



TRILLION

WINTER RENSHAW

WINTER RENSHAW
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COVER DESIGN: Louisa Maggio, LM Book Creations
LINE EDITOR: Kelley Harvey
COPY EDITOR/PROOFREADER: Wendy Chan, The Passionate Proofreader
BETA READER: Ashley Cestra
PHOTOGRAPHER: Sandy Lang
MODEL: Renato Freitas

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DESCRIPTION

Trey Westcott—devastatingly gorgeous. Intimidatingly brilliant. Powerful beyond belief.

A man with all the money in the world—literally.

As the first trillionaire in existence, my boss lives a life most people can only dream of. Anything he wants—anything at all—is a snap-of-the-fingers away.

But when the coldhearted magnate snaps his fingers and requests me for a stint on his arm playing the role of his devoted fiancée and then some, he makes an offer I can't refuse.

And so I don't.

But I make it clear that, he'll have my time, my body, my attention, my discreet professionalism—everything except my heart.

It's not for sale.

Because all the money in the world can't change the secret I've kept the last eight years. A secret that complicates the very business deal I'm to help him secure. A secret that makes the undeniable tension between us all the more forbidden.

Trey Westcott can have anything he wants ... but he can never have me.

Even if he's all I've ever wanted.

For Jill Kirtley. Thank you for your unwavering support!

I'm not confused. I just don't want to want what I want.
—Lauren Eden

ONE

SOPHIE

Past

"BEFORE YOU LEAVE, I need to make something crystal clear." My mother uncaps a tube of half-dried red lipstick as our reflections connect in the tiny bathroom mirror. "There's love ... and then there are things *like* love. Most people spend their entire lives confusing the two."

"How do you know the difference?" My attention drifts to my cleavage, distracted by the way her vintage dress makes me look bustier than I actually am. The zipper almost didn't zip, and the hemline is dangerously revealing when I sit, but this is all we have. I'm taller than her by four inches. Curvier than she was at this age—at least going off of the faded pictures in the photo album she keeps beneath her bed, the ones that paint a portrait of a woman with unrivaled vivacity, naivete in her idyllic soul, and an entire life ahead of her.

Blissfully unaware that the core of her beautiful life was mere years from rotting.

I wish I'd known her then, before she was a ghostlike shell of a woman.

I recall a certain memory of her perched on the end of my father's heirloom sailboat on a late August afternoon. Wind whipping her sun-bleached hair. Skin as bronzed as it could get for a girl with her Swedish-Irish complexion. She grinned so wide it had made *my* cheeks ache in response.

She stopped smiling like that after he left us.

And I spent most of my teenage years bleaching my dishwater-blond hair in hopes it would remind her of him a little less every time she looked at me. Though, of course, she thought I was going through some typical rebellious stage. I didn't tell her the truth. I didn't want to make her more sad than she already was.

"There's no way to know for sure. I can tell you real love is rare, and there are a lot of fakes." Mom exhales after being lost in thought. Her weary blue-gray irises turn glassy. I imagine she's thinking of my father. The bastard. "If there's anything I can teach you before I go—"

"Mom." I cut her off and snatch the bullet of Revlon *Ravish Me Red* from her bone-thin fingers and ignore the fact that she's wasting away by the second beneath her tattered terrycloth robe. I don't like to talk about this. About the return of her cancer. About what could happen this time.

She's not going to die.

I won't allow it.

Swiping the color across my mouth, I purse my lips until it blends. Then I touch up a couple of spots with the pad of my ring finger, the way she used to do a lifetime ago.

"You don't have to do this, Soph. You know that, right?" There's a lack of confidence in her whisper-soft tone. "We can figure something out."

"It's fine. I promise." We trade lies. I force myself to smile and hope she doesn't hear the nervous rattle in my words. My fingers twitch. My heart gallops. My soul quakes. "I'm sure it'll be fun. It's just dinner."

She and I both know this is the only way.

We're less than a week from being evicted. And between her meds, our groceries, and my youngest sister's physical therapy, there's a very real possibility we'll find ourselves on the street at some point in the near future.

"I'll be home by ten," I add, "and I'll tell you all about it."

Mom winces.

I don't think she wants to *hear all about it*.

I don't think she likes me pretending this is some date with a boy from school when in actuality some forty-something Rolls-Royce-driving businessman in a custom suit is whisking her seventeen-year-old virginal daughter off for a "dinner date."

He promised it would only be dinner.

And he's offering five hundred dollars for five hours of my time.

A hundred dollars an hour.

It takes me four weekend shifts at the café to make that kind of cash. Besides, if I wasn't doing this tonight, I'd be lounging in my room blaring All-American Rejects and mindlessly scrolling Insta. This way, I can at least contribute to our bottom line and take a load off my mother's chemo-drained mind.

"He's super nice," I tell her in an attempt to lift her spirits and quiet my nerves at the same time. He's dined at the restaurant where I wait tables more times than I can count over the past several months.

He always dines alone.

Always pays in cash.

Always requests me.

Always leaves staring at me for noticeable portions of time.

My co-worker, Ciara, tells me I should report him, but he's harmless. Plus, he's my most generous tipper. And secretly, I'm flattered by his interest. That, and I might have the tiniest crush on him as well. The guys my age stare *through* me half the time. And the dates I've been on are never anything to write home about. Bargain matinees. Fast food dollar-menu dinners. Driving around aimlessly listening to horrible music in a car that smells like dirty football cleats and empty bottles of Mountain Dew.

"He's so handsome, too," I say. "Reminds me of those photos of JFK Junior you used to show us. You'd love his hair."

I toss in a short chuckle under my breath and try to pretend what I'm about to do is no big deal.

I ignore the molten guilt that bubbles up from my center and burns the back of my throat.

I didn't tell her he's taking me into the city, or that we're going to a private party near Lincoln Park—one that requires masks and a pass code.

It sounded like fun when he told me about it, and I loved the idea of getting dolled up and spending a few hours on the arm of some rich, fancy, attractive capitalist who looks at me like I'm the most exquisite thing he's ever encountered.

Maybe it's messed up, maybe it's naïve to think anything could come of this, but there's no denying the man gives me butterflies.

"Mom, stop," I say because her silence is a weighted blanket on my shoulders. "This is *so* not a big deal. I promise. It's literally just dinner."

My phone buzzes on the bathroom counter. I exhale into the palm of my hand, checking that my breath is still fresh even though I've brushed my teeth twice in the past hour, flossed, *and* gargled thirty full seconds with a capful of purple Listerine.

My mother's gaze narrows. "You said you weren't going to kiss him ..."

I roll my eyes and fight the heat blooming in my cheeks. The idea of my mom picturing me kissing someone makes me cringe. I might die of embarrassment before I set foot out the lobby of our apartment building.

"We're going to be in his car." I shrug off her suggestion. "Close proximity ... just want to smell good."

She stares for a second, as if she doesn't believe me. I hold a lungful of stale air in case she protests. All she'd have to do is put her foot down, and I'd stay.

I might throw a fit, but I'd stay.

I've always been a good girl—a Golden Retriever of a daughter.

Dependable. Obedient. Loyal. Protective.

My mom is my whole world. My little sister, Emmeline, too.

I'd do anything for them ...

... which is why I'm doing this.

I check my texts and shove my phone into the black satin clutch I used last year for junior prom. "He's here."

"Sophh ..." is all she says. Then her lips press flat. I can't begin to imagine the sour brew of emotions running through her. She's having second thoughts. She wants to talk me out of this. I can see it in her eyes.

But it's too late.

I'm all dressed up—and he's outside, waiting in his car, probably smelling like a million dollars, ready to drink me in the way he always does at work: like I'm pretty, like I'm someone who matters to him.

My stomach somersaults in anticipation.

There's no turning back now ... even if I wanted to.

Wrapping my arms around her lithe shoulders, I inhale her vanilla-lavender scent, give her a delicate hug, and go.

TWO

Trey

PRESENT

“SO MY COUSIN was at this party with Westcott a couple of years ago, and she claims he snorted pure Peruvian cocaine off a stripper using a ten thousand-dollar bill, and then, get this—he *lit the bill on fire*,” a woman’s nasally voice trails from the eighth-floor break room.

Never heard that one before ...

I stop outside the door and listen. I’m on my way to a conference call, but I can spare a few minutes for some cheap entertainment, especially on a monotonous Tuesday. Most people hate Mondays. I hate Tuesdays. Mondays are full of hope and ambition for the week. Wednesday’s halfway to Friday, Thursday closer still. But Tuesdays? They’re boring, tedious. Generally unexciting.

“That’s nothing,” a second woman says. Her voice holds the desperate, youthful quality of a follower. A sheep who goes with the herd. I can sniff out those types a mile away. “I used to date this paralegal who worked for one of his attorneys. Said Westcott threw the most insane parties where everyone had to sign an NDA the second they walked in, and she was pretty sure everyone got roofied because the next day no one could remember what happened.”

I stifle a snort.

Fake news ...

“I’d legit give an entire paycheck to be a fly on the wall at one of his parties,” the first one says.

“Right?” the second one—the spineless disciple—counters. “Did you know his house is, like, two-hundred-thousand square feet? I tried to look up pictures of the inside of it, but all I could find is this book that was written in the nineties when his parents were still alive. Not going to lie, I was kind of disappointed. Reminded me of a castle-version of my Nana’s house. Hope he’s updated the place. God knows he can afford it.”

The first one laughs. “Maybe he wants it to look old on purpose? Wasn’t he screwing that woman twice his age a few years ago? Maybe he likes old things.”

My jaw tightens. The woman to whom they’re referring is my aunt. She accompanied me to a bevy of fundraisers one year when I was tired of the revolving door of desperate women sucking my dick for a chance to get a photo with me on a red carpet.

I throw up a little in my mouth.

Only an ignorant idiot would mistake my aunt for a lover.

They’re lucky she isn’t here to listen to this bullshit. She’s made grown men cry with her sweet smile and cutting tongue. These two would be minced meat.

“Eh, I doubt that,” the other one says. “Did you see the last girl he dated? Freaking. Drop. Dead. Out. Of. This. World. Gorgeous.”

She was easy on the eyes.

I’ll give her that.

But that was about the extent of her admirable qualities.

“Didn’t he date two girls at once before? Like a throuple kind of thing?” Number two asks.

Dated? No. Fucked until I grew bored of them? Absolutely.

“Probably,” the other laughs.

“Do you guys actually believe all that?” A third woman interjects, her voice soft yet feminine but her tone direct, no-nonsense. “If he makes everyone sign NDAs at his parties, then couldn’t your cousin get sued for sharing that? And if your friend and everyone at that party thought they were drugged, wouldn’t they want to get tested? Also, they haven’t made ten-thousand dollar bills in decades. That, and I highly doubt he does coke. Everyone knows he’s vegan.”

Silence.

“Also, what the inside of his home looks like is none of your business—that’s extremely invasive,” the third woman continues. “How would you feel if someone was Googling your address, trying to find pictures of where you slept? Where you ate dinner? And doesn’t one of you have a sugar daddy right now? You were just talking about your ‘allowance’ a minute ago ...”

Silence.

"I kind of feel like when you're the richest person in the world, people are going to be curious," the second woman says, a little late on her defense. "It comes with the territory."

"Yeah," the first one chimes in. "It's not like we're being stalkers. It's different when you're famous."

"Ah, true," my fearless advocate sighs, a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

I lean closer to the door, just enough to catch a glimpse of her face - only to be met with the back of her head and the ice-blonde waves cascading over her shoulders. A pinstriped blouse is tied high on her waist and cuffed at her elbows, and a fitted skirt skims her hourglass curves.

She reminds me of one of those Old Hollywood pin-up girls my grandfather was obsessed with in his younger days. He kept a full file of photos in a desk drawer in his study, where my notoriously jealous grandmother would never see them.

I lean away before I'm spotted.

"My mistake, ladies," the modern-day Marilyn Monroe says. "I must have forgotten rich people aren't human. By all means, carry on."

I glance at my timepiece and make a mental note to have my right-hand man and personal attorney, Broderick, check the cameras in the break room so I can get the names of the two Gossiping Gabbys. And I take a hint of pleasure in imagining them commiserating at some God-awful trendy neighborhood bar, drinking sugary cocktails that match the pink slips they're about to receive.

I have zero tolerance for bullshit gossip—but I'll make an exception if it's flattering.

I have a business to run—biggest in the world, in fact. And I've had more than a few deals go south because of idiotic rumors.

The women's conversation pivots to the topic of "keto friendly chocolate", and I take that as my cue to leave. Only the instant I take a step past the open doorway is the same instant the curvy blonde in the pinstripe blouse exits the break room.

We collide in passing, but it's a subtle collision.

My arm brushes hers just enough for a quick startle.

Palm splaying across her chest, she apologizes.

Our eyes lock, like she's realizing who I am. This happens on a daily basis. For whatever reason, I intimidate the fuck out of people with my mere presence.

The woman sucks in a breath before going silent, recognition widening her eyes, and then she brushes a flaxen wave from her forehead, chewing the inner corner of the juiciest rose-colored mouth I've ever seen.

Funny how a moment ago she was so brave, standing up for a man she'd never met and now she's a deer in the headlights. Doe-eyed and all.

"What's your name?" I ask. A work badge hangs from her neck, but I can't take my attention off her pleasing almond-shaped gaze with their spray of dark lashes and ocean-blue irises. A chorus of wild flowers, sun-dried cotton, and fresh air fills my lungs. She smells like a morning in the countryside, and for the briefest moment I'm transported to childhood summers at my grandparents' country home in Surrey.

She swallows, straightens her shoulders, and tips her chin upwards. "Sophie Bristol."

She doesn't ask my name. I imagine she doesn't need to.

"Thank you," My gaze skims past her delicate shoulders toward the break room doorway, "for ... *that*."

Her full lips press and she offers a slight nod. "You're welcome."

"I'm not vegan by the way," I add.

Her nose wrinkles. "I'm sorry?"

"You told them I was vegan. But you should know, I'm very much a carnivore." I give her a nuanced wink and earn a reserved smile from her pretty mouth in return.

With that, I'm gone.

I don't stick around—I don't have the time. I'm officially running late for a meeting with the board of Ames Oil and Steel, one in which I'm attempting to make a record-shattering, unheard-of offer. Not that I need it. As the richest man in the world, I don't need much of anything, personally, professionally, or otherwise. Acquiring businesses has become more of a sport in recent years. I'd compare it to climbing mountains. You start with the smaller ones and work your way up to the tallest.

Ames Oil and Steel is about to become the Mount Everest of my career.

I head to the elevator, press the button for my private floor, and swipe my key before heading to the private boardroom.

The second I stride through the door, Broderick greets me, throwing his hands in the air and mouthing something along the lines of, "What the hell?"

The projector screen behind him is filled with a bevy of middle-aged faces with impatient frowns, all of them video-conferencing from a stuffy-looking room in Philadelphia.

"Ladies, gentlemen, esteemed members of the board, I hope you weren't waiting long." I smile. I'm told I look halfway pleasant when I smile. When I'm not, I've been told I'm akin to an expressionless marble statue and people tend to grow uncomfortable when they think they can't 'read' you.

I take a seat at the head of my forty-foot mahogany table. Broderick slides me a legal pad emblazoned with the Westcott Corporation logo, along with a pristine Caran d'Ache fountain pen—only the best for my note taking. It was my father's favorite brand. I'd hardly call myself sentimental or superstitious, but some things are worth an exception.

"Mr. Westcott, we assume you received the agenda for today's meeting?" Someone from their team breaks the east coast silence.

Broderick slides me a printed email.

"Have it right here." I give it a quick perusal, speed-reading the bullet points and identifying the words that matter. "And I can already tell you that half of these items are unnecessary. I know your time is valuable. As is mine. So I propose we both stop wasting it, and you tell me the number you want on the check. I can have my CFO authorize it before close of business today."

I'm met with a few chuffs, and a handful of them exchange unreadable stares.

Unprofessional, but I'm willing to turn the other cheek because once I buy them out, I'll never have to see their sour faces again.

"Mr. Westcott, as we all know, you're well aware of the legacy clause in our contract," Nolan Ames, the man at the head of the table with a 51% stake of his family's company, folds his hands.

"I'm well aware. Yes. Thank you." I bite my tongue and hope he doesn't pick up on the condescension in my tone. This absurd legacy clause is the only thing holding up the takeover and so far neither of us have been willing to budge. It's difficult to see eye-to-eye when your opposition is an incredulous asshole on a power trip. "But from one businessman to another, I'd like to remind you that everything is negotiable."

He leans forward in his oversized leather chair, head tilted, polite smile painting his aging face, and he clears his throat. "My great-grandfather founded this company."

I nod, as if I'd never heard the name Ames along the likes of Astors, Rockefellers, and Rothschilds. I listen, silent as if I've no idea what it's like to run a company founded by generations of familial predecessors.

"At the end of the day, it's a family business," Nolan says. "It can't switch hands unless I know for certain it'll continue to *stay* a family business."

The idea of an environment-demolishing corporation being a "family business" is laughable at best. But this man is the kind of delusional with whom one can't argue.

I shoot Broderick a look. He pinches the bridge of his nose. We both know this is bullshit. Likely a stall tactic. If Nolan really wanted to sell, he'd sell. We've had enough off-the-record conversations with board members to know they're ready to unload. Steel is holding steady but oil is at a twenty-year low. They can't compete with the Saudis in this market. They're ready to take their money to greener pastures and they'd have done it eight months ago when I initially offered, but I'm not interested in 49%.

I'm an all-or-nothing man.

"I'm willing to double my last offer," I say, "which, we can all agree, was remarkably generous."

One could even argue it was *stupid* generous.

Nolan peers at his folded hands. Still. Soundless. Either the conference call has glitched and they're frozen, or he's counting dollar signs. A second later, he finally moves, twisting the glinting platinum and diamond wedding band on his left ring finger, sliding it off then on again.

"Mr. Westcott, do you mind if we place you on mute for a moment?" A woman in oversized pearls and a charcoal suit stands.

"Not at all," I say.

She reaches for the black device in the center of the table. The sound disappears and the screen goes dark. Nothing but a flashing icon that shows we're on hold.

"Can't wait to be done with this prick." I point my pen toward the screen. "At this point, I should make *him* pay *me* for wasting my fucking time."

Broderick exhales. "Just be patient. It's going to happen. You always get what you want."

I sink back into my chair.

He's right.

I *always* get what I want.

In fact, I don't recall a time when I haven't.

Glancing to my left, I take in a view of the somber Chicago skyline outside and contemplate my weekend plans. When I return my attention to my legal pad, I've jotted a name on the lower right corner of the first page. I don't remember doing it, but it's undeniably my handwriting.

Sophie Bristol.

I must have written it so I could remember. With over sixty thousand employees, I couldn't begin to remember anyone's names outside my tight-knit circle of trusted executives.

The screen fills with the Ames baker's dozen once more and the sound returns. A handful of indiscernible whispers. Shuffled papers. Cleared throats. Creaking chairs.

I circle Sophie's name to remind myself to check into her later—mostly out of curiosity. Her face—and body—suddenly adulterate my focus, and very rarely does something distract me to this degree.

"Have we reached a decision?" I ask.

Broderick gives me a subtle wink, as if he's certain this is the moment Nolan finally relents after eight agonizingly tortuous months of back-and-forth negotiations.

"Not quite. I have a proposition for you," Nolan says. "If you're open to hearing it."

"Of course." I sit up.

Broderick shifts in his seat, listening, taking notes as Nolan lays out an offer I never could have anticipated.

Nolan Ames is holding strong on the legacy clause. He wants me to "find someone," to "settle down," to get fucking *married* and start a family. He's also graciously giving me two years because according to him, "you're thirty-five and your best years are behind you anyway." He even had the audacity to say I'd thank him someday.

Thank him for *what*? For a money-hungry trophy wife? For a kid that'll inevitably be raised by a team of nannies? For a version of my life I've never wanted?

People like me don't do the marriage-and-family dance.

It's not who we are.

It's not who I am.

I'm aware of my strengths. I'm also aware of my weaknesses. I'd be a horrible husband and an even worse excuse for a father.

Nolan agreed to put everything in writing—that he wouldn't offer his shares to anyone else in the next two years, and the board agreed to do the same. I imagine there was an extensive amount of coaxing going on behind the scenes, hence the muting, but I don't have time to imagine what he could possibly hold over their heads because I'm too busy wrapping my mind around this preposterous, unprecedented stipulation.

"Who the hell does he think he is?" I all but spit my words at Broderick when we disconnect a few minutes later. "He's insane."

Broderick rises, his chair groaning beneath his bodyguard-esque frame, and he tosses his pen on the table. Pacing the windows, he inhales hard and heavy, always a man of few words.

"I'm going to need you to actually fucking say something." I exhale, my patience non-existent. Though my words are sharp, Broderick's got a chainmail ego. He can handle it, unlike the spineless trout before him. He puts up with my moods, whichever way they swing, and when necessary, he puts me in my place.

It's why I've yet to replace him in the ten years he's worked for me.

Most people tell me what I want to hear.

Broderick tells me what I *need* to hear—the truth.

A man can't make savvy business decisions based on sugarcoated lies.

"It's a power move," he says, eyes pointed yet unfocused. I don't like this side of him. I need my shark, not his shell-shocked alter.

"Obviously." I clench my jaw. "So what do you propose?"

He stops wearing a pattern into the carpet with his polished dress shoes and turns to me. "How badly do you want this?"

"Do I even have to answer that?"

His mouth forms a straight line, nostrils flaring. "Fine. This is the plan. We hire someone. We find a woman—one we can trust—and we pay her to marry you, have your child, and to do it all in Nolan's timeframe."

"Please tell me you're fucking joking."

He lifts a brow. "Eight months of this back-and-forth bullshit and the man hasn't budged, Trey. Hasn't even come close. You heard what he wants. He's not wavering on that clause. And unfortunately, he knows he has the upper hand because anyone else would've walked by now."

"This is the most absurd thing I've ever heard." In my nearly fifteen years of negotiating acquisitions and takeovers, I've yet to hear of such a provision. If I didn't know better, I'd think I was being pranked. But Ames has a reputation. He's a family man. Wife of nearly ten years. Two kids. The bastard even wrote a book on "creating the ideal marriage in an anti-marriage world." Instant bestseller. He considers himself an expert in that—and many other—arenas.

In my experience, powerful men who think they're the smartest asshole in the room make some of the dumbest decisions ... sometimes simply because they can. The world doesn't tell men like Nolan Ames "no" just as it doesn't tell men like me "no."

I hunch over the table, staring down at the circled name.

Sophie Bristol.

"All right. Plan B. We tell him we're going to pass," Broderick says, lifting a finger because he knows I'm about to protest. "If he knows you're willing to walk away and take your excessively generous offer off the table, maybe it'll light a little fire in him. Level the playing field a bit. Tip the scales in our favor—or at least equalize them."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we move on and find another company to buy."

I don't like the idea of moving on. I want *this* company. I've had my sights set on it for years, and when rumor had it he was looking to sell so he could retire early and focus on being a "family man," I jumped on the opportunity.

"No." I exhale. Perhaps I'm being petulant in this moment, but I don't fucking care. There's a way to make this happen, I'm certain.

"Then we need to find someone," he says, "someone who's compatible with you, someone you find attractive, someone who would be an ideal mother, and like I said, someone you can trust. We could have them vetted by a psychologist if you want, a doctor as well to make sure she's capable of bearing—"

I lift a palm. He shuts up mid-sentence.

"—now you're getting too many people involved." I wave his words away, gaze focused on that name. *Sophie Bristol.* The syllables roll soft and sensual in my mind. I can only imagine the way they'd feel on my tongue. "I want you to look into her."

I rip the page from the legal pad and slide it toward him.

"She works here," I say. "No idea what department. I ran into her earlier. She might be a fit for ... this."

Broderick scans the name before folding the paper into fourths, and then he tucks it into the interior

pocket of his suit jacket. "I'll see what I can find out."

THREE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I'M in the middle of running a Tuesday report for Miranda in Accounts Receivable when my office phone flashes with an unfamiliar extension.

It takes me three rings to process the name on the Caller ID.

It takes me an additional stomach-dropping ring to answer. "Sophie Bristol speaking."

In the three years I've worked at Westcott Corporation, Trey Westcott has *never* called me.

"Ms. Bristol, I need you to report to my office." The commanding tenor in my boss' voice sends actual chills down my spine—not an easy feat. "Immediately."

The number of times I've physically seen the unknowable powerhouse of a man, I could count on one hand, and all of those times have been in passing—with today being an exception.

From what I've heard, a person only gets called into his office when they're about to be fired. The man likes to dole out pink slips in person. He claims it's a respect thing, though I can't help but wonder if he simply gets off on it. Power changes people.

Then again, Westcott's been powerful his entire life. Born to one of the wealthiest families in the world and orphaned as a teenager, he's spent the past twenty years turning his \$500 billion inheritance into a net worth that tops a trillion dollars.

A hundred times, I've tried to wrap my head around that kind of money, but I can't come close to fathoming it. They say if you were to count to a trillion, it would take two-hundred-thousand years. I don't think an ordinary person could stay sane with that kind of influence and authority.

Some of the most prominent people in existence are terrified of him—of his capabilities. And the shroud of mystery (and rumors) that surround him only add to his intimidating allure.

I log out of my computer and quickly calculate the odds of it being the last time I do so. He's got no reason to let me go, that I can think of, but I've lost track of how many times I've watched some poor, thankless company minion packing their belongings into a cardboard box while they attempt not to break down in tears in front of their staring colleagues. Once they load the elevator, they're never seen or heard from again.

I don't tend to fear anyone.

Trey Westcott is an exception.

For the past hour, I've replayed the break room incident in my mind on a loop, wondering what he heard and how much, if any, he attributed to me.

He stopped me in the hallway and said, "Thanks for ... *that*."

Was there sarcasm in his tone?

What if he thought I was the one spreading those ridiculous rumors?

Also, why is he calling me personally? He has half a dozen assistants to do this sort of thing ...

"Ms. Bristol?" His brusque voice in my ear tells me I don't have time to wonder.

"Yes." I keep my composure and swallow my concerns for now. "I'll be right there."

Westcott is my boss' boss' boss' boss' boss on a zig-zagged chart that makes me dizzy if I stare at it for too long. I didn't think the man knew I existed.

I've sat in on some meetings, amongst a hundred others, and we've passed in the hallway a time or two, never making eye contact. Other than that, nothing about our dealings have been remarkable or memorable, at least not for him.

I slip my work badge around my neck and lock up my office, mentally calculating how long it'll take to get from the eighth floor of the southwest corner of our extensive corporate campus to the northeast section where I'll hitch a ride on a private elevator to a penthouse office suite where Mr. Westcott spends no less than seventy hours a week.

Five minutes later, I check in at the desk outside his office where his number one assistant works behind a shiny black desk so gargantuan it nearly swallows her whole.

"Mr. Westcott wanted to see me," I say. "Sophie Bristol, from Payroll."

Spa-like music plays from hidden speakers but the air is particularly icy. I heard this is how he works. The hospital-grade air purifier combined with the frigid sixty-six degree thermostat keeps Westcott clear-

headed and helps him do his best thinking.

The nameplate on the assistant's desk identifies her as Mona, and while I've seen hundreds of emails go out on his behalf—all with her name on them—I'd yet to put a face with it. She's stunning. Wide set hazel eyes. Inky dark hair that shines like lacquered glass. Pouty, matte-red lips. Lingerie model body. Baby face. Barely twenty-three if I had to guess.

She taps a button on her phone, lifts her fingers to the microphone of her headset, and mutters something low before pointing to the double doors behind her with the hand-carved Westcott monogram: a giant W flanked with a P on the left and an A on the right.

Pierce Ainsworth Westcott III.

The third in a line of successful, old-moneyed men, the world has only ever known him as Trey.

"You can head in," she says, gaze careful yet curious. "Mr. Westcott is ready for you."

I press my fingertips against the gold-plated door handle and give it a push.

It swings open and in a flash of a second, I know how Alice felt when she went down the rabbit hole.

FOUR

Trey

PRESENT

THE DOORS GLIDE OPEN, presenting a beautiful bombshell of a woman backlit by the soft lighting of the reception area.

"Ms. Bristol." I check my watch. She isn't late. Quite the contrary. She came as soon as I called. But it's crucial she learns I don't like to be kept waiting. This will benefit her going forward.

She clasps her hands softly in front of her hips, drawing my eye toward her delicious hourglass frame, and pulls her shoulders back.

Clearing her throat, she accepts my gaze head on.

I like her already.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Westcott?" Her voice is smooth and unshaken. If I make her nervous, she's doing a superb job of hiding it.

"I'm told you work in Payroll." I come around the front of my desk, taking a seat on the edge and folding my arms across my chest.

She hasn't taken a single step closer, keeping a careful distance of ten, maybe twelve feet between us. Either she's quietly intimidated by me or she's got a thing for personal space. If it's the latter, we already share something in common.

"I do," she says. "Going on three years next month."

"And you love your job?" I ask.

Without pause, Sophie answers, "Of course."

I don't buy it.

Her brows meet. She's confused. Understandably so.

"Tell me, Ms. Bristol, what are your long-term goals here at Westcott Corporation? Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten?" My attention shifts to her glossy pale waves and the glistening lips that deliver her words on a breathy velvet cloud.

She's a walking, talking juxtaposition of vulnerability and confidence.

An enigma.

I'm too distracted by the way she carries herself to listen to the words coming out of her mouth. Besides, her answers don't matter. I've already chosen her. Once my mind is set, there's no changing it.

Sophie is in the middle of waxing on how long it took her just to get an interview here when I lift a palm to silence her.

"Thank you for that information, Ms. Bristol," I say. "I've heard enough."

She half-squints before righting her posture.

"I'm going to cut to the chase," I say, drinking in her Coke-bottle figure. The subtle nip at her waist, the elegant way her heels lift her calf muscles, the shiny, flawless set of teeth I've yet to see overtaken with a full smile, the regal posture—either she's pedigreed and hailing from a respectable family or incredibly self-assured and disciplined.

Either way, I'll take her—she's perfect for what I need.

"I'm relieving you from your current position," I say, the way I've said to countless souls who've stood in her very position. I never apologize. I never break eye contact. I never sugarcoat.

The only difference now is I'm about to dump the opportunity of a lifetime into her lap, and she hasn't the slightest.

I resist a smirk.

A sharp intake of breath passes between her open lips, but her expression is impossible to read. Her eyes—a steely Atlantic blue—don't show a hint of emotion. Still as a statue, she lingers. Or maybe she's hardening herself. This is a girl in complete control of her emotions. So much more than a pretty face and a marathon-sex worthy body.

"May I ask why?" she finally speaks, voice unbroken.

"Because I have another job for you. One I believe will suit you better," I say. "Not to mention the pay and benefits will beat anything you could ever make on your current track."

She winces. "I'm sorry. I don't understand. Are you firing me or promoting me?"

“Both.”

I reach for the stack of papers on Westcott Legal Department letterhead and slide them toward her, along with a pen. “Before I get into the details of this new position, I’m going to need you to sign this NDA. It’s a standard, boilerplate contract. I just need to know that the offer I’m about to make you won’t be shared outside this room, beyond the two of us.”

Her inquiring gaze dances over the fine print, and a moment later, she reaches for the pen —albeit reluctantly, makes a few elegant loops, and signs on the line.

“This would be a personal position,” I say. “You’d work for me. With me. And only me.”

“Like a personal assistant?”

“No. I have five of those already.” I roll my eyes, realizing how fucking ridiculous this proposition is going to sound. The words haven’t so much as left my mouth and already I’m cringing on the inside. “Before I elaborate, I’d like you to know that I’ve had my personal attorney dig up your file, and I have to say I’m impressed with your background. Four years at Princeton. Dual degrees in international business and accounting. President of three collegiate clubs. Founder of two charities. Fluent in multiple languages. A laundry list of remarkable references ... All of this by the age of twenty-seven? I have to ask: why are you wasting your time working in payroll here?”

“As I said earlier, Mr. Westcott, it was quite difficult to get an interview at your company and, when I finally did—I took what I could get. I’ve actually received two promotions since I’ve been here. From what I understand, the opportunity to move up is worth the wait.”

It’s true. It’s a steep climb but the view is incredible. Many will try. Few will reach the pinnacle of Westcott success. That’s the secret to maintaining a ball-busting team that comprises the core of my company.

“There are a few blanks I need to fill in—mostly concerning your familial history—but given your extraordinary background, your work ethic and loyalty, I’m confident I’ve made the right decision, and I believe you’ll be much happier in this new position.”

“Which is ...?”

“I’m in need of a,” my mouth curls, as if I can’t help but laugh at what I’m about to say, “personal partner. Or to put it in black and white ... a wife.”

“Wait—what?” She tilts her head and a hand lifts to her angled hip. A moment ago she was stoic and composed, but something tells me I’m about to see a different side of her—and I hope I do. I need to know everything about her, familiarize myself with the facets of her personality. “Did you just say you need a wife? Is this a joke?”

She peers from left to right, as if inspecting her surroundings for a hidden camera or two.

“I wish it were. Believe me. I fully understand the outlandishness of my request.”

“Why me?” she asks after an endless pause.

I drag a hard, cold breath into my lungs. “I believe I already explained that to you.”

She folds her delicate hands in front of her again, this time her fingers twisting into a gridlock.

“Respectfully, I have to pass.”

I almost choke on my spit, but I contain my reaction. “My attorney will send you the offer, in writing, as soon as we’re finished. I behoove you to take it home, read it over, and reconsider.”

Her full lips press together. “I’m sorry, but my answer is still no.”

“I was under the impression you were single. Am I wrong?” There was no husband or common law spouse listed on her medical insurance paperwork. From what Broderick could find, she lived alone in a fifth-floor, one-bedroom apartment approximately four blocks from here.

“I am,” she says.

“Allow me to paint a picture for you. We could start with six months together,” I say. “And a tastefully publicized whirlwind engagement. At the end of those six months, you would receive a sum of two million dollars. Another six months after that, we would make everything official—a wedding. Could be a grand affair if you’d like, or we could hold a private ceremony anywhere you’d like. After the wedding, you would receive a payment of five million dollars. If, within the year that follows, our marriage produces a child, you would receive an additional ten million.”

It’s a drop of water in the vast ocean that is my wealth, but to someone making Sophie’s humble salary, it’s a Powerball jackpot.

Her iridescent irises flash.

But she says nothing.

“You and my child would forever be financially cared for. You’d want for nothing. And if you’d like to legally go our own ways, I would grant you a divorce as well as primary custody, and we would come to a fair co-parenting agreement. I would never expect you to stay in a loveless marriage or sacrifice your long-term happiness.”

It’s imperative that I be upfront about this.

I can promise her all the money in the world, but I could never promise her my heart.

“I’m not a pawn, Mr. Westcott,” she says, spoken like a woman who knows her worth. “And I’m not for sale.”

“Of course you aren’t,” I say with the careful negotiating tone I use with anyone sitting on the other end of a business deal. “I’m not buying you, Ms. Bristol. I’m buying into a partnership with you.”

“You’re a good salesman, Mr. Westcott,” she says. “You paint a lovely picture. But things like that—they can never be that simple. Contract or not.”

I chuff. “It’s not like there’s a precedent for this sort of thing. I assure you, anything you want from me

will be put in writing. It'll be a fair agreement. And I'm nothing if not a man of my word."

She begins to speak but stops.

"I'm in a situation, and I need your help. No, I *want* your help. And I would help you in return. It's as simple as that." And then I add, "I think we can both agree it's the opportunity of a lifetime."

"I'm sorry, but no, thank you." Short and sweet, as if she's slipping back into her graceful, poised demeanor like a satin jacket.

She doesn't stick around to even consider the generous offer I've made, the easy money, the lifetime of financial freedom with a side of luxury. While the contract would guarantee her seventeen million dollars over the course of two years, the mother of my child would live a life afforded to royalty. I could add a house. Ongoing child support. Every resource she could possibly need or want to maintain a high standard of living.

She'd be set until her dying day.

"Again, Broderick will send you the contract," I say. "As you read it over, please bear in mind that everything is negotiable."

Chin tipped forward and gaze locked on me, she asks, "Do I still have a job here or am I fired?"

She doesn't so much as hint at considering it.

I contemplate the legal ramifications of threatening someone's job in exchange for a relationship, and I think better of it.

"Of course not," I say.

Besides, it'll give us more opportunities to see one another. From here forward, I'll be making extra trips to her section of the Westcott campus.

My future wife shows herself out without any fanfare, her heels padding silent on the lush carpeting.

I'm sure, once she peruses the paperwork later over a glass of twist-cap five-dollar wine in her humble apartment, she'll reconsider.

And tonight as she lies in bed, she'll imagine a life with me. The gravity of my offer will hit her like a wall of regret. Come morning, my phone will ring. And if it doesn't? I'll find a way to change her mind.

I always get what I want.

And I want Sophie Bristol.

FIVE

SOPHIE

Past

EVERY TIME his fingertips graze the small of my back, I feel nauseous—the good kind. Butterflies. Goosebumps. An electric trill running up and down my spine. Total sensory overload.

Everyone at the party is dressed in all black, their faces hidden behind glimmering facades made of silk, satin, leather, or sequins.

They could be anyone. Movie stars. Politicians. No one would know.

The mask he brought for me is covered in dark rhinestones and accentuated with exotic feathers that turn deep purple in certain lighting.

It's all I can do to think straight with everything going on around me. Even from behind masks, I can tell some of the most beautiful people in the world are in this very room. Celebrities, maybe. I want to take it all in, all at the same time, but whenever I find myself enamored with a beautiful dress or an antique oil painting on the wall, I'll find myself distracted by something else elegant and otherworldly.

The delicate tinkle of guests toasting with their crystal goblets. The hush of intimate conversation parsed with educated vocabularies and the occasional exotic accent. Wafts of expensive perfume. Glistening diamonds dripping from lithe bodies.

A server in a tuxedo delivers flutes of rose-hued champagne to a cluster of people beside us. When he gets to us, my date hands me one.

My fingers tremble when I accept it.

I've never had alcohol before.

Gold flakes float in the bottom of the glass. Is it safe to drink gold? A quick glance around the room tells me it must be fine because everyone else is doing it.

I hesitate, imagining the disappointment in my mother's eyes if I were to come home smelling like this, imagining the words she wouldn't have the energy to say.

"It's okay, Sophie," he says, his full lips curling into a mischievous smile that makes my insides somersault. "I won't tell, if you don't."

His hand finds my lower back again, and I bring the glass to my lips. One couldn't hurt. The liquid is bubbly on my tongue, tickling my throat as it glides down effortlessly. Sweet but not too sweet. It tastes like privilege and glamour.

He leans in.

"You like?" His voice is low and vibrates off my ear drum.

I nod and take another sip.

"You're going to like it here," he says, scanning the large room. We're in the living room of someone's palatial penthouse, that's about all I know. "I can tell already. You fit right in." Leaning in again, he points to a group of suited men chatting near a lit fireplace. "See those sorry bastards over there? They've been staring at you since we walked in the door tonight."

One of them looks my way, letting his gaze linger. He doesn't care that I see him gawking. It's almost as if he's challenging me to a staring contest? My confidence buckles, and I look away first.

How could he possibly know if I'm attractive when half of my face is covered?

A warm flush floods my cheeks when I remember the too-tight dress hugging my body, accentuating my curves.

That's what they're staring at.

"Does that bother you?" I ask. Because I think it would. I'm here with him. As his date. All the guys my age get jealous so easily.

He tosses back a mouthful of champagne, swallows it clean. "No. I love it actually."

"I don't understand."

"They wish they were here with you, Sophie," he says with his velvet tenor. "But they're not. And it kills them. That feels good to me—to have something everyone else wants but can't have."

"So I'm a possession to you?"

His hand slips into mine, giving it a squeeze and lifting it to his lips to deposit a kiss. "Oh, God. Sophie, no. I didn't mean it that way. I just ... I enjoy showing you off. You're gorgeous, and tonight, you're mine."

I'm a lucky man, that's all. You should know that."

My stomach tightens. The sensation of being desired by someone like him is foreign, exhilarating in a way I've yet to know in my seventeen years.

I had a crush on Devon Peterson for three years before he finally noticed me, and when I heard through the grapevine he thought I was "kind of cute," it didn't feel half as wonderful as it feels when my date's eyes drink me in from behind his shiny onyx mask.

"We should make our rounds before dinner," he says. "There are a few people I'd like to introduce you to."

I hook my hand into my date's elbow, and for the hour that follows, I get lightheaded off flute after flute of champagne as he takes me from one masked party goer to the next. The floor is wobbly beneath my heels and the sparkling chandeliers spin above like crystal stars. A string quartet of masked players serenades us from another room.

"Why do we use our real names if we're all wearing masks?" I ask him when the host calls us all to the dining room. I'm drunk. I think.

Everything around me swirls.

I can't stop grinning.

I want to laugh at everything he says, which is suddenly ten times funnier for no reason at all.

And I love the way the fabric of his suit feels under my palm. It reminds me of junior prom, when the guys rent the nice tuxes from the store on the square and everything is stiff and formal and fancy and special.

Pulling me aside, he leads me to a private hallway. He lifts his hand to my cheek, and my face feels small. He presses his body against mine, delicately pinning me to the wall.

I want to curl up inside him, be here forever in this magical moment where everything is new and exciting and I'm not Sophie-with-the-hand-me-downs, Sophie with the sick mom and disabled sister, Sophie who waits tables to pay her family's rent.

I'm simply ... *his*.

Nothing more, nothing less.

"You're having fun, yes?" he asks, his dark eyes dancing in mine.

I bite my lip, nodding, breathing in the sharp citrus of his aftershave.

"The people here, they have silly little rules," he says. "It's like a club where people use code names."

"... but you gave them *my* real name." My tongue is heavy and my words slur into each other. I can't talk right but I can still think. My logic is intact.

"It's different when you're not an actual member."

"So only the men here are members?" I ask.

He hesitates. "It's like that, yes. Think of it as a fraternity."

My older cousin was in a fraternity in college. I know how obsessed those guys can get. How they pledge their loyalty, become like brothers, and do anything for each other.

"Members with code names?" I still don't understand, not fully.

"Yes." He sweeps a strand of hair from my forehead. "Exactly."

"Your name isn't John, is it?" Maybe it's the champagne, but the question leaves my lips before I consider the fact that I might not want to know the answer.

"No, Sophie." He sighs with a smile, as if he finds my question endearing. "It's not."

The host calls from the next room, asking about the two empty chairs.

"We have to go," he says. "We can't keep them waiting."

"Wait. I want to know your name. Your *real* name." I tug on the lapels of his suit coat, bouncing on the balls of my feet, narrowing the space between us—like a silent, unconscious plea for him to kiss me.

To know me.

To be *real* with me.

He's been looking at me like he wants to devour me all night, and it's only a matter of time before it happens. I know it. I sense it in my bones. Whatever's between us, it's electric. The truest thing I've ever felt.

"You will." His thumb traces my lower lip, and then he lowers his mouth to mine, stealing a kiss without asking—the way Kai Masterson did at homecoming last fall. Only he tasted like Burger King French fries and smelled like Axe body spray. "John" tastes like sweet bubbles and smells like a dream. His lips are hot on mine and his kiss lingers for three seconds ... I count them. "We'll talk after dinner. I'll tell you everything."

Slipping his hand in mine, he leads me to the dining room, and I'm grateful for the low lights that hide the blush of my cheeks as all eyes pivot in our direction, likely wondering where we ran off to and what we were doing. I imagine they think we shared more than an innocent kiss in a quiet hallway.

He slides my chair out. Pushes it in. Takes a seat beside me.

While we're far from the head of the table, the chairs are massive and throne-like, and in a strange sort of way, I feel like his queen.

Whoever he is.

Trey

PRESENT

IT'S BEEN twenty-four hours since I gave Sophie that contract, and the only thing she's given me in return is deafening silence.

Still not giving up.

She'll come around.

"Let me ask you this." I shove the stack of manila folders back to Broderick. Supposedly these are backups. But they might as well be college applications, and I don't have time to pore over stacks of women who aren't *her*. "How many hours did you waste this afternoon doing this?"

"It's good to have options," he says from across my desk.

"Where did you even find these people?" I reach for the top folder, flipping it open to reveal a glossy-haired brunette with double Ds protruding off her bony chest. Her smile easily consumes the lower half of her face, teeth too perfect to be real. And her eyes are sad. God, they're so fucking sad. I shove that one aside and glance at the next. Not that I'm considering any of them. "This one's from Serbia. Ames is going to think she's a fucking mail-order bride."

"She already has her green card." He points to a paragraph on the bottom, summarizing her "qualities."

According to this, her name is Petra and she speaks four languages. She spent eight years in the Moscow Ballet Company, one of them as prima ballerina. Now she practices immigration law pro bono. Honorable, but she's not the one for me.

The next girl is Tiffin Wisecup Hurstfield.

I know those names: Wisecup and Hurstfield.

She comes from blue-blooded old money. Her mother and father spawn from a long line of thoroughbred breeders and international shipping magnates respectively. If her parents haven't yet fixed her up with someone in their vast and extensive social circle, she's likely damaged goods.

Also, her face has had way too much fucking work. Lips like swollen sausages. Chipmunk cheeks. Baby doll lashes down to her nose. Brows lifted to the middle of her forehead so she appears permanently surprised. She looks ten years older than her actual age and plastic as hell.

I'll be damned if I sire a child with a human fuck doll.

"I don't know whether to thank you or to be offended," I tell him. "Clearly you have no idea what I like, and after ten years working for me, I'm not sure what that says about our professional relationship."

"It's a start." He's unfazed as always.

"It's not a start, Broderick. It's a fucking joke is what it is," I say. "Stop wasting my time and get me Sophie."

He clears his throat, folds his hands in front of him, expression wiped clean. We've worked together long enough that I know he's about to tell me something I don't want to hear.

"All due respect, Trey, there's only so much I can do. I can't make someone be with you if they don't want to be with you. Obviously money's not a motivating factor for this woman if she's willing to walk away from almost twenty mil. We could double, triple our offer, and I don't know that it would matter." He exhales. "Maybe she's not interested in fake. Maybe she wants real love. A real family—not a contractual agreement."

I lean back in my chair, my fingers grazing my mouth. It's easy to forget that some people give a shit about things besides the number of zeroes in their bank account.

"So I'll give her real." I don't know how. I've never done *real* in my life. But I'll fucking try if it means getting her to sign on the dotted line.

"Too late, don't you think? You told her you need a wife, someone to give you a child. You told her you were willing to pay a lot of money for that. No offense, but none of that sounds romantic. You start pursuing her, she's going to see through it."

I grab the stack of files and page through a few more before discarding them all in the "big fat fucking no" pile. There are perfectly good candidates in here. Educated. Beautiful. Well-traveled. Laundry lists of accolades. Most of them would serve the purpose fine, at least on paper.

But Sophie has something they don't have—self-respect ... the kind of thing you can't illustrate with honors, awards, and pedigreed names. You can buy fake tits and lip fillers, but you can't buy self-worth.

It's priceless.

"I want you to call her into a private meeting this afternoon. Double the offer and give her another twenty-four hours to reconsider," I say. Most of the time, if you give someone a sharp deadline, it lights a fire.

Urgency is key.

"Tell her she's the only one I'm considering," I say. It's proven that if you know someone is interested in you—romantically, professionally or otherwise—they'll think about you more. This could soften her resolve, make her reexamine her decision, contemplate what our future could look like.

I slide the stack of file folders into the garbage can beside my desk.

Broderick shows himself out.

When he's gone, I call my third assistant—the one who handles my social calendar. "Set up a reservation at The Black Lotus in downtown Chicago for Friday night. And make it for two."

I'm taking her out.

And then I'm making her mine.

SEVEN

SOPHIE

Past

WE'RE PARKED outside my apartment, his hand resting dangerously between my knees. My hemline is pulled high, making the exposed flesh of my pale thighs glow in the moonlight. The clock on the dash says it's after midnight.

If my mother has any energy, she's going to use it to kill me the second I walk through the door, I'm certain.

"I wish I could take you home with me," he whispers, his breath hot against my flesh. A spray of goose bumps peppers my arms.

"Me too," I exhale. My hand rests over his, guiding it beneath the hem of my dress, closer to the heat between my legs. My heart pounds in my teeth and my mind frees itself of all logic and reason. My mother could be watching from the living room window, and I wouldn't notice or care. All that matters in this moment is him.

I am drunk—with lust, with excitement, with possibilities.

His hand slides away. His mouth leaves mine. He draws in a long breath and runs a palm along the glossy leather steering wheel.

"Take me home with you," I begged him. "I don't care if I get in trouble. I'll deal with her tomorrow."

It's the strangest anomaly when you're not thinking clearly and you know it. I blame it on the champagne. And the knots of unfulfilled anticipation tangling my insides. I've never wanted something—or someone—as much as I want him.

It just feels *right*.

"Sophie, I had a great time with you tonight," he says, an air of regret in his voice like a boy about to dump a girl. "But this can never be ... anything."

"I don't understand."

The inside of his car is humid with desire, thick with discomfiture. I crack the window and swallow a lungful of crisp night air.

"I'm twice your age," he says.

"That didn't stop you from asking me on a date. It didn't keep you from putting your hands all over me tonight." I lift my hand to my neck, fingertips trailing all the places still warm from his kiss.

"I saw a beautiful girl and I lost my mind." He sighs and looks at me sideways. "I wanted to remember what it was like to feel young again."

"You're not *that* old." I huff and glance away.

"I'm old enough to be your father."

I roll my eyes. I don't like to think of my father—ever, and I especially don't want to think of him in this moment. He walked out of our lives when I was three and my mother was six months pregnant with my baby sister. As far as I'm concerned, he isn't just dead to me, he never existed in the first place.

"When's your birthday, Sophie?" he asks. Does he want to buy me something? Is he trying to pay me off so he feels better?

"I don't want anything from you." I reach for the door handle. I don't see what it matters. He places his hand on my arm, gently stopping me.

"Fair enough," he says.

"I should go. My mom's waiting."

"Sophie ..." He says my name soft, like he doesn't want me to go yet—quite the contradiction from a moment ago when he was all but discarding me.

I turn to him, peering through a sideways glance. "You still haven't told me your real name."

I asked him again after dinner, when we were dancing in a crowd of other black-clad, masked guests, and he leaned in to whisper that he would tell me later. On the car ride home, he played music from a chill playlist on his phone and held my hand. The volume was too loud to speak over, and I found myself wanting to soak in every second of the journey back to my humble apartment on Flor Street, on the other side of the river.

I suppose it doesn't matter what his name is.

Tonight was a one-and-done kind of thing.

He wanted me on his arm, he got me, now it's over.

Removing my arm from his tender grasp, I leave him with a stinger, "I had a lot of fun with you tonight ... whoever you are."

I hope he chokes on his conscience.

I tug on the door handle. A burst of night air blankets my lower legs as I step out. My feet ache and burn from dancing all night. I wonder how long I've been in pain but too drunk-in-lust to notice?

"Nolan," he says. "My name is Nolan Ames."

The name is vaguely familiar, like I've seen it on billboards or the side of semi-trucks or something. Maybe an ad on TV? It's hard to know with my mind so foggy.

"When is your birthday?" he asks again.

"Why?"

"Because I ..." he begins to speak then stops. "I want to see you again."

I don't answer. Instead, I slam his passenger door. The window glides down, smooth and sleek. While he wasn't looking earlier, I Googled his car out of curiosity because I'd never seen anything like it before. I wasn't even sure how to pronounce it.

According to my research, this thing costs half a million dollars.

I don't know that I'll even see that kind of money in my lifetime.

"You said this could never be anything. You said I'm young enough to be your daughter. I don't know what you're trying to do here, but—"

"I know what I said," he cuts me off. "But I think if you were ... a little older ... maybe I wouldn't feel so guilty. Maybe this wouldn't feel so wrong? Maybe it ... maybe it *could* be something?"

"My birthday's in three weeks," I say. "If three weeks is the difference between right and wrong for you—"

"—this is new to me too," he says. "The age difference thing."

"You pursued me for *months* before you asked me out."

"You're right," he says. "Because after the first time I saw you, I couldn't stop thinking about you. But after I asked around and found out your age, I knew it was wrong."

"That party you took me to tonight," I say, "why there? Why not just dinner?"

His lips flatten. "Because it would be masked, because it would give us some anonymity so we could enjoy the night. And given the circumstances, it seemed safer. Being seen together, Sophie, it could be a liability for me. Professionally. If anyone were to find out your age ..."

"Fine. But why'd you lie about your name?"

He's quiet, contemplative. His hand runs across the center console. "Because I thought it would be a one-time thing. I didn't plan on seeing you again after tonight. I wanted my one night to feel young again, and then I was going to do the right thing and walk away."

My eyes sting. I blink and look away so he can't see the tears forming. I've never felt so used. Not even by the pencil-dicked pricks in my grade.

"I enjoyed my time with you more than I thought I would," he says. "There's something about you, Sophie. I have no idea what it is. But after spending the evening together ... I know I shouldn't, but I want to see you again."

My stomach flips against giving him permission. I wish his words didn't have that effect on me.

Aside from the fucked-up pockets of this night, his half-truths and messed-up confessions, I enjoyed my time with him too.

I wouldn't mind seeing him again ...

And that little thrill that travels up my spine every time I think about how rebellious this is, how it made me feel to step outside my good girl bubble and be someone else for a change, is nothing short of exhilarating.

"When do you turn eighteen, Soph?" He shortens my name like he knows me. I'm not stupid. He doesn't know me. Not all the way. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to give him the chance to *get* to know me ...

"Next month," I say, knowing this man will become either the best thing to happen to me ... or my greatest undoing. "The seventh."

John—*Nolan*—pulls out his phone and makes a note.

"Perfect." His full mouth curls into a half-smirk. "I want to celebrate with you."

"I'm probably working that night," I say, because it falls on a Friday, and I work every Friday.

Reaching into his wallet, he slips out a small stack of crisp bills and hands them to me. "Not anymore, you're not."

I don't have to count them to know there's more than five hundred dollars in my hand.

"See you in three weeks," he says.

The passenger window glides shut. I move to the sidewalk. The engine of his shiny coupe purrs, and the weight of his watchful gaze follows me inside.

A minute later, I stand outside our apartment door, key in hand, breath held tight in my chest.

I count the money before I go inside.

Fifteen hundred dollars.

"Holy shit," I mouth before shoving it into my clutch.

"You're late." My mother whispers through the quiet dimness of our living room when I step in. She reaches for the string on the crooked lamp by the corduroy recliner. The dim lights paint dark shadows on

her gaunt face, sending ominous vibes to this moment. “You said you’d be home by ten, Sophie. *It’s after midnight.*”

“I know. I’m so sorry. We were having such a good time ... I wasn’t paying attention ...”

“How long does it take to go out to dinner?” She paces the living room. I should stop her. She shouldn’t be up and around. She should be resting, sleeping. If she wakes up feeling worse tomorrow, it will all be my fault. “Where else did he take you?”

“Nowhere else. It was just a long dinner. We talked. A lot ...”

“You could have called. You could have texted.” Her words are terse, halfway between a yell and a whisper

I’m frozen on the entry rug, praying she doesn’t rise and stagger over here because she’ll smell the champagne on my breath—and the champagne on my skin from all the places Nolan kissed me tonight. My neck. The tops of my shoulders. The back of my wrists. Behind my ears.

He captured every exposed inch of me over the span of five hours.

“I’m so sorry, Mom,” I apologize again. “It’ll never happen again. I promise.”

She tries to form a response, but exhaustion colors her expression instead.

“I’m going to bed.” She shuffles down the hall to her bedroom and closes the door behind her.

I slide out of my heels, leave them on the rug, flick off the lamp, and make my way to my bedroom in the dark. My sister, Emmeline, is sound asleep, nothing but the hum of the respirator machine that helps her breathe at night. She doesn’t stir as I peel out of my skintight dress and pull an oversized t-shirt over my head.

A moment later, I lie beneath my paper-thin quilt, staring at the clutch resting on my dresser and wondering why Nolan gave me fifteen hundred dollars when we agreed on five.

The way he touched me was tender and endearing. For most of the evening, I’d forgotten this was a cash transaction. It felt like a real date, and not once did the age thing bother me—until the end of the night, when he almost seemed disgusted with himself for taking me out.

I roll to my side, unable to quiet my mind.

There’s something between us.

I *feel* it all the way to my marrow.

And clearly he feels it too or he wouldn’t have been so conflicted about this. Maybe that’s why he gave me extra money—he felt ashamed.

I replay the night in my mind a dozen times before finally nodding off with a smile on the very lips Nolan claimed.

WHEN I WAKE in the morning, I am positive it was all a dream—until I check my clutch and find the crisp green bills still inside. I count them twice. Fifteen in total. It would take me months to make this at the café.

I trail to the kitchen for a bowl of cereal to fill my growling stomach with hazy, blurry eyes and a dazed mind. And when I’m finished eating, I don’t even remember pouring the milk.

All I can think about is him.

I rinse the dishes and wash the others that rest in the left basin so my mom doesn’t have to when she wakes. Besides, Emmeline will be up any minute and Mom will need to tend to her first.

I don’t know how I’m going to explain the extra cash.

She’s going to ask why he gave me so much—and I won’t have an answer for her. At least not one she’ll buy. For now, I’ll have to save it. Blend it with my money from the café.

Nolan implied I wouldn’t need to work anymore, but I love my job too much to quit. I weirdly enjoy waiting tables, even if it isn’t glamorous. I love meeting new people. Catching up with the regulars. The surprise of an unexpected generous tip. Commiserating with my co-workers about the assholes back in the kitchen, out of customers’ earshot. When I’m there, I’m not thinking about the latest drama at school, my sister’s recent test results, or whether or not my mom’s PET scan will come back clear next time.

Work is my escape.

I want to tell Nolan he doesn’t have to pay me for my company—I could still work and see him on the side.

He could be my *second* escape ...

For the first time in my life, I have something—someone—to be excited about.

EIGHT

SOPHIE

PRESENT

THIRTY-FOUR MILLION DOLLARS.

I blink and re-read that line of the contract again. I thought his initial offer of seventeen million was insane, but this is just absurd. Westcott can have any woman he wants—literally and otherwise.

Why *me*?

I fold the paper and tuck it away in my purse, and then I finish my lunch and log back into the system. I refuse to accept a proposal from a man who doesn't know me, and my heart isn't for sale.

I've sold it out before.

Never again.

Certain things are invaluable—and they're only to be earned. Never given freely.

My heart ...

My mind ...

My soul ...

My love ...

My affections ...

My loyalty ...

I've learned this the hard way.

Besides, I don't need millions of dollars to be happy. I'd much rather live a life of meaning than one of leisure and luxury. Despite my simplistic lifestyle, I'm relatively fulfilled. I visit my mom and sister a couple of times per week. I have a handful of good friends who are near and dear to me. I make a comfortable living which affords me a decent apartment, a nice-enough wardrobe, and enough left over at the end of the month to contribute to my 401k *and* the local Humane Society.

I run two of my Friday reports and forward them to my supervisor, despite the fact that she's out of the office today, as she is most Fridays. And then I check the clock, contemplating whether I should wrap things up over the next hour and call it a week.

I think I should.

Clicking send on an email to the rest of my department, I switch on my out-of-office and shut down my computer. I'm gathering my bag and coffee mug when a knock at my door interrupts my early departure.

Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I yank the door handle open, fully expecting it to be Hadley from next door or perhaps one of the new interns who can't do a damned thing without asking permission first.

But it's not Hadley.

And it definitely isn't an intern.

"Mr. Westcott," I say, throat tight. His icy gaze washes over me and my body turns to steel. I brace myself for whatever outlandish request is about to leave his full lips. "Hi."

"Ms. Bristol. You have a minute?" He doesn't wait for me to answer before making his way in. I close the door behind him and tighten my grip on my purse strap. His shadowed hazel stare continues to drink me in, practically pinning me in place. "I didn't realize you were on your way out. Late lunch?"

I shake my head. "Heading home."

He frowns. "Big plans?"

"Yes, actually," I say. I could tell him I've got plans, that I'm meeting my girlfriends for drinks or something that makes me sound averagely interesting. Or I could tell him the truth. I opt for the latter, seeing how I've no need to impress this man. "Going to binge-watch *Outlander* and polish off a bottle of dessert wine."

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't laugh. Doesn't give a damn.

"I have reservations at The Black Lotus for seven tonight, but your plans sound better."

I can't help but laugh. "You're a terrible liar."

Are we flirting? If we are, it's accidental.

"Am I?" I think he's teasing.

I nod. "The worst."

I imagine people tell him what he wants to hear all the time. Maybe it wouldn't kill him to hear the

truth once in a while.

"Why don't you join me for dinner? This place has got a years' long wait list," he adds, as if that might sway me. "I typically prefer to dine alone, but I'd love your company. Besides, I'm sure the wine and *Outlander* will be waiting for you when you get home."

"Tempting," I say.

I've heard of The Black Lotus. The place is reserved for the wealthiest of the wealthy. Ultra-exclusive. Diamond-encrusted silverware. Antique crystal plates. Michelin-starred. Thousands of dollars a plate. "I'm going to pass. Enjoy your dinner, Mr. Westcott."

I try to get around him, but something about the way he looks at me anchors me, keeps me from leaving.

"Please, call me Trey," he says.

I turn to face him.

His shoulders strain against his navy suit coat, causing me to unintentionally wonder what he looks like beneath his expensive façade. If his chest is smooth or brushed with a masculine spray of hair. If the veins pop from his forearms when he fucks. How the curve of his biceps would feel beneath my palms.

I push the intrusive thoughts from my head and offer a gracious smile. "Enjoy your dinner, *Trey*."

He's trying to woo me.

I'm not an idiot.

I've been pursued before. It's all smoke and mirrors. A man impresses a girl, makes her feel like it's a privilege just to be on his arm, and in the end, he takes what he wants and discards the rest. Like a lion devouring a gazelle and leaving nothing but bones before moving onto the next meal.

"I don't beg," Trey says. "Ever—"

I stop him there. "—don't go breaking your rules just for me."

"One dinner." He steps closer, a faint hint of his woody cologne permeating the air we share.

"Why?"

He chuffs, as if my question is preposterous. "Why not?"

"I've already made my decision. It's not going to change anything because you take me out to dinner." I tilt my head, steadying my gaze across the room at him, and I try not to be distracted by his dashing, timeless good looks. The way the brill cream in his side-parted hair makes it seem almost shower-wet. The chiseled jaw line with the flash of dimples when he speaks. The stare that cuts through me and simultaneously anchors me in place. "You're an incredible businessman, Trey. I'm sure there are a lot of women out there who would sell their souls for a lifetime with you. I'm sorry, but I'm not one of them."

I leave before he can protest.

It's tempting, I'll admit. I'm only human. And I can only imagine how thirty-four million dollars would change my life—my mother's and sister's lives too. All of our futures.

But I'm not arm candy. I'm not a commodity or a business acquisition.

I have my reasons.

And they number in the trillions.

NINE

Trey

PRESENT

I DINE alone at The Black Lotus Friday night, staring at the empty chair where Sophie should be sitting. The woman is proving to be more formidable than I expected, and when it's all said and done, this deal will go down in the history books as one of the toughest—right alongside Ames Oil and Steel.

I slice into my filet mignon as the server deposits a fresh Scotch in a glass adorned with a one-carat canary yellow diamond encircled by their logo, and I feast my attention on the sparkling city view.

Everyone should have a chance to see the world from the hundredth story of a century-old building at least once in their life.

Unfortunately not everyone will.

The man and woman at the next table over hold hands, a tall candle flickering between them, throwing reflections in their starry gazes.

I imagine that's what love is like—blinded by the warm glow of something both dangerous and beautiful.

Not that I'd know.

My parents had that. At least from what I remember and what I've read in the dozens of biographies written about them since their passing two decades ago. Edie and Pierce Westcott II were iconic. American as apple pie. Timeless as Chanel. Fascinating as Princess Diana.

They'd spent most of their lives polishing the Westcott name, building charities, foundations, and futuristic business endeavors for the greater good of humanity—only to have it all cut short when a faulty wire in the engine of their personal jet took them down in fiery flames extinguished by the frigid Atlantic ocean.

Most of what I know of them came from books and articles written long after their deaths.

Someone once compared them to Jackie and JFK, minus the infidelity and assassination that colored their early years. My mother was a style trendsetter, with women all across the world mimicking her signature sleek chestnut bob, and my father—in his younger years—graced covers of heartthrob magazines everywhere. He was once named the world's most eligible bachelor ... a title I inherited my first few years out of Harvard Business School.

My father relished every second of being the eligible bachelor of his day ... until my mother came along and swept him off his feet.

They crossed paths in a Moroccan souk in the early eighties. Legend had it, she was perusing caftans, the sheer, vibrant patterns blowing in the wind, and he spotted her from across the way, instantly smitten the moment they exchanged smiles. When he discovered they were both from the States, he invited her to dine with him that evening. They stayed up all night talking and he declared his affections for her before the sun had a chance to rise the next morning.

Their love was the thing fairytales are made of, or so I'm told by former staffers who adored them. I knew my parents for fifteen years of my life, but those memories have faded with time.

They've also made me the man I am today, a man who doesn't dwell on the past, a man who only moves forward.

At eighteen, I inherited my parents' massive estate.

By twenty-eight, I'd turned the Westcott fortune into over a billion dollars, becoming one of the youngest billionaires in the world.

Two years ago, my net worth topped a trillion.

There isn't a man in the world who needs nor deserves that kind of money, but building wealth, breaking ground, and conquering industries is the only thing I know how to do—and I'm fucking amazing at it.

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Westcott?" My server stops by once more.

"I'll take the check," I say, refusing to remove my stare from the twinkling skyline.

Somewhere out there, Sophie is drinking dessert wine and binge watching some God-awful show—alone.

I get the sense that maybe she likes to be alone.

Perhaps we have that in common.

If we're going to be alone in this life, perhaps we should be alone ... together.

SOPHIE

Past

HE GRINS WIDE when I climb into his car. “Long time, no see, beautiful.”

He hasn’t been to the café in the three weeks that have passed since the party, and for a while, I thought I’d never see him again, but he texted me a week ago, reminding me that we were going to celebrate my eighteenth birthday together.

I almost said no.

I was certain he’d forgotten about me, that all those things he said in the car that first night were in an attempt to appease a broken heart.

Curiosity got the best of me.

That and I missed the way I felt when I was with him—euphoric.

Everything’s been gray since that night.

“Happy birthday.” Nolan hands me a box the color of robins’ eggs wrapped in a white satin ribbon.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I say.

His eyes light in the dark interior of his coupe. “Of course I did.”

My heart thumps hard in my ribcage. For a moment, I wonder if I wore too much perfume tonight. If the lip gloss I nervously slicked on will keep him from wanting to kiss me. If he thinks I look just as pretty in jeans and a sweater as I did in that vintage dress.

“Open it,” he says.

I tug the ribbon loose and gently pry the lid off.

A sparkling diamond pendant rests on a white silk pillow. In the movies, women gasp when presented with jewelry, but all the air seems to have been sucked from my lungs.

I don’t know what to say.

No one’s ever given me something like this before, not even close.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

What kind of question is that? Who *wouldn’t* like a diamond necklace?

I swallow the stunned lump in my throat and force myself to nod. Of course I like it. It’s beautiful. Almost too beautiful to wear.

“Try it on.” He takes the box and carefully removes the necklace. A moment later, it’s fastened around my neck.

I flip down the passenger visor and inspect the way it shimmers against the backdrop of my fuzzy brown sweater like a sharp juxtaposition of my humble life against his, my eighteen years against his forty-some. My nervous hope against his impeccable confidence.

“I love it,” I tell him. I’d lean across the console and kiss him, but I doubt he wants to be covered in sticky vanilla lip gloss.

“Three flawless carats,” he adds. “I’ve always loved the number three. Signifies past, present, and future.”

Is he saying he has a future with me?

I don’t ask.

“You ready?” He gives my hand a squeeze before lifting it to his lips and depositing a kiss that sends butterflies twirling in my middle.

“Where are we going?” I fasten my seatbelt as he pulls out of our apartment complex. I told my mother I was seeing him again tonight. She protested with what little energy she had, and I promptly reminded her I was eighteen.

I rarely pull the sassy teenager card on her, but tonight I had no choice.

I wanted to see Nolan.

I *needed* to see Nolan.

“There’s a little place just outside the city,” he says. “We should be able to see the stars from there, once we’re farther away from the lights. Thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better.”

He takes my hand in his, holding it the way you would a boyfriend or girlfriend, and a blanket of warmth envelopes every inch of me, head to toe.

"Sound good?" he asks, peering at me before checking his rearview.

The fact that he wants to get to know me is a good sign. I'm an adult. We can date. Maybe something's going to come of this after all?

I nod, whispering a quiet "yes" as I gaze from behind the pristine glass of his lightning-fast sports car. We weave through traffic, the engine growling at times and purring at others, the ride as smooth as ice. It's quite a change from my Honda that picks up every bump and crack in the road and overheats every time the temperature hits the nineties.

I think of the cash hidden under my mattress. The price tag on this sports car. The diamond dangling from my neck.

According to Google, his father is a steel magnate and his mother is sole heir to an oil fortune. The internet listed their family's net worth in the hundreds of millions of dollars. A few images showed Nolan with various beautiful women on his arm, all of them clearly in their twenties. All of them worldlier than me. Their hair and makeup professionally done. Their outfits impeccably styled.

With his vast wealth and the entire world at his fingertips, I can't help but wonder: why me?

"Did you quit your job yet?" he asks. In the blink of an eye, the scenery changes from city to suburban sprawl.

I shake my head. "I can't."

"Of course you can." He removes his hand from mine as he changes lanes.

"I like my job."

He shoots me a quick smirk and then he chuckles. "Nobody likes being a waitress, Soph."

I do.

"My family needs the extra money," I say. "My mom's not able to work right now and my sister has muscular dystrophy. We have a lot of expenses."

In fact, we're drowning in them ...

"I told you, I'm going to take care of you," he says.

"I know. But I take care of my family, so ..."

"Let me know what you need. I'll help you any way I can."

I don't know what to say other than it sounds too good to be true. "I don't want to be a burden."

I just want him to love me ...

"I'm going to be in the city every weekend for the next year." He turns to me in the dark. "I'd like to spend my free time with you, but if you're working ... I'm not sure how that's going to happen. I want to know that I can call you and you'll be there. I don't want to wait until the end of your shift, when you're tired. I don't want scraps of you, Soph."

He takes my hand again, kissing the top of it.

Our surroundings grow darker as we reach the countryside, the roads winding with every passing mile. The stars are brighter out here and the moon is as big as I've ever seen it. A wooden sign says we're in Harrington Park.

We stop at a little pull-off with a guardrail and a million-dollar view. He kills the engine and unfastens his seatbelt. I do the same.

"I don't know what this is or where this is going to go," he says. "And maybe it's a little unconventional. But I want to find out."

My mouth is dry and my heart gallops so fast I think I might faint. "I want to find out too."

"What do you make at the café?" he asks.

I lift a shoulder. I've never told anyone what I make before except my mother. "On a good day, a couple hundred. On a slow day, half that?"

"I'll give you a thousand dollars a week." He doesn't so much as hesitate when dropping that offer in my lap. "I only ask that you answer my calls and texts, and that you make yourself available to me when I need you."

When he *needs* me ...

I think of those pretty girls in the pictures with him. Did he pay them for their time, as well? Aren't there other women who would be with him for free?

"That's extremely generous of you," I say, "but it seems weird ... don't you think?"

Accepting the fifteen hundred last time was enthralling at first, but the more I thought about it, the dirtier I felt.

"That's a lot of money," I add. Though I suppose it's pocket change to a millionaire. "I don't want to feel like I owe you something."

He chuckles, his hand cupping my cheek and his head tilting. "You owe me nothing. I want to be with you, and your time is valuable. That's all."

The warmth of his cologne invades my senses as it emanates from his wrist, and before I have a chance to respond, he silences me with a kiss—lip gloss be damned.

I melt against him and quiet the storm of questions swirling in my busy little head.

Something tells me my mind might win the battle, but it's going to lose the war.

It's him my heart wants.

ELEVEN

Trey

PRESENT

THE INFINITE EXPANSE of my home greets me with my own echoing footsteps after dinner. The housemaid left a note by the backdoor, telling me the dry cleaning has been hung and that the gardener had a family emergency and wasn't able to prune the boxwoods this afternoon.

I crumple the paper and toss it in the garbage.

The caretaker's cottage is dark, Mr. and Mrs. Petroff are likely visiting their grandkids tonight, as they do most Friday nights.

I stop by the study on my way to bed and pour myself two fingers of Four Roses bourbon, a quick nightcap to take the edge off my thoughts.

Collapsing in my father's old wingback chair, I retrieve my phone and check a few emails. And by a few, I mean at least ninety-six—most of them sent in the past couple of hours.

I delete the majority of them and file the important ones that can wait until I'm in a clearer state of mind. Friday evenings are when I unwind, shut my mind off to give it a break after a long week. I don't like to think too hard because thinking is all I fucking do every minute of every hour of every other day of the week.

When I get to the bottom of my inbox, I find the message from Broderick sent earlier this week—one containing Sophie Bristol's personal address and cell.

It's not quite ten o'clock.

I'll bet she's still up.

I toss back a mouthful of bourbon and let my impatience and minor lack of inhibition get the better of me. Composing a text, I hit send before I change my mind.

ME: Did you finish your wine yet?

Three dots fill the screen instantly before disappearing. A moment later, a message fills the screen. Any other woman would've taken their time replying so as not to seem desperate, but not her.

She has zero interest in playing any games and no reason to impress me.

SOPHIE: Texting my personal cell on a Friday night? Boundaries must not be a thing with you ...

ME: Limitations are for the weak-minded. Again, did you finish your wine yet?

SOPHIE: Every last drop. You realize I'm hourly, not salary, right? This could cost you in overtime.

ME: It would if this were work related. This has nothing to do with your current position in Payroll. This is a private, non-corporate matter.

I top off my bourbon and swallow another mouthful. She wants to flirt. This is good.

ME: Tell me what it's going to take.

The screen is blurry. I'm buzzing and mentally exhausted, but I re-read my message to make sure there are no typos before sending.

SOPHIE: You're not giving up, are you?

ME: I'm a man who knows what he wants.

SOPHIE: I appreciate that, Trey. I do, but you don't want me. You only think you do.

ME: How could you possibly know that?

SOPHIE: Because you saw me in the hallway and immediately decided you wanted me to marry you and have your babies?

There were hints of this version of Sophie earlier today in her office. Flirty. Slightly feisty. Office Sophie is proper and poised and she keeps her cards pressed firmly against her ample bosom. Wine Sophie is brazen and doesn't speak to me like I'm some sixteenth century guillotine-happy king.

I picture her tossing back her unpretentious wine, grinning drunkenly as she taps out her messages. No one but Broderick has ever spoken to me with such blatant casualness before, and I fucking love it.

ME: I didn't randomly choose you. You stood up for me in the break room. You got my attention, whether you wanted to or not. And when I looked into your file, I knew there was something different about you. You're not like anyone else. Also the fact that you turned down seventeen million dollars, tells me you know your worth.

She still hasn't officially accepted my second offer, but the clock is still running. Broderick gave her

seventy-two hours on this one. We wanted her to have the weekend to think it over.

SOPHIE: Thank you for the flattery and the kind words, but I'm still not going to marry you or be your fake fiancée or have your baby. Also, I'm exactly like everyone else.

A second later, a photo comes through—a selfie of Sophie with her blonde locks in a messy bun piled high on her head, a lime green mud mask covering her pretty face, and a wine chalice pressed against her fuckable, full mouth.

I chuckle.

Smart ass.

I've received millions of "selfies" in my day—never anything as wholesome—or unsexy—as this.

ME: You have no idea how turned on I am right now ... please send more.

SOPHIE: Despite my education and extensive list of accomplishments and references, at the end of the day, I'm as basic as the next girl.

ME: There's nothing basic about you, Sophie Bristol.

I love her name, the way it rolls off my tongue when I say it out loud. But Sophie Westcott sounds even better. There's a ring to it. A rhythm.

SOPHIE: All joking aside, you only see what you want to see when you look at me. And my resume? It's a small drop of water in the ocean of my complexities.

ME: Poetic. Also, how can you be basic and simultaneously complex?

SOPHIE: I write poetry. See? That's not on my resume. And plenty of basic women write poems. Sometimes we sketch too. And listen to music that makes us cry. It's a whole thing. Also, we have a group that meets on Wednesdays. At Starbucks. We get matching pink drinks.

ME: Send me some of your work.

She sends me three laughing emojis—the ones with tears.

ME: I mean it. I'll forward it to our publishing division.

SOPHIE: Your publishing division doesn't publish poetry. Only commercial fiction. The kind that makes insane money ... \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$.

ME: Then I'll add a poetry imprint.

SOPHIE: You're too much.

ME: And apparently not enough.

My phone stops buzzing with texts. Either I've got her tongue or she passed out from all that "dessert" wine.

I wait a while longer before heading to bed. It's enough for tonight.

We're making progress.

It's only a matter of time.

TWELVE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

OH MY GOD.

I wake on the couch Saturday morning with a throbbing head and immediately reach for my phone, poring over the drunken text messages I exchanged with Westcott last night.

"No." I clamp a hand over my mouth when I realize none of it was a dream.

I can't believe I was so casual with him ...

I sent him a selfie ...

And used *emojis* ...

Also, I think I flirted with him a little? No—there's no "think" about it. I definitely flirted.

Two wine bottles rest on my coffee table—one empty, one half full. I don't always drink like that, but yesterday was the anniversary of a day that changed my life, and I wanted to zone out to silence those painful memories.

I re-read the messages, cringing, and then I tap out a quick text, my thumb hovering over the 'send' button until I delete the whole thing.

Half of me wants to apologize and explain that I wasn't myself last night. The other half of me knows he's going to see it as an invitation to keep his foot in the door of my life.

And what's going to happen come Monday when I'm back in the office? I've always prided myself on being professional, keeping my workplace persona top notch. He's officially seen the *other* side of me. The side I share with friends and family and people whose electronic signatures don't grace my paycheck every other week.

I'm damned if I say something, damned if I don't.

I type out a second message and scan it over three times before changing my mind and deleting it all. I'm not going to say anything to him. I'll wait until Monday and I'll apologize in person for being so off-the-cuff. I'll tell him I hope I didn't give him the wrong idea about ... us.

I'll also ask that he not contact me on the weekends unless it's work-related.

Popping a Swiss mocha pod into my Keurig, I wait for it to brew and hunt through my medicine cabinet for two Advil. My brain pulsates with regret, wishing I could wave a magic wand and re-do last night. I should've ignored his texts. I shouldn't have engaged.

As soon as I finish my drink, I hit the shower and then throw on a pair of boyfriend jeans and a vintage Prince t-shirt before lacing into some Converse—my weekends are all about comfort. A second later, I grab my phone and car keys and lock my apartment behind me.

Forty minutes later, I'm at my mom's outside the city. Saturdays are when she gets a break from caring for Emmeline. Usually she'll use this time to grab groceries. Get an oil change. Sometimes get her hair or nails done. She has a caregiver who comes during the week when she's working, but during the evenings, it's just the two of them and it isn't always easy to run errands on a whim.

"Hello, hello," I call out, letting myself in.

"In the back," my mom calls. I follow her voice to Emmeline's bedroom, where she's braiding Em's hair.

"Love that blouse on you," I say to my sister, bending to kiss her cheek. She smiles and places her hand over mine. "You've always looked so pretty in violet."

"Thanks, chica," she says with a wink.

Ten years ago, this wouldn't have been possible. The muscles in her face were so constricted she could hardly sip from a straw. While my sister's disease is incurable, the progress she's made because of Nolan Ames' connections have given her a new lease on life.

Prescription pill bottles, vitamins, and perfumes cover her dresser, and in the corner, a small Bluetooth speaker plays Fleetwood Mac—forever her favorite. Here it's an ordinary Saturday morning, and I almost forget about last night.

Almost.

"I can take over, Mom," I say. "Go do what you need to do. We'll be fine."

Mom exhales as she secures the end of Em's braid and then she kisses the top of her head.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," she tells us on her way out.

As soon as the front door closes, Em turns her chair and wheels down the hallway toward the living room like she's got somewhere to be.

"You want to watch our show?" she asks with sparkling eyes.

I chuckle and pretend to resist. "It's so awful."

"Please?"

Ever since my relationship with Nolan—if you can call it that—my mom has become ultra conservative and hyper protective, especially when it comes to what she allows my sister to watch. Things with sex (gasp) or swearing (God-forbid) are outlawed under her roof.

But she's not here.

And what she doesn't know won't hurt her.

I grab the remote, cue to Netflix, and settle in on the sofa.

The opening credits of Emmeline's favorite show—one about a college-aged escort living a secret double life in New York City—begin to play. I don't know why she loves this show with its cheesy dialogue and second-rate acting, but I suppose we all have those themes that just resonate with us for whatever reason.

That and she loves the male lead. She's had a mad crush on him ever since I took her to see one of his movies several years ago.

An italic subtitle flashes across the bottom of the screen—produced by *Westcott Cinematic Enterprises*.

I roll my eyes. How I never noticed that before is beyond me.

The man owns software companies, grocery chains, pharmaceutical companies, newspapers, and the largest e-commerce website in the world. Amongst a million other things. Of course he owns a movie production company.

My sister laughs, and I recall a time not so long ago when that wouldn't have been possible. I'll never forget the first time I saw her smile—truly smile—or the first time she was able to brush her own teeth. Or the day we moved her from her expensive motorized wheelchair to one that allowed her more independence because her needs had changed for the better.

I can say many things about Nolan Ames, nearly all of them unfavorable, but at the end of the day, he was the one who put us in touch with the world-renowned physical therapists and physicians who were able to use cutting-edge stem cell treatments and yet-to-be FDA approved medicinal regimens that completely changed Emmeline's prognosis and quality of life. And he paid for every last cent along the way ... he still does.

It didn't come for free though.

I sold my soul to the devil—though it's not like I had a choice at the time. And I'm happy for Emmeline, for what she got from the bargain. But he took a piece of me I'll never get back and left something hollow in its place.

But I'm older now. Wiser.

And I'll be damned before I let another man put a price on me again.

THIRTEEN

SOPHIE

Past

THE NUMBER of times I've lied to my mom I can count on one hand.

Fresh red roses—two dozen of them—perfume the darkened hotel suite we share tonight. In the corner, my boyfriend, Nolan, uncorks a bottle of wine. The curtains are pulled wide behind him, city lights twinkling like something out of a fairytale.

Tonight's *the* night.

My mom thinks I'm staying the night at Stacia Hendricks' house.

She also doesn't know I've been seeing Nolan every weekend for the past two months—or that I quit my job at the café.

Three weeks ago, we found out she's officially in remission, and she's been slowly gaining back her strength and energy. But there are good days and bad. And when she's not caring for Emmeline, she's sleeping or zoned out in front of the TV.

She's yet to notice I haven't come home smelling like French fries and salad dressing—or that the bills that normally pile high on the kitchen table are dwindling one by one as I secretly pay them off.

I don't think she'd understand this arrangement we have—nor would she understand how much I want to be with him.

"For you." Nolan hands me a stemless glass filled halfway with white wine. "Shall we toast?"

My stomach flips. We've fooled around in his car several times, but we've never gotten carried away. He knows I'm a virgin and he knows I want my first time to be special. It's why he rented this penthouse suite, the highest one in all of Chicago.

In this moment, I'm not wandering the halls of Stillwell High, backpack slung over one shoulder as I count the hours until the final bell. I'm not worrying about my chemistry test or when I'll have time to write that essay for College Prep Composition.

I'm a woman on the verge of something bigger than she ever imagined.

Nolan taps his glass against mine, his full mouth curving into a smile. "To the best night of our lives."

My head whirs with anticipation before my lips so much as touch a drop of alcohol. Am I drunk with lust? With want? I don't know. Heat burns between my legs. My underwear grows wetter by the second.

I take a sip, my gaze locked on him. The wine isn't as sweet as I expected. And it's not bubbly like the champagne was. Still, it makes me feel grown.

Gentle and patient, he takes my glass and places it aside, along with his.

The whites of his eyes shine in the dark and the lights of the city envelop his shadowed figure. When he returns, his hand moves to my hip and he steers me closer, until my body is flush against his.

Nolan tips my chin until our faces are perfectly angled, and in an instant, his mouth is on mine.

He takes his time, lifting his hand to cup my cheek as our tongues dance. He devours me soft and slow, savoring every endless second. We exchange the taste of semi-sweet alcohol and the heat of our clothed bodies.

Stumbling backward, we collapse on the oversized bed, the plush bedding catching our fall. Together we sink, still connected at the lips. He tugs the hem of my skirt to my upper thighs before trailing his fingertips down the inside of my left leg.

His hardness presses between my legs, through his suit pants, through my wet panties. My legs wrap around his hips. I'm pinned beneath him yet somehow I'm light as a feather. Lifting my hands to his neck, I run my fingers through his silky dark hair as he grinds against me.

Fire blankets my skin, followed with goose bumps as he abandons my mouth and trails kisses down my neck.

He makes his way to the tops of my thighs before working his way closer to my sex. Shoving the damp fabric aside, his tongue is warm against my flesh, and I squirm each time he tastes me. My body sinks deeper into the mattress, melting into a puddle with each touch, as I stare at the ceiling above.

Nolan slides my dress over my head before tossing it aside. A second later, the metallic clink of his belt fills the silent hotel suite.

I've never wanted anything—or anyone—like this in my life.

His toast plays in my head ... *to the best night of our lives*.
I can only hope it's the first of many to come.

FOURTEEN

Trey

PRESENT

ACCORDING to our employee badge location system, Sophie is currently in the fourth floor break room of the north building, which is interesting given the fact that she has no business being in that section of our corporate campus at all ...

She's literally going out of her way to avoid me.

Mona delivers my lunch precisely at noon, but instead of devouring it between emails and text messages, I decide to take my organic salad and make a beeline to the north building.

The walk there is long and time-consuming, and I'm met with a handful of starstruck, gaping stares in every hallway, but I pay them no mind. It's easy to forget that with tens of thousands of employees, many people will go their entire careers without seeing me. I'm sure to some, I'm a ghost. My presence is felt in every corner of these buildings, but if they've never seen me, how can they be certain I exist?

By the time I make it to the break room, I spot Sophie immediately. With her nose buried in her phone, she mindlessly dabs the corners of her pouty lips with a recycled brown napkin. A tight white sweater hugs her curves, the neckline swooping down just shy of her cleavage, and an oversized pearl necklace circles her delicate neckline.

Almost as if she senses my stare, her deep blue gaze flicks up, meeting mine from across the expansive space. Within seconds, a hush falls over the room. All eyes are on me.

"I'm going to need you all to evacuate this break room immediately," I say to the spectators, though my attention is all hers.

Sophie begins to rise.

"Not you," I say.

The room empties in warp speed. I close the door behind the last straggler before taking a seat across from her.

"I'd ask how you found me, but ..." She lifts the badge attached to her sweater. When she puts it like that, I can't help but feel like a creep.

I shove that thought away. It's not who I am.

"You left me hanging Friday," I say. "Had me worried for a second."

Her pink mouth arches and her gaze falls to a poster on the wall behind me. "Yeah, it was a rough night. I fell asleep in the middle of our conversation."

"Never considered myself the boring type, but I suppose I can't argue with that evidence."

I elicit a flicker of a smile from her, but it vanishes before I have a chance to appreciate its beauty.

"Listen ... about those texts ..." Sophie draws in a long, slow breath and sits straighter. "I'd had a little too much wine and I wasn't myself. I said things I wouldn't have normally said. Not just to you, but to anyone. I apologize if I came across—"

"—please don't apologize," I cut her off. "I thought you were ... charming."

Her eyes widen. "Charming? Really?"

"I'm still waiting on that poetry." I wink.

Sophie laughs, tossing her head back. For a moment it feels as if I've known her a lifetime, though I can't pinpoint why.

"I'm afraid you'll be waiting forever then." She lifts a curved shoulder, and her sweater falls just enough to expose a patch of creamy soft skin.

"Poetry is meant to be shared."

"Not *my* poetry." She rolls her eyes.

"You don't think it's good?"

"It's personal." She blinks, her tone matter of fact. "For my eyes only."

She's a locked box, this one. And I get the impression she's swallowed the only key.

I make a mental note to have Broderick check into her dating history. I want to know her type. I want to see the face of every man who's had the pleasure of taking this woman behind closed doors and peeling back her tightly-wound layers. I also want to know what they had that I don't.

An unexpected flash of jealousy burns through me when I think of her with another man, giving him

her unguarded affections.

"You said you had a rough night Friday," I say. "Can't imagine it was the *Outlander*."

Sophie avoids my stare, peering off as if lost in thought.

"Yes," is all she gives me.

"Want to talk about it?" I ask, before adding, "Anything I can do to help?"

I'm not normally one to lend an ear, but for her, I'll make an exception.

Her snowy teeth rake across her bottom lip before she frowns and her silky blonde waves brush the tops of her shoulders as she shakes her head.

I conjure up an image of the two of us in red carpet photographs. In *People* magazine engagement spreads. On celebrity gossip websites. In *New York Times* articles. We'd look incredible together.

And we'd make the most beautiful babies—not that I've ever had to think about this sort of thing.

"You know, since you signed that NDA, everything discussed between us is strictly confidential," I say. "You can tell me anything."

"Trey ..." Her lips part but she hesitates. "I realize I was cordial with you Friday night, but I think I might have given you the wrong impression." She gathers a breath. "We're not friends. I'm not going to tell you why I had a bad day. And I'm not going to change my mind about what you asked for just because you're trying to forge some kind of connection. Also, I need to be honest with you—the fact that you randomly dug up my file and decided I'm the one for you, is—"

"—that day you defended me," I don't let her finish because I know where she's going, "how did you know those things?"

"You hear things, you read things ..."

"So you've checked into me."

"I did my research before I applied to your company," she says.

"So you and I are the same. We see something we want and we do our research before going after it."

"That's not the same. At all."

"It's exactly the same."

Sophie rises, gathering the papers and napkins left over from her half-finished lunch. "If you don't mind, I've got reports to run."

"Actually I do mind. I wasn't finished with our conversation."

She eyes the clock.

"Your reports can wait," I add. "Why don't you take the afternoon and I'll do the same. I want to show you something."

I've got three meetings scheduled this afternoon, but I won't hesitate to reschedule them in exchange for some one-on-one time with her.

"I don't want to get in trouble with my supervisor ..."

"Weak excuse." I huff. "Who's your supervisor?"

"Barb Scottsman."

"If Barb so much as thinks of reprimanding you, she'll find herself in the unemployment line first thing tomorrow."

"That's cold." She huffs as if disgusted. "Is that really how you operate? Like a tyrant child?"

"Like a ruthless businessman." The crestfallen expression on her face tells me I'm not doing myself any favors, so I add a more flattering, "I'm nothing if not persistent."

"Noted."

"Give me the afternoon, Sophie. Spend a few hours with me. If you still don't see me in a new light, just say so. I'll never bother you again. We'll be passing ships in the night, like before." It's a risky offer, but I'm confident.

She's quiet. Contemplative, perhaps.

"Your time is valuable, Trey. Maybe even invaluable. I'd hate for you to waste it on me."

"I'd hardly call an afternoon with you a waste. Besides, I'll take my chances."

Her ocean eyes light, but her expression remains unreadable. I've flattered her. I'm positive.

"Where would you take me?" she asks, slow and careful.

"Meet me in thirty minutes outside the west parking garage," I say. "And you'll find out."

FIFTEEN

SOPHIE

Past

“WHAT DO YOU WANT, SOPH?” Nolan pulls me into his arms, our naked bodies wrapped in silky sheets. My body reels, electric from head to toe, still pulsing from not one but two massive orgasms he gifted me with tonight.

We’ve been doing this every weekend for the past month—coming to this hotel, locking ourselves away in this very room, making love like the world is ending.

“I don’t know. I was thinking maybe the roasted chicken?” I exhale, staring at the ceiling. “I’d have to look at the room service menu.”

He laughs. “No, I mean, what do you want out of life?”

I’m taken aback, silent. He’s never asked me such a meta question before. And it’s not a question I’ve given much consideration to. With Emmeline’s needs and Mom being sick off and on the last five years, I figured maybe I’d attend a local community college part-time, maybe transition to nursing school—though blood has always made me queasy if I’m being honest. I’m good at math, but what would I do with a math degree? I don’t want to teach. High school isn’t the kind of thing I’d want to repeat in any capacity.

“If you could do anything, be anything ...” he continues, “what would that look like?”

Married to him? I laugh to myself. It’s silly to think that far ahead when we’ve only been together such a short time, but a girl can daydream.

I nuzzle against the inside of his arm, roll to my side, and place a palm over his smooth, bare chest. “I just want to be happy.”

His mouth tugs up at the corner. “Can you be more specific?”

I shrug. “I don’t want to have to worry about anything. Like my mom getting sick again. Or who’ll take care of my sister if something happens to one of us.”

“Your sister has muscular dystrophy, yes?”

I nod. I’ve briefed him about it before, never going into too much detail. Most people aren’t familiar with it. There are hundreds of variations, some more severe than others. It’s complex and unique to each person. The details of Emmeline’s condition tend to cause yawns and glazed eyes to anyone who isn’t close to her—which is almost everyone. I tend to give CliffsNotes.

“I know some people who might be able to help her,” he says.

“She’s already seen every specialist in the Chicago area. And there’s no cure for MD. We can only make sure she’s comfortable, able to breathe, that sort of thing.”

“This person’s an old friend of mine from Princeton. He’s a neurologist. Actually specializes in muscular dystrophy. Runs a medical research center in Michigan ... I’ll give him a call first thing tomorrow. See what he says.”

“I don’t know if our insurance would cover that ... it barely covers everything as it is.” Just yesterday we got a bill from the pharmacy for five hundred dollars. Emmeline’s insurance magically decided that one of her medications was no longer necessary.

“This wouldn’t cost you a thing. I’d take care of any expenses.”

“Really?” I sit up. “You would do that for her?”

He gathers my hand in his and brings it to his lips. “I’d do *anything* for you, Soph.”

I want to know why, but for some reason I can’t bring myself to ask. This whole thing is too good to be true to begin with, and I’m afraid if I start questioning things, it’ll all go away.

I love this bubble we’re in—whatever it is. It’s like I’ve stepped into an alternate reality where all the things that once kept me up at night disappear when we’re together.

If Nolan Ames is a drug, I’m one-hundred percent addicted.

SIXTEEN

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I CAN'T SAY that I've ever imagined what it would be like to live in a palace. And now that I'm here, in Westcott's castle-sized estate just outside the city, I can't say that I'd likely enjoy it. I inventory my surroundings. This is probably the first—and last—time I'll set foot inside the world-renowned Westcott mansion.

Dark mahogany walls envelop me.

Glossy black floors swallow me whole.

Chandeliers the size of a car drip from the ceilings of every room.

Ice-cold marble covers the sprawling kitchen, accented with industrial stainless steel appliances that give me frostbite just looking at them.

On the way in, boxwoods manicured into pointed shapes lined the perimeter of the property along with an endless wrought-iron fence. The exterior was coated in limestone and brick—virtually impenetrable. This place is a medieval fortress. It practically screams, "Stay the hell away."

I can't wrap my head around anyone calling this a home ...

... I also can't wrap my head around Trey raising a family in this dark monstrosity.

"This is what you wanted to show me?" I ask as he leads me down a new hallway.

"Almost."

We stroll side by side, our footsteps echoing in sync. There's no life here besides a handful of full-time staff I spotted in the kitchen on our way in. I counted two gardeners outside. A woman dusting velvet drapes the color of ripe plums in the study. Another polishing silver in the dining room, humming a haunting tune. I'm sure there are more probably hidden away in one of his hundreds of rooms.

A dusty draft sends a chill down my neck.

That day in the break room, one of the girls said his home was outdated.

There's nothing outdated about this place. Unfamiliar maybe, to the average person. Slightly depressing color scheme. But with its antiques and timeless finishes, it borders a fine line between past and present. It's like a living museum—only I don't know that a lot of actual living happens here.

Trey notoriously spends the majority of his waking hours in the office.

We round a corner, entering another unending hallway, this one with oil paintings lined along the walls, one after another, and dimmed crystal pendants hanging in three-foot intervals from the barrel ceiling.

I could fit my entire apartment in one of his halls.

We turn yet another corner, this time met with a set of switchback stairs ... the left side going up, the other side going down.

"This way," he says, pointing to the right.

Eight steps later, we reach a wide wooden door with a keycode lock. He punches in eight digits and waits for a chime before the door swings open.

"Welcome," he says before turning to me, "to my sanctuary."

To be completely honest, I thought he was taking me to his estate in an attempt to impress me—but now I'm confused.

"No one else has ever stepped foot in here besides me," he says. "You're the first."

He closes the door behind us, and the lights automatically dim to a warm, rosy hue. A wall of pure Himalayan salt fills the opposite side of the room, and soft, tranquil music begins to pipe from hidden speakers. On the floor rests an arrangement of silk and satin pillows in deep variations of natural blues and earthen grays.

"Not what you were expecting," he says, perceptive. "Which is exactly why I wanted to bring you here."

A narrow man-made stream runs parallel to three of the four walls, the gentle water trickling over smooth river rocks. A soft breeze kisses my face, though I have no idea where it's coming from.

It's almost as if we're on a tranquil island, away from the rest of the world.

"I mean ... it's certainly unique ... not everyone has a meditation room in their house," I say, glancing

around to spot what other minor details I might have overlooked. I find a Buddha statue in the corner. A collection of unlit white candles. A cocktail of scented oils fill my lungs.

He has all the elements—earth, wind, fire, water.

“Most people expect to walk into my home and find lingerie dangling from light fixtures, tipped-over bottles of vodka ...” he says.

“I didn’t expect *that*,” I say. “But I didn’t expect *this* either.”

He laughs under his breath. “You told me about your poetry, which I understand is a part of you that you don’t typically share with others. I thought I could do the same. No one knows what’s inside this room, not even my staff.”

I press my lips together, cheeks heated. “I feel like now would be a good time to tell you I was joking about writing poetry.”

He studies me.

I lift a palm. “I’m really sorry for lying, but in my defense I’d had a lot to drink and at the time, I thought it was hilarious.”

I manage a half-laugh out of him. “Then you got me.”

Head tilted, I erase the amusement from my expression. “Thank you for sharing this space with me though ... I’m sure it wasn’t easy to do.”

“You said you had a difficult day last Friday,” he changes the subject. “This is where I go when I have days like that. These walls are soundproof. There’s no WiFi. The entire outside world does not exist the second I walk through that door. This is the only place I can come to escape, to feel grounded, to eliminate all that noise and just ... merely exist.”

I don’t remind him that when you’re the richest man in the world, you can have rooms like this. Most of us buy a meditation app and count ourselves lucky if we remember to use it five minutes a day. Personally, I tend to buy a bottle of cheap wine from the drugstore and call it a night.

“My mother told me something once that I’ll never forget—she said if you’re ever struggling to ground yourself in the present moment, count to three,” he says. “But before you get to three ... *stop*.” Trey gathers a breath, pausing. “That space between two and three? That’s where you need to be. That’s where you’ll find peace. That’s where you can just *be*.”

I bask in the profundity of his mother’s wisdom. And I’m speechless at the words coming from this brilliant titan’s lips while simultaneously filing them away in case I ever need them someday.

“I realize this isn’t the sexiest thing in the world and probably not the kind of thing people think about when they try to imagine who I am in my own home, but this is me.” He studies me, maybe waiting for a reaction.

But I don’t know how to react.

I’m still taking it all in.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, at a loss for better words. “And it makes sense why you’d need a space like this ... you must feel the weight of the world on your shoulders sometimes with all your ... endeavors.”

“This is true. Although one could argue I bear that weight by choice.”

“Do you?”

Our eyes connect. The tiniest spark of something hits my chest until I bury it deep. I don’t want to feel it. I’ve been down this road before. I know where it leads.

I know how it ends.

I’m taking the proverbial exit on the left.

“I enjoy staying busy,” he says. “And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have a thing for control. It works. For me.”

I make my way to the silk cushions and take a seat, bringing my knees against my chest and peering around. It’s not like we’ll be going back to the office anytime soon, so I settle in.

Water trickles and the air has an earthy, fresh quality.

I could stay here forever, in this unadulterated serenity.

Trey takes the cushion beside me.

In this room, we’re just a couple of people having a conversation. I’m not the random girl from Payroll and he’s not the richest man in the world.

“A lot of people are intimidated by you,” I say.

“I know,” he says. “Are you?”

I was. Once. But the more time I’ve spent with him, the more I see him for what he really is—a man used to getting everything he wants.

I bite my lip. “You have a ... presence.”

“I’d worry if I didn’t,” he says, “but you didn’t answer my question. I’m more interested in whether or not I intimidate *you*.”

“I try not to let anyone under my skin.” I don’t mention that day outside the break room, when I found myself at a loss for words the second he bumped into me. I also opt not to tell him that my heart was beating outside my chest the whole walk to his office the day he called me in. Fear is a powerful thing. Almost as powerful as him ...

I always told myself if I ever ran into Trey Westcott, I’d be calm and collected. But until the day it happened, I hadn’t the slightest clue how hard that would be.

“Have you always been this way?” he asks.

“What way?”

“So guarded?”

I sniff. "I don't think I'm *that* guarded. You got me here, didn't you?"

I've become quite skilled at the Queen of Denial thing in my adult years, at answering questions with other questions so I can steer conversations.

His gaze drags over me. "Look at the way you're sitting. Legs drawn in against your chest, arms wrapped around your knees. That's a protective stance. You're afraid of something."

My arms ache from hugging my legs too tight. He isn't wrong about the way I'm seated. I let go and stretch my legs out.

"Feel better?" he asks, hazel eyes glinting.

"Somewhat." My shoulders ache with tension, as does my middle. I never know what's going to come out of his mouth next, so my body instinctively braces itself around him.

"Take a deep breath," he says. "And then let it all go."

"So you're a yoga guru?" I ask. I'm not meditating with him. I'm not going to let him make me malleable and pliable and drunk on relaxation. "In addition to all the other things you are?"

"What else am I?" His perfect dark brows angle in. My breath hitches. In daylight he's a work of art, but in the soft light of this room, he's stunning. If he were some random guy at a bar buying me a drink and looking for a hook-up, I'd probably go home with him, have a good time, and call a late-night Uber when it's over.

But this is wildly different.

"CEO of *everything* ..." I roll my eyes, teasing. Though it's pretty much the truth. There's hardly an industry he's yet to conquer. He owns a little bit of everything, all over the world.

"Fair enough." He doesn't deny it.

His gaze lingers on me a while longer, and out of nowhere he rises, extending his hand toward mine.

"Shall we go?" he asks. "There's something else I want to show you."

I allow him to help me up, a jolt of invisible electricity sparking the instant our palms connect, and he leads me out of his sanctuary.

I let go once we're in the hall. I don't want to give him the wrong idea. Just because he's opening up to me and giving me an up-close-and-personal tour of his intimate life doesn't mean I'm going to magically change my mind about his offer.

Following Trey through hallways and down an additional set of stairs, we find ourselves outside his manse, following a bluestone path that leads to an iron gate accented with massive trimmed hedges easily a story tall. Once inside, the overwhelming scent of blooming roses surrounds me.

"This was my mother's," he says. "This is where *she* went to get away from it all. She pruned every bush by hand. Personally. No one else was allowed in." He reaches for a tender pink bud, a late bloomer compared to the rest. "The gardeners have kept it exactly as she left it. We haven't added or removed a single plant."

I'm tempted to touch the soft petals of a nearby white rose, but I stop myself. Everything around me is sacred, and I want to respect that.

"So sweet of you to keep it all intact in her memory."

I read a biography about his parents once, long before I worked for Westcott Corp. It was assigned reading in high school. My English teacher was obsessed with Edie and Pierce, their history, their love story, their tragic and untimely demise.

From what I remember, Trey was fifteen when they passed.

I was fifteen the first time my mother got sick. Without my father in the picture, I'd spent many nights lying awake in bed imagining what it would be like to be orphaned, like him. At least I had my sister, I always told myself. Together we'd figure it out.

Trey had no one except a staff of butlers and gardeners and caretakers.

He must have been so lonely ...

I walk the gardens, the never-ending rose bushes creating a maze-like path akin to something out of *The Secret Garden*. For the tiniest sliver of a second, I picture children running through here. A little girl in a white dress. Giggling. Hiding. Squealing with joy when she's found. But I quickly shake the thought away, carrying on along the path. From the corner of my eye, I spot Trey a few steps behind. Watching.

He thinks he's making progress with me, I'm sure.

"Would you like to see more?" he asks when the path veers back to where we started.

I read once that the Westcott mansion has nearly two hundred rooms and nearly twenty-thousand square feet. A full tour would take days.

"You don't have to do that," I say. "I'm sure you're anxious to get back to the office ..."

"Clearly you don't know me very well. When I give my time and attention to something, I give it fully. I've set aside this time for you, Sophie. I cleared my schedule for *you*."

"Is that supposed to make me feel special?" I'm teasing. Sort of.

"You don't need anyone to make you feel special," he says as we walk toward one of the many doors on the back of the stone palace. "And you know this or you wouldn't have turned down my offer."

It's more complicated than that.

"I don't want to be married to someone I don't love," I say. "And I would never bring children into a loveless marriage. Not for all the money in the world. It's not right."

"Maybe you're thinking of it all wrong. Maybe you should focus on all the good you could do with that money. Or the fact that the child would be loved by both parents, cared for the rest of its life in every way imaginable."

"Would you love it?" I ask. "Knowing that it was nothing more than a component of a contract?"

Something you bought and paid for?"

He stops for a moment, turning to me, brows furrowed. "Of course I would love my own flesh and blood, Sophie. What kind of question is that?"

We step inside, greeted by a dark hall lined with dim sconces.

"I don't understand why you can't just find someone else," I say. "You must have millions of prospects."

"Dating is different for me. I can't just swipe right on an app and meet someone for drinks and hope things will take off organically."

"But have you ever tried?"

He laughs through his nose. "I've never used an app, but I've dated in the past."

"And?"

"Preconceived notions tend to get in the way before any of it has a chance to evolve into something meaningful," he says. "I realize this arrangement I'm proposing is as unromantic as it is unconventional, but at least I'm being upfront from the start. You know my expectations, what I want and what I need. And you know what you'll be getting out of it. This way we can both avoid disappointment."

He leads me to a room with soaring gold-leaf ceilings, a forest green billiards table, a marble chess set, and a wall of books two stories high.

He flicks on the lights. "I'm not buying your heart, Sophie. And I'm certainly not trying to sell you on mine."

"Kind of seems like you are ..."

"That's only because you don't know me ... yet." He turns to face me, pausing to drink me in. "Why don't you stay the rest of the afternoon? Tonight we can have dinner. And after that, I'll take you to the conservatory. There's a meteor shower later and the view from up there is second to none."

While he claims this isn't about love or forming an everlasting connection, the evening he's suggesting sounds like a date. I'm seconds from declining his offer when the words get stuck, lodged by curiosity.

"Why do you need a wife and kid anyway?" I ask. "What do you get out of it?"

Without hesitation, he says, "I'm in the process of procuring a rather large business deal and the seller insists on maintaining its family-operated business reputation. He won't sell it to me unless I *settle down*. His words."

"So none of this is because you're secretly lonely and you want someone to share your life with?"

"Would it make a difference if I were?"

I contemplate my answer. At least he's being honest—I think. There's no way to tell when someone's being real or fake, though I thought I knew the difference once upon a time.

"I guess not," I say.

"So will you stay for dinner?"

Despite the lump in my throat and the voice in my head reminding me that my mind is already made up and all of this is a giant waste of time ... I nod.

"Sure," I say.

And against my better judgement, I stay.

SEVENTEEN

Trey

PRESENT

A BLANKET of stars shine through a pristine glass ceiling of the conservatory. I leave the lights off, of course, and take Sophie by the hand, leading her to the center of the room where my staff has prepared an arrangement of tufted floor pillows so we can lie on our backs and take in the spectacular show in the night sky.

"Make yourself comfortable," I point to the cushions. "I'm going to check on that nightcap."

I move to the corner of the room, lifting the phone from the receiver and calling down to the kitchen where I'm told our drinks are en route.

We shared a bottle of wine over dinner in the Field Room, a smaller, more intimate setting overlooking the magnolia gardens. For two hours, we discussed neutral topics: favorite vacation spots, film, and literature. Topics like politics and religion were avoided, as in good taste. Given her knowledge of a proper place setting, I got the sense she would flourish in some of the formal settings she'd be required to attend by my side. So far she's checking all of my boxes and then some.

Our drinks arrive—bourbon for me and vodka soda with a wedge of lime for her.

"Tell me about your family, Sophie." I hand her the tumbler and take the spot next to her. "What are they like?"

The faint glow of the stars above provides enough light for me to make out her delicate features and catch the glimmer of light in her eyes when she looks at me. All evening, she's kept her distance—physically—but she's opening up like a flower, even if she doesn't realize it. One petal at a time.

If we aren't friends yet, we will be by the end of tonight.

And if she doesn't trust me yet, she will by the end of the week.

She takes a slow drink. "I was raised by a single mother. Her name is Sybil. And I have a sister. Three years younger. She has muscular dystrophy, so she lives at home. We're a pretty tight-knit little group."

Her full lips arch for a moment.

"Do you define yourself by those things?" I ask. "The circumstances of which you had no control?"

"No." Her smile fades and her brows narrow. "Why?"

"When someone asks me about my family, I don't start out by saying my parents died in a fiery plane crash when I was fifteen. It's interesting to me that you included the fact that you were raised by a *single* mother and that your sister is disabled."

"I thought we were getting to know each other?"

"We are." I sip my bourbon, unable to take my eyes off her. I've rattled her. But it's an experiment of sorts. I want her to push back, to challenge me. To speak up. This is never going to work if she can't. "It's interesting, is all I'm saying."

She draws in a long breath, as if she's carefully choosing her response.

"I'm not going to discount the things that made me who I am." Sophie lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. "I was raised by a single mother. My sister is disabled. I'm choosing to share those things with you not because I'm defined by them, but because I thought we were getting to know each other ..."

I smile in the dark.

Unapologetic, this one.

I like it.

"Fair enough." I take another drink.

With my attention above, I still feel her watching me. I get the impression she isn't sure what to make of me—yet. And that's fine. Intrigue and curiosity is going to light the path, it's going to get us exactly where we need to be.

"What about your father?" I ask since she mentioned her single mom. "How does he fit into the picture?"

"He doesn't." She takes a sip, unflinching.

"He passed?"

"No," she says. "But he's dead to me."

The weight of silence that settles between us tells me to lay off the topic, so I do. For now. I've dated

women in the past with “daddy issues,” and most of them want to talk about their father to an almost obsessive degree.

But not Sophie.

“Brutal.” I glance up at the sky to catch vivid streaks darting through the blackened sky. “Meteor shower is beginning.”

Sophie sits her drink aside and lies back on the cushions, tucking her hands behind her neck as she takes in the earthly show, but while the veins of light reflect in her deep blue eyes and she rests mere inches from me, her quietude tells me a part of her is worlds away.

“Tell me more about you, Sophie,” I say.

She blinks back into the present moment and turns to her side, facing me. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“I doubt I’m as interesting as you think I am ...”

I relax on the cushions, turning on my side to face her. “Let me be the judge of that.”

She rolls to her back, watching the comets above, her chest rising and falling with slow, deep breaths as if it’s been forever since she last lived in the beauty of a single, simple moment.

“It’s been a long day. You mind if we sideline that conversation and just enjoy this?” Sophie points above.

She isn’t wrong.

We’ve been chatting nonstop all afternoon, most of the conversation pointless on the surface but all of it serving the greater good.

I told her about my obsession with astronomy as a child. The awful German tutor I had in sixth grade. The memorable summer my family spent in Lebanon.

She told me about her years at Princeton. The charities she started. The organizations she chaired. All things I’d already gleaned from her HR file. But not once did she share a treasured family remembrance or defining childhood. There was no talk of relationships. Friendships or otherwise. No mention of hopes or ambitions for the future. Sophie—the real Sophie—is still buried deep inside.

This woman is a fortress.

And I intend to dismantle her brick by brick.

EIGHTEEN

SOPHIE

Past

"I'M SO SORRY," I tell Nolan over the phone Friday afternoon. I'm hiding in the bathroom, and I left the faucet running so my mother can't hear. "My mom planned this last minute. She just told me about it today."

He exhales into the receiver. "And she won't let you stay home? You're eighteen for Christ's sake." I've never heard him like this—frustrated.

"It's a two-hour drive to my grandma's ... it's a lot for Mom to do in one weekend," I say. She's doing better, but she's still not quite one hundred percent. Until then, she needs me.

"You can't tell her you have to work?" He knows I've yet to mention that I quit waiting tables months ago.

For a while, I debated telling her the truth. Living this lie makes our relationship feel wrong, and it's anything but.

Nolan talked me out of it.

He said he loves things exactly how they are, and he didn't want to chance her getting upset.

"If I do, she might call my work and try to talk my old manager into giving me the time off." I keep my voice low.

"You really think she'd do that?"

I shrug even though he can't see me. "Maybe? I don't want to risk it."

He's quiet. My stomach sinks. Gone is the excitement that normally colors his tone when he tells me what time to be ready each weekend.

Usually I Uber to a restaurant of his choosing and we kick off our date night with a fancy dinner before holing up in our favorite hotel suite.

Tonight we were supposed to see a movie, and I spent all of eight period today daydreaming about cuddling into his arms in a cool, dark theatre, munching on popcorn and Red Vines—normal boyfriend and girlfriend stuff.

"Please don't be mad," I say.

Nolan says nothing.

"I can text you," I add. "All weekend. As much as you want. I'll keep my phone on me the whole time."

"It's not the same." His voice is monotone.

"Soph, you ready?" Mom calls from the next room. She's finished packing for Emmeline.

"I have to go," I tell him. "I'll text you, okay?"

He's silent, not giving me a single goodbye. When I glance down at my phone, I realize he hung up.

Tears sting my eyes, hot and sharp.

"Sophie ..." Mom calls for me again.

"Coming," I yell back, praying she doesn't hear the break in my voice. I shove my phone in my back pocket, splash cold water on my face, and dab it dry with a hand towel. When I emerge, I hurry to my bedroom, grab my Nike duffel bag, and slide a pair of sunglasses on before Mom has a chance to notice the red splotches on my skin.

Ten minutes later, the three of us are loaded up in the van, headed west to my grandmother's house for the weekend.

"Why are you so quiet today?" Mom asks when we merge onto the interstate a few minutes later. "Everything okay? I feel like you never talk to me anymore."

I force a smile, hands gripping the steering wheel at ten and two. "What are you talking about? I'm totally fine."

But I'm lying.

I'm not *totally fine*.

I'm confused.

The next two hours are tortuous as they are endless since I can't text him. And when we arrive at my grandmother's, she has dinner on the table. Three times I sneak off to check my phone, but Nolan hasn't sent a thing.

Is this a fight?
Or are we over?

NINETEEN

Trey

PRESENT

I DROP her off shortly after one AM. We spent nearly twelve full hours together and I still feel as if I hardly know her. I know things about her, yes. But I don't know what makes her tick. What gets her excited. What she wants out of this lifetime.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself tonight," I say, parked outside the awning of her apartment building.

"It was definitely a night to remember." With heavy-lidded eyes, she offers a sleepy smile. I offered to put her up in a guestroom but in true Sophie fashion, she refused. Drawing in a slow breath, she sighs. "Thank you for sharing your home with me tonight. I liked seeing this other side of you. Makes you more ... human."

"I wasn't before?"

"You're kind of ... super human." She winks. "You accomplish more in one day than most people will accomplish in their lifetime."

"It's called prioritizing."

And taking time to get out of my head. An hour in the gym six days a week. A handful of nootropics every morning. It's amazing what someone can achieve if they eliminate their excuses and commit to a lifestyle of self-discipline.

"The average person prioritizes going to kickboxing class. Sticking to their diet. Calling their grandma once a week," she says. "That's not you. You're about a hundred notches above that."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

She laughs; soft, drowsy. "Anyway ..."

The dash clock shows we've been sitting here six minutes now. I'd hoped to get a few more minutes out of her, but I'm content to end this evening on a playful note.

"See you tomorrow, Sophie," I say as she climbs out.

She gives a wave and closes the door of my SUV with a gentle click. I could have called my driver, but he's set to wake in four hours to take me to work, and I'd rather he get his sleep. Besides, there's something intimate about a man and a woman sharing a late-night drive, confined to the front seat of a car with nothing but each other to fill the void.

I wait for her to disappear inside before pulling away.

Half of me is certain tonight was an enormous step in the right direction. The other half of me wonders if I've yet to scratch the surface of this enigmatic woman.

Still, progress is progress.

TWENTY

SOPHIE

Past

"I'M SO SORRY, SOPH." Nolan cups my face, kisses the top of my head, and pulls me tight against him. We're outside a little Italian restaurant on the north side of the city. It cost me thirty dollars to Uber here, not that I can't afford it. I wasn't sure if I should come.

He went radio silent on me for six days—but it might as well have been an eternity.

Every night, I waited for my sister to fall asleep before crying into my pillow wondering what things were going to be like going forward. What my weekends would look like. If my friends would still want to hang out with me despite not seeing me for the last several months. What I'd do if the stockpiled cash runs out and we get another unexpected medical bill.

"There's no excuse for the way I acted," he says. "I was an asshole, and you didn't deserve that."

It's my turn to be silent, but mostly because I don't know what to say. I'm upset, but I'm also all cried out. I want to tell him I've dated boys my age who were more mature than that. And I think he should know that I was days away from calling the café and begging for my job back.

But for whatever reason, I say nothing.

It's like everything is frozen. My heart, my body, my words.

"I was just looking forward to seeing you," he adds. "And when I couldn't, and there was no way around it, I got angry and I took it out on you. It'll never happen again. I promise."

There's a fullness in my chest that overpowers the tightness that had been there all week. I want to forgive him and pretend like nothing happened, but I also want him to know he can't do that to me again.

I also want to ask him what he did last weekend without me, but anytime I think of asking, a stab of jealousy cuts through my middle. The thought of Nolan spending an ounce of his free time with anyone except me makes me strangely sick to my stomach.

He brushes the hair from my forehead and kisses my mouth, slow and lingering, depositing the familiar aftertaste of Wrigley's spearmint gum as his signature cedar and ambergris cologne cloaks the oxygen around me.

I close my eyes, and the world around me disappears the way it always does when we're together. The symphony of city traffic around us fades into the background. The warm scent of heated asphalt disappears from my lungs. There are no barking dogs or construction jackhammers or city buses humming past.

"What do you say we get dinner to go and head back to the hotel?" he asks.

His eyes search mine, hopeful.

"I know I hurt you." He exhales. "Tell me what I have to do to get back into your good graces and I'll do it. I'll do anything. What do you need from me? Name it and it's yours."

I swallow the hard lump in my throat. "The only thing I want is you."

"Baby, you've already got me. I'm all yours."

TWENTY-ONE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I PLASTER my hair with dry shampoo, sweep it into a bun, and almost forget to zip the fly of my pants on my way out the door the next day. Sleep refused to come last night. For hours I lay awake in bed, tossing around and replaying my time with Trey like a movie in my head.

Everything about the past week has been surreal.

Never in a million years could I have imagined bumping into Trey Westcott would lead to a multi-million dollar proposal and a personal tour of his estate.

It's so absurd, I almost laugh out loud.

I speed-walk the four blocks to the office and make it to my desk with a minute to spare. But no sooner am I signed in does my inter-office messenger ping.

TREY WESTCOTT: Rough night?

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Were you literally waiting for me to get here so you could message me?

TREY WESTCOTT: Of course not.

TREY WESTCOTT: I have the system set to alert me when you arrive.

I'm not surprised he can do that ...

SOPHIE BRISTOL: That's not creepy at all.

TREY WESTCOTT: Actually, I happened to glance out the window in the conference room and saw you sprinting in. You about bowled over that poor lady walking her dog.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: I wasn't sprinting.

TREY WESTCOTT: Semantics. Either way, you were in a hurry.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: I don't like being late.

I wait for him to respond, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. But a minute passes, and another, and nothing.

I don't take it personally. He probably has a calendar of back-to-back meetings and more important things to do than play message ping pong with me all morning.

Closing out of my messenger window, I pull up our payroll software and work my way through a handful of tasks my boss sent yesterday while I was out. When I'm finished, it's a quarter 'til noon.

Grabbing my work badge, I head to the cafeteria to get a quick bite to take back to my desk so I can eat in peace. Lunchtime at Westcott reminds me of high school some days. It's clique-y and impersonal and every once in a while, some random person I've never seen before sits down across from me and starts showing me pictures of their cats on their phone.

I'm not in the mood for small talk today—I spent twelve hours engaging in it yesterday.

I respond to a handful of group texts from some friends, inhale my salad in my office, toss the cardboard container in the recycling bin, and log back into the system only to be met with a messenger alert.

TREY WESTCOTT: What are you doing tonight?

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Busy. Why?

TREY WESTCOTT: Prove it.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: 555-836-8826

SOPHIE BRISTOL: I'm going to my mom's for dinner. Feel free to call her to verify that.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Actually, don't. She'll think it's some kind of phone scam and then she'll probably call the police. That or I'll have to explain why you're calling her and I really don't want to do that.

TREY WESTCOTT: Are you going to tell her about my offer?

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Absolutely not.

TREY WESTCOTT: ???

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Why would I do that?

TREY WESTCOTT: So she could talk some reason into you and tell you what a horrible mistake you're making.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: You don't know her. She'd probably give me a gold medal for saying no. I'm one hundred percent positive she would be against your proposal.

TREY WESTCOTT: Give me an hour of her time and I promise I can change her mind.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Your confidence is impressive, but you have no idea what you're up against. If you think I'm a hard sell, wait until you meet her.

TREY WESTCOTT: So you're saying I can meet your mother?

SOPHIE BRISTOL: I didn't mean it like that ... it's a figure of speech.

My cheeks ache, and it takes me a second to realize I'm *grinning*.

Weird.

And more importantly, *why*?!

I wipe the ridiculous smile off my face and check my email in an attempt to distract myself with actual work. Despite seeing him in a new light yesterday, my answer is still no. Friendly conversation isn't going to persuade me otherwise.

TREY WESTCOTT: Fine.

TREY WESTCOTT: What are you doing tomorrow night?

SOPHIE BRISTOL: Meeting some Basics at Starbucks for our weekly meeting.

TREY WESTCOTT: Liar.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: ;-)

It doesn't matter how much my brain screams at me to disengage with this man, my fingers type lightning-fast responses before I have a chance to talk myself out of them.

TREY WESTCOTT: Come over. We can hang out. As friends.

The offer is tempting. I secretly enjoyed last night. That and his place is amazing and I haven't seen a fraction of it. Not to mention, I'm only human and his attention is gratifying ...

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't having a little bit of fun with all of this. I imagine myself old and gray, playing bridge in some Floridian retirement village and telling my friends about that time in my twenties when I was relentlessly pursued by a trillionaire.

SOPHIE BRISTOL: What time?

I bury my face in my hands, shaking my head because I know better.

Last week one of my friends told me I was in a slump. She insisted I remedy that with a weekend of casual sex with her hot neighbor who keeps asking for my number. But I don't know ... this sounds more appealing in its own weird way.

Not saying I'm going to hook up with Trey. But sometimes the fantasy of hooking up with someone is the best part of getting to know them. I have no shame in dirty little daydreams ...

TREY WESTCOTT: I'll send someone to pick you up at seven.

For the remainder of the afternoon, concentration evades me and getting into my work flow is impossible.

It's the strangest thing, but I can't get Westcott out of my head.

His honesty is refreshing.

His tenacity, flattering.

As long as we don't detour off the friend track, nothing should go wrong.

SOPHIE

Past

I SLIP my shoes on and tie my server apron around my waist Friday night. I'm seconds from bolting out the door when my mom stops me.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asks.

I turn. "Work ..."

"That's funny. I ran into your manager at the pharmacy earlier today and she told me you quit your job months ago." Her gaze falls to my apron. "So then I called Stacia's parents. They said they can't remember the last time you stayed the night, so where have you been running off to every weekend?"

My heart ricochets and warmth crawls up my neck.

This moment was inevitable, but I didn't expect it tonight.

"You better have a damn good reason for lying to me." My mom never swears. This isn't going to go well.

I don't know where to begin.

"Sit." She points to the worn pleather sofa in our tiny living room. "And take your shoes off. You're not going anywhere."

In thirty minutes, Nolan's going to be waiting for me outside The Crystal Menagerie restaurant on Freeborn Street.

With her hands resting firmly on her bony hips, she peers down her nose. For a petite woman, she's got a menacing presence.

"I've been seeing someone," I say.

"And who might that be?" She lifts a brow, head cocked.

"His name is Nolan."

Frowning, she asks, "And why haven't you told me about him?"

I bury my face in my hands, breathing through my fingers. "Because he's older."

"How much older?"

"In his forties." He looks younger, though I don't say that because I doubt it would matter. All she's going to focus on is that number.

Mom gasps. "*Sophie.*"

I can't look at her.

"He gives me money." I realize how it sounds the moment the words leave my lips. "So I don't have to work. He's very generous. I've been paying some of Emmeline's medical bills—"

"Oh my god." She clamps a hand over her mouth. "Are you sleeping with him?"

I don't answer, which is apparently an answer in and of itself because now she's pacing the room, mumbling under her breath.

"Do you know what an escort is?" she asks.

Rolling my eyes, I say, "It's nothing like that. He cares about me. He's my boyfriend."

She clucks her tongue. "Don't be so naïve. Men only care about one thing and if you think otherwise, you've got another think coming. He's going to smash your heart into a million pieces. Just wait." Mom paces some more. "Oh, god. Sophie. What have you gotten yourself into?"

"Just because Dad left you doesn't mean Nolan's going to leave me."

Her cool gray eyes turn glassy. It's an unspoken rule in our household never to bring up my father ... now I know why.

"This isn't worth getting upset over, Mom." I spring up and grab a tissue from the box on the coffee table. She swipes it from my hand, catching a few tears that roll down her gaunt cheeks before dabbing at the corners of her eyes.

I hate to see her in pain, and knowing I'm the cause of this ...

"He's a good man." I place a hand on her shoulder.

"He's old enough to be your *father*," she says. "It's just wrong."

"I'm an adult."

"You're in high school."

"Only for a few more months ..." I force a tight smile. "I'm not a little girl anymore. You have to trust me to make decisions like this."

She peers out the window of our living room with its parking lot view, listless and silent.

"You didn't seem to have a problem when he took me out to dinner that first night," I remind her.

"It was different. We were about to be evicted and you swore to me it was only dinner." She moves away, heading to the kitchen and unscrewing a bottle of wine before pouring a generous amount into a Mason jar. "Obviously you know this is wrong, otherwise you wouldn't have been keeping it a secret all this time."

"I only kept this a secret because I knew you were going to overreact."

Her pointed stare trails to mine, slow and audacious. And she scoffs. "You think you're grown now? Fine. Don't come crying to me when this explodes in your face."

Underneath it all, she means well.

She loves me and doesn't want me to get hurt. There's nothing I can say to change her mind ... not now.

"That specialist Emmeline's been seeing? He's a friend of Nolan's," I say. "He's paying for everything."

Her mouth presses into a hard, thin line.

Ever since Nolan referred us to his friend's research center, Em's been making noticeable strides, and it's only been a couple of months. At this rate, the experimental treatment could change her entire life. Ours too.

"You told me you found him online," she says. "You said you applied for his program."

"I said what I had to say."

"Apparently."

The loudest kind of silence settles between us.

"I'm leaving," I say. My cheeks heat when I think of the true meaning of my words. I might as well be saying, "*I'm going to have sex with my boyfriend ... see you later.*"

Mom finishes her wine, wordless, and I slip back into my shoes. She doesn't try to stop me—not that she could.

Nolan and I are in love.

Nothing can keep us apart.

TWENTY-THREE

Trey

PRESENT

"THESE WERE MY FATHER'S." I open a box of Cuban cigars and slide them across my grandfather's mahogany desk in the center of the study the next night.

Two hours ago, I sent a Town Car for Sophie. She arrived in a cloud of floral perfume. Tight jeans. Cashmere top. Silk headband with a leopard print. Tiny gold studs in her ears.

I imagined her standing before her bathroom mirror, primping and preening down to the last detail—all for me.

She can claim she's not interested all she wants, but she made an effort to look good tonight ...

"Always thought I'd save these for a special occasion," I continue. "Wedding day. Birth of a child."

"I thought you never wanted those things?"

"Just because you never wanted something doesn't mean you've never thought about it before." There was a brief phase in my late twenties, when I thought maybe I could be the kind of man my father was. But every woman I dated tried to morph herself into what she thought I wanted to be or had transparent motives. It was easier to keep things physical, to cycle through them once boredom settled in.

And that's what marriage is to me ... perpetual boredom.

Eventually the sex fizzles into a monotonous hell. The conversations grow stale. The attraction wanes.

Who in their right mind would want that if it weren't forced upon them?

Apparently Nolan Ames ...

"Have you ever smoked one?" she asks, reaching for a cigar. She drags it beneath her nose, inhaling the way I do when I want to remember the way my father used to smell. Like tobacco, leather, and a trace of my mother's perfume after she hugged him.

"Once. On the tenth anniversary of their death. Thought it would make me feel closer to him."

"And did it?"

Distorted memories of that day dance through my head. A coldhearted reporter from a major newspaper had just called asking for a quote. I was drunk. Angry. Then numb. I wanted to feel something ... else.

Instead it felt as if someone carved a hole in my chest, like a piece of me was missing, never to be replaced.

I decided then and there that I never wanted to feel that way again.

"No," I say.

"I'm sorry." Her eyes turn a darker shade of blue, if that's possible. She places the cigar back. "That must've been hard for you."

I release a terse breath and close the lid on the box. "Certain things are beyond our control. I prefer to focus on what I *can* control."

Our gazes hold.

She sinks into the guest chair on the other side of the desk, a stemmed wine glass held lightly between her fingers. An hour ago we shared dinner in the courtyard before I brought her into the study. I wanted to show her photos of my family—the private ones not published in a dozen different biographies, magazines, and newspaper articles.

"My father left before my sister was born. I don't remember him. I've only seen pictures," she says. "Not that it compares to what you went through, but I know what it's like to miss a parent. I can't imagine missing two."

"Your reluctance toward my offer," I say, "does it have to do with him?"

Sophie shakes her head. "I made peace with that a long time ago."

"Can a person ever truly make peace with abandonment?"

"If you try hard enough, anything's possible," she responds without pause.

"You speak my language." I take a sip of my drink before pointing to her near empty chalice. "Another glass?"

When she's sober, she's nothing but witty comebacks and deflective questions.

When she's been drinking, she's clever with a heaping spoonful of details she'd never share otherwise.

Sophie glances at the time on her cell, her lips bunching at the side. "One more. But only one."

Too easy.

I use the desk phone to call the kitchen and order a second round. At this rate, it's safe to say there'll likely be a third in the near future.

"Do you ever wonder how your life might have turned out differently?" she asks. "If things with your parents ..."

"Never," I say before she finishes her question. "I don't dwell on the past. You?"

"It's natural to wonder about things." Her brows meet. "You've never thought about it?"

"What's the point? I don't have enough hours in the day to waste time daydreaming."

A quick rap at the door is followed by a kitchen staffer bearing a serving tray of fresh drinks. She disappears in the midst of Sophie thanking her.

"Ah, right," she says. "You're too busy hanging out in the space between two and three ..."

I tilt my head, examining her. "I shared that with you in confidence."

She swats at me, her delicate fingertips brushing my arm. Her cheeks are tinged with pink. If I had to guess, she's half-past buzzed.

"I'm messing with you," she says. "I actually love that you shared that with me. I'm going to try that one of these days ..."

"What do you do to escape? Surely you don't sit around daydreaming about how life could've turned out better? Maybe your father wasn't in the picture, but it didn't stop you from accomplishing a damn thing. Look at you now. You're clearly the winner in this situation."

Her gaze drifts to the side as she sips her wine.

"One could argue that." Her words are hazy and distant, almost as if she's speaking solely to herself.

I lean back in my grandfather's oversized chair, examining the fair-haired beauty across from me, briefly picturing what our child would look like, how her blonde hair and blue eyes would mix with my darker features.

"What is it you want out of life? Surely you haven't come this far only to be a corporate slave the rest of your life. You've got to want something more for yourself."

She appears to snap back into reality.

"I've only ever wanted to be happy," she shrugs, like it's no big deal. Like she's said it a million times to a million different people.

"And what does happiness look like for you?" I ask.

"Honestly ..." She hesitates. "I don't know."

"Everyone knows," I say. "Are you worried I'll use it as leverage as we negotiate my offer?"

"The things I want can't be bought." She isn't speaking my language, but she's garnered my full attention.

"Everything can be bought." At least in my world ...

I'm always up for a friendly debate. Most people don't tend to challenge me in conversations. They're afraid to disagree. Afraid to be honest.

But Sophie Bristol isn't like most people.

Sitting straighter, she adds, "You're like a dog with a bone."

I sip my bourbon, hiding a half-smile. "You and your compliments. See, I could tell you're starting to like me ..."

She rolls her eyes. And she hides her half-grin behind her wine glass, as if she could disguise the fact that she's letting her guard down.

Rising, she makes her way to the other side of the room, perusing a shelf of antique encyclopedias.

"Back to your happiness ..." I ask.

"Do you mind?" She points to the fifth one on the middle shelf, deflecting my question once more.

"Not at all."

She flips the antique pages, one by one, tracing her fingers over the older-than-dirt paragraphs, taking her time, as if she's lost in wonderment. Her eyes trace the words as she chews the inside of her lip.

I'd give anything to know what she's thinking.

But I remind myself I'm getting there ...

"Tell me about your last boyfriend." I take a sip. "What was he like?"

Sophie closes the book and slides it back into place, keeping her back to me. "He was horrible."

Interesting ...

Turning around, she adds, "And that's all I'm going to say."

The last woman I dated would happily unleash a dumpster truck of verbal garbage about her exes if prompted. The one before used to "accidentally" send sexy pictures to her ex, claiming she'd confused "Trey" for "Trent" in her drunken haze. In the past, I only asked about previous involvements because I wanted to see if I could spot a pattern ... if they tended to seek out a certain kind of man or if they tended to view their exes as inherently evil, if they refused to accept partial blame for the demise of the relationship. That sort of thing. It usually told me everything I needed to know—and often times told me it was time to walk away.

But Sophie's dating history is a glaring question mark.

"Horrible. Wow. I'm sorry to hear that," I say, infusing my tone with sympathy in hopes that she'll keep the dialogue going.

"Tell me about *your* last girlfriend," she flips the script.

"Ah. That would be Raquel. We lasted not quite two years. Fought like cats and dogs. Had no business

being together," I say, leaving out the part about it being mostly about sex. "After a while, she realized I loved work more than her, and I realized she loved coke more than me. We went our separate ways, and I haven't heard from her since."

"Do you ever wonder what she's up to now?"

"Never." And it's the truth. Someone told me once she was making her rounds in Hollywood, bouncing from C-list actor to C-list actor. I told them she could be fucking a limp-dicked gnome for all I care. "Do you ever think about your ex?"

"Never on purpose."

"What does that mean?"

"He's in the news sometimes ..."

"Would I know him?"

"You know a lot of people," she says, lips angling up at the side as if she finds that fact amusing. "So probably."

"What's his name?" I ask.

"What's it matter?" She answers my question with a question. Typical. "It's in the past."

"Is it though? Seems like he did a number on you." I toss back the rest of my bourbon. "I'd say that hurt is alive and well—some could argue it's in this very room."

"You mentioned you had some Renoirs? And a couple Monets? I'd love to see them." Her voice sparkles with admiration. Once more, she's flipped a switch.

She really has a knack for this—turning her emotions on and off, swapping one for another.

I've never seen anything like it.

I make a mental note to see if Broderick's uncovered any of her dating history yet. With enough digging, we should be able to find something ... especially if her boyfriend was in the public eye.

There have got to be photos.

A paper trail.

A gossip monger in the know.

If it's out there, Broderick will find it.

"This way." Apparently we're shelving this conversation—for now.

I lead her from the study to the locked art galleria on the main floor. Many of the pieces are priceless, and, given that they're family heirlooms, I haven't wanted to part with them or take a chance on loaning them out to a museum.

Most people are unaware, but many of the "pieces" in museums are dupes. The real ones are hidden away in humidity-controlled chambers—if they weren't stolen and quietly replaced. Black market art is a dirty little secret amongst the wealthiest art collectors.

"I took an art history class in college," she says, studying an eight by ten Monet painting in a gilded frame—a gift from some French ambassador's wife to my mother thirty years ago. "I've seen some of these before. In textbooks and slides. But up close ..."

She drifts to the next painting—a Pellegrini, before stopping to gape at a Picasso sketch ... my childhood favorite.

"I'll be completely honest, sometimes I forget this room exists," I say.

"Is that supposed to be endearing?" She laughs through her nose. "Because it's not."

"Just being honest," I say. "That's what we do ..."

"All right." She moves to the next one.

"If you agree to my offer, Sophie, I promise I'll always be forthright with you," I say. "About everything."

"I've heard that line before ..."

"What makes you think it's a line?"

She spins, inspecting me before returning her attention to an oil painting by an artist whose name escapes me because all I can think about is the mysterious work of art standing before me. Her nonchalant beauty. The layers of personality, all hidden beneath one another. The mysterious past. The quick wit. The spunk. The cautious, guarded heart.

She's everything I never knew I was missing in my life.

"Because at the end of the day, I have something you need, and you're going to tell me whatever you think I want to hear until you get it." She doesn't mince words—a sexy little quality that would have me eating my fucking fist if we weren't trying to have a respectful conversation. "I know how men like you operate."

"Men like me? Care to elaborate?" I keep a straight face, disguising my offense. I've spent my entire life ensuring I could never be lumped into categories, and I'm certain I've done a damn good job of it.

"Charming. Intelligent. Attractive. Influential. Successful. Driven. Rich ..."

"Last I checked, those were excellent qualities to possess," I say. "I wasn't aware those were turn offs for you."

"Depends on the man."

"I can't help but assume you're describing your last boyfriend," I say. "Whoever he is, I can promise you we're not the same. I'm my own person. And let me remind you, Sophie, I'm not trying to be your boyfriend."

I can do sex. I can—on occasion—do something that resembles a relationship. I can do gifts and dinners and lavish trips and once-in-a-lifetime experiences. But I can't do love.

Love is for the fucking birds.

And love is for my parents.

As far as I'm concerned, if I can't have anything close to what they had (and I've yet to come across that in my thirty-five years), I don't want it at all.

"And I'm not trying to be your bought-and-paid-for baby mama." She winks, moving closer to the door. "I appreciate your straightforwardness, Trey. Maybe you're not like the last one, but I have no intention of finding out, so ..."

She shrugs, as if that's that.

My jaw tenses, but not in anger. Something closer to impatience from these never-ending rounds of mental chess.

Enough with the fucking games.

"Fifty million dollars," I announce.

She coughs, choking on her response. "What?"

"A hundred million. Is that enough for you?"

"You're insane." She doesn't laugh. Quite the contrary. With stormy blue eyes beneath narrowed brows, she rests her hands on her hips.

"Five hundred million." My voice is louder. "A billion? What's it going to take?"

"You're an asshole."

"Give me one good reason why you don't want this," I say. "Why this couldn't work?"

"I could give you a trillion reasons—"

"—I don't need a *trillion* reasons," I cut her off. "Only one."

"Because I don't want to." Her shoulders rise and fall. Our deadlocked stares contain words unspoken. "I think we should call it a night."

We both stand, unmoving.

Does she really want to go?

"I'll call you a ride." I walk her to the car port. Neither of us say a word, though maybe there isn't anything to be said at this time.

I'm not in the mood to beat my head against a wall the rest of the night.

The chauffeur pulls up and gets the rear passenger door. Sophie slides inside, out of sight behind the black tinted windows. I watch them drive off before I head in.

I'm not proud of my little outburst—it's not my style—and it was born out of an uncharacteristic moment of weakness. But it happened. Wishing it hadn't won't change a damn thing.

The more she pulls, the more I'm going to push.

It's what I do.

I know no other way.

I was twelve when my father shared a piece of advice I've carried with me throughout my life: *when the day disappoints you, there's always tomorrow.*

Would he have imparted me with that little gem if he'd known he wouldn't always have tomorrow?

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I fire off a text to Sophie.

ME: Life is really fucking short.

She leaves it on 'read.'

I head to my bedroom suite and call it a night. My bed has never felt so empty and my mind has never felt so full. I jam a set of Air Pods into my ears and attempt to drown out our final exchange with a podcast on the cerebral merits of pineal-activating meditation. Something bland and unemotional. Rooted in logic.

And I need that: logic.

Because nothing about this makes a damn bit of sense.

SOPHIE

PRESENT

LIFE IS REALLY FUCKING SHORT. I read his text again and again, my phone screen glowing so bright in the pitch blackness of my bedroom it stings my eyes. They aren't the most eloquent of words, but for some reason, they resonate. And it isn't in what he says but what he implied.

I think of his parents.

While I know loss, Trey knows loss *and* death.

Maybe there's more to this arrangement than some business deal. Maybe deep down he wants it? Maybe he's haunted by his legacy. Who would he leave his trillions to if he had no one? Who would carry on the business he's worked so hard for? I understand wanting an heir.

But I still don't understand him wanting *me*.

I rest my phone face down on my nightstand and roll to the side. Eyes squeezed tight, I try to imagine how the next two years would look should I agree to his ridiculous offer. Surely he wasn't serious when he offered me a billion dollars. Then again, money like that is pocket change to him. It's a drop of water in the ocean of his wealth. A small price to pay when he wants something more than anything in the world.

Earlier tonight, he asked me what happiness meant to me.

I couldn't answer. And not because I cared what he thought or I was worried he'd use it as leverage. I literally couldn't answer.

Everyone wants to be happy.

Not everyone knows what that looks like.

Financial stability. A career that doesn't leave you hating your life forty hours a week. Close friends who remember your birthday and keep your secrets. Family close by. Health. A way to give back to those in need without going broke.

I have all of those things already.

Maybe I should've asked what happiness means to him? If he fed me something sweet and vulnerable, would I believe it or would it all be a ruse? Then again if he were being honest, I don't know that his response would change anything.

My answer's still no.

I kick the covers off as my room grows hot, the air too thick to comfortably breathe.

Dollar signs dance in my head as I mentally calculate all the good I could do with that kind of money. And two years is nothing in the grand scheme of things.

But would he still want me if he knew the truth about my past?

If he knew what I've done?

TWENTY-FOUR

SOPHIE

Past

“WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT ME?” I slip my arm around Nolan and rest my head on his chest. The air conditioner hums and room service will be here in the next ten minutes.

“What kind of question is that?”

“Just answer it.” Call me insecure, but ever since my mom found out about us, I’ve been paranoid that he’s pulling away.

Sneaking around was fun. What if that was the best part for him?

“Everything, Soph. I like everything about you. There’s nothing I don’t like.”

Unsatisfied with his answer, I sit up, wrapping the sheet around my bare breasts. “What about me though? I know what I get out of this, but what about you? I don’t have anything to give you. I don’t know anything about the world. I’ve never even left the country before. There are a million beautiful women out there—”

“Stop,” he says. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t measure yourself against anyone else. You’re not them. They’re not you,” he says. “And never question your worthiness. Just know that if someone’s giving you their time, it’s because you’re worth it—to them.”

I laugh through my nose and roll my eyes. “Why does it feel like you’re giving me relationship advice? All I asked was why you liked me ...”

He’s quiet.

Oh, God. *Is he giving me relationship advice?*

“I don’t know how to describe it,” he says. “But when I look at you ... it makes me feel a certain way. You make me excited. You make me feel desired. You make me feel younger. And you have this huge heart. A heart that hasn’t been ruined by the real world yet.”

“And what happens when I’m older? When I’ve got more real-world experience and the excitement has worn off?”

Nolan gathers my hands in his, kissing the insides of my palms. “One day at a time.”

I don’t like his answer. There’s no comfort or assurance in it. It’s not like I’m expecting an engagement ring, but a little word of encouragement would be nice. Something that tells me he’s in this for the long haul.

Lord knows I am.

A quick knock at the door, followed by a man announcing himself as “room service,” sends me scurrying, naked, to the bathroom. A minute later, Nolan retrieves me. He’s slipped into his black slacks, the belt undone and his smooth chest exposed.

“Dinner’s here.” He looks me up and down, only now I’m wrapped in a fluffy robe with the hotel monogram on the lapels. “Come eat.”

We dine in silence.

My chicken is dry and the vegetables are bland. I shove the food around on my plate so it looks like I’m eating more than I am. I don’t touch the wine he’s poured. Lately I’ve been nauseous, and it only intensifies when I’m having an off day.

Nerves, mostly likely.

“You want to rent a movie?” He points to the giant flat-screen TV across the room.

“Sure.” I force a smile. I just want things to be normal again.

But I can’t ignore the nagging pull in the deepest part of my chest telling me something’s not right.

Maybe I’m reading too much into it, but it’s like we’ve been knocked out of our perfect little orbit.

We finish our meal and burrow beneath the covers. I tell him to pick the movie. I’m probably going to pass out soon anyway—lately I can hardly stay up past nine.

The credits roll and Nolan pulls me into his arms. “I love you, Soph.”

“You do?”

If he only knew that I’ve said those words to him a million times in my head ...

“Don’t act so surprised.” He laughs, cupping my cheek and pressing his mouth against mine. His tongue passes between my lips, and he pulls me into his lap and steers my hand to his hardening cock.

“I love you too,” I whisper against his inferno-hot mouth.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Don’t doubt that for a second.”

Despite the swell of nausea in the back of my throat and the overwhelming desire to rest my head on the fluffy pillows beside him and call it a night, I give myself to him again.

He’s always giving me things: gifts, money, his time, his attention, and now ... his love.

The least I can do is give him a little bit of pleasure in return.

It’s not like I have anything else to give him ...

TWENTY-FIVE

Trey

PRESENT

"MR. WESTCOTT, Ms. Bristol is here to see you," Mona says.

I was about to take a conference call with our publishing division, but I can spare a few minutes for her. My inbox dings and Broderick's name fills the screen. Earlier today, I'd asked for an update on Sophie's dating history. I want to know her type. Any patterns that can be identified. Her longest running relationship. *Anything*.

Also, I want to know the name of the public figure who broke her heart ...

"Trying. No info yet. Still digging," he writes. "Not much to go on."

Excuses ...

"***Try harder***," I type back in bold, underscored, italicized letters before telling Mona to send Sophie in.

Three seconds later, the doors swing open. Sophie enters with confident strides, a woman on a mission, hair cascading down her shoulders, lips red as maraschino cherries.

"Fine," she says. "I'll do it."

This is completely unexpected.

I rise, hiding my shock and replacing it with a cocksure smirk. "I knew you'd come to your senses."

It had to have been the text last night ...

"But it has to be on my terms," she says. "I want to keep things private. I don't want this to be a PR stunt. And I don't want a billion dollars—I don't even know what I'd do with a billion dollars. And *if* we have a child together, it's on my timeline. When *I'm* ready."

"All right. Aside from a brief media announcement, we can keep things low-key." Easy enough. "I'll have Broderick draft the new contract immediately, and I'll have my assistant locate a mover to place your apartment belongings into storage."

"I'm keeping my apartment."

"What's the point in that? It'll sit empty for years."

"I need to have something that's still mine and only mine," she says. "I'll pack a few bags, but everything else stays."

"Okay. Anything else?" I slide a notepad from the corner of my desk, grab a silver pen, and take notes.

"Where will I sleep?"

"In the master suite. With me. Everything needs to appear authentic, and that includes what happens around my personal staff."

She draws a quick breath, as if she's coming to terms with that part of the arrangement.

"My mom can't know about the contract," she says. "This has to be real to her or it'll break her heart."

"That won't be an issue. This needs to be real to *everyone*." I come around my desk until I stand before her. "When can I meet your family?"

"Soon." She wrings her hands, uncharacteristically nervous. Is she having second thoughts? "I want to prep her first. This engagement is going to blindside her."

"Do you always walk on eggshells around her?"

"She's ... different." Her glance swings to the side. "You'll see what I mean when you meet her."

Sophie's ocean gaze searches mine.

"Everything's going to be fine." I take her hands, which change to steel as her body braces.

This might be the first time we've ever touched—aside from bumping into each other the day we met. Given the fact that we're about to be married, I don't think I'm overstepping my boundaries.

"Take the day. No, take the week," I tell her. "Go home. Collect your things. Gather your thoughts. Visit your mother and sister. Tell your friends. Tend to your personal affairs. Broderick will email you the final contract."

I've never shared the Westcott estate with a single soul other than the caretakers who reside in the cottage and the staff that cycle in and out throughout the day who do a top-notch job of making themselves scarce.

"This will be quite an adjustment for both of us," I say. "But I think it could be fun—that is, if we make it fun."

“Ever the salesman ...” Her lips draw into an unexpected smile, half nervous, half flirting. “I’m pretty sure we have different definitions of fun.”

“Fine. It’ll be an adventure.” Though something tells me she’s not exactly the adventurous type. “There’ll be a learning curve, but I’m confident we’ll figure everything out together. One day at a time.”

She nods, the pallor of her complexion fairer than when she walked in a few minutes ago. To be honest, she looks like she’s about to lose the contents of her stomach. While she may have agreed to my offer, I’m not sure she’s one hundred percent at peace with her decision.

“Go, Sophie.” I release her hands. “I’ll see you tonight—at home.”

When she’s gone, I have Broderick finalize the contract.

I don’t want to risk a last-minute change of heart.

TWENTY-SIX

SOPHIE

PRESENT

"WHAT'S WITH YOU TODAY?" Mom asks that afternoon. "You're biting your nails. You never bite your nails." She swats. "Stop that. You're going to ruin your manicure. Lord knows you pay an arm and a leg for those in the city."

I tuck my hands beneath my thighs and take a deep breath. There's no easy way to preface any of this. Maybe I should've told my friends first, practiced on them. But it didn't seem right to tell my family last.

"I'm getting married," I blurt. I steady myself for her reaction, only to be met with her signature silent response.

"What? When?" Emmeline asks from the other side of the kitchen table. "And to who?"

"To *whom*," my mother corrects before turning to me. Her brows lift as she awaits my answer.

"His name is Trey." I clear my throat. "Trey Westcott."

"Wait," Emmeline says. "Isn't that your boss?"

"My boss' boss' boss' boss," I say, "Or something like that ... but yes. He owns Westcott Corp."

Mom takes a seat, practically collapsing in the wooden chair. I should've told her to sit before I broke the news. I haven't dated anyone since Nolan, not seriously anyway, and that was nearly a decade ago. And while I've had my fair share of hook-ups and a couple semi long-term friends with benefits, I've never allowed a single one to step foot inside my mother's home.

"How did this happen?" she asks. "I didn't even know you were seeing someone."

"I'm just as shocked as you are ... we ran into each other in the hallway at work one day." I don't tell her it was just the other week. "Next thing I know, we're spending time together outside the office. It all took off from there."

"And now you're getting *married*?" Her expression twists in disbelief. "Don't you think you're moving a little fast? We haven't even met him."

"You will," I say. "Soon. I'm actually moving in with him."

"This is so exciting," Emmeline claps. "I can't wait to go wedding dress shopping!"

Mom shoots her a look before turning back to me. "Have you set a date yet?"

I shake my head. "We're still working out the details."

"Where's your ring?" Her attention descends to my hands, which are still hidden beneath my thighs.

"I don't have one yet. Everything happened this morning ..."

Mom rests her elbows on the table, staring out the tiny window beyond our kitchen table. She doesn't congratulate me, doesn't manufacture an ounce of feigned joy. Not that I expected her to. I know where she stands on things like marriage and men. They're nothing but dirty words in her vocabulary.

"You'll love him," I tell her, placing my hand on hers. I need to sell this.

She won't look at me. "I'm sure you think that or you wouldn't be marrying him."

"He's excited to meet you. I've told him so much about you both," I say. Silence rests between us. "It would mean the world to me if you'd give him a chance."

"Would you change your mind if I didn't?" she asks.

Emmeline's watchful stare passes from Mom to me and back.

"No," I say. I already signed the contract, though I don't dare mention it to her. If Trey and I divorce in a couple of years, I can chalk up the millions in my bank account to a prenuptial agreement. She won't think twice given the infinite wealth that accompanies his name.

I lace my words with a hint of enthusiasm, ignoring the tension in my shoulders and the swirl of nausea in my center.

I remind myself of his words to reaffirm my decision. And even if I changed my mind, it'd be a breach of contract, and to be honest I didn't read the fine print. I have no idea what kind of repercussions I'd face if I backed out. A part of me didn't want to know.

Life is fucking short.

The number of good, humanitarian things I could do with those millions is endless. Charity work. Donating to Third World countries. Orphanages. Animal shelters. Unable to sleep last night, I sprang up and made a list of everything I could do with that money.

Personal happiness aside, I could spend the rest of my life making the world a better place.

I wouldn't be able to do that if I dedicated those years to a corporation.

Not to mention, I'd be able to ensure Emmeline would always be cared for should Mom get sick again.

"You *really* want this?" Mom asks. Her tea has cooled, untouched, though her hands wrap the powder blue mug tightly. Her body language holds words she won't dare say. I'm almost certain she's thinking about Nolan and the aftershocks of my time with him.

At least Westcott is upfront about what he wants.

He's not pretending like most men do.

He's stated exactly what he expects from this arrangement, even going so far as to put it in writing—unlike Nolan.

Nolan lied.

Nolan manipulated.

Nolan obliterated my heart and changed me forever.

This arrangement isn't forever—it's two years with a side of co-parenting.

I could do a hell of a lot worse than Westcott.

Lord knows I once gave my heart to the devil himself.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Trey

PRESENT

SHE'S IN SILK PAJAMAS, hair back, face free of makeup. Still the fascinating beauty who first intrigued me, but there's a vulnerable quality to her now. As if she's removed a mask and stripped down to a more natural state.

She climbs into bed beside me, tense as she get situated. And she fusses with the covers, getting them just so.

It's awkward, sure. But we're separated by a continent-sized space. She'll survive.

I get the lamp. The room succumbs to darkness.

"Relax, Sophie," I say, exhaling.

"I *am* relaxed."

"You really need to practice this lying thing. You're terrible at it."

She rolls to her side. I can almost see her smiling in the dark. "All right. Fine. This is weird for me."

"You'll get used to it."

"This isn't weird for you?" she asks.

"Of course it is. Think of it as a sleepover with your best friend."

"Best friend?" She laughs. "We're moving at breakneck speed, but I don't think we're there yet."

"Then we'll fake it until we make it ..."

She yawns. "I told my mom about ... us."

"What'd she say?"

"She wasn't thrilled. But I told them they could meet you this weekend."

"I'm actually going to Seattle this weekend ..."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"Of course not. I hadn't mentioned it yet. I was going to ask you to join me. I'll be working most of the time, but you can explore the city and we'll reconvene at night," I say. "The following weekend, I'd be happy to meet your mother and sister."

Sophie yawns. "Sounds good ..."

"So you'll come?" I ask. "On the trip?"

"Sure ..." she's checked out, giving into the day's exhaustion. It's easy to forget that not everyone crams a million life-altering decisions into their day and sleeps like a baby at night.

A minute later, she rolls to her side, covers pulled just beneath her chin. I could reach across the bed and feel her warmth, and yet she couldn't be more untouchable.

TWENTY-EIGHT

SOPHIE

Past

"YOUR MOTHER CALLED ME TODAY," Nolan says.

"What?" My stomach sinks. She had to have gone through my phone when I was sleeping to get his number. She's never done anything like that before. Then again, I've never given her a reason not to trust me until recently.

"She doesn't want us to be together. She thinks I'm using you." He scoffs. "You know I'm not using you, Soph. Right?"

"God, yes." I climb into his lap and kiss him to prove that I know.

His eyes examine mine in the dark.

"Don't listen to her," I say. "My dad broke her heart. She's worried you're going to break mine."

"I would never." He cradles my face in the warmth of his palms, a light trail of cologne wafting from his wrists.

I breathe him in. "I know."

"I promised her I'd take care of you."

"What'd she say?"

"She hung up on me."

I laugh. That sounds exactly like something she'd do. Whenever she's upset about something, silence is her primary response. Sometimes it's a relief, knowing the argument is over. Other times it's terrifying, wondering what she might be thinking or if it's tearing her up inside.

There's more weight in the things people don't say than what they do say.

"Don't let her get to you," I tell him. "I'm an adult. She can't tell me who to be with."

He rolls me to my back, pinning me beneath him. His hardness presses between my thighs as he kisses my neck. "Enough about her."

If he doesn't care, then I won't either.

Tonight, it's us against the world.

TWENTY-NINE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

THE WESTCOTT MANSION comes to life shortly before sunrise the next morning. The scent of coffee and eggs permeate the air the closer I get to the hustle and bustle of the kitchen. When I pass the main foyer, a woman in a gray uniform arranges a fresh assortment of flowers in an oversized vase. I offer her a nod and a quiet, "Good morning." She nearly does a double take before offering me the same.

I get the sense Trey isn't the closest with his staff. The way he's always coming and going probably leaves little time for small talk or pleasantries.

I won't be like that.

Trey woke over an hour ago, leaving me to sleep, nestled deep in the silky, imported linens tousled across the vast expanse of his enormous bed as he hit the shower and selected a dark gray suit and silky black tie from his closet.

I read in a Westcott newsletter interview once that he doesn't like patterns or busyness when he dresses for work. They distract him, pull him away from his zone. I'm sure there's a whole world of particulars when it comes to him. And with time, I'll become familiar with them.

One of his staffers is supposed to give me a tour today, taking me to the fourth floor, which I've yet to see, except for the night he took me to the conservatory.

"Coffee, Ms. Bristol?" One of the housekeepers asks when I wander into the butler's pantry. I was going to help myself, hoping to stay out of their way. But if she's offering ...

"Yes, please," I say. "Thank you."

"Mr. Westcott takes his in the drawing room," she says. "He'll be in shortly."

I don't know where that is ...

As if sensing my hesitation, she points behind me. "Fourth door on the left, just down that hall. Do you take cream and sugar?"

"A little of both would be perfect. Thank you so much," I say before adding, "I don't think I caught your name?"

Her eyes sparkle. She reminds me of my grandmother. "Eulalia. I'll have your coffee for you in a moment. Breakfast will be served shortly."

"There you are." Trey finds me settled near the head of the table and takes the chair beside me. The windows along the wall display the back of his mother's rose garden.

It's sweet that he's maintained it all these years.

And that he's been saving his father's beloved cigars.

"Sleep well?" he asks, sipping the coffee Eulalia has just delivered. She steals a glimpse of the two of us together before disappearing.

I nod. "It was like sleeping on a cloud."

Out of nowhere, more staff begin laying out an elaborate breakfast spread, enough to feed a small gathering of people, more than the two of us could possibly eat. Scrambled eggs with parsley. Fresh-cut melon. Pastries galore. Buttered toast.

"Do you always feast like a king?" I ask.

He laughs through his nose. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I had them prepare a little bit of everything. When you get a chance, you can meet with my head chef and let him know what you like. He'd be happy to prepare a personal menu for you."

Westcott dabs the corners of his mouth with a pristine cloth napkin when he's finished. I'm mid bite when he places a red velvet ring box on the table.

"I hope this will suffice." He slides it to me.

I swallow my toast, wipe the crumbs from my fingers, and prop the lid up.

A triangular-shaped diamond glimmers at me, almost too perfect to be real.

"It's a trillion cut," he says. "Each point represents past, present, and future. Three flawless carats, ethically sourced and hand-selected by my family's personal jeweler."

The diamond pendant Nolan gave me when I was eighteen was three carats—past, present, and future, though it was a brilliant cut ... round to signify eternity.

What a joke that turned out to be ...

When I was twenty-three, I sold it.

I'd planned to use the proceeds to buy a car, as the one I had was on its last leg. But then I figured every time I got behind the wheel I'd think of him, and I didn't want that, so I put the money into a retirement account instead and purchased a used and practical Nissan.

"I hope it's to your liking." He mistakes my silence for disapproval. "We can get you something bigger ..."

"No, no." I don't need a stamp-sized rock on my finger. I take it out of the box and slide it on. It fits like a glove, effortless perfection. "It's beautiful, Trey. Thank you."

"I'm heading out. When I get home tonight, we can talk dates for the ceremony."

"We should elope," I say without hesitation. The idea of standing before a congregation of hundreds of watchful eyes in a virginal white gown makes me cringe. I've never been one to fantasize about wedding cakes and lace veils and being carried over the threshold. "Would make sense with how fast we're moving ... people would just chalk it up to a couple of people caught up in the excitement of a new relationship."

His dark brows angle. "This is true. Plus the quicker we marry, the sooner we can begin the next item on the agenda ..."

Having a baby.

A sharp twist cuts through my center. I reach for my coffee, nodding. "Sounds like a plan."

We haven't discussed the method, whether we try the old-fashioned way or involve a fertility clinic. Either way, my body, my choice.

I place a hand on my lower belly, imagining it swollen and kicking with life. The tiniest piece of my glass-shard heart aches, but I keep that to myself—as I've always done.

As I'll always do.

"Enjoy your day," I tell him on his way out.

He turns in the doorway. "You as well."

The dining room grows hollow with his absence. Domiciliary staff move about the estate, cooking, cleaning, arranging. The noise comes in echoes and waves. The amount of time and energy it takes to maintain this place is mind blowing.

Trey's got to be lonely, living here by himself. Though I suppose he likes it that way. No one to bother you. No one to fill your head with silly, meaningless words, tease you with cheesy pet names, or leave wet towels on the floor in the morning.

I'm one of those rare forms who enjoy being single.

From what I've gleaned, he's not much different.

They say similar attracts similar, like attracts like.

In the strangest, most inexplicable way, it makes sense—he and I together.

THIRTY

Trey

PRESENT

“AMES SPEAKING.” Nolan comes on the line after a time-sucking twelve-minute wait despite the fact that our call was scheduled in advance.

Ass.

Broderick and I trade looks across the desk.

“Nolan, it’s Trey. Wanted to give you an update regarding the progress of your contract stipulations,” I say.

“So soon?” He chuckles from the other end. “It’s been what, two weeks since we last spoke? Don’t tell me you found your soul mate already. What agency did you use?”

My jaw tightens.

“It’s rather sudden, I know. But when it feels right ...” I try to keep a straight face knowing I sound like a love-drunk sap. If he knew me better, he’d see through the act.

Don’t get me wrong—Sophie’s incredible.

But I’m not pussy-whipped.

And certainly not in love.

“I was actually calling to tell you *personally*, that we intend to marry in the coming months,” I say. “Thought you should hear it from me first before you read about it in the *Times*.”

“Trey ...” He exhales into the phone. “You really think I’m that big of a moron? I know what you’re doing. You can’t tell me you met a girl two weeks ago and now you’re running off into the sunset together. Pretty convenient timing, wouldn’t you say?”

“This sort of thing happens all the time. It’s nothing new. We’re not the first. We won’t be the last. If you’d like to question the authenticity of our relationship, then I invite you to come to Chicago for a visit and meet her.”

“Hm.” His voice is muffled, as if his hand covers his mouth. “That’s actually not a bad idea. Though I’m not a huge fan of the Midwest. Why don’t the two of you come east? Just bought a place in Martha’s Vineyard. We’re taking the kids there next month. You could spend the weekend as our guests ...”

Fuck.

I’m not worried about selling our relationship as authentic, but the idea of “vacationing” with Ames and his family is about as appealing as stabbing my cock with a blunt butter knife.

“What do you say? Anabelle loves entertaining,” he says, referring to his wife. “Could be a good time.”

Doubtful.

Broderick’s brows rise, a silent coaxing, and he nods, letting me know where he stands on this proposal. We’ve come this far. Now we don’t have a choice.

“Email me the dates, and we’ll make it happen.” I feign excitement.

“Excellent,” Nolan says. “Can’t wait to meet the lucky girl.”

I stab the red button on the intercom to end the call.

“Think of it this way,” Broderick says, “it’ll put you that much closer to the end goal. A week with Ames and his family. A quickie wedding. A baby ... What’d I tell you? You always get what you want. Somehow it works out for you every damn time.”

My office phone rings, and I check the time.

“I’ve got a conference call with senior management in web services,” I say, motioning toward the door.

He leaves, and I pick up the receiver.

When I’m done, I make another call, this time to Sophie.

She answers on the second ring.

“You getting settled?” I ask. It’s strange knowing she’s in my home without me.

“Trying to.” Her voice is an echo, like the sweeping halls of the estate swallow her as she makes her way around. “Only got lost twice today.”

I laugh. “Won’t be long until you know the way around there like the back of your hand.”

“I’m aiming for the end of the week, but that might be slightly ambitious given the fact that you have an insane amount of rooms ...”

"To be fair, I don't know what's in half of them. One of these days *you'll* be giving *me* tours," I say. A flight itinerary reminder pops up on my screen. "Don't forget to pack for this weekend."

Not that Seattle is littered with paparazzi, but I'm already envisioning grainy shots of the two of us strolling the city blocks, in baseball caps and sunglasses, arms around each other like some kind of celebrity couple trying to enjoy the real world incognito.

We've got this ...

"I'll have my assistant add you to the manifest," I say. "We leave Friday at noon."

"I'll be ready." Her tone isn't colored with excitement, but I'll ensure she enjoys every minute of our weekend away. That and I'm excited to get her out of her element for a bit. Could bring out a side of her I've yet to meet ...

I tell my future wife I'll see her tonight, and end the call. Then I send an email to my first assistant to add Sophie to the flight. When I'm finished, I take a moment to relax. But only a moment—I don't have all day, and my next meeting starts in fifteen minutes.

Broderick was right.

Things *always* work out for me.

At this point, I don't think anything could go wrong.

THIRTY-ONE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

SEATTLE IS PRETTY from way up here. I slide the door to the hotel balcony and inhale the earthy petrichor that saturates the air. Rain clouds roll in and below a blue-gray fog settles over the city. We landed in Trey's jet over an hour ago at some small airport east of the city. He arranged for a driver to bring me here while he hightailed it to a meeting.

Ever since my time with Nolan, I've hated hotels because they only remind me of him.

They all smell the same—bleached linens and shampooed carpet, icy air conditioning and a cocktail of random people with a mélange of intermixing colognes and fragrances. The furniture is always arranged the same way. The towels are always white.

It doesn't matter which hotel I'm in or the city, the ghost of Nolan is always here, haunting me.

That said, our suite is gorgeous with its extra-wide balcony and sweeping views of the city. The concierge left a bottle of wine, a box of Belgian chocolates, and an assortment of artisanal soaps on the coffee table along with a handwritten note from the hotel manager.

I slide the door closed behind me and perch against the limestone balcony railing. A dozen stories down cars honk, buses hum, and people hustle and hurry like ants on a farm.

I spend the better part of the hour taking it all in, and when I'm done, I grab the book I threw in my bag at the last minute, read a few chapters, and catch a quick nap on the king-sized bed in the next room.

It's impossible to remember the last time I had a lazy afternoon where I hadn't a single thing to do or care in the world. Even on my laziest of days at home, there's always a nagging to-do list haunting my thoughts.

When I wake, it's almost six.

Trey mentioned dinner was at seven-thirty and that there was a dress code. I unpack my suitcase, hang my clothes in the closet, and select a classic black number before heading to the bathroom to get ready.

I'm securing my earrings ten minutes later when the gentle open and close of the hotel door tells me he's back. A moment later, he appears in the open bathroom doorway.

"How'd it go?" I ask.

"Just as I expected." He leans against the jamb, casual, his suit jacket slung over one shoulder. His expression is unreadable as his stare weighs on me.

Nolan used to look at me that way, utterly transfixed.

Or maybe I'm projecting.

"So ... you got it?" I select a rose-pink lip stain and dab it onto my lips.

He nods. "Of course."

"Congrats." I can't help wonder if anyone ever tells him that. Or if it even matters. Grabbing up businesses is just another Friday in his world. "I'm happy for you."

"Think we'll order champagne tonight," he says when he snaps out of it. I exhale. All that heaviness from his gaze left me holding my breath, woefully aware of every angle my body held as he studied me. "We should celebrate."

Champagne always brings me back to my first date with Nolan at that party, the way it flowed like a river and left delicious bubbles on my tongue that tasted like sugared lemons and gave me a sample of true freedom for the first time in my life.

"Sounds great." I meet his gaze in the mirror, forcing a smile. And I make a silent promise to myself not to let Nolan spoil this weekend for me.

I can't. I won't.

He's already ruined enough.

THIRTY-TWO

Trey

PRESENT

IT'S NOT QUITE eleven when we return from dinner. The hotel room is soundless and pitch black, save for the bathroom light pouring from the open doorway, illuminating a path to the bedroom like an implied invitation.

If she were any other woman, we'd have torn our clothes off by now and I'd have her pinned against the wall, hands over her head as I did what I pleased.

But Sophie's not any other woman.

She's the kind you savor, not the kind you devour.

She kicks off her heels, hips swaying as she makes her way to the foot of the bed. She's somewhere between buzzed and drunk and she hasn't stopped smiling—or chatting—all night, even taking the time to make small talk with our server. While we were leaving the restaurant, a college-aged kid stopped us and asked for a picture with me. Sophie happily took his phone and snapped three shots because his eyes were closed in the first two.

"Seattle suits you," I say as she rubs her feet. "Maybe we should move here after the wedding."

She smirks. "You would never leave Chicago. You'd have to uproot your entire company."

"I know." While I like the idea of leaving, I couldn't do that to my employees. And the Westcott name is synonymous with Chicago. Practically royalty. I'd be pissing all over my family's legacy if I left.

I sit beside her.

"May I?" I point to her feet, which are covered in welts the color of bitten lips.

Sophie nods, and I take her right foot, pressing my thumb along the center of her arched sole. Her skin is baby smooth, delicate and feminine, and her toes are painted a milky white.

She exhales, head tossed back until her hair nearly touches the top of the mattress. The Seattle drizzle earlier tonight dampened her waves until they became swollen and untamed, and as the evening progressed, I couldn't look at her without picturing her naked body wrapped in sheets, sex hair spilling around her shoulders and a satisfied smile claiming her ripe mouth.

Her lips part, followed by a sweet burst of liquor-scented breath. A pleased wince covers her pretty face.

I'm certain this is what she'd look like if my tongue were between her thighs right now ...

I massage the spaces between her toes and then I work my way to her Achilles tendon before moving higher, to her calf.

"My god. How are you so good at this?" She bites her lip as if stifling a moan, eyes squeezed tight.

My cock swells, straining beneath my boxers. I massage deeper, but not too deep. Just enough to incite another breathy moan.

"All I have to do is watch your face ... it tells me where I need to go." The technique has never steered me wrong in the bedroom. But it works for this, too ...

She gives me a sideways glance before trading one foot for the other.

"Thank you for celebrating with me tonight." It was different commemorating an acquisition with someone for a change. I didn't hate it.

"How do you normally celebrate?"

"By prepping for my next deal."

Her eyes widen. "You don't stop to appreciate it? You don't take a trip or have a drink or ... I don't know, get laid?"

"Why? Are you offering?" I laugh through my nose. I'm teasing, but it doesn't hurt to plant the seed. There's nothing wrong with a little physical release when the moment's right.

In my twenties, getting laid was all I cared about and there was no shortage of beautiful women clawing down my door, blowing up my phone, throwing themselves in my path—figuratively and otherwise. But after a while, my reckless ways grew unfulfilling and the women were all the same. I tried the dating thing. Raquel was my longest relationship on record, and toward the latter part of our relationship, I'd kept meaning to end it but work obligations were getting in the way so the talk got sidelined until the day I came home early and found her by the pool doing a line of blow off her tennis

coach's six-pack.

"When was the last time you got laid?" she asks.

"Last month." I don't remember her name, just that I met her in an exclusive Chicago speakeasy and she wore a red dress that left little to the imagination. Unfortunately it turned out to be false advertising. I might as well have been grinding against a dead fish for an hour—silent, unmoving, wide-eyed. A handful of times I debated whether or not to check her pulse. When it was over, she told me she had a boyfriend, grabbed her things, and got the hell out of there. "What about you?"

"Same," she says.

"Boyfriend or hook-up?"

"Hook-up. Always a hook-up." She runs a hand through her mussed-up mane.

"Relationships," I huff, half-teasing. "Who has time for that?"

Sophie snickers. "Apparently not us."

If I had a drink in my hand, I'd drink to that. Instead I continue working on her calves, inching higher by the second.

"You look beautiful tonight. I don't think I told you that."

"Thank you," she says without pause. Her lashes flutter as she stares at me the way women do sometimes, mesmerized, starstruck.

"Tell me something I don't know about you," I say, bored with small talk.

"This game again?"

"It's not a game. Just trying to know you more. In a couple of months you'll be my wife, so ..."

"I'm allergic to cantaloupe."

"Don't insult me with tedious trivia," I say. "Give me something better than that. What's your greatest fear? Who was your first love?"

"I fear nothing." She spreads her arms wide and wears a goofy grin. "And I don't have one."

Bullshit.

"As per usual, you're a terrible liar."

"I used to be terrified of spiders when I was little," she says. "But I grew out of that. And fine. I had a first love, but he was a jerk."

"Aren't they all ..."

"Every last one." She leans back on the bed, arms behind her neck, and the hem of her skirt rides up her thighs, exposing her silky soft legs.

I lie beside her, watching her, head resting on my hand. "I still don't understand you."

"What don't you understand?"

"Either your eyes are lit and you're slinging sassy one-liners my way or you're completely shut down, and there's nothing in between," I say. "I want to know who you are, Sophie. The *real* you. Tell me, what makes you tick? What gets you going every morning? And what made you finally agree to marry me?"

"One question at a time, Tom Brokaw ..."

"Just answer."

Dragging in a breath, she says, "What makes me tick? Sunny days. Wandering the public library on a lazy Saturday morning before grabbing a coffee on my way home. The scent of warm laundry. My sister's smile, my mother's hugs ..."

They say the best things in life are free. Clearly Sophie's mastered that mantra. Perhaps I went about it all wrong, dumping millions of dollars into her lap when all she wanted was a basket of dryer-fresh towels on a sunny day with a side of coffee.

"What gets me going every morning?" she continues. "My alarm and my intense, irrational fear of being late for work. And why did I finally agree to marry you?"

She rolls to her side to face me.

"Because someone once told me that *life is fucking short*," Sophie feeds me my own line and accents it with a slow wink that tells me tonight's champagne is still making its rounds through her veins. "And he was right."

"Smart man," I say. "But that still doesn't answer my question."

"Does it matter? I said yes ..." She sits up, gathering her hair at the nape of her neck before letting it go. The strap of her dress falls down one shoulder. "It's warm in here. Do you think it's warm?"

Sliding off the bed, she tiptoes across the room and adjusts the thermostat before returning to my side. The air kicks on with a steady hum, chilling the air around us.

"Sophie." There's an edge in my voice. I need to get her back on track. "Why did you really agree to marry me?"

She's quiet at first, picking at a fingernail before sliding her hands beneath her thighs.

"Because you're not what I thought you were," she finally answers. "And because I can put a lot of good into this world with that kind of money. The positives outweighed the negatives."

"And what were the negatives?" Other than sacrificing some pie-in-the-sky hope of finding the elusive myth of true love, I can think of none.

"The potential for complications."

"Fortunately for you, I'm as uncomplicated as they come. And everything's in writing. We're both protected."

"I'm not talking about what's in the contract," she says. "I'm talking about ..." Sophie bites her lip, glancing down, uncharacteristically pensive. "The way you looked at me tonight ... you telling me I looked beautiful ... the way you touch me, so tender and careful ... and your eyes keep drifting to my mouth ..."

You want to kiss me, Trey. And part of me wants to let you because everything feels so easy with you in this moment."

Then kiss me. I lean in, hand cupping her cheek, but she turns away. I've never been rebuffed.

Ever.

Leaning back, I say, "What's the worst that could happen? One thing leads to another and we wake up two orgasms richer? I thought I made myself clear, Sophie. I'm not looking to be your boyfriend. I've no need to steal your heart. We have an arrangement. And as two consenting adults who are wildly attracted to each other and are about to spend an incredible amount of time together, why should we deny ourselves physical pleasure?"

"You make it sound simple."

"Because it is."

She rolls her eyes. "What if it gets messy?"

"What if it doesn't?"

She doesn't answer my question, then again it was rhetorical.

"Let's make a pact," she says a minute later. "If we do this ... and either of us begins to feel something, we speak up—and then we stop before it goes too far."

I used to think I was the king of noncommittal, but Sophie has officially dethroned me.

"I'm one hundred percent on board with that," I assure her. "You're clearly allergic to feelings and I don't have time for them. Rest assured we're on the same page."

Her posture loosens and her shoulders fall as she exhales. "Shake on it?"

She extends her right hand, the bathroom light behind me showcasing a teasing glint in her eyes. She's serious yet she's deflecting with humor.

Typical.

I slide my hand into hers, and then I pull her into my lap. Gripping her hips, I push her against me. The resistance between us fades as our lips finally meet. She rocks back and forth, her hemline gathered around her waist and her tits pressed against me as our mouths crash into one another. My cock throbs until it aches, and she moans before accepting my tongue.

A moment later, she slides off me, dropping to her knees at the foot of the bed, unfastening my belt followed by my zipper. I lean back as she frees my cock. It fills her hand and she pumps the length before swallowing the tip, tonguing circles down the shaft.

"Holy shit." I gather her hair in my fist, guiding myself deeper into that fuckable mouth I've been staring at for the past six hours.

Intensity builds. I've never had issues lasting, but tonight might be an exception.

Taking her hand, I pull her from my cock and guide her on top of me. "I want to taste you."

Lying back, I position her spread thighs over my face, pushing her panties aside and dragging my tongue against the length of her seam. Gripping her ripe ass in my hands, I devour her arousal with greedy, painted strokes until her legs begin to quake and her breath begins to shorten.

She reaches for the headboard, bracing herself as I grip her harder and circle my tongue against her sweet clit. Riding my face, her hips buck and quiet moans fill the room. I'm certain she's about to come when she sits up, flips her position, and turns her attention back to my cock. Taking me into her wet mouth once more, I melt into the mattress beneath her, gaze fixed on the ceiling and hardly able to see straight. When I get my shit together, I run my hands along her inner thighs before dragging her panties down and sliding two fingers into her wet slit. A minute later, she's riding my face, reverse cowgirl style, my cock deep in her mouth as she moans, the vibrations taking me out of this hotel room, out of this fucking world.

She works my length harder, faster, her moans growing louder the greedier my tongue becomes. When her pussy pulses against my lips, I know she's close. A moment later, I let myself go, filling her waiting mouth as her hips buck and her body unfurls, relaxing against me in a collapsed heap of pent-up exhaustion.

Maybe we didn't fuck, but I've never been this satisfied in my life.

When it's over, she climbs from the bed and disappears into the bathroom as I lie spent, unable to move. The faucet runs and she emerges a few minutes later in nothing more than her lace bra and matching panties. I watch her body, outlined by shadows and light, as she retrieves a silk nightie from her suitcase and slips it over her head before unfastening her bra.

Guess we won't be sleeping naked tonight ...

Without a word, I head to the bathroom to get cleaned up. When I come out, she's fast asleep, covers pulled to her chin as per usual. Climbing in beside her, I think about pulling her against me just to breathe in her sweet scent and bask in her warm, soft afterglow. It's a strange desire, wanting to be close to her. Normally when this sort of thing happens, it's the other way around. I've never been one for spooning after sex or anything remotely couple-y. But once again, I can't help but feel as if I didn't get all of her tonight.

And good God, do I want all of her.

But I think better of it because that's the kind of thing a boyfriend would do, and we both agreed not to complicate this. We even shook on it ...

Rolling to my side, I shut down my urges with a massive dose of self-control. But an hour later, I'm wide awake, replaying tonight in my head. And in the middle of the night, I turn to watch her sleep, utterly absorbed by the one woman who can never be mine.

THIRTY-THREE

SOPHIE

Past

MY MORNING STARTED with two pink lines and ended with me walking out of Planned Parenthood with a sonogram tucked into my purse.

I don't understand how this happened. I've been on the pill for years. And I don't know how Nolan will react. We've never discussed what we'd do if something like this happened. I've been feeling tired and nauseous lately, chalking it up to stress. Between studying for mid-terms and running from school to Nolan's hotel and back, I hadn't had a chance to sit still in months. But when I finally looked at the calendar, it hit me...no period in eight weeks.

I sit in my car, tears streaming down my face as I call him.

"Hey, Soph." He answers after the first ring.

I try to speak, but my lungs gasp for air as I hold back tears.

"Soph? You there?" he asks.

"Yeah." My voice is a breathy whisper.

"What's wrong? What's going on?"

I wanted to tell him in person tonight, but that's three hours from now, and I don't want to sit with this for any longer than I have to.

"I'm pregnant," I say.

His lack of a reaction makes me think of my mother, which only makes me want to cry more. She's going to be beyond disappointed in me. Not to mention, she's already got her hands full caring for Emmeline. Add a crying newborn to the mix ...

"All right," he finally speaks. "I'm in and out of meetings the rest of the afternoon, but we'll talk about this tonight, okay? Don't ... don't cry. Don't get upset. We'll figure this out."

We end the call, and I check my reflection in the visor. There'll be no hiding these bloodshot eyes or this puffy face. I can't go home looking like this.

I drive around until I find an abandoned parking lot, and I have a good cry.

Nolan said we'd figure it out together.

I have to trust that he'll know what to do, that he'll have our best interests at heart—all three of them.

THIRTY-FOUR

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I WAKE NAKED, with a satisfied ache between my legs.

The bathroom door is ajar and fog leaks into the bedroom as Trey showers.

The water stops, and a minute later Trey steps out, white towel wrapped low around his hips. His abs glisten, still damp, and droplets of water form rivulets down his shoulders. The scent of soap and cedar fills the air, and when his gaze meets mine, he smiles—dimples and all.

My heart trips over itself, but I quickly remember last night, how quickly everything happened, how my inhibitions flew out the balcony windows, thanks to a few too many celebratory drinks and a pact made in good faith.

Tucking the sheets around me, I try not to make it obvious that I'm checking him out as I replay last night in my head. I can practically feel his feathered, frenzied strokes against my sex. In fact, my recollection is so vivid I almost come just thinking about it ...

"Sleep well?" he asks.

I nod. "Haven't slept that hard in a long time ..."

The last man to go down on me had no idea where my clit was and jammed his fingers into me with a haphazard rhythm, like he'd dropped something in my cervix and was trying to fish it out. When I suggested we move onto fucking, he fished an old condom from his wallet and pounded me jackhammer style until he came five minutes later. The guy before him couldn't get hard, and when he finally did, he used porno moves the whole time. Of course, there've been guys who have been too good, which has its own implications. But none of those experiences have come close to the way I felt last night.

It was more than physical, it was liberating.

I've never been so at ease with a man, like there was zero pressure to be anything but myself.

Earlier in the day, I promised myself a fun evening. And for some inexplicable reason, there's something about Trey's presence that makes me feel safe. His honesty, perhaps? The fact that we're on the same page? His peculiar interest in getting to know me?

The man shatters my expectations on a daily basis. Sometimes it's the little things, sometimes it isn't.

At dinner last night, he didn't take his eyes off me once. Not to check out the gorgeous brunette who sauntered by our table. Not to peruse the menu (he already knew what he wanted). He studied me with an intensity in his gaze unlike anything I've ever felt before. And in the car on the way home, our fingers brushed, causing a hitch in my breath because I almost thought he was going to hold my hand—and I almost thought about letting him.

The lines that separates the road to love and the magic of lust can be dangerously thin.

I take comfort in knowing we're on the same page.

Trey takes the spot beside me. Bedhead frames my face, I obviously haven't so much as brushed my teeth, and yet he drinks me in like I'm the sexiest thing he's ever seen. His eyes flash. I wonder if he's replaying last night, too.

"I've got a meeting this morning," he says. "But I'll be back shortly before noon. We can spend the afternoon together. Anywhere you want to go."

"Sounds good." I tamp down my excitement and ignore the erratic beating in my chest when a curious urge to kiss him goodbye washes over me.

No, no, no, I tell myself. Don't do it.

It won't end well.

THIRTY-FIVE

SOPHIE

Past

WE'RE SLOUCHED on the hotel couch. Side by side. Nolan's head is in his hands. My elbows are on my knees. There are no fresh flowers on the coffee table. No champagne on ice. No dimmed lamps.

Tonight's not about that.

All afternoon I conjured the dozens of different ways this could go. Maybe he'd propose? Maybe he'd embrace this unexpected gift and make the best of it? We could get a house in the suburbs with a yard. I even pictured what the baby would look like, trying my best to guess the gender, but neither one felt quite right. I thought women were supposed to just *know* when they're pregnant, like a gut feeling, but so far I feel nothing but confusion and a laundry list of conflicting emotions.

My hopes fly out the window as I study him.

Nothing about the way he looks suggests he's about to spin this into a fairytale ending.

"I've been thinking about this all afternoon, about the right thing to do," he says. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. Being a mom would take all of that away from you, every last opportunity."

"So what are you saying? I don't want to get rid of it ..."

"That's not what I'm saying at all, Soph." He places a hand on mine. "I can get you into Princeton this fall. My father's on the board of trustees. He knows people in admissions. All I have to do is make a call and you're in."

He's insane.

"I can't afford Princeton."

"I'd pay for it all. Every last cent."

"And what about the baby?"

He pushes a breath between tight lips before dragging his hand through his hair. "I've never wanted to be a father, Soph ..."

"So I'm on my own?" My voice breaks and my voice is so tight in my throat that it burns.

He pinches the bridge of his perfect nose. "That's not what I'm suggesting."

"So you're saying we should give it up for adoption?" My palm cups my flat stomach. It's crazy how something so tiny has the power to change so much.

"Out of all the options, I think that's what's best. Don't you?"

"I don't know." I pick at my nails. "The idea of just ... handing my baby over to some stranger ..."

The thought alone blurs my vision with a waterfall of tears.

Damned hormones.

"What if I knew someone?" he asks. "A woman. A friend of mine from college. She's been trying to have a baby for years. She'd give anything to be a mother."

A hot flash of jealousy jets through me even though he says she's just a friend. Obviously he has female friends. And he's dated other women before. But he's never talked about them around me.

"It'd be better than giving it to some stranger ..." he says. "I just ... I think this baby would be better off ... without us for parents."

"How could you say that?"

"I'd be a terrible father. I work too much. I play too hard. I'm always traveling ... I'm only in Chicago on the weekends, and not for much longer," his voice trails. We hadn't talked about an end date. All this time our nights together felt infinite. Or maybe I was in denial, needing to believe something like this was a forever kind of thing. "And you're so young. You should go to college, get a career established, make something of yourself before you dedicate the rest of your life to another human being."

I think of my parents, and how my father up and decided he didn't want to be a dad anymore. Just like that. Mom sent him to the store for diapers and he never came back. I can't imagine raising a child for years with Nolan, only to have him walk out of our lives.

It'd destroy me.

"How old is she?" I ask. "This woman you know."

"My age."

"What does she do for a living?"

"She's a pediatrician." He smiles. The room is dim but I could swear his eyes light, like he's certain about his choice and his mind is settled. "Never met anyone who loves kids more than she does."

"Can I think about it?"

Nolan breathes hard and lets his hands fall in his lap.

"I just found out about this. I need to wrap my head around the concept of giving birth to a child and handing it over to someone else," I say.

"You really want to raise a kid, Soph? Is that what you want to do for the next eighteen years? While all your friends are out running around, having the time of their lives? You want to work paycheck-to-paycheck jobs, barely making ends meet? Like your mother?"

My jaw falls—even if he has a point.

I don't bring up child support. He's always been generous with me, but he's always wanted me. He's always gotten something out of this. If he doesn't want this baby, he could easily sign away his rights. And he'd have every reason to if he had no intention of being in its life.

I rise from the sofa. He didn't need to bring my mom into this. "I can't believe you just went there ..."

He wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me back. "You're right. I shouldn't have said that. It's just ... this is a lot."

I avoid his gaze, though I can't ignore its heaviness.

"I just want what's best for you," he says. "And for the baby."

"I still need to think about it."

"Fine." He lets me go, watching my every move. I try to imagine what's going through his mind right now, but something tells me I don't want to know.

"You were never in this for the long haul, were you?" My voice is meek yet jagged. I never dreamed I'd be asking this question. "This was never about *us*. You just wanted sex. I can't believe I was so blind. God, I'm an idiot—"

"—this was *always* about *us*," he says. His dark eyes plunge to my stomach. "But now it's about ... all of us."

There's no compassion in his tone, no tenderness in the way he touches me. He doesn't reach for my stomach. There were no saccharin tears in his eyes when he picked me up earlier. The entire drive to the hotel was radio silent. Nothing but road noise and the occasional brush of the windshield wipers against glass as we drove beneath spitting rain clouds.

"I'm scared," I say, wishing I could lose myself in his arms but knowing it wouldn't be the same as before.

I don't know that it'll ever be the same.

He pulls me into his lap, but he doesn't kiss me. He isn't hard. He simply holds me.

"I need you to trust me," he says. "Can you do that?"

Burying my face against his shoulder, I cry into his dress shirt. Quiet, contained sobs so as not to make a complete fool of myself.

"Can you trust me, Soph?" he asks again.

Sitting up, I dry my cheeks with the back of my hand. "Can you take me home?"

He frowns. "Why?"

"I want to be alone tonight." As alone as I can be. Mom and Em are home, but they'll be in the living room watching Friday night TV.

"Are you sure?" The fact that he doesn't beg me to stay stings, even if I've already made my mind up to leave.

"Yes. I want to go." I collect my purse, phone, and duffel bag and wait by the door.

The drive to my apartment, much like the drive to the hotel earlier, is filled with silent uncertainty. When we arrive, he holds my hand, kissing the top as he promises everything's going to be okay.

I say nothing as I climb out and head inside.

To my surprise, Mom and Em aren't home. Looks like I got what I wanted—to be alone. Only then I remember I'm not alone. Placing my hand on my belly, I close my eyes.

It's a girl, I think to myself. Certain this time.

Even if Nolan doesn't want her, I do.

But even if I kept her, would I be enough?

Could I give her enough?

I amble to my room, darken the blinds, grab my ear pods, and collapse in a heap on my bed listening to a playlist I made years ago, long before Nolan Ames walked into my life. I pull the covers over my head. Close my eyes. And let it all out.

I'm half asleep when Nolan texts me, asking if I'm okay.

NOLAN: Just checking on you ...

NOLAN: Let me know if you need anything.

NOLAN: I'm here for you.

I silence my ringer, taking comfort in the fact that he reached out. Maybe he cares more than he lets on? Maybe our little predicament has paralyzed him with fear and he's not thinking straight? He's definitely not acting like himself.

We have thirty-two weeks to make this decision.

A lot can change in seven months.

THIRTY-SIX

SOPHIE

PRESENT

A WOMAN with green hair and Doc Martens points her camera phone in our direction as we take in the view of Elliot Bay Saturday afternoon. It's the third time today that Trey's been recognized.

"Don't look now, but we're being watched again," I say through the side of my mouth, leaning in. I find it humorous how people care so much about someone they'll never know.

"Maybe we should hold hands? For authenticity's sake?" he suggests, his expression serious.

We're flanked by a team of security, all of them ensuring no one invades our personal bubble while keeping a comfortable distance.

I nod.

This is literally what I signed up for—to be his fiancée. Public displays of affection are a part of that.

I take Trey's hand and brush my shoulder against his arm as we stroll unhurried, like a lovely, normal couple enjoying the moment. He looks down at me with a knowing, closed-mouth smile and, for a microsecond, a spark of realness passes through me. Hot then cold. Electric then gone.

Diverting my attention, I focus on the Olympic Mountains in the distance. From here, I'm reminded how tiny we are in the grand scheme of things. Lifetimes from now, no one will know my name. It makes all of life's big problems and impossible decisions seem almost miniscule. And it gives me all the more reason to do as much good as I can while I'm here.

We grab a quick lunch at a local oyster house before ambling into a vintage bookstore and a handful of charming little shops all lined up in a row. In the end, we've amassed a collection of things we don't need. A first edition Maya Angelou. A crystal candy dish the shape of the Space Needle. A postcard-sized, framed map of the city from 1962. A Babe Ruth autographed baseball card that reminded him of his grandfather's card collection. A few hundred dollars later, we climb into his rented SUV and head to the hotel.

Buying things I don't need without giving them serious contemplation isn't something I'm accustomed to, but Trey does it as if it's as natural as breathing.

A handful of years back, I received a \$2,000 tax return that burned a hole in my pocket for weeks until I finally compromised and splurged on a new pair of shoes before stashing the rest in savings. I imagine a trillion dollars could burn quite the hole if a person let it.

"Westcott," he says as we turn a corner. His phone is pressed against his ear. I hadn't heard it vibrate. In fact, I haven't heard it vibrate once this afternoon. It was also quiet at dinner last night.

That can't be normal for him ...

Did he turn it off—for me?

"Yes," he says, "that's fine. Tell them I'll handle it first thing Monday. And don't do anything until I get back."

Trey ends the call, slides his phone out of sight, and clears his throat. "Sorry about that."

I wave it off. "It's fine. Work doesn't stop because you're out of town."

I tell myself not to read into any of this, that a man with his upbringing has kindness and good manners in his DNA. He probably treats everyone in his personal life this way. His reputation as a shark in the office is probably nothing more than a tactic that helps him close business deals and keep his employees from stepping out of line. No one respects a pushover.

"Is there anything you'd like to do on your last night here? We fly out first thing in the morning."

Flashbacks of last night fill my head. My stomach flips at the thought of his tongue flicking between my thighs, and I shift in my seat.

"I'm up for ... *whatever*," I say, hoping he can read between the lines—and praying his driver and the three security guards with us don't. In a perfect world, I'd exercise restraint. I'd suggest a museum or a movie, something neutral and unsexy. But last night's been playing in my mind on a loop all day, and I've been craving another release ever since.

It's Trey's turn to shift. He loosens his tie, his lips turning up at the side. "*Whatever* ... sounds like a plan."

Once again, we're on the same page.

The chauffeur deposits us under a black awning covered in the hotel's monogram, and the guard in the front seat takes us inside. We board the elevator, and Trey's fingers trace my lower back before trailing lower. A spray of goose bumps cover my flesh, and I stay still as a statue so as not to capture the guard's attention.

When we arrive on our floor, a man and a much younger woman are waiting to board. The woman nudges her partner, nodding toward Trey with giant eyes and gaping, overfilled lips. But before they have a chance to say anything, the guard sweeps us away to our room.

The door isn't halfway closed before he pins me against the wall. Lifting my arms over my head, he captures my wrists in his grip as his mouth trails tingling kisses down my neck. I writhe, heart beating in my throat, barely able to feel the marble floor beneath my weightless body.

"You're so fucking sexy," he all but growls, his cinnamon breath hot against my skin. "Every time I look at you, it's all I can do not to touch you."

He releases his hold and cups my cheek in his hand before his mouth crushes mine. Inhaling the scent of coffee shops and bookstores and Seattle sea breeze, I breathe him in and let myself melt against the magnetic heat of his body. His hips press against mine, his bulge prominent and unapologetic. I climb into his arms with an urgency unlike any I've known before.

Cupping my ass, he lifts me, carrying me to the bedroom suite and depositing me on the freshly made bed. Climbing over me, he tastes my lips once more as his hand unfastens the buttons of my blouse one by one, until my bare stomach is exposed to the icy air of our hotel room.

His fingertips trace my flesh, followed by his mouth, but, with each inch closer to my pulsing arousal, my body tenses.

Sitting up, I place my hand against his chest and gently push him to his back. Before he has a chance to protest, I straddle him, working his zipper.

He doesn't argue. Most men don't when your hands are deep into their pants.

I free his cock, palming his impressive girth before bringing my lips to meet the tip.

Dragging my tongue along his veiny ridges, his thighs go limber beneath me as he melts into the mattress the instant I take him into my mouth. A moment later, he attempts to pull me closer to him—but it's still daytime outside, and the break in the blackout curtains spills light onto the bed.

We're not in the dark. Not completely.

There are things I'm not ready for him to see, things I don't want to explain—not here, not yet.

I ignore his insistence and suck him harder, faster, until he gives up ... and gives in. When he finally explodes in my mouth, I swallow once before disappearing into the bathroom to freshen up.

He's still on the bed when I come out, his fly zipped but belt buckle undone.

Pulling me into his lap, he whispers, "Your turn," before burying his face into my neck, caressing the curve of my hips, and working his way to my waistband.

I place a hand on his chest, leaning in to nibble his ear, and I whisper in return, "Later."

And I fully intend to cash in on that promise ...

He frowns, brows furrowed. His lips part, as if he's about to question me, but I silence him with a kiss before climbing off.

"I'm going to grab some fresh air," I say as I head to the balcony.

Once outside, the wind sweeps my hair over my shoulders, and I keep an eye on the glass slider, fully expecting him to step out any moment. But he leaves me alone, as if he knows it's what I want right now.

Someday I'll tell Trey everything.

But that day is not today.

I'm enjoying myself too much to ruin it.

THIRTY-SEVEN

SOPHIE

Past

"WE NEED to get you up and moving." A nurse in yellow scrubs bursts into my hospital recovery suite like a ray of freaking sunshine, beaming so bright the apples of her cheeks are as red as cherries. "The sooner you start getting around, the easier your recovery will be."

She positions a walker by the front door and comes around the side of my bed.

"Mom, you're welcome to help me," she says to my mother. "We have handrails along the hallways, but we definitely don't want Sophie on her own. Need someone there just in case."

My mom and I exchange looks, both of us knowing it should be Nolan helping me.

The nurse offers a bent arm, and I hook my hand in the crook, slowly swinging my legs off the side of the bed until my socked feet meet the hard floor.

My C-section incision burns as yesterday's morphine works its way out of my system, and my legs ache from immobility.

Baby Girl Ames was born at 12:02 pm yesterday. Eight pounds, twelve ounces. Twenty inches long. Full head of dark hair like her father. Nolan stayed by my side during the surgery, brushing my hair and offering me looks of assurance since all I could see was a blue sheet and all I could hear were the beeps of the machines that registered our heartbeats.

I'll never forget the doctor declaring, "It's a girl!" and the nurses cheering.

I'll also never forget that the second she was out, Nolan flew to the nurses' side as they weighed and measured and tested her. When they were done, one of them showed me a pink face swaddled tight in a white hospital blanket before placing her back in the clear bassinet and rolling her out of the OR.

Nolan went with her ...

I'd never seen such light in his eyes, and as the doctor sewed me up, I thought maybe ... *just maybe* ... he'd had a change of heart about all of this.

"Come on, Sophie. You can do this." Mom takes my other arm and together, we stand. I'm unsteady at first. Then the nurse positions the walker and IV stand and offers an encouraging nod. I grip the bar. Mom moves the IV, hand on my lower back.

"You're doing great," the nurse tells us. "I'll let you two roam a bit and I'll be back to check on you shortly."

With stunted, cautious steps, I make my way to the hall. A sign outside the door points left for the nursery.

I want to see her ... I want to see her one last time before the social worker comes in and I sign my life away.

"Have you heard from Nolan?" I ask.

They had me sign the birth certificate yesterday, pressing my fingertips into black ink and placing them in the boxes next to my daughter's inky footprints. The spot for Nolan's signature was blank, which I thought was funny since I was under the impression he hadn't left the baby's side since she breathed her first breath.

"I tried to call him," Mom says. "But he didn't answer."

She doesn't disguise the disgust in her voice.

Up ahead, a row of glass windows paints a view of the nursery. Babies lined up. Some sleeping. Some squirming. Some crying. Some sucking rubber pacifiers and staring blankly above. All of them swaddled. Tiny. Innocent. A man and woman in regular clothes stand beside a bassinet in the corner, talking to a nurse in head-to-toe pink with a stethoscope around her neck.

The closer I get, the more I recognize the man ... the broad shoulders, thick hair the color of coffee, the twinkle in his gaze when he grins. He places his arm around the lanky, raven-haired woman, whose face I can't see. And she leans against him, resting her head on his shoulder. A second later, he presses a kiss against her forehead and pulls her tight into his arms.

This must be the adoptive mother ...

... and clearly she's more than a "friend."

I suck in a breath and pray my mom doesn't notice—but she does.

"Don't make a scene, Mom. Please," I say.

And she doesn't. Hand steady on my lower back, she keeps her gaze trained forward. "Let's head the other way. I heard the view is better than *that* end of the hall."

My lips quaver with each step.

Two thick tears slide down my cheeks.

"I hate him, Mom," I say. "I hate him, I hate him, I hate him."

"I know." Her voice is low, a cushion of sympathy. Her gaze is distant, as if she's retrieving a painful memory from her own personal collection. And now I get it. I get why she felt the way she did about my father. He lied. He betrayed her in the worst way. "But you're going to be okay, Sophie. You're strong. Stronger than you give yourself credit for. A lot stronger than I was ..."

I swallow the hard lump in my throat and continue on, each step bringing me closer to my full recovery. And with each burning, painful step, I make a promise to myself—that I'll never fall for another man like Nolan Ames again.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Trey

PRESENT

"I LEFT FOR TWO DAYS." I slam the phone down as Broderick takes the chair opposite my desk on Monday morning. "I want Pesek fired. And I want Monrovia to replace him. *Immediately.*"

Over the weekend, it came to light that one of our marketing interns has been harassed over the past three months by a certain married executive. He's lured her with jobs that don't exist as well as career-oriented threats he has no ability to carry out. I never cared for the blowhard when we hired him, but he had the reputation as one of the best marketing hires in the industry, so I took a chance.

But now the girl's parents are threatening legal action—understandably so. The last thing I need when I'm trying to acquire a "family" business is a shit storm like this smearing the Westcott name. Not to mention we're on the heels of going public with our engagement in the coming weeks.

This could overshadow everything.

Lifting my receiver, I call Mona and have her summon Pesek to my office.

"She's willing to accept a private settlement," Broderick says. "She's asking for five million, but I think we can get her down to two and an ironclad NDA."

"Give her whatever she wants." I turn my chair, studying the Chicago skyline and its ironically sunny disposition today.

Broderick leaves.

I don't have time for this today.

Mona calls my phone. I answer on the first ring.

"Mr. Westcott, I'm told Gary Pesek didn't report to the office today," she says. "Apparently he turned in his notice via email earlier this morning."

Fucking coward.

I'll deal with him one way or another.

I hang up the phone, only to have it ring once more. Without checking the caller ID, I answer it with a brusque, "What?"

"Hello to you too ..." It's Sophie.

Exhaling, I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Rough morning?" she asks.

"Something like that."

"Anything I can do to help?" Her voice is low, and I picture her in her office, hand cupped over her receiver, a brand of mischievousness in her ocean eyes as her full lips tug up at the sides.

"Yes, actually. You can report to my office. *Now.*"

It takes eleven tortuous minutes for my future wife to saunter into my space, her hips swaying with each high-heeled step. Apparently the word "now" wasn't enough to light a fire in her leisurely pace.

"Lock the door behind you." I point. My cock swells as she fastens the deadbolt, and I loosen my tie.

I meet her halfway, crushing her upturned lips with a kiss as I grab a handful of her ass. Pulling her against me, I untuck the hem of her shirt from her tight skirt, sliding my palms up her silky-smooth skin until I reach the lace cups of her bra. Tugging the fabric aside, I lift her blouse and take a rosebud nipple between my teeth before swirling my tongue around its ridges.

Sophie tosses her head back, cupping my head in her hands.

When I've sampled her enough, I lead her to my desk, positioning myself between her spread thighs. She eyes the open blinds behind me and her body turns rigid.

"No one can see us all the way up here," I say. "We're practically in the fucking clouds."

She swallows, her body still frozen beneath my touch.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing." The enigmatic minx reaches for my belt, unzips my fly, and takes me in her palm.

I place a hand over hers. "You're a terrible liar."

"I don't like being on display."

"Fine." I leave her on my desk, legs wide and panties peeking from beneath her skirt, and I make my rounds to every window in my office, tugging the blinds closed. When I come back, I claim her mouth with

a punishing kiss and slide my hands between her creamy thighs until I reach the damp fabric. "I want you, Sophie. *All of you ...*"

Without a word, she kisses me back as she maneuvers off my desk, pulls her skirt up to her hips, and tugs her panties down. Bunching the lacy fabric, she tosses them in the middle of my desk before turning and gifting me with a full display of her silky ass. I plunge my fingers into her wet pussy from behind. She grinds against me, palms splayed on my desk.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" I whisper in her ear as I lean over her. Over the weekend we discussed birth control, and the week that followed the contract finalization, we both tested clean. I wanted to ensure everything was in order.

Head slanted, she bites her lower lip and nods. "Yes ..."

I place my cock at her entrance, giving her one inch of me at a time. Her pussy is as soft as it is tight, as slick as it is hot. She's dripping wet, fucking me as her body accepts mine.

A moan escapes her lips.

"Shh," I remind her.

I pull her closer as we fuck, kissing the back of her neck and gathering a fist of her glossy hair as I stretch her with each thrust. With my next meeting in five minutes, it's a frenzied rush to fulfillment, but what we lack this morning I have no doubt we'll make up for tonight.

Running my hand down the front of her thighs, I stop at the mound of her fevered flesh and rub circles against her swollen clit. What I wouldn't give to taste her—if only we had more time.

"Are you close?" I whisper against her ear, plunging deeper, harder.

"Mm hm." She leans forward, gripping the ledge of my desk as her heart-shaped ass begs for more.

We match rhythms.

Her breath shallows.

The tightness between my legs warns that the release is near, and the instant her pussy tightens against my cock, I rear hot and hard against her, spilling into her with unapologetic spasms until she's filled to the hilt with my seed.

When it's over, I turn her to face me, tasting her mouth one last time before she slides her panties up, tugs her skirt into place, and disappears into the private restroom in the back of my office to clean up.

Mona rings me to let me know my conference call with our e-commerce division is on line three.

"Tell them I need a few more minutes," I say.

Sophie emerges a moment later, rosy cheeks, blouse tucked into a straightened skirt, hair slightly more tousled than it was before, but nothing obvious.

Her gaze falls to the blinking light on my phone, indicating I've got a call on hold.

"See you at home?" she asks, on her way out.

"Wait."

She stops, and I go to her, taking her hand and pulling her close. "You're the only woman I've ever fucked on that desk."

It's the truth.

I don't cross-contaminate my work space with my personal liaisons, but for my future wife—and a body I've been dying to fuck since she strutted into my office that first day—I'll make an exception.

"Is that your way of making me feel special? Because it's not necessary." Her eyes shimmer, the brightest thing in this room. She can say she doesn't want this to turn emotional until she's blue in the face, but everyone wants to be told they're special.

"No," I lie. I *do* want her to feel special ... because she is. To me. For some strange and unexpected reason. "I just thought you should know."

She shows herself out, and I take my call, tracing my fingers along the handprints she left on my polished desktop, inhaling the trail of sensual perfume that mingles with a trace of her sweet arousal.

I miss her already—the escape, the release, the heat of her skin, the taste of her lips. The way nothing else matters when we're together because my thoughts orbit around her like she's the fucking sun giving me life.

I've never had this before, this total loss of restraint, this shift in priorities, this preoccupation with another person. In all of my years running Westcott Corp, I've never cleared my schedule or silenced my phone as much as I have these last few weeks.

I told myself she deserved my undivided attention outside the office as we get to know each other. But the more I get to know her, the more I don't want to give my attention to anyone—or anything—*but* her.

We made a pact in Seattle that we'd speak up should this start to veer off and become more than physical.

I don't know *what* this is that I'm feeling.

But I have a feeling I'm going to have to say something.

Soon.

SOPHIE

Past

“SOPHIE, FINISH YOUR DINNER.” Mom pours Emmeline a glass of milk as she scrutinizes my untouched plate. Two months ago she would have complained about me wasting food, reminding me of our grocery budget. But now that I’ve essentially sold my baby, budgets are no longer a thing.

Maybe “sold” is overstating it.

But that’s how it feels in my soul.

Ever since I signed away my parental rights and left the hospital more alone than I’ve ever felt in my life, Nolan has essentially bankrolled us into a humble yet comfortable lifestyle, a level up from what we knew before. He’s even in the process of purchasing a three-bedroom ranch (in his name) in the next town over for my mom. This fall, he’ll be covering my tuition at Princeton. And he’s agreed to pay for my sister’s ongoing care indefinitely—all of this in exchange for my silence.

Hush money.

I’m never to speak of our relationship—or our baby—to anyone outside my family ever again or he’ll take back the house and terminate the experimental care Emmeline’s been receiving, the care that’s given her back her smile and placed a light in her eyes that wasn’t there before.

I’ve convinced myself that I did the right thing ... for the baby, for Mom, for Emmeline. Even if it wasn’t the right choice for me, at least the ones I care about are benefitting. It’s the only thing that helps me sleep at night—if I manage to fall asleep at all.

“I’m not hungry.” My voice is hardly more than a whisper. I don’t talk much these days.

She throws her hands in the air. “You’re never hungry.”

I don’t have the energy to respond.

“Look at you, wasting away.” She points at my withering body beneath the baggy clothes I wear so I don’t have to look at my flat stomach all day long. I’ve been wearing the same Led Zeppelin top for three days. I’ll change later. “You need your strength. You’re leaving for college in a few months ... do I need to call your doctor?”

The idea of leaving Illinois and relocating halfway across the country, away from my sister, only compounds the loneliness that colors my life these days, but withdrawing my enrollment would be a stupid move.

Almost as stupid as falling for Nolan.

For the first few weeks, he texted me half a dozen times, asking how I was feeling or if I needed anything. I always told him I was fine. Nothing more, nothing less. I didn’t want anything from him, and I still don’t.

Toward the end of those first weeks, I stopped replying. Eventually he stopped texting. I never told him I saw him in the nursery with the adoptive mother. His so-called “friend” whom he kissed as they admired my baby. The way I saw it, there was no point. Everything he ever told me was a lie, and I was tired of being lied to. Besides, there’s nothing he can say or do to change any of this. It’s best we go our separate ways.

I never want to see him again.

Mom carries Emmeline’s dishes to the sink and plucks her phone from the charger. “I’m calling Dr. Conrad. We’re getting you out of this funk.”

“I’m an adult,” I remind her. An adult who has given birth ... “He’s a pediatrician.”

“Then I’ll call your OB,” she says. “I bet your hormones are all out of order. And maybe you need a mood stabilizer. Oh, and something to help you sleep.”

We’re used to medicating things here. Between Emmeline’s muscular dystrophy and Mom’s bouts with cancer, pills are all we know. Anything to numb the discomfort of the cards we’ve been dealt.

She presses the phone to her ear and wanders into her bedroom at the end of the hall, closing the door until her voice becomes an indiscernible mumble. When she returns, she grabs a pen and jots a note on the calendar on the side of our sunflower yellow fridge.

“You’re going in Friday at nine,” Mom says. “Everything’s going to be fine, Sophie.”

She’s said those exact words a hundred times lately. But at least she’s not saying, “*I told you so. I told*

you he'd break your heart." Though I'm sure she thinks it every time she looks at the shell of me moping around the house.

Emmeline studies me with the saddest blue eyes I've ever seen. My chest caves when I realize I haven't spent any quality time with her since coming home from the hospital. We don't watch movies anymore. I haven't painted her nails or braided her hair since I can't remember when. We haven't locked ourselves away in our room, listening to vintage music and pretending the world outside no longer exists.

The realization hits me, unapologetically hard and heavy: I've neglected my sister—my favorite person in the world—since the moment Nolan came into my life.

Heartbreak is a bitter, jagged pill.

But it just might be the guilt of everything I've sacrificed that does me in.

Rising from the table, I dump my untouched food into the trash, rinse my plate, and wheel Emmeline to the bedroom.

"You want to listen to some Fleetwood?" I ask.

Her concerned expression lightens for the first time in forever. "Yeah."

I read once that Stevie wrote *Dreams* as a diss track to Lindsey Buckingham after he broke her heart. If she can get through that, I can get through this.

I cue the music, place Emmeline in her favorite corner of the room, and crawl into my messy bed, staring at the ceiling as the familiar snare drum kicks off one of the most famous breakup anthems in existence.

Closing my eyes, I let Stevie's words saturate every fiber of my being, head to toe, heart to soul.

When the rain washes you clean you'll know ...

FORTY

SOPHIE

PRESENT

"OH MY GOD. So get this ... I heard Westcott is screwing that girl from Payroll." A nasally voice steals my attention Monday afternoon.

I stab my salad with a plastic fork, nose buried in a book as I take my lunch solo. On the other side of the break room, the gossippiest women on my floor are in the midst of a conversation about *me*.

I lay my fork down and close my book, giving them my full attentiveness. They're oblivious to my presence, which means nothing is off the table. This could get interesting.

"You're kidding," the other one says. "The blonde one who always dresses like it's 1950?"

Rolling my eyes, I let the comment roll off my shoulders. I'd take my chambray, gingham, pencil skirts, and tea-length dresses over their off-the-mannequin outfits any day of the week. Outside the office, I'm a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl. At work, I like to have fun with my wardrobe.

"That's what people are saying. Heard from an extremely reliable source that she's been going into his office a lot lately," the first one says, pointing her spoon at her friend. "And someone said he took her to Seattle for a weekend. Why else would he do that?"

When he had me added to his flight manifest, someone must have leaked the info. I'm sure Trey would be livid if he knew, but I'm not trying to get anyone fired. Nobody got hurt. Plus the engagement announcement will be public soon enough.

The first one leans in, sweeping her inky black flat-ironed strands off her shoulder. "I don't get it. I don't see what's so special about her. I mean, she's cute, yeah, but he can have anyone he wants. Literally. Supermodels. Movie stars. Me ...What does she have that we don't?"

Her friend chuckles. "It's probably the sex."

The dark-haired one dabs her mouth with a napkin. "Isn't it always?"

Tucking my book under my arm and depositing my lunch in the trash, I stride to their side of the break room. "I'm sure he'll get sick of her and move on eventually."

Doe-eyed and silent, it takes them zero point two seconds to realize who I am.

"Especially if it's just about the sex." I lift my left hand to my hip so my trillion-cut diamond can glimmer at their eye levels. It's a catty move, sure, but apparently that's the only language these women understand.

The first one swallows, lips pressed flat like she's about to lose the contents of her stomach. The second averts her gaze to her half-eaten bowl of broccoli cheese soup. I could have them canned if I wanted, but that's not the person I want to be.

"Oh. Sorry. Didn't mean to impose on your conversation." I wave my hand. "But if you have any questions about Mr. Westcott's personal life, I'd be happy to pass those along for you."

The raven-haired one begins to say something, but her friend kicks her under the table. I'm not sure there's anything either of them can say to save face. They've said what they've said, and I heard every word of it.

With that, I show myself out and return to my office to finish the rest of the day. While I don't normally let other people's opinions weigh on me, their words replay on a loop as I run my reports.

This arrangement isn't about sex. At least not on paper. And neither one of us could have anticipated the animalistic magnetism that washes over us the second we're alone lately, but those women weren't wrong when they said he could have anyone he wants.

If he knew about my past, about the baby I gave up in exchange for an education and financial security, would he think less of me? Would he still want me? In a way, I'm repeating history, only I'll get to keep my child this time.

The lingering slickness of his seed from this morning dampens my panties. I'm on my final week of birth control and, at the rate we're going, we'll be pregnant before the wedding.

I need to come clean to Trey.

I need to give him a chance to back out before it's too late.

SOPHIE

Past

MUSIC BLASTS from the other room. A couple on the sofa jam their tongues down each other's throats like no one's watching. In the corner, someone's setting up beer pong.

It's the first of November, which means my monthly stipend has been deposited into my bank account. Three thousand dollars. It's more than I need given the fact that my room, board, books, and tuition are all covered.

I don't bother checking my balance anymore. There's always enough in there. *More* than enough. And every time I see that money, I think of *him* and everything I sacrificed to get here.

"You want another one?" Tennyson, a guy with wavy, sandy blond hair and bold Abercrombie looks lifts an empty bottle of Dos Equis. "Or I can make you something else? I think they have vodka and Sprite?"

"I'm good." I lift my mango White Claw, which honestly tastes like vomit water but it's the 'cool' thing to drink here. I've never been a follower, but since coming to Princeton, I've never felt so out of place, and I've found myself going with the flow in an attempt to stick out less.

Everyone comes from prominence here. All the girls carry designer backpacks and the guys drive Range Rovers and people talk about their family's sail boats and vacation homes like they're discussing the weather.

That, and I'm homesick. I FaceTime with my mom and sister almost every day. It's not the same, but it'll tide me over until I fly home for Thanksgiving in a few weeks.

I have a group of girlfriends. Five of us altogether. Two went to the same high school so they're insanely close and sometimes go on boring tangents about people from their hometown, but they're not so bad. Plus they know where all the good parties are, where the alcohol flows like water, and if you want a casual hook-up, all you have to do is eye fuck a guy from across the room until he comes over to talk to you.

Tennyson returns with a new beer and sits beside me. Our thighs touch. He takes a swig, watching me, waiting to make a move. I get the impression that I make guys nervous sometimes. One of my friends told me last month that I'm "hard to read," whatever that means.

"So you're from Illinois?" he asks.

"Yep ..." I take a sip of my lukewarm White Claw.

"And you're an international business major?"

"Yep ..."

We met in Econ 101 at the beginning of the semester, when he chose the desk next to mine and asked to borrow a pen—never mind that he had a razor thin MacBook Air to take his notes. It was something straight out of an 80s movie. The following week, I chose a seat in the back row. He spotted me the instant he walked in and took the spot in front of me. After a while, I got used to it. And it took him months to muster up the courage to invite me to this party at his fraternity.

I don't normally 'do' frat parties, but all my friends have recently landed boyfriends and were embarking on a "quadruple date" tonight. They offered to hook me up with some guy, but I had no interest in being the fifth wheel.

"I'm glad you could come tonight," Tennyson says. You'd think, with his dashing good looks and family money, everything would come easy to the guy, but he has the confidence of a meek mouse. Shitty parenting, maybe? Hard to know.

"Yeah, thanks for the invite." I feign excitement, glancing around the room. My attention settles on the couple on the sofa, still going at it. His hand is up her shirt now and she's grinding on what I'm pretty sure is a massive hard-on.

I catch Tenn staring at my lips. He glances away and takes a drink of his liquid courage. The guy had no qualms stalking me in Econ every week this semester, but the second he has me to himself at a party, he's a shaking poodle.

I finish the last of my tepid drink and rise from the love seat we're sharing.

"Getting another?" he asks.

"No." I take him by his sweaty hand. "Where's your room?"

His green eyes widen, and in this moment I'm certain he has no idea how hot he is. Maybe his teenage years were sheltered. I'm guessing he went to an all-boys school because he's got absolutely no game.

He leads me up a wooden staircase and down a drafty hall until we come to a room. The sign on the door says TENNYSON HEARST AND FOSTER BIRCHFIELD.

"My roommate went home for the weekend," he says, unlocking the knob before leading me inside. He closes the door and flips a switch. Party lights glow from the ceiling. The scent of old things ... leather, wooden furniture ... mix with new things like expensive clothes and electronics and cologne, creating a dizzying cocktail of sensory overload as he licks his lips and cups my face and presses his lanky body against me.

I slept with a random guy the first week of school, and someone else last month. It helps to fill the void, even if it's temporary.

Tennyson's kisses are too wet and he fumbles in his rush to strip down and locate a condom from some wooden box on his dresser, but within minutes we're tumbling into his extra-long bed, straddling, kissing, tasting, touching, and finally—connected ...

But the moment doesn't last long.

Five minutes is all.

When it's over, I roll to the spot next to him, our bodies filling the entirety of the narrow twin mattress.

That was ... underwhelming.

He turns to me and even in the dim light I spot his proud, satisfied grin.

"We should do this more often," he says.

"Yeah," I lie.

"Maybe we could hang out sometime?" He almost stutters. "I could take you to dinner? We could catch a movie?"

Just as I suspected, Tenn's been crushing on me since the beginning of the school year. It's sweet. And I'm flattered. But I'm not interested. And not because he's unpracticed in the sack. If I was into him, if we became a thing, we could explore what we like and what we don't like and figure out a way to make sex mutually satisfying.

But I don't have the time or energy.

"I've got a full load and I'm in, like, five different clubs," I say.

He lies back, head on his pillow, quietly wallowing in this rejection. But it'd be cruel to tell him yes when I have no intention of following through.

Only an asshole would lead someone on.

I climb out of his bed and locate my clothes strewn about his room. My bra hangs from the back of his chair. My jeans are crumpled in a heap at the door along with my sneakers. My sweater is somehow under the bed and my panties are MIA.

A minute later, I'm dressed and Tennyson hasn't moved from the bed, lying there with his limp cock and the look of defeat covering his handsome face.

"See you Monday?" I offer a smile on my way out.

The entire walk back to my dorm, all I can picture is his disappointed expression; all I can hear is his silence. Going forward, I vow to always be upfront about this sort of thing—what I can offer—my body—and what I can't—my heart.

That way nobody gets hurt.

Trey

PRESENT

WE LOCK eyes in the bathroom mirror Thursday night with toothbrushes in our mouths. Standing side by side, we actually look like a couple—a *real* couple.

Minus the emotional aspect and any lovey-dovey words of affirmation, we're getting good at this. We sleep in the same bed. We fuck like rabbits. We have coffee in the morning and dinner at night. And now we're getting ready for bed together.

I rinse my mouth and place my toothbrush in the cup between the faucets. "I win."

She laughs, finishing. "Not everything's a competition."

"Obviously you've learned nothing about me." I slip past her on the way to the door, stopping to rest my hands on her hips and deposit a kiss on the side of her neck, the spot that makes her toss her head back and give the tiniest of squeals.

While Sophie is forty chapters short of an open book, I'm slowly getting to know her better. I find the details are in the things she *doesn't* say. She chews her nails when she's nervous—which is rare, but it happens. She's quietly fascinated by everything, often reading multiple books in varying genres at the same time. She's adamant about being on time everywhere we go. And she's got an impressive collection of vintage t-shirts she reserves for the weekends. She also prefers cheap wine over pricey, sunrises over sunsets, and she's got a small but tight-knit group of friends. Sophie doesn't bother with acquaintances or the lighter side of relationships. Like me, she wants it all or nothing. And she's particular about whom she trusts.

She climbs into bed a minute later, dabbing lotion onto the backs of her hands before placing the bottle back on the nightstand. The sensual scent of Chanel floods the space between us.

"I've been meaning to tell you," I say, "Next month we're taking a trip to Martha's Vineyard. That client I told you about? The one insisting I 'settle down.' He wants to spend a couple of days with us to make sure what we have is real."

She laughs through her nose. "Weird, but okay."

There are pockets of time I myself question whether this is real or not. There's no way Ames won't buy it.

"Yeah, he's interesting in his own way ... Anyway, I'll send the dates to your calendar in the morning," I say.

"You still need to meet my family."

"And you still need to choose a wedding date." I switch off the lamp on my bedside table. "I checked my schedule, and I can clear a week in September."

"Why a whole week?"

"For the honeymoon ..."

"Honeymoons are for lovers."

I smirk. "And what would you call us?"

She rolls to her side, head propped on her hand, eyes shining in the dark like two endless pools. "Do we need a label? I mean, we're engaged. We're going to be married. But we're not in love."

"I'm aware," I say. "But we spend every spare moment of every day together and we can't keep our hands off each other. So what would you call that?"

"Not lovers ..." Her lips pull at one side. "That word makes me cringe."

I laugh. "Me too."

"Partners," she says after a minute of contemplation. "We're partners. That's what you called it the first time you pulled me into your office and made me this offer. You said you needed a partner."

She isn't wrong about what I said.

But we've evolved way past *partners* ...

Exhaustion floods my veins, and I'm getting nowhere with her. Best to sideline this conversation for another time.

"I'd like you to choose a date tomorrow," I say. "Sometime in September. Once we nail that down, I'll have my assistant book a trip. Let me know where you'd like to go, and I'll take you."

Sophie lies back.

"If we don't go on a honeymoon, people might wonder," I add. "It's part of the bigger picture, Soph."
Her attention snaps to me. "Please don't call me Soph."

Frowning in the dark, I sigh.

For the longest time, I hated being called "Trey." It was a nickname, meant to signify the fact that I was the third Pierce Ainsworth Westcott who ever existed. It made me think of the breakfast trays our staff was always delivering to my parents' bedroom, and a kid at my prep school was always spelling it with an 'a' just to get under my skin.

Eventually, I learned to block out that noise.

"I think it's a pretty nickname," I say. I can understand not wanting to be called *tray*, but there's nothing mean-spirited about *Soph*. "But I won't call you that if you don't want me to."

"Thank you," she says without hesitation. She rolls to her side, ending the conversation physically and otherwise.

Once again, she's shutting me out.

One step forward, ten steps back.

I need to speak to Broderick in the morning. Since we're fast-tracking everything, I want to ensure she receives her first payout sooner than the initial six-month mark.

She falls asleep in quiet, resisting increments. Her lips stir. Her eyes tighten. She adjusts her pillow again. And again. Part of me wants to pull her into my arms, slide my hands between her thighs, and get her out of her own head.

She can call this a partnership, but someday she's going to realize it's so much more than that. What we have is different. What we have is so much more than either of us bargained for. Maybe someday she'll allow herself to see that. And I hope to God she does ... because I want her.

All of her.

And I always get what I want.

FORTY-THREE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

MOM SITS STRAIGHT in her chair, pushing her food, her gaze flicking across the table to Trey in the dinette of her home.

I wanted their first meeting to be here. Trey offered to host at his house, but my mother isn't easily impressed and, if anything, the fanfare would've worked against him. She would've thought he was trying to buy her off, the way Nolan did a lifetime ago. While she appreciates his financial help over the years (and was never in a position to turn it down), she knows it came at a price.

And she knows men with money can buy anything they like ...

"This casserole is delicious, Sybil," Trey says, eyes smiling. He looks out of place in this humble home with his designer dress shirt, shiny shoes, and debonair hairstyle. But he doesn't act it. He hasn't stared at the stains in the living room carpet or the pile of clutter on the kitchen counter or the overwhelming scent of cheap cinnamon potpourri that hits you when you first walk through the door.

It may not be what he's accustomed to, but it's home to me.

I also want him to know that the woman he's marrying is more salt-of-the-earth than corporate city girl.

Emmeline stares from her chair, taking careful bites, as if she's self-conscious and doesn't want to spill in front of him.

"So tell me, how did the two of you meet again?" Mom asks despite knowing the answer.

She wants to hear it from his mouth, I'm sure.

I deflect to him. I've been trying to get him to do most of the talking, that way they can get to know him better.

"We bumped into each other in the hallway," he says, glancing at me with a twinkle in his hazel eyes. "Physically bumped into each other. But before that, I'd overheard her defending me to a couple of women who were saying some unflattering non-truths about me."

Mom raises a pencil-thin brow. "Can't say that I'm surprised. Sophie has always been one to speak up for others. You should have seen her in high school. Always protesting other people's causes, always defending the underdog, always calling out bullies."

"Is that so?" Trey shoots me a look.

"I'm surprised you didn't already know that about her," Mom says. "You two must know everything about one another if you're ready to take that next step ..."

"Getting to know your daughter has been half the fun. It seems like every day I learn something new." He squeezes my hand under the table.

"Have you picked a date yet?" Emmeline asks. "For your wedding?"

Trey and I exchange looks.

"September seventh," I say.

Mom takes a drink of her iced water, staring blankly out the window behind my sister. Even if she adored Trey, she'd still tell me we're moving too fast. And I don't blame her. She's protective. She's seen me at my worst and doesn't want to watch me go through that again.

She should really give me more credit ...

"Where will the two of you live?" Mom asks, snapping back into the present.

"At my family's estate," he answers, "just outside the city, about thirty minutes from here. The two of you are welcome any time you'd like."

"Trey's going to put in a special entrance for you, Em," I tell my sister. "And there are elevators. You'll have no problem getting around."

My sister lights. "I can't wait to visit."

"Mom, you have to see his art collection." I place a palm on her forearm. "And his conservatory ... he's got the best view of the stars."

"Our art collection," he corrects. "Our conservatory. And yes, the two of you should stay the night soon so you can enjoy the night sky."

My mother's expression softens, but her posture stays rigid. She's warming up to him, but we're

hardly past tepid.

"So tell me, Trey, what do you love about my daughter?" she asks. "Why are you in such a hurry to lock her down?"

To my mother, marriage is a prison sentence.

His gaze lands on me, and his mouth curls at the side. "Everything."

"Such as?" she asks.

"It's difficult to put into words, but I'll try," he says. "She's the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning. The last thing I think about before I fall asleep. She's beautiful, not just on the outside, but on the inside. She drops coins in charity jars when she thinks no one's looking. She tears up at those ASPCA commercials they run on late-night TV. She happily snaps photos when someone recognizes me on the street. I've never met anyone as witty as her. Every conversation we've ever had has kept me on my toes. Some days, just when I think I've figured her out, she throws me for a loop, and I'm back to square one. Your daughter is a fascinating riddle of a woman. Strong-willed. Independent. And for all those reasons and more, I can't lock her down fast enough."

My heart gallops, my head dizzies, and my hands turn clammy.

I wasn't expecting his answer to be so ... heartfelt?

Mom leans back in her seat, her head angled, her stare less piercing than it's been all evening.

"That's so sweet," Emmeline says. "Sophie, what do you like about Trey? I want to hear your answer."

A heat flushes my cheeks as the spotlight moves on me. Nothing I can say will even come close to that—not because I don't think highly of him, but because I don't allow myself to think about all the ways he's been wonderful to me this past month.

"Sophie's always been private with her emotions," Mom says.

"Yes." Trey's mouth forms a flat line. "I'm quite aware of that."

I could say he makes me feel safe, desired. But I couldn't tell them that I adore his honesty—that he's been clear from day one that he only wants me for one thing—to make him a husband and a father. I also can't tell them he's as generous between the sheets as he is skilled. Or that I'm doing all of this because he's offering me an insane amount of money.

Clearing my throat, I decide to wing it.

"Aside from the fact that he's blindingly good looking," I say with a teasing tone despite the fact that it's true. "He's the smartest businessman I've ever met. He's ambitious. Driven. More sentimental than most people think. He's honest. Curious ..."

"Yes, but how does he make you feel? Obviously, Trey, we know you're driven and successful or you wouldn't be where you are today," Mom says before redirecting her attention to me. "So what is it about him that's made you throw everything out the window and marry someone you've only just met?"

She knows me too well. She's starting to see through the thin veil we've created.

I'm going to have to do better than that.

Trey squeezes my hand under the table once again, a silent reminder that we're in this together.

It hits me hard, the flood of reasons—*real* reasons—I admire him, and they have nothing to do with all those zeroes I stand to receive. It starts with his commanding presence, I think. The way everyone stands at attention the second he walks in the door, followed by the way my body melts with his touch. And when he looks at me, my breath hitches sometimes—but only when I let it. Last week, I overheard a conversation with his accountant where he mentioned he donates one hundred million dollars per month to various charities. That's one-point-two billion a year that he could be funneling back into his businesses, but he chooses to do good things with that cash instead. And the fact that he's never once brought that up to me tells me he does it out of the kindness of his heart, not because he wants recognition.

And he's thoughtful. More than people realize. He had housekeeping change the laundry soap because it made me itchy. And after learning about my cantaloupe allergy, he ensured his chef permanently removed it from the shopping list. He's detail-oriented and nothing gets past him. He can tell by the way I walk when my shoulders ache and he knows when I bite my lower lip I'm ready for him to pounce on me then and there.

He's also respectful of my work ethic, never insisting that I quit my job so I can stay home and be a kept woman.

In all of my years, I've never met anyone quite like him.

So I say none of those things, because if I did, he'd know they were true. He'd know how I really feel about him. And that would open a door we've yet to walk through.

"When you know, you know," I say before rising to clear the table. "Trey brought you gifts. Trey, you want to grab them?"

He studies me before excusing himself to retrieve the wrapped boxes we left by the rug at the front door. When he returns, he hands one to my mother and one to my sister. A minute later, Mom is holding up a vintage Pucci caftan that once belonged to Trey's mother, and Emmeline is fawning over a signed and framed Fleetwood Mac poster.

"This is beautiful, Trey. Thank you." Mom holds it up, and while I've no idea where she'll wear that, the colors bring out the violet in her irises and the implication behind the gift doesn't go unnoticed to me. It couldn't have been easy for him to part with something that once belonged to his mother. The man has a box of his father's cigars sitting on the corner of his grandfather's desk. He could buy anything he wanted in this world, but those are the things he values.

When I'm done clearing the table, we make small talk for another hour before taking off. I hug Mom

and Emmeline and take Trey's hand as we walk to his SUV parked in the pitted concrete driveway.

"That went well, don't you think?" he asks when we back out.

"I mean, I don't think she hates you." I chuckle.

"She's very protective of you. I like that."

"Protective is an understatement, but yes. She is. Sometimes it's a little much."

The next five miles are silent. I'm lost in thought, replaying pieces of conversation tonight like memorized clips. Analyzing them. Imagining everything from their point of view. But eventually Trey's words slip somewhere between all of that.

He knows me better than I thought—yet there's still that one thing he doesn't know.

Every time I convince myself to come clean, he distracts me with a disarming smile or his hand between my thighs or the dizzying way he drinks me in after a long day, and I get caught up in the moment, the delicious escape he provides.

"I meant what I said earlier tonight," he breaks the silence. "All of it."

My thoughts freeze, but my body has a lot to say. Feelings are funny things, the way they crawl down your skin and tighten your chest and flip your stomach. It's a bizarre rollercoaster of fear, anticipation, relief, and ecstasy. And I've never been a fan of rollercoasters.

"You're sweet to say those things," I finally respond.

"Don't." His voice is terse.

"Don't what?"

"Don't downplay this."

"I'm not downplaying anything. You said some nice things, and I appreciate that. So thank you."

"I think you're falling for me, Sophie. I see it in your eyes. I hear it in all the things you don't say. And I think it terrifies you."

If he only knew.

"We made a pact in Seattle," he continues. "Do you remember that?"

I swallow the tight lump in my throat, sensing where this is going. "Yes."

"We promised to speak up if this started feeling more than physical," he says. "And so I'm speaking up. I like you, Sophie."

Heat creeps up my neck. The words that should come, refuse. Stubborn. Like me.

I like him too.

"This is new for me," he continues. "Uncharted territory."

I clasp my hands in my lap, staring at the cherry red taillights in front of us until my eyes sting.

"You don't have to say anything." He takes the pressure down a notch, and I exhale. "Not tonight. But whenever you're ready to have a conversation about this—a *real* fucking conversation—I'll be ready."

If I relent, if I tell him how I truly feel ...

If I give myself to him wholly ...

It's only a matter of time before the newness wears off, things grow stale, and something shiny and new catches his eye. He might be superhuman, but he's still only human.

"Can I sleep in a guest room tonight?" I ask when we get back to the estate. "Just for a little space?"

"No," he says, avoiding my stare. "I'll sleep in a guest room. You can have our bed."

In that moment, the overwhelming urge to climb into his arms and kiss his mouth and inhale his sharp scent and pretend like everything is easy and physical again rushes through me, but I let it pass.

Now that he's admitted he's catching feelings, it's never going to be the way it was.

I'm climbing the stairs to the second level when he disappears into his study. By the time I reach the landing, I hear the clink of a crystal tumbler as he pours a glass of bourbon followed by the familiar creak of his grandfather's leather chair.

I wash up and change for bed, opting for one of the modal pajama sets I wore the first night we shared a bed. Slouchy. Comfortable. Not sexy in the least.

It's weird, sleeping with clothes on now. And the bed is cold and empty without him. An hour later, I'm no closer to sleep than I was before. When my mind races like this, it's impossible to shut it off.

I'm going to tell him tomorrow, and I'm going to tell him everything. It can only go one of two ways.

Flinging the covers off, I tiptoe downstairs to get a glass of water from the kitchen. On my way back, I spot the light in his study glowing through a half-open doorway. Quietly, I make my way over.

He's as still as a statue in his oversized chair. His bourbon rests in front of him, untouched. I doubt he's moved an inch since an hour ago.

"You just going to stand there or you going to come in?" His voice sends a start straight through me. "I heard your footsteps."

His gaze steers toward the doorway and, for the first time in forever, he doesn't look like he's two seconds from making a sexual meal out of me.

I enter, though reluctant, words stuck in my throat. The clock on the wall reads a quarter past midnight. I told myself I'd tell him tomorrow ...

Tomorrow has arrived.

"Before I tell you how I feel." My voice is distant in my ears, like my words are coming from someone else. "I have to tell you something."

His chocolate-gold gaze narrows as he sits forward.

"When I was eighteen, I fell in love with an older man." Weakness spreads through the lower half of my body, but I stay upright. I want to stand for this. A chair seems too informal for what I'm about to say. "He was a successful businessman. Much like you. Handsome. Charming. Charismatic. He pursued me

relentlessly—again, like you. And he gave me money to be with him.”

Speaking those words out loud for the first time sends a painful squeeze to my chest. Not even my closest friends know about this.

“He told me he loved me,” I continue. “And I believed him.”

Trey folds his hands on the desk, listening with intention.

“But everything changed when I got pregnant,” I say, pausing to collect myself. “I found out in the middle of my senior year of high school. I was eight weeks along. And I was terrified. But he said he loved me, and I believed him. I trusted that we’d figure things out. Only he was adamant that we give the baby up for adoption. He said it’d be best for each of us. And when I resisted, he made an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

He frowns, as if he knows where this is going. Though I can’t tell if he’s sympathetic or disapproving.

“He said if I gave our child away, he’d get me into Princeton so I could focus on my future. He said he’d pay for everything. He also said he’d buy my mother a house. And he offered to cover all of my sister’s medical expenses ...” I say. “All I had to do was sign.”

My eyes brim with hot tears, but I blink them away.

“So I did,” I say. “I sold my baby in exchange for a better life.”

His lips purse. Still he says nothing.

I’m going to be sick ...

“So I think you should know, before this goes any further, that I’m a selfish woman who has done selfish things,” I say. “And if you don’t want me to be the mother of your child, I completely understand.”

An endless pause lingers between us before he pushes himself from his chair and makes his way to my side of the desk.

“Is that why you were so against this arrangement?” he breaks his silence.

Gazing up at him through half-damp lashes, I nod. If I tried to speak, I’d surely choke on the words.

He gives me a moment. Or maybe he’s taking one for himself. All I know is the silence between us bears an excruciatingly painful weight.

“What made you change your mind?” he finally asks.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I need more time. And yet, bottling the details grows more painful by the second. There’s an ache deep within my marrow that both fills and hollows me.

“Because I kept thinking about all the good things I could do with that money,” I say. “I can’t change what I did, and I’ll never get that part of me back, but if I spend the rest of my life making a difference for other people, maybe one day I’ll be able to forgive myself.”

Trey drags in a long, jagged breath as he studies me.

“Anything else you want to come clean about?” he asks.

I can’t read him.

“Yes.” I slip my fingers around the waistband of my pajama bottoms and slide them halfway down my hips. Next I push my panties down an inch until the translucent, silver-white C-section scar is on full display. “This is why I’ve always insisted on the dark when we’ve messed around, why I’ve always turned away from you when we have sex ... I didn’t want you to see this, to ask questions I didn’t want to explain. This scar is a reminder of a time in my life that holds nothing but shame and grief.”

He forces a hard breath through his nostrils. Without warning, he lowers himself until my scar is at eye-level. I squeeze my eyes tight, sucking in a breath when he runs his finger along it.

“If you want out of this, if you can’t look at me the same now, I understand,” I say.

When I peer down at him, he meets my stare. And in a moment I never could have anticipated, he presses his mouth against the one place I’ve never allowed a man to kiss since that fateful day.

My lungs burn and my body turns stiff. I force myself to take a deep breath.

Trey rises slowly, his tender hold remaining on my hips. “You were *eighteen*, Sophie. I imagine you were scared out of your mind. You did what you had to do.”

“I could’ve made it work.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I *would’ve* made it work,” I say.

“But then you wouldn’t be who you are today.” He takes my cheek in his hand, and suddenly I resent the compassion in his voice and his despondent gaze washing over me. “You’ve spent all this time hating yourself for what you did when you were a *child*.”

“I was an adult and should’ve known better.”

“You were exploited by an older man. You *couldn’t* have known better.” His words are tight on his mouth. “Tell me, are you going to spend the rest of your life punishing yourself for this?”

“I ... don’t know,” I say. I’ve never thought about it like that. “It’s my burden to bear.”

“So you’re just going to carry this around with you forever?” he asks, incredulous.

When he puts it like that, I realize how ridiculous it seems.

But feelings are real to those who feel them. Unless he knows what I’ve been through firsthand, he can’t comprehend how difficult that would be.

“My baby’s father,” I continue, “he was adamant that he never wanted to be a dad. And he said he found the perfect adoptive mother. He made her sound wonderful ... but the day I signed my baby away, I saw him with her in the nursery. He *kissed* her. He had his arm around her. I later found out she was his college girlfriend ... And a year later, he married her.” My lip trembles and little earthquakes run through my body. “So while I walked away with nothing, they walked away with our baby. He got to raise her. *Gets* to raise her. He got to see every milestone, be there for every first.”

"You had a daughter."

I bite my lip, not realizing I'd used those pronouns. Everything was supposed to stay secret, including the gender.

"Everything about you suddenly makes perfect sense," he says. "Who did this to you, Sophie? I want his fucking name."

My lips press flat. "I wish I could tell you ..."

"Then tell me."

"I signed an NDA," I say. "If I say anything, there'll be repercussions."

He'll stop paying for my sister's experimental treatment. He'll seize the house my mother has come to love the last eight years. There'll be questions. She'll want to know why I broke the NDA. And if she finds out about my arrangement with Trey, I'll break her heart all over again.

"I'll handle those repercussions."

"This isn't your problem."

"Your problems became mine the moment you signed that contract," he says. "Let me deal with him."

I huff. "And what are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

They named her Sasha, and she's beautiful. Wavy dark hair, big blue eyes accented by a thick fringe of lashes, rosy cheeks. In the handful of photos I've seen, she seems bright and happy and cheerful. If Trey were to make a fuss of this, if word were to get out that Nolan knocked up a high school girl and adopted the baby, Sasha could read about it someday. I'm not even sure she knows she's adopted. She looks so much like Nolan ...

"It's too late," I say. "It's not like I can get her back. And it's not like he'll ever apologize. Even if he did, it won't change anything."

Trey exhales, brushing a strand of hair from my forehead. "Tell me who he is anyway. You've already told me everything else, yes?"

"I haven't said his name in eight years," I say.

"Seems to me there's a lot you haven't said in eight years ..."

I open my mouth to speak. But I stop myself.

"It doesn't matter who he is. He's in my past ... and I need to focus on the future ... like you said."

His thumb grazes my lower lip. "Yes, Sophie. You do."

Trey crushes my mouth with a kiss so tender my eyes burn—until a flood of euphoria rushes my veins.

"I'm falling for you." The words are weightless on my tongue but heavy in my chest.

"Oh, Sophie ..." His mouth curls. "I know."

FORTY-FOUR

Trey

PRESENT

"I FEEL embarrassed to ask this as I should've done it by now ... but this business deal you're trying to nab, the one that requires you to be a family man ... what kind of business is it?" Sophie asks as we disembark my jet and make our way to a waiting Town Car. "What makes it so special that you're taking such extreme measures to get it?"

We climb inside and wait for our luggage to be loaded.

"It's a steel and oil company," I say, taking her hand. I haven't stopped touching her since we took off a few hours ago, haven't taken my eyes off her. Instead of her usual weekend jeans-and-t-shirt, she dressed in a fitted navy dress, her hair twisted into a low bun as she wanted to make a memorable first impression. She's Jackie O. and Marilyn combined and then some. "Landing this would be a record deal for me. It'd go down in history as one of the biggest takeovers Westcott Corp has ever done. Not only that, but it would allow me to control a significant portion of the U.S. oil market, which could influence my electric car agenda. I'm also planning to remedy their environmentally destructive practices and uncompetitive worker's wages. They're a parasite of a company, and I intend to fix the error of their ways."

Her hand turns clammy in mine. "What's the name of this company?"

"Ames Oil and Steel," I say. "Soon to be Westcott Oil and Steel ..."

Her gaze falls to her lap, then out the window. To our left, a vast body of water holds bobbing sail boats and yachts in all lengths. Since my parents perished in the Atlantic, the idea of dipping my toes in that ruined ocean makes me slightly nauseous, but with Sophie by my side and this historical deal on the horizon, I'll make an exception.

Shingled houses and colonial-style shops and restaurants line the street on both sides as we enter a quaint seaside town. The sidewalks are peppered with people in carefree, vacation-esque attire, bags in tow.

"We'll be staying in the guest house," I say. "So fortunately we'll get a social reprieve at the end of each night."

I lift her hand to mine and kiss its top. She's trembling.

Up until now, she was excited about the trip, saying she'd never been to Martha's Vineyard. All of last night, her phone glowed in the dark of our bedroom as she researched its history and shared fascinating bits of information. And before that, while packing, she held up dresses and brimmed hats and asked my opinion as I chuckled and reminded her we were only going to be there for two days.

Her face is turned away, attention focused outside.

"Can we pull over?" Her breath quickens and she releases my hold to fan herself.

"Of course." I lean forward and tap the driver. "We need to stop. Immediately."

He pulls into a packed parking lot on the side of a café. She opens the door before we've stopped, rushing to the trunk side of the car.

I hurry around back, finding her hunched over, hands on top of her knees.

"Jesus, are you sick?" I reach for the small of her back as I opt not to check the gravel at her feet.

Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, she nods. "I'm sorry ... it just hit me back there ... maybe it's altitude sickness from the plane?"

That happens, especially in smaller jets and especially when someone is only accustomed to flying commercial. The G-force hits differently.

"Don't apologize." I rub small circles against the spot between her shoulders. "If anything, I'm sorry. I'd reschedule this trip, but I've already cleared my schedule and Ames is expecting us. Plus, the sooner we get this over with, the closer I'll be to closing the deal—then I'll never have to deal with this difficult bastard again.

Sophie is silent, and out of nowhere our driver produces a bottle of water and sanitizing hand wipes. She cleans up and takes a few small sips before steadying herself against the side of the car.

"I can find a doctor. I'm sure I can find someone who makes house calls," I say. "Maybe we can arrange for an IV? Get you some hydration? Since we'll be in the guest house, you'll have privacy as you recover.

I'm sure they'll understand about the altitude sickness ..."

"No, no. I'm sure I'll feel better after I finish this." She takes another drink. "Let's go."
The three of us climb back into the car, and for the next forty miles, she rides in silence.

FORTY-FIVE

SOPHIE

PRESENT

“WELCOME, WELCOME! I’M ANABELLE.” A tall woman with glossy dark hair down to her elbows answers the door of a sprawling blue shingle house with white trim and a private drive. The landscaping is filled with nothing but green and white hydrangeas, trailing a sweet scent into the air along with the salty ocean breeze. “You must be Sophie?”

She leans in, air kissing each of my cheeks and depositing a faint perfume against my skin that smells like a million bucks and warm chocolate chip cookies at the same time.

Our driver wheels our luggage up the paved walkway. Anabelle waves him closer, telling him to place everything inside the front door. He leaves our bags in the foyer before vanishing into the Town Car and departing down the circle drive.

Children’s laughter fills the background. Somewhere in this home, my daughter plays, oblivious to my presence. My throat constricts, but I force a smile.

“And of course, you’re Trey,” she says, air kissing his cheeks as well. “I know all about you ... but it’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“The feeling is mutual,” he says.

“Nolan’s out back on the patio by the pool,” she says before rolling her eyes. “Just took a work call. That man wouldn’t know the meaning of vacation if it smacked him alongside the head.”

My stomach twists and hot bile rises up my throat, but I force it away with sheer will. I won’t let him see me quake. I won’t let him get a reaction out of me.

Trey slides his hand around mine and we follow Anabelle through the soaring two-story entry to a sliding door off her impressive white-and-marble kitchen.

He’s lounging in a chair that faces a sparkling cerulean blue pool, legs crossed at the ankles as he peruses something on his phone. From this angle, I can tell his broad shoulders have rounded and his hair has thinned since nearly a decade ago. And when we get closer, I spy a stomach that protrudes enough to strain the buttons on his chambray shirt.

Time has not been kind to him.

A petty burst of satisfaction washes through me.

“Nolan,” Anabelle says, voice sing-song-y. “Our guests have arrived.”

He darkens his phone screen, places it on a table that matches his lounge chair, and turns to face us, pushing himself up to a standing with a subtle groan. His gaze lands on Trey first and he extends his right hand.

“Pleasure to finally meet you in person,” he says. But when his attention shifts to me, a restrained paleness colors his tanned face. “And you are?”

Of course he’s going to pretend he doesn’t know me.

“Sophie Bristol,” I give him my full name. A reminder of a name he’s likely spent the last eight years trying to forget.

“Nice to meet you,” he says, extending his hand. All eyes are on us, so I can’t show a hint of reluctance.

“Likewise,” I say, our eyes holding for one knowing second. The inner teenage me wants to glare at him, but I won’t. He doesn’t deserve the satisfaction.

Anabelle checks her watch. When we disembarked the jet earlier, it was nearly four o’clock. “Should we start with some drinks? I make a mean margarita ...”

“That would be amazing, Anabelle. Thank you,” Trey says.

“Why don’t you all have a seat here.” She points at a zinc-topped table beneath a stained-cedar pergola. “And I’ll be right back.”

Anabelle disappears inside, her brightly patterned sundress loose on her thin hips as it sways in the breeze.

“How was the flight?” Nolan makes small talk, his laser-intense stare flicking between the two of us. Something about it weighs on me, hard, intrusive. But I offer him a smile each time, a silent “fuck you.”

“As expected,” Trey answers. He hates small talk, so I imagine this is torture. “How long are you

staying here?"

"As long as the wife would like." Nolan chuckles. "Lately I've been letting her call the shots. She's the one pushing for me to retire. The kids aren't getting any younger, and neither are we. Sasha will be graduating high school in ten years and Enzo will be right behind her. I'm sure that time will fly."

He peers at me from across the table. It was a directed jab, I know it. He probably thinks I'm here on purpose, that I've leaked the details of our NDA. And in a way I did, but I kept his name out of it. After all, that's what mattered most to him. As long as "Nolan Ames" is detached from that scandal, his secret is safe.

The sliding door whirs and Anabelle returns with a pitcher and four empty margarita glasses. "I hope you don't mind agave for the sweetener. I used fresh limes, but I've got strawberries inside I can puree if you'd like?"

"Lime is fine," Trey says. "No problem with keeping it traditional."

"Wonderful." She places the tray on the table, pouring and passing out drinks.

"So how'd the two of you meet anyway?" Nolan asks.

"At work," Trey answers, looking to me. "We bumped into each other in the hallway and I was immediately smitten with her. Called her into my office and we hit it off."

Nolan sips his drink. "Psh, come on. I think you can do better than that."

"And what do you mean by that?" Trey squints but keeps his tone jovial.

"No offense to you or Sophie, but that doesn't exactly scream love at first sight," Nolan says.

"I guess you had to be there," I say, taking Trey's hand. He rubs the top of it with his thumb, offering me a loving half-grin. "When you know, you know."

"Exactly," Trey says.

"Have you set a date for the wedding?" Anabelle asks, taking a seat next to her husband.

"September," I say.

"Can't come soon enough," Trey adds.

"That's wonderful." Anabelle's arched brows rise as she smiles. "September is a beautiful time of year, perfectly straddling summer and fall. Have you planned your honeymoon yet?"

"Florence," Trey says without pause. "Sophie's always wanted to visit, and I haven't been since childhood. Should be a treat seeing it all over again through her eyes."

The sincerity in his words blankets the tightness in my core. I exhale, more relaxed than a moment ago. And while I never wanted to see Nolan again, with Trey by my side, it's not as unpleasant as it could've been otherwise.

The faintness of a child's scream passes through an open kitchen window and Anabelle chuckles. "Sounds like there's a fire I need to put out. Probably arguing over magna tiles again ... Excuse me for a minute please."

She doesn't seem the least bit bothered by this, and I take comfort in witnessing her patience. Nolan claimed she was a pediatrician. Whether that was a lie or not remains to be seen, but her love of her children is evident in the serene smile on her face and her unhurried walk inside.

"She's amazing with them," Nolan says, watching Anabelle disappear inside once more. "Truly."

My heart breaks and mends at the same time, two sides of a conflicting coin.

Trey squeezes my hand. "We hope to have a family of our own someday. Soon, God willing."

Nolan peers at me, gaze heavier than before. "Yes. God willing."

I haven't seen my daughter's face since she was born, and I've never seen a picture of Enzo. It wouldn't surprise me if Nolan knocked up some other poor, unsuspecting girl and did her dirty too, but I'll never know. If he did, I'm sure she signed an iron-clad NDA. But that's none of my business ...

I sip my lime margarita, the organic aftertaste lingering on my tongue.

Anabelle returns, breathless. "There is once again peace in the valley."

Nolan grazes her backside as she sits down. Intentional, I'm sure. While he wears an agreeable expression on his face and colors his tone with gentle cordialness, his eyes flash with irritation.

"I'm making lobster for dinner," she announces. "My grandmother's recipe."

"Anabelle makes the most amazing lobster," Nolan adds. "You'll never have any better than hers."

"You're too sweet," she leans over, gifting him with a tasteful peck on the cheek. "Isn't he the best?"

If she gets excited about a compliment about her lobster, I can only imagine all the other ways he snogs her over.

"I got a sitter for the children. Thought we could do adults-only tonight since it's your first night with us," Anabelle says. "Tomorrow Nolan's taking us boating. There's this beautiful private enclave with a little beach. We just happened upon it the other day. Thought we could let the kids play and soak up some sun at the same time."

Anabelle places her hand over her husband's.

"Sounds lovely," I say before remembering Trey's parents died in a plane crash over the Atlantic. I can't imagine tomorrow will be easy for him. "Will be a new experience for the both of us."

Anabelle finishes her drink before rising. "I hate to leave you, but I should get started on dinner ..."

"Anything I can do to help?" I ask.

In a petty flash of a second, my heart swells at the chance to see him sweat. His former girlfriend and his lovely wife in the same room together ... it'd make him sweat bullets, I'm sure. Not that I'd do anything, of course. But it could be fun (for me). The thought alone sends a smirk to my lips, but I bite it away before anyone notices.

"Oh, Sophie. You're sweet to offer, but I've got it. Please, relax. And if you need another pitcher, send

Nolan to fetch me.” Anabelle heads in and I get the sense she doesn’t sit down much. It’s probably how she keeps her svelte figure. That and she has the lean build of a marathon runner. Strange how Nolan used to worship my curves and yet he married a woman without a single arc on her body.

“Have you seen the guest cottage?” Nolan asks, though he must know the answer already.

“Not yet.”

Nolan rises. “I’d be happy to give you a quick tour. I’m sure you’d like to put your feet up for a bit before dinner. I know how exhausting a day of traveling can be.”

Trey and I follow him, hand in hand, down a bluestone walkway toward something more mini-mansion than cottage. The blue shingle siding matches the main house, and window boxes hang from the main floor window, overflowing with pink and blue flowers that drip down the sides, sweet and delicate.

Nolan gets the door and lets us in first. It smells like vetiver and sea salt, and everything is neutral, beige and white. Fluffy pillows flood the sofa. Chic and tasteful coastal décor fills the walls. I’ve walked into boutiques before that weren’t half as nice as this. Save for the vacuum track marks on the rug, it doesn’t appear that anyone has ever set foot in here.

“You’ll be comfortable here,” he says, confident. “If you need anything, please let Anabelle or I know. I’ll leave the two of you to get situated.”

Our bags are already in the bedroom. They must have staff.

The moment the front door closes, Trey pulls me against him, crushing my mouth with a kiss. I leave my lips closed, remembering that I lost the contents of my stomach a couple of hours ago on the ride here.

“I should freshen up,” I say, pressing my hands against his chest.

“Of course,” he says, studying me. His hand cups my face. Funny how less than an hour ago, he was watching me vomit in some random parking lot and didn’t question my air sickness rationale. Not that I’m upset about it. We came here to do a job and he’s focused on landing this deal. I can’t expect him to be tuned into me twenty-four-seven. “You’re doing amazing, by the way.”

“Helps that I mean every word ...”

I locate the master suite and load my suitcase onto the plush king bed, digging out my toiletry bag and tucking into the bathroom to get cleaned up. When I emerge, Trey is perched on the mattress, resting against a stack of propped pillows, shoes kicked off and hands behind his head. With eyes closed and his brows furrowed, I can only imagine how heavy his mind is. Everything he’s worked for is riding on this weekend.

He deserve a respite.

And I need a distraction.

I climb up, settling across his lap, the hem of my dress tugging up to expose my thighs. Peering at me through a squinted gaze the color of an autumn sunset, he grips my hips, pushing me onto him as his cock pulses, growing firm between my legs.

“I’ve been waiting for this all day,” he says.

I wasn’t in the mood for anything remotely physical after the car ride here nor was I in a mindset to fantasize about screwing Trey while I was drinking margaritas with Nolan and his wife, but now ... losing myself in his wanton gaze, I’m transported somewhere else completely.

Nothing outside that door exists—I’m ready to surrender myself in his arms.

Leaning in, I graze my mouth against his, breathing in his familiar, comforting scent as he works the back zipper of my dress and pulls it over my head. Next, he unfastens my bra, tossing it aside, and I work the buttons of his dress shirt until his smooth, muscled chest fills my palms.

I’m still not used to making love in daylight, but I push the nagging thought from my mind, refusing to let it harden my body and steal my breath.

Flipping me to my back, Trey slides my panties down to my ankles using his teeth, and when he returns to my middle, he kisses my C-section scar before working lower to my mound and then dragging his tongue down the length of my slit.

He spreads my thighs wide, tasting me with generous strokes, and I melt into the mattress, all but dissolving as I give myself to him on this bed in Nolan’s guest house.

It’s the sweetest revenge. Poetic almost.

But I turn my focus to the man who makes me forget who I am, who I was, to the man who adores me exactly as I am, even when I’m not quite sure of that myself.

I grip his thick, dark hair and close my eyes.

And for the first time in a long time, I bask in the familiar bloom of warmth that fills my heart.

I never thought I could love again.

But maybe ... just maybe ... I could love *him*.

Nolan

PRESENT

“THEY’RE LOVELY, AREN’T THEY?” My wife massages organic chamomile lotion into her hands before climbing beneath the covers Friday night. She sidles up to me, the way she does on the nights she’s willing to get “frisky” (as she likes to call it). “Reminds me of us when we were young.”

When we were in college, we couldn’t keep our fucking hands off each other.

During our twenties, medical school stole most of her time, attention, and energy. And I was constantly fending off competition. Never mind my last name or the zeroes in my back account, it’s impossible to compete with a dashing man in scrubs who can carry on an intelligent conversation about medicine without yawning.

“Christ, Anabelle. We’re not *that* old,” I say, and then I slip my arm over her shoulders because I shouldn’t have snapped. She did nothing wrong. She’s never done anything wrong.

I don’t deserve Anabelle—which is why I’ll stop at nothing to protect what we have.

The TV flickers across the room as her fingertips trail down my chest and stomach and travel below the comforter. In the dim bedroom light, I count her ribs beneath her silk pajama top.

One ... two ... three ... four ...

She’s skin and bones. And it’s no surprise. She never sits still. She’s always doting on me, the kids, our guests ...

She even dotes on the help for crying out loud.

The other day Margaux had a mild cough and Ana ordered her to bed, personally delivering her two Sudafed pills and a cup of lavender tea.

“You think they enjoyed themselves tonight?” Anabelle draws in an exhausted breath as she pumps my length in her hand.

“Of course.” I offer a reassuring nod. “You’re a world class hostess.”

I can’t recall the last time my wife actually let me inside of her. A year ago? Maybe two? And it was on my birthday, so it was obviously a pity fuck.

That’s the thing no one ever tells you about marriage and kids—if you’re not careful, they suck all the passion out of your relationship and leave a shell in its place that no amount of couples counseling or sex therapy can ever fill.

But Anabelle’s a pleaser. She’s also a martyr, always willing to sacrifice for those around her.

“They couldn’t stop smiling all night,” Anabelle muses. “Remember when we were like that?”

“Baby, I smile every time you walk in the room.” We both know it’s a lie but Anabelle would never call me out on it.

Straddling my legs, she pulls my cock from my boxers. I flick the TV off and I lean toward my nightstand to turn out the light. From the break in our blinds, I spot the guest cottage. Dimly lit. Cozy. Romantic. My jaw tenses and my mind is flurried with a dozen worrisome concerns and a side of unexpected jealousy.

Never in a million years did I expect to see Sophie Bristol again.

Never in a trillion years did I think she’d be the one showing up on Trey’s arm today.

It took all the strength I had not to come unglued. But no good could have come from acting out on my emotions. Anabelle would’ve noticed something was off and she’d have asked questions. And Sophie would’ve had the satisfaction of getting a rise out of me. It was better to play dumb, to stare through her like she meant nothing to me while doting on sweet Anabelle.

My wife takes me in her mouth. I close my eyes. Lean back. Try to concentrate. But I’m not getting hard.

This has *never* happened before.

Ana’s vigor and enthusiasm tells me she notices ...

Eyes clenched tighter, I narrow my concentration, envisioning the redhead in that office porn video I watched earlier this morning when the kids were with the nanny and Ana was on one of her two-hour marathon jogs.

Still nothing ...

I glance toward the guest cottage again.

Trey and Sophie are probably in there christening the place from top to bottom—and I can only imagine the pleasure she's deriving from all of this.

The thought of Sophie prancing around naked mere yards from this very room, wrapping her curved thighs around a man I couldn't have competed with in my best of years ... sends a simmer to my blood and a circuitous heat to my skin.

I rip my t-shirt off and toss it across the room.

My cock throbs, but it's only slightly more swollen than before.

Anabelle sucks and circles harder, faster. The sooner I come, the sooner this will be over for her, but part of me wants to enjoy this bizarre little cocktail of sensations lacing my veins. One second I'm furious, jaw clenched and fists gripping the sheets. The next minute my cock expands so fast it fucking burns.

Sophie was dynamite in bed, always. She had no inhibitions. No insecurities. Willing to try anything to please me. And she was exceedingly generous with an unrivaled, insatiable libido.

At the time, I was convinced she was a phase.

I was always going to marry Ana ... we were just waiting for stars to align. I never wanted children. She did. Deep down we both knew one of us would succumb to the other's wishes eventually.

The stars aligned when Sophie discovered she was pregnant.

The way I saw it, I had two options—lose Ana forever and become the laughingstock of the Ames name when word got out that I'd knocked up a high school girl ... or buy Sophie off and create the family Ana dreamed of so she'd finally agree to marry me.

The latter seemed like a win-win situation for everyone.

So while I hurt Sophie—deeply, I'm sure—in the end, it was in the best interest of all involved. Sasha is thriving and loved and she'll never have to want for anything so long as she lives. Sophie wouldn't have been able to give her that. She could've given her love. Maybe a leaking roof over her head and a handful of used books from the thrift shop. A questionable public school education. Ten hours a day at a mediocre daycare center. Store brand macaroni and cheese and processed hot dogs for dinner.

But my child deserved more than that—even if she'll never know I'm her biological father.

I could never risk Ana finding out ...

I'd have lost her for good.

My wife's lithe body is hunched over me as she coaxes me to the edge as she's done a thousand times before ...

... but this time it's different.

The lights go out at the cottage.

An image flashes in my head—Trey driving himself deep inside Sophie, the excitement of new love, the insatiable sex drive of a relationship not yet marred by commitment and fatherhood. And then I think of those long weekends holed up in a Chicago hotel room, Sophie worshipping my body as I feasted on hers, content with fine diners, sweet nothings, and empty promises.

My cock hardens, my body stiffens, and molten jealousy in the form of cum shoots into my wife's throat. She swallows in one gulp and wears a smile tinged in exhausted relief before trotting off to the bathroom to clean up.

Had Sophie not fallen pregnant, I'm not sure how much longer we'd have carried on, but at the time, I was taking things day by day. Did I love the girl? No. Not even close. But I loved how I felt when I was with her. Young. Exuberant. Carefree. While Anabelle made me feel loved, Sophie made me feel alive—two completely distinct experiences.

Anabelle was, is, and forever will be my first love.

For a brief period in my life, Sophie Bristol was my weakness.

And now she's *his*.

But not for long.

First chance I get tomorrow, I'm putting a stop to their happily ever after.

FORTY-SEVEN

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I WAKE as the sun rises Saturday morning and spot the pool out our bedroom window. Trey is sound asleep. Last night's dinner was exhausting with all its superficial small talk and the subtle and sometimes blatant scrutinizing from the other side of the table.

I'm not sure Nolan is entirely convinced.

Climbing out of bed so as not to wake Trey, I slip into a t-shirt and robe, make a coffee in the guest cottage kitchen, and quietly slip out the door to enjoy the pool solo. I can't remember the last time I so much as dipped my toes in a pool. Maybe a few years ago on a girls' trip to Jamaica? But we mostly hung out by the ocean, sipping Mai Tais and burying our feet in the soft sand.

The still water glistens in the sun, reflecting the light above, and I perch on the edge of the pool, sliding my legs in until it stops at my knees. Closing my eyes, I breathe in the salty air and focus on the present moment, forgetting, for a second, where I am.

Today I get to meet my daughter for the first time in eight years. The heaviness of that isn't lost on me. I promise myself I'll be happy for her, that I'll spend time with her, but I'll try not to get too attached. Years from now, she probably won't remember this day, but I will.

I'll cherish it as long as I live.

All this time, I should've been ignoring the fact that I have to spend a weekend with Nolan and focusing on the gift I'm getting in return—time with Sasha.

The whoosh of the sliding glass door forces me into the moment. I turn, praying it's only Anabelle.

It isn't.

"You're up early," Nolan says. He's dressed in khaki shorts embroidered with palm trees and a white t-shirt that skims his dad-bod, as casual as I've ever seen him and hardly recognizable from the man I knew a lifetime ago. He takes a seat on a lounge chair and moves it closer, until we're separated by an intrusive couple of feet. "Good job yesterday, by the way. Very convincing."

The warm air arounds me turns unwelcomingly brisk, covering my skin in goosebumps, and the sun hides behind a cloud—as if she *knows*.

But I push the sensations away. I didn't cower yesterday. I won't cower now.

"Convincing?" I scoff. "No idea what you're talking about."

"Psh. I know what you're up to. I don't appreciate being manipulated."

"Manipulated in what way?"

"Certainly you're aware of the clause in Trey's contract?"

I scrunch my brows. If I tell him I'm aware, it'll make all of this seem fishy as hell and could cost Trey the deal.

"I know nothing about a clause," I lie. "The only thing I know is that we're in love. And it's the only thing I want to know. His business deals are none of my business."

"Still letting men take advantage of you, I see." He sips his coffee. "God, you're naïve. Always have been."

I glance toward the cottage. If Trey heard Nolan right now, I don't know what he'd do, but it wouldn't be pretty.

"You're jealous," I say.

"If you think I'm jealous, you're delusional."

"Why else would you say those things? Why else would you try to poison my relationship with doubt? You can't stand to see I've moved on. You hate that another man makes me happier than you ever did."

"Oh, Soph ... you could never make me jealous," he says. "Sure we had our fun, but it was never anything of substance. And when you got pregnant, I did what I had to do to make the most of it. At the end of the day, I couldn't bear the thought of my child being raised by anyone else but Anabelle and me. We dated in college, and off and on since, and she'd been pressuring me to get married for a while, but she wanted children. That was a dealbreaker for her."

"I don't need to know your relationship history."

"My point is, things worked out for Sasha," he says. "She's happy. Well-adjusted. Smart as a whip."

Beautiful. And she'll have every opportunity she could ever need."

I can't argue with those things.

But it doesn't change what he did to pull that off.

"I don't like this ... you and Trey," he says. "It's a little close for comfort."

"He doesn't know. About you and me."

"It doesn't matter. I still don't like it."

"Fortunately it's not your choice."

"That's where you're wrong." He leans closer, elbows resting on his knees so hard they leave indentations. "First of all, you inheriting my company is not something I'm crazy about."

"I don't see how that matters?" I say. "Maybe you should've added a clause to your NDA."

He chuffs. "You're not going to marry him, Soph."

I cringe at the use of my nickname, but I opt not to tell him to quit using it. He'd still do it, if only to get under my skin.

"Actually, I am," I say, shrugging and peering off toward the crashing waves in the distance.

"Trey wants this company," Nolan says. "But he's not going to get it if you stay with him."

"You're disgusting."

"I'm doing what I have to do to protect my family."

"I'm not going to tell him," I remind him. "Your secret's safe. I'll take it to the grave. And Trey's not stupid, if I tell him you won't sell because of me, he'll figure out there's a past between us and it won't be long until he connects the dots. He's already seen my scar ..."

"That's why you're not going to tell him you're standing in the way of the deal. You're going to break it off with him as soon as you get back to Chicago."

A sharp pang flashes through my chest. My mouth turns dry.

"I'll still sell him the company," he says. "Out of sympathy for his broken heart. But if the two of you so much as think of getting back together once the deal goes through, I'll repossess your mother's home and ensure the doctors treating your sister cease their care immediately."

With the payout arrangement and the millions of dollars coming my way, I could easily find another place for my mother to live and connect Emmeline with another group of world renown neurosurgeons. But if there's no deal, there'll be no reason for Trey and I to get married, which means there'll be no payout.

"You're a monster." My words are low, a growl almost. My palms press into the tiled ledge of the pool until they ache.

"It's the best decision for everyone involved."

"Anabelle doesn't know, does she? She doesn't know Sasha is yours."

He's quiet, fingers pressed into a point.

"You never signed the birth certificate," I add. "That's why you're so protective of your secret. If she knew, she'd leave you. You were never broken up with her, were you?"

His lips press flat. There's nothing attractive about him anymore. And I've heard that stress and secrets can age a person faster than time. He's got a lot on his shoulders. Clearly, guarding this information for the past eight years while running a large corporation has done a number on him.

"You're doing this." Nolan avoids my questions. "Or I walk from the deal."

The front door to the cottage swings open. Trey walks out, dressed for the day, hair shower-damp. His eyes light from across the way when he sees me, and he makes his way to the pool.

"Everything rides on you," Nolan says. "You'll ruin a lot of lives if you don't do this."

And he's right.

My mother ...

My sister ...

Trey ...

He comes closer, and with every step, like faded daydreams, all the visions of marriage and children with him evaporate.

Trey

PRESENT

“HOW BADLY DO you want this deal?” Sophie asks when we retreat to the cottage Saturday night. Her skin is warm and sunbaked beneath her dress, and she smells of coconut sunscreen, ocean, and sunshine.

We spent the day boating on Nolan’s yacht, which he named *The Always Anabelle*, and when we got to the alcove with the private beach, we disembarked for a couple hours relaxing in the sand. I’ve never been a beach person, but I took pleasure in watching Sophie with the children from behind dark sunglasses as Nolan yakked my ear off about business merger rumors and the history of his steel and oil company—as if I hadn’t already done my research.

I’m convinced the man simply loves to hear his own voice.

“More than anything,” I tell her as I strip out of my shirt. “Why do you ask?”

“You don’t talk about it much,” she says, unbuttoning the front of her dress. The straps of her bikini have created fresh tan lines, and I kiss the bronzed skin of her shoulders before working my way up her neck.

“I don’t want to bore you.” I press my lips into the spot behind her ear, fingers laced in her wind-blown hair.

“And what if you don’t get it?” she asks. “What if he doesn’t believe ... us?”

I sniff. She should know me better than this by now. “I’ll get it. And he will. He already does.”

She bites her lip, forcing a breath through her nose. Her nipples perk from beneath her bikini top and her heated skin is covered in goose bumps.

“I loved watching you with those kids today.” I trail my fingers down her arms, where tiny grains of sand remain. “You’re going to be an incredible mother. So patient. So gentle. Willing to get down to their level. And the light in your eyes ...”

She’s quiet, perhaps thinking about the future child we’ll create someday.

“You really bonded with Sasha,” I add, lips grazing hers. “Kind of makes me hope we have a girl ...”

“One thing at a time, Casanova,” she’s kidding around now, which historically has never been a good sign. Something’s bothering her and she’s trying to lighten the mood to avoid discussing it.

“I’ve never mentioned this before. Not even to Broderick.” I cup her face and meet her intense blue gaze. “But the Amesese sold my parents the plane they died on. Taking over their company and rearranging their business model would be a way of sticking it to them. Their family will be furious with me by the time I’m through, and while this makes me sound petty, I’ll take great pleasure in every fucking minute of it.”

Sophie’s expression suspends in time for a moment, and just when I think perhaps she’s judging my little confession, she says, “Good for you.”

We stumble backward, to the bed, and I run my fingers down her stomach. It caves in response and her breathing heavies. Working my way down, I slide my hand into her bikini bottoms—until she stops me.

“It’s been a long day,” she says, growing stiff beneath my touch. “You mind if we just relax tonight?”

Disappointed, I remove my hand from between her thighs and pull her into my arms. My cock pulsates before growing limp. I’ve been waiting all day to have her to myself again, but if she’s not in the mood, she’s not in the mood. If I pressed, I’m sure she’d relent, but I’d never do that to her.

“Everything okay?”

Her eyes light and she swats at my chest. “Of course.”

I don’t believe her—but I know better than to pry when she’s like this.

The sun sets outside our window, coloring the guest room in variations of orange-pink. I could lie like this forever with her in this dream-like trance.

“My mom broke her leg once. Don’t ask me how because I can’t remember. I was quite young at the time.” I breathe her in. “But I remember that for weeks, my father refused to leave her side. He stayed by her side in bed. He helped her around when she needed anything. He cut fresh roses from the garden every day so she had something beautiful to look at when she woke, something to lift her spirits. He loved her to the point of obsession sometimes. And I never understood how someone could be so fixated on anyone else ... but I get it now. That level of devotion makes sense, and it’s all because of you, Sophie,

that I finally understand it.”

A wince covers her pretty face. Or maybe it doesn't. It happens so fast.

I think about saying the words that've been on my tongue all weekend.

I love you.

But for some reason, I stop. And I take the euphoria that floods me as a consolation prize.

My gut tells me to wait, that she's not in the right frame of mind to hear it.

Nuzzling into the bend of my arm, she sighs. And a moment later, her breath steadies as she succumbs to the exhaustion of the day.

"I love you," I say as I watch her sleep, but only in my mind.

I'll tell her soon enough.

Trey

PRESENT

"WE'RE SO glad you could stay the weekend with us." Anabelle air kisses Sophie's cheek before turning her attention to me.

Nolan keeps his distance, nodding, scrutinizing before shaking my hand as if completing a business transaction. Cold. Formal. Eye contact that demands the upper hand while simultaneously conveying an unspoken threat.

"It was so lovely getting to know you both," she adds, practically gushing, oblivious to her husband's steely countenance. "And you make a beautiful couple."

A Town Car waits in the circle drive, holding our loaded luggage as the driver stands patiently by the passenger door.

This morning, we enjoyed breakfast in the nook with the children. Sasha asked Sophie to sit next to her and proceeded to tell her all about her teacher, her homework, her best friends, her "boyfriend," and her favorite Disney movies. When she was done, she begged her parents to let us stay "just a little longer."

It was adorable.

But I'm ready to get home and back to an ounce of normalcy.

"Bye, Sophie!" Sasha appears from behind her parents and wraps Sophie in a hug around her waist.

"Goodbye, Sasha," Sophie hugs her back, and for a second I swear her eyes turn glassy.

The two of them really bonded over the past twenty-four hours. Completely unexpected. Enzo mostly kept back and stayed to himself. A kid of few words. While Anabelle tried to coax him into being social, he wouldn't have it. The only person he would talk to was his sister, and even then she was so chatty she did most of the talking for him.

"It was so lovely to meet you," Sophie adds. "Good luck with third grade."

Sasha dashes off, disappearing into the next room.

"Thank you—*both*—for a wonderful weekend ..." Sophie says before turning to me, hands folded regally in front of her hips.

I check my timepiece. "Yes. Thank you so much for hosting us, Nolan. Anabelle. Nolan, we'll be in touch this week, I presume?"

He nods, his pointed stare passing from Sophie to me and back. "Yes. I'll call you."

I hope our time together was enough to convince him, otherwise the past couple of days were for naught.

We're in the car a few minutes later when I take Sophie by the hand. "Everything okay? You've been so quiet since last night."

"I'm fine." She offers a smile, though her eyes disagree.

"No. Seriously. There's something on your mind."

She laughs. "I had a good time this weekend. Just kind of sad to leave."

"You're a terrible liar, as per usual." I cup her face, bringing her closer and kissing her. "Whatever it is, whenever you're ready to talk about it, I'll be here."

Sophie kisses me back, lips tight and posture rigid.

Something's off.

As soon as we get home, I'll right this ship.

I can't imagine it's anything that can't be fixed.

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I'M PACING when he emerges from the shower Sunday evening, towel wrapped tight and low on his hips, showcasing the deep V that points to one of my favorite parts of him ... a part I'll never know again after tonight.

We landed a few hours ago, and I immediately headed for the soaker tub the second we got home. I poured the water so hot it turned my skin red, and I stayed in until it cooled to a tepid, teeth-chattering temperature.

If I tell him about Nolan's threat, I'll violate the NDA and my sister and mother will suffer for it.

If I *don't* tell him about any of it and stay with him, Nolan won't sell his company—and Trey's worked so hard to land this deal. He wants it more than *anything*. And he deserves it ... especially after hearing about the faulty plane Nolan's parents sold his.

On the off-chance Trey's willing to sacrifice this record-breaking acquisition to save our budding relationship, he might be able to figure out the truth behind it. And what if he does something rash? What if he tells Anabelle the truth and she leaves Nolan and Sasha grows up in a broken family? *All* of this would be for nothing.

I wring my hands, avoiding the stare from across the room that attempts to anchor me in place.

"Are you finally going to tell me what's going on?" Trey asks.

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it ..." It's better I be blunt and honest and get this over with. Plus Trey hates sugarcoating. "I can't do this anymore."

His eyes widen and he rushes to my side, placing a steady hand on my forearm to get me to stand still.

"Did something happen this weekend? I thought you enjoyed yourself."

"No," I lie. "And I did."

His eyes flash, incredulous, challenging. "I don't understand what changed ..."

"It's hard to explain."

"Try me."

"My mind's made up. I'm so sorry." I pull away from him and go to the suitcase I haphazardly packed while he was showering. I can't look at him or else it'll burn. It'll slice right through my soul and convince me to stay, and that's not an option. So I stifle my emotions.

I'm an expert at that. Practiced and proficient.

"Can't we talk about this?" he asks, watching me roll the bag to the door. "I know we're moving fast ... we can slow it down. You want to delay the wedding? Say the word."

"I'm sorry." I keep it simple, wishing more than anything I could tell him that staying with me is the only thing standing between him securing Nolan's company.

"Let me worry about that."

He deserves the truth. But my hands are tied.

Trey captures my wrists, pulling me against his warm skin. His heart beats in my ear, frenzied. He doesn't want to lose me. But everything will work out for him once he does.

"I know how you get when your mind is made up, Sophie," he says. "But you changed it for me once. You can change it again."

I say nothing because there's nothing that can be said to soothe the pain of this breakup.

"We're two sides of the same coin," he adds. "I realize we never saw *this* coming, but it doesn't make it meaningless. It doesn't mean less to me. We belong together."

I kiss him long, hard, pressing this moment into my memory like a flower between the pages of a book. And then I slide the trillion-cut diamond from my finger, placing it into his palm.

"Goodbye, Trey," I say.

And then I walk out of his life.

Forever.

Trey

PRESENT

"I'M SO sorry to hear about you and Sophie," Anabelle pouts from across the table at The Black Lotus. For some reason, Ames decided he wanted to close the deal in person, over lunch, opting to come to Chicago for some unknown reason. "Nolan and I just feel terrible for you. I can't say we saw it coming. You two seemed too perfect together. Anyway, I'm sure there's someone else out there for you."

There isn't. But I nod. "Yes, I'm sure there is."

I haven't heard nor seen Sophie in over a week. She's called into work every day. And she refuses to take my calls. I thought giving her time to cool off was the right protocol, but now I'm not sure.

Nolan clears his throat. "Shall we sign? I'm not getting any younger over here."

Anabelle taps his hand, head cocked yet offering a gentle smile. "Nolan, the poor man just got his heart broken. Let's show a little sympathy, yes?"

"It's fine," I say, retrieving a pen from the inside of my suit coat. "I think we're all ready to move on with this."

"From your lips to God's ears." Anabelle lifts her champagne. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this man to retire."

Nolan doesn't smile or acknowledge his wife's teasing tone. His lips press flat as he readies his fountain pen. He hasn't touched his two fingers of whiskey and he's hardly touched his salmon plate.

He claimed he was moving forward with this deal because the board—and his wife—were pressuring him. And after spending a couple of days with me, he decided he could trust that Ames Oil and Steel would be in good hands. That and he was impressed with the way I've been running my parents' company for the past fifteen years, claiming my growth was unparalleled (as if I didn't know). He'd decided he wanted his legacy to be a part of that after all, family man or no.

I sign on my line.

He signs on his.

Broderick, who has been sitting here in utter silence, watching our exchange, notarizes the document.

"So you think you and Sophie might make amends?" Nolan asks out of the blue.

"I'm still holding out, yes," I say.

He draws in a breath that expands his chest, and he releases it slow, gaze fixed on me. "I have to confess. That morning you found us sitting by the pool ... she'd confided in me that she was having some doubts, that things were moving too fast, and she was scared."

I sit straight, jaw tight. There's no reason Sophie would confide in Ames. No reason at all. And she knew what was at stake with this deal, that we were to put on our best faces at all times in order to sell Nolan on the authenticity of our relationship—not that it was hard to do. The last thing she'd do is share concerns with him that things were moving too fast.

"Is that right?" I ask, pretending I believe him.

"She said she'd read one of my books," he says, referring to his pseudo-science books on the "art" of marriage. "Made her think about a few things she hadn't thought about before."

Bull-fucking-shit.

I've been with her enough the last few months—I'd have known if she were reading his books.

"I guess I can't help but feel partly responsible for her decision," Nolan says. "So for that, you have my sincerest apologies."

"Everything happens for a reason," Anabelle adds. "And I mean everything. Sometimes the worst moments of our lives happen because there's something better in store." Leaning in, she continues, "You know, for the longest time I wanted children. But the doctors said it wasn't possible. Then Nolan found this young girl, eighteen I believe. Still in high school. Poor as a mouse. She waited tables to help pay her mother's rent. Anyway, she was pregnant and wanted to find a good home for the baby. He offered and thank the good Lord above, she accepted. That's how we got our Sasha."

Anabelle rests her hand over Nolan's forearm, lips pulling up at the sides as her eyes turn a deep shade of warm coffee. "And then we found ourselves pregnant with Enzo two years later—and it was completely unexpected since we didn't think it was possible. Sometimes I think having Sasha sort of took

pressure off trying to conceive and that's what allowed Enzo to happen. Sorry if I'm giving you too much information." She laughs, fingers splayed across her diamond necklace. "But my point is, everything has a domino effect and it's always darkest before the dawn."

"Ana, my love, I don't think Trey wants to be bothered by our family's journey ..." He offers a nervous chuckle.

"No, no," I say, piecing together their story.

A baby girl born eight years ago to a waitress still in high school ...

The instant sickness in the car on the ride there the second I mentioned his name ...

Sophie and Nolan talking by the pool Saturday morning ...

The way she played with the kids at the beach, never leaving their side once and paying special attention to the little girl ...

The hint of barely-there tears in her eyes when she said goodbye to Sasha ...

Her sudden and abrupt change of heart after that weekend ...

She refused to tell me the name of the man who got her pregnant all those years go, but she once mentioned he was an "older" and "prominent" businessman.

Son of a bitch. The asshole strong-armed her out of marrying me.

I thought his change of heart was peculiar ... but he backed his decision up with a myriad of reasons, all of which made sense.

I take a swig of my Scotch, gripping the tumbler so hard it might break.

As soon as this takeover is final, I'm dismantling his fucking business piece by piece. Selling it for pennies on the dollar if I have to, giving every last dollar to Sophie.

God knows she's earned it after dealing with him.

"Anyway." Anabelle sips her champagne. "It's so nice to be back in the Windy City. We lived here temporarily before we got Sasha. I was teaching for the pediatrics program at Northwestern. Nolan would leave every weekend for business, but we made it work. And once we welcomed our daughter, we moved east permanently to be closer to our families."

Nolan checks his watch. "I hate to cut this meeting short, Trey, but we've got an appointment with our personal jeweler at Cartier in an hour and this city traffic is brutal."

"We can reschedule, can't we?" Anabelle asks. "I'm sure Monique will understand."

"I'd rather not." Nolan forces a tight smile, dabbing his lips with his white linen napkin before rising. His mind is made up.

His wife offers an apologetic smile.

"This isn't easy for him," she tells me. "But good luck with everything. We know the company will be in capable hands."

I rise, extending my hand to Nolan. He gives it a tight squeeze before offering one to Broderick, hardly making eye contact.

Underneath the pomp and circumstance and the annoyingly rigid negotiation tactics, he's nothing but a goddamned coward.

Whatever he's holding over Sophie's head, I'm going to rip it limb from limb.

And then I'll do the same to him.

I may be paying him for his company, but in the end, he's the one who'll pay—dearly—for the heartless cruelty he inflicted upon the only woman I've ever loved.

SOPHIE

PRESENT

“WHAT REALLY HAPPENED, SOPHIE?” My mom is waiting for me when I get back from lunch with my friends. When I told them I’d broken off the engagement, they called an emergency get-together at our favorite bar for drinks and small plates, not that I could stomach anything. And they collectively agreed that they were secretly relieved.

“*It’s not like you to jump into a relationship and then when you said you were getting married ...*” Sara said.

“*Obviously you were going through something,*” Carina added. “*We’re just glad that whatever it is, you’re over it.*”

They bought me drinks that melted before I could finish them and I offered excuse after excuse about getting caught up in the excitement of the wealthiest man in the world pining for me.

In the end, they told me it was for the best.

And I said that I agreed, even if I didn’t, even if the words cut through me like a rusted, dull switchblade.

I collapse in the corduroy chair in my mother’s living room. I’ve been staying here for the past week. A temporary escape. I’ve also been avoiding work because I know Trey will be there, ready to call me into his office in an attempt to sell me on getting back together. He’ll paint a beautiful picture, as always, and feed me the most convincing words in the universe. And I’ll want to give in.

Oh, God, will I want to give in ...

But I can’t.

“You’ve always told me everything,” Mom says, sitting on the sofa. And she’s right. But she’s been there since day one, plus she was there when Nolan’s attorney handed me the NDA the day after the baby was born. There’s nothing she doesn’t know. Besides, if she knew the truth, it’s not like she’d go running to Trey to tell him. “What is it? What happened?”

“Trey’s been trying to land this business deal for the past year,” I say, opting to hand-select details. “Long story short, the man selling it wanted to spend a weekend with us. But it turns out, that man ... was Nolan Ames.”

Mom gasps, fingers tracing her open mouth.

“He didn’t like seeing us together,” I continue. “And he didn’t like the idea of me marrying Trey and having access to his company.”

She rolls her eyes. “What would you possibly do with his company?”

I shrug. It’s impossible to know what’s going through the head of a liar and a con and a self-serving bastard.

“Maybe he thought I’d carry out some revenge fantasy,” I say. “But who knows?”

“He disgusts me.” She stands from the couch and paces the living room picture window. “What did he threaten you with?”

I huff, too mentally exhausted to get into my chain of logic. “*Everything.*”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Hasn’t he taken enough from you, Sophie?”

Yes. Yes he has.

“Don’t let him take Trey.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware you liked Trey.”

With a hand on her hip, she exhales. “I didn’t want to ... but after that dinner ... the way he talked about all the things he loved about you, the way his eyes lit when he looked at you ... this one’s different.”

It takes a lot for my mom to like anyone. The fact that she likes Trey is nothing shy of a miracle. But now he’s the one person I can never be with ... and the point is moot.

“Figure out a way,” she says.

“I’ve tried.” Many times. Lying awake in bed.

“Whatever it is, Trey’s a man of means and influence. I’m sure he can strong-arm Nolan even worse than Nolan strong-armed you.”

It sounds good in theory.

But any rebellion against Nolan's wishes would only cost him the deal he wants more than anything.
And I love him too much to take that away.

FIFTY-THREE

Trey

PRESENT

I LEAVE The Black Lotus the second the Ameses are gone, and I hightail it to Sophie's apartment. She doesn't answer, so I text her. When she leaves me on 'read' I text her again. I tell her it's an emergency and we need to speak immediately.

No response.

I head to her mom's house next. If she's hiding out there, I could picture her mom lying, telling me she isn't inside. But at this point I'm willing to take a chance.

I have to find her.

I have to tell her that I know it was Ames who did this to her.

And I need to find out exactly what he's holding over her head.

Thirty minutes later, I fly into the driveway of the quaint yellow house I've only visited once before, recognizing the crooked "welcome" sign hanging on the front door. Slamming my car door, I trot up the pitted sidewalk and ring the bell.

Footsteps sound on the other side, followed by the unlatching of a deadbolt. When the door swings open a second later, I'm taken aback to see Sophie.

My thoughts scramble as she opens the door and steps outside under the stoop, arms folded in her baggy t-shirt. Despite the messy ponytail and the dark circles under her eyes suggesting she hasn't slept in a while, she remains the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Beautifully broken. Perfectly imperfect.

I want to tell her I love everything about her, flaws and all. That I'd take her pain if I could so she would never have to feel it ever again.

But first thing is first.

"Sophie ..." I resist the urge to cup her face or pull her into my arms. "I didn't expect you to answer. I've been trying to reach you for over a week."

"What are you doing here?"

"Ames sold me the company. Signed the papers today," I say.

"Congratulations." There's no emotion in her voice, only steel in her blue gaze. "I'm happy for you."

"I know it was him," I say, attention falling to her lower abdomen. "I know it was Nolan who did that to you."

She doesn't react. Doesn't confirm—or deny.

"I also know he said something to you that weekend," I continue. "But whatever he said, it doesn't matter. You can come home now. You *should* come home."

"Please don't tell me what to do," she says. "If another man tries to control my future ..."

I frown. "You're not hearing me. I'm not trying to *control your future*, Sophie. I want to *be* your future."

She avoids my stare, chewing the inner corner of her lower lip, the one I'd give anything to taste again.

I tense my jaw, impatient, our entire life dangling on the tip of her tongue.

I've been called the most powerful man in the world—but suddenly, she's the most powerful soul in mine.

If I'm the sun, she's the whole fucking universe.

"How did you figure it out?" she asks, admitting what I already knew. "About Ames?"

"I had lunch with him and Anabelle earlier. She was telling me the story of Sasha's adoption, and let's just say she gave enough information that I was able to piece it together. It didn't help that Ames was all but squirming in his seat the whole time. That coupled with a few strange reactions of yours that I noticed over the weekend and it made perfect sense."

Her gaze narrows and she draws in a deep breath. "I knew you'd figure it out on your own eventually ... there's not much that gets by you, is there?"

"Come home, Sophie. I'm not above begging," I say. "Tell me what it's going to take. I'll do it. I'll do anything."

"I'm sorry, but that doesn't change anything. I wish it did, but ..."

"Of course it does. It changes everything. Ames got what he wanted, but now he doesn't have a say."

"I'm afraid he does."

My jaw sets. "What's he holding over you?"

"You're a very convincing man, Trey, but my answer is still no. I don't want to marry you." She tightens her folded arms. "I wish you the best though. And thank you for everything."

I don't ask if I'll see her at the office—if she's bidding me farewell, she likely doesn't intend to return.

"So this is it?" I ask, unable to mask my incredulous tone.

"This is it," she says.

Sophie disappears inside the house, and a second later, the tumbler clicks on the lock.

FIFTY-FOUR

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I LOCK THE DOOR, my heart smashed into a million shards, never to be the same after this.

If I went home with him, if we picked up where we left off, as soon as Ames caught wind of it, he'd carry out his threats on Mom and Emmeline. And it's not like I could ask Trey for money. The millions of dollars he offered me were from before things got real. Now that he's closed on Ames Oil and Steel, the contract I signed with him is unnecessary and void.

Plus, I could never take advantage of him.

I won't expect him to pick up where Ames left off and provide my family with a future. Plus, what if it doesn't work out? Even a man with all the money in the world would be stupid to throw money away on an ex-girlfriend.

And at the end of the day, if I married Trey and had his children and things took a turn for the worse, he'd be one more moneyed man with the ability to hold something over my head—my babies. I don't know that I could go through that again.

"Who was that?" Emmeline asks, speeding my already racing heart with the surprise of her voice. I didn't realize she'd come out of her room. Everything around me is tunneled and my breath is shallow.

I've just closed the door on a beautiful forever. The gravity of that isn't lost on me.

Mom follows her, a cleaning rag thrown over her shoulder. "Yes, who was at the door?"

"Trey," I say.

"And what did he say?" Mom asks.

"He wants me back ..."

"Duh," Emmeline says.

"Yes, but what did he say?" Mom asks again.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!" they say in unison.

Before I can answer, Mom's at the window, brushing the curtains aside. And in an act of total unexpectedness, she dashes out the front door.

He's still here ...

He didn't leave.

He's going to fight for me—even if it's a battle he can never win.

Trey

PRESENT

I RUN my hand along the steering wheel, parked in the driveway, staring at the back of Sybil's minivan, when my passenger door swings open and none other than Sybil herself climbs inside.

"This is unexpected ..." I say.

"Isn't it though?" she asks. "I came out here to tell you not to give up."

I raise my brows. I wasn't even sure she liked me. That first—and only—night we met, she was lukewarm at best, avoiding eye contact, alternating between stoic and fidgety. I couldn't get a read on her, which is rare for me.

"I don't intend to," I say.

"You see her the way I do. Complicated and beautiful. And you like her anyway."

I don't just like her, I love her. But I don't tell Sybil that—Sophie should hear those words first.

"I'm crazy for your daughter," I say.

"I know," she sighs, staring back at the house. The curtains are still. If Sophie's watching from inside, I can't be sure. "You have no idea the amount of angst she carries in her heart. And sometimes she lets that cloud her decisions. She doesn't think straight. She's always worrying over everyone else, never about herself. She likes to take care of people. Her greatest trait is also her biggest weakness."

"I've gleaned that much from my time with her," I say.

"Just promise me you won't throw in the towel," Sybil says. "She'll come around."

"I have no doubt."

She turns to me. "You sound like a man with a plan."

"I've got one." I can't speak on dismantling Ames' company just yet. Not until our paperwork's been filed and the acquisition is final.

"Good," she says. "In the meantime, you work on that. And I'll work on her."

With that, she gets out and vanishes inside the house.

The dismantling of Ames' company can't happen soon enough. But when it does, I'll be back to take my bride.

SOPHIE

PRESENT

IT'S BEEN a week since Trey pulled into my mother's driveway and asked me to come home. I haven't heard from him since. Not a text. Not a call. Sometimes I glance outside and picture his SUV parked with perfect clarity, but it's always a mirage.

I tried to turn in my two-week's notice last week, but my manager talked me out of it, reminding me of the "mental health hiatus" built into our benefits package. I can take up to six weeks, fully paid.

Maybe by then I'll feel like coming back ...

Though I can't say it'll be easy seeing him around.

"Oh my gosh, Sophie, come in here," Mom calls from Emmeline's room.

I grab my phone off the coffee table and sprint back, assuming the worst. Only when I get to the doorway, I exhale my harbored breath. Emmeline is fine.

"What?" I ask, hand over my heart, taking shallow, adrenaline-fueled breaths. "You scared me. What's wrong?"

"Did you see this article?" She shoves her phone into my hand and I read the headline.

WESTCOTT CORPORATION TO DISMANTLE AMES OIL AND STEEL AFTER FINALIZING MERGER.

This has got to be a joke.

I check the news source—NPR.

It's legit.

"I don't understand," I say, scrolling and inhaling each sentence with an impatient fervor. This makes zero sense. "It says he's selling for pennies on the dollar. He's losing hundreds of millions of dollars on this. Why would he do that?"

"Don't be so dense," she says. "He's doing this for *you*."

I furrow my brows, attention flicking from her to the screen and back. I read the article once more, ensuring I got every last detail.

"Why would he do this for me?" I ask.

After his visit, I told my mother that he knows about Ames. I also broke down and told her about the contract we had. Every last detail. She made me a cup of peppermint tea and fished my favorite fuzzy blanket from the hall closet and together we cried—for the past we couldn't change, for the heartache of the present, and for the future that slipped out of my hands before I could grab hold of it.

She told me not to give up. And she said she'd be okay with moving if it meant I was happy. She also assured me we'd find new doctors for Emmeline, but there's no guarantee they'll put her on the same experimental regimen that's given her life back.

"Shouldn't we all be so lucky to have a man put a woman's heart before his bank account?" Mom asks. "I don't know about you, but I've never met a man like that before."

"This still doesn't make sense ..." Even if he piece-meals Nolan's company and feeds it to sharks, it's no guarantee he'll get his desired outcome—me.

"You're the one thing he can't buy," Mom says. "This announcement is his way of showing you that he's choosing you. That you matter to him more than this company ever did."

I inhale and hand her phone back.

"Please, Sophie," she says. "For once in your life, do something that benefits you. You've put our happiness before yours for your entire life. We'll be fine. We'll figure something out. I promise. *Go to him.*"

Trey

PRESENT

"MR. WESTCOTT," my housekeeper, Eulalia, calls from phone near the foyer. "Ms. Bristol is here to see you. Shall I direct her to the study?"

I rise from my grandfather's chair, heart ricocheting in my chest, certain I'm imagining this. The article on the sell-off went public two hours ago. I'd hoped I'd get something from her ... a text or call at the least.

But a visit in person is a pleasant surprise.

"Is this true?" She storms into my study, her eyes maelstrom-blue, phone in hand and today's press release pulled up.

"Every word of it." I meet her halfway.

"Why would you do this?" Her voice holds anger with a side of confusion. "I thought you wanted this company?"

"I want *you* more."

"Ames is going to retaliate. You know that, right?"

"Then I'll give it back to him tenfold," I say, wishing we could get this over with so I can take her into my arms already. If she's come this far, it's only a matter of time. Minutes, perhaps. "I've got a team of lawyers that'll have him pissing his pants by the time they're done with him."

"What about Sasha?"

"What *about* Sasha?" I answer her question with a question. "He's not going to do anything to hurt her. And I got the impression his wife has no idea he fathered her. At lunch the other week she said he *found some pregnant teenage girl waiting tables and offered to adopt her baby*. Didn't sound like she was aware of your relationship, and I doubt he'd like that information to get out."

She's silent as she slides her phone into her back pocket.

"Have you read the comments?" she asks. "The whole world thinks you're insane for doing this?"

"When have I *ever* cared what anyone thinks?" I ask. "Besides, I'll gladly be the laughingstock of corporate America if it means pissing off that insufferable bastard."

A smirk claims her rose-bud mouth, and in that moment, I waste zero time taking her into my arms. Her body is warm and pliant in my embrace, and my palms skim the addictive landscape of her curves.

"Also, I can't wait until he finds out each and every cent of the proceeds is going into your name."

She leans away until our eyes lock. "You actually *are* crazy."

"Crazy about you, yes." I drown myself in a lungful of her cashmere-soft, summer-sweet scent.

Sophie's gaze softens. "Why are you so good to me?"

"Because I see you for who you are," I say. "And I'm in love with you, Sophie. You're the only woman I've ever loved and the only woman I ever want to love."

Peering up at me through a fringe of dark lashes, expression equally vulnerable and strong, she says, "I love you too."

I crush her pink lips, greedy, our tongues clashing and my hands in her hair.

So long as I live, I'll never let her go.

"I'm sorry I didn't have faith in you," she says when we come up for air.

"How could you? The last man you thought you loved let you down in the worst of ways."

She bites her bottom before slipping her fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck—a sweet surrender.

"Please tell me you're coming home." My voice is low against her ear as I breathe in the sweet scent I've missed every minute of every hours of every fucking day since she left.

"I'll come home," she says. "But I want to start fresh. No contract. I want to date you. *Really* date you."

"We were always dating," I say. "It was always real to me, contract or no."

"You know what I mean." Her mouth pulls up at the corners.

"But yes. Anything you want."

She deserves a proper courtship. An actual proposal with a real yes.

I place her on the edge of my desk, pulling her t-shirt above her head before diving in to taste her

cashmere-soft skin. Her legs hook around my hips as she guides me closer, and in our haste, we knock over the cigar box, each carefully wrapped cigar spilling onto the floor.

She stops, her mouth moving as if she wants to say something, but I silence her with an impatient kiss. All I want is to be deep inside of her, to have the steady drum of her tortured heart beating against mine, and later, after I've devoured every inch of her, I'll enjoy a cigar on my bedroom balcony, overlooking the garden our future children will run through many years from now.

Finally, something worth celebrating.

FIFTY-EIGHT

SOPHIE

PRESENT

I WAKE in his bed the next morning.

Correction: our bed.

His half is vacant, the covers pulled up, nice and neat. I roll to my side with blurry eyes that come into focus on a vase filled to the hilt with blooming pink roses. Their soft scent invades my lungs, and when I sit up, I spot an engraved plaque on the crystal.

To Edie, Yours now, yours forever ... All my love, Pierce.

Trey's story comes to mind, the one he shared in Martha's Vineyard about his mother's broken leg and never understanding his father's obsessive devotion until he met me. Part of me wonders if that was his way of telling me he loved me.

The bedroom door swings open, and when I glance toward the doorway, Trey stands with a breakfast tray, hair messy and broad shoulders covered in his favorite navy robe.

"Breakfast in bed. Nice touch." I climb back beneath the covers, a delicious soreness between my thighs from last night's triple encore production, and pull the sheet beneath my arms.

He comes around to my side, resting the tray on the nightstand before propping the pillows behind me.

"Good morning." He deposits a kiss onto my forehead.

"Thank you for the flowers ... I don't know how I didn't hear you getting up and doing all of this ..."

"You were out cold." He places the tray in my lap and takes one of the two coffees before getting in beside me. "Didn't want to disturb you."

I take a sip. "Someone wore me out last night."

"And someone has every intention of doing the same again tonight."

Retrieving a small remote from his nightstand, he presses a button and the curtains part, flooding the expansive bedroom suite with morning light and a picture-perfect view of the gardens. In a crystal-clear daydream, I envision chasing our children through the rose bushes, laughter and teasing and tackling. Grass stains and tickles. Picnics and board games.

When we first started this, I couldn't imagine Trey as a father ... but everything has changed.

One thing at a time, though. We've called off our engagement, though I told him to save the trillion-cut ring. We officially have a past, as rocky and unconventional as it may be. He's my present. And our future is on the horizon.

"I love you," he says, leaning close to press a kiss into the place where my jaw meets my ear. An electric jolt rushes through me, from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, and then it settles between my thighs.

He told me he loved me last night, and I actually allowed myself to feel it—really feel it. It's as warm as a summer day. As terrifying as an angry storm. It's equally filled with wonderment and discomfort. Apprehension and certainty. But most of all, it's a beautiful contradiction of the best kind.

We finish breakfast and hit the showers, making love before heading out. He said he's taking me somewhere special. I didn't ask questions ...

This new me is letting go of her control-freak ways, and she kind of likes the idea of being surprised ... Something tells me we'll have a lot of those in our future.

EPILOGUE

Trey

FIVE YEARS LATER ...

"TREY, DID YOU SEE THIS?!" My wife's voice is a whispered shout as she rocks our two-year-old daughter, Edie Emmeline Westcott, to sleep. "There's an article about Ames on this celebrity gossip site ... Anabelle is leaving him."

"What?"

She offers her dim-screened phone. It's not that either of us give a flying fuck what happens to the bastard, but this could get interesting. And we're especially vested since this involves Sophie's first daughter.

I scan the article, which is relatively brief. Their source claims that Anabelle was curious about her daughter's lineage and randomly did one of those AncestryDNA tests, which showed a connection between Sasha and several other distant Ames family members. She was able to secretly procure a DNA sample from Nolan and shipped it off to a private lab, which confirmed with 99.999% accuracy that Nolan was Sasha's biological father.

"Poor Sasha ..." Sophie says, voice broken. "Having to find out this way ..."

The article claims there was no prenup, and Anabelle stands to walk away with almost a quarter of a billion dollars as well as three family homes, a yacht, two vehicles, and a Swiss chalet. She's also pushing for full custody with visitation rights for Nolan.

"Anabelle's a good mother," I remind her. "Sasha's in capable hands."

Sophie nods, rocking our daughter. "You're right."

"You need to accept that not everything's in your control. Trust that it'll all be all right in the end."

She pats circles into Edie's back before rising.

"When the dust settles, we can reach out and see if we can be of any service," I say. "Might be a good time to let Anabelle know about you. I'm sure she'd like to hear the truth for once."

"Yeah." She carries Edie to her crib across the room. "That's a good idea. We'll do that."

Sliding my hand into hers, I claim her lips with a soft kiss, and we watch our daughter settle into her evening sleep before heading to our room. Once we're settled beneath our bed covers, I pull her against me, placing my arm around her side, hand resting on her belly, where our son kicks.

"I think he's going to be a night owl like his father," she says, a grin in her tone.

In the earlier days of our relationship, I'd be holed up in the study at 2am when I couldn't sleep. Sophie would always tiptoe down and lure me back to bed, reminding me of the importance of a good night's rest. During the evenings when sleep truly evaded me, she'd accompany me to my sanctuary and we'd spend a half hour just ... existing ... together. In that space between two and three.

She's good to me, this woman.

Marrying her four years ago in the south of France was one of the best days of my life. Sybil came. And Emmeline. We kept it family only. I imagine my parents were there in spirit ...

I'm committed to spending the rest of my life loving her the way my father loved my mother—fearlessly, relentlessly, like there's no tomorrow.

Sophie falls asleep with ease tonight, her curves beautifully swollen as she nears the end of her last trimester. Until I had a child of my own, I never understood what my parents felt when they said they loved me. Those were always just words.

Now the magnitude of those words is as overwhelming as a tidal wave when I say them to my daughter. They take on a new meaning. And my love for Sophie has only deepened with time.

All the money in the world could never buy a bliss like ours—what we have is priceless.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader—

Whenever people ask me how I come up with my ideas, I never quite know how to answer. To be honest, sometimes it feels like they appear out of thin air. Other times, I might watch a documentary, read a biography or magazine article, or stumble upon a word that makes me feel a certain way and somehow it magically spins into an idea (ROYAL happened like that).

I'm serious. It's a magical process. (Just ask Elizabeth Gilbert—she wrote the book on this very topic).

Typically I start with a title and blurb before I do anything else.

Next I order a cover from the lovely and talented Louisa Maggio.

I spend a day or two naming the characters (names have to feel right *and* sound good and I have a whole process).

After that, I start figuring out plot points.

But this wasn't the case with TRILLION. A couple of years ago, I decided I wanted to write a book about a trillionaire hero. I had an image, ordered a cover, and let it sit in a file on my computer until this year. I had no idea what the plot was going to be. I just wanted a book about an arrogant hero who happened to be the richest man in the world.

Only once I started actually writing, the book started taking on a life of its own and the characters began telling ME their story the way they wanted it to be told. As a control freak-slash-planner, I don't tend to hand over the creative reins to fictional people, but my intuition told me to with the flow and I "pantsed" the entire book (wrote without an outline).

I recently read a biography on Marilyn Monroe. Random, I know. But it gave me a major book hangover that bled into this story. Fascinated with her beautiful, tragic, short little life, I drew from her unique qualities her while dreaming up Sophie Bristol. Marilyn was undeniably stunning. Complex. Intelligent. Tortured. She could flip a switch and be whoever she needed to be in that moment, but her emotional wounds ran deep and haunted her until the very end. No one really knew the real Marilyn. Legend has it, the men in her life were always drawn to her striking beauty, but it was her vulnerability that hooked them.

They all wanted to save her—no one really knew how.

When I started writing this book, it was all about Trey. Sophie completely took it over, and I'm not mad about it. She had quite the story to tell. ;-)

All of that said, thank you SO, SO much for reading TRILLION. I truly hope you enjoyed it!

Love,

Winter

PS - Love angst and star-crossed love stories? Check out my last book, THE BEST MAN! (Page ahead for a sample!)

SAMPLE - THE BEST MAN

CHAPTER ONE

Brie

Numbers don't lie.

But men like the one beside me? With iridescent copper eyes, a jawline so sharp it could cut diamonds, and muscle-wrapped shoulders made for digging your fingers into as he pushes himself into the deepest parts of you?

They lie.

They lie all the time.

Especially in Hoboken hook-up bars like this one.

He told me his name, but already I've forgotten. Men like him don't tend to give real names, so there's no point in remembering. He also told me he's from Manhattan, and that once a month he rents a car for a weekend so he can get out of the city, breathe some fresh air, and hear himself think.

Sounds made up.

A story you tell someone to impress them, to make them think you're deep.

Different.

Special.

If I had to guess, he has a wife and a new baby in the 'burbs. Ridgewood or Franklin Lakes. Maybe his sex life isn't what it used to be. Maybe the family life wasn't what he expected. In my mind's eye I've imagined him packing a small suitcase, kissing his family goodbye, loading up in his luxury SUV and hauling ass to a little bar where nobody knows your name or marital status.

I steal a peek at his left hand.

It's too dim to spot a wedding band indentation.

"How long are you in town?" He leans in when he speaks to me, his voice smooth as velvet and sending a spray of goosebumps along my neck. The faintest hint of aftershave wafts from his warm skin. Faded with a hint of vetiver and mystique, I enjoy it. But I don't tell him that. If I flatter him, he'll think he's got a 'nibble' and he'll try to reel me in.

I don't want to be caught. I don't want to be reeled in.

I want to enjoy my glass of pinot, maybe take a walk around the block, and then head back to my hotel room, paint on a charcoal mud mask, and fall asleep with Seinfeld reruns flickering on my TV screen.

"Not much longer," I tell him, avoiding eye contact for a myriad of reasons, most of all being the fact that he's the most beautiful stranger (physically speaking) to ever have purchased me a drink and every time I allow myself to bask in that, I lose my train of thought. "A couple more days."

"Same." He sips his drink, something amber in a crystal tumbler. The kind of liquor you savor drop by pricey drop, the kind you don't rush to finish. "Where did you say you worked again?"

"Phoenix." I clear my throat. Nothing worse than a man who asks questions but doesn't take the time to listen.

"No, I remember that part," he proves me wrong. "I meant *where*? What company?"

"The Fletcher Firm." I lie for safety reasons.

I don't know this man from Adam—no need to give him Google ammo.

"Kind of young to be an actuary, aren't you?"

His next question catches me off-guard, and I nearly choke on my pinot. Most men—the ones laser focused on securing a piece of ass for the night—rarely remember what I do for a living once they've asked me. And the ones that do, have no idea what an actuary is or the education and tests that go into becoming one.

"I *am* young for an actuary, yes," I say. I turn my attention toward him without thinking twice. Big mistake. His hazel eyes glint, focused on me. My stomach tightens in response. "I fast-tracked." Taking a sip, I add, "I don't recommend it unless you're willing to sacrifice your social life—or any kind of life you may have—for the majority of your twenties."

So much of life passed me by. Semesters blurred into one another. Weekend invites were turned down in favor of studying for the next exam. In the end, I was racing to a finish line for no other reason than it felt like a safe choice in a world filled with so much uncertainty.

Go to college. Get a career. Everything else will fall into place ...

"You love it though, right?" he asks. "It was worth it?"

I nod. "I do love it."

Whether it was worth fast-tracking is another thing. If I could go back and do it differently, if I could slow down and spend more time with my sister before her unexpected passing, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

He covers my hand with his palm for half of a second before waving to the bartender. "Your drink is low."

"No, no. I'm good," I say, shaking my head at the bartender to cancel the order. "I'm going to head out soon."

The man checks his watch—a reflective silver piece with an oversized bezel and a simple, classic face—before wrinkling his nose. "It's only nine-thirty ..."

For a second, I imagine his wife gifting him with that timepiece on their first anniversary. Or the day of his first big promotion. Or the day she told him she was pregnant.

Deep down, I know this is a story I'm telling to myself feel better for not taking a risk. At the end of the day we're always justifying everything, all of the time, in our own individual ways.

I turn away from him and stare at the purple remnants in the bottom of my chalice.

One sip and it's gone.

One sip and I'm out of here.

One sip and I'll never see the man with the gold-flecked irises again.

I must admit, I'm quite flattered by the fact that out of all the lovely and beautiful women in this bar tonight, this dashing Adonis approached *me*.

"I realize I'm in a singles bar on a Friday night," I say, "but I can assure you, you'd have better luck casting your line in another direction."

He half-laughs. "What?"

"You're fishing. You want sex." I blink. "Not judging you. Just saying, you're wasting valuable time and energy on me."

His brows meet. His gaze snaps to my left hand. "You're taken?"

I bite my lip, shake my head. "No."

"Then, what? You aren't into men?"

"I'm into men. I just don't sleep with people I don't know." I sit taller. "I don't do one night stands. Nothing personal."

"Fair enough. Dare I ask why?" He squints, and for a second, I think he might be genuinely interested in my answer because he doesn't take his attention off of me for one moment. I'm also impressed that he isn't shrinking away from the sting of rejection or denying that he was, in fact, only after one thing.

The world needs more people like him—at least, assuming he's every ounce the single, sex-prowling man he claims to be and not a married dad from the suburbs.

"A woman's odds of orgasming during a hook-up with a stranger is a paltry twenty-two percent and the average duration of said encounter is seven minutes. I can do better on my own.

Not to mention, over forty percent of men have had dozens of partners—and a third of those men have had over one hundred."

Once again ... numbers don't lie.

"Why'd you come here then?" he asks.

"Because drinking alone in my hotel room on my birthday would've been a new low for me." This time, I don't lie to this stranger. I have no reason to. Besides, stating anything other than this would be lying to myself.

I take full responsibility for not doing my research on this bar. I also take full responsibility for not walking out the door the instant I set foot in here and immediately overheard a couple of guys talking about how this was the "hottest hook up bar on Washington street."

This place is walking distance from my hotel—and by walking distance, I mean it's practically connected. Their walls are sandwiched together on a busy strip of downtown street, the New York City skyline in the distance and the faint stench of the Hudson River infused into every breath.

I stay in this neighborhood every time I travel here for work.

It's familiar. I know what to expect.

I toss back the final few milliliters of my pinot and place the goblet on my cardboard coaster before sliding it away.

"Happy birthday," he says.

I meet his gaze. My breath catches in my chest with the gusto of a silly school girl with a two-second crush. Heat blankets my body.

If I were an adventurous woman, his mouth would be on mine by now. My fingers would be deep in his sandy hair. We'd be going at it in the bathroom, his back against the door to keep unsuspecting patrons from barging in. Or maybe they would barge in, but we'd be going at it so hard we wouldn't notice or care. Maybe when it's over, we'd sprint to my hotel room for round two followed by breakfast in bed and round three in the morning. We'd go our own ways, sore and satisfied, and I'd file the entire encounter away in my memory.

But I'm not that girl.

And I'll never be.

I rise from the bar stool and collect my things. "Thank you for the drink. And for your honesty. It's refreshing."

He chews the inside of his lower lip, studying me. "So you're just going to go back to your hotel room now? Spend the rest of your birthday alone?"

I offer a surrendering shrug and lift my brows. "Yep."

"Where'd you get those numbers? Those statistics?" he asks.

"On one night stands?"

He nods.

"I don't know ... some article I read a few years back. Why?"

"Because they're bullshit." His eyes glint. "I'm not in the forty-percent, I can tell you that. And I can promise you, I last a hell of a lot longer than seven minutes. And there's nothing I love more than making a woman come—whether it's on my cock, my fingers, or my tongue."

My throat constricts around the words attempting to come out, and I almost choke on them. Heat blankets my skin before settling between my thighs, and I'd love nothing more than an icy burst of February air right about now.

His words are a sharp and unexpected contrast against his reserved, gentlemanly exterior.

"It's too bad." He bites his lip, looks me up and down, and leans in. "Was really looking forward to tasting that heart-shaped mouth of yours tonight. Amongst other things ..."

For a few endless seconds, I consider taking him back to my room. I contemplate throwing caution to the wind like confetti. I deliberate whether or not I would hate myself for it in the morning.

Lastly, I calculate the risk factors.

I cinch my hand around my purse strap and pull in a deep breath. "Good luck with ... tonight. And thank you again for the wine."

I don't wait for him to respond, and as soon as my heels hit cement sidewalk outside, I release the breath I'd been harboring.

I'm several yards closer to my hotel's entrance when a man behind me yells, "Hey!"

Dozens of people litter the sidewalk. It could be anyone calling after anyone.

"Hey!" The voice is closer now, along with the soft trump of dress shoes scuffing concrete.

I steal a look from my periphery, and come to a complete stop when I realize it's the guy from the bar, and he's chasing after *me*. But before I have a chance to react or concoct some worst-case-scenario situation in my mind—he hands me my phone.

"You forgot this," he says. Our fingers brush in the exchange. Our moonlit gazes hold for what feels like forever.

Clearing my throat, I force out a quick, "Thank you."

He nods, and we both remain planted where we are, as if I'm waiting for him to speak or he's waiting for me to have a change of heart.

"I'm sorry ..." I point to my hotel—a rookie move given the fact that he's still just a nameless stranger looking to get a piece. "I'm going to head in ... alone."

"I know. You made it abundantly clear that you don't sleep with strangers." He laughs through his perfect, Greek God nose. "Maybe next time we meet, we won't be strangers."

I smile, amused.

And then I head inside, opting not to share with him the statistical odds of the two of us ever running into one another again.

CHAPTER TWO

Cainan

One Month Later ...

Beep ... beep ... beep ... beep ...

I wake to a steady sound, slamming into an unfamiliar shell of a body, which as it turns out is mine. A dreamlike haze envelopes me, and when my surroundings come into focus, I'm met with white walls, white blankets, white machines connected to white wires leading to a strip of white tape on my wrist holding an IV in place.

I'm in a hospital.

I try to remember how I got here, but it's like trying to recall someone else's dream—an impossible task. And it only makes the throbbing inside my head intensify.

"My wife ..." My words are more air than sound, and it's painful to speak with a bone-dry mouth and burning throat.

"Mr. James?" A woman with hair the color of driven snow leans over me. So much fucking white. "Don't move. Please."

She's a calm kind of rushed, hurried but not frenetic as she makes her way around the room, pressing buttons, paging for assistance and adjusting machine settings.

The room fades in and out, murky gray to pitch black, and then crystal clear before disappearing completely. The next time I open my eyes, I'm fenced by three more women and one white-coat-wearing man, all of them gazing down on me with squinted, skeptical expressions, as if they're witnessing a verifiable miracle in the making.

I'm certain *this* is nothing more than a bad dream—until my head pulsates with an iron-clad throb once again, accented by a searing poker-hot pain too real to be a delusion.

"Mr. James, I'm Dr. Shapiro. Four weeks ago, you were involved in a car accident." The doctor at the foot of the bed studies me. "You're at Hoboken University Medical Center, and you're in excellent hands."

They *all* study me.

I try to sit up, only for a nurse to place her hand on my shoulder. "Take it easy, Mr. James."

Another nurse hands me water. I take a sip. The clear, cold liquid that glides down my throat both soothing and stings. I swallow the razor-blade sensation and try to sit up again, but my arms shake in protest, muscles threatening to give out.

"Where's my wife?" Each word is excruciating, physically and otherwise.

She should be here.

Why isn't she here?

"Your wife?" The nurse with the water cup repeats my question as she exchanges glances with the dark-haired nurse on the opposite side of my bed. "Mr. James ... you don't have a wife."

I try to respond, which only causes me to cough. I'm handed the water once more, and when I get the coughing under control, I ask for my wife once more.

"Has anyone called her?" I hand the cup back. If I've been out of it for weeks, I imagine she's beside herself. And our kids. I can't begin to imagine what they've been going through. "Does she know I'm awake? Have my children seen me like this?"

"Sir ..." The nurse with the dark hair frowns.

"My wife," I say, harder this time.

"Mr. James." Dr. Shapiro comes closer, and a nurse steps out of the way. "You suffered extensive injuries in your accident ..."

The man rambles on, but I only catch fragments of what he's saying. Shattered pelvis. Spleen removal. Internal bleeding. Brain swelling. Medically-induced coma.

"It's not uncommon to be confused or disoriented upon awaking," he says.

But she was *just* here ...

She was *just* with me ...

Only we weren't in this room, we were at the beach—the little strip of sand beyond our summer home. She was in my arms as we lay warm under a hot sun, watching our children run from the rolling waves that rolled over the coastline, leaving tiny footprints up and down the shore.

A boy and a girl.

My wife smelled of sunscreen, and she wore an oversized straw hat with a black ribbon and thick-framed cat-eye sunglasses with red rims that matched her red sarong. I can picture it clearer than anything in this damn room.

I can hear her laugh, bubbly and contagious.

If I close my eyes, I can see her heart-shaped smile—the one that takes up half her face and can turn the worst of days completely upside down.

"We're going to let you rest, Mr. James, and then we'll order a few tests." The doctor digs in a deep pocket of his jacket, and then he sneaks a glance at his phone. "I'll be here for the next eight hours, if you have any additional questions. The nurses will ensure you're comfortable in the meantime. We'll discuss your treatment plan as soon as you're feeling up to it."

He tells the nurse with the dark hair to order a CT scan, mumbles something else I can't discern, and then he's gone. A moment later, the room clears save for myself and the third nurse—the one who's done nothing but stare at me with despondent eyes this entire time.

"There must be a mistake. Someone needs to call my wife *immediately*." I try to sit up, but an electric intensity unlike anything I've ever experienced shoots up my arm and settles along my back and shoulders.

The thought of her not knowing where I am sends a squeeze to my chest. What if she thinks I left her? What if she thinks I disappeared? What if she has no idea what happened? And what was I doing in Hoboken when our life is in Manhattan?

"What's her name?" Her question comes soft and low, almost like she's trying to ensure no one hears her. "Your wife?"

I open my mouth to speak ... only nothing comes out.

I can picture her as vivid as still blue waters on a windless day—but it's the strangest thing because her name escapes me.

Nothing but blank after infuriating blank.

"I ... I can't remember." I lean back, staring into the reflective void of a black TV screen on the opposite wall.

The nurse's gaze grows sadder, if that's possible. "It's okay. You've been through quite an ordeal."

She doesn't believe me.

"Would you like me to call your sister?" she asks.

My sister ... *Claire*.

If I can remember my sister's name, why can't I remember my own wife's?

"Yes," I say. "Call Claire. *Immediately*."

She'll be able to sort this out, I'm sure of it.

"Would you like me to adjust your bed?" The nurse straightens the covers over my legs. "I'm Miranda, by the way. I've been assigned to you since you arrived. I can tell you just about anything you need to know."

"Just ... call my sister."

"Of course, Mr. James. Can I grab you anything while I make that call?"

I lift my hand—the one without the IV—to my forehead. "Head's pounding like a goddamned jackhammer. Got anything for that?"

"Absolutely. Be right back ..."

Miranda hurries out the door, and I'm alone.

If I close my eyes, the room spins, but I can picture my wife with impeccable lucidity—the square line of her jaw, her heart-shaped lips that flip up in the corners, the candy-apple green of her eyes.

My heart aches, though it isn't a physical pain, it's deeper.

More profound.

Like the drowning of a human soul.

I remind myself that the doctor said it's normal to be disoriented, and I promise myself everything will come back to me once I get my bearings.

The clock on the wall reads eight minutes past seven. The sky beyond the windows is half-lit. I haven't the slightest clue if it's AM or PM. I couldn't tell you what day it is or what month it is for that matter.

"Mr. James, your sister is on her way," the nurse says when she returns.

She hands me a white paper cup with two white pills.

So much fucking white.

If I never see white again after this, I'll die a happy man.

"Oh my God ..." Claire stands in the doorway of my hospital room, her hands forming a peak over her nose and mouth. From here, she's nothing more than a mess of dark waves and shiny, tear-brimmed eyes.

She looks like shit, but I'm in no place to judge. Nor would I tell her that. She'd kick my ass, hospital bed or not. Claire may be pixie-sized, but she's scrappy.

Her neon green sneakers graze against the tile floor with muted shuffles as she hurries to my side, and she wastes no time sliding her cold hand into mine. Her hands are always cold, but in this moment, they're icy—a staunch reminder that I'm far from the warmth of the beach and the place I existed mere moments earlier.

"Of course you'd wake up the *one* time I stepped out." She forces a smile, but she looks at me the way a person looks at a ghost—uncertain if what they're seeing is real.

"How long have I been here?"

Her brows meet as she shrugs out of her jacket and drops her bag on the floor. "Thirty-three days. Thirty-three terrifying days ..."

"What the fuck happened?"

She retrieves a guest chair and pulls it next to me, only in true Claire fashion, she opts to perch on the side of the bed instead.

"You were on one of your weird little weekend rental car drives where you go God knows where ... and we think you were maybe driving back to the Enterprise in Newark on a Sunday night." She gathers a long, slow breath. "Someone crossed the median on the 495 and hit you head-on—a drunk driver."

"Jesus."

"They didn't live ... in case you're wondering." Her voice is pillow soft. "Luke is working on getting a settlement from their insurance company for you, but these things take time."

We wallow in silence, and I let the gravity of the situation take hold. The settlement is the least of my worries at this point.

"It's a miracle you survived after all of your injuries." Her lower lip trembles, and she picks at a hangnail. "You lost a lot of blood ... your brain was so swollen... they had to put you into a coma ... I called Mom and Dad ... but I haven't heard back ..."

I place my hand over hers, pain shooting up my shoulder.

Her dark eyes are marred with sadness and relief, but she forces a tight half-smile.

"Have you talked to my wife yet?" I ask.

Claire's smile fades, and her expression morphs into the same one plastered on the faces of the nurses earlier.

"Don't look at me like that." I sniff. "Is she okay? What ... was she with me in the car when that happened?"

My stomach sinks as her eyes search mine.

My God.

That's it.

She was with me and she didn't survive ...

"Cainan, *you don't have a wife.*" Her words are careful and deliberate, and her head tilts and her gaze narrows as she surveys me.

"Of course I do." My hands ball into fists, though the grip is weak, pathetic.

"You're confused." She lifts her hand to my forehead, brushing away a strand of hair like a mother comforting her child.

I push her away.

She rises and takes a step back. "You had a head injury ..."

"I *saw* her, Claire. I was just *with* her." My jaw is locked, and I speak through clenched teeth. The more I recall being with her, the more it begins to slip away like an elusive dream that fades with each waking minute.

"You saw her *where*?"

"At our summer home in Calypso Harbor."

My sister stifles a laugh. "Cain, it's March. Your accident was in February. And you don't have a *summer home in Calypso Harbor*—you make fun of people with *summer homes*. Like all those assholes at your firm. You always say you're never going to be like them. Plus, where even *is* Calypso Harbor? I've never heard of it ... have you? Whatever you're remembering ... was probably a dream."

No.

It was too tangible, too sensory-rich to be a dream. As real as this moment, here, in the hospital, as real as the fire-poker pain searing down my back and the salty droplets leaving mascara-colored tracks down my sister's red cheeks.

"What about my kids? The boy and the girl?" I'll be damned—I can't remember their names either.

"You don't have a wife and you *definitely* don't have kids, at least none that *I* know about ..." She perches on the side of my bed once more. "You once told me ... and I quote ... *I'd rather stick my manhood in a vise grip than lock myself down with a wife and kids*. Granted, you were drunk when you said that, but you said it. And hell, Cain, you're a freaking divorce attorney. You make money on the fact that more often than not, marriages are a joke. Mine excluded, of course."

She winks despite her serious tone.

"Mr. James?" Nurse Miranda clears her throat in the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt, but I need to take you down to imaging. Claire, you can wait here. It shouldn't be too long."

"Yeah. Let's check out that head of his." Claire squeezes my hand before I'm wheeled away. "Apparently my brother ran off and got married while he was out of it ..."

My sister would *never* mislead me—and yet a part of me refuses to believe her.

I lie on my back as the muted fluorescent hall lights pass above me, one after another, alternating with stark white ceiling tiles.

More fucking white.

The instant I close my eyes, *her* face is the first thing I see—and in full detail, from the starry, Northern-Lights glow of her green eyes to the single freckle on the side of her nose.

Fullness invades my chest and warmth courses through my veins when I imagine her smile.

Maybe I'm dreaming now. Maybe, if I close my eyes one more time, I'll wake up in our bed, her soft skin hot against mine as she kicks off the covers and laughs in her sleep.

If none of that was real, how do I know she gets teary during happy movies? How do I know she sponsors orphans in Third World countries and donates to no-kill shelters? How do I know her favorite author is Toni Morrison, with Stephen King coming in as an unexpected close second? Her favorite vacation spot is this hole-in-the-wall place we found in Greece on our honeymoon. She glows when she's pregnant. Pure radiance. And she's a phenomenal singer, even though she'll insist she isn't. Her thick, chocolate-brown hair gets frizzy in the summer and flat in the winter, but she'd be just as gorgeous if she sheared the whole thing off. She chipped her front tooth when she was twelve, though it's hardly noticeable unless she points it out. She loves Christmas more than a person should. Loves those disgusting hot dogs from the carts on the street, too. She's seen *Chicago* on Broadway more than anyone else I know. But more than anything, I know that I'm her whole world. The kids too. We only work when we're all together. And right now, I'd do anything to get back to them.

And I will.

I'll do *anything*.

"All right, Mr. James." The nurse brings my bed to a halt outside a set of double doors. "We're here."

This is all a dream.

No—a nightmare.

It has to be.

CHAPTER THREE

Brie

"I hope you weren't waiting long. There was a stalled semi on 15." His name is Grant Forsythe, and I met him in a hospital waiting room in Hoboken a month ago. He noticed my ASU sweatshirt and after a couple of minutes of small talk, we discovered we both live in the Roosevelt Row section of Phoenix, never miss the opening Cardinals game, belong to hiking clubs, and enjoy many of the same dive bars and local musicians.

He's also the best friend of the man whose life I helped save.

As an actuary and hobbyist statistician, I should be able to calculate the odds of such a chance encounter, but I'm trying not to overthink this. While I've never been the girl with the adventurous spirit and a go-anywhere-anytime attitude, something about witnessing a man cling onto his life last month has sparked something in me.

Life is short.

And it can be gone in the blink of an eye—zero warning.

I was on my way to catch a late flight out of Newark when I witnessed the accident happen in real-time—a red Ford truck crossing the interstate median, only to barrel into a black sedan head-on. The truck skidded into the ditch and proceeded to burst into flames, but the sedan came to a rolling stop upside down beneath an overpass. The screech of tires, the burn of rubber, the metallic crunch that followed—I'll never forget them as long as I live.

It all happened so fast. Blink-and-you-might-miss-it fast. Did-that-actually-just-happen fast.

But I slammed on the brakes of my rented Prius and pulled to the side, dialing 9-1-1 as I checked on the driver—a man, bloody and incoherent, fading in and out of consciousness.

I stayed with him until help arrived.

I held his blood-covered hand.

I begged him to hang on just a little bit longer ...

And when I saw him begin to lose consciousness, begin to let go, I squeezed his hand tighter and rambled on about anything and everything—myself mostly. A ridiculous little one-sided introduction. But I wanted him to focus on my voice.

To cling to the present.

To not succumb.

After all of that, it seemed wrong to head on to the airport, to carry on with my life like nothing happened, so I followed the ambulance to the hospital, and I waited in the waiting room—the scene from the accident replaying in my head over and over and over like a traumatic movie my head refused to turn off.

I couldn't visit the man, of course, since I wasn't family. But I stayed at the hospital, waiting until the nurses assured me that his family was there.

I didn't want him to be alone.

And if he died, I didn't want him to die alone either ... like my twin sister, Kari, five years ago. If only someone had been there when she rolled her Jeep down a steep embankment at one o'clock in the morning, maybe she'd still be here.

To this day, we don't know if she was distracted or if she'd fallen asleep at the wheel. We also don't know what would've happened had help arrived sooner. The authorities said she'd been gone at least four hours before the sun came up and a passing driver noticed the garish red of her car contrasting against the muted tans of the desert landscape.

I've been thinking a lot these last few weeks, about chance and probability, about the likelihood of me being on that stretch of New Jersey interstate at that exact moment, of me camping out in the waiting room and running into an attractive stranger who happened to be visiting from my hometown—a stranger who just so happened to be the best friend of the victim.

"Not long at all." I lift my martini glass and give him a gracious smile. I don't tell him that if it were any other night, I'd be putting in a few more hours at the office. I find that sometimes men get put off by a driven woman. If he likes me enough to stick around after the first date, he'll figure it out on his own anyway. "So sorry it's taken this long for us to get together. My travel schedule has been crazy."

"You fly a lot for work?" He flags down a server and orders a beer.

"At least once a month, lately it's been more often than that. They've been sending me to our HQ in Hoboken and sometimes into one of our satellites in Manhattan, which I don't mind."

"Grew up in Jersey City," Grant says. "Not far from there."

He's handsome.

More handsome than I remember.

Broad-shouldered. Tall. Dark eyes. Darker hair. Deep-set eyes. Even deeper dimples.

A flash of a smile that plays on his lips when our eyes catch.

I'm no expert in menswear, but I'm willing to wager that his suit cost a pretty penny.

Also, I saw him pull up to the valet stand in a freshly-washed silver Maserati.

Not that any of those things matter.

They don't.

I do just fine on my own, and material things have never impressed me.

But if a girl's going to be approached by a stranger and asked on a date, it isn't the *worst* thing in the world if he's dashing, confident, and clearly unafraid to work his ass off for the things he wants.

The last guy I dated was respectably average in all areas, and I was beginning to think about introducing him to my family ... but eight dates in, he dropped a bombshell that sent me packing. Not only was he in the middle of a messy divorce, he was living with his mother and paying for our dates with funds from his weekly unemployment checks—which were about to run out (hence the confession).

Crazy enough, he was a step above the guy who came before him—a man who claimed he was a doctor when he was actually a "holistic animal chiropractor" and got bent out of shape when I would refer to him as "Liam" and not as "Dr. Jeppesen" in conversation.

I'd resigned myself to a much-needed dating sabbatical in the months leading up to my chance encounter with Grant.

"What brought you all the way out here?" I ask. Seems like anymore, Phoenix contains more transplants than locals, and everyone has a story. Most of them are along the lines of wanting to trade gray midwestern winters for sunshine and palm trees or 'just wanting a change,' but every once in a while, someone throws a curveball of a story my way.

"A job."

I don't love the vagueness, but I give him a chance to elaborate before lobbing questions at him like darts. I do that to people. I fact-gather. I can't help it. I've always been curious, always wanted to have all the information possible before I make my assessment.

He continues, "I graduated from Montclair State with a degree in Finance. My uncle knew a guy who wanted to hire someone fresh out of college, someone he could shape into the right fit for his company. Jumped at the chance and haven't looked back since. Best decision of my life. Bar none."

"You don't miss the hustle and bustle of the East Coast? Or the seasons?"

Grant shakes his head and makes a face.

"Think you'll ever move back?" I stir my drink with a skinny metal straw.

"Not a chance." His beer arrives and he takes a sip, eyes locked on me. "The views out here are ... *breathhtaking.*"

I don't think his comment was a double entendre directed at me, but for some insane reason, my cheeks flush with heat and my heartbeat reverberates in my ear. Maybe it's the way he's looking at me—like he's two seconds from devouring me. Like I'm the only woman he sees in this room full of distracting, prattling strangers.

It's not something I'm used to.

I tend to intimidate men, I think. Or I attract the kind of men who are easily intimidated, men who expect me to make the first move or throw myself at them like a sex-starved damsel in distress.

Something tells me Grant can hold his own in the sexual prowess department. But I'm not a sleep-with-a-guy-on-the-first-date kind of girl, so my assumption will remain unproven.

For now.

"I never had a chance to ask you about your friend," I say. "The one who had the accident ... is he okay?"

"Funny you should ask," Grant says. "His sister called me earlier today. They brought him out of the coma."

I lift a brow. "He was in a coma?"

"Medically induced. They were trying to get the swelling down on his brain or something like that. I didn't ask for details. Medical stuff makes me ... yeah." He offers a humble chuckle and sips his beer before peering around the crowded restaurant. "Anyway, Claire said he was talking, asking questions, getting his bearings. He was a little confused, but she said his prognosis so far is good."

I clasp a hand over my chest and exhale. "Oh, that's amazing. I'm so relieved to hear that."

"Yeah, same."

"My sister was in an accident several years ago ..." I say. "Unfortunately she didn't make it, but I'm happy for your friend."

Summarizing Kari's life in a single sentence hurts. Physically hurts. But I plaster over it with a winced smile.

"Jesus, Brie. I'm so sorry about your sister. I had no idea." He reaches across the table, places his hand on top of mine, but not for an awkward or uncomfortable length of time. "That must've been horrible."

"We were twins," I say. I don't get to talk about her that often, so I relish the opportunity. "Identical. Crazy close even though we were night and day. She was the wild one. I was ... not."

He offers a bittersweet smile as his dark eyes hold mine with full attention.

I ramble on about Kari longer than I should, telling him silly stories and painting her personality in vivid detail, from her neurotic obsession with peel-able nail polish to her affinity for pinpointing which indie rock bands were going to make it big before anyone else. Not once does his expression glaze with boredom. Not once does he interrupt or change the subject. He gives me his full, undivided attention.

"Are we ready to place our orders?" Our server interrupts our moment.

"Oh ... I think we're just doing drinks," I tell her—because that was the plan. We were going to meet up for drinks and conversation, nothing more, nothing less.

Grant's dark eyes soften as he peers across the table in my direction. "You hungry? I'm starving."

I try to tamp my excitement. "I mean ... a girl's got to eat, right?"

His bright grin fills the dim, candlelit space that environs us.

"Give us another minute to look at the menu, please," he tells her. "And in the meantime, we'll take another round." The server dashes off, disappearing behind the bar. Grant rests his elbows on the table and leans closer. "You were saying?"

He doesn't take his eyes off me. Not for a second.

My stomach somersaults.

Who is this guy?

When our second round arrives, he lifts his glass to mine. I don't know what he's drinking to, but for the first time in my life, I'm drinking to chance, to strange coincidences, and to the future—whatever it may bring.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wall Street Journal and #1 Amazon bestselling author [Winter Renshaw](#) is a bona fide daydream believer. She lives somewhere in the middle of the USA and can rarely be seen without her trusty Mead notebook and laptop. When she's not writing, she's living the American Dream with her husband, three kids, the laziest puggle this side of the Mississippi, and a busy pug pup that officially owes her three pairs of shoes, one lamp cord, and an office chair.

Winter also writes psychological suspense under the pseudonym of Minka Kent. Her debut novel, THE MEMORY WATCHER, was optioned by NBC Universal in January 2018 and her book, THE THINNEST AIR, was a #1 Amazon Kindle bestseller and a Washington Post best seller five weeks in a row.

Winter is represented by Jill Marsal of Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

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