

I WON'T FAIL
HER TWICE.

Pretending
**SHE'S
MINE**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**VIOLET
PAIGE**

PRETENDING SHE'S MINE

VIOLET PAIGE

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Prologue

There were many ways I had imagined fatherhood. It was a rite of passage. A milestone in a man's life that cemented the beginning of a new chapter. A way for him to secure his legacy. Pass on the best elements of his gene pool.

Part of me was old-fashioned. I blamed the military training and the years as a Seal for that rigidness in my personality. There were steps a man was supposed to take. Plans he was supposed to make before becoming a father. I was the kind of man who did things the right way.

The irony of what I now faced wasn't lost on me.

I envisioned becoming a parent with the woman I loved. Mainly, the woman sleeping next to me. A woman I had bought a ring for. Planned a proposal for. Fallen for in a way I didn't know I was capable of.

But this? Finding out I was a father like this? No. I shook my head. It was all wrong.

I was supposed to sit on the edge of the bed while we waited for the results on a little plastic stick. It was something we were supposed to do together. Plan it. Think about it. Talk about it. Not like this. Never like this.

Where was the gold band on my left hand? When had the vows been made? Where was the house and the savings plan? Those were the values drilled into me. Those were the things a man with honor and character did before he became a father. A man was supposed to provide. He was supposed to protect his family. Yeah, it was old-fashioned as hell, but that's who I was.

It was on me. I had done this. I had played Russian Roulette like a rookie, thinking it wouldn't catch up to me. It looked like it finally had.

I thought about what had led to this moment. I thought about the decisions I had made when I was in the darkest place in my life. It didn't matter that I wasn't that man any more. I had to pay for my sins. Or at least in this case, own them.

I had drowned out the nightmares with women. Night after night. One woman after the next. Beautiful women. Smart women. Women eager to help a soldier forget his demons for a few hours. They weren't women I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Or even women I wanted to date. It was mutual. It was plain and simple sex for the sake of fucking. Two people satisfying a need.

A need that couldn't be quenched any other way. I had tried drinking. I had tried running and lifting weights. They didn't do what sex did for me. Hell, nothing did what sex did.

It was never about making a baby. *My baby.*

Maybe if I hadn't been so adamant that I didn't need counseling, I would have found another way. Or if I hadn't told everyone who asked if I was all right to fuck off, things would be

different. I came home from that last deployment determined to erase the horror on my own. To move on. To build a new career. It took a few months of wandering in the murky abyss to get my shit together.

I ran my hands through my hair. Journey sighed beside me, nuzzling against my shoulder. The sheet rose and fell with her soft breaths. Her dark blond hair outlined her face. It hit me then that this was the last time for a while she'd sleep peacefully.

I wanted to study her face. Memorize every beautiful line of her body. Every curve. Every sound she made while she slept. Was that possible? Could I commit to memory everything about the woman I loved in such a short time?

But the fear that she would awaken and read the expression on my face, hit me violently and I knew what I had to do. I had to stop stalling.

I eased out of the bed, placing one foot on the floor, followed by another. I stretched my tall frame as she instinctively tucked my pillow against her breast, never opening her eyes. She did the same thing every morning when I climbed out of bed. Although, this morning I knew it was different.

I knew I was getting ready to shatter everything we had into unrecognizable fragments. Fragments so small they'd become dust and ashes. Remnants of the trust she had in me.

I held the phone in my hand, tapping the button to close the screen. I had used two independent DNA testing agencies. The results were the same for both. Both reports had landed in my inbox last night, just as promised. The forty-eight-hour guarantee or my money back was something they touted. Then, I thought it was worth the extra expense. In this moment, I wished I had put it off longer. Sent the analysis off to a thirty-day lab instead. Results I had wanted two days ago, were now upending my life.

The reports were clear. There was no need for a second test, or a third opinion. The girl was mine. I had a daughter. A two-year old who needed me. A little girl whose mother had abandoned her to a set of elderly grandparents ill-equipped to take on a toddler.

They reached out to me after months of trying to raise the girl on their own. They had to be desperate to contact me. I knew it was the last thing they wanted, but reality had set in. They needed help. The kind of help that meant swallowing their pride and doing the one thing their daughter demanded they never do—contact the man listed on the birth certificate. Asher Westbrook.

I dressed quickly and grabbed my gun from the bedside table, tucking it against the small of my back. I closed the door to Journey's room behind me. I passed her house manager in the hallway.

"Mr. Westbrook." She nodded, pressing her lips together. Her hair was pulled in a tight bun.

"Claudia." I hurried past her.

"Is Miss Tessier awake?" she asked. She held a large tablet in her hand, scrolling through the day's itinerary I was sure.

I stopped at the top of the staircase. "No. She's not. Let her sleep." My voice was terse.

"But she has that photoshoot this afternoon."

"And she won't be happy if you wake her up early."

Claudia huffed. "All right. I'll give her another hour. But that's it."

I started down the stairs. I had to be out of the house before Journey started looking for me. I didn't have time to argue with Claudia about Journey's schedule. It was something we seldom agreed upon anyway. My role as her bodyguard was always in direct opposition to how Claudia ran the house and the schedule on the property.

I rushed through the kitchen, narrowly bumping into the chef.

“Would you like an omelet this morning, Asher?” Sasha blocked my exit. “I can have it ready for you in fifteen minutes.” She was busy, tying an apron around her waist.

“No. No thank you. Not this morning.”

“Are you going to take the coffee up to Journey?”

I shook my head. I stood in the doorway to the herb garden. On the other side was the garage and my car. It was the last hurdle.

“No,” I answered, closing the door on my way out.

It was better this way.

One day she might understand. One day she might forgive me.

ONE

Asher

Two Years Later

THE COFFEE WAS HOT. Too damn hot. I abandoned it on my kitchen counter. I pulled up my itinerary, scrolling through today's meetings.

There wasn't room to fucking breathe today.

It was my own creation. My own triumph. And days like today, my own prison.

My dark hair was still damp from the shower. I'd already run five miles on the treadmill before sunup.

The first meeting on the schedule was with acquisitions. I was in buying mode. Snatching up as many of the small security companies that I could get my hands on. It was the quickest way to expand without spending a fortune on infrastructure development. I had thirty minutes to read the team's report on the ten companies we were targeting. I'd choose the top three and hope we landed one.

My phone beeped. It was my assistant Mickey. She called at 8:30 every morning, like clockwork. She was punctual and meticulous. I trusted her about as much as I trusted anyone. She was the first person I hired when I started Westbrook Securities.

"Yes?" I held the phone to my ear.

"Good morning, Mr. Westbrook." Her voice was warm, but firm.

"Mickey. What do you have for me?"

"I synced today's schedule. Are there any changes? Should I add anything for you?" she asked.

"No. Nothing was missed." It never was.

"Ok. I'll confirm all your meetings and upload the finalized version for you."

"Thank you."

I sat on the couch. The TV ran in the background. The chatter of the broadcasters made my penthouse feel a little less sterile. A little less isolated.

It was bound to feel that way. Everything inside was made of steel and reinforced glass. It was a fortress. I had personally supervised the installation of Westbrook Securities' latest tech. It was impenetrable. I used the penthouse to test all our prototypes. If it didn't meet my standards, it never moved beyond research and development.

I glanced at the screen as the anchors ran through back-to-school hacks for parents. They

clutched cups of coffee and grinned, showing off their white teeth. I muted the TV.

“Is there anything else, sir?” She asked the same questions each morning. It wasn’t a mandatory script, but Mickey knew I liked consistency. I valued productive habits. I admired routines and people I could count on.

“There aren’t room for adjustments, so if something pops up today, you’ll need to fit it in later. You’ve done an excellent job of managing my time today, as usual.” It was a compliment.

“Of course, Mr. Westbrook. There will be no changes. The schedule is locked.”

“You have the information on Avajeau’s return?” I pressed. I had already asked yesterday and the day before, but when it came to my daughter I would ask a hundred times to make sure every detail was secure.

“Yes, I spoke with her grandparents last night, *again*, and she will be on the early flight back to New York first thing tomorrow. She has a first-class ticket.”

“The nanny is sitting with her?”

“Of course. Always, sir. I bought two tickets together.”

I twisted my lips together. I considered how much I disliked this arrangement. Four times a year I sent my daughter to visit her grandparents in Valencia. Part of the agreement was that she didn’t travel without, Nicole, the nanny I hired the minute I had taken custody. The grandparents had pushed back, but there wasn’t much they could do. I had full custody and it was my decision. Avajeau traveled with the person I trusted, or she wouldn’t travel at all.

Gene and Shelly were good people. I had gotten to know them through bits and pieces of conversations that revolved around their granddaughter. It didn’t change the circumstances. Their daughter had walked out and never returned. Avajeau didn’t have a mother. I was the one left trying to navigate single parenting. Over the past two years I had built a securities empire, while managing fatherhood. I seemed to succeed at one more than the other.

“I think I’ll give Nicole a call once I know everyone is awake on the west coast. I don’t know that she would appreciate a 5:30am call.”

“I’m sure they’d love to hear from you, no matter what time you called, sir.” Mickey could get away with lies like that because of the kind tone in her voice. Anyone else would sound flat and fake.

I chuckled. “Thanks, Mickey. I’ll see you in the office in an hour.” I ended the call and tossed the phone on the coffee table.

I walked to the doorway of the master suite. The brunette from last night was tangled in my sheets. Her long legs were toned. Her toenails painted red.

Savannah Green and I met for drinks last night in the lobby of my building, under the guise of her wanting a marketing contract. She claimed to be an expert in online data. She threw out snappy catch phrases like SEO and high CPC returns. I drank bourbon and listened, knowing full well her only intention was to make it upstairs to my bed.

Serious businesswomen didn’t meet clients at 9:00 pm wearing fuck-me heels and mini-skirts. The way her boobs spilled out of her top didn’t give her much professional credit either. I took her cues and after two drinks took her to the penthouse.

There wasn’t going to be a contract. I didn’t do business with women I slept with. Savannah didn’t believe me. She wanted to change my mind with her body. Westbrook Securities didn’t do business like that.

Her eyes opened. She smiled like a satisfied cat.

“Good morning,” she purred.

“Good morning.” I watched her from across the room. “Should I have a car take you back to

your place?" I offered.

She pouted. "I thought we could have breakfast together."

"I already had coffee. I could bring you a cup."

She nodded. "That sounds lovely. Would you?"

"Sure. There are towels in the cabinet next to the shower. Why don't you get ready and I can drop you off on my way to the office?"

"Want to join me?" Her long legs slid from the sheets and she strutted in front of me, naked and proud of her physique.

"I'll get the coffee, Savannah."

"Want to have dinner at my place tonight?" she asked. Her fingertips rested against the doorframe. "I think it might be hard to top what we did last night, but I'd like to try. Are you up for the challenge?"

I shook my head. I didn't date. I didn't see women more than once. I had a rule about getting attached, or letting anyone into our lives.

"I'm afraid not. My daughter will be here bright and early tomorrow. I don't do sleepovers, Savannah. Enjoy the shower."

I turned for the kitchen, pausing for a second. Wondering if I should go into greater detail about my situation with Avajeau. Questioning my tactics. I realized when I talked to women about Avajeau, they had one of two reactions: complete adoration for the single dad burden I carried, or fear that they were going to be trapped in an insta-family. I couldn't tell what type of woman Savannah was, and it didn't matter. The one-night rule kept me from having to worry about it.

As I strolled through the living room to retrieve her cup of coffee my eyes fell to the TV. I caught a glimpse of the breaking news banner flashing on the screen. There was a special report. I took another step toward the kitchen, but stopped.

I reached for the remote, increasing the volume. I tried to listen to each word. Confused. Numbed with shock. The buzzing that had started in my ears muffled the sound of the anchors' voices.

I saw the pictures. The chaos. Flashing lights and sirens blaring. First responders were running back and forth behind the reporter on the scene. I stood there, watching it unfold.

"Actress Journey Tessier has been rushed to L.A.'s Saint Simmons Medical Center. Authorities say her attacker is still on the loose and should be considered armed and dangerous. We are waiting for Tessier's spokesperson to update us on her condition. We can confirm she was shot this morning as she exited her gym in Hollywood. Witnesses at the scene say there was blood, and the beloved actress was unconscious.

"There is a second victim in the attack. We're awaiting details while this story develops. Miss Tessier was recently nominated as Best Actress for her role in *Under Water Love*. We will bring you news of her condition as soon as our reporter at the scene has more information."

I blinked, scanning the news scroll. I saw her name. I saw the blood splatters on the sidewalk. I heard what they said, but putting the words and the scenes together was like trying to make the opposite ends of magnets meet. Everything in me wanted to reject them.

"Ash, baby. I forgot to get the towel." I heard Savannah call for me from the bathroom. Her voice felt far away as if she were in a tunnel.

I swallowed hard. My chest tightened. I picked up my phone and pressed for Mickey's number.

"Sir? Did I forget something?"

I pressed the phone to my ear. The buzzing hadn't stopped. The sick feeling had gotten worse. It felt like I was being poisoned with every passing second.

"Mickey, there has been an emergency. I need you to call the Westbrook Securities pilot. Journey—" I stopped myself from going into detail and wasting seconds. "I'm headed to the airport immediately. We leave for L.A. as soon as he can get us in the air."

"Sir? I don't understand. Is it Avajeau? Is she all right?"

"She's fine. She's fine. Just call the pilot." My voice already sounded horse.

"You just said not to make any changes to your—"

"Do it," I gritted my teeth, unable to look away from the images of Journey on TV. They alternated between the crime scene at the gym, and pictures of her smiling on the red carpet.

"Please," I added. "Do this, Mickey."

"And your schedule?" she eked.

"Cancel it. All of it."

"Yes sir. I will handle it. It will be taken care of. Anything you need." The confidence in her voice was reassuring.

"Thank you."

"And sir?"

"Yes?" I paced the penthouse.

"If I can help—"

"I know. I'll call from L.A."

I shoved the phone in my pocket and grabbed my jacket. The door clicked behind me and I hurried to the elevator. I didn't care that I had left Savannah in the shower and I'd left every light on.

Somewhere Journey was lying in a hospital. She was all that mattered. I had to get to L.A.

TWO

Journey

I cringed. Damn it. Just trying to squint hurt.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The sound was loud. So deafening I tried to reach out and swat at whatever was near me. It was like an aggravating mosquito I couldn't find in the dark. It was incessant. Repeating the same monotonous tone over and over.

Every time I attempted to raise my hands to slap it into silence, I struggled. They were listless. Useless. I wrestled to move the right and then the left, but nothing happened.

Could someone please turn off that alarm? It's driving me crazy. Really? The alarm. Does anyone hear it?

Ouch!

Something jabbed my upper arm like a fire poker. Did someone inject hot lava in my body? It hurt enough to make me cry, but even my tear ducts were unresponsive. And then I was floating. The feeling was soothing, actually. A nice change from whatever was happening around me. I tried to reach out again, but I gave in to the warmth coursing up my arm. I stopped fighting.

Hey, this is pretty nice. Just floating and drifting. Drifting and floating. Was I on a cloud or maybe a raft in the middle of the pool. My infinity pool. So pretty. So peaceful. So calm.

The beeping wasn't as irritating. The fire was gone from my arm. And I could sleep.

Something I hadn't done in weeks.

I wasn't the kind of woman who could afford the luxury of sleep. A seventy-million-dollar beach house, sure. But a nap—no way.

Who could nap when awards season was around the corner? No one slept during this time of year. I had meetings with designers. There were gowns to choose. Diamonds to pair. And someone had to decide what shape to file my nails. Every element of my look was choreographed. The dietician went over my strict meal guidelines. I felt like I'd be zapped for even looking at a carb. And then there was Tristan.

He was relentless. We met at BodyWerks, a Hollywood term for the place where I got my ass kicked every morning at 5am. My stomach had to be flat to fit in the gowns. My arms had to look sculpted. And my booty had to be round. It was Tristan's job to make sure I was molded into some kind of impossible Barbie doll.

There were plenty of other reasons I couldn't sleep besides the stress of being nominated. By the time I crawled into bed at night, I was exhausted. Ready to sleep for three days. But instead, I stared at the ceiling, warding off fear. Fear that another round of nightmares would start. By the time I fell asleep I had an hour or two before I had to get up and meet Tristan.

It was the same thing every day.

I heard someone call my name.

“Journey, can you hear us?”

Of course I could hear them. They were standing next to me. But my mouth refused to cooperate with my brain.

“She needs to get into surgery.”

“Is she going to have scars?” I recognized Dante’s voice. When had they called my manager?

“Someone from plastics will be there. It’s the underside of her arm. I wouldn’t be concerned.”

“Wouldn’t be concerned? You do realize that’s Journey Tessier? Her pinky finger is worth more than your entire body.” Dante’s voice was the highest-pitched in the room.

I thought Dante was being overly dramatic and rude. His exaggerated tone usually came off as charming but, right now, it made him sound like an ass.

“Miss Tessier is in excellent care. I’d like to take her into surgery to stop this bleeding. She’s not clotting on her own. And our plastics team will do their best to ensure minimal scarring.”

There was a long pause and I waited to hear how Dante would handle the information.

“Fine. But if it’s not absolutely perfect there will be a lawsuit.”

Shit, Dante. I don’t want to sue anyone.

“Let us help her. I understand you’re worried, but it doesn’t do anyone any good to start threatening legal battles before we even have her stable.”

Stable? I’m not stable?

My stomach flipped before twisting into a permanent knot.

The calm man continued, “Once she’s out of surgery we can assess if there are any significant brain injuries. But the bump on the back of her head is indicative of the hard hit she took on the pavement. I see no signs of a concussion. We have to stop this bleeding first.”

“Why isn’t she awake then?” Dante asked.

Good question. I’d like an answer.

There was a buzz of activity around me. I couldn’t open my eyes to see it, but I could feel it. Everything had shifted into another gear and there were more people in the room. People were whispering as they moved in all directions.

My body started to float and I realized I was being rolled somewhere. The wheels squeaked on linoleum.

Wait? I’m having surgery? What’s wrong with my arm? I need answers before you do this to me.

Dante called, “Don’t worry, babe. I’ll be right here waiting for you. You’ve got this. There’s nothing to worry about.”

A chill ran through me. Isn’t that what Tristan said just before...before...I couldn’t remember. It sounded familiar. It sounded so recent. But something inside told me not to try and figure it out. I shouldn’t press too hard. I shouldn’t question it. It was better to follow the sleep. Just sleep.

THREE

Asher

I hated hospitals. Fucking despised them. This one wasn't any better. High-dollar art on the walls and classical music in the waiting rooms didn't erase the smell of antiseptic in the air. They could lay as many marble tiles as they wanted, set out expensive orchids—it didn't change what this place was. Celebrities died and decayed like everyone else. I wondered if they thought adding this gloss and shine could change the outcome.

My two best agents followed closely behind me. I rarely traveled without them.

It shouldn't have been so easy for me to gain access to this wing. I glared at the security guard watching as I walked past. Amateurs. They had no business being in charge of people's safety. The press was camped outside, and I hadn't seen any attempts to ask for their credentials or keep them from infiltrating the hospital. Who was in charge?

I had time to think on the flight to L.A., but not enough. The last couple of years should have been all the time I needed, but I had developed and fine-tuned a mechanism for blocking out anything related to Journey. I never saw her movies. I turned off the TV if she was being interviewed. I never read the articles about her. I focused on building Westbrook Securities for my daughter. I wanted an empire that would keep her safe. It kept me away from Journey. I had deceived myself into believing it was a better alternative.

Until now.

We continued past the nurses' station as I scanned the numbers on the doors. I heard the men's heels hit heavy on the floor behind me, announcing our arrival. I was tempted to call in more of the Weston Securities force to fortify the entire wing. I had to face Journey first. I stopped in front of her door.

Room 321.

I wasn't ready for this.

"Wait here," I directed the agents. "Don't let anyone in. Keep an eye on this hallway."

"Of course."

I pushed open the door. My chest pounded from the deep breath I was holding in. Dante Peacock hopped up from his seat, balancing three different cell phones in his hands.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he screeched.

But I didn't answer. My eyes were on her. Journey was still. Her pale blue eyes were closed and for a second my heart felt shredded. It was hard to breathe. She shouldn't be in that bed. I wanted to scoop her up and run out of here with her in my arms. There were lines and tubes running into her arms. A thin hose for oxygen was taped to her nose. *Fuck. No.*

"How did you get in here, Asher?" Peacock was agitated. It didn't take much to rile him up.

“No one called you.”

My gaze broke away from Journey and landed on him. I’d never seen him look this bad. The man was always put together. He had dark circles under his eyes. I looked down at his hands. His nails were bitten and raw.

“How did this happen?” I felt the heat rise in my neck.

He shook his head. “No. No. No, Asher. I’m not letting you barge in here like this. You really think she wants you here? I didn’t call you.”

My eyes narrowed. “I asked you a question. Answer me.”

Dante nodded and pointed toward the door. He wanted me to follow him to the hallway. I sighed as he led the way. He closed the door behind us. We stepped away from my agents and moved into a family counseling room with glass windows.

“I don’t know what Journey can hear,” he explained. “We shouldn’t argue in front of her.”

I eyed my agents from the where I was standing. They had an eye on the activity in the hall as well as Dante and me.

“I don’t see a need to argue,” I replied.

His shoulders relaxed. “Good. I thought you were going to start acting all commando again.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “I don’t know about commando, but I want a full debrief. Every eye witness account. Every photograph from the scene. I need a full rundown of her schedule for the past two weeks and any cross-referenced encounters. I’m going to need the security camera footage and a list of all members of that gym.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “See? Commando. You haven’t been on Journey’s security detail in two years. Not since you became Mr. Billionaire. Don’t think you can prance in here with your hot agents and take over. You aren’t in charge of Journey. I am.”

I huffed. “Look what happens when you’re in charge. She gets shot.” I wanted to wrap my hands around his neck. “Get me what I asked for.”

“You’re not my boss. Journey is. You can’t order me around. Or anyone for that matter, Asher. You haven’t been a part of this family for a long time. We all know it. Most importantly, Journey knows it.”

I wasn’t going to engage in my personal history with Dante. I was here to do something much more important. “Trust me. I have no interest in hiring you, Dante. But until the suspect is in custody, Journey isn’t safe. I’m taking over as of now. I can protect her. You clearly aren’t cut out for it.” I glared at him. Beads of sweat covered his brow. He would argue, but he always folded in the end. It was only a matter of time before I wore him down.

He sputtered. “This is not my fault. I’m as shaken as anyone. I’m not a bodyguard. I’m her manager. Don’t put this on me. She makes her own security calls.”

“And who lets her do that? Where is the guard for her door? Where was her bodyguard this morning?”

He blinked. “She went to the gym. She never takes security to the gym. It’s her personal time. She is very clear about that.”

I groaned. “See? You don’t understand how important her security is 24-7. It’s not part-time. It’s *never* part-time. In fact, her security should have doubled after her nomination. Did it?”

Dante looked confused. “I-I don’t deal with that part of her management. You know that.”

“Get me the information I need. The agents with me should have full access to all the reports. They will be working this with me. Also, set up a meeting with her doctor within the hour. I want to speak to her doctor immediately. Journey needs to be moved tonight.”

“Tonight? She just got out of surgery. Dr. Mills wants her to rest.”

I fought the urge to let my heart rip open again. Journey should never have had surgery. She shouldn't be here. There was an attack on her life and Dante had no idea how to handle it. She needed me now more than ever. I had to stay focused and get her out of here.

"She can rest in a safer place than this hospital. I'll take care of her from here on out." I walked out of the family conference room, and stopped in front of Journey's door. I wanted to make it clear he wasn't stepping foot back inside until I had what I wanted. My agents flanked the entrance behind me.

Dante twisted his lips together. "You're honestly going back in there?"

"Yes."

He rolled his eyes. "She's going to kill me for doing this."

"At least she'll be alive to carry it out," I mocked.

"This is seriously messed up. She hates you, Asher."

"I don't care how she feels. I'm going to do what I've always done—protect her."

Dante shook his head. His hands rested on his hips. "Fine. But if you're going back in there don't upset her. Just stay quiet. She needs calm right now. Don't even talk to her. Ok?"

"Ok."

I nodded and walked inside room 321.

I took the chair in the corner and watched Journey sleep. Her dark blond hair was pulled to the side in a braid. I guessed that was one of Dante's touches.

I should have been here. I could have stopped this from happening. I could have kept her safe. I never would have let her go to the gym alone. How stupid and lax had this team become since I left? Was this how they had operated for two years?

I knew they hated me. Dante's words weren't a surprise. I walked away. Turned my back on her. I abandoned her.

Watching her sleep like this, I couldn't come up with a single reason why I wasn't spending my life with her.

My elbows dug into my knees as I buried my face in my hands.

The machine beside her beeped. She sighed lightly in a deep sleep.

I did something I never did—I prayed.

I swore then and there, that I would never leave Journey unprotected again. I'd make whatever deal God wanted me to make, to ensure she woke up and smiled. I wanted to hear her laugh. I wanted to watch her walk on the beach. I wanted to catch her curled up with a book. I wanted to see her dance around the kitchen to silly 80s songs. I'd do whatever it took. Whatever sacrifice God came up with, to give her all those moments again.

FOUR

Journey

I didn't want to wake up. This bed was deliciously comfortable. But my head was pounding and I was thirsty. I could get up, grab some aspirin, and crawl back into this perfect bed. I could stay here all day and relax. Wouldn't that be a luxury? I could do something people thought movie stars did all the time.

I knew that wasn't something I could do. I had to start my day. First, with a detox tea and my morning meditation on the dais overlooking the ocean. I hoped by the end of my practice, the headache would be gone.

I let one eye open and then another.

I shrieked when I saw the stern woman sitting next to me.

"Who are you?" I croaked. My voice was hoarse. "Wh-what are you doing next to my bed?" It was an absurd question. One I was certain I had never asked anyone before.

"Look who's awake." She patted my wrist. "I'm your nurse." Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun and she had deep lines on her forehead.

"Nurse?" That didn't make sense.

The headache pounded at the base of my skull. I looked around. I didn't recognize this room. I wasn't in my Malibu beach house. I looked over the nurse's shoulder at the towering trees outside. Nothing looked familiar, yet I felt a strange connection to the room. I couldn't place it. Everything felt a little fuzzy and distant.

She rose steadily and placed the back of her hand on my forehead the same way my mother did when I was a child. "Yes, I'm your personal nurse. Mr. Westbrook hired me to take care of you and assist with your recovery."

"Mr. Westbrook?" I eyed her. I must have misunderstood. There's no way. No possible way.

"You don't mean Asher Westbrook?" I asked again.

I tried to sit up. Everything was wrong. As I pushed into the bed with my elbows a stinging pain shot through my arm. I looked down at the bandage wrapped around my left bicep.

"Yes. He has personally seen to everything. He's been worried," she whispered. "But I knew you'd be fine. Just a scratch on the arm and a bump on the head. Just a few stitches here and there." She smiled. "But he wanted everything a certain way. His instructions." She patted the back of my hand. "Don't know that I've met a man like him before."

I think she was trying to comfort me, but I still hadn't processed I was here – wherever here was – because of Asher.

Asher was a name I had wiped from my existence. My staff wasn't allowed to say his name. The fact that this woman said it so casually meant she had no idea what that man had done to me.

“No fever,” she reported.

I smiled weakly. “That’s great.”

I had a thousand questions for her. How had I ended up here? What did Asher have to do with it? Where did this raging headache come from? And could I please just get up and go pee?

But as she finished up her basic examination, the air shifted.

I didn’t have to hear his voice to know he was in the room. My body knew. I’d always had an uncanny Asher radar under my skin.

“Why didn’t you page me?” he asked the nurse. There was a darkness in his voice that made me shiver.

“She’s only been awake a few minutes, sir,” she answered.

They spoke as if I weren’t here between them.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. I didn’t want to see him. I didn’t want to look in his eyes. I didn’t want to hear his voice. I closed my eyes, praying the nurse would stay as a buffer between us. I didn’t know her, but I was willing to throw myself on her to keep her from leaving.

“You may leave us, Agnes,” he dismissed her casually. “I’d like to talk to Miss Tessier. Alone.”

No!

“Whatever you need, sir. I’ll be in my room checking supplies and updating Miss Tessier’s records.” She reached for a canvas bag and walked out. As soon as Agnes was gone, I knew I was trapped. I couldn’t run. I could barely prop myself up. What in the hell was happening?

“How are you feeling?” Asher asked, as if this was somehow normal. As if we were normal. He walked closer.

“Terrible,” I answered truthfully. Was it terrible because we were in the same room together? Terrible because I was confused? Terrible because my entire body felt foreign to me?

“Are you in pain? I have every medication you were prescribed. I can get you anything you want,” he offered. “Possibly more. Just say the word. Agnes is the best. The absolute best at pain management.”

I shook my head. “No more pain meds,” I responded. “That’s not necessary.”

“That’s a positive sign.”

“Sign of what?”

He rubbed the scruff along his jaw. It looked like he hadn’t shaved in days. I was afraid to study his face any closer. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to gaze into his eyes. Oh no. Not happening.

“That your recovery is going well,” he answered.

“Right. My recovery.” I glanced over the mound of blankets to where my toes wiggled at the foot of the bed. Agnes had layered several quilts on top of me.

I hated being in this position. He knew something I didn’t. It seemed he knew everything about this situation. He understood the circumstances and what had happened. He knew the nurse and knew this bedroom. My fingers curled around the soft comforter in frustration. I hated being at a disadvantage, especially in front of Asher. I still didn’t understand what was happening. The worst part was I had to depend on him for answers.

“I think I’m better now,” I lied. “I’ll get out of your hair and let you do whatever it is you do now.”

I didn’t know if it was possible to walk out of this room, but I wanted to try. I wanted to get as far away from Asher Westbrook as I could before we exchanged anymore small talk. Before he asked question. Before he told me something about himself. Some tiny anecdote that I

wouldn't be able to forget. I had to get out of here before any of that happened.

Asher towered over the side of the bed. "Journey, don't you remember what happened to you?"

I bit the inside of my cheek.

"Of course I do."

"Journey." His voice was stern and controlling.

How many times had I heard that tone? But it had been two years since I was in a room with Asher. Two long years of doing everything in my power to erase his memory. Erase the hold he had on me.

"What?" I refused to look at him.

He moved closer. The air was suddenly thicker. His body was next to mine. His finger landed on the underside of my chin and tilted it upward.

"Do you know why I brought you to Big Bear? Do you remember anything about the attack yesterday?" he asked.

If I stared at his chest it would be better. I tried to tell myself not to think about how sculpted and chiseled it was. How muscle met muscle in hard angles under his crisp white shirt. I spotted the gun tucked at his waist. *Holy shit*. What was going on? Was he a bodyguard again?

"I'm tired." I sighed. "And thirsty. And honestly, I'd like to get up and pee. So could you call the helpful nurse back in to give me some water?"

"Journey, look at me."

I never wanted my eyes to drift to his. But there was something about Asher that I couldn't deny. I blamed the long eyelashes. The smolder was undeniable. And how when he looked at me it was as if he could read my soul. He wasn't supposed to be able to do that. Not now, not ever.

But I did as he told me. I wasn't prepared for the sudden well of tears. His eyes said everything. He was worried and scared. He was protective and overbearing.

"What?" I whispered. Once I started, I couldn't look away. It was everything I had fought against.

If we held this gaze, was it possible to get to know each other again without having to say a word?

"It's ok if you can't remember. It will come back to you. And you're safe here. Nothing and no one will hurt you. I promise. You have time to recover. Time to remember when you're ready."

My lip started to tremble. What was he doing to me? There were two vacant years between us. He didn't deserve my tears. He left me. He walked out. I wasn't prepared for any of this. The pain he had caused was unbearable. How did I shield myself from him?

Maybe I didn't know why I was here or what happened to me, but I wasn't ready to forget the hollow feeling he had created in my chest. I hadn't forgiven him. I had no intention of ever forgiving him.

"I-I just want to get up and take a shower. Please." I turned my head before he could see the first tear fall.

"I'll get Agnes. Hold on," he offered.

He strolled out of the room. The tears were heavy on my lashes. Asher Westbrook was a liar. A horrible liar. Because as long as he was here my heart was going to break over and over. There was no way he could protect me from that kind of pain.

FIVE

Asher

I paced in the living room. It was the longest hour of my life. I waited for Journey to finish her shower. She had dismissed Agnes almost as soon as I sent her in. I realized maybe she just wanted me out of the room. Could I blame her?

She hated me.

There was a side of Journey I knew that few did. She was a survivor. She was strong and tenacious. I never dismissed her ability to claw her way up from a humble childhood. The woman I loved had always defied the odds. Maybe it was one of the reasons I knew I could leave—she would survive without me, no matter how painful it was.

I glanced at my phone when it rang. I was hoping for an update from my team, but it was Mickey.

“Mickey, what do you have for me?”

“Good morning, sir. How are things in L.A.?” she asked calmly.

“Actually, I’m in Big Bear.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Well, I hate to ask, sir, but...”

“What is it?”

“Avajeau. She and Nicole were supposed to travel this morning, but I called Nicole and told her that she needed to stay in Valencia a few more days.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Was that wrong? Would you like me to fly them back to New York? I can do that.”

“No. It wasn’t wrong.” I shook my head. I had thrown all my energy into having Journey moved from the hospital last night. I hadn’t called to check in with Avajeau.

“If you’re in Big Bear, should I have a car drive them to you? They aren’t far away. It would be easy to arrange.”

The knot under my ribs tightened. That would mean Journey would meet Avajeau. She would know the truth about why I left. I didn’t think either of us were prepared for that conversation. It was clear she was confused about yesterday’s attack. I couldn’t heap this problem on her.

“Mickey, tell Nicole to stay where she is. If Gene and Shelly need them to leave, find something suitable. I’d like Avajeau nearby, but I’m not ready for her to arrive at the cabin.”

“Absolutely. Anything else?”

I exhaled. “I’m going to be in Big Bear for a while. Clear my New York schedule. Clear everything for the next couple of days, and I’ll be back online in a couple days for calls.”

“I will handle everything.”

“Good. Thank you. Please tell Nicole I will call tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hung up and looked out the window at the tree line. I had to decide what was safest for Avajeau. For now, everyone was most protected by holding onto the truth a little while longer.

Until I had some answers, it was going to be difficult to work on capturing Journey’s attacker. The police had visited this morning but, while Journey was unconscious, there wasn’t much they could do. I wanted to speak to her first.

I hadn’t visited the cabin in Big Bear in over a year. It was far from L.A. and there was no reason to think the paparazzi would be able to find her here. Keeping her safe meant keeping her off the public’s radar. As far as they knew, she was at her Malibu home recovering. Dante was instructed to move in and out of her compound as if she were there. I wanted food deliveries. Flowers. All the expected activity surrounding Journey’s recovery. I wanted whoever had done this to believe she was in Malibu.

I flattened a large map on the coffee table and sat on the couch. I needed to focus on the attack. I circled the locations of Journey’s timeline for the seventy-two hours prior to the shooting. Dante had reluctantly forwarded her schedule to me. He threatened to ride up to Big Bear if Journey didn’t call the minute she awakened. He was the only one who knew where she was. It was a reluctant agreement I made with him. I traded revealing her actual location with taking over her security.

The door creaked open and I looked up.

God, she was gorgeous. I had tried to forget how soft her lips were. How the sunlight made her eyes look like the Caribbean Sea. For years, I built a security empire without a single glimpse of Journey Tessier’s breathtaking body. But I was a fucking idiot to think I could erase her. The lines of her body had been seared into my hands. I knew every curve and freckle. I couldn’t forget her, even when I drowned myself in bourbon and brunettes.

“How was the shower?” I asked.

Her hair hung in damp tendrils on her shoulders.

“Good. I needed it.” She walked toward me.

“Feeling any better?”

She shrugged. “Where did these clothes come from?”

“I had a few things sent here while you recuperate.”

“A few things? I saw an entire closet full of outfits in my size,” she argued.

“I might have gone a little overboard,” I admitted.

“You can return them. All of them. They aren’t necessary. And as soon as I’m home, I’ll have this outfit delivered to you.” She glanced down at the flowing pants and tank top that clung to her breasts. “I’ll call my driver to come pick me up. Or Dante. I’m sure he’d rather do it himself anyway.”

I shook my head. “No.”

She ignored my answer and walked past the couch. “Where is my phone?” She scanned the dining room table and the kitchen counter.

“Journey, you aren’t going anywhere. You’re staying here.”

“The hell I am.” It was the first glimpse of the spitfire I knew. I let out a deep breath, relieved she wasn’t different. That two years hadn’t changed her.

I rose from the couch. “Someone tried to kill you yesterday. Until I find him, you’re not leaving.”

“What did you say?”

“The madman with the gun is still out there. You aren’t going anywhere.”

I saw the fear flash across her eyes. She stepped back and gripped a chair.

“Journey?”

She sank into the seat. “Asher.”

“What is it?” In one long stride, I was next to her. “Are you in pain?”

She shook her head. “No. No.”

I was on the verge of shouting for Agnes, but I realized this had nothing to do with her condition and everything to do with the realization that her life was in jeopardy.

“I don’t remember it,” she whispered.

“It’s ok. It will come back to you. You just need time to heal. Time to recover.”

Her gaze whipped to mine. “Someone tried to kill me?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Not yet, anyway.”

I wanted to pull her into my arms. Keep her safe. Tell her I’d kill the sick bastard who tried to hurt her. I’d never let her go again. But one thing at a time. Catch the killer first.

Journey

I knew it was bad. I knew it had to be something horrific for Asher to be back in my life. But a murderer? A killer on the loose? I was paralyzed. I lost the ability to think or speak. I sat in the chair and shook. I shook so hard my teeth rattled.

I didn't answer his questions. I didn't move when he placed his hands on my shoulders.

"That's it. I'm taking you back to bed. You shouldn't be up. It's too much too fast."

I heard him speak. Archer's arms lifted me in the air and he carried me to the bedroom. I wanted to protest. He had no right to touch me. To wrap his warmth around me. To comfort me. Or save me. I didn't want any of it from him, yet at the same time, my instincts kicked in. I knew there was no one who could keep me safer. No one who had the intense level of detail where my safety was concerned.

He strolled through the room, maneuvering around the furniture.

I spoke up before he lowered me to the bed. "I can stand. I'm fine. You don't need to carry me around like a doll."

"You're in shock."

"Yes, but I'm not an invalid." I wiggled against him, feeling more like myself.

Shock was the perfect word to describe it. I was filled with disbelief and bewilderment. How had something like this happened? And why couldn't I remember it?

"Fine." He lowered me gently until my feet touched the floor.

I quickly backed away as if his touch could singe my skin. I didn't care if I lost my balance, or made myself dizzy.

"I want to be alone," I announced.

He sat on the bed and crossed his arms. I knew then he was unmovable. "That's not going to happen until I know you're all right. I can get Agnes if you'd rather have her monitor you."

"I don't need to be monitored!" I was angry enough to throw my arms in the air, but stopped when I felt the shooting pain against my shoulder.

"You're not going to remember anything like this. I'm not trying to scare you."

I closed my eyes. "Just leave, Ashe. Go."

"Not yet."

I felt his eyes on me, watching me. Observing every breath I took. Every sound I made. Every gesture. Every blink.

"Staring at me isn't going to help get my memory back."

"What will?" he asked.

"I don't know." I walked to the other side of the room. Maybe it would be easier to think

with more distance between us. I curled up in an oversized chair near the window.

“Is there anything that’s coming back to you? Anything at all? Even something that seems unimportant to you could be a lead,” he pressed. “Any memories? Anything in there?”

I swallowed. I wanted to tell him I was drowning in memories. They had flooded every sense I had. Every thought. I remembered the way he used to kiss me. I remembered the sound of his voice against my throat. How his palm squeezed mine when we walked on the beach. How he was ticklish under his ribs, and how he was allergic to pineapple. I remembered the stories he told me about Afghanistan and the missions he carried out. I wasn’t short on memories of Asher Westbrook.

“No.” My voice was flat. I stared out the window.

He sighed. “I’m not going to rush you. It will happen. You need more rest. You need to heal.”

“Can you stop telling me what I need to do? You don’t know what I need.”

Asher’s dark head moved from side to side. “I guess I deserve that.”

“How long do I have to stay?” I didn’t know if I had the kind of strength it was going to take to guard myself from the emotional avalanche starting down the mountain. I could already feel it happening.

He leaned forward, digging his elbows into his knees. I remembered that look. The seriousness in his eyes. The way his jaw clenched when he was worried about something.

“First, let’s focus on you feeling better.”

“How long?” I pushed. “I want to know how long you intend to keep me locked up in Big Bear.”

“You’re not locked up, Journey. You’re safe. There’s a big difference.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“If I gave you the option to go back to Malibu right now, would you take it? Would you risk your life just to spite me?”

My eyes blazed as I faced him. I wanted the answer to be that I would run out of here as fast as I could, but it wasn’t that simple. I didn’t know who I could trust. I couldn’t remember how I had been shot. I didn’t particularly want to test out my safety at the beach house. I was left with only one solution, and I hated him.

“No.”

“Good.” He pushed off the bed.

“Where are you going?” I squeaked.

“It looks like the shock has passed. I don’t think you’re in danger of passing out. I’m going to let you get some rest. If you remember anything, come find me. My room is down the hall.”

Of course he wanted me to find his bedroom. I wasn’t going there. I’d never go there again.

“Good night, Journey.”

He closed the door and was gone.

SEVEN

Asher

My eyes burned they were so tired. I had caught up on the Westbrook Securities' reports Mickey had sent over. Agnes let me know that Journey had eaten a few bites of dinner, but turned most of it away. I didn't know whether that was caused by a physical lack of appetite or her stubbornness.

I punched the pillow behind my head. Nothing was comfortable. I turned off my tablet and tossed it next to me on the king-size bed.

There were no updates from the police. Nothing from Dante. It was as if we were in a remote part of the world, cut off from all communication. It was much worse than that, though. No information meant the killer was roaming freely and I wasn't any closer to catching him.

I reached for the switch on the lamp next to the bed when I heard footsteps in the hall. They were fast and heavy. Frantic.

The door to the bedroom flew open just as I reached for my gun.

Journey panted. Her hands gripped her neck. There was a wild look in her eye that was somehow both childlike and feral.

I jumped from the bed and rushed to her. "What happened? Are you ok?" I scanned her body for signs of her incision bleeding.

She waved my hands off her.

"I-I remember pieces of it. I didn't before, but it just...I had a memory of yesterday. It hit me. Out of nowhere. I-I don't know what to do."

I let my palm fall to her lower back and I guided her to the edge of my bed.

"Sit. Take a deep breath." I walked over to the dresser and poured a glass of water for her. "Here. Take a sip."

She clasped the glass in her hands and drank. I waited for her to finish.

"What do you remember?" I took the seat next to her, trying to give her space to breathe. The mattress bounced beneath my heavy frame.

Her eyes darted back and forth.

"I don't know how I could have forgotten. How did I forget something like this? Something like being shot? What is wrong with me?"

"It's all right. You hit your head pretty hard, and with the combination of drugs for the surgery and sedation to travel, I would expect anyone to have the same reaction."

"But not you. You remember every horrible thing that happened to you overseas."

"This isn't about me right now. We don't need to dredge that up. Tell me. What do you remember?" I tried to pace my words so she didn't feel rushed. I didn't know if it would help to

tell her that the memories hadn't all come home with me in one package. They hit me in spurts. Just like this had happened to her.

Journey began to rattle off her account of the shooting.

"I was leaving the gym with Tristan. It was barely light out. The sun was starting to come up and I teased him about how evil he was for making me work out so early." She paused, staring at her bare feet. She was wearing a T-shirt that hung off her shoulder. She had raced to my room so quickly she hadn't added pajama bottoms. I tried to keep my eyes off her thighs.

"He told me it would all be worth it once I started the award circuit. He said, 'you've got this'." She held her breath. "I was getting ready to tell him as soon as the awards were over we were going to sit on the deck and eat gallons of ice cream together. But that's when I heard the gun. It didn't register that that was what the sound was. I know what guns sound like, but not at the gym. Never at the gym—it didn't fit. I screamed. I think I kept screaming. I'm not sure exactly. I don't remember what happened next." Her voice cracked. "I think. Maybe..."

"What is it?"

"I think I remember blood. There was blood on my hands. I was washing my face before I got back in bed and the warm water..." She shuddered. "Oh God."

"It's ok. You are ok." How did I help her? She wouldn't let me touch her. I couldn't hold her. I couldn't lock the door and promise the darkness would never find a way inside.

"Tristan? Did he? Is he ok? Where is Tristan? There was so much blood. I can't get it out of my head."

I knew what she was going through. I knew the trauma wouldn't ease up anytime soon.

"He's still in the hospital. He jumped in front of the gunman. That's why the bullet grazed under your arm. I'm also anxious for him to wake up. I need to interview him."

Her eyes widened in horror. "It went through him?"

I nodded. "It did. But the doctors say his surgery was a success. He's being watched carefully. I'll have the first call when he's awake," I assured her.

"I want to see him. I need to thank him." She jumped from the bed. "I have to go to the hospital. He has to know he saved me. He has to know what he did for me. He has to."

The pain circled my ribs, suffocating me. She was on the verge of hysteria. The shock began to settle in. Her brush with death. The memories of yesterday morning. It was starting to catch up to her.

"You can't go to the hospital." I looked at her. "I'll make some calls and get an update on Tristan for you. But this is the safest place in the world you can be right now. If you go anywhere near that hospital the press will be all over you. You can't risk it. I won't allow it."

"You can't hold me here against my will, Asher, not when I'm starting to remember. I have to thank Tristan for what he did. You're not going to stop me."

"Want to test that theory?" I taunted.

I wasn't letting her out of my sight. She didn't need to know I slept in the chair in her room last night. That for twenty-four hours, I hadn't been more than twenty feet away from her. That I was holstered and ready to shoot at the first sign of danger.

There would be time for that. Her life came before anything else.

"You can't be serious." Her eyes flared. "I have my memory back. I don't need your recovery cabin or whatever you call this place."

"You're not leaving."

She crossed her arms. "And I was almost going to say thank you for the hot shower and soft bed, but I've changed my mind."

I arched my eyebrows.

“You want to thank me for something else instead?”

She groaned. “No. I want to go home.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Then you go with me. You can take your old room. I don’t want you to, but I’ll give you that if you insist on this arrangement.”

“That’s generous of you. But I think I’ve outgrown the security quarters.”

“Oh right. Because you’re a millionaire now.” She rolled her eyes. “This is all insane. You’re not a bodyguard anymore. Why are you acting like one?”

“I’m acting like a man who is putting your life above everything else right now.”

“Why?”

I saw the way her face fell as if a soft shadow had crossed her. She let go of the hostility and aggression.

“Why are you doing this, Ashe?”

“My first answer wasn’t enough?”

“No. I don’t think it is. I want the truth. All of it.”

If only she knew. If only I could tell her. But my confession was a selfish one. I wasn’t going to put that on Journey. Not with everything she still had to face.

“That’s all I have. Are you going to be able to go back to sleep or should I call Agnes?”

She placed her hand on the door. “You’re an asshole. Do you know that? A bastard.”

She slammed the door. I didn’t exhale until I heard her last footsteps disappear into her room.

EIGHT

Journey

I swear I didn't know I could survive an entire week without my cell phone, but I managed. There was actually something peaceful about being disconnected from everyone at all times. I wasn't willing to admit it to Asher. Every morning I asked for my phone. And every time he gave me the same gruff "no."

Luckily, the Big Bear cabin was stocked with an incredible library. Before she left last week, Nurse Agnes informed me that since I didn't have a concussion, there were no reading restrictions. I started with the classics. I couldn't remember the last time I had read this much, or spent this much time alone.

I could change the dressing on my arm without any help. After a few days, the wrapped gauze bandage was reduced to an oversized Band-Aid. The slice the bullet cut ran from the side of my bicep along the back of my arm. Most people would probably never notice it.

I wasn't going to be one of those people. I'd wear the scar for the rest of my life, knowing how close I came to dying.

I closed the book I was reading and placed it next to me on the bedside table. The house was quiet. I knew in a few minutes I'd hear Asher's footsteps in the kitchen. He was a notorious midnight snacker.

It was one of a thousand things about Asher that was carved into my eternal memory. He liked to run early in the morning. He never missed a Texas football game on TV. He liked to shave with a fresh razor and never used one more than once. He liked bourbon straight. I didn't want to fall asleep reliving everything I knew about him.

I pulled the covers close to my chest and turned off the light. I stared at the ceiling. I listened for Asher's unmistakable sounds. Ever since the night I ran into his room, I had tried to put as much distance between as I could. As much distance as two people could have co-existing under the same roof.

I didn't know if he realized I was mortified. That his room was the last place I wanted to use as my sanctuary. It didn't matter. It was one more page in the history of things I did I'd rather pretend never happened. I closed my eyes, praying sleep would find me quicker than it had since I had arrived in Big Bear.

The next morning, I ventured into the living room and out onto the massive wraparound porch. The air smelled fresh and clean. I took a giant inhale, feeling the peacefulness wash over me. It was another thing I didn't want to admit to Asher. I liked it up here. Almost as much as I liked it at the beach house. I had traded seagulls for morning birds and shells for stones.

"Good morning."

I froze when I heard his voice behind me. I turned slowly. He was dressed for his morning run. His earbuds dangled around his neck.

“Hi.”

I watched in awe as he stretched his muscular arms overhead. I was aware of how beautiful his body had always been to me. The twinge of jealousy that wormed its way into this moment surprised me. Was there another woman who admired his rock-hard body the way I did? Had there been many women since we were together?

“I’m headed out for an hour.”

“I see that.” My gaze was stuck on his biceps. I lowered my eyes to the beams on the deck.

“You wouldn’t want—” He shook his head. “Never mind. Bad idea.”

“What? What is it?” I leaned closer, peeling myself off the railing.

“You seem to be feeling better. Do you want to join me? I’ll take it easy on you. We could try some of the low-key trails.” The smirk he made was enough for me to melt into a puddle, despite the chill in the air.

I paused too long.

“It was a bad idea. I’ll just go. You stay and relax.”

“No!” I covered my mouth. “I mean. Yes, I’d like to go. I haven’t been on the trails yet. Can you give me a minute to change?”

“Sure. I’ll wait.”

I tried to enter the house casually, but once I was inside I hustled to my room and flung open the closet door. Part of me worried Asher would change his mind and leave before I had socks on. The other part was in disbelief he was actually letting me leave the house.

He had spared no expense in purchasing my wardrobe. My hands landed on a cute pair of running shorts, a sports bra, and a cutoff shirt. I dressed and grabbed the running shoes on my way to the balcony. I immediately felt Asher’s eyes on my stomach when I stepped in the sunlight.

“You’re going to need to tie those.”

“Hmm? What?”

He pointed to my feet. “Your shoe laces.”

“Oh. Right.” I knelt to secure double knots.

“We can take it slow,” he offered.

“No. I need to move,” I argued. I hadn’t had a good workout since the shooting and I craved those feel-good endorphins. I wanted my body to work hard. I wanted the challenge. Most of all, I wanted Asher to stop looking at me like I was fragile and delicate. I needed to erase that look of pity he carried around with him.

“Show me what you’ve got,” I taunted as I rose from the deck.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for.” He jogged down the three flights of stairs that ended in the driveway.

“I can handle it.” I waggled my eyebrows. My confidence was high. I was excited to be out of the house.

Asher chuckled. “We’ll see.”

He pivoted on his heels and darted into the woods, ducking under a low limb. I took in a big gulp of air and followed him onto the trail.

The beginning of the trail was mostly flat. We kept a steady pace, and I was certain Asher had been teasing me for the fun of it. I had to watch where my feet landed, but fifteen minutes in to our run and I relieved it wasn’t as hard as he had made it sound. But then we turned and

started running uphill. My week of inactivity and recovery bit me in the ass. Hard. I needed to stop, but didn't want to admit it.

I pushed myself to keep Asher's pace. I forced myself to follow him, even though the distance between was growing. He leapt over a fallen log and it was the last straw. I couldn't go any farther. My side ached with a nasty cramp. My breath was no longer even. I steadied myself against a tree. Asher was out of sight. I wondered how long it would take him to notice I wasn't on his heels any longer.

I leaned into the tree, sucking in big swallows of air.

I looked up when I heard his footsteps ahead on the trail.

"Shit, Journey. Are you ok?"

I nodded. "Just a cramp. No big deal."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and jogged toward me. "I knew it was too much."

"No. It's not too much. I just need a break."

"I pushed you. I shouldn't have."

"Not everything is your fault, Ashe." I stared in his eyes. It was one of the things I had vowed not to do, but he was standing next to me. Even with an entire forest surrounding us, there was nowhere to move. No escape. I looked into the rivers of emotion and saw how much hurt my words caused.

"Yeah, everything kind of is." He stood facing me.

My heart was about to beat out of my chest, but it wasn't from the hike. It was from. From how the energy changed when he looked at me that way. From how I reacted to the nearness of his lips.

"Do you think when the cramp lets up you'll be able to make it back to the house, or do I need to carry you?"

My eyes widened. "You are not carrying me."

"You want to test that option?"

I tried to back up, but I was pressed against the tree. He could fling me over his shoulder in an instant if he wanted.

"I can walk out. Give me a few minutes." I crouched to the forest floor. "It doesn't mean you can't keep running. You should go. I can find my way back to the house. It's one trail." Maybe my pulse would return to normal if he would leave.

"You know I can't do that. It's not safe to leave you alone."

"I don't need a bodyguard in the middle of the woods. There is no one out here. No one at the cabin. There are no people. No one, Asher. We're completely alone."

I saw the flicker in his eyes. We had been avoiding each other inside the house. Entering and exiting rooms as if the other had a contagious disease. We barely spoke to each other all day. We could pretend we had things to do. Pretend we weren't irreversibly drawn to each other. Pretend that the solitude of the cabin was haunting each of us when we climbed in bed in night.

Now, it was the emptiness of the forest. The knowledge that for a solid week Asher and I had been alone. Dancing this dance all by ourselves.

NINE

Asher

The blood rushed to my fingertips. I wanted to pull her against me. Wrap my arms around her body. Tangle my hands in her hair. I wanted to kiss her pouty lips until they were mine again. I inched closer.

Journey's eyes widened with the kind of innocence that pulled me toward her the first time we met. She ever so slightly bit her bottom lip.

"How is the cramp?" I asked, moving my hand to the exposed skin under her ribcage. "Is it here?"

She nodded. "It was. It was right there."

My fingers dug into her lower back as my thumb brushed the silkiness of her abdomen. It was enough to draw her against my body with a small step forward. I didn't know if I'd ever touch her again. If she'd ever let me be this close. Be this intimate. If I didn't kiss her now, I'd always regret it.

My mouth covered hers in the hungriest kiss I'd ever known. My tongue pushed inside and flicked against hers. Journey moaned lightly as I explored her mouth as if it were the first time. Her soft perfect lips moved in unison with mine. I pressed her body against the tree, cupping her jaw. I didn't know how to be gently and possessive at the same time. But I sure as hell was going to try.

It was the first time since I had brought her to Big Bear that I didn't feel the knot under my ribs. I nipped at her bottom lip, drowning in her. Absorbing the contact. Relishing her curves. Touching her everywhere.

But then my ears perked. I heard a snap.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Shh." I broke away, turning from Journey. I reached for the small pistol I carried with me on my morning runs.

I heard her gasp when she saw it.

"Stay here," I ordered. "And stay low." I pushed her shoulders so she was crouched on the ground.

I crept along the trail, and moved into the brush in the direction where I heard the loud cracking sound. I checked over my shoulder, keeping one eye on Journey and one ahead. Had I let my guard down? Had I given in to the solitude of the cabin for too long? I scowled as I edged forward. Guarding Journey had always been a problem. She distracted me. She pulled me from focus. I growled to myself, scanning the woods for a trespasser.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up when I saw what was ahead. I froze. *Fuck.*

I crawled backward, staying out of sight until I was at the tree with Journey.

“What is it?” she whispered. “Is there someone out there?”

I put my finger to my lips and shook my head no. I motioned to my eyes with double fingers and pointed at the target forty yards in front of us.

“Wh—” she gasped, when I covered her mouth with my hand.

Her eyes bulged.

A mama bear was traipsing through the forest, towing two cubs behind her. I curled a hand around Journey’s waist, pulling her against me. If we stayed still the mama would continue. She wasn’t headed off her path, but I didn’t want to startle her. The cubs rolled and jumped on each other, before finally following her.

When they were gone, I lowered my hand.

“Oh my God. That was amazing.”

I looked at Journey, expecting her to be rattled. I let out a deep laugh. “Amazing, huh?”

I stood and helped her to her feet.

“Yes. I’ve never seen a bear up close before, let alone cubs. They were adorable. Wow. Just wow.”

“Adorable can rip you apart. Hopefully, we won’t see any more. I think we should head back to the cabin in case she turns around. This run didn’t go as expected. Nothing did,” I grumbled.

Journey hopped up from the ground. “I know you don’t like unexpected things.” I heard the accusatory tone in her voice.

“That’s not what I meant.” It had nothing to do with the kiss and everything to do with pushing her too hard physically. Add to that a dangerous animal.

“It doesn’t matter. I think I’ll get a cup of detox tea and spend the day in the library.”

I had to jog to catch up to her. She was already descending the path. She was pissed. I didn’t know how to bring the moment back. I didn’t know how to tell her kissing her was only the beginning of what I wanted to do. Damn bear.

I ran beside her. “J, wait.”

Her head whipped around. “You stopped calling me that a long time ago.”

“Maybe I should start again.” I smiled.

Instead of leaning into me. Instead of reaching for my hand. She huffed and started her trek to the house.

I exhaled. Spending the day in the cabin together was going to feel just as lonely as before.

TEN

Journey

I heard screams. Loud. Frightened. Ear-piercing screams. I shook my head, trying to make them stop.

“J. Journey. You’re dreaming. Wake up.”

My eyes adjusted to the darkness. Asher was next to me on the bed. His arm wrapped around my shoulder and pulled me against his chest. I let go of the pillow I had tried to strangle.

His chest was warm and bare. For a second I nuzzled against him, sighing into his embrace. God, I loved how his skin always smelled like clean soap and felt as if he had been sitting in the sun.

“It’s ok. It was just a dream,” he soothed.

I pushed off the solid plane of muscle. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s ok. I ran as soon as I heard you.”

“You didn’t have to do that. You can go back to bed.” My voice still sounded foreign in my ears as if it was raspy from screaming.

“No. I’m staying until you’re asleep.”

“Why?” I questioned.

“Nightmares like that aren’t easy to shake,” he explained.

I didn’t believe that was the truth. “Really?”

“What?” He squeezed my shoulder. “You’re upset. I’ll wait until I know you’re ok. It’s easier to fall back asleep if someone is with you.”

“I am ok.”

“Try to sleep, J.”

There it was again. The familiarity. The pretense of closeness.

I shrugged away from him. “Why are you doing all this?” I couldn’t remember what the dream was about. But I wasn’t scared anymore. My pulse had returned to normal.

“I want to make sure you’re ok.”

“You’re not a bodyguard anymore, Asher. You haven’t been mine in a long time.”

I was glad it was dark so I couldn’t see his eyes.

He tensed against me. “Journey, it’s late. Lie down and get some sleep.”

I shook his arm off my shoulder. “Damn it.”

“What is wrong with you?”

I shoved his chest, moving him barely an inch. I had suppressed the rage and confusion for too long. It came barreling out at once.

“What are you doing in my bed Asher? What am I doing in your house?” I was yelling.

“Why are we here? Why are you here? Why do you think you have a say in anything that happens to me after you walked out? Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Don’t do this.” His voice remained icy calm.

“Do what? Show emotion? Tell you you’re driving me insane with your controlling bullshit? That you have no right to crawl in my bed after you’ve been out of it for two years?” I was on my knees, growing taller and angrier.

He was going to hear two years of pent-up heartbreak.

I moved to strike him but he caught my wrist before I could slap his face.

“Stop it, Journey.”

“No.” I threw the other arm at him, and he snatched that one just as quickly.

“There’s no point in doing this.”

“Why? Because you think you might say something? Feel something? Or would you rather just keep me up here trapped like a prisoner. I won’t be Rapunzel in your rustic cabin,” I mocked. “I can’t live like this. I want to leave. Tomorrow.”

“I would have to perform a complete threat assessment at the Malibu estate before we could relocate. I don’t see why it’s even worth it. You’re safe here. The threat doesn’t know you’re here.”

It was that word that chilled me. The *threat* was still out there.

“I can’t stop living my life because of a lunatic. If I stay in hiding, he’s won.”

I couldn’t help but feel the warmth in Asher’s hands. His grip on my wrists was steady.

“He’s not winning. And he’s not going to win. I’ll make sure of that.”

“While keeping me hostage?”

“God damn it, Journey. You’re not a hostage. You’re safe.”

I tugged on his grip. “Then let me go.”

“No.”

I pulled harder against the restraint. “Asher,” I whispered.

He drew me closer to him, so that my body leaned forward.

“Don’t ask me to let you go again.”

“You can’t keep me.”

He was close enough I could feel his breath on my cheek and the heat from his body. I inhaled his scent, swearing I could reject what these memories did to me. The familiarity of Asher was too much. The closeness. The intimacy. The pain that was between us.

Darkness surrounded us and all I could think about was why we weren’t together anymore. I had loved this man with every part of my soul. And he had left me alone.

ELEVEN

Asher

The smell of her shampoo made me drunk. Her skin. Her warm breath. Five shots of bourbon and I'd feel less intoxicated than I did in this moment, holding her.

I'd spent the week keeping an eye on her, but keeping my distance. It hadn't been easy. More like hard as hell. One of the hardest things I'd ever done, and that statement came from a man who performed rescue missions.

I handled conference calls in the study, burying myself in numbers and projections. I went through itineraries with Mickey, reframing my appointments for virtual meetings. I listened to the acquisition proposals, studying the due diligences of the companies I wanted to bring into my portfolio. And I did all of it while digging into the details of Journey's attack.

I hadn't made much headway. The LAPD wasn't any more successful.

I'd watched the scratchy feed the gym had provided a hundred times. It was dark and impossible to make out the gunman. If only she had hired a new bodyguard. If only she took her safety as seriously as I did. None of this would have happened.

She wanted to be normal. She wanted to get coffee and go for runs in the park. She wanted to shop with friends and help out at church bakes sales on Sundays, but that wasn't the kind of life she lived. A-list celebrities couldn't do those kinds of things unless they were willing to hide out in tiny Montana towns.

Wasn't that what I had loved about her? She *was* normal. Journey was a breath of fresh air in a town that ran on greed and popularity. We used to joke about moving somewhere far from the fame. Move back to her roots in Georgia. To the small town where she grew up in. That was the woman I fell in love with—the one who could be sexy and glamorous one minute, and have be buried up to her elbows in cookie dough the next without an ounce of makeup on. She was kindness and brains personified. It made it even more unbelievable that someone wanted to hurt her.

There had to be more to the attack. There had to be more information out there about a motive, but I didn't want to press her at Big Bear. I didn't want to ask too much too soon. Part of me knew I was using every distraction I could grab, to keep the inevitable from happening. I didn't want to have to let her go.

My chest pounded. I wanted her as much now as the first time I met her. I wanted her more than I did today in the woods.

"You left me," she whispered. "I woke up and you were gone. Just vanished."

"I know." I held her wrists against my chest. I had regretted it every fucking day.

I dropped her wrists, tangling my hands in her hair. I crushed her mouth with a rough kiss. A

kiss that said everything I couldn't.

The little moans coming from her throat made me ache for her. My tongue twisted along hers. Tasting her. Drinking her in.

Her hands wrapped against my neck.

I could devour her. Wipe away the pain of the past. Kiss her breathless until she forgot I hurt her. I wasn't the man who was supposed to leave. I was the man who had sworn to always protect her with my life.

I groaned against the softness of her lips. "J."

She nipped at my mouth, climbing into my lap one leg at a time. My tongue flicked along hers. Her skin was warm under the flimsy tank top she slept in. My fingers pressed into her flesh, remembering how she felt. Every smooth line. Every curve. My hands molded to the roundness of her breasts. Her tits perked into hard points under my touch. Sweet precious Journey.

She sighed as I lifted the tank top over her head.

Her nipples rubbed against my chest as I brought my mouth crashing down on hers. The friction built as her hips ground into my cock.

"Why did you leave me?" she whimpered.

I sighed. "It's complicated. I didn't want to."

"Tell me you didn't have a choice. Tell me someone put a gun to your head."

My hands coasted to her hips. "There was a gun to my head," I groaned. "I swear I did it for you."

Our bodies were on a course that was set to combust. We could say and pledge anything we wanted. There was no turning back. No turning off the charge of electricity pulsing beneath our skin.

"Don't leave me again," she whimpered.

"I won't," I promised, tugging her panties at her hips. I meant it. I meant every fucking word.

I could have lost her. With one bullet my life would have ended.

I'd never put us in that position again. Tonight I'd prove it. I'd show her how much I loved her. How sorry I was. As I buried myself inside her over and over. Making her scream my name. Coaxing her to come harder than she ever had.

Tonight was a new beginning.

We'd fuck until the sun came up. Until we were covered in sweat and the smell of sex. Fuck until we had forgiven each other. Until I had forgiven myself.

I lowered Journey to the pillow, sliding my hand between her legs. Her knees fell to the side as I massaged her center and her hips danced under my command.

"Ohh, Ashe," she cried.

My head whipped around when the alert alarm sounded from my tablet.

I jerked upright. My hand froze between her thighs.

"Oh my God. What is that?" she asked, panting the words. Journey pressed her knees together.

It was a high-pitched alarm, guaranteed to wake me even in a deep sleep. I had it set for emergency updates. I didn't like that it was sounding off now. I couldn't ignore it. Not even when we were about to have everything we wanted.

"Wait here. I'll be right back. Just give me a second," I instructed, walking into the great room. My devices were plugged in and resting on the kitchen table.

My tablet blinked and the siren wailed from the small speaker.

I pressed mute and read the alert on the screen. I had to scan it a second time to make sure I

read it correctly.

Journey appeared in the doorway with the quilt wrapped around her naked shoulders. “Ashe? What is it? What’s wrong? Did they catch him? Please tell me that’s what it is.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “You didn’t tell me you had email threats.” I stared at her. “You’ve never mentioned your email. Not once.”

“What are you talking about?” She stepped closer.

“I asked for details. Everything. Anything. How many times have we gone over the past six months? I said you couldn’t leave any detail out. Nothing.”

“Why do you sound so mad at me? What happened, Ashe?”

I held up the screen. “This. This is what happened. I got the report back on your email account. You’ve had fifty-five threats from the same account. The IP address changed ten times, but there’s no mistake, you had a repeated threat.”

How could she have withheld this information? Didn’t she know I was doing everything in my power to catch this guy?

“Let me see that.” She took the tablet from my hands and read the top briefing of the report. “I’ve never seen these.” She looked at me. “I haven’t had any threatening emails.”

“They’re all right here, J. Fifty-five.” I hadn’t read more than a few keywords from them.

“I’ve never seen them.” She remained defiant. “How did you even get into my email?”

“My team analyzed all your traffic,” I answered. “They scoured your social media too. I should have a report that cross-references this address with any posts.”

“You didn’t ask me about that.” She shoved the tablet into my hands.

“Ask? I had to get an analysis on all threatening activity.”

She turned away. “So you hacked my accounts? Did you break into my phone too? Is that why I can’t have it?”

“Hold on. We’re getting off target here.” I tossed the tablet on the counter. “I have a potential lead. These emails could lead us to your attacker and you’re pissed at me?”

She pulled the quilt tighter. It was starting to slip against her arm. There was a thin sliver of moonlight falling across the floor like a line dividing the room in half. Journey was on her side and I was on mine.

“I’m pissed about everything,” she answered.

“That’s fair.” I lowered my voice. I didn’t want this to escalate into a fight, but I knew we were past that point.

“And you think it’s justified? All your actions? Keeping me hidden. Hacking my personal information. Heading up the investigation. Every decision you’ve made for a week without even asking my opinion. You believe those were the right calls to make?”

“I do.” I pressed my lips together.

“Then I’m going back to bed. *Alone.*”

TWELVE

Journey

He could be infuriating and stubborn. Like an immovable wall. Had it been one of the things I loved or hated about him? Standing in the Big Bear living room, I wasn't sure anymore. The news of the emails was disturbing. The fact that Asher had hacked all my accounts was maddening.

I hadn't leaned on him in so long. What used to be natural now felt like an invasion of my privacy.

And then there were the kisses that had blistered my lips and turned me into complete putty. I wanted his hands on me. His breath blazing over my skin. My body craved him. It missed him.

He could soothe my nightmares and hold me.

But this was reality. Asher was controlling and overprotective. And right now he was in bodyguard mode. The man who had started to let the shield crack fifteen minutes ago was quickly gone – he had patched it back up.

I saw the gun tucked in his pajama pants. I didn't even realize he had grabbed it on the way out of the bedroom. He had an ease with guns and weapons I couldn't begin to understand.

"Don't do that." His gruff voice carried over my shoulder.

"Why not? We can't do this. I can't do this. I don't want to fight with you."

He sighed. "Put us aside. I want to talk to you about the emails."

"Of course you do."

He had the ability to switch from emotion to mission focus as if it was as easy as turning a light switch on and off. I was still angry I had let him get me naked.

"J. Talk this through. If you've never seen them talk to me. Help me figure it out."

"Oh, all right." I lowered my eyes to the floor and slumped on the couch. "I didn't see those emails. Dante forwards the important things to my private account. If it's fan mail, he handles it. Someone on his staff responds."

"Then there's a possibility Dante read these?" he pressed.

I shrugged. "I don't know. It's possible I guess."

"I need to get him on the phone now."

"Asher, wait. What time is it?"

"3am," he replied.

"Let Dante sleep. You can talk to him in the morning."

He groaned. "You don't get it. I need to speak to him because this comes first. You come first."

"Then why don't you act like it?"

“Excuse me?” He put his cell down.

“Nothing has made sense for the past week. If I’m being completely honest, the past two years.” I turned to look at him. “It shouldn’t take a near-death experience for you to be back in my life. And I don’t even know if this is back. You’re cold. You’re distant. Unless I need you. And then you want to be in my bed. I can’t handle it. I can’t handle this. Whatever it is.”

He tried to talk, but I held up my hand. I wasn’t finished.

“I may never have another chance to say this, so I’m going to say it before I lose my courage.” My throat tightened. “You were supposed to be it. You were supposed to be the man I spent my life with. I trusted you. I believed you. And you walked away.” I blinked. “That kind of blind trust doesn’t suddenly reappear. I felt so broken I didn’t believe in any man. I don’t know that I will.” I took a deep breath. “I know you’re worried about me. I believe you. But I don’t want my hired bodyguard back. I don’t want surprise kisses in the woods. I don’t want you to comfort me after a bad dream. I don’t want you to break my heart again. That’s what I need to say.”

“I’m sorry. I am sorry for what I did.”

“And you want my forgiveness?” I asked.

“Yes. I want you to forgive me. But I want more than that.” His voice was deep and slow.

“Ok. I’m listening. What do you want?”

“It’s simple. It’s always been simple.” He paused in front of the couch and I felt the energy around him. There was nothing cold or distant. He radiated heat. “You, J. I want you.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple.”

He knelt in front of me. “You’re right. I get wrapped up in the target. I spend more time on your safety than you. I always did. I’m doing it again, against every warning in my head. I have to fight the instinct to protect you and just give in and love you.” He tugged at the quilt, letting it fall away, exposing my breasts to the cool air. He sighed. “I do love you. I love you enough to abandon my company. Enough to hide you from the world. Enough to spend every dime I have to make sure you’re alive and happy.”

My pulse quickened. His thumb ran over my nipple, making it perk. My eyes landed on his.

“Not like this,” I whispered.

“Then like what? How do I tell you I’ve been lost since…” His words trailed off. “Since I made the worst mistake of my life.”

“Sex isn’t the answer. It’s too easy this way. We’re too good at this. Sex makes it seem like everything is ok.”

And it was. Our bodies knew each other. Wanted each other. He didn’t even have to touch me to spread fire under my skin.

His mouth lowered to my nipple. Kissing it before sucking it between his teeth.

My head reeled back. “Ashe,” I whimpered. I pressed his head to my chest, wanting more pressure. Wanting to feel the life surge through me.

His teeth clamped against the tight bud and I bucked. The last of the quilt fell to the floor.

“This…this is what I’m talking about,” I whimpered, knowing I was already lost to him.

His hand trailed along my waist before sliding my legs apart. I gasped as his fingers slipped between my wet folds. I opened, eager to feel him. He flicked my clit and my hips rocked. It wasn’t enough. I rocked again, panting until his fingers sank inside me.

Shit. It shouldn’t feel this good. But it did. It always did when Asher worshipped my body.

His fingers pumped in and out. He climbed on top of me as we fell backward on the couch. His mouth covered my neck and shoulder, kissing me wildly. Licking, sucking.

I worked his pajama pants over his hips, pushing them down his legs until he could kick them

off his ankles. They landed on the floor. His made a trail of kisses, lower each time until he was circling my navel.

I gasped as my knees were pressed wide and his head dove to my heated center.

“Oh God,” I moaned. His tongue was wild and expressive lapping at my juices.

I tugged at his dark hair, urging him to go deeper. Suck harder. Drink faster.

As his tongue plunged inside me I found the fire I had missed. My body was alive in his arms. I was like captured lightning when he commanded me this way.

I felt his growls vibrate against my thighs and through my entrance.

My core tightened, tingling faster and tighter as he coaxed the orgasm from my body.

“Come baby,” he growled. “Let me feel you.” I heard the anguish in his voice.

I didn’t have a defense when it came to this man. He could love me. He could leave me. And I’d still be his. My body would still come for him time after time.

The last resistance I had snapped as he thrust his tongue from my clit to my pussy and I felt the waterfall of sensation wash over me.

“Oh shit,” I moaned.

I grabbed his head, grinding my hips into the roughness of his face. Burning my thighs with the friction. Releasing my body from the built-up ache that seven days of Asher had created. It poured through me, lifting me through the sky. Until I had nowhere to go but land in his arms.

He kissed my knee, stilling me with a lusty gaze. “I missed you. So much.”

He tucked his arms under me and scooped me up from the couch. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“My bed,” he answered.

He kicked the door to his room open and lowered me on the bed. He climbed toward me and I thought my heart would explode.

I’d loved him. I’d mourned him. I’d cried too much. Missed him too much. And now the pain had vanished. He was here, loving me again.

He folded his arms around me, kissing me roughly. I tasted my scent on his tongue.

“I swear I’ll never leave again,” he promised. “I’m a different man, J. We have a lot to catch up on. I have a lot I want to tell you.”

I nodded. We could talk tomorrow. We could talk next week. I didn’t care as long as he was inside me.

“Will you tell me after you fuck me? Please?”

I reached between us, fisting his wide cock in my hand. He groaned as my palm slid over the silky skin. I traced the throbbing vein with my thumb.

“You drive me crazy, Journey. I want to fuck you. And never stop.”

I whimpered, wanting that too. “You better not stop.”

He nudged his cock against my entrance. My breath caught as he made a circle, coating the thick head in my juices. His fingers threaded through mine as he pushed my hands over my head.

His cock inched inside me and we both groaned. The pressure and pleasure were intense. I had to adjust to his size again. I stretched and quivered around him, knowing what was about to come.

“Never again,” he whispered, clasp my hands. He slammed into me and I screamed his name as he drove deep inside me.

I looked into his eyes. His gorgeous face hovered over me. His chiseled jaw set in a determined line as he thrust into me, making us whole again.

“Asher, I—” My head turned to the side as his body overwhelmed mine with pleasure.

“What? You want more? You need more?” he asked with a husky voice.

“Yes, please,” I begged.

He scooped me up, rolling me on my stomach. I grew wetter just thinking about how it felt when he took me from behind. He shifted me onto my knees.

I pressed my palms into his expensive sheets as my ass rose in the air. I hissed as his cock sank inside me. Each time he gripped my waist harder and tighter.

My breasts bounced, grazing the bed with each thrust. It felt so good. So incredible to be in his bed again. To be consumed and loved by his body.

Asher skimmed my hip, following my hipbone, grazing my clit with his fingers.

“Ohh.” I jerked upright.

He chuckled. “Feel good?”

I moaned when his fingers flicked against the tender bud of flesh. Each touch jolted me closer to my next orgasm. I was going to come faster this time. What choice did I have? Asher filled me so fully. I clenched around his cock, trying to climb my way to climax faster. He pushed inside me, slamming his balls against me.

I cried out with pleasure. With pain. With love.

He strummed between my legs until I was panting and begging.

“You’re mine, J.”

“God, yes,” I called over my shoulder.

He rocked forward, kicking my hands out from under me so that he pinned his chest to my back.

“Asher,” I whimpered.

He was deeper this way. We were closer. There was no air between us. Only our bodies melting each other.

“Fuck.”

He came as violently as I did. Our bodies fluttered as we came together. Cresting and crashing. Rising and falling.

He kissed my neck and back, pumping in and out.

One.

Two.

Three.

His release spilled inside me and I sucked in desperate breaths, searching for air.

He let the full weight of his giant body relax as he rolled to the side, tucking me against him in the process.

He smoothed the hair from my neck, planting one kiss after another. His thumb rubbed my breasts, circling over my nipples.

“It felt so fucking good being inside you...” His words trailed off. “I’m addicted to your body. I always have been,” he admitted.

I bit my lip. I was in some strange place where euphoria was mixed with sadness. And in the pit of my stomach, there was fear. Fear that I had just opened my heart to him again. Yet, my body was his. There was no doubt this was where I belonged. I might as well have *Asher Westbrook* tattooed all over me. Inked in my skin to prove how permanently he had taken hold of me.

I twisted to face him. His features were dark in the shadows.

“We’re doing things differently this time,” I stated.

He brushed his lips over my mouth. “I don’t know how, but I swear I will.”

“We start by going back to Malibu tomorrow.”

He opened his mouth and I pressed my thumb to his firm lips. His head tilted to the side.

“I’ll listen to you. But you have to listen to me too.”

He sighed. “And you expect me to willingly take you somewhere I don’t think is safe?”

“It’s awards season. You can’t ask me to withdraw from the world. It’s not a reasonable request. And you know it.” He sucked on my finger and I moaned. “And Tristan is awake. I need to visit him in the hospital. It’s the right thing to do.”

He grabbed my ass, digging his fingers into the softest part of my bottom. “Those are convincing points. Do you have any others?”

My pulse escalated and I had to fight for the reasons to leave Big Bear.

We had just found each other again. Couldn’t we hide up here and have earth-shattering sex day after day?

“I’ll compromise,” I breathed.

“This is a first.”

“You can send your team or whoever to the beach house ahead of us. Twenty-four hours and then we leave Big Bear.”

He hiked my leg to his hip and I gasped when I felt how hard his cock already was. He pressed it between my swollen folds and I moaned, wanting him again. Needing his body.

“Deal.” He took my mouth with a sudden kiss.

I pushed against him. “Did you just agree?”

He nodded, yanking me on top of him. “I did. See? I’m a changed man.”

I straddled him, looking down in his eyes. The last bit of fear that I had clung to vanished. I decided I was going to live in the place of euphoria.

THIRTEEN

Asher

Journey smiled at me from across the kitchen island. She had made coffee and a batch of muffins.

“Are you always on that thing now?” she asked, motioning to my tablet.

“It’s the best way to stay connected to Westbrook Securities,” I explained.

She crossed her legs, showing the edge of her bottom. She was wearing one of my T-shirts.

“It’s still hard to wrap my head around the company.” She pulled off the top of a blueberry muffin. “After you invented the Connect Tech it took off?”

“There’s no doubt it changed my life.” I took a sip of coffee. My eyes hadn’t moved from the soft skin along her thigh. “But what do you want to know?”

“Ok. Yeah. I’d like to ask you some questions, Mr. Billionaire Westbrook,” she teased.

I laughed. “You can’t call me that.”

“Ok, just Mr. Billionaire then.”

I shot her a warning stare. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you like it?” she asked.

I laid the tablet next to the basket of muffins. “Sure.”

“That’s not very convincing. Does it make you happy, running a company?”

I inhaled. “I haven’t thought about it like that. It gives me something. I don’t know that I’d call it happiness. Security, I guess.” I winked. “No pun intended.”

Her laughter was light. “At least you still have a sense of humor.”

“I try.”

“Tell me something about it. What’s your favorite part?” She held the coffee between her palms.

“Other than the money? Hmm.” I pressed my lips together.

“I’m serious, Asher. How did you go from a security contractor to owning a billion-dollar company? That’s a huge change. There has to be something meaningful in it for you. Something that drives you.”

That was the purist in Journey. She thought everything had to have a sense of purpose. All intentions were meant for a positive outcome. She didn’t accept that sometimes people did things because they were stupid. Or because they were dark and hopeless. And sometimes people did things because they had nothing else to do. Boredom. I wondered if the shooting had changed her perspective on the human spirit.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I still protect people.” My eyes flashed to hers. “Just not on a one-on-one basis. That’s something I feel good about. I employ thousands of people. I’d like to

think they enjoy their jobs. And I make a shit-ton of money. I found a way to use a skill I had to invent a device that makes people safer. Families can sleep better. I don't say it, but yeah, I'm fucking proud of Westbrook Securities."

"Well you should say it." She grinned. "What you've done is incredible."

I walked toward her. I brushed the hair from her shoulder. "You know what I hate about it?"

She searched my eyes. "No. What?"

"That I did it without you." My palm flattened against her thigh, pushing the T-shirt up her hip.

"We're not going back though." She shook her head. "Only forward."

I nodded. "I'm never doing any of it without you again."

"I like how that sounds. I don't know that I totally believe it. Yet," she added.

"We have a lot to put back together, don't we?"

She nodded. "Starting with figuring out how to merge your busy billionaire life with mine?"

"Actually." I cringed. There was never going to be a good way to tell her about Avajeau, but I knew it was time. I couldn't let the days go by without explaining the truth.

"Actually what?" I heard the alarm in her question.

"There's something I want to talk to you about. It's why I walked out."

Her eyes misted over. "Ashe, I don't know if I can... We're happy right now. We can go over it later. Maybe get a couples' therapist or something." She let out a nervous laugh.

"It's not something I can put off. I promised you the truth. I promised you I was a changed man and I think you need to know why."

"You're scaring me."

"I know. It's scary as hell, but there's no other way to say this, J. I'm a dad. I have a daughter. Avajeau and she's four-years old."

"Holy shit," she whispered. "You can't be serious. Really?"

"I'm serious. I found out the paternity results the day I left. I didn't want to bring that kind of scandal to your name."

She blinked. "She's the reason you walked out?"

I threaded my fingers through hers, relieved she hadn't withdrawn. "You had just landed that first big movie. I didn't know if your career could take it. I didn't want to involve Dante. It wasn't a pretty story, or a happy story."

"But her mother? Are you two..." She looked away.

I tipped her chin toward me. "No. God, no. I haven't even seen her. Or talked to her since I picked up Avajeau. Her parents are the ones who reached out to me. I didn't believe them at first. So I had paternity tests performed at more than one lab—just to make sure. I didn't know how to tell you what I'd done. I didn't know how to be a dad. I didn't want to drag a kid, practically baby through the Hollywood paparazzi. There was no happy ending at that time. The only thing I could do was take Avajeau and start over."

"And start Westbrook Securities?"

My jaw flinched. "Yeah. I kind of threw all my energy into it. I wanted to give her a legacy. Make sure no matter what happened to me my daughter had something. Her grandparents are too damn old, and her mom has never come back. She depends on me for a future. For everything."

"Oh my God, Ashe. I can't believe it. I can't believe any of it." Her palm reached for my cheek. "You've been a single parent? Doing all this on your own?"

"It doesn't mean I've done it well. I hired a nanny. She spends the most time with Avajeau."

"Where are they now?" she asked. "Does she know you're in Big Bear?"

I nodded. "They're in Valencia, visiting her grandparents. With everything going on with your recovery I didn't want to make things worse."

"You think meeting your daughter would make it worse?"

I hung my head. "No. I'm not sure. Until last night, I thought I had lost you forever, babe. I couldn't put Avajeon in that situation either."

She exhaled. "I see. You were protecting both of us."

"In my own way. Yes."

"I want to meet her." She smiled. "Is that something you want?"

"More than you could imagine. My two girls?" I laughed loudly. "Shit. It would be incredible."

"Do four-year olds like the beach?" I saw the glimmer in her eye.

"You're amazing. Do you know that?"

She smirked. "Why?"

"Because you don't know anything about it, and you're already all in. How did I get so fucking lucky a second time?"

She twisted her lips together. "This is going to go straight to your head, but you are a hot dad."

"Really? I like that title than being a hot billionaire." I tugged on the edge of her shirt. "Do you know how I like things?" I winked.

Her hands raised toward the ceiling as I dragged the shirt over her head.

"You're so damn sexy," I growled.

I lifted her from the barstool and sat her on the corner of the counter. I shoved my boxer briefs to the floor. My cock sprung free, bobbing between her legs. I saw the hungry look in her eyes when she saw how ready I was for her. *My perfect Journey.*

I would suffocate if I wasn't inside her. She was my oxygen. My light.

I spread her legs as I pulled her ass to the edge of the counter. The truth was bringing us closer together. The one thing that had torn us apart was searing our souls into one.

Journey dug her heels into my back as I thrust my cock inside her hot velvet walls.

"Fuck," I groaned, gripping her lower back.

She leaned back, jutting her tits forward. I never felt anything like her. She clutched my dick like she owned it. Her walls were a vise and I was her prisoner. I was ready to spend the rest of the day fucking her senseless on the kitchen counter.

"Oh shit, Ashe," she whimpered as I hammered into her. I had a great angle on my feet, pumping inside her with certain strokes.

"You feel so good." I buried myself inside her. This perfect woman. The woman I'd risked everything for. The woman I'd never leave again.

Her nails clawed into my back as I picked up the pace, driving us closer to our orgasms.

"I-I'm going to..." Her eyes closed and I watched as she came in my arms.

I only wanted to fuck her more. Love her more.

She vibrated and fluttered around my cock as she climaxed with gulps and screams. Her toes curled around me and I felt my spine cinch around the point of no return. The lightning sensation rammed into my balls before I exploded inside her.

"Oh fuck, baby," I howled, reveling in how fucking fantastic it felt to be inside her like this.

I pressed my forehead to hers. She lowered her legs and I wrapped my arms around her.

"THANK YOU," I whispered.

"For what?" She panted.

"For understanding. For accepting I'm a dad."

Her eyes closed. "It's a lot to process, but I'm excited to meet her, Ashe. Really, I am."

"You sure you don't want to stay at Big Bear longer than today?" I teased. "I promise you'll never stop coming if we stay here."

She sighed. "Don't tempt me."

I lifted her from the counter, cradling her to my chest.

"Now what?" she asked sleepily.

"Now we shower."

She nodded. "And morning nap?"

"Whatever you want." I started down the hall.

She took my face in her hands and gazed deep into my eyes as we stopped in front of the master suite. "I want this, Asher. This is what I've always wanted. I wanted you to come back to me."

My chest contorted with the pain I had caused her. The pain I had put us through.

"I'm back and I'm not going anywhere."

FOURTEEN

Journey

He had a daughter. A child. A little person in the world with half his DNA. I couldn't deny the pain the news caused me. I was caught off guard. I was shocked. I wondered how I had managed to exist for two years without knowing something so crucial and important had happened in Asher's life.

I had wanted that dream for us. Only, when we were together I had never stopped to consider when. The future was such a vague and nebulous concept for me. I handled one project at a time. One script. One movie. I hadn't penciled in time to have a baby. There was no good time to have a baby in Hollywood.

I knew Asher hadn't done this without me. It wasn't as if we fought about it. Or disagreed about the timing. I wanted to have his baby. I did, I just never committed to it. I thought it would happen one day.

Asher's plunge into fatherhood happened before me. He had a past that was filled with dark memories and mistakes. I had accepted that when I fell in love with him. But this? A little girl?

He walked into the bathroom as I applied the last strokes of mascara.

"All the bags are packed," he announced. "Are you sure you want to leave? We could stay longer and track that mama bear."

I laughed. "I don't believe that for a second."

"Smart girl." He strolled toward me. "I won't let you near that bear."

I placed the tube of mascara on the counter as Asher's arms circled my waist. "Tell me something about her."

"The bear? They eat honey, and insects I guess."

I slapped him on the chest. "No. About Avajejan. What is she like?"

"She's into super heroes. But she likes all the women. Supergirl. Wonder Woman. Poison Ivy."

"Poison Ivy is not a hero," I teased.

He chuckled. "She doesn't care. She likes the ones who don't need to be rescued."

"Sounds a lot like her father. Have you ever been rescued?"

He tilted his head to the side. "Once," he answered.

"When?" I challenged.

"When I met you." His eyes darkened. "You're why the nightmares stopped. You brought me back from the edge and you didn't even know it."

"Oh." I didn't know how to answer him.

"But yes, I guess she's like me a little. She also knows how to make a mean mud pie."

I giggled. "It sounds like you've tasted the mud pie."

"Only in the land of make believe." He wagged his eyebrows. "I try to leave a lot of that stuff to Nicole."

"Who is Nicole?" There was that uncomfortable wave of jealousy again.

"Avajeau's nanny. She's great with her. She travels with her at all times."

In my mind Nicole was a perfect twenty-something blond with big boobs and a tiny waist. I already disliked her and it was completely unfair.

"Oh, I see."

Asher tipped my chin forward. "She needs a mother, J. A real mother."

My heart started to race. I could practically feel the sweat on my palms. We were charging ahead like a runaway roller coaster. Were we about to do one of those spirals where we would flip upside down?

"A mother?"

He grinned. "Someone smart and funny. Gentle and kind. Someone who is down to earth, but confident in designer couture. Someone like you." He pressed his lips to mine and I fell into the kiss.

"Me?" I mumbled as my arms circled his neck.

He nodded. "Too fast, too soon?"

It was. Everything we did was, but I couldn't say no. It felt right. Being back together felt like the world was once again in balance.

"No, I want to meet your daughter," I purred.

"Ok. Let's get you to the next safe house."

And that's when I remembered that with this beautiful new love story we were writing, there was still a nightmare waiting for an ending.

FIFTEEN

Journey

I knew Asher didn't like my idea. It was clear from the scowl on his face, but Asher swore this time we'd listen to each other. It wasn't a one-way street anymore. We were on new footing. This was our second chance.

I felt as if we were in an armored vehicle as we rolled out from the Big Bear cabin. And we probably were. Asher had access to the most elite security devices and systems. During dinner last night, he explained how his first private security contract landed him a million dollars. After that, he branched out, moving into body armor, weapons, and cyber tech. His experience in the military and stint in celebrity private security, provided him insight few security experts had. He was one step ahead of everyone.

His hand was on my thigh in the backseat of the car. He dug into his suit jacket and held up my phone.

"I get it back?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, yes." There was a line between his eyebrows. "But I encrypted it. So if any of those emails come in, they automatically alert my phone. Nothing goes through Dante anymore."

"Did you tell him this?"

"Dante is going to learn there is a new set of rules."

I eyed Asher. "He isn't trying to get in your way, you know. He has a job to do."

"Good. Then we should be on the same page."

"That means you're going to my dress fittings?" I teased.

He laughed. "I've been to a few of those."

I saw the glimmer in his eyes. My cheeks heated. He was remembering the same moment I was. The first time we had sex was in a dressing room. The seamstress had left me with a broken zipper and no way out of the beaded fabric. I had called for help and Asher had run in, thinking I was in actual distress. The way he looked at me, I didn't have to ask for help with the zipper. He was going to devour me. We had been dancing around it for months.

Sexual tension like that was tangible. I knew it was going to get us in trouble when I hired him.

He locked the dressing room door. Within minutes, the designer gown was on the floor and Asher was buried inside me. I'd never experienced anything like him. A man so primal. So raw with his emotion. He was strong and powerful. My heart never had a chance.

"Madame Karina isn't going to like it if you defile her Oscar dress."

"What about the dressing room?" His voice was flat.

I swallowed hard. Oh, God. What was he doing? His fingers rounded to the inside of my thigh.

“You don’t want to be responsible for an old woman’s heart attack.”

His fingers ran under my skirt, sliding under my panties.

I closed my eyes, leaning into the leather seat for support.

“No. I don’t.”

He pushed a finger inside me and I squirmed. “Or our driver’s,” I argued.

“The shield is up. He won’t know a thing.”

He sank another finger inside me, curling it upward.

“Oh shit,” I hissed.

He groaned. “Fuck. You make me hard.”

I smiled. “I do?” I reached out, feeling the erection stretching under his charcoal pants. “I can do something about that.”

I moved faster than he expected and landed on the floor between his knees.

“J.” He eyed me.

“What?” I teased.

I reached for the button and zipper on his pants. My hand moved inside until I clasped his cock and freed it. He sighed.

I leaned forward, tasting the tip with my tongue. His hands combed through my hair and settled at the back of my head.

I teased his cock with my tongue, swirling up and down his long shaft as if it were a lollipop. He jerked his hips when my mouth covered the head.

“Mmm,” I moaned, tasting the salty sweetness of his cock.

He thrust forward and I took him inside my mouth, adjusting to how big he was. He wanted to go deep. He wanted to hit the back of my throat, but I was out of practice. I needed to ease into it. I sucked hungrily, hearing him grunt with satisfaction each time I took him farther in my mouth. My muscles started to relax.

“I love it when you do that,” he growled.

My eyes locked on his as I mastered the final stroke and sucked him to the deepest part of my throat. There was a sense of accomplishment spurring me on as I brought him to his climax.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “Oh shit, J.”

He jerked as I latched at the base of his cock and settled in to suck until he came. He pressed his hands into my head and I mewed into his groin, loving that I could do this to him.

His spine tightened and I knew what was coming. He grunted, as I sucked hard and his release sputtered, running down my throat. I drank without mercy, swallowing and gulping until he closed his eyes and sank into the seat.

“Shit. That was incredible.”

I wiped my mouth and crawled into the seat next to him. “I love doing that.”

He grinned. “That makes two of us.” Asher pushed himself in his pants and fastened them.

I looked out the window as the trees from Big Bear faded behind us. L.A. was on the horizon and just beyond that was the beach house. I had argued that before I did anything else, I was going to visit Tristan.

Asher’s phone beeped. He looked at me. “I need to get this.”

I nodded. “It’s ok. I’m going to text Dante we’re on the way.” I had mixed emotions about having access to my phone again. It had been nice to have a break.

Asher answered quickly and launched into a tense conversation about a prototype that didn’t

sound like it was working. It would take time, but eventually our lives would blend together again.

Only this time I realized it wasn't going to be as easy.

Asher had been in every aspect of my life. He was next to me at every event. He was in the car wherever I drove. He slept in my bed wherever I stayed. And it was because I was the center of the relationship.

This new world we were creating wasn't going to revolve around movie star Journey Tessier. This time I was the one who had to figure out how to navigate him—and Avajeau.

I listened to him bark orders on the phone and I realized as much as I loved him, as much as I knew him—there was a side of him that was a stranger to me now. I had to take time to learn. He was a father.

SIXTEEN

Asher

I didn't like the idea of Journey stopping at the hospital on the way home. It was too public. The security was too lax, and she was too recognizable. The fact that she had gone into hiding would only make it worse if someone spotted her.

There was a fevered frenzy about her that had grown since the attack. This was not anything I would approve as the CEO of Westbrook Securities or as a bodyguard for that matter.

But I was trying to be the kind of man who was less domineering and more like a partner.

I had my Westbrook Securities driver deposit us at one of the back entrances. Two agents met us at the service entrance, holstered and ready to shield Journey if needed.

I stepped out of the car first and scanned the perimeter. This part of the hospital was secluded. It was a common route for celebrities to use when they were discharged.

The agents nodded at me as they flanked the door.

I guided Journey inside.

"Is all this necessary?" she asked. "It feels a little overboard."

I folded my sunglasses and tucked them inside my jacket. "If you want to go to public places, then yes," I answered.

We walked through the corridors and to a side elevator.

Tristan had been moved from ICU and was in a regular patient room. I punched the button for the third floor. His condition had been upgraded. That was the good news.

Journey wrung her hands together.

"It's going to be ok," I tried to reassure her. "He'll be happy to see you."

She nodded. "I don't know why I'm so nervous."

The elevator stopped, but I held the door closed for a brief second. "You and Tristan survived something horrific together. It's normal that seeing him is going to bring that up. You don't have to do this until you're ready. No one is asking you to push yourself. It's ok if you want to wait a little while longer."

Her eyes flared. "I am. I'm asking myself. That man deserves a thank you. He deserves a car or a yacht. I don't know, anything that a person deserves for saving someone's life. I can put aside my own anxiety for twenty minutes to tell him that."

She stuck her chin forward and I knew her mind was made up. I'd seen that look too many times before to try to talk her out of it. If seeing her trainer brought darkness to her, I'd hold her. If the nightmares returned tonight, I'd fight them for her. She wasn't in this alone.

I let the door go and we strolled into the hallway. Tristan's room was closest to the nurses' station.

I saw a flicker of recognition on some of the nurses' faces as Journey walked past, but they were used to stars. They weren't the ones I was worried about.

Journey tapped on the door and it swung open.

"Are you up for visitors?" she asked, peeking her head inside.

Tristan grinned. For a second I had to put myself in check and remember this man had almost died saving her. I hadn't expected him to look like a damn Greek god.

Even in a hospital gown, he was all hard muscle. I frowned as I stood next to the door. I didn't miss the adoring look on his face when he saw Journey.

"Journey." He grinned. "Look at you, love."

She leaned over his bed, kissing him on each cheek.

"How are you? I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner." She pulled up a rolling stool and planted herself next to him. "What do you need? What can I get you?"

"I was asleep for most of the week so you didn't miss anything." He had perfect white t

"But still. I wanted to say thank you." She choked, and I had to fight the urge to rush toward her and power her through this. "You saved my life, Tristan. I don't know if I can ever say thank you enough." I saw a tear land on his hand.

"No. No." He shook his head. "It all happened so fast. It was just instinct I guess. You don't have to thank me. Maybe do a few extra squats at the club." He winked. "You've got to keep that body toned. Right?"

Journey giggled.

That was it. I had gone from wanting to comfort Journey to wanting to punch the trainer. I moved slowly, my fists loose at my side. No shit he wanted to watch her do squats. She had an incredible ass.

"I never thought that chick would have had a gun. It still blows my mind. Since when do yogis carry guns?"

My head jerked. "What did you say?"

Tristan looked at me. "Who are you, exactly? Did you get a new manager, Journey?"

Journey intervened. "No. No. I still have Dante. This is Asher Westbrook. He's personally investigating the shooting," she explained. "It would be a huge help if you could answer any questions he has. He owns Westbrook Securities. We're using all his resources to find the attacker."

"What did you just say, Tristan?" I pressed again. "Yogi?"

He blew a long breath of air. "She must be bat-shit crazy. Didn't get Zen on that morning."

I stood at the foot of the bed. "Are you saying you saw the shooter and it was a woman?"

Tristan looked at me then Journey. "Yeah. I saw her. She was maybe twenty feet from us, standing between the cars. She had on yoga pants and a tank top."

"And that makes her a yogi?" I questioned.

He shook his head. "I saw her before she raised the gun because she had a fluorescent *Namaste* on her shirt. It was bright even at sunrise. In fact, if she hadn't had that on I wouldn't have had time to step in front of Journey." He turned his gaze upward and she smiled at him.

"You were so brave."

What in the hell did this mean? The emails had been from a man. The gym video had been too blurry to distinguish any characteristics of the shooter, but we had all assumed it was a male suspect. What the fuck was going on?

"What else? What else do you remember? Did you recognize her from the gym? A client maybe?"

He rubbed his temple with his free hand. The other was strapped in a sling.

Journey gave me a stern look, cautioning me to slow down. I didn't care if I was rushing him. It felt as if the information could disappear. I needed to extract it.

"No." He shook his head. "I've never seen her before. That was the first time."

"Anything else out of the ordinary besides the shirt? Tattoos? Piercings? Can you describe how tall she was?"

Tristan paused. "She did have a tattoo on her wrist."

"You saw that?" I was surprised.

"I probably wouldn't have noticed it except it was on her shooting arm. I wasn't close enough to see what it said. But it was like time stood still. I saw the gun, like it was frozen or something and then I saw the tattoo."

"But it said something? You're sure it was words and not a drawing?"

"I think so. I don't know for sure. It seems like it was a message, not just one word." He scrunched his forehead in concentration.

Journey patted his arm. "Let's take a little break. I don't want you to get a headache. Can I get you something? Want some water? Or a protein shake?"

He laughed. "No. I'm good."

I wanted to run through the analysis again. I needed to call Tomas at the office. He was my lead agent and had updated me every hour on all incoming information. He never once mentioned the shooter could have been a woman. We were certain it was an obsessed fan. Some lunatic who thought Journey had shunned him. A guy. A psychopath. A male. It had to be.

The shooting had all the signs of a revenge attack. The emails seemed to confirm our theory.

But now I realized we had been wrong from the beginning.

"Journey, we need to go."

"But, we just got here," she argued. "I want to stay a little longer."

I eyed her. That wasn't going to be possible with this revelation.

I placed my hand on her shoulder and extended a hand to Tristan. "Thank you for what you did. I hope you know it makes you a hero." He shook my hand, gripping probably more than he should.

"Thanks, man."

I squeezed her shoulder. "We've got to reassess the protocols for tonight. We need to discuss if it's even possible to leave the compound."

"But tonight is the first awards dinner."

If I had to throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of here kicking and screaming, I would.

"Journey, if you want to go to that dinner, we need to leave now. All the plans have shifted."

She nodded. Maybe she was starting to realize there were things she had to compromise too.

"It's all right," Tristan offered. "I've got some hot nurses waiting on me." He winked at her again.

"You say your goodbyes and I'll wait in the hallway for you."

"Ok."

I stepped through the door and waited for her outside the room.

A minute later she appeared.

"Is it really that bad?" I saw the worry on her face and had to admit she had been strong in there for Tristan.

I nodded. "Worse. But you're not alone, babe. You're not going to be alone."

She squeezed my hand. "I know. For the first time in a long time I actually believe that."

"Good. Let's get out of this hospital and go somewhere we can talk. Everything has changed."

Our palms slid together as we traveled through the corridor and exited the back entrance of the hospital. I scanned the sidewalk and the parking bays before ducking inside the car after Journey. The sick feeling that had started when I realized we were off track with the suspect had grown. I wondered what else we had gotten wrong.

SEVENTEEN

Journey

I don't know what I thought it would feel like being inside the beach house again. The last time I was here I dressed, poured a smoothie, and left for my killer workout session with Tristan. I grimaced. Bad choice of words.

I wandered through the rooms, feeling like a stranger.

Asher followed behind me. "I've added additional window sensors and laser triggers at all entry points. I don't have a full computer system installed, but by the end of the week you'll have the best tech I've got."

"Mmmhmm." I nodded absently.

I looked out at the ocean breaking against the shore. It was rough today.

There were two men planted on the beach, wearing ball caps. There were two more in my driveway. This didn't feel like home. I missed Big Bear.

Suddenly, Asher's arms wrapped around me. He kissed the side of my head.

"Something's wrong. What is it?" he asked.

I didn't want to admit he was right. I was more comfortable at the cabin. I liked the serenity and isolation. I didn't realize how soothing it was until it was gone.

"It sounds dumb."

"Try me."

I sighed. "It feels creepy here. Like someone's watching. Maybe it's all the windows."

It was why I had loved the old house to begin with. It wasn't one of the new fancy Malibu houses. It had been here since the first wave of celebrities moved to the coast in the fifties. The windows stretched from the floor to the ceiling. I had loved the sunlight. Now I wished I could board up the windows and hide.

Those beautiful old windows made my skin crawl.

"Let's head back to Big Bear," he offered. "We don't have to stay here. Nothing says you're locked into the beach house."

I shook my head. I had finally achieved the greatest recognition in my career. I couldn't let some maniac ruin that for me. This was my time. My hard work had gotten me here.

"I'm not going to be scared out of my own home. Besides, I'm not going to miss my first awards dinner. I have a dress you're going to love."

I spun to face him. Maybe all I needed was a little Asher distraction.

"What kind of dress?" he asked.

"A very low-cut black dress." I grinned, flattening my hands against the ridges of his abs.

"Is that so?"

I nodded. "Want a preview before tonight?"

He brushed his lips over mine. "I'd love a preview, but I have to go over the schematics for the venue."

I stuck my bottom lip out. "Schematics over sex?"

"Believe me. Not an easy decision, but the dinner is only a few hours away, unless you want to cancel. In that case I promise to put your dress to good use right now." He gripped my ass roughly and I moaned. "Want a trade?" he taunted.

I shook my head. "You know I can't do that."

"Then sex will wait."

I wrinkled my nose. "Fine." He took a step back. "But you aren't leaving, are you?" Little alarm bells went off under my skin. I didn't want to stay in the beach house alone even if I was under heavy protection. I couldn't bear it without him.

"No. I'll be here. I've had everything sent to my tablet. I'm not leaving."

I sighed. "Good. Maybe I'll lie down then. Can you work in my room? There's a desk."

"I can do that."

He followed me down the hall to the master bedroom. It was a suite I remodeled as soon as I bought the house. There were soft blush hues mixed with a pale sky blue. I liked to think it was somehow both cool and warm at the same time.

He watched as I curled up in the center of the bed. Asher pulled a blanket over me, draping it at my shoulders.

"Don't let me oversleep," I warned. "I need at least two hours for hair and makeup."

"Got it. I remember your schedule." He smiled.

"I remember all of this." I knew I sounded sleepy. My body felt heavy and exhausted.

"All of what?" he asked, running a hand over my hip.

My eyes burned too much to open. "The way we fit together." I turned into the feather pillow. "The way your hands feel. The bourbon you drink."

"You remember all that?"

"Mmmhmm." I nodded. "And how no one else in their right mind gets up at 5am to work out. Except us."

"What?" he asked. "What did you say?"

I thought there was something different in his voice.

"I never dated anyone after you who wanted to wake up before five. We're the crazy ones, I guess." I didn't know if either of us liked it, but it was what we had trained our bodies to do. He had always been meant for early-morning military PT. Even when he was no longer a Seal.

"No one else you dated..." His voice trailed off. "Holy fuck."

My eyes blinked open. Oh great. I had opened Pandora's box.

"I-I didn't mean to say I dated other people. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to bring that up. Just forget I said anything."

He waved me off. "It's not that. I dated other people, Journey."

"It's ok. I know." I just wanted him to rub my hip and put me back to sleep.

"No. I said something once." He walked from the bed and paced in front of the window.

This nap was going nowhere. I pushed myself up. "What is it, Asher?"

He sat in an overstuffed chair. It was funny, it could actually make him look normal-sized. He folded his hands together.

His eyes landed on me. "There was a girl I dated."

"We each have a mini-past. I'm ok with it. We don't have to go through this."

He shook his head. “This girl. She wanted more from me. She wanted to take me home to meet her parents and buy a dog together. She was serious. More serious than I ever was about her.” His eyes drifted across the room. “And I was an ass to her. I said something shitty.”

I didn’t know why he was confessing, but I listened. I didn’t want or need to rehash our separation. I knew it would reveal itself in fragments as we got to know each other again.

“It couldn’t have been that bad. You’ve never said anything I couldn’t forgive.”

He huffed. “I said, ‘You really think I want to meet your parents? I don’t even want to spend my 5am workouts with you.’” He paused. “She laughed and said that was ridiculous, no woman would get up that early anyway. And instead of keeping my fucking mouth shut, I told her she was wrong. I told her I loved 5am with you. That you were worth the sting of the morning. That you were the kind of woman I wanted to take home. That I’d buy a dog with you, because 5am workouts with you were what made me want to wake up every day.”

I swallowed hard and my stomach knotted. “Oh my God.”

He closed his eyes. “This is my fucking fault.”

I rushed from the bed and knelt in front of him. “You think it’s her? The girl you dated?”

His eyes hardened. “She had a tattoo on her wrist. Something from a college spring break trip.”

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think.

“Where is she?” I asked, shaking him. “Where did she go when you broke up?”

He lifted his head. “She moved from New York to L.A.”

EIGHTEEN

Asher

I deserved that bullet. Me. I was the one who should have been in the hospital. I should have had to fight for my life. Not Tristan, and especially not Journey.

I had swallowed Claire and spit her out. Used her. I never pretended to want a relationship. The terms were always clear, but that didn't mean I wasn't an ass. I never let anyone get too close. Not with Avajeau in my life and Journey in my past. At some point, that behavior was going to catch up to me.

That day had come.

I couldn't stand the look on Journey's face.

I pushed her off me and rose from the chair. "I need to call Tomas and get Claire's profile to the police."

"Claire? That's her name?"

"We dated a few months ago. I guess two or three maybe?" I didn't have the exact date. It hadn't mattered that much. "She texted and told me she was moving to L.A. I thought it was just to get a reaction from me. She wanted me to ask her to stay. I don't know. I don't do mind games. And honestly, I didn't care. I haven't heard from her since."

"Then how do you know it was her, Asher? You don't know for sure it was this woman you knew. This might be one jump too many."

"It's not." I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed the office. I looked at Journey. "She knew about you. I said too much. I don't know why." I walked out of the bedroom when Tomas answered.

"I have an ID on the Tessier shooter."

"You do?" He sounded surprised.

"Her name is Claire Stephens. She doesn't have a criminal record. I'll send a picture. I've got one on my cloud. Roughly 5'6". Black hair. Green eyes. Moved to L.A. in the past two months. I don't have an address. We have to find her. She isn't done."

"As soon as I have the picture I'll start scanning for facial recognition."

"We leave in two hours for the dinner. I can't take Journey out of the house with Claire waiting for her."

"I understand."

Nothing else mattered right now except finding Claire. She could be in the house next door. She could be parked in a car down the street. She knew me, and she knew about Journey.

My next call was to the detective contact I had at the LAPD. Officer Erickson took the information I gave him, but without any evidence or proof, he wasn't willing to go after an

accused woman. It was my word and hunch, and he had to follow the law.

I didn't.

I met with the four agents at the house. They all had shots of Claire on their phones. If they recognized her from when we dated, they didn't mention it.

I vetted Journey's hairstylist and makeup artist at the door. They were patted down for weapons and I personally searched them for anything planted. Journey thought I overreacted. They had worked for her for years, but I didn't care. I wasn't taking any chances.

The only good thing about tonight's dinner was it kept Journey distracted. For two hours, she could focus on transforming into a Hollywood starlet. I'd worry about her safety and let the artists do their work.

I spoke to the driver while Journey was upstairs getting ready. I wanted to make sure we took a different route than what was expected from Malibu. We needed to stay in well-lit areas. Any unexpected stops, and he had instructions to detour immediately.

I walked into the house just as Journey emerged from the double set of doors at the end of the corridor.

She walked toward me, her hips swaying seductively. This was the girl I didn't recognize sometimes. The star. The woman people saw in the theater. People screamed and fainted when they saw this version of her. They pushed and scrambled for autographs and selfies.

And here she was, walking into my arms.

"God, you're gorgeous."

"You like the dress?" She smiled like a devilish cat.

My eyes dipped to the deep V that ran to her navel. "Sexy as hell."

She smiled and I saw the light blush on her cheeks.

The doorbell rang and I tensed.

"It's just Dante. He wanted to ride with us." She leaned to kiss my cheek before entering the foyer.

I rushed in front of her. I didn't care there was an agent at the door, she wasn't going near any open spaces.

"I've got it." I looked over my shoulder. "And you should have told me he was coming. We aren't operating under normal circumstances."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think it would be a big deal. It's just Dante. He goes everywhere with me."

I huffed and let the manager inside. He was wearing a dark purple tux.

"Babe, stunning. Truly stunning." He ignored me and embraced Journey.

"Thank you. I love that color tux. Armani?" she asked.

"It's going to pop on the red carpet."

I fucking hated the red carpet. Tonight more than usual. Claire could be anywhere in the crowd.

"Are we ready?" Journey asked, looking at me.

I nodded. "But not out the front." I pointed the staircase that led under the house. "We have three cars tonight. We're going in car number two."

Dante's eyes bulged. "I had forgotten how thorough you were."

I slapped him on the back, almost sending him down the stairs. "Not something you should forget, man."

NINETEEN

Journey

I remember when I first wanted to be an actress. I was five, maybe six. I watched a show on Disney and rehearsed every word in my bedroom. I made my parents watch while I stumbled through my lines after dinner. They clapped and laughed, and I took that as a sign that I was destined to be a star.

No one really thought I'd go through with it. It must have been after I starred in my high school play when they realized I wasn't kidding, and I wasn't five any longer.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. I wished my parents were here to see it. To know that little girl's dreams came true. I was a best actress nominee. And I was on my way to my first dinner to celebrate.

It wasn't supposed to matter if I won any awards in the coming months. This was the first accomplishment. This was part of the journey.

Dante sat across from me in the stretch limo. He sipped a rum drink. He was nervous.

I expected Asher to have a bourbon in his hand, but he was back to bodyguard status. The revelation that my attacker was his ex had hit him hard. He wasn't going to admit it until this was over.

I knew him well enough to let him have space to work while he dealt with the shock.

I ran my fingers over his knuckles. He brought my fingertips to his lips.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

I nodded. "You're here. That's all I need."

"We can still cancel. I'll have the driver take us back to the house, or even better, back to Big Bear. I still advise lying low until we have Claire in custody."

"I know, but this is the biggest moment of my career. I'm a nominee for best actress. I can't ruin this time in my life with fear. You understand something in that, don't you?"

He nodded. "I do."

"I don't know what I'm witnessing." Dante rolled his eyes. "This is worse than watching a bad Lifetime movie."

"I'm happy." I tilted my head. "That's all you have to worry about."

He kicked back the rum.

I wasn't going to let his nervous jitters or doubts about Asher ruin tonight. I wanted to focus on the dinner. I'd drink champagne and mingle with stars. I'd pose for selfies. I'd laugh and congratulate the other nominees. I was going to have a beautiful night. And Asher was going to be there for all of it.

The car lurched and Dante spilled his drink. "Shit. Who is this driver?" He glared at Asher.

“This is designer. Designer,” he emphasized.

Asher’s eyes darted to the front, but the car had taken a sharp turn and we landed in a pile on the floor as the tires screeched.

“What the hell?” Dante tried to help me back to my seat.

“No. Stay down,” Asher ordered, pushing me back to the floor. He pulled a gun from his belt and the car careened in the opposite direction. We shifted left then right.

Whoever was driving didn’t care that they were tossing us around like pinballs.

“Ouch.” I hit my elbow on the armrest.

Asher punched the call button. “Rick, what’s going on up there?” he asked.

We waited for an answer, but there was silence.

“Rick? Answer me. What’s happening? Why are we off course?”

I watched the realization hit Asher that something was terribly wrong.

“Don’t get up. Whatever you do, keep your heads down,” Asher choose his words carefully. I noticed his eyes scanned the lights blurring past us.

“Who is up there?” I whispered. “Where’s Rick?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “Just stay down. Ok?”

After bouncing around for another ten minutes, we finally stopped. Asher looked at Dante. “This is it,” he announced. “Stay with her no matter what. Understand?”

Dante nodded.

“Wait. What?” I shrieked. “You’re leaving us in here?”

I wanted to grab on to him and tell him there was no way he was leaving us in this car. There was nothing good on the other side of the door.

“I have to. I can’t protect you like this.”

“But—” I protested.

“As soon as the door opens I’m going out,” he whispered. “If something happens to me, back up will be here in less than ten minutes. I’ve already triggered the Westbrook Securities alarm.”

“Ten minutes?” I panicked. I knew it only took two seconds to fire a gun. Ten minutes was an eternity when waiting for help. “Don’t go out there,” I begged. “Don’t leave me again.”

His eyes locked on mine. “I have to. I don’t have a choice. You can survive. I know you, Journey. You’re strong. You’re vibrant. You can survive this. If you do end up outside the car, you need to listen to me.” He paused. “No matter what, stay away from Claire. The longer you avoid her... just keep moving. Don’t get in her line of fire.”

“She’s here?” I creaked.

He nodded. “I’m sorry, I don’t think there’s any other reason the car detoured. She has to be behind it. I’m operating under that assumption right now. You know she’s armed. You know she will shoot. Keep her safe, Dante.”

The door opened and Asher hurdled himself forward, stepping over my back and throwing Dante out of his way. The door slammed behind him. I wanted to pull him back in and be the one to shield him from whatever was out there. He was strong and fast.

Dante and I huddled together. I couldn’t hear anything on the other side. I’d never regretted a decision so deeply before. The selfishness of my actions hit me like a smack in the face. Why was I determined to go to the awards dinner? Why did I put my spotlight moment ahead of our lives? What if something happened to Ashe? What if he died because I wanted to eat gourmet mousee and drink French champagne with Meryl Streep? I buried my face in my hands.

“Oh God,” I whimpered.

“He’s going to be ok, babe,” Dante whispered. “We’re going to get out of here. You’re not

going to miss your first awards dinner. No way.” His teeth chattered, but I squeezed his hand.

I didn’t care about the awards dinner any longer. I just wanted Ashe back in one piece. I wished we were still in Big Bear in bed. Or fighting over who made the best pasta sauce. We should be anywhere but here.

“Just hang tight, babe. I’ve got you,” Dante repeated.

I didn’t know Dante had a heroic bone in his body, but I was glad it had decided to kick in right now.

I nodded, holding his hand. We had to make it through this. I hadn’t found Asher just to lose him to a crazy ex-girlfriend.

TWENTY

Asher

I tumbled out of the car as quietly as I could. The engine still ran, muffling the movements I made. I crawled on all fours toward the front passenger door. I peeked through the window to see Rick lying unconscious in the seat. He was slouched forward. Fuck. I hoped he was still alive. It was then I saw the needle sticking out of his neck. I presumed everything that happened was because of Claire, but I was trying to assess how such a small graceful woman would have been able to overpower him.

How long had she been in the car? I tried to calculate when the last scan of the vehicles had taken place. When had she been able to infiltrate the drivers' check of the cars? How was it possible? The plan was secure. Locked down. What the fuck had happened?

I turned as I saw her walking around the rear of the car. I only had half a second to scramble out of view. I rounded the hood and charged along the side. I had to get to her before she opened the back door.

She wasn't expecting me to pounce like a jaguar.

"Arrr," she wailed.

"Stand down," I ordered.

Claire lost her breath for a second when I knocked her to the pavement in the surprise attack, but as soon as I rolled off her she pointed a gun at me. I was ready to shoot. But we were locked in a target battle. Who would shoot first?

"Claire, what are you doing?" We both eased off the pavement, standing slowly. "Why are you doing this?"

I hadn't had much time to observe where she had driven us, but I knew we were behind a warehouse. We were still in Hollywood. Westbrook Securities pinged our location. I just had to keep her talking for nine more minutes before my backup arrived. They were on the way.

I still had no idea how she had hijacked Rick, but it didn't matter. She had pulled it off. The other cars had gone in different directions and we were here alone.

"Are you starting to take me seriously now, Asher?" She tilted her head to the side. She was dressed in black, wearing form-fitting pants and a long-sleeved shirt. There was nothing as obvious as the yoga shirt Tristan had recalled.

"I always took you seriously." I lowered my hands, keeping the gun at my side. I could tell she wasn't ready to shoot. She had too much to say to me. Lying was my best option. Stalling her with conversation was the only way to keep everyone here alive.

"I wish that were true." She kept both hands on the gun.

"It is. I'm taking you very seriously right now. You've made your point. I was a dick. I

fucked up. I should have been more honest about my intentions. I'm sorry for that. I *am* sorry."

Her eyebrows rose. "I wasn't expecting a sudden admission, or an apology. You were a dick. It's nice to hear you say it."

"Just because I was an asshole doesn't mean other people should get hurt." I lowered my gun to the ground, keeping my eyes on her. "See? I'm not interested in hurting you, Claire. I know that's not really what you want. I'm unarmed."

She sighed. "You already hurt me. You think a bullet could do more damage than your words?"

I swallowed. What the hell had I said? My relationship with Claire was short and it wasn't serious. I dated women when I wanted. It wasn't the time to tell her she wasn't the only woman I slept with during that time. No one had a repeat invitation. She didn't understand what it meant for me to be a single dad. She had no idea how I kept Avajeau protected from another woman like her mother.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

She huffed. "I didn't have a chance. I never did. You were never going to give me more than you gave her." Her head rotated toward the limo. My throat tightened.

"It's not her fault. It's not yours either," I added. "It's mine. I did this, Claire. I made you feel like you weren't there. Like I could look right through you. I compared you to Journey. I shouldn't have done it. It was wrong and arrogant. It was cruel. I see that now. You've helped me see it."

Maybe I never had the right to date another woman. Or fuck one. Not while Journey was buried in my heart the way she was. But I never made promises and I sure as hell didn't promise anything to Claire. She saw what she wanted to see whether or not it was true.

"But you see me now? You notice me?" she asked.

I nodded. "I do. I'm paying attention. You have my full attention."

She smiled. "And now it's too late. I've gone too far. I know that."

I shook my head. "No one else has to get hurt. I can help. You know I have connections. Resources. Let me help you."

"God, you're the ultimate liar. A fuckboy lying asshole."

"Claire," I warned. "This is your chance. Take it." I stepped toward her. "I don't make offers like this lightly. Take the offer. Let me help you start over."

Her hands trembled. I noticed the tattoo on her wrist and remembered what it said. *Follow your heart*.

I hadn't paid enough attention to the details. Details didn't matter to me if they weren't about Journey. It didn't matter whether Claire's pain was justified. It was still her pain. This was her response to it, and I had to deal with the consequences of how casually I had handled her.

"Here's what I can," I explained. "I can give you a fresh start. You choose where you want to go. Pick any place in the world, but not anywhere in the States."

"What?" She balked. "You're serious?"

"I'll own this. I did this. So I'm making you an offer. Start your life over. But I'll be watching. If you try to return, or try to make an appearance at any of Journey's international events, the deal is off. I'll turn you over to the authorities. Immediately. I will not go easy on you a second time."

"Then I might as well shoot you now." She clicked the hammer.

I shook my head. "Your picture has already been circulated within the legal authorities. They know who you are. But no one knows where you are. I'll get you out of the country without a

trace. I can do this for you.”

“Why would you do that?” she questioned.

“Call it my penance.”

“Just like that?” She looked confused.

“You’ll go to Westbrook Securities. You’ll be outfitted with tracking tech, and then planted in your new location. You can be on a tropical beach in a matter of days. Just say the word, Claire.”

She lowered the gun. I rushed her, kicking it to the ground and out of reach. It skidded across the pavement.

“I knew you’d go back on it,” she moaned. “I shouldn’t have trusted you.”

I pulled her to her feet, clasping her wrists together. “No. I’m not going back on the deal. If you want to start over, my offer still stands. But that doesn’t mean I want to pull that trigger.”

I looked toward the sky. My team should land any minute. “I meant what I said. You can start over. I’ll bring you in under my watch, but you have to play by my rules from now on. No matter what they are.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re doing this for her, aren’t you?”

I heard the helicopter buzzing overhead. I held Claire behind the warehouse as the wind kicked up. We waited for the propellers to slow. I led Claire to the chopper as the door opened.

“You should know this about me by now. Everything I do is for her,” I growled.

I handed her over to my agents with a set of instructions. I wanted her chipped immediately before any other protocol was followed.

“Wait,” I called before they shut the door. “What about Rick?” I asked.

“Who?” She shook her head.

“The driver with the needle in his neck. What did you do to him?”

She rolled her eyes. “He’ll be awake in a few hours. It’s just a sleeping serum. A little something to knock him out while I drove.”

“At least he’s not dead,” I mumbled. “Take her up,” I ordered.

“That’s it?” she squealed. “You’re not going with me?”

“No.” I watched as they secured her into the seat with more than one strap. She had proven more than once that she was sneaky and not to be trusted.

Claire glared at me from the window, surrounded by my best agents. I didn’t know how to react to seeing her fly higher and higher. She was gone, and Journey was safe. But I had committed to hiding her for the rest of her life. I would be tethered to her forever.

When the helicopter was safely in the sky, I strolled to the car, tapped on the door, and opened the limo.

Journey leapt into my arms. Her tears smeared my cheeks as she sought my lips.

“You’re ok. You’re ok.”

I nodded, kissing her. “I’m fine. Not a scratch.”

“And Claire? Where is she?” She searched the ground around the car. “We heard a helicopter.”

“She’s not coming back,” I promised. “You’re never going to see her again.”

Journey’s eyes darted. “Did you? Is she d—”

I held her hand. Dante had ducked his head out of the limo. “I didn’t kill her, but I offered her a deal. I don’t think you’re going to like it. I’ll explain in the car. Come on. We have to get you to that dinner.”

She rubbed at her eyes. “You’re going to let me go to the dinner?”

I tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. “Only if you want to go.” I smiled. “It’s up to you.”

She sniffed. “My mascara is ruined. And the side of my dress is torn. I can’t go like this. I never should have tried so hard in the first place. I almost got you killed. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“This wasn’t your fault. You were trying to face the fear. You were trying to send her a message that she didn’t control your life. I know that. What you did took a lot of courage. But no one would blame you if you didn’t want to go to the dinner. I’m sure Dante can come up with a perfectly legitimate excuse for you.”

Dante held up his phone. “I’ve got this. Emergency crew is on the way, babe. They’ll meet us outside the hotel in five for hair, makeup, and a new dress.”

I studied Journey’s expression. If she wanted to hide out from the world for a while, I’d be next to her while she did it.

She smiled. “You’re a lifesaver, Dante.” Her eyes landed on me.

“You’re going to go through with this?” I asked.

She nodded. “Absolutely. So, what is this deal I’m not going to like?”

I wrapped my arms around her and drew her to me. “Just remember when I tell you we’re all alive, and I did it for a lot of reasons that maybe aren’t obvious.”

She pinched her lips together. “It’s that bad?”

I helped her inside the car. I was going to have to drive the rest of the way. Rick had been carted off by my medical team.

“You’re going to hate it.”

I closed the door behind her. But it didn’t matter. She was safe.

TWENTY-ONE

Journey

We had attended two brunches, three dinners, and one cocktail party in the span of three weeks. I was exhausted.

Today, Asher and I decided we were taking the day off for ourselves. We had planned it intentionally with great purpose. Today was going to life-changing.

He pulled up in front of the cabin and I didn't know I could be so happy.

He walked around to the passenger side and opened the door for me. I grinned at him. "What should we do first?" I asked.

He laughed. "I have to check in with Mickey and then we can do whatever you want."

I was nervous and excited. "We only have a few hours," I reminded him.

He nodded. "But until she arrives, they are your few hours."

I climbed the stairs all the way to the top deck. There was a thin layer of snow surrounding the property. It was beautiful.

I was finally going to meet Avajeau today. As important a milestone as that was, there was something else I wanted to tell Asher. Something that had become unmistakably clear to me over the past few weeks.

He jogged up the steps behind me and typed in the code to the door. He had already performed a security scan on his system. Ever since Claire had started the reintegration process with Westbrook Securities, he had been slightly more relaxed, but he was never going to let his guard down completely. That wasn't the kind of man he was.

I waited while he made his phone call to the New York office. I played the conversation out in my head. I knew what I wanted to say, but how was it going to sound when the words came out of my mouth?

Asher sauntered out of his study. He grinned. "Did you check the walk-in cooler? Lunch was delivered this morning. I had everything catered. Are you hungry?"

I bit my lip. Ok. Lunch would be the opportunity. That's when I would just throw it out there.

"Yes, I'm kinda hungry. What did you order?"

He walked over to the stainless steel door and retrieved an over-sized picnic basket. "Don't worry. I checked with Tristan about the menu."

I giggled. "Have you two finally buried the hatchet?"

"No. Never," he teased.

It was too cold to eat on the deck, so we spread a blanket on the living room floor. Asher opened a bottle of wine while I unwrapped the food from the basket.

He settled next to me.

"I love being back here." I looked at him.

"You do? I thought you hated this place when we were here."

I drank a big sip of wine. "I did, but I fell in love with you again here, so now I love it."

He turned toward me, cupping my chin. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Oh my God. There's something I want to talk to you about."

"There is?" His long lashes blinked. I didn't think I could keep it in any longer.

"I think we should have a baby," I blurted.

"What?" His brows pinched together.

Oh shit. I drank more wine. "There's never going to be a perfect time. Or a right time, but I also know there's never going to be a wrong time. With Avajeau coming today, I know we have a lot to manage as a new family, but I want this. I want a baby with you. Our own baby, Ashe. I don't care if it's right or wrong for my career. None of that matters as much as you and me. I want to do this. I know I do. I want your baby more than anything in this world." I held my breath while I waited for him to say something.

He lowered his head and chuckled.

I gasped when he pulled a ring box from his pocket. "That's funny, because I was going to ask you to marry me today."

I squealed. "Oh my God."

He moved to position himself on one knee. "I'm not sure if I should answer your question first, or ask mine."

I laughed. "Answer mine."

He pressed a long deep kiss on my lips. "Yes, I want to have a baby with you. I've always wanted to have kids with you. Always." He cleared his throat. "So now, I get to ask my question. J, will you marry me?"

I nodded, blinking back tears. I held out my left hand as he threaded the massive diamond over my knuckle. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

He pulled me into his arms. "You've made me so happy."

I sniffed. "Ditto."

He kissed my cheek and held me at an arm's distance. "A baby? Really? And I was scared to death to ask you to marry me."

I nodded, smiling. "Yes. Are we crazy?"

"I think we'd be crazy not to do it."

I reached for the bottle of wine and refilled our glasses. "I don't know how much drinking I'll be doing after today, so I'm going to enjoy this glass with you."

"Please do, and then prepare for me to take you in that bedroom."

I flushed. My body was instantly hot. The idea that Ashe wanted to make a baby with me was the sexiest thing I could imagine. I already felt as if I would combust from one touch.

"So I'm in the window. Today," I announced. "I stopped taking my birth control. I'm ovulating, if you want to try."

"Holy shit," he whispered. "You just made me incredibly hard."

I buzzed from the wine. I felt daring and risky. I was high on love and a little bit of alcohol. I pulled the shirt over my head, and tossed my bra on the floor. "This is where we made up, isn't it?" I teased. "On this couch? Let's make our baby here." I shirked my palazzo pants off my legs, taking my panties to my ankles.

"Fuck," he growled, moving the picnic out of the way. "I'm afraid we're not going to get much baby-making practice. You'll be pregnant in no time if this is how it's going to go."

I laughed as he rose from the floor and stripped down to nothing. He climbed on the couch, pulling me into his lap. He quickly spread my slick petals, settling his swollen cock against my heat. His kiss burned my lips and his hands were everywhere. Touching me. Twisting my nipples. Dipping inside me.

“Ohh, Ashe,” I cooed as he worked my clit with his fingers.

“You’re going to be my wife, you know that?” He nipped at my throat and kissed my breasts.

I nodded. The pleasure was taking over. “Your wife,” I echoed. The diamond glittered on my finger. It was the only thing I was still wearing.

“We’re going to get married. You’re going to walk down the aisle in a white dress.”

“Mmmhmm. And then we get to take a honeymoon and try this baby thing all over again.”

I started to rock my hips toward him. I wanted him inside me. I wanted to get our first baby making attempt started.

“Fuck me,” I whispered.

He laughed. “Do you know how much I love you? Especially when you demand sex.”

I nodded. “So much. As much as I love you.”

I hissed when he reached between us and his cock stood tall and erect. I lifted my hips and slid over it, sucking him inside with a rough thrust.

“Oh shit,” I whimpered. “You feel so good. So thick.” Sometimes it felt as if Ashe was too much, but my body always accommodated him. I had to adjust and let the pressure turn to pleasure.

His fingers dug into my flesh, securing my hips to his. “Keep riding, J. Just keep riding my cock.”

Our lives were forever intertwined. Our bodies permanently seared into each other. Today, we had committed to our forever. I was going to be his wife. Today we were making a baby. Joining our lives. Promising pledges that would never be undone. As we worked harder and faster to please each other, I knew we would never forget this moment. We would never forget how we had found each other again. We would never regret the hard work and pain we had fought to bring us back together.

My nails clawed at Ashe’s shoulders as I rose higher and crashed on his shaft harder. I was close to coming.

“Ohh,” I whimpered. “I’m going to come.”

“Me too,” he groaned.

I gasped when he spun me around on the couch and planted me against the cushions. He surged inside me, slamming into my entrance with one powerful thrust after another. He erupted and I clenched around him, lost in my own orgasm.

“I’m going so deep, baby. I’m giving you everything I have. I want you to have my baby.” His voice had never sounded sexier.

“Oh God, Ashe. Go deeper.” I’d never craved his essence like this before. It was the first time I realized a primal side of me had kicked in. The side that wanted to get pregnant.

“Fuck,” he whispered, kissing my neck. “That was incredible.”

I giggled. “You know we aren’t moving for a long time. I want every swimmer you have. Don’t even think about moving.”

He kissed me fully. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

After two rounds of insanely hot baby making sex, we ate our lunch and packed up the leftovers in the cooler. We took showers and tried to look presentable. Avajeau was only an hour away. Ashe announced he had a text from Nicole when they made the last turn.

“Does she know you were planning to propose?” I asked Ashe as we sat on the deck with fresh cups of coffee. We at least looked normal and dressed out here. No one would suspect all the dirty and sexy times we had just had.

He nodded. “I wanted to make sure it was ok with her first. I drove out to see her a couple days ago.”

“But she hasn’t even met me,” I argued.

“I wanted to talk to her. Besides, I’m not worried. She’s going to love you as much as I do.”

“How can you be sure?” I was bubbling with nervous anxiety. A four-year old had never scared me so much.

“Because I do. I love you with everything I have.”

It was then that I realized everything was going to be ok.

TWENTY-TWO

Asher

I didn't know how to let Journey know that Avajeau was the kind of kid who had the kind of perspective most adults didn't even have. For a four-year old, she was already an old soul. I always wondered what kind of affect her mother's absence would have on her. Would she grow up angry? Would she resent that I was the only parent in her life? Would she ever heal?

Since the minute I met the kid, she had been nothing but pure joy and happiness. She had a kind of resilience that amazed me. Journey would see it. In a few minutes, she would understand that Avajeau would love her too. There would be bumps on the road. That was inevitable, but we'd get through them as a family.

I looked at my soon-to-be wife. I didn't know if she had ever looked more beautiful. She cupped an oversized coffee mug between her hands and sipped.

The mountain sun made her hair look like a halo. The fact that we were trying for a baby was enough to make my heart want to explode. I had everything I'd always wanted.

"You know we have some logistics to figure out."

"Like what?" She rotated in the wooden chair. She had brought a blanket outside to drape across her shoulders.

"My headquarters are in New York. You have the Malibu house. The last few weeks I've managed from L.A., but I can't keep doing that. I need to plan a trip to New York."

"Oh." Her expression was full of concern.

"I don't think I can move Westbrook Securities to the other side of the country. It's just not feasible."

"Ok." Her brow furrowed. "What do you want to do?"

"I can fly back and forth for a while. I don't know how either of us are with that idea."

She rested the mug on her knee. "What if I go with you to New York when you have to go back?"

"You want to go to New York?" She had never made that kind of offer before. She was a California girl now. At least, I thought she was.

She shrugged. "Why not? I can explore the city. We can go out and you can show me your favorite restaurants. We can take in some shows. I think it would be fun and very romantic." She grinned.

I chuckled. "I'm a workaholic. You know that."

"I am too, but we're both making changes, aren't we? We both need down time."

"I don't think you'll like the penthouse. We're going to need something else." I rubbed my jaw. There was a lot that had to change.

“Why wouldn’t I like it?”

“Trust me.” I eyed her. “It’s not your style. Avajeau doesn’t even spend time there.”

“What? Where does she go?”

“I have a house outside the city. It’s in a neighborhood. I wanted her to have something more normal. A penthouse is no place to raise a little girl.”

“I’m not going to argue with you there, but why can’t I stay in the house where she lives?”

“Because that’s where Nicole is.”

Journey sighed. “All right. Fine. I’ve been holding this in, but I need to know...just how hot is this Nicole?”

I almost spit half my coffee out. “You’re jealous of the nanny?”

“No.” She frowned. “Yes. Yes I am.”

“I’m not going to say she’s not attractive.”

“I knew it.” I saw the anger glaze over her eyes.

“But, there’s a slight problem.” I was enjoying this way too much.

“It didn’t work out for you two?”

I shook my head. I wanted to drag it out as long as possible. It was fun seeing Journey be the jealous one for a change.

“No. That’s not it.”

“Then what? What aren’t you telling me about the hot nanny?”

I laughed. “Babe, Nicole is in a serious relationship.”

“Like that would stop someone who saw you. You’re a sex god, in case you didn’t know. Women take one look at you and start ovulating.”

“Well, that’s good to know in case I have any more kids out there.”

She threw a magazine at me. “Hey! Not funny.”

“Sorry, sorry. No, Nicole is in a serious relationship with Daphne.”

“Ohh.” She bit her lip. “Oops. Sorry.”

I grinned. “It’s ok. I never had a chance.” I chuckled. “She’s great with Avajeau and that’s all that matters. Ok?”

“You’re exactly right. And she’ll be ok with our baby?”

The thought that Journey was going to be carrying my child made my chest swell with pride. I didn’t care if it didn’t happen for months. We were going to do this. Marriage. The white picket fence. Kids. Old age. It was all in front of us.

“Of course. We just have to figure out which coast we’re raising these kids.”

She scrunched her nose up. “Kansas?”

“Meet in the middle? I like it.”

We stopped when we heard the wheels of the car in the driveway. Avajeau was here.

Journey’s eyes met mine. “Are you sure this is going to be ok?”

I squeezed her hand. “I promise. This is everything we’ve ever wanted. Now, come meet my daughter.”

Epilogue

Journey

I ROLLED ON MY SIDE. The windows were open and I could smell the salt rolling off the ocean.

“Good morning,” Asher growled into my ear. “Ready to get out of bed and go for a run?”

I smiled. “You want to leave my warm bed for a workout?” I twisted my body to face him. I had lost my motivation for morning runs on the beach.

“We could work out here instead,” I suggested.

He pulled me under him and I gasped. We had slept naked. We always slept naked. He pressed his hard erection against my thigh.

“But you love the beach,” he teased.

“But I don’t want to get out of bed,” I complained.

My legs widened as he settled against my slick folds. He slid back and forth, building my want for him. I arched against his chest.

“Journey,” he moaned as his cock pushed inside me.

“Ohh,” I whimpered.

He was inside me before I knew it.

We settled into a slow rhythm, deepening the thrusts with each stroke. My heels dug into his backside, urging him to move harder. I loved it when he fucked me like this. It was inevitably my favorite new routine of ours.

My eyes drifted over his shoulder, catching a glint of the awards lining my dresser. It was called a full house. I had swept best actress at every awards show. I was still running off the adrenaline of the season.

But I wouldn’t have been able to do it without Asher. He was there for every event. Every detail. Not as my bodyguard, but as the man I loved. The man I trusted with my life. With my soul.

He reached for my ankle, dragging it to his shoulder. He pushed off the bed, angling with intensity. I bit down on my lip.

“Oh God, Asher,” I mewed.

“Feels so fucking good.”

I nodded, knowing I was losing control.

My breasts perked. They were sensitive and ached for his touch. He leaned forward, flicking his tongue over one and the other.

I sighed, loving the new ways my body reacted to him. My skin had never glowed like this. My orgasms had never been so intense.

“It won’t hurt the baby, will it?” he asked. “I’m so deep. I love being inside you. But is it ok? Is it too much for the baby?”

I smiled. “The baby is fine.” I drew my hands to his jaw. “Don’t you dare stop. I love how you feel. Don’t. Stop.” I struggled to form the words.

He grinned wickedly. “Never.”

He pounded against me as my panting grew louder and wilder. I gripped the sheets as the orgasm sprung from my core.

“God, I love it when you come.” He watched in awe as I wriggled and convulsed under him.

I saw the desire light in his eyes and he pushed into me, groaning with his own release.

Asher collapsed next to me, resting his palm against the new swell of my belly. It was hardly noticeable except to us. I had made it through awards season without a single dress alteration, but my boobs were busting through every neckline I had. I wouldn’t be able to hide it from the public for much longer.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“Are you talking to me or the baby?” I teased.

“Both.” He rubbed my belly like a genie lamp. “Sorry kid, your mom is fucking hot.”

“Language is going to be a thing once the baby is here.”

He laughed. “I’ll set some kind of alarm.”

“Language security for new parents,” I mused. “I like it.”

He laughed. “Have to keep things new at work.”

“And with us.”

I rolled on top of him, straddling him. I peppered him with kisses.

“I don’t even have to try to keep things new with you.” He gazed in my eyes.

I didn’t know I could be this happy. I didn’t know a man who had shattered my heart could mend it so easily. I didn’t know having his baby inside me would make me love him more than I already did.

Our platinum wedding bands were simple, but matched. I traced over his. “What time do we pick up Avajeau?”

He looked at his watch. “I told her grandparents we’d be there after breakfast. We probably have a couple of hours.”

I smiled. “I miss her on these weekends. But I love spending extra time with you. And I think it’s good for her to see them more than just a few times a year.”

I had done my best not to alter things too much once I became Avajeau’s stepmother. I was cautious at first, but eventually found my footing. I thought it was important that she had a relationship with Gene and Shelly. They had welcomed me as well. It was surprising that we all fell into an agreement so easily. I knew that was because everyone loved Avajeau.

The day we met at Big Bear, all my worries dissolved. We spent the afternoon making blueberry muffins and watching old *Wonder Woman* re-runs. We had an instant bond. Ashe joked that he sometimes felt outnumbered, but I knew he was happy we were close.

With award season behind me, and our elopement announced, I could focus on my pregnancy and being Avajeau’s mom. We had a summer ahead of us that would take us to the East Coast as much as Asher wanted to be in his office. I was taking at least a year off for this new phase of

my life. As reigning best actress, I could afford that luxury. I was going to take advantage of it.

We still hadn't decided on a permanent home base. I still joked that Kansas was the happy middle. I knew we would land in the right place to raise our family. We would know it when it happened. And if I knew anything about my husband, it would be the safest and most secure house to ever be constructed.

That morning, we stayed in bed as the sun started to peek over the horizon. There was plenty of time to get up and go for a run before collecting Avajeau. Asher's empire could wait. The Journey Tessier world wouldn't fall apart.

Right now, we were home. We were a family.

And nothing else mattered.

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SNEAK PEEK OF SOUNDS LIKE OBSESSION

His fingers curled around mine. Tight and strong as if he was offering to let me siphon his strength. If we could hold on a little longer this would be over.

Over.

It was a word that had fractured us before. Now, it was more threatening and severe. A finality I hadn't been willing to face. Not when he slipped out of my life. Not when darkness consumed me. Not when I struggled to carry on. Not when everything barricaded my next step.

He squeezed again. I looked down at the way our fingers threaded through each other's. It was as if they belonged that way, tangled and meshed. As if they fit together. As if they had never held any other hands but these.

Maybe he clasped with such a fierce grip to siphon *my* strength. He needed me as deeply as I always had needed him.

Was that our connection? Had it always been? Was it give and take? Need ingrained with want? Or something so consuming we drained each other?

The suitcases and crates rattled across from us. We were wedged in a corner. Our backs against the metal cavern. Our feet tucked under us in an awkward position. I was grateful I wasn't alone, but I didn't want it to be like this.

I lifted my eyes to AJ.

There was no explanation for why he was here now. For how we had collided in this cruel joke. It almost didn't matter. I had gotten past the shock. Enough to realize we weren't going to have a happy ending.

"I'm sorry, Syd." The words sounded bitter and full of regret.

I nodded. I didn't think I could put it into a sentence. "I know," I whispered. "I know."

"I should have told you sooner. I should have—"

I stopped him. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“If only I had—”

“No,” I snapped. “Just no.”

“I haven’t given up,” he replied.

“And if I have?”

The only light came from a crack under the door. Our ankles were bound with zip ties. Any movement and they pinched together, cutting into my tender skin. The blood had seeped through my jeans. A few droplets oozed into my shoe.

My head pounded. The cut over AJ’s left eye looked vicious. He needed stitches. I knew the skin over his brow was thin, and the bleeding was naturally worse in that area, but it looked like something out of slasher film. For the time being it had crusted over enough to keep the blood from running into his eye.

That was how I was measuring our wins down here. The breaths I could still take. The beats my heart could still make. The pain my body still felt.

Pain was good.

Pain meant we hadn’t died.

Yet.

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