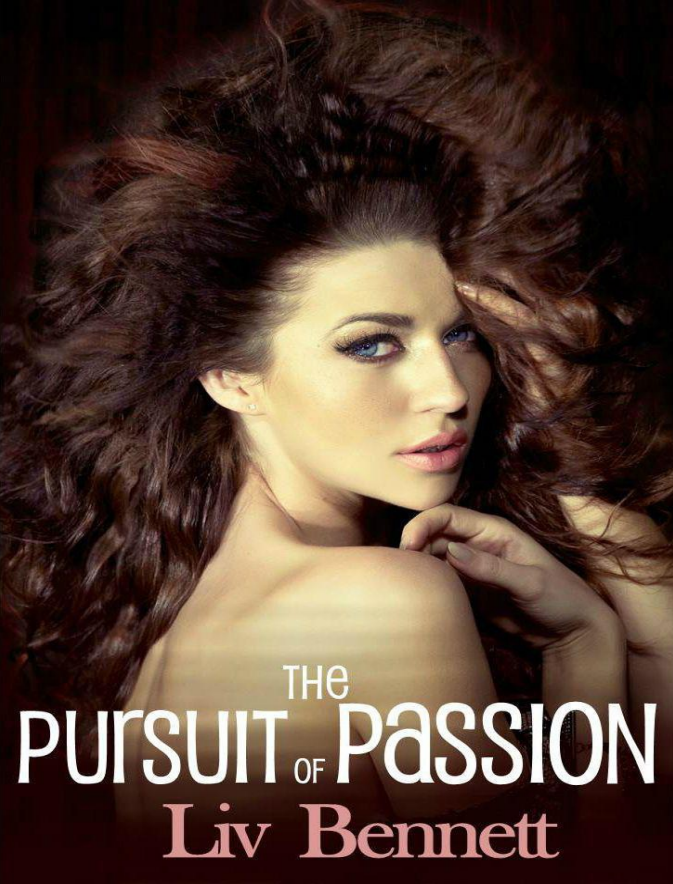




THE
PURSUIT OF PASSION
Liv Bennett

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by

Liv Bennett

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THE PURSUIT OF PASSION

Adam Garnett has been known for his utterly good looks, brilliance at closing multimillion-dollar business deals, and failed attempts at seducing his boss, Taylor Doheny: The beautiful widow of Adam's best friend.

Three years after her husband's death, Taylor Doheny is still determined to keep her heart locked away from men, particularly the ultimate flirt and notorious womanizer named Adam Garnett.

She had better take care; his

ravishing words, sweet promises, and provocative gestures are threatening to break through her defenses and irrevocably get under her skin.

When Adam risks his life to rescue her during a vicious assault, Taylor can't find it in her to ignore his broiling desire and obsessive lust for her. Will she be able to leave the past behind and open up her heart to Adam, despite the real danger of having her already fragile emotions crushed?

Due to strong language and descriptive sex scenes, this book is not intended for readers under the age of 18.

PROLOGUE - TAYLOR

The day Jack died was the day I came close to death myself. The last seconds before that merciless truck crashed into the back of our car replayed in my mind so many times that I am sure it is engraved into my synapses and won't be erased, even if I suffer from a memory loss in the future.

We were driving on the interstate between San Diego and L.A. late at night. At exactly eleven thirty seven, just before midnight, Adele's "Someone Like You" began playing on the radio. Jack

hated romance pop as much as he hated snakes. So, he leaned down to change the radio station, in spite of my pleas for him to give it a try for once, and settled on “Hit the road, Jack” by Ray Charles. He even made a little joke about how that evil song was written for him, before slamming on the brakes and rear-ending the car that had suddenly pulled out in front of us.

Between the airbag blowing up on my face and the seat belt cutting into my chest, I heard Jack yelling, “The brakes aren’t working,” like a broken record. As I tried to pull my face away from the airbag that was drowning me, blinding lights blocked all my senses, and within a split second, the car shook

with another hit. The last thing I saw before I passed out was the roof smashed down onto the driver's seat.

All my hopes died with Jack, along with the meaning of my life. I had nothing to look forward to and nothing to fear from. It was as if my taste buds for life's offers died altogether. Winning the jackpot or losing a finger would elicit the same effect on me; that is, no effect at all. When I saw people laughing or hugging each other, I turned away as though I'd accidentally clicked on the news channel in Chinese. I stopped understanding feelings. I stopped feeling sensation of any sort. Jack's death emptied my emotional storage, if such a thing existed, and numbed me to the

core.

And, ironically enough, the next time I looked death in the eye, it helped to set me free from my emotional dry land, and since then, a new hope has begun limping in.

That's probably one thing I should thank my attacker for.

CHAPTER 1 - TAYLOR

“You’ve got multiple cysts on both of your ovaries, and your blood test shows hormonal imbalance. You might experience permanent infertility issues, if we don’t treat them now.”

Dr. Fowler’s words keep echoing in my ears like a catchy song you can’t get out of your head. There is a long list of issues I should take preventive steps against, cancer and osteoporosis being the top, but I don’t. So, why should I bother about infertility issues when my husband, the love of my

life, is dead, and I have no plans whatsoever about having another man in my heart—or in my bed, for that matter?

Only, I can't help but bother.

I've always wanted to have children of my own. If Jack and I'd had a child, perhaps I wouldn't be so numb inside. And, I'd have a piece of him with me.

I hand the valet the key of my Hyundai, vaguely aware of the stretched Bentley and Aston Martin lined up behind, and stride toward the hotel door. The doorman greets me and opens the door for me. I nod and walk toward the majestic hallway of Peninsula at Beverly Hills.

My toes curl inside my five-inch-

high heels as I step on the shiny marble floor, taking extra care not to slip. I stop to take in the simple but tastily decorated cream and brown anteroom, letting the one and only memory of me enjoying this luxurious hotel, a popular destination for the Hollywood's rich and famous, flash through my mind.

Jack proposed to me here in one of its prominent, private villas almost four years ago. He'd planned everything perfectly; a delicious dinner with a violinist playing only for us, a grape-sized diamond ring that had 'You and me, forever' engraved on the inside, and a fascinating view of Beverly Hills. But I couldn't give a damn shit for all the details. I had the most caring, handsome,

and loving man in the world proposing to me. I would have melted into a puddle of happy tears, even if he had given me a rubber band as a ring... at McDonald's.

A young girl with blonde hair carefully arranged in a bun on top of her head, wearing a green skirt suit, comes around the reception desk, taking me away from the sweet memories.

“Mrs. Edelman, welcome to the Peninsula at Beverly Hills.”

I smile at the way she's addressed me, rather using my real last name, Doheny. My assistant instructed her well, I think to myself. Although three years have passed since Jack's death, I refuse to change my marital status and still keep Jack's last name.

She continues with a well-practiced tone, “We’re very pleased you chose our hotel for your company’s fifteenth anniversary celebrations. Everyone else has arrived and is waiting for you in the Magnolia Suit. I’m here to accompany you to the suit.”

Your company. Another thing I continue to keep after Jack’s death. His construction firm; the Edelman Constructions. I couldn’t tell granite from marble, but I promised myself, after Jack’s funeral, that I’d continue his family’s legacy and run the company his father had founded fifteen years ago. But more often than not, it’s the company that keeps me going rather than the other way around.

“Thank you.” I nod and pace with her toward the elevators. She starts reciting the menu to me as we enter the cab. I half-heartedly listen to her while checking my look in the mirror beside the sliding doors, to make sure my Roberto Cavalli sits right. One of the many ridiculously expensive dresses Jack bought for me. A purple, knee-length, sheath dress with a boat neckline. It shows half of my left shoulder and covers the other one fully. The shopping assistant at the store made me feel guilty about not buying matching shoes and insisted on selling me the most eccentric pair of high-heeled boots I’ve even seen. The cream boots reach a little above my ankles and are covered with large green,

blue, and purple stones.

I run a hand through my hair that is resting loosely around my shoulders and suck in the fresh floral aroma as we leave the elevator and head toward the suite door. Although the people on the other side of the door in the suite have more reasons to fear me, losing their income being the main, my knees shake as if I'm about to appear in court. I'm sure they expect me to give a motivational speech for the bright future of the Edelman Constructions and make a few silly jokes along the line. However, I've never been much of an extrovert and have gotten even worse since Jack's death.

Jack must be watching me,

otherwise, why do I feel so nervous?

The blonde, whose name I've already forgotten, opens the door for me and wishes me a great evening before she leaves. I clear my throat and step inside the suite.

Among the crowd, my eyes look for the one and only person who can help me out in this hairy situation; my good friend and HR manager, Valerie Holland. With her hot pink dress and dark-red hair, she's not difficult to spot.

I'll need time to get used to those red curls of hers. I liked her better as a brunette. For some reason unclear to me, she looked friendlier and more approachable with brown hair. Rather than changing her hair color every six

months or so, she would do better to get rid of that pair of thick, black frames hiding her almond-shaped, brown eyes. As a caring friend, I told her so, and even bought a gift card for a complete laser treatment for her eyes in the most regarded eye clinic in L.A. for her last birthday. She'd easily meet a Hollywood celebrity or two on her way to her appointments.

But, no. The little miss red-hair will keep her glasses no matter what.

She stands only inches away from Adam Garnett, the project engineer. That's his title, at least, but he involves himself in every aspect of the company and the projects we take over. He spends most of the time on the

construction site to ensure that schedule and quality requirements stay on track, while keeping a keen eye on what's going on with the staff, and still squeezing clients into his lunch break. He's a one-man show in every sense, and if it wasn't for his brilliance and commitment, I'd be signing for bankruptcy the minute I stepped outside of the hospital after the accident.

Adam lets out a hearty laugh at something Valerie says, and I remember Valerie's rather surprising revelation, about her secret crush on Adam, the last time she and I went out to get drunk. That was two months ago, and I wonder if she still has feelings for him.

Actually, it's not difficult to fall

for Adam. Besides his tall, muscular figure, thick black curls, and intimidating hazel eyes, Adam is a person-magnet. It never ceases to amaze me how easily he can get along with different types of people, ranging from construction workers to CEO's of multi-million-dollar companies. He's like a movie star everyone wants to hang out with.

I've watched him enough at work to know that it isn't just women who fall for his smoldering, bad-boy looks, but he has an enigmatic personality that pulls men, too. And strangely enough, other men don't look threatened by the way women react to him. I bet he'd make a good subject for a social psychology class, only if the female students could

manage to stop drooling and actually analyze him objectively.

Luckily for me, both Jack's inner and outer beauty prevented me from having a crush on Adam.

I close the door rather loudly, turning the heads toward me. Crap!

"Here she is, finally honoring us with her lovely presence." Adam moves through the crowd, holding two glasses of champagne. I'll need both of them to calm my nerves. He sports his usual bad-boy look through and through, despite the perfect and crisp, navy-blue, two-button suit he's wearing. His thick, long hair is unsuccessfully pulled back with gel, silken dark curls rebelling around his face. His eyes are constantly

flaming, his lips curled at one corner hinting at the promiscuous thoughts that must be running wild in his mind. He extends one of the champagne glasses for me, and I take and swallow a large sip. “How are you?” he whispers, drilling his deep-set, intense eyes into me.

I’ve a sufficient number of reasons for my legs to shake tonight; I can’t deal with his not-so-subtle flirtations on top of them. I ignore his question and proceed toward the middle of the crowd where Valerie stands. She winks at me but says nothing. A few calming words would go a long way.

I guess the quicker I get the unavoidable opening speech over with, the better it’ll be for all of us. “I’m glad

we're here celebrating yet another successful year with higher profit margins and satisfied clients. And, let's not forget our new employees." I raise my glass toward the two ladies in the legal team. I hope they're already drunk enough to overlook my shaking hands.

"When Jack died and I took over the company, I thought the right thing to do for the survival of the company was to sell it. After all, as most of you know, I was studying Sociology and had no idea about construction. However, you guys proved me wrong, and together we made the Edelman Constructions what it is today." Some nod; some clap hands. "Each of you has left a significant imprint in our company's success; be it

Bree, who skillfully turns down some very persistent insurance Detectives; David, who manages to deposit the Christmas bonuses exactly on Christmas day, never early enough for us to really buy a Christmas present with it; and Valerie, who is so obsessively fixed on providing training for work ethics and professionalism that I feel a strong urge to download a porn video onto her computer.”

People laugh and nudge each other. Even the subjects of my little joke. I straighten my face and take another sip, before I continue with my nervous talk. “Together we’ll make Jack’s legacy last for many years and decades to come.”

The laughter dies into softer

smiles at the mentioning of Jack. My eyes wander around to find Jack's picture that I requested my assistant, Bree, to bring to the party. My beautiful man with the face of baby and heart of an angel.

“To Jack,” Adam says and toasts his glass with mine.

Even if no one gave a shit about Jack, Adam would, as Jack's best friend since childhood. And actually, it's thanks to Adam that the company is more successful than it's ever been. Following Jack's death, I had no one to turn to but Adam to continue where Jack had left with the business. Graciously, he resigned from his highly-paid position in a multi-million dollar marketing

company to work for me. Upon his resignation, his employers convinced him to continue working part-time with the same amount of salary he used to earn working full-time. Same amount! How impressed they must have been by Adam's success that they wanted to keep him so desperately. In the end, we made arrangements for him to work half of the week for me and the other half for the other company. Even so, his accomplishments have been more than I'd expected and helped us increase the company's profit margins.

“Let the dinner begin,” I announce and motion everyone toward the spectacularly arranged tables with some extraordinary French food. All

Bree's idea.

As the guests start moving toward the tables, my eyes scan the suite for Adam and spot him by the door. He's crooking his forefinger to me, gesturing me to go to him. I want to thank him in person, anyway, so I move toward him, under his intense stare, which makes me extremely self-conscious, as if I'm naked. His eyes are roaming over my body, lingering around my breasts. No amount of clothing will make me feel comfortable around him. I fist a hand on my side and clutch the champagne glass with the other to suppress the urge to cover my chest with my arms.

"You look particularly delicious in that dress," he points out, as soon as I

stand in front of him.

Delicious, mouthwatering, mind-blowing, tempting, and so many other inappropriate words of his preference to describe my looks. Where is the good, old pretty?

Nevertheless, his words burn into my skin and make the hair on my arms and neck stand up. I can barely escape his deep, penetrating eyes that are practically undressing me with each passing second. Were it not for several years of exposure to his blatant advances, and the sacrifices he's made for the company, I'd have already emptied the contents of my glass onto his face.

“Thank you,” I say with my voice

low. “I wanted to personally thank you for being a part of the Edelman Constructions. Don’t tell anyone, but it’s actually because of your hard work that the company is what it is today. You practically saved my life by saving the company, and I owe you a big one for that.” Trying to crack a shy smile, I let my eyes follow the curves of his full lips, then move up to the hazel-fire of his eyes. A big mistake. My stomach twists and turns at the sight of lust brewing in his irises. He stares at me as if he’s restraining himself from smashing his lips onto mine.

“Is that so?” He leans in, invading my personal space, and whispers to my ear, “Then, why don’t

you pay back the favor and go out on a date with me tomorrow night?" His breath is warm and penetrating on my skin, and I shiver at the close proximity of his lips to my ear.

"Adam, please. Not tonight." I raise my left hand, my palm close to his chest. I can't believe how he can be so dead set on getting me into his bed, under the false pretense of wanting to have just a dinner date with me.

"If not tonight, then when? When will you finally agree to have a simple dinner with me? I won't initiate anything you aren't comfortable with. I just want a few hours alone with you outside of work hours. We can order a pizza or go eat at a nice restaurant. Whatever you

want.” The rawness in his voice, however, hints at everything but a simple dinner.

“It... it feels wrong.” I nervously twist my wedding band around my finger. Yeah, I’m still wearing my wedding band. How pathetic of me, and how much more pathetic of Adam to want to have a date with me. This only goes to show he just wants to screw me. “I’m not ready for this.” *And I never will be.* But, if I tell him that, it might be the end of his commitment to the company.

He rolls his eyes in a well-practiced manner, as if he was expecting my answer. “Three goddamn years have passed since the accident.”

As if I’m not aware of that. I

drop my head and glare at the stones on my boots. I wish I could take them out and plug them into his mouth to shut him up, because he seems to have a long speech prepared.

“I want you, Taylor. I’ve never wanted another woman like I want you, and I’m ready to take it as slowly as you want to. But you don’t even let me be a friend; you shut me out completely. What will you lose if you have dinner with me? What you’re doing to yourself isn’t healthy.”

Healthy? “What do you know about healthy?” I’m so annoyed I’m ready to leave the celebration and head directly home.

“A great deal. A lot of people

lose their loved ones, but life goes on. Do you think Jack would want you to stay single and lonely for the rest of your life? Look, I don't want to fight. I just want to take you out tomorrow night. Please, give me that much. I know you don't feel the same way for me as I feel for you, but let me at least try and show you what may become of us."

Us? This is too much. My stomach is so tight with knots, and I'll have to rush to the bathroom to puke if he goes on. Sucking in a desperate breath of air, I take a step back and pull my eyes away from him toward the stage and see Valerie's brown eyes, wide with shock, staring at me. As soon as our eyes meet, she scoots out of the suite and

shuts the door behind her. Oh, shit. The last thing I wanted was her knowing about Adam's interest for me.

“Excuse me,” I say and pace toward the table Bree's sitting. “Bree, can you go and check up on Valerie, please?”

She pulls her eyebrows together in confusion, but without asking a question, stands up and heads to the door.

I throw myself at the chair and start massaging my forehead to rub away the looming headache. The party was supposed to honor Jack and celebrate the growth of the company, not to host a cheap soap opera. I vaguely notice the chair beside me is pulled out and look

up to see Adam holding it.

Why am I even surprised? He must have forced Bree into arranging the tables so that he sits with me. Poor Bree. How much more of Adam's games to get me will she endure? She's already acting as his personal mailman, bringing me his weekly dinner-date cards with some bullshit romantic words on them.

As if we didn't just discuss his plans about my bedroom life, he takes his place nonchalantly next to me, not neglecting to brush his leg against mine as he sits, and nods to the girl sitting across from me. Although plus-ones weren't invited to the party, Bree brought her friend—with my permission, of course—to fill in the place of another

employee who canceled at the last minute. I don't miss the ecstatic look on the girl's face as Adam reaches for the menu.

Yet another evening of being surrounded by women who can't stop giggling, flaunting, or generally making fools of themselves for Adam.

"I'm Nichole," the girl says with a large smile and extends her hand to Adam, and Adam shakes it briefly and introduces himself.

"I'm Taylor," I say when her eyes find mine, but I don't bother with shaking hands. The three-tiered silver tray of pastries between us is too big an obstacle.

Grabbing a mushroom-cheese

mini-quiche, I inhale its aroma and swallow it with one easy move. Bree's friend causally slides onto Bree's seat, which is right next to Adam's, and begins chatting with him.

Bree comes back, shooting an angry look at her friend, and leans down to whisper in my ear, "I think Valerie is crying. I heard sobs in the restroom, but I'm not sure if it's her."

I nod and tell her to sit and enjoy the dinner. I don't want to deal with someone else's heartache. Valerie is a beautiful, young woman. And smart too. Why the hell is she crying over a man with whom she hasn't shared anything beyond work duties? Or did she, and I don't know about it?

Feeling angry and curious in equal parts, I wipe my lips with the napkin and leave the table, under Adam's questioning eyes.

The restroom is well-lit and smells of fresh flowers. I start to check the stalls to locate Valerie, but she materializes from the last one, with her eyes red and wet, and strides to the sinks.

“What is the matter?” I know what it is, but I want to hear it from her lips.

She blows into a tissue and walk passes me to the mirrored room. “Like you don't know what the matter is.”

“I want to hear it from you. What upset you so badly that you hid in the

restroom to cry?” Looking at her reflection in the mirror, I cross my arms over my chest and stand close to her.

“Is he into you?” She pulls the faucet on and begins washing her hands.

“Who?”

She rolls her eyes and snorts. “Is Adam into you?”

“Yes, he wants to screw me, if that is what ‘into you’ means for you.”

“It didn’t look to me like he wants just that.”

“Seriously? I’m one fucked-up woman who sleeps in her dead husband’s pajamas. Every second sentence I speak is about Jack. And, I’m still wearing my wedding band, in case you haven’t noticed already—” I raise

my left hand to show her the ring “What else can he want from me?”

She shakes her head, barely hiding a smile. “Since when did you know about it?”

“Well,” I say, trying to remember the first time Adam asked me out on a date. “I think it was six months after Jack’s death.”

Her eyes grow large with surprise and she gasps. “That’s more than two fucking years ago.” Abruptly, she turns to face me. I’m forced to take a step back by her closeness. Actually, I’m a little worried she’ll slap me in the face.

I shrug, although I, too, am more than a little taken by the lengthy amount

of time Adam has been pursuing me. Since then, he hasn't missed a Friday to ask me out for a dinner for Saturday night. But, of course, I won't tell her that.

“And, you were gonna tell this to me... when?” she asks, her chin up, eyes narrowed.

“I don't know. The thing is I don't give a shit about his advances. He loves attention. He loves women. Lots of women. He uses one and moves on to the next. Haven't you ever heard of his relationship with the famous country singer, Pat Carter? He dumped her after four years of relationship, and she couldn't keep it together for a long time after him. He's a playboy. I thought

you'd figure it out on your own, without me having to tell you about his interest in me." I pause and hesitantly put my hand on her shoulder. "You deserve someone better than him."

She dries her eyes with tissue; even so, she doesn't take those damn glasses off. Her eyelids are coated with dark grey eye-shadow. I consider telling her she'd have a better chance with him if she ditched those glasses and considered a new makeup style but I don't want to be slapped. So, I just squeeze my hand tighter on her shoulder before we leave the restroom.

"Maybe I just want some senseless fuck," Valerie says.

My stomach turns at the thought,

and I taste in my mouth the quiche I've just eaten. "I don't want to hear a word about it, then."

"A playboy, huh? I've never imagined that."

"Not a word," I warn, raising my forefinger to stress my point.

When we come back to our table, I find Bree and her friend giggling at Adam's jokes. I turn and give Valerie a 'what have I just told you?' look.

The servers come to take our drink orders and, when I ask for soda, Adam glances at me with an approving look in his eyes for the choice of my non-alcoholic drink, then goes back to entertaining the girls. Oh, Bree. I'm going to raise your salary for freeing me

from Adam's clutches even for a few hours. And I'll promote you if your little friend gets in the sack with him.

In a couple of minutes, the servers place our drinks and entrees efficiently and disappear as soon as they come. I dig into the glazed duck leg with figs while enjoying the exchange between Nichole and Adam. Valerie not so much, I notice. Nichole manages to have her hand very close to Adam's arm. Unable to mask my curiosity about her next move, I swallow a piece of fig and touch Valerie's shoe with the tip of my boot to raise her attention to the happening.

Nichole moves her hand very casually toward Adam, while laughing

with body-racking laughter at Adam's yet another joke. I'm about to burst with excitement and thrill, as though I'm watching a blockbuster in 3D. As soon as Nichole's hand lands on Adam's arm, though, he jerks away as if stung by a bee and pushes his chair back to stand up. His face purple, like the fig on my plate, he excuses himself to go talk to one of the employees. Employee, my ass. He dashes off directly toward the door.

There goes the promotion for Bree. I exchange curious looks with Valerie and remember to swallow the piece of tender duck in my mouth. He's playing the devoted and loyal around me. I bet money it's all part of his scheme to get me.

Nichole gapes after him with her mouth wide open and cannot bring herself to shut it even long after Adam's gone. I'm surprised to find a tickling of compassion for her inside me. She has no way to know of Adam's pursuit of me.

When Adam comes back, approximately ten minutes later, he avoids our table like the plague and socializes with the accounting team. Nichole eyes me briefly with shame written all over her face, before cocking her head down to her plate. I observe with amazement that she has yet to touch her dish. What an effect Adam has over women that they even neglect eating! Forget about Weightwatchers or Jenny

Craig. There's no better way than Adam to get those lumps in shape.

"So, Bree. The evening has been great so far," Valerie says between the sips of her champagne. "I think you should go into event planning rather than waste your talent with organizing Taylor's agenda."

"I'm happy with my job, and Taylor is the best boss ever," Bree says with a cheery tone and grabs a scone off of the pastry tray.

"Don't feed her mind with nonsense." I nudge Valerie's ribcage, while stealing a glance at Adam. No matter how I detest his flirtations, I still find him the most interesting person in the room. Even though I can't make out

what he is speaking about with the people at his table; his demeanor, energy, and the power he radiates as he speaks make me want to switch tables to his. If only his intentions for me were of a more friendly nature. He'd make a great friend, I'm sure.

I'm not the only one peeking at Adam. I catch Nichole staring at him through her mascara-coated eyelashes while playing with her fork aimlessly on the plate. Her face shows every bit of the disappointment she must be feeling.

I gesture to Andy, the intern in accounting, to sit with us for the desert. His shyness and major at college, Math, tell me he is a much better fit for Nichole than Adam will ever be. It turns

out I wasn't completely wrong with my assumption, and as soon as the two discover they're both UCLA alumnae, they hit it off pretty well. I won't be surprised if I walk in on them kissing in front of the restrooms by the end of the party.

While I'm vaguely listening to Valerie's strong opinions about how Republicans are on the verge on ruining the country, a group of four young men with musical instruments enter the suite. I turn to Bree with a questioning look. Her face beams once she notices the group of men, and she stands up abruptly. I guess this is her only chance to break free from Valerie's infamous political discussion.

“Our musical guests have just arrived. I’d better attend to them,” she explains to Valerie.

“I didn’t know we’d have live music,” I say, showing my discontent for not having been informed about it. After all, I’m paying for this evening, and I have every right to know what and who is on the menu.

“Oh, but I mentioned them to you early this morning. Besides, the entire evening plan was sent to you together with the bill. Both in paper and electronically.”

“Oh, my mistake, then. Sorry.” I gesture at her to go and see to the musicians. From their Michael-Bubl   looks, I assume we’ll be listening to

some jazz-pop classical tunes.

Tapping my fingers on the table, I study the band members as they prepare their instruments and settle on the stage. When I see the guy whom I assume to be the singer nod his head to Bree, I start to stand up to introduce the band. However, Adam appears by the stage and grabs the microphone from the singer's hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he begins.

CHAPTER 2 - ADAM

From the corner of my eye, I see Taylor shifting in her chair. If she's thinking she'll just come up to the stage and make a dry announcement of the band, she's completely wrong. I smile at her briefly, and wait for her to sit back in her chair, and then introduce the band. I recite what Bree told me about the band earlier in the evening and introduce the band members by their names.

“What would a celebration be without hitting the dance floor? Unfortunately we're thirty-two men

against fifteen women. That says a lot about HR, doesn't it?" People begin laughing; I wait for a few seconds before I go on. "As a solution, you ladies have to dance with at least two gentlemen, so we all can get a chance to shake it. I know you're all shy and not intoxicated enough. So, I'm going to go ahead and do the first dance to open up the dance floor."

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know Taylor won't say 'yes' to my dance invitation if I ask her nicely, so I have to impose it on her. Holding the microphone still close to my mouth, I raise my free hand toward her. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head as a reply. Only, she won't be able to escape. I

won't let her.

“You’re part of the statistics.” I can barely contain a laugh coming.

“Pick someone else. I don’t want to be your first victim.” Her gaze is glued on the glass of soda in her hand, her fingers drumming around it. A nervous tick that I’ve grown accustomed to over the years. She doesn’t stand a chance, and she knows it. But she won’t go down without a fight. That’s the Taylor I know and love.

I start to walk toward her, taking each step in stride. She shakes her head several times and raises her hands, palms facing me. Wrong move. I reach for her hand and clutch it firmly. Nothing in the world can stop me from having

this dance with her. Not even her. I pull her hand gently, but with resolute will, toward me and bow my head like the gentleman that I am.

“Will you do me the honor?”

Standing up ever so slowly, she casts those wicked, blue eyes of hers toward me, arresting me with their beauty. “Under one condition,” she whispers to my ear.

She'd run miles away had she known the effect of her warm breath anywhere near my skin. The touch of her hair on my face fires a jolt of arousal in my groin, and I don't know how much longer I can wait to have my way with her.

“What is it?” Now it's my turn to

avoid her gaze, the heat of it so seductive that I'm afraid I'll just force my lips onto hers. Instead, I breathe in her perfume, J'adore by Dior. I bought a bottle of the cologne, as soon as I figured out the brand, just so I can have her smell anytime I want. Only, the scent in the bottle isn't as intoxicating as it is on her skin.

“You'll dance with Valerie afterwards.” She glances down at Valerie, who is eating her desert, looking oblivious to our conversation.

I nod briefly and lead her slowly to the dance floor, where everyone can see us. I'd rather have her only for me for our first dance ever, but for now it'll have to do.

“Let the dance begin.” I hand the microphone back to the singer. The first song is hand-picked by me; Sinatra’s *I’ve got you under my skin* and I’m dying to see Taylor’s response.

Sliding my hand around her waist, I pull her closer to me. My hand spans across a little above the small of her back. My heart is racing with desire and the thrill of being so close to her, and I work on breathing slowly to keep the storm brewing inside me to myself. My fingers draw circles across the thin fabric of her dress that leaves nothing to imagination about the smoothness of her skin underneath. Will I ever get to run my hands across her beautiful body without the interference of a dress?

She takes extra care not to let her chest touch mine. What wouldn't I give for that touch? I let my eyes trail down her body. Her breasts look larger under the dress, likely because she's wearing a padded bra. I prefer the lacy ones that do nothing to hide her nipples when they harden. I bet they're stiff now beneath the bra, just as the rest of her body is. Her soft hand in mine, I inhale her sweet smell again and watch her expression as the tune begins.

A smile flickers across her plump lips, making me suck in a sharp breath. Her smiles are so few and far between, I can't help but feel triumphant for lightening her mood, even for a little bit.

Bending her head down, she looks up at me through her long lashes. “Did you pick this song?”

I don't answer her. What's the point of saying 'yes' when the answer is crystal clear? I gently draw her closer and begin to sway with her to the music. She tenses more, even tries to pull back, but my grip is tight.

When she finally relaxes, I start whispering the lyrics to her ear. I'll be damned. She picks up the song where I stop and continues singing the lines softly, almost inaudibly. Why the sudden change of heart? I try to look into her eyes but she's hanging her head, maybe to hide her emotions from me. Her voice is soft like velvet, soothing and angelic.

Like Christmas to my ears.

At one point in the middle of the song, her voice cracks, her body begins shaking, and all I can hear are her silent sobs. I lead her in a circle, until I face the stage so her face is blocked by my torso from the audience, and slide a finger under her chin to tilt her face up. Her eyes are clouded with tears and unfocused with deep thoughts, as though a private piece of memory is playing in her head.

Suddenly, it all comes crashing down to me. Who am I kidding? I am the one who doesn't stand a chance. I can't even beat a dead man in his grave. It's true what everyone has been saying all these years. What she has been saying.

Her coldness, the way she always tries to keep her distance, her constant refusals of my dinner invitations aren't because she's close-minded or afraid to give love another try. It's because she can't. I can continue this foolish game and run after her for years to come, yet it won't change the fact. The simple, plain, but hurtful fact that her heart belongs with Jack, my best friend for life. She can never love me the way she loves him. She'll never be mine like she's given herself to him.

Oh, god. Why did I fall in love with the one woman I can never have? What did I do to deserve such an excruciating pain?

Suddenly, it is all too much to

bear. Her shaking body, her tears, the pain in her face. I want to shed tears with her, share her pain, and sooth mine, too, as if it were remotely possible.

How I wish to be able to let her go and find another woman who can mend my heart and make it beat again. Does such a woman exist? Even Pat, my first love, couldn't make me forget about Taylor. Actually I'm at the point where I don't care about falling in love again. I'd settle for a woman who could at least get her off my mind.

I'd give everything for such a woman. Everything.

"I think that's enough for tonight," Taylor says between her sobs, pulling me back to reality. The reality

where not loving her is not an option, but loving her is a cross I have to carry along for the rest of my life. The reality where I can't take my mind off of her even for a minute, let alone forgetting her completely.

“Please, stay with me until the song ends. I need this,” I beg.

She stares at me with those big, blue eyes glistening with tears and blinks her acceptance. I pull her close to me one last time, my eyes glued onto hers, lost in the impossible dream of one day, maybe... Who knows?

Can I go on like this? Loving her while she swears a life-long commitment to a dead man?

She looks as though she'll

collapse onto the floor any second. When the song ends, I walk her out to the restroom and then go back to the party. Fortunately, the dance floor is now full of people dancing and chattering the evening away. I don't want to sit and deal with the colleagues, but I can handle one. So, I slowly step toward Valerie and hold my hand out to beckon her for a dance. She wipes off her mouth with her napkin and slides her hand into mine.

It's not the same with Valerie, although every time she's around me she brings out her sweet side, rather than the usual cold treatment she gives to everyone else. Things would have been so much easier if I could love Valerie.

She's smart, witty, and pretty. Well, would be pretty if she tosses away those black specs and eases on the eye makeup.

I don't wrap my hand around her waist, just place it a little above her hip, and keep a clear distance between us.

"Did she start crying?" Valerie asks, taking me off-guard.

I nod apologetically.

"Of course she did. *I've got you under my skin* was the opening song of her wedding reception. The first song she and Jack danced to as a married couple."

"Really?" I try to remember but I can't. I was drunk for most of their wedding day, anyway. "How do you

know? Were you at the wedding? I thought you and Taylor have known each other for only one and half years.

“No, I wasn’t at her wedding. I’ve known her for two year and three months. She once showed me the video recordings of the ceremony. The two made an eye-catching couple, not to mention how deeply in love they looked.”

I nod again, wondering where she’s heading at with this.

“So, what’s your deal?” Valerie asks.

“What do you mean?” She’s got me totally confused.

“Do you love Taylor?”

How dare she? I look at the

couples dancing close to us to make sure they didn't hear Valerie's outrageous question. "It's none of your business."

"It wouldn't be if you weren't hurting her. She's my friend. As much as I wish her to move on and get another man, your persistent advances are just pushing her back to where she was when she lost Jack. You don't let her breathe. You're around all the time, constantly demanding love and affection when she cannot even provide those feelings for herself."

With her lips pursed into a tight line and her scowl leveled at me, I can see how utterly she's pissed off. Can she be right? Am I the reason why Taylor is still struggling? "I... I had no idea."

“You need to give her some space. You’ve been with her since the day after the funeral. It’s too much. Don’t you see you’re drowning her? She doesn’t need someone like you; a constant reminder of her dead husband. Why don’t you take a couple of months off from work? She’ll have room to breathe, and you’ll get an opportunity to think things through. You know what they say, *‘Out of sight out of mind.’*”

“I don’t know.” I wish she’d shown me the cold treatment rather than this irritating talk. I don’t want to go away and leave Taylor alone. Even if she may not love me back, she is my best friend’s wife. Well, she was. So, her well-being is my responsibility. I can’t

just turn my back on her.

“I’ll be here for her,” she adds as if she read my mind. “I had a sister who died in a traffic accident when she was seven. She’d be Taylor’s age had she lived. Since the day I met Taylor, I see her like my little sister. In spite of the turmoil she’s going through, she’s a very caring and understanding person. I truly want her to be happy, again. But, she can’t get there as long as you’re around. And, don’t worry about the company and the projects. Your help has been incredible, but the business is pretty standard from this point on.”

At last the song finishes, and so does the torturous talk of Valerie. I thank her for the dance, without commenting

on her absurd ideas, and walk her back to the table.

So what, she knows Taylor for two years and three fucking months. I knew Jack for the majority of my life. I won't leave his wife alone during the hardest times of her life.

I snap up a glass of champagne and toss it back. I wasn't going to drink more than a glass, but Valerie's preaching didn't leave me another option.

Taylor appears at the door; her eyes and cheeks are blood red. She was even smiling before I asked her for dance. But now, it's like Jack's funeral all over again.

Shit? Is Valerie right? Am I

drowning Taylor? She paces in front of me, without looking up at me, and goes to her table. I watch her idly as she murmurs something to Valerie and picks up her purse and scarf. Fuck, no! Is she leaving so early? It's because of the song. The song I've chosen for our first dance.

Even a blind man can see it. I'm drowning her.

She waves goodbye at Valerie and Bree and strides back toward the door. I want to go down on my knees and ask for forgiveness until I see her smile again. I'll even promise to let her go if that's what she needs to feel happy.

I run after her through the hallway but she's nowhere to be seen. I

hurry toward the elevators, hoping to find her there, without success. I call the elevator and wait an entire minute for it to arrive. I step into it and press the button for the lobby, hoping to catch Taylor before she leaves. As soon as the doors slide open at the lobby, I dash toward the exit door, my eyes scanning around. Where has she gone?

“Have you seen a red Hyundai leaving?” I ask the doorman.

“Yes, Mrs. Edelman’s Hyundai. She’s just left.”

“Crap.” I motion to the valet to bring my car. She must be going to her apartment. I have to apologize to her and let her know I won’t be bothering her anymore. I’ve been blaming her for not

moving on, but I think it's me who has to listen to my own advice and move on.

CHAPTER 3 - TAYLOR

I'm driving fast, and my eyes are blurred with tears. I can't believe a song could bring me to tears in a room full of people, especially after my eyes have been tear-free for almost three long years. I should feel happy about it, finally shaking off the emotional numbness that was eating at me for so long. I was even worried that my eyes had permanently lost the function of producing tears after crying nonstop for one full month after Jack's death.

I should have left a note or

something for Adam, I think to myself as I wipe my tears away and notice through the rearview mirror a green sedan driving a little too close to me. Adam must be dead worried, and I can't even imagine Valerie's attitude. I decide to text Bree as soon as I get home and floor the gas pedal. At least, the others will enjoy themselves without their crazy boss bitching around.

I smile at the thought of anyone calling me bitch behind my back. Frightening maybe, freaky most likely, demanding surely, but a bitch? Bree reported to me more than a couple of times how happy and thrilled everyone is to be working at my company, even though I forbid employees chatting with

each other or using Internet for anything besides work-related reasons and made it clear to them that I'd randomly check their browsing histories.

The turnover rate is practically nonexistent, although the actual reason might be the global economical crisis. I pay fifteen percent higher salaries than the other companies, in addition to generous Christmas bonuses, gift cards from restaurants and department stores for the employees and their family members' birthday celebrations. And, not to forget the annual vacation lottery at the end of January. I feel that particular lottery is a big influence for the more-experienced employees to stay. Every year I pay for an entire one-week

vacation for two lucky winners and their families: A fully paid trip with business-class flight tickets and accommodation at five-star hotels, together with a generous amount of pocket money to spend at a location of their choice anytime during the year. Until now, I've had to pay for over fifteen persons' vacations in Thailand, France, Barbados, Japan, and Australia.

The most expensive trip was to Japan because the winner, Miranda from customer service, took her husband, along with five kids. Just the flight tickets cost around twenty-five grand. I was thanked more than a dozen times by her and her kids, both verbally and in hand-written letters. The letter from her

seven-year-old girl describing the exotic foods they'd eaten and places they'd seen paralyzed me for an entire evening. If I'm still alive when she starts college, I'll pay for her school tuition.

More tears begin running down my cheeks as I remember that letter. I should be glad that at least the reason for my crying is not Jack. I wipe my tears away as I spot the La Brea exit on the highway, but can't slide into the right lane on time, and miss the exit. Punching the steering wheel, I take the Crenshaw and notice the green sedan is right after me, taking the same exit.

With a little bit of traffic, I make it to the parking lot of the residency where my condo is in twenty minutes. A

yawning attack hits me, as I kill the engine in my parking slot and pull out the key from the ignition. I wrap my scarf over my shoulders and grab my purse before opening the door.

I note it's chillier here in Miracle Mile than the Peninsula's front entry, wondering whether the hotel invests in heaters at the entrance. That'd be the ultimate customer satisfaction.

I hear murmurs deep inside the lot when I reach the elevator. While I continuously hit the button, I turn around to find out the source of the noise. No one is to be seen. Must be a neighbor, I think to myself to calm down, but if the tapping of my shoe is a sign of anything, it is that of my fear. I look around once

again to make sure it's just the wind or even some rat, but my senses are all about fight or flight. I glance down at my boots, whose heels appear miles long in my anxiety. Just the right length to break my ankles, were I to start running in them.

Good thing the residency is gated and secure.

The two elevators seem to be stuck at the lobby. I push the button three more times, angry at the people who selfishly keep them occupied. I'd rather have some more traffic on the way home than wait for the elevator in these boots.

Suddenly, I feel a strong grip on my arm, and a hand covers my mouth. My senses haven't been wrong.

Whoever is gripping me doesn't have benign intentions and moves the hand that was holding my arm toward my neck. Terror washes over me as I remember the killing scenes in the movies, and how easy it is to kill someone with just a twist of the neck. However, he's too strong for me to even move a hand, let alone break free from his iron grip.

I inhale deeply and try to scream, although his salty hand is firmly covering my mouth. My voice is too low, especially for the people in the lobby to hear. If the elevator arrives, the doorman might hear me through its open doors. But the fucking elevator is more stubborn than the hands holding me

caged and paralyzed.

The attacker now squeezes my throat and covers both my mouth and nose, leaving me no chance to breathe. My lungs burn without air, and my stomach revolts at the disgusting salty taste of his sweaty hand. If I can't think of a way out, these will be my last seconds.

I always imagined I'd welcome death, if it came, after Jack was gone. His absence was too painful to even think of living a long life. But, it's not that way. Even though I wished I'd die and finally re-unite with Jack, now all I want is to dig my fingers in and hold on to life with all my power.

In a matter of seconds, my

already insignificant existence will cease. Will anyone remember me after five years? Ten years? I won't be able to leave a child behind, someone who would come to my grave and beautify it with flowers, nor a piece of art that would allow me to continue living in people's minds. I will be a nothing. And for a strange reason, the nothingness makes me think about my boots and their high and heavy heels.

I lift my right foot and slam it directly on the attacker's foot. He jerks back and hauls me down to the floor. Taking advantage of my suddenly free airway, I inhale a deep breath and begin screaming my ears deaf, earning me an excruciating punch in my stomach.

“Shut the fuck up,” the attacker yells at me as he pulls me up. His face is scarier than any man I’ve come close to. Deep scars and dark tattoos cover the majority of his face. He slaps me with so much force that I fly back down onto the floor, and he begins kicking me. I taste blood as I double over to protect myself from his kicks, in vain.

Dying from a twist of the neck would have been much better than being beaten to death. I whisper Jack’s name and beg him to help me.

All of a sudden, the elevator doors slide open, and I see a pair of black shoes jumping out toward me.

“Taylor.” I hear a familiar voice screaming and the attacker collapses

onto the floor beside me.

“Adam,” I choke out his name together with blood and try to move away from the attacker. As though Adam knew the attacker had kicked me in the stomach, he fires away violent kicks into his, one after another. I see blood coming out of the attacker’s mouth, but Adam doesn’t look like he’ll stop kicking anytime soon. “Adam, stop,” I beg with my cracked voice. “You’ll kill him.”

He stops to look at me and shoots one more kick to the attacker’s back before he bents down to help me up.

A sudden gunshot at the entrance of the parking lot startles me. “Leave

him alone,” a man yells and another deafening shot follows. The attacker on the ground uses the distraction to spring to his feet and disappears toward the exit. Breathless, I turn to Adam but go numb when I see him sprawled on the floor.

“Oh, my god, Adam! Are you shot?” Fisting his jacket, I shake him until he turns his face to me.

“I think so.” He raises his hand and places it onto his chest, close to his heart.

Is he really shot? In the heart? I wipe open the jacket and rip the shirt apart to examine his chest.

“They might come back.” Adam coughs. “Take me to the elevator and

call the police.”

I put his arm around my neck and push myself hard to get onto my feet. Hell, he's heavy and my boots aren't helping. We stump each step until we get to the elevator and fall onto the floor once we're inside. I reach up to push the lobby button and go back to examining Adam's chest, which is now covered with warm blood. Worse yet, he's passed out.

As soon as we arrive at the hospital, the doctors take Adam to surgery. While waiting for his operation, a police officer approaches me to take

my statement regarding the attack. I recite to him what little I remember. How much can one say about being attacked by a tattooed and scarred man, while waiting for the elevator in the parking lot?

“He grabbed me by my mouth, tried to twist off my neck, I smashed his foot with my high heels—” The cop glances down at my feet. I don’t miss the arching of his eyebrows. Yeah, we women like to torture ourselves, but every now and then we manage to torture others, too, “I started screaming and soon Adam showed up and rescued me. But, the guy’s accomplice, waiting at the exit, shot Adam right in the chest. I don’t remember anything else about them

afterwards. I suppose the two ran away immediately.”

“Do you have any idea who they might be?”

When I shake my head no, he asks me to describe them. I try to give as many details about the attacker as possible but can't manage it beyond talking about the tattoos and scars on his face. Afterwards, a nurse tends to my injuries. I have bruises all over my stomach but nothing serious, like internal bleeding.

The thought of being seconds from death still haunts me. However, that Adam may die or be permanently injured because of me makes my stomach revolt with pain. I'm so grateful

to him, yet angry at him for risking his life for me.

The nurse gives me pain killers and releases me. I'm back in the waiting room, feeling as though I'll shuffle off this mortal coil if I have to wait longer, without hearing whether Adam will make it or not. My hands and knees shake violently, and my stomach is on the verge of emptying itself. I debate for a while whether I should call Valerie or not, but knowing all too well how she'll grill me about being reckless and irresponsible, I decide against it. But, I need someone thoughtful beside me to calm me down and take care of me and Adam, if I pass out or something. So, I text Bree, and explain to her briefly

about the attack, and ask her politely to accompany me.

She arrives before I know it and brings me green tea, clean clothes, and shoes. Wow, talk about being thoughtful. I burst into tears as soon as I see her and thank her for being there for me. I change into the blue t-shirt, jeans, and sandals she brought and dump the boots into the nearest garbage bin. Although it was thanks to them that I could injure the attacker to get a chance to scream, my feet can't take any more of their abuse.

"You're the best," I say and take the seat beside her in the waiting room.

"I can't say no to that." She tugs a strand of hair behind my ear. Since when is she such a mother hen? I briefly

explain to her about the attack and Adam's shooting.

“What was Adam doing in your apartment building?” Her mouth is wide open with shock and worry. I can see Valerie asking the same question with a whole different attitude.

I glance down at my hands. “I don't know, but I can guess why.”

She doesn't prompt me, so I take my time to speak. It's more of an explanation for me than for Bree. “I got a little emotional while Adam and I were dancing at the party. I didn't want people to see me crying.”

“Did you cry? I didn't notice it. You both looked like you were enjoying the song. Did you know it was Adam's

pick? He literally begged me for it.” A ghost of a smile flickers across her lips.

I shake my head disapprovingly. I should have known Bree was Adam’s partner in crime. “No, I didn’t know. It doesn’t matter anyway. When I started crying I didn’t want others to see my outburst, so I left. I think Adam thought I was upset with him and came after me to apologize. You know how stubborn he can be.”

“You’re lucky that he is.”

“You don’t need to tell me that! The guy attacked me with the intention of killing me.” I hug myself as the images of his kicks to my stomach flash across my mind.

“Do you have any idea who the

guy might be or who he's working for?"

I shake my head no. "I don't have the slightest idea."

"I can't imagine our competitors stooping so low," Bree says. "Any relative who may inherit money from you in the event of your death?"

"You know my sister. She wouldn't attempt such a thing. Neither would my cousin or aunt."

Bree raises an eyebrow. "So, no relatives who can benefit from your death. There is one other motivation..."

"Which?" I ask.

"You must have angered someone so much he's taking his revenge," Bree says apologetically.

I manage to elicit a snort. "That

seems to me the most likely motivation. I have a long list of dry cleaners, cashiers, and waiters who hate me enough to plot my end.”

“In any case, I don’t think it’s safe to return back home soon. They may attack you again,” Bree points out and rightly so. But I’m not worried about that.

“I wasn’t planning to. I’ll squat at the hospital until I’m sure Jack is fine,” I say.

“You mean Adam, right?”

I review what I’ve just said and glance at Bree with embarrassment. “Just a slip of the tongue.”

“It’s the first time you’ve made this mistake around me.”

“Well, it’s also the first time I’ve had a blood-thirsty criminal kicking my brains out.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—” Bree looks miserable and I don’t want the night turn to more miserable than it already is.

“I know you didn’t mean anything. You know what actually saved my ass? But don’t tell it to Adam.” I tell her the part with my high-heels landing on the attacker’s feet. This instantly puts us into a laugh attack, under the angry looks of the other visitors in the waiting room. I deserve a little laughter, don’t I? But, my real laughter will come when I hear from Adam’s doctor. My nerves are over the edge and the lack of sleep isn’t

helping either.

Finally, one of the doctors who took Adam to surgery shows up, and I jolt right up to my feet and run to him.

“I’ve got good news.” The doctor nods to Bree when she arrives. “We removed the bullet. Fortunately, it didn’t hit his heart, but he lost a lot of blood and will need a transfusion. We don’t have enough O negative blood reserves in the hospital. I’ve just got the Cedar Sinai’s officer on the phone to request some from their reserves. They’ll be sending it in a few hours.”

“Adam is O negative?” I ask, but without waiting for the doctor’s reply, I continue. “I’m O negative, too. Shoot, I drank alcohol a few hours ago.”

“Oh.” The doctor scratches his head. “How many hours ago was it?”

Bree tugs at my arm. “That champagne you drank was non-alcoholic. I arranged it so you don’t get... you know.”

I scowl at her words, trying to decide whether I should be upset with her or thankful. But I did feel light-headed as if I drank alcohol. Was it just an illusion?

“In that case,” the doctor interferes. “Would you like to donate for Mr. Garnett?”

“Nothing could stop me from donating my non-alcoholic blood,” I reply and follow the doctor to a room where a nurse makes me lie down on a

long chair and sticks a needle into my arm. Bree sits by my side, cringing and hardly looking at my direction.

“Man up,” I joke but still can’t make her look at me. Instead, she gets up and excuses herself. I shouldn’t have made fun of her. Donating blood sucks, particularly when I’m tired and agitated.

After an hour of struggling in a half-sleeping, half-awake state, the nurse finally pulls the needle out and offers me a bottle of orange juice. I find Bree in the waiting room with a bowl of take-out fettucini alfredo with chicken. I couldn’t have been happier with her.

Fifteen hours past surgery and Adam is still in a coma. Bree and I took turns trying to sleep, but we're both drained of our resources. I go to the vending machine to get coffee for us and when I return I find Bree talking to a nurse.

“Adam is awake.” Bree jumps up and down, as if fire has just cracked in her ass, and drags me by my arm behind the nurse. I manage to drop the coffee cups into a garbage can on our way and straighten my hair before I enter Adam's room.

I don't know what I expect to see after his surgery, but finding him so pale, broken, and beside himself, and his chest wrapped up in bandages, sends panic

through my veins. I was beaten down for several minutes, but compared to me, Adam looks like he was trampled by a gang. I swallow the large lump of guilt in my throat and put on my calmest face as I move toward his bed.

“Hi,” he whispers without moving his cracked lips. His eyes are only half-way open. Why does he even want to see us? He should go back to sleep and recover.

Before I know it, Bree leaps the distance between the door and Adam, springs to his bed, and tightly hugs him, all the while letting out loud sobs. “Oh, Adam. I thought you would die. Thank God you’re alive.”

Crap, I’m a cold-hearted witch

compared to Bree.

Adam closes his eyes and gives out an exhausted smile. “I’m not easy to get rid of.” Then he opens his eyes and shoots one long, flirtatious look at me. Even a bullet in the chest isn’t able to stop him from being the playboy he is. I’ll give him that.

“Bree, please be gentle,” I say. My voice comes out more edgy than I’ve intended.

“I’m okay, Bree. She’s just jealous.” Adam turns down to Bree and winks at her. “I have enough space here for both of you.” He eyes me as he tries to raise his bandaged arm but can’t move it beyond lifting his fingers. It breaks my heart, seeing him this vulnerable. I wish

I could change places with him. But one thing is sure; if Adam hadn't shown up in time I'd be in the morgue rather than a hospital bed.

Bree gets off the bed and pulls a chair to sit, without letting go of Adam's hand. I walk toward the bed, to the side where he was shot, trying to imagine the deep hole in his chest. Will he have a scar for life? An irrevocable gift from me.

"It's all my fault," I whisper and bite my lips.

"Why?" He frowns. "Did you hire the guys to first beat you up and then shoot me?"

"Of course not, silly." I roll my eyes slowly for an effect, biting my lips

to conceal my smile.

I glance at Bree, whose face is now wet with tears, and motion her to the door. “We should let Adam rest.” She gets up and leans down over the bed. I stare at her in total shock when she plants a kiss on Adam’s cheek before leaving.

As soon as Bree is at the door, I run my fingers softly on the back of Adam’s hand.

He doesn’t miss the chance to grab my hand and squeezes it. “I’m sorry about the party.”

I think for a moment to remember what he’s sorry about. “Ah, long forgotten. It wasn’t your fault anyway. I’m an emotional wreck, and I’ve come

to terms with it.”

“The nurse told me that you gave me blood.”

I shrug it off. What is a pint of blood compared to him saving my life?

“Like I was singing to you last night; *I’ve got you under my skin.*” He closes his eyes, but a teasing smile stays on his lips. I shake my head in shock, wishing I had the guts to kiss his lips just to show him he’s not the only one who can play this game. But, I’m a coward. Have always been, will always be.

CHAPTER 4 - ADAM

Five years ago, I was asked to assist a summer course in Business at UCLA. Just a week before the classes began, my boss at the company where I worked assigned me to an important project that would leave me no time to attend the classes. So, I asked Jack, who was also an MBA graduate. Being my best friend and his own boss, he readily agreed to help me out. Six weeks later, he showed up with the most beautiful girl in his arms, as a perk of being such a good friend.

He called me to arrange a double date to introduce his new girlfriend. I would stop at nothing to meet the girl who won his heart. And from the excitement in his voice, I could sense she was a special one.

We reserved a table at the favorite Mexican restaurant of my then girlfriend, Pat, away from all photographers and TV cameras. Since Pat's new album had become yet another big success, she became the big news.

Pat put on a pink shirt and navy jeans. "No need to intimidate the poor girl at the first meeting," she joked. Only, she had no idea who would intimidate whom.

Pat and I had arrived at the

restaurant a few minutes before Jack and his new girl did and ordered piña coladas while waiting.

Then she entered the room, tall, slender, and graceful, stealing the spotlight from every other woman and man in a one-mile radius. Even Jack's appearance by her side couldn't snap me out of my trance.

Holy hell, was such a beauty possible? Smooth, chalky skin, blue eyes, and cherry-red, plump lips. Her thick hair hung down to her waist in brown-blond strands. The red summer dress she was wearing had the first buttons undone, just enough to reveal the tops of her boobs, making every muscle in my body tense. My pulse leaped, and

my eyes stung as if I was looking directly at the blistering sun.

There had been only a handful times in my life that made me believe in God's existence, and this was one of those. God must have created her to show his subjects a glimpse of heaven, a proof that nothing was a coincidence but rather a part of his plan. A carefully arranged master plan that allowed Jack to get her, leaving me open-mouthed and jealous of my best friend for the first time during our nineteen-year friendship.

"She gets the same reaction every time," Jack said, ending the hypnosis session both Pat and I found ourselves in. "This is Taylor."

"Jackpot, she is a beauty." Pat

held out her hand. “Honey, you should go into the entertainment business. With your beauty, I would bet everything I have you’d hit it big.”

“Oh, wow, Pat Carter. I’m a big fan.” Taylor grabbed Pat’s hand with both hands and flashed the most beautiful smile that could melt the entire Arctic irreversibly, and I felt all my insides liquefy in a flash.

“She’s got good taste, too,” Pat said. “Don’t screw it up, Jack.”

Then Taylor moved her attention to me, boring the most intense and seductive eyes into mine, right into the depths of my soul. “Hello, you must be Adam.” Blinking her long, lush eyelashes, she stretched out a hand

toward me.

My hand rose without my control and grasped hers. Just the brief second our eyes met and hands touched, I felt exposed, vulnerable, raw, and self-conscious all at once. My body jolted with her feathery touch, as though I received a blow in the chest. I found myself plotting the most outrageous plans to get this unearthly beauty in spite of Jack, Pat, and the five-carat diamond ring I'd bought for her. Taylor had to be mine or else my existence would only mean endless suffering.

“He’s normally not like that.” Pat laughs and taps on my shoulder, saving me from my embarrassing speechlessness.

“Pleasure to meet you,” I could finally say. She gently pulled back her hand and sat beside Jack and across from me.

I ran my eyes around the restaurant just to make sure nothing was wrong with my perception and they landed on Pat, who was gazing at me with a newly found curiosity.

“Baby, are you all right? You’ve turned all pale. Look at your lips.”

I smiled and then forced myself to plant a kiss on her lips. Much to my surprise, they didn’t have the sweet, smooth taste that always welcomed and comforted me. I could kiss the elderly lady at the next table and would feel the same. Just a matter of minutes was

enough to turn Pat into a stranger in my heart. Taylor could turn everything upside down. “Nothing is wrong with me.”

Nothing was wrong with me. I’d just happened to find the one and only woman my heart was yearning for since the day I started laying eyes on women. What could be wrong with me?

Taylor excused herself to go to the restroom. I couldn’t help but watch her as she walked away, swaying gracefully like a tulip in the spring breeze. As if her beauty wasn’t enough, she had an ass so firm and round that only a Black woman could have rivaled it. For the rest of the evening, I took every opportunity to admire her beauty.

It was one of the most tormenting, yet most pleasurable, hours of my life. Everything about her was nothing less than superlative.

The words that came out of her mouth were sweeter than honey, her smile like the first rays of the dawn, and every time she flipped her hair over her shoulders, I imagined wrapping those strands of hair around my fist and pounding my cock into her until she screamed my name. I could have done that everyday, and more than once a day, if I hadn't taken up the new project and had been the one to give that summer course, as had been my original plan.

I missed the chance to be at the right place at the right time to get to

know Taylor and make her mine, because of my work. Since then, I promised myself that work would never be the top priority on my list.

Fortunately, life gave me another chance to be at the right place at the right time, just before a mother-fucker gangster could take Taylor's last breath. Even though it meant for me to be shot. I'd rather get shot a dozen times than let Taylor die. I love her to death, and I pray to God every day that one day she'll believe my feelings for her and grow to love me for who I am.

A faint knock on the door pulls me back to present. I open my heavy lids and let my eyes adjust to the sunlight

looping inside. My throat is too dry to speak, but I utter a low “Yes.”

“May I come in?” I hear Taylor asking.

For the love of god, please come in and never leave. “Yeah, why not?” I offer her a big smile as she appears behind the door.

“Hi,” she says shyly as she closes it. Apparently, having hosted a deadly bullet close to my heart for half a week ago won’t stop my body from reacting to her the way it’s always done. The pale blue t-shirt she’s wearing is showing hints of the black, unpadded bra underneath. Too dangerous to put on such a t-shirt around the newly-operated-upon me. Had doctors known

Taylor's effect on me, they'd post a ban for her in neon signs at the hospital entrance.

"Hi," I reply. The huge flower bouquet and balloons on the table across my bed grab my attention. "Thanks for the flowers."

"Huh?" She looks around and stares at the flowers. "They're not from me." She proceeds toward them, picks up the card from the bouquet, and reads it aloud.

"I shouldn't be shocked to see someone else wanted to shoot you, too, but I am.

Get well soon and go on breaking innocent women's hearts.

Your Pat."

I smile in spite of the bitter memories of my last months with Pat. How would everything have been different, had Taylor not showed up in my life? “I think I should call her to say thank you.”

“Are you in touch with her? I mean regularly?” Taylor asks.

“I haven’t talked to her since... since we broke up. She didn’t want to have me around, and rightly so.”

Taylor pulls a red rose from among the flowers to smell it and sits on the edge of the bed, only an inch away from my hips. I could easily pull her over to me. Her skirt rolls up, revealing her smooth thighs, the view stealing my breath away.

“It smells delicious.” She arches an eyebrow and shoves the rose toward my nose.

“No, you smell delicious.” I grab her hand gently, ready to let her go, in case she intends to pull it free. Only, she doesn’t. I snap the rose away with my other hand and pull hers close to my lips, my eyes searching her face anxiously for a reaction. Instead of stopping me, she stares at me, perhaps unsure of what to do. Oh, hell, who am I kidding? She’s letting me play with her hand, just because she thinks she owes me her life. Even so, I can’t prevent my body from taking every opportunity to have her close.

I brush my lips across her

delicate knuckles and roam up toward her fingertips. She hums and closes her eyes. A tint of a blush sweeps across her face, and her chest rises. The sight of the hard peaks of her breasts sends jolts right to my balls. Slowly, I part my lips and slip her middle finger inside my mouth. I watch her face with fascination, while I roll my tongue around her finger. Her eyes fly open when I lick the sensitive flesh between her fingers, and her chest heaves up and down in short breaths, making her breasts appear doubled in size.

Is she picturing my tongue down there between her legs, as I am? Is she aroused? Or annoyed? Her face doesn't reveal anything.

“Adam, please,” she says but doesn’t pull away. I give up and release her hand and give the rose back to her. After a minute of disturbing silence during which she gazes out the window, she faces me. “Why did you break up with Pat? You were the couple everyone talked about. Everyone thought you, two, loved each other and would marry some day.”

Isn’t the answer clear to her? Hasn’t she already found out I fell madly in love with her the first time I saw her? “I couldn’t love her the way she deserved.”

“Well, you did love her for many years before the breakup, didn’t you?”

“I don’t feel well enough to talk

about it. Maybe another time.”

“But you feel well enough to lick my finger.” A hint of smile flickers around the corner of her mouth.

“I’ll always feel well enough for that and more.” I narrow my eyes, as I scan her up and down. Even on my deathbed.

“More?” She snorts and arches an eyebrow. Even that brief sound is like music to my ears.

I open my mouth to speak but close it immediately. How could I forget my promise that I would not chase Taylor anymore? She hasn’t sued me for sexual harassment because she thinks I’m essential to her company’s success. Now she won’t even decline my

advances because of the fucking bullet hole in my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper and drift my eyes away from hers. “I promised myself I would stop bothering you.”

“For that you’ll have to stop existing.”

I look up at her again to see whether she’s serious. Can she hate me that much?

“Just kidding.” She taps her hand on my thigh, a little above my knee. I inhale sharply at the brief touch and try to think of the face of the man who attacked Taylor in order to keep my cock from growing, or it’ll be pretty obvious under the thin layer of the bed sheet. But her bare thighs and hard nipples make it

impossible for me to think of anything other than having her.

Ahh, would it be so bad for her if she pulls that skirt up, sits astride me, and slides down on my cock? Would it be so hard? I wouldn't even need a lot of time to come. I bet with the years of desiring her, it'd take only a few thrusts. A simple thing for her would mean the world to me. It would even cure me faster than the medications.

Feeling her wet and tight around me. Shit, I'm afraid I won't be able to keep my promise, and worse yet, I'll shamelessly use my heroic act to my advantage.

"I talked to your doctor before coming in. He is thinking about releasing

you tomorrow. I'm glad you're recovering quickly. I hired a housekeeper to run the errands for you everyday for the next few weeks until you're back on your feet again. All expenses are on me, of course."

I shake my head no. "I already have one. Keep your money for yourself. And, I don't want you thinking you owe me a thing because I saved you. Anyone else would do the same thing. Believe me, I'm not special."

"You may be right. Anyone would do it. But, it was you who came after me that night. You were there for me when I needed you most. Who else would do that? Please, let me at least give you this. A small gift among the

many I want to give you.” She takes a breath break and looks down at the rose in her hand. “Something happened that night. Since Jack’s death, I’d felt indifferent toward life, even hoping death would come sooner rather than later. But, looking death in the eye made me aware that I’m not ready for my life to end anytime soon. And, it’s thanks to you that I’m still alive. You have to accept what I’m giving you, or I’ll have to force you to take them.”

“Now you’ve made me curious; what other gifts I’m gonna be forced to take.” Will I have a say in what kind of gift I should get?

“Just wait and see.” She shakes her head, smiling, and gets up. “I talked

to Adrienne. She's coming to stay over the weekend. I'll pick her up at the airport tomorrow. Just so you know."

"Shit. Can you please shoot me once more so I can avoid her? She may be my sister, but she thinks she's my mother. She'll turn my weekend into hell."

"Come on. It can't be that bad."

"Yeah, just wait and see. Well, thanks anyway."

"You're welcome." She checks her watch and turns back to face me. "I gotta go. Visiting time is up. See you tomorrow." And for some outrageous reason, she leans down and brushes my cheeks with her soft and wet lips. One of the many gifts she'll force me to have?

I wave her goodbye and drift into a comforting sleep full with X-rated dreams of Taylor.

The next day, about half an hour after breakfast, I put on my clothes with the help of a kind nurse, dump the pajamas into the small handbag Taylor brought the day after the surgery, and get back into bed. I'm still sore and easily exhausted. The bullet might be gone, but its effects are still in full force.

A knock on the door pulls me back from sleep.

"Hi, Adam." Bree pops her head out behind the door. "Am I disturbing you?"

"No, come in." I set about

straightening myself in the bed, as Bree enters and closes the door behind her. I frown. “Isn’t Taylor coming, too?”

“She left to meet your sister at the airport. She’ll drive her directly to your place, and I’ll drive you home, unless you want your sister to see you like this.”

“Good point.”

“The nurse should bring the release documents any minute. Do you need any help putting on your clothes?”

“No, thanks. A nurse helped me earlier. I’m all set to go.” I throw the bed cover off to show her my clothes.

“So, Friday, huh?” Bree says, but I don’t respond. I know where she’s going. “Have you already given Taylor

your invitation card? What did you write this time?"

I shake my head no. "That's over. I won't bother her again. And I'm in no condition to take her out anyway."

"What? Why the change of heart? Has it gotten too dangerous being around her?" She grins, moving her eyebrows up and down playfully.

"Yeah, right."

"Then why?"

"Well, for one thing, she should have already realized by now that I love her. If she wants me, she knows where to find me."

"And the other reason?"

"I think I overdid the wooing thing to the point of suffocating her. She

needs some space to breathe and let it sink in, I guess.” I hope I’ll stick to my promise, but a part of me is flashing me a devilish smile, and I know how easily that part can take control over me when I’m around Taylor.

Oh, Taylor. You always bring out the bad in me.

CHAPTER 5 - TAYLOR

Adam's sister, Adriana, comes out almost an hour after her plane lands. Wondering what has kept her so long, I wave at her when she appears at the arrival gate. She hasn't changed much since the one and only time I saw her at my wedding reception. Only extra pounds around her belly, which should be understandable for a woman with three kids.

With the earbuds of her phone at her ear, she shakes my hand and briefly asks me how I am before she heads out

toward the exit. Her expressionless face showcases how little she cares about my answer. Does she think of me as her private chauffeur, or something? I work on keeping my steps close to her for the possibility that she may want to focus her attention on me, rather than her phone.

“Don’t forget the basketball training of the girls at four... Yeah, the dinner is in the freezer... No, the lasagna is for tomorrow. Chicken curry soup is for today... Please just follow the order I wrote down on the fridge. They like their soup after the training...Yes... I said yes. Just heat up the oven before you put the food inside. We’ve talked about this... Okay, I gotta go now. I have

a dinner to organize.” She finally presses the end button, but still keeps on occupying herself with the phone rather than initiating small talk with me. Once inside the car, I peek at the screen of her phone and see pictures of iceberg lettuce, olive oil, and cucumber. Is she doing online shopping?

“We can pull up by the Whole Foods if you want,” I ask her and turn the key in the ignition.

“No, thanks. I’ve come here to see my brother, not to shop.”

There goes my friendly offer and only attempt to talk to garbage. She keeps herself busy with shopping online, until we reach the parking lot of Adam’s apartment building. And, when we enter

the elevators, her phone rings. From Adriana's words, I assume the caller is from the online shopping store. "Five pounds black angus... Two whole chickens... Twelve lamb chops... No, ten pounds of Bintje potatoes... Yes... Yes... Oh, pecans too. What brand of olive oil do you have?"

Is she planning to have a feast? She doesn't want to lose time with shopping, but she will with cooking if she is planning to use all that food—enough to feed a small town.

She continues talking while I unlock the door to Adam's apartment. It wasn't difficult to get a spare key to Adam's apartment after the shooting. After I help Adriana place her suitcase

by the door, she waves me her thank-you and strides to the kitchen. I glance at my watch, wondering when Adam and Bree will arrive and head toward the bathroom to wash my hands. The condo is large enough to feel lost inside. Just as I open the bathroom door, I hear giggles coming from the end of the corridor. Bree and Adam are supposed to arrive at least half an hour later, but from the sound of it, they're already here. I step back and walk in the direction of the voices.

“Wow, are you solid,” I hear Bree saying. Is she in the bedroom with Adam? What are they doing in there? I feel my body go stiff in shock, and my jaw clenches tightly.

I stop a few feet away from the door and hold my breath to hear more of their conversation. I hear Adam's murmurs, but it's impossible to make out what he's saying. All of a sudden, the door swings open, and Adam stands beside it, wearing a white shirt with buttons undone, revealing most of his torso, and a pajama bottom is hanging down from his hips.

I'd be a liar if I say it's not a sight to behold.

I swallow a gulp and clasp my hands behind me to stifle the urge to run them over the bulging muscles of his chest and stomach. Maybe I should start considering a topless Friday at work just for him. That'd be the worst day, in

terms of productivity for sure, given my eyes are still glued to his washboard abs.

When I finally realize I've been sweeping him up and down for long enough to be defined as awkward, I force a casual smile at both of them. "Oh, you're here. I thought you were still at the hospital and wondered what the noise was about."

"Oh, my God, Taylor, did we scare you?" Bree asks, her face growing serious.

"No, no. Well, just a little." I glance at Adam, only briefly though, or I'm sure I'll blush deep red, thanks to the shameful finger-licking incident at the hospital that managed to become

engraved on my memory. “So, Adam, how... how are you?” I step aside to let them pass, but mostly to escape Adam’s stare.

“Much better.”

“Don’t be a hero, Adam.” Bree nudges him with her elbow. What is going on with the two? Then she turns to me. “He was complaining about the pain in his chest when I was driving him home.”

“That was because of the seat belts.” Adam shakes his head and strides away.

“How are you feeling now? Does it still hurt?” I ask.

He shakes his head to answer. “Where is Adriana?”

“In the kitchen, organizing a feast,” I whisper guiltily, hoping Adriana doesn’t hear it.

“There you are.” Adam spreads his arms wide open as he enters the kitchen. I stay at the doorway and study Adriana. She drops the phone on the counter top and throws herself into his arms.

Careful! His scar is still tender,
I want to say as she hugs Adam tightly, but I manage to keep it to myself.

“Is it here?” Adriana pushes aside Adam’s shirt to view the bandage on his chest and scrunches up her face. “Oh, my God. My poor brother. How could they do this to you?” She hugs him again and turns her eyes to me. “You’re

lucky that you got out of it without a scratch,” she says to me.

Without a scratch? You, bitch!

“Come on Adriana, don’t be mean.” Adam comes to my rescue. “The guy was full on kicking and hitting Taylor when I found them.”

Bree clears her throat beside me and steps inside to introduce herself to Adriana. “I’m Bree, Taylor’s secretary. You two look so much alike. Are you twins?”

“For God’s sake, no. I look nothing like this old fart,” Adam says.

Adriana pinches him in the arm. “We’ve got just three years difference, and I’m an old fart. I’ve got three kids. What have you got?”

“A bullet in my chest and a condo full of pretty ladies.” Adam flashes a beautiful smile, but I can see the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. Is he jealous of Adriana’s family?

“You’re right about that. You’ll have another pretty lady coming for the dinner.” Adriana turns to us, well, to Bree actually. “I’m going to cook a special dinner for Adam’s release from the hospital. You’re both welcome.”

Adam eyes me and Bree. For some strange reason, my stomach begins fluttering as his eyes rest on mine; as opposed to the usual nausea I feel when he stares at me. “Adriana is a professional cook. She caters important events in New York. You shouldn’t miss

the chance to eat her food for free.” Then he looks back at Adriana. “Who else is coming?”

“First, promise me you’ll not be mad at me.” Adriana holds Adam’s hands between hers.

“Who is coming?”

“Pat, but only because tonight is the only night she’s available. I want to see her now that I’m in L.A. It’s been months since she and I last met. Please tell me you’re not mad.”

Pat? Adam’s ex? As much as I’d love to stay and witness how the two interact with each other after their sensational breakup, which occupied the tabloids for several months, and see how Adriana will manage cooking all that

food, I suppose it's better for me to leave Adam alone with Pat. For all I know, they will pick up where they left off, and get back together again. I only need to find an excuse for not joining the dinner.

Adam runs his hand through his hair and breathes heavily in and out of his nostrils. I wish I knew what is going through in his mind. "Wait a minute." He takes a step away from Adriana. "Does Pat know the dinner party is at my apartment? Did she actually agree on eating at the same table with me?"

"Yes, of course she did. She doesn't hold grudge against you, anymore," Adriana answers and looks at Bree again. "I'm counting on you, girls.

Don't leave me as a third wheel with them."

"I'd love to meet Pat Carter." Bree claps her hands and makes an enthusiastic jump on her feet.

Adam tabs on his foot, shaking his head. "Why third wheel? It's not gonna to be a date."

"Well, maybe not tonight's dinner but the next one." Adriana winks and claps her hands, following Bree.

I'm sure I'll feel uncomfortable being around Pat. She tried to be friends with me when she was still with Adam, and I always felt she and I clicked on a personal level. Maybe if we'd met in different circumstances we would have become good friends, but her breakup

with Adam and then Jack's death put a stop to our fragile relationship.

Looking at Adam, I can see I'm not the only one uncomfortable at the prospect of meeting with Pat again. His expression turns suddenly serious and maybe even a little hostile. "You're playing with fire, Adriana. I don't want her getting hurt again. She and I are finished. No point in trying to rekindle something that's long dead."

"You must still feel something for Pat, otherwise, why haven't you dated another woman for such a long time?" Adriana asks.

Did he really not date another woman? Or perhaps he just doesn't talk about his conquests to his sister? Must

be the latter. I wouldn't want to share my private life with her either, given her nosiness, which I'm witnessing only a few minutes into their conversation.

Adam let out a long breath full of frustration and glances at me before he turns to Adriana. "I don't want to discuss it. You can invite whomever you want. I'll be resting in my bedroom."

My time for flight. "Can I get a rain check? I... I've already other plans for tonight."

"Really?" Adam raises an eyebrow. Come on. Among all the people, he should be the one who should understand my reasons for not wanting to stay for the awkward dinner party.

"Yeah, I'm running late,

already.” I look down at my watch, as if to show them how terribly late I am.

“Well, thanks for driving Adriana over here.” Adam moves toward me, his eyes drilling into mine. “I’ll walk you to the elevator.”

After saying goodbye to Bree and Adriana, I follow Adam out. He stands very close to me as he presses the elevator button, his eyes holding my gaze. I’m wearing running shoes, so I’m barely reaching his shoulders.

“I won’t be at work for some time.” He stares in my eyes, his face serious and sad at the same time, making me wonder whether his scar is hurting. “Will you come and visit me?”

“Of course, I will. I’d like to call

you, too, if you don't mind." Which is true. Although I don't want to tell him that I feel a huge debt to him, so as not to upset him, and I feel like he is now my responsibility, as if I'm his guardian and he's an orphan.

A sexy orphan, though.

His sweatpants are brushing my skirt; his musky scent mixed with some hospital chemicals fill my nose. The curls of his hair fall all over his forehead as he looks down at me, and I want to reach up and run my fingers through them to smooth them. How furiously my heart is beating at his close proximity doesn't escape me. I can hardly ignore his beautiful face and the toned muscles and the smooth dark skin

of his chest under his undone shirt. Even though I know he works out regularly, seeing him half naked brings some naughty thoughts to my mind, like spreading my hands all over his muscles, up and down on his chest and across the v-shape of his belly toward the waistband of his sweats.

“Are you seriously asking me that? I’d die for your calls. Not really die, of course. But you know what I mean. Call me any time you want.” Cautiously, he lifts his hand and places it on my shoulder and, for some weird reason unknown to me, I don’t jerk away. He looks surprised by that fact, too.

The elevator doesn’t look as

though it'll come anytime soon. The last time the elevator delayed nearly cost me my life and Adam's. But, this time, I don't mind the long wait. I could even stay longer if he licks my fingers again. I shudder at the thought of the pleasure his tongue gave me in that brief moment at the hospital.

“Did you want me to stay for the dinner? I can if you want, you know?” I don't know why I'm offering him that. Maybe because the fact that Pat's coming to dinner is bothering me. If the two start all over again, Pat surely won't want him working for me. And, I don't know if I'm ready to stand on my own without him, both at work and privately.

“You don't actually have any

plans for tonight, do you?" His hand moves toward my collar bone, stroking away gently at my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. Before I can react, it slips under my shirt and begins caressing the bare skin on my cleavage. His fingers are dangerously close to my hardened nipples, and I remember I'm wearing only a lace bra underneath. At this distance, he won't miss his effect on my body. I close my eyes at the unexpected softness of his fingers running circles on me and also because I'm afraid to look at him.

It dawns on me, I'm always afraid of looking at him.

I open my eyes when I hear the elevator doors slide open, interrupting

our intimate moment. Yet, Adam doesn't seem to be bothered by it. He runs his hand over my throat up to my chin and brushes my lips with his thumb. Cold and hot shivers go up and down my spine. My racing heart will burst out of my chest if I can't get it under control.

“Instead of hiring me a housekeeper, why don't you pay back your debt with kisses?”

His words rip the breath away from my lungs. I manage to look up at his face, carefully avoiding his lips, though I notice he's running his tongue over them, perhaps preparing them for the one-move launch on mine.

“I thought you said I didn't owe you anything.” My chest rises and falls

with a crazy speed. I attempt to take a step back, but my numb legs fail me. I can barely hear the elevator doors closing over my deafening heartbeats.

“Yet, you insisted you did.” He leans down close to my face, his hair brushing my forehead. My eyes fall shut again, and I savor his scent. I’ll have to let him kiss me, and it doesn’t feel as if it’ll be a torture. Certainly, calling up my housekeeper to arrange for her to take over Adam’s condo will be more trouble than a kiss from him. If kissing an ice queen will make him as happy as he claims.

Heat surges through me as I stand on my unsteady legs, paralyzed with anticipation. I sigh as he leans in and lets

his lips touch mine. Only shortly, though, because he just licks my lower lip and pulls back immediately. My eyes spring open to see why he doesn't kiss me fully. Hard to admit, but I'm a little disappointed at the briefness of it. I suck my lower lip to relish the taste of his lick, under his surprised gaze.

“Go now. Or I'll have to hold you captive here.” He swallows hard and presses the elevator button again. “Text me when you arrive home, so I know you're safe.”

His eyes, ablaze and hot with lust, scan every inch of my body as the elevator doors open again and I step in. Holding my breath, I soak in the strange sensation his presence is subjecting me

to, until the doors close, and throw myself back against the wall to support my unsteady knees. My crazy heartbeats don't slow down even after I get into my car and go through the scene again in my head.

I cross my legs, savoring the revitalization between my thighs and run my hand over my chest, imagining having Adam's tongue deep in my mouth. If he had a chance to see me like this, he wouldn't just enjoy watching my embarrassing reaction, but would also push open my legs and satiate the hunger in me. Pat once mentioned what an aggressive lover Adam was in bed. The thought of him ripping my shirt and skirt flames the fire between my legs.

How long has it been since the last time I felt anything sexual? Since Jack, of course, because no other man after him has managed to made me want to take a second look, let alone arouse me. I should relish the moment as a sign of healing from my grief.

But how? What should I do?

I can't just throw myself into Adam's arms and start having sex with him. It'll put our work relationship in grave danger. Although I wouldn't give it a chance, he may want more than just sex, and I don't think I can love another man. Worse yet, if I do fall in love with him, and he breaks my heart? What then? I don't think I can handle another heartache after Jack's death. That he left

Pat, even though he loved her, tells more than enough about his commitment issues. In any case, staying away from him is the right way to go.

But whether it will be easy is an entirely different matter.

As soon as I step into my condo, I grab my phone to write a text to Adam.

“Safe at home and curious.”

He replies instantly, *“Curious as to what might have been if I held you captive?”*

Oh, shit. He goes in directly for the kill.

“Curious as to what the rest of your chest looks like,” I type and sit on the couch. Two can play this game.

Adam's message arrives in less than a minute. *"Just the chest or the rest of everything, too?"*

Rest of everything? I giggle to myself. The guy is out of his mind. I decide to leave it at that and throw the phone over at the coffee table. Five minutes later, it buzzes with a new message. I grab it and snap open the new message, only to see a picture of Adam's chest.

Muscled. Dark. And bandaged. He's so doing it on purpose. Using every opportunity, including the scar, to get my attention. And, it works. I'm once again reminded of what he did for me. He risked no less than his life to keep me alive. How bad can it be to go on a date

with him?

Only, he hasn't asked me out again. Must be the scar.

"Nice and dangerous," I write, hardly keeping my fingers away from the phone.

"You've got me figured out. And, one more thing; I always get what I want. Just so you know," Adam replies.

I'll need an ice-cold shower to cool me down after this. I leave the phone on the coffee table and head to the bathroom. After a quick shower and a bowl of cereal, I settle in my bed and switch on my tablet to go through my wedding pictures. Adam appears in only a handful out of a thousand pictures. I

wonder why.

And in the ones he appears, he is barely smiling. Did he have feelings for me, then? Was I the reason for his breakup with Pat? The thought of coming between them makes me want to bang my head on the wall. As if the past wasn't enough, instead of making it clear to Adam that he has no chance with me, I'm giving in to his advances and even encouraging him to flirt with me now that Pat might be interested in taking him back. What is wrong with me?

I select a picture of Jack and hug the tablet, before switching off the lights and tucking myself in under the covers.

Jack. If only you could tell me what the right thing to do is.

In the morning, I wake up all soaked in sweat with vague memories of the wet dreams I had last night. With none other than Adam. Oh, God. He has managed to force himself into my dreams, too. I wasn't just running my fingers over his chest in my dream, but my goddamned tongue, too. What is it about his chest and its effect on me that I would shame myself in the bed I shared with Jack?

I change into a t-shirt and a denim skirt, and dump Jack's pajamas, which are now dark with sweat, into the laundry box, and head to the kitchen. Switching on the TV to watch the morning news, I grab an orange juice

from the fridge and drink directly from the bottle.

While drinking, I sit on the chair and turn up the volume of the TV. Just then, the face of the guy who attacked me fills the screen. Shocked, the juice spurts out of my mouth. The little bit of juice that manages to escape down my throat makes me choke. I cough violently, while trying to breathe at the same time. Am I hallucinating or is it real?

I hear the phone buzzing in the living room. Must be Adam, I think to myself as I race to get the phone and then press answer without looking at the ID.

“Hello.” My voice is husky from coughing.

“Am I talking to Ms. Doheny?” a

man asks.

Hearing my maiden name throws me off a little, and I barely utter a “Yes.”

“I’m calling from LAPD. We’d like to ask you to come over to our station to help us establish the identity of a body that we think is the person who assaulted you on Friday.”

“Sure,” I mumble. “How... how did he die?”

“He was shot with the same type of gun Adam Garnett was shot. That, and your description of the assailant makes us believe that he is the one.”

“Okay. I’m on my way.”

Grabbing my purse and the keys I hurry outside. When I press the elevator button my phone chimes in my hand.

“Taylor, we’re coming over to pick you up.” Adam’s voice conveys every bit of agitation and anxiety I’m feeling. “Have you seen the news? The police found our guy dead. Adriana is driving me over to the police station. We’ll be in front of your apartment building in a couple of minutes.”

“I received a call from LAPD just a minute ago. I’m already on my way out.”

“Okay, we’ll pick you up in two.”

I press the lobby button, rush out when the doors slide open, and find Adam’s car pulling up beside the sidewalk. Adam is sitting in the passenger side in the back and motions

for me to sit beside him. I round the back of the car and climb in quickly.

“It’s definitely him. I saw his face on TV,” I say as I settle by Adam. He’s holding his right hand over his chest under the seat belt, and I wonder why he’s not sitting in the front beside Adriana.

“The news said the police found two dead bodies,” Adam says. “The other one may belong to the shooter. Did you see his face? I don’t remember anything about the second guy.”

“Neither do I. He came out of nowhere, and it was too dark to see anything from that distance.”

Adriana eyes me from the rearview mirror but doesn’t say a word.

I guess witnessing the end of her brother's shooter so soon wasn't among her plans for her brief visit to L.A.

I hold Adam's hand throughout the ride and squeeze it even tighter when we step into the room where two bodies lie under white sheets on two tables. The heavy metallic smell of blood mixed with dirt stings my nose. I can hardly keep my stomach under control. It gets worse when the sheet is pulled down to display the dead body of the attacker. Just a millisecond of a glimpse of his scarred face is enough to send me running out, looking for a bucket to empty the contents of my stomach.

"Yes, it's him," I utter, bending down over the garbage can I find a foot

away from the doorway. The officer hands me a tissue and leaves me alone with the can. I hear him talking to Adam but can't make out what he says. I gag several times but nothing comes out. At last, I force myself back to my feet and wipe my face with the tissue.

Adam approaches and slides an arm around my waist. "Are you okay?"

"I guess."

"The officer told me that the gun I was shot with was registered under the name of the second victim. It's very likely that he is the shooter."

I try to steal a glance at the tables inside. "Good news, isn't it?"

"Yes. At least we know we're safe now. Nobody will be coming after

you anymore.”

The officer takes us to another room and has us sign some documents, which I guess are statements confirming the identity of the victims. I’m in no condition to read them, though. I leave the station with mixed feelings. Death is never good news, but in this case I should be glad because, for all I know, they might have come after us and killed Adam or another innocent person.

“You okay?” Adam pulls me to a corner between the police station and the building next door.

“I’m a little shocked. That’s it.”

“Do you want to grab a coffee?”

“No, no. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

He lifts his hand and places it gently on my cheek. “You’re freezing.”

“I am okay.” I tilt my head back to look into his eyes, while I put on my calmest face.

He flashes me a naughty smile. “Don’t look at me like that.” He shifts his whole body toward mine, pushing me against the wall. His dark eyes stare at me with burning intensity, as he catches my hand and presses it against his chest.

“Like how?” I frown, working hard to stop my hand from shaking. His muscles stand firm beneath my palm, sending heat rushing through my body, and I find myself wishing I could touch his chest without the barrier of his shirt.

His eyes clouded with desire, he

shakes his head, as if I said or did something outrageous, while his fingers brush my cheek, past my throat, down to my cleavage. My pulse shoots straight up and I inhale sharply. His left hand firmly grips my hair, and he traps me against the wall with his hips.

I can feel his erection pressing against my belly, and from the feel of it, it tends toward the massive side of the scale. Shame fills me as I picture its colossal size taking away the aching itch building inside my sex. I try to yank myself free from his hold, only to have him draw closer to me.

“Someone will see us. Let go of me,” I falter as I speak.

“You don’t sound very

convincing.” He leans down, his breathing heavy, and forces his lips onto mine, catching my lower lip between his teeth to open my mouth, and sweeps his tongue into my mouth. I gasp when his tongue glides over mine and an embarrassing moan escapes from deep in his throat. His kiss is hard, yet tender, and full of longing. I feel his groin growing harder, fear it’ll rip through the fabric of his jeans.

He interrupts his kiss to whisper into my mouth, “Don’t hate me for that. You bewitched me since the first day we met.”

The shock of his confession washes over me. My guess was right. He was interested in me even when Jack

was alive. Some friend he was.

I can't break free from his claiming kisses even if I try. It's not just his iron grip, but my unwillingness too, that stands in my way. And worse yet, my hands slip under his shirt and begin hungrily exploring his body. His stiff abs flex under the direct contact of my hands. His hand pushes my legs apart and positions his between my thighs and begins rubbing my sex.

With relief, I realize that he can't take me here. Not because of it being in public or too close to the police station—I bet he's the kind of man who'd get a kick out of public sex—but because of his health. The doctors must have ordered him to steer clear of any

strenuous physical activity. Feeling relieved with this realization, I get up on my toes to press my lips harder on his, though trying to resist the urge to rub myself against his leg.

The next thing I feel is his hand roaming under my skirt, probing the inner flesh of my thighs. He presses his palm flat between my thighs through my panties before his fingers mercilessly slide under the seam and begin sliding along my folds. The feeling of someone touching me there is overwhelming and sends my head spinning with shock. Before I know it, he has a finger deep inside me, thrusting and twisting around my inner walls. Shit, this is Adam, Jack's best friend, exploring my most

private parts out in the open. It's wrong in every way.

“Have you lost your mind?” I try to push him away, but his grip holds me too tightly between the cage of his torso and the wall of the building.

He looks down at me, his eyes sparkling with his intent. “Please let me have it. You feel so good,” he hisses, his voice raw and his breath hot with lust. “Shit, you're so wet.” He grips me tighter and slips another finger inside.

In spite of myself, I moan when his fingers apply pressure on a sweet spot, and I clasp my thighs around his hand to lock it in place.

“You like it this way, don't you?” His lips claim mine again.

There is no talking sense to him. Or to me, for that matter. I brace myself for the inevitable and let his fingers continue touching the places that I almost forgot existed. How could I manage so long without the pleasure of having a man?

He breaks our kiss and moves toward my ear. “Want me to finish you off?”

As if it’s remotely possible to say no to him... the explosion has already started to build up inside me. “Yes, please.” My answer comes out muffled between my labored breathing. But, all of a sudden, he stops and pulls the fingers back until the tip of his fingers are touching my entrance.

“I will, baby, I will if you go out on a date with me.”

“What?” I yell. He seems to take delight in rendering me confused and helpless.

“A date is all I want. Say yes and you’ll have your orgasm.” He’s as breathless as I am.

“Okay.”

“Okay, what? Say it.”

“I’ll go out on a date with you,” I shout at him from deep in my lungs then close my eyes to feel the full power of his damn fingers thrusting me to an intense orgasm. I begin crying as my muscles contract violently around his fingers. I feel almost delirious with the intensity of the orgasm rushing over me.

He keeps his fingers there for a little longer, letting me enjoy the last moments of my subsiding orgasm. I gasp when he draws them out, and drop my head on his shoulder. My body shakes in rhythm with my furious heart beats. I'll be lucky if I don't collapse in the street. "I can't believe you did this to me."

"You're welcome, babe." Adam lifts his hand up and sticks his fingers that are wet with my juices into his mouth.

All of a sudden, Jack's face appears before me. He looks ashamed of seeing me breaking apart from a man's fingers right around the corner from the LAPD. With none other than his best friend.

Finally, gathering up the energy and courage I've been missing the last sinful minutes, I shove Adam away from me. "You can't play with me like this. I don't want to see you again besides at work. I don't care if you saved my life or a thousand other people's. I won't allow this again."

"But, you said yes. You wanted it, too. Am I missing something?"

"You're missing a whole a lot of somethings. I'm not interested in you. And get your hands off of me." I storm out into the street in tears without caring about the traffic lights, as a green car drives past me with furious speed, almost crashing into the car ahead of it. If a hand hadn't pulled me at the right

moment, I'd have been swept under its wheels. My heart pounding against my chest, I stride off in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 6 - ADAM

Why didn't women come with a how-to manual? It doesn't have to include some complicated information like how to manipulate them and make them do whatever your heart—or cock—desires. But some simple basics, like how to talk to them, how to understand their cues, how to flirt with them, and most importantly how to please them without screwing it up.

Even so, Taylor would need a special edition just for her.

She won't see me. She won't

take my calls. She barely acknowledges my existence during the weekly meetings. And this happens just when I start thinking things were looking up between us. What do I have to do to make her see that she'll be better off with me than spending a life of solitude?

I don't know how much longer I can continue this ever-challenging pursuit of her. I'm beginning to get tired of following her like a cat after a mouse.

The night Adriana invited Pat over for dinner Pat asked me, "Are you happier now than when you were with me?"

She had a point. She's always had a point. She is one of the rare women who don't need a how-to

manual. She is direct in her thoughts and wishes, and that was one of the thousands of things I loved about her.

Yet, I couldn't answer her question without the possibility of breaking her heart. I was happy, maybe the happiest in my life when I was with Pat. This is no overstatement or exaggeration. She loved sex and was open to trying different things. She cooked delicious food, maybe as well as Adriana. She was humble, tender, and caring without compromising her directness and rationality. She was a half man, half woman in a hell-of-a-sexy woman's body. The perfect mixture. We had plans for the future. We wanted a big house in the city and another by the

beach and lots of kids to fill them with. I would teach them basketball, and she would teach them music.

However, everything changed when Taylor entered the equation, disrupting plans for my future with Pat. Since then, I've become the miserable-and-lost me that I am today, in spite of having once been in a happy relationship with Pat.

And, after the day at the LAPD station, I'm in deeper shit than I've ever been. After seeing Taylor writhing with an orgasm, listening to her stifled whimpers, feeling my fingers deep inside her wet core, my suffering has evolved to an unbearable level.

She begged me to make her reach

orgasm; I felt the spasm of her inner muscles around my fingers. All crystal clear signs of pleasure. Pure and real pleasure. Yet, she's rejecting me as if I burned her house, or killed her cat.

At times, I swear I'll stop working for Taylor and go back to where I left off with Pat. She is willing to take me back. She told me so during the dinner with Adriana, with the promise of giving me the time of my life. If she wasn't such a good-hearted and generous person and I was an asshole, I'd take her up on the offer and let her spoil me rotten. But, she deserves a man who truly loves her and puts her above everything. Not someone like me who will show up today and leave tomorrow

because he's love struck by another woman.

A month has passed since my intimate moment with Taylor, and to this date she hasn't said a word about it. I have no choice but to go along with her unspoken wishes.

I leave my office windows and door open to help with the air circulation and sit back in my chair to continue with the spreadsheet I've been working on since the morning. Murmurs in the hall keep me from concentrating, so I get up with the intent of asking the people to keep it quieter.

Strange, Taylor hasn't warned them already. She squarely objects to the notion of losing precious work time for

unproductive activities, like simply talking or surfing the Internet. Well, she hasn't objected this time because she is the one chatting. With Valerie.

"You should come, too," I hear Valerie say. "His friend is very hot. You won't be disappointed."

"I don't know. I'm not in the mood," Taylor replies.

"You're never in the mood—" Valerie speaks my mind. "Come for a short time, then. If you don't like him you can just come up with an excuse and leave."

I don't want to hear Taylor's answer, most likely a positive one, so I shut the door loudly enough for anyone in the hall to hear. I want to punch the

wall. She'll agree on meeting a stranger, but she won't come anywhere near me. How fucking unfair is that?

There's no point in trying to work now. I'll just skim through the numbers without really studying them, so I'd rather call it a day and get prepared for the dinner. Jerry, my boss from the marketing company I work for, invited me to a dinner party at his summer house in Malibu. To save time, I brought a fresh shirt and pants to the office. I shrug out of my work shirt and place it on the couch. Examining the scar on my chest has become an unbreakable daily habit, so I approach the mirror by the door and examine my chest while putting on the clean shirt.

I leave the buttons undone and run my fingers over the scar. It's still a little sore and sensitive, even to my soft touch. I've already made an appointment with a dermatologist to get the scar removed with a laser. I don't want the constant reminder of having come close to death, although I receive compliments from women at the gym every now and then about how sexy it looks on my chest. Sexy, my ass. I was in pain, terrified, and helpless at the shooting. Nothing sexy about that.

A knock on the door startles me, and I take a step back. "Yes."

Taylor opens the door but doesn't enter. "Are you busy?"

I shake my head and motion her

inside. I don't bother with buttoning my shirt and sit down on the edge of my desk while surveying her from head to toe. Her hair is lying loosely on her shoulders, a little longer than she usually keeps it since Jack's death. Jack loved her waist-length hair. So did I. And right after his death, her very first action was to shave off all her hair. Even bald she looked good. Maybe she will grow it back to her waist again. Her long hair was her signature, besides her big breasts, and round ass, and plump lips, and daring eyes. Well, every part of her is special.

Her bra is vaguely visible under her crisply pressed white shirt, and from the outline of her nipples under the shirt,

it's clear that she's sporting an unpadded bra. Maybe a lace one? No, I shouldn't go there. Too distracting. Maybe I should file a complaint about the sensual clothing she's wearing at work. Valerie would be delighted to act upon it.

I glance down at her tightly fitting grey skirt and wonder how she can walk in that. Well, at least she's wearing flat shoes. She's the perfect height for me. Not too short to make me feel like I have one of my sisters around, and not so tall that I can't still feel protective over her. Yeah, I'm macho like that. One of the handful of downsides of being me.

I'm not the only one studying the other, though. Her eyes are sweeping

over my pecs down to my abs. She looks hesitant as she moves toward me. I want to joke and say “I won’t bite,” but I may not be able to keep to that promise, if she gets too close to me.

She motions toward my shirt with her eyes. “You can turn on the AC if it’s too hot in here.”

“That’s not it.” I shake my head, unable to suppress a smile. “I was just changing into a fresh shirt for a party in Malibu.” She raises an eyebrow. Her expression is clouded with curiosity and even a little jealousy. When she doesn’t reveal any of her thoughts, I ask, “So, what brings you here?” *After a long time of practically ignoring my existence?*

“I need you for a meeting on

Monday afternoon.” She’s brisk and to the point. She won’t spend any second longer than necessary with me.

But, I want to keep her longer. “I don’t work for you on Mondays.”

She rolls her eyes. “Like I don’t know it.”

I flash a knowing smile. “Well?”

“Can you leave your other work earlier and meet me at four at the Four Seasons?”

I lift my hand to scratch my forehead and look away as if I’m thinking about it. Of course I can leave earlier. No problem there, but she doesn’t need to know that. “I’ll be meeting with an important client for lunch. I don’t know if I can make it.”

“Oh, please. It’s important that you come with me.”

I remember the last time she said “Please” to me when she desperately needed me to finish her off. Shit. It’s too hard being around. And, it’s making me hard, too. “What is it about?” Change of the subject is always good to keep my cock in check.

“Well, it’s sort of a secret.”

I don’t respond, but just stare at her to prompt her to reveal to me the secret of hers.

She exhales a long breath and sits on the chair close to me. Her skirt inches up as she crosses her legs, revealing her shapely knees. “Have you heard of the Berenson Country Club?” I

nod my head. “Well, it changed owners recently due to financial problems, and the new owner wants to turn it into a housing development. I managed to land an appointment with him to get him to consider us handling the construction. I need you to come with me to—”

“Impress him.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, that and you know more about construction than I do. Probably, he’s heard of your name, too.”

“How large is the land?”

She clasps her hands over her lap. “A little over one hundred acres.”

“We haven’t taken any project that size. Are you sure you’re up to the challenge?”

“I want to take the company to the next level. If it means I’ll have to work harder, find more subcontractors, and hire more people, I’ll do it. And of course, I’ll need your help, too. The new owner sent me some of the designs he’s considering for the townhouses and apartment buildings. I’ll send them to you so you can check them out and tell me what you think.”

Nodding, I shift at my place. I notice her eyes running down to my chest and immediately back up to my eyes. “Have you talked about it with the board?” I ask.

“No. It’s not necessary at this stage. And, you know, I don’t really need consult them about anything—” She

pauses and looks down at her hands. “As long as I know your opinion on it.”

My lips curl up into a smile with pride, but I purse them to hide it. She doesn't need to know how I love the way she values my opinion over everyone else's when it comes to work. Why can't she do it in personal matters, too?

“So. Are you coming?” She lifts her head and shoots me the same ‘Please, let me come’ look she did. She claims I'm playing with her, when in reality I'm just a pitiable toy in her hands.

An idea pops up. “It'll be complicated for me. I'll have to arrange a new meeting with my client, and he

may take it in a negative way. He's coming from Las Vegas. Which will include changes in plane tickets and hotel reservations, too."

"Oh." She bites her lips as always she does when she is disappointed.

"But, I can—" I stop to watch her face light up "—make it by four-thirty, if you do something for me."

"Anything," she says. "Well, not anything, of course. Depends on what you want."

I smirk at her wordiness. "Let me take you out to dinner tomorrow night."

She shakes her head slightly as if trying to say *'I should have known this was coming,'* while staring at me.

“Please, it’s just a dinner. I’ll be good. I won’t do anything that you don’t want. I promise I will ask clearly and well in advance if I intend to do something.”

She springs to her feet and stands right in front of me, her pale face so close to mine I can feel her warm breath on my skin. “How about you don’t *intend* to do anything, and we just have dinner?” Out of the blue, she raises her hand and touches the middle of my bare chest with the tip of her forefinger.

I haven’t seen it coming and I have no idea why she touches me, when all she wants me to do is to stay away from her. My heartbeat races as if I’m on a treadmill. I watch her face with the

utmost curiosity and feel her finger tips trail along my bare skin. A sweet strawberry scent spreads from her hair and fills my lungs. Her lips part slightly, and I see her tongue brushing her teeth. I might need a cardiac massage if she keeps on teasing me like this.

She pushes away the shirt far enough to reveal my scar. "The bandage is gone." She gazes at the scar, her fingers tickling my skin.

Why don't you run your hand all over my chest, baby? It takes all my energy to not grab her waist and haul her over my desk. It'd turn this boring day into a memorable one. "Yes, it is."

Gently, she runs a circle around scar; her eyes reach up and lock on

mine. “Does it hurt?”

I swallow hard. “No.”

“Good.” With that, she jerks away and strides toward the door. “Pick me up at seven,” she says before she stalks out of my office.

I pull my BMW in behind a green sedan in front of the apartment building where Taylor lives. When I spot her walking down the stairs, I climb out and open the door for her. She’s wearing a black, fitted pant suit, despite her infamous preference for skirts. I guess that’s her way of protecting her holy grail from me. As the saying goes, once

bitten, twice shy. A transparent tan blouse is gleaming under her silk blazer and I wonder whether it's transparent all around.

Behave Adam, or she'll run away for good!

She steps down the last of the stairs with ease, in spite of the mountain-high heels she's wearing, and smiles at me once she reaches by my side.

“You look beautiful,” I say.

She examines me from head to toe without even trying to hide it. “So do you.” She grins, and climbs inside the car and buckles up. “Where are you taking me?”

Hurrying back inside the car, I turn the key in the ignition and gun the

engine. I'll give her an unforgettable dinner. "Yoshida."

She shoots me a sharp glare. "No way."

"Don't you like Japanese food?"

"Yes, but not when it costs a thousand dollars. Look, I know you have this impossible mission of trying to get in my pants, but throwing away your hard-earned money isn't the way to go."

"Oh, yeah? Then, what is?"

She shakes her head with a long sigh and stares out of the windshield. She doesn't know the answer either.

"Have you ever eaten there?" I ask.

"No."

"You'll see it's worth every

penny.”

“I doubt it.”

I drive over Wilshire and, in less than forty minutes, I’m maneuvering my car into the restaurant’s parking lot in Santa Monica. I kill the engine and pull the key from the ignition.

“I am not dining here, unless you let me pay half of the bill,” Taylor says when I make a move to open my door.

“It’s a date, and it’s on me, or you can forget about the Monday meeting.” I open the door, certain that she won’t be able to say no.

“I didn’t take you up on the dinner date, because of the Monday meeting.”

If it wasn’t for the flicker of

smile across her lips, I'd slam closed the door, haul her over my shoulder, and head to the restaurant.

Intrigued, I pull the door back but not fully close it. "What convinced you, then?"

"I can't tell you. It's too embarrassing." She blushes beet red instantly, shooting my curiosity to the highest.

"Is it... about that day in front of the LAPD?" She told me she never wanted to see me again, but her body had said something totally different.

"No," she replies curtly.

"Is it because I saved your life?"

"Partially related, but that's not the reason."

“Is it the scar?” The girls at the gym might have a point about the sexy, after all.

“Nope.”

“What is it, then?” I ask, but she just shakes her head, enjoying this little game of hers. “Give me a clue, if you won’t give me the answer.” I beg.

Carefully, she unbuckles the belt and reaches for the first button of her blazer and undoes it. Although her eyes are locked on mine, I instantly run mine downward to her cleavage. My heart leaps to my mouth, when her fingers undo the second button in line, revealing more flesh for my eyes to relish. In total, there are five buttons, and she lingers ever so slowly in unbuttoning the other

three, making me clutch the sides of the seat in a sweet agony and full-blown curiosity.

When the buttons are all freed, she pulls the sides of the blazer away and flashes me the most beautiful, perky, and round breasts I've ever seen, live or on TV.

Jesus! Is it my imagination?

To answer my previous question; yes, the top is transparent all around, and I'm beginning to think it's no coincidence.

I take in every curve of her breasts, her erect nipples, and the smoothness of her belly, struggling hard to hold my hands to myself. "I don't see it."

She shifts her body toward me, giving me full view; her boobs sway as she turns.

“I meant, I don’t see what your breasts have to do with our date tonight?” I drag my eyes to hers for a moment, only to drop them back to her chest. My mouth waters with the thought of tasting and pinching those heavy globes. I’d take my sweet time on each of them, savoring them, until they bruise, then rub my cock in the creamy valley between them, and coat them with my sperm.

“You’re just messing with me to keep on staring at them, aren’t you?” She’s grinning.

“Seriously. I swear I don’t get it.

I mean, I don't think your reason is that you want them to be grabbed... by me... is it?" I frown at the absurdity of my guess. But, who knows? She's the most unpredictable woman I've ever met.

"You, silly thing." She shakes her head and begins buttoning up the jacket. "It's your chest."

"My chest? How?" My eyes are following each move of her fingers. No, please, wait. I want to admire them for a little longer, maybe until I wet my pants with my load.

"Do I need to spell it out?"

"Please."

"Let's say you know nothing about me," she begins to explain. "But, you get a chance to see my boobs.

Would you consider going on a date with me, at least once?”

“You’re saying you’re giving me a chance, because you think my chest is sexy?”

“At last.” She is done with fastening the buttons.

It takes a while before I burst into loud, body-wracking laughter. “I ran after you for years, begged you for just one date, and nothing happened. But, revealing my chest did the trick?” I shake my head several times in disbelief.

“I didn’t know you had such a sexy body. I guess I’m on the lower side of the imagination scale. I have to see it to believe it.” She looks up at me. “And,

the near-death experience helped me back to my senses, I guess.”

“I wish I’d known it before. But, better late than never, right?”

She shrugs.

“Answer one more thing. Why didn’t you go out with me within the last month?” I ask.

“You haven’t asked me out properly since the shooting. Now, I’m paying the half of the bill, or I swear on everything good and holy that you won’t get another chance to see my boobs.”

“What can I say to that?”

CHAPTER 7 - TAYLOR

The food is as exquisite and delicious, as expected for any half-thousand-dollar meal to be. I lost the count of the number of plates we'd been served, after we hit the tenth. I work hard to focus and not moan at the explosion of tastes in my mouth, but I lose control every now and then, and each time I do, Adam's jaw tightens and his expression hardens. With lust, I guess. A forced *'I told you so'* smile tugs at his lips, yet his eyes grow distant as if he's lost in a wistful memory. I

know it's that shameful memory that sweeps him away. I have yet to forgive him for smashing my guards down in a moment of weakness to take advantage of me in public.

“So.” He drops the chopsticks beside his napkin for the first time during our twenty-minute stay. “Did you go out with Valerie on the double date last night?”

“Were you eavesdropping on us?”

“If I were, I wouldn't be asking you this question. I just heard a small part of the conversation... accidentally.”

I swallow the tenderest piece of lightly cooked beef I've ever eaten, a.k.a. A-5 Kobe beef, and savor its taste

and the expectant look on Adam's face for a few seconds before responding to his inquisition. "Nope, I've had enough of dating people I don't know very well."

He arches both eyebrows, a hint of curiosity flashing across his face. "You mean before Jack?"

"No, Jack was my first boyfriend."

"You dated after Jack?" he asks, as if it couldn't be further from the truth.

"Why are you surprised? You think I should have waited longer, before I began seeing other men? Maybe, we should just cancel this one right away in order to follow your opinion about my dating habits." I place the chopsticks,

throw the napkin over to the table, and start to get to my feet.

He reaches out and holds my hand. “No, no, no. I didn’t mean it that way. Please, forgive me.” He chews a small piece of beef slowly, glancing at me only occasionally. I love how I make him feel as if he’s walking on broken glass. He’s burning to ask another question, but I guess he is waiting for the right time.

He clears his throat but doesn’t lift his head to look at me. I see he’s going for casual. “So, those dates you had—” He pauses to take a sip of sake. “How many men did you actually date?”

I wish I had a chance to record these next few minutes and watch it

again to honor the scene with the hearty laughter that it deserves. It'd make a rare gem of comedy, better than many professionally shot movies.

He sips more sake, his fingers grasping the edge of the table.

“Thirty,” I say casually.

“Thirty?” he repeats and gulps down the entire sake in his glass. Ouch! That must burn. Deep lines form in his eyebrows, and his left eye twitches with a trace of rage. “Thirty. Seriously? I wasn’t expecting that many. I guess I had the wrong impression about you.”

I won’t ask him his impression about me. I don’t want to hear how well he knows me. And what is thirty compared to the endless number of

women he must be hanging out with, or just banging.

“Have you slept with any of them?” He stops pretending to be casual and stares me directly in the eye, his expression devoid of any softness.

I grin. “Believe me; you don’t want to know about that.” Oh, the delicious taste of revenge, sweeter than the sweetest deserts.

“Actually, I do. Please, enlighten me.”

I shake my head. The waitress brings us the next dish.

“Surely, you didn’t sleep with all of them, did you?” There is begging in his voice, along with disappointment. I can’t believe I’m enjoying torturing him

more than I am enjoying this exquisite meal.

“No. Of course not. What do you think of me?” I pop a piece of shrimp into my mouth and chew it slowly to relish its delicate taste. He’s completely ignoring his plate now. “One wasn’t my type,” I begin. “One wanted a threesome with me and his girlfriend. And, another one had to leave early. Oh, and, one came only with a blow job, and that doesn’t count as sex in my book.”

He looks around before shooting his next question, lowering his voice to an almost inaudible level. “Are you saying that you slept with twenty six men?” His eyes look like they will pop out of their sockets. “Twenty six men?”

he repeats. I don't know whether it's the sake or the shock, but his face turns a deep hue of crimson, tending toward purple. And, the twitching in his left eye spreads over to his cheek.

“Do you have a problem with it?” I gaze at him, feigning serious and angry. If I'm not successful at running the Edelman Constructions, my next career move will definitely be acting. He inhales deeply to calm himself down, but the redness on his face doesn't fade away. I should have waited until after the meal, so as not to ruin this expensive and delicious meal for him. He doesn't reply to my question and just focuses on his food.

Even though I enjoy bothering

him—clearly he looks more than just bothered—he’s taken me to this beautiful restaurant. I should make the dinner as enjoyable for him as well, so I go for changing the topic. “I thought you majored in electrical engineering. How come you know so much about the construction business?”

He lifts his face to look at me, his brows still pulled together. “Haven’t you read my resume?”

“Huh? No. I never thought about it, actually. I just trusted you.” As my aunt always says *‘A little flattery is never a bad idea, when it comes to winning a man’s heart.’*

His features soften; a hint of smile appears on his lips. “I started out

in the electrical engineering department, but Jack's father had convinced me to work part-time and during summers at his company since high school. It was more fun than work really. I had so much hands-on experience in construction that it'd be a pity not to take advantage of it. So I doubled in civil engineering."

"And you had an MBA later, too," I add, remembering the three courses I'm lacking to finish my Sociology degree. The responsibility of running Jack's company has overwhelmed me. But, if I hadn't met Jack, I'd probably be struggling to earn a PhD and have a huge debt with student loans. I may not be a born leader; but I'm improving in my managerial skills

every day. Knowing my limits, I'm certain I wouldn't have come as far as the CEO of a company if Jack hadn't entered my life. My career turned out to be much better than I had imagined it would. It's all thanks to Jack. Nonetheless, acknowledging that simple fact makes me feel like a ruthless gold-digger.

"Are you considering taking those last courses and getting your diploma?" Adam asks, pulling me away from my thoughts.

"I should, right?"

He nods. "Of course, you should. You can take evening or weekend classes, like Bree is doing. And before you know it, your diploma will be

hanging on the wall in your office.” His voice is calmer now. I think he’s already forgotten about my little joke.

“Bree is taking evening classes? I had no idea.”

His lips finally curl up into a smile. “She talks about her classes all the time. Haven’t you been paying attention?”

I shake my head in response.

“On a company scholarship that Jack arranged for her years ago. She’s actually getting her degree at the end of this semester.”

“What is she majoring in?”

“Economics.”

My jaw drops with surprise. I’d considered studying Economics only to

shy away because of the sheer number of math classes.

“You should really put in an effort to read your employees’ resumes. Listening to what they say wouldn’t hurt, either.” His features are playful now, and I can see he’s trying hard not to burst into laughter.

“Yeah, right.” I pick up a ball of black caviar and throw it at him, but I feel immediately guilty when it lands on his crisp white shirt, forming a circle of oily stain. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry.”

Before I can move, he’s pointing his forefinger smeared with soy sauce at me, with a wicked grin on his face.

“No, you’re not ruining my clothes.” I hold my palms up to him to

shield myself. "Please, don't."

He narrows his eyes, shaking his head, but his dirty finger is still nearing me. "You ruined my shirt and you'll pay for it."

I drop my hands and wait for my punishment. I let out a breath of relief when his finger skips my clothes and lands on my throat, smudging the soy sauce all over it. His touch heightens my senses and freezes me in my chair. I don't need to look at him to know his hot gaze is on me, burning holes in my skin.

The waitress comes, interrupting our little dirty foreplay, and serves us blue fish tuna. We eat quietly until the end of the meal, but every time I look at him, I catch his gaze traveling down my

throat. I have no doubt he'll find a way to lick the soy off of me.

We share the bill, as agreed, and say our thank-you's to Chef Yoshida. Even after all my complaints about the price, I think I'll come back to eat here again.

Adam puts his hand on the small of my back, as we walk out to his car, and opens the door for me. After settling in his seat and starting the engine, he turns to me. "I don't have plans for a threesome. I don't have any time constraints. And, I think I'm your type, well at least my chest is. So, I can assume that I'll be one of the many lucky guys who got laid by you," he says, emphasizing on many. I eye the stain on

his shirt, feeling guilty for ruining a nice piece of clothing. It must have cost a lot of money, too. Shit.

“Don’t push your luck.” Pulling out a tube of dark pink lipstick and a compact, I coat my lips and check them in the compact mirror. I dare a glance at Adam’s face and find his eyes watching my lips more intently than I’ve watched them in the mirror. My heart hammers at the naughtiness of the thoughts he must be entertaining.

An audacious smile plays at the corner of his mouth. “Why? The statistics are on my side.” At this very moment, it dawns on me why and how I could allow him to finger me in public. He radiates an offhanded sexual aura

that promises a raw, passionate, and primal fuck. And, it renders me helpless and overwhelmed, as if I'm a butterfly on a spider web. "Don't worry. We won't be doing anything you don't want. I promised to ask clearly and well in advance before I intend to do something. Remember?" With that, he focuses his attention on the road, releasing me from the momentary hypnosis, and drives out of the parking lot to Wilshire, toward my home.

I don't dare speak on the way. I showed him my boobs, lied to him about the high number of sex/date ratio, and now I'm letting him drive me home. Am I ready for the next step? Maybe rather than pondering it to death, I should just

follow my instincts, give Adam the one chance he's been pleading all these years for, and maybe experience a unique night that will, hopefully, help me break free from my grief.

After the ride, Adam comes up to my door—expecting otherwise would be just naïve—and stands at the doorway, begging me with his puppy eyes to let him in. I hold the doorknob and stand between him and the door, taking care to keep my poker face, although my knees are shaking at the close proximity of his body.

“I think that's it... unless you want to invite me in for a cup of *coffee*.” He grins as he says the last word, as if he meant it as a code word for something

else.

“I do, actually, want some *coffee* and it’d be pity to drink it all by myself.” I lift my eyebrows for an effect, but don’t open the door yet, enjoying making him suffer this way a little longer. “But, you need to promise me you won’t mention anyone about... the *coffee*.”

He runs his fingers across his lips as if to zip them up. “My lips are sealed.”

I push open the door, step aside to let him pass, and check the hallway for an eavesdropper. Having neighbors gossip about me is the last thing I need on my way to finally having another man in my life.

I close the door and lean my

back against it as I free my feet from the high heels. The tight jacket is bothering me, too, but that'll have to wait a little longer.

I find Adam studying an oil painting of a woman holding her infant baby on her bare chest. I realize it's his first time at my home. Although he was Jack's best friend, he always came up with excuses to pass on our dinner invitations. Who'd know coffee would make him change his mind.

"The lady in the painting looks a lot like you," Adam points out, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

I nod. "Jack bought it exactly for that reason. I guess I have a doppelgänger somewhere."

“I should have known it before.”

His eyes focused back on the painting, he crosses one arm over his chest and rests the other on top of it, running his fingers along his chin.

“Why?” I frown. It’s not like he’s so into me that he’d go after my doppelgänger .

“Like you don’t know why.”

I sit on the love seat and tap on the space beside me, gesturing him to come and leave the painting alone. He loosens his tie as he sinks to the couch next to me, so close that our legs brush.

Suddenly the thought of being naked in front of Adam doesn’t seem as comfortable as it did when I flashed him my boobs. Hesitantly, I look up at him

and see his eyes lingering around my lips, most likely mapping out the right angles to launch on them.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers and lifts his hand to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. The tenderness in his voice helps me stay a little calmer, despite the hard lines set across his face, as though telling me there is no escape from what is about to come.

Between his heavy breaths, he cups my face and strokes my lips with his thumb. “I’m gonna kiss you, if you don’t have any objection to it.”

My pulse shooting up, I give my head a little nod, hypnotized by his eyes, paralyzed by his touch. He dips his head

and tenderly brushes his lips against mine. I can barely react to his kiss, his lips sucking mine softly. As soon as I part my lips, his tongue invades my mouth. His hands remain on my face, never giving me an opportunity to escape, while his tongue explores my mouth and tongue, searching and possessive.

When I give in and let my tongue wrestle with his, he slides a hand to unbutton my jacket and begins fondling my chest through the transparent blouse. It doesn't take long before his hand alights on my breast. His thumb draws circles around my nipple before pinching it and then he tugs it toward him. Just like Jack used to do.

Jack, Jack, Jack.

I close my eyes so I can erase Jack from my mind for a moment and focus on Adam's kiss. But, as I open them again, a sudden fear takes over me when I realize Jack will see me. He'll be watching everything his best friend is about to do to me in the next minutes.

"What is it?" Adam pulls away his lips and hands off of me.

How can I tell him about my disturbing thoughts of the ghost of my husband peeping on us? I can't imagine a shorter way to get labeled as crazy. "I don't think I'm ready for this. I'm sorry."

"No, no. Don't be sorry. It's my fault. I pushed you too far. I don't usually go this fast, but I... I lose all my

control around you.”

His care and affection bothers me. My attraction to him bothers me and makes me feel like a cheater, as if Jack wasn't dead. Oh, hell. There, I march right back to the beginning of my grief process, denying his death. Hot tears begin rolling down my cheek, yet it isn't sadness or grief. It is pure anger at myself and at my stubborn unwillingness to accept that Jack's gone forever and to move on.

“Do you want me to go?” Adam asks softly.

I don't want him go. I want my disturbing thoughts out and gone. “Please, wait,” I say and hurry to my bedroom. I won't let this chance slip

away from my fingers so easily. Adam is probably the only man who can give me physical pleasure without making me feel fearful or disgusted by his presence, and my one and only ticket out of my creepy life. And, I am going to have sex with him tonight no matter what it takes.

I slide open the mirrored closet door in my bedroom and find at the back of my clothes the nurse uniform that is still wrapped in its plastic bag. I'd bought it as a special treat for Jack's birthday, but the accident come before the birthday.

Ripping off the plastic bag, I pull out the nurse costume, which is more like a long vest, with a red-cross sign on the left pocket and buttons that start way

below the chest line. I watch myself in the mirror as I change into the costume and place the stethoscope around my neck.

My legs look too bare and plain as opposed to the eye-catching dress. I look for thigh highs in the drawer and grab a pair of light pink with lace tops. Together, with the white high heels that I keep only for special occasions—can there be another occasion more special than this—I look like an expensive whore. Not a bit like me, the ever-grieving widow. As a finishing touch, I apply a red lipstick on my dry lips and give my hair a final fluff.

My heart is racing as I make my entrance into the living room and stand

with a hand on my hip right in front of Adam. His face goes from stunned to confused and finally lights up into a bright grin.

“There is nothing to grin about, Mr. Garnett,” I say, working to speak with a deeper tone. I don’t sound like me at all, either. Which is just the way I want it. Not being me. “Your blood analysis came up with negative results.”

“Oh.” He narrows his eyes, perhaps trying to make out what I’m doing.

Come on, you silly thing. How difficult can it be to understand that I want to role play. I can’t be me, myself, to have a shot at sex. I have to become an entirely different person, even if it is

only pretending. But, my good mood will, without doubt, be ruined if I have sit down and explain him what goes on in my mind.

“Am I going to die?” he asks. His question isn’t as good as I hoped it to be, but at least he is playing along.

“I must administer some more tests to find out the severity of your situation.” I pull the stethoscope and walk slowly toward him. I let out a relieved breath, when I notice his chest is heaving heavily up and down, just like mine is.

CHAPTER 8 - ADAM

Just when I've decided to call it a night, Taylor comes out in a nurse's uniform, looking so hot and sexy that I couldn't have dreamed it even in my wildest fantasies. I drink in the dress that is so short that I could make out her red thong as she walks toward me, taking my breath away. And her rebellious breasts hang like they'll pop out any minute. To top it off, those pink thigh highs. Icing on the cake. As if she knows my weakness for colorful thigh highs on beautiful, long legs.

Can this night get any better?

But, I shouldn't jump the gun, yet. What if she changes her mind and dumps me with the most painful hard-on. Speaking of hard-on, all my blood is pooled in my groin. I should wear larger pants around her, or I'll make a fool of myself every time I get aroused, which is every time I'm around her.

But, for now, I have no option but to pick up her cues and obey her wishes.

Her eyes are daring me, evaluating me, teasing me. She stops in front of me, pushes my knees apart with her hand, and places her knee on the sofa between my legs, slightly pressing on my hard-on with her thigh. It takes every

ounce of control I have not to grab her, pull her under me, and ride her hard, as if it's the last time I'll ever have sex.

As though her torture is not enough, she unbuttons my shirt all the way down and puts the icy stethoscope on my bare chest. The cold metal makes me aware of the flaming heat of my body, all for this fragile woman with large breasts that are now only inches away from my face. I don't know whether I should stare at them, until I explode without even taking off my pants, or tune out to control my erection. However, even if I manage to close my eyes and tune out her breasts, her sweet strawberry scent filling my lungs will suffice to throw me over the edge.

She moves the stethoscope across my chest toward my heart with care and precision and then down to my abs. I'm sure my crazy heartbeats scared her off.

“What do I have?” I ask to distract myself.

She ignores my question and orders me to take off my shirt. I obey and shrug out of it with a quick move. I wish she'd take off that little dress of hers, too. Without saying a word, she starts examining my back.

“Am I going to die?” I immediately regret shooting another silly question. I'm officially an idiot who severely lacks fantasy. Next on my to-do list; start watching Grey's Anatomy or

other shows about medical professionals.

She lifts her hand and begins playing with her lower lip. I have to roll my eyes at the sexiness of such a simple move. “You have a rare type of blood disease caused by a defect in the hemoglobin formation.”

“What?” Her line is so elaborate that I find myself considering the risks of getting such an illness.

“But, there is no need to worry; its cure is very simple,” she says with a calming voice, like you’d see in health professionals. Damn, she’s good! “But, I’m not sure if your wife will agree on the treatment procedure.”

Either she has a born talent for

acting or she's done this before; coming up with a scenario like this. Maybe with Jack or one of the twenty six lucky men she slept with? Actually, twenty seven, because blow jobs count as sex, in my book. Twenty seven men enjoyed her beautiful body when I was thinking she needed time to grieve. Twenty seven fucking penises violated her innocence.

Pangs of jealousy rush through my body, tightening my chest, and my breathing becomes laborious. I want to go after those men to castrate them, cut their hands off, and take their eyes out while I'm on it. My hands are trembling. If I don't get myself under control, she'll give up on our little game before the real action starts.

“My wife will agree to anything you recommend, for the sake of my health,” I say.

She shakes her head, her eyebrows frowning. “My hands are tied without a written consent from her or an oral consent over the phone.”

Consent? Wife? What am I supposed to do now? “Here is my phone. You can call her.” I pull out my phone from the pocket of my jacket, which is lying down on the couch beside me, and hand it over to her.

She lifts it to her ear as she takes a couple of steps back, still facing me, and places her foot on edge of the coffee table, revealing the semi-transparent, red thong underneath. Mesmerized, I watch

her thighs and waxed sex, completely ignoring the strange looks she must be giving me. It takes only pulling up a skirt to completely shut off my brain. As simple as that. I have no option but to agree with everything the extreme feminists say about us men, and our animalistic sides.

Yet, her plans to torture me don't seem to be coming to an end any time soon because she starts speaking to my imaginary wife on the phone, "Mrs. Garnett. I'm sorry to inform you of the terrible health conditions your husband finds himself in. His blood tests reveal that his illness is much more severe than we originally thought. So, he has to be treated immediately for him to

recover... Yes, the procedure is very simple. The malformed cells will be sucked out of his penis.”

Sucked out of his penis? Sucked out of MY penis?

I tear my eyes away from her thong to see her face to confirm that what I’ve just heard is true.

“I understand your concern,” she continues speaking and plays with her nails as if bored. “The procedure is one hundred percent safe and has no danger what-so-ever.”

Yeah, right. Except maybe a cardiac arrest.

“Yes, we will. Thank you for your cooperation.” She places the phone on the coffee table and approaches me.

“So, she agrees to the treatment?” I ask as if I give a fucking shit about anyone agreeing on anything that will happen between Taylor and me, never mind an imaginary wife.

“Yes, she loves you. She wants the best for you.”

“Am I going to get the best... treatment?”

“You surely will.” She moves toward me, taking my breath away with each step, kneels down in front of me, and runs a finger on my erection before unzipping my pants.

How many times I’ve dreamed about this, her kneeling in front of me, her long fingers brushing my groin, her mouth preparing to suck my insides out.

Never once have the dreams ended with me holding her hands to stop her.

“No,” I force myself to speak as softly and gently as possible in order not to hurt her feelings. “If your mouth comes anywhere near my erection I’ll explode right away.” And it’ll be the literal case of blown into her face.

She looks at me, lines forming on her forehead, and lips pursed tightly together. I can see in her expression the prudent calculations going on in her mind, and I fear she’ll conclude I’m not as much fun to play with as she originally thought. She’s so fucking sexy I doubt things would be much different if I’d jerked off a number of times before meeting with her.

She gets to her feet with one move and her eyes lock onto something behind me. What the hell have I done? She'll back out—it's written all over her face—and I'll have to finish myself off with my bare hands, rather than her exclusive mouth.

My heart sinks as I watch her turn her back to me and step away. I deserve to be excommunicated from manhood for declining a blow job offer from such a seductive woman. Much to my astonishment, though, she stops short and bends down to slide off her thong. Her dress is too short to cover her bare ass, giving me an unforgettable, mind-fucking view of her pink slit. Who am I kidding? I'll explode just by watching

her.

She spins around and faces me again, before throwing the thong at my face. I catch it and feel the moist on the fabric. She desires me, too, like I desire her. I have to focus hard to make this as pleasurable as possible for her. My hands long to touch her down there and my mouth to taste her sweet juices, but the longer I wait, the harder it'll be to control my erection.

I must have her. Now. I can't wait any longer, but she takes her sweet time as she moves toward me, her hands lingering as they unbutton her dress with each step, revealing her beautiful breasts. When she's finally done with the unbuttoning, she takes off the dress

and tosses it to the floor. She gestures at my pants with her index finger. I stand and yank down my pants and boxers in a flash. She approaches me, her bare breasts brushing mine, and pushes me back down onto the couch. Fully naked, save for the thigh highs and the high heels, she parts her legs, still standing. Her pussy is pink, and swollen, and glistening with dampness.

“I need to touch you there.” I look up her face. “Will you let me?”

Her response comes as a brief humming. I lift my hand to stroke her thigh up toward her sex and glide my hand between her legs. She’s waxed bare and smooth all around, and I think of taking a picture of her completely

naked as a proof that this isn't just a dream. She stands rigidly, except for her chest moving up and down too quickly.

My cock twitches and throbs with the anticipation of having her wet core wrapping around me like a glove. I slide my forefinger along her folds and dip it inside, my eyes searching her expression. She flinches with the invasion but doesn't move away.

Her eyes fall closed. Her head tilts back a little. She wriggles her hips with slow motions, her inside muscles rhythmically clenching and unclenching around my finger, as if it's her mouth suctioning it. Her breasts, two large globes, heave with every breath, her nipples ridged. I'm torn between sinking

my cock deep inside her right now and continuing rubbing her with my finger until she climaxes. Although she might just turn me down once she's satiated, it'll help her stretch a little for the real friction. I circle her waist with my free arm to close the gap between us and mouth one breast. I suck, tease, knead, and bite it; the lightly salty taste of her skin makes my pulse race.

It doesn't take me long to push her over the edge and the spasms inside her shoot in succession like fireworks. Her lips part and her cheeks flash red, the exquisite sight firing jolts of heat and craving directly to my balls. Before the spasms subside, I pull out my finger and grip her hips as she positions herself

astride me over the couch. Her eyes now open and fixed on mine, she slowly slides down onto my shaft.

She's so tight I'd think she was a virgin if I didn't know about Jack and the twenty seven fucking men before me. Shit. If only I could erase her past.

Pain is surfacing on her irises as she begins to take my length inside of her, each inch earning little groans. She cries out and stabs her nails into my shoulders when my cock fully sinks inside her.

Finally! There is no going back now, and both of us know it.

She is so wet, her juices are practically dripping down my balls. Can this get any better? Her eyes never

leaving mine, she begins riding me, first slowly, then gaining speed and intensity. I have to squeeze my butt to keep myself from coming too early; but it's so fucking hard when she moans into my mouth and her breasts sway on my chest with every move. When she digs her nails deeper into my skin and twists her hips around me. When her vagina is tightening around my shaft, it's as if she's begging me to coat her insides.

Her entire body is shaking, and she grazes her lower lip with her teeth while gazing somewhere behind me.

Oh, God, please don't make her scream Jack's name!

I cup her round ass to thrust harder and faster until her screams

become deafening, until I make her lose her mind, just the way she did to me. I tremble with lust and the need to mark her and erupt like a volcano, exploding deep inside her, watching the pleasure roll across her face together with the tears in her eyes. Our ragged breaths crash, and she buries her face in my shoulder. No word comes out of her mouth, but loud, catlike screams that assure me I'm not the only one who's had an intense orgasm.

CHAPTER 9 - TAYLOR

I did it. I finally had sex with another man. And what sex!

I collapse on Adam's sweaty chest and lie still, listening to his mad heartbeats until I catch my breath. The role playing with him was more arousing than I'd ever expected. I even reached orgasm. Twice. That's one hell of an achievement in the last three years, besides that embarrassing finger fucking in public. Keeping my eyes open and solely concentrating on Adam's face definitely helped me stay focused on him

and forget about Jack for once. I should keep that in mind for the next time.

If there will be a next time.

“You blew my mind away,” Adam says between his heavy breaths. “I don’t even mind the twenty six douchebags who did this before me.”

I roll down on the couch next to him and pull the cushion over me to cover my breasts and pelvis. “I was messing with you. There’re no twenty-six douchebags that you should worry about.”

“Seriously?” He straightens in his seat and stares down to me. “So, it’s just Jack and me?”

Hearing Jack’s name from Adam’s mouth when we’re both naked

and wet with each other's fluids makes my stomach turn in knots. He can't compare himself with Jack because he'll lose the competition even before it starts. And hell if he thinks he can replace Jack.

"I'll go take a quick shower." I snatch the nurse costume from the floor to toss it into the laundry basket and stride to the bathroom. After a quick shower, I briefly towel dry my hair, snuggle into my bathrobe, and go to my bedroom to get a pillow and a blanket for Adam. It's past two, and we're both under the influence of alcohol. I don't want him to stay, but it wouldn't be fair to tell him to go, either.

I find Adam lying on the couch,

his eyes closed. The sticky spots on the couch between his legs tell me I'll have to get the cushion covers washed the first thing tomorrow. Maybe I should get everything he touched washed.

He jerks and opens his eyes when I try to cover him with the blanket.

"You can stay if you want." I force a smile.

"With pleasure, Ma'am."

"But, you're gonna have to sleep here on the couch." The second room in the condo was Jack's office and I haven't come around to turn it into a guest room. The chances are I'll never be able to. So, for now, the couch will have to do.

"Fine with me. May I use the

shower?" Adam stands up, still fully naked and not even a bit ashamed.

I nod, working hard to not look at his penis but, even so, I notice it hanging thick and long between his muscular thighs. No wonder it nearly tore me apart when he thrust it into me. My sex is still sore, but I'd rather have this soreness than no feeling at all.

I place the pillow and the blanket on the couch, when he leaves for the bathroom, and busy myself with towel-drying my hair while listening to him have a shower.

He comes out with a green towel wrapped around his hips—Jack's towel—his damp hair hanging over his eyes. I concentrate on his firm muscles to keep

myself from commenting on Jack's towel, but I can't help the sick feeling growing inside my stomach. I'll have to replace all Jack's towels and other belongings so that strangers like Adam don't use them.

I rub circles over my stomach to ease the pain. "Help yourself to the food in the kitchen if you get hungry."

"Thank you." He takes a step toward me, his lips twisting with a rueful smile. "This was by far the best sex I've ever had." In a split second, he leans down and places a kiss on my lips. I wouldn't have let him kiss me if I'd seen it coming. And, now that he kissed me, I don't know how I should feel about it. It wasn't one of his sensual, seducing

kisses. I wouldn't have been bothered if he'd kissed me to try it for a second round. But, this kiss is affectionate, as if saying I care about you and I'm here for you. I don't want his emotions. I don't want any men's emotions.

Just sex. Simple, senseless sex is all I want and need to be able to get Jack off my mind and get on with my life. My stomach is knotting and twisting at the fresh memories of having Adam inside me. His scent is spreading everywhere like a gas bomb, taking over Jack's.

"Good night." I pull away, and cover my mouth, swallowing the puke back down that is halfway in my throat, and hurry to the bathroom. I kick the door closed as I kneel in front of the

toilet bowl and let my body expulse the most expensive food that I've ever eaten. I should have seen this coming and spared Adam the money.

Adam!

He is at the door, knocking. Without waiting for me to reply—my mouth is too occupied with puke to say anything—he yanks it open and dashes inside. Great, the only missing piece of tonight's fun was vomiting in front of him. Now, we're truly intimate.

“Oh, my—” He begins but can't end it. My puke smells horrendous. At least, I won't need to worry about his scent taking over everything. He finds the package of wet wipes, pulls out a handful of them, and starts rubbing my

head with them. The cold feels good and I'm glad I bought non-scented ones, or his nice gesture would prompt another round of puking. I take some wipes from his hand to clean my face and lean back to the wall for support.

He flushes the toilet. "Was it the food? I'm so sorry that I took you there. Maybe your stomach isn't used to all those flavors."

"I don't think it was the food." It was you but I can't tell you that without hurting you.

"You... you can't get pregnant that fast either, right? Although it'd be fantastic to get into the Guinness Record book for the quickest sperm in the history of mankind..." He gives me a

fearful smile. I can't help but smile, too.

A few minutes later, when my bottom starts feeling cold, I start to get to my feet, but he is faster and lifts me up gently. I thank him, trying not to breathe in his face with my acidic breath, and wash my face and brush my teeth, while he stands behind me studying my reflection in the mirror.

"I'll go to bed now." I dry my face with a hand towel. He walks the three steps from the bathroom to my bedroom with me and kisses my cheek. I wish him good night, then close and lock the door behind him, in case he plans to surprise me in the middle of the night.

I change into Jack's grey cotton pajamas and slide into the bed with just

one thing on my mind. The car accident that took Jack from me forever.

The next morning, I wake with an ache between my legs. It can be the hard sex from yesterday or my ever-so-punctual period. Yawning, I drag myself out of the bed, grab fresh panties and t-shirt, and head to the bathroom. Listening for any noise, I check my panties for blood and find a large circle of red. Right on time.

After a quick shower, I tiptoe to the living room, hoping Adam is already gone. He isn't on the couch, but the sounds and the smell coming from the kitchen tell me he's discovered the fridge. I run my hand through my wet

hair and walk into the kitchen to find Adam cooking scrambled eggs. He's wearing the same shirt and the pants from last night, only wrinkled.

“Good morning, beautiful, how are you?” he asks with a sly grin on his face. His eyes sweep over me, making me feel naked, although the t-shirt is long enough to cover my thighs until a little above my knees. “I’ve made breakfast for us.” He pulls out two plates and fills them with scrambled eggs.

“I’m not hungry.” I reach for the kettle to switch it on. “I’ll just have a cup of tea.”

“How is your stomach?”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. It was just a one-time incident,

I guess.”

“I hope so.” He rounds the table and spins his arms around my waist. “You scared the life out of me.” Staring down at my lips, he runs the back of his fingers on my cheek, then leans in, and kisses me. He tenderly sucks my bottom lip, without using his tongue. My nipples harden at the sensation of having him close, reminding me that I didn’t put on a bra. As if sensing the stiffness of my nipples, his hand moves from my face down to my collar bone, then rests on my chest, cupping and kneading my breast. I take a step back to free myself from him, but my move won’t save me from his penetrating eyes, which are now ruthlessly roaming over my breasts. I

swallow hard. I should have kept Jack's thick pajamas on.

“How did you sleep on the couch?” I work on my voice to sound nonchalant and move toward the chairs. But, it's no use. He won't let me go so easily, I can tell by the heat in his eyes. He turns around, places the plates on the table, and takes the chair beside me. Rather than digging into the scrambled eggs, he pulls my chair toward him, the screeching sound of the iron on the marble hurting my ears, and then wraps his arms around me.

“The couch was okay, but I missed you on it.” With that, he smashes his lips back on mine, leaving me no chance to even move. His hands are too

intrusive, wandering around my breasts, my back, my hips, everywhere, as though there are more than just two. When his hand slips under the hem of my t-shirt, I squeeze my legs together to block it, but it breaks free and reaches my panties.

I try to pull my lips back to explain to him about my period, but as soon as his fingers reach my panties and probe the thick pad beneath them, he loosens his grip on my body and lips. “There goes my entry to the Guinness Record Book,” he jokes.

“Yeah, right.” I pull away and shift myself toward the table.

“I don’t know what came over me last night. I had condoms in my wallet but never thought of using them.”

“I noticed that. I wouldn’t get pregnant anyway. I haven’t ovulated for ages.”

“Uh-huh.” He remains silent for a moment and then turns to his food. He doesn’t speak a word until he clears the two plates. I should have known; there is nothing like female fertility problems to turn down a man’s libido. I’ll make sure to use it next time. When he’s done eating, he collects the plates and washes them. Still no word comes out of his mouth. I fill a cup with hot water, dip a green-tea bag in it, and watch him dry the plates.

“I’m taking Adriana to Santa Monica. Want to join us?” he asks as he heads to the door to leave. I put the tea

cup on the counter and follow him to the door.

“I didn’t know she was still here.”

“Oh, god, no. She’d stayed only for three days last time and she came back again two days ago to check up on me. Come with me to lunch. Might be your last chance to meet her for a long time. She’s leaving today.”

As if I’m deeply fond of her. “Is Pat coming, too?”

“Jealous, much?” He cocks an eyebrow and leans against the door.

I shrug. Maybe I am. I don’t know. I realize I still don’t know anything about that dinner he had with Pat right after the shooting, thanks to

Adriana's overenthusiastic initiation. I can imagine Adriana pretending to suddenly feel tired in order to leave the two alone. Oh, wait a minute. Bree was there, too. She can fill me in on what happened during the dinner. Adam is staring at me with a wide grin on his lips. He probably took my brief silence as yes. I don't miss the beam of satisfaction washing over his features. I shake my head no. "No, I have other plans."

"Like what?"

I love turning the tables, but I won't start lying about another man just to make him jealous. The sex-with-twenty-six-men joke is enough for a long time. I say the first thing that comes to

my mind, “Lunch with Valerie.”

“I can see what you’ll be talking about.” He grins and pulls me toward his chest, his hands smoothing gently up and down my back. Apparently, my menstruation and my fertility issues haven’t completely taken away his interest in me.

I press my palms against his chest, both to feel his hard muscles and keep a comfortable distance between us. “I won’t say a word about last night. You should keep it to yourself, too.”

“I won’t share it with another colleague.” He winks and lowers his head but doesn’t kiss me yet.

“You can’t share it with anyone. Okay?” I insist, feeling dizzy at having

his face so close to mine.

He brushes his nose against mine, his expression suddenly serious. “But you can talk to Valerie about it if you want to. You actually should, so she stops bugging me to get in the sack with her.”

“She didn’t do that.” I frown. “Did she?” A snippet of jealousy tugs at my heart. Although I’m well aware of Valerie’s romantic interest in Adam, I’ve never imagined her making a move.

“Well, a couple of times. But, don’t judge her. Women can’t control themselves around me. You should know it by now.” He moves down and brushes his lips on my throat, sending tingles shooting down my spine. Oh, hell, he’s

right.

“Tomorrow, at four-thirty at Four Seasons and not a minute late.” I dig my nails down into his chest through his t-shirt, and he flinches.

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Finally, he moves up and lands his lips on mine with a kiss so gentle and smooth I moan. He smiles into my mouth and dips his tongue in for a brief instant, before pulling himself away. “If I don’t leave now, I won’t be able to leave at all.” Walking backwards toward the elevator, he blows me an air kiss and hops inside the cab.

I wait a few minutes, until my shiver wears off, and then call Valerie to convince her to have lunch with me.

Although Adam gave me the green light about sharing the details of last night, there's no way I'll share it with her or anyone else. I've never liked talking about my sex life, let alone my role playing skills.

I wave at Valerie when I spot her reading *Vogue* at a table beside the windows of the café.

“On the hunt for your next eye-catching dress?” I ask when I sit in the chair across from her.

“Well, kind of. I'm just collecting ideas for my next date with William.”

“How was your date on Friday night?”

Excited, she starts to open her mouth, but the waitress comes to take our orders, interrupting her. As soon as she disappears back into the kitchen, Valerie pulls her chair toward the table, leaning in toward me, and begins speaking with a low voice, “Friday and Saturday. And I’m going to see him tonight, too. I can’t believe it.”

“Wow, he must be really into you.”

“A little.” She reveals a naughty grin and winks at me. “Won’t you ask me if we did it?”

“So, you did it?” *After three dates?* But, who am I to judge after having Adam score me on our first date.

She nods, her eyes scanning

around briefly.

“Want me to ask you how it was, too?” I joke, feeling like high school again, digging for details that might be useful for my first time.

“Just one word; exhausting.” She giggles.

The waitress comes back with our orders. The sight of the chicken soup makes my mouth water. I spoon a mouth full of chicken and potato pieces and let it warm my body.

“Did you hear from your gynecologist about the blood work?” Valerie asks.

“Yeah, I did.” My appetite slips away, and I barely chew the piece of chicken before swallowing it down.

“I’m having hormonal issues that’ll probably turn into some serious infertility problems.”

She puts her fork on the table and clasps her hands together. “Oh, I’m sorry, honey.”

I shrug, unable to talk about it, and let my eyes trail the flower pattern on the table cloth. Strange, how the seriousness of this issue didn’t take me down when I was with Adam. Now that I’m reminded of my possible future without the prospect of having my own children, I feel depressed and tired, as if it was bugging me all night long.

“You know what you should do about it?”

I raise my eyes to look at

Valerie. Her expression is solid and serious. With those glasses she's wearing, seriousness is her natural look. But it's more intense now and makes me curious as to what she might have to say. Maybe a natural remedy or a famous doctor in L.A., or a friend who has been through the same problem and managed to conceive and give birth to her own child?

“What?” I ask when she doesn't speak for a moment.

“You should get your pussy eaten to get blood flow back to the pelvic area,” she says and bursts into laughter.

Shocked at her blatant manner, I look around to see if anyone heard her. “Will you keep quite, please?”

“You should give it a try. Even if it doesn’t cure your problem, it’ll give you something to look forward to. More —”

I raise my hand to cut her off.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be good.” She grins and turns to her salad bowl but keeps on watching me above her glasses. “What’s your gynecologist saying about it? Is it treatable?”

“I hope so. I’ll have to make another appointment to discuss the treatment.”

“Do you really want kids? I thought you didn’t want another man after Jack.” At last, she’s serious again.

“I don’t need a man to have kids. What are sperm banks for?”

Another smile curves up her lips. “Good point. But, raising a child as a single parent isn’t a bed of roses. My mother suffered a lot and gave up many things for me. Growing up, I always wondered how it’d be like to have a father around and, needless to say, I was very jealous of the other kids for their fathers. I guess it’s even harder for boys to grow up without a father.”

I inhale a deep breath of frustration. My mother died when I was five, but I had my aunt and her husband to take care of me and my sister. So, I can’t really imagine how difficult it must have been for Valerie to have only one parent caring for her. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just... I lost Jack and I don’t

want to lose the chance to have a child, either. I'll have to think it thoroughly."

"I'm sure you'll figure out something that's right for you."

We eat in silence for a while and then Valerie calls the waitress to order strawberry short cake and ice cream for both of us. When the waitress comes back with our desert plates, Valerie swallows a spoonful of cake and says, "I hear you and Adam are on the next stage."

I glance at her, alarmed. Did she see us? There is no way she can know about last night. "Who told you that?" I ask, working on my voice to sound amused and not startled.

"Bree told me she saw you, two,

kissing.”

Anger flows through me and I begin drumming my fingers on the table. Since when is Bree spreading rumors about Adam and me? What else did she say? “Did she really say that?” I try to gain time.

She nods. “And?”

“And what? There was nothing special about the kiss. It was a brief one, no tongue, nothing. He kissed me just before I was leaving his apartment on the day of the discharge from the hospital.”

“I don’t believe Adam let you go with only that.”

“What else can he do?” I shrug it off. Her inquisitive attitude is making me

uncomfortable. Maybe if she hadn't asked me anything, I would have talked about the dinner last night, but now I feel I'd rather keep it to myself.

“Whatever. If you don't want to talk about it, fine.” She focuses her attention back on the cake and doesn't say a word until she finishes eating. “In case you haven't noticed, I'm over him. You can have him if you want to.”

I snort. “Thank you for your kind permission.”

“Come on.” She narrows her eyes and fixes them on me with a questioning expression on her face. “Are you hiding something from me? I thought we were friends.”

How can she guess that I'm

hiding something? Am I so easy to read?

She shakes her head several times and points her spoon toward me. “Look, I’m all for you going out on dates. Be it with Adam or the next Brad Pitt. You can’t live like a nun for the rest of your life.”

“I think I’ll get there eventually. But, enough about me. Tell me more about William.”

She looks content with my choice of the topic. “I was desperately in love with him throughout high school, but he was dating a cheerleader and never so much as looked at me. And now he’s crazy about me. I’m still in awe about how things turn out to be.”

“Sounds like a story you’ll tell to

your grandchildren.”

Valerie laughs heartily. “I’m crossing my fingers for it. Hey, tomorrow I’ll have lunch with him. Why don’t you eat with us so you can see how adorable he is?”

“Tomorrow is difficult. I have a meeting in the afternoon. I’ll just grab a sandwich and prepare for the meeting in my office.”

“What meeting?”

“Remember that country club I told you about?”

“Which one?” She frowns. “Oh, that. Are you still after it?”

“Yeah, I really want it. I’m taking Adam to the meeting to discuss the construction details.”

“Does Adam know how large the territory is? Maybe you should talk to him first about the risks you’re taking by jumping into such a big project. We don’t have enough experience to handle constructions that size.”

We might not have the experience for big-sized projects, but we’ll never have it if we don’t start at some point. And, risks are always part of running a business. If I learned anything from Jack’s business attitude it was his ‘no risk, no gain’ motto. However, Valerie is intent on objecting to my plans for taking the company to the next level, talking only about it being too risky.

“If you’re worried about the

company's future, I'd rather retire today than put the company in danger," I say, hoping she won't make more comments on it. Funny how I want her to drop anything she wants to talk about. Why can't she just gush about her new boyfriend?

She shrugs and goes on eating. "I'm going shopping after lunch. Want to come?"

If I don't go shopping with her, I'll be stuck with watching the re-runs of *How I Met Your Mother* for the entire afternoon and evening. Worse yet, I'm afraid I'll start feeling guilty and depressed about my depraved actions with Adam. At least, shopping will make me get some exercise. "Yeah, sure. If

you can't find something you like, you can always borrow some of my clothes.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I don't think you have the super-sexy, mini dress I have in mind.”

Oh, you have no idea what kind of clothes I keep in my closet.

I pay the check and follow Valerie into an endless number of luxury stores in Beverly Hills, feeling glad that I have something to take my mind off of the wild sex I had yesterday with Adam.

CHAPTER 10 - ADAM

Adriana will never give up on her dream of having me and Pat get married. She's invited Pat to the lunch at Santa Monica. It seems Pat shares the same dream with Adriana, because she's wearing a low-cut, red, mini dress revealing her beautiful curves, and finds excuses to run her hands on my forearm. I force myself not to jerk away when she touches me. Her glances are full of intimacy and temptation, and she blushes every time Adriana brings up the good old times when Pat and I were happily

together.

“Are my eyes fooling me or do you look genuinely happy today?” Pat asks me on the first opportunity of being alone, after Adriana excuses herself for the restroom.

I shrug and shake my head no.

“Come on, Adam. It’s me. I know you inside and out. Are you seeing someone else?”

Shit, not that question. I don’t want to lie to her, but the truth will hurt her more than my dishonesty. “It’s related to something at work. How about you? Don’t tell me you haven’t met any good-looking guy in Nashville.”

She drops her eyes to the table and starts fidgeting with her fingers. “I

guess I turned blind to other men.”

I put my head between my hands, keeping on staring at her, and run my fingers through my hair. She’s my reflection. She feels the same for me, as I feel for Taylor. She hasn’t let anyone else into her life because of the tiny chance that maybe she’ll get back to me. Just like I’ve been keeping myself women-free for Taylor. What kind of shit life is this?

I reach out and hold her hand. “You’re a dream woman. You have everything a man can wish for. Just take a look at you. Is there a man in this restaurant who isn’t taken by your beauty?” She raises her eyes and looks directly into mine. A shy smile curls up

her lips. “But, you are not just that. You’re smart, talented, and sweet, too. It’s wrong and unfair to waste your life for me. I wish I could give you the love you deserve.”

“Why, Adam? Why can’t you love me anymore? You loved me before, or was it just a game for you?” Her hand loosens around mine, but I hold it.

“No, of course not. My love for you was real.”

“Then, what changed?” She is begging with her eyes, and I’m afraid soon they will be full of tears. *Damnit, Adriana, why can’t you keep your nose out of my life for once?*

“Is it Taylor?” she asks when I don’t speak.

I stare at her, frozen to the core. Is my interest for Taylor that obvious? Has she known it all along?

Her mouth pops open, and she shakes her head in disbelief. “I should have known it before. You kept acting so weird around her. Did you cheat on me with her?” She bites her lips and wipes away the tears that are sliding down her smooth cheeks.

I look around to make sure no one is taking our picture and lean in to whisper, “No, I didn’t cheat on you with anyone.”

“How can you love Jack’s wife? He was your best friend. After what he’d done for your mother, how could you even think of his wife that way?”

“I go to hell and back everyday for that. These last years were nothing but torture for me.”

“Do you love her so much? But, why? What does she have that I don’t?”

“If only I knew the answer.”

“Come back to me. I don’t care if you love another woman. I’ll mend your heart.” Her eyes are now glassy with more tears, and her cheeks are red. She is one of the few women who look even more beautiful crying. Do I have the courage to resist such an innocent and generous request? Maybe I’d have given in to her, if last night hadn’t happened.

What kind of spell has Taylor put on me, to chill my heart against Pat, the woman I shared my bed with for four

long years?

I want to tell her to forget about me, but would I be able to do so if Taylor demanded me to forget her and move on? I only give a small shake of my head. Slowly, she lifts my hand to her lips and places a gentle kiss on the back of it, before she stands up.

“You’re choosing sadness with chasing after Taylor over one hell of a good time with me,” she says and leaves, without looking back at me.

When Adriana comes back, she asks me about Pat. I don’t even have energy to tell her to shut the fuck up. Why did she have to put her nose into my life? Ignoring her question, I stand up, throw two one-hundred dollar bills on

the table, and make my way to the car.

I don't answer Adriana's questions about Pat in the car, even though she persistently corners me for details. Finally, she gives up and lets me be. At the airport, she gives me a tight hug before she departs. "I apologize for whatever I did, but everything I do is to make you happy. Please, forgive me."

"I do forgive you, but for next time, mind your own business." I hug her again and wave at her as she leaves.

On Monday, I arrive exactly at four-thirty at Four Seasons and find Taylor drinking wine with a blond man

in his fifties. After introducing myself and awkwardly shaking Taylor's hand, I sit and order white wine. Taylor's eyes wander around my lips and chest whenever possible, making my blood boil with lust. If she wasn't having her period, I'd yank her to the restroom to bury myself inside her at the first opportunity.

But for now, I try to keep my hands and eyes in front of me and focus my little attention on Mr. Hawkins, the new owner of the Berenson Country Club. He talks about his dream of building a water-and energy-efficient residential area surrounded by gardens and trees. And, from the details he mentions, it's clear he's knowledgeable

in environmentally-friendly constructions, too, and isn't just a dreamer with millions in the bank. It'll be huge for the company, if we can get the project and successfully carry it out.

"Adam Garnett." I hear a familiar voice behind me and turn to see Zachary Schulberg, one of my colleagues at the marketing company I work for. I stand up to shake his hand and introduce Taylor and Mr. Hawkins. Zachary bows and takes Taylor's hand to kiss. A part of me wants to snatch his sneaky hands away with my angry fists and show him she belongs to me.

"Now I understand what keeps you from becoming CFO," Zachary says, without taking his eyes away from

Taylor.

Fortunately, Taylor pulls her hand away quickly and turns to me. “Were you offered the CFO position?”

“Indeed, he was,” Zachary answers for me.

I shoot a fuming glance at him for leaving me no time to explain. “It’s not what you think, Zachary.” I glare at him to shut him up. If he’s clever he’ll take my cues. I don’t want Taylor to feel uncomfortable in front of Mr. Hawkins, otherwise I’d know how to deal with Zachary.

“I hope it’s not,” Zachary says and faces Taylor again. “And, I hope I’ll see you again, very soon.” I watch him from the corner of my eye, as the waiter

shows him his table at the back of the restaurant.

“Is it true?” Taylor’s voice is firm, but her expression is puzzled and even a little disappointed. Does she expect me to tell her everything about my other job?

“Let’s talk about this another time.” Forcing a smile, I sit back in my chair and focus my attention back on Mr. Hawkins.

Mr. Hawkins talks eagerly about the reasons why he wants to close down the country club and use the vast area for building kids-friendly homes surrounded with parks and lakes, and gives details about the designs and the construction materials he wants to use. He’s planning

to hold the bidding in two to three months, but will invite only a select group of five construction firms, all with excellent ratings, including us.

I try as much as I can to convey to him the details of the projects our firm has carried out successfully and in time, while trying to ignore Zachary's furtive glances directed at Taylor from across the room. She's not even wearing a mini dress or showing cleavage as an excuse for a foolish man like him to be checking her up and down. I'm torn between punching him in the face and putting my arm around Taylor's shoulder to show everyone that she's mine. I can totally understand why Arabian men want to cover up their wives. But, even all

covered up, Taylor would manage to intimidate men with just her daring blue eyes.

What am I supposed to do? I am cursed with equal amounts if Taylor loves me back or if she doesn't.

Mr. Hawkins stands to leave before the desert, with a promise to meet with us again, together with the architects who designed the homes. I walk him to his car and hurry back to the restaurant only to find Taylor standing beside our table, chatting with none other than Zachary. That asshole will use every opportunity to get a beautiful woman.

I approach Taylor and wrap my hand around her shoulder, while giving

Zachary my fuck-off glare. Taylor looks up at me, her eyes scowling. “Zachary was telling me about the joke they did to you on April’s fool day.”

“I’m sure he was,” I say, seething between my teeth. I’m only a few seconds before punching him in the face for telling Taylor about that embarrassing day and for raising his hand to touch her when he laughs. “If you’ll excuse us, Taylor and I have work to do.” I pull Taylor back to our table, watching Zachary nod his head to Taylor and wish us a good day before heading back to his table.

“Please, stay away from him. He’s an opportunist and a liar.” I clasp Taylor’s hand between mine on the

table.

“Look, I won’t date him or any of your colleagues. I can promise you that. But, that’s the only thing I can promise you.”

“Do you mean you’ll date other men?” I ask, hating every word of my question. I try hard not to cringe at the thought of another man touching Taylor between her legs, making her come, sticking his... Fuck, I should stop that before I end up doing something stupid.

“Didn’t you say that you didn’t mind the twenty-six men before you?” A flicker of a smile plays around her lips.

“I didn’t mean it, really. I was just trying to be a man about it. I don’t want to share you with anyone else.”

She regards me as if I'm a poor street child, asking for money to buy food. "Look, I'm not over Jack, and I don't know whether I'll ever be."

"But, Saturday night? Please, don't tell me that it didn't mean anything." I squeeze her hand, hoping she'll squeeze mine back and tell me she's all mine.

"I don't know what it meant, but one thing is certain; you make me feel like a woman again." She blushes as she averts her eyes to our hands. "I didn't feel anything sexually until that day you licked my fingers."

I grin proudly. I wish Zachary could hear her revelations. I wish each and every man in the world could see

how I make her blush. Then, a disturbing thought takes over. “Are you telling me that I just paved the way for other men to enjoy you?”

She eyes me with an ‘*enough with the bullshit*’ look through her long eye lashes. I can’t do anything but melt and forget about my jealousy. When I relax my hands around hers, she begins stroking my palm with her fingertips. I close my eyes and enjoy the tingling taking over my body.

My eyes still closed, I begin speaking, “Was it a love at first sight with Jack?”

“No, not at all.”

I fling open my eyes to see if she is messing with me. “Jack told me it was

for him.”

“I had more worries at that point in my life than flirting with one of my instructors. And anyway, Molly Kaufman was after him. She was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. Tall, blonde, and slender like a ballerina.”

“Yeah, right, unless you hadn’t looked in the mirror.” With her beauty? Someone more beautiful than her? No way.

“Well, thank you.” She grins as if she needs my assurance for her incredible looks. I don’t understand women. Mirrors tell the truth better than men. Why do even the smartest ones need to hear about their appearances from men rather than just look at their

reflections?

The waitress comes with our long-forgotten deserts; chocolate mousse for Taylor, raspberry pie for me. But, she starts with mine anyway. I watch her place a spoonful of pie into her mouth, working hard not to think how she was going to suck my cock on Saturday night.

And how I stopped her. Shit!

“If it wasn’t love at first sight, then how did it happen?” I ask.

“He forced me into a date.”

“I see you cave in easily to men coercing you into dates,” I joke. Never mind the nearly three years I’ve been running after her. She swallows another spoon full of the pie. “Will you tell me how he did it?”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“I have all the time in the world.”

“So, Molly Kaufman and I were both taking the class he was giving that summer quarter. We were the only ones who didn’t have a partner for the final assignment, but neither of us wanted to work together.”

“He convinced you to work together on the assignment?”

“Yeah. He said that if we agreed to work together, he’d date one of us when the classes ended.”

I laughed heartily. “That was probably the only time he got cocky in his entire life. I can assure you that.”

She nods enthusiastically. “I

know, right?”

“And, what happened next?”

“I told him I wouldn’t date him, even if he gave me an A right away. Not because I thought he was repulsive or a jerk. I’d decided I wouldn’t date anyone until I finished my studies. I didn’t want any distractions. But, later, Molly promised to help me get a job at the university library if I pair up with her for the assignment. And, I desperately needed a job inside the campus.”

“Stupid girl. She just helped Jack get you easier.”

“Kind of. When the classes ended and we submitted our assignment, Jack apologized to Molly because he said he’d wanted to date me since the

beginning.”

“Oh, you just made yourself an enemy,” I point out.

“You can say that. And, of course I didn’t get that job at the library.”

“I can imagine.”

“Still, I didn’t want to do anything with Jack,” Taylor continues.

“How did he convince you, then?”

“He did something very special that I’ll always be thankful to him.”

“Will you tell me what he did?” I find myself leaning in closer toward her with interest, feeling glad Jack hadn’t got her with ease, either.

“It goes back to the times before

my conception.” She eyes me as if to ask whether I still want to listen to what she’s about to say.

Nothing can stop me from learning more about the woman who stole my heart mercilessly with no promise of giving it back. “I’m all ears.”

“You see, my mother and my aunt were identical twins. Even after they married, they bought houses next door to each other to stay close and they arranged their pregnancies so that my cousin, Tina and I were born only a few weeks apart so we could become best friends, like my mother and my aunt were. Then they planned their next pregnancies with the same idea in mind. But, my mother died while giving birth

to my sister and my father committed suicide three months afterwards because of depression. So, my aunt took me and my sister in and raised us as if her own. My sister, Alice, still calls her mom, because she's been mom to her, and to me as well, ever since our mother's death."

"I'm sorry about your parents." My poor beauty in pain. No wonder she's been taking so long to get over with Jack's death. I wish I could ease her suffering. Yet, for having gone through so many heartbreaking experiences, she's still more determined and stronger than many people I know.

"Yeah, thank you. Well, just like my mother and aunt had wanted it, Tina

and I were inseparable. We couldn't have been closer if we had been twin sisters, really. During the last year in high school, Tina started dating a guy from the high school's football team. He was good-looking, didn't hang around with girls, and cared a lot about Tina. One evening, Tina invited him for dinner to introduce him to my aunt and uncle. He made a good impression on my uncle particularly, I guess, because he'd been accepted to UCLA Medicine. After dinner, they left for the movies and that was the last time we saw them."

"What do you mean that was the last time you saw them?"

"The two disappeared and never came back. The police didn't work very

hard to locate them because they were both eighteen. Long story short, Jack found them, well, their graves. It turns out they were killed by gun fire that took place a few blocks away from the movie theater they'd gone to. The police never cared to mention the shooting or we'd have gone deeper into the case. But the private investigator that Jack hired found out that the gang members hid Tina's and her boyfriend's bodies in the woods a few miles away from our home. All the years we were looking for her, she was just a few miles away from us. Finding out about Tina's death was devastating, but that was also the best present I've ever received. At least, we now know what happened to her."

She casts her eyes down to the table and bites her lower lip, playing aimlessly with the fork, and I can tell she's working hard not to cry.

I reach over, grab the fork, and pull her hand to my lips to shower it with kisses. I have to do something to lighten up her mood. "Did you know I was supposed to give that lecture where you met Jack?" I risk a brief smile, hoping she won't think I'm being a heartless jerk. "Because of that, I've always thought Jack stole you from me."

She raises her glassy eyes, and a smile creases her lips. "You'd have no chance with me unless you pulled off something special like Jack did. Honestly, I doubt anyone else would

think of something so selfless.”

“You may be right.” I’m all about insistent pursuits, nothing in the creative area, like Jack’s idea.

“If you think about it, you wouldn’t see me anymore after the course, if it wasn’t for Jack,” she points out. I’d never thought about it that way but, maybe, my best friend might have helped me get the woman of my dreams.

If only he didn’t have to die.

When she finishes both of the deserts the waitress brings the bill. Taylor skillfully snatches it before I can lay my hands on it. “On the company.”

I don’t want my time with her to come to an end. Not when I’ve just discovered I didn’t know a whole lot of

things about her. Not when my heart, and not just my over-enthusiastic cock, is swelling for her. As she reaches for her handbag, I lean in and whisper in her ear, "Spend the evening with me."

She glances at me with an alert expression on her face. "I don't really like doing it when I have my period."

I give her an amused smile. There are so many pleasures she can give me without using her sex, but for once I want her just for herself and to talk. And maybe the blow job she was supposed to give me if I can get her into the mood. "Does that mean you'd let me fuck you if you didn't have your period?"

He eyes go glazed in a split

second. Have I turned the innocent lamb into a wild tiger? The sight of her swaying breasts plopping out of the tight nurse uniform fills my mind, making my mouth water.

“Fuck?” Taylor imitates my tone, with an edge in her voice. “I’ll remind you later who fucks whom.” Her eyebrows are knitted together, her lips squeezed shut, and her chest is rising up and down.

I love how hot she looks, when she’s pissed off. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Barely keeping her anger to herself, she leaves her credit card and waits for the waitress to collect it. As soon as the waitress comes back with

the card, Taylor is on her feet, pacing toward the door. I think she's really angry. Maybe that wasn't the right way to go, right after she talked about the tragic events of her past.

"I was kidding." I run after her and grab her elbow. "Let's go to a club where we can dance."

She shakes her head and keeps on striding toward the parking lot, despite my hand on her elbow. "I don't like dancing when I am—"

I cut her off, "Oh, I didn't think about it. How about movies?"

"I have another appointment in an hour."

"Have you just come up with it to get rid of me?"

“No, it’s not an excuse.”

“I can come with you if it’s work related.”

She slows down to glance at me.

“It’s a hair-dresser appointment.”

“Please, don’t tell me you’ll get a hair cut. I love your hair long, much longer than this, like you used to have it, at your waist.”

“Since when do men have a preference for women’s hair?”

“I like my woman with long hair.”

She smirks. “Pat doesn’t have long hair.”

“Pat isn’t my woman.”

“Neither am I.”

I was expecting she'd say that, but I'm not furious. She just needs to be shown who she belongs to. "Oh, baby, haven't I told you? Once you give yourself to me, there's no going back." Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her against my chest with one quick move and crush my lips onto hers, immediately plunging my tongue deeply into her mouth to claim my territory. Her hands helplessly find their way to my chest, grasping my shirt with her fingers. Her eyes flutter shut and she moans into my mouth as I move my hands down to her hips and cup her tight buttocks, grinding my hips against hers. Then, as suddenly as it came, I tear my lips away from hers and look into her eyes. "I

don't want you dating or sleeping with other men when you're with me."

She nods and stares at me without blinking, most likely still in a daze from my kiss.

CHAPTER 11 - TAYLOR

Something has to be said about the days when Adam is absent for his other work. I feel like an angry and jealous mistress, knowing he's using his talent for another company when he could just do so much more for my company if he'd dedicated his full time to it. For the most part, the days he's not here are either boring or when the most problems at work tend to break out. No middle point.

I try to keep myself busy with the reports, but it's just not enough to fill

two entire days. And worse, Adam sends me a text on Tuesday to let me know that he's not coming to work until Friday, without stating any reason.

Since I wasn't expecting to lose precious work time on Thursday, too, I settle in front of my computer and start doing exactly the thing I forbid my employees to do; reading tabloids. I didn't care about Adam's relationships after he'd left Pat, but at this point, my curiosity can compete with that of a cat.

The first hits about Adam are all about the shooting attack a month ago. Somehow, his name is stated in all the news as Pat's ex-fiancé, as though he's had no other accomplishments in life. I knew they were together for four years,

but I had no idea that they were engaged to be married.

When I narrow the search to three years prior, I get some jaw-dropping, eye-popping news that I wish I hadn't come across. Pictures of Adam leaving a night club hand in hand with a Russian catwalk model, or with an eighteen-year-old Grammy-award-nominated singer, or with the long-legged, blonde heiress to a fast-food chain. Nonetheless, the stunning girls by his side seemed incapable of doing anything for the defeated and crushed look he was showing the cameras. If I think carefully about it, he never struck me as the kind of guy who sported a genuine smile, and that defeated look

had always been on his face like permanent makeup and it never left him until maybe a year or so after Jack's death.

One night, when Jack and I were driving from Jack's summer home in Malibu to Los Angeles, Jack's phone rang. Since he was on the steering wheel, I answered it.

"Who can it be at this hour?" I whispered and hesitantly pressed answer. "Hello?"

"Can I speak to Jack Edelman?"

"He's driving at the moment. Can I give him your message?"

"I'm Barney, the restaurant manager of Calimar. I'm calling for Adam Garnett. He passed out a few

minutes ago. Can Mr. Edelman come and pick him up?”

“Why, what happened to him?” I shift my eyes from the road to Jack’s face.

The man on the other side of the phone cleared his throat before replying me. “He consumed too much alcohol.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you for calling us. We’ll be there in half an hour to pick him up.” Pressing the end button, I recited what the restaurant manager had told me. Rather than getting upset, Jack’s face twisted with worry. “This is the third time this month you’ll be collecting him from clubs.”

“Yeah, I know. He’s going through very hard times after the breakup

with Pat,” Jack said.

“Pat is the same, but she doesn’t find comfort in alcohol. Besides, he inflicted this upon himself. He ended a perfectly fine relationship. And for what? To score an endless number of women who happen to cross his way?”

“It’s not the way you think. He’s really in pain. And, please, don’t speak badly about him again. He’s like a brother to me. You should acknowledge him as such,” Jack said. That was probably the only time he raised his voice when speaking to me.

Stunned and hurt by the tone of his voice, I kept quiet the entire ride until we arrived at the restaurant and I stayed in my seat while Jack hurried

inside the building. A man helped Jack to get Adam in the back seat. How much had Adam drunk to wind up being hauled to the car by two men?

Unfortunately, I had to help Jack carry Adam to his apartment. He wasn't just stone-heavy, but smelled the stomach-churning combination of smoke, alcohol, and cologne, too. Once Adam was safely on his bed, I left Jack to deal with preparing him for sleep, like a father would do to his toddler son. I couldn't stomach the sight and escaped to the bathroom to wash my hands and face to get rid of Adam's smell on me.

"You need to quit doing this to yourself," I heard Jack's soft voice. "You're ruining your life."

I wiped my hands off on the towel, and tiptoed to the bedroom door, but didn't enter.

“My life is already ruined without her.” Adam's voice came out almost as a whisper. He'd left Pat with no clear motive so he couldn't be talking about Pat, could he?

I neared the doorway to get a better view of Adam. He was resting his head on a pile of pillows and crying like a child. Whoever that woman was, she must have played him like a fish on a line to make him cry like this. Seeing the tears that poured from his eyes softened my feelings for him and even made me feel compassion for his pain.

At that time, I thought another

woman he couldn't have, maybe a married one, must be the cause for his heartbreak. Now, a tiny voice in my head is whispering that the woman who ruined Adam's life might be me. Jack looked like he knew who Adam was talking about. What kind of strange bond was it that held the two men together, even though one was in love with the other one's wife?

Of course, I could be dead wrong about the woman being me. And if I re-think it, I hope that woman isn't me or things between Adam and me will get way too complicated for my weak mind and even weaker heart to deal with.

Bree's knock on the open door

pulls me back to reality. She's wearing a coat and clutching her purse. Is it already five?

“Are you coming?” she asks, her patented cheery smile surfacing on her lips.

“Uh, where?”

“To my birthday party. I sent an email to everyone about the party tonight. Everyone, except for Valerie, will be there. Are you coming?”

I hate night clubs and everything about crowded, unventilated, and loud rooms. “Sorry, I have another plan for tonight. But, I got you a little something.” I grab a small Tiffany box from the top drawer and stand up to hand it to her.

“Are you proposing to me?” she

asks, smiling. "I'm not gay, but I may change my mind depending on the size of the diamond."

I chuckle and give her the box. "Open it."

She carefully pulls the white ribbon and opens the lid. Her beaming face and open mouth tell me she likes the golden necklace in the box. "Oh, my God. Taylor, this is gorgeous."

"Want me to help you put it on?"

"Please." She takes the thin, golden chain out of the box and places it in my palm.

"Did Valerie say why she's not going?" I ask, while fixing the necklace around her neck.

"No, but she looked a little

down. I asked if she was all right, but she said she was fine. I didn't want to dwell on it and bother her."

When the necklace is safe around her neck, she runs her fingers on it and then gives me a tight hug. "That's the prettiest jewelry I have."

"Am I forgiven for not coming to your party?"

"Of course." With a newly found closeness, she embraces me for several seconds long, before she waves at me and leaves.

Wondering what upset Valerie, I walk to her office. She didn't answer my first knock, but from the loud keyboard punches I can guess she's angry, so I turn the doorknob and enter.

“How is everything going?” I ask.

She doesn't lift her head from behind her computer to look at me, but she can't hide her pale face and red eyes from me. “Busy as usual,” she answers with a shrug.

“Bree told me you're not going to her party.”

“Bad news travel fast, huh?”

I smile briefly. “I'm not going, either.” I walk ahead and settle in an armchair before her desk.

She rests her head on her chair and clasps her hands together on her belly. “Too loud music?”

“And, too many people,” I reply.

She nods, but her eyes are miles

away.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” She pauses a moment. “It’s just William hasn’t called yet. Last time we talked, he told me he’d call me today to plan our weekend.”

“Maybe he didn’t get around to it. You know how busy it can get at work.”

She sighs, revealing a tired smile. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am. And, the last time I checked, the day hasn’t finished yet.”

She reaches for the cellular phone beside the computer. “If he doesn’t call by six I’ll call him.”

“No, you won’t. Seriously.” I

pull the phone out of her hand and place it where it was. “Let him enjoy the thrill of pursuing you.”

“I should ask Adam how much he’s enjoyed that thrill for the last couple of years.”

I arch an eyebrow at her observation. “It’s worked, hasn’t it?”

Her jaw drops open, and I replay in my mind what I’ve just said, to check whether I’ve said too much. She inclines forward, squinting, and places her elbows on the desk. “Is there something going on between you two that I should know about?”

I wish I could keep the things between Adam and me only to myself, but given the big mouth Bree has, it’s

better Valerie hears it from me.

“Come on. Spill the beans,” she pleads.

“We went out on a date.” But, no way I’ll tell her about the rest.

“Where did he take you? What did you wear?”

“To a Japanese restaurant.” She doesn’t need to know that it’s the most expensive Japanese in town. “A black slack suit.”

“Arghh, you should have told me. I’d have taken you out shopping.” She palms her phone again. “Why isn’t he calling me?” she yells at the phone with a mocking anger on her face. “I bought a super sexy, grey, strapless, mini Marc Jacobs for him. Which, by the way, cost

half of my salary.”

Red hair, brown eyes, pale skin, and a grey, mini dress. Sounds like a dangerous combination. Slowly, I get on my feet and walk back toward the door. “Promise me you won’t call him.”

She inhales a long, deep breath before she yells, “I promise.”

I admit I’m looking forward to Friday, to finally seeing Adam again. My entire body is on alert with excitement and the thought of being in the same building with Adam. If he was with me right now I’d force him to kiss me again just the way he kissed me on Monday

evening after that dinner with the client. I couldn't find the courage to get a haircut and just ended up with having a scalp treatment and manicure.

I'm curious as to how Adam will ask me out this time. That is if he'll ask me out at all.

A tiny, depressing voice reminds me that he hasn't contacted me all these days since Monday, except for some work-related emails. He was supposed to be in Las Vegas to meet the clients for the other enterprise he's working for. Between the contracts, the infamous lunch buffets at Mirage, and the night clubs, he might have easily forgotten about my existence.

I enter the anteroom Bree uses as

her office at eight-thirty sharp. Bree always arrives before me, but now, she isn't at her desk, neither is her jacket or her purse. I hang my own purse and jacket on the hanger in my office and call her on her cell. I have to know if she keeps Adam's card for a date in her locked drawer in order to hand it to me in person. She doesn't answer so I leave her a voice mail, asking her to come back to her desk ASAP.

Fidgeting with my fingers, I skim through my emails that are mostly related to Mr. Hawkins's project that I want to take over. The majority of the committee members find it too risky and aren't shy about showing their opposition. I guess it's my duty to read their reasons, but it's

so hard to focus on reading while my mind keeps wandering back to Adam.

I look over at Bree's still-empty desk, tapping my finger on the keyboard.

"Come on, girl; come to your desk if you want to keep your job," I whisper to myself. I wait five more minutes before calling her again and slam down the receiver when the answering machine picks up.

Breathing through my nostrils, I jump to my feet to go check her desk. It's strangely empty. Hasn't she come to work at all today? I don't remember her telling me she was taking the day off. Sitting on her desk, I dial Valerie's secretary at HR.

"Good morning, Ms. Edelman.

Bree has called in sick. Apparently something she ate at the night club last night was contaminated.”

Oh, yes. How did I forget about her birthday party? Contaminated food? Make it a terrible hangover. But, I should give her that much. “Did anyone else call in sick?”

“Adam won’t be coming either. Stomach flu.”

“Adam has to come. Today is Friday.” I shouldn’t have vocalized my thoughts. “We have the weekly meeting in the afternoon,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment.

“Shall I schedule it for next week?”

“No, thanks.” I hang up without

saying another word and grab the framed picture of Bree with her older sister. The two women—rather girls, considering they're both under twenty-five—look actually pretty with their long, blonde hair and tanned skin.

Bree and Adam aren't coming. Is this just a coincidence?

Even though Bree is very chit-chatty, I've never heard her talking about a boyfriend. Suddenly, I remember Bree's words when she was admiring Adam's muscles in his bedroom the day he'd come back from hospital and the intimate way she threw herself onto Adam after the surgery at the hospital.

Adam and she wouldn't be hanging out together, would they? It

doesn't sound impossible. Thanks to the invitation cards Adam has been leaving me for the last two and a half years, he and Bree have developed a rather close relationship. What if that harmless kidding-around stuff and well-intended physical contact created a sexual tension between the two? I wouldn't be surprised if Adam lost the thrill of pursuit after I gave in to him on Saturday and has started to consider scoring other women. And, I doubt Bree will find a man better than Adam in every sense.

I shouldn't be bothered if it is actually the case. Who am I to stand in their way of a relationship? But, something about this union bothers me to no end. Something I couldn't put my

finger on. Okay, I'm really anxious to get Adam's invitation card today, but that's just because I've grown accustomed to them. Not because I have feelings for him or something.

No. I feel nothing for him. Zero, zilch, nada.

I drop the picture back to its place and walk back to my office. Those angry emails from the board members will be my savior until lunch time. Then, the meeting will distract me enough to get through the rest of the afternoon.

I scroll down to find the original email that prompted the heated discussion. Much to my surprise, it's from Valerie. She is all but against the Hawkins project. One by one, I read her

arguments that merely revolve around how our company isn't yet ready for a project of that size.

She's probably right, but it's my company. Jack's legacy to me. I'd never do something to put it in danger, but I won't stop it from growing and spreading out, either. This new project is a big move, sure, but will also bring us to the league of the big players. As long as I have Adam in the project, we'll nail it, just as Mr. Hawkins envisions it.

I try and read the following emails but quickly lose interest as my mind keeps coming back to Adam and Bree. Heck, even their names match. I can see the curly font their names are written in for the invitation card to their

wedding reception.

Who am I kidding? I'm jealous as hell and will die if I can't find out whether they spent the night together or not.

So, I grab my cell and dial Adam's number. I don't care if he doesn't answer since I have his home phone number, too. Another great advantage of being the boss.

He answers on the first ring, "Taylor?"

"Yes, hi. How are you? I've just heard you were sick. Just wanted to check out how you are doing."

"I can't say I feel okay. Must be food poisoning." He pauses and breaths to the phone. "Why do you want to

know? Will you come and suck out the poison?”

I’m caught off-guard. I should have known the nurse thing would come up sooner or later. “Be careful with your words. You’re talking to your boss. You don’t want to have a sexual-harassment record in your file, do you?” I work to speak matter-of-factly, but I’m not actually mad. His flirting is a clear sign that Bree isn’t with him. Even so, I can’t be sure whether she spent the night with him or not.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. It won’t happen again.”

“Forgiven and forgotten.” I wait a brief moment, thinking how I should proceed to sound him out to explain

what happened the previous night. “I hear it was a wild party last night.”

“Was it? I don’t know. I stayed only half an hour just to say hi to Bree and give her a present.”

“Let me guess; a plush toy?”

He laughs heartily into the phone, prompting me to pull away the receiver from my ear. “No, not a toy. A pair of gold earrings.”

“You bought her a pair of gold earrings?” I couldn’t hide my surprise. “She’ll think you’re into her.”

“So what if she thinks that.”

I shouldn’t care if she thinks he’s madly in love with her, but I do. Shit. The idea of him being into Bree makes my stomach churn. I rub my forehead

with my fingers, trying to think of a way to escape his trap. “Nothing. Only, you have to report it if you’re having a relationship with a colleague.”

“Taylor, Taylor, Taylor.” The way he whispers my name causes my pulse to speed and blood to rush downward to my sex. “Are you jealous of your secretary? Well, maybe you should be. I must admit the way she flaunts her tits kind of turns me on.”

“You’re disgusting.” Snapping the phone shut, I throw it over to the desk. It begins buzzing immediately. I don’t need to look at the caller ID to know it’s from Adam. When I don’t answer, he calls my office phone. I lift the receiver and put it back to stop the

annoying ringing. But, he doesn't give up and calls over and over again.

A new email alert pops up on the screen, I lean down to read the sender's name and see it's from Adam.

"It was just a joke," the subject line says. I click on it to read the rest of the email. "She doesn't wear any revealing clothes and you know it. I just said it to push your button. Please, forgive me and have dinner with me tomorrow night. PLEAAASSSEEEEEEE."

Yeah, right. My cellular buzzes again. I wait a long moment before answering it.

"I have only eyes for your tits," he says as soon as I hit the answer.

“If you keep on annoying me like this you won’t get to see them again.”

“No, I swear I’ll be good. Let’s meet tomorrow night. I miss you so much. I can’t stop thinking about that Saturday night.”

I won’t give in so easily. “We will meet only if you come to the board meeting this afternoon.”

“I can’t. I have a doctor’s appointment at twelve.”

“You can still make it to the meeting. Come on. Valerie succeeded in turning everyone against me about the country club. I need someone solid who’ll speak up for me.”

“You don’t need anyone’s approval for that. As the owner of the

firm, you can just go ahead and sign up for the bidding.”

Finally someone is vocalizing my thoughts. “Still. I don’t want to look like a dictator, doing what I want without listening to my employee’s advice. And, I don’t want to try and convince them. That’s what you’re there for.”

He inhaled a long, loud breath. “I may not make it.”

“Look, if you come,” I covered my mouth with my hand and whispered to the phone, “I’ll have a little surprise for you tomorrow night. But, if you don’t —”

“Really? Okay, I’m canceling the doctor’s appointment. But, if I have a

serious illness you'll have to suck it out.”

Valerie comes to my office to pick me up for the board meeting. The dark circles under her eyes are clear signs of a sleepless night.

“Has William called?” I ask with a low voice, as we walk down the corridor toward the conference room. She shakes her head as a reply.

I stop to stare at her. “Have you called him?”

Her eyes drop down the floor as she shrugs.

“Come on. Haven’t we said that

you'd wait until he called?" When she doesn't respond I shoot another question, "When did you call?"

"Today, in the morning. He didn't answer me, anyway. So I left a short message to remind him to call me back." She pulls the tablet in her hand up against her chest and hugs it with both arms.

"Exactly what time was it?"

"Eight."

"And you called him just once?"

She shakes her head again. "I called him again at ten-thirty."

That's gotta be a joke, right? Hasn't she ever dated before to know the simple rules about the first dates? But, the frustration and the defeat on her face

keep me from pouring out my criticizing thoughts to her. It's two in the afternoon now. That the guy hasn't called yet might mean a lot of things.

“Promise me you won't call him again. You don't want to appear as a clingy, insecure wimp.”

“I promise,” she yells with a loud sigh, when we arrive at the door of the conference room. I glance guiltily inside to locate Adam. He's already facing the door and studying me up and down with his lustful eyes. I turn my gaze back to Valerie, because if I keep looking at Adam, my legs will stop supporting my body. Valerie jabs an elbow to my ribs and winks at me.

Oh, shit! She really has a keen

eye.

I make it my mission not to look at Adam throughout the meeting, except for when he speaks, which happens more frequently that I'd have wished. At some point, he splays his right hand over the table toward me and begins drawing circles with his forefinger. He's doing it on purpose, I have no doubt about it, to remind me the pleasure his fingers gave me. I find myself hyperventilating and on the verge of shuddering. What little concentration I've had vanishes as the circles of his forefinger come closer to my location. I pinch my palm under the table to re-focus my attention back to the conversation, though without success.

As distracted as I am, Adam

seems to be his usual self, confident and poised, his answers informative, convincing, and to the point. As if nothing had happened between us beyond the customary employer-employee relationship.

When the meeting comes to an end, I stay seated, occupying myself with my tablet, waiting for everyone to leave. Adam walks toward the door, closes it when the last of the employees are out, and turns to me.

“You didn’t actually need me. Tell me the real reason why you called me in.” He moves to my side and drums on the desk in front of me with his fingers.

My breaths shorten by his close

proximity, and my lips remain sealed.

“Will you answer me?” he asks.

“Let’s just focus on work when we’re here.” I look up to see his piercing eyes gazing at me with a frightening intensity, and I realize I won’t be able to stop him if he wants to claim me as his, right here on the very table Jack bought years ago. How stupid I was thinking that giving in to Adam for once would calm him down and get me out of his system, while helping rid me of my sexual numbness. Right now, I’d prefer the numbness than to have the entire company attesting to his seductive power on me.

“Did you miss me?” he asks.

“Well, I wondered why you

didn't call me after the dinner on Monday." Have I just said that? Me, who recommended, no, commanded Valerie to stop appearing as a clingy, insecure wimp?

A cheeky smile spreads across his lips. "You know I was in Las Vegas with clients. They had some wild fantasies to be fulfilled."

I don't know why, but I always imaged his clients as rich men who didn't have anything else to do but golf and invest their money in whatever profitable investment activity crossed their way. However, the business world is full of women, too. Young as well as old. As much as I trust Adam's project management skills, his true success

might be coming from seducing those rich women into doing business with him. Trying to yank away the stomach-churning thoughts of another woman wrapping her legs around Adam's hips, I get up and start to the door.

He catches my arm and hauls me toward him. "Want to hear some of those fantasies?" One minute, he's composed and professional, the next he's acting like a drunk.

I manage to free my hands and push against his chest. "You make me sick."

A flash of anger clouds his features, and his eyes burn like hot wax. His arms encircle my waist and he forces a leg between mine, pressing his

thigh against my sex. “I make you sick? I thought you didn’t give a fucking shit about me. You don’t even care to look at me.”

I inhale his scent to detect alcohol, but the smell of the aftershave mixed with the musky scent of his skin hits my nostrils like a blow, sending me back to Saturday night. Where he had me breaking apart wildly in his lap. “I just don’t want others... to know about us.” My voice cracks with the sudden rawness between my thighs caused by the friction of his leg swaying back and forth aggressively.

It isn’t long before the tension in my groin builds to an unbearable level. I’ll either squeeze my legs around his to

reach climax with the obvious consequence of embarrassing myself in front of him one more time, or do the impossible and free myself from his iron grip. Yet again, I have neither the strength nor the will to stop him, although any moment, someone might come and witness one of the lowest scenes of my life.

Burying my head against his chest, I squeeze his leg with my thighs and start rubbing on it harder. Sweat forms on my forehead, my hands tightly holding onto his shoulder as support. In a split second, a dizzying wave of contractions sets off inside me, taking over my body and making me moan like a beast.

“Jesus, baby, have you just come?” I hear him smirk. I deserve it. How could I lose myself so easily and quickly? After three years of no sexual desire, I’ve turned into a sex-crazed maniac.

He loosens his grip around my waist but keeps rubbing his leg. When the waves of contraction end, I pull myself away from him.

He looks at me wide-eyed. “Can’t wait to be inside you.”

I sink into a chair to catch my breath, wipe the sweat off my forehead with my hand, and lift my head to glance at him. “You expect me to keep myself for you, while you brag about your sexual conquests with your clients?”

Forget about being inside me, this was the last time you get to touch me.”

He settles in the chair across me, his hand reaching for mine. “I was just kidding. I’m a professional. I don’t fuck around with my clients.”

“Why didn’t you call me or at least send me a text.” I have to give it to Valerie. It’s not easy to hold back and act the unapproachable once you give yourself to someone.

“I had to stay at the hospital. My scar got infected, and I had high fever for two days.”

“What the hell?” I shout, hoping my voice will convey all my anger. “Why didn’t you call me?” I repeat. Here I was wondering who he was with,

while he was suffering because of the bullet that had been aimed at me.

He shrugs. "I didn't want you getting worried about me."

"Worried? Now I'll always worry about your health. Please, don't keep such information from me. I might not show it, but I care about you. I really do." I look down at my hands. "You're Jack's best friend, and you saved my life." And, I really felt for you when I saw you back then crying over a woman who might or might not be me.

"I'm all right now." He leans forward to grab my hand again. This time, I let him and watch as he brushes his lips on my knuckles. His eyes are softer now and lingering on my lips.

“The doctors would object to your visits, anyway, if they knew you’re the reason for my constant hard-on.”

I roll my eyes and chuckle, trying to repress an unwanted shiver at the thought of him sitting there right across me with a hard-on. “I might know a cure for your constant hard-on.”

“I have no doubt about that.” An amused expression lightens his face, and he lowers his eyes to my breasts and back up to my lips.

I squeeze his hand before standing up. “Are you gonna be in town tomorrow?”

“Yep.”

“Wait for my call.” I open the door and glance at him. “And please, if

you get sick again, I'd like to know about it.”

CHAPTER 12 - ADAM

All Saturday morning, I've been waiting impatiently for Taylor's call. Just the thought that I'll have her in a few hours is enough to send flames raging through my body, and only Taylor's juices can extinguish them.

Yet, it's three p.m. now and still no sign from Taylor. Either I'll stay at home and jerk off the rest of the afternoon, or go out to distract myself. I choose the latter and drive to Whole Foods for the weekly grocery shopping. I don't want to have the fridge empty,

and I can even cook some nice dinner in case Taylor wants to spend the night at my place. Not very likely, but who knows?

I go through the flowers section, trying to guess the flowers she likes. There're so many options that I end up spending half an hour just picking out a bouquet of pink roses. Then, I went ahead to buy wine, chicken, rice noodles, some vegetables, and fruits. While waiting for the butcher to prepare my order, I spot a woman who looks very much like Valerie. Tall, slim figure with red hair loosely tied in a messy bun, but no glasses. I push my cart toward her and wave my hand at her when she looks at my direction.

“Hey, there. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Her red eyes grow wide with surprise, then flicker back to the box of tea she’s holding in her hand. “Hi.”

“Are you all right? You look sick.” I study her pale face and dark bags under her eyes. Her eyes? Her eyes are brown and not green. I can’t be that stupid to have confused brown with green, can I?

“I’m fine. But, thanks for commenting on my sick look.” She shakes her head with an annoyed expression on her face and picks up another box of tea.

“I didn’t mean—Sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Unless you have an extra space in your bed, there is nothing you can do for me.”

Extra space in my bed? My eyes are fooling me and now my ears, too? She can't possibly mean that, can she? Shit, how am I supposed to respond to that?

She shoots me a curious glance and grabs her shopping cart. “Yeah, I thought so,” she says and disappears into another aisle. I stand there, baffled and dismayed, and watch the empty aisle. I may not share my bed with her, but I could listen to her problems as a friend.

The rest of the grocery shopping passes with me speculating over Valerie's problem, and back at the

parking lot, I decide it must have to do with a guy. I've had my fair share of listening to my sisters' blabber about men; I could easily be a shoulder to cry for Valerie, too. But, not with that hostile attitude of hers.

At home, I unload the groceries into the fridge and head to the bathroom for a quick shower. As I step out of the bathroom, I hear the phone buzz. My pulse shoots up with a burst of anxiety. A part of me is afraid that Taylor will call it off at the last minute. But, her text proves just the opposite. She sent me the address of the bar she wants to meet at in half an hour and put a capital O at the end of the text.

O as in oral sex? Oh, yes,

please!

The image of her full lips curving into an O when she was unzipping my pants flashes through my mind, instantly bringing my cock back to life.

I can't jerk off now, although it'd help me focus on talking with Taylor rather than focusing on her body. Still, I can't help but wish to have her here right at this moment, without any clothes or games, her legs spread widely on my bed, waiting for me to make her scream like hell...

With pleasure, I'd take my revenge for making me go through her ups and downs.

I hurry to the bedroom and put on

a blue shirt and navy jeans. Before leaving my condo, I spray Chaps by Ralph Lauren over my throat and groin. Every time I go out using this cologne, I get strange stares from women, as if they'd be ready to do whatever I might propose. Hope it'll work on Taylor, because I don't know how long I can keep my erection under control. Even so, I admit I enjoyed immensely her little nursie thing last time. I wish she'd have let me sleep with her in the same bed so I could have had her at least one more time.

I get only green lights during the ride to the bar. It sure is gonna be my night. Parking my car at the parking lot, I hasten inside the bar and scan the tables.

At eight o'clock, only a couple of tables are occupied, and she is nowhere to be seen, although she told me to be here exactly at eight.

I proceed toward the bar and spot a red-haired hottie with a dangerously mini dress. If my heart hadn't belonged to Taylor, I wouldn't have hesitated to make a move on her, but tonight she's just a cheap hot dog compared to the tender and juicy bone-in rib eye steak I'm about eat.

I pick the chair farthest from the red-head and order a whiskey on the rocks, while keeping my eyes on the door. About two minutes into sipping my drink, six men try and approach the reddie, all ending up turned down. Why

did she come here, dressed like that, and decline every interested man?

I wonder if I'd have a chance with her. Apparently yes, because she gets up from her chair and walks slowly toward me, the clack of her high heels echoing across the room. Taylor will surely freak out if she sees her near me, given the fuss she made over a silly joke about Bree's boobs.

I grab my glass and prepare to leave my chair, when I hear her speak, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Taylor?" I turn sharply and give her a once-over. The red-haired woman is Taylor with a wig. Now that I can take my time to study her, without worrying about making someone jealous, I drink in

the black mini-dress and what it's not covering.

Short, red hair with her sparkling, blue eyes and that black dress. I can hardly resist the growing urge to pull her onto my lap and show her how hard she makes my cock simply by showing up.

"I don't know any Taylor." She sits on the stool next to me; her arm brushes mine. "Won't you buy me a drink?"

I signal the bartender for another whiskey.

"Make it a Martini," she says, so I change the order.

"I'm Jolette." She extends a hand to shake. I notice her long, red nails and

picture them scratching my back all the way down to my butt while my cock gives her the pleasure of her life.

“I’m Adam.” I take her hand and kiss it, trying to guess the rules of her new game. Is she acting like a stranger I’m supposed to pick up at the bar?

She pulls her hand away gently, while watching the bartender pour her drink. The damn sucker is taking his time to fill her glass, of course, sizing up the top of her breasts spilling out of her low-cut dress. He can forget about getting a tip from me for checking out my date. I clutch the glass of whiskey in front of me to keep my hand from punching him in the face and take a sip to cool down.

Taylor turns to me with a serious expression that I have only seen in board meetings. Otherwise, she always has that indifferent look, as though she doesn't give a damn shit about the world.

“As we discussed over the phone earlier, my price for a night is one thousand dollars,” she whispers, leaning in close to me.

I barely register her words, as I'm momentarily distracted by her milky white cleavage that's pointed toward me. But, when I re-play her words in my mind, I choke and spit the drink from my mouth.

“What are you talking about? Will you charge me a thousand dollars for sleeping with you?” I try to speak as

quietly as possible, but heads turning in my direction proves just the contrary.

“Why do you expect to get my services for free? This is a business deal. I’m a call girl, and you’re my client. I don’t care if you’re the next governor of California; you have to pay like every other client.”

Oh, right. This is part of her game. So, I must say something along the lines to keep the game going. Think, think, think. “Do you accept a check? I don’t have enough cash with me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Despite the fact that we agreed on the price on the phone.”

I pull out my checkbook and a pen. “I’ll pay you one hundred dollars

more if you accept a check.” After all it’s a game, right? I can pay her a million imaginary dollars if she wants me to. Hell, I’d pay her millions of real dollars if that’s what she wanted.

“Whatever.” She watches me when I write down the amount and sign.

“What did you say your last name was, Jolette?”

“Keep that part empty.” She pulls the checkbook from my hand, methodically tears the check out of it, and hands it back to me. “I’m at your service for the next twelve hours. You can do whatever you want with me.”

“Whatever?” I arch an eyebrow, trying to guess what that whatever might include.

“Whatever,” she repeats.

I lean in and whisper to her ear, “Even anal sex, bondage, and dominance?”

I’m very curious to see her reaction. She turns and faces me, without any annoyance or surprise readable on her face. “You’ll have to pay extra for those.”

“How much more?”

“Those are in the five-digit range and must be requested in advance.”

“I see.” I wonder what, then, constitutes everything for tonight. I guess I’ll see when I express my wishes.

“Are you sure you want to spend your precious hours here? We can go somewhere quiet.”

I consider the options while busying my hands with the whiskey glass; otherwise I'm afraid they'll make a move that might scare her off. "I've always had a thing for public sex."

"Oh, no. I don't want to get arrested or appear on Youtube."

"Not that kind of public sex. I'll tell you in the car." I help her down from the stool, leave a twenty-dollar bill for the drinks, and hold her hand while we head out. I swear most of the men in the club throw jealous glares at me, and those who don't, I'm sure, are gay.

My heart is pounding hard against my chest as if a mountain bear had been chasing me for hours. I turn the key in the ignition and inhale the sweet

scent of Taylor filling my car.

Taylor, a.k.a Jolette, has already buckled up and is reading something on her phone, her other hand caresses her cleavage. Her beautiful legs are crossed, the knees pointing toward me. If the behavior analysts aren't wrong about body language, she's into me.

I can have her here and now, without going to any trouble of waiting or looking for a parking slot wherever we go. And, it'd be just fine as any other fantasy because it's her. The woman I've loved for so many years that it even hurts having her sit this close to me, sharing the same air with me. I can't remember the other women in my past giving me the same feeling and don't even want to

imagine the others I might have in the future. If only she could love me back with a fraction of the amount I love her, I wouldn't lay my eyes on another woman ever again.

She used to be prettier, I notice. Her hair that once was reaching down to her waist is now barely below her shoulders. Her curves used to be smoother and more prominent. Now, she's nearly all skin and bones, as if she's stopped eating all together. And, she used to laugh a lot and make others laugh, too. Now, I'm lucky if I can induce a shy smile from her lips.

I wish she could be her old self again.

I wish I could make her happy

again.

I decide to dampen my desire for her so she can enjoy this role-playing game of hers. Yet, I can't pass on those cherry-red lips pursing like they want to be kissed. Smiling, I reach over and tilt her chin up to me until she's facing me. Her lips part with surprise; her eyes grow bright with anticipation. As she moves her lips to speak, I press my mouth onto hers. Her tongue finds mine easily and begins massaging it.

I'm loving the new Taylor who's making no attempt to disguise her interest in getting laid by me. Never in a million years would I think she'd give herself to me willingly, although I could never stop hoping. And, my hope gave

its first fruits. I grasp her hair at the back of her head to better angle her mouth right below mine, licking her lips, sucking her tongue, swallowing her shameless little moans. Her hands rise to the buttons of my shirt and unbutton the first one before I can stop her.

“Not yet, baby.” I pull away and wink at her, dazzled by the lustful glow on her face.

Although I’m more than thrilled having her by my side and with the prospect of being inside her, I can’t push away the thoughts of losing her again the next day. How I wish she were mine completely, not just for this moment of pleasure, but every time, loving me the way I love her, with the passion I adore

her.

Will she ever come close to viewing me as someone who could make her forget her pain? Will she ever find a place for me in her heart, beside Jack?

I wipe my lips with my fingers and run the engine. Our first stop is a movie theater. She's fidgeting with her hands, while I try to pick the least popular movie just by the name. Who'd have thought reading movie critiques would be this essential for sexual experiences?

A group of women in the ticket line grab my attention, and I listen carefully to hear which movie they're going to see. For being a Saturday night, it's clear that all the movies will be at

least half full. I'd rather have sex with Taylor surrounded by women than some pervert men peeping on us.

Taylor elbows me in the ribs when she catches me staring toward the women. I love to make her jealous, if that's what she's feeling. I go ahead and buy tickets for the same movie as those women did. It turns out to be a 'Sex and the city' type of romantic comedy. And, yes, I watched both of the Sex and the City movies, thanks to my sisters.

I keep my hand at the small of Taylor's back, as we hurry to the salon to get the best seats on the back row. I must be the luckiest guy tonight, because the majority of the watchers are women, except for three men that I imagine were

forced to tag along with their wives or girlfriends. The last two rows have only a middle-aged woman as an occupant, and I don't mind if she watches us in action.

Taylor and I sit in the middle of the back row. As soon as the lights are out, I throw a hand around her neck and indulge in her sweet mouth. I love kissing her, feeling her soft, full lips curling under mine, her tongue surrendering all too quickly to my furious intrusion. Soon, those lips will be sucking my erection. She can't even begin to grasp the intensity of my desire and lust for her.

Between our heavy breathing, my hands roam down over to her breasts.

I'd suck and bite them until they harden, if her dress had buttons over them. But right now, I'm forced to enjoy them only through the fabric of her dress.

While I squeeze her breast with one hand, I run the other one on her back toward her buttocks. She's squirming and digging her fingers into my biceps as her lips are massaging mine. Just like me, she's lost in our kisses, not caring about the audience barely ten feet away from us. Her tongue is eagerly tasting and exploring inside my mouth, and her breasts poke forward, yearning to be touched.

She won't let me pull away even for a second, not that I intend to. I can feel desire rolling off of her like furious

waves, as she presses her chest against mine. She's shivering under my hungry touches, although her skin is burning hot. All week long, I was agonizing over whether she'd agree to let me have her one more time, only to find she was burning with the same level of desire.

My hand traces down the side of her thigh, longing to feel her between her legs where she was soaking wet last Saturday. Her skin is smooth and silky, like feathers. My lips glued to hers the whole time, I rub my hands all over her legs, then let them wander toward her sex. Her breathing intensifies as I reach up and touch her and... feel no fabric. Hell, isn't she wearing any panties?

Shocked and thrilled, I tear my

lips from hers and pull at the hem of her dress to get a glance of her. The sight of the swollen lips of her labia glittering with her juices in the dim light of the theater sends me into a complete head spin. My cock grows throbbing hard at the thought of her sitting right beside me all this time without panties; at the club, in the car, and now here. A few heads turn toward us at my loud groan, as I slide a finger through her slit and see her shudder at my touch.

My cock is so hard and wanting, a simple blow job won't do it anymore. I'll have to fuck her properly to ease the tension burning my balls.

She sighs between her teeth and pushes my hand further between her legs.

I lick her lips, chin, and down her throat, as I slide two fingers deep inside her. She jerks at the assault, but her legs snap firmly around my hand, locking it in place. Her inner muscles tighten with each thrust of my fingers, and she shoves her hips against my hand. Her eyes lose focus and her lips part widely with a restrained moan, when I hit a sweet spot. She's so fucking arousing when she loses herself that I grip her hair with my free hand and pull her to me to capture her lips while pushing harder on the same spot with my other hand.

My fingers continue fucking her until she can't control her groans. Pulling them out, I lick them, savoring the sweet delicacy of her lust for me.

“We’re leaving. Now!”

Hazy and dizzy, she smoothes her dress and falls into step beside me. Outside, I find an employee, a tall, slim guy with blond hair, and squeeze a hundred bucks in his hand so that he finds us a private space. He glances at Taylor, squinting, then leads us to what seems to be a storage room, and leaves us alone.

I close the door while enjoying Taylor’s just-finger-fucked look. She has no idea what is awaiting her, though she might think she does. Her breathing accelerates, when I approach her and grab her hands. She flinches at the suddenness of my move, but lets me flip her and pin her face-first against the

wall. I unbutton and unzip my jeans, shoving them down together with my boxers, release my stiff cock, and rub its tip along her wet and hot slit.

“You, saucy little cunt, tell me how much you want me to fuck you,” I whisper to her ear, and she utters a loud moan as if I just slammed my erection into her.

“Tell me,” I repeat, pushing the tip inside her.

She jerks and pushes her ass against my groins. “Very much.” Her answer comes out muffled.

I smile at the weakness of her voice, though it makes my knees go loose for a split second. “I’ll fuck you so hard you’ll be unfuckable for days. And,

when you think you're too sore to even walk, I'll fuck you again. Are you ready for it?"

"Yes."

I take a tight grip of her hips, spread her legs wider with my knee, and ram my shaft inside her with all my might. She cries from the top of lungs. She's a screamer all right. Her pussy is so tight that I have to pull out all the way, or I won't be able to drill her as I wish. She screams and mumbles incoherent words that drive me crazier than ever. Inhaling a sharp breath of air, I shove my cock back in, rotate my hips, making circles inside her, giving her time to adjust to the pressure, and then begin thrusting in and out.

My hands wander ruthlessly over her stomach down to her sex to satiate her hunger for more. Her body arches over mine, her hands pressing fiercely against my arms as if she wants to have my hands inside of her alongside my cock. She's that insatiable.

I plunge into her harder, for all the years I couldn't have her, for all nights she lay under Jack, and for all the love I could have given her.

The warmth and the wetness of her snug insides, her constant moans that you can't tell whether from pain or pleasure, the way she moves in rhythm with my thrusts; it all feels surreal, and so much better than every dream I've ever had. I felt an abrupt urge to give her

more pleasure, hoping it'll take her out of the darkness she'd lost herself in.

“You’re my filthy whore. When I’m finished with you, you’ll be lucky to remember your name.” *And him.*

She reacts with another loud moan and calls out my name. My name, not Jack’s name. She’s completely immersed in my presence; she’s with me with her body and her mind, rather than dreaming of Jack or wishing I was him. The feeling of triumph is so intense that I want to shout out how much I love her.

Out of the blue, her words at the breakfast table at her condo echo in my ears. “*I wouldn’t get pregnant anyway. I haven’t ovulated for ages.*” Not the most arousing words to remember in the

middle of fucking, but my cock twitches and throbs and my balls ache at the challenge of impregnating her infertile womb. And suddenly, all I can think of is coating her insides with my full load, shooting my strongest, most able sperm deep into her to conquer her womb.

With a renewed determination to bombard her with more pleasure, to open up and revive her womb, I rub circles around her clitoris, bite and suck her earlobe, and squeeze her breast all the while thrusting my erection deeper into her.

She's shuddering and trembling helplessly as her inner muscles are enveloping my cock tightly, squeezing and milking it eagerly for my seed.

“Harder, Adam, harder. I’m about to come.”

“You’ll get what you wish for.” My balls constrict with the need to blow and deposit my baby-making release into her cervix, but I keep thrusting into her with long, slow, and hard strokes, until no nerve ending inside her goes unstimulated. As her muscles begin clenching wildly around my length, I explode and shoot my full load deep inside her.

I collapse onto her against the wall, breathless and sweaty, but keep my cock inside her a little longer to allow more time for the sperm to strike her ovaries. Just the thought of giving her something Jack couldn’t give makes my

penis stir and swell again.

We stay pressed up to the wall until we catch our breaths. Unwillingly, I pull out my semi-hard penis, pull up my boxers and jeans, and gather her against my chest. The hair in her wig is harsh against my skin, and I'd rather smell the strawberry scent of her own hair, but I ignore it in order to not spoil the beauty of moment.

Locked in each other's arms, we walk to the restrooms, and I wait for her while she gets herself straightened up. When she comes out she avoids my gaze, her cheeks flashing beet red, matching the color of the wig on her head. Perhaps the fresh memories of our fuck make her shy, or she just doesn't want to reveal to

me how much she enjoyed me having the upper hand.

I wonder whether she's sore down there. It's highly likely, given the level of the tightness of her sex. My cock twitches with need to be inside her again and stretch out her stiff muscles. I don't remember being so hot for another woman, and I can't imagine I can ever get hotter than this for someone else. Simply impossible.

I pull her by the waist and whisper to her ear, "Can I take you to my place?"

"Sure," she says, her eyes still on the floor.

I slip a finger under her chin to lift her face. Her features are soft, her

expression full of contentment and pleasure with a tint of shyness. Her eyes reluctantly find mine, and I know she'd rather close them to hide the passion sparkling in them from me. I love the way she's trying to keep a part only for herself, even after opening up to me at the most primal level. But, more than that, I love how she can't succeed, even if she tries hard. I'll break her defenses one by one and make her mine in every sense.

I lower my head to suck her swollen lips one last time, before we set off to the parking lot. Opening the door of the passenger seat, I watch her enter the car with so little grace that her slit becomes visible as she pulls her legs

inside. She sends me a knowing glance through the window, while I close the door. As soon as I get inside the car, I put the key in the ignition but don't turn it just yet. I gaze her bare legs as she starts to pull the seat belt.

“Don't buckle up yet,” I say. She drops the belt and faces me. “Pull up your dress,” I order, and she pulls the hem of it only a little bit and stops when it's barely covering her pelvis. I shake my head and smirk at her intimidation. “Up to your waist.” Fixing my eyes between her legs, I envision how wet it still must be with my sperm as she unravels it ever so slowly.

She's such a tease.

Her legs are crossed, so I can't

see anything, just the creamy, perfectly waxed mound.

“Spread your legs.” My heartbeats accelerate with anticipation, in spite of the fact that I fucked her less fifteen minutes ago. She uncrosses her legs slowly and spreads them apart.

I tilt my head down to get a better view of her slick. “Touch yourself.”

What a better way to break one of her defenses than to make her touch herself in front of me until she shudders with bliss. And, this time she can't hide her face in my chest like she climaxed on my leg yesterday in the meeting room. I look up at her face and see her eyebrows pulled together, forming deep lines in

between.

“Excuse me?”

“Slide a finger inside.”

Her chest stops moving, and I can see the vein in her neck pulsing wildly against her milky white skin. I make a mental note to let my lips and tongue mark her smooth skin with hickeys. Her eyes gleam with confusion and concern, and I wonder whether she did it in front of Jack. Most likely yes, but not like this: in semi-public, acting as a call-girl. And it doesn't matter even if she did it the exact same way with Jack. I can fill her mind with a million new pieces of memories until whatever happened between her and Jack becomes nothing but a distant past.

I want her cheeks flushing with embarrassment and guilt while her fingers stroke her most private parts for my viewing pleasure. I want her crying out uncontrollably, knowing her every move and sound will be burned forever into my memory and that I may and will bring up her naughty performance whenever I damn well please.

She swallows and bites her lower lip. Still no answer, no move from her side. She's hesitating and maybe considering how to get out of my less-than-comfortable order.

"Remember the check in your purse," I say. After all, she's the one into role-playing.

Her hand drops the hem of her

skin, drawing my attention back to her bare sex, and reaches up to her mouth. My cock presses hard against my pants with excitement and anticipation. She sticks out her tongue and licks her two fingers, making a production out of it, taking away all my doubts about her stellar blow-job skills, then slowly moves them through the valley of her cleavage, past her belly, and then down to her thighs. My heart hammers against my chest. Her eyes shift forward toward the windshield. Her breathing quickens as she trails her fingers around the folds of her swollen sex and begins rubbing.

“Look at me,” I order. She snaps her eyes up to mine, and my balls ache at the sight of the lust flaming in her eyes.

“You’ll not come until I tell you so.”

I want to yank her over to my lap and fuck her until she can’t keep her eyes open, but I’ll probably never get another chance to see her pleasuring herself. So I force myself to keep my over-demanding libido under control and just watch her with fascination, while she’s moving her hand between her feathery thighs.

At one point she snaps her legs together around her hand, just the way she did in the movie theater around my hand, preventing me from seeing her sex. But, the sight of her face blushing a deeper red by the second, her eyes rolled back in a haze, and her body arching backwards and forwards with pleasure is enough to make my hard-on

throb painfully beneath my jeans. This must be the ultimate test for self control I've been through. I want to ram my cock inside her pussy and into her slightly parted lips at the same time.

I will not be able to pass the test; her labored breathing accompanied with silent hums, her breasts moving up and down as she leans deeper in the seat are too much to stand. I have to do something, even if it's just touching her.

She looks like she is somewhere else, high and concentrated from all the emotions her slim fingers are giving her. "I'm... I can't hold it for much longer."

I stretch my hand out to grab hers that's between her legs and slide my middle finger inside her, beside her two

fingers, pressing hard against the hot and wet walls I'm becoming familiar with. She moans at the additional pressure and shoots me a surprised look. It takes every ounce of willpower not to smash my lips onto hers and suck her tongue out, but I force myself to keep on watching and memorizing each and every breath, moan, and quiver her body is giving off under the building pleasure.

“Come now,” I order. It isn't long before her muscles start to clutch and squeeze at our fingers, and she lets out a loud groan while her eyes close tightly. I keep my finger in her a little longer to feel the aftershock spasms radiating through her.

“God, you're so sexy,” I finally

press my lips onto hers and get a taste of her now dry lips.

“Thank you,” she whispers when I pull back my lips and my hand. “You’re the best client I’ve ever had.”

I thought the role-playing was long over, and frankly, I’m not really enjoying her acting like a prostitute. “Lick your fingers,” I say curtly as I turn the ignition. She wrinkles her nose, but does it anyway, only to cringe more. I bet she’s the only one who doesn’t appreciate the taste of her juices. Perhaps, she simply needs to get used to it. And I’ll make sure that she will.

As I maneuver my way out of the parking lot, all of a sudden, a green sedan turns in front of me at the exit. If I

didn't jam on the brakes frantically, I'd crash into it. And luckily, there was no other car following us that could plow into my mine from behind. The driver of the sedan drives off without apologizing, and I don't bother checking his plate number.

CHAPTER 13 - TAYLOR

This was certainly the strangest night of sex I've ever had. Jack wasn't exactly the sex-outside-the-bedroom type of guy and would never in a million years call me a whore or treat me as such. As surprised as I am at Adam's bad-boy attitude, I'm more taken by how much I actually liked it. Who would have thought I had a soft spot for dirty talk?

As for his threat of making me unfuckable, the combination of his huge size and the fierce way he pumped into

me made me as sore down there as I'd ever been. A delectable soreness, though.

I inhale heavily, trying to fill my lungs with oxygen, whose existence I've forgotten about under Adam's seductive spell, and watch the road as we drive toward his condo. Inside the elevator, I slip my arm into his to support my unsteady legs, wondering what else he has in mind for the rest of the night. Though I'm not exactly sure, I'm planning to spend the night with him, having sex or doing whatever else he wants to do with me.

His condo isn't very orderly. There are towels on the couch and the chair in the living room, and one hanging

on the doorknob of the kitchen door. Either he has a terrible sweaty-hands problem, or the housekeeper skipped his home. I make a mental note to call her the first thing tomorrow to remind her of her duties at Adam's home.

He invites me to the living room, sets about collecting the towels, and gestures me to the couch. My scalp is sweaty and itching under the wig. I excuse myself and go to the bathroom to get rid of the wig and fix my hair. The Jacuzzi grabs my attention and makes me think of the possibility of getting naked inside it with Adam.

I leave the bathroom and manage to sneak a peek through, his bedroom before I show up back at the living

room. I can only glance at the unmade bed before I hear his footsteps, and I wonder how many women shared this bed with him. Ten, fifty, one hundred? And, I'll be just another one on his list. I wish I could ask him about his love life, or better, sex life, but that's outside of my call-girl role. I've already dumped the wig. If I start to chat about his private life, I can forget about the entire role playing.

“Are you hungry?” Adam asks when he notices my presence back in the living room.

“Not really.”

“Why? When did you eat?”

I frown, trying to remember. Eating has become a chore more than a

fun activity, except for sweets. I didn't cook much, but I used to love eating out at restaurants with local and international cuisines. Going to the farmer's market to buy fresh produce, smelling and touching every fruit on my way was among my favorite activities. Now coffee and crackers have become my breakfast and lunch, and I'll get a hamburger if I remind myself to eat dinner.

“If you're trying to remember, you haven't eaten in the past five, six hours. Have you?” He stands up, his hands on his hips, pulling my eyes down to his groin. I blink and look back at his eyes. I should stop looking at him as a sex object only, I think to myself, only to

stare at his buttocks as he turns to walk toward the kitchen.

I don't understand what it is with him. Or is it actually me? I've known him for longer than four years now and never so much as raised an eyebrow at his looks. But, now I can't seem to take my eyes off of him.

"You paid me over a thousand dollars. Are you sure you want to spend your time feeding me?" I follow him to the kitchen and sit at a stool by the kitchen island.

"Are you gonna insist on being Jolette?"

I nod hesitantly.

"Please, I want to have dinner with you and only you. Am I so

repulsive to you that you can't even sit and eat with me without pretending to be someone else?"

I shook my head. I never thought he'd take it that way. "I didn't mean to offend you. I don't find you repulsive. It's me."

"Whatever the reason is, please be yourself and drink this orange juice."

He hands me a tall glass of orange juice and starts cooking something with chicken and vegetables. "I'd have prepared something in advance if I knew you'd come over."

I smile briefly and say, "Don't bother with cooking. We can order something."

"Are you kidding me? You eating

something I cook is one of my fantasies.”

“Really?” I smirk. “Is there more to that fantasy?” I eye the dinner table and evaluate its ability to hold us both.

“Well, I don’t want to force you into anything, but yes, it always ends up with you loving the food so much that you want to give me something pleasurable in exchange.”

“You remember you paid me right? You don’t need to feed me to stick your cock in me.”

“Would you mind keeping your mouth clean in the kitchen, please?”

Clean mouth? Look who’s talking. I’ll have to remind him of his words when we’re wrestling on the table.

He sets the table and serves chicken teriyaki with rice and two cups of green tea. I place the napkin on my bare legs and dig into the food. Although my taste buds have been exposed to mostly artificial food these past years, they seem to remember the taste of fresh and homemade food.

The crispy sweet peas and tender chicken prompts a surge of fluids in my mouth. Not just a man who can fuck, but one who can cook extraordinarily delicious food, too. I survey the kitchen with more attention and notice the series of cookbooks on the shelves and the pots and pans hanging from the overhead rack. If he cooks so well, why had he never invited Jack and me over to his

place for a dinner party?

“How did you learn to cook so well? Did Adriana teach you?”

“Hell, no. Once she figured out she was good at cooking, she banned us all from entering the kitchen for cooking, including my mother.”

“Then, how?”

“Pat.”

Just one word, and my appetite is gone. I force myself to eat some more food to hide my jealousy for his past relationship. By the time half of my food is in my stomach, I give up and leave the fork on the plate. Not the reaction Adam must be expecting from me.

“You’re kidding me, right?” He points at my plate with his fork.

“You put too much food on my plate.”

“You used to eat double that amount.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Remember the buffet you over-abused in Las Vegas?”

I remember all too well the buffets and the beds I used to over-abuse with Jack. “I don’t want to talk about the past.”

“Fair enough. But you’ll have some desert, too.”

I don’t mind sweets. “Fine.”

As soon as he finishes his plate and places my food in a box, which I assume will be forced into my hands as take-home, he serves us mango mousse

with cream in a large bowl.

“Eat,” he orders and gives me a spoon. I notice how much he likes ordering me around tonight. I try and lick the spoon long enough for him to notice my performance. He dips his forefinger into the cream and then slides it between my lips. I suck his finger and coat it with my tongue, while watching him close his eyes in a trance.

Slowly, he leans in and whispers in my ear, “I want to have you in my bedroom.”

I don't know whether he's ordering me to go ahead and get prepared for him in his bedroom or just stating what he'd like to do with me, so I stay still, watching him. But he keeps on

eating his mousse. Maybe, I should spread it all over me, then he'll not be taking it so slowly.

Even worse, he makes us chamomile tea before leaving the kitchen. He's way too keen on his stomach. He always has been, actually, if I think about it. But, how does he stay so fit? I haven't noticed any treadmill or heavy weights around. He must be going regularly to the gym, or maybe having multiple numbers of sex partners is his only work out. Does that mean I'm going to sleep on a bed which was used by several other women?

Disgusting.

Perhaps he sees my hesitance and holds my hand for me to follow him

into the bedroom. Navy satin bed covers, silver-framed pictures of his family, shelves filled with books and a vase with pink roses. What's with the roses? Doesn't really look like a typical bedroom of a single man. Either it's Adriana's doing, or he has a secret girlfriend.

I sit on the bed beside him. He cups my face with his big hands and gives me a soft kiss, nothing like the aggressive, urgent kisses he gave me earlier in the evening. Is he tired already, with just one round? Then, he frees my face and lets me take in his room. A picture of Jack on the nightstand catches my attention. I reach over and grab it. An elderly couple, whom I

assume are Adam's parents, are standing beside Jack, arms wrapped around his shoulders.

"I didn't know Jack was close to your parents, too," I say.

"They probably loved him better than they loved me." Adam chuckles. "Story of my life, I guess."

"Were you jealous of him?" I eye him as his eyebrows frown.

"It doesn't matter if I was jealous of him or not. I loved him like my own brother."

"You're just saying it because it's me you're talking to."

He shakes his head. "You knew him for two years. I knew him for most of my life. He was one of a kind."

He was. He was my one of a kind. I force back the tears that are threatening to make an appearance and place the picture back in its place. “Where are your parents now?”

“My mother died of lung cancer a few years ago. My father lives in San Francisco with my youngest sisters.”

“I’m sorry about your mother.”

He shrugs. “I’ve learned to live with the fact that she’s gone. Life goes on, doesn’t it?” He stares right into my eyes as if trying to make me internalize his words.

“Have many siblings do you have?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“Four, all sisters.”

“Wow.” I laugh. “You’re the only brother of four sisters? That must have been hard.” I find it strange that I know almost nothing about him, although he was my husband’s best friend. He managed to keep a certain amount of distance from us, or maybe just from me.

“It still is.” He smiles, perhaps remembering a private joke.

His hand reaches for my neck; his smile turns into a lustful expression. His eyes, filled with fire, flick down to my lips, rendering me breathless in a matter of seconds. He kisses the corner of my mouth slowly and gently, as if tasting the food he’d cooked on me, then licks my lips and parts them. His breath is tickling my skin; his hand is forcefully

tugging at my hair. I gasp into his mouth as he starts suctioning my lips.

Yet, there is no hurry in his moves, and he doesn't neglect to look into my eyes between his kisses, conveying unspoken admiration with those piercing hazel eyes. I'd rather be spoken to straightly. Better yet, called a whore and fucked hard to forget my misery, than to endure this emotional torture. But, I'm not even sure whether his kisses will lead to sex. I didn't sign up for pitiful, romantic kisses.

Suddenly, I remember Jack's picture standing only a few inches away from me, and I free myself from Adam's grip. He's frowning, his expression now void of lust and desire. Apparently, the

absurdity of Jack staring at us isn't obvious to him.

When I start to turn around to put the picture down, he holds my hand and pulls me back to him.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Jack,” I manage to say, motioning to the picture with my chin.

He gazes at me, still confused about the source of my discomfort.

“What's with Jack?” His eyes shift toward the nightstand and back at me. “Is the picture bothering you?”

Doesn't it bother him? I give my head a slight nod.

He gets up, grabs the picture, and leaves the room with it in his hand. When he comes back, I notice a sly

smile playing on his lips. “I’m not fond of my parents watching me in action, either.”

He positions himself next to me and holds my face between his hands again and continues the torture of slow kissing. I force myself to shut away the thoughts of the sweet sensation Jack’s soft and tender kisses used to give me. They were the assurance and reminder of his true love for me, when I was in doubt of myself and of my life.

Oh, Lord. Will I ever be able get over Jack?

Adam’s hand moves down to my neck along with his lips. He caresses and strokes every inch on his way. I close my eyes and tilt my head back,

hoping the tears won't make it out.

“I want you, Taylor. Only you,” Adam whispers to my ear and starts to run his hands all over my dress.

Taylor? Taylor belongs with Jack.

I feel my stomach tighten, as he runs his hand across my chest and his lips move along, violating everything that belongs to Jack. Suddenly, his touches, his lips, his breaths feel too much to deal with. I swallow a heavy sob.

“I can't do this.” I shove him away from me and pace toward the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I sit on the floor, cover my face, and pour out my pain through tears. If only the

pain will depart my body with the tears, but it only grows more.

I should have made it clear to him that I couldn't do it without role playing. I feel dirty all over, and his cologne is still in my nose, making me want to puke. Stashing my dress on the floor, I jump into the Jacuzzi and run the water, with a weak hope that a thorough cleaning will help rid me of this dirty feeling.

Adam appears behind the curtains just when I start soaping myself. "May I join you?"

"I'd rather not," I answer without looking at him.

"I swear I'll be good." He strips down fully naked, dips his feet into the

water, and grabs the soap from my hand. “Let me do it.” He slowly starts rubbing my back with the soap.

My eyes are squeezed tight, and I hang my head down to my chest as his soapy hands wander shamelessly all around my body, including my breasts and between my legs. I guess his definition of being good is a lot different than mine.

“Did I do something wrong?” His whisper in my ear is barely audible against the water splashing on the little lake inside the Jacuzzi.

I don’t know how to respond. It wasn’t his fault, but mine. Why did I even come here? Why did I accept having sex with him in the first place?

Was it just because of the shooting? Did I feel I owed him some good fucking in exchange for saving my life?

He turns down the water, pulls me down to sit between his legs, my back against his chest, and begins massaging my shoulders. “Please, don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?” I ask.

“Don’t be sad. I’ve watched you sad for so long, I can’t take it anymore.”

“I guess it’s become an unbreakable habit.”

He chuckles and squeezes my shoulders. “I understand why you can’t forget him, but for God’s sake, I don’t understand why you insist on ruining your life.” He lowers his voice to a

whisper, “Believe me when I say he’d want you to be happy.”

“I don’t deserve happiness. If at least a bit of justice had existed in this world, I’d be the one who had died in that accident.”

He shifts his position, splashing water around. “Of course not. Why are you saying that?”

I remain silent for a moment to decide whether I should tell him what happened before the accident or not. He has a right to know it, sooner rather than later. Better before he gets too deep, too involved in this shit with me. And, I had to get it out off my chest anyway. I didn’t even talk about it to my therapist. She’d think I set it up on purpose to get my

hands on my husband's money. "Jack died because of me."

"What do you mean?"

"I forced him to buy a used car after his car had been stolen. The car we bought together was very cheap and broke one week after the purchase. But, he didn't say a word. He just agreed to take it to a mechanic I'd found through Valpak coupons. Not to the dealership where he used to go. He was so supportive of my decisions. And... and the accident happened the day after we took the car from the mechanic I'd chosen."

Adam doesn't say a word, doesn't even move. I hear only the water drops crashing down the bubbles in the

bathtub. He's judging me, blaming me for Jack's death. Which is the truth. But it wasn't on purpose. I didn't want him dead. I just wanted to help him save money for more meaningful stuff. How could I know my greediness would end his life?

I feel the sudden urge to explain myself so Adam doesn't think of me as a gold-digger slut. "It's just that I hate spending money. My father didn't leave us anything. My uncle took care of us with his salary as a firefighter, which wasn't much. We didn't exactly live on food stamps, but we had to save every penny. That's the only way I know. It feels like I'm giving a piece of my limbs when I have to spend money. I still buy

my clothes at yard sales, except for the ones I wear to work. And Jack... He loved spending money on nonsense. He'd buy me clothes, shoes, bags that could feed a family of four for an entire month. It was so unnerving. I was torn between feeling guilty for taking that money away from poor people and for not appreciating Jack's generosity."

Adam won't believe me; I can sense it from his insistent silence, in the rigidity of his hands. Anyone who hears the details of Jack's accident will think I planned it on purpose. Oh, God! Will Adam doubt my love for Jack now?

"Is this the real reason why you can't move on after Jack's death?" His voice breaks through the deadly silence.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I pause to consider it. “The guilt is eating at me every day. I feel like I’m living the accident every minute. It’s the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning and the last thing when I put my head on my pillow at night. His last words echo constantly in my ears ‘The breaks don’t work.’ If he’d bought a brand new car in the first place, he’d still be alive.”

“Millions of people drive used cars, every day. And believe it or not, I found my mechanic through Valpak coupons, too. He’s kind of an engine whisperer. You might have bumped into a less talented one, but it wasn’t your fault that the mechanic couldn’t fix the

car to its best shape. There's no need to beat yourself up for it. Nothing in the accident was your fault.”

I cover my face with my hands and let the sobs rack through my body. I so needed someone to tell me these words, although it still doesn't change the fact that Jack is gone permanently.

Adam wraps his arms around me; my back is pressed hard against his chest. I cry for long minutes, my mind roaming through the special moments Jack showed me his love. There were so many of them, thousands, but my memory has already started failing me. Had I known he'd leave me so early, I'd have kept a journal, jotting down every little, yet wonderful, thing we did together in

order to keep the memories fresh.

“Okay, I feel guilty of his death, but I still love him from the bottom of my heart.” I slide my hands down and let them sink into the now-lukewarm water. “You can’t possibly want a woman who still loves her dead husband. If you’re as smart as you make everyone believe, you’d run away from me.” I want to turn around to see his reaction, yet, I don’t want him to see my face wrinkled with crying.

“I lost my brain permanently when Jack walked into that taco restaurant with you on his arm.” His breath is soft, yet shivering against my moist skin.

“I loved that restaurant and the

tacos I ate there.”

“You ordered the weirdest combination; shrimps, pickles, and mushrooms.”

“You remember that?” My lips curve with a faint smile.

“How could I forget it? I was like ‘Fuck, Jack knocked up the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.’”

My smile turns into laughter.

“You’re so beautiful when you laugh,” Adam says.

“Hey, you can’t see me from my back.” I turn around to face him.

“I don’t need to see your face to know how beautiful it is.” He stares right into my eyes for a moment—no single hint of blame in them—before

lowering them to my lips.

I don't feel comfortable enough to kiss him while talking about Jack, but the visible agony and anguish in his face break my heart. He's suffering for me and with me. Is he really not blaming me for the accident? Is he that into me? It's so wrong. I don't want to pull anyone with me into the dark world of incurable depression and grief.

I lift my hand and run my finger over his cheek, which is wet with water, then down to his lips. "You're beautiful, too." The words slip from my mouth before I have time to think about them. But, he is indeed a beautiful man. Those big, hazel eyes framed with long lashes, the thick eyebrows, the straight nose, and

the strong jaw line are in perfect proportion. His sun-kissed, smooth skin and thick hair are just icing on the cake. I tried to remember my first impression of him the day Jack introduced me to Adam and Pat. The two made a pretty couple, but it was clear Adam was the trophy boyfriend in their relationship. Nonetheless, it's the pain that touches every feature of his face that makes me realize and acknowledge his true beauty.

I lean forward and brush my lips against his, waiting for him to take over, yet, he stays unmoved, his eyes still open, examining me. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I push my lips further against his and let myself sink into him. He pulls me to his lap in response and

folds my legs around his hips. Even though his cock gets hard underneath me and has an easy access, he doesn't make a move and keeps me tight in his arms for many minutes, until the water starts to feel cold.

After leaving the bathtub and drying each other's bodies, we move to the bedroom and lie naked on the bed. Uncomfortable under Adam's intense gaze, I slide under the sheets to cover my body.

"I want you, Taylor." Adam moves toward me on the bed, making my chest tighten with discomfort at the thought of being his as Taylor. He surely wouldn't want me as Jolette after this point. He reaches over and holds my

hand. “Just let me kiss you. I promise I won’t do anything else, unless you beg me for it.”

Me, begging for it? Right. “Your humbleness is refreshing.”

He smiles and leans in to sniff the crook of my neck. “There are times when being humble won’t take you anywhere.” He places a soft kiss on the spot where he’s been sniffing.

“And, being cocky will take you somewhere, in this case?” Reflexively, I hold on tight to the sheets around me.

“I may know a thing or two in bed to justify my cockiness.” He rolls over me beyond the sheets, settles between my legs, pins my hands above my head with one hand, and begins

showering me with kisses. On my forehead, cheeks, nose, chin, and lips. Oh, the lips. He's pulling, and, sucking, and biting, and kneading them, his tongue possessively wrestling with my tongue. Lost in an explosion of various sensations on my face and in my mouth, I can't help but close my eyes and savor the moment.

Just before moving along to the next destination, he blows cold air to the sore spots, cooling the fire he set there only a while ago. I feel his erection against my legs above the sheets and doubt he'll be able to wait patiently for me to beg with that impossibly big hard-on.

“You're so sweet,” he murmurs

to my ear, before he sucks my earlobe. Tingles pool down between my legs, as he dips his tongue in my ear, sending a big ball of heat surging through my body. It's both tickling and seductive. His tongue trails slowly from my chin down my throat, licking everything on its way.

My chest heaves up and down at the thought of his lips soon ending up on my breasts. But, he doesn't look like he'll move down anytime soon. He licks my throat for long minutes, then bites the crook of my neck before moving to the other ear. Again, he sticks his tongue in my ear. This time I can't help but squeeze my legs around his to rub away the heat inside me.

Shaking his head, he lifts up and

shoots me a narrowed-eye smile. “Be nice,” he whispers and goes back to my ear. Reluctantly, I relax my legs and close my eyes again to immerse myself in the sea of tingling, shaking, and bursting sensations his kisses leave in my body.

Leaving one of my hands free, he pulls the other one to leave soft kisses on the tips of each finger, then inside my palm, knuckles, and the back of my hand. All the while his piercing eyes are glued to mine, examining my every reaction.

An embarrassingly loud moan leaves my mouth when he slips my middle finger between his lips and starts to suck it. His tongue mercilessly lingers on the sensitive flesh between the

fingers, making me aware of the gush of wetness pooling between my legs.

He gently pulls my finger out of his mouth. "I knew your fingers were your soft spot." He slides the other middle finger into the dangerous territories of his mouth, leaving me gaping with curiosity. How did he know such a thing, when even I hadn't been aware of it until he did it for the first time in the hospital?

I feel like I'm in a dream, half awake, half asleep. My face must be providing him with sufficient amount of entertainment for at least a month. I throw my head back to enjoy the luscious feeling of his tongue between my fingers without the intrusion of his

intense gaze. If I had panties on, they'd be soaked all over by now. And, he hasn't even touched me there.

I begin inhaling heavily when he slowly pulls the sheets down, revealing my breasts inch by inch, while his tongue moves from my hand over to my arm. I have no doubt my nipples are hard as rocks, and the low growl coming from deep down in his throat confirms it. I realize, in spite of all the things he's done to me tonight and last Saturday, he has yet to enjoy my breasts.

Curiosity takes over my shame, and I snap my eyes to his, only to find them smoldering at me with lascivious promises. Black locks of hair cascade over his eyebrows; his features glow at

our eye contact.

“Taylor,” he howls softly, his mesmerizing eyes holding mine captive.

My breath hitches in my throat with a new realization, and I open my mouth to let more air in. It's now all clear why I've always been so afraid of looking directly into his eyes. Because from deep down, I knew I might have fallen hard for him if I didn't watch out. Pieces start falling into place. The first time Jack introduced Adam to me, my first move after three minutes into meeting Adam was excusing myself to use the restroom so I could escape Adam's ever-consuming presence and guard my heart from him.

I loved Jack and knew he was

the one for me, but Adam's existence posed a grave threat to my love. If I think about it, it wasn't just Adam avoiding me; it was also me who canceled several dinners and weekend get-togethers with him in those tender early months of my relationship with Jack. How utterly uncharacteristic of me to suppress such an important piece of memory.

“You're so beautiful.” Adam's voice, deep, husky, and layered with pure, primal lust, snaps me away from my thoughts, and I shudder at the overwhelming and insatiable passion his eyes radiate. “Are you okay?” He props on his elbows, putting a distance between us.

I'm miles away from being okay. I'm shaking through the depths of my soul with a new awakening. Now, I can have him without any wavering. I don't need to guard my heart from his advances anymore. In fact, I can fall hard and deeply for him, and it's all right. He desires me as much as I desire him.

My hands reach up to his chest, and I run my fingertips around the scar over his heart, my eyes never leaving his. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes... but it hurts more when I'm without you."

Placing my hands around his neck, I pull him down to me. "Kiss me."

His lips find mine without further

ado, and he folds me into his arms, almost crushing me to his chest. My breasts jerk to attention at the close contact of his skin. He groans into my mouth; his hands set fires on my skin. His erection is wedged thickly between us, reminding me of the hot pool between my legs.

I desire him so much that it hurts. I want him to kiss and suck every part of me until my desperate need to be touched is gone. But, mostly, I want him to take me and put out the fire inside of me. I squirm and whimper in need when his lips lick their ways down to my breasts and suck each of them with expert precision. His hands caress beneath my breasts, then pull them up,

and tease the nipples.

“Take me, already,” I beg. And he hasn’t even touched me there. Wow, that’s a first.

“You’re throwing in the towel so soon?” He lifts himself and crawls back to my face. “I’ve got bad news for you. I’m not even half way through with you.” He leans in to suck my low lip, gently grazing it between his teeth.

How long has he been doing this? Fifteen minutes, half an hour? And he’s planning to go double that amount? I can’t hold it anymore. I feel like I’ll burst into a wild orgasm as soon as his hand, tongue, cock, or any other part of his body touches me down there.

“Please,” I manage to whisper

between his kisses. "I can't wait longer."

He teasingly shakes his head and slides back down, so his tongue fiercely sweeps across my hard-tipped breasts. Rather than satiating, my breasts' need to be touched, his strokes send me spiraling close to the pinnacle, but just not enough to reach it. I tense at the burning need for release, despite my best effort not to. My heart has turned into a trumpet beneath my chest. His sucking and kneading grows urgent when he moves from one breast to the other, and I hope he'll give up this torture and give me my remedy; his cock.

When he keeps on tormenting me even after several minutes, I gasp and

move my legs to free myself from the sheets so that I can grind my bare hips onto his erection. He jerks back, as if an electric shock has gone through him, when we're skin to skin, wet pussy to hard cock.

Shooting me a shocked look, he pushes my hands above my head to keep me in place and waits for a moment, probably trying to decide whether to take me right now, at this very moment of fire and sparkles. Then, the most annoying words spill out of his mouth, "Be nice, or I might not finish you off at all."

"Please," I whimper. Wasn't it his condition? Me begging. I'm begging already. I've been begging for several

minutes.

He shakes his head no; this time his face is deadly serious. He crawls down between my legs, never breaking the eye contact, and sits up. The sight of his hard-on makes my heart hummer. My chest rises and falls at a furious rate, while I'm anxiously waiting for his next move, every limb in my body aching with anticipation.

Will he eat my pussy, finger me, or just shove his cock in me? He has my permission to do any of them, or better yet, all three of them if it was possible. But if I've learned anything from him tonight, it's that he has a damn solid patience.

I jolt at his sudden touch, when

he lifts my right foot and rests it in his lap. His penis is brushing the side of my leg. A satisfied smile appears on his lips, as his eyes drop down to my wet pool. "Jesus, Taylor. You're so wet." He pauses to inhale a deep breath. "It'll be such a pleasure to fuck you."

I gasp for air as his words sink in and open my mouth to ease the breathing. His eyes find mine when he pulls my foot to his mouth and starts sucking each toe. I moan and groan every time his tongue presses against the flesh in between, as though he's pressing it between my legs, where it's hot, wet, and very close to a dangerous explosion.

I start to plot ways to get him to finally fuck me. Throwing myself onto

his lap and sitting on his cock seems to be the best way to go. However, I'm afraid he'll be a damn asshole and follow his threat. I decide to postpone the plan for a bit, when he gets on his hands and knees and sneaks toward me like a lion eyeing his prey. Slowly, he kisses his way up my leg, licking under my knee, then gently biting the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh, until his hands are right between my legs, though not touching my sex.

If I was embarrassed for moaning at his kisses earlier, I'm now terrified of screaming as soon as his lips touch my upper thigh, only inches away from my sex. He lingers, as he licks his way all around my slit, but not inside,

making me want to slap him hard to knock some sense into him.

Bastard!

Totally ignoring my overly needy sex, he grabs my other leg and re-does the licking and sucking thing with it.

When he's back between my legs, I reach down and run my fingers through his hair and plead with the most pathetic and miserable tone in my voice, "Please. I'm ready. Take me now."

He smirks and lowers his head. His gaze focused on mine, he releases his tongue and presses it against my center, where juices run freely. Lost in a dazed haze of lust, I squeeze my legs around his head and grind my hips against his mouth. He licks and sucks my

folds but doesn't push it farther inside, leaving me hanging on just a fraction away from an all-consuming orgasm.

"Fuck, me already," I yell uncontrollably, lift my head, and pull his hair so his face is at the same level as mine. When our eyes lock, I lower my voice as I beg again, "Please, take me now." I feel like crying and bursting into wild tears, before bursting into any kind of orgasm if he continues this torture.

He pushes me onto my back, slips his arms under my shoulders to hold me in place and positions himself between my legs. Oh, he's going to enter me.

Please, do it me already!

"Are you sure about it, Taylor?"

he asks me, stressing my name. I haven't been so damn sure about anything these past three painful years as much as wanting him inside me now. But, if I try and explain my thoughts him to him, I've no doubt my tongue will fail me.

“Yes.” As soon as the word is out of my mouth, he slams his cock deep inside me with one swift move, taking me by complete surprise.

“Fuck, you feel so good.”

I smirk and let out a relieved breath. I can feel a mind-blowing, earth-shuddering orgasm approaching. My breath hitching uncontrollably, I squeeze the bed covers, waiting for the pleasure taking over my body. But, it turns out Adam's torture hasn't come to an end

yet, because he pulls back until only the head of his cock is inside me.

“Did you think I’d let you have it so quickly?”

“What?” I lift my head to shoot him a fierce look.

He pulls away his arms, and presses his hands on my thighs to open them wide, and starts to thrusts only a third of his cock inside me with an unnervingly slow speed. I try to wrap my legs around his hips to get all of him. Without success, since his hands push my legs further apart.

“You’re an asshole,” I roar, finally done with his torture and pull myself back, letting his penis completely out of me. Once I stand on my knees, I

shove him with all my anger and frustration. “Back off. It’s over. I’m through with begging you.”

He grabs my wrist, but I manage to yank it free, jump from the bed, and race toward the door. Before I can escape, he blocks my way and grabs me by my waist.

“You’re not going anywhere, until I fuck you properly.”

“You’d have done it hours ago if you were man enough,” I shout and push his chest with my fists, but his grip is too tight, and he pulls my hips and glues them against his. His erection is warm and wet on my skin, reminding me momentarily of the pleasure it gave me only a few seconds ago.

“You’re so sexy when you’re upset.” He cups my buttocks and lifts me off my feet.

“Let go of me,” I scream from the top of my lungs and begin slapping his face and chest.

Undisturbed by my slaps, he carries me to the bed and throws me in the center of it.

I’m breathless, desperate, frustrated, and frantic. I have neither the energy nor the will to fight him. I may consider forgiving him for torturing me if he takes me here and now.

“Fuck me, please,” I say between my labored breaths.

“Tell me you want me.”

“I want you.”

“Say my name.”

“I want you, Adam. Please, fuck me already.”

He climbs up onto the bed, and flips me onto my knees and elbows with a swift move, and plunges into me with everything he’s got.

I scream as the pain and pleasure hit me with full force, once he starts pounding in and out like a jackhammer. It takes only three strokes, before I shudder with a powerful and mind-numbing orgasm, making my inner muscles clench violently around him. Tears begin rolling down to the bed at the intense sensation taking over my entire body and mind.

He pulls back until only the head

of his cock is inside me and curses several times under his breath. “Are you trying to take your revenge?” He shoves his length full force back inside me. If he wasn’t holding my hips, his thrusts would send me rolling down the bed.

As soon as the spasms of the orgasm subsides, a new wave of intense pleasure starts to form with each thrust of his throbbing cock. I crumble, weep, tremble, and shake, when a series of orgasms ripples my core. He doesn’t last long either and explodes inside me. In unison, we collapse to the bed—he on top of me—sweaty, breathless, and worn-out.

CHAPTER 14 - ADAM

I'm in an ocean, wrapped up in a swaddle like a baby. An unusual feeling of warmth and safety engulfs me. A sweet scent of strawberries hits my nose, and I'm vaguely aware of Taylor lying beside me. Slowly, my dream fades away, but the enveloping warmth stays, and I suddenly realize why. Taylor is sleeping, spooned in my arms, her back facing my chest.

And I'm still inside her, my penis semi-hard.

How did that happen?

We both must have passed out right after the sex. I dare not move so she can sleep longer, yet my cock twitches and hardens with the moist heat embracing it tightly. It's an unusually arousing and incredibly intimate feeling, and makes me wonder why I haven't tried it before. Maybe, it has to be with the right person.

Being inside her and one with her in every sense is overwhelming both for my cock and my heart, and I'm afraid I won't be able to let her continue sleeping for long. My hips begin to make small circles as if they have their own mind, pushing and probing as discreetly as possible. I wonder how she feels, and whether my hardening cock is causing

her to have some wild dreams. Her dreams can't be as wild as what I'm about to give her, though.

She hums, her arms move up to her face, rubbing her eyes. A moment of silence later, she asks, "How did you...?"

I chuckle. "I've never left."

She turns her head toward me, facing me sideways. "Is that even possible?"

"Apparently." Taking advantage of her awakened state, I begin thrusting her harder, still slow enough to enjoy it a little longer.

She moans and pushes herself toward me. "It feels kind of strange."

"Good strange, right?"

“Hmm hmm.” She throws a hand over to me and grabs my hip to make me push harder into her.

I slide a hand under her arm and cup her breast, and with the other one, I massage my way over her belly down to her sex. Shameless tiny whimpers escape her mouth one after another, taking away the little control I have. She digs her nails into my ass, when I rub her clitoris and pulls my hand that’s cupping her breast up to her mouth, sucking my thumb. Fuck!

I thrust into her harder, but the position doesn’t give me enough space to move freely. So I roll us face down, without pulling out from her, and settle between her legs. Lifting her hips, I

plunge into her.

She's panting with desire and urgency, just like me. Her groans are growing louder by the second. I ram into her harder with furious intensity, enjoying each and every sensation her wet muscles are giving me as they spasm and vibrate. She's giving herself to me completely and freely, letting me drive her wild, and crazy, and into the deep seas of bliss.

What is better than to give it hard to a woman you love and see how she shudders and breaks apart with the ecstasy of an intense orgasm? And by the feel of it, Taylor is having more than just one orgasm. I want this to last forever, me driving into her with everything I've

got, she yelping with yet another surge of orgasm. But, my heart will explode if I don't end it soon. So I ram into her one last hard stroke before I detonate inside her, making her mine again. We collapse over the bed, breathless and satiated.

She can't escape me, even if she tries.

She's mine. Completely.

Muffled sounds somewhere away wakes me up to a dark room. I roll over to feel for Taylor. Just the thought of her, the dream-like memories of her begging me, crying for me to take her, then me waking up inside her make me

want to re-live the night again. I'll probably never forget the yet-another round of amazing sex with her, even if I suffer from severe dementia in my elderly years.

Taylor passed out instantly after giving herself to me the last time, so I had to carry her up to the pillows and tug her back under the sheets, where she'd been hiding herself from me before my kiss shower started. Even better than the sex was being able to hold her tight while falling asleep next to her, inhaling her sweet fragrance, and feeling her warmth beside me in the privacy of my own bedroom.

I jerk up in the bed when I realize she's not there, and the muffled

sounds become louder by the second. I listen attentively to determine what the source of the sound is and more importantly where Taylor is.

My mind is lethargic and foggy, as I jump from the bed and walk toward the attached bathroom to find Taylor sitting on the floor, grabbing the toilet bowl.

Shit, she's throwing up again, and I can't stop wondering about the slight but still significant chances of her being pregnant.

Her bare body is shaking with each wave of puke. She raises her beaten face to me, probably trying to ask me to leave her alone without saying any words. Maybe that's the thing I should

do, but I don't want her suffering alone, even if she may think I'd be disgusted. I was at Adriana's child's birth—because her husband was stuck at the airport and there was no one else who could be with her—and seeing all the blood and the entire placenta. Now, that was disgusting. Taylor's sitting on the floor and emptying her stomach does nothing to me, save for the feeling of compassion that swells in my chest.

I grab a hand towel and soak it in cold water to give it to her. “You should go see a doctor. Do you have this frequently?”

“No, not really.” The way she averts her eyes away makes me wonder whether she's hiding something from me.

Last time I saw her vomiting was right after amazing sex, just like this time. Can the incidents be psychological, say, maybe because of feeling guilty?

Is she feeling guilty for sleeping with me?

It hits me like a speeding train that she may actually be. In both times, the dates were conditional on me helping her out. And, let's not forget her gratitude to me for saving her life in the shooting. Everything added up, forcing her to sleep with me. I feel corrupt and evil, like a shameless pimp who tricks innocent girls into the dark and dirty path of lust.

I help her up and go back into the bedroom to get her a t-shirt, while she

washes her face and brushes her teeth with a spare toothbrush. When she's done with cleaning herself, she puts on the t-shirt, her face as pale as the tiles on the bathroom walls.

I hold her elbow as a support while we walk to the bed. Maybe sleeping in the guest room to give her some privacy isn't such a bad idea. I sit on the edge of the bed and help her under the sheets.

I don't want to bother her at this vulnerable time, but I have to get it out off my chest, or I won't so much as blink all through the night. "Is it because of me? Do you find me repulsive?"

Her tired eyes grow large at first, then she shakes her head several

times. “No, it’s not you. Of course not. How can you think that? You’re just trying to help me.”

“Confession time; actually I was just trying to get you under me.” I hesitate to smile; maybe my silly joke will send her running back to the bathroom.

“It’s not you.” She bites her lower lip, as if trying to keep herself from speaking, then opens her mouth again. “I feel like I’m cheating on Jack when I’m with you.” Her gaze escapes down to her fidgeting hands above the bed covers.

There is no point repeating how deadly dead Jack is inside his coffin and nothing of him left just bones. I wonder

whether it'll be the same every time; great sex followed by some violent puking. As much as I want her with me, I can't make her suffer like this.

"I'll sleep in the guest room. You rest well." Before I can leave, though, she grabs my hand and pulls me toward her.

"Please, don't leave me alone," she whispers, her blue eyes clouded with pain, and something in her pained look tells me she's not just talking about tonight.

I nod, pulling her hand to my lips, and kiss her knuckles. Rolling beside her, I rest my head on the pillow, keeping some distance between us, and pull the sheets over me. Contrary to my

expectations, she moves toward me and snuggles into my chest. Being awake and having her skin to skin with me is a sure combination to get me hard no matter what kind of sad, disgusting, or fearful incident precedes it. Making sure to keep my hips away from her so as not to force her into yet another round of sex, which will most likely cause her to vomit again, I kiss the top of her head and close my eyes.

The following morning, I wake up and again Taylor isn't in the bed next to me. I jump out of the bed, grab a pair of boxers from the top drawer, and put them on quickly, before I open the bathroom door.

The steam and the smell of shampoo coming out of the half open door tells me she had a shower just a few minutes ago. I stride toward the living room. My chest begins to tighten, when I don't see her there. Pacing right to the kitchen, I exhale a long breath of relief as I meet her wide eyes. She gives me a quick once-over, before dropping her gaze to the cup she's holding in her hand. A blush washes over her face, reminding me of the beautiful glow she had last night right after the sex in the movie theater.

My cock twitches inside my boxers when I realize she's wearing nothing but the Hard-Rock-Café t-shirt I gave her last night. Her legs tightly

crossed can only mean she's hiding something between them. Maybe her bare pussy?

“I woke up an hour ago, but I couldn't leave. I need a ride home.”

Her overtly-revealing dress and the absence of panties are working to my advantage. “I can drive you anytime you want, hopefully not too soon, though.” I smile and lean in to give her a kiss on the nose.

“I have a lunch date—” She looks up at me for my reaction and smiles. Is she expecting me to fly into a jealous rage? “With Valerie.”

Without responding, I move toward the coffee machine to pour myself a cup of coffee and settle across

from her at the breakfast isle. "I'd like to take you somewhere before that." I look at the clock on the wall. Nine-thirty. Plenty of time until noon.

"I don't think it's allowed to go out in the streets in just a t-shirt."

"And without panties, I suppose," I add and wink. She blushes some more, as if it was possible to beat that deep red that covered her face just a minute ago. "I've got some women's clothes for occasions like this."

She raises an eyebrow but doesn't say a word.

"Just kidding. They're all Adriana's."

"I don't think Adriana will want to share her clothes with me. Besides, I

don't want to wear her panties.”

I break into laughter as she watches me with a triumphant smile. “You can borrow one of my boxer briefs if you want.”

“I guess I'll do that. Do you want your boxer briefs back washed or unwashed?”

I'm surprised that she's messing with me like this after the violent vomiting last night. And, the thought of my boxers soaked in her juices makes my chest tighten, and my cock stiffen with need.

She drinks her coffee nonchalantly and lowers her eyes to my stiffening cock. “I guess I don't need to hear your answer.”

I inhale deeply to pull myself together, or I'll have to pull her over to my lap just to show her what exactly I'd want her to do with my brief boxers. "Want to hit the shower with me before leaving?"

She shakes her head. "Maybe another time."

I curse myself for getting up too late and losing another round of explosive sex. With the unbearable stiffness of my groin, I'd settle for a quick hand-job from her beautiful hands. I drink half of my coffee and hurry to the shower.

When I'm cleaned and dressed in a black t-shirt and khaki pants, I give Taylor one of my boxer briefs and walk

her to the guest room to choose among Adriana's clothes. I leave her alone, so she can put on the clothes she picks without me disturbing her. She comes out wearing a pink t-shirt with beige, knee-length shorts and puts on her own high heels. Before we leave the condo I notice the check I gave her yesterday lying on the table in the kitchen.

Taylor buckles up in the car, eyeing me curiously. "Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise." I run the engine and focus on the road. Who knows what kind of crazy driver might cross my way. And, being Taylor, she's the ultimate distraction for me. After an hour drive to

the outskirts of the city, with only a brief stop at a flower shop on our way, I pull up and take the car key from the ignition.

“You’re taking me to a graveyard?”

“Yes.” I grab the flowers I bought on the way, climb out of the car, and open her door.

She studies the grave stones carefully as we walk pass them. “Whose grave are we visiting?”

“Just wait and see.” I keep on walking until we get to the east end of the yard. Once we arrive I blow away the dust gathered on the grave stone and kneel down to place the flowers on the grave covered with freshly cut green grass.

“Grace Linda Garnett. Beloved wife and mother of five. You’ll never be forgotten,” Taylor reads the words engraved on the stone aloud. “Your mother?”

I can’t move, I can’t speak, and my eyes are already stinging with tears. She walks around and sits beside me, covering my hand with hers, while I pray a brief prayer for my mother. She didn’t have the chance to meet Taylor, but I’m sure she’d love her as much as she loved any of her daughters. After all, whoever Jack loved would unconditionally be welcomed into her heart, too.

“She died of lung problems,” I begin. “She’d had issues with her lungs since I was a kid. They operated on her

a few days before my eighteenth birthday and she recovered. At least, that's what we thought. Two years later, she came down with a massive flu. When we took her to the doctor he told us that she was in the end stage of lung hypertension and that she'd die in a few weeks if she didn't get a lung transplant. My father was a match for the donation, but two donors are needed for lung transplantations, one for each lung. Adriana was pregnant at that time so she couldn't donate. My other sisters were too young to be eligible to be living donors, and I... I wasn't a match. She had five fucking kids, and we couldn't do anything to ease her pain.”

I brush the grass as though it's

Mom's soft hair that I so miss touching.
"Then came Jack."

"Jack?" Taylor's voice comes out like a tweak.

"Yeah, Jack. He loved my mother a lot, so much that he wanted to donate a part of his lungs for her. And, surprise, surprise; he was a match. He left us speechless with his offer. I mean, he was my best friend and I loved him dearly, but donating a lung is not like picking apples. She wasn't related to him by blood or anything, but he wanted to give her a part of his body, his health. Who, in his right fucking mind, does that? Just when you think everyone is all selfish bunches of craps, someone like Jack comes and turns everything you

believe upside down.”

Taylor squeezed my hand. “I didn’t know anything about the donation. He never explained me the scar on his torso, even though I asked.”

“He was so god-damned modest about his acts, too.” I pause to let the memories of those painful yet happy days fill my mind. My best friend, my brother, giving life to my mother. “It’s true what they say, *‘Before God gives you a problem he gives you the solution.’* Jack was the solution to our biggest problem, and he was there with us all the time.”

“That’s my Jack,” Taylor whispers softly.

“The surgery turned out to be a

success, and my mom lived for another five years. Five beautiful, long years that we adored, cherished, and valued each and every minute we were blessed with to spend with her. I hadn't seen her that happy in her entire life. And we, my entire family, owe it to Jack. He was our special person. Our angel on earth."

Then, I turn to her, without giving a shit about my red eyes or my cracking voice. "That's why I hated myself for falling in love with you. You, among all the millions of women in the world. My best friend's love. I've hurt Pat along the way, too, but it's nothing like the feeling of stabbing my best friend in the back."

"He knew about your feelings for me," she says it as a statement, not as

question.

“Yes, and that’s the worst. He didn’t hate me or beat me up until I couldn’t walk, like every other man would do. He just suffered along with me. He collected me from the bars in my deepest hours of intoxication and forced me to get back on the track. I tried to be away from you and worked hard to keep my relationship with Pat going but nothing would work. For some inexplicable reason, my heart stopped beating for anyone else but you from the minute you walked into that restaurant. Can you imagine my confusion? My suffering?” I ask, but I know the answer is no. No one can imagine the pain I went through all those months of seeing

the love of my life loving the very man who gave me and my family those beautiful five years with our mother.

“I... I,” She inhales and exhales deeply, looking around as if the answer is written somewhere.

“It didn’t make sense... at first. But everything fell into place with Jack’s death.” I watch her expression going from pained to angry.

“What are you trying to say?” Her voice comes out edgy and defensive, and she jerks her hand away from mine.

“I’m saying that I *had to* fall in love with you. It was pre-destined. Jack’s death was pre-destined; his love for you was pre-destined. I believe from

the bottom of my heart that he's among God's favorite people. And, God arranged it so that when he took Jack's life, he made sure to have someone taking care of you after him, loving you as much as Jack would do, so he wouldn't be worried about you. Who else would fit the bill better than me, his best friend?"

She's pale with shock, staring at me with her mouth wide open. She must be thinking how truly crazy I must be for coming up with a shit like this. But, it's the truth. If this is not the truth, then I don't know what is. She opens her mouth, just to close it when the words don't come out, then opens it again, and closes it back.

After some minutes of hesitation, she finally finds her tongue. “Your theory has a hole.”

Of course it’ll have a hole or two. But, it won’t change my strong belief in it. I frown, trying to read her expression and guess what goes through her mind.

“If your family adored Jack like you say and Jack loved me, why does Adriana hate me, then? She never warmed up to me even when Jack was alive,” she says with a slight grin on her face.

A smile creeps up my lips at the absurdity of her words. Here I’m on my knees, declaring the Godly reason of my love for her, crying my eyes out, and

she's cracking a silly joke? "She has her reasons," I explain. "She was trying to hook Jack up with a colleague of hers. Then you came and ruined her plans for Jack and her friend, and then her plans for Pat and me."

She snorts and stares at the stone of my mother's grave, probably letting my words sink. But, I have a feeling that they're too heavy to sink in anytime soon.

The moistness of the grass starts leaking through my jeans, and my legs are starting to get numb from sitting on them. Taylor is shifting her position on the ground and probably feeling cold, too. I don't want her getting sick from sitting too long on the frigid soil.

“Want to go back?” I ask.

She nods and we both get up. I’m taken aback when she slides her arm into mine and keeps herself close to me as we walk toward my car. I thought from the point on from when I poured out my heart, she’d be compelled to keep me at arm’s length.

Once we get in the car and I start the engine, she turns to me with a crooked eyebrow. “There is another major problem with your theory.”

“What is it?” I twist the key in the ignition but let the engine run without pressing the gas pedal.

“You’re not considering an important variable in your equation.”

“What is the variable?” I ask.

“Me and my love. I loved Jack and I still do. But for your theory to work, I should be in love with you.”

“No, you don’t have to. I’ll keep on doing what I’m doing whether you love me or not. Aside from my love for you, that’s the least I can do for Jack.”

“See, I don’t want you ruining your life trying to pay it back to Jack. I’m more than glad to have you helping me out with the company. But, other than that, I don’t need you taking care of me, and certainly I don’t want to stand in your way to happiness. I’m full of sorrow, deep into my bones, and the last thing I want is to drag someone else in with me.”

“You’re not dragging me into

anywhere. If anything, I'm having a blast every time I'm around you. Both figuratively and literally," I add the last part to ease the impact of our conversation. She's an escapist when confronted with big issues. More so since Jack's death, as though she perceives every new responsibility as a potential danger to the wobbly balance she has. And, my words are hard to swallow, let alone digest in a matter of minutes.

She blushes as if I've said something embarrassing. Well, it was embarrassing, but it's better to see color spreading across her face than making her pale with the deep thoughts about our relationship.

“Still, I’d rather you not take your theory too seriously,” she adds. “We’re grown-ups who are having fun together. I’d like to leave it at that, at least for some time, until I get used to the idea of having another man in my life. It doesn’t sit well with me yet, and I think you’ve already figured out the reason behind my puking each time after we have sex.”

“About that. I think you should really see a doctor to rule out pregnancy.”

She shakes her head. “I told you I’m fertility-challenged. I have hormonal issues and—” She doesn’t end her sentence, instead looks away through the window, perhaps considering the idea of

being really pregnant. Would a baby make her happy again? I'm already a goner for those innocent blue eyes, and if a baby will make her happy again I'm more than eager to give it to her.

Pressing the gas pedal, I drive out of the parking spot and merge into the main street. Taylor remains silent, her head resting on the seat, watching the road. After half an hour into our drive, her phone buzzes and she sighs deeply and fishes it out of her bag.

“Who is it?” I ask, afraid of her reminding me to mind my own business and lose my jealous attitude.

She doesn't reply, instead fixes her eyes on the phone screen. She must have started watching a video, because a

mixture of muffled sounds starts to come out from her phone. I turn to her and repeat my question only to make her look at me with a terrified expression.

Then, I hear the most disgusting, stomach-churning words coming from the video she's watching. *"You, saucy little cunt, tell me how much you want me in you."*

"What are you watching?" I pull the car to the closest spot on the street and kill the engine. Speechless, she's staring at me wide-eyed and her jaw dropped.

"I'll fuck you so hard you'll be unfuckable for days. And when you think you're too sore to even walk I'll fuck you again. Are you ready for it?"

It's me speaking. It's my fucking voice. How did it get into her phone?

"Tell me what the fuck you're watching." I snap the phone from her hands to look at the most horrifying video there could exist; the video of me having sex with Taylor at the movie theater last night. "Where did you get this video?"

"Someone is blackmailing me," she manages to blurt out.

I keep on watching, although the images are burned into my brain. It's recorded on a webpage, which must mean it's live for every fucking pervert to watch.

She snaps the phone back and shows me the text she's received.

“If you don’t give me ten thousand dollars by midnight, I’ll make sure to spread the video around so everyone can enjoy it as much as I did.”

My stomach revolts with disgust and anger. Someone caught Taylor and me sharing an intimate moment and is now threatening to spread it for millions to watch and jerk off to. I won’t calm down until I disfigure that guy’s face with my bare fists and do to him things that’ll make him regret the day he came out of his mother’s womb.

“Who could have done it?” Taylor’s voice is cracking, hinting at the tears that’ll soon shower her beautiful face.

“It must be the blond boy who showed us the storage room.” How could I trust a total stranger? How could I risk it, even though Taylor had clearly warned me about the possibility of being caught by someone and ending up on Internet? I forced her into having sex with me in public, just like I forced her into everything else. What if that mother fucker managed to record Taylor touching herself in my car, too? I’ll destroy her life completely.

The phone slips down to her lap, and she covers her face with her hands. “This is gonna ruin the company!”

Probably the entire nation will know her by name. She won’t be able to leave her condo for a long time. And

she's thinking about the company?

I punch the steering wheel to shift at least a bit of the fury boiling in me, overwhelming me, suffocating me with every passing second. The only thing I can focus on now is the image of my hands around that little sucker's neck, until his last breath leaves his lungs. He's just made sure he's lived his last day. He'll pay, not just for his malicious intentions, but also for putting Taylor through such a horrible and embarrassing situation. The minute I find him he'll pay for every second of the pain he's caused us.

I run the engine and floor the gas pedal. The movie theater is just a fifteen-minute drive away, but every

second feels like an hour and I fear the rage scorching me will cause me a cardiac arrest, preventing me from stopping that malicious parasite before he can spread the video around.

Thank God Taylor doesn't ask me anything when I turn the engine off at the parking lot and only climbs out of the car and paces after me. At the entrance of the movie theater, I ask her to wait for me outside. I don't want to expose her to more nastiness if the boy—or his accomplice, if he has one—is here. Her arms crossed against her chest, her eyes begging for me to rescue her from this mess, she nods and walks toward the store next door.

I take a deep breath to compose

myself before I enter. Two girls are chatting at the cash register while a middle-aged man is attending to a short line of customers. I proceed to the cash register, trying to soften my expression with a smile, and greet the girls.

“I’m looking for an employee who attended me last night. Unfortunately, I forgot his name. He’s a tall, lean boy with curly blond hair.”

“You must be talking about Case. He had a night shift yesterday,” the girl with long, black hair replies.

“Yeah, that must be him. Why do you need him?” the shorter one asks.

After sneaking glances around to make sure no one is listening to our conversation, I lean in toward them and

lower my voice, “I need his address.” Casually I pull out my wallet, draw two-hundred dollars out of it, and press them on the register desk.

The two girls look down at the bills and then to each other, their eyes growing large with surprise.

“It’s illegal to give away private information about the employees. We’ll get fired on the spot if someone figures it out,” the shorter one points out.

“How about I give two hundred to each of you?” I ask.

The shorter one shakes her head. “Five hundred to each of us.”

“I don’t have that much cash.”

“There is an ATM outside, right around the corner,” the one with long,

black hair says. They're tougher than I expected. But, I'd rather pay a thousand dollars and shut the boy up than let Taylor pay ten times more only to make the boy ask for more.

"All right, you get me the address while I go get the money." I slip the bills back into my wallet and hurry outside.

Taylor spots me immediately and strides toward me. "Did you find him?"

"No, but I'll get his address and surprise him at his home." I find the ATM two stores down the alley and hurry to withdraw the missing amount.

Taylor frowns. "Why do you need so much money?"

"I have to bribe two girls at the

cash register to get the guy's information." I keep the amount to myself in order to not freak her out.

"How much do they want?"

I collect the notes and shove them in the pocket of my pants. "Nothing compared to how much the guy will want from you."

"Look, I thought about it while waiting for you. I think it's the best if I pay him the ten thousand now as he demands. Maybe, he'll fear I'll call the police and won't bother me anymore."

"He'll press you for more. You can't trust him. Those parasites are there to suck money out of people at every opportunity."

Not wanting to leave her any

chance to debate, I rush back to the movie theater and find the girl with long, black hair selling tickets to a couple. Her face darkens when she spots me behind the couple. “My colleague will attend you in a second,” she tells me coldly.

I nod and scan around. Her shorter friend appears in a minute and motions with her head toward the door. Perhaps, she doesn’t want her other colleagues to know about our little exchange. I follow her outside nonchalantly and take the money out of my pocket.

“Why do you need his information? Are you going to hurt him? He’s a very nice guy,” she says

nervously, holding a piece of paper tightly in her hand.

“He’s not as nice as you think of him. But, don’t worry I won’t hurt him. He has something that belongs to me.”

“Where is the money?” Her eyes dart around. Guilt must be eating at her. That mother fucker is getting into yet another person’s good conscious.

“Here.” I show her the thick roll of twenties in my hand. She grabs it and counts it hurriedly, before handing me the paper in her hand. At that moment, it dawns on me she may have jotted down a random address just to get her hands on my money. “The address better be correct, or you can be sure I’ll come back.” To get my point across, I stare

directly into her eyes, which are now large with fear,.

“I swear I’m not playing with you. I took it from his file in the administrator’s office. It must be correct.” Her voice falters, and her chin trembles. Probably, she’s thinking I’m from the mafia or a gangster.

“Okay.” I look down at the address and drift my gaze back to her. “One more thing. No word about our little transaction here, all right?”

She nods and runs back to the theater at the first opportunity.

Taylor finds me right after the girl is gone, her arms across her chest. “I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“This is the best we can do under

these circumstances.” I hold her hand and hastily make it back to the parking lot.

The address the girl gave me is in Korea Town and takes us only fifteen minutes of driving, thanks to the lack of traffic. When I stop the engine in front of the apartment building with the right address, I turn to Taylor. “You stay in the car.”

She shakes her head and winces as if a bee stung her. “No, I’m coming with you.”

“It’s too dangerous for you to be out there.”

“Why? What will you do to him?”

I don’t reply. I don’t know the

answer. Right now, with the rage I'm feeling, I'll hurt him so badly that he'll need to be hospitalized. I should breathe deeply, and calm down so I can think with a clear head. "I won't do anything. It's just that he might not be alone. He's probably part of a gang or something. I don't want you anywhere near danger."

She tears her gaze away, probably considering my reasoning. With or without gangsters, her presence won't be helping me with anything.

"Stay in the car." I climb out, without giving her a chance to insist on coming with me. My hands are shaking with anger and fear of what's waiting for me inside that building. I jump the stairs three at a time and locate the buzzer

number. I look back at Taylor before I press the buzzer.

No one replies or opens the door, so I press again. This repeats five times without any response. He's either not home or probably expecting my arrival. I wait until an old lady opens the door to leave the building and nod to her and give her a smile, before I enter. I don't take the elevator; instead I hurry up the stairs while keeping my ears open for the noises from the building. Our guy lives on the second floor, his apartment at the end of a long, dark corridor.

I take care not to make any noise while walking. When I arrive in front of his door, I stay still to listen to the sounds. If he's in there and just ignoring

the door bells, the crackling of the floor when he walks will give him away. I wait patiently, praying for a tiny crackling for minutes long, but nothing comes.

Not just my hearing, but all my senses are on high alert. The artificial floral smell combined with the faint moldy odor is drowning me and leaves a metallic taste in my mouth. The hair on my neck and arms is pricked up higher than the hair of a cornered cat.

After more minutes of pondering and trying to calm my raging heart, I finally decide to knock on the door. Slowly, I lift my hand, bang my knuckles three times on the white wooden structure, and wait with my ears wide

open to detect any tiny, insignificant sound.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Nothing comes. Neither a sound, nor the boy.

What am I going to do now? I can't break into his apartment. Not just because people will hear me, but also I'm sure he's not in there. He can't be sitting in there motionless for so many minutes without at least wondering if I was gone. Any person, criminal or not, would come and look out through the peephole, and no amount of careful walking will go unnoticed in this ancient building.

Defeated, I leave the building and head toward the car. Taylor doesn't ask me what happened in there. It must

be written all over my face.

“I’ll pay him whatever he wants,” she says.

I hate losing the fight. If just paying the money would suffice, I’d go for it. But, it has never worked, and it won’t work in our case either. “Let’s go to the police. They’ll know what to do.”

“I can’t risk it. The video can go viral in a matter of seconds. Your name and the company are on the line.”

I smirk. “You don’t care about your name?”

She shrugs and pulls her phone out of her handbag. She types on it as she says aloud the content of her message, *“I’ll pay you the money, but this will be the only time I’m paying you, and I*

want the video deleted. Or I'll go directly to the police."

Not a full minute passes after she sends the message, her phone buzzes with a reply.

"Ten grand is for my silence. You'll have to pay me another ten grand for erasing the video completely from my computer. I'll give you the camera with the video on it as a bonus if you pay me all the money tonight before midnight."

Taylor's hands are shaking; she can barely hold the phone in her hands. I hate seeing her like this, and I can't even help her ease the pain. What the hell is wrong with me? I'm supposed to protect her, not become the source of her

problems.

I run my fingers through my hair so that I don't punch anything. That mother fucker has some nerve. "Shit. I knew he'd ask for more. The only difference is that he's asking for it now."

"I'd rather get it over with at once than have the trouble longer. I'll pay him what he wants."

My instincts are telling me he won't give up so easily on the chicken laying golden eggs and that he will come back demanding more. But, the guilt for causing her the pain is eating away at me so much that I can't breathe. I don't feel entitled to even mouth my opinion.

"Promise me something, then," I say. "You'll immediately go to the

police if he wants more money later on.”

“Let’s hope he’ll just do what he’s promising.” She types onto the screen of her phone, asking for the location for the exchange.

“At least, let me pay the money. All this is happening because of me. I have cash in my safe at home.”

She nods, her eyes fixed on her phone.

The message arrives in a matter of seconds after her reply.

“Be at the Starbucks across LACMA with the money ready. A young, blonde girl with a black jacket and black handbag will be waiting for you. Ask her the time. If she says ‘it’s too late for you to be outside’ she’s the

right one. Give her the money; she'll give you the camera. Only when I get a confirmation from her will I delete the video from the web link.

Come alone. Don't play games. Don't call the police."

We drive to Taylor's apartment first so she can get changed. I wait in the living room, while she locks herself in her bedroom. I hear her calling Valerie to cancel their lunch appointment, then she talks to someone else on the phone, I guess her sister. After that no more sound comes out. Wondering what she's doing in there, I stand up and tiptoe toward her bedroom only to hear her silent sobs behind the door.

Fuck! What have I done to her?

I'm not able to comfort her. What can I even say? Don't worry, darling. I'll make sure that we won't get caught having sex in public again? I'm a disgusting piece of filth to cause an innocent woman like Taylor this anguish, and even worse for not being able to help her out.

I'd leave her alone and get the fuck out of her life if I could be sure she'd be fine without me. First the shooting at the parking lot, then the blackmailing. She's going through a hell of difficulties. With her tender nerves, I'm afraid she might end up hurting herself. Besides, the guy who threatened us might be around. Who knows what he has in mind? After smelling his way to

the twenty grand, he might cancel the agreement and set up an attack to lay his hands on more money. From deep down, I wish he'd go for that way, so I can confront him and introduce my firsts to his ghostly yellow face.

Still waiting in front of Taylor's bedroom door, I glance at my watch. It's only one-thirty. How are we supposed to kill time until the midnight? She'll go crazy with counting the minutes without knowing what will happen with the video. I wish I could at least ease her anxiety.

I go to kitchen and do the best I can in this situation; prepare her a warm cup of tea. She has two drawers full of various teas, from herbal, fruit, and

black to fancy teas like vanilla rooibos chai, and cinnamon spice.

I put the kettle on and pick a package of chamomile tea for her and a black tea for me. I collapse in one of the chairs around the breakfast island while waiting for the water to boil, and drop my head into my hands. I nearly jump in the chair when I see Taylor's feet on the floor and jerk to look up.

Her face and eyes are beet red as expected, creating a deep contrast to the pale skin of her neck. Avoiding my gaze, she settles down on the chair next to mine.

I stand up to serve us the tea. "Is chamomile okay?" I ask as I place the teacups in front of her.

She just nods. While pouring the hot water into the cups, it occurs to me that I have yet to apologize to her. I sit back in my chair and cough to clear my throat, working on suppressing the urge to hold her hand.

“I’m sorry for what happened.” I force myself to pour my heart out, but no more word comes out.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Her eyes are still intent on looking everywhere but me.

“It was. I pushed you to—”

She shoots me an enraged look, cutting me off. “When there is malice in a person’s heart, it doesn’t matter whether you have sex outside or in the privacy of your bedroom; he’ll find a

way to invade your privacy to take advantage of you. I bet he'd put cameras in my bedroom if he could."

I stare at her, unable to do anything else. She's going through such a traumatic and humiliating predicament; she'd have every right to blame it on me, kick me out of her apartment, and tell me to get out of her life, forever. Yet, she manages to show me her real strength in spite of the tears she shed just a few hours ago.

I place my hand on hers and squeeze it tightly "Thank you." She's beyond doubt a unique beauty from outside and inside for not loathing my existence when I truly deserve it. Yet, another reason for me to imprison myself

in her arms and never let another woman get to me.

She pulls her teacup to her without moving her other hand from under mine and takes a hesitant sip from the boiling hot beverage. I do as she does and allow the warmth of the tea relax my muscles. It's actually her hand still wrapped in mine that works like magic to ease my tension, but I'd like to think it's the tea and not my undeniable weakness for physical intimacy with her.

CHAPTER 15 - TAYLOR

I knew I was doing something wrong. I shouldn't have let Adam into my life in the first place, much less into my heart. Having sex with him, in public or not, was the biggest mistake I've ever made, and now I'm receiving a grand punishment for acting so foolishly.

Jack must be disappointed in me. I'm disappointed in myself. And more to the point, Adam is falling for me. I've taken it too far; I let him expect more from me than what I'm capable of giving to him. I had no idea that his feelings for

me were so deeply rooted.

I let the day pass without being able to open my mouth to utter a word. He's not much better than I am and walks around in the living room like a ghost. Deep lines creased on his forehead; perhaps he's blaming himself or trying to figure out a solution to this perfectly planned threat.

The threat is too big, considering the consequences for Adam and his family's name and Jack's company but, at the same time, I can't help but feel gratitude for it. The video was a wake-up call. Its timing was perfect. Right when the affair between Adam and I could escalate to a higher level. What would be next if I hadn't received the

threat? Adam and I would probably announce that we were together. He'd want to spend every night with me. In the bed I shared with Jack? Just the thought of another man near that bed is enough to send me running to the bathroom to vomit, let alone having sex on it. I may have had some weird feelings for Adam the first time we met, and for the last few days I spent with him, but they're nothing comparable to my love for Jack.

I'll let Adam pay the money and then pay it fully back to him as the first thing tomorrow. Although he might think it was his idea to have sex in the movie theater, I was the one who pulled a stunt as a cheap prostitute. It was me who messed with his heart. He doesn't need

to suffer along with me.

When the sun goes down and the night settles in, I change into black slacks and a black turtleneck sweater and pick up my purse to head to the door. Adam follows me out without a word, like my shadow.

His home is dark and smells of sex, as if shouting my sins at me. I stay in the living room, while he disappears into his bedroom. I promise to myself that I'll never again set foot in those four walls of indulgence, called his bedroom.

He comes out wearing blue jeans with a navy raincoat, holding a duffel bag, which, I assume, has the twenty grand in it. "I called a friend of mine who is a martial arts instructor at the

gym I go to regularly. She knows Taekwondo and Krav Maga. She'll be there at the Starbucks, in case the guy tries to kidnap you or harm you any other way."

"I don't think involving someone else is a good idea." I gaze down at the bag, unable to look into his eyes and see the self-blame in them. His voice is already laced with pain and fear. If I see all that turmoil directly in his eyes, I'm afraid I'll just throw myself into his arms and embrace him tightly in order to ease his fears. From the corner of my eye, I barely notice he's shaking his head.

"I've got the feeling that you're treating this matter too lightly. You don't

know the real motive behind the guy's action. He's asking a very little amount compared to the harm he can do by making the video go viral. He may have a secret agenda which may or may not involve kidnapping you. Have you heard nothing about human trafficking? They prey on innocent women like you and sell them as slaves, and nobody can do anything about it. Not even the police."

"Okay. Whatever you say. Your friend can come if she wants."

"Take this with you." He puts his hand into the pocket of his jacket and draws out a handgun.

The sight of the cold killing machine nearly makes me scream. Suddenly, everything becomes too grave

to bear, as if my brain has just registered the severity of the deep shit I find myself in. Why me? Why did the guy pick me to blackmail, while Adam was the only one he interacted with?

When Adam told the guy to find us a room in the movie theater, I made it a point to fix my eyes on the floor to hide my face from him, in case he might have been an acquaintance. And, not to forget the wig with bangs I was wearing. How could he figure out my identity, much less my cellular number? The guy can really be a member of a large, organized-crime group as Adam is suspecting.

Swallowing the large lump in my throat, I tear my eyes from the gun and

look up Adam's face. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Again, just in case. Nothing wrong with being prepared for the worst." Fear is eating at him; it's clear in every inch of his face. His mind must be bursting with similar questions. Questions he's too afraid to share with me.

"Is it even registered?" I work on my voice to hide my fear.

He nods. "I bought it right after the shooting. I wanted to be equipped, in case they decided to attack again."

"But... I don't even know how to shoot."

He gives me a brief introduction about the features of the gun and trigger

control. Which I know I should pay attention to, but my mind is too numb with panic and tunes out everything. Because I'm not capable of touching it, Adam slips the gun into my purse. Just the fact that it's in my bag scares the hell out of me. Can it explode on its own? What if I shoot an innocent person while trying to aim at the blackmailer? I'm afraid I won't be able to survive until the transaction is over, without going crazy.

We leave half an hour before midnight and pull up and park on the street across from the Starbucks where I'm supposed to hand over the money. Adam's phone rings, startling me. He glances at me before looking at the

screen. It's a text message from his instructor friend from the gym. He reads it aloud for me, *"I'm sitting at the table across from the cash register. There are only two guys in their forties besides me and the employees."*

I find my hands shaking and feel the blood drain out of me. I look out of the window and stare at the line of restaurants, although it's too dark and we're too far away to make out anything inside the Starbucks. What if they carry out a raid in there to kidnap me? That'd explain why the guy only demanded twenty thousand dollars. A very small amount before they get to the millions I inherited from Jack. Maybe I should have listened to Adam and called the

police.

As if reading my mind, Adam grabs my hand and whispers, “I won’t let anything happen to you.” I really hope he means what he says. I keep staring at the empty tables in front of the Starbucks until my eyes hurt. Adam squeezes my hand, pulling me back from my troubling thoughts. “It’s time.”

I inhale deeply, as if it’s my last one. And, maybe it is. I bite my lips to keep from crying and stare at him with a straight face to convince him that I can do this. If I show him my fear, he’ll interfere. Which will automatically put him in danger, too.

Adam types a brief text to his friend before we step outside. “I’ll be

waiting for you on the sidewalk.” He pulls me to him and plasters his lips onto mine, catching me by surprise. His kiss, no less feverish than the ones he showered me with last night, helps relax my tensed muscles. I wrap my arms around his neck and let the illusion of protection his body radiates sink into me.

Slowly, he pulls away, his hand brushing away a strand of hair from my face. “Ten minutes from now, you’ll be back in my arms.”

We pace across the street, hand in hand, mine squeezing a bit harder than his. He hugs me one last time before he lets me go and hands me the duffel bag. I look around and see no one.

Unhurriedly, I wave at him and take a step toward the Starbucks. I count until three before opening the door. I barely register the two men sitting at a table at the back of the room and a girl in an armchair by the window. She must be Adam's friend. Yet, the girl who's supposed to pick up the money is nowhere to be seen.

I fist my hands and walk to the cash register to order tea, hoping the girl will arrive before my tea is ready.

Luck is failing me, because the boy at the cash register hands me my tea and the change, leaving me standing without a purpose. I nervously take the paper cup filled with my beverage and sit at the nearest table. I should have

ordered a bottle of water or juice, because the tea is too hot to drink. But, maybe I can use it as a defense if the guy decides to attack me with his gang friends.

Five minutes later, the door opens and a blonde girl with a black coat and a black bag enters. Does that mean there is no raid? The girl waves at me and smiles as if we're best friends.

"Hey, you?" She sits at the chair across me. I'm surprised by the pretty face staring at me with warmth.

I straighten up, though, startled, and squeeze the handle of the duffle bag. "Hello." My eyes dart behind her, looking for a movement, a shadow.

"Is it in there?" Without waiting

for me to say my line, she motions down with her chin toward the duffle bag and lowers her voice. “All twenty grand?”

“Yes, yes. Do you have the—”
My tongue freezes. Damn it!

She places her purse on the table and rummages through it. “Here.” She pulls out a blue Kodak digital camera. “The video is here. I made sure Case erased all the copies from his computer. You can check the web link. It’s erased, too.”

I nod, fishing out my phone from my pocket, and find the link on the text that her accomplice, Case, sent me. An error message appears when I click on the link. Which, I assume, means the video is erased from the net.

“See.” The girl is looking down at the screen of my phone. “Don’t worry. You’re safe now. I can assure you this is the original and there’s no copy of it.” She puts the camera on the table. “Look, I’m truly sorry for what we’re putting you through. We’re not bad people. Case is taking care of his mother and little sister. About half a year ago, his mother got hit by a hit-and-run driver. So, he had to pay all the hospital bills. The money in the bag is all he needs. I promise to God we won’t be bothering you anymore.” She draws a cross over her heart with her forefinger.

“I... I’m sorry to hear about the accident.” Hesitantly, I push the duffle bag toward her and grab the camera.

“Don’t worry. His mother is much better now, although she’s permanently wheelchair-bound.” She leans down to check the money but doesn’t bother with counting it.

“The guy with you in the video is sizzling hot. You’re one lucky woman.”

I can’t help but smile at the strange direction our talk has taken. But I can’t complain. “Thank you. I have a question, if you don’t mind.”

“Shoot.”

“How did you get my phone number?”

“Pure coincidence. You see, I work at the Peninsula Hotel at Beverly Hills. I remember seeing you and your boyfriend a few weeks ago at a special

event. When I saw the video recording, I knew instantly that it was you. And finding your contact information from the hotel registrations was a matter of minutes.” She examines her manicured nails.

“Oh.” I pause to register what she’s just said. “Small world.”

“Well, hope we won’t get in each other’s way in the future.” She leans toward me and whispers, “Thanks a million for not calling the police.”

What shall I say? *You’re welcome? My pleasure?*

With the duffle bag in her hand, she moves toward the door and waves at me one last time, before she disappears into the darkness. When I drop the

camera and my phone into my purse, I feel the cold metal of the handgun. A rush of relief washes over me. Thank God it didn't come to that.

Adam bursts into the café even before his friend from the gym can get to her feet. "You're not hurt."

I stand up and throw myself into his arms, tightly clutching my purse in my hand. The boy at the cash register eyes us suspiciously.

"I was hoping I'd kick some asses." His friend, a girl with raven black hair and a few inches shorter than me, appears behind Adam.

"Lynn, I owe you a big time. Thanks for coming here tonight." Adam releases me to shift his attention to her.

“What for?” She snorts and raises her hand to my direction. “I’m Lynn, by the way.”

“Taylor, nice to meet you. It was a great relief having you here. Please let me know if we can do something in return.”

“I may have something in mind.” She winks at Adam and nudges him in the elbow. Her look has nothing friendly in it and makes me wonder about the nature of their relationship. Even though I must admit I’m downright bothered by her flirtation, I can’t overlook the fact that it serves my ultimate purpose; letting Adam go his own way.

I pull out a business card and jot down my cellular number on it. “I’d like

to thank you on behalf of myself, too. Designer shoes, flight tickets, VIP concert tickets, you name it. Just give me a call, and I'll arrange anything you want." I hand her the card with my most genuine smile on my face.

"Come on. Let's get out of here." Adam pulls me under his arm as we walk out. "Lynn, did you come by car?"

She shakes her head. "I was counting on you."

"No problemo," Adam says with half-grin.

Lynn hurries up and sits in the front. Adam eyes me apologetically, as he climbs into the car. I ignore his look and begin reporting to them the details of my conversation with Case's

accomplice.

Adam shoots me a fierce look through the rear-view mirror. “You shouldn’t trust those rats. I bet money that they’ll come back to you in a few days, if not tomorrow.”

Lynn turns to me, nodding. “The girl didn’t look trustworthy to me. I know that type of people. Once they sniff an opportunity to make big bucks, they won’t leave it until they suck your last penny.”

I sink in the seat, unwilling to agree to their opinions. I’m not naïve or blind. I’ve got a reliable feel of people, and the girl didn’t give me the impression of a liar. In fact, her apology seemed genuine and sincere. I want to

leave it at that and not be troubled by the idea that someone else might be watching the video. That's the only way I can stay sane.

Lynn turns to Adam, "What was in that camera?"

Adam shrugs. "Something personal."

"Are you in it?" Lynn asks.

Adam shakes his head, while eyeing me cautiously through the rear-view window.

"Good," Lynn says. Although I can't see her face, I can imagine her smile with relief. I'm pretty sure something is going on between the two, and I'm glad I've already made the decision to get out of Adam's life.

Adam stops the car in front of a three-story building and hugs Lynn. She turns to me to shake my hand, before she climbs out of the car. I stay seated in the back, although Adam orders me to the front.

“She’s very sympathetic,” I say to make him stop pressing me to get in next to him. “And pretty, too.”

He doesn’t make a comment, just stares at me. I examine his expression, hoping it’ll give away his feelings about her, although I shouldn’t care. I can envision her giving herself away easily to handsome men like Adam, only to end up being treated like nothing more than a fuck-buddy. Is she Adam’s fuck-buddy? I can’t help but cringe with disgust at the

thought. Did he eat her down there, too, make her beg for his dick? No, I shouldn't be jealous. He's not mine.

“Can I see the video?” he asks.

I grab the camera and the gun and hand them to him. He shoves the gun into the glove compartment and studies the camera. My moans from the recording echo inside the car, making my stomach flip.

“Would you mind if I keep it?” he asks.

“As long as you won't blackmail me with it.”

A smile clinging to his lips, he puts it inside the pocket of his jacket and starts the engine.

“I want to go home,” I say before

he hits the road.

“I thought we could—”

I cut him off. “Execute another porn video? I don’t think so.”

A low chuckle escapes his mouth, making me realize that I’ll have to end it with him officially. He doesn’t deserve to be waiting for me with his hopes high, with a fuck buddy or not. Yet, his revelations today about his love for me will make it hard for me and probably even harder for him.

CHAPTER 16 - TAYLOR

It's Monday before noon. I'm having the worst headache ever; even Advil can't save me. My thumbs pressed against my temples, I call Bree to my office.

She hurries in, holding a folder in her hands. "You don't look good."

I roll my eyes. "Thanks for pointing it out."

"Shall I cancel your lunch appointment?"

The appointment is a business lunch with Zachary Schulberg, a

colleague of Adam's at his other work. He approached me about the construction plans of a new branch of CVS pharmacy. Apparently, the contractor they usually go with is having managerial troubles and won't take over new contracts. All the better for me.

I shake my head; the movement, though very slight, sends jolts around my head.

"I need your signature on the change order for the Nielson project." Bree places the folder on the desk in front of me. "Remember, today is the last day to send it in."

"I haven't gone through the revised plan sheet yet."

"I was afraid you were going to

say that. Can you go through them now?"

"Yeah, right." I press at my temples harder; even the pain from the pressure doesn't come anywhere near the headache.

"Adam prepared them, so they should be fine. Well, let me get you another tablet of Advil, then."

"Whatever." I shove the folder away and close my eyes. I hear Bree collect it from my desk and then stride out of the office.

A knock on the door startles me, and I open my eyes.

Adam. Great.

Isn't he supposed to be at his other work today and the next two days?

He closes the door and moves

toward my desk, his expression soft but unreadable otherwise. "I took the next days off from Caplan & Meyers to make sure you're not alone if they get in contact with you again." They, as in Case, the movie-theater guy, and his girlfriend, who blackmailed me.

"Very kind of you to be supportive of me but they won't bother us again. And, even if they did your other office is just five miles away."

He scowls while pulling a chair across me. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?" I snap, immediately feeling guilty. "Sorry. I'm not the one to hang out with when I get a headache."

"Headaches suck." He grimaces

his face with an effect. “Want me to massage your temples?”

“Bree massaged half an hour ago, and I swallowed some disgusting pain killers, but it won’t go away.”

“You gotta give it some time. Why don’t you go home and rest?” He stands, rounds the table, and settles himself behind my chair. I don’t move but just let his fingers rub my scalp and temples, humming with the warm sensation of relaxation taking over my body.

“I know the best cure for headache,” he whispers in my ear and slips his hands down to my neck and then under my shirt toward the top of my breasts. I catch his hands before they go

too far down and turn this friendly massaging into a mating show for Discovery Channel. Which reminds me of my intentions of ending our affair.

“I think I’ll just rest on the couch for a few minutes,” I say.

He doesn’t move his hands from my bare skin, but doesn’t force them further down either. “Let me lie next to you.” He digs his nose into my hair, inhaling, and begins making circles with his fingertips under the clutch of my hands.

I shiver at the thought of the multiple ways he can take me on the couch. We haven’t done it the good old missionary style yet. I swallow hard as I imagine his entire body weight on me,

his solid muscles pressed on my naked skin, his erection rubbing the sensitive flesh between my legs.

Oh, hell. How am I supposed to cut him off from my life when all he needs to do is to touch me to set me off? As tortuous as my longing for him can be, it seems to help me ease my headache.

He reaches down and gently bites the nape of my neck. If his tongue comes anywhere near my ear I'm a goner.

“Adam, no!” My low and trembling voice is evidence for the exact opposite of my words. He follows what my body wants and moves his head up and sticks his tongue into my ear, while

forcing his hands down toward my hardened nipples, twisting them between his thumbs and forefingers. “Oh, God,” I moan, locked up in his grip.

The phone rings, rescuing me, yet Adam doesn’t release me even when I place the receiver against my free ear.

Bree speaks, “Your lunch appointment is here. Shall I invite him in?”

“No, don’t. I’m coming out. Thank you.” I place the receiver and turn to Adam, trying to keep my face serious. “We need to talk.”

He pulls his hands off my chest and straightens up. “Not exactly what I want to do with you right now.”

I reach down to pick up my purse

from the lower drawer and stand up. I'm wearing flat pumps, which makes Adam tower over me. I take a step back as I let my mouth take over. "I think we should take a break from each other for a while. Maybe... maybe we should end it altogether."

He starts to say something, but I raise my hand to stop him talking.

"I'm aware of your feelings for me and truly grateful for your support. I know you'll hate me for what I'm saying, but I don't feel ready for committing to you, and I don't know whether I ever will be. It's best for both of us, if we end whatever we're doing now and move on."

He crosses his arms over his

chest and stares at me with a terrified expression. “You can’t decide what’s best for me.”

“Look, it’ll hurt you now, but you’ll thank me later, when you find the right woman. I’m no good for you. Each time we have sex I feel like you interpret it as the next step into a committed relationship, rather than just simple sex. And, the way you look at me with those *‘I’m going to marry you and make you mine forever’* eyes... I don’t know. It’s too much. You have to understand that I can’t love someone else. My heart is beating only for Jack although he’s...”

“Give me a chance.”

“I don’t want you getting hurt. I owe it to you.”

“Is it because of the blackmailing?”

“No, it’s not about that, although, it helped me realize what sort of shit I’ve been pulling you through. I’m very sorry for using you for my selfish needs.” I glance down at my watch. “I gotta go now. I have a lunch date... err... appointment, a business lunch, definitely not a date.” I dash out and hurry down the hall.

Zachary Schulberg waves at me, as soon as he notices me at the reception.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting.” I force myself not to look back for the fear of seeing Adam behind me.

“No need to apologize. I can

wait for hours for a beautiful woman like you.”

Shit. Does he have to speak as though we're going out for a date? If Adam is around, he'll be furious. Zach stretches out his hand to shake. I grab it briefly and then pace toward the door so that we're out as soon as possible.

He drives me to a restaurant in Beverly Hills. We talk about business for only fifteen minutes, but he promises to send me bidding requirements CVS Pharmacy wants for the new branch. Our entrées haven't arrived yet. Which can only mean we'll end up talking about personal stuff, and from the way he looks at me, hearing about my private life will be more of his preference than

sharing his own.

“So,” he says as he places his elbow on the table, revealing some tanned skin and the thick veins running underneath. “I guess we’ve got plenty of time left. Although I’m dying to get to know you better, I understand if you don’t want to open yourself up to me at our first lunch.”

First lunch? Is he thinking there’ll be a second?

He continues, “I heard about your husband’s death. My deepest condolences. Although it’s not the same, I can understand how much it hurts not being able to be with the one you love with all your heart.”

Surprised with the new direction

of our conversation, I nod my head encouragingly. “You sound like you were hit by the poisonous arrows of love, too.”

He laughs and pours wine into my already half-full glass, implying the talk will be long and probably deep. “Indeed. It happened in the late years of my adolescence with the cutest girl in the high school.”

I take a large sip from the wine. “Those girls should be banned, right.”

“No, definitely not. Then you’d be banned, too. I bet you mesmerized your entire school with your beautiful eyes.”

I look down at my glass, embarrassed and uncomfortable. I can

bear this conversation, only if he stops flirting with me.

“Anyway,” he says as if he understood my discomfort. “I managed to make that cute girl my girlfriend. She was very loving and tender, but even if she was a total bitch, I loved her because she had an amazing voice. Listening to her singing was like angels whispering in my ears. She’d sing any crappy song and make it sound like the most romantic, meaningful, extraordinary song.”

“Sounds like a keeper to me.”

“Yeah.” His face is hardened, perhaps with some bad memories. “I fell hard for her and thought I’d marry her one day. But, she had other plans. She

wanted to make it big with her music talent and moved to Nashville. At that time, I'd been accepted to UCLA, but I was ready to decline it and enroll at a college in Tennessee just to be close to her. I loved her that much. At the end, we decided to keep it as a long-distance relationship. 'Yeah, right,' you might say, but wait. We were able to keep it going for a year, visiting each other once a month or so during the semesters and longer during the summer vacation."

The waitress comes with our plates, but I find myself more inclined to listen to the end of Zachary's story than eat. He thanks the waitress, cuts a small piece of his steak, and places it in his mouth with a quick but elegant move.

“Then, in the beginning of the second year, she came to LA to appear as a singer in a movie. Soon after the movie, she signed a deal with Columbia Records. I decide to propose to her and make her officially my wife before all the jerks took notice of her. I bought her an engagement ring, but when I finally gathered all my courage to propose to her, I found out she was cheating me with another man she’d met in LA.” He drops his eyes to his plate and cuts more pieces of the steak with furious strokes, as if the meat belonged to the man his girlfriend left him for.

“I’m sorry.”

He just shrugs. I don’t know him, but I feel like I owe him for opening

himself to me. And the silence that sets between us doesn't help, either. So I begin telling him how I met Jack and some amusing snippets of our relationship without going into more personal stuff. Talking about Jack so lightly with a total stranger makes me realize it doesn't hurt as much as it used to. As if I can detach myself from that part of my past if I want to. My diminishing headache and Zachary's hearty laughter help me delve into other hilarious incidents even before Jack. Like my subconscious is telling me that I'd had a life before him and can go back to who I'd been if I allow myself.

When the lunch ends and Zachary pays the check, I can't help but notice the

disappointment that creeps into me over the ending of our chat. I feel like I've just started talking. As my aunt used to say, "Sometimes it takes a stranger to open up your heart." By stranger, I don't mean a heart surgeon. The sense of easiness he radiates helps, too. He'd easily make a good therapist, much better than mine at least for taking years and years to improve my emotional health without much success.

On the ride back to work, he tells me some more about himself and how he landed his current position. He pulls up in front of the building where my company is and turns to me. "I had the most delightful lunch with you. We must repeat it very soon."

“We most certainly must.” I smile and unbuckle the belt.

His face turns serious in an instant. His eyes gazing deeply into mine, he holds out his hand to me. I hesitate but place my hand into his moist palm, and before I know he pulls me toward him and plants a kiss on my lips. Stunned by his unexpected action, I let a moment pass, until my brain realizes the inappropriateness of the situation. When my senses start reporting back, I squeeze his hand hard until mine hurts. Without making me try further, he pulls his face only an inch away, breaking the connection of our lips.

“Pat Carter. My girlfriend was Pat Carter, the famous country singer,”

he says, his gaze furious as if it was me who attacked his lips without his permission. Then something, the strangest sensation, makes me turn my head toward the building entry, and I see Adam's piercing eyes staring at me with those '*if eyes could kill*' look in them.

Unable to tear my gaze away from Adam, I release my hand from Zachary's.

"And Adam Garnett stole her from me," he says. "I'm sorry for the kiss, but I had to show him how it feels for someone to be stealing his love."

Adam makes the first move and storms inside the building, freeing my gaze from him. I turn to glare at Zachary. I'd slap him in the face if I had time. The

entire feeling of light-headedness disappears, leaving the traces of headache to return to the root of my head. “You just lost yourself the chance of meeting me again.”

With that, I open the door and climb out. Running through the sliding doors, down to the elevators, I scan around for Adam. He’s nowhere to be seen. I step into an available elevator and press the button. I don’t even know what I’ll tell him if I find him. I wanted to end things with him, but not like this. He deserves a decent explanation, not a disgusting kissing scene with me in the arms of another man.

The elevator doors slide open, but Adam is still out of sight. He must be

waiting for me in my office. Unwilling to confront with him, although I owe him an explanation for the kiss, I drag my feet toward my office. Much to my surprise, Adam isn't there, either.

“Don't put through any calls,” I tell to Bree as I pass by her desk and slam the door of my office. Good thing I keep a bottle of scotch for emergencies, generally for clients, but I need a generous sip of it to put my thoughts in order, or better, suppress them.

I pour a glass and toss it back instantly, enjoying the shock of the high level of alcohol in my mouth and then in my system. I start to pour again when I hear noises outside, and the door is flung open.

Adam stands behind it, his furious eyes boring into mine. “Bree, you may leave now.”

“Excuse me?” Bree looks as curious as I must be looking with my dropped jaw.

“You’re dismissed,” Adam says without moving his gaze from me. “You can take the rest of the afternoon off. Hurry.”

I nod briefly when Bree turns to me for confirmation. “How about the change order request?”

“Can you bring it to my place in the evening, say around eight? You have the key to my apartment, right?” I ask quickly before my voice can crack with the fear that Adam’s presence is giving

me. She nods and sets off to collect her jacket and purse.

I leave the glass next to the bottle of scotch and proceed to my desk. If only I could hide myself under it. Adam has come here to confront me; I can see the anger, disappointment, and frustration in his eyes.

Bree is at the door faster than I'd hope for. For some reason, I don't feel up for a deep conversation with Adam yet. The truth is I'll never be. What can I tell him when I, myself, don't even know why I used him, and not a random stranger from the street?

Bree wishes us a good afternoon and leaves, closing her door behind us. Without responding to her, Adam closes

my office door and strolls to my desk.

I finally manage to pull myself together at least sufficiently enough to explain the scene with Zachary. “The kiss meant nothing. Zachary pulled a stunt just to upset you. He knew you were watching us.”

“Get on all fours,” he says with the deep tone he was using when I was playing his whore.

My hands tremble with anxiety. Now it’s my turn to ask for clarification. “Excuse me?”

He points with his hand toward the couch. “You heard me.” He stands in front of my desk like a sculpture, without breathing or blinking, and I think he won’t move an inch until I comply to his

order.

I want to demand an explanation again, but his intense gaze numbs my lips and I move obediently. I don't break our eye contact as I walk over to the couch. My heart is thumping against my chest. I stop when my thighs touch the arm of the couch. There is no way I'll go on all fours.

“Hike up your skirt.” His order sends a sharp shiver of excitement through my body, and I feel my nipples hardening and wetness pooling between my legs. I hate the eager way my body reacts to him, the hunger he entices in me just by mere words. What's wrong with me? I can't allow him to take control of me like this.

“No,” I say, although I already start fantasizing him inside me, his hands all over my breasts, my belly, on my thighs. This is all wrong.

He fists his hands and inhales deeply. “I swear to God, I’ll resign from my job and leave you alone if you reject me one more time.”

Oh, no. What have I done? It hits me all at once. I’ve just ruined my relationship with perhaps the only person who has cared about me and stood by me for many years, besides my family. How silly and selfish I’ve been all this time by letting myself indulge in sex with him.

I close my eyes, pull my skirt up to my panties, and turn my back to him. I

don't hear his steps, since my heart is too loud to allow me to pay attention to anything else.

He grabs me by my hips and pushes me face first over the arm of the couch. I fall on my hands on the leather cushion. I hear him unzip his pants and then feel his hard-on brush my skin when he shoves my panties down to my knees.

Air hitting my skin creates goosebumps on my bare buttocks. I breathe in and out heavily, anxious and frightened of the imminent seconds.

Without even touching me there, he plunges his entire length deeply inside me, nearly splitting me in two. I gasp from the sudden assault, but work hard not to scream. Giving me no time to

adjust to his size, he starts pounding into me so hard that I have to bite my lip to hide the pain he's giving.

"I love you. You hear me? I love you so much that it hurts," he screams between his thrusts, which are shaking my body to the core.

I bury my face into the cushion and cover my ears, for his words hurt me more than his cock. He can't love me. Shouldn't. He deserves better than a woman who loves a dead man. I can't give him anything but misery and sorrow.

He drives hard into me, pushing me farther onto the couch until my legs aren't touching the floor. He's mad, but I'm madder than him, to let him play

with me like this and take his revenge. Besides the ragged breaths, he doesn't show any sign of thrill, as though I'm just an inflatable sex doll. A drunken man from a bar would fuck with more emotions.

His fingers dig into my hips, and he slows down his speed to pump me with rough strokes again and again, until the furious friction of his cock sends me off on a solid wave of uncontrollable spasms. I make no noise and keep the screams for the intensive orgasm hidden deep inside, where he can't hear. He can't know how much pleasure he's giving me, even when his sole intention is to hurt me.

I feel his grip on my hips tighten

as he slams into me one hard, final time and detonates his warm liquid deep inside me. His grip remains locked for a long moment before he pulls out.

I close my eyes and stay still, trying to hold onto the pleasure and the vibrating sensation a little longer. But, mostly because I don't want to face him and see the satisfaction in his eyes.

"I can't play this game any longer." His words snap me back to the reality. I straighten up and pull my skirt down. His sperm is trickling down my legs toward my shoes, taking with it the little dignity I've left. He continues, "I fell in love with you the first day we met, and I swear to God I haven't touched another woman since then. I

couldn't. No one came close to the perfection I thought you had."

"No, don't tell me that." Not touching another woman? How about Pat? He can't be serious. Now way. I'd rather have him fuck me cold-heartedly a dozen more times than hear such a profound love confession.

"You have to hear me out." He points his index finger toward me. "I never wished Jack's death. Never. He was more than a brother to me. But I just couldn't be with another woman. That's more than three fucking years long. All because of you. I kept thinking, wishing, maybe one day. Who knows? And then it happened. You gave yourself to me. It was unbelievable, mind-blowing, and so

much better than I'd ever dreamed of. But, I can't stay like this anymore. It's not enough. I want more. I want to be a part of your life."

I shake my head to each word that comes out of his mouth. I can't give him anything, let alone a part in my life. I don't have a life to begin with.

"Look at me." He approaches me to lift my chin; his eyes are glassy with threatening tears that make me wish it was me who died in the accident in place of Jack. "I'm not asking you to forget Jack and fall head-over-heels in love with me. All I want is a chance to have a place in your heart. Is that too much to ask, after waiting for you for so many years?"

“Jack,” I mumble.

“Jack is gone. For God’s sake. He’s dead,” he yells. “Three fucking years have passed. Why can’t you come to terms with it and move on? Give us a chance. Let me heal your heart.”

“I can’t. I can’t do it. Please, forgive me.” I cover my face and burst into heavy sobs. “I can’t. I can’t.”

“That’s what I’d expected.” I hear his steps toward the door. “I’ve already sent my resignation letter to HR.”

“What?” I yell and pull my hands off my face at the same time. “What the hell did you do? You can’t leave the company.”

“Oh, yes, I can. And I promise

you'll never see me again."

I run forward to grab him by the elbow. "Why, then, did you fuck me if you already resigned?"

He tilts his head and shoots me a side glance. "A small farewell present for you."

It feels like time jumped without me realizing it, and I find myself clinging to a martini glass in a bar with Valerie. I gulp down a large sip, trying to remember how I ended up here. I have only faint memories of collapsing on the couch with the scotch bottle in my hand. Probably, the contents of the bottle

traded places from the bottle to my stomach, taking away all my memory functions for the time being.

Just perfect. As if my problems with Adam weren't enough, now I have to cope with a heavy hangover, too.

Valerie's blood-shot eyes catch my attention. It's hard to see the whites of her eyes, thanks to her heavy makeup and glasses, but the red spots aren't hard to miss, even for someone as drunk as I.

"Why did you cry?" I ask, causing Valerie burst out in loud laughter. I notice some heads turning to our direction, but I can't move my own head. Everything is too shaky out there.

"Have you not been listening? William dumped me," she says, or better

yells.

Her words echo in my ears for a long moment. When the torture of echo ends, I shoot another silly question, “Who is William?”

She empties the glass into her mouth with one move and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Some friend you are.” With the same hand, she motions the waitress for more alcohol.

I shake my head when the waitress collects my glass. That little head shake makes me dizzy, and my stomach twists in disgust, as if I’ve just inhaled a long-forgotten trash can. Suddenly, my hands are covering my mouth. “I’m gonna leave now,” I try to say between my fingers, but from the

funny look on Valerie's face, I might have as well have said I peed myself.

"I'll call a cab." She holds her phone against her ear. I didn't even see where the phone came from. My hands are still on my mouth even though I work to push them down. They seem to have found a way to get control of their own moves.

Valerie pays the check; we walk to the exit; the cab arrives. All the while everything is blurry. I try to remember the last time I drank so much that I lost the command of my senses. And of my hands. Maybe a couple times following Jack's death, but nothing recently.

Time jumps again. This time I

find myself staring at the roof of the cab. My head is pounding with the worst kind of headache. It aches so much that I wish I had a gun with me so I could shoot directly at the source of the ache. I remember Adam's gun. Did I give it back to him?

“Gun,” I mumble for no reason.

Valerie's hand grips tightly on my arm. “The driver will drop you directly in front of your apartment building, okay?”

It takes only a few seconds for me to forget what she's just said. She throws some bills to the driver and leaves. I keep on staring at the ceiling, without caring where the driver is taking me. All I can think of is the headache.

The mother-fucking headache. I feel my lips move. Did I just say my thoughts out loud? Shit.

The taxi stops with a force that pushes me toward the front, and I bang my head on the back of the front seat. Like I didn't have enough of a headache. The door opens, and I'm sure it's not my hands opening it. They haven't taken that much control to be able to open the door from outside.

Michael, the doorman, greets me. "Ms. Edelman, may I help you out?"

Please help me out and up and in. Whatever you can. I push myself toward him, hoping I didn't verbalize my damn thoughts. After today, I may have to consider moving to another apartment to

avoid the walk of shame every time I pass by him.

The time jumps again, and I hope this is the last time or I'll start believing the possibility of time jumps being real, and not just that my mind is blanking out. My eyelids are closed. I can't open them even if I try. But my other senses begin coming back to me. I feel warm water hugging me, but I shiver as if I'm sitting on ice. My hands feel weird under the water. Have they gone totally numb after their odd self-control attempts?

My wrists itch so strongly that suddenly it's all I can think of. I force open my eyes, as if they'll help me locate my hands, so that I can finally get

them to scratch those fucking itchy wrists.

It's dark, and a sharp smell of iron hits my nostrils. What are the odds of being in a hot tub in an iron factory? Where am I? I wait until my eyes adjust to the darkness before I set myself to seek my arms. From the feel of it, they might have just abandoned me.

I look down at the water and see how dark it is, but not because of the darkness in the room. The water is dark as if it's muddy. And I see my arms floating on that dark water, and it dawns on me why the water is so dark. I shriek with fear when I twist my arms to see the deep cuts on my wrists spreading from one end to the other and the blood

gushing out of them.

The next thing I see is Bree's horrified face, but my ears can't register any sound beside my deafening screams. She disappears as quickly as she appeared. When she comes back, I notice her widened eyes, as if they're seconds away from popping out of their sockets. She presses towels on my wrists and tries to carry me out of the bathtub. I recognize the tiles on the wall. I'm in my own bathroom.

Have I just tried to commit suicide? I've never forgiven my father for taking his own life without caring about me or my newborn sister. And now I've attempted to do the exact same thing, without caring about my sister, my

aunt, my cousin, and Adam.

I close my eyes for a while, and when I open them again, I see two paramedics hovering over me and ushering me out in a matter of seconds. I see Jack on their faces, reproving me for the easy way I decided to take. Trying to take one's own life. Hadn't I promised myself I'd never do such a lowly thing? I've never thought of myself as a hypocrite, but here I am. A hypocrite through and through for trying to commit suicide; something I'd once been so enthusiastically against.

But, the worst thing is that I have no memories of the events that led me to slashing my wrists. I don't even remember whether I used razors or a

kitchen knife, for God's sake, let alone what had been the ultimate thought that crossed my mind in my last minutes.

I feel like I'm floating in the air and watching my nearly dead body from up above. Maybe, I'm already dead and I haven't realized it yet. An oxygen mask is covering my almost lifeless face. Seeing myself so clearly is disturbing and makes me think I'm really dead. Shouldn't there be some angels coming down here to guide me up? That is if I go to heaven, of course. Perhaps those of us who commit suicide get a different treatment, namely no treatment at all. I've been contemplating my loneliness after Jack's death, now I may be facing loneliness for eternity.

I'm vaguely aware of the ambulance stopping and my body being carried out of it. It must be a good sign. I might not be dead after all.

I try to focus more on the sensations of my body parts to make sure I'm in it and not above it, all the while praying for forgiveness and showing my regret. I may be a crazy hypocrite, but there is no pretending the deep remorse I'm feeling right now. I want to go back to my life, it doesn't matter how much pain it has in store for me. I don't even care if I'll get headaches every fucking day for the rest of my life. It's still better than this freaking ocean of loneliness that's threatening to drown me.

I work on feeling my fingers, but

no success. Must be the cuts on my wrists. Then I start with my toes, imagining a feather tickling them. When was the last time someone tickled me? Jack liked tickling me until tears covered my face. Torture by laughter. But my toes don't respond to me. Maybe they're too far from my brain.

I should try something closer. My eyes. Aren't they the most mysterious organs ever? They help us perceive not only the world around us, but also each other's souls—now that I have a firsthand experience of feeling my own soul, I should talk about it, right? I must open my eyes and see everything through them. Like waking up from a deep sleep or pulling up the blindfolds covering

them while waiting for a surprise. I must be able to open my eyes so that I can welcome life's surprises with open arms.

Please. Open up to a new life. Don't let this day be my last. I promise I'll hang on to life so tightly that I'll not pout or pass a day without hearty laughter.

Please, please. Open!

And then it happens. My eyes fly open, and the first thing I see is a pair of eyes staring down at me. I wish they were Jack's, but I'm not disappointed when I realize they're Adam's. He's looking at me just like Jack used to do, as if I'm some kind of miracle he's witnessing. Maybe the intention and

insinuation in Adam's eyes are the reason why I could come back.

“Taylor,” the hazel eyes speak to me. “Thank God, you're alive.” Warm fingertips stroke my cheek, leaving trails of goosebumps and tickles along the way. Haven't I just been thinking about tickling? “I'm sorry for what I did to you. I've never planned to leave you; I haven't sent any petition to resign my job. I just wanted to show you how your life would be without me. Instead you showed me how deserted and lost I'd be without you.”

The last hours before I intended to take my life come crashing in my mind. Adam's pleas for a chance with him remind me my own pleas for life.

And, I remember the painful itching on my wrists. Whatever he did or intended to do, he didn't force a gun into my hand; it was me who chopped my own wrists. I'm the one who owes an apology to him, to myself, and to Jack. But I can't move my lips. I might have control over my eyes, but my mouth seems to be a whole different story.

"I lost my mother; I lost Jack. But this was worse. Do you hear me?" Adam cups my chin. "The fact that you came so close to death because of me makes me want to take my own life."

"No." My lips finally move, but my voice is too low. I'm not even sure whether Adam heard me. It takes an enormous effort to cough to clear my

throat. The blood that left my body must have taken with it all the energy I had. Dizziness howls around me, making my eyes lose focus, and all of a sudden, darkness replaces those beautiful hazel eyes.

The morning after my suicide attempt, a nurse in her late thirties with black hair and olive skin sits in the chair beside my bed and starts shooting me question after question about the suicide; whether I had planned it, left any notes, spoke to someone about my intentions, had any previous attempts, how long I've had this feeling, and so on.

I sit up and work hard take notice of the seriousness in her voice, while giving my best and honest answers, though carefully filtering everything about Adam and the blackmailing and focusing mainly on the stress of the job and the alcohol overdose. Does she honestly expect me to explain all the details of my life in front of her, with all the exhaustion and frustration I'm fighting against right now? I doubt anyone who has gone through a suicide attempt lays everything out there like an open book. Maybe that's what makes us suicidal, but anyway.

I'd rather talk to a professional therapist about my problems than an emergency nurse, who might use my

words against me, like putting me into a psychiatric ward. With real crazy and dangerous patients. Can they do that against my will? Maybe not based on this nurse's judgment, but she sure might exaggerate my symptoms and influence the psychiatrist's decision about my sanity. I give her the contact information of the therapist I see regularly and who, I'm sure, will confirm that I have no suicidal tendencies—well, did not, at least, have until now.

My body feels drained of its life reserves by the end of the brief interrogation, which in fact, feels like a second round of wrist slitting.

When she's at the door, she looks at me one last time with a

distrustful look on her face, as though she's saying she's seen through my manipulation. I may have to call my attorney to prove I haven't lost it all.

Adam and Bree come in together with the food server who brings in my lunch. The sight of the food makes my stomach growl. A remarkable sign of life, though embarrassing.

With his face gloomy and colorless, Adam sits in the chair the nurse was sitting on and starts feeding me my lunch as if I'm a baby. My hands are useless at this point, and I wonder for how much longer I'll depend on others for my basic needs.

Bree sits at the foot of my bed, her face conveying every concern and

sympathy she must be having for me. “I’m tired of seeing you guys ruining your lives like this. How many times more will I have to visit you at hospitals?” Her voice carries contempt for me, for my terrible mistake. I can feel it, and I feel ashamed for what I did to myself and to those who actually love me, Bree being one of the few.

Adam gives his head a little shake, maybe as a sign for Bree to stop, and offers me more soup. Hungrily, I swallow several spoons of it, before I can gather some energy to speak.

“There aren’t enough words in the world to describe my regret for what I did. And the worst thing is that I didn’t see it coming, or I’d seek help. I don’t

remember why I did it or how I did it.” My eyes dart between Bree and Adam, two people who haven’t abandoned me even when I was grumpy and mean to them for a very long time. “Now, I have not just one, but two people I owe gratitude for saving my life. Bree, if you haven’t been the best employee ever and come to my home last night... I don’t know what I can do to show you my gratitude. You can’t imagine how thankful I am for the second chance I’ve received.” A sudden gush of tears blurs my eyes.

“You can thank me by using your second chance wisely. Don’t take life for granted and don’t take our love for you for granted.” She looks toward

Adam, and I know what she means with every word.

“Bree, enough,” Adam cuts her off. “You don’t know what she was going through the last few days.”

“No, please don’t argue over me. No amount of troubles can excuse my behavior.” I gaze down at my bandaged wrists, trying to imagine how the cuts must look like underneath all that fabric. I could barely make out the cuts through the darkness last night, but the sordid way they itched inside the warm water was something I hope I’ll never have to feel again. “I really don’t know what came over me. I don’t have any memories of it. In one second, I was leaving the taxi, the next, I find myself

sitting in the bathtub, my wrists slashed. It's like I had a multiple personality or something." Maybe I shouldn't have said the last part, because they look at each other with raised eyebrows. Oh, shit. They'll talk to the nurse about it, and that's it for me and getting discharged from the hospital. "It was alcohol," I add anxiously. "I drank way too much. I drank some in the office, and some more at a bar with Valerie. She's going through some tough patches herself and needed me to share her pain. I lost count of how much I drank."

"If alcohol is your problem, you can easily look for counseling or join an AA group," Bree points out, calmly.

"Yes, I'll do that. Will definitely

do that.” I hope I sound every bit as convinced as I feel. I finish everything on the food tray, much to my surprise and their content.

“I’ve got something to tell you.” Bree moves a little toward me. “I’ll totally understand, if you want to fire me for it.”

“What is it?” Adam asks.

Bree bites her lower lip, drifting her eyes between Adam’s and mine. “I forged your signature on the change order request to be able to send it in time. If they hadn’t received it by today we wouldn’t be able to get the approval for the extra cost of the new equipment. That’s why I came over to your place last night, you know. But, because you

couldn't, I had to do it. I checked the numbers carefully by the way. Everything seemed fine."

Adam turns to me as if I carry more information about Bree's confession. I inhale a long breath and smile. "I'm glad you did it, considering the circumstances. But don't do it again."

"I won't. I promise. Cross my heart." She draws a cross over her heart with her finger. "If you don't need me for anything else I'll leave you guys alone. But, call me anytime you want, okay?" She stands up, smiling, and leans down to give me a kiss on the cheek. It's the first time she's shown physical affection to me, and I'm both moved and

astounded by her intimacy. She waves at us when she leaves.

Adam leaves the tray on the little table by the door and comes back. "I'll never forgive myself for causing this." He sits back on the chair, glancing at my hands and frowning. I'm afraid he'll start crying any second.

"Adam, please."

"Don't you dare forgive me. Everyday for the rest of my life, I should be reminded of the fact that you were about to die because of my stupid pride. Still, that won't even cover one tenth of the punishment I deserve for what I did."

"Adam, it wasn't you." I shake my head although it makes me dizzy. "I was feeling guilty for taking advantage

of you. I was convinced that I couldn't reciprocate your feelings for me and that I should leave you. That was eating at me more than anything else."

"How about now? Are you still convinced about that?"

I avert my eyes, unable to give him an answer, much less a 'no.'

"You don't have to answer now. You must still be in shock. Take your time. I'll wait for you, until I give my last breath."

He's making it impossible for me to ignore him. Maybe, that's his purpose. And why do I try to ignore him in the first place? I'm exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Obviously, the life I thought was sufficient for me

turns out to be so depressing that I find solace in suicide attempts. I sentenced myself to a life of solitude, without caring about my need to have someone at my side, someone who'd love me unconditionally. Apparently, loneliness isn't something my inner self, or subconscious, or whatever it was that pushed me to suicide, actually wants.

I gather the courage to look into his eyes, which are begging for love even more, and realize that among all the men who made a move on me, Adam is the only one with unconditional love. Aside from Jack, of course. Adam is willing to take me even in my current state, with 'crazy' officially engraved on my forehead with neon letters. Men run

away from crazy women, don't they? And, I don't give a crap about his feeling of debt toward Jack being the reason for his love to me. The fact that he'd left Pat during the heat of my love for Jack says a lot about his real feelings toward me.

Adam doesn't leave me for a second during the following days of my hospital stay. He sleeps in the chair by my side, his finger linked in mine. It's clearly an uncomfortable position for him to sleep, instead of resting comfortably on his own cozy bed at his home, and it doesn't take a doctor to know he'll have a list of aches for sleeping in the wrong position. Nonetheless, he doesn't pull his hand

away. He remains at my side no matter what.

If he's not the man I should dedicate the rest of my life to, then who else?

CHAPTER 17 - ADAM

As luck, or in this case bad luck, would have it, the first time in years I put my phone on silent before going to bed, I wake up to find seventeen incoming calls, five texts, three voice mails.

“What the fuck,” I curse, rubbing the sleep away from my eyes, and read the first text.

It's from Bree. *“Taylor tried to commit suicide. We're at the hospital.”*

The time I take from my bed to the drivers' seat of my car, including

putting on a t-shirt, pants, and shoes, is a record for my life. I don't even remember whether I locked the door, and I couldn't care less. When I arrive at the hospital and finally find my way into Taylor's room, I beg the nurse attending her to let me in even for a few minutes. She looks up at me for an unnervingly long time, with her lips pursed in a thin line and her thick brows furrowed, studying me, probably assessing me for my effect on Taylor in such a tender condition, and finally lets me in.

"Two minutes," she says, holding up her hands with fingers spread for effect. I nod and tiptoe into Taylor's room. My heart sinks, like a rock hitting the depths of the ocean, at the sight of

her chalk-white face covered with an oxygen mask and her bandaged wrists, and I drop to my knees. She must have slashed those beautiful wrists of hers. A shuddering image of her soaked in her own blood hits my brain, paralyzing me for a moment. I swallow hard and force myself back on my feet.

I'm no stranger to hospitals. I've had my fair share of time in them; more than an average citizen would have because of my mother's illness. But, I'm most definitely not desensitized to what it represents; sorrow. Everyone's face, from the doctors' to the visitors of the sick, is tensed with stress and long with sadness. The only people who can laugh are those who're discharged.

But this? No amount of hospital visits could have prepared me for the sight of Taylor walking the fine line between life and death, because the sole reason for Taylor's hospital stay is me, my stupid stubbornness in pursuing her. She told me numerous times and tried to show that she couldn't be with me. I neither listened to her words, nor took into account the violent pukes she had right after having sex with me. Hell, I even wanted to knock her up, without first discussing it with her.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I broke her so much that she couldn't take it anymore. Even Jack's death couldn't accomplish what my

stubbornness did.

I ruined the two women I love.
First Pat, now Taylor.

On Taylor's last day at the hospital, the nurse enters the room with the discharge papers in her hands. She's been kind to me, calming me down with soothing words about Taylor's condition when I was too freaked out to be able to function, explaining many details related to patients with suicide attempts, all of which I'm sure was beyond her job duties.

She makes me sign a document while giving instructions about Taylor's

care. “The stitches are dissolvable, but she’ll still have to come in to be checked to see, if they get infected. I already set up an appointment for her for the day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll make sure she’ll make her appointments. Thanks for everything.” I shake her hand and walk her out of the room, then go back to help Taylor put on her jacket. I’m more than happy to be her caretaker, but it breaks my heart that she can’t do some very basic things without help, like eating, putting on clothes, and showering. Fortunately, it’s only temporary; the cuts on her wrists didn’t damage any nerves.

She flashes me a tired smile, which I can only imagine must take a lot

of effort from her. “I can’t wait to be home.”

“You’ll have to wait a little longer for that because I’m not taking you to your condo. You’ll stay at my place until you’re back to your full strength.” I squeeze her shoulders, though very gently, not to hurt her.

Fear is eating at me that she won’t accept my offer and claim that she’ll hire a nurse to take care of her. I’m all for her getting the best care, but even the best of the best nurses won’t be able to watch her every move as I’m capable of. Although she said her suicide attempt had been just because of drinking too much alcohol and that she won’t try it again, I still have my doubts.

Never in any of my countless experiences with alcohol intoxication have I considered killing myself. Even during my lowest days, when I thought I couldn't breathe without Taylor, I held onto life. Who knows if she won't try it again, and in her state of weakness, she'd succeed easily. Just ripping off those bandages and let her stitches bleed for ten, fifteen minutes would be enough.

She said her father killed himself, so it probably runs in the family.

Who the fuck am I kidding? She could be coming from perfectly happy and healthy family with stellar DNA and still going through the same shitty road, because it was me who forced my

fucking cock into her at every damn chance I could get, and demeaned her and her pure love for Jack ruthlessly. That she hadn't pulled this shit when Jack had died—which, by the way, would have been a respectable, even admirable reason—and had held it together for three fucking years tells a lot.

If my punishment is being on a suicide watch for 24/7 for the rest of my life, so be it.

She'll back off; maybe she's already mapped out a way to finish what she started with her wrists. Shit, she may even do it the first minute she's alone at her home.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her

eyes gazing at mine for an unusually long time.

Really? She's not already googling for private nurses on her phone, to prove to me she doesn't need me, and instead she's thanking me? Thanking the motherfucker who put her in this mother-fucking hospital and caused her to be labeled as suicidal?

"That's the least I can do for what I—" caused you to do. My eyes fall to her hands, which are now safely gripped in mine.

"Please stop. You have no fault in this. And if you bring this up again, I'm going back to my home." The tiredness is stamped on her; in her hands, in her posture, even in her voice.

Although she couldn't be further from the truth, I can't argue with her and cause her to lose more energy.

My eyes reach hers, and I see more tiredness. She frees her hands from mine and slips them around my body. I'm more anxious of the bandages around her wrists than the touch of her hands. In the darkest of her days, she's showing me mercy.

Mercy that I'm not worthy of.

And I hate myself even more.

Nevertheless, I wrap my arms around her fragile body carefully, as if she may break with the slightest pressure. My lips find their way on her forehead, and I shiver with the coldness of her skin.

She's unusually absent, somewhere else in her mind on the drive back home, and I know better than to interrupt her. I wish she could doze off a little, though.

Because she looks like she may collapse any second, I slide my arm around her waist, as we stroll to the elevator then to home. She stays for a moment at the doorway, hesitant to enter. Does she remember the night we spent here, being coaxed into having sex with me yet another time? I hit the definite bottom when I forced her in her office, and took her as if she was a random woman I met at a club and not the woman I love. My mother must be rolling over in her grave.

For some strange reason, a flicker of smile shines on her lips. What the hell?

“What is it?” I drop my jacket and her hospital bag on the chair.

“Nothing.” She bites her lips to hide a smile, in vain.

While examining her face to read what she’s not telling me, I help her slide out of her jacket and hang both mine and hers on the hook. “Are you hungry? I can cook something light to keep us until the dinner.”

“No, I’m fine. I just need to rest.”

“Sure. Bree packed a bag for you with clean clothes and pajamas. It’s in the bedroom. Come on. I’ll help you get

changed.” I stride toward the bedroom, and she follows suit. I open the suitcase and pull out the first things on the top; a pink tank top, and black pajama bottoms.

“They’re not mine.” She points at the price tag to show it to me.

“Bree must have bought them, although we agreed she’d pick up clothes from your condo.”

“Yeah. Whatever. Umm... I need to shower first. I stink.”

Shower? Shit, shit, shit. What am I going to do now? Of course she’ll have to shower, and I’ll have to help her. “Right, right.” I swallow as I move to her and carefully pull the hem of her t-shirt over her head. Her black-lace bra does nothing to hide her breasts, much

less the hardening of her nipples. Taking care of her is going to be harder than I imagined. She turns her back to me, and I undo her bra and pull down her pants and panties, and she steps out of them. Grabbing a towel, I wrap it around her on the way to the bathroom.

“Just a quick shower. I don’t know how long I can stand on my feet.” She steps into the bath tub and leans on the tiles.

The quicker the better.

Lifting her hands, she motions with her chin to the bandages. “I need something to cover my wrists to keep the bandages from getting wet.”

I stop to think. The nurse didn’t mention anything about it. How odd,

because she talked about so many seemingly unnecessary things, like the type of drugs Taylor wasn't supposed to take. "I can go to Rite Aid around the corner. They must have bandage cover or something."

She exhales a long breath, looking paler by the second. "I can't wait that long. I'm tired already. Don't you have some Ziplocs? Or even a plastic bag will do."

"I'll go see what I have." I run to the kitchen, rummage around, and collect any storage bags I can find. "Here, which one do you think will fit?" I ask when I'm back in the bathroom.

She points toward the Ziploc, and I hold it up so she can put her hand

inside it, then repeat with another for her other hand. By the time, we get into the shower—I take off my clothes in a heartbeat—she’s swaying left and right as if she’ll faint in a matter of seconds. Maybe, it’s not such a bad thing, because it keeps me focused on the work at hand. I shampoo her hair and soap her body both quickly and efficiently, while she keeps her hands up to keep the water from spilling inside the bags.

At the end of the five-minute shower—or maybe shorter—her breath becomes laborious, and her body is on the brink of collapsing. I hurry to wrap a towel around her, throw a bathrobe on me, scoop her up, and carry her to the bed. When I look down at her face, her

eyes are closed.

“Taylor?” I whisper, fearing she fainted.

“Hmmm,” she murmurs, her eyes still closed.

“I’ll put on your sleeping clothes now.”

“Hmm hmm.”

I make sure I dry all around her body, before I slip her panties then her pajama bottoms up her legs. I pay extra care while pulling the tank top over her head and slip her arms through the straps. When she’s fully clothed, I drag her up to the pillows and tuck her under the covers. Her skin is icy cold, and her wet hair isn’t helping. Pulling all her hair up, I lie down behind her and hug

her from her back to warm her up faster. Soon her breathing steadies and her muscles relax. I close the curtains over the windows and exit the room, leaving the door a little ajar.

I check the time on my phone and see two missed incoming calls; one from Bree, the other from Adriana. I call Bree first.

“You called?”

“Yeah, just wanted to see how Taylor is doing.”

I don't want to tell her Taylor is bone-tired and nearly fainted in the shower. She was already way too stressed all the while Taylor was at the hospital. She doesn't need to worry more. “She's sleeping now. How is it at

work? Did Nielson called?"

"Yes, he wants to make an appointment to meet you and Taylor next week to discuss the project. I offered him a lunch appointment on Friday and he's okay with it."

I lower my voice as I speak, "Friday? Let's hope Taylor will recover by that time." Which I think is highly unlikely, but miracles do happen.

"Yeah."

"I'm gonna start cooking dinner." I ordered a fridge full of food online at the hospital for Taylor's stay here. But, we probably won't be able to finish it all. "Wanna come and join us?"

"Really? Sure. I'd love that. At what time shall I be there? Shall I bring

something, a desert, or salad?”

I snort. “Just bring yourself and a cheerful mood.”

“Oh, by the way, did you see the list of the companies with the biggest growth rate in California?”

“Yeah. Good that you brought it up. Taylor’s gonna freak out about the news. I’m not surprised, though. Be here at seven.”

“I will. Bye.”

I stroll to the kitchen, put rice in cold water in a bowl, grab some ice cubes made of bone broth out of the freezer, and set about seasoning and salting a large piece of rib eye steak. When I’m done with the preparations, I dial Adriana’s phone.

“Why are you ignoring your sister? I called you, like, five times yesterday. Is everything okay?” she asks. I hear giggles from the background. The girls must be having fun.

I know I should keep Taylor’s suicide to myself, but Adriana might have an insight about how I should take care of her. Or a home remedy to boost Taylor’s immune system or at least some nourishing recipes for someone with a lot of blood loss. Anything. “Things have been a little rough these days... Taylor tried to commit suicide.”

“What? Oh my God. How is she now?”

I lean against the counter, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. I’ve

been holding myself together to be strong for Taylor, to be there for her at her most vulnerable times, but it's becoming too much. Guilt, failure, fear, anger, remorse... All the emotions are boiling deep inside me, pressurizing to explode any minute. I need to get it out. I need to talk to someone, and who is better than my older sister to talk to? "I don't know. I guess a little better, but she looks very weak. Maybe you—"

"This is out of line. I tried hard to tolerate her because of Jack, but what she did is almost nullifying your sacrifice to save her life in the assault a few weeks ago. Such an ungrateful piece of brat."

What the hell is she talking

about? My blood shoots up to my head; my pulse accelerates. “Look, I understand you siding with Pat, and you wanting me to go back to her. But, you have no idea what Taylor has been going through. I won’t let you speak like that about her. One more bad word, and this will be the last time you’ll hear from me. I’m serious, Adriana. You have to watch your mouth about Taylor. Or I won’t care if you’re my sister or my mother. Do you hear me?”

“I don’t know what kind of spell that witch—”

“Taylor!” I roar at the phone, my fist landing on the counter.

“Fine, fine. Whatever you say.” Her voice softens, but I guess my threat

will not suffice to make her change her mind about Taylor. As long as she keeps her mouth shut, that's enough for me. She doesn't speak for a while. It's clear she doesn't have the guts to chitchat nonsense about her life, as she always does during our weekly phone calls.

I inhale and exhale slowly to keep my anger under control and examine my fist, which is now red and hurting. "Gotta go. I've got things to do."

"Okay, call me when you can."

I press end without saying goodbye. How dare she speak like that about Taylor, or stick her nose into my life? Her nagging attitude as if she's my mother, urging me to call Pat, repeating again and again how much she's

suffering, even years after I left her... I've enough shame already dragging me down daily for what I did to Pat without Adriana's irritating reminders.

Rubbing my fist, I inspect the damage and then grab an oven pot. Cooking will be my distraction. Carefully I prepare the steak and the vegetable and place them in the oven to cook for half an hour.

A mumbling voice catches my attention, and I pace to the bedroom to find Taylor pressing her wrists against her chest, her eyes closed, her face cringing as if she's in pain.

I flip on the lights and walk over toward her, kneeling down in front of her. "What is it?"

“I think I’ve made a wrong move.” Her face is still cringing.

I find all my body tensing at the sight of her suffering, my teeth clenching tightly together. I wish I could take her pain into my body. “I’ll get you an ice pack.” I hurry back to the kitchen, pick two packs of ice from the freezer, and stride back to her in a flash. Pulling her forearms gently, I place the ice packs on her wrists and hope the cold will help her sooth the pain.

“I’m feeling better now.” Slowly, she opens her eyes, her face a little more relaxed.

I study her face for traces of pain, and luckily I see none. “Are you hungry? I’m cooking dinner. Bree will

join us. But, you can stay in bed if you don't feel like it, or I'll throw a pair of pillows for you on the couch in the living room. What do you say?"

"I'll take the couch. And a blanket, please. It's strangely cold in your condo."

"It's you, baby. You're still very weak. Come on, I'm cooking some juicy beef steaks for you to stock up on iron. And rice cooked in bone broth, too. My mother's secret recipe."

I grab two pillows and the comforter and walk out, glancing back at her as she follows me. She sprawls on the couch, and I cover her with the comforter. She hands me the icepack and rests her head on the pillows.

Just when I announce the dinner is ready, Bree knocks on the door as if she was waiting there for the announcement. She hugs me first and walks toward Taylor, with a bouquet of purple irises in her hands.

“How are you?” She leans down to hug Taylor and leaves the flowers on the coffee table.

“Getting better.” Taylor’s smile is tight.

I go back to the kitchen to bring out a vase with water for the flowers and the plates. Bree puts the flowers inside the vase and helps me turn the coffee table into a diner table, and then sits in the armchair across from Taylor. Putting on some classical music, I settle

on the couch beside Taylor and start feeding her the beef and the rice.

“Anything new at work?” Taylor asks Bree between chewing.

“Everything is going well.” Bree wipes her lips with a napkin. “I didn’t mention to anyone the incident. I just said that Adam and you are off to visit a territory in northern California for a new project. Nielson’s assistant called to make an appointment for next week. I gave him the spot but I’m sure he won’t mind postponing it if you can’t get back to work by then.”

“Don’t worry about work.” I give Taylor another spoon full of rice to keep her quite until I give her my big news. “I quit my other job to be able pay

full-time attention to our projects.”

“Why did you do that?” she asks, without caring about the food in her mouth “That’s not a good move for your career.”

“That’s actually a very good move,” I begin to explain. “We made it to the top fifty of the fastest growing small businesses in California. That, with only a handful of projects. Now that I’ll work full time, we can take up more projects and hit more lists of successful companies. Already some more potential clients showed interest in our work.”

Bree nods her head enthusiastically. “The phones didn’t stop these last two days since our name appeared on that list. We’ll need Adam

and more employees to keep up with all the new projects. Oh, and don't forget the Berenson Country Club."

Taylor darts her eyes between me and Bree, frowning, as if she's assessing the truthfulness of our answers. "You're not lying to me to pick up my mood, are you?"

Bree and I shake heads in synch.

"Why would we do that?" Bree leaves her plate on the table and pulls out her phone from her purse. "Here, you can see the list for yourself." She hands me the phone so I can hold it for Taylor to see the list.

"It really is true." Taylor flashes a big, beautiful smile but despite that, she looks as if she's going to burst into

tears any minute.

I tilt head down to get a better view of her eyes. “You’re not gonna cry, are you?”

“Maybe.” She lifts a hand and covers her nose with the back of it. “I never thought it’d—” A sob stops her and other sobs follow. “It’s all thanks to you, guys. You’ve given your best for the company. You’ve been always there for me, teaching me the insights of the business, supporting me, correcting my mistakes patiently.”

“Don’t underestimate your abilities,” Bree says. “You’re a great manager, not very friendly, but a great one, nonetheless. If they run an employee satisfaction assessment among the

companies on that list, we'd be among the top three, if not the first one."

"Not a very friendly one, huh?" Taylor mocks an annoyed glare, which earns laughter both from Bree and me.

"You're not the worst, though. Valerie can easily beat you at unfriendliness," Bree jokes, or does she? I can't tell by the tone of her voice; half serious, half laughing.

"How is Valerie by the way?" Taylor asks. "She was very depressed over something on Monday. That's why we wound up getting drunk. But, I can't remember what she was depressed about."

Bree shrugs, chewing food absentmindedly. "She didn't strike me as

depressed. She looks her usual self, straight-faced and a little grim.”

“You’re a badass, Bree,” I say, and Bree and Taylor throw a fit of laughter. I like how Bree lifts up our spirits. Which makes me think I should invite her over more often while Taylor is here so she gets more positive vibes.

I keep on feeding Taylor until everything on the plate is safely transferred into her stomach and then put on a movie for us to watch. A romantic comedy with great ratings, mind you. I intend to stir more laughter out of Taylor tonight and hopefully for the rest of her life.

After Bree leaves, Taylor relocates to the bed in my bedroom,

looking a little more joyful and livelier. Must be the combination of my mother's secret recipe combined with the Bree effect. Putting on a t-shirt and sweatpants, I switch off the lights and wish her goodnight.

“Wait, you're not sleeping here with me?” she asks.

Wasn't it obvious? “You'll sleep better without me tossing and turning around right beside you.”

“Please stay.” There's begging in her voice and maybe fear, too. Is she afraid of being alone?

“I don't think it's a good idea.”

“Well, only until I fall asleep, then?”

Sliding under the cover beside

her, I lie on my back and rest my head on my hands. She sneaks over to me and places a hand on my chest. The darkness prevents me from seeing her; nonetheless, there is no diminishing of power in my desire for her.

I swallow the sudden sensation of dryness in my throat and cover her hand with mine. “I haven’t properly apologized for forcing you to have sex with me. I’m very sorry.”

“Which one are you apologizing for?” she asks, revealing no hint about her thoughts in her voice.

“All of them, the last one particularly.”

She doesn’t respond, doesn’t move. As my eyes adjust to the darkness,

I make out the details of her face. She's biting her lips as if she's keeping herself from speaking or from yelling at me. She won't forgive me. I don't deserve her forgiveness, anyway. What I did was wrong in every way.

"I'm very sorry," I repeat, my voice weak and trembling.

"Will you be surprised if I say you made me climax every single time, even the last time?"

My heart starts pumping like crazy, so does the throbbing in my penis. Of course I noticed how her inner muscles were clenching around me that day when I took her in her office. But, that's not the thing to say to a man who has no limit in his sexual desire. And

especially not when lying side by side on the same bed.

“I might have noticed it,” I say.

“You did? Oh, shit. How embarrassing.” She pulls her hand over my chest and covers her face with it.

“It’s me who should be embarrassed. Not you.”

“I guess I like it rough every now and then.” She chuckles, making me think she’s joking.

I can joke, too. “Be careful with what you’re saying or you may end up getting it.”

Her hand lands back on my chest, and she moves closer to me. I turn to face her only to find her lips too close to mine. I pull the cover over to me to keep

my hands busy or they'll just grab her face so I can taste those sweet lips that I've missed so much.

She clears her throat as if preparing to say something important. "Is it true? I mean is it true that you haven't had sex with another woman since..." Her breath massages my skin, stirring more desire in me.

"Since the first day I met you? Yeah, it's true."

"How about Pat? She was your girlfriend back then. You didn't even..."

"No, I didn't have sex even with her. I couldn't. It felt wrong having sex with her while thinking of you."

"I saw your pictures with some women on the net, all celebrities."

She googled me? “I was trying to get over you and forget the pain I caused to Pat. But, I didn’t touch those women. None of them.”

“Why? What were you thinking would happen? You didn’t make a move on me because of Jack. And you couldn’t know Jack would die. Were you planning to become a monk at some point?” A flicker of smile spreads over her lips, and she stares at me intently, her eyes large with curiosity.

“I don’t know. Maybe if I could somehow have managed to pull myself back together and Pat still wanted me back, I’d have gone back to her. Maybe not. I have no idea what I’d be doing if Jack was still alive.”

“It almost sounds like you’re happy that he’s gone.”

“Excuse me?” I jump on the bed, working to cool the anger boiling my blood. How can she, among all people, think that after I told her about Jack’s sacrifice for my mother? “Are you telling me that to hurt me? Because you’re succeeding it.” I spring up to my feet and head toward the door. “Things would have been very different if he’d lived. For one, you wouldn’t have attempted to commit suicide,” I say before slamming the door close behind me.

I kick the bed in the guestroom, then throw myself on it, and bury my head in the pillow. It takes several hours

of tossing and turning in the bed to fall asleep.

I wake up with my head pounding with a headache. I grab a cup of coffee and head toward my bedroom to check Taylor, only to find her sleeping. Contrary to my sleepless night, her sleeping is deep and lasts several hours until three p.m. Worry over her empty stomach prompts me to finally decide to wake her up.

She opens her eyes, taking her time to realize she's in my bedroom, then gets up only to launch back on the bed because of dizziness. After a few seconds of resting, she gets to her feet and leaves for the bathroom. While she's in the bathroom, I bring her lunch to the

bed.

Her face softens as soon as she spots the food on the side table. Waddling like a penguin, she sits on the bed and places the napkin on her lap.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she says after she swallows a few spoons of the chicken soup I made for her. “I don’t know why I said that last night. It was just a silly observation. Even thinking someone might be happy for Jack’s absence is insane. He was such a good man in every sense.”

I just nod and continue feeding her until, she eats up the rest of the soup, which she does obediently. When I put the empty bowl on the nightstand, she slides her arm over me to embrace me.

Of course I don't hold back and launch myself over her and kiss her.

If she takes one step toward me, I'll run to her.

She squirms under my kiss, splits her lips apart for me to get a taste of the soup in her mouth ,and I savor it, licking and sucking her lips and tongue.

When I tear my lips from hers to lie beside her, she makes little noises of objection.

“Did you love Pat?” she asks out of the blue, catching me off-guard.

Anything other than the truth would do unjust to me, to Taylor, and to Pat. “Yes, I did love her. Very much. I thought she'd be the woman I'd spend the rest of my life with. I even bought a

ring for her before I met you, but never proposed.”

“Are you telling all those details to make me jealous?”

I examine her face for any hint of jealousy? To be jealous, she first has to have some feelings for me. Her face looks a little tense, spiced with a small amount of seriousness and contempt.

“Are you... jealous?” I ask.

She doesn't reply and instead asks another question, “Why did you leave her? Frankly I don't believe the reason is me.”

“I wish I could say it wasn't you, because then I could fix everything else to work it out for Pat. But, the day I met you, your beauty hit me like a train. I'm

still suffering from the accident injuries that went way deep in my heart.”

She snorts, shaking her head. “If I hadn’t seen how I look, listening to you I’d think I’m Miss Universe or something equivalent.”

“You are for me, because you’re made for me. Every little detail of your face and body overwhelms and exhilarates me as if I’m in a speed car race.” Gently I lift her hand—which is cold like ice—and guide it over my pounding heart. “You do that to me.”

She slides closer to me and captures my lips. If she could use her hands freely I’d be long gone.

I pull away gently, before it’s going too fast for me to stop. “Rest now.

I'll be in the living room if you need me."

"Why do you have to leave? Stay with me."

Like it's not obvious why. "If I stay I won't be able to keep my hands off of you."

She grins. "Is that a bad thing?"

"A very, very bad thing."

"Maybe, I'll like that very, very bad thing."

I make a move to get up, but she sneaks back into my arms before I can escape.

"Please," I plea, trying to keep my voice determined, my face straight. The last thing she needs right now is another round of rough sex followed by

vomiting. “You’re not ready for it.”

“You should check out the wetness in my panties to see how ready I am.” Her irises widen as they dilate. This is worse than helping her shower.

I throw myself on my back, groaning. “I can’t touch you. You’re too weak.”

“Then you can do all the work. I won’t complain.” Still resting on her side, she swings her leg over my groin and starts rubbing my semi-hard cock with her foot.

Shit, how could I forget about her feet? I’m gonna have to tie her down to be able to keep her safe from me. “Look, there’s nothing I’d love to do more, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I won’t get hurt,” she says, pressing her foot harder on my cock, making it twitch and pulse.

The only thing that’s curbing me from the temptation of launching over her, pulling down her pajama bottoms and panties, and burying myself inside of her panties are my jeans, and I intend to keep them zipped up and buttoned as long as possible. “Yes, you will, if you throw up again. And you did throw up the last two nights we had sex. Remember?” I don’t even need to remind her how she ended in the hospital after the third round. “You need all the energy you can get, not lose it with puking.”

She pauses to consider awhile,

pursing her lips, making me want to part them and unite our tongues again. “You’re right, but— ” Her chest heaves up and down. “I’m too hot to sleep.”

She wasn’t talking about her body temperature for sure. As if her words weren’t torturous enough, her scent—must be abundant with sex pheromones right now—and the way she’s appraising my lips is making me lose my mind, driving me wild. Her hips pressed against my groin are naughtily torturing my deprived cock. I squeeze shut my eyes to block her from me. I’m not immune to being around her, no matter what health condition she’s in, and it’s worse when she’s making a move on me.

Fuck!

I focus on the memories of the violent way she threw up in my bathroom. She won't be able to take it this time, if she ends up by the toilet bowl again. If only my cock listens. Or better yet, her pussy.

A thought pops up. "Did you throw up that day at the police station?"

I think she got my point, because her face beams up. "You mean after you finger-fucked me? No, I didn't."

Her word choice makes me shake my head in a mocking disapproval. "Do you want to give it a try?"

She doesn't say a word but answers me with rolling on her back and

spreading her legs, ready for me to extinguish her fire. The problem is it'll only fuel mine.

I position myself between her legs and prop on my elbows on either side of her body. Her eyes follow me cautiously; her tongue brushes her lips, moistening them.

“Sure you want this?” I ask.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

Just one yes would be enough. I smirk, satisfied by the need in her voice, and plant my lips on hers. My hands wander under her tank top and find her breasts. Hello rock-hard nipples! We men should have been created with at least two mouths to be able to suck lips and breasts at the same time to avoid the

frustration I'm facing right now. I love the taste of her mouth, the way she shivers and shudders under my lips, but I can't keep myself for much longer from mouthing those beautiful tits, so I slide down and take one breast into my mouth, gently biting it, while my hand kneads the other one. Her eyes roll back, and she moans loud enough for the neighbor next door to hear.

I'll have some envious neighbors. Hell, it's about time.

"Calm down," I murmur, worried about the tenseness in her body. Maybe I should just hurry up, before she exhausts all her energy storage. Blowing air to her hard nipple, I move to the other one and run my hand down

between her thighs. Her panties are soaking wet, as she'd said. How could she go from wanting to end her life to being so wet and hot with desire in a few days? As if the suicide thing had never taken place. I draw circles around her entrance, making her squirm, and she starts grinding her hips against my hand. "My needy, little wanton."

I'd have massaged her longer until she begged for more before I drove her into orgasm, but I can't now for the sake of keeping her in one piece. Still, she seems intent on using up all her resources with moving her body around, like a snake. Even her arms don't stay still.

"Stop moving or I will stop," I

say a little loudly so she can hear me through her moans.

She lifts her head and looks at me, confused, as if I'd spoken Chinese.

“Don't move,” I repeat and slide two fingers inside, stretching her, while rubbing her clitoris with my thumb. The snuggling tightness around my fingers—only two, that is—makes my cock twitch with envy and yearn for several rough thrusts in her soaking wet insides.

Her body stiffens, and her mouth pops open and forms an O. Releasing a loud scream, she throws her head back on the pillows. How I wish I could mount my throbbing cock directly into that beautiful O. My fingers explore her swollen walls that are burning with heat.

Wasn't she ice-cold just a minute ago? Where did she get all that heat in such a short time? Really mind-boggling.

I thrust my fingers all the way inside her, probing and teasing the sensitive walls, then begin pumping rhythmically. Her chest moves up and down, releasing short breaths. She tilts her head from one side to another, her lower lip snagged between her teeth. My cock is so hard it feels like it'll explode any second. I curve the tip of my fingers only slightly to grate the swollen bump close to her entrance, setting off her muscles to clamp around my fingers. She arches her back and cries out my name. I keep on thrusting until I feel no more spasms and then pull my fingers out.

I'm torn between licking her juices off of my fingers and making her do it. The possibility of her throwing up prompts me to go with the former, so I suck her sweet juices under her sleepy gaze.

“The only thing that'd top this would be having you in me,” she says.

I jerk out of the bed, fearing the possibility of her jumping on me. “Don't push me.” I throw the covers over to her and give her a small peck on the forehead, before leaving for the bathroom to tend my own unfinished business.

CHAPTER 18 - TAYLOR

Protected and cared for. That's how I feel around Adam. He provides everything I need, even before I realize I need it. A long-forgotten feeling of happiness is blooming in my heart and spreading throughout my body. It annoys me to think that I could have had this sooner. It is what Adam has been trying to show me all this time. That he could make me happy again.

As I'm sitting here in the kitchen and watching Adam cook breakfast for me after three beautiful nights in his

home, I finally feel peaceful. The grief and the gloomy thoughts have long abandoned me, and I don't see Jack's face floating in the air, blaming me or judging me for my wrongdoings. The Jack I know would never do that. It was me, my own obstinate self, who was pulling me down into the deep pit of depression.

"I'll be gone for only two hours, and Bree will be here for you," Adam says, glancing at me over the breakfast island. He's breathtakingly handsome in the plain, black t-shirt and sweatpants. I'd rather have him for breakfast, lunch, and dinner than real food, but he won't bend until I get my health back. The strange thing is I feel healthy, well

expect for my wrists. They still feel tender when I move them, but nothing too worrisome.

“I don’t need a babysitter. I’ll just sleep until you come back.” Perhaps he fears that I’ll attempt to kill myself again. Even the thought of it is sickening enough to make me nauseous. “If you worry that I’ll try it again you can stop now, because I won’t.” I try to sound reassuring, but my voice cracks with an unexpected sob. How I could do it in the first place is beyond me. I get ever so annoyed at myself for putting Adam and myself in such a complicated situation because of a moment of madness.

Adam walks around the kitchen island and curves down to kiss me. “I

know you won't. You're too horny to be suicidal."

He should recite it to the skeptical nurse who wanted to lock me down in the psychiatric ward at the hospital. My sob turns into laughter, and I place my arms around his neck to pull him closer.

The doorbell buzzes, interrupting our kiss. Has Bree come an hour too early?

"I'll see who it is," Adam says and walks to the door. I tighten the bathrobe around me and follow him, my eyes hypnotized by his round butt.

A man and woman appear at the door, flashing a police badge toward us. "Adam Garnett?" the man asks and

Adam nods. "I'm Detective Perez, and this is Detective Costa. We're from the LAPD. Can we come in for a minute?"

"Yes, sure." Adam stands aside to let them pass but doesn't invite them to the living room. "What can I do for you?" he asks as he closes the door

"Where were you on Tuesday the 12th between three a.m. and five a.m.?" Detective Perez asks, while Detective Costa examines me up and down. That's the night of my suicide attempt.

"Um, I was here at my home, sleeping."

"Do you have an alibi that can prove it?"

"Yes." Adam nods. "Can you please tell me what it's about?"

Detective Perez doesn't answer him, instead turns to me. "How about you? Ms. Doheny, right?"

I nod, confused by the sudden focus of attention. I look at Adam as if he knows the answer. "I was at the hospital..." My voice trails off, and for some reason I feel like a liar.

Adam comes to my rescue. "You can check the hospital records at Cedar-Sinai. She was admitted on Monday evening and was discharged three days ago."

"We'll look into that," Detective Perez says. "Mr. Garnett, we'll have to take you to the station to ask you a few more questions."

"I'll come if you tell me what's

going on. Why are you here?"

"A man named Case Huggins was found dead in his apartment, killed with the same gun that killed the two assailants related to your shooting."

Oh, my God! Isn't that the guy who filmed Adam and me while having sex and then blackmailed us? He's dead. And his death is connected with the murders of the two attackers in the parking lot of my apartment building? I tremble and lean my arm against the wall for support. Were the blackmailer and the attackers murdered by the same person? And, why do the police think Adam might have something to do with the murders.

Adam cups his chin with his

hand. “Why, exactly, am I being questioned?”

Detective Perez turns to his partner, and the partner replies, “We found a video where you and Ms. Doheny appear having sex and the messages Case Huggins sent to Ms. Doheny the following day, asking for money in exchange for his silence.” Suddenly I feel too embarrassed to look at their faces, so I drop my gaze and wrap my arms tightly around the bathrobe. Detective Costa continues, “We know about the deal and the fact that he was going to ask for more money, because we found a new message of him asking for another twenty thousand dollars in the draft folder.”

Adam was right. Case wouldn't leave me alone and would shamelessly press for more. What a parasitic excuse for a man. He must have annoyed someone else so badly that that person ended up killing him. I wonder if the killer happened to find out about my video. Maybe he, too, will come to me asking for money. Crap!

“Am I a suspect?” Adam asks. My eyes flick to Detective Perez, then to Detective Costa to see their reaction. Their faces reveal nothing, though I can guess they consider every one with a small association as a prime suspect. Oh, my god. A man as caring and loving as Adam, a murderer? Although he was overly angry on the day of the

blackmailing, he'd never consider killing that guy. Maybe beating him up, but definitely not murdering him.

“At the moment you're the only one who's related to both cases. So yes, you're a suspect until you can prove us otherwise. Can you give us the name of your alibi?”

Adam eyes me briefly, his thick lips pursued in a thin line, and then faces Detective Perez. “Isn't it that everyone is innocent unless proven otherwise? But, anyway. Lynn Gilman can confirm I was here. She spent the night with me in my apartment.”

My body goes numb in a matter of milliseconds, as the shock of his words takes over. Just three days ago, he

swore he hadn't slept with another woman for several years and yet he's just confessing to the contrary. He was lying to my face without even blinking an eye. What else did he lie to me about?

"I'll call my lawyer and get ready. Can you wait for me outside, please?" Adam asks to the detectives.

After walking them out, Adam comes to me and grabs my elbow. "I haven't slept with her, if that's why you look so shocked. She just needed a place to crash. I swear, nothing happened between us."

I want to believe him, I truly do. But I remember the strange closeness between Lynn and him that night at the car and the possessive way she asked

Adam whether he was in the video. And the night she stayed here was right after Adam had said he was leaving the company. Maybe he was indeed certain about leaving but changed his mind after my suicide attempt. The realization that he really might have gone, had it not been for my suicide attempt, triggers a strong wave of nausea in my stomach.

“I don’t know what to think,” I say, suddenly uncomfortable with his touch.

“Please, believe me. You’re the only one for me; you’ve always been, for a very long time.”

I avert my gaze from his face for fear of looking at his eyes and finding no love in there. Maybe he loved me at

some point but just got tired after several refusals. Or, he's truly a playboy and sleeps around with any woman in his way, as the tabloids were presenting.

Will I ever know the truth?

He pulls my arms around his neck and tilts my chin up to meet his gaze. "I didn't sleep with her or any other women. Please, believe me. We'll talk about it when I come back. Don't do anything stupid. Okay? Promise me I'll find you here, just like this, when I come back."

"I won't try to kill myself if that's what you're implying," I shout and free myself from him, but I can't stop wondering whether he has been fully honest with me.

I don't want to dig deeper into it, but my mind seems to be pondering several hypotheses, all revolving around the possibility of Adam being a murderer. The two attackers in the parking lot of my apartment building were killed the night after Adam had been released from the hospital. He could have easily gone out of his condo in the night without Adriana noticing his absence. And obviously, he could use Adriana as his alibi.

And, Case, the guy who blackmailed me, was killed the night of my suicide attempt. Maybe Adam didn't sleep with Lynn but invited her over to his place to have an alibi to cover up his plan to murder Case. After all, he knew

where he lived. A violent shiver goes through me at the thought of having shared a bed with a murderer, no matter what his ultimate motives were. Maybe everything he said about his love for me is true. Maybe he is, indeed, deeply in love with me to the point of obsession. Trying to protect me from danger, no matter what.

And, maybe he's done something else, something inconceivably horrendous. Even for him.

He stares at me, as if begging me to spill what is going through my mind. "Okay. I'll call Bree and tell her to come here as soon as she can. You'll wait here for her, okay?"

I take a step back, putting

distance between us while examining his face to get a clue of his soul. Was he capable of doing that? If he loved me so much that he couldn't touch any other woman... A passionate man like him wouldn't live the rest of his life like a monk, would he?

He comes closer to me, his eyes full of fear, reflecting mine. "Please, answer me."

I walk backwards until my back hits the wall. "Stay away from me." How could I be so foolish to believe him?

"Taylor. What's going on? You know I didn't kill those people, right? Tell me you believe my innocence."

I shake my head. "I don't know

what to believe.”

“Please.”

“Did you...” The words are so heavy that my lips can’t carry them out. “Did you kill Jack? The brakes in his car... Did you break them so they didn’t work?”

“Are you seriously asking me that? Are you seriously asking me whether I murdered Jack?” he shouts on the top of his lungs. “I could never do such a thing. Not even for you. And even if I wanted to get rid of Jack, breaking the car would endanger your life, too. Think about it.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Please, believe me. I didn’t kill anyone. I thought about killing the

blackmailer that day he sent you the text, but I didn't do it. I swear on the lives of my sisters I didn't kill anyone. Please, just believe what I say. We'll talk about it when I come back. Okay?"

He strides to the bedroom and comes back wearing a white shirt and black pants, holding his phone against his ear. "Shit, Bree isn't answering. I'll send her a text." He punches on the phone then calls his lawyer. After talking to him, he turns to me again and lifts his hands toward me but doesn't dare to touch me. "It shouldn't take too long. Don't go anywhere. Don't do anything."

I want to believe him; I want to have the peace I was feeling just a few

minutes ago, before the detectives came in and ruined it. And most of all, I want Adam to be innocent. God, how good my life could have been with him if I was sure of his innocence. I can't have him close to me with the doubt that he took people's lives... Jack's life.

"I'll be here," I say but the truth is, I don't know. I can't predict what I'm capable of doing. What if the devil in me shows his face again at another weak point and convinces me to attempt to end my life again? I should find a way to divert my negative thoughts. Maybe, I should call Bree.

After Adam leaves, I hurry to the kitchen to look for my phone and dial Bree. She doesn't answer. I dial her

home. She's not there, either. Where on earth is she hiding when I need her most?

A knock on the door makes me jump, and I run to get it, hoping it's Bree. I check on my bathrobe and run a hand through my hair before unlatching the door. I'm not exactly presentable but she has seen me at my worst, so why do I even worry about my look?

I open the door and see the strangest pair of green eyes staring at me.

“Valerie?” I have to ask, but it's obviously her, except for her eyes. Her

red hair is tightly pinned up in a bun at the back of her head; her lipstick is her favorite tone of dusky pink; her cheeks covered with a darker tone of pink. All her makeup is the same, except for the makeup on her eyes. Instead of her usual heavy mascara and dark shadows that she so loves to coat her eyelids with, they're bare and plain and not framed by glasses.

“Surprised to see me?” She raises her eyebrows, intently watching my face.

“Yeah, I wasn't expecting to see you.” I motion her inside with my hand and let her walk in. Her feet step silently in the brown flat pumps as she moves toward the living room. I follow her,

examining her eyes as keenly as they are surveying Adam's living room. There's something else strange about her today, starting with the long, brown coat she's wearing and the matching gloves. Unless she has health issues, like mine, causing her to feel constantly cold, her choice of clothing is redundant for the high temperatures of August in L.A. "Your eyes threw me off, a little."

"Oh, yeah?" She diverts those eyes back to me, catching me off-guard. Suddenly, I realize that I know those eyes backwards and forwards. I take a step closer to get a better view of them. And as soon as I detect the yellow drops right around the pupils, I shriek with shock. "Are you wearing contacts?"

She shakes her head, sporting a hair-raising smile. “I was wearing contacts every time around you, but not today.”

I swallow the lump of uneasiness in my throat, working hard to absorb her words.

“Come on, won’t you finally tell me where you know my eyes from, or shall I spill the beans?” she asks.

“Jack,” I say in a low voice. But how? Jack was a single child, and I don’t know any cousin from his father’s side with the same eyes as he and his father had.

“Bingo. Now you must be wondering how on earth I have the same eyes as your dead husband, right?”

My hands start trembling, as I realize something is totally off with Valerie today. Maybe something has always been off with her, and I never took notice of it. Why is she here now, exactly when Adam is escorted to the police station?

She places a briefcase I've just noticed on the coffee table and takes a seat on the couch. "I'm his sister. Half-sister, that is."

“That’s...” I can’t find the right word. My mind has stopped working altogether.

“Unexpected? Terrible?
Outrageous?”

“Impossible.”

“Hah, that’s what my father told

me, when I met him for the first time when I was seven. You know what else he told me?" Her voice is soft with a tint of agitation as she says father, and it gives me enough chills to get my body in alarm mode. "He told me to fuck off and find myself another father among the pimps that fucked my mother on a daily basis. Yeah, those were his words to a seven-year-old child. Not exactly father material, don't you think?"

I throw my hands on my cheeks. "That's horrible."

"Horrible? You don't know a thing about horrible. My entire life was horrible. I lived in trailers through most of my childhood. I had to start working at a young age so I could pay for the

transportation to the crappiest schools in the state. All because of that motherfucker excuse of a man who denied me, his own blood, the love and care that I deserved while his real child got everything I should have been given, too. I have seen things that a person should never see, let alone a child. When my mother sued him, he convinced the judge that my mother actually stole a condom with his sperm in it and injected it inside herself to get pregnant.”

I can't help but wonder whether she's making all that up about Jack's father. I didn't get the chance to know Jack's father in person, because he'd died before I met Jack. But, just being Jack's father is enough to think of him as

a good and honorable man. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You didn’t do anything. Unfortunately, though, you’ll have to pay for it.”

“Of course, I will. I’ll transfer to you all the money I received from Jack through his inheritance from his father.” That’s only fair, considering what a dreadful childhood she’d gone through.

She leans forward and grabs the briefcase, opening it. I tilt my head to see what’s inside, but can’t make out anything. “Not just that. I want the properties, the company, and the condo, too. Everything Jack had should be mine.”

“But, the company is my responsibility. I owe it to him.”

“I don’t give a damn about your shitty feelings of responsibility. Now, come over and sign these documents.” She pulls out a thick stash of papers and places them in front of me.

I sit across from her and draw the documents to me to analyze them. The first page is the request to assign ownership for the company. She must have strong feelings for it to place it as the first page. Then come the transfer of stock ownership, the properties, the money in the saving accounts, the condo, and even the car Jack and I bought together. She’s out of her mind if she believes I’ll give her the condo and the car. I’d rather lose a limb than hand her the two things I had my happiest

memories in.

“I guess you aren’t aware that most of the properties belonged to Jack’s mother. Not his father. Well, I have to talk to my lawyer, anyway, before signing anything.” I place the documents back on the coffee table and look up to see Valerie laughing heartily, her loud voice echoing in the living room.

“Are you that dumb to think that I’d let you talk to anyone?” Her laughter ceases abruptly. “Let me put you in the right state of mind. Jack told you his father died of cardiac arrest, right? Well, wrong. I made sure he got the medication to accelerate his heart rate, not slow it down. And the robber who

stole his mother's jewelry and pushed her into the swimming pool causing her death? That was yours truly, as well. I strangled her throat with my bare hands, until her squeaky voice stopped. I suppose I did Jack a big favor by freeing him from her irritating voice." She shivers exaggeratedly, as if she's heard a screeching sound.

My hands are covering my mouth and my stomach is twisting; there's a strong threat of it shooting out its contents.

"That's distressing you? Then I guess you'll pass out when I tell you the truth about Jack's death."

I blink my eyes several times and bite my lips to stop them from saying the

most revolting words. My hands drop to my lap, forming into balls of fists despite the sharp pain in my wrists.

“Yeah, you’ve guessed it right. I paid the mechanic to play with the car brakes.”

A jolt of disgust courses through my body, shooting my heart to the highest pulse rate.

“I must say his death satisfied me the most. If it wasn’t for him, maybe my father wouldn’t have denied my existence.”

“He was your brother, for God’s sake. How could you do that to someone as good as him?” I shout so loudly that my throat hurts.

She rolls her eyes for effect, as if

to say I had said the most absurd words one could ever say. “I don’t care whether he was Jesus or a mafia leader. He stole what belonged to me and that’s enough reason for me to get rid of him. But, you. I wasn’t sure about killing you and when you came out alive from that deadly accident I thought maybe you weren’t meant to die. So I decided to give you a chance to prove your innocence to me. That’s why I applied for a job at the company.”

“Also, it wouldn’t be so bad to learn the insights of the business and how to run the company that would soon be transferred to me. It turns out, you’re worse than Jack and his parents. You’d turned down Adam for years, but the

minute you learned about my feelings for him you snatched him from me without caring about my feelings. And, now you're living in his home, sharing his bed, wearing his bathrobe. Everything that I should be doing; not you. You stole my inheritance and now you're stealing the man I love. You're worse than a cheap whore. You sneak into the wealthy men's bed just to steal their money. I think killing you will top the pleasure I had with Jack."

She's delirious and delusional and the fact that she's wiped out an entire family for money makes me want to rip her heart out and squeeze it until it explodes. "You think I'll sign the documents after you've just confessed to

me your plans of killing me?"

"Oh, yes, you will. 'Cause otherwise I'll give this to the police." She pulls out a Ziploc bag with a gun in it, startling me with its sight, and holds it up in her hand. Of course she'll have a gun with her. Why am I even surprised? "This is the gun I shot the three men with," she adds.

"Which three men?"

"Oh, you're really dense, aren't you? The two men who attacked you in the garage. Those stupid motherfuckers were supposed to be professional killers but they couldn't manage to cut your throat, like I'd asked them to."

"You sent them after me?"

She nods her head, laughing a

sinister laughter, scratching my ears. “What? You thought they were just some random robbers?”

“Did you hire Case to film us in the storage room, too?”

“No. It was me who filmed you and then blackmailed you. The guy had no idea what was going on even at the moment I unloaded the gun into his brains. He was the only innocent person I killed.” She jumps to her feet in one swift move and for one second I think she’ll launch her fists into my face. Circling around the coffee table, she moves to my side and grabs the pen to hand it to me.

“Adam’s fingerprints are all over the gun,” she continues. “If you

don't sign the papers now I'll hand it in as evidence to the police and you can be sure he'll spend at least twenty years in jail. May even be executed. I'll also make sure to get rid of all your living relatives. Your aunt visits her daughter's grave ever so frequently. It won't raise any eyebrows if a drunken teenager happens to rob her for money and kill her on the spot. And your sister. I can make sure she's raped and tortured before killing her. Just so you know. The choice is yours. Either you die with dignity and save Adam's and your relatives' lives, or—"

She doesn't finish the sentence. She doesn't need to. The untold words wrap around my throat like a sneak,

stealing my breath away. I struggle to breathe; the thought of Adam languishing in prison, my sister and aunt tortured and murdered, sits like a tennis ball in my air-tube. The harder I try to inhale the less oxygen enters into my lungs. I clutch at my throat, punch at my chest to ease the constriction—uselessly. My sight is blurring, my head twirling, and the vision of Adam in an orange prison uniform swallows me back into the darkness. I lose sense of space and time and feel a part of me leaving my body. My soul? I thought it was just a dream, my soul watching over me in the ambulance.

A stinging slap across my face snaps me back to reality, where Valerie

is waiting for me to sign the papers that'll ensure Adam's freedom and my sister's and my aunt's lives. My trembling hand lifts to pick up the pen she's holding. I notice tiny red spots on my bandage. Suddenly the pain in my wrists hits me as if I've just rubbed it on barbed wire. I bite my lip hard to ignore my wrists and look down at the papers.

“Hurry,” she screams, her voice piercing my ears.

I viewed her as a good friend and thought our friendship would only get better with time. Yet, all the while she was hiding her true identity behind heavy makeup and thick glasses and plotting my end.

Barely getting control of my

hand, I sign the first paper and leaf through the next ones. Knowing what's awaiting me after I'm through signing everything makes my hand tremble. I won't even be able to see Adam for a last time, inhale his sweet scent, taste those hungry lips. I won't be able to say goodbye to my sister and aunt. It takes an incredibly long time and energy to sign everything. Once I'm done Valerie snatches them off of the table, draws another gun out of the pocket of her jacket, and points it at my face.

“You managed to survive even the fake suicide.”

Confused and shocked, I palm my bleeding wrist. “I didn't do it?”

She smiles again. “You see how

right I am about my observation of your stupidity. You don't even know for sure whether it was you or someone else who tried to kill you. Of course, it was me. Admit it, it was a brilliant plan. I knew Bree would come at some point to leave you that change-order request because I heard your conversation at the office about signing it. Now that you're officially labeled as suicidal, nobody will even investigate the scene here. And the fact that you transferred everything you owned to me is more proof of how intent you are about ending your own life."

She's right. It was a master plan, and I was too stupid to see through it. I didn't even go after the attack at the

garage and quickly accepted to pay the ransom for the blackmailing. I should have hired a detective for the attackers and gone to the police to report it, as Adam suggested. The police might have tracked down Case and saved his life. And Adam wouldn't be a suspect in murder now.

She pushes the gun against my face, the cold metal making me shiver like a leaf hanging loosely against the wind. I close my eyes, praying silent prayers for Adam's freedom and my family's safety.

“Okay, I have to get something else out before I pull the trigger. That gun has no fingerprints of Adam on it. I just made it up to make you sign the

papers.” She laughs, throwing her head back.

Snarky bitch!

The smell of something burning distracts me and just then the fire alarm goes off. I remember Adam cooking breakfast. He must have forgotten the food on the flame. Valerie drops the hand that’s holding the gun and looks around the living room. For once, she appears as shocked and confused as I feel. Taking advantage of her agitation, I spring to my feet and launch myself at her, throwing her to the floor on her back. Before I can hit her again she points the gun back at me. I stumble but manage to jump a few steps back to put enough space between us to ensure her

murdering me will be impossible to be considered as a suicide. As if reading my mind, she stands up, holding the gun to my torso, and starts walking toward me with slow and steady steps until she corners me at the wall.

I cough hard at the taste of cold metal when she pushes the gun into my mouth, down to my throat. The fire alarm is piercing my ears, the smell of burning assaulting my nose. Now there's no way left for me to escape death. I close my eyes, hoping at least it'll be quick.

"Die, bitch," I hear Valerie saying.

Not exactly the words I thought I'd hear before giving my last breath.

CHAPTER 19 - ADAM

Despite their initial accusations and lack of friendliness, Detective Perez and Detective Costa thank me for my cooperation as I open the door of the passenger seat at the back of the cruiser. Glancing at the green sedan parked three cars behind, I can't help but calculate the odds of this sedan being the one that I nearly crashed into when I was leaving the parking lot after Taylor and I had had sex in the movie theater. I wish I'd recorded its plate number or at least the first numbers just so I could verify and

end my suspicion now.

“Why was Ms. Doheny hospitalized?” Detective Costa asks, pulling me away from my thoughts, and I climb in and settle at the back of the cruiser.

I shouldn’t be talking without my lawyer but they can easily access this information from the hospital records and I’m sure they’ll do so. I reply, “She tried to commit suicide.”

Both Detective Perez and Costa turn to face me once they’re seated inside the car. Detective Perez eyes me suspiciously while Costa widens her eyes and examines my face. “The sex video?” Detective Costa asks.

“A part of it, I guess. You’re

gonna have to ask her because I don't know what really triggered it." And I'm too ashamed to talk about my sexual dominance over her.

Detective Perez turns back to the steering wheel and starts the engine while Detective Costa keeps on staring at me. "Has your bullet scar recovered well?"

"Yeah, it's much better now. Thanks for asking."

Under the curious looks of Detective Perez, Detective Costa flashes me a knowing smile. "Those nasty things. I've got two bullet scars of my own, but not close to any vital organ like yours," Detective Costa says, making me wonder why she's suddenly all

flattering.

“You, folks, have all my respect. It takes guts to become a police officer. I wouldn’t be able to do that.” I shift in my seat, uncomfortable since I’m at a loss as to whether she’s flirting with me or it’s just my overly-active imagination. I normally notice when women have an interest in me by the blatant way they check me out, or their inviting smiles, none of which Detective Costa is sporting right now. Either being in a male-dominated job took away her flirting skills or she’s just playing the good cop.

“You’re not so bad yourself, either. You risked your own life to save someone else’s. That’s exactly the same

thing that we do.” She finally turns to the front, releasing me from her stare.

“The difference is you folks do it on a daily basis.” I glance at Detective Perez, who’s now watching me intently through the rearview mirror although we’re out in the traffic.

I wonder how long the interrogation will take and what Taylor is doing right now. Bree hasn’t replied my text but she’s very reliable when it comes to helping out Taylor or me. So, most likely she’s behind the wheel, driving to my apartment, and that’s why she can’t respond to my text.

My mind keeps wandering back to Taylor’s accusations, but no, I refuse to go there. She’s fragile both physically

and mentally and will soon realize I would rather kill myself than kill Jack. She has to: otherwise, I don't know how she and I can continue being together.

I shouldn't think about this; I should focus on the task at hand. That is, defending myself properly and proving my innocence. It's still hard to conceive how the murders of the three guys, all attached to Taylor in one way or another, ended up being murdered by the same person.

I must be the luckiest crime suspect in a thousand miles radius to have an alibi for the two nights that the crime took place, the night of the last crime being more vital, or my chances to prove my innocence would be in the

unfriendly zone close to zero. The only person with ties to the three murders, besides Taylor, is me.

So, if it's not me or Taylor, then who? And why? It's like there's someone out there as protective of Taylor as I am, getting revenge on the guys who tried to hurt her. But, who sent out those killers to Taylor in the first place? How about the blackmailer? How could he even figure out it was Taylor in the storage room with me merely hours after recording the video? It's not like she's a celebrity, or someone everyone will recognize instantly. Worse yet, how did he find her cell phone number? And let's not forget the wig she was wearing that night.

I freeze with the fear that my alibis won't be as bullet-proof a jacket for me as I was imagining, because all three murders took place in the wee hours when both of my alibis were sleeping. The police won't have any hesitation using this against me, claiming that I might have left the house for a couple of hours without Adriana or Lynn noticing it, since they were deep in sleep.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead and around my neck at the feel of being cornered. Someone planned this out diligently to show me as the murderer. Someone who has been following all my steps.

Someone who has been

following both my and Taylor's steps.

Suddenly, all I can think of is the green sedan. It was there right after my date with Taylor at the movie theater, nearly causing me to crash into it, and before that, in front of Taylor's apartment building, when I'd picked her up for our date at the Japanese restaurant.

My breath catches in my throat when I remember the very first time I saw the green sedan. It was the night of the company's anniversary celebration. When Taylor ran away from me after we'd danced, I followed her to her apartment. And the green sedan was parked again in front of her apartment building.

Can this be a coincidence?

And now it's parked in front of my apartment building, where Taylor is alone and weak.

If this is a mere coincidence or my wild imagination, neither I nor the officers will lose anything by checking out how Taylor's doing. But if there's really something to my suspicions... I don't even want to think about what can happen to Taylor.

"We need to go back to my apartment," I shout and both officers turn to me. "Someone is after Taylor and I think he's planning an attack on her right now." Without giving them a chance to object, I explain to them my strange encounters with the green sedan at the

most inappropriate times.

Detective Perez doesn't lose a second placing the sirens on the top of the cruiser and turning around. I literally counted the milliseconds of the ten minute drive back and jump out of the car as soon as Detective Perez floors the brakes when we arrive. All three of us storm inside the building toward the elevators. I barely notice the guns in their hands as I press the bottom to call the elevator cab.

My heart stops beating at the faint, fire-alarm beeps coming from somewhere upstairs, and my mind raced with the disturbing thoughts of Taylor being helpless and at the mercy of a murderer in the middle of a fire.

“Stairs,” Perez orders and stalks through the door toward the stairs together with Costa. I run behind them, taking three steps at a time, with the only thought in my mind; shedding, with my bare hands, the blood of whoever is after Taylor. The beeps turn deafening as we near the front door of my apartment. I fumble with the keys and when I finally open the door, the two detectives jump inside, with the guns held up in their hands, and roam through the smoke-filled hallway toward the living room.

Beneath the loud beeps, I hear a familiar female voice saying “Die, bitch,” before a gunshot rings out. I nearly drop down to my knees and struggle to force my legs to continue

walking.

Where did I put my gun? If Taylor is the one who is shot I'll have to find it and load it into my skull because I can't live without her. I'd rather have her suspecting me of Jack's death for the rest of my life a hundred times over losing her to a bloody murderer.

The smoke clouding my sight, I step toward the bedroom and barely make out two women lying on top of each other.

"Help, help me." Taylor's voice comes out faintly but giving hope to my shattered heart and I move front to do exactly what she's calling for. The detectives pull the woman off of Taylor. My mouth jerks open when I see it's

none other than Valerie. What's going on?

I lift Taylor and she wraps her arms around my neck, mumbling words that I don't understand into my ear. Then all of a sudden, her arms go loose, her body weight tripling in my arms, and her head falls back.

"Taylor," I shout when I notice her irises lost at the back of their sockets. "Call the ambulance."

At the hospital, Bree and I listen to Taylor with both our jaws dropped open, while Detective Costa takes her statement. That Valerie was capable of

killing an entire family and pulling all those tricks on Taylor, just to get her hands on her inheritance, is beyond anything I can even comprehend. And knowing that if Valerie had gone to Jack and asked for help, Jack would have given her everything without hesitating makes me want to pace to the intensive care unit and disconnect the machines that give life to Valerie at this very moment. She must have a severe mental disorder to be able to live a secret life for so many years and heartlessly kill her own flesh and blood.

Taylor is discharged from the hospital the same day, and I take her back to my apartment. She sleeps the entire ride and doesn't wake up as the

car stops. So, I carry her up to my apartment and lay her on my bed.

She sleeps until noon the next day. After a shower and a silent breakfast, she sits on the bed without saying a word. Three days pass with her not opening her mouth to speak, except for thank-you after meals. That's if she eats at all. She doesn't leave the bedroom, not even for a shower, and lies on the bed without moving as if she's bedridden. It's the months after Jack's funeral all over again. She was the same ghost she used to be on those early days after Jack's death.

I don't know what to do. So I let her be, secretly wishing Valerie won't make it out of the hospital alive for

causing Taylor heartbreak twice. Only a monster can inflict so much pain.

On the afternoon of the third day, I finally reach my limit of watching her fade away, and knock on the bedroom door. She doesn't call me in, so I enter anyway and sit at the edge of the bed. It's dark inside; she doesn't even open the curtains. Only a thin ray of light illuminates the dim room.

"Taylor." I gently place my hand on her shoulder. She opens her eyes and wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand. Has she been crying? "You gotta eat your lunch. It's three in the afternoon now. You haven't eaten anything today."

She puts both of her hands between her cheek and the pillow,

letting out a long breath of exhaustion. “He could have been alive.”

Will she ever come to terms with Jack’s death? My hand on her shoulder slips down involuntarily but I remain silent.

“If Valerie had given him a chance to get to know her, she’d know what a great person he was and she’d have let him live.” A sob follows her words.

“No, she wouldn’t,” I say, rather loudly. “She’s sick in her brain and all she wanted was money and revenge. She wouldn’t recognize the good, if it was given to her on a silver tray. She had two long years to get to know you and still wanted to kill you.”

“That’s because she was in love with you. She thought I started dating you to steal you from her.”

“That only confirms my observation. She has a distorted perception of what’s going on.”

A ghostly smile tugs at the corner of her lips. “Since when are you a psychologist?”

“Since you chose to ruin yourself with grief.”

“I didn’t choose... I can’t help it.” More tears stream down her cheeks, filling me with rage and sadness.

“Yes, you can. Don’t let Valerie win again. This is what she wants. You owe it to Jack. Please, pull yourself together. I know it won’t be easy but you

can make it. I'll be with you. I'll always be with you." I lie down beside her and hold her in my arms, drying the tears of her silent sobs with my hand. After several minutes, she falls asleep and I dare not move, to let her rest for as long as she needs. But, my phone rings, startling her awake.

Still holding Taylor in my arm, I switch on the light and place the phone against my ear. It's Detective Costa, calling to let me know that Valerie's accomplice, the guy in the green sedan, was arrested yesterday while hiding in a motel, and he's plea-bargaining for five years instead of twelve, in exchange for giving detailed accounts of all of the crimes he and Valerie committed over

the years. Apparently, he started working for Valerie two years ago, which means the police have no way to prove she murdered Jack and his parents, besides Taylor's statement of Valerie's confessions.

I press end and recite everything Detective Costa said except for the last part about Jack's and his parents' murders. As she listens to me her face gradually lights up. I don't know, maybe she feared he'd come after her, too, and now that he's arrested and will spend several years behind bars, she can breathe again.

"I need to go back to my apartment," she says. "I can't keep on occupying your place."

“What? No. Stay and never leave.” And I mean it. Now that I have her, I don’t want to let her go ever.

Her eyebrows arch up; she shifts away, releasing herself from my hold, and sits up on the bed. “Stay and never leave?”

“Yeah, move in with me.”

She shakes her head no. “I can’t. So soon?”

I reach out and hold her hand, fearing she’ll slip away from me if I allow her to put more physical distance between us. “Why not? I want to have you with me every second of the day.”

“You’ll get tired of having me at work and then at home.”

Seriously? Is that her reason?

“Will you let me have you at work?” I ask, half joking, half serious.

“I didn’t mean that.” She blushes a deep hue of red, and I instantly picture making her turn even redder, beneath me on the couch of her office.

“I know what you mean,” I say. “And no, I’ll never get tired of you. That’s one thing I can promise you right now.” And nothing can be truer than that.

“I have to think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about it. You can have my bedroom if you want. I’ll empty it for you and move to the guestroom so you can set your own belongings here. And, I promise I’ll never disturb you when you’re in this bedroom. Your bedroom. I just want to

have you close. I'd rather die than let you go."

"No." She leans in, her hand cupping my chin, her thumb brushing my lips. "Don't ever mention death again."

I grab her hand and plant a kiss against her palm. "Then, don't leave me."

"I..."

"You can rent your condo to some low-income college students for a little rent."

"That doesn't sound bad." She shrugs a shoulder, biting her lower lip.

"Please, say yes, please. You'll make me the happiest man alive if you say yes." I place her hand over my scar on my chest. Yes, I'll stop at nothing to

have her move in with me and even use my scar to convince her.

“Will you help me take a shower?”

“Is that a yes?”

She doesn't reply and gives me a sweet smile instead. Getting out of the bed, she takes off her shirt and pulls down her sweatpants. I stare at her, gaping more than looking, as she strips down completely naked and extends her hands to me. I jerk out of the bed, grab a pair of bandage covers, and place them over her hands.

“Before going to the shower, I have to apologize for something.” She looks up at me, her lips trembling, her eyes glittering as if announcing the

imminent arrival of tears. “I’m sorry that I blamed you for Jack’s death. I shouldn’t have done that. But, you should know that suspecting your innocence was one of the darkest moments of my life. I didn’t know how I could go on without being able to trust the only man I cared about after Jack.”

I can’t deny it; her accusations hurt me to the core. Causing pain to Jack would be equivalent to causing pain to my mother, and I’d never intentionally do such a thing. “I couldn’t believe you could think I’d be capable of doing such a horrible act to my best friend.”

Her head drops to her chest, and I hear another sob. Shit, if swallowing my pride and accepting her apology is

the only way to stop her crying, so be it. I don't want another drop of a tear coming out of her eyes.

"I'll forgive you—" I slip a finger under her chin to tilt her head up to me. "If you agree to move in with me." I offer her an apologetic grin.

She glances up at me, smiling despite the tears rolling down her cheeks. "You can't do that."

"Oh, yes I can. If you move in with me I'll forget it ever happened."

"Okay, fine."

Thrilled, I slip my arms around her waist and lift her, sweeping her feet off the ground. "You'll never regret it."

"But, I still need to go to my condo today to pick up some clothes."

I laugh. “Okay, but I’m coming with you.” I put her down and hold her elbow while walking with her toward the bathroom. I wash her hair and body slowly, hoping she’ll turn around and give me a kiss and a hug, and some more, but she doesn’t. I guess I’ll have to jerk off again.

After drying up and having a late lunch, we settle on the couch in the living room; Taylor chooses to keep her thoughts to herself, making me wish I could read minds, just hers actually. Pain stabs my chest, when I notice her face darken and then go to that dull, emotionless state she had for several months after Jack’s death. Despite the short break from depression, she’s going

back there again, losing herself to grief and despair. The fact that there's nothing I can do about it is killing me.

I reach for her cheek and brush it in an effort to erase that lost look on her face. "Taylor, I'll get bullets all around my chest, if that's what it takes to make you happy again."

Her hand covers mine, pressing it harder against her cheek. Her eyes close, and I feel her warm tears on my fingers. I didn't say that to make her cry. I should have just shut the fuck up. She cries for several minutes, each tear piercing my chest like a sword.

Will it be like this everyday? Will she just drown herself with tears and agony in front of my eyes?

Then, out of the blue, she opens her eyes, wipes the tears with her hand, her face brightening as if she's just had an inspiration for an invention. "I don't want to be depressed anymore. I hate it. I hate it when all I can think about is Jack and the short time we spent together, as if I hadn't had a life before him. I hated every minute of the years I grieved after him, but I couldn't get out of it, even if I tried." Letting my hand go, she grasps my shirt and pulls me toward her. Her lips barely brushing mine, she says, "Then something miraculous happened," and locks our mouths together.

She shifts around to straddle me, her hands tightly clutching at my shirt,

drawing me closer to her, as though she can't have enough of me. Her lips press against mine, licking, sucking, biting, and teasing my flesh to the point of pain, until I open my mouth and let her tongue in. Her kisses are greedy and hungry like never before. My cock hardens under the feathery pressure of her weightless body. I slide my hands through her hair and allow her to take me the way she wants me, relishing the intimacy of our fervent kiss. The kiss so full of longing and fire, it stirs up every cell, every nerve ending in my body, purifying me from the stains in my soul.

Her hips ride on me ever so slightly, and I run my hands on her sides up and down, then over her breasts

through her tank top.

Gasping, she tears her lips away from mine, ending the most lustful dream in a flash. “You saved me, your passion and your love. Now, I need you to do it again.”

“You want me to get shot in the chest again? Because I’ll do it if—”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Beautiful words coming from the mouth of the most beautiful woman.

I slip a hand behind her neck, moving her face close to mine, and let my lips graze slightly against hers, but not fully kissing them. Her short breaths are an aphrodisiac on my skin. She pushes forward, I pull back. There’s nothing more arousing than seeing her

frustrated with need. Need for me.

“I didn’t hear a ‘please’ there,” I say, my eyes fixed on her wanting lips.

She throws her head back, looking down at me with narrowed eyes. Her eyebrows arch upwards. “You want me to beg for a kiss?” I can’t read her expression but I prefer it thousand times more than the dull, emotionless one that scares the hell out of me.

“It surely wouldn’t hurt.” My lips curl up to a smile, despite my best attempt to keep a straight face.

“Someone will beg, all right. But it won’t be me.” Her face lighting up with a mischievous grin, she splays her hands over my chest and roams them downward, where I’m at my most

vulnerable.

I catch her hands but don't stop them, as they unzip and unbutton my jeans and grab my cock out of my boxers. I freeze, as she runs a thumb over its head, her touch making it inflate to its full size instantly. Her hands tight around my cock look so small and pale; the sight of her tongue licking her lips is worth dying for.

I swallow hard, trying to decide whether to shove her hands off or let her continue. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She bites her lower lip seductively and rubs the head of my cock across her soft cheeks, then over her lips, causing pre-cum to leak.

The last time I jerked off was the morning of Valerie's attack, and that was three days ago. When a few hand strokes can finish me off, she's planning to give me the best of the treatments that'll make me come in seconds. "I'm begging you, please stop it or you'll throw up." My voice is intermittent and nearly inaudible. Actually, I wish she hasn't heard my plea.

Shooting me a dirty glare, she slides a hand down to cup my balls, while her tongue swipes up the length of my cock, increasing my desire for her tenfold.

I involuntarily grasp her hair with both hands and roar, "Taylor!"

"I want you," is all she says,

before the head of my cock disappears between her swollen lips. I'm lost in bliss at the slick heat of her mouth.

Bucking my hips against her mouth, I urge her to take more of me in that snuggling heaven and she does, earning a loud growl from my throat. "Fuck, Taylor."

I'm afraid she'll go running to the bathroom to vomit any second, but she keeps on sucking me ravenously, wrapping her tongue around my cock, as if it's the sweetest treat she's ever tasted. Her eager hands are tightly stroking the rest of my throbbing cock, prompting a string of curse words to roll out of my mouth.

"Breathe," I whisper to her

between my own ragged breaths. My balls ache with lust and feel like they'll explode any second. I use all my strength not to thrust into her mouth harder than she can handle. But, at some point, when my urgency to release escalates, I press her head down while thrusting my cock deeper into her mouth, the head hitting the back of her throat. "Stop now. I'm very close," I yell so I can at least finish myself off, before filling her mouth with my sperm.

Her eyes dilate at my words; she holds still for a moment, making it impossibly hard for me to keep myself from exploding into her mouth. Then, she releases my cock, stands up, and strips off her pajama bottoms together with her

panties, leaving me breathless at the sudden sight of her engorged sex, pink and moist with need for my attention.

At that moment, I lose my brain. Every sound and coherent thought disappears in a flash with no promise of coming back. I stand up to take off my shirt and pants before I grab her by the waist, flip her backwards on the couch, spread her legs with my hand, and position myself between them.

She lifts her head and her hand reaches up and wanders on my biceps, pecs, and lands on my abs. “You’re so beautiful. Everywhere.” Her tongue licks her lips, and then she bites the lower one in anticipation. Her eyes drop down to my cock. “I want to see you taking me.”

She has to seduce me this way, as though I'm not already seconds away from a mind-fucking explosion. "Jesus, Taylor, do you want to kill me or what?"

Her chest rises and falls rapidly; her nipples are hard beneath her tank top. I grab the fabric and expose her breasts. Watching the pink nipples go rock hard, I want to take my sweet time on each of them, but that'll have to be for another time.

Under Taylor's curious and hazy stare, I begin rubbing the tip of my cock over her swollen folds. She's so wet and slippery, I could easily glide inside her. She leans her head closer to get a better view of the action down there. I see her eyes grow and dilate, her cheeks

flushing a deeper red. Her lower lip is between her teeth, probably to stifle her moans. But, I want her to moan, and yelp, and cry out my name. I run circles around her entrance and smirk, when she purrs and pushes her hips against me, wanting to suck me in. But, I don't thrust in her, just yet.

“Don't make me beg for it.” Her voice sounds at the verge of crying. She lifts her eyes to meet mine. She may not be begging, yet, but her eyes do.

“But, I love it when you do.” I push half the way inside her and pull it back immediately and thrust it halfway again.

She closes her eyes; a drop of tear leaves and rolls down on her cheek,

and I panic. Have I pushed her too much? I shouldn't have forced her in her fragile state. Then, suddenly, I notice the tiny vibrations buzzing around my cock.

Fuck me running, she's already coming apart as if she was the one who received oral ministration and not me. That's so hot I can feel the sperm in my testicles boiling, fighting to break free.

"Didn't you want to see how I'm fucking you," I say. Her eyes fly open and glance at me before gazing down. Her face goes from embarrassed to carnal in a matter of seconds, as I hold her hips and ram my cock all the way into her. We both cry out as her taut insides welcome my entire length.

I want to live in this moment

forever; her pussy swallowing my cock, her breasts bouncing with my thrusts, her hair disheveled, her forehead sweating, tears of lust wetting her red cheeks. It's just me, and her, and no sadness, or grieving.

“Hard, fuck me hard.” She pushes her hips against mine in rhythm with my thrusts and digs her fingernails into my biceps. I shift to bring her legs up to my shoulders, grab her buttocks, and push my cock deeper inside of her.

“You feel so good.” And I'll be damned if I ever get tired of being inside you.

“Adam,” she shouts from the deep of her throat, “I'm very close.”

I pick up the speed and pump her

harder. An old desire inflames to full fire. “I’m gonna get you pregnant.”

“What?” She snaps her eyes open. “You know I can’t...”

I dig my nails into the soft flesh of her buttocks, and she responds with a cat-like moan. “Then, I’m gonna fuck you until you can.”

Maybe it’s for my words or the rough strokes of my cock, but she begins trembling violently, and her inner muscles are clenching tightly around my cock. She can’t keep her eyes open, even if she wanted and squeezes them shut as the orgasm hits her with full force. Her head drops back on the cushion; her inarticulate words mixed with weeping ring in my ears.

I can't keep it any longer, so I pump into her my full load, watching her pant, and quiver, and lose herself in the ecstatic pleasure. My energy drains out of me together with the last spurt of sperm, and I pull out and roll beside her, pulling her over onto my chest. It takes forever until our breaths calm down to normal, and I feel my heavy lids closing.

Her finger runs circles on my chest; her warm breath massages my sensitive skin. "Now isn't the right time to have a child. And, it's kind of freaking me out. I've just accepted to move in."

"I know; I'm sorry." I open my eyes and cup her chin to meet her gaze. "I'm not gonna lie, I want to have

children with you some day. But, more than the prospect of a child, I want your womb to be fertile. I feel like it's my responsibility to..."

"Fix it? It's not like your sperm has magical curing qualities or something." She laughs, her body shaking with her laughter. Just a few minutes ago, I was plagued with the fear that she wouldn't smile again. And now, her laughter is chiming in my ears. What a sweet irony.

I kiss her hot skin on the forehead. "You never know."

"I'm beginning to doubt your Engineering diplomas. Your science knowledge sucks."

A tired smile tugs at my lips. "I

want to go with you to your next doctor's appointment."

"Please, don't tell her anything about your magical sperm. She might want to use it for her other patients and I don't want to share you with another woman. Just so you know."

I narrow my eyes, raising an eyebrow to show my mocking disbelief. "Is that so? Not even to help women in desperate need?"

She shakes her head. "Not even for them."

For the briefest of moments, her eyes sparkle with a new emotion that I recognize from Pat's eyes, and I know it is love. Or at least the first seeds of it. And, my heart feels like a blink away

from bursting out of my chest with raw and unadulterated love for her. Before I can react, though, she reaches up and seals her lips against mine. And for some outlandish reason, it has a sense of finality and permanency on it.

Yet another surprise comes when she doesn't feel the urgency to throw up after sex; neither that day nor another day where we become one with our desire for each other. Which gives me another reason to give her the love and pleasure I've always wanted to share with her.

CHAPTER 20 - TAYLOR

Life is a real bitch to the bitter end. It punches us in the face, knocks us down, and drags us into the deep dark of the sea. It's the real love that breathes oxygen into our lungs, soothes the bruises and scars that life has given us, and makes us stand up to life's cruelties. It is only then that life softens, loses its edge, and shows us its real beauties and pleasures.

Despite what life took away from me, Adam's love made me realize that my end hasn't come yet, and many

years of happiness are waiting for me. And now, I'm outrageously in love with him; with all the stomach-flutters, crazy heartbeats, madness, longing, and desire a woman can feel for a man.

And what a man!

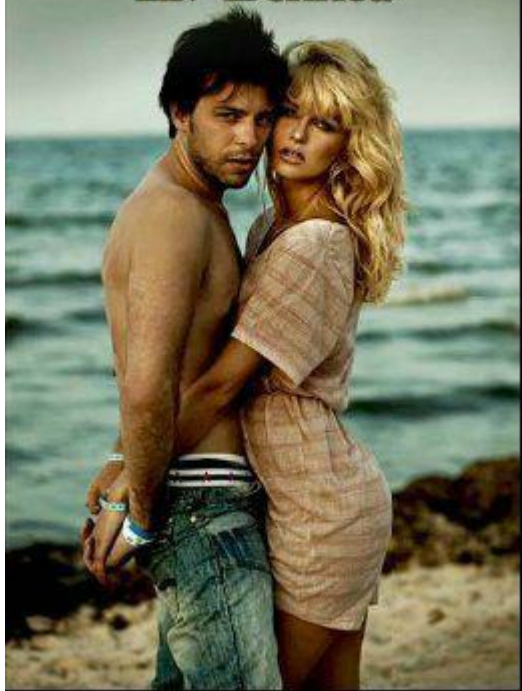
I'm ready to dive nose-deep into the challenges and struggles life has in store for me, as long as I have Adam by my side.

THE END

An Illicit Pursuit
(Pat and Zachary's Love Story)

AN ILLICIT PURSUIT

Liv Bennett



Being a relentless pursuer is in Adam Garnett's blood. His first obsession is the up-and-coming, beautiful country singer, Pat Stevens. The fact that she has a boyfriend whom she adores does nothing to Adam's plans to seduce her into his bed and eventually into his life. Alas, he doesn't know how destiny will teach him a lesson when he meets his best friend's beautiful girlfriend.

Pat Stevens has tried it all to become the famous and influential singer she's been dreaming of being since she was a little girl. Yet, nothing seems to be working for her toward that goal. As if her career struggle isn't

disheartening enough, she has to deal with the strictly religious and proudly Jewish mother of her boyfriend.

Adam's provocative words and seducing moves are becoming hard to withstand. Damn if she doesn't find herself wanting him to try harder to win her heart. Will she be able to get passed her morality and give in to Adam's advances? And to which price?

When life presents her an unexpected surprise, she has to confront difficult choices between her boyfriend and the career she has always dreamed of.

Excerpt from AN ILLICIT PURSUIT

PAT CARTER

Early September in Los Angeles is a sheer torture to behold. I'm soaked in my own sweat in spite of sitting under the shade of this humongous oak tree. Wiping away the sweat gathered on my forehead, I check my watch. Twelve fifteen. Zach, my high-school sweetheart and current boyfriend, is fifteen minutes late for our lunch date.

"You'll be late to your own funeral," I once told him.

"Nobody is perfect; not even the

chosen ones,” he responded, laughing. His Jewish identity and my Catholic upbringing are two of the few topics we tend to avoid. Except for jokes, of course.

My eyes scan the countless students, roaming around the UCLA campus trying to locate Zach, but he’s not among them. Instead, I spot a tall, masculine guy with wavy dark hair, wearing a V-neck, white t-shirt, and blue jeans, which are hanging loosely around his hips. The way he pushes the strands of hair off his forehead and laughs is like an oasis in this extreme heat. Which, nonetheless, doesn’t stop me from turning my gaze away from him down to my guitar. I’m not usually the type who

piques the interest of such beautiful guys. Oh, and I almost forgot; I'm taken, anyway. So, I pull my guitar to my lap and spread my fingers on the strings, hoping I won't get heat stroke, or at least if I do, Zach will arrive in time to take me to the hospital.

“Do you actually play that thing?” A velvety tone pulls me away from my frustration. I look up to see none other than the oasis guy, standing a few feet away from me, with a disarming smile playing on his beautiful lips and his hands hanging casually in the pockets of his jeans. His eyes are both mesmerizing and exhilarating. His hair is a dark hue of brown, his skin dark olive on his face and arms, lighter on the

visible part of his chest.

I have to re-play his question in my mind, because honestly, he's so much more gorgeous up close that I can't help but be tongue-tied. I avert my eyes and glance down at my guitar. "That thing is called a guitar," I say and look up at him with a grin. "And yes, I do play it."

He draws his thick brows together. The seriousness washing over his sexy face makes my heart go drumming. "Wait a minute. Do I know you?"

I use the opportunity to sweep my eyes over him from head to toe, as if I have to study him thoroughly to be able to answer his question. "Um, I don't think so."

“Yeah, now I remember.” He raises a hand and taps his index finger on his lips. Which draws my attention to the plump opening of his mouth and there, at that point, I admit to myself that I could risk making a fool out of myself, just to steal a kiss from him. “I saw you in a movie. What was its title? Luscious Life Under Stars, right?”

“How do you know that? The movie isn’t out yet.”

“I saw a test screening of it.”

“So, what do you think?”

“You’re so much hotter in real life,” he says with the same playful smile on his lips. I can’t make out whether he’s serious or not, but I can’t stop blushing, either. The extra heat

makes my arms go loose.

“The movie. What do you think of the movie?” I ask, trying to be nonchalant about his compliment.

“Honestly, my favorite part was the lights coming on at the end.”

“That bad?” I cringe. Isn’t that just great? I got one shot at having my voice heard across the country, and it’s a dead-end one.

“It won’t make it to the Oscars. Regardless, you make quite an impression in the scene where you appear. I was fighting the urge to sleep until your song came on. You gave a whole new meaning to ‘save it at the last minute.’”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“Just look at me, undress me, make me lose my mind, my everything,” he recites a line from the song I sang in the movie, making me shiver despite the boiling heat. “I’d love to hear it live.”

I glance down at my watch. Twelve thirty. Zach will be here any minute, and he won’t like finding me flirting with a gorgeous stranger. “Sorry, I don’t have time.”

“Then, let’s meet another time to grab some coffee, lunch, or dinner. Whatever you like.”

“Are you asking me for a date?” I frown, unable to grasp the reason why. He’s in a whole different league, where girls must be worshipping the ground he’s walking on. What will he do with

me, an average blond with average height and larger-than-average hips? Maybe he doesn't see me clearly under the bright sun's rays.

“Yes, indeed.”

“I don't even know your name.”

“Adam Garnett.” He takes a step closer and stretches out his hand toward me. I stand up with one hasty move and nearly fall back on my butt, but he catches my hand and pulls me toward him. Standing inches away and inhaling the mixture of orange grove and spices of his light cologne makes my head twirl.

“Pat Stevens,” I mumble in a low voice, unable to pull my eyes away from his captive eyes. Oh, my goodness!

He laughs; his breath brushes the skin on my face, breaking through my senses. “Short for Patricia?”

“No, just Pat.” He hasn’t released my hand yet and I won’t be the first one to let go.

“Sounds very similar to Cat Stevens.”

“That’s why my artist name is Pat Carter.”

“Nice to meet you Pat Stevens a.k.a. Pat Carter. Will you give me the honor to have your cell number?”

At that point, he releases my hand to pull his phone out of the pocket of his jeans. I tell him my number, staring at his long fingers, trying to brush away the thoughts of the goose bumps

those fingers would cause on my skin if he touches me again, while he types quickly on his phone.

“Done, I’ll call you tonight.”

Tonight? Zach will find out. Shoot! Will I seriously cheat on Zach? It only takes me a three-minute appearance in a movie to become a cheater.

“I have to catch a class. Wait for my call.” He winks at me and leaves. I watch him go until his silhouette disappears into the crowd he came from. Suddenly all I want is to see him again. To talk to him, to get to know him. To make sure he was real and not an oasis or a dream I had during a heat stroke.

“Hey, love.” Zach shows up.

I don’t even pretend to be upset

at him for arriving thirty five minutes late and exposing me to the highest heat of the midday. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”

He doesn’t make any effort to apologize or at least explain why he was late. Tugging me under his shoulder, he gives me a peck on the lips. If only he knew what his tardiness cost him.

Yeah, Zach will have to pay for taking me for granted.

Add [An Illicit Pursuit](#) to your to-be-read list on Goodreads.

About The Author

Liv Bennett lives in California with her scientist husband, toddler daughter, and two loud budgies. Reading and writing erotic romance are her favorite forms of relaxation, in addition to long walks and yoga. She's a social drinker of coffee but a serious tea addict. Adam Garnett, the hero of the Pursuit of Passion, came to her in a dream during a romantic getaway in Las Vegas on Valentine's Day, and since then hasn't left Liv's mind for longer than a day, much to her husband's dismay.

The Everlasting Pursuit, the third in the PURSUIT series, is

scheduled to be published before Christmas.

Send Liv an email at slivbennett@gmail.com to be one the ten lucky readers to receive an advance reading copy of The Everlasting Pursuit before its release date.

Join Liv on Facebook at www.facebook.com/LivBennettAuthor to get the latest news about the book-cover reveals and release dates.

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