeteria without a

glance back.”

I chuckle. “I had to. I needed to breathe. I had to think.”

He reaches for my chin to tilt my head up until our eyes meet again. “Tell me why you ran out of the club after you blew me, Eloise. I wanted more, but you were gone before I could beg you to stay.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

GAINES

THAT QUESTION HAS BEEN a thorn in my side, and my heart, for more than two years.

She bolted when I wanted to fuck her. I wanted more than that, though. I wanted her real name and her phone number. I wanted to meet her back in that club every night after that, but she left.

Her hand drops to the center of her chest. “I thought I was going to pass out.”

The doctor in me takes over. “That means what? What were you feeling?”

“Amazing.” She smiles. “I came harder on your hand than I ever had with any guy in any way.”

I want to take pride in that, but my concern for her is overshadowing everything else.

“When you came down my throat, I was in awe.” She rubs the side of her face. “The sensation, the taste, and those sounds you made... I felt lightheaded. My heart was pounding so hard it was drowning out everything. It must have been an adrenaline rush. I hadn’t experienced anything like that before.”

That makes sense.

“I ran because I couldn’t breathe.” She smiles. “I felt overwhelmed by it all, and I think, and please don’t laugh, but I felt like I was falling in love with you.”

I sit stone faced because hearing that now, even if it’s in the context of a fond recollection from two years ago, hits me hard.

I want her to say that to me again, and mean it now.

“I was too young to be there,” she confesses. “I was twenty. Almost twenty-one but I was too young to know what was in store for me. I’m so grateful that you were the man who took me to that room.”

“I’m grateful too.”

She cups a hand over my cheek. “That night taught me that sex can be this incredible experience. I learned to demand more from my lovers. I learned to ask for what I really wanted.”

I drop my gaze to the bed. I can’t hear this. I don’t want to know about her other lovers or how they got her off. I sure as fuck don’t want to hear how I played a hand in that. Literally played a hand because I fucked her tight pussy with my fingers until she came.

“Whose turn is it now?” she asks as if I can go on with this “*game*.”

I feel as though I was pushed into a confessional booth just as I was the one time my grandmother dragged me to church with her. I was ten, maybe twelve, and my sins at the time amounted to throwing a rock at a squirrel.

My aim was shit. The squirrel was fine.

She shifts in my lap to straddle me, resting her hands on my shoulders.

Her gaze sears into me. I feel so damn exposed. It’s almost as if she’s looking straight into my soul.

If she keeps that up she’s going to realize I’m in love with her.

“His voice was like a wave that met her at dawn,” she whispers, her fingers tangling in my hair on the back of my head.

I finish the last line of the Garin poem she’s quoting, “It soothed her very soul until she took her last breath, and then it stayed with her beyond.”

With more tenderness than I’ve ever experienced, Eloise kisses me in a

way that will stay with me forever.

“ARE WE EATING PIZZA FOR BREAKFAST?” Eloise laughs as she enters my kitchen. “How did you get pizza delivery at six in the morning?”

I look her over. She back in my white button-down shirt and since only one button between her breasts is holding it place, I catch a glimpse of her panties underneath.

I’m dressed for my day in a shirt that matches the one she’s wearing, along with navy blue pants and a striped blue tie.

“I saved the owner’s life last year.”

It’s the truth, but that’s not only reason I was able to get a ham and pineapple pie delivered this early. The owner of my favorite pizza place starts his day early so that anyone who wants a slice of pizza with scrambled eggs and bacon on it, and a coffee knows where they can go. The food is free in exchange for a donation to the food pantry across the street from his business.

When I called him an hour ago to request a special order, he said he couldn’t refuse.

I’ll reward his kindness with a healthy donation to the pantry on my way to work.

She pops open the lid of the box. “Ham and pineapple? This is my favorite.”

I know. Stevie is the source for that tidbit of information.

We were making homemade pizza one night when she asked if we could race to a market to get ham and pineapple. She mentioned that it was Eloise’s favorite so she wanted to try it out. She wasn’t a fan. I was.

She reaches for a piece, but pulls back to lick sauce from her finger. “It’s delicious. Is it your favorite too?”

I take her hand in mine and trace my tongue over the finger she just licked. “It is now.”

“We’re kind of perfect for each other,” she says, before she sucks in a deep breath. “I mean, we have a lot of fun.”

I like her first statement more, but before I can tell her that my phone starts ringing.

Her eyes dart to it, but she doesn’t say a word.

I do when I scoop it up and answer it, “Dr. Morgan.”

I listen to Julissa rattle off an update about a patient in the CCU. I turn my back to Eloise as I list the blood tests I want done on the young man before I arrive at the hospital.

I hear movement behind me just in time to see Eloise disappear down the hall.

“I’ll be there shortly,” I tell Julissa before I end the call.

By the time I’m at the doorway to my bedroom, Eloise is getting dressed. “I’ll get ready to go too.”

“You can stay,” I say. “Eat pizza, watch something, have another bath. The door will automatically lock behind you when you leave.”

“I have school in two hours.” She buttons her blouse. “I’ll take a slice to go, though.”

“Good.” I turn to exit the room.

Before I can, she’s behind me with her arms wrapped around my chest. “You’re such a good man.”

I let out a deep seated chuckle. “I’m not so sure about that. I am a good doctor, though.”

“The best.” She rounds me to grab hold of my tie. She tugs it slightly. “One last quick round of our game.”

The patient Julissa called me about is stable, and I see a playfulness in Eloise’s eyes that I don’t want to rush away from, so I bite. “Who gets to ask the question?”

“Me.” She widens her eyes as if to suggest that was a given.

“Go.”

“Why did you become a doctor?”

I have to look away from the truth that is always in her gaze. She expects that from me now, but it will take us down a path that will create a distance I can’t bear.

“Let me guess.” She taps her finger to her chin. “Was it to impress women? Or maybe it was to...”

“I need to go,” I cut her off mid-sentence. “I’m needed in the CCU, Eloise.”

Her expression shifts instantly. “Oh, of course. I’m sorry.”

I step back and suck in a breath. “Have a good day.”

“I will.” Her voice is soft. Pain taints it, but I can’t do this right now.

With just a simple goodbye, I turn and walk out of my bedroom and away

from the woman who owns my heart.

CHAPTER FIFTY

ELOISE

“YOU LOOK A LITTLE PALE,” Astrid remarks as she steps into Vinyl Crush.

“I said the very same to her when I got here,” Penny pipes up from where she’s currently sorting through a box of records that arrived yesterday.

Astrid tosses me a look and mouths the words, “*Is she working here?*”

“*Just helping me,*” I mouth back.

“I’m fine,” I say in response to my cousin’s comment. “I’ve been working on a million different projects at once.”

It’s an exaggeration. I’ve spent the past week and a half focused on Penny’s wedding dress and sketching a design for Stevie’s special dress. I plan on texting her an image of that after she’s done school today.

“One of those projects is for me,” Penny states proudly.

She skims a hand over the front of her denim shirt to brush away some dust. “I love this place. I never knew this jewel existed until Els told me to stop by for a visit.”

Astrid beams. “It was my mom’s jewel. I wish I could devote more time to it, but with my recording schedule, and writing new songs, I just can’t make the time.”

“Thank God for Castle.” It almost feels wrong to say that since I gave Astrid a hard time when she hired him on as manager.

“He gave me his resignation last night.”

My head snaps to the left to look at my cousin. “What?”

“He’s leaving New York.” She sighs. “He has family out west and there’s a job that’s his if he wants it. It’s at a radio station. Something local but he wants to give it a try.”

Shit.

As much as I want to fill the void of his absence, I don’t have the time.

“I’ll need to start looking for someone right away,” Astrid says. “Where’s that Help Wanted sign we had? I want to post it in the window.”

Penny steps forward, dusting off her white pants now, too. “Could I apply?”

My gaze darts to Astrid to gauge her reaction. I see instant relief in her expression. “You want the job?”

“I’ve worked retail. I was the manager of a clothing store back in Rhode Island,” she goes on, “I should also mention that I love music. Old, new, country, jazz. You name it. I love it. Go ahead, quiz me.”

I already know by the smile on Astrid’s face that she’s going to give Pen the job, but she plays along.

“Give me the name of the local band who released their first album a few years ago.” She pauses. “They’re music is next level. The band consists of three sisters, and...”

“Cupid Karma,” Penny blurts out. “If you’re not talking about Cupid Karma, you should be.”

Astrid races toward her with her hand outstretched. “You’re hired. When can you start?”

Gaines: I can't tonight.

THIS MESSAGE MAY HAVE JUST ARRIVED on my phone, but it a carbon copy of the one I received yesterday when I was with Penny and Astrid at Vinyl Crush. He sent a similar message three days ago, but added work as the reason he couldn't meet up with me.

Penny peers at me over the menu in her hand. "What's up, Els?"

She brought me to Crispy Biscuit for lunch today so she could give me a condensed version of her first time with Daxton. I told her I didn't need details and I was happy for her, but she insisted we sit down for a meal so she could replay the entire night for me.

I set my phone on the table with the screen down. "How do you know when you're being ghosted?"

Just as she's about to answer, I change up the question, "Are repeated brush-offs considered ghosting? Or is that something else?"

"Who the hell is ghosting you?"

I laugh, even though my heart has been breaking a little more each day since Gaines left me to go to work that morning a week and a half ago.

"Who, Els?" She looks around the crowded diner. "Give me his name and I'll set him straight."

I glance at the two vintage butterfly hairpins she's wearing. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," she argues. "If a man repeatedly brushes off your advances, ignores your messages, or never responds to you, consider that man yesterday's news."

I want him to be tomorrow's headline and an important part of the story of my life for each day going forward.

"In the past, I've always handled men like that in a certain way."

I curl my fingers. "Give it to me. Tell me how."

"Do this by text, or a call, or if you know where to find him, go there." She smiles. "Tell him that if he wants you, he needs to show that to you, and if he doesn't, he needs to man up and own that."

I've done the same with men in my past, but I've never been in love before.

"You know it needs to be done." She reaches across the table to pat my hand. "I'll go along with you for backup if needed."

I manage a weak smile. "I can handle it."

"I know you can." She glances at the approaching waitress. "Can you handle half a grilled cheese sandwich and fries? I think that's what we should

share.”

“Sure,” I say without giving it a second thought.

As she orders that and two soft drinks, I pick up my phone and read his message again.

Penny’s right. I don’t want to live in limbo forever.

I know Gaines is busy with work, but I thought he’d make time for us, even just a few minutes via text to catch up.

I jump a little when another text lights up my screen.

Astrid: Why don’t you and Pen come by for dinner later? We can celebrate Pen’s new job.

I glance at Penny. “Do you want to go to Astrid’s for dinner tonight to celebrate your new job?”

“Hell, yes.” Her face beams with a smile. “I’m going to be making twice what I make at my insurance job.”

I smile too. “Good. I’ll tell her we’re in.”

“Saylor is still in town.” She sighs. “They’re heading home in two days, but I know she’d love to see Stevie and the Robinsons could use a date night.”

“Let me check to see if she’ll be around.”

Eloise: Should Pen bring Saylor or does Stevie have big plans with her dad tonight?

Astrid’s reply is swift, but it’s not what I expected.

Astrid: Yes, please! Stevie will be home. Gaines invited Berk out for dinner, so it will be just us girls.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

GAINES

I DROP my gaze to my phone's screen but this time I'm not reading an update on a patient or my upcoming office schedule. I'm staring at the only picture of Eloise that I've taken.

She was asleep in my bed when I snapped it.

The covers were pulled up to her chin and her hair was a halo on the pillow beneath her. She looks like an angel.

I should be with her tonight, and every night forever, but before I can do that I have to cleanse my soul. I need to unburden myself. It starts tonight when I confess my sins to my cousin. I need his advice on how to tell Eloise about my past.

I asked Berk to meet me for dinner. I suggested a diner near my apartment. He insisted we eat here, so I told him to make the reservation and

he did.

Atlas 22 has played a pivotal role in my life over the course of the last couple of months. In some twisted way, it's fitting that I'm taking the first steps to leave my past behind here.

"Dr. Morgan?" Tony, the manager, comes at my full speed. "You're sitting down for a meal tonight?"

I laugh that off. "It's a rare occurrence, but I am."

"Will a beautiful woman be joining you?"

I shake my head. "My cousin. He's not nearly as good-looking as I am."

I expect him to laugh, but he nods. "Not many men are."

I toss him a smile. "I'll wait to order until Berk arrives. I'm a touch early so I'll start with a glass of sparkling water."

"If it's a special occasion, I'm more than happy to send over a bottle of champagne." He pauses. "On the house, of course. The entire dinner is on the house."

"That's not necessary, Tony."

"You saved a life in here," he reminds me of something I'll never forget. "That doesn't happen every day."

I spot Berk on the approach so I motion toward him. "There's my cousin now."

I stand to greet him. As usual, he goes for an embrace. I welcome it tonight as I always do.

He pats my cheek. "It's good to see you, Gaines."

"The genes in your family are next level." Tony chuckles. "What can I get you to drink, sir? Are you a Morgan too?"

"Berk Morgan." Berk offers his hand to Tony. "I understand my cousin saved a life here."

"It was like something out a movie." Tony takes Berk's hand. "Being a witness to that sure does change your outlook on life."

Berk jerks a thumb toward me. "They'll write books about him one day."

"Enough!" I raise both hands in the air as I smile. "I'm hungry. Let's sit."

Tony nods. "Champagne for you, Berk?"

I already know how he'll respond. "I won't turn that down."

"I'll bring the bottle." He sprints toward the bar.

Berk adjusts his suit jacket as she takes a seat across from me. "That guy loves you."

"That guy is grateful that Daxton didn't die in that spot over there."

Berk looks me over. “What was that like? In that moment, when you saw him on the floor, what exactly goes through your mind?”

I lean back in my chair. “My training kicks in.”

“Sure, but there’s more to it than that,” he presses. “Do you panic at all? Is there any fear? Or is it more a challenge?”

All of that exists in the moment when you’re faced with someone dying in front of you, so I nod. “It’s hard to describe.”

“Try,” he insists. “I’ve always wondered about that. When Stevie has a nosebleed I fucking feel like the world is about to end.”

We both chuckle.

“I meant what I said to Tony.” He points at my suit jacket. “You always look like a million bucks. You’re single. You’re rich as fuck, and you’re a life-saving cardiologist. Give me the word, and I’ll get Sinclair a contract to write your autobiography.”

I know it’s her job, but I’ll never be her subject.

I don’t address that, though, I skip past it all to hone in on the reason I asked him here. I might as well take the step since he just opened the door for me.

“I’m not single, Berk.”

Technically, I am, but I’m madly in love with Eloise. I want a future with her and that begins with telling her about my past, and sharing my love for her with my family.

“You’re not single?” His brows pinch together.

Before I can say another word, Tony is back at his side with a bottle of expensive champagne and two glasses.

He pops the cork before pouring a taste for Berk. He samples it quickly, motioning that he wants a refill.

I wave a hand over the empty glass since I’m on call.

“Can I join the party?”

The voice behind me is familiar, but unexpected. I glance over my shoulder to see Daxton Robinson behind me.

“Hey, Dr. Morgan.” He raises his hand in the air. “I’m sorry to interrupt but I could really use a minute of your time.”

I survey the room behind him, expecting to see Penny, but instead, I see his folks being seated at a table not twenty feet from where we are.

Why am I not surprised that I keep running into this kid here?

“I’m Berk Morgan.” Berk shoves his hand at Dax as Tony slips away.

“Daxton Robinson.” Dax shakes his hand. “I’m a patient of Dr. Morgan’s.”

Berk shoots me a glance. I toss him one back meant to apologize for the interruption but he pushes back from the table. “I’m going to call Astrid and check in.”

“Wait.” Dax drops his hand to Berk’s forearm. “Are you her husband?”

“I am.” He stands. “I’m pretty sure your girlfriend and sister are at my house right now having dinner with my wife and her cousin.”

“What a small world.” Dax laughs. “It’s good to meet you, man.”

“You too.” Berk motions toward the bar. “I’ll make that call. Sit and talk with Gaines.”

Dax sits his ass down as Berk takes off.

“Again, I’m sorry to interrupt.” Dax kneads his hands together on top of the table. “I just need to tell someone, and since you’re my doctor.”

Concern grips me. “What’s wrong? Are you feeling all right?”

He edges back in the chair before he slides forward again. He’s a bundle of nervous energy. “Penny is the one, Dr. Morgan. I’m in love with her.”

I’m happy for him but that doesn’t explain what’s tearing him up. “What’s bothering you, Dax?”

“I’ve been keeping something from her.” His gaze darts past me. I suspect he’s looking at his parents. “I’ve been keeping it from everyone.”

I’m not a priest, but it feels like he’s about to make a confession. “I can recommend someone you can speak with. I have colleagues who are very experienced in dealing with issues related to anxiety. You may find that helpful.”

“If I tell you something it stays between us, right?” He laughs nervously. “You can’t tell anyone else about it. You took an oath, didn’t you?”

“I’m not a lawyer, Dax,” I explain. “If it’s related to your health, I’m legally bound to keep that information private unless you give me permission to share it.”

He nods. “All right. I get that. It is related to my health.”

Since we’ve finally established that, I take a sip of water and lean back in my chair. “Tell me what it is.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

ELOISE

“THAT WAS BERK.” Astrid rests her phone against her chest. “What is it about his voice that makes me feel so... complete.”

Stevie looks at Saylor. “That’s how we will be one day.”

“Nope.” Saylor hugs the stuffed walrus she brought with her.

She gave Stevie a walrus charm that she’s since placed on a silver chain around her neck. It’s a perfect complement to the bracelet that her parents gifted her with that she rarely takes off.

“It’ll be me when I’m thirty.” Stevie shrugs. “I put it in my life plan so I need to follow it through.”

“Okay.” Saylor nods. “I’ll say that about a boy when I’m thirty.”

I scratch the back of my neck and look at my cousin. “How is Berk?”

That’s a very roundabout way of asking if he mentioned Gaines. I’m

pacing myself, though. I can ask about Berk's cousin after I test the waters with a few more questions about Astrid's husband.

"This is funny." She looks toward where Penny is sitting next to the kitchen island.

"What's funny?" I ask.

"Daxton and his folks are at Atlas 22, too."

At least I know where to find Dr. Morgan. That's if I wanted to find him. I don't. I'm more interested in the fact that he's not home.

"They're having champagne." Astrid goes on, "Berk said they haven't ordered dinner yet so I don't think Daddy will be home to read you a story."

Stevie glances at the clock on the kitchen wall. "Bedtime is soon."

Mine isn't. I still have plenty of things planned for tonight, including breaking and entering, although I suppose it's not classified as that when you have the key code to the apartment you want to enter.

"Is everyone still full from dinner?" Astrid asks the room.

She prepared spaghetti sauce with meatballs, and garlic toast. A garden salad accompanied it and I'm not sure how she managed it but the carrots were cut into different shapes that resembled bunny ears and hearts.

"I'm stuffed." Saylor taps her stomach beneath the cute pink top she's wearing. "What about you, Stevie?"

Stevie smiles. "I'm full to here."

She cuts a line across her forehead with her hand.

That sends Saylor into a giggle fit.

"I think I need to get someone back to her brother's apartment so she can shut her eyes." Penny stands. "Dinner was awesome, Astrid. Thank you for doing this."

Astrid rounds the island to take Penny in her arms. "Thank you for starting work next week. I had no idea Castle would want to leave that soon."

"I'm so happy to do that." Penny looks my way. "Do you want to share an Uber, Els? We can drop you off first."

"I need to make a stop before I go home." I move to stand, but a sudden burst of dizziness hits me. It sends me back to my chair.

I barely ate dinner. It's been the story of my life since Gaines said goodbye to me that day in his apartment. I felt the shift in him before he walked away, and my world has felt off its axis since then.

"I'll get you a glass of water." Astrid rushes toward the sink.

I try to stand again with greater success. "I'm fine. All knitting, and no

eating is not a great combination.”

“It’s not,” Penny agrees. “Promise me that once you run your errand, you’ll go straight home to bed.”

I raise my hand as though I’m taking a vow. “I promise.”

The girls say goodbye to each other with hugs, I share one with everyone in the room, and grab my tote to take off.

Astrid stops me just as I’m about to leave the room. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I look into her eyes. “I’m fine.”

She studies my face. “If you’re not, you can talk to me.”

“I got a little dizzy when I stood up,” I tell her honestly. “I need to eat better, sleep more, and laugh a little.”

I need to move forward with my life because Gaines has. He’s out drinking champagne and having dinner at a nice restaurant.

“Do all those things starting now, Eloise.”

I adjust one of the buttons on the cardigan she’s wearing. “I will.”

Playfully, she tugs on one of the big red buttons on the white sweater I’m wearing. “Good.”

I CRACK open my poetry book to page forty-two. I can’t read the poem that’s printed there. I may never be able to do that again.

The poem is a sweet promise to a lover. It encompasses everything I felt for Gaines. The hope for the future. The vow to never look back.

A tear streams down my face to dot the center of the page.

I don’t try and wipe it away because it’s fitting. It’s a reminder of loving and losing.

I glance down at his bedside table. That’s where I found the book sitting next to my broken diamond bracelet. It’s sitting atop a small blue velvet sack. I pick it up, noticing the clasp has been repaired.

I should send Gaines a text message thanking him for that, but I can’t. Not yet, at least.

I know I’ll cross his path again at a family gathering, but I’m hoping by then, my courage will have returned, and I’ll possess the strength I thought I once had.

I sit briefly to wrap the bracelet around my wrist. I push on the clasp and it snaps into place.

When I stand, my chest tightens. It's not enough to stop me, though. I won't let a broken heart destroy me.

I place the business card Gaines gave me with his key code on the nightstand and I walk out of his home and his life.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

GAINES

I SEND Eloise another text message. It's a repeat of the one I sent her thirty minutes ago.

Gaines: Please call me. It's important.

I stand in the entrance to the ED and wait for a response from her. Nothing comes.

"Dammit," I swear. "Please call me."

"Why call when I'm right here?"

I glance to my left to find Evan heading toward me. I don't offer a greeting. I just stare at him.

"What is it?" His face goes ashen. "What's happened?"

I can't fucking explain it to him or anyone because I am barred by law.

I'm standing in the middle of a hellish situation that I can't clearly see my way out of.

If that's not bad enough, Logan rounds the corner in a sprint, headed toward the ambulance bay.

Jordan Whitman is hot on his heels. Striped red and orange socks are his accessories for tonight.

"Incoming," Jordan yells to Evan. "Cardiac arrest. Twenty-three-year-old female. She fell down the steps at a subway stop. Trauma to her head, and ankle."

Jesus.

"You're not on duty," Evan reminds me. "You don't have to be the hero at every turn."

He's right. I'm here to check on a patient in the CCU and to figure out what I need to say to Eloise to guarantee we have a future.

I step back when I see what's coming my way.

Jordan is standing on the bottom rail of the stretcher performing chest compressions. Logan has a hand on the woman's head as the EMTs hurriedly steer the stretcher toward its destination in what I imagine is a trauma bay.

I get a glimpse of an open white sweater and a pink bra beneath it. A long mane of brown hair is matted with blood. When the patient's lifeless hand falls off the stretcher to hang off the side, I'm on my knees.

A thin silver band circles her thumb and the diamond bracelet I bought her is wrapped around her wrist.

A panicked growl erupts from somewhere deep inside of me as I watch them wheel my beautiful Eloise past me.

I TRY to push past Evan to get into trauma room one. He struggles to hold me back. Logan rushes at me. He joins in to help Evan by placing a shoulder against my chest.

"I need in there," I protest. "I need to help."

Logan pats my cheek to get me to look at him. "Her heart is beating again. Dr. Whitman is in there with her. I'm going back in to evaluate her head wound, and her ankle. The good news is that her pupils are reactive, Gaines."

I scrub both hands over my face. “Let me in.”

“Jordan is one of the best,” Evan reminds me. “He’ll figure out what caused this. He’ll determine if it’s related to her heart.”

I pull on my hair. “I need you to listen to me.”

Both men step closer to me. Evan lowers his voice. “I called her cousin. They are on their way here, now. You need to get out to that waiting room to tell them what’s going on.”

“I can do that,” Logan offers. “Gaines isn’t in any shape...”

“I’ll handle it.” I growl at him.

His gaze catches mine. This is all too fucking familiar. The two of us in an ED. Someone who doesn’t deserve it is facing death.

His jaw stiffens. “You love her.”

I hang my head. “I fucked it up so bad with her.”

He taps the back of my neck the way he always did when we were kids. “There is never a fuck up that’s so bad that we can’t come back from it.”

Those words hit hard.

I glance up at him and make a decision that could impact the rest of my life. “Tell Jordan she’s at risk for CPVT.”

Evan pats my shoulder. “Catecholaminergic polymorphic ventricular tachycardia? You think that’s what caused her to collapse?”

I nod. “I think there’s a very good chance that’s what caused this.”

“That’s hereditary,” Evan points out. “Have one of her parents been diagnosed?”

I shrug and answer honestly. “I have no idea.”

Logan and Evan exchange glances. “A sibling?”

I look straight into Logan’s eyes. “Trust me. Tell Jordan. I realize she can’t be tested right now, but there are treatments until she can be. He’ll understand.”

“I’ll tell him now,” Logan assures me. “We’ll get her through this, Gaines.”

A repeat of what happened the last time we faced down death together can’t happen. I won’t allow it.

“Wait.” He slides his hand into the pocket of his pants. He flashes me a small zip top bag. “These are Eloise’s things. I think you need to be the one holding onto them. She had a purse with her, too. I’ll go get it.”

I greedily take the bag and cradle it against my chest.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to save your girl,” Logan promises.

“I need her.” My voice breaks. “I’m going to marry her.”
“You will,” he assures me. “You will.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

GAINES

ASTRID RESTS her head against her husband's shoulder as they sit in a private waiting area I directed them to.

"I don't understand." Tears stream down her cheeks. "You're saying that she went into cardiac arrest? Is that a heart attack?"

"No," I explain. "They're different."

I tack on more to offer her the hope that my colleagues have offered me. "She's receiving the best care possible."

"She's not," Astrid argues. "You should be in there. Why aren't you in there?"

Berk pops a brow, silently asking the same question.

"I want to be," I tell them both as I sit across from them. "It's hospital policy not to work on someone you know. Someone you love."

Berk gets it first. His eyes widen. "Gaines."

Astrid gaze volleys between us. "What? She's part of the family. He loves her just like he loves all of us."

"No," I say in a deep tone. "It's not that kind of love, Astrid. I'm in love with her."

"What?" Her voice rises. "Since when?"

"For years," I answer honestly. "It's a lot to explain, and I will, but suffice it to say I am head over heels in love with your cousin."

She leans forward to wrap her arms around my neck. "How can I feel so much joy and be so scared at the same time?"

I pat the center of her back. "She'll get through this."

Clinging to me, she sobs. "We need her to."

I agree with a silent nod of my head.

"Her parents and brother are on their way," Berks fills me in. "I called them. I told them she was stable because that's what the woman at the reception desk in the ED said before you found us."

I pull back from my embrace with Astrid so I can address both of them. "She is stable."

"I texted Pen to tell her," she whispers. "I think she's coming with Dax. She's become important to Eloise."

I nod.

"I'm going to go back in and check on her status."

That loosely translates to I'm going in to hold her hand and kiss her.

I stand but before I do I point at the purse I set down next to Astrid. "That's Eloise's. She had it with her when she collapsed."

She drags it closer to her but it tumbles off the chair, spilling the contents on the floor.

A hairbrush, lipstick tubes, her wallet and phone fly out, along with one knitting needle. I rush to pick it all, stopping when I spot something barely hang on inside of it.

I scoop that into my palm and hold it against my chest. Tears well in my eyes.

"What is it, Gaines?" Berk asks as he takes over picking up Eloise's belongings.

"It's our book," I whisper. "She must have taken it back tonight."

I open it to page forty-two and spot the stain in the middle of the page that wasn't there this morning.

It has to be from her tears.

She snuck into my apartment to take back what was hers, but she left behind my heart. I need her to wake up now and reclaim it.

LOGAN STORMS into the doctor's lounge. "Give us the room. I need the room."

I don't move from where I'm standing next to Evan. That's because I know that whatever Logan has to say is directed at me.

All I can do is pray that it doesn't involve Eloise.

"I'll go," Evan says. "If you need me to fight him, I'll do it."

I know he's trying to leverage the situation with humor, so I give him an appreciative tap on the shoulder.

As soon as he's gone, Logan shuts the glass door.

"Gaines."

"Don't tell me she's gone." My voice cracks. "You can shut the fuck up if you're going to say that."

"She's going to pull through this." He walks toward me. "Her stats are better. The fall did a hell of a number on her ankle, but we'll get that set. From what we can determine, that bracelet she's wearing caused her head wound. She's got a pretty substantial gash across her forehead but it's being stitched up as we speak by Dr. Sufford. She came in just for it."

Nicole Sufford is the best plastic surgeon in the city.

"You called in that favor."

"My wife did."

"Your wife?" I question him. "You're married? To who?"

He laughs. "To a woman you work with everyday. I married Julissa a few months ago."

"Shut the fuck up." I take a step closer to him. "How is that not hot gossip around here? Everyone, literally everyone, thinks you're single."

"Her folks don't know yet." He shakes his head. "They're on a cruise with limited access, so we're waiting until they're back in Florida to break that news and our other news."

"Which is?"

He holds the palm of his left hand to the center of his forehead. "I'm

going to have a son, Gaines. My little boy is arriving in six months.”

I tear up. “Jesus, Logan. That’s fucking amazing.”

“The guilt.” Tears stream down his cheeks. “It’s been suffocating. I wanted to save him, Gaines. I wanted to save Rudy.”

I drop the armor that’s protected me from our shared past for almost two decades. I wrap my arms around him. He clings tightly to me.

“I know the guilt,” I confess. “We let him down.”

He takes a step back to rub a hand over his cheek. “His folks have reached out to me. They told me to forgive myself.”

They’ve done the same to me.

Mr. and Mrs. Taake lost their only child when he was seventeen – when we were seventeen.

“Is it time?” he asks me. “Is it time to let him rest in peace?”

I tap the tattoo covering my bicep. Logan does the same to the one wrapped around his. It’s always hidden under his white coat or a button-down shirt. I only saw it once. That was the night of Rudy’s funeral when we convinced a guy who owned a tattoo shop on the Lower East Side to ink our late friend’s name on our bodies.

I rake a hand through my hair. “I know you blamed me for letting him near that river.”

“I blamed myself more for bringing the beer and weed.”

It was a recipe for disaster. Three teenagers on summer break with a penchant for pushing the limits. We took Logan’s dad’s car and headed to a river that our friends used to cliff dive from.

It wasn’t even a cliff. It was more of a hill, but you had to aim just right because the rocky shoreline wasn’t forgiving.

I went first and nailed my landing. Logan followed with a double summersault before he hit the water. Rudy Taake tripped and dropped headfirst straight to the shoreline.

By the time we got to him, his head was bleeding profusely and his heart had stopped. I performed CPR since my dad taught me months before. Logan ripped off his T-shirt to hold it against the wound on Rudy’s head, but it wasn’t enough.

Our best friend died that day,

Our friendship died the night we got the tattoos, when we argued about who was more to blame.

We never worked that out. Instead we walked away from each other.

“It’s time to let him sleep well.” I wrap a hand around the back of Logan’s neck. “Let the guilt go before you son gets here.”

“Rudy Sexton.” He smiles. “It has a nice ring to it, right?”

“The best.” I take a deep breath. “I’ll keep your secrets until you’re ready to share with the staff, but just know, I’m happy for you, Logan.”

“I’m happy for you, too.” He bows his head. “Eloise is strong as hell, and one day you’re going to have it all with her.”

“I already do,” I tell him. “She’s alive and I think she loves me. What more could I ask for?”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

GAINES

I STROLL through the ED after meeting with Eloise's parents and her brother. Draco took the news that his sister was brought in by ambulance hard. I sensed that he's the type of brother who would move heaven and earth to put a smile on her face.

I shook his hand, told him I loved her, and vowed to do right by her.

She hasn't woken yet, but I won't break that promise.

I just need to figure out what I'm going to say to her when she opens those beautiful blue gray eyes.

I glance up as I get closer to trauma room one.

Eloise hasn't been moved up to CCU yet because we're waiting on a bed.

A man in his early twenties is staring at the door to her room. I approach him cautiously, convinced that he's looking for a relative or friend who is in

the ED.

It's not uncommon for people to lose their way in the corridors of this department.

When he glances my way, I stop in place.

I've seen him before.

"Will she be okay?" He rubs his chin. "Her name is Eloise Rehn. I've been trying to get in to see her, but no one will let me."

I won't either because the guy in front of me is the same guy that was in the framed photograph with Eloise that I saw in her nightstand.

Her had a hand on her when she was wearing a bikini.

"You are?" I ask, ignoring what he just said to me.

"Lynton Zale." He swallows hard.

"How do you know her, Lynton Zale?"

He drops his head. When he looks up again tears are clouding his eyes. "I'm her best friend. I've always been her best friend, but we... I never should have left."

"Lynton!"

I turn to see Draco sprinting toward us. He rounds me to get closer to the guy claiming to be Eloise's best friend. "They said we can't see her right now."

I look to Draco for more information but I don't need to hear him speak a word. He wraps an arm around Lynton's shoulder and tugs him closer. He presses his lips to Lynton's forehead. "She'll be okay, babe. This is her boyfriend. Dr. Morgan."

"She'll be all right?" Lynton looks at me, his eyes pleading with me. "I never got a chance to tell her I was sorry I left town, but my heart was broken."

"I'm sorry about that." Draco cradles him in his arms. "That was all my fault."

"I didn't know how to apologize to her," he confesses. "She didn't know about us. We hooked up and then split up, and I couldn't take it, so I just left."

"He doesn't need to know about all our bullshit." Draco comforts him with a pat on the cheek. "We found our way back to each other. That's all that matters. That's all she's going to care about."

"I'll be able to tell her I'm sorry?" Lynton asks me. "That'll happen."

I glance through the glass to where Eloise is. She's hooked up to monitors

and oxygen but she's improving by the minute. "You'll need to get in line behind me, but yeah, it'll happen."

"Is she in love?" He looks to Draco to answer that.

I do it for him. "I believe she is. I know I'm in love with her and I'll love her until I die."

I catch sight of someone else heading this way, so I excuse myself. "I need to take care of something."

Both men nod as I walk away.

"How is she?" Daxton tries to look past me.

"You should be in the waiting room with Penny."

"I can't." He drops his gaze to the floor. "Els entire family is here, aren't they?"

I nod. "They came as soon as they heard what happened to her."

He takes a step to avoid a nurse running right into him. She apologizes for staring at her tablet screen, but I hurry her along by asking her to check on one of my patients in CCU.

"What should I do, Dr. Morgan?"

"Do what's right," I tell him. "When Eloise is strong enough, and her heart can handle it, you need to talk to her."

"I should talk to her brother now and her dad?"

I nod. "That's a good start."

"Or I guess my brother and my dad," he whispers.

His confession at Atlas 22 may see the light of day, after all, even though he vowed it never would.

When he told me he suspected that his father wasn't his biological dad, I had no clue where he was headed with that. But a DNA sample and a test kit answered one of his questions.

As he sipped the champagne meant for Berk, Daxton explained that he found out, through that kit, that he's related to Draco Rehn. He tried to contact Draco through the site, but when he got no response, he dove deeper. That led him to New York and before he could summon up the courage to go to Buffalo to introduce himself to Draco and his father, he collapsed at the restaurant.

When he woke up, his half-sister was suddenly a part of his life.

"I told my mom earlier." He shuffles from one foot to another. "She never knew the guy's name she slept with. It was at a hotel in Vegas. She was there for work. He was at a conference and I was conceived."

The details don't matter. The people involved do.

"Tread carefully," I warn him. "This impacts a hell of a lot of people, including Eloise."

"I will," he promises. "She has CPVT, doesn't she? She has what I have."

I can't answer that yet, so I don't. "She's undergoing tests."

"If I had told you weeks ago that she was my sister, you could have checked her out, right?" He sobs. "This wouldn't have happened to her."

"Don't go there," I tell him because it's what I've had to tell myself to get through the past twenty-four hours.

I'm a goddamn cardiologist.

She felt faint. She experienced chest pain, and increased heart rates. I'm second guessing if that fall she took when the devil was on her heel was caused by the wet pavement or if she passed out because her heart short-circuited.

There's a damn good chance she raced out of the club that night because her heartbeat was too much to bear.

"I'll make this right for her," he says. "For all of us."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

ELOISE

I MOAN as I try to open my eyes. “I think I had too many tequila shots.”

A burst of light laughter greets me along with a woman’s voice. “I’ll get Dr. Morgan.”

“Gaines,” I whisper, a lightness warming me from the inside out. “Yes, please.”

I crack one eyelid open and try to focus on my surroundings. Since I can’t I force the other open but this can’t be right. This isn’t my bedroom.

“Lamb.” His voice comforts me instantly. “I’m right here.”

“You’re here but where am I?” I ask softly, still trying to gain a clear focus.

“The hospital,” he whispers, kissing my head.

“Give me room, Morgan.” Another man’s voice comes at me. “I want to

check her vitals.”

Gaines steps back slightly. “My friend, Jordan, is going to take a look at you.”

“Don’t go,” I plead with him as I close my eyes again. “Please, Garin.”

“Garin?” The other man questions. “She’s experiencing some confusion.”

“She’s not,” Gaines tells him. “She calls me that sometimes.”

“And, sir,” I say. “Oh, wait. That’s a secret.”

Both men laugh.

I feel hands touching me and hear a steady beeping.

“Eloise?” The man named Jordan says my name. “I need you to try and squeeze my fingers.”

I do it with my left hand, and then my right.

“Can you open your eyes?”

I do it again and this time I can see. The doctor shines a light in my eyes before his index finger pops in the air. “Follow my finger.”

I do just that.

“You’re a very lucky young lady,” he tells me. “You’re going to be just fine.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, still not sure why I’m here.

Gaines steps back in place beside me. His jaw is covered with a light beard and his hair is messy. He’s so handsome that I think I might...

“Did I faint?” I ask him.

“Something like that.” He kisses my forehead again. “You collapsed on a subway platform.”

“That’s not good.”

“You hit your head.” He smiles. “It’s bandaged up again.”

“It’s karma.” I attempt a smile. “My head fell on that fake diamond bracelet again, didn’t it? I stole it from your apartment.”

He laughs. “You can’t steal something that belongs to you, lamb. It’s not fake, though.”

“It is.” I nod. “My friend in Buffalo bought it for ten dollars at a thrift store.”

“I bought the bracelet you were wearing at a jeweler in SoHo for a lot more than ten bucks.”

Frantic, I try and reach for my left arm, but I’m attached to so many wires that I can’t move. “Did I lose it?”

“No.” Gaines voice is comforting. “I have it, but diamond bracelets might

not be your thing.”

I smile. “My forehead agrees with you.”

“We can trade it for a ring.”

I stare at his face. “A ring?”

“I love you, Eloise.” I hear a tremor in his voice as his eyes well up with tears. “I’m so fucking sorry that I didn’t know how to do that properly. I had things to tell you and instead of manning up and doing that, I hid.”

“You love me?”

“I’ve loved you since you sat down next to me at the club, Loretta Lamb.”

“For that long?”

“Yes,” he says in a tender tone. “I’ve never been in love before so I fucked up along the way, but I’m here for the long haul if you’ll have me.”

“I’ll have you,” I say eagerly. “Will I be here for the long haul? I know your friend said I’d be fine, but I don’t always feel great. Maybe you can check on my heart.”

“We have.” He kisses my lips softly. “You’ll need more tests, but we suspect you may have something called CPVT.”

“It’s treatable, though?”

He trails a finger over my collarbone. “If you do have it, you’ll need to get a device implanted that will regulate your heartbeat.”

“A device?” I stare at his lips before my gaze moves to his eyes. “Like Dax has?”

He nods. “Your father has it, too. He was diagnosed with CPVT before you were born. He told me that today.”

“I had no idea.”

“He’ll explain it to you,” he assures me. “Once you’re stronger.”

“When can I go home?”

“Never.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“I want you to move in with me,” he tells me. “The extra bedroom can be your studio. Or if you like, I’ll move in with you, but...”

“No,” I interrupt him. “I want to move in to your apartment. You have that claw foot tub, and that big bed.”

“We’ll handle all of that before you’re discharged.”

I tap my hand on the bed. “Hold my hand, Gaines.”

He does as asked, scooping mine into his. He leans down to press his lips

to my wrist.

“I love you too,” I whisper. “I fell in love with you when you told me your name was Garin.”

“You’ll marry me one day.” He smiles softly. “It doesn’t have to be soon, but one day, lamb. One day.”

“One day soon.” I bite my bottom lip. “I’ll marry you.”

“Will it be my turn to talk to her soon?”

I sob when I hear the voice calling out from the doorway. “Is that Lynton?”

“He’s here.” Gaines stands straighter. “He’s a great guy.”

“He’s my best friend.” I smile. “Don’t tell Pen that.”

“It’s our secret, my sweet Eloise.” He kisses me softly on the mouth. “There is a long line of people waiting to see you. I’ll give them each a couple of minutes and then I’ll be back to move you up to CCU.”

“Okay,” I agree with a slight nod of my chin. “I feel like a storybook character. I woke up from my dream to find the love of my life waiting for me.”

“You’re the love of my life, too.” He smiles gently. “This life and every life beyond.”

“You’re quoting Garin again.”

“No,” he corrects me. “That one is all me, my love.”

EPILOGUE

ELOISE

Six Months Later

I FEATHER my fingertips over the small scar that is a reminder of the device that is keeping me alive.

“Will this set off any alarms at the airport?”

Gaines looks up from where he’s sitting on the couch. “Are you planning a trip?”

I shrug. “I like to plan ahead.”

He pats the spot next to him, summoning me to him. “If you could go anywhere in the world, where would that be?”

I settle in next to him. Tugging my bare legs to my chest. “It would need to be a warm place so you wouldn’t have to wear any clothes.”

He drops his phone on the coffee table and faces me. “Or you.”

I glance down. "I'm only wearing a bra and panties now, that's close enough, right?"

"Wrong."

He tugs one of the straps of my bra down my shoulder, trailing kisses along its path.

"We can't fuck yet."

His brows perk. "I gave you the all clear months ago, lamb. We've fucked how often since then?"

"I lost track." I smile. "I would guess somewhere near a thousand times."

His head falls back in laughter. "I'm not a machine."

"Close, though."

"Tell me why I can't fuck my pretty little wife right now."

I swoon. "Oh, you know I like that."

"The part about me wanting to fuck you, or the part about you being my hot and very pretty little wife?"

I lift my left hand in the air to admire the diamond wedding band and matching engagement ring.

The ring was on my hand the day I was discharged from the hospital.

We made it official last month in a small ceremony at a venue called Howerton House.

The people we love were there including our shared family. Stevie and Saylor acted as flower girls in dresses I knit for them. Stevie wanted to wear the dress I made for her school dance, so with a few minor adjustments it became the perfect flower girl ensemble. It took no time at all to knit one for Saylor too. That little girl has come to view me as her sister, even though we're not related by blood.

Astrid stood next to me and Berk took his place beside my husband.

My folks attended although their marriage is in a period of adjustment. Dax's admission shook the Rehn family to its core, but we survived. It took some time for me to sit down with Daxton to listen to the reasons why he didn't tell me he knew I was his sister immediately, but I've come to see that his journey is his alone.

Penny and I are closer than ever. When she marries my half-brother next summer, she'll walk down the aisle in the dress I'm almost done knitting.

As for Lynton and Draco, my heart almost burst apart (*in a good way*) when I found out how deeply they love each other. Like Gaines and I, their journey to be together wasn't a straight line, but they found their way back

together, and they are happy in Buffalo.

Gaines reaches for my hand with his left hand. The cut of the diamond on his wedding band cuts a band of light into the air that bounces off the wall.

“You still haven’t told me why I can’t fuck you, Mrs. Morgan.”

I go for a change of subject because I love teasing him. “I heard you talking to Logan earlier. Is everything okay with him and Julissa?”

He closes his eyes briefly. “He asked me to be Rory’s godfather.”

I scoop my arms around his neck. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Emotion catches the word in his throat. “We’ve come a long way since that night.”

That night has haunted my husband for years, and when he told me about the loss of his dear friend, I cried along with him.

I instantly understood why he wanted to be a doctor. He’s saving lives now, and doing everything he can for our community.

“Do you want a baby?” I ask the same question I did the day before we got married.

“I do,” he answers as he did back then. “I want you all to myself for a couple of years first. It took forever to find you, so you’re all mine right now.”

That works for me.

After I posted a picture of Penny’s wedding dress online, I was bombarded with orders.

I couldn’t complete them all, but I have been commissioned for a special project for Katie Rose Bridal. It’s a boutique in midtown and the owner is open to the idea of showcasing my bridal designs every few months.

I crawl onto his lap and face him.

He tugs his T-shirt over his head to deposit on the floor somewhere behind him. “I’m still waiting for that fuck.”

My eyes flare as I get a look at his bare chest. “What would it take to make you angry?”

“My wife wants me to angry fuck her.”

I scoot my panties over his lap, using the fabric of his scrubs as friction. “It’s not an angry fuck if you’re pretending to be angry, Gaines.”

“You want it hard.”

I laugh. “When don’t I?”

“I can do that.” He unclasps my bra with one hand.

His other finds my left breast. He pinches my nipple before lowering his

mouth to it. The sharp bite of his teeth on it sends my ass up. "Ouch."

"You fucking loved that," he says with my nipple still between his teeth.

"Guilty as charged."

He slaps my ass before he flips me over in one swift movement. My back hits the couch.

He rips my panties off with a quick tug and not a second later, his scrubs are pulled down far enough to reveal his very hard cock.

"You're wet enough," he deduces with one single swipe of his fingers over my core. "You can't wait."

"Fuck me," I whisper as I stare at him. "Just the way I like."

He splits my thighs open with the width of his hips and guides the crown to my center. "Fucking you like this with no condom is my ecstasy."

"Show me." I plead. "Show me now."

He pushes in and with a low growl as his tender kisses find my mouth.

I can't resist. I dig my teeth into the corner of his bottom lip.

He laughs as he thrusts harder and harder. "I love you. I will forever."

"I love you," I whisper as the pleasure takes over, chasing away everything but this moment and the man I'll spend forever with.

EPILOGUE

GAINES

Three Months Later

THE SOFT BREEZE from the Pacific Ocean trails a path through my wife's hair. It bounces off the side of her face. She pushes it back, laughing as she does.

“When you said you were taking me on the honeymoon of my dreams, you weren't kidding.”

She doesn't know the half of it yet.

I glance at the house that we're calling home for the next two weeks. It belongs to Otis and Irene.

They attended our wedding and before the night was over, Otis made me promise I'd bring my beautiful bride here to Maui, so I made that happen.

The staff manning the house are preparing for a very special event.

Eloise believes it's dinner to be served on the beach.

That's part of it, but the prelude to that is what I sense will take her breath away.

"Dance with me," I offer her my hand.

She spins in a tight circle, sending the skirt of her strapless white dress into the air. I catch a glimpse of the white lace panties underneath.

I want in them, as I always do.

I fuck my wife at least once a day, often twice.

Work keeps me busy, but I make time for her. I will always make time for her.

Otis taught me that a man can serve his patients, and also cherish his wife.

"There isn't any music," Eloise points out.

I hum a made-up tune.

She lets out a chorus of giggles. "I kind of like that, Garin."

"Do you?"

Her head pops up. "What's wrong with your voice?"

"That wasn't my voice." I spin her around in my arms so she's facing the man who inadvertently has played a major role in our lives.

Claude Garin, dressed in linen pants and a white shirt, much like what I'm wearing, waves to my wife. "Hello, Eloise. It's been a long time."

She stops dancing, but clings tightly to me. "You don't remember me."

"I do." He nods. "You came to see me in Buffalo. You brought a copy of my book. You wanted it signed."

Her gaze catches mine. "Is this real?"

"It's real, lamb."

"Your husband asked me to join you tonight," he goes. "If that's all right with you."

"All right with me?" She laughs. "My favorite poet and my favorite man on this earth are in the same place."

Garin laughs. "You handed me a short poem that day back in Buffalo."

My bride buries her face in my hands. "That was bad."

"It's beautiful." I tug her hands down. "It's amazing,"

"I've never told you about that." She shrugs. "I'm not even sure why I gave it to you, Mr. Garin."

"Claude," he corrects her. "You gave it to me so I'd come to this spot tonight and help your husband marry you all over again."

Tears well in her eyes. “Are we getting married again?”

“I’m going to marry you as often as I can.” I kiss her softly, grateful that Claude Garin was receptive to my offer to help me with this. He’s been living on Maui for a decade, finding new inspiration in the beauty of the island. “Once, twice, maybe three times a year.”

“Forever?” she questions. “Are we going to do that forever?”

“Yes,” I answer simply.

“The staff has decorated the atrium with flowers for the ceremony,” I explain.

“I was just in there.” Claude smiles. “He’s underselling it. There are thousands of flowers in there.”

“Can we go now?” she questions.

I take her hand and kiss her palm. “Claude is going to read your favorite poem of his in place of traditional vows, so let me hear your poem now, from you.”

She shakes her head. “I was a hopeless romantic back then.”

“And now you’re not?”

“I am,” she acquiesces. “I’ll always be that with you.”

I smile. “Please let me hear it.”

She takes a breath and faces me. Her hands find mine.

“The journey to my kindred heart will twist and turn as I walk the path. I’ll stay on course because the beauty of his soul is my beacon. I know I’ll find him when my soul is ready. When I do, I’ll never let him go.”

I kiss her forehead. “I’m your kindred heart.”

She looks up and into my eyes. “You’ve always been.”

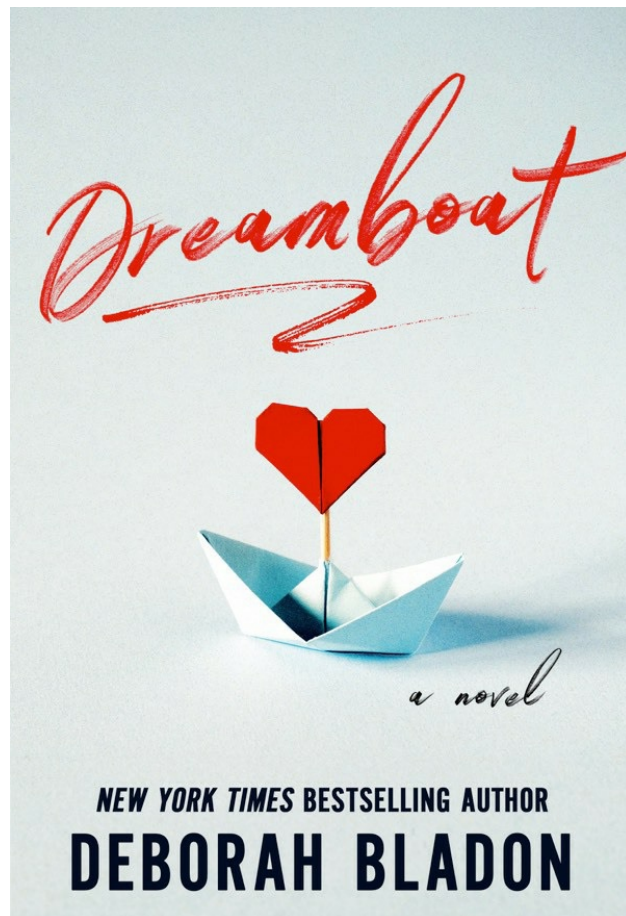
I drop to one knee. “Marry me again, Mrs. Morgan?”

“Yes.” A single tear falls down her cheek. “I will, Dr. Morgan.”

I scoop her into my arms like the bride she is and follow Garin into the house so that I can once again commit myself, and my heart to the woman of my dreams.

The journey to my kindred heart has brought me here, and I can’t wait to experience the rest of the ride toward eternity with my love.

COMING SOON
THE HAWTHORNES OF NEW YORK



I came home with more than memories from a luxury cruise.

I'm pregnant, and my brother's boss is my baby's daddy.

Dr. Donovan Hunt is a respected veterinarian, the poster boy for panty melting hot, and a wizard between the sheets.

He's also my brother's boss.

Boo, right?

Wrong.

A few tropical drinks in the Caribbean sunshine on a luxury cruise and all of my reservations disappear, as does my tiny string bikini when we hit Donovan's stateroom.

We spend two glorious days in his bed.

When we return to Manhattan, we agree to go our separate ways.

Technically, I agree to go my separate way because Donovan wants our high sea adventure to continue on solid ground.

I give in because the man is fun with a capital *F*, if you know what I mean.

Fast forward six weeks, and I'm in for the surprise of my life.

I'm pregnant, and Donovan is on board to be the ultimate dad I'd like to... well, you get the idea.

We decide we'll be co-parents, but when I start to wish for more, I discover there's much more to Donovan than meets the eye.

[Pre-Order for Summer 2024](#)

MORE BOOKS? YES, PLEASE!

Love in
MANHATTAN



Are you up for another series? If so, I have just the one for you, including someone you just met!

My Love in Manhattan series follows 6 individual couples who meet by chance encounters. The first in series, [**HUSH**](#), follows how Chloe and **Dr. Evan Scott** receive more than they bargained for after their passionate night together.

CHAPTER ONE OF HUSH

Evan

"I'm not a coward. I am not a coward." A soft, smooth feminine voice catches me off guard.

I turn toward it and grab a quick glimpse of what looks like the world's most perfect ass in a pair of black lace panties. They vanish the second the woman in question stands upright again, the red umbrella in her hand mangled from the brutal wind.

"You don't strike me as a coward, sweetheart." I raise my near-empty glass of bourbon in a mock toast because any person brave enough to venture out in January in a New York City blizzard, dressed like it's the middle of July, deserves a medal. This one earns bonus points for having an ass that can halt a snowstorm in its path.

That may or may not be a fact, but the timing is sure as hell spot-on.

The deluge of snow that has blanketed the city for the past five hours has stopped abruptly. That wasn't the case up until a minute ago when I was

standing, alone, outside this hotel contemplating what my next move will be.

Big picture stuff, not which-of-my-casual-hook-ups-should-I-call-tonight stuff.

"Thanks, stranger." She smooths her hands over the short skirt of her frilly navy blue dress as she takes in the length of my six-foot plus frame. "I'm not your sweetheart, though."

Wheat blonde hair, warm hazel eyes, glossy full pink lips, and an attitude.
Forget the big picture. My next move needs to involve this woman.

My eyes don't leave her angelic face even though I want to trail my gaze and my mouth over every inch of her body. "Fair enough. Introduce yourself, and while you're at it, I'd love to meet your imaginary friend too."

I can't resist the urge to look when her nipples pebble into hard points beneath the airy fabric of her dress. As much as I want that reaction to be from the rich baritone of my voice, I suspect it's from the burst of wind that just picked up her skirt. There's a brief flash of sheer lace covering smooth skin before she yanks the hem of the skirt back in place.

My evening just got a whole hell-of-a-lot better.

"My imaginary friend?" She tucks a piece of her windswept hair behind her ear. My fist clenches in envy. I want those waves balled in my hand so tightly that the only noise she makes is one that tells me she wants my cock deeper.

I crack a smile. "You were hell bent on convincing someone that you're not a coward. Since we're the only two out here and there's no phone in your hand, I take it that your imaginary friend is the asshole who thinks you're a coward. I'll argue your case if you point me in his direction, or is it her direction?"

"Are you a lawyer?"

I'll be anything she wants me to be. I'm a surgeon, vascular to be precise, and I have to be. Tonight, I don't want to be Dr. Evan Scott. I'd rather be the star of her future fantasies; that one awe-inspiring lay all women look back on for the rest of their life when they get themselves off.

"Not guilty." I hold my hand up in mock surrender. "Your name, beautiful. What is it?"

Her thickly lashed eyes widen as the heavy metal awning above us creaks under the weight of the wet snow. "It's Jane. Jane Smith."

She's the third *Jane Smith* I've met this month.

I'm not offended that the name offered is as fake as the smile plastered on

the face of the doorman who is watching our every move from the warm comfort of the lobby. Experience has taught me that women in this town hide behind a false persona for just three reasons.

One is that their wedding ring is tucked in a pocket or a purse and they don't want the night to seep into their two kids, bake sales, walking the dog in the park, day-to-day life.

For the record, I avoid those women at all costs. They're easy to spot, even if they think they're fooling everyone, including themselves.

The second reason women morph into Jane Smith, Jane Doe or just plain Jane is they're prepping to hand over a fake number.

Eye contact is everything, and if a woman I'm after can't make it with me, I tap out. There are too many women on this island who are interested in what I'm offering. I'm not into wasting my time on someone whose type isn't tall with dark brown hair, blue eyes, muscular pecs, that cut V that women dream of, and a thick nine-inch cock.

Yeah, I measured. Every man does. He's a fucking liar if he doesn't admit it.

The third reason is why my new blonde friend tossed out the name Jane Smith to me just now. She's looking for the same thing I am. One night of no-personal-details, uninhibited, I-dare-you-to-walk-straight-after-that fucking.

"It's nice to meet you, Jane." I extend a hand because in public I'm always the perfect gentleman.

She takes a step forward, dragging her sorry looking umbrella behind her. Her hand lands in mine for a soft shake. It's just enough pressure to stir my cock. "What's your name, stranger?"

I could easily be the Jack to her Jane, but I want to hear my name from those lips tonight. "Evan."

The look on her face is all surprise and awe like I've already got two fingers inside her and I'm honed in on that spot that will etch my name into her memory forever. "Is that your real name?"

I crane my neck to look at the lobby. The last thing I need right now is for anyone I work with to breeze past us and call me *Dr. Scott*. I have to get this woman into a hotel room and out of that dress now.

"According to my driver's license, it is." I circle the pad of my thumb on her palm before I let her hand go. "I'm going inside to refill my drink and then I'm heading upstairs. Can I get you anything, Jane?"

She reaches up to touch her neck. It's a subtle sign that she wants my

hand, or maybe my mouth, there. "Are you inviting me up to your room?"

Technically, I'm inviting her to a room I haven't rented yet. I was out here catching a breath of frigid nor'easter air. I did my time inside when I took the podium, ran through an off-the-cuff speech about the boatload of accolades my boss acquired in his career and then handed him a silver wristwatch courtesy of his wife. He threw the goddamn shindig on his own dime and then expected me to kiss ass in public to hold onto a job I'm not sure I want.

"If you are, I'm game," Jane tosses that jewel out before I have a chance to offer a formal invitation to get naked with me. "I didn't notice you at the ceremony. Are you a friend of the bride or the groom?"

It's the obvious conclusion to jump to. I'm dressed in a tuxedo. There's a wedding reception in the ballroom tonight. She has no clue that I was just in the hotel's five-star restaurant with a group that consists of primarily sixty-something-year-old surgeons all desperate to one-up each other with elaborate descriptions of their summer homes.

At thirty-four I'm the baby of the bunch, hence the reason I'm standing in the bitter cold with a drink in my hand contemplating why I went to medical school in the first place.

Jane marches on, nerves twitching at the edge of her words. "I'm a friend of Leanna. I'm actually one of her bridesmaids. I had to get the hell out of there when Henry started talking about how committed he is to her. It's bullshit. You know that, don't you? He totally screwed her over this past summer when he was in Vegas. She forgave him and now they're married. Can you believe that?"

"Henry is a selfish son-of-a-bitch."

Her eyes flick up to meet mine. "What's your room number?"

The snow starts again, large flakes of unwanted inconvenience. I need a condom. My gaze darts up and down the street. Other than a restaurant a block over, every other storefront and business are locked up tight.

Late Sunday night will do that to Manhattan. A snowstorm doesn't help.

"You have protection, right?" Pretty Jane reads my mind like a sensual sorceress. "I didn't bring any condoms with me."

Normally, I'd have at least a few tucked in my pocket, but I got dressed at the hospital. An emergency surgery this afternoon cut into my prep time for this hellish evening, so I had my rental tux delivered. I changed in the locker room and forgot one of the essentials. The breath mints made it into my pants pocket next to my wallet, but the condoms didn't.

Fucking great.

I'm not sending this woman on a mission to get me a rubber. That comes with the risk of her bailing on me because she doesn't see the effort as worth the reward.

It's worth it, in spades, or in her case, orgasms.

"I've got that covered, or should I say, it will be covered," I quip with a tip of my glass before I down the last swallow. I'll go floor-by-floor and door-to-door in this hotel to find a condom if need be. "Do you need to say goodbye to Leanna before you bail?"

She blows an adorable puff of air out from between her lips. "I do. I left my purse in there. What about you?"

"I didn't have a purse that matched my outfit tonight," I joke. "I'll meet you in the lobby in thirty minutes. We can head up to the room together."

"Make it fifteen," she counters, a challenge woven into her tone. "I'll take a Bellini."

"Consider it done," I whisper as she breezes past me, the maimed umbrella dragging behind her.

The doorman jumps into action and props open the heavy glass door. Jane steps into the vestibule just as the ugly winter wind gives not only me but the doorman, the early holiday gift of an eyeful of her luscious ass.

Something tells me this night is going to be one for the record books.

[*Click here to continue reading HUSH*](#)

THANK YOU

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BLOOM

RUSH

CATCH

FROSTBITE

XOXO

HE LOVES ME NOT

BITTERSWEET

THE BLUSH FACTOR

BULL

CRUEL

STARLIGHT

SAINT

SWEETHEART

TRUST

GREED

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Bladon has never read a romance hero she didn't like. Her love for romance novels began when she was old enough to board the bus, library card in hand to check out the newest Harlequin paperbacks. She's a Canadian by heart, and by passport, but you can often spot her in New York City sipping a latte and looking for inspiration for her next story. Manhattan is definitely her second home.

She cherishes her family and believes that each day is a gift for writing, for reading, and for loving.

