

FALLING  
FOR  
WHISKEY  
*book two*

*loving*  
WHISKEY

BRITTANÉE NICOLE

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***DEDICATION***

***It's okay not to be okay.***

**But I'll make it better...I promise.**

**XOXO**

**Brittanee**

**P.S. This one's for you Mo. Thank you for always believing in me.**

# CONTENT WARNING

For a detailed list of content that may be troubling to some readers, please go to my website.

[www.brittaneenicole.net](http://www.brittaneenicole.net)



# PLAYLIST

1. Okay Not to Be Okay by Marshmello and Demi Lovato
2. Hate My Heart by Carrie Underwood
3. White Fence by Sophia Scott
4. Ten Things I hate About You by Leah Kate
5. The Night We Met by Lord Huron
6. Mr. Percocet by Noah Cyrus
7. Hate myself by Tate McRae
8. Drowns the Whiskey by Jason Aldean and Miranda Lambert
9. You Proof by Morgan Wallen
10. Feel me by Selena Gomez
11. Break My Heart Again Danielle Bradbury
12. Gone Too Soon by Andrew Jannokos
13. Coming Up for Air by Signals in Smoke
14. Everything I didn't Say by Ella Henderson
15. Last of the Whiskey James Arthur
16. Feel by Fletcher
17. Ghost by Carrie Underwood

18. Slow Dancing in a Burning Room by Lindsey Ell
19. Glimpse of Us by Joji
20. Unsteady by X Ambassadors
21. Angel by Aerosmith
22. Heaven by Callum Scott
23. Love Like That by Phillip Phillips
24. You and Me by Lifehouse
25. Heart Hurt Good Lauren Durksi
26. Tennessee Whiskey by Chris Stapleton
27. Hold My Hand by Lady Gaga
28. Fall To Pieces by Velvet Revolver
29. You are the Joy of my Life by Chris Stapleton
30. This Will Be by Natalie Cole



**Cassius James** ✓



@CashJames

Grace Kensington is a con artist. Her mother was correct when she said all Grace cares about is money and fame.

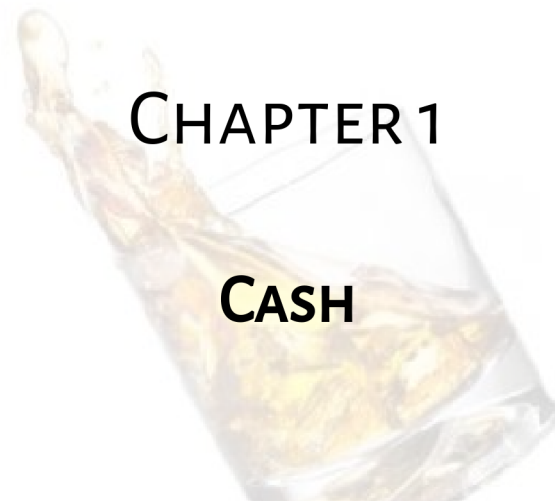


**Cassius James** ✓



@CashJames

She took advantage of me as her client. I was unaware of her marriage and am deeply sorry to have caused my family embarrassment.



The papers feel too light to be this life changing. With my jaw tight in frustration, I sign my name on each highlighted line. When Cat gives my knee a light squeeze, I glare at her.

“This is going to be great,” Hanson says after I slide the paper in his direction. “We will plan the announcement in a few weeks.”

I raise my eyes and cut him with a stare. “You aren’t really going through with this sham of a marriage? I signed the papers—it’s unnecessary.”

Hanson frowns. “Sintac wants a family business. What’s better than two family businesses that are joined together in holy matrimony? This is a happy time, Cash; get on board.”

Cat sits stiffly beside me. “You don’t have to do this,” I say under my breath.

When she shakes her head and smiles at Hanson, my stomach twists. “We are doing this, Cash. We’re friends. Jay and I are happy. It’s what’s good for both of our companies.”

Hanson’s smile broadens. “See, a family affair. It’s going to be great. So will Grace be there?”

This guy is looking to be punched. “I know what you did. I know you and Grace planned this. I’ll figure out how to prove it and then I’ll get my company back.”

Cat sighs. “Jay had nothing to do with Grace’s tell-all. He stopped it from being aired.” She turns to her new boyfriend and scolds him. “Jay, stop bringing her up. I told you, we’re done with her.”

My stomach flips as I remember every horrible minute of the night before. Finding out that the woman I believed was the love of my life had betrayed me. Seeing my brother’s face after each of our family’s secrets were dangled before the masses. The identity of Chase’s mother; the fact that he’s the product of statutory rape. The news that my brother Carter may have a child. And the horrible truth that the woman who spilled it all was Grace.

He cuts her with a stare. “And I told you, she’s my friend. She *didn’t* do this. And you don’t need your company back, Cash, because I didn’t take your company. We are merging—you will still have management of your side and Cat will handle the expansion. This is a win-win.”

Irritated, I reply, “If you want this to work, I’d suggest you don’t mention Grace to me again. We’re done. I don’t deal with liars and cheats or people I can’t trust, and Grace is unfortunately all of those.”

Hanson lets out a bitter laugh. “You’re a bigger fucking fool than I thought. That woman gave you everything, and she would have given up even more for you. She practically did. You were off-limits in the interview, Cash. Vanessa played her. And nothing came out. All the secrets remain under wraps. *Nothing* is coming out. Forgive her or you’ll regret losing her.”

I shake my head, not buying the lies. I saw it in Grace's violet eyes. She betrayed me. "Let's just stick to talking about business. Stay out of my personal life and I'll stay out of whatever fake marriage bullshit you guys are doing." I push my chair back and walk toward the door.

"Sit down," Hanson's voice booms across the room and halts me on the spot.

I wear anger in my gaze. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Sit the fuck down, *please*," he says condescendingly. Cat meets my eye and pleads with me to listen.

With tense shoulders and a clenched jaw, I walk back to the table and sit.

"Now you are going to have your publicist put out this statement, and if you get asked anything about Grace you will refer to the statement or give nothing but a glowing review of her. Do I make myself clear?"

I don't even pick up the paper that Hanson slid toward me. There is no way that I'm protecting Grace. "Not going to happen."

Cat grabs the paper from me and reads it out loud. "A few months ago, I engaged Grace Kensington to help me in my pursuit of a wife. During that time, I was introduced to Vanessa. Although I did not see it going anywhere past the first date, she apparently did not feel the same way. After our date, and after I learned of Grace's pending divorce, I pursued a relationship with Grace. When Vanessa found out about this, she was apparently angry and somehow hacked my account last night to make those slanderous allegations against Grace."

Cat scoffs at the paper. My breathing matches her anger.

"At this time, I want to make clear that Grace Kensington was an utmost professional when I was a client. She did not pursue me. She did not introduce me to anyone after I made it clear that I was only interested in

her, and she is a victim of Vanessa's lies. I am profoundly sorry for how she has been affected and hope that Vanessa is brought to justice for her crimes."

Cat throws the paper down. "This is shit and you know it," she says heatedly.

I shake my head, even more convinced that Hanson and Grace planned this entire thing. Somehow, she comes out scot-free and he gets my company. Guarantee you in a year he will divorce my sister and marry Grace. The entire situation makes me ill.

Hanson turns his cold stare on her. "This only works if you make that statement. If not, let's rip up the contract, I'll go to Sintac, get the deal myself, and move on. You all seem to forget that I don't need you. *You* need me."

As much as I hate to admit it, he's right. My stupid tweet last night made me look like a fool, made Grace look like a scam artist, and gave credence to the previews that the news channel had uploaded before Hanson had the entire thing shut down. The vultures will keep circling if they believe there's a secret we're hiding. A cover-up. And there is.

Carter's child, the identity of Chase's mother, and her age.

Spinning it as a jealous ex who was trying to destroy both me and Grace would benefit my whole family. But it still doesn't explain one thing. "Why are you doing this? I get why it makes sense for us. I fucked up last night by sending the tweet. But you're right. You could just go to Landry and take the deal with him yourself. Why are you helping us? What do *you* get out of this?"

Cat looks at him like she is just as intrigued in his answer as I am.

“Because Grace doesn’t deserve what you did. I may not be a man who loves many people, but I love her. She’s good. She’s kind. She’s the type of person I would aspire to be, if I actually cared about that shit. And because of my interest in dating other people, I introduced her to a man who almost destroyed her. Who took all of her goodness and used it against her. She was a shell of herself during the last few years of that marriage, and when he cheated…” He clenches his fist and looks away as if it’s too much, then he turns back to me, his eyes cold. “For a moment, I thought you were actually going to be good for her. She was back to that light, fun, good person I knew in college. But you took it all away last night. And I won’t have it. I won’t have her lose everything because of you.”

Cat and I sit shell-shocked by his admission. I honestly never believed he cared about anyone but himself. I’m still convinced that his endgame is Grace. But in the end, I don’t have a choice. No matter whose fault it is, this is the position I find myself in, and I have to protect my family. “Fine.”

Cat jumps up. “You can’t be serious! Both of you. You can’t be serious. Jay, I won’t stand by and let you do this. We can fix everything with our relationship. We don’t need to fix things for her.”

Hanson barely blinks at her. “Oh, you have a part too. Don’t you worry. After we leave this office with Cash’s signed statement, you and I have an appointment with Grace Kensington.”

She shakes her head. “You’ve lost your damn mind.”

Hanson’s palm slams loudly against the table. “This is the last time I am going to say this. I care about you, Cat, but don’t make me choose.”

Cat visibly shakes, but I watch her wide eyes begin to fill with tears right before she bites them back down. “No surprise there.” She huffs out a breath and turns to me. “We good?”



I want to say no. I want to pound my fist like Hanson and make a point. But I've lost all bargaining power. In the end, I don't care what happens to Grace. Let him save her if he wants. I'm done with her, and as long as I can protect my business and my family, that's *all* that matters.

I look back at my sister and my blood boils. As I get up to leave, Hanson stands, ready to shake my hand. Instead, I push close to his ear and mutter, "Does she know?"

His eyes don't even glance in my sister's direction. If he's nervous, it doesn't show.

"Walk it off, Cash. Don't ruin more than you already have today," Hanson warns. Clearly my sister doesn't have a clue what Hanson did years ago.

"What's he talking about?" Cat asks, looking between the two of us.

"Don't worry, Kitten," he says to my disgust.

At his words I watch my sister's shoulders fall back and her eyes light up. It's almost like she falls to his praise. *What the fuck?*

I can't be here. I can't watch whatever this is. She's a fool and he's a monster, and one day she'll learn that.



## CHAPTER 2

### GRACE

“**G**race, Sweets, the phone is ringing, you have to get up.”

I shake off the hand that pulls on my arm and shift my legs over to the other side of the bed so that I’m lying on my stomach. That’s better.

“Grace, darling, come on, it’s Jonathan.”

I shake her away again. Why would Jonathan be calling me? It’s too early.

Then I remember the day before. Cash leaving. Frank and Jonathan entering Cash’s apartment. The sobs that wracked my body but left me completely silent and shaking. The way they both spoke softly to one another before Jonathan knelt in front of me and tried to soothe my shivering body.

When I still didn’t get up—not because I didn’t want to listen to them, not because I wouldn’t have done anything for those two men to not see me broken on the floor, but because I physically couldn’t move—Jonathan whispered in my ear, “I’ve got you,” and snaked his arms under my hips

and behind my head and lifted me into his arms. Curling into his chest, the tears started again and didn't stop until I fell asleep.

I'm not ready to open my eyes again. My head pounds and I'm dehydrated. I feel physically exhausted from crying for so long. "Can't," I manage to mutter.

Marion's fingers rake through my hair. "Yes, you can."

I hear her answer the phone and speak softly. "She's not going in today....No, Jonathan, she can't....Meet with her tomorrow....Fine, I'll have her in by two but that's the best I can do....Okay, we'll see you then."

A glare slips through the slit of my eyes. What did she agree to?

I'm not getting up.

I can't.

I wish I could.

But I really cannot get out of this bed today.

Groaning, I turn away from Marion and the curtain she's opened trying to let in the light. Why isn't it pouring? Why is the sky not as dark as my mood? Who the hell told the sun it was allowed to shine today?

"You have an hour to wallow. The publicist is going to be here at noon and before that time we need to get you camera ready. I have Anthony coming before that to do your hair and makeup and..." She stops talking as I moan again. "Grace, I know you're sad. But you have no choice. You have to get back up and prove to everyone they can't take you out. *You can do this.*"

Her inspiring words don't even touch my psyche. I know she cares. I know she loves me, and I know she isn't doing this because of the business. If it all falls apart, she'd be fine. She's doing this for me. Because she knows that when I finally come out of this fog, months from now, I will

need my business and my reputation, and right now I don't have either of those.



Three hours later I stand in front of Marion and Anthony with a frown on my face. “Beautiful, I did not just spend two hours making you gorgeous for you to give me that scowl. Now show me some fucking teeth.”

I grit them like a toddler, and Anthony laughs.

Marion shakes her head. “There she is. Okay, Jonathan just messaged that he’s on the way up.”

I panic. “I thought he was meeting us at the office.”

Marion looks at me pensively. “The press will be at the office. He wants to talk to you first.”

My shoulders sag and Anthony quips, “Breasts out, shoulders back.”

I straighten and push out my breasts. “Happy now?”

He smiles. “Positively giddy. Okay, this has been fun. Marion, thanks for the call. Grace, try to look more like a woman and less like a gremlin. Love you both.” He throws air kisses and disappears out the door.

Involuntarily, I roll my eyes and smile. I hate that Marion knew Anthony would do that. I don't want to smile. Smiling feels like a betrayal of my misery. Just like the damn sun.

Moments later the door opens, and Jonathan walks in wearing a grey suit and a smile. His blue eyes study my face, then they quickly skirt over my

attire before returning to my eyes again. “Come here, you.” He holds out his arms and I walk into them.

Before I allow my emotions to travel down my face, I throw my head back and flap my hands in front of my eyes. “I can’t cry again. Don’t look at me like that.”

He smirks. “Would you rather me tell you how amazing that skirt makes your ass look?” He turns me sideways so he can scope out the assets, and I actually laugh.

The sound takes us all by surprise.

“What are you doing here, Jay? Why am I dressed up, and what am I saying to the press?”

I don’t even question that I must do everything he says. Jonathan saved me last night. Just like he saved me every time I asked for his help over the last few months. He has a reputation as someone who only cares about himself, but he’s never been that way with me.

He hands me his phone, and I stare at him before looking down. When he motions for me to look, I sigh before doing as I’m told.

As I read the words attributed to Cash, I momentarily find myself hopeful. “Wait, he wrote this? He knows the truth? Is he coming?”

Jonathan doesn’t even have to reply. His pitiful look tells me everything I need to know. This is a PR stunt. Something that Jonathan forced upon him. How, I’ll never know. Cash hates Jonathan. And now he hates me.

“But why?” I ask instead.

“Don’t worry about the why. Just know that we are going to make this right, and he won’t be a problem for you again.” Jonathan squeezes my shoulders. He may think his words are reassuring, but he couldn’t be further from the truth.

I'm heartbroken. *I'm* still in love. And the man I'm in love with destroyed me.

He hated me so much that he actually went out of his way to take everything I loved, everything that mattered, away from me without even bothering to have a conversation. His faith in me was that miniscule. Where I would have given him the moon, he deigned to give me dirt. My actions through the last few months apparently told him that not only was I selfish and untrustworthy, but I wasn't even worth a conversation.

*Our love wasn't worth a conversation.*

The reality is that if he had loved me the way I love him, he would never have been able to believe that I did what they accused. Even with the evidence he was presented with.

If the roles were reversed, I never would have believed it.

He destroyed me, and I still don't believe it.

Anger replaces sadness. Humiliation for devastation. Cash isn't the first person to throw me away. But he will most certainly be the last.

Standing across from Jonathan, I make myself that promise. I won't ever let myself feel this way again.



## CHAPTER 3

### GRACE

“**W**hat is she doing here?” I ask as we walk into my office to find Cat sitting in my waiting room dressed in all black like she’s attending a funeral.

*My funeral.*

She probably wishes she were.

Then again, she’d probably wear red and celebrate.

Cat practically growls at me. “Believe me, I’d rather be anywhere else. I think the appropriate thing for you to say is thank you.”

I roll my eyes and look to the heavens.

*God, give me the strength. God, please do not let me take this woman to the bathroom and stick her head in the toilet because that is the only image that is currently running through my head. Cat struggling as I continue to flush over and over again. Then letting her up for a second and staring at her sopping head.*

“Let’s go in your office and talk,” Jonathan says, awaking me from my daydream.

Appreciating the power that comes from sitting behind my desk, I walk around and take a seat, motioning for them to do the same.

Marion follows behind them and stands in the doorway, her arms crossed in a warning. She's my protector. Or she's making sure I don't have a nervous breakdown. Either role is welcome.

"Grace, Cat here would like your help finding a husband," Jonathan says with a slight lift of his lips. I'm not sure if it's a smile, or a smirk, or something in between.

Cat glares at him as if it is the last thing she wants, and I feel giddy. If this is his way of punishing her, or making me feel better, I'm all for it. I could set her up with the biggest assholes in Boston. I could find men with warts, or toe fungus, or nasty sisters.

Even as my insides get excited at the prospect, I manage to contain my excitement at her demise. "And why would I do that?"

Cat laughs. "Oh, that's how she's going to play this. Like she even has a choice." She turns to me then with a glare. "Because your reputation is in the toilet, and I'm kind enough to help you fix it."

Jonathan throws daggers in her direction, and I feel the strength come back to my legs. He's got my back. He's going to *fix* this. I will do whatever this man says because of the way he just glared at my nemesis. He's here for me and I can do this.

"I watched the interview, Grace," he says, meeting my eyes.

Momentarily, I shut my eyes, trying to filter through the tape in my brain as he continues. "It was a great idea. Having female clientele. Helping strong, independent businesswomen meet men who appreciate those qualities rather than stifle them. It's a damn good business plan, and Cat would be the best candidate for your first client."



It's like a lightbulb goes off in my head. My idea the day before to begin offering our services to women. The one I pitched to Vanessa, and the only reason I did the damn interview in the first place. Obviously, Vanessa won't be my first female client, but Cat doesn't exactly seem like a better option. I spend a tremendous amount of one-on-one time with my clients, and I just don't know how Cat and I will do that without killing one another.

"Jay, I hear you. And believe me, I appreciate everything that you are doing for me. But it's no secret that Cat hates me, and I'm not her biggest fan. How are we going to sell anything but that to the press?"

Cat scowls and looks to Jonathan for direction. "For once, I would have to agree with Grace."

I offer a fake smile.

"Because it's what you both have to do. Cat is doing this for her family's business. You are doing this for your own. I'm sure you've had to play nice before with people you didn't like. Do it again and just be happy that you dodged a bullet, and you won't actually have to be family."

I know he says those words as a comfort, but they are anything but. My stomach turns as I remember Cash's coldness the night before. My eyes close as I feel the pang in my chest, the squeezing of my heart, and the stolen breath. This is what a broken heart feels like. There are actual physical ramifications to this kind of sadness.

When I open my eyes, I find Cat's whiskey-brown ones staring at me. It's almost as if she can actually see my pain and doesn't know what to do with it. As if my sadness makes her uncomfortably aware of the true depths of my despair. Her lip moves between her teeth, and she looks away. "I think we can make it work," she finally says in a soft voice.

Jonathan reaches out and squeezes her hand, and I watch as her demeanor softens even further, and she smiles at him. “That’s my girl.”

He turns to me while still holding on to her hand and my eyes are drawn to their connection.

What is that? *What exactly is that?*

“Grace, what do you say?”

I tear my eyes away from their embrace and nod. “Fine.”



## CHAPTER 4

### GRACE

**A**pparently reports that your wife is screwing not one, but two billionaires leads a husband to consent pretty quickly to divorce. That is one perk of my new notoriety. The call from my lawyer letting me know that we have a mediation scheduled in a few weeks and that Steven has agreed to almost every one of my demands leaves me feeling pretty good.

It's been forty-eight hours since my life was upended. Forty-eight hours since Cash kicked me to the curb. I think I must be numb because I woke up this morning, got out of bed, and actually went for a run. Couldn't tell you the last time I exercised, but it felt good to suck in the fresh air, hit the pavement, and wave at other runners.

It's incredible how kind runners are. The number of people that told me *you go girl, or you got this, or great job*, this morning was more than my mother did my entire childhood.

Pathetic, I know.

Even more pathetic is that I'm relying on strangers I'll never see again to help boost my confidence, and it's apparently working.

Unfortunately, I need all the confidence today because I'm having lunch with Cat to discuss her position as my first bachelorette. It seems cruel that so soon after her brother broke my heart, I have to be faced with her cattiness, but it is what it is. Jonathan is right about one thing; this will be good for business. He's saving our reputation.

*My reputation.*

If this is what he thinks I need to do, then I'll do it.

My office door flies open, and I don't even have a second to catch my breath before Tessa is barreling toward me, kneeling at my feet, and throwing her head into my lap. "I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry, Grace. Please forgive me."

My hands immediately go to her hair, and I stroke her head as I comfort her. "It's okay. I know you were out of town on assignment. I'm fine. Marion and Jonathan took care of me. I'm okay," I say again.

Tears stream down her freckled face. "No, you've got it all wrong."

"What do I have wrong?"

Tessa sucks in her tears and sits back on her knees. She wipes her eyes and places her hands on my legs. "Grace, I swear to you, it was a mistake. I *never* meant to hurt you. I was trying to fix things. I am so sorry."

I shake my head in confusion. "Tessa, you aren't making sense. What was a mistake?"

Shakily, she replies, "Vanessa." It sounds more like a cry than a name.

"What about Vanessa?" I ask patiently.

"She saw you," she says on a sob. "She saw you in the garden."

The garden. What garden?

Oh, the bamboo garden...it was only a few days ago, but it feels like a lifetime has transpired since that event.

Biting my lip, I nod in acknowledgment, trying to shake the memory of Cash's lips taking me over the edge while he told me to hang on to the bamboo tree. Or the way he held up my legs and devoured me. Or the tie he wrapped around my mouth to stifle my cries.

"Yes, I know that."

She raises her eyes. "You do?"

"I saw her too."

Surprise freckles Tessa's face. "Oh."

"What does that have to do with why you're crying? What's going on?"

She shakes her head as if she's trying to catch herself up to the conversation. "She came back saying she was going to destroy you. That you'd conned her. I was drunk, but I wanted to protect you. I thought we had become friendly after the limo ride. Grace, I never meant to hurt you."

"Tessa, what happened?"

"I told her everything. I was trying to get her to understand why the James boys were so screwed up. I was trying to get her to understand that they didn't *need* this drama. I thought she was Cat's friend. I never thought she'd use the fact that their father had sex with their nanny and impregnated her as a news story. I mean, how could she do that to her *friend*?"

My chest falls as I realize the truth of her words.

*Carter confided in her.*

I wasn't the only one who knew about Chase's mom.

*It wasn't me.*

Obviously, I already knew I wasn't to blame since I didn't spill any secrets, but just hearing that there was someone else behind it makes my head spin. I sit silently soaking in the truth, growing angrier by the second.

Not at my best friend. Tessa never meant to hurt me. And she didn't tell my secrets.

My blind fury is directed at Cash. He didn't take even a moment to consider that it wasn't me who broke his family's trust. He didn't give me even a second to explain.

Fury engulfs me, stifling my ability to breathe.

"Please say something. Please tell me you don't hate me. I mean I deserve it. I totally deserve for you to never speak to me again. But please, please don't." Tears pour down Tessa's face. I've never seen her cry. We've been best friends since college and never once did I see her so much as tear up.

I put my hands on hers. "Tessa, I don't hate you. I'm not even angry with you."

She lets out a breathy sigh. "But why? I destroyed everything. You lost *everything* because of me."

Even though my life has spiraled out of control, I somehow manage to smile. "I haven't lost everything." I breathe out as I realize the truth behind those words. "The man who I thought loved me turned on me without even a conversation. I'd say I dodged a bullet, wouldn't you?"

Tessa shakes her head. "He's just hurt. He's under a lot of pressure and his family has tried for so long to keep all of that hidden. I should have never—"

With my hand up, I stop her before she can continue. "*Don't*. Don't make excuses for him. Don't take the blame. He made a choice. He could have spoken to me. He could have trusted me. He could have done so many things. Instead, he broke my heart."

Tessa studies me and then she nods. “Okay. We won’t talk about him. So what can I do? How can I make this better?”

“Jonathan took care of everything. He’s been wonderful.”

I bite my lip, still confused as to why he’s been so wonderful. What is he getting out of all of this? I know he cares about me, but this is so much more than that. He’s a businessman. He doesn’t attach his family’s name to just anything. There is something more at work here, and I have no idea what it is.

Tessa nods. “Okay. Well, there has to be something I can do. Anything. Seriously, Grace. I’ll take you shopping, or drinking, or we can go home and watch *Friends* all afternoon and eat ice cream. Anything. Just name it.”

I laugh at her desperation. “Tessa, seriously, I’m fine. I have to work today anyway.” As I remember what I have to do today, a thought enters my mind. “Actually, there is something you can help me with.”

She practically jumps up and shouts. “Anything. You name it and I’ll do it.”

“I have to have lunch with Catherine James. She’s my newest client.”

Tessa grimaces. Yeah, that’s how I feel too. “But why?”

“Like I said before, Jonathan took care of everything, and this is apparently his solution to my disastrous reputation.”

Her face falls. “God, this is worse than I thought.”

“It’s really okay. I mean she’s not my favorite person, but I’m sure I can be a professional for a few weeks.”

Biting her lip, she replies, “Okay, well, what do you need from me?”

I smile. “We’re having lunch with her today.”

“We are?” she asks, confused.

“Yes. That’s how you can make it up to me. You can be my date at night when I meet with her and at all my lunch meetings. Can you handle that?”

“Your handy wing-woman at your service,” Tessa says with a salute of her hand.

I laugh and it feels good. Cash may have broken my heart, but he didn’t break me. I’m still standing and laughing. “You are ridiculous,” I tease.

“But you love me,” she says with a smile, and I nod, because I really do.



Lunch is scheduled at a spot where the press is sure to spot Cat James meeting with Grace Kensington.

I’m still not used to being Googleable. Nor is it something that excites me. I’m sure it has the potential to be good for business, but at thirty-six, I’m too old for this.

I’ve become a meme, an almost divorcée, and a gossip rag queen.

Who would have thought? Certainly proven my mother right. She must be so proud.

Cat walks in as if she’s strutting the runway. Unlike me, she has no qualms being the center of the tabloids. Her long dark hair sways with her every step, and her curves are the envy of every woman in the restaurant and hold the attention of every man.

But she’s above it all. As if she’s used to people staring. I guess that’s what happens when you’re the only female heir to the James fortune. It’s no wonder we never got along.



We are *nothing* alike.

When she spots Tessa and me seated at a table, her lips turn up in a sly grin. “You couldn’t handle me on your own, Grace?”

She remains standing as she looks down at me, perhaps believing that she’ll intimidate me.

Unfazed, I shrug. “I just don’t really *like* you, Cat. I figure if I have to share a meal with you, might as well have my best friend along for the free lunch.”

Tessa looks back and forth as if she’s embarrassed to be seen with either one of us. “Down girls, down.”

Cat looks the other way before sitting. “Well, at least you’re not being fake. *Anymore.*”

I let out a stilted laugh. This woman has got to be kidding me. “Seriously, you are the one who needs help finding a man.”

Cat purses her red lips, and the golden bangles that adorn her wrists jangle as she practically vibrates in anger. “Do you really think *I* need help finding someone to spend time with me?”

I remain aloof. “Why else would Jonathan be begging me to take you on as a client?”

Her laughter echoes across the table before she stills and launches her attack again. “To help *you*. Believe me, I’m not doing this of my own free will. I’m doing this because I had to cover up your bullshit lies that almost destroyed my family and did destroy Cash. Do you know how much you hurt him? Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

My cheeks flame at her insinuations.

Also, screw Cash. I couldn’t care less how he’s feeling right about now.

Tessa puts her hand over mine under the table and squeezes. Then she pulls back her shoulders and launches at Cat. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

As if irritated by our mere presence, Cat scoffs, “I don’t expect you to back me up, Tessa. She’s your friend, I get it. But even you have to admit that what she did was pretty shitty.”

I can’t help myself but laugh again as I look away and fold my arms. A waiter appears to pour us waters and take our drink order. “I’ll have a dirty martini,” I say without hesitating. It’s either going to taste delicious going down my throat or look fabulous dripping down Cat’s face. Jury’s still out which way we’re going.

When they both order the same, I bite back a small smile. At least Cat knows a good drink.

“As I was saying,” Tessa begins again, “you have it all wrong.”

Cat stares at her with a raised eyebrow and a standoffish gaze.

Tessa breathes out a long breath. “It was me. I’m the one to blame. Vanessa was upset at the party because she found out about Grace and Cash. She thought they were playing her the whole time.”

“Well, *she* was,” Cat says, motioning to me. “My brother would never do that though.”

I let out an exaggerated “ha!” Her brother would have slept with me the night of his first date with Vanessa. Hell, he didn’t want to go out with her to begin with. But sure, let’s blame me.

Tessa’s eyes pinch together. “You and I both know that your brother was head over heels for Grace and that Grace continued to push him away. Let’s not rewrite history.”

Cat goes to interrupt, and Tessa holds up her hand. “Can you please just let me get through this?”

Cat finally relents with a nod and Tessa exhales. “She was going on about how she was going to destroy your brother. The press would know what a player he was. Cat, she was acting crazy.” With a roll of her eyes, Tessa tries to rein in her thoughts. “I *thought* I was helping. I thought she was *your* friend.”

Cat seems to straighten at the accusation and then shrinks down again. “Yeah, me too.”

“I thought if I told her *why* Grace stayed away from Cash for so long, she would understand. I explained that your brothers were all screwed up over your father’s actions. I told her how Grace wanted to protect him from any bad press or any attention at all because he had enough on his plate. I never thought she would use what I told her to destroy your family or Grace. You have to believe me; if I thought for even a second that she would have done what she did...” Tessa stops and stares at her hands. “If I had a clue this would be the outcome, I never would have opened my mouth.” She raises her eyes to Cat. “I am so very sorry that your family has suffered because Carter trusted me. And I am so sorry that Grace has been the one to pay for my big mouth.”

I lean over and put my head on Tessa’s shoulder, and she leans her head down against mine in solidarity.

Our drinks arrive and Cat twirls the olives silently.

It appears I need my drink more than she needs to wear it, so I bite down on an olive and take a sip.

Shockingly, Cat says nothing. I’m not really sure what I expect her to say, but her claws always seem to be out, so this quieter version is a surprise.

“Listen,” I say, trying to redirect the conversation, “you and I obviously got off on the wrong foot.”

She tilts her head as if she’s listening but also kind of in a sarcastic manner, her forehead wrinkling as her eyebrows quirk up.

“I would really like to keep my word to Jonathan and help you. Or maybe we are just both helping Jonathan—I have no idea. But either way, if you can move on from the past now that you know there is no chance of your brother and I dating, we can work together. What do you say?”

She breathes in and sets her glass down. Shockingly, she puts out her hand. “Hello, Grace, my name is Cat James. It’s nice to meet you.”

Biting the side of my mouth, I hide a smile and take her hand. “It’s nice to meet you too. Now, if you were looking for a man, what exactly would you be looking for?”



## CHAPTER 5

### CASH

**F**rank enters my office and slaps pictures down on my desk. I pick them up and sift through them.

“I don’t get it. Where is he?”

Chase disappeared when the news story previews played, and we haven’t been able to find him since. It’s been almost two weeks, and I can’t for the life of me figure out where he went. I had Frank find his mother, worried that Chase would be stupid enough to lead the press right to her, but she’s still living her normal life uninterrupted by the twenty-seven-year-old hothead.

“Maybe he went to Vegas or something?” Frank suggests. “You know your brother. He probably just needs to blow off steam.”

I blow out a breath and walk over to the bar, grabbing a drink. “You’d think he would realize that we’re all going nuts looking for him. You’d think he’d care that I’m here doing damage control while he parties.” I grip the glass tightly before taking a sip of the clear liquid.

“Vodka?” Frank asks, staring at my glass like it’s poison.

“Whiskey wasn’t cutting it.”

Or more like it reminds me of the person that causes me to drink. Which ya know is fucking fantastic since I own a damn whiskey company.

Frank shakes his head. “Maybe you should try not drinking so often and then it won’t lose its effect.”

“Maybe you should mind your own fucking business,” I grit out.

“You are my business, Bossman,” he retorts.

“Don’t,” I say, cutting him with my eyes.

“She’s only a few blocks away. You could make this right. Just apologize. Tell her the truth, that you flew off the handle, you lost your mind, that you’re sorry, that you were wrong...”

Before he can continue, I fling the glass in my hand at the wall, filling the void between us with a noisy clatter and sending shards of glass and liquid flying.

“*Fuck!*” I scream.

Frank doesn’t flinch.

“I did nothing wrong! You’re supposed to be *my* best friend. You’re supposed to be the *one* person I can rely on. Now you’re taking her side too!”

Frank folds his arms across his chest. “Despite what you may think, this is me being someone you can rely on. This is me being here for *you*. I’m here to tell you that you fucked up and you’re making a mistake.”

“Get out,” I say, walking back to the bar to pour another drink.

“You are going to be really fucking miserable when you wake up and realize that she did nothing wrong.”

“Out!” I scream again.

Frank doesn’t budge. “Do you really think she would do that to you? Honestly, think about it, Cash. It doesn’t make sense. None of it makes

sense. *Talk to her.*”

Not bothering to turn around, I pour myself another drink and down it in one shot.

When I hear the door close, my shoulders relax in relief. I strain my neck to rid the tension that the mere thought of Grace does to me on an almost hourly basis.

Fuck, it’s not like anyone has to even say her name, since she’s on my mind constantly. The way she felt below my fingertips, the sounds she made when she came, the taste of her lips—sometimes vanilla because of her lip gloss, vodka from her dirty martinis if she’d been out, or just Grace when she was waking beside me, no makeup or filter in the way.

Everyone thinks they know her better than I do, but I knew every intimate detail of that woman, and it is because of that knowledge I’m positive I’m right. Grace always put her career first. Hell, she told me she wouldn’t change and she didn’t. Memories of every word she ever said to me, every kiss we ever shared, and the way she tasted poison my every thought.

It is because of this, and also in spite of it, that I did something incredibly stupid only an hour ago. When an email came in addressed to Chase, Carter, and me regarding purchasing a club in Boston, I accepted without even speaking with my brothers. To be fair, I can’t speak to Chase, and who knows what the hell is going through Carter’s mind now that he’s found out about a potential love child. But that wasn’t the reason I made the decision without discussing it with them. It was because it was *the* club. The one where I watched Grace’s hips move, where I watched her laugh in unbridled joy, the one where I grabbed her and finally kissed her in public. The place where she admitted to me that what I was feeling wasn’t one-sided. That

what we had was real. The club we left, hand in hand, before we spent the night talking and making love.

That was also the same night I told her my family's secrets. The same ones she used to destroy me.

No one else could own that place. Part of me wants to burn it to the ground. Part of me wants to preserve it. I'm not sure which side will win, but either way it will be my decision to make.





## CHAPTER 6

### CASH

I'm surprised how quickly my attorneys are able to finalize the purchase of the club. Transfer money, sign the deed, and voilà—within two weeks I am the owner of the hottest night club in Boston. Something that would be far more suited for Chase.

Maybe it will be my apology to him whenever he decides to show his face again.

Like a burst of air, my sister breezes into my office with a scowl on her face. “Did you buy a nightclub?”

Looking her up and down, I study her outfit. What is she wearing? Cat is always dressed in stylish outfits that take some getting used to, but this is just a cowl-neck top and a high slit skirt. It's something Grace would wear. The fact that thought even enters my brain drives me nuts. When will everything I see stop reminding me of her?

I eye her skeptically. “Yeah, I bought a club. Are you going to tell me I don't have the power to do that now?”

Cat plops into the chair, both her legs going outward rather than her typical crossed perfection. She looks like the Raggedy Ann doll she used to

carry around as a child. Her knees tight and her legs out in a triangle. Exhausted and stressed.

Or more accurately, she's probably just tired of my shit.

"No. Of course you can buy whatever you want. I just thought maybe you would have talked to me before such a big purchase."

I straighten my tie in an attempt to control the temper that keeps lashing out at everyone else. Clearly, something is going on with Cat. Something bigger than my buying a club. "It was a good opportunity. Besides, I need something else to focus on since you and Hanson are taking over my company."

So much for reining in the asshole.

Cat lets out a long breath. Something must be really bothering her to let me get away with being such a jerk. "We didn't take over the company, Cash. We're merging. Those are two very different things. And you will still be running the liquor company."

I laugh. "How kind of you."

"What do you want from me? An apology? I'm sorry. I am fucking sorry that a girl I trusted screwed you over. I had no idea Vanessa was like that. I am really, really sorry, Cash."

I slump back into my chair and kick my leg so that I roll backward until I hit the wall. Once again, I'm lashing out at my family. Lashing out at the one person who has my back. The only one who hasn't yelled at me for letting go of Grace, who hasn't disappeared off to who knows where, and who has signed her life away just to save all of us. I stand up and walk around the desk, kneeling in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Cat." I loosen my tie. "I'm just so damn stressed and miserable. I shouldn't take it out on you."

She motions to the chair next to her and I sit. “No, you should take it out on me. It’s my fault. If I hadn’t been so damn adamant that you stay away from Grace, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I don’t really see how that’s true. You were right about her. I should have listened.”

Cat sighs loudly again. “Yeah, about that, maybe I wasn’t,” she says quietly.

I push back. “Maybe you weren’t what?”

She looks at me out of the side of her eye and quietly replies, “Right about Grace.”

I growl in frustration. “Don’t you start too.”

Cat takes this as a win and perks up. “So, I’m not the only one saying you might have been wrong about her. That *I* was *definitely* wrong about her.”

I cannot believe this woman. She’s turned my entire family against me. She’s even turned my best friend and driver against me. And now my sister. My sister who hated her. This is ridiculous.

“You know what, I’m not discussing this with you. Or Frank. Or anyone else for that matter. You can all keep your thoughts to yourself because I’m fine.” I huff out a breath and look away. Then because I can’t stop myself, I push out of my chair and move to the bar.

“You realize that drinking at two in the afternoon is a pretty good indication that you are, in fact, not fine.”

“No, Cat, I wasn’t aware that is the case. Please enlighten me.” Lifting the glass to my mouth, just the smell of the bourbon relaxes me. Once it hits my tongue, my eyes close and I feel numbness take over.

Cat stands. Her footsteps are like an alarm in the morning; you try hard to ignore it, but it's inevitable that eventually it will shake you from your rest. She pulls the glass from my hand. She's got bigger balls than Frank. Looking me dead in the eye, she warns, "Cash, I won't let you throw away your life because of my error. Talk to her. *Please.*"

My heart pounds as the remnants of the bourbon burns my throat. I hold her stare. I won't back down. "No."

"I'm telling you, Cash, you are going to regret this. I talked to Grace—"

I silence her with a glare.

"Tessa—" she tries again, and I look away from her.

"Not another fucking word," I warn.

She hands me back my drink and spins on her heels. "Fine. Then be miserable. Turn into Hanson, a man you hate, who cares only about himself and business. I'm sure you'll make excellent business partners."

Before she can leave, I nip at her toes again. "Thought you wanted to marry him. Seemed pretty obvious from where I sat the other day that you're happy with whatever scraps he gives you."

She doesn't turn around. She taps on the door and flicks her middle finger at me before walking out. Laughing into my glass, I find myself smiling for the first time today.



## CHAPTER 7

### GRACE

“So what exactly are you looking for in a man?” I ask as I sit across from Cat at dinner. I was surprised when she called. She’d been putting off our meetings for the last few weeks and I figured she’d gotten Jonathan to agree to drop this. But according to her message, the merger had just taken more of her time than she expected and now she was ready to focus on our project. I was shocked when she asked if we could meet at a restaurant rather than at my office. I thought for sure she’d avoid spending any more time with me than necessary. After arriving, we both ordered dirty martinis, and it’s cutting the awkwardness. Marginally.

Cat picks up the toothpick with the blue cheese olives on it and spins it between her fingers before taking a bite. Then she tilts her head in thought. “Honestly?”

I laugh. “Yeah, I mean unless you want me to pair you with the devil, you should give me some direction.”

Cat throws back her head and laughs loudly. Men and women turn to stare. She has that effect everywhere she goes. There’s an air about her. A sensuality. I’ve never been attracted to women but it’s her essence. She

oozes it. I would not be remotely surprised to learn that she's dabbled with both men and women. And probably enjoyed it.

"The devil would probably be what I deserve after how I treated you. And better than what I've dated in the past."

Her eyes shine with fire. She has passion and poise, and had her poker stick not been aimed in my direction for the last few months, I probably would have liked her. A lot.

"Like you said, it's in the past. I'm happy to move forward."

I take another sip of my martini as I study her. Cat's red nails match her lipstick perfectly, and her dark black hair has been recently cut into a stylish bob. I try to avoid looking too closely into her eyes though. They only remind me of the man who broke my heart.

"I tried talking to him," she says as her eyes meet mine, forcing me to deal with the pang of loss all over again.

I laugh dryly. "I'm sure that went over wonderfully."

She rolls her eyes. "He's spiraling. Drinking all the time. He's miserable without you. But he has too much pride to hear he was wrong."

*Angel, loving me isn't a risk because me not loving you is an impossibility.*

Cash's voice breaks into my thoughts, and I close my eyes to expel the memory. It stings knowing that he knows the truth and still hasn't reached out. It's brutally painful knowing the man who told me that loving him wasn't a risk lied through his teeth.

I truly believed he was the love of my life.

I shake my head with a tense smile. "There's no going back." Shrugging my shoulders, I try to feign indifference. "We're not here to talk about me.

We're here to talk about you. So seriously, Cat, what are you looking for in a man? What attributes do you find attractive?"

Around us, the restaurant buzzes with people wanting to be seen. Businessmen looking at women like they are on the menu, women dressed in low-cut tops, short skirts, and made up like the low hanging fruit they want to be for the night. But not Cat. She holds herself above everyone else. She looks around the room, her eyes focused and determined. I follow her gaze when she takes the toothpick which is now empty of olives, bites it and points to a man who stands at the bar with a woman by his side. "Him," she says.

He has a strong jaw, an expensive suit, and his gaze is locked on his companion.

"Hm." I turn back to Cat. "Why him?"

Her lips turn up in a smile. "He's looking at her like my brother looked at you. Not a woman in this room could tear his gaze away. I want to be that for someone. I want someone to *feel* that way about me. But I want him to almost lose control in his thirst for me. I want him hungry. Desperate for me. Find me that, Grace. Anything less isn't worth my time."

A chill runs through my body. She has the same passion as Cash. The same desire for love. Desperation.

Although, I think using Cash and me as an example is dooming her hopes before we even start.

"Got it. One insanely hot, narcissistic asshole coming up."

She laughs loudly, drawing attention again.

Behind me, I hear a familiar voice, reply, "Did someone summon me?"

I turn around to spot Jonathan standing over me.

Cat shakes her head, but the smile remains on her face. I watch as their eyes meet and feel a zap. Literal fireworks. I shake my head and look again. No...I must be seeing things. Jonathan looks at women like they're play toys, not with that intensity. And Cat, she wants someone who will give her everything. Jonathan's incapable of that.

"You ladies enjoying dinner?" he says with a twinkle in his eye as he squeezes my shoulder. He lowers his mouth to my ear and whispers as he kisses me hello, "Is she playing nice?"

I laugh and motion to the chair beside me. "We're fine. Join us for dinner? Or do you have a date tonight?" I look around him to see if anyone is trailing him or staring after him. It's not unlike Jonathan to leave a woman he's with if he sees something more enjoyable. I'd unfortunately been on the wrong end of that scenario years ago.

Jonathan leans over and kisses Cat hello and whispers something in her ear. She bites her lip and shakes her head.

Okay, maybe there *is* something there.

"Can't. Just wanted to stop and say hi to my two favorite girls. Make sure you're playing nice." He winks at me then looks back to the bar. I see a group of men looking over at us. "I'd ask you to join us for a drink after dinner, but I don't want my friends looking at either of you the way I know they will."

I fake a pout. "After all I've been through, you'd deny me a fun night of no strings attached?"

Jonathan's eyes grow dark. "Don't even think about it, Gracie. You deserve better than all of them. You deserve better than everyone in this damn restaurant."



A warmth settles between my ribs. He's a good friend. "Thanks, Jay, enjoy your drinks."

Turning back to Cat, I'm struck by the confusion that laces her face. As if she's trying to figure something out. "Why did you two break up?" she asks pointedly.

Why does anyone break up in college? Because no one is ready to settle down. Because there are literally girls throwing themselves at the guys at every party. Because of sex, immaturity...God, you name it, and all those things were part of it.

But to her I reply, "Honestly, I don't think Jay is the one woman type."

Cat nods. "Yeah, that's my thought too." A mask drops over her face, and whatever vulnerabilities were previously present are hidden. "What do you say to dancing?"

I practically choke on my drink. Not only because of the change in topic, but because dancing reminds me of one person and one person only.

*Told you we'd dance beneath the stars again, Angel.*

"I'm not a big dancer," I lie.

"Oh, come on! I know you used to go to the clubs with your girlfriends. Let's go dancing. Call your friends! I need a night out."

I don't know why, but somehow I know this is true. She needs girlfriends. She needs dancing. Almost as badly as I do.



## CHAPTER 8

### GRACE

**I**t's the strangest thing to sit across from a person you pledged your life to, someone you saw yourself growing old and raising a family with, and feel nothing.

I expected to hate him. Or to want to launch across the table and squeeze his neck until his pupils grew and his face turned red. I'd certainly envisioned doing those things plenty of times after he told me he was having an affair. Or when he did the "explosive interview" regarding my relationship with Jonathan. Or when he turned my mother against me for the final time.

Yet, as I sit across from Steven, staring into his almost made-up face, his perfectly gelled hair, his smooth hands that he lotions every night, I feel absolutely nothing. He's become such a stranger that I don't even remember a time when I felt *something* for him. Not love, not hate, just anything. It's like I lived an entire life since we split, and I can't even be bothered to deal with the clean-up of eight years of my life.

His attorney speaks, and I stare at a crack in the wall behind both their heads. I'm more interested in how an attorney who I'm sure Steven is

paying hundreds of dollars an hour can't afford to caulk the wall. He really should have that checked out. It could be structural damage.

"Grace, do you understand?" my attorney asks.

I turn to her and smile. Nope, I don't understand a thing. But I nod anyway because more than anything I want to get out of this room. I want to walk down the streets of Boston, enjoy the crisp fall air, and be free of the last of my baggage. Maybe I'll buy an entirely new wardrobe. I can certainly afford it now. I feel my lips turning up in a smile, and my attorney hits me with her foot. I may be beaming a bit too much for a woman signing divorce papers.

"Well, that should take care of everything then. Steven will have his stuff out of the house by next week and you can move back in if you wish," his attorney says.

I stand up and look down at my now ex-husband. "Oh, I didn't want the house. I'll be selling it." His face morphs in complete shock. I'd made such a big deal about all the money I'd spent on the rehab that it only seemed fair that I got it in the divorce.

*Suckers.*

They're so surprised that neither says a word. I take the opportunity to sneak out before they have a chance to ruin my mood.

In the hallway, my attorney laughs. "Did you enjoy that?"

"Um, yes. Didn't you?"

She smiles. "You might just be the happiest divorcée I've ever had. At least as far as women who've been cheated on goes."

I shrug. "He did me a favor. Can you believe I would have had kids with that man?"

A tap on my shoulder leaves me rigid. Oh, shit, I was probably being obnoxiously loud. Turning around slowly, I scrunch my face in embarrassment when I see Steven scowling at me. “A moment, please?”

I roll my eyes and sigh before turning around to my attorney to say goodbye. She gives me a pitiful wave and disappears down the corridor. I turn back to my ex. “What can I do for you?”

“Feels weird, doesn’t it?” he asks introspectively.

I knit my brows together. “I guess.”

That’s all it takes for his face to get red and his breathing to escalate. “You know, I thought you’d appreciate that I fought you on nothing. I gave you everything. I get that I was wrong, but after eight years together you would think you could at least appreciate everything I gave up.”

His opinion means so little to me that only a bitter laugh escapes. “Yes, I really should be more appreciative. Thank you, Steven,” I say, placating him. “I never would have left you if not for the affair, and I am so much happier now without you. So from the bottom of my heart, *thank you.*” I offer him a fake smile, pull my hands together in prayer, and dip my head in appreciation. Then I turn to walk away. He doesn’t get to waste any more of my time.

Steven’s sweaty hand grabs at my wrist, and he pulls me close to him, his breath heating my skin as he whispers into my ear, “It’s a good thing it was all just gossip about you and Hanson. But if you end up sleeping with someone, I’d use protection. I’m pretty sure your birth control is useless.”

I push myself away from him and stare into his icy cold eyes. He has the audacity to smirk, and if we weren’t in the hallway of his lawyer’s office, I would slap him right across the face. My breathing is heavy, and thoughts swirl in my head as I try to make sense of his threat.

Before I can reply, he's gone. I guess I didn't get the last word after all.



“What do you think he meant by that?” Tessa asks as she sits on my bed. Once again, I'm searching through my closet for something to wear because Cat and Tessa convinced me that we have to celebrate tonight.

Even I'm surprised by how friendly Cat has been. She's a completely different person from when I was dating her brother. I wouldn't exactly say we're friends. That would be stretching it. But ever since we had to spend time together for work, I don't mind being around her so much. Besides, there is a sadness I recognize in her—a loneliness that comes from being motherless—that I seem innately drawn to.

And she doesn't appear to have any friends. I almost feel obligated to take her under our wing. Or at least that's what Tessa tells me we feel. I think it's really just Tessa's guilt from destroying all of our lives, but seeing as how I could use a cocktail to celebrate the dissolution of my nuptials, I don't mind so much.

Spinning around, I shrug. “I don't know, but I am not taking any risks. I threw those pills right in the trash. I never thought Steven was enough of a psycho to mess with my birth control pills, but I also never thought he'd try to blackmail me or go to the press with lies about me, or you know, turn my mother against me, or cheat on me. So really, I mean, how can I trust anything I thought about him?”

Tessa bites her lip in solidarity. “Fucking douche.”

I raise my glass of wine to her. “Amen to that.”

“What time are we meeting Cat?” Tessa asks.

“I think Jonathan is picking her up and then us. In the limo,” I exaggerate the O and raise my glass like we are all fancy. “I never could get used to the lifestyle those men live. I’m so glad I’m done with all of it.”

Tessa rolls her eyes. “Oh yes, being a billionaire’s girlfriend was so hard.”

I tilt my head in annoyance. “It certainly wasn’t a walk in the park.”

“I’m still not convinced that you won’t end up with a billionaire. A certain blue-eyed one that always seems to come to your rescue, perhaps.” Tessa bites her lip as she smiles at me. Wiseass.

“Jonathan and I are friends. That’s it. Nothing more.”

She smiles. “Yeah, I’m just not buying it.”

Biting my lip, I reply, “Actually, I saw something between Cat and Jay the other day. I kinda wonder about them.”

Tessa frowns. “Really?”

“Yeah, I can’t really explain it. Just a feeling. The way she looked at him, it’s obvious she has something for him. But he’s such a playboy I don’t know why she would bother. But then they touched hands and I don’t know. I just...it was strange.”

I can’t put my finger on it. That is just about the best way I can describe it. *It was strange*. And Cat’s already been on a few dates since then, and I haven’t seen her react to any of the men in the way she reacts to Jonathan. I don’t know. There is something there. I just don’t know what it is.

Tessa looks to the ceiling in deep thought as I hold up another dress. It’s red, which I never wear, but Cat sent over dresses she said were from her magazine’s fashion closet. I have no idea why she would ever want to be in

the family business when she has such a cool job. I told her I wouldn't fit into any dresses worn by models, but she told me the models in her magazine weren't what I thought. To be fair, I had never taken the time to even see what magazine she worked for. I'll give her credit, it's a women's magazine. *For all women*. Women who are over the age of thirty, maybe even more like forty, with real issues and careers and hips. I'm impressed.

Once again I have a pang over the relationship we could have had if she had just given me a chance. I wonder if it would have made a difference with Cash and me. Would we have made it?

I raise my eyes to the ceiling to stop the inevitable tears. Tessa catches my watery eyes immediately and leaps off the bed and into my arms. "No, no, babe, don't cry. If you cry, I'll cry, and my makeup is already done."

I laugh at my beautiful little firecracker. She is the Kit to my Vivian. I love her to death. I sigh into her shoulder. "Okay, I can do this."

Tessa points to the dress in my hand. It's a deep red silk. "This dress is incredible. You have to wear it."

"I don't know if I have the right undergarments for this."

Tessa doubles over in laughter. "I'm sorry, Ethel, the 1950s would like their underwear back."

I roll my eyes. "Seriously. What am I supposed to wear under this? My ass is going to be all jiggly."

She raises her brows. "That's kinda the point."

"Fine. But if Cat says I look like an old lady with cellulite or gives me one of her up down stares, I swear I am going to blame you."

"She sent the dress over for a reason, Grace. She works for a fashion magazine, for God's sake. And she dresses like a runway model. The woman knows what works. You are gonna rock the shit out of this dress."

Resigned to losing the battle, I take the dress and my undergarments to the bathroom, muttering the entire time under my breath about how absurd I am going to look.

When I come out of the bathroom with my makeup done and the dress on, Cat is standing in my room with a smirk on her face. Her eyes run up and down my body. “I am so fucking good it’s amazing.” She walks over with a pink bag in her hand. “You can’t wear a silk dress with just any panties. They’re *La Perla*. Turn back around and put them on.”

My eyes grow and I shake my head. “Cat, I can’t let you give me underwear. This is beyond...well, it’s just beyond. It’s crazy.”

She laughs. “Please let me do this. I owe you a hell of a lot more than some pretty panties.”

I bite back a smile and turn around because, secretly, I am really excited. I’ve never worn expensive underwear. I always thought it was kind of a waste. Steven never took the time to enjoy them. Naked was always his preference. For some reason I think Cash would have enjoyed lingerie. I suppose I’ll never know.

Fingering the smooth fabric in my hands, I practically salivate over how gorgeous they are. The dress goes around the neck and then flows to my thighs. I have on a strapless bra, and the panties are a rich cream color that feel like Moroccan oil against my skin. When I walk out of the bathroom, Cat and Tessa both clap.

“Hair up,” Cat instructs, walking over and taking my hair into her hands before folding it into a fancy updo that is really just a ponytail but so much more at the same time.

When I look at myself in the mirror, I’m shocked. Tessa did my eyes smokey, so the purple irises almost look black, and the red dress hugs my



neck like a choker. I'm only wearing a clear gloss on my lips, and when Jonathan walks in he smiles so wide I feel like a million bucks. "You look fucking gorgeous, Gracie."

Tessa smiles widely at all of us and screeches. "Group hug!"

I groan, but before I know it, all three of them are coming close to me, and I open my arms in defeat. Laughing against Jonathan's chest, I finally succumb to this new life I find myself in. Surrounded by three people I never would have imagined would be in my room together, divorced, and going out with my ass cheeks hanging—hello, thirty-six, I'm ready for you.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes is shown in a dynamic, tilted position, with the liquid splashing upwards. The word "CASH" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 9" are written in a similar bold, black, sans-serif font.

## CHAPTER 9

### CASH

**I**t should bother me that the only person I could get to hang out with me tonight is my best friend who I happen to have on my payroll. I'm pretty sure if I asked him, and he wasn't my employee, he would have said no. But since he has to drive me to the club for the grand re-opening night under our new ownership, he has no choice but to do as I say and join me inside.

"You could at least smile when I'm buying you a drink," I mutter under my breath as the very good-looking waitress delivers our drinks.

Frank shows his teeth in a failed attempt at a fake smile. "I didn't want a drink because I'm supposed to be driving."

I toss my hand in the air. "I'll have Chase's driver pick us up. It's not like he's around to use him anyway."

Frank rolls his eyes. "You realize it's pathetic that you are paying me to hang out with you, right?"

"Would you have come if I didn't?"

Frank stretches out his legs as he takes a sip of his scotch. It's been so long since the two of us have been out like this. Sometimes I wonder if it

was a mistake to hire him. Not because I don't want him in the position, but he's more distant now.

"Of course I would." He puts his drink down and stares at me. "Just because I think you've been a dick lately doesn't mean I don't have your back."

I blow out a breath. I didn't realize how badly I needed to hear that. My brothers are both MIA, and Cat is too busy playing fake bachelorette with my ex. It's like overnight I lost everyone in my life. Actually, come to think of it, I really did.

"I can't believe I bought a club." I look around the space and laugh.

Frank shakes his head. "Me either. Can you imagine how much we would have loved this place a few years ago?"

Drawing my eyes to the dance floor, I watch scantily clad women dancing. I'm sure we could point to any of them and they'd be in our laps in seconds. "Who says we can't love it now?"

Frank picks up his drink and sips it again. He's always scanning the room; his eyes never stop moving. It must be his military training. Or maybe cautiousness left over from his time overseas. He never quite relaxes. There was a time when Frank would have been the life of the party, dancing in the center of everyone here. Now he sits quietly and watches.

A bouncer looks at us over the rope that separates us from the rest of the crowd and motions behind him. "There's a few pretty girls who would like to join you, boss. You interested?"

When Frank shrugs, I nod, and the man lets four women by. They look young. Probably in their early twenties. But they're all knockouts and they know it. A tall brunette who seems to be the ringleader walks up without

any hesitation and plops her ass down on my lap, putting her arm around my neck. “Buy me a drink, handsome?”

I laugh at her audacity and call the waitress over. “So, what’s your name?”

“What do you want it to be?” her pink pout coos.

Internally groaning at her response, Grace’s words echo in my head. *You like a challenge.*

The biggest challenge is getting over Grace, but I dive in headfirst. “We’ll go with honey tonight.”

She smiles. “That works. Do you come here often?”

It’s as if she’s come from a singles anonymous class with all her horrible one-liners. Is this what I have to look forward to? I look to Frank who appears equally bored, despite the fact that he has three women vying for his attention.

Why did I tell the bouncer to let them up? I much preferred watching from afar and talking to my best friend. Even my dick seems uninterested in the way this woman is moving in circles on my lap to the music. She’s clearly had some practice.

But this is what I need. I’m going to take this woman who clearly wants only one thing back to my apartment and cleanse the space of Grace by fucking her in every room. I think she’d be down. I’d certainly make it worth her while. I never get off before a woman.

“I actually just bought this club,” I admit.

*Bingo.* That does the trick. Her tongue wets her lips as she rubs her body even harder against my own. “Want to dance, Bossman?”

And just like that, any thought of taking her home drains from my body. My dick settles in my pants, and I have to hold myself back from throwing

her off me. Grace's teasing voice plays in my ear, and I curse her for destroying everything in my life.

Even meaningless sex.

Frank looks at me with a smirk, and I flick him the middle finger. I'll prove him wrong. I'll prove Cat, Frank, and everyone else wrong. I will take this girl home and fuck her even if I have to force myself.

"Yeah, let's dance," I say, hating how I'm taking something that once was sacred between Grace and me, a cherished memory with my mom, and using it to move on.

Honey, as she wants to be known, smiles as she holds out her hand and I take it, allowing her to lead me through the crowd of people to the dance floor.

Frank isn't far behind, and not because he wants to dance; I think it's something inside him that doesn't allow me to be alone. Like he's a damn bodyguard or something. The guy needs to loosen up.

I motion to the bartender for shots, and within seconds a waitress is delivering them to us before we step onto the dance floor.

I throw back two shots and follow Honey's hips. The women dance more with one another which is completely fine with me. The grinding Honey is doing against me while her friend dances against her is more than a welcome show.

Frank's eyes keep moving, though, and eventually I see them light up and then he flicks his gaze to mine, pulling me from my intoxicated haze. When I turn, I spot Cat walking toward me with Hanson following closely behind.

*Fuck, when I invited her, I didn't think she'd bring that ass.*

Honey's arm wraps around my waist trying to pull my attention, but I've given up. There will be more Honeys as the night goes on. I'd rather not

have my sister watch me embarrass myself.

Spinning out of her needy embrace, I walk away without a second glance. Cat raises her eyes letting me know she didn't miss my dancing, and I shrug. As we reach one another, I lean into her ear and speak over the music. "Glad you came. Although, you could have left the asshole home."

She pinches my arm and replies, "Why would I leave him at home when all the assholes are here for him to play with?"

I roll my eyes and motion to the cordoned off area where we can sit and get drinks. I can't believe I'm actually inviting Hanson to join me, but I guess it's better than having no one in the huge VIP space.

The asshole slaps me on the back. "Looks like it's a good thing we showed up. Your brothers still missing?" He smiles at me like he actually cares, but his words and eyes tell me differently. The man is always plotting. I can't believe my sister lets him anywhere near her.

With a tilt of his head, Frank motions for me to sit next to him, keeping me from a reaction.

Cat sits on the edge of Hanson's chair, and I bite back anger. She's only in this damn mess because of me, but she doesn't have to be so fucking friendly with him. He puts his arm around her waist, and she smiles down at him. "This place is awesome, Cash. I must admit, I think this was a good buy for you."

I nod. "So far, so good. So where were you guys before this?"

Cat turns to Hanson and after he shrugs, she turns back to me and admits, "We had dinner with friends. A little celebration."

Hanson picks up his drink and sips it, watching me.

*Why is he watching me?*

"What friends?" I ask, already wishing I didn't.

Before Cat can reply, Hanson speaks for her. “Tessa and Grace.”

My jaw tightens and Frank sits up. It’s like he’s trying to protect me from the emotional assault of this conversation.

I should stop. I should let it go. But I don’t. “And what were you celebrating?”

Hanson smiles as he looks directly at me, delivering his final shot. “Grace’s divorce.”

It hits me square in the chest. Grace is finally single. And she’s celebrating.

I close my eyes before I can ask what I already know. I turn to Frank, and without me having to say a word, he’s up and scanning the club. If she’s here, he’ll find her.

Cat launches herself up. “Let her be. It was hard enough to get her out tonight. Don’t ruin this for her.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “You brought her to *my* club and you want *me* to leave *her* alone?”

“If you’re going to send Frank over there to make her leave then yes. I was hoping that you could be an adult about this, see Grace, and realize that you made a mistake. Maybe fix things before it’s too late,” Cat says with fire in her voice. It’s not often that we go toe-to-toe. Clearly, Grace has come to mean something to her, although I have no idea why.

I sigh. “I’m not going to make her leave. Honestly, I can’t believe she’d want to come to a club that I own.”

Frank walks back to our table and sits down. Before he can tell me what I need to know, Cat says, “She doesn’t know you own this place. And she wasn’t exactly in her right mind to argue with us anyway.”

Hanson grips Cat’s arm and shakes his head.

“What does that mean?” I ask, feeling my anger start to grow again. I don’t like how Hanson is squeezing Cat and I don’t like the insinuation that he wants her to hide things from me.

Frank nods over to the bar. “I think what she’s trying to say is that Grace is pretty drunk and probably not concerned where she is at this point. She looks like she’s having a good time.”

All four of our heads move in that direction. I scan the bar but don’t spot who I’m looking for.

*This isn’t my problem. Grace being drunk in my club is not my concern.*

I repeat this to myself as my fists squeeze tighter around my legs, trying to will myself to remain seated. My body wins out in the end though, and I stand up and move to the bar before any one of them can stop me.

When I get there, I still don’t spot her. It’s so loud that the floor feels like it’s moving with vibrations from the music. The lighting is almost nonexistent, except for around the bar and on the floor where rope is built into the ground so that people can see as they move. A strobe light darts around the dance floor, but I’m not looking in that direction yet. I scan each face but don’t see her.

What will I do when I find her? I’m not even sure. I haven’t seen her since the night she destroyed everything.

Frank is up and scanning too. I’m not sure if he’ll actually bring her to me when he finds her. Part of me wonders if his loyalty is split over his obvious concern for her. At this point, I feel concern as well. If she’s drunk and in my club, it’s a liability.

Or at least that’s what I tell myself.

He looks over at me from across the bar and shakes his head. He can’t find her either. I mouth for him to check the bathrooms and make my way



to the dance floor. My skin heats from the exhilaration of knowing she's close. It's like hunting prey, although quite honestly, she may be the huntress. I'm like fucking Bambi looking for the hunter. One look at her could actually kill me—set me back into swirling self-loathing and hate—and yet I keep moving, my body unable to keep itself from seeking her out.

It's her ponytail I spot first. A man stands behind her as she dances against him, swaying exaggeratingly. I look around for Tessa, but don't spot her.

Grace is alone, *drunk*, and this asshole is running his hand up and down her thigh. As his hand moves around the front of her leg, I grab him without putting any thought into my movements. Once again, my body moves on its own accord when it comes to her.

The surprised look on the man's face tells me everything I need to know. He wants to hit me, and I only have a few seconds to react. I do the only thing I can think of and grab Grace's hand, pulling her to me.

“You fucking touch her again, I'll cut your hand off,” I growl.

Grace's eyes dart to mine and she says nothing, her mouth in the shape of an O. The guy holds up his hand and backs away, deciding she's not worth the hassle.

As soon as he's gone, she turns on me, lifting her hand out of mine and preparing to slap. Before she makes contact, my hand pulls hers into my own and I spin her, bringing her ass flush against me. Drawing her hair to the side, I nudge her head with my own so that I can whisper in her ear, “Did you like him touching you like that?”

Her body stills and both our chests rise and fall with our breathing. I'm enraged to admit that my body exhales at her nearness. My fingers grab at

her hips, pulling her tighter against me, my movements angry and unyielding. “Did you? Did you like it when he ran his hand up your thigh?”

She arches her back, and her head falls to the side so that I have greater access to her ear as goose bumps prickle her flesh. Her red silk dress is soft against my arm, and I lower my other hand down her stomach, moving exquisitely slow.

When a high-pitched moan escapes her throat, my dick jumps. “Is this what you came for tonight, Grace? You looking for someone to fuck?”

I’m angry and so fucking turned on at the same time.

With my palm flat on her stomach, she grinds against my erection as my other hand skirts across her pebbled nipple. Coconut teases my senses as her hair sways, and I can practically taste the vanilla I know she wears on her lips. I’m like a live wire, tripping from adrenaline and Grace. There’s only one thing I still need...and I’m fucked if I give in.

But I do it anyway.

I spin her around so she’s facing me and look into the violet eyes that haunt my dreams. The ones I fell in love with. The ones I thought I’d look into for the rest of my life. The eyes I thought would belong to my future wife.

It’s always been her eyes that undo me.

They render me speechless, soothe something deep in my soul.

Even in this moment when I hate her, they still have that power. And I need to see her when I touch her. Desperate to know that she feels the same as me. That she feels the excruciating pain that I do.

But I don’t see the pain I expected. Instead, her violet eyes are hazy with lust. They search mine, looking for answers I couldn’t possibly give.

Instead, my thumb traces her bottom lip, and like my own personal toy, she lets me bend and press her however I want, as if she doesn't actually believe any of this is real.

Her lip teases me and her tongue darts out and swipes at my thumb, making my cock jump. "Fuck, that is what you want," I say as my eyes dance between her eyes and her lips, in a war with myself over wanting to kiss her.

She still hasn't said a word. Part of me wonders if that's the only reason it's lasted. If I hear her voice, it's possible I'll walk away. Her eyes dip down and stare at my lips and then she wets her bottom one and looks up at me, starving.

There is an entire city around us, dancing and drinking and living it up on a Friday night, but I see and hear nothing but the beat of my own heart, the glistening of her lips, and the desperation in her eyes. I lower my mouth to hers so that we are only a breath apart and I pause, holding us in this tantalizing, torturous pattern.

Grace bites her bottom lip, and her eyes dart up and down again. I can already taste her, and we haven't even touched. A whimper escapes her mouth, and she lifts her hand to my head and smirks before leaning in and biting my bottom lip, her teeth running against it softly before she pulls it to her and then sucks it into her mouth, drawing my eyes closed.

My tongue darts into her mouth and I groan as our kiss deepens. I start to push her through the dance floor, my mind solely focused on getting us somewhere private. She keeps her hand around my neck and allows me to guide her as I hold her ass and mouth to me. When we hit a door with a thud, her eyes fly open in shock, but before she has the ability to question me, I reach into my pocket, pull out the card I need, and swipe it in front of

the pad, tumbling us into my new office which lights up as we enter. Grace pulls back and goes to speak, and my fingers silence her mouth before I press her back against the door, lift her arms above her head, and kill the lights. “Don’t say a word, unless you’re screaming my name.”

Her eyes flash, but she remains silent. She doesn’t nod, but she doesn’t shake her head either.

She looks so fucking edible in the short red silk dress with her wrists locked between one of my hands, I don’t even know where to start. I trace my fingers over her nipples and watch how they peak below the smooth fabric, as she hisses a breath. Her chest rises and falls as she breathes erratically, and in that moment, I can do nothing but worship her body. It’s like my knees bend when I’m near her and I find myself kneeling before her, begging to please her.

I drop her wrist from my hand and fall to the floor. Grace looks down at me and I nuzzle my head against her thighs. For a moment, I do nothing but sink my head against her soft skin and breathe her in.

She’s like the ocean current, pulling me farther from safety, her tug so gentle I barely realize I’m lost at sea.

When I lift her dress and find myself staring at her barely-there panties which are already damp, I struggle for breath.

I brush my lips against her, and when I finally let out a warm breath, she shivers beneath me. I open my mouth and run my tongue against her panties, and she cries out as my tongue follows the edges until I’m able to dart beneath them and taste her sweet skin.

“Oh, fuck, Cash,” she says, and I practically cry. Her voice soothes my soul and pierces it at the same time. I must be a sadist because I keep going, knowing she’ll be unable to stay quiet as I slip down her panties, lift one leg

over my shoulder, and move my mouth against her, until I'm feasting on every inch of Grace.

Her tangy sweetness coats my tongue, and my dick strains against my jeans, dying for its chance. She bucks her hips forward, and her hand rakes through my hair as she controls my movements, chasing her pleasure almost as earnestly as I seek it myself. It's not until she's arching toward me and crying out that I stop the incessant swirling of my tongue, instead sucking every ounce of her pleasure that I can.

When her head falls back against the door and her legs feel like they may give out, I stand up and press soft kisses against her exposed neck and then lift her up and carry her toward the couch.

"Bend over," I tell her, propping her up before lowering my pants, holding my erection in my hands. I tease the head of my cock between her legs, pressing into her warmth only barely, and she whimpers again. "Is this what you wanted, baby? You wanted to get fucked tonight?"

"So did you," she says defiantly, finally showing the anger I've been craving. I need her anger, her fire, to remind me why we're doing this.

"You're fucking right I did," I growl, the palm of my hand landing on her ass as she lets out a shriek.

I wait for her to fight me.

"Fuck you," she cries as she pushes her ass back farther, wanting me as much as I want her.

"That's my plan—to fuck you until you can't stand. Is that what you want?"

I rub my hand against her ass, smoothing where I've just left a red mark, and wait. When she turns back to look at me, her hair falls forward, concealing one of her eyes, and she shakes it away as she bites her lip. My

dick swells as it presses harder against her, just barely entering, teasing and prodding at her entrance.

She's finally single and I'm the first one to have her—*again*—ruining her for everyone else.

Even if she's ruining me as well.

Her eyes remain on mine as I wait for a reply, and when she offers a single nod, I thrust into her, stupidly not looking away. Our eyes hold one another as I thrust in and out of her, the feel of her tight heat squeezing me almost as tight as the vise she holds around my heart. It's the connection, the fire between us that makes the sex so much better. So much hotter. Anyone can fuck, but that's not what we're doing.

We aren't making love, either. I hate the woman.

It's something in between because there's a passion and a fire between us that rages as I pound into her. It festers and grows until I'm squeezing her hips so tight, and she's screaming and clenching around me until I can't hold back anymore, and I come so hard I see nothing but blackness.

I throw my head back at a loss for what we've just done. I've been trying to avoid this woman for weeks, and the first time I see her, I sneak her into my office and fuck her until I can't see straight. What the hell is wrong with me?

Grace tries to straighten her dress and she looks up at me, appearing just as confused as I feel. "There's a bathroom over there if you want to get cleaned up," I offer.

For a moment, hurt flashes in her eyes, but she recovers quickly and nods, leaving me standing with my dick hanging out.

I pull myself together and fall down onto the couch, my head in my hands. I don't even know what the hell to say, but I can't just leave her here.

I may hate her, but I'm not a complete dick.

She walks out, and I can see that her buzz is gone, and she's just as freaked out about what happened. She bites her lip as she looks at me, waiting for me to say something. "So, you have a key to the club's office?"

I stand and fix my shirt. "Yeah, I bought the club."

Her eyes dilate. "Oh, I had no idea. Cash, I wouldn't have..."

I hold up my hand to stop her and find myself moving to be closer. "I know. Cat told me she brought you here. Congrats on the divorce by the way," I say, making small talk.

She worries on her bottom lip and looks away. When she looks back, I know she's going to try to apologize, and I can't bear to hear it. I hold my hand up, pushing my thumb against her lip. "Don't say it, please. Just leave, Grace. Turn around and save us both, because if you don't walk away, I may not be able to."

Her head tilts and her eyes soften. "What if I don't want to walk away?"

I brush my lips against her own, kissing her softly before pulling back. "I don't trust you and I never will. Walk away."

Her eyes flash, and it's like a wall comes down. She lets out a breathy laugh and shakes her head, before muttering, "I can't *believe* I let you do this to me again." It's almost like she's talking to herself. She looks to the door and then looks back at me before raising her voice. "I *cannot* believe I fell for it again. Motherfucker! You destroyed me. *Destroyed me*. Despite the fact that I did nothing to you, you left me without a backwards glance. You assumed the worst about me. And then did exactly what everyone I've ever loved has done to me. *You left.*"

I wince at the accuracy of her words. At the pain I finally recognize in her eyes. It's like being hit by a tidal wave, and my mind struggles to keep

up.

“And then because apparently leaving me crying on the ground wasn’t enough, you tore my reputation to pieces. So do me a favor, Cash, don’t ever come near me again. You see me, turn the other way. A man talks to me, and it bothers you, fucking deal with it because I’m not your concern and I never will be.”

Before I have an opportunity to even fathom the words or hurt that emanates from her every pore, Grace is gone.





## CHAPTER 10

### GRACE

The smell of starch and man permeates the morning air. I blink open my eyes, and my headache crushes them shut again. “*Shit,*” I grumble, blocking the sunlight from my face and rolling over. When I try opening them again, I’m met with a smirk, and I practically fall out of the bed.

“Holy shit, who are you?” I cry, pulling the sheet off the bed and wrapping it around my nearly naked body, as I roll onto the floor.

*Why am I only wearing panties? And where the hell am I? And who’s in my bed?*

A deep chuckle echoes above me. I don’t *know* that chuckle. “Grace, it’s me. Hayden. Jay’s brother.” Hayden leans down and holds his hand out, offering to help me up.

I slam my forehead against the side of the bed, ignoring him completely. “Oh, you really did it this time, Grace. Divorced one man, got screwed by another, and then went home with someone completely strange. Nice work.”

Hayden's laughter continues. "I see you're now talking to yourself. Excellent. And I must admit, I'm a bit sad you're calling me strange. I've had a thing for you for years."

I finally raise my eyes to meet his and see the teasing glint sparkling in his blue eyes. It's unfair how good-looking Hayden and his twin brother, Garreth, are. The forty-year-old bachelor twins would be dream clients. I can already see the headlines.

A sigh passes my lips. It doesn't look like I'll be taking him on as a client anytime soon. Seeing as I, well, you know...*God, this is bad.*

"Stop," I groan. "This is terrible. How did we even get here?"

Hayden slides off the bed and sits next to me. Unfortunately, he's only wearing boxers and they leave *nothing* to the imagination. Morning wood is a thing, ladies. Especially on six-foot-four muscled men with thighs for days. He pulls his knees up to his chest, hiding his gloriously beautiful, muscled body from my roaming eyes, and smiles sheepishly. "Let's start with, nothing happened. You stormed out of the club as I was walking in, and I could tell you were about to break down."

Tears prick at my eyes as I remember Cash's blank stare from the night before. And my body aches from the memory of his touch. I'm so angry that I fell so easily for the tiniest bit of attention. It's despicable and pathetic. I drop my head onto my knees, unable to meet Hayden's gaze.

"My brother asked me to take you home since you refused to get in the limo. You were really upset. Anyway, you couldn't tell me your address, so I brought you back here. And then you told me you don't sleep in clothes, got naked, climbed in bed, and went to sleep."

I peek a glance at Hayden and mutter, "I'm so sorry," my mortification at an all-time high.

Hayden only smiles. “You don’t have to apologize for stripping down in front of me. Believe me,” he says, holding up his hands in mock retreat.

I groan again. “God, this is embarrassing.”

“Let me get you something to put on. I’m afraid all you have is your dress.”

He stands and disappears. While he’s gone, I look around for my phone which I grab off the bedside table. Within seconds, I’m feeling my face heat again when I see the text from Tessa linked to an article.

It’s the story of my life that I can no longer go anywhere without it being broadcast all over the Internet. This is only made worse by the fact that I decided to go out with Jonathan Hanson and Catherine James. Photographs of us at dinner, followed by them at the club, are circulating everywhere, and because everyone loves a salacious story, the latest gossip is now that Jonathan Hanson, billionaire and bachelor, has not one, but two women fighting for him. It appears that no matter how many times we tell the press Jonathan and I are only friends, the fake stories are what sell magazines, so that’s what continues to spread.

At least they didn’t get pictures of me with Cash. Or Hayden. Now those would make for actual juicy gossip.

Truth is, this time I want to confirm the rumor. At least the rumor about Jonathan and me. And I wouldn’t mind wringing Cat’s neck. Just when I was starting to trust her, to believe that she was my friend, she drags me to her brother’s club without warning.

What did she think would happen? She knows how much he hates me. He’s outspoken enough about it with me, I’m sure he’s not holding back with his family. The only explanation is that she still hates me and wanted to hurt me. Well, she succeeded. It was a crushing defeat. Just when I was

finally starting to feel like myself again, on the night I had recaptured my freedom and divorced the asshole who destroyed me, that's when I'm thrown right back into another toxic relationship.

How did I let him do it to me? How did I let her fool me? The James family is like a snake that slithers into your camp tent. You know it could be dangerous but mistake the lack of fangs as harmless, while it slowly squeezes you to death, and its toxins seep into your skin.

Okay, that may be overkill. Clearly, my alcohol-soaked brain is running away from me.

**Tessa: Holy shit, check out the statement Jay released.**

I slam my hand down on the floor.

*Now what? What could he possibly say now? Does he ever think to talk to me before he does these boneheaded things?*

I squeeze my eyes shut in aggravation before typing his name into the search engine.

**Jonathan Hanson Confirms Relationship with Catherine James.**

*Cat and I have been friends for years, but it wasn't until Cat started working with Grace Kensington that I was able to see Cat in a different light. Grace has a tried and true method that leads to a real connection, and Cat and I are so grateful to her for helping us realize what has always been right in front of us.*

What is he talking about? They're in a relationship?

If they are, I had nothing to do with it. God, that's the last woman I'd set him up with. This is a freaking disaster.

I hit the icon to call Tessa, and she picks up on the first ring. "Hey."

"Are we living in the twilight zone? I'm being dead serious. For months, years, Jay has been hitting on me, flirting with me incessantly, and now, just

when I'm ready to say fuck it and date him, he announces he's with Catherine James. What the actual fuck!"

Tessa groans. "First of all, there is no way you were ever going to date Jay, so stop it with that. And this has to be some sort of PR stunt. There is no way they're dating."

I bite my lip. "You didn't see him with her when they came into my office. Or when we ran into him at dinner. There was something odd about their interactions. I'm telling you, something is up, and it's more than Jay helping me out."

Tessa hums on the other end of the phone. "Listen, I'll do whatever you want because I owe you, but seriously, I think this is a good thing. You can finally move on from that entire messed up family."

My stomach flips at her words. I didn't tell her what happened with Cash last night, but I'm sure she could tell when I walked out of the office with my just-fucked hair and missing lipstick. If that wasn't a dead giveaway, the shocked expression on my face was probably information enough. And now I'm naked in Jay's brother's room. This has disaster written all over it.

Although, Tessa is right about the Cat and Jay match. I should take this and run with it. Now I don't have to deal with any of them. I'm officially off the hook from representing Cat, but I still get the publicity of having set her up with her billionaire boyfriend, and no one is looking in my direction anymore as Jay's girlfriend. Win-win.

I let out a long breath. "Okay. So, this is a new beginning you're saying?"

I hear Tessa's smile when she speaks, "Yes, my girl. So, what do you want to do with your life?"

I can't help the small smile that peeks out from my mouth, like the sun sneaking through a cloudy sky. This is what I've been waiting for since I

walked out of my house and away from marriage. A new beginning. A fresh start.

What sounds like a laugh escapes my throat, but it comes out as a sob. Overwhelmed by all the changes, by the losses, and by the new beginning, I feel the tears pour even as I smile. It's almost manic. And maybe no one would understand unless they've been in my shoes. Heartbroken, torn apart, and yet still freaking standing.

Well, really curled up on the floor twisted in between sheets to hide my naked body, but still. Steven didn't break me. Cash didn't break me. And if losing the man that I literally thought was the love of my life didn't actually make my heart stop beating, then I'm pretty sure I can make it through this.

Hayden walks in with that adorable smile on his face, and I feel my mood lift slightly. "Tessa, I'm going to have to call you back," I whisper into the phone while keeping my eyes on the man in front of me. "That new beginning may have just come knocking, and I don't want to waste another minute."



## CHAPTER 11

### GRACE

**F**all has officially arrived in New England. The trees in the park are all different shades of gold, burnt reds, and intense orange. I wear long sleeves as I run, the cool air filling me with a steady resolve to start over. To be strong, to build new healthy habits, and to learn to stand on my own two feet again.

After a quick shower, I head into work, stopping at my favorite coffee shop on the corner, settling into little habits that bring me daily joy.

“Looking good, Grace,” the barista behind the counter says with a flirty smile. A few weeks ago, he told me he’s going to school for fashion design after he’d seen my dress in the gossip rags. We struck up a friendship, and I told him he could help dress some of my new bachelorettes if he was up for it. Now he hooks me up with extra whip cream and I’m sure my hips don’t appreciate it, but I sure do.

“Thanks, Evan, see you tomorrow.”

When I walk into my office, Rachel is setting some papers down on my desk, and she greets me with a friendly, “Hello, boss.” Just the sound gives me another jolt of strength. I am the boss. This is my business now. And

despite being pretty weak when it comes to a certain male, in this office, I am more than competent.

A few hours later, Rachel comes storming into my office. She shuts the door and leans back against it with a red face and fans herself. “Oh my God, Grace, the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen in my life is currently in our waiting room.” She pauses and looks down before dramatically fanning herself again. “Please, please tell me he’s a client you forgot to mention because if so, I don’t care what you say, Grace, you are setting us up.”

Completely flabbergasted at this reaction, I let out a confused laugh. Sure, Rachel has been interested in past bachelors—a certain whiskey-eyed one comes to mind—but she’s never been this demanding, or honest, about her interest.

“I have no appointments on the calendar, Rachel. Did he tell you his name?”

Rachel groans. “Oh god, is this a new billionaire courting you? I love you, Grace—you are an awesome boss—but if you go from Cash James to this hottie I am going to drop down to the floor and kick my hands and feet like a toddler. Then I’m going to crawl over to you and beg you to teach me your ways because girl, that guy is man candy!”

I shake my head, laughing still. “Name?”

Her cheeks pink as she replies dreamily, “Hayden. And he’s British, Grace. Ugh, the accent, the muscles, the boyish smile...*the eyes.*”

I can’t help the surprise that shows on my face. And with a nod of the head, I agree. Hayden is all those things. But why is he here?





“So, to what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Hanson?” I ask as Hayden fits his large body into my purple velvet chair. He looks absurd. Absurdly delicious but absurd just the same.

“Oh Grace, I think we can skirt the formalities after you stripped in front of me and cuddled me all night while waxing poetic about my hard muscles that made your toes tingly.”

I bark out a laugh and cover my face. “Oh gosh, what does that even mean?”

He laughs. “Don’t know. I’m hoping that it means you’ll agree to have dinner with me so that you can get those toes tingling again.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me.

I roll my eyes. “You don’t want to have dinner with me.”

“I don’t?” He quirks an intuitive brow.

“No. You want to have dinner with Rachel out there. She’s young, gorgeous, and available.”

“And you’re not available?”

I like how he skirted over the other adjectives.

“I’m a mess is what I am,” I admit honestly.

“Well, good thing I’m not a neat freak, ” he volleys, leaving the ball in my court to flop spectacularly.

“Hayden,” I pan.

“Grace,” he says with a sparkle in his eye. “Have dinner with me.”

“It’s too soon.”

“Well, yes, it’s only two thirty. I was thinking more around seven tonight.”

“Hayden, you know what I mean. It’s too soon for me to be out with another man.”

“Shall I wear a skirt then? I can’t pull it off like the Scottish men, but I’m sure I could come up with a reason if it put a smile on your face and turned that no into a yes.”

I laugh, imagining the blond Zeus in front of me wearing a skirt. “Stop! You’re crazy!”

“Have dinner with me. I promise to keep you laughing and not to expect anything. I just like seeing you smile.”

My heart lifts a little at his words. And really, what does one dinner matter? I owe no one anything. I’m single. Hayden sees my hesitation, my openness to considering his request, and he goes in for the kill. “Please, I don’t know anyone in this town other than my brothers and Cat. Be my friend, have dinner with me.”

“Fine, I’ll be your *friend*,” I emphasize the last word and he holds up his hands as if saying he’s harmless. But there is nothing innocent about those man hands. I can imagine the things they could do if given the opportunity. And I know quite a few women who would enjoy those man hands on them, so I agree to his little date, hoping one day soon he’ll let me set him up on some of his own.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly to the right. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 12" are written in the same font and color.

## CHAPTER 12

### CASH

“**H**ow long until you snap out of this mood, Bossman?” Frank says as he walks into my apartment, grating on my last nerve with that stupid nickname.

“I can tell you that calling me that is definitely not going to help.” I stare at the liquid in my glass and hope it magically turns into alcohol. When that doesn’t happen, I walk to the bar and grab a bottle of scotch.

“Want one?” I hold up a glass to him and he nods. Shocked, I smile.

“Figure you can’t just keep drinking by yourself. Some would say you’re turning into an alcoholic.”

I grip the glass between my fists and glare at him. “I’m just trying to cope.”

He laughs. “Yeah, if you need alcohol to get through the day, we really do need to chat.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m fine. I just...” I exhale my entire mood. “I just need something good to happen. Fucking Cat is now openly dating Hanson, Chase is still fucking missing, and Carter barely leaves his apartment. My

entire family is falling apart, and I don't know how to wrap my head around any of it."

Frank takes the glass that I hand to him, and as I take a sip of my drink, he levels me with a stare. "You sure it's not because Grace has been linked to Hanson's brother now?"

I roll my neck. It's been over two weeks since the nightclub. Weeks since I last laid eyes on her in person. Since I touched her, kissed her, fucked her, and left her. Within days she was seen out and about on dates. To think, I almost reached out to her. I felt horrible for the way I acted. Sure glad I didn't waste my breath on an apology. Apparently, all she needed was a good screw to move on. And move on she has. Right over to Hanson's brother. Honestly, it's disturbing how she hops from one to another. She really had me fooled.

"Why don't we go to the club tonight? Maybe we can even get Carter to come," I suggest.

Frank just looks at me over his drink. "Is that really what you want? To chase after girls?"

I shrug. "I don't know what you expect from me. You have this crazy idea in your head that I'm unable to move on from Grace, but it's just not true. I am not spiraling because of Grace. I'm spiraling because I can't get my business under control. Because Hanson and Cat have taken control of everything. And because fucking Chase is still missing."

Frank rolls his neck. "Fine. Then let's go out. Maybe if you get laid, you'll calm the fuck down."

"How do you stay so calm?" I ask my best friend honestly. Frank had a rough upbringing that I'm pretty certain involved the Irish Mafia. He's

never confirmed this, but I've heard enough grumbling to know the truth. Yet, Frank is the calmest person I know.

Frank shrugs and takes another sip of his drink. "Never got myself mixed up with all these feelings. You can tell me 'til your blue in the face that this is about your family, but even when my family was at their worst, I didn't get this bothered. It's women that do this. One older woman in particular I'd say."

I look away from his penetrating gaze. "Don't fall in love, Frank. It will destroy your perfect ability to stay calm."

He laughs and holds up his drink in cheers. "I don't plan on it. Now let's get out of here before you depress the hell out of both of us."



Walking into the club with Frank by my side, both of us dressed in dark jeans, button-down shirts, and blazers, I feel like myself again.

"Eleven o'clock," Frank mutters under his breath as we both sit down at the bar. For once I don't want to be on display in the VIP area. It brings too much unwanted attention. At first, I thought it was a perk of ownership, but I've learned that the women there are only interested in the color of my American Express Card, not me.

In the corner, I spot Hanson and his brothers. Panic grips my throat. Grace wouldn't come here on a date, would she? That seems low even for her.

Frank shakes his head. "She's not here."

I realize that my fingers were digging into my leg, and Frank is staring at them. I exhale. “How do you know?”

“I told the bouncer to keep me posted. They came in by themselves. You want me to find out if she’s coming?”

I shake my head. And then because I’m weaker than I’d like to admit, I nod. “Yes, please.”

He doesn’t even flinch. Within seconds he’s on his feet and speaking to Hanson and his brothers. They look in my direction and smile before making their way over. This entire scenario just backfired. I don’t want to spend the night with these guys. Hell, *I* don’t even really want to be here. I feel like I’m crawling out of my skin every time I walk into this place. But it’s the constant state that I’ve been in for the last few months since everything went to shit.

“Cash, good to see you,” Hanson says, holding his hand out to me. I shake it. “You remember my brothers, Garreth and Hayden.”

I nod in their direction. They’re his half brothers and twins. Unlike Hanson, they were raised in London by their mom while Hanson grew up here in boarding schools like us. Which one of them is currently screwing my ex?

“Where’s Cat tonight?” I ask.

Hanson smiles, completely at ease. “She’s at home tonight. With my brothers in town at the same time, I wanted a night out with the boys. She understands. Your sister is wonderful.”

I grit my teeth. It’s a fake relationship, so why the hell would she care whether he was out or not? As long as he isn’t sleeping around and making a fool out of her, that is. Cat won’t put up with that. Neither will I.

“I’m very aware of my sister’s attributes.”

Hanson shakes his head. “It doesn’t always have to be like this, Cash. We can be friends. We’re business partners, and we *will* be family.” He says the last part quietly so that his brothers don’t hear him. I wonder what they think of his relationship. Do they find it odd that suddenly Jonathan Hanson is interested in settling down? With a James at that. What the hell must they think of it all?

I shake the thoughts from my head. If my sister wants to throw her life away with that tool bag, so be it. If they want the burden of running the company, great. My grandparents were the only reason I did all of this to begin with. As long as they don’t see me slipping further and further from the man I was before, I can ignore everything else and keep pushing forward.

One of the twins moves in closer. He’s got scruff on his face whereas his brother is clean-shaven. “The club is amazing, Cash. Really impressive.”

I think he’s Hayden. “Thanks, appreciate it,” I say tersely, wondering if he’s the one screwing Grace.

His twin eyes me quizzically. I’m guessing he’s the one. Garreth. God, what a pretentious name. The fucking Brits.

“Jay told us your ideas for expanding the company. And about the merger. It’s going to be bloody amazing. I can’t believe the James and Hanson families are actually going to work together.”

I nod. I can’t believe it either. “Well, it’s all Cat and your brother. I’m certainly not the brains behind all this.”

Garreth interjects, “Really? That’s not what Cat said. She’s been singing your praises.”

Okay, so they are both nice. Fuck. I wanted to hate them. “She’s my sister. She has to. I promise, she’s got the brains and beauty.”

Hanson nods. “No one will argue that. My girl is gorgeous.”

It’s odd how when he says it, I feel like he genuinely means it. I don’t know how I feel about that.

“So just a guys’ night tonight?” I ask, glancing at the twins. It’s obvious as fuck what I’m getting at, but fortunately they both are kind enough not to laugh.

Hayden sips his drink and looks at me over the rim. “Yup, we all needed a night off. How about you? Any ladies meeting you out?”

He’s definitely the one with Grace. He’s interested in my answer. I can feel it. “No, but maybe someone will be coming home,” I say with a sly smile, hating myself as I say it.

Beside me, Hanson shakes his head. I don’t need him to confirm what we both know. I’m an idiot. The tall guy across from me with muscles and a kind smile is probably going home to the woman I love, and I can’t do anything about it because she’s also the woman I hate.



An hour later I’m coming back from the bathroom when I overhear Hanson and his brothers chatting as they cash out.

“So, you’re really thinking about inviting Grace to London?” Garreth says quietly.

Hayden gives him a firm nod. “If she’ll come. Is that a problem?”

“No, I just didn’t realize things were that serious. I mean bringing her home...” the last part is lost to bar chatter.



Bringing Grace back to London with him...that's...serious. I scrape a hand against my face.

Jonathan smacks his brother's back. "Well, I for one couldn't be happier. Grace is a gem and deserves someone good. Why don't you bring her to Black Label on Saturday?"

Unable to get a handle on breathing, I start to cough, and all three men turn around and look at me. "Oh Cash, didn't see you there." When I continue to cough, Jonathan turns back and grabs a water from the bartender. "Fuck, take a drink."

I down the water, and it practically dribbles down my face from my continued cough. Frank walks up and claps a hand on my back, and I'm finally able to breathe.

"You okay?" he asks in a low voice, glancing in Hanson's direction.

I sigh as I try to get a handle on my emotions.

*Grace is moving on. Things are serious with Jonathan's brother. How the hell did this happen?*

My panicked eyes must communicate just how dire the situation is because Frank takes control. "We have to get out of here. Early morning. Night, guys," Frank says before steering me out of my own club.

I can't breathe. No matter how many times I try to suck in air, it doesn't make its way to my lungs. Is it physically possible to have a heart attack from heartbreak because I'm pretty positive that's what's happening right now.

Frank remains calm beside me as he steers me toward the car, but I lean my hand against the door as the driver we arranged for the night gets out to open it for us. Frank must motion for him to leave us alone because he gets back in the car, giving me privacy.

Frank's steady voice grounds me. "Focus on breathing; that's your only job right now."

I don't know how long we stand there, in the middle of a Boston city street, outside of my bar, on a late Wednesday night, but it's long enough for me to feel embarrassed once I've finally managed to gain control.

With my palms against the car and my head hung low, I feel like I've been hit by a bus. "When is this going to end? When will it stop hurting?"

Frank's arm finds its way to my shoulder and he squeezes. "When you talk to her. When you let go of the anger. When you get her back."

I jolt up. That can't possibly be his answer. That I forgive her for her betrayal.

"You...I..." I can't even form a sentence.

"What had you so upset in there? What happened?"

Rubbing my hand over my face, I try to scrub the entire conversation from my mind. "Hanson's brother...Hayden, the one who's dating her. He said he's going to ask her to go to London with him. I think maybe that's still home for him?" I ask more than say. Frank will find out.

He nods. "Okay. So, she's dating. We already knew that. It's been all over the papers."

I roll my neck trying to find a comfortable position, but I think it's useless. I'm itching to get out of my own skin. To get out of my head. "I need a drink," I plead.

Frank just glares at me. "No. When are you going to realize that the drinking is half your problem? Cash, you need a clear head."

"She's going to fucking Black Label with him this weekend."

"The sex club?" Frank says, quirking his brow.

A breath rushes out of my nose, and I feel my entire body tense again.

“Yes.”

“Well, you know what that means, don’t you?” Frank says.

I grit my teeth. I know exactly what it means. If she hasn’t slept with Hayden yet, she will that night.



## CHAPTER 13

### GRACE

“I don’t know how I let you talk me into this again,” I groan into Tessa’s ear as we walk into Black Label on Saturday night. Ever since she and Carter broke up—if they were ever really even dating—she’s been dragging me out every night. I feel bad that their relationship didn’t make it, but with the truth of Tessa’s part in the hit piece on his family there was little she could say to make it right.

Tessa gives a low sexy laugh. “Oh, I didn’t talk you into anything. It’s your sweet British boyfriend who did all the talking,” she says as she waves toward Hayden and his twin, Garreth. Seeing them together always leaves women tongue-tied. They are over six feet three, all muscle, chiseled jaws, blue eyes, and dark blond hair. While Garreth is clean-cut, Hayden always has a bit of a five o’clock shadow which makes my toes curl. He’s got bad boy written all over him, but he’s the kindest person I’ve ever met.

The twins are four years older than Jay and neither ever married. I never spent much time with them over the years, but since the night he saved me at the club, he’s become quite the fixture in my life. It’s been weeks of

dates, late nights laughing, and a friendship I never expected. He's one of the good ones.

"He's not my boyfriend," I mutter under my breath before Hayden's steps match our own and he's standing before me, pulling me against his chest and leaning down to press a soft kiss against my lips.

"You look absolutely stunning, Grace."

I roll my eyes and pat at his chest. "Yeah, you don't look so bad yourself."

Being back in this space is so strange. It feels like an entire lifetime has flashed before me since I last came here and snuck upstairs with Cash. But it was only a few months ago. Now the seasons are changing as well as the man I'm standing next to. It's almost comical how right Tessa had been all those months ago when she swore that the first guy I kissed post-divorce would not be my last. And although I get that I need to move on, and I have, I also haven't.

And part of me wonders if I ever will.

As if Tessa can hear my inner thoughts, she grabs my side and pinches me lightly. "Stopp!!! Come on, Hayden, buy my bestie here a drink and maybe we'll make out with you later." She tosses him a wink and I roll my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I mutter under my breath, but Hayden's grin is wide.

"Doesn't sound awful to me," he says against my ear as he steers us toward the bar. His large hand presses against the small of my back, which happens to be bare thanks to the dress Tessa made me buy. It's black silk and dips low in the back, exposing it completely. With black heels, my hair down in soft waves, and red lipstick, I definitely fit in with the crowd.

And by crowd, I mean half naked women.

But it's fine. I'm fine. And as long as I keep saying it, maybe it will eventually become true.

"What are you drinking?" Hayden asks.

Before I can answer, Tessa replies, "Champagne because we fancy."

I can't help but laugh as Hayden looks to see if I agree. "Yeah, we fancy," I say with a smile.

Hayden's smile matches ours and he turns to order our drinks, but not before whispering next to my ear, "You have a beautiful smile, Grace."

The teeniest of butterflies sets my skin tingling. For a moment I savor the feeling. The lightness that comes from enjoying another man's compliment.

Around us people laugh, women flirt, men's eyes dip down for just a peek, and Tessa sways to the beat of the music, a happy, carefree smile on her face. Just watching her makes me want to be more like her. To say *fuck it* and just enjoy life. She's smart enough not to fall in love. Obviously, she liked Carter, but she's not pining over a relationship that fizzled out. She's *living*.

Hayden offers Tessa her drink and she nods appreciatively, then he turns to me and hands me mine with a wink.

The man has game, that's for sure. I'm not sure if he knows how to turn it off. He's not smooth in a playboy way. He's smooth in a kind way, where every woman probably thinks he's flirting with them, but it's just his gentle giant personality.

He's not actually a client of mine. But he's agreed to be on the list of bachelors for my female clientele, so in a sense it is understandable that I'm noticing all these things about him.

It's not like I can turn my brain off. It's not because I'm interested in him. I can't possibly be interested in anyone. Or at least not wealthy men who

light your world on fire.

Just have to keep reminding myself of that.

“Do you want to dance?” he asks, his eyes filled with mirth as if he can actually hear my thoughts and he’s challenging me to let go of my baggage.

A hand on my hip steals my attention, and I suck in a breath as the woodsy scent infiltrates my skin like a shot of whiskey straight to my veins. “We love to dance, don’t we, Angel?” Cash’s warm breath tickles my skin as he speaks so close that my nipples harden.

It takes three long seconds for the buzz to sour. During that time, I couldn’t tell you what I do, but as soon as I see Tessa and Hayden’s wide eyes watching us, I snap out of my drunk love stupor and pull myself out of Cash’s embrace, pushing my body toward Hayden’s. Luckily, the perfect gentleman snakes his arm around me in a protective stance. I don’t miss how Cash’s eyes watch Hayden’s fingers as if they are knives pressed against my skin.

“Cash, good to see you. Did you come alone?” Hayden asks.

I take that moment to breathe.

“For now,” Cash says as if reminding me that he’ll likely leave with someone else. It’s cruel and I hate him for it. Imagining him with someone else makes swallowing feel like knives are going down my throat.

I’m not sure what my knife obsession is right now. Just seeing Cash is making me stabby.

“Enjoy your night,” Hayden says, before steering us away from Cash’s penetrating gaze. But I can still smell him on my skin, taste him in my mouth, and feel him in my bones. He’s left an impression that’s not likely to disappear tonight. I’m just hoping it doesn’t last forever.



## CHAPTER 14

### CASH

*F*uck.

Seeing her with him, watching the way his fingers dug into her hip protectively, as if she belongs to him, makes me want to put my fist through a wall. I can't even hate him for protecting her though. She needs the protection. I'm no good for her. To be fair, she's no good for me either, but I'm acutely aware that I've inflicted my fair share of damage.

From the second floor I watch as he spins her, and she laughs. Even in a club full of people her energy pulls my attention. I couldn't unsee her if I tried.

This thing I'm doing is unhealthy, stalking the woman I claim to hate. Obsessing over the way other men look at her. Wondering whether Hayden knows the way her skin tastes, the sounds she makes when she's losing control, if she grips his head of hair the way she dug her fingers into mine when I whispered kisses against her most sensitive parts.

I wonder if she tells him her innermost thoughts, shares a coffee with him in the morning before going to work, brushing a kiss against his lips with a small smile on her own. I hope if they are together, he draws her a bath and



dances with her in the kitchen. It kills me to think of anyone else doing these things with her, but it hurts more to imagine that no one does.

Jealousy makes you do crazy things, and the craziest thing would be to not walk away. For her and for me, it's the right thing to do. Let her be happy. She won't find happiness with me. I'm incapable of forgiving her.

A stronger man would admit defeat. A better man would leave. But I never claimed to be a better man.



## CHAPTER 15

### GRACE

**A**s Hayden and Tessa sway beside me on the dance floor, I lose myself in having fun. It's easy with both of them. Hayden is like a wall that keeps everyone away from us, as no man would dare grind against us with him around, and it makes for a fun night. He's goofy one moment and suave the next, and Tessa keeps shooting her eyebrows up in question, but I pay her no mind. If seeing the man who shall not be mentioned has reminded me of anything, it's that I'm not ready to date yet.

After three glasses of champagne, there is no hiding that I have to take a break from dancing and hit the ladies' room.

As soon as I walk out of the bathroom, I'm met by a man wearing a suit and a serious look on his face. "Grace Kensington?"

I nod nervously. Did Tessa do something to get us kicked out? She probably tried to sneak upstairs.

"Follow me." The man's instruction leaves no room for argument. I follow along and am only momentarily surprised when he guides me into the elevator. With each passing floor, the anticipation grows to an almost manic level. He doesn't say a word, just looking straight ahead, focused on

his job. Which I'm guessing is delivering me to a certain location. As I start to open my mouth to ask where we're going—to demand he bring me back to my friends—the elevator door opens and he presses me forward into the hall.

I'm not the least bit surprised when he opens a door and tells me to wait here and then he disappears without another word.

What the hell just happened? Do I have absolutely no fight or flight reaction? Am I one of those women in my stupid novels that gets kidnapped and tortured and enjoys it?

What am I doing just standing here and waiting for my death sentence?

Before I have time to answer my own insane questions, the door swings open and my executioner arrives.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, anger heating my body. It's a stupid question. I knew he was going to be in here. The minute the bouncer approached me, I knew where I would end up and I still came. *Why?*

Cash's eyes hold so much emotion as they gaze into my own. “I had to see you.”

I scoff. “What?”

“I tried calling,” he offers.

Rolling my eyes, I retort, “Changed my phone number after someone posted it online anonymously. Got a little tired of the late-night calls from men asking how much I charged.”

Cash winces. “I was in a bad place, Grace.”

I can't even look at him. Grabbing the railing to balance myself, I look down at the club and away from his penetrating gaze. “Well, you've got me here. Say what you need to say so I can get back to my friends.”

“Hayden,” he grits out, as if it pains him to say it.

I don't spare him a glance, ignoring whatever immature jealousy he's sporting.

"I can't bear to see you with him," he whispers, his voice closer now and the warmth of his body within inches of my own. I lean closer to the railing, trying to keep him from getting too close. As he steps farther into my space, I feel my body coming to life with the promise of his touch.

Traitorous body parts.

"You don't get a say in my life. You lost that right when you left me broken on the floor," I manage to remind us both.

I need that reminder more than I'd like to admit. I circle my thoughts back to that night, but Cash's pull is stronger as the palm of his hand lands on my hip, pulling my body into practical submission.

"Does his touch set fire to your skin like mine does?" he grits huskily into my ear, his breath sending a shiver of betrayal down my arms. With his left hand still on my hip, he presses against me and trails his fingers up my bare arm, and I have to hold back my whimper.

*Do not let him know he's affecting you.*

"Do you possess his thoughts like you do mine? Making it impossible for him to work, to breathe, to fucking sleep at night without dreaming of your taste?" His tantalizing voice dances against my skin as he brushes the barest of kisses against my shoulder, and my legs clench together as I squeeze my eyes shut.

A shiver takes hold of my body as he inhales me, as if he's taking a shot of my spirit, my vitality, a hit to hold him over until next time.

Staggering breaths work their way through my lungs, and I try to push back, but his hand grips me tighter. "Please, Grace, put me out of my misery."

I don't know why I reply, "How?"

"Let me touch you," he says in a voice so low it scratches at my skin.

I'm not naïve enough to say that I don't have control over my body, but I don't *want* to have control.

Turning my mind off, I press my ass against him, only slightly, feeling the evidence of his desperation hard as steel against me. It's the only affirmation he needs. Cash's hand snakes down my leg and he lifts up my dress with one hand as the other slides below my panties. As soon as he touches my bare skin we both let out a breath, and he holds still for a moment.

I don't need this moment though. If he gives me a moment to think, I'll turn around and run out of this room. Which is exactly what I should do.

Instead, I push against his hand, seeking his movement, and rub my ass against his erection, leaving him groaning and biting down on my shoulder. "Fuck, Grace, yes," he mutters as his fingers expertly circle my clit. As I continue to gyrate against him, he slides two fingers inside me and groans, "You're soaking."

There is no hiding the evidence of my desire for this man. I am drenched to the point that I feel myself dripping between my legs.

"Condom, Cash," I pant, knowing I need him inside me as soon as possible. His fingers aren't enough. I'm not sure even the feel of him will be enough. I need him bare, but that's not an option.

He slides his fingers out of me and pushes me forward against the railing, transporting me back to the night over the summer when we first entered this room. When he stripped me bare and fucked me in the open.

Just the memories leave me gripping the metal and begging for him to hurry.

The telltale jangle of his belt, the snick of the zipper on his pants, and the ripping of the condom wrapper each hit me like little matches against my skin, fanning my desire.

The buzz in my ear accelerates as he moves closer, lifting the back of my dress, pulling down my panties and pressing his hand against my back so that I'm angling up for his access. "Faster," I beg, needing him inside me before I lose my nerve.

Cash presses his head against my opening and leans forward so that his breath is against my neck. "I'm dying without you, Grace," he whispers, a breathless confession before pushing inside me, the strength of the feeling leaving me unable to breathe.

I squeeze my eyes shut, ignoring his words, ignoring the way it feels to finally have the one person who made me whole inside me again, and instead focus on one thing and one thing only—my orgasm. I chase it like a thief in the night. I have no right to it, no claim whatsoever that entitles me to grasp it so quickly, but it's there, circling and teasing and pulling at me as Cash presses the point inside my body that feels almost like a massage, making me teeter into the abyss.

When his fingers find my clit and he circles and whispers what a good girl I am, I spasm around his cock, as every nerve in my body feels as if they are clenching and exploding, and then Cash snaps as his cock throbs inside me and he lets out a guttural cry as he comes.

His weight against my body feels debilitating, and shame hits me almost immediately. I press forward so that he's pulled out of me and push down my dress. Then without another word or a glance in his direction, I dart to the door, leaving my dignity and Cash behind.



## CHAPTER 16

### CASH

**D**rumming my hand against my desk, I stare at Frank while I wait for him to speak. “Can you say something already?”

Frank lifts his head and looks at me again, then shakes his head and looks away. “I told you to talk to her...not fuck her,” he grits out.

I grunt as if he’s punched me in the gut. It’s the same way I felt when I stood there with my dick hanging out at the club as Grace ran out of the room. What the fuck was I thinking? It’s like she gets within inches of me and my body takes over. I literally couldn’t stop myself.

“Have you called her?” he asks in an annoyed tone.

“Was I supposed to?”

Frank scoffs. “Fuck, you’re a bigger dumbass than I thought. Yes, you’re supposed to motherfucking call her! You are in love with the woman, and rather than telling her you’re sorry, you got drunk and fucked her again.”

“Well, unlike you I don’t watch the goddamn telenovelas. Tell me what I’m supposed to do?” Frank had a thing for telenovelas in college. He’d watch them religiously. I laugh at this memory and Frank grimaces.

Frank leans his elbows on his legs and looks down. When he raises his eyes up slowly to meet mine, he shakes his head again. “You need help. Real help.”

“That’s what I’m asking you for!”

“No. Like professional help. You should talk to someone.”

I feel a headache coming on and glance over at the liquor cabinet where I know Advil and Tylenol are stored. Frank looks in that direction too and his face morphs. “See. You are currently thinking about a drink! You can’t figure things out with Grace until you figure your own shit out.”

With both my hands gripping my desk I look at him evenly. “I know that I fucked up over the last couple of months, and I’m sorry you’ve had to witness it. But I wasn’t thinking about drinking. I’ve got it under control. I’m fine.” Standing up, I walk over to the bar, open the cabinet, and take out the Tylenol, jiggling it in front of me. “See, just wanted medicine for my headache.” I grab a water and two pills and walk over to the couch to get more comfortable.

Frank spins his chair in my direction. “You’re not fine. And until you are...everything in your life is going to remain shit.” Then he stands up and walks out of my office.



Two days later as I’m sitting at my desk, mulling over the latest plan Hanson has put together on the expansion, I’m shocked to find a text from an unknown number pop up on my phone.



**“10 PM Black Label Saturday night.”**

I look around the room, waiting for Frank to jump out and say *got ya*, but it's completely silent. Is Hanson screwing with me? Did he find out what I did with his brother's girlfriend? I stare down at the phone. She's not still dating Hayden, right? I mean if she is, she wouldn't be texting me.

I type out fifteen responses before I send back one word. **“Grace?”**

The phone is silent for what feels like thirty minutes but is really only two. In that time every thought crosses my mind. *What if it is her? What if it isn't? What does this mean? Do I forgive her? Does she forgive me? Can we become something?*

*Does she still love me?*

Her one-word answer doesn't give me any clarity.

**“Yes.”**

Although a part of me knows Frank is right that I'm more fucked-up than I'd like to admit, I decide to turn to what had previously been my salvation and hope to God she's still heaven-sent and not a devil in disguise.

**“I'll see you then.”**



## CHAPTER 17

### GRACE

**T**his was a terrible idea. I don't know what made me even consider doing what I'm about to do.

Okay, that's a lie. I know exactly what made me do it. It was the rousing speech I gave to one of my latest bachelorettes. She was so in her head, like I always am, and I saw her spiraling. I just wanted to instill some confidence, and after my orgasm-infused Saturday night, I think my brain short-circuited to only consider confidence and orgasms.

I made her a deal. If she agreed to step out of her comfort zone, go dancing with one of my prospects, then I'd take a leap as well. I don't know why I admitted to her that I had a secret rendezvous with an ex at a sex club. She was scandalized, in the best way possible.

It made me view the entire night in a different light. For once I hadn't thought about something six different ways before I'd done it. The only times in my life I acted without thinking were with Cash. And there was something incredibly freeing about it.

Like jumping out of a plane knowing you'll survive. You take the leap and soar. I've survived the heartbreak...I deserve a little happy.

I still hate what he did to me. But the bitterness is slightly less intense. Like taking what I wanted from him, without any thought as to his wants or needs, gave me the tiniest bit of closure.

Well, obviously not closure because only a week later, I'm considering opening my legs again.

*Power.* That's what it gave me. It gave me my power back.

And after he left me broken on the floor, God, did I need some power back.

At Black Label, I got it in spades, because it's now clear that Cash still wants me. And when he replied to my text almost immediately and agreed to meet me again...I had the power.

I can choose to show up or ghost him.

I can choose to strip down naked, or I walk out and leave him with blue balls. In the end I have the power.

And if I'm being honest, it feels really fucking good.



The man with the rope smiles at me and winks. "You're in Room 12."

I'm not sure how I feel about the fact that the bouncer at a sex club recognizes me. Also, what does he mean Room 12? I thought we'd just go to the same balcony, fit in a quickie, and be on our way. I don't want to go to a room!

"You look nervous," the man says to me. He has a kind demeanor. "Do you want me to let him know you changed your mind?"

My frown is almost instantaneous. I'd walked into the club with the attitude of a sex goddess, and already the real Grace is making an appearance. "Is it that obvious?" I whisper.

He chuckles good-naturedly. "You are not the first woman to have second thoughts. It's natural. I think the man just wanted to give you a little privacy. This isn't one of the voyeur rooms."

*Voyeur rooms? God am I in over my head.*

Shock adorns my face. "I...uh..."

*Think, Grace, do you just want to leave?*

"Room 12. Okay," I say making my decision.

I'm taking back my power. I'm going to walk into that room with confidence, take what I want from Cash—my orgasm—and then leave on my own terms.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but he holds out his hand as if to say, *off you go*.

Swinging my hips as I walk, I remind myself of the control I hold over the man in room 12. I'm going to bring him to his knees.

But when I reach the door, I pause.

*Do I knock? Just enter? What is the proper protocol before entering a room in a sex club?*

The giggle sneaks out of me, and I peek to the side to see if anyone is witnessing my utter hilarity, my breakdown, the moment I completely lose it.

Perfectly timed, the door swings open and Cash stands on the other side, a smirk tugging at his lips as he takes in my hysterics.

And just like that the laughter dies.

I don't want to see his full smile; it hurts too much.

Swallowing my own nerves and the laughter that accompanied them, I attempt to straighten my dress and pop out my hip seductively.

I'm pretty sure it looks like I have gas instead.

"You look absolutely stunning," Cash says as his eyes sweep over me affectionately.

So maybe I *don't* look like I have gas.

He leans in to pull me through the door, as if he knows I'm having trouble making my legs move, and the second his hand touches mine, my body curls in on itself as if I've been stung. It hurts to be this close to him and not know how to touch him.

What *can* I do? How do you properly seduce a man you're still in love with? I'm pretty sure the alcohol and the fact that I didn't look him in the eyes last time kept me detached. But there is no way to be detached when he's looking at me like *that*. When I can smell him and see the way his eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles, gazing down at me the way he used to, before he broke my heart.

Back when he would say things like, *I'm obsessed with you, I love you, I want everything with you.*

"This was a bad idea," I mutter, looking away from him.

A terrible idea.

Always knowing exactly how to bend me to meet his needs, how to press me in a way that makes us both play out a beautiful melody instead of a warring tune, Cash spins my body so that I'm facing the wall, grabs my hip, and whispers into my ear as he lifts my hair off to one side of my shoulder, his touch sending a shiver through my body. "Just relax and let me touch you."

His fingers have yet to even touch my bare skin, and already I feel him everywhere. Between my legs, in the small of my back, at the tip of my throat, and deep in my core. His mere presence seeps into my skin and burrows inside my soul.

He presses a soft kiss against my bare shoulder, and I shudder. Cash's mouth moves back and forth in the crook of my neck as he inhales me.

"I can smell how much you want me," he rasps as the hand that was holding my hips curls around my body to grip between my legs, his fingers tapping against my most sensitive parts. "If I put my lips right here, would you drip on my face?"

Involuntarily my pussy flutters to life, as if she knows she's about to get some attention. Greedy little slut that she is. My heart isn't happy, but I've already made my decision. Screw my heart, I need this.

Cash's laughter tickles my shoulder, and my head tilts into his own when my legs grab his fingers as if holding him hostage.

"I see," he says simply, before pressing one more kiss to my shoulder and then pulling me back from the wall. "I want you naked and on all fours... *now*," he says in the demanding tone I like so much, earning him a desperate sound low in my throat.

The grown woman in me snaps to attention, *he can't talk to you like that*. But the desire that is currently dripping down my leg tells a different story. *We like when he talks to us like that*, the greedy bitch reminds me.

Cash must see the war in my eyes because he just laughs again and walks to the door, sliding the lighting to a low flicker.

I blow out a relieved breath. Without the light, it's almost impossible to see every crease in his face now, to study his every look, which will help keep my spiraling mind from picking apart every moment tonight.

In the dark, within the shadows, we skirt reality and I lose myself. I'm already teetering on the edge, and without the light, toeing the line feels like walking in the sun, a tingling burn setting me free.

Finally relaxing, I look around the room. There's a bed against the wall with a mirror above it that has my thighs clenching, and in the corner, there is a dresser which appears to have several items sitting on it. Curious, I walk over and peruse the choices.

Some things are so obvious that even I know what they are. A vibrator, a strap-on—holy shit, that thing is huge—different tassels and nipple clamps, and then there are things I cannot identify, and I'm pretty sure I want nowhere near my body.

“See anything you like?” Cash wonders aloud as he materializes beside me.

I bite my lip and peek at him peripherally, before picking up the tassel that I remember admiring on the waitresses in the club the first time I was here. She told me they didn't hurt, and quite honestly, it feels just a teensy bit dirty but not to the level of, say, anal beads.

Cash appears excited at my choice, and I take that encouragement and run with it, turning toward him and letting him watch as I strip.

There's power in the way he stares. As his jaw clenches when my top drops to the floor and he finds that I'm not wearing a bra. At the way he licks his lips as he gazes down at my pert nipples and adjusts his pants when I allow my fingers to drift over one, and my own head falls back as the pulsing pleasure shoots through me.

“Fuck, Grace, you're so goddamn beautiful,” Cash says in a low gravelly voice, after clearing his throat.

I love having this effect on him. It spurs me forward. I unzip the side of my black pants and then slip them off slowly, my movements delivered torturously slow.

All that is left is my light pink lace panties. Cash nods toward me. “May I?”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he waits for my response.

“Yes, Sir,” I reply, knowing exactly how those words will affect him. His jaw clenches, and I practically preen from the praise I see in his eyes.

Cash’s movements are disjointed as he presses closer to me, invading my space with not only his touch but *him*. His scent, his electric pull, his desire—it’s all so much and yet never enough.

For a moment he simply looks at me, his hands holding my hips, his breath mingling with my own, and his eyes hold me hostage.

I wait with bated breath for him to take off the final layer. When he finally sticks his thumbs under my panties and pulls them down slowly, whiskey eyes dilate at finally having me bare.

He shakes his head, as if remembering what we’re doing, and clears his throat. “So the tassels?”

I nod as he picks one up and inspects it, pressing the clamp first on his finger, and then when he seems to have approved of the pain level, he surprises me by dropping his lips to one of my nipples, sucking it into his mouth and lavishing it with attention. I’m so shocked by the feel of his mouth on me I barely register when he replaces it with the clamp, and I hiss in a whimpering sigh.

The ache between my legs grows, and I watch as he picks up the next one and goes through the same exercise. At this point I’m actively squeezing my legs as I begin to pulse in anticipation.



“Please, Cash,” I beg, and his lips pull up at the edges.

“Please what? Tell me how you want me to touch you.”

Any moment of hesitation or concern over our situation flies out the window. I’m too turned on, too strung up, and I can feel myself ready to snap like an elastic. It won’t take long for me to go hurtling over the edge, and yet as he stands just a few inches from me, I feel my body radiating and wanting him to prolong the moment. Part of the pleasure is in the wait. The anticipation of knowing how good it will feel when I finally take the leap.

“I want you to fuck my mouth,” I admit.

Cash’s eyes grow dark, and something snaps in his demeanor. The last vestige of his control flies out the window, and he’s stripping down before me in seconds, exposing his rock-hard erection which he strokes with his eyes on my own.

“Get on all fours on the bed,” he says gruffly, as he continues to stroke himself.

I’ve never moved so quickly in my life.

As I kneel before him on the bed, waiting impatiently, he continues to stroke himself. “You look fucking exquisite, Gracie. It’s a travesty I’m about to make that mascara run,” he warns right before pressing into my mouth.

His fingers dig into my scalp as he runs them through my hair until he reaches the end and then he ties it around his fist and pulls me forward until he hits the back of my throat. I start to gag, but this only spurs him on, and as wrong as it feels, it also makes me wetter. He thrusts in and out, and the complete loss of control, mixed with the feel of the clamps on my nipples, leaves me panting with need.

My eyes water, and I know my cheeks will be coated with black just as he promised.

“Turn over,” Cash says gruffly as he climbs across my body and settles himself between my legs before I can question him, and then he feeds himself right back into my mouth. He fucks my pussy with his tongue and my mouth with his cock, and I spiral out of control. When he slips two fingers inside me while his tongue continues working miracles, and I feel those fingers massaging backward, dragging my wetness until he circles my ass, I almost stop him. But he continues licking me with his tongue to the point that I’m actually pressing my ass against his finger and pushing him inside.

His fingers filling me everywhere, his cock in my mouth, and his groans as he eats me send me reeling. My orgasm takes me by surprise, starting on the outside and pulsing on the inside as every inch of my body explodes and warmth shoots in every direction.

“*Grace,*” Cash growls my name, almost as if he’s angry we’re already climaxing, “get ready to swallow.” Then he moans as he licks my orgasm from my body while I press my hands into his hips, possessively wanting all of him as he spills down my throat.

Dazed from the intense feelings, I barely register Cash kissing the inside of my thigh before he sits up and moves off me. We both sit panting in opposite directions, unable to speak.

Or at least I’m unable to speak. Cash, on the other hand, shocks me with his words. “Go to dinner with me.”

Sitting up on my elbows, I look at him with only confusion. “What?”

He smirks. “Have dinner with me,” he says slowly.

I fall back against the bed. The man is crazy. He's taking us out of the dark too quickly...and back to a reality neither of us is prepared for. "That's not a good idea."

"Why? Have you already eaten?"

I let out a stilted laugh. "It's eleven o'clock at night. Of course I've already eaten."

"With H—" he starts to ask, and I know he was going to say Hayden so I lift myself off the bed and shush him.

"I'm going to go," I say, as I grab my clothes off the floor and slowly unclip the nipple tassels. My body is still buzzing from the orgasm, and I want to leave with this high.

Cash sits up and watches me dress, his eyes never leaving my body. "Will I see you again?" he asks.

I slip on my heels and force a flirty smile to my lips, despite the fact that I feel anything but confident in this moment. Then I turn before walking out the door and croon, "Maybe."

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted to the right. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. The background is white.

## CHAPTER 18

### CASH

“**Y**ou do realize I’m not actually your therapist, right?” Frank says with a perturbed quirk of his brow. I take a weak swing at him and he dodges left out of my reach.

“You’re not even trying,” I retort, throwing another punch and hoping he’ll finally toss one my way.

“Why couldn’t she just answer my question?” I grunt as I swing at him again.

Frank bounces around the ring and I stop chasing him. “Why did you feel the need to ask the question?” he asks.

“You do realize you’re not actually a therapist, right?” I quip.

Frank rounds his way toward me and pops me right in the chest. I fall back and grunt in surprise. “Answer the question,” he says as he readies his arm to hit me again.

No longer wanting to feel that strong arm against my cheek, I hold up my hands defensively. “Because I wanted to go out.”

“But why?”

“Because I’m sleeping with her, and I wanted her to spend the night with me.”

“But why?”

“Because I...I don’t know.”

“Well, is this going somewhere? Would going to dinner have led to something more?”

I glare at him. He knows fucking is all I can do with Grace. I can’t let go of her, but I can’t move forward either.

“What the hell, Frank? Whose side are you on?”

His nose flares and he looks down at me. “Why are you sleeping with her, Cash? Answer those questions and then you’ll have your damn answer.”

“Why can’t you just tell me,” I grunt as I bite the Velcro of my glove, slipping it off my right hand.

“Because you know the answer. You’re just too fucking stubborn to admit it.”

“You think I want her back?”

Frank shrugs. “Do you?”

“I don’t trust her.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“She betrayed me.”

He raises his eyes and stares me down.

“Being with her would be a betrayal of Chase and Carter. She destroyed their lives.”

“And don’t forget about your company,” Frank reminds me. Like I need the reminder.

“Exactly. She’s selfish and didn’t think of anyone when she agreed to that interview. And now she’s dating Hayden...she barely waited a month before she started dating again. I couldn’t have meant that much to her.” The admission pinches my chest, and I grab hold of it, massaging my fingers roughly into my skin, as if that will stop the pain.

“You have no idea who she’s dating. All she said is she wouldn’t date you,” he says as he shoots me a look. It’s a *fuck you* if I’ve ever seen one.

“I don’t know why I talk to you. I came here in a good mood. And now you’re making me miserable again. All I was saying is I don’t know why she can’t give me an answer. I hate waiting around for her to text when she wants her next booty call. I hate that she has all the cards here.”

“She holds the cards because you aren’t being honest with her.”

“What is there to be honest about? I want exactly what she wants. Sex. That’s all.”

Frank shakes his head. “You’re fucked, man, if you don’t even realize what you really want.”

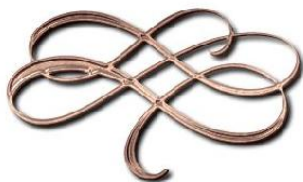
“Since you think you have it all figured out, why don’t you tell me? What do I want?”

“Did you apologize for breaking her heart? Did you tell her you’re still in love with her? That you’re miserable without her? That you want her back?”

I breathe in and out, trying to control my anger. Or my sadness. It all seems to be one and the same lately.

Frank places his arm on my shoulder. “Exactly. You need a therapist, Cash. Not me. Not Grace. And for the record, your family just wants you to be happy. Even Cat realized she fucked up. Figure your shit out, decide if

you want to make it work, and stop blaming everyone else for your inability to be happy.” He pulls me close and hugs me tight and for once I let him.



I know he means well, I know he thinks he’s right, but I don’t need a therapist. I need my company back. I need to forget Grace existed...I need...a goddamn time machine.

“You know it’s strange, no matter how many times I looked down into the whiskey glass, I never quite got the answers I was looking for,” a man says beside me. I stiffen as I recognize the voice. It’s one I haven’t heard in nearly a decade, but one that sounds so similar to my brother’s that even if I didn’t remember it, I’d know it was him.

My cheeks inflate as I suck in a breath and stare down at my drink, refusing to meet his steady gaze.

“Everyone always said you were like your grandfather, but from what I’ve seen lately, you have an awful lot of me in you.”

I spin on him, dropping my whiskey glass, and hiss in my father’s direction. “I’m nothing like you. *Nothing.*”

He quirks an amused brow. It’s the first time I’ve seen my father in over a decade. I don’t want to notice how his hair is now salt and peppered, and I wonder if I’m looking into my own future. His skin is weathered from the drinking, but he’s not unattractive. He carries himself as if he still has money, which I know he does because my grandparents write him a check

every month, but he smells of cigar smoke and greed, and his whiskey-colored eyes are yellowed through years of addiction.

He holds up his hand and drops a finger every time he makes a point. “You lost the woman you love and your company at the same time, your family has disappeared on you, you’re drinking on a weekday to forget all that you’ve lost, and you hate who you see when you look in the mirror.”

My nostrils flare but I ignore him. Denying his statements would be a lie, but I’d rather slit my wrist with this glass than admit any similarities to the man before me.

“What did you do to my company, Cassius?” he asks coolly now, realizing he’s not getting the rise he was seeking.

I laugh at his absurd assertion. “*Your company?* That’s rich.”

His face distorts and he moves closer to me, his putrid breath hitting me hard. “You always were a cunt. It’s how you came into this world. You stole everything from me, and I won’t let you steal my company and destroy it like you’ve destroyed everything else.”

I lean back in my chair, amused by his outburst. A therapist would have a field day with the humor I find in my father calling me a cunt.

“You think this is funny?” he asks, getting angrier and louder by the minute. People at the bar turn to look, and I just shrug my shoulders.

“I tried to protect you. For years, we all kept the truth from you. And this is how you repay me? You steal my company, flush it down the toilet, and mock me?”

I roll my eyes at his hysterics. “This really is beneath you, *Dad.*” He grimaces at the term. He hasn’t been a father in decades. Carter and Cat were more parents to me than the man sitting across from me, and they were practically still in diapers themselves when I was born.



“I’ve never done anything to you. And I want nothing to do with you or your truths.” Done with the embarrassment that is my father, I stand and put a twenty on the bar to pay for my drink. The bartender nods a goodbye, and I turn to leave.

“Never done anything to me...” his voice taunts at my departure. “How about kill the love of my life? That’s not enough to warrant my hatred?”

My feet stop moving and I feel my heart seize.

“Right. No one told you why your mom never got the treatment, I see.” I feel him move closer, and for all the strength in me I cannot get my feet to press forward. “You were an oopsie,” he says sarcastically, his eyes pinching in exaggeration. “We never meant to have another child. Cat and Carter were *more* than enough. But your mom, God, that woman was everything, and when she found out she had cancer and was pregnant the same day, she didn’t listen to my pleas. I begged her to scrape you from her body. I pleaded with her to inject whatever poisonous treatments they had. But no...’*the baby,*’ she cried...” He grabs at my shoulder and pulls me around to face him. I don’t react. I can’t. I’m stuck in his words, heavy in the molasses of his accusations, and choking on the vitriol he’s spewing. His hand flies to my chest, and he pokes at me as he continues, “You. Cost. Me. My. Wife. You *killed* your mother. How’s that for the truth?”

There is no life in his eyes, no humanity at all. And I’m afraid if I look too closely, I’ll see my future.

When I don’t react, he shakes his head. “Worthless little cunt. You don’t have the backbone to keep this company.”

He storms out the door, and I’m left standing there, lost to his words. I don’t want to sink into them though. I’ll easily drown. Before I allow them to infect me any further, I admit the truth to myself. There is only one

person I need right now. Only one person who could make me forget everything that just happened. I finally give in and text her.

**“Please, Grace, I need you.”**



## CHAPTER 19

### GRACE

I'm lying in bed when the text arrives.

**“Please, Grace, I need you.”**

My stomach drops. I'd spent the better part of the last two nights tossing and turning over what I've been doing with Cash. Crying myself to sleep because I miss him. Because when he asked me when he'd see me again, I realized we probably shouldn't. It all feels good in the moment, but then the moment ends and I'm back to square one. Our relationship is over. We're just fucking now. And I know I can't do it anymore.

But now, in the quiet, with those words on the screen, I don't know how I'm going to stay true to myself.

Because going to him—is that a betrayal of who I am, or would ignoring him be?

**“We can't keep doing this.”** I finally get up the courage to reply.

When he doesn't respond, I lie in bed staring up at the ceiling, knowing this doesn't feel like goodbye.



Two hours later, I look up at the dark sky which envelops the night and listen to the sound of a body smacking against water. My eyes dart to the pool which lights up the entire rooftop deck. We'd never made it up here before. Not together at least.

I watch as Cash's arms push and pull the water below him, cupping it just as aggressively as he once squeezed my flesh. I'm wet almost instantaneously. He's so fucking gorgeous. Even now when my anger sizzles to the surface, my body heats only for him.

Getting into the elevator again—the one that Jay carried me out of, a sobbing mess months ago—brought everything back. Coming here was a terrible idea.

His body glides through the water, and right before he hits the wall, he flips gracefully and takes off in the other direction, never seeing me, allowing me to continue my voyeurism for a few moments longer.

Beside me the hot tub bubbles.

*Does he have plans? When I didn't respond, did he invite someone else?*

The thought sends a bolt of fear through me. I can't imagine what it will be like to see Cash with someone else. To see him moving on.

My heart splinters and I turn to leave. I shouldn't be here.

As I walk away, the sloshing water stops, and I hear his voice, "Gracie?"

My eyes close at my nickname slipping off his tongue softly, as if he's forgotten his hatred for me. I memorize the way this moment feels, the

moment before he remembers, the moment before I go back to living in hell.

Because that's what I've been doing since I last stepped foot in this apartment. Living in a purgatory trying to figure out how to move on. It's been months since I was last here, and I thought it was over for good. But now I'm here again. And so much has changed.

I shake away my thoughts and push the door open, right before he cries out, "Grace, wait!"

My traitorous body turns, and I watch as he lifts himself out of the pool. The water drips down his muscular frame, coating each divot and leaving him glistening before me in the darkness, with the pool lighting him up like a goddamn bronze statue.

In four long strides he's standing before me, dripping, his face still a mask of confusion. "You came? You said you wouldn't come, but you came. Is everything okay?"

His eyes dip, and he inspects every inch of me. As if he could see the scars that litter my body. Unfortunately, I don't bleed. There's no mark to let the outside world know I'm broken, that I've been beaten to within an inch of life. It's all inside. It's the way my heart squeezes when I look at him. The way my hands tremble at the sound of his voice. My inability to sleep at night without self-medicating, be it booze or sleeping pills. There are physical ramifications from my heartbreak, but no one can see them, least of all the man who put them there.

"I shouldn't have come."

I look away from his gaze, from his intense stare, from the war that wages in his eyes.

"Why did you then?" he asks softly. He's still dripping wet.

“Can you get a towel or something?” I ask incredulously, motioning to his nakedness.

Cash’s eyes lighten and his lip pulls up in a smirk. “Is my nakedness bothering you?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, could you put on some clothes?”

He laughs. “You came to me. To my *home*. To my private pool.” His eyebrows go to the sky before his hands move to the top of his swim trunks. *He wouldn’t.*

The smile that graces his lips is naughty, and it makes me spin. I bite down on my lip to keep from moaning as he drops his bathing suit to the ground and stands before me erect.

It’s freezing out. A cold dark New England night on a rooftop should not render an ability for anything to stand that tall. But hell, it bobs in excitement.

His eyes heat as he watches me stare. I can’t take my damn eyes off him. It’s perfection.

*He’s perfection.*

Knowing how it feels sliding in between my legs, slamming into the back of my throat, or impaling me as I ride him does nothing to dampen my desire. But when he takes his cock in his left hand and starts to pump, I bite down hard on my lip. He moves back and forth with his eyes on me. “What you got on under that coat, Gracie?”

My eyes grow. *Are we doing this?* I mean why else did I come? He’s right, what I have under this coat will make it crystal clear I came for one reason only.

*What the hell was I thinking?* He told me he needed me, and I ran over here in lingerie. It’s pathetic, really, this game we’re playing.

“One night,” I whisper into the wind as my eyes remain on his glistening head. I lick my lips and pull on the belt of my coat, letting the trench fall open and reveal the panties and bra I’m wearing.

Tonight is goodbye. We can’t keep playing this game. But I want to end on a high note.

Cash’s lips pull apart as he groans loudly, “Fuck, Gracie, crotchless panties? Seriously?”

I smile. Two can play at this game. I’m standing tall with a see-through black bra and panties to match that leave *nothing* to the imagination. His eyes heat as they rake over my body, sending pimples across my skin and wetting my not-there-panties.

*I’m soaked.*

“One night isn’t enough,” he whispers, moving to me and pulling me by my neck so that we are flush against one another. I’m shocked when he kisses me. We haven’t kissed since...God, I can’t even remember the last time we kissed. We’ve had sex. Orgasms.

*But kissing.* Kissing is personal. Emotional. It can’t not be when it’s a kiss between us.

I moan against his mouth as his tongue darts in and out and tangles with my own. His other hand grips my hip, and his fingers dig into my flesh. He possesses me with his kiss. Any control I came with, or that this outfit had offered, disintegrates at my feet. I’m pliable for his taking, and a shiver runs down my back in excitement.

Pushing him back, I say honestly, “One night is all I have, Cash. This is goodbye.” And it is. In my heart, I know this is the last time I can be this reckless. When I got that text, I couldn’t *not* come, but I also know I can never come back.

Cash raises his brow in challenge, as if he thinks he can change my mind, and I don't fight him. It's pointless. Let him believe what he wants; I know the truth.

When I simply shrug, he stalks toward me, lifts me up, and carries me to the edge of the hot tub. The heat from the water warms the chill that was just about to set in on my skin. "You've got me naked for one night and you want to go in the tub?" I tease.

Cash kisses me and then pulls up a lounge chair. "First, you aren't naked. You're in fucking crotchless panties. And second, no, we aren't going in there yet."

I raise my eyes in question.

"Spread your legs, beautiful," he rasps, positioning himself so he's between my knees. He pushes them apart when I sit there stupidly confused. "I'm going to taste that pretty pussy and watch you come in front of the entire city of Boston."

My eyes practically roll back in my head as Cash presses soft wet kisses against my inner thighs, working his way up to where my panties don't exist, and then pressing his hot mouth against me. He inhales for a moment, then lifts his eyes to mine as he opens his mouth and runs his tongue right between my sex.

*What the fuck.*

And then he groans. And licks. And groans again. "I fucking taste you in my dreams, Gracie. I taste you in my shower. I taste you when I have a fucking cup of coffee. When I hold my cock in my hand at night, it's your taste on my tongue when I come. Give me every drop, baby; I'm a starved man."



I stare down at him in ecstasy. The man's face glistens as he continues to work me over, his nakedness on display as I ride his tongue for the entire city to see.

I'm sure no one can really see us on the top of the penthouse and yet there is still a thrill that being outside offers. What a waste that we didn't do this more often when we were together.

When his eyes meet mine again, he holds my gaze as he runs his tongue in lazy circles on my clit, and I come so hard I have to bite my tongue to keep from screaming. I try to close my legs, and Cash nudges my thigh back with his head, continuing his slow assault, sucking every last drop as he promised.

"I'm only getting started, Angel, I want to torture you," he mutters right before he stands up, grips my thighs, and pulls me so that I'm on the edge of the tub and wide open for his taking. He slams into me in one forceful thrust, and we both grunt before he leans in and grabs my lip between his teeth. Slowly he pulls out again, and we both look down at our connection right before he slams in again. He continues this as I cry out and try to get closer, try to hold him and go slower, but as always, he knows what my body really wants and gives it to me, slamming into me over and over again until I'm clamping down around him and pulling his orgasm from his body.

I shouldn't let him do this without a condom, but for some stupid reason I let him. I want to feel him one last time. I want *everything* tonight.

Cash falls against my shoulder and bites down, panting. "Two," he grumbles between breaths as he turns his head and kisses my neck.

"Two?"

"Yes, I've made you come twice. I'm thinking we go for six."

I laugh. "Six? Have you lost your mind?"

He smirks as he removes himself from my embrace. It is only then that I realize I'm still in my lingerie. "You going to take that off now, gorgeous?"

Cash slides into the hot tub, and I groan just imagining how warm and inviting it is. I should really go. We've had our fun. Our truce can only last so long, and I am not ready to get bit by Cash again. I want to end this on a high note. "I should probably leave," I say, standing.

"You promised me the night," he says evenly, his tone indicating he'll accept nothing less.

I bite the inside of my mouth uncomfortably. "Cash."

"Get in the tub, Grace."

"It's too hot," I lie.

Cash picks up the temperature gauge and shows it to me. "It's ninety degrees, Grace. That's cooler than your baths."

Fuck it. He's right. I promised the night and I *want* this. I unclasp the back of my bra and slide down my panties before stepping into the tub. As soon as the water hits my skin, I hiss in pleasure. There is nothing I enjoy more than a bath.

Cash holds out his arm to me, and I fall back against him, just like I used to. He wraps his arms around me, and both of his hands move to my breasts. Lazily his thumb traces over my nipple as we sit quietly, staring up into the dark sky.

I lean back my head to look up at him and offer my lips in a kiss, and his hand finds mine as he twines ours together. As he kisses me softly, lazily, as if we have all the time in the world, his hand squeezes mine three times, and my heart breaks.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Cash's arms stiffen around me and he squeezes me tighter, as if he's trying to soak in my strength. Lowering his lips to my neck he kisses me softly. "Shhh, we're not talking about that tonight."

I sigh. "Right, just sex." I moan as his fingers move between my legs, and he begins torturing my clit again.

"Is that a problem? Do you want me to stop?" he murmurs between kisses on my neck. His lips are soft, hot, and wet, and alone they could bring me to orgasm.

I raise my hips to meet his fingers and close my eyes as I reply, "Don't you dare fucking stop." I ride out the next wave as he continues to kiss my neck and breathe against my ear. I swear in my heart I can hear him speaking even if the words never materialize. It's like our souls are having a conversation even though our mouths will never utter the words.

*I'm sorry. I love you. You broke my heart. I don't think I can forgive you. This will never work.*

As soon as I start to come again, Cash pushes me forward so that I'm leaning my arms against the wall while he thrusts into me. We move back and forth, the water splashing around us as he moans his pleasure into the night, and I come two more times.

Maybe it's his magical dick or maybe it's the knowledge that this is the last time, but every time he gets anywhere near me, I practically combust in pleasure. Cash nips at my ear as he mutters. "Four."

"I don't think I can take anymore, Whiskey," I say honestly.

Cash steps out and grabs a towel, drying himself off and then wrapping it around his waist. Then he grabs another one and holds it out for me. "I have faith in you," he says with a smile.

When he bends down and lifts me into his arms, cradling me and carrying me back into his apartment, I giggle against his chest. He doesn't put me down until we are standing in my favorite room in the entire city of Boston—his bathroom. He turns on the shower and watches me as I look around the room.

“Never thought I'd be back here,” I admit, the air feeling heavy around us.

Cash leans down and takes my lips again. It seems that we really aren't going to talk tonight. That's just fine. We aren't going to solve anything by talking. Fucking it is.

He pushes me under the rain shower, and the warm water washes away any of my anxiety. But when he grabs the shampoo and begins to lather my hair, I pull back.

*That is too much. Too personal. Too us.*

And yet, I want it. I want *everything* with him. If only for tonight.

His hands massage my scalp, and I lean back against his chest enjoying every delicious moment. He twists me so that I face him and pushes my head back into the water to rinse out the conditioner. As he does, he leans down and kisses the droplets of water from my chin, then my cheek, then between my eyes, my nose, and finally his mouth meets my own and his tongue sneaks in and we both moan.

Back where we belong.

I know it can't last, but God does it feel good to pretend for a few moments. To live in the memories. To kiss the only man who's ever made my heart skip a damn song.

When it all gets to be too much, and I feel the tears start to sting my eyes and the emotion clog my throat, I drop to my knees and take him in my

mouth. He hisses out several curses and then starts thrusting into me repeatedly.

“Such a good girl,” he mutters as he fucks my mouth. My tongue laps at him, and my hand cradles his balls. Cash’s head falls back, and I love the power I get over this moment. Knowing I’m in control, that I give and take his pleasure as I see fit. I think even Cash is surprised when he mutters, “Fuck, I’m coming again.”

I smirk when he’s finished, allowing him to help me up. “Two,” I whisper, before kissing him and leaving him standing in the shower.

His loud laughter jumps off the tiles, and I turn back in time to see his beautiful smile. *God, I’ve missed that smile.*

I’ll *miss* that smile.

I towel off and prepare to say goodbye. While this has been a night to remember, and I don’t regret coming, it really is time to call it.

Cash’s arms snake around my waist, and he whispers in my ear. “Please don’t leave yet. Stay with me.”

“Cash,” I whimper, leaning back against his chest. His heart beats wildly, and I can feel his desperation in every drum. But when I turn to meet his eyes, to force him to tell me what happened that has him spiraling out of control, he just shakes his head, and I know he might actually lose it if I push. I’ve never seen a man cry, and I don’t know if I can bear to see the sadness that engulfs him.

In this moment, I see the man I fell so hard for—the one who so desperately sought love—and I don’t push.

“You owe me two more,” he says as he flips back to the domineering man he’s become these last few months.

And I let him. Ignoring the gnawing in my chest that wants to push back, instead, I play along, rolling my eyes before replying, “Cash, you can’t possibly have anything left in you.”

“Not for me, Gracie—this is for you. I’ve had you on my tongue, my finger, on my cock, and now I want into that ass.”

I shake my head. He can’t be serious. We’ve never...*I’ve never.*

“Please, Grace,” he begs, his eyes shutting as he says it. My heart splinters.

And the truth is, if there’s anyone I’ve ever wanted everything with, it’s him. And I will never have it again. I’ll never have *this* again.

“Fuck it,” I mutter, kissing him brazenly.

Cash’s entire body relaxes against me and he whispers against my mouth, “There’s my girl. Go get in bed and spread your legs.”

I sigh in resignation, as if he’s really putting me out, and when he smiles, my heart skips a beat at having brought him even a moment’s relief.

He grabs something from his drawer and then walks with determination toward me. It is then I see the lube in his hand and a smirk on his face. My stomach tightens and I throb in anticipation.

*What have I agreed to?*

“Don’t worry, Gracie, I’m going to get you nice and wet before we go any further.”

I hold my breath as Cash settles himself on the bed, looking down at me. When he lifts up my leg I breathe in loudly. He kisses the inside of my ankle and murmurs, “Relax, this won’t work if you don’t trust me.”

Well, that is asking for something that I’m not sure I can give. But I do trust him not to hurt me physically. It’s the emotional and mental Olympics that he plays so well. I nod as his eyes remain on mine, while his lips work

their way up my inner thigh. With his head, he pushes my knees farther apart and settles himself between them.

“Are you sore?” he asks, before kissing me tenderly in my most sensitive spot.

“Not yet.”

His tongue darts out and swirls circles throughout my sex. “Oh fuck,” I murmur, shocked by the intensity of how everything feels, my body like a wire, humming from the previous orgasms.

“That’s a good girl. I’m going to get you nice and wet for me. We’ll give you number five now and then I’ll give you the best orgasm of your life.”

A low moan leaves my throat. Those are tall words. Every orgasm I’ve had with Cash feels better than the last. “Have you ever...before?” I ask nervously.

Cash’s eyes hold mine. I’m afraid of the answer. This feels too intimate. Why did I agree to this? He hesitates as if he’s unsure of what to say. “The truth, Cash. All I want is the truth.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“No, you won’t give me the truth?” I ask, lifting myself up on my elbows and attempting to push him off.

Cash crawls on top of me, caging me in with his arms. “No, I’ve never done this before. I’ve never been close enough with anyone to...” His eyes dart down to my lips and back to my eyes again as he pauses. “Before you, I didn’t do relationships.”

My chest constricts. We aren’t *in* a relationship. We’re barely speaking. This is like a blip in time. A cataclysmic slip. One I’ll likely regret as soon as it’s over. But with his admission on his tongue and his eyes holding the painful truth of his heartbreak, I can’t walk away.

Lifting my head, I offer him my lips, and he takes them greedily, kissing me with as much passion as he's ever offered. He's putting into it every emotion, every want, every need, as if he's laid himself bare before me. I wish it made a difference. I wish kisses or words could fix us.

Cash moves back down my body and begins his trek to five. It doesn't take long before I'm panting and crying out his name. As promised, Cash uses this moment for both of us. "Flip over, beautiful," he growls, pulling out the lube and sending a swarm of nervous butterflies my way. "You gotta relax, baby, okay? I'll let you know before I do anything, I promise."

With my head against the bed, I wait, listening to the sounds in nervous excitement. "It's going to be a little cool," he says, before snaking one finger in. I jump in surprise, and he chuckles before slapping my ass just hard enough. It's an odd feeling. It feels wrong, and dirty...and *good*.

He slips another finger in, stretching and preparing me, and I groan and curse into the sheets, inhaling the intoxicating woodsy whiskey scent.

"That's my girl. I knew you'd like this. Now lift up and play with yourself, baby. I'm going in nice and slow."

My breath hitches as I listen to his commands. There is something empowering about handing over my control. He replaces his fingers with his cock, and I hiss as he pushes in slowly. It's almost too slow. As I circle my clit, I find myself pushing back to take him in deeper, crying out in pain even as I do. He's stretching me, bruising me, marking me, and possessing me in a way I never imagined.

"That's a good girl," he says as he pushes in farther, his praise leaving me dripping with desire. "You're doing so good, Angel. You have no fucking idea how good your ass looks taking my cock." I cry out again but as soon



as he buries himself inside me the pressure turns to pleasure, and I groan as he cries out loudly, “Fuck...oh, it’s fucking...oh, Grace...dammit...”

My cries match his own as he pours a bit more lube on and then starts to move.

My entire body clenches around him, my orgasm building as he begs for me to come again. I’m so full...everywhere. So tight, so wrong, and so fucking gloriously buzzing from all of it. As if he’s in control of everything, I come at his request, harder than I’ve ever come before. As the aftershocks start to wear off and I drop my own fingers, he reaches out again. “One more time, Angel,” he whispers in my ear.

The nickname kills me.

“Cash,” I pant, “I can’t.”

I’m wrong though. With the feeling of his fingers, and his breath so close to my ear whispering dirty words about how tight I feel, how wet I am, how he’s never felt this out of control, I’m swirling. But it’s the last words that he utters that send me over the edge. “God, Gracie, I love you. Fuck, I hate what you did...but still...I love you.”

We both come hard, and it’s an insanely intimate feeling.

“Seven,” he whispers, before slapping me gently and pulling out slowly. “Fucking seven.”

I laugh as I fall down against the sheets, my entire body spent, my emotions spilling forward. I can barely keep my eyes open. He told me he loved me. *He still loves me.*

Cash drops a kiss on my shoulder and pulls me so that I’m cuddled against him. Just like he used to hold me.

In his arms I feel a sense of hope. Like maybe we really can move forward. It feels like things shifted tonight. And with his admission...

maybe I wrote us off too soon. Hoping to get through to him, I ask again, “Are you okay?”

“Are you still seeing him?” he murmurs so softly I question if I heard him correctly.

“What?”

“Hayden,” he says firmly, looking down and meeting my eyes. “Are you still seeing him?”

My stomach turns and I groan. “What are you talking about, Cash?”

“It’s a simple question. I’d think you could provide a simple answer,” he says with venom tingeing his tone.

It feels like I’ve been smacked. I stare up at him, my eyes darting back and forth trying to read his expression, but he’s devoid of emotion. I allowed myself to believe...*God, what was I thinking?* “You have no right,” I whisper.

Cash sits up and looks down at me. The loss of his body heat against my own is jarring. But it’s the look in his eyes—the coldness, the detachment—that hurts the most. After swimming in his love for hours tonight, I drown in his hate. “You going back to him now? I’m only good for a fuck and he gets the rest of you?”

An angry laugh falls from my mouth. “You need to stop contacting me,” I say as I grab a towel from the floor so I can find my jacket and get out of here.

“You came here,” he says in a condescending tone, “wearing fucking crotchless panties. And now you’re surprised that all it is was fucking.”

He’s right. I did. Like a fool, I thought I could control this scenario. Keep feelings out of it. Just have orgasms and move on. What a fool I was.

There's no in-between with Cash. You're either burning in his sun or frozen in his shadow.

With the taste of him in my mouth, the salty tears don't even faze me as they pour down my cheeks. They only serve as a reminder that all we cause one another is pain. Intense feelings, which sometimes create orgasms, but that's really just pain masked in another form.

I said I'd never let a man control my happiness, but I simply changed one man for the next. Standing on my own two feet, I look at Cash with clarity, finally seeing our ending in a new light.

This thing between us is over.



As soon as I'm in the Uber, I dial Tessa. She answers almost instantly. "Hey G, want to meet me for a drink? I'm just finishing up a story."

I try to breathe through a sob, but it bubbles up and gets caught in my throat, causing a stilted cry to escape.

"G-Grace...you there?"

"Yes," I manage to reply before the sobs consume me again.

"Okay, I'm coming to your apartment. Are you there?"

I am able to give her one final word, "Almost," and then I dissolve into tears again.

"Okay, I'm coming."

It takes another ten minutes for me to get to my apartment, but when I walk up the stairs, Tessa is standing on the landing, a sad smile on her face,

a tequila bottle in her hand and a bag of limes in the other. “I brought reinforcements, babe.”

I manage a gurgling laugh and collapse against her chest. Even though she’s shorter than I am, she manages to take all my weight and make me feel like she’s the adult as she absorbs my sadness. I genuinely don’t know what I would do in life without her and Marion.

We walk into my apartment, and I don’t bother doing anything but plopping my ass down on the couch. I must look like a drowned rat in my trench coat, with my hair wet from the shower and mascara coating my face. Suddenly feeling too naked, I slip off into my bedroom to change and hide the evidence of my seduction.

When I come back out in sweats and my hair in a ponytail, Tessa is sitting on the couch. I spot the shot glasses, tequila, and cut-up limes and try to smile in approval. She hands me a big glass of water, ignoring my fake smile. “Here, drink this and take a few breaths so you can tell me why you were dressed fuck-me hot and crying.”

I laugh so hard as I sip my water that I end up choking, and Tessa claps me on the back while giving me a sheepish smile. “Okay, I’ll stop being so damn funny, and you start talking.”

“I had sex,” I say softly.

Tessa’s eyes grow. “Oh...oh! With Hayden? Oh God, you had sex for the first time since Cash and you cried? I’m sure Hayden understands...it’ll be okay.” She pulls me in for a hug and squeezes in reassurance. “Honestly, this is good. You finally popped your Cash cherry.”

I clear my throat while still in her embrace and push back a bit to hold up my finger. “Not exactly.”

“Not Hayden?” she asks quizzically.

I shake my head. “No...I didn’t pop my Cash cherry.”

Confusion laces her face. “Huh?”

“It was with Cash...I’m sleeping with Cash again. Well, I was. I’m not anymore. Definitely not,” I say finally, as I watch her face morph in anger.

“You don’t sleep with the ex! Come on Grace, that’s dating 101. You break up and you quit him cold turkey.” She groans and rubs a hand over her face. “Ugh, especially when you’re in love with your ex like you are. Oh God, Grace. You’re a matchmaker, for fuck’s sake! What is wrong with you?”

Throwing my head back on the coach, I groan, “I know, I’m completely pathetic. I’ll stop; I promise.” And then because I really am pathetic, a sob escapes. It feels like I’m losing him all over again.

“Grace, baby, no. You aren’t pathetic...he’s pathetic. Stringing you along like this. God, I could kill him.”

I turn to face her, my head still resting on the cushion as tears stream down my face. “It’s not him. It’s me. I’m the one controlling this. I’m the one who called him, asking him to meet me for secret sex. I’m the one who showed up tonight in fucking crotchless panties. *It’s me,*” I admit pathetically.

This is exactly why I wasn’t thinking. I was just living in the moment. Because when I really think about it, I see just how bad of an idea it was. And the worst part is, the idea that I just ended it—whatever *it* was—that I’m losing that last little piece of him again, fucking kills me.

Tessa pushes closer and wraps her arm around me, pulling me onto her shoulder. She drops a kiss on my head and rubs my arm reassuringly. “I’m going to skip over the crotchless panties part even though it’s killing me because now is not the time to tease you about that.” I look up at her and

see her smiling down. It makes it hurt a little less. She winks. “I know it hurts, darling. I know it’s hard. But there’s no way around a breakup other than pushing through it. And unfortunately, that means you have to feel the pain, work through the pain, and learn to live without the other person.”

I nod my head against her chest as the tears continue to mount. Dammit, for a few weeks there I had myself fooled. I really thought I was over this. That I had all the control. That I’d taken my power back. But the second I allowed Cash back into my life, I lost every ounce of self-respect. I gave away even more pieces of me, and now I’m just a shell of myself. Clearly, I wasn’t over him. And I can’t help but wonder if I ever really will be.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly to the right. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 20" are written in the same font and color.

## CHAPTER 20

### CASH

**T**he definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Frank had warned me to stay away from Grace. He told me to get my head on straight before I reached out to her. He told me not to fuck her. And the minute my father sends me spiraling into self-loathing, what did I do? I called Grace, and rather than talking to her—rather than telling her I needed her comfort, not her body—I took what she offered and then some.

I fucking took everything from her, and I deserved none of it.

Staring over at the empty spot next to me in the bed, I slam my palm down in aggravation. There is a war going on inside my body—I feel like I am literally coming out of my skin, my stomach is in knots, my heart is in my throat—and I don't have anyone to blame but myself.

I told her I loved her and she left anyway.

*But you didn't tell her you were sorry. You didn't tell her you needed her to breathe. You didn't tell her she's still everything you want and nothing you deserve.*

In the end, I told her nothing.

And then I told her it was just fucking.

*Why did I do that? Why did I lash out? And why couldn't she just answer me about Hayden?*

I was ready to tell her how I felt. Ready to talk it out. But I was out of my mind with jealousy, and I just needed her to confirm that what I was feeling was real. I wanted her to tell me that it was over with Hayden. I needed to know that I wasn't in this alone. That it wasn't just sex. That she wanted me for more than a fucking booty call. If she'd just given me that, maybe I wouldn't have lashed out. Maybe I would have admitted the truth—that I need her, that I miss her, that I'm still fucking in love with her.

I blow out a breath trying to stop the hammering in my chest. I think my heart is finally giving out. I've been dangling close to the edge for months. Last night when she said it was over, when she told me this was it, I saw it in her eyes. Defeat. Surrender. Goodbye.

Breathing in again, I stare up at the ceiling, waiting for my heart rate to settle. When it finally does, I pick up the phone and dial the only person I have left.

“Hey, Cash,” Frank says in his professional tone.

“Do you have a number?”

“A number?” Frank inquires.

I blow out a breath. It's time to face the music. “For a therapist. Do you have someone in mind?”





## CHAPTER 21

### GRACE

**I**t's been almost a week since I left Cash's bed. I gave myself one night to cry over the end of us and then threw myself into my next client. Nothing I say or do can change the reality of my situation with Cash. There's too much hurt there. Too much pain.

"You do realize you look edible tonight?" Hayden whispers into my ear as we walk into the restaurant.

Turning back, I offer him a stern glare. He knows how much I hate compliments. Or at least ones that are said with heat in them. "*Stop.*"

He chuckles softly against my hair as his hand guides me forward. We don't even stop to check in with the hostess; it seems the entire world just bends at his whim. The woman leads us to the back where candles line the table and a dozen roses sit in the center.

"Enjoy your dinner," she says before leaving us alone, but I see the way she eyes Hayden. He's eye candy for sure in his suit which pulls across his muscular chest and the smile he gives everyone who even looks in his direction. He is fun personified, and over the past few weeks, he's helped me pick up my broken heart more times than I can count.

“She’s interested,” I tease.

“I’m not,” he replies without even looking up.

I roll my eyes. He makes for an impossible client. Not that he really is one. I keep trying to match him with everyone we meet because I want him to be happy. He’s done so much for me, I just want to return the favor.

“White or red tonight?”

That’s another thing Hayden and I both enjoy. Wine. God, I’m glad he’s not into whiskey even though it’s his family business. Hayden has been looking into wineries in Europe, and I love the idea of that for him. Although, I already know I’ll miss him when he goes back to London for Christmas. A winery would take even more time away from here.

“Red,” I reply, as I glance down at the steaks on the menu. I’ve already decided I’ll be having the porterhouse. And the lobster mac and cheese as a side. Hayden will share with me. That’s another thing I love about him. He lets me order whatever I want, and he eats it with as much excitement as I do.

Once we’ve placed our orders and the wine has been decanted and sits in our glasses, Hayden takes a deep breath and looks as if he is trying to steal some courage to say whatever is on his mind.

*Please don’t let it be that he’s leaving for London before Christmas.*

With Marion settling into retirement, Tessa busy with work, and the rest of my life in shambles, I look forward to my time with Hayden more than I should.

“Everything okay?” I hedge, eyeing Hayden’s eerily quiet demeanor. Hayden is loud, and fun, and sweet and kind, but he’s not quiet. Ever. In fact, sitting in the quiet with him is uncomfortable and makes me squirm for something to say.

Hayden puts down his drink and straightens his jacket. It reminds me of the way a man acts before he gets down on one knee. The similarity makes me burst out in laughter. Clearly, Hayden—gorgeous, funny, kind Hayden—would never get down on his knee for a woman like me.

“Something funny?” he asks as his nervousness seems to slip and he offers me a kind smile.

“Oh, no,” I cover my mouth in embarrassment. “Just you look like a man with a serious question, and it made me think of how men look before they get engaged which just made me laugh because a man like you would never be doing that with someone like me.” I shake my head on a smile and pick up my glass for a sip of the pinot noir Hayden selected.

Hayden’s smile falters. “Why do you say it like that?”

“Why do I say what like what?” I ask honestly.

“You act as if I wouldn’t be interested in pursuing you.”

I let out an unladylike guffaw. “Well, I know we aren’t like that.”

“And what are we like?” he asks, genuine interest adorning his face.

“We’re...us...” I struggle for words, pausing to look at him and wondering why he’s acting so strange.

“And what exactly is ‘us’?” he pantomimes his hands in question.

“Um...” I struggle. “Friends. Mates as they say in England?” I try for a joke.

Hayden lifts his eyebrow to me, and I see the smirk shining through. He finds me funny. No one finds me funny. I don’t even particularly find myself funny which is another reason why I love him.

“Mates?”

I shrug. “Sure. Mates,” I say confidently.

“As your mate do I get to kiss you?”

A zing hits my chest, and the air becomes harder to grasp. “Wh-what?” I stutter.

“Do I get to know how you feel below me?” he asks, his voice taking on a gritty texture that twists my stomach.

I’m pretty sure my chin hits the floor with the O my mouth is rocking in complete shock.

*What is happening right now?*

“Do I get to show you off at events?”

I grasp on to the final question because *that* I can reply to—the others are so foreign I don’t know how to even consider them.

“What kind of events?”

Hayden gives me the out I so desperately crave and peppers me with information on the event he wants me to attend. “It’s a company party—a fashion show that Cat thought up.”

I grimace. I haven’t spoken to Cat since she brought me to Cash’s club over a month ago, and I have no interest in talking to her again. “Sorry, I think I’ll pass.”

When his face falls, I feel my resolve weakening. He’s been such a good friend, and I hate letting friends down. “Please, Grace, it’s a big deal. I’m trying to convince this company to partner with me in the winery in Tuscany. This event could help seal the deal.”

Another business event. Another Hanson. It feels like déjà-freaking-vu. The last event upended my life. I’m not sure I’ll survive another one.

“*Hayden*,” I whine like a child, already knowing I’ll give him what he wants.

When he flips his freaking lips down like a puppy, I just about lose it. “Fine. But I’m coming for two hours tops, and if you leave me alone with

Cat James for even a minute, I'm out."

Hayden grins. "I promise not to leave your side."

There's a twinkle in his eye and a promise in his words that I'm not ready to deal with, but when the lobster mac and cheese and rare porterhouse are placed in front of me, all thoughts leave my head. "Dinner's on you," I crow before dipping my fork into the gooey lobster goodness.

Hayden laughs. "Anything for you, Gracie."

And dammit if that nickname doesn't make swallowing a bit harder.



## CHAPTER 22

### CASH

**E**ven the sun seems to mock my misery. It's been a perfect fall. The weather is warm, the Patriots are winning, and everyone around me has fucking smiles on their faces. People in Boston never smile—they're called Massholes for a reason. They grimace, they gripe, they're fucking miserable—but it seems the entire city is delighting in my misery which only makes me angrier.

My first appointment with my therapist was completely useless. She expected me to do all the work and refused to tell me how long this would take, when I could reach out to Grace, or provide any other metric as to when I'd be deemed mentally healthy enough to pursue a relationship.

"There's no time limit, Mr. James," she'd said in her cool tone as if she thought I was an imbecile. And I must be because I've gone back to her bi-weekly for the last two weeks. Four sessions in, and I'm no closer to figuring out how to move on from what Grace did. I just don't know how I'll ever trust her again...and without trust...

I haven't even begun to skim the raging ocean wave that is the discussion I had with my father. To say the words aloud, to admit the truth of his

statement—that I killed my own mother—is too much for a therapy session at this point.

To make matters worse, or better I suppose some would say, Cat and Hanson’s latest plans for the company aren’t half bad.

I’d actually sat across from them at a meeting and cracked a smile when Cat suggested a fashion show for the release of our newest malt. It will attract a different crowd, and honestly, old-money investors will have their chins on the floor over Cat’s model friends. The plan is for the models to carry different liquor bottles down the runway, and we’ll be serving only drinks made by our two companies—now our combined company. Even I could admit that it sounds fun, but as I watched Hanson squeeze my sister’s hand reassuringly after she sold me the idea, I felt a pang of jealousy. I used to have that with Grace. Will we ever have it again?

So now I’m walking into my useless therapist’s office again hoping today she can provide me some sense of when I can talk to Grace. Or provide some insight as to how I can move on from what happened.

“How has your week been?” Lydia asks as she settles her pad against her knee and quirks an eye up to look at me. There’s no couch for me to lie on. Honestly, it would be easier if I was lying down and looking away from her. Now I have to come up with an answer as I watch her study my every facial expression. It’s like she can see that I’m calculating a reply. Trying to come up with the answer that will have her declaring me mentally healthy enough to be done with this exercise so I can tell Frank I’m ready to be reunited with Grace.

“It was good. I actually had a very productive meeting with my sister and her”— I choke on the word—“fiancé.”

That's something else that happened over the last two weeks. Hanson publicly proposed, and my sister accepted as was the plan all along. I gulp down my disdain that she has to go through this because of me—because of what Grace did.

And we are back to circling the problem I live day in and day out. How do I forgive Grace for something that affects every one of my siblings' lives? How do I even attempt to get her back when I can't face what she did? I can't understand it. I can't make peace with it.

“Well, that's good.”

“It is,” I admit. “And the event that they've planned is only about a week away, and I was thinking of using it as a peace offering with Grace—maybe ask her to come.”

Lydia's face transforms into instant disapproval, so I roll back my suggestion. “Or not...it's probably a bad idea to do that in a group setting, huh? I should probably reach out when it's just the two of us,” I offer.

Her face remains tight. “And what would you say to her at that type of get-together?”

I huff in annoyance. I've been quite obvious in my reason for coming here. “I'd tell her I want to be with her. That I want to work on us...that I”—I hesitate—“forgive her.”

“Do you?” Lydia says, her tone giving nothing away.

What is the right answer here? What will get me her approval? “I understand that she didn't think Vanessa would use the interview to disparage my family.”

“But you don't understand why she did the interview in the first place,” Lydia counters, hitting the nail on the head.



“Well, yes and no. I know why she did it—to help her career,” I admit begrudgingly. But I still don’t know why she would do that to *me*—why did she pick her career over our relationship?

“And do you forgive her for that?”

I grimace. It’s an impossible question. After an hour I leave the appointment with no new answers and angrier than when I walked in.



## CHAPTER 23

### GRACE

**T**wo weeks after my dinner date with Hayden, I'm sitting in my apartment with a stupid smile on my face. "You didn't have to do this," I say into the phone to him.

Tessa screeches in the background, "Don't listen to her. We love you, Hayden; this is amazing!"

I'd easily convinced both Hayden and Tessa that my best friend had to come with me if I would be attending a Hanson-James event tonight. I can't believe I actually agreed. It's been almost two months since the night of my divorce party when Cat lured me into the lion's den of Cash's club without warning. I may have willingly seen Cash again after that, but that didn't excuse what Cat had done to me. I thought we were friends—I'd been foolish enough to believe we had bonded over our hate for Vanessa, our love for dirty martinis, and her dating endeavors. I won't be so easily fooled again.

"What color dress are you thinking?" the woman who is here to do my makeup asks.

I stare at the rack of clothes that Hayden had delivered and try not to smile. “Billionaires and their need to show off.” I tsk into the phone again. “This really is absurd, you know that?”

Hayden’s smile comes through his deep baritone. “You deserve this, Grace. No one deserves it more. Wear whatever you want...hell, if you like more than one keep them all. The only thing I care about you wearing is a smile.”

“Then consider your mission accomplished.”

He laughs, and Tessa squeals again as she sashays over with a champagne glass in her hand. “Okay, Haydes, let me go beautify your date,” she says into the phone before hanging it up. “Seriously, G, he’s a dream. If you don’t bone him soon, I will. I mean someone has to give that guy a happy ending.”

Surprised, I laugh so hard, champagne dribbles down my face. For all my nervousness over tonight, I feel surprisingly light. I guess this is what Tessa meant all those months ago when she said this is dating. I never thought running into an ex would just become a regular occurrence and that I’d grow used to seeing any member of the James family, but they live in Boston as do I, and, unfortunately, we do know the same people. It’s bound to happen, and the more it does, the more normal it will feel. Tonight is just another example of that.

It also doesn’t hurt that Hayden surprised me with these dresses, stylists, two dozen roses, and an appetizer spread of cheeses fit for a queen. And the champagne. No one can ever forget the champagne, least of all Tessa who is currently chugging from the bottle.

“Bottoms up,” she says with a giggle as she pours more into my mouth. If the stylists are surprised by our antics, they don’t give off any judgment.

They simply smile and wait for us to pick out our dresses so they can get on with their jobs.



“This is officially the coolest event I’ve ever been to,” Tessa says in awe as we watch the models walk around in what are essentially pearl bras and tiny black leather shorts, carrying different liquors of the Hanson-James variety.

Hayden smiles proudly. “Jay and Cat did a really good job.”

I recognize a few of the waitstaff from Black Label and wonder how this event and the notorious club are related. I probably shouldn’t recognize staff from a sex club, but I do.

The event is held in an old warehouse on the penthouse level overlooking the city. Candles of varying sizes provide a dancing glow throughout the space, and white bouquets in gold candelabras of differing heights are strategically placed all around the room to make it feel bougie. Whoever designed this event did an excellent job, and I want his or her card.

As the night progresses, I’m happy to note that Hayden has done an impeccable job of keeping Cat away from me, and there’s been no Cash sighting. *Yet.* “God, G, do you see these women? They are like Amazonian sized,” Tessa whispers in my ear. She’s wearing the highest of heels so that my miniature Polly Pocket is almost my size. I agreed to go with a low heel so that I didn’t add to our height difference. I also picked a deep V-neck purple romper. I don’t trust myself in dresses around Cash James, and

without knowing if he'd be here, pants it was. Tessa is in a short black dress which makes her freckled legs look impossibly long for her short stature.

"You are just as beautiful as every woman in this room," I reply to my best friend.

Tessa snorts and shoots me a withering look. "Oh, I know!"

I laugh. My best friend is many things, but modest is not one of them. I don't think she has a humble or embarrassed bone in her body. As always, her confidence gives me a boost as well.

"Want to dance?" Hayden asks with humor in his eyes, clearly listening to everything that comes out of Tessa's mouth.

The smile on my face could light up the entire city, so I agree to the dance. Hayden has earned it in spades. Tessa waves us off as she goes in search of her conquest for the night. It doesn't take long. We haven't even reached the dance floor when I see her point to a handsome man in a suit, give me a thumbs-up and a little shimmy of her chest, before she dives right in to introduce herself. Hayden's laughter tickles my ear as he presses his hand to my back, pulling me close to dance. "Is she always this..." He falters for a way to describe Tessa. I get it, she's indescribable.

"Sure of herself?" I offer. He shrugs. "Yes," I reply, "and it's absolute perfection and fun to be around."

Hayden raises his eyes. "I could say the same about being around you."

A blush creeps up my chest. "Thank you, Hayden." I lean into him, letting my head rest on his broad chest. "You really have made my life a lot less lonely."

We sway to the music and laugh late into the night. At some point, Jay comes up and tries to get me to join him and Cat for a drink, but Hayden

interjects, feigning a headache, and then he, Tessa, and I sneak out of the event without incident.

We drop Tessa off first and then Hayden delivers me back to my apartment.

As we stand at the door, Hayden wears a peaceful smile. “Thank you so much for coming,” he says, pushing my hair back from my head. I’d decided to go with an updo, but after our dancing it’s a mess falling around my face. He presses his hand to my cheek and stares down at me.

*Is he going to kiss me? Oh god, I’m not ready.*

“I really had a great time. Thanks for letting Tessa tag along.” Hayden’s thumb continues to caress my cheek while I stare up at him, stumbling over anything to say. “It was a great event. I’m sure you guys got a lot of investors...and more people to drink your...er...drinks.”

Hayden laughs, and lines pull at the corners of his eyes. He’s an absolutely gorgeous specimen of a man. And a wonderful human. I tilt my head to the side, studying him, and he laughs harder. “I think you’re properly drunk, Gracie.”

It’s like water on the low embers that were starting to spark. My eyes shut, and Hayden senses the shift immediately. He leans in and presses a kiss against my cheek before pulling me in tight for a hug.

“I’m sorry,” I crow, knowing that he was going to kiss me. Knowing that I’m not quite ready. And feeling shitty about it just the same. “You went to all this trouble,” I say against his chest.

Hayden’s hands move against my back, offering a circling reassurance. “Don’t ever apologize for sharing the night with me. I had a great time. And when you’re ready for your new beginning, I’ll still be here.”

I sigh against his chest. What a perfect answer. And I do want to be ready. I'm so close to being ready. Maybe I just need to pull off the Band-Aid...kiss this man...get it over with.

When Hayden looks down and smiles, I feel a pang in my chest. I'm not ready for him to go. "Hayden, wait," I say as he begins to turn to leave.

Hayden spins back around and tosses me one of his cheeky winks, and my smile comes effortlessly. "Can I help you with something?"

I bite my lip as I consider what I'm thinking of asking. I study his face, his kind eyes, the blue an almost cobalt, deeper as they stare at me with an obvious hunger.

His fists open and shut, as if he's physically holding himself back from reaching out and touching me. And I can't help but wonder how those hands would feel sliding against my throat. How he would taste. Probably not like whiskey. Maybe like wine and happiness. Something I'm grasping at, yet continues to evade me. Making up my mind, I nod and stutter, "I... uh, will you stay the night?"

Hayden doesn't hide his surprise, his eyes knitting together as he really questions me. "Are you sure?"

Before I can let myself overthink my next words, I hold out my hand to his, trusting him to be gentle, to take care of me, and to help me move forward. "Please...I need you to touch me."



## CHAPTER 24

### GRACE

**T**his cannot be happening. In no world is this my new beginning. “Seriously!” I screech, staring at the man across from me.

“I assure you, I don’t often joke around with my patients about this.”

I look to the ceiling, summoning God, or my self-control. “I cannot be pregnant. This has got to be some sick joke.”

Not for nothing, but it seems unfair to tell a woman she’s pregnant while she’s wearing a white piece of paper that barely covers her ass. I want to jump up and storm out of here, but I can’t very well do that with my ass cheeks hanging out.

This isn’t a rom-com. I’m not here for everyone’s entertainment. My life is currently spiraling out of control, and I can’t help but think this sounds like one of Marion’s romance novels. The girl always gets pregnant after the breakup. It’s like science. Except it’s not. Because science says that when you use birth control you don’t get pregnant. Of course when your ex-husband is a psychopath who screws with your birth control, science doesn’t win.

*What the fuck!*



“If you give me a few minutes I can tell you how far along you are.”

I laugh. It’s a maniacal shout of a laugh. “Ha. Ha! I don’t need a damn test to tell me how pregnant I am. I *know* how pregnant I am.”

I hate my life.

“It’s really not good for you to be getting this worked up. Your blood pressure...”

I shoot him a look telling him he doesn’t want to finish that sentence. For a few minutes I just need peace and quiet. I need a second to get a handle on this insane situation.

I’m pregnant. I’m a divorced, pregnant lady. Woman? Lady. It sounds better. I’m also probably losing my mind just a bit right now.

My phone rings, and I glance down even though the last thing I should be worried about is work, or men, or Tessa, or whoever is calling me right now. But somehow when I see it’s Hayden, I feel my blood pressure return to normal. He’s my one good thing.

“Hey,” I squeak into the phone as the doctor looks at me with an annoyed expression. Whatever, he’s just upended my world; he can give me a minute.

“Hey love, how is your day going?”

Ha. How’s my day going? Just peachy, my little British friend. I sigh far too loudly, and the doctor shakes his head. “I’m having a day. How about you?”

“I was hoping to take you to dinner tonight?”

I smile at his request. Hayden’s voice always leaves me smiling. I love his British accent so much.

“I’m not sure I’d make great company,” I admit. Besides, we always drink together. He enjoys ordering expensive bottles of wine, and I enjoy

drinking them. I'm not sure how I will be able to beg off not having a drink without raising suspicions, and I am not sure I'm prepared to divulge this news. I haven't even come to terms with it myself.

The doctor motions for me to hang up. "I'm sorry, Hayden, I'm in the middle of an appointment. Can I take a raincheck?"

"I just want to see you. How about I bring takeaway to your place?"

I laugh at his terminology. "Fine. We can get takeout. I'll see you around seven?"

"Sounds wonderful, love. See you then."

With a smile still plastered on my face, I hang up the phone. "Okay, you can perform whatever tests you need now. I'm ready."

The doctor smiles. "I know it's a lot to digest and we can obviously discuss options—"

I cut him off before he finishes. "No," I say resolutely. "I'm having this baby." I'm surprised by how firm I sound. How saying the words doesn't set me off the way it did only moments before.

Truthfully, I know it will be okay. I'm a thirty-six-year-old woman with a good job, a home, and a wonderful support system. I can handle this.



Back at my apartment, I slide off my heels and rub my feet. I'm not that far along; I can't possibly already have swollen feet. It's likely just in my head. Or these heels.

Looking around the room, I wonder if I'll stay here once I have the baby. There's a guest bedroom that can be turned into a nursery, and it's walking distance to work. But if I'm honest, I never imagined raising a child in the city. I imagined the nursery in the house that I updated with Steven. I imagined *doing this* with Steven.

"Ugh," I groan. How could my ex-husband do this to me? What a freaking disaster...and yet...my hand goes to my belly, and even though I know there is barely an embryo let alone a full-fledged baby, I find comfort in holding my stomach.

In just a few short hours, I've gone from finding this entire thing to be utterly insane to almost excited.

This was never my plan. Being married, settled, raising my child with two parents—those were all part of the plan. But if I've learned anything in the last year it's that God doesn't give a hoot about my plans.

After taking a long shower where I allow the steam to billow around me for far longer than necessary, I put my hair up in a bun and toss on a pair of black leggings and a long green sweater. This can't be a good sign that after less than two months of being around Hayden, I'm already skipping makeup. Or maybe I'm just preparing him for what I'll look like for the next several months. If he wants to stick around, he'd better get used to this face.

I remove my contacts and slip on the glasses that I haven't worn in months. And then the tears start. I can't look at myself in these glasses without thinking of Cash. But I also need to see, and the contacts mixed with the amount of tears I'm sure to shed when I tell Hayden everything are not going to work.

*How is this my life?*

I slip the glasses off. Seeing is overrated.

In my kitchen I spot the bottle of wine that I was drinking from only last night. *Whoops*. What is the difference between having a glass last night and today? Why is it one day it's okay and the next it's not?

Oh right, because now I'm *aware* there's a child growing inside me. Why can't I live in Europe where women drink wine throughout their pregnancies? Or is that a myth? I'm spiraling, I know.

Oh, God, screw wine. I can't have my dirty martinis. There is no world in which it's okay to 'just have one.'

Dammit.

The knock on the door disturbs my inner rantings. "It's open," I shout. Clearly, we've moved past me welcoming him into my home. Poor guy is in for quite the shock.

Hayden walks through the door, and just the sight of him calms me.

"Hey beautiful, how are you doing this evening? You sounded off today." Hayden enters my space in three strides and brushes a kiss against my cheek before pulling me in for one of his amazing hugs.

I sigh against his chest. "I'm better now. I just needed to wrap my head around a few things. What did you bring to eat? I'm starving."

Hayden smiles, and his thumb caresses my jaw. "Chinese okay?" he asks with a boyish grin.

I smile. "It's perfect." As I move around the kitchen grabbing plates and utensils, Hayden sets everything down on the table in the living room. This isn't our first night eating in, and he discovered my secret obsession the last time he was here. Watching *Millionaire Matchmaker* and eating on the couch with chopsticks. Even when it's not Chinese, I feel like it controls my food intake because I have to take smaller bites.

We settle next to each other on the floor with our food in front of us on the coffee table, and I flick on the TV. Before I take a bite, I turn to Hayden and smile. He's sitting cross-legged like me, but his legs are so long he looks like a giant. Like Buddy the elf. "Thanks for being here," I murmur softly, grateful for his presence.

He smiles and squeezes my leg. "I saw your ex at the office today."

I practically choke on my lo mein. "Way to bury the lede."

He chuckles. "The man's a bastard, and it's clear as day he misses you."

I roll my eyes. "Well, now I have no idea which ex you're referring to, because neither of my most recent ones want anything to do with me."

He shakes his head. "Love, any man who let you go is out of his damn mind."

I harumph and go back to eating.

"Cash must have seen the papers," he says thoughtfully before taking a bite of his dumpling. I grab one off his plate and dunk it into the soy sauce. It's surprising how after such a short time I feel comfortable enough to eat off his plate, but I do.

"What papers?" I ask with a full mouth. This guy is really getting the best version of me.

Hayden laughs. "You weren't kidding when you swore off the media."

I shrug my shoulders. "Listen, after the debacle with your brother, my ex-husband, my mother, and then Cash...yeah, I'm all set. Nothing I say changes what they print, and as we all know, when I decided to actually sit down with someone from the press...well, that really backfired."

Hayden laughs. I'm glad he finds my downward spiral amusing. "Come on, love, it's not all bad. Now you got me."

I smile and push my shoulder against his. “You’re right. So, what are the papers saying?” I ask in my best British accent.

Hayden’s eyes dance. “Just how you’re shagging the hottest Hanson brother. Clearly the better-looking twin.”

I guffaw. “You better watch that tone. If Garreth hears you, he may murder you with his death stare.”

Hayden chuckles. “Right on that.”

Garreth is always so serious. It’s quite a shock from the playboy attitude of Jay and the jokester that I find in Hayden.

I sigh. “Well, if I have to be linked to anyone, I’m glad it’s you. Although, if I were you, I’d be running for the hills.”

I feel Hayden jostle next to me, and before I know it, he’s pulling me from my seated position into his lap. I nearly spill my food but drop my chopsticks onto my plate just in time. Hayden fingers my chin so I’m looking up into his big blue eyes. “That’s my girl you’re talking about. Be kind to her, please.”

I lower my lids and sigh. “I’m such a mess.”

Hayden presses his forehead to mine. “You’ve had a rough year. Your entire life has changed. Give yourself some grace.”

He has no idea how much my life has changed. But tonight I’ll have to share it all with him. “I’m trying. Really, I am. Let’s watch *Millionaire Matchmaker* and then I’ll fill you in on my day.”

Hayden brushes a kiss against my lips. “Whatever you want, love.”

I close my eyes and wish that were true. There are so many things that I want and not a single one of them is something I can have.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes is shown in a dynamic, tilted position, with the liquid splashing upwards. The text 'CHAPTER 25' is centered at the top of the glass, and 'CASH' is centered in the middle of the glass.

## CHAPTER 25

### CASH

I'm meeting at Hanson's office with representatives from Sintac when I spot her walking out of an office with Hayden. I pause in the entryway and watch as she leans her arm against him and smiles at something he says.

My legs move without my agreement, urging me a few paces closer just so I can hear her voice, or maybe inhale her scent. The last time I saw her was at the event Cat planned. The event where I watched Grace smile up at Hayden the same way she is now. Watched her sway in his arms and gaze into his eyes. I broke a glass with my bare hands and hid in an office half the night. Lydia had a field day with that revelation.

Grace's hair is pulled back from her face, and she wears a pair of jeans and a sweater. It's only now that I realize I never saw her in jeans. In all the time we spent together, she was always in work attire, dressed up, or naked. But now that it's nearly winter, she looks different.

The seasons continue to change and yet my heart remains stuck in summer.

“You should call him,” he says, running his hand against her cheek. My throat closes up. I don’t know what he’s talking about, but I feel nauseous watching him touch her. Still out of view, I shake my head and bite back my words.

She meets his eyes and stares for a moment, and it’s like they have a conversation. I’m ill watching it. There was a time when we could have that type of silent conversation. It’s one shared between lovers—not couples, but people who truly love one another.

“I can’t. I just...*can’t*.”

Hearing her voice, the way it cracks, sends me spiraling. Who can’t she call and why? It’s been nearly four weeks since I found her on my rooftop and fucked her on every surface I could. Four weeks since she told me it was over, and to find her here, with him, makes it all the more real.

When Grace turns, I pivot quickly, moving into an office that I find as she walks by. Coconut drifts through the air, and I squeeze my eyes shut and try to hold my breath so that I don’t inhale her. I can’t breathe her in. If I do, I won’t be able to stop myself from reaching for her.

I think I’m almost in the clear when I hear Hayden call after her, “Grace, stop.”

She pauses in front of the door. I know this because now the smell seeps through the air and into my nostrils and doesn’t leave. I’m no longer able to hold my breath. It’s too long, and I’m selfish and a masochist because I want to smell her.

I *need* to smell her.

Leaning my head against the wall, I wait for them to do something. *Say something*. Or just move so I can get myself out of this purgatory.



“Hayden, please, I know you guys are going to be family, and Jay wants me there, but I honestly don’t think I can be around Cat. And obviously her brother hates me. It’s not a good idea.”

I don’t hate her. I hate myself.

There’s a pause, and I want so badly to look into the hall to see what’s happening. Is he reaching down and kissing her? Is he stroking her face?

*What is happening?*

“He deserves to know the truth. He’s going to find out eventually. These things tend to become impossible to ignore.”

I hear her soft laughter, and it burns my chest. “These *things*. It’s not a thing, Hayden, it’s a baby.”

My face drops, and I bite my fist to keep from reacting. From walking out there and demanding she tell me what the fuck is going on. He’s telling her to tell ‘him.’ Is that *him* me? Is Grace having a baby? My baby?

I lean forward, gripping my knees as the room starts to spin.

“I know it’s a baby. Your body is going to make it a little impossible to ignore.”

She lets out a surprised breath. “Are you telling me I’m going to get fat, Hayden?”

He replies, “Never. You look beautiful, love. I’m just saying, you can’t hide it forever.”

“I’m not hiding. I will deal with all of it, I promise. I just don’t want to talk to him at his sister’s engagement party. The last time we saw each other, it didn’t end well.”

She continues speaking, “I know you guys are going to be working together, and we need to get this settled soon and out in the open, but I just need a little more time. I mean this all just happened...”

“But you’re happy, right?” he asks her.

I can practically hear her moving in for a hug because her voice is muffled when she responds, “Yes, Hayden. I’m very happy thanks to you.”

My back slides against the wall, and I hit the floor with a thump.

Not my baby. Hayden’s baby. Well, motherfucker. That’s the final nail in the coffin.



“Excuse me, Mr. James, I am in the middle of an appointment.”

I glare at the man sitting in my normal chair. “I’ll give you five hundred dollars if you give me the last ten minutes of your session.”

The man’s sad demeanor perks up, and he stands as he reaches out his hand. I slip five crisp one hundred dollar bills out of my wallet and into his hand with a smile.

Lydia seems less than impressed, but I’m used to being met with her disappointing stony disposition, so I pay it no mind. As he walks out, I chuckle. “Wait, tell me he wasn’t here for like a gambling addiction or something?”

She shakes her head. “I cannot discuss another patient with you, and I assume since you just paid him double my rate for only ten minutes of my time, you have something important you’ve come to say.”

She’s got a point. Maybe she’s not such an imbecile.

“Grace is pregnant,” I dive right in, ignoring the preamble. “You told me I couldn’t go to her until I forgave her, and now she went and got pregnant

with someone else's baby. So now what do I do?"

She swallows as she stares me down. "That's a lot to unpack."

"No," I say with a shake of my head. "I don't want to unpack it. I don't want you to ask me questions to get to the bottom of my feelings. I want you to tell me what the fuck to do so that I can forgive her and make this right, because now I'm out of time."

She sighs as she pulls her glasses off her face. "Mr. James, I said no such thing."

I huff. "I remember exactly what you said. I've been waiting for you to tell me what to do to forgive Grace so I can talk to her, and you just keep talking in circles—so, give it to me straight, Doc. What do I have to do?"

A rare smile crosses her face. "First of all, I'm not a doctor, but thank you for the nickname. And I'm not talking in circles; I'm letting you talk through your issues. That's what therapy is...you have complete control when you walk out of here as to what you do with what you learn about yourself while you're in here."

My face falls as I let out a growl I can't hold in. "Just tell me what to do?"

She sighs and looks down at her notes before she finally decides to lay it on me. I wait with bated breath knowing the next few sentences could be the answer to what I've been searching for.

"Have you ever considered asking her why she did what she did?"

I grimace. "I did."

"Did you?"

Here we go talking in questions again.

"Yes, when it first happened I..."

*“Cash, please, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please, Cash. I didn’t do it. Whatever it is, I didn’t do it.”*

*“Did you do an interview with Vanessa today?” Her face falls, telling me everything I need to know. “Exactly. See, that..”—I point at her face —“that tells me everything I need to know. You betrayed me, Grace. You destroyed my family. Destroyed my company. And you trampled on my heart. I thought we had something special. I thought I finally had it. A woman who loved me. A real chance at a family.” A tear slips from my eye, and I swipe it away in anger. Fuck her; she doesn’t get to see me cry. “But it was all a lie. Get out! Get out of my house. Get out of my life and don’t ever show your face around here again.”*

*Desperate, she grabs at my shirt, but I can’t even look at her. How could she do this to me?*

*“Don’t do this, Cash. Whatever you think I did, I didn’t do it. She twisted my words. I swear to God, Cash, I would never betray you.”*

*“The minute you talked about my family on the news, the minute you agreed to sit down with her, you betrayed me. You put your career first just like you told me you would. And she used your ambition, your need to put yourself above everyone else, your selfishness—she used that, to destroy me. And you let her because that’s who you are. A selfish woman who cares about nothing but her career. About proving that you deserve to play in the big leagues. That you don’t need a man. The fucking worst part about it though, Grace, is that I knew this about you, and I admired it. You didn’t need to prove your worth to me because I saw you and loved you just the way you were. But you proved us all right. You don’t need a man. You don’t need love. You don’t need anything but yourself, and now that’s all you’ll have. Now get the fuck out of my house.”*

*She falls to her knees, and my heart feels like it's being ripped out from the inside. I can't stay. If I look down at her again, I'll cave. "Fine, if you won't leave, I will."*

My frown grows as I try to remember when I asked why. When I asked her anything...

But I didn't. I just yelled. And berated. And told the woman I loved that she was selfish and heartless and to never contact me again. "I didn't..." I falter as I finally realize what Frank, Hanson, Cat, and now Lydia have been trying to get me to see since that night. I never asked what happened, or why she did the interview. I never talked to her about what she thought it was about...or what she said. I just assumed the worst and broke up with her.

"You don't need some magical timeline to make it better, Mr. James. There isn't some special tactic I can teach you to forgive...you have to talk to her to find a way to move forward. You've got to face it. Are you willing to do that?"

The pain in my chest is almost unbearable, my heart races, and my head spins, because for months I had the tools to fix this, and now that it seems I have the answer it may all just be too late.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes is shown in a dynamic, tilted position, with the liquid splashing upwards. The word "CASH" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the center of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 26" are written in a similar bold, black, sans-serif font.

## CHAPTER 26

### CASH

**F**or the sixth time today, someone leaves my office near tears. I rake my hands over my face, wiping away the sweat from all my stress. I have never been an angry person. I was the guy with the personality, the one who always took time to get to know the quiet ones in the office or at a bar. If someone was by themselves in grade school, I'd invite them to our table. It's what made me a good leader. It's why Pa chose me for this position.

But I haven't been that person since Grace left, and I have to own that. I have to find a way not to be a raging asshole every time someone asks me something that I don't want to answer, or does something wrong that I think they should know how to properly do, or just looks at me.

But I don't know how. I blow out a breath and walk to the counter, grabbing the whiskey I keep in the decanter, and pull out a crystal glass.

"It's a little early for that, don't you think?" Carter asks, furrowing his brow as he stalks into my office. His long legs take only three strides to get to me, where he holds out his hand, waiting for me to give him the bottle.

"Is Chase here today?" I counter.

Carter shakes his head.

“Then I don’t think it’s too early.”

Despite Frank’s search, we still haven’t found Chase. At least Carter is finally back in the office.

“When Chase comes back, I’ll stop drinking. Until then,”—I hold the glass up in a mock salute—“bottoms up.”

The alcohol burns a trail of sorrow and relief down my throat. It’s strange how one thing could bring about such different emotions, but that’s precisely what it does. Relief because it cuts the edge and sorrow because I can’t make it through a day without a glass now.

“You don’t see me drowning my sorrows in alcohol.” He stares down at me like a big brother should, and for once I really want to let him be the adult, let him take control.

But he hasn’t, so I’ve had to.

“Well, last time I checked, your girlfriend wasn’t a lying liar who destroyed everything good in your life and is now pregnant with another man’s child.”

Just saying the words makes me ache for a stronger drink. What I need is to get laid. I need to lose myself in another woman. It’s been weeks since I’ve had sex. Since I’ve burrowed myself inside of someone. But I know it will feel empty after Grace. Just like everything else.

Carter grabs the bottle from my hand and pours a glass for himself and another shot into my own. “Grace is pregnant?”

“Yeah, so please, just shut up with your condescending tone. I lost everything. *Everything.*” I throw back another shot, sinking into the depression, and massage my forehead.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry, Cash. I should have been here for you.”

I shake my head. “You have your own shit to worry about. The kid. Tessa. The kid’s mother. What’s going on with that anyway?”

His eyebrows pull together as he shakes his head and takes another sip. “I’m working on it. We have a private investigator searching for them.”

I nod, trying to be the reassuring leader that I used to be. “You’ll find them.”

Carter sits down on the couch, dropping his elbows to his knees, and looks down at the ground. “Cash, it wasn’t Grace,” he says in a low timbre.

I lean against my desk to gauge what he’s saying. “What wasn’t Grace? Pregnant? Oh, I heard it from her lips.”

Carter looks up at me. “You’ve spoken to her?”

A grunt of a laugh leaves my throat. “No. I hid in a closet when I saw her leaving Hayden’s office.” I laugh again. “Can you believe that?”

Carter meets my eyes and shakes his head. Then he drops his head again and places his glass on the ground. Blowing out a breath, he looks up. “It was Tessa. It was my fault, not yours. *Mine*. I fucked up and trusted someone I shouldn’t have.” He blows out a breath. “I can’t even say that. She didn’t mean to break my trust. Not that it changes things. It blew our fucking world up and you lost Grace. I’m so sorry.”

Not following, I just stare at him, trying to figure out what he means. “*What was Tessa?*”

“She is the one that talked to Vanessa, the one who spilled the truth about Chase’s mom. *Not Grace*, it was Tessa.”

I run my hand over my mouth while my other one grips my glass. “But why?”

Carter leans back on the couch and runs his hand through his hair. “She thought she was helping. Vanessa saw you and Grace...in the bamboo



garden?” He says it with a questioning lilt, but I’m pretty sure he knows exactly what she saw.

*Fuck.*

I nod and drop my head in shame.

“Apparently she was really upset and going on about how she was going to destroy Grace for setting you up with people when she was just trying to hide your affair.”

“But that’s not what happened,” I practically yell in Grace’s defense. “Grace didn’t want to be with me. Or she thought she wasn’t good enough for me. *Nothing* was going on with Grace when I went out with Vanessa.”

Carter shoots me a look.

“Okay, well, obviously, I still had feelings for Grace at that point. That’s why I practically threw her over my shoulder at the club like a caveman. But not Grace. She wasn’t like that; she was trying to keep her distance.”

I hear my defense of her, and even I’m surprised how adamant I am. Running my hand over my face, I curse, “*Fuuuuck.*”

Carter continues, much to my dismay. “Tessa tried to calm her down. Explained the reason that Grace stayed away from you. Our history. Our parents’ history. And the fact that Grace knew you didn’t need a scandal. Tessa was drunk. She didn’t mean any harm,” he says in an aggravated tone. “She didn’t expect that Cat’s best friend would be such a devious little cunt.”

None of us saw that coming.

“It doesn’t change the fact that she chose to talk to Vanessa to begin with. I mean if Grace hadn’t done that interview, Cat wouldn’t be engaged to freaking Hanson right now, and our companies wouldn’t have merged into

this disaster.” I hang my head. No matter how many times I run my mind around it, I can’t change that fact.

Carter sighs heavily. “You should watch this,” he says, holding out a small SD card.

I take it without thought and spin it between my fingers. “What is this?”

“The interview. Grace didn’t say anything about you. Or our family. She talked about her business. She talked about being happy.”

The air stills as the truth hits me square in the chest. “But the commercials—”

He cuts me off. “Were all clipped together to sensationalize the interview. Come on, Cash, we’ve lived this life long enough to know what the media can do with a sound clip. They played her. I still don’t know how Vanessa found this mystery child of mine. I continue to wonder if it’s even real or if I’m on a wild goose chase trying to find some child that doesn’t exist.”

I move to the couch and sit next to him. “We’ll figure it out, I promise.”

Carter turns his head sideways and looks at me. “You have enough on your plate. You need to talk to Grace. She didn’t do this. She isn’t to blame.”

I hear his words, but I can’t wrap my head around them. The shame is all-consuming. First my mother’s death, then the loss of my family company, and now the destruction of the woman I love. When will I stop being such a fuckup?

“Even if I talked to her, what good would it do? She’s having a baby with Hayden.” It hurts my throat to mutter the words. I had this whole life with Grace planned in my mind, and her having a kid with someone else was never part of it. Somehow even when she left my penthouse a few weeks ago after telling me it was over, it didn’t feel as final as it does now.

There's no going back.

“So, if she somehow is pregnant with someone else's child, but she was still the person you met and fell in love with, you wouldn't want to be with her?” Carter says it so matter-of-factly that I actually consider the absurd question.

None of this matters because Grace will never speak to me again. I was horrible. Frank and Cat both tried telling me the truth and I wouldn't listen. Instead, I destroyed her, and until now, I didn't even think I was wrong for doing it. I took every insecurity she had, twisted them into horrible words, and then spit them back at her, aiming to hurt her. It's physically nauseating to remember the way she looked at me.

“I asked you a question,” Carter says, pulling me from my memories.

“If Grace gave me a chance, would I take it, even if she was having someone else's baby?” I clarify.

“Yeah. Exactly.”

I don't hesitate. “I'd love her child because it's hers. None of that would matter to me if I actually had a chance to be happy with Grace, to spend my life with her. I'd be the best goddamn stepfather that ever existed.”

Carter nods. “That's what I thought. You should talk to her.”



## CHAPTER 27

### GRACE

“**W**hat do you think of this crib?” Tessa asks, pointing to a beautiful bassinet with white bedding and little lambs embroidered into the lace.

My eyes double at the price. “Tessa, it’s a thousand dollars. *For a bassinet.* The baby is going to sleep in it for, like, six months. Maybe not even that long.”

“It’s my gift. Don’t worry about the price.” She points to a bedroom set beside it. “Look at that. It matches. You should get it all. My treat.”

I shake my head. “Tessa, you don’t have to do this.”

“I do. I really do, Grace, because if not for me—”

I stop her from finishing her sentence by putting my hand on her wrist. “Forgive yourself. I’ve forgiven you; it was a mistake.”

Tessa’s lip quivers and I sigh in annoyance. My best friend doesn’t cry, and if she starts, then this stupid pregnancy is going to make me cry too. “But he still doesn’t know. You need to tell him it was my fault.”

I look away, focusing on a blue blanket in the corner. Lifting it up, I inspect it and run my hand across the soft fabric. Now this is worth buying.

It feels like a cloud against my skin. I soothe myself by strumming my fingers against it mindlessly.

“Fine, if you don’t let me buy it you should at least tell him about the baby so *he* can buy it. You shouldn’t be paying for all of this alone.”

We’ve been over this several times a day since I told her about the pregnancy. I change the subject because I don’t want to talk about it. “I am happy to be alone, Tessa. I’d rather be a divorced pregnant lady than a married miserable mom. I am finally free. I thought about going back to my maiden name, but I hate having any association with my mom. Can I just make one up?”

“Want to take my last name? The offer still stands; I’ll marry you and we can raise this baby together just like we always dreamed.” She eyes me and smiles.

“That was never a dream. That was your insane ramblings.”

“Come on, admit it. I’d make a good second mom.”

I pull her close. “Of course you would. And you will make an excellent aunt to this baby. But I’m not giving the baby your last name. Nice try.”

She shrugs. “You need to let me do something. I can’t believe I got drunk and spilled all of Carter’s family secrets to Vanessa. What was I thinking?”

I shake my head. “You thought you were talking to someone who was a friend of the family. *Cat’s friend*. You were trying to get her to understand why we kept our relationship under wraps. How could you know she was a conniving bitch who would stab us all in the back and try to rise to fame from it?”

“I still think you should talk to Cash. I told Carter everything. I’m sure he’s told Cash the truth by now. He’s got to forgive you.”

I eye her. It's interesting that everyone thinks I'm waiting for him to forgive me. Screw that. I've come to terms with the fact that this is our reality. I did nothing wrong. I made a deal with Vanessa that Cash was off-limits. I talked to her about my business. That was it. However she managed to twist my words and use whatever secrets she had cultivated isn't on me.

Hell, I was ready to stand in the sun with that man, accept any of the storms that came our way—together—and if Cash had given me five seconds to explain rather than exploding, he would know that. Even worse, he echoed the words of my mother, cutting me to the core. And he did it intentionally. And then after weeks of radio silence, he drags me to his secret office, fucks me senseless, and then tells me he can't trust me. Only to do it again and again...even telling me he loves me, but that he can't forgive me.

If accepting that I'm going to be a mother has taught me anything, it's that I need to be strong. I need to stand up for myself. The only people I need in my life are those that support me, that trust me, and that lift me up. So no, I am not looking for forgiveness from that man.

"Can we talk about something else, please?" I walk to the front of the store with the blanket, and Tessa follows after me, grabbing it from my hand and pulling her credit card out of her wallet.

"Stop. I can buy my own damn blanket."

She smiles. "I'm very aware, Ms. Hotshot Businesswoman. Should we change your last name to that?"

I can't help but laugh. "Shut up."

"Oh, I can't help it that my best friend is now the owner of the hottest matchmaking company for WOMEN and that you have a line out the door

for your services.”

I flip my eyes to the sky. Business really is booming ever since Jay and Cat’s announcement and their subsequent engagement. Who saw that one coming? Not me. They were barely together a few weeks when he dropped down on one knee. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear this was Jay’s plan all along. I just don’t know exactly what he’s getting from the deal. But it’s good for business, so I’m not digging.

“Speaking of, I have an appointment in thirty minutes, so I have to go.”

Tessa frowns before pulling me in for a hug. “Fine. Bye, my little alien,” she says to my stomach, and I laugh. “Thank you to Steven for being such a diabolical asshole that he screwed with your birth control.”

I shake my head as I sigh again. “Can we not keep reminding the baby of that? I don’t think he or she needs to grow up knowing that. I’m trying to do things differently than my mother, and reminding the baby that its existence was because of a narcissistic asshole seems counterproductive.”

She shrugs her lips in assent. “Hey, at least you were able to keep the business, the apartment, and the house.”

“That’s true. And I’m free of him. That’s honestly all I care about. The sale of the house will give this baby a good nest egg, so I don’t have to work as much once the baby is born. Speaking of which, I have to go.” I drop a kiss on her cheek and walk off before she can heckle me anymore.

“Bye, best friend,” she sings after me. “My offer still stands; the baby can have my last name!”



Back at the office I settle at my desk and skim down my list.

Men. *All men.* Different ages, different income brackets, different ethnicities. But all men interested in dating a professional woman who is looking for a partner, not a happily ever after.

That is my promise. Helping women find an equal.

Chemistry is important, and we will make sure they have it, but so is finding someone who has the same values and the same beliefs as my bachelorettes. One of the most important beliefs being that they support their future wife in her career. That she could be the breadwinner if she wants and that wouldn't threaten their marriage. That she doesn't have to be a mom if she doesn't want to be.

The new company under my leadership is less about fairytales and more about choosing a life that you both want.

*I am thrilled.*

This is precisely what I was talking about when I said I wanted a fresh start, and finally, after months of twiddling my thumbs, crying myself to sleep, and takeaway nights with Hayden, I am moving forward.

Rachel pops into my office. "There's someone here to see you."

I nod. "Yes, my three o'clock." But as I look down, I see it's only 2:30.

Men are never early. If anything, they're constantly walking in with a second to spare, with some excuse about an emergent matter that just couldn't wait. *Their time is always more valuable than mine.*



Rachel shakes her head, and I spot Cat's tall figure behind her. The woman is intimidating when I'm standing up, let alone when she's taking up the entire door to my office. I sigh. "Come in, Cat. How can I help you?"

I stand up, and immediately my hand goes to my stomach, an impulse of protection, or hoping to hide the truth.

Cat's eyes dip to my hand, and her mouth pinches together. "So, it's true."

I motion for her to sit as I settle back into my own chair, glare at her, and motion to the chair as I take a seat. "I don't really see how anything to do with me is any of your concern."

Cat nods. "I deserve that."

I huff out a laugh. "Oh, I'm glad we finally agree on something."

"Grace, I swear I tried to tell Cash the truth...he wouldn't listen. I know you're mad at me, and maybe I shouldn't have taken you to the club that night, or I should have at least let you know he owned it, but I thought for sure once he saw you, he'd pull his head out of his ass..."

I grip the desk to keep my wits about me. *I trusted her.* "Listen, for some reason Jonathan has got it in his mind that you're a good person, and he wants to marry you, so I'll be civil, *when necessary*, but I doubt you and I will have to see one another often."

To Cat's credit, she doesn't react. "I *know* what's going on, Grace."

I don't know what she's trying to insinuate, but the good news is I don't care. "Cat, your opinion and your thoughts, and what you do or don't know, doesn't matter to me. There was a time that I hoped we would one day be family, but that's no longer the case. Cash and I are done. And when I was stupid enough to believe that maybe you and I could be friends, you

brought me to Cash's club and let him destroy me again. So, I no longer care what you think of my life. It doesn't matter to me."

"But it matters to *him*. And that's why I'm here."

I shake my head. "Jay doesn't need us to get along. I'm not his family. He's a good guy, and I appreciate his friendship, but we won't be spending holidays together. You don't have to play nice for my sake. I'll be nice when we run into each other, but aside from that we don't need to do this."

She finally snaps. "Can you stop being such a bitch? I'm talking about Cash. *He cares*. It matters to him that we're friends."

"Cash and I haven't spoken in weeks. I promise he doesn't care if we're friends."

She squeezes her hands together. "I am really trying here, Grace, but you are making it impossible."

"Oh, I'm sorry I'm making this hard for you. You've always made things so easy for me. Do you have any idea how it felt to be near Cash again and see how he looked at me? To see the hatred in his eyes. Was that your plan all along?"

She shakes her head. "Cash is spiraling. He misses you. You guys need to sit down and talk. He deserves to know the truth."

"Why? It won't change anything. Him knowing who destroyed his life won't change a damn thing."

She shakes her head. "I disagree. Him knowing you weren't the one who destroyed his life changes everything. He trusted you, Grace, and he thought you blew that all up just like our father did."

I tap my fingers against my desk, irritated she won't leave. "See, that's the problem. Grownups have conversations when they get upset; they don't let their past insecurities about their parents dictate how they deal with a

partner. I am not your father, and I am most certainly not my mother. He chose to lash out at me, hurt me, and turn on me, rather than talk to me. And you feel bad now because you are partially to blame for poisoning him against me. I'm sorry that he's sad. I'm sorry if he misses me. But I didn't do this."

Cat sighs. "You're right."

Although I'm surprised by her quiet admission, I don't have it in me to gloat. I lift my eyes to the door, letting her know I'm done.

She ignores me and continues, "But being right isn't all it's cracked up to be. And for the record, Grace, that's not the truth I was talking about."

Her eyes dip to my stomach again, and in that moment, I realize she knows. My mind races trying to figure out who would have told her. I can't imagine Hayden would have betrayed me that way, but Jay *is* his brother.

"We're having an engagement party at the house in Bristol on Saturday. Jay would really love it if you were there, and I know it would mean the world to my brother. And Grace, no matter what you say," she says, her eyes dipping to my stomach again, "we *are* going to be family. I didn't know you. I thought I did, but I didn't, and I am very sorry for how I treated you. I have only ever wanted what was best for my brother, and I'm sorry that I didn't realize that was you."

Before she reaches the door, I stand up and blurt out, "We used to be friends..."

Cat's eyes furrow.

I sigh, not really sure why I'm throwing her this bone. "My mom, my godmother, and your mother were best friends. I used to spend the weekends at your house with my godmother, Marion, and your mother when mine didn't want me around."

I'm quiet as I study her face. She leans against the door as if she needs the support. "You knew my mother?"

I nod. "Marion showed me some pictures she has from when we were kids. You and I were apparently quite fond of playing princesses together. And Barbies. I always loved Barbies." I let out a little hiccupped laugh as a tear falls down my cheek. Damn pregnancy hormones. "If you want, I can bring the pictures to the engagement party...for you to see."

"I don't know anyone who knew my mom. She died when I was pretty young so none of my friends ever..." She looks away as she wipes a tear with the back of her hand. "I'd really like that, Grace. Thank you." She holds my eyes, and in that moment, I wonder if the child I'm carrying will have my violet eyes, or Cash and Cat's whiskey ones.



## CHAPTER 28

### GRACE

“This is a bad idea. Like the worst idea,” I mutter as I stand in my room trying on different dresses while Marion and Tessa sit on the bed.

Tessa twirls her finger. “Spin.”

Marion smirks. “I think this is the one.”

I huff. “This is not the one. Look at my hips! And my waist. I don’t have a waist anymore.” I flop on the bed in frustration. Why am I showing so early? I thought I had a few more weeks at least. But seeing as how I’m almost through the first trimester and am not blessed with Tessa’s tiny frame or Marion’s tall one, my hips and waist are just becoming one.

“You look beautiful,” Tessa says.

Marion rubs my back in reassuring circles. “You are doing the right thing. Hope would be really happy to know that you were at her daughter’s engagement party,” Marion says, getting choked up.

“You should come with me. Bring the pictures. Cat said she didn’t know anyone who knew her mother. That kind of broke my heart.”

As horrible as Cat had been, I had seen how tortured Cash was over the loss of his mother, and I can only imagine that it would be ten times worse for a woman about to get married. At least I've always had Marion. Who did Cat have? Maybe that explained, *only slightly*, her terrible attitude toward me.

Marion breathes in a heavy breath. "I don't know if I'd feel right about that."

I can already see her turning the idea over in her head. Not only do I think it's the right thing to do, I also need her with me. I need her strength to stand up in front of Cash again. I have no idea how he will act toward me. It's been a month since he held me, touched me, kissed me...and reminded me again that even though he loves me, it'll never be enough.

*I'll never be enough.*

And now to make matters worse, I have to tell him that I'm pregnant. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to know that a selfish woman like myself is going to be the mother of his child.

I close my eyes in defeat. "Please come. I need you."

She nods once, and I feel relief all the way to my bones. I wish I could take a bath—that's what I really need—but I don't have a tub. The bath I'm dreaming of exists in a place I'll never step foot in again.

Or maybe I will. Maybe one day Cash and I will co-parent this child growing inside of me, and I'll have to go to the penthouse for pickups. He'll likely have a wife, and more kids, and I'll be standing on the outside, still dreaming about that damn tub.

"I think I need to move out of the city," I say resignedly.

Marion shakes her head. "We'll get you a bigger apartment. You can't leave the city."

“I can’t raise the baby here. I don’t even have a tub,” I say, as if that explains everything. “Babies need baths.”

Marion smiles. “Listen, I’ve never had a child so I can’t deign to understand what you are going through, but I have been around plenty of friends with babies and I can tell you that for the first year, there are a lot of things you *don’t* need. A baby needs love. A baby needs somewhere to sleep, and a baby needs food and diapers. Those are the extent of what a baby *actually needs*.”

I know she’s right. But the idea of raising this child on my own is starting to get more real every minute and every inch that my hips grow. “Okay, if I’m honest, *I* need a bathtub.”

Tessa laughs. “Thatta girl. Tell us what you need, and we will make it happen. You don’t have to go to the suburbs for a bath though. They have them in the city now.”

My stupid eyes tear because I know they have them in the city. The most magical bath that ever existed sits in a penthouse in this very city.

I let out a stilted breath. “Do you really think this is a good idea?”

Marion pulls her fingers through my hair, stroking while she stares down at me. “I think that it’s time.”

I nod. I suppose she’s right. “Let’s get this over with.”



## CHAPTER 29

### GRACE

**T**here are moments in your life that you will never forget. Walking into the home that Cash was born in, the place where he finally said I love you, while pregnant with his child, is definitely one of them for me.

It's not the place that makes it memorable though, although it certainly is jaw-droppingly beautiful enough, with more flowers than I remember and a thin silk tent which blows in the breeze covered in greenery and cascading wisteria which makes it look like a fairytale.

The reason this moment will be seared in my brain for the rest of eternity is the way Cash looks at me the first time we meet eyes again after weeks apart, and how he slowly lowers them down my body, taking in every inch.

How his pupils dilate, his gaze strengthens, and his jaw tightens. How his lips part, his hands drop, and his head tilts in wonder. How I render him completely speechless.

There is a wall of people around and between us and yet they part like the Red Sea when I walk in with Marion by my side.

The invitation said it was a white party, likely Cat's idea seeing as how she's in the fashion industry, so the only pops of color are the flowers, the



fire-like sunset, and the orange and red sea in front of us.

My dress is white silk, dips in the front with a cowl-neck, and clings to me, accentuating my new figure, stopping right below the knee. It's a cool December night, so I wrapped a faux fur stole around my shoulders, but my nipples still pebble from the breeze, and the silk does nothing to hide them.

I'm on display to the man who set fire to all my insecurities and walked out while I burned. In that moment, every single word he uttered, while I fell to my knees begging him to just listen to me, replays in my head, and my hand goes to my stomach as if I can somehow protect my child from his thoughts, from what I know will be his reaction when he realizes that the woman he hates is also going to be the mother of his child.

"I can't do this," I mutter, clinging to Marion.

She moves her fingers between mine, interlocking them and forming an emotional barrier of strength for me. "Yes, you can. But you don't *have* to do it right now." She guides me out of Cash's view and into Hayden's waiting embrace.

"Grace Kensington, you are a dream," he says with a big smile and open arms. I move into them, taking solace in his friendship. For a moment, I focus on nothing more than breathing.

I *can* do this. But more importantly, I don't have a choice. "Thanks for being here," I mutter against him.

His chest rumbles in laughter. "Kinda didn't have a choice," he says as his brother walks up.

"You have quite a party here, Jay," I say, stepping out of Hayden's arms. Jay looks around the room, surveying everyone who came to meet the woman who finally stole Jonathan Hanson's heart.

He beams when she comes into view in a white, floor-length mermaid gown with a sweetheart neckline covered in jewels. She looks like an ad for Tiffany with her teal shoes which offer just a pop of color as she moves. As she gets closer, I see that it has an illusion on top with a cream underlay, making it look like she's naked beneath the sheer fabric.

"Beautiful," he whispers, as his arms move around her waist, pulling her close. He places a kiss on her cheek, and she remains mostly stiff in his arms.

"Grace, thank you so much for coming." She pulls away from him and moves her arms around me. After months of our dueling, we've finally come to a place of peace. I hope it lasts.

Remembering that Marion is behind me, and that Cat is her best friend's daughter, I turn to include Marion in the conversation.

"Marion, you remember Cat," I say, motioning behind me. I don't know how I expect them to react, but Marion reaching out and pulling Cat into her arms isn't it. Yet that is precisely what happens. The warmth Marion exudes toward Cat is so motherly, it's hard to imagine that she never had children.

I find myself clutching my stomach remembering that I was also raised by this woman, not just my mother, and I can emulate her. I can be like her and not be selfish like my mother. Even if that is how others see me. I *can* be better.

Marion holds Cat at arm's length and stares at her. "You look just like your mother. My God, it's like stepping back in time. You're absolutely gorgeous."

All three of us start dabbing at our eyes, and Jonathan smiles as if this is the most enjoyable moment he's had in months. He's always been warm

with me, but it's strange to see him that way with others. He really must care for Cat.

"Go grab a drink, ladies. Cat and I have to mingle, but I know she wants to look at those photos you mentioned, Grace," Jonathan says, and I nod, pointing at Marion's oversized bag.

"Is there somewhere I can put this for the time being?" Marion asks.

Cat replies, "Sure, I can bring it inside."

I shake my head. "It's fine; I can do that. You go enjoy your guests."

Hayden wraps his arm around me, always appearing at the right moment. "I can go with you."

Everyone's watching me as if I'm made of glass. It does nothing for my confidence. "I'm pregnant not an invalid. Calm down."

I grab Marion's bag and walk straight into a chest, falling backward almost immediately, before strong arms grab and pull me upright. I close my eyes knowing exactly who it is. Even if I couldn't smell his woody scent, which I can, I could always feel his presence. It used to feel like a sizzling energy, but now it feels like being stabbed.

Groaning in despair, I feel all eyes on me and hear Hayden's voice in my ear. "It's alright, I got you." I turn back to look at him, still avoiding Cash's gaze, and mumble a thank you before taking off in the direction of the house. I can't take Hayden's kindness right now. I just need to be alone.

It's not until I'm inside that I take a breath, then another, and another. I'm pretty sure I'm hyperventilating.

Grasping my stomach, I drop Marion's bag with the photo albums and lean against the wall. It's not that I thought seeing Cash again would be easy, but I didn't think it would be this damn hard either. How am I going to raise a child with him?

Forget that...in the more immediate future, how the fuck am I going to tell him I'm pregnant?

An animal-like sob escapes my throat just as Carter rounds the corner from the hall. I cover my face, not wanting him to see me. "I'm so sorry. I'll just leave this here and go back to the party," I stammer, turning away from him so he won't see the tears that are about to escape.

Carter doesn't stop moving. He walks straight up to me, lowers his head so he's at eye level, and turns my face to his. "Are you okay, Grace?"

Sucking in my lips, I shake my head as my chest burns trying to hold back my sobs.

Carter's brow furrows and he pulls me against his chest. "Shhh, it's okay," he says while stroking my back.

It's not that I didn't think he was this nice of a guy, but we never had this relationship. He dated my friend, and he was my boyfriend's brother, but we never really interacted with one another while alone. Despite all of that, there is something about him that reminds me of Cash, and since I can't fall apart on Cash, this is comforting.

Finally, my breathing starts to return to normal and I pull back a bit, trying to avoid meeting Carter's eyes. "I'm so sorry. This was harder than I thought it would be."

Carter smiles kindly. "You thought seeing Cash again for the first time would be easy?"

I laugh at the ridiculousness of that thought. "Yeah, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking coming tonight."

He shakes his head with the smile still playing at his lips. "Cat really wanted you here. I'm glad you came."

I tilt my head in surprise and let out a sad laugh. “Who would have thought Cat would want to see me?”

His smile grows. “Seriously. She was not your biggest fan.”

“That’s an understatement.”

Carter motions to the purse. “Are the photos in there?”

I nod.

“May I?” he asks, picking it up.

“Help yourself.”

“Will you sit with me and look at them?”

I bite back a smile. “Sure. I’d like that.”

Carter motions toward the back porch and I follow him. “Can I grab you a water or something first?”

“That would be good.”

Once again, my hand moves to my stomach, and Carter gives me a knowing glance but says nothing.

My big reveal may not be as much of a secret as I thought.

A few minutes later we sit down on the wicker couch, and I pull out Marion’s album. The first page is a picture of Marion and Hope. Marion had shown me the pictures a few weeks ago, and now it almost feels like a memory, even though I really don’t know if I remember any of these.

Carter’s eyes crease and he smiles, touching his mother’s photo. “Cat looks so much like her, I almost forgot,” he says with a sigh.

“She was really beautiful,” my voice cracks as I speak.

Carter turns the page, and a little boy and girl who are about four or five stand in front of the bay wearing bathing suits and big smiles. Carter looks at me and back at the picture again. “Is this you and me?”

I bite my lips shut and smile. “Yes. Crazy, huh?”

He shakes his head. “It’s so much more than that.”

The next photo is a young Cat sitting in her mother’s lap. There’s another one with me and his mother, and this is the one that makes the tears fall from my eyes every time I stare at it.

“Holy shit,” he says, pointing at it.

I try for a shaky breath. Hope is smiling at the camera, and I am kissing her very swollen pregnant belly. I close my eyes and try not to cry.

“You have to show this to him,” he says, turning to me.

I shake my head.

“Grace, if that’s his baby...”

I suck in air. “I promise, I will talk to Cash. I’m not hiding anything from him. It’s why I’m here. But this,”—I point to the picture—“whatever crazy idea that everyone has that we were fated...that dream died the moment he gave up on us and destroyed my reputation.”

From the door, I hear a throat clearing and turn to find Cash looking down at me with war in his eyes. “Well, I’m glad we established that.”



## CHAPTER 30

### CASH

**S**taring down at the woman who holds my heart sitting cozily with my brother has me gripping my fists together, trying to stop myself from reaching out to her. “I was just coming to see if you were okay.” When Grace doesn’t react, likely thinking I’m talking to Carter, I ask again, “Are you...okay?”

Carter puts his hand on Grace’s knee and squeezes. What is with my siblings suddenly having a relationship with my ex-girlfriend? Especially Cat. Suddenly she’s her client, then her friend, and now Grace is at her engagement party to Jonathan Hanson. It’s like I walked into the twilight zone.

“I think he’s talking to you,” Carter says in a low voice.

Grace looks at him and then up to me, and I nod.

“Oh. I’m fine,” she stutters. She looks so beautiful that it actually hurts to look directly at her. It’s the first time tonight I’ve been close enough to see her violet eyes. I will myself to keep my gaze on hers, to soak her in and not turn away. No matter how much it hurts to see the normal warmth missing from her gaze.

“Do you think we could talk?” I ask.

Grace’s eyes dart to Carter and then back down to the book in his hand. Carter squeezes her leg again, hands her back the book, and whispers something in her ear. Then he stands, makes his way to me, and grabs my arm before he walks out. “Go easy on her, okay?”

I’m not sure when I turned into the villain. We were all victims to Vanessa’s scheme. I didn’t handle it well, I lashed out, but I’ve already told Carter I know I was wrong. Why is he acting like Grace needs protecting? Like I would do anything to hurt her. All I want to do is figure out a way to speak to her. To get through to her. To apologize.

I give a curt nod and turn back to Grace. She’s fiddling with the book in her hand, clearly attempting not to look at me.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” I ask, nervous to be alone in this room with her. Sitting down next to her seems too dangerous. Last time we were on this porch I watched her paint a picture of us dancing beneath the stars. I pressed her against this window and dragged kisses down her throat. I held her and told her I loved her. And I thought we had forever.

I never imagined I’d be afraid to get too close. She was never close enough.

Grace doesn’t respond right away. She keeps her eyes on something that I can’t quite make out. When I take a few steps closer to see what she’s staring at, she slams the book closed and puts it down on the coffee table. “Sure. Just...give me a minute. I want to run to the bathroom. I’ll meet you outside?”

I nod. A minute would be good. I could use that time to figure out what I’m actually going to say. She gets up and walks around the coffee table, putting more distance between us.



I shake my head in frustration. This is going to be difficult.

Curiosity gets the best of me, and I walk over and pick up the book Grace and Carter had been looking at. Close up I now see that it's a photo album. I open it and am caught staring at a picture of a little girl with a big smile and my brother. He must have been about four or five here. I go to move to the next page and find my mother holding a young Cat.

Unprepared for the emotions that arise, I cover my mouth, continuing my perusal of the photos. There are images of the little girl and my brother and sister looking up as they eat mac and cheese. Another one they are running on the back lawn at sunset. Then there is a picture of just my mother and a woman who looks like a younger version of Grace's boss, Marion.

That's when it hits me. The little girl, the one in the pictures, is Grace.

"Holy shit," I whisper to myself.

I flip back to the first picture, and sure enough, Grace's purple eyes draw me in. I look through the pictures again and know precisely which picture Carter and Grace were looking at when I walked in. The photo that had Grace gripping her stomach and swearing it meant nothing.

My mother smiles and looks down at a young Grace who kisses my mother's bump. My eyes fall shut as I feel my mother's presence weighing on me. And shame.

The shame I feel is all-encompassing. I destroyed a woman who my mother looked at with adoring eyes. A woman who as a child sat at my mother's legs and kissed her pregnant belly with me in it.

Photos of my mother are practically nonexistent thanks to my father's selfishness. I've never seen a single photo of my mother pregnant with me.

Any thought that I wouldn't win Grace back, that I wouldn't do everything in my power to make her mine again, disintegrates. Grace was

meant to be mine, and I was hers long before I met her.

We're written in the stars, recorded in the constellations, and promised to one another by fate's hand. Fate worked hard to bring Grace back into my life. The least I can do is work hard to keep her.

I slide the photograph out of the album, slip it into my jacket pocket, and put the album back on the coffee table before heading outside. Hopefully, fresh air will help me figure out the right words, or maybe my mother can help me find my way back to Grace.

Outside, Frank Sinatra plays over the speakers. Hanson had mini speakers installed throughout the property, along with heaters, so no matter where people wandered, they would be warm and entertained. It is so Hanson, and it aggravates me because I enjoy the crooning of Ol' Blue Eyes, but I don't like that anyone has disturbed my mother's gardens.

I glance down at my watch impatiently. Grace has been gone for nearly ten minutes. Maybe she changed her mind and snuck out front to avoid me, not that I would blame her.

"Having fun?" Cat asks, taking me by surprise.

"Don't you have a party to get back to, Kit Cat?" I reply, pointing to the tent with what feels like hundreds of people in it. Of course, Hanson would make this a publicity stunt. The entire relationship is. I don't know how Cat stands to be around him. This entire idea is ludicrous, and it drives me mad thinking that my sister is going to marry him just to save the family business.

As if reading my thoughts, she puts her hand on my shoulder. "Cash Money, *stop*. I'm happy."

I scoff. "How could you be happy with *him*?" I motion toward Hanson who is talking loudly and gesturing. Always the life of the party, always an

attention whore—I hate him with a vengeance.

She sucks in a breath and shakes her head. “You don’t know him. We’re friends. This is a good thing, Cash. For us and the company. It’s what needed to be done and I’m not sad about it, so just get over it already.”

I roll my eyes. How can I get over it when it’s my fault we are all in this mess? I never should have agreed to a date with Vanessa. Somehow that jealous woman destroyed everything in our lives.

“But what about kids? Don’t you want them? And sex. *Love*. I mean you’re entering an arranged marriage with a known playboy. How could any of this make you happy?”

Cat shoots me a look. “Please don’t concern yourself with my sex life. I’m well taken care of.”

“I don’t even want to know what that means.”

“Good. Then don’t ask things you don’t want the answer to. I’m fine, Cash. Last time I checked you’re the one who pushed away the woman you love. None of us are in happily ever after relationships. Give me a break. We all know that in the real world, marriage isn’t like that. People cheat. Spouses die. People betray one another. I’d rather have my fake marriage where I know exactly what I’m getting into. There’s no preconceived notions here. I know who Jay is and he knows who I am, and we aren’t setting any lofty expectations that neither of us can uphold.”

The reminder of my mother’s death, and my part in it, leaves me wincing in pain, and I find myself continuing to lash out even though I don’t want to. I want to grab my sister and shake her. I want to tell her she deserves better, but only vitriol leaves my mouth. “So, you’re just going to turn the other way when he fucks other women?”

She flings her arms. “I don’t know. Maybe. And he’ll look the other way when I do as well. I mean, what can I say? We are entering this with eyes wide open as business partners.”

Seething, I hiss, “It’s a marriage, not a business arrangement.”

“He’s not the person you think he is,” she says, looking behind her again. “I thought you knew that now. He’s the one who stuck by Grace time and again over the last few months after you hung her out to dry. *He* picked up the pieces. *He* helped her rebuild the business you destroyed.”

The truth of her words burns my chest, and I grit out, “That’s because he’s in *love* with her. He wants to be with *her*. And if he could have her, Cat, he wouldn’t be with you.”

As soon as I see her face fall, I feel like shit. Why did I say that? What is wrong with me lately? Everything that comes out of my mouth is shit.

“Fuck you, Cash. I get that you’re miserable and you’ve lost a lot, but it doesn’t have to be that way. Grace is here. Fix it while you still have a chance to make things right. This is the life I’ve chosen, and if you can’t stand beside me then you can get the fuck out of my way.”

I reach out to her before she can walk away. “I’m sorry, Kit Cat, I was out of line. I just want you to be happy.”

Her breathing is shallow, and she doesn’t look at me. “That’s what I keep trying to tell you. I *am*. It may not be what you imagined for my life. And maybe it’s not exactly how I wanted it to go either, but I am happy. And you can be too.” She raises her eyes behind me, motioning for me to turn.

When I do, I find Grace standing there quietly watching us with her eyes wide, and I’m left to wonder how much of our conversation she’s heard. Just more evidence of what a colossal asshole I’ve become.

“I’m sorry. Do you guys want a minute?” she says softly, looking at Cat and avoiding me completely.

Cat shakes her head. “No. You guys talk. Maybe once my brother works out his issues with you, he’ll stop being a complete asshole to everyone else.” She shoots a fake smile in my direction before walking away.

My shoulders fall back in embarrassment, and I roll my neck trying to figure out where to go from here. This isn’t how I wanted to start my conversation with Grace. I turn back to her and find she’s still doing anything to avoid looking at me. How are we going to get past everything if she can’t even *look* at me?

I take the opportunity to stare at her body, to the curve where a baby is currently growing, and I’m surprised to find that I’m even more attracted to her. There was a part of me that wondered if her being pregnant with someone else’s baby would change that for me, but my dick tells me otherwise. If anything, it makes me want to worship her even more. I just want to touch her, hold her, *fix us*.

“We can do this later,” Grace suggests, still not looking at me.

I move closer to her. “I’d really like to talk to you now. If you still want to?”

When she raises her eyes, immense hurt is all I see reflected in her gaze. But she nods and waits for me to lead.

For a few moments we walk in silence along the path to the water. I didn’t really have a destination until I did. This is where I came to talk to my mother about Grace. And there is a bench which we really need right now. I can’t apologize to her as we walk. I need to be able to look her in the eyes so she can see just how sorry I truly am.

What I really want to do, what would make the apology perfect, is if I could take her in my arms and dance with her. But even I know that is asking too much.

The sky has gone from fire orange to a light pink as the sun is finishing its descent. Soon the entire yard will be lit up by only lanterns, twinkling lights, and the stars.

“Can we sit?” I ask, motioning to the bench.

Grace drops to the bench, still not having said a word. I sit down next to her and unbutton my jacket, giving myself some breathing room. When I turn to look at her, she meets my gaze pensively.

Fuck, this is hard.

“Grace, I owe you an apology. I am so sorry for everything that happened. For not believing you, for jumping to conclusions, for lashing out. I’m so sorry for everything I said. None of it was true. You aren’t selfish, and your ambition is nothing to be ashamed about. I was hurt, but I make no excuses for my behavior. I was horrible.”

Grace opens her mouth to speak and then closes it again. I watch as she shakes her head at whatever she was going to say and then simply nods while not looking at me and whispers a polite, “Thank you.”

I practically growl in exasperation. “Thank you?”

She remains completely neutral, unaffected by how worked up I am. “Yes, thank you for the apology. I appreciate it.”

I am out of my mind by her response. She’s completely written me off. She’s written *us* off. “I don’t want you to appreciate it; I want you to talk to me, tell me how you’re feeling, help us move past it.”

She rolls her eyes and laughs. “So now my response to your apology isn’t good enough?”

“That’s not what I mean. I just mean, it’s not okay. What I did was not okay and you should be angry. You shouldn’t *thank* me for apologizing.”

Grace stares at me, expressionless. “Cash, I don’t have time to be angry. It’s been over three months since we broke up. Nine weeks since you fucked me over. Literally. A month since we last saw one another...and you told me it was just fucking. What would you like me to say? That I wish you didn’t blow up both our lives without a second thought?” She lets out a rough breath and nods. “Yeah, it would have been great to avoid all that. You want me to bore you with the many nights I sat in bed crying myself to sleep or the days I had to hide from the press because you blew up my life? Because I don’t really want to relive that, thank you very much. Do you want me to tell you how without Jay and your sister I probably would have had to close my business? Or how Hayden has had to pick me up off the floor more times than I can count? That he’s literally rocked me to sleep as tears wet his shirt. I mean, what do you *want* from me? You apologized, I accept it. If you can’t tell, I have bigger things to worry about than your damn apology.”

She motions to her stomach, and my heart gets caught in my throat.

Without thinking, I pull her into my arms and against my chest. She doesn’t fight me, and for a moment I think just maybe this is what we need—physical touch. I inhale her coconut scent, the smell I’ve missed the same way I would a limb if it was cut off, and I run circles against the silk fabric on her back and just enjoy holding her again. But then I realize that Grace is like a stone in my arms. She didn’t push me away, but she’s held herself so tight as if she’s afraid to even *feel* me against her.

I pull back and look at her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

She looks down and then her hand goes around her stomach again. “Cash, there’s something you should know.”

I cut her off. “I know, Grace, and it changes nothing. If anything, I realized tonight it makes me want you even more. I love you, Grace. I’m so fucking in love with you that even when I thought I hated you, I loved you. I couldn’t breathe without you. Couldn’t make it through a day without drinking because it hurt to be sober and be without you. I am going to fight for you. You having a baby doesn’t scare me. What scares me is being without you. Having to *live* without you. I’ll be here for you and your baby every step of the way. I’m never going to abandon you again. I’m going to earn your trust and prove to you that you’re *everything* to me.”

My heart beats wildly in my chest at my own admission. I search her eyes for any response. She simply shakes her head, confusion evident in the lines of her forehead. “What?”

“Do you love Hayden? Do you feel for him the way you felt for me? If your answer is yes, I’ll walk away, Grace. I’ll step aside so you can be happy. But if you don’t...or if you’re not sure...”

I meet her eyes and try to read her thoughts like I used to be able to so easily, but they’re blank.

“Cash, I...you don’t just turn those type of feelings on and off. Or at least I didn’t. I couldn’t go from loving one man so desperately to feeling the same for another...” Grace looks down as her voice goes quiet. It’s like she’s trying to work something out in her head, and I find my opening. They aren’t *there* yet. She doesn’t love him, *yet*. I still have a shot.

I do it again—touch her. I can’t keep my hands to myself. Reaching out, I place my hand on her stomach and close my eyes briefly as I smile, feeling the swell beneath my palm. “You’re beautiful, Grace. You’re a goddamn



dream come true, an angel on earth, and the life I planned for us, the one I pictured, and we talked about—it's still possible. *This* changes nothing.”

Grace removes my hand and replaces it with her own and I feel the air spark with her fire. “Cash, this changes *everything*. It's a bit convenient that when you learn I'm pregnant with your child, you miraculously forgive me. When you learn the truth about the interview, you suddenly decide you still love me. When everything is packaged up nicely in a little bow for you, I'm no longer the selfish woman you broke time and again, I'm the dutiful girlfriend you want to make a wife. But for me,”—she huffs out a breath and looks away before turning her blazing eyes in my direction—“for me, *this isn't nothing*. And I don't *trust* you not to turn on me again. I don't trust that you're finally speaking to me because you want *me* and not just because you envisioned this perfect life and want to make it a reality. I think you said it best a few months ago when you told me to walk away, because I *don't* trust you and I'm not sure I ever will again.”

My mind reels as I try to work through everything she just said. As I try to focus on her anger and not the one sentence that literally just changed my life. But I fail. “That's my baby?”

Grace's eyes shut, and she shakes her head in what appears to be disappointment. “I can't do this right now.”

I grab her hand before she gets up, knowing that I have to fix this. I have to get through to her. She needs to know that whether that child was mine or not I would have wanted her. That this is about *her*.

“I'm not going to lie to you and tell you that I've never been fucking happier knowing that you're carrying my child. Because Grace...having a child with you,”—my voice cracks—“having you be the mother of *my child*, I've never wanted anything more. And that's because it's *you*. You

are the love of my life. And I know I haven't been the man you would choose to be father of your child, but I'm going to change that. I'll be better, I promise." I squeeze her hand three times and she stares down at our connection, speechless.

Knowing she needs time, I lean in, kiss her on the cheek, and stand. "I'm going to head back. Take some time to think about what I said, and get ready, Grace, because I'm coming for you. I will be a father to our child either way, but you need to know, this is about you. I love *you*. And this time I'm going to prove to you that I'm worthy of your love. That I'm someone you'll be proud to have a child with. That you can trust in our love, you can rely on it, *you can trust me*, and I swear, Grace, I won't let you down."



## CHAPTER 31

### GRACE

I sit staring out at the bay until the orange sky is black and the pink water is a deep navy. There isn't a single scenario that I ran through to prepare myself for today that ended with Cash telling me he loved me. That he *still* loves me.

That he's coming for me.

The shock from those words reverberates down to my core. It wasn't a possibility that I ever entertained. And perhaps that's why I don't quite know what to even think of it.

I assumed he hated me because that's what he told me right before he destroyed everything that mattered in my life. He took away *everything*. Burned it all to the ground. I never took a moment to wonder if I could still love him. I never considered to even ask myself if he was still the love of my life.

I didn't allow myself to sink against his chest, because he had stopped being my safe place.

He's not my safe place.

What am I supposed to do? He says he's coming for me. He says he loves me. He says this child, *our child*, changes nothing. That he still wants me. That he still wants us.

But he's wrong—this baby changes everything.

My throat feels dry.

I'd been prepared to act civil. To figure out a way to co-parent. To do whatever was best for my child because that is what a mother does. The possibility that this child could have two parents that loved one another, that wanted to grow old together, that could be a *family* together—that possibility never existed. But that's what a child deserves. If it's possible at least.

My heart aches knowing that now it's my choice. The knowledge that now it's a possibility, and that I may choose not to give it to my child, is almost unbearable.



## CHAPTER 32

### GRACE

**M**onday morning I walk into the office completely dragging. The lack of caffeine and insomnia, coupled with the fact that when I actually start to fall asleep all I do is stress over Cash's words, has made me a walking zombie. Something I cannot be today because I am meeting my next bachelorette at ten a.m.

The buzz from Jonathan and Cat's engagement party is making our phone ring nonstop. Everyone wants to meet the matchmaker who introduced the power couple. In all honesty, I kind of wish that I had spotted their chemistry and actually could take credit for their pairing, because it is epic.

Watching Jonathan toast Cat on Saturday evening, with stars in his damn eyes, had me dabbing at my own. Fortunately, Cash steered clear of me the rest of the night, and I was able to sneak out after dinner with Marion by my side, feigning exhaustion. Now I only wish I had actually gone home and slept, rather than rolling Cash's words over in my head. I should have napped yesterday rather than spending another day with Tessa traipsing through the city in search of baby items. I swear her guilt is going to give my baby a wardrobe until he or she turns eighteen.

Rachel smiles kindly when I walk in the door, and she holds out a tea. “It’s decaf, but it has natural vitamins in it that should help with your exhaustion.”

I smile and take it from her. “Bless you. Have I told you that you’re my favorite employee?”

She laughs. “I’m your only employee. Which we really should discuss seeing as how...” She stops and points to my stomach.

“Yes. You’re right. We should bring on a new receptionist so you can take on more of my duties.”

Rachel does a small, happy clap and calls after me as I continue to my office. “Oh, by the way, flowers were delivered. They’re on your desk.”

I spot the gorgeous white calla lilies with purple accents on them situated in a deep purple vase.

I’m not ready to deal with them, but curiosity gets the best of me.

***Gracie, I told you I was coming for you. Prepare to swoon. Have dinner with me tonight. I love you, Cash.***

My lip twitches and I curse at my traitorous body part.

*We aren’t supposed to be this easy.*

He can’t just say he’s ready and expect me to smile and fall for it. *I’m* not ready.

I turn the card upside down so that I can’t see his ridiculous words. I sip my tea and curse that it’s not coffee, then turn on my computer and scroll through emails.

My newest client’s name is Sarah. She’s thirty-three, an executive for a tech startup, and made her first million when she was twenty-one. I want to *be* her when I grow up, and I haven’t even met her yet. I’m giddy just thinking of all the men I want to introduce her to. Possibly even Hayden.

He deserves someone as fantastic as Sarah and no one is better than him. After all my back and forth with the man, he deserves someone wonderful. My mind returns to the night where we almost took things too far. When I asked him to touch me and then couldn't even handle his kiss. The moment his lips met mine, I felt the burn of tears. I tried to push through it though. A man like Hayden is everything I could ever hope for. But I couldn't do it. And he knew it without making me say it. Instead, he pulled me into his strong arms and cuddled me all night. And then he came back the next night and did it again.

I need to stop leading him on. It's not fair or practical. He may be willing to wait for me to move on from Cash, but I can't do that to him. Not with a baby involved.

And Sarah may really be good for him.

I'm ecstatic that she gets to be in the driver's seat and choose from a list of eligible men once she's really gotten to know them. I google one of the men on my list and scroll through his information.

Five minutes later I turn over the card from Cash again.

***I love you.***

My eyes look everywhere in the room but at the card and then I look at the words again.

I love you.

Is he fucking insane? *I love you?* We haven't spoken in weeks, and the last time we did it wasn't pretty. He literally screwed me and then screwed me over. And now we're having a damn baby. After all that, he believes he can apologize and send me flowers that say I love you! He expects me to go to dinner with him? I can't even wrap my head around it.

I turn the card back over and return to my search.

I'm not sure how long I stare blankly at my screen, not paying attention to what I'm doing and instead rehashing every shit thing Cash has ever done, but by the time Rachel knocks on my door to tell me Sarah is here, I've come to a decision. I can't move past his words. Or his actions. It's really convenient that now that Cash knows the truth, he suddenly wants to win me back. But he didn't have faith in me before. He didn't believe in us enough to even talk to me before he tore me apart, piece by piece. I don't think I'll ever be able to get past that. And I don't think I should.

"Oh, Grace, I can't tell you how excited I am to meet you," Sarah says as she sits down in the velvet purple chair opposite my own. She's even prettier in person, and her curves are out of this world.

"Believe me, the pleasure is *all* mine. Your resume is incredible. I can't wait to introduce you to some of the men I have in mind. I actually have one man in mind who I have a feeling may be perfect for you."

She looks up at me shyly. "Does he like plus size girls?"

I have to school my face not to react. *Plus size—is that even a thing anymore?*

This woman is gorgeous. The fact that she's insecure about her curves makes me ragey. And yes, I know it could be because of my hormones. Or my anger in general toward the male gender right now. But who the fuck made her feel like her size makes her any less desirable?

I reach out my hand to her own and meet her gaze. "I assure you, this man, the one I have in mind, would worship your body. But I also promise you I won't bring anyone around that makes you feel anything but beautiful, because Sarah, you are gorgeous. Inside and out."

My heart cracks a little. I remember feeling insecure in my own skin when I'd first met Cash. Feeling less than whole because Steven didn't



desire me anymore. I realize now that his affair had nothing to do with my appearance, but sadly, and I'm not proud to say it, the reason I was able to gain much of my confidence back was because a certain man made me feel so desired. He never once looked at my stretch marks or my squishy parts with anything less than adoration. He never grimaced when he looked at my body. He helped heal a small part of me that doubted myself. I want to find someone who can help Sarah do that.

"I just...I know I can be a lot. I'm career driven, I enjoy work almost as much as I enjoy a pizza late at night, I like going out dancing, and I'm not sure if I'll ever really want to be the stay at home wife that so many men want."

I roll my eyes. "There is nothing wrong with being a stay at home wife, if that's what you want. But there is also nothing wrong with wanting to have a career. Don't shrink yourself to fit into someone else's box. Believe me, I did that in my first marriage, and it didn't work. In a true partnership you find someone who complements your lifestyle, not changes it. And lucky for you, it's my job to find you that special someone."

Sarah beams. "Well, I trust your judgment. And dare I say it seems you found someone who did just that for you as well." Her eyes dip to the flowers on my desk and I turn red. I don't dare tell her that I'm pregnant but alone. Not that it's shameful. But still, I would rather not get into that story.

"Something like that," I say with a wink.

During the rest of the appointment, I work hard to focus on anything but the note sitting in the flowers. Could Cash really love me the way that I deserve? I need to talk to someone, I just don't know who.

Marion will be understanding but I don't know if I want that. She'll give me those eyes that tell me that while she understands my dilemma, she

knows what's best. She believed Cash and I were meant to be together and, thus, we should be together. She's the damn fairy godmother of Boston after all. She won't ever say it, but I know it's what she thinks.

And Tessa is too damn guilty. Anything I say to her about Cash will result in more self-loathing. I just need someone I can talk through it all with, who can understand but who doesn't have this emotional tie to me.

Calling Hayden will only confuse me more. He's good and kind and it'd be easy to fall into his arms. Like Cash, I could see him actually stepping up to the plate and fathering a child that wasn't his, but that's not fair to him. Turning to him right now would be selfish, and I will never be accused of that again.

The answer hits me over the head as soon as Sarah leaves, and I dial the number quickly, shocked that I'm calling the one person who worked so hard to tear us apart.



“Don't go to dinner with him,” Cat says as she sits across from me at lunch.

Huh? I'm pretty sure only a week ago she was telling me how I needed to talk to Cash. How I had to be honest with him and now she doesn't want us to share a meal?

“We're going to be raising a child together, Cat. I think we need to discuss it.” I hit her with a stare, and she doesn't blink. The rock on her

finger is distracting, and I choose to focus on that rather than her calm exterior.

“He hurt you, Grace. Make him grovel a bit. Besides, I thought there was something between you and Hayden...you don’t need to go back to my brother just because you’re having his child.”

Color me gobsmacked. What in the hot hell is going on? I can’t even have a dirty martini to make this conversation more palpable. “Honestly, I thought we were good, Cat.”

Her face finally morphs into something less than cool and she frowns. “We are.”

Across the table she reaches and grabs my hand, her long fingers warming my cold hands. Ever since the doctor told me I’m pregnant, my limbs always feel cold. It’s like the baby is literally sucking all the energy and heat from my body.

“Then why are you trying to keep me from talking to your brother?”

Cat sighs. “I’m being serious when I say that I don’t like how he treated you. He’s been an asshole for the last few months. Ever since you guys broke up, he’s been not only mean, but cruel. Honestly, he needs to prove himself before you let him back into your life. He’s my brother and *I’ve* been keeping my distance.”

I bite my lip. I’d certainly witnessed his cruelty. “I can’t believe I’m actually saying this after everything he did, but don’t you think you should cut him some slack? I mean his entire life was torn to shreds...”

She interrupts me before I can continue. “*So was yours!* And last I checked you didn’t lash out at everyone who tried to help. You handled your situation with dignity. And Grace, I’m not sure if I’ve said it before,

but sincerely, I've been in awe of you. None of us made it easy on you. Me especially."

I laugh as a tear falls down my cheek. Damn hormones. "I've been lucky enough to have a core group of people supporting me. I don't think Cash has that," I say honestly. "He's always been the head of the family. He doesn't allow himself to lean on others..."

I seriously cannot believe I'm defending him. For the past few months, he's made my life hell, whether it was in lashing out or his silence, both were brutal. To love someone the way I loved him and have him rip me apart the way he did, I don't know if I'll ever get over it.

But I still empathize with him. I still *feel* for him.

Cat shakes her head. "Wow...Jay was right about you."

My brow quirks. "How so?"

She seems to be lost in thought. She takes a sip of her martini, apparently not having been taught that she shouldn't drink in front of a pregnant woman, and then she puts her drink down. "You are the best person I've ever met. Or at the very least, the best person for Cash."

I roll my eyes. "I'm sorry, I came so you would convince me to meet him, not the other way around."

She laughs. "What can I say? I love my brother, but he hasn't been Cash since you guys broke up. Maybe he doesn't deserve you, but if he's lucky enough to get another shot, maybe you're the only one who can bring my brother back to me. Maybe he'll actually return to the person I admired my whole life, my best friend, because that guy..." she sighs and closes her eyes. "That guy will be a wonderful father."

That's what I was afraid she was going to say. Because in the end, I'm not sure if I can take him back, but I also don't think I can be selfish enough

not to at least give my baby a chance to have that man be a part of his or her life. I want my child to have what I didn't. A mother and a father who love each other. Is it possible for us to have that?



## CHAPTER 33

### GRACE

In the end I can't get myself to respond to Cash. I'm not ready, and going into this before I have even opened up my heart to forgiving him doesn't make sense. I don't want to be angry, don't want to be bitter, and I really want to do the right thing, but I just don't know what that is yet.

Marion knocks on my door as I'm getting ready to leave, and we make our way out of the office. "Hey sweets, you want to grab dinner?"

"Another night? I'm honestly beat from this weekend. I just want to throw on pajamas, sink into the couch, and watch a movie."

Marion smiles. "Of course, or you could read one of my books," she sings with her brows raised.

I laugh. "I'm not in the right headspace for a romance right now, Mare, I just..." I look at the cars passing by trying to express how I feel. "I just need to laugh, I think. Remind myself of the good."

She nods. "Want a ride home?"

"No, I know it's cold out, but I'd prefer to walk." It's the second week of December. Decorations sprinkle the brownstones. Lights and wreaths

garnish every entryway and the smell of winter, the fresh, cool almost wet smell that indicates it may snow at any moment, revitalizes my lungs.

“Night, Sweets,” Marion says, walking to her car. I wave and start my short two block walk home.

Before I even make it a few steps, a car slows beside me and the window lowers. “Why are you walking by yourself in the dark?”

I throw my head back in aggravation. “I just wanted one night,” I say to the stars. “*One night!*”

Cash mumbles something, and the car stops. As he gets out, Frank lowers the front window and smiles at me apologetically.

I roll my eyes. I get that he’s his boss and his friend but after Frank picked me up off the floor of Cash’s apartment, I thought we bonded. In light of that, this feels particularly traitorous. I keep walking, ignoring my newfound company.

“Grace, please, let us at least give you a ride.”

Continuing my trek, I ignore him. “If I wanted a ride, I would have had Marion drive me. I want the cold air in my lungs—no, I take that back, *I need it.*”

Cash catches up with my stride. “Fine. Then I’m walking you home.”

I huff. I really don’t want him near me right now. I haven’t come to my decision, I haven’t had a moment to even really consider what I want, and the last thing I need is for Cash’s wants and needs to confuse me or worse, for his bourbon-colored eyes to suck me in and his whiskey scent to overcome my willpower, pushing me into his warm embrace.

I know it will only take a few seconds of being near him for me to lose all my senses, and I want to be smart about this. When I decide what I want

for our future, the baby's and mine, I want to do it with eyes wide open and only with my mind in control.

Not my traitorous, hussy body parts that always act of their own volition when in Cash's presence.

"How was your day?" he asks, clearly not getting the memo.

"It was fine."

"Great. Mine was good too. I had meetings with your best friend Hanson and his brothers, who I guess you are also pretty close with."

I shoot him a glare to stop him from talking.

He smirks. "What?"

I shake my head. Indulging this conversation is exactly what he wants. He's trying to get a rise out of me. I never should have admitted that I didn't love Hayden. At least before, he was more pensive...now he's just being cocky.

I focus on my breath which is coming out in gusts in front of my face and on my hands which feel like they're slowly getting harder to move as the cold settles against my skin. I can't believe I forgot gloves. These are things that as a mother I'm going to need to be more cognizant of.

There is a laundry list of things I need to remember on a daily basis once I have this baby, and I can't even remember a pair of gloves when it's twenty degrees out.

Out of the corner of my eye, I study Cash. Of course, he has gloves. He's prepared for everything, always has been. The man books a hotel room the night before he arrives on vacation, he has a driver following him as he walks, and a penthouse that can fit four of my townhouses in it. Not my actual floor, but the actual buildings.



I'm being selfish putting my wants over my baby's needs. This baby deserves a father. Not just a father with all those things, but a father like Cash, because Cat is right—when given the opportunity, he will be the best.

I slow my steps, not yet ready to share these thoughts with him, but more open to it. Stubborn ass that he is couldn't just give me the night to realize it on my own; he had to thrust himself in my direction. Like the beginning of our relationship, I feel my wiseass appearing and know it's only a few seconds before she attacks.

“This weekend,” I say as we arrive at my building.

Cash gives me a puzzled look. “What about this weekend?”

I escape to the darkness behind my lids and breathe before raising my eyes to his, knowing that looking at him will be hard. His eyes always had the ability to undo me. Stealing one more second, I open them but keep my view on the car which has followed us the entire way. Fortunately, Frank has raised the window, so he doesn't have to witness this awkward interaction.

“We can do dinner this weekend,” I say, finally raising my eyes to his. The whiskey pools of hope puddle and warm right before my eyes. It's too early to feel actual movement, but I swear my kid kicks me in the stomach. Even this baby has a visceral reaction to Cash.

He sighs as if he's been holding his breath since he last saw me. In all honesty, I may have been too. Then his lips turn up in a small smile, as if he's too nervous to let his face curve appropriately for fear that I'll steal the happiness back as soon as he relaxes. “Name the time and I'm yours,” he says earnestly.

I stifle back a laugh. In this moment he is so much the Whiskey I had met many months ago, the puppy dog willing to please. “I’ll text you,” I say, turning to walk up the steps.

Cash reaches out and grabs my elbow before I can move past him. When I grimace at his touch, his jaw clenches in frustration. In that moment, I see the other Whiskey, the one that possessed my body, controlled my thoughts, and made me ache so deep within my bones that I feared I would need a cast to heal.

Turns out all of those fears had been valid. Cash burned me and healed me in the same moment. He stole my heart and gave me everything in return. Only to crush it below his feet when he walked away without a backwards glance.

“I’ll be counting the seconds,” he says, blowing out a breath against my ear. I stand stuck, unable to move from his touch. His warm breath against my ear is like a drug. It entices me and sends prickles down my spine, making me want to forget the last three months. But the baby inside of me won’t let me do that. I can’t give in to passion; I *have* to do this right. So, I close my eyes, inhale one last shot of my favorite drink, and walk away.



## CHAPTER 34

### GRACE

Tuesday is completely filled with meetings. I've got several men lined up that I'm interviewing as potential dates for my bachelorettes. I love the change in my business. I love that these men are vying for a chance with a successful, independent woman. None of these men *need* me to find them a date. They are all extremely good-looking, wealthy, and charismatic. They could easily have a woman on their arm or in their bed by simply batting their eye lashes or holding out their black Amex cards. But because of the James-Hanson match, everyone wants to see who I will set them up with. Who will be the next Cat and Jay. They have really taken the media by storm, and my reputation has come along for the ride.

I'm just finishing up with a client phone call when Rachel knocks on my door. "Hey, are you all done?" she asks as she peeks in.

I nod as I hang up. "Yeah, you want to grab lunch?"

"Oh sure, but that's not why I knocked."

I motion to the chair, letting her know I'm all ears. She places a package on my desk. It's black and shiny with a red bow wrapped around it. I glance at it and then back up at her. "What's this?"

Christmas is around the corner, but I don't have a gift for Rachel yet.

"Oh, it isn't from me. It was just hand delivered." She points at the package and motions for me to open it. There is a card that matches the wrapping on top. I flip it open, and a stupid smile crosses my lips before I have the chance to clamp it down.

**Because I can't always be there to keep you warm. XOXO, Whiskey.**

I roll my eyes at my own excitement as I slip the bow off the top and open the box.

*Gloves.*

Purple leather gloves.

He noticed my lack of gloves last night and sent me some. *Of course he did.* I bite my lip.

"Gloves?" Rachel asks, eyeing me skeptically.

I purse my lips trying to temper my smile. "Yup. The man is persistent. Gotta give him that."

Rachel smiles. "That he is. Okay, where should we go for lunch?"



Wednesday a mug arrives that says, *You're Gorgeous.* With it is a variety of teas, a coffee-scented candle, and another card.

***My favorite moments with you were sharing a cup of coffee before heading to work. It was the best week of my life having you in my penthouse. I imagine you are missing your coffee almost as much as I miss you. Almost.***

*I love you,*

*Cash*

*P.S. Okay, the coffee thing is a bit of a stretch. I really loved our moments in the shower too. And my bed. And don't forget the bath. You can't tell me you don't miss that.*

I roll my eyes and try to hide my smile, and then I throw my head back in laughter when I see the other coffee mug in the bag, which says, *I'm sorry, did I roll my eyes out loud?*



Thursday, I walk into my office to find a breakfast sandwich, a cup of tea, and a smoothie on my desk. “Rachel,” I call out.

She walks in with a smile. “He dropped it off a few minutes ago. You just missed him.”

“Frank?” I ask, as I take out the sandwich and stare at the delicious concoction. Where the hell did he find a place that had Taylor ham? It’s a salty ham-like meat that is mostly found in Jersey. I’d told him about it when we were in the Keys. Growing up it was the one good memory I have with my mom. Taylor ham, egg, and cheese bagels on Saturday mornings. When she didn’t have a boyfriend staying over, that is.

I close my eyes and take a bite. It almost feels like I’m transported back in time. Strange how food can do that to you.

“No, Cash. He dropped it off and left a bag in your fridge as well.”

I narrow my eyes. “Cash came here, in the cold, to hand deliver me breakfast, and he didn’t stay?”

Rachel shrugs as if it’s no big deal, but she couldn’t possibly understand how wrong she is. The man is relentless and busy. If he was going to hand deliver me a sandwich, why wouldn’t he stay? He practically forces himself on me in his demanding, attention-seeking way.

*He’s giving you what you asked. Time and space. But also showing you that he’s thinking about you,* my traitorous mind whispers.

*Shut it,* I tell my tingling body parts as they get excited to see what else he’s left me. It’s been a few days of him wooing me. He doesn’t get a damn medal. Even if he’s been thoughtful and creative, no one said he wasn’t capable of those things. He’s just also capable of breaking my damn heart if I give him the opportunity again.

I take another bite of my sandwich before walking over to the fridge to see what else he’s left. There’s a note on top of a white box.

***The first time I saw you, I knew you were beautiful. But when we shared Key Lime pie and I heard you moan, I knew I was in trouble because I’d do anything to hear it again. I still would. I love you, Gracie.***

***Cash***

***P.S. I miss you.***



## CHAPTER 35

### CASH

**I**t was Monday when I asked her to dinner. Monday was the last time I saw her, touched her, spoke to her, and yet somehow, I had to get through an entire week of work, waiting and wondering when she would text, and hoping she wanted to see me Friday and not Saturday. I physically don't know if I can be patient enough to make it through another night and day without her.

I want to know how the baby is. How she is. Has she been to the doctor? When is she due? I want to feel the swell of her stomach again below the palm of my hand, I want to whisper to our baby how loved it is already, and I need to convince my child's mother that I'm all in.

But the time has also been a blessing because I'm not ready for her yet. I want to be. Actually, fuck that, what I really want, what I would do anything to have, is the ability to go back in time to the moment after Cat walked into my office and dropped the bombshell about Grace's interview with Vanessa and to react differently. To trust the woman I love. To gain just a moment of clarity before I threw literally everything that mattered away. Because if I could do that, then I wouldn't be sitting here at my desk

right now trying to figure out precisely how I can win back the only woman I've ever loved.

The woman who even when I thought I hated her, consumed my every thought.

Which is why I just spent the last hour with Lydia, opening up about my feelings for Grace, dealing with the revelation that she was much closer with my mother than even I thought, and discussing what it means now that I know Grace's baby is mine.

I also told her about my father's accusations. We'll be working through those for a long time.

If I can't get Grace back, if I don't wear her down, I'll likely end up just like my father. A fact that scares the shit out of me.

The funny thing is, I'd already done this. Months ago, I worked hard to win Grace over. To prove to her what we had was real. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was pretty fucking messy. We hurt each other quite a bit during the process, but in the end we were able to be honest with one another and we both admitted that what we had was real, that it was once in a lifetime, and we both fell in love.

That can't just go away. No matter how much I've fucked it up, even if Hayden is still in the picture...fuck, it's not ideal, but I'll be damned if he could love her as much as I do.

The thought that he could be raising my child with her—that she could choose to spend her life with someone else and I'll just have to sit on the sidelines and watch...

No, it can't happen. She's mine. And one way or another I'll prove that to her.



As I sit pondering where to take Grace to dinner if she ever actually calls, Frank walks in the door with a somber look on his face.

“Found him,” he says, throwing a stack of photos on my desk.

As much as I don’t want to deal with whatever drama Chase is involved in, I know I have no choice but to look down. I just don’t expect to see what I find.

“He’s with our father?” I say, the shock evident in my tone.

I can’t fathom why Chase would run to our father after learning the true story of his birth. What was he hoping to gain from spending time with him? The man is a pathological liar, a cheater, and apparently a pedophile. I can understand Chase seeking out his birth mom, but not our father. It makes no sense.

“Why?”

Frank shakes his head. “I haven’t figured that out yet, but at least we know where he is now.”

I grimace. “I don’t know, Frank, it’s like something is missing here. First, the story of his birth miraculously leaks but doesn’t actually come out. Then we are forced into merging with Hanson, which leaves all sorts of power up for grabs. Now Chase is with our dad. I mean, if I didn’t know better, I’d think they were all connected. That somehow Hanson put this all in place. It just...something doesn’t feel right.”

My skin crawls from all the deception, from all the games and lies that feel eerily strategic.

“What would Hanson gain from your father coming back into the picture?” Frank asks honestly.

I shake my head and growl in frustration, pulling at the hair on my head. “I don’t know. But I’m telling you, all of this was put into motion when we

started going after the same deal. The same *girl*.”

My eyes narrow as I meet Frank’s eyes.

“Right, but now Grace is with his brother, not Jonathan. So that backfired.”

I ground my teeth. “Grace isn’t *with* Hayden. She didn’t arrive with him at the engagement party, and she didn’t leave with him.”

Frank scoffs. “Well, she’s certainly not with you.”

“If she were with Hayden, she wouldn’t have agreed to dinner with me.”

Frank smirks. “Has she texted you yet?”

I grind my teeth and look away.

“That’s what I thought.” He sighs. “Anyway, my point is, we have no reason to believe Hanson is behind this. If Grace was who he was after, he could have had her. There was no reason to include marrying your sister in the deal.”

I stare at him for a moment, trying to figure out how the pieces fit together. “Right, which is why I think it has more to do with the company. I don’t know what the plan is, or his end game, but I’m telling you, somehow Hanson is behind all this. And it was one thing when it was just the company, but now he’s fucking with my family.”

Frank shakes his head. “Cat seems happy. And we have no proof Hanson is behind any of this. I think you should focus on winning Grace back and reaching out to Chase. Going after Hanson or your father is only going to push Grace and Chase away. I’m telling you, let this go.”

I shake my head. “No. Keep an eye out on what’s going on with Chase. I want to know what my father is up to. Maybe we can get someone to follow him too?”

Frank nods. “I’ll handle it.”

I sigh. “Thanks.”

Frank stands up, but before he walks out, he taps on my desk, grabbing my attention. “I’ll handle your father and Chase; you focus on Grace. Eye on the prize, Bossman.”

I lean back in my chair and laugh. Just the thought of hearing her call me that again relaxes me. “I’m not going to take my eyes off her, don’t you worry.”



## CHAPTER 36

### GRACE

I can't get my head on straight. No matter how hard I try, I can't convince myself to text Cash.

No gift arrived this morning, not that I expected it. I haven't reached out to say thank you all week. It's rude that I haven't said thank you—I admit that—but it's Friday, and even though I was supposed to text him, the idea of spending the evening with him terrifies me.

When the phone rings and I hear Hayden on the other side of the receiver, I feel my entire body exhale.

“Hey love, how are you feeling?”

I smile into the phone and look down at my small bump. While I complain about my growing hips, the bump is still only noticeable if you know I'm pregnant. Today, in a loose-fitting sweater dress, the bump is well hidden.

“I'm doing okay, how about you? You leave for London this weekend, right?”

Hayden sighs into the phone. “Yes, I'll be gone through the New Year. The offer still stands for you to join us.”

The Hanson brothers are going home to London for the holidays. Well, everyone but Jay. He and Cat are going to wait until after Christmas because she doesn't want to miss the holiday with her grandparents. Her grandfather is still weak and no one knows when or if he will recover completely.

"I appreciate that, Haydes, but I don't think it's good to travel while pregnant."

He laughs into the phone. "I can have a doctor on the flight and at your beck and call for the entire trip if you say yes. But we both know that isn't the reason..."

I sigh because he's right. Marion and Asher are going to Paris for Christmas. It was planned when I was still with Cash and she didn't envision me being alone, let alone pregnant, for Christmas. Even though it's a second honeymoon for them, she invited me along.

"You're right. With business taking off as it is, and holidays being a time to fall in love and all," I say with a laugh, "I don't think it would be a good time for me to go on vacation."

Hayden grumbles, "That's not the reason either, Grace."

"If you're suggesting that I'm staying because of Cash, you couldn't be more wrong."

As it is, I'm dreading dinner this weekend. So much so that it's already five p.m. and I still haven't called him. I can't say I even feel bad about it. After Cash made me suffer for months, he can stew a bit longer.

Hayden's voice softens. "Have you spoken to him yet?"

Tears prick at my eyes. I have no idea why. Why does Hayden's soft voice make me cry? Maybe it's what he's referring to that's really my undoing. The reminder that I need to talk to Cash. Or maybe it's the fear

that once I give Cash an inch, he won't give me the space I need. He'll just take what he wants, and I won't be able to stop him because deep down I'm still a sucker for all things Cash related. Even when I'm angry.

I stagger a breath. "He sent flowers on Monday, requested dinner, and then showed up at my office to walk me home. And he's sent gifts every day this week. Well, every day but today." I roll my eyes. "I'm supposed to text him, but I haven't yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Can we go out? I'm not ready to deal with Cash yet, and I have something to give you before you leave for Christmas." Just saying that I'm going to delay dinner with Cash relieves my nerves. I'll see Cash tomorrow. Tonight, I just need my friend and I need more time.

I can hear his smile as he replies, "I'll come by and pick you up in twenty?"

"Perfect. Thank you, Hayden, I really need this."

Then he hits me with perfection which only leaves me questioning if Cash really is the one for me. "Anything for you, Grace. Always."



Hayden's broad frame makes me feel tiny, which is hard to come by ever since the proverbial stick turned pink. His five o'clock shadow has developed into a well-groomed beard, and his blonde hair is pulled back low on his head in a man bun. A man his size, with long hair and broad

shoulders, never interested me before. But on him, on the kind man who befriended me when I was at my worst, it's utterly gorgeous.

With his hand on my back, he steers us into the restaurant, and he doesn't remove it until we reach the table. "You look gorgeous, Grace," he says with a smile, his eyes not leaving mine.

I bite my lip in response. "You don't look too bad yourself, Hayden. I'm sure all the women in London are cheering waiting for Garreth and you to arrive."

He shakes his head and laughs. "Not interested."

"In gorgeous women throwing themselves at you? Seriously, why not?" I tease before reaching out to grab a piece of the delicious warm bread that is placed before us. There is an oil and parmesan mixture on the table with red pepper flakes in it, and I dip the bread before popping a bite in my mouth.

Hayden watches my every move with a smile on his face. "I'm not interested in a fling, Grace. I'm looking for the real thing."

Smiling, I sing, "Well, do I have the woman for you. Her name is Sarah, and she is my newest bachelorette. Thirty-three, a business executive, gorgeous and quite funny. I may have a crush on her myself," I say with a laugh.

Hayden meets my eyes and holds them for a beat before responding, as if he's gauging something before he speaks. "Are you getting back together with Cash?"

I almost choke on my bread. "God, Hayden," I say, taking a sip of water while he stares at me with concerned eyes. "Warn a girl before you jump right into the hard stuff."

His eyes dance as he waits for me to respond. I sigh. "I don't know. Honestly, I really don't know. I mean I'm having his baby. That much I

know.”

Hayden reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it. “Just because you’re pregnant with his child does not mean you have to take him back.”

I don’t know why every time this man talks today, I cry. The tears well below my lids and I bite my lip trying to control my emotions. “I didn’t have a father, Hayden. I never knew him, and every man my mom brought around never wanted anything to do with me. I was always…” I pause because I hate even saying it despite the fact that it’s true. “I was always a burden. I moved in with Marion in middle school because my mother felt I was cramping her style, and I never went back. I mean there were months where I didn’t even *see* my own mother… I don’t want that for my child.”

In one quick movement Hayden is by my side, kneeling and cradling my face as he looks up at me. “Grace, you will never have that for your child because you are not your mother. You deserve the world, and I for one would feel honored to give it to you.”

My breath is caught in my throat as I stare down at him. What is he doing? People glance in our direction as I make a scene with my tears. “Hayden, stand up,” I whisper shout, already feeling the camera lenses focused in our direction.

He laughs and rolls his eyes. “Stop worrying about the rest of the world, Grace. What do you want? Really think about that, and then know that if there’s even a chance that it’s me, I’ll happily drop down on this knee again.”

I pull him up by his shirt and push him toward his chair. “Will you stop it! You’re so smooth these lines just come rolling off your tongue.” I tsk at him and he just shakes his head.



“It’s not a line, Grace. I’m serious. Cash isn’t your only option. If there’s a ring, consider my hat tossed in.”

My stomach clenches. This was not how the night was supposed to go. I need Hayden as my friend, and he’s respected that for the last few months. Sure, he’s flirted and made it clear he’s interested in more, but once we found out I was pregnant, I figured that would end. Is he nuts?

“Hayden,” I say his name as if it’s a sentence and he lifts his eyes to mine, holding his breath. “You have literally become one of my closest friends. I don’t want to lose that.”

He shakes his head. “And you never will. Grace, I kept my hands to myself and my lips sealed because I knew you were wearing a bruised heart. I thought I had time to tell you how I felt, but then you found out you were pregnant, and my feelings didn’t change. I don’t care that this baby is Cash’s. And honestly, if he makes you happy, then I will stand back and remain your friend, but if he doesn’t, if you are only going back to him because you think you don’t have other options, I want you to know...you have me. As a friend or as more, if that’s something that interests you.”

He’s so confident as he speaks, so strong in his conviction, and his words are filled with nothing but sincere love. I don’t have any illusions that he’s *in* love with me. We’ve never really kissed. Hell, I’m not sure there is actually chemistry here, not that I’ve ever given it a chance. But I know in my heart that Hayden is a good man, and he loves me as a friend, and if given the opportunity we could likely have a good life together. But is that enough? After experiencing the intoxicating love of Cash, could anything short of that ever be enough? And is it even possible to get that back with Cash?

Without answers to any of these questions, I simply nod my head and thank Hayden for his kind words. “I don’t have an answer for you tonight, Hayden. Just give me some time to think?” I offer, scared to pull the trigger on any decision at this point.

Hayden reaches across the table and squeezes my hand again. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Except to London,” I tease.

He smiles. “Yes, except to London. But the offer remains—if you change your mind I’ll fly back and pick you up, doctor in tow, and all the support you’ll ever need. If not, I’ll see you in the New Year.”

I bite the inside of my lip. It seems that I have all sorts of decisions to make and I’m running out of time to make them.

A clear glass filled with amber-colored liquid, likely whiskey, with ice cubes. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. The background is white.

## CHAPTER 37

### CASH

The phone never rang and a text never appeared. It's eleven p.m. on Friday, and I have to acknowledge that she isn't going to call. Frank appeared two hours ago and tried to get me to go to the club or even out for a late dinner, but I refused all his offers. So now we both sit staring at the television, me still in my suit pants but my tie off and the top shirt button undone, and Frank watching me like a hawk.

"You can go home now," I grumble. "I promise I won't do anything stupid."

"And what stupid thing would I be worried about you doing? I mean I was the one who tried to get you to go out." He smirks at me as if he has any idea what I consider stupid. I want him to leave so I can finally text her. I need to know why the hell she hasn't reached out. I need to know if she's done.

Standing, I look toward the door. "Right. Well, I'm tired so I definitely don't want to go out."

Frank sees right through me. "Exactly. And you're a fucking liar because what you want to do is go to Grace, and you can't do that. She asked for

time, Cash, and you have to give it to her.”

I don't even bother fighting this point. I know it's true and yet all I want to do is beg him to drive me over there. I want to camp outside her door until she lets me back into her life.

Frank's phone dings and he pulls it out of his pocket. He hisses when he looks at whatever he's been sent, and my hackles go up. “What is it? Is it Chase?”

Frank shakes his head. It's quick and deliberate but he doesn't *say* anything.

“It's Grace, isn't it?” I know in my gut it's about her. It's about her moving on.

He just stares at me, grinding his teeth and seemingly trying to buy time.

I feel the control seeping from my body. “You have three seconds to tell me whatever the fuck you saw before I storm out of here and go straight to her apartment.”

Frank rolls his neck and hands me the phone. I stare down at it and close my eyes before I take in the image before me. Hayden on his knees in a restaurant in front of Grace. It isn't an article. *Yet*. Just someone following Grace per Frank's instruction I'm guessing. I certainly didn't tell him to do it, although he did tell me not to take my eyes off her. I guess he fulfilled that promise.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Fuck!” It comes out as a scream the second time, and before I throw the phone, Frank grabs it from my hand.

“He didn't see a ring and there was no kiss, Cash. But I thought you should know. He's definitely *in* the picture.”

“You think I don't know that? She's been dating him for months. Of course, he's in the picture!” I snap, just the thought of Grace in bed with

Hayden making my stomach roll.

Frank blows out a breath. “What are you going to do?”

My shoulders slump and I sink into the couch as my head falls into my hands which rest on my knees.

“What can I do?” I ask through my fingers, barely meeting his eyes. “She hasn’t called. She chose to spend tonight with him...I think I lost her, Frank. I think this is it.”

I fall back against the couch, finding it impossible to believe that this is real. We were so close to having it all. So close to happiness.

I let out a frustrated growl and rub my forehead. “You can go. I swear I’m not leaving this place. I just need to shower and go to bed. I...” At a complete loss, I stop and stare at my best friend. “God, Frank, I think it’s over.”

The worst part is how he doesn’t argue. “I’ll sleep in the guest room. Go take a shower.”

I make quick work of taking my clothes off and stepping into the steaming shower. The problem is everything in this room reminds me of Grace. The shower was our place. The bath was our place. God, this entire room was our place.

I belong to her, and she belongs to me. Why doesn’t she realize that? How could I have broken us beyond repair?

The steam billows around me, and I feel the sobs begin to wrack my body. I can’t tell you the last time I cried. It was probably when I was a child. But I feel myself breaking down. Sobbing over the loss of the woman that I love, a girl who my mother loved and who is now the mother of my child. She’s going to make all the dreams I wanted come true...with someone else.



Snow blankets the city. The sun didn't come out this morning, the sky is completely grey, and the ground is completely white.

I stay in bed later than I ever do, avoiding Frank's commentary or concerned looks. When I finally look at the clock and see it's ten a.m., I know I can't avoid it any longer. I have to get up.

I grab the phone and see I have multiple text messages. Two from Cat asking about brunch tomorrow, one from Frank saying he's grabbing bagels, and one from Grace. My hand stills over her message, afraid to open it and also impatient not to.

**Morning, do you still want to grab dinner? I'm free tonight.**

I read the message over and over, wondering if she put as much thought into what to write as I'm putting into what she wrote.

*Do I still want to grab dinner?* Um, yes.

*She's free tonight.* Unlike last night.

I bite back the bitterness. She's reaching out. She owes me nothing and she's still reaching out. That has to be a good thing.

If she wanted to be with Hayden, she could just tell me she changed her mind. She's not obligated to tell me in person. If anything, most people would choose not to talk to the person who broke their heart if they were done. Which leaves me with only one interpretation...she's not done; there's still a chance. Whatever happened between her and Hayden last night is not a sure thing. I've still got a shot.

**Of course I am. I wasn't sure after I saw the pictures of last night.**

I immediately delete that message. She does not need to know someone was following her.

**Yes, I can't wait.**

That isn't right either.

**Cash: Of course, I've been looking forward to it all week. Prepare to smile.**

I hit send before I can overthink it any further. I have a few hours to get my head wrapped around how to handle tonight, and I don't want to waste another second sitting in bed.



## CHAPTER 38

### GRACE

**T**essa arrives with a handful of shopping bags and a smile. “Okay, I brought options and refreshments.”

I glance toward the bag with a critical eye. “You do realize I’m pregnant and can’t partake in tequila days to get ready for my date/non-date with my baby daddy?”

Tessa laughs as she bops my nose. “God, you’re cute.” She then barrels past me and starts emptying the contents of the grocery bag.

Ice cream shakes and to-go boxes litter the counter. God bless that woman.

“Are those burgers?” I ask as I make my way toward the delicious smelling food.

Tessa smiles. “Yup! Burgers, fries, and shakes at your service. If you can’t have tequila...” she drifts off, pointing toward the food.

I grab one of the shakes and take a greedy sip.

*Coffee ice cream.*

Oh my God, why hadn’t I thought of this before? Does this solve my conundrum of missing the taste of coffee but not having the actual caffeine?



I'm too afraid to ask if there is caffeine in this shake. I don't want to know the answer because I'm not putting it down. And God bless anyone who would try to take it right now, since I'd probably bite their hand off.

"Why are you so good to me?" I ask through sips as she brings my burger and fries to the table along with her own.

Tessa frowns. "I'm pretty sure I owe you more than burgers and fries, my girl."

I glare at her over a bite of fry.

*Why are salty fries and milkshakes the best damn thing to ever happen?  
Who needs ketchup?*

"You don't owe me anything. I've told you a bajillion times I don't blame you for what happened."

She shrugs. "Well, I blame me. And so does Carter." She looks down at her burger, and I realize she hasn't even taken a bite.

I begrudgingly put down my shake and fries and focus on my friend. "So, you've spoken to him?"

She nods. "A few times. I feel so damn bad about what happened, and even though he understands...he can't get past it."

I watch my friend who is always so cheerful and sarcastic morph into someone unrecognizable. A tear rolls down her cheek and she swipes at it quickly, as if she can somehow hide the emotions that are written all over her face. I reach out my hand to hers and squeeze. "Give him some time. He has a lot on his plate."

She nods and scrunches her nose. "That's just it. He needs someone serious, and we both know that's not me. I was a fling. A fun time. He's trying to find his *child*. He's a *dad*." She meets my eyes as if I can't possibly fathom the seriousness of this allegation.

My eyes immediately dip to my stomach, and she gulps down a nervous laugh. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” she adds quickly.

I smile and squeeze her hand again. “But it’s not what *you* want.”

She shakes her head sadly. “No. Not with him, at least. I mean maybe one day I’ll want kids and I know I’ll love the shit out of yours, but I’m not stepmom material right now. Hell, I clearly don’t know how to keep secrets, and I feel like that’s a prerequisite to being a mom.”

I roll my eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the freaking Easter bunny...moms have to keep all these magical secrets...it’s like in the rule book or something.”

A laugh rolls out of my throat, and I nearly start crying. “You are so absurd. You do realize that, right?”

She gives me one of her saucy smiles. There’s my bestie. With a loud sigh, she finally turns her eyes to her food.

“So, I have some news,” she says between bites.

I raise my eyes.

“I’m going to Tahoe.”

My eyes bulge. “What?”

She bites her lip. “Ryan called last night. His sister is getting married and he needs a date to the wedding. Apparently, the women in town have been trying to set him up with one disaster after another so he told them he has a girlfriend.” She shimmies her shoulders as if she’s a prize. “And you’re looking at her. But I won’t go if you need me,” she adds for good measure.

I shake my head. “It’s fine. *I’m fine*. I’m only a few months along. Nothing is going to happen while you’re gone. This is a good thing, T. You need a break.”

She sighs. “You don’t think I’m running away?”

“Maybe, but there are worse arms to run into.”

Tessa rolls her eyes. “We’re just friends. Knowing Ryan, he’ll probably have a revolving door of women while I’m there. He just doesn’t want to give any of them false hope that he can be anything more. Which is why I’m the perfect decoy.”

I shake my head. Ryan and Tessa have been best friends since middle school, but they’ve never dated. I always thought things would turn romantic between them but then he up and moved to Tahoe a decade ago and that ended that. I’m pretty sure they talk almost daily, but she’s never gone to visit him. “This is a big deal, T.”

She lets out a shaky breath. “It’s not. I just need a change of scenery, and since I have some time off that I need to use before the end of the year...” She drifts off.

We both know this is a big deal. She’s going to spend Christmas with *the* guy. Even if she doesn’t know it yet, I do. I have a feeling that this will be life changing for her, but since I don’t want to scare her into backing out, I don’t fight her on this. Let her live in denial for a little longer.

“Whatever you say. So when will you be back?”

She gnaws on her finger. “After New Year’s. Ryan convinced me to stay after the wedding because he says there is some big party he doesn’t want me to miss.”

I bite back a smile. “Sounds like a perfect break.”

“Are you spending the holidays with Marion?” Tessa asks.

I almost consider lying because I know when she finds out that I’ll be alone for Christmas she’ll try to cancel her plans. But I also know she’ll kill me when she finds out I lied, so I just tell her the truth. “No, she and Asher are going to Paris for their second honeymoon,” I say dreamily.

Tessa smiles but then her face falls. “Well, then who are you spending Christmas with?”

“In case you forgot, I just took over running my own business. Holidays are one of the busiest times for dating. Besides, the baby and I will be happy to curl up with a good romance novel, a cup of tea, and watch the snow fall out the window.” The picture I paint in my head is pretty freaking tempting to be honest. I’m not upset at all if that’s how it all pans out.

She looks at me thoughtfully. “Or you could be spending it with the hot half-Brit that is obsessed with you.” She wiggles her brow and I drop my fry.

“Hayden is not obsessed with me.”

She gives me a knowing glance. “Hmm, interesting that you knew precisely who I was referring to.”

I laugh. “Because I don’t spend any time with Garreth, so clearly you were talking about Hayden. And we’re just friends. I have enough on my plate.” I look down at my actual plate and laugh. It’s almost empty. Okay, so it was a bad euphemism.

“Or maybe you’re just sticking around because you want to hang out with a young billionaire without any of us watching.”

I roll my eyes. For God’s sake. “Tessa, he’s not some young billionaire. He’s the father of this baby. And I do have to spend time with him. I owe it to the peanut to find out if we have a shot of being an actual family.”

“And you love him,” she spits out.

Before I can think, I agree, “Yes, and I love him.”

Both our eyes grow wide when I realize what I said. “*Fuck.*”

She pats my hand. “Yes, you really are fucked.”

I blow out a long breath. “I really hope he doesn’t make me regret this.”



In the end, I try on five outfits that Tessa bought and decide to go with a black sweater dress and thigh-high black boots. The dress hangs loosely so my bump is not pronounced which I prefer. It puts less emphasis on the pregnancy.

For tonight at least I need to see if Cash and I can get back to even being in the same space without fighting. Or without me breaking down and sobbing. Unfortunately, that is all that happens every time I see him.

I add red lipstick and mascara and appraise the result in the mirror. “You look edible,” Tessa says from behind me.

I laugh at her inappropriateness. “You are ridiculous.”

“Eee!” she screams while clapping her hands and looking out the window. “The car is here!”

Nerves dance in my belly, or maybe it’s the baby, who knows. I do a little shake of both my hips and my fingers. Jazz hands but down low. Then I gather my purse, my jacket, and keys.

“Now just remember, G, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Tessa sings as I walk to the door.

I turn around and pin her with a stare. “That doesn’t restrain me at all.”

She shrugs. “What can I say, the only one who should be restraining you is Cash! Ha, that’s what she said.”

Oh my God, she’s juvenile. I shake my head as a giggle escapes, and she raises her brows in apparent satisfaction.

I open the door with a smile on my face and take in the man before me. He's standing with a bouquet of gorgeous flowers, reds and golds tied tightly with twine. His brown eyes dance as they peruse my outfit, seemingly appreciating the small skin that peeks out between my boots and my dress. Then they snap back up, and Cash gives me one of his devastating smiles. "Gracie, you look absolutely beautiful."

I close my eyes at his words, savoring this moment. How is it just the sight of him makes me literally weak in the knees? I inhale his oaky scent when he leans in to hand me the flowers and kisses my cheek.

"You don't look so bad yourself," I reply into his ear. He turns and stares at me, his eyes heating at my words. "Let me just put these in some water and we can go."

As I go to turn around, Tessa grabs the flowers. "I've got them. You kids have fun!"

She practically shoves us out the door, and Cash gives me a knowing smile. He clearly knew I was trying to get away from him for a second. He's very aware of the power he has over me. The way just his smile makes my insides melt, and forget his smell, I'm already clenching my legs together, taming my inner hussy. This is going to be one interesting night.

"So where are we going?" I ask, trying to make conversation since my nerves are shot.

Cash quirks a suspecting brow at me. He can read me like a book. "It's a surprise."

I huff out a breath in annoyance. "Cash, in case you haven't realized, I've had more than enough surprises this year to last me a lifetime...literally." I motion to my stomach.

Cash swallows.

Just the mention of my pregnancy and he's gone all cotton mouthed and quiet. It's easy to wax poetic when he was just finding out about the pregnancy, but unlike him, I don't get to live in fantasy land. This pregnancy is very real and a lifelong surprise.

Before my spiraling takes us down the wrong path, he grabs my hand and stops us from moving outside into the cold air. At first, I don't look at him, keeping my eyes down, afraid of the connection. Petrified of the control his eyes hold over me, the way he captures everything with just a look. But Cash doesn't accept only part of me; he always demanded all my attention and now is no different.

Thumbing my chin, he pulls my eyes up to his and holds my gaze for a moment. No words are spoken, just a quiet promise made as he leans his forehead against mine. "We're going for hibachi."

I don't know why I find it so funny, but the image it conjures and the surprise of his words makes me laugh.

"Hibachi?" I ask with a smile.

Cash's eyes light up at my laughter. "Yes, hibachi." He kisses my nose and pulls back. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's kind of perfect."

It isn't overly romantic. Hell, it doesn't seem like a place the paparazzi would frequent and with the entertainment of the chef, it will resolve some of the awkwardness of sitting at a table by ourselves.

Cash drops my chin and takes my hand in his, squeezing it three times before he starts walking again. "Great, let's go then."

Outside, the air smells like snow, and Frank stands by the car waiting to open the door for us.

“Isn’t that what he’s for?” I tease Frank, pointing at Cash. He smiles and opens his arms for me. I give him a big bear of a hug and he lifts me off my toes. “It’s good to see you,” I whisper.

“Jeez, he gets a better welcome than I did,” Cash whines.

Both Frank and I turn to glare at Cash, and he holds up his hands. “Okay, okay, I deserved that.”

Frank grumbles under his breath, “Yeah, you do.”

I slide into the seat, and Cash takes hold of my hand again, placing it in his lap. I don’t want to fall back into his arms so easily. He should have to chase me a bit more, but it’s honestly so damn nice just having him close that I let go of my anxiety and focus on the drive.

The restaurant isn’t far, and I recognize it’s the same place I ran into Cash months earlier when he still thought I was married, and I thought he was an ass.

*Apparently, I wasn’t completely wrong.*

I roll my eyes at my inner commentary and try to get rid of the snark.

Cash’s hand grazes my lower back, the palm of his hand warming my entire body, as we move into the restaurant and I wait for the hostess to bring us to some private table, imagining that my billionaire baby daddy isn’t going to sit with a group of people.

Instead, she leads us to a table filled with families. On our side alone there are five kids who seem to be approximately five or six and two women sitting at the end. They give us an apologetic gaze and one of them mouths, “It’s my son’s birthday.”

I smile warmly, hoping that I exude the type of air that says we are just fine with sharing a table with a bunch of children. Cash sits me on the end,



leaving him sandwiched between me and a precocious little boy who is sticking his chopsticks into his nose and pretending to be a walrus.

“Is she your wife?” the little boy asks Cash.

I stifle a giggle and Cash eyes me before turning to the boy. “No, but she’s my friend.”

For some reason his reply leaves me sad. *Are we even friends?* I can’t be sure.

The little boy nods, pointing to the girl beside him. “Yeah, Sadie is my friend too. And that woman over there, she’s my mom. If you’re single maybe you could ask her out.”

The woman’s eyes grow wide, and I cover my mouth to hide the giggle that almost escapes. “Timothy, we don’t ask people if they’re single,” she admonishes him, “and we don’t ask people to ask Mommy out.”

Cash doesn’t miss a beat. “That’s okay, Timothy. It’s always good to ask for what you want. Important life lesson.” He winks at the mother, who turns several shades of red.

Both women eye Cash. With his dark hair imperfectly styled on his head, his whiskey-brown eyes that have just a hint of mischief in them when he speaks to Timothy, and a green sweater that makes his olive skin tone shine, he is delicious. Or as Rachel would say, man candy.

Looking back in my direction, Cash teases, “What are you having to drink, *friend?*”

I lean into the teasing lilt in his voice and relax. We could be friends. Maybe that’s all we’ll ever be.

And that’s not the worst thing. He’s the father of my child. It’s good to be friends. Maybe we’ll co-parent and keep things civil and attend birthday

parties like this, and just...move on. I mean that wouldn't be horrible, right?

As if he can read my thoughts, Cash moves his hand to my knee and squeezes, his fingers remaining on the inside of my thigh and sending very unfriendly thoughts my way. "Uh, just an iced tea, decaf," I stutter to the waitress who is standing beside me.

"Make that two," Cash says.

"You can have a drink, Cash. Just because I'm..."—I pause uncomfortably—"doesn't mean you can't drink."

He smiles and reaches out his hand to mine, squeezing three times. "Pregnant, Gracie. You don't have to dance around the issue. You're pregnant, and if you can't drink then neither will I."

Color me shocked. The CEO of a liquor company giving up alcohol. Yeah, that won't last. But I shrug as if it's no big deal.

We place our orders and wait for the show to begin. "So, what made you choose this place?" I ask, unsure of what else to talk about.

When I envisioned this night, I imagined we would have been at a private table where we could discuss everything. The baby, our relationship, the future. Lay it all out there. Really see where we stand. But this is definitely not the setting for that conversation.

Cash turns so his entire body faces mine, his legs caging me in. "You know how my grandparents raised me and my siblings," he says, and I nod for him to go on. "Well, we didn't have the typical birthdays with lots of kids and bouncy houses."

Cash's eyes turn to the group beside us. The kids are loud, the moms look worn out and they are sipping their wine exaggeratingly just to show how

worn out they are, but there is no bouncy house in sight. I smile to let Cash know I'm listening.

“Anyway, there were four of us, which is a lot to handle for parents, let alone older parents.”

I nod in understanding.

“But they wanted us to have special celebrations. They just couldn't bring a bunch of other kids along. So, every year we would go for hibachi. My grandfather would have sake squirted in his mouth, my grandmother would begrudgingly laugh at his antics, my brothers and I would fight over who could catch the zucchini slices that the chef tossed in our mouths, and at the end of the night we'd all share fried ice cream.” His eyes warm as he talks, as if he's going back in time and reliving his memories. His shoulders lift in a shrug. “It wasn't your typical birthday cake with candles, but it's what we did to celebrate.”

Softly, I reply, “It's your special place.”

He nods and I feel my throat tighten. *He brought me to his special place.*

“So why did you choose it, Cash?” I ask even though I'm not sure I'm prepared for the answer.

He squeezes my hand. “Because we have something to celebrate. A baby...*our baby.*” He looks down between us toward my hidden stomach, then clears his throat. “And hopefully a new start for us. I just wanted to commemorate it in the way that my family does. I know it's not fancy and maybe I should have taken you somewhere quieter so we could talk, but I just...”

I put my hand on his leg and squeeze it reassuringly. “It's perfect, Cash. Thank you for sharing that.”

I blow out a breath, and he chuckles nervously. “God, this is hard, isn’t it?” he asks.

“I think it will get easier. We’re just...reacclimating,” I offer.

“You really do look gorgeous, Angel,” he whispers as he lifts his hand and pushes a few strands of hair behind my ear. That simple touch sends a flurry of butterflies through my stomach and I press my eyes shut, memorizing how beautiful this moment is. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed you.”

I smile sadly because I have missed this man. But the one who destroyed me I didn’t waste any time missing. I hated him. I’m just trying to reconcile the two.

The chef arrives and starts his show. He throws zucchini and Cash and Timothy eye one another when they catch piece after piece in their mouths. I laugh the entire time, seeing a future that feels almost too good to be true.

We eat and we talk, and we ease back into just being in the same space together. At the end of the night when the hostess comes out with a gong and fried ice cream for the entire table with sparklers on top, my heart skips a beat. The moms look shocked and ask if this is a freebie, and Cash winks at the hostess. In that moment, I know he splurged and got ice cream for everyone.

He’s going to make a wonderful father.

He smiles wide as he waits for me to take a bite, and I may overcompensate on my moan in excitement. It is good, but not *that* good. But seeing Cash like this, like the man he was when I first met him, like the boy I know he had been with his siblings on his birthday, without a mother or father, but still just looking to make everyone happy, it makes me want to make him happy.

“Thank you for tonight,” I whisper as we reach the door of my apartment, and then I add, “And thank you for all the gifts this week. It was very sweet.”

Cash’s eyes catch mine and he holds my gaze. “Thank you, Gracie. I know I don’t deserve the second chance. God, I know I fucked up everything between us, but just being with you tonight, being close to you, being your *friend*—it’s everything.”

I try to breathe through his words, but the entire night is taking me by surprise. I want to kiss him. I want to lose myself in him. I want to forget the last few months ever happened, and I want to go home with him tonight. To our home. The place we became us. But it’s not that easy. Because everything did happen. And as much as I remember the man I met months ago, I also remember the man he became.

“Cash, I…” I falter for words as I stand at my door, wondering if I should invite him in.

Reaching out, he brushes the hair behind my ear before moving his hand behind my neck and pulling me close. With only a whisper between us, he breathes against my mouth, “Have dinner with me again this week?”

My eyes drop to his lips and then rise to his again.

*Kiss me*, I want to beg.

“Do you want to come in?” I hear myself ask.

Dammit, I didn’t even mean to say it, and my eyes register my nervousness.

Cash leans in and kisses my cheek. “No, Angel.”

My stomach twists at his rejection. Maybe he does just want to be friends. The yo-yoing jolts me in surprise.

“Not because I don’t want to. God, Grace, the things I want to do to you. The places I want to *taste* you, the way I want to make you moan in pleasure...” he groans. “It’s almost painful. But we’ve always been good at that—the pleasure.” He raises his eyes and I feel myself clench. “The next time I strip you down and worship your body, I want you to trust that I’ll never hurt you again. When I sink into you, I want to know that you’re mine and mine alone. So, no, I can’t come in tonight. I’m going to prove to you that I want more than your body.” He leans in and kisses me softly against the mouth, and I practically purr like a kitten, begging him to take me now that he’s just so much as told me the way he would touch me if he could.

I nod against his mouth, though, because all the things he’s said to me, I want them too. I want to be his. I know that now. This passion, this all-consuming feeling—he’s the only one that’s ever made me feel this way. I can’t live without it. But for the sake of this baby, I need to make sure we do this the right way.

“So dinner?” he asks again.

“Name the day.”

Cash laughs. “Is tomorrow too soon?”

I smile. “I think I can fit you into my schedule.”

He brushes his thumb against my lips, and I see the war in his eyes. I don’t know what the war is. I don’t know what he’s thinking, but I hate seeing it.

I lean into his touch and press my mouth against his, giving both of us a moment’s peace. His lips are soft, and I bite down on his bottom one right before I lose myself completely and stick my tongue in his mouth. He groans, and for a moment I’m in heaven.

“Just a taste,” I say, pulling away. Before I can get past his grip, he smiles at me and squeezes my hand again, three little pulses that I’m beginning to live for. I lean in once more to press a kiss against his jaw and then slip in the door and close it before I lose my nerve. I lean against the back of it, panting, and listen to him push back into the door as well. I imagine he’s just as breathless as I am. Just as confused. And just as in love. The feeling is still there.

A few minutes later, I hear him walk down the steps, and the engine of the car turns over as he drives away.



## CHAPTER 39

### CASH

**S**unday morning, I sigh out a long breath when Cat arrives to brunch by herself. I need my sister, my best friend—not Hanson’s fiancée, not Hanson, not even my brothers. I just need her.

“Hey Cash Money, how you doing?” she sings as she grabs me for a hug.

“Kit Cat,” I say into her hair, “I missed you.”

We haven’t had brunch together in months. Not since everything happened. I’d been too angry, too blind. I couldn’t see past my own pain to understand that I was pushing my sister away.

“I’m doing good,” I say, finally releasing her.

She looks up at me and I feel her eyes travel my face, as if she’s really trying to decide whether I’m telling the truth. I hope she sees the difference in me—that I’m no longer angry, that I’m no longer an asshole, that I’m fucking trying.

As if she can read my thoughts, she smiles. “You’ve seen Grace, haven’t you?”

I shake my head on a laugh. “Let’s grab some food and I’ll fill you in.”



After placing our orders and taking that first critical sip of coffee, Cat eyes me. “So, what’s really going on?”

I smile because for once I have reason to. “I had dinner with Grace last night.”

Cat screeches and claps her hands like a damn five-year-old girl. “Oh, where did you take her? What did she say? Are you back together? Am I in the wedding? Am I having a niece or nephew?”

Her happiness must be infectious, or maybe it’s the reminder that Grace and I are having a baby, because I can’t wipe the smile off my face. “Which question would you like me to answer, Kit Cat?” I tease.

“Sorry, I got ahead of myself. How did the date go?”

“It was good,” I reply honestly. I knew it the minute I brought her home last night that we were going to be okay. The way she looked at me, the way her eyes danced as I told her everything I wanted to do to her, *the way she kissed me*.

Like me, she knows this is it. We just need time. I need to prove to her that I’ll never turn on her again. I’ll prove to her that the only thing that matters to me is our family. The one we will become when our child is born.

“How are things with Hanson?” I ask, only because it feels like the right thing to do.

She smiles. “They’re good. I’m excited for the holidays and just spending time with family. He’ll be around for Christmas, you know?”

As if I need to be reminded.

“Whatever makes you happy, Kit Cat.”

A genuine smile spans her face. “I really am happy, Cash. Things are good. Business wise and personally. He’s different with me. I know it was a

rough start and certainly not what you wanted for me, but I promise, this is all good.”

I squeeze her hand. I still don’t like that he practically blackmailed her into an engagement, but I have to listen to my sister when she says she’s happy. It’s her life in the end. “I’m glad you’re happy, Cat. I really am.”

“So, back to you and Grace. What’s going on?”

I hum into my coffee cup. “I don’t know, honestly. I’m trying everything in my power to get her to trust me again. To prove to her that I’m not going to bail when things get hard.”

Cat raises her brow. “And how’s that going?”

I let out a laugh and push my hand over my face. “Okay, I guess. I mean she seemed to want to do more than talk last night,” I say dryly.

Cat rolls her eyes. “Ew, gross.”

This makes me laugh harder. “Yeah, how do you think I feel when Hanson is all over you?”

She smiles. “Touché. But seriously, Cash, you can’t screw this up.”

“I know. I’m really trying not to. It’s why I didn’t go into her apartment last night. Why I am *trying* to take things slow. I want this to work.”

She smiles wide. “I’m so proud of you. I know it wasn’t easy to get over everything, and I know I didn’t make it easy...”

I shoot her a glare and she holds up her hands. “Okay, I was actively trying to sabotage you. Which for the record, I’m very sorry about.”

“That’s putting it lightly. But yes, I know. And it’s honestly not your fault. I should have trusted Grace enough to ignore you. I should have at least given her the opportunity to explain. I was just so blinded by my fear of losing our family—the pressure to keep the company afloat and our family in one piece—I snapped.”

Cat nods and reaches across the table, grabbing my arm as she meets my eyes. “I know. I’m sorry we all put that pressure on you. I kind of think it all needed to blow up though for us to come out the other side. I mean, you were working yourself to death, the stress was eating you alive, and I don’t think that would have stopped if not for the drama with Vanessa.”

I wince at the mere mention of her name. That’s one thing I can thank Hanson for—he destroyed her career in one swift move. Forcing me to link her to the drama with that statement about Grace, back when I wanted nothing to do with her, meant no news station wanted to go near Vanessa with a ten-foot pole. They took the word of a scorned man over their own employee. I’d feel bad about it if she wasn’t such an awful human being who purposefully tried to destroy Grace and my family and almost cost me my relationship with the only woman I’ve ever loved.

“So Christmas,” Cat says, as if she’s winding me up for her big reveal. “I’m thinking we all spend it in Bristol. With Pa and Grandmother.”

“Of course. Sounds great.”

“And Jay...” she says quietly and then as if she’s throwing me a bone, “maybe Grace will want to join us?”

I see right through her ploy. “I think it’s a little soon, but if it feels right, I’ll ask her. I’m sure she has plans though.”

Cat hums. “Maybe. I guess we’ll see.” The food is delivered then, and we both focus on eating.

As we are finishing up, Cat’s phone rings and she eyes me before picking it up. “Hey Grace, how are you?”

My heart skips just knowing she’s on the other end of the phone. And then a warmth envelops me because Grace has become friends with my sister. My best friend and the woman I love...the woman I hope will

become my best friend, my everything. Her relationship with Cat was the one thing that was missing when Grace and I first got together. Everything feels like it's almost within reach, and I can practically taste happiness.

When Cat's demeanor changes, my pulse quickens. "Okay, I'll be right there...No, Grace, don't go on your own. I...No, Grace, you're bleeding. You need to wait for me."

Not waiting for Cat to say anything further, I throw money on the table, grab my sister by the hand, and drag her out of the restaurant before she has a chance to react. When Frank spots us, he must see from my clenched jaw that something is wrong, and he's out of the car directing us inside immediately.

I grab the phone out of Cat's hand and speak authoritatively, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. "Gracie, we are on our way; don't move a fucking muscle."

She hisses into the phone. "Fuck, Cash, I'm..." Her voice cracks and I feel my heart breaking.

*Please don't let her lose our baby. Please don't do this to her.*

"Grace, you're going to be okay, you hear me? Talk to me. Just keep talking to me until we get there."

I hear her snuffle into the phone. "Okay..."

"What are you wearing right now?"

I practically hit my head against the glass with the absurd question, but I can't put two thoughts together. I have no idea what to say to her.

An exasperated sigh comes from the other side of the phone. "Cash, I don't think now is the time."

I cut her off. "Humor me, okay?"

Frank eyes me in the rearview mirror, and I give him a look to floor it.

Grace sighs again. “Nothing very exciting. Black leggings and a T-shirt.”

I smile for a moment just listening to her voice. “What kind of T-shirt?”

She grumbles into the phone.

“What did you say there, Angel?”

I can practically hear her rolling her eyes. “Your Red Sox T-shirt,” she says, making my head grow five times in size.

I bite my lip. “Oh yeah? Didn’t realize you still had that. Do you wear it often?”

She sighs. “No, I didn’t want your smell to disappear.”

In that moment, I know it’s all going to be okay. Gracie is wearing my shirt. Even after all this time she’s holding on to hope. Not washing the shirt, not letting me go. I will do everything in my fucking power to make sure both she and my child are okay.

“Remind me to give you a pile of them later,” I say in a teasing tone.

She grumbles again into the phone.

“We’re pulling up now, Angel. Don’t come out yourself. I’m coming up for you.” Before Frank can stop the car, I’m bounding up the steps and running into her apartment building.

Grace stands at the door, her purse in hand, with tear-stained cheeks and tiredness in her eyes. “Oh, baby, come here.” I pull her into my arms and rock her against me as she sobs.

“I don’t want to lose this baby, Cash. I can’t lose...” She sobs and I feel my throat close.

Even though it’s not a promise I can make, I say it anyway. “You won’t. I got you. Come on, let’s get you to the hospital.”

Grace leans into me, and I open the door to the backseat. Cat has already moved up front, and Frank takes off once we’re both seated. Cat grabs hold

of Grace's leg as I pull her against my chest, rubbing her shoulder with my hand and willing everything to be okay.



Despite the fact that I growled and pulled at my hair, Cat went inside with Grace. “She just needs some privacy, Cash,” Frank says, trying to keep me calm.

“But I should be in there. That’s my fucking kid. I’m going out of my mind not knowing what’s going on.”

I didn’t want to pressure Grace, but when she looked at Cat and then back to me, I could see she wasn’t completely comfortable with me going with her, and I sent Cat inside saying I’d be right here if she wanted me.

It took everything in me to stay in the car with Frank.

It’s *still* taking everything in me to sit still.

We park the car and I go to get out, but Frank grabs my leg before I can. “You need to calm down. Don’t go in there if you are going to be demanding or bulldozing right now. It will only make it worse for Grace. Can you do that? If not, stay in this car until we hear from Cat.”

I turn around and glare at him. “I run a fortune 100 company. You think I can’t keep calm?”

“Not when it comes to Grace,” he says honestly. I lean back against the seat. I hate that he’s right.

I give myself a few minutes to get my shit together and look back at him. “Alright, I hear you. I’ll stay calm.”

Frank eyes me. “You sure?”

I nod. “Promise. She needs me to be calm and to give her space. This is happening to *her*. Not me. I need to prove to her that I can be the person she needs, not make her the person I need. I’ve got this.”

Frank smirks and I give him another look. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just...you’re growing up.”

I punch him in the arm. “Shut the fuck up.”

He laughs and my nerves relax slightly. “Thanks,” I mumble as we get out of the car.

Inside we find Cat sitting alone in the waiting area. “They took her back,” she explains.

I squeeze my fists together to keep myself from demanding a nurse let me through. “She didn’t want you to go with her?”

Cat shakes her head. “They don’t let non-family into examination rooms, Cash.”

*This wouldn’t be a problem if she was my wife like I want her to be.*

The thought doesn’t even scare me. I know I’m miles ahead of Grace when it comes to us. Hell, she just got divorced; who knows if she even wants to get remarried after everything she’s been through.

I have to take some responsibility for that. Not only did her husband turn on her, I did as well.

*Fuck.*

Cat stands and rubs my back. “I know, Cash...this whole thing is horrible.”

“I just want her to know I’m here if she wants me...and...that’s my baby back there, Cat. I need them to be okay.”

Cat rubs my back and gives a reassuring squeeze. “I’ll go find a nurse and see if they can check on Grace, see if she wants anyone with her, okay?”

I nod and she disappears.

It feels like hours pass before a nurse summons us. “Are you here with Grace Kensington?” she asks. Both Cat and I jump up while Frank stands a bit slower.

“Yes, how is she?” I ask as Cat grabs my hand, her fingers linking with my own and squeezing tightly.

We’re met with a smile. “She’s okay. The doctor finished her exam and she’s just getting dressed.”

I blow out a reserved breath. “What was wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Can’t share that, but she should be out soon.”

I would like to note that I should be up for a freaking Oscar. The way that I have outwardly maintained my cool, not reached across the desk and demanded they let me into Grace’s room, and gritted my teeth in an almost smile is impressive at this point.

That all goes out the window when Hanson runs into the emergency corridor demanding information on Grace. “Is she okay? What’s going on? Why are you all just standing here?”

Cat drops my hand and grabs her fiancé’s, attempting to calm him down. “She’s just finishing up. They said she’s okay.”

Hanson’s shoulders sag in relief. It is at that moment that I realize he’s not a threat. There is nothing wrong with more people caring about Grace. He cares about her and her well-being. Why should that make me angry? He’s clearly with my sister and considers Grace a friend.

*See, Oscar worthy performance. Even in my head I’m convincing.*



“Your brother gonna show up next?” I scoff.

*So much for that award.*

Hanson’s eyes crease as he looks at me, but Cat steers him away before he can reply. Probably a good thing to keep us separated. My nerves are about shot, and I have no idea why I’m asking about Hayden. He’s the last person I should be thinking about. But I can’t help but wonder if he still means something to Grace. If he’s still in the picture. If he is, why didn’t Grace call him? Why did she call Cat?

*And why didn’t she call me?*

Grace appears from the double doors, and I swear my breath stops. I hold it until she’s standing before me, eyes low and head hanging. “Thanks for waiting for me. Do you mind giving me a ride home?” she asks quietly.

I ball my fists trying to keep myself from shaking her.

*Talk to me. Tell me what the fuck is going on. Let me in!*

“Grace, what did the doctor say?” I ask, trying to maintain my calm.

Grace looks up, but her eyes remain unfocused. “Just some cramps and bleeding. Nothing abnormal. I’m going to monitor it and if it gets worse, I’ll call again. They said it could be completely normal and nothing seems out of the ordinary.” Her eyes water, and I want to take her into my arms and soothe her, but I’m afraid that’s not what she wants.

“Why are you crying, Angel?” I ask, brushing the tear from her face with my thumb.

Fuck keeping my hands to myself. I need to touch her. I want to scoop her up into my arms and cradle them both. I want to put them in a damn bubble and not let them out of my sight until Grace gives birth—hell, even that won’t be long enough. This feeling in my chest, the one that makes it hurt to even breathe, will probably only get worse when the kid is on the

outside. But my touch only makes her crumble, and I immediately regret my selfishness.

Through streams of tears, she speaks, "I'm just embarrassed." She blows out a breath and finally meets my gaze. "I'm fine and I made you all rush around and then waste your entire Sunday all because I was scared."

Unable to stop myself, I pull her against my chest as I rub circles on her back. "Gracie, we were scared too. No one wasted the day. We had you checked out and now we know you and our baby are okay..." I hesitate. "The baby's okay, right?"

She smiles and bobs her chin up and down. "Yes, the baby's heartrate sounded good, and all indications are everything is fine."

Breath whooshes from my chest, and I pull her back into my arms again. "Okay, then it wasn't a waste. You got to hear the heartbeat, you're okay, and we can take you home now."

"Mrs. Kensington, you left this in the room," the nurse calls as she walks toward us with her arms outstretched.

"God, if my head wasn't screwed on..." Grace says, the color coming back to her cheeks as she takes her bag.

The nurse laughs. "Yes, well, it's a lot being pregnant. But looks like you have a wonderful man to take care of you when you get home." She turns to me. "Make sure you don't let her lift a finger tonight. Feet up on the couch and monitor the bleeding. If it's any more than spotting, bring her right back."

Grace tenses below my arms and I nod at the nurse. "I'll take good care of her. Thank you."

When she smiles and walks off, I turn to Frank, telling him with my eyes to give us a minute. Then I look down at Grace. "They told you to monitor

everything?”

She lets out a tired sigh. “Yes, which I’m perfectly capable of doing. Like I told you, the doctor said everything is fine. I’ll just go home, read a book, and get some rest.”

“And what happens if you start bleeding again?”

“Then I’ll call an ambulance or Tessa.”

“Why didn’t you call Tessa earlier?”

Hanson interrupts, “Tessa’s in Tahoe; why would she call her?”

I shoot Grace a look, then turn back to Hanson and my sister. “Can you guys give us a minute?”

Hanson eyes Grace, and she nods.

“Grace, why are you hiding from me? I thought we had a good night last night.”

She lets out an exasperated breath. “I’m not helpless, Cash. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing just fine on my own the entire pregnancy.”

I feel the punch to the gut but don’t react. If she needs me to accept the hits, I’ll gladly do it.

“You have. But you don’t have to do that anymore. And it’s not just about you, Angel. You have a baby, and we need to make sure that you and our baby are okay. If you don’t want me to help, I’m sure we could call Hayden.”

Grace looks up at me wearing a cautious, questioning gaze. “You’d be okay if I called Hayden?”

No, I want to shout. But I don’t because that’s not what Grace needs from me. She needs me to be the bigger man, and I will do it because I’ll do anything for her.

“I’m okay with you doing anything that keeps you safe and makes you comfortable. If having Hayden come over and help is what you want, we can call him.”

Grace looks over to Hanson and then back to me again. “Hayden’s traveling.”

I lower my face so that we are forehead to forehead. “Grace, let me be there for you. I want to make sure you’re okay. It practically killed me seeing you in pain, worrying about you and our baby. I...*please*...just let me help.”

I’m out of sorts, not used to begging and putting my fate in someone else’s hands. But Grace holds all the control.

She runs her head back and forth against my own and then looks up at me. “Fine. If you don’t mind, I would welcome the company.”

My mouth practically splits open in a smile, and I run my hand against her cheek, cradling her face. “Thank you, Angel. I’ll take good care of you, I promise.”

She sighs. “I don’t have a guest bed...”

“Do you want to go to my place?” I watch as she twirls the thoughts around in her mind. I know the space is filled with some pretty bad memories. But I also know one thing that my apartment has that hers doesn’t. “A bath might feel good.”

She bites the side of her cheek and then nods. My entire body relaxes from that simple gesture. Just that acceptance by her, allowing me to take care of her, allowing me to be with her...it’s everything. “Okay, beautiful, let’s get you home.”

She settles against me and allows me to lead us out, and I can’t help but think that once I’ve got her back in my apartment, I’ll never let her go.



## CHAPTER 40

### GRACE

**G**lancing around my bedroom, I grab the book on my bedside table and toss it in the bag I've packed. I have no idea how I'm going to feel walking into Cash's apartment. I tried to get him to go there first saying I'd meet up with him in a bit, but he refused. Which just means that when I walk into the apartment, I'll be doing it with him by my side. Is it too much to ask that he look the other way or something when I enter? I'm terribly nervous that I'm going to be unable to even step off the elevator from PTSD.

Why did I have to call Cat today? If I'd had anyone else to call, I honestly would have. Especially if I'd known she was with Cash. But I should have known better. Of course, she would have told him even if he hadn't been with her. They are thick as thieves. Besides, I didn't have anyone else.

*Ugh, why did I go to the hospital?*

The bleeding started this morning, and although it was light it made me nervous. I'm not sure if the cramping was in my head because I was

bleeding, or if I was really doubled over in pain like I felt, but suddenly the anxiety over losing the baby became too much and I just lost it.

*I completely lost it.*

And now, because I overreacted, I have to go spend the night at Cash's.

Last night the idea of spending the night with Cash was sexy. Now he's looking at me like I could break, he's monitoring the way I step, and watching to see if I touch my stomach. I know he cares, but it's smothering.

If not for the fact that it's more than just me I have to consider, I'd tell Cash to mind his own business and stay by myself. But it's not just me. The doctor said I need to take it easy and monitor the symptoms. As much as I want to believe I can do everything on my own, there are certain times when I have to put aside my pride for the baby and accept help. I owe this baby everything my mother didn't give me. I have to put the baby first.

"You alright in here?" Cash asks, peeking into the room. He looks tired and worried which reminds me that he genuinely cares about me.

I put my hesitations aside and meet his gaze. "Yes. Let's go."

Cash goes to grab my bag from me and stops at the bedside table, picking up my glasses. "Don't you need these?"

I stare at them and then look back up at him. It's absurd that the sight of my glasses in his hands is going to make me cry, but here we are again, with tears filling my eye lids. "I don't wear them anymore."

Cash eyes me critically and it's like he immediately knows it's because of him. "I love you in glasses," he whispers.

I nod.

He stares at me for another moment and then he puts down the bag and reaches out to straighten my shoulders so I'm facing him. With slow

movements he opens the glasses and then looks up as he holds them to my face. “May I?”

It’s like I’m seeing him clearly for the first time in a long time. I nod as he slips them onto my face and then he cradles my chin. “Don’t ever change yourself for anyone, Angel. Least of all a bastard like me.”

I sigh, trying to accept his words, and mumble a simple, “Okay.”

As we walk to the car, I take a deep breath of fresh air, willing the smell of winter to infiltrate my lungs and not the scent of Cash. He’s like poison to my senses. The oaky spice takes me back to the early months, to falling in love, to being possessed.

Right now, I need all my senses to keep me strong, to keep me out of Cash’s bed and in my own.

I know Cash promised last night that he wouldn’t come near me until he proved he could be trusted, but I can’t promise I’ll do the same. I’m falling apart right now and would love nothing more than to be held by him all night. But once we cross that line it will be hard to redraw the boundaries.

“You hungry?” Cash asks.

“Starving, actually,” I answer honestly.

Cash smiles. “For anything in particular?”

“Pizza?” I ask, eyeing Cash pensively.

He breaks out in wide smile. “Whatever my girl wants, my girl gets. Hear that, Frank? Let’s stop for Luigi’s.”

Frank nods in the front seat and I bite back a smile. “You know it’s weird that you sit in the backseat when he drives, right?”

Cash laughs. “I pay him really well.”

“He’s your best friend,” I counter.

“You’re back here,” he says, pulling me close. “If you think I’d sit anywhere but next to you, you’re crazy.”

Frank grins in the rearview mirror. It’s comfortable having him here. He breaks up the awkwardness. Although, if I’m honest, it’s not exactly awkward right now. It’s nice having Cash’s arm around me. Having his warm breath tickling my skin, his fingers stroking my arm. It’s familiar, and it doesn’t feel the least bit awkward.

When we walk into Cash’s building with a piping hot pizza and Frank by our side, I am ecstatic to see Sal manning the front desk. “It’s Sunday, Sal. Does this guy ever give you a break?” I tease, thumbing back toward Cash.

Cash snakes his arm around my waist, and his lips brush against my neck. “So much sass tonight.”

I smile and push away from him, moving into Sal’s arms. He gives me a big hug. “I’ve missed you, Ms. Kensington. How have you been?”

I glare at him. “Stop with the Ms. Kensington. Gah, that’s my mother-in-law. *Mrs. Kensington*,” I say in a prim and proper voice, and then I remember that she’s no longer my mother-in-law, and I smile wider as a giggle sneaks out.

I think I might be delirious from the lack of food and the stressful day.

“What are you laughing at?” Cash says as we walk to the elevator.

“Just that I have the *best* gift for my ex-mother-in-law for Christmas,” I say with a grin.

Frank smirks. “I’ll bite. And what is it?”

“Her son back!” Frank lets out a loud laugh, and Cash eyes us both as the giggles take over. “Get it!” I shriek. “Because I gave him back!”

Cash rolls his eyes but smiles as Frank and I continue laughing. It isn’t until the doors open to the penthouse that silence returns. The laughter dies



on my lips, and I remember the last time I was in this elevator with Frank. When Jay carried me out of here, numb and in shock with tears coating my face. And then when I rode this elevator down, dazed and in shock after Cash told me I was nothing more than a good fuck.

Cash reaches over and squeezes my hand while Frank takes the pizza and walks into the penthouse. I don't get off though. I can't move. I'm stuck in place.

Cash reaches over and presses the emergency button, stopping the elevator and giving me a moment to breathe.

"I know this is a big deal. I wish it weren't, Grace. God, I wish so many things. But most of all, I wish that I'd never hurt you." He turns to face me, my hands held tightly within his own. "I promise you, you're safe here. Not just physically, but emotionally. Mentally. I...God, Grace, I love you so damn much I promise I'll prove it to you that you're safe with me."

I look into his eyes, the hope teasing me like a drink in the desert. I want it so bad I'd crawl to it. I want to believe everything he's saying. I know he believes it. I know he truly means what he says. But it's not that simple. He meant it when he said that months ago. When he told me he loved me. When he told me to trust in him. When he promised that loving him wasn't a risk...and then he broke me.

I close my eyes, trying to disengage from these emotions. Trying to forget the past—and maybe even forget the future and just live in the present.

When I open them again, he's still staring at me, but I've removed myself from the control of his gaze. I let go of his hands and step off the elevator, not giving any more power to the location or the memories than necessary.

“I got plates. Come get a slice before it gets cold,” Frank offers, breaking the proverbial ice.

I drop my bag on the floor next to the couch, nervous to claim anywhere else as my spot for the night, and move into the kitchen to eat. The smell of greasy, cheesy deliciousness wafts through the air, and I’d love to blame it on the baby, but it’s my stomach that grumbles and growls in hunger.

Frank smirks. “Baby’s hungry, huh?”

I smile. “You’re a smart man, Frankie baby.”

With a wink, he hands me a slice which I devour without looking up. I’m on my second slice by the time Cash finally comes into the kitchen. He settles onto a stool and watches Frank and me, but he doesn’t join in on the conversation.

“Any new ladies, Frank?”

He shrugs. “No one worth talking about.”

“You know, I am now representing all these awesome, career-driven women. Might be right up your alley.”

Frank stares at me. “You think one of your hoity toity bachelorettes wants to date a chauffeur?”

This time both Cash and I scoff. “You’re not a chauffeur!” I reply with indignation. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but what Frank provides is so much more than that.

Cash looks equally annoyed. “Don’t fucking talk like that or I actually will fire you.”

Frank laughs. “Oh, way to make a guy feel better.” He takes another bite of his pizza.

“You know what I mean,” Cash grumbles.

Frank quirks his brow. Honestly, if he doesn't see how good-looking he is, or how many women would fall on themselves to be around someone who is so protective, quiet, and thoughtful, then he's crazy. Those are attributes anyone would be lucky to find in a prospective partner. When I'm not so tired, I'm sure the matchmaking will start in my head.

I look at the clock and see it's already almost ten p.m. "I think I'm going to head to bed. Where do you want me?" I ask without looking at Cash directly.

His gaze burns my skin. "Go to the master."

Turning with my hand on my hip, I shake my head. "Cash, no. We aren't..."

He cuts me off. "I started a bath. It's all set up. Go relax. I have my stuff already. I'll stay in one of the other rooms."

I try to object. "Cash, I'm not kicking you out of your room."

Cash smiles. "You're correct. I am willingly leaving it for you." He stands up and rounds the island, moving into my space, until I can't do anything but breathe him in and submit to his every command. "Angel, there is no way you are sleeping anywhere but my bed."

I sigh and grumble an acceptance of his demand. "Fine, I guess it's only one night."

He puts his hands over my lips, silencing me. "No. You're not spending another night in any bed but mine."

I eye him gingerly. "So sure of yourself and so bossy, Bossman."

As if he has been waiting for the nickname, Cash raises his eyes in challenge. "When it comes to taking care of you, yes I am. When it comes to you in my bed..." He raises his eyes in promise, "Yes, *I am.*"

Involuntarily, I bite my lip and clench between my legs. While I'm no longer hungry for food, I'm starving. And I have a feeling it will only get worse when I'm sleeping in his bed. Even if he's not there, even after the day I had—hell, even after the last few months.

Being in his bed, surrounded by him, leaves me feeling only one way, and it sure as hell ain't ready for sleep.

Cash tips his head toward the bedroom. "Go. Your bath is waiting."

I stare at him for another moment, searching his eyes, dipping my lids to his lips, then back to his eyes again. Cash watches my every movement with his lips parted and silent, as if he's afraid to breathe for fear I'll disappear in front of him. I lean up and brush a quick kiss against his cheek, right in the corner where his lip meets skin.

I'm teasing myself as much as I'm doing it to him. It's not intentional. I literally *can't help* myself.

I can't get out of my own head enough to just give in, but I also can't *not* touch him. I can't *not* bring my lips to his face. He's an addiction I can't kick.

"Night, Frank. Thanks for today. I really appreciate it."

He shrugs and offers me a wink. "Glad you're feeling better, Gracie."

Cash shoots him a glare at his nickname on someone else's lips. Both Frank and I share a smile.

"I'll check on you in a bit," Cash says below his breath, almost like he's nervous to offer.

"Sounds good, Whiskey," I reply, walking away from them both.

Making my way into Cash's bedroom, I prepare myself for the reality of the next few moments. For a time, it was our bedroom. A very brief time. Barely a blip in my life. What was it, two weeks? Is it possible that was all

we had? No. We had a lot longer than that but as for how long I actually *lived* here, it was probably even less than two weeks.

The smell of coconut and vanilla assaults me when I open the door. Cash clearly kept my favorite bath salts and soap. I drop my bag on the bed, ignoring the memories that conjures, and move straight into the bathroom.

“Oh, hello gorgeous,” I say to the tub. “God, I’ve missed you.”

Without hesitating, I strip out of my clothes and check my underwear.

*No blood, thank God.*

It really does feel like it was all a distant nightmare this morning when I first spotted blood.

I sink into the warm bath and turn on the jets so that I can really get the full benefit of this bathroom, and my mind quiets. For once in the last few months, life doesn’t hurt so much. I don’t feel like I need to put on armor to get through the hour. I’m just...*here*.

My hand moves to my stomach, and I rub it. “Okay, baby, you really do have a good daddy. I think it’s all going to be okay.” I close my eyes at this admission, almost sure that it’s true.

A few moments later I hear a knock on the bathroom door. “Come in,” I reply, ready to open up to Cash.

“Hey Angel, can I get you anything?” he asks, opening the door. I can’t see him because my back is to him, so I turn to the mirror to see if I can spot his face. His eyes are closed. It’s absolutely adorable that he’s trying to keep his word of being a gentleman.

A grin tugs at my lips. “Can you come in here? And don’t try walking with your eyes closed. I don’t feel like taking another trip to the emergency room tonight,” I tease.

Cash meets my eyes in the mirror and smirks, but he stays rooted in place. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay.” He starts to back out and I feel panic rising. I want him here, beside me, holding my hand. I need it more than I can explain.

“Please, Cash, I need you.” Desperation drips from my voice.

In two steps he’s beside the bath, staring down at me with an almost pained expression. “You know it’s impossible for me to say no to you.”

I twist my mouth and smile. “Good.” I tap the area beside the bath. “Now sit down and wash my hair, please?”

Cash’s entire face warms and his eyes sparkle like a glass of whiskey that’s been poured over ice. I want to drown in his stare. Get drunk in it and dance.

He rolls up his sleeves, sits down on the edge, and grabs the shampoo and conditioner that I noticed he’d already moved by the bath earlier. “Come here, beautiful.”

I maneuver myself so that my head is almost in his lap, and I allow Cash to lean me back, and with a cup he empties warm water over my head, making careful work not to get any of it on my face.

My eyes are closed but I can feel him moving closer to me, until the moment his lips are right next to my own, breathing the same air, humming with an electric energy that makes my entire body buzz. My breasts float on the edge of the water, and I feel my nipples harden as the cool air dances around me and the warm water laps against them.

“Oh Cash,” I moan, feeling everything so acutely.

Cash’s mouth hits mine and his tongue parts my lips. My hand moves around his neck, and I pull him closer to me, almost losing control and pulling him into the water. Cash pulls me up though, so that I’m sitting

upright and against his chest, practically panting with need. The pressure builds between my legs, and I'm positive I'm about to get him into this bath and between my legs when he pulls away.

He stares at me, breathing heavily. "I made a promise..." he says in a whisper.

"Fuck your promises..." I reply with a throaty laugh.

Cash licks his lips, and his eyes dip to mine again. "You're so gorgeous, Gracie. You're a dream come true right now in my bath, in my bedroom, *in my life.*" He swallows. "I don't want to screw it up."

I lean my head against his chest. He's sopping wet now from my body against his own, but he's still just sitting on the side of the tub. My completely gorgeous, hopelessly in love, disaster of a man. He's not perfect and neither am I, but in this moment, I truly believe we are perfect for one another.

"The only way you'll screw it up is if you stop kissing me," I say in defiance.

Cash glances down at my lips again, and it's like I can read his thoughts the moment that he says *fuck it* and grabs me, pulling my mouth to his own. I'm lost in the warmth of Cash, in his taste, the familiarity, the longing.

When the phone starts to ring, I ignore it. Nothing matters but the two of us right now. The moment we're sharing. The reconciliation, the reunion, the future I'm mapping out in my head. But the phone doesn't stop, and eventually Cash chooses not to ignore it anymore.

"It could be Tessa or Cat checking on you. Let me grab it, and then I promise I'll go back to what I was doing," he says with a wink as I groan in disapproval from the loss of his lips against mine.

Cash moves to the bedroom and grabs my phone, and I hear him mumble a few words. When he comes back his entire demeanor has changed. The lightness of a few seconds ago is gone, and the warmth has left his eyes completely.

“Who is it?” I ask, nervous for the answer.

“Hayden,” he replies, barely looking at me. “You should probably get out of the bath,” Cash says, grabbing me a robe and a towel which he leaves on the side of the tub before placing the phone on the counter and heading toward the door.

“Cash,” I say, trying to stop him as I stand up and wrap the towel around me.

He doesn’t even look up. Even with me naked, he doesn’t spare a glance. “I’ll see you in the morning, Grace. Sleep well. If you need anything, let me know.”

I take a few seconds to get my mind back on task, swirl my hair into a towel and wrap the robe around my body before I pick up the phone. “Hi, Hayden.”

“Grace, are you okay?”

I sigh. I was. I was more than okay for a few moments there. “Yes, the doctor said everything is fine.”

Hayden blows out a breath. “God, I was going out of my mind when I heard, but I was on the plane so I couldn’t get in touch. You’re staying at Cash’s?”

I move into the bedroom and stare at the space I had some of the best and most pleasurable moments of my life. It’s probably good that Cash left. If not, I don’t know if I would have been able to stop from coming into this bed with him. Not only would that not be good after the bleeding today, it



would have gone against Cash's plan which I'm starting to agree is necessary. If we keep the physical out of this, maybe we can see if this can really work. The sexual chemistry was never a problem for us. It's everything else that needs some attention.

I flop on the bed, ignoring the warmth that springs through my body when I lie on Cash's pillow. "Yes. The doctor didn't want me to be alone."

Hayden clears his throat. "Is that the only reason you're staying there?"

I frown. "Hayden, I know you put your heart out there the other night, but I'm in no place to think about anything with anyone."

"Can't help but feel like that's not exactly true. Where are you sleeping?"

"The master. But Cash is staying in a guest room. He just wanted me to be comfortable."

He chuckles. "Yeah, sure. Listen, I don't blame the guy for trying. I would do the same thing."

I wish he'd stop being so forward. He wasn't like this the last few months. Why is he suddenly changing our friendship?

"Hayden, seriously, we're friends and I'm pregnant with Cash's child. You have to know this is too complicated."

"See, that's where you're wrong. It's not too complicated for me. Unlike Cash, I won't leave you if things get hard. I'll communicate with you. If something happens, you can always rely on the fact that I'll be your friend and that will *always* come first."

I smile into the phone. "Then be my friend. It's what I need right now. You're a good man, Hayden. But my heart isn't open to anything more. I'm sorry if that isn't what you want to hear."

Hayden is silent for a moment. "I just want to take care of you, Grace."

“This is taking care of me,” I say softly. “I’m where I need to be right now. Go enjoy London with your family. I promise I’ll call.”

Hayden exhales and I almost feel it through the phone. He’s letting go of me. I really hope I didn’t just make a mistake.



## CHAPTER 41

### CASH

**I**t's wrong what I'm doing. Completely and utterly wrong. And yet I can't stop myself. The need to see her when she speaks to him overwhelms every promise I've made. The only one I'm keeping right now is that I'm not having a drink, despite the fact that the liquor sitting on my office bar is calling to me.

Grace is lying in my bed, wrapped in her robe, twirling a piece of hair between her hands as she speaks on the phone. *To him.*

*Fuck.*

We were moments away from so much more. Hell, we were in it. Why the hell did I stop us? Why did I pick up the phone?

I feel nauseous watching her smile as they talk. I shouldn't be watching her. I should turn off the video. It's not as if she doesn't know that I can see her. She knows I have access to every room from both my phone and my office.

But I was too much of a coward to watch her from my own apartment. Afraid to get caught. Afraid to stay in the same space as her. Even if there was ten thousand square feet to spread out in, it was too close.

Knowing she was talking to him, knowing they'd been intimate and that it was all my fault, guts me. If I had just listened, if I'd given her a second to talk rather than lashing out, Hayden wouldn't even be a thought. She'd be mine and we'd be fucking happy.

Grace hangs up the phone and throws it across the bed. I watch her turn her head, as if she's exasperated. I'm guessing Hayden isn't happy she's with me. I wouldn't be happy if he were with her either. I lean my head back in my chair. Will she go looking for me? Do I want her to?

I need to get my head locked up. I turn back to the screen and my jaw locks. *What the fuck is she doing?*

Grace opens her robe, and her hand snakes down her smooth skin, slowly but with purpose. It burns every ounce of willpower I have as I sit in my office and watch her do this to herself in *my* bed. Her other hand moves to her nipple, and she pinches it as she continues the assault between her legs. Slow circles just as I know she likes it. My mouth waters as she spreads her legs farther apart. I want my lips right there. I want my tongue where her fingers swirl.

Her mouth opens, and I know she's moaning. Her feet dig into the bed—*my bed*—and her hips buck against her hand. All restraint leaves my body and I hit the button to hear the sound. I'd felt wrong listening to her conversation with Hayden, but I feel nothing but turned on and in need of her moans now.

Her soft whimpers echo in my quiet office. My erection is steel in my pants. The fact that I've done nothing but watch up until this point should earn me some sort of medal. But when she cries out my name, my restraint snaps. "Oh, fuck, Cash...yes."

Then her eyes turn up and she gives me a wicked smile. She's looking directly into the camera. She winks and takes the hand that was on her nipple and sucks on it, staring at the camera for another second. "This is what I want Cash—you, only you," and she dips her finger back to her swollen flesh, riding it until she's crying out in ecstasy.

Watching her hips move, her body a soft glow on the camera, lit only by moonlight, the sheen between her legs, I unzip my pants and fist my cock. As I thrust into my hand, I imagine it's her I'm feeling. Stroking back and forth, my hand tugs harder, but I keep my eyes on Grace. On her perfect curves, on the breasts I want to stain with my cum, on the mouth I want to possess. And with one last pull, I groan out Grace's name.

Sitting there spent and slightly confused by the turn of events, I can't help but laugh when she looks back at the camera and mouths, "Night, Whiskey."



The next morning I'm awake before Grace, and I have to be in the office before she even walks out of the bedroom. As much as I wanted to go snuggle her last night, I went to the guest bedroom, sleeping better than I have in months knowing at the bare minimum Grace was in my bed. The fact that she came with my name on her tongue definitely didn't hurt.

I chance a look down at the camera to see if Grace is still sleeping and find that she's no longer in bed. Before I have the opportunity to switch to the kitchen, a knock on my door steals my attention.

Cat strides in without waiting for me to invite her, and she plops into the chair as if she owns the place.

“Welcome, Kit Cat, I wasn’t busy or anything,” I pan.

“Ha. You were staring at the camera like a creeper. Does Grace know you have cameras all over that place?”

If I was the type to turn red, now would be the time. But in all honesty, I’m not embarrassed to admit that I watch her. I shrug my shoulders. “Yeah, she knows.” I smirk and Cat sticks her finger down her throat as if she’s gagging herself.

“God, I don’t even want to know.”

I laugh. “Yeah, you definitely don’t.”

“Okay, well, this has been lovely. I actually just popped in here to say hi before I go up and check on Grace. I’m going to see if she wants to get lunch. If that’s okay with you, of course.”

I raise my eyes in confusion. “Why would it matter to me?”

“You’re the one who’s watching her every move like a hawk. Just figured I’d check with you first.”

I laugh. “Grace is in complete control.” I clear my throat and adjust my tie. “Believe me.” The woman has me eating out of the palm of her hand. And as long as she agrees to stay put in my apartment and sleep in my bed, she can tell me to jump through whatever hoops she wants.

Cat smiles and then her face takes on a serious expression. “Have you guys talked at all about the baby?”

I feel her gaze penetrating me as if she’s trying to see some crack in my façade. “Not other than to check on how she feels. What else are we supposed to talk about? I mean it’s still early, but she knows how I feel.”

Cat raises her eyes. “And how is that exactly?”

I push away from my desk in aggravation. “Like I’d do any fucking thing to make her happy. Like I’d move heaven and earth to give her and our child everything. This baby makes Grace family. It’s that simple. I really hope you don’t have a problem with that.”

Cat holds up her hands. “Not at all. I love Grace. I’m going to love her baby. Just wondering where you guys were on all of that.” She motions her hand as if there is something in front of her that she’s pointing at.

“All of what?”

Cat smiles. “The baby. The relationship. Living arrangements.”

“It’s been one damn day, Cat. I haven’t even seen her since Hayden fucking interrupted us last night.”

Cat’s eyes narrow. “Did he?”

I sigh. “Yeah. He called at the worst time.”

Cat shakes her head. “On second thought, don’t share that with me. I don’t want to know what you were doing when he interrupted.”

I smirk. “No, you definitely don’t. Anyway. I…” I exhale and shake my head. “I’m just trying to take it slow. I’m trying to let her lead.”

Cat smiles. “I hear that. And I understand, one hundred percent, but hear me out…” She shimmies her shoulders in excitement. “It’s Christmas in five days. We are all going to Bristol and Grace is going to be alone.”

“What do you mean she’s going to be alone? Isn’t Marion or Tessa around?”

“Nope,” she says popping her lips on the p. “Marion is in France, I think,” she says with a tap of her finger on her chin, “and Tessa is in Tahoe through the New Year.”

“Well, what the hell was her plan?”

Cat shrugs. “She doesn’t have a big family like us, Cash,” she says on a sigh. “I’m guessing she planned on relaxing in her apartment. But you can’t let her do that.”

“Well, no shit. Even if I didn’t care about her being lonely, which I do, I wouldn’t let her be alone after the hospital scare.”

Cat jumps up. “Good, I was hoping you’d say that. So it’s okay if I invite her to Bristol for the holiday?”

I lean back in my chair and laugh. “I see through you.”

She looks at me innocently. “Huh? What?”

“Hanson is coming, and you’re hoping Grace will distract me from fighting with your fiancé.”

Cat shakes her head. “Honestly, I don’t care what you guys do. I just don’t want Grace to be alone.” My sister who never gets emotional gets a glimmer of a tear in her eye, and she squeezes her nose, trying to control it. I stand up and walk around the desk, pulling her against me. “She’s just... she’s the first person who knew Mom, ya know. It feels...” she pushes for a breath to keep from crying. “It feels like Mom would want her there. Like Mom had a hand in all of this.”

I think of the picture I stole from the engagement party. The one of Grace kissing my mother’s belly. I couldn’t have said it better myself. I nod and pull Cat’s head against my shoulder, squeezing her tight. “You know you have me too, right? Always, Kit Cat.”

Cat lets out a tortured breath against my shoulder and in a muffled voice says, “I know that, Cash Money. But sometimes a girl needs a sister. Could you work on that for me?”

I stroke her hair and kiss her head. “I’m trying...*believe me*, I am trying.”



Cat allows herself a few more seconds of being hugged and swayed by me and then she pulls back and meets my gaze with a shaky lip. “So, we’re inviting her to Christmas, right?”

I smile. “Yeah, we’re inviting her to Christmas.”

“And we’re not taking no for an answer?”

I chuckle. “No, I’ll drag her out of there kicking and screaming...but Cat, I have a feeling she will willingly come knowing you want her there.”

I rub my knuckles against her cheek, and she smiles. “I think you underestimate how much she loves you, Cash.”

“God, I hope you’re right.”

Cat eyes me knowingly. “After everything you did...after everything we did...she’s forgiven you. That takes love. A whole lot of it. Don’t give up... she’ll come back to you.”

I swallow uncomfortably. As many steps forward as we’ve taken over the last few days, we’ve got miles to walk.



Knowing Grace is busy with Cat, I call Lydia’s office to see if I can make an appointment before heading to Bristol for Christmas. There’s so many things I need to talk through, and I just want to get everything right when it comes to Grace. An hour later I’m sitting across from her as I replay everything that’s happened since we last spoke.

“So, she’s living with you now?” Lydia asks, her tone devoid of judgment.

I shift uncomfortably. “No. She is staying with me until the doctor gives her the all clear.”

I just plan on using this time to convince Grace to never leave.

Lydia sees through my semantics. “But you want her to live with you?”

I can’t help the smile that makes my dimple pop. “Yes.”

She sighs and I can’t help but feel like I’ve gotten the answer to a test wrong. “Just say it, Doc. Tell me what you’re really thinking.”

Lydia rarely smiles but the hint of one crosses her lips. “Mr. James—”

“I’ve told you all my deepest darkest secrets; I’m pretty sure you can call me Cash.”

She closes her eyes as if I’m testing her patience. “Cash, are you sleeping with her?”

I shake my head. “We never really had a problem with that part of our relationship, Doc.” I wiggle my brows and she just laughs. “But it’s the other stuff—the trust, the communication, as you’ve so aptly pointed out—that kept us from having everything. I told her I want to wait. I want to work through those things first.”

The pride that crosses Lydia’s face is like a beacon pushing me forward.

“Which is why I’m here. I need to know what to do. How to open up to her. How to get her to open up to me. I want to do this right.”

“You are here. Putting in the work. Continue to do that, and open up to Grace, and I have no doubt in my mind you’ll be better for it.”



Back in the office, I text Frank to see if he wants to grab a late lunch. He can't exactly beg off and say he's busy because he works for me. It's a sick joke that I constantly feel like I'm bribing him to spend time with me. For a few months I was a prick, but I'm pretty sure I've made up for it at this point. Or at least I'm working on it.

Surprisingly, Frank walks in the door only seconds later. His face is grim. "I've figured out what your brother is doing with your father," he says as he sits down in the chair across from me.

I'd just started standing up and putting on my jacket, but seeing his demeanor, I unbutton my coat and sit back down. Worry lines his forehead.

"You may need a drink to hear this," he says, pointing to the bar. He actually stands up and walks over, pouring us both a glass before he speaks again. I go to object—I made a promise to Grace—but Frank sticks it into my hand. "You're *going* to need it. Believe me."

With the warning in his voice, I take a sip of the whiskey, letting it burn a trail of guilt down my throat.

"Okay, hit me," I say, leveling him with a stare.

Frank's eyes close and for a moment I almost think he fell asleep. Then he opens them again and blurts out life changing words. "He's spending time with Grace's mother and your father."

The words are hard to comprehend. I don't mean that I don't understand what he's said, but involving Grace in any context with my father throws me for a loop.

"But why?"

Frank shrugs. "I haven't a fucking clue, and I can't figure it out. But it seems..." Frank scratches his chin as if he's trying to find a proper way to word what he's going to say. "It seems like they're *familiar*."

“Why would Chase and Grace’s mother be familiar?”

Frank shakes his head. “Not them. Your father and Grace’s mother.”

He leaves me to do the mental gymnastics of what this could possibly mean.

“Grace doesn’t talk to her mother. Her mother disparaged her. Destroyed her,” I say, flinging my hands in defense of Grace.

If someone is accusing Grace of working with my father, I will have her back this time. I will *not* repeat my mistake.

Frank holds up his hands. “Hey, I’m on Grace’s side. *I’m on your side.* You don’t have to defend her to me. I don’t have any reason to believe Grace has any idea this is going on.”

I stagger a breath and am annoyed that in the back of my mind, I still wonder. *Why the fuck don’t I trust her?* She’s done nothing to give me reason not to. I know for a fact that her mother mentally abused her for years. That she sided with Grace’s ex-husband and disparaged her to the press. There is no reason for me to have even the slightest suspicions of Grace’s motives.

“So, her mother and my father...and *Chase.*”

Frank nods. “Do you have any idea what they could be up to?”

This time I pick up the whiskey and take a bigger swig. “I don’t have a fucking clue. But if my father is involved, it’s not good.” I slam down the glass and groan in frustration.

Why won’t Chase just call me back? I mean doesn’t he realize that our father is to blame for all this? He’s mad we kept the truth from him, but it’s our father who raped his mother. Why the fuck would he be teaming up with him now? It makes no sense.

“Are they in Bristol?” I ask.

I honestly have no idea where my dad is living. My grandmother had assured me that he wasn't staying at the house and he wouldn't be there for Christmas. It was the only way we all agreed to come.

He shakes his head. "Boston."

My eyes are like saucers. "He's *here*?" My chest burns.

Frank leans against my desk. "Breathe."

I hadn't realized I stopped.



## CHAPTER 42

### GRACE

I've been in Cash's apartment for four nights. Ever since our kiss the first night he has kept his distance. I'm running out of excuses to stay here. I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow. On Christmas Eve of all days, and I know Cash has plans for Christmas with his family.

Cat told me their plans. *She* invited me. He's said nothing. I don't want her invite. I appreciate it, but I'm not going without Cash asking. I won't be a burden, and that's all I feel like right now. Once the doctor clears me, there will be no reason for me to stay.

It's not like I haven't made it clear that I'm interested in things progressing with us. I'm acutely aware of the cameras in his apartment. I know he used to love watching me when he was in the office. I just assumed he'd do it again. But maybe since we aren't together anymore, he feels wrong looking. Or maybe he's not interested.

I mean, that seems impossible. He's told me he wants to get back together. But he also hasn't made a move to touch me again. Maybe the pregnancy freaks him out. Maybe he's not attracted to me now that I'm pregnant. Plenty of men get like that. It's not ideal, and quite frankly, it's

unfair. Women are the ones who have to grow the baby, whose bodies change, who literally lose all control over even simple bodily functions, and yet men can just say, “I’m not attracted to you right now,” and we’re supposed to just deal with it.

Unfortunately, it’s even more precarious for us because we aren’t *actually* together. If we were, I could tell him that he’s making me feel unwanted, but seeing as how we haven’t had sex in months...well, I’m feeling quite uneasy about it all.

It’s nine o’clock at night and I’m tired of sitting in this apartment wondering when he’ll show his face again. He came up for dinner, watched me eat, said a few words, and then disappeared downstairs, mumbling about needing to finish something for work. If I’m going to be alone all the time, I might as well be back at my apartment.

Tired of waiting around and refusing to beg for attention, I set out to find a piece of paper to leave Cash a note. I’ll leave it in his room. No need for him to sleep in the guest bedroom with me gone.

I jot out a few words, the gist of which is that I’m feeling restless and decided to go home. I feel fine. I’ll call him tomorrow and see him after Christmas.

I grasp my belly and swallow down a tear. “I’m sorry, baby. I just can’t do this. I lived through a marriage where we didn’t talk or spend time together. I can’t do it again. We’ll be okay on our own.”

I feel ridiculous in my stupid robe. I’d taken a bath and now I need to get dressed and get out of here. I grab the note, and my robe billows around me as I speed down the hall to the guest bedroom. There’s no way he’ll miss the note if I leave it on his pillow. I open the door without hesitation and draw back in shock.

Months ago, when I'd been living here, I'd commented how much I loved the light in this room. There were bookshelves and big windows which didn't exist in any of the other rooms. It had been a plain grey color with a black bed and simple furnishings. That's what I expected to find when I entered. I'm not prepared for what I find instead.

The walls are now a distinct purple. I know without a shadow of a doubt they are the color of my eyes. The light of the moon streams in through the windows which remain uncovered, revealing every detail of this love letter of a space.

On one wall is the bed that I remember, but the rest of the furniture is gone. In the corner by the window is a large easel with a stool in front of it.

Without thinking, I move in its direction, picking up the new paint brushes and art supplies which sit on the bookshelf behind it. I run my hand over the canvas and close my eyes as emotion threatens to spill from my eyes and burns my throat.

The painting that I began in Bristol, of Cash and me dancing, sits on the easel. "Oh, Cash," I whisper, as my fingers stroke the figures on the paper. I'm brought back to a happier time, a simpler time, when I thought for sure Cash and I would dance beneath the stars again. Not just once, but for the rest of our lives.

"What is all this?" I can't help but mutter aloud. My eyes roam the rest of the room, and I spot the books that now line what used to be empty shelves. My fingers scroll across the titles, and I recognize a few of the love stories that sit in Marion's apartment. *My apartment*. All of them appear new.

Scrubbing my forehead with my hand, I try to make sense of it. In the corner I spot a rocking chair, and I sigh. "It's like the room was designed for



me,” I say to myself. But what does it mean? When did he do this? And why?

And why has he been hiding it?

Why has *he* been hiding?

Fueled by confusion, and sorrow, and joy, and anger, *and need*, I flick off the light and leave the room, making my way quickly to the elevator.

It’s time for answers. It’s time for hard truths. We can’t keep walking on eggshells around one another. I need to know what this all means, and I need to know why he’s pushing me away again.

It isn’t until I’m arriving in his office suite that I realize I’m still wearing the damn robe. At least it’s black and silky, although I do much prefer my blue one that feels like a hug. This is more like a negligee, and while it served its purpose to tease Cash while I walked around the penthouse in it, or maybe it didn’t because he’s clearly been uninterested, I feel too naked in it now.

Still, I continue to move forward, the wooden floor cold against my steps. I’m shrouded in darkness as the only light seems to be coming from below Cash’s office door, although the moonlight sets a path forward thanks to the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over the city of Boston.

I burst through the door before even considering that Cash may have a woman in here or be meeting with someone.

Squeezing my eyes shut in nervousness for what I might find, I stand in the doorway and clear my throat. “May I come in?”

Cash laughs. “Why are you standing there with your eyes closed?”

I slowly allow one lid to peek open, adjust to the light, and peer around for a few seconds before opening the other. I bite the inside of my lip. “Didn’t know if maybe you were meeting with someone.”

Cash shakes his head with a smile. “And if I was meeting with someone, do you think that would be an appropriate outfit for you to wear?”

He points to my silky robe, and I fold my arms across my chest. “Well, obviously I didn’t think before I came down here.”

Cash holds his arms out to me. “Come over here.”

I stare at him, sitting behind his desk with his arms open. His hair is mussed as if he’s been rubbing his hands through it in stress, his shirt is unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, showing off the veins in his arms, and his whiskey-brown eyes gaze at me with a bit of a challenge.

I stay rooted in my spot, afraid to get too close for fear I’ll lose the nerve to say my piece.

Cash’s eyes grow darker. “Angel, get over here now, or I’ll be forced to come get you and then I’ll have to punish you for not listening.”

I clench and heat with desire. “How?” I ask in barely a whisper.

Cash narrows his eyes. “Why don’t you come over here and find out?”

I shudder in anticipation. “Maybe I’d rather be punished,” I challenge.

Cash is out of his chair and in front of me in four quick steps. He presses me against the wall, caging me in with his arms, and leers down at me. I lean my head back, exposing my neck and staring at the veins in his arm.

Cash’s head dips to my collarbone, and he rubs his mouth up my neck and to my jaw and then leans in and just inhales. “Fuck, you smell delicious.”

My pride cracks. “Then why have you been staying so far away from me?”

Cash’s head dips against my chest and he stays there, silent. The confusion and need and embarrassment pulsate with every breath I take.

“Please, Cash, tell me what’s going on.”

Cash raises his head and looks me in the eye. “Come sit with me, Angel.” He leads me into his office where he takes a seat in his chair, and I lean against his desk, my arms folded across my chest, waiting for him to talk.

When he says nothing, I feel myself going stir crazy and I blurt out, “Why did you paint the guest bedroom?”

Cash’s eyes flicker to mine in recognition. He knows I’ve been in there. He gives me a sad smile. “I did it for you. As a surprise. Before everything...” he trails off, not finishing the sentence.

Before we broke up.

“But *why*?”

Cash runs his hands through his hair. “I wanted you to have a space that was all your own. I know how much you value your independence and enjoy Marion’s apartment for those reasons. The books, a place to sit quietly by yourself, a space to paint...just a space for you. And I had asked you to give all of that up so quickly after just regaining your freedom. I wanted you to have something that was yours, a spot you could retreat to if you wanted a break from me.” As he speaks, his head remains down, and he doesn’t meet my eyes.

This time it’s my turn to pull his chin up, forcing him to look at me. “I happily gave all of that up because I didn’t want space from you. I wanted *us*. A life...together.”

Cash nods, his eyes heavy with regret. “I know, and I fucked it all up.”

I give him a sad smile. “Yeah, you did. But what I’m trying to figure out is why you’re doing it again? Why are you pushing me away? I’m here, in your penthouse, *in your life*, standing in front of you, *begging* you to touch me. To want me, to spend time with me, but you’re pushing me away.”

Cash grimaces, and he lifts his hands up and puts them on my thighs which are crossed in my closed off stance. The second his hand meets my skin, electricity fires through my body, warming me throughout.

Cash looks up at me with fear in his eyes. “I’m so damn scared to lose you again. To fuck this up. You think I don’t want to touch you? That I don’t want to spend time with you? I sit in this office every night and watch you because it’s the only way I feel safe getting close to you. I’m nervous if I say or do the wrong thing, you’re going to walk out of this building and disappear from my life for good.”

The emotion in his voice, the angst which sets his hands trembling upon my legs, makes it obvious that words are getting us nowhere. Reaching down, I grab his shaking hand and pull it to my breast, holding it there and gazing down at him. “*Touch me.* Want me. Show me how badly you want this to work. Don’t push me away.” I plead with my eyes, my voice, and my body, arching toward him.

Cash visibly shudders and then it’s like something snaps; his eyes close and open again with determination. His fingers twist my nipple which is bare below my robe, and I arch farther back and hiss as my eyes fall shut. “Cash, please,” I beg again.

“Did you know I was watching?” he says in a deep voice, staring up at me as his fingers continue to roll my nipple and his other hand pushes me back so I’m sitting on his desk.

I nod down at him with hooded eyes.

“You touched yourself knowing I was watching?” he asks again. As if he wants to be clear precisely what he’s talking about. I’m not shy though. I have no shame in what I did. In what I want. It’s him. Only him.

Since the moment I met him, Cash has been my whiskey of choice. The only drink I've needed. The one I craved. Even when it was burning on the way down. Even when it hurt the next morning. The pounding headaches, the nausea, the tears—it had all been worth it because it's him.

Playing with his hair, I pull it up a bit, so he's forced to look directly at me when I speak. "I prefer to come on your tongue, but if I can't, then I come with your name on my own."

That seems to do the trick. Cash pushes my legs apart and pulls me so I'm flush against him, grabbing my mouth and bringing it to his own. His kiss is bruising, his stubble rough against my soft skin, and his tongue almost angry. "You want my tongue on you, you just have to ask," he says in between kisses.

"I thought I was the other night," I pant. "But you stayed away."

Cash's eyes light up. "So you walked around in this thing for the past few days looking for attention?"

I push against him. "I thought it was pretty obvious. I mean how many baths do you think I need to take? How many times did I have to disappear into the bedroom and touch myself while I talked dirty to you?"

"You don't have to walk around naked to get my attention, Grace. You *always* have it. If you want me to touch you, tell me. If you want my tongue on your pretty pussy, demand it. There isn't a moment in time when I don't want you, when I won't drop everything I'm doing to pleasure you."

Cash's hands move to my robe, and he pulls on the tie so quickly I barely feel it flying open. "You're not even wearing panties," he says as he eyes my naked body. He pushes my legs farther apart and slides a finger up my slit, before rubbing circles over my clit.

“I remembered someone telling me they preferred their dinner bare,” I reply with a raised brow.

Cash flattens his tongue against my pussy, and he licks me from bottom to top, the pressure forcing my legs to squeeze him tighter. “Such a greedy girl,” he says, before his entire mouth is on me, leaving me writhing beneath him.



## CHAPTER 43

### CASH

Grace's moans are almost as hot as seeing her laid out on my desk like fucking dessert. I tried to stay away, tried to work out what was going on with her mom and my dad before I took things any further, tried to listen to Lydia's words that we needed to work on us before we gave in to the sexual aspect of our relationship, but turning Grace down when she showed up in this tiny black silk robe with needy eyes is an impossible ask.

I've wanted to taste her, to pleasure her, to feel her come on my tongue for days now. It's been two months, and it's something I've craved. "Fuck, Gracie, you taste so fucking sweet." I look up at her with my mouth still on her. Her hair falls over her face, and her eyes are hooded but greedy in their gawking.

"You like to watch, Angel?"

She nods as her eyes flare when I press my tongue flat again.

"You like to perform for me, too, huh?" I ask, getting harder as I think about just how much she's come into her own since we first met. Taking control of what she wants. So much so that she now enjoys showing me.

Grace moans a yes. "I love the feeling of your eyes on me."

“Better than my tongue?” I tease, stopping briefly. She’s already so close her legs shake just from the brush of my fingers tapping against her clit.

“*Please,*” she begs.

I rub my thumb and slip my finger inside her and then bring my mouth back where she likes it. She starts riding my face, pulling on my hair and controlling my movement so that she has me exactly where she wants me. As soon as I bring her clit, which is soft and pliable from being so wet, between my lips it starts to pulse, and Grace clenches my fingers as she curses and moans.

I don’t stop, keeping up my incessant licking and sucking until she’s fallen back completely, losing all control over her own body.

“That’s right, baby, are you relaxed now?” I whisper as I kiss her thigh and then her stomach, until I’m leaning over her and taking her sweet mouth in mine.

She groans into my kiss, weak and sated. “Yes, that was—”

I cut her off with another kiss. Then with my lips mere inches from hers, I reply, “I know. It was fucking heaven for me. Having you in my mouth. Having you ride my face. On my desk. Fucking perfection.” I look down at her body again and take a visual snapshot. This is going to make it nearly impossible to get work done in the future.

She sits up with a glint in her eye. “Lean back, Bossman.”

Grace kicks my chair back and drops to the floor in front of me. Her robe sits open, and I see the slight swell of her bump. It feels wrong having her on her knees. “Grace, you don’t have to do this.”

“Have to? Yes, I do. Want to? So fucking bad. Need to? More than my next breath,” she says, panting and licking her lips as she makes quick work



of unbuckling my pants and pulling on them until I lift up my ass so she can pull them down.

My erection is so hard it's almost painful. I spring up when she removes my boxers, and to say that Grace looks excited would be a huge understatement. "You've been waiting to taste me, Cash? What about me? I haven't had you in my mouth in months." Before I have a second to prepare, her mouth surrounds me, and I'm sucked into her warmth. She pulls off and makes a pop sound before looking up and smiling. "So good, Whiskey. So fucking good."

I lean back and watch as she takes me in her mouth again, farther this time until I hit the back of her throat. I fight to keep my eyes open, swearing under my breath as the intense feel of her tongue moving up and down my shaft while her hand cradles my balls sends me spinning. Already, I feel the tightening and my resolve weakening. The last person who touched me was Grace, and that was months ago; there is no way I'm going to last. "Grace, slow down, baby. I want to take care of you."

She shakes her head as she looks up at me, continuing her hard work. Realizing that she isn't going to stop and too overwhelmed from the incredible feeling of her mouth, I grab her hair in my hand and thrust into her mouth deeper.

Grace moans and smiles as she takes me farther back. "Don't smile at me like that, baby," I warn before I feel the familiar tug in my balls. "Fuck, Grace, I'm going to come." I try to pull back, but she moves her hands behind my hips and pulls me closer. Giving up, I pull on her hair tighter and she groans again, liking it rough. "Okay, baby, if that's how you want it, swallow like a good little slut." I see the gleam in her eye, the way my words spur her, right as I thrust once more before emptying into her mouth.

Even that doesn't stop her though, and she continues tugging on me until I actually beg her to stop, slumping back in fucking ecstasy.

When I finally open my eyes, I see Grace leaning back with a proud smile on her face. "Feel better, Mr. James?"

I bark out a choking laugh and pull Grace up onto my lap. "You're a goddess."

She leans against my chest and twirls her finger. "I missed you so much, Cash."

I kiss her hair and pull her face so that she's looking at me. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

She sighs as her lashes fall down and insecurity creeps across her features. "But you've been so distant. You've been pushing me away. I thought maybe..." She looks away and I pull her eyes back to mine. "I thought maybe you weren't attracted to me anymore...because of the pregnancy," she admits quietly.

The idea that I made her feel unwanted, undesired, *un-fucking-anything* is too much.

"Grace, I'm not sure how it's possible, but you being pregnant has made me harder than I've been in my life. Watching your body change, seeing you become a mother, it's such a fucking turn-on for me. *You* are not the problem."

She eyes me as she bites her lip, perhaps trying to decide whether she believes me. "Then what is it? Because you're pushing me away, Cash. Before I saw the guest bedroom, I was leaving you a note to tell you I was going home. I can't do this. I don't want to be in another unhappy relationship where my partner and I don't speak. Where we both work all

the time and don't enjoy one another. I've done that—*divorced that*—and I have no intention of going back to that life.”

I rake my fingers through her hair as I look down at her beautiful face. “At first, it was Hayden. I don't want to share you with anyone, Grace. I've already done that with your ex-husband, then Jay, and now when we finally have a shot, I feel like he's still in the picture. I have no problem fighting for this relationship, fighting to make it work. Grace, I'll fight every fucking day to build a future with you.” I search her violet eyes and hope she's hearing me. “But I won't share you. I won't wonder if you're all in with me, if you're thinking of someone else. I can't do it. I love you too much to share.”

Grace closes her eyes and breathes me in, then she reaches her hand up and cups my face. “Whiskey, don't you know that since the moment you said hello on the plane, I've been yours? There's been no one else. No one can hold a candle to you.”

I inhale her words with a deep breath, practically choking on her promise. And yet the constant phone calls from Hayden tell me otherwise.

“Is it over with him?” I ask.

Grace shakes her head, confusion etching her face. “Cash, I wouldn't have agreed to a date with you, or stayed in your apartment, or kissed you, if I wasn't ready to give us a real shot. It's just you and me, I promise.” With both her hands on my face she pulls me in for a kiss.

Her words encourage me, and I stand us both up, wrapping her legs around me, and carry her out of my office. Although I still have a shirt on, I'm pantsless, and her robe is open. I'll have to make sure I delete all the video footage in the morning, or security is going get an eyeful.

In the elevator, I continue to kiss her, not letting her go until we walk through the penthouse into the master bedroom, and I lay her down on our bed.

Because that's what it is. This is our bed now. With every fiber of my being, I know that I am not letting Grace leave me again. "Grace, do you know what this means?" I ask as I crawl up her body, positioning myself between her legs.

Grace shakes her head and watches me intently.

"We are going to live here. We are going to raise our child here. And right now, I'm going to fuck all the doubts out of your head. I'm going to show you precisely how much I love you and how fucking bad I have it for you." I twine her fingers with mine and put her hands above her head, right before I push into her, both of us hissing and groaning in the exquisite pain and pleasure.

She begins to move under me. "Yes, Whiskey. Yes, to it all," she says as she leans up and bites my bottom lip, pulling my head to meet hers.

"You're mine, Gracie, tell me you're mine," I say as I thrust in and out of her, leaving her panting.

With her eyes on me, she says in between moans, "All yours, Cash. Always yours. Only yours."

"That's right, Angel. You're mine to fuck...mine to care for, and mine to love."



## CHAPTER 44

### CASH

The morning light caresses Grace's skin, and I stare at her in complete awe. I call her Angel for a reason. She's been my saving grace, the light in all the darkness, but right now, as her bare skin glows and I stare at the slight swell in her abdomen, I could swear that God above put her in my life.

Her eyes flutter open, and she palms her face. "Morning, Whiskey. Why so serious?" Her voice is scratchy and her smile mysterious.

I curl into her neck, inhaling her and tickling her at the same time, before I bite down on her shoulder. "Just looking at how beautiful my angel is."

She lets out a silent soft laugh and smiles, then plops a kiss on my lips. "You are delusional, Cassius James."

I sigh against her, letting the joy filter through my entire body. "I'm happy is what I am."

Grace's face stills and she stares at me in wonder. "I'm happy too, Cash." Her hand moves over her stomach, and she looks up at me with a shy smile. "What do you have today?"

I have yet to tell Grace about my Christmas plans—and it's Christmas Eve, so I'm running out of time. "Heading to Bristol for Christmas Eve with the family," I say before kissing her again.

Grace pulls back. "Oh, okay. Well, I'll get out of your hair then so you can get ready." Before she can move an inch, I pull her back to me.

"Grace, if you think for a second I'm going anywhere without you, you've lost your mind."

She smiles. "Cash, we just started this again. It's okay, I'll be fine for a few days. I'm going to the doctor anyway to get checked, and once they confirm that everything is fine, you are off Grace babysitting duty."

I palm her ass in my hand and pull her on top of me. Grace straddles me, and I stare up at her gloriously naked body. Her breasts have gotten heavier, fuller, and more delectable because of the pregnancy. I lean up and nip at one, and she screeches and then rolls herself against my hard length. Before I get too distracted, I hold her hips in place and offer her a stern glance. "Now be a good girl and sit still for two fucking seconds."

She giggles as she rubs over me again. I close my eyes and hiss in delighted frustration. "Gracie, I'm not playing. I'm trying to be serious here."

"I seriously want you to fuck me," she replies, tracing her fingers down her breasts, onto her stomach, and then rolling them over her clit as she rocks against me. "Please, Cash, make me feel good."

I scrub my hands over my face to stay in control. This is what she does. To avoid conversations she doesn't want to have, Grace uses her body, and I fucking love and hate it at the same time.

Without warning, I grab her hips, flip her below me, and jolt inside her. Grace sucks in a hot breath, speechless. "Finally, got you quiet," I say, as I

move above her, excruciatingly slow.

Grace bites her lip and closes her eyes but remains silent. I lower my mouth to her ear. “That’s my good girl. Now listen to me. You are going to go to the doctor, get the all clear, and then we are going to grab your stuff from your apartment and move you back in here, *for good.*”

Grace’s eyes fly open. “Cash, you can’t...” I stop her from speaking by moving quicker, and she’s unable to get out another word.

Gritting, I say, “You can, and you will. You promised you’re mine, remember that.”

She nods as her head falls to the side. “Yes, all yours.”

I tweak her nipple between my teeth, then look back up at her. “And then you are coming with me for Christmas. We are going to sing Christmas carols, drink eggnog, watch Christmas movies, and be the jolliest fucking couple anyone has ever seen.”

She laughs and moans at the same time. I speed up until neither of us are able to talk. I got what I want, and now I’m going to take what I need. Grace pulses around my cock, and we both cry out as I lean down and kiss her through both of our orgasms.

“Oh, you play dirty, Whiskey,” she pants below me.

I stare down at her and laugh. “Really, you’re just learning that now?”

She smiles and leans up for a kiss. “I love you.”

I pause midkiss and stare at her. “What?”

Her eyes soften, and with both hands she pulls my mouth so it’s against hers. “I love you, Whiskey. Will you come to the doctor with me today?”

I close my eyes at her admission. At her *request*. It’s been months since I’ve heard her tell me she loves me. Part of me wondered for a long time if I’d ever hear those words again. Coupled with the fact that she’s finally

letting me in *completely*, letting me come to doctor's appointments—not just letting but *asking me to join her*—it feels like we've made it through. Like we actually have a real shot.

“I love you too, Grace. I love you so damn much.”



As Grace and I sit next to each other in the waiting room, she continues to pick up her phone, check emails, close it, only to open it up and go through the same procedure again. We've only been sitting here for eight minutes, and she's checked her email at least six times. I'm not saying she's not busy, but I think it has more to do with nerves than anything else.

Putting my hand over her own, I stop her from sliding the screen open again. “It's okay. Everything is going to be fine. There's been no more blood, no more cramping, and there is no reason to think anything is wrong.”

She breathes in deeply and looks up at me. “What if us having sex hurt the baby?”

I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. I know women tend to get a bit overemotional and nonsensical during pregnancy, not that I'd ever say that out loud, but Grace is a sensible woman. She has to know that couples have sex throughout pregnancy without a problem. “Grace, I like to think that I am extremely well-endowed in that department, but even I have to admit that my,”—I clear my throat and look down—“isn't *that* big.”



My attempt at self-deprecation works and Grace giggles. She leans her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry. You’re right; it’s not that big.”

I squeeze her and she laughs harder. Before I can come up with a reprimand, Grace’s name is called. She looks at me, stands up, and waits for me to take her hand and follow.

“Hi, Grace, how are you feeling today?” the nurse asks. She’s young, possibly early twenties, with a big smile and a bounce to her step.

“I’m okay. Just looking forward to confirming the baby is doing okay,” Grace answers honestly. I squeeze her hand in mine, and she offers me a small smile.

The woman brings us to a room and tells Grace to get on the scale. She looks at me sheepishly and I glance at them both. “How ’bout I go outside, and you call me when the doctor comes?” I offer.

Grace shakes her head. “It’s fine. I’m thirty-six. Before I was pregnant, I weighed one hundred and sixty pounds give or take. If you’re going to be around for this, you might as well be around for all of it.”

I shake my head and laugh. “Is that your way of saying you want me to be there when you give birth?”

The nurse smiles, clearly unaware of the very real conversation Grace and I are having. “Oh, you guys are too cute. Most couples that come in here barely talk. The man is always on his phone, or he doesn’t show up at all.” She takes down Grace’s weight, without announcing it, and turns back to Grace. “Okay, now put this on,” she says, pointing to a white piece of paper, “and the doctor will be right in.”

As soon as she’s gone, I point at the outfit. “You gonna get a few of those to go? You could surprise me in my office in them. That seems to be your

MO. Crotchless panties poolside, lingerie in my office...lets add this to the roster..."

Grace lifts her arm to smack me, but I grab her hand before it makes contact and pull her toward me, stealing a kiss. "You hear that? I'm a good boyfriend," I say as I wiggle my brows together.

Grace rolls her eyes. "Gosh, we sound like we're fifteen. Going steady. *My boyfriend.*"

My hands move down to her ass, and I cup both cheeks, squeezing. "Don't care what you call me, as long as I'm yours."

She leans up on her tiptoes and kisses me again. "You got it, Whiskey. Now help me unzip this dress so I can put on my fancy lingerie."

Moments later, Grace is changed and sitting on the table waiting to be examined, and I'm pacing, unsure of what exactly I'm supposed to be doing.

"Cash, you told me it was going to be fine. You are not exactly instilling confidence right now."

With my hands in my pockets, I spin and look at her. "I'm sorry." My shoulders sag and I move closer, pushing her legs apart and moving between them as I rake my hands through her hair and force her face up to mine. "I'm just unsure of my role here. What am I supposed to do? Sit next to you? Ask questions? Just hold your hand?" I eye her, waiting for guidance.

Before she can respond, the door swings open and a male doctor walks in with a tablet in his hand. When he sees us, he smirks, having caught me looking as if I'm about to ravage his patient. "Grace, how are you doing today?"

I push myself to the side, and Grace closes her legs, although she looks a lot less embarrassed than I feel. “Anxious to see the baby.”

The doctor smiles. “Well, then let’s get right to that.” He puts down his computer, washes his hands, and walks over to Grace’s side. “Is this Dad?” he asks her.

Grace turns to me and grabs my hand, pulling me so that I’m on the other side of her. The doctor is staring at a computer-like screen. “Yes, this is the daddy, Cassius James.”

The word daddy sneaks up on me. My chest gets tight, and I feel immense love, pressure, and like I want to beat on my chest like a caveman.

The doctor looks up at me and smiles. “Nice to meet you, Cassius. Congratulations. Now let’s check on your baby.”

I stare back at him stupidly, still lost on that one damn word.

“Are you ready to see our baby?” Grace asks, squeezing my hand reassuringly.

The doctor lifts Grace’s gown and rubs a clear jelly-like liquid onto her stomach. I’ve seen movie scenes with this, but it all feels foreign right now. The doctor slides the wand over Grace’s belly, and I hear an almost galloping sound come out of the machine.

My eyes dart to the screen, and I stare at the circular image with what very clearly shows a head, two arms and two legs in the shape of an alien-like creature.

*A baby. My baby.*

It’s incredible. Grace and I are rendered speechless, staring at the image and listening to the soundtrack of our child’s heart.

“Grace, have you had any ultrasounds yet?” the doctor asks.

Grace shakes her head. “No, they checked the baby’s heart at the hospital. And if you remember, the first appointment was a bit of blur. I don’t even think I let you speak.”

He laughs. “Yes, you were quite surprised. Well, it looks like the baby is in a good position right now, so you’re in luck.”

She smiles up at me and squeezes my hand again. I’m completely numb. I hope I remember all of this later. Right now it feels like I’m witnessing it all from above.

“Do you want to find out the sex?” he asks.

Grace looks at me and then back at the doctor. “I didn’t think that was possible this early. I’m only about thirteen weeks.”

The doctor laughs. “Remember how last time I tried to tell you how far along you were, but you didn’t let me finish. Did you ever read the paperwork I gave you?”

Grace shakes her head. “Honestly, I don’t remember much. I thought I read everything. Why? Is something wrong?”

The doctor shakes his head and in his jovial voice assures her, “No, it’s just you are eighteen weeks, Grace, not thirteen.”

Grace looks up at me in complete shock. Under her breath, she whispers, “So it wasn’t the club.”

And I’ve got to be honest, I’m really fucking happy that I didn’t impregnate her then. This baby was made out of love.

*Our baby was made out of love.*

Crushing disappointment in myself threatens to ruin the moment when I realize that I almost lost everything. If not for Grace letting me back into her life, our baby would be raised without me. And in the early months I didn’t even know. That’s all on me.

“So, what do you say? Want to know the sex?” the doctor asks again.

Grace turns to me with question in her eyes. “What do you think?” she asks.

I clear my throat and adjust my collar, pulling my hand out of hers for a moment. I need air. This is all so much. “Uh, whatever you want.”

Grace sits up and the doctor leans back, giving us privacy, while still holding the wand that was just pressed against Grace’s stomach. “Cash, look at me. I know you’re having a bit of a freak-out...”

I blink a few times, trying to wrap my head around the new developments. Grace is five weeks farther along than we thought. Which means five weeks less until we’re parents.

*And then I’ll be a dad.*

“Yes, I want to know the sex,” I reply loudly, in excitement. I meet Grace’s eyes and smile. “I’m fucking thrilled, Grace. Hearing the baby’s heartbeat just made it all more real...but this is the best damn Christmas present I’ve ever received. Let’s find out if we are having a son or a daughter.”

A tear drops from Grace’s eye, and she leans back and nods at the doctor. “We’re ready.”

I grab her hand, waiting for the doctor to put the wand back. When the heartbeat fills the room again, I squeeze Grace’s hand three times, and she turns to me with nothing but love in her eyes.

Our baby’s heartbeat. I’ve never heard something so beautiful. I know she’s thinking the same thing.

The doctor moves the wand around until he apparently sees what he’s looking for. He points to the screen. “So, there are fingers, and there are

toes, and right there, between the legs...there's nothing...You're having a little girl. Congratulations!"

Tears fall down Grace's face and she laughs. "We're having a daughter? Oh, wow, I'm having a little girl." She leans back and smiles so wide I'm afraid my heart may break.

I'm having a little girl. I shake my head in wonder and stare up. It's a habit I've had since I was a child, looking to the sky to talk to my mom. Silently, I say, *can you believe this, Mom? I'm going to be a dad. To a little girl!*

I think of the picture which sits in my wallet. Little Grace kissing my mother's belly. I know right now my mom is smiling. I lean down to Grace's face and kiss her lips. "Thank you, Angel."

She kisses me back and replies, "Merry Christmas, Whiskey."



## CHAPTER 45

### GRACE

**W**e're both silent on the way to Bristol. Frank is with his family, so Cash is driving for once, and it feels odd sitting up front in the SUV I wasn't aware he owned. There's so much we still don't know about one another. And now we'll be raising a little girl together. But before that I'll be meeting his grandparents. The people who raised him. The man he's admired his entire life. And the woman who everyone warns me I should fear.

*I'm spiraling.*

Cash's hand lands on my knee, and I realize I'd been bouncing it. "Sorry," I mutter sheepishly, looking out the window again.

Cash squeezes. "It's okay to be nervous. I know this is all a lot."

I laugh dryly. "Um, you just found out you're going to be a dad in twenty-two weeks...how are you not this jittery?"

"Angel, I'm thrilled I'm going to be a dad in twenty-two weeks. This is a dream come true. How are you feeling though?"

I turn to face him. Cash's eyes dance as they study me. He's not lying. I can see joy radiating off him; he's thrilled.

I twist my fingers together. “I don’t know. I’m so not prepared to be a mother. And now I have even less time to figure it out. I mean I never had a good example of what a mother should be. What if I’m like her?”

It’s almost more stressful having a daughter. What if I don’t know how to do this? What if I’m as selfish as everyone says I am? I don’t want to do to my child what my mother did to me. But I also don’t know how to be any different.

Cash pulls my twisting hands apart and brings my fingers to his mouth, kissing them softly, one by one as he continues to drive. “Gracie, you are warm and loving. You are *fiercely* protective of those you care about, and you stand on your own two feet. Our daughter is going to be incredibly lucky because she will see that a woman can be all those things. She doesn’t have to shrink or mold herself into what society says. She will have a role model, and I for one know that I wouldn’t want any other woman to be the mother of my child.”

His words hit a place in my chest, opening me up to feel every syllable from his tongue. They are words I will need to remind myself of when things grow dark in my mind, and I store them away like the precious treasure they are. “Thank you.”

Cash turns to me and winks. “I’ll be your personal cheerleader anytime.”

I smile imagining him with pom-poms and a skirt. The giggle escapes and he eyes me. “You’re imagining me in costume, aren’t you?”

“Yup,” I say, popping the p as I continue laughing.

Cash shakes his head with a big goofy grin on his face. “Anything to make you smile, Angel.”





The house is decorated to the nines, and I can't help but wonder who did it. No one lives here full time and yet a ten-foot Christmas tree stands in the center of the living room lit up and looking as if a Hallmark movie were set to be filmed here.

A *Balsam Hill* catalog threw up all over, and I'm loving every inch of it. Not surprisingly, the woman who is a softie for a love story, secretly reads romance novels, and never had a big family Christmas growing up, would be swooning over this setup. I can hardly contain my excitement.

Cat rushes straight at me when we walk in. She's dressed in a red sweater and black leather pants. Her sky-high heeled boots leave her towering above me. "How was the doctor this morning?"

"It went well," I say as I lean into her hug. "Baby is fine. In fact, we got a little surprise."

Cash walks in and I eye him, wondering if he wants to be the one to tell his sister or if we are waiting to make some big announcement. I've never had a big family where these type of things are a big deal, so I'm suddenly lost as to the proper etiquette. Cash simply winks and wraps his arm around me, cradling my belly.

"I'm going to be a girl dad," he says, and even though I can't see his face, I can feel his smile against my cheek.

"A girl! Ah, I'm so excited!" she screeches in excitement.

Jay walks in at that moment, and I feel Cash's grip tighten. "You're having a girl?" he asks me with a smile.

I lean back against Cash, trying to give him a little of my strength. "Yes, we're having a girl," I say softly, turning to meet Cash's eyes. They dance in joy, and I know Jay can't possibly have an effect on him anymore. He has all he needs.

"That's great. Congrats," Jay says as he snakes his arm around Cat, pulling her in close.

"I honestly didn't care about the sex of the baby—just happy she's mine," Cash says under his breath.

"What? Whose baby did you think it was?"

Cash nuzzles his lips against my neck. "I'd really rather not talk about this."

I twirl around so that I can see him. "Seriously, who would it have been if not you?"

"Hayden's," he says casually, as if he's not studying my reaction. I know damn well he is though.

I laugh. "Hayden and I never even kissed," I remark, then I pause to clarify when Cash looks far too excited. "Well, not like that at least."

"I'm not sure what that means but I don't care. We were broken up. I have no right to be upset for what you did or didn't do when we weren't together."

"Oh God," I hear Cat mutter under her breath.

I try to ignore her. "I'm not sure what that means, Cash, and as you said it's not like it's your business, but I'd like to be very clear. *I don't sleep around.*"

Cash's face falls. "I didn't mean to insinuate you did."

“And in case you forgot, I was with *you* even when we were broken up.”

Cash pulls me closer to him and walks me away from Jay and Cat. “Gracie, I’m sorry. None of this is coming out right. I’m just saying I’m not judging you for what you did or didn’t do during the last few months. It’s a fresh start. For both of us.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, how convenient. It sounds like you’re feeling shitty about what you did when we were broken up, and you’re trying to act all magnanimous by saying it’s okay.”

Cash grabs my chin and forces me to meet his eyes. “Angel, I could barely get out of bed daily. Looking at other women was painful, and believe me I tried,” he says bitterly. “I swear to you, I haven’t slept with anyone else since I met you. I haven’t *kissed* anyone else since I laid eyes on you. I think Jerry Maguire said it best—you had me at hello.”

“That was Renée Zellweger,” I say, rolling my eyes, and his whiskey ones light up.

I’d been raring for the fight. I have no idea why. Only moments earlier in the car we were happy. I think I’m so prepared for the other shoe to drop that I’ve kept my boxing gloves on, afraid to get caught without protection. It’s no way to live and definitely not the way to enter a relationship with the man who is the father of my child.

My defenses fall. “Like I said earlier, it’s only been you. I never had to wonder whose baby this was. I always knew it was yours.”

Cash’s arms pull me in, and I inhale him.

“I’m not very good at this,” I admit.

He laughs from above. “Yeah, I think we both need some work. But that’s okay, Gracie, I’ll put in the work with you. What do you say we start a fire, and I’ll grab you something to drink? Eggnog?”

I make a face.

“Okay, no eggnog.”

Cat calls from the living room. “I made a punch just for Grace.”

So much for them not listening to our conversation. Cash winks at me and gives me a soft kiss before walking us back to the living room.

“Sorry about that,” Cat says as she hands me punch.

“It’s okay,” I reply. “We needed to have the conversation at some point. Probably should have had it before, but this whole thing has been a whirlwind.”

“A good one though, right?” she asks hopefully. I’m surprised when I follow her eyes to see Jay and Cash are actually standing by the fire working together to get it started...and not fighting. It’s like a Christmas miracle.

“Yeah. A really good one. How’re things with Jay?”

Cat beams. “So good. We’re thinking a summer wedding. But uh, I kinda wanted to ask if you would be in the wedding. So, we’ll wait until you feel comfortable. When is the baby due again?”

I smile. It’s insane how far we’ve all come. “I would be honored to be in your wedding.” Cat pulls me in for another hug. “And we actually found out the baby is due a lot sooner than we thought.”

“Oh my gosh!” Cat screeches. “When?”

“End of May.”

“Wow, okay. So if we do August?” she asks, peering back at Jay and then looking at me again.

I smile. “We’ll be there whenever you want. But yeah, I think August would work.”

Cat looks at me again and grabs my hand, pulling me closer to the Christmas tree. “I know this is crazy, and feel free to say no, it’s just...I feel it in my bones, we’re going to be sisters...and you knew my mother...and...”

I silence her with my hand. “Just say it, Cat. Whatever you need I’ll do it,” I say with a laugh.

“Be my maid of honor? I know it’s nuts after all I put you through, but honestly I’ve never been close with girls, so if it’s not you it will be Cash and that’s weird.” She laughs and turns back to look at Jay again. Letting out a long breath, she starts again. “You are the closest thing I’ve ever had to a sister...I would love it if you would be my maid of honor...*please?*”

Emotions swirl, and the warmth of the room and the holiday get to me, or maybe it’s the hormones, or maybe it’s the fact that I know I’m carrying her niece, but all those things have me falling into her arms, hugging her close, and smiling. “Yes, I will happily be your maid of honor. Thank you, Cat. For everything.”



Carter arrives an hour later, and we sit down for a late Christmas Eve dinner. Apparently, it’s tradition in the James family to have pizza on Christmas Eve. You can’t help but laugh at a family that has more than most choosing to have cheese pizza on a holiday.

Not that I have much to compare it to, but over the years I’ve spent Christmas Eve with Asher, Marion, and Steven, and we always went out to

a fancy restaurant, drank insanely expensive wine, and exchanged beautiful gifts.

But as with the hibachi restaurant, the Jameses don't flaunt their wealth; they take joy in the simplicity.

"So, it's a family tradition that we wear matching pajamas, take a picture in front of the tree, and then play Twister," Cat says as we carry the plates into the kitchen. I ate my weight in pizza, so Twister doesn't sound like a great idea at this point.

I level her with a glare. "Don't you think the pregnant lady gets to sit this one out?"

Cat shakes her head. "Nope. Family tradition, and now that you're one of the family, you've got to participate."

"I'm not one of the family; we *just* got back together."

"You're having his baby, Grace. I'm sure he's dying to get down on his knee to ask you that special question."

My heart skips. It's not that I'm opposed to the idea of marrying Cash, *one day*, I think, but we seriously *just* got back together.

"You don't think he'll ask now, do you?"

Cat shrugs her shoulders as she washes the dishes. I don't think she can see how much this conversation is freaking me out. How the simple idea of being married again sends me in a tailspin of worry. I know most girls would give their left hand to marry Cassius James. He's a catch by anyone's definition.

For most women, just the simple idea of getting married and having a baby is a dream come true. But most women didn't just spend the last six years in a loveless marriage. In a marriage where I lost myself and had to fight to remain *me*. In a marriage where I felt selfish simply for choosing to

be happy, to want to work, to want to spend time with friends, to want to spend time by myself doing the things that I loved. To take a morning and paint. Or to sit and have a cup of coffee in silence.

Or, God forbid, enjoy my job.

It scares the shit out of me that if I get married again, not immediately, but over time, I'll start to feel selfish just for wanting all those things.

*I can be a mother and a partner to Cash without giving up who I am. That's not selfish, is it?*

“Penny for your thoughts?” Cash’s deep voice says in a whisper against my neck. The hairs stand on end, and it’s not the usual chemistry that is causing it.

Shifting on my feet to get some space, I brush past him. “Just going to grab a change of clothes.”

I almost make it out of the kitchen before he grabs my hand and pulls me into his chest. “Pajamas are on the bed,” he says, before dropping a kiss on my lips. When he pulls away, he looks at me as if he’s inspecting my every thought. I try to feign a smile, hoping to hide my worries. “I’ll be in to change in a minute. Just want to talk to Kit Cat.”

I nod and walk out before he has a chance to read me any closer. When I get to the bedroom, I shut the door and lean against it, attempting to stabilize my quick beating pulse. He wouldn’t try to propose this weekend, would he?



## CHAPTER 46

### CASH

**A**fter a spirited game of Twister and the family photo in front of the tree, in which I begrudgingly let Jay partake and had to practically beg Grace to join, Grace yawns loudly and says she's heading to bed.

"I'll be in soon," I say to her, walking her to the door to have a private moment alone. "Everything okay?"

I know this is a lot for Grace. Her entire life changed dramatically this year. It's not lost on me, mine has too, but I know it's different for her. My siblings have always grounded me. Although Grace has Tessa and Marion, with them gone, she seems more fragile than normal. It's odd because she never lets me take care of her, but this week after her scare, it's almost like she's slowly dropped her walls and allowed herself to lean on me. But it feels like she just noticed she did that, so she's working hard to rebuild the walls even higher.

I'll keep climbing them to get through to her, but I wish she'd put down the bricks for a while and let me in.

Grace gives me a fake smile. "I'm fine. Just a long day. I'm tired."



“Okay, Angel. I love you. Get some rest.” I kiss her lips and leave her alone. It’s what she needs, even if it isn’t what I want. Truth is I have other things I need to handle.

I walk to the other side of the house and unlock the door that leads to my grandparents’ suite. It broke me that my grandfather didn’t feel well enough to join us for pizza and Twister tonight. He was always the reigning champion of Twister, for reasons that were rather unfair though. He’d always slice our legs out from underneath us, causing us to fall in a fit of laughter. Through the years, we’d all play the same way. Not tonight though. With Grace playing, I gave both Cat and Carter a stern glare that told them to keep the hijinks out of the game. I know she’s not made of glass, but after the hospital scare, I’m not taking any chances.

Cat is already sitting with my grandmother when I walk into their living room. “Merry Christmas Eve, Grandma,” I say dropping a kiss onto my grandmother’s soft cheeks.

Her eyes shine as she stares up at me. “Cassius, I was just telling Cat how excited I am to spend the day with my family. Cat tells me you have exciting news for us?”

I throw a look in Cat’s direction, and she has the decency to at least look a little sorry. I sigh. “Yes, I do. It should come as no shock to you that I’m dating Grace Kensington, as you and Marion put it all in motion.”

My grandmother’s cheeks turn rosy. “Oh, you heard about that?”

I laugh. “Yes,” I try to grumble as if I’m put out by her meddling. The truth is if my grandmother hadn’t forced me to settle down, I probably wouldn’t have met the woman who makes my heart run in circles.

“Well, I’m glad it all worked out,” she says with a smile. As if the fact that it all ended well gets her out of the doghouse.

It does, but I won't tell her that.

"Grandma, you had no right to play matchmaker."

She laughs. "No, I'd say it was Grace herself who played matchmaker. We paid her to do that, right? Seems it was a bit of a bonus that she got you on top of all that money." She raises her eyes as if she's just backed me in a corner.

"Believe me, I am the one that lucked out in this whole thing."

My grandmother tuts her lips. "Cassius James, you are the head of the company, a good-looking, kind man, who could have your pick of any woman you wanted. Believe me, she's not *unlucky* to be with you."

I smile. "You're biased because I'm your grandson, and I appreciate it. But believe me, I'm the lucky one. I'm also not the head of the company anymore."

My grandmother's eyes narrow. "What?"

Now it's Cat's turn to squirm. "Ask your granddaughter over here what she's been up to. It's only a matter of weeks until it all goes public, Cat, so no time like the present."

Cat sighs. "We're merging with Hanson. Cash will remain in charge of the liquor division, but Jay and I will be handling the expansion."

My grandmother's face is white and her chin locks. "Is that what this engagement was about?"

Cat shakes her head. "Jay and I are happy together. I know it all seems sudden, but we've been friends for years. Our marriage is a good thing. For us and for our families, I promise."

"This isn't what your grandfather wanted," she says, unable to look Cat in the eye.

As much as I hate how Cat and Jay handled everything, I don't want her taking all the blame. It was all of us who got us into this mess, not just Cat. I take my grandmother's hand and squeeze it, drawing her attention. "I'll talk to Pa. I should be the one to deal with this. It was me he left in charge."

My grandmother holds my stare. In it I see so many words pass between us. Disappointment that this has happened, sadness that we've lost control of the company, and maybe a little bit of relief that she doesn't have to be the one to tell him.

I stand up and walk to the bedroom where my grandfather spends his days recovering. When I open the door, I take a minute before entering. It's hard to see someone you have admired your entire life, who has stood tall in both mind, body, and spirit, so weak in front of you.

The monitors tracking his every breath beep steadily, and I watch the rise and fall of his chest as if it were life and death. And in some ways, it is. An immense pressure weighs me down, knowing I'll be disappointing him. He put so much faith in me, and I gave away half his empire.

"Don't just stand there and stare; come in here so I can see you," his deep gravelly voice shocks me.

I move quickly to his side and wait as he hits the button which raises him to an almost seated position. After the stroke, we had a hospital bed and all the equipment necessary for his recovery moved here to the Bristol property. He has chosen to remain hidden here though.

*"You can't let your enemies or your friends know you're weak; that's when they strike,"* he'd always warned.

Unfortunately, I allowed the enemy into our own family. I hang my head in failure.

“Pa, how are you feeling?”

My grandfather’s brown eyes which match my own stare back at me. “I’m fine. Why do you look like I killed your puppy?”

I let out a low laugh. “Well, you did put down Skip without telling us.” I remind him of our childhood dog that was by mom’s side until she took her last breath and was our last connection to our mom.

“The dog went to live on a farm,” he repeats the same line he told us back then.

I smile. “Right, Skip is still living his best life out on the farm with the chickens.”

My grandfather laughs, and it turns into a cough. I grab him his water. “Here, drink.”

He takes a sip from the straw but eyes me sternly, likely hating that he’s showing weakness in front of me. “Let me guess, you finally came here to tell me what happened to the company?”

I raise my eyes to his and tilt my head, trying to read him. “You know?”

My grandfather laughs. “I’m bedridden, not dead. Of course I know. I ran that company for fifty years. You think I don’t have people who keep me apprised of what’s going on?”

I clear my throat, trying to work this all out. “I…” I stutter, lost for words.

“I thought you’d be the one to tell me. You’re supposed to be my people on the inside, Cassius.” His voice leaves no room for anything other than an apology.

My shoulders slump. “I’m sorry. You kept this business running for fifty years, and after a few months in my care, I’ve lost half of it.”

My grandfather says nothing. He points to the bureau behind me. “Top drawer.”

I raise my brow. “What?”

My grandfather rarely says things twice, so despite the fact that I don’t know what he’s getting at, I stand and walk to the bureau. When I open it, I spot an envelope with my name on it. I pick it up and show it to him. “This?”

He nods and motions for me to come back. “I always knew your father would try to come for the company when I retired.”

“Pa, it’s not Dad, it’s Hanson.”

My grandfather shakes his head and holds his finger up to me. It looks like it takes every effort for him to keep it still and not shake. “Don’t be fooled. Your father is involved somehow. He’s always behind the scenes.”

Not wanting to get him worked up, I simply nod. “So, what is this?”

My grandfather’s eyes warm. “I wanted to do this at Quito’s over a lobster roll.”

I smile as the memories of years of lobster rolls and discussions with my grandfather filter through my mind. “Wanted to do what?”

“When Chase was born, your grandmother and I realized your father was never going to be the man to take over the company.”

The mention of Chase and the circumstances of his birth put my skin on edge. “Right.”

“But I knew he wouldn’t go away quietly. The only thing that kept him and the boy’s mother quiet was money. And a lot of it. I couldn’t let your father raise you kids, so we made a deal; I’d turn the company over to him when I retired if he gave me you kids.”

I rake my hands over my chin. He what? My mind can't even wrap around anything that's being said. This can't possibly be true. My grandfather wouldn't give up everything he'd worked for. He wouldn't turn over the keys to our family's business to a man who would destroy it. "But..."

My grandfather shakes his head. "Suffice it to say, he's not happy that I didn't keep up my end of the deal."

"You didn't..." my words fall short.

"Cash, open the envelope."

If the document on the inside hands the company to my father, I will scream. He can't possibly think I'll follow through.

When my hand stills, my grandfather's voice grows louder. "*Open the envelope.*"

I throw back my head and close my eyes before doing as he asks. As I slide it open, I find several documents. "What is this?" I ask as I sort through each one.

The first is a warranty deed, although I have no idea for what. The next one is a contract. Or so it appears.

"The assets of the business. I started divesting the company years ago, fully aware of what was coming."

I look up at him in confusion, but he keeps talking.

"Cash, you were always like me. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I don't know. But like me, you loved the creation side of the business. Getting to know the workers at the distillery, the fermentation process, the distilling process. We were never meant to be just in the office running things. We were meant to be on the ground. I missed that when we moved to Boston. It was good for business and good for our family, but I knew like

me you'd jump at the chance to stay in Tennessee if given the option. It's why I didn't force you to come back years ago to learn the business side of things."

My grandfather pulls a mask of oxygen over his face, takes a hit, and then continues. "I thought I'd have more time...and for that I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you hanging in the wind."

I shake my head. "Pa, you didn't. And I'm sorry that I've been so behind on learning the business side of things. You're right, I do miss being on the ground. The suit and tie thing is taking some getting used to, but I promise I'll get the hang of it. I'll figure out a way to get the company back from Hanson..."

My grandfather shakes his head. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. I didn't want you to choose. And I didn't want you to have to fight my battles with your father. That's why I opened a distilling facility in Rhode Island. It's why I stopped production in Tennessee."

Confusion must stretch in every corner of my face. My grandfather laughs and then coughs again. "I know this is a lot. But the company you merged with Hanson is worthless."

He coughs out a laugh again, and a smile spreads across his face. "Before I got sick, Charles Landry and I were getting ready to bring you on board to announce our new project...next page, son."

I look down at the papers in my hand and flip to the next page.

### **Red, White, and Whiskey.**

"It's been soaking for three years. It's time to take it out of the barrels and begin bottling. It's a new era. *Yours.*"

I'm still lost as to what any of this means. "You were working with Landry? I thought he was going to partner with James/Hanson? Hanson and

Carter have been working the angle for the last few months.”

My grandfather shakes his head. “He didn’t know who knew what, so he kept up appearances, but he was never going to partner with the Hansons. He wanted a Bristol family and that’s what we are. This whiskey is going to be made right here. You can oversee everything. All without the threat of your father taking it. The company has been in your and your siblings’ names for years, but you’ll run it.”

“But Cat is engaged to Hanson. We merged a company that’s worthless. This will destroy them.”

My grandfather glares. “She made a deal with the devil. She should have known better.”

“That’s not fair, Pa. She did what she thought was best. And I think she really loves him.”

My grandfather takes another hit of oxygen and leans back. He looks tired. “It’s all there,” he says, pointing to the paperwork. “I need to rest. But Cash, you can’t tell anyone about this until the announcement.”

“What announcement?”

“At the Fourth of July ball.”

“Fourth of July? Pa, it’s Christmas. You expect me to hide this from the entire family until then?”

“Not just family, Cash. You can’t tell anyone but Frank. You’ll need his help. Get in touch with Landry and he’ll fill in the rest of the pieces.”

“But what about our employees?”

My grandfather nods. “Landry is going to take care of them. Keep them on payroll until we become profitable, which should happen quickly. We’ve got an entire rollout.”



“And what about our distributors, our bottlers? People we’ve done business with for years. We can’t just turn our backs on everyone.”

My grandfather smiles. “They’re all on board.”

Realization dawns on me. The renegotiations of contracts. Bottlers not calling me back. Distributors acting cagey when trying to place product. “You have them all in place? That’s why they were avoiding me. Not because they thought they could take advantage of the new guy...”

My grandfather nods. “Yes, Cash. They all know you will be the head of this. But like I said, I kept the circle tight, and it was only those who needed to know. You didn’t need to know before, but now you do. Just keep going forward as if it’s business as usual. We’ll have our business meetings here with Charles so no one suspects a thing, and when the time is right...”

“In July,” I interject.

“Yes. In July, we announce the new company. My retirement and the closure of James Liquors. And the new era. *Bristol’s Hope*. Whiskey is only the beginning son. Landry and I have many plans.”

I shake my head in awe. “You named the company after my mother?”

After another shot of oxygen, my grandfather nods. “Merry Christmas, son.”

“Wait, Pa, one last thing. Chase...he’s been meeting with Dad. Do you have any idea why?”

My grandfather shakes his head. I’m not sure why I thought he would.

I try to explain. “He found out about his birth mother and the uh, circumstances of his birth.”

“What circumstances?”

My hands inadvertently ball into fists just having to utter the words. “How our father took advantage of our nanny.”

My grandfather shakes his head. “Whoever told you that?”

I feel like I’d known it my whole life. I can’t even remember who ‘told’ me. I was three when Chase was born, so I can’t exactly remember things clearly but Carter certainly could. He was ten.

“Chase’s mother was not the nanny. She was someone else. And it’s not my story to tell. But believe me, it’s not something to uncover. Let this dog lie, Cash. Get your brother to drop it. Only more pain and heartache will come of it.”

“Pa, he thinks he’s the product of rape. It can’t be worse than that.”

“Well, we should certainly clear *that* up. But the answer to who his mother is will provide no comfort. She’s not someone who ever wanted him, and it will not be a warm reunion. Figure out a way to get him off this search. Believe me, it will only end in devastation for everyone.”

So much for a merry Christmas. I’d come in here looking to provide my grandfather with answers, and instead walked out with more secrets than I can carry. A new business, the demise of the old one, a fake merger, and an unknown mother—I leave my grandfather’s room feeling both lighter and heavier than when I entered.



## CHAPTER 47

### CASH

**W**ith Grace curled against my body and my hands wrapped safely around her growing stomach, I leave a trail of kisses down her neck. “Morning, Gracie. Merry Christmas, my angel.”

She hums and lets out a contented sigh. “Merry Christmas, Whiskey.”

I lean over her, hovering, and stare down at the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Even with all the darkness of the night before, she continues to be my light. Secrets can’t exist between us. We’re having a child together. Today isn’t the day to discuss it, but soon I’ll have to confide in her. Nothing is worth risking what we have together.

“This is indeed the merriest Christmas I’ve ever had,” I say, leaning down and kissing her lips.

Grace moans against me. “I could think of a few ways to make it merrier.”

I smile and raise my brows in suggestion. “Oh yeah? Like what?” Even as I tease her, I lower my hands between her legs, rubbing circles just how she likes it.

Grace’s mouth falls open. “Oh, Cash.”

Leaving a trail of hot kisses down her neck, on both breasts, and then stopping slowly at her belly, I move my mouth between her legs and don't relent until Grace is begging for me to enter her. "I love you, Grace," I say as I hold myself above her, just before dropping down to the place where heaven and earth meet.

Grace's hand moves to my cheek, and she sighs. "I love you, Whiskey. So damn much."



With matching pajamas, Grace shyly meets my grandparents. My grandmother is beaming when she learns of Grace's pregnancy, and my grandfather sits quietly with a smile on his face. A moment passes between us, and he shakes my hand in congratulations. "It's going to be one hell of a year, Cassius," he says knowingly.

*Ain't that the truth.*

Grace is quiet. She takes calls from Marion and Tessa, but aside from that she stays by my side all day, helps my sister serve breakfast, and then sits with her cup of tea while we all exchange presents.

When I reach under the tree and, from my position on the floor, look up to hand Grace her gift which is in a small box, the room goes silent, and I see the terror in her eyes. Not going to lie, it hurts that she's that terrified about an engagement, but I smile easily at her, hiding my concern. "Don't worry, Gracie, I'm not proposing."

Her shoulders visibly relax, and she opens the diamond necklace I bought her. “Cash, it’s beautiful.”

Moving behind her, I lift her hair and secure the necklace in place, before dropping a kiss between her shoulder blades. “I’m glad you like it. Had you a bit freaked out there, huh?”

She laughs nervously and leans back against me. “Just give me some time, Cash.”

I cough out a laugh. “Hey, I didn’t ask you a question.”

“Right,” she says softly, looking back at me with a confusing smile. I squeeze her hand three times trying to let her know that I’m not confused about us in the least and then head to the kitchen to toss the wrapping paper that litters the floor.

As I’m finishing up in the kitchen, Carter corners me. “Did you talk to Pa about everything?”

I’m uneasy from keeping secrets, but I promised my grandfather. “Yeah. One thing he did tell me is that Chase’s mom wasn’t the nanny.”

Carter looks as perplexed as I feel. “Really? Then who was it?”

“Don’t know. Pa said not to look into it. I believe his exact words were ‘only devastation’ will follow if we know.”

I level Carter with a stare, and like me he seems to take Pa at his word. Our grandfather does nothing without tremendous thought and care. It’s the reason I’m not divulging my grandfather’s other secrets right now.

I hate hiding the truth from my brother. Like me he’ll be thrilled to know that our company is safe. Or at least our family’s legacy. The company seems to be gone, with a new one in its place.

A new name, a new legacy, and a fresh start.



## CHAPTER 48

### GRACE

I'm feeling a bit uneasy when we get back to Boston. It's not that Cash hasn't been clear. He wants me to move in. I'm just nervous. We've done everything in our relationship backwards. Or sideways. And I don't just mean our sex life.

Giving up my independence, my apartment, my time alone, and just moving in with Cash because it's what he wants, *feels* like going backward. I don't want to lose myself in work. I want to be a partner to Cash in every sense of the word. But I also don't want to overcompensate not being me, just so I avoid making the same mistakes I made in my marriage.

"Can you drop me off at my apartment?" I ask Frank as we make our way down Commonwealth Avenue. Frank arrived this morning and spent the day with us relaxing and watching Christmas movies. It was nice to see Frank and Cash just joke around with each other, more as friends than coworkers.

Frank nods in the rearview mirror, but Cash squeezes my hand to get me to look at him. "It's late. We can stop tomorrow and grab your things. You have enough to get through the night, right?"

I see the worry in his eyes, the concern that our conversations over the last few days have me spooked. He's not wrong, but he's also not right. I just need a little time.

For years, I've been processing things on my own. First as a child, without a mother who gave one shit let alone two. Then in college with boyfriends like Jay who weren't exactly the chatty type. Most recently in my failed marriage where Steven and I were passing ships in the night. I'm used to my solitude, and I just need a little time to figure out my next move without Cash's whiskey-brown pools of hope staring back at me.

"I just want to shower in my own place, curl up in bed, and get a good night's rest. I have a big meeting tomorrow with my bachelorette Sarah. She has a New Year's Eve event she needs a date for, and I've only got a few days to get that handled."

Cash's entire demeanor shifts from hurt to anger. "Your place? Good night's rest? You don't sleep well in the penthouse?"

I'm annoyed. I don't want to have to explain myself. "I thought you knew who I was. Work comes first, Cash. Just like it does for you."

Cash shakes his head and lets out a bitter laugh. "Work has *never* come first for me when it comes to you."

My eyes widen in shock just as he realizes his mistake. He put everything before me only a few months ago and destroyed us. To act as if he didn't is so hypocritical that I feel justified in my need for space. Even as I feel my mind spinning, my body isn't getting the heated reaction that normally happens when I get into a fight. I'm confused because I feel justified in my anger, but I almost feel like I'm *choosing* to be angry. As if I know I'm picking this fight with him so that he'll storm off and let me be for the

night, rather than being an adult and just asking for what I want, which is time and space.

I turn away from him and face the window, knowing that any response right now will come out wrong. Which is precisely why I need space. I'm self-aware enough to realize that I'm spiraling. Blame it on mommy and daddy issues, the divorce, pregnancy hormones—any of those could be it. Quite honestly, it's probably all of those things mixed together with my imperfect personality. But either way, I know I need to get out of this car.

“Frank, can you just stop here? I can walk the rest of the way.”

Cash growls next to me. “Don't you fucking dare stop this car until you get to her apartment.”

I squeeze the seat next to me and slam my lids closed to avoid the tears welling up. An hour ago, we were hugging his family goodbye by the warmth of the fire, and everything felt right. Slowly as we drove to Boston, I allowed my brain to run haywire on the last week, and now we're cursing and radiating anger at one another.

What the hell have I done? It's like the closer we got to the city, the more the anxiety set back in. Is it the city? Is it the circumstance? Is it work? I can't wrap my head around any of it.

As if he can sense my breakdown, Cash unbuckles his seatbelt, slides across the leather, unbuckles me, and pulls me onto his lap. I don't even react. “Angel, what are you doing? Why are you pulling away from me right now?”

I sigh against his chest, still not looking up. I'm curled up like a baby as he strokes my hair. “I just need a night on my own. Everything's *fine* with us.”



Cash doesn't stop raking his fingers through my hair. It's soothing in a way I can't explain. "Okay, you can have your space. But remember, I created an entire room so you'd have your space. *I understand you*. You just need to ask for what you want, and I'll give you whatever that is, because, Grace, I don't want things to be *fine* with us. There's no settling. I want things to be extraordinary."

I close my eyes, giving myself a moment to breathe through what is clearly a panic attack.

After a few moments of breathing, I reply softly, "I could actually maybe use a bath."

Cash chuckles, and I feel his joy shaking my body. "Okay, Gracie, let's take you home, draw you a bath, and then I'll set up your room for you, okay?"

I nod. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

Cash shakes his head. "Baby, you have given me every dream I've had since I met you. You tell me what I can do to keep you happy, and I'll make it happen."

I look up at him, and my eyes dance between his lips and his eyes. "I love you."

Cash moves down and kisses me softly. "I love you too."

From the front of the car Frank clears his throat. "So, am I going to the penthouse or what?"

Cash and I laugh against each other's lips. "Take us home," I reply, and Cash's wide grin makes my heart split in two.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly to the right. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the glass. The background is a light, neutral color.

## CHAPTER 49

### CASH

**T**ruth is, I wanted to marry Grace the minute she came back into my life. Everything is coming together. Obviously, I have to deal with the fallout from Hanson and my sister, and I still have to figure out how to get my brother Chase to come back, but all of those things are secondary to convincing Grace to be my wife.

I've come up with a plan. Step one is to show her how good we are together. Step two is to confide in her and show her that I trust her and that in turn she can trust me. Step three is to prove to her that marriage is more than a trap. It's more than me asking her to give up everything that she loves. We're a team. Our marriage can be different from the one she previously had and the ones that we've seen our parents have.

I'm sitting in a meeting with my lawyer, publicist, and Frank when my secretary peers in and motions toward the phone.

"Grace is on line one. Do you want me to tell her you'll call her back?"

"Nope, I've got it." Turning away from the men at the table who are all eyeing me, I pick up the phone and proceed with step one. "Morning, gorgeous, I take it you got my delivery?"

“What is this, Cash?”

“I’m asking you out. I thought that was clear from my card.”

“Cash, I got the card. I’m just trying to figure out why it says that I have to be at the airport in thirty minutes and why it’s asking me for a first date?”

I chuckle as I speak lower into the phone. “Because I realized that we never had one. And I think you owe me.”

Grace sounds frustrated when she replies, “Cash, we’ve been on plenty of dates.”

I interrupt her. “No, we’ve shared plenty of meals together, but we haven’t ever had a first date.”

She lets out a frustrated laugh. “What?”

“In the Keys, you stood me up.”

Grace grumbles, “That’s not fair. I fell asleep. And then I spent the weekend in bed with you. And have gone on countless dates since then.”

“As my matchmaker, not as my date,” I reply, knowing I’m winning this argument.

“Okay, what about when I moved in with you. We went out during those two weeks.”

“No, we didn’t,” I retort. “We couldn’t be seen in public together.”

“Okay, well, what about hibachi?”

“That wasn’t a date, Grace. That was a chance for us to reconnect. And we sat at a table with five first graders. Definitely *not* a date.”

“So, you’re telling me we’ve been together for months—on and off—and we’ve never gone on a date?” she asks incredulously.

I smirk. “Exactly. Which is why I’m claiming my first date; you owe it to me.”

She laughs as she finally accepts the truth. “Fine, but why do we need to get on a plane to do it? I have that client I’m working with. This is important, Cash.”

I sigh. Its aggravating how much work it will be to prove to her I’m not trying to take precedence over her career.

“I’ll have you back at work in the morning.”

“That seems like a waste of fuel. And bad for the carbon footprint.”

Oh, she’s good.

“Gracie, do me a favor, and for one moment just let me take control. I promise I’ll make it worth it.”

She sighs into the phone. “Fine, Cash, I’ll see you soon.”



My eyes dance watching Grace’s reaction to the plane. “God, if my mother could only see me now,” she mutters under her breath.

I smirk. “Better than being a Kensington, huh?”

Grace laughs as she pats my chest. “Yeah, Steven never rented a private plane for me.”

“Rented?” I laugh. “No, sweetheart, we own this.”

Her eyes grow. “You own this plane?”

I wiggle my brows. “Impressed?”

“Why in God’s name did you fly commercial to the Keys?”

I turn my head, thinking back. “Hm, Carter had it that weekend. Although seeing as how it was all a setup, I wonder what’s true.”

Grace smiles. "And what a setup it was."

"Greatest flight of my life," I admit honestly.

Grace's shy smile breaks every inch of my facade. "Mine too, Whiskey."

"I have a feeling this flight might be a little more enjoyable though," I tease, motioning behind me.

Grace laughs. "If there is a bed back there, I swear to God, Cash, you will totally have earned your name."

"Oh, I intend on doing a hell of a lot more, Gracie. You just tell me, am I having you as an appetizer or for dessert?"

She raises her eyes. "A girl doesn't put out on a first date."

I laugh. "Oh, that's how you're gonna play this?"

She shrugs.

"I was hoping maybe you'd make an exception for me this time around."

She smiles. "I mean, I do know you are excellent with your tongue."

I raise my eyes. "That I am."

"And I wouldn't want to miss out on the whole experience."

She starts to take my hand and walk to the back, but before she gets too far she spins around. "Wait, how many women have you had back here? Oh, forget it; I don't want to know." Her cheeks turn red, and she looks away.

"Angel, I've never gotten this close to heaven with anyone but you."

She laughs as she pulls me into the bedroom and collapses onto the bed. "You are such a player with these lines."

I shrug and reply honestly. "Only for you, baby."



Three hours later we land in the Keys, and Grace's face is worth every ounce of greenhouse gas emissions. Or so Grace admits when she kisses me as we hold hands and walk off the plane.

“So we're going to dinner in the Keys?” she asks with a teasing lilt.

“Yup.” I pull her hand to my mouth and kiss it as I stare into her violet eyes. “You owe me a first date, and I'm taking what I'm owed.”

Grace laughs.

We eat at the restaurant at the hotel. Unlike at hibachi, I make sure we have our own spot, on the beach, with tiki torches and candles on the table. Grace is served mocktails, and she smiles and laughs the entire meal.

“Thank you for this, Cash. It's been a perfect night,” she says as she polishes off a piece of key lime cheesecake.

“Do you trust me?” I ask, as I lower to my knees beside her.

Grace's hand flies over her mouth, but she doesn't have the same fear as she did days earlier. It's still not the reaction I want when this is real, so I pull her hand to mine and kiss it.

“Relax, Gracie, I'm not proposing today.”

She squirms and looks around, but we're by ourselves. “Then get off your knees; you're making a scene.”

I silently chuckle. “Ya didn't mind me on my knees a few hours ago.”

“Cassius James, stop teasing me!”

I laugh louder. “Sorry, you make it so easy.” I look up into her eyes. “Do you trust me?”

Grace sighs. “Yes, I do.”

“Move in with me. Tell me your hopes and dreams. Let me help make them come true.”

Her smile softens. “Can you please stand up? Or sit down...really just get off your knees.”

I laugh as I swipe the sand off my pants and sit across from her.

Grace meets my eyes. “I’m nervous I won’t be any good at this.”

“At what?” I ask honestly.

She sighs. “Motherhood. Living together. Being your partner. Whatever it is that we are doing, I’m afraid I’ll screw it up.”

I nod, already aware of her fears. “Can I share something with you, Angel?”

Grace looks at me pensively. “Anything.”

“I’ve been seeing a therapist.” She sucks in her breath as I continue. “I have no idea what the hell I’m doing. I’m far more screwed up than you, and I’m scared to death that I’ll mess up everything.”

Grace reaches her hand out to me. “You will make a wonderful father.”

I raise my brow. “Will I? I don’t have a good role model...I could be just like my father.”

She shakes her head. “You’ll be nothing like your father. You’re warm, and kind, and loving...you are there for every single person in your family. You’ll never abandon your child...I may have worried about how you would be with me, Cash,”—I flinch because I hate that I ever made her doubt me but know I’ve earned every concern—“but I never worried about you being a father. If anything, knowing you, and knowing all that you

would give to our daughter, made it impossible not to give us a second chance.”

I smile. “Yes, Angel. I will do anything for our daughter. And for the record, I’ll do anything for you. I am going to keep putting in the work. Keep trying to be better. I promise, you are *everything* to me.”

“I can’t promise you I will be what you are looking for,” Grace admits. “I mean I had a terrible model for a mother, and I have no idea how to be in a relationship. I don’t want to lose myself to make you happy.”

I smile.

“Why are you smiling? I just told you I think I’ll be a crap partner and mom.”

“I’m smiling because I know you won’t. And I know it because you’re finally *talking* to me. You’re being honest, and Grace, if we are honest with one another and talk through our fears, we don’t have to become our parents. I don’t have to be a miserable workaholic and crap father, and you don’t have to be a selfish, controlling mom. We can be ourselves and still achieve our goals because I’ll always be in your corner, and you’ll always be in mine.”

I squeeze her hand three times, and she seems to relax and finally opens up. “I don’t want our children to be raised by nannies or to go to boarding school. I don’t want them to look forward to summer because that’s the only time they have one-on-one time with us.” She hits close to my childhood, but I know she’s only doing it because she cares.

I smirk. “Children?”

Grace looks at me nervously. “I know you didn’t propose, but I’m planning a life here.”



I try to hold back the grin, but it bursts through. My plan is working. She's finally picturing a life with me...*she's making plans.*

“And what kind of life do you want?”

Grace looks out at the ocean as if she's really picturing it. “I think I want a house our kids can have a yard to play in. I want a kitchen for you to cook for me.”

She winks and I laugh. “I think that can be arranged.”

“And as much as I love the city and worry about running my business, I want them to have space and a small town to grow up in. I want baseball games and Saturday picnics, and Sunday night dinners with our family. But I don't know how to make that happen and also maintain my business... because, Cash, that matters to me too.”

I look at her in awe because it's all the things I want, and I *can* make it happen. I can give her everything she wants.

“Done.”

Grace frowns. “What do you mean done?”

“It means that your dreams are my dreams, Gracie. I told you to tell me what you want, and I'd give it to you. That was a promise. Give me a few weeks to come up with a plan, but just know that every day I will pick you. I will *choose* you. And I intend on making every one of your dreams come true.”

“Will you dance with me?” she asks, standing up and holding out her hand. It's such a turn-on seeing Grace ask for what she wants. Such a difference from the woman I met only seven months ago who was a shell of herself.

I take her hand and lead her out onto the sand, and beneath the stars, with the waves and birds providing a symphony, we hold each other tight and

sway as I whisper another promise to her, “Always.”



## CHAPTER 50

### GRACE

Cash is a man of his word. I know that everything I've told him I want is what he'll make happen. I just don't know how it's possible. I haven't fathomed a way that I can have my career, live in a small town, and raise my kids with Cash by my side. And yet, I know this man will move mountains for me and somehow make it so that Boston can occur in a town like Bristol. That family can coexist with our busy lives. That love can blossom between us because he says it will. Where there is a will, Cash will make it the way.

"I'm in love," Sarah coos as she stares at the dress I've picked for her New Year's Eve event.

I let out a hearty laugh. "Well, I'd rather you be in love with one of the men I selected, but the dress will do."

"It's just you did such a good job upselling Hayden Hanson, everyone else seems like a disappointment."

I frown. I really did sell Hayden, and he's not coming back. Apparently, he has some ritual with his best friend from home where he spends every New Year's Eve with her. Sounds rather interesting and not exactly

innocent, but I'm hoping that means Hayden is moving on. Even if it's just for the night.

“Oh, there are plenty of eligible bachelors that I sent your way. What about Andrew?”

Sarah looks down at the photos before her and then stares back wistfully at the dress. “I suppose he will do.”

I laugh. “Nope. I am not settling for he will do. Let me look back at our list and see if I can find someone better.”

Sarah wrings her hands together. “Honestly, maybe it's me. I'm looking for a damn unicorn. Someone who isn't threatened by my career. Someone who can stand on his own damn feet. And it wouldn't hurt if he was good at oral too.”

I laugh loudly at her admission.

“See, I told you...a unicorn. He doesn't exist, right?”

I shake my head. Yes, he does. But I'm not sharing. Cash is all of those things and more. “We just gotta find you a nice shot of whiskey,” I reply with a sly smile.

Sarah scrunches her face up. “I'm a vodka girl.”

I shake my head. “Just because you haven't had the right kind yet. Believe me, darling, once you've had the perfect smooth bourbon, you'll never go back.”



New Year's Eve arrives and I'm almost ecstatic. Sarah has a date. He's not Cash level amazing, but he definitely can live up to the Whiskey name, and I have a date with the bathtub and my amazing boyfriend.

When the phone rings and a name I never thought would come across it again appears, I'm at a complete loss for words. Cash is still at work, finishing up some last minute things, and I decide now is better than later to deal with my mother.

"Hi Mom," I say, picking up the phone, uneasy and unsure what to expect.

"Grace, how was your Christmas?"

I sigh. We really are doing this. "It was fine. How was yours?"

"Well, I didn't hear from my only child, but I suppose it was okay. Spent it by myself. Nothing new there. Waited by the phone all day to hear from you, but that didn't occur."

I roll my eyes. Is this woman for real? "I'm sorry to hear you didn't have someone to spend it with. Honestly, I'm surprised Steven didn't ask you to join him since you were both so chummy-chummy last time we talked."

Whoops. I really thought I'd make it further in the conversation before snapping. Oh well.

My mother appears at a loss for words. Flustered and completely speechless. Can't lie and say I'm not a teeny tiny bit proud of myself. But the joy is fleeting. Damn morality sets in, and I feel shitty for being so petty. "Sorry, Mom, that was uncalled for. Or maybe it was called for, but I appreciate you reaching out, so I'll try to bite my tongue."

"Well, I..." My mother grumbles something unintelligible and then starts again. "I'm the one who should apologize. It's been months, Grace. I'm sorry."

Color me shocked. My mother has never admitted to being wrong in the entirety of my life. In fact, she's never been the one to reach out. Before this call I would have sworn that if I never reached out to her, I'd never speak to her again. She just isn't the type to admit her faults, or even see them, in all honesty. I stumble a response. "Thanks, Mom."

"So, I hear Marion retired. How's business been?"

"It's good. Busy. I've taken women on as clients, and it's completely changed our business model, so it's been a lot of work, but very fulfilling."

My mother is silent on the other end of the phone.

"Of course, Marion approved of that switch," I say, continuing to fumble through this awkward conversation. *Why is it so hard to converse with the woman who birthed me?*

"Right. Well, that's good," she replies. "So, I'd love to see you. Are you still living in Marion's apartment? I could come to the city to visit."

Instinctively, my hand moves over my belly as I remember my biggest news. News I'm not ready to share with my mother yet. Or am I? I'm having a child after all. A daughter. Certainly a new life, my mother's grandchild, warrants a second chance. Maybe this could be a new beginning for us. She doesn't have to live up to some perfect mother fantasy I had growing up to become something to my child. And after seeing Cash with his family last week, it's hard to imagine that I have no family to bring to the table. He's got family members popping out of rooms. Literally. And I've just got me. It would be nice to have someone else. Even if it's my mother.

I think.

Honestly, I'm not sure. I never expected to hear from my mother today, let alone considered what I'd do if I did.

*What if she already knows I'm with Cash and that's the only reason she's reaching out?*

Cash isn't wrong that a James is far superior to a Kensington. For my mother it would be in all the wrong ways though. Cash is better than Steven because he loves me the right way. Because he doesn't try to squash my dreams; he tries to enhance them. He doesn't try to convince me not to be *me*, not to work hard, not to take time for myself. He builds me a room to do it. Complete with paint, a reading nook, and all the things I love so that I can have my own space, away from him, even though I find myself wanting him with me even when we're apart.

It's funny that it took my mother calling for me to realize this, but in this moment, I realize there is nothing to be scared of when it comes to my love with Cash. It's real, and it's true, and it won't steal from the other parts of my life. It only makes them brighter.

But none of that changes that once she knows I'm dating a James, once she knows I'm having his baby, all she'll see is status, dollar signs, and stability. Will it be me and my baby she is sticking around for, or will it be what we can provide her?

"Yes, still living at Marion's," I lie.

My mother hesitates. It's momentary, but it leaves me wondering what she knows. "Well, what do you say I come into the city, and we can have a day together. Shopping. My treat."

I roll my eyes. My mother has never treated me to a day of shopping. But I want to give her the benefit of the doubt. I want to stop rolling my eyes, the defense mechanism I acquired through many years of underwhelming moments with my mother. A way to mask the hurt. Something so ingrained in me that my boyfriend bought me a coffee cup referring to it.

“How about we just start with lunch, Mom?”

A whole day is asking a lot. If we can make it through a meal without me wanting to slink down into my own skin, I’ll be amazed.

“Okay. Does tomorrow work?”

Today is New Year’s Eve. Cash has the day off tomorrow, and I know he has something planned.

“How about next week? Saturday?”

Likely realizing she doesn’t hold the bargaining chips to force tomorrow, my mother relents. “Okay, Saturday. Let me know where you want to meet, and I’ll see you then.”

“Sounds good, Mom. Thanks for calling.”

My mom is silent for a beat and then it almost sounds as if she’s gotten choked up when she replies, “Thanks for picking up.”





## CHAPTER 51

### CASH

**M**y meeting with Landry takes longer than I'd like. It's New Year's Eve, and I have a date with my hot girlfriend. There is nothing I want more than to ring in the new year with Grace in my arms. It's a fresh start, the beginning of our life together. We're going to become parents this year. I'm going to meet my daughter. *I'm going to be a dad.*

I know Grace is nervous about history repeating itself. I know she's concerned that not only will she become her mom, but that I'll become Steven. That she'll be made to feel small, that I'll try to fit her into some box that I tick off in my life. My goal this week is to prove to her that will never happen. And Landry is part of that process. So unfortunately, even though he's making me late for my new life to start, he's also a key component and won't be rushed.

"And you're sure they will be open to working with us?" I ask for the fifteenth time since we sat down to discuss this plan.

"They don't have a choice. Caris bit off more than she can chew, and she owes me."

“How so?” I ask. This is my concern with working with a man like Landry. With relying upon anyone else. If they deem it necessary, they will cut you off at the ankles. I don’t even know this woman, Caris, and I feel bad for the way Landry is describing her.

Charles Landry’s blue eyes reach across the computer screen and beckon me to pay close attention. “She trusted the wrong person. I’m pretty sure she’s mixed business with pleasure and it’s cost me a lot.”

The coldness of his words stabs me in the chest. Isn’t that what I’m doing? Mixing business with pleasure. I’m about to proposition Grace with a business arrangement that will make all her dreams come true. But it also means melding both our professional and personal lives.

Is that a risk? Yes. Is it worth it? Honestly, I think it’s the only way forward, so I damn well hope it is.

Do I trust her?

I’m angry I even question it. Grace has given me no reason not to. But I certainly have given her reason to not trust me, and I won’t do it again.

“That won’t happen here,” I reply confidently.

Landry nods. “Doesn’t matter to me. It’s a great business deal. The winery will take off soon, and from what I’ve heard she’s interested in hosting weddings at the property. It’s honestly a great investment. The hotel will be an asset to the town, and with the distillery next to it, we can capitalize on the winery’s reputation and really build the hotel and restaurant into a destination that people from all over will want to visit.”

I glance down at the blueprints that Landry had couriered over this afternoon. My gift to Grace, proof that she can have it all, and that I’ll be the one to give it to her. “I agree. I’ll bring Grace down tomorrow and we can walk the property.”



When my office door swings open, the last person I expect to walk through is my brother Chase, and yet here he is. Momentarily at a loss for words, I just stare at him. His broad frame and domineering gaze make it feel like he's aged five years in the last four months.

“Where the hell have you been?” I manage to ask, the frustration and irritation overpowering my urge to grab my brother in a hug. Chase has always been the baby, and I've always been overly protective of him. While I am closest with Cat, the four of us in general have always been close; it was the James siblings against the world. Somehow, he's ended up on the outside of that circle, and I don't know how to bring him back into the fold.

Pausing at the door, as if shocked by my greeting, Chase shakes his head and then charges forward. “Nice to see you too.” He flops into the seat in front of my desk.

“Nice to see me? I've been calling you for months. *Searching for you.* It was Christmas last week and you don't even reach out to let us know you're okay!” My anger flames my skin as my voice booms across the office.

Chase is unfazed, pulling his ankle onto his opposite leg and holding it while staring at me, waiting for me to finish. “I had to get my head on straight.”

I take a deep breath and stare, waiting for him to continue. When he doesn't, I drum my hands against the desk in irritation, then huff out another breath. “Listen, I get that the Vanessa exposé was a bit of a shock.

Fuck, she screwed all of us, but Chase, we're family. Where the hell have you been?"

I know where he's been. I'm really hoping that he hasn't lost his way so much that he lies to me about it. I'm not sure how we'll move forward if he does.

Chase lifts his hand to his head and runs it through his blond hair. "I... uh...went to see Dad."

My heart finally stabilizes. He's telling the truth. "And?"

"And he swears it's not true. Says that it was a fabrication that Pa told to gain custody." Chase's blue eyes raise to mine, and he looks so unsure of himself, so lost, that it breaks my heart. I can't imagine how hard it's been trying to figure out who he is. Who his mother is. It's unfair that he was put in this position, but fuck my father for his lies.

"He gave us up for the money, Chase. Pa promised him the company when he retired if Dad signed off on being a dad. He gave us up over this." I hold my hands out, motioning to the space where we currently sit. *Our legacy*. Four walls and a lot of green. That's all we were worth to him.

Chase shakes his head, not believing me. Or not wanting to. "No, Dad told me they did this. They took us from him. He was so distraught after your mom died and he had an affair with a woman. They didn't want that to get out so they fabricated a lie, and he had no choice but to give us up. If not, he would have gone to prison."

"Is that what he told you? If so, why wouldn't the woman have just come forward? Told the truth? If she wasn't a seventeen-year-old who he raped, and I'm not saying she was, but if she wasn't, why not just tell the truth? If so, Dad wouldn't have lost anything."

Chase looks down as he kicks at the chair next to him. “Because she didn’t want me either.”

I stand and move to his side, kneeling beside him. The devastation in his eyes, the war that is raging through his body, radiates off him like a true injury. He appears to be in physical pain over this.

“No, Chase. Pa told me it wasn’t the nanny, but he did say the truth would hurt. It would devastate everyone. I don’t know who she was or why she didn’t stick around, but it wasn’t our grandparents’ fault, it was Dad’s. But you have to know that even if Dad didn’t want us, even if your mom didn’t stick around, you have us. You have Pa and Grandmother, you have Cat, Carter, and me. We all love you. We’re family, and we’re going to figure this out.”

“So, I’m just never going to know who my mother is?” he asks on a grimace. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me. You can’t possibly understand. I don’t have any memory to reminisce over, no woman who loved me so much but was taken from me. You and Carter and Cat have that. You have a mother who would have done anything for you...and I have...nothing.”

Closing my eyes as I feel his pain, and my own, I try to find words to help. Wishing I could confide in him. Tell him how I’m the reason that Carter and Cat don’t have a mother. And now I’m the one standing between him and finding out the truth about his own mother.

But I need to protect the business for my family. I can’t give any of them their mother back, I can’t fix the past and give Chase a mother who cared, but I can provide for them. I can help bridge the gap in our family and bring Chase back into the fold.

“You don’t have nothing. You have me. I swear, Chase, I’ll help you move forward. You just have to meet me halfway.”

Chase’s blue eyes meet my own, and he gives a singular nod. It’s not enough to assure me he’s off this tangent, but it’s something.

“Please, just promise me you won’t disappear. I can’t help you if you run off and don’t answer our calls. And Chase, big things are happening...*good things.*”

Chase’s eyebrows lift.

Taking a deep breath, I smile. “I’m going to be a dad. Grace is having a baby. *My baby.*” The pride this fills me with is indescribable.

For once tonight, Chase’s face splits open in a smile. He reaches out, grabs me in a hug, and laughs. “Better you than me.” And this time I laugh too, because for a moment it feels like I have my little brother back.



Upstairs, I find Grace floating about the kitchen in a long, white, silk nightgown. I pause at the door and watch as she hums and shakes her hips, cooking dinner and looking like dessert. For the seemingly thousandth time since I’ve laid eyes on her, I thank the lord and my mother above for sending me this beautiful creature. I doubt there will ever be a day where I don’t feel this way.

Prior to meeting her, my life was so empty, and I didn’t even know it. Now knowing that we are so close to every one of our dreams coming true, I feel my heart squeezing in anticipation. And fear. I understand now what

Grace meant months ago when she said she was scared to feel what she felt for me, that she was afraid that if it ended, it would destroy her. At the time I didn't understand because I'd never had love and lost it. But after going through the months without Grace, after seeing what life is after you've had perfection, I completely understand what she meant. If I lost her after experiencing this kind of love again, I don't think I'd survive it.

Lost in the music and her movements, Grace doesn't notice me stalking toward her. I take her by surprise as I lean against her back, and she draws a surprised breath when I whisper into her ear, "Angel, you better be on the menu tonight."

Grace leans into me and lets go of the ladle which she was using to stir the tomato sauce. "Me and meatballs work for you?"

My hands move down her neck, and I pull her breast out, holding it in my hand. "Sounds perfect."

Grace moans as I twist her nipple between my fingers, and she rocks her ass against my hardness. I lick up her neck, ravenous for her after only a few hours apart. "May I?" I ask as I move to turn the burner off. Grace nods against me, and I put our dinner on pause before whipping her around.

Her nipples pebble and I lower my lips to one, biting as she cries out in pleasurable pain. "Yes, Whiskey, just like that."

"I'm fucking starving," I say huskily, grabbing her ass and lifting her onto the kitchen island behind us.

Grace's eyes are hazy when she looks down at me. She's already worked up from just these small touches. I lift up her legs, and she leans back onto her elbows with a smirk. "Feel free to have your appetizer."

A loud laugh escapes me, but when I move her dress up in search of her panties and find none, my eyes grow laser focused, and I'm left licking my

lips in anticipation. “Oh, you were ready for this, weren’t you?”

She bites her plump lower lip and nods, watching me as I slowly kiss up her inner thigh. “Is this what you wanted?” I tease, alternating between soft bites and my hot breath against her skin.

Grace whimpers and pushes her body closer to the edge, trying to get me to the place that she wants, *that she needs*, for her release.

“How long have you been standing here without panties waiting for me?”

Her whimpering cry is the only reply I receive. I lift my finger between her slit and practically growl when it’s coated with her warmth.

I look up at her right before my tongue touches her skin and keep my eyes on her so that I can see the way her lips fall apart, how her breath comes out ragged, and her eyes shutter closed as I flatten my tongue against her. “Oh, Cash,” she moans, and my dick jumps.

“Eyes on me, pretty girl. I want you to watch me pleasure you.”

Her eyes flash open and she smiles. “Yes sir.”

I eat her like she’s my last meal. I don’t let my tongue stop moving, my fingers darting in and out and stretching her, until I feel her pulsing into my mouth.

She laughs as I look up at her with pride and then falls back onto the granite. “What the hell was that?”

I kiss her inner thigh again before returning her outfit to its proper place. “Just getting started, beautiful. So how about those meatballs?”





Over dinner, which is lit by candlelight, I fill Grace in on my meeting with Landry. This is step two of the plan. Show her I trust her by entrusting her with the biggest secret I have, the new family business.

“So, he wants to open a whiskey distillery in Bristol?” she asks between bites.

“Not *wants to*, Grace, it’s happening. My grandfather and Landry put this entire thing in motion...hell, my grandfather has already distilled the first few batches. This operation is up and running...adding a bar to it though, that was my idea. When I heard about the winery, I thought it was pretty fucking brilliant. What do you think?”

She beams. “I couldn’t agree more. It’s amazing, Cash. And this means that you don’t have to partner with Hanson?”

A knot forms in my gut every time I think of what this will do to Cat. I nod. “The company has basically been stripped of all its valuables. Our contracts, our grains, our rye...hell, our damn supply of whiskey—it’s all under the new name.”

“And you had no idea?”

“Not a clue. I mean it makes sense now. So many things that I saw as red flags—things falling apart, contracts up in the air—I thought it was all because others were concerned about my leadership...or maybe even that my grandfather had started slipping in the last few years. But the man’s sharp as a tack. His body isn’t all there, but he’s been planning this for years.”

Grace is quiet for a moment. “And you aren’t worried what this will do to Cat? I mean Hanson is going to be livid. The company will suffer...”

I reach across the table for her hand. “I know you’re friends with that family, but you can’t say anything, Grace. My grandfather swore me to

secrecy. Honestly, I shouldn't have told you, but I don't want secrets between us."

"Cash, my loyalty...my love...you have it all. I'm only asking about your sister. The Hansons are big boys, and they should have done their due diligence. If they had, these things would have been apparent, I'm sure."

I shrug in agreement at that and feel myself relax. "I think Hanson was so focused on one-upping me, he didn't do any due diligence to be honest. But yes, I am worried about Cat. In the end, this will benefit her too, though. This is our family's legacy."

Grace smiles. "It's amazing, Cash. I know you've missed working in the distillery." She bites her lip. "Does this mean you'll be spending more time in Bristol?"

Without responding, I stand up and move next to her, then kneel beside her chair. Grace's eyes crease in confusion, and I smile as I reach to my back pocket. "Yes, it does mean that I'll be spending more time there. Which means I'll need my Angel by my side."

I reveal a small black box and place it on the table in front of Grace. She eyes it curiously. "Cash, what is this?"

"Open it, Gracie." She looks at me and then back at the box again and then lifts the top. She exhales when she lifts the key on the inside.

"It's a key to where we are going tomorrow," I explain.

"And where is that?"

"It's a surprise," I reply with a smirk.

Grace pushes me over, and I fall to the ground laughing. "What? How about a thank you?"

"You have to stop doing that!" she says with wide eyes.

"Doing what?"

“You know what you’re doing.”

“Haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” I say coyly as I get back on my knees and look up at her.

“Get off your damn knees, Whiskey.”

“Ohhh,” I say, acting like I’m just now understanding her. “You mean you thought I was proposing again?”

She shakes her head. “You’re insufferable.”



## CHAPTER 52

### GRACE

The drive to Bristol is quick today since there aren't many cars on the road. New Year's Day is a day better spent in bed, nursing a hangover or making love, than it is traipsing outdoors in New England, but for some reason that's what Cash has us doing. Although he told me about the distillery and the winery, I didn't quite imagine that we'd be walking the grounds as we stared out at the ocean.

"This is incredibly beautiful, Cash."

He squeezes my hand, and I can feel the excitement radiating off him. I'm not sure I've seen him this happy ever in Boston. Unless we're alone in the penthouse. But even then, he doesn't have the same intensity that he has right now, the same fire. He was meant to run this business from the ground.

"It's pretty amazing, right?" He leans down and kisses me quickly before taking another moment to point out something else he finds fascinating about the operation here. That's all he's been doing since we arrived. Pointing out what he loves, things that his grandfather put into place, and

ideas he has. He's constantly reaching into his pocket to take out his phone and jot down notes. It's freaking adorable.

As he babbles on, my mind drifts to the phone call with my mother. I haven't told anyone about it yet. Part of me is embarrassed. Is it weak of me to agree to meet with her so easily after everything she's done? And considering her penchant for speaking to the press, I should be worried that she'll out Cash and me. It's not that I don't want people to know we're together. I mean, they certainly will soon enough. It's just not going to look great that I'm pregnant and the timing clearly lines up before the divorce.

And he *was* my client.

I look over at him and wonder what he'd think if he knew I was considering allowing my mother back into my life. Will he allow it?

*Allow it?* I mock myself; he doesn't control me.

But it affects him too. As much crap as I give him about slowing down and giving me time to catch up to his penchant to make me his wife, I know he's a huge part of my life already.

I smile at him as he continues his exciting chatter. His brown hair blows in the cold wind, and his cheeks which are covered in scruff are rosy from the frigid temperatures. I'm wearing the gloves he bought me and riding boots he surprised me with this morning. It's like the man thinks of things I need before they ever cross my mind. And he provides them with little effort. The perks of money, I suppose.

"I haven't even shown you the best part yet," he says with a twinkle in his eye.

"Does it involve a bed or a bathtub?" I tease. The man's appetite has only grown since my pregnancy. It's like the idea of his baby growing inside me makes him an animal.

Cash pulls me close to him and drops his forehead to mine. “No, although that could certainly be arranged.”

I kiss him and then lick my lips to preserve his taste. “Okay, Mr. James, lead the way.”

Cash shakes his head at me. “You know what calling me Mr. James does to me, Angel.”

I smile. Yes, I do. And I happen to love it.

Cash lifts me up and carries me inside the building, a huge smile on his face the entire way. “Oh, am I getting punished now?” I tease.

He laughs, but we both grow quiet as he brings me inside the brick building. I look around us, taking in the incredible setup with curiosity. “Is this the distillery?”

Cash nods and sets me down on my own two feet. “But this *isn't* the best part.”

I raise my brow. “No?”

He shakes his head and leads us into an elevator. It's all glass and you can see the ocean as we climb each level. We reach the top, only five floors up, and Cash leads me out. The floors are a deep oak, and the entire room smells like the whiskey and wood that I've come to know as Cash's signature scent. I really need to figure out a way to bottle it—we could make a fortune.

“Your new office?” I ask curiously, looking around and appreciating the wooden barrels that also grace his office in Boston.

“*Our* new office,” he says looking down at me.

I eye him cryptically. “Our?”

Cash smiles but I see the nervousness in his gaze. “Follow me.”

With my hand in his, he leads us down the hall. Above one door hangs a sign that says Bristol's Hope, Inc. which leads to a suite of offices on the other side of the glass. On the opposite wall it says Grace Kensington & Associates. I stare at it and get lost in the way the G curves larger than the rest and how it almost looks like a magical twist below it, as if he tried to replicate a fairy godmother's magical zap.

It's incredible and overwhelming and so very confusing.

"What is this?" I whisper. I feel his eyes studying my reaction, but I can't school my features. I have no idea what expression I'm giving him. Probably wonder.

"*This,*" Cash says as he opens the door to the office suite and waits for me to enter, "is all yours, if you want it. And before you think that I'm trying to control you and force you into small town living like Steven did, just listen to my pitch, okay?"

I nod numbly and don't interrupt him. He's nothing like Steven, but I'm too overwhelmed to tell him that.

"So, the woman here, Caris Milsom...she's built the winery, and they want to start hosting weddings. We, as in the Milsom family, the James family, and Charles Landry, are going to build a hotel and restaurant here that will rival any hotel in Boston.

"The idea is that you set up your business here. It will be the elite of the elite. Not just people from Boston, but New York City, hell, maybe even London, will come here for your services. You'll have full use of the hotel, restaurant, and property for your dates. You can host retreats, events, anything your heart desires that you think will lead to helping people find their perfect match."

My eyes are alight as I listen to him. I'm practically salivating as I think of all the possibilities.

"You want your business. You want to be a mom. You want to be a partner in our relationship. You can do all of that here, Grace. I know it's not Boston and I don't want you to think I'm forcing this on you. If you say no, that's okay, no hard feelings. But I don't want you to think that you have to give up one thing for the other."

He leads me down the hall, and we pass a few offices—more than we have in Boston and certainly more than I need for just Rachel and me—but I take it all in, storing away thoughts of what could be done as I see things that spark my imagination. We end at the last office. When he opens the door, I see it has floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the bay. It's almost four o'clock, so the sun is already starting its descent. It's beautiful and surreal. I shake my head in amazement.

"There's a nursery on site. For now, it will just be for our baby, but eventually we will staff it for other employees as well. You won't have to miss out on anything, Grace." When he turns to me, nervousness worries around his eyes. But there is also that same boyish hope, the puppy dog anticipation, and the yearning to please that pools in those bourbon whiskey-brown eyes that I fell in love with so many months ago. The man who is always trying to give me everything, always pushing for more.

I smile as I turn to face him straight on and brush my hand against his cheek in wonder. "You did all this for me?"

Cash's eyes watch as my own dart to his lips and then rise to meet his again. "I'd do anything for you, Grace."

Shivers cascade down my chest and warm my belly. A tingling excitement springs on my cheeks, and my lips break out into a blinding



smile. “I love it.” I throw myself at him, kissing him fiercely while also whispering between kisses, “I love you and I love all of it. Thank you, Cash.”

He pushes me back into my office and kicks the door shut with his leg. It’s quite comical because the walls are glass; the door is offering no barrier. Not that anyone is in the office today. It’s a federal holiday and these offices aren’t inhabited yet either way.

“Hmmm, this doesn’t offer the same privacy as my office; we may need to rethink this,” I tease him as he pushes me back against the sleek black desk. The walls which aren’t glass are a lilac color and the chairs, like my office in Boston, are a deep amethyst color.

Cash has me on the desk and is pulling my pants down to my ankles before I can think to object. “Top drawer, Gracie,” he says, nodding to the other side of the desk. I lean back and reach into the drawer, pulling out the only item in there, a thin black remote.

My forehead creases in confusion. “This better not be a sex toy, Whiskey.”

He throws his head back in a deep chuckle which has me clenching tightly. “No, you dirty girl, it’s for the glass. Privacy curtain.” I glance around the office but fail to see curtains anywhere.

Cash laughs and grabs it from me. When he hits the button, the room grows dark. We never turned on the light, and now that the glass is shaded, even the low sunlight evades our eyes. “Ohhh,” I crow in excitement. “Never mind, this will work.”

He chuckles again, but this time I feel it against my skin as his warm breath leads a trail toward my panties. Yes, I’m wearing them today and

he's not thrilled. "Really, Angel, I thought we had an understanding?" He looks up and meets my eyes with a dare.

"Cassius James, I am not going to be panty-less every day if we are working in the same office building."

I feel Cash's smile against me. He pulls the cloth to the side, and his tongue darts in and out, drawing a hissing breath from my mouth.

"Really, Gracie? After this wonderful surprise today, buying you an office building, creating a dream job for you, you'll threaten to withhold *this* from me?"

I bite back a smile. *He bought me a building!* Let me repeat that...the man bought me a building! And built me a perfect office. With a nursery. I mean...if I wasn't already wet from what he was doing, good lord, I'd be drenched. He hits another button on the black clicker, and the glass wall behind me which is shaded turns into a mirror. And now all I can see is the way his neck strains as he runs delicious, teasing circles against my clit.

*Holy fuck, this is hot.*

"I know you like to watch," he murmurs.

"Okay, you win. No panties in the office," I manage to pant out as I start riding his face, even more turned on now that I can watch his every move and my own body's reaction to his every touch. It's erotic in a way I can't describe. This must be how he feels when he watches us on his camera. Suddenly curious, I ask, "Wait, do you keep recordings of the surveillance videos from your office and the penthouse?"

Cash growls against me as he pulls me closer. When he looks up at me, his hair falls across his face, and he continues to work his tongue, but his eyes remain on me. "Why? You want to see them, Gracie?"

I suck in a breath. Everything is too much. The feelings. The way he's looking at me. The business. The naughtiness. It all makes me dizzy. "Do you watch them?" I ask as I feel my eyes growing hooded.

Cash nods against me.

"Do you take your cock out when you do?" I practically whimper.

His eyes lock on mine as he nods.

"Do you fist it, moving faster, imagining it's me holding you. Me squeezing you?" I pant, picturing him doing just that. Cash doesn't take his eyes off me, and the pressure, plus the pleasure and the adoration in his eyes, spurs the strongest orgasm I've ever had on his tongue. Cash moans as he laps it up. Then he pulls me off the desk. "Lean against the chair, Grace, and stick your ass up. I want you to watch as I fuck you. I want you to see what I see, and then we can watch this recording together."

I do as told, turned on and excited by the prospect that he has more cameras. The sound of Cash's belt jangling and his zipper lowering brings me back to the present, though, and has me clenching and biting my lip. He lifts my hips up, and I feel his heavy tip prod at my entrance. Then in one fell swoop he slams into me, filling me so completely. "Oh, fuck, Grace, this is just the beginning. We can have everything here," he says through grunts. "Anything you want, baby, anything at all, it's yours."

I scream as he continues pounding. "And I'm yours, Cash, all yours."

My words send him into a frenzy, and soon he's hitting the spot inside of me that makes us both seize up and see stars. I watch his face in the mirror with rapt attention though, wanting to focus on the way he loses control for a moment, how he gives himself completely to me. How his eyes roll back and he bites down hard as a growl escapes. How his fingers dig into my

hips as he takes everything he needs. How his mouth falls open on a curse as his cock begins to pulse and he empties himself inside me.

Cash falls against my back when he finishes, and he kisses my neck, panting against my skin. Then just as I'm growing accustomed to the sweetness, he smacks my ass and pulls out. "Now, that's what I call a great first day in the office."

I laugh as I clean myself up and roll my eyes. "You're crazy."

Cash grabs my hands and pulls me to his chest. "For you, Gracie. I'm *crazy for you.*"



## CHAPTER 53

### GRACE

**L**unch. It's *just* lunch. Of course nothing can be *just anything* when it involves my mother.

“Do you want to go to Bristol with me today?” Cash asks as he dresses in front of me. “I have to meet with my grandfather, but after we can go by the office and then grab an early dinner if you want?”

I bite my lip. I still haven't told him about my lunch plans, and apparently, I'm not going to. “Actually, I have plans today. But if you come back tonight, we can do dinner at home?”

“Okay, Angel, I'll plan on it. Do you want me to leave you Frank for the day? I can drive myself to Bristol.”

*Yeah, no. Definitely don't want Frank driving me to meet my mother.*

“No, that's not necessary. Go with Frank. I'm sure he'd love to catch up with you for a few hours without me around.”

Cash pauses putting socks on and looks at me. “Frank loves having you around.” He grumbles under his breath and laughs. “I think he likes you more than me.”

“That’s because I’m prettier than you. And I smell better. And I am not so grouchy.”

“Can’t argue that. You most certainly are prettier.” He turns around and crawls toward me on the bed. “As for how you smell, I’ll be the judge of that.” I laugh as Cash grabs my hips and pulls me under him, inhaling my neck with exaggeration.

“I love you,” I say, wrapping my arms around him.

“Love you too, Angel. How’s my baby treating you? You feel okay?” he asks as he runs his hand across my belly. He’s started talking directly to my stomach, and I find it completely adorable.

“She’s been a good girl, not causing me any trouble.”

Cash leans down to drop a kiss on my stomach, whispers something into my skin, and then leans up to kiss me on the lips. “Good. Enjoy your day. I’ll see you tonight.”

Then without another word he grabs his socks, puts on his shoes, and he’s out the door, leaving me with my guilt.



My mother greets me at the restaurant with a smile. “Grace, you look lovely,” she says as she gives me a once-over. I don’t stand since I can’t hide my stomach any longer. I’m halfway through this pregnancy, and the bump has officially popped.

“Thanks, Mom. You look good too.” And she does. Lily Winter always looks beautiful. It’s how she’s seduced so many men throughout the years.

Her beautiful long caramel hair falls in waves at her shoulders, her plump lips—which are no doubt fake—and botoxed face leave no wrinkles to indicate her age. In all honesty, most would mistake her as an older sister, which leaves me to wonder how she'll react when she finds out she's going to be a grandmother.

My mother sits down, and we both look at the menu awkwardly. We've already gotten the *I'm sorrys* over with on the phone, so now would appear to be the time to just make small talk or catch up, but it's awkward.

How do you just move on from your mother destroying you so publicly? Then again, I forgave Cash for doing the same thing. I bite the inside of my cheek and focus on the menu.

"The salads here are very good," I say, aware that my mom would never dare to have the wood-oven pizza I'm currently craving. I'm sure she'll have something to say about my choice, and she'll eye me as I devour each slice. But I don't care. I'm starving and so is this baby.

"Actually, I was just thinking that the burrata pizza sounds delicious. Would you be interested in splitting that, and we can get salads as well? Ya know, live dangerously but still have our greens?"

I stare at my mother with her teasing voice and the glint in her eye as if she's got two heads. I've never seen my mom eat pizza. This is not an exaggeration. It's *never* occurred. Who is this woman and what did she do with my mother? Actually, scratch that, I much prefer this version.

I push a piece of hair behind my ear and reply, "Sure. Sounds good."

"Would you like to split a bottle of white wine as well? I remember you always liked Sauvignon Blanc. I wouldn't mind the Kim Crawford if that works?"

I'm so stunned that she remembered my preference for wine that I just nod an assent before realizing that I cannot have a glass of wine because I'm having a baby.

"Actually, Mom, I um..." *Dammit why is this so hard?* "I'm pregnant."

My mom's jaw drops open, and then she peers down at me as if a baby should be sitting on the table and not hidden in my stomach under my sweater. I push my chair back so she can in fact see that I have a bump.

"Wow, Grace, I had no idea. Does Steven know?"

The waiter's arrival is perfectly timed for me to take that little nugget and decide how to reply. I only have a few moments to decide whether I'm going to divulge who the father is. I had decided before arriving I wasn't going to tell her about Cash. Not yet anyway. But now that she's—I don't even know what she is, I can't put my finger on it precisely—*just different*, I am second-guessing hiding his identity.

"We're going to each get the chopped salads, dressing on the side, please, and then the burrata pizza," I instruct. "Also, do you have a decaf iced tea?"

The man nods.

"Great, I'll have that with a lemon. Mom, what would you like?"

My mother turns to the man and smiles. "Bring us a bottle of champagne. It seems we have some celebrating to do."

I roll my eyes. Of course, she's excited by this. She thinks I'm back with Steven and having his baby. God, she's in for a surprise.

"Mom, I can't have champagne." I motion to my stomach.

"A little bubbly never hurt anyone. You can have a little to toast this amazing news. I'll drink the rest."



Now that sounds more like the woman I remember from my childhood. I sigh an assent to the waiter, and he disappears.

“So how did this all happen? Last time we spoke, you and Steven weren’t even on speaking terms.”

I laugh because this is ridiculous. The last time she and I spoke, my mother and I weren’t on speaking terms either.

“Steven and I still aren’t on speaking terms. We’re officially divorced,” I say proudly. It gives me immense pleasure to see my mom’s reaction to this. She winces as if she thinks this baby is his and I haven’t told him. I’m nothing like her though. I would never hide my child from her father. “I met someone else, and we are very happy together.”

My mother nods. “Well, I hope you don’t mean Jonathan, because I saw he’s engaged, and another affair is not what you need.”

“I didn’t have an affair, Mother. I was never *with* Jonathan. Steven had the affair.”

“Right. Well, then who is he?”

“His name is Cash. He’s a good man.” I decide not to divulge that he’s Cash James. If she has any inkling as to who he is, she doesn’t reveal her thoughts.

“Right. Well, that’s good. So how far along are you?”

Instinctively, my hand goes to my bump. “Halfway. She’s due at the end of May.”

My mother’s face tightens, and she stares down at my stomach. “She?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m having a girl. Cash and I found out on Christmas Eve. It was quite a surprise.” I smile at the memory.

The waiter delivers our drinks, and we wait while he opens the bottle and then pours the champagne into two glasses. When he leaves, she motions to

my glass which I pick up out of obligation. She raises hers and looks at me. “I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Grace. I’ve disappointed and hurt you.” I’m surprised to find emotion in her eyes as she speaks. Her brown eyes fill with grief, and I reach across the table to squeeze her hand. “I’m hoping we can have another chance. That you’ll give me a chance to be better, and to get to know my granddaughter,” she says softly, looking down at my stomach again. “Cheers, darling, may you be a better mother than I was and your daughter be just as wonderful as you have always been.”

My throat grows tight as I clink my glass against hers. “Cheers,” I reply hoarsely, overwhelmed and emotional that I may actually get another second chance, not just at love, not just at work, but with my own mother as well. Is it possible that I can actually have it all?



## CHAPTER 54

### GRACE

Cash and his fake proposals are driving me nuts. For Valentine's Day, Cash flew us to Nashville and introduced me to all of his old friends from the time in his life when he lived there. We stayed at his house with the wraparound porch, and as the sun dipped down across the fields of gold, Cash kneeled in front of me, and I thought for sure this was it. He was *finally* going to propose. At our first business date he'd described to me his version of a perfect marriage which included nights on the porch in Nashville. I thought he wanted to take us full circle. But nope, he just saw a penny he wanted to pick up on the ground, and when he saw it was heads up, he told me to make a wish. I told him I wished he'd go screw himself, and he laughed so hard he fell over.

The following week while out at a restaurant after an ultrasound where we got to see our baby's angelic face, Cash was waxing poetic about how happy he was and then he dropped to one knee again. Or so I thought. I watched him quietly, wondering what trick was up his sleeve. He was tying his damn shoe. The man always wears loafers. I swear to God he intentionally wore shoes with ties just to tease me.

So today when he has asked me to meet him in Bristol at the winery, I already have it in my mind to ignore whatever stupid stunt he pulls next. If he drops to his knee again, I'm not even going to give him the gratification of looking down. I'll have the last laugh.

It isn't lost on me that when he does this for real, he'll be like the boy who cried wolf, and I'll be immune to it. He's going to ruin his own damn moment.

Frank eyes me in the rearview mirror and clears his throat. "Something bothering you, Grace?"

I roll my eyes. "Bossman is driving me nuts with his stupid nonproposals. Seriously, can you tell me if he's got some big plan? Because if he does, you can tell him it's backfiring. At first he was softening me up to the idea, but now when he asks me, I'm going to say no."

I fold my arms across my chest in defiance and Frank laughs. "Sure you will."

I glare at him. "He's not so irresistible, Frank. I *can* resist him."

Frank chuckles. "Yes, you resisted him for a whole week after he begged for you back as I recall."

My jaw drops. "I thought you were on my side."

He laughs harder. "Just reminding you that like him, you can't resist him. You each get each other so worked up. Look at you—you're practically salivating for an engagement you don't even want!"

"That's not true; I want it."

Both Frank and I lock eyes at my admission. *Shit*. I don't even think I realized how badly I wanted it to be real until this moment.

"You can't tell him," I say quickly.

Frank's eyes close and he nods. "You have my word."

We come to a stop in front of the winery, and it's bustling with cars. It's the end of March, so the weather is just starting to warm up and it appears so is the town of Bristol. People mill about with smiles and light jackets, probably happy to finally be out of the house and past the grueling months of winter.

Frank opens the door and helps me get out of the car. Unfortunately, I actually need his assistance now. This belly of mine gets in the way of everything. I'm constantly bumping into inappropriate things, like doors and clients and coffee cups. I've broken so many that Cash sent a memo to Rachel to only keep Styrofoam in my office, and he replaced all of our cups with paper for the time being.

Cash walks out, and my heart skips a stupid beat like it always does in his presence. He looks edible in an emerald-green button-down, dark jeans, and a smile, his hair windblown and unkempt as his eyes dance as they peruse me. You'd think that my whale-like status would turn him off, but he's just as hungry for me as the day we met.

I blush as he nods at Frank and then pulls me in for a kiss. "Hey beautiful, thanks for making time for me today."

I close my eyes and inhale his scent, appreciating the warmth of the sun on my skin. "Honestly, it's good to get out of the office. Besides, I could really use some time here so that I can brainstorm some more."

Cash's eyes remain on my lips, and he rubs his thumb over my bottom one. "No work today, sweetheart. This is purely pleasure." His warm breath teases my skin, and I lean in for another kiss. Cash chuckles against my lips and pulls me toward the entrance. "Come on, Angel."

As he opens the door, I retort, "I'm only going in there if you promise you won't drop down on your knee for another fake proposal. No more

jokes, Cash. I don't like those kinds of surprises..."

The words die on my lips as a small group yells, "Surprise!"

My eyes clock Marion in the corner, Tessa standing beside her with Rachel, a few friends from Boston, Caris, the owner of the winery who has become a good friend as we work out the kinks of our new business, Cash's grandmother, and then Cat standing beside her with a big smile.

"Sorry, you should have mentioned you hated surprises before," Cash teases in my ear. Lucky for him he doesn't choose this moment to drop to his knee for another fake proposal. I would have kicked him.

Smiling, I whisper, "Did you arrange all this?"

"Yup. Happy baby shower, baby. Now I'm going to get out of here, because I heard these things are only for women." He kisses my cheek, waves at his family, and heads out with Frank.

"Are you surprised?" Cat asks, walking up and grabbing me in a hug.

"Shocked," I admit.

Tessa beelines toward me and squeezes. "Gosh, this place is fantastic. I wish I could live here."

I feel a pang of remorse. No one in this room knows about our plan for the new companies, least of all Cat. My eyes dart to Caris's in concern. *She knows not to mention the business and the distillery, right?* As if she can sense my nerves, she smiles and winks. *Okay, I guess Cash took care of that too.*

"Yes, it's beautiful, right?"

Tessa nods and then she laughs uncomfortably. "Although, I wouldn't think a winery is a great place for a baby shower. Nice job, Cat! Really rubbing it in that Grace can't drink."

Cat holds her hand up. “Don’t blame me. This was Cash’s plan. I have a feeling it’s because he’s trying to woo Grace into loving Bristol, so she’ll agree to move here after the baby is born.”

If she only knew how little convincing he’d have to do. I’d move here in a heartbeat. He leased a condo for us for the next year so we can figure out what we want to do. We agreed to give this business plan a year to see if we’re both happy. Then we can reevaluate whether or not we want to stay in Bristol or commute from Boston.

Or somewhere else, I guess.

Or maybe he’s just waiting to see where we are in a year. It’s not like we’ve made a commitment to one another. I mean obviously we’re having a baby, but he still hasn’t proposed. Maybe he wants to see how we do at parenthood before we make anything permanent.

Even as my mind works, I roll my eyes internally. Cash isn’t going anywhere. He loves me.

“It’s a beautiful town,” I admit.

We spend the afternoon laughing and opening far more presents than there are people. Every single woman in this room spoiled our daughter, and I honestly can’t wait to see her in the tiny clothes that look like they wouldn’t fit a doll.

*Are babies really that tiny? And why don’t any of my friends have one?* I have no idea how to even hold a baby. It’s been years since I babysat, and it was never for infants.

By the time Cash and Frank come back, I’m spiraling. No one else in the room would know, but the second Cash’s eyes meet mine, it’s as if he can see my internal thoughts. He walks up and wraps his arms around me and nuzzles his head into my neck. “It’s a lot to take in, huh?”

I try to relax into his embrace, but I'm just a bunch of nerves. I grab one of the outfits and show it to him. "Cash, what are we doing? Have you ever held a baby? I mean look at how tiny this is!"

He chuckles against my neck. "We'll figure it out." He takes the outfit and stares at it for a moment, the smile still tickling his face. "Our baby is going to be wearing this soon," he says with wonder and then lets his hand drift to my stomach.

She decides to give him a little fist bump or kick right at that moment, and both our eyes jump. "Looks like someone is already a daddy's girl."

Cash's eyes crinkle. "Just like her mommy."

I exhale a long breath and lean against him. "Sorry, I got a little crazy."

Cash rubs circles against my stomach and kisses my temple. "It's okay, Angel, I know this is a lot. New baby, new office, new house..."

I turn to him. "House?"

"I mean condo. You know what I mean."

"Right. Speaking of, can we stay there this week? I want to get some stuff done in the Bristol office and get the nursery set up."

Cash smiles. "Anything you want."



After my admission to Frank in the car, and my freak-out at the baby shower, where Cash once again showed me he is the calming force I need in my life, I have come up with a plan to show Cash that he's not in this alone.



For so long he's been chasing after me, literally since the first day we met when he asked me to dinner and I didn't show up, to our non-dates dates when he forced us to spend time together even though I knew enough about him to properly set him up with a match, to the day in Bristol when he caged me against the wall and told me he loved me. Even after he'd broken my heart, I still felt the pull of him. For once I want to show him that I want this just as badly as he does. Not because he wants to marry me, not because we're having a baby, but because I really want to be his wife. *I want to be his partner.*

He's made it all so much less scary by proving to me that he really knows me. That he gets me. And that I'm enough just as I am.

My plan is two-fold. The first part was put into place this past week while we were in Bristol. It's the reason I asked if we could stay. I met with Caris to ask her to help with my little project since she knows more people in town than I do, and I'm pretty sure Cash is going to love the surprise.

The second part involves my mother. It's time to let him in on the fact that she's back in my life. Since our first lunch in January, we've seen each other almost weekly. It's incredible how much she's changed. She hasn't forced me to tell her anything more about Cash. She hasn't asked about his job, or his family, not even his last name. And I've kept my mouth shut because I know there is a history between my mother and Cash's mom, and I'm not ready to bring those two worlds together. But the fact that I haven't shared any of this with Cash feels crippling. We don't need secrets.

At first I was nervous that he'd get angry about how she treated me, and he'd put his foot down about our lunches, but I know that's not the case now. If he acted in anger it would only be because he cared, not because he

was trying to control me. I wanted to give it time to make sure she really changed, to ensure that it wasn't just some game.

Honestly, I've really enjoyed having a relationship with my mother. She *has* changed. She seems to genuinely care about me and my child.

Unfortunately, I have to cancel lunch with her this week since I decided to stay in Bristol. But I'm hoping that tonight I can talk to Cash and that next week he'll join me to meet her.

"Are you sure you don't have time at all this week, Grace?" my mother asks over the phone.

I stare at the bay from my desk. "I'm sorry, Mom. I'm not even in Boston this week. I'm spending the week in Bristol with Cash." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. *Why did I mention Bristol?*

*Shit.*

"Oh, is his family from there?"

Trying to think of anything other than admitting that Cash is *the Cassius James* and yes his family is from Bristol, I quickly say, "Didn't I tell you? I opened an office in Bristol."

"Oh, no, you didn't mention that. Isn't that going to make it hard for you to see Cash? I hope you realize how busy you'll be with a baby and a business. You don't want to make it harder by working so far apart."

I lean back in my chair and instinctively turn to Cash's side of the building. I can't see him from here, but there is a secret door that connects our two offices. I smile thinking of all the fun that will be once we don't have this huge belly to contend with. "He's actually moving his business here too. It was his plan. Have his office and my office in the same spot, in the suburbs, so that I don't have to pick and choose between work and

family. He even had a nursery built in the office,” I brag, truly touched that he’s done all this for me.

“Wow, that really is something. I wasn’t aware he could just up and move his company though. James Spirits is headquartered in Boston, isn’t it?”

I close my eyes as realization dawns on me. I think even she realizes her slip.

She knows he’s a James. She’s probably known all along.

*Fuck.*

“Uh, sorry, Mom, someone just walked in. I have to go.” I hang up the phone before I divulge anything else.

I can’t believe she had me fooled. I can’t believe I trusted that she was trying to spend time with me because she actually wanted a relationship with me. How could I have been so unbelievably naïve? And now she knows about the Bristol operation.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

What is her angle? Does she just want money? I can’t have her going to the press again. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to swallow my pride and continue this farce of a relationship with her so that she doesn’t realize I know her game. At least until Cash announces the new company.

My stomach clenches with unease. This feels awfully familiar to when I fucked up by doing that interview with Vanessa. God, how could I have been so stupid to slip to my mother? The least trustworthy person I know. And to top it all off, I’ve been lying to Cash all along by not telling him about my lunches with her. Even if I never blatantly lied, I lied by omission. And I have a feeling he’s not going to think that is a distinction worth mentioning.



## CHAPTER 55

### CASH

“**W**hat the fuck is he thinking?” I grumble as I flip through the pictures Frank brought me. My brother is back to his game of meeting with my father and Grace’s mother. *Why?* The past few months haven’t been great with him, but he was coming into the office, keeping his head down, and joining me for lunch a few times a week. I had no reason to suspect that he’d go back to our father. I figured after all he’d learned, he’d be done with him.

Frank eyes me uneasily. “That’s not the worst of it.”

I lean my head back in aggravation and sigh. After rolling my neck a few times, I give him my full attention. “Please tell me what is worse than my brother sneaking around with my psychopath father and the woman who raised Grace and tried to destroy her? I mean can you imagine if Grace finds out her mother is hanging out with my father? *Or my brother?* The woman has been nothing but the devil to Grace. I don’t want her to have this stress while she’s seven months pregnant!”

“I’m not sure it will be as much of a surprise as you think,” he quips.

“What are you talking about?”

“The guy I had following Grace’s mom—he...uh...just informed me that she’s been going to Boston once a week for the past few months.”

I shrug. “To see my father. I can’t believe it. They’re screwing each other, aren’t they? What are we in some sort of Spanish soap opera?”

“They are called telenovelas and they’re awesome,” Frank replies, his chin tightening.

“You just think the girls are hot,” I retort.

“No. They have good stories *and* fucking hot sex scenes. I’m telling you, you’re missing out.”

I let out a laugh. “Thanks for that. Anyway, okay, so Grace’s mom and my dad.” I groan in disgust.

“No, that’s not where I was going with this. I mean, obviously I think they’re sleeping together. But that is not who she was going to see.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Who was she going to see?”

Please don’t tell me Chase is having an affair with Grace’s mom. That would obviously be way worse.

“Grace.” He looks at me to gauge my reaction, but confusion is all I feel.

“What? Grace hasn’t seen her mother since the hit piece she did on her months ago.”

Frank shakes his head. “Nope. She’s been meeting with her for the last few weeks at least. She hasn’t mentioned this to you at all?”

I clamp my mouth shut as unease filters through me. *Why wouldn’t she tell me?*

The door to my office swings open and Chase storms in. “What the hell are you doing in Bristol?”

My fingers knead my forehead, and I try to speak evenly. “I think the better question is why are you spending time with Dad and my girlfriend’s

mother?”

Chase turns to Frank and then looks back at me. “You’re having me followed?”

“For good fucking reason, apparently!”

“I can’t believe this. I cannot *fucking* believe I trusted you. What are you doing in Bristol?” he booms.

*The audacity of this kid.*

“Visiting Pa?” I say exasperatedly, throwing up my hands.

Chase shakes his head, and he points at me angrily. “You bought a fucking building, Cash! There’s a goddamn distillery. And I talked to the guys on the ground in Nashville...you’ve completely stopped operations there. So, I’ll ask you again, what the fuck are you up to?”

My teeth clench together as my stomach sinks with the knowledge that the cat is out of the bag, and my girlfriend, the only person aside from Frank who knows this, has been meeting with the woman who has been spending time with my brother. It’s all just a little too convenient. A little too *fucking* convenient. “Why are you spending time with Grace’s mom?”

Chase throws up his hands. “Because I found out she was having an affair with Dad years ago, and I was trying to figure out if she’s my goddamn mother!”

Chase’s face falls, his shoulders sag in defeat, and my grandfather’s words ring out in my head. *If the truth of Chase’s birth came out, it would only lead to devastation.*

*Yeah, it would certainly be fucking devastating to find out that my girlfriend and I share a brother. What a fucking mess.*

“Well, is she?” I practically yell.

Chase shrinks onto the couch. “No...” He covers his face, and although I know he wants answers, man, am I relieved as fuck to learn that Grace and I don’t share a brother. “She told me she couldn’t have kids after Grace. She’s kinda crazy. She blamed Grace.”

My fingers dig into my legs. “She what?”

“She said she had to have emergency surgery when Grace was born—that Grace left her infertile.”

I grind my teeth. That woman is poison.

“Anyway, that’s not the point,” my brother continues. “The point is you *lied* to me. Everyone lies to me.”

I kick my desk and my chair goes flying. I stand up and move to the couch to sit down next to Chase, tugging on his arm so he’ll look up at me. “No, Chase. I’m under an NDA. Believe me, I wanted to tell you guys. Pa put something into place to protect the company from Dad. I promise I was going to share it all with you as soon as I could.”

“Did you tell Grace?” he says, clearly hitting me where it hurts.

Yes, she knows, and apparently she’s been seeing her mom. Has she told her about the business? Does she know her mother and my father are together? None of this makes any fucking sense.

I nod. “Yes, because we are planning a life together and having a baby together. She needed to know where I’d be. It’s not because I trusted her more than you, Chase.” I swallow the words angrily, trying hard not to fly off the handle like I did last time I thought Grace lied to me. Although, here it seems pretty impossible that she didn’t do what I’m thinking she did.

*No one else knows.*

“Can you help me find out who my mother is? I need to know, Cash. This is eating me alive.”

I sigh heavily. “I’ll find out.”

Over Chase’s shoulder, Frank stares at me. I shrug a response. What choice do I have? I need to get to the bottom of all of this. And unfortunately, I’m afraid I won’t like any of the answers Grace has for me.



“Don’t go in there screaming,” Frank says as he rides the elevator up with me.

“I don’t need a fucking escort into my own apartment, Frank.”

“See, that’s where I think you’re wrong. Because you’re still stewing. I can practically see the steam coming out of your ears. You need to think before you talk to her.”

I shake my head. “I need to get the truth before my mind spins any more crazy lies. I swear, Frank, right now my head is coming up with the most fucked-up thoughts. I need to put them to rest. There’s obviously been some sort of misunderstanding. There is no way Grace told her mother about the company. Even if she was reconnecting with her mother,”—*and hiding it from me*—“she wouldn’t tell her about the company. She knows how much it means to me.”

Frank sighs and puts a hand on my back. “I don’t know. I mean I never would have believed she did this if I hadn’t been sitting there, but I think you should be prepared.”

I roll my neck in stress. “I know.”



When the elevator door opens, we're met with silence. "Find out where  
—"

Frank interrupts me as he holds up his phone. "On it."

I wander into the apartment, calling out Grace's name even though I know she isn't here. I feel her absence, and the quiet taunts me.

I need answers...but even more than that, I need Grace.



## CHAPTER 56

### GRACE

This is either the greatest idea I've ever had or the worst. I pull the strap to my jacket tight around my belly. I'm actually amazed the trench coat still fits. Well, barely. Honestly, I think it gives me a little street cred, like I'm a spy rather than a pregnant woman dabbling in an activity she has no business entertaining.

Because that's what I'm doing right now. Spying on my mother. Trying to figure out why it matters to her who Cash is and what she plans on doing with that information. And then I'm going to go home and beg my boyfriend to forgive me and come up with a plan to save his company if, God forbid, I'm right about my mother.

*What is she doing in Boston?*

It's what was most surprising when I had her cellphone pinged.

Even I was impressed that I'd figured out how to have that done. But one of Rachel's friends is a computer whiz, and she was able to do it with little effort.

I stare up at the apartment that my mother apparently occupies. She hasn't left this location for the last few hours. Rachel is keeping tabs. *What*

*are you up to, Mom?*

Guess it's time to find out. I thank the Uber driver and head up the steps of the brownstone, finding a listing on the front door with four different families' names on it. My heart hammers in my chest as I read the one at the top. *Edward James.*

James.

Edward James.

*Oh, Mom, what did you do?*

Out of ideas and aware that it's time to face the music, I hit the buzzer and pray this is all a mistake. "Please let my mother not be here. Please let this be a strange coincidence," I mumble breathlessly, my hands twitching by my side.

"Hello," my mother's voice croons over the intercom system. My breath stops. I turn back around to look for the Uber which is long gone, and my mother's voice echoes again, "Hello, is anyone there? If this is—" she starts, and I slam my finger on the button again to talk.

"Mom, it's me, Grace."

I'm met by silence. Clearly, she was as unprepared for this reunion as I am.

My lips twist together as I try to figure out what to say. Before I have the chance to backtrack, or demand answers, she interrupts me. "Come on up." Her tone is resigned, as if she knew this conversation was inevitable.

I just wish I knew what the conversation was going to be. The ideas that are floating in my head are crazy. This can't possibly be *the* Edward James. Cash's dad. That's...insanity. Freaking crazy. Not possible.

And yet...when it comes to my mother, I'm not sure I'm even that surprised.

I take the stairs slowly, annoyed that on top of being confused, I'm now going to be out of breath when I reach the door. If this is *the* Edward James, he's really slumming it in comparison to his children. I doubt any one of them would live somewhere without an elevator. And with only four floors. Oh, the humanity.

As I reach the top step and round the corner, I see my mother standing outside the door, her fingers wringing together in nervousness. Her hair is layered stylishly like always, and she wears a pair of cream slacks with a gold belt, a cream top, and a frown. Always beautiful, always miserable, Lily Winter in the flesh.

"I take it you know," she says simply.

No. I know very little. I suspect many things but have very little concrete knowledge. However, seeing as how I'm still huffing from my trek to the top, and I'm curious how much information she'll spill, I nod.

"Come in then." She motions for me to follow as if it's not odd at all that I'm finding her at a random apartment on a Thursday evening with the name James on it.

Inside, the apartment is all light colors—beiges, rich blues, and honeys. The couch is pretty but doesn't look comfortable, there are no candles or decorative pillows, but there are a few pictures lining the shelves, and I feel the nausea roll through my stomach.

A man who looks decidedly a lot like Carter with whiskey eyes taunts me with his arm wrapped around my mother in picture after picture. Photographs that span years. *Decades*.

My mother in a red dress I remember her wearing to drop me off to Marion's house before my first day of school in eighth grade. Her hair past her shoulders, her eyes absent of wrinkles, and a smile I can't remember my

mother ever sporting. She was always put together, always smiling outwardly when we were around people, but she was never genuinely happy. Not the kind of happy she appears to be in this picture.

Absently, I pick it up and groan.

“Don’t be dramatic, Grace,” my mother reprimands, as if she can hear my thoughts.

I replace it on the shelf and pick up the next photo. She has her hair cut into a bob, more blonde, and a few more wrinkles. This must have been when I was about eighteen, because the following Christmas she had a new set of breasts and her laugh lines had disappeared. They haven’t made an appearance since that year.

“How long?” I whisper into the room, unable to turn and meet her gaze.

My mother sounds bored. “How long what?”

“How long were you screwing your best friend’s husband?” I hiss.

No wonder she didn’t think Steven’s affair was a big deal, why she thought it was a forgivable offense—she was screwing her dead best friend’s husband all these years. She has no moral compass.

When I turn to look at my mother, waiting for her response, I see nothing but rightful indignation. “I saw him first.”

*I saw him first.*

The words play in my head, like putty in my fingers, sticky and unfathomable. And oh so childish.

“How long, Mom?”

“You know if it weren’t for you, we would have been together sooner,” she taunts. She’s like a petulant child.

“Mother,” I chide.

“It’s true. He and Hope had troubles after Carter was born. She was so obsessed with being a mother, she forgot to be a wife.”

I roll my eyes. “And you were so obsessed with being a mistress you forgot to be a friend...or a mother,” I add.

Her chin remains upright, as if she believes she’s truly above me.

Whatever...I’d rather be several rungs below her than be her equal. *That* would be the true injustice.

She shakes her head. “We’ve been better, Grace. Even you have to admit, I’ve been trying.”

“Because you wanted information on my boyfriend—not me!” I shout, my emotions finally getting the best of me. These last few months I’d actually begun to believe my mother cared about me. That she truly wanted to get to know me. That I maybe could have a real relationship with the woman who birthed me.

As if she’s been struck, my mother’s stoic expression falters. “That’s not true. When I reached out to you, I had no idea you were with Cassius. Honestly, I would have tried to steer you away from him. This is not ideal,” she says, pointing to my stomach, as if my daughter is the interloper in this arena. Of course, she would consider a child to blame, not herself.

“So, what was your plan, Mom? Why even reconnect? You had to know I’d never approve of this life you’ve been leading.” I look back at the pictures, a pang gripping my chest as I wonder if Cash’s mom knew all along that her best friend was screwing her husband. If on top of battling cancer, she felt belittled and worthless like I had after learning of Steven’s affair. I hope if she was aware, that her children gave her the love and attention, the purpose and fulfillment that I have found after discovering my husband’s infidelity.

I grip my stomach in solidarity with the woman who carried my daughter's father into this world, apologizing for the transgressions of my mother. Someone who couldn't care less about what she did or who she hurt.

"Ed and I were in love, but he wanted more children." The words hang in the air between us. She wanted more children too. Not because she actually wanted more children but because she wanted to be with Edward. And she couldn't have them because she had emergency surgery when I was born—my fault of course—which left her unable to become pregnant again.

I close my eyes, already exhausted from this conversation. "So you continued an affair with your best friend's husband while he impregnated his wife. *Unbelievable.*"

And then because I can't help myself...I get in a jab. "But Chase isn't Hope's."

Bitterness colors my mother's eyes, jealousy tinges her cheeks, and anger pulls her teeth together. "No, he's not."

"And do you know who is?" I taunt.

An aloofness returns to my mother's demeanor. I mean, she has had twenty-seven years to adjust to the idea that her lover cheated on her as well. Once a cheater, always a cheater. But when she tells me the answer, even I find myself gaping. I can't form a response. My mother clearly doesn't want to discuss it further, so she turns on her heel and walks toward the kitchen.

"Let's have tea. We can discuss why you're here."

Unable to process much, I mindlessly watch as she moves around her kitchen, a place she seems completely comfortable, and makes us tea.

She motions for me to sit at the table, and I pull out the cream cushioned chair and focus outside on the streets of Boston which are lined with cherry blossoms that are fully bloomed. The pinks are vibrant and sway in the wind. A child skips down the street, holding her mother's hand. When the girl tugs on her mother's arm, they pause their skipping, and the little girl says something that has her mother's head falling back in laughter. I can almost hear their joy. Feel it in my soul. My hand goes to my stomach again, caressing my daughter in a promise that we'll be like them—not like this cold detached relationship I share with the woman in this room.

The tea kettle whistles, signaling the end to the silence, and my mother rattles around for a few more moments as she grabs the cups, steeps the teabag, and sets it before me, sitting in the chair opposite mine.

“I want a seat at the table,” my mother says calmly.

My eyes knit together in confusion and I quip, “You've got one.”

My mother rolls her eyes and I swear in that moment I'll never do it again. And then I roll my eyes at myself.

I really hate sharing any similarities with her.

“I know about the business in Bristol; I haven't shared that information with Ed yet,” she says, shocking me.

“I...what?”

My mother drums her pink nails against the teacup before taking a sip. “I admire you, Grace.”

A keening sound which could be mistaken for a laugh leaves my throat.

“I do. I know I haven't always shown it, and maybe it's because for years I didn't understand the validity that came from doing something for yourself, and not just from a man's affections.”



The amount of self-reflection in that statement is shocking. “Okay,” I say, my eyebrow lifting up for her to go on.

“I want a seat at the table in your business. I want to work with you—like Marion got to. I want us to have that kind of relationship. I want to know my granddaughter and be in her life...I want to be in your life.”

As a child I would have jumped at these words, as a teenager I would have grudgingly admitted I wanted my mother’s love, and as an adult, I craved it. But now, after everything, after learning who she really is and what she’s been all these years, it feels like a ploy. Another prank. And even if it isn’t, it’s devious and cunning just like her.

“If you wanted a relationship with me, all you had to do was ask. I was giving you that chance, Mom. I gave you chance after chance. But this...”—I motion to the room we’re in, to the life she’s been leading—“it’s too much. And what happens if I say no?”

My mother’s eyes dip in challenge, a *you’ve got to be fucking stupid if you don’t know the answer to that*. “I’ll tell Edward everything.”

A puff of a laugh escapes, and I look away, trying to keep the pressure behind my eyes in place. “So you think blackmailing me will win over my affection?”

“I don’t want your affection; I want your respect. I want my granddaughter’s respect. I want to *be* someone, Grace.”

“I’ll give you everything I received in the divorce settlement. Go make something of yourself.”

She bites the inside of her mouth, considering, and then gives it a firm shake. “Half the divorce settlement and half the company.”

I raise my eyes to the ceiling. “This isn’t a negotiation, Mom.”

Her lip tips up at the side, almost in a smile but it's far more sinister. "Oh, but it is. You're negotiating for your boyfriend's business. It's yours or his. Which do you choose?"

The breath seeps from my mouth as I realize she has me. For years I've picked my business over everything else. *My hopes, my dreams, my future.* All of those things were wrapped up in one place—a building, a career.

But she doesn't realize that it's not even a choice now. I don't have to consider what my hopes and dreams are because every single one of them centers around two people, Cash and my daughter.

A business I can rebuild, a reputation I can restore, but our love, our family, Cash's trust—those are invaluable and irreplaceable.

She can have whatever she wants as long as I protect him. As long as I protect my family.

"Fine."

My mother's eyes shoot up to mine, clear surprise even Botox can't hide.

"Really?"

Over this conversation, I sigh, "Yes, Mother. Now if you don't mind, I want to get home to Cash. Remember your promise—Edward knows nothing. If he finds out about the business, if you breathe so much as a word—the deal is off."

She nods.

I move to stand, and the sound of the door slamming makes me jump instead. But it's my mother's eyes that lead me to drop my teacup. When the cup hits the table, the hot liquid splashes onto my shirt, and I feel a slight burn against my chest. "Oh fuck," I mutter, pulling my top away from my skin.

My mother remains focused on the living room, as if she's waiting for something to happen.

"Don't just stand there, get me a towel," I cry, finally giving up and walking to the counter to grab one myself.

Steps echo from the living room in our direction, the staccato of the shoe announcing the impending arrival.

My eyes dart up at the figure which looms between the rooms, his familiar eyes dancing between my mother and me.

I glance at my mother, waiting for her to make the awkward introductions between me and my daughter's grandfather, when I see the look in her eyes. It's not one of indifference, or even the fake happiness I've watched her exude over the years. No, right now my mother is unable to hide her true emotion, and it's one of fear.



## CHAPTER 57

### CASH

**H**ours pass and my impatience grows. With each passing sweep of the clock, I imagine what Grace is doing. Laughing with her mother about the one she got over on me. Hiding out at Tessa's trying to scheme her way out of this. Toasting with Hanson that she's gotten away with it.

My imagination is a bastard, and my heart is a coward.

If Grace actually told her mother the truth, and my father knows about the business, then he's already ten steps ahead, and I'm sure it's only a matter of time before he notifies Hanson of our plan.

I should *do* something—warn Landry, call Carter—*something*. But as the hours tick on, I can't get myself to move. I can't leave this apartment until Grace comes back.

*She's going to come back*, I remind my stupid brain. There is an explanation for everything. A reason why she hid her relationship with her mother. *Something* that will explain all of this as just another misunderstanding.

There has to be. I refuse to do what I did last time. I refuse to crucify her before I talk to her.

But I'm losing my mind. I need something—*anything*—to remind me that Grace isn't the person my bastard brain keeps conjuring. And then I remember the video Carter gave me months ago.

*The interview.*

For months, I'd held onto it, knowing I didn't deserve to hear what Grace really said after I had written her off without so much as a conversation. Tonight, I'm not as strong. I slip the SD card from the top drawer next to my bed into the computer, my heart beating so loud I can hear it in my eardrums, just like the damn hands on the clock.

And then Grace's face appears, and I feel myself exhale. I listen intently, consuming her words, her expressions, her smiles, the tilt of her head when she looks away from the camera, shy in her discussion of her love life but vibrant when she turns back and admits that, yes, she's in love. She never says with whom, but I can feel it through the screen. It's as if she knew all those months ago that I would need this moment. I would need this reminder that she picked me long before I thought she did. She chose our relationship when I thought she'd written us off.

She sat across from Vanessa and told her she was ready to stand in the sun with me. That I taught her what real love was. That she was finally happy.

And then I destroyed us.

Sitting in my bedroom, I stare out at the sun setting over the city. The fire-like show would be something that Grace would enjoy.

It was another plan we made, how at the end of our days we promised to make time to watch the sunset together. And after the baby is born, we planned to do it with a glass of wine and our daughter between us.

There was an entire life I planned. A life filled with sunsets, dancing, working together, living together, laughing together, sitting on the porch at night, holding hands, taking baths.

I can't help but wonder if she has even been listening these last few months. Has she been paying attention? Does she get that I'd do anything to make her happy?

*She didn't tell me she was seeing her mother again. She still doesn't trust me.*

It appears that no matter how hard I've tried, Grace never really forgave me for what I did to her all those months ago. Instead, the fears her mother has instilled in her—the fear that love doesn't last, that happily ever afters don't exist, that marriage isn't forever—seem to win out every time.

And rather than me proving her wrong, rather than me earning her forgiveness and proving to her that love can be enough, she's proving she's right. What the hell do I know about happily ever afters? I cost my mother her own.

Guilt eats at me. Guilt for doubting Grace, guilt for not being more careful about my family's secrets, and guilt for killing my mother.

And shame because I feel myself slipping further and further into a man I recognize and a man I hate—my father.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, with a splash of liquid rising from the top. The glass is tilted slightly to the right.

## CHAPTER 58

### GRACE

“**H**ow many hours has it been?” I wonder aloud to no one in particular. Hard to talk to someone when I’ve been left alone in this stupid apartment for what feels like days.

“Mother dearest really did it this time,” I mutter to the empty room. I’d never seen my mother so still, so compliant, so...not my mother, as the moment when Daddy dearest told her to tie the rope around my arms. Of course the fact that he was holding a gun and aiming it in both our directions might have garnered her compliance.

My belly rumbles, reminding me it’s been hours since I’ve eaten, and the baby kicks. I lean back against the chair I’m tied to and stare down at my belly. I can’t even comfort my girl with a rub of my stomach. And I’m not sure my voice offers much comfort, as the fear in my tone can’t exactly be hidden. But I try anyway. “Okay, baby girl, we just need to make it a few more hours. I’m sure Daddy has figured out we’re gone, and he’s looking for us. He knows Mommy wouldn’t just disappear.” *He knows that, right?* The calmness in my voice doesn’t match the hysteria in my thoughts.

None of this makes sense. Cash's dad wants the company, my mother wants mine. Neither of them get what they want if I'm harmed...so I'll be fine. "We'll be fine," I echo.



The sound of the front door slamming and whispered voices stirs my eyes open. I can't believe I actually fell asleep like this. My back hurts, and my bladder is pressing down hard, ready to burst.

"So that's your brilliant plan?" I hear my mother whisper shout.

The sound of hand meeting flesh and my mother's yelp leaves me squeezing my eyes tight, my entire body seizing up in fear. *If he hurt her, he'll hurt me.*

"Oh, look, Cash's princess is awake," he says as they walk into the kitchen, my mother still holding her cheek and staring at me in...I don't even know what the expression is—sympathy, shame, bewilderment.

She's in over her head, and she's only now realizing it.

My mother rushes over to me and looks back at Cash's father. "She's harmless. I'm untying her."

His command sounds like a battle cry, "Don't you dare!"

Somehow I am able to summon my inner strength, remembering that I was raised by Marion, a woman who would eat this man for lunch. "Can we stop with the dramatics now? I need to pee, and you must have some sort of plan. So if you let me use the bathroom, we can all sit calmly and you can tell me what it is you are hoping to gain from this little stunt."



It's an Oscar worthy performance.

I think even Nicole Kidman would be impressed.

As the front of his hand flies toward my face though, I realize I've severely underestimated the man before me. I turn a second before his palm meets my flesh, but the aftereffects of it still land somewhere near my shoulder and send my chair reeling back, my head hitting the ground with a loud thump. The last thing I hear is my mother's screeches.



## CHAPTER 59

### CASH

**I**t's been eighteen hours since we saw Grace ride down the elevator and exit the James building. Eighteen hours since we can account for her whereabouts.

Frank pinged her phone, but it's not even registering. That means it's more than off. It's been destroyed. And as much as there is that tiny thought that still teases my brain, wondering if she destroyed it, I can feel in my soul that something is wrong.

Every feeling I had for Grace wasn't a lie. Every time she looked at me, kissed me, held me, lingered in my arms for an extra minute even though she was running late, those weren't all lies. The way our souls saw one another that day on the plane, mine searching for a love I'd never known, hers searching for peace, validation, acceptance. We gave it to one another in spades, and I know it wasn't all a lie.

Which means that Grace is in trouble.

*Real trouble.*

"Eat something," Frank says gruffly, pushing a bagel in front of my face.

"Can't," is all I manage.

“Cash,” he says darkly, his eyes softening when he looks into my own and probably sees nothing but pure terror.

My entire life rode down that elevator and disappeared. Everything that’s ever mattered to me—none of it means a thing without them. I...can’t breathe, I realize as I pull the white shirt from my chest, the buttons like a vise, squeezing me tighter. Or maybe that’s my heart seizing.

Frank tosses the brown bag the bagel came in at me. “Breathe, Cash. We’re going to find her, but you can’t do anything for her if you’re in the fucking hospital because of a heart attack.”

I push air into the bag, and it inflates and then I inhale, and it deflates. Somehow the exercise relaxes me, only minorly, and I feel my heart slowing.

When Frank’s phone rings we both jump.

“What did you find?” he asks with no preamble.

I have no idea who’s on the other end of the phone.

“On Boylston? Really? *Fuck*,” he mutters, and I think the same thing.

Fuck is right. Boylston is where my father lives.



## CHAPTER 60

### GRACE

“Come on, Grace, wake up...*Grace.*”

I shake my head, confused as to why I hear my mother’s voice so close to my face. It must be a dream.

“Grace, baby, wake up,” she urges louder now, her nose touching my own. Her fingers flutter over my forehead, and I wince in pain.

“Mom?”

“Shhh, don’t try talking. I’m going to get you untied and you can go to the bathroom, okay?”

“Hurry this along; we have to go,” I hear a man’s voice say.

*Who’s that man? Where am I? Is that Steven?*

“Steven?” I question, my mind foggy.

My eyes search the room for him, but I can’t see past my mother’s face. She’s so close. Her eyes crease in confusion. When did she dye her hair that darker brown? I thought it was blonde.

“Like your hair,” I mumble.

Her hand moves to her hair as if she’s trying to remember what I could possibly like about it. I close my eyes though because the pounding in my

head hurts too much.

I feel my mother move around me and my hands fall. They feel heavy, and I open my eyes again and realize I'm sideways on the floor. I try to move, but my mother's arm on my shoulder stops me. "Don't roll, honey, you could hurt the baby."

My mind seizes. *Baby? What baby?*

My eyes fly open and dart around the room in search of a child. All I find is a linoleum floor and a man's shoes. My eyes travel up the legs belonging to the shoes, and my eyebrows shoot up as I see an older gentleman staring down at me with a furrowed brow and a gun in his hand, just kind of lazily positioned with no thought as to safety or aim.

My legs start to move as I try to crawl away from him, but my mother grabs me again. "Grace, stop, let me help you."

The man rolls his eyes and huffs out a breath. "This is annoying." He reaches down and grabs hold of my arm, pulling me up by the bicep. I feel heavy and weak, unable to get a grasp on the floor with my toes.

"Take her to the bathroom and let's get out of here," he mutters as he pushes me in the direction of my mother who is jumping to her feet. I go to straighten my clothes, to adjust myself and get my bearings, but when I look down I spot the swell of my belly, and I breathe in an audible gasp.

"What the hell?"

"Shh, come with me," my mother whispers again.

"But I'm...I'm—"

She sighs. "Yes, you're pregnant. Let's go to the bathroom before you wet yourself."

My wrists are marked from the rope, and I lift them to my face, running my hands through my hair, trying to shake the fog from my brain.

“Where’s Steven? Where are we? Mom, who is that guy with the gun?”

My mother’s exasperated sigh doesn’t answer my question. She leads me to the bathroom where I know well enough to sit down and take care of business. I may not remember much, but at least that’s still working. I stare down at my belly, the very round one that clearly houses a child that is far along, and will myself to remember.

*What is going on?*

“Mom—” I call out to her, and she peeks around the door and looks at me. “What is going on?”

Tears stream down my face. I’ve never been so lost in my life.

My mother walks over and motions for me to pull down my shirt, covering the child I don’t remember, and she stares at me.

“Grace, baby, you just need to do everything I say, and we’ll both be okay, alright?”

“But who is that guy?” I ask, fear puncturing every word.

“Edward James,” she whispers, watching me as if she’s inspecting my reaction. The name means nothing to me though.

I shrug my shoulders. “And he’s?”

“Cash James’s father,” she replies, as if that means something to me.

“Cash James,” I say, letting the words settle on my tongue. It’s a nice name. “Never heard of him.”

A flicker of something I don’t recognize jolts my mother, but she turns away from me before I can consider it further.

“So now what?” I ask as she opens the door.

We’re met by the barrel of a gun. “Now we go for a ride.”

I’ve got to be honest, as confused as I am, I know that I don’t like this guy. And I’m getting really annoyed at having a gun aimed in my direction.

But since I'm not really all with it, I follow my mother and listen to her warning to just do what she says.

The car is a black sedan, nondescript with no plates on it.

*Not suspicious at all.* I roll my eyes. *Can this day get any weirder?*

Also, I'm starving and the baby in my stomach is kicking. I have a feeling neither it nor I have eaten in hours. Or maybe I'm always this hungry. I have no idea because I had no idea I was pregnant until like ten minutes ago.

*Also, where the fuck is Steven?*

My mother sits up front next to our kidnapper, and they seem a little too friendly. Where are we going, and why is my mother spending time with this psycho?

I clear my throat, and he glares at me in the rearview mirror. "Sorry, just..." *living.*

I roll my eyes. *This guy sucks.* I stare down at my stomach as the car starts to move.

The ride is quick. While we travel I look out at the streets, taking in the brownstones that seem familiar but not. I haven't lived in the city since I was in high school with Marion, but there is something about this area that feels like a tingling in the corner of my head, like I can visualize it but I can't. I close my eyes and try to summon my memories, but the pounding in my head hurts too much, so I give up and lean my head back, waiting for the next surprise.

What is this guy's plan?

As the car pulls up to a behemoth of a building, I press my nose as close to the window as I can get so I can look up. Even this close I can't see the top of the building. It's all glass and a hundred miles high.

“Don’t move,” he says to my mother before darting a glance in my direction. Then he gets out of the car and stands on the sidewalk before picking up his phone and calling someone.

My mother whispers without her lips moving, “Get ready to run, Grace.”

“What?” I ask, darting my eyes in her direction.

“Don’t look at me,” she hisses. “Just...just get ready to run when I tell you to, okay?”

“Where am I running to?”

“Just keep going down the street in the direction we just came from. There’s a police station around the corner. Don’t stop until you get in there, okay?”

“What about you?”

My mom turns back to me, and she reaches out her hand to my stomach, resting it there. “I’ve been an awful mother, Grace. I’m so sorry,” she says as emotion starts to fog her eyes.

My hand goes on top of her own. “Mom, stop, what’s going on?”

She shakes her head. “Just remember that, please, Grace. Remember I’m sorry. And make sure you tell the police to call Cash James when you get there. He’ll be able to fill in the blanks. And Grace, be happy. Be fierce... and be a better mother than I was.”

I nod, tears falling down my face. I don’t know why but this feels like goodbye. And if not for the fact that I’m pregnant I would stay. I would try to convince her to come with me. But I am. And I don’t know much about being a mother—but I know this baby comes first. I open the door to leave and whisper, “I love you, Mom. Thank you.”

As soon as I turn to step out of the car, the man turns back, spotting my attempted escape, and I watch as a sneer jars his face. He looks up at



someone in the distance and shouts, “Now you’ll understand what it’s like to watch the woman you love die.”

And then the world goes black.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 61" are written in a similar font.

## CHAPTER 61

### CASH

**T**he text that changes my entire life contains only three words.  
**I've got Grace.**

Those three words tell me a few things. One, Grace didn't betray me. Two, my father is a bigger psychopath than I realized, and three...I'll trade my own life for hers in an instant.

He holds all the control. Anything he wants—and I know what it is already—he can have. The James Liquor Company, Bristol's Hope, all the money in my name—he can have all of it because without Grace and my daughter, it's worthless.

I hit dial, and my father's voice carries over my speaker phone. Frank perks up from his position in the corner, his eyes rising to mine in question.

"Cash, I was wondering how quickly you'd call."

"Where is she?" I ask, skipping right to the point.

"She's taking a little nap. Nothing to be concerned about—*yet*. I take it you know what I want?"

My head pounds from the lack of sleep, and I massage my fingers against my forehead, trying to ease a little bit of the pressure. "The company. It's

done. I'll have the papers drawn up in the hour. Now where's Grace?"

He laughs, and my fingers white-knuckle the phone in my hand. Frank is now beside me, staring down at the speaker as we both wait.

"When you get me the contract—ironclad—I'll bring her to your office. I also have an account. I'll text you the info, and you can wire me all the companies' funds."

Frank scoffs but I shake my head. Whatever he wants...none of it means shit to me.

"Done. But if so much as a hair is messed up on her head—"

My father cuts me off. "Hate to break it to you, son, but she's more than a bit messed up, and she'll only be worse for the wear if you don't get me my fucking company back and my money. Tick tock...time is running." The phone goes dead, and Frank and I stare at the blank screen. Before I have the opportunity to fling the phone across the wall, Frank grabs it from me.

The hair on the back of my neck rises as my entire body heats imagining Grace hurt. My hands shake so badly that the table shifts, and Frank places his hand on my own. "We're going to get her back."

"Them, Frank, them. My daughter and my wi..." The word dies in my throat. She should be my fucking wife. This is all absurd. Ridiculous. I should have proposed months ago. I should have forced her to see what I've known all along. I should have protected her.

"Call the lawyers and get the paperwork started. I'll make calls and find out where your father is."

"What kind of calls?" I ask gruffly.

Frank's eyes pan to mine, and I know without him telling me what he is going to do.

"You know I'd never ask you to use your connections..."

“You didn’t ask.”

“Frank...”

“He’s got your pregnant girlfriend. There are lines that even my family draws, Cash...”

My father’s a monster.

“You haven’t spoken to your father in years though...for good reason,” I remind him, all while trying to figure out who we should call. The police? Carter? Hanson?

Someone has got to be able to help us.

“This is what my family does, Cash. They deal with monsters. They are monsters. But...this is what they do,” he says evenly, his eyes dipping to the ground, finally admitting what I’ve always suspected.

And while I’d never ask Frank to go back to that world—one he’s worked hard to distance himself from and at great personal cost—he’s offering, and this is for Grace. I nod, and he turns away, already dialing into the phone.

In the meantime, I call my lawyer and start the process of turning both companies over. I’m not sure if my father knows about Red, White, and Whiskey, so I’ll have two sets done. I’m not going to risk pissing him off by not having both.

An hour later and I have the documents in my hands and wire instructions on my phone.

“I can have it look like the money went through without it actually doing it,” Frank offers.

I shake my head. “No. I’m not taking any chances.”

“Cash, my guys will be at the meeting point. They will get her out, and your father won’t make it past them...I can handle it.”

“You’re not hearing me. I’m not taking any risks. Yes, have your guys there. Yes, kill my fucking father if they have to, but above everything, Grace needs to be okay. And if that means he gets my money, or it disappears into the ether...that’s what fucking happens...because I”—my voice cracks as I contemplate a world without Grace in it—“I can’t live without her, Frank. Just...do it my way, please.”

Frank nods and I click the button, authorizing the transfer of funds. As soon as the phone lights up indicating every last dollar has been transferred, Frank and I stare at one another and he blows out a breath.

“Damn, Grace always said she didn’t care about the money.”

I stretch my neck. “Now really isn’t the time for jokes.”

He reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. “I know. Okay, make the call.”

Per my father’s instructions, I shoot him a text with a picture of the transfer, and the phone rings moments later.

“Where is she?”

“Cash, good news, since you’ve played along perfectly, I’ve brought your girlfriend to you. Come downstairs. She’s waiting.”

I close my eyes in relief, and we both get to our feet. Frank is already on the phone calling his family. “I’m not sure they are going to be here quick enough,” he says honestly, the nervousness evident in his entire demeanor.

“It’s fine. We gave my father what he wanted. He’s a prick, but he’s just a selfish prick. I’m sure his threats about Grace’s safety were nothing more than hyperbole.” Even as I say this though, a seed takes root in my brain, and it raises alarms I’m not quite sure what to do with. If Frank’s guys don’t get here in time, and my father really has gone off the deep end, can Frank and I take him?

Yes. *Maybe?*

Yes, we absolutely can. We have to. We don't have a choice.

As we leave the elevator, Sal sees our tense demeanor and stands up. "Need help, boss?"

I nod and Frank motions for him to follow. Now we've got three on one. We can do this. It's going to be fine. My phone rings as we walk outside, and I spot my father standing on the curb, his back to a black sedan. I squint trying to make out if anyone is in the car. I see someone in the front, but the back windows are tinted and I don't see a thing.

"Is Grace in the car?" I ask into the phone as I walk in his direction.

My father looks almost jubilant as he holds up a button and jeers at me, shouting, "Now you'll understand what it's like to watch the woman you love die."

I lurch forward, but he's too far away. As I fall to the ground, the hard sidewalk scraping my hands and knees, I hear the car engine start, and it jumps the curb going in his direction.

I watch as my father realizes what's about to happen, the way his face turns into a scowl and then he appears to shrug as he pushes the button in his hand, and in that moment, as the car rams into my father, sending his body flying into the air and tumbling over the top of the hood, a loud thunderous noise descends upon us and the entire area bursts into flames.

For a moment, the entire world goes silent as black descends upon us. My eyes shut and I will myself to open them again.

I'm jarred from the silence by a high screeching ringing noise which echoes through my eardrums, and I cough through the black smoke that billows from the car, trying hard to push myself up, determined to find Grace. Praying and begging with each army crawl that she wasn't in that

car. When I don't see her, I collapse onto the ground, sobs wracking my body.

This can't be happening. This has to be some fucking nightmare. I pinch the skin of my arm so hard that it will leave a bruise, begging to wake up.

Someone pushes on me, and I look up to see Frank covered in soot. My eyes try to blink through the tears so that I can understand what he's saying, but I can't hear a thing. I study the way his mouth moves, trying to make out the words. When he sees I'm not understanding, he points, and I follow his finger's direction, watching as Sal runs toward a body which is sprawled on the ground, only twenty feet away.

He sits the body up and I see her face, a mask of confusion, tears coating her cheeks and her violet eyes staring straight into mine.

Frank offers me a hand, and I take it, pushing myself off the ground. My ankle feels sore, but I lean on Frank's shoulder, and we hop as quickly as we can to where she's sitting.

The street looks like a war zone. Cars that were once moving have come to a standstill and their occupants are slowly getting out and staring. Red lights alert me to the police, but I can't hear the sirens.

I hear nothing but white noise, but I don't feel any pain, only relief at the sight of Grace in front of me. She looks almost okay. Shaken but not bleeding. When we reach her, I fall beside her and go to reach out to touch her face, but she pulls back, her eyes narrowed and her lips trembling.

"Grace, it's me," I say...or more likely shout as she looks like I've assaulted her with my words. "It's Cash," I try to say quieter.

I watch as her lips form the words that break my heart. "Who?"

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 62" are written in a similar font.

## CHAPTER 62

### CASH

**T**essa and Marion bookend Grace’s bed as I pace the hall in front of her door. The nurse tried to say that I couldn’t stay since Grace said she didn’t know me, but the look in my eyes combined with the persuasion of Marion changed the nurse’s mind. I couldn’t exactly offer to buy the entire wing of the hospital, considering I just transferred my entire bank account to my dead father, but I would have given my left hand to be near Grace.

“She’s going to get her memory back,” Frank reminds me, trying to get me to stand still.

“You don’t know that.”

“*Cash*—she’s going to be fine. Your baby is going to be fine. They are both alive...she’s just shaken up.”

“And it’s my goddamn fault!”

Frank doesn’t flinch. He stares at me as my breath comes out rapidly. I’m out of my mind with guilt. “It’s my fault, Frank. I should have told her months ago that her mother was meeting with my father. Maybe then...”

Frank shakes his head. “No one thought for a second your father would do something like this.”



I slam my fist against the wall. “*I knew!* I knew what he was capable of. He’s a monster. And I’m the one who made him that way!”

The door to Grace’s room flies open, and Marion stands there with her lips tight, her eyes wary, and I can see that she’s pissed. “Don’t make me regret letting you stay,” she says crossly, her finger pointing at me as she stares me down.

Shame pulls at my shoulders, and they sag lamely. I rake my hand through my hair and clear my throat. “I’m sorry.”

Her eyes soften. “She’s going to wake up and she’s going to remember you,” she says softly, walking closer.

My voice cracks as I try to tell her my struggle. “It’s my fault. All of this is my fault.”

Marion shakes her head. “No, Cash. Your father was a sick man. You can’t blame yourself for what he did.”

Using the yellow hospital wall to hold myself up, I recall his final words. “He wanted me to watch Grace die. Just like he watched my mother...” my voice cracks. “He said I killed her. That me being born...” I hazard a breath. “Me being born cost Cat and Carter their mother. Him his wife. That’s why he tried to kill Grace. It’s my fault.”

Frank sighs as he settles himself down in a chair next to us.

Marion’s eye roll is slight as she huffs out a breath. “God, that man...” She looks to the ceiling, maybe to talk to God, maybe to talk to my mother. “He wasn’t always like that. Her death changed him. Honestly, I always believed he loved your mother in the same way I’ve seen you love Grace. All-consuming, all-encompassing, she was everything to him. She was everything to everyone. But her kids were everything to her. *You* were

everything to her. And he was jealous of how much she loved you three kids.”

I rub at my chest. I can’t imagine being jealous of my child. Of not wanting Grace to love her with everything she has. Knowing that Grace has enough love for the both of us.

My heart aches as I realize that Grace may not love me though. She doesn’t even remember me. What if she *never* remembers me?

My head pounds as I try to shake the thought and focus on something—on *anything* else. “What was she like?”

Marion hums. “Who?”

“My mother...what was she like?”

Her entire demeanor shifts and a smile lifts her lips. “She was happiness personified. She found joy in everything. Her name was how she lived her life, with hope. And Cash, her three favorite things in the world were you and your siblings.”

The image she conjures, the lightness she describes, it both lifts me up and scratches at me. “I know she was like that with Carter and Cat, but with me...she was sick,” I venture.

Marion’s smile is wistful. “And yet she smiled bigger when you were born than I’d ever seen her smile before. She knew she had a battle ahead of her, but she wanted you so badly and you were such a good baby. Carter had been colicky, and Cat was demanding in her constant cries, but you brought a mellowness to the entire house. And honestly, I think her nighttime feedings, and the naps you two took together, brought her more joy in the last years of her life than you can imagine.” Tears prick Marion’s eyes, and I feel my throat clog. “You were everything she wanted, Cash.

Her only regret was that she couldn't be your mother for longer. If love was enough, she'd be right here next to you right now."

My chest grows tight, and Marion steps closer, pulling my rigid body into her arms. For a moment, I allow myself to fall apart. Crying over the loss of my mother, all that we missed out on, and over how little I can control the future. I can't help Grace. I just have to stand here and wait. And it's killing me.

When I finally shift out of her embrace and brush my hands across my face, embarrassed for the tears that dampen my hands, Marion hits me with another bomb. "Cash, if you found out that you had a choice, you or your child, what would you do?"

It's not even a thought. "Me. I'd give my life for our baby. Grace and our daughter are everything to me."

Marion nods. "Exactly. And Grace would do the same."

My chest burns imagining a life without Grace. I lean off the wall and look through the glass into the hospital room, staring at the machines that are hooked up to Grace as she sleeps. My father almost succeeded.

From behind, Marion squeezes my shoulder and says softly, "You didn't kill your mother. Cancer did. And Grace didn't do anything to make her mother act the way she did—that is all on Lily."

"Assuming she remembers me—" I start as I turn to face her again.

Marion puts her hand over my own. "She will."

"Assuming she does, how do I get through to her? How do I get her to understand that she's loved? By you, by me...that she can trust in our love enough to just relax in it?" I use the words that Marion used to describe my mother's love for me. Because isn't that what we all deserve? To find someone who loves us enough that we don't have to work so hard? That we

don't have to prove it day in and day out. That you can just lean into the love, relax in it, and just *be* happy.

Marion smiles. "Now that I have an easy answer to...and you already know it because you've been doing it and you'll keep on doing it, because you do love Grace...and you know exactly what she needs."

"I do?"

"Yes. You show up. You use your actions, your words, your days, your time, to show her what you would do inherently without even having to think about it. *You love her.* Day in and day out. Bringing her coffee, switching from glass coffee cups to Styrofoam,"—I smile at the reminder of Grace's clumsiness—"you dance with her, you draw her baths, you make her dreams come true, you give her what she's always wanted—a family."

On any other night I'd be at home with Grace doing all of those things. Instead, I'm standing in a hospital corridor having a heart-to-heart with my dead mother's best friend because Grace doesn't remember me. Because my father almost blew her up.

I close my eyes as I remember the feel of my daughter kicking below my palm. The way she moved when I spoke to her, or the way it felt like she was dancing with us when I swayed Grace around our kitchen. I miss them both so much that I physically ache.

"I've been doing all of those things," I counter, "but Grace still didn't trust me enough to tell me about her meetings with Lily."

Marion frowns. "That's not fair. We both know they had a complicated relationship. And she *has* noticed what you've been doing, Cash. You know she has. But there's one thing you haven't done...one thing that I think you and I both know you want more than anything. And sometimes you have to ask for what you want. Are you ready to do that?"

Before today I would have said no. Not because I don't want to make Grace my wife more than I want just about anything. But because I wasn't sure it was something that *she* wanted. I'm still not one hundred percent sure it is. But Marion is right. If I don't ask for what I want, how will I ever get it? And I want a love that we can both relax in. A love that my mother had for me. I want the family that I've craved my entire life for my daughter.

*Hope*...even from the grave my mother gives it to me in spades. And that's exactly what a mother's love should do. I feel it as I look at Marion. It's not the guilt or the shame that overwhelms me and sends me spiraling, it's my mother's love which anchors me to my future, which pushes me to believe that Grace and I can have it all.

She'll wake up. She'll remember me. And we will be a family.

*Hope.*

A clear glass filled with a golden-brown liquid, possibly whiskey, is shown in a dynamic, tilted position. The liquid is splashing upwards and outwards from the top of the glass. The word "GRACE" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. The background is plain white.

## CHAPTER 63

### GRACE

The smells of bleach, hospital, and applesauce surround me. A beeping monitor taunts me. But it's the familiar voice that wakes me.

"She doesn't know who I am...how long could this last?"

"It's nothing to worry about—it happens."

"And the baby?"

My hand immediately flies to my stomach. *Is she okay? Did we make it?*

"The baby is fine, her heart rate is good, there's no signs of any trauma," the other voice replies.

I let out an audible breath that matches Cash's.

My throat is dry. Drier than my throat has ever been. I lift my hand to my head, blocking the light, and open my eyes.

Or try to open my eyes. They feel heavy. But I need water.

I attempt to clear my throat, to swallow, to scratch my tongue to the top of my mouth, hoping for moisture anywhere. But nothing. Absolutely nothing. I groan, unable to voice a single sound.

The movement and breathing in the room stops. I can feel everyone staring. I have no idea how many people are in here, no idea who is present,

just that whoever it is, one of them is Cash and everyone is staring at me. I hear footsteps and then feel the bed sag with his weight as he sits beside me. He takes my hand away from my eye and moves closer to my face, so close that I can feel his warm breath against my lips. It feels wet. I try to lick my lips, seeking any moisture.

Suddenly, I feel a straw being pushed to my lips. The sharp edges attack me, but as soon as it's in and I'm able to pull in the water, I groan in relief.

"It's okay, Angel, you're okay," Cash says, stroking the hair on my head repeatedly.

I finally blink my eyes open and see him, eyes sagging and dark with circles, stubble coating his face, crinkled shirt that I recognize from days ago, and a smell that makes my nose scrunch up. "Cash," I manage to whisper, and I squeeze his hand three times.

He stares down at my hand and then back into my eyes. "Yes, Angel, I'm right here."

"Means I love you, right?" I rasp.

Cash's smile doubles. "Yes, baby, means I love you. And I do, I love you so goddamn much."

Behind him I hear a gasp. "She remembers you!" I think it's Tessa screeching. "She remembers you. Oh God, G, we were so worried about you."

My best friend is now crowding my space, and my head splinters in pain from her loud voice. "Ow," I manage to say slowly, and I see Cash glare at her.

Tessa ducks back and offers a simple, "Sorry."

"Baby?" I ask nervously.

Cash smiles. It's a big smile, a relieved smile, one that I've never seen, and I pocket it for the future, something good to remember after all of the bad. "She's fine, Angel. You did good. You did so good," he whispers as he presses a kiss against my forehead.

I grimace again, and I hear Frank's laughter in the corner. "I think your girl is trying to tell you, you stink."

Cash's smile grows. "Yeah?" he asks as he looks at me, as if the fact that I think he smells is the greatest thing I've ever done in my life.

"Yeah," I say softly, my voice almost lost to the beeping.

"I'll go get cleaned up now that you're okay."

He leans down and kisses me again, and even with the smell I welcome it. I need it. As he goes to get up, I reach for his arm. "Your...dad?" I rasp.

Cash shakes his head. "He's gone. He'll never hurt you again."

I close my eyes, not quite relieved but something...I can't quite put my finger on it. And then I remember what happened. My mother's words...her forcing me out of the car...her goodbye. "My...mom?" My voice cracks.

Cash shakes his head. "She didn't...she's gone, baby."

I close my eyes as my throat closes, and I gasp for a breath. Within seconds, Tessa is beside me and she grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly as the warm tears drop from my eyes.

My mother is dead. My mother who never loved me...who traded all her time with me for money...and then saved my life. She saved my daughter's life.

The tears fall harder.

In the end, my mother loved me. And now she's gone.





## CHAPTER 64

### GRACE

**W**e don't return to the penthouse. I'm not ready to go back to the street where Cash's father blew up my mother.

*How is that even a sentence that I have to think, let alone a reality?*

I've been cleared to leave the hospital but because of my concussion—the likely cause of my temporary amnesia—Cash is now watching my every move.

And it's exhausting.

It's exhausting not crying. It's exhausting crying.

*Everything* is exhausting.

Add being seven months pregnant into the mix and I am at my wits' end.

"You need to stop staring at me," I remind him. It's likely the seventh time I've said it in the last hour.

Cash looks away sheepishly and goes back to staring at his computer. But I know him well enough to know that he's just going to turn his head back in my direction in three, two...yup, there he goes again. "Cash, seriously, you need to go to Bristol."

He sits up and shakes his head. "Absolutely not. I'm not leaving you."

I sigh. “You’re right. I’m kicking you out.”

“Grace,” he growls. I study the dark circles under his eyes and the stubble which is spotty on his face. The man needs a break from watching me. And I need a break from being watched.

I press my fingers into his thigh and squeeze. He winces and moves away from me. “That hurt; what are you doing?”

“Exactly! I’m alive, Cash. My hands work. You have things you have to do. Tessa will stay here with me. Go and do what you need to do.”

Cash’s body sags against the couch, the fight just about gone. He runs his hands through his hair and then looks at me again, his gaze tired and remorseful. That’s the part I hate the most. His guilt. Every time he looks at me with those eyes, I feel guilty. And he feels guilty. We are living in a freaking cauldron of boiling guilt, and it’s burning me alive.

“Please, Cash, I love you. I love you so damn much, but you are smothering me. And we both know you have things you have to take care of. And I need to fall apart for a little bit.”

We haven’t even buried my mother. Or his father.

I’m not sure the proper protocol for a funeral for the man who tried to murder you. But as far as my mother goes, she deserves something. Softly I say, “I want to do something for my mother with Marion. Please, just let me do this. Let me say goodbye.”

Cash looks up at me and his eyes soften. “I’ll do whatever you want.”



We bury my mother on a Saturday in April. It's a warm spring day, and we lay lilies on top of her gravesite. Cash honored my wish of allowing it to be just me, Marion, and Tessa, and at the end of the day, I lay my palm against her casket and say thank you. She may not have been perfect, and she disappointed me more than I'd like to admit, but in the end she tried.

I walk away from the day feeling closure and ready to move forward.

"He still doesn't know my plan," I say to Marion as I cradle my bump.

Marion smiles as she pulls me close, and Tessa wraps her arm around my other side. I lean my head on top of my friend, and the three of us walk down the street toward dinner.

"Is it all finished?" Marion asks.

I nod. "Caris sent me a picture yesterday. But she's kept it covered so Cash can't see."

"What are you waiting for?" she asks.

We stop in front of the restaurant. I asked to go to the pizza place I went with my mother. I have no idea why. It's probably not appropriate for after a funeral, but there was something about the way my mother smiled when I told her I was pregnant, or when we ate pizza together, that I want to remember.

It may seem naïve to believe that my mother cared, but I truly believe she had her moments. And one of the good ones was in this restaurant.

"I'm waiting for it to feel right, I guess," I admit. "For months we've been *almost* on the right page. I'm just waiting to get there."

Marion hums in approval, and for once I think I've got it right. The right man, the right future, and the right plan.

Now if only time would be on our side.



“I cannot believe I get to be the father today! You do realize this is like my dream come true scenario, G?” Tessa says with a big smile.

It’s been two weeks since I left the hospital. A tear starts to bubble, and I force it down with a swipe of my hand.

*No, pregnancy hormones, we are not going to cry today. Body, do not betray me, I am going to be a mother, I need to learn how to be one.*

Which brings us to why we’re here. At a parenting class. Me and Tessa. Not my dream come true, despite the fact she claims it’s hers.

“Yes, but you’re not the father. You’re just standing in as the other parent for the day.”

Tessa shrugs. “Come on, I’d totally be the man in our relationship.” She raises her eyes in suggestion.

I smack her. “You’re ridiculous. We aren’t having sex. This isn’t really your child; you are here for emotional support.”

Tessa wiggles her eyebrows. “I’ve got you focused on me rather than everything else, right? Seems to be working,” she croons.

And I have to admit, she has me smiling. I let out a laugh. “Okay, help me learn how to be a mom, please.”



“Oh no, Grace, no, no, no, this can’t be right.”

I turn to find Tessa holding the fake baby, and she’s covered in an oozing liquid. “It won’t stop!” she screeches. “Make it stop!”

Bewildered, I start grabbing baby wipes and trying to wipe her down. But the more brown liquid I wipe off, more drips down through the baby’s diaper and onto her chest.

“Try tilting her back,” the instructor says, walking up to our spot and motioning with the fake child in her own hands. “Like this.”

Tessa stares at me incredulously and tries to tilt the baby, only now the liquid starts shooting out of its mouth and into Tessa’s face. Like an idiot she opens her mouth to scream, and it shoots into her mouth. She gags and drops the baby, something she should have done to begin with, and the thing starts wailing.

Tessa spits the liquid out, and I reach out to rub her back.

The instructor snaps, “Your baby just fell! You have to pick her up!”

I realize she’s staring at me impatiently, waiting for me to grab the doll on the floor, and maybe this makes me a shitty future mom, but there is no way in hell I’m picking up that doll.

“Ugh, I’m sorry, I’m just going to get my friend out of here before she gets sick.”

Tessa is already on the move and gagging loudly. The entire class stares at us, and I wave a few times in apology before we hit the fresh air and sunlight.

“Oh my God, please tell me your baby won’t be like that demon in there!” Tessa says as she grabs more wipes from my hands. She takes a wipe and swipes at her tongue, and I giggle.

“That was mortifying.”

Tessa eyes me. “I’ve officially earned your forgiveness. I’m off the hook, right, G?”

I roll my eyes. “Seriously, I forgave you months ago, you psycho!”

“I just ate baby shit for you.”

I glare at her. “It was food coloring. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, would you like to go back in there and try some?”

I scrunch up my face in disgust. “Yeah, no thanks, you win. You are officially off the hook.”

“And I make a better baby daddy than Cash, right?”

I shake my head. “You really are nuts.”

“He should be here, G.” She takes my arm, and we start walking to lunch.

“You are ignoring the fact that *I* sent him away. This isn’t his fault. Besides, he’s busy fixing everything after my big screwup,” I say with a sigh, feeling bad that his business is such a disaster. “The company’s money is tied up now and—”

Tessa cuts me off with a glare. “You’re pregnant and you’re perfect. You get a pass; he sucks.”

Amen to having the best friend in the entire world. I smile. “You really are my favorite person. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my mom. If I’d confided in anyone, perhaps I could have avoided this whole mess.”

“I just can’t believe she was sleeping with Cash’s dad that whole time!” She looks at me and her face softens. “Are you okay, G?”

I blow out a long breath as we continue to walk down the street arm in arm. “No,” I admit, as the tears bubble again. “I still can’t believe she’s gone,” I whisper. “She was...”

“Awful,” Tessa offers.

I turn and give her a look.

“And she was your mother,” Tessa says, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“She saved me. I just...I don’t know. I keep running through all the different scenarios. If I’d told Cash or you or Marion when she first reached out...what could have been. She’d still be alive, maybe...I’d probably have no relationship with her, but she’d still be alive.”

Tessa squeezes my arm. “She was an adult. She made her own choices...”

“But she never knew love. She always loved Cash’s dad...it’s just so *sad*.”

Tessa sighs. “Yeah, it really is. But here’s the thing. You do know love. Lots of it. And you can’t change the past. And in the end”—Tessa breathes in as if she’s really working up to the next sentence—“in the end, she did the right thing. She protected her daughter...and our little alien,” Tessa says, as she taps on my belly and lightens the mood.

Lost in our conversation, I don’t notice the vehicle that’s pulled up beside us. “Hey Grace, slow down,” Frank says as he rolls down the window.

*Is Cash in the car?* I look to the back and Frank shakes his head, trying to stem my disappointment. “He asked me to pick you up.”

With her hands on her hips, Tessa is unamused. “Not a chance. If he wants to talk to Grace, he should come to her. Not summon her. He’s not a fucking king!”

Frank glowers and I put my hand on Tessa’s arm, telling her to back it down. “You’re a pain in the ass,” Frank mutters, then his eyes shoot to mine, “Grace, please.”

“I’m a mess,” I say, *and unprepared to be stared at again*.

“I’ll take you back to your apartment to change first,” he offers.

I huff, knowing that Frank’s been given his orders and he’s not going to leave me alone until he does what Cash asked. “Fine. But if he just stares at me...” I start.

Frank chuckles. “Give Bossman a break. He literally watched a car blow up and thought you were inside. And then you forgot who he was. He’s doing better though, Grace. It’s time. He needs you.” The smirk pulls at his lips, and I feel my own lips turning up.

Who knew one could smile after such a disaster? But as Tessa reminded me, the only way to deal with heartache is going through it—sometimes that means smiling when it feels wrong, and sometimes it means smiling when it feels right.

Right now, with the sun shining, my best friend by my side, my baby and me safe, Frank smirking, and my boyfriend expecting me, I lift my head to the sky, breathe in the spring air, and smile. Because it finally feels like it’s our time. And man has it taken us a long time to get here. I’ve earned this smile.





## CHAPTER 65

### GRACE

The ride to Bristol is lovely. Frank turns up the music and we both jam out to Bruce Springsteen with the windows down and smiles on our faces. I haven't seen Frank this relaxed in a long time, and I wonder what Cash must have planned for Frank to be so carefree. Even the baby kicks along as we dance, and at one point I force Frank to touch my stomach so he can feel, and his entire face lights up.

We pull down the familiar driveway of Cash's grandparents' house, but Frank doesn't stop. He continues driving past the house until we reach the end of the gravel and hit grass. He parks and I look out to the field in search of our destination. There are gardens blooming with every flower you can imagine, purples and blues, yellow daffodils, and pink roses. There is a stone walkway that leads to what appears to be a stone patio. Frank turns off the radio and silence descends upon us, completely changing the mood in the car as he motions toward the garden. "Cash is in there."

I turn back and give him a soft smile. "Thanks for this, Frank. For everything..." I sigh as he nods imperceptibly. There aren't enough words to express how thankful I am things turned out the way they have. That

Cash's father failed in his plan. That Cash and I are still together. Since I first met Frank he's had my back, and I only wish one day I can return the favor.

"Just do me a favor," he says quietly, "be happy. And give Bossman his happy ending; you both deserve it."

Warmth travels through my veins, and I nod before getting out of the car. It's a short walk through the garden where I spot Cash standing in the center of it with a bottle in his hand. I eye it curiously, but my eyes quickly return to him. His lips are slightly turned up in a smile, and his jaw is relaxed and covered in delicious scruff. Clearly, he's cleaned up his stubble since I last saw him.

Before I have a moment to speak, Cash walks toward me and pulls me into his arms, hugging me fiercely against his chest. "Gracie, I missed you," he whispers against my hair, before taking both of my cheeks in his hand and staring into my eyes. "I missed you so damn much." Then he drops his eyes to my belly and kneels with ease. "Hey, baby girl, you been good for your mommy?"

My eyes burn from the scene before me, but Cash stands up and kisses me softly on the lips before I can cry. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

"I'm okay," I say softly as I run my hand against his scruff. "God, I forgot how gorgeous you are," I say more to myself, shaking my head. He really is a sight for sore eyes.

Cash chuckles. "See, this is why you need a ring."

My eyes knit together. "What?"

"A ring. Ya know, the kind that goes on your left finger and tells the world that you're mine. But more importantly tells you that I'm yours."

"I'm not following."

“You forgot me,” he says simply, as if that explains his insanity. “You forgot who I was, and because I’m not your husband I wasn’t even entitled to medical updates. What if you’d never gotten your memory back? I’d...” he falters, sighs, and then leans toward me, lifting his hand to my cheeks. “Angel, I *need* you to be my wife.”

“Because I almost forgot you?” I tease with a small smile.

He rolls his eyes as a smile pulls at his lips. “Not only because of that. Also, because you need me to be your husband.”

“I do?” I ask, the grin teasing at my eyes.

“Yes.” His face turns serious now. “You need to trust in our love, and you need to understand that I’m committed to you. No matter what.”

My breath comes out hard. The guilt over what he’s referring to swirls between us. He thinks I didn’t trust him enough to tell him about my mother. And that cost all of us so much.

What he doesn’t get is that it wasn’t about trust. It’s always been about love. Love to me has always been conditioned upon me acting a certain way. Behaving. Conforming. Changing myself to fit into whatever box my mother or Steven wanted.

I thought for him to love me I would have to act a certain way, and part of that was keeping the woman who almost destroyed me out of my life, or at least hidden because I never thought Cash would approve.

But Cash has shown me time and again that his love has no conditions. My reasoning for not telling him had nothing to do with him and everything to do with me.

Cash continues, “You need to see what a real commitment looks like. You need to understand that people can get in fights and not break up. People can have disagreements and not end their relationships. You can do

something that I don't like, and I'll still stand by your side. I'm *committed* to you."

Tears stream down my face as I stare at him in awe.

"Grace, you are the *love* of my *life*. You give me purpose, bring a smile to my face, and are my favorite person in the world. I get that you haven't had any real examples of what a marriage can be...but here's what I can promise you...to me it means that no matter what you do, no matter what kind of fight we have, I will *always* choose you. You can rely on *that*."

"But my secrets cost you everything," I whisper.

Cash brushes the tears from my face. "Not everything, Angel. You and our daughter, *you're everything*. You are the *joy* of my life. And as for the company, it wasn't ideal that Hanson learned about Hope Whiskey before we were able to announce it, but everything is ironclad. There's nothing he can do."

"But the money..." I protest.

Cash shakes his head on a smile. "Has all been returned. But seriously, even if it hadn't, even if we had to start over...none of it matters. Our family is all that matters to me, Grace."

"So, it all worked out?" I manage to squeak, still overwhelmed.

He smiles. "You could say that. I've just got a few more things to work out and yeah, it should all be alright."

"And you're still a cajillionaire?" I tease.

Cash smirks. "We still have the private plane, if that's what you're worried about."

I raise my eyebrows and point to the bottle in his hand. "What do you have there?"

Cash laughs as he brushes more tears from my face and kisses my nose. “Oh, this is a little something I had made...a special edition bottle that we’re going to roll out in the coming weeks.”

Cash holds up the bottle of whiskey which has a deep purple wrapper on it.

*Hope’s Angel* is written in white letters in beautiful curves.

“Have I ever told you about the distilling process, Gracie?”

I shake my head as I stare at the bottle and try to figure out the significance.

“Well, there’s three components of the whiskey when it’s being distilled. The head, the heart, and the tail. The head can actually be toxic—we distill it out of the liquid and toss it. Then comes the heart. It’s what makes up the majority of our bottles—after we’ve gotten rid of the toxic chemicals and distilled it to perfection. But here’s a little secret, Gracie. The tail...the tail can surprise you. It’s what’s left after the heart, and some distilleries, *ours included*, put it right back through the process so we can squeeze out more of the heart, giving us a malt that has been distilled three times.”

A bit lost as to where we’re going, I just nod. “Okay, that’s very interesting.”

Cash chuckles. “Gracie, our relationship is like a perfectly distilled bottle of whiskey. We met and things were a bit toxic. We had to work through that, toss out the perceptions we had, the baggage we both entered the relationship with, difficult pasts, broken hearts, broken families, and when we did that, we got to the heart. Things were wonderful, and during that time we really learned how much we truly cared about one another. But then we got to the tail again, and some of those toxic traits had managed to make it through. We still had the baggage from our past...*we hadn’t*

*distilled it all out yet.* So now we're going back through the process again. We're making the tail a part of the heart. And Gracie, it's going to be even better this time around because we've taken the time to work through our insecurities, our concerns, and we've stumbled along the way, made mistakes, but we didn't just sweep the head off the top and enjoy the heart —*we're doing the work.*"

A faint smile whispers across my face at his words. "And does this have something to do with Hope's Angel?"

Cash smiles. "I thought you'd never ask. So, the Red, White, and Whiskey line will launch with the whiskey we distilled from the heart. It's been sitting in barrels and aging for a few years. But Hope's Angel, that came from the tail. It's been distilled three times now and aged...and when you give birth to our daughter, you and I are going to toast by having a glass of this." He takes the bottle out of my hand and stares at it. "I truly believe my mother sent you to me, Angel. I believe that she would have loved seeing us together and so this bottle is dedicated to the two women I've loved the most. Even if I didn't know her well..."

I lift my hand to his chin and rub my thumb against his cheek. "You're a good man, Cassius James."

He smiles down at me. "Now can I show you my last surprise?"

I shake my head with laughter. "More surprises?"

I wait for him to go down on a knee. It's all I can think about now.

*Please, ask me to marry you.*

But he takes my hand and starts leading me down the path. We walk for a bit through a garden which leads into a lot that is shaded by trees, but the path is clear. When we get to the end of the path my mouth drops open at the sight of the big white house with the wraparound porch and an

obnoxiously large red ribbon on the front door. I look between Cash and the house, my hand flying to my mouth in surprise. “What is this?”

His whiskey eyes meet mine. “Our home, if you like it.”

There are acres of greenery, a white picket fence, flowers already blooming, and a wooden swing hanging from the porch. “*If I like it?* Cash, this place is incredible.”

His boyish grin breaks through, and he grabs my hand as we walk quickly toward the front door. “If you like the outside, wait until you see the bathtub.”

I laugh as he swings the door open and leads me through a beautiful living room, complete with a gorgeous fireplace with a huge hearth and white stone all the way up to the twenty-foot ceiling, past a kitchen which is all white, through a hallway which smells of fresh paint, into a bedroom which has high ceilings, a king-size four-poster bed which is already made with plenty of pillows, just like I like, and into one of the biggest bathrooms I’ve ever seen. White and gold marble line the floor, and a walk-in shower to the left catches my eye.

But it’s what sits against the back of the room, in front of beautiful windows that overlook Bristol Bay, that catches my attention. A tub that could fit both of us very comfortably, with plenty of jets and a fireplace to the right of it.

“Cash, it’s heavenly.”

When I turn around, he’s down on his knee, staring up at me intently. I shake my head in disbelief. It’s all too perfect. Too much. And yet, it’s *not* right. I want him to know that I pick him too. I want him to know this isn’t just what he wants...and I know precisely how to show him.

“No, Cash, not now...wait...”

He looks up in shock.

“Please, just...I want to show you something first. You should know everything before you do that.”

Cash sighs as he stands up. “I’ve got to be honest, that’s not what I expected.”

I smile and squeeze his hand. “I’m never quite what you expect, huh? Always a challenge. I promise, it’s a good thing. I just want to show you something first.”



Cash is silent on the way to the office. I know he thinks I’m still hesitating, but I’m not. I just need him to know that I want this as much as he does. That like him, I’ve been making plans too.

“Where are we going?” Cash asks as I lead him through the dark office. When we reach the door to my suite, I flick on the lights and pull on the sheet that covers my sign.

Cash’s eyes double. “Grace *James* & Associates,” he says hoarsely.

“Ask me now,” I whisper.

“What?”

“I wanted you to know that it wasn’t just you who wanted this. *I* want it more than anything. I wanted you to know that it wasn’t just you asking me to marry you and waiting for me to agree. You showed me through the last few months that this wasn’t something to fear. Marriage, becoming parents,



forever...it's not something to fear. That's what you were doing these last few months, right?"

He nods. "Yes, but..."

"And this is me showing you that I want it too. Not because it's something you want. Not because we're having a baby. I want to marry you because becoming your wife, knowing you are mine forever, it's the only thing I can think about. It's become *my* dream. It's not something I'm settling for to make you happy. It's not something I'm agreeing to because it's the next step in life. Screw steps and rules and doing things when they are proper."

Leaning my hand against the wall for balance, I slowly lower my knees to the floor and stare up at the man who has changed my entire world. He has challenged everything that I ever thought. He taught me what it means to have family. It's not about blood, it's about people showing up for you. People who have your back, who love you even when you continue to screw up.

"Cassius James, I was quite literally your first kiss, and if you'd be willing, I'd love to be your last. *Please* marry me. Make all my dreams come true and be my husband."

Cash smirks. "Can I get down on my knee now, or are you gonna stop me again?"

I laugh through tears. "Sure, I won't stop you."

"Promise?" he asks through a grin.

I nod.

Cash moves to the ground and takes both my hands as we kneel together. "Should I answer your question, or can I finally ask my own?"

I cry harder. "You can ask your own."

“Gracie, I wasn’t looking for love when I walked onto that plane. But if I’ve learned anything through the past year it’s that life with you is unexpected. Surprise husband, fake dates, unexpected pregnancy...not all bad, not all good...and yet all worth it. I love you more every day, and I know we are just getting started. Would you do me the honor of being your husband, Grace? Marry me, Angel.”

“Yes,” I say through tears as I struggle to kiss him past my belly. It’s not the easiest thing being eight months pregnant and kneeling through a kiss, but we manage.

Cash reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring. I hold out my hand, and he slips it onto my finger, staring down at it with a stupid grin. “God, I’ve waited a long time to put that there.”

“It hasn’t even been a year, Cash,” I laugh as I cry.

“Longest year of my life, Angel. I woulda married you months ago. As it is, you better be ready to go down to the courthouse this week and make it official!”

“Are you crazy?”

Cash smiles. “For you I am. And you will be my wife before you give birth to my baby. We can have a big fancy wedding if you want after...but when we leave that hospital, we’ll be doing it as a family, my wife and my daughter by my side.”

The titles mean nothing to me, but I’d give Cash any title he wanted. “Okay, Whiskey, let’s get you a wife.”

“Finally fulfilling that contract, Gracie,” he teases.

I laugh. “What can I say, I’m very good at my job.”



### Six Months Later

“Can you hold the baby?” I say, pointing in Hope’s direction.

Tessa side-eyes me. “If your kid shits on me in my bridesmaid dress, I am not going to be happy!”

“You wouldn’t do that, would you, Hopie?” Cash coos as he walks into the bridal suite and scoops up our daughter. The man is wrapped around our five-month old’s fingers.

Tessa hops up to grab the baby. “Cassius James, get out of this suite right now! It’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

Both Cash and I laugh. “Think that ship has sailed, T. We’re already married,” I say with a wink.

Cash ducks away from Tessa and walks with Hope in my direction. “Besides, after all I saw when this one gave birth, I promise you, nothing is a secret anymore.”

I glare at him. “You promised we would never talk about that again.”

Cash visibly shudders, and I have the urge to smack him. Of course I won't since he's carrying our daughter, but if looks could kill he'd be ashes right now.

"You almost ready, Gracie?" he asks, adjusting Hope in his arms before dropping a kiss on my lips. All anger dissipates at his touch. I wonder if this will always be how it is, the two of us teasing and making up almost instantaneously, him having the ability to calm me with just a touch. If the past few months are any indication, we're in for a good ride. Even with a newborn and two new businesses, we've found time for one another and have managed to keep the spark not only alive, but in flames.

"I'm ready. Have you seen your sister yet?"

Cash shakes his head. "She said she was coming though, right?"

"She's a bridesmaid so she better."

Cat didn't take kindly to the news that the company she and Hanson had merged into his was basically nonexistent. Hanson was less than pleased when he learned that all they'd received was a lot of debt. They've postponed their wedding and it hasn't been the smoothest transition to say the least. But she's shown up for everything related to Hope and put aside business when it comes to family functions, so I'm hoping that today will be no different.

"Well, she was supposed to be my best person, but she never agreed," Cash gripes as he looks out the window as if searching for Cat's tall figure.

I lean against Cash's back and kiss his neck. "I'm sorry, Whiskey. She'll come around eventually."

"You'd think she'd thank me. Now she doesn't have to keep up with her sham of a relationship!" He pulls on his hair, but when Hope lifts her

chubby hands up to his face, he immediately relaxes and nuzzles into her nose. “Hi baby girl,” he whispers softly.

My heart melts and my ovaries explode. I’m not in a rush to get pregnant again because...hello, vagina, but also, I’m almost thirty-eight. We don’t have forever. And if I know one thing it’s that Cassius James was meant to be a dad, and I’m going to make him one as many times as I can.

“I think she started to believe it was more than a sham, Cash,” I say, rubbing circles on his back. I’m still shocked that it was all a setup put in place to merge the companies and win over Landry. I thought for sure Jay was in love with Cat. Clearly, my matchmaking skills were wrong on that one. “Are your brothers here?”

Cash finally gives Hope to Tessa’s reaching arms and adjusts his tie. “Yeah, come here, Angel, I didn’t get a proper hug.” He reaches out to take me into his arms and then pushes me back again. “Damn, did I mention how absolutely gorgeous you look today?”

I smile. “Only a few times.”

He shakes his head in wonder. “Incredible. Luckiest man alive.” He leans down and kisses me again. This time it isn’t a chaste peck; it’s filled with hunger as he takes my cheek in his hand and pulls me closer. “The honeymoon can’t come soon enough,” he mutters.

Behind us, Tessa squeals, “I couldn’t agree more.”

Cash rolls his eyes. “Did we have to invite her on the honeymoon?”

“Cash, we need someone to watch the baby if we want to get any actual time alone.”

“Right, but Marion offered,” Cash reminds me.

Tessa laughs. “I’m right here, ya know? Plus, I’m way more fun!”

Cash arches his brow. “You’re also constantly threatening to steal my wife from me and saying you’d make a better partner.”

Tessa shrugs. “I’m excellent with my tongue.”

I point in her direction. “Don’t start.”

Cash squeezes my hips. “That is not the proper response.”

“And what is?” I ask coyly.

He throws up his hands. “You tell her I’m better.”

“Oh my God, you guys are like teenagers.” I pull away from Cash. “Go find your brothers, and I’ll see you in a bit.”

Cash grabs my hips before I can slip away, and he pulls me flush against him with a wicked smile. “I’ll see you at the altar, my bride.”

I smirk. “I’m your wife.”

His grin grows. “I know, just wanted to make you say it. And you’ll forever be my bride, Gracie. Just like you’ll always be my Angel. I love you.”

“Love you too. See you down there, Whiskey.” I lift up to sneak one more kiss before turning away from him to fix the makeup he just destroyed.



**Cash**

“This place is incredible,” Chase says beside me. I have to admit I was a bit taken aback when Grace said she wanted to get married at Blithewold. I thought for sure she would have picked the winery since she’d launched her business so spectacularly at the venue. People were quickly learning about the program that she and Caris had begun, retreat dating for the wealthy. Although, as Grace likes to say, it’s not only for the wealthy. Her goal is to empower women. She offers an array of eligible bachelors who treat her ladies with the utmost respect and allow the women to decide how they want to live their lives, whether that’s at home with their children or in an office, or in some other facet—it’s all about giving the women control.

But I still like to tease her about it since so many of the bachelors are extremely wealthy, good-looking men on the East Coast. She’s had baseball players and musicians join her list, not that I’m at all surprised—if there was one thing I learned when I met Grace it’s that she is an excellent businesswoman. But when I pointed out to Grace that it would be good for business to have the wedding there, she reminded me of the bamboo garden at Blithewold.

“We could start the honeymoon early, Cash, old times’ sake and all,” she said with a wink. I could practically see her writhing against my face, and that was enough for me to rent out the mansion for the entire weekend. Grace doesn’t know it yet, but we’ll have the grounds all to ourselves tomorrow.

I adjust my tie again, searching the crowd for my sister. I know things have been more than difficult for her lately, but I can’t imagine she’d really not show up for my wedding.

As if on cue, Cat strolls in with Jay who is trailing her by a few steps. Great, now I have to deal with that asshole today. I was really hoping he

wouldn't show up given how our last blowup went when he found out I'd left James Spirits penniless and debt-ridden.

"Cat, wait," Jay says, grabbing her by the elbow. She visibly stiffens and turns around to say something to him. When she's finished speaking, he looks like he's been put in his proper place. He stares at her for another moment and then takes off to the bar.

Cat continues toward us with determination on her face. She hugs Carter first, then Chase, and when she reaches me, I hold my breath, ready for disappointment. When a whisper of a smile tugs at her lips, I feel my entire chest fall. "Cash Money, I can't believe you're finally getting married."

I smirk. "Already married, Kit Cat."

She glares at me haughtily. "A quickie wedding at town hall doesn't count."

"According to the State of Rhode Island it did." I hold up my left finger proudly.

She laughs. "Come here."

Hugging my sister closely, I feel the weight of the last few months finally drain from my body. I'd worried we'd never get back to this closeness. I think she knows I did what I did for our family though. And it seems she's moving on from Jay, if their conversation was any indication of how it's going, so hopefully she'll be happier in the long run. "You going to stay up here with us?" I ask, motioning to my two brothers.

"Wouldn't be anywhere else," she replies, pushing Chase over so that she's the one standing closest to me.

My person, my best friend, my sister, exactly where she should be.

"So, what's going on with you and Hanson?" I ask, testing my luck.

Cat shoots me a look. "Can't talk about it now."



“You guys want anything?” Chase asks. “I’m gonna grab a drink before the ceremony. I think I see a cute bartender over there I want to hit up later.”

Cat laughs and Carter shrugs. “I’ll come with.”

“You’ve got five minutes,” I say, pointing at them both. “Don’t be late.”

When they disappear, my sister turns to me with a smile. “Are you excited?”

Grinning, I reply, “Of course. Marrying Grace in front of everyone, telling the world we’re a family—it’s all I’ve ever wanted. *She’s* all I’ve ever wanted.”

Cat’s smile is wistful. “I love her for you.”

I laugh. “I remember a time when you said that about a certain woman who shall not be named.”

Cat rolls her eyes. “God, I was an idiot. And so wretched. I’m sorry again, Cash. I mean I can’t even imagine if I’d succeeded. We wouldn’t have Grace in our lives, or Hokie.”

We both smile as we think about my daughter. She’s spoiled and treasured in equal parts.

I tap my elbow against her own. “It’s okay, it all worked out. So really, what’s going on with you and Jay?”

Cat’s eyes search the room, as if seeing if someone will hear. “It has to do with Chase’s mom. Remember how Pa said knowing would only lead to devastation?”

I nod, but my eyes crease in confusion. What could that possibly have to do with Jay?

Cat sighs. “Well, he was right.”

Before she can explain, Chase is walking back with a smile on his face, and Carter is clapping him on the back. “This guy. He is one smooth motherfucker.”

Chase laughs and moves into place. “Let’s just say, I’ll be testing out your bamboo garden later.”

Cat mock pukes. “Gross, can my brothers at least hide their sex lives from me?”

Chase smiles sheepishly at her. “Nope.”

Music starts and interrupts our antics, and my focus is immediately drawn to the back of the garden. Everything else can wait. It’s time to marry my wife.



“You look proud of yourself,” Frank says as he sets his glass down on the bar next to my own. His eyes are on me, but mine haven’t left the view on the dance floor, my wife spinning my daughter in circles with Tessa, Cat, and Marion as the band plays “This Will Be” by Natalie Cole.

I nod my head as I finally peel my eyes away from the most perfect sight. “I really fucking am,” I admit. “But I couldn’t have done it without you.”

My best friend smirks right before taking another sip of his drink, and we both turn back to the show in front of us. All of the women surrounding my daughter are making ridiculous faces, and Hope’s smile gets bigger every time Tessa pops up surprising her. My wife’s best friend is insane, but I do love how happy she makes both of my girls.

My grandfather and Landry sit to the side of the dance floor, big smiles on their faces as they watch all the women dance around Hope. Our family keeps expanding—with friends and kids and spouses—and I couldn't be happier. Unfortunately, the little bubble pops when Jay appears on the dance floor trying to gain my sister's attention. I can see she's trying to ignore him but she doesn't want to make a scene, so she leaves the dance floor and they head in our direction.

"Incoming," Frank mutters under his breath as they walk toward us. We both turn to face the bar, having no interest in interacting with that man today.

In a voice barely above a whisper my sister mutters, "Not today, Jay. Until you give me the answers I want, I have nothing to say to you."

His reply is just as terse. "It's not what you think."

"Then tell me what exactly it is. Why is Vanessa asking you for *another* million dollars? Why did you pay her the first million? What the fuck aren't you telling me?"

Frank's and my eyes snap to one another and I bite my tongue. I knew that motherfucker was behind everything all those months ago. Before I can turn around and ruin my wedding, Frank's hand is on my shoulder. "I got this; go enjoy your wife."

I close my eyes, my jaw clenched and my heart hammering in my chest.

Frank squeezes my shoulder. "It's not worth it. Breathe...I got this."

I sigh. He's right. I shoot Hanson a scalding look and the man has the decency to look sheepish as he sulks out of the wedding leaving my sister fuming in her place. "I'll deal with Cat," Frank says as he pushes me toward the dance floor.

I take a few minutes to breathe, really not wanting to allow Hanson to ruin another moment of my wedding. Frank is right. It's not worth it. In the end, I got my wife and my child—it was just made exponentially more difficult because of Hanson. And for that I'll never forgive him. I may not have all the pieces but any chance he had at becoming my brother-in-law is all but over. Over my dead body will I allow my sister to marry that asshole.

A tapping on my shoulder interrupts my brooding. “Hey Big Daddy, why you looking so sour?” Tessa says as she hits me with one of her megawatt smiles.

She started calling me Big Daddy when Hope was born. It's annoying. But it makes Grace smile and I'm a sucker for anything that makes that woman happy.

I sigh. “Just trying to get back into the moment.”

Tessa's eyebrows rise in suggestion. “Oh, I've got just the thing for that.”

I look down, waiting for her to go on.

“I gave your wife a little present after the ceremony. And made her use them.” Tessa's hand slips into my own and she hands me a small plastic item. When I turn it over, I see it appears to be some type of remote.

“What did you do?” I ask as my tongue goes to my cheek and I look up to stare at my wife. Our daughter is now being carted away by Marion, and Grace is speaking with Rachel and Caris.

Tessa's voice is low when she says, “Don't say I never gave you anything. Come on, hit the button—let's watch our girl lose it for a minute.”

I chuckle and Tessa's shoulders jump up in excitement as she waits for me to turn on whatever she's given Grace. I flip the setting onto low and watch Grace's body stop in shock, losing her words for only a moment before she shakes her head and then continues talking.

*Oh, this is going to be fun.*

“What exactly did you give her?” I murmur, watching as my wife’s body tenses when I ease the setting a little higher.

“Balls,” Tessa replies, her giddiness punctuating the one word.

My shoulders shake with laughter.

“Go on, take your wife out onto that dance floor and show her a good time,” Tessa says. I nod at her and mouth a thank you, my eyes never leaving Grace.

“Angel,” I murmur into her ear as I press myself against her back, interrupting her conversation.

Grace leans her head back and smiles at the girls. “Excuse me, ladies, I think Mr. James needs my attention.”

Naughty girl knows that makes my cock swell. Her friends laugh knowingly and leave us to ourselves. “I just heard the most obscene thing,” I whisper as I nuzzle my head into her neck.

“Oh?” Grace says before spinning so she’s facing me. She wraps her arms around my neck and her fingers play with the ends of my hair. I let out a low growl, loving her hands on me.

Reaching into my pocket, I flick the switch up higher and feel Grace jolt in my arms. “Balls, Grace,” I say quietly.

Her body shakes with laughter, and I turn it up a little higher as a low moan slips past her lips. “Mr. James, this is highly inappropriate,” she scolds.

“Well since we’ve already established that I like things that are highly inappropriate, that’s not the scolding you think it is.”

She leans into my shoulder as I sway us around on the dance floor, the balls that are currently vibrating likely causing all sorts of tension in her

body. “Are you going to come for me in front of all of these people, Mrs. James?” I whisper into her ear as goose bumps flood her arms.

She lets out a sigh as we move around on the dance floor, my hips slowly rubbing against her own, so imperceptible to the naked eye, while others dance around us. “Yes sir,” she says in that husky voice of hers that will always be my undoing.

“And then I’m going to take you to the bamboo garden, take this tie right here around my neck and tie you to the bamboo so you can’t even touch me while I torture your pussy with my tongue,” I tease as I kiss her lips softly.

Grace bites down on my lip, and I know the moment that she’s going over the edge, her fingers digging into my neck as she searches for some way to stabilize herself, to keep herself from crying out in pleasure. I pull her mouth to mine and kiss her through it, loving that I can have her right here in front of everyone.

“There is nothing more beautiful than watching you come,” I whisper into her lips.

“I love you, Whiskey,” she says, almost breathless.

“I love you too, Angel. It was fate that brought you to me and I’ll never let you go,” I remind her as she settles into my arms.

Fate. Soul mates. Lovers. Call it whatever you want. Say what you will, but you can’t argue with this connection. Finding the one person who completes you, who makes you feel alive, like you’re burning on the inside but it’s a fire you willingly dance in.

As the song ends, my wife looks up at me with watery eyes. “Promise it will always be like this?”

“Like what?” I ask. Even though I know what she’s saying, I want to hear her say it. I want her to tell me what she wants. Because when she trusts me

with her dreams, I'll make every one of them come true.

“Days spent with family and Hopie. Watching the sun set over the bay every night with a drink in our hands. Office sex,” she says seductively. “Lobster rolls with your grandparents at Quito, overnight trips to the Keys when we need a break, weekends in Nashville...baths every night after Hope goes to bed...and showers in the morning where you'll wash my hair?” I smile and nod. “*And dancing.* Promise me we'll still dance, Cash. That we'll never stop this. We'll always come first for one another. We'll always make time for one another.”

I rake my hand through her hair and hold her head as I promise, “Do you even have to ask, Angel? I plan to dance with you every night for the rest of our lives.”

She closes her eyes, and I see peace as she relaxes into our love. “We do love dancing, don't we, Whiskey?”

**THE END**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I honestly cannot believe this is the end of Grace and Cash's story. These two have lived with me for the last nine months and I'm honestly not quite ready to say goodbye. This experience, writing the duet, hearing from readers about the cliffhanger, about your love for Cash, about how much you related to Grace—I get chills just thinking about it. It has been the most fun I have had as a writer to date. So THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart.

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Brittini from Overbooked Author Services, you pushed me to make this book better. End of story. I cannot stop singing your praises.

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And to my amazing readers, thank you for all of your messages, your Tiktoks, your dms, your posts and your rants. There is nothing I love more than hearing from each of you how a character affected you, or a storyline made you laugh. I love your reviews, your anecdotes, and the notes you send to me.

Now Grace and Cash's story may be over, but I'm sure I left you with quite a few questions so don't worry, you will be getting Cat's story in due time. But first, everyone's favorite best friend has a story of her own. Tessa is heading to Tahoe in *Wishing For Champagne Kisses*. Go ahead and preorder now! Her story will be a part of a series I am doing with a group of authors and everyone's favorite bartender, Shawn Chase, from *Love &*

Tequila Make Her Crazy will be making an appearance in all of their books so make sure you check out the Silver Lining Series and then stay tuned because we will FINALLY find out who Shawn kissed in his book which will be coming in the late fall.

If you want to follow along on my writing journey and have sneak peeks into all the characters in Bristol, follow me on Instagram, join my awesome Facebook group, sign-up for my newsletter and follow me on TikTok.

# ALSO BY BRITTANEE NICOLE

COMING SOON

[Wishing for Champagne Kisses](#)



## **Best Friends Don't Kiss.**

Ryan Manning has been my best friend since we were kids. He's my secret keeper. The holder of all my truths and the person I admire most in the world. He's also a *Lumbersnack* and the man I've secretly pined after for decades.

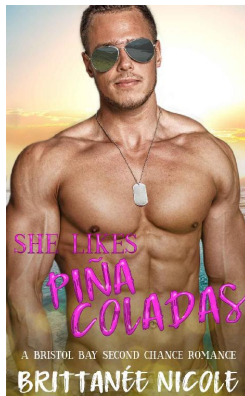
But we don't talk about that.

I'm just here in Lake Tahoe for the next week to play the part of his doting girlfriend. Cuddle up in front of his ex? Not a problem. Hold hands in front

of his family? Totally fine. Kiss him while no one is watching? I'm your gal.

**As a rule, you definitely shouldn't kiss your best friend. It's a good thing I don't follow the rules.**

**[She Likes Pina Coladas: A Second Chance Romance \(Bristol Bay Book 1\)](#)**



**Wanted: Hot Stranger For Vacation**

It started with a simple message from the man known as Pina Coladas: Message me and Escape. After dumping my apartment-stealing boyfriend and rooming with my best friend's dog, the promise of fruity drinks, dancing in the rain, and maybe even a midnight romp, leaves me singing a familiar tune, excited to travel to the Azores with the stranger who answered my wanted ad.

When Jack, aka Mr. Perfect, aka the one who got away, shows up at the

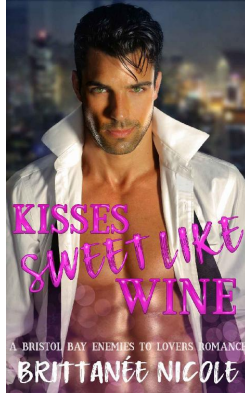
airport, I'm left to wonder if this is just another one of life's dirty pranks.

Jack isn't only hot, he's a fighter pilot with a sense of humor and blue eyes that make my butterflies dance. He's saying all the right things and sending sparks in every direction he looks, asking me to take all sorts of risks—like swimming in hot springs, jumping in mysterious pools, and giving *him* a second chance. But he still hasn't told me why he disappeared in the first place.

After a sip, or twenty, of sangria, I'll happily explore the cafés and the beaches and possibly even Jack's calves, but what I absolutely, positively will not do is fall for Jack—*again*.

**Authors Note: *She Likes Pina Coladas* is a full-length, standalone, steamy and humorous contemporary read featuring a second chance at romance.**

**[Kisses Sweet Like Wine : An Enemies to Lovers Office Romantic Comedy \(Bristol Bay Book 2\)](#)**



**She's his boss. He wants her job. But he wants her more.**

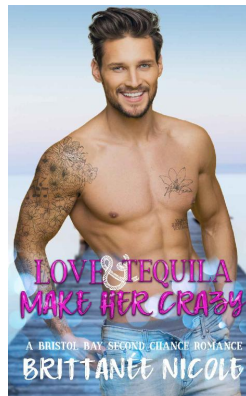
It started with a lie. An innocent, white lie. Okay, it wasn't so innocent. I'd hit rock bottom. No career, no boyfriend, and I had accidentally moved into a fifty-five and up community where my best friend was a short seventy-year-old white haired Italian grandmother with big hips and an even bigger mouth who was constantly trying to set me up with her grandson.

When I was offered a job as a private investigator working with the hottest man I'd ever seen, I may have fibbed a little and told my new boss that I've got the right experience.

Tiny problem. I don't actually know what investigators do. Googling corporate espionage and taking my seventy-year-old neighbor on stings while drunk on Limoncello probably isn't in the job description. Neither is falling for my assistant, the gorgeous Green-Eyed Luca, who is either trying to take me down or take me out. I absolutely, positively cannot date Luca but with sparks flying, how could something so wrong feel so right? And will he still want me once he discovers the truth?

**Authors Note: Kisses Sweet Like Wine is a full length, standalone, enemies to lovers, office romantic comedy in pink high heels, with a book boyfriend that will make you swoon, featuring explosive chemistry and a guaranteed happily ever after.**

**[Love and Tequila Make Her Crazy \(Bristol Bay Book 3\)](#)**



**Nate Pearson was my first *everything*.**

My first friend, first love, and first heartbreak. Now he's just my ex-husband.

It's been three years. It's time to let go of the past. When a man covered in tattoos walks into the bar where I work, with a guitar case slung over his back and a determined swagger, I think I'm finally ready to move on...until I see his guitar. I'd recognize it anywhere. It was the last gift Nate ever received from his father.

The man holding the guitar is different than the one I left behind in Nashville, but one thing remains the same, Nate Pearson will always be the love of my life.

The reasons why I asked for a divorce haven't changed. Only problem is, Nate Pearson says he still loves me, and this time he's playing for keeps.

Authors Note: Love & Tequila Make Her Crazy is a small town, brother's best friend, steamy, full-length, stand-alone, contemporary second-chance romance filled with emotion, that features both Nate and Amelia's past and present.

### [Over the Rainbow \(Bristol Bay Book 4\)](#)



I thought I learned my lesson...going undercover is not for me. But a trip to Positano with my favorite Italian grandmother wouldn't be complete without a stake-out and some prosecco. Now if I could just find my boyfriend and help the real detective locate the missing con artist, I can hopefully salvage this vacation.



Unless it's all just another elaborate scheme of Carmella's to help me get my  
happily ever after.



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