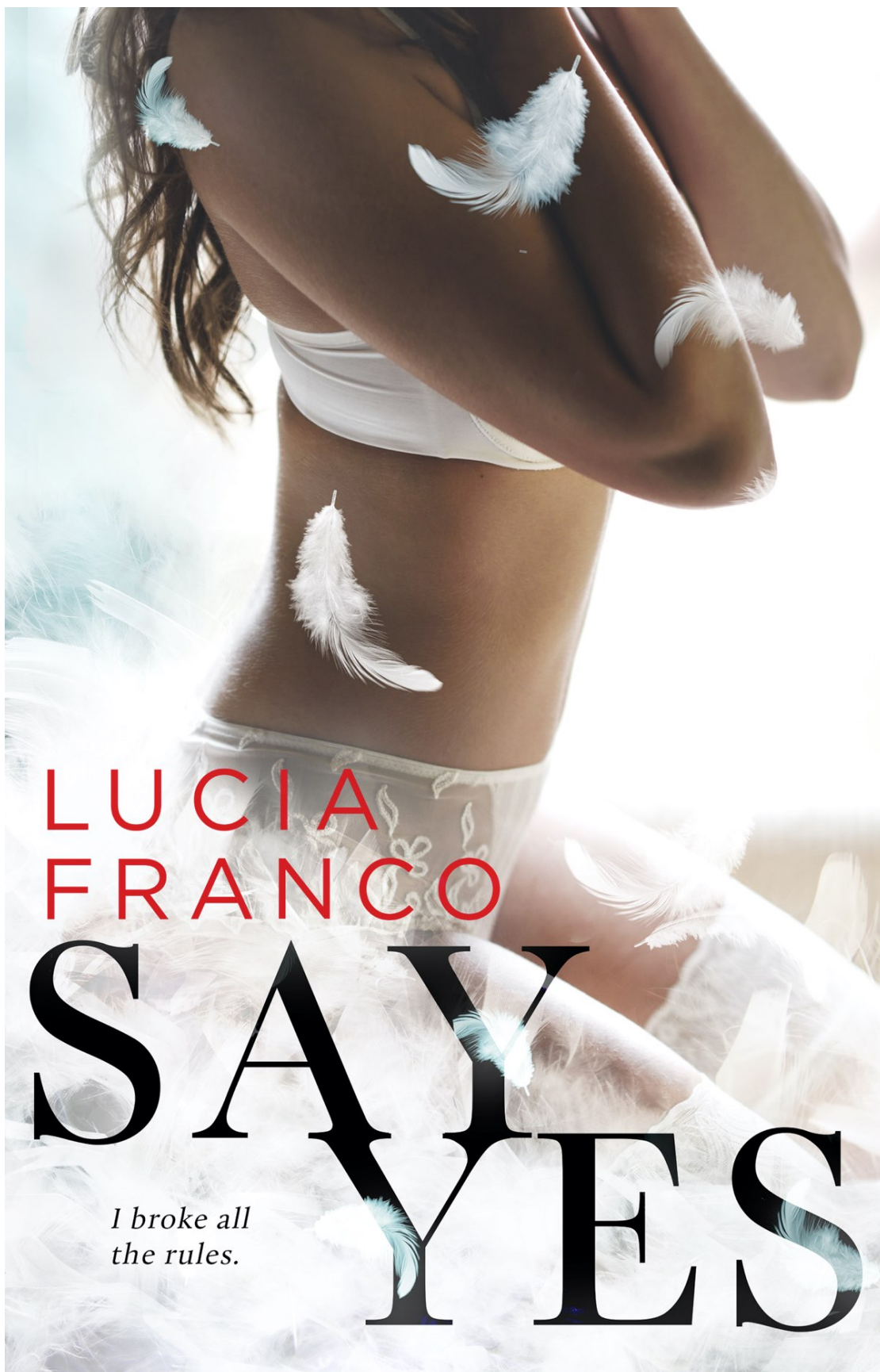




LUCIA  
FRANCO

# SAYES

*I broke all  
the rules.*



LUCIA  
FRANCO

# SAY YES

*I broke all  
the rules.*



**SAY  
YES**

LUCIA  
FRANCO

SAY  
YES

Say Yes  
by Lucia Franco

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*To every reader who fell in love with James and Aubrey and asked for more,  
Say Yes is for you.*

## ONE

Sleep eludes me as I fight off this horrible headache.

I turn over and curl onto my side. Light from the cracked door spills across the bed and I place a pillow over my face to block it out. Sleeping in a pitch-black room has always helped in the past, but this time it isn't working. The main cause of my headache is stress. I've had so much on my mind lately I've hardly slept.

I yawn and close my eyes, feeling the pull of sleep finally taking me under. I'm nestled under a pile of blankets when a door outside my room slams, startling me awake. I gasp and my heart seizes in my throat as my bloodshot eyes widen for a split second. I lay in silence for a moment, my eyes growing heavy and I begin to drift off again, until I hear James yelling from the other room.

"You tell that little fuck he has one last chance to come clean with me or I'm dropping his case, and he can go beg another lawyer to take him on pro bono." A pause of silence. "Reece, I was paraphrasing... Yeah... I'm not in the mood. Remind him I was the fifth person he spoke to who finally said yes. He's facing life in prison. Let him know if he doesn't come clean with everything by the time I get back, I'm dropping him. All I need is two minutes with him and I'll know if he's lying."

I swear I can feel James's tension through the walls. My heart is saying go to him while my body is urging me to wait.

He's quiet as he listens to Reece, and I catch the clatter of ice cubes falling into a snifter. The glass meets the marble countertop with a sharp clink and the lid pops from what would only be a bottle of cognac. I know him like the back of my hand. He'll give it a little spin after he pours and take a quick sip before he responds to Reece.

I move the pillow off my face, stretch my arms above my head, and inhale. My body is desperate for sleep, but I want to see James more.

"Thanks, Reece. Just stay on top of it. I'd hate to drop him, but maybe it's time he learned a lesson."

After a pause, James lets out a lively laugh.

"Yeah, she's here. Stop thinking about her like that, you fuck," James says, and I know he's joking. "Yeah, I'll tell her you said hi. All right, man, yeah. See ya later. Thanks again."

A tired smile tips my lips. I like hearing them banter. James and I had discussed the possibility of bringing other people into our bedroom since we are officially a couple now, but we'd both decided it was best if we didn't. Reece has been trying to get us to recreate that hot night the three of us shared a few years ago, but James and I always say no. We're both comfortable in our relationship and don't feel the need to bring anyone else into it.

Quite frankly, I'm not sharing him.

James's footsteps echo as he strides down the hall toward our bedroom. I sense his riled presence and see a shadow appear before he opens the door and pushes his way into our room.

"Val."

I love when he calls me Val. Normally, a sly smile would curl my lips and my blood would rush with desire of what's to come at the sound of that nickname.

But today I just want someone or *something* to put me out of my misery. Maybe I'll see if Natalie will bring me her weed pen. He doesn't hit the light switch because he knows I have a headache from hell, so he leaves the door open just enough to be able to see me.

Wide steps eat up the distance. James is standing at my bedside, looking at me with a piercing gaze like something is simmering beneath his skin, itching to come out. The contrast of blues in his eyes always come out when the lights are turned down low. He places his glass on the nightstand, then leans down to press a kiss to my forehead. My eyes close and I smile, even though he can't see it. I love his forehead kisses. Reaching for him, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull him to me, making him climb into bed. He comes to me without hesitation.

James is positioned on his side so he can spoon me, but I curl up next to him instead and nuzzle his neck with my nose. I need to feel his body pressed to mine. He wraps a strong arm around the back of my neck and scoots closer to me. I guess he needs me too.

"Feeling any better?"

"Mmmmm," I hum under my breath, then nod.

"Are you?"

"Yes, it's a dull headache now, but a lot better. It helps being in your arms."

I release a sated sigh and burrow myself into his chest. Being in James's arms is the only medicine I need.

"I would've come home sooner if you needed me."

Angling my chin up, I press my lips to his and feel his salt and pepper beard tickle my skin. I shake my head and say, "Not necessary. Everything okay at work?"

James hooks my knee with his hand and scoops my leg around his hip so that I'm partially laying over him. A little purr vibrates in the back of my

throat at feeling the heat of his body warm mine. He lays his hand at the crest where my thigh and hip meet and gives me a good tug.

"It would be if this client of mine would get his act together. This kid doesn't seem to comprehend that he's facing life in prison. He thinks it's a joke and figures since he's got my firm to rep him, he'll walk scot-free. Too bad it doesn't work like that."

"How old is he?"

"Seventeen."

"That's unfortunate," I say quietly. "Hopefully he'll come around. He only has so much time before he seals his future with bars."

James is quiet for a moment. I know he's stewing over the situation and that it bothers him. Attorneys are taught to leave their emotion at the door, but they're humans too, and occasionally, a case gets to them.

"Yeah, I hope. I'd hate to see him wind up as another teen statistic, and that's the route he's going down."

I don't like the sound of hopelessness layering his words. James is a good man with a good heart. He's constantly offering a helping hand to anyone who needs it. To see him troubled to this degree bothers me and causes this need to unfurl through me to take his mind off things.

My palm glides over his wide chest, feeling his strength beneath the expensive material. A fire burns inside of me at having someone like James—the strong and silent type—hold me like I'm the only thing that matters in this world.

Pressing into him, I roll against him until he's lying on his back. I rise to my knees and straddle his hips. I lean over and linger above his mouth, purposely arching my hips back with a sexual slide of my pussy. James grips me, his hands come to rest on my rounder hips.

"I heard you call out to Val when you walked in," I say, my voice taking on a huskier tone. I know what he needs, and I want to give it to him. James

needs his mind taken off work and what he can't control. He needs someone to take the reins and make him forget his own name.

I'm that girl.

I reach for his black tie and slip my middle finger through the knot to loosen it, then pull it off completely. My touch searches for the black buttons of his dress shirt so I can remove it too.

James slips his hands under the oversized shirt I'm wearing and presses into my skin as I undo his buttons. His hips give a little surge into mine, causing a tide of tingles to flow through me. My body turns lax for him, and my eyes roll shut at how divine his hands feel on my skin.

"I did," he murmured.

Val. We made a deal when we officially started dating almost two years ago. When I become Valentina for the night, all cards are off the table and I am at his mercy. Not that I'm *not* every other night, but on Val nights, it's different. We're different. I don't say no. I wear what he wants me to wear, and he is relentless all night. Anything I've voiced about liking or wanting to try with him, he gives it to me. Being open with our sexuality is what drew us together in the first place. Happy sex life, happy wife. That's the motto, right? Although I'm not his wife, it's pretty much the same thing. James loves that he makes me happy. He even walks around with a goofy grin on his face all the time.

At first, I worried that Valentina was who James wanted and not Aubrey, but he'd assured me that wasn't the case. He said he liked to change things up a little, and I couldn't fault him for that. Who doesn't? I know I do. He was open and honest with me. It keeps things interesting and fun for us. I never know when he's going to call out for her—it's always a surprise—and I never regret it. Usually, I'm eager for the next time before we're done.

"Only if you're up for it," James says.

Move aside, Aubrey. Valentina's up.

"I'm always up for you," I say, dropping my voice to match the mood. James loves when I go full Valentina on him.

My fingers reach the last button. I push his shirt open to reveal the colorful tattoos on his chest. For fifty-six, he's in better shape than most twenty-year-olds. Brawny, virile, and still hot as sin. James Riviera is all mine. It's hard to see the actual designs in the shadows, but I know the colorful swirls of ink on his skin by heart. My palms slide up his abs, feeling each rib of muscle, then over to his pecs. I scoot down to undo his belt, but he reaches out to stop me before I can even pull it free.

My eyes snap to his. Without saying a word, James flips me over so he's looming above me. He pulls me in with his steel gaze like there's something he has to say, and I'm lost to him. He lowers his body and gives me his weight. My fingers thread through his hair while I revel in the touch of his bare chest between my thighs.

"Val can wait until this weekend," he says, and my brow creases in confusion. "We're going to Tahiti for a week. I already have it set up and cleared your schedule with your assistant, and I made sure the cats are well taken care of."

My eyes widen in surprise, my heart rushing fast from excitement. Before I can respond, James says one more thing that makes me a goner for him all night.

"Right now, give me my Aubrey and let me make music with her body."

## TWO

Since James and I were reunited that day in Chelsea—thanks to Natalie—he's taken me all around the world every chance we've had.

We've been to each continent and tried as many delicacies as our bellies could hold. He knew I wanted to travel and see the world, but he also knew how important it was for me to focus on Sanctuary, my non-profit women's and children's shelter. As crazy as it may seem, the amount of money I made while working as a high-end escort was enough to set myself up financially for the rest of my life and pay it forward to help those in need. I feel good knowing I could give back. In some way, it makes me feel like Grammy is still around.

My chin is resting on the tops of my hands while I lay on my stomach in our private over-the-water bungalow room. Behind me, James is giving me a hot-oil tissue massage. He spared no expense on this trip. It's still early morning and the French doors are open wide. The spray from the salty sea blends too perfectly with the rich, floral scent of the frangipani flower. I inhale the decadent aroma as I stare at the crystal teal water lapping under the cloudless sky. I could sit here all day.

James doesn't think twice when it comes to needing time away to breathe from the rat race we live in. He just gets up and goes. Sometimes he takes me on a surprise vacation for two days, other times for two weeks. I

used to worry at first because Sanctuary demanded so much of my time. I'd feel bad for enjoying the pleasures in life while seeing firsthand how people struggled to get on their feet. Some of the members didn't have two pennies to rub together when they first walked in, and now they have part-time jobs. Seeing them thrive makes me happy, but it all comes with a price.

Sanctuary has grown so much over the course of two years that I'm opening another one on the other side of town. The second location will cater to single fathers and their children. Call me naïve, but I never knew how many men were left alone to raise their children and in need of help. Society always assumes it's the woman, but there are just as many men who are raising their children with nothing.

"What are you thinking about?" James asks, pressing his thumb into my shoulder to knead out the tension. I let out a sigh and close my eyes. This feels incredible. He gives the best back massages.

"That you're so good to me," I say, my voice taking on a dreamy tone. James applies more hot oil and I sink deeper into the bed as his hands spread over my back.

"I'd do anything for you," he says, then leans down to press a kiss between my shoulder blades. "I know you're stressed about Retreat." A small smile tips my lips at the mention of my second shelter. "Right now, the only thing I want you to focus on is us, and what my hands are doing to you while I work out these knots. There's nothing else you can do for the shelter, sweetheart, everything is finished and ready for the opening."

I let out a sigh. "I know. I just feel like I'm missing something. It doesn't help that the gala is the same day."

When I'd learned I would be one of the four recipients of the New York City Women of Impact Humanitarian Awards, a swarm of butterflies invaded my nerves. I haven't been able to stop thinking about the upcoming dinner, or how I had been chosen for this particular award in a city housing eight million people. Adding to my stress is Retreat opening the same day.

It will be a moment I will always remember and feel in my heart. I don't want anything to tarnish that feeling.

"That's normal. You've invested a lot of time, money, and energy into it. This isn't just a hobby for you, this is your life and what you love. It's what drives you. I know you want it to run smoothly, and it will. Just stop thinking about it for five minutes."

I bob my head. I really do want that, but my anxiety is still there and wreaking havoc on my nerves.

I draw in a breath and exhale the worries like James said. I focus on his touch, how he flattens his hands and spreads his fingers as he applies pressure downward, then drives them up my spine until I feel a tingle in my pussy. His fingers curl around the curve of my shoulders. A little moan escapes my parted lips and my back sweeps up in an erotic curve in response. His hot fingers tease the sides of my exposed breasts until I'm writhing on the mattress. My nipples are puckered, and the cool sheets do nothing to tame the pleasure they're receiving. James moves his fingers over my ribs, slowly gliding them down to my hips. I clench my thighs, feeling the wetness between them. Friction surrounds my clit and the pressure intensifies. My body breaks out in need as his fingers squeeze my pelvis while arching my hips at the same time. James leans down and kisses the small of my back. My toes curl as he makes his way up my spine, peppering my back with kisses.

The only problem with James giving me back massages with hot oil is that all I want is sex right after.

His fingers are on the back of my neck again, this time threading through my hair. My lips part in bliss. I love having my hair played with like this, and James knows it. His hands cup my scalp and he massages my head with a sensual tug of my hair.

"James..." I grin then laugh. "I know what you're doing."

"And what's that, sweetheart?"

I rise up on my elbows and look over my shoulder at him. He's humoring me.

Every time I look at him, my heart does this stupid flip-skip thing that causes the organ to swell larger for him than the cage it's held in. We're an unlikely pair with him being thirty-plus years older than me, yet we couldn't seem more perfect for each other. It's been four years since we met, and I swear the man hasn't aged. He's still rocking the salt and pepper hair with the matching beard, but now with more tattoos and a tad more muscle. The crow lines around his eyes have deepened in color too. I know people stare at us a little longer when we're in public together, but I don't care. He's mine and I wear him proudly.

"Come here," I say, waving two fingers at him.

James leans over me while still straddling me from behind. I cup the back of his head and pull him to me so I can feel his lips on mine. I kiss him once and his mouth opens, allowing me to slip my tongue inside and lay it against his. I give it a little sensual tug and lean into him as I do. James returns the kiss ten times better, then moves off me so he's on his back and I'm hovering over him. I hitch my leg up to rest on his inner thigh, my knee laying against his heavy sack. I scoot closer to him and peer into his glossy eyes, immediately desiring more when his thick thigh presses against my wet pussy. Sensing my arousal, James applies pressure.

"I love you," he whispers. His hand fists my hair and he studies me like I'm the eighth wonder of the world

"I love you more." I give him my usual response.

My heart beats wildly as an array of emotions fill me. Sometimes it scares me how much I love James. Occasionally I'll wake up in the middle of the night sweating, panicking in my sleep that I won't have enough time to love him.

"What's wrong?"

I shake my head. I don't want to tell him my thoughts, even though it's something I think about a lot. I love this man more than I love my own life, and I can't imagine a world without him. A world where I don't get to love him the way I want to. The way he needs to be loved.

"Nothing. I'm just really happy I get the man I love all to myself for the next few days. It's just you and me, babe."

He's quiet for a moment. His fingers are brushing over my jaw and I lean into his hand. "I've been wanting to ask you something."

I smile into his palm. "Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"How would you feel if I sold my brownstone and we bought a house together? Say, in Bergen Beach?"

I pick my head up and look at him, my brows drawing tight. Within six months after we got back together, I moved to Brooklyn Heights to be with him. We'd spent two years apart and didn't want to waste any more time than we already had. It only made sense since we were at each other's home every night anyway. He offered to come live with me, but I knew being in Brooklyn was better for him, so I'd packed up the cats and moved in with him.

I kept my grammy's house, though. I can't bear to let it go, but I hate to see it empty too, so I use it now as a transitional home for those in my shelter who've taken the steps to get on their feet. There's no charge for rent, just utilities. They have to start somewhere. Living in New York is extremely expensive—one of the priciest places to live in the world—and I want to give these women a chance they deserve. There are strict rules they have to follow, along with monthly check-ins, but I know my grammy would've loved it and that makes me feel good inside.

My brows deepen. "Can I ask why?"

"I picked that place out, had a decorator come in and spice it up. We didn't pick anything out together, and I want something we both love that's only ours." His tongue slips out over his bottom lip, like he's hesitating. "I

want us to have a place to call our own, where we can continue creating more moments. I want everything with you, Aubrey. A marriage, a home. I'm in this for life, sweetheart, and I'm ready to take the next step with you."

## THREE

**M**y eyes soften at his words.

I didn't think it was possible for my heart to grow any bigger with love for this man, but clearly I was wrong. I'm smiling from ear to ear so hard my blushed cheeks are aching.

"James Riviera, how are you the sweetest man in the world?"

Creases form between his eyes and the muscles in his body stiffen. That isn't something I expected.

"I'm serious, Aubrey. You're my life and I love you. I want us to be more, and I think buying a new home that's *ours* is a step in the right direction."

I giggle from how adorable he is. I can't help it. Sometimes men are so dumb it's painful. James is getting worked up for no reason.

"Babe?"

He doesn't respond. James is lost in his stare and I giggle again at how hard he's thinking. He can't possibly think I feel any less for him, right?

Sliding my leg higher on him, I hook his thigh with mine and twine our limbs together. My palms skim over his heavenly chest, then to his arm where he had a map of the world tattooed when we got back together. It was expertly done with a fine needle and black ink, and spans from the top of his shoulder down to his wrist.

He documents all our moments that are important to us. Every single place he's taken me that's brought us closer together, he's had inked onto his body forever. I still remember the day he came home with his arm bandaged in white gauze and plastic wrap. He hadn't told me he was getting it done and wanted to surprise me. Surprise was an understatement. James permanently inked the arm he was saving for only us. I've been wanting to surprise him with a tattoo of my own, I just haven't figured out what I want to do yet. I want it to mean something to the both of us the way his do.

I pick up his wrist and kiss the place where his pulse is. I gaze at it with softness, then thread his fingers with mine. My thumb caresses my favorite inked moment by far—the day he told me he loved me for the first time. We weren't anywhere romantic, or had a special trip planned. In fact, we were right in the middle of Manhattan getting Chinese food in the dead heat one summer evening when he said it. Our order hadn't been ready for pick up yet, so we'd been standing on the busy street with his back to the wall and me in his arms taking in the perfect Instagram-worthy sunset. The fiery amber ball burned between the skyscrapers as it descended, illuminating the buildings with a breathtaking glow. This wasn't just an ordinary sunset anyone could see as they walked through the concrete jungle. I'd remarked on how incredible it was and that I'd never seen the sun between the buildings like that before, how it made one appreciative of how beautiful life really is. James told me it was actually Manhattanhenge, and it's when the sun aligns with the city's street grid to produce—and fit—the perfect setting sun only four days out of the year. It was larger than life, and the heat flowing around the outer rim could be seen when "I love you" came out of James's mouth. It was so natural and just right, and it ended up being the first tattoo he got for us—a sun that overlooks his map. I glance at the sun inked in warm hues of orange and red over his pulse and smile softly at the memories I hold so dear behind it.

My knee nudges his erecting cock. "James, I love that brownstone. I love being there with you, I love walking up the street to our home and taking in the flowery landscape that people don't typically associate with living in the city. If you want to sell it, then we'll sell it and buy a new home. I want what you want. But don't think for one second that it bothers me you had it before I came back into your life." I pause, an idea springing to mind. "What if we get rid of everything your decorator bought, and we go shopping together. We'll create our own little oasis. If you want to redo the whole damn unit and tear everything out, we can do that too, but I'm happy there and I really love it."

His frown deepens. "You do?"

I nod. "I do, but if you'd rather us have a new place, we can do that too," I say, then something dawns on me. My head tilts to the side and I ask, "Do you want to sell it because you purchased it during a low point in your marriage and it reminds you of that?"

James has been divorced for four years now, but he spent more than twenty years in a somewhat unhappy and unwanted marriage. Now I can see why he's considering selling it.

"A little bit."

A soft smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. "Then we're selling it. End of discussion. When we get home, it's going on the market immediately. But, James?"

"Yes?" His body relaxes a little, and I clamp my teeth onto my bottom lip.

"I'd like to stay in Brooklyn Heights, or in one of the surrounding neighborhoods... like Williamsburg, or even Park Slope, and in one of their brownstones. I never thought I'd live in Brooklyn, but now I can't imagine not living there. It's our home, where my heart is, where we have so many incredible moments together. I don't want to leave them behind."

James scoots up to a sitting position and takes me with him. He wraps a strong arm around my lower back and tugs me up until I'm straddling his hips and our bodies are flush together. My nipples graze over the soft dusting of hair on his chest. A purr escapes me and I drape my arms over his shoulders and look him in the eyes.

"A compromise I can work with," he says, a hint of a smile pulls at his lips. "I assumed you'd want an actual house one day like most women, the whole white picket fence and all of that."

I grin and brush a hand down his beard. "I think we both know by now I'm not like most women."

He chuckles and the sound causes my belly to flutter. "Thank fuck for that. I love you the way you are, sweetheart, and I wouldn't change a fucking thing."

I'm really fortunate to have a man who accepts all my flaws and sins... and not give a damn about all the men I fucked when I was an escort. I don't hate that part of my life because it brought James to me, but sometimes I have regrets because of the things I did for money.

"Then it's settled."

"I just want you to be happy," he says, and it makes me mushy for him. He's such a romantic at heart.

"Well..." I begin with puckered lips and flirtatious eyes. "There is one thing I need that would make me *really* happy."

"Anything," he says against my lips.

My heart is beating so fast for this man that I seal my lips to his in a bruising kiss and he takes it. He's my every heartbeat, my every breath. God, I love him so much. I draw in a quick breath through my nose as I tighten my arm around his neck while my free hand holds his jaw. My large breasts are pressed to his chest. Our tongues tangle around each other's as the desire we feel envelopes us as one.

"Make love to me," I whisper.

"I already told you, sweetheart. I've been making love to you the whole time."

James reserves his charming side for when he's in a loveable mood like this, but I know deep down he's serious about what he said.

His palm connects with my thigh and I feel a little zing zap through me. "Lift up." I rise to my knees and James grips his cock in his hand, angling it at my entrance. He peers up at me with a burn in his eyes that says he's at my mercy.

"Now take all of me," he says, and I do, sinking down on him in one good, long stroke. My head rolls back and I exhale a pleasure-filled sigh. Sometimes we forgo foreplay because I like the feel of him stretching me. It's an automatic given that he likes it just as much.

One would think with a boyfriend James's age that sex would slow down or it would be hard for him to get it up, but it's the complete opposite. Sometimes it's me who can't keep up with him. He has so much testosterone flowing through his veins that our lovemaking grows more manic each and every time. There's an abundance of passion flowing from his touch to the way he kisses me with hunger. I'm addicted to him and can't get my fill.

"Stay down," he demands with his hands on my hips.

My inner thighs are quivering as I try to loosen up to accommodate his width. Sometimes he slides in and bangs me, other times it's a little tight at first. I wonder if I'll ever be able to fit him without pain.

"Then kiss me and make me forget how your cock is stretching my pussy out and tearing me from hole to hole. You're going to give me a gaping vag one day."

He grins and I try to fight mine. "Such a filthy fucking mouth."

"You love it."

"Fuckin' right I do," he says, then kisses me. After a few strokes of his skillful tongue, I'm slow riding him.

James is still in control with his arm around my hips, allowing me to only rise halfway up his erection. I love it and hate it because all I want to do is fuck him wild but he's setting a pace that will drive me into a frenzy for him. It's sublime torture on my clit and I cry out. He's hitting it but he's not. Teasing me until my heart is racing a mile a minute and pleasure begins to set in at the tips of my toes. My nails score his skin and he purposely starts fucking me from the bottom, thrusting deep inside my pussy. James groans, and I feel the vibration from his chest against mine.

"It doesn't get better than this," I say.

He chuckles, his warm breath tickling my neck. "You say that every time."

"And every time it gets better. You're like fine wine, James. You get better with age."

"I prefer cognac," he says, and I laugh. "One day," James says, his breath hitching, "I'm going to make you my wife, Aubrey. I hope you're ready, sweetheart, because I'm not taking no for an answer."

"James," I whisper, then gasp when he plunges in deep, holding me to him. My hips angle into his and he leans over with my thighs molded to his, holding us up with one hand flat to the bed. James rears back and slams into me. His lovemaking becomes needy and his hands are groping every inch of my bare skin. This position couldn't be more perfect for us to come together. He's striking my clit and pounding into my wet pussy while he angles my hips to reach a deeper spot for himself. He's going to leave bruises on my body when he's done from how hard he's gripping me. Everything becomes an afterthought when that first prick of euphoria assaults me in the highest way possible. We don't conceal our lust, instead we allow any sound to express how we feel when we're this deep into the moment.

My heart is racing double time now. I don't need a piece of paper to know that he's mine and I'm his. We already know that. There's no reason to

put a label between us. We have a good thing going. Why ruin it?

Some of the best and longest lasting relationships are ones without any type of label.

I don't want marriage, and I hope that's something he can understand. I love him and he loves me. That's all that matters.

Right?

## FOUR

I 'm not a fruity drink kind of girl, but I am on vacation.

I like to try all the touristy drinks and foods native to the country we're visiting because I know when I go home, no matter what I do, I'll never be able to recreate it. Manhattan is thriving with just about every kind of cuisine one could want, and while I'm not complaining, it's just not the same.

Tahiti has a drink native to the island called The Tahiti. I laughed over the name at first, until James reminded me there's a Long Island iced tea and a Manhattan Special where we live. Whatever, all I know is it has pineapple-and coconut-infused juice with some rum that's made here and a sprinkle of ginger. It's delicious, and I'm on my third and feeling amazing in my man's arms.

James and I are sitting on the beach under a massive umbrella in a lounge chair together. I'm between his legs lying back against his bare chest. I love to be in his arms every chance I can. When he came out of the bathroom earlier dressed in only board shorts that sat super low on his hips, I had to fan myself. He's too damn good-looking and his sexuality is way too damn alluring. I told him I want to chain him up in our basement and keep him all to myself. He said he was cool with that.

James has his leg propped against the arm rest, his hand on my hip with the tips of his fingers under my bikini bottoms, lounging away with me.

I never want to leave here.

"Want a sip?" I lift the glass over my shoulder. I ask him every time and every time he takes a sip to appease me, even though he despises sugary drinks. I just ask to be nice, really.

"You're almost out. Do you want another one?"

I finish off the rest and place the tall glass on the round mosaic table next to us. My hands find his and I lace our fingers together, shifting so I'm laying my head on his arm. I kiss the inside of his bicep and snuggle up to him, breathing him in.

"James, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you're trying to get me drunk."

I feel him shrug. He has no shame and I love that about him. "Two words. Drunk. Sex."

I giggle. Alcohol does one of two things for me: I'm either giddy, or I want to have sex. I pause in thought. Actually, make that three. Sometimes I like to drop it low and shake my ass.

"Drunk sex in the ocean?" I suggest.

"You're too wild for the ocean when you're drunk. I may accidentally drown you."

I laugh and pick up my head to look at him. Laughter dances in his blue eyes. "You make me that way. It's all your fault."

He smirks and I feel it in my belly. He has no regrets. "You're welcome."

Reaching higher, I drop a quick kiss to his lips and sit up. I try to pull back, but he cups the back of my neck and holds me for a longer kiss. Sometimes I can't concentrate when he does that. Like when his thumb is pushed up under my jaw.

Grabbing his hand, I break the kiss and pull up to stand. I'm a little tipsy but not drunk.

"Come on, let's go swimming. I want to feel the water on my skin."

James's eyes roam the length of my body, making sure he doesn't miss an inch of skin. He makes me feel so beautiful. So wanted. So loved.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"When we go snorkeling later, you're not wearing that."

I glance down. I did pick a red skimpy suit to wear for him since I know he likes this color on me. My top is two sizes too small, making my C cups look even bigger, and I'm wearing a Brazilian style bottom that's very cheeky. Since I've gained a few pounds over the years, I think I'm leaning toward double D breasts, though I'm not entirely sure since I don't usually wear a bra at home anymore, and everything I wear when we go out already has proper lining.

"What's wrong with my bathing suit?" I ask, trying not to smile. "I picked it out just for you."

"You're testing me. I'm two seconds from ripping it off you."

I giggle again and take a few steps back toward the ocean. "You have to catch me first."

Turning around, I lightly run toward the beach. The sand is hot under my feet, so I run on my toes. The light crystal blue water reminds me of James's eyes and I smile. Just as I reach the shore, James wraps an arm around me from behind and lifts me up, throwing us both into the water.

I'm giggling as I go under and hold my breath. The cool water feels refreshing and I wish it was like this back in New York. New York doesn't have light teal water beaches like this. They're more murky and gray.

We come up for air, both of us smiling. I reach for James and wrap my legs around his waist. He automatically tugs me closer. I can reach the ground, but this is more fun.

"I caught you," he says, his voice low.

My heart does a little flip. He caught me the moment we met in Bryant Park. We both know that.

"You did," I say.

"If I didn't already set up a full day of sightseeing for us, we'd be making our own waves right now."

"Real suave, James. That might be the most cliché thing you've said yet."

"I have my moments," he says. "I can cancel..." He lifts a brow in suggestion.

I almost want to say yes, but I don't. I playfully slap his shoulder. I know he's not serious. When we're on vacation, we make the most of it and see and do everything we can.

"No! I want to see the waterfalls, and snorkel with the fish. I want to feed the sharks and stingrays. I want to do couple's massages with you, and after dinner I really want to see the Polynesian dance. You're taking me to do all of that." I try to be firm, but he can see right through me.

James is smiling from ear to ear. He moves the wet hair stuck to my cheek and leans in to place a kiss on my neck.

"Okay, okay, okay. Whatever you want to do, I want too." He lifts his wrist and checks the time. "We have about an hour before we have to be at the dock for the boat I chartered. As much as I want to make love to you again, I think we should eat and get one more drink. We have a full day planned."

"And change my suit. I want to grab some shorts too."

"We'll get your shorts but don't change the bathing suit. You're fucking smoking in it."

"You don't care?"

One corner of his mouth turns up. James has that sexy, quiet confidence that makes him secure with who he is.

"No, sweetheart, I was just playing. Let people look at you. I want them to. I know who you'll be coming home with at the end of the night."

"Damn straight, big daddy."

James lets out a raucous laugh then pulls us under water to kiss me.

CARDI B'S "MONEY" STARTS BLARING IN OUR BUNGALOW.

I frown as I look around trying to uncover where I placed my purse. I know that's my phone, but I don't remember setting that ringtone for anyone.

"Who's that?" James asks as he buttons his shirt.

"No idea."

I grab my cell phone from my clutch and read the screen.

"Real slick, Natalie." I shake my head as I answer the phone.

It takes her a second to comprehend what I'm talking about, then she bursts out laughing. "I forgot I did that!"

"Now your dad thinks you like to fuck in big tall heels, but you don't really need the D because you just really want the money."

She's still laughing. "Oh my God! I'm dying!"

I turn to gage James's reaction, but he's not paying attention to my conversation anymore. He's slipping on his Tag watch and rolling up his dress shirt sleeves to his elbows. I love this look on him. The distressed jeans and partially buttoned shirt. The way the tattoos tease his arms and chest works well with who he is. We'd been sightseeing and snorkeling for most of the day. Now there's a golden tint to James's cheeks.

I can't believe I snagged myself a fucking hot silver fox.

I still can't believe he's my best friend's dad either.

"What's my ringtone when I call you?"

"'Milkshake' by Kelis."

The beginning of the song begins to play in my head, and I smile to myself. Natalie is hysterical.

"What's up, bestie?"

"I hope not my dad's—"

"Nat! Stop it."

She sighs dramatically and chuckles. "When do you two lovebirds get back? I have breaking news."

I frown. "Are you all right? Is everything okay?"

James looks at me with concern. He lifts his chin, wanting to know what's going on.

"Everything's fine," she says. "I just have something I want to talk to you about in person."

"You're pregnant." I deadpan, and James's eyes widen.

"No, you raging lunatic." I shake my head at James so he knows she's not pregnant. "I'm living my best IUD life. If I could find a doctor to perform a hysterectomy on me now, I would. No little monsters for me. I plan to spread myself thin."

I shake my head, laughing under my breath. James still doesn't know Natalie is the one who got me a job as an escort at Sanctuary Cove, and he never will. I'm happy she hung up her knee pads and isn't hooking anymore.

"But are you okay?"

"Yes, I just want to make sure I see your face when you get back."

"Ah, okay. We'll be back late the day after tomorrow."

"I'll be there the next morning with bells on bright and early equipped with guava and lime mimosas."

"Oh, what are we celebrating?"

"My vagina's freedom. I gotta run, Ram Jam, and don't forget to make sure he wears a rubber. You can't trust anyone these days."

Natalie hangs up, leaving me laughing at her sarcastic, vulgar sense of humor. Nothing she says shocks me anymore.

"What's the ringtone when I call you?" James asks.

A huge smile lights up my face. "Call my cell and find out for yourself, *Big Daddy*."

James retrieves his phone and dials up my number, then meets my gaze when "Doin' It" by LL Cool J blares from my phone.

"That's what plays when I call you?"

I nod proudly.

"Every time?"

I nod again.

"I fuckin' love you," he says, and plants a kiss on my lips, then takes my hand and guides us to dinner.

## FIVE

"Thank you for this, for tonight."

James has his arm around me and I drag my nails back and forth over his forearm. We're sitting on our deck under the night sky sipping Remy Martin. James ordered a special bottle for us, and just like in Aureole, he says we have to finish it. We're about halfway through, but neither one of us is drunk. It's a soothing, warm body, relaxing high when sipped slow.

After a romantic dinner with the full moon slipping behind the darkening ocean, we walked a short distance with my high heels hooked on two of my fingers and James holding my other hand. I could walk the streets of Manhattan in five-inch heels, but on the soft sand I basically had two left feet.

We watched the Polynesian dance show. I was entranced the entire time, and I think James was too. They thumped the tops and the sides of the barrel drums with their thumbs and heels of their hands, then they blew into conch shells to produce a sound I'd never heard before. James said if you hold a conch shell to your ear, you can hear the ocean. Mini tiki torches were posted every two feet or so in the sand. The flames were small, but enough to come together to create a sultry mood and color the women's exposed skin in a coppery radiance. The best part was the large, colorful

feathered head pieces they wore that I imagine are heavier than they look. Matching straw skirts that sat extra low on their hips and a basic triangle bathing suit top finished the ensemble. Every time the skirts swayed, a rustle blew in the air. I've seen some pretty eclectic dancers on the subways in New York City, but the precision and speed these girls popped their hips and rolled their bellies was fascinating to watch. I swear they hit every beat and didn't stop until it was over. They encouraged the locals and tourists to go on stage to dance with them toward the end and managed to carouse James up. I wish I'd brought my cell phone to dinner to video record him to show Natalie. The way he was smiling from ear to ear, how his eyes glittered with delight as he danced in the sand barefoot with the girls made me so fucking happy inside. James Riviera makes me high on life and it made me realize just how much my love for him grows by the minute.

"For what, sweetheart?" he asks.

I look at him. Our eyes lock and I hope he feels what I say.

"For bringing me here. For noticing when I'm stressed and trying to help. For being you. For having a big heart. This might be my favorite vacation we've taken yet. You're so good to me. Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve you."

James doesn't say anything. He reaches for me, cupping my cheek, and kisses me softly. My eyes close and I draw him in. His lips are pressed between mine, but we don't move our mouths. We just hold steady, like we're cherishing the other's touch. It's a simple kiss but makes my heart feel the most because it's James who's giving it to me. When he kisses me, he always makes me feel like I'm the only person who matters to him.

Breaking the kiss, James's steel eyes search mine. He's breathing a little deeper, heavier. "I was going to tell you I want Valentina tonight." Excitement sparkles in my eyes, but he shakes his head. "But I don't. I just want you. Always and forever, just...you, Aubrey."

Does he not comprehend what his words do to me? He takes my breath away and makes my heart rush faster at the same time. I swallow hard, feeling my pulse in my damn throat.

"Come on, I have something planned for you."

James takes my hand and walks us to our bungalow about twenty feet away. We step through the French doors and my jaw drops in surprise. My eyes widen as I take in the moment, wondering how he made this happen while we were sitting on the front deck.

The lights are turned down low, and there are white candles lit along the walls. There's usually a tropical aroma that follows us on the island, but in our room, there's something deeply seductive and alluring about the scent that pulls me in.

My eyes land on our king-size bed. I shoot a quick glance at James who's watching me.

There are white feathers and red rose petals sprinkled on top of the down comforter. I've never seen a blend like that on a bed before. It's beautiful but more sexy than anything else. My heart is rushing so fast against my ribs that I can't process what's happening in front of me.

"When did you do this? When we came back, none of this was here."

He turns to face me and steps closer until he's an inch away. "I had the resort set it up for us. I gave them instructions and told them when to come. I shut the door so you wouldn't hear them while we sat outside together."

I shake my head, blinking a few times. I can't believe how thoughtful he was to set this up.

"Really? This may be the most romantic thing you've ever done."

He cups my cheeks and gazes into my eyes. "I told you, Aubrey, you're my world. You make me feel young and what it's like to be happy again. You're my light, what I look forward to every day I wake up. There isn't a thing I wouldn't do for you."

Emotions well in my eyes. James can be a total mush ball, but he never gets this mushy and deep into his feelings like he is right now. I can feel them striking me all at once. I know James loves me and he'd do anything to see me smile, but tonight makes me think he's hiding something...like he's sick, and doesn't have much time left.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

My lips form a thin flat line and my jaw trembles. He grabs my arms, frightened eyes look back at me.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Are you sick? Something that you're afraid to tell me? Is that why you're being sweet to me and had this set up?" My voice shakes, and I feel so stupid saying what I did, but I can't think straight now that my heart's a frantic mess. "Because I need to know if you have a terminal disease and need to buy two caskets because I can't live without you, James. I just can't."

James stares back at me in complete silence. His jaw is hanging open and his blue eyes are unmoving. I knew it. I guessed and he didn't expect that.

My stomach is in knots. Now I'm always going to associate Tahiti with James telling me he's sick.

"Uh, Aubrey?" he says, scratching the side of his head. "There's nothing wrong with me. I don't know where you got that I was sick from, but I'm not. I'm healthy as a horse."

My eyes shift back and forth between his. "What?"

"I'm not sick." He drops his arms and I suddenly feel bad. "I just want you to know how much you mean to me and that I really just fucking love you so much. I can't believe you thought I was sick."

I roll my lips between my teeth and cringe inside. My eyes drop to the floor as my cheeks bloom with embarrassment. I feel like a moron now. A small giggle makes it past my lips. Closing my eyes, I laugh at how dense I

am sometimes. Natalie likes to say it's a good thing I'm pretty when I say something really ignorant. I bet if she were here, she'd say it again.

"Baby, I'm so sorry." I put my hand on his chest. "I feel terrible."

"And that's why you laughed," he says with zero emotion. No smile. No personality.

Oh, no. James is hurt and that makes me feel like shit. I hate that I sometimes laugh at the wrong moments.

"I laughed because I'm dumb. I'm really sorry, James. I never once doubted your love for me, so when you started talking, I thought you were preparing me for something bad."

He doesn't say anything, and it causes my pulse to spike. God, I fucking ruined it.

"James? I really am sorry."

"I guess my emotions are a little more hands-on this trip." His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "But that's because I'm so proud of you after watching how hard you've worked these last couple of years. I love you. I know we've been together a while now, but I've never felt like this. Like you hold all the power inside of me, and I can't do anything about it. Like my fucking heart won't stop burning at the sight of you. If this is what real love feels like, then I never want to have the chance to experience it with anyone else ever again. What I feel for you scares the shit out of me. Every move I make, everything I think about, it involves you in some way. I guess the way you make me feel turns me into a sap, but that's what you do to me, Aubrey." He pauses. "I can't turn off what I feel for you, and I won't."

I'm speechless.

I'm also a fool.

I definitely didn't know he felt like *that*. Like how I feel about him.

A very small smile curves my full lips. My eyes drop to his throat where his pulse hammers away in his neck. I lean in, pressing my lips over it, and allow my tongue to do a lap. I find the buttons on his shirt and begin to

slowly undo them. James's hands slide onto my hips and he gives me a little tug.

Without lifting my head, my eyes shoot to his. I'm a little nervous, but I want him to know his feelings are not one-sided.

"Tomorrow," I say, and my voice takes on a velvety smoothness, "you and I are going to this little tattoo shop here we passed a few times when we were strolling. I'm going to get my first moment. I've been waiting for the right time, and it's now." I swallow and lick my lips. "When I say I love you more, it's because I can't imagine you can feel more than what I already do." Sudden shyness attempts to pull at my lips. My cheeks are a little flushed.

His hands roam my loose and flowy dress, inching it up with the tips of his fingers. The need in his touch and the way his fingers leave a trail of heat in their path rocks me down to my core. It makes me fall harder for him more, if that's even possible. To be loved so profoundly and manage to still give it in return is a feeling one would never understand unless they lived it fully. This is what life is all about and the meaning behind why we're here.

I can tell James all night long that I love him, but I'd rather show him how I feel.

## SIX

**M**y hands move to his shoulders to slide his shirt off. It falls to the floor in a heap. I lean forward and press my lips to his chest and inhale the cognac and crushed cigar scent clinging to him with my eyes closed. He smells like money and masculinity. His hand cups the back of my head as my fingers reach for his belt buckle to loosen it. James pulls down the straps of my dress and I slip out of my high heels as my dress joins his shirt on the floor. I'm above average height for a woman, but I feel small in comparison to James.

"Never doubt what I feel for you." My voice drops to a throaty whisper as I look at him. "Never doubt it's any less than what you feel for me. You're it for me, baby."

Rising up on my tiptoes, I palm his cheeks and bring his kiss to me. One hand finds my lower back, the other is threading through my hair, holding me to him. The way James kisses me this time, while it's the same, it's completely different. It's deeper, harder, more intense. Like he's not holding back anymore and showing me how he truly feels.

He tears his mouth from mine. "Do you trust me?"

I nod without hesitation. "Of course."

"Lay on the bed facedown."

I do as he says and lay on the feathers and petals. I hear him rustling behind me and turn to watch him over my shoulder. James in a designer suit is heart-stopping, but James naked is ovary combusting. He's a big man all over, strapping and brawny. He's not cut with definition, but it's clear he has it and that he's strong enough to hold both of us up.

James picks up one of the many candles in the room and climbs onto the bed. He straddles my legs. His heavy, thick cock grazes the back of my thighs.

"This is going to be hot for a second, but it won't hurt you." James blows out the flame. "The wax turns into massage oil."

"Are all the candles like that?"

"Yes."

I nod in eager excitement and wait. Hot oil is drizzled down my spine and I hiss and fist the sheets, my hips rising back of their own accord. It doesn't last long, just long enough to spread a soothing warmth over me.

"Does it hurt?" James stops pouring.

"No, not at all. I just didn't know what to expect the first time. It feels good actually."

"I wish you could see yourself like this," he whispers, then places the candle down on the bed and begins to massage my back. "You look... I have no words." Fingers spread out, he applies pressure and glides up my back to my neck. He gives my shoulders a good squeeze before moving back down. The tips of his fingers browse the sides of my breasts, over my ribs, to my lower back.

"Oh, wow." I nearly purr, my hips moving again. My toes curl. "James, this feels incredible."

"I'm going to do your entire body."

He applies more oil to my back, then moves down to my ass and pours some on it. Wide hands palm my cheeks as he caresses me in slow circles.

He takes his time, dragging his thumb from my pussy, up the inside of my ass, before moving in an outward circle and repeating the motion.

"Can I do you next?" Fuck. I can barely speak.

"Another time. This is for you, sweetheart."

After he does my entire back side down to my ankles, the desire hovering above my tingling skin makes me painfully needy for him. I hope he's ready for me soon. He had to know what a massage like this would do to me.

James turns me over and I immediately start laughing. He looks at me with a puzzled expression.

"The feathers and petals are sticking to my back," I answer his unasked question.

Laughter spreads across James's face. "I didn't prepare for that."

"You can pull them off when we're done and then we can dip in the ocean," I suggest, and his eyes light up. He likes the idea.

James takes his time and starts at my feet, making his way up my thighs. I realize the oil is scented with vanilla bean and a dark tropical smell, which only heightens my senses. I watch James as he's so careful with my body and how he applies pressure to the thicker parts of me. In the two years I've been with him, I've gained a fair amount of weight and he swears he loves it. I went up four full sizes—five, depending on where I shop. "More cushion for the pushin'" he'd said when I'd grumbled about it. I laughed.

My hips are more rounded, my thighs are a little bigger, and my ass is heavier with more bounce. Somehow my stomach has stayed flat. Most of the weight went to my boobs. I'm curvier than I was before and I've never felt so sexy in my life. James makes me love my body and feel entirely comfortable around him. I could have been born without sight and still wouldn't need it to see what he sees. That's the feeling he evokes from me. Sexy. Confident. Vixen.

My body is lax, my legs quivering on the edge of need as he presses and kneads my inner thighs. I lift my knees and slowly open my legs to expose myself to him.

"I want you to put it on me here," I say, touching my pussy. I'm already so wet and ready for him. I dip two fingers inside. He watches as I pull them out and use my glossy desire to circle my clit. My back bows and I hiss in a breath through my teeth.

James's blues eyes flicker with black shadows against the flames. They remind me of sapphires.

Bracing myself, I hold my breath as I watch him get another candle and blow out the flame. He returns to the bed and slowly drizzles the hot oil all over my pussy. My eyes fall closed and my head presses back into the sheets. It's a shock at first that quickly leads to an overflowing stream of decadence. My jaw falls open and I gasp as it drips into my tender folds. James makes eye contact one last time before the oil breathes warmth into me, alighting my flesh with intense sparks of desire. He rubs it in and I draw in a long breath, clenching my fists. I turn my face and the rose petals are soft as silk as they graze my cheek. My back arches in response, nipples puckering, knees falling open as wide as they can go when his fingers begin to delve carefully around my pussy. My toes dig into the mattress and a moan escapes my throat.

"James," I gasp, reaching for him. My heart is burning with fire.

He doesn't respond, just leans down to press a kiss to my stomach, then moves onto my arms.

I watch his face as he focuses on what he's doing. The lapping ocean waves outside is our only sound. It's peaceful while there's a passionate storm brewing inside between us. James is tense, his shoulders are bunched tight and his brow is creased.

Placing my hand on his bicep, I ask, "Can I pour the oil on you so you can feel what I do?" His nostrils flare and he nods with a set jaw. I look at

him once more and he answers my confused look.

"I'm trying not to lose control," he says.

A murmur forms in the back of my throat. "I like when you do, though." My gaze drops to his straining cock. The tip of his head is a shade of deep violet and there's proof of his arousal dripping from the tip. I lick my lips watching it fall in a thin stream to the bed.

After he finishes with both my arms, I sit up. Between the warm oil and smooth taste of cognac streaming through my veins, I'm hungrier for him than ever before.

"I'm not done," he says. But I can't handle anymore. I'm about to jump his bones.

James gets up to hand me a fresh candle. He lifts it to my face for me to blow out the flame, then hands it to me.

James is kneeling in front of me, mimicking my position. "I don't want to hurt you," I say, suddenly hesitant as I look at the steaming oil and his jutting erection.

"There's nothing you can do that would hurt me, sweetheart, unless you leave me."

My eyes snap to his. I shake my head. If I wasn't so worked up inside, I'd be angry he even suggested such a thing.

Palming his cock with one hand, I hand him the candle to hold for a second as I scoot back. I lean down to take him in my mouth, flattening my tongue and relaxing. I taste his arousal as I suck him good and deep before pulling back. I do it a few more times and look up at James.

My heart is in my throat.

His head is tilted back, and there's a maze of veins straining in his neck. Through the colorful ink, his chest is blushed with pleasure and the vascularity in his body is pulsating. It sounds funny to call a man beautiful until you witness it. James is beautiful when he's in the throes of passion. He's abandoned reserve and only moves on feeling.

"I love you, James." I find myself whispering as I look at him. My heart is too full, bursting with emotion for this man I never should've been able to love in the first place.

His head comes up and his eyes open to reveal a depth of emotion I wonder if I've ever had in my eyes when I've looked at him.

Leaning forward, James grabs ahold of the side of my neck and plants a hard fucking kiss on my lips.

I break the kiss. "I don't want to hurt you," I say again.

"If you're concerned, you can pour the oil in your hand and rub it on me. But it's not going to hurt."

Nodding, I direct him to lie back, and he does. His legs are spread wide, his thick thighs dusted with fine hair. Our eyes meet one last time before I lift the candle and turn it over slowly. I watch in fascination as the oil drizzles down his engorged cock. A loud moan rolls out from his throat and his body vibrates. The tip of his cock produces a small pearl of cum. I place the candle on the table next to our bed, then wrap my hand around his width and lean down. I run my tongue over his pleasure, tasting the saltiness. His back bows and he palms the back of my head, his thighs coming up to encage me. He releases me and I twist my wrist and squeeze, stroking him as I suck the head of his cock.

"Stop," he demands, his voice like gravel and he fists my hair. James pulls my head up as he sits up. "Get your ass over here," he says, his voice low and so fucking sexy.

One of the things I loved about James when we first met was the sound of his voice and how New York he sounded. When he's aroused, it's so much deeper and stronger, more lax on the Rs and tighter on the vowels. He thinks it's funny that I like hearing him talk, but I do. He's sexy.

Scooting closer, James gets up on his knees then sits back on his feet. My hearts racing, pounding with anticipation. I climb over his hips so my knees are pressed into the mattress as I straddle him. James reaches out for

my waist to guide me to him. Grasping his cock, he angles it at my entrance but stops me from sliding down on it. He looks in my eyes and I hold my breath.

"I want us to last all night. We don't come until we can't handle anymore, and when we do, we come together."

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip and nod. I like this idea. I just hope I can hold out.

"We're not fucking, Aubrey," he states. "Tonight, we're going slow. I'm going to show you how much I love you."

## SEVEN

I swallow hard as James guides his cock into me painfully slow. He gives good foreplay, and he knows it.

"We're going to feel every bit, so we never forget who we belong to."

My lips part and I fall more in love with this man as he inches his way into me. I'm not sure my heart can take anymore. The way it beats, how it's pulsing in my throat, how when I look at him, I know he's the love of my life.

Once he's fully seated inside of me, my thighs loosen and I soften against him. My hands come up to cup his face. Leaning in, I hear him draw in a breath before our lips meet. Sometimes I feel like the only way to tell him how much he means to me is by kissing him with everything that's in me. Slow, with a side of control. Everything can be felt with a kiss.

James guides my hips to move with his. This is where we both make perfect sense because we connect in the same fashion with the same splitting control. I've got his lips that lead to the same place for me that his touch leads to for him—where our bodies are joined. My hips slowly rotate over him, my clit hitting the hair on his mound. James drives in and holds my ass in place. We move at the same pace, the same tenderness, the same passion. It's a deeper connection for us, one that we never speak about.

"James," I whisper against his lips. My forehead is pressed to his, my hands cupping his curved shoulders. I move one hand to the back of his head as he holds my hips steady and thrusts inside of me. He's so fucking wicked on my soul that I want to beg for him to always take me like this.

"Yeah, sweetheart?" he responds in a raspy voice. He knows what he's doing.

He moves my hair that's sticking to my damp face. My jaw angles up toward him, my back arching so my nipples are pressed against his chest. Our mouths don't touch, instead we tease each other with the promise of more debauchery. Abandon desire lights my body up like a diamond under the sun. My body is shaking, toes curling, fingers struggling to hold on as utter rapture grips me.

"Nothing... nothing feels this good," I tell him, eyes closed in ecstasy. "How are you holding on?" My entire body quivers. I'm struggling to not finish.

"Look at me."

I open my eyes and find a slight curl on James's lips. His gaze says everything.

"Do I look like I don't know what I'm doing? I know your body like a book, Aubrey. It belongs to me. Your pussy, your body, your heart. It's all mine."

Coming from his words alone wouldn't be a first for me.

A saucy huff rolls off my lips. I should've known he'd say that. James bends back slightly to pull out. He watches his cock leave my pussy only to plunge back in without shame. It's one of the sexiest things I've ever seen him do. He's in a state of unrestrained euphoria while he does it, and it's magnificent.

He's shaking under me now and I know if I move my hips just a fraction, he'll lose control and come. If I breathe too deeply, he'll come.

I grind my hips forward and ride James, feeling the ridges of his cock and taking him in me the way I know he loves. Gritty sex is James's middle name. There's a deepness inside of him that only I can reach.

Rising up on his knees, he leans into me until my back is on the mattress again. Red petals and soft, white feathers breeze around us like it's snowing. He's driving into me like he's determined to show me who's in charge.

"Baby," I say, and he knows what I mean.

I straighten one leg so it's up against his leg and then hook the other around his hip, pushing him farther inside me. We gasp in unison as he slips in deeper at this angle. It's tight as a fist for James and just the right angle for me to come soon.

My hands roam his broad backside, groping every inch of him as he carries us to a higher level. James is hammering into me with finesse. We're both dewy from the damp air when we finally climax together. Nails score his beautiful ink but never tear him, and my toes curl around the rose petals. An unabashed moan rolls off my lips. James is coming inside of me. I can feel his cock twitching and his warmth filling me. The walls of my pussy suck him dry until he's emptied inside of me.

"I have no words." I say the first thing on my mind. His cum leaks out between us and I can feel the stickiness of it on my thighs and dripping down my ass. We're both breathing hard and I have a feeling he's about to pull out, so I hold him for a second and just look into his eyes. I smile as he meets my gaze and use my thumbs to trace his lips.

I bring my mouth to his and he cups the back of my head at the same time, rolling us to the side. My legs sandwich his, and his wet and used cock slips out of me and lays against my thigh. He has no shame between the sheets and I love that he's so free. I glance between us and smirk at the way his cock glistens, laying there like I completely used him.

I guess I did.

"You're welcome," he responds, and I giggle.

"That was incredible. I can't believe you remembered when I mentioned the candles to you. That was like forever ago."

He smiles proudly. We had ordered some sex toys online on a whim. Since we'd already had so many things in our cart that I wanted to try out first, I figured I'd get the candle next time, among a few other things that had caught my eye. I'm glad he took it upon himself to get it for us.

James shifts to fully turn his body toward mine. He twirls my dark hair around one of his fingers and gives it a little tug. My gaze shifts to his chest that holds a giant lion's face inked into his skin. I look into its black eyes. They lure me with interest and in a strange sense remind me of James. The lion's mane is full of vivacious colors mixed with black lines that are intertwined. I look at it and feel alive. I feel inspired. I feel wild passion. But most of all, I feel James. A silent but strong man who is all mine.

"Aubrey?" he says, and I look up at him with a lazy smile. "Do you ever think about the future? Like, our future?"

I swallow a little rougher and turn onto my side to prop my elbow up and place my jaw in my hand. "Yes."

"How come you never talk to me about it?" His brows start to form a frown but he masks it.

"It's nerve-wracking, I guess. My future only has you in it, but I don't know if what we each want is the same thing. I'd hate to risk the argument that would probably ensue right after if we saw different things."

We're both quiet for a moment. He twirls my hair again.

"I definitely have that fear myself. You're young, you probably want babies. As much as I'd love to have a child with you and see you become a mother, I think I'm past my time. I don't want to be eighty when my child goes to college. I'll be lucky if I live that long."

I don't say anything because I don't know what to say.

The truth is, I'm torn myself. We've been wrapped in this bubble we both created that I never really thought about if I wanted kids or not with him. I want to be angry that James is basically telling me kids aren't an option. Sure, I'd love to create a family with the man I love, but in all honesty, the selfish part of me is fine with just having him, and only him, to myself for the rest of my life.

## EIGHT

"I know children is a deal breaker for some," he says. "I feel like it's better to get that out and in the open first and go from there."

I peer up at him. "Is it strange that I'm okay with not having kids?" I'm surprised by how okay I am with the idea. "Women are expected to want to start a family when they get married, but I never had the desire to. For the longest time I felt ashamed for not wanting children. It doesn't mean I don't like kids, or that I'm too selfish or inadequate to have them. I just never really considered having them, I guess because it wasn't high on my list." I pause, then ask, "Does that bother you?"

"I think people want it both ways. You see the pros and cons and want both. Do I want you to reason with me about having kids so I feel like maybe you do want our child? Yes. I'm a man, and I want you to have my kids, but I'm also relieved you don't."

I muse over our conversation, my fingers drawing squiggly lines on his chest.

"I want kids, but I don't. I think I'm leaning toward the cool aunt title more than anything, I just don't have any siblings to make me one." I stop and think about Natalie and how she's basically my sister and could make me a cool aunt. But I have a hard time seeing her ever having kids. I

chuckle. "I'm trying to picture Natalie with kids. I don't know why it makes me laugh. I feel like kids would run her life, not the other way around."

James grins and rubs his eyes with the heel of his hand. He doesn't realize that I caught the spark in his eyes at the thought of becoming a grandfather. "That'd be something."

I think about it more. Would I feel like I'm missing out on something? As a woman, yes, but as a person, no. Maybe we could just get a dog one day and be dog parents.

Glancing at James's chest, I trace the black lines of the lion's mane with my acrylic nail, pulling on some of his chest hairs. "I don't think I'd feel any sort of loss or longing if I don't have kids. I do a little now, but I think that's because I've accepted what I've been thinking about all along. It's just once you actually speak about something, it makes it feel more real than anything."

"Look at me," he says, and I shoot my eyes up to his. I can see the legitimate worry plaguing his eyes. "Tell me you're not going to resent me for not having kids."

I do better. I lean in and give him a hard kiss, then I look at him. James cups my hair and fists it in his hand. "I will not resent you," I say slow and clear. "And if I ever change my mind, I'll tell you."

"Good, because I don't think I could live with it." He blinks a few times, still holding on to me. "If you see a future with me, does that future involve us getting married?"

My heart drops and I roll onto my back. I had a gut feeling this topic was coming soon. James has been much more lovey and hands-on and attentive, showing me exactly how he feels. I'd wondered what changed for him or if it was because he'd been considering marriage at some point. Now that I think about it, when James had opened up to me about his previous marriage to Nat's mom, that was the extent of the marriage talk we'd had.

I'm a little nervous to tell him, though. I love James and don't want to upset him if we're on different pages. I know in my heart I don't need a piece of paper to tell me I'm connected to someone, or to vow my love for them. What James and I have is real, whether I'm legally his wife or not. To me, it's all the same. Most people think the point of a relationship is to get married, but it's not. Some people reach a deeper connection because of that paper, while others find it pointless to have that label when nothing is changing.

"I hope you know I only ever want to be with you. I just don't think we need a piece of paper to prove we're committed to each other."

As soon as the words leave my lips, I hold my breath.

Fuck. This is harder to talk about than whether or not I wanted kids, and talking about that terrified me. This is making my stomach twist into knots while I wait to hear his response. I don't want to lose him, but I'm not going to lie to him either. This is a conversation of truth.

I should've made sure we brought the cognac in before we came inside. Who knew James was going to get all serious with me right after giving me the best orgasm of my life?

My lips are flattened. My lungs ache from holding my breath. I'm worried I may have made a huge mistake, but I couldn't lie either and give him false hope. Not over something like this. He's asking about marriage, not which restaurant I want to dine at.

James is staring. He's thinking too deep and it's making my stomach cramp from anxiety. I can see the wheels spinning in his mind, and I don't like it.

"You don't want to get married? Is that what you're saying?"

My teeth dig into my bottom lip. "Yes," I say quietly. "I don't want to get married."

His brows deepen the longer he studies me. His eyes though... the crystal blue are sharper than broken glass. It cuts my heart in half seeing

James hurt.

I feel this large shift between us opening up. James isn't happy, and his lack of response is spreading the gap wider. My heart thumps in my throat and my stomach is a rotating disaster the longer he stays quiet.

"You don't want to get married," he repeats, a statement this time instead of a question. All I can do is shake my head while I look into his eyes full of disbelief.

James pulls away to sit up and my biggest fear is brought to the center of us. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to look away from me but I can still see his eyes. My pulse skyrockets in my neck. I feel like I'm going to be sick. I watch as his eyes scan the space around us like he's looking for an answer. He wasn't prepared for my response, and I wasn't ready for his.

With his back to me, I can feel this distant energy burning inside of him. A nauseating feeling slithers through my veins leaving me unsure of us now.

"James," I say, sitting up and reaching for him.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I scoot closer to him and hug him from behind. He grabs my wrist like he's prepared to tell me to stop so he can get up and walk away. I feel it, and when he tightens his hold, my thoughts are confirmed. Only, he doesn't move. Relief exhales from my lungs and I close my eyes resting my head on his back.

We're quiet for a moment. His hurt over my refusal is felt tenfold and it makes me feel so guilty. I love James, the last thing I want to do is upset him.

"Just because I don't want to get married doesn't mean I don't want to be with you."

"It does, Aubrey," he says, and he shakes me off to stand.

My heart plummets with my fucking jaw. I don't like the tone he used, like he's aggravated with me.

"I just don't want that piece of paper between us. It always ruins a good thing," I say, my voice urging him to understand me. I climb to my knees and pull the sheet around me.

James remains quiet. His silence lengthens the tension and it only makes this that much worse. He doesn't turn around to look at me. He just folds his hands behind his head and arches his back until his muscles are straining.

"You really think that's what breaks up a good thing? Sweetheart, you're smarter than that."

James's back flexes as he speaks to me. Dread fills my veins fearing the worst.

"You're mad at me," I whisper.

He looks over his shoulder at me and I'm speechless. "You *are* mad," I state.

"Yeah, I fuckin' am. I want you as my wife, Aubrey, and I thought you wanted it too."

## NINE

"Why can't we just leave what we have alone and not jinx it?"

He shakes his head in annoyance and looks away. "Who says we're going to jinx anything?"

I blink, a little hesitant to proceed. The last thing I want is to get into an argument over this while we're on vacation. One he surprised me with at that.

"I'm just worried we're going to ruin a good thing with a piece of paper that in the long run means nothing. I love you, James, and no piece of paper, or lack of one, is going to tell me any different. I've read countless stories about how people change before the ink even dries. I'm not saying that would happen with us, but I don't want to chance it either. Isn't what we have good enough?"

"No, it's not. Good enough is knowing you're mine in every sense of the way. Peace of mind. Peace of heart."

I deflate. How could he not know I'm his in every sense of the way already? "But you already know I am. What's the paper going to do?"

"It signifies that you're mine and I'm yours in the eyes of the law and everyone."

"Why does it matter what the law or anyone else thinks? Shouldn't the only thing that matters is how we feel?"

"I want to be able to call you my wife."

My heart melts for this man. "So, you still can," I tell him. I'd love it if he did.

James shakes his head. "It's not the same thing and you know it, Aubrey." He sounds like he's been defeated, and it kills me. "You won't have my last name."

"It's the twenty-first century. A lot of women don't take their husband's name anymore."

"Call me old school. I'd like to introduce you as my wife and not my live-in girlfriend. I want you to have my last name. I want to marry you. There's a security behind the marriage, you know."

I'm taken aback by his brash tone and increasing bite in his voice. I thought we already had security. Never once did I second-guess us. I exhale slowly, trying not to allow the hurt to take over completely because he's offended that I don't want to marry him, but I can't help that it does. We're both passionate people, so the hurt we're feeling spreads to anger, and that's not a good thing for us. Neither of us likes to back down.

"You can't possibly think there's a security behind marriage after your last marriage." I spit out before I could stop myself. I clench my eyes shut and wince, regretting it.

James's arrogant chuckle under his breath causes chills to run down my arms. "How'd I know you'd say something like that."

It was immature of me to use that against him. We don't have the same relationship he had with his ex-wife and it's wrong of me to ever use that against him.

Standing up, James walks over to the dresser and yanks the drawer open to pull out a pair of gym shorts. He steps into them then slams the drawer shut with his knee and levels a quiet stare at me. He's waiting for me to change my mind. My heart is cracking down the center the longer the silence spans between us. The truth is, I can't give him what he wants.

I remain quiet. The guilt is eating away at my stomach.

Bending down, James reaches for a shirt I left on the ottoman this morning and throws it to me. It falls into a soft heap right in front of me. I don't reach for it because I can't seem to steer myself from looking at him. His eyes probe me longer, deeper, like he's begging me to change my mind so he can make me his wife. Still, I remain quiet. He exhales a breath through his nose and I feel the frustration flaring from him. I love him so much and I'd give him anything else he asked for, but I can't give him that.

I swallow thickly as he props his hands on his hips. The colorful hues of his inked arms flicker against the low lighting in our room. My gaze lands on the flower he had tattooed onto his forearm. It was a moment, our first one, and one of the first tattoos he'd gotten on his untouched arm. The flower matches the dress I wore when we first met in Bryant Park. To this day, it's still his favorite.

"Do you have no desire to get married? Or does the idea of marrying me repulse you?"

"Repulse me?" I repeat. "You think marrying you repulses me?"

I'm shaking now over his asinine words.

Men are so dumb sometimes.

I need to count to ten, but I'm beyond hurt that he thinks he repulses me.

My eyes flare, instantly filling with tears. How could he even think that? He has to know what he means to me. James is taking this the wrong way.

My heart is a burning ball of fire right now confined inside of my chest. I grab the shirt and let the sheet fall to my hips to slip it on. It's inside out but I don't really give a fuck. I jump out of bed and march right up to him with determination. Lifting my chin, I say, "If marriage to you repulsed me, would I even be in a relationship with you? Just because I don't want to get married doesn't mean I don't want you."

"What's the reason then, Aubrey?"

My lips twitch, anxiety filling me instantly. "There's no reason."

He takes a step closer to me and a little gasp crests in my throat. I ache to lean into him. I'm so drawn to him. How could he question any of it?

"There has to be."

There is, but now isn't the time to bring it up. Not when the tension is increasing by the second.

"You won't ever marry me, will you?"

His voice is a clamp on my pulse. I'm reminded of the day I walked away from us the first time all those years ago in his home. How he looked when he threw his glass across the room—the way it shattered against the wall—knowing there was no changing my mind. He feels ruined, again, because he won't win.

I don't say anything. It's not possible when I'm pressing my lips together fighting emotions I know he can clearly see. I can't bring myself to utter the words.

My lungs are straining for air, my chest taut with what feels like skin being stretched.

Stepping around him, I walk through the French doors to the patio to where we were sitting earlier in the night. I pick up the glass I was drinking from and toss the rest of the contents back, then I refill it. It burns good going down my throat. Hurts a little, but I like that bite, feeling like I deserve it.

The wood creaks under James's footsteps. Instinctively, I refill his glass then reach out to my side to hand it to him blindly.

He takes it and stands next to me. We're staring at the slow wake of black waves brushing up against our private bungalow together. Unspoken words remain floating between us that thicken the salty air.

Pressing the glass to the center of my chest, my voice is flat as I say, "We don't need a label to make it official, James. Look where your marriage got you. Look where it got my parents. Even my grammy lost my grandpa.

They waited until he left the Naval Academy to get married, only for him to pass away a few years later. The only people I know who were married—including you—and look how it ended for them, for you. I only have you and Natalie in my life. I don't want to chance losing you guys too. That's what I feel like comes from having that dumb paper. You're my family," I add, my voice breaking a little.

James lifts the glass to his mouth and tosses back what is equivalent to three shots like it's nothing. His throat bobs once. He's not handling this well.

He hands me the glass and I place it down next to mine. "I never intended to marry Kathleen, and you know that. I never loved her the way I love you. This is different. I thought you knew that."

I wish I could cave, but the way I see it, I'm doing us a favor.

"We don't need a piece of paper to dictate our relationship."

## TEN

James turns toward me.

Eyes illuminated by the soft lights on the deck, James takes my hands in his and lifts them to his mouth. He kisses the back of my knuckles and rubs the center of my palm with his thumb. The fine lines around his eyes are tight with worry. He makes me feel like this is a deal breaker for him.

Licking my lips, I swallow hard. I pray to God it's not. I don't think I could handle it. In fact, I know I couldn't. Just the mere thought makes my stomach knot with dread. I wouldn't survive it a second time. I barely did the first time.

My heart does this odd little flip and my eyes widen from the way it dips into my stomach. I hate the way it only happens when anxiety is consuming me the way it is right now. It's worst when my stomach and heart join forces to produce a nasty panic attack I have to talk myself down from.

But the way he's looking at me confirms my fear. Inhaling and exhaling quickly, I blink rapidly, trying to mentally ease the tightness in my chest. Maybe I'm overthinking and I'm wrong. James tugs me closer, and instinctively I try to pull away from him. The thought of James leaving me cripples me to the point that I'm breaking down inside. I'd marry him if I

absolutely had to, but I really hope it won't come to that. Then every day I would live in some state of fear that something was going to take him from me.

My knees are shaking. I'm weak and on the verge of fainting when James wraps an arm around my lower back and pulls me to stand against him. The warmth of his chest soothes my anxiety and I feel a settling in my soul that only he is able to give me. He nestles his cheek against mine and holds our hands pressed to his chest. The scruff of his beard is oddly comforting. He's holding me up knowing I can't handle another second longer. I feel like he's always holding me up, though. He's my rock. My silent warrior. He didn't ask me for anything, he didn't expect anything. Now that he was, I was rejecting him.

I snuffle, upset we're at odds over this and press myself into him. James holds me tighter and I love him more for it, but I can't help but fear he's going to leave me now too. The feeling is too gut-wrenching to ignore, no matter how hard I push the thought from me.

"Can you at least consider it, sweetheart?" James asks. "Marriage is something I really want with you. Nothing is going to happen to us. We're only going to get better. I promise you that. If you think for a second it's ruining what we have, we can get divorced and go back to dating. But please, all I'm asking is for you to think about marrying me."

"You don't know that, James," I say, my heart is in my throat. "You mean too much to me to risk it."

"I would do anything for you," he responds, his words like knives jutting between my ribs.

James's voice is one of the things that drew me to him. Deep and in the back of his throat, his spoken words can't be mistaken for anything other than validity. There's something about that I'm drawn to explicitly. He hits all the right notes in my body easily by simply talking. His vibe exudes old New York and that ups his smoking hot factor by a margin.

But when he's deep in his emotion and basically asking me to marry him, he's fucking savage on the ears.

"You know that, right?"

I nod. "I know."

"Maybe I *am* old fashioned," he continues, "but I want to know that the rest of my days are sealed with yours. You're my world, my light. You give me a reason to wake up every day. Be mine forever in the way that matters most to me."

My heart is racing a mile a minute. I'm standing in nothing but a sleep shirt that just barely covers my ass. I'm completely naked underneath while James is only in a pair of basic shorts.

And I'm fairly certain James did just ask me to marry him... in a roundabout way.

I blink again, unsure what to say. I don't want to ask him if he just asked me to marry him. I won't set myself up like that, but I'm not sure what he meant by that either.

"If it doesn't work out, then we can say we gave it a shot. We can be that couple that never learns and keeps marrying each other."

Fuck. He did.

James turns so his back is to the wall now and pulls me to lean on him. Our legs are pressed together and there's a cool breeze drifting across the back of my thighs. Rising up on my tiptoes, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and bury my face in his neck. I draw James into me as a soft moan escapes my throat. My nipples harden in response and I shiver. God, I love the feeling this man creates inside my heart for him. If love had one specific feeling, this was it. This type of mood, this attraction and undeniable chemistry, is only meant for one person. Only for one person to evoke from another. My other half. James Riviera.

His embrace awakens a desire in me that spreads warmth throughout my body like a damn tidal wave. My shirt lifts, exposing my bare flesh. His

palm skims over my rounded ass. He gives me a firm squeeze at the base of my cheek and my eyes roll shut. Little flames pop over every inch of my skin and my head falls to the side. I can feel his hand itching to move higher. I want him to. James knows I love when his dominate side comes out to play.

His thick erection strains against my stomach. He's hot and long, and feeling his frame fit perfectly against my curves makes me want him even more. I've joked to him before that we fit like two puzzle pieces, but we really do.

His hands roam my thighs in a feather soft touch. Arching my chest into his, I slip my hair over my shoulder as his teeth find my tender flesh. Our bodies create this sultry friction that intensifies by the breaths we take. We're both fighting for something we believe in. Both wanting to give each other what they desire.

His lips brush over the shell of my ear and my pulse quickens. I catch the faintest scent of cognac that reminds me of a crackling fire. My skin flushes with need. He knows my body like the back of his hand.

There's something deeply intimate about being alone with James under the dark sky that amplifies the enormity of tonight's conversation. In the dark, we're vulnerable. His hands tell me what to feel and his kiss silences my fears. Our desires are exposed without regret but sated with ecstasy.

A salty breeze glides past us and my hair feathers around us. I'm hoping we're done talking about the topic of marriage seeing as tomorrow we leave for home. I don't want to go to bed fighting with him. We don't need to end the trip on a negative note.

I need James's lips on mine so I can show him we don't need a paper to claim what we are. We've been doing that. We know what we are. He is mine, and I am his. Always. End of story.

His prickly beard tickles me as he moves closer to where I need him. He peppers kisses along my jaw, causing me to produce little gasps. Just as I

reach for his mouth and my body curls alongside his, I feel his resistance.

"James." I whisper his name like it's a plea and open my eyes. The way he's looking at me causes a knot to lodge in my throat and render me speechless. He's about to say something I'm not prepared to hear.

"Marry me, sweetheart."

## ELEVEN

**M**y lips part.  
I'm speechless. I don't blink. I don't breathe.

James doesn't just ask me to marry him hoping for a positive answer in return. He asks me like it's the right thing to do.

All I can do is stare at him in total silence as my heart viciously pounds into my ribs. I'm not all that shocked he'd go there after I told him how I feel about marriage; persistence is James's other middle name. I'm more shocked by how much I want to agree with him.

The truth is, I know it's the right thing... I just can't do it.

"Marry me, sweetheart," James says again, though he's not as sure this time. There's a deflated tone to his words that kills me. "Say yes."

His arms tighten around me and I find myself leaning into him. I take a deep breath. I want to give him what he wants, but I'm scared. The loss would be too great to endure.

Dating my best friend's dad is one thing. Marrying him is another. I almost lost both Natalie and James as a result of us dating. Granted, it was behind Natalie's back at the time and the furthest thing from a normal relationship by any means. Still, it took Natalie over two years to finally agree to James and I being together. I have a hard time believing she'd accept marriage without issue.

Just like I don't want to risk losing James over a stupid piece of paper, I don't want to lose my best friend either. Being her stepmom is out of the question and just seems so wrong. It would drive a wedge right between us.

James's arms loosen and my heart begins to fall as he pulls away. I glance up and take in the shadows moving through his eyes as his body stiffens defensively against mine.

He's watching me, waiting patiently for a sound response. I don't give him one. I can't even tell him no.

"What's the real reason?" James doesn't bother hiding the pain in his question. "Can you at least give me that?"

Tears fill my eyes and my jaw bobs. I wish he'd never asked me to marry him.

His arms unravel around me completely. The air leaves my lungs in a slow withdrawal as he let's go. My life, everything I love, suddenly feels gone to me.

James takes a step to the side and puts a small amount of space between us.

"James." I pant, winded as panic sets in.

My stomach drops.

I'm going to be sick.

I'm losing him.

My eyes search his. He's quiet as he moves to the side again, detaching from the concept of us. I can feel it in my bones, in my heart of hearts, and it scares me what might come next. What he could say or ultimately do. That's not what I want for us, or for him to experience.

"James, please."

I reach for him and place my hand on his forearm. He waits, looking at me expectantly. I need him to know... I don't know what I need him to know other than I love him, and that I need him to not hate me, that this doesn't have to be a deal breaker for us.

"You know you're it for me, right? That I love you? That nothing will weaken how I feel?"

There's a slight drop in his shoulders. James doesn't respond. He doesn't move. He stands still like it's both a serious struggle for me to be touching him and for him to be in front of me. I think that's harder for me to handle more than anything. Light begins to fade from his eyes. I wait, listening to the ocean softly lap against our bungalow, and wonder how we got to this point.

"Right?" I say, my chin wobbling. "You know I love you more than life."

Gently, he pulls his arm away so I'm not touching him anymore. His body is partially turned away from me now, and that just makes it worse.

"James?"

I don't know what I'm asking for. I don't think he does either. What I want is for him to see that I love him, that we aren't going anywhere, and that nothing needs to change, but he doesn't. He's purposely not looking at me, and I can't stomach it. His avoidance could mean so many things.

My heart is breaking by the second. But so is his. I thought we were stronger than this.

Though his eyes are lowered to the ground, James straightens my shirt so my backside is covered. We're alone out here. No one could see us unless they came onto the deck of our private pavilion. He didn't have to cover me—he chose to.

A tear slips from the corner of my eye. He takes a step away from me like he's ready to leave and I gasp. It feels like there's hundreds of miles between us now and not a few inches. He takes another step and my knees start to buckle.

I can't handle this and need to rectify it.

"Wait," I plead, and James stops. "Don't leave me, please."

Finally, he looks at me, and I almost crumble to the ground.

James is fucking shattered. Worse than me. Absolutely gutted.

My chest feels like it's caving in while being torn apart with two bare hands. I'm struggling to breathe while James looks like he's dying inside.

What did I do to the man who has done nothing but love me for who I am? Who didn't try to change me but let my wings flap with the wind? Who's tried to make me smile every single day by showing me how much one could love another human?

I broke him.

I want to reach for him, but I can't. All I can do is grab the hem of my shirt and tug on it like it's supporting me. I can't ask him for anything, not after I quietly rejected his proposal.

His eyes, though. I see the way he looks at me. They scream devastation.

James subtly shakes his head in disbelief. He takes two steps toward me and I reach for him at the same time, needing to feel his skin on mine, hoping it'll give me a sign that we're going to be okay. He palms the back of my head and threads his fingers through my hair. I lean in and meet him halfway. He presses his lips to the top of my head, then steadies himself.

"Contrary to what you think, I can't leave you. Not even if I wanted to."

A soft whimper escapes my trembling lips, followed by a louder one. My back is vibrating with emotion while my heart rips wide open. I'm shaking in his arms while he feels as steady as a rock. I know he's not steady, though. I know he's breaking inside, just like I am. We're two peas in a pod.

James cups my jaw and tilts my head up, bringing my eyes to meet his. Steel baby blues shift back and forth between mine. James studies me. His brows deepen together like he's trying to figure out where he went wrong, how his calculations were off.

He shakes his head again before blowing out a breath of surrender onto my lips. "Not even if I wanted to..." James presses a hard, brutal kiss to my

mouth. He breaks it just as fast, leaving me breathless. "I guess I'll just have to deal with it."

Letting go of me, James steps back then turns around and strides into our room.

*I guess I'll just have to deal with it.*

The wind picks up and whips around my bare legs, veiling me with loneliness. My toes curl into the deck floor and I can feel the pressure of the ocean push up into the wooden planks that hold up our room. Like it's knocking into my chest and filling my lungs.

With a hand to my neck, I fall into the chair I sat in earlier.

I became what he divorced.

He's settling for me even though it makes him unhappy. Settling had been the crux of his previous marriage, and why he'd been so miserable. Why he'd been a member of Sanctuary Cove. The sole reason we met and connected is now the same reason we're on the verge of a messy breakup, because this isn't just a conversation about what we're eating for dinner. This is our future fused together by two rings and a piece of paper.

Fear is two hands pressing on my throat. I'm terrified I'm going to push him in the direction of another woman just like his ex-wife did. She didn't satisfy him sexually, and now I don't satisfy him emotionally. Emotionally, sexually, physically connecting to another person, these are the three basic needs a person with a beating heart seeks every day. You can't have one and not the other. It doesn't work like that, because then you'll always be searching for what you don't have in someone else.

With James and me there was no searching. We were satisfied in every area of our relationship. Until tonight.

Glancing to my side, I eye the bottle of cognac we left open and grab it by the neck.

I don't bother with a glass.

Pulling up my leg, I rest my elbow on my knee then bring the bottle to my lips. I take deep pull after deep pull, until my throat burns and I feel like I could blow flames from my nose. I drink until the last bit of amber liquid that was left is gone.

I toss the empty glass bottle onto James's empty chair and pray to God history doesn't repeat itself.

## TWELVE

**I**t feels like someone's using a feather to draw figure eights on my thigh. I inhale an exhausted breath. My eyes are dry as I rouse from a heavy sleep. I try to lick my lips, but I can't move yet.

The airy feeling is back again, tickling my inner thigh. I'm still half-asleep trying to piece together where I am. I listen to the sounds around me. There's an exotic bird chirping, water curling into itself, followed by the warmth of sunlight spilling into the room from a window that had been left open.

It all comes crashing back to me.

Squeezing my eyes, I take a deep breath and force myself to wake up. The sheets are cool as I sweep my legs across them trying to remember when I came inside. My mind is totally blank. A black room of nothing. Last I remember, I was sitting by myself outside until I could swear I saw the sunrise just peak above the horizon.

I lick my lips and reach above my head, arching my back, when I feel pressure at my hip. I glance down my body and find James has laid his head on my stomach, and it's him who's drawing circles on my leg. His body is perpendicular to mine. I watch his eyelashes flutter and realize I still don't have panties on and my knee is bent up. I've never shied away from James before. Countless times I've woken with his head between my thighs or

with him inside of me saying he couldn't wait. The mornings were mine to have him any way I wanted, while the evenings were his. But I suddenly feel like I'm too exposed after the way we left things last night and I shift my legs until they're closed.

This is the first time I didn't wake in his arms.

We didn't make love as the sun came up.

He didn't tell me I'm his forever, and I didn't tell him he's mine.

And I fucking hate it.

Threading my fingers through his salt and pepper hair, I remember when he told me he wanted to let it grow out a little. Now it's slightly longer than most men's, but not long enough for a man bun. I draw the line at sharing hair ties.

"When did I come inside?" I ask, my voice still full of sleep. I want to get up to get a drink of water, but I can barely bring myself to move. I'm too tired and I think I'm a little depressed from last night.

"You didn't. I carried you in," James says. "You fell asleep out there."

"Oh." I frown.

James wraps an arm around my waist and hugs me the same way he does pillows. He turns his head to look at me and lays it back on my stomach. My body tenses, unsure what I'm going to see.

Our eyes meet, and regret and sadness spills from both of us.

"My mind is a little hazy. I don't remember being carried in."

"How's your head? Do you have a hangover?"

I think about it for a second.

Bringing my hand to his jaw, I run the back of my knuckles down his beard and then over the golden curve of his shoulder until my nails are gently scratching his back.

"My head is fine," I say. "The benefit of good alcohol—no hangover."

He doesn't smile. Instead, he laces his fingers with mine and scoots our joined hands to my side. There's a quiet reserve floating around him this

morning. I know James well enough to know how he feels, and right now he feels alone and like he's settling again. I know this because I'm just like him. We bleed the same emotions, the same feelings, the same humor, the same sexual desires. We're each other's other half. What one feels, the other does too. And what he's feeling fucking kills me.

He's waiting. Being patient. Watching me. The morning sunrise casts a gorgeous radiance across his eyes creating the palest blue. They flicker with clarity. With the hope I had a change of heart.

But he knows I didn't. He's too perceptive for that.

"What's the reason, Aubrey?"

I swallow thickly from the sound of pure dejection in James's voice. He sounds like he didn't sleep.

"I already told you."

He levels an unfiltered stare at me. James is not going to stop until he gets the answer I'm keeping from him.

"The real reason, sweetheart. And not the bullshit excuse that you think a fucking piece of paper is going to ruin what we have. I deserve better than that."

The rawness in his words cut deep, but it's warranted. Our connection runs deeper to fathom than coming up with something so frivolous. A reason like mine is a joke to him, and probably to most as well. It would've been a joke to me too, but who knew this is what love would feel like? Once this imaginary love line is crossed, there's no turning back. The further you get, the deeper you're pulled in. We flew past that by our second date as James and Valentina. Even when we weren't together, there was no denying the force being pushed at in our hearts.

"I don't understand why you think two people who are clearly fucking madly in love with each other shouldn't take the final step and get married. It's preposterous to me."

I shake my head and avert my gaze, stopping to stare at the French doors. No matter what I say, it won't make a difference to James. He doesn't understand why we don't need a paper to keep our bond strong. There's nothing stronger than what we already have.

I'm ashamed though, because in a way, in some closed off chamber of my heart, I agree with him, and that's not fair to either of us.

My throat is sore and scratchy as I speak. "Do you really think Natalie would be okay with it?"

I can feel the weight of his stare on me while I gaze mindlessly out the window at the rippling water. The sun is fresh above the water right before its peak. It's enchanting and pulls me away from the torment between us. I can't bring myself to look at James because I'm so torn and upset inside. It's messing with my emotions.

Warmth blooms under my cheek. I'm avoiding him and I sense he gets that. A chuckle echoes along the corners of our intimate room. I frown and finally look down. He's smirking in disbelief and beholding me with stupefied eyes.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"I'm dead serious."

He pops his head up and places his chin in his palm. "You and I live together. When she visits, she sits on the bed we have sex in every day. You think she'd object to us getting married?" We're both quiet. "Tell me my daughter is not the reason you won't marry me."

Humiliation invades me. My reasoning sounds like total bullshit now and messes with my feelings. I'm saddened that in all the days we've been together, this is our first real fight, and it's over marriage.

"Did you forget how she reacted to us dating and how long it took her to come around? She's going to be ten times worse over marriage. I'm not going to lose my best friend completely when there's no reason if everything is fine the way it is, which it is."

"It's not *fine* the way it is," James spits out, then rolls out of bed to pace the floor.

My eyes widen as hurt consumes my heart. I lower my voice and say, "Wow. I had no idea you were so miserable."

"What makes you think she'd react the same way, anyway?" he challenges, throwing his arm in the air. A colorful blur of inked hues crosses my gaze. Frustration drips from him when I don't say anything. "You don't know. You're just scared to take the plunge because you think you have bad luck and it's the reason all the good things in your life are taken from you. Guess what? You had shitty luck before you met me, and you already took a risk with me. Yeah, it fucking backfired on us because it wasn't under normal circumstances, but look at us now. I'm the one good thing that has made it this far with you, because it was meant to fucking happen." James pauses, his eyes wild. "I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart. We're only going to get better from here on out. I just wish you'd open your eyes so you don't waste time trying to fight it and enjoy what we have."

James is good. His argument guts me. Damn that devil on my shoulder, he was so fucking hot as he did so too.

"I'm serious, James. I can't fucking do that to her. To us. You really don't think she won't care? You're wrong, and I won't do that to her."

James does that sarcastic chuckle again under his breath as he strides toward the bathroom. It grates on my nerves and makes me want to chase after him, but I don't. He made a good case in a matter of seconds and crushed any reason I feared would tear us down with one breath.

James stops and places his hand on the wall before he turns into the room and looks around the corner at me. His brows angle toward each other like he's struggling worse than I am. My face has tears streaming down my heated cheeks. I wish he'd come to me and kiss them away. I wish he'd tell me we'd find a way to make this work. Because right now, this feels

hopeless, and even though he said he's not going anywhere, it feels like he's already gone.

"Hypothetically, say Natalie doesn't have an issue and we could get married tomorrow, would you marry me?"

The silence in the room is deafening. My vision blurs further as the seconds tick by. I watch the hope in James's eyes reduce to grief, and it kills me. Breaking a man does something to me I can't explain. My brain is saying to be smart and follow the evidence so I can break the cycle, but my heart is saying yes. Like why is he even asking me? Of course, I'd say yes.

But I don't say anything at all, and neither does he.

I watch James's fingers tap the corner of the wall. He presses his lips together, his eyes boring into mine, and with a firm nod, he looks away. "Okay," he says, his voice low. "I understand."

## THIRTEEN

**F**or the last two days, the only times James has spoken to me was to ask me for a reason.

He says my reasons aren't legitimate and I need a better one if I'm going to win my case.

He'd ask me before the sun rose when he'd just woken up. His voice groggy, thick with sleep and making my body come alive. The rawness in his tone that comes with age and patience just gets to me, especially when he's passionate about something. These last few mornings have been torture on me.

I couldn't bring myself to have him the next morning after we'd arrived home. I wanted him desperately, but it felt wrong. Twice I turned over to reach for him, and stopped myself. How was I supposed to have what I wanted with him if I wouldn't give him what he wanted with me?

I knew the moment I touched him I would pounce, so I'd quickly climbed out of bed and made my way into the bathroom.

This is the longest we've gone without each other since we got back together, and now we're in this weird state of limbo. Sex is something we connect with and find reprieve from the real world. It isn't just out of necessity to have sex with our other half, it's part of who we are and what

connected us as a couple. We physically and mentally and emotionally need each other. Not having every part is sucking the life from me.

I'm standing in our bathroom wiping off my mascara when James rounds the corner. I freeze, holding my towel tighter to my chest as my gaze drags down the length of his body. I'm in my prime and want sex all the time, I can't not look. There's something about a silver fox in black sweats that makes me question why I ever once loved gray sweats on a man. Gray is for boys who like to play with their pecker and braid their pube hair. Black is for men who like to throw you to the bed and take you from behind, all while holding your hair and fucking you into oblivion.

Masculinity oozes from him as he strides toward me with a swagger that makes my heart race. I finish blotting away the smudge under my eyes and drop the cotton ball on the counter. Our gazes don't waver. I don't turn around to face him, but I hold my breath the closer he gets to me. Placing both hands on the counter to brace myself, James steps up right behind me as if this past weekend didn't happen. He moves my wet hair to one shoulder to press a few kisses to my neck and wraps both arms around my waist. The warmth of his body presses against my back and my eyes roll shut. I'm at home in his arms and never want to leave.

"Stop fighting me," he says against my throat. He gives me a little bite then kisses it. "Give in to me."

My lips twitch. He's persistent.

"Be my wife. Say yes."

"I've missed you, James," I whisper, feeling a little emotional.

"I'm right here, sweetheart, for you to have and to hold."

I chuckle and lean into him. I needed that little moment of humor. His breath strokes the curve of my neck, making goose bumps prickle my arms. I miss the feel of his lips on mine and need them. I hope he needs mine too.

I turn my face up to his and cup the back of his head. I pray he doesn't reject me as our eyes meet.

He towers over me, which isn't easy at my height. James stares down at me as I hold my breath, testing me to make a move. His eyes are shaded by thick black lashes that makes it so easy to get lost in. He laughs when I tell him he has bedroom eyes.

James leans in and I produce a little gasp right before his lips find mine. He doesn't hold back and I'm glad he doesn't. I need him to break this awkwardness between us because I'm not big enough to. Truth be told, I'm scared.

James plunges past my lips. My knees nearly buckle at the stroke of his tongue against mine. I moan into his mouth as I thread his hair through my fingers, giving him a firm tug. I press back just as hard with my lips to show him how much I fucking love him. We devour each other in a fiery kiss that leaves us both breathless when he abruptly breaks it.

James shakes his head and gives me a disappointed frown. "Just fucking marry me already."

Each time he brings it up, it hurts more.

He slips his hand through the opening of my gray towel and glides his palm along the deep sweep of my hip. His touch speaks confidence and it's something I learned I'm attracted to when I first met him. James is a man who knows what he wants, and he isn't afraid to show it.

I spin around and press my chest against his. James doesn't give me any room to breathe. His hands roam over my bare body, loosening the towel. He's stoking the desire I only have for him to a no-return zone. Going without James is like going without water.

I reach between us and palm his cock. My fingers wrap around his erection and I press my forehead to his shoulder looking for support. I dig my nails into his length and he jerks. His hips surge into my hand and my lips part with a not so surprised needy sigh. He's as hard as steel and it turns me on high. Desire wets my pussy and I clench my legs together.

I push the elastic waistband over his hips when James rips the towel off me. I give his ass cheek a good grab and yank him to me. There's a nice roundness that I like. James grabs my face as he lifts one of my thighs. He bends his knees to get down and angles the tip of his shaft at my entrance. He surges into me without hesitation and rises to his full height, forcing me to strain on my toes. I gasp loudly and clench my thighs, my toes curling in response. The pressure, the tightness, the pain and longing, the sensations are overloading my senses and taking over. My mind goes blank. All I can do is focus on us and the moment and what we're doing.

He spreads my thighs wider and dips again to get deeper, grinding up my clit when he stands. My body shakes in response and I can barely hold myself up. My pussy softens for him and leaks on his cock as I pulsate around him. He's going to make sure I don't forget who's inside of me.

The type of connection James and I have can't be replicated.

I reach for the counter behind me. I'm already weak and my elbow bends. James places a palm on the small of my back then clutches the back of my neck with the other. He pulls out and pushes back in like he needs to be in me. His heavy sack slaps into my ass and he lets out the sexiest groan.

My nails dig into his skin. James is frantic, gripping harder, and I respond like I always do. He pulls me to him and lets out a deep sigh when he buries his face in my neck.

"Say yes..."

I clench my eyes shut and dig my teeth into my bottom lip until I taste blood. I want to say yes. And I think he knows I want to and it's why he keeps asking me.

"At least give me a reason," he begs. "No one is going to love you more than me. I can promise you I'll love you harder than anyone else until my very last breath."

I don't give him a reason. Not even after he makes sweet love to me for the next two hours, making up for what we lost the last few days.

I don't finish, though. Not once. I can't. I'm depriving myself because I feel guilty over my decision.

## FOURTEEN

"You better not be fucking my dad!"

Grinning, I sit up higher at the sound of Natalie's voice and feel a spark of excitement burst through me. I've missed my bestie. She said she'd be here bright and early the day after we got home, but shit happens.

Natalie steps into the kitchen carrying a brown paper bag and places it on the island. Sounds like a bottle of some sort. My gaze takes in her appearance. She's wearing the cutest toffee-colored Boho lace-up sandals I might have to borrow from her. It's late summer here in the city, so her tattered ripped shorts and graphic tee aren't going to keep her warm when the temps drop once the sun goes down completely. Always fashionable, though.

I close my laptop. I was taking my time tying up some loose ends before Retreat opens, but I can finish later.

Truthfully, I've been avoiding James. He's been in his home office all day and now into the evening. It's uncharacteristic of him and I'm not sure what to think of it. In fact, we haven't spoken since he made love to me this morning. Granted his office in the basement has a full working kitchen and bathroom allowing room for me to work alongside him, I purposely sat in the kitchen on the main floor in hopes we'd see each other when he came upstairs. At five o'clock I could count on him to come and make a drink,

and that's what I'd banked my plan on. Now that it's after six and he still hasn't shown himself proves to me he's vexed.

I shelve my thoughts and hop off the chair to give Nat a hug. "Hey, girl." I smile.

Natalie places a hand over her heart. "Oh, thank God. I thought I was going to walk into a sex fest or some sketchy shit."

I laugh at her dramatic sense of humor. "I'm pretty sure the last thing he wants to do is fuck me right now."

She puts up a flat hand. "T-fucking-M-I, Ram Jam. That's my pops you're talking about."

Like I didn't know.

Not that I ever talk sex to her about James. That's just too... yeah, no thanks.

Natalie continues. "Sex talk about my dad requires alcohol. Good thing I'm always prepared."

She reaches into her brown bag and retrieves a bottle of Dom Pérignon and a bottle of Espolòn tequila. I like her style. "For real, though, what happened? Is everything okay?" she asks.

"What makes you think something is wrong?"

She gives me a droll stare. "Don't insult me. Just tell me if I gotta kill him." She hitches her thumb over her shoulder. "'Cause you know, chicks before dicks and all. Fuck that he's my dad. I only just started liking him. You're my ride or die."

I bark out a series of laughs and she smiles as she unravels the wire then removes the foil from the champagne bottle. I love my best friend. When Natalie gets heated about something, a stronger accent comes out. She reminds me of a Puerto Rican from the Bronx. That flare can't be replicated.

I grimace as Nat bites down on the cork of the champagne bottle to loosen it. All I see is a row of blinding white teeth she pays top dollar for. "You're going to crack your teeth doing that."

She shrugs. "I'll just buy new ones. Cum wears down the enamel anyway."

My eyes widen and for a split second I'm gullible enough to believe her serious tone.

"Hello to you too." I laugh, and she smiles from ear to ear.

As much as I'd love to talk about it, I really don't want to. It involves her, and the last thing I want is to end up fighting with Natalie too. I've hardly been able to focus on my actual work since shit hit the fan with James. If life went south with Natalie too, well, there's always the bottom of a bottle to look forward to.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were coming over tomorrow."

Her face scrunches up like she's been snubbed. "It is tomorrow."

What? My brows furrow only for them to rise to my hair line. I shake my head.

"Thank God you're pretty," she jokes, and I laugh with her. "Now tell me what happened. I could smell your pity cupcakes when I walked through the door."

I guess I'd been so stressed about James and our future that I got my days mixed up.

My smile fades. "I'd rather not talk about it."

Blue eyes that resemble the hottest part of a flame glare at me. I give it to her right back. This isn't something I ever planned to talk to her about anyway. I just wanted to hang out with her.

"What? I'm just not in the mood. When I'm ready, I'll talk."

We have a staring match like we're seven years old. Her firm gaze could make a grown man cower, but she's my bestie and I know her just like she knows me. This is what we do. I push her to talk, and she pushes me right back. Normally it wouldn't take long for either of us to give in to the other, but this time I can't open up, because it could be the end of our friendship.

Natalie props a hand on her hip and shifts to the side, waiting. Her eyes are still boring into mine and I struggle not to laugh as she tries so hard to make me open up. She only has so much patience to give. I mimic her action with a smirk and she rolls her eyes and shakes her head. Her arm falls to her side in forfeit. We've done this before.

"Yeah, this isn't how we work. I'll be right back."

Natalie spins around, her long platinum locks have a tint of strawberry blonde to them this summer. I tried going blonde once. Not a full golden hue, I just wanted some summery sunset tones to add to my darkest brown color.

The stylist fucking ruined my hair to the point it was melting off. I wanted to slash her tires for it. After that, I never dyed my hair again.

"Where are you going?" I ask after her.

She turns around, walking backwards. "James wants to talk to me. He called me a couple of hours ago and said to slide by. I told him I was already coming to see my favorite wannabe stepmama. So when I'm through with him, be ready."

A chill runs through my heart. Instant paranoia pales me. Natalie jokes, but she doesn't realize how close to the truth she is. I shake my head.

As she takes the stairs down to the basement, I wonder when James called her and why. Not that I really care, but after how things have been lately between us—

An exaggerated scream echoes throughout the brownstone, followed by my name. "Aubrey!"

Making my way downstairs, my heart rate increases with each step I take closer to James's office. My palms are damp with nerves. I'm not sure how he's going to react to seeing me. But one thing I do know, I'm dying to see him. My heart misses him. We're both working just steps away from each other and yet it feels like it's miles.

Reaching the bottom step, my pulse is hammering in my neck as I wonder what I'm going to walk into. Natalie is leaning on the doorjamb with her hip cocked to the side and her arms crossed in front of her. Large gold hoops poke through the openings of her hair. She turns her head toward me and drops her arms to stand up straight.

Eyes wide, she lifts her hand. Her words rush out of her mouth.

"Why is he watching this? What happened to the pact we made? Just because you're getting boned on the regular doesn't mean you can forget about our deal."

Puzzled, I turn into the room, avoiding James's gaze and look at the television.

"Really, James?" I turn toward him with my arms crossed in front of my chest and lift my brow. "*The Silence of the Lambs*?" Nat and I had made a deal to never watch that fucking creepy movie ever again. I'm still traumatized over the John who wore a Hannibal Lector mask and asked me to rub lotion on him or I'd get the cock again.

James is leaning back in his leather chair a little too proudly. Even though he didn't go into the actual office today, he's dressed in a white button-down shirt with sleeves cuffed to his elbows and matched with dark slate gray dress pants. He's barefoot, and his hair looks unbrushed.

My nostrils flare. Why does he always have to look so fucking mouthwateringly delicious? He makes the floozy in me flare to life and want to pounce. Like right now. Just at first glance he made my heart drop and my pussy wet for him. I swear, the older he gets, the hotter he gets.

He's not wearing a full-on grin, but I can sense the one underneath his salt and pepper beard threatening to spill from his skilled lips. James's eyes are fixated on mine, challenging me. I have a feeling he's not going to stop until I say yes, and there's a small part of me that's secretly happy about that. Not because I want to lead him on, but because I have hope that one

day I can say yes without the anxiety of losing someone clouding my vision.

My fears may seem irrational to someone else, but Grammy taught me not to judge others until I've walked a mile in their shoes. Having only her to raise me, I learned to keep my family close and do what's necessary to cherish them. James and Natalie are my family regardless of a piece of paper. The risk of losing them is greater than the risk of marriage.

## FIFTEEN

"Turn it off, James, or you'll be paying for mine and Aubrey's therapy," Natalie demands.

James responds by lifting a shoulder. His lips twitch. "What's wrong with this movie? It's considered a classic to some."

"To who?" I scoff. "Serial killers? Men who like to skin women alive and wear their flesh like a fashion statement? I don't think so."

He waves his hands out, palm side up, and this time he grins because he can't help it. My heart palpitates and I briefly wonder if he feels what I do.

"You know I don't judge what goes on behind closed doors, sweetheart. My door is always open."

"Don't make me regret telling you about my Johns."

Natalie gasps and winks at me when I glance at her. I had told James I came clean with Nat and told her all about my escort days. He can never know it was really his daughter who introduced me to the lifestyle. It would kill him.

"You told him about all of them?" Natalie chimes in. "Even Ram Jam?"

I offer her a loose shrug and her eyes widen further, then I turn back to look at James. I didn't have anything to hide and he wasn't judgmental.

Leaning on his elbow, his eyes glisten with delight. "The most memorable bedtime stories ever told."

Natalie fakes a gag like she's revolted. "You guys have the weirdest fucking foreplay. Christ Almighty."

My cheeks heat at her words. What Natalie doesn't know is that when I'd told James about my test Johns and clients, he turned around and recreated a sexual fantasy from each one. I thought it was a sweet gesture. He didn't need to because my past honestly doesn't bother me, but James had insisted he wanted this with me because what he had planned needed to be experienced.

I told him it sounded like a good deal. I'd be stupid to say no to a hot tumble of passion and guaranteed sublime ecstasy.

And I was right. It was the BEST. SEX. EVER.

James had turned Ram Jam into a lick-a-thon with my pussy. My thighs tremble slightly at the memory of James dominating every nerve in my body with the caress of his tongue. Each orgasm I had that night was more breathtaking than the last. I lost count of how long he'd spent with his face pressed deep in my core.

Each encounter I had with a John, James reenacted all of them, making those moments his.

And he had left the best for last.

James isn't watching *The Silence of the Lambs* to taunt me; he's watching to remind me—him, us—of what we have together.

James had rented a log cabin in Washington our first winter together as a couple. But it wasn't just any cabin. This cabin was meant for people with an acquired taste for darker things. Set deep in the woods with massive trees surrounding the property, there was nothing but foliage for miles to hear my pants and screams.

James had tied me up and suspended me in the air by a ring in the center of the main room. Two rows of rope were looped through each other, one went around my waist, the other between my legs with a knot pressing right below my clit. My legs were bound separately with rope down to my

ankles. I had been entirely and completely at his mercy. There is just something so illicit about it that entices me even now.

He'd stroked and pumped my pussy with his fingers, not stopping until he had my full submission. Once he'd garnered it, he placed a blood red satin blindfold over my eyes, leaving me in complete darkness. James then lathered my skin in an oil that warmed through touch, unlike the cold lotion I'd used with the test John. James had rubbed and kneaded my sensitive skin in all the right places. The rope shifted from his deep massage, causing the ribbed outline to push against my tender clit again.

The lust between us had intensified and the scent of my sex filled the room. James then used a feather flogger on me next. He spanked my pussy until I dripped in his mouth with pleasure, then he flattened his tongue across my pussy lips, devouring me until I couldn't focus on anything but the intense gratification flowing through my veins. I had cried out in fucking delight as I came in his mouth.

Afterward, James had lowered me to the floor and yanked my hips up so I was on my knees, and he drove straight into my pussy from behind. Ruthless. Savage. He—

"Earth to Aubrey."

My eyes flash to Natalie's. Never one to hold back how she feels, she wears her expression and doesn't give two fucks about it. One corner of her mouth is twisted up as her eyes search mine. I want to laugh, but I don't. Instead, I blink, wondering how long I've been standing here lost in my thoughts and feelings.

I glance over at the love of my life. My chest aches with guilt. James wants to marry me, but I don't want to ruin what we have.

I met James because he was searching for something his wife wasn't giving him, and he found it in me.

Would he search for what I'm not willing to give him in someone else?

## SIXTEEN

"Aubrey." Natalie attracts my attention again.

"Yes? Oh, I was just thinking about something I forgot I needed to submit for Retreat by tonight."

I see James frown from the corner of my eye. He knows I don't have to submit anything since he acted as my attorney and reviewed every document.

He knows I'm lying.

Warmth creeps under my cheeks and my skin prickles with anxiousness. My eyes shift between both of them. "I'm gonna go." I hitch a thumb awkwardly over my shoulder. "I'll see you in a few, Nat."

I turn and leave before she can respond, taking two stairs at a time to the first floor. My heart's racing fast, my fingers are tingly from my shot nerves. A million thoughts are running through my head, but the loudest of them is what the fuck am I doing.

The constant look in James's eyes, like I've let him down, kills us both.

I grab James's fleece sweater off the back of the couch, then reach for the bottle of Espolòn. On a last thought, I rummage through Nat's bag and find what I'm looking for. I know she won't care. Hell, she'll join me when she's through with James. I pocket the joint and lighter, then take the stairs to the second floor where our bedroom is located. I pass our room and make

my way down the length of the hallway to a door that's bolted shut. Above our room sits a private balcony, and that's where I'm headed.

I unlock the door and climb one last set of stairs to our little tropical patio that overlooks the city. I park my ass on one of the lush lounge chairs and inhale a breath, then exhale. It's one of those nights.

I uncork my clear liquid and take a heavy swig of it. There's a subtle burn and it makes the hair on my arms rise. I haven't had this in so long I forgot what it tastes like. I usually drink James's cognac. I take the burn though for the next hour or so, until Natalie finds me.

"Hello? I'm looking for Miserable Mattie," she says from behind me. She's such a sarcastic ass.

I release a little chuckle up to the cloudless sky. I'm much looser now after working my way through a quarter of the bottle. I smile lazily over at her. She observes me with humor in her eyes and takes the lounge chair next to me.

"Not even a chaser... I'm so proud of you." She palms her hand over her heart in mock pride. "You've come so far."

I laugh and give her the middle finger. When we first met our freshman year of college, Natalie would give me shit for taking shots the way I did. I had to sip them and always chase with a fruity drink.

"I know how to open my throat hole now," I say, reminding her of her old advice. Who the hell says throat hole?

Natalie grins from ear to ear. "I see you've stopped with the bitch drinks too." She laughs and shakes her head, then her expression turns serious. "If we're gonna talk sex when I know you're fucking my dad on the regular, then I need to catch up to you." She holds her hand out and waves her fingers at me. "Hand me the damn bottle."

Instead, I reach inside my pocket and pull out the joint and lighter and hand them to her. It's been a while since we've smoked.

"Nice." She lights up—both her face and the joint—and takes a hit.

"We're not talking sex talk," I tell her. "I don't want to talk about your dad."

"Oh, great. Because I was going to go home and bleach my ears out if that was the case. I'd rather get brown out drunk with my bestie the night before I leave for Italy."

My jaw drops and I turn my head to look at her. I almost laugh over her brown out comment. We'd searched the internet once for an answer as to why we could only remember some parts of a drunken night but not the whole thing. Apparently, it's called a brown out, and we found that hysterical. But I'm too engrossed in her travel plans that I don't laugh, and I listen intently.

"You're going to Italy tomorrow? For how long?"

Natalie shrugs and exhales a dense cloud of smoke. She hands me the white rolled baby blunt. "I'm leaving in three days. I don't have a return date. Figured I'd see where the trip takes me and go from there. Italy is known to have the best food and lovers in the world. Why wouldn't I go there?"

I smile to myself. "Like father, like daughter." I take a deep pull myself and watch the white cloud of smoke appear in front of me. "So, you're leaving me too?"

"Don't get dramatic. And before we talk more about the *Chronicles of Natalia* and what her next phase of life is, I want to know what happened. This isn't you. In fact, I haven't seen you like this since Grammy passed away. I know, it's heartless of me to compare, but you look like someone died. Now tell me what the fuck is wrong."

I swallow hard as tears climb the back of my eyes. I don't look at her, I can't. I know if I do, the waterworks will come. Considering the amount of mascara I wear on a daily basis, I look scary when I cry. Natalie's been trying to get me to try lash extensions for a while now. She swears by them and says I'll never wear mascara again. Now I wish I had tried them.

I blink a few times to pull back the emotions, and then I take another hit and hand the smoke back to her.

*Don't be a little bitch. Don't be a little bitch. Don't be a little bitch.* I give myself a pep talk.

"What's the weather like in Italy right now?" I ask.

"Oh, we're gonna play like that? Cool. Take a swig and I'll answer. Tit for tat. I'll just get you drunk and make you confess."

My lips twitch at the blunt sarcasm in her voice. I do as she says, and she does too. One for one. I guess she's really on a mission to get drunk with me. Tequila fixes everything.

Natalie doesn't answer my lame question, and I'm grateful. She just hangs with me until we smoke the rest of the joint and have a few more sips each. We listen to mostly old school New York hip hop as we chill and watch the sky further darken. My best friend knows something's wrong and just sits with me, offering her silent support. Even though I don't talk for a good hour, I know she's got to be buzzed by now. I'm drunk *and* high, and she matched me *and* caught up, yet she seems normal.

"Whatta Man" plays through the speaker phone next and it makes me think of James. I listen to the lyrics and find myself smiling, the euphoria of this moment hitting me. My heart feels warm and tingly. I got myself a good guy and I'm stupidly risking his love. Every bone in my body says give him what he wants because that's what he'd do for me.

"This must be my old man's theme song, judging by the corny as fuck look on your face." Natalie jokes.

I turn my head to look at her. Oh, yeah, I was right on the money. Her eyes are glossy, and her pupils are basically all I see. She's definitely as fucked up as I am, which only makes me bark out a laugh.

"I was just thinking it was actually." I pause and release an annoyed sigh. "Whatta fucking man is right."

She doesn't flinch. Natalie just studies me with a softness to her. She's waiting, and if I know her, she'll wait all night for me to talk. She may even move her trip back if I don't start flapping my lips soon.

I swallow then quietly break it down for her.

"When you said I look like someone died, it's how I feel." My tears climb just thinking about opening up to her, but I need to. The tightness in my chest can only stretch so tight until I explode. I need to talk to get it out, and soon.

My heart races so fast at the thought of telling her the truth. I sit up and lean over, placing my elbows on my knees and stare at the ground. My fingers are tingling like they're numb. I shake my hands out and stand, suddenly feeling really hot. I pace the balcony in my bare feet and look ahead at the twinkling office lights, they make the concrete jungle feel optimistic.

"I'm not going anywhere, so you better open up those pretty little lips and start talking. I got all the time in the world, plus this is my dad's house and he'd never kick me out."

Exhaling a dramatic, loud breath, I prop my hands on my hips and level a stare at her. Natalie glares back, challenging me the way a bestie should. Despite the cool air, the liquor sends a fire through my veins and my nerves aren't helping. I blink a few times, then it all comes out before I can stop myself.

"I'm so nervous to tell you. I don't want to fight with you, and ohmygod I have PTSD just thinking about it. I wasn't even going to talk to you about this, but the tension is eating us both and it's just getting worse, and that's the last thing I want. I don't want to fight with him and lose you both at the same time, and I feel like that's what's gonna happen." My chest rises and falls fast, the pressure of the moment causes sharp pains around my heart. "The last thing I want to do is jeopardize our friendship because you mean

the world to me, Nat. We've been there, and it's honestly the last thing I ever want to go through with you again."

Everything comes out like I've had ten shots of espresso. I'm freaking out inside, and my ears are ringing. But Natalie is just smiling like I'm her form of entertainment for the night.

I lick my lips and keep going, even though I feel like I'm going to cry. It's now or never. Sometimes my nerves cause tears to shed. Angry tears, happy tears, PTSD tears. I groan inwardly wondering when I became a sensitive little hussy. Lifting my eyes to the midnight sky, I exhale, trying to blink away the emotion and sort out the millions of thoughts running through my brain.

"How the *fuck* did I get myself into this situation?"

"Because you fucked your best friend's dad. Duh," Natalie replies, and I chuckle at her dark sarcasm.

I look down and she's just smirking at me from the lounge chair. She's good at making the situation lighter, which in turn makes me slightly more comfortable sharing. Slightly, being the keyword.

"I blame you." I joke. "If you hadn't offered to make me a millionaire floozy, then this wouldn't have happened, and I wouldn't be having a panic attack. It's killing my high."

"Do you regret it?"

"Well, no."

I truly had no regret about being a high-end escort and the things I did for money.

"Then you can't blame me for shit." She laughs. "You got what you wanted." Natalie stretches her boney arms out. "You're welcome."

I don't know why, but it makes me blurt out what I've been stressing about incessantly for days.

"James wants to get married."

I wait for the aversion to appear in her eyes, but Natalie doesn't react the way I expect her to. It's the opposite, so I repeat myself just to make sure she heard me.

"James wants to get married, like rings and all. He even asked about kids."

She continues to smile, and it's similar to the one James gives me when he finds my manic moments adorable.

"What's wrong with you and your father and that stupid matching fucking smirk on your face? I tell you your dad wants to marry me, your fucking best friend, he wants to make an honest woman out of me, and you just sit there and smile?"

She full-on belly laughs and it totally changes my mood—in a good way.

"I'm gonna punch you," I threaten her.

Natalie's eyes are positively bursting with laughter. "You are so dumb."

"Can you elaborate before I have a fucking heart attack?"

## SEVENTEEN

Natalie moves her legs off the lounge chair and sits up.

She gestures for me to take a seat. I hesitate and inhale a heavy breath before sitting down in front of her. Leaning toward me, she makes sure she's looking in my eyes. I roll my lip between my teeth and bite down, unsure how this night will end.

"Were you honestly worried to tell me my dad wants to marry you?" she asks, then breaks out in a chuckle. "Okay, now that I say that out loud, I guess I can see where you're coming from."

I nod. "It brought me back to the past—"

"Nope. Hush. We're not going there—"

"I know, but I don't want to do anything to ruin us, you know? That was awful, Nat, and I'd do anything to prevent that from happening again."

She offers me a sweet smile. "Glad to know you're all about that chicks before dicks life, but this is different. Listen, that day in the restaurant, when I gave you guys my blessing, it didn't come with terms. That wouldn't have been fair of me. In fact, it'd be kinda fucked up. Am I the reason you won't marry him?"

My brows fall. "How did you know I won't marry him?"

Natalie gives me a droll stare. "Why do you think I'm here? Daddy called about his princess. Thanks for taking my spot, bitch."

I clench my eyes shut and cringe. "Please don't call him Daddy."

"Ew. No. I don't want to know." She covers her ears as my meaning sinks in.

We both laugh for a moment until I sober up, and say, "He called you about this?"

"He did. It was pretty cute. He was just as nervous to talk about it as you. When he told me he asked you to marry him—not once, but like three times—and you said no each time, my jaw dropped. I can't believe you said no."

My eyes widen. I'm going to get wrinkles from how much I'm lifting and dropping my brows. "He told you that?"

"Oh yeah, when my dad's motivated over something, there's no stone he won't turn over to find a positive outcome. He has no shame in his game when it comes to something he loves. Can't fault him for it. It's admirable."

My shoulders slouch, the guilt beginning to settle in my bones. "That's kind of cute of him."

"Trust me, when he asked me to come over because he had something he wanted to tell me, that was the last thing I expected. I wasn't mad, though, and I certainly didn't reject the idea of you guys getting married. Honestly, I was really ecstatic until I heard you said no. What the hell is wrong with you?"

She isn't angry, but more so frustrated because I'd rejected his proposal. It makes me feel a torrent of emotions for holding back, and especially for causing James to suffer in silence. Natalie clearly has no issue and I'm not sure how to respond to that.

"It's not just you, though." I tip my head to exhale up at the sky. "I feel like we have a good thing going on. Why put a piece of paper between us and ruin it? We're basically married now, anyway. Why do we have to change anything? I feel like that's asking for trouble. You know how they say don't wake a sleeping baby?"

"No, I hate kids, but keep going so I can hear this nonsense."

Natalie isn't sold. I can see it in the way she's glaring at me. I'm searching for answers from every corner of the earth, when she and I know deep down the only place I'll find them is in me.

I sigh inwardly. "It just means don't ruin a good thing."

"First of all, my dad's a lawyer. He loves to live by the law. Marriage, in his eyes, is making it official. Making it official gets his jollies off. It's basically something no one can ever take from him or you. It's something only you two can have. What makes you think it'll ruin you guys, anyway? What if it bounds you together even more?"

I stare at Natalie, wondering where this romantic side of her came from. She's usually so far removed from the idea of marriage and commitment, yet here she is giving some pretty good advice. I bet she reads my old sappy romance novels I left behind at her apartment. I bet she wants the white picket fence and two point five kids. Maybe even a dog since she hates cats.

"I'm scared, Nat. I've lost so many good things in my life. My parents, Grammy. I almost lost you and him. You guys are all I have left. The same way James would move mountains to get what he wants, I'd do to prevent anything bad happening."

"You didn't almost lose me. We were on a mini break." Regret softens her words.

In times like this when everything seems impossible to have, I love my best friend even more for reminding me hope isn't lost. Our bond is strong, but that doesn't mean we're unshakable. Shit happens and it's all about how we react to it. We've lived and we've learned. Since day one we've been there working out our problems as a team, just like now.

"You didn't lose those people because of you. Your parents, your grammy... they were unfortunate situations, but they're not your fault. You know that, right?"

My eyes drop to the ground and I let out a defeated sigh. I know I didn't personally cause their deaths, but they left my world in the blink of an eye because of a split-second change in events.

"Why would I risk tomorrow when I know what the outcome will be? We have a good thing going on right now. Why can't it just stay that way?"

There's a flare in her eyes now. Natalie reminds me of James when he's confident he's about to win an argument.

Shit.

"Can I ask you something?" The tone in her voice seizes my heart. Hesitantly, I lift my gaze to her. "Do you want to marry him? Tell me the truth."

I don't have to think about her question—I already know my answer. The organ beating behind my ribs nearly breaks through them. Marry the love of my life? The thought of walking down the aisle to marry James is a rush unlike no other. It makes me giddy thinking of him as my husband, but that doesn't mean it should happen. No one gets to eat their cake without consequences.

"Of course, I want to marry him. I fucking love that man so much. I wanted to marry him yesterday, but you know what's stopping me now."

Natalie is beaming from ear to ear like a total fool. Admitting I love her dad isn't scary—she can see the proof herself when he and I look at each other. Telling her I want to marry him is a totally different emotion that chokes me up. Wrecking his heart is not on my list of things to do, and neither is losing a bestie.

Tears fill my eyes, and I swallow hard before telling her what's been on my mind since the first time James brought up marriage.

"I'm scared, Nat." My heart rushes with anxiety and the knots in my stomach are cramping together. The truth is always hard to admit. "I'm afraid of loss. Everyone who's ever meant something to me has died."

I blink and stare, thinking about James dressed in a designer tux standing next to the officiant with Natalie across from him. I'd want our wedding to be small and intimate, so it's only about our love and the people who mean the most to us. My gut is saying to take the risk, but my heart is marked with blemishes that hold me back. His face flashes through my mind again, and this time not only do I see his devastation, I feel it.

"You know he's so madly in love with you he'd do anything to be with you, right?" She pauses, and for the first time since I've known her, she looks reluctant to continue. "I never saw him look at my mom the way he does you." She lowers her voice. "I always thought they were in love. They laughed, they smiled, they kissed, the usual affection every married couple and parents have for one another. But as I get older, I realize they didn't love each other in the same degree as you guys do. Not in the sense my dad loves you, that's for sure. The smiles are real, the kisses aren't forced, and the laughs are genuine. It's a bone-deep type of love." She squints her eyes as she thinks about her next set of words. "Isn't it funny how things work out? You think you know love until someone comes around and changes your entire perception of the word, making you reexamine every aspect of your life." She pauses, then continues more to herself than to me. "It takes you by surprise and makes you wonder why that is, what was lost or what was never there."

James wants a marriage with someone he loves more than life, and he wants that with me.

My eyes clench shut at the veracity of my thoughts. It makes my heart swell with pride that he'd want me to be his wife.

Opening my eyes, I steal a look at Natalie. I think she's realizing how honest her confession is, which is how I see it. It takes strength for her to let go and admit her father loves me in ways he didn't her mother. They're her parents, and I would bet it's caused her to question things she hasn't told me yet.

Natalie continues, though her tone is gentle. Sympathetic. "If I was a reason you were holding back from marrying him, and we already confirmed you didn't cause the loss of your family, what's really going on?"

We're both quiet for a moment until I look away with embarrassment. I have a great man who wants to make me his wife, he wants to give me the world, and I said no.

"Me. I guess it's just me." I let out a dramatic sigh over my stupidity. "I'm dumber than a box of rocks."

She offers me a somber smile that clenches my heart. Melancholy doesn't complement her.

"Yeah. This isn't any regular relationship, so there's no manual to reference. Look at how you met him up until now. Sometimes weird shit, like marrying your John who's also your best friend's dad, is meant to happen."

I glance at her and we both bust out laughing. "Yeah, maybe in some alternate universe."

"Yolo," she says quickly. Natalie picks up the tequila bottle and takes a swig, then hands it to me. "Cheers to you becoming Mrs. Aubrey Riviera. I'll never call you mommy, so don't get any ideas."

The shot doesn't make it down. It gets stuck in my throat and I choke. *Mrs. Aubrey Riviera*. My eyes widen as fucking tequila spills from my mouth and my nose. It hits the ground with a splat. I reach out and Natalie takes the bottle, then moves next to me.

"Lift your arms above your head," she says.

I don't question her, I just do it. The burn of the tequila effectively sears off the skin in my nostrils, while simultaneously making me feel like I have a horrible case of strep throat. I turn my face into my bicep and cough into it. My eyes are watering, and I squeeze them shut.

"Bend over and put your head between your legs."

"What?" This time I manage a brief confused-as-fuck look at her.

Eyes wide, Natalie yells, "Just do it!"

## EIGHTEEN

I do and she scoots closer so she can pat my back and rub circles over it. "My mom used to do this to me when I had croup as a kid. This angle is supposed to help when you're choking and can't breathe. Take small breaths and focus."

I'm perched on the edge of the lounge chair with my knees spread wide and my body bent over, my arms still in the air. I feel like an idiot sitting like this, and I can't tell if this is helping or not with how far I'm leaning over. I feel like I'm blocking my airways, not opening them up. Once the coughing subsides and my eyes aren't watering anymore, I sit up.

I look at Natalie. "You know the first thing I thought of when you told me to put my head between my legs? Marilyn Manson."

"What the fuck for and why?"

"I heard he had some ribs taken out so he can suck his own dick."

She blinks, and remains quiet for a second, then lets out a hilarious chuckle. "This is why we're besties. It's shit like this that comes out of your mouth that just confirms we're soul mates. Wait—did you think I was telling you to get yourself off?"

It's my turn to giggle. "No, he just popped into my head for some reason. I felt like I was bent over really far and he just appeared in front of me, pasty white face and all, but I swear he had piranha teeth." I pause,

thinking about how weird this conversation is now. "I guess I wondered if he could actually do it or not."

"That'd be some sick shit, but after all the Johns I've had the last couple of years, I wouldn't be surprised if he could."

She's not even phased. I'd seen a lot in my escorting days, but Natalie's been around the block a time or two more. The stories she's told me is not something you can make up off the top of your head. No one person has an imagination like that.

"Bet you a million bucks he does it." She puts her hand out.

Natalie is thinking deeper over this for some reason, while I'm trying to not allow my imagination to run wild.

"Now that I've poured my heart out to you, tell me why you're leaving me."

Natalie's face softens with a dewy look. She has this innocent, sweet look on her face that causes her to appear five years younger.

I chuckle inwardly. In reality, she eats men for breakfast and spits them out.

"Only if you promise me you won't reject my dad again because of me." She waves her hand in the air in a dismissive motion. "Listen, you're stuck with me forever, whether you have a piece of paper between you guys or not. It makes no fucking difference to me. So why not make it official?"

My lips twitch. New Yorkers have a way about themselves that come off as pushy and arrogant to non-New Yorkers. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was trying to scold me because the truth was so painfully obvious she couldn't handle it anymore.

But I wouldn't say that. She's just trying to get real with me and get me to see it for what it is.

I glance down and the smile falls from my face. "You really think he's going to ask me to marry him again after I shot him down multiple times? Fat chance." Before she can respond, I divert the conversation back to Italy.

My heart can't handle another ounce of anxiety over rejecting James. "So, Italy? What part and why?"

"Italy is calling to me, so Italy is where I must go," she says, and I'm grateful she takes the hint to change the subject. "I don't have a specific spot. I'm just going to backpack it and see where it takes me. The plan is to eat my way through the country and see if Italian men really are the best lovers in the world."

My brows rise. "You're going to backpack it?"

Natalie rolls her eyes. "No, but it just sounded better. You get my drift."

I nod. She'll have a driver or plane on standby, a wad of cash, and a black American Express card. Oh, and a luggage full of designer duds.

"Considering the number of men you've fucked over the years, you'd think you'd die happy never having to spread your legs again."

"*Au contraire*," she says with a light French accent and holds up one finger. "I discovered what I like and what I don't like, but also that there's literally someone out there for everyone. I'll find my man in the land of cuisine and attractive blokes," she says. "If not, I'll just move on to Greece. They're basically cousins of the Italians. I'm bound to find a few."

I study her, finding it comical what she wants to do. "Are you just going to put out a want ad or something? What's your plan of attack?"

Natalie purses her lips together. "My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard..."

We giggle together. "How long are you going for, really?"

She shrugs. "Until I get my fill?" We both laugh again but she sobers up. "The older I get, the more I really start to realize we only get one life to live. Why not live like tomorrow isn't guaranteed? I know not everyone can do that, but I can, and I don't want to waste the opportunity to experience it."

"Your idea of living life to the fullest is eating Italian food and no-strings-attached sex."

"Basically." She winks.

I love how Natalie's not ashamed in the least. She is who she is, and she loves herself for it. I find it an admirable and endearing quality.

"In some odd way, it suits you."

"Did you ever have a feeling inside of you that you can't explain but you know it's right? That's how I feel about going to Italy, well, about traveling in general. New York will always be home, but I kind of want to see the world."

"You're going to get wanderlust like James."

Her blue eyes light up like that's her goal. I could totally see that being her kind of lifestyle.

Standing up, Natalie fixes her shorts and smooths out her shirt. "I'm gonna go. My plane leaves in three days and I still need to go shopping."

"That soon? What if James asks me again and then wants to get married three days later? You're not going to be here?"

The annoyance in Natalie's glare makes me chuckle under my breath. "'Thank God you're pretty. I'll just fly back ASAP. Duh, Ram Jam."

Natalie grabs the mostly empty Tequila bottle and chugs the rest then dumps it in the garbage. I shake my head and stick the remains of the joint in a pile of sand we use as an ashtray and walk her out.

"I'm going to start praying for your future husband now."

"Good. My ex-husband is going to need all the prayers he can get when I'm done with him."

A giggle erupts from my throat. "You're already calling your divorce. That's great. Who gets the kids?"

"Psh." Natalie pushes through her lips. "Won't be an issue because I fucking hate kids."

"You're a real piece of work." I joke as we step off the last step onto the first floor. My gaze flickers around the room and I pretend I'm not looking for anyone specific, but I really am. It's quiet and I don't like how empty it

feels. The only light is coming from the living room around the corner. I can picture him sitting in his Chesterfield chair with a cigar in one hand, a crystal tumbler in the other. Quiet nights lounging in his leather chair are his favorite. My heart aches to be next to him, but I'm too embarrassed to see him now.

"You love me," Natalie says, taking me away from my thoughts.

"I wouldn't want you any other way."

Our smiles match each other's. Natalie grabs her purse then a water bottle from the fridge before she heads to the door. I follow next to her.

"Tell *Daddy* I said bye-bye."

I don't conceal my gag. Not only did she call James daddy, but she said it in a sex operator's voice.

"I hate you sometimes. Don't forget to FaceTime me while you're living your best life."

"Oh, I will be living my best life surrounded by balls like the lemons that country produces, while you'll be with ones that look like prunes under the Tuscan sun." She pauses for a second and gives me a smirk. "P.S. I wasn't supposed to tell you what James told me. So, hush, hush, like a good girl."

I stare at her long and hard. Her harmless smile is anything but. Kill 'em with a honey sweet voice and southern belle smile while throwing digs at them. I know her, though. Inwardly she's struggling not to laugh because she's that girl who laughs at her own jokes.

Finally, I speak. "I can't wait until the day you have to introduce me as your mom."

That one breaks her and she throws her arms around me chuckling. We hug each other tight for a moment longer then break apart. Pressing a kiss to each other's cheek, we say goodbye and part ways.

I shut the door and stand there for a moment contemplating what I should do. If I should go to James or just go to bed. After all the alcohol I

consumed, plus the smoke, my emotions are delicate now and I feel like I'd cry easily in front of him. That's the last thing I want him to see.

## NINETEEN

**I** bite my lip and make my way to our bedroom.

I decide on taking a bath because I'm not quite ready to go to sleep yet. I need to unwind. There's too much vulnerability swimming through my veins to talk marriage with James again. I'd just end up a bawling muffled mess. Plus, he's kept his distance today, so there's not much driving me to do that.

I turn on the water to start my bath, then I undress and tie my hair up. I want him to know marriage isn't off the table, but I need time to process it. I went from not wanting to marry to changing my mind and being open to it in the span of a couple of hours. That's a lot for my heart to bear and my mind to process.

Stepping into the steaming hot water, I sigh as I sink down. My eyes close as I listen to Demi Lovato's voice croon out a heartbreaking ballad. Her brutal honesty somehow manages to trigger an arrangement of emotions to bloom inside of me.

The thing is, James Riviera is the only man who has ever done it for me. It would almost be hypocritical of me to not marry him, really.

I wave the water between my fingers, watching the bubbles fizz. Could it be possible we'd be even more in love and happy together? Like Natalie

said, James loves to live by the law, so a marriage certificate would mean a lot to him. Seeing him happy would make me happy too.

I let out a long, tired sigh and sink further into the water until it hits my neck. My eyes are growing heavy when I hear the wood floor creak below me. This brownstone echoes and we can hear everything. I know exactly where that creak is too—in the kitchen near the small bar. The decanter clinks together and I can hear the faint sound of liquid being poured twice.

Hope branches through me. I sit up a little higher and hold my breath, knowing he's headed up to me.

The door pushes open and James steps inside, gently kicking it closed behind him. Blush tints my cheeks and my teeth dig into my bottom lip at the sight of him. My heart desires him in ways that turn me into a stage five clinger, and I'm not ashamed in the least. My eyes openly drag down his body. He's wearing sweatpants that sit low on his hips and nothing else. I run my tongue over my lip, staring at the space between his hips. His manly appeal makes him so fucking gorgeous. James is in excellent shape, despite his apparent age showing. I love how hard his body is. The fact he doesn't look like a twenty-year-old makes me ache even more for him. There's just something about a man, an older, real man, with a good career whose wisdom and confidence are his sex appeal.

His eyes meet mine, observing me. I feel all these emotions form a cloud of steam in front of me.

"Hey, you." My voice is relaxed and easy.

James blinks, and his face softens. "Hey, sweetheart."

My heart is about to pump out of my chest. In the stillness of our bathroom, with soft music playing in the background, we both feel that pull between us.

Leaning against the ledge of the bathtub, James hands me a glass, then walks over to the accent chair posted near a window and pulls it up to the tub. I get on my knees and rise just as he takes a seat. Suds trickle down my

naked body, his heated gaze follows the lavender scented soap over the swell of my heavy breasts and down the slope of my belly.

I don't give him a chance to speak. I just pull his mouth to mine and plant a hard kiss to his lips. James clutches my waist with his free hand, then drops to his knees so we're eye level and kisses me back with just as much vigor. Once his hands are on me, they don't leave. Blindly, he places his glass down then takes mine to do the same. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and deepen the kiss. I'm soaking wet but it doesn't faze him. His arms are securely wrapped around the small of my back and my chest is pressed to his. He moans into my mouth and it makes me wet for him. Our tongues tie together in a slow, languid kiss, like we're both trying to prove something. James cups some water and drizzles it over the curve of my hip, then runs his hand down my thigh, ending with a firm grip. I love when he grabs me like a savage. It makes me feel small and weak for him at the same time, something that revs my engine.

I break the kiss and he groans. Chills dance down my arms at the sound of his desire. Our love is insurmountable.

"I don't want to fight with you," I say quickly. "I feel like there's this wall between us and I don't like it."

"Sweetheart, shhh," he says. James cups the side of my face and I lean into his palm. His blue eyes gaze into mine like he's baffled. "There's never going to be a wall between us, Aubrey."

My heart, god, what he does to me when he tries to show his commitment.

I nod. "Promise?"

"Yes." He hesitates for a split second, then says, "I respect your decision and won't bring it up again."

A breath hitches in my throat. My ribs feel like they are being laced together and pushing the air from my lungs. How can I tell him I want him to without sounding needy?

Instead, I try a different route. "Can you just give me time to process it? It's not off the table." I throw in, my voice shaky. Shit, I'm so nervous. "I just wanted you to know that."

Cupping my cheeks, he tilts my face up to his so I'm only an inch or so away. James looks into my eyes. He's all I see and all I want in this life. There's a hint of lavender surrounding him that fuses gently to the cognac on his lips. I find myself pressing closer to reach him.

"I will forever want every part of you," James says. "Never doubt that. I will forever love you more than anyone ever could. Never doubt that either. You were right about something, though. We don't need a piece of paper to prove what we have. We are only what matters."

"I don't know what I did to deserve a man like you."

"Not deserve but complement. When two people have an unconditional love like ours, to me that's a complement to each other."

I don't know whether to cry or smile or do both at the same time. I don't think James is convinced I've changed my mind, but it's clear he's doing what he is simply for me, and that just wrecks my stomach. That's a losing battle for both of us. I need to tell him again just to make sure he heard what I said, so he knows I do want to marry him.

Fuck. Here I am worried he'll never ask me to marry him when he asked me a handful of times already. I'm the definition of an ungrateful woman, one who held onto the past and ruined what was right in front of them.

"You heard what I said, right?" My brows angle in worry between my eyes. "Marriage isn't off the table."

His lips twitch, and he nods. "I'll think about it. Gotta make sure you really are wife material."

A matching smile tips my lips, I pull in a gasp and giggle. James steals a quick kiss, then says in all seriousness, "I love you, Aubrey."

"Not more than I love you," I say. "I want all my moments to be with you for the rest of my life."

## TWENTY

"It's been thirty-seven days, sixteen hours, and four minutes since the day you were here, and he still hasn't asked me to marry him again," I whine to Natalie over the phone. "He's never going to ask me. He's going to make me ask him, I just know it."

I almost laugh at myself over how ridiculous I sound.

"He's doing it on purpose," she says. "I thought he would've this morning before your shelter opened, but I guess not. I wish I could've been there with you today. Congrats, Ram Jam. That mouth of yours is still paying it forward."

Shaking my head, I smile into the phone. Today marked the opening of my second non-profit shelter, Retreat, a place for fathers with children. I decided to keep the men's and woman's shelters separate since more than half of the women had noted on their questionnaires that they felt more comfortable amongst other females. Respecting everyone's wishes has been a struggle since I want to help everyone, but we've managed pretty well so far. I had planned to open one final shelter, a place for runaway teens, but James had suggested we do one for families too. His desire to be involved melts my heart. I guess teamwork really does make the dream work.

"Well, he isn't getting any younger, you know."

Natalie laughs. "I'm sure he's aware. He still doesn't know I told you I spoke to him. How sweet. He's really respecting your wishes and not pushing it."

"Fuck my wishes. Since when has he really ever done that?" I mean... he has and hasn't... like in the heat of the moment when I'm screaming his name.

"This is different, sis."

I groan, gripping the phone tighter. She's right, and that annoys me. "I know. Maybe I should drop hints. But obvious ones."

"Don't embarrass me."

A smile draws across my face. I wouldn't go that far, but it was fun while the thought lasted. Exhaling a breath, I wince at the inflamed skin over my ribs. I gently cup my side and hold myself, wondering what James will say. After this morning's opening of Retreat, I told a little fib and said I had a doctor's appointment I couldn't miss.

"Do you think James will like the tattoo?" I ask Natalie for the tenth time since I got it. She saw it the moment the artist was finished, I had quickly FaceTimed her before it was wrapped up.

"Yeah, I actually think it's gonna give him a raging boner."

I shake my head. Any chance Natalie gets to be vulgar, she jumps on it. "I hope so. At one point I felt like she was under my damn boobs with the needle gun."

"It's gorg, Aub. He's gonna love it. Maybe be a little jealous you didn't take him with you for your first tattoo. Put a robe on so he doesn't see it through the slip."

"Good idea," I say, then stand up to retrieve the silk robe. I'm waiting until later tonight to surprise him with it. "How's Italy treating you?"

"I'm rich, young, and single, fucking my way through Italy with limoncellos running through my veins. What's your question again?"

She's a rare breed of person. "You are literally the worst, and I love it."

"Oh, speaking of lemons... this man came up to me on the beach today, and to make a long story short, he said I haven't had the best limoncello, even though I claimed the one in my hand was the best, to which he replied I haven't had *his* lemons yet. Thank heaven he was gorgeous, or I would've taken him to church for that one."

I cup my mouth and laugh. We both hate lame-ass pick-up lines and would try to beat each other with who had the worse ones in college. I could just imagine her facial expression when he said that to her, it would've been priceless.

"I would've loved to have been there for that. What did you say?"

"I told him when you've had one lemon, you've had them all." I feel like she's right next to me as we're having this conversation. "He asked me to come to this place called South of the Lemon Tree."

"What's that?"

"A restaurant that overlooks the Amalfi Coast."

A dreamy sigh rolls off my lips. "I've been wanting to visit Italy, especially that coast. Your Insta pics are stunning, girl. That's one place James and I haven't been to yet together. So, when do you leave?"

"For what?"

"To meet the lemon guy."

"Yeah, that's not happening."

My jaw drops. "What? Why not?" I was kind of hoping she'd tell me she was on her way so she could come back and tell me what happened.

"Because he sounded like a fucking creeper and talked about how amazing his lemons are?" Natalie says with such sass. "Any man who talks about his junk in any way like that gets kicked out of my bed."

"I think you should go. Humor me. He could be one for the books. You never know unless you try. What else do you have going on?"

"I don't know. Watching this amazing sunset alone on my wraparound balcony in peace? Don't you have somewhere to be?"

I glance at the clock and see I have a few more minutes before I have to put on my dress. "We have the New York City Women of Impact Humanitarian Awards dinner tonight. All I have to do is put on my gown and I'm ready to ride."

"Take pics for me. What are you wearing?"

"An emerald green sequin frock James picked out for me. It's floor length with a thigh-high slit and a deep plunge neckline. My boobs don't fit though, they look massive."

"I'm sure he loves that."

I chuckle. "Oh, he does."

The bedroom door opens, and James struts in wearing a white dress shirt, a black fucking bow tie, and matching suspenders that connect to tux pants. My jaw flops to the floor as my gaze takes in the length of his body.

"Damn, baby," I say in awe. James's confidence is in his stride, the quiet way he holds himself, and how he doesn't smirk like a know-it-all. "We're gonna be late." He gives me a dirty smile that heats my blood in the best way.

"Annnnnddd that's my cue," Natalie says. "I have a date with the lemon man that I apparently need to get ready for."

James leans over and I tilt my head back to give him a kiss. "If you don't want to go, then don't," I tell Natalie.

She hesitates. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I just feel like I shouldn't be drinking alone with him."

I frown. "Why's that?"

"Because I think he would give back just as good as I give. I'd want a second serving."

"And the problem is...?"

Natalie huffs obnoxiously loud into the phone. I grin, knowing I got her. "I want to do filthy, nasty things to him, okay? Like leave a mark on him so

he always remembers me."

"There it is." I chuckle, my voice a little higher but full of laughter. "Despite his corny comment, you still want to hook up with him."

"I have eyes, okay, and they like what they saw... a lot."

She's so annoyed with herself that I can't stop smiling. Natalie isn't the type to fall hard, but she does love the pretty boys. I can tell this guy is on her mind and that she actually wants to go see him. She just needs a little push.

"Listen, I have to go and ravish your dad before we leave for the dinner, but I think you should go and live in the moment and have fun. Text me tomorrow, ho."

I disconnect our call, not giving her a chance to respond, and put my cell phone down. I rise in my five-inch heels and walk to where James is standing in front of our dresser putting on his cuff links. He looks like a beast from behind, and I wonder if there will ever be a time when he doesn't make my heart rush for him over the simplest thing. I catch his reflection in the mirror and fall into what he's doing. Stepping close to him, my fingers slide over his to lock in the first cuff link. Before I can reach for the other, James grips my fingers and holds me in place. My stomach clenches. He already looks like a walking wet dream and smells like the devil is testing me. I don't need much of a push at this point.

I look at our fingers and smile at the contrast. Mine are boney and milk white with a delicacy to them. His are much thicker, darker, and seasoned with age. With his other hand, James uses his index finger to tip my jaw up toward him.

"It's taking everything in me not to rip your clothes off right now and have my wicked way with you," I blurt out before he can say anything.

Everyone loves a good compliment, and James doesn't hide the fact he likes what I said. The smile that lights up his whole face rouses a need inside of me. He palms my waist and slides his hand over my hip.

"The feeling is entirely mutual, sweetheart. Every day of my life I feel that way, and it's not just because of your beauty. It's because of up here," he says, gently tapping my temple. "I love your vision and your drive, that you allow me to be part of your life with you." James pauses, and I swallow hard. "And right here," he says, placing his hand over my heart. "Because you love me unconditionally, and you allow me to love you the only way I know how." A soft gasp clutches my throat. James showed me how to make love with untamed passion. "And then, right here," he finishes, two fingers pressed to my lips. "You make me so happy, Aubrey. I don't know what I'd do without you."

The longer he stares into my eyes, the harder my heart beats for this man. His gaze is intense, like there's something on the tip of his tongue he wants to say. I wait for another moment to pass and wonder if he's looking at me like I am him, like he's my whole world.

Thanks to my heels, I don't have to stand on my tiptoes to reach him. Leaning in, I press my stained lips to his, the prickly fine hairs of his mustache are like sharp little knives on my skin that only heightens his touch. The urge to feel his lips on mine after the way he spoke from his heart is too strong to deny. Sometimes a kiss is more intimate than sex and creates a deeper connection by way of showing love for someone.

I expect his hand to cup my ass and give me a rough squeeze, like I know he loves to do, but James surprises me. Pressing his body to me, his thick tongue strokes over mine and tugs as his hand drags down to my sex. I gasp around his kiss and tense from the blitz of need assaulting me in all the right ways. My skin is tingling from head to toe. James slips his hand beneath my robe and slip and cups my pussy, making sure one of his fingers is painfully teasing my entrance while there's pressure on my clit. I grind against his hand, aching for more already. I love when James's control is unforgiving, how he knows exactly how to touch me to make me weak for him. How to make me melt in his hands.

I grip his shoulders. "James." His name is a prayer on my lips. "I need you."

His kiss is deep and slow and leaves me breathless. There's nothing like a man who appreciates sex but gets total gratification in making his partner feel good too. James is that man.

"We have twelve minutes until we leave. Turn around and bend over. We don't have time for you to get fixed up again, and I don't have another pair of tux pants."

"We can wait until after," I suggest with a flirtatious glint in my eyes. "Allow the temptation to build."

"Too late for that, sweetheart."

"I love the way your mind works."

Grabbing my jaw, James growls then plunges his tongue into my mouth for a quick kiss. "It's going to be so good, sweetheart."

"The best twelve minutes of my life."

## TWENTY-ONE

"You look beautiful," James whispers. "I know I never got to meet your grandmother, but I'd bet my life's work she's looking down on you and smiling, proud of you the way I am and what you have become."

We're sitting in a room with a few hundred people illuminated by chic chandeliers that shimmer like diamonds under water. His words were low and only meant for me to hear. Swallowing thickly, I turn to look at him, a tint of blush colors my cheeks. He's holding my hand as the names of the four honorees are being called, including mine. I still can't believe I'm among the women being honored tonight when there are others just as worthy, maybe even more than me. My thumb strokes over the top of his hand as I gaze into his eyes. I love this man so much. I just hope he knows that.

"Thank you for being here with me." My words are soft and intimate.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

A demure smile curves the corners of my lips. James truly means that and it moves me to pieces. I feel myself getting more attached to him, falling deeper in love with him, if that's even possible, and I'm okay with that. I just hope he is too.

"Aubrey Abrams..."

"Get going, sweetheart." James smiles at me.

I glance at the stage and my eyes widen when I realize the honorees are already up there.

In a quick succession, James cups the side of my neck and presses his kiss to mine. My eyes automatically roll close at the touch of his lips between mine. His thumb is gently resting on the front of my throat then sweeps over to the side and strokes down. I lean in just as he breaks the kiss and mumbles against my lips. "They're waiting on you. Get your ass up there."

I nod quickly and blink a few times to gather my bearings. Standing up, I exhale a breath I didn't even realize I was holding and smooth down the front of my gown. I smile at James one last time before I make my way toward the front of the room then up the few steps to the stage.

A shiny trophy-like award is handed to me. It's black and in the shape of a tall rectangle. Though I'm filled with disbelief, I smile at it. It's heavier than I anticipated, and the corners could scratch glass, they're so fine. I glance at the gold-plated tag and read the inscription as the applause dies down.

The award's committee had informed us we would be going in alphabetical order to give our acceptance speeches. Lucky me, I get to go first. Licking my lips, I take a deep breath before stepping over to the podium. I gaze into the crowd of designer suits and custom dresses and allow the reality of the moment to sink in.

My full heart is content. All the people in this room are on similar wavelengths as I am. We're all just trying to make a difference in the world.

"As most of you may know, my grandmother raised me after I lost both my parents. Giving back is something she instilled in me at a very young age. She was my best friend, my mom, my dad, my sister..." Tears fill my eyes. Nearly five years later, and I still get choked up thinking about Grammy not being here anymore. I miss her every day. "We may not have been able to afford heat every winter, but that never stopped her from

offering a helping hand. She always said it could be worse and I needed to count my blessings.

"As I grew up, I wanted to be just like her. I still do. She taught me to follow that driving need in my heart, to go after what makes me happy, and that's what I've been doing ever since. My need to help others has never wavered. When she died, I lost a life, but in opening Sanctuary, and now Retreat, I've gained so many more. I think she would've been proud of the shelters she helped me build even after she left."

The last thing I want is to be that person who talks too much and has to be ushered off the stage, but I have a few more things I must say.

I look at James and meet his steel blue eyes. I grip the award a little tighter in my hand as I speak.

"My grammy isn't the only one who's influenced me. There's a man here with me today who means the world to me. He's my best friend, my confidant, and without his support and encouragement, I would've crumbled so many times trying to build Sanctuary and Retreat the way I had envisioned them. He's my biggest cheerleader and *extremely* patient with me." The crowd chuckles lightly. "You know how us women have our moments," I add to lighten the mood. "I'm a better person because of him, because he's inspired me to grow into the person I am today and the reason I'm able to give back even more.

"He gave me a wish, and now my wish is to inspire at least one person who walks through my doors the way he has me. I want someone's life to have meaning the way he gave meaning to mine. He not only helps to continue my grammy's wish with me, but he also wants to be there knee-deep in the planning. I will forever be indebted to him for that. Rome wasn't built in a day, but when you have the right people on your side, it feels like it can be."

Taking a deep breath, I prepare to end my speech. There's a bubbling need inside of me to be on James's arms after looking into his eyes while

speaking to a sea of people about him. I want to claim him in front of everyone and show the world he's mine.

"James Riviera, my—" I pause for a split second with my heart in my throat. The word husband wants to slip off my tongue like it's the most natural thing in the world. Like I'm supposed to say it. I'm itching to and that shocks me.

"James, baby, you are my world and the love of my life. Thank you for wanting to create a future of moments for people you've never met. You didn't have to, but you wanted to, and that means more to me than you could ever know. This award is just as much yours as it is mine. Thank you."

I gather my dress with one hand and rejoin the other women as the next honoree gives her speech. I purposely didn't have a drink beforehand, even though my nerves were shot.

After the last woman addresses the crowd, I make my way back to the table where James is waiting for me. The applause fades away as harp music fills the room.

I hand James my award and he places it on the table next to him, then turns back to me. He closes the distance between us and pulls me to him, planting a huge kiss to my lips in front of everyone. His strong arms wrap around me, holding me tightly as he dips me back and kisses me even deeper. It reminds me of the iconic black and white post-war photo of the elated sailor who pulled a random nurse into his arms and kissed her right in the middle of New York City.

Just like back then when the kiss happened in the center of the street, people are looking at us. I know what they see—a clearly older man professing his love by the act of a kiss to a fresh-faced twenty-something-year-old woman. I'm sure they think he's paying me. High-end hooking is huge in Manhattan and spotted everywhere.

James pulls me upright and breaks the kiss. His arms are still wrapped around me as I draw in a breath and gasp, my lips tingling. He doesn't say anything—he doesn't need to. It's all right there for me to see in his eyes what I mean to him. My fingers stroke his salt and pepper beard as I gaze into his eyes. We're both grinning like two cheesy fools.

"I fucking love you so damn much." James grins. "I love this woman!" he shouts to the room, and my cheeks burst with heat as my smile stretches across my face once more.

"James!" I whisper sharply under my breath.

He gives me an unapologetic shrug. James caught me by complete surprise, and I love him even more for it.

Taking my hand, he laces his fingers with mine and sits next to me until the dinner is over.

## TWENTY-TWO

"Tell me when you had time to plan this?" I ask James.

As soon as the dinner had ended, James whisked me into a Bentley and had the driver take us to a private airstrip where a plane was waiting for us. He wouldn't tell me where we were going no matter how many times I'd begged, but he'd assured me it was somewhere I wanted to go.

And he wasn't wrong.

Aspen holds fond memories for us. It's where we both fell hard for each other with so much on the table to lose. Where we found balance and unison. Aspen is where we'd realized we were unapologetically in love with each other.

"I had a little help." James beams from ear to ear as he guides me inside the log cabin I've dreamed about revisiting.

Happiness curls through my veins as I take in the space around me. It looks exactly the same, like we were just here yesterday. The cozy first floor is decorated in forest greens and brassy gold hues. This place screams home to me, and there's a warmth spreading in my chest that solidifies the feeling.

"Who helped you?" I turn around and James stares like the answer is obvious. "Natalie," I state. I can't believe that dirty little ho didn't tell me.

"I planned this a few months ago, but Natalie only knew about it recently because I asked her to pack you a bag. I didn't trust her to keep it a secret from you."

I'm delighted he planned a surprise trip like this. "You asked her to pack my bags? I'm scared to see what she put in there."

James laughs and walks over to where I'm standing. I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders and his hands encircle the small of my back.

"I caught her before she left for Italy and told her to go shopping for you. I've been hiding your suitcase in my office." There's a pensive weight to his stare now. "I know you've been wanting to come back here. I have too, but I felt like it needed to be a special occasion for us. Today, with the opening of your second shelter and the award's dinner, it felt like the time was finally right."

"It's *our* shelter, baby." I correct him. What's mine is his, always. I hope he knows that.

James shakes his head. "No, sweetheart, that's all yours. I'm just along for the ride."

"How did I get so lucky with you?" I want to smush his face against mine and kiss the fuck out of him.

"Well, I wouldn't necessarily call it luck..." We both see the dark humor behind his comment. James continues. "I need you to do me a favor and close your eyes. I have one more surprise."

My cheeks are starting to ache from smiling so hard. "Another surprise? James, you're too good to me. It is enough just being here with you. I don't need anything else but you naked and on top of me."

His eyes glow with pride. I love seeing him smile. It makes me happy to see him like that. I wiggle my hips against his, along with a few brow raises, and his smile stays until his eyes fall to my mouth. He turns serious again, and he squints like there's something on his mind. I can feel how hard he's thinking and worry about what's suddenly bothering him.

"It's never enough when it comes to you, don't you realize that by now?"

I study his gaze for a moment then press my chest against his and lean into him. I release a soft sigh. "Do you think there are other couples out there who are as happy as we are?"

"I'd like to think there are, otherwise, that's a sad life to lead."

I agree with him, then I loosen my arms and take a step back.

"Don't move. I just have to grab something really quick."

I close my eyes and wait. The urge to peek is strong, but I don't. Whatever James has planned means a lot to him and I don't want to ruin it. He returns a few seconds later and steps behind me, placing a satin ribbon over my eyes.

I'm giddy as hell now. Tingles work down my arms in anticipation. The last time we were here he'd used one of his work ties to pin my wrists together and played my body like a violin.

"Is it too tight?"

"No."

I feel James step in front of me and take both of my hands into his. Lifting them to his mouth, he presses a kiss to the top of both of them.

"Now, I didn't plan this part ahead, so I'm going to improvise and carry you. I don't want you to trip up the stairs since you can't see."

"Good idea."

James scoops me up as if I'm light as a feather and holds me to his chest. If he were my height, I'd worry he couldn't carry me. Luckily, he's got a good eight inches on me and years' worth of natural muscle to pick up my lengthy body and carry me up a flight of stairs.

We make it up five steps when he says, "Did you gain weight?"

My lips purse together. I know he's playing around, James has been trying to thicken me up more. With my weight gain over the years, he's turned into such an ass man and can't get enough. My ass is a magnet for his hand now the way his tongue is a magnet to my pussy. It's been a struggle to

keep the pounds off more than anything and that bothers me. He knows that, but James insists I'm just as gorgeous as I was when we first met. He says he gets the best of both worlds. It definitely doesn't seem like it bothers him the way it does me. He fucking cherishes me. I sigh inwardly. I'm working on accepting my changing body, I guess.

Placing my hand to his chest, I notice he must have removed his tie and unbuttoned his shirt halfway before blindfolding me. I skim my hand over his bare chest until I feel his nipple under my fingers. My thumb circles around it before I pull it between two fingers and pause. I fight a giggle.

James stops walking. I think we're midway up the stairs. "Aubrey," he warns. "You know what that does to me."

"It goes straight to your dick?"

This time I can't help but laugh. Sometimes I revert to a seventeen-year-old. I start twisting slowly and feel his fingers press into my body a little deeper. I can't fuck up his balls and hit them like I would in middle school when a boy annoyed me. I need those stones to slap my clit when he fucks me like an animal from behind.

I continue, and since I can't see him, all I feel is a cool breeze skate across my neck before his teeth latch onto the top of my supple breast just above my dress.

"I can play dirty too, sweetheart," he says with my skin between his teeth.

I give him one good crank and let go, but he's just as quick and sinks his teeth deeper. I flinch then gasp before letting out a laugh. We're like kids half the time.

James pulls back. "That's going to leave a mark." He's so proud and I shake my head in amusement.

We finish making our way upstairs. I remember this place well and know he's taking us into the master bedroom. The door creaks as he opens it and the scent of burning wood blankets me. The warmth against my cool

skin feels sublime. I sigh dreamily at the sound of the crackling fire behind us.

James let's go of my legs and helps me stand.

"Don't move," he warns.

"What do you have up your sleeve?"

James reaches around me to untie the sash. Low lighting sets the mood in his eyes when I finally look into them. He drops his gaze to the floor, and I catch the colorful ink on his chest. My eyes roam down his body, and as I reach his shoes, I realize I'm standing near a thick pile of blood red and hunter green blankets on the floor. I blink. My brows draw together as familiarity paints me. I spin around and a small breath hitches in the back of my throat.

"James," I whisper. My gaze bounces around the space, taking it all in at once. "What did you do?"

## TWENTY-THREE

From the blankets to the fire to the bottle of cognac, James has recreated one of the evenings we spent with our naked bodies flushed together in ecstasy. The weather had been brutal that night, dropping to a mere three degrees, but that didn't faze us as our passion built toward the most glorious heated climax. I consider it a favorite and one of our most romantic nights.

James steps closer to me. There's something in his hand I briefly take note of before he places one hand on my hip and looks into my eyes. I'm all he sees and that makes me hotter than the fire behind me.

"No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to let this go. There's no questioning how I feel for you. I think you already know, Aubrey, and have known for a very long time I love the fuck out of you. I'm going to love you more than anyone else and will prove that to you until you see I'm not playing around." James runs his tongue over his bottom lip, and my heart drops like it knows something I don't. "I'll make it my mission if I have to, to show you how much I cherish you. You're it for me. I may have met Valentina first, but I fell in love with Aubrey, and that's never going to change. My love for you grows every day into something that's new to me. I never knew I could love someone the way I do you."

My eyes are round and huge, and my lips are slightly parted. James places one foot behind him and steps back. My pulse skyrockets, my breathing becomes denser. Chills pepper my arms.

I thought...

Oh, God.

My heart is pounding against my ribs.

I can't think straight, and I'm a bit in shock.

I didn't think he was going to ask me again. I really thought I had lost my chance.

Tears fill my eyes instantly, and I flatten my lips tightly together.

James lowers to one knee and presents a black velvet box to me. Little breaths turn into pants. I meet his gaze and look at him, the man who will become my husband. I'm trembling inside to the point the nerves are making me sick. The other times James had asked me to marry him, there'd been no ring. I suspected he had one with him each time, but when I rejected the notion of marriage, I'd just assumed he didn't take it out. As odd as it sounds, I'm glad he hadn't until now.

He also never got down on one knee until now.

He lifts the top up and I draw in a loud breath and cup my mouth. Nestled inside the cushy pillow is a simple but large diamond engagement ring. It looks nearly flawless as it flashes against the glow of the fire. There's a row of thin diamonds encrusted around the outer edge hugging what has to be at least four carats. I stare at the way it sparkles against the metal. He didn't go for platinum. He didn't go for gold. He went for rose gold, and I know without a shadow of a doubt it's because I wear my mom's necklace and the one Grammy got me all the time, and they're both rose gold. James knows how much they mean to me. He also didn't go for a traditional princess cut diamond. He went for the pear-shaped cut, the least common engagement ring.

We most definitely aren't like everyone else.

"Please, sweetheart, put me out of my fucking misery and just say yes already. Say yes to forever with me."

Tears are streaming down my cheeks and my lips feel swollen from the emotion. I can barely focus over the pounding of my sprinting heart to formulate words. The only thing I can do is give him my shaking left hand as my answer.

I think my response shocks him. His wide blue eyes stare at me with hope, and his beautiful lips that worship me like a queen part with disbelief.

"You're... you're," he stammers, and I can't recall a time when James faltered his words.

I nod my head and smile at him. "I was a fool to say no the other times you asked me."

He stares at me with profound awe. He's not even blinking. I giggle at him, then wiggle my fingers.

"I finally say yes, and now you're going to make me work for it?"

James falls to the side and catches himself with his hand. He's sitting back on one foot and staring up at me with his baby blues. His hand is shaking as he runs it through his hair. It's a little longer than usual, but I like it on him. The way he's acting is adorable. I gather my dress and attempt to bend down so I'm eye level with him, but James raises his palm for me to stop and gets back up on one knee.

"I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack. You're really saying yes? Don't play with me, Aubrey. I'm old."

A laugh rumbles in my chest. My lashes fall to a half-moon as true happiness settles in my heart.

"Yes. I'm saying yes, James."

I find it endearing how stunned he is. He blinks rapidly and looks between the jewelry box and me, then attempts to take the ring out.

I'm standing in the cabin where we found love in the most unusual way. And now, four years later, James is on one knee asking me to be his wife.

He plucks the ring from the box and it falters in his hold. A breath hitches in my throat as he fumbles with it. James steadies himself and I fight the grin tickling my lips.

"Goddamn nerves."

This time I let the laugh out. James follows suit and chuckles under his breath. I could tell he was nervous, but I wasn't going to state the obvious.

He takes my left hand in his, and just as he's about to slide the delicate ring over my finger, I pull my hand away.

"Wait!"

James snaps his gaze up to mine and pales. His skin almost matches the gray hair on his head. I realize my timing is pure stupidity on my part and I need to make this quick. He's probably thinking the worst right now. I know I would be.

"You have to promise to never divorce me. Under no circumstances are you allowed to even utter those words, James Riviera. And don't even think you can use your special lawyer skills and say it in ten different ways, because it won't work on me." Emotion fills my throat. My heart flutters. "Don't make me tell you I told you so." I allow the panic in my voice to be present. This is real. "I'm not playing. Can we include it as a clause in our vows or something when we get married?"

James shakes his head then drops his attention back to my hand and the ring he's holding. Not letting another second pass him by, he pushes the ring forward and slides the stone where it belongs. The thing is larger than my knuckle.

A little sob escapes me. I can't believe I'm going to marry the love of my life.

I look at our hands. James is looking too. Between my milky, youthful fingers, and his olive-toned aging ones, we're perfectly matched in every way. I belong to him, and he belongs to me. He raises the top of my hand to

his lips and presses a gentle kiss. James stands, looking into my eyes, my left hand still in his.

"The only reason I would ever divorce you is if that ring ever comes off your finger."

I can't stop the blush that sweeps over my cheeks.

"Then I guess we have a deal."

A massive smile lights up my face. Excitement I didn't even know is possible to experience explodes like fireworks inside of me.

James isn't smiling like me. He's reflective, like there's a sense of peace finally settling inside of him.

"You know, that ring is basically a contract between us," James says matter-of-factly.

My cheeks are burning. He finally throws me a beaming smile, and it's a good one. James likes contracts. Once they're signed, there's very little that can be done to reverse them.

"Can I just start calling you hubby now?"

His mouth flickers with laughter. "Two months ago, you rejected the idea. Now you want to start calling me husband early?"

I give him a shrug. "Why not?"

James barks out a laugh. "I'm going to make you the happiest woman on earth, sweetheart."

"You already do."

I close the distance between us and wrap an arm around his shoulders, the need to feel him against me consumes me. Cupping my cheek softly, James leans in and captures my lips with his. I open for him and allow his tongue to stroke mine. My eyes close and I press my chest to his, kissing him back with the same slow intensity he's kissing me with.

There's no rush to this kiss.

We kiss like we're making sweet love to each other. Soft caresses mingle perfectly to the beat of our hearts.

## TWENTY-FOUR

**M**y arms loosen from around James's neck. Flattening my palms, I pull them down over his broad chest and catch the sparkle of my engagement ring.

"I know you keep saying you're going to make me the happiest woman on earth, but I need you to know I intend to do the same for you. Marriage was never a goal of mine, but now that I'm going to marry you, it scares me because of the love I already have for you, and how much more I want to give you."

"You know what would make me really happy?"

Laughter bubbles in my throat. I feel like I know where this is going.

"What's that, handsome?"

"You on your back naked with nothing but that ring on your finger, and me deep inside of you. Aubrey, I gotta get in you."

Warmth curls around my neck. I want that too.

"In front of the fire?"

"That's where I'm going to have you first as my soon-to-be wife." He pauses for a second. "I was thinking when we do get married, we keep it small and intimate. Just a thought."

"I want what you want. But can we please make love first? I'm dying here, baby."

"If I didn't love the way this dress looked on your body, I would've ripped it off you already." His fingers grasp the zipper and start a slow descent down my spine. James and his dresses. I smile to myself knowing he's about to see my new tattoo.

"You love every dress I wear."

He nods in agreement. "Because you look fucking incredible every time." He lets out a breath. "I can't wait to call you mine forever," he says, then kisses me again.

It must've slipped his mind that I've been his since day one.

The zipper reaches the bottom, and my dress falls in a whoosh at my feet, followed by my slip.

James's palm skims my bare body, creating a trail of warmth through me. He growls and I feel it in his chest. I went without panties or a bra, and he's pleased. As his hand skims up my waist, he stops when he reaches the Saniderm bandage that was placed over my tattoo. James breaks the kiss and pulls back. He turns my body to inspect what he touched. He bends down and moves in closer.

Startling blue eyes land on the delicate ribbon of feathers that decorate the length of my ribs and come up under my arm to cup around my breast. They were detailed with an extra fine needle and look so incredible. Almost real. I almost showed James the moment I got home but I wanted it to be a surprise tonight. Little did I know he had his own surprise planned too.

James angles my body to read the words entwined with the feathers: *I love every moment with you.*

"I got it for you," I say.

James is quiet. The pad of his index finger carefully moves over the letters I picked out with him in mind.

"When did you do this?"

"Remember when I said I had a gynecologist appointment today?" His eyes lift to mine and he nods. "I lied." His brows raise. "I wanted it to be a

surprise for you. I hope you're not upset with me."

James stands to his full height and my heart beats a little faster. His penetrating gaze weakens every nerve in my body and the aura surrounding him gives me chills. With his shoulders pulled back and his chest slightly pronounced, he slips a hand around the small of my back and yanks me to him. His erection strains against my leg.

"Upset? No. I'm fucking turned on by it. You did that for me?" he asks, and I nod. "Does it hurt? Your skin is raised around the outline. You should probably take the plastic off soon."

"It's tender right now. I went to your girl. She said it's going to feel like third-degree burns for the next few days."

"Sweetheart," he says, his hand moving toward the back of my neck, "I want to take a closer look at it and clean it for you, but right now I need to be inside you." His fingers thread through my hair now. His voice is darker, creating a tendril of desire. "I didn't think it was possible for you to be any sexier, but that just put me over the edge." He swallows thickly and I see his Adam's apple bob. "I fucking love it."

James captures my lips with his and plunges his tongue into my mouth. There's a bite to his kiss, a bit of aggression that cranks up the sexual tension between us. My hands move frantically over his chest. It doesn't take long for me to undo the rest of his buttons and remove his shirt, then I'm unbuckling his belt and pulling down his zipper. His kiss deepens as my fingers move over his cock. I purposely trace the length of his shaft to feel him. He's ridiculously hard and my need only intensifies for him.

Suit pants and boxers fall near my dress, then my hand wraps around his erection. My fingers glide softly over the crown of his head a few times. James knows I love to feel how swollen and thick he gets. It's fucking sexy to know his dick stands tall and hard because of me, because of us. There's something about making him feel good that rocks me. I want to take him in my mouth and send him past the clouds so he's out of his mind for me.

I purr into his mouth and feel my heartbeat quicken. Just touching him like this accelerates the desire coursing through me for him. Needy fingers thread my loose curls as James angles his kiss deeper over mine. His need increases and within seconds, he scoops me up into his arms and takes a few steps to the makeshift bed he had made up in front of the fire.

James cradles me gently over the flannel blankets then shifts his body before mine. He's careful not to touch my tattoo. My legs spread wide for him and I raise my arms above my head, my heels dragging down the blankets as he takes in my exposed body. My large breasts lift, and my rosy pink nipples harden from the way he's looking at me, like he's about to slowly devour me until I can't move.

Fuck. Yes.

Grabbing my knees, James roughly glides his palms over my smooth inner thighs to the crease near my hips. Between the pressure building inside of me and the heat of the moment, I don't know how he's able to hold off. I want to jump on top of him and ride him into next week with him pulling my hair to the finish line.

My hips undulate in a sensual flow. I'm not shy in the least and want him to look. His thumbs pull back my pussy lips as he slowly opens me. I watch as his teeth bite into his bottom lip and his eyes lower to slits. I'd give anything to know what's on his mind.

Not wanting to wait another minute, I reach for him.

Cupping his palm to his mouth, James spits in his hand then rubs it over the tip of his shaft. My lips part and my knees fall wider at the simple act that makes my pulse skyrocket. My gaze travels the black ink up the length of his body as he strokes himself a few times, then leans over and positions himself at my entrance.

Looking into my eyes, James places the tip between my swollen folds then closes the distance with his mouth and slides in until he can't get any deeper, kissing me at the same time.

I already know neither of us are in control tonight.

Tonight, we're one.

Tonight, we allow the passion and love we have for each other to take the reins.

Our groans echo around the crackling warmth of the fire. We both hold still, feeling the click between us lock in place. Even our kiss is clutched still.

I feel it.

James feels it.

Trembling above me, James separates his lips from mine and looks down at me. He laces his fingers with my left hand and presses his palm to mine.

"You're it for me, sweetheart. I hope you know that."

"You just put a huge rock on my finger. I better be."

The happiness in my eyes matches the contentment on my lips. When a spouse treats their other half like a king, they get the same treatment in return. I'm a firm believer in you get what you give. It's not just about me if I'm in a committed relationship, it's about both of us. Even after the scandalous life I've lived, I have no qualms about my past, and he doesn't either. Finding a partner who accepts their flaws and sins and lets them loose is what causes the emotion to bloom. In the end we're all after the same thing—we want someone to want us the way we are. James and I love each other just the way we are.

I lock my ankles around his back and beam up at him. The sexy grin that tugs at the corner of his lips sends my heart into overdrive. We're going to have a great life together.

Pulling his hips back slightly, James's kiss is demanding as he surges back inside me. Warmth explodes through my blood. My skin is tingling from my neck to the tips of my toes in sheer pleasure. We break apart and both moan in unison, holding on to each other for a second longer so we

can catch our breaths. My trembling limbs are tangled with James's, and the hammering against my chest beats into his. The masculine scent that oozes off him drives a dark need through me. We're lost to each other for the better, and there's no place else I'd rather be but here with him wrapped in my arms.

My lips suction around the skin just below his beard and I tug it into my mouth. James's cock twitches inside my pussy in satisfaction. He hits just the right angle and I spasm around him. My tongue twirls over his pulse before my teeth gently scrape down his throat.

James's sexy groan gets louder the harder I pull on his neck. I find it incredibly attractive. "Leave a mark. I want you to," he says, his voice strangled with ecstasy.

Chills dance over my arms at the thought. I kind of want to leave a mark on his cock with my mouth, but that will have to wait.

There's no more talking now. Not from the grunt that just reverberated from his chest into mine. My thighs tighten around his waist and my free hand plays with the back of his head, twirling my fingers through his hair. He drives into me and I pull on his hair, giving him a little tension. James's hips rear back, and I lift mine for him to plunge back in deeper. I gasp as heat coats my skin and my fingers squeeze his. James's body slams into mine with an ache so deep that my pussy shudders in defeat. I lift one leg higher up his back, and he reaches down and grabs my ass cheeks so his drive is richer for us. His fingers dig into my skin, causing a delicate heat to border the place he's gripping me.

"Oh, James," I say breathlessly. The feel of my clit being slapped while he's pummeling into me carries me to a higher level. "I'm close, baby."

My legs fall open and James takes that as his cue to pick up his pace. This is a man who knows what he wants and how to give to get it. This kind of passion brewing between us is a once-in-a-lifetime type of passion that I'll hold onto forever.

## TWENTY-FIVE

**H**ear racing, my skin is damp from how hard my pulse is thumping. I'm on the verge of orgasming, but I need James to come with me at the same time. My back bows and my nipples press into his chest. A slow purr slips from my lips.

James dives toward my lips but teases me by hovering just centimeters away. "Ready to fly with me?"

My eyes shift back and forth between his. Be still my heart. "Always."

"Then kiss me."

I do without hesitation.

With my left hand still joined with his, the need is closer and my breathing is growing deeper. James pumps his hips into mine and my body shudders in response. I moan into his mouth and feel the orgasm crawl up my legs. We're so close to the edge I can hardly take it. James shifts his legs so one knee is higher, allowing him to drive in deeper, then he places his large palm halfway over my throat as he cups my jaw. His lovemaking is raw, his kiss is unforgiving. James makes love to my mouth the way he does to my body, giving me everything he has to offer so I know I'm his in every conceivable way.

My mind is solely focused on the way my pussy feels suctioned around his cock, the way he's applying pressure to my clit. It's so incredible that it

makes me wild for him. Our chests rise and fall into the other's, we're both struggling to hold on. With another three plunges, our kiss becomes a desperate pant. Euphoria layers over us until we're flying together into the most beautiful sunset. Our hands stay joined the entire time as James spills into me. Fingers squeezed together, his hips undulate nice and slow with a good, hard drive.

James hums under his breath in utter delight. I love making my man feel good.

"James." I pant, then release a loud exhale. "How do you manage to make love better every time?"

He chuckles, and when he does, semen slips from my tender pussy. How does he manage to find humor in such a serious comment?

I let out a long sigh. "Dead serious, James."

His nose grazes mine, and I feel his lips pull upward against mine. "Takes two, sweetheart. You make me want to beat the last time just based on the way you fall apart in my arms."

My eyes are heavy as I stare up at him when the idea I had earlier pops into my head. "It's my turn, lover," I say.

How to make a man fall to his knees? Give him the best blowie of his life.

I manage to roll him onto his back and pull him out of me. There's a soft plop between us, and then his cum is dripping out of me onto the blanket.

"What are you doing, Aubrey?" he asks, peering at me on propped elbows.

"I'm going to make you fall apart now."

His head falls back between his shoulders and he lets out a guttural moan as I lick myself off him so I only taste him. The veins spinning toward his neck are jutting in strain.

I palm his heavy balls and run my fingers through our combined release dripping down his sack, then I move up toward his shaft to grasp his

thickness. James likes a tight fist and that's exactly what I give him. I hallow out my cheeks and pull him as hard and as deep as I can to the back of my throat. His knees come up, but I quickly shove them down. One time he almost put me in a headlock with his damn thighs while I was sucking him off.

My tongue smooths over each rigid crease and the thick fold around the tip of his cock, then traces a straining vein as I lick him clean. I don't prefer to taste myself, but I find it highly erotic when I do it for James.

I drag my teeth gently up his shaft and wrap my tongue around the width. He thrusts into the warmth of my mouth like he can't hold on any longer and releases a deep moan.

"That fucking mouth of yours," he says through gritted teeth, which only encourages me to suck him harder.

He's drowning in pleasure and I suddenly feel deprived of him. There's an urge clinging to me to climb up his beautiful body and ride him. I attempt to rub my thighs together to apply any ounce of pressure I can to my aching clit. My growing desire makes me work his cock like it's my job.

"Aubrey, sweetheart, give me that pussy."

Ignoring James, I focus on the mushroom tip and slurp the crown loudly knowing he likes to hear me suck his dick. James rewards me with a groan deep in his lungs. He threads his fingers through my hair and gives me a good tug until my mouth pops off him and he's dripping down my chin.

"Climb over here and give me that pussy, now."

Shaking my head, I know I only have so much time left before he overpowers me. I begin sucking the tip like I'm sucking down a thick milkshake that's slightly frozen, working his cock with my tongue to pull him to the top.

I glance up and see his head thrown back. James is a sight to see at this angle with his hands fisting the blankets beneath him. I taste his pleasure

and know he's close. I drink him deeper and feel his erection twitch in my hand.

"Oh, fuck... Aubrey... Stop it... Jesus fucking Christ!"

He's about to come any second. I open my mouth and lower myself, taking all of him in like I'm going to drink him dry. I swallow, creating a tighter space. Just as he's about to reach his pinnacle of bliss, James changes it up before I can stop him and turns, placing my body parallel to his.

I let out a soft sigh as he latches onto my pussy with his mouth, and I feel myself leak on his face. Unfazed, James rubs his beard on my sensitive skin while holding my hips firmly in his hands like he's on a mission. He slaps my ass then places his lips on my pussy like he's sucking the juice of a peach. I let out a gasp as his tongue vibrates over my clit.

"Oh, oh, oh." I whimper, digging my nails into his leg trying to fight my orgasm. My toes curl in ecstasy.

"You're so fucking hot from his angle," he says more to himself.

My inner thighs are shaking and I'm on the verge of release. My hips move on their own while I drink him down faster, greedier, to the point that I know he's going to combust any second.

And that's exactly what he does.

James pulls up his knee and drives his heel into the floor. A sexy as hell growl erupts from his lungs as he comes, shooting into my mouth with zero shame. I close my eyes and focus on the way he's torturing me. My hips rear back while his lips seal a tight suction. He holds me in place and that only makes my skin tingle more when stars explode inside of me. I climax into his mouth as pleasure takes over both of us.

My body rolls to the side and my knee pulls up, flopping open. I'm bare to James, my spent pussy next to his face. It doesn't bother me though. I'm staring up at the rustic wood beam ceiling in a hazy daze trying to catch my breath.

"You're so pink right now," James says. "It's raw." His finger reaches out to softly touch the inside of my folds. "Does this hurt?"

"No. It feels like a feather is touching me." I swallow, my mouth parched.

"What about now?" he asks, with two fingers deep in my pussy now. I clench around him and shake my head, unable to form words.

I'm too weak to move but James has other plans. He plays with my sex, tracing the lines and inside my folds with his finger.

I watch his eyes study the act like he's lost to what he's doing. His gaze travels lower when the evidence of his pleasure mixed with mine slides down my ass. James sits up and maneuvers himself that so his cheek is resting on my thigh and he kisses my tender clit. I love that he's so comfortable with my body. This man needs no lessons in how to please a woman.

"James, I can't. I need a second."

"I'll be gentle. Just lay there and let me play with you."

Who am I to argue with that?

There's no rush to James's kiss. He takes his time, lapping my sex with soft, gentle caresses. I hardly move when the orgasm appears like a burst of energy blowing into me. My legs attempt to scissor his body, little sighs push past my lips. He keeps the slow and steady pace the entire time while holding my legs in place so I can't move. When he does this, holds me still so I have to take what he's giving me, it lights a dark flame inside my belly. Having to remain still while a torment of heat and emotion tears through me always proves to be the biggest challenge of the day.

## TWENTY-SIX

I gaze longingly out the French doors. Little flurries of snow fall right before my eyes roll shut and another intense orgasm blows through me. A sexy, long moan pushes past my lips. The sound of James sipping down my pleasure causes a tremble in my bones. I lift my hips to his face, angling them so the orgasm hits harder. It's the only way I can move my body as he wears me down to a pile a pleasure at his feet.

Rising to his knees, James presses kisses up my belly, over my nipples, then to my mouth. He grins above me. I'm so used I can't even cup his face and hold him. He knows this and I watch as his smile grows larger.

"Hey, beautiful," James says, then sits to the side and pulls me with him so we're leaning back on the couch in front of the fire.

A tender kiss is pressed to the top of my head. I'm nestled in the security of his arms, feeling the intimacy between us go from two heartbeats to one.

My hand is resting on his pelvis. Just like with me, I always need to have my hands on him in some way.

The dancing burnt orange and amber yellow flames create a shadowy, soft glow in my engagement ring. I lift my hand to take in my ring again, and stare at it in awe. The small diamonds circling the band match the flawless stone at the center. The clarity reminds me of looking through clear glass and not even realizing it. James picked out a stunning ring.

"Thank you for not giving up on me," I say in appreciation. "I was scared I lost my chance to be your wife."

"I had no plans of giving up." James pauses, then says, "We're good together, Aubrey."

"We are, aren't we."

Picking up my head, I gaze at him with loving eyes. My palm skims up his stomach toward his chest. He grips four fingers in his hand and holds them over his heart. We stay like this, relaxing in front of the fire while the snow falls heavier outside. One thing I love about this cabin is the natural light. There are no window treatments in our second story room, just glass windows that give way to a snowy morning or an uncharted forest at night. If I remember correctly, we're sitting on roughly ten acres secluded in the mountains and surrounded by wildlife. James and I made love in the open for anyone to see, if they were allowed on the private land, that is.

"I can stay like this forever," I say, my words thick with contentment.

"Same, sweetheart."

A little more time passes before we stand. I'm dying to tell Natalie about the engagement and decide to FaceTime her to witness her reaction.

"Where are the suitcases?"

Not that she hasn't seen me naked before, but I figured I'd dress first. James glances at me like he's thinking while he uncorks the champagne. My lips twitch. He rarely strays from cognac.

"Wait. Did you know I would say yes and that's why you have bubbly here? So we could celebrate getting engaged?"

I'm playing with him. It doesn't matter how James planned what he did, just that he did it. He could tell me a hundred times a day he loves me, but showing me is another story. It takes effort to prove one truly loves someone more than just words. Don't tell me you love me. Show me you love me. And he does. Every second of the day he tries to show me. God, I

hope I do the same for him. I want James to know love the way I do from him.

"Today is your day, and I wanted to celebrate with you the best way I could. Did I hope you'd say yes when I proposed? Hell yeah. The way I see it, the engagement is just a bonus."

A chuckle gushes from me.

"Check the closet." He nods with his chin.

Stepping into the walk-in closet, I see our black luggage in the corner and go to retrieve them. I grab both in case James wants to put pants on, only to frown when they're in my hands. I glance down. One of the suitcases feels awfully light. I shake my head. Typical James. He usually under packs, then has to buy clothes. I hope he at least packed a pair of flannel sweats to wear. He looks mighty fine in them.

With two flutes between his fingers, James comes to stand near me. I place his down and turn around, holding my bag.

"That's mine," he says.

I pause.

"The heavy one? I assumed it was mine and that Natalie just packed everything under the kitchen sink for me."

"Look closer."

My gaze roams over the luggage. I cup my mouth and stifle a laugh behind my palm. There's a keychain that says "My Daddy is #1" hanging from the bottom where the two zippers meet. I got it for James when we were in Barcelona at a little hole-in-the-wall after one of the natives kept referring to him as Papá, thinking he was my father. I thought it was hysterical that he loved it and put it on his suitcase.

I glance over my shoulder at James, shaking my head. "Why do you put up with me again?"

His eyes glitter with amusement. "I could count all the ways I love thee, but I fear it would take centuries to complete."

"You're a riot, James."

I reach for the other suitcase and kneel on the floor to unzip it, then throw the top back. A whoosh of air blows past my lips as the contents appear in front of me.

One content, actually.

Shaking my head, I reach for the yellow Post-it note stuck in the center with Natalie's handwriting.

*You're welcome.*

I giggle while tapping the back of the sticky part with my index finger. "She's such an asshole. Why am I not surprised?"

I stand up and hand James the note. He squints, then his nostrils flare and I watch as an amused smile moves across his face.

"I can't believe she did that."

"Did she know you were going to propose?"

"No." He huffs out a laugh still looking at the note. He drops his arm and raises his eyes to mine. "I didn't trust her not to tell you. She did say that if you didn't come back with a ring on your finger to consider my brownstone torched. Honestly, she had a crazed look in her eyes. I wouldn't put it past her. Women are mental."

I raise a brow. "And yet you just put a ring on one of them."

The corners of James's lips curl into the cutest, most heart melting smile I've ever seen on a man. He drags an arm around my neck and leans over to give me a bear hug.

"The best one," he says, and a cheesy smile lights up my face.

"I need a shirt to wear," I say, pulling back.

James looks up and down the length of my naked body. "I think you look fine just the way you are."

"I can't call Natalie without a shirt on." I hold up my left hand. "And I want to tell her we're engaged." I faux pout.

James fluffs my hair. I realize he hasn't stopped smiling at me since I said yes. Butterflies create designs with their wings around my heart. I wish I would've said yes sooner.

I wish... I decide right then and there to let go of my past decisions. I got the man. Why harp on the past when I can focus on the future?

"Technically, you can since she didn't pack you any clothes."

"True... How about I take it off the moment I hang up with her?"

"Deal."

Once my breasts are covered and James has a pair of shorts on, he tends to my tattoo with soap and water, then applies lotion. There's a little tightness and some burning, but he assures me it won't last more than a couple of days. He refills our flutes with champagne while I fix up our makeshift bed in front of the fire. It's toasty and picture-perfect to cozy up next to my fiancé for the rest of the night.

My fiancé.

"James." He places the bottle back in the ice bin then looks at me. "You're my fiancé." I don't know why I say it, it's not like he obviously doesn't know. James studies me with a peculiar look in his eyes, and a blush fills my cheeks. I guess I'm just giddy as hell that I blurt it out.

"And you're mine."

"We're getting married." I state the obvious like a fool. James seems more amused than anything.

"And I can't fucking wait."

Be still my heart.

James walks over and takes a seat next to me, then hands me a glass. He places the blanket over us and I pull up my knees and lean into his side. He wraps an arm around my shoulders. I can hear the bubbles fizzing as we tilt them toward each other to celebrate.

"To us."

Simple. I love it.

"To us," I repeat.

James and I toast, then we take sips.

"I can't believe we're getting married," I say excitedly.

"I think you're in shock."

I chuckle and James smiles. "I think you may be on to something." James gives me a knowing look. "So, when are we getting married?"

This time he laughs. "That's up to you and the kind of wedding we're going to have."

My eyes light up at the thought of our wedding. The gowns I get to try on... My lips curve into a smile. It's going to be so much fun dress shopping with Natalie.

I pucker my lips and think about a date. I say the first one off the top of my head. "I say we get married February 25th."

James's brows shoot up and he seems a bit overwhelmed now. "That soon?"

My brows furrow. I feel a pang in my heart over his response. "Now it's too soon?"

"No, it's whenever you want, sweetheart," he rushes to say. "I just didn't expect it, that's all. You said no every time. Want to elope tomorrow to Vegas? We can do that. It's whatever you want, whenever you want. Just tell me where to be. All I'm asking is to see you in a wedding dress."

The tension in my neck loosens. He's right. My eyes soften and I smile up at James. He returns the gesture and kisses my forehead.

"I'm really happy," I tell him softly, but it sounds like I'm talking to myself.

"I am too."

My cheek presses into his chest. Drawing in a breath, the burning fire blends seductively with the subtle scent of James's cologne. I exhale as bliss curls through me. The bergamot and lavender creates a cozy softness around my heart. I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

"You smell like cognac and Cubans," I tell him.

James studies me with a deep fondness in his eyes that moves me to snuggle closer to him. I gave my heart to a man thirty-plus years my senior, and it was the best decision I ever made. We went through a devastating heartbreak and nearly lost each other forever. We almost didn't make it here. Our love tested my friendship with Natalie. Through it all, I still wouldn't change a thing if it would mean changing this moment right now.

Age is just a number, and love truly does conquer all.

"I guess becoming a ritzy prostitute has its benefits after all."

## TWENTY-SEVEN

I hold the phone in front of my face waiting for Natalie to answer.

"What time is it in Italy?" I ask James.

"I think we're about six hours behind. So, it's probably early in the morning."

I glance at the time and my shoulders drop. "Natalie isn't a morning person. Damn. I really wanted—"

She picks up.

"Aubrey," she says excitedly, drawing out my name like she's loving life.

Before I can say anything, I flash my left hand in excitement with a huge, cheesy ass grin on my face. I wiggle my fingers and she squints her eyes. Her jaw slowly drops as she leans in to get a better look. Natalie's sitting against a headboard with a sheet covering her chest, her hair a wild mess, and there's black coal liner smudged under her eyes. Looks like someone had a fun night.

She pops up when she realizes what she's looking at and screams her excitement. "Ohmigod! Fucking finally, Ram Jam!"

Laughter spills from my lips. "I know, right?"

Natalie tries to get a closer look and I hold my fingers still. I can see the ring glistening on the screen, but the camera doesn't do it justice.

"Wait until you see it in person. It's stunning."

"A teardrop stone? Oh, Daddy did good," she says, staring at the rock.

"Who are you calling *Zaddy*?"

My brows furrow at the unexpected voice in the background and I bust out laughing, covering my mouth. "Who the hell is that? And did he just say zaddy? Does he know what that means?"

I'm dying inside. A zaddy is a hot-as-sin older man with swag and sex appeal. James to a T.

She rolls her eyes playfully and she's blushing hard. Natalie never blushes. "Yeah, that's the lemon guy. His accent fucked up that word."

"I'm the lemon guy?" I hear.

"Who's the lemon guy?" James asks, chiming in.

James leans in to view the screen and waves to Natalie the same time the lemon guy leans in too. I see the space between his eyes crease. Natalie and I watch as they both stare at each other trying to figure out who's who. It's quite comical. We're all quiet for a moment until Natalie speaks.

"Luca. He's the flavor of the week," Natalie says, her lips twitching. "Lemon."

"I hope you're using protection, Natalie," James says, his voice a little firm. Spoken like a true, concerned father. If they weren't so open with each other, I'd think this is weird, but it's not.

"Who is that?" Luca asks.

He's got a full beard and what looks like hazel eyes, which surprises me. Natalie hates beards, says they're unsanitary. She once told me she'd rather lick the subway floor than kiss a man with a beard. Guess she changed her mind.

"Hey, Dad," Natalie says.

I bite back a laugh. She's fighting the laughter herself. I can only imagine how odd this looks. I'm FaceTiming my best friend with her shirtless dad next to me. We've all clearly had sex judging by our lack of

clothes and the relaxed flush on our cheeks. Natalie's got a rat's nest on her head while my mane is just everywhere. I'm going to have to call her later when she's alone to get the details on her date and what happened.

"That's your father?" the lemon guy asks. He's blatantly perplexed.

"Yeah, and my best friend."

A pregnant pause, Luca turns to look at Natalie. He's confused as he looks at her flawless skin like he's trying to figure out what one plus one is.

"They're together?" he asks, and she nods. "Engaged?" She nods again. This time Luca has a longer pause, then says, "We don't do that sort of thing in my country."

Natalie gives him a bland stare. "You just got done telling me your inbreeder cousins got married in the hills of Italy."

"What is an inbreeder?" he asks, and I laugh. It sounds much funnier coming from him.

"Country folk who fuck their cousins," Natalie says, dead serious too. Luca almost looks insulted, but something tells me he's actually not. This is great entertainment for us.

"We are not cousin fuckers, Natalia." I love that he calls her name in his native tongue. It sounds sexy coming from him.

"To a New Yorker, you are. Cousins who marry are inbreeders."

Luca gives her a serious look. "That's because New Yorkers are crazy. They're not normal people."

"Oh, and you've been to New York?"

"Many times, actually."

"For what?"

"Natalie, did you know anything about this man before you got into bed with him?" James asks.

She ignores James and continues with Luca. They talk like they've been married for twenty years, and honestly, I'm loving every second of it.

"You told me you're one hundred percent Italian."

He sits up a little taller and his eyes lower. "I am."

"That's not possible, unless you're keeping it in the family."

A boisterous laugh expels from James. "Don't torture the man, Natalie."

"Poor lemon guy doesn't know what he got himself into," I add as James stands up and gestures that he's going to use the restroom. I nod and watch my fiancé walk away, taking in the powerful muscles in his shoulders that paint a path to a sexy pair of dimples right above his butt.

"Oh, I know exactly what I got myself into," Luca says, and I turn back as he tilts his head and looks at the screen with a proud smirk on his face. "I've gotten myself into her a lot already."

I gasp and Natalie looks at Luca like she's actually bashful for the first time in her life. He drags an arm around her waist and pulls her to him. A sweet smile curls her lips. She doesn't even fight him, and she's rarely the type to ever blush from a man, and she totally did with Luca. I feel a little spark in my chest for them.

Natalie's got her hands full with this one. I hope she goes on another date with him.

"Shut the fuck up, Luca," she says, but is completely playful, and he sees that.

"That mouth." He shakes his head. "My mother does not like women who curse."

"Since I don't plan to marry you, I don't really give a shit."

"We're getting married," Luca states. I'm pretty sure they're in their own world right now.

Red heat flames Natalie's cheeks and I'm dying over this for more than one reason. I bet she was sure as shit he'd never be so forward.

"The fuck we are. I just met you ten minutes ago."

"And nine minutes ago is when I realized you are to be my wife."

Natalie turns to look at me with a straight face. "I'm gonna stick an ice pick in his fucking eye."

I'm trying to hold back my laughter, but it's impossible. Seeing Natalie clearly smitten over this guy is what makes this moment so memorable. A loud giggle erupts from me when I think about what she'd said over the phone in the early evening. She had told me she thought it was dangerous to drink with him. Now I see why.

"Make sure to fuck James every day when he wakes up. Happy wife, happy life," Natalie says with a cheesy grin.

"I will be sure to remember that too," Luca chimes in, extremely proud. It's hard for me not to get a rise out of these two. "Why do you call your father by his name?"

Natalie grinds her teeth together and exhales through her nose. That look makes me think back to when I used to nanny the little twin monsters and they'd ask for water for the hundredth time after they were tucked in for the night, then twenty minutes later they peed the bed.

Without looking, she spreads her fingers and palms his face, then shoves him down to the bed while holding the phone. He goes down in one swift motion. Natalie is entirely too happy with herself, until Luca snakes a surprise arm around her and tugs her down too. She goes down and the phone flops to the bed. All I see are white sheets now. Natalie giggles like she's being tickled as Luca says, "Say goodnight, Natalia."

"Goodnight, Dad and bestie!"

I can hear the smile in her voice and it warms my heart. "That's stepmama to you." She giggles again, and I hang up and place the phone on the floor.

"Goodnight," James says as he steps out of the bathroom. "Should I be worried?" he asks and returns to his spot next to me.

I shake my head. "Nope. I know she's your daughter, but trust me when I say she can handle this. She's going to take that guy to school."

He's contemplative. "Did she really just meet the guy only ten minutes ago?"

"Aw... baby."

James runs a hand through his hair. We both saw the flirtatious way Luca and Natalie were with each other. I know he felt how comfortable they were the way I did, but he's still her father.

"I just want to make sure she's okay. She's in another country."

I turn to look at him. I want to add that she didn't meet him ten minutes ago, but earlier on the beach, but I realize it wouldn't help the situation.

"I bet she brings him to the wedding," I say, hoping to smooth his feathers.

"You're that sure she's okay?"

I nod. "Yes."

James tugs me until I'm sitting between his legs with my back pressed against his chest. His arms are around my stomach and his cheek is pressed to the side of mine.

"You girls are my world. If anything happens to either of you, I don't know what I'd do with myself. If you're confident she's okay, then I trust you."

I lace my fingers with his, then fold our arms under my chest and cuddle up into his shoulder. "I am."

We're quiet, watching the fire together and feeling at home. Neither one of us speaks for a bit, and I think it's because both of us are recounting the night. A soft smile stays on my face and a warmth fills my heart until I'm bursting from it. I feel like I'm floating on cloud nine. This is what love is and why people want to marry, I realize. I get it now. I'm not naïve to think it'll always be diamonds and cognac, but there isn't one person in the world who I'd want to spend quiet nights with, in the middle of nowhere, just watching a fire as time passes by.

"I'm going to love you more than anyone, James."

## EPILOGUE

JAMES

I 'm one lucky son of a bitch.

My hands are crossed in front of me and my tux feels like I'm wearing an extra layer of skin. There's a harp playing an Ed Sheeran song gently in the background, but it does nothing to lower my blood pressure, let alone soothe me. All I can hear is my heart pounding against my chest and feel the nervous bounce in my heels as I wait for Aubrey to walk down the aisle. If she doesn't hurry up, I'm going to start sweating any second.

I shoot a fleeting glance at my daughter, who's wearing a massive smile and dreamy eyes. There isn't a day that goes by that I'm not grateful for Natalie's blessing. Those two years I was separated from the love of my life was hell on earth for me. Countless times I found myself looking for her everywhere I went, trying to catch a glimpse of her in the darkest shadows of my mind. I wanted to go to her and tell her to drop the shenanigans and be with me, but I respected my daughter too much for that. I wasn't going to come between them, despite how utterly alone and broken I was inside.

The world works in mysterious ways, though, and the day Natalie demanded I meet her at a specific time in Chelsea Park, I didn't question it. I fucking jumped.

In my gut, I knew this was my only chance.

Now she's watching and waiting for her best friend, my wife to be, to make her grand entrance. I follow her teary gaze and take in the room of guests. We opted for a small, intimate wedding of no more than fifty people in the heart of Manhattan. Tomorrow we leave for Aspen, again, because Aubrey insisted, and then we're off to Greece for a couple of weeks.

The music flows into a different song and the lighting in the private room lessens to cast a soft glow. Aubrey had told me when the lights change is when she'd be walking out. She had gone on and on about some special rose gold bulbs she needed to have that would set the lush, romantic mood and reflect her dress. I had no idea there was such a thing, but it didn't matter to me. I'd shrugged my shoulders and told her she could have whatever she wanted. I wasn't kidding either. This is our one and only wedding, and I want it to be perfect for her. I wasn't going to give her a reason to divorce me.

But now I understand why she needed these lights.

My lips part and I freeze while chills run down my tepid arms.

She's here.

Aubrey steps into the room and I feel like my heart is actually going to stop. She's unbelievably breathtaking. I've never seen anything so magnificent in my life. Our guests turn to watch her walk down the aisle, the photographers are snapping pictures, I can even hear Natalie sniffing, but all we see are each other.

There's a tawny hue to her skin that makes her look kissed by sunlight. She didn't want a veil, so her dark hair is in some messy, curly braid thing that pulls to the side with little wispy strands that dangle around her beautiful face. The braid hangs past her breasts that my eyes can't help but stop on. I'm definitely more of an ass man now that she's got a little extra cushion back there, but her boobs are just as spectacular. There are ornate pearl and diamond embellishments embedded along the top of her bodice

and plunge down the center. They look almost amber from where I'm standing. The elegant pale ivory corset that cups her breasts makes me drag my teeth over my lip in sheer desire. She said there were layers of tulle that start at her waist, but she forgot to mention the ruffles that look like three dimensional feathers and butterfly wings floating down the sides toward the train.

"Fuck," I mumble under my breath. She's just incredible.

I reach up to cup my mouth, my vision a little blurry. I'm in awe and overcome with emotion seeing her like this. If I shed a tear, Natalie would never let me live it down, but man, am I fucking close to it. Every day I imagined what Aubrey would look like walking down the aisle, but my imagination didn't do her justice. Not even close. She's the light of my life, my other half, my best friend, my lover, and the reason I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack from how fast my heart is racing.

She's everything I could ever want and imagine and more.

I can't tear my gaze away from her. Aubrey is fierce on the heart and devastatingly gorgeous on the eyes. And she's all mine, forever.

But then...then she flashes a smile with a look in her eyes only meant for me, and I can hardly hold back another second.

Aubrey makes it a little more than halfway before I'm walking down the steps and striding toward her on autopilot. She doesn't have time to process what's going on and I really don't either as I take her face and kiss the fuck out of her. I didn't plan this, and while our guests definitely didn't expect this, they roll with it just like we do, clapping and hollering their excitement around us.

I had to have her.

I pull back and gaze into her eyes, feeling like my heart is going to explode. "I'm sorry. I couldn't wait." I give her another small kiss.

A slow smile spreads across her face and reaches her eyes. "I wouldn't want it any other way."

Goddamn, I love this woman.

Taking her hand, we walk together until we reach the altar. She's blushing and I love that she is. My palm is damp from nerves and there's a slight tremble in my fingers, but she doesn't acknowledge it. Today means a lot to me—it's one of the most important days, next to when Natalie was born—and she knows that.

I guide her up the steps and Natalie bends to fluff out her dress then takes the bouquet. The harp music descends so we can begin the ceremony, another romantic touch Aubrey wanted.

I move to stand in front of her, grinning like a fool because I'm so damn happy. Her eyes are glossy, and I can tell she's fighting back her emotions just as much as I am. Unable to fight the urge and how ecstatic I am, I reach in to steal one more quick kiss.

"James." Aubrey giggles under her breath and her cheeks deepen in color.

Natalie nudges her and checks if her lipstick is smudged. She wipes a small spot away. Aubrey turns back to look at me, and I mouth an apology.

She shakes it off and looks deep into my eyes, unfazed by it but more so enamored. It's another reason why I fell in love with her so quickly. She gets me, I get her, and we both make it work. We don't fault each other for who we are.

Aubrey blinks, giving me a smile where she's biting her lip in anticipation, letting me know she feels the same way I do. A sensual curve slides into place and it's all I need to see to know she's ready to be my wife.

Turning, I look at the officiant. "I'm not getting any younger. Make her my wife before she has the chance to leave me for someone her own age."

"SALUTE," REECE SAYS.

"Salute," I respond, and we clink our glasses together, throwing back a shot. Shots are for millennials, but on the rare occasion, I'll have one.

"I can't believe you locked her down."

I glance at him in and nod in agreement, then wave two fingers at the bartender for fresh drinks. I'm not trying to get drunk on my wedding night, so I'm going back to what I'm used to and know best—cognac. Aubrey and I both agreed on a couple of drinks, but that's it. We want our wedding night to be a moment we both remember vividly.

"Tell me about it. I'm still questioning what it is she sees in me," I say.

"Never would've thought the girl you had me fuck in front of you would be your wife one day."

A loud cackle flies out of me. I turn to Reece while laughing hysterically and pat him on the back a couple of times. A grin lights up my face thinking back to that night and how he has the balls to bring it up now. I had to trick Valentina into seeing me at that time. She was fighting fate, even then.

Typical Reece, though. I'm not angry. I got the girl in the end. I know who she's under at night and who she's on top of in the morning, and that's all that matters.

"You fuck." I laugh again. "I knew you were going to say something like that tonight."

He shrugs unapologetically and smirks. "I couldn't resist."

I take a sip of my poison then turn to glance around the reception room trying to find my wife. "It was a fucking hot night, wasn't it?"

"It gets my dick hard just thinking about it."

I nod in agreement and lift my glass to his. I watch as Aubrey and Natalie are deep in conversation. I frown, wondering why they look so intense.

"All jokes aside," Reece says, dropping the humor from his face, "I'm happy for you, man. You guys kind of give me inspiration. You know I love

to live the bachelor life, but now I'm thinking maybe I need to slow down and enjoy the good life."

I tilt my head and give him a knowing look. "The good life it is, Reece. Take my word for it. Get yourself a woman who knows you and loves you more for it."

Sipping my drink, my brows crease when I see Aubrey reach for Natalie's arm only for Natalie to yank it back and whip it behind her back.

"Mind if I have one dance with your wife?"

I snap my eyes back to Reece. He's got a good poker face, but I know he's dying inside holding the laughs in. "Don't even fucking try it."

"But I didn't bring a date."

Eyeing him, I raise my hand and point my pinky at him. "Not my problem." I finish off the cognac then place the sniffer on the bar counter. "I'll be back in a bit. I need to see what my wife is up to."

"I'll be here scoping out the room, hoping to find my own cradle to rob."

I shake my head. Reece is such a douche bag. I laugh because he's a good guy at heart and I know he's not serious. He has wedding fever right now. The phase won't last long. Come next week, I'll get a call from him wondering why he was acting like a pussy on my wedding night. I bet he'll say the bartender drugged him or something equally as dumb.

I stride to where Natalie and Aubrey are standing, still deep in conversation. Just as I reach the little corner they're in, Natalie lifts her hand to Aubrey and I catch a sparkling reflection under the chandeliers. It happens again, and harsh frown lines fill the space between my brows. My stomach sinks as I close the distance between the three of us.

"What the hell is that?" I blurt out as I stare at a fucking yellow diamond ring on my daughter's left hand.

She snatches her hand away and places it behind her back. Natalie's eyes are round and wide, like blue marbles ready to pop out of her head.

"You got engaged and didn't tell me?" I say, slightly hurt.

I'd only gotten a quick look at it, but I'd say it's close to the size of Aubrey's, if not a little bigger. Not something that's easily overlooked, especially since it's a rare yellow diamond at that. I wait, hoping for a solid response, but Natalie watches me with guilty eyes knowing she's been caught red-handed.

Something dawns on me. "How come I didn't notice the ring before?"

"She had it turned around," Aubrey says, and my eyes shift to her. "I didn't see it either. All you see is a thin gold band. When she was dancing with Luca, I spotted it. She'd unconsciously turned it around with her thumb to the right side up."

"Is he wearing one?" I ask.

Aubrey frowns. "I don't know. I didn't look."

I glance back at Natalie, who's looking guilty as sin but with no remorse now. My chest is feeling a little tighter at the thought of my only daughter getting married. I'm not upset, but I'm shocked as hell and need time to process it. Right now, I just want to dance with my wife. Natalie being engaged is a discussion we'll all have over brunch tomorrow.

"I'm not engaged." Natalie drops her arm. "But it's not what you think either."

"Oh, boy. Here we go," Aubrey says, then lifts her palm up, waving her fingers at Natalie so she can see the ring. "What did you do?" Truthfully, I want to see it too. Few people in the world can buy a rare gem like that. If Luca bought her a fake stone, then I'm putting a fucking stop to whatever bullshit this is until I get to the bottom of it.

I snake an arm around Aubrey's waist and pull her to me as the engagement ring appears before us.

Fuck.

It's the real deal.

I'm stunned to the bone. The clarity is blinding, there's no way that's a fake one. Aubrey shifts Natalie's hand and the stone glistens. It's a nice one,

and now I'm wondering what the fuck this guy does for a living.

"What do you mean it's not what we think?" Aubrey says, still admiring the stone. "I didn't know you guys were serious."

"We're not... I'm not... We... He's not." She pauses, and I look up at her, hearing the nerves in her voice.

"Aww," Aubrey says, delivering a sugary sweet smile. She lets go of Natalie's hand. "You like him and you can't admit it. Typical Natalie. Kind of like the way you didn't like that naked musician from back in the day."

She chuckles and it causes Natalie to release a little of the tension, but she shakes her head and gives Aubrey this look in her eyes that makes me think it's a girl code look. Now I'm confused.

Women. I'll never understand their language.

From the corner of my eye I see Luca striding over to us. I turn to look at him as he approaches. He's carrying two drinks, and only has eyes for my daughter. He doesn't strike me as a criminal or give me a bad vibe. My instincts are usually on the money, but I'm also human and I make mistakes.

I guess he has one point so far. Luca doesn't even notice I'm looking at him as he moves in behind her. I try to get a view of his left hand, but it's blocked by the glass he's carrying.

"Like I said, it's not what you think," I hear Natalie say like she's almost heartbroken. "He's... he's just not my type. That's all. I'm having a little fun, but he's just not my type."

I can't tell who she's trying to convince by saying that, Aubrey or herself.

"Tomorrow," I say quickly, but it's too late. Aubrey notices too and the smile slips from her face. Luca heard what Natalie had said. It's not that I'm trying to help Luca. Quite frankly, I'm pissed off he didn't ask me first, but no man wants to hear the woman he's with say something like that. "You and Luca will have brunch with us tomorrow so we can all talk," I say.

"Now, I'm going to have one last dance with my wife, and finally take her home."

"Hey, Luca," Aubrey says, her voice tight.

Blood drains from my daughter's face. I shoot a glance at her fiancé, who's acting completely blasé and uninformed. There's no way he missed what Natalie said about him, but he's acting as if he did.

I shake my head. Kids.

Natalie turns to greet Luca, but she's looking at him completely different than she was to us two seconds ago. I squint my eyes and shoot a brief look at Aubrey to see if she noticed it too, then look back at Natalie. It's like she blinked, and a new person appeared before us. Gone is the torn look, having been replaced by someone who is happy and free about her life. They're staring at each other as if they've been in love forever. Knowing my daughter the way I do, it's almost alarming.

Luca hands Natalie a glass. She takes it and leans in to give him a kiss on the cheek, then steps closer to him. She seems rather at peace and now I'm more confused than ever. I have no idea what the hell is happening. I open my mouth to tell them we are definitely meeting tomorrow when Luca puts his hand out.

"Congratulations, Mr. Riviera," he says, dipping his head respectfully toward me and my bride. I place my hand in his when he delivers his next set of words like a man proud. "I'm Luca Enzo Alessio Bianchi Francesco the third, Natalia's husband. It's nice to finally meet you."

I still. His greeting is a shock to my heart.

"Husband?" I repeat, then aim a pointed look at my dear daughter. I realize I'm gripping Luca's hand harder than I intended to and pull away. "This is news to me." I pause and then say again, "Husband?"

Aubrey's fingers tighten around mine over her waist and it brings me back to where I am. Her thumb strokes over the top of my hand. Flexing my digits, I glance over and meet her sympathetic gaze. She smiles softly, and

suddenly everything feels okay again. I know whatever wild story Natalie has for us, I can handle with my wife by my side.

I also feel like Aubrey is giving me some sort of code look to just shut up for now.

Turning back to Luca, I say, "I was just informing Natalie that we can all have brunch tomorrow. Tonight, I want to enjoy the rest of the evening with my wife."

His smile is genuine. I wish it wasn't. "We'd love that."

Maybe it's the heightened emotion that comes with weddings, but I can't bring myself to be angry with Natalie at the moment. I just want her happy, and if marrying some man from Italy with a mouth full of names does that, then who the fuck am I to tell her no? I just married her best friend.

Though, her poker face is better than mine.

Letting go of Aubrey, I step forward and give my daughter a hug. "We're going to talk about this," I say near her ear, only for her to hear. She nods and I give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Congratulations," Aubrey says excitedly, but I can hear the tightness in her voice. I think she's hurt learning her best friend got married and didn't tell her. I offer my good wishes as well and tell myself I'm going to shelf this fucking bombshell Natalie dropped on me until tomorrow.

Lacing my fingers through Aubrey's, I steal her away and walk her toward the dance floor. She wraps her arms around my shoulders as I pull her close to my chest.

"Look at me," she says, and I do.

"How does my only daughter get married and not tell me?"

Aubrey doesn't respond to my question. I know she's trying to make sure I keep my cool, which I am, but it still upsets me that I wasn't given the option to walk Natalie down the aisle.

"Baby."

Gavin DeGraw's "More Than Anyone" begins playing through the speakers. A slow smile spreads across my face and I hold her closer to me. She had the DJ replay our first dance song again. We're swaying together to the ballad. Everything fades away and I fall into her beautiful brown eyes. Aubrey starts lip-synching the song's lyrics, saying she's going to love me more than anyone, something we always tell each other.

I can't wait until I have her naked in my arms tonight and we make love as husband and wife. My heart beats so fucking hard for this woman and the way she makes me feel inside.

"Want to know a secret?" I ask. She nods excitedly. "I can't wait to wake up to my wife tomorrow." The thought makes me embarrassingly giddy, but I don't give a shit. I got the girl and she's going to be mine forever.

She cups the back of my head and pulls my mouth to hers to place a gentle kiss on me. Her lips feel like pillows.

"Want to know my secret?" she asks, and I nod. "Valentina has been dying to get a taste of her new husband."

My head falls back and I let out a full belly laugh.

I'm going to cherish the fuck out of her.

The end.

Turn the page for a preview of *Stay With Me*, book 1 in the *Stay With Me* series by Nicole Fiorina.

## PROLOGUE

*“You stood before me, a memory,  
but I was a stranger in your eyes.  
Did you forget to remember  
or remember to forget?”*

*—Oliver Masters*

mia

I WOULD NEVER FORGET the day you slipped away. A small lift of your chin and our eyes met. I only saw emptiness in a place where a wistful vulnerability used to collide with wonder. Now, a hollowness of a bottomless pit. In your eyes, I'd never seen your shade of green so dim. It caused my stomach to fall into the same somber eclipse, spiraling faster and faster with no end, no walls, only darkness.

And then you averted your gaze.

The flesh from my bones, the blood in my veins, the oxygen in my lungs, all of it crumbled, breaking into small pieces yet still holding on by a

thread—the thread was my heart. It pumped on auto-pilot as if it couldn't associate with the rest of my body. It's thumping sounded in my ears, and I wished it would stop, but my heart was not ready to let go. It continued with the same steady beat, refusing to give up what was right in front of me. *Maybe your eyes will return to mine*, I thought—well, prayed.

And I waited.

Two seconds passed.

Then three—waiting as my body weakened from your disconnection, and my heart continued to pump.

*Four.*

And then your back was to me.

Whatever we'd had no longer existed, but I remembered everything clearly, and it wasn't fair. Could I have accepted the hollow look in your eyes over the wonder? Surely, anything you had to offer would be better than nothing. If only you had turned back around. Had you even noticed me?

And then you took a step in the opposite direction.

You were gone, left in obscurity and I couldn't bring you back, but my heart still maintained a steady beat, pumping along to a rhythm of crimson hope. *"Stay with me,"* you had said over and over. Who would have thought you would be the one to take a step into oblivion? *I'm screaming now, can you hear me? Why didn't you stay with me?*

I didn't get to kiss you goodbye. You were gone, and even though you were only twenty feet away, I missed you. It was entirely possible you'd wake up and turn back around, or I'd wake up.

Either way, it was a nightmare.

I forced my eyes closed. I couldn't watch you walk away, each step drawing more distance and less of a chance of you coming back. The darkness was better, anyway, and if I held my lids closed tight, I could see stars. I focused on the yellow and orange horizon behind my eyelids,

pretending it was a sunset through the bitterness. The only warmth was the water gathering in the corners of my eyes. The tears struggled for a moment, fighting the same lie as my beating heart.

I wished I could switch places with you, because I didn't deserve a world once blessed by your light, and you didn't deserve this at all.

But *this* is what I deserved.

In the beginning, I'd thought you'd be fun, and I'd thought I could leave you effortlessly. It was me who ripped hearts out, but now mine was the one bleeding. The walls surrounding me had been durable, indestructible, before you.

And with no more walls, and no more you, I was slowly suffocating.

When it came down to you and me, I'd never thought you'd be the one to slip away.

## CHAPTER 1

“Falling down, through the darkness.  
She doesn’t scream, or cry for help,  
lost her mind a long time ago.  
She prefers falling down.”

—Oliver Masters

I NEVER TOOK my stepmother seriously when she said I would one day be sent away for my reckless behavior after she found a boy in my closet, and I never really cared. It only fueled my actions.

So, one day, I stole the keys to her precious BMW 3 Series and drove it straight through the garage door.

Diane had grown tired of my acting out and blamed it on my father's increasing abandonment of the belief I could be cured. My father, the simple and passive-aggressive man he was, took each harsh word that poured from her perfectly made-up lips as he sat at the dining room table, staring blankly.

I didn’t even like the boy, either. All I’d wanted was to feel something. Anything.

On the edge of nineteen, and at my stepmother's final straw and my father's last nerve, they both agreed to call the law after my BMW incident. Since it was my last warning, I would have been thrown into a mental institution, but my father pleaded with the judge to send me away to Dolor—the farthest reformatory college for people like me.

Don't get me wrong, I knew I wasn't normal, but I never thought there would be anyone else like me, especially not a school dedicated to my ... kind—if there was such a thing.

At what point had I taken a turn for the worst? I assumed I had always been this way. Allowing boys to use me had never been for their benefit.

It had been for mine.

I wanted to feel their hands on me, their mouths on mine, and the eagerness and lust as if it would rub off on me. It never did, but maybe, just maybe, it would light a fire inside me long enough to burn. Pain, lust, anger, passion, I would take anything at this point. My heart was stiff. Rigor mortis had already set in my soul, if I even had a soul. I could no longer be sure.

My suitcase lay half empty at the edge of my bed as I stood over it. Even with a brief list of acceptable items, I had nothing I desired to bring. No pictures, no attachment to a pillow or blanket. No interest in anything aside from my headphones that I was sure they would confiscate upon my arrival. I opened my nightstand to retrieve a box of condoms, because it wasn't on the list of "unacceptable items," and stuffed it into a secret pocket at the bottom of the suitcase.

Satisfied, I reached for the top of the suitcase, slammed it shut, and closed the zipper without an afterthought. I wasn't mad at Diane. If I had been, that would have meant I had feelings. Honestly, I didn't blame her. If I had a stepdaughter like myself, I'd call the police as well.

"Mia, you ready?" my father called out from the bottom of the stairs.

I didn't answer.

"Mia Rose Jett!"

"Two minutes!" I set the lightly packed suitcase beside my bedroom door and took one last look around at the bare walls of an old prison before I entered a new one. My walls were always empty, just like my bed, my dresser, and my desk. No personality. Once I walked out the door, it would be like I had never lived here. This space could quickly become a guest bedroom, and I bet Diane already had a Pinterest board dedicated to it.

"Oh, no. You can't wear that." Diane scrunched her face from the bottom of the stairs. Her short bleach-blonde bob didn't move as she shook her head slightly from side to side. She always wore too much hairspray. Come to think of it, I don't believe I'd ever seen her without her hair blown out, straightened, and sprayed in place. Even when she did her fifteen-minute workout videos after dinner in her room with the door cracked, I'd never seen her hair move.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" My chin dropped as I straightened my oversized black t-shirt that read "cute but psycho" over my destroyed jean shorts, revealing my chicken legs. One would think I was naked underneath, the shirt was so big, but I wasn't. I was covered. Promise, Dad.

"Nothing's wrong. Let's move. We're already late for the airport," my father said, waving me down. He always avoided confrontation at all cost, and sometimes I wondered who he was more scared of—Diane or me? At this angle, I finally noticed the bald spot he'd been complaining about on the top of his head. I never believed him before, but now I didn't care enough to point out he was correct. He'd been a handsome man, but even with Diane around, loneliness had sucked the life out of him. Bags scalloped under his brown eyes and his cheeks were sunken.

Marriage would do that to you.

The suitcase banged against each stair as I stepped down. "She could have, at the very least, brushed her hair," Diane said under her breath as she

walked out the door ahead of my father and me. I pressed my lips together at the hypocrisy of her statement. At least I could run a brush through my hair if I wanted to.

"Not too much longer now," my father said as he gripped the handle of the suitcase and brought it behind him. He was right. Only eleven and a half hours longer, and I would be 3,447 miles away from both of them, give or take. He was choosing a perfect life, and I wasn't a part of perfect, and that was okay. I'd done my research. I knew what was waiting for me on the opposite side of the plane ride.

Dolor University was a reformatory college—prison—specifically designed for troubled souls and delinquents who suffered from mental illnesses, addictions, and a poor parental guidance that led one to a career in crime. Apparently, the best in the world, located in none other than the United Kingdom. I couldn't help but think the reason for the location was so they wouldn't feel pressured to visit, and I was okay with that. They could ship me wherever. I didn't want to be around people who didn't want to be around me, anyway. Isolation was my paradise.

I kept my attention out the window, twirling my dirty brown hair around my finger the entire way to the airport while my father went on about the curriculum.

"With Mia Rose's history, we should have chosen an all-girl reformatory," Diane scoffed.

"Mia Rose needs diversity," my father reminded her.

"Mia Rose is right here and can speak for herself," I informed both of them.

Diane conveniently stayed in the car as my father escorted me through baggage check-in and to the end of the line at security. He couldn't go any farther, and I was surprised he had made it this far.

I stood before him as his eyes glossed over. "I'm sorry, Mia."

He had never been good with words, but neither had I. Seconds passed, and he still couldn't look me in the eyes. He never could. Even when I talked to him, he'd look past me as if I were a ghost.

Look at me, Dad.

But, after a single nod, he turned and left me without so much as a second glance as I clutched my passport and plane ticket in my hand.

MORE NOVELS BY LUCIA FRANCO

Standalone Titles

You'll Think of Me

Hold On to Me

Hush, Hush

Say Yes: A Hush, Hush Novella

Off Balance series

Balance

Execution

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YOU'LL THINK OF ME

With his thick southern drawl and seductive charm, Luke is the country boy everyone adores. He has his future mapped out, but his plans with Olivia are derailed when she makes a decision that blindsides him, changing the path they both envisioned.

HOLD ON TO ME

He's a sweet talking Georgia boy, rough around the edges with an irresistible smile. John sets his sights on the new girl, determined to show her what his small town is about. But Alyssa isn't as accepting as he thought and she rejects him at every turn.

HUSH, HUSH

The dark and glamorous lifestyle of the rich and shameless open my eyes to a lavish world of sin and wealth, and a man I can't have.

A man I desperately want—James Riviera.

#### SAY YES: A HUSH, HUSH NOVELLA

James Riviera is everything I never knew I wanted. Powerful, sexy, alluring, and completely mine.

Now he wants to make me his wife.

I only have to say yes and I'll have forever, but forever isn't as lasting as people believe.

#### BALANCE (Book 1 in the Off Balance series)

Kova's power and domination, coupled with Adrianna's fierce tenacity, reveal there is more for her body to learn. Every interaction can be misconstrued, but there's no mistaking the darkening of his gaze, the lingering of his touch, or the illicit image of his bare skin pressed against hers. Integrity is on the line.

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Kova underestimates Adrianna's endurance, and gravitates more toward her, despite his internal battle raging within to stay away. They try to disentangle themselves, but the tension between coach and gymnast mounts, engulfing them both in a forbidden world of deception and passion.

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There is no atoning for what Kova did. The vow he made cannot be undone. With boundaries set and lines clearly defined, Kova will now have to be the one to relinquish control in order to regain Adrianna's trust.

#### TWIST (Book 4 in the Off Balance series)

As Adrianna fights for her life, Kova battles for them both. No one is left unscathed as they succumb to their darkest hunger. Passions reignite and their actions grow bolder, creating an endless link between them. Once is a mistake. Twice is reckless. Three times is a choice.

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## About Lucia Franco

A competitive athlete for over ten years, Lucia Franco currently resides in sunny South Florida with her husband and two boys. Paranormal romance was her first love, but she has a soft spot in her heart for small-town and reunion romance stories.

When Lucia is not hard at work on her next novel, you can find her relaxing with her toes in the sand at a nearby beach.

Find out more at [authorluciafranco.com](http://authorluciafranco.com).



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