



AVOIDING TEMPTATION

K.A. Linde

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DEDICATION

To History and Fairy Tales

—August 25th

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Present

The phone buzzed noisily on the nightstand.

Lexi groaned. She wasn't ready to get up and go to work yet.

Throwing her arm out to the nightstand, she tried to switch off the alarm, but it continued to ring. Peeling her eyes open, she grabbed the phone off the nightstand.

"Who is it?" Ramsey murmured, pulling her back against him.

The screen flashed in her hand—*Jack Howard*. It was too early for that. She had to be at work soon, and she had far better things on her mind.

"Jack."

"Too early," Ramsey whispered, kissing her shoulder.

"You read my mind."

Lexi clicked the Ignore button and let it go to voice mail. "I'll call him back."

"Mmm..." His lips traveled up to her neck. "Time for you to get up anyway."

"No," Lexi said, pulling the white covers up over her eyes.

"Come on, you're going to be late for work," Ramsey said, prying the covers from her hands.

She squirmed against him under the sheets, tangling their legs together.

"Can't make me," she quipped, turning over and burying her face into his toned chest.

"Oh...I can make you late," he murmured into her mass of curly brown hair.

His nose found her ear, and he lightly brushed against it, causing her to squirm for all new reasons.

"Good," Ramsey said. His hand trailed lightly down her spine before resting comfortably at the small of her bare back.

She hummed into his chest as he kneaded the tight muscles. Lexi's hands wound up into his hair, and she slowly peeked back up at him. The smile on his face was lazy, comfortable, and so incredibly endearing. She couldn't believe that after everything they had been through, he could still look at her like she was the greatest prize he had ever won.

"You're so distracting," she grumbled, pulling lightly on his blond hair.

"I'm the one trying to get you out of bed even though all I want to do is keep you in it all day," he said before kissing her forehead.

"You're going to make me late," she teased, tugging harder on the locks of blond hair and pulling his lips down to her.

He didn't argue with her as their lips melded together. She couldn't figure out how he always tasted so unbelievably delicious. She hadn't felt him get out of bed to brush his teeth, but the faint taste of peppermint lingered on his breath.

Nibbling slightly on his bottom lip, Lexi sucked it into her mouth. His breathing hitched, and he grasped her hips forcefully between his hands. She could feel the indents he was making in her lower back, which only fueled her forward. Sliding her leg across his body, Lexi straddled his hips and slowly started grinding herself against him. He assisted her in the movement, rocking her hips and pushing her harder against him. She could feel him growing for her through his green boxers. She wasn't far behind him.

"You can't go into work," he groaned into her ear. "I'm not letting you."

Lexi responded by pressing her lips to his. He smiled against her lips, encouraging her onward. He tried to push her harder, but she resisted, teasingly licking his lips as lightly as she could manage.

He growled deep in the back of his throat and grabbed her head, crushing their lips together. Lexi opened her mouth, allowing their tongues to connect, and she responded with her own enthusiasm. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she relaxed into his eager embrace.

He broke from her lips to kiss across her jawline, and she happened to take a glance at the alarm clock.

"Shit!" she cried, rolling off of him.

Ramsey groaned, reaching back for her. "Are you serious?"

“I’m actually going to be late if we continue,” she said, lying on her side next to him. She watched his chest heave up and down. A smirk crossed her face as she realized how turned-on she had gotten him.

“If you keep looking at me like that...” He trailed off, running his hand seductively down her side.

She giggled and swung her legs off the bed. “Sorry, I still need to shower.”

“I need a cold shower,” he mumbled, watching her stand up in nothing but peach lacy underwear.

“Well, you can go after me. Must be nice being your own boss,” she said with a shrug as she walked to the bathroom.

“I’ll let you boss me around.”

Lexi twirled around, her hair swishing over her shoulder, to look at Ramsey. Her expression was scandalized as if she couldn’t believe he would say such a thing. She tried to remain serious for as long as possible, but the devilish look on his face as he stared at her like he was going to eat her up broke her resolve.

“Get your ass over here,” he demanded, scooting up on the bed to get a better look at her.

“You can watch my ass as I walk out the door,” she said, popping open the bathroom door.

Ramsey’s playful expression faltered and then fell off his face. When Lexi realized what she had said, she anxiously pushed her messy hair behind her ear. She hadn’t meant it the way it sounded, but with their history, it hadn’t been exactly the best phrasing.

Gulping hard, Lexi ducked her embarrassed face into the bathroom. She knew it was stupid to get so flustered about her statement, but some habits were hard to break. They’d had too many ups and downs to take her comment lightly—even if she had meant it that way.

Two years just hadn’t been long enough for them to completely forget about their breakup—at least, not with everything else that had happened since then.

Especially not with what had happened last month...

She knew their relationship was strong, but sometimes, it didn’t feel as strong as it should. Sometimes, it felt like too many other things got in the way of their relationship.

Sighing at her thoughts, she flipped on the shower and stepped inside, letting the water pour over her head. The water beat down on her as she tried to block out the heartbroken look on Ramsey's face. Taking a deep breath, she held it in as she slowly counted to ten and then blew it out. The boiling hot water helped clear her head and dissolve the concerns that she still harbored. She couldn't beat herself up about everything in her past and his past—their past.

A knock on the glass door broke her out of her thoughts. Cracking the door open, she stuck her head out to see Ramsey standing before her, still wearing nothing but his green boxers. She smiled at him, thinking he was going to join her.

"Jack keeps calling," he said, holding up her phone to show her the two missed calls on the screen.

"Why is he calling this early?" she asked, her brows furrowing.

"Who knows?" he said with an easy shrug. "I thought you'd want to call him back when you're done."

"Yeah, I will. Let me just finish." Just as she said that, her phone lit up again with Jack's name on the screen. "Damn it."

"Do you want me to answer?"

Lexi immediately started shaking her head. "Nah, I've got it," she said, reaching back and turning off the water. "Can't even finish my shower."

Ramsey smiled at her and handed her a towel. She dried off as fast as she could.

"Just answer it," she told him, knowing she would miss the call if she waited any longer.

"Hey," Ramsey said, answering the phone. "Yeah, she's right here. Just give me a second to go and get her."

Ramsey held out the phone to Lexi as she hastily knotted her towel.

"Thanks," she murmured softly, shaking out her wet hair and taking the phone out of his hands.

"No problem," he said, stripping out of his boxers and stepping into the shower she had just vacated.

Asshole, she mouthed to him at the display before her.

He just shook his head at her and shooed her on. She knew this was payback for leaving him on the bed, but she didn't like it.

“Hi, Jack,” she said cheerfully before sticking out her tongue at Ramsey as she left the bathroom.

“Lex,” he breathed into the phone.

Her heart stopped. She and Jack spoke on a regular basis but not like *this*. It had been a while—a long while—since she had heard the desperation, need, and desire in his voice. *Had Ramsey heard it? Would he have known?* She glanced back at the closed shower door and then felt bad for doing it. It had been two years since she and Ramsey had left Jack’s wedding together. Ramsey knew better.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to act like she hadn’t heard it either. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Do you have some free time today?” he asked.

“I really don’t. I’m going to be late to work as it is,” she told him happily, trying not to feed into his mood.

“What about after work or during your lunch break?”

“What’s going on?” she couldn’t help but ask. Curiosity was getting the better of her, and she wanted to know what was wrong.

“I just need to talk to you,” he murmured hastily into the phone.

“Maybe after work,” she told him. She wouldn’t normally spend the time, but something in his voice kept her from denying him.

“Thank you,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, of course. Jack,” she began, unsure of how best to proceed, “are you okay?”

He paused before answering. It felt like forever as the silence dragged on between them. She knew the answer even before he said anything. There was no one she could read better.

“I don’t know.”

“Can I help?” she asked, concerned and confused.

“I’ll meet you after work. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“No, I’m driving today,” she told him. She didn’t mind driving through the city, but she despised parking, so Ramsey usually dropped her off just to avoid the hassle.

“Okay,” he said wistfully as if he had been looking forward to picking her up from work.

“Jack, really, what’s going on? I’m going to be thinking about this and stressing all day at work. I’ll be distracted, and you know I have that big case,” she reminded him.

“I know, but we have to talk in person. I...I can’t talk about this on the phone,” he said, his voice cracking.

Lexi’s mind was swimming with possibilities. She wished she had actually woken up on time. Then, she wouldn’t have to wait until after work to find out. “All right. I’ll see you after.”

“See ya,” he said before hanging up the phone.

Ramsey walked out of the bathroom a minute later, towel-drying his blond hair, nude. Her eyes traveled over his gorgeous body from his messy blond hair, to his bright green eyes, to his strong jawline, across his hunky shoulders, down the six-pack abs he had worked so hard for, to the defined V, leading to where she really wanted to look.

“You checkin’ me out?” he drawled as if he hadn’t come out of the bathroom like that on purpose.

“Yep. Wondering how late I can be without getting yelled at,” she said.

Ramsey chuckled, wrapping the towel around his waist to cover up some of the distraction. “I don’t want you to get yelled at.”

“It might be worth it,” she murmured, watching him walk into his closet.

“So, what did he want?” Ramsey called from the other room.

“Bah,” she grumbled, not really giving him an answer.

“That good, huh?”

“He’s so...Jack sometimes,” she said, putting on cream lace underwear with a matching bra.

“Can he be anything else?” Ramsey asked.

Lexi wandered into the bathroom and diffused her hair over the sink as she contemplated the question. *Could Jack be anything other than himself?* It was something she had taken a lot of time to think about over the past two years. It was something she didn’t really want to think about with his desperation still ringing in her ears.

After applying her makeup for the day, Lexi tangled her hair into a tight bun on the top of her head. She thought it looked more professional in court than her wild curls.

She walked back into the bedroom and changed into a pencil skirt and a mint-green silky blouse, giggling at the appropriateness of wearing this around her Ramsey.

“We’re still on for dinner, right?” Ramsey asked, peeking around the corner of the closet to stare at her as she threw on a blazer over the blouse.

“Fuck,” she said, whirling around. “I thought that was tomorrow night.”

Ramsey shook his head. “Tonight. Can you still make it?”

Lexi bit her bottom lip. “I just promised to meet Jack, and I have that case right now—”

“It’s okay. We can reschedule,” he said, his expression falling. He disappeared back into the closet.

“I don’t want to though,” she said, adjusting the jacket. “We’ll make it work.”

“Sure,” he said, coming back into the room with a crisp white button-up, undone to reveal his toned abs.

She just stared at him. “You’re going to make me even later,” she whispered, eyeing his body.

He smiled and walked over to her. She trailed her hands down the defined muscles and to the waistline of his pants.

“You’re going to get out of your obligations?” he asked, pushing his hands up into her still damp bun and bringing his lips down onto hers.

“Of course I am,” she murmured as she pulled away. “I’m a good girlfriend.”

“Yes, you are.” He brushed his nose against hers. “Now, get out of here before you’re actually late,” he said, smacking her ass.



The day at court was as grueling as ever. She had gotten a job in corporate law, and she had spent more time in court working with assholes than she ever thought possible. This week though was really hitting her quota for the amount of time she could spend dealing with such stupidity. Her nerves were constantly on edge, and she had been returning home just to spend more time working on the one case she didn’t want to think about. She had hoped she would get out of court early, but the likelihood of that happening was practically impossible. She had never met anyone who could bicker so fiercely. Half the time, she felt more like a babysitter than a lawyer.

She would have handed the case over to a colleague long ago if it hadn't been such a good commission, and she wanted to prove she could get through it. The last thing she wanted to be seen as in the firm was the girl who couldn't hack it. She hadn't been there long enough for them to take her seriously.

By lunch, she wanted to pull her hair out. Nothing was going as she had planned, and her client was being completely uncooperative. She kept trying to give the company the legal advice they were paying her for, but then they would go in the opposite direction of her judgment.

Pulling her phone out of her purse, she walked down the hallway as far away from everyone in the courtroom as possible. She knew she should be spending her break devouring her lunch and reviewing her materials, but she just wanted to forget everything else.

The line clicked over, and Jack's voice filled her phone. "Hey, Lexi. I thought you didn't have time for lunch."

He sounded like himself again, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"I don't," she told him, opening up a side door to a meeting room before locking herself away from the outside world.

"You sound tired," he mused.

"Thanks," she grumbled. "I appreciate it."

"Just an observation."

"Well, keep it to yourself."

"Are you okay, Lexi?"

"Yeah," she said, leaning her head against the doorframe. "Just stressed."

"I know you are. If you ever need to talk and take your mind off the case, you know I'm free," he told her.

"I know, Jack," she murmured softly.

"If you want me to be here for you, I am."

She held her breath and closed her eyes, counting to ten before releasing the breath. This wasn't why she had called him. She knew he would be there for her if she needed him to be.

"I just called because I can't meet after work. I forgot that I already have plans," she vaguely told him.

"You can't meet?" he asked, the need filling his voice once more.

"Lex, I really need to talk to you."

“I know, I know. And I want to talk, but I can’t tonight. Can you wait until tomorrow?” she asked, struggling to turn him down. She had completely forgotten about her plans with Ramsey, and she didn’t get enough time with him as it was. She couldn’t cancel everything just because Jack needed her.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Yeah, it can wait.”

She could almost see the defeated look on his face—those blue eyes begging and pleading, the forward tilt of his head. “I’ll...I’ll talk to you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah, all right,” he muttered into the phone.

“Are you going to be all right until then?” she couldn’t help asking, knowing he was going to shrug it off regardless.

“I’ll survive. Will you make it through court?”

It was Lexi’s turn to shrug. “Can I murder my clients?”

“Can you be your own defense attorney?”

“Yes?”

“Then, do it. You’re the best.”

Lexi chuckled, loving the easy banter between them. Today was one of those days when she wished she could get out of work to go have lunch with Jack. When he was around to lighten her mood, it was easier to forget the headache that had become all but a constant fixture from this job.

“You’re silly,” she told him through her laughter.

“There’s that smile. That’s better.”

She could tell his own smile had returned.

“Thanks, Jack.”

“Anytime. I’m here.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Lex.”

She hung up the phone, her mission accomplished, and she went back to the insufferable job of working with these corporate hacks. Sometimes, on days like today, she wanted to turn them all in and make them handle their cases on their own. They weren’t worth the trouble she had to go through for them.

Knowing she had plans made the day drag on longer than usual. Her client even noticed how antsy she was to be dismissed from court for the day. Her feet were tapping under the table, her legs were bouncing up and

down, and she couldn't help continually checking her watch. She practically sprinted out of the courtroom as soon as the judge released them.

She found a place to change into something more appropriate and raced across town on autopilot. She floored the car, weaving through traffic, on her way to the restaurant.

Snatching her phone out of her purse, she pressed the button for Chyna.

She answered on the first ring. "Chica!" Chyna cried over the background noise.

Lexi rolled her eyes. She loved her party-animal best friend. "Hey, C. Are you drunk already?"

"Well on my way," she said with a giggle. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Lexi asked. *How did Chyna always know these things?*

"You think I don't know you, chica? Come on, spill it!"

Lexi thought that she knew her best friend pretty well, but sometimes it felt like Chyna could read her mind.

"Jack called me this morning."

"And? Isn't that normal?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is," Lexi said, trying to figure out how to explain.

"But he sounded like...Jack."

Chyna was silent for a second. All that Lexi could hear was the music in the background and a cacophony of people talking.

"You mean he sounded like...*Jack?*"

"Yeah...I mean, I don't know. He just said he had to talk to me, and he sounded desperate. Am I reading into things?"

"I'd tell you to trust your instincts, but your instincts suck."

"Chyna!"

"What? Jesus, do you think he's going to try anything? I'll come kick him in the balls again for you, if you think that."

"No, I don't think he's going to try anything."

"Then, go see him. Are you on the way now?" Chyna asked. "I bet you are."

"I have dinner plans with Ramsey."

"Is not knowing eating you up? Do you want to skip dinner?" Chyna giggled.

"Oh, shut up. I can't skip dinner."

"But you want to."

“I have to go, Chyna. Tell Adam hey for me.”

“Will do, chica. Tell Ramsey and Jack hello for me.”

Lexi hung up the phone with a shake of her head. Chyna had a way of reassuring her while also throwing her off-balance.

Lexi would figure out what to do about Jack tomorrow. She was already running behind for dinner, and that should be her priority.

Slamming on the brakes in front of the valet booth, Lexi rushed out of her car and tossed the keys to the waiting valet. He looked at her in surprise as she tugged her skimpy dress down and hobbled past him toward the entrance. She reached down and adjusted her slingback heels. She was late. She was unbelievably late, and she felt like nothing short of a disaster. With curly tendrils falling haphazardly from the ponytail holder, her hair was still knotted into the messy bun she had worn to court that morning. Her makeup was still intact, but she hadn't checked it anytime recently. At least her assistant had remembered to pick up the black halter dress from the dry cleaner, and her slingbacks had still been in her car. She slung her wildly inappropriate hobo bag over her shoulder and steeled herself to walk into the restaurant.

The maître d' gave her a once-over as she paraded into the restaurant, and then he turned back to the buxom blonde before him. Lexi ground her teeth in irritation. She didn't want to deal with these people any more than she had to. The blonde seemed to occupy all his attention, so Lexi just continued walking toward the dining room.

“Reservation?” he asked, blocking her path.

“Bridges,” she explained confidently with the arrogance and authority she had sometimes seen Ramsey use.

“Ah...Mrs. Bridges,” he said with a fake smile.

“Oh!” she said awkwardly. “We're not married.”

“My apologies,” he said, the contempt returning. “Easy mistake.”

“Yeah,” she grumbled.

It was a mistake that had happened way more than she liked. Everyone mistook her for Ramsey's wife. They had been to so many functions where that happened. *It wasn't like she wore a goddamn ring or anything! Just because they had been together for two years didn't mean they had to get married immediately! She wished that people would just stop asking her!* Rings made her nervous. *Why ruin a good thing when it was working without a ring? Ugh!*

“We’ll have someone escort you to your seat,” the man said, snapping his fingers at a hostess.

“Thank you,” Lexi said, following the snobby woman through the restaurant.

Watching the crowd of people made Lexi entirely uncomfortable—the couples picking at their food, the women barely munching on a piece of lettuce, the men distracted by someone else’s wife. *Was this where her life was heading?* She shuddered at the thought and tried to push it aside. She had never liked Ramsey for his money, and oft times, she would forget he was as wealthy as he was. She was bringing in a handsome salary herself, but something about the way these people were acting tonight ruffled her feathers. She had never been that person, but it was easy to see how money changed people. Holding back her unmitigated qualms, she forced a smile on her face and tried to hide her apprehension.

“Here you are,” the woman said, smiling politely at Ramsey.

“Hey,” Ramsey said. His gorgeous smile appeared on his face at Lexi’s approach.

“Hey,” she managed, walking past the hostess.

Ramsey stood, wrapped his strong arms around her, and kissed her forehead. She breathed him in, during even the briefest of embraces, and smiled at the minty smell he exuded. It never got old.

“It’s so good to see you,” he murmured.

Lexi couldn’t help but giggle at his cute PDA moment. Maybe those other couples could take note and pay more attention to each other. Taking her seat across from him, Lexi crossed her legs under the table and unfolded her napkin before laying it on her lap.

“So...you’re late,” he mused with a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Yeah, court ran over. I’m sorry,” she told him.

“You didn’t end up seeing Jack?” he asked, only half-joking.

“No, I ended up rescheduling with him,” she said, shrugging. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow, I guess.”

“Well, I took the liberty of ordering for us. I hope you don’t mind,” he said, gesturing to a vodka-cranberry placed before her.

“No, that’s fine. I needed this,” she said with a laugh.

“I figured as much. This case is taking a lot out of you.”

“The people are relentless,” she said before sipping on her drink. “I just can’t catch a break. One asshole client to the next.”

“We should get away,” he told her.

“That’d be nice,” she said, sending him an amused smile. “What did you have in mind? And when can we make it happen?”

“When does the case end?” he asked.

The look on his face showed that he knew it wasn’t going to be over anytime soon. She didn’t even need to voice that. She had been up late, working on it, for far too long.

“We’ll go after,” he added.

“Sure,” she murmured softly. She took another sip of her drink. “Why did you choose this place anyway?”

“The restaurant?”

She nodded.

“Because you like it. You do like it, right? Should we have gone somewhere else? We can still leave,” he mumbled, trying to recover from a misstep he hadn’t made.

“No, no, it’s fine,” she said quickly, giggling to herself at his adorable reaction. “I do like this place. It’s so classy though. Sometimes, I feel dirty when I walk inside.”

“Isn’t it supposed to have the opposite reaction?” he asked curiously.

“Let me rephrase. I don’t feel clean enough to eat here. I feel like someone needs to polish me, like the silverware,” she said, holding up and examining a pristinely polished fork. “I could never get forks this clean.”

“What’s this about, Lexi?” Ramsey asked, reaching across the table and taking her hand. He didn’t let go, and he slowly swirled a figure-eight pattern against the top of her hand.

“I’m just tired,” she murmured, glancing away from him, “and I didn’t get to eat lunch. Just irritable, I guess.”

“Hey,” he said, tugging on her hand lightly until she looked back at him. “I love you. You’ll get through this case.”

She sighed and nodded. She wished she could tell him about all the other things on her mind, but this wasn’t the place. *How could she ask him in the midst of these people whether or not she was going to end up like them?*

Lexi knew that she was thinking too much into it, and her stress was starting to seep into her personal life, but she had a hard time preventing it from happening. Being surrounded by such opulence reminded her too much of the people she worked for—the people she wanted to forget.

Trying to clear her mind, she placed a smile on her face and asked Ramsey about his day. He already knew that hers had been stressful, but she needed to remember that he had a stressful job, too. Sometimes, it was easy to get wrapped up in what she was going through at work and the doubts she was having about her future. Putting in the effort to find out about Ramsey's day eased her mind, and dinner arrived shortly after.

By the end of the meal, her apprehension about the evening had dissipated, and they had slipped effortlessly into a debate about who was going to pay for the meal. Ramsey won, of course. He always won, but Lexi found it amusing to prod him on the subject. Maybe one day she would be able to convince him otherwise.

Latching on to his arm, Ramsey led Lexi out of the dining hall. She wished that they could do this more often...that they had more time. Snuggling against his arm, they exited through the main entrance and into the late October air. The valet smiled at their approach and motioned to his assistant to grab the keys.

"Take a walk with me," Ramsey said, pulling Lexi away from the parking lot and waving dismissively at the valet.

"But our cars."

"They'll take care of it. Don't worry about it," he said, continuing to lead her away from the restaurant.

"Are you sure?" Lexi asked. She was concerned about leaving the only real possession she cherished alone in a parking lot so late at night.

"Of course. Where do you think we are?"

"I guess you're right," she agreed reluctantly, glancing back over her shoulder at the valets standing around. "Where are we going?"

"I just wanted to walk with you and forget the rest of the world. I miss our time together. We're both so busy."

"I know this case is really something else."

She felt like she was always making excuses. She never had enough free time anymore, and when she did, she would have so much else to do that she wouldn't get to spend it with Ramsey.

He laced his fingers with hers as they veered toward the nearest intersection. The city lights gleamed all around them, and she shuddered a little bit as the crisp evening air reminded her that winter was just around the corner.

“Are you cold?” he asked, putting his arm around her and rubbing her arm.

“Just a little.”

“I’m glad we were able to get dinner tonight. It’s nice to see your pretty face.”

Lexi giggled slightly at all his compliments. She was now glad he had asked her to walk with him. She had forgotten how nice it was to just get away. He hadn’t been lying at dinner when he said they needed a vacation. They both worked too much to do it though.

Ramsey gestured for her to cross the street, and she traipsed across the grimy crosswalk in her slingback heels, being careful not to trip over a pothole.

“Let’s go in,” he said with an easy smile as he motioned toward one of the entrances to Piedmont Park.

“This late at night?” she questioned him, slightly uncomfortable at the prospect.

“Yeah, let’s go together.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” she asked, biting her lip.

She hugged her arms around herself as he stood, silhouetted by the lights at the entrance. He did look smashing tonight in a black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to three-quarter length and charcoal slacks. His green eyes stood out in contrast to his dark outfit, and she just wanted to kiss him.

“You feel like you’re in some kind of danger with me?” he asked, his lips quirking up at the sides at the humor in his statement.

Lexi reached up on her tiptoes and lightly kissed his lips. “I’m not the only one with a pretty face tonight.”

“You’re trying to change the subject,” he murmured against her lips.

“Is it working?” she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Are you in any way unsafe with me?” he asked, circling his arms around her waist.

“Depends on what you plan to do with me tonight,” she whispered huskily.

“After this morning? You’ll be lucky if I let you out of bed.”

“You think being out of bed would be lucky?”

Ramsey shook his head. “Into the park,” he demanded, pointing at the entrance.

“Nope. We should go home now.”

Ramsey smiled, clearly contemplating her suggestion. Then, as she began to drag him back to their cars, he hoisted her up into his arms and carried her into the park himself.

“Oh my God! Ramsey, what are you doing?” she squealed as he walked forward.

He held her gingerly in his arms as if she weighed nothing.

“I can walk! I can walk!”

“Are you going to behave?” he asked, smirking down at her face.

“Not if you keep carrying me!”

“Then, why would I put you down?”

She threw her head back, exasperated, and he just laughed at her.

“All right, all right. I’ll put you down.” He placed her lightly on her feet.

“Thank you,” she said, steadying herself against him in her high heels. “Can we try to act like civilized adults now?”

“What’s the fun in that?”

“You have a point.”

As they walked farther into the park, the trees began to cluster together, and the city lights gradually disappeared. The characteristic speeding of cars on the interstate and honking of horns in traffic through the commuter city faded away to a dull hum, and they were left with each other. The winding path they had selected was even farther off the beaten track, and Lexi actually noticed that some stars were overhead. The stars had come out for she and Ramsey tonight, like the stars had known they were going to take this moonlit stroll through the city.

The weight of his hand was peaceful against hers, and the sound of each other’s breathing kept a slow, easy rhythm about their movements—so much so, that she hardly realized just how dark it was where they were. They had walked so deep into the woods that even the lights in the park were missing or had been extinguished. It reminded her of the night when they had ridden four-wheelers in the woods back when they were first exploring each other, first accepting what was happening, first falling in love.

“Ramsey,” she whispered, not even sure why she was being so quiet. “It’s really dark out here. Don’t you think we should go back?”

“Yeah, probably,” he agreed, stopping and staring down at her. “Let’s just go a little farther, and if we don’t find the other side, we’ll circle back.”

Lexi nodded.

After another minute of walking on the darkened path, they followed a bend in the trail, and suddenly, light illuminated the path before them.

“Oh, good,” she murmured, breathing a sigh of relief. “We made it.”

Ramsey smiled back at her. “We did.”

Lexi looked into his face and saw a glint of something she hadn’t recognized before. *Had she not been looking?* He appeared absolutely ecstatic. She hadn’t even realized how happy he was and that such a small walk with her could brighten his mood.

Walking forward along the path, Lexi noticed it narrowed as they ventured toward the light. Her eyes widened as everything came into focus.

No wonder he was grinning like an idiot.

White candles of all different shapes and sizes flickered along the path. Hundreds of them illuminated their way, and she noticed, where she hadn’t before, the streetlights were all still in place but had been shut off to allow the red-and-orange flames to be the only source of light. He had turned off the world in Piedmont Park to give Lexi one of her own.

She stared forward, perplexed and in awe at what was materializing, as she followed him down the pathway. The candles opened up to a small clearing where a giant blanket was laid out with a picnic basket and a dozen long-stemmed red roses in a clear vase.

“What is this?” she whispered, facing Ramsey once more.

He just smiled. “Dessert?”

Lexi didn’t even have words right then. *How was he always able to surprise her with such unbelievable acts of kindness? Would she ever be able to reciprocate his immense love and admiration for her?*

He slowly pulled his dress shoes off his feet and padded onto the plush blanket that she suddenly realized was the same one they had used at Stone Mountain on their very first date. Kicking her heels off her feet, she walked forward, toward him, her face still a mask of shock.

She stood there, and without her heels on, she had to tilt her head back to look into his face. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Long enough that I wasn’t going to let you miss dinner,” he murmured.

“Sneaky.”

“I’m so in love with you.” He reached up, took a hold of the ponytail holder, and freed her long, flowing hair. It fanned out around her face and past her shoulders in giant waves from the spiraled tight bun. “That’s better. That’s more like you.”

Lexi beamed up at her boyfriend. *He had planned all of this.* She couldn’t believe it. Her mind wasn’t even functioning properly as she realized just how much he really loved her. He was full of surprises. He had been from day one.

“What’s for dessert?” she murmured, licking her lips.

“There will be plenty of time for that,” he said huskily. He lightly brushed his lips against hers.

“Now?”

“Later,” he said before kissing her once more.

“Now?” she repeated, reaching up on her tiptoes to try to capture his lips again.

“Alexa, my Alexa, I don’t know how to say this any other way.” He pushed a lock of her hair out of her face.

“Say what?” She was still staring at his lips.

“You are and always will be everything I want in my life. You get me through even the cloudiest of days by making the sun shine all around you. I could never in a million years find the right words to let you know how much you mean to me. So, I thought I’d start my explanation with this.” Ramsey slowly sank to one knee.

Lexi gasped, her hand rising to her mouth. “Oh my God,” she murmured as she watched him pull a small black box out of his pocket.

He slowly opened the lid and revealed what lay beneath. She stared in wonder as hundreds of flames reflected off the engagement ring. Perfect, simple, elegant—it was everything that represented their relationship and more. A perfectly cut pear-shaped diamond sat all alone on a thin silver band. It needed no adornment. It needed no decoration. It was flawless all on its own.

“Alexa Mae Walsh,” Ramsey began, holding the ring out for her viewing, “will you do me the honor of spending the rest of our lives together as my wife?”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she brushed them aside with her free hand. Her heartbeat was accelerating, and she couldn’t keep from staring at

him with her mouth open. Her eyes shone with unadulterated shock at the turn of events.

“Lexi?” he murmured her name again softly. He was still waiting for an answer.

She could see the concern beginning to creep onto his face.

“Yes! Yes, oh God, yes! Of course, Ramsey,” she told him, leaning down and kissing him full on the lips.

His arms came up around her, and he picked her up off the ground and swung her in a circle. “You said yes.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,” she said over and over again.

Placing her lightly on her feet, he took her left hand in his own and slowly slid the ring onto her finger. The diamond glittered in the candlelight, and they both stared at how perfectly it fit.

“You said yes,” he repeated.

“Did you think I’d say anything else?” she whispered, transfixed by the diamond resting on her finger.

“No.” He brushed his finger against her ring. “It suits you.”

“You suit me, Ramsey Bridges.”

“Forever and always.”



August Two Years and Two Months Earlier

Lexi blinked into the afternoon sun. It was all but blinding and caused her to sneeze three times, back to back to back.

“That’s really cute,” Ramsey told her.

She glanced at him to retort, but then she let out another sneeze as she looked up into the sun over his shoulder. He chuckled softly to himself, clearly trying to hold it in.

“Thanks,” she muttered. She sniffled at the onslaught. She walked over to his parked Mercedes and hopped inside.

It had been twenty-four hours. *Just twenty-four hours. A whole fucking twenty-four hours. The longest and shortest twenty-four hours of her life.*

They had walked out of Jack and Bekah’s wedding.

They had actually walked out of their wedding!

Her head still swam with the thought. She couldn’t believe they had done it. She couldn’t believe Ramsey had come with her. She couldn’t believe how much mind-blowing, earth-shattering sex they had had in the past twenty-four hours.

From where they had been just one week earlier, she was hard-pressed to believe all that could happen in such a short period of time. She hadn’t even left his bedroom until a minute ago when they had both caved and decided eating was in their best interest.

Not to mention, she had a plane to catch.

Ramsey kept trying to talk her out of it. He wanted her to stay in Atlanta for a while longer. She didn’t have a job lined up yet, but she wasn’t ready to just move in with him. Call her crazy, but jumping into things right after the madness of the past week didn’t sound like the best idea. She

wanted to try to work everything out with Ramsey. She wouldn't mind considering moving in with him again, but maybe she would do it eventually—like after they got all of their trust issues out of the way.

“Come on, just stay one more week,” Ramsey said, sliding his hand into hers across the car.

“Nope. Can't do it. I need to get home and work out some things there—find out about the jobs I applied for, settle things with Chyna, make sure Rachelle hasn't kicked me out of the apartment.” *Talk to John.* Yeah, she still needed to talk to him before she could settle all of this with Ramsey.

“All things that can be done a week from now.” Ramsey backed out of the driveway and started to zip through the city.

“Psh. If I let things sit with Chyna, she'll eat me alive when I see her next.”

“She'll get over it. If we're okay, then she should be, too.”

“You clearly don't know my best friend and her ability to hold a grudge,” Lexi told him.

“I'm just glad that you don't have the same affinity for it.”

Really? She was pretty sure she could benefit from holding on to a grudge a bit tighter. Lexi could think of one too many times when she had been too forgiving, too understanding, too accepting. *Jack Howard.*

No, she wouldn't think about him today. She wouldn't think about their past and everything that had led to her walking out of his wedding. Today was the day that she wanted to move forward and be okay with the fact that she had left with Ramsey. She would just think about Ramsey today.

Maybe tomorrow, she would let the weight of what she had done sink in—when she was all alone and could start to process what had happened. Maybe after she found out whether Jack had gone through with it...

“Where are we getting food anyway?” Lexi asked, changing the subject. She might have also forgiven Ramsey too easily. She wouldn't think about that right now either.

“I was thinking Flip Burger,” he suggested.

Her stomach growled at the mention of food, and feeling embarrassed, she placed her hand on it.

“I guess we waited too long to eat.” Ramsey smirked at the suggestion.

She was sure that he was thinking about their sexcapade last night. Her cheeks heated as she replayed her body sliding against his, his hands running through her hair, their hot breaths mingling in the dark room.

“Uh...Flip sounds fine,” Lexi said, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear and staring out the passenger window.

Sex had been a nice distraction from all the problems they had to face. She had unabashedly reveled in it, knowing they had too much to talk about when they were finished. She wondered if they would be having this conversation over lunch or if it would wait until later, like maybe when she was back in New York. Lexi had so many decisions to make, and she didn't even know where to start.

Ramsey pulled into the Flip Burger parking lot and took the last remaining spot. As Lexi stepped out of the Mercedes, the August heat pressed down on her from all sides, and the humidity caused her dark curls to tighten from the added moisture. She couldn't believe how just three years in New York City could change her ability to handle the humid Southern summers. A twinge in her chest reminded her how much she missed the city, and she couldn't wait to get back even though returning would do nothing to help her relationship.

“Shall we?” Ramsey asked, coming around to her side of the car and extending his hand in front of them.

“I believe so.”

They made it up to the front of the building and pushed through the crowd waiting to be seated.

“Welcome to Flip. How can I help you?” the waitress asked when they approached.

“What's the wait for two?” Lexi asked.

“About twenty to thirty minutes.”

“Okay, that's fine. Lexi, for two.”

“For four,” Ramsey said over her head.

Lexi turned around and glared at him. “What?”

“Four,” he said, holding up four fingers and smiling at the hostess.

“What do you mean four, Ramsey?” she demanded.

“People are meeting us.”

“Ramsey, what did you do?” Lexi shook her head and took a deep breath. She turned back to the hostess. “Lexi, for four. Thank you.”

Lexi grabbed Ramsey's shirtsleeve and yanked him out of the busy restaurant. She dragged him to the edge of the building before dropping his arm. "Are you out of your mind?"

"No."

"Look, this can't happen. It just can't. I'm tired of going into things blind and running headfirst into a brick wall. Step one of our relationship rehab is I know *everything!* I want to know every single thing that you are planning, orchestrating, and organizing. I want to know everything about your past, and I want to know everything for the future. You can't keep me in the dark anymore, or this isn't going to work. That's the deal, and it's the only one I'm willing to offer." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Whoa, Lexi! All of this over adding two people to lunch?" Ramsey asked, his brow furrowing.

"Yes! It might seem like I'm overreacting, but everything in my past tells me I'm not. We have a lot to figure out about how to make this work, Ramsey. I've been a forgive-and-forget kind of girl my whole life, but I can't be that person anymore—not if I want a real relationship. And I'm willing to give it a shot, but I can't be lied to. I just can't."

"I wasn't lying to you—"

"Stop. Just stop and listen for a second while I try to explain. I'm just going to flat-out say that I'm emotionally messed-up. I've discovered that. And I think I've let myself get taken advantage of one too many times because of that. Second, third, fourth chances were in my repertoire. I swore I wasn't going to give out any more, but then you happened," Lexi told him.

She glanced out across the full parking lot, trying to collect her thoughts. She knew she was rambling, but he needed to hear it. He needed to know what he was up against.

"I'm giving you a second chance even though I told myself I was done with chances. You fuck up, and you're done. That's what I wanted to do when I went back to New York, but I couldn't. So, prove me right. No more lying."

"Okay, Lexi," Ramsey said. He actually looked uncomfortable.

Had she ever seen Ramsey look uncomfortable? She sure as hell couldn't remember a time when she had.

She hadn't meant to explode like that, but she hadn't been able to keep it in. *Didn't he know how much easier this all could be if he would just*

tell her things? It wasn't hard to be like, *Hey, I've invited two people to have lunch with us.* She wouldn't have cared—unless, of course, those people were Bekah, Jack, or Parker. Then, she would care. But she didn't think he was that stupid.

“Okay then,” she said awkwardly.

Ramsey reached out for her hand and threaded their fingers together. “Hey,” he whispered, pulling her into him. “I didn't mean to upset you.”

“I know.”

“This is new for me, too. If we want this to work, I know we both have to put in the effort in the relationship. I'm willing to work on it, and I'll listen when you call me out when I fuck up...like you just did.”

Lexi giggled. “Yeah, I guess I overreacted a bit.”

“You're just being the adorable woman I fell in love with. I wouldn't want you any other way.”

He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Lexi smiled and glanced away from his entrancing green eyes.

How did he always wash the anger right out of her like that?

“I'm going to try your everything route,” Ramsey told her. He turned her chin, so she was staring up at him again. “I'm going to tell you everything until it's so annoying that you'll beg me to stop.”

“I don't think I'd ever beg you to stop,” she said huskily.

Ramsey chuckled and shook his head. “Right now, I want to take you back to my apartment and fuck you into tomorrow. I think I'll start with you on top and then from behind and then maybe the stairs...”

Lexi flushed all over, her body heating at his words.

“And then, I think I'm going to clean you up in the shower and not keep my hands to myself,” he murmured into her ear.

“Okay, okay!” Lexi took a few stutter steps backward and cleared her throat. “Maybe...maybe not everything.”

Ramsey laughed boisterously. “You're already asking me to stop!”

“You know what I mean. I can't be turned-on all the time when we're together.”

Ramsey arched an eyebrow, and with that one look, he asked, *Why not?*

“I just want you to tell me everything that you might think about keeping from me. After yesterday, I'm pretty sure that has nothing to do with our sex life.”

“All right, Lexi,” he said, closing the distance between them again. “I’ll do whatever I can to make this right.”

“We can start with, who is meeting us for lunch?” She stared up into his handsome face and sighed.

She sure hoped he meant what he had said. She couldn’t go through this all over again. *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.*

“I meant for it to be a surprise, but I see that surprises are going to be...difficult.”

That was one word for it.

“I’ve invited my new development team for the medical wing of Bridges.” He scratched the back of his head in that cute way she had grown accustomed to. “I, uh...thought you’d want to meet who I’ll be working with for the next year as we build and staff the new wing.”

Fuck. Of course, he was trying to do something sweet for her. Well, as long as that team doesn’t include Parker.

“That...sounds nice,” Lexi said.

“I should have told you. No more surprises from now on.”

“You’re so funny.” Lexi rolled her eyes.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be more attentive to your feelings,” he amended with a kiss to her lips. “Can we go back inside now?”

“Yes.” She felt sheepish for blowing up on him like that, but she was glad that she had stood her ground. She refused to let her cycle continue.

They walked back up to the front of the restaurant just as her name was being called. They were ushered inside to a big red booth. Ramsey took a seat after Lexi, and she held his hand as they ordered drinks and waited for his new business associates. She wasn’t sure what to expect or why he was springing all of this on her so quickly. They had just gotten back together, and they weren’t even official yet or anything. While she was glad that he wanted her to know everything happening in his life, she wasn’t sure how ready she was for the next big step.

“They should be here any minute,” Ramsey said with a megawatt smile for her.

“So, what does the development team do exactly?”

“They mostly make sure we get the project off the ground in the time that we desire. Since my father really wants this medical wing up and

running and fully functional within the year, he hired a private company to do a lot of the logistical work.”

Lexi’s mouth popped open. “Within the year? I thought that you didn’t even think this was ever going to get off the ground.”

Ramsey sighed. “My father called me this morning, and after he finished lecturing me about walking out of Bekah’s wedding, he let me know about hiring this new team.”

“When did you have time for a phone call?” Lexi asked.

She was seriously going to have to break him of the habit of hiding things. They had been sleeping together all day and all morning. There had barely been enough time for her to sleep, let alone think of checking her email.

“I woke up before you did.” He shrugged. “Anyway, he wanted me to speak with them this morning, but I told him I wouldn’t be available. I don’t think he’s going to like the discretion he put into my contract.”

Lexi giggled. “Probably not.”

“He said it had to be today though since the pair just flew in from New York.”

“Your dad hired people from New York for this?” Lexi asked, impressed.

“He wanted the best. That shouldn’t surprise anyone. So, yeah, here we are. I could have waited to meet them after you flew back home, but since they’re just here to consult this week, I thought I would start the process as soon as possible. Plus, I really want you to be involved in this, Lexi. I don’t want you to feel like you’re on the outside of anything I’m doing. Since I’m working with...Parker, I don’t want you to think this will mean anything different for us,” Ramsey told her, staring deep into her eyes for emphasis.

She sure hoped he was right.

“So, are we okay? I can include you on all of the planning now? After all, this was all for you.”

“Yes,” Lexi murmured. “I want to be involved. It’ll take some getting used to, but I want to be there for you.”

“Good.” Ramsey brought his lips to hers once more.

Then, drinks were placed before them.

“Are y’all still waiting for two more?” the perky blonde asked, leaning her hip against the table.

“Yes, they should be here any minute. Thank you,” Ramsey said dismissively. “Oh, I would guess that’s them.”

Ramsey pointed out a girl who walked in, wearing a black pantsuit with a pink blouse. Lexi couldn’t believe that the girl could wear black pants and a jacket in this weather. It certainly wasn’t cool enough back home, but here, it was atrocious. She was pretty and about average height without her heels, and she had super straight blonde hair. Lexi didn’t know how the humidity wasn’t making it frizzy. She contemplated asking the blonde for the secret.

The next person who walked in made her stomach drop—not just out of her body, but also to the floor. No, it was more like through the floor. She couldn’t believe this was happening. Only her luck was this terrible.

John.

His hazel eyes landed on hers across the room, and the shock was as evident on his face as it was on hers. She couldn’t even begin to hide it.

He looked really handsome in a black suit with a white shirt and a blue-and-silver striped tie. His dark brown hair was cut short, and he looked very professional. As he approached, she remembered just how tall he was. He wasn’t as tall as Ramsey, but he was close to it. And those shoulders. *How had she forgotten those shoulders?* Underneath that suit, he had a swimmer’s body with muscular shoulders and a sexy six-pack that cut down to a trim waist. And the tattoos—she hadn’t forgotten those either.

But she had to forget *all* of that right now, and she needed to remember where she was and what he was doing here.

John was consulting on the Bridges medical wing. She knew he worked at Global International, a leader in the New York business sector. They were a massive conglomerate, specializing in everything from consultation on business development to international business expansion. Whatever John did for the company, Lexi had assumed it was on the international side, which would explain why he was always out of the States. So, what was he doing in Atlanta consulting on the Bridges project?

Ramsey was standing and shaking the blonde’s hand. Lexi hadn’t even noticed. She was too engrossed in the fact that the guy she had slept with—Adam’s brother, the person Ramsey had found out existed only yesterday, the person she was supposed to figure things out with when she got back to New York—was right in front of her in Atlanta.

“Jessica, this is Lexi,” Ramsey said, introducing her to the blonde girl.

“What a pleasure to meet you,” Jessica said.

Lexi shifted her gaze to the other woman and mechanically shook her hand.

How could she fix this? She needed to clue everyone in on the train wreck they had just walked into. Ramsey didn’t know who John was, and John didn’t know who Ramsey was. She was just standing there in the middle, wondering how the hell she could make all of this less embarrassing and awkward.

“Ramsey,” Lexi whispered, turning to face him and dropping Jessica’s hand. She needed to be blunt about the impending collision.

“One second,” he said with a smile. “You must be John. Thanks for consulting with Bridges.”

“Pleasure,” John said, shaking his hand.

Lexi could see the flicker of confusion in John’s eyes, but he was trying to stay professional. If she could just collapse back into the booth and throw her head into her hands, it would be better than what was going on right now.

Instead, she just stood there and waited for her chance to butt in.

“John, this is—” Ramsey began.

“Lexi,” she said, sticking out her hand immediately before Ramsey could say anything further.

John slid his hand into hers. He had such big hands with long fingers that grazed her wrist when they shook. “Hello, Lexi.”

He didn’t immediately release her hand, and she had to clear her throat as she pulled her hand back.

“How have you been?” John asked, never breaking away from her gaze.

“Good. Uh, Ramsey,” Lexi said frantically, “this is John.”

“Right. We met,” Ramsey said.

“No, Ramsey...this is Adam’s brother...John,” she said softly.

And there was the realization. Ramsey’s entire body went rigid, and all conversation halted. He stared into her eyes, then to John, and then back to Lexi, like he couldn’t believe what she had just said. She couldn’t blame him for that either.

“I’m sorry. Am I missing something?” Jessica asked. “Do you know each other?”

All three stared off uncomfortably, not sure who should be the one to answer that question. Lexi knew that they all needed to stay professional. Nothing good would come from blurting out that she had slept with both of these men.

“It’s a bit complicated,” Lexi finally admitted. “John is the brother of my best friend’s boyfriend. I just graduated from NYU Law, and I still live in the city.”

“Oh, a New York girl and law at that. I love it,” Jessica said with a genuine smile. “We should get drinks in the city when we get back. I always love to consult after-hours.”

“Jessica is a partner at Global International. She’s the main point of contact for the project,” Ramsey explained, finding his voice.

“Wow, congratulations.”

Jessica looked really young to be a partner. Either her looks were deceptive, or she was an unbelievably driven, ambitious person. Lexi suspected a bit of both.

“Thank you,” Jessica said. “Mind if we sit now?”

“Of course not,” Ramsey said, taking his seat next to Lexi again. John and Jessica sat across from them.

Lexi’s eyes found John’s across the table, and he was giving her a pointed look. He had questions. She was sure of that, but she wasn’t sure how to answer them. She would have preferred to have that conversation when she got back to New York—in the safety of her own city and thousands of miles away from Ramsey. John’s eyes slid from her face to her chest, and she quickly averted her gaze.

Jessica immediately launched into a full campaign of information and began presenting how they were going to get the entire Bridges medical wing on its feet in just one year. She was certain that it was possible. Lexi didn’t know how much of that was bullshitting and how much of it was determination. Lexi didn’t think these things happened that fast, but apparently, based on the packet of information and the tablet full of slides, Jessica was going to make this happen. She covered everything Lexi could think of and more—building construction, insurance, employment, equipment acquisition, security systems, and so on.

As far as Lexi could guess from the presentation, the Bridges project was the first full-scale assignment Global International was allowing John to consult on, which would explain why he was here and not working on an international case. *Just her luck.*

Lexi kept her eyes glued to Jessica's display. She wouldn't even let her eyes wander to John when he was discussing his aspects of the plan.

She was here for Ramsey. She was here for Ramsey. She kept repeating that over and over in her head, hoping it would sink in.

Over an hour later, when it seemed Jessica's project overview had come to a close, the four stood from the table to leave.

"Thank you so much for meeting with us today," Ramsey said. He shook Jessica's hand and then John's. "It was really rather enlightening."

"Thank you for trusting us with your medical wing. It is a huge step for your company, and we're glad to put the Global name behind it," Jessica said.

She was clearly a pro.

"I'll be in contact to schedule meetings for the rest of the week. I'd like to introduce you to the other half of my team, so we can start setting the foundation as soon as possible," Ramsey said. He seemed to speak to both Jessica and John, yet only Jessica at the same time.

Lexi tried not to look at anyone in particular as they walked out of the restaurant.

As Jessica asked Ramsey a few additional questions about the project, John turned to Lexi. "Can I speak to you privately before you leave?"

"Um..." She glanced over at Ramsey. She thought his undivided attention was on Jessica, but it was clear that he was watching her. "Let me see if we have time. I have a flight to catch tonight."

"Ah, right...you're going back to New York," John said.

"I thought you were going to be in the city when I got back," she said quietly.

"I was, but this was a last-minute job. I heard about it on Friday, and I just got the to come down here yesterday afternoon. We've been working on our proposal all night. Otherwise, I likely would have found the time to let you know I would be in town," John said. Leaning in a bit closer than he should have under the circumstances, he spoke softly, "Just give me five minutes, Lexi. I want more, but I can wait. I'm patient."

Lexi swallowed and stepped back. She pushed her hair behind her ear and then dropped her hand, remembering that it was her tell. “Sure. Hold on.”

Five minutes would be okay. She would totally be fine in that amount of time. She would just tell John the truth and break things off, and then everything would be peachy keen. Because that was how simple everything was in her life...

“Sorry for interrupting,” Lexi told Jessica. “Ramsey, are we okay on time still? I’m going to talk to John for a couple of minutes.”

Ramsey’s green eyes searchingly bore into hers. She knew he was trying to trust her, like he wanted to. She knew he was trying to let it all slide off of him with ease, but it couldn’t be easy. He had only found out about John yesterday.

“Yeah, we should be fine,” Ramsey said, bending down. He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her full on the lips.

Lexi came back blushing when he released her. *Since when was Ramsey the type to stake his claim so publicly?*

Maybe since she ha left him, and he ha found out that she had slept with Jack before his engagement and John when she returned to New York...

“I’ll, uh...be quick,” she murmured. She turned and walked back to John.

He still looked calm despite the display Ramsey had just put on.

“Five minutes,” she told John.

They walked out into the parking lot and away from prying eyes and ears. John storde over to a black BMW and leaned back against one of the doors.

“Is this your rental car?” she asked, making small talk.

“You’re dating Ramsey Bridges?” John asked incredulously.

“Uh...yeah. Kind of.”

“Well, that’s inconvenient. I’m pretty sure you weren’t yelling his name when we were together,” he mused.

Lexi laughed, which she immediately turned into a cough, as she glanced away from him. This was not the territory she wanted to venture into.

A little over two weeks ago, she had slept with the irresistibly handsome man in front of her. When she had returned to New York after

breaking up with Ramsey, she had been distraught from another failed relationship, another lie, another heartbreak. Chyna had been in Milan, and her roommate, Rachelle, had been away, working as a law associate for the summer. Adam had been the only one around who she had wanted to hang out with. He had been the only one who could understand since he and Chyna had broken up before she left.

Hanging out with Adam meant being around John, who Chyna despised for an instance that had occurred earlier that year when John had come on to her. But with Chyna gone, Lexi had found that she got along easily with John. She had let herself hang out with him without Adam, and then that had moved on to a couple of dates, which then moved on to the bedroom. To be honest, she had just liked not having to think or act or tiptoe or anything else. She hadn't cared that it was a rebound. It had felt comfortable, and that had been what she needed. She wasn't going to apologize to Ramsey about what had happened, but she couldn't let it continue either.

"So, how long have you been together?" John asked casually.

She could tell he wasn't as casual as he sounded though. His eyes were vigilant, and he seemed to be assessing her in a way she wasn't used to from him. He was usually so relaxed and in control. This must have thrown him off-balance.

"We were together for almost a year, but I broke up with him and moved back to New York at the end of June," she confessed. "I came back to Atlanta for a, uh...mutual friend's wedding, and we decided to try to work it out."

"And you were going to tell me..."

"When I got back," Lexi said.

"Why are you getting back together with his guy?" he asked.

She shifted her feet uncomfortably and chanced a glance back into his hazel eyes. He seemed legitimately interested, and she wasn't sure how to answer.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you broke up with him, moved back to New York, and started your life over. You don't seem like the type of person who just runs back to a guy who hurt her. He did hurt you, right?"

She nodded softly.

"So, what made you change your mind?"

“Why does it matter?” Lexi asked, sidestepping.

“I want to know, so I can figure out how to change it back.”

Lexi’s mouth dropped open before she had a chance to realize what she was doing. She had *not* been expecting that. She had been planning to let him down easy, hoping that they could keep their relationship civil while he was working on the Bridges medical wing. She hadn’t thought he would want to continue seeing her.

“I, uh…”

“Go out to dinner with me,” he said, reaching out for her hand and pulling her a little closer to him.

Lexi stumbled forward a step, but she quickly dropped his hand. She was too close, and this was a really, really bad idea. She was used to bad ideas, but this—well, this was even worse.

“I can’t. Sorry.”

“Come on, you were going to tell me you were dating someone else when you got back to New York anyway. Go out to dinner with me when I get back. Then, you can tell me if your relationship is still perfect, and you have no doubts in your mind,” he said in an almost mocking tone.

“John,” she warned.

“If your relationship is perfect, then what does one dinner between friends hurt?” He smirked at her in a way that made it clear he thought he had her backed into a corner.

“No.” Lexi shook her head and took a step backward. “I should probably get back. I hope this doesn’t interfere with your job, and you’ll still work on the Bridges project.”

She turned and began to walk back up to the restaurant.

“Hey,” John said, jogging to catch up with her, “does he know?”

“Know what? That we slept together?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“He knows.”

“Then, you have insurance against it not happening again,” he said, his voice dipping lower for her ears only. “Unless you want it to.”

Lexi shook her head again as she kept walking.

John reached out and grabbed her arm. “Go to dinner with me, Lexi. One dinner. It was just this week that you said you couldn’t wait to get home to me, that you wanted to go to my cabin in Connecticut with me, that you were sexting me.”

He hadn't lowered his voice this time, and Lexi's eyes bulged.

"Jesus, keep it down," she growled, swatting him on the arm.

"I want what I want, and I'm not ashamed of it. I'm not asking for those things—yet. I'm just asking for dinner. After dinner, if you never want to see me again, we can try to forget. We won't even call it a date. It's not a date," he repeated for good measure. "Dinner."

"Why are you being so persistent?" *Why did she attract such persistent guys?* That would have been a better question.

"I don't like to see people make terrible mistakes."

"You don't even know—"

"I do. It's just dinner, Lexi. Don't make me beg." He winked.

"I'll think about it."

"Daniel restaurant. Do you like French food? Gorgeous. You'd love it."

Lexi arched her eyebrows. Chyna had told her about Daniel before. It was over a hundred dollars a plate. They had five hundred dollar caviar. That was outrageous.

John smiled at her response. "I think Daniel will be perfect. Saturday?"

"John," she groaned.

"I'll pick you up at seven thirty."



Present

Lexi had been staring at the glittering diamond ring on her finger for what felt like an eternity. She was just sitting there and staring.

She was engaged. *Holy shit!* She was seriously, legitimately, one hundred percent engaged to Ramsey Bridges.

Why this shocked her so much, she couldn't quite put her finger on. She knew he was going to propose eventually. She didn't date someone for that long without the knowledge that someday she was probably going to get married. That was what people did. It was totally a normal thing to do. People got engaged all the time. How many of her friends were married now? Pretty much all of them.

But still, she was shocked.

Maybe because it was this ring.

Maybe because it was this guy.

Maybe because she hadn't told anyone yet.

In movies, she knew that the first thing people did when they got engaged, after they finished screaming or crying, was call everyone that they knew. They started with their parents and went down the list. Now, people posted it online as soon as it happened.

But she hadn't done that.

Last night, Ramsey had asked her who she was going to call first. She had told him it was too late, and they could make calls tomorrow. Well, now, it was tomorrow, and she still hadn't made any calls...or posted it online...or anything.

She needed to tell her parents, and she needed to call Chyna. Those were the most important ones. Her parents would be happy that their little girl was getting married, but Chyna would flip her shit and likely fly down to Atlanta as soon as she heard. Lexi wasn't quite ready for that much enthusiasm.

Lexi hadn't left her office all day because she was still working on that big case, so no one had even seen the damn thing. She had even ordered lunch in.

Now, she was back home, waiting for Ramsey to get home, before she went to see Jack, and she felt like an idiot. *What was wrong with her?* A gorgeous, successful man wanted to marry her and live out the rest of his days with her in his life.

That was the dream—someone's dream.

Ugh! She stood and stormed upstairs. That was her biggest problem... her biggest setback. She had never been the kind of girl who prioritized marriage. Sure, she wanted to get married—someday. But she was only twenty-seven years old, and she had so much else that she wanted to do and so many more places she wanted to go.

See...now, she was being irrational. She could do all of those things with a man at her side, with Ramsey at her side, but it just felt different. Marriage had never been her end game. *She wasn't Bekah Bridges, for Christ's sake!*

Just as she made it upstairs, determined to call Chyna and set this all right, she heard the front door open.

"Lexi!" Ramsey called.

"Up here," she yelled back.

Great. Now, she couldn't even hide the fact that she hadn't told anyone. This was going to be good.

"Hey!" he said, a big smile plastered on his face. "Look at my gorgeous fiancée."

Ramsey bent down and kissed her lips, the taste of peppermint lingering on his tongue. Lexi smiled against his mouth as he wrapped his arms around her waist and picked her up.

"So," he murmured against her lips, "how did your parents take the news? Are they excited?"

"Well..."

Ramsey placed her gently back down on her feet and looked at her with a stern expression. "You did tell them, right?"

"I was super swamped at work today, and I just got home a bit ago."

"So, you haven't told them?"

Lexi shook her head. "No. I was about to call Chyna before you got home."

“Chyna before your parents?” he asked.

She didn’t know why that was a bad thing. She loved her parents, and they got along, but Chyna was her family, too. They had gone to hell and back together the last couple of years.

And maybe she wanted to hear Chyna’s opinion before telling everyone else. That wasn’t weird or anything.

“Have you told your parents?” she asked, ignoring the question.

“I wanted to tell them together.”

Lexi blew out the breath she had been holding. She wasn’t sure why she was nervous about them knowing. It had nothing to do with Jack. At all. Not even a little bit. They were friends. *Just* friends for two years now.

“When did you want to tell them?”

“What about brunch on Sunday? The place where it all started,” he said with a smile.

“Well, it all started in a club in New York.”

“Where it all started over then. Is Sunday okay?”

Lexi tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. She couldn’t even help it. She was nervous. Ramsey’s parents made her nervous. The possibility of seeing Bekah made her nervous. Lexi did what she could to avoid his sister at all costs. But she had said yes to Ramsey last night when it counted. It would be silly not to say yes to tell his parents two days from now.

“Of course.”

“Great. I’ll let them know we’ll be there.” He walked toward the bedroom door.

“I’m still meeting up with Jack tonight,” she told him.

“Oh, right. I forgot about that.” Ramsey stopped in the doorway and turned to face her.

She saw that he had a question at the tip of his tongue. She could generally read him pretty easily. Whatever his question was though, she wasn’t sure she was ready to hear it.

“I was just waiting to leave until after you got home.” Lexi grabbed her jacket.

It was only October, and it was already too brisk to go without.

“You’re leaving now? Should I make us dinner?”

“Oh, I don’t know how long I’ll be. Do you want me to just text you?” she asked.

“Sure, Lexi.”

Ramsey opened his mouth like he was going to ask a question, but she averted her gaze and slid into her jacket.

“Have you seen my purple scarf?” She couldn’t help but change the subject.

“Hey, you,” Ramsey said, drawing her attention. “Come here.” He pointed to the ground in front of him.

Lexi shuffled forward and stood before him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. “Are you okay with all of this?”

“With all of what?” she asked like she had no clue what he was talking about.

“The engagement, Lexi—telling everyone, getting married, being mine forever,” he said before dropping a kiss on her forehead. “I know how you feel about marriage, and we can wait, if that’s what you want. I just thought you were ready.”

“Ramsey Bridges, are you trying to talk me out of it?” Lexi asked.

“I’m not joking with you. I’m not trying to talk you into or out of anything. I just want you to be mine.”

Lexi opened her mouth to tell him that she already was, but he kept speaking before she could say anything.

“I want you to be mine, Lexi. Mine. I want you to take my name. When people call you Mrs. Bridges, I don’t want you to have to correct them. That’s what I want. But mostly, I just want you to be happy. Are you happy?”

“Of course, I’m happy.”

“Good.” Ramsey’s smile returned with her answer, and he drew her into him. “So, you’re going to be okay with telling people...everyone?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. With her hands wound around his neck, she couldn’t think of how she couldn’t be.



Are we still meeting? Are you hungry?

The message from Jack came as soon as she got into her car. She had thought that she was meeting Jack at the office, but it seemed like he had something else on his mind.

Yeah. Did you want to get dinner?

Well, there went her plans to be back to have dinner with Ramsey. She would have to text him and let him know that wasn't going to happen. Whatever was going on in Jack's head was a mystery to her. *Though... hadn't it always been?*

Thai 5.

Huh. Fast-food Thai wouldn't have been her first choice for dinner, but it did kind of sound good.

Lexi maneuvered her car out onto the interstate toward the Thai restaurant. She had been there only a couple of times. Once, she had gone with her friend Brandon for sushi, but they had found another place they liked, so they had stopped going to Thai 5. It was pretty close to her office, but lately, she was so often in court that she would eat around there or at the Bridges offices.

Fifteen minutes later, she pulled up in front of the restaurant. Jack was idling in his car, but he hopped out as soon as he saw her car park. He had been working really late days recently, so Lexi had thought that he would be coming straight from the office, but he wasn't wearing a suit. Instead, he had on a pair of dark jeans and a half-zipped, long-sleeved, dark blue pullover. She smiled when she saw the Chuck Taylors on his feet. *So Jack.*

"Hey, Lex," he said with a bright smile as he jogged up to meet her.

"Hey."

She watched him as he approached, knowing that something was wrong. Dark circles were beginning to appear under his captivating blue eyes, and his hair was ruffled. Though it still looked good. Plus, the Chucks were a dead giveaway. They were like a security blanket.

"You look nice."

"Really?" she asked, considering her outfit.

She was wearing a loose, cream button-up tucked into a flowing coral skirt with her black jacket. She still hadn't been able to find her scarf. At least, it wasn't cool enough yet for it to be necessary, but she had thought it would go well together. Nothing fancy though.

"Really." Jack nodded and pushed her toward the entrance to the restaurant.

He grabbed the door handle before she could reach for it, and then he opened the door for her.

“Thanks,” she murmured, walking through the door.

“Anytime.”

The pair got into line behind another couple, and they waited to order. Lexi already knew what she wanted, but she was really more concerned with what was going on with Jack.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” she prodded.

Jack chuckled. “Not here, Lex.”

His blue eyes seemed to stare straight through her, and she looked away quickly. She knew those eyes still had power. They were friends, but it wasn’t always an easy gaze to hold.

Lexi cleared her throat before speaking again. “If not here, then where are we going to talk?”

“I was hoping we could get into your office.”

“What?” she asked, surprised.

Jack had been to her office before, but usually, he would only meet her there to go to lunch or something. The office was closed. It was after-hours. He knew that. *What could he want to go to her office for?*

“I just need somewhere private to talk to you.”

“It’s closed, Jack.”

“You have a key, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah...”

He looked at her pointedly, pleading. “So, we could still go?”

Why was she letting herself get sucked in by that stare? It must have something to do with that desperation she had heard through the phone yesterday.

“I mean, yeah, we can go, but why do we need to?”

“I don’t want to talk about it here.” He actually looked uncomfortable. “Can we just go to your office? I was hoping we could get this to go.”

Lexi sighed. *This man always had his own agenda.*

“Fine. We can go there, but we can’t stay long.”

He reached out and squeezed her right hand. “Thanks for understanding.”

She stood still for a second as that same bolt of electricity shot through her body, like it always had. She saw it mirrored in his eyes, and

then they both hastily dropped their hands.

Same old Jack, yet...still so different.

With to-go bags in hand, they returned to their respective cars and drove the short distance to her office. Jack got stuck at a red light right as she turned into the parking lot. Lexi easily slid her car into her normal parking spot even though there were closer places. It was just a habit at this point.

As she waited for him to make it through that interminably long light, she stared down at her ring. Her jacket was long enough that it covered her hands, and unless Jack had been looking for it, he probably wouldn't have noticed the diamond on her finger. She had been meaning to tell him over dinner, but now that they were bringing dinner to her office, it felt too intimate.

Biting her lip, she yanked the expensive ring from her finger and placed it in the glove box. *Ugh!* She already hated herself for doing it. Her hand looked bare without the ring, and guilt seeped into every pore. *She should tell Jack today.* But...she couldn't tell him. She hadn't even told her parents or Chyna yet. Jack couldn't be the first person to know.

A tap on her window made her jump clear out of her seat. Her hand flew to her chest, and her head darted to the source of the noise. Jack was laughing as he looked at her through the window, and she scowled up at him. She opened the door really fast and heard him grunt as it collided with his knee.

"Jesus, Lex," he said, grabbing for the door to keep it from hitting him anywhere else.

Lexi stood from the car and smirked. "Serves you right. You shouldn't scare a girl like that."

"I didn't think I would scare you. Chill," he said, shutting the door for her. He experimentally stretched his knee out a few times, but then he seemed to walk just fine once they started up the hill to the entrance.

When Lexi located her office key, she opened the door and quickly disabled the security system. Once Jack was inside, she reactivated the alarm, so no one could follow behind them. Then, she shut and locked the door. They took the elevator to the third floor, and Lexi flipped on the light switch, illuminating the open office space.

Her office was one of the first doors, right next to the employee lounge, which was both good and bad. She always heard the latest gossip,

but people frequently dragged her away from her work. Not to mention, she was one of the first people her boss would see when he walked in.

“Do you want to eat in the lounge?” Lexi asked, pointing at the open door.

“Sure.”

The lounge was high-end with two black leather couches, a mounted flat screen television, a small but sleek kitchen, and a wooden table that could seat six comfortably. Jack walked inside and set the food down on the glass coffee table in front of the couch. She followed behind him and took a seat on one of the couches before reaching for her food.

Lexi was anxious to know what he wanted to talk about. Too many scenarios ran through her head, but none seemed plausible. She never knew with Jack though—anything could happen. She wanted to broach the subject again, but he was already pulling out his pad thai and digging in, leaving no room for conversation. Seeing that he wasn't going to talk about what had been so urgent yesterday until he was ready, Lexi reached for her sushi.

Silence with Jack had never been uncomfortable. Even now that things were different between them, it still seemed as effortless as it always had. He didn't seem to be in a rush, so she didn't rush. She didn't have anything else to do tonight besides finally telling Chyna about the engagement. At that thought, she bit down on her lip on accident and squeaked. Jack looked up at her with a question in his blue eyes, but she just swallowed her food and looked away. He didn't know why she was jittery, and she certainly wasn't going to tell him after prying that damn ring off of her finger.

After they finished their food, Jack threw the rest away in the trash across the lounge. Then, he leaned back against the counter and stared at her. Lexi stared right back. She searched his face for a clue, for anything that would tell her what she was about to hear, but she didn't like what she saw. His eyes were stormy and contemplative, his forehead was creased in thought, and his arms were folded lightly over his chest. Whatever it was... was heavy.

“Jack,” she whispered unintentionally, “what is it?”

“You remember that time we went to the beach together?” Jack asked.

Lexi tilted her head to the side and eyed him suspiciously. *What did that have to do with anything? And for that matter, how could he think she*

would forget? That had been the first time they had...been together.

"Of course I do. What about it?"

"I was just remembering how you looked at me that day when you saw me in the sand." His eyes were distant as he seemed to be recalling the moment.

"You weren't supposed to be at the beach. You were supposed to be in Savannah," she reminded him. "I was just surprised."

"Surprised." He laughed and shook his head. "You were flat-out shocked and lit into me, like it was all my fault for existing."

Lexi's cheeks burned as she recollected the experience. She remembered he had been about to kiss her before Kate and Clark had interrupted them. He had deserved her sharp tongue.

"It had a happy ending, I suppose," he said with a shrug.

Lexi narrowed her eyes. "Happy ending? Clark conning me into telling him we slept together was a happy ending?"

Jack shook his head like he was breaking out of a trance—as if he had forgotten that was how the story had ended. "Sleeping with you was the happy ending."

She immediately dropped her gaze to her hands. *What the hell was up with him?* Recounting old memories and digging up the past—there was no point in any of that anymore.

"What does this have to do with anything, Jack?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "It doesn't have to do with anything, Lex. I don't even know why I brought it up."

"Jack, what's going on? You're acting really strange," Lexi said, her gaze returning to his troubled blue eyes.

"Bekah served me divorce papers," he said flatly.

"What?" Lexi snapped. "What did you say?"

"She served me papers," he said, his blue eyes showing as much pity and shock as she had ever seen.

"After everything...she's filing for divorce?" Lexi couldn't believe it. She couldn't fucking believe it. Bekah had done everything to keep her and Jack together, and now, she was going to divorce him after only two years. Lexi suddenly felt murderous. *How dare she ruin everyone's life over and over and over again like this!*

"I guess, Lexi. I don't know what to do. That's why I called you. I never thought this would happen."

“But did she at least give you a reason?” Lexi demanded.

Jack hung his head and sighed. Her heart went out to him in that moment. He looked so lost and vulnerable. Those weren't emotions she associated with Jack.

“She thinks I cheated on her.”

Lexi snorted. *That was rich!*

“I'm serious!” he cried angrily. “Take this seriously.”

“How can I when this is all a sham to begin with? You did cheat on her!”

“Not while we were married!”

“And who's going to believe you?”

“I was hoping you would.”

“You thought *I* would believe that about you, Jack? After everything I know about you, you thought I would think you wouldn't cheat on Bekah? Did you hit your head this morning?” Lexi asked, crossing her arms.

Jack rolled his beautiful blue eyes at Lexi's dramatic behavior. “I thought I'd proven myself over the past couple of years.”

“You thought wrong. I know who you are, even if you are my friend. Even more so, I've known you too long. I've been there.”

“But it didn't happen! You have to convince her—”

“Whoa, there!” Lexi cried, holding her hands up in front of her. “I'm never convincing Bekah of anything *ever* again.”

“I didn't mean—”

“I don't care! I don't care! Can't you just deal with this like everyone else?”

“How does everyone else deal with this, Lexi? I'm not everyone else. This isn't a normal scenario or anything.”

“It never is with you,” Lexi remarked sullenly.

Jack sighed and stormed away from Lexi to the other end of the room. “Can we be serious for one goddamn second? My whole marriage is on the line.”

“You shouldn't have gotten married in the first place!” she cried angrily.

She hadn't been able to hold it back. *He shouldn't have gotten married. That was one thing she was damn certain of.*

She shook her head, already riled up from the conversation.

“I knew it was a mistake to ask you about this.”

Lexi shrugged. She couldn't agree more. "I don't know how you could expect anything else from me."

"Things are different."

"You've been saying that for a long time."

"But you know they are."

Lexi tried not to glance at her left ring finger. She wasn't ready to tell him about that yet.

"Maybe they are, Jack," she whispered.

She should tell him! She knew she should tell him.

He walked back across the lounge to Lexi and sat next to her. "I'm sorry I bothered you. You shouldn't have to deal with this. You have your own life. I know what we are now, but you're all I have left. I can't talk to anyone else about something like this. Lex, you're my best friend," he whispered huskily.

She diverted her eyes from the curve of his lips, those soft pleading eyes, the heady smell of him. She couldn't help him. She wouldn't.

He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and he was so close that she could almost taste the familiar scent she associated with Jack. It was like musky cologne, sex, and tension all rolled into one delicious mix. Her nerves cracked at the feel of his hand against her earlobe.

"Stop it!" she cried, jumping off the couch, feeling the heat and adrenaline course through her veins.

"Lex, I'm not doing anything!" he yelled back, unable to control his temper. "You're the one accusing me of cheating on Bekah!"

Lexi stormed across the room in a fury. She had been so in control around him that she hated getting this heated. She knew what her anger did to him, even if they hadn't done anything in two years.

She just wanted to punch something. Here he was—after all that shit they had gone through—requesting the same goddamn thing of her all over again. It was like he hadn't even considered what this would do to her.

"I haven't done anything in the past two years to make you believe I have cheated on her," he growled, standing angrily. "Tell me I've done something that makes you think that."

Pressing her palms to her temples, Lexi shook her head back and forth. "It's nothing you've done in the past two years. It's everything that happened the seven before that."

“You can’t always hold me accountable for the past. You’ve done bad things, too, Lexi. I’m not the only one! So, stop blaming me for everything. I’m trying...I’ve tried to be a better person. I’ve been successful in fact. So, can you please stop acting like I’m the same nineteen-year-old boy who you knew all those years ago? It’s not fair to me. After all the effort I’ve put in, the fact that you can come to me like this...I came to you as a friend. You are the only person I can still rely on.”

“Okay, I get it,” she grumbled, turning around slowly and putting up her hands. “I’m sorry, all right? It’s easy to fall back into what we...were.”

“I know,” he agreed, diverting his eyes.

“It’s easy to forget the wedding...and everything else that happened afterward,” she said wistfully.

Well, it hadn’t been easy at first, but she had gotten there with time. When she was around him, she just forgot the rest of the world. Even though they weren’t romantically involved anymore, he still had that same pull that she could never deny. *He was just so...Jack.*

“It is.” He looked up at her from across the room.

Their eyes locked, and from that distance, she could tell from his crystal-clear blue eyes that he was thinking the same thing she was thinking. It was a good thing he was so far away.

“I’m glad we’re past that,” she murmured, never breaking away from his gaze.

“I agree.” His characteristic smirk crossed his face.

“I wouldn’t be able to be around you if we were anything but friends.” She hoped she sounded convincing.

“Definitely not.” He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and tried not to look smug.

“So, I’m glad we have this...friendship,” she told him.

“Me, too.”

“It’s weird when you’re not in my life,” she admitted.

She wasn’t sure why she was admitting any of this right now. Maybe it was the familiar way he was looking at her. Maybe she was trying to pivot away from his ungodly request. Maybe it was the heated passion that sometimes flared up between them that she tried desperately to douse.

“I don’t like it,” he said, looking at her in a way that made it clear he was wondering where she was going with this line of conversation.

He ran his hand through his dark brown hair, letting each strand fall back into place. She wished it were longer. He used to let it fall into his eyes...those eyes. Now, it just hit his forehead. He looked good... professional. It suited him for the accounting career he had decided on, but it didn't suit *Jack*.

The silence dragged on as Lexi and Jack stared at each other across the room. The tension was palpable. She didn't know what to do or what to say. What Jack wanted from her, was out of the question. They had gone through too much and put up with too many years for her to agree to help him. It would only hurt the one relationship she hadn't royally fucked-up.

"What are you going to do about the divorce?" Lexi finally asked.

"What should I do?" His eyes searched her face for the answers that she had never had.

It was a more in-depth, determined, focused question than could be answered in words. She could feel years of questions hanging in the balance. She could feel years of desperation forced between them. She could feel years of heartache, destitution, and irreversible need roll off of every syllable.

"What happens if you and Bekah get a divorce?" she breathed, barely above a whisper.

She couldn't believe she had asked it. *She was engaged! It didn't matter. It didn't matter what happened. Why did she even have to ask him that question?*

The stretch of space between them had felt like a hundred miles growing every day since he had said, *I do*. Yet, here she was, the day after accepting Ramsey's proposal, feeling the distance between them dissipating. She wanted to ignore it. She desperately wanted to ignore it. But what would she do if the Bitch no longer had her claws in him?

Jack looked down at the ground and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. She could see the thoughts running through his head. She could see what he wanted to say, but she knew he wouldn't. She knew he wouldn't say it.

"What do you want me to say, Lex?"

There was that pet name again.

She didn't even know what she wanted him to say. *And even if she did, even if she allowed herself the slip-up, what could be done?*

"Nothing," she finally whispered, turning away from Jack.

She tried to shut herself down, to think only about the memorable night she had had the day before. Yet, her mind kept wishing he would call out to her, but he didn't. He didn't stop her from walking away.



September Two Years and One Month Earlier

Five whole days of silence from Chyna.

It wasn't the longest Lexi had gone without hearing from her. She had been in Milan for nearly two months after all, but this was deliberate. Chyna had walked out of that wedding with Lexi, Ramsey, and Adam, but Lexi hadn't heard from her since.

Lexi couldn't let this stand. She had tried reaching out to Chyna. She knew it would be best to talk things through before Chyna got to sit and stew. The woman could hold a grudge like no one else. But of course, Chyna seemed to be avoiding Lexi's phone calls.

Lexi needed to make this right. Throwing on a pair of tennis shoes, she decided she was going to go over there and talk to her. She knew that Chyna was pissed about John, but that was over now. She was going to have dinner with John today to end things just like she had told him in the parking lot. *The end.*

She just needed to tell Chyna and hope that Chyna wouldn't be a bitch about it. *That would be great.*

Lexi hailed a cab to head uptown. On a different day, she might have jogged to Chyna's apartment, but she wasn't in the mood. She needed to make things right, and she had too many thoughts swirling around in her head. Running would only make her obsess more about the situation. That was never a good thing.

The cab came to a stop in front of Chyna's building. Lexi paid the fare and then stepped out onto the sidewalk. She walked up to the front entrance and saw Chyna's doorman, Bernard, standing there.

"Hey, Mr. B," Lexi said as she approached him. She liked that he was a constant staple of the Fifth Avenue apartment.

“Miss Lexi, it’s always good to see you,” Bernard said with a smile.

“It’s good to see you. Is Chyna up there...alone?”

“I feel like you ask me this every time you come over,” he said, his hand on the door. “Are you thinking she isn’t by herself in the middle of the afternoon?”

“Well, I just didn’t know if Adam was up there. That might not be the best thing for me right now,” she told him. Though she wasn’t sure why. She always seemed to divulge a bit too much information to Bernard.

“No,” Bernard said with a shake of his head as he pulled open the door. “She’s up there all by herself. Mr. Ward left earlier this morning.”

“And she’s still there, and she hasn’t returned my calls?” she snapped. She hadn’t meant it to come out so harsh, but it was so irritating. *If Chyna was home alone, why couldn’t she just answer her phone?*

Bernard certainly caught the irritation in her voice. “Have you done something, Miss Lexi?”

“No,” Lexi said quickly, running up the stairs and through the front door. She didn’t want to have this conversation with Bernard. She was already dreading having it with Chyna. “I’ll see you around, Mr. B.”

“Bye, Lexi.”

Lexi took the elevator to the penthouse suite, listening to the mind-numbing classical music as she went up. It dinged open on the top floor, and she walked down to the end of the hallway. She had a received key to Chyna’s apartment nearly three years ago, and she had never given it back. Under the circumstances, Lexi figured it would be better if she knocked.

Taking a deep breath, Lexi knocked on the door and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Nothing.

“Really, Chyna? You’re not going to answer the door?” Lexi called out irritably. “I’m here, and you’re not going to talk to me? How immature are you?”

And still nothing.

Chyna wasn’t leaving Lexi with any other choice. She needed to speak with Chyna. Lexi wouldn’t let Chyna stew any more than she likely already was. Lexi hadn’t come all this way for nothing. After knocking one more time without a response, Chyna pushed Lexi over the edge. Lexi procured the little gold key from her purse and slid it into the lock. Bracing

herself for the conversation ahead, she twisted the knob and entered Chyna's penthouse.

"Chyna!"

Lexi kicked the door closed behind her and walked through the foyer, which Chyna had already redecorated since she had gotten home from Milan. Her interior designer and resident gay best friend, Frederick, must have had his hands on the place. He was constantly redecorating Chyna's apartment based on her ever-fleeting taste in décor. It all had once been white chic and modern, then it was black leather with a classic New York flare, and then Chyna had gone through this terrible leopard-print stage that Frederick definitely did not agree with. Now, it was decorated in muted tans and gorgeous reds, blues, and greens that popped from the rest of the subdued style.

The room still had the same collage of pictures from Chyna's many travels. Lexi noticed a few new pictures that Chyna had added since returning home. One was of a landscape on a canal in Milan, and the second was of the coast. Lexi wondered if they had any significance. *Why had she picked those two to bring back?*

And just as she had the thought, the door to Chyna's bedroom opened, and she walked down the hallway into the living room.

"What the fuck are you doing here, chica?" Chyna asked, crossing her arms over her thin body.

She wore nothing more than a lacy demi bra and matching lace back V-string underwear. Somehow, she managed to look even more beautiful than she did in some of her thousand-dollar designer dresses.

Lexi hated her every moment for it. How could her best friend be this gorgeous? It just wasn't fair to the rest of the world. It certainly wasn't fair to Lexi, who was so much shorter than Chyna. And Chyna was just supermodel thin and tall with perfectly perky breasts, sleek black hair, and gorgeous emerald eyes. *Fucking ridiculous.*

"What do you mean, what am I doing here?" Lexi asked. "I've been trying to call you all day, all week. You haven't answered any of my fucking phone calls."

"Oh, did you call?" Chyna asked, arching a masterfully groomed eyebrow. She tapped her finger against her arm. "I guess I missed it."

"You're not fooling anyone right now—certainly not me," Lexi said, rolling her eyes. *Why did Chyna have to be so difficult?* Lexi had known

that she was going to be, but standing here and seeing that she actually was made it more frustrating. “You’re angry at me. That’s why you haven’t returned any of my calls. You don’t have to pretend like you didn’t get them, Chyna. I know that’s not true. Why don’t you just admit you’re angry at me?”

“Fine. I’m angry at you.” Chyna shrugged. She grabbed a short silk robe out of a closet and tied it around her waist. “I mean, what the hell, Alexa? You had to hide things from me?”

“It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t purposely hiding things from you.”

“Oh, really? So, when *were* you going to tell me that you were seeing John?”

“I wasn’t *seeing* John.”

“Now, you’re going to try to play it off? Alexa, I know you *way* too well for that. I have known you for three years. I have seen all of the shit that you have gotten yourself into. I have seen Jack tear you apart. I have seen Ramsey tear you apart. I have seen you go back to both of them,” she said, ticking them off on her fingers. “Don’t try to act like I don’t know who you are. I *know* who you are. And you probably fucked John just because you knew he’d tried to sleep with me!”

Oh no, she had not gone there!

Lexi was near to bursting with anger. “Chyna! Are you fucking serious right now? I thought you were my best friend. I thought you were the person who—yeah, told me all the shit I’d done wrong and opened my eyes to what the fuck I was doing, but I didn’t think you were judgmental. I didn’t think you ever *judged* me.”

“Well, you probably shouldn’t have hidden things from your best friend then, should you?”

“Really?” Lexi asked solemnly.

Chyna just shrugged her little shoulders and looked away from Lexi. “So, what do you want?”

“I want to clear this up,” Lexi told her. “I don’t want to lose my best friend. I don’t even want to be with John.”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before keeping everything from me.”

“Chyna, you were gone! You were in Milan. I’d just broken up with Ramsey. I was a hot mess. Adam and I were hanging out, and I met John. He didn’t seem like the person you’d made him out to be. He didn’t seem

like a bad guy!” Lexi waved her arms dramatically. *How could she get this into Chyna’s head?* “I didn’t know how to bring it up with you because I know how you feel about him.”

“We’ve known each other for years. I would think you could just bring it up to me like you have brought everything else up to me. You hid it because you were scared, just like you hide everything else because you’re scared. The fact that it’s John is just icing on the cake.”

“So, what? I kept one thing from you, and now, you’re going to hold a grudge against me forever?” Lexi cried in disbelief. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Sometimes, life isn’t fair.”

Lexi shook her head and tried to clear her mind. She couldn’t push Chyna any more than she already had. If Chyna cared enough to want their friendship to work, being the person that Lexi knew she was, then she would come around. If she didn’t, there wasn’t anything Lexi could do about it. It made her want to walk up to Chyna and shake her. Lexi just wanted to tell her to get over this nonsense.

It was just a guy! Sure, John had been the reason Chyna and Adam had broken up earlier that year, but Chyna leaving for Milan had been the reason they had broken up the second time. Chyna and Adam were back together now, but maybe she needed to look a little closer at herself before passing judgment on Lexi.

Either way, Lexi thought this whole thing was stupid, and she really wanted to move on.

The thought of losing Chyna was agonizing. It made Lexi’s heart feel like it was about to burst out of her. But she couldn’t show Chyna that. Chyna hated weakness. She had always hated it. She hated it in herself, and whenever Lexi had shown it, Chyna would try to slap it right out of her. And really, at this point, the last thing Lexi wanted was for Chyna to slap her. The only time that had ever worked was when she had fainted in Chyna’s penthouse in Atlanta. And even then...Chyna had been right.

“Okay. Fine,” Lexi said finally. She didn’t want to argue. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have hidden John from you. I admit it—I shouldn’t have even slept with him. It was stupid, and it’s never happening again—ever. I’m going to see him tonight to tell him it’s over and that there’s nothing between us. It was just a one-night stand, and it’s done. I’m with Ramsey again,” Lexi said. “Chyna...”

“You’re going to see him?” she asked, looking her straight in the eyes.

“Yeah, it’s kind of complicated.”

“Isn’t it always with you, Lexi?”

Lexi laughed and nodded. “Yeah, it really is.”

“So...why is it complicated? Is Jack involved?”

“Actually,” Lexi said with a stilted laugh, “no! Jack is not involved this time. Um...God, Chyna...John is working on the Bridges medical wing.”

“What?” she snapped, her hand flying to her mouth in disbelief.

“What do you mean?”

Lexi walked over to the couch and leaned against it. She still couldn’t believe that this had happened, and retelling the story would make it feel more real. “Ramsey’s dad hired Global to work on the medical wing to get it completed within a year. They brought in a partner, and John is working with her,” Lexi explained.

“Oh my God,” Chyna crooned exaggeratedly, finally sounding like the old Chyna. “How the *hell* do you get into these kinds of situations?”

“I wish I knew,” Lexi said lightly. “So, um...Ramsey met John—the *day* after we walked out of the wedding, right after he’d found out I slept with John.”

“Oh fuck, Alexa. That’s bad luck.”

“Really bad luck.” Lexi couldn’t agree more.

“Anyway, when I saw John, I ended up talking to him privately for a few minutes. I told him what I just told you. I told him it was over. And he said, since we’re both going to be back in New York by the end of the week, we should meet over dinner and talk about it.” Lexi thought the abbreviated version of that story was probably best in this scenario. “So, I’m doing that. We’re meeting to talk, but I’m just going to tell him it’s over. It never was much—”

“Where are you going to dinner?” Chyna licked her lips and crossed her arms again.

Lexi breathed out heavily. It was clear Chyna didn’t like the idea of Lexi going to dinner with him. She had really hoped that Chyna wouldn’t have asked about dinner plans though. That was the worst question Chyna could have asked her. If she were upset at the prospect of dinner, she wouldn’t be any happier knowing where.

“Um...” Lexi stammered. “I, uh...” she hesitated, playing for time. She did not want this to go where it was already headed. She knew Chyna was going to be pissed-off.

“Lexi, where are you going?” Chyna suspiciously narrowed her eyes.

“Um...we’re going to Daniel,” Lexi whispered.

“You’re going on a date!” Chyna said, shock written all over her face.

“No, I’m not going on a date.”

“You’re going on a date. Alexa, you’re going on a date. I just can’t fucking believe you. You got back together with Ramsey. You let Jack get married to that *whore*. And you’re risking everything by going on a date with John?”

“I’m not risking anything because I’m not going on a date. I swear! It’s not a date.”

“You don’t go to a restaurant where it’s a hundred dollars a plate if it’s not a date. You just don’t. So, you should think about that. I just...I think maybe you should leave,” she said softly.

“Chyna...come on. I don’t want us to be broken. You’re the only thing in my life that hasn’t been!”

“Alexa, I just need...time. I don’t know. I don’t know what to tell you. I need time to think about it. It feels like a deception...” Chyna said, trailing off and looking out across the apartment. “I have some things I want to talk to you about, but I guess I need some time to think about all of this.”

“Okay,” Lexi said with a sigh. It was pretty clear she wasn’t going to get anywhere with Chyna today. “I guess I’ll go. Tell Adam I said hi.”

“I will. Have fun on your date.”

“Chyna, it’s not a date!”

“If it wasn’t a date, then you wouldn’t be going to Daniel,” Chyna repeated. “Also, why are you going to *dinner* with him? Dinner, really? Couldn’t you just meet him for coffee to tell him to fuck off? Like, it’s really easy. Oh, I like my friends better than you, so fuck off. Right? No, you’re not doing that! You’re going to a hundred-dollar dinner and letting him *woo* you.”

“What would you do, Chyna?” Lexi snapped. *She was not letting him woo her!*

“I would *not* do that!”

“And what? You would lay out your best friend’s dirty laundry to a room full of people instead? You’d totally break girl code and rat on me

when there was obviously a reason I didn't tell anyone that Jack and I had slept together at his birthday party because...right, I should be better than that."

"I broke girl code? You slept with John! After you knew how I felt about him."

"How exactly do you feel about him, C? Because you're acting like I stole your boyfriend," Lexi snapped.

"Don't even. You know he was an ass to me and then caused the breakup."

"But now, you're fine! And John is not bothering you anymore. I'm not happy that you told everyone about what had happened with Jack that night, but I'm willing to get over it!"

"Then, get over it. You're always hiding things. If you just communicated with everyone else, then this wouldn't even be a problem."

"All right, whatever," Lexi said in frustration. "I can't be you. I can only be me, so I just hope you'll forgive me."

She looked at Chyna deliberately before turning on her heel and walking out. Lexi closed the door behind her before she let the tears come. She couldn't lose her best friend over this. She just couldn't...



It wasn't a date.

It definitely was not a date.

There was no way she was going on a date with John—but that didn't explain why she had taken a lot of time to pull the straightener through her long hair, making it silky smooth, or why she had carefully applied the makeup she didn't normally wear, or why she had found a dress that had once belonged to Chyna that had somehow made it into Lexi's closet with the price tags still on it.

Well, she had to still look the part. She had to still look like she was going to Daniel. They weren't going to let her in if she was in an oversized T-shirt, running shorts, and tennis shoes. That was why she had put on her favorite pair of Manolos that Chyna had given her. There was no other reason—whatsoever.

It wasn't a date. That was obvious.

Lexi shook off her worries and finally left her apartment. She wanted to think it didn't matter what she looked like, but it did. It wasn't about the dress code. It mattered to her. She had to tell John it was over, but still, a part of her wanted to look nice for him.

John had wanted to pick her up from her apartment to take her to the restaurant, but she had refused. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea about what they were doing. This put some distance between them, and it helped to calm her down.

Nerves hit her full force as the cab driver pulled up in front of the restaurant after the short drive. A valet opened the door for her and assisted her out of the car.

"Thank you," she murmured.

She walked across the red-carpeted entranceway that read *Daniel* in the restaurant's signature design and in through the wooden double doors.

Lexi bit her bottom lip as she stared at the beautiful interior of the restaurant. She had always wanted to come here, but she had been intimidated by the luxurious surroundings. It had an all white interior with large columns artfully placed in archways that divided the rooms. Tables were evenly spaced throughout the room with crisp white tablecloths, sterling silver utensils, and bouquets of red roses. The lighting was dim and romantic. Daniel was a date spot, and Lexi knew it. Knowing it made her even more anxious. *She wasn't on a date.* As far as she wanted to look at it, she was here on business.

"May I help you?" the maître d' asked, stepping up to greet her.

"Yes, I have a reservation for two under Ward," Lexi said. She fiddled absentmindedly with the deep purple clutch she held in her hand. At least she wasn't pushing her hair behind her ear.

"Of course. Mr. Ward has already arrived. Allow me to escort you to his table."

Lexi followed him across the main room, through a large archway, and into a smaller similarly decorated room. The maître d' strode into the candlelit room and headed to the very back corner.

"Here you are," the maître d' said, gesturing to the table.

"Thank you."

When the maître d' left, Lexi caught her first look at John as he stood from the table. He was strikingly handsome in a charcoal gray suit with a black button-up. He didn't have on a tie, and the top button on his shirt was

undone. His short brown hair was styled, his hazel eyes looked dark in the low light, and his lips were pulled up into a smile at the sight of her.

“Lexi,” John said in greeting, his eyes roaming the curves clearly visible in the tight black dress she was wearing.

She saw a glint of desire in his eyes. She couldn’t keep the smile off her face as she approached him.

“Stunning,” he murmured.

He reached out his arms and took her hands in his, pulling her lightly toward him. Lexi teetered forward on her high heels as just that slight tug threatened to pull her off-balance. John caught her against his chest and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Absolutely stunning,” he whispered into her hair.

His hands slid down her sides, and she quickly stepped away from him.

She smacked his hand lightly and shook her head at him. “No touching.”

He smirked devilishly. Lexi remembered why she had been able to forget everything that had happened when she had left Atlanta after breaking up with Ramsey. She had *really* wanted to forget though, so that probably helped.

“Oh, I forgot. Boyfriend.”

“Yes, boyfriend,” Lexi repeated. *He would do well to remember that.*

He didn’t seem perturbed by that fact as he ushered her to her seat.

John pulled out the chair for her, and she sat down.

“Does your boyfriend know that you’re out to dinner with me?” he asked, scooting the chair forward.

Lexi sat up straight and swallowed. “He knows that I’m meeting you.”

Ramsey knew that she had agreed to meet John to straighten things out. He didn’t really need to know much more, just like Chyna.

John brushed her hair off her neck, his fingers skimming the soft skin. Lexi shivered at the touch.

“That’s what I thought.”

Lexi bristled at that comment. She wasn’t hiding this from Ramsey. She just didn’t want to cause him to unnecessarily worry.

“He doesn’t have anything to worry about,” she said.

John walked around the table and took the seat across from her. He just cocked his head and smiled at her.

“What?” she asked. She didn’t want to be flustered by that look.

“I highly doubt that he’s not worrying. If I were him, I’d be worried.”

“I don’t see you as the worrying type,” Lexi said, deflecting.

John chuckled. “No, I suppose I’m not. I never really have been.”

Lexi wanted to swipe that smug look off his face. She was reconsidering coming here. She hadn’t wanted to in the first place, but after he had convinced her in Atlanta, she had somehow convinced herself that it wouldn’t be that bad.

But now, she was remembering what had drawn her to John in the first place. He was arrogant, practically to a fault, and instead of it coming across as cocky and irritating, he just seemed to exude sexuality. He was used to getting his way, and when Lexi had been depressed after another failed relationship, she had been happy to let him have his way. She hadn’t put up a fight at all.

Now, she had to start building a brick wall against his charm. *It wasn’t exactly easy.*

Before she could say anything, the waiter arrived with a rather expensive bottle of red wine that he had John taste before pouring. John proceeded to order a three-course meal for both of them, including an eyebrow-raising expensive caviar that only a connoisseur could appreciate. Lexi didn’t even know if she liked caviar, but she was sure that she could have tried it somewhere else for less than that price.

She remembered then why she had avoided these kinds of places. Not only did they cater to the rich and powerful, but the waiter also hadn’t even checked with her once to see if what John had ordered was what she wanted. She was sure it would be delicious, but it was a personal preference. She could order for herself. She had been doing it for twenty-five years after all.

It reminded her of the time that she had thought Ramsey was going to take her somewhere this fancy. Instead, he had taken her to a picnic at Stone Mountain with a laser show and fireworks included. He had made it romantic without showing opulence. She liked that about him. He never had to take her to fancy dinners or made her feel helpless to try to win her over. If John thought this would work on her, he was going to have to try harder—not that she wanted him to try harder.

“So, have you changed your mind about Ramsey Bridges yet?” John asked with a smile that said he knew she hadn’t.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well, I have the rest of dinner then,” he said, checking the large Rolex on his wrist.

“John...” Lexi said, trailing off when his hazel eyes met hers again.

“So, let’s start from the beginning.”

She turned her head to assess him. “The beginning of what?”

“Of what made you change your mind about Ramsey.”

“Have you never gone back to an ex before?”

She found that hard to believe. Her world had been full of walking in and out of Jack’s life and now Ramsey. It was something she had grown accustomed to. Sometimes, people deserved second chances—and in her world third, fourth, fifth...

“Once.” He didn’t elaborate.

“So, it didn’t work out? And now, you’re going to try to apply one situation to all of them?” she asked.

“No. All situations are different. Mine...was an exceptional circumstance anyway. I just want to know what *your* exceptional circumstance was.”

Had there ever been an exceptional circumstance that had brought her back together with Jack or Ramsey? Jack...no. She knew there hadn’t been. They had just kept crossing paths and falling back into bed, drowning in years of lust and love, and they had never been able to tell the other one no. *Ramsey...well, she didn’t know.* He had lied about so much—Parker... mostly, Parker. But he was trying to change, and his heart was in the right place.

She didn’t even know where to begin.

“So, I’m guessing there isn’t one?” he asked.

“What’s yours?”

“She quoted Oscar Wilde when she asked for us to get back together.”

“What?” Lexi asked. “You’re not serious.”

“No. Though, she did quote Oscar Wilde. Can’t hurt.”

Lexi laughed softly and took a sip of her wine. The waiter returned with the first course, and she picked at the appetizer before her. She didn’t even know what it was, but it was good.

“Oscar Wilde is your exception.”

“The man was a genius. What’s your exception?”

“I don’t have one,” she admitted.

Blue eyes maybe. She almost chuckled to herself at the thought.
Stupid fucking blue eyes.

“Everyone has one. You probably just don’t know what it is,” he said, his eyes staring deeply into hers.

“Maybe.” She needed to move forward with this conversation.

She didn’t want him to convince her otherwise about Ramsey. Even if she was having a good time with John, it didn’t matter. She wasn’t going to be that person again.

“I didn’t really come here to talk about Ramsey.”

“I didn’t either,” he said, leaning forward in his seat. “I came for *very* different reasons, Lexi.”

Lexi flushed at the implication in his words and the sensual way in which he had said them.

“It’s over, John. I know I led you to believe this could be more than it is, but it isn’t,” she got out quickly. “We had sex—that’s all.”

“Do you think because we only had sex once that it was a one-night stand?” John asked curiously from across the table.

“I, uh…” Lexi said, unsure how to answer. It had been more than a one-night stand, but it couldn’t be anything more than that now.

“I can assure you that neither of us treated this as just a meaningless fuck. You can try to tell yourself that all you want…but you’re just lying to yourself.”

“Look, I don’t think it would be fair—”

“Oh, don’t give me fair,” he said, slamming his hand down on the table. “I don’t want fair!”

Lexi jumped at the fierceness in his voice that hadn’t been there before. He was really serious about all of this. From across the table, she glanced into his eyes and felt the anger simmering just under the surface. John took a breath and reached for her hand. He wrapped his hands over hers as he kept his eyes locked on her gazes.

“You don’t play fair, Lexi. So, why should I?”

“John,” she whispered.

“What has Ramsey ever done to make you want to take him back? Did he fight for you? Did he charm you? Did he make you forget all the

reasons you had broken up with him in the first place?” John asked.
“Because I’m not going to give you those reasons.”

God, something in all of this felt so...familiar. Maybe it wasn’t the words or the reasons for being here. It was just something in the tone, in his earnestness, in the way the night had progressed. Lexi couldn’t put her finger on it.

She stared at him, trying to decide what it was. He was looking back at her, begging for that chance that she so readily would give away under other circumstances. And yet, she wasn’t giving it to him. She couldn’t. *How could she go back on Ramsey after only a week?* She couldn’t even consider it.

Ramsey was the right choice. He was the one who she was supposed to be with.

But John didn’t remind her of Ramsey. They were very different people.

Lexi knew then why it all felt so familiar—the tilt of his head, the hidden smile, the gleam in his eyes...everything.

It was Jack.

And John didn’t even have blue eyes!

Lexi sighed heavily. *She was over it. She was so over it.* She never wanted to be susceptible to this charm again. The reason it had worked with Jack was because they’d had six or seven years of this...whatever. She didn’t even want to finish the thought. Of whatever they’d *had. Past tense.* They didn’t have it anymore. It was over. He had married the Bitch. Capital B, Bitch. And there was nothing she could do about it—at least not with Jack.

But she could be smarter and stronger with John.

Lexi pulled her hands out of his, tossed her napkin down, and stood. “I need to leave.”

John reached out, grabbing her elbow and keeping her from moving. “Where are you going?”

“I just...you don’t understand what I’ve been through. And you don’t understand what all of this is doing to me.”

“I’d like to know what it’s doing to you,” John said, his eyes traveling up and down her clingy black dress.

“See, that’s exactly it,” she said, taking a seat when people started staring at her. “There’s someone I know who’s a lot like you—who you’ll

probably get to meet him now that you're working on the Bridges medical wing. And...you don't even compare to him."

John's eyes narrowed. The anger flared up easily at the comment. She knew it would. It was harsh.

She pushed forward anyway. "He can look me in the eyes, and I'm putty in his hands. Just one look—that's all he needs. He doesn't even need your *words*," she said, wanting him to understand. "And I never want to be like that again. It's destructive, and it's...wrong for the other people in my life. So, I think I should go. If you think that I'm going to fall at your feet with a few charming words and a smile, you're sadly mistaken. You've got the wrong girl. Because...I'm not that girl anymore."

John cracked a smile, his arrogance returning. "There's no comparison. Whatever happened in your past is simply that...your past. If you keep living in it, you'll always compare—always. But I don't want the girl who falls at my feet with a smile. There are plenty of those around. I like you—the one who puts up a fight."

"So, is that it? You just like me for the chase then?" she snarled.

John chuckled. "Baby, I've already fucked you. I won that chase."

Lexi shook her head. *He would get it eventually, but not today.* "Sleeping with me was only part of the chase," she said calmly. "To be honest, I've given it up for less. The chase is getting me to commit. While you don't know my past, the first thing you should know is that I avoid commitment at all costs."

John didn't have a charming retort to that.

"Thank you for dinner. I'm sorry I can't stay," she said, standing again. "I'm sure I'll see you again in Atlanta. I hope we can still be civil... under the circumstances."

With that, she turned and walked right out of the expensive restaurant. She hadn't even made it past the first course, but she knew that she had made the right choice.

Lexi walked out of the restaurant and pulled her phone out of her purse while she hailed a cab back to her apartment. It rang three times as she tried to get a hold of Chyna. As it had happened every day during the past week, it went straight to voice mail. This time, Lexi knew she needed to leave a message because Chyna needed to hear her what she had to say. And she couldn't just go over there tonight to tell her.

The voice mail beeped.

“Chyna, it’s Lexi. I guess you probably already knew that. I just wanted to call to tell you that you were right. It was a date, and I didn’t want to see it. I guess I don’t normally want to see things that you point out. So...sorry,” Lexi said with a sigh. “I left. I just walked out. You mean more to me than any guy could ever mean to me. I hope you call me back, and we can work this out. Anything that has happened isn’t worth losing you. You’re the one thing that I can’t replace. It seems like there are always guys around but never friends—not like you. I’ll never find another friend like you, Chyna. So, I know this is kind of a long voice mail. I just wanted to tell you that you were right and that I’m sorry. I just hope we can move past this. So, call me back, chica. I love you. Bye.”



Present

“You’re sure you’re ready?” Ramsey asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Yes,” Lexi said. She smoothed out her burgundy sundress and then looked up into his green eyes. “I’m ready.”

“Then, we should probably get going.”

“All right.”

Lexi grabbed a cardigan and then followed Ramsey out of their apartment and into his Mercedes. They were having brunch with his family at the country club to break the news to them about their engagement. Lexi had called her parents the day after speaking with Jack about his divorce. She couldn’t hold out any longer, and she didn’t want Ramsey to think that she was purposely holding off. She wasn’t.

She thought it might have been nice to invite them to the country club to find out at the same time as Ramsey’s parents, but then Lexi was afraid it might seem strange. Her family came from a completely different world. She doubted her parents would be any more comfortable with the lifestyle than Lexi was.

She still hadn’t spoken with Chyna though. Her reaction would cement this all into reality. Even though she was wearing the big, sparkly diamond ring on her left ring finger, it still felt like someone else’s fantasy.

Her eyes wandered to the ring, and she sighed softly. Jack didn’t know about the ring either. There was no way she could have told him after pulling the ring off her finger when she had seen him. She still felt a little sick about the fact that she hadn’t had the guts to wear it around him.

But then, he had gone and pulled out fucking divorce papers. *What was she supposed to do with that? Nothing.* She wasn’t supposed to do anything with that. She would find him a good divorce attorney and let him

get himself out of his own mess. She didn't want to be involved with any of that—not if she wanted to keep her sanity.

Telling Ramsey about the divorce had been even more awkward than when Jack had told her about it. Ramsey's family was actually inherently against divorce. His parents had stayed together through really hard times, and even when they wouldn't even sleep in the same bed, they had worked it out. Ramsey had been shocked, and considering his family, it was pretty shocking.

But...it was also Bekah. She did whatever the fuck she wanted. The only thing she cared about was herself. Since she was the one claiming Jack had cheated on her, she would play the victim until the very end.

What Jack's attorney would need to do was make her look the opposite and show Bekah for who she really was. Jack would never come out ahead if Bekah made everyone feel sorry for her.

If Lexi were on the case...

No, she wouldn't go there. She wasn't going to analyze the situation. She did *not* want to be involved.

Right before Ramsey had been about to leave to call his sister, he had stopped and asked, "What did Jack say about the engagement?"

His face had been strained, and she had felt bad that he still sometimes got that look in his eye.

"It, uh...didn't come up," Lexi had told him with a shrug. "We started talking about the divorce, and that took up the whole conversation."

Ramsey had nodded. "You're going to tell him, right?"

"Yeah."

There was no way she wanted Jack to hear it from anyone else. But she hadn't wanted him to be the first to know either.

Now, she and Ramsey were on their way to let everyone know. After today, she would have to tell Jack before it got back to him. She would have to tell Chyna, too. *She wanted to marry Ramsey. She did.* So, she just needed to get past her fears—starting today.

Ramsey reached out and laced their fingers together as he raced up the interstate. "I'm excited."

Lexi looked out the passenger window at the cars whizzing by. "Me, too."

Truth be told, she was nervous as hell. Ramsey's parents weren't exactly against her, but they certainly hadn't welcomed her with open arms.

She was sure that part of it had to do with Bekah and walking out on her wedding. There wasn't much Lexi could do on that front, and she just hoped that they would be supportive of Ramsey. They didn't have to treat her like a daughter, but she wanted them to treat Ramsey with the respect he deserved. He had founded the medical wing for them—even if he had done it on his terms.

Ramsey lightly stroked his thumb across her hand. “You know I love you, right?”

Lexi jerked her head toward him.

He was smiling, and his eyes kept darting over to her.

“Of course I do,” she said.

“You know I'd do anything for you.”

“You've already done everything.”

“And I'll keep doing that and more, Lexi.” He brought her hand to his lips and softly kissed it. “My Alexa.”

Lexi tried not to fret anymore about it. Ramsey was trying to ease her nerves the best way he knew how, and it would be better if she just let his soothing words sink in. His parents didn't have a choice in the matter. She was marrying their son, and that was that.

They drove through the gated entrance to the country club and down the long drive to the clubhouse. He parked his Mercedes in between two BMWs, and Lexi tried not to feel insignificant amidst the excessive wealth. This was how Ramsey had been raised, but it wasn't Ramsey. This wasn't her life, even if it would technically be her money.

She shivered at the thought. It was strange to think that once they got married, half of everything would be hers. She didn't want to know how many zeroes that would add to her net worth. Seriously, she needed to stop overanalyzing. *This was stupid.* Ramsey wasn't his money, and he wasn't zeroes in a bank account. He was just Ramsey, the man she had fallen in love with three years ago. *She was acting like an idiot.*

Lexi waited for Ramsey to walk around the side of the car, and then after she got out of the car, she latched onto his elbow. It was only October, and she was already cold. She wished she could have worn jeans or something. That would have been better, but at least, she had her cardigan. She stuffed her hands down into the pockets of her cardigan and briskly walked across the parking lot.

She traversed the familiar foyer plush with seasonal floral arrangements, down a long hallway, past the restrooms where she and Ramsey had first officially met, and across the main banquet space to the private Bridges' dining room. Lexi's eyes landed on the gold plate with the Bridges name on it. *Would she change her name? Share a name with the Bitch?*

The thought had never crossed her mind. *Mrs. Lexi Bridges.* She frowned. *Maybe she would hyphenate.* She knew people who had done that. *Mrs. Lexi Walsh-Bridges.* She crinkled her nose at the thought. Professionally, her attorney license was still under her last name, Walsh. She wasn't sure if she would want to fight to get it all changed.

"You ready?" Ramsey asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Uh...sure," she whispered. *Why was she having these stupid thoughts right now? She seriously needed to get herself under control.*

Ramsey pushed open the door to the private dining room, and Lexi took a deep breath.

The room was mostly full when they arrived. Ramsey's father sat at the head of the table, wearing a navy suit coat over khakis and a striped button-up. He was broad-shouldered and formidable. His mother sat to his left in a dark pink square-cut dress. She was petite with angular features and already holding a bloody mary in her hand.

Lexi recognized a slew of other people at the table, but she didn't remember any of their names. She was sure she had met all of them before, but they were business associates and friends of the Bridges.

Sitting at the opposite end of the table in a navy dress that could have rivaled her mother for modesty sat Bekah. Her blonde hair had been curled softly, and her normally chunky bangs were swept back off her face. Her baby-blue eyes portrayed the innocence that Lexi knew she had not a single ounce of, and a haughty, superior smile played on her lips. Lexi wouldn't give Bekah the satisfaction of seeing how much her presence still irritated her.

Her eyes drifted to the other side of the table, and her own smile rose. Jack wasn't seated across from Bekah in his proper place. Lexi's eyes met Bekah's, and Lexi tilted her chin up as she moved to take her seat. Bekah's eyes narrowed at the gesture, and it was deeply satisfying to see that smile wiped off of her face, if for only a very short second.

Lexi took her seat across from Ramsey, Jack's absence leaving a gaping hole next to her. Surely, others would notice that he wasn't there. By the look on Bekah's face, Lexi highly doubted she had told her parents about the divorce yet. She wondered what they would think about it. Bekah clearly wouldn't have done it if she had thought that it would damage the relationship with her money...erm, parents. Her reputation and the family name were the only things Lexi really thought Bekah ever cared about. Lexi would like to see how Bekah was going to get herself out of this one.

"Lexi, so good to see you," Bekah said.

Her sugary-sweet voice made Lexi want to gag.

"Hi, Bekah," Lexi said curtly. She wasn't exactly being rude, but she couldn't even pretend to be happy to see Bekah.

"Good to see you back in the club, Ramsey," Bekah said, already turning her attention to her brother, which was fine by Lexi.

"And it's like I never left," he said with a tight smile.

Lexi would have laughed if she hadn't been keeping such a tight rein on herself.

Bekah gritted her teeth at the underhanded statement, which made coming all worthwhile.

Just then, the wait staff appeared and began taking orders. Lexi requested a small breakfast, orange juice, and a coffee, and then she handed off her menu. Her stomach was already in knots from anticipation, and she didn't want to fill it with anything else to throw her off-kilter. She didn't know when Ramsey wanted to tell them about the engagement, and she was going to let him decide.

Lexi twisted the ring on her finger under the table and sat there awkwardly as silence settled on their end of the table. She didn't have anything to say to Bekah, and none of the Bridges' colleagues seemed to have any interest in engaging her.

Her coffee showed up, and Lexi sighed happily. At least she knew she would be able to make it through the afternoon now. She took her first sip when the door to the dining room opened.

Lexi's eyes rose to the door. They didn't normally start brunch if they were still expecting someone. That was part of the privilege of having their own room—besides the privacy that came with it, of course. They made all the rules.

Lexi swallowed hard when she saw who walked in—Parker. She had on a long black maxi dress and a light jean jacket. She smiled apologetically and closed the door behind her.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Parker said, taking the last open seat next to Ramsey.

“Get caught at the hospital?” Ramsey asked.

Lexi felt a familiar pang stretch through her chest as he addressed Parker. It was always there—no matter how much she pushed it aside, no matter how many times she tried to forget that night this summer.

Frankly, it didn’t matter, did it? She had a glittering diamond ring on her finger, and Parker didn’t. But it still made Lexi sick.

“Do I ever leave?” Parker asked.

Lexi heard the exhaustion in her voice.

“If you didn’t insist on spending as much time in surgery as doing administrative work, you might leave more,” he said.

It would have been a reprimand, but the way he had said it sounded more like an endearment. It was a habit Ramsey had never been able to kick.

“I’d leave more if someone hadn’t seen me sleeping on the floor and insisted that I get this couch that I swear is more comfortable than my bed at home. I have no incentive to leave,” Parker said with a shrug.

Lexi cleared her throat, and Parker’s face paled as if she had just realized what she had been talking about.

“I think that sounds wonderful,” Bekah butted in. “Always nice to have somewhere to...relax when you’re stuck at the office for a long time.”

“How many extra hours are you spending in the office right now?” Lexi asked, trying to match Bekah’s sugary-sweet tone as she stared at Bekah innocently.

Bekah just shrugged, unperturbed. “Not too much recently. I’ve had some things to take care of with my husband,” she said, dropping the word easily.

Even though the woman was fucking divorcing him, she still used that word. It didn’t matter one bit that things had changed over the past two years. The rational part of Lexi knew that she shouldn’t care, but the irrational side really fucking hated that Bekah had won. Even more, Lexi hated that after taking her victory, Bekah was tossing it aside like week-old

spoiled milk. Lexi didn't even have words for the new level Bekah had reached.

Ramsey quickly changed the subject to something more neutral, letting Lexi zone out of the conversation. It took a lot of effort not to just throw her left hand out on the table, like Bekah had done that day three years ago back in Jack's office. But Lexi didn't want Bekah to pull that kind of emotion out of her. Lexi wasn't going to give away their chance to tell everyone about their engagement. Bekah didn't deserve that right. It would be on Lexi's terms. No one else but Ramsey got the privilege.

Brunch continued without much more awkwardness. Their end of the table was blissfully quiet other than Bekah's incessant droning on to a few of the family friends that Lexi didn't remember. They talked about everything from business to shopping to their summer vacations and the weather. Lexi tried to tune it out, and only an occasional smile from Ramsey helped her keep her cool. He knew how she felt, and those smiles reminded her that he was on her side. He had always been on her side.

Ramsey's father cleared his throat, and everyone fell silent.

"Thank y'all for coming out to Sunday brunch. Thanks to the nice weather, we'll be moving post-brunch activities to my estate. Everyone is more than welcome to come out for an afternoon cigar and cocktail."

Conversation started up again with people explaining their way out of attendance or confirming their plans to attend. The waiters took that opportunity to clear the table, and people started filing out of the room.

Ramsey walked around to Lexi's side of the table and took her hand in his. He leaned down and whispered into her ear, "We'll tell them when we get back to the house, okay?"

"Sure," she said, looking up into his green eyes.

He smiled proudly and kissed her lips. It was a chaste gesture, but the contact in public made her heart flutter. Not that Ramsey was against public displays of affection, but he usually kept everything discreet at the country club. It was the rules of the game.

They followed Ramsey's parents out of the country club and into the parking lot.

"I'll see y'all there," Parker said with a wave.

"Oh! Can I go with you?" Bekah asked. "You can swing me back by here on your way out."

"Sure, Bek."

“See y’all in a minute,” Bekah said. She fluttered her hands at them and walked off after Parker.

Lexi caught Parker staring at Ramsey, her eyes distant. It was a familiar look. Lexi wasn’t sure she would ever get used to the way Parker looked at him.

“Come on,” Ramsey said, wrapping his arm around Lexi’s waist and pulling her away from the girls.

Lexi opened the car door and sank down into her seat with a sigh. *This was going to be fun.* Now, they didn’t just get to tell Ramsey’s parents. They would have a full audience that included Bekah and Parker. She wished they could have just told everyone at brunch instead of waiting. It made her stomach twist.

What was Ramsey waiting for? Surely, the right time wouldn’t materialize out of thin air. It never did with things she was involved in. It was better just to get it over with than to wait for the moment. Then again... Ramsey was a planner. He had found the perfect time to propose just like everything else in his life, and he would only move forward with this when he knew it was right. The tension at brunch had been so palpable that Lexi was sure it would never be the right time around Bekah or Parker. They both put her too much on edge.

The Bridges’ estate was only a few minutes drive, deeper into the depths of the country club–gated community. Ramsey pulled around to the side of the house and into an open space in the massive garage. Parker drove her Range Rover into the space next to his, which Lexi knew was Bekah’s normal spot.

Lexi had been surprised to find out that their parents had left garage space for their two children even though they had both moved out years ago. It led her to believe they had attachment issues, and that slightly terrified her.

They piled out of the car and took the short route through the Bridges’ mansion, out the back doors, and down the stairs that led to the backyard. Their parents were already set up at the pavilion with the afternoon drinks and cigars, as promised. Some lemonade, sweet tea, and finger foods were also on display. Only one other couple from brunch had arrived. Likely, the others would go home and freshen up before returning.

Ramsey picked up lemonade for Lexi while he poured himself a whiskey drink to match his father. She wasn’t sure how he had known that

she wasn't in the mood to drink...or maybe he had just known how much of a lightweight she was, and he hadn't wanted her to get drunk in front of his parents. Ramsey's tolerance was through the roof though, so she knew that whiskey wouldn't do much to him.

"Excuse me," Ramsey said to the group as soon as everyone had a drink in hand. "I have an announcement to make."

Lexi's stomach twisted as everyone turned to face him. He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her in closer. The silence before he spoke was like a hundred-pound weight on her shoulders. Bekah suspiciously looked at Ramsey, her eyes darting between Ramsey and Lexi, like she was trying to piece together the puzzle. Parker only had eyes for Ramsey. She didn't glance at Lexi once.

Lexi took a deep breath and waited.

"I wanted y'all to know that I asked Lexi to marry me," he said softly. His eyes found hers, and he smiled. "And she said yes."

She only saw him in that moment, and the emotions that had crashed down all around her the night he had asked her to marry him ripped through her again. She was very, very lucky to have found someone who loved her unconditionally, who put up with all of her indecision, and believed in her despite her own fears. She beamed up at him, lost in the moment, lost to this man.

And then, the moment was broken.

But not from the commotion she had been expecting. It was from the silence. She turned to face the small crowd they had around them. Various looks of shock crossed their faces, but no one moved or said anything at first.

"We're getting married," Ramsey confirmed when still no one had said anything.

"Oh, Ramsey," his mother said, walking forward slowly, "that's wonderful news."

"Congratulations, son," his father said. He was as stoic as ever.

Neither of them really sounded excited.

His mother moved to Lexi and wrapped her in a hug. "So glad to hear, dear."

Parker opened her mouth and then closed it. She looked between them as if she didn't even know where to begin, then she swallowed and

walked up to Lexi. “Congratulations,” she said, hugging Lexi next after Ramsey’s mother. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy together.”

“Thank you,” Lexi whispered.

She hadn’t expected Parker to be so genuine, but she didn’t sound spiteful at all. Maybe Parker was a little shocked, but everyone seemed to be shocked.

The other couple that had been standing with Ramsey’s parents came forward and issued their own congratulatory hugs and handshakes. They said something to Ramsey that made him laugh, and it seemed then, for a second, as if all the tension had broken.

Yet, Bekah still hadn’t said anything. Lexi chanced a glance in her direction, and she wasn’t sure what she saw reflected back in Bekah’s baby-blue eyes. *Was Bekah realizing that after everything, she was giving up Jack, and Lexi was still going to marry her brother? Was Bekah plotting a way to ruin it? Could she be that stupid?* Lexi would never trust her to do anything less.

“Jack and I are getting a divorce,” Bekah said, straightening visibly as the words tumbled from her mouth.

The silence that had been there at Ramsey’s declaration was now nowhere to be seen. Everyone spoke at once, and Lexi couldn’t even differentiate who was speaking and where the shouting was coming from. Lexi smacked her hands over her ears and hunched slightly at the uproar.

Bekah’s announcement had shaken everyone to the core, and now, all the attention was on her—just like she liked it. Lexi glanced up at Ramsey, who looked furious. She figured it was because his sister had once again stolen his thunder.

After all, no one had even asked to see Lexi’s ring.

“Rebekah Caroline!” her father bellowed over everyone else. “Explain yourself!”

He looked beyond furious. His chest was puffed out, his eyebrows were drawn down as he surveyed his daughter, and his hand squeezed the glass of whiskey so hard that Lexi was sure he was going to break it, like in a movie.

“Daddy...” Bekah murmured.

“Do not *daddy* me, young lady,” he growled.

Bekah’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t look happy that everyone wasn’t already on board with this. They had only been married for two years. It

was an insanely short period of time, considering her parents displeasure for each other. Not to mention, they had spent nearly a million dollars on a wedding that was now being broken so quickly afterward. Lexi couldn't blame them for being pissed.

“He cheated on me with other women while we were married. I can't continue to be with someone who cares so little for our marriage...and for me.”

In that moment, Lexi was glad that she had met with Jack, and she had already known this was coming because she was sure that she would have snorted with laughter at the comment any other time. As it was, she was already well aware of Bekah's accusations.

“Do you have proof of this?” her father asked.

“Yes,” she said confidently.

Lexi wondered what that proof was. *Had Bekah hired a private investigator? Was there video evidence or just pictures? No. Lexi was not part of this case.* She was not going to be an attorney at the moment. She was just Lexi—hearing about the person she hated and the man she had loved splitting up. She could just be happy about it while everyone else freaked out.

Then, she looked at Bekah and took her in from head to toe. Maybe Jack hadn't been lying. Bekah was too confident, and Lexi never trusted her when she got like that. *Could Bekah be bluffing?*

“At least the prenup will hold,” her father said, still clearly angry but deflating.

“Prenup?” Lexi immediately asked.

Jack hadn't mentioned a prenup. *Shit, shit, shit! This could be very bad. They could mean to bury him.*

“Of course,” Bekah said as if it were a common practice. “I wanted to protect myself.”

Lexi knew she shouldn't ask, but she had to know. “Did you include an infidelity clause?”

Bekah smiled that evil smile, the one Lexi had learned to associate with only Bekah's worst ideas. “I said I needed to protect myself.”



October Two Years Earlier

“I guess I don’t have that much stuff,” Lexi said.

“No, you really don’t. I didn’t realize you were such a minimalist,” Ramsey said with a smirk. “Then, I look in the closet.”

Lexi shrugged. “I had priorities in law school.”

“Like spending all of your nonexistent money on clothes?”

“Like raiding my best friend’s closet. Seriously, Chyna trashes things after she’s worn them once.”

“We might have to rearrange once we unpack everything,” Ramsey said with a shake of his head as he looked at the piles and piles of clothes.

“Yeah...like move your stuff to the guest bedroom,” she said with a giggle.

“Ha! Good luck with that.” Ramsey took a step forward into her personal space and forced her to look up at him.

Her breath caught, and she tried to keep the lustful thoughts at bay. They still had quite a bit of work to do. Not to mention, after moving all of her things into his apartment that had arrived from New York this morning, she needed a shower.

“Don’t make me use my womanly wiles on you.”

“Is that an option?” he asked, ducking his head and planting a kiss on her lips. His hands gripped the back of her T-shirt.

Stepping out of the embrace, she threw her hands up. “Ew, I’m seriously gross right now.”

“I think you’re beautiful.”

“Beautiful, and in need of a shower,” Lexi said, backing toward the bathroom.

“I could join you...” He trailed off as he backed her into the bathroom. His hands pawed at her shirt, which he quickly guided over her head to where it belonged...on the floor.

“I mean, if you insist,” Lexi murmured.

He slid her running shorts to the ground. “Oh, I insist,” he said, admiringly sliding his hands down her slight curves.

Ramsey backed up a step to flip the walk-in shower to its hottest setting before locating two towels and placing them on the counter. Lexi stripped out of her bra and thong, and then she walked right into the steamy glass shower. As Ramsey watched, she eased back into the spray, closed her eyes, and let her head dip back into the water. She heard him groan, and a smile played on her face.

A few seconds passed, and then Ramsey entered the shower. His hands retraced their earlier progression down her now wet body. She breathed in sharply when they moved back up to her breasts and flicked gently against her erect nipples. He leaned forward and took one in his mouth, pushing them both through the shower and back against the tiled wall. Lexi gasped from both the feel of him against her and the cold tiles behind her.

She wound her fingers into his hair and breathed in the air, thick with steam. He hoisted her leg up around his waist, pressing her harder against the wall.

“Fuck,” she cried as she felt the length of him slide between her legs.

“God, I missed you, Lexi,” Ramsey growled against her throat. “I don’t ever want you to go away again.”

“A month in New York was too long,” she agreed, arching her back and swirling her hips invitingly.

“Much too long.”

Ramsey pulled her off the wall, turned her around, and bent her over at the waist. She followed his lead without complaint. She didn’t care how sore she was from carrying boxes and unpacking today. The only thing she could think about right now was the feel of his hands on her body and how much she wanted him.

He took her in one stroke, and she gripped the bench before her. Her body moved in time with his as he pulled out and thrust back into her deeply. The water cascaded down their bodies, dripping from her long brown hair and making them slick and slippery.

But all of that was lost on her as he plunged deeper into her each time. Her body tightened all around him, begging him to give her more. His hands dug into her hips to gain more leverage. Her eyes closed, and she arched her back, feeling the familiar ripples of the climax starting at her core.

“Close,” was all she managed to get out as he picked up the pace.

“Fuck. Fuck!” he growled.

She hit her climax as he buried himself deep in her pussy one last time. He grunted at the feel of her orgasm tightening around his dick and came with her. Lexi felt all the energy leave her body, and her arms wobbled on the bench from where they had been holding her up.

He slowly pulled out of her, holding her around the middle to keep from her collapsing, and then they both took a seat on the bench. Her head fell to his chest as the water splattered on their feet.

“Mmm,” she murmured.

“Agreed.”

After a couple of minutes of silence, they both finally cleaned each other up and got out of the shower just as the water started getting cold. Lexi wrapped herself up in the towel and twisted another one around her hair before plopping down onto the bed.

It was an unbelievable feeling to be back in Atlanta...for good.

She would miss New York, but it was wonderful, knowing that she was finally taking some control of her life. After walking out of dinner with John, Chyna had finally called her back. She was still a little hung up on the fact that Lexi had hidden that she had slept with John, but Chyna didn't want to lose her best friend over it. They had some work to do in their relationship, but it wasn't anything that wasn't fixable.

Over the next week, Lexi had received three calls with offers for jobs—two in New York and one in Atlanta. After confirming with Ramsey that he'd had no contact with the firm in Atlanta, she had agreed to join their company as an attorney, pending her bar exam results. The money was a little bit less than the firms in New York, but the firm in Atlanta had more opportunity to move up, and as far as she could tell, they also had better, more flexible hours.

Plus, this kept her close to Ramsey. She would be lying if she said it hadn't been a difficult decision. She had always told herself that she wanted a corporate law job in New York City, which was why she had gone to

NYU in the first place. But when the Atlanta job offer came in, she hadn't been able to turn it down. She would miss the city and Chyna and even her roommate Rachelle, but it would be nice to be home with Ramsey.

She had been so excited about it all. She had even agreed to move back in with him. At first, she had thought about getting her own place, but it seemed silly for the same reason it had seemed silly the last time she had moved in with him. She would be spending the majority of her time at the apartment with him. There was no reason to add the extra distance in their relationship. Not to mention, she didn't have any intention of moving back out again.

It all seemed like a no brainer.



While Lexi missed Chyna terribly, another benefit of being back in Atlanta was getting to hang out with her friend, Brandon. She hadn't seen him since the day, nearly four months ago, when he had corroborated Parker's story about her relationship with Ramsey. The thought still made Lexi cringe...and she wasn't sure when or if it ever wouldn't. That had been a dark time for her.

But with everything happening so quickly in her life, she hadn't had any time to see anyone or had any time for herself. So, she had called Brandon to play catch-up and finally get her sushi buddy back.

After reluctantly agreeing to meet him at Bridges Enterprise downtown, she had driven into town. Ramsey was supposed to be in meetings all day with his father, Parker, and the Global partner, Jessica, who had flown down for some of the groundbreaking work on the medical wing. Lexi had gathered that John wasn't supposed to be in attendance, which had made her breathe easier.

He had called her a few times, which she had shamefully ignored. She knew that she had to be around him for the medical wing, but that didn't make it any easier. She would have to figure out how to handle that situation.

Lexi pulled into the underground garage below the main Bridges Enterprise building and parked her car. She took the main elevator that exited into the entrance of the building.

Nerves hit her unexpectedly.

Too many bad memories resided in this building. She tried not to think about them, but when she was surrounded by the Bridges logo and the glass building and the clientele, it all rushed back. She let the nerves harden into barely repressed anger at the thought of the wedding.

She walked over to the elevator and pulled out her phone to text Brandon to let him know that she was on her way up. She sent the text and tossed it back into her purse, and then her phone beeped immediately. Surprised that he would respond so fast, she fished it back out of her bag and saw that it was ringing.

Jack was calling her. She glanced around the small alcove where the elevators were, wondering if he could see her or if he had just somehow known that she was in the building. There were two men standing by her, but neither were Jack. Surely, she would have noticed.

She hadn't spoken to him since the wedding...since he had married Bitch Bekah—not that he had tried to get a hold of her, which was fine by her. She didn't want to talk to him. *She should just silence her phone, go get Brandon, and vacate the premises immediately.*

Taking a deep breath, she clicked the Ignore button. She couldn't remember ever having done that before. Her heart constricted, she inhaled deeply, and then she followed the two men onto the elevator.

"Twenty-four, please," she said softly.

One of the men pressed the button for Brandon's floor.

Her phone beeped again, and she stared down at the text from Brandon.

Sounds good, honey.

She laughed. *Some things hadn't changed at least.*

Another beep came through her phone. Jack had left a voice mail. *Really strange.*

She got off on her desired floor as she continued to debate whether or not to listen to it.

Why did he always have to pop back up? She had just moved to Atlanta, she was moving on with her life, and he was married. Yet, he was still *here*.

She sighed and decided it wouldn't hurt to just listen to a voice mail. Surely, there was no harm in that. She wouldn't even call him back.

Once she had successfully talked herself into it, she clicked on the message and pressed her phone to her ear.

“Uh...hey, Lex,” he said hesitantly. “I know you probably aren’t very happy with me or even really want to hear from me right now...and well, I’m sorry that it’s like that.”

She took a deep breath and placed her hand on the wall, bracing herself. All she wanted to know was why he had called her.

“I didn’t think it would all happen like this, but yeah...I guess...on with the point of this call. I have a question for you. Even though you don’t want to talk to me right now, will you still call me anyway? I promise, you’ll actually like the nature of this call. That, I can promise you. So, please call me.”

He sounded so sincere that her heart felt like it was lodged in her throat. *Stupid Jack Howard. How did he always make her feel like a ball of mush? Couldn’t he have just left her alone and moved on with his...wife?*

God! That was a terrible word.

She pushed her hair behind her ear fiercely and then took a few steps in the direction of Brandon’s office. She made it halfway down the hallway before stopping and staring at her phone again. *What could he possibly want that he would call her and promise that she would like the nature of the phone call?* She couldn’t think of anything off the top of her head.

Her fingers itched to press the button. And with a sigh, she finally just gave in. It was better to know right away, so she could put it out of her mind instead of obsessing about it during her entire lunch with Brandon.

“Lex,” Jack said with a hint of surprise in his voice. “I wasn’t sure you would actually call me back.”

“What do you want, Jack?” Lexi asked. She didn’t want him to hear any of the emotions that had gone through her when she had seen he had called and left a voice mail. *That was over and done with.*

He sighed. “You’re pissed.”

“Jack...”

“It’s all right. You have every right.”

“Yes, I do,” she said stiffly.

“I, uh...what are you doing next Friday night?”

Lexi’s anger boiled over. “Jack Howard, are you asking me out? Is this a serious conversation we’re having? Did you really have the *nerve* to call me and ask me about next Friday, like we’re back in college and

stupid? You even said that I would *like* the nature of this call. Well, you're going to have to try again if you think I could possibly be happy about seeing you!"

"Lexi—"

"No. You know what? I'm clearly the idiot for calling you back. Not sure what I was thinking. Old habits die hard and all that. Please, just leave me alone," she snapped and then hung up.

Her breathing was ragged when the phone went dead, and she hadn't even realized how riled up she had gotten. *Goddamn it! Why did Jack Fucking Howard always do this to her? It wasn't enough that he had gotten married? Couldn't he just let her at least try to move past it all?*

Her phone lit up in her hand, and she almost snarled in frustration.

Not asking you out. I'm sorry. Jesus, I can't seem to do anything right. I didn't mean to bother you or make you feel like an idiot. I have concert tickets—that's all. Can I call you back...please?

Concert tickets? Well, that piqued her interest. Why the hell was he contacting her about concert tickets?

If you hear me out and still hate me...you can hang up on me again.

Lexi actually laughed at that, and then she looked up to see if anyone had heard. The hallway was empty. She didn't have much time before she had to go see Brandon. *Satiate her curiosity or just let it go...*

Fine. This better be good, Jack.

Her phone rang almost immediately.

"Hey," he said softly. "Sorry."

"What is this about concert tickets?"

"Okay, so the story is...Bekah got me tickets to the Sienna Sexton and D-Bags show in Atlanta next weekend."

"Oh my God..." Lexi breathed. It was their favorite band.

"Yeah. Well, the mix-up at the, uh...wedding," he began.

Lexi cringed at the word.

"Anyway, Bekah refuses to go and support them since they canceled last minute. Now, I have two tickets...and I guess I could have asked someone else, but I know you love the D-Bags."

“Yeah. That song of theirs playing on the radio is so good,” she murmured.

That Sienna was a lucky bitch if she were fucking the lead singer because he was quite possibly one of the sexiest men on the planet. Lexi was sure she would use a pass with Ramsey to get to Kellan Kyle.

“It is. And the D-Bags’ ‘Good-bye’ song...I can still listen to it on repeat.”

“Me, too.”

That song always sounded like someone had written it with a specific person in mind. It was so emotional, tugging at her heart and forcing her to feel every powerful, heart-wrenching word.

Silence lingered between them as shared memories took up the space. Sometimes, she hated how easy it was with Jack. She was angry with him. She didn’t want to remember a time when they had been able to listen to their favorite band together.

“So...will you go with me? Just as a friend. You know...someone who also happens to like the same music as me.”

“What does Bekah think about that?” Lexi asked, deflecting. She had never been able to be Jack’s friend—never.

“Bekah told me to take whoever I want because she’s not going.”

“I don’t think she meant me.”

“She didn’t specify.”

“Well, she’s not too bright, is she?” Lexi muttered before she thought better of it.

“Let’s just...not, okay?” Jack sighed through the line.

She wondered what he was thinking. She never really knew with Jack.

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to, but I know you’ve never seen them live. I just thought I was being nice.”

Fuckity-fuck. Fuck.

“I have to check with Ramsey.”

“Of course. Take all the time you need. The show is next Friday night at seven thirty at Philips Arena. It’s sold out.”

Lexi tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and sighed heavily. *This was such a bad idea, but damn did she want to go to that show.* The D-Bags had been one of her favorite bands since college. She was so excited that

they were getting more attention, and they were even opening at a huge venue for Sienna Sexton.

“All right,” she said, breathing out in frustration. “If Ramsey is okay with it, then I’ll go. You should probably make sure Bekah actually knows you’re taking *me*. If I’m going to the concert, then it’s not going to be a secret.”

“Got it. No secrets. Text me after you talk to Ramsey. If he’s down, I’ll talk to Bekah.”

It felt a little like they were getting permission from their parents, but at least she was going about it the right way. Under no circumstances was she going to risk Ramsey a second time for a fucking concert. She wanted to see the D-Bags, but that wouldn’t be worth losing him

“Okay, I have to go. I have lunch plans. Bye, Jack.”

“See ya, Lex. Also, uh...thank you.”

She swallowed and nodded even though he couldn’t see her. She hung up the phone and placed it back into her purse. *This was going to be interesting.*

Lexi walked the remaining distance to Brandon’s office and knocked. She heard muffled voices from the room and then laughed. He never ceased to amaze her.

“Brandon,” she called, wondering who the lucky lady was that he was entertaining.

“Just a minute,” he said.

A minute later, the door opened, and a familiar brunette walked past Lexi.

“See you soon, Kace,” Brandon said as she walked out.

“Go to hell, Calloway,” Kace said, straightening her skirt.

“Why does she still fight you?” Lexi asked. She shut the door behind her as she entered the office.

“She likes to put on a show. I don’t mind role-playing,” Brandon said, cocking an eyebrow. “You interested, honey?”

“Now, now, Pookie. You know I’m taken, by one of your bosses no less.”

“That changes daily.”

Lexi rolled her eyes and jabbed him in the side. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Now, there’s a thought,” he said with a wicked glimmer in his eyes.

“Oh my God,” Lexi said, a blush creeping up on her cheeks.

He chuckled deep in his chest and ran his hand back through his dark hair. "I've missed you, Lexi. It's nice to have you back in the city."

"Are we going to get lunch? Or are you going to be ridiculous?"

"I can't promise you that I won't be ridiculous, but I think I choose lunch."

"Great. Let's get the fuck out of here."

They left the office and walked out to the elevator. Brandon pressed the button and started firing off questions about her time when she had returned to New York, the new job, moving in with Ramsey.

She laughed at his string of questions and tried to begin answering them, but he seemed to have another question already poised on his tongue before she could elaborate. She would be talking nonstop during lunch.

The elevator dinged open, and Lexi followed Brandon inside. When she took the last step inside the elevator, she realized that Jack was standing in front of her. She stopped laughing at Brandon, her face going blank.

"Lexi," Jack said, surprised.

"Um...hey."

"What are you doing here?"

"I said I had lunch plans," she said, sticking her thumb out at Brandon.

"Oh, hey, man," Jack said.

He extended his hand out to Brandon, and the guys shook.

Jack turned his attention back to Lexi. "If I'd known you were in the building, I would have just talked to you in person."

"Well, this is for the better then," Lexi said, doing everything she could to keep her hands at her side. All she wanted to do was furiously push her hair behind her ears.

His blue eyes landed on her brown ones, and he smiled that Jack smile. She swallowed, but didn't look away.

"Well, I hope you go to the concert. The seats are pretty good."

Lexi shrugged. "We'll see. I should be able to make it as long as... everything works out," she said vaguely.

The elevator dropped to the bottom floor, and the doors dinged open.

"Have fun at lunch then. Brandon." Jack nodded his head at him.

"Talk to you later, Lex."

Jack walked away, and Lexi sagged slightly as he disappeared into the Bridges lobby.

Stupid bad luck!

Brandon and Lexi moved forward in silence until they made it out to the parking garage and almost all the way to Brandon's truck. Then, he couldn't seem to hold it in any longer, and he started laughing.

"You're going to a concert with Jack?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah," Lexi said with a shrug. "I guess."

"You do know he got married, right?"

"Yes, I know he got married," she snapped a little too harshly.

She took a deep breath. It was still too fresh, too early. *She shouldn't go to the concert. It was stupid, but the offer was too hard to resist. It certainly had nothing to do with Jack because she still wanted to pummel him.*

"But this isn't about Jack. This is about Kellan Kyle."

Brandon continued laughing at her as he hopped into his truck. He was still laughing almost the entire way to the sushi restaurant.

"Knowing what I know about you, Lexi, I feel like I should tell you that this is probably a bad idea."

"It'll be fine," she said, convincing herself.

"You like me because I don't shoot shit. I tell you how it is, like I always have. Like, I want to fuck you and see how that gymnast body bends."

"Brandon," she groaned.

"Yes, I want to hear you scream out my name, too, but that's beyond the point, Lexi. Keep your mind out of the gutter."

"Insufferable," she grumbled under her breath.

"What I'm trying to tell you is that before, when you screwed up royally in the past, it wasn't *that* bad because, while you were dating other people, neither of you were married."

"I know that!"

"Well then, I'll just remind you. Coming from someone who got the shit beat out of him for sleeping with a married woman, I wouldn't recommend it."

"You get the shit beat out of you a lot, don't you?" she asked, remembering the time Brandon had told her about Ramsey punching him because Brandon had started dating Parker. *That all felt so long ago.*

Brandon smirked. "Hardly. This guy had an unfair advantage."

"Which was?"

“A car.”

“Oh Jesus,” Lexi cried.

“Anyway, I don’t like to talk about serious shit. So, don’t do anything stupid.”

“You mean, don’t act like you?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Even I’m not stupid enough to push Bekah Bridges’s buttons. You have a few more degrees than me,” he said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes. “Use them.”

Lexi shrugged and looked out the window. She had no intention whatsoever of doing anything with Jack. She had been avoiding him ever since the wedding and really the entire year before that. She might want to push Bekah off a cliff, but that didn’t mean she was going to do anything that would bring her closer with the Bitch at a more normal occasion.

Lexi tried not to think about it anymore. She would have to talk to Ramsey when she got home, and that, in itself, was not going to be a fun conversation, but it was one she needed to have. If she could yell at him about not holding back any more secrets, then she had to be willing to be more forthcoming about her own life.



Lunch was refreshing, to say the least. Without Chyna, Lexi desperately felt the loss of close friends. She knew her old friend, Krista, still lived in the city, and Lexi might drop her a line. Maybe they could go visit the gym together. It had been too long since she had done gymnastics. Lexi was excited to get back into some kind of state of normality for her life.

Brandon had kept her entertained through lunch, getting her mind off of the concert and what she knew lay before her when she got home. He had known her mind wasn’t fully on their lunch, but he hadn’t made any further comments about it. She loved him for that. They had promised to meet up for lunch again, at least biweekly, and then Brandon had dropped her back off at her car.

She drove home in silence. She had never been good at this kind of thing. Hiding had always been a big part of her life, and just thinking about telling Ramsey made her anxiety pick up. It wasn’t even that she had

anything to hide, but it was an old, familiar feeling. She wished it wasn't that way. She wished she had made some better choices in her life, but this was who she was. Now, she had to fight herself to make it right again.

Lexi parked her car in the garage and took the stairs up to the apartment she now shared with Ramsey. When she walked in, Ramsey was on the phone in the living room, pacing back and forth as he talked. He smiled at her and gave her a small wave before diving back into the conversation.

"No, I agree. I think we should work on that tomorrow. We'll have to solidify it by next week, so we can start breaking ground," Ramsey said into the phone.

Her stomach knotted as he talked about the medical wing.

It was all for Lexi. That's why he was doing this. She just repeated the mantra over and over in her head. It was how she remained sane.

She didn't like the idea of the project at all. Not that she didn't support a new hospital facility in downtown Atlanta or even Ramsey following his dreams, but a lot of the time, it felt more like he was giving in to his father's demands. She had never wanted Ramsey to change for her. She had just wanted the lying to stop. It was this fragile balance, and she wasn't sure how far would be too far before it tipped.

"Okay. Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow then. Bye, Parker," Ramsey said before hanging up. He turned back to face Lexi. "Sorry about that. Work." He shrugged.

"That's all right," Lexi said even though Parker's name had made her wince. "Everything working out with the initial concepts?"

"So far, so good. Jessica says we're right on track, but I have no idea how we could be with only a year to get everything done. There's a lot to do."

His shoulders tensed, and she could see all the plans circling in his mind. He was taking on a huge endeavor. *Who was she to judge him for doing what he wanted?*

"Anyway, nothing much to report. How was lunch with Brandon?" Ramsey asked.

Ramsey didn't like Brandon—not after he had dated Parker briefly. Ramsey tolerated it though because, thus far, absolutely nothing had happened—and nothing ever would happen with Brandon. She liked him

but just as a friend. As a pseudo-replacement for Chyna—although, certainly no one could replace Chyna.

“Good. Uneventful.”

“Sushi?” Ramsey asked knowingly.

“Yep,” Lexi said, wringing her hands in front of her. “I’m not good at this, Ramsey.”

“At what?” he asked cautiously.

“Nothing bad,” she said quickly. “But Jack called me today and asked me to go to the Sienna Sexton and D-Bags concert with him. Bekah got him tickets, but since they canceled at the wedding, she doesn’t want to go. The D-Bags are my favorite band, and it’s a sold-out show, and, um...”

“And you want to go,” Ramsey finished for her.

“I don’t have to if you don’t want me to.”

“Lexi, I don’t want you to feel like you have to ask me for permission,” he said, sinking back into the couch.

“I know. I just...I know I can go if I want, but I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. It’s not permission as much as taking your feelings into consideration.”

Ramsey smiled at that and beckoned her over. She crawled onto his lap and rested her head against chest. He was warm and comfortable and smelled like peppermints. She just wanted to breathe him in and remember this moment. He was accepting her for who she was, even through her ridiculous mini panic attacks.

“I’m not comfortable with Jack,” Ramsey admitted. “But I’m comfortable with you. If you want to go to the show and you think everything will be all right, then I’ll be all right, too. I might wait up all night for you to get back. And I can’t promise I won’t kill him if he touches you.”

Lexi giggled softly. She believed him, too.

“But I trust you, Lexi.”



Present

“You signed a prenup?” Lexi asked.

She was having trouble keeping her cool. All she wanted to do was yell at Jack. She knew that from Bekah’s standpoint, it was a good idea to get a prenup drawn up. Bekah had insane assets, and anyone with money or who owned a business should get one signed. Not to mention, if either party had a history of cheating. Infidelity clauses weren’t all that common anymore because of how often they were thrown out in court, but Lexi highly doubted Bekah would push for adultery in a divorce case without knowing what she was up against.

“What?” Jack asked.

“You signed a fucking prenup. You know, that legal document that says if I cheat on my spouse, she gets everything!”

Jack sighed into the phone. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“How? How can that sound like a good idea to you, Jack? You’ve cheated on Bekah with me, if not with other people—”

“No one else,” he stated firmly.

Christ, she wanted to believe him. If he wasn’t telling the truth, he could end up losing a large chunk of money and the house and everything else.

“Did you have a lawyer present? Were there witnesses? Did she coerce you in *any* way to sign that document? How long ago did you sign? Was it rushed at all?” Lexi fired off a series of questions.

She shouldn’t be asking him about this. She should find someone to work his case, and then she should back far, far away. There was no way she could take on this case. She didn’t work in family law, and she definitely had a conflict of interest.

“Jesus, Lex. Slow down. Let me try to answer all your questions. I had a lawyer present, and other people were there. I signed it in January

before we got married.”

She mentally calculated the time frame—right around seven months. *That would hold in court.*

Lexi brushed a hand back through her hair and sat down heavily on the couch in the study. Ramsey had converted Jason’s old room into a study for her shortly after she had moved in. She didn’t spend as much time there as she wanted, but she did consider it her space, which was nice. It was sparsely decorated and immaculate with a mahogany wooden desk and chair, her diplomas framed on the walls, a blue-green-and-white patterned area rug, and a plant sitting on a stand. Ramsey had insisted that the room needed a bit of life, so she had obliged him.

“What else did you ask me?” Jack said.

Lexi closed her eyes and shook her head. *This was such a bad situation.* She curled her legs up on the couch and lay down. She knew that she didn’t need to help Jack with this. He’d had a lawyer present when he signed the prenup. He could find his own. But she felt *bad* for him.

The thought of him getting taken advantage of made her chest ache and her stomach twist. Marrying Bekah had been a mistake, but it didn’t have to ruin his life. And Lexi had this terrible feeling that Bekah intended to do precisely that.

Though Lexi couldn’t figure out *why*. Bekah had won. She and Jack had gotten married. They lived in a house together just outside of the Atlanta proper. She was living her fairy tale. Bekah had known Jack had cheated on her before the wedding, and she hadn’t cared about it then. *So, what was the motivation behind the divorce?*

Lexi knew that if she got the answer to that question, she would finally be able to figure out Bekah. Until she knew, she would treat Bekah like an active volcano waiting to erupt.

“Coercion,” Lexi reminded him. “Did you feel an obligation to sign? Was there ever any talk of the fact that you *had* to sign? Anything like that at all that you remember?”

“No, uh...I don’t think so. It was a long time ago.”

“Three years is not *that* long to remember if someone forced you to sign away your livelihood if you cheat on her,” she quipped.

“I didn’t cheat on her.”

“Yeah,” Lexi said.

She had never considered Jack a liar. He had always sworn that he would tell her the truth in everything, but with their history, it did make it difficult to take this seriously, especially with Bekah claiming she had hard evidence against him.

“So, what should I do? I can’t use the same lawyer as last time. He works for Bridges now.”

Lexi narrowed her eyes. “Did he work for Bridges at the time?”

“No, he got hired about a year ago.”

Lexi cursed under her breath. A million-and-a-half scenarios ran through her head all at once. She was just going off of the information she had learned from the family law classes she had taken in law school, but those were two or three years ago at this point. He would need someone else—but who? She racked her brain to think of someone who would be good enough. She would have to ask around at work tomorrow.

“I’ll see if I can find someone, and then you probably need to make a pretty convincing case against her, Jack. I’d tell you to settle this in mediation and just get it over with, but I have a feeling that Bekah will take this to court,” Lexi told him.

“Okay,” he said with a heavy sigh. “This is so fucking frustrating, Lex.”

“I know,” she whispered.

She knew how he felt about divorces, especially after his parents’ rough break while he had been in high school. A part of her felt bad for him for having to go through this, and then the other half wondered, as she always did, why he had gotten married in the first place.

“I did everything right once we got married. I so desperately didn’t want to be my parents, and I still can’t seem to get it straight. She’s still divorcing me, tearing us apart for no reason—a fake reason,” he said.

She could hear the anger and desperation in his voice, and it made her want to go over there and hug him even if he was talking about Bekah.

Lexi steeled herself for what she was about to do. “Have you tried... talking to her about it?” She wanted to gag at the thought of urging him to talk to Bekah about it...to even hint at encouraging him to convince her not to go through with it, but she needed to be a friend right now.

“Of course I’ve tried to talk to her. She won’t see me. I had to move out. I’m staying with Seth and feel so...so...I don’t even know.”

She could almost see him in that moment—his eyes closed, his hands fisted into his dark brown hair, the look of pain on his face. It made her want to do something, anything to take it away. Despite everything they had gone through, she could never make herself stop caring. It was Jack.

“What did she say when she gave you the papers?”

He gave a stilted laugh. “I want a divorce. Then, she handed me the papers and told me to get out.”

“Just like that?” Lexi asked. *Bekah was the devil.*

“Just like that.”

“Was there any forewarning that this might happen?”

“No.”

“She wasn’t acting strange...erm, stranger?” Lexi asked.

“What do you want me to say? That I knew my wife was going to divorce me? That I should have seen the signs? That I should have known better? Well, I didn’t,” he growled. “I didn’t see any of it, and yeah, that probably makes me even more of a fucking idiot. But I tried every day for the past two years with Bekah, and I was still trying up until that day she handed me the papers. Marriage isn’t easy, but I wanted my marriage to work, so I put in the effort.”

“I’m sorry, Jack,” she whispered. She didn’t know what else to say to that. She wasn’t sorry about Bekah, but she was sorry for Jack.

“Please don’t pity me, Lex,” he said so softly she almost didn’t hear him. “Don’t remind me that I gave you up for this.”

Her heart seemed to hammer in her chest, and she pinched the bridge of her nose. Her throat felt swollen just for a minute as she fought back the tears threatening to spill out. *Why now? Why did he have to realize this now? Too little, too late. She loved Ramsey. She was marrying Ramsey. End of the line.*

When she felt like she could speak again without her throat closing up, she said, “I’ll find you a lawyer tomorrow, okay? I should probably go.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Hopefully, this will all be as painless as possible,” she encouraged, assuming Bekah would do her worst because she always did.

“For who? Certainly not me...”

She hated agreeing. He had dug the hole himself, and now, he had to sit in it, six feet under—right where Bekah wanted him.

Lexi hung up the phone and rested her head back on the couch. She sniffled and hugged her legs tight to her chest. She needed to stop this feeling.

But she couldn't help it.

She felt really, really bad for Jack. It was an emotion she was so not used to. *Normally, the things she felt for Jack were, ahem...a little lower on her body. When had this happened?* All she felt in this moment was sympathy. She did pity him—even if he had told her not to. The thought of Jack being married to Bekah had always made her sick, but the thought of him actually hurting from the divorce...well, that was a different feeling entirely. It was like so much of her wanted him divorced...wanted him *rid* of Bekah finally. *But at what cost?*

It was so messy.

She sniffled again and tried to think of something else—like her engagement. She needed to tell Chyna. That was all she had left—well, Chyna and Jack, but Chyna needed to know before Jack did. *That was for sure!*

Lexi sat back up and reached for her phone just as the door to the office slowly pried open.

“Lexi?” Ramsey asked, peeking his head around the corner.

God, she hoped she didn't look like she had been crying.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I'm just about to call Chyna to tell her about the engagement.”

He eyed her likely bloodshot eyes and red cheeks cautiously, but he broke out into a smile at the word *engagement*. “Let me know what she says.”

“I will,” she said, producing her own smile for him before he retreated.

Yeah, messy didn't even begin to cover it.

Lexi spent a minute straightening up her hair and sitting up properly as if Chyna could see her. It was ridiculous, but still, it made her feel better and helped her forget.

Chyna answered on the second ring. “Chica! I miss you. Come to New York for the week,” she said.

Lexi laughed. *Oh man, she missed her best friend.* “I have work this week. Maybe soon.”

“You keep saying that, but all you do is work.”

“We can’t all be like you, Chyna.”

“Obviously.”

“How was your weekend?” Lexi asked. She knew Chyna wasn’t really known for small talk, but Lexi hadn’t seen Chyna for a while. It made Lexi feel better to know what Chyna had been up to.

“Oh, you know, same old, same old,” she said dryly. “Went to the club, got drunk, got picked up by a guy, and went home with him. So hot. He’s an architect.”

For a second there, Chyna almost had her fooled. She had been about to freak out on her friend if she was cheating on Adam. They were so good for each other, and Lexi knew she wasn’t the person to talk about cheating, but damn, she would have lit into her friend. Adam was too good of a person for that.

“Jesus, Chyna, you about gave me a heart attack,” Lexi groaned.

Chyna laughed wickedly. “So, I let Adam pick me up from the club and take me home. This time though, I wasn’t passed out from getting roofied, and he fucked me.”

“Y’all are ridiculous!” Lexi couldn’t stop shaking her head. *Only Chyna.*

“We just know how to have fun. How are you and Ramsey? I swear, for a man who used to manage strip clubs, he is a lot less fun than he could be, Alexa. I mean, sure, he can throw a party, but all I’ve heard you talk about is the medical wing. Work, work, work. Don’t you do anything but work?” Chyna asked.

“Well, he proposed,” Lexi said offhand, staring off across the room while waiting for Chyna’s reaction.

“What?” Chyna cried. A crashing sound blasted through the phone and then a series of curse words before Chyna came back. “Fuck! I dropped the phone. Are you fucking serious? Did you tell him yes?”

“No, Chyna. I told him, why the hell did I spend three years of my life with you when I have no intention of marrying you?” Lexi drawled sarcastically.

“You’re a bitch. I hope he smacked you.”

Lexi giggled. “Of course I said yes!”

“Oh my God! This is so fucking exciting. When should I come down? This weekend? We need drinks! Shots! Hookers! Whatever you want, that’s what we need,” Chyna yelled into the phone.

Lexi could practically see her bouncing around her apartment.

“You want to come down this weekend?”

“Yes! Are you kidding me? My best friend is getting married. I need to be there to celebrate with you, chica.”

Lexi smiled brightly. Now, *this* was what it was supposed to feel like to be engaged. It had only taken her a week to get the giddy feeling back. She had been so happy when Ramsey had asked her. She had been shocked beyond words. She wasn’t sure why she hadn’t seen it coming, but then when it had been right in front of her, she couldn’t believe it had happened to her.

Ramsey had worked so hard to make the night perfect, to make it memorable, and it had worked. She knew she would never forget what it had felt like, walking through the park, the candles, the picnic.

“Yes, come down! We’ll party here to celebrate,” Lexi said after a few seconds.

“So, how did he ask you? Tell me everything. Did it happen today, over lunch, or what? Come on, dish!” Chyna said enthusiastically.

“Um...” Lexi said awkwardly. She had forgotten about this part—the part where she hadn’t called Chyna for four days when she should have called her right away.

“Oh no,” Chyna groaned. “What’s wrong?”

“He asked me on Thursday.”

“Thursday? Why did you wait so long to call me?” Chyna asked, sounding hurt.

“I, uh...well, I had a freak-out about it.”

“Already? I thought you were excited about this.”

“I am excited! Ramsey wanted to tell his parents in person, so we told them over brunch today.”

“In front of Jack and Bekah?” Chyna gasped.

“Um...well, not exactly. Jack wasn’t there.”

“Why not? Aren’t they, like, white-picket-fences and shit now? Oh my God, does Jack not know, Alexa?” Chyna asked. “Please, please, please tell me that Jack knows.”

“They’re getting a divorce,” Lexi said quickly, releasing the breath she had been holding.

Chyna was struck silent on the other end.

“That’s why he was calling to talk to me earlier during the week.”

“No,” Chyna murmured.

“I know.”

“I don’t understand.”

Lexi sighed. She wished she could explain, but even she didn’t really understand any of it. Jack and Bekah had been married for two years with no problems as far as Lexi could tell. Jack was still Jack, but things had changed.

She didn’t even know if she could articulate it clearly. How could someone be the same person he had always been and yet so different? Then, this...she had never seen the divorce coming. With the Bridges’ abhorrence for divorce and Jack’s personal feelings toward the matter, she had thought their marriage would have been a one-and-done deal.

Now with him back—nope, she wasn’t thinking about that.

“So, let me get this shit straight. Jack has finally come to his senses and is divorcing Bekah. What is his reasoning? Irreconcilable differences?” Chyna asked.

Lexi knew that was what Chyna’s parents had filed their divorce as in New York.

“Bekah is divorcing him.”

“I’m sorry...what? That Bitch is completely mental. Why the hell would she divorce him?”

Lexi bit her lip. She hated this conversation. Chyna was the one who was going to go mental when she heard the reason.

“She claims that Jack cheated on her, and she is filing a fault divorce, so she can run off with any money he made during the marriage. Apparently, the idiot signed a prenup with an infidelity clause in it.”

Chyna burst into laughter. “Wow. Give me a minute with that one,” she said, her laughter coming harder. “I told her that he’d cheated on her on her fucking wedding day, she still went through with the wedding, and then two years later, she’s filing for divorce for infidelity. That’s...wow...that’s rich. I mean, why is she dragging this out anyway? She has a fortune of her own. As shitty as it is, I get why my parents dragged it out. They both were worth a ton of money, and neither wanted to get screwed. Bekah doesn’t *need* his money.”

“That’s the million-dollar question—quite literally,” Lexi said under her breath.

“Well, just because he is getting a divorce doesn’t mean you can’t tell him you’re engaged, chica. You know that, right? I mean, I know he’s different, but it’s still *Jack*.”

“I know, C.”

“Right, you’ve always known. You’ve always known everything.”

“Chyna...”

“I’m just looking out for you. You’re marrying Ramsey. He’s a good guy. You love him. Remember that.”

“God, I haven’t forgotten any of that, all right?”

“Just saying.”

“So, are you finished reminding me of things I already know? And can we get back to planning your trip this weekend?”

“Just don’t be stupid.”

“Thanks for that one.”

“Jack makes you stupid.”

“He’s married!” Lexi snapped. She did not want to have this conversation. She had been fighting that battle with herself. She didn’t need Chyna’s help with it.

“Not much longer...”



Lexi spent the next day at work searching out the best divorce attorney in Atlanta who didn’t currently work under the Bridges hegemony. She was fucking pissed by how difficult it was to do that. *How did they possibly have five of the best attorneys in-house? Didn’t that seem a bit ridiculous to anyone else? Who had allowed them a monopoly on the market?*

Fucking Bekah Bridges—that was probably how.

The girl never stopped plotting. Three of the attorneys had been acquired in the last year since she had been married to Jack. It didn’t seem coincidental, but Lexi didn’t know how to prove that it was connected. It made her eyes hurt.

In the end, she just plucked up the courage to ask her boss about it.

He suspiciously eyed her. “You thinking of getting a divorce before you’re even married?” he asked.

“Just asking for a friend, sir,” she said.

“Did I hear you got engaged?”

Lexi smiled sweetly. It was the only way to deal with her boss.

“That’s right,” she said, showing off the ring.

Her boss whistled between his teeth. “That’s a big diamond.”

“Yeah, he spoils me.”

It wasn’t something she would have normally said, but her boss cared about pedigree, power, and privilege. Ramsey had all three, and sometimes it helped situations.

“Good man you have there.”

“So, sir, about that attorney. Do you think you could put me in contact with one?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

“Yeah, I know a guy. I’ll give him a call on my lunch break and put him in contact with you,” he grumbled. “Oh, and Lexi...”

“Sir?”

“Any progress on the Bryant case? I want that one resolved this month. It’s eating away time,” he told her before promptly turning around and walking away like he hadn’t just handed her an impossible task without a second thought.

“Great,” she said, storming back to her office.

At least she was getting that fucking name.

Lexi spent the rest of the afternoon buried in casework. She hadn’t even bothered surfacing for lunch, and by the time she was ready to leave the office that afternoon, she was starving and still without a contact for the divorce attorney.

She hesitantly wandered over to her boss’s office.

His assistant was looking bleary-eyed at the computer screen. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yeah. Is Chuck still here?” Lexi asked.

“No, he never came back after lunch.”

“Great,” Lexi groaned. “Did he happen to leave a message with you about a divorce attorney?”

His secretary glanced around her desk before shaking her head.

“Nothing here, sorry. Did you want me to phone him?”

“No,” Lexi said quickly. The last thing she wanted to do was to draw *more* attention to herself than she already had. The next time she talked to

her boss, he would probably tell her to close the case by the end of the week rather than the end of the month. “Thanks.”

She would have to remind him about it some other time. There wasn't all that much time to waste, but there was nothing she could do at the moment.

She took the elevator down to the parking garage, got into her car, and drove out of the building. Stopping by the nearest drive-through restaurant, Lexi ordered some much-needed food, and then cut across town to Ramsey's office.

Last night, she had told him all about Chyna's freak-out about the wedding and how she was going to come into town for the weekend to celebrate. He had been ecstatic to hear it. By the look on his face, it almost seemed like he had been afraid that Lexi wasn't excited about the prospect of their engagement. It wasn't that she wasn't excited. She had just had so much other stuff piled on top of her all at once. Listening to Chyna freak out about it had brought Lexi back to reality, and now, she was looking forward to the celebration.

In fact, she was on her way right now to celebrate. She had gotten out of work a little early, and she was surprising Ramsey at the office. They hadn't spent as much time together prior to the engagement, and she thought it would be a sign of goodwill, proving that she really was invested in him. *She loved him.* All this talk of divorce made her anxious to show it.

Lexi had a pass to the staff parking lot, so she could come and go whenever she wanted. She found the closest open spot and parked her car. She had stuffed down the burger while she was driving, and she was finally starting not to desperately crave food. She could still eat more, but she didn't feel like she was dying. Maybe she could grab something light with Ramsey on the way home. She smiled at the thought as she entered the medical wing.

It was a bustle of activity as doctors, nurses, and patients flitted about in the midst of activity. Lexi smiled at a wide-eyed receptionist at the front. She had caramel-colored skin with long black hair and brown eyes.

“Hey, Cierra!” Lexi said with a wave.

Cierra had been with the company since day one, and Lexi thought she was one of the best hires. Cierra had a great smile and was always able to calm people down like no one else.

“Hey, Lexi!” she said, waving. “Good to see you today. How is your case coming along? Are you kicking ass?”

Lexi chuckled and shook her head. “I wish it were over. How are things here?”

“Peachy. Smooth-sailing. Some of the doctors called out. I guess something has been going around, but it’s been fine. No complaints at least,” Cierra said with a giggle.

“They should know better than to complain to you about it anyway.”

“You know that’s the truth.”

A patient walked up then, and Lexi stepped back.

“See you later, Cierra.”

“Bye, girl.”

Ramsey’s office was on the top floor of the colossal building. He had always preferred his office at the clubs to be shrouded in secrecy with a full view of everything else that was going on. He hadn’t wanted something so extravagant, but the architects had said that offices were best on the top floors to get them out of the way. Then, they had kind of gone out of their way to make sure Ramsey had something nice. He had considered firing them over it, but Lexi had talked him off the edge. It had been a nice gesture.

She stepped out onto the top floor and over to Ramsey’s office. The lights were off, and his secretary was missing. He hated having a secretary, but with the added responsibilities, it was a necessity.

He should still be here though. He never left the office this early. Plus, most days, he would call her to let her know when he was on his way home to her. Sometimes, she was impressively domesticated, and she would cook him dinner if she got home first. She wasn’t a great cook by a long shot, but he never complained about it.

And that was why she was a bit confused as to where he was.

Lexi pulled out her phone to call him when she heard voices coming from next door. *Maybe someone else knew where he was.*

Taking a deep breath, she walked to the other office—Parker’s office. Her secretary was also absent, Lexi noticed as she approached. Her stomach knotted uncontrollably even though she knew she was overreacting. Ramsey had proposed to her last week. There was nothing going on with him and Parker. There hadn’t been anything going on with them for years. She wished her stomach would cooperate, but it wouldn’t. It never did when

she knew they were together. And she most certainly knew they were together now.

Her hands balled into fists as she rounded the corner and stared through the glass windows into Parker's office. It was as it always was—a hot mess. Paperwork was stacked high on every surface. Parker rarely ever got to them because she would spend more time in surgery, helping people, than anywhere else. Medical equipment sat in boxes, some half-opened, some still in plastic containers, while a few others were out and looked like she had been trying them out. A bicycle was in the corner. Lexi wasn't sure what it was doing there. Parker didn't live close enough to bike into work, and Lexi wasn't sure what people would think if Parker took that thing into the elevators. Some clothes had been strewn into the corner—a couple pairs of scrubs, the black maxi dress she had worn yesterday, a few other random articles of clothing, and at least three pairs of shoes. *She must practically live here.*

But what Lexi didn't want to take in as she surveyed the room was what she couldn't help but see.

Ramsey was sitting on the couch, completely relaxed, with one arm on the armrest and the other on the back of the couch. He had a gigantic smile on his face, and he looked like he had been laughing all afternoon. Parker was lying back on the couch, her head on the opposite armrest, with her feet pressed against Ramsey's thigh. As Lexi stood there, she watched Parker say something that Lexi couldn't make out. Parker then threw her head back in laughter as she kicked out at Ramsey for whatever he had said in response.

Lexi felt numb from her fingers to her toes. She stared unblinkingly at the display before her, knowing that it was just *them*. It was just Ramsey and Parker and the way they interacted, the way they had always interacted. It was this inherent familiarity that they had since they had known each other their whole lives...and loved nearly as long. Chyna had once equated it to how Lexi was with Jack.

Maybe it was. Maybe it was platonic at this point. Maybe it shouldn't make her sick.

It wasn't like they were having sex on the couch or anything. They weren't actually *doing* anything, except sitting around and laughing. They were completely clothed aside from Parker not wearing shoes. There was no reason for Lexi to feel like this, but she still did.

Ramsey noticed Lexi first, straightening visibly before standing. Parker realized that Lexi was there next, but instead of adjusting herself, she just smiled brighter and waved Lexi inside.

Lexi moved mechanically to the door and walked in. A part of her wanted to turn around and just walk away. She wouldn't do it, of course. Ramsey and Parker hadn't been doing anything wrong. Lexi was just making up about a billion scenarios in her head. But that was all it was—her imagination getting the best of her.

“Hey, y'all,” Lexi said as the door closed behind her.

“Lexi, speak of the devil, we were literally just talking about you,” Parker said, her feet falling onto the ground as she sat up on the couch.

Just talking about me now...when you were laughing?

That was what Lexi wanted to ask, but of course, she didn't.

“What about?” she asked instead.

“We were talking about the look on my parents' faces when we made our announcement this weekend,” Ramsey filled in.

That was funny? Lexi thought it had been pretty horrifying.

“Anything that makes them look like that is a good thing,” Parker threw out there.

“And here I thought, they hated me,” Lexi said, staring between them.

Parker shifted her feet and stared at the ground.

Ramsey shook his head and started to walk toward her. “They don't hate you.”

“They don't treat many people very well,” Parker said. “I mean, they were rotten to me for years.”

Ramsey turned to look at Parker, who promptly closed her mouth.

Lexi shrugged. *Great. Now, she was being compared to Parker. Well, it wasn't the first time.*

“At least I have years then, I guess,” Lexi said. She knew it probably sounded bitchy, and the words had only tumbled out of her mouth because she was so thrown by the situation.

Parker pursed her lips, and Ramsey took another step toward Lexi.

“Can I talk to you?” Lexi asked.

“Yeah, let's go,” Ramsey said, taking her hand. “See you tomorrow, Parker.”

“Bye, y'all,” she said softly as they exited the office.

Ramsey walked next to Lexi down the hallway. He opened the door to his office for her and flipped on the lights. Once the door closed behind him, he turned back around toward Lexi, who had moved to the center of the room.

She felt pretty shitty for saying that to Parker. Nothing was going on. But it was hard not to feel upset about it all, especially after the summer. She just wanted to forget everything about it. She really just wanted a life without Parker, but it wasn't one she could have. Ramsey and Parker were working together. They had opened a company together. Lexi had said she was okay with it. So, she just needed to be okay with it.

"Sorry," she said immediately, shaking her head. She was flustered, and it sucked! "I got off work early. I wanted to surprise you. I feel dumb."

"Lexi, it's all right. You're not dumb. I'm glad you're here." He walked across the room and pulled her into his arms.

She breathed in his peppermint scent and let it calm her nerves. *This engagement was making her a spaz. She needed to chill.*

"You know there's nothing between Parker and me," Ramsey stated calmly.

"I know," she said. "I know there's nothing. I'm not worried. I just feel dumb."

"Stop calling my fiancée all of these terrible things. She's wonderful and beautiful and mine," he whispered before he leaned forward and kissed her.

Lexi tilted her head back and opened her mouth to meet him. *God, he tasted heavenly.* She wound her hands behind his neck and let him press his body flush against hers. Their lips moved together, breaths intermingled, hands desperately held on to each other...to forget everything else.

She wanted to push the moment. She wanted to take this feeling and stretch it to infinity. Because here, right now, she didn't feel anything but his lips on hers. She didn't overanalyze, she didn't reconsider, she didn't freak out. She just felt Ramsey—her fiancé. She actually allowed herself to feel rather than think.

He broke away before she was ready, and he laughed when she tried to pull him back down to her.

"I think your phone is buzzing."

"Shit!" she said, digging through her bag and pulling it out. "It's my boss." Lexi answered the phone. "Chuck, how are you?"

“I just got a hold of my friend, the divorce attorney you were bothering me about,” he said with no preamble.

“Oh, that’s great. Thank you, sir,” she said, a smile spreading on her face.

“His name is Richard Brian with Brian & Hancock. I’ve given him your information. He’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Thank you very much. I look forward to his call.”

“Yes, well, don’t forget to work on the Bryant case.”

“I’m on top of it, sir.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The line went dead in her hand, and she placed the phone back into her purse.

“What was that about?” Ramsey asked, his eyebrows scrunching together.

“I asked my boss for a recommendation for a divorce attorney, and he just called me back with a name.”

“A divorce attorney...” Ramsey said. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at Lexi as if waiting for an explanation.

“Yeah,” she said, the excitement over getting the name draining out of her.

Ramsey didn’t look happy about it.

“Lexi, why are you getting involved in that?” he asked, shaking his head. “I’m assuming that’s for Jack.”

“It is.”

“I just...don’t see any possible gain from you getting involved. If Bekah really has information on him cheating on her, then the best possible thing for you, your career, your future...fuck, our future...is to just stay far, far away.”

“I’m not involved,” she said stubbornly.

“He called you when he found out. He wanted to talk to you about it. He wanted your advice. And now, you’re getting him an attorney,” Ramsey said, ticking these things off on his fingers. “You’re already involved.”

“Well, that’s the end of it anyway. He is doing everything after this point.”

“Are you sure?” he pleaded.

“Look, what do you want me to do? Your sister...” She shook her head and glanced away. “She’s going to try to bury him six feet under. She

knew Jack's past. I fucking told her about his past. After accepting that and marrying him anyway, she is going to try to *divorce* him over it? That's just twisted."

"It's their problem. Please don't make it our problem, too."

"It's not my problem. It's not your problem. But at the same time, we are invested in it, Ramsey. It would be stupid to think we aren't. Bekah is your sister. Jack is one of my closest friends."

"No," Ramsey said, putting his foot down. "We can't get involved in this. Promise me that you'll stay out of it, Lexi." His voice softened at the end, and he pulled her back in for a kiss.

She let him kiss her with the unanswered promise hanging between them.



October Two Years Earlier

Lexi stood outside of the conference room in the rented office space where the Bridges medical wing team was working. She had thought it was strange that they would rent space when they had all of Bridges Enterprise to use for the conferences with Global as well as the contractors, architects, and various other businesses they were working with to get this building up and running. But Ramsey had told her that when they had first gotten the place, they had wanted something semipermanent near where they would break ground.

Apparently, the location of the new Bridges tower was far enough away from the rest of Bridges Enterprise to warrant this. Lexi thought it was ridiculous. The plot was already being cleared, but it wasn't like they would be looking up at a skyscraper next week or anything. Why waste the money? Besides the fact that they could

This was why she had never gone into business. She found it incredibly boring—not that law didn't have its moments, but this whole thing just looked like a headache.

Some days, she was happy that Ramsey was keeping her in the know about every little detail, and other days, she felt herself zoning out. Really, he could settle with what was important and stick the rest through some kind of filter.

She yawned and sank back into a chair. Ramsey had said the meeting wouldn't be that long, and she could come with him if she wanted. This was her last Friday before she started her new job, and she had thought she would get to spend some time with Ramsey, finish unpacking a few of the stray boxes from New York, and get prepped for the big day on Monday before heading out to the D-Bags show with Jack later that night. But one

meeting had turned into three, and she still couldn't believe that three hours later, she was wasting the day in meetings.

Lexi had sat through the first one, but when it had become clear that it was a bunch of gibberish that she couldn't comprehend, she had lost interest in trying and dipped out. The battery of her smartphone was dying a slow death, and if it didn't last to the end of this meeting, she was definitely going to leave.

Shuffling in the other room brought her out of her thoughts, and she stood, praying to anyone who would listen that they could leave. She was never agreeing to this again.

Several contractors walked out of the room without so much as a glance in her direction, and then the door closed. Lexi sighed and fell back into the chair. *Seriously?* She could *not* handle waiting. *It was the worst thing ever.*

A second later, the door opened again, and John walked out. Lexi raised her eyebrow when he looked over at her still seated.

He smiled brightly when he saw her. "You want to get out of here?"

"Desperately," she said, lifting her eyes to the ceiling and leaning back in the chair.

"We could go get something to eat," he suggested.

She didn't even have to glance at him to know he was smirking.

"You want me to walk out on you again?" Lexi asked

He chuckled, and she did look at him then. He had on dark dress slacks and a gray button-up, rolled up to his elbows. His dark hair was neat, but he was sporting a five o'clock shadow that really worked on his cut features.

"They're sticking around to talk for a few more minutes. I needed something to drink. Could you at least manage a walk to Starbucks?"

Coffee. Heaven. Life force. "Yes, I think I can manage anything for coffee."

Lexi stood and stretched with a yawn. She wasn't even tired, but she had been sitting there so long that she almost felt exhausted. Plus, the mention of coffee had made her brain seem to slow down as if it couldn't function properly on her caffeine addiction without the stuff running through her veins.

They walked out of the building and down the steps to the sidewalk. She stuffed her hands into her pockets and ducked her head against the

wind. John looked at her questioningly with humor in his eyes.

“What?” she demanded.

“How are you cold? This weather is beautiful.”

“You live in New York. You’re used to the freezing weather.”

“Didn’t you live in New York for the past three years?” he asked.

“I never adjusted to the temperature change,” she said with a shrug.

“Well, I think you’re crazy. Sixty degrees is not freezing.”

“In the South, it is.”

“Right. It’s not where I grew up in Michigan. It’s laughable,” he told her.

“Laugh all you want,” she grumbled. “I’m still cold.”

“Good thing we’re here then, huh?”

John opened the door to Starbucks, and Lexi walked inside, shaking off the cold that had sunk into her cardigan.

They walked up to the counter. John ordered a chai tea latte and then allowed Lexi to order.

“Just a venti coffee for me.”

“Cream and sugar?” the associate asked.

“No, thank you. Black is fine.”

John smirked at that, too, and she didn’t even bother asking him about it. Most guys didn’t expect girls to drink their coffee straight. With as much as she drank, she would gain a million pounds if she added anything to it. Not to mention, she had gotten used to the taste in college and had never gone back.

John paid for the drinks, and then they set back out for the conference room. Lexi blew on her coffee. She didn’t want to scald her mouth, but she really wanted to drink it. Giving up, she dove in and started drinking the steaming brew.

“So...you moved in with Ramsey, I hear,” John said.

Lexi sputtered on her coffee. It was pretty freaking hot.

“Yeah, I did,” Lexi finally got out.

“Kind of quick, isn’t it?”

“Not really. We were living together before I moved back to New York.”

“And that worked out so well for you,” he said dryly.

“How do you even know we moved in together?” Lexi asked.

She hadn't talked to John since that night when she had walked out on him. She figured he had moved on. After all, he was attractive and charming. He could get any other girl he wanted. She just needed him not to focus on her.

"A little birdie told me."

Lexi turned to face him, narrowing her eyes. "A little birdie?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss."

"You have someone feeding you my personal information, and you won't tell me who said it?" she asked. That sounded like some pretty messed-up bullshit to her.

"That is what not being at liberty to discuss means," he said with a glimmer in his hazel eyes.

"Well, you tell your little birdie to fuck off for me!" she spat.

John burst out laughing and shook his head. "My little spitfire. You never do what I expect. It's really hot."

Lexi rolled her eyes and took another sip of her coffee. "I'm serious."

"That's what makes it all the better."

They made it back to the office, and Lexi turned to face him. She didn't want this little birdie to keep broadcasting her information. John didn't need to know what she was up to. She had closed that door, and she wanted it to remain firmly closed. She couldn't do that when he kept flirting with her, buying her coffee, and instigating the banter while he knew so much about her new life. If it were the chase he was after, she would have to show him that she had meant what she said. Ramsey was the one she had agreed to commit to. Someone who thought sex was the end game wouldn't cut it—even if John would deny that to his last breath.

"So, are you really not going to tell me who told you?"

"If you think about it, I'm sure you'll figure it out," he said, clearly enjoying having the upper hand. "Aren't you going to a concert with your ex tonight...the married ex?"

"That's really *none* of your business," Lexi shot back defensively.

"I sure hope this isn't the one who I can't compare to because if you thought going to dinner with me bordered on bad ideas..." He trailed off.

"This conversation is over. You're just poking at something you don't understand," she said.

He was getting her flustered, and she needed to extricate herself from the situation. He didn't know her history. He didn't know about Jack or

even about Ramsey. John most certainly didn't want what she had gone through to get to the point where Jack was married. And it was quite clear that John had no idea that she would have preferred to go with anyone else other than Jack to this show. So, while him prodding her for a reaction was working, it was surfacing the wrong emotions.

"Don't be mad," he said, reaching for her elbow.

"Then, tell me who you've been talking to."

He smiled devilishly, and her knees wobbled. *God, he was handsome. It was so unfair in this situation.*

"You'll figure it out, babe. Thanks for going to get coffee with me."

Lexi took a deep breath as he walked past her and inside. The coffee warmed her fingers, so she didn't follow him inside right away. She was sure she looked ready to pounce on someone.

Who the hell would feed John information about her? Who could benefit from that?

It didn't actually do her any harm. She was not getting back with John. That had bad news written all over it. But still, her personal information was her personal information. *She didn't like this at all.*



When Lexi heard Jack's car door close outside, she literally jumped since she had been listening so hard. She looked over at Ramsey apologetically when he arched an eyebrow. She knew he had heard it, too.

After getting out of his last meeting, they had left the office and had since been sitting around the kitchen table, staring at their laptops. Well, that wasn't completely true. They had tried to relax and watch a movie, but neither of them had really managed to relax. Thus, they had nixed that idea and spent the time working over coffee.

She had felt pretty ridiculous during most of the time she had sat there. She hadn't done anything that she had wanted to. Half the time, she had fretted over what John had said to her at the office, and the other half, her mind had been on this concert. She had kept thinking about backing out, knowing it was a bad idea.

Sure, she wanted to see the D-Bags, but she didn't want to see Jack. In fact, she wanted nothing less than to punch him in the face. He deserved

it for what he had put her through. She was sure it would be a feat to get through this show with him. Never in her life had she been uncomfortable around Jack—even when she had been angry with him, even when they had been with other people, even when those people had been around. It had always been Jack.

But no—he had broken her. Something in her had snapped. It was like he had stretched the thread taut, and over time, it had frayed, but one day, the pressure became just too much, and the thread split. Truth be told, she couldn't come back from that. The thread would never be whole again. Sure, she could knot it together, but there would always be a noticeable imperfection.

A knock sounded, and Lexi's eyes flew to the door.

"Do you want me to get it?" Ramsey asked, standing from his seat.

"Sure," she said with a nod. "I'll just grab my purse."

Lexi's eyes followed him all the way to the door, and then she just stood there and watched. She couldn't tear herself away.

Ramsey swung the door open, and Jack stood there with a sheepish smile on his face. He actually looked like *her* Jack tonight—even though that term did *not* apply. He was wearing dark faded jeans and a black T-shirt with an old pair of Converse. She liked seeing him not look so stuffy. He didn't need to be in a suit all the time to look good with his mussed dark brown hair, piercing baby-blue eyes, and a smirk that was to die for—not that she was thinking about that at all.

"Hey, man," Jack said with a nod at Ramsey.

"Jack."

The guys shook hands, and Lexi could feel the tension rolling off of them from across the room. *What kind of parallel universe was she living in right now that she would be living with Ramsey and having a married Jack pick her up to take her out?* Of course, it wasn't a date or anything even remotely close to that, but still, it was weird.

Jack said something that she didn't catch as she walked to get her purse at the foot of the stairs. Ramsey laughed, but she knew that he wasn't finding anything humorous. He was probably about to tell Jack what he had told her—that he would kill Jack if he laid one hand on her. She took her time getting her purse. She didn't want to hear any of it. The whole situation was already awkward enough.

She grabbed her purse and slung it on before straightening. Jack was nodding at Ramsey. She was really glad she wasn't over there. Jack didn't look happy, and by the set of Ramsey's shoulders, he certainly wasn't. *Well, great.*

"All ready to go," she said, walking across the living room to where the guys were standing.

Ramsey still hadn't let Jack inside, which was fine by her. She didn't want to be here with the both of them any longer than was necessary.

"Hey, Lex," Jack said, nodding in her direction but making no move to walk inside.

"Hey."

Christ, if only he wasn't so attractive...if only he hadn't married the Bitch.

Whatever. It didn't matter.

"I'll see you later," she told Ramsey as she turned to walk out.

Ramsey wrapped his arms around her middle and pulled her back into him. She moved to give him a hug good-bye, but he dropped his mouth down to hers and kissed her thoroughly. She knew he was doing it as a show. He had probably been planning it while they had been sitting over their computers. He had probably plotted how to put the fear of death into Jack. She knew Ramsey didn't trust Jack, and she didn't blame him. She could feel every ounce of emotion Ramsey was pushing into this kiss. He wanted her to remember what she was coming home to. He had said he trusted her, but this kiss said he wanted to make sure. It stung as much as she enjoyed the display.

Still, when he released her, she was breathless and latched on to him to steady herself.

"I'll be waiting up for you," he said softly before releasing her.

Lexi nodded and then left. Jack was already halfway down the steps when she walked out the door. *Had he left while they were kissing? Or had he waited until he heard what Ramsey had said? She didn't know if he was affected, and even if he was, what did it matter?*

She didn't want to think about that. This concert wasn't about her and Jack. She hadn't done it to make Ramsey jealous, to make him want her like that. It certainly wasn't to make Jack jealous...if he was even still capable. It wasn't for anything but to see the D-Bags.

Jack didn't turn around as he walked straight to his car. She wondered what he was thinking—though she knew he wouldn't tell her, not that she would ask.

Walking around the car, she opened the passenger side door and slid into the seat. It smelled like Jack. *Dear Lord!* She swallowed and tried not to associate the musky scent he exuded with where her mind always went with it—sex. She closed her eyes and breathed in and then out slowly. *Whoa!* It was intoxicating.

"I guess I wasn't planning to start the night off like this," Jack said, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel in a familiar fashion. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked, trying to bring herself down from the high.

"Putting Ramsey on edge."

"Right," she said, unable to hold back the sarcastic undertone.

"I'm serious."

"Whatever, Jack. Just drive."

He sighed heavily and backed out of the driveway.

The best way to get through this evening would be to disengage—not to think about the smell she associated with sex in his car, or his baby-blue eyes, or his smooth words. She just channeled that feeling from the wedding, the red-hot feel of his desperation in that moment. He had wanted a way out, and she had refused to give him one. Now, he was married to Bekah. She balled her hands into fists, remembering the pain and the anger and the heartache. It scorched through her, which helped with her clarity in this situation.

She could not let Jack back in. *For the love of God, she would not let Jack back in.*

Jack pulled out onto the interstate toward the arena. She hadn't said a word since they had left, and he hadn't either. She could feel his eyes wandering over to her, like he wanted to say something, but he didn't. He just gave her space because it was clear that was what she wanted.

It wasn't exactly uncomfortable. It was Jack after all, but it did make her anxious. She just wanted to break the spell, yet she couldn't. As much as she wanted everything to be okay and break down this wall between them, she wanted to stay angry with him. She wanted to be able to hold on to that for as long as possible.

They made it all the way to the exit ramp before they hit traffic. They eased into the line of cars and waited for everyone to putter along to the nearest parking garage. She was sure all of this was for the Sienna Sexton and D-Bags show, but she wished traffic would just move faster. She was ready to be out of this car and away from this feeling.

Jack glanced over at her as they approached the light. “Thanks for coming with me.”

Lexi humphed and turned to gaze out the passenger window. The line of traffic broke, and they drove through the light and into the nearest parking garage. A few levels up, Jack took the first available spot and put the car in park.

Finally. That had to have been the most stressful car ride she had ever been on...and Jack had only said one thing. And it had been something really nice.

“Are you going to ignore me the whole show?” he asked.

He hadn’t moved from his seat, and he was staring at her with such intensity that she could feel it without even looking at him.

Disengage. Disengage.

“No,” Lexi said curtly, popping open the door and walking toward the elevator.

Jack was not allowed to be nice to her when she wanted to be angry with him. It didn’t matter how irrational that sounded because he had married someone else. And well...she was allowed to be irrational about that.

Jack jumped out of the car and jogged to catch up with her. “Okay,” he said, stopping the elevator with his hand and staring at her with those big blue eyes.

She could drown in those eyes.

“Are you going to be pissed at me the whole time?”

She could hear the edge of desire in his voice that he was trying so hard to mask. If only she could keep her temper under control when he was around, then maybe this wouldn’t always happen. But he had always liked her when she was angry.

“No.”

“Well...good,” he mumbled, following her into the elevator. “Are you going to say anything other than no by any chance?”

“No,” she said calmly.

“Look, I’m being perfectly nice to you, Lex. You’re treating me like I slammed you back against the wall in the elevator when I promised I wouldn’t do anything stupid.”

Heat rushed to Lexi’s neck and cheeks as she glared at him. “And you wonder why when you make those kinds of suggestions.”

“I’m not suggesting it,” he said quickly. “You have it all wrong. I’m here for the show...with my friend. Plus, I got you to say something other than no.” He smirked devilishly at her.

Lexi turned to face the front of the elevator and crossed her arms over her chest. *How did he rile her up so easily?* She was just trying to keep her defenses up, and he was trying to shatter them. A few words...those blue eyes...that smile...and she was a goner. But she couldn’t...

She could just imagine the feel of his arms pressing her back roughly against the wall of the elevator after slamming the emergency button. She hoped no one would need the elevator. She would see the light in those blue eyes as they turned crystal-clear blue, telling her all he wanted to do was devour her. And she could let him as his lips found her mouth, neck, ear—nipping and licking and sucking and teasing—until she was grinding her body against him. Her eyes would flutter close as she wound her fingers into the thick, dark hair, begging him for more with her actions as much as her words.

He would hoist her legs up and press himself firmly against her. She would rake her hands down his back, and the heat of the moment would make them lose all thoughts. It would only be them in that moment—only the other person. The feel of their lips, the roughness of his hands on her hips, his dick pressing against her...

Shit! She stopped her rather active imagination right there. She couldn’t toe that line, even in her thoughts. *Not a good idea.*

Jack stuck his hands into the pockets of his scuffed-up jeans and rocked back and forth as the elevator dinged open on the bottom floor.

“Well, thanks for coming anyway,” he said softly.

Maybe if she didn’t repress so heavily, she wouldn’t start having stupid daydreams about him in the elevator. *Jesus!* She just needed to act normal. Clearly, closing off wasn’t working. *Maybe cautious would do.*

“I wanted to be at the show,” she finally told him as they walked toward the venue. “You know I like the band.”

“They’re so good,” Jack said. “Plus, you think the lead singer is hot.”

“He is hot,” she said as a matter-of-fact. “Everyone who is anyone thinks he’s hot.”

“I mean for a dude, sure. I can pick up my guitar again if you want,” he said with a faint chuckle.

Lexi glared at him. “Don’t even play.”

She couldn’t imagine Jack with his guitar. It wouldn’t be good for her mental health, not after her thoughts in the elevator. She would be better off fantasizing about Kellan Kyle. He was much further out of reach.

“Okay, okay,” he said, throwing up his hands. “Just joking. I’d probably sound terrible. It’s been too long since I’ve played, and I was better at keys.”

“I know, Jack,” she said, following the line of traffic toward Philips Arena. “I remember.”

They stopped talking as they maneuvered through the crowd. Jack pulled out the tickets when they reached the entrance.

The lady wearing a Philips Arena polo scanned the tickets and handed them back to Jack. “Enjoy the show.”

“Thanks,” Lexi said, walking behind Jack into the building.

The arena was already teeming with people talking to friends, looking at merchandise, and standing in long lines for concessions. A smile spread across her face at the energy in the room, and excitement took her over.

She was going to see Kellan Kyle. Holy fuck!

“I think you need a T-shirt,” Jack said, grabbing her hand and pulling her toward the merchandise stand.

“Are you crazy? I’m not paying thirty-five dollars for a T-shirt.” Lexi tried to stop him.

“You’re joking, right?”

“What?” she asked with a shrug.

He shook his head like he wanted to say something, and then he reconsidered.

“Seriously, what?”

“It’s just...you just got a new job. This is your first time seeing the D-Bags. They’re your favorite band. You’ve been stealing *my* shirts for years.”

Lexi bit her lip and tried not to give her thoughts away. She loved the D-Bags’ music, but she had only ever stolen his T-shirts because they were *his*. She could never tell him that now.

“And you won’t spend thirty-five bucks to get yourself your own shirt?” He tilted his head and smiled at her. “I think you should get it, but it is kind of refreshing to hear that people still care about the price of things.”

“I guess you’ve been spending too much time with the wrong kind of people then,” she said, her face heating.

It wasn’t that thirty-five dollars was too much. She could afford it now, but it felt weird.

Jack kept that goofy grin on his face and then walked forward without her.

“Hey, where are you going?”

He ignored her and bypassed a few girls who were making up their minds about what shirt to get.

“Can I get the plain black D-Bags shirt in black? A small,” Jack said.

“Sure,” a guy said, picking off the top of the pile and handing the shirt to him.

Jack passed him his credit card and signed the receipt.

“Here you go,” Jack said.

He tossed her the shirt. She caught it, not even sure how to respond.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she murmured.

“I’ll let you buy the drinks.” He smirked and directed her in the opposite direction.

She really didn’t know what to say. No part of her had expected Jack to just go buy her a D-Bags T-shirt for no reason. She couldn’t even remember the last time they had just gone out and had a good time together. *It was probably in New York over three years ago. That felt like a lifetime ago.*

They stopped and grabbed Jack a beer while Lexi simply opted for a Coke. She might have a margarita later, but she didn’t want to drink too much, especially tequila. If she started at the beginning of the show, then she would be in a bad place by the end of the show.

“Where are our seats?” she asked as she followed him through an open entranceway.

Before her was the entirety of Philips Arena. The Atlanta Hawks professional basketball team played their games in the arena, and it was home to some of the biggest headliners of the year in music. Growing up, she had seen concerts here with her parents. It had normal stadium seating, but the venue had arranged seats all along the floor, leading up to the stage.

The lights were dim, and the room was twinkling with camera flashes. The chatter was loud over the background music, and Lexi was bubbling with so much excitement that she just wanted to dance to their seats.

“I’ll show you,” Jack said.

Her stomach flipped as he started walking down the endless stairs. He showed their tickets to someone who let them pass to the lower level. *Wow, this was close.* She normally sat up in the nosebleed section. They reached the bottom of the lower level, and Jack handed off the tickets again. When the person let them through to the floor, Lexi really started to freak out.

“We’re on the floor?” she gasped, grabbing his arm.

Jack’s answering smirk set off butterflies in her stomach. “Yeah. We had a suite, but I traded them in for floor seats.”

“What? Why?” she asked, stunned. “If you had a suite—”

“I thought you’d want to be close,” he said barely loud enough for her to hear over the music.

“I do,” she agreed, lost in the fact that he had traded in a suite because he had thought she would want to sit closer...be closer to the band.

“Well then...good.” He shuffled his feet but kept his eyes trained on her face. “I just thought...it would make you happy. I know I can’t make up for everything, but as long as you’re happy, then that’s all that matters.”

“Jack...” Lexi said, shaking her head from side to side. She didn’t know what to say or how to respond.

“Let’s go find our seats,” he said quickly before walking away into the crowd.

Lexi stood there, stunned for a second, before trailing after him. *He just wanted her to be happy. Gah! What was she supposed to do with that?*

They walked all the way up to the front, and Lexi was getting close to hyperventilating as they approached the stage.

“Third row was the best I could do on short notice,” he said apologetically.

He was acting as if he hadn’t just told her that he had gotten them third-row tickets.

“But I got us the end of the aisle, so you can poke your head out.”

“Oh my God, I just don’t know what to say,” she said, taking the seat at the end of the aisle. “Third row...on the aisle...so I can actually see something around all the tall people.”

Jack chuckled softly, and she tried not to think about how perfect that sound was. *Why...why...why was he doing this?* She wanted to ask him so badly, but she couldn't. She was just going to enjoy the concert. He hadn't tried anything. That was what she had prepared for. She had prepared for the elevator daydream in her head but not for Jack just being...nice. Her well-built wall didn't know how to process this new information.

They sat in their seats and chatted about mindless things during the opening act, Holeshot. They were good, but they weren't the D-Bags. She told him all about her new job and how excited she was to actually work at something substantial after being in school for so long. They talked about the fact that Seth was going to be a father and how terrifying that was to both of them. Not to mention, Seth had just told everyone he was having a girl. Knowing the kind of person he had been in college made that all the more terrifying. Just as she started telling Jack about what Chyna had told her about Milan, the lights went out, and the crowd erupted all around them.

Lexi and Jack jumped to their feet and started clapping and cheering with the rest of the crowd. The lights careened around the room, dropping onto the stage briefly before flashing out toward the audience. After a couple of minutes, the lights returned to center stage, and she stared up at Kellan Kyle, who was no more than thirty feet away from her. *Holy shit!* He was about a thousand times more attractive in real life than he was on TV.

If she thought the crowd had been loud before, it was nothing compared to what it was now that the audience realized the guys were onstage. Kellan took the microphone in his hand like he owned it, the stage, and the audience. And he did.

“Good evening, Atlanta!”

The crowd managed to get louder, and Lexi just cheered along with them. When he raised his hand, she silenced and heard the cheers die down marginally. Kellan introduced the band, and then they moved right into their first song. Mesmerized, she watched his fingers fly across the guitar, and then his voice broke through the speakers.

Her heart fluttered. That, right there, was the sexiest singing voice she had ever heard. They were so much better live. She wasn't even sure she was going to be able to articulate this experience when it was all said and done.

She felt Jack's eyes on her, and she turned to face him with the biggest smile on her face. He wasn't even watching the show as the D-Bags

were killing it onstage. Lexi threw her arms around him and hugged him close. Jack hesitated with his hands out to his sides, like he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. She wondered if Ramsey's warning was ringing in his ears. But then, his arms were around her waist, and something clicked together like a puzzle piece.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome, Lex," he said, his voice strained. He released her quickly with a faint smile before returning his attention to the stage as their favorite band played.

She tried not to give it any thought. Her heart hammered away to the tune of the music and the sway of Kellan's vocals. They played through their set with the crowd singing along to almost all of the songs.

The first chord to the second to last song struck her to her core. They were going to play "Good-bye." *Oh my God!* She thought she might faint. She thought she literally might faint. This was her favorite, Jack's favorite, song. The band was good, but the way Kellan sang those lyrics made them great. It felt like he was singing directly to her, calling out to her, begging for her to feel. It was so emotional, and watching Kellan sing the lyrics brought tears to her eyes. She wet her lips and tried to hold back the tears that threatened to unleash. Breathing deeply, she sniffled and felt her throat tighten. She didn't even know where these feelings were coming from or what her mind was remembering that made her want to cry, but Kellan managed to draw it out of her.

She felt Jack's hand brush against her own, and then he was holding her hand, sharing her pain, allowing her to feel. She took another shuddering breath as the Good-bye song came to a close. She swallowed hard, wishing that all of these emotions could all just pass over her. Jack squeezed her hand again, and it felt like strength. She let it envelop her as the D-Bags moved into their final song.

They closed their set to deafening cheers, and Lexi watched Kellan's amazing body leave the stage. The lights flickered back on as the stage crew worked on the setup for Sienna's act, and Lexi hastily dropped Jack's hand. In the light, everything came crashing back on her.

"Good-bye" song. Saying good-bye. Second...third...fourth...fifth chances. The ring. The wedding. Ramsey. She loved Ramsey.

She hadn't even *done* anything with Jack. It might have been the most platonic moment they had ever lived through together, but still, a heat had

pressed against the boundaries. She was sure the concert had something to do with it, but it was still there.

Jack and Lexi cheered through Sienna's set even though neither of them was really all that interested in her. They only stayed for the end of the show to see the duet she sang with Kellan. It was unbelievably hot and catchy. Lexi heard it every time she turned on the radio. The tension between Sienna and Kellan onstage was palpable, and Lexi was starting to believe the rumors. She wouldn't blame anyone for wanting to get with Kellan Kyle.

The concert ended in a haze. Lexi was shocked to see it was almost midnight. She felt like they had just gotten here, and then already, it was done. The crowd pressed against her on all sides, and she had to latch on to Jack's shirt to not lose him. They made it up to the front, but she yanked on his shirt to get him to stop.

"Restroom," she said, motioning in that direction.

He nodded and followed her in that direction. There was a pretty long line for the women's restroom, but it was moving quickly. She did her business, washed her hands, and then ran them back through her unruly hair. She pulled the long tresses into a high ponytail to keep the strands off her neck, and then she turned to exit.

She passed the person washing her hands next to her, and she wondered why the girl looked familiar. Before she made it to the exit where a line of women waited to use the restroom, she realized who it was. Her heart beat furiously in her chest, and she felt her fingers tingling with anticipation. *Should she say something? What point would there be?*

But still...

"Stella?" Lexi asked in disbelief.

She couldn't be sure that was who was standing before her. She hadn't seen or heard from Stella since the night that Jack had slept with her in New York...the day he had left Lexi.

The girl turned around, her big green eyes wide with confusion. Then, they landed on Lexi's face, and they widened even further with alarm.

"Lexi?" she asked like she didn't believe it herself.

Stella was four or five inches taller than Lexi with platinum-blond hair cut short, framing her angular face. Lexi noticed with self-satisfaction that it looked like Stella had gained some weight.

“What are you doing here?” Stella asked. “I mean, not the concert... Atlanta.”

“I’m from Atlanta.”

“Oh, right,” she said awkwardly. “I forgot.”

“What are you doing here?”

“My husband got relocated to Atlanta for his company,” she said softly.

Then, Lexi noticed the glittering ring on Stella’s finger. Lexi felt sick. *It wasn’t fair. It was stupid. This girl had ruined everything...and she still had married someone before Lexi. How could the universe allow this to happen? It just didn’t make sense!*

“Congrats,” Lexi said through gritted teeth.

“Lexi,” she said, biting her lip, “I’m really sorry.”

“Really?”

“I never got to tell you, but I am really sorry about what I did. Jack was drunk, and I was so jealous of you two. You were perfect, and I...I was a thief. I wanted what you had, so I took it. I shouldn’t have seduced him that night. He said no like five thousand times—”

“Wait...what?” Lexi asked, scrunching her eyebrows together. Her body shivered at those words. “He said no?”

“Of course he did. Didn’t he tell you?”

“No,” she breathed. “No, he didn’t.”

“Now that I’m with the man I love, I can’t help but think back to that night and how stupid I was. If someone had done that to my husband, I would hunt her down and kill her. You have every right to hate me,” she murmured.

Lexi shook her head in a daze. *Jack hadn’t wanted to sleep with Stella. It hadn’t just been some fluke. Stella had gone after him that night.*

Lexi couldn’t process this. She couldn’t erase more than three years of assumptions in the blink of an eye.



Present

Lexi spent the next month trying to keep a promise that she had never made to Ramsey. She gave Jack the information about the attorney, and then she took a giant step back. If he called to ask her something about it, she would always reroute him back to the attorney. She wanted to help and be there for him. *But at what cost?* Ramsey didn't like the idea, and she was marrying him after all.

So, she spent her weekend hanging out with Chyna and Adam, celebrating her engagement and getting rip-roaring drunk. Chyna was basically the best friend Lexi could have in this situation. She was supremely supportive and anxious to already get started planning a bachelorette party.

Lexi hadn't even thought of the details. She had been so wrapped up in work, Jack's divorce, and telling everyone she was engaged that she hadn't even considered—like she assumed most girls did—all of those minute details about planning the wedding. *Where were they going to have the wedding? What kind of dress did she want? How many bridesmaids?*

Her head spun with all the questions she had never even thought about. Ramsey jokingly said they would just hire a wedding planner, and Lexi laughed it off.

She didn't need a wedding planner. She could do this on her own. She had plenty of time.



When Ramsey came home from work a week later and told her he had booked a meeting with a wedding planner, Lexi blew up on him.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Lexi asked, jumping up from her seat and planting her hands on her hips. “You didn’t even consult with me about this. Do you think I can’t do this on my own?”

“Whoa!” he said, striding across the room. “I didn’t say anything like that.”

“But you didn’t even ask me about a wedding planner. What if I don’t want one?”

“Lexi, I’m not sure you know how much work has to go into this.”

“I don’t want it to be a big thing.”

Ramsey shook his head and closed the distance between them. He placed his hands on both of her shoulders. “Lexi, where is all of this coming from? I mentioned getting a planner when Chyna was in town. You didn’t seem to care then.”

“I didn’t think you were serious!”

“You have the Bryant case to finish up. I’m running the medical wing. Neither of us has the time to plan a wedding. I’m trying to make this easy for both of us. If you hate the planner and decide you want to do it all by yourself, we don’t have to hire her. Okay?” he asked, staring down into her big brown eyes.

Lexi took a deep breath as his words sank in. All of this wedding stuff put her on edge. *It wouldn’t hurt to talk to someone else about it.* “How much do wedding planners cost?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “You let me worry about the money, all right?”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“That’s because you don’t like spending money, and to have a wedding, you have to spend it. So, just ignore the dollar signs in your eyes. I’ll cover it. It’s your day. That’s all that matters,” he said with a smile.



Another week passed, and now, it was the big day, and she was a mess. She had been buried nose deep in the Bryant case, and she hadn’t even given the meeting with the wedding planner any thought. The damn meeting had just snuck up on her. *What was she even supposed to wear to it?* She blankly stared at her closet. *She had nothing to wear.*

“Hey, are you ready?” Ramsey asked, poking his head in a few minutes later.

She was still standing there in her bra and thong with a pile of dresses at her feet. “I don’t have anything to wear,” she whispered.

“You have a million things to wear.”

Lexi turned her head to the side and looked out the window. *How could she explain this to him? She had to look nice—no, perfect. She had to look absolutely perfect.* This was supposed to be the best time of her life, and she didn’t even have something to wear to it.

Ramsey checked his watch, which made her cringe. She was going to make them late—all because she couldn’t figure out what outfit to wear.

“How about purple?” Ramsey said. He walked through the closet and pulled out a deep purple dress and handed it to her.

It was a bit dressy, but he looked so cute, holding it up for her to take. She just smiled and grabbed it. “This is perfect.”

His smile grew as she tossed the hanger to the ground and yanked the dress over her head. She slid her hands down her sides and held in her sigh. The material hugged her perfectly, but it wasn’t so tight that she felt like she would be better fit for the club. Ramsey certainly appreciated it.

Tugging on a pair of knee-high brown boots and grabbing her jacket, she followed Ramsey out of the house. They drove across town and into Buckhead. Lexi was already squirming. Ramsey might be covering the cost of this, but just the fact that the wedding planner’s office was in Buckhead meant it was going to be expensive.

They pulled up to a small boutique called Happily Ever After with its crisp, clear design work and nondescript entrance. *So, this was it.* Lexi took a deep breath and exited the car. Ramsey walked over to her side to walk with her inside.

The interior was gorgeous and modern, set in all blues with baby blue cushioned chairs and a navy blue coffee table. A receptionist sat behind a white desk, and a large spread display of the company’s work was on the wall behind her head.

“Welcome to Happily Ever After. I’m Eve. How can I help you?” she asked, placing her hands demurely in her lap and staring up at them.

“We have an appointment,” Ramsey said. “It’s under Bridges.”

“Ah, Mr. Bridges, of course. Let me contact Sherri,” the woman said before pressing a number on the phone and letting Sherri know that they

were here.

A woman about Lexi's height or maybe even shorter with insanely straight blonde hair to her shoulders and a soft look to all her features walked out of the back of the office. She wore a black pencil skirt with a pale blue blouse and all gold jewelry.

"Ramsey Bridges," she said with a bright smile. "Pleasure to finally have you here."

"Sherri," he acknowledged, shaking her hand carefully, "it's great to see you. I've heard such great things."

She waved him aside. "Don't flatter me. I'm just doing my job. Now, introduce me to your beautiful bride-to-be."

Lexi stood stoically through the entire conversation. She had never wondered how Ramsey had selected the wedding planner. *Did he know her personally?* They sure seemed to know each other, but Lexi didn't know how they were acquainted.

"Sherri, this is Lexi," Ramsey said, drawing Lexi closer to him.

"Hello," Lexi said politely. She extended her hand out, which Sherri took.

"So nice to meet you. You are positively stunning!"

"Thank you."

Lexi could tell that Sherri was trying to assuage whatever nerves were floating around inside Lexi, but that wasn't likely to happen.

"Please, come back into my office. I'm so excited to work with y'all on your special day," she said.

They followed her down the hallway and into the back area of the boutique.

Sherri chatted away the entire time. "I don't normally work with the grooms as well. It's a real treat to have you along to help plan. You know I would do anything for the Bridges. After working on your sister's lovely wedding, I am just thrilled that you contacted me for this."

Lexi froze in place in the middle of the hallway. *Bekah. Ramsey had selected Bekah's wedding planner. That was how they knew each other because Ramsey had been in Bekah's wedding—the wedding he had walked out of with Lexi.*

Ramsey's hand slid into hers, and he urged her to continue walking, but she stayed rooted in place. There were a million planners in the city, and he had chosen the one who had worked with Bekah.

“Why?” she whispered.

She could see in his eyes that he knew what she was asking.

“She’s the best. You deserve the best.”

“But Bekah...”

“That was two years ago, Lexi. Bekah can’t dictate our choices.”

“Yet, you selected her planner.”

“I’m having you meet with the planner that she used, yes. She’s so popular that she books out two years in advance. Just the fact that she is meeting us is out of her normal schedule. But she likes me, and she likes my family.”

“Why does it always have to be about who you know?” Lexi asked.

“Because that’s the world we live in. I can’t help that my name holds influence. It just does. I don’t think you deserve anything less than Bekah on your wedding day. In fact, you deserve much more than her. I’m simply asking you to try this...for us. Please.”

“Fine,” she said, only because he was pleading with her.

A part of her just wished that something had changed during those two years since she had agreed to get back together with Ramsey. They were better but still, he hadn’t told her about the planner. *How hard would it have been to just tell her?*

It was probably as hard as it had been for her to just tell Jack she had gotten engaged, yet she still hadn’t.

That thought sprang her into action, and she moved forward down the hallway. The wedding planner had stopped at her door, pretending not to listen during the exchange. Lexi wondered how many other women had breakdowns and freak-outs during the earliest stages of planning.

Sherri ushered them into her immaculately decorated office. The room had soft sand-colored accented in varying shades of green and supplemented with plants to make the room feel more natural and inviting. Lexi and Ramsey took the seats opposite Sherri, waiting for her cue.

After giving a lengthy introduction about the company, Sherri turned the spotlight on Lexi. “What is your vision for this, Lexi? I’d love to know what your dream wedding looks like. I’m in the business of making dreams come true,” she said with a big toothy smile.

Lexi just stared at her. *What did she want her wedding to be like?* She had no idea. She thought most weddings were the same. She had been in a few, and they had been all right, but most had been expensive and rather

annoying. She knew she didn't want their wedding to be anything like what her friends had done—and absolutely nothing like Bekah's. Lexi wasn't really sure how to articulate that though.

Sherri waited for Lexi to say something. When she didn't, Sherri asked another question, "Do you see this as a big event, small event, beachside, or intimate night wedding? We can do whatever works best for you. I know with the Bridges, the guest list tends to get pretty long, so it might be good to think local. Of course, it's your choice though. I'm here to make your wedding a reality."

"I don't know," Lexi finally answered. "I haven't thought about it."

"How long have you been engaged?" Sherri asked, turning her attention to Ramsey.

"Almost a month," he answered immediately.

Sherri clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and then stood. "I have another idea. If you'll follow me," she said.

They left Sherri's office behind and tailed her into a large open room with an oval table taking up the center and several large bookshelves filled to the brim with magazines, booklets, and folders.

"Feel free to have a seat. I think it might be better just to show you what we have done in the past, so we can get a grasp for your tastes."

Lexi plopped into a chair and stared at the massive collection of books. *How many weddings had they done? How much work really went into them?*

"The first things we really like to focus on with clients are the date, the color palette, the number of guests, and the venue," she said, picking out a big three-ring binder for each thing she mentioned. "So much of our design work is captured online for your viewing at any time. I've handpicked some of the company's favorites for us to glance through."

"Okay," Lexi said softly.

Her palms started to sweat, and she had no idea why. Her palms never sweat. When she had been in gymnastics, she had never had to use as much chalk as the other girls for that very reason.

"Now, the date—I'm sure you've already discussed when you would like the wedding to be. At least a year out is ideal, but a season would do." Sherri flipped to a page with a picture of weddings in each of the four seasons.

Sherri looked at her, but Lexi turned to Ramsey. They hadn't discussed this.

"Summer?" Lexi asked, biting down on her lip.

"Or fall," he offered.

"Summer or fall next year then," Sherri said. It was clear that she was glad they were making progress.

The rest of the session went in much the same fashion. Sherri pulled out everything from thousands of different color palettes, to swathes of garments, to images of large weddings and small weddings and beach weddings, to massive cakes...and the list went on.

Her opinion was asked over and over again, and Lexi frankly didn't have an opinion on much of it. The longer she sat there, the more her hands became clammy. Then, it got worse. The back of her neck felt sticky with sweat. Her forehead beaded. She felt her throat begin to close up as if it were swollen. Her stomach twisted like she might be sick, and it took everything in her to sit through one more question about her taste on anything.

Lexi pushed her chair back abruptly and stood. "I, uh...need to use the restroom," she said. She twirled her hair around her finger and then threaded it behind her ear.

Ramsey and Sherri looked at her with concern in their eyes as Lexi extricated herself from the stifling room and rushed down to the restroom. She thought she literally might be sick, but the farther she got away, the better she started to feel. It was like the time when she had walked with Bekah into the jewelry store in the mall. Her whole body had protested.

She splashed some water on her pale face and tried to get herself under control. It made no sense that she was this tense from looking at color palettes. She even liked Sherri. She was straightforward but determined to figure Lexi out, even when she gave Sherri practically nothing to work with. *But how would Lexi be able to get through this process if sitting in a wedding planner's office made her nauseated?*

She rested her head in her hands and held back the tears. She felt ridiculous and wished she could make it all go away. *Why did she have to make this all so difficult?* Chyna had been so enthused. All of this would be better with her best friend here to hold her hand and walk her through her anxiety. Every time she looked at Ramsey when she felt like this just made it worse, like she was letting him down.

Taking a deep breath, she straightened out her hair and walked back down to the room. Sherri and Ramsey were chatting calmly as if Lexi hadn't just stormed out. He was always so collected with other people. They had their moments, but country club born and bred made him eternally polite. He never said the wrong thing. Sometimes, he would go on and on and on while he was getting his thoughts together or when she threw him off guard, but still...he always said just the right thing.

She swallowed her pride, knowing that she would continue to say the wrong thing on a pretty regular occasion, and stepped into the conference room. "Thanks for waiting for me."

"Of course, dear," Sherri said, leaning her hip against the table. "We were just discussing costs and such. Nothing for you to worry about."

Costs. Nothing for her to worry about. That was for Ramsey to deal with.

"I think we'll take a few days to think about it, Sherri," Ramsey said. He walked over to Lexi and put his arm around her shoulder.

"Of course. Half will be due when you decide, and I'll need a date to make sure I don't already have something booked," she said with that same toothy smile.

"Thank you so much for your help," Ramsey said.

"It was wonderful to see you again, Ramsey, and to meet you, Lexi."

"Nice to meet you, too," she said.

Ramsey steered her out of the office, down the hall, and out of the boutique.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Sherri talking to Eve and laughing. Lexi wondered if they were talking about her...if they were wondering how long Lexi and Ramsey were going to last after Lexi's freak-out. She didn't want to think about that. It wasn't healthy for her already fragile psyche.

Lexi remained silent on the drive back to their condo. She felt pretty foolish. She had been so worried about looking and acting the part that she had completely lost it. She knew that wedding planning wasn't always easy, but they hadn't even picked out a wedding date yet. The only things that she really knew were that Ramsey was the groom and Chyna was going to be her maid of honor. Lexi was going to need to get her stuff together if they wanted the wedding to be a reality.

Ramsey took an unexpected turn, and Lexi raised her eyebrows.

“Where are we going?”

“Just the long way home,” he said with a smirk that suggested he wasn’t telling the truth.

“Oh, really?” she asked. “This seems like really far out of the way.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The way his eyes gleamed told her otherwise, but she decided to let it go and wait to see where he was taking her.

About fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of Morelli’s, and Lexi laughed.

“Ice cream?” she asked.

“You looked like you needed some,” he responded before getting out of his car.

Morelli’s was a local Atlanta ice cream shop that had opened relatively recently and won the hearts of everyone around. With an old-school style walk-up menu and over thirty flavors that changed daily, Morelli’s was the best place in town, and it had been rated best ice cream in Atlanta almost since its inception.

Even in the chilly October weather, the place was still packed, and they filed into line. Once they reached the front, Ramsey ordered a scoop of the butter pecan with a cone, and Lexi chose the coffee fudge almond.

Cones in hand, they walked over to a bench and sat down.

“So...what do you think?” Ramsey asked after a minute.

“I like her,” she admitted.

“You do?” He didn’t seem convinced.

She took a deep breath and stared down at her ice cream. *Seriously, it was heavenly.* “She seems nice and put-together. She knows what she’s doing, and she I think she’s genuinely interested in what I want...what we want. You’re very comfortable with her, and that means a lot, too.”

“I am. She’s very professional.”

“I know. I can tell. I was very worried that she would expect me to be Bekah, but she didn’t treat me that way at all. I won’t have time for everything she mentioned, and I don’t know two things about putting a wedding together,” she told him, finally looking up at him. “Plus, I don’t really want to sit through another one of those meetings again.”

Ramsey burst out laughing. “That’s my Alexa right there,” he said, leaning forward and kissing her lips. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” she murmured softly.

“And you’re sure you want to hire her? I only want what’s best for you.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding slowly. “Let’s do it.”



Lexi yanked the door open to the courthouse and strode through the double doors. She had just gotten out of work, so she fit the lawyer profile that afternoon in a gray pencil skirt suit and cream blouse. She had left her jacket in the car, but her dark brown leather messenger bag was slung over her shoulder. The only thing that would identify her as out of sorts was she had pulled most of her dark brown hair into a messy bun at the back of her head earlier that day, and it had fallen out with loose tendrils framing her face.

She didn’t think anyone would recognize her where she was headed anyway. Her office worked on corporate matters, not family law.

Jack had frantically called the day of her meeting with the wedding planner to let her know that a temporary hearing had been set up to decide immediate circumstances before an official court date could be held. The court had expedited the case to be heard only three days from then. Lexi had been shocked that they had moved it up so quickly. That typically only happened in extreme cases when children or money were involved.

Lexi wondered if Bekah had bought off the judge. If that had happened already, this really wasn’t going to go well.

Jack had spoken to the attorney she had gotten for him, but Jack hadn’t called Lexi for advice. She had given him everything that she had on that front and then some. But the way he had spoken to her...the need in his voice...it had pierced her heart.

“I wasn’t lying when I said that I didn’t have anyone else. I’m living with Seth right now, but I can’t *talk* to him about this. What would he understand about a broken marriage? He and Sandy are the picture-perfect couple,” Jack had said.

“I’m just trying to stay out of it, Jack,” Lexi had tried to tell him.

She hadn’t told him that she was keeping a promise to Ramsey. Sure, she had never actually told Ramsey that she would stay out of it, but she had felt obligated to do so. It had been an unspoken agreement of sorts.

“I know. It’s just that this is the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through, and it feels like I have a transmittable disease or something. None of my friends want to get caught up in this, and I still have to go into work every day at Bridges. I don’t know why I thought you would understand that, Lex. You’ve just always understood me,” he had said softly.

“Jack,” she had groaned, “it’s not that I don’t understand.”

He had sighed heavily on the other end. “Forget I asked, all right? I know you have your own life. I doubt Ramsey wants you involved in this. If I know him, I’d bet he asked you to stay out of it.”

Lexi had remained silent.

“I see. And here I thought, we were past all of that.” He had sounded defeated...like he had hit rock bottom.

“Jack,” she had whispered. She had hated the desperation in his voice.

“I mean, I was there for you this summer when you had nowhere else to go. Chyna was in her own state of bliss and a thousand miles away. That’s what friends do for each other.”

She had swallowed at the memory that sometimes hit her again like a sucker punch. Just when she had grown complacent—no, not a good idea to think about that.

“All I’m asking is for you to be my friend now...when I need you,” he had said softly.

She had felt glad that she couldn’t see those pleading blue eyes again. She had almost told herself that she had imagined the way he had talked to her in her office when he had told her about the divorce. He hadn’t wanted her. He had only been relying on a friend—a friend he needed again now.

“They won’t let me in the courthouse, and it’s a terrible idea for me to be there anyway,” she had told him.

“Meet me after?”

So, that was how she had ended up walking into the courthouse directly after work. She turned down the hallway toward the family court area and took a seat outside. Jack should be out any minute. She was a bit surprised they weren’t already done. These things didn’t take that long. It was usually the mediation and actual trial that took the most time.

She tapped her foot on the tile floor and looked down at her watch. *Any second now.*

As if on cue, the door opened, and Bekah walked out. Lexi scrambled to her feet. She didn’t want to be sitting if Bekah said anything to her. Lexi

didn't want Bekah to be able to look down at her at least.

Bekah's lawyer followed. He looked familiar. He was probably one of the attorneys Lexi had investigated when searching out one for Jack. The lawyer nodded at Lexi and urged Bekah to keep walking, like he knew it was in her best interest not to stop.

Bekah didn't listen.

"What a surprise!" Bekah said. She looked at Lexi smugly as if she had expected her to be here.

Lexi didn't like falling into Bekah's plans in any way. "Bekah," she said curtly.

"Do you really think this is the best place for you right now?"

"Around you? No, not particularly," Lexi responded dryly.

Bekah bristled, which was highly entertaining. Lexi liked to see her uncomfortable. She was just a little too perfect with her long blonde hair, perfect chunky bangs, and baby blues. She had on a rather innocent-looking pink dress and modest heels. Lexi assumed Bekah was playing the victim card just by her appearance.

"Let me just give you some friendly advice," Bekah said, stepping forward toward her.

"Just what I always wanted."

"If I were you, I'd stay away from Jack."

"Is that so?" Lexi asked, arching an eyebrow.

"You shouldn't even be here right now. What does Ramsey think about all this?"

"The best part about all of this, Bekah, is that it's none of your business," Lexi said. She shot her a big fake smile before turning her back and walking away.

Jack appeared in the entranceway a minute later. He didn't look happy. Things must not have gone well. Lexi hadn't thought they would.

"What happened?" she asked, concerned.

"She won."

"It's not over."

Jack pulled out a paper. "I don't even know where to start—exclusive use of the marital home, exclusive use of the motor vehicle, freeze on all joint accounts, payment of her attorney's fees. Christ, her fucking attorney fees—when she's a fucking vice president of Bridges," he growled. "Plus, I

still have to pay my half of the house and utilities—the house I can't live in."

Lexi knew that wasn't the worst they could have done. Every single day, she was thankful that kids weren't involved. Money could be spent and earned. It was just a piece of paper that people valued. What really mattered, money could never touch. It could make things easier, but it was such a fragile aspect of life. It was something that people so easily allowed to make or break their happiness.

"It's okay. It's not the worst it could be, and you'll have time to plan a defense before you go to a full trial, if it comes to that." *When it comes to that.*

Jack shook his head. "My attorney is talking to the judge. He wants to meet with me after this to discuss the impact and strategy going forward. So, I guess I can't even see you, but thanks for showing up."

"Of course," she said softly.

She stared up into those blue eyes and just saw defeat. *How had Bekah done this? She was destructive.* Lexi wanted to go back outside now and beat her to a bloody pulp for every person she had hurt from her games and manipulation. That kind of person did not deserve to walk around the world with a chip on her shoulder as a vice president of a huge company. She deserved nothing less than to be buried six feet under—in the same way she was doing to Jack.

"Maybe I'll see you soon," Jack said.

It was the first optimistic thing he had said since she had arrived.

"Sounds good," she said and then turned to go.

"Lexi, what's that?" Jack asked, sounding shocked.

"What is, what?" She crinkled her eyebrows together.

Jack stalked forward, closing the short distance between them, and grabbed her left hand. "This. What is this?"

Lexi's mouth went dry. *No. He wasn't supposed to find out this way. He couldn't know now, not when he was so beat-up already.*

She shook her head, not able to form the words.

"Lex, tell me," he demanded, his eyes like ice as they stared into her.

She just shook her head more furiously. "I can't."

His grip on her hand tightened imperceptibly, and she winced. When she tensed, he dropped her hand like she had burned him.

"When were you going to tell me?"

“Soon,” she whispered. “Every time I wanted to, I couldn’t. The divorce—”

“Every time?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “How long have you been...how long ago did this happen?”

He couldn’t even say it. She couldn’t either.

“About a month.”

Jack staggered back a step. His face was a mask, and if she hadn’t known him so well, she wouldn’t have seen the hurt flashing in his blue eyes.

“A month...”

“I’m sorry, Jack.”

“That you’re...” He shook his head. “Or that I found out this way?”

She took a breath before answering. “That you found out this way.”

“You always were a fucking terrible liar, Lex.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she shook her head. She hated hurting him. After all the fucking bullshit they had gone through, she still fucking hated this so fucking much. It made her chest ache, and her ears were ringing.

“I’m not lying,” she said. *She had to stand by it. She loved Ramsey. She wanted to marry him.*

“You can’t even say it. You haven’t even told me. I’ve known you for years, longer than everyone else you still talk to. I *know* you, Lex,” he said, still standing at his safe distance. “Don’t ever forget that I know who you are as much as you know who I am.”

“I know. God, I know, okay?” She swiped at her eyes as her vision got blurry.

“Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

“No, are you really, really happy? Like, you’ll never really be sad again because you have everything you want. Are you happy like that, Lex?” he asked.

Those blue eyes stared straight through her. They demanded she think and feel and remember.

She hesitated. “Yes.”

He shook his head and looked away from her. “Then, what are you doing here?”

“What?”

“If it’s him, Lex, and you’re really happy, then what are you doing here?”

“Don’t ask me stupid questions. I came because you asked me to,” she whispered.

He smirked at her. It was a knowing look. She had seen it a million times. How he managed it through the pain that was clear across his entire face at this point was beyond her.

“Exactly.”

Lexi just stared at him. *How was she supposed to respond to that?*

“And it’s why you should leave now because I’m asking you to.”

“Jack...”

“I told you once that all I wanted was for you to be happy. If you are, then that’s all that matters. That’s it,” Jack said before turning and walking back into the courtroom.

Lexi stood there, stock-still, for longer than she wanted to admit.

What had just happened?



April **One Year and Six Months Earlier**

Lexi might as well have been in a nightmare.

She stood at the center of a large group of people. Photographers were all around. A podium had been constructed off to the side. A shovel sat in the freshly tilled earth, and before her was the completely cleared land where the new Bridges medical wing was going to sit. Even though breaking ground had officially begun two months ago with the underground garage that was going in, they were having the public ceremony on this perfect sunny Saturday morning in front of the press.

The press made Lexi nervous.

They made her even more nervous when three guys who she had slept with were in close proximity. Not to mention, Bekah and Parker and Ramsey's parents were also present!

She had never been with all of them in one place. Last year, the rehearsal dinner and wedding had been close, but John hadn't been factored into the equation. Now, he was here, standing smugly next to Jessica. When he caught Lexi's eye, he stared at her like he knew all of her secrets. It was completely disconcerting. She had never found out where he was getting his information from, but damn it, he seemed to know so much about her every time she saw him. He was civil and hadn't pushed his luck with her or anything, but he was never far out of the loop.

And she just wanted to know—*how*?

But he wouldn't tell her.

She couldn't badger him about it without raising questions as to why she would be talking to him so much. So, she tried to avoid it. But she would be lying if she said the temptation to gather as much information from him as possible wasn't there.

Lexi averted her attention from John as he started up a conversation with Jessica. Lexi surveyed the rest of the crowd. Bekah wasn't even standing with Jack. He was talking to some business associates that Lexi had never seen before. Bekah was at her father's right side, a position of power. Even though Bekah wasn't working on the medical wing, she was sure to put herself in the spotlight, regarding the development.

Everyone was dressed in suits, and for a brief moment, she mourned the loss of Jack's Chuck Taylors. She hadn't seen him in them since the day of the concert. That could also be because she hadn't seen him outside of work.

Something had shifted that night after the concert. Lexi hadn't known what to say to Stella after her announcement. *Jack had said no. Stella had pushed her luck. Still, they had slept together.* But Lexi didn't know why Jack had never given her the details. She remembered her interaction with Jack in New York clear as day. He had said that he didn't have an excuse, it was his fault, and that he had to tell her...get it out in the open. *Why would he say that when in reality he'd had an excuse?*

It wasn't that he had lied about it.

She probably would have still been pissed that he had gone through with it. But some part of her brain kept whispering that maybe things could have been salvaged.

Yet, she hadn't been able to bring it up with him.

She just couldn't do it.

She had walked out of that restroom and stared into those big blue eyes with a wave of memories crashing down all around her—the way he had looked at her on the beach, the first time he had told her loved her, the whispered sweet-nothings before falling asleep together, the depth of emotion in his eyes when he had produced that ring in her ratty New York apartment. She had seen all of that and thousands and thousands more moments all in a second. She had seen her Jack standing before her, wanting to do nothing more than to make her happy, when all he'd had to do was make an excuse for his behavior.

But he'd never had.

He had never once made an excuse for who he was.

He was just Jack—the blue-eyed, smirking, beautiful man she had loved for far too long.

Something had clicked in that moment. She wasn't mad at him anymore.

She'd had every reason to be mad at him. He had fucked her over ten-thousandfold over the years. She'd had her heart ripped out of her chest more times than she could count. He had slept with someone else when they had finally had a shot at working it out. He'd had sex with Lexi before proposing to Bekah. He had put a duplicate of her ring on the Bitch's finger. And then, he had fucking married the Bitch.

And still, she couldn't be angry with him even when she wanted to be. So, she had let it go. Because the only way that she could keep going was to move on.

As his blue eyes found her in the crowd, she knew that there would forever be a pull between them—a magnetic, inexplicable pull. If she kept fighting it, then she would only be putting all of her energy into pushing something away that kept crashing into her life and not focusing on the life she was currently living.

So, she lived her life with Ramsey. Jack just happened to be there—not like he had always been but more like...a friend.

“Lexi,” Ramsey whispered.

He stood at her side, and she hadn't even realized he had been talking to her.

“What? Sorry,” she said, turning back to Ramsey.

He chuckled and squeezed her hand. “You look a little pale.”

“Press,” she murmured softly.

“Don't worry. They're just here to take pictures and maybe ask a few questions. You won't even have to be around them.”

“That's good.”

“We're about to start,” he said before bending down and kissing her cheek. “I'll find you after.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“I don't need it,” he said with a confident smile.

“I know. Take it anyway.”

“From you...I'll take anything,” he whispered.

She believed him.

Ramsey left her side and walked up to the podium, followed close by his father and Parker. His father did some quick opening remarks, thanking everyone for being in attendance. Then, Ramsey gave a speech on the

progress of the project, the vision behind the development, and the future of Bridges Enterprise.

Parker chimed in with perfectly timed delivery of her lines. She looked a bit nervous up there in front of all those people. She had clearly taken the time to put herself together though. Lexi normally thought that Parker had a bit of a thrown-together appearance, like she didn't care about much more than the next surgery ahead of her. Someone must have convinced her otherwise today because she looked great—even Lexi could admit that. Parker's dark brown hair was blown out, and she had on shimmery makeup that brought color to her naturally pale skin. She was wearing a fine-cut coral dress and nude heels—both designer if Lexi had to guess.

Ramsey's suit was black, but his shirt and tie complemented what Parker was wearing. *They looked good up there.* Lexi's heart constricted at the thought, and she wished to her very core that she could unthink it. *Someone had dressed them. It hadn't been an accident. It absolutely had not been an accident—not when they were going to be on TV and in pictures and going to be broadcast.*

Fuck.

She turned away from the speech because, truthfully, she didn't want to get choked up in front of anyone, especially not the people *here*. Thankfully, no one was looking at her. Everyone was trained on Ramsey and Parker talking about what they had created together.

She wished these kinds of things would hit her at more opportune moments. She had been trying not to care about the fact that Ramsey and Parker were working together. To begin with, Ramsey had only given in to the idea because of Lexi. Of course, if he had asked her, she would have told him not to even consider the idea. *How ridiculous was it that she preferred him around strippers and club whores all day than to being near Parker?*

But Ramsey wasn't in love with Parker anymore. At least, there was that. They were just friends...coworkers. Lexi could get through that.

Schooling her features, she turned back toward the stage and stared up at her handsome boyfriend. He was the only one looking at her. He was speaking to the crowd, but he was looking directly at her. She wondered if he knew what she was thinking, what emotions were roiling through her chest.

By the look on his face, he had a pretty good idea. She wasn't very good at masking her emotions, holding back, not reacting. She couldn't lie well with her body any more than with her words.

The speeches ended to a round of applause. Lexi forced herself to clap along with the crowd as the Ramsey, his father, and Parker stepped down from the podium and walked over to the ornate shovel. A series of pictures were taken with each of them scooping a bit of dirt into the hole. Lexi didn't see the point since construction was already well underway, but it was a press release, and she didn't get anything about that. The press took a few more shots of them all together and then split them apart for interviews. Ramsey and Parker turned to speak with one reporter, and Lexi just stared.

She felt the presence behind her before he spoke.

"You all right?" Jack asked.

"What do you mean?" She kept her voice light and airy. She wasn't sure why she was even trying to fool Jack. It was pretty useless.

"So, no?"

She sighed. "I'm all right. Don't worry about me."

"You looked pretty sad for a minute during that speech."

"You weren't even looking at me," she said. She didn't even know why she was defending herself like this.

Jack smirked at her, and those blue eyes lit up. "I could feel your panic a mile off, Lex. I only needed a peripheral look to know what you were feeling."

Lexi just shrugged. If he knew, then she wasn't going to explain herself. There were too many eyes and ears around at the moment. For all she knew, Bekah was going to barge over and confront her any second—except Lexi knew that probably wouldn't happen. Bekah cared for her reputation more than anything else, and she wouldn't risk losing her sugary-sweet persona in front of the press and a long list of prestigious Bridges associates.

"What do you think of all this?" Lexi asked, gesturing to their surroundings.

"Pretty lame party if you ask me."

Lexi giggled and shook her head. "No, the medical wing."

"Ah. I'll probably still go to Grady," he said with a shrug.

Lexi crinkled her nose. Grady Memorial was not a well-liked hospital in Atlanta, known primarily for being in a bad part of town and being good at saving gunshot victims. She had been there most recently when her father had had a heart attack. She didn't really ever want to go back again.

"Only if you have a bullet wound. I'm pretty sure you'd die from anything else there."

"Right. Forgot about that," he said, shooting her a smile. "What do you think about it all?"

Lexi opened her mouth to tell him, but she didn't know what to say. On the surface, it was brilliant. A full-service medical facility would help put a more positive spin on the Bridges brand. It would make them look compassionate, like they were providing a benefit to the community. It added another layer to their motto, *Bridge the distance between you and your troubles*.

Yet, she had a terrible feeling about it. She was sure it had something to do with who was standing right before her eyes and a whole hell of a lot less to do with the actual medical wing.

Ramsey and Parker were standing side by side, facing the reporter. Both seemed relaxed and comfortable with what was going on. Lexi wasn't that far away, so she could pick out what they were saying if she concentrated. They were just doing some introductions, and she could tell the reporter was trying to keep them relaxed even though he didn't really need to. Ramsey was never uncomfortable, and Parker seemed at ease by his side.

"We should probably find something else to occupy your mind," Jack whispered.

"What?"

"You're staring."

"I'm his girlfriend," she said, breaking her attention and looking back up at Jack. "I'm allowed to stare."

"They're not together, Lexi."

Lexi's brow furrowed at Jack's words. "I know!"

"Just thought you needed the reminder."

"Well, I don't."

Jack touched her elbow softly when she turned away from him to stare at Ramsey again.

“Ramsey’s not stupid. He won’t fuck up, Lexi,” Jack said. “Trust me...he told me.”

Lexi’s mouth went dry. Instead of reacting, she closed off. She couldn’t hear that. It made her insane, like she literally wanted to hurt someone...primarily Bekah but just because she was a bitch. Lexi should like the fact that Ramsey had said he was never going to fuck up, but the audacity irritated her. He had already fucked up. He had fucking lied to her over and over and over again. He had built their relationship on a foundation of lies, and the worst one was currently standing at his side, giving an interview with him.

“This is a huge achievement for the two of you and at such a young age. What was the catalyst that triggered the decision to open a new hospital in the Atlanta area?” the reporter asked Ramsey and Parker.

Lexi listened from a distance.

“It’s something we’ve always talked about doing,” Ramsey said, “but after Parker graduated from medical school and started working as a surgeon, we knew that there would be no better time.”

Wait, wait, wait—Parker was the catalyst behind this endeavor? That was the story they were going with? Of course, in the back of her mind, Lexi knew that it was a better story to sell to the press. But the rest of her wanted to stomp right over there and give them the *real* story.

Lexi’s eyes narrowed as Ramsey placed his hand on the small of Parker’s back.

“She’s the mastermind behind the project. It’s all her.” Ramsey didn’t move his hand.

It was just for the press. It was just for the press. It was just for the press.

“Uh...maybe we should take a walk,” Jack said, grabbing her elbow.

“Did you fucking hear that?” she blurted out.

“Yeah. It might be best for you to walk off the steam blowing out of your ears right now,” he said.

“Fine,” she grumbled, still glaring at Ramsey as he easily chatted with the reporter.

She had stopped listening. It clearly wasn’t healthy for her to do so.

They turned together, Jack leading her farther away from Ramsey and Parker. He was right. She needed to get away from that. It was just a show, and really, it didn’t matter. *Just a dumb ceremony—that was all.*

“Lexi,” someone called as they veered away from the groundbreaking area.

John came into view, and she almost groaned. As far as she knew, he hadn’t met Jack yet. *This was going to be fun.*

“You aren’t leaving, are you?”

“No. I was just going to get some water,” she lied through her teeth.

Jack looked away and tried to hide a smile. *She must really suck at lying.* Well, after being out of practice for a couple of years now, that tended to happen. It was a good thing as far as she was concerned.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” John said, holding his hand out to Jack. “John Ward. I’m one of the leads on the medical wing project through Global.”

Jack took John’s hand in his and squeezed. “Jack Howard. I’m a senior accounting executive at Bridges.”

Worlds collided.

Lexi wanted to run as fast as she could until her lungs burned, her legs shook, her breathing came out in gasps, and she literally couldn’t carry herself any farther. That would be better than standing here in this moment.

They released hands, but something had shifted in John. She didn’t know what it was, but she was sure she wouldn’t like it.

“Come on, Jack. I really need that water,” she said, pushing him in the opposite direction.

“Is this the guy?” John asked before she could run off.

Jack’s features screwed up at the question, and Lexi wished she could just keep walking.

“What?” she managed.

“The one I don’t compare to?”

Lexi groaned. *Great. Her words were getting thrown back at her.*

Jack’s head snapped to the side to look at Lexi, but she couldn’t even meet his eyes.

“Huh. I thought he’d be a little...bigger,” John said, sizing Jack up.

“John, just cut it out.”

“Lex, what is he talking about?” Jack demanded.

“I could take him,” John said offhand.

He smiled at her with that insufferably arrogant look on his face, and she just waited for a fucking fight to break out.

Christ! Neither of these guys were even her boyfriend! Her boyfriend was currently with his ex-girlfriend. Perfect.

“Jack is married,” she told John, surprised that she managed to say it without wincing. “In fact, he’s married to a Bridges vice president. Jack and I are just friends, and *you’re* acting like an asshole.”

“Oh, wait,” Jack said, like something had clicked into place. “You’re Adam’s brother.”

“Adam is my younger brother.”

“He’s the dick you fucked when you went back to New York?” Jack asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

John actually laughed at that.

Great! She was a big fucking joke right now.

“That is none of your business. None of this is either of your business,” she said, smacking John for laughing and then smacking Jack just as hard. “Both of you can fuck off.”

Lexi stormed away. As if she wasn’t already angry enough with Ramsey, those two had to have a fucking dick-measuring contest right in front of her. *She couldn’t believe John had brought that stuff up about Jack right in front of him, and then Jack had laid out her dirty laundry where anyone could fucking see!*

Jack caught up to her easily. “Lex, Lex, slow down. Come on, I’m sorry,” he said, reaching out for her to stop her in place. “I was surprised, that’s all.”

She slowed to a walk, and Jack fell into step next to her. He didn’t say anything else, and she didn’t really want to know what he was thinking. She wanted to get the fucking water she had said she was going to get and then get back to Ramsey. *Maybe he would be done with Parker by then!* She almost growled in frustration at the thought. *What the hell had her world come to?* She knew that this groundbreaking ceremony was going to be a bad idea. Too many people in one place.

Lexi sauntered into the conference building and grabbed a water bottle out of the fridge. She took a long swig with a sigh. Jack was staring at her, and she didn’t even care at this point. Maybe she should have just refused attending. That would have been the smart thing even though Ramsey would have likely objected to that.

“Hey, what was he talking about back there?” Jack finally asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You told him that he doesn’t compare to me?” He looked surprised by the admission.

“Please just drop it. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Jack stood there silently for a minute. She wasn’t sure if he was pissed or just curious, but she didn’t care. *Ramsey was out there with Parker. John had brought up all that bullshit with Jack. And Jack...why the fuck was she even angry with him? For laying out her dirt in front of everyone? For even just being here when he was fucking married to Bekah?*

She shook her head and stared away from those blue eyes.

“Should I just leave?” he asked.

Lexi nodded, still looking away.

“You know,” he said, grasping her chin in his hand and forcing her to look at him, “just because you’re pissed at Ramsey doesn’t mean you have to shut me out.”

“I’m not shutting you out,” she grumbled.

“Liar.”

“Just stop it, Jack,” Lexi said, shaking him off. “What do you want me to say anyway?”

“I just want you to stop acting like you have to go through everything alone. And, Jesus, I don’t think one question should set you off.”

His blue eyes were heated, and she just wanted to punch him...or maybe...

Nope. It was just Jack. Breathe in. Breathe out.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“Do I need to call you a liar again?”

“You need to shut the fuck up.”

“I’m not the only one. You’re acting like an idiot when I’m trying to help you.”

“So, now, I’m an idiot?” Lexi asked.

“You are if you don’t calm down.”

Lexi swallowed and held her breath. She was angry and all riled up—not a good combination around Jack. He wouldn’t do anything about it, but damn, if she didn’t stop herself...she didn’t know if he would hold to that.

She was angry with Ramsey, not Jack. She didn’t need to take this out on him. It wasn’t fair to him. She had been taking out her frustrations on him for long enough.

As if he could sense her shift in mood, he chanced his luck. “Are you going to tell me what he was talking about or leave me wondering?”

“I broke things off with John last August after your...” She swallowed. *She could say it.* “After your wedding. He didn’t take kindly to it.”

“He seems like the type,” Jack said with a smug smirk.

She was going to smack it off his face if he didn’t keep it together.

“I told him that he reminded me of you but that he couldn’t compare...you know, with all of our history,” she ended softly.

Jack nodded. “Very few people can compare with our history...and maybe that’s a good thing.”

Lexi realized they were still standing close together, and she took a step back. She didn’t really want to breathe him in and fall back into that history. She wasn’t even sure how to interpret that last comment. *Was he glad because so few people had ever been this affected by someone else like this or glad that others didn’t have to go through so much bullshit? She certainly wasn’t going to ask him.*

“We should probably head back outside now that I have my water. I’d hate for people to come looking for us,” she whispered.

Irritation flashed in his eyes, but then it was gone, and he was ushering her out of the conference office. She didn’t even have a second to wonder what that was about because as they stepped outside, it was clear that people were already looking for them. She hoped no one got the wrong impression since, clearly, absolutely nothing even remotely sexual had happened between them. Even though Ramsey was supposedly becoming more and more comfortable with the fact that she had the beginning of this strange friendship with Jack, he still wouldn’t be okay with her wandering off with him. It made everyone look bad.

Ramsey caught her attention first. He looked like he wanted to stride over to her and steal her away from Jack—as if there were even a competition anymore. She tried to keep her face impassive. She was angry enough with him, and any confrontation could make her blow up in public—not a good idea. He had an image. His reputation was as important as Bekah’s at this point.

Lexi didn’t even say anything to Jack as she walked away and headed straight for Ramsey. Parker was still at his side, but she was talking to someone else. Her eyes flashed to Lexi as she walked closer, but then

Parker's gaze quickly darted away. Lexi was sure she would never figure out Parker. *What was she thinking behind those haunted eyes?*

Truthfully, it didn't matter.

As long as she stays out of the way.

"Hey, baby," Ramsey said with a smile that she knew he was faking for the press in the vicinity. "Where were you?"

His eyes asked, *What were you doing with Jack?*

"Getting some water." She held the bottle up.

"We're about finished here. Are you ready to head out?"

"I've been ready," she said through a smile of her own. She was sure he had read the edge to her own comment, *Before you were playing nice with Parker.*

"Great, I'll just be a minute," he said.

"I'll be right here."

She knew she was acting a bit crazy, but that tended to happen when her boyfriend of a year and a half told the entire world that the medical wing he was working on with his ex-girlfriend was all on her genius!

Ramsey returned a few minutes later as promised, and they managed to duck out of the groundbreaking ceremony before she could run into any other unpleasant surprises...like Bekah.



The ride back to their place was tense and silent. Lexi stared out the window, unseeing. Ramsey was gripping the steering wheel a little too tight. She knew she should say something, but she didn't.

They made it all the way up the stairs and closed the door before she burst open at the seams.

"Parker is the mastermind behind this whole project?" she shouted at him. "She's the reason you decided to do this? It's all her?" Her hands were flying as she spoke, and she couldn't keep her temper under control.

"What do you want me to tell the cameras, Lexi? Do you want me to tell them that I fucked everything up with my girlfriend, so I did this, trying to make it right by her?" he demanded.

"It would be a better fucking story than telling the fucking cameras that it was Parker who made you decide to do this! You want to know why

that would be a better story?” she asked, striding right up to him.

“Why, Lexi?” he asked, his green eyes narrowed and fiery.

“Because it would have been the *truth!*”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Are you fucking serious? Because it’s news to me that Parker was the reason for any of this!”

“Parker has been doing a lot of the work. I’ve been the Bridges name and have offered my two cents on the business side. She knows the medical side. It’s her baby.”

“Only because she lost the other one,” she said before she could stop herself.

Ramsey glared—actually glared at her. “Don’t talk about that,” he said calmly.

It was a scary calm, one that was bordering on madness. She had touched on the topic that he couldn’t possibly discuss with a level head, and she knew it. She was pushing him for no good reason, pushing just because she was angry and wanted the fight in that moment. She wasn’t even playing fair.

“I don’t like her. You said she would be gone if I wanted. You said that she didn’t have to be in our lives anymore. I don’t want her in our lives anymore,” she told him flatly.

“I said that before I signed the contract for the medical wing,” he said, some of the fire in his eyes leaving.

“Another broken promise,” Lexi said, shaking her head.

“Look, I *have* to work with her now, and I’m doing all of this shit for you. I can’t just push Parker away when we’re in the middle of getting this company off the ground. But it changes absolutely nothing in our relationship whatsoever.”

Lexi looked away. Sometimes, it felt like it changed a lot more than he would ever admit.

“And what about you?”

“What about me?” she snapped. Her temper clearly hadn’t run its course yet.

“I have to work with Parker, but you don’t have to be around Jack, and you still are. So, why are you still around him?”

“Yeah, I don’t work with Jack, which means I don’t have to be around him every fucking minute of every day. It means I don’t have to tell the

press that he's the reason for my next big project," she said, raising her voice as she spoke. "It means there is distance between us."

"Don't be hypocritical!"

"Hypocritical?" Lexi cried.

"Yes! Just because you're not around him all the time doesn't make it any better."

"Jack Howard is *not* my problem anymore. He is married to *your* sister and has been nothing but a good friend to me since that happened!"

"No one is that good of a friend when he stares at you like he does."

"Are you just trying to make me mad? Are you just trying to push me away?" she asked, walking away from him.

"Lexi, get your ass over here," he growled. "Right now."

"No," she said stubbornly.

Ramsey took two big strides to close the distance between them before crashing his mouth down on hers. She didn't want to enjoy this. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to slap him and tell him to get his shit together or she was out the door. Of course, she wasn't going to leave, not really. It was an irrational anger coursing through her from months of pent-up frustration about Parker being around Ramsey, months of wondering if something was going to happen, months of keeping her mouth closed.

Then, she hadn't been able to keep it closed any longer.

His hands were on her in an instant, yanking her dress over her head, unclasping her strapless bra, and grasping her breasts in his hands. Her hands went to his belt buckle. She wanted him out of these clothes. She didn't want him in anything that matched Parker ever again.

Once she was finished with his pants, she grabbed his tie and jerked his face back toward her. "Did y'all plan this?" she demanded.

"Plan what?"

"Matching. You matched."

Ramsey looked at her in shock, and it was enough to tell her that they hadn't planned it. *Fuck*. She thought that would make her feel better, but it didn't. It made her want to curse the universe for her bad luck.

"We need to get you out of this now," she said, going to work at the buttons of his shirt.

"No time," he grunted.

Ramsey pushed her toward the side of the couch and bent her at the waist. Her thong fell to the floor at his insistence. She heard the zipper of

his pants, and then they fell to the floor as well. He held her down, facing forward, before thrusting into her.

Lexi cried out. She was already heated from their conversation, but he wasn't being gentle. He was as angry as she was, and that made for a deadly combination. With one hand on her shoulder and one on her hip, Ramsey pulled back and slammed back into her over and over and over again. He had never been this rough with her before.

It had always been good, but this was...in a different ballpark.

She couldn't think of anything, except him pounding inside her, her pussy clenching all around him, and the anger building in her heart.

"I'm so fucking pissed at you," she growled.

"Good."

He didn't give up, even an inch, and she could feel her whole body giving in. She was so fucking pissed at him, but God, did she love this man.

"You're going to come for me."

"No, I'm not," she said even though she knew that she was so close to the brink she was going to explode any second.

"Yes, you are. And I'm coming with you," he said, reaching one hand down in front of her and stroking her clit with his finger as he continued to fuck her.

Her body started trembling. She couldn't hold out. And he didn't want her to.

The way she was feeling at that moment, she didn't want to either. She wanted to feel him thrust up inside her as they came together. She wanted to forget their argument and just live in the here and now—knowing that they might be angry, but it would be okay. They could move on from this.

She felt her legs give out as soon as the orgasm ripped through her body. Lexi collapsed onto the couch as Ramsey let go of her shoulder and released deep into her. His weight shifted as he grabbed on to the couch for support.

As she lay there, panting, she looked up at him and managed to get out, "I love you, Ramsey."

He smiled a lazy, heartfelt smile down at her. "I love you, too."



Present

“You what?” Lexi shrieked through the phone.

“Chica, chill the fuck out,” Chyna said.

“My party is this afternoon. What do you mean you have a photo shoot in New York?”

“It can’t be helped. Fashion week is less than a month away.”

“I don’t care about fashion week, Chyna. It’s your best friend’s engagement party.”

“I know,” she whined. “I tried to explain that to them, but they don’t really care. Plus, we already celebrated when we found out. It’s not the end of the world. I’ll fly you up here to go shopping for it. Oh! Better yet, let me talk to the designer about your dress. We could get it custom-made.”

Lexi shook her head. “You’re insane. Do you know how much a custom dress costs?”

She could almost see Chyna staring blankly. Money wasn’t an object for her. But Ramsey wouldn’t object to whatever Lexi wanted anyway. That still didn’t mean she wanted to spend ten or twenty grand on a wedding dress.

“Don’t worry so much. You’re going to come up for fashion week, right?” Chyna asked, deftly changing the subject.

“I haven’t talked to Ramsey about it.”

“Forget the old ball and chain, and come visit me.”

Lexi rolled her eyes. “Real nice of you to say...since you aren’t on your way here for my engagement party.”

“Anyway, what’s really going on? You’ve been quiet lately—besides you bitching at me about the party,” Chyna said.

“We still talk every day,” Lexi told her.

“I mean, almost every day. But you’ve been all scatterbrained, like something happened and you didn’t tell me. Oh, like that time you slept

with Adam's brother. Oh, or like any time with Jack. Does this have to do with a boy?" Chyna asked.

Lexi glanced around the apartment. Ramsey wasn't anywhere in sight. She knew that he was busy with preparations for the party tonight. The man knew how to throw a party, that was for sure. She was glad that the Sunday night escapades were over, but he was pumped to throw something together for their engagement. She hoped that it didn't turn out like the Sunday parties she had frequented when they had first started dating. The guest list certainly boasted enough of his friends to warrant it... but she didn't think it would get like that.

Or at least, she hoped not.

Deciding that Ramsey wasn't about to walk in on her at any minute, Lexi sighed.

"This should be good," Chyna said with a giggle.

"Are you drunk?"

"Not yet."

"Then, why do you take such perverse pleasure in my pain?"

"Because you torture yourself, chica. Dish the goods."

Lexi grumbled under her breath about the directness of her best friend before speaking. "I told Jack that I got engaged."

"Right. I assumed so. You've been engaged for, like, two months now. I figured everyone knew. Did he...flip out?"

Lexi shook her head even though she knew Chyna couldn't see. "Yes and no. He just heard about the temporary hearing results. Bekah got everything she wanted. I think she's going to try to ruin him in court."

"Alexa...seriously, not your problem," Chyna said softly.

"I know, I know. I'm not saying it is. I went there for, like, moral support when he was done. I barely got to talk to him about it because he had to meet with his attorney right after. As I was turning to go, he saw the engagement ring."

"Eesh," Chyna said. "Not the best way for him to find out. Why didn't you just...tell him?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully.

There had never been a right time. First, she had found out about the divorce, and then a series of unfortunate events had spiraled into existence. She just hadn't been able to tell him. Maybe she had known all along on

some level that it would hurt him, and she didn't want to inflict any more pain on him than he was already receiving.

"Psh, chica, you know."

"I don't," she denied.

"I know. You're just acting dumb if you're saying that you didn't."

"Why don't you tell me then, Chyna?"

Chyna tsked Lexi through the line. "All right, play dumb."

"Chyna..."

"Besides the glaringly obvious fact that you probably didn't want your ex...something or other to know that you were engaged, you also clearly didn't want to hurt him because you two are all buddy-buddy now. Since you're buddy-buddy, that means you can never, ever let go of your relationship. I know you're about to jump down my throat and tell me it's changed—so help me God," Chyna said, staving off Lexi's imminent protests. "All I'm going to say is that Jack is probably in a lot of pain because of his divorce, and you didn't want to make it worse. Whether or not I think he might deserve to be the one hurting this time...is beside the point."

"You're a real charmer, C," Lexi said.

Though, Chyna was right. She was always right about these kinds of things—as irritating as it all was.

"Whatever, chica. The man needs a taste of his own medicine now and again."

"He's going through enough."

"Listen to yourself. Same old Lexi," Chyna said under her breath. "Stop defending him."

"I'm not defending what he did in the past. I'm seeing him for the person he is now. Two years of marriage changed him, and I'll be the first to admit it."

"If it changed him so much, then why didn't you tell him you got engaged?" Chyna asked.

"Okay, Jesus, I get your point. You just didn't see him that day when he was telling me about the divorce papers or after he left the courtroom."

"I'm not susceptible to those blue eyes."

"Big words, C," Lexi said with a laugh.

"Bitch."

“Anyway, I know you need a lot less than a pair of blue eyes,” Lexi said.

“Not anymore.”

“What? You can change, and no one else can?” Lexi asked. She knew playing the hypocrite card was low, but it made people angry enough to see a point.

Chyna was silent for a minute. Lexi assumed she was brooding over there while trying to find a way out of the hole she had dug herself into.

“Fine. Whatever. What did he actually say when you told him?”

“A lot of stuff,” Lexi said, not wanting to remember. It still made her heart constrict. “He asked me if I was happy, and I told him I was. Then, he said that all he had ever wanted was for me to be happy, so I should leave.”

“Whoa. Did you leave?”

“Yeah.”

“That explains why you’ve been mopey then.”

“I haven’t been mopey. God!”

Chyna scoffed. “You’ve been annoying. You should have just told me. Now, get your ass up here for fashion week. I have to head out. Tell Ramsey I said hello.”

“I will, Chyna, but I still don’t know about fashion week.”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’ll see you then, chica. Bye!”

Lexi set her phone down with a sigh. Telling Chyna all about the stuff with Jack was a relief. She had been holding it back, trying to pretend like none of it had happened...trying to forget the horror on his face when he had seen the ring.

They hadn’t talked much since then. He was preparing with his attorney to attempt to mediate the divorce. It wasn’t required in Georgia courts, but it was strongly recommended that Jack try to negotiate outside of court. It saved on expenses for everyone, and it spared the judge’s time... and patience.

Lexi doubted it would be settled through mediation. Jack wasn’t going to accept Bekah’s accusation that he had cheated on her while they had been married. Just because he’d had a past history of bad behavior didn’t necessarily mean that it had happened presently. And since he was going to fight her on that to the grave, they would likely end up in court as soon as Bekah had all of her evidence and a date was set.

Lexi shook her head softly and then tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. As Chyna had said, none of that was her problem, and she really was trying to stay out of it. Ramsey had actually agreed not to invite Bekah to the party tonight, which meant it *should* be blissfully quiet.

A knock at the door jolted Lexi. She wasn't expecting anyone. She strode forward just as Ramsey came barreling down the stairs.

"Door?" she asked as he rounded the corner.

"Yeah, I can get it."

Lexi was already there, so she yanked open the door. Standing before her was an incredibly tall, buxom blonde with bright red lipstick and a tight black bodysuit.

"Lola!" Lexi said with a start. "I didn't know we were expecting you."

"Hello, darling. It's so good to see you," Lola said, bending forward and planting a red kiss on Lexi's cheek.

"Lola, you're early," Ramsey said. He didn't sound displeased.

"You forget how long setup takes, love. Two years out of the business, and already, you forget," she said with a light reprimand. She walked over and squeezed Ramsey's bicep. "Are you still working out? You look thin."

"Two insults in one sentence, and I thought you might be different after two years of running the company alone."

Lola waved her hand with her long red-lacquered nails in the air. "I'm a bitch. It comes with the territory."

"Wait—setup?" Lexi asked, tilting her head. "I thought we were having the engagement party at a restaurant."

Ramsey sheepishly looked at her. "Last-minute change. I was on the phone with Lola earlier, and she insisted it be at the club, but I knew you wouldn't be into that. So, she wouldn't take no for an answer, and we thought we would bring the party here. Keep it more low-key than typical parties, but bring it back. I mean, it was our first kiss."

Lexi didn't know what to say. On one hand, she didn't mind him moving the location to their apartment, but she had been expecting to go out and have a good time. Fun would sure be had if they stayed here, but it was different.

"What about everyone else? The invitations already went out weeks ago," she reminded him.

“I got it all taken care of.”

“Oh.”

“You’re not happy,” Ramsey said softly.

Lola sighed. “I will have people start bringing things in. If you choose to reschedule again, please let me know before we carry in the speakers. They’re heavy.”

She eyed Lexi dramatically before exiting.

“I just...I don’t mind that we’re having it here, but it’s this...” She sighed. *How many times had they had this conversation?* “When were you going to tell me?”

“I had planned on it before Lola got here. She was early,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

Lexi reminded herself that he was doing this for her, trying to make this the best it could be for her. She was not going to blow up at him. *She was definitely not going to blow up at him.* The last thing she wanted was an argument right before their engagement party.

“But...why didn’t you even ask me? It’s my engagement, too, you know?” she said, aiming for a level voice.

When Ramsey winced, she knew that she hadn’t achieved it.

“I know you hate surprises, so I was going to break it to you, but in a surprise kind of way...not by Lola showing up at our front step with massive speakers and too much lipstick,” he said.

“Okay.”

There wasn’t anything else to say. It was too late to change it back to the restaurant they had booked together weeks ago. And it wouldn’t do any good to be angry with Ramsey for trying once again to make her happy.

“Lexi...”

“I’m going to go get ready. Tell Lola to bring the speakers in,” she said, turning to walk up the stairs.

“Hey,” he said, catching her and drawing her into him. “I love you. I thought you would like this.”

Lexi smiled faintly. “I do like this. It’s thoughtful. It’ll be nice to have everyone at the house.”

“But you’re not happy.”

“I’m fine.”

“Fine means you’re pissed,” Ramsey observed.

“I’m...frustrated. It’s okay. It’ll pass. I should just go get ready,” she said.

Ramsey didn’t let go of her though. He pulled her tight to him and kissed her on the mouth softly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered against his lips.

“What are you wearing tonight?” he asked.

“It’s a surprise.” She gave him a devilish smirk before breaking out of his embrace and rushing up the stairs.

At least upstairs, away from his watchful eye, she could allow herself to be angry and frustrated, and she would be able to punch something. She didn’t think it was that hard to consult with her on things. *Wasn’t the wedding supposed to be the girl’s thing?* Not that she was a girlie-girl or anything. Not that she hadn’t freaked out at the meeting with the wedding planner. Not that Ramsey couldn’t see through her bravado from a mile off. Still, even if she wasn’t doing all the work or didn’t know what was needed to do all the work for the wedding, that didn’t mean she couldn’t be clued in.

Lexi plopped back onto the bed and closed her eyes. She really needed to start getting ready, but all she could think about was Lola sauntering into the apartment and Lexi feeling like an idiot for not knowing what was going on...again. She couldn’t have that talk another time about wanting to know everything that was going on. She had lost count on how many times it had already happened.

Ramsey still told her what he thought was important. He wasn’t hiding *big* secrets as far as she knew, but sometimes, even the smallest, teeny, tiniest omission felt massive. It gave her a headache.



Two hours later, guests began arriving.

Lexi was pretty frantic at this point. Her anger had turned into exhaustion, and she had accidentally fallen asleep on the bed.

Planning this event only a week and a half before Christmas really wasn’t the best idea. She had thankfully closed out the Bryant case, but her boss had promptly assigned her a new doozy to work on. Plus, she had Christmas shopping to get done and meetings with the wedding planner to

finalize their fucking color palettes and shit. On top of all of that, Jack was getting divorced.

But she couldn't think about everything else as she put the finishing touches on her makeup. She had chosen soft colors to accent her naturally tan skin and dark hair. Her eyes were lined in black with thick mascara, and she added some gold shimmer powder to her eyelids with a faint touch of lip gloss to her lips. Her dark hair was down, nearly to her waist, in soft curls. Her bangs were swept off to the side, and when she turned, they fell down into her eyes seductively.

The dress she had chosen was virginal white, the most ironic color in her closet. Lexi practically never wore white. She thought she stood out more in deep purples and luscious reds and even bombshell blacks. But well...she figured if there was ever a year for her to wear white, it was this year.

The body-hugging material clung to her in all the right places, stopping at the tops of her thighs. The straps were thick as they wound over her shoulders and into an X, low across her back before tying off into a bow. While the neckline wasn't as revealing as a lot of her outfits, it still warranted a double take in the sweetheart style. She paired it with a string of pearls and a pair of blue heels.

She couldn't wait for everyone to see how she looked. She wished Chyna were here for it...but Lexi wouldn't dwell on it. She just needed to hurry her ass up, so she could greet her guests.

Lexi took a deep breath and then took the stairs to the first floor. When she hit the landing, she stared in shock at her apartment. They hadn't had a party at their house in the two years that they had lived together—not since Ramsey had given up the clubs.

It felt like a lifetime ago that this had been her life. She hadn't realized how much would change after she got out of law school. Now, she had a full-time job, and Ramsey had the medical wing. She came home exhausted, and she only had more work to do. At least, she still had Chyna to force her to come visit and party, reminding her that she was only twenty-seven.

That was what made the transformation of their apartment all the more interesting. It had been two years, yet the place still looked the same—the lights, the DJ, the bar. And at the same time, it was clear that Ramsey had instructed them to change it up. It was more low-key. Guests could

actually carry on a conversation. There wasn't an insanely large group of people she had never seen before grinding in their living room. It was mostly Ramsey's friends from work, the club, school, but intermixed were a few of her friends who had already shown up.

She knew that Ramsey was just trying to make her happy. And if he had suggested having the party at their place earlier, then maybe she wouldn't be so frustrated.

"Honey, you look way too fuckable to be thinking that hard," Brandon said as he slid his arm around her waist and drew her in for a hug.

"Pookie! It's so good to see you." Lexi pulled back to smack him on the shoulder. "I don't look fuckable!"

"Lexi, Lexi, Lexi..." Brandon said, shaking his head. "You're just testing my patience. You think I won't throw you over my shoulder and prove my point?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I think! Ramsey would follow you upstairs, and we both know how that ends."

"Ah...I suppose I am still recovering from when I decided to sleep with Parker."

Lexi wouldn't cringe. All of the men in her life were connected in one way or another. Jack was married, erm...currently divorcing Ramsey's sister. John worked with Ramsey on the Bridges medical wing. Brandon had dated Ramsey's ex-girlfriend. At least, there were a few degrees of separation between Jack and John, but Christ...she didn't believe in coincidence anymore.

"Brandon, you're touching my girl," Ramsey observed as he strode toward them.

Brandon made no move to let her go. Lexi just shook her head. Ramsey knew by now that Brandon stood no chance whatsoever with her, but he still didn't like Brandon. And he probably never would.

She stepped out of Brandon's embrace and took a step toward her fiancé. "You didn't change," she murmured.

He still looked delicious in a pair of dark jeans and a black sweater. "When would I have had the time? You were upstairs the whole time."

"Oh, right. I accidentally fell asleep."

He laughed. "And here I thought, you were unhappy with me."

She had been, but he looked visibly relieved that she hadn't been upstairs, ignoring him this whole time. She didn't want to break him out of a good mood even if she was still unsatisfied with how the day had progressed.

"Don't think you're off the hook," she chastised lightly.

He smiled down at her with a knowing look. "I never am with you."

Shit! She knew it was supposed to be sexual, but still, she felt bad.

She had always been a forgive-and-forget kind of person, but since the blowup at Jack's wedding, she had been holding on to her past tighter and tighter. Ramsey seemed to always be at the center of that. And his reminder of that, even if it was accidental, didn't help matters.

And then, the party started.

Lexi was swept around the room, introduced to an array of people from Ramsey's life. She smiled and laughed and joked, and somewhere in there, she breathed. She knew that an engagement party was supposed to be more low-key than the wedding itself, but it still scared her. This felt anything but low-key, and maybe that was because Chyna wasn't here, and a lot of her friends from college and law school lived out of town. She couldn't expect them to come into town twice.

Ramsey's old roommates, Jason and Brad, were making jabs at him, and Lexi was deep in conversation with her old gymnastics captain, Krista, who lived in the metro-Atlanta area. She was pregnant with twins and already showing. It was crazy to see the small athletic woman who had barely any fat on her body to have a little baby bump. Lexi had thought it strange when Krista's hair had been all one color, and now, she was having kids! At least, her hair was red with blonde underneath it now.

"I just can't believe you're marrying Ramsey Bridges," Krista said, staring down at Lexi's ring again.

Lexi laughed. "Yeah."

"I mean, I seriously always thought that you and Jack..." Krista trailed off, glancing up to make sure Ramsey wasn't looking over here. "And you mean that you and Jack are literally just friends?"

Lexi always forgot that Krista and Jack had been friends in college and that Krista was the person Jack had gone to when he had gotten Lexi on the gymnastics team after she had stopped talking to him.

"Just friends," Lexi confirmed.

“Crazy. I mean, I guess no one expected me to end up with my college boyfriend. If I had, then I never would have met Matt, who I love something hard.”

“Exactly,” Lexi said, her gaze shifting to Ramsey.

Then, the front door opened.

Lexi wasn’t sure why she even noticed it over the noise of the party and the DJ playing party music, but it drew her attention. She felt like she was watching *Gone with the Wind* when Scarlett walked into the party wearing the iconic red dress after having been caught with Ashley. Her eyes landed on Parker at the front door, and Lexi held her breath. *Of course Ramsey would invite her. They were business partners, but still...*

Parker was dressed in a long-sleeved, cowl-necked sweater dress in a deep burgundy color and black boots. Her hair was piled high on her head, like she had been in a rush. *Who was Lexi kidding?* Parker was always in a rush. She was wringing her hands together as she sought out Ramsey in the crowd. Lexi knew that was what Parker was doing before they even locked eyes across the room.

“Who’s that?” Krista asked. “She kind of looks like you.”

Lexi breathed out through her nose. *Of course she did.* “That’s Parker. She runs the medical wing with Ramsey,” Lexi explained.

“Weird. You do know she looks like you, right?”

“Yes,” Lexi said as she watched Parker veer through the crowd right toward Ramsey. “I know.”

“Strange coincidence.”

Coincidence. Ha!

“Something like that,” Lexi said softly.

“Fuck, I would kill for a drink right now,” Krista said, eyeing the bar sadly. “And my husband won’t stop drinking. If I have to drive home, I might kill him before these babies pop out.”

“You will not,” Lexi said, laughing.

“I love him, but I want to kill him daily. You’ll understand when you get married,” Krista said, patting her shoulder.

Lexi glanced over at Ramsey and cocked her head to the side. “I’m pretty sure I already get it.”

“Lexi,” Ramsey said, motioning her over.

She took a deep breath and walked toward them. “Hey, Parker.”

“Hey,” she said shyly. “I, uh...brought you this.” She shoved a bottle of wine and a flat rectangular box into Lexi’s hand.

“Oh,” Lexi said, embarrassed. “Thank you.”

She hadn’t expected gifts. The engagement party Ramsey’s parents were planning was where she anticipated small gifts but not at the party they were throwing for their friends.

“It’s not much. I wasn’t sure what y’all wanted since you aren’t registered yet, but I kind of felt like I should bring something,” Parker said softly.

“Well, wow, um...thanks. We didn’t get any other presents.”

Parker’s cheeks turned bright pink. “Oh...really? I thought...isn’t that etiquette?”

Lexi shrugged.

Ramsey jumped in. “It is. Thank you,” he said with a smile, taking the wine out of Lexi’s hand.

“You can open it now, if you want. It’s not much, but I thought you could...I don’t know. It’s up to you,” Parker said.

“Go ahead, Lexi,” Ramsey said encouragingly.

“All right,” she said.

She untied the silver ribbon, tore back the white and silver paper, and popped the lid on the box. Inside was a wedding planner with individual tabs for each thing she would need to accomplish, and the front read, *Lexi and Ramsey’s Wedding*, in a swirly silver font.

Lexi smiled up at Parker, feeling completely genuine about it for the first time. The planner was truly a nice gift. “Thank you,” Lexi said graciously.

“I know that you hired Sherri, but I thought it’s never a bad idea to have your own planner. I didn’t know if you already had one.”

“I don’t. This will be a big help.”

“Well...well, good.”

They both stood there awkwardly for a moment, the knowledge of how close Parker had come to being in Lexi’s shoes weighing them down.

Ramsey shifted from one foot to the other. “I think I’ll go put this away,” he said, hefting up the bottle of wine.

The two girls watched him walk away, and silence fell between them like a brick wall. *What did she have to say to Parker that Parker didn’t already know?* It wasn’t that Parker was an inherently bad person. Lexi just

couldn't be around her without seeing Ramsey all over her. The man he had been, the things he had sacrificed, the desperation had shown to make things right—it made her heart ache.

“So, um...what do you think about the divorce?” Parker asked.

Oh, for fuck's sake!

“About Bekah and Jack?”

“Yeah...it's kind of weird, right?”

Lexi eyed her suspiciously. “Why do you think so?”

“I just know that, growing up, Bekah was in love with weddings, and she always said that once she got married, that was it. I'm surprised to see her breaking it off so soon just because he cheated on her. I mean...he's done that before,” Parker said, biting her lip and looking away.

“How do you know that he cheated on her?” Lexi asked.

She filed away the information about Bekah. It made her want to gag, and she would look at it another time when she could process.

“Oh...well, I don't know. I'm just going off what she said.”

“He didn't do it,” Lexi said.

She wasn't sure why she had to defend him in that moment. For a while, she herself had been debating whether or not it was the truth, but with the words tumbling out of Parker's mouth, Lexi just couldn't let her think that about Jack. He hadn't done anything with Lexi when he'd had chances...so she highly doubted he had with anyone else. She hoped she was right.

“Well...if he didn't, then it's even stranger,” Parker admitted.

“She hasn't told you why?” Lexi asked, arching an eyebrow.

Parker shrugged. “I know a lot of people don't like Bekah, but she's not all bad.”

“You mean, her heart is black. It's not missing?”

Parker actually cracked up laughing at that. When she did, Lexi could almost see the girl who Ramsey used to love. It was a strange feeling in that moment. She had seen Parker laugh before. It was like her guard was down for a split second. She didn't look so tired, overworked, and disheveled.

“Bekah and I aren't as close as we once were, but I don't think she would divorce Jack if he hadn't actually done something. So, if he didn't cheat on her, then what did he do?”

Then, what did he do? That was a good question. Lexi had a few theories herself about that situation, but she wasn't sure if Parker was the

best person to try them out on.

“I don’t know,” Lexi answered with a shrug.

Parker looked off in the other direction, like she was thinking about something else, when Brandon snuck up behind Parker and grabbed her around the middle.

“Hey, you!” he cried.

Parker jumped and turned around in surprise. Her smile dropped marginally when she saw who it was, but then she recovered and smiled slightly up at him again. “Hey, Brandon.”

“Oh, aren’t you just excited to see me?” he said dryly.

“It’s good to see you.”

Brandon glanced at Lexi and gave her a look that said, *She’s fucking lying*. “What were y’all lovely ladies just discussing anyway?”

“Bekah and Jack’s divorce,” Parker told him.

“Ah...the Bitch,” he said, nodding.

“We were just discussing what we thought the real reason was for Bekah divorcing Jack,” Lexi said, smirking at his comment.

“Lexi doesn’t think that Jack cheated,” Parker said.

“Because Jack would never do anything wrong,” he said sarcastically.

“He didn’t cheat on her,” Lexi repeated.

“So, what’s your theory then, honey?” Brandon crooned.

Her theory? Eesh. It was probably not the best time for any of that, but they were both staring at her now.

“Personally, I think Bekah put in all the effort in the beginning while they were dating. She saw it as a competition. She saw it as just another way to win. She did everything...and I mean, everything to keep Jack, even when it was pretty clear that no one else knew why. Then, they got married, and she won,” Lexi said softly. “So, she had nothing left to fight for. Jack started putting in the effort to make the marriage work...to salvage the heap of shit that they walked into. She had nothing left to put effort into though.”

Parker and Brandon stared back at her in surprise. Neither of them spoke.

“The game was over.”



August **One Year and Two Months Earlier**

Chyna latched on to Lexi's arm as she stumbled forward. "You will not believe the things Adam can do with his tongue."

"I don't have any desire to know what he can do, Chyna," Lexi grumbled.

"No, seriously, Alexa." Chyna giggled as they walked forward out of the restaurant.

"Please spare me the details of your love life."

"I never had to spare you the details before. You're getting boring now that you have a job," Chyna complained.

"Boring? Are you kidding me right now?"

"I can't help it if your job and boy toy are turning you all domesticated. When you're with me, chica, you get raunchy details, and we're going to party like you never left. Have to make up for the lost time," Chyna said just as her driver opened the door to her town car.

They both stepped into the onyx car, and he closed the door.

"So, we're supposed to be meeting Adam at the usual spot. He's already on his way," Chyna informed her.

At the moment, it seemed she had forgotten about the story she was telling. Lexi was happy to allow her to forget. She leaned her head back against the black leather interior and sighed. It was so nice to be back in New York. She knew so many people who liked the city, but they needed to be far enough away in the suburbs, in the country, out in the fucking cornfields to feel like they could breathe. But Lexi felt the exact opposite. It was like the three years that she had lived here had been instilled into her very existence. Atlanta was a big city, but it had a different energy than New York. And through the smog, the traffic, the noise, the smoke, and the

waste—she felt like she could breathe. Every time she visited, it felt more like coming home than it did when she went back down South.

Chyna's driver pulled up in front of the club they always frequented, and they glided out. A mile-long line was already wrapped around the building, and Lexi was reminded of the first night when she had met Chyna. Lexi had been one of those girls waiting to enter the club, and Chyna had yanked her out of line after Lexi had bitched her out. Lexi had been sure Chyna had heard it a million times before, but it had been different somehow. And now, they were best friends and had been for four years.

The bouncer recognized Chyna in an instant, and he swished back the rope to let her in. Lexi heard the venomous threats sent their way as both girls squeezed through the door and into the crowded nightclub. They took the stairs to the VIP lounge on the top floor where Chyna winked at the bouncer as he smacked her ass to let her through. Lexi only shook her head. *Chyna would always be Chyna.*

Chyna pointed out Adam across the room, and they veered toward him. As they approached, they saw another body plant two drinks down before turning to look at the girls. A smirk crossed his face, and Lexi could see those hazel eyes staring straight through her in that moment. He was too damn attractive for his own good.

“What is he doing here?” Chyna asked, crinkling her nose.

“I don't know. Adam probably invited him.”

“You didn't?”

“I don't talk to him,” Lexi told her.

Except when she had to talk to him, when he was helping with the medical wing. She saw him at least once a week, but it wasn't the same. He knew way too much about her life, and she had no clue who was filling him in.

“Must have been Adam then,” Chyna grumbled. “If he fucks with my buzz, I will end him.”

Lexi laughed and continued behind Chyna toward Adam and John. Chyna rushed right over to Adam, who promptly stood and wrapped her up in his arms. Lexi smiled at her friend. She was so happy for them. It was nice to see Chyna in some sort of a normal relationship. They had been going steady for over a year and a half, excluding their short time apart. Lexi knew a bit too much about what had happened when Chyna had been

in Milan to completely discount that time, but neither of the girls tended not to bring that up.

“Hey, babe,” John said, standing and offering Lexi a seat.

“Hey,” Lexi said softly.

“Vodka cranberry, right?” John said, shifting past her.

His hand brushed against her arm as he passed, and she shivered.

“Yeah. How did you know?”

He just smirked at her once more. “Chyna, dirty martini?”

Chyna glared at him. “Go fuck yourself.”

“I’m not really into that.”

“I bet your hand gets a pretty good workout,” she grumbled.

Adam tapped her lightly on the arm and whispered in her ear.

John just shook his head. Lexi could read all the thoughts swirling through his mind. She remembered what had gone down between John and Chyna so long ago. Chyna had a hard time letting go of grudges. It was clear the grudge with John was still perfectly intact.

“Dirty martini, it is,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” He reached out and squeezed Lexi’s hand, his thumb running along her palm, before he walked away.

“I wouldn’t let him touch you, Alexa. Don’t know what you might catch,” Chyna said, glaring after him.

“Chyna, back off. Jesus!” Adam said, pushing her into a seat. “He’s still my brother.”

“And he’s still disgusting. Why did you invite him here tonight?”

“I was hoping you would be able to grow up for one night,” he shot back.

Chyna shrugged. “I guess not.”

Adam shook his head and took a seat next to her. “You’re insufferable. It’s a good thing I really fucking love you.”

“You mean that I really fucking love you,” she shot back, almost as a challenge.

“If you guys start making out, I’m leaving,” Lexi said, plopping down next to Chyna.

Chyna shrugged. “Where’s your boy toy tonight anyway?”

“I already told you that he had to work.”

The new medical wing was set to open in just two months’ time, and Ramsey was working around the clock. Considering that fact, Lexi was a

little surprised that John was here at all. Lately, he had been in Atlanta nearly as often or maybe even more than he had been in New York.

“That blows. It would have been nice to sit here and watch Ramsey beat John for eye-fucking you when we walked in,” Chyna said.

“He was *not* eye-fucking me!”

Chyna rolled her eyes. “Whatever, chica.”

“Chyna, your phone is ringing,” Adam said, holding up the small clutch in his hand.

“Ugh! Who is calling me at this hour?” she demanded. She fished out the small phone and stared down at the number. “That’s strange.”

“What?” Lexi asked.

“It’s international.”

“Is your mom abroad or something?”

“My mother doesn’t call me,” Chyna said, staring down at the number curiously.

“Just answer it,” Adam told her.

Chyna shrugged and pressed the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

All of the color drained out of her face in the split second it took for the person on the other end of the phone to respond. Lexi had never seen Chyna look so mortified in her life. There might have been a twinge of green to her face in that moment.

“What the fuck do you want?” she demanded, her voice like ice.

Lexi and Adam both stared at her very carefully. Adam rested his hand on her thigh. Neither of them knew what was happening on the other end of that call.

“Are you fucking serious right now? It’s been a year! A motherfucking year! And you have the audacity to call me after what you fucking did to me!” she nearly screamed into the line. Chyna stood up swiftly and started yelling louder, “You fucking blacklisted me, Marco! I haven’t had a goddamn modeling job in a year!”

Lexi’s and Adam’s eyebrows rose in equal proportion. *Marco*. Now that was a name Lexi had not heard in a long time. He was the illustrious fashion designer and photographer that Chyna had worked for and become lovers with during last summer when she had been in Milan. He had made her a supermodel and had taken it all away when she had left him high and dry, taking the million-dollar dress she had worn at her spotlight gala with

her. Their falling-out had shaken Chyna's world after he had blacklisted her from the modeling world for theft.

"No," Chyna said icily. "You got the dress. I got the boxes of goodies you shipped me. I got everything! The answer is *fuck no*."

Chyna had called Lexi one day last fall, crying her eyes out over a box from Marco that had shown up at her house. Apparently, it had every article of clothing she had ever worn at a shoot for him, every sex tape, all of the rolls of pictures, and then everything she had left in Milan. The only thing missing had been the million-dollar dress.

Two weeks later, a giant desk had shown up in her apartment. Chyna had thought that Frederick had imported it without her knowledge, but then she had realized that, in fact, it was from Milan. It was a desk from the dressing room in the opera house where she had been the star of a gala. Lexi didn't want to know how much that had cost. The guy was fucking crazy.

Lexi hadn't really wanted to know the next part, but a nude picture of Chyna had shown up at her doorstep every Friday for three months. But as far as Lexi knew, Chyna had never actually spoken with Marco. Then, in March, everything had just stopped, and Chyna hadn't heard from him again...until now.

"I don't give a shit about fashion week. I don't give a shit about your fucking company. *I* left you, remember? And then, you fucked me over. Even Corsa, who had already offered me a job, rescinded her offer...so fuck you, Marco. Go fuck with someone else's life. It looks like Ravenna is enjoying it," Chyna said, throwing out the name of the girl that Marco had replaced her with.

There was silence for another minute.

"No. I'm done with this conversation. I don't care if you say you'll lift the blacklist, you motherfucker. I will never work for you again—not at fashion week, not in Milan, not anywhere. Get it through your head, and stop acting so desperate," she growled out.

Then, she pressed the End button and tossed the phone back on the table. She was still standing...and she was shaking. Lexi didn't know if she was shaking from rage or embarrassment or sadness because she'd had to give up her career a second time over the same man.

"Chyna," Lexi said softly, reaching out to try to comfort her friend.

“What’s going on?” John asked, appearing at that moment with a wary expression on his face and the girls’ drinks in his hands.

“That motherfucker messed with my buzz,” she growled. “Gimme.”

She reached her hand out for the dirty martini in John’s hand, and he promptly offered up.

“I’m going to need like ten more of these. ’Kay, thanks.”

“Chyna,” Adam said gingerly, standing next to her.

Chyna had already started downing her drink.

“What was that all about?”

He plucked the drink out of her hand, and she glared at him.

Lexi was pretty sure they both knew what that had been about. Chyna had made it pretty clear while shouting back at Marco. Luckily, the club was packed, and the VIP lounge was equally as crowded. Only a few people had stared over at them while Chyna had berated Marco for calling her.

“Run along for another drink,” Chyna said, shooing John.

He stared defiantly back at her, like there was no way he was going to do her bidding.

“Chyna, talk to me,” Adam said. He rubbed his hand along the small of her back and kissed her shoulder lightly.

It must be rough, dating someone like Chyna—explosive, a little too stubborn, a lot too strong-willed with the tendency to drink, exaggerate, and be dramatic.

“Marco asked me to be the *star* of his fashion week show. He’s coming to the States to oversee his Fifth Avenue boutique and begin production for the new line.”

“Why now?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I was too busy screaming at him.”

“What does he gain from giving you a job and taking you off the blacklist a year later? It doesn’t seem to make sense,” Adam said.

Oh no! Lexi saw where this was going. She was pretty sure Adam already knew the answer to that question, but maybe having Chyna admit it and getting it out in the open would help.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Chyna spat. She turned her head away from Adam and seemed to be staring off over John’s shoulder. “He wants me back. I’m the one who got away.”

“Well, he can’t have you,” Adam said. He grabbed her around the middle and pressed her against his chest. “You’re mine. I don’t care who the

hell this guy is.”

“He’s actually a pretty nice guy. And he drives a Bugatti,” John said, placing Lexi’s drink down in front of her.

Then, he took the seat next to Lexi. She was determined not to be fazed by his nearness.

“And how do you know him?” Lexi asked.

“I brought his clothing company to the States from Italy. He’s a Global customer,” John informed her.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Chyna said, shaking her head.

Lexi saw that Chyna had known that, and she wondered if it had something else to do with why Chyna disliked John.

“Well, really, none of that matters,” Adam said. “It’s not like Chyna is going to be working for him anymore. It’s not worth it.”

“No, it’s not,” Chyna said wistfully.

Lexi knew how hard it had been for Chyna to give up the one thing she been pretty amazing at, and had also really, really enjoyed.

“Whatever. Maybe we should just get out of here,” Chyna suggested.

“Where do you want to go?” Adam asked.

“We should go back to my place. I’m sure we could get our own party together.”

Adam shook his head. “Why don’t we just take a walk? Central Park?”

“At night?” she asked, scrunching up her nose.

“We’ll stay in well-lit areas. It doesn’t close until one.”

Chyna shrugged. “You want to?” she asked Lexi. Chyna clearly did not care about John’s opinion.

“Definitely.” Lexi knew that Chyna needed to get away from what had just happened to her.

Drinking away her problems had always been her coping mechanism, but Lexi knew it wouldn’t really help Chyna. Maybe just trying to get her mind off of it would be better.

They finished their drinks quickly and then exited the crowded nightclub. Chyna’s town car was waiting for them. Lexi forced John into the front seat as she scooted in next to Chyna. John told the man where to drop them, and they were whisked away through the city.

Chyna snuggled into Adam's arm, and Lexi left them to their private whispering. She didn't need to hear what they were saying to know that Adam was trying to cheer her up. Lexi stared out the window at the passing scenery. John glanced back at her once and smiled reassuringly. She shot her eyes back to the city lights and tried not to think about anything but the reason she was here...to hang out with Chyna.

Things had been pretty hectic at work, and Lexi was really glad that she had gotten the time off to come visit. She wished Ramsey had been able to join her, but he had been so swamped at work. Sometimes, she felt like she saw Jack as much as Ramsey these days, which was so bizarre. It wasn't really true, but Ramsey was unbelievably busy, working all hours of the day and doing everything he possibly could to get the medical wing up and running. Half of the time, she just wanted to tell him to take a break, to slow down. She hadn't actually wanted any of this to begin with, and he was overworking himself to get it done. It made for a tense situation even if he hadn't meant for it to come off that way. When he was always at the office in a tense situation, it was a struggle not to bring it home. Neither of them was succeeding at that. Though, they were trying to take it one day at a time.

The driver pulled up to Central Park at East Seventy-Second Street and Fifth Avenue, and all four of them piled out. Chyna told the driver that they wouldn't need him until later in the evening, and she would have Adam call to let him know when to return. As the driver left them behind, they walked down the well-lit entrance into the park.

Chyna and Adam took the lead, and Lexi fell into step beside John. The park was pretty deserted at this time of night, and it made Lexi anxious, even on the lighted paths. She had heard horror stories of people getting abducted in the park. Thinking about that just then did nothing to ease her anxiety.

"So, I didn't know you worked with Marco," Lexi said lightly.

"I'm sure there's quite a bit you don't know about me," John said. His answering smile was brilliant. It lit up his whole face.

"That's probably true," she said, averting her eyes back to the path in front of her. "Like who the person is that is feeding you information about me. You always seem to know something..."

"Like the Bridges Enterprise event tonight," John said offhand.

"Wait—what?" Lexi asked, turning to face him.

“There’s some event for the upper-level employees of the whole company. I think, primarily, it’s a big schmooze to pat themselves on the back. I’m a little surprised that you’re not there.”

Lexi stared up at him, stunned. *Had Ramsey ever mentioned this to her?* She couldn’t remember. The worst part was that it was entirely possible that he had, and she had brushed it off. She didn’t want to go to things if Bekah would be around. Not to mention, this week was Jack and Bekah’s wedding anniversary. It made her stomach twist, thinking about it, and she hadn’t wanted to be in town for the occasion. She had been pretty desperate to get out of Atlanta, so she must have just missed Ramsey telling her about this because he certainly wouldn’t have held this back. *This was a big thing to hold back.*

“You did know about it, right?” John probed.

“Yeah...I guess I just forgot,” she lied.

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a terrible liar?” John raised his eyebrows.

“Plenty of people.”

“I was surprised to find you here since that was going on. I thought your boyfriend would have wanted you there.”

“Don’t talk about him. I’m sure Ramsey told me about it. I’ve just been busy, and I had this trip planned already...” She trailed off as his smile grew. “What?”

“You always defend him.”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

“And he’s pretty shitty at the job.”

“I don’t know why you have such a negative opinion of your boss,” she spat back.

“He’s not my boss. I work for Global, and right now, I work with Jessica. Bridges Enterprise just happens to be a client of Global.”

“Now, who’s acting defensive?”

John chuckled. “You’re beautiful when you’re feisty.”

That wasn’t the first time she had heard that either.

“Um...thanks,” she said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

At least he didn’t know that was her telltale sign of anxiety.

With a smirk, he pushed the other strand behind her ear for her. “No need to be nervous, babe.”

She gaped at him. *What the hell? How did he know that?* She had not been around him enough for him to know little things like that.

John shook his head and laughed again at her reaction. “Give me some credit, babe. I pay attention.”

“It’s been a year since I broke things off. I don’t know what you’re up to, but you have to stop,” she whispered.

She didn’t want Chyna and Adam to overhear the conversation or the earnestness in her voice. John hadn’t been pursuing her like she had expected him to. If he didn’t know so much about her all the time, she would say he had given up. But the gleam in his eyes and that cocky smile told her otherwise. *She was a challenge.* In fact, she had set forth the challenge for him, and he was trying to meet it. It clearly didn’t matter whether or not she wanted him to continue because he was going to anyway.

“I’ll stop when your heart doesn’t skip a beat when you see me,” he told her confidently.

Lexi opened her mouth to argue with him, but Adam cut them off. “Hey, you two. Come on.”

They had reached the Bethesda Fountain in the center of the park. It was a gorgeous display. Two giant staircases led up to a bridge that overlooked the fountain area. The bridge had seven lit archways underneath it that opened out to the fountain with the famous Angel of the Waters statue atop it. Depicted as a beautiful angel, the statue represented the blessing of the pool and its healing capabilities as referenced from the Gospel of John. Past the fountain, the bricked walkway opened up to a lakefront view. During the day, the area would typically be filled with families and couples rowing about on rented paddleboats.

“It’s so beautiful at night,” Lexi murmured, following Chyna and Adam to the lakefront.

“It’s perfect,” Chyna said.

A light breeze rustled Chyna’s black hair off her face, and she smiled up at her handsome boyfriend. They looked picture-perfect in that moment. John came to stand next to Lexi, and even though there were a lot of unanswered questions, they shared a moment where they were both happy for Chyna and Adam. Lexi had always wanted her best friend to be with someone who treated her like Adam did. Despite the differences between Chyna and John, he seemed pretty happy that his brother was so in love.

“You’re perfect,” Adam whispered.

He kissed Chyna softly on the mouth, and as he pulled away, he sank slowly down to one knee.

Chyna’s hand flew to her heart. Lexi froze. John placed his hand on Lexi’s back to keep her steady, and she glanced up into his hazel eyes for just a second. *He had known. He had known all along what was going on.*

“Oh my God,” Chyna breathed.

Adam pulled a powder blue box from his pocket and opened it to reveal an engagement ring. “You’re the most perfect person I’ve ever known. You’re the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. Will you marry me?”

It was so simple in that moment. Everything fit together. Her best friend was getting married. Lexi never thought she would see the day.

“So, this is what you’ve been hiding?” Chyna said. She nearly choked on the words.

Adam laughed and nodded. “I’d never hide anything else from you.”

“Well, are you going to answer him or what?” John joked.

“Well, yes, of course, I’ll marry you,” Chyna said.

She threw her hand out in front of her, and Adam slipped the ring onto her left ring finger.

“I love you,” Adam said, standing, picking her up, and pulling her into him.

“I love you, too.”

John and Lexi watched them for a minute before turning to give them their privacy. They took a stroll around the fountain and then Lexi took a seat on the edge. John sat next to her and stretched out his long legs.

“I can’t believe Chyna is getting married,” Lexi told him truthfully.

“She doesn’t really seem the type.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Especially compared to her best friend who is still not engaged,” he said, nudging her in the ribs lightly.

“You’re a jerk,” she said. She shook her head at him. “Anyway, it’s not like I even want to get engaged or married or anything. It’s just this weird thing, seeing it happen to your friends.”

“You don’t want to get married?” he asked. “For someone who puts a lot of effort into her relationships, you sure act like someone who wants to.”

Lexi shrugged. “Law school was my first goal. I didn’t care about two, three, or four.”

“Would you tell him yes if he asked you?” John asked thoughtfully.

“What? Oh, Ramsey...I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it,” Lexi said, coloring softly at the admission.

“You really aren’t like other girls, are you?”

“I guess not,” she said, standing and dusting off her dress. She didn’t want to continue having this conversation with John. “You don’t seem like the marrying type either.”

He stood, towering over her, and gave her the cutest smile. “Guess we’re a pair, aren’t we?”

Lexi laughed, pushing him backward a step. It was not a good idea to have him that close to her. She couldn’t deny his attraction—not that she would ever be stupid enough to act on it again.

“Keep dreaming.”

“That’s where I always find you.”

Lexi rolled her eyes. “Let’s just go find the lovebirds. Shall we?”

They found Chyna and Adam still in a lip-lock. They were pressed so tightly together that not even an inch of space was between them anywhere. Lexi was glad the guest bedroom didn’t share a wall with Chyna’s. As it was, Lexi was afraid she might be able to hear what was going on through several layers of walls.

She and John managed to pry them apart. They walked out of Central Park as the clock struck one o’clock, and the park closed.

The car ride back to Chyna’s place was short and slightly uncomfortable. The physical attraction Chyna and Adam normally held back in public was gone for the night. Lexi couldn’t blame them. They were engaged now after all.

Lexi just stared forward until they reached her doorstep. John pulled open her door and let everyone pile out of the car once more.

“I know you’ll be devastated, but I’m going to head back to my place now,” John said. He leaned against the car and invitingly stared down at Lexi. “You want to join me? I can’t guarantee it will be any quieter than Chyna’s place.”

“You know I have no intention of going back with you,” Lexi said, taking a step back.

“Come on,” he coaxed. “You’ll have a good time.”

“And no one will have to know?” she offered up with a shake of her head.

“I’d rather everyone know—at least the entire floor.”

“Oh my God,” Lexi said with a blush. “I have to go. Good night, John.”

“If you change your mind, give me a call.” His eyes gleamed with mischief. He clearly enjoyed teasing her.

Turning quickly, she followed Chyna and Adam back up to the apartment, trying to push John’s attempts to get her to go home with him out of her head. She knew all too well what a night in his apartment entailed. She had been there a year ago...and it wasn’t something she should dwell on when she was lonely.



Lexi awoke the next morning to her phone buzzing noisily in her ear. *Fuck! Where had she placed that goddamn thing?* She looked around, bleary-eyed for a second, before she realized that it was actually under her pillow.

Stifling a yawn, she pressed the Talk button. “Hello?”

“Lexi,” Ramsey said into the phone.

“Hey, baby,” she mumbled, yawning big.

“Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, but it’s okay. Just let me wake up,” she said, falling out of bed and stretching.

After a minute of stretching, she remembered everything that had happened last night. *Dinner, the club, Marco, John telling her about the Bridges party, the proposal—what a night!*

“You still there?”

“Yeah, sorry. How are you?” *What she wanted to ask was why he hadn’t told her about the party.*

“I had an interesting night.”

“Me, too. Adam proposed.”

“What? Wow. Well, that’s wonderful. I’m assuming Chyna said yes.”

“She did. I wish you had been here.”

“I wish I had been with you, too. Much more than dealing with what I just walked into,” he said, sounding beaten down.

“What happened? Was this at the company party you didn’t tell me about?” Lexi asked.

She hadn’t thought she was going to bring it up, but it had eaten at her all last night. He had probably been out with Parker instead of with her. Lexi’s imagination had gotten the best of her, and she hadn’t been able to concentrate on anything else.

“What do you mean, I didn’t tell you? I told you a couple of weeks ago, but you were set on going to New York,” Ramsey said defensively.

“I don’t remember you telling me,” Lexi said sheepishly. *Had he told her?*

“Then how did you know about it?” he asked.

Lexi bit her lip. *Great.* There was always a possibility she would run into John when hanging out with Chyna, but she and Ramsey just hadn’t really talked about it.

“John told me.”

“Ah, I knew he was invited, but I didn’t know his reason for not showing,” he said gruffly.

“He was here for the proposal.”

“Right.” He didn’t sound like he believed her.

“Doesn’t change the fact that I don’t remember you ever telling me about this event. Didn’t you think that I would want to go?”

“I did tell you about this, Lexi. You’ve kind of been absent recently.”

“I’ve been around more than you have.”

“I meant mentally...you’ve been out of it a lot. I don’t know if it’s stress, but that’s really neither here nor there. I need you to come home,” he said abruptly.

“Home? Why? I’m supposed to be in New York for two more days.” She did not want to give up her vacation.

“I just...need you here.”

“Ramsey, what the hell is going on?” Lexi asked, confused.

With the medical wing right now, he didn’t normally need her around, period. *Why would he need her to fly back to Atlanta on the weekend she had off?*

“I’m going to book you a flight. Make sure you make it, all right? I’d ask Chyna for the private jet, but I think that might be overdoing it. I’m not

sure though. Do you think she would care? She probably wouldn't, but I hate to impose," he said, rambling on to himself.

"Ramsey!" she snapped. "What is this all about?"

He breathed out heavily on the phone. She could almost hear his brain working, trying to find a way out of telling her. Something had happened. She didn't know what it was, but she had a feeling that it was bad. Everything about this felt wrong, and she reached out for the footboard on the bed in Chyna's guest room.

"What is it?" she whispered again.

"Are you sitting down?"

"No."

"Then...then, I think you should sit down first," he said softly.

Lexi walked over to the chaise lounge in the bedroom and sat down heavily. Her stomach was in knots, and she couldn't keep from automatically pushing her hair back behind her ear. She was ready for her heart to shatter. She was ready for her world to tilt. She was ready for whatever he was going to dish out to her. *She could take it. She had been through worse than anything he could say right now. Right?*

God, she didn't even want to know. In that moment, the last thing she wanted was to hear something that was going to tear her apart. *Hadn't she had enough? Couldn't she live through someone else's perfect life for once?*

Lexi braced herself on the armrest and sighed. "I'm seated."

"I'm really sorry that I have to tell you this...that any of this is being brought up. I really hate that you have to hear this over the phone when I can't see your reaction, reassure you, hold you in my arms. I'm just...I'm sorry about a lot of things."

The way he spoke to her was like his heart was breaking. She could almost picture him sitting in their apartment, disheveled and unkempt, still wearing last night's clothes.

She clenched the phone harder in her hand. She didn't think she could prepare any more for what he was about to say to her.

"I've had a sexual harassment suit come up against me from a previous employee. It was a girl, Elisa, who worked at one of the clubs I managed."

Lexi's mouth dropped open. She had thought she was prepared for it...but she wasn't. She couldn't have prepared herself for that. *Sexual harassment...when had that happened?*

“She claims that we...had sex,” he said, his voice strained. “And that when she got pregnant, she was forced out. She has a son, not quite one year old. She claims that he’s mine.”

Her vision swam. A baby boy. *The club whore had a baby boy with her boyfriend.*

Oh my God!

No.

It couldn't be possible. It couldn't be.

Ramsey couldn't have a kid with someone else. He had avoided the scandal with Parker. The clubs had just been a distraction. Ramsey would never sleep with employees. He would never force out pregnant women. He would never have a son that he didn't know about.

Wait—not yet one year old!

That would mean...the baby would have had to be conceived when they were dating. It meant that Ramsey would have had to cheat on her.

She didn't even have words in that moment. *What could she possibly say to that?*

Ramsey continued quickly, “It’s not true. None of it is true. Elisa is a bitch. I never, ever would have done any of the things that she said. There’s no way that she can prove it. She’s trying to capitalize on the publicity and success of the medical wing. She wants her fifteen minutes.”

“She’s fucking with my life for her fifteen minutes,” Lexi growled.

He sighed heavily. “I know. I wish none of this had ever happened. I wish she had picked someone else for this bullshit. It’s not fair to you or the company. I wish she wasn’t trying to drag us all through the mud to get a little bit of money.” He paused. “It’s going to hit the news tonight... tomorrow at the latest. I wanted you here with me before it broke.”

Lexi ground her teeth. *Just what she wanted to deal with.* “What are you going to do about it?”

“We’ve already asked for a paternity test, which we’re scheduling as soon as possible,” he told her.

“Are you lawyering up?”

“Of course. We’ll have an attorney working on the logistics. We really just want this to go away with as little damage as possible.”

“But you’re going to prove her wrong, right?” Lexi asked. She knew that she had an inherently jaded view on the legal system, but still, she

wanted the person crashing a train into her life to see justice. “If you are innocent, you’ll be able to prove it.”

“We’re minimizing the damage,” he said softly. “The company doesn’t care if it’s true or not...just as long as it’s swept under the rug and doesn’t impact the medical wing.”

“But *I* care if it’s true or not.”

“And you have my word, Lexi, that it’s not true,” he said earnestly.

And all she could think about with the realization that she would likely never know what had really happened was that...Ramsey’s word had never really meant that much.



Present

Christmas had been about as awkward as Lexi had ever experienced with the Bridges family.

She and Ramsey had decided that they were going to do their own thing on Christmas Eve morning, hang out with his parents that night, and then go to her parents' house in the morning to celebrate with them. They had spent less time with her family since they lived farther away and thought it would be nice to spend a little more time with them for the holiday. Her mother wanted to help with the engagement preparations, and it would be a good excuse to talk to her about it.

That should have worked. It should have been okay—except his parents had decided that they were going to throw the country club holiday party on Christmas Eve after church, and Ramsey's mother was hosting this year. So, Ramsey and Lexi wouldn't be able to do any kind of celebrations with his family that night. Lexi had compromised and said they could go to her parents' house on Christmas Eve even though she wouldn't have as much time with them, and then they would spend time with his family on the big day.

But, of course, Ramsey had been expected to be at the party on Christmas Eve as well. A big part of her had wanted Ramsey to be the rebellious man she had fallen for. She had wanted him to tell his parents no, and she had just wanted she and Ramsey to do their own thing. Christ, she would have been happy to just skip all of it, sit around in their living room, and open presents without anyone else around. They could have eaten cinnamon rolls and watched *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

Ramsey just wasn't that person anymore. He had signed his soul over to the devil when he had agreed to work for his father. Expectations came with that, and even if Ramsey hated the club, he wouldn't do anything to risk the business he had created and now loved.

They had spent Christmas Eve at the Bridges country club party. It hadn't been too bad. Parker hadn't shown up, and Bekah had actually left Lexi alone. She had been too busy receiving all of the sympathies for the terrible circumstances behind her divorce. Lexi had tried to avoid rolling her eyes.

They had stayed the night at his parents' house and opened presents with them in the morning. It had been completely different than what she was used to. An interior designer had decorated everything, and all of the packages had been perfectly put together under the tree. Her parents usually used whatever wrapping paper was around that year and hand-wrapped the packages. They liked to overdo it, too, and they would get a ton of small presents to fill the tree past capacity.

Lexi and Ramsey hadn't been able to escape the country club until well into the afternoon, and by the time they had arrived at her parents' house, they had already eaten, thinking she wasn't going to show up. Overall, it had been more stressful than it needed to be.

Next year, she was determined to do better. Though, her mother had told her about how difficult it had been to accommodate everyone's schedules when they first got married, and sometimes it was just better to do her own thing and see people when she can.

Lexi had smiled and agreed. *Next year.*

New Year's had been uneventful.

Lexi had gotten the flu and couldn't leave the house. She had been pretty bummed because they had been planning to spend the weekend in Florida at his beach house, away from the rest of the world. Needless to say, Lexi hadn't been able to make the trip, so they had just cozied up in front of the fireplace and watched the ball drop in the comfort of their own living room.

Once she had gotten over her sickness, they had taken engagement pictures at a local plantation. Lexi thought they were kind of cheesy, but the wedding planner had insisted because they needed something for the save-the-date cards.

It all seemed to be happening so fast. One day, Ramsey had proposed, and five months later, they had picked a date at the end of October. Now, they were sending out save-the-dates to their guests.

It all felt a bit surreal.



Lexi wandered into the small Mexican restaurant in Buckhead and took a seat in the back corner. Her new client actually wasn't the worst thing she had ever suffered through, so she was back on a normal schedule where she actually...ate. *What a luxury!*

"Hey, Lex," Jack said as he approached the table. "Sorry I'm late."

"I just got here."

A waiter came over and brought them drinks before disappearing just as quickly.

"How is work?" Jack asked.

"Fine. Nothing to complain about."

Lexi always felt the weight of her engagement ring during these encounters. He didn't even have to say anything. He could just look at her with those big blue eyes and know...

"How is the apartment shopping going?" she asked, just so he would stop looking at her like that.

"I found a place a couple days ago. It's not as nice as what I had before...but I don't really need much. I've always been more of a minimalist."

"Says the man who drives a BMW," she joked.

"You have to at Bridges." He just shrugged, defeated.

He didn't even like saying the name right now. She didn't ask him about work anymore. It was clear that it was not an ideal situation. He was pretty miserable there, dealing with Bekah.

"I suppose so."

"It's kind of strange, having my own place again. Really...quiet," he said.

Lexi nodded. She had never had her own place before. All through college and graduate school, she'd had roommates, and now, she lived with Ramsey. She could imagine a world without other people being very quiet, especially after living with someone like Bekah.

"You should come see it sometime."

"Yeah, sure," she said because, God, did she feel bad for him.

This was not a feeling she was used to. Jack was supposed to be in control. She had a hard time grasping the person in front of her.

And then, his eyes met hers, and she remembered. He was still Jack.

“How are the divorce proceedings?” Lexi asked about the elephant in the room.

Jack shrugged again. “Richard says that things are going smoothly. He got them to agree to mediation.”

“That’s great! If you can settle this out of court, it will be better.”

“I guess. That’s what he keeps telling me.”

“When does that begin?”

Jack laughed sardonically. “This afternoon actually. I’m supposed to meet Richard after this to go over our case and how they want to handle proceedings. Then, we’re heading straight into mediation.”

“Well, good luck. What kind of outcome does he want?”

“Fifty-fifty split,” he told her.

But something in his posture showed her that he was thinking something else. She just wanted to reach out to him, but she didn’t dare move.

“What do you want?” she whispered.

“I thought I wanted my wife back,” Jack answered honestly.

Lexi couldn’t help but cringe. Bekah and the word *wife* had never sat well with Lexi. It certainly didn’t now when the Bitch was working so hard against him.

“You thought?”

“I feel kind of like an idiot that I didn’t see it before.”

“What?” Lexi asked.

“Bekah is kind of a bitch.”

“Kind of?” Lexi asked, laughing.

“Am I late to the game on that one?” he asked sheepishly.

“Way late.”

“I’m not sure how I missed it. When we were dating…” Jack trailed off, shaking his head. “You probably don’t want to hear this.”

Lexi sighed softly. Jack needed her. He didn’t have anyone else, and if he needed to rant about Bekah, Lexi could oblige him. She didn’t even like to think about Bekah. At least if she got to add a jab in there every now and again, then it might be worth it.

She forced herself to continue. “You can talk to me.”

“You know that you’re something wonderful, right?” he asked, staring up at her, from across the table.

Her heart jumped out of her chest, and she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Looking at her like that should be outlawed. It wasn't fair that he still had that much control over her body.

"Um...thanks."

"You and your obsession with your hair..."

"It has a calming effect!"

Jack laughed. "I'm just messing with you. I like it. It tells me what you're thinking without having to ask."

"You know what I'm thinking anyway." At least, it always felt like that.

"I'm pretty sure if I knew what you were thinking without asking, I wouldn't have been such a fuck-up," he said.

Silence lingered between them as Lexi stared back at him. He was not making this easy. Part of being around Jack was so easy. He just got her. They had been around each other so long that she didn't have to explain herself. In the past, he had known exactly when and where to touch her. He had known her. But then, there were things about Jack that were so difficult, such as his need to always pick someone else, the heavy weight of their history, the hint of desire that always sprang up between them, unbidden, at the most inopportune moments. So much was there between them, swirling around, that at times, it felt suffocating. And Lexi just wished she could see past those emotions.

The waiter interrupted them by dropping off drinks and taking their orders. Lexi wasn't that hungry to begin with, and the turn of the conversation didn't seem to help.

When the waiter disappeared, Jack started talking again. "We got off track. What I was saying before is that when Bekah and I were dating, she was a really different person, to me at least. She was sweet and sincere and acted like she loved me. We were together all the time. I was hesitant about marrying her. I was worried that she was into me a bit more than I was into her."

Lexi ground her teeth together. She wanted to shake him. She wanted to reach over the table and slap some sense into him. *Didn't he know what he had done by being so stupid? Argh!* It just made her blood boil.

"Then, we got married, and things were all right for a while. We both had to adjust to living together and our new life. I guess you could call it the honeymoon effect, but then something happened. It changed. She stopped

caring about me, about anything. I don't know what happened. Maybe she just decided that she had made a mistake. In any case, she wasn't the same person that I'd met. And she's even worse than that now."

"Then, I guess this divorce is for the better," Lexi said softly.

Lexi knew that it was. She had known that he shouldn't have ever married Bekah, but Lexi couldn't change the past any more than he could.

"Lexi, the worst part about it all is that I really tried to make it work."

"I know, Jack," she whispered.

"How do you know?"

"I was there through it," she reminded him.

"But there's something more to that statement." He pointed at her, like he was trying to figure out what she was hiding behind her big brown eyes. "Isn't there?"

"It's just...Jack, you would try to make a marriage work even if it was all wrong."

"Why would you say that?" he asked, his eyes icing over.

He didn't want to hear what she was dishing out.

"Because you did it with all of your other girlfriends."

Jack's eyes hardened. "There's nothing wrong with trying to make things work with someone."

"There is when they're all wrong for you," Lexi couldn't help but shoot back.

"It's better than running away from every relationship as soon as things get rocky."

"I'm pretty sure the only thing that kept getting in the way of my relationships was your dick," she said, not able to hold her anger down.

"Oh, come on, Lex, give me some credit. Sometimes my tongue, too."

Lexi stood abruptly. "Why? Why didn't you try with me? Why every other person but not me? Why am I still the only one here, Jack?"

"I did try with you," he said, not breaking eye contact. "We tried it out in New York."

"Bullshit! You slept with someone else in New York. Tell me the truth."

"Lex, I did try—"

"You know I talked to Stella?"

"What?" Jack asked. He looked seriously confused in that moment.

“I saw her at the D-Bags show,” Lexi said, taking a seat when the couple across the room started staring at her.

“That was more than two years ago.” He didn’t look pleased that this was coming up. “What did she say?”

“She said that she was sorry for what she had done to me. What did she do to me, Jack?”

“Why is this just now coming up?”

“Because she told me that you said no like five thousand times. She said that you didn’t *want* to sleep with her that night and that she seduced your drunk ass. She said you had an excuse for being a total moron that night, but you didn’t even tell me that! You said there was no excuse for what you did, and then you pulled out a fucking diamond ring, and poof! You vanished into thin air.”

“I told you I had no excuse for what I did with Stella because there *was* no excuse for what I did. I couldn’t come crawling back to you, begging you to see me as the *total moron*,” he said, spitting her own words back at her, “who had slept with someone else, groveling for you to take me back.”

“But I would have!” she snapped.

“Lexi, whether or not Stella seduced me and I told her no five *million* times did not matter to me because I let you down that night. You were right. We were different. And then I slept with her. No matter what happened to get me there...that was still the outcome. I didn’t deserve you.”

Lexi just stared at him. All this time, and it came down to that one statement. *He didn’t deserve her*. It hurt worse than she had ever thought it would. Other people had said it to her, but she always ignored them.

“I had to own up to what I’d done in New York and take responsibility for my actions. I gave in that night. The thousand times I’d said no didn’t matter because of the one time I said yes.”

“It would have mattered to me.”

“Well, we can’t change what happened,” Jack said, leaning back in the booth. His eyes were distant. “No matter what we might want...we have to live with our mistakes and live with our past.”

“That’s all I’ve been doing...living with my mistakes,” Lexi said.

“Yeah. A lot of the time, it just feels more like dying from my mistakes rather than living.”

Lexi sighed and nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“If anyone does,” he said, staring up at her again, “you do.”

Food arrived, and they ate together in silence. Jack’s mediation was swiftly approaching, and she had to get back to work. But she found it difficult to rush back to their obligations. Even when they argued, even in the silence, even when it felt like they were just milliseconds away from ripping each other’s clothes off—things with Jack always felt natural and normal. She had never gotten over that feeling of being around him. It was an indescribable feeling that, even through their friendship, they had never gotten rid of.

Things had just changed. But one thing never changed—Jack was always the person she turned to when things went wrong in her life.

Jack paid even though Lexi had insisted that it was a terrible idea with the divorce proceedings. But he had just laughed it off and told her that he wasn’t going to end up penniless. He could pay for lunch.

“Good luck at the mediation. I hope she takes it seriously,” Lexi said.

“Thanks. Did you want to come over after? I can tell you about how it went, and you can see the new place.”

Lexi bit her lip and looked down. “I don’t know, Jack.”

Memories flashed through her mind of him asking her to come over to his place, him making it up to her, him promising not to cross a line. Her face heated, and she felt like every dirty thought was written clear across her forehead.

Jack chuckled softly at her. “Come here, you,” he said as he drew her into a hug.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried not to feel completely embarrassed. She breathed in that old familiar scent, reminding her body not to react to the association she had with the smell. When he released her, his blue eyes were still laughing at her. She dropped her arms quickly and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

“You know I’m still married, right?”

Lexi smacked him on the arm. “Of course I know. I’m engaged, remember?” she said, flashing him the diamond rock on her finger.

The humor left his face, and he nodded. “You don’t have to remind me. I know.”

“Yeah...”

“I was just suggesting you come see my place—nothing more than that. It’s what friends do. If you’re not comfortable though...” he said,

trailing off.

Lexi sighed. "We'll see, Jack."

"All right." He didn't seem to want to push his luck.

"Remember to listen to your attorney, and don't give in to her baiting. Because, Jack," she said, "she's going to try to bait you. Just...just try not to let her win, okay? That's all she wants. If you've done nothing wrong, then you've nothing to hide. You'll do great."

"Thanks, Lex," Jack said, even as the color drained from his face.



Lexi paced back and forth across the living room, a legal pad tucked under her arm. She had work that needed to get done, but she was having the hardest time concentrating. There was just too much to do. Besides work, she had so much wedding stuff to do that she was ready to go cross-eyed. Plus, Jack was currently in his mediation with Bekah. Lexi was anxious to hear how about it and if she had been right about Bekah baiting him.

Ramsey was upstairs, working in his office. He had been working from home more frequently lately. She didn't know if he got more work done here or if he just liked being away from the hospital. She suspected he would tell her that it was because he liked being close to her. The thought made her smile.

"Sherri called," Ramsey said, appearing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Why does she always call you?" Lexi demanded. She stopped mid-stride.

"Because you never answer your phone."

Lexi marched over to her phone and pressed the button to light it up. "She didn't call me."

"Almost four months of you not answering her phone calls when she calls has led her to call me first," Ramsey explained.

"I don't avoid her calls or anything."

"No one said you did, dear."

"Well, what did she want?" Lexi asked.

"Just checking in mostly since we're seven months out. She asked if we had selected a florist and said she would email me some

recommendations. She asked how you were doing with picking out a dress.”

“Ugh! Terrible. None of them are right.”

Ramsey laughed. “I know. You told me. She said that should be your number one priority right now.”

“It is. Chyna wants to use a custom designer, but I don’t need anything that extravagant. I’m only going to be wearing it once.”

“That’s right you are,” Ramsey said, walking toward her and scooping her up.

“Hey, put me down!” she cried.

He carried her in his arms, up the stairs, and into their bedroom.

“You are thinking way too hard about something that doesn’t concern you,” he said, tossing her lightly onto the bed.

She giggled as she landed in the middle of the down comforter. “I’m not thinking about anything but this bed right now.” She spread out her fingers and ran them down the soft fabric.

“Where was your mind at before I carried you up to bed?” he asked, kicking off his shoes and crawling up next to her.

Lexi shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Tell me.” His lips planted a kiss on her hip, and his fingers ran down her thigh.

“It’s nothing. Really.”

He moved farther up, kissing her side and her stomach. One arm wrapped around her waist, pressing her body against him.

“Don’t make me tickle the answers out of you. It’s not beneath me.”

Lexi scrunched up her nose at him and poked him in the side. “Don’t be a jerk.” She couldn’t hold back her smile.

“Oh yeah, that’s me. I’m the biggest jerk you’ve ever met. How can you even stand me?” Ramsey asked, rolling his bright green eyes.

“Clearly, I can’t. What are you doing in my bed anyway?”

“Your bed?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “Since when is this your bed?”

“Oh, I don’t know? Maybe the last two years,” she said. She couldn’t keep the smirk off her face.

“And who has been sharing this bed with you for the last two years?” His lips landed on her palm, and then slowly, tenderly, he ran kisses up her arm.

“I might have allowed you to sleep in my bed—”

Ramsey stopped at her shoulder and stared up at her. “As long as I’m sharing it with you, then it can be yours.”

Lexi lazily smiled back at him. *Sometimes, he was so romantic.*

“Doesn’t exempt you from telling me what you were thinking about downstairs,” he said slyly.

She groaned. “Must you know?”

“Must you try to evade me?”

“Jack and Bekah are in mediation today,” she whispered, not taking her eyes from him.

It was Ramsey’s turn to groan. He heavily rested his forehead on her shoulder. “I thought you were going to stay out of their business.”

“Jack is my friend. He’s always been there for me when I needed him. I feel like a bad friend if I’m not there for him now,” she said, trying to explain but knowing it was futile.

“I know things between you and Jack have changed and that you’re his friend. I know all of that. I’ve been really damn accepting of it all, considering your past...”

Lexi cringed. That was one of the moments she felt like she was dying from her mistakes rather than living with them.

“The last thing I want is for you to get tangled up in this,” he said, squeezing her hand. “You understand, right?”

Lexi shrugged and stared up at the ceiling. From her perspective, she was already tangled up in what was going on. She was always tangled up in something with Jack, and this was no different. It wasn’t like she had taken his case on or anything. She was just being the supportive friend he needed. She didn’t think it was asking too much.

“Why do you have to be involved with this? Make me see your point,” he said.

He could probably see her shutting down and closing off. She had never liked being told what to do.

Lexi observed the motion of the fan for a few seconds before responding. “I’m not sure what to say that I haven’t said before. I’ve known Jack since I was eighteen years old. Yes, our relationship has changed since that point, and it should. We’re older, and we’ve grown up. Sometimes, I really hated him, and sometimes, I really loved him. It was hot and cold—no, burning and freezing. It was two extremes that I thought we would

never be able to control, never be able to figure out. Instead, we just crashed into catastrophe over and over again,” Lexi explained.

She wanted to say so much more, but she didn’t know how to explain something that hardly made sense to her.

“When he married your sister, that was the end for me. I was just over everything. I didn’t even want to be me anymore.”

“I remember how it was,” Ramsey responded.

Lexi smiled softly. “I was an ass to Jack at the D-Bags concert. But he said something that night that he has actually held to the past two years. He told me that all he wanted was for me to be happy. Against my better judgment, I let him try to be my friend. It’s hard to let go of someone who has always been there,” she whispered.

She rolled over on the bed to face Ramsey, and something in his expression told her that he understood that much at least.

“The divorce is the culmination of every terrible thing Jack could ever think. This is probably his biggest fear. Bekah is destroying him, and he doesn’t have anyone.”

“But he did that to himself,” Ramsey reminded her.

“Probably true.” She would give him that.

“How would you feel if this were Parker?”

Lexi held her breath. She knew exactly how she would feel. “You want to bring Parker into this?” she asked.

“I’m just using her as an example.”

“If I can adjust to you spending every day with her, then you should certainly be okay with me being there for Jack when he’s going through something pretty traumatic,” Lexi said quickly.

“Okay, Lexi,” he said, stroking her hair back off her face. “I’m not trying to fight with you. I’m trying to understand. I wouldn’t tell you not to be friends with Jack. Only that the same rule applies from the beginning.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“If he touches you, I’ll kill him.”

Lexi laughed and buried her head in his chest. “I think you’re safe.”



A few hours later, Lexi found herself driving up in front of Jack's apartment on the outskirts of Buckhead. The fact he considered this a step down was a bit ridiculous. The complex was by no means a dump. She had lived in much, much worse in New York. Then again, she had been a student, not an executive at a huge conglomerate.

Lexi had never been to the house that Jack had shared with Bekah. She hadn't been able to do it. For all she knew, it had been a mansion. So, compared to that, this place was probably a dump. Either way, Jack was now paying rent on a one-bedroom apartment and half of the mortgage for the house they had purchased. The place couldn't be that spectacular if he had to pay double...or his Bridges salary was that extravagant. She wasn't sure which was the case.

She pulled into a spot a few doors down from the entrance to his building. Her hands were shaking.

"Shit!" she grumbled.

She swiped her hands on her jeans a few times, trying to see if that helped anything. She didn't know why they were even shaking. It didn't make sense.

After such a nice afternoon, locked away in the bedroom with Ramsey, she felt weird coming over to Jack's place. Ramsey knew that they were meeting up. Since they had talked about how she felt about being there for Jack, Ramsey hadn't pushed the subject when she said she was meeting him. *Still...*

Ugh! She needed to stop her brain from overanalyzing. It was just Jack. Nothing had happened between them in over two years, and nothing was going to happen with him today. It shouldn't matter that she was at his place rather than meeting him at a restaurant. She was psyching herself out for nothing.

Lexi exited her car and then walked into the apartment complex. A blonde attendant was seated behind the desk, typing away on her cell phone. She didn't even look up when Lexi walked in, which was fine by her. Walking up to the elevator, Lexi pressed the button, and as soon as it dinged on the bottom floor, the attendant looked up.

"Can I help you?" she asked, still typing on her phone.

"Nope. Thanks though."

"We're supposed to clear visitors."

Lexi shrugged. "I'm here for Jack Howard, apartment number six fifty-two."

"Oh, Jack!" she said with a big smile. "Tell him I said hi!"

Lexi fought rolling her eyes. Jack had only lived here a couple of days, and already, the attendant knew who he was. *Typical.*

"Will do," Lexi said, stepping into the elevator and letting the doors close between her and the blonde bimbo.

Some things never ceased to amaze her.

Jack's new place was near the elevators, so it was a quick walk to his front door. She remembered standing on the threshold of his apartment, debating whether or not coming to Atlanta to meet his girlfriend was a good idea. So much had changed since then.

Lexi rapped lightly on the door and waited for Jack to answer. She heard feet pattering as he jogged toward the door. It cracked open, and Jack appeared, smiling brightly at her. It was one of those gut-wrenching, take-your-breath-away smiles. His bright blue eyes lit up as he reached out and gripped the doorframe.

"You made it," he said. He gestured for her to come in.

"Yeah." She walked forward into the apartment. "It was easy to find."

"That's good. No trouble getting upstairs or anything? Some of the attendants aren't accommodating."

"No trouble, but the girl downstairs wanted me to tell you hi!" she said, mimicking the girl's voice. "Nondescript blonde attached to her phone."

"Ah," he said, "I think that's Heidi."

"She seemed pretty happy when I mentioned you," Lexi said, arching an accusatory eyebrow.

Jack slammed the door shut roughly. "I don't think I can hear anyone else accuse me of cheating tonight, or I might snap and literally fuck the first person I see." He stared at Lexi pointedly.

"I, uh...yeah," she stammered, trying to find the right words without blushing furiously at that look. She had seen it a million times, and it was not helping. "That's not what I meant."

"Of course it's not," Jack replied sarcastically.

"Did the mediation go so poorly?"

Jack laughed disdainfully. "I'll let you tell me."

She followed him into the living room where an open bottle of Jack Daniels and a half-empty glass rested on a beat-up coffee table. “That good, huh?”

“It’s only drink number three. Think I can finish the bottle?”

“What happened?” she asked, taking the opportunity to look around his apartment.

It was sparsely decorated, to say the least. He had an old couch sitting behind the coffee table and a flat screen TV hooked up to the opposite wall. She wondered if all this stuff had been in storage or if someone had loaned it to him. There wasn’t anything on the walls—no pictures, no old record albums, nothing. Besides the Jack Daniels, there wasn’t anything really visible. It was more depressing than when a typical freshly moved in apartment because there weren’t even any boxes around. All of his stuff must have still been at the house.

“Everything you said would happen. Her lawyer spent half the time talking over the mediator, trying to get me to admit that I cheated on her while we were married. She kept baiting me, playing the victim. We accomplished nothing, and then after hours of trying to get something done, Bekah said she didn’t want to continue mediation, and it wasn’t helpful. So, we’re filing for a court date anyway,” Jack said.

Lexi hated to tell him that she told him so. *Probably not the best thing in this situation.*

“Well, at least, the alcohol is cheering you up,” she said softly.

“No. You’re the first good thing I’ve seen since I left.”

He stared back at her from across the room, and she could feel the tension crackle between them. *Not good.* She needed to redirect and quickly.

“Are you sure you’ve only had three drinks?” she asked. She picked up the bottle and looked at how much was left.

“You want to pour me another?” He sank into the couch and ruffled his dark brown hair, which had grown out past where he normally got a haircut for Bridges.

She liked it better a little longer.

“I don’t think you need one right now.”

“I guess I still have some of this one,” he said, picking up the glass and tipping the rest of the whiskey down the back of his throat. He slammed

the glass back on the table and smiled up at Lexi. He patted the cushion next to him. "Come take a seat, Lex."

"Where did you get all this stuff?" she asked, trying to be casual as she sank down into the cushion.

"Seth," Jack said with a shrug. "Sandy insisted that I take the stuff from their basement since they weren't really using it. It's not the best, but who the hell am I kidding? Everything else has gone to shit. Why would I need nice things? Next thing I know, someone is going to ram into my BMW tomorrow on the way to work."

"Jack," she whispered before swallowing hard. It was so difficult to sit here and listen to his pain. She wanted to help him and make it better. She wished there were a way for that to be possible.

"It's all right. I'll bounce back. I always do," he said nonchalantly.

"You do," she agreed. She bit her lip and kept her eyes trained forward.

"At least I still have you," he murmured, resting his arms across the back of the couch.

She turned to look at him, surprised by the statement. "Uh...we're friends."

"That's right," he said with that killer smirk. "We're friends."

"Jack, don't even try this with me right now," Lexi said, shaking her head. "You can't act like you want to be with me all of a sudden."

She couldn't believe she had gotten the words out when he was looking at her like that, but she knew that she had to say something. She had to stop it.

"I'm not acting like that."

Lexi shook her head. She didn't believe him.

"Trying to be your friend is not the same as trying to be with you, Lex."

"I know," she said softly.

"It's trying to be with you however I can."

Lexi's mouth literally dropped open at that statement. *Well, damn, wasn't the alcohol talking tonight?*

She quickly stood in disbelief. *What the hell was Jack thinking?* He was still married. She was engaged. After all of this time, he was just going to try to lay this on her now...when he was desperate and in the middle of divorce proceedings with the Bitch he should have never married.

“I think I should go.”

“Wait...” Jack stood uneasily on his feet. “Fuck! I didn’t mean to piss you off, Lex.”

“I’m not pissed-off.”

“You look pissed-off. And really, it’s fucking sexy on you, but I honestly didn’t mean to,” he said, running his hand back through his hair again.

“It’s okay, Jack. I just think with you, um,” she said, eyeing him up and down, “a little drunk that it might not be the best idea for me to be here. Ramsey is waiting for me at home. He knows where I am. He trusts me.”

“That’s good. He should.”

“But I don’t trust myself around you, like this,” she admitted. “So, I think it’s best if I just...leave.”

“All right. I guess you should go then,” he said.

He stared straight at her in a way that made her wish she could stay.

Jack unnerved her like no one else ever had. He made her walls crumble and her heart melt, but at the moment, she was closer to a panic attack.

He walked her to the door, following behind her. She put her hand on the doorknob to exit, and his hand came down and covered hers. She turned back to stare at him, to tell him to let her go, but she got one look in those blue eyes and was struck silent, transfixed in that gaze.

Jack was so close, no more than six inches from her body. His hand was warm where it covered hers, and she could feel the heat radiating off him. He smelled like sex with a hint of whiskey. It was a combination she had grown used to in college, and it made her senses buzz. He looked so much like her Jack in that moment, and she knew she needed to get out of that apartment right *now*.

“You know what?” Jack asked, leaning forward over her, nearly closing the gap between them.

His breath was hot on her face, and she wasn’t even sure if she was even breathing. His hand reached forward and brushed a lock of curly brown hair behind her ear.

“Wha-what?” she stammered.

She tried not to flinch as his hand caressed her ear before retreating.

“You shouldn’t talk to me anymore.”

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

God, he was so close. If he moved any closer, his lips would be on her. And there was nowhere for her to go.

“You shouldn’t be around me anymore. You shouldn’t want to, Lex. Because all I see when I look at you is the woman I love, the woman I want to take home with me, the woman who I’ve spent damn near ten years messing things up with. And you should stay away because I know I’d do it all over again.”



October One Year Ago

The sexual harassment charges never made it to court.

Lexi hadn't breathed easily during the month and a half it took to schedule a paternity test and get the results back. It usually only took a week to find out who the father was, but Elisa had kept dodging them at every move. She had always had an excuse, whether it was conflicting schedules or her just bitching about how the paternity test wasn't necessary because she just *knew* that Ramsey was the father.

After they threatened to sue her for defamation of character, Elisa had somehow managed to miraculously get the DNA swabs that they needed for the testing.

It had been the tensest month and a half of Lexi's life. Ramsey had kept trying to reassure her that nothing had happened, and she had really wanted to believe him. *God, did she want to believe him.* He had kept telling her to trust him. After all the lies, she hadn't known what to do.

They'd had a long-distance relationship for an entire year. It hadn't been easy, and they had been apart a lot. He'd had a million opportunities to be with someone else. She hadn't thought he had, but the seed of doubt had just kept cropping up.

*What if the kid was his? What if the sexual harassment was true?
What if they had slept together?*

The more she had thought about it, the more it had eaten at her from the inside out.

She had lost ten pounds that month. On someone who was already a petite woman just over five feet tall, ten pounds was a lot. Her clothes had stopped fitting right, and she'd had bags under her eyes. She had endured

three years of law school, and the possibility of Ramsey having a child with someone else had been the stress she couldn't handle.

When the results came back negative, Elisa's lawyer had dropped her like a sack of potatoes.

And Lexi could finally breathe again.

She could still remember the smile Ramsey had given her when he got off that phone call.

"Negative," he had said, picking her up and crushing her against him.

"Really?" she had whispered.

"Really."

"And the sexual harassment charges?"

It had all felt so surreal. One minute, she had been obsessing nonstop about the possibility of her boyfriend having a child with someone else, and then...he hadn't.

"Dropped," he had said, placing her gently back on her feet. He had taken up her face in his hands and claimed a kiss. "She won't ever bother us again."

"She just couldn't prove the charges? Or she has agreed that they were fabricated?" Lexi had asked against his lips.

"She just dropped the case. Her lawyer wouldn't help her after the paternity test came back negative. There was never a case. No grounds for them to stand on."

"Oh. So, she just gave up then?" Lexi had asked.

She hadn't been sure why she couldn't wrap her mind around this. Of course, Elisa had given up. She hadn't had any proof. She had tried to wager her son against a multimillion-dollar corporation, and she had run smack dab into a brick wall.

But that didn't prove that nothing had happened. It just brushed the dirt under the rug so that the floor looked clean for visitors.

So, they had moved on.

She had to make a choice. Either she accepted that Ramsey was the man she had always believed him to be, or she didn't. Really, there was nothing else she could do about it. The Bridges medical wing was opening in three weeks' time. They were all under a lot of stress as a year of work was coming to a conclusion. She had to choose.

If she didn't believe him, then that was the end. *Was she willing to walk away because of one cunt? There wasn't even any proof! Maybe that*

was the worst part. If she'd had proof one way or another that something had actually happened—even if the kid wasn't his—then she could have closure and move on. Without it, she had to go on blind faith. She had to trust Ramsey—the man she had given a second chance to a year ago after he had lied to her over and over and over again for a year straight.

That meant there really wasn't a choice. She wasn't giving up on Ramsey. If he said nothing had happened, then nothing had happened. She had been just as far away from him, and she hadn't done anything. He had never acted like anything had happened. Lying about his past did not make him a cheater.

She just had to remember that—while he spent every day with Parker.

The three weeks had disappeared in the blink of an eye, and suddenly, they were standing in front of the block of land that had been dirt a mere year ago. Now, it was a sixty-story, full-service hospital with a colossal Bridges Enterprise logo on the front. Lexi couldn't believe they had finished in time.

Ramsey might look sleek in a brand-new black Armani suit for the occasion, but he had been a hot mess all week. Mini earthquakes had kept shattering through the company's plans, and he had spent most of the week putting out fires. Lexi had taken a liking to one of the new receptionists immediately, and she had found herself spending more time with the new girl, Cierra, than upstairs with the big guys sorting out the details.

But finally, today was the big day—the official grand opening of the Bridges medical wing. A large ribbon had been stretched across the entrance, and standing at the front of the crowd were Ramsey and Parker. His father, Bekah, and other senior vice presidents in the company stood directly behind them. Jessica and John stood nearby, looking relieved that they had actually accomplished everything they had set out to do. Lexi wondered what their commission would be on this project, not that it was any of her business.

Personally, Lexi hadn't wanted to be anywhere near the spotlight. She had held back and stood off to the side among the growing crowd, far away from the media thronging the building for the best spot. She knew Jack was here, but he wasn't with Bekah, and she hadn't seen him when she arrived. Lexi just hoped this went better than the groundbreaking ceremony.

A hush fell over the audience as Ramsey stepped forward confidently. He started speaking when Lexi felt someone touch her elbow. She scooted

over to accommodate the person as she listened to her boyfriend deliver the opening speech.

“Sorry I was late. I got held up,” Jack whispered into her ear.

A chill ran down her spine at his nearness, and she fought to keep her eyes forward.

“Where were you?” she whispered back. “I thought you’d be here with Bekah.”

“No, she’s been really busy with this stuff lately. Gone a lot. I came on my own,” he told her. “I already hate the parking situation.”

Lexi bit on her lip to hold back her laugh. Ramsey had talked all the time about how shitty the parking was, even with the underground garage.

“You shouldn’t have been late then.”

“Probably not.”

“What were you doing anyway?”

“Picking up some things for the party tonight. I should have gotten them earlier, but I procrastinated,” he said, nudging her in the side.

“Doesn’t sound like you at all,” she whispered in a scolding tone.

“Not at all.” He chuckled lightly and crossed his arms, effectively ending their conversation.

She probably should be paying more attention anyway.

Lexi stared up at Ramsey. Pride washed over every other emotion that had manifested. Even if she hadn’t been sure about this venture to begin with, she couldn’t deny how happy it made her that he had done it. He had accomplished this against all odds. A year’s time should not have been long enough, but somehow, it had been. Now, they were standing on the threshold of a new beginning.

A few more speeches later, Parker and Ramsey held out a pair of giant gold scissors, and together, they sliced through the ribbon blocking the entrance to the medical wing. And just like that, Atlanta had a new hospital. Knowing how much work they had put into it, the actual ceremony felt largely inconsequential. It was a photo opportunity with a whole hell of a lot of applause and congratulations.

The real test would be seeing how the building actually ran. But in that moment, they had succeeded, which was what mattered. Tonight, they were throwing an enormous party to celebrate. She had actually splurged on a killer dress. Because if she was going to walk into that ballroom after

everything that had happened with Elisa the past two months, then she wanted to look damn good.

At the end of the ceremony, the crowd surged forward into the medical wing. Lexi held back and let the majority of the people follow Ramsey and Parker through the sliding glass doors. She had already been inside more times than she could count since the building had been constructed. She could let everyone else have a turn.

Jack squeezed her elbow lightly before disappearing with the crowd. She saw him catch up to Bekah. She was in conversation with someone else, and she barely acknowledged him when he wrapped his arm around her waist. Lexi took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. It was just something she'd had to get used to over the past year. It might make her blood feel like it was being pushed through sludge, but there was nothing she could do about it. She'd accepted that fact a long time ago.

The crowd dispersed, and Lexi moved over to the front desk where Cierra sat, staring wide-eyed at the large group. It was clear she had taken a lot of time to get ready that morning. Her black hair fell pin straight past her shoulders. Her caramel skin was highlighted with a shimmery bronzer, and her black eyes were rimmed with coal that made them pop. She had on a shiny burgundy lip gloss that was perfection. It never would have worked with Lexi's complexion.

"Hey, Cierra!"

"Lexi! Phew," she said, breathing out heavily. "Finally, a familiar face among the suits."

Lexi laughed lightly. "You'll get to know everyone as they come and go."

"I hope not. I prefer working with real people. Big-time suits make me nervous."

"I didn't think anything made you nervous," Lexi said, leaning against the desk.

"I mean, not physically nervous," she said with a shrug. "I just feel like they're always preparing to fire me."

"What?" Lexi asked. "No one is firing you. You're the best employee they have."

"Lexi...be real. There are surgeons and shit who are irreplaceable."

"Well, I told Ramsey that I like you. I doubt you're going anywhere."

Cierra's eyes widened further. "You've talked to Mr. Bridges about me?"

"Don't look so freaked-out. He's just my boyfriend."

Mr. Bridges. Ha!

"And my boss."

"Well, I'm his boss, so we're good."

They both laughed pretty hard at that. Lexi missed having Chyna around so much. It was nice being able to talk to Cierra. The only real friends she had in Atlanta were Brandon and Jack, and it wasn't like she could really talk to either of them about her relationship—not without getting serious looks at least. Krista lived too far out of the city for it to be practical to spend a lot of time with her, and Lexi hadn't connected with anyone at her office. She hoped Bridges kept Cierra, if for no other reason than that Lexi really wanted a girlfriend.

"Speaking of the boss," Cierra whispered, nodding her head and raising her eyebrows.

Lexi spun around and saw Ramsey standing there, waiting for her.

"There you are," he said, striding toward her. "I knew I'd find you here."

"Don't act like you know me," she said coyly.

"Oh, Lexi, I do know you." He pulled her into him and kissed her little button nose.

She giggled. "When do we get to leave?"

"Soon. I have to talk to a few more people, and then we can head out."

"Good. I'm ready to take you home."

He arched an eyebrow. "Sounds like we're going to have a night in," he said, brushing his lips against her ear.

"Ramsey," she said, smacking him on the arm and breaking out of his embrace. "Not here."

He chuckled at her. "Yes, I figured we'd go home first."

Lexi felt the blush creep up her neck. She was hardly prudish, but out in public like this at his work, she thought he would have had a bit of discretion. His gleaming green eyes told her that the last thing on his mind was discretion.

She heard a low catcall behind them, and she quickly swiveled around. Cierra was grinning from ear to ear at them, but she was trying to

play it off like she had been working busily at her computer the whole time.

“Did you just whistle at me?” Lexi sputtered out.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Cierra said with a smirk.

“They just let anyone work here, don’t they?” she asked playfully.

“Almost like they just let anyone stroll right inside,” Cierra said, winking at her.

“Y’all play nice,” Ramsey said, kissing Lexi’s forehead. “I’m going to go finish up.”

Lexi watched him walk away toward a crowd of people. She could see Parker chatting up a group of suits. She looked surprisingly uncomfortable. Lexi knew Ramsey preferred the spotlight, and Parker preferred the background work. She had still been working as a surgeon this past year, and as far as Lexi knew, Parker would be taking up that job here, too. *Seemed like a crazy life...*

Even after the stress Lexi had endured through law school and now while working for a prestigious company, she thought being a surgeon and helping to open and run a brand-new hospital just seemed...insane. It sounded like a person who wanted to run herself into the ground.

Whatever. Parker wasn’t any of her concern. If she wanted to run herself into the ground, that was fine...as long as she stayed away from Ramsey. Lexi had already had to deal with Elisa. She couldn’t deal with Parker, too, and not come out unscathed.

“I know we haven’t known each other very long, Lexi, and I might be overstepping...but you don’t have to worry,” Cierra said softly.

“What?” Lexi asked, her head snapping back to Cierra.

“You look at her like she’s a thief.”

“Who?”

“Ms. Mackenson.”

“Oh...Parker,” Lexi said.

“You don’t have anything to worry about. He worships the ground you walk on.”

“I know.”

“He doesn’t look at her like he looks at you.”

“I know.”

“Then, stop worrying so much. Don’t let that Elisa girl get into your head. That’s what she wants. If you let it bother you, then she wins.”

Lexi bit her lip. “How can I not let it bother me though?”

Cierra shrugged lightly. “That’s between you and your man. I’m just saying, if I had a man who looked at me like that...I would be worried for the girl who stepped wrong in his path because he wouldn’t put up with it.”

“Don’t you have a boyfriend?” Lexi asked, trying to redirect the attention.

“Boyfriend? More like a plaything,” she said with a giggle.

“Oh Lord...”

“Yeah, he’s younger. Doesn’t know what he’s in for.” Cierra winked at her dramatically.

“Are you bringing him to the party tonight?”

“Oh!” Cierra said, her eyes lighting up. “I’m so excited for this party. I’ll have him in tow. You can judge him for me.”

Lexi just laughed. “I look forward to it. See you tonight.”

Walking toward the group of people that Ramsey was talking with, Lexi thought about what Cierra had said. *Did she really look at Parker like she was a thief?* Lexi didn’t mean to if she did. But it was so hard not to be concerned after the lying and then this huge debacle with Elisa. Lexi just needed to take a deep breath and let it go.

Maybe tonight would help.



Splurging had been well worth it when she saw the look on Ramsey’s face after she came out of the bathroom, all done up for the party tonight. The strapless plum dress ruched around the middle, and reached the floor with a thigh-high slit showing off her tan lean legs. She paired the dress with long drop earrings that nearly grazed her shoulders and mile-high black Manolos. She had woven her hair up into an intricately messy braided bun with soft curls falling around her face. Her makeup was smoky, giving her a cat-like, seductive appearance, and she wore soft nude lipstick that highlighted her natural beauty and the grace of the dress.

“No,” Ramsey said, shaking his head.

“No?” she asked, her smile faltering. “No, what?”

“You can’t leave the house in that.”

“And why not?”

“Every guy in the place is going to want to get his hands on you,” he said, walking forward and running his hands down her sides.

“They’re going to have a pretty pissed senior vice president to contend with if they even think about trying.” She slid her palms up the front of his crisp black suit.

“Damn right, they will.”

She pressed her lips lightly against his, not wanting to smudge her makeup before their debut. He didn’t seem to have the same idea as he crushed Lexi against him. She squealed, trying to push him back to avoid touch-ups, but he didn’t listen and just kissed her until she gave in.

“I know it’s been rough lately,” he said, drawing back, “but I love you so much. I’m glad you stuck with me through the bad. I promise to keep pushing to make it better from here on out, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered, giving him the reassurance they both needed.

She wanted to believe what Cierra had said about him, and the easiest way to do that was to just keep saying it over and over. *It would sink in eventually.*



Their arrival at the party was with a big fanfare. Lexi thought it was mostly for Ramsey since he was a partner on the project, but with the way everyone kept eyeing her dress, she wondered if Ramsey had been right.

The party was set up at Opera in midtown, which on any other given day of the week was a packed nightclub complete with paid go-go dancers, a dance stage, and poles. The grandeur of the nightclub had been removed and replaced with an open dance floor and table with food. It had two levels, just like an old-fashioned opera house with balcony seating and crystal chandeliers.

The place maxed out at around a thousand people, and Lexi could see that they were likely going to hit capacity tonight. They had a lot to celebrate with the medical wing, and so many of the employees were here, dressed in their best. Bridges medical wing had only officially been open for a half day, and then tomorrow, it would be in full swing.

After Lexi and Ramsey managed to break through the crowd, they moved over toward the stage where Ramsey’s parents were in deep

conversation with some other executives that Lexi recognized. Bekah was in a tight, floor-length bright blue gown that made her baby-blue eyes pop out and her thin frame even more evident. Her blonde hair had been slicked straight back into a tight bun. She wore no jewelry, save for her wedding ring and two giant diamonds in her ears. Her shoes were champagne-colored peep toes with rhinestones running up the heel. Lexi hated how much she liked Bekah's outfit. *If only the Bitch were uglier...*

Jack wore a navy suit with just the top button clasped and a charcoal gray tie. He stood with one hand tucked into the pocket of his pants and the other hanging loose at his side as his eyes roamed the packed room.

Lexi and Ramsey made their way over to his family crowded together. She wasn't sure what his parents thought of her. Sometimes, they acted like they thought she was nice, but more often than not, they acted like she was this weird growth that had appeared at their son's side. She wasn't sure what she had to do to get their approval or if anything would ever be enough. Maybe if she started working for Bridges as an attorney—no, she would rather die than give in to that!

"Ramsey! You're finally here," Bekah said with a big fake smile. "We thought maybe you were held up with Parker."

Lexi glared at Bekah. Yes, she knew that Bekah was just trying to get a rise out of her, but damn, did Lexi want to throat-punch her for saying anything at all.

"Is Parker not here?" Ramsey asked.

"No, she hasn't shown up yet either."

"Yes, where is that Mackenson girl?" Ramsey's father roared. "She was supposed to be here earlier, like you were."

"I have no idea," Ramsey said, shrugging his shoulders.

"She always has been a little flighty," he mused. "At least I know that I can trust her to get a job done."

Ramsey stared forward at his father, like he was a pig that had just sprouted wings and was about to fly around the room. His father didn't give out compliments lightly, and to hear one about Parker and not directed at him must have been torturous. The clear implication in his father's words was that he couldn't always trust Ramsey. Even though he had done everything his father had wanted, Ramsey still had to deal with this type of behavior. Lexi wished they could just walk out.

“I’m sure she’ll be around,” Lexi said, leaning into Ramsey for support. “I’m going to go find the restroom. Come with me?”

“I have to stay here,” he said softly through gritted teeth. “Come back to me quickly.”

“Okay,” she said, wishing he had taken the out.

Lexi pulled Ramsey down to her by the front of his suit and kissed him on the mouth. He smiled against her lips as she showed him just how much he meant to her in that one motion. She pulled back marginally, and he was grinning like an idiot, looking down at her.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Lexi waited for him to nod before releasing him, and then she veered away from him to seek out the restroom. She glanced around at all the employees. She recognized so many, but there were far more she had never even seen before.

She found the restroom easily, but she took her time once she got in there. She didn’t really have to use the restroom, but she didn’t want it to seem like she had just disappeared for no reason. She washed her hands slowly and touched up her makeup before forcing herself to walk back out into the party.

Almost immediately, Lexi saw Cierra out of the corner of her eye and walked over to her, waving as she approached.

Cierra was in a short black sequined dress with high heels to match, and her boy toy was in a black suit with a skinny black tie. He was cute with a baby face, and he didn’t seem to see anything else in the room but Cierra. The girl was crazy if she didn’t think he looked at her like Ramsey did with Lexi.

“Hey, girl! You look fabulous!” Lexi said.

“Lexi! Thank you. You look great, too!” Cierra cried. “This is my man, Deon.”

“So nice to meet you,” Lexi said, taking his extended hand.

“Pleasure is all mine.”

He looked like he could be a basketball player. He was tall and skinny but still muscular. Lexi felt miniature next to his towering height.

“Are y’all having a good time so far?” Lexi asked.

“There’s an open bar,” Cierra observed. “I’m not sure the party can get much better than that.”

Lexi laughed. “Yeah, that’s a nice feature.”

“There you are,” Lexi heard someone say behind her right before she felt an arm wrap around her waist.

“Oh!” she said, trying to twist out of the embrace she hadn’t been expecting.

She turned in place and stared up into a pair of hazel eyes. She stopped squirming. *Damn, that man was attractive.*

“John,” she whispered.

“Lexi,” he said with a smug smirk. “It’s good to see you.”

Coming to her senses real quick, Lexi pulled out of his arms and stood up straight. She could feel Cierra’s and Deon’s eyes on her, but she couldn’t meet them.

“You, too. Have you met Cierra?” she asked, pulling them into the conversation. “She works at the medical wing.”

“Ah, I don’t believe I have,” he said, shaking her hand and then Deon’s.

“John works for Global. He was one of the people in charge of getting the hospital up and running in time,” Lexi explained.

“Wow, nice gig,” Cierra said, glancing at Lexi again.

“Well,” Lexi said awkwardly, “I’m glad y’all could make it. Come find me later.”

“All right, Lexi.” Cierra gave her a disapproving look.

For someone Lexi had known for only a few short weeks, she sure had Chyna’s stares down.

They left Cierra alone with her man, and Lexi and John wandered slowly toward Jessica, who looked stunning in a square-cut coral dress that hugged her frame to her knees before fanning out to the floor.

“You look...God, what’s the right word?” John said, eyeing her up and down appreciatively. “Stunning...radiant...”

She shook her head. “No need to continue. I get it. Thank you.”

John was in a light gray suit with a dark royal blue tie. Whatever cologne he was wearing tonight was musky and intoxicating. It made her head spin a little.

“I haven’t seen much of you lately,” he said.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Ah, with that Elisa girl?”

Lexi ground her teeth together. She knew that John would know about that. Everyone knew about it...but she really didn’t like to talk about it.

“I haven’t even thought about it,” she spat out.

“It’s just us. You don’t have to lie.”

“Look, I don’t really want to talk about it,” she said stiffly. “I should actually go find Ramsey now.”

“He’s just up there with Parker,” John said, gesturing to the front of the room.

Lexi’s head snapped up. *God, she hadn’t been gone that long, had she?* It shouldn’t have been a surprise to see her here...or them together, but it still was. Not to mention, Parker looked striking in the very casual, effortless way she always exuded.

She had on a forest-green dress with small swirls of black in it that accented her figure and slimmed her already trim form. The thin straps cut into a shapely V in the front before the dress dropped to pool at her feet. Standing next to Ramsey, it was clear she wasn’t wearing high heels because she still barely came up to his shoulder. Her brown hair was down, past her shoulders, and in a natural just-got-out-of-the-shower wavy style. Her freckles were evident against her pale skin, even from where Lexi was standing. The only true adornment that Parker wore was the bright cherry-red lipstick on her lips. Lexi had never really seen her in makeup before, and the lipstick made her look startlingly pretty.

“Is Ramsey’s tie green?” John asked into Lexi’s ear.

“Yes,” she said softly.

She hadn’t thought about it. His tie was green. *They matched—again.*
Ugh!

“They’re so cute together, huh?”

“Not working,” she said, stabbing a finger into his chest. “And you can cut it out. Now.”

John laughed. “I was kidding around. Someone is defensive.”

“I’m not defensive. I’m just...you’re talking about things you don’t understand. So, it’s better if you keep your nose out of it.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said, reaching for her arm to stop her from walking away. “I was seriously just messing around.”

“Fine.”

“Are you excited for Chyna?” he asked, hitting on a topic he knew she would gush about.

“Of course I am! I can’t believe this is all happening for her.”

“Adam told me that you are the maid of honor.”

“That’s right,” Lexi said. As if there were another choice.

“Sounds like I get to walk you down the aisle then.”

“Oh,” she said, letting the words sink in. “You’re the best man.”

That should have been obvious, too, but for some reason, it hadn’t been.

“That’s right.”

“Just throw a better bachelor party for Adam than the last one I went to,” she said.

She saw the comment had thrown him off guard, and it made her smile.

“You’ve...been to a bachelor party?”

“And I thought you knew everything about me,” she said with a wink before turning and walking away. *Let him mull over that one.*

By the time she made it back to Ramsey’s side, his father had launched into a congratulatory speech, thanking everyone for being in attendance and for their dedication to the company.

It always came back to that.

Ramsey slung an arm around Lexi’s shoulders and smiled down at her lovingly. She caught Parker staring up at him, but when she noticed Lexi looking, she turned away abruptly. If Lexi weren’t so suspicious, it would almost make her feel bad for Parker...almost.

The speech concluded, and everyone applauded. Music filtered in through the speakers, and that was the signal for everyone to begin dancing. Ramsey handed her a drink, and she took a relaxing sip of it. This was how things were supposed to be—easy and relaxing.

Parker waved at her, but she didn’t come over and say hi. Instead, she turned and walked toward Bekah. Lexi didn’t blame her, and she was glad that Parker had gotten the hint.

“Dance with me?” Ramsey whispered.

Lexi nodded, setting her drink down on a table and falling into his arms. The music had a hip-hop beat, but they didn’t care as they swayed back and forth in each other’s arms. Lexi rested her head on Ramsey’s chest and closed her eyes, savoring the sweet smell of peppermint.

They stayed like that for three more dances before Ramsey was pulled away to discuss business with some associates who would be leaving soon. She remained at his side through the entire boring interaction though, and

when he was finally able to walk away from them, he was carried into another conversation. They were swept around the room in a different kind of dance as they sought to accommodate all the guests who wanted his attention. The room started emptying out as the people who had to be into work the next day saw the hours ticking away. Ramsey said good-bye to one couple and then moved to say something to the person behind him, but he stopped dead in his tracks.

Lexi had been staring elsewhere, but she felt the shift in his mood immediately.

“What are you doing here, Elisa?” he growled.

Elisa. Fuck!

Lexi had never met her in person, and Elisa was every bit of what she had expected. She was average height, a couple of inches taller than Lexi, with bleached out blonde hair and a rail-thin frame. Lexi could see some of her ribs in her chest. Her lips were pinched together, and she looked like she might attack. How she had ever gotten inside wearing a skin-tight pink dress that barely touched the top of her thighs was beyond Lexi.

“How dare you not return any of my text messages or calls! How dare you threaten to *sue* me, Ramsey! How dare you say that all the things I said were a lie!” she said, rearing back and slapping him clear across the face.

The crack across his cheek silenced the people standing in their vicinity. The DJ blasting music through the speakers drowned the rest of the room out.

Lexi’s mouth dropped open at the sight, and Ramsey looked ready to backhand the girl right back.

Ramsey grabbed Lexi’s wrist and pulled her behind him slightly, blocking her view.

“Elisa, you need to get out of here *now*,” he said, his voice deathly serious.

“I’m not fucking leaving until you tell me what the fuck you’re going to do about all of this shit! My lawyer dropped me because of your fucking bullshit. He said he couldn’t prove that what I’d said was true, but fuck, I know that I had your dick up inside me without so much as a condom between us, baby. I had your cum inside me, and you fucking fired me as soon as you were done with me!” she shouted.

Lexi gasped—as did almost everyone else nearby. She tried to wiggle out of Ramsey’s death grip, but he wasn’t having any of it.

“Let’s get your facts straight,” Ramsey said through barely contained hatred. “You were a stripper. You took off your clothes for money. I never, ever would have touched you or any other girl in my establishments. You can ask Lola. You can ask any other stripper who worked for me. I wouldn’t go anywhere near you, especially without a condom.”

“You fucking say that now when you’re working for your daddy,” Elisa said with a snort. “In front of all these people who didn’t know who the fuck you were back then.”

“Oh my fucking God,” Lexi cried.

She yanked on her wrist, but Ramsey wouldn’t let go.

“Who is that? Your new pussy?” Elisa spat.

“Get out of here, or I’ll call the police.”

“Hiding your little kitty-cat from me? Afraid she’ll see the truth when we’re talking?” Elisa purred.

Lexi wiggled free in that moment and walked around Ramsey to glare at the bitch who had made her miserable for the past two months.

“Just leave,” Lexi said fiercely. “Just get out of here. You’re only embarrassing yourself. You’re fighting a losing battle, and the only thing you’re going to get out of this is a restraining order if not something more severe.”

“What? You think you’re a fucking attorney or something, kitty-cat?”

“Yes, actually, I am. And you’re nothing more than a stripper who got knocked-up by someone other than my boyfriend. You’re nothing more than an embarrassment. You can’t keep crying wolf and expecting people to take you seriously. My advice is to get far, far away from me, Ramsey, this facility, and the entire Bridges Enterprise, or we *will* take legal action,” Lexi said. “There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. If you keep harassing us, then I’ll take you to court myself. And I don’t lose.”

“I bet you don’t,” Elisa said, rolling her eyes.

Lexi could see a shift in her demeanor, a sense of unease.

Elisa took a step back as if she were going to walk away peacefully, but then she grabbed a drink sitting on a nearby table and threw the liquid at Lexi. Luckily, it missed her face, but it landed all over her brand-new dress.

Lexi’s mouth dropped open in shock. *Had Elisa really just thrown a drink at her?* The liquid sank into the material, and Lexi felt sticky all over at once. Lexi knew almost immediately that the dress was ruined. Another

expensive beautiful dress was ruined at a party...and this time, it wasn't even for something fun.

People rushed forward as one. Parker was at her side, and then Cierra was there, too. A few other people ran over with napkins and towels to try to clean off the dress, but Lexi knew it was useless. When she glanced up, Ramsey was walking with two muscular bouncers. They had picked up Elisa, who was kicking and screaming, and they were now carrying her out of the building.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Lexi said, shaking people off of her.

But she wasn't fine. Her hands were trembling with anger. She was trying desperately to hold it together in front of all these people.

Lexi walked over to a table and held her hand up to keep people at bay. Everyone stayed back, except for Bekah. For some unknown reason, she thought Lexi might actually want to talk to her. She had thought Bekah was the last person she wanted to see, but she was pretty sure that, for now, that spot was reserved for Elisa. Jack hovered just off Bekah's side—not really involved but not really out of it. He didn't seem to know where his place was.

"I can't believe you treated her like that!" Bekah said.

"What?" Lexi cried.

She was covered in some type of liquor, and Bekah was chiding her for how she had acted?

"Ramsey had it under control. If you hadn't said anything, she would have just left. Why do you always have to have the last word?"

Lexi's mouth dropped open. "Are you joking?"

"Just because you can't handle something that happened in Ramsey's past doesn't mean you can ruin the entire party with your antics," Bekah threw the words at her.

They landed all over Lexi's body like a punch to the gut.

"Why don't you just shut the fuck up?" Lexi snapped.

She couldn't hold back her anger—not now, not after what had happened with Elisa. Lexi visibly straightened and glared at Bekah. Lexi's dress was soaking wet from the crazy lunatic who was trying to tear apart Ramsey, and Bekah had the gall to yell at Lexi.

Lexi just couldn't take it.

"You didn't even care that your fiancé had cheated on you before he proposed. You don't get to be involved in this at all," Lexi said, her voice

barely above a whisper but so threatening that it might as well have been deadly. “So, why don’t you just go scamper off and worry about your marriage or something equally useless?”

Bekah’s eyes were on fire, and she was visibly seething. “You don’t get to talk to me like that, you little bitch. You weren’t good enough for Jack, and you’re certainly not good enough for my brother—”

“Bekah,” Jack snapped, moving in between them, “just leave her alone.”

“What?” Bekah nearly screeched. Her nose was scrunched up as she stared at Jack in shock.

“I said, leave her alone. You don’t need to attack her like this right now. It’s bad enough that someone wrongly accused Ramsey, and she’s dealing with the aftereffect. You don’t need to lay into her, too.”

Lexi and Bekah both just stared at Jack. *When had he ever stood up against Bekah? When had he ever kept Lexi and Bekah from each other’s throats?* Lexi didn’t know what to say to that. She just wanted to thank him because him speaking up had actually shut Bekah up...and that was all Lexi had wanted at this point.

“Come on, Bekah,” Jack said, taking her hand, “just walk away.”

So, she walked away.

And Lexi stood there, speechless.



Present

How fast had she run out of that apartment?

Jack's lips had hovered so close to hers. His eyes had been drunk with more than whiskey. She could practically hear his heart beating out of his chest. *Or had that been hers?* The heat rising between them had been like a blazing inferno threatening to overpower them both.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't look into those blue eyes and give in to the feelings he always stirred in her. They were friends now...just friends. And if he felt otherwise, then maybe she should stay away from him.

But her head knowing that didn't seem to connect with the rest of her body begging and pleading with her to stay—just stay, just one moment, give in. Give in to that smirk, those eyes, the pheromone-spiking smell of sex, to the heat and desire and passion that consumed them inside and out. All she would have had to do was close her eyes. It would have been that simple.

Jack knew what she wanted. He had always known. And it would be no different now.

No different.

No...it certainly wouldn't be different than any other time they had gambled their relationships away. No different than all the other times they had drawn a line in the sand only to cross it over and over and over again. No different than any of it.

"Then, I should go," she had whispered into the stillness.

His hand had come down hard on the doorframe to steady himself, and she had thought for a split second that he would cross that line they had drawn more than two years earlier.

"Yeah...yeah, you should."

“Your hand is still...” Lexi had gestured to the door where his hand had been covering hers.

He had withdrawn his hand with a sigh, and Lexi had turned the knob.

“Hey,” he had whispered.

Taking a deep breath, she had turned back to face him one more time. He had reached out and tucked another lock of hair behind her ear.

“I’ll miss you.”

And then, his lips had landed softly on her cheek, way softer than she had thought they would, considering how much alcohol was in his system. She had swallowed, yanked the door open, and bolted from the apartment.

Her hands shook as she fished out her car keys. She dropped them once and cursed loudly before picking them up and pushing a key into the door. Once it was open, she fell into the front seat and slammed her hands down repeatedly on the steering wheel.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” she cried, the tears threatening to let loose. “No. Please, no.”

She leaned forward, pressed her forehead into the steering wheel she had been abusing, and let the tears fall. She didn’t even know how to articulate what was ripping through her chest, but it hurt like a motherfucker.

She just wanted to claw her way through her chest and make all the pain go away. *How could he say those things to her? How could he say those things when he knew it didn’t matter, when he knew that she was marrying someone else? How could he put her in that position?*

The tears ran hot down her cheeks as the roller coaster of emotions unleashed all around her. And she couldn’t stop them from falling because she didn’t even know the true source of her pain. *Was she angry that he had said those things to her at all...or that he had said them too late?*



“So, let me get this straight,” Chyna said, pacing her flat.

Lexi sat with her feet scrunched up underneath. She had just told Chyna the whole story from start to finish, and she was waiting to hear the backlash.

“Jack told you that he loved you and that you should leave, and you actually walked out of his apartment?”

Lexi nodded solemnly.

“Chica, I’m shocked. Have you actually grown up? Do you have a temperature?” Chyna asked, walking up to her and pressing the back of her hand to Lexi’s forehead.

Lexi brushed her off. “No, I’m not sick, you crazy person.”

Chyna laughed and backed away when Lexi swatted at her again.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. You did the right thing. Jack was drunk and acting like...Jack. I know he hasn’t been that way for a while with you, but that doesn’t mean that the man isn’t still inside of him. I guess the divorce is just getting to him.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

“What are you going to do now?” Chyna asked, walking back to Lexi and sitting down.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...now that Jack is getting a divorce...he’ll be free again,” Chyna said softly.

“So?” Lexi said, looking at Chyna suspiciously.

“Stop looking at me like that. I know you love him.”

“I don’t...”

Chyna leveled her with a stare that stopped Lexi right in her tracks.

“Don’t even try that with me. I know how you are with Jack. You two might have been friends since he got married, but that doesn’t mean you love that man any less. Whether or not it’s stupid is not the question. It’s completely idiotic, but that doesn’t change the fact, not one bit.”

Lexi bit her bottom lip. “I’m not going to do anything. I’m getting married at the end of October,” she whispered, pushing the ring out in front of her as if Chyna didn’t know or hadn’t seen it.

“I know. I’m your maid of honor, remember?”

“I know you are. Speaking of being maid of honor, am I supposed to be doing anything in these last couple of weeks besides planning the bachelorette party that you’ve already planned?” Lexi asked, batting her eyelashes up at Chyna innocently.

“No. Speaking of bachelorette party, what do you want to do for yours?”

“I don’t know,” Lexi said with a shrug. “Isn’t that your job?”

“Have you even found a dress yet?” Chyna asked, ignoring her question.

“For the bachelorette party?”

Chyna rolled her eyes. “Don’t think you can fool me. You still don’t have a wedding dress, do you?”

“Um...”

“Alexa, you *need* to get one. We’re only six months out!”

“Six months is a long time!”

“I had my designer on that aspect of the wedding, like, two days after Adam proposed. I wanted her to have enough time to do the dress justice. That was before I even knew I was going to be part of fashion week that year and had to add a six-month extension on to the wedding. She breathed a sigh of relief when I told her she had six more months for it. Eighteen months, chica. Not six!”

“Well, I’m not having a big-time fashion designer put together my dress. I’ll buy that shit off a rack and have them tailor it. Can’t take that long,” Lexi said with a shrug.

“Sometimes, I wonder how we’re friends.”

Lexi chuckled at the differences between them. They certainly had drastically different backgrounds, but it had never mattered to Lexi. They worked just the way they were. Lexi was sure Chyna wouldn’t want a friend who mooched off her, and just as likely, she wouldn’t want someone with as much money as her. Most of the other people in the latter category were even more self-absorbed than her best friend, not that she would have Chyna any other way.

“Do we need to go out and look for a dress for you?” Chyna asked, standing quickly at the prospect of shopping.

“Um...no. It’s not a big deal. I’ll find something.”

Chyna dramatically rolled her eyes. “Can we at least go look for a bridesmaid dress for me or something?”

“Aren’t I supposed to be here to help you with *your* wedding?”

“Yes, but my wedding is planned. You just need to show up.”

“Then, what am I doing here?” Lexi asked, exasperated. She had gotten out of work for this.

“Because you needed to get away from Atlanta.”

Lexi opened her mouth to protest.

“Away from that divorce, by the looks of it. Maybe away from Ramsey for a bit, too.”

Lexi sighed heavily and rested her head back against the couch. “Isn’t this supposed to be the happiest time of my life?”

“I think a lot of people find wedding planning to be insanely stressful. And while the day of is supposed to be spectacular since it’s one big party...it’s usually pretty nerve-racking and stressful, too. I don’t think it’s strange that you’re freaked-out by this,” Chyna said thoughtfully. “I mean, especially because you freak out about everything.”

“You must have me confused with someone else.”

“Try and tell me that half of this anxiety doesn’t come from Jack’s imminent divorce.”

“Not half—”

“And the other half doesn’t come from shit with Ramsey—the past of lies, that Elisa bitch...what happened last summer.”

“Let’s not talk about that,” Lexi snapped.

“Okay, fine,” Chyna said, throwing up her hands. “Live in your delusional life right now, but one day, you are going to have to face up to all of these anxieties. Wouldn’t it be better to just tell me about them, so you can move on, rather than sitting in your head and obsessing over everything? I’m here for you. I know the stupid shit you’ve done. You know the stupid shit I’ve done. I’m not going to judge you. What do you want, Alexa? What makes you happy through all of this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Seriously?” Chyna asked. She planted her hands on her hips and practically glared at Lexi. “You don’t know what you want?”

“I mean...I know what I want.”

“Then, just forget all the other bullshit. Forget all the drama—Ramsey, Jack, Bekah, Parker, Elisa, John. Just forget it. Tell *me*.”

“I want Ramsey,” she said automatically.

“I told you to forget about the bullshit. Don’t feed me cookie-cutter answers. I know that you love him, and you agreed to marry him, but that doesn’t tell me what *you* want,” Chyna cried. “Why does this have to be so difficult? You know what I wanted most of my life?”

“One-night stands?”

Chyna gave her a stilted laugh. “I wanted my parents to leave me alone. I wanted to forget about how much they fucked me up when they got

divorced. I wanted their memory not to taint every relationship...every thought of a relationship...even a friendship. And you know what? Then, I found you. They can't touch you. So, I won at least part of that even if I have to fight the rest of it daily. I won. They didn't. I got what I wanted. I found a best friend who didn't treat me like they did, who treated me like a person. I've made mistakes...I mean, every once in a while," she said, raising her eyebrows with a smirk on her perfect lips. "But I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't going to settle for less than that."

"While I appreciate the sentiment, are you going to tell me you didn't settle for less than that all of those years you were sleeping around with half of Manhattan?"

"I wasn't looking for a relationship then. I'm sure I wouldn't have found one with the guys I was taking home. Aren't you surprised I'm getting married?"

"A hundred percent," Lexi said without skipping a beat.

"Bitch!" Chyna cried. "Anyway, this isn't about me. I was stupid, and I didn't go after what I wanted all the time either. I fucked it up with Adam twice, but once I realized that he was it, I haven't looked back. I just *know*. It's like after Marco blacklisted me for over a year. I just didn't give in to his demands, but I still went after modeling. I never stopped. Then one day Corsa calls me back, says that Marco lifted the blacklist, and that she wants me for fashion week. I won. I got what *I* wanted. So, cut the bullshit and talk to me."

Lexi took in a shuddering breath. Chyna wasn't messing around, and Lexi couldn't act like it was all a joke any longer. Just considering everything Chyna had said made Lexi want to burst into tears. Because the truth was that her head had been so fucked-up for so long that she didn't even know what she wanted.

She thought that was Ramsey. She had certainly been saying it was Ramsey for long enough. He was perfect. He loved her fiercely. He wanted what was best for her. There was absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to be with a man like that. *How could she resist a man who treated her like that?*

But then, there was that feeling...that moment...that ate away at her heart. *Doubt*. Chyna had hit the nail on the head. She had been with Ramsey for almost three-and-a-half years now, and she still couldn't say whether or

not she actually trusted him. It felt ridiculous—absolutely ridiculous. *How could she waver about someone when she had been with him that long?*

But it still sat there—that seed of doubt—creeping up her spine, spreading out through her nerve endings, paralyzing her when she least expected it.

“I want to...stop feeling like I have to try so hard,” she finally whispered. “I feel like I’ve spent all this time just trying to hold in everything. I can’t be irritated about Parker because I’m friends with Jack. I have to just forget about Elisa because the company wants to forget about Elisa. I have to just accept the man who works a country-club life because he did it for me—when I never asked for any of it! I just have to accept that Ramsey did everything for me because he loves me. I just have to accept that Bekah is trying to tear Jack apart when all I want to do is make it right. I can’t seem to do anything without my past creeping up and smothering me. Above all else, I just want to forget about my past and live my present. Why is that so fucking hard?”

She hadn’t been able to hold in the tears. *God, she hated that.* But they came to her anyway, and she buried her head into her hands, trying to force them to stop.

Chyna sighed, and Lexi felt the couch dip in when Chyna sat down next to her. She rubbed Lexi’s back, and they let her tears run their course.

“I think the problem isn’t that you can’t forget your past. It’s that you don’t really want to,” Chyna spoke finally.

“What?” Lexi asked, swiping the back of her hand against her cheek.

“Your past shapes who you are as a person. It’s made you into the person you are today. Jack left his mark on you, and Ramsey left his mark on you. Scars can last forever.”

“I know that it shaped me, but that doesn’t mean I can’t change.”

“Of course you can change,” Chyna said, clearly trying to hold in her usual cattiness. “Everyone can change, and I think you have. I just think that the one thing you haven’t changed is running from the things you want. It’s like you think you’re not good enough, like you don’t deserve the world and more—but you do.”

Lexi brushed off Chyna and stood. She made a full circuit of the living room before making up her mind about what she wanted to say.

“You tell me all of this—you say that I run from what I want, that I deserve more, but I don’t know what else I could do to make that a reality.

I've pushed myself completely into this relationship. I moved to Atlanta. We moved in together. We've gone through highs and lows, ups and downs, sideways and back ways—”

“I don't need to hear about your sex life,” Chyna said, arching an eyebrow suggestively.

Lexi chuckled but continued on, “I'm just saying that I have tried everything and more to make this relationship work. Doesn't that *prove* that's what I want? Doesn't that *prove* that I deserve to have some semblance of peace and happiness?”

“You've put everything into this relationship?” Chyna asked softly.

“Yes!” Lexi cried, exasperated.

“Then, just answer my one question,” Chyna said, moving to stand directly before Lexi. “Why haven't you been able to let Jack go? Through all of this...he's still here.”

“I've let him go. We're just friends.”

“He told you he loved you and wanted to take you home with him. I don't have friends like that.”

“Are you *trying* to push me toward Jack? He got married! He married Bitch Bekah!”

“And now, he's divorcing her! I'm not saying that you have to run back to Jack...again. I'm just telling you to think about your life, Alexa. I'm telling you to be a grown-up and realize that some of what you're going through might just be your own fucking fault! You might love Ramsey and have put everything into this relationship, but you're only fooling yourself when you keep saying that you and Jack are just friends,” Chyna said, pushing Lexi's shoulder in a rage. “I think that's what pisses me off the most. You can have it, have all of it, what everyone searches for, but you do everything in your power to fight it!”

Lexi sagged visibly, feeling the weight of Chyna's words. “I don't know how to do anything else.”



Pushing open the door as quietly as possible, Lexi eased into the apartment she shared with Ramsey. She had bumped up her flight from New York and taken the red-eye back that night. Chyna had tried to get her

to stay longer, but Lexi knew where she needed to be tonight. She had taken off the weekend to work with Chyna on wedding plans, but Lexi really needed to be here, working on things with Ramsey.

She needed to see him, to touch him, to hold him, to remember why she loved him so damn much. She didn't normally need that reminder. She didn't have to be around him at all times to feel those three-and-a-half years envelop her like a blanket. But tonight—well, tonight was different. Chyna had made her all topsy-turvy, and she wanted to be right-side up again. She wanted her initial gut reaction, the one she had been saying over and over again for three years, to be instinctual, to always be at the tip of her tongue. She didn't want to think about anything else. *That* was what she wanted.

In that moment, she didn't care if she was lying to herself about it.

She shut and locked the door behind her and then tiptoed upstairs through the darkened apartment. She had left her bags in her car since she didn't want to have to haul them upstairs in the middle of the night. All she wanted was to see Ramsey.

Her feet carried her to the end of the hallway. She stood in front of the closed door to their bedroom and took a deep breath before pushing it open.

Ramsey was lying on his side of the bed, curled in, facing where her body normally lay next to him. He looked so calm with the covers falling half off his bare muscular torso. She smiled at the familiar picture—one that she had grown accustomed to and taken for granted. She got to sleep next to him every night. Even when she staggered into bed, exhausted, she still felt the warmth of his embrace and the acceptance between them. Those were the things that mattered.

Lexi easily stripped out of everything but her underwear and crawled into bed, next to him. He didn't even stir as the bed dipped under her weight. Moving forward, she pressed her chest against him and then her whole body. Without even opening his eyes, his arm came around her, holding her gently in place against his body.

She trailed her hand up the definition in his six-pack, to his built chest, up his neck, and then to the strong jawline. At first, her lips landed on his lightly, but then her increasingly demanding kisses began rousing him from slumber.

His fingers digging into her back was the first indication that he had awoken, and then his lower half pressed into her before finally his lips parted to let her tongue inside his mouth. They kissed passionately,

desperately, as she fed him every emotion locked away in her body. He didn't hold back either as he began a slow grind against her. She could feel him stiffening through the thin layer of clothes separating them.

"Baby," Ramsey growled against her mouth, rolling her over and pressing her firmly into the bed.

"Mmhmm..."

"You're home early."

"I needed you," she said, giving him the most honest answer she had.

She needed the physical connection now more than ever before. She needed the reminder tonight that she was making the right choice.

"I love to hear that," he groaned. He spread her thighs and eased down between them, continuing to grind against her.

"Make love to me," she all but whimpered as his cock pushed against the thin material of her underwear.

Removing their last layer of clothes, Ramsey settled back down between her legs and took her for his own. She felt him pull back and meet her again and again, and she tried to keep her mind in the here and now.

This was what she wanted. She wanted to have this feeling, to know he was hers and she was his. To feel him and know that she was going to have this for the rest of her life...that this was what she wanted for longer than that.

She could feel him straining to release, and her walls were tightening around him, quaking at his measured thrusts.

She loved this man.

She fucking loved this man.

They might have their problems, but every couple had problems. She could get past everything that had happened. She could deal with the problems they had faced, like she had been since the beginning. Because here and now...was the right decision.

She wasn't going to fight him on this.

And she didn't as he pushed her over the edge, sending waves of pleasure from her core to the very tips of her fingers. She closed her eyes, savoring that feeling, and then she let her body relax back into the bed.

Ramsey collapsed over her before pulling out.

"I love you," he said.

He kissed her lips and then slid off the bed to head into the bathroom.

Her endorphins spiked and then released. It was like she was hitting the bottom of a sugar high. She rolled over and buried her face into the pillow.

If this was how she was supposed to feel, then why did she have to keep reminding herself she was happy?



December Ten Months Earlier

Atlanta was a bustle with tourists throughout the holiday season. Traffic clustered the interstates, the malls were packed with Christmas shoppers, and everywhere Lexi went, the city was full of Christmas cheer. It was unseasonably cold for the South. These low temperatures didn't normally hit until the end of January or early February, and they lasted only a few weeks at most. She was surprised to be constantly clad in her New York attire of sweaters, knee-high boots, and peacoats. She loved the layers, but she was already missing the summer.

The law firm had given her two weeks off around Christmas, and she had no idea what to do with herself. Last Christmas, she'd had three days off. She figured the extra time off came from paying her dues...or maybe they had just seen how much of a wreck she had been recently. It certainly didn't help when her relationship woes had made it into the news.

When Elisa had been hauled out of Opera that night two months ago, she had been arrested for trespassing. The local Atlanta news had reported on the event, including a picture of Ramsey and Elisa together outside of the venue. It had been all sorts of humiliating.

His father had been worried about the backlash against the company and ran a series of press releases, trying to do minimize the damage. But aside from the embarrassment, it hadn't done anything to the medical wing. In fact, it seemed to get the word out even more, and the new building was flooded with people. Lexi just hoped the company didn't try to use personal scandals to get more business after this.

The one benefit from all of this was that Ramsey had been incredibly chill about everything in her life. Going to lunch with Jack was no big deal. Spending time with Brandon didn't irk him. She didn't know if he had just

let go of his concerns or if he just didn't want to put her through anything else after that. She wanted to believe that he trusted her, so that was what she was going with.

Either way, it was a relief not to have to worry so much. Ramsey had always said that he didn't care about Jack and Brandon or anyone else as long as they kept their hands to themselves, but she had never really believed him. After that incident with Elisa when Lexi had been left standing in the middle of Opera with a glass of vodka poured on her, then Jack saving her from Bekah, and no one but Cierra and Parker to look after her—well, things had changed.

And it seemed that the change was needed.

Even when she had hung out with people when Ramsey had said he didn't care, she had still felt like she was tiptoeing around him in some ways—but not anymore. It was like someone had flipped a light switch.

So, when John called her out of the blue, she actually answered the phone. If Ramsey was going to be cool about everyone else, then surely, she had nothing to hide regarding John.

"There's a name I haven't seen on my phone in a while," Lexi said when she answered.

"Babe, I've missed your voice," John said seductively.

"You don't strike me as a man who wants a talkative woman," she joked.

"Just you."

"Oh, ha-ha!" Lexi rolled her eyes. *The man never gave up.* "What did you really call me about?"

"It's cute how you think I'm joking."

"It's cute that you think I'm that oblivious."

John chuckled through the phone. "I don't, not at all. I'm actually just coming into Atlanta for the weekend. Bridges kept me on for the main contact for the medical wing, and they're due for a sixty-day inspection checkup. I heard that you had the week off, and I wanted to see if you'd be interested in keeping me company."

"How the hell do you know if I have the week off?" Lexi asked, sitting up straighter. *Christ, how did he always know things about her?*

"You do, don't you?"

"Yes, but how do you *know*?"

"That hardly matters."

“It’s just weird that you always know these things. Who do you talk to? Is it Adam or something?” Lexi probed.

“Do you just not want to spend time with me? Is that why you’re stalling?” he asked with a laugh. “I hardly believe that, or you wouldn’t have picked up my call.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“Or is it your boyfriend who doesn’t want you hanging out with me? Is he trying to avoid another company scandal like his big fuck-up with that Elisa chick? Shouldn’t he have known better than to go outside with her that night?” John asked, tsking softly under his breath.

Lexi ground her teeth together. *Elisa*. Just the name brought bile to her throat in these circumstances. She was a step below Bekah on the hatred scale.

“You’re not making your case at the moment,” Lexi grumbled.

“So, it is the boyfriend then?”

“No,” she snapped. “Ramsey doesn’t care who I hang out with because he doesn’t have anything to worry about.”

“Of course he doesn’t, babe,” he said.

She could almost see his smirk.

“Then, you’ll have no reservations about spending some time with me while I’m in Atlanta, all alone, right before Christmas.”



And that was how Lexi ended up touring the Bridges medical wing with John the week before Christmas. It had been fully functional for just over two months now, and as far as Lexi could tell, it was running smoothly. Ramsey didn’t complain half as much as he used to before it had opened, so she assumed things had fallen easily into place.

John was in a crisp black suit and black tie when he met her outside of the glass front entrance to the Bridges medical wing. By the look of the suit, his work for Bridges was paying off handsomely. Years back, Chyna had taught her how to pick out an expensive suit, and Lexi would put her money on a Fifth Avenue boutique.

She had dressed more casually in an oversized cream sweater paired with a burgundy skirt, patterned tights, and knee-high caramel riding boots.

She had a navy knit infinity scarf wrapped around her neck twice, and her long brown hair hung loose. Her hands were stuffed into the long sleeves of her sweater as she jogged up to John. Her cheeks and nose were pink from the wind, and she shivered.

“Inside,” she said in greeting and then walked toward the building.

He laughed and caught up to her easily. “This is not cold weather.”

“You told me that last year, and it didn’t matter then.”

“Wow...was that a year ago?” he mused aloud.

Lexi nodded. It was hard to believe that it had been a year and a half since she had walked out of Jack’s wedding, since she and Ramsey had worked things out, since she had told John that they couldn’t date. It was a bit surreal that they were all in her life still in some capacity.

As much as John knew about her life, she never asked him about his. She tried to keep it as professional as possible. He always tried to cross that line just a little bit at every interaction, but she never tried. She wondered if she should ask him about his life, but then she stopped herself. *What good would that do?* He would just think that she had taken a renewed interest. He took that from everything she did.

But she was curious. It wasn’t like he was *actively* pursuing her, but he still was trying to see her when he was in town. That made her think that he wasn’t dating anyone seriously. She hated when her curiosity got the better of her.

Lexi blew on her hands as she walked into the hospital. She wished she had brought her coat with her. She hadn’t wanted to have to carry it around with her though in case Cierra wasn’t there to let her stash it.

“Need me to warm you up?” John asked, coming up behind her.

“No, thank you.” She jumped away from him, and her eyes darted around the cavernous entrance room.

Ramsey knew that she was coming into the hospital today, but she hadn’t been sure when they were actually going to arrive, so she hadn’t let him know the specific time. He really could be anywhere inside, but she hoped that they ran into him. Maybe she should just text him.

She fingered her phone in the pocket of her skirt, but then she decided against it. If he knew she was already here, then he would come seek her out. She preferred to avoid awkwardness at all costs. John, after all, was the man who she had slept with after she had broken up with Ramsey. He might

say he was okay with it and even act like it, but she sure didn't like standing between them.

"This way," John said, motioning her toward the elevators.

"What's the plan?"

"Haven't you wanted to walk every floor in the building?"

"No. Not really," she said honestly.

"No, me either. So, we'll skip some. Pop in here and there, and scare people half to death."

"You should have brought a clipboard," Lexi said.

"We'll nab someone else's."

They hopped onto the elevator, and John chose a floor seemingly at random. She was sure that he had detailed instructions about what he was supposed to be doing, but he hadn't shared that with her. That was fine by her. She didn't want to know any more about the inner workings of the medical wing than she already did from living with the person who had started the company over a year ago.

They wandered up and down the hallways, talking about trivial things. He would stop to talk to people in various rooms, and she would wait outside for the few minutes that he would be inside. She did a lot of people-watching and felt a bit like she was watching a television hospital drama with all the people chatting and wandering between disasters—not to mention, the obvious love interests.

John announced that they were halfway through, and they stopped for a minute, so she could pick up some coffee. She wasn't sure why she was tired...or maybe she was just craving her coffee. Either way, the bitter taste was the pick-me-up she needed. Also, the liquid gave her courage to actually ask John the questions she'd had at the back of her mind.

"So, are you seeing anyone?" Lexi asked, blowing on her coffee.

"Why? Are you still interested?"

"Nope. I have Ramsey. I was simply curious."

John looked at her sideways, assessing her, before answering, "Nothing serious."

"So, you are seeing someone! What's she like? Is she putting up a fight?" Lexi asked with a giggle.

She didn't know why she found this amusing. It could just be because he always made fun of her about Ramsey. She just couldn't hold it in.

"I'm not seeing anyone," he told her stiffly.

“But you are or else you wouldn’t be acting like this.”

“I also wouldn’t be here with you, would I?”

Lexi snorted. “Yes!”

“Well, I know you’re worried, but you can stop. It’s not serious. Just something fun,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Uh-huh. So, what is she like? What does a girl have to do to hold your interest?”

“I’m looking at it,” he said, staring her down.

Lexi’s cheeks heated at the comment, but she pushed forward. “Are you saying that she’s like me?”

“No, she’s nothing like you. That’s why it’s not serious.”

Lexi didn’t know what to say to that. It had been a year and a half since they’d had any kind of sexual relationship. Sure, it had been a great month together, but she had stood her ground and put it behind her. If she could manage to be friends with Jack, then she could do anything.

Surely, all of John’s antics were more funny than serious. He was a man in a place of immense power. He’d graduated with a Harvard MBA, worked at Global, and had his own loft in the city. She just couldn’t see him pining after anyone—not when there were a million women in the city who he could chase after.

“Well, I hope she changes your mind, erm...proves you wrong,” Lexi said.

“It’s doubtful.”

“I’m sure you can find someone else to keep you occupied fairly easily.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” John said confidently. “There’s always another fish in the sea and all that. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“I mean, not...exactly.”

“I’m the last person who needs your pity.”

“I wasn’t trying—”

John turned and grabbed her hand. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

Lexi was so surprised by the abrupt change in the conversation that she just followed him down the hall. She hadn’t meant to come across as pitying him. She certainly didn’t look down on him for not having a girlfriend or for not settling down. To each his own for whatever lifestyle he wanted. Of all people, she definitely wasn’t the model for how to go about

relationships. It wasn't her place to judge, and she hoped he didn't think that.

"Where are we going?" Lexi finally asked after they had taken the elevator to another floor and had rounded a corner to another hallway.

"I'll show you."

Lexi bit her lip, a sinking feeling settling into her stomach. She didn't know where it had come from or what had made her apprehensive, but it just stuck in her gut. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear reflexively and continued to follow him down the hallway.

They stopped at a closed door. John knocked twice, and when no one answered, he opened the door and ushered her inside.

"What—" she began but then stopped when she saw where they were.

They were in a relatively small room with two bunk beds and a small computer desk.

"Where are we?"

"This is the on-call room," he said, sliding his hands down her arms.

Lexi jumped when he touched her, and she pulled away from him.

"It's for doctors to sleep or relax when they're on-call in the hospital."

"Oh," she peeped. Her heart was accelerating as she stared at the small room. She didn't know how true hospital shows really were, but this was frequently shown as the room where all the doctors had sex. She wanted to laugh it off, but she didn't feel like laughing in that moment. She felt anxious.

"You know that night when you told me that I didn't compare to your ex...to Jack. You said that you gave it up easy, but you didn't do commitment," John said, walking toward her.

Lexi took a step away from him. "I didn't say that...exactly," she whispered, wondering where he was going with this.

"I think you did. And I'm a bit confused by a couple of things," he said. "Would you care to explain a few things to me?"

"Um...sure," she said, taking another hesitant step backward. She didn't know what he was going to ask her, but her unease was peaking.

"You dated Jack a long time, right?"

"Um...no. We've never dated actually."

"But you were together."

"Well, not exactly."

"Sleeping together," John offered.

“Um...yeah.”

“And you’ve been dating Ramsey now for over two years?”

“Yeah. Two and a half.”

“That seems pretty committed to me.” John arched an eyebrow.

“I just said that getting me to commit is the hard part...not impossible.”

“Committed to Ramsey and still seeing Jack though, right?” John asked, stepping into her again.

Lexi took a few more steps to put distance between them again. Brushing her hair behind her ear, she glanced away and tried to wrap her mind around where John was going with this. *What did any of it matter to him? And why did he look so angry?* His hazel eyes were dark under his thick black lashes, and his body was stiff where he was normally relaxed.

“Jack and I are just friends. We’re not seeing each other. I don’t know what you’re trying to prove in this conversation, but I think we should leave,” Lexi said, trying for her best courtroom voice.

“You’re friends with someone you slept with since college?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, some people do learn to grow up,” she spat back. Then, it hit her. “How do you *know* about me and Jack? I haven’t told you about our relationship. Who did you talk to? How do you keep finding all of this out?”

John just shrugged.

“Why do you want to know all of this anyway?” she asked. “What do you gain from it?”

John strode forward quickly, and Lexi took another unsteady step backward. Her back hit the wall, and he hovered close over her. She held her breath as he stood there. A million scenarios went through her mind at once.

She didn’t want whatever he was offering. She liked him, and they got along, but he also put her on edge. Most of the time, it was because of the physical attraction that was still there between them but not at this moment. This felt different. She could feel the physical need simmering underneath it all, but there was something else there that she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“I told you once that I wasn’t going to play fair. You don’t play fair, so I wasn’t going to. The more that I found out about you, Lexi, just proves

that you've never played fair—leading Jack on for years and forcing Ramsey to be around Jack. All the while berating Ramsey for being around Parker when you're around Jack.”

“What is the point of all this?” she snapped. “Don't judge me for the life I live! You don't know what I've gone through to get here, and I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions.”

“Walk away from it all.”

Lexi's eyes bulged at the comment. *Where the hell had that come from? Walk away from her life? From the life she had fought tooth and nail for?*

Was he mentally insane?

There was no way that she was going to walk away from Ramsey. They had their ups and downs, but he was the real deal, the sure thing. As long as Elisa was behind them and she could trust him around Parker, then they would be fine.

And Jack...

Well, Jack, she had finally made peace with. They were friends. *Just friends. Nothing else. Not ever again.*

She wasn't going to give that up now that it was finally working. She never thought that she would be able to call Jack her friend in any real sense. The sexual tension between them had always been too palpable, but they had made it work. And she needed him.

“Walk away from what? My life?”

“Just leave it all behind,” he said softly. He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch her, but he didn't.

“I can't leave my life behind. Do you know how crazy that sounds? I just want to get out of here,” she said, pushing against his chest to try to walk past him.

John caught her wrists and pulled her in against him. The breath whooshed out of her lungs as her chest collided with him roughly.

“I'm offering you an out. You want to get away. I want you to get away with me. Come back to New York. Hang out with Chyna. Spend time with me.”

Lexi shook her head back and forth and tried to wrench her hands back from him. “No. You can't tell me to give up my life because you want to date me. I already told you no...a year and a half ago. Now, let me go!”

“Why do you fight like this?”

“Because you’re hurting me,” she said, gesturing to where he still held her in place.

John released her, and she pushed back against his chest again.

“I told you no. I’m sorry that you can’t accept no, but my answer hasn’t changed. I love Ramsey. I’m dating Ramsey.”

“Do you want to marry him? You said you’re not the marrying type... is he?” John asked.

“That’s none of your business. You seem to know everything else about my life. How come you don’t know the answer to that question?”

“I already know he is. I just want you to see how wrong you are together.”

“And what?” she asked angrily. “To prove that we’re right for each other? You prove that with actions, not words.”

“Then, let me prove it. You’re going to look back on this moment and regret not taking the out. I can see it all over you. I know you, Lexi,” John told her.

She stepped around him. “We were talking for a total of one month. We had sex *once*. We might have hung out since you were working on the Bridges hospital, but I’m not walking away, and I’m not going to regret it.”

Lexi turned and walked toward the door. She couldn’t believe she had just had this conversation. The audacity of that man to actually say these things to her—to try to convince her to give up Ramsey, her friendship with Jack, her life in Atlanta for something with him in New York—and the very idea of it all was outrageous.

John stalked after her, keeping her from the door. “I’m not saying walk away *because* of me. I’m saying walk away with me. We could very well fall to pieces in a couple of months, but at least you would know. You wouldn’t be doing this run-of-the-mill thing to satisfy anyone else but yourself.”

“And how do you know that I’m doing this for anyone else but me?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “You think that I decided to love Ramsey because he wanted me to? That I decided to move in with Ramsey because he wanted me to? That I decided to be friends with Jack because he wanted to? I’m pretty sure I had a say in all of that!”

John laughed softly and shook his head. He actually looked distraught from her speaking. “The fact that you’ve deluded yourself into thinking that

is the saddest part of all of this,” he said, forcefully opening the door and walking out into the hallway.

Lexi stormed after him, ready to give him a piece of her mind. John stopped short just out of the door, and she faced him, ready to yell at him some more, but then she got a good look at what had made him stop.

Ramsey and Parker were standing only a few feet from the on-call room. They were talking to each other but were walking straight toward Lexi and John. When Lexi had stormed out of the on-call room, Ramsey and Parker had both looked up at her.

Fuck!

No way did this look good. She was all angry and flustered because of the conversation she had just had with John, and now, she had to deal with this. Ramsey was in a suit, as usual, but Parker was dressed in scrubs with her hair up in a messy ponytail. Walking away in that moment didn't sound so bad.

“Lexi,” Ramsey said, “I didn't know you were at the hospital already.”

She knew that she should have texted him to let him know that she was here, but she had planned to do it when she was done, so she could spend time with him. Now, she had been caught walking out of the room known for where doctors had sex. *Just fantastic.*

“Yeah, I got here a while ago. We've just been wandering the hallways as John does his report.”

“Part of his inspection was in the on-call room?” Ramsey asked, keeping his voice even.

But Lexi could see that he wasn't pleased.

Parker forced a stilted laugh. “I'm sure it was nothing.”

They all stood there awkwardly in the minute of silence. Lexi wasn't sure what to say. She knew Ramsey would be pissed if he knew what John had been saying to her. She figured the extent of Ramsey acting cool with her being friends with these men extended only as long as they kept their distance. John had crossed that boundary. No, it was more like he had hurdled the line at a full sprint.

“We just finished anyway,” John said casually.

Lexi glared at him. Of course he would find a way to make it sound dirty.

“He was just showing me around. I didn’t even know what room it was,” Lexi admitted.

“I’m going to finish my inspection now. I believe she’s yours to take care of,” John said crisply, offering Lexi up.

“Yes, perhaps you should finish your work here,” Ramsey said, taking Lexi’s hand and pulling her toward him, claiming her.

“I can escort you the rest of the way,” Parker said immediately.

Lexi wondered if Parker could get any nicer. Lexi wanted to hate the woman, but she just couldn’t. She didn’t like the history between Ramsey and Parker, but she would give Parker the same chance that Ramsey had given Jack.

Parker moved to stand next to John, and then something crossed Parker’s face that Lexi hadn’t noticed before. Parker looked happy... happier. Normally, when Lexi was around her, Parker had this dejected, aloof expression about her, but it was missing.

“Wait,” Lexi muttered, her head spinning. *Could she be imagining it?*

“What?” John and Ramsey asked at the same time.

“Are you seeing Parker?” Lexi spat out in shock. She really hoped that she was wrong. Honestly, for Parker’s sake, she hoped that she was wrong.

Parker’s cheeks colored immediately, and she looked down at the ground. John just looked smug.

Shit! Oh God, the girl that he had been talking about...or at least one of them as far as Lexi was concerned...was Parker.

What had he said to Lexi about the girl he was seeing? *She’s nothing like you. That’s why it’s not serious.* As much as she looked like Parker, they were absolutely nothing alike. Lexi was strong where Parker was weak, confrontational where Parker skirted around arguments, emotional where Parker was stoic.

“Oh my God, you are,” Lexi whispered.

“You’re seeing John?” Ramsey asked, clearly surprised.

“Um...not exactly,” Parker said, averting her gaze and looking back at John. “I mean...it’s not serious or anything.”

No, of course it wasn’t serious—because John didn’t care about Parker. John was using Parker. Lexi couldn’t believe it when it hit her. She had always assumed that John had gotten all his information about Lexi from Adam, that it had trickled down from Chyna to Adam to John. She

had thought that John was just nosy, and Adam was too good of a brother to deny him anything.

But now...

“She’s been the one feeding you information,” Lexi gasped.

“Feeding him what information?” Ramsey asked.

Lexi had never told Ramsey about John always knowing things about her. Every time it had happened, she hadn’t been with him, and then she had tended to forget that it had happened until the next time.

Parker looked genuinely confused for her part. “What are you talking about?”

“All this time, John has just magically known so much about my life. It’s Parker, isn’t it?” Lexi asked, unable to stop. Answers to the nagging question she’d had for the past year and a half were so close that she couldn’t keep her mouth shut. She should have chosen another time and place, but she had to know.

“Have you been telling her stuff that I said to you?” Parker gasped.

John just shrugged, all nonchalant like.

Lexi’s eyes widened. *He didn’t care. He had no shame.*

“How long has this been going on?” Ramsey asked. His face was still a mask of disbelief.

Clearly, this had come out of left field for him as much as for Lexi.

“He’s known stuff since last October,” Lexi reasoned. “So, at least that long.”

“September,” Parker murmured softly. She actually looked scandalized by the whole thing.

“You’ve never said anything,” Ramsey said, shaking his head.

Lexi could see what he was thinking. *How could he be around someone every single day for a year and a half and not know that she was hiding something?* Then, Lexi had a terrible thought that she wished she could hold back. He had gotten a taste of his own medicine.

“It didn’t come up. And like I said...it’s not serious,” Parker said with a shrug and then looked away from Ramsey quickly.

“A year and a half isn’t serious?” Ramsey asked before he could stop himself.

“Just stop it,” Parker said. “Of all people, I’m the last person who needs your judgment.”

The group stood very still at that comment.

Lexi didn't know what had happened, what had shifted. But Ramsey just nodded and then reached out for Lexi to try to get her to leave. John turned to go, encouraging Parker to follow him. Parker looked like she had more to say, but she couldn't form the words. Then, Parker jerked out of John's grasp and stalked down the hallway, far away from them all. Lexi stared after her, wondering if she was hurting more from John or Ramsey in that moment.

"I would just finish up your report and go," Ramsey said to John viciously. "You've done enough damage here."

John cracked a smirk and looked Ramsey up and down as if measuring him up. "I understand why you two are together now," he said, his eyes shifting between Lexi and Ramsey. "You're equally oblivious."



Present

Chyna wasn't even nervous.

How was it possible that Chyna wasn't even nervous one bit about her own wedding? Most people were excited, but nervous jitters would usually set in about now. They were only minutes away from Chyna walking down the aisle, and the girl wasn't even drinking. Chyna drank for everything.

Maybe she was freaked out enough that Adam had struck her sober.

"Are you sure you don't want something to drink?" Lexi asked, staring at the unopened bottle of champagne. She was really considering opening the expensive bottle herself and downing the contents. *She could walk in her heels slightly tipsy, um...drunk, right? Was it normal for the maid of honor to be nervous for the bride?*

"No, Alexa, I'm fine. I don't need alcohol today," she said with a bright smile on her face.

Chyna looked positively stunning. Lexi had seen her modeling pictures, and nothing compared to her wedding day. She was glowing.

The makeup artist, who Chyna had fallen in love with on one of her last photo shoots, had artfully applied her makeup. The girls had hit it off during the hours of makeup sessions they had spent together, and Chyna had acquired her for the wedding. She managed to set off Chyna's natural beauty without making her look overdone or even like she was wearing much makeup at all. Her eyes were lined, and her lashes were coated in thick black mascara that made her green eyes pop. Her lips were a gorgeous natural pink to match the glow of the blush and bronzer.

Chyna had been going to the same hairstylist for years now, and even though the man never left for private jobs, he had agreed to work on Chyna's hair. Lexi was sure that Chyna had coerced him into it, but he seemed to be a miracle worker. Her long, pin-straight black hair had been turned into gorgeous curls. The front had been parted to one side and swept

gracefully back into a half-up do, and her long bangs were tucked loosely behind her ear. Lexi couldn't believe how insanely beautiful her already supermodel-gorgeous friend was. It was enough to make any other girl green with envy.

Still...Lexi couldn't believe Chyna wasn't drinking.

"I'd say something was wrong with you if you weren't drunk by this time of night already, but it's your wedding day, so I guess I'll let you be right for once," Lexi said with a laugh at the end.

"I appreciate it, chica," Chyna said, rolling her green eyes skyward.

"Thanks for letting me be a part of your big day," Lexi said.

Chyna smiled even bigger and shook her head. "Please. I didn't let you. It was a necessity."

"Well, either way, you look gorgeous."

"That was also a necessity."

"Not a necessity. An inevitable. You're always gorgeous. I think marriage is going to look good on you," Lexi said. If she kept talking, she was going to start crying, and crying was not an option with her makeup like this.

"Are you telling me I'm going to get fat?"

Lexi burst out laughing. "No! You couldn't possibly be fat. Look at you! Adam is one lucky man."

"Damn right, he is," Chyna said with a wink. "I mean...I'm the lucky one. He's worth it all."

"He's your knight in shining armor," Lexi said with a giggle.

"Oh God," Chyna groaned.

"Come on, he slayed the dragon and saved you from your evil stepmother."

"You're ridiculous. So, now, Adam is suddenly Prince Charming?"

"He is to you, isn't he?" Lexi asked. Seeing her friend just beam back at her at the silly comparison gave her the best feeling.

"All that and more," Chyna admitted.

Chyna moved forward and pulled Lexi into a hug. "You mean the world to me, chica. I'm sorry about yelling at you when you were last here."

"Really...it's okay. I needed to hear it," Lexi admitted. "And you don't need to rehash it on your wedding day. Today is *your* day. All smiles. All congratulations. All about you. Just the way you like it."

“Can’t even keep you from being snotty when you’re saying nice things,” Chyna said, rolling her eyes.

“You wouldn’t want me any other way.”

“Ladies,” the wedding planner said, popping her head into the room. “Are we all set?”

Chyna didn’t let go of Lexi, and they stood together as best friends, practically sisters. They both nodded because speaking might result in tears. Lexi knew Chyna wasn’t nervous, but happy tears were equally as likely as jitters.

“Lexi, I’ll take you first,” the wedding planner said, opening the door wide.

Lexi turned to face her friend. “Next time I see you, you’ll be walking down the aisle, making everyone jealous. I love you. You’re my best friend. Try not to cry. I can’t promise I won’t. The only thing I have to say is...I’m really glad it’s Adam. Of all the guys I would want to share my best friend with, I think he’s the best.”

“Thank you,” Chyna whispered, her voice stuck in her throat at the words.

Lexi kissed her powdered cheek before turning and walking out of the dressing room with the wedding planner. She took in a shuddering breath and held back her tears. She couldn’t cry. Nothing had happened yet.

They walked up a small flight of stairs to the landing area where Adam and John waited. Lexi turned to look out the double doors leading to the rooftop location Chyna had selected. While seeing the backdrop of the entire New York City skyline, her breath caught in her throat. She had been up here before with Chyna to see the venue, but this was something else all on its own. The sun was setting high on the horizon, casting a beautiful glow across the rooftop.

The entire rooftop was decorated in an elegant burgundy and gold color theme with a bit of extravagance that only Chyna could pull off. There was no altar, only a small platform before an old-fashioned brick fireplace. Chairs were filled with friends and family on either side of the aisle. Each chair was draped in a burgundy cloth with individual gold bows on the back. Floral arrangements with burgundy and gold flowers paired with white roses were tied to the end of every row. The aisle was littered with dark red rose petals and a shower of gold flecks that reflected off the ebbing

sunlight. The officiant stood at the end of the aisle, patiently waiting for the wedding to begin.

“Wow,” Lexi whispered. “It’s gorgeous.”

“You look gorgeous,” John whispered.

Lexi took a deep breath and then turned to face him and Adam.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“I agree with my brother,” Adam said. “Gorgeous.”

“You two look great yourself,” she said cordially.

And they did.

Both were in tailored made-for-their-bodies black suits with pressed white button-ups. Adam’s tie was burgundy and gold, diagonally striped, while John wore a solid burgundy tie. They looked so much alike in that moment even though John was a few years older. John still carried himself with that staggering confidence that melted girls’ panties, but this was Adam’s day. He was as excited as Chyna, and so...today he had won. Plus, he got Chyna, and she was the real prize.

“That’s your cue, Adam,” the wedding planner said.

He walked through the double doors and took his spot next to the officiant. They shook hands and exchanged a few words. Adam had the biggest smile that hadn’t left his face practically since the proposal. He was a man who appreciated the person he was with and would never take advantage of their relationship. He knew how lucky he was today.

“You should wear gold more often,” John said.

That was when Lexi realized that the moment had finally come where she was alone with him again.

“It highlights your skin tone and brings out the gold in your eyes.”

Lexi sighed softly. She had been debating how to approach this situation for a while now. She had never been able to figure it out. She wanted to be okay with all of this for Chyna, but John was walking her down the aisle. The only people she ever wanted to do that was her daddy and her husband. Lexi glanced down at her engagement ring and stopped moving when she realized that her thought hadn’t been Ramsey. It had been on her husband. Granted, they weren’t one and the same...yet.

“You’re lost in thought,” John said.

“Oh, yes. Just thinking about Chyna and how we got to this moment,” she said.

“Right.”

He sounded disbelieving, but she couldn't care about that.

She brushed down the front of her dress in anticipation of the upcoming wedding ceremony. When she had first caught a glimpse of the dress that Chyna had had designed for her, she had been stunned. It was beautiful. Chyna hadn't tried to make the dress a little ugly. She knew there was no way she would be outshined on her big day, and the bridesmaid's dress she had chosen would only make Chyna look more beautiful. It would cast her in the spotlight, not out of it.

The form-fitting dress was a knee-length gold and burgundy number with hand-sewn gold sequins swirled into a pattern on the top. It was strapless and cut into a sweetheart neckline. The bottom half was several layers of pleated sheer burgundy material over a burgundy silk slip that dropped to her knees. She had on matching burgundy high heels, a thin gold chain with a knot resting between her collarbones, and matching gold knot earrings that she had received as a bridesmaid gift.

"Are you all right?" John asked.

"What?" Lexi asked, brushing her palms down her dress again and again.

"You look a little nervous, and you're kind of pale."

"Am I?" she gasped, her face blanching further.

"Yeah, you are. Do you need some water? Or do you need to sit down?"

"No, I'm fine. Just...weddings make me nervous," she admitted.

"Right. Not the marrying type," he said without any humor in his voice. "Funny since you have the huge ring on your finger."

"Ramsey's different," she said softly.

There was no point in having this conversation with John. It had never ended well in the past. She doubted it would get any better in the future.

"Right," he repeated.

He smirked at her, but it was equivalent to him just rolling his eyes. *Infuriating man!*

"Seriously though. Water?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"No. Seriously, I'm fine."

She wasn't. She felt like she might hyperventilate while walking down that aisle with John. It wasn't even her wedding, and she was acting like this. She needed to get a handle on herself.

The wedding planner rushed back over to them and smiled through her stress. Lexi didn't know why the woman was stressing. This had to be one of her easier weddings. It was so small, no more than fifty people in attendance. It was probably even less if Lexi had to guess. They could get through this.

"All set? Just link arms there," the wedding planner said.

Lexi slipped her hand into the crook of John's elbow, and he pulled her in a little closer. She took a deep breath and promised not to let it get to her.

"Once you guys are out there, remember to turn at the same time to your places. Chyna will follow once you're in your spots."

"Ready?" John whispered in her ear.

Lexi nodded.

And then, the doors were whisked open, and music played a soft classical song. John took the first step, urging her forward. They walked across the rose petals, and she was careful to keep her balance.

Her eyes drifted to Ramsey, who was seated in the middle of the bride's side. He was in a suit and tie. His green eyes were locked solely on her. He didn't even blink at the fact that another man was walking her down the aisle. He just continued staring up at her adoringly.

Why wouldn't this bother him? John was anything but platonic toward her. He never had been. *Not that she wanted Ramsey to be irritated with her, but did he just not care?*

She was being irrational again. *Why was it upsetting her that he didn't care? Wasn't that what she wanted? Wasn't that what she had fought for with Jack?*

And now, Jack was getting divorced...and he had told her that he loved her...and he wanted to take her home with him. She wondered if Ramsey would still be okay with it.

Her mind flashed back to the night when he had proposed. She had walked through that restaurant and seen the cookie-cutter wives and the cookie-cutter husbands and the couples who barely cared about each other. She had wondered then if she was headed on that path, if she was going to end up sitting around in nice restaurant because that was what they did rather than truly enjoying each other's company. *How had she swept that under the rug?* She still didn't know if that was where she was heading.

She loved Ramsey. She needed to stop her mind from wandering. This was just a walk down the aisle with John. This had no reflection on her relationship...on her fiancé.

“You remember that conversation we had in the hospital?” John whispered as they neared the platform.

“Yes,” Lexi whispered, intuitively knowing where this conversation was going.

“You’re regretting not taking that out right now.”

Lexi breathed in sharply. She had known it was something like that, but it didn’t stop it from hurting. *Was she regretting that?*

No...

She never would have taken the out that he had given her. She hadn’t wanted to come back to New York. She had been set on Ramsey...still set on Ramsey. That was the life that she had chosen. It was the life she wanted to lead.

Wasn’t it?

“That offer still stands,” John said right before they broke apart.

John moved to stand next to Adam. Holding her flowers up to her chest, Lexi turned at the same time and took her place next to where Chyna would be standing. John caught her gaze, and he smirked as if he knew that she was considering the offer.

How could she ever consider an offer like that? What was wrong with her? What would make her do that? She felt so out of it all of a sudden. The conversation with Chyna a few weeks ago had only put further doubts in her mind. As if she wasn’t already freaked-out enough, she was now constantly thinking about what she wanted. *Was this what she wanted?*

It felt like it—most of the time.

But was that good enough?

Lexi averted her gaze from John. She didn’t want to hear his words echoing in her mind. *You’re regretting not taking that out.* She couldn’t regret it. She had always promised herself she wouldn’t regret. And anyway...her life was everything it should be.

Then, why was she such a ball of stress?

Ramsey met her eyes and lifted his eyebrows as if to ask, *Are you okay?*

She nodded slightly. She hoped he took that to mean that she was okay rather than she just didn’t want to talk about it. There was a time and a

place for that conversation. The more she obsessed, the more she realized that it was pretty inevitable. They needed to get back on track, and they couldn't do that with her acting like such a hot mess. He would calm her down once they were back in Atlanta. *Things would be all right.*

Right now, she needed to worry about Chyna's wedding...and nothing else.

And as she had that thought, a traditional Canon in D filled the speakers, and everyone rose to their feet. After a second, Chyna materialized in the doorway. Everyone caught their breaths at the sheer awe-inspiring beauty before them. Surely, everyone looked good on their wedding days, but not everyone was a supermodel. So, Chyna took the cake.

Her dress was the best of both worlds with a mix of vintage and modern designs. It was a full lace gown with cap sleeves that dangled elegantly all the way down to a V-cut in the back. The bodice had a wave cut that ended in a small V to reveal just a hint of cleavage but nothing over the top. Intricate design work was beaded under the chest until the waist where the lace swept down elegantly into a train behind her. The backside of the gown had a small bow at the base of the V-cut, and then two-dozen little buttons held the dress together.

Chyna smiled her supermodel smile, and then she proceeded down the aisle in a smooth light gait, not rushed but not slow.

The best part of it all was that Chyna needed no one to walk her down the aisle. In most circumstances, this would be a moment of embarrassment, of hushed whispers among the guests. But Chyna had refused to invite her parents, and there was no one else that she wanted to give her away. Lexi had suggested Frederick, and Chyna had just laughed at the very idea of it. Frederick was seated on the bride's side, but he couldn't be the one to do it. She had reasoned that she was completely independent now, and thus, she should be free to give herself away.

Lexi thought it was perfect.

Chyna's eyes found Adam on the platform, and they didn't leave his the entire way. There could be no one else in the room, and Chyna would have been happy. This was the man she had always wanted, and he was right in front of her. She was finally going to have the happiness she deserved.

Chyna stopped at the platform, handed off her bouquet of flowers to Lexi, and then moved into place in front of her husband-to-be.

The officiant smiled down upon them before speaking. “On behalf of the bride and groom, I would like to welcome you all to the union of Chyna Van der Wal and Adam Ward. Please be seated.”

He waited for the crowd to readjust to their seats before continuing. “I am pleased to be here today to join together a pair so well suited for each other. I have heard nothing but praise and blessings showered down on them since meeting them and speaking with their friends and family. And it is with great pleasure that I conduct this ceremony. If you’ll join hands, we’ll begin.”

Chyna and Adam clasped hands together and stared up into each other’s eyes. Lexi had been surprised that Chyna, who was one of the least traditional people that she knew, had wanted a very traditional wedding. She hadn’t wanted anything in a church, but the ceremony itself seemed very important to her, and it had translated into what the wedding planner had put together for them.

He turned to Adam first. “Adam, do you intend to take this woman whose hand you hold to be your lawful wedded wife? Do you pledge before your friends and family to love, honor, and protect her through sunshine and shadow alike, keeping yourself for her alone, until death separate you? If so, answer *I do*.”

Adam turned and looked directly at Chyna. Lexi could see him from her vantage point, and it sent a shiver up her spine. He loved Chyna so much that it was almost unbelievable. There was no way that anyone could miss it. It made her heart pound, just seeing the devotion on his face.

He answered, “I do.”

The officiant repeated the statement of intent to Chyna, and she also answered in the affirmative. Lexi’s heart fluttered.

“Now, Adam, if you’ll repeat after me,” the officiant said, preparing them for the vows, “I, Adam, take you, Chyna, to be my wife...”

Lexi watched them exchange vows through the tears welling in her eyes.

“To have and to hold from this day forward...”

She had never been so sure of a marriage before. Chyna and Adam just worked together.

“For better or for worse...”

They were polar opposites coming together, balancing each other out, and creating a harmony in each other's lives.

"For richer or for poorer..."

That was what Chyna needed more than anything, and Adam was the only one who was capable of providing that.

"In sickness and in health..."

It was what Lexi wanted, what she had been searching for all along...

"To love and to cherish, excluding all others..."

Someone who didn't need to take care of her. Someone who didn't need her to take care of them. But a balance...

"As long as we both shall live."

Someone who didn't need anything *but* her.

The officiant spoke briefly about the significance of the wedding rings—how the ring formed a perfect circle as a symbol of eternity and showed the duration of the commitment they were making to each other. Chyna and Adam looked ecstatic at the prospect, and Lexi just felt like a weight was crushing her shoulders.

"Repeat after me, I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow..."

Commitment—there was that word again. It all came down to that, to knowing that she was going to spend the rest of her life with this one person.

"And with all that I am..."

And not because she had to but because she wanted to. She couldn't imagine a minute of your future without that person. She couldn't imagine there ever being another person waiting at the altar for her.

"And with all that I have..."

But Lexi...could.

"I will honor you."

It made Lexi's head spin at the very notion. She tried to remain in the present, but it was hard not to visualize herself standing in Chyna's shoes and wondering if she would be as excited as her friend. Judging by how sick she was feeling standing *next* to Chyna...Lexi kind of doubted it. *How was she supposed to stand there in just over six months without trembling and wondering if she was making the right choice?*

"And now, by the authority vested in me and in accordance with the laws of the great State of New York, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Adam smiled brightly. “With pleasure,” he whispered just faintly enough for Lexi to hear before pulling his wife into his arms and crushing their lips together.

The crowd clapped and cheered at their union. Lexi even heard a few whistles and catcalls as they stood together in an intimate lip-lock before all their friends and family in attendance. When they pulled apart, Chyna was giggling, and tears were welling in her eyes. Lexi had never in her life seen Chyna look so happy.

They turned to face the crowd as the officiant ended the ceremony.

“It is my pleasure to introduce to you for the very first time, Adam and Chyna Ward.”

Everyone rose to his or her feet, and the applause continued. Lexi handed Chyna back her intricate bouquet of flowers. Adam and Chyna lifted their clasped hands high, and everyone cheered louder.

Lexi glanced across the altar at John. In that moment, it was the least guarded she had ever seen him, and he looked genuinely happy for his brother. After what had happened with him and Chyna, it had taken a long time for them to be able to let it go. She didn’t even see a trace of it on his face.

He caught her eye and smirked as if to say, *Are you this happy?*

She bit her lip but didn’t pull her eyes away. The answer was no, and he could read it clear all over her face.

Adam hoisted Chyna up into his arms, and her head dropped back as she laughed at the pure joy and ridiculousness of the man she loved. Instead of letting her walk down the aisle, Adam carried her to a deafening round of applause just as the sun eased to the bottom of the horizon, and the sky changed to a gorgeous pink, orange, and yellow hue across the skyline.

John and Lexi came together in the center, linked arms again, and followed the couple off of the rooftop. Lexi didn’t glance over at Ramsey once. She couldn’t meet his eye. She couldn’t let him see the thoughts swirling through her mind right now.

They made it through the double doors, and when she finally removed her hand from the sleeve of John’s suit, she took a few steps away from him. Chyna and Adam had disappeared, and Lexi could only guess what they were up to.

“We’ll take pictures in about ten minutes,” the wedding planner said, addressing them.

“Thank you,” she got out weakly.

“Are you okay, dear?”

“She’s just a little light-headed,” John interjected quickly. “I’ll make sure that she’s taken care of.”

The wedding planner smiled, relieved. “Thank you. Remember, ten minutes.”

John waited until the wedding planner left before doing anything. The reception would be starting shortly after this in the ballroom downstairs. An open bar was keeping people entertained while they waited for all the pictures to be completed. But there was only one way on and off the roof, and John was hauling her into a private room, away from the entrance to avoid the partygoers who would soon follow.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” John asked once they were inside the room.

Lexi shrugged. “No.”

“At least you didn’t say that nothing was wrong.”

“Just...leave me alone.”

“What? So, you can mope in here during your best friend’s wedding? No can do,” John said. “So, just spit out what’s wrong, and we can go take some pictures.”

Lexi just glared at him.

“Better yet. Let me just guess. You’re realizing how heavy that ring is on your finger.”

“I am not,” she snapped.

“Let me see it,” he said, snatching her left hand in his. “Pear-shaped.” He tsked her, shaking his head. “I would have pegged you for a princess cut, but what do I know? I’m not marrying you.”

“You’re such an ass,” Lexi said, snatching her hand back. “I thought you were going to try to make me feel better, not harass me about my engagement.”

“Fine. Do you want me to lock the door? I bet we can make this quick,” he said, walking toward the door.

“No! Are you out of your mind?” Lexi asked, jumping up to stop him.

“Are you sure? You look like you need a good fuck to get your head on straight.”

“The only person fucking me is my boyfriend!”

“Fiancé,” John corrected with a smirk.

“Oh, whatever.”

“That’s right. It’s just, whatever. It doesn’t really matter,” he said, whirling her around and pushing her back against the wall, right by the door.

Once again, she was backed against a wall by John when she had given no invitation.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Lexi, you can’t deny the physical attraction between us,” he said softly, running his hands down her cheek.

She tried to swat his hand away, but he grabbed her wrist. She started panicking. *This was not good.*

“Um...yes, I can!”

He leaned down toward her and smiled devilishly. “No, you can’t. You never could.”

The door swung open then with John hovering only inches above her lips, his hand gripping into her wrist, and the other, she hadn’t even noticed until then, was pressed into her waist.

“What the fuck is going on in here?” Ramsey asked, glaring daggers at John.

John released her slowly but kept that insufferable smirk on his face. He was clearly in no hurry.

Lexi didn’t even know what to say. Ramsey looked livid. His eyes were on fire. His body was rigid, and his hands were balled into fists. She had only ever seen him this angry that night on New Year’s so long ago. It was a white-hot fury, uncontrollable and unstoppable.

“I’ve only ever set one rule,” Ramsey said, walking into the room with slow, measured steps. “I don’t care who she’s friends with. I don’t care who she hangs out with. I don’t even care if they want to fuck her or love her or marry her. You just can’t touch her.”

And then, Ramsey pulled back and rammed his fist into John’s jaw.

Lexi shrieked in shock. *Where the fuck had that come from? Holy shit!*

John took a staggered step back on impact, but Ramsey wasn’t letting up. He slammed his fist into the other side of John’s face, then into his gut, and then another into his ribs. It wasn’t until that last one that John truly grasped what was happening. He blocked Ramsey’s next hit and sent his fist into Ramsey’s kidney.

“Stop!” Lexi cried, tugging on Ramsey’s suit. “Stop! Stop!”

It was like they didn’t even hear her or feel her trying to get between them. They were set on each other, and she could already see blood running from John’s nose. *Fuck!*

“It’s Chyna’s wedding! We still have pictures! Are you guys fucking stupid? Cut it out!” Lexi yelled, placing herself in between them and pushing Ramsey back with both of her hands.

He didn’t budge at first, but then he seemed to let the anger slide off him, and he sagged backward a few steps.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” John said, holding his nose. “Do you see what you’re marrying, Lexi? Do you believe me now?”

“Just get out of here, John. Go have someone look at your nose,” she said, pointing her finger to the door. “Fuck.”

John stormed out of the room in a fury, and Lexi was sure she would never hear the end of this with Chyna. *How the hell were they supposed to take pictures now when John had a busted nose?* And it was all because John had cornered her when she had been freaking out, and Ramsey had jumped to conclusions. She had been trying to push John away, and she had wanted him to leave but not like *that*.

“What was that, Ramsey?” she asked, shaking her head and pacing back forth. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I know you said that you would kill anyone who touched me, but I didn’t think that was a *literal* statement! I thought that you would just scare the person to get him to leave me alone.”

“He’s scared now.”

“Oh, stop talking. Just stop talking!” Lexi breathed in and out sharply, trying to keep her calm but finding no serenity from which to draw from. “Boys and their stupid fighting! As if this solves *anything*! It only makes everything worse!”

“I was coming to find out what was wrong with you at the ceremony. Don’t think it slipped by me that something was going on with you. Then, I come back here and find you like this? Is this what the problem is? Is it John?” Ramsey asked.

“No! It’s you!” she spat and then covered her mouth in horror.



June Four Months Earlier

Lexi jogged down the beach in nothing but a purple bikini top, short black hot pants, and running shoes. Her breathing was heavy, and her long brown hair was whipping around her face at her quick pace. This was her favorite place in the world—sand beneath her feet, expansive ocean as far as the eye could see, breathing in the salty sea air.

She was close to the beach house already, and her wanting to turn back around and run another couple miles had everything to do with the desire to soak up some more sun. It had nothing to do with the fact that the only reason she was at the beach at all was because she was on vacation with Ramsey's family.

The one week she was allowed off during the year, and they'd had to use it to spend the time with his family who hated her. Okay, they didn't all hate her, but it was never a pleasant experience. As if it wasn't bad enough that she had to spend time with his parents, Bekah, Jack, and Parker had tagged along for the occasion. Parker was practically family with the Bridges since opening the medical wing with Ramsey...and maybe even before then. It didn't make any of this any easier.

Lexi slowed to a jog and then a walk, letting her heart rate come down. Sweat glistened on her in the late afternoon heat. She wasn't sure how long she had been gone, but by the direction of the sun, she would guess she had been running for at least an hour, if not longer. *How far had she run?* She would have to map it when she got back.

Her feet carried her away from the ocean and through the loose sand, back up to the massive beach house Ramsey's family owned on the Florida coast. Ramsey had his own house, but they had decided to go to his parents' place because it was a bit bigger. The only benefit was that their room was

far enough away from everyone else that no one could hear them, and she couldn't hear anyone else.

Jack was sitting on the deck with his feet propped up on the balcony, reading a beat-up paperback. He didn't glance up until she was climbing the short flight of stairs. His eyes traveled her tiny form wearing practically nothing while she was coated in sweat and sand, and he smirked. She smiled shyly, reading his mind.

There was nothing she could do about him being attracted to her, and she wasn't going to go running on the beach in more clothes with the off chance that she might see him.

And him sitting around in nothing but blue swim trunks didn't help her much. His dark hair was shorter, and his eyes...those blue eyes were as bright as ever as they stared at her.

"Have a good run?" he asked, flipping the book over and resting it on his leg.

"Yeah. It's nice to be back on the beach," she told him. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, this?" he asked, flipping to the front. "One of the Wheel of Time books by Robert Jordan."

"Do you like it?"

Jack looked so relaxed. She couldn't see him focusing on anything without enjoying it thoroughly.

"Yeah. Not usually my preference, but the guy can tell a story. We'll see if I make it through all fourteen books." Jack shrugged. "What are y'all doing tonight?"

Even though they were at the same house as everyone else, they hadn't all been spending a lot of quality time together. Lexi hadn't wanted to see any of them, and Ramsey had been happy to spend more alone time with her. It still didn't feel quite like a vacation, but it was better than being at work.

"Not sure we have anything planned. You?"

"Bekah is meeting some friends from college who live in the area, so I'm by myself tonight."

"She doesn't want you to go with?" Lexi asked, remembering the time that she and Jack had been at the beach together with all their friends. She would have never thought of not including him, but then again, they were mutual friends.

“I didn’t really want to go, honestly,” he said with a laugh. “Her friends are a bit much for me. I’d rather sit here and read all night than listen to the constant chatter.”

“I get that.”

“So, if you guys are doing something, just let me know. Otherwise, I’ll be here,” he said, holding up his book.

“Will do,” she told him. “Right now, I think I need a shower.”

“Probably for the best.”

“I’ll let you know about tonight,” Lexi said, turning and walking into the quiet beach house.

Ramsey’s parents were around here somewhere, so she hurried to the back bedroom. She had been avoiding them all week when she could. And she didn’t really want them to see her like this. She felt grimy, and she was already anticipating the feel of the shower washing away the grit.

Lexi opened the door to the bathroom that also connected to their room. She pulled out a towel and set it on the counter for her to use. She was about to turn on the shower when she heard voices coming from the bedroom.

Odd.

She reached forward for the handle to open the door to find out who Ramsey was speaking with, but something held her back. Her fingers brushed against the doorknob, and then she let her hand drop back to her side. Moving forward, she pressed her ear to the thin wood and strained to hear the conversation on the other side.

“Are we having this conversation again?”

Lexi was just able to make out that Ramsey was talking. He hadn’t raised his voice, but she could tell he sounded irritated.

“I’m not sure why we’re having this conversation again, but I’m going to keep having it until it gets through to you,” Parker said.

Lexi’s stomach dropped. She knew that she shouldn’t be eavesdropping. She didn’t know what they were talking about. She didn’t want to know what they were talking about. She just wanted to know why they were having a private conversation in the back bedroom.

What she should have done was back out of the bathroom, retrace her steps back to the living room, and catch her breath. Then, when she was composed, she could return and knock on the door.

But she didn’t move from her place behind the door.

“It doesn’t change anything that has happened between us,” Ramsey said gruffly.

“I’m not asking for it to change your mind. I get that you’re with her. Don’t you think I get that by now?” Parker asked without a trace of hesitation.

This wasn’t the meek, quiet girl who Lexi normally saw around the hospital. She didn’t have to hold back with Ramsey.

“Good. You should get that.”

There was silence for a minute. Lexi wished that she could see what they were doing. *Was Parker pissed? Was she frustrated? Was she happy?* She immediately discounted the last thought based on the conversation at hand.

They were talking about her. *Eesh!*

“I’m not stupid. I have a medical degree. I’m a surgeon and a businesswoman. You don’t have to lay things out for me as if I’m not aware. I was there when you grabbed her and pulled her away from John at the hospital. I see the way you look at her. You don’t have to throw the words back in my face,” she said evenly.

“I’m not throwing Lexi in your face.”

“Ugh! This conversation isn’t even about Lexi. You’re happy with her. I get it. This is about false assumptions sitting with you for too long now.”

“They’re not assumptions,” Ramsey said in frustration.

“One day I’m going to prove you wrong.”

“I doubt that. You have no proof,” he bellowed. “You’ve never had proof. They’re just words from you, Parker. It’s why we *never* worked.”

Lexi heard Parker draw in a sharp breath, and she wasn’t sure if she had done the same thing. He was talking about the fate of the unborn child. Years had passed, and he was still hung up on it. He would never really find out whether or not Parker had had an abortion or a miscarriage. *Why did he even bother having this conversation? How did it even come up?*

“We worked,” Parker said just loud enough for Lexi to hear. “We worked for *years*. We were everything...everything. Just because you didn’t trust me enough to believe me, just because we were young and stupid and threw away the best thing that had ever happened to either of us so easily doesn’t mean that you can defile that memory with lies. You were going to marry me, Ramsey Bridges. And don’t you damn forget that.”

Lexi imagined him running his hand back through his neatly kept blonde hair, considering what she had said, debating on how to respond. She saw the anger further welling inside of him. She wondered if he would blow up on Parker.

“You’re right,” Ramsey said softly.

Lexi gritted her teeth. *She was right? Just like that?*

“I shouldn’t have yelled at you. The whole thing just pisses me off.”

“That’s because you’re a fool, and you messed up,” Parker said with such conviction that it sounded like it had to be the truth. “I wish you would just believe me.”

“I can’t. I can’t be over it...”

Lexi’s breath caught, and she took a step away from the door. She couldn’t hear any more of that. He wasn’t over it.

Did he mean Parker or what had happened to them or just the abortion-miscarriage fiasco? In any case...it wasn’t an appropriate thing for him to say...not with Lexi right in the other room. Sure, he didn’t know that, but there shouldn’t be any secrets between them. *Wasn’t that what she had said from the beginning?*

She stumbled back a few more steps, wanting to distance herself from what she had just heard. It made her chest tighten and her throat close up. After almost three years together, he still wasn’t over Parker.

No.

Okay, he hadn’t said that.

He just wasn’t over the fact that Parker had had an abortion. Sure, he didn’t have proof and that made it more difficult, but Lexi didn’t have proof about whether or not he had slept with Elisa, and she believed him. She had put it behind her. And she hadn’t needed years to get over it.

Sure, it still aggravated her. It still made her cringe to think of the bitch, but Lexi wasn’t hung up on it. She hadn’t left him over it. *Why couldn’t Ramsey move past what had happened with Parker? Didn’t he love Lexi enough to move on?*

Dwelling on it just allowed it to eat Ramsey alive.

What the hell was she supposed to do with that information? If he wasn’t over that, then maybe he wasn’t over Parker. It had been years, but they had opened the medical wing together. What had Jack said to her all those years ago?

On some small level, you don't think that working in close proximity together every day is going to rekindle something that was once there? Imagine if we had to work together every day. What would it be like?

She had told Jack then not to try to make her doubt Ramsey. But maybe she always had. From the first day that she had found out about Parker, she had just reasoned that if she could get over Jack and become friends with Jack, then it only made sense that Ramsey would be over Parker. *That was why Ramsey was with Lexi now after all. Right?*

Was she just an idiot to not see it happening?

Lexi ground her teeth together. *Fuck that!* She didn't have to deal with what was happening on the other side of that door.

She wrenched open the door to the bathroom and rushed out. She slammed the door shut behind her, and it was loud enough that she was sure Ramsey and Parker would hear it. All she wanted to do was turn back around and keep running down the beach like she had wanted to from the beginning. If she had done that, then she would have avoided this moment. Maybe it wasn't for the best in the long run, but right now, it sounded like a better idea than being anywhere near them.

Her feet stilled in the middle of the hallway, and she took a breath. Chyna had always said that she ran feet first in the opposite direction of her problems. Maybe she was overreacting. It took a lot of willpower to get her to stop and consider that maybe she had just walked into a bad conversation. *Maybe he was over Parker. Maybe she was wrong.*

Just as she turned around and started to walk back down the hallway to face Ramsey and Parker, the door popped open, and Ramsey hurried out of the room. He came up short when he saw that Lexi was walking toward him and not away.

"Lexi," he said. He looked guilty.

Was he wondering how much she had heard? Was he deciding how to twist this? Would he lie? Was he going to try to cover it up?

God, she hated herself for thinking it.

Lexi just stared at him. She couldn't open her mouth. She didn't trust what would come out of it.

"I didn't know you were back from your run," he said hesitantly.

"Were you in the bathroom?"

Without saying a word, she let him stand there. He shifted from one foot to the other. *Man, way to look guilty.*

“Do you want to talk?” he finally asked.

“With Parker still in *our* room?” she asked, her eyes accusing him.

“So...you were in the bathroom.”

Duh! She just wanted to yell at him, but she couldn't let loose her anger. It had been a slow buildup from the very beginning. If she let loose now, then she couldn't guarantee that Ramsey would get a word in edgewise...or if they would end up together in the end. It was better to remain silent and wait.

“I think we should talk.”

Lexi just gritted her teeth further. Her hands were in fists at her sides. She felt foolish for putting all of this stock into their relationship and then seeing the seams unravel in the course of one afternoon.

“Are you going to say anything?” he asked.

“Are you sure you *want* me to say anything?” she managed to get out.

“Yes. Yes, of course, I do. I don't, uh...I don't know what you heard, but it's not whatever you're thinking.”

Lexi arched an eyebrow. *Oh really?*

Parker appeared in the doorway. Her face was so pallid in that moment that her freckles stood out in sharp contrast. She looked shaken and maybe even a little bit scared but definitely a little bit guilty. It was clear she hadn't wanted Lexi to hear anything that she had said.

Well, he probably shouldn't have said things that he didn't want anyone else to hear!

“Lexi, I'm sorry,” Parker whispered. “I didn't know you were standing there.”

Hold it together. Lexi took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“You should go back in there,” she said, snapping her fingers and pointing toward the bedroom.

“Lexi, I—”

“Now.”

Parker's eyes narrowed, but Ramsey put his hand on her shoulder, and Parker held back whatever retort was on the tip of her tongue.

“Fine,” she said, turning and walking back into the room.

“It's not her fault. It's mine, so be angry with me.”

“Oh, I am,” Lexi said.

He ran his hand back through his hair, just like she had expected him to do when she had been listening in on their conversation. He was

flustered. She was sure he was about to start rambling to try to get his thoughts together. She used to think that was cute, but if he did it right now, she was going to shut that shit down.

“We were just talking about work, and then the conversation took a turn for the worse. It doesn’t mean anything. I don’t want you to overreact or think it’s more than it is. It’s just Parker. We’ve known each other for a long time, so sometimes, we end up talking about things that—”

“Please stop talking,” she said, holding her hand up. “I really don’t need to hear it.”

“Lexi, come on.”

“You said you weren’t over it!” she yelled.

That stopped him. He just stared at her with his palms up. There wasn’t anything he could do because he couldn’t take it back.

“So, don’t come to me and say that you were just talking about something...that it doesn’t *mean* anything. If it didn’t mean anything, then you would be over it. You would just be friends...coworkers. You wouldn’t be having a hushed conversation in *our* fucking bedroom.”

“We weren’t having a hushed conversation in the bedroom. Christ, that’s not what this was, Lexi,” he said, walking toward her.

She took a step back. “The door was closed. You were talking about your relationship with Parker. She brought up marriage and told you not to forget that. Have you so easily forgotten that, Ramsey? She did *just* tell you not to.”

“That was *years* ago! I’m nowhere close to marrying Parker.”

“Lord, let’s hope not,” she said with a sarcastic drawl.

“Stop acting like this!” he bellowed. “There’s nothing going on with me and Parker.”

“Then, why aren’t you over it?” she asked, not even raising her voice. “Go ahead and try to explain it to me. I’ve explained Jack for what feels like a hundred times. So, try to explain Parker to me. Explain why you still find yourself in situations like this. Explain why I’m standing here a couple of weeks away from our three-year anniversary, having to deal with the same shit that we were dealing with two years ago. I don’t deserve this. I was able to fix things with Jack. Why the fuck can’t you fix this?”

Ramsey glanced back toward the bedroom, and his brow furrowed. “Let’s go somewhere to talk about this. We don’t have to do this standing here.”

“What? You can’t talk about this in front of Parker?” Lexi demanded. “You can’t explain your relationship around her?”

Ramsey seemed to deliberate but didn’t find an out. She certainly wasn’t going to give him one.

“You already know the story, Lexi. The fact that you’re blundering forward with this is just insane. Are you that insecure about our relationship?”

Lexi’s mouth popped open. *Had he just said that? Was he trying to blame her?*

“You’re going to blame me?” she gasped. “You were the one in there, talking to your ex-girlfriend about how you’re not over her! We broke up two years ago because you couldn’t seem to tell me the truth about your relationship. First, you never dated someone, never loved someone. Then, there was a girlfriend...who looks like me. Then, you were madly in love and going to get married but were quite tragically ripped apart. And, somehow, you think it’s my fault that I’m confused about what’s going on? You think I deserve to get the blame for this bullshit? I told you how I felt about Parker last year, and you said there was nothing you could do about it. Well, I’m starting to wonder if maybe you just didn’t *want* to do anything about it!”

She shook her head. She had said her peace and now, she needed to get away from there to think about what she was going to do.

Lexi turned to walk away, and Ramsey took a few steps toward her.

“Just leave me be,” she said.

But he moved forward and grabbed her arm. “You’re not leaving.”

“I need to get away from here. I need to think. I can’t be near you,” she said, tugging on her arm.

“No. You have the wrong idea.”

“Ramsey Bridges, stop it! Stop trying to dig your way out of this hole. I’m so sick of it,” she said, smacking his chest and trying to pull away.

Ramsey released her, and she stumbled a few steps.

“You drive me crazy when you’re angry. Can’t you see reason?”

“You drive me crazy when you lie! Can’t you just tell me the truth?”

“Fuck, Parker!” he cried and then froze.

Lexi’s mouth dropped open. *Had he just called her Parker? Oh, fuck no!*

“Lexi. I meant, Lexi,” he corrected quickly.

Lexi shook her head in horror. “I’m leaving.”

“Lexi, please...”

But she didn’t hear what he said next because she turned on her heel and bolted from the hallway. She was still dressed in her running gear, and she needed to be anywhere but there in that moment.

He had called her Parker! Oh God, she couldn’t breathe. It infuriated her! She thought she might combust.

Her hands were shaking, and her heart was thudding loudly. *Who was she kidding?* Her entire body was shaking, trembling, practically convulsing. She didn’t know if it was from embarrassment or anger. Maybe it was a little of both. All she knew was that she wanted to just run. She wanted to get far away, hit that point of exhaustion, that point where she wouldn’t feel anything anymore.

She pushed open the door to the deck, and Jack glanced up at her from his book. When he saw her distraught look, he put his book down on the table and stood.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern coming through every syllable. “What happened?”

Lexi just shook her head and jogged past him, down the steps, and back into the sand. She heard the door crash open behind her and heard her name being yelled out, but she didn’t slow down, and she certainly didn’t stop. She couldn’t go back there and face Ramsey right now. She needed a chance to clear her head first.

She looked over her shoulder once, just to make sure he wasn’t following her. She saw Jack had his finger in Ramsey’s chest, and then he was yanking on a shirt. Lexi turned back around to see where she was going. She didn’t know how far she was going to run, but she would go until her legs stopped moving.

A second later, she heard feet pounding in the sand behind her. *Great.* She was going to have to tell Ramsey to leave her alone—again. *Couldn’t he see that she just needed to be alone?* He could only do more damage by following her.

But when she turned back around, she didn’t see Ramsey at all. It was Jack chasing after her. Despite everything, a small smile touched the edges of her mouth. Wasn’t it just perfectly ironic to have Jack chasing her?

Jack was much taller than her, so she knew that he would catch up soon enough, but he didn’t try calling out to her or asking her to slow down.

He just made headway, and when he caught up to her, he matched her pace and jogged alongside her. He didn't say anything. He just let her run away from her problems...away from everything.

Everything but him.

Her breathing was jagged, coming out in uneven gasps and pants. Her side had a stitch in it that stabbed her with every breath. Her hair was matted, and her body was coated in a layer of sweat and sand that had only gotten worse with her second run. Her feet and legs were starting to feel heavy, and she knew she was slowing. She wasn't going to be able to keep up this pace for much longer. She was feeling a bit woozy, probably with dehydration, but it had the added benefit of clearing her mind.

Jack was breathing heavily next to her, but he didn't look as out of it as she did. This must not be a hard pace for him, and he hadn't just come from a run in any case.

Lexi stumbled and fell onto her bare knees in the sand. Her hands landed roughly down to catch herself, and she groaned as her legs finally stilled. Her whole body was humming alive with the adrenaline coursing through her. Her chest heaved as she stared down at the wet sand, and her vision dipped and blurred. She slammed her hands down again and again on the sand, wanting to make a difference in the shape of the world, but her hands just pushed the sand out of the way, not really changing it at all. It was just an act of displacement...not change...never change.

"Hey. Hey. Hey," Jack said, sinking into the sand next to her and grabbing her hands.

She fought against him, but he held her tight, keeping her from continuing her assault.

"Lex," he whispered, "it's okay."

"It's not okay," she said through tears that she hadn't even known were spilling down her cheeks.

"It'll be okay," he said, pulling her in close to him.

She resisted him. "Stop. I'm disgusting."

"I don't care."

"I'm covered in sand and sweat."

"You're still beautiful, and you still need me. So, I'm not going to stop," he said, drawing her into him and cradling her against his chest.

"You're not allowed to think I'm beautiful," she said through her tears.

“Shh...” He stroked her back softly. “I’ll never stop thinking that.”

“Don’t be nice to me. I want to be angry.” Tears were falling so hard now that she could only speak through the hiccups.

“Then, be angry. I’m not going to stop you.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Not even on my worst day, and I’m far from that, Lex.”

“Did you sleep with those girls?” she asked.

Jack stiffened. “What girls?”

“Your secretary...the attendant at your old apartment...other people...”

“No,” he said softly. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” The question had been eating at her, and in her delirious state, she wanted to think about anything but what she had left behind at the beach house.

“I didn’t say anything because...no one would have believed me. It’s like how I tend not to discuss politics because people argue with me, and I’m not going to change their mind...but that doesn’t mean I don’t disagree with them.”

“It was stupid.”

“Very. I’ve done a lot of really stupid things, but I don’t think you’re trying to punch a hole through the sand because of me.”

Lexi sagged in his arms at the reminder of why she had run miles away from the beach house. Ramsey had called her Parker. Even if it was just in anger, he had still called her by the name of his ex-girlfriend...the one they were arguing about in the first place. *How could he be that stupid? And was he really still that hung up on her?*

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jack asked.

“No. Not really.”

“Do you want to just walk then?”

“Okay,” she mumbled, shifting away from Jack.

He stood up first and then offered her his hand. She let him haul her up off the ground. Her legs were still shaky, and she grabbed on to his arm to keep herself steady.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere. Not back,” she admitted.

“Me either.”

Jack nodded his head toward the direction they had been running in. They set off across the mostly deserted beach. Lexi hadn't wondered at the time if anyone had seen them together in the sand, but she thought about it now. She wondered who had been witness to her meltdown. Granted, it didn't really matter because the only person who would remember it was Jack.

In the distance, they could see a large public pier, and with a knowing glance between them, they headed toward it. When they finally reached it, the sun was already falling on the horizon. They wouldn't be able to stay long, or they would never get back in time before nightfall.

Lexi walked out to the end of the pier, leaned her elbows on the railing, and stared out across the ocean. Jack followed, and they stood there, watching the waves rise and fall.

“I never thought I'd be with you on a pier again,” Lexi said.

“The first time was pretty memorable,” he said with a smirk.

“And we're both still with other people while we're here.”

Jack just shrugged, keeping his eyes forward. “Ramsey didn't tell me what happened. Are you going to?”

“He called me Parker,” she spat out.

Jack hissed between his teeth. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“How the hell did that happen? Ramsey doesn't seem the type to confuse you two. I mean, y'all are so different. I don't even think you look that much alike.”

Lexi laughed. “Yes, we do. I thought we were twins when I first met her.”

“I guess,” Jack said with a shrug. “You don't look or act enough alike for me to ever confuse you...ever.”

“Well...he was in the bedroom, talking to Parker.”

Jack's eyebrows rose at that. “In your bedroom?”

“Yep. They were talking about why they had broken up. She reminded him that they were going to get married, and she wanted him to just believe her, but Ramsey said he couldn't...and that he wasn't over it. We got into it, and I guess he got mad and mixed us up.”

“Damn...sounds like us,” he mused.

Lexi laughed. “Maybe three or four years ago.”

“So,” Jack said, turning his back to the ocean and leaning back to look at Lexi, “what are you going to do? You want to be with him? You think Parker is going to try to interfere?”

It felt so strange in that moment, to be having this conversation with Jack, especially on a pier. So often in the past, he had been the source of this contention, and now, he was there for her exactly when she needed him—and he kept being there when she needed him.

Things had changed. He wasn't looking at her with that lust in his eyes. In fact, she hadn't seen it in so long. He was trying to be there for her as the friend she deserved. He wanted her to be happy. It made her happy... and also terribly sad, which was even more confusing. She wanted Jack as a friend. It was something they had never really been able to achieve before. But having him as her friend...meant he wasn't anything more.

She knew it was a dumb thought. She was pissed at Ramsey for calling her Parker, and then she was standing here, being sad about Jack. But the only reason she was thinking about it was because of this situation with Ramsey. It made her want to be the same idiot teenager she had been for a long time. She wanted to lash out the only way she knew how.

And it would be so easy.

But it would be so dumb.

“What should I do? We've had the conversation about Parker more than we've had conversations about you.”

“He trusts you,” Jack all but whispered.

“I know. I know.”

“That's pretty valuable...as long as you trust him.”

“What if he's not over her?” she asked, staring up into those blue eyes. She just wanted an answer. She wanted someone to tell her what to do—even though she knew she was the only one who could decide.

“I think you're asking the wrong person...”

Of course she was. She dropped her head down between her hands resting on the railing. *What was she supposed to do?* Even though Jack hadn't been over her, he had still married Bekah—not that she wanted to compare their relationships at all. Still, Ramsey might not be over Parker, but he wasn't pursuing anything with her. They had their differences—the abortion—but it didn't mean that he was going to run back to her.

She didn't feel like she was overreacting. She felt that she was enduring the byproduct of too much emotional buildup. All this time, she

had been worried about Parker, and then she had been right. She had wanted to be wrong.

“Lex,” Jack said, reaching forward and tucking her hair behind her ear, “are you happy?”

“Right now?”

“In general. Does Ramsey make you happy?”

“Yes,” she whispered, straightening up and looking back at Jack. “He does.”

Jack swallowed and nodded. “Then, we should go back. I bet he’s worried. I’d be worried.”

“Jack Howard worrying? Now, I’ve seen everything.”

“I was worried when I saw you run out of the house.”

“Thanks for coming after me. I don’t know where I’d be...” she said, shuffling her feet.

“And you’ll never have to know because I’d do it every time.”

Lexi smiled shyly off into the distance. She couldn’t meet his eyes. She was grateful to have him in her life in that moment. She wished it had always been this way...that things had been different. But they weren’t, and she just wanted to appreciate it now.

“Thank you,” Lexi said.

Jack nodded and then guided her back off the pier. They walked through the sand, back to the beach house, together in silence aside from the waves crashing against the surf and seagulls in the distance. It was peaceful and helped to calm the nerves flitting around in her stomach from the prospect of having to talk to Ramsey when she got back.

When the beach house was in sight, Lexi felt her feet dragging, but Jack held her to his pace. It was almost completely dark, and if they slowed any further, they would have to walk the last leg at night.

“You’ll be fine,” Jack encouraged her. “This is not the worst confrontation you’ve gone through. Imagine what it felt like when Clark cornered you in your apartment.”

Lexi’s anxiety spiked. “Why would you bring that up?”

“Because there’s no way it’s going to be that bad. You haven’t done anything. It’s your call about Ramsey. If he really makes you happy, I’m sure it will be an easy decision,” Jack said.

She could see that the porch light was on as they drew nearer. Then, Ramsey’s frame came into view. He was sitting in a chair, staring out at the

ocean. She wondered how long he had been there. She wondered why he had never come after her—not that she had wanted him to at the time, but still...

They reached the porch, and Ramsey stood hastily, staring down at Jack and Lexi standing together. Jack squeezed her arm and then disappeared inside with a backward glance for reassurance. The distance between her and Ramsey kept her feet planted in the sand and him standing on the porch.

“You were gone a long time,” he finally said.

“Yeah.”

“Where did you go?”

Lexi just shrugged and pointed in the direction they had come from. She didn’t know where they had gone. She just remembered the sand, the ocean, the pier...and Jack.

“I was worried.”

Jack had called it.

“Yeah.”

“Lexi,” he said, walking down the steps and into the sand, with his hands splayed out before him, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened with me. I love you. It shouldn’t have happened. You just overreacted—”

“Don’t,” she said, holding up her hand. “Don’t tell me I overreacted.”

“Okay. You didn’t. I was in the wrong.”

“Yes, you were. You want me to be okay with Parker, with you working with Parker, after everything we went through. Then, you have a conversation like that with her...and you...” Lexi shook her head. The very thought still made her angry. “Then, you call me her name.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t know! I really, really want to be okay with Parker because this is the real deal, Ramsey. Jack asked me if you made me happy. If you did, then he said we should come back because you would be worried. Well, I’m back because you *do* make me happy. I just can’t figure out what to do with this relationship while Parker is still in love with you.”

“But I don’t love her. I love you,” he said earnestly, taking another step toward her.

Lexi sighed heavily. She stayed in place and allowed him to approach, but she didn’t move toward him. “Then, how can you tell her that you’re not over it?”

“Because what happened between us fucked me up for years. Not knowing still kills me. It’s not her. I don’t want her. I want you. There’s just history between us. Surely, you can understand how hard it is to let go.”

“I understand how hard it is. I don’t understand why you would then blame me by saying I’m insecure about our relationship. I think I’ve been pretty fucking understanding.”

“You have been, and I’ve been an idiot,” he said, reaching out for her. He ran his hands down her sandy arms. “Two years ago, you put your trust in me again, and I have been a hundred percent honest with you since then. I shouldn’t have had that conversation with Parker, but I didn’t say anything that meant I didn’t love you or that I didn’t want to be with you. Please let me continue to show you that I do.”



Present

“Me?” Ramsey whispered. “*I’m* what’s wrong?”

“Yes. No. Yes. I don’t know,” she said, storming away from him.

“I’m not following. That asshole had you pinned against a wall, and you looked scared out of your mind. Somehow, I’m the problem?”

“It has nothing to do with John or this moment. I’m just freaking out.”

“About what?”

“The wedding. It’s not you. It’s me. I know that sounds stupid and cliché. God, it sounds cliché,” Lexi said, pacing. “But my head isn’t on straight. I keep freaking out about it, and I try to keep it under wraps, but I can’t. It’s all coming up so soon, and I feel like I’m not doing anything for it. I can’t find a dress, and I didn’t want to find Chyna’s bridesmaid dress when I was up here. I feel stupid for being so messed up about it, but I can’t seem to make it stop. What’s wrong with me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Lexi,” Ramsey said softly. He kept her from continuing to pace and held her gaze. “I love you. If that means that I marry you in October or I marry you next October or the one after that...it doesn’t matter to me. *You* matter to me. Marriage is a piece of paper. You’re my lifetime.”

“I know.”

But still that feeling crept through her. She just imagined standing behind Chyna, being so happy for her friend and feeling absolutely none of it for herself.

“If it’s just the wedding, then we can postpone. I don’t care that we’ve already sent save-the-dates. We can retract them. We can say fuck it to a real wedding and go to the courthouse or Vegas or wherever and just make it official.”

“But you wanted a wedding.”

“I want you. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you. I want you to be mine. I want you to be Mrs. Bridges.”

She had known that he wanted to marry her. It wasn’t like this was all a secret or a big surprise to her. Ever since that night last June, when he had made the mistake of calling her Parker, Ramsey had been the perfect boyfriend. They had never discussed marriage in much detail, but she didn’t completely cringe away at the thought. She loved him. They were happy. That was what was important. That was what had encouraged her to tell him yes.

“That’s what you want, right?”

Lexi opened her mouth, ready to tell him yes. She was ready to confirm that and clear away his doubts. *But how could she clear his doubts when she had so many of her own?*

The wedding planner poked her head in at that moment with a smile. “Time for pictures.”

“Thank you,” Ramsey said tersely.

“I’ll see you later,” Lexi said, reaching up and kissing him lightly on the lips.

He tried to pull her in to deepen it, but she had already backed away and turned to walk out of the room. As she walked back to the rooftop, she couldn’t believe that they had just had that conversation. *Were they postponing the wedding? Was that even what she wanted?*



The rest of the wedding had gone off without a hitch. John had been cleaned up, and luckily, there was only some swelling, and nothing was broken. The wedding planner had rushed him an ice pack as soon as the pictures were complete. Lexi had apologized about a thousand times over even though he had told her repeatedly that it wasn’t her fault. He had said it was her “psycho boyfriend” that should be held responsible.

Chyna had laughed when she heard what had happened. *Quintessential Chyna*. She had told Lexi that John had probably had that coming for a long time. While likely accurate, Lexi had still felt so pissed about the whole situation that she couldn’t join in with her friend’s laughter.

Chyna had been in such a state of bliss with Adam that someone getting punched at her own wedding hadn't even affected her.

Lexi hadn't been able to talk to Ramsey at the reception, and even after that, the anger had just festered inside of her. He had suggested pushing back the wedding again, but she had just waved him off. She hadn't wanted to make a decision when she was this angry. Sleeping on it would be a better alternative to making a quick decision now and regretting it later.

Ramsey had tried to make it up to her, but she wasn't having that either. Mostly, she had just wanted to be alone...and call Jack...and sleep.

She didn't get to do any of those things though.

The workdays after the wedding were some of the worst Lexi had experienced since she had closed the Bryant case last year. Months of work had come to a head during the weekend, and she hadn't been there for any of it. That meant her life when she came home at a reasonable hour was nonexistent. It also meant that the time that she really needed to be spending with Ramsey was nonexistent.

When they returned to Atlanta, she spent all Sunday night and Monday preparing for a rushed court date. Then, the next two days, she had awoken at the crack of dawn and spent all day in the courtroom and her office before collapsing back into bed, exhausted.

She was so excited when court released early on Thursday. After spending a few more hours preparing for the next day, Lexi's boss finally allowed her to leave the office. It was already getting dark outside, but at least it wasn't approaching midnight. That had been her hell week.

"Lexi," her boss called, turning the corner into her office.

She tried not to cringe as he said her name.

"Yes, sir?" If he asked her to stay late another night, she might have a meltdown.

"Stay on call tonight, okay?"

"Do you think I'll be needed?" she asked, hoping and praying that she would get a few moments to breathe.

"We're waiting on some last-minute sensitive material to show up, and if it comes in tonight, we'll need you here to review it before the morning."

"Yes, sir," she said, wanting nothing more than to turn off her phone and pretend like she hadn't heard any of that.

He left the doorway, and she sagged into her chair. *Great.* If that information came in tonight, then she was screwed. Tonight was the one night this week that she knew she wouldn't be working until all hours of the night before still coming in bright and early.

She wanted to talk to Ramsey about the wedding. She had decided to postpone. With this brutal schedule, there was no way she was going to be ready for a wedding. Another six months to a year wouldn't be the end of the world. She needed more time. He was okay with more time. Chyna had done an extended engagement, and that had worked out for her.

Yes, that conversation needed to happen tonight. She couldn't put it off any longer.

She threw the last of her paperwork into her messenger bag and rushed out of the office before her boss could hold her over any longer. She made it through the elevator and out the front door before her phone started ringing.

"Fuck!" she cried.

No, he couldn't be calling already. She needed time away. She needed to leave!

Fishing the phone out of her purse, she stared down at the number on the screen and slumped in relief. "Jack," she said in greeting. "Thank God you're not my boss."

"Hey, Lex. Were you expecting your boss?"

"I haven't gotten a moment's peace all week. This case is almost as bad as that one from last year. I can't even see straight. I fear I'll be back in the office really early," she told him as she walked to her car.

"That sucks. How long do you think they will keep this up?" he asked.

"Not sure. Last time it was at least two weeks of this hurry-up-and-wait business."

"We just got our divorce date."

"That's great!" she said, not able to hide her enthusiasm because she was too brain dead. She was quite ready for Bekah to stop torturing Jack like this. "When do you have to be there? I doubt it will be like what I'm doing right now. They try to wrap up divorce trials pretty quickly."

"Three weeks from tomorrow."

"Three weeks! They gave you three weeks' notice?" she squeaked, sliding into the driver's side and pulling out of the parking lot on the way

back to her place.

“It seems that Bekah’s father knows the judge and got the date scheduled as soon as possible.”

“Of course he knows the fucking judge,” she grumbled. “Is Richard prepared?”

“Yeah, we’ve been working on it for months now.”

Lexi sighed. At least there was that. She hadn’t heard from Bekah since the mediation session back in February. It had been blissfully quiet, which just made her a bit anxious. Being the masterful manipulator that she was, Bekah being quiet meant that she had more time to plot.

“Okay. Well, I hope that this is as painless as possible, and you can just...move on.”

“Yeah. Thanks for still talking to me after what happened last month. I probably shouldn’t have gotten that drunk and—”

“It’s fine,” Lexi said quickly.

They had never brought up what had happened at his apartment a couple of weeks ago. They had just moved forward.

“All right,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to jeopardize anything for you.”

“You didn’t,” she said. “Please, Jack, let’s just...not do this. I need to go.”

“Okay, Lex. I’ll let you know if I hear anything more from Richard. If you need anything, I’m only a phone call away. Now that tax season is over, I’m not as swamped at work as you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered before jumping off the line.

She didn’t want to have Jack stuck in her head when she was about to go have a serious conversation with Ramsey, one that she probably needed to have a while ago.

Lexi pulled into her spot in the garage and killed the engine. She was nervous about what was to come, but knowing that she was finally going to speak with Ramsey about how she had been feeling gave her more of a clear resolve than normal. She hadn’t wanted things to just implode at Chyna’s wedding, and Lexi was glad that she had taken the time to think about what she wanted to do.

She took the stairs up to the front door. She was so happy to be home. It felt like such a long time since she had seen Ramsey for more than the few minutes before she crawled into bed. Things had been rocky lately, but

that didn't mean she didn't want to see him. Her throat constricted as emotions rushed over her. She just wanted to make this all right.

Ramsey wasn't downstairs, but she knew he was home. She'd seen his Mercedes in the garage next to the Maserati he always kept covered. Lexi dropped her bag on the couch, kicked her heels off, and then raced up to the second floor.

"Ramsey," she called softly, announcing herself to the quiet upstairs.

When she didn't get a response, she wondered if he was napping or if he was wrapped up in his work and hadn't heard her. She shrugged and wandered down the hall.

She toed the bedroom door open and found it also empty. *He must be in the office.* She pulled off her blazer and tossed it onto the dresser before continuing down to the office. She turned the knob and walked in.

"Ramsey, I'm home early," she said and then stopped in her tracks. "What are you doing here?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Ramsey sat in his office chair, holding some papers, and Parker stood in front of him. She actually wasn't in scrubs and just had on a plain pair of light-colored jeans and a polo. Her arms were crossed, and she didn't look happy.

"Oh!" Parker said, her head snapping to the door. "Lexi!"

Ramsey sat there, staring down at the papers. His face was a mask of shock, and it took him a minute to register what was going on. "Lexi, you're home early."

"I said that," she said hesitantly.

Ramsey placed the papers carefully on the desk, like he didn't want to mess them up, and then stood. He walked to her and pulled her into a hug. She returned it halfheartedly. She didn't know what this was all about.

"What's going on?" Lexi asked, knowing that something was going on.

"I was just leaving," Parker said. She glanced between them uncomfortably and then walked toward the door.

"But what are you doing here?" Lexi blocked her escape route. "Why is she here?" She hated repeating herself, but answers weren't following.

"I came to bring him some paperwork, and now, I'm planning to leave," Parker said softly. "That's it."

"Is that right?" she asked, facing Ramsey once more.

"Yes. Just some paperwork."

Lexi crossed her arms and glanced between them. Something didn't feel right, but she didn't know what it was. *Why did she have to bring him paperwork to his house? Why couldn't it have waited until tomorrow? Why couldn't she have called him into the hospital?* Nothing looked out of place. Ramsey's suit was immaculate. Parker didn't look guilty or anything. She just looked run-down as per usual—maybe even a little more worse for wear.

“What kind of paperwork?” Lexi asked.

Parker stiffened at the question, and Ramsey wouldn't meet her eyes. *Aha!* So, she had touched on it—what neither of them wanted to talk about.

“Ramsey?” she implored.

“You should let Parker go. She doesn't need to be here for this. Then, we should talk.”

Lexi's heart thudded in her chest. *We should talk.* It sounded like a death trap. Of course, she had come home early because she wanted to talk to him about the wedding, but...but this sounded different. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she tried to get herself under control. *This couldn't be good.*

She moved out of the way, and Parker left the room as quickly as possible. With her gone, she thought that the tension would fall off of him...but it didn't.

“What's going on, Ramsey? You're as white as a ghost.”

“She had a miscarriage.”

“I'm sorry. What?” she snapped, her mind going to the worst possible place.

His green eyes locked onto her, and he shook his head. “When we were dating in college...she had a miscarriage.”

Lexi's mouth dropped open slightly. *A miscarriage.* “How do you know? I thought there wasn't any proof.”

He walked back to the desk and grabbed the paperwork. “See for yourself,” he said, shoving it into her hands.

Lexi snatched the papers from him and scoured the paperwork to try to decipher what she was looking at—discharge paperwork for an abortion clinic.

“What?”

“Admitted and discharged in the same hour. She didn't go through with it.”

“Where the hell did she come up with this? Is that really suspicious to you that she just magically appeared with the paperwork to prove her point?”

“She went to the clinic right after we broke up and tried to get some paperwork, but the person she spoke with said they had no record of her being there. She didn’t go to the doctor because she was scared that her family would find out. She went back just to see if someone else could be more helpful, and they were able to find this.”

“Don’t you find it odd that she continues to corner you to talk about it? And now, she can prove her innocence even though she knows you’re marrying another woman?” Lexi demanded. “Why did she even have to bring this up? What does she gain?”

“I don’t know, Lexi. I’ve been accusing her of having an abortion for years. It must have been hard to have someone think that you were lying. I guess she gains absolution,” he said softly.

She thought the reasoning was bullshit. Parker was doing this to get back with Ramsey. She might want forgiveness, but she damn well wanted Ramsey, too.

“And you don’t think these papers magically appeared because she wants to get back together with you?”

Ramsey stared at the ground and shook his head. “We had our chance. She didn’t want that after the break, and she doesn’t want that now.”

It was convenient how Ramsey didn’t say that *he* didn’t want that. Though, she knew he had told her that countless times. She knew that he had always said that he didn’t want Parker.

Lexi ground her teeth together and rifled through the papers, wanting them to say more, wanting them to give her the answers. In frustration, she tossed the papers up in the air and let them settle down on the ground.

“These don’t prove anything!”

“Lexi! Jesus!” he said, scrambling to pick up the paperwork she had just discarded.

“Why does this even matter to you?” She gestured at the paper, still scattered on his office floor. “Why the fuck won’t you just let it go?”

“Because I ruined my life years ago over nothing!” he bellowed.

Lexi stood very still. “Ruined your life? I didn’t realize that your life was ruined without Parker,” she whispered scathingly.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said, fisting his hands into his hair. “Don’t you at least understand? We broke up because I thought she had taken away my kid without talking to me. Do you know what that does to someone? And then to find out you were a complete and total asshole to the one person who had *always* believed in you...I just feel like such a douche. And I know it shouldn’t matter to me because I have you, Lexi, but it does. It matters. I can’t explain it. It’s like watching a wall I’d put up for years crumble to the ground in an instant.”

“Do you still love her?” Lexi whispered.

“I love you.”

“I know you do,” she said, swallowing back the lump in her throat.

“I just need time to process this information. It doesn’t change anything with us, Lexi. It doesn’t change how I feel about you. I just never expected this to happen. I was so certain that it was an abortion. It was the only thing that made sense to me. I couldn’t believe Parker, and I couldn’t believe Bekah. Oh Bekah—fuck!” he cried, sitting back into the chair. “I was an ass to her about this for so long.”

“Well, she probably deserved it.”

“Lexi, just lay off for one second. I walked out of her wedding for you. Don’t you think you could cut me some slack when it comes to her?”

No, she most certainty did not. Bekah was the epitome of evil. If they wanted to talk about people who had ruined *her* life, then Lexi would be sure to put Bekah right up there on the top. In fact, the more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

“We shouldn’t even talk about Bekah. I hate her.”

“She’s still my sister.”

“Well, it’s really clear that we don’t choose our family,” Lexi said.

“What are you even doing home this early?” he asked, changing the subject. He sank in the chair at his desk and rested his head in his hands.

She could see him hurting, and she wanted to find sympathy for him. She did feel sympathy for him...she really did. It probably hurt like a motherfucker, finding out that he had been all wrong about the woman that he had been planning to marry. She couldn’t imagine going through something like that with Jack. She was glad there had never been a pregnancy scare. She didn’t know what she would have done in that situation.

But at the same time, all of this had happened years ago. And yeah, it was emotional and upsetting that he was just now discovering the truth, but it wasn't the end of the world—not unless it changed something...changed the way he felt about Lexi or Parker or both.

“My boss let me out since I had to be in early the rest of the week. I came home because I hadn't seen you, and I wanted to talk to you. We haven't gotten a chance to talk since Chyna's wedding.”

“What do we have to talk about?” he grumbled.

She hated doing this right now. He was already hurting, and this wasn't going to make anything better. But she couldn't hold back any longer. It was eating at her every day. She couldn't keep things from him, not when it was impacting her this much.

“I want to postpone the wedding.”

Ramsey let loose a strangled cry at the words, and Lexi felt like her heart was breaking.

“You said it was okay...”

“I didn't think you would actually want to do it.”

“So, you...lied?” she asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Ramsey stood slowly. He was so tall that he towered over her, even with the weight of everything that had happened holding down his shoulders. “I didn't lie. I want to marry you whenever you'll have me. I just worry about postponing.”

“Why?” she whispered, feeling like she knew what was coming.

He sighed and dropped his head before answering. “I'm afraid this is a reaction to what just happened, not a reflection of how you really feel. I promise it doesn't change things with us, Lexi.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “This isn't about Parker. This is me. This is my decision.”

“It just seems like you didn't want to do it before, and now you do because of what just happened.”

“I'm telling you that I'm making up my mind about what *I* want. This is my decision. The pressure at work is too much. I don't feel in control.”

“Are you ever going to be in control?” Ramsey asked, running his hand back through his hair. “You keep talking about control like you'll ever have a grasp on it. If we ever had control over our relationships, then I wouldn't have just found out about Parker's miscarriage. That,” he said,

pointing out the door that Parker had just left through, “that is what it’s like to be out of control. You just use it as an excuse.”

“An excuse? Seriously?” she growled. “It’s okay for you and Parker to be out of control but not for me? I get it. This was a mistake. I guess I shouldn’t have even brought this up to you.”

She whirled around and out the door. Rushing into their bedroom, she grabbed a change of clothes and an extra suit and stuffed them into a bag.

Ramsey appeared in the doorway a minute later. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking control,” she spat.

“Lexi, wait, wait, wait...you can’t leave,” he pleaded, grabbing for her bag.

“I’m sorry—what? I *can’t* leave?” She held the bag to her chest and away from him.

She turned to walk to the bathroom, but he blocked her path.

“I don’t want you to leave. That’s not taking control. That’s leaving.”

Lexi pushed him aside and walked into the bathroom. She dumped her makeup bag, a bottle of mousse, and her toothbrush into the bag.

“That’s right. That’s leaving. I’m taking back the control in this situation. I flushed it down the drain two years ago when I let you make me think that Parker wouldn’t be an issue and that you would trust me.”

“I do trust you,” he pleaded, his voice rising hysterically.

“And Parker?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Lexi, please...”

“You’ll never let it go. If you would just let it go,” she said.

“I’ll let it go. Just don’t leave.”

He grabbed her around the middle and tried to get her to stay, to kiss him, to hold him, but she couldn’t. *How could she stand there for another second, feeling this way?* She was aching all over. Her body felt like it had been pounded into the ground from being overworked, and then when she had come home to see her fiancé, he was emotionally distraught over another woman. *No, she couldn’t be in this house for another minute.*

“Lexi,” he called, following her out the bedroom door and down the stairs, “please just stop and think about this for a minute.”

“I’ll think about it when I’m gone.”

“Are you leaving me?” he asked, snatching her wrist and forcing her to look at him.

“I’m leaving the house. I can’t stay here—not with the way I’m feeling right now.”

“Lexi, I love you.”

She sighed, her resolve breaking. This wasn’t what she wanted. This was the man she had spent more than three years loving, the man she had agreed to be with. He was perfect, absolutely perfect—except when he wasn’t, except when she saw his flaws, the flaws he never let the rest of the world see. She knew him inside and out. She knew all of his quirks. He was hurting right now, and he wanted her to make it right. She didn’t want to argue with him, but she was stubborn.

He didn’t get to pick and choose when he was going to be the man that the rest of the world saw. Relationships were work. They were really hard work, and she had put her fair share into this one. She wanted it to work so desperately. But how could it with everything else hanging over him right now? These were the things she needed to figure out, and she wouldn’t do that while she was still around him.

“I love you, too,” she said before standing on her tiptoes and kissing his lips tenderly. “I do. I really do.”

Tears hit her as he held her in his arms, silently pleading for her not to do this.

“But...I have to go,” she said, pulling away from him and walking out the front door.



Present

Lexi sat in her car, her hands shaking. *What the hell had she just done?*

She had walked out on Ramsey. She had left their apartment with a change of clothes and her toothbrush. *Did that mean they were over?* She looked down at her diamond engagement ring, and the tears came harder.

No. They hadn't broken up or broken off the engagement, but she had actually just walked out of their place.

She didn't know what to do. She could barely breathe.

Through her tears, Lexi backed out of the garage and started driving aimlessly. She didn't even know where she was going to go. She wanted to talk to Chyna, but her friend was thousands of miles away on a private island for her honeymoon. She wouldn't be back until next week.

How did it keep happening that Chyna was out of the country when she and Ramsey were having problems? Chyna needed to stop leaving!

Not that Chyna would be able to do much more than talk her off of the ledge. She would have been in New York when Lexi needed her in Atlanta. Granted, her best friend had access to a private jet and could have been in Atlanta in a few hours, but Lexi needed her now. In any case, it didn't matter because Chyna wasn't even close to a couple of hours away.

Pulling off the road and into a parking lot in frustration, Lexi let the tears fall until her fingers and toes tingled from hyperventilation. Her cheeks were hot and wet, no matter how many times she tried to dry them. She wanted the pain in her chest to go away. She wanted to feel human again.

Wasn't this supposed to be the happiest time of her life? She kept repeating that to herself, but it didn't matter if she said the mantra a million times. She had to admit that she wasn't happy. She was sitting on the side of

the road in an abandoned parking lot, crying her eyes out. If that didn't show how low she had sunk all over again, then nothing did.

Her phone buzzed at her side, and she glanced down. Ramsey.

Please come back.

No, she couldn't. She couldn't do that. She wasn't ready.

Exiting the screen, she found another number and dialed, knowing it was the only place she could go.

"Lex, I didn't think I'd hear from you again today," Jack said pleasantly into the phone.

The sound of his voice made the tears fall harder. She didn't even know why. Maybe it was the prospect of talking to someone else about what had happened. Maybe it was just Jack.

"Are you okay? Why are you crying?"

"Ramsey," she said. It was the only word she got out.

"Do you need me to come get you?"

"No," she said, hiccuping through her tears. "I'm parked somewhere."

"You shouldn't drive like this," he said, concerned. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"Can I just come to your place?" Lexi asked weakly.

"Of course you can. Are you sure you don't want me to get you?"

He paused, and she could feel the tension in his stillness.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," he said.

"I'll survive."

She hung up the phone, dried her eyes, and set back out on the road. She knew it was probably stupid to go see Jack when she was so emotionally messed-up, but where else would she go? A hotel probably would be the better option, but the last thing she wanted was to be alone tonight.

Jack would take care of her.

The drive over to his place happened in what felt like a matter of seconds, or it could have been a couple of hours. She didn't remember any of it. All she remembered was walking out of her place, leaving with a bag of clothes...leaving Ramsey behind.

She parked the car in front of Jack's place and walked deliriously through the entrance. No one was waiting around in the lobby, and she was

thankful that she didn't have to face anyone else in her condition. The elevator dinged open, and then she was standing in front of Jack's door.

What was she going to say to him? How could she begin to explain what she had just done? Jack wouldn't judge her, of course. He had never judged her, but it didn't change how she was feeling in that moment.

"Lex," Jack whispered when he answered the door.

His brow furrowed when he saw her face swollen and red from tears that she hadn't been able to hold back. And when she looked up into his handsome face—his hair, dark and shaggy, his eyes, her favorite color of blue, that jawline so well-defined—she started crying all over again.

He sighed and pulled her into his arms. She grabbed the T-shirt he was wearing between her fingers and buried her face in his shoulder. His hand came down on her back, holding her securely against him as he toed the door closed.

"Shh," he said softly.

He ran his hand through her hair over and over again, stroking it soothingly, until she settled against him. The tears were still flowing, but the hysterics subsided, and she felt like she was able to breathe again.

"You know," she said against his T-shirt, "that I don't hate you, right?"

He chuckled softly and kissed the crown of her head lightly. The gesture seemed so perfectly in tune with what she needed in the moment that it didn't even make her freak-out.

"I know you don't."

"I kind of hate myself though."

"If you don't hate *me*, you can't hate yourself," Jack said, holding her at arm's length with a smirk.

Lexi grinned and shook her head. "You don't know the kind of person I am."

"Oh, believe me...I do."

"I was a total bitch."

"Yeah?" he asked. "And no one deserved it."

Lexi sighed and looked away. "I walked out on Ramsey."

Jack sputtered and then coughed to try to cover it up, but he did a terrible job at it. For someone usually so collected, he was anything but in that moment. She didn't know how to read him then, and all she wanted

was to curl into a ball on the floor and feel bad for herself. She deserved that at least.

“You guys *broke up*?”

“Well...no,” she said, twirling the ring on her finger. “I mean...I don’t think so.”

Jack put his hand on the small of her back and guided her to the couch. “I think you should sit down and start from the beginning. Do you want something to drink? I think I only have Jack Daniels and water, but—”

“I’m fine. I think drinking is a bad idea. I’m too much of a lightweight,” she said, plopping onto the couch and pressing her head back into the cushion.

Jack took a seat next to her, mirroring her pose before speaking. “I never thought y’all would break up.”

“Me either.”

The very thought made her throat constrict and her head dizzy. She couldn’t break up with Ramsey. She loved him. He was her fiancé. They were going to get married. *But did she want that? Wasn’t that what Chyna had been getting at from the beginning?* Lexi needed to determine what she wanted, not what someone else said she should want. And she couldn’t stick with this just because she had told herself she would no matter what.

“What caused this? There had to be something, right? Most people don’t just wake up from an engagement...even when they should,” he all but whispered the last part. Surely, he was reflecting on the idiocy of his own marriage.

Lexi shook her head and pressed her palms over her eyes. She didn’t want to cry anymore.

Tears were the words she had left unspoken.

They spoke volumes about her pain, her grief, her despair for a relationship that she had put all of herself into. They broke a seal on the emotions she so tightly contained to the point where she could literally feel the pain in her chest, in her lungs, in her very being. And yet, she hated the vulnerability of it all. Knowing that once invested in her tears, she couldn’t take them back. They consumed her.

As another tear rolled down her cheek, she realized then how much she really needed them though. They were her heart’s way of speaking of that pain.

So, she let herself feel.

Tucking her feet up onto the couch, she hugged her knees to her chest and wept openly. Jack wrapped an arm around her shoulders, but he didn't say a word. He didn't need to. His comfort was all that she needed.

After a few minutes, she found her voice again. "Do you remember that night on the beach last summer?"

"How could I ever forget?"

His hand trailed circles into her muscles, and she bit back the sigh that threatened to escape as he physically massaged the tension out of her back.

"I took Ramsey back that night because he told me he wanted to prove to me that everything I was freaking out about with Parker was nothing. And it wasn't."

Jack's hand stilled as her words sank in. "Did he...do something with Parker?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"No. I mean, I don't think so...but I came home, and she had found paperwork that said she had been discharged from an abortion clinic without anything happening. She proved what she had been saying all along...that she'd had a miscarriage."

"That's kind of huge for them, isn't it?" Jack asked softly.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. And I probably wouldn't have cared as much if it hadn't all been handled behind my back and if he hadn't freaked out about the whole thing. I mean, if he's still so hung up on this thing with Parker," she said, turning to face Jack, "then how can he even want to marry me?"

"I know why he wants to marry you. And I know why, despite the red flags, he can't see anything but you," Jack said.

"Why? Because I sure don't see it. I mean, I'm not crazy. How he is acting about Parker is a huge red flag, right?"

She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and stared into his blue eyes.

"You're not crazy. He's the guy who realized your worth and put you first. He gave you what you deserved. And he's a complete fucking idiot to do anything to jeopardize that."

Lexi stared down at the floor as his words sank in. She had given Ramsey everything, and he had risked their relationship with whatever was going on with Parker. Something that had happened between them years ago, which should have been put to rest years ago, was cropping up and suffocating everything she had invested in.

"He should have learned from my mistakes," Jack said.

And then, she saw it in those crystal-clear blue eyes she had missed more than she cared to admit.

He wanted her. And it was a terrible idea to even let him see that she might want him, too. But it was Jack. She licked her lips and felt her pulse racing. She was too exhausted from work, too run-down, too emotionally distraught over the collapse of her life. She needed to back out of this situation and deal with it another night.

Jack's hand slid down her cheek and down the curve of her neck, and then he pulled her head forward toward him. She breathed in sharply as he met her halfway, their faces no more than an inch apart. She could close her eyes and practically feel his lips on hers. This was a bad idea, but her brain and her heart weren't listening to her. She wanted to forget everything. Jack had always been the easiest escape.

But no...

She couldn't.

Her ring sat heavily on her finger.

Jack tilted his head forward, and instead of kissing her as she had expected, he rested his forehead against hers and dropped his hands to her shoulders.

"Losing you was the biggest mistake of my life. I don't think another person deserves to feel that loss at my expense."

And he pulled back, and she was left there, gasping.

Jack had...stopped. She didn't know how to respond. *Was she supposed to be relieved?*

Because she wasn't. She had expected him to kiss her. Her relationship was in shambles, and the thought of returning to her house left her feeling nauseated.

And now...through her haze, she heard the words that Jack had just said to her.

Losing you was the biggest mistake of my life.

Oh God!

After all this time...

Lexi pulled away sharply and stared forward at the far wall. She wasn't sure if she was breathing properly. Her heart felt ready to burst. It was too much, all at one time.

"I think...I think I need to get some sleep," she said, standing.

She couldn't address what had just happened. She couldn't let herself think about his words and the consequences in his meaning. She couldn't think about how much she had wanted him to kiss her, to feel his lips pressed against her, to taste him.

"Yeah," he murmured. "You can take the bed."

"Okay," she said, not wanting to argue with him.

She trudged down the short hall after him to the only bedroom in the place. He opened the door for her and flipped on a light. The minimalist décor continued into the bedroom. There was a queen-sized bed sitting in the corner and a small dresser. The closet was open on the opposite wall, and she could see that it, at least, was mostly full. It seemed the only real thing he had moved over to the place was his clothing.

"Bathroom is across the hall. Let me know if you need anything," he told her. "I'll just grab a pillow. I only have the ones on the bed."

"Oh, okay," she said.

He took a pillow and walked back out of his own room. "Good night." He smiled forlornly, and then he disappeared back down the hall to where he would be sleeping...on the couch.

What was the world coming to?

Lexi padded into the bathroom where she changed into sleeping clothes and brushed her teeth. She stared at her reflection and wondered how anyone could want her at all. She looked run-down because she *was* run-down. She hadn't exercised since last week, and that wasn't helping anything. When her job put her on benders like this, she didn't get to do much of anything—sleep, eat, work out. Circles were under her puffy red eyes, and her complexion was seriously missing the beach. At least her hair was still long and glossy.

Ever the optimist.

Lexi rolled her eyes and walked back across the hall and into the bedroom. She shut the door with a sigh and then hesitantly curled up into Jack's bed. She groaned when she took in her first breath and buried her nose into the pillow.

Christ! The whole bed smelled like him—musky sexy cologne and sex. It made her entire body curl in on itself in pleasure from the heady feeling of intoxication that washed over her and the joyous aftereffect of an adrenaline boost pumping endorphins through her body.

There was no way that she was going to be able to sleep in this. All she could think about was all the times she had been pressed into his body in college after marathons tucked away in his bed...and the sound of his voice telling her that losing her had been the worst mistake of his life.

She lay in bed, wide-awake, for as long as she could stand it. She knew that she had to work bright and early in the morning, but she couldn't fall asleep, lying here. If only her exhaustion would just set in and give her the temporary relief she needed...

But it didn't.

With a sigh, she swung her legs back over the edge of the bed, walked across the room, and back down the hallway. Jack was lying on the couch, facing the ceiling, a blanket thrown across him. When she walked in, he turned to face her. He didn't look like he had been sleeping either.

"Can't sleep," she whispered.

"Me either."

"Thinking about you."

"Yeah."

Lexi leaned against the entrance to the hallway and fiddled with her hair hanging loose over one shoulder. She wasn't wearing more than a tank top and sleeping shorts, but she couldn't be self-conscious in front of Jack.

"What should I do?" she whispered, wishing she had all the answers.

"Sleep on it and decide in the morning."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's for the better," she agreed. "Come with me?"

Jack took a deep breath. "Where?"

Her eyes found him in the darkness before she responded. "Bed."

"Lex," he groaned huskily.

"I don't want to be alone."

"I...I can't."

"Please," she begged.

Jack kicked his feet over the side and ran his hand through his hair. After taking a deep breath, he walked across the room to stand in front of her. "You're still engaged."

"I know." Lexi nodded, meeting his eyes. "I'm not asking you to sleep with me..."

"I can't promise you that I won't." His hands found her hips, and he gripped them tightly in his hand.

He was fighting for control. She could feel it rolling off of every inch of him.

“I didn’t ask you to,” she said, biting her lip. Her eyes flitted back to the ground, and she felt him reflexively pull her against him.

“I don’t want to hurt you ever again...”

“You’re not hurting me,” she said, finding his hand and pulling it into hers. “I’m just asking you to hold me. Please.”

She tugged on his arm, and with only a moment’s hesitation, he followed her down the hallway and back into his room. Jack closed the door behind them as Lexi snuggled back under the covers. Her heart was fluttering in her chest with anticipation. She licked her lips again and tried not to think about what she was doing. Nothing was happening.

Jack crawled into bed next to her, and she could feel her pulse in the tips of her fingers.

He set her body on fire.

“Lex,” he whispered.

She could feel the charged space between them and realized that she was even more awake now than she had been before.

“I can’t...”

Lexi pushed her body into him, and he stopped talking. She relaxed against his chest, fitting into him like the missing puzzle piece. His hand wrapped around her waist and pulled her flush against his body, his head falling onto her shoulder.

“God, you smell so good,” he groaned, breathing her in.

His body was warm, and together like this, it was like an inferno. They hadn’t been together like this since his birthday and before that...New York. All of the resistance that she had put up melted away in an instant, and she wondered how she had ever said no. She remembered why she had been an idiot all those years. She remembered why it had all been worth it to her.

But she wouldn’t...couldn’t do this with him. She was still engaged. If she slept with Jack tonight, like her body was practically demanding in that moment, then she would be completely in the wrong. It wouldn’t be her decision with Ramsey anymore. She would have fucked up another relationship, no matter if it was already in a weakened condition. She had sworn she would never do that to Ramsey...ever. Even where they were

now, she knew that she had to hold on to that. If she were with Jack now, then she would be no better than Ramsey having feelings for Parker.

With a groan, Lexi pulled away from Jack. “I can’t either,” she said, turning to face him.

He dropped his head to the pillow with a sigh. “I know.”

“We’re friends,” she said, trying to put back up the barrier that they had worked so hard to achieve, the barrier she had single-handedly knocked down.

“I can’t just be your friend,” he breathed huskily into the darkness.

Lexi couldn’t make out the outline of his jawline or the smirk she knew that played across his face or the shaggy set of his hair that perpetually fell into his eyes. But she knew what it all looked like by memory. His breath, hot on her face, made her eyes close, conjuring those memories that she desperately tried to hold back.

“You have to be,” she managed to get out. She didn’t even sound like herself. She wasn’t herself when she was with him. She was his.

Seth had said it the best all that time ago—when they were together, there was no one else.

“No.” His hand found her fingers and slowly pried them apart, and then he slipped his hand into hers.

She didn’t even fight him.

“See.”

“What?” she asked, pressing her palm against his as his thumb stroked up her hand.

“We fit together perfectly,” he murmured. “Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

Lexi whimpered at the words falling from his lips that she so desperately craved. It wasn’t fair. It was too late. *Too damn late. Why now?*

“No, Jack.”

“We’ve tried being friends. It was the only thing we hadn’t tried,” he said, his voice changing.

He had a commanding edge to him that pushed aside what she had been saying.

“I gave it a shot, Lex. I gave you your space. I let you be happy. That’s what you said you wanted.” He gripped her hand a little harder.

“How did that work out? Are you happy? Are you happy without me?”

“Jack,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes once again.

“I know I wasn’t.”



Present

Lexi spent the next four days, alternating between locking herself away at work and Jack's apartment. The case was coming to a close. She could see the light at the end of the tunnel. At least things were going well in her professional life even if her personal life was shit. Her secretary had even stopped her on Monday morning to ask if she was all right. Lexi hadn't thought that she looked *that* bad, but apparently, that hadn't been the case.

She had splurged over the weekend and bought some new clothes, so she wouldn't have to go home. She had felt guilty about it...about spending the money and about avoiding her place.

She had known she needed to talk to Ramsey. He had freaked out when she hadn't come home the next night.

At nearly midnight, she had returned to Jack's place, and she hadn't responded to any of Ramsey's messages or calls during the day. She hadn't been able to talk to him. The memory of being locked in Jack's arms, falling asleep in them, waking up in them, had kept her from being able to speak to Ramsey.

Nothing had happened, but still...*something* had happened.

Lexi had finally broken down and texted Ramsey.

I'm all right, but I don't know when I'll be coming back.

The response had been instantaneous.

Please come home. I'm sorry. I'm losing my mind over here. I can't lose you, too.

Lexi had almost broken down at those words. Her heart had felt like someone had rolled over it with a steamroller. Every muscle in her body

had itched to walk back to her car and comfort him. But she hadn't.

I need some time away.

We should talk about this. Please come home and talk to me about this.

I can't. Just give me some time, she had responded, biting down hard on her lip.

Where are you? I'll come to you.

Yeah, she wasn't even going to go there. If Ramsey knew that she was with Jack, he might do something drastic...like drive over here and come find her. She had remembered only a week ago when his fist had connected with John's face. She had doubted he would be so merciful with Jack.

I'm sorry. I can't. I have to go.

She had turned off her phone and tossed in her purse. She hadn't spoken to him since.



Three days later, and still, all she wanted to do was sleep.

Jack had given her a key to the place, so she could come and go as she pleased. He hadn't even hesitated. He had just placed it in her hand Friday morning before he had left for work. It hadn't really mattered because she hadn't been there without him, but it had been a nice feeling.

She slid the key into the lock and opened the door to the quiet apartment. She knew it was late. She wasn't expecting Jack to be awake. The past three nights, she had found him passed out on the couch when she got back. She would shake him awake to let him know that she was home, and he would sit up to talk to her about her day, to try to get her mind off of everything else. She would relax back into his lap, and he would stroke her hair until she stopped speaking and fell asleep.

The next morning, she would wake up alone, wrapped in his sheets after he had carried her exhausted body into bed. It was the only way she found some peace from the headache and the heartache.

But tonight, when she quietly closed the door behind her and walked into the living room, Jack was sitting on the couch with his hands clasped together, staring at the coffee table.

“Hey. Did something happen?” Lexi asked, dropping her bag and walking over to him.

Jack dropped his head and then sat up straight. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me, too,” she said hesitantly. “Is everything okay?”

“Ramsey called me.”

“He did?” she asked, her stomach dropping out. *What did Jack talk to him about? Did he tell Ramsey that she was staying here?* She glanced back at the door, wondering if Ramsey would be breaking it down any minute.

“What did he say?”

“He wanted to know if I’d heard from you.”

“What, um...what did you tell him?” she asked, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

“I told him that I had and to give you some space. He didn’t really like that answer.”

“Did you tell him I was here?” she squeaked.

Jack arched an eyebrow incredulously and stood. “I’m not stupid. I wouldn’t have told him. I’ve still kind of been waiting for him to show up all afternoon.”

“Oh,” she said with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that to your doorstep.”

She stared down at her feet and tried to figure out what the hell had become of her life. If Ramsey came here and messed with Jack because she had needed someone, then she was going to be so pissed. But she didn’t want Jack to have to go through that. She just wanted to do the right thing.

“Do you want me to go?”

His face showed actual shock at her conclusion. “How could you think that? I don’t want you to leave. That’s the exact opposite of what I want.”

“Ramsey punched John at Chyna’s wedding. I don’t want him to come here and do that to you. You don’t deserve it when you’ve been nothing but supportive of me through all of this.”

“My attorney would probably love for Ramsey to come and beat the shit out of me,” he said with a sad laugh. “Then, we might be able to do

something about this situation the Bridges are throwing on my table.”

“What are they doing?”

“Besides Bekah divorcing me? Besides trying to take me for every penny I’m worth? Besides dragging my name through the mud? Besides all but forcing me out of the company?” he asked.

“They can’t fire you over this!” Lexi cried.

“Oh no, they’re not firing me. They’re just strongly encouraging me to seek employment elsewhere.”

Lexi’s mouth dropped open. “They can’t do that.”

“And why not? They own half of Atlanta. They’re not going to get in trouble for kicking out one employee. And even if it came to that, they would just get a pat on the hand, saying don’t do that again. It’s okay. Really. This whole situation has made me see things very clearly,” he told her. “Seven months separated from Bekah, and I see the kind of person she is. I get what you were saying all along.”

That she was a lying, conniving, manipulative bitch? Yes, that was what she had been saying all along. She was so glad that Jack was really realizing all of this, but she did hate that he had to get hurt so much to realize it.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You’re the last person to blame.” He reached forward and cupped her chin, tilting her face back up to his. “You tried to tell me. I was the one who didn’t listen.”

“I’m just sorry that you’re going through this,” she said, gazing back up into those eyes.

“And I’m sorry that I hurt you, Lex.” He sighed and stroked his thumb down her cheek instinctually. “You’ve been hurt too much by too many people.”

Lexi blinked back tears and pulled away from him. “We should go to sleep,” she whispered.

“Not yet. I wanted to talk to you,” he said with a sigh. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot since you’ve been here, thinking about how we were, how we are.”

She turned her head and assessed him. He was staring at her with some fierce intensity. He hadn’t been waiting up to tell her about Ramsey. He had been waiting up to talk to her about whatever was on his mind now.

“What about us?” That word felt so foreign yet so familiar.

“Let me try to get this out. I...I had this idea in my head that it would never work out between us. I wanted it. I really fucking wanted it. But I just couldn't see it happening, Lex,” he murmured softly.

Lexi's heart tightened at his words. *Just what she wanted to hear. He wanted it, but it was never going to happen. Hadn't she known that from the start?*

“Well, thank for your honesty,” she said sarcastically. She couldn't keep the hurt out of her voice.

“No, that's not what I meant,” he said, reaching out for her.

She moved away from him. He had said he didn't want to hurt her, and then he tossed this out. *Like she could handle anything else this week.*

“I'll try to explain. I can admit that I was really messed-up from my parents' divorce. My parents were so completely, totally, madly in love. I've heard stories from family friends about how they were so cute that they were disgusting. I've heard it from both of them that they just got married too young, they were too in love, they didn't know what they were in for. They thought that the love and passion were enough, that it would carry them through,” he said softly, “but it didn't.”

Lexi gulped. She didn't know this part of his history. She knew about the divorce, of course, but not about his parents being in love—at least not like this.

“I thought after it all went to shit that I was *never* going to be like them. Not ever. I wasn't going to just give in to someone like that. I'd find someone solid, stable...”

“Predictable,” Lexi offered.

“Very much so. It wasn't that I wasn't invested or that I didn't love the people when I was with them, but it wasn't right. In every new relationship, I tried harder and harder, and it just seemed to get worse and worse. It seemed like I had to push at every step to make it work...when things should have just fit together.”

He sighed and met her gaze. She could feel the waves of emotions rolling off of him.

“Well, look, I pushed so hard that I married someone without that passion, without the burning drive, and it's all fucked-up, too, Lex. It didn't matter that my parents loved each other because they let that love die. I never had it with Bekah...I've only had it with you. And I don't want to let it die, Lex. Not ever.”

Lexi smacked him in the chest. “I can’t believe you would say this stuff to me right now. After what—nine or ten years, you finally realize how dumb you were? You finally realize that I’m the one you want? I’m no saint, but you’re an asshole,” she whispered.

He grabbed her hand and brought it softly to his lips. “I am, but damn, Lex, I’m your asshole.”

“Jack, please...”

“When you landed on my doorstep last week, you asked me what you should do,” he reminded her. “I asked you the same question on my wedding day. You should have told me to walk away. You should have told me to leave her. That’s what you should have told me. I think all along it was what I wanted to hear. I made the mistake...and I don’t want you to make the same one.”

His eyes blazed as the words he had been holding back fell from his lips. He reached out and rested his hands on her face, and she stopped breathing. Lexi had known that was what he was asking her that day, but she hadn’t been able to say it. She shouldn’t have *had* to say it. She had wanted him to come to the conclusion on his own, but he hadn’t. And he had married Bekah. Now, he was telling her it was all a mistake and that they had gone through all of that for nothing.

“So, you asked me what you should do. You should leave him. Because if you’re not happy now...you’re not going to be happy when you’re married.”

Lexi locked on to those baby-blue eyes, on to the face of the man she had loved for longer than she could imagine. He was telling her to end it with Ramsey. He was fighting for her happiness. His mistakes with Bekah were far from what she was dealing with right now with Ramsey, but they had their similarities.

But she didn’t know if she was ready to make that decision. She could work things out with Ramsey. She could make things right. *She could be happy...right?*

“I see what you’re thinking. You have it written all over your face. You’re making a terrible mistake,” he pleaded with her.

Jack Howard was pleading with her.

She felt years of need pressing on her from all sides. She had wanted this. She had wanted him to fight for her. *And now that he was, what was she supposed to do?*

Three years with Ramsey, an engagement ring, a wedding...

That she had asked him to postpone.

"I can't make a decision like that right now. It's midnight. I'm exhausted. I still have to talk to Ramsey. I can't..."

"Excuses," he said quickly. "You already know you're not happy. You wouldn't be here if you were. Why did you stay friends with me, Lexi?"

Lexi bit her lip and turned away. She didn't like to answer that question.

"You could have cut me loose. You could have used me for the D-Bags show and then never saw me again. You probably should have walked away from all the bullshit that I put you through, but you didn't. Why didn't you?"

"I don't know what you want me to say," she whispered. "I don't know what you expect from me."

"The only thing you've ever expected from me, Lex. The truth. Why? Why, after everything, did you stay friends with me? Why did you still see me? Why are you helping me with the divorce?" he asked, following her as she walked a few steps away from him. "I just want to hear what you have to say."

"Because I couldn't, all right?" she cried. "I couldn't walk away. I was bound and determined to leave you in the dust after you married that fucking Bitch. You gave her a duplicate of *my* ring, and then you married her! I didn't even want to think about you, let alone see you. And still, you managed to wiggle your way back in."

She turned around and smacked his chest again. He let her lash out without even trying to stop her. She wasn't really hurting him, but she wished that she had the energy to. She wished she had the energy to fight him and not cave to his words.

"I wanted you gone, but then when I was around you again, it felt right. It always feels so right and so easy. Then, you were my friend...even when I thought you were going to try something...even when I fucking wanted it, you held back. You were the only person aside from Chyna that I could count on. Do you know how fucking strange that has been? But I didn't just like it...I started craving it. You were always there to pick me up. You even defended me against Bekah...your own fucked-up wife. I let you be that person. And now what?"

Lexi stopped fighting him and hung her head low. Her hands still rested on his chest where she had been hitting him.

“You’re still here. You’re still a part of me. I can’t seem to get rid of you, Jack. And I don’t want to,” she whispered, defeated.

“And I don’t want you to either,” he said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “Seth has always said that you’re my girl. Well...I’m your guy. I always have been. I’ve just been too damn scared to do anything about it. But I’ll be damned if I let you slip through my fingers again. I’m yours. You’re mine. Just...be mine.”

“It’s not that easy, Jack,” she said, tears pooling in her eyes.

His thumbs brushed against her cheeks, sweeping away the fallen tears. “Nothing is ever easy with us, but that doesn’t mean it’s not worth fighting for. The best things in life are worth fighting for, and you’re the best thing I’ve ever had in my life.”

She couldn’t breathe. It was just like Jack to flip her world upside down. It was just like him to make her feel the most intense emotions. He wouldn’t have it any other way.

Jack continued, “I don’t want it to be easy. I just want it to be right, and the only way it’s ever going to be right is with you.”

“I need to...I need to sleep on it. I need to talk to Ramsey. I can’t... I’m not in the right mind-set to make a decision,” she said, trying to forestall this, trying to hold back. Because if she let loose, then she didn’t know what would happen. She had to change the subject, or she might combust. “What are you going to do about work?”

Jack waved off the question. “I don’t care. I’ll get another job. I’ve already been looking.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Does it even matter? I’ll go anywhere as long as I have you,” he said with earnest.

“Jack, you’re still married,” she reminded him, hoping to put some much-needed distance between them.

Jack groaned and shook his head. He looked like talking about his marriage at the moment was the last thing on his mind.

He wanted her. He fucking wanted her. How long had she been craving those words?

But could she even trust that they would last? Could she trust that if another predictable blonde walked by, he wouldn’t walk, too? Two years

ago, she would have said with certainty that he would run scared. He would find another Danielle, another Kate, another Bekah. He would look for something stable and solid, just like he had said, and leave her behind in the dust.

Second-best.

That was what she had been for so long. But she didn't *feel* second-best any longer. Sure, they hadn't been working toward a romantic relationship for the past two years, but they *had* been working toward a relationship. They had been working toward a friendship. And it was as solid and stable and perfect as she could have ever wanted from anyone... let alone, Jack.

He hadn't put her second.

He had exchanged the D-Bags tickets for the front row because he knew she wanted to be closer. He hadn't put a move on her, and he had respected her relationship with Ramsey. He had defended her to Bitch Bekah against Elisa. He had followed her that night on the beach. Even drunk and desperate, he had told her to leave his place. He hadn't wanted to fuck up her relationship. And then, when her relationship was in shambles, he had still waited four whole days before telling her how he felt and risking his feelings. And she was almost certain that he wouldn't have said anything at all if he had thought that she was going to go running back to Ramsey on that first day.

"I'll be divorced in three weeks. I'll let Bekah say whatever she wants. I'll just get it over with, and then I'll be free."

"You can't let her win like that," Lexi said, the lawyer in her coming out automatically.

"She's not winning when I'm gone."

"She won't see it like that. You need to fight."

"I don't want to prolong the proceedings. I just want her gone," he said earnestly.

Lexi bit her lip and closed her eyes. She couldn't do this right now. She couldn't think about this with Jack's words spiraling through her mind.

"Lex, look at me," he whispered. "Please."

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared into his baby blue eyes.

"I already told you what I think. I think you should leave him. Not because of me, but for you. To save this," he said, pointing at her heart. "I

just want you to open your eyes and do what your heart wants. Does it want that person, that life?”

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and then straightened, giving her the space she needed.

“I took what you said to heart, and I tried to listen to you. I tried to commit, to work through my issues, to let you go, to let you be happy. You were the catalyst, but I did those things for me. I did them to make me a better person,” he told her. “You once asked why you weren’t good enough for me when my eyes were open. It had nothing to do with you and everything to do with what was wrong with me. And Lex, I just want you to feel good enough for yourself with your eyes open.”



Present

Lexi pulled out her cell phone and prayed for Chyna to answer. She and Adam were returning from their honeymoon today. Lexi knew it was selfish to rain on Chyna's parade as soon as she got back, but there wasn't much else that she could do. She needed to talk to her best friend. She needed Chyna to calm her down.

Knowing it was her only opportunity to speak to Chyna before Lexi got off work later tonight, she had taken a break from court for an early dinner. She hadn't been able to sleep last night, and she was worse for wear because of it. Sleeping in Jack's bed, even alone, with all of his words pushing through her mind, demanding her attention, had been impossible. She had tossed and turned all night until she finally fell into a restless slumber a few hours before she had to be up.

She hadn't seen Jack in the morning, and Lexi had assumed that had been on purpose. He probably wanted to give her the space she needed.

Lose Jack and be with Ramsey.

Be with Jack and lose Ramsey.

Be by herself without either of them.

Move back to New York, start a new life, rebound-fuck John all over again.

Run from her past for a future that couldn't even begin to handle her emotional baggage.

"Chica!" Chyna cried.

She sounded hella happy in that moment, and it made Lexi frown at the thought of bringing her down.

"I'm glad you're back."

"Oh my God. I'm not. I could live on the beach with the ocean and a private cabana on a private island, having marathon sex and drinking my life away. It was pure bliss. Pure fucking bliss, Alexa," Chyna crooned.

“It’s good to hear that,” Lexi said sullenly. She knew Chyna didn’t have a picture-perfect life, but she had a life with Adam that was about as pristine as it could get since that last breakup when they had finally decided to commit.

“What did I miss? You sound like you’re...perpetually, emotionally distraught.”

“It’s not perpetual.”

Chyna snorted. “Yeah, okay.”

“Whatever.”

“What? Don’t act dumb. You’re a hot mess. I’ve come to live with it. At least you’re hot.”

She could practically see Chyna shrugging it off.

“Are you still drunk? You’re talking like an idiot. Or is *that* just your perpetual state?” Lexi asked harshly.

“Drunk is my perpetual state. We both know I’m a genius,” Chyna said with a giggle.

“Oh...totally. Genius.”

“Anyway, you shit. What’s up with you and that buzzkill sound coming out of your mouth?”

Really, she could always rely on Chyna for an understanding, caring pick-me-up.

“I walked out on Ramsey, left the house, and haven’t seen or spoken to him in, um...five days. I went to Jack’s, and he’s in love with me. So, I guess he wants to be with me. Now, I have to decide what I want to do, because I don’t think that they’re down for a threesome,” Lexi said, letting it all out in a rushed paraphrase of everything that had happened.

“Damn. That would be some really good hate sex,” Chyna mused aloud.

“Chyna!” Lexi cried. Sometimes, her best friend astounded her, but still, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“What? What do you want me to say? You’re in the same position you were three years ago, except this time, you have the baggage to boot with Ramsey and a diamond ring on your finger. This is the same conversation we had before *I* got married. What do *you* want?” Chyna implored. “You don’t need a guy to make you happy. You wouldn’t have spent three years in law school killing yourself if that were the case. If Ramsey doesn’t make you happy, then let him go. If Jack doesn’t make you

happy, then let him go. If the only thing that will make you happy is a threesome, I know some people who could help with that.”

Lexi laughed again. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Your loss.”

“Chyna,” she said softly, contemplating what she had said, “what if I don’t know what I want?”

“You do. You’ve always known. You just have to stop thinking about what everyone else wants. Ramsey wants you. Jack wants you. I bet John still wants you. I fucking want you back in New York, but I’m not going to ask you to come back unless that’s what *you* want!”

“Well, I have to talk to Ramsey tonight and decide what I’m going to do.”

“Whatever you do, it will be the right choice because it’s for you, chica. No one can tell you that you made the wrong choice. No one. I’m certainly not going to. If anyone tries to say that what you decided to do wasn’t right, then you just remind that person that it’s your life. No one else is going to live it but you. So, why not live by my philosophy? Do whatever the hell you want and tell everyone else to just fuck off.”

Chyna made everything sound so easy. It was, after all, Lexi’s decision, and she was the one who would have to live with the choice that she made. It didn’t exactly make the decision easier because she still had to choose. She still had to hurt someone who she cared deeply for. But at least when she made the decision, she would know that it was the right one.

“Thanks, C.”

“Good luck tonight. Call me later to let me know how it goes. I want to book you a flight back up to celebrate.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to do,” Lexi said.

“First, I so know what you’re going to do. I’m just waiting for you to know what you’re going to do. And second, we’re not celebrating you choosing someone. We’re celebrating you putting yourself first and making the right choice for you,” Chyna told her. “That’s the Lexi I knew who called me a slut and a whore outside of the club and fucking smirked at me like you knew it was true. That’s the Lexi who placed in the top ten of her class and passed the New York and Georgia bar in the same summer. You’ve got it all, chica. Now, take what you want.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Oh no! I’m not telling you what to do. I love you, but I’m not making that decision. I chose Adam. Now, it’s your turn.”

Lexi nodded and took a deep breath. It was time for that. Chyna was right. Glancing down at her watch, she realized how quickly her break was disappearing, and if she wanted to eat anything, then she needed to get off the phone.

After ending her call with Chyna, Lexi shot off a quick text message to Ramsey.

We need to talk tonight. Can I call you when I get off work, so we can meet up?

Of course. I can’t wait to see you and hear your voice.

Lexi bit her lip and thought about the decision she had to make going forward. It was all she could think about throughout her meal, in the courtroom, and back in her office late that night. Her boss cut her out early because she was so out of it. He told her to be better prepared tomorrow, or he was cutting her from the case, too. That was hardly true since she had done all the legwork on the project, but it still stung when he said that to her.

It also didn’t help that by sending her home early, he was forcing her to face her problems hours before she was ready. Though, she would likely never be ready. She just had to suck it up and face what she was walking into.

Lexi pulled her phone out and stared down at Ramsey’s number. She had to do this. There wasn’t anywhere else for her to go, nowhere else for her to hide. And she didn’t want to anymore. She was tired of this feeling, and having this conversation was the only way to get rid of it.

“Hey,” she said when Ramsey answered the phone.

“Hey,” he said just as softly. “It’s really good to hear from you.”

“Yeah. Same,” she said truthfully. It was good to hear from him. She had missed him in the short time they had been apart...as much from the physical distance as the emotional. “Can we meet to talk? I’d rather have this conversation in person.”

“Sure. Do you want to come home?” he asked, using that last word like he was tightening a vise grip on her heart.

“I think I would rather talk somewhere else.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Do you want to meet me at the hospital or something? I don’t know many other places that will be open and conducive to a conversation at this time of night.”

Ugh! One of the last places she wanted to be was at the hospital, surrounded by Bridges Enterprise with the knowledge that Parker was such an important actor in that company. But Lexi hadn’t thought about the fact that everything was closing soon.

“Is Parker going to be there?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t keep tabs on her, and since our conversation last week, she has made herself scarce,” he said stiffly.

“Scarce in her own hospital?”

“I might have had words with her.”

Lexi could imagine how that had gone. She didn’t doubt that Ramsey had probably blown up on Parker about the abortion paperwork. He had a short temper when it came to Parker, and Lexi had seen his short fuse unleash on Parker before. Lexi didn’t think Parker was necessarily a bad person, and she wondered in that moment what she thought about all of this, not that she wanted to talk to Parker to find out. Lexi was still pretty pissed that Parker had the audacity to bring that paperwork to Ramsey in the first place.

“All right. If you think she won’t be around, then I’ll come by.”

“Okay, I’ll head over there now,” he said eagerly.

Lexi hung up the phone with a sigh and placed it back in her purse. It was strange, as a lawyer, to hate confrontation, but she really did. Maybe it was just different because this was her personal life, and work had nothing to do with her, but it felt so much worse.

She drove across town to the hospital and parked in the staff parking lot as normal. She knew that Ramsey had likely beaten her here, and he was probably already waiting for her in his office. She tapped her foot anxiously in her car before getting up the nerve to head out. She knew she shouldn’t drag her feet and put off the inevitable.

Lexi breezed through the sliding glass doors and into the massive hospital entranceway. Her feet carried her toward the elevator when she heard her name being called out through the haze she was in. She shook her head and turned to face the direction where she had heard her name.

“Lexi!” Cierra said, waving at her. “What are you doing here? It’s late!”

“Oh, hey,” Lexi said softly. She hadn’t wanted to run into anyone. “Just coming to see Ramsey. I didn’t think you worked the late shift.”

“They started requiring us all to work one a week. I guess enough people didn’t want to work the night shifts.”

“Oh.” That was all she could manage. Her mind was elsewhere.

“I’m glad I got to see you. I really wanted to talk about the wedding. Just let me know if I need to help with anything or meet up with the other bridesmaids for anything for you,” Cierra said, her face an open book as far as emotions went.

Lexi sighed and bit her lip. She liked Cierra, and she had wanted her as part of the wedding party, but she didn’t really trust anyone but Chyna with what had happened between her and Ramsey and Jack. And she couldn’t talk about a wedding right now.

“Let’s talk about it another time, okay?” Lexi asked.

“Is everything all right?” Cierra asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Fine. I just have to meet Ramsey.”

“Okay. Come say hi before you leave.”

Lexi waved her off without a response. She couldn’t talk to her without seeing how this conversation with Ramsey went first. After this, then she would decide what to do about bridesmaids and the wedding and everything else in her life. *One step at a time.*

She took the elevator to the top floor. Through her nerves, she laughed at how this was the one thing that Ramsey hadn’t gotten to go his way. He hadn’t wanted a top-floor office like his family, and even though he had been given discretion over almost everything else, the designers had still put him up on the top floor. So much good that discretion had been for...Parker still worked with him, and they still had offices next door to each other.

He better be true to his word and have her out of the area if not out of the hospital entirely.

When the elevator opened on the top floor, Lexi steeled herself for the conversation she had been dreading all week. If she knew how this was all going to go down, then she likely wouldn’t be as terrified as she felt, but she couldn’t help it. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and walked out of the elevator.

Ramsey was pacing in his office as she approached. His secretary was mercifully absent. Lexi glanced into the office next door and didn’t see

anyone. She sighed in relief. *No Parker.*

She was used to seeing him in suits, but he hadn't been at the office. He had driven here from home, so he was dressed more casually in a pair of pressed khaki shorts, green polo, and boat shoes. He still looked perfectly put-together even though she could tell by his pacing, the way he ducked his head, the way he ran his hands back through his hair methodically, that he was a wreck.

Her hand landed on the doorknob lightly, and Ramsey's head jerked up at the sound. Her heart broke at the sight. Her Ramsey never went anywhere without being clean-shaven, and Lexi could see stubble along his jawline. His eyes seemed far away, and bags were forming under his eyes, like he hadn't been sleeping. She hated that he was like this...that she had caused this.

Lexi turned the handle and walked into Ramsey's office, slowly, cautiously. He took a few steps toward her like he wanted to scoop her up and pull her into his arms, but when he saw her face, he stopped in his tracks. He wasn't stupid. He didn't want to push her again. But any distance between them felt exponentially worse with those few feet.

"Lexi, it's so good to see you," he all but whispered into the silence between them.

"It's good to see you, too," she answered honestly.

"I'm really glad you called and wanted to talk."

Now that she was here, staring at his beautiful face, Lexi didn't know what to say. *Do what you want.* That was basically what Chyna had told her. *You already know what you want. You just have to make that decision for yourself.*

Lexi sighed and closed her eyes. *Why couldn't it really be that easy?*

"I know you wanted to talk, but can I go first?" Ramsey asked. "I've been holding on to this for five days, and I want to get it all out."

She nodded. She didn't even know where to begin. So, maybe this was better.

"Those papers don't mean anything to me. That was a lifetime ago..."

Lexi sighed and shook her head. She knew she was going to have to sit down for this.

"I'm serious," he continued. "I was just shocked when she showed up with them. I was so sure it was an abortion that I had forced myself to believe it all these years. It was kind of like losing a part of myself. I don't

know how else to explain it. But even if I was wrong about Parker, it doesn't change what happened between us. Parker and I broke up, and we haven't been together in a very long time. I'll admit that the day you walked in to my office, I had all of these what-ifs swirling around in my head, but that's all they ever will be—what-ifs. Parker..." Ramsey paused as if trying to wrap his mind around the name and the emotions. "She isn't you."

"Yes, well, that's very clear," Lexi said softly.

"Very clear. You asked me to explain her to you, to tell you why she matters. Well, the answer is because she's always mattered to me. First, as a big brother joking around with his sister's friends. Then, as a girlfriend. Then, for all the reasons that we couldn't work. Then, as a coworker. The reason you care for people can *change*. Just like my feelings for Parker have changed."

Lexi knew exactly what he was talking about because she had that with Jack. And it might change, but it always came back to that one aching desire she had in the pit of her stomach. And if what Ramsey and Parker were going through was anything like her experience with Jack, then no matter how much it changed, no matter how much distance was put between Parker and Ramsey...it still plagued them.

"But my feelings for you have never changed like that. They've only grown and grown, and they continue to grow every day, every minute, every second I'm with you. And I knew on that first date that you were different, that things with you would be different. I wanted to protect you. I wanted to make it all better. I wanted to rid you of the hollow expression and depression that seemed to hang off of you."

"And you did," she whispered softly. "You pulled me out of the pain that I'd been in for years."

"Good." His green eyes were wide.

She could tell he had been running this all through his head for days on end. He wasn't rambling or incoherent, like her Ramsey always was. He had thought this through. He wanted to make this right.

"You did the same for me."

"I know," she said.

"And when you walked out that door, when I didn't hear from you, I felt...I don't even know how to explain it. I felt like it didn't matter what I did anymore because the only thing I wanted in the whole world, I'd let walk out on me...again."

Lexi's heart stopped. *How could she not love a man like this?* He said and did all the right things. He loved her unconditionally despite all her faults and all her baggage. He picked her up out of the pain and placed her back into working order. He had been exactly what she needed.

"Please, Lexi, my Alexa, let me make it right," Ramsey whispered, bridging the distance between them and staring down into her wide brown eyes.

She could tell that he wanted her to make the next move, to make it all right.

"When I went to see Chyna before the wedding, she told me that I should decide what I want. That I've always looked to make everyone else happy. That I've never considered my own happiness. Chyna has a certain way with words...that I think I lack."

Ramsey swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing with his uncertainty about where this was going.

"She's like a dose of reality through my overanalytical mind."

"That's a good way to put it," Ramsey said tentatively.

"I think, in some ways, she's right. I think of other people's happiness because it coincides with what I want. I wanted Jack for years, so I didn't think about what he did to me during that time or how it would affect me. And I went back to you after you'd hurt me without even thinking it through. I feel like I was kind of always doing what others expected me to do. I don't regret any of my decisions. They have shaped who I am. They made me happy at the time, but thinking about it makes me realize that I was always running in circles."

"Lexi," Ramsey interrupted, "I really don't mind if we have to postpone the wedding. I—"

Lexi held up her hand to silence him. She needed to finish. She couldn't think through his words. "I think you're right. Your feelings for people *do* change with time. You might need someone for one reason, and then when that reason is obsolete, you might not need that person anymore. People come in and out of your life all the time. They shape and mold you like clay, and then the water washes away the edges."

She could feel tears prick her eyes as she finally got out what she was trying to say—as she finally realized what Chyna was telling her.

"You came into my life. You pulled me away from my pain. You molded me into a better person," she said, taking a step back and

swallowing hard. “But I think that was what I needed then...not now.”

“Lexi,” Ramsey choked out.

She had always thought that her temptation was this heart-stopping, unbelievable emotion where she was unable to think or breathe or do anything because of how it made her feel and what it made her want to do. That temptation was something she had always given in to. At least, that was how it had been for a very long time—before Ramsey, before she had realized how important it was not to give in to that, not to let it affect her like that.

But then, the temptation changed.

She changed.

Desire, lust, cheating—those temptations weren’t there anymore. She didn’t *ever* want to cheat again. What came with cheating was heartbreak and pain—the exact pain that Ramsey had pulled her out of.

Now, she was avoiding temptation to settle—to stay with Ramsey because he had been the person to pull her out of it, and realizing that was the reason why he was important to her.

And she loved Ramsey. She had loved him for a really long time.

But she didn’t love him enough to spend the rest of her life with him.

And really, when it came down to that, it was an easy choice.

Because it was what she wanted.

“I’m sorry, Ramsey. I just...I’m not happy,” she said. “I want us to work. I want it to be right.”

“Then, let me show you.” Ramsey reached out for her, pulling her toward him. “I’ve changed my whole life for you, Lexi. Just let me show you. Please.”

“Ramsey, no,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t ask you to change your life for me.”

“But I did anyway!” he said, running his arms up and resting his hands on her shoulders.

“I liked who you *were*. I liked you being independent. I liked the rebellious Ramsey.”

“I wanted something we could be proud of.”

Lexi shook her head and tried to pull away. “I never judged you for how your life was. I liked that you cared enough about what you wanted, that you didn’t have to be under your father’s influence.” Lexi bit her lip and turned her face from him. She wished she could explain all of this

better. “But when you changed, for me, you lost part of the person you were when I fell in love with you.”

“I changed for the better, not for the worse, Lexi. I changed to be a better man for you.”

“You’re not hearing me,” she said softly. “You were already a great man. You’re still a great man. I just...don’t think you’re the man for me.”

Lexi saw the exact moment Ramsey’s heart broke. It was stunningly painful, like staring into the sun on a bright afternoon or the glare of a flashlight in his eyes in the pitch black. It was like the moment a storm broke overhead, dropping a torrential downpour onto the earth. It was that second when the fight went out of a boxer’s eyes, the moment of defeat, the moment of destruction, when he only needed one more punch to crumple to the ground and have darkness swallow him up whole.

A single tear fell out of Ramsey’s right eye and rolled down his cheek to his tensed jaw. His eyes were misted over with emotion, and Lexi had to swallow back a knot in her throat. She had brought this strong man, this beautiful man, to tears, and there was absolutely nothing that she could do about it that she wouldn’t regret for the rest of her life.

“I’m sorry, Ramsey. I can’t keep this,” she said, pulling the diamond ring off her finger. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and tried to blink back the tears forming in her eyes. “I already have one that belongs to me. It was saved for me before I even knew who you were.”



Present

Lexi had always thought that when it came to this moment, when she had the right to choose, the right to make up her mind for herself without any exterior complications, she would turn Jack away. *How many times had he done it to her? But then again...how many times had she done it to him?* He had told her how he felt when she was dating both her college boyfriends, and she had said no. They had never had their chance only because they had both run scared at every opportunity. But now, Jack was laid out in front of her, and she couldn't bear to do it. She couldn't bear to give him up.

It was a terrifying notion—no more running, no more hiding. She had owned up to how she was feeling with Ramsey, and she would have to do it now with Jack.

Christ! She had left him waiting for her without an answer. She had walked out of his apartment, still deciding what she was going to do. The choice to leave Ramsey was her own. It had nothing to do with Jack. And by now Jack probably thought that it was over.

She could walk away, start over, find a new life.

But...what kind of life would she have without Jack?

It made her heart constrict, thinking about it. She had been so ready to move on and get past him after his wedding, but she had found that she couldn't. It wasn't even that she couldn't. She just didn't want to. She wanted him in her life. She wanted him around. She wanted him to be the person who picked her up when she was down, the one who made her smile. She was so tired of heartache, and she wondered over and over again if she had just tried it with Jack from the beginning what it would have looked like.

She would never know. They had never taken the chance. Even in New York, she had been the one to say, *Let's just take it slow. But how*

could they even possibly take it slow? All her heart told her was to floor the pedal and speed down the road as fast as she could.

They had been fighting this for so long that she couldn't even articulate what it felt like to know that Jack was waiting for her, that he wanted her, that she could have him...

Almost four years since they had last slept together. Almost six since New York.

She swallowed hard when she did the math. All this time—ten years in August—and Jack was still the one man she couldn't live without.

Jack had told her, all those years ago, that they were fated to be together....that he wished he could go back to change the way he had acted. Nothing could erase the past though. Nothing could change what they had gone through.

But *Jack* had changed. Over the last two years, he had grown up. He had stopped thinking that he could have his cake and eat it, too. He respected her, and now...he was fighting for her.

So, while nothing could change their past, *they* could change the future.

They already had.

Lexi's hand shook as she knocked on the door to Jack's apartment. It was half past one o'clock in the morning, and she knew Jack would likely be asleep...in the bed she had been sleeping in for the past five days. She still had the key that he had given her, but she didn't feel right using it, not after walking out on him this morning. She couldn't until she figured out what was going on between them.

As she waited for an answering call, for the door to slide back, for Jack's face to appear, shocked, in the doorway, she let her mind wander back to the hospital.

The weight of the ring in her hand as she slid it into Ramsey's palm. The look of pure unadulterated sadness that took over his face. The realization that he had lost her...that it was over.

With the beginning wave of acceptance already taking over, Ramsey had embraced her and left a lone kiss on the top of her head. She had let herself feel his arms around her once more, knowing that this would be the last time. Ramsey had stared down into her eyes one last time as he had pushed her hair behind her earlobe.

He had leaned forward and whispered into her ear, “His warning still stands with me, Lexi.” His voice had been hoarse with the edge of protectiveness that he had always had. “If he hurts you, I’ll kill him.”

Lexi had finally pulled back, her mouth set into a straight line, and nodded. He had nodded back, and that had said everything without saying anything. She hadn’t wanted to hide it from him. He deserved to know the truth, and through that one look, she had known that while he might not like it, and it would take time for him to get over it, he *would* get over it...get over her.

And then, he had let her go. Because there was nothing else that they could do. She had made up her mind.

So, she had said her farewell and departed.

She hated hurting Ramsey, seeing the pain that she had inflicted upon him, but she would hate herself more if she stayed with him and didn’t love him...not like she wanted to...not like he deserved.

Her hand had come down lightly on the doorframe. Her hand had fisted over her heart as she had pushed the pain aside. Ramsey occupied a different part of her heart, but the truth of it was...she could never give herself away fully to anyone with Jack still taking up residence. So, she had to let the pain pass, let it wash off of her like water on clay, and know that she was making the right decision.

With a sigh and another deep breath, she had dropped her hands and straightened her back. She would never forget the three-and-a-half years she had spent with Ramsey. They had been good years.

But she was ready to begin the rest of her life.

The door swung inward, and Lexi held her breath as Jack’s face came into view. He was still rubbing his eyes, trying to orient his already groggy body. She must have pulled him out of bed. He was wearing nothing more than burgundy basketball shorts hanging low on his hips. She could see the navy plaid boxers underneath, like he had just slid the shorts over top of them. He was shirtless, and she could see every muscular line in his chest and abdomen. Her eyes traced the taut muscles in his shoulders and down his arms before lifting back to that gorgeous face and those baby-blue eyes that were now staring back at her in shock. It was clear that he hadn’t been expecting to see her...maybe never again.

Their eyes locked on to each other, and it was like she didn’t even have to speak. It felt like he knew every thought in her head. This was *her*

Jack.

“Lex,” he whispered.

“Can I come in?” she asked, her chest rising and falling in rhythm with her increased heartbeat.

Jack opened the door wider without a word and let her pass before him. It took everything she had not to just grab him, but she needed to talk to him first. She wanted to be rational about all of this...before he made her lose all her senses.

“I didn’t...I didn’t think you’d come back,” he said honestly.

Jack could never hide anything from her.

“I know,” she said.

It hurt her to think about what he had thought when she had left... when she hadn’t come back. She didn’t want to hurt him like that again.

“You issued an ultimatum last night...”

“I can’t keep doing this, Lexi,” Jack said immediately. “I want you. All of you. I want you so bad right now that I’m shaking to find control.”

Lexi smiled faintly. He still thought she was deciding.

“Jack, you’ve never made me decide. You always just...wanted me however you could have me. Why is this time any different?”

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head, walking a pace away from her. “I thought I explained last night. When you walked out of the wedding, I knew it was the end. I knew I had finally pushed you away... irreconcilably broken. But you broke me that day, too...in the best possible way. When I said I never wanted to hurt you again and I just wanted to see you happy, I meant it. I’ve been working for that these past couple of years. I’ve been giving you what you wanted. But I’m officially getting divorced in a few short weeks, and the thought of not fighting to be the person who makes you happy, to be the man who you come home to...well, I couldn’t live with myself. Because you’re what I want.”

He took a deep breath, and their eyes met again.

“And if I’m not what you want, then...just put me out of my misery.”

“Oh, Jack,” Lexi groaned, closing the distance between them and wrapping her arms around his waist. “You’re what I want. You’re all I want.”

Jack stood frozen, like he couldn’t believe what she had just said. She pulled back to look into his eyes, which were clouded over.

“What about Ramsey?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I already talked to him,” she said, letting Jack go and showing him her left hand. “I told him it was over—that I couldn’t keep the ring because I already had one.”

He stared down at her hand, blatant shock on his face. He had thought that last night was the last one they would have together. He had clearly believed that that it was over...that the woman he had loved for ten years was going to walk out of his life forever. And he had been willing to let her go...if that were what she wanted.

He drew her left hand into his with a smirk and planted his lips ever so softly onto her ring finger. “Damn right, you do.”

She closed her eyes with a sigh right before his lips crashed down on top of hers. Their lips melded together with the ease of two people who had spent ten years fighting to be together. He tasted and smelled and felt exactly how she remembered. Every sense was heightened, and she knew then that she could drown in this right here. This was right. It was sweet perfection, hypnotic energy, euphoric adrenaline pumping down through her veins.

Her hands moved up to tangle into his dark brown hair, and she tugged on the strands, pulling him closer to her, trying to feel all of him, as his tongue explored her mouth. He groaned into her mouth as she yanked a bit too hard, but his grip just tightened on her waist where he had moved aside her shirt and dug his fingers into her warm flesh.

“I love you,” he got out between kisses. “I love you so much.”

She pressed their bodies further together, and she could feel the heat coming off his body, superheating her skin and leaving her body aching.

“I love you, too. I always have...”

“And I always will,” he finished for her.

He slid his hands over her ass and down the backs of her thighs before hoisting her legs up and around his waist. He started walking back to the bedroom without even breaking their kiss...and she damn well was not going to stop him.

Her back collided with the hallway wall, and the breath left her lungs in a whoosh. He grabbed her shirt in his hands and started unbuttoning each button as his lips landed on her cheek, her neck, her collarbone.

“Fuck,” he groaned as the buttons didn’t give easily.

He grabbed the front of her shirt with both hands and yanked, the buttons popping off all the way down to her navel. She shrieked in surprise,

which immediately turned into a giggle.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

“And I’m not even angry,” she said.

His hand trailed from the base of her throat to the curve of her breasts and dipped under the thin lace material. She arched her back against his touch and felt her body demanding his attention.

“But I’m going to be if you don’t get me to the bedroom.”

“What? I can’t take my time?” he asked, pushing aside the bra and bringing his lips to her erect nipple.

She moaned openly, wanting nothing more than for him to do whatever the hell he wanted. But her body was not agreeing as it pulsed all around her.

“Take your time on round two,” she got out breathily.

Jack looked up at her with a smirk. Those blue eyes were crystal clear and devilish as sin, and they were all fucking hers.

“I love the way you think.”

She bit her lip as he moved her farther down the hallway, and with his toe, he kicked the bedroom door all the way open. He dropped her down onto the bed, and his body covered hers immediately. She felt every inch of their bodies pressed together. He was hard through his thin shorts, and she demandingly wiggled her hips against him. She wanted to feel him buried deep inside her. She wanted him to take her, to claim her. She wanted to be his...all his. Her mind was lost in this moment, knowing that they were here and together and had a future. It was everything she could have asked for and more.

He stripped her out of her clothes and tossed his shorts and boxers to the floor before returning to her. She ran her hands down each and every ab to the V that trailed even lower as he settled between her legs.

“Lex,” he whispered as he dropped forward on his forearms and kissed her lips softly.

She slid her tongue along his bottom lip and lifted her hips to touch herself against his dick. He leaned forward at the movement and pushed against her but not quite in. She moaned, her eyes fluttering closed, with desire for this moment...this man.

“Hey, look at me,” he said.

Lexi opened her eyes and stared up into the blue depths of the man she loved.

“I want to watch you. I want to see your heart when I’m inside you,” he whispered huskily.

“My heart belongs to you,” she told him. “You took it a long time ago and never gave it back.”

“And I’m never going to,” he said. He kissed her lips again softly before burying himself deep into her.

She groaned at the feel of him as he stretched and filled her. Her eyes started to close, but he shook his head and kept staring down at her with so much love and affection she thought her heart might burst.

He loved her. Jack loved her.

Their pace matched each other like they had never been apart...like the years hadn’t changed a damn thing. And in that moment, as their bodies met again and again, it felt like nothing had changed. They were still very much in love, their bodies completely and perfectly in tune, and the years of separation seemed like a lifetime ago. It felt like this was exactly how it was always supposed to be, and they would do everything in their power to keep it just like this.

Lexi’s breathing picked up, as Jack thrust into her. Her walls tightened all around him, and she tossed her head back, desperate for the release teetering on the brink.

“Lex, you don’t have to ever hold back with me,” he whispered into her ear as his pace quickened. “I’m always going to come with you.”

She pushed against him, harder and harder, until she knew that she couldn’t hold on to anything for another second. He groaned and thrust into her one more time as they both exploded, and her world seemed to shift out from under her.

All along, she had thought that Jack tilted her world off axis, but maybe she had been wrong. Maybe the rest of the world was off axis, and Jack was absolutely, perfectly right. Because nothing else on this world or any other could ever make her feel so utterly wonderful, could shatter every notion of what she should be feeling, and could leave her in a puddle of delirious happiness.

He pulled out and collapsed onto the bed next to her, wrapping an arm around her waist and not letting her move an inch. “You...are the most... amazing woman I have...ever met,” he said as he struggled for breath.

She snuggled into his chest and rested her head on his arm. A sheen of sweat coated both of their bodies. Her hair was a rat’s nest of messy

curls. And she was the happiest she had been in as long as she could remember.

“It was always different with you,” she whispered.

“Always,” Jack agreed.

“Better.”

“Definitely.”

He buried his head in her neck and kissed across the sensitive skin. Goose bumps broke out across her arms and down her chest. He laughed lightly and brought his hand up to follow the bumps down between her breasts. Her skin flushed under his hands, and she felt her heart rate picking up.

God, she loved him.

He adjusted her, so she was facing him, and their lips found each other again, slow and sensual. In that moment, she felt like she could kiss him forever. There was nowhere else she would rather be than locked away with Jack right now.

Before releasing her, he nibbled lightly on her bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth and drawing it back between his teeth. She pushed her hands back into his hair, loving how his breathing hitched when she grasped on to him.

“Tease,” she whispered.

“I said I’d take my time on round two,” Jack said, running his mouth down the hollow of her throat and nipping at her skin lightly.

Their bodies melded together, and she felt him stiffen against her stomach.

“You’re ready already?” she asked eagerly.

She was surprised but excited. It wasn’t like Jack was always a one-and-done kind of guy. *But already? Without even a break?*

“Love, I’ve been missing out on this for years. I have a lot of catching up to do.”

And so, they savored each other’s bodies and the reuniting of their love.

Jack rolled Lexi over, on top of him, and she laid her chest across his body, feeling heated skin against skin. His hands moved up into her hair and tugged it as teasingly as she had. It was bliss.

She might have been on top, but when he moved up into her, there was no question that they were sharing control over the situation. She

temptingly circled her hips in figure eights around him, causing him to groan, and his grip on her hair tightened.

Not able to take her teasing anymore, his hand landed heavy on her ass, and he started working her hips up and down on him until she felt herself losing control again. She couldn't slow down or stop what was beating through her body, and if they kept up this pace, then she was going to lose it sooner rather than later.

Jack saw it in her eyes, and the smirk on his face told her that there was no way he was going to keep her from the orgasm about to rocket through her body.

"Oh fuck," she said, burying her face in his chest, as she came unhinged all around him.

He waited for her to finish before rolling her onto her back and burying himself into her once more. He hoisted one of her legs up onto his shoulders, leveraging her body to get deeper.

"God, my little gymnast's body," he murmured into her ear.

She smiled through her satiated haze as he pumped faster and faster, bringing her blissfully to the brink again. She couldn't believe that she was already there, but with the way he was pushing, she knew that she wasn't the only one. They came together a second time, soaring far, far away and crashing back down into each other.

Lexi closed her eyes, letting the moment wash over her.

She let her breathing even out. "I thought you were going to take your time."

"Are you complaining?"

"Definitely not."

"Good. I'll take it slow for round three," he said, pushing her hair back out of her face.

"I might not be awake for that," she said groggily.

"I'll wake your body up," he whispered seductively.

"You always do."

She could feel herself slipping into a sex coma of record proportions. All of the exhaustion and anxiety had been wiped away and had been replaced by this incredible peace. And she knew she could sleep away the next couple of days, wrapped in Jack's comforting arms.

"Hey," he whispered, brushing his nose against hers.

"Mmm..."

“I love you.”

Lexi smiled and opened her eyes to stare up into the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen. “I love you, too.”

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” he admitted.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I didn’t think you were going to be coming back.”

She trailed her hand down the side of his face and gave him a soft kiss on the mouth. “I can’t live without you. It was you. It was always you.”

“I’m going to spend every day of my life proving you right,” he told her.

His eyes were completely serious, and she believed him. They had been through too much for him to start lying to her now. He loved her, and he wasn’t going to give her up again.

After a short break, they indulged themselves in the feel of each other again before sleep captured them.

She didn’t know how long she had been out when she heard a banging coming from somewhere far off. She thought that she was dreaming for a second, and the disorientation of what had happened and where she was didn’t help anything. Then, it all came rushing back to her. She had broken off her engagement with Ramsey, then slept with Jack...and now, she was wrapped in Jack’s sheets.

Yawning wide, she rolled over and saw him sleeping peacefully next to her—his hair a mess, his eyes closed, his body rising and falling softly with his steady breaths. For a second, she didn’t know if she had overslept and was going to be late for work, but with one glance at the digital clock across the room, she knew that it was only seven o’clock—a full hour and a half before she had to be into work.

Then, the banging started again. This time, she was sure she hadn’t imagined it, and it definitely wasn’t a dream.

“Jack,” she murmured, rocking his shoulder, “wake up. I think someone’s at the door.”

“Hmm?” he asked as she slowly pulled him out of his slumber. He slung an arm around her waist and pulled her into him. “You smell like me.”

Lexi giggled. “I wonder why that is.”

“I had a dream that you came home to me, and we had sex all night.” He still hadn’t opened his eyes.

“That wasn’t a dream,” she said, pressing her lips to his lightly.

“Mmm,” he groaned. “Another round in the morning? Fuck, I love you.”

Lexi laughed aloud that time. “I love you, too. Maybe another round after you answer the door...if you’re lucky.”

“I have you, Lex,” he said, opening his eyes. The crystal-clear orbs stared wide-eyed up at her. “I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”

Lexi sighed softly while she looked down at Jack. He smiled lazily up at her before cupping her face and pulling it down to meet his lips. She laughed as the banging started again and then pulled away.

“Go answer the door. Jesus,” Lexi said.

“All right. All right,” Jack said, rolling out of bed, completely nude.

She admired his gorgeous backside as he searched around for his boxers, shorts, and a discarded T-shirt that he hadn’t even bothered with last night.

“Don’t go anywhere. I want to think about you lying around naked in my bed.”

She laughed again, but he waited for her to nod before walking out of the door and down the hallway.

“Coming!” she heard Jack yell.

The banging on the door finally ceased.

Lexi stretched her arms up over her head as she waited patiently for Jack to return and ravish her body. She heard the door open, and soft voices echoed down the hall toward her. She hoped Jack would just tell whoever was there to get lost, so he could come back to her. She would give him a couple of minutes, and then if the person wasn’t gone, she would be happy to help him get rid of whoever it was.

The door closed again, and Lexi smiled until she heard the faint click of high heels on the hardwood floors. *High heels. Huh.* Lexi sat up, listening harder to try to make out what was going on in the living room.

Then, she heard what she had been dreading. That voice.

“Jack, please...”

Oh, fuck no!

Lexi swung her legs out of bed, and she pulled on a pair of Jack’s boxers and one of his T-shirts. She threw her hair into a high ponytail and walked down the hallway as if she were oblivious to what was going on.

“Jack!” Lexi called. “Is someone here?”

She crossed the threshold into the living room where she saw Bekah standing next to the couch with the coffee table between her and Jack.

“Oh, hey, Bekah,” Lexi said with a smirk that spoke volumes.

“What is she doing here?” Bekah snapped, her eyes shifting to Jack.

“She’s here with me,” Jack told her, leveling her with a serious gaze. “She’s with me.”

“She’s *with* you?”

“Yeah,” Lexi said evenly.

“I bet Ramsey would be very interested to know that you’re here,” Bekah said, turning up her nose snootily.

Bekah thought that she had Lexi then. It actually made Lexi smile.

“He already knows,” Lexi said defiantly. “And seeing as I broke up with him...it’s really none of your business.”

Bekah had the decency to look surprised. Lexi had actually surprised the Bitch who seemed to know everything. It was a gratifying experience.

“You weren’t good enough for my brother,” Bekah said, gloating.

Lexi glared at her. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“Visiting my *husband*, you whore.”

Bekah’s eyes roamed Lexi’s body, clad completely in Jack’s clothing, like she was some two-cent slut Jack had picked up on the street. Lexi stood there, letting Bekah assess her, without so much as flinching.

She knew that Jack and Bekah had been legally separated for nine months, and as long as they weren’t living together, they could date whoever they wanted in that time. Lexi knew the law. There was absolutely nothing Bekah could do about it unless it had been happening before Bekah filed for divorce, but it hadn’t.

“Bekah, you’re divorcing me. I really don’t think that’s necessary,” Jack cut in right away.

“You know what?” Lexi said, stepping forward. “You remember the time I saw you after the temporary hearing? I really meant it when I said that none of this was your business. I still mean it.”

“Well, he’s still *my* husband,” Bekah said with a sadistic smile. “And we were having a conversation. So, you can just run along now.” Bekah actually rolled her eyes and flitted her hand at Lexi like she was a fly that needed to be shooed away.

Lexi took a deep breath before surging forward, ready to claw the Bitch’s face off, but she was cut short when Jack spoke up.

“The answer is no,” he said. “I don’t know what made you change your mind, but I don’t want us to try to work it out. Maybe nine months ago when you first gave me the papers. Maybe. Even then, I don’t know.”

Lexi stared with her mouth slack. *Bekah had come here...to try to win him back. What the fuck? What would possess her to do that after nine months into a divorce with only a week before the whole damn thing became official?* Bekah had worked her ass off to make sure that Jack was seen as the supposed cheater that he was, going as far as pressuring him out of her own company. *Why would she try to get him to come back? What possessed that crazy woman?*

“It’s Lexi,” Jack said. He took a step toward Lexi, found her hand, and laced their fingers together. “She’s what I want.”

“You don’t think that it’s disgusting she broke up with my brother and decided to jump into bed with you?”

“No,” Jack said flatly.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Bekah said, taking a step back. “You’re both perfect sloppy seconds. Not good enough for anyone else but another lying, cheating scumbag.”

“Bekah,” Jack warned, his eyes fiery.

She raised her hand and stopped him. “Oh, please...save it for court. You’ll need all the help you can get.”

“You should get the hell out of my place,” Jack said, raising his voice and pointing his free hand at the door. “Right now.”

“Allow me to leave you to your adulterous ways,” she said, throwing her hands up and backing out.

Bekah turned to say something to Lexi, but Jack cut in front of her line of vision.

“Don’t you dare say one more word to her. She’s too good for your bullshit, Bekah,” Jack growled. “Now, get out.”

Bekah opened her mouth to say something else, something likely villainous, but Jack snapped his fingers in front of her face.

He repeated himself, “Out! Get the fuck out!”

And Bekah did the unthinkable. She actually turned and walked out of Jack’s apartment without saying another word. Lexi wasn’t too sure if that was for the better with the way her devilish mind worked, but she was just glad to have Bekah gone. Jack had told her to leave...and she had.

Lexi was still reeling from the outburst when Jack scooped her up in his arms and started to carry her back into the bedroom.

“Wha—”

“I don’t want you to think about what she said for one second,” he whispered, walking into the bedroom and tossing her back onto the bed.

“I’m not worried about her, Jack.”

“I know you’re not, Lex,” he said, crawling across the bed to her and brushing aside the hair that had fallen out of her messy ponytail.

“How can you even imagine that I could be thinking about anything else but you telling her that I’m what you want?”

Jack’s smirk returned with full force, and he kissed her lips until she had to pull back breathlessly.

“You’re all I want,” he whispered, his mouth touching her lips.

“You’re all I want,” he repeated. His lips dropped onto the corner of her mouth.

He repeated the phrase each time he kissed her cheek, her nose, her eyelashes, each temple, her earlobe until she was smiling from ear to ear, lost in the words echoing through her mind.

You’re all I want.

She was all he wanted.



Present

Lexi knew that it wasn't a good idea to walk into the courtroom with Jack.

As a lawyer, she knew that she wasn't in the wrong in her relationship with him. She knew that they could be together right now while he and Bekah were separated. But the lawyer in her also knew that walking into a courtroom for his divorce proceedings when his wife was trying to prove that he had cheated on her was idiotic. She would kill her client if the person even thought about it.

Jack's attorney, Richard, had basically said the same thing when Jack addressed it at the follow-up meeting that Lexi had attended with him. Even Lexi had looked at Jack like he was a crazy person when he had suggested it, but Jack hadn't backed down.

How long had they been in hiding? How long had they pushed their relationship aside to deal with the rest of their lives? Well, they didn't want that to define them going forward. Jack wanted to show solidarity. He wasn't afraid of Bekah, and based on the evidence, he was certain she didn't have a case that could prove he had cheated on her—because he hadn't.

Lexi had gone through the paperwork sent over by the Bridges' attorney, and she just felt like something was missing. She didn't know what it was, but with how thorough Bekah had been with all of her other evil plotting, Lexi just didn't find it airtight. But they could only work with what they had sent over, so Lexi tried to let the feeling pass.

And even though she knew it was a bad idea...she couldn't possibly stay away. She not only wanted to be there for Jack, she *needed* to be there for him.

That was how she ended up with the day off work, the first official day since Chyna's wedding, standing outside the courthouse with Jack at her side. This was her job, her specialty and it felt strange being in court,

not dressed to take down her next unsuspecting victim. Without the case, the power suit, the certainty that she was in this to win, she felt vulnerable.

She had picked out a sensible square-top black dress tapered to a fitted waist with a flare A-line skirt. She had paired it with a gold belt, long gold necklace, and her trusty pair of black Manolos. She had braided the front of her hair back with half hanging loose in spiral to the middle of her back. She completed the ensemble with neutral makeup and the softest pink lip gloss—Jack’s favorite.

“Please stop fidgeting,” Jack whispered, taking her hand and wrapping his other arm around her waist. “You’re going to make me nervous.”

“I’m not nervous,” Lexi said, showing the air of confidence her stomach didn’t have.

Jack looked gorgeous in a gray suit with a tie to match his eyes. He had even gotten his hair cut even though she had begged him not to. *What was she supposed to hold on to?*

“Lex,” he said, his hand running up her arm, across her shoulder, and to her ear where he looped her hair behind her ear, “you were never a good liar.”

“I just...have this weird feeling. It’ll pass. Don’t worry about it,” she said softly.

“You want to tell me about it?”

He played with the loose strands at the base of her neck, and it took a lot of effort not to sigh and close her eyes to his touch.

“It’s just a big day. A lot rides on the outcome.”

“You and I don’t ride on the outcome,” Jack said softly. “No matter what actually happens inside...I’ll be free to be yours and only yours.”

“You already are.”

“Legally.”

“Legally, you’re mine, too,” she teased.

Jack gave her a knowing smirk and planted a kiss on her lips. “Not yet, but you will be. Someone has to make an honest woman out of you.”

“Jack Howard,” she cried, smacking him on the arm.

He laughed at her outburst and looped her arm with his. “There’s my Lexi.”

She shook her head at him as they walked to the building and through the double doors. They passed through security and into the lobby of the

courthouse. It was an enormous old building set in an old Southern style with large white columns and a grand staircase leading up to the many ascending floors. The civil courtroom where the divorce proceedings would be taking place was off the right wing of the building, and Lexi walked with Jack in that direction.

Standing with her arms on her narrow hips, Bekah was talking to a team of lawyers as well as her daddy and another Bridges associate Lexi had seen around but still didn't know his name. Bekah looked like the queen bitch she was in a knee-length black pencil skirt with a long-sleeved cream blouse tucked into it. Her nude heels were on the shorter, more modest side. The only jewelry on her body was the pearls in her ears. Her makeup was light, and she had her natural blonde hair pinned back, out of her face.

Victim.

She was always trying to play the victim. It was how she got away with everything. Sugary, sweet outside, but a sour, rotten human being on the inside.

Out of the corner of her eye, Bekah eyed Jack and Lexi, dropping her gaze to where their hands were linked before flitting back up to their faces. Bekah didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Lexi could see the contempt on her face from a mile off. She pushed Jack toward Richard, who was standing off to the side and fumbling through a stack of papers in his hands.

"Good, you're here," Richard said, his face drawn and tense when he looked at Lexi.

"Right on time," Jack said.

"I see that you still showed."

Lexi bit her lip and nodded. The look on Bekah's face had been enough to know that Lexi was needed here. In a way, it was deeply satisfying knowing that while Bekah had married Jack...she had never really had his heart. He had just been fighting his love for Lexi all along. He certainly hadn't found what he was looking for in a match with the Bitch.

Richard blew out heavily. He looked like this case was causing him a lot of grief. Lexi hadn't picked him because it was going to be easy. She hoped he wasn't losing his grip.

"There have been some last-minute changes. Sorry to repeat myself, Lexi, but I wish you would have stayed home."

"Last minute?" Lexi asked, frowning her brow.

“What happened?” Jack asked. He crossed his arms, his jaw set. He looked like he was ready to get right down to business.

Despite the situation, Lexi smiled, admiring the man that he had become.

“It seems the judge has allowed the Bridges to admit some last-minute evidence into the case,” Richard said, shaking his head. “In all my years...”

“Fuck,” Lexi said, feeling the other shoe drop. She knew that packet had felt incomplete. *What was the Bitch hiding?*

Richard handed Jack a packet of information, and Lexi glanced over his shoulder to read what it said. She skimmed through the legal jargon that warranted Bekah admitting new evidence after the designated discovery period. Lexi’s mind was already trying to figure out how to get this thrown out. There was no way this could be admissible in court. *Why had the judge allowed Bekah to submit this?*

Because Bekah owned the judge.

Lexi had suspected before, but this seemed to confirm it in her eyes. No judge would have just allowed Bekah to produce new material without some serious justification. Bekah was strategic in holding back this information. She didn’t want anyone to see it until the day of. She didn’t want to give Jack a chance for a rebuttal. Now, they only had an hour before court was in session to discuss what to do with the new information... unless they requested a change in date.

Looking at Jack just then told her that there was no way he would agree to that. He was ready to be rid of Bekah. He would go through with it even if it were against his better judgment. *When would they next get a court date?* Bekah wouldn’t push for a quicker date, knowing that Lexi and Jack were together. She would delay, delay, delay.

Lexi pinched the bridge of her nose, understanding then why Richard looked more run-down with the weight of this news.

And then, Jack flipped the page.

Her mouth dropped open, and she braced herself against Jack’s arm. It was a photograph of her and Jack. They were at the beach. She was wrapped in his arms, her head resting on his chest. She couldn’t tell from the angle that she had been crying. It just looked like they were together... really together. The next ten pages were of that night.

Lexi's heart raced as she looked at each one individually. *These were from so long ago.*

The next picture was of them at the D-Bags show. *Shit!* Whoever had taken the picture had somehow zoomed in enough to get their hands laced together. She had completely forgotten about that. It had been friendly. It hadn't been anything at all. It hadn't happened like that.

Jack flipped through the pictures, one at a time. There were dozens of them together—some in his apartment, others at lunches together, one of him opening the door to her office after-hours. Lexi felt herself hyperventilating. Bekah had been tailing them. With the quality of these, Bekah must have hired a private investigator.

Then, Jack turned to the back, and they both stared slack-jawed at a picture that, while it was grainy and hard to see, was unmistakably them. Neither would ever forget that night. Lexi's back was pressed firmly against a wall, her red dress hiked up over her hips with her legs wrapped around his waist. There was no mistaking what was going on.

She was so shocked by the sheer volume of pictures and the story being told that Lexi couldn't even get her mind working to tell Richard how much this was complete and utter bullshit. Jack had to get these thrown out. It wasn't true, but goddamn it, from this storyline, it looked believable to even her. Lexi could account for every moment when these pictures had been captured. None of them were doctored, but also none of them were of her and Jack cheating...except for the last one.

"No," Lexi said, shaking her head. "Let's find a room to talk this out. It's a false trail. She's planted a false trail. She's fucking falsifying evidence. Oh, I'll skin her alive!"

"That's a great idea," Richard said, gesturing for them to walk down a hallway.

Lexi could hear the lilt in Bekah's laughter as they walked away. It took every ounce of Lexi's strength not to turn around and claw the Bitch's face off.

They stepped into an open room, and Richard closed the door.

"Are either of you going to explain this to me, so we can have a starting point on how to address it?"

"Have the judge throw it out! It's not permissible."

Richard shook his head. "We need a plan of attack. The judge has already agreed to keep it. He took one look at it and said it was too

important not to include.”

“What was their reasoning for not having it *earlier*?” she cried.

“The private investigator was waiting for video footage that was held up,” Richard said, shaking his head. “Bullshit. That’s how I know it’s all wrong. So, one of you needs to start explaining. We don’t have time.”

Richard yanked out a chair and took a seat. After retrieving his legal pad and a pen, they launched into the story. They explained every single picture in complete detail. Neither of them wavered in their stories because it was the truth. For once, they had absolutely nothing to hide.

“And the last one?” Richard asked, raising his eyebrow.

Lexi looked at Jack, and he sighed and nodded.

“It was the night before I proposed to Bekah,” Jack said.

Richard dropped his pen. “You’re really not helping me.”

“It’s the truth though. Bekah knew about it before we got married.”

Lexi chimed in. “I was there. I told her about it. I can name almost ten people who were witness to that.”

“It’s too late for witnesses, but this will have to do. Is there anything else either of you can think of that would change the tides? They’ll work this storyline pretty hard. I can already tell.”

Jack and Lexi glanced at each other, trying to decide if there was anything else, but there wasn’t.

“All right. This is what we’re going to do...”

This entire thing hinged on whether or not they could prove that Jack hadn’t cheated. If he hadn’t signed that damn prenup with Bekah—saying that if either of them cheated, the one at fault had to pay the other a sizable, crippling amount of money and give up all of the assets—then none of this would even matter. It would be a normal fifty-fifty split, like every other divorce.

Forty-five minutes later, when they were called into the courtroom, they had a game plan for how they were going to approach the new evidence. Lexi took a deep breath, and Jack grabbed her hand again.

He squeezed it lightly and smiled down at her. “Don’t worry. We’ll get through this. Lying never seemed to work. Maybe telling the truth will do us some good,” he said with a wink.

Lexi smiled weakly up at him. She wanted to have his optimism in that moment, but this had gone from good to bad to worse in a matter of minutes. She didn’t want Bekah to demoralize Jack...to tear him down until

there was nothing left. Lexi didn't want to think Bekah was capable of it, but Lexi didn't know. She just didn't know.

They left the room behind and walked down to the entrance of the courtroom. Bekah smugly walked in before them. The way she looked at them made it seem like she had already won.

Lexi didn't know what it was about that look, but it sparked a light bulb in her mind. She pulled up short, yanking on Jack's arm, as he tried to continue walking forward. Lexi was shaking her head, realizing what she had been missing.

"Lex, come on," Jack said, urging her forward. "It'll be over soon."

"I have to get something. I just remembered..." She trailed off.

"What?" Jack asked, his eyes trained on her.

She was sure he could feel Richard staring daggers at them.

"I know what can help. I'll be back," she said, turning to leave.

"What? Lexi," Jack called.

She stopped and turned back around.

"What is it? What should I tell Richard?"

Lexi smiled and whispered into Jack's ear.

Jack laughed and nodded. "All right."

"Tell him to be ready," she said before turning and jogging out of the courthouse.



Lexi missed almost everything, but it didn't matter.

She had found what she had been looking for. She hadn't been sure that it still existed or that it would be enough, but she had to try. Jack would try for her. As long as the judge allowed them to contribute more information to the case, then they would be in the clear. If Bekah had completely bought out the judge of all sanity, then nothing they did would help anyway.

Lexi eased quietly into the courtroom and took a seat in the back. She didn't need to move forward until Richard called for her.

Lexi tapped her foot impatiently. The adrenaline was pumping through her veins, and she felt the familiar rush that she got right before

putting the nail in the coffin on a case she had been working on for a long time. And Bekah certainly was a case Lexi had been trying to crack.

Bekah sat on the stand. She had already been sworn in, and her attorney was asking her questions. Bekah looked the part, and it turned Lexi's stomach. She had been coached well. Lexi didn't even hear the question her lawyer had asked, but she heard the speech Bekah gave then. It was clearly well rehearsed.

"Cheating is never okay, but in marriage," Bekah said, dabbing at her eyes, "it is so much worse. In marriage, you made a commitment before your friends and family and God. You signed a legal document with the state, acknowledging that you're family now. It's different. Why waste all of that time and love? Nothing destroys you that much, and if it does, then you should turn to your partner."

Bekah looked over at Jack then with what she was trying to pass as true sadness. While Bekah's act was good, it was still just an act.

"Your partner," Bekah repeated. "Not anyone else. That's what your partner is there for. If the partner is not, then you should at least have the decency to talk through it. Don't put the other person through the ringer for your own inadequacies."

Lexi was pretty sure she was going to throw up if she had to listen to another word of the bullshit Bekah was spouting. Yes, what Bekah was saying was true, but the context was all wrong. Jack hadn't done anything!

Bekah continued talking about the photographs and telling the easy story that was spun out of the pictures. Lexi knew it was coming, but she still couldn't keep from cringing.

"No further questions."

Phew! Richard's turn. Finally.

"Ms. Bridges," Richard said, standing and walking up to her, "did you ever purchase anything for Ms. Alexa Walsh, who is pictured here?" He slapped one of the photographs down in front of Bekah.

"I'm not sure how that's relevant," Bekah answered snootily.

"Simple question, Ms. Bridges. Did you or did you not purchase anything for the woman pictured here?"

Bekah's eyes flitted to her attorney, then to her father seated directly behind the attorney, and then to Lexi. Lexi broke out into a challenging smile.

"No. I don't believe I did," Bekah said.

Lie. And under oath.

“Really?” Richard asked, raising his eyebrows. “Your honor, I would like permission to submit two pieces of evidence before the court and request a subpoena for Ms. Bridges’s credit card history.”

“I object,” Bekah’s attorney cried, standing and throwing his fist down. “New evidence is not permissible during court proceedings.”

“What new evidence?” the judge asked. “And why a subpoena? Explain yourself, Richard.”

Richard gestured for Lexi to move forward, and she rose to her feet as Richard continued speaking.

“Ms. Bridges claims that my client had an affair with this woman. While only a few pictures, grainy at best, show my client having any sexual relations with Ms. Walsh, we can prove to you that these pictures were taken before my client was married to Ms. Bridges since Ms. Bridges herself purchased the dress in the photos.”

“I object,” her attorney said again. “There is no reason to admit this into the file.”

“If we had had all of the evidence you were bringing to the table by the discovery deadline, then we would have easily obtained this information and had it on file for you,” Richard cut in.

“Quiet, both of you,” the judge said. “Let me see what you have.”

Lexi handed Richard the folded red silk material of the dress she had worn to Jack’s birthday party all those years ago. It had been tossed to the bottom of her closet in New York—out of sight, out of mind. But when she moved, she had put it in a box with a bunch of other stuff that she had never unpacked. There it still lay when she had recovered it to hand to Richard.

Next, she passed him a picture she had taken off her dresser. She had felt bad about taking it without talking to Ramsey, but he hadn’t been home, and she hadn’t moved her stuff out yet. She and Ramsey had been standing together at Jack’s birthday party. A passing photographer at the event had taken the photo that night, and in the background, she could just see the birthday festivities and the *Happy 25th Birthday, Jack* banner hanging across the back wall. It was faint, but it was there. There was no mistaking it. Lexi had always hidden the picture behind some of the others that cluttered her dresser but Ramsey had always liked it...so she had kept it. Now, she was glad that she had.

Richard passed the evidence to the judge and explained each of them thoroughly. Lexi thought that Bekah and her attorney were going to combust. She had never seen Bekah fraying at the edges like this. Bekah was going to have an outburst. Lexi could see it, and so, she just smirked at Bekah.

Take that, Bitch!

The judge looked at the picture and the dress and shook his head. He was muttering under his breath to himself. Lexi couldn't make out what he was saying, but she thought she might have heard, *Damn kids*. Maybe she had heard wrong.

"Ms. Bridges, would you be willing to submit a copy of your credit card history to the court from the time this picture was taken?" the judge asked.

Bekah swallowed and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Lexi could hear the fear in her voice. She was sure the judge saw it all over Bekah's face. Falsifying evidence, lying under oath—Bekah was surely adding up all the things that had gone wrong in her plan.

"Good. We'll take a short recess for me to determine whether or not to proceed with this new evidence or to reconvene at a later time when this can all be properly processed," the judge said, slamming the gavel down and giving them a short break.

Richard and Jack followed Lexi back out of the courtroom and into their room once more.

As the door closed behind them, Richard started talking. "That evidence is going to push the outcome to a fifty-fifty split," he said confidently. He looked practically giddy with relief. He had been pretty sure that Jack was going to get screwed out of everything.

Fifty-fifty was way better than losing Jack's entire livelihood to a Bitch who didn't even need it!

"Good," Jack said. "We don't need to push for anything more than that. I just want it to be over with."

"She'll have to back down. The judge looked like he was going to have to use the evidence after Bekah's comments," Richard said. "Good thing you thought about the dress."

Jack found Lexi's hand once more and pulled her closer to him. "It is good."

“I didn’t want her to get away with it,” Lexi said softly, her brown eyes meeting his baby blues.

She wished in that moment that they were alone and this was all over. She just wanted to start over with Jack. After today, they would finally be rid of Bekah and the past and could think concretely about the future.

They spoke for a few more minutes about what to do going forward, and then they were called back into the courtroom. Lexi took the seat directly behind Jack this time. It was clear she was part of this hearing whether or not Richard had wanted her to be. He was probably thanking her at this point since, based on the prenup, the offending party would have to cover his attorney fees.

The judge ambled back into his chair and took a seat. “I’ve decided to include the evidence into the file as long as Ms. Bridges produces the proper paperwork. We’re going to break for lunch and return in an hour.” He banged his gavel down and disappeared as quickly as he came.

An hour came and passed so slowly that Lexi felt like she was trying to run through shoulder-high water against a current. She ate something, but she couldn’t really tell anyone what it was. Jack had been just as high-strung during the break. He wanted it all to be over with more than anyone. He was the one who had been dealing with this for the past nine months and dealing with Bekah four years more than that. It would surely be a relief like nothing he had ever experienced to have this all over and done with.

Lexi and Jack walked back up to the courthouse together. She hoped that she shouldered some of the tension for him—that was all she could hope for. As they got closer to the entrance, she noticed someone standing just outside with his arms crossed over his chest. Lexi squinted against the sun beaming into her eyes. She was sure that she was imagining what she was seeing. As she got closer, she realized that her eyes weren’t deceiving her.

“Clark,” Lexi said tentatively in greeting. *What was her ex-boyfriend doing here?* “Hey.”

Jack tightened his grip on her hand like he thought she might pull away, but she had no intention. She felt absolutely nothing for Clark anymore. If she hadn’t pulled away in front of Bekah, she certainly wasn’t about to for Clark.

“Lexi,” Clark said, nodding at her. “Jack. Isn’t it funny, seeing you two together? No? No, not really, I suppose.”

“Hey,” Jack said, just as tentative.

“Are you in court today?” Lexi asked, trying to figure out why he was standing here.

He was in business, but she hadn’t kept tabs on what he was doing. She hadn’t actually even known he was still in the city.

Clark chuckled and shook his head. “No. I came to talk to Jack actually.”

“What’s up, man?” Jack asked.

Clark stepped forward and dropped his arms. Lexi had no idea what this was all about. The last time she had seen Clark had been at Jack’s wedding. He had been a total ass to her, and everything had just gone downhill from there.

Clark stuck his hand out to Jack as if to shake. Jack stared at it hesitantly, like he was wondering what to make of it all, but then decided he had no real reason not to take the offered hand, so Jack shook his hand.

“I just wanted to say that we’re even,” Clark said, squeezing.

“Even?”

“A long time ago, you took what was mine,” Clark said, completely calm, “and now, I’ve taken what was yours.”

Jack dropped his hand and drew back. He cocked his head to the side. “What are you talking about?”

“I knew she would never tell you because she’s as much of a coward as you were. So, I wanted to come and make sure you heard it for yourself. I’ve been sleeping with your wife for the last year,” Clark said evenly without a single waver or an ounce of remorse.

Lexi stared in shock. She couldn’t even comprehend what had just come out of Clark’s mouth. *Bekah had...cheated. She had cheated on Jack with Clark.*

“What?” Jack asked. He sounded as surprised as she felt.

“We met at your wedding and ran into each other again probably a year after that,” Clark explained. “It took me only a couple of weeks to get her into bed. I really thought you would notice your own patterns when they were used against you.”

Jack just stared. There was nothing either of them could say to what was coming out of Clark’s mouth.

Clark chuckled at their dumbfounded expressions. “Did it ever occur to you? Think of all the times she was missing. Your beach trip? She was

with me. After the medical wing opening? She was with me. Ever wonder why she hired so many divorce attorneys? That was the day she thought you might have suspected her. Why did she claim you had cheated, besides the fact that you probably did? The easiest defense is a strong offense. No one would ever suspect.”

Jack glanced away with a sigh. Lexi could tell that Clark was looking for a bigger response. She sincerely believed he wanted Jack to swing on him. But Jack just nodded after a minute and turned back to look at Clark.

“Then, it’s good I’m divorcing her,” Jack said, crossing his own arms. “Would you testify to this under oath?”

Lexi felt her mind process what was happening. It was like the click a lock made after entering the right combination. If Jack brought forth Clark as a witness to Bekah cheating, then the prenup infidelity clause would pass to Bekah...and she could lose everything.

“You won’t even have to say anything,” Lexi said quickly. “Just you being there will be enough to make her admit it herself.”

“Why should I help either of you?” Clark asked.

“You’re just weeding out the truth,” Jack said, reasoning with the man who had once been his friend.

Clark had only ever cared about the truth. That was what he had wanted from Jack and Lexi when they had cheated. He couldn’t let Bekah get away with lying, too.

“If you walk out now, she’s going to lie and say it never happened.”

“Please, Clark,” Lexi said, hoping that somewhere in the broken man she was staring at, there was still some humanity left.

He shook his head, but after a minute, he finally sighed. “I won’t have to say anything?”

And they had him.

Back in the courtroom, they filled Richard in on what had happened. The best part of all was seeing Bekah’s face drain of all color as Clark walked in behind Lexi and Jack. She covered her mouth and actually looked like she might be sick. Her eyes were wide and not with just fear, like Lexi had suspected...but maybe, just maybe, something else.

Lexi wasn’t sure she would have believed it if she hadn’t seen it with her own two eyes—affection...love even. Bekah really cared for Clark. *Holy shit!* Lexi didn’t think that the Bitch had a heart. And now, they were about to stomp on it.

How fitting.

After the judge walked back in and gave his piece about the case, Richard made his move to step in.

“Your honor, we would like to change our file of no fault to breach of the infidelity clause in the prenuptial agreements signed and witnessed by my client and Ms. Bridges. Recent evidence has been brought forth that Ms. Bridges herself has entered into a sexual affair with another man while married to my client. We have the man in question here to testify if Ms. Bridges deigns to deny the allegations,” Richard said smartly.

Bekah opened her mouth to speak, but her attorney placed his hand on her shoulder, effectively silencing her.

“My client was unaware of this new evidence, and we have not been given sufficient time to prepare for a defense. I would like to request that we postpone the case and reconvene at a future date.”

Bekah slapped his hand away and sat up straighter. She looked indignant and maybe even a little bit like she had cracked.

“Your honor, I never finished cross-examining the witness,” Richard cut in. “I believe we should get Ms. Bridges back up on the stand.”

“Ms. Bridges, do you consent to return to the stand?” the judge asked.

“No, she most certainly does not,” her attorney said.

“Ms. Bridges?” the judge implored, bypassing her attorney and looking squarely into her bright blue eyes.

It was like he could see that she was a cornered mouse and maybe even he didn’t want to see her get away with it either.

Bekah glanced first at Jack and then to Lexi sitting behind him. She looked hollowed out and used up. She was trying to find a way out of all of this, but one wasn’t producing itself. There was no way out. Even if she waited out for another date, Clark had confirmed this story, and all they needed was the threat of him on record.

That was when Bekah’s eyes found Clark. Lexi saw the look that passed between them, and she knew all too well what was going through Bekah’s mind. A love lost...a desperate, foolhardy love that Bekah had been stupid enough to fall for. Clark turned his face away from her, and the tender string that Bekah was holding on to snapped.

“Yes,” Bekah’s voice rang out clearly. She turned back up to the judge. “Yes, I’ll get back up on the stand.”

Lexi was shocked. The girl was sending herself to the grave. It was like she had hit a breaking point. Her attorney collapsed back into his chair and threw up his hands. Lexi understood his concern.

They swore Bekah back in, and on record, Richard asked her if she had had an affair with Clark. After a few minutes of prodding, Richard managed to pull the truth out of her. When the words left her lips, confessing that she had been sleeping with Clark for over a year, Bekah actually broke down into tears. Lexi had never seen Bekah cry. Lexi hadn't believed Bekah was capable of it.

And all Lexi could hear through Bekah's sobs was, "I thought he loved me. He told me he loved me."

Lexi couldn't get over the fact that Bekah was human. Despite everything that had happened, Lexi couldn't believe that Bekah was able to show any emotion, except malice. It didn't really make Lexi feel bad for her since Bekah had put her through too much for that, but Lexi did at least understand her in that moment. Lexi had done the same with Jack over and over again. The only difference was that Jack actually did love Lexi. And he was staring at her right then like he was never going to stop.

The attorneys made their closing remarks, and then the judge made his ruling orally before everyone. He announced that Bekah had breached the infidelity clause in the prenuptial agreement. Due to this, all marital assets would pass to Jack, and Bekah would owe him a prearranged sum that made Lexi's head spin with zeroes.

Bekah looked like she was in complete shock, and her father looked ready to pummel her. She had broken the rules. She had done the exact opposite of what she had come here to do. She had not only humiliated herself but the entire Bridges family. And Lexi knew what kind of fallout that would have on Bekah.

The judge kept the photograph for now, but he relinquished the dress back into Lexi's protection. Clark had a few words with Jack before leaving, and Lexi was glad that Clark hadn't tried to speak with her. She wasn't sure what she would have been able to say to him. He had been unnecessarily cruel. Sure, it had been to Bekah, who deserved everything that was coming to her and more, but Lexi didn't want to have to face him for that.

Bekah's father ushered her out of the courtroom in a hurry, and Lexi and Jack followed close behind them with a smile. Lexi could hear the

hushed whispers passing between Bekah and her father as he berated her. Lexi only knew that was happening because she had been around the Bridges enough to pick up on their mannerisms.

Jack stood at her side, a smile bright on his face. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "We're free."

Lexi smiled brighter.

"I love you," he said.

Lexi looked up into Jack's gorgeous face, and she knew without a doubt that a day had not passed when she did not love this man. "I love you, too."

They walked by Bekah and her father on the way out of the building, and Lexi heard the word *bitch* echo behind her. Lexi raised her eyebrows and stopped in her tracks.

"Just give me a minute," Lexi told Jack.

He looked warningly at her, but she just gave him a reassuring smile and turned back to face Bekah.

"What the fuck do you want?" Bekah snapped as Lexi approached.

"Rebekah!" her father said. He knew that anyone could be listening. He was a pro at this.

"I just wanted to say thanks for everything," Lexi said, a glint in her brown eyes.

She tossed the red dress into Bekah's chest, and Bekah caught it instinctively.

"I thought you could wear that since all you were ever good enough for was my sloppy seconds."

"You bitch!" Bekah snarled, lunging toward Lexi.

Lexi's eyes went wide, and she staggered backward a few feet out of Bekah's reach. Bekah's father grabbed her around the middle and held her back.

Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap.

Flashes went off overhead, catching the entire thing on camera. A reporter appeared in her line of vision. It was clear a story was already forming in the reporter's head.

Bridges Enterprise Golden Girl, Bekah Bridges, Lashes Out At Ex-husband's New Girlfriend. Father Restrains Raving Lunatic.

Okay, so Lexi's imagination had embellished the last part, but it would be a good headline.

"You think you won?" Bekah snapped. "I fucking won. You don't even know what I did. You and Ramsey will never be together. I ensured that when I planted that whore, Elisa."

Lexi gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth as the words sank in. Suddenly, it all made sense—how Elisa got into the party in the first place and why she was so eager to keep coming back to attack Ramsey, even when it was clearly a lost cause.

The realization made Lexi feel so bad for Ramsey. They'd had to go through all of that for nothing because his sister was the devil. Lexi wished she had known from the beginning. It could have made all the difference in their relationship. She bit her lip and considered what Bekah had orchestrated. But in the end...it probably wouldn't have changed all that much. It would have had the same outcome. Knowing it now though just made Lexi's chest feel lighter. Ramsey was the man that he had always said he was. Lexi knew that for sure now.

"That's right! I helped her," Bekah said, clearly teetering off the edge. "And I helped Parker find that paperwork. She came to me, wanting to prove that she was right, and so I proved that she was right."

"Did you manufacture the clinic paperwork?" Lexi asked, imagining how devastated Ramsey would be all over again to hear that. She couldn't believe how low Bekah had stooped to put a wedge between Lexi and Ramsey.

"I didn't have to. My brother was an idiot," she said.

Her father tried to quiet her, but she just brushed past him.

"I just knew the right person to ask to get the paperwork Parker had been looking for. And now, you don't have him!"

Lexi nodded. She didn't have Ramsey anymore. And maybe part of that was because of Bekah and what she had done. But the pieces had already been in place. The cracks had already been there. Their relationship hadn't fractured because of Bekah. They had just fallen apart. She hoped that whatever Ramsey did after this...he got the hell away from his crazy sister.

"You know, Bekah?" Lexi asked, ignoring the reporters and stepping up to meet her. "I truly pity you."

"Don't pity me. I have the world."

“You have nothing—at least nothing that really matters. The only things you care about are money, status, and your precious reputation. They motivated you and deluded you into thinking that you were happy. But all of these things can leave you in the blink of an eye. Once they’re all gone, what do you have? Nothing. Your brother despises you. Your husband left you. Your best friend can’t even trust you. And you turn to complete strangers for the attention you desperately crave, and you mistake that for love,” Lexi told her. “So, I’ll repeat myself. I pity you, and still, I think it’s more than you’re worth.”

She felt Jack place his hand on her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Lexi shook her head at Bekah, knowing another sharp retort was coming. But Lexi was over it. She wasn’t marrying into the Bridges family. Jack was free of Bekah. Lexi had said her peace. Lexi would be happy to never see the Bitch again for the rest of her life.

“Yeah,” she said, looking Bekah up and down with disgust. “Let’s go.”

“Jack!” Bekah all but shrieked. “Here take this filthy thing.” She hurled the glittery diamond ring into his chest, and he caught it easily in his hand.

He stared down at it for a second. “No, you keep it. It was made for you,” he said, tossing it uselessly back in her direction. “I still have the one that means something to me.”

Bekah gasped. “You mean she was right? You gave me a fake?”

“Oh, it’s real, but you were never getting my grandmother’s ring.”

Lexi covered her mouth to keep from laughing hysterically at Bekah, whose mouth was just hanging open. Jack draped an arm around Lexi’s waist and guided her away. Bekah started calling out to them even as they walked back to Jack’s car.

“What are you all smiley about?” she asked, her heart still racing from the confrontation.

He chuckled. “You’re so hot when you’re angry.”

Lexi couldn’t hold back her laugh. “At least that hasn’t changed.”

“Never,” he said, meeting her gaze, his eyes turning crystal-clear blue. “And I’m ready to take my girl home and show her just what that does to me.”



Present

Lexi wrapped her caramel-colored knit scarf around her once more, trying to fight against the rapidly dropping temperatures. Early May in New York City had notoriously temperamental weather, and summer hadn't quite broken through the clouds. It felt nice to be back on the NYU campus. She hadn't realized how much she had missed the city and her old law school stomping grounds until she returned.

After speaking with Chyna, Lexi had decided on a date to fly back to the city with Jack to visit. He had been there with her during that first winter in New York City, but she'd had so much more to show him this time around, and they had spent a majority of their time wandering the city and eating at all her favorite restaurants. It had been a totally different experience with Jack. After the past couple of weeks, she had been glad that she was able to share it with him.

They had both moved out of their previous residences, and for the time being, they were living in his tiny one-bedroom apartment in Atlanta. The majority of their stuff was in a storage unit just outside of the city until they decided what they were going to do.

Lexi had thought that Jack would keep his stuff in the house that he now owned outright, but as soon as the house had been moved into his name, he had met with a real estate agent to get rid of the property. He hadn't wanted to keep it as a reminder any more than Lexi had. He was still waiting on the divorce money from Bekah to come through. While he was uncomfortable with that, the truth of the matter was that with the amount of money he would receive, they would be able to start over anywhere.

And Lexi was ready to get out of Atlanta. The Bridges owned half the city, and she didn't really want to stick around for any backlash.

"It's getting late," Lexi said as she led Jack across the street from the law school to the edge of Washington Square Park.

“It’s not even dark yet,” Jack told her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to try to help warm her up.

“But it’s cold.” She buried her fingers deeper into the pockets of her white peacoat.

Jack laughed. “Can we look at the arch one more time?”

“You want to walk through the park right before nightfall? Do you want to get mugged?” Lexi asked.

“Live a little. We’ll be fine,” Jack said, shaking his head at her.

Lexi shrugged and directed them to the entrance. They still had enough light to get them through the park before nightfall. Lexi knew the stories about Washington Square Park at night, and she didn’t care how secure Jack felt. They were not going to stay in there.

Jack sensed her tensing up as they started through the park, and he drew her hand out of her pocket. Their hands swung loose between them as a breeze whipped her hair off her shoulders and around her face. As they made it to the giant circle leading up to the arch, Lexi laughed and tried to wrangle her hair back into place.

They stopped in front of the colossal marble statue that was a model replica of the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris. The lights had already flickered on, illuminating the great construction. Lexi and Jack passed through the arch, giggling about the similarities between it and the arch at their alma mater. Students weren’t allowed to pass under the arch on campus, or they would risk never graduating.

Jack circled them back around to face the front where two sculptures of George Washington stood tall and proud. Lexi had passed through here so many times, but standing here with Jack felt like it was the first time she was appreciating it.

“This might be my favorite place in the city,” Jack said.

“Why?” Lexi asked, scrunching up her nose. She liked the arch, but there were so many amazing places in the city. She didn’t think she could pick one.

“Because I’m standing here with you.”

Lexi wrapped her arms around his neck. “Jack Howard, when did you become such a sweetheart?”

She lightly brushed her cold nose against his as he grabbed her around the middle. It felt absolutely blissful to be out in public, standing around with Jack like this. They had hidden and fought their affection for so

long, and now that she didn't have to hold back any longer, she felt it bursting out of her at every corner.

"Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation to uphold," he joked, dropping his mouth to hers.

"Oh yes, wouldn't want to hurt your jerk reputation."

"You're killing me, love," he said against her mouth.

"You like it."

"I love everything about you."

Lexi ducked her head into his shoulder. "Sure know how to make a girl blush."

"You bet I do," he said huskily into her ear.

She smiled seductively while grabbing on to the collar of his gray coat and pulling him toward the street. "Tonight."

"That's so long from now."

"So impatient."

"I've waited forever for you, Lex," he said, stopping them in their tracks and taking her face lightly in his hands. "I'll always be impatient. I want you all the time. I want you right now."

Lexi swooned at his words and felt her knees giving out as she stared up into baby-blue eyes. *God, she loved this man.*

"A bit cold out to take me right here," she said with a wink.

"Don't tempt me," he growled.

"I'll always be your temptation."

Jack smiled that heart-stopping smile, and in that moment, Lexi knew she would follow him anywhere. Sex in the park wasn't sounding like that bad of an option with that expression on his face telling her that it would be worth her time. It always was.

"We...have to get to Chyna's," Lexi murmured, trying to keep them on track.

"You're really going to make me wait? What if I just pick you up and take you now?" he demanded, walking her backward into the ever-darkening park.

"I wouldn't stop you," she said with her own smirk.

"Fuck, how am I supposed to control myself when you look at me like that?"

"You aren't?"

“How much time do we have?” Jack asked, already walking down a side path.

Lexi had walked on it a few times, and she knew it was far enough off the beaten path that they likely wouldn't be disturbed. Her heart raced ahead of her with the anticipation of what was to come.

“Not enough,” she whispered.

But she didn't care. *Chyna would forgive her, right?*

“Oh well.” Jack glanced around and shrugged.

It was already pretty dark back here. It wasn't likely anyone would stumble across them.

“This will have to do,” he said.

His hands tangled into her hair, pulling her mouth up to his, as he pressed her back against the base of a large tree. Their kisses were heated and intensified with only the few short minutes of buildup. It was always like this every time—more heated, more passionate, more feverish. They couldn't get enough of each other. They couldn't stop, and it was beautiful that they didn't have to.

Lexi dug her fingers into the fabric of his dark sweater before moving her cold hands underneath the material to run along his bare stomach. He jumped at the temperature difference, but he didn't stop kissing her. He grabbed one of her legs covered by a thin layer of black tights and brought it up around his waist as he let his other hand find the hem of her skirt. She teasingly ran her hand softly along the waistline of his pants.

“Fuck,” he groaned.

His hand slid up the bottom of her skirt, and her back arched to feel him touch her. He chuckled at her need as he ran his hand slowly up her inner thigh. Her body was pulsing, and she was ready to just rip off her tights and let him take her. She needed to feel him, to feel the rush of their bodies connecting.

Jack's thumb found her clit through the material, and he circled around it until she thought she might combust. A moan escaped her lips, and she latched on to his belt buckle, willing him closer. The moan must have been too loud because Jack covered her mouth again with his lips, and he pressed his rapidly growing erection against her. She whimpered through the kisses as their bodies moved together, desperate to take him. Her hand fumbled to undo his belt buckle. She finally yanked it apart, unbuttoned his

pants, and slid the zipper to the bottom. Her hand found his thickness through his jeans, and she ran down the length.

“Jack, take me,” she growled into his ear.

He didn’t need anymore urging as he grasped the waistline of her tights and shoved them down her legs forcefully. She hoped she didn’t have runs in them, but at this point, she could care less. Jack released himself from the confines of his boxers, and shoved her back harder against the tree. His body was pulsing with the heat radiating between and the forcefulness.

This was her Jack.

He lifted her up off the ground easily, until his dick pressed against her opening, and then he slid her down onto him. Her pussy took all of him in and tightened around the welcome intrusion.

“This is just how I like you,” he said, taking one of her hands, forcing it over her head, and then doing the same with the other.

She smirked at him from her position with him inside of her, and her completely exposed to him. “I’ll try to hold in my screams,” she said defiantly.

“Don’t. The world could use a lesson.”

She laughed until he moved out of her slowly. It was the only movement he took slow after that. He thrust up inside of her forcefully over and over again. The risk of getting caught only intensified the excitement and desperation in their movements. And he took her unrestrainedly; in a way that left no doubt in her mind that there would never be anything like this, no one else like Jack.

He could take her slow or fast or rough or fucking brutally, and she liked it. She wanted more. And she couldn’t imagine a time that she wouldn’t ever want more.

As Jack pumped inside of her, Lexi’s back scratched against the tree, and she felt her world tilting—the way it always did with Jack. Her breathing quickened, and she felt the first wave of orgasm take over her body. She clenched all around him, and he hit climax with her. As they both rode out the pleasure coursing through their bodies, Jack rested his forehead down on her.

“Mine,” he whispered.

“Forever.”

They separated and were in the middle of pulling themselves together when they heard someone clear his throat behind them.

Lexi dropped her hands immediately, and Jack jumped away. They both turned, faced the source of the interruption, and saw a young male cop standing nearby.

“Sorry, officer,” Jack said with a nod.

“I’d move along,” the guy said. He looked more like he was trying to hide his amusement than admonishing them.

Jack placed his hand on the small of Lexi’s back and walked with her off of the trail. “Sorry about that,” Jack said.

“About what?” Lexi asked. “The orgasm?”

Jack laughed. “No. I’m never sorry for those. Sorry about the cop.”

“Pervert.”

Jack cracked up again. “How much time do we have?”

Lexi checked her watch. “Shit! We’re cutting it really close. We have to meet Chyna at her place, and then we have dinner reservations almost right after.”

They walked out to the street, and Jack hailed a cab. He opened the back door and let her slide in first. “Hey, Lex,” he murmured.

“Yeah?”

“I have something I have to get before dinner. Can I meet you there?”

Lexi narrowed her eyes. After that encounter in the park and all this talk about eating her for dessert first, Lexi had no idea why he wouldn’t want to go with her. It made her suspicious, and it was a feeling she really didn’t like. Years of suspicions made her stomach jolt at the thought.

Jack could pretty much see it on her face, and he bent forward and kissed her. “You’ll like it.”

“Where are you going?” she asked anyway. Her stomach fluttered anxiously.

“It’s a surprise—for you. I don’t want to ruin it.”

“The last time you left in New York—”

Jack shushed her with another kiss. “I’m not leaving you.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

“It’s a good surprise, but it is a surprise. Please let me do this,” he whispered.

Lexi nodded slowly. She trusted him. He looked so earnest in his request, not an ounce of deception on his face. She wondered if he had planned this the whole time or if it was all just spur of the moment.

“Okay. I’ll see you at Chyna’s or the restaurant?”

“I’m not sure yet. Probably the restaurant.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, too, Lex,” he said right before closing the taxi door.

Lexi gave the address to Chyna’s apartment to the cab driver as her mind drifted away to Jack. They’d had a great weekend in the city, and it just further solidified her desire to move back. She’d had offers from New York law firms before choosing Atlanta to be closer to Ramsey, and she was sure she could acquire a job here again with all the experience that she had gained. And Jack surely could get a job in the city now. He had been applying broadly, but she wanted to talk to him about focusing here more. She thought it would be good for them to get out of Atlanta.

She just hoped that whatever this surprise was would be good. She knew Jack had changed, but sometimes, it still scared her, knowing that they were together. She loved him with all her heart, and the only thing she wanted to do was give it away to him. Now, she just needed to trust herself not to try to hold on to it too tight. Jack knew what he was doing with it.

The cab drove her uptown through traffic to Chyna’s penthouse overlooking Central Park. Luckily, Lexi managed to arrive a few minutes early. She paid the cab and then stepped outside to see Bernard holding the door open for her.

“Miss Lexi,” he said with a nod. “Good to see you.”

“Mr. B,” she said with a wave. “You know, I never asked—what’s it like for Chyna not to show up with a random man every night? You actually don’t have to babysit her anymore.”

Bernard laughed and shook his head. “Mr. Adam does all the babysitting now. It’s pretty nice.”

Lexi bit her lip and smiled. So much had changed since she had first arrived in New York. “Good seeing you.”

She stepped inside, took the elevator upstairs and walked down the hall to Chyna’s place. The door was unlocked for her, and she entered an almost completely empty apartment. She had been expecting Chyna to be slightly drunk, pacing the apartment with Adam watching on incredulously, like he normally did when his wife acted like...herself. Instead, all Lexi saw was John.

He looked good. She was pretty sure every woman in the world found that man attractive. He just had the look. He was in a dark three-piece suit with a black shirt underneath and no tie. His short brown hair was spiked.

His hazel eyes looked her up and down, and that smile crept up across his face.

Lexi hoped it wasn't obvious what she had been doing with Jack. She hadn't even checked to see if she had stuff in her hair or if her clothes were properly aligned. *Oh well. Nothing she could do about it now.* She ran her hands down the front of her skirt reflexively anyway.

"Hey. I didn't know you were going to be here." She hadn't seen or heard from him since the wedding fiasco.

"I didn't realize you would be here either," he said, standing from where he had been seated on the couch and walking across the room toward her. "How have you been?"

"Great," she answered honestly.

A smile grew on her face as she thought about Jack—his face, his body, his sweet kisses, the way his hair curled at the edges, the perfect color of his eyes, the way his hand traced her palm, the way his lips looked when he told her that he loved her.

"Really great."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that even if I think your fiancé is a total dick," John said.

Lexi's mouth popped open. She was so used to John knowing everything about her life that it hadn't even occurred to her that he wouldn't know what had happened. *But why would he?* It hadn't been that long ago. As far as she knew, he wasn't still talking to Parker. She supposed that Adam could have told him, but it didn't seem like that had happened.

"I broke up with him," Lexi told him softly.

It was John's turn to look surprised. There was no way that he had been anticipating that.

"I can't say that I'm disappointed," John said, taking another step closer to her. "Though, I am disappointed about all the time wasted. You could have been up here all along, avoiding all the bullshit that happened in your life then."

"I don't think I wasted any time," Lexi said defiantly.

John balked at the statement but kept going. "Are you moving back?"

"I think so, but I still have some loose ends to tie up."

"When can I see you again?" he asked without missing a beat.

Lexi shook her head. Her heart broke a little bit for him. "Why have you waited for me all this time with no certainty that anything would ever

happen?”

“You’ve always been at the forefront of my mind. I’ve never met another woman quite like you.”

“One who told you no?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

He chuckled and shrugged. “There’s that, but you’re different, Lexi. You know that. You don’t bullshit. You’re not afraid to speak your mind. You’re smart and beautiful. A deadly combination.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

She hated having this conversation again, but at this point, she knew it was necessary. She wasn’t sure how many times she had told John that they couldn’t be together, and it hurt each and every time to have to deliver the news. He could have anyone he wanted, and she couldn’t understand, even with his kind words, why that person would be her.

“What is holding you back?” John asked, reaching for her, wanting to sway her.

“Jack,” she answered, pulling out of his grasp. “It was always Jack.”

John narrowed his eyes. “The one I could never compare to?” he asked the question as if it was still the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard.

She hated to admit it, but she still meant every word that she had said to him that night over dinner.

“Isn’t he still married?”

Lexi shook her head. “No. He got divorced.”

“And now, you’re together.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Perfect,” he said sarcastically. “Where is he now?”

Lexi bit her lip. *Great. Just what she wanted him to ask.* “He’s in the city with me, but I don’t know where right now. He’s on his way.”

“From everything I’ve heard about him, he’s a serial cheater. You’re not concerned that he’s just off and away?” John asked, spouting all the fears that had clouded her mind for years.

But she couldn’t stand there and let him say those things. Jack hadn’t cheated in a very long time. *And if she could change, then why couldn’t he? Why couldn’t she give him the benefit of the doubt?* Neither of them had been faultless, but they couldn’t continue to judge each other on what had happened so long ago. As Jack had said the day he found out about the divorce paperwork, he was no longer that nineteen-year-old boy anymore.

“I was a serial cheater, too. People tend to forget that when they start to blame Jack for everything. We were both at fault, and now, we’ve both come to terms with who we were and moved on to the people we want to be. So, if you’re going to judge him, then you should judge me, too.”

“So, that’s it then?” John asked. “I can’t change your mind? Tell you how much of a mistake you’re making?”

“I’m not making a mistake. I’ve made my choice. It’s the right one because it makes me happy.”

“Okay.”

He didn’t sound convinced, but she was pretty sure her words were beginning to sink in.

They heard rustling from the other room and then the turn of a doorknob. John pressed his lips together and then sighed.

“Tell Adam I had to head out. I hope you’re right about him,” John said. “I bet Ramsey would smash *his* face in, too, if it turns out you’re wrong.”

“Yeah, I bet he would,” Lexi said with a giggle even though she was sure John didn’t find that funny at all. “Sorry, not funny. Just feels like a lifetime ago.”

“I’m glad I got to see you. If you change your mind—”

“I won’t,” Lexi answered automatically.

“All right,” John said with a shrug.

And then, he walked out of Chyna’s apartment without another word—no big fanfare, no emotional heart-tugging moment, no farewell kiss. Just the likely realization that he was wasting his time by continuing to fight for her. She had no doubts that if things didn’t work out with Jack, then John would still be interested, but she didn’t think that was going to happen.

In fact, at this point, she couldn’t even imagine a possibility of a life without Jack.

And she counted on never having to.



Present

Just as John closed the door behind him, Chyna and Adam started down the hallway.

“Alexa!” Chyna crowed, walking confidently down the hall in her six-inch high heels and tiny, tight black mini dress.

Lexi could tell that she had clearly been hitting the bottle already.

“Hey, C,” Lexi said with a shake of her head.

She felt a bit strange after what had happened with John coupled with Jack disappearing out of nowhere. She could use a drink of her own.

“Where’s your man?”

“Had to stop to get something. He said it was a surprise, and he would meet us at the restaurant. Are you ready?” Lexi asked quickly.

Chyna raised one perfectly manicured eyebrow. “He just went to get something? That’s...odd.”

Lexi shrugged, trying to let it roll off her shoulders. “It’ll be fine.”

“Totally. I mean, he would be stupid to screw up now,” Chyna said with a tipsy giggle.

Adam shook his head and strode past Chyna. “I have the most insensitive wife in the world.”

“And you love every minute of it,” Chyna snapped back.

“I’m sure Jack is doing *exactly* what he said he was doing,” Adam said, ignoring Chyna’s outburst. “Have you seen John by any chance?”

“Yeah. He just told me to let you know that he had to head out. He found out about Ramsey and Jack and then took off.”

“Ah,” Adam said.

Their eyes met, and she knew that Adam understood what had passed between her and John. She had always had an uncanny connection with Adam, and Lexi knew that he was very close with John. She wondered but

had never asked if John and Adam had talked about her after Adam had found out that they had slept together. She figured it didn't matter now.

"Well, we're already going to be late because Adam wanted to give me two orgasms instead of one. Isn't he a stand-up guy?" Chyna said with a wink as she snaked her hand up his back.

Adam rolled his eyes, but Lexi saw his ears burn red. Lexi assumed it was always like this between them. He was probably used to it even if it still made him blush.

"Get your ass to the car," he said, smacking her playfully on the butt.

"Y'all are ridiculous," Lexi said.

Lexi followed their ridiculous asses back out of Chyna's apartment and into the backseat of her town car. A few minutes later, they pulled up in front of the new restaurant that had just been opened by a prominent reality-TV chef. It was classic Americana food in a gourmet setting with the decadence of the Upper East Side.

As soon as Chyna flounced into the place, they were ushered upstairs and deposited at a table in a private room off of the main dining floor. With candlelight illuminating the small room, the table was set for four with single-sheet hardback menus at each place. Lexi checked her cell phone to see the time. Jack still wasn't here. They had shown up ten minutes late for their dinner reservations, so she couldn't say anything about him being late. But she missed him and was so damn curious about what the hell he was doing.

The waitress appeared a few seconds later, and Chyna ordered an expensive bottle of wine for the table while they waited for Jack to appear. The wine was uncorked, and four glasses were poured when Jack showed up. His cheeks were flushed with the chill from outside, and his blue eyes locked in on Lexi. He smiled, and she felt her heart stop.

"Sorry I'm late," he said before kissing Lexi's cheek and then taking a seat beside her.

"Glad you could join us," Chyna said dryly.

Jack chuckled at her. "Drink some more wine, Chyna."

"Don't mind if I do," she said before tipping back her glass. She pulled it back and pointed between them. "You know, I knew that you would pick him."

"You told me," Lexi said.

Once Lexi had finally called Chyna to let her know what happened, Chyna had gone on and on about how she knew that Lexi would end up with Jack. Lexi was pretty sure Chyna had thought that Lexi would just leave Jack and Ramsey altogether, but Chyna had insisted it was Jack all along.

And Lexi agreed with her on that. It was always Jack—her Jack.

Dinner came and went without Lexi getting a chance to ask Jack about what he had been up to. She eyed him, trying to get him to spill, but he just smiled and squeezed her hand under the table. If he was bound and determined to hold it back, she might as well let him keep his surprise to himself. She would find out in good time.

“Did you get my message?” Jack whispered when Adam and Chyna were seriously invested in another intimate debate. “You never responded.”

“Message? No. I checked my phone right before you got here. When did you send it?”

“Right before I walked into the room.”

Lexi held up her finger and dug her phone back out. *Yep*. There was a missed message from Jack.

3 o'clock.

Lexi giggled. “You were checking me out.”

The last time she had gotten a text message like that was when she had been in college, and he had seen her from across the bar. That night had been the spark that they needed to end up back together. And they had kept ending up together for years after that.

“How could I not?”

“You’re silly. I could never forget that night.”

“I could never forget you.”

Her phone buzzed in her hand just as she was putting it away, and she clicked on the email that had come in.

Huh. It was from Cierra.

Cierra had been sad to hear about Lexi breaking up with Ramsey, but she had understood Lexi’s side on the whole thing. Lexi was lucky to still have her as a friend even though she worked for Bridges. Cierra was going to be a bridesmaid for Lexi after all.

The email appeared before her eyes, and as Lexi skimmed the intro, she immediately started laughing.

“What?” Chyna asked, coming out of her argument with Adam.

“Oh, you’ll never believe this,” Lexi said, covering her mouth to keep from laughing hysterically as she read through the article attached to the email.

“*Atlanta Lifestyle* magazine has a full-page spread about none other than the Bitch herself,” Lexi announced.

“Bekah?” Jack asked softly.

“What is *Atlanta Lifestyle* magazine?” Chyna asked.

“It’s the richie-rich Atlanta magazine,” Jack explained with a shrug. “All the country clubbers read it religiously. Bekah has had a subscription her whole life. Basically your page six.”

“Oh,” Chyna said, turning her nose up. “So, what does it say?”

Lexi turned her phone around and showed off the picture. It was a clearly unstable Bekah lunging at Lexi with her arms outstretched in front of her and her father holding her back. She looked ready to murder Lexi. Luckily, only the back of Lexi’s head was visible or else it wouldn’t have been as hilarious.

“It briefly mentions the divorce proceedings going wrong for her. The majority of it deals with her cheating with Clark and the destruction of her golden-girl reputation. And get this part,” Lexi said, turning the phone back to herself and reading a part of it. “Due to the humiliation endured against the famous Bridges name and her inability to handle her own finances, an anonymous source has leaked to us that Bekah’s trust fund has been frozen, and her active role as Bridges Enterprise vice president has been revoked until further notice.”

“Wow,” Jack whispered. “She’s got to be mortified.”

“Yeah,” Lexi said, seeing the concern on Jack’s face. “I’m sorry. I mean...I still hate her, but I’m sorry it all happened like this.”

“You know, she was the first person to ever cheat on me,” Jack said offhand.

“I know.”

“Well, personally, I think that crazy bitch got what was coming to her,” Chyna said. “She was pretty dreadful to everyone.”

Lexi reached over and grabbed Jack’s hand.

He smiled at Lexi and agreed, “She was, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. I think this calls for a toast in fact,” Chyna said, raising her glass into the air.

Lexi loved the way her best friend diffused tension...with alcohol.

“What are we toasting to?” Adam asked, jumping in with his wife.

“To being free,” Chyna said.

Lexi laughed, remembering the time when she had boarded Chyna’s jet to escape the world with those same words ringing true. “No,” Lexi said. “To closure.”

Chyna winked at her as Jack and Adam raised their glasses as well.

Just before they clinked their glasses together, Jack added, “To new beginnings.”

They finished off their wine, and a heavy buzz began setting in on the conversation. As her treat, Chyna insisted on paying the entire tab even though everyone tried to argue with her, but really, there wasn’t a way to argue with Chyna.

Lexi half-stumbled down the stairs and back out of the building. Jack had his arm around her waist and helped support her unsteady legs as they exited into the chilly evening.

“I think we’re going to head back,” Jack told Chyna with a smile.

“Now?” Lexi asked. “But the night has just started.”

“It’ll be worth it,” he whispered into her ear. “I’m still dying to get my hands on you again.”

Lexi giggled and nodded. “Yeah, okay. Let’s go.”

“Cool,” Chyna said, waving the comments away. “You should take the town car. We’ll take the next cab.”

Her eyes wide, Lexi stared at Chyna. Never once had Chyna ever offered up her town car when they were separating. Chyna would rather drive Lexi halfway around the city before getting back to her own place than give it up.

So, this could only mean that Chyna knew what Jack had up his sleeve.

Adam pulled open the door for Lexi and Jack to step into the car. Jack went in first, so Lexi wouldn’t have to scoot over in her dress.

Lexi grabbed Chyna’s hand. “What is going on?” she whispered, hoping Chyna would dish.

“You’ll thank me later, chica. Have a nice night,” she said, fluttering her fingers at Lexi.

Lexi leaned into Jack in the back of Chyna’s town car. She didn’t even bother asking where they were going because she knew that if Chyna

hadn't spilled the beans, then Jack certainly wasn't. Lexi occupied herself on the drive with the weight of his hand against hers, the roughness of his palms against her smooth skin, and the way his seemed to dwarf her tiny hands. Yet, they still fit perfectly together. It made her smile.

They pulled up into a valet station, and Jack eased out of the car. He held his hand out for her, and she placed hers lightly in his. Her eyes drifted up to his eyes and then over his head to the sign hanging on the doorframe. Her eyebrows rose sharply.

"A hotel?" she asked with a quirky smile. "All of this for a hotel room? Couldn't you have told me that you wanted me all alone?"

Her stomach fluttered anyway. Staying in Chyna's penthouse was divine, and the location was unreal, but Lexi had missed being alone with Jack. She never would have suggested a hotel though. It didn't make sense, considering Chyna lived here.

"I want you all alone, Lex," he whispered, brushing his lips against her.

"Still lost in our park escapade?" At the mention of their early behavior, her mouth quirked up.

"Lost in you," he answered simply.

Lexi took Jack's hand and let him escort her through the fancy hotel lobby. It was tiled in a pristine waxed marble with antique-like furniture draped in gorgeous blood-red oriental rugs. An enormous crystal chandelier hung high above their heads on their way to the elevator.

Jack placed a plastic key card into a slot and clicked the button for the top floor.

"Penthouse?" Lexi asked, narrowing her eyes.

Jack had never been one for big displays of wealth. She knew he had money from his accounting job, and of course, he was getting the settlement money from Bekah. But since neither of them had really grown up with opulence, it wasn't ever a high priority.

"Only the best for my girl."

"You spoil me," she said, wringing her hands. "You totally did not have to do this."

"You don't know what I've done yet," he whispered.

"Oh God," she groaned, "with that tone, I just know you've outdone yourself."

Jack reached forward and pushed her hair behind her ear. “With that tone, I know you’re about two seconds away from losing your grip. Chill out. This is me treating you the way you deserve to be treated because you’re special, Lex.”

She closed her eyes and let him kiss her anticipation away until the elevator doors opened. He kissed her one more time before walking down the hall. They located their room, and Jack slid the key into the slot.

He opened the door and held his hand out wide. “After you.”

Lexi bit her lip and glanced up into his mischievous blue eyes before walking into the hotel room. Her eyes lit up as she took in the room before her. Candles lit a trail leading through the room, and she followed them like the bread crumbs that they were. They wrapped around the room and brought her into the master suite with an oversized king bed. Candles were lit on either bedside table and in front of the mirror reflecting back at her from the bathroom. On a side table, a bottle of champagne chilled in a bucket with a plate of regular and chocolate-dipped strawberries. It was really quite simple, and perhaps, that made it even more romantic.

Tears pricked her eyes if for no other reason than the fact that Jack had put so much thought into making her happy. Her heart squeezed painfully at the realization that Jack was giving her everything she had wanted and more.

His hands landing lightly on her shoulders, Jack spun her around. “Do you like it?”

“Like it?” she asked, wiping under her eye. “I love it.”

“Why do you look sad? What did I do?” he asked, concerned.

“Nothing. It’s really beautiful.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “If it’s so beautiful, why are you sad?”

“It’s just...this is everything I want. You. I want you.”

“I’m yours,” he said, holding his palms up in submission.

“I know.” She tried to get her thoughts together. It was all so perfect, so beautiful, and exactly what she wanted. She just didn’t want something bad to happen. She didn’t want anyone to take this away.

“The last time we were together in New York, you showed me your grandma’s ring and left,” Lexi whispered. She hated bringing it up, but she couldn’t pretend not to have fears. She wanted to confide her fears to him and allow them to fade away naturally.

Jack nodded, understanding crossing his face. "I prefer to think about the month before when I held you in my arms every night."

"Sometimes, it's easy to forget the highs with all the lows."

"There are always going to be lows," Jack responded, sweeping her hair behind her ear for her. "But I don't think any of us could really appreciate the highs without them. And I can't promise you that there won't be lows. There will be, but every high will be worth it." His achingly tender lips found hers.

"I know, Jack," she murmured against his lips. "It's just...memories."

"I don't want to erase those memories. They keep us on the straight and narrow. They remind us where we went wrong and where to go from here. They kept us together," he said. "You and I, Lex, we'll always be unfinished business."

Lexi smiled up at him, letting the tension slide off her shoulders. Jack was right. Of course he was right. There would always be problems to face, but as long as they had each other, trusted in each other, they could overcome them.

"It took me ten years to get to you. I think that's a fair trade as long as I have a lifetime to spend with you," he whispered.

Lexi smiled up at him, practically glowing at the statement. *How long had she imagined a lifetime with Jack? And now...it was within reach.*

"Please don't freak out," he told her.

She cocked her head to the side in confusion until she saw him pull out a small black box from his pocket.

"What...is...that?" she stammered, already well past freaking out.

"I told you not to freak out. It's not what you think," he said with a tight chuckle.

"Um..." she said, her eyes wide.

Jack opened the box and plucked the small piece of jewelry out before she could get a look at it. At this point, her stomach was sitting somewhere around her feet, and her mind was somewhere else, far, far away. Her mouth was dry, and she could hear ringing in her ears. *What exactly was in this little black box that she wasn't supposed to freak out about?*

"I just...I got you something," he said, his blue eyes meeting hers.

That look alone made her soften. This was Jack. He knew what made her freak out. He knew everything about her.

“You’re such a big part of my life. And I know we’re not ready to make a big step, but I felt like I just needed to *show* you that I am ready to make a little step. It’s more important to me, I think, Lex, to show you that I’m committed to you more than anything. Because I am. I can tell you a million times that I’m all yours, but I know that time will be proof of that. So, for now, I just thought I’d start with this.”

Jack held out a tiny silver ring with a looped knot on the top. It was simple and easy and so unbelievably perfect for them.

“I want you to be tied to me, Lex, in every way possible,” Jack said, his voice hoarse. “I want you to wear this one until we’re ready for you to wear the other one.”

Jack slid it onto Lexi’s finger. Her heart was in her throat the whole time. This wasn’t an engagement ring or anything, but it meant so much. Maybe, at this moment in time, it meant even more than that. It was a promise ring—a promise to commit to her, a promise to love her, a promise to treat her the way she deserved. And by wearing it on her finger, she was promising him the same in return.

And so much more—so much that they would never be able to articulate to the other, except through glances and touches and experiences and time.

And they had all the time in the world.

THE END

NOTE TO THE READER

Thank you so much for going through this journey with me. This book is the culmination of more than four years of writing and publishing the *Avoiding* series. I know that this series has had many ups and downs and twists and turns. I've heard of people throwing their Kindles. I even had someone bring me a broken iPad to a signing. I get that this journey is emotional, and I appreciate every single day that you allowed me to show you my vision.

I know that this story isn't exactly conventional, but I've never claimed to be a conventional storyteller. This last book took a lot for me to write, not because I didn't have a story in my head, but the one that I tried to write wouldn't let me. Once I figured out the real ending, the one that you just read, I wrote the entire first chapter without stopping. And then, I wrote the entire book with that ending in mind. It's the story I *had* to write.

I've never been a person who likes things tied up in pretty little bows. Life is messy. I like my fiction messy. I like my characters flawed. I like to keep them true to themselves while still growing, changing, and adapting to the situations at hand.

We've all been in situations where we knew someone was *perfect* but not for us. I know how hard the decision is to not settle for anything less than you deserve and that not everyone will understand that decision, but it's *your* decision as much as it was Lexi's.

The whole team mentality made the decision about how to end this book difficult, but once I figured out what I wanted—more importantly, what *Lexi* wanted—there was no turning back. So, I hope you appreciate the different challenges Lexi had to face along the way. And even if she

didn't pick your guy, I hope you still love her for standing up for herself—
for what she believed in and for the man who she chose to love.



K.A. Linde

Turn the page for a sneak peek of K.A. Linde's
next series!

gold
All That Glitters
Book One

K.A. LINDE



chapter *one*

Bryna barged into Eric's house without knocking, and she slammed the door closed behind her. She had just finished business as usual and needed to de-stress. Eric loved to hear about all her latest conquests, and she was happy to provide him with the information. *How often did she get to gloat?* Well, all the time, if Trihn and Stacia were around, but it was more of a competition that way.

With Eric, she was free to be herself—her uninhibited, gold-digging self.

She whisked her golden blonde hair off her shoulders and let the big curls fall down her back. She smoothed down her short, skintight red dress, the deluxe gold watch and diamond tennis bracelet jangling as she moved. She was riding the high of her accomplishment as her stiletto heels carried her up the short flight of stairs and around the corner to Eric's bedroom.

Nearly running into someone, Bryna deftly jumped out of the way and right into a large fish tank at the top of the stairs. Why Eric had that thing, she would never be able to guess. Running into it now and seeing the water slosh and splash onto the cream carpet upon impact just made her wonder even more.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," the person said immediately, reaching out for her. "Did it get you wet?"

Get your mind out of the gutter.

Maybe under other circumstances, she would have laughed and made that sexual, but she actually was a little wet, which was pretty disgusting. Bryna regained her balance and turned to face the unexpected visitor.

"Andrew?" she breathed, looking him up and down suspiciously.

Andrew Fennell was on the football team. Stacia could have told Bryna what position since she was the jersey-chasing cheerleader, but all Bryna knew was that he wasn't the quarterback. And he was also walking away from Eric's bedroom.

"Uh...Bri...shit. I wasn't expecting you to show up," Andrew blabbered, straightening his shirt and standing taller.

I bet you weren't.

"Were you just with Eric?" She narrowed her charcoal-rimmed baby-blue eyes accusingly.

Andrew wasn't the biggest player on the Las Vegas State football team, which had won the national title for the past two years, but deciding which guy was the biggest player was a hard thing to determine. It was like judging between mass murders. *Are they really that much worse because they killed fifteen people instead of fourteen?*

"Now, Bri, don't jump to any conclusions," he muttered.

She liked that he was flustered.

A smirk crept up onto her mouth. "You're acting as if I have a conclusion to jump to." She stood straighter, crossing her arms and arching an eyebrow. She would love to see him try to wiggle out of this.

He blushed furiously. "Of course there isn't. I was just...uh..."

"No wonder we never worked out," she said, shrugging nonchalantly. "Turns out I'm not *exactly* your type. I was curious as to why you never tried anything."

"Bri, you broke up with me," he reminded her.

"Oh...right," she said after pondering for a moment. It had lasted three weeks during their freshman year, and then she had gotten bored. "For Bryan Stewart. He was gorgeous. Too bad he transferred to Virginia."

Andrew rolled his eyes at her tone of voice. "Are you through?"

"Quite," she told him, smirking devilishly.

"Mind not mentioning this around?" he asked tentatively.

"You know me." She gestured to her mouth and ran her hand across it like she was closing a zipper.

"Right," he murmured, sarcasm oozing from every pore.

"Oh, Andrew, I'll keep your little secret," she said, patting his shoulder. "Just remember that I did."

For a second, he looked like he would rather she told the entire university that he had taken it up the ass than be indebted to her. With Bryna, there was no telling when a favor would be called in and under what circumstances he would be forced to help out.

But, really, what other choice did he have? Even though she was just a sophomore, Bryna was wildly popular at LV State because she was tough shit and flat-out gorgeous. She was the kind of girl that every guy wanted and every girl wanted to be. She was the kind of girl that guys were afraid

to take home. She was the kind of girl who had a particular proclivity for wealth, status, the chase, and getting exactly what she wanted. *Some people called her entitled, but why wouldn't she be?*

“Whatever, Bri,” Andrew finally acknowledged.

And she had him.

Andrew nudged past her and walked back down the stairs.

Bryna let a wry smile come onto her face before proceeding down the hall.

“Eric?” she called as she burst into the room.

Her smile widened as she stepped inside and observed Eric lying buck naked in the middle of his enormous king-sized bed. His entire muscled body was perfectly tanned...inappropriately so. Things that weren't supposed to see the light of day were tan. All of his muscles were standing at attention—*all* of them. And he was a man of many indulgences. Toning his already built body was one of them, and she let her eyes scan from his calves up the curves of his thighs, over his tightened erection, to the line after line after line of hard abdomen, up to his defined chest, and then his well-sculpted arms. It was truly a sight.

His soft blond hair was a wreck, but he looked good with tousled bed head. The green comforter and a mass of sheets were tangled at his feet and falling onto the floor. A pair of handcuffs lay unused at his headboard, very close to his wrists. She bit her lip at that, not even wanting to keep the dirty thoughts off her face.

Soft music, something classical, was playing in the background. And as she listened closely, she could make out something else, too. Bryna realized that pants and moans were coming from the direction of the large mounted television on the adjacent wall. She tore her eyes away from her friend's gloriously naked body and turned to stare intriguingly up at the girl-on-girl interaction on the screen.

“For a gay man, E, you watch an awful lot of lesbo porn,” Bryna said. She shook her head and took a seat in a plush cream-colored armchair.

“Sometimes, it makes them feel more comfortable,” Eric said, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“Oh, just admit it. You like it,” she purred, letting her legs spread wide in her mini dress.

She was on full display for him, and he wasn't even paying attention. This was always how it was with Eric. It was fun to tease.

“Sometimes, I think I do,” he said with a shrug, his eyes trained on the television screen.

The pants turned to cries of ecstasy and climax, and Bryna watched him visibly harden before her. Her eyes flicked to the screen and saw one girl going down on another.

“When were you last with a woman?” she asked, startling him out of his trance.

He looked at her then—her legs spread wide, breasts nearly bursting from her top, eyes wide and ravenous—and laughed. “Darling, you’re not my type.”

Bryna shrugged, unperturbed, and straightened herself again. “You’ll come...around.”

“How often will you dangle yourself before me?”

The moans increased in volume in the background.

“Probably until you comply,” she said without compassion.

“And why would I?”

He returned his attention to the screen. Bryna secretly loved how uninterested he acted because it meant she got to chase him at every turn. Eric was the kind of guy she loved and would fucking marry in a heartbeat if he weren’t gay. But he was. So, she consoled herself with his friendship and tried to fuck him at every opportunity.

“I’ve never been with a gay man,” she told him.

It was mostly true. There had been that time...but the gay guy hadn’t fucked her. He had fucked the other guy. She shook her head at the fond memories.

“This, I’m well aware of, but you’ve been with every other guy on campus.”

“Not every guy,” she said coyly, kicking off her pumps.

“Right,” he agreed, “not the gay ones.”

“Eric!” she chided.

They both knew that the statement wasn’t true. She enjoyed sex. She had a rather lavish sex life in fact, but she was careful about her reputation and who she slept with. She wasn’t easy. She wasn’t going to just give it up to anyone. There were a few exceptions along the way, but the last thing she wanted to be known for was having slept with every guy on campus.

She preferred to give it up to guys who she could get something out of. And even then, she was very particular about who she was digging. She

didn't always need the money. She did it for fun, for sport, for the challenge that college guys didn't offer—except Eric, of course.

“Anyway, I'm your best friend, Bri. What do you want me to do?” he asked, licking his lips. His honey-colored eyes defiantly found hers. “Tie you up to the bed and have my way with you, so you can feel a gay guy's dick? I promise, they all work the same.”

Bryna started to walk toward him, seductively placing one foot directly in front of the other. Her hips swayed in time with her steps, and she knew her breasts bounced just enough to draw attention. She tilted her chin down and eyed him thoughtfully. His eyes didn't even register the motion.

“You're right. I'm just teasing,” she said.

She stretched her body out next to him on the bed and curled into his side. Staring up at the scene of a woman now plunging a dildo in and out of another woman, Bryna realized how horny she really was. Lesbian porn never turned her on, but it had been so long that she couldn't even stop herself. Her lower half began to pulse.

“Dear Lord, you're overcharging,” Eric said, placing his hand on her abdomen.

“I know. I'm horny as fuck,” she murmured. She hid her face in his neck and smelled the faint touch of sex still on his skin. Bryna trembled and breathed deeper. It smelled like fucking heaven. “I might call up Rohde.”

Eric groaned, pulling away from her, at the mention of his fellow fraternity brother's name. It was a bit ironic that they were in the same frat, and no one—let alone Rohde, who Eric hated—knew that Eric was gay. Very, very few were privy to that information.

“Really? Are you still letting that douche fuck you? I can't possibly comprehend what you see in him. He's a chronic, alcoholic, asshole, womanizer. He's not worth a second of your time, Bri.”

“First, I'm not into him for anything but to satisfy a certain need that you refuse to quench,” she argued.

She always had to defend Rohde. He wasn't a total creep to her, but she knew he had his moments.

“Second, just because he's a binge-drinking frat boy doesn't make him an alcoholic or an asshole. *You* should know!” She pointed her finger into his tanned chest, trying to punch in the last words.

“Yes, but I’m different. No one knows I’m gay. I have a reason to act like a moron frat boy. Rohde’s just a moron,” he quipped.

“Regardless, he’s some of the best sex I’ve had, and I’m not about to give that up without a really good fucking reason. And since I have to keep up appearances with everyone else, I think it’s all right for me to fuck a moron who treats me like a queen without any pretense.”

Another half-truth. Rohde treated her like a queen in bed, which she supposed was where it mattered. Once he came, he treated her about like everyone else.

“You choose your life, darling,” he said unsympathetically. “Speaking of, how is Mr.—or is he a doctor? I can’t keep them straight.”

“Doctor,” she cooed, extending her arm to show him the beautiful tennis bracelet sitting on her wrist.

Eric gasped, straightening and grasping her arm to examine the unbelievable piece of jewelry.

As he shifted, his penis fell against her leg, and she groaned.

“Eric, please.” Bryna pointed downward at him. She was trying desperately not to respond.

“God, Bryna, it’s not like you haven’t seen one before,” he sighed dramatically, shifting again to remove it from her leg.

She clenched her open hand into a fist and blew out. She really needed to rein in her sexual drive.

Eric still had a hold of her wrist, and he whistled slowly. “Damn girl, this thing had to have cost a fortune. Is it Tiffany’s?”

Bryna nodded proudly, remembering the powder blue box the doctor had pulled out of his suit coat pocket and then handed to her at lunch.

“When do you see him next? He better be getting hot pussy for this.”

“Nope,” she cried enthusiastically. “I broke up with him after he gave it to me.” It was always a treat, not to have to sleep with the guys to get what she wanted. Sometimes, it was better to use her powers of seduction without having to cross the line. It made the highs even better.

Eric gasped a second time. “Naughty girl. I love it! Your escapades astound me.”

“I know, right?” she said, admiring the cut of the diamonds strung on the chain. “You should have seen his face. He never saw it coming.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” he said. He fingered the diamond bracelet with envy.

“It’s a gift,” she breathed triumphantly. “Anyway, I’m taking the night off. Let’s party!”

“Girl, I’m spent,” he said, lying back and lifting his arms over his head.

He closed his eyes and seemed to be returning to the state of peace she had found him in when she burst through the door. He looked like fucking Adonis, and she wanted to eat him alive. Bryna shifted her weight to straddle him, and his eyes snapped open at the movement. Now, she had his attention.

“Bri,” he warned.

She placed a finger on his lips to silence him. He rolled his hazel eyes at her but complied nonetheless. Bryna wiggled her hips a bit on top of him and felt him stiffen under her weight. Reaching forward, she snatched the remote from the nightstand. He eyed her curiously, clearly waiting for her to shut off the television, but he didn’t comment. He just waited and let her do what she wanted. She liked when he got like that. Finding the volume button, Bryna turned up the sound louder until the room was filled with pants, grunts, moans, and cries of elation as the women pleased each other on the screen. Eric arched an eyebrow at her, but he couldn’t deny that it was sexy.

Tossing the remote onto the table, she let it clatter until it hit the lamp and stopped.

In imitation of what was going on behind her, Bryna began softly stroking her own body. She already had a heightened sexual appetite and incredibly sensitive skin, so even the faintest touches caused her to gasp. Her hands pushed down from her collarbones to cup her breasts, barely hidden under her red dress, which was already hiked up to the top of her thighs. She massaged her breasts in circles, tossing her head back dramatically, while purring in delight. Tugging lightly on the straps of her dress, she let the top fall to her stomach, displaying a white lace bra, and hidden underneath were her perky, large breasts. Her smile was devilishly playful when she next looked at Eric. He was just staring at her, unmoving, but he wasn’t completely uninterested. Her hands returned to the soft contours of her breasts. She touched them and prodded them for his display. After unsnapping the clasp at the back of her bra, she threw it across the room and let her breasts fall gloriously out of their enclosure. Proud of her naturally incredible rack, she let him stare for a few seconds. She didn’t

give him much more time to stare than to get a full view of them before she went back to work on them. She pinched the nipples until they hardened, savoring the buildup she was creating for her own body.

Slowly, one of her hands traveled south along his hard abdomen. She let it rest where the hem of his boxers would have been if he were wearing any, and she lightly trailed along the spot with her fingers. He eyed her suspiciously as she traveled farther south and lifted her tiny skirt over her hips, so just her thong separated their bodies. Her hand was so close to him, and just when it appeared he might protest, she moved her hand to her matching white lace underwear.

Her fingers gently swirled around herself until she was near gasping for air. Orgasm was just out of reach, and she was dying to hit that peak. Eric's eyes were intent on her face as it began to match the looks of pleasure playing above her head. Getting overzealous as she pleased herself before him, her hand came out and stroked the length of him. Eric shuddered beneath her. The shudder caused a tremor to move through her body, and she felt herself getting ready to climax. She groaned and stroked him again.

He reached up unexpectedly and grabbed Bryna by the shoulders. She humphed at the interruption, but he seemed not to have noticed. Using all of his weight, he flipped her over and crushed her back against the bed. Bryna lay there motionless against his chiseled chest, panting, breathless, and aching.

"Are you finished?" he asked emotionlessly, arching one manicured eyebrow. His voice was even and alert.

"I was close," she teased. "If you don't mind, I'd like to."

"Well, I do mind. So, go call your moron and have him finish you off. I need a shower," he muttered, standing and walking to the bathroom.

The door slammed behind him, and soon, she heard the water running.

Bryna sighed in frustration. She so desperately wanted to finish, but he had completely cooled her fire. Him on top of her, pressing on her—fuck, she could have come right then and there. Now, she was left wanting again, and she didn't even have it in her to do it herself. She would have to visit Rohde after all.

She took another second to compose herself, and then she quickly stripped off her remaining clothing. She sauntered into the bathroom and

confidently pushed open the glass door to the stand-up shower, walking inside and joining Eric as if she had been given an invitation.

“Bryna, I’m not in the mood,” Eric said before walking forward into the stream of steaming hot water.

“I was just playing, E. No need to have a hissy fit...unless you enjoyed it.” She poked him playfully in the ribs.

“Stop that,” he said, jumping away from her.

“Well, share the water then,” she said, walking into the line of water. She changed the subject easily back to where they had been before she had tried to get him to fuck her for the umpteenth time. “Let’s go out tonight. I think Trihn and Stacia will be up for it.”

“Those two girls are always up for it,” Eric said. “Are you going to see Rohde first?”

“Unclear. I haven’t talked to him,” she admitted.

“But you’re going to?” he asked, leaning his head against the tiled wall.

“I usually do when I get home after a long day of work,” she said, giggling.

Eric couldn’t help it. He laughed. “Darling, if you even knew what work was.”

“I work hard for my money. So hard for my money,” she singsonged into his face as he pushed her out of the water.

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She currently resides in Georgia with her boyfriend and two puppies, Lucy and Riker. She enjoys dancing in her spare time. She plans to finish the Record series, the All That Glitters series, as well as her future endeavors.

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