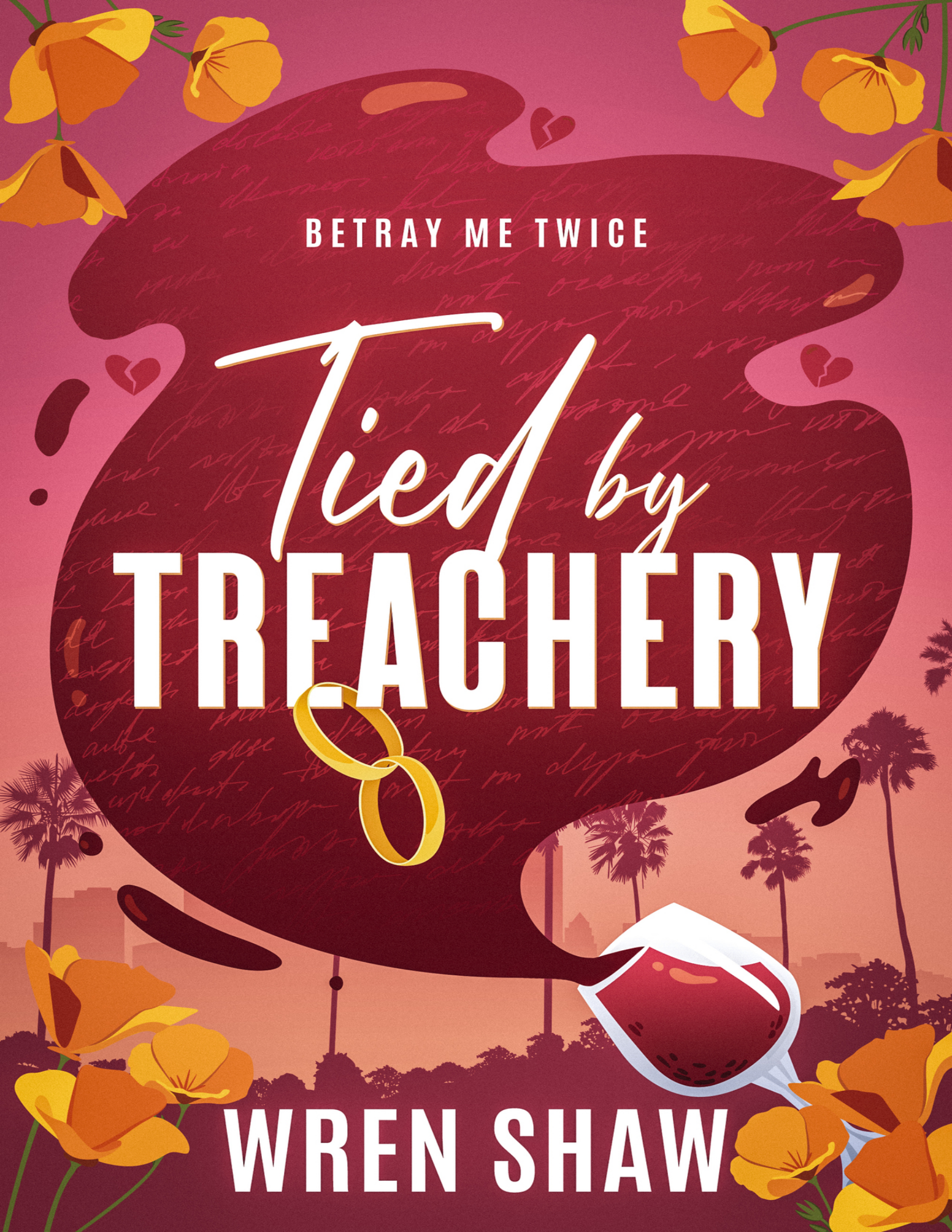




BETRAY ME TWICE

Tied by
TREACHERY

WREN SHAW

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TIED BY TREACHERY

She thought she'd put the worst betrayal of her life behind her.

Celia Cromwell was stunned when she discovered her husband was cheating. Then he made her fight for every dollar in their divorce before marrying his much younger mistress.

She never expected to fall for anyone again. Until Julian Hayes made her feel safe to love again.

Except when he asked her to meet his daughter...Celia found her ex sitting at the table with the pregnant woman who helped ruin her life. Forced to pick sides, Julian makes the wrong decision.

Now he has to grovel for the woman who never should have been the one to leave, while the people who already wrecked her try to do it again.

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The final course was already plated when my mother-in-law found me in the kitchen. We couldn't have looked more different if we tried, with her in silk and pearls and me in my loose-fitting pants and chef's coat.

She stopped in the doorway without a hint of a smile on her perfectly made-up face. "They're asking about dessert."

I finished wiping down the edge of the last plate. "It's ready."

"Good." Her gaze swept over the kitchen that had been my domain since I married her son. "Please bring this course out yourself. Richard Thornton mentioned he wanted to meet the chef, and we need to impress him tonight."

"I'd be happy to."

She returned to the tasting room without another word, and I heaved a deep sigh before picking up two plates.

"Want me to help serve too?" Susan asked.

I flashed my sous chef a grateful smile. "Thank you, but no. I've got this."

"Damn straight you do." She jerked her chin toward the door. "Even if the lady of the vineyard doesn't realize it."

A soft laugh bubbled out. "Don't let her hear you say that."

Susan rolled her eyes, but she pressed her lips into a flat line when the servers came in. They carried the remaining plates out, and I followed them into the tasting room.

Harrison stood at the head of the long table with a bottle of Syrah. The label carried his family name, the one I'd taken when we got married nine years ago. Not that any of the guests would know it since he didn't even bother to meet my eyes as I walked into the room.

I set my plates in front of Richard Thornton and his wife. She looked down at her dessert, then twisted in her seat to smile up at me. "Dark chocolate lava cake with a red wine raspberry coulis?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her eyes lit up, but she didn't get the chance to explain why she was so excited about the cake before Harrison murmured, "It's the perfect pairing with our Syrah."

Mr. Thornton shot him a look that he completely missed, and his wife's smile widened. "How on earth did you know?"

"I was in the kitchen at Providence when you celebrated your tenth anniversary," I explained.

"And you remembered a small detail like that after all this time?" She reached out to pat my hand. "Thank you."

"Now I understand why the meal was so incredible." Mr. Thornton dipped his chin in approval before turning toward Harrison. "You have a talented chef in your kitchen."

"The vineyard's always been lucky." My father-in-law reached for the bottle in his son's hand. "Which is why our wine sells itself."

I quietly excused myself, and Mrs. Thornton's gaze following me to the door was the only acknowledgment I got on the way out. But I didn't have time to sulk over it because the kitchen needed to be cleaned.

Servers scraped plates, and Susan stood at the sink with her sleeves shoved past her elbows. "They like the dessert?"

"Absolutely."

She grinned. "Good."

We didn't talk much after that. My shoulders ached when we were done, but I was used to it.

Harrison came in when the last rack of dishes was already going. His jacket was off, his tie was loose, and his smile was genuine. "Thornton wants a custom barrel. The Syrah we poured with dessert."

I understood why he was so happy. Tonight's dinner had already garnered him a forty-thousand-dollar sale.

“He asked about buying out the property,” Harrison added. “A whole weekend with an unlimited budget for a gala his wife is planning.”

Susan gave voice to what I was thinking. “The cake clinched it.”

“She liked the pairing.” His phone buzzed, and he checked it before locking the screen. “Which is why they bought the barrel.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed.

Harrison pocketed his phone. “I have calls to return. Don’t wait up.”

Susan waited until he left, then muttered, “Not even a single word of gratitude for all your hard work.”

I shrugged. “You know how he is.”

“Yeah, but the question is...do you?”

My answer a year ago would’ve been easy, but my husband had been so busy lately. I felt like we barely saw each other.

Picking up the clipboard hanging from the end of the counter, I mumbled, “Better take this to the office before I forget.”

“I hope you have a great rest of your weekend, Celia.”

“You too, Susan.” My smile was wobbly. “Thanks for doing such a great job tonight.”

“It was my pleasure. You know how much I enjoy cooking with you, chef.”

My smile widened. “And that’s why you’re my favorite person to have on the line with me.”

“Of course I am.” She winked. “I’m awesome.”

I laughed softly as I walked away. Harrison was already on the phone when I walked into the office. When he saw me, he cut the call without saying goodbye.

I held the clipboard out. “Invoice from the butcher.”

Harrison set it on the desk, face down. “Couldn’t this wait?”

“I didn’t realize you were going to be in here when you said you had calls to make.”

He quirked a brow. “It’s the office.”

“Right,” I drawled, barely stopping myself from pointing out that he rarely worked in here since he does most of the vineyard’s business from our home in LA.

“Is that all you needed?” He wiggled his phone. “I still have those calls to make.”

I hadn't been planning to say anything, but his dismissive attitude ratcheted my irritation up even more. "A thank you would be nice."

"What?" He tilted his head to the side. "You don't think you got enough recognition tonight?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Thornton complimented my skills in the kitchen, and you just stood there while your father told him the wine sells itself."

His mouth tightened. "Dad was closing a forty-thousand-dollar barrel. It wasn't the time for a staff introduction."

"I'm your wife. Not staff."

"You were working." He stood and shoved his phone in his pocket. "Not everything is a slight, Celia. You got to serve the course. His wife liked it. Did you want me to give a speech or something?"

"I wanted my husband to look at me."

"I'm not doing this right now." He came around the desk. "The night was a huge success, and you're in here keeping score. Being too sensitive. Yet again."

I dropped my arms to my side, fisting my hands. "That's not fair, Harrison."

He moved toward the door. "Neither is coming in here to attack me while I still have work to do."

"That isn't—"

"As I said before, don't wait up," he said over his shoulder, and then he was gone.

Tears filled my eyes, blurring my vision as I stared at the desk while his footsteps echoed down the hall. I needed a moment to pull myself together, so I rounded the desk and sat down. Then I pressed the heels of my hands under my eyes until the need to cry passed.

The butcher's invoice was still face down. I turned it over and stared at the name of the winery at the top. I'd been a part of the Cromwell family for nine years. Five years ago, when their previous chef accepted another offer with notice, I'd offered to help run the kitchen until they could hire someone else. I'd had a rising career in LA, but my family had needed me, so I pitched in.

My boss had given me a tight timeline for how long I could be away from the restaurant, which was understandable. And when it ran out, I felt

like I couldn't abandon the winery when Harrison and his parents needed me.

But I couldn't even sign off on a bill for wagyu beef because it exceeded my authority.

As I pushed the clipboard away, the tablet next to the keyboard dinged with a notification. I glanced over at the sound, and the screen lit up, flashing a name I didn't recognize.

Brie

I missed what the notification banner said and wouldn't normally have thought anything of it, but I recognized the slight crack in the corner. The tablet was my husband's.

Then another message came through, and since I was already staring at the screen, I saw the preview.

BRIE

When will you be back in town? I miss you.

The screen went dark again, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I tried to think of a reasonable explanation for what I'd just read. But I couldn't come up with an innocent reason for why a woman I didn't know felt comfortable sending my husband a message like this.

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I needed to know more, and the perfect opportunity sat in front of me. Standing, I circled the desk again and walked across the room to shut the door. Then I turned the lock. The last thing I needed while spying on my husband was one of his parents walking into the office and catching me.

Now that my privacy was ensured, I snagged the tablet from the desktop and sat on the loveseat that lined the wall opposite the desk.

Balancing the tablet on my knees, I looked at it for a moment and considered what I was about to do. Reading my husband's texts was a violation of his privacy. If it turned out that there was an innocent explanation for Brie's messages, then I would be the one who damaged our relationship. Yet if my suspicions were proven correct, my marriage was over.

I felt like I was staring down a lose-lose situation. There were no good outcomes here, so I decided to trust my gut.

Hoping I'd regret invading his privacy, I entered his passcode, our anniversary.

Which made it hurt all the more when I found the texts between him and the reason he'd been so distant lately.

I sagged against the cushions when his device unlocked. Then I braced myself and clicked on the messages icon.

Finding the thread with Brie was easy since it was right at the top. The text I'd already seen on his notifications was the most recent, but as I

scrolled up, I quickly discovered it was on the tamer side compared to other messages this woman had sent my husband. And Harrison's replies were just as bad.

One in particular jumped out to me.

BRIE

I miss your dick.

HARRISON

You'll get plenty of it soon. Told my wife I'm needed at the winery so we have all night.

I set the tablet down and took a moment to cry as quietly as I could. Pressing my palm over my mouth to hold back my sobs, I let out some of the pain. Then I stood to grab the bottle of bourbon my father-in-law kept hidden away in the cabinet behind the desk. After pouring a shot into one of the crystal snifters, I gulped it down. It burned going down but helped settle my nerves.

My hands were trembling a little when I sat back down. That didn't stop me from picking up the tablet and settling it on the cushion next to me while I pulled my phone from my pocket.

I needed proof, and I couldn't risk sending myself screenshots from the tablet because Harrison was most likely on his phone right now and the devices were synced. Which meant there was a chance he'd see the outgoing messages to my number before I could delete them.

I scrolled all the way up and gasped when I realized how far back this went. An entire year

"This is a full-blown affair," I mumbled, a tear spilling down my cheek.

My husband had been acting strange for the past year. I thought we were just in a lull. His parents were putting more pressure on him, which meant he was home even less than usual. We were drifting apart, and nothing I tried to bring us closer again had worked.

I never expected it was because he was having an affair with a woman more than a decade younger than me.

Calling upon all of my discipline, I took a photograph of the screen, scrolled, and took another. Over and over again until I had every single message they'd sent to each other. Some of the pictures they'd shared were sexual, so I skipped past those. My actions were already in a gray area. I

didn't need to give Harrison and Brie a good reason to sue me for invading their privacy or revenge porn.

Once it was all done, I scrolled through the messages again, pausing on the texts that jumped out to me.

BRIE

I can still feel you inside me.

HARRISON

Best night of my life.

Another tear dripped down my cheek at his reply. My husband rated time spent with his mistress higher than our wedding night. If that didn't prove our marriage was truly over, I didn't know what did.

It took me a moment to see well enough to keep reading.

HARRISON

I booked us a suite. Champagne will be waiting.

BRIE

I get you for the whole weekend?

HARRISON

Yes, she thinks I'm on a work trip.

BRIE

Good, you can ignore her calls and blame it on a client.

There were photos she'd sent him from that weekend, showing he'd been in San Francisco, as he'd told me. But that was the only true part. There was no potential high-value client. Just a getaway with his mistress. And I'd been completely clueless.

The message from today showed how recently they'd been together.

BRIE

Tell her you have an early meeting. I want you before the vineyard.

We'd driven down separately because Harrison had told me he needed to take care of some business first, and I couldn't wait until he was available because I had too much dinner prep to do. So while I'd been working hard in the kitchen to make sure the winery's guests would be impressed by the tasting, he was having sex with Brie.

And he hadn't even been grateful enough to freaking thank me for impressing the Thorntons after they'd dropped \$40,000 on a barrel.

I locked my phone and slipped it back in my pocket. Then I closed the message app and set the tablet on the desk where I found it. Unlocking the door, I carried the crystal snifter into the kitchen to rinse it out before returning it to the cabinet.

The office looked normal, as if my whole world hadn't just been blown apart. Unfortunately, I couldn't say the same about my face. My eyes were puffy and my skin pale when I walked out of the office. And my mother-in-law was only ten steps away.

She looked perfect, not a single hair out of place, as her gaze raked over me. "You should get some sleep."

At least she didn't realize I was a mess because something was wrong. "I will once I'm home."

"You're not staying in the guest wing?"

I shook my head. "I'm driving back."

"Tonight?" Her expression didn't change, but it never did after all the work she'd had done. She still somehow managed to convey her disapproval with the slight flaring of her nostrils. "You look exhausted, Celia. And your hair. The Thorntons are still on the property. They wanted to take a walk through the vines—"

"They've met me."

"And now they know you're married to Harrison." She reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear without asking. Her fingers were cold. "It would help if you put a little effort into your appearance."

I stepped back. "I spent more than ten hours in the kitchen today to make sure the Thorntons were impressed by the food."

"The side door, then." She glanced over her shoulder. "Their car is parked in front so you won't run into them."

My food had been instrumental to tonight's success, but Catherine was treating me like staff rather than family. "Sure, I can do that."

She gave me a smile that held no warmth. "Drive safely."

I grabbed my things from the kitchen, then left by the side door as requested. My car was where I had left it, and I got in before I bumped into anyone else.

I made it to the freeway before I called Megan.

She picked up with the television on in the background. "It sounds like you're on the road. I thought you were staying at the vineyard tonight?"

"Yeah, my plan changed. Just got on the 15."

"At least the traffic shouldn't be awful this late." She muted the television so I could hear her better. "How did it go?"

"Great until after it was all done." I moved into the right lane and kept my speed steady. "Then Harrison was a jerk, and Catherine made me take the side exit so I didn't embarrass the family name with how I looked after spending the entire day in their kitchen."

"Why do I feel like that's not the worst of it?"

Probably because my best friend had seen them treat me like an outsider for years, but I'd always made excuses because I was blinded by my love for my husband. "Harrison is cheating on me. With someone named Brie who looks ten years younger than me. Maybe more."

"Holy crap, Celia. You know Harrison isn't my favorite person, but are you sure?"

I explained how I'd come across their texts and that I'd taken photos.

"Does he know you saw it?"

"No." My knuckles turned white as I clenched the steering wheel tighter. "I was careful, and he didn't pay any attention to what I was doing before I left. He always makes himself scarce when he thinks I'm being too emotional."

She sighed. "Because it's easier for him to deflect blame after minimizing your feelings if he's not there for you to defend yourself. At least you have proof of the affair to remind yourself he's lying when he tries to gaslight you about Brie."

"I need to figure out what I want to do before I confront him."

I was saying it more to myself than anything else, but Megan replied, "I'll research while you're driving and send you the names and numbers for some good divorce lawyers."

Divorce. It was rough hearing the word out loud even though it was obvious that was where we were headed. I'd never forgive Harrison for betraying me like this.

"Thanks."

Hopefully, I'd be able to get an appointment first thing Monday, so I'd know what my options were before I took the step Harrison should've taken a year ago...to end our marriage.

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Two days after I discovered the affair, the receptionist took my name for my appointment with one of the divorce attorneys Megan had recommended. She had sent me three names before I got home Saturday night, and this one had the best reviews and could squeeze me in this afternoon.

A woman walked into the waiting room. “Ms. Walsh is ready for you now, Mrs. Cromwell.”

My knees were shaky as I stood. Although I’d spent Sunday coming to terms with the fact that my marriage as I knew it was over, being here somehow made the decision feel more real.

My lawyer’s office was at the end of a long hallway. The corner space had large windows overlooking Santa Monica Boulevard. Her assistant shut the door behind me.

“Please, sit,” Dana Walsh urged, gesturing toward the chairs in front of her desk.

I dropped onto the one nearest to me. “Thank you for meeting with me so quickly, Ms. Walsh.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” She smiled at me. “And please call me Dana.”

“I hope you understand why I wish I didn’t need this appointment, Dana.” I set my phone on the desk, screen down. “But I found months of

texts between my husband and his mistress, so I don't really have much choice."

"What you do with the information you found is entirely your call." She pulled out a notebook and pen. "Some wives find they're able to look past this kind of transgression. Do couples therapy."

Shaking my head, I snorted. "No amount of therapy is going to help me forgive Harrison for what he's done."

"Then let's figure out the best plan to maximize your settlement." She wrote my name at the top of the page. "How long have you been married?"

"Nine years."

"Did you sign a prenup?"

I pulled a folder out of my purse and slid it across to her. "Yes, here's my copy."

"I like clients who are organized. Makes my job easier."

While she read through the agreement Catherine and Edward had insisted I sign the week before the wedding, I unlocked my phone and pulled up the photos I'd taken of the texts so she could look through them next.

She turned to the last page. "The agreement waives any claim to the winery and to the house. In place of that, you get one hundred thousand for each year of the marriage. There's also an infidelity penalty of two hundred and fifty thousand if you can prove it. That's one million, one hundred and fifty thousand."

It had sounded generous when I was twenty-three and excited about getting married. "Yes, his parents wanted the winery to be protected."

"Understandable." Dana tapped the signature page. "A valid prenup supersedes California's default split. Community property would be fifty-fifty of what was acquired during the marriage. We only try to throw this out if the number on the other side of it is better, but that fight would take much longer."

My eyes widened. "What would we need to get it thrown out?"

"I see that you signed the day before the wedding. If they made any changes during the week prior, then they violated the seven-day rule. The state of California also requires that you have independent counsel, so if the attorney you used was really theirs, that would be an issue. Or if there were any hidden assets because full disclosure is required so you were aware of everything you were giving up any claim to by signing."

I pressed my lips into a firm line as I thought about how Catherine and Edward had handled everything back then. “The timeline was tight, so it’s possible, and the family recommended the lawyer who advised me.”

“Then we’ll do some research to see which options we actually have.” She set the agreement aside and tilted her head toward my phone. “I can get my investigator on that along with obtaining proof of the affair.”

I showed her the photos of the messages I’d taken. “This won’t be enough?”

“The texts are a start, but they also present us with a potential problem. It would be better to have something he can’t call an invasion of privacy in court. If he’s using funds from a joint account to pay for anything related to the affair, you’ll be able to access statements. So he’ll also tail your husband to get some photos of him and Brie.”

“Unless I get a photo of my own,” I muttered.

Dana’s pen stopped. “I don’t recommend following Harrison around. My investigator will be much more discreet and won’t be tempted to do bodily harm when he gets the proof.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I tapped the screen of my phone. “But they’ve spent time together at the winery, and some of the dates are when I’ve been in the kitchen there.”

She quirked a brow. “In the kitchen?”

“Yes, I’m the executive chef.”

I explained how that had come about, including answering her questions about my salary and benefits.

“Then we have another piece of leverage.” She wrote while she talked. “They pulled you out of a position with much better compensation to underpay you for work the vineyard benefited from. That’s separate from the prenuptial agreement and marriage settlement. You relied on promises from your husband and his parents, and your spouse who owed you a duty not to strip your career so his family’s business could save on a chef. The prenup might protect the vineyard, but it doesn’t stop us from going after their corporate ledger for back wages and fraudulent inducement claims.”

I sat back. “Sounds like I have a lot of options if I don’t want to just walk away with my million dollars.”

“You’ve brought me more avenues to explore than most clients,” Dana agreed. “Please send me your payment records and joint bank statements as soon as you can. I’ll reach out to the lawyer who advised you on the prenup

to confirm whether throwing it out is an option. My investigator will get to work. Then we'll decide whether we enforce the penalty or go after the agreement itself. And if you want to file a claim against the winery or use the underpayment of wages as leverage for a bigger settlement without needing to go to court."

"I appreciate you laying it all out for me so I understand." I stood and slid my phone into my pocket. "I'll head straight home to get you everything you need while Harrison is busy with work."

"Thanks." She walked me out to the reception desk. "Kelsey can handle the retainer and representation agreement. She'll also make a copy of your prenup for my records."

I signed where indicated and used an account only in my name to pay. Dana's assistant slid the receipt across the counter, along with a copy of the agreement. I put it in the folder with the original prenup once she returned it to me. "Thank you."

The elevator let me out into the garage. I sat in the car long enough to pull myself together. Harrison had stayed in Temecula until this morning, and I'd left our house before he returned because I wasn't ready to see him yet. I spent my morning visiting several specialty food markets I hadn't been to in too long.

He texted while I was on the way to Dana's office and lied about missing me and promising we'd have dinner together tonight. A late one since I'd made something up about being busy until after six, which had been fine with him because he was supposedly booked solid all afternoon and early evening anyway. Probably a meeting with Brie at a hotel somewhere since his mistress missed him so much.

I made a retching sound as my stomach turned, thinking of them in bed together right now. Starting the engine, I was determined to get home and find everything Dana needed. The sooner this was all over, the better.

Except I should've paid more attention when I arrived home. I didn't wonder why there was a red convertible at the curb in front of our house as I parked on the driveway and went in through the front door instead of using the garage. I planned to drive straight back to Dana's office once I found everything, so it seemed easier.

As I walked through the front door, I assumed the alarm was off because Harrison had forgotten to set it when he left, since he made that mistake at least once a month.

And I didn't stop and turn around when I reached the top of the stairs and heard sounds coming from the primary bedroom. Or even just head toward the smallest guest bedroom, which Harrison had told me to use as my home office. He got the big one downstairs, and the other bedrooms were reserved for his parents when they were in town or other people he invited to stay with us because the house was his, as he liked to remind me.

But I never felt it more than when I stood a few steps from the doorway of the bedroom we'd shared for nine years and saw him on top of the young woman from all the texts.

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I lifted my phone before I let myself step closer. My fingers trembled, but the camera app opened on the first try. After snapping a couple of photos, I switched it to video and hit record.

Harrison's back was to the hall as he thrust into another woman. Her face was blocked from my view by his body, but her identity was confirmed when he groaned, "Brie."

Gripping his shoulders, she moaned. "More, baby. Take me harder. Deeper."

My husband's mistress was begging for his dick in our bed. On sheets I bought. With her head on my pillow.

The ring on Harrison's left hand caught the light when he shifted to press his palm into the mattress next to her waist. He hadn't even bothered to take it off. Yet more proof that our marriage didn't mean anything to him.

I stopped the recording, checked that it had been saved, and sent the video to my email in case Harrison managed to get my phone away from me to delete it. Then I hit record again before carefully placing my phone in my pocket, hoping I'd catch the audio from our confrontation. Then Dana would have options for what to use as proof of his infidelity.

They still hadn't noticed me. I could walk away right now, and they wouldn't know I'd been here. My plan had been to have a strategy in place with Dana before Harrison found out I knew about the affair. But finding

him in bed with her here changed everything for me. I couldn't climb onto that mattress tonight after what I just saw.

I had my proof. My copy of the prenup was safely with my lawyer. The records for what I'd earned before I took over the kitchen at Cromwell Winery couldn't be changed. Neither could the paltry sum his parents had paid me each month for the past five years.

Keeping quiet right now provided me with no advantage. So I stepped forward and knocked my fingers against the doorframe. "Almost done? I'd like to pack some of my clothes, but I need to walk past you to get to the closet."

"Celia." Harrison twisted around, reaching for the duvet to pull it over their naked bodies. "This isn't what you think."

"Not what I think?" I echoed, shaking my head. "You're naked in our bed with another woman. Having sex. Are you seriously going to try to tell me there's what...some explanation other than the obvious?"

"I...I—" he sputtered as he yanked his arm from Brie's grasp.

"C'mon, Harrison. You can do better than that." I leaned against the doorway. "Let me guess, she's a personal shopper, and while you were trying on a new suit, you tripped and fell on top of her."

"I'm not a personal shopper." Brie peered around Harrison's arm to glare at me. "But maybe if you used one, Harry wouldn't have gone looking for someone better."

My smile held no humor. "Oops, your mistress shot that story down."

"Mistress!" Brie shrieked, losing the sheet she had pressed to her chest when she tried to dive off the mattress, but Harrison yanked her back. "Harry loves me! As soon as he kicks you to the curb, we're going to get married."

The utter denial in Harrison's eyes made me laugh so hard I cried. Whatever he'd told Brie to get her in bed, his reaction seemed like he hadn't planned to leave me for his mistress. Too bad for him, part of that decision was now out of his hands because our marriage was over the moment I read the first text.

They apparently took my reaction to mean I was devastated.

"Please don't cry, Celia," Harrison murmured.

Brie wasn't the tiniest bit embarrassed at being caught in bed with my husband. "Cry all you want. It isn't going to make a difference. Harrison

loves me, so your tears aren't going to work. You can't make him feel guilty enough to go running back to your boring bed."

"Running back?" I echoed on a watery laugh. "I wouldn't touch his dick with a ten-foot pole after he's stuck it in you."

Harrison had the nerve to look offended at that. "Celia—"

"Stop. Whatever you want to say doesn't matter anymore. I'll have my attorney call yours." Then I shifted my attention back to his mistress. "Just remember, the way you catch them is how you lose them."

Harrison went red in the face. "We don't need to drag lawyers into this, Celia. Let's just talk this through."

"We're not going to talk anything through while you're naked in bed with her. Get dressed." I turned and glanced at him over my shoulder. "Be quick. I need to get to the closet, and I'm not walking past you for it."

Harrison still had the duvet in his fist. "Celia, if you would just—"

"I'm giving you privacy. Use it."

I left them in the bedroom and went down the hall to my little office. Before I went digging for what I needed, I pulled my phone from my pocket and stopped recording. Once again, I emailed myself the video as a backup. Then I printed copies of the past year's bank statements on any account where I was named, pulled my tax returns for the past six years to show the difference in what I was earning before I left my job and now, and shoved all the papers into a tote bag I found in the small closet.

Slinging it over my shoulder, I headed back to the primary bedroom for my clothes. I'd given them enough time to get dressed, and Harrison had used it to get Brie out of the house too. But before I walked in, I hit the record button on my phone and slid it into my pocket again.

The duvet had been dragged back over the mattress, and the window was cracked, as if airing out the room would make me forget what I saw. Harrison stood between me and the closet. His shirt was buttoned wrong, and he was holding his hands up, palms out. "Celia, please. It's just the two of us now. Don't go."

"Your mistress might've left, but I can still smell her perfume in our bedroom, Harrison." I walked around him. "I'm not staying."

"Celia, stop." He caught the closet door before I could open it. "You walked in on something ugly. I know that. Things got out of hand. But I didn't bring her here to hurt you."

I looked at his hand on the door, then at his face. “You brought her to our marital bed. In what world would that not hurt me?”

“I didn’t think you’d be...”

“Home?” I finished for him after his voice trailed off. “Get out of the way.”

He lowered his arm and let me pass him, but he stayed in the doorway. “It was a mistake. One time. I was going to end it.”

I pulled a large suitcase down from the shelf. “Don’t stand there and lie to me.”

“I’m telling the truth, Celia,” he insisted, taking a step closer.

“To your mistress or to me?” I started tossing clothes into the bag with surprisingly steady hands. “Because she said you love her and are planning to get married once we’re divorced.”

He grimaced. “I let it go too far, and that’s on me. She’s young and got more attached than I expected. I didn’t go looking for something serious with her.”

“Well, gee.” I rolled my eyes as I shoved more stuff into the suitcase. “Now that I know you weren’t out there trolling for a serious relationship, I guess I should just let bygones be bygones.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “I know this is bad, but being sarcastic while you’re packing to leave me is only going to make the situation worse.”

“Worse for who?”

“For us.” He came closer but stopped when I zipped the bag. “How can I make this right if you won’t even talk to me?”

“That sounds like a problem for you, not me.” I rolled the suitcase past him. “I’m going somewhere else tonight. Maybe I’ll be in the mood to talk to you tomorrow. Probably not. But there isn’t a chance in hell that I’m going to sit down and listen to excuses you haven’t even put any thought into right now.”

“Where?”

That was an excellent question since I didn’t have a plan yet. “Not your business anymore.”

His phone buzzed, and he glanced at the screen without answering. I took that as Brie calling. She didn’t strike me as someone who would sit idly by now that she’d gotten her hooks into him.

“Celia.” His voice dropped to the beguiling tone he used on buyers. “You’re allowed to be hurt. But please don’t do something permanent because we had one bad day in nine years.”

I crossed the room and stopped in the doorway. “I don’t need your permission to react to you cheating on me in the home we share.”

“Shit, yeah. Sorry. I should’ve been more careful choosing my words.”

“And with where you put your dick.”

Harrison chased me all the way out to my car, but I didn’t listen to anything else he had to say. I needed to drop my documentation off to Dana and call Megan to see if I could stay with her while I figured things out. All while putting my husband off so I could have the upper hand when I filed for divorce.

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6 months later

Megan called while I was still in the lobby. I answered before the elevator arrived. “I’m about to go up.”

“Do you think he’ll finally agree to the settlement so this will all be over?”

“I have no idea what Harrison will do anymore.” I watched the numbers above the doors. “He’s been putting this off so long, I’m tempted to take the prenup money and walk away.”

“That just rewards him for cheating on you,” Megan argued. “He owes you a lot more than that. Don’t settle for less than you’re owed because you’re tired.”

The elevator doors finally opened. Two men in suits stepped out, and I waited until they were past me. “Headed up. I’ll call you when it’s over.”

“I’ll be here.”

I ended the call and stepped inside, with no doubt how much my best friend meant that. She had let me stay at her place all this time. LA was expensive, and I’d lost my job at the winery the day after I’d walked in on Harrison and Brie when his parents heard what happened. Dana had rubbed her hands in glee because it improved our claim against the family business, but it also put me in a tough spot while Harrison dragged this whole thing out. It felt like we were playing a waiting game to see who’d blink first, but

at least I was comfortable in Megan's guest room and busy building my list of private chef clients.

The elevator doors slid open, pulling me out of my thoughts. When I walked into the waiting room, I came to an abrupt stop.

Brie was in one of the chairs. She looked up and smiled like she'd been waiting for me. "Finally. I was starting to think you were going to skip the meeting in yet another attempt to delay the divorce."

"You shouldn't be here."

"There's no law saying I can't wait for my fiancé." She stood and set her hand low on her stomach, and I noticed the diamond on her ring finger. It was twice the size of the one Harrison had given me when he proposed. "None of us would have to be here if you'd have taken a hint and let go of a man who doesn't want you. It's sad, really."

I huffed out a frustrated laugh, wondering what lies Harrison had spun for her. "That's not—"

"Sign the papers, Celia." She tipped her head toward the conference room. "I want to be married to Harrison before the baby comes."

Brie was pregnant.

It took every ounce of my self-control not to allow my reaction to show on my face. For the last five years of our marriage, Harrison kept telling me we needed to wait a little longer before we had a baby. Now I was thirty-four, going through a nasty divorce, and might never have a child of my own. But he'd knocked up his mistress while doing everything he could to nickel and dime me so I would walk away with less money.

"I can't think of two people who deserve each other more," I murmured before walking past.

The conference room door was open. Dana was already seated at the long table, and I kept my gaze on her until I joined her.

Harrison was across from us with his lawyer at his side. When Dana learned he'd hired Graham Evans, she warned me we were in for a bumpy ride. He had a reputation for being ruthless when handling contentious divorces, one that I'd unfortunately gotten to experience firsthand.

After six months of unproductive meetings, none of us bothered with a greeting.

"Are you finally willing to see reason?" Dana asked. "We're here for a settlement that matches the facts. Not another delay."

Graham rested his hand on a closed folder. “Your client signed a prenup. She should be held to the agreement she made.”

Dana didn’t look intimidated at all. “She’s been willing to sign off on that number since day one, against my advice because it’s more generous than she should be.”

“For the divorce only,” Graham pointed out. “We need the wage claim settled as well.”

“Only because you insist on handling them together.”

Graham quirked a brow. “I wouldn’t be doing my job if I let your client keep her leverage along with a hefty settlement.”

“Mr. Cromwell and his family set the terms of the prenuptial agreement. If they didn’t like them, they never should have presented it to my client.” Dana leaned forward. “If you continue to stall, I’m filing to challenge the prenup. I’ll go for half of everything, four and a half years of spousal support, and my not-insignificant fees. Once that’s all done, I’m going to file the wage claim. And I’ll win. Everything.”

“Enough.” Harrison shifted in his chair. “I want this finished. My parents are angry about what it’s costing, and they don’t want the vineyard in the papers.”

“Then you already know what it will take.” Dana folded her hands. “You’ve had the terms for months.”

Harrison stood. “Get it done.”

Graham turned toward him. “Harrison—”

“You heard me.”

Dana didn’t smile. “The six-month waiting period has passed. We can get a judge pro tem to preside over the settlement by the end of the week.”

“That fast?” Harrison finally looked at me. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes.”

I could have said so much more, including asking him why he cared about what I wanted when his pregnant fiancée was in the waiting room. But it didn’t matter because we weren’t a part of each other’s lives anymore. These meetings were the only time we were in a room together now. And once the divorce was finalized, I would never have to see his lying face again.

“Send the paperwork over,” Graham told Dana. “We’ll review it.”

“No need.” Dana pulled a stack from the folder in front of her and slid it across the table. “Here you go.”

Graham shook his head. “Really?”

She shrugged. “I like to be prepared.”

He took the pages and read. The room stayed quiet except for the turning of the paper every few minutes. Harrison paced back and forth with his phone in his hand, sending several text messages while his lawyer reviewed everything.

Graham finally looked up and gestured at Harrison to come close. “It’s what we expected. The prenup amount, including the infidelity penalty. Another quarter million on the wage claim, plus one hundred thousand for the firing. No hidden traps.”

“Would I try to pull a fast one on you?” Dana murmured.

Graham shot her an exasperated look. “Absolutely.”

Harrison leaned over, took the pen, and signed. Then he shoved the stack toward me. “Your turn.”

I signed, equally surprised and relieved that my hand didn’t shake.

“There. All done.” Dana collected the pages with a smile. “I have a retired LA Superior Court family law judge I’ve used as a judge pro tem. I can get these to her today if you’d like.”

Graham nodded. “Go ahead.”

Harrison buttoned his jacket. “You should look happier. You’re walking away with one and a half million dollars of my family’s money.”

“You’re lucky it’s only that much,” Dana retorted.

A muscle jumped in Harrison’s jaw as he shook his head. Then he walked out and slammed the door shut behind him.

Graham stood. “You’ll send over a copy for my files?”

“I’ll have Kelsey get on that right away,” Dana confirmed. “They’ll be waiting for you before you get to your desk.”

“Always a pleasure doing business with you, Dana.” He nodded at me, then followed Harrison out.

I slumped over the table and whispered, “It’s finally over.”

“Almost.” Dana patted my back. “By this weekend, you should be a single woman again.”

I stared at the door. “I wonder how long he’ll be able to say the same.”

Dana tilted her head to the side. “The same about what?”

“That he’s single.” I leaned back in my chair. “Brie was in the waiting room when I got off the elevator. She told me to sign the papers so she can marry him before the baby comes, while pressing her hand to her belly to make sure I would see the giant rock on her finger.”

“I’m sorry.” Dana shook her head. “You shouldn’t have been ambushed on the way into your own settlement meeting. If I had known he brought her, I would have put her in another conference room to wait.”

“It’s okay.” I heard how tired I sounded. “Harrison finally signed. His reasons shouldn’t really matter.”

She flashed me a sympathetic smile. “I know you’ve worked through the loss of your marriage and his betrayal, but nobody is going to fault you for feeling a certain way about your husband getting his mistress pregnant and planning to marry her before he had the decency to divorce you.”

“It sucks,” I admitted as I pushed away from the table and stood. “But finally being able to buy my own place will help.”

My life was very different from the night I discovered Harrison's affair seven months ago, but the food hadn't changed much. I had just put the subprimal block of wagyu in the fridge and would cut it into individual steaks about an hour before dinner. As I turned to pull the other ingredients from the bags I'd brought with me, Serena Watts padded into her kitchen.

She beamed a smile at me. "It smells good in here already."

"I haven't even started cooking yet." I grabbed the lemons. "Maybe it's these."

"Or my imagination because I'm looking forward to whatever you're planning to make."

I laughed softly. "You know exactly what I'm cooking tonight."

"I do." She licked her lips. "My mouth is already watering for the wagyu steak, truffle mashed potatoes, sautéed wild mushrooms, and charred broccolini. Followed by grilled peaches drizzled with honey for dessert."

I pulled the leafy lettuce out of the bag. "What about the arugula and shaved parmesan salad?"

Her nose wrinkled. "I'm trusting you on that."

"You'll be happy for the freshness of the arugula and the acid from the lemons I'm using to dress the salad. It will help balance the rich, buttery fat of the beef."

Her stomach growled. "We better stop talking about food, or I'm going to tell you to forget about our guests and just make everything for Hudson

and me now so we can feast on four pounds of meat.”

Hudson strode in and slid his arm around his fiancée’s waist. “Have you eaten anything today?”

Serena didn’t look up. “Does a cupcake count?”

“Absolutely not.”

I wiped my hands and grabbed the avocado I saw in the fridge. “Can I use this?”

“Sure.” Serena bounced on her stool. “Please tell me it’s snack time.”

I grinned at her over my shoulder. “Absolutely.”

“See.” She leaned deeper into Hudson’s side. “I told you Celia would take great care of us.”

“You make it sound like you had to talk me into hiring Celia.” He looked up at me and rolled his eyes. “We both fell in love with your food when you were at Cromwell Winery.”

Hearing my ex’s surname didn’t fill me with dread like it used to, so my smile was genuine. “I’m glad.”

I toasted a couple of slices of the crusty sourdough I’d brought, mashed the avocado on top, and finished it with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice, a drizzle of olive oil, and a generous sprinkling of sea salt. Then I slid the plate across the counter to Serena.

“I love avocado toast, thank you.”

She took a bite and hummed in pleasure. Hudson watched her, then looked at me, and his smile was filled with appreciation. “Thanks. Now she should at least have the energy she’ll need to deal with our guests.”

“You mean our friends?” Serena teased.

“And our lawyer,” Hudson grumbled.

“Stop.” Serena lightly swatted his arm. “Julian is a friend, too.”

“Who bills by the hour.”

I winked. “Only because he can’t charge per person or event like I do.”

“Fair point.” Hudson stole a bite of the avocado toast. “I probably shouldn’t be the one to say it, but you could definitely get away with charging more.”

I quirked a brow. “You only say that because you earned twenty million on your last movie.”

“More like forty when you factor in the backend points,” Hudson corrected.

“And now that he’s bragged about that, I’m adding even more to your tip.” She held her palm out and grinned up at her fiancé. “Please give me all your cash.”

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tugged out ten one-hundred-dollar bills. “Here you go, baby.”

“Nice.” Her smile widened. “I’ll have to see how often that works.”

Hudson pressed a kiss to her temple. “You know that what’s mine is yours. If you want cash every day, I’ll make sure my wallet stays full.”

“Sweet talker,” Serena whispered.

He kissed her lips this time. “Only with you.”

I took a cast iron skillet off the hook above the island. “You guys are seriously too cute together.”

“That’s what my sister says,” Serena mumbled around the last bite of avocado toast. “Which reminds me. Please tell me that you’re finally ready to be set up. I’m in a matchmaking mood.”

My reply was immediate. “No.”

“Celia,” she wheedled.

“I have absolutely no interest in dating right now. I’ve barely finished furnishing my townhouse, and I need to build up my client list more,” I explained.

Serena’s shoulders slumped. “What a waste. The perfect guy is out there somewhere with no idea what he’s missing.”

“Not everyone is as lucky in love as the two of you.” I pulled out a cutting board and unrolled my knife sleeve. “And I have a dinner to cook so you can wow your guests.”

I kept prepping, and for a few minutes, the only subject in the kitchen was food. Then Hudson and Serena wandered out of the kitchen to go check on some other details while I focused on my job. The A-list celebrity couple was already paying me quite well for tonight, and I wanted to go above and beyond for them because I knew she was going to shove those bills at me for a tip before I left.

At times like these, it was easy to remind myself how fortunate I was to be paid so well to do something I loved. My love life might be nonexistent after the painful lesson Harrison taught me, but my career had been quickly revived when I returned to LA full-time.

The next hour flew by, and I was butchering eight perfectly portioned filet mignons from the wagyu tenderloin when the doorbell rang. They were

one and a half inches thick and heavily marbled.

“I’ve got it,” Serena called.

There was a low murmur of voices after the door opened. Then Serena led a man into the kitchen. He was a couple of inches over six feet, had dark hair with a touch of silver at the temples, and was dressed in a suit that must’ve been custom-tailored for his lean body. His piercing blue eyes raked over me, and there was no missing the intelligence in them.

“Julian, this is Celia. She’s cooking tonight.” Serena stole a slice of peach from the other cutting board. “Celia, Julian Hayes.”

I flashed them both a quick smile. “I’d offer to shake your hand, but...”

“Wouldn’t want to get my hands bloody,” Julian murmured.

“Since when?” Hudson asked as he joined us. “That’s what makes you such a great lawyer.”

Julian handed him the folder he’d been carrying. “I save it for negotiating contracts like this for my clients.”

“Guess I can’t complain about that.” Hudson took the folder and gestured for Julian to follow him.

As I turned to wash my hands in the sink, I noticed Julian stopped in the doorway to glance back at me. But I didn’t have time to think about the sexy lawyer who was more distracting than I needed right now. So I kept my head down and focused on the food for the next two hours.

I was plating the last of the dessert when Julian came back into the kitchen. His jacket was off, and his sleeves were rolled up just enough to show off the muscles in his forearms.

The server Serena’s assistant had hired for the evening had just taken the first four plates, and the other four were lined up on the board.

“Hudson said if I touched anything, you’d have me removed.” He stopped at the end of the counter. “I decided to risk it.”

I wiped the rim of the last plate. “You’ll miss dessert.”

“There’s still time.” He tilted his chin toward the remaining plates. “And I wanted to give my compliments to the chef.”

“Thank you.”

The server came back, picked up the rest of the desserts, and wagged her brows at me while her back was turned to Julian.

“Your time is running out,” I murmured. “The grilled peaches look deceptively simple on the plate, but trust me when I tell you they’re delicious.”

“Then I suppose I should return to my seat.”

Watching him walk away, I waited until he was out of sight to fan myself with my hand. I had no business noticing that Hudson’s lawyer was smoking hot. Especially not with Serena only one room away, with matchmaking on her mind. Julian Hayes was a temptation I wasn't ready for yet.

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Reid rapped his knuckles against my open door when I got off a call. When I met his gaze, he strode into my office and dropped onto the chair across from me. Crossing his ankle over his knee, he looked too pleased with himself for a Monday morning.

“Good weekend with Lila?”

“The best.” He grinned at me. “Married life is treating me quite well.”

“I’m glad.”

It was good to see Reid so happy after Lila had called off the wedding because he’d messed up by allowing a paralegal to cross boundaries. Kaylee had been fired just last week after posting a video online ranting about the firm, which broke her employment contract. So at least he didn’t need to worry about bumping into her around the office, although it had been a while since they’d worked on a case together.

He shook his head with a laugh. “My only complaint is that I had to run to the store at one o’clock this morning because she was craving ice cream but none of the flavors in our freezer were what she wanted. She’s never liked chocolate and wanted rocky road all of a sudden.”

“That’s pregnancy for you.” Although my daughter was twenty-one, I remembered the nights when Courtney had sent me out for whatever new food she needed that very second. “Be glad it was a flavor you didn’t need to drive hours to find.”

“Yeah, it was relatively simple compared to some of her other cravings.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Although I’d happily drive however long it took if she’d stop working now so she could enjoy the last two months before the baby comes.”

Lila was a sought-after celebrity makeup artist who worked with many of the firm’s top clients. “I had dinner with Hudson and Serena on Saturday. She mentioned she has your wife booked for the next two weeks.”

“The press junket was lucky timing. At least I know Serena will make sure Lila keeps her feet up as much as possible. Can’t really say the same for many other A-list actresses.”

“You really can’t,” I agreed, my thoughts drifting to how well she and Celia had seemed to get along in the moments I’d seen them interact. Most of my clients would’ve treated the personal chef like staff, but Serena acted like they were lifelong friends.

Reid tilted his head. “What’s with your face?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” I forced my thoughts away from the woman who had been on my mind more often than I liked to admit, even to myself.

“I recognize that look.” He sat forward. “There’s a woman, isn’t there?”

Reid had made partner because he was sharp. I’d just never had his insight turned toward me in this way.

I should have shut it down. As managing partner of the firm, I rarely brought my personal life into the office. But Reid had come to me when he was struggling. And he’d turned his relationship around. My track record didn’t have a similar win.

“Not the way you’re implying, but yes,” I reluctantly confirmed. “The personal chef from Hudson and Serena’s dinner party.”

Reid’s eyes widened. “And?”

I closed my eyes for a moment and saw Celia so clearly. She could’ve been in the room with us. She hadn’t bothered with makeup that night, but her bare face hadn’t taken away from her beauty. Her pale skin was flawless, her dark hair thick in the ponytail she’d worn, and her green eyes lined by dark lashes. The chef’s jacket she’d worn had only hinted at her curves, but my fingers had still itched to explore them. “I haven’t stopped thinking about her.”

“That’s a hell of an admission from the firm’s notorious Ice Man.”

Sighing, I opened a file I didn't need at the moment. "Are you here for a reason, or did you come to interrogate me?"

"Sorry, didn't mean for this to sound like a cross-examination."

I shrugged. "Occupational hazard."

The intercom buzzed, and my assistant's voice came through sounding stiffer than usual. "Julian, your ex-wife is on line one. She says it can't wait."

His tone suddenly made sense. My ex-wife was difficult to handle at the best of times. "Thank you, Stewart. Please let Courtney know I'll be available in just a minute."

"Will do, sir."

Reid stood. "That's my cue. Good luck."

"Thanks. I'll need it." He shut the door on his way out, and I picked up the call. "Courtney."

"Took me long enough to get through," she grumbled.

I grabbed one of the stress balls from my drawer and squeezed hard. "One of the other partners was in my office, a conversation Stewart interrupted to let me know you wanted to speak with me."

"Only after I had to beg him to put me through," she complained.

Her definition of begging sounded more like harassing the person on the receiving end, but that wasn't a point worth arguing right now. "What do you need?"

"You should have done more on the prenup. The agreement you let her sign is a joke. If he leaves her, she gets almost nothing."

Our daughter had gotten married only two weeks ago, and her mother was already planning the divorce as though it was inevitable. "The terms were fairly standard, which you know because we had this same conversation several times leading up to the wedding."

"She was rushed into the whole thing," my ex insisted, refusing to listen to reason.

Nobody had forced our daughter to get married so quickly. The whole thing had been all her idea. The start of her relationship had been messy as hell, and I'd been relieved to walk her down the aisle because it meant the drama was finally over. Ellie was twenty-one and took after Courtney in ways I didn't like to think about because that would mean admitting to myself that I'd failed her as a father.

“Only because she didn’t want to wait to get married,” I reminded her. “But she had the agreement the full seven days required in California before she signed.”

“You’re talking about contracts while our baby girl is grieving.” Courtney sniffled, and I wondered if she bothered to try to make actual tears gather in her eyes when nobody was there to see them. “I’ve always known you were heartless, but I cannot believe you’re this uncaring about the loss of our grandchild.”

I scrubbed my palm down my face with a deep sigh. “Of course I’m sad about the miscarriage. But I don’t see what that has to do with you calling me to discuss a fully executed prenup that already went into effect when Ellie got married.”

“There was a baby on the way. Now there isn’t, and that husband of hers can walk whenever he wants. I talked to her this morning, and we both agree you should have pushed for better terms.”

I shook my head at her explanation. For a woman who had just accused me of not having feelings, she sounded more upset over our daughter’s prenup than her miscarriage. “It’s done. They’re married. Maybe the next time you speak with Ellie, you can encourage her to worry about making things work with her husband instead of how much money she’d get if they divorce.”

“You’re the last person anyone should take relationship advice from,” she spat. “Which our daughter knows because you were never around when she was growing up.”

I had to clench my jaw to stop myself from arguing. Courtney had fought me for everything in our divorce, using Ellie as a weapon whenever she wasn’t getting her way. Including convincing her to tell the judge she preferred being with her mom, which resulted in my custody time being more limited than I had wanted.

“Then why are you calling?” I finally asked.

“Draft a postnup. Something that protects her if this all falls apart.”

I wasn’t surprised by her demand. “If Ellie wants me to—”

She didn’t let me finish. “Our daughter will do as I say.”

That was the problem in a nutshell. Courtney had too much influence on Ellie, and she never seemed to use it in ways that would enrich our daughter’s life. “Tell her to send me what she wants, and I’ll draft something. That’s all I’m agreeing to.”

“Fine.”

She hung up, and I heaved a deep sigh of relief as I set the receiver down. I’d talked to my ex-wife more in the past six months than I had in the year prior. After the wedding, I’d hoped that would change. Apparently not.

The reminder of what Courtney was like should have scared me off Celia. I had spent years keeping my dating life casual because my track record proved that I had awful taste in women. That meant avoiding women who wanted something serious because I wasn’t interested in breaking anyone’s heart.

I had no idea if Celia was already involved with someone else. Suppose she was hoping to fall in love and get married if she wanted to build a family or have children of her own.

But I wanted to find out, which was a danger in and of itself.

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I was unpacking groceries in my kitchen when Serena called. After wiping my hands, I answered in speaker mode. “If this is about the ridiculous tip you gave me on Saturday, I regret to inform you there are no takebacks. I’ve already spent a chunk of it on a new enameled cast iron dutch oven and everything I need to make braised beef short ribs in it tonight.”

“Yum. Remind me to have you come over and cook those for us sometime soon.”

Sliding the butcher-paper-wrapped meat onto the counter, I grinned. “I could special order wagyu beef short ribs since Hudson loved the filet so much.”

“Sold,” she cheerfully agreed. “Mark us down for three Saturdays from now if you’re available. The press junket will be over, and I can’t think of a better way to celebrate than with your food.”

I pulled up my calendar app and put her down for that evening. “Done.”

“Fantastic.” She sounded pleased with herself. “But your incredible food isn’t why I called. Julian asked for your number.”

I pulled the Carnaroli rice for the risotto out of my reusable shopping bag. “Serena.”

“I know. You literally just told me not to set you up with anyone only two days ago. But he asked, and it didn’t feel right to tell him no without running it past you first.”

Walking over to the balcony, I stared outside while considering how to answer. I'd been completely honest with Serena about my lack of interest in dating. But then I met Julian, and there was no denying I'd felt the chemistry between us. Or that he'd been on my mind a lot since then.

"If I say yes, you don't get to plan a date I haven't even agreed to yet."

"I would never."

My lips curved as I shook my head. "Now you're just lying."

"I'm too good of an actress for you to know for sure." Serena laughed. "Fine. I won't even make the tiniest suggestion about where Julian should take you, but I'm sending him the number when we hang up. Try not to panic."

"Too late," I whispered.

"Good. That means you're tempted to go out with him." She hung up before I could reconsider.

I stood there wondering if I'd just made a mistake. I'd only been officially single for a month even though my marriage had ended half a year earlier. Or more if we took the entire length of Harrison's affair into consideration.

I thought it would take me much longer to even consider dating someone, but I'd just given my number to a guy who could too easily change my mind about that.

"Just because he has it doesn't mean he's going to call anytime soon," I mumbled to myself as I finished lining the shelf-stable ingredients and produce I needed on my counter.

I had just finished browning the short ribs when my phone rang.

Since I didn't recognize the number, I almost let it go to voicemail. Then I dried my hands and answered. "Hello?"

"Celia. It's Julian Hayes. Serena gave me your number. I hope that's all right."

His deep timbre had the same impact on me over the phone as it did in person. Leaning against the counter, I murmured, "She asked me first."

"I know, but it occurred to me that I might've put you in an awkward position since she's a client of yours."

I looked down at the pan and laughed softly. "She's one of yours too, but that didn't stop you from going to her for my number."

"Being bold and asking for what I want is essential in my line of work."

From what Hudson said about his last movie deal, it was clear Julian was amazing at his job. “I’m sure it is.”

“Feel free to tell me if this is too brash”—he paused long enough to make sure I wasn’t going to interrupt—“I’d like to take you on a date. Dinner. Anywhere you’d like to go.”

I laughed again. “Just the right amount of cheekiness.”

“Is that a yes?”

It was refreshing how he wasn’t playing games. He hadn’t waited to call me after getting my number, or delayed in asking me out. He got straight to the point, and I decided I should do the same. “Yes. When?”

“Tomorrow, if you’re free. If you’re not, give me a night you’re available.”

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nerves. “Tomorrow works.”

“I’m glad.”

“And you’re really okay with me picking the restaurant?”

His deep chuckle rolled over me. “I defer to your expertise.”

“There’s a great Parisian-style bistro not too far from where I live.”

“Sounds perfect.”

I rattled off the address. “Seven?”

“I’ll be there.”

He hung up, and I stared at my phone screen for a moment, wondering what I’d gotten myself into. Then before I sautéed aromatics for the short ribs, I sent a quick text to my best friend.

ME

I have a date.

The dutch oven was going into the oven when I got her reply.

MEGAN

Got off early. On my way.

She sent another right away, proving how well she knew me.

MEGAN

Do not cancel before I get there.

I shook my head with a laugh.

ME

I'll try not to, but be warned...dinner won't be ready for a few hours.

The townhouse felt more like home as I let her inside thirty minutes later. "Come on in."

"Mmm, something smells good." She flashed me a smile and thrust a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon into my hand. "Hopefully this will go with dinner."

I glanced at the label. "It's a perfect match. The high tannins and full body will complement the richness of the meal."

"The one good thing that came from nine years married to that man is your brilliance with wine."

Megan refused to say Harrison's name, but at least she'd stopped using colorful swear words once the divorce was finalized. "I'll concede I learned more after we met, but I'm going with proximity to the winery instead of giving the Cromwells credit for anything."

"Good because they don't deserve any."

She followed me into the kitchen and grabbed two wineglasses from the cabinet. Then she took the bottle opener from a drawer. The kitchen was small, so we maneuvered around each other while I worked on the meal and she let the wine breathe, snagging a soda from the fridge.

After chugging half of it down, she leaned a hip against the counter. "Ahh, better. I was dying of thirst. Now spill."

"I'd prefer it if you didn't." I tapped my foot against the tile. "I just mopped this yesterday."

She set down the can and planted her fists on her hips. "Ha ha, very funny. You know what I meant. Stop procrastinating and tell me about the date. And the guy who got you to agree to one."

"Julian Hayes. Serena and Hudson's lawyer."

Her eyes widened. "Wait. Didn't you cook for their dinner party on Saturday?"

"Yes."

"Girl, you have some explaining to do." She wagged her finger at me. "You broke best friend code by not telling me about the hot guy until two days later."

"How do you know he's hot?"

“That’s the part you jumped on?” she cried before closing the short distance between us to grip my shoulders. “You wouldn’t have been tempted enough to actually agree to dinner unless the sparks were too big to ignore.”

“Good guess.”

I filled her in on everything, then poured us each a glass of wine.

“I should’ve brought two bottles.” She took a sip. “Or champagne, so we could properly celebrate you getting back into the dating game.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything to celebrate. I don’t know what I’m doing, Megan.”

“Then it’s a good thing we have three hours until the short ribs will be ready.” Her smile was blinding. “We have plenty of time to plan what you’ll wear, order, and talk about.”

A laugh burst past my lips. “I don’t think deciding our small talk in advance will work. He’s a lawyer.”

“A hot lawyer.” She tugged on my arm to lead me into the primary bedroom, heading straight to the closet. “Which is why I’m thinking you go with a little black dress.”

I played along as she rifled through my clothes and shoes, picking out the perfect first-date outfit. But when she started going through my lingerie drawer, I wrapped my hand around her wrist. “It won’t matter what’s under the dress because no way in hell am I getting naked on our first date.”

“That’s what you say now.” She wagged her brows. “But you never thought you’d accept a dinner invitation with a sexy man, and that didn’t stop you from saying yes to Julian. So maybe it’s best if you choose your bra and panties wisely. Black lace, matching.”

I didn’t admit it out loud, but she might have a point. Julian Hayes struck me as a very persuasive man.

I hadn't been nervous about a date since my divorce nearly a decade ago, but I left the office more than an hour before my seven o'clock dinner reservation. And that was after being distracted all day because my thoughts kept drifting to my dinner plans. Something that had never been an issue for me before.

Celia was different.

And her choice of restaurant only proved it.

The small bistro was nothing like the places where women usually wanted me to take them to dinner. I'd been able to get a reservation only one day in advance, and a chalkboard propped at the entrance had today's specials.

She came in at seven exactly, and I was glad I arrived early because the smile she aimed my way when her gaze landed on me was filled with relief. A woman as beautiful as she was in her black dress and heels should never be worried about being stood up.

With her dark hair flowing over her shoulders and her eyes emphasized by smoky makeup, she knocked the breath out of me. My chair scraped as I stood, and I was surprised to find I didn't know what to say.

"Hi," she greeted me with a shaky smile.

"Hello." I came around the table because I wanted to be closer. "You look beautiful."

A pretty pink flush filled her cheeks. “Thanks. I’ll have to let my best friend know she picked the right dress.”

Her lack of artifice was captivating. “It’s you, Celia. Not the dress.”

“Oh. Well.” She ducked her head for a moment. “That’s quite a compliment.”

“It’s only the truth,” I murmured.

I pulled her chair out and barely resisted the urge to brush my thumb against her side when she sat, and I helped scoot her near the table.

She twisted around to smile up at me. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

“Very gallant,” she teased as I rounded the table to sit back down.

I flashed her a smile. “My mother will be happy to know I still have some of the manners she drilled into me.”

“Her son is a lawyer.” She arched a brow. “I’m sure she’s already proud of you.”

I shrugged. “One would think, but she measures success by kindness more than money.”

“That’s lovely.”

I’d moved up the ladder at the firm in large part due to being a good communicator, and here I was talking about my mom on a first date. Celia had thrown me way off stride.

Picking up the menu, I asked, “So what do you recommend?”

“That depends.” Her green eyes twinkled at me from across the table. “Do you like cheese?”

“Who doesn’t?” I quipped.

“Someone who’s lactose intolerant,” she mused. “But I’m glad to hear that doesn’t include you because Zinqué’s sharing board is a great way to start our meal.”

When the server set down water, I ordered the board while Celia looked at the wine list.

“What do you like?” she asked.

“Red or white. I’m not picky.”

“White sounds good to me tonight.” She scanned, found a couple of options, and handed the list to me. “We could do the Chablis Domaine Gueguen or Puligny-Montrachet Bourgogne.”

Scanning the list, I smiled when I found the wines she’d recommended. Both were excellent vintages, with one toward the lower end of the price

list while the other was on the higher side. I appreciated that she'd put thought into what would pair well with our cheese board instead of suggesting a bottle of Dom or a two-thousand-dollar Bordeaux.

Glancing up at the server, I requested, "The Puligny-Montrachet please."

"Of course, sir."

Celia rubbed her hands together before opening her menu. "It also pairs perfectly with their signature bowl with salmon. Or the tuna tartare tartine. You could also do the moules-frites with it because the wine will help the meal feel light."

"Dining with a chef is fun."

Celia wrinkled her nose. "Sorry, one of the pitfalls to my career."

"No." I stretched my arm across the table to rest my hand on top of hers. "I meant it as a compliment."

"Thank you."

The wine came out, quickly followed by the board. Before the server left, we ordered. Celia chose the bowl, and I went with the moules-frites. She seemed pleased that I chose a dish she'd recommended.

We talked about our careers as we nibbled on cheese and French country-style sourdough. Our fingers brushed toward the end, and neither of us moved for a moment. I felt the shock of awareness all the way up my arm, and she seemed to as well.

"Excellent suggestion," I finally murmured, tilting my chin toward the nearly empty board.

"Almost too good." She leaned back to pat her belly. "I doubt I'll have room for my meal and dessert. Which is a shame since the apple tarte tatin is one of my favorites."

"We can take dessert home."

The pink returned to her cheeks. "Um..."

It took me a moment to realize she was blushing because of how my offer sounded. "That wasn't a new spin on asking you to come up and see my etchings. I meant our respective homes."

"Ahh, good." She took a sip of her wine. "Sorry, didn't mean to assume."

I reached out to take her hand again, this time brushing my thumb across her knuckles. "In this case, you can assume away. I'd like nothing

more than to take you home tonight, but I want a second date with you too much to rush this.”

“Slow is good.” She turned her glass, not quite looking at me. “My divorce was finalized a month ago.”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“It was over much longer than that, but thank you.” She met my gaze. “I almost didn’t come tonight.”

“Your hesitation is completely understandable. I’ve been divorced for almost ten years, and I still haven’t got it all figured out.”

She shook her head with a laugh, the tension easing from her shoulders. “That’s weirdly comforting.”

“Good, we can muddle through together.”

Celia lifted her glass to toast me. “With how well tonight’s gone so far, I think we can do better than that.”

I had to drag my gaze away from her smiling face when the server dropped off our meals. And as we began to eat, I realized her suggestion was spot-on again.

“You were right. This pairs well with the wine.”

She finished a bite of her salmon. “Thanks for trusting me.”

“After that delicious meal you prepared at Hudson and Serena’s, how could I not?”

Her green eyes lit up. “If you enjoyed the wagyu filet, I bet you’d like the short ribs I’m going to make for their next dinner party.”

She told me about the meal she’d cooked for her best friend last night while we ate. The bowls were half gone when I nodded at her plate.

“Do you want a box for that while you still have room for the tarte?”

Celia blinked. “You’re a good listener.”

“Thank you. I only wish my daughter got that skill from me.”

“Daughter?” she echoed. “How old?”

“Twenty-one and newly married. We’re not as close as I want, but the divorce was hard on Ellie.”

She did some quick math in her head. “Ouch, yeah. Almost a teenager with parents splitting up had to have been rough.”

“And her mother only made it harder.” My lips pressed together in a slight grimace. “Sorry, remember what I said about not having it all figured out yet? Talking about my ex during our first date is proof of that.”

“Technically, I brought up my divorce first,” she pointed out with a smile. “And if it makes you feel any better, my ex-husband is also horrible, so I guess I’m lucky we didn’t have children because now I never have to see him again.”

“To borrow from you earlier...that’s weirdly comforting.”

She pointed her fork at me. “See, there you go with the listening again.”

I couldn’t remember a first date I’d enjoyed more, so I was disappointed when we were done. Dessert was boxed for us to take to our respective homes, and the bill was paid.

I walked her out with my palm at the small of her back, and she leaned into the touch for a moment when the bistro door shut behind us.

“I had a really good time,” she admitted.

“Does that mean I get a second date?”

The box shifted in her hands. “Yes.”

“This week?”

“Yes.” She shook her head with a laugh, as though she had surprised herself. “I didn’t expect the night to go like this.”

“Neither did I.”

I leaned in slowly enough for her to turn so my lips met her cheek, but she just stared up at me instead. Her free hand caught my jacket as I brushed my mouth against hers. It was only a hint of a kiss, but it still packed a punch.

When I pulled back, her eyes were bright. “Thursday night?”

“Sounds perfect.” I waited until she started down her street. “Celia.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“Thank you for not canceling.”

She smiled. “Best decision I’ve made in a long time.”

Handing my ticket to the valet, I watched her until she turned the corner. This was only our first date, and I’d see her again in two nights, but I felt the loss of her when she was no longer in sight.

Megan called before I'd even had my first cup of coffee, which was surprising since she wasn't a morning person. "Everything okay?"

"No, everything is not okay. All I got was a measly text last night saying the date was good," she complained. "Get dressed and meet me at Broad Street Coffee. I want the full story, face-to-face, so I'll know if you're leaving anything out."

I put the empty mug back in the cabinet. "In the mood for a French toast latte?"

"Only if it comes with a big serving of gossip. I'm leaving in ten, so get your butt moving."

I was laughing when she disconnected, which was a great way to start the day. Enjoying my favorite iced latte while having girl talk with my bestie would only make it better. Especially since I finally had something good to share after all the bad.

Glancing outside, I was tempted by the sunny sky to walk the mile down the road to the coffee shop. I quickly changed clothes, pulled my hair into a ponytail, and headed out so Megan didn't need to wait too long for me.

The walk was great, with a breeze off the ocean. I felt reinvigorated when I walked inside.

Megan had a table and two lattes by the time I got there. She pointed at the chair across from her. "Sit. Talk."

“I see I’m getting bossy bestie this morning,” I teased before taking a sip.

“No, I’m in nosy best friend mode because you made me wait all night for details.”

“That’s fair.” I grinned at her over the rim of my cup. “The strange part was that it was easy. The conversation flowed without the usual first-date awkwardness. He was charming but also really listened. Asked for my recommendation on the wine and food, then actually took it and thanked me after because he enjoyed it all. Ordered me dessert to take home since I was too full to eat it there.”

“The apple tarte tatin?”

I nodded.

“The hot lawyer has moves.”

“Except it didn’t feel like he was playing games,” I murmured, tightening my grip on my latte. “I told him it was one of my favorite desserts, and he wanted me to have it. Simple as that.”

“Even better.”

It really was. “He’s a good kisser, too.”

“Celia Gardner,” she gasped, eyes widening.

I took my maiden name back in the divorce, and I still enjoyed hearing it even when my best friend was full-on naming me to make a point.

“Should I have mentioned that in my text?”

“Absolutely.”

We dissolved into giggles, the same as we had gossiping about boys as teenagers. It felt nice, like proof that I’d finally found myself again after everything Harrison had put me through.

“The kiss was quick, almost over before it began,” I added, pressing my fingers to my lips. “But I can still feel it.”

“Wow,” she breathed. “Please tell me you’re going to see him again.”

“Thursday.”

She did a little dance in her seat. “Drink your latte. Then you can panic about what you’re wearing.”

“Oh crap.” I slammed my cup on the table. “I need to go shopping.”

“You really do. Come on. We’ll go now. I promise to only veto the safest options.”

“I can’t.” I finished my drink and stacked our cups. “Weekly meal prep for Trevor Wright. If his food isn’t in the fridge when he gets home this

afternoon, I'm the one who'll never hear the end of it."

Megan groaned. "Ugh, fine. I guess that's an acceptable reason to pick chicken over dresses."

"Just because he's a professional football player doesn't mean he eats chicken all the time." When she quirked a brow, I added, "Okay, fine. There will be a decent amount of chicken on the menu, but I'll make it delicious."

"Which is why he hired you."

"That and my infamous lasagna with bone-broth ragu," I quipped.

"The dress can happen after the groceries."

"I hate that's actually reasonable." She slung her bag over her shoulder. "Send me a picture from the fitting room before you buy. I reserve veto rights."

We walked outside. "I can do that."

She hugged me before heading to her car. "Go feed the football player. Then find a dress that will blow the sexy lawyer's socks off."

Five hours later, I was almost done with the first of those tasks. Trevor's gourmet kitchen was a chef's dream, and I had put his custom range to good use. The lasagna was resting, and a tray of chicken was cooling on the island, delicious scents filling the air as I worked.

My phone buzzed with a notification, and when I saw Julian's name flash across the screen, I tugged my gloves off and washed my hands. Then I picked up my phone and read his text.

JULIAN

Hope you're having a great day. Looking forward to tomorrow.

He hadn't waited to reach out, and he wasn't trying to hide his interest in me. I liked that more than I wanted to admit. And it helped me to be open with him, too.

ME

I am, thank you.

And I'm excited for our second date too.

He didn't make me wait for a reply.

JULIAN

Can I pick you up this time?

I thought for a moment before answering.

ME

That depends. Where are you taking me? I wouldn't want you to have to go out of your way.

Three little bubbles appeared right away.

JULIAN

It'd be worth it, but I can choose somewhere nearby if you'd like.

His answer was perfect.

ME

Then yes, please.

Grinning, I put the phone face up on the counter, where I could still see his name as I finished Trevor's meal prep. I glanced over more often than I expected, but I didn't let my distraction slow me down too much.

I slid the last container onto the shelf and shut the fridge as Trevor came in from the garage.

"Hey, Celia." He tossed his keys into a bowl near the door. "Smells good in here."

"Thanks." I rinsed my hands and dried them on a towel. "You should be stocked up through Sunday."

"Fantastic."

My screen lit up as I grabbed my phone from the counter, and I smiled again, thinking about Julian's texts.

"You're in a good mood."

"Now that I'm done cooking in your gorgeous kitchen, I'm headed out to shop for a new dress," I explained. "So pretty much a perfect day."

"Why do I feel like there's more to that story?" he drawled.

"Because I'm surrounded by nosy people today." I headed for the door before my blush gave me away.

"Have fun with the dress."

Shaking my head with a laugh, I got into my car and backed out of Trevor's drive in search of the perfect dress for a second date. And maybe some new lingerie. I didn't plan on needing it anytime soon, but I'd felt more confident wearing the pretty bra-and-panties set Megan had talked me into last night.

Malibu Country Mart was on my way home from Manhattan Beach, making it the perfect place to stop. There were several boutiques there with lots of date-night dress options. And the complex right next door had a lingerie shop.

I wandered through two stores before I spotted a forest-green dress in the third that made me stop. The material was soft, with a neckline that dipped just low enough and a skirt that moved when I turned.

“Yes,” I whispered, heading into the fitting room.

As I looked at myself in the mirror, I knew I’d found the perfect option. After twirling around a few times to enjoy the flare of the skirt, I took a photo and sent it to Megan.

ME

If you veto this, I'll be forced to overrule.

Her reply came before I finished unzipping.

MEGAN

Buy. Immediately. Do not look at another dress.

Also, I hate you a little.

I laughed, then sent her a quick reply.

ME

Saw some dresses that'd be perfect for you too.

I changed back into my clothes and slid the dress on the hanger.

MEGAN

Mimosas and shopping this weekend. Let me know which morning.

ME

Will do.

After I paid for the dress and was headed to the strip of shops next door, she sent another message.

MEGAN

You'll need another dress for your third date anyway.

I really hoped she was right. And that the lingerie I was about to buy would give me the confidence to go for a kiss of my own when Julian dropped me off tomorrow night.

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Picking Celia up for our second date made it feel more serious, which was another reason my looking forward to it so much was completely out of character. Same with the flowers on the passenger seat.

When I walked out of a lunch meeting this afternoon, I found myself wandering into the florist next door. I couldn't remember the last time I'd bought flowers for a woman, but when the owner had suggested a bouquet from a local farm, I'd had her put something together that was perfect for Celia.

As I walked up the sidewalk to her townhouse, the door swung open before I could knock. Celia was in another knockout dress, green this time, and a strappy pair of nude heels that made her legs look like they went on forever. Her hair was down, and her makeup was more subtle than on our first date.

"You're gorgeous."

"Thank you." Her smile lit up her green eyes, which looked darker because of the dress. "You brought flowers."

"I couldn't resist." I held them out. "The florist had peonies and violas that just came in from a local, organic farm. She said they're edible, which I thought you might appreciate more than roses."

"Wow, that's incredibly thoughtful. Thank you." She stepped back to let me pass through the doorway. "Come in. I'll put them in water."

A few boxes sat along the wall next to the stairs. "Just move in?"

“Yeah, a couple of weeks ago,” she confirmed as I followed her into the kitchen, which was smaller than I expected, given how much she loved to cook.

She reached up to grab a vase from the cabinet, and I stepped out of her way while she filled it with water. Once she had the stems exactly how she wanted them, she set the flowers in the middle of the counter.

“They’re perfect.” She flashed me a grateful smile. “And I just might steep the petals to make a jelly. Or crystallize them to decorate cookies.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

“I more than like them, Julian.” She moved close and went on her toes to brush her lips against my cheek. “It’s been a long time since anyone bought me flowers, and nobody has ever thought to choose ones I can use in the kitchen.”

“Lucky timing,” I murmured, sliding my palm against her lower back.

“Only because you pay attention.” She grabbed her purse from the counter. “Ready?”

“If you are.”

I followed her out to my car and opened the door to help her into the passenger seat. When I rounded the hood and slid into the driver’s side, she turned toward me. “Where are we going?”

“I thought about Nobu.” I checked the mirror and pulled out. “Or Lucky’s.”

She wrinkled her nose, confirming my instinct was right. Celia didn’t care about going somewhere to see and be seen. She just wanted to have a nice dinner with me.

“And?”

I smiled. “I booked a table at Tra di Noi instead.”

The Italian restaurant was only a couple of miles away from her townhouse, had a cozy vibe, and the servers were attentive in a low-key way so that we wouldn’t be interrupted often.

“Great pick.”

I turned onto the PCH. “I’m looking forward to your recommendations again. Dining with a chef is something I could easily get used to.”

“If you’re on your best behavior, maybe you’ll earn a third date, and we can do this again soon,” she teased.

“I’m already looking forward to it.”

She laughed. “I like your confidence.”

I parked behind Tra di Noi and came around before she could reach for the handle. I opened the door and offered my hand.

“Thank you.” She slid her palm against mine and stepped out carefully. “This sits lower than I’m used to. I was picturing a less graceful exit.”

“Then I’m glad I got here first.” I shut the door. “What do you drive?”

“A completely practical Toyota Rav4.” She looked back at the car. “I’m not really a car person. I don’t even know what this is.”

“Lucid Air Sapphire.”

She shook her head with a laugh. “Yeah, that didn’t help much, but the car suits you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

Inside, the hostess had my name and didn’t make us wait. She led us to a table for two in the back. I pulled Celia’s chair out before I took my own.

The smile she gave me made it clear she noticed again. “Did you tell your mom I complimented your good manners?”

“Actually, yes.”

Her eyes widened. “Wait, really?”

“She was quite pleased with herself.” Chuckling, I shook my head. “And then she interrogated me because I haven’t mentioned a date in much too long, according to her.”

“That makes two of us,” she confessed with a grin. “My best friend grilled me for all the details over coffee yesterday morning.”

“We’re quite the pair.”

That pretty pink filled her cheeks. “I guess we are.”

Tearing my gaze away, I dipped my chin at the wine list. “I’m in the mood for red tonight.”

“Then we’ll find a good one.” The restaurant had a vast selection, but she quickly found what she wanted. “The AJA Vineyards Malibu Coast Syrah.”

I looked where she pointed. “Local. I like that.”

“So do I.” She had an oddly wistful look in her eyes, but I didn’t get the chance to ask because the server came over to the table.

“I see you have the wine list out. I’d be happy to make a recommendation.”

“No need.” I smiled up at her. “My beautiful date has impeccable taste.”

Celia tapped her finger next to her choice. “A bottle, please.”

“Certainly,” the server agreed. “Would you like some time to go over the dinner menu?”

Celia’s gaze switched to me, and I shook my head. “I’m game for just about anything that goes with the red you ordered.”

“You don’t mind if I order for both of us?” she asked.

“Please do.”

Her smile was blinding. “The stinco d’agnello, brasato di manzo al Chianti, and the lasagna Bolognese. Please bring a couple of extra plates as well so we can share.”

“Great selections.” The server took the menus before walking away.

When she was gone, I pointed out, “That’s three dishes. Not saving room for dessert again tonight?”

“It was a busy day, so I’m starving.” She reached for a piece of bread from the basket between us. “And the lasagna was a last-second addition. I made one for a client yesterday and didn’t get the chance to taste it.”

“That must be hard when you make something you love.”

It was the perfect reply because Celia lit up when she talked about food, sparking a long conversation over the wine and dishes she’d ordered. And it turned out to be a good thing she was in the mood for lasagna because there was barely anything left on the plates when we were done.

I leaned back in my chair. “You keep outdoing yourself.”

“Tell it to the chef. All I did was order.”

“Maybe you didn’t cook.” I reached out to interlace our fingers. “But I’ve eaten here half a dozen times and never enjoyed it as much as tonight.”

“Thank you.”

I didn’t let go of her hand when the server returned to clear the plates. “Would you like dessert?”

“Tiramisu,” she requested. “Two forks, if he behaves.”

“Best behavior over here, remember?”

She looked at me over the last of the Syrah. “You’re doing all right so far.”

“Enough to get the elusive third date?”

She narrowed her eyes, but they held a gleam of humor. “That depends on dessert.”

The tiramisu arrived, and she took the first bite.

“Good?”

“Delicious.” She handed me the other fork. “Try for yourself.”

I took a small bite and agreed, "Very good."

"Want more?"

I held my fork in midair. "Only if it won't cost me a third date."

"Are you free Saturday night?" she asked after taking another bite.

"For you, yes."

"Then come over for dinner, and you can decide if my tiramisu is better than theirs," she offered.

"I already know the answer to that." I scooped some dessert onto my fork. "But I better get another taste to make sure I remember."

She knocked her fork against mine. "Well played."

After we finished the tiramisu, I paid and drove her back home.

"Wait," I murmured when she reached for the car door.

I got out and went to her side to open it for her, offering a helping hand again. Then I walked her to the door.

She turned with her keys in her hand and reminded me, "Saturday at seven."

"I'll be here."

Leaning in, I brushed my lips against hers. I wanted more but kept it brief because she had told me slow was good. But when I started to pull back, her hands caught my shoulders and held me there.

My palm slid to the small of her back, and I dipped my head again to capture her mouth in a deep kiss. She gasped, and my tongue swept in to tangle with hers. This time when I let go, we were both breathless.

Her eyes were bright. "Text me when you get home."

"I will."

I waited until she was safely inside, then walked back to my car with the taste of her still on my lips. Only two dates in, and I already knew this thing between us could quickly become serious. And that only made me look forward to Saturday even more.

On Saturday evening, Megan let herself in while I was finishing the tiramisu. “It smells like you’re trying to impress a man.”

“Just feeding one.” I smoothed the top and did not look at her. “There’s a difference.”

“Sure.” She dropped her bag and came around the counter. “What do you need?”

I nodded at the salad. “You can pull the vinaigrette out of the fridge so it’ll be room temperature if you want to be useful.”

“That saved you ten seconds,” she grumbled as she set the Mason jar on the counter.

“You know how I am when I’m cooking.”

“True,” she conceded with a smile. “So I’ll go find other ways to be useful.”

She grabbed some cleaning supplies and got out of my way. I’d already picked up, so the place wasn’t messy, but my best friend cleaned as a stress reliever, so I didn’t complain. Until she came downstairs with a smug look she didn’t bother to hide.

“What did you do?”

“Changed your sheets.” She picked up the throw blanket, folded it, and then smoothed the material over the back of the couch. “Just in case.”

My cheeks heated. “I am not having sex tonight.”

“I didn’t say you were.” She found the wine I planned on serving and uncorked the bottle so it could breathe. “But you’re allowed to want more than dinner. Fresh sheets just mean the option is open so you can see where the night goes.”

“Megan.”

“You’re already falling for him.” The teasing tone disappeared. “I can tell from how you talk about him.”

I opened my mouth and closed it because arguing was pointless when she was right.

“That’s what I thought.” She gave me a quick hug. “I’m so proud of you for putting yourself out there again.”

“He’s going to be here at seven,” I muttered, feeling a little misty-eyed. “And I still need to get changed.”

She bumped my shoulder as she passed me. “That’s why I’m here to help. But I promise I’ll be gone before he knocks.”

Inviting Megan over before Julian got here turned out to be the right decision, even if my thoughts kept drifting to the clean sheets now on my bed, thanks to her. When he knocked on the door five minutes early, my home was cleaner than it had been since I moved in, my hair and makeup were done, and the food was almost ready to serve.

“Welcome.”

I was more nervous than I had been for our first two dates. When he came inside, it was only the two of us. Inviting him over had been a spontaneous decision, and I hadn’t really stopped to think about the lack of distractions until now.

“These are for you.” He handed me a small white bag.

I peered inside, and my eyes widened. “You brought me black truffles?”

“Since you seemed to enjoy the edible flowers so much, I decided to go with something else you can use in the kitchen.”

“You’re very good at giving gifts,” I murmured as I shut the door behind him.

“Hopefully, I haven’t set a precedent that I won’t be able to meet in the future,” he joked.

I led him into the kitchen. “You don’t need to bring me something when we go out. Just yourself.”

“I know. That’s exactly why I like finding things you’ll enjoy.” He lifted my hand and brushed a kiss against my knuckles, sending a spark of

awareness all the way up my arm. “You appreciate them.”

“I appreciate you,” I corrected, emphasizing the last word.

“Because you’re a very special woman.”

My nose wrinkled. “That makes me wonder who you’ve been dating lately.”

“Nobody serious, until you.” Still holding my hand, he brushed his lips against mine. “And I haven’t bought gifts for another woman except my mother or daughter in longer than I can remember.”

“Then I guess you’re right about me being special.” Because Julian made me feel that way. “But you are too.”

His blue gaze took in the food staged on my counter. “You’re certainly treating me like I am with all this.”

“I wanted to do something on the lighter side that would go well with the tiramisu that I promised you.”

“Scallops and risotto are impressive.”

“Don’t forget the salad,” I teased. “But really, it’s one of my favorite pairings.”

“Need any help?”

I shook my head. “Everything’s ready. I just need to sear the scallops, which will take only a couple of minutes per side. The pan is already hot.”

Julian leaned against the counter while I finished the meal. And just as I was plating everything for us, I thought about the gift he brought tonight.

Reaching into the bag, I pulled out the black truffle and got my mandoline to shave some onto the risotto. “The rice will gently warm the truffle, which will be balanced out by the Parmigiano Reggiano I used.”

He looked down at the plates, his smile widening when he spotted the violas I’d garnished the scallops with. “You used both my gifts.”

“As I said, you’re very good at giving them.”

I carried the meal over to the table, which Megan had set for me. Glancing over my shoulder, I asked, “Can you grab the wine?”

He took the open bottle and brought it over. “Want me to pour?”

“Yes, please.”

He filled the glasses halfway, then set the bottle aside so it wouldn’t block our view of each other as we sat down at my small table. Then he lifted his glass and tipped the rim slightly toward me. “To dinner with the chef who’s already outdone the fantastic meals on our first two dates.”

“You haven’t taken a single bite yet.”

“I can tell you put a lot of thought into what you’re serving me tonight. Then you made it pretty enough that my daughter would take a photo of her plate to post to social media. And to top it all off, you put my gifts to good use, which makes me feel like I contributed to this meal.” He set his glass down and reached over to hold my hand. “That makes tonight special in a way dinner reservations can’t be. No matter how good the restaurant is.”

Julian’s gratitude meant the world to me because I knew he truly appreciated my efforts. But before I got teary-eyed over it, I lightened the mood. “Be warned, I might want delivery pizza for our next date.”

“I don’t care what we eat as long as I’m sharing a meal with you.”

I squeezed his hand before letting go to pick up my fork. “Let’s see if you can still say that after you taste my tiramisu.”

His grin was mischievous. “I’m sure it’ll be fantastic, but I don’t think it can top knowing you’re already thinking about our fourth date.”

“Hmm.” I pretended to think about it for a moment. “I’m not sure...I baked my own ladyfingers and everything.”

“Then I’m in for a treat.”

His enjoyment of our meal made it taste even better to me. It didn’t take long for us to polish off our dinner, and I served dessert.

Julian licked his lips, which made me crave another kiss more than the tiramisu. Then he took a bite and let out a low moan of enjoyment that sent goose bumps along my skin. Suddenly, my thoughts drifted back to the clean sheets upstairs, and I wondered for the first time if Megan had been right to change them.

I cleared my throat. “Good?”

“Best I’ve ever tasted.”

The stove had been off for a while, but it suddenly felt hot in here. “I’m glad you like it.”

We finished the tiramisu without talking much. I was too aware of his mouth, but he was enjoying his dessert so much that I didn’t think he noticed.

When I stood to clear, he got up with me. He took his plate and mine before I could reach for them.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“You cooked.” He carried them to the sink. “The least I can do is help clean up.”

I didn't want to compare Julian to my ex-husband because Harrison didn't deserve space in my thoughts anymore, but it was nice to share dinner with a man who didn't assume cooking and cleaning were both my job, even at home. So I turned on the water and let Julian dry while I washed, the two of us moving around each other in a comfortable way.

"There's more," I told him when the last fork was in the rack. I opened the fridge and pointed out the container I had packed before he arrived. "Tiramisu. For tomorrow."

"That was very sweet of you."

I shut the fridge door, and he pressed my back against it to claim my mouth with a kiss that was probably meant as a thank-you. It didn't stay one for long.

His hand came up to my jaw, and I stepped close. Our simmering chemistry finally had somewhere to go. And upstairs, the sheets on my bed were clean. I was no longer sure I wanted them to stay that way.

I finally had Celia against me, and she tasted like tiramisu. Her hands were fisted in my shirt, and my cock was already pressed hard against her stomach. I wanted nothing more than to take her upstairs to her bed, but that was the complete opposite of taking things slow.

Reluctantly pulling my mouth from hers, I growled, “I didn’t come here expecting anything more than dinner.”

“I know.” Her pretty green eyes were cloudy with passion as she looked up at me. “It might only be our third date, but you’ve proved your intentions to me already.”

“Good.” I kissed her again, slower this time, taking my time to explore her mouth with my own.

When I started to pull away again, she chased my lips for more. The heat between us continued to build until I finally ripped my mouth away and warned, “Fucking hell, baby. We keep this up, and I’m not sure how much longer I can continue to go slow.”

“Then don’t.”

I searched her expression for any hint of indecision, but I only found passion. “You sure?”

She twined her arms around my neck. “Yes.”

I crashed my mouth down over hers and pulled her body flush against mine, only pulling away to ask, “Bedroom upstairs?”

“Uh-huh,” she gasped when I swept her off her feet. “You going to carry me all the way?”

“Absolutely.”

When we got to the top step, she pointed toward the door at the end of the hall. The lamp on the nightstand was on, letting me see her face as I eased her onto her feet beside the bed. Her curves pressed against my chest on the way down, and she made a sound that went straight to my dick.

I eased her onto the mattress but didn’t follow yet. “Still sure?”

“Stop checking.” She reached for the hem of her dress. “I want this. You.”

We took our clothes off between kisses. Her dress went first, up and over her head. My shirt, quickly followed by my jeans. I was down to black boxer briefs when her bra straps slid down her shoulders, leaving her only in a scrap of white lace over her pussy.

“You’re beautiful,” I told her, but the word was inadequate. “I’ve wanted this since Serena’s kitchen, but seeing you like this is better than anything I could have imagined.”

“So did I.” Her green eyes dropped to the outline of my shaft against the dark cotton. “You’re unfair in a suit. In those, you’re a problem.”

“They’re staying on.” I pressed her back to the mattress and crawled over her. “For a minute. If they come off now, I’ll be inside you before I’ve earned it, and I want you ready.”

“It’s not going to take much.”

“I’m still going to take my time.” I dipped my head to suck one of her pebbled nipples into my mouth. “We might’ve thrown taking it slow out the window, but this isn’t going to be fast.”

“Julian, please.”

Whatever else she’d been about to say was replaced by a needy whimper when I flicked my tongue over her nipple. I used my lips, tongue, and edge of my teeth to make her writhe beneath me. I lavished one breast with attention, then the other, until the sting of her nails in my scalp had me near the end of my control. But I was determined to have the taste of her in my mouth when I finally slid my cock into her pussy.

I kissed down her stomach, hooked my fingers in the lace at her hips. She lifted off the mattress, and I drew her panties off before settling between her thighs. “Your pussy is drenched, baby.”

Her eyes were heavy-lidded as she stared down at me. “Only because you proved your mouth is clever outside of the courtroom too.”

“I’m just getting started.” Using two of my fingers to spread her bare lips, I circled my tongue around her clit before licking down the center. Her flavor hit me, and I groaned against her damp flesh. “I could stay here a long time, devouring you.”

“I’d allow it.” Her voice shook. “Except I want more than your mouth before the night is over.”

“You’ll get my cock.” Pre-come dripped from the tip of my dick at the thought of her pussy being wrapped around me. “After you come.”

I worked her with my tongue, then added a finger, followed by another. The thrust of my hand was slow as I built the pleasure in her. She grabbed my hair, and her thighs tightened around my shoulders.

“Oh yes, Julian,” she gasped. “Right there.”

“Here?” I twisted my wrist to hit the sensitive spot inside her. “Or here?”

Her hips bucked, and her cries filled the room. I knew she was close, so I quickened the pace of my fingers and pinched her clit. Her body went taut before shuddering as her orgasm ripped through her. But I didn’t stop there. I licked Celia through her release, waiting until her body melted against the mattress to go to my knees. Then I shoved my boxer briefs down and kicked them off.

When I settled over her, she twined her arms around my neck. Staring into her hazy eyes, I dragged my cock through her wetness. As I inched the tip of my cock inside her, it hit me.

“Shit.” I dropped my forehead to her shoulder, stunned that I hadn’t even considered this possibility. “I don’t have a condom.”

She laughed, her nipples brushing my chest. “You brought truffles but not a condom.”

“Terrible planning.” I held still. Barely. “We can stop.”

Her hands moved on my back, meant to soothe, but her touch did the opposite. “I’m on the pill.”

“My last physical was clear.” I lifted my head. “That was more than six months ago, and there hasn’t been anyone since.”

“I got tested around the same time, and this is the first time since my marriage ended.”

Her eyes held a vulnerability that hadn't been there a minute ago. I brushed my nose against hers. "I don't want to leave this bed. That's the only preference I have. We can cuddle if you want to wait."

"I want more than that." Her cheeks turned pink, which was sweet after what I had just done with my mouth. "But if you'd prefer to use a condom, there's other stuff we can do now."

I kissed her again. "I don't want to wait. But only if you're sure."

I didn't have sex without protection. Ever. But I found myself turned on to an impossible degree by the idea of having her bare pussy wrapped around my cock.

"I am. Take me, Julian."

That was all the encouragement I needed before I pushed in until my balls knocked against her ass. "So fucking tight."

Pressing my forehead to hers, I gave her a moment to adjust to taking every inch of me. When her hips lifted and she took me deeper, I gave us what we both wanted. Slowly at first, only picking up the pace when her legs wrapped around my waist. "That's right, baby. Take it. I want to feel you move for me."

"Julian! Oh, yes," she cried, meeting me thrust for thrust.

I tilted her hips to go deeper, and her nails dug into my shoulders.

"Gimme your mouth."

Wrapping her hair around my fist, I tilted her head back to plunge my tongue between her lips. Then I kissed my way across her jaw and down her neck as I continued to pound in and out of her.

The tingling at the base of my spine told me I wouldn't last much longer. I wedged my hand between us and found her clit, and the sound she made when I circled it with my thumb nearly ended me.

"Come for me, baby," I demanded, snapping my hips at a furious pace. "Now."

Her walls clenched around me as she came again, and I followed as I buried myself deep, spilling into her until I had nothing left to give.

"Celia! Oh, fuck!"

"Wow," she panted, collapsing against the pillows.

I dropped down on the mattress next to her and pulled her head onto my chest, running my fingers through her dark hair. Our first time together, and I'd just had the biggest orgasm of my life. I couldn't imagine how much better it would get once we'd learned each other's bodies.

“That was unexpected,” she murmured after we caught our breath.

I brushed a kiss against her temple. “You caught me unprepared.”

“I’ll have to give Megan a hard time for not thinking of condoms when she changed the sheets.” Her eyes widened, and her cheeks turned pink when she realized what she’d just admitted. “Can we pretend I didn’t say that?”

I kissed her hair. “Sure, but I love that you have a best friend who’s there for you.”

“She’s going to be impossible if I tell her the sheets were the right call.”

“That’s okay because you made me tiramisu and then ruined me in bed. I’m going to be impossible at breakfast.”

She leaned her head back with a smirk. “You’re assuming you’ll still be here.”

“I’m not leaving this bed unless you kick me out.” I tightened my arm around her. “Was that smug enough?”

She laughed into my chest. “Yes.”

“Want those cuddles I offered earlier?”

“I do.” She snuggled closer. “I’ll even trade you breakfast for them.”

That was too good a deal to turn down.

Julian's kitchen was much bigger than mine, and he let me have the run of the place whenever I was over, which was often.

Dating him wasn't anything like I had expected. He was undeniably busier than my ex-husband had been, but not a day went by without him texting or calling. For the past three months, we went out several times a week. Sometimes it was for breakfast before he went into the office. If I was fully booked for dinners, he had no problem being flexible when needed.

He never seemed to mind that my job had odd hours, and he didn't make me feel as though his career was more important than mine, which would be much more understandable as the managing partner of a successful entertainment law firm, compared to Harrison, who sold his family's wine for a living.

Being with a man who appreciated me and had no problem showing it was refreshing. And inspired me to be a better girlfriend. Like waking up when I didn't need to so I could make breakfast for Julian before he headed into the office.

I had eggs soft scrambling in butter, smoked salmon waiting, rye bread in the toaster, and a bowl of berries I had cut because the plate needed a splash of color.

Julian came down already dressed, his hungry gaze on me instead of the food. Three months of this, and the passion between us was only growing

stronger.

“Stay home.” I turned off the burner. “Call in sick and play hooky with me. I have no clients today, and our breakfast has enough protein to give us plenty of energy for whatever we might get up to in bed.”

“Blame Serena.” He stole a berry from the bowl. “I need to negotiate a deal with the studio for her this morning. If I play hooky, she won’t let me come to any more dinner parties with the most gorgeous chef in town.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure you’ll keep your standing invitation. She likes showing us off while taking credit for setting us up.”

“I still say she can’t technically call herself a matchmaker.” He poured himself a mug of coffee and topped mine off. “I asked for your phone number before she got the chance to do anything.”

“True.” I put the toast on the plates, slid the eggs on top, and then added the smoked salmon. “Voilà. Breakfast inspired by the disturbing movie you talked me into watching last night. Very Nordic.”

He took the plate I held out and kissed my temple on the way to the table. “Eat with me.”

“That’s the plan.” I sat across from him.

He finished his breakfast while I still had half a plate left. “I have something for you.”

“We agreed you’re limited to one gift per week,” I reminded him. “And you just gave me those roll-your-own dinner dice yesterday. Which is how we ended up having a wasabi mashed potato shepherd’s pie for dinner last night.”

“And it was surprisingly good.” He got up and carried his plate to the sink before heading into the utility area off the garage. Then he came back with something small in his hand and set it beside my plate.

A garage clicker.

“Put that in your car,” he instructed. “I don’t want you waiting in the drive if I’m running late.”

“Julian.” I picked it up. “That’s only happened once.”

“And now it won’t again.”

“It’s still a clicker to your house.” I got up and opened my purse, found the key I had been carrying for a week, and held it out to him. “You should have this.”

He shook his head. “Didn’t mean it as a trade, baby.”

“Good, because it isn’t one.” I pressed the key into his palm and returned to my chair. “I’ve been carrying this around, waiting for the right time. You just beat me to it.”

He closed his fingers around it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I grinned at him. “And thank you, too.”

“We’re quite the pair.” He shook his head with a laugh.

“I love having you as my other half.”

His blue eyes turned serious as he tucked the key into his pocket and sat down next to me. “I’m glad. Because I love you, Celia.”

“You do?” I sniffled, my eyes filling with happy tears.

He wiped his thumbs across my cheeks to catch them. “I know that neither of us were looking for anything serious when we met, but I can’t picture my life without you in it now that I have you.”

“I can’t either.” I wrapped my hands around his wrists and pressed my cheeks into his palms. “I love you too.”

He kissed me, and I poured all of my emotion into it while he did the same. Then he cradled me against his chest, and I never felt safer than I did right then with his arms around me.

“Are you one hundred percent sure you have to be at that meeting for Serena?” I mumbled against his suit coat.

“Unfortunately, yes.” He gave me another quick kiss. “But I’ll try to leave early so we can celebrate properly.”

I wagged my brows. “In bed?”

“Anywhere you want, baby.”

I was considering my options when his phone rang. He glanced at the screen and then showed it to me. Seeing his daughter’s name, I waved him off. “Take it. I’ve got this.”

As he left the kitchen, I heard him murmur, “Good morning, Ellie.”

I finished the last of my breakfast while he was on the phone, the low rumble of his voice in the background. By the time he returned, the dishwasher was running, and I was halfway done with another cup of coffee.

I’d poured what was still in his mug into a travel mug and added the rest of the pot. Then I filled a container with some of the trail mix I made last night. An upgraded version with roasted pecans and cashews in brown butter, rosemary, and cayenne pepper, plus high-quality dark chocolate chunks and dried cherries.

He tucked his phone in his pocket. "That was surprising."

"A good one, I hope."

He didn't talk about her much, but I knew he wanted a closer relationship with her. But from a couple of calls he'd taken from his ex-wife while I was close enough to hear, it sounded like she put up as many roadblocks as she could between him and Ellie.

"It was." His smile made his blue eyes twinkle. "She's going to be in town this weekend and wants to have dinner on Saturday night. Her husband will be there too."

I hugged him. "That's wonderful."

"You're free that night, right?"

"Yeah." I handed him the tumbler and trail mix. "I'm just doing a meal prep earlier, but I'll be done around two. Why?"

"I know we've only been together a few months, but I'd like to introduce you to Ellie."

My eyes widened. "Really?"

"It could be a while before the opportunity presents itself again, and I don't want to wait too long."

I grinned at him and teased, "So you think we'll still be together however long that while is?"

"I know we will be." He reached out to take my hand in his. "I love you, and what we have is good. I'm not going to do anything to fuck this up."

I couldn't argue when he put it that way. "Then I guess we have plans for Saturday."

I met Harrison when I was only twenty-two, so I had never dated a single dad before. I wasn't sure what to expect from his daughter, and I doubted we would have much in common from the little he had shared about Ellie. But I was determined to make a good impression on her because I'd fallen in love with her father.

“He wants ten percent on the back end.”
“Gross?”

I huffed out a breath. “Of course.”

“You and I both know that’s never going to happen.”

I thrummed my fingers on the top of my desk. “It will if you want his name attached to the movie.”

“Ten is an outrageous ask.”

“His star power is the primary reason the project is about to be greenlit,” I pointed out. “If you want to risk the financing, fine. It’s not like I can’t replace this movie with another tomorrow.”

“Dammit, you’ve got me over a barrel here.” I heard the rifling of paper in the background. “The only way I can swing that many first-dollar gross points is if we drop the upfront salary to ten million.”

“Done.”

We worked out the rest of the details, and then all that was left was to finalize the contract. Not too bad for a morning’s work since my 5 percent would probably net me almost two million if the project went the way my A-list client expected.

As soon as I ended the call, Stewart buzzed me. “You have a visitor.”

He sounded weird, and I was filled with sudden dread that Courtney had decided to drop by, since I refused to engage over the phone when she called yesterday to complain about me going to dinner with Ellie tomorrow

night. And she didn't even know I was bringing Celia, because then she would've been tempted to crash my reservation. We hadn't been married for a decade, but that wouldn't have stopped her from making a scene when I introduced another woman to our daughter. Who was grown and married herself.

Before I could ask who it was, my door was pushed open, and Celia walked into my office. "Surprise!"

"My favorite kind." I stood and circled my desk to kiss her. "I thought you had plans with Megan for lunch?"

"Yes, but she's not available for another hour, so I thought I'd bring you this first."

She brought her hands out from behind her back to show me the heavy-duty windowed Kraft box she'd been hiding. It was lined with gingham paper and contained a wrapped sandwich tied with twine, a bag of her homemade potato chips, and two brown-butter chocolate-chunk cookies.

Taking the box from her, I set it on my desk and pulled her into a hug. "Seriously, what did I ever do to deserve you?"

"I don't know, but you better figure it out because I'm gonna need you to keep doing it if lunches like this are on the line."

I glanced up at the doorway, where Stewart stood with a wide grin, holding a box lunch of his own. "You brought him one too?"

"I'm not sure why you sound so surprised," Celia smirked at me. "It's not like I was going to walk right past him with lunch for you and not want to feed him too."

"She's a keeper, boss." He pulled out one of his cookies and took a bite. "Whoa."

I patted my abs. "And this is why I've been hitting the gym more often."

"Totally worth it," Stewart mumbled around a cookie before going back to his desk.

Celia winked. "I make sure you get extra workouts in bed too."

"Tonight," I murmured, capturing her mouth in a kiss that was starting to burn out of control when I heard a throat clear behind Celia.

Lifting my head, I met Reid's gaze. "Sorry, I didn't realize I was interrupting. Stewart had his mouth full when I asked if you were busy, so I didn't understand his answer."

"Hey, Reid." Celia gave him a cute little wave as her cheeks went pink.

Reid's smile didn't hide how tired he was. "Hi, Celia. It's good to see you."

"Don't worry, I just popped in for a minute before meeting my best friend for lunch."

"Speaking of lunch," Reid drawled, spotting the box sitting on my desk. "Where did Stewart order from today? Those look amazing."

"Oh, I brought them," Celia answered. "Julian mentioned his calendar was booked solid today, and I was worried he'd forget to eat, so I put those together. I'll bring you one next time."

"Thanks, that's kind of you to offer." Reid crossed over to my desk to look inside the box. "I'd be more than happy to pay for a couple of them if you have time to make some next week. Lila is breastfeeding and would love these."

"No way am I going to charge you," Celia insisted. "Consider them a small gift to help with the baby."

Reid shot me a look. "You better be checking her contracts with her clients. She's too nice to negotiate on her own behalf."

"I make very good money, thank you very much." Celia shook her head with a laugh. "But I also give an excellent friend discount."

"Resistance is futile," I warned Reid. "She can outstubborn even me when it comes to food."

"Impressive," Reid murmured.

"Thanks. Be right back."

I wasn't sure where Celia rushed off to, but she was barely gone long enough for Reid to almost convince me to hand over one of my cookies so he could take it home for Lila. That turned out to be unnecessary because she came back with a small cooler, which she handed to Reid.

"What's this?" He looked inside and let out a low whistle. "You had two extra box lunches just hanging around?"

"I figured as long as I was making boxes for Julian and Stewart, I might as well do them for Megan and me too since we hadn't decided where to have lunch," she explained. "But I hadn't told her about them yet, so we can just pick a restaurant instead. And you can go home and earn some brownie points with your wife. Everyone's happy and well fed, just how I like it."

"Normally, I'd say that taking someone else's food is a step too far, but this will make Lila's day, and she deserves that. So thank you."

“You’re welcome.” Celia brushed a quick kiss against my cheek. “Enjoy your lunch. Love you.”

“I love you too, baby.” I tangled my fingers with hers before she could walk away. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” She beamed a smile at me before walking out.

Reid waited until the door shut before looking at the cooler, then at me. “She really is great. I’m happy for you.”

“Never been happier,” I admitted as I walked around my desk and sat down.

“Figured that out when you told her you love her, right in front of me.” He dropped onto the chair across from me. “Didn’t think I’d ever see that kind of easy affection from you.”

“She makes it easy.” I unwrapped my sandwich. “Although the words are newer.”

“I came back from paternity leave, and it’s like you’re a whole new person.” He shook his head and scrubbed his palm down his face. “If I wasn’t so tired, I’d suggest a double date so Lila can meet Celia, but that’ll have to wait until Ryan is sleeping through the night.”

“Maybe we can bring dinner over sometime next week,” I suggested.

Reid’s eyes lit up. “If Celia wants to make another batch of the chicken fajitas you dropped off when we got home from the hospital, I wouldn’t turn it down.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.” I made a mental note to talk to Celia about it tonight. “But first we need to make it through dinner with Ellie and Harry tomorrow night.”

“You’re introducing her to your daughter? That’s bigger than saying ‘I love you’ to each other.”

“Hopefully big doesn’t mean dramatic.” I took a bite of my sandwich. “Courtney and I have been divorced for a decade, and I’ve never brought a woman around Ellie in all that time.”

“You waited for the right one. Nothing wrong with that.”

I just hoped Ellie saw it the same way.

I called Megan on the way to the restaurant.

“Hey girl. Are you almost there?”

“Ten minutes out. Julian sent a car so I could ride back to his place with him after we’re done.” I smoothed my skirt over my thighs before admitting, “Is it weird that I’m scared?”

“Not at all,” she reassured me. “This is a big step for you and Julian.”

“Yeah.” I sighed.

“Just remember, your sexy lawyer is in love with you.”

I shook my head and laughed. “Are you ever going to use his name?”

“Only when I’m talking directly to him,” she quipped.

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“As I was saying before, I was so rudely interrupted,” she drawled. “He loves you. You’re part of his everyday life, and his daughter barely spends any time with him. Even if she’s upset, it shouldn’t have that much of an impact on your life.”

I wished it was that simple. “She’s still his daughter, Megan.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make her the boss of him. Seriously, Julian doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who’ll let his daughter dictate who he can date. Stop borrowing trouble and be yourself. You’re pretty irresistible.”

“I should have brought cookies,” I mumbled.

“You don’t need to bribe her with food,” she chided. “Just make her dad happy, and everything else will fall into place.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, bestie.”

“Happy to help.”

I stared at the lights zooming past as the driver got off the freeway. “I wish my parents had the chance to meet him.”

When I was going through the divorce, it was the first and only time I’d been relieved they were gone. But only because it meant they weren’t around to see how badly things turned out with Harrison. They would have been devastated to know I didn’t get the happily ever after they wanted for me when my dad walked me down the aisle.

Now I would give just about anything for them to have the chance to see how well Julian treated me. They never said anything bad about Harrison to me, but they hadn’t been happy when I left my job to work at the winery. Then only six months later, the car crash took them from me, and I didn’t have the energy to think about leaving the vineyard.

“Your mom would’ve flirted her butt off, and your dad would have had double the reason to want to brandish a shotgun.”

“He would’ve had to go out and buy one first.” He’d actually threatened to do just that when I went on my first date back during my freshman year of high school.

“Nah, he would have already bought one to shoot Harrison.”

“True.” I stared down at the ring on my right hand, the same one my dad had used to propose to my mom. “I’m glad you knew them so well.”

“Any time you want to reminisce, I’m your girl.”

I appreciated her offer because it was nice to talk about them with someone who understood. “I know, but sadly we’re out of time now because I’m at the restaurant.”

“Good luck!”

“Hopefully, I won’t need it.”

I thanked the driver before climbing out of the back. Then I took a few deep breaths to settle my nerves and headed inside. I’d giggled when Julian told me we were eating at Nobu because it reminded me of our second date, when he’d said he had considered taking me here. I could happily eat several of their dishes every day, especially the black cod with miso. But between music piped through the speakers and the crowd, it wasn’t the best place to go for conversation.

Julian mentioned it was one of Ellie’s favorite spots, so I didn’t voice my opinion about where we were going tonight. I just checked the wine list

online to see what champagne options they had since he said that was what she preferred. I wanted to do something special since tonight was a big step, so I called to order a bottle of the Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label Brut in advance.

The server was supposed to bring the chilled champagne to the table when we were seated, and Julian texted me a photo as I walked through the door.

JULIAN

Have I mentioned that I'm in love with the sweetest woman in the world lately?

Smiling, I typed back a quick reply.

ME

I may have heard something along those lines, but feel free to tell me again. I just got here.

After putting my phone back in my purse, I gave the hostess Julian's name.

"Right this way." I followed her toward the back of the restaurant. "Your party is here."

I met Julian's gaze as I approached the table, and he stood with a smile. My focus was entirely on him, so I barely noticed the reaction from his daughter and her husband when he pulled me close for a kiss. But then I turned and saw the shocked stares of two people I had never wanted to see again.

"This whore is your girlfriend, Daddy?" Brie shrieked.

Considering she slept with my husband when we were married, that was incredibly hypocritical of her.

And then my ex waded into the argument.

"What in the hell are you doing here, Celia?"

It wasn't the right time or place, but when I signed the divorce papers, I promised myself I'd never back down from my ex again. So I pasted on a smile and taunted, "You should be nicer to me, Harry. I might become your mother-in-law and your mistress's stepmom someday."

"Never," Brie yelled.

Julian gripped my arm and guided me a few steps away from the table. "Your ex is my daughter's husband?"

“Apparently.” I stared up at him, blinking back tears. “I had no idea. You always called her Ellie, but I only knew her as Brie.”

I had a bunch of other colorful terms Megan and I had called her, but I was never going to share those with him.

He raked his fingers through his hair. “Fucking hell.”

“Yeah, who knew the world was this small?”

Brie got up and marched over to us. “Are you seriously going to try to claim you didn’t know exactly who my father was when you targeted him?”

“I’m not—”

She didn’t let me finish before she turned her attention to Julian. “She’s jealous and bitter because Harry fell in love with me.”

“I meant it when I told you that you could have him,” I murmured.

Brie stomped her foot. “I refuse to stand here and listen to your lies. Either she leaves, or I do.”

Julian’s gaze darted between her and me, and I could see he was struggling with how to respond. Brie was horrible, but she was his daughter. “It’s okay.”

“None of this is okay,” Harrison growled, moving to stand next to his wife. “I won’t have Brie upset because you’re playing games.”

His defense of her, when he’d never stood up for me to anyone in all our years together, hurt, but not nearly as much as it would have even just three months ago. Falling for Julian had healed my broken heart, but I didn’t know if we could survive this.

“You know me better than that, Harrison.”

“See, Daddy.” Brie pointed at me. “She’s too busy flirting with my husband to care how much this hurts you and me.”

“I care very much about Julian’s pain and wouldn’t flirt with Harrison if he was the last man on earth.” I pulled my phone from my purse to order a rideshare. “So I’m going to make it easier for everyone and skip dinner. Please enjoy the champagne.”

Brie planted her hands on her hips. “Ugh, as if we need your cheap bottle.”

There was literally nothing I could say to make this better, so I turned and walked away. When I got to the door and Julian pushed it open, I realized he’d followed me. I stopped on the sidewalk and turned toward him. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” He clenched his fist at his side, and I wondered if it was because he wanted to reach out to me. “But I need to get back in there and see if I can calm her down.”

“I understand.”

“I’m glad one of us does.” He shook his head. “Because I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do. I love you, Celia. But she’s my daughter. I think I need to take a beat and figure out if there’s a way for us to move forward without destroying my family.”

“Okay.”

My rideshare pulled up, saving me from saying something I might regret later.

I understood why Julian wanted to take a step back from our relationship. The situation we’d found ourselves in was as complicated as it could get. And wrong on so many levels.

But it still hurt like heck that he chose Brie...even if she was his daughter.

As I returned to the table, I couldn't wrap my head around what had just happened. The woman I loved was gone, my daughter was crying, and her husband was glaring at me over her head. When I'd thought about the possible ways tonight could go wrong, I had never once imagined anything this awful.

"I can't believe you were dating that horrible woman, Dad." Ellie looked at me with accusing eyes. "When you told the hostess there were four of us, I assumed Grandma was coming."

I dropped onto my chair. "I didn't know."

"How could you not know?" Harry's voice was low. "She was my wife."

Celia hadn't shared much about the failure of her marriage with me, but what she'd said about her ex was enough for me not to be happy that he was my son-in-law.

I looked at Ellie, not him. "She took back her maiden name, and you never called her Celia."

Thinking about all the slurs she'd used whenever speaking about Harry's ex, I grimaced. Never in a million years would I have guessed the woman she'd been describing was my Celia.

Ellie's eyes filled again. "She almost ruined my life. She made Harry miserable and dragged out the divorce. The stress was awful, and you...you brought her to my favorite restaurant."

Her version of events didn't line up with how Celia had described her divorce. I could not make any of Ellie's accusations fit the woman who had given me a key and cried when I said I loved her. Who treated food like love and shared it with everyone she could.

"She ordered champagne, and then she left so you wouldn't have to look at her," I reminded them. "That is not a woman trying to ruin your night."

"It's an act." Ellie wiped her face. "She's jealous and wanted to hurt me. Ask Harry."

Harry put a hand on her shoulder. "We should go. She's upset."

"We're already here." I heard how flat I sounded.

"I couldn't possibly eat. I've lost my appetite."

Harry stood and tugged my daughter to her feet. The look he gave me over his shoulder as he led her away was furious. I wished I had someone to be angry with, but I didn't think Celia sought me out so she could hurt my daughter. I understood why Ellie was upset about her father dating her husband's ex. And blowing up at Harry wouldn't do me any good. It would just upset Ellie more.

But I wasn't happy that I'd sent Celia away only to wind up alone at the table.

The server cautiously approached. "Would you like me to pour the champagne, sir?"

The bottle was already open, but I didn't want to stick around after the spectacle we'd just made of ourselves. "No thank you, just the check."

"The champagne has already been paid for."

"Right." Celia had bought it because she wanted to make a good impression on my daughter, and I'd mentioned how much Ellie liked champagne. She was thoughtful like that, every day in so many ways.

And she had just gotten into a car because my grown daughter pitched a fit.

I dropped cash on the table for the tip and left the champagne sitting. The server could keep it or give the bottle to another table. I had bigger things to worry about.

I felt the stares follow me out the door, and I didn't care about that either.

When I got to my car, I sat with the engine off and stared down at my phone. It was not fair to ask Celia for anything after the way I had left her

on the sidewalk, but I sent a text anyway.

ME

Let me know you got home okay.

Her townhouse was only two miles down the road, so I waited. But the screen stayed dark, so I eventually put the phone down and drove home.

The house was quiet when I walked in. I tossed my keys onto the entry table and stopped to stare at the one she gave me for her place.

Things had been going perfectly for us before it all blew up tonight.

I headed into the kitchen to make a snack since dinner didn't happen, but when I saw all the leftovers that Celia had carefully portioned and put in the fridge for me, I couldn't bring myself to eat any of it right now. So I grabbed a bottle of bourbon instead, and poured myself two fingers on the rocks.

It burned going down, but I poured myself another glass when it was gone.

The phone rang while I was standing at the counter, but the name that flashed on the screen wasn't the one I wanted.

I almost let Courtney's call go to voicemail. Then I thought about Ellie in her car, crying, and I answered.

"What the hell did you do?" Courtney didn't wait for me to say a word before she started yelling. "She showed up here sobbing. Harry had to pull over because she couldn't breathe. You brought that woman to dinner, and you didn't even have the decency to warn her."

"I didn't know." I paced the length of the island because standing still made me feel worse. "I didn't know Celia was Harry's ex. If I had, I would have handled it differently."

"Handled it?" Courtney's laugh was devoid of humor. "Where was any of that energy when your little girlfriend told Harry she might be his mother-in-law someday?"

I closed my eyes. "Celia was blindsided. She said something she shouldn't have. Ellie also said stuff she shouldn't have. Neither of them was at their best."

"Don't you dare make this equal." Courtney's voice rose. "Ellie is twenty-one. She just got married. And you brought the woman who tried to destroy her into her favorite restaurant and expected her to smile over champagne."

“I wasn’t—”

“That woman is not a victim. She lost, and she’s trying to punish Ellie for winning.”

I shook my head. “That’s not the Celia I know.”

“You’ve been alone for a long time. I understand that you want company. But you do not get to use our daughter as the audience for your midlife crisis. Tell her it’s over before Ellie has to spend another day wondering if her father is going to keep that woman in his life.”

“Do not patronize me or tell me what to do. You don’t get a say when it comes to my life.” I heard the edge in my voice and didn’t pull it back. Unlike earlier when I had nobody to vent my anger on, Courtney had given me a target. Herself. “You know I love Ellie. That’s why you used her as a tool against me for so long. But I also love Celia.”

“You love her.” Courtney sounded incredulous. “You’ve known her, what, a few months? You do not choose the woman who hurt your daughter over your daughter.”

“I didn’t say I was choosing anyone.” I braced a hand on the counter. “Ellie is the one who chose to leave the restaurant after I told Celia I needed a beat.”

“You’re a fool,” Courtney spat. “Ellie is on my couch. Harry is pacing my kitchen. They’re talking about whether they can ever see you again if you continue your little fling with her. Is that the family you want? Your daughter staying away because you would not let go of a girlfriend who chose you to get back at her ex?”

“I will talk to Ellie when she’s willing to listen to me. I will not do it through you.”

“She doesn’t want to hear you.” Courtney’s voice dropped to a demanding hiss. “She wants her father to act like someone who gives a shit about her feelings. End it, Julian. Or stay out of her life until you do. Those are the options she has. I’m only telling you what she already said.”

“I’ll believe it when she tells me herself.” I was done. “Good night, Courtney.”

I hung up before she could lay into me again.

When my phone buzzed only a minute later, I assumed it was her rage texting me for hanging up. But it wasn’t.

CELIA

Home.

That one little word eased some of the tension in my shoulders. My relationships with my daughter and the woman I loved were a disaster, but at least she'd been kind enough to let me know she was home. Yet more evidence she was nothing like the catty bitch Ellie thought she was.

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When Harrison betrayed me, I didn't hesitate to call Megan. But this time, I wasn't sure I could get the words out. So I sent a text instead.

ME

Brie is Ellie, Julian's daughter.

Seeing the two nicknames so close to each other, I finally realized her real name must be Brielle. And she must've taken her mother's maiden name at some point because I knew her as Brie St. Clare, not Hayes.

The only photos Julian had of her were from years ago, and she looked so different now. His ex had given him a hard time about getting a copy of the photo of him and Ellie from the wedding even though he paid for the whole thing.

There had been no way for me to figure it out until it was much too late to protect my heart.

The phone rang before I had set it down.

"What do you mean Brie is Ellie?" Megan asked.

"I walked into the restaurant, and she was at the table. With Harrison."

Megan was quiet for a moment. Then I heard a drawer open and the jangle of keys. "Holy shit. I'm coming over."

"You don't have to."

"I'm already getting in the car." A door shut on her end. "There's no way I'm leaving you alone with this...this...trainwreck."

The word she finally landed on was unfortunately an accurate description of what happened tonight.

I sniffled. "Thanks."

"Did anyone know before you got there?"

"No." I sat on the edge of the couch. "Julian looked as wrecked as I felt. Harry was angry. And Ellie lost her mind, accusing me of seeking her father out on purpose to get revenge on her because I'm bitter."

"Bitter, hah," she echoed. "You have every reason to be, but that's just not you."

"I kinda wish it was," I murmured, slouching against the arm of the couch. "Maybe then I wouldn't feel like my heart was broken. Again."

"She's lucky you didn't target her father on purpose because that's the kind of comeuppance she deserves. Totally understandable to become an evil stepmother in this situation."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Considering Julian said he needed to figure out if we could move forward without destroying his family, I don't see us ever getting married."

"He actually said that after everything they did to you?" Megan's voice got quiet, which was never a good sign.

"She's his daughter."

"And you're the woman he said he loves." She huffed out a breath. "Sorry, I know my anger isn't helping. I'm ten minutes out."

She hung up before I could argue. I stayed on the couch and listened for her car. When she knocked, I let her in without a word.

Megan took one look at me and pulled me into a hug that I really needed. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"It still feels like I lost him." I pressed my palms to my eyes. "And I don't know if I can bounce back like I did with Harrison."

Megan's arm stayed around me. "You don't have to figure anything out tonight, but you're stronger than you give yourself credit for."

For the first time since seeing those two at the table, I let myself cry.

Megan did not let go until the tears dried up. When I finally pulled back, my face was a mess.

I let out a watery laugh. "I actually said the stepmother thing at the table after Harrison accused me of playing games. Only I topped it off with the warning that I could be his mother-in-law too."

"Oh my gosh, did you really?" she gasped.

“Yup.” I pressed my palm against my mouth to hold back another sob.

“Don’t look so horrified.” She winked. “You channeled your inner me.”

“Maybe I did.” I wiped my face with the heel of my hand. “But it wasn’t my finest moment.”

“It’s a good thing I wasn’t invited to dinner tonight because a lot worse would’ve been said.”

More tears streamed down my cheeks. “Yeah.”

“You’re allowed to be wrecked.”

I nodded because I didn’t trust my voice.

She got up and came back with water and a box of tissues. We sat on the couch until I couldn’t cry anymore, and there was a pile of tissues on the table.

“Okay, so does a pause warrant alcohol, ice cream, or both?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I think this calls for macaroni and cheese.”

“Your mom’s recipe?”

“Of course.”

She stood and tugged me to my feet. “Comfort food at its finest.”

When we were in the kitchen, she started pulling out the pot and pan I’d need while I grabbed the ingredients. It only took about half an hour for me to boil the pasta and make the sauce. But then we had to wait another thirty minutes for it to bake.

“Stay,” I requested when I saw the clock on the oven. “The guest room is already made up.”

“I was already planning on it.” She squeezed my hand. “Go change. I’ll pour the wine. White, right?”

I thought about the bottle I’d had delivered to the table at Nobu. “Actually, champagne would be best.”

“Hell yes.”

She rummaged through my wine rack and pulled out a bottle of Yellow Label Brut that was nearly as good a year as the one I didn’t even get a sip of before my dinner plans went to hell.

“That’s actually perfect.” I tilted my chin toward the freezer. “If you put it in there while the mac and cheese bakes, it’ll act like a blast chiller.”

“Will do.”

I went upstairs, changed into pajamas, and washed my face. When I came back down, Megan had glasses, plates, and forks out. And as soon as

the pan was out of the oven, she poured the champagne while I dished up bowls of my favorite comfort food for us.

Then we went into the living room and got comfy on the couch.

“To the bottle you actually get to drink,” she offered.

I touched my glass to hers. “And to not wasting it on people who call it cheap.”

We drank and ate, finishing the bottle and most of the pan. With my belly full and the alcohol in my system, my eyes grew heavy.

“Bed,” she ordered. “You need some sleep.”

She hugged me at the bottom of the stairs. I went up to the bed Julian had often shared with me, his masculine scent clinging to the air. Downstairs, I’d barely been able to keep my eyes open. But up here, I knew I wouldn’t sleep. The memories were too close.

So I stared at the ceiling for six hours, wondering if Julian was struggling too. Suppose being in his bed made him think of me. How much time he needed to figure out if he still wanted to be with me.

I didn’t have any answers when dawn broke.

There wasn’t any noise coming from the guest room, so I hoped that meant Megan had been able to sleep. I felt so bad that I’d interrupted her night, but I was also grateful to have a friend like her.

Quietly slipping downstairs, I decided this morning called for one of my famous waffle boards. I had the fresh berries, homemade warm chocolate sauce, freshly whipped cream, and cookie butter spread all ready when Megan woke up. By the time she joined me in the kitchen, two waffles were done, and coffee was brewed.

“Time to eat our feelings.”

It worked to distract me for a little while, as I felt like I was hanging in limbo, waiting to see what Julian decided. And what it would take for me to feel safe with him again.

Ellie was still ignoring my calls and texts the following morning. I'd barely slept and wasn't hungry, so I tried to distract myself by clearing out my emails. I didn't make much headway, but at least it was some kind of progress.

At ten o'clock, I tried calling my daughter again. She didn't answer.

Neither did Harry when I tried his number thirty minutes later.

Or Courtney, when I grew increasingly frustrated at eleven.

I was sent directly to voicemail each time, and my texts only showed as delivered, not read.

The contrast with how Celia handled my request for her to let me know she got home safely last night was glaring. After I asked her for time to figure my shit out, she owed me nothing. But that didn't stop her from texting me.

Because she was the kindest person mixed up in all this.

And it was starting to feel like I was making her pay for other people's mistakes.

At eleven thirty, I realized it could easily be months before Ellie would be willing to sit down and talk with me.

By noon, I was pulling into Celia's driveway.

Using the key she'd given me didn't feel right under the circumstances, so I rang the bell. Megan answered the door, and she glared at me. "If you're not here to confess your unconditional love and fix this, you can turn

your butt around and go home until you've managed to pull your head out of it."

"I—"

Whatever I'd been about to promise dried up when I heard Celia call, "Was that the door? Who is it?"

I nodded, and Megan reluctantly replied, "It's Julian."

"I guess we figured out a situation where you'd use his real name."

Celia's footsteps were slow as she walked through her living room. She looked like she had slept even less than I had last night. Her face was scrubbed clean, and purple smudges were under her red-rimmed eyes. Her skin was pale, and her dark hair was piled atop her head. She wore yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt, barefoot. And she'd never looked more beautiful.

"Hey."

"Hi," she whispered in a raspy voice.

"I can't with you two," Megan muttered before pulling me inside the townhouse.

My gaze was locked on Celia's face. "Are you okay with me being here?"

"I'm not okay with anything right now, but you not being here hasn't helped that at all yet."

It felt like her honesty stole the air from my lungs. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged.

"Listen." Megan pointed at Celia, then at me. "You guys are disgustingly sweet together. From what my best friend told me about last night, there's no way either of you could've known about your unfortunate connection before you fell in love. But you did. Right?"

Celia's lips were pressed into a flat line, but she nodded.

"I did," I murmured.

"Then don't throw it away." Megan put her shoes on and grabbed her bag. "I'll go so you can talk."

Celia threw her arms around her best friend for a long hug. Her shoulders shook a few times, and I worried she was trying not to cry. But her cheeks were dry when she pulled away. "Thanks. For everything."

"I'll always be here for you," Megan promised. "And thank you for feeding my soul with your food even while you were hurting."

I looked down at my shoes, my throat tight at the care the two friends had for each other. But Megan caught my attention when she passed me on her way to the door.

“One last thing. You’re both good people.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “The same can’t be said for those who’re being loud about all the reasons you two shouldn’t be together.”

Celia grimaced but didn’t disagree. Not that I blamed her since she had good reason to dislike Ellie, Harry, and Courtney. Even more than she most likely realized if what I suspected was true.

As soon as Megan left, Celia turned to me. “I guess we should probably talk.”

“Yeah.”

I followed her over to the couch but was careful not to sit too close, so as not to crowd her.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins. “This is weird, huh?”

“My mom would say it’s like one of her shows,” I mused, shaking my head. “Only I’m not sure the soap opera writers would’ve come up with a plot like this.”

Celia’s lips curved the tiniest bit. “If they had, then I really would’ve planned it so I’d be the villainess everyone loves to hate.”

Seeing the wounded look in her eyes, I knew she was thinking about the accusations Ellie and Harry had tossed at her last night.

“You’re too nice for that role.”

She shrugged. “I wasn’t feeling very nice when I taunted Harrison about becoming his mother-in-law.”

“Except you’re regretting what you said, aren’t you?” When she nodded, I added, “Even though he hurt you?”

“Hurt is putting it mildly.” She took a shuddering breath. “I haven’t talked about it with you much because I didn’t want to be the woman who always complains about her ex. But maybe if I’d said more, we would have—”

“Don’t blame yourself,” I interrupted. “No matter what happens next, I’m glad I had the chance to fall in love with you.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Julian.”

“Sorry.”

“I just don’t know what to do,” she whispered.

“How about we set the record straight because I’m pretty damn sure I was fed a load of bullshit during your divorce.” A muscle jumped in my jaw. “I just don’t know if Ellie believed everything she told me or if Harry was lying to her.”

“I don’t want you to hate me once you know the truth.”

I pressed a finger under her chin until she met my gaze. “About Ellie?”

Her eyes turned anguished as she nodded.

“That’s what I thought.” I brushed my thumb across her bottom lip before dropping my hand to my side. “But you’re the only one who seems worried about my feelings, baby. I couldn’t hate you when you love me so well.”

She reached for my hand and told me about discovering her ex-husband’s affair with my daughter. And the hellish six months leading up to her divorce being finalized.

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she reassured me.

“Graham Evans only took Harry’s case on my referral,” I explained.

“Oh, well then carry on with apologizing because it would’ve been helpful if his lawyer wasn’t quite so good.”

“I only made the call because my daughter told me she was pregnant and the baby’s father couldn’t marry her because his estranged wife refused to sign the paperwork.” When her eyes widened, I rushed to add, “Which I have already realized none of it was true. I just don’t know how much of the lie is Ellie’s doing.”

“Probably a lot,” she whispered. “Based on the texts I found, she knew he was married and not already going through a divorce when they started seeing each other. And negotiations were rough because Harrison didn’t want to pay the infidelity penalty in our prenup or have me file a wage claim against his family’s vineyard. Still, the settlement was finalized about as quickly as you can in California.”

I wished I’d asked more questions when Ellie first came to me about the situation, if only because I indirectly contributed to Celia’s suffering. “Wage claim?”

I felt even worse when she explained the five years she’d spent working for the Cromwells and how quickly Catherine and Edward kicked her to the curb when she walked out on their son for cheating on her. “And now they’re my daughter’s in-laws.”

“This is a very tangled web.”

I reached for her hand and stroked my thumb across her palm. “You and I stick to the center of our own little web, and we don’t let ourselves get pulled into anyone else’s drama.”

Celia looked skeptical. “What about Ellie?”

“I love my daughter, but she’s not the innocent party here. You are.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” she warned.

“Trust me, I’m well aware of the trouble Ellie can cause, especially when her mother is spitting poison in her ear.”

“I meant rebuilding trust between us.” She wrinkled her nose. “Although I guess I should probably be worried about them making things harder for us.”

I shook my head. “They’re my problem. Not yours.”

“Okay, we can handle it your way. For now.” She squeezed my hand. “But we’re back to going slow, sorry.”

“I have nobody to blame but myself.”

Not even my daughter, ex-wife, or son-in-law. Because I was the one who’d decided I needed to take a beat on our relationship only days after I told her I loved her. She had every right to make me prove myself again.

I didn't think about how bad the timing was until I walked into Serena and Hudson's kitchen on Monday afternoon. She took one look at my face and told her movie-star fiancé, "Take the bags from her."

As soon as my hands were free, she tugged me into the living room. After getting me situated on the couch, she handed me a throw blanket and went to make me some herbal tea.

When she pressed the mug into my hands, I lifted it close to my face to breathe in the steam. "Thank you."

"With how pale you are right now, I would've guessed you're sick. Except you wouldn't cook if you're contagious, and Julian sounded strange when I talked to him this morning. And when I asked him about you, he changed the subject. That is not a man who is fine."

I took a sip to buy myself a moment to decide how much I wanted to share. "His daughter is the woman my ex cheated with. I found out at Nobu on Saturday night when he introduced us to each other."

"I don't even know what to say to that."

I lifted the mug higher. "You should've brewed yourself a cup too."

"If I'd known you were going to drop a bombshell like that on me, I would have." Serena reached out to pat my knee. "It makes the time Hudson let his female best friend interfere with our relationship to the point where my sister and I hid at Château Marmont for more than a week seem a little less awful."

I remembered a lot of speculation about their relationship splashed all over the media a couple of years ago. “Only because he groveled and has been making it up to you ever since.”

“Yeah, but maybe Julian learned from him. Or Reid because he messed up too.”

I gave her more details about the destruction of my marriage and how my conversation with Julian went yesterday. “I don’t know how to be around him without wanting to fix it, but I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“My advice isn’t going to be easy, especially not with everything you’ve been put through,” she warned.

“Okay.”

“He said it was his to deal with, so let him.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I hate that you’re right.”

“It’s his daughter, son-in-law, and ex-wife,” she pointed out. “That makes them his problem, not yours.”

I blinked innocently. “Not even when the son-in-law is my ex-husband.”

“Nope, you just need to focus on what it will take for you to trust Julian again.” She shook her head with a sigh. “That’s going to be enough of a challenge.”

“Julian has his work cut out for him there,” I agreed.

She nudged my foot before standing. “It’s a good thing he’s got the brains to back up his confidence.”

“Why yes, I do,” Hudson teased as he came into the living room.

When he rested his hands on her shoulders, Serena tilted her head back to smile up at him. “I wasn’t talking about you.”

He bent down to brush his lips over hers. “I could’ve sworn I heard my name.”

“Only once.”

“As a cautionary tale.” I stood with my mug in my hands. “Which I’m going to be if I don’t get started in the kitchen soon. I need to shop for another client today, and I want to be done early enough to have dinner with Julian tonight. But I’m not working at top speed right now because I still need to catch up on some of that lost sleep from Saturday.”

“Fine. Go, cook.” Serena wagged her finger at me. “For your other clients and us. Julian should earn your food back, right along with your trust.”

“Harsh.” Hudson dropped onto the couch cushion I’d just left and pulled Serena onto his lap. “But if it gets me more of Celia’s food, then I’m okay with Julian suffering.”

Their banter made me smile as I got to work on the meal prep they’d asked me to do for this week. I got into the rhythm faster than I expected, so I was done around when I’d originally planned. After saying my goodbyes, I hit up three different stores for the ingredients needed for a client’s book club tomorrow. By the time I dropped it all off at her house, I felt like I was about ready to fall over.

I was thinking about calling Julian to cancel our dinner date when I parked in front of my house. But my internal debate ended when his car pulled up behind me.

I got out of my SUV and waited by the driver’s door for him to get out of his sports sedan. “You’re early.”

“I noticed the doorbell was quiet when I came over yesterday.” He pulled a package of batteries out of the inner pocket of his suit coat, along with a flathead screwdriver. “So I was going to swap the old ones out before I pick up dinner.”

That was such a Julian thing to do that I almost threw myself into his arms. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, baby.”

I ignored the flutter of butterflies in my belly and asked, “What were you planning to get for dinner?”

“Pizza.” He got on his knees, paying no attention to the dirt on his dress pants, so he was at eye level as he pried open the outdoor cover of the doorbell. “We haven’t done that since our fifth date, and I thought it might be a good way for us to have a no-pressure date tonight.”

“That actually sounds amazing.”

“Good.” He pulled out the old battery and replaced it with a new one.

“Not going to use your key?”

He shook his head. “Not until you tell me it’s really mine again.”

“Okay.” I liked that he didn’t assume we were going to pick up where we’d left off before the disastrous dinner, but it made me wonder about something. “What about the clicker to your garage?”

“Use it all you want.” He snapped the cover back and rang the bell, which was back to sounding normal again thanks to him. “I have the doorbell until the time is right.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“No rush.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Want me to run out and get the pizza, or is delivery okay?”

I appreciated that he left the decision up to me. “Delivery is fine. You’re already here.”

He dipped his chin in acknowledgment and tapped on his screen. “Margherita, plain cheese, or pepperoni?”

“Pepperoni.”

He ordered from the same place as before and paid when it arrived, smirking because the bell echoed through the house now. He carried it into the kitchen and set it on the counter, and I got out the plates and napkins. I grabbed him a soda when I got one for myself, and it felt like our usual rhythm just with a little more distance between us as we sat down to eat.

We didn’t talk much as we finished most of the pizza. He boxed the rest and put it in my fridge. “So you have a couple of slices tomorrow morning.”

I liked that he didn’t judge how much I enjoyed cold pizza for breakfast. “Thank you.”

“Thanks for letting me spend time with you tonight.” He helped rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, just like always. “It means a lot to me.”

I’d made the decision for me, but I was glad it was where he wanted to be.

I followed him to the door. After opening it, he turned toward me. “Pencil me in for any day, anytime, anywhere. I’ll make it work.”

“Breakfast tomorrow,” I blurted even though it hadn’t been my plan. “I’ll bring muffins to the office.”

“Text when you’re on the way. I’ll have a French toast latte waiting for you.”

I shut the door behind him and pressed my forehead against the hard surface while I stopped myself from flinging it back open to invite him to stay until morning.

Tonight had been nice, but Harrison and Ellie’s shadow loomed over us. Julian was going to have to deal with them at some point, while unequivocally taking my side if we were going to stay together.

The date I had planned for today was something I set up a month ago. I was taking a risk by not postponing it, because Celia might feel like I wasn't taking things as slowly as she wanted. But my gut told me she could really use this outing, so I went for it. I was okay with her being mad at me if it meant she got what she needed.

Her dark hair swirled around her head as we drove up the PCH with the windows down. "I'm going to look a mess when we get wherever we're going, but I'm enjoying the breeze too much to worry about it."

"Nobody is going to mind." I jerked my chin toward the bag in the back seat. "And I brought a hat you can put on."

She beamed a smile at me. "Thanks."

When we turned inland near the National Guard station, she rolled up the window before we got on the 101.

"Is the drive the date?"

I shook my head. "Only half of it."

"You're being very mysterious."

"You'll see why soon," I promised.

When I turned into the marina in Ventura Harbor, her eyes lit up. "Are we going on a boat?"

"Yes, one of my friends keeps his Boston Whaler here, and I booked a local captain to take us out to Santa Cruz Island."

“Wow,” she breathed, practically vibrating with excitement. “I haven’t been out there in ages. Thanks for setting all this up.”

“You’re welcome.”

After we parked, I led her down to the boat and helped her on.

“Welcome aboard,” Dave called from the cockpit. “Your supplies have already been loaded, so we can head out whenever you’re ready.”

Celia pressed her hands together and blinked up at me. “Now please.”

“Let’s go.”

He quickly showed us around the vessel, and we decided to use the molded forward lounge seat directly in front of the console, which had a removable table where I spread out the food and drink I’d provisioned from the marina.

As Celia sipped on sparkling water, I handed her the sunscreen. “You should put some on so you don’t burn.”

“You really thought of everything.”

I accepted the tube back when she was done. “I tried.”

The crossing to Santa Cruz Island took about an hour and a half, then the captain circled to the Painted Cave.

When he turned inland, Celia gasped. “Are we going in?”

“There’s no north swell or large breaking waves, and there’s plenty of clearance for us to go halfway into the first chamber,” Dave confirmed.

Celia reached out to grab my hand. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“You mentioned it was one of your favorite childhood memories.”

“I know.” She blinked her eyes rapidly and sniffled. “But there are only two people in my life who’d do something this thoughtful. Megan and you.”

“You deserve to always be treated like this.” I bent toward her and rasped, “I’m sorry I almost fucked this up. I hate that I hurt you.”

She pressed her hand against my cheek. “You were in an impossible situation, too. And it took you less than twenty-four hours to come knocking on my door. Considering everything, I think that’s understandable.”

“Thank you.” I turned my head to press a kiss into her palm. “I won’t make you regret opening your heart to me. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The transition from the ocean into the cave was visually stunning. It was as if Dave had just driven the boat into a cathedral carved entirely from

volcanic rock. I'd never been here before, but I enjoyed the view just as much as Celia. The walls had swaths of red and orange from iron oxides, purple and green from plant life, and white from mineral deposits. None of which I knew until she explained it from memory.

The tall entrance was just as impressive when we left.

"That was amazing." She twisted around to stare at the cave as we motored away. "Best date ever."

I had one more surprise in store for her, and I hoped it didn't change her opinion.

When we were about halfway back to Ventura Harbor, Dave cut the motor and dropped the anchor. Celia sat up and looked confused for a moment, then recognition dawned in her eyes.

"Is this—"

Her throat worked, and I knew she was having a hard time getting the words out, so I answered the unsaid part. "I checked with Megan, and she gave me the coordinates for where you scattered your parents' ashes. I thought if we were this close, you might want to take a moment."

"I do."

"I'll give you a moment."

I started to stand, but she grabbed my hand. "Stay, please."

Dave went down below, so it was just the two of us on the open water for about ten minutes. Then Celia turned to me with a watery smile. "I know we have rough days ahead of us with the Ellie situation, but I'm not going to step back graciously again. But I need to know that you won't either."

"I'm not going to make the same mistake again."

As the lawyer for many celebrities with messed-up family situations, I've helped others navigate tricky situations. It was different being on this side of things, but I'd learned my lesson the hard way last weekend.

"You're sure?"

I brushed my lips against hers and vowed, "They won't come between us again."

"Okay, then we're really doing this."

"We are."

Dave came back up to start the engine and raise the anchor, and we got comfortable sitting hand in hand. The ride back to the marina was gorgeous,

but my promise was tested as soon as I loaded the car and got into the driver's seat.

My phone rang, and Ellie's name flashed on the screen. I hadn't talked to her since she stormed out of Nobu, and she chose the absolute worst time to finally call me. The dad side of me wanted to pick up. Still, I knew my daughter well enough to accurately guess the conversation would mostly consist of her saying awful things about Celia and refusing to listen to reason.

I set my phone in the cup holder and started the engine. "Did you get enough to eat on the boat, or do you want to stop somewhere for an early dinner on the way home?"

"I'm not hungry." Her smile was soft as she gestured toward the phone when it rang again. "But I think you should get that."

"It's not going to go well," I warned.

"I know, but she's your daughter, and you've been waiting all week for this."

I didn't put the phone on speakerphone, tucking it between my ear and shoulder as I reached for Celia's hand on the other side. "Hello, Ellie."

"Mom is going to take Harry and me to Nobu for dinner tonight to make up for how that woman ruined it last time. I'm still mad at you, but I thought you might want to join us so we could talk."

There was so much wrong with what she'd just said that it was hard to pick a place to start. "I have no interest in having dinner with your mother."

I could practically see Ellie's pout as she complained, "I don't understand why you have such a problem with her."

"And I don't see why you have an issue with Celia when you and Harry are the ones who lied and cheated. She's the injured party, not you."

Celia slammed her hand over her mouth to cover her pleased gasp.

Ellie's reaction was on the other side of the spectrum, a piercing screech that left my ear ringing. "She must be great in bed if you're taking that whore's side over your own daughter."

"I love her, Ellie. She makes me happy. Don't you want that for your dad?"

"Not with her!"

I heard Courtney yell in the background, and that was enough for me to end the call. When I turned back to Celia, tears were streaming down her

cheeks, and I knew they were as much for me as they were for her. Because I'd fallen in love with one of the kindest people I'd ever met.

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I could barely see him through my tears. “Ellie is never going to accept me in your life, and I don’t want to be the reason you lose your daughter.”

“You’re the only one not making me choose,” he growled.

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed his hand. “I can’t even say I wish I’d known who Ellie was to you when we met because I don’t regret falling for you. Just that it’s put us all in such a terrible position.”

His blue eyes softened. “You’re being much kinder than most people would be in this situation.”

“Ranting and raving isn’t going to fix anything.”

“That positive outlook is a big part of why I fell for you,” he admitted. “And why I know you’re the only one telling the truth about what really happened.”

I didn’t see what good would come from telling him he’d bashed his daughter, so there wasn’t much else I could say. “Then let’s go home and not let that call ruin what was otherwise the best date of my life.”

“I’d love that.”

By the time he pulled into the garage and killed the engine, I had made a decision. “I don’t need to take it slow. I love you. You love me. That’s what’s important, and I trust you to remember that we’re sticking to the center of our own web.”

“Outside drama doesn’t touch us,” he echoed his words from last weekend.

“Agreed.”

Julian came around and opened my door. He offered his hand, and I took it. But as soon as my feet hit the concrete, he swept me up into his arms.

“I can walk.” But it didn’t stop me from winding my arms around his neck.

“I know.” He kissed my temple and carried me inside. “I like having you in my arms.”

He headed straight for the stairs and into the primary bath. The room was already warm from the afternoon sun, and he set me on the counter just long enough to turn on the shower. While steam gathered, he came back and stood between my knees.

“Still with me?”

“Yes.” I tugged at his shirt. “I have been all day. You defending me just cemented what I already knew.”

He pulled the shirt over his head. “I won’t ever treat you like the thing I might have to give up again. You’re not.”

I kissed him before I got weepy again, and it was all the encouragement he needed to claim my mouth until neither of us could see straight. My legs were shaky when he helped me out of my clothes, stripped off the rest of his, and led me into the shower.

The spray hit my shoulders until he turned me so it beat down on him instead. We hadn’t been naked together like this for a full week, so we explored each other’s bodies as though it had been much longer.

His mouth found the curve where my neck met my shoulder, then his hands slid over my ribs, across my waist, and over the flare of my hips. He didn’t rush, learning me again.

I pressed back into him and felt how hard he was, and the sound he made sent a sensual shiver up my spine. “Julian.”

“I’ve got you.” His palm came around and cupped me, two fingers sliding through where I was already wet from more than the shower. “Let me feel you fly apart for me, baby.”

I braced a hand on the tile while he worked me with a patience I didn’t share. “Please.”

“I’ll always give you what you need.”

His thumb circled my clit, and two of his fingers curled inside me. His mouth was at my ear, his breath hot against my damp skin. “You’re so

fucking beautiful. Come for me.”

Waves of pleasure crashed over me, and I only managed to keep upright because his arm wrapped around my stomach. He held me through the trembles, pressing open-mouthed kisses to my neck and shoulder.

When I finally caught my breath again, I turned in his arms and reached down to wrap my hand around his hard-on. “We need a bed. It’s been too long. I want you.”

“Shower first.” He nipped at my shoulder. “Let me wash the salt out of your hair, then I won’t let you out of my room until we have to come up for air again.”

I shifted so my back was against the water, but we were still pressed together. Then I leaned my head back to wet my hair. “Ready for shampoo.”

His thick fingers worked the lather through my locks, gently rubbing my scalp until I was practically melted into a puddle on the shower floor. I didn’t know getting your hair washed could be so sexy. And the way he tipped my chin so the soap didn’t get in my eyes made it sweet at the same time.

When the suds were fully rinsed, I slid my hand down his chest. His dick was heavy in my fist.

He let me stroke him twice, then caught my wrist. “If you keep that up, we won’t make the bed.”

“Rinse your hair, and nothing is stopping us from getting into yours right now.”

He carefully swung me around and shook his head under the spray. Then he shut the water off and toweled me off as best he could while also kissing each place the towel swiped.

We left a trail of damp footprints into his bedroom, and he tossed the wet towel toward the bathroom without caring where it landed. He laid me down on sheets that smelled like him, and he was careful not to give me too much of his weight when he crawled on top of me.

“Fucking hell, I meant to restock the condoms,” he admitted, pressing his forehead to mine. “With everything that happened, I forgot.”

I laughed, wondering if this would be an ongoing thing for us. But I didn’t mind overly much. “You brought me on the most thoughtful date ever and forgot condoms.”

“Terrible pattern.” His hips settled between my thighs, the crown of his dick pressed against my drenched core. “I’ll grab the jumbo pack

tomorrow.”

I wrapped my legs around him. “I don’t want to wait.”

“Neither do I.” He kissed me again. “Tell me if anything is too much.”

“It won’t be.”

His eyes remained locked on mine as he pushed in. The stretch was familiar and new at once, and I breathed through it, feeling close to him in a way I never had before.

He waited for me to adjust until I wiggled my hips and urged him. Then he moved, giving me long strokes where every inch of his hard length dragged in and out of my tight heat.

His hand found mine on the pillow, and he interlaced our fingers. There was nothing frantic in the way he was taking me. Julian was showing me his love with his body.

“You feel like home,” he murmured against my mouth.

“Don’t make me cry during sex.”

“Too late.” He kissed the corner of my eye. “I’ve got you.”

I met him thrust for thrust. “Julian.”

“That’s it, baby. Tell me what you need.”

“Harder.”

He gave it to me while still cherishing my body. When I was close, his thumb found my clit again. The second orgasm hit deeper, and I came with my face in his neck and my cries echoing off the walls.

He followed a few strokes later, buried himself all the way, and spilled into me with a groan. “Fuck, Celia. Missed you so damn much.”

“Never again,” I whispered, believing we were stronger after how we’d been tested.

When we both caught our breaths, he gently pulled his dick out of me and rolled to his side. Pulling me against his chest, he buried his face in the crook of my neck and ran his fingers through my hair. “That was even better than I remembered.”

I cuddled closer and murmured, “It was only a week.”

“Seven days when I didn’t know if I’d ever have you like this again.”

I traced the line of his shoulder. “Sounds longer when you put it like that.”

His arm tightened. “We’re here together now. I’m not spending another night in this bed wondering if I already lost you.”

“You didn’t.” I lifted my head so he could see my eyes. “And I don’t want you to feel like you need to keep proving yourself to me. It’s forgiven. We’re moving on.”

He rolled me under him, his dick already stirring again. “I can think of one way I’m not done showing you.”

I laughed, but the sound turned into a gasp when he kissed his way down my body. His mouth teased both of my breasts, then his hands spread my thighs so he could make me come again.

When he finally slid back into me, my world had narrowed to only him.

“I love you.” He said it against my mouth, over and over again until I believed it in my bones.

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The week after our boat outing was boring in the very best way. No clients with fires I needed to put out. Celia and I were together every night, but we kept to ourselves instead of going on any more dates. Ellie was back to ignoring me, but so was Courtney, which was a plus.

I made it all the way to Friday afternoon until things went sideways. I was thumbing through resumes for a new junior associate when Stewart buzzed me.

“The publicist from the Rivera matter is on the line, Lucy Blake. She says it’s urgent.”

I closed the file. “Put her through.”

She was in crisis mode. “Someone is shopping a video. They claim it’s Celia Gardner. Explicit. They’re asking for five figures, and they’re not being careful about who they’re calling. How I ended up on their list is a mystery, but I got the pitch twenty minutes ago. I told them I needed to see a sample before I could take it to a client, but several of mine have used her as a private chef.”

I’d gotten calls like these before, where I was the lawyer who helped someone buy a video so it was never released. But Celia still blushed sometimes when I talked dirty. She met her ex when she was young, and she’d already been proving herself in a career that didn’t offer much downtime.

Agreeing to a sex tape didn't sound like a decision she'd make lightly. So either someone she had trusted—presumably the piece of shit married to my daughter—had not kept the video private or it wasn't her. Both options meant she'd been betrayed.

"You have the sample," I managed.

"Thirty seconds," she confirmed. "Female subject's face is clear. The rest is not subtle. I haven't opened it past the first frame. I thought you should decide since Serena Watts mentioned you're dating."

Thank fuck Serena liked to brag about her matchmaking skills, or I might not have found out about this before it was too late. "Send it."

"Sent, the whole email so you're in the loop on everything I have."

"Thank you, Lucy. I owe you a favor."

She paused for a moment, considering my offer. "As much as it pains me to say this, I'm not going to claim a marker for this. I wouldn't feel right about it."

Her answer earned me a lot of respect. "Okay, please let me know if you hear anything else while I'm taking care of this."

"Will do."

I locked the door before I opened the email. Stewart did not need to walk in on this.

The file was labeled with a date and a seemingly random string of numbers. It had been sent to Lucy from a Gmail account that sounded generic. The ask was exactly what she described—fifty thousand dollars to buy the exclusive rights. The firm kept a slush fund for cases like this, so I could easily purchase the video.

First, I needed to open it to know what we were dealing with.

The first frame was her face. Same mouth I kissed that morning. The green eyes I knew in every light. My stomach twisted, and I was about to close the video because I didn't want to invade her privacy by watching a sex tape she might've filmed.

Except her hair was the same length as it was now. Her face looked around the same age. She hadn't been with anyone but me since the divorce, and that wasn't me in that bed.

Then she moved.

I knew how Celia moved in a bed. The way her back arched when I got the angle right. How her hips rolled instead of jerked. The small hitch in her breath before she came. The dip in her waist under my hand.

None of that matched.

I stopped playing at twelve seconds because I did not need to see the rest. Then I closed the laptop and sat with my hands flat on the desk until the urge to throw it against the wall passed.

Someone had taken the woman I loved and made a deepfake sex tape that they were trying to sell. No way in hell was I going to allow that to happen.

They were about to find out the hard way that they'd fucked with the wrong woman.

I did not call Celia yet. She'd have questions I needed answers to.

I pulled up a contact I had used for clients a few times. A man who did not advertise or accept jobs from anyone he didn't know without a referral.

"What do you need, Hayes?"

"I have a deepfake. Face of a woman I care about. Body is not hers. Someone is shopping it for fifty thousand. I need it killed, and I need to know who made it." My words came out choppy because I was barely holding on to my anger.

"Send me what you have. I'll run the metadata and an analysis of the video. Give me an hour."

"You have forty minutes." That was how long it would take me to get to Celia's townhouse.

"Understood."

I was five minutes from her townhouse when the phone lit. I answered on the speaker and kept my eyes on the road. "You were right. The lighting doesn't match the room. The shadows under the collarbone are from a different source. Whoever made this used a free tool and didn't clean the edges."

"Seller?"

"Anonymous. Gmail created the day they sent the pitch. Crypto wallet that has never been used before this. No prior listings. No watermark. No attempt to hide the IP on the first email. They used a public network. Coffee shop in Beverly Hills. Sloppy."

I slowed for a light. "Amateur."

"Or someone who wanted it to look like one. My bet is a grudge with a credit card and a bad idea."

That description fit three people I knew, but I hoped like hell it wasn't connected to my daughter in any way. "Can you kill the offer?"

“I can flag the wallet and the Gmail so the money and messages are rerouted to me. But I can’t stop them from posting it themselves if they decide the money isn’t worth the wait.”

“Send me everything you have.”

“Already in your inbox.”

“Thanks.” My hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Then see if you can get the video from the coffee shop for the day the emails started going out.”

“Won’t do much good without something to compare against.”

“Pull photos of my daughter, ex-wife, and son-in-law.”

He let out a low whistle. “Fucking hell. I’ll get right on that.”

I ended the call as my car pulled in front of her townhouse. Then I got out. She needed to hear it from me.

She’d told me just last night that I could use the key she’d given me, but I rang the bell. She opened the door with a smile that died when she saw my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone is trying to sell a video that’s supposedly of you. A fake. I’m already killing it.”

She went still, and the color left her face. “I didn’t—”

“I know.” I stepped inside and shut the door behind me. “I watched just enough to know the body isn’t yours. I know how you move. I didn’t come over to accuse you of anything, and even if you had made a sex tape, I would’ve made sure you were the only one who had any remaining copy.”

Her hands were shaking. “How did you find out?”

“Publicist named Lucy Blake got the pitch.” I pulled her against my chest and explained how everything had gone down.

Her breath hitched, then she nodded.

“You’re not alone in this,” I promised.

The video was still for sale, but she had my considerable resources at her disposal, and that was the only part I could control.

She tilted her head back to meet my gaze. “Okay, this is not how I saw today going, but it sounds like you’ve handled situations like this before?”

“More than I care to admit.”

“Then I’m going to trust you to handle this. I don’t want to see the video. I just want to know the name once you have it.”

Celia’s faith in me soothed some of my fury, while also making me feel even more protective of her. “You’ll have it right after I do.”

“Even if...” She trailed off, unable to say what I was already thinking.

“Yes, no matter who it is. I won’t hide anything from you,” I promised.

“I can live with that.” She tugged on my wrist. “But my patience is going to require cookies. Lots of them. Come be my taste tester.”

There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation in her as she led me into the kitchen, told me to sit on the stool at the end of the counter, and fed me cookies until my belt felt too tight. Even in this dark hour, her light shone through. And I wasn’t going to let anyone dim it. No matter who they were.

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I stood at the counter with a bowl of batter I did not need. I'd baked more cookies than everyone in the entire row of townhouses could eat. Now I was moving onto cakes. But it felt too quiet whenever I stopped.

Julian sat at the small table with his laptop open, the screen angled away from me. Neither of us had mentioned the video since last night, but I felt it in the room with us. But if the person who did this had been hoping to tear us apart, their strategy went horribly wrong.

I was only upright because he never hesitated. He only watched enough to confirm it was fake. And he'd been telling the truth when he said he would've bought the video if it had been real so nobody else would have any copies out there.

Julian had stumbled a little under extreme circumstances, but not this time. He was proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that I could trust him, handling the entire situation while I marathon cooked to keep calm.

My hands moved because it was the only way they stopped shaking. I cracked an egg, and the shell stuck to my thumb. I wiped it on a towel and kept going. The mixer was loud enough to cover the sound of Julian typing. When it stopped, the batter was smooth. I scraped the sides of the bowl, poured it into the pan, and set the timer for thirty minutes.

We hadn't left my townhouse since he showed up almost twenty-four hours ago. I hadn't gone online or called anyone. Not even Megan.

Around three, my phone rang for the first time. I was filled with dread as I padded across the room to glance at the screen. “It’s just Trevor. One of my clients. His team is away this weekend, so he’s probably checking in to make sure I’ll be at his house tomorrow to do meal prep so he has food waiting in the fridge when the team lands at LAX.”

“You don’t need to run your calls past me, baby.”

“Sorry.” I ducked my head as my cheeks filled with heat. “I’m jumpier than I realized.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about.”

I took a deep breath and called Trevor back. “Hey, sorry I didn’t get to my phone fast enough.”

“No worries. I’m headed to Miami for an away game tomorrow, but I need you to double my portions on the meal prep.”

“Double?” I already made him a ridiculous number of calories per day.

“Or maybe do the second batch as halves since she won’t eat nearly as much as me.”

“Sure thing.” I had to press my lips together to stop myself from asking about the woman I’d be cooking for.

I only had more questions when he added, “And don’t tell anyone. I can’t have it getting out that she’s staying with me.”

“My lips are sealed.” And this wasn’t even the juiciest secret I was keeping. That was my deepfake sex tape.

“Thanks.”

He hung up, and I updated my shopping list for tomorrow, debating if I should just use a grocery delivery service. I didn’t want to get paranoid and wonder if the person who was trying to ruin me was following me too.

Just as my thoughts started to spiral, the doorbell rang. My hand froze on the oven handle. Julian was already up, striding through my home to open the door before I could decide whether to answer it.

Megan stood on the step with a grocery bag in one arm and the look of a woman who was ready to kick someone’s butt.

My eyes widened. “You know?”

“I called her,” Julian explained. “I wanted your best friend here in case you need her when the name comes through. It should be soon.”

“Thank you,” I managed.

The bag rustled when Megan shifted it. “He earned some brownie points for filling me in so you don’t have to.”

“I’ll take them.” Julian kissed the top of my head as he walked back into the kitchen.

Megan and I followed him. She set the bag on the counter and pulled me in for a much-needed hug. I held on longer than I meant to.

Megan whistled when she saw the counter. Cookies covered just about every surface—chocolate chip, oatmeal, and brown butter chocolate chunk, and many more.

“You stress-baked for an army,” she murmured.

My best friend didn’t need to ask if I was all right. She already knew I wasn’t. So she opened the bag and started putting the groceries away, giving me another slice of normal.

Once she was done, she walked down the row of cookies. “Which ones are the salted caramel?”

I pointed, and we both took one. We stood at the counter and chewed while the oven timer counted down. When I pulled the cake out, the top was cracked. I set it on the rack and started to make the frosting.

Julian’s phone buzzed against the table. He answered and put it on speaker before I even looked up from my mixing bowl.

The man on the other end did not waste words. “Coffee shop footage matched one of the photos you provided. It’s your daughter.”

Ellie.

I set the spatula down and realized my first thought was not about the video. It was about the man sitting in my kitchen.

I loved Julian, and she was his daughter.

His tech guy had only been able to figure out it was her because Julian had given him a photo of Ellie to check against.

When I looked up, his gaze was already locked on my face. He didn’t rush to defend her. He just closed the laptop and set the phone face down. Then he waited.

“I need a minute,” I managed.

“Okay.” Julian stood and started to walk out of the kitchen. Then he stopped in the doorway. “I’m not leaving unless that’s what you really want. But I can give you space.”

I shook my head and gestured toward the couch in the living room. He went and sat down. Megan pulled me in for a hug that was tighter than the one she gave me when she got here.

“I have a shovel in the trunk,” she murmured against my hair. “Ride or die. Always.”

“Love you, Megan.”

She let go, and I climbed the stairs. After locking the bathroom door, I splashed cold water on my face. It didn’t really help except to wake me up a little.

If one of my friends told me this was a plot from a book they were reading, I would’ve said it was too unrealistic. But my ex-husband’s mistress really had tried to sell a deepfake sex video of me. And the man I’d fallen head over heels in love with was her father.

Julian had done everything right since he found out about the video. He had proven that he was ride or die for me too.

I dried my face and went back down. Julian was still on the couch, and I sat next to him. Our shoulders touched.

“I don’t blame you for what happened.”

His hand found mine, and his shoulders slumped. “I’m so fucking sorry, baby.”

“Hey.” I climbed on his lap and pressed my forehead to his so we were staring into each other’s eyes. “This is not your fault. She could have decided to target me for being Harrison’s ex, even if you and I had never met.”

“She tried to hurt you.” His hands gripped my hips. “Again. In the cruelest way possible. The little girl whose hair I braided turned into the kind of woman who sleeps with a married man and then torments their ex-wife because she somehow thinks she’s the wronged party.”

“Then be sad for that, but don’t be mad on my behalf. I’m okay because you made sure I would be.”

The woman Ellie had tried to destroy was sitting here, telling me she was okay because I had made sure of it. I didn't know what to do with that kind of grace. A recurring theme in my life with Celia.

I had spent a decade not wanting anything serious because of how selfish Courtney had been, but my pain was worth it because I'd come out the other side with this incredible woman at my side.

"Thank you."

She kissed me, then pulled back as if to check that I was still with her.

"I'm okay, baby."

She stroked her finger over the crease in my brow. "Maybe not yet, but you will be."

I set her on the cushion beside me and stood so I could pace.

"The video is a crime. It's not one with mandatory reporting for my license. So the choice is yours." Her hand stayed on my thigh, and she looked so steady that I confessed, "Even if it were required, I would only call it in if you wanted me to. And be honest. I'm not going to be mad at you either way."

She sighed. "Go ahead."

I had contacts in the LAPD, so I knew exactly who to call. One of the detectives had done a great job and was discreet while handling a corporate leak for one of the studios.

He answered on the second ring. "Walker."

“Good afternoon, detective. This is Julian Hayes. I have evidence on a revenge porn, cyber harassment case.”

“One of your clients?”

“No.” I met Celia’s gaze. “The woman I intend to marry someday.”

Her eyes widened, and Megan did a little cheer in the kitchen doorway. Describing Celia that way accomplished two things. My name would be attached to hers, and that carried a certain amount of power in legal circles. And it made clear to Celia that I wasn’t going anywhere without her.

“Damn, someone dug themselves a hole that’ll land them in prison.”

That was putting things mildly, considering the situation. “My daughter is the suspect.”

I gave him a rundown on everything my tech guy found as well as Ellie’s potential motives.

“She’s at her mother’s address?”

“Yes.” I rattled off the street number and name.

“We’ll be there within the hour.”

I hung up and told Celia what Walker had said. Then I grabbed my keys and added,

“I want to be there when they take Ellie.”

“I’m coming too,” she insisted.

“Make that three,” Megan called, rushing outside with us.

It took us an hour to drive to Beverly Hills. When we pulled onto Courtney’s street, two unmarked cars were already at the curb. I parked a house down and cut the engine.

Celia’s fingers tightened around mine, and Megan leaned between our seats. “I’m sorry, but your daughter is about to find out that when you play stupid games, you win stupid prizes.”

As if on cue, Detective Walker opened the front door.

I got out of the car, and for the first time, I was too distracted to think about opening Celia’s door for her. I was staring as Ellie came out of the house first, hands cuffed in front of her, head down. Courtney and Harry followed the officers, both of them talking at once.

Celia circled my vehicle to stand on my right, and Megan stood on the other side of her as we watched the situation spiral even further out of control.

“This is a mistake,” Courtney snapped. “You can’t just haul her off like this.”

Harry stayed close to Ellie's shoulder. "We'll call a lawyer. Don't say anything."

Ellie stopped on the curb and lifted her arms to gesture at Courtney. "My mom helped. She knew about the video."

Courtney's face went tight. "I can't believe you ratted me out. I didn't tell anyone that you faked the pregnancy to get Harry to marry you and then lied about having a miscarriage."

Harry took a step back from Ellie. His mouth opened and closed several times before he managed to shout, "You tricked me into marrying you?"

The officers mostly ignored him as they slapped cuffs on Courtney too.

I understood his shock because it mirrored mine in many ways. Ellie had talked me into paying for her wedding and getting Harry a great divorce attorney by using a fake pregnancy. Then she'd tried to imply the stress Celia allegedly caused was the reason she lost the baby.

I had thought about getting her a lawyer and urging her to take a plea deal because the evidence was so strong, but there was no rescuing her from the depths she had sunk into on her own.

Harry just stood there shaking his head until he looked up and saw Celia beside me. He started toward us at a run, his shoes slapping the pavement.

"Celia. Please. I didn't know. She lied to me. We can fix this. Just give me a chance."

Celia waited until he stopped a few feet away. "What did you just say? Because I definitely couldn't have heard you correctly."

Megan bumped her elbow against Celia's arm. "It sounded an awful lot like he was begging you for a second chance, just like I predicted when you told me he was cheating with a girl fifteen years younger than him."

"Yeah, but you didn't predict this," Celia pointed out.

Megan shrugged. "I don't think anyone could've seen this coming."

"But I can certainly enjoy watching it all go down in flames." Celia smiled. "It seems like everybody is experiencing the consequences of their own actions today. Can't say I'm sad that you are too."

"Celia, please," Harry begged. "It was just—"

"Not my problem. Enjoy living with your parents." She waved goodbye at him. "I'm going to sue everyone involved. That includes your wife. Which means you're screwed."

Harry's face went pale. He looked past her at the officers loading Ellie into the car, then back at Celia. "You can't do that. The settlement already

took more than it should have. My parents are going to lose their minds when this hits the papers.”

That only made her smile bigger. “Couldn’t have happened to anyone who deserved this more.”

Detective Walker called for Harry to move. His shoulders slumped, and he finally turned and walked toward the house without looking at either of us.

“All those cookies you baked, and you didn’t think to make a bag of popcorn,” Megan chided. “I really could’ve used some right about now.”

“I have some at my house,” I offered.

Both women turned to look at me with wide eyes.

Megan shook her head with a laugh. “Sexy lawyer can make jokes.”

“I thought you weren’t going to call him that to his face,” Celia muttered.

“Sorry, it sounded better in my head.” Megan shrugged and waved at the cop cars. “And I figured we could use something to make us laugh after all that.”

Celia leaned into my side. “Yeah, that escalated quickly.”

It was horrible timing, but I decided to ask anyway because all the shit that went down had made it clear to me that I wanted to keep Celia close. “As long as things are moving fast around here...want to move in?”

“To your house?” she sputtered, eyes going wide. “Is this a serious question? Or a knee-jerk reaction to a super crappy day?”

“How is today crappy at all?” Megan asked. “Everyone who deserved comeuppance just got it.”

Celia tipped her head toward me. “Do I really need to remind you that Julian’s daughter was just arrested?”

“Oh yeah, right.” She leaned around Celia and winked at me. “But I’m pretty sure you can turn his day around by agreeing to move in with him.”

Those best friend brownie points she mentioned earlier paid off right away because Celia turned to me and murmured, “Going along with the theme of everyone getting what they deserve today...yes, I’ll move in with you.”

EPILOGUE

CELIA

Julian kept one hand on the wheel and the other on my thigh while the hills rolled past the windows. I had my phone open to the calendar and was laughing as I deleted meetings that Megan had tried to add. “Oh my gosh, she literally put ‘drink a glass of wine’ on here ten times.”

“We’re touring five vineyards in seven days,” Julian pointed out. “Ten might be on the low side.”

“Ten a day,” I clarified as I jabbed my finger against the screen.

“Only if you’re spitting while you’re tasting.”

I shifted in my seat to grin at him. “You know I’m not a spitter, honey.”

His deep laughter filled the car, and I leaned back in my seat to enjoy the rest of the drive. This was the first vacation we’d taken together, but we’d been living together for six months, so we already spent all of our time together. But it still never seemed like enough.

I reached over and covered his hand where it rested on my leg. He turned his palm up and threaded our fingers together. We stayed like that as we wound our way through wine country.

The entrance to my least favorite winery in the world came up on the right.

“Oh my gosh, Harrison’s parents don’t own the vineyard anymore.”

Julian’s foot eased off the gas so I could take the new sign in. The old stone pillars were still there, but the gate had been painted, and the family crest was gone. A new name had replaced it.

I watched the sign slide past the window. "Did you know?"

"I might've heard some things." He squeezed my hand. "And chose this route so you could see for yourself."

He brought the car back up to speed and kept driving while I twisted around to look one more time with a soft laugh. "You always give me the very best gifts."

His thumb brushed over my knuckles. "I didn't buy the winery, baby."

"Ugh, no." I shivered. "Don't even joke about that. The place holds too many bad memories for me."

"Don't worry, you'll like the other surprise I have in store for you."

I rubbed my hands together. "Will you tell me if I guess?"

"Nope."

"Aw, c'mon," I complained. "That's no fun. You've got to give me a fighting chance to figure it out at least."

He shook his head. "This time, the surprise is going to stay a surprise, unlike your Christmas presents."

"It's not my fault I stumbled across them while cleaning." I pasted on my most innocent expression. "Even if I had to climb a ladder to reach that shelf in your home office closet."

"Trust me, baby. This'll be better as a surprise."

I'd trust Julian with anything, so my answer was easy. "Okay."

Luckily, he only made me wait until that evening to find out what he planned.

The private table where we shared a romantic dinner sat under string lights on the patio of a winery neither of us had ever visited until this trip. I stroked a finger down the petal of one of the violas in the vase of flowers in the center. "You ordered these special, didn't you?"

"Yes," he confirmed with a grin. "But I can't guarantee these are organic, so it's good you didn't decide to garnish your scallops with them tonight."

I tugged a petal off the flower and tossed it at him. "Darn, missed opportunity."

"Maybe this will help." Julian poured the last of the champagne into both glasses and set the bottle aside.

I lifted mine for a toast, and the light caught something at the bottom of the glass. I held it higher and realized a ring rested against the curve of the crystal. "Oh, Julian. Is this...?"

“Yes.”

My eyes filled with happy tears as I set the glass down carefully so the champagne wouldn't spill. Julian reached across the table and fished the ring out with two fingers. He wiped it on the edge of the tablecloth and held the diamond solitaire between us.

“I want the rest of my life with you. Starting whenever you're ready.”

The tears kept coming, but I was smiling when I answered. “Yes. Soon.”

He slid the ring onto my finger, and it fit like it was made for me. Which it probably was, knowing Julian.

I stood, rounded the table, and climbed into his lap right there under the lights. His arms came around me. “Happy?”

“More than I could've ever imagined I could be.”

Find out what's going on with Trevor and his mystery woman (aka: teammate's soon-to-be-ex wife) in [Tied by Deception!](#)

The comeuppance isn't over... see how Courtney and Ellie are faring in prison in this [extra epilogue](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Romance author of love stories with heroes who mess up & heroines who make them beg. ❤️



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