



# Filthy Rich Single Daddies

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** "That's it, baby. Let go for us."

Maybe skinny dipping in the neighbor's pool wasn't the best idea. Especially when the ridiculously hot new homeowner catches me and scolds me like I've been a very naughty girl.

Turns out, my new neighbor, Austin, doesn't live alone. He has two smoking-hot housemates and two adorable kids.

When the kids' coldhearted nanny abruptly quits, Austin offers me a live-in nanny gig. I love my kid-free evenings, but I'm in desperate need of a new place to live, so I reluctantly accept.

Now I'm living in a house full of temptation. All three of these men are sharing my bed and stealing my heart.

Austin exudes confidence and has this way of looking at me with those intense blue eyes that make my heart race. Cohen's calm demeanor hides something deeper, and I can't help but wonder what secrets he's keeping. And Theo? He's my first love—and the last person I ever thought I'd fall for again—but the heart wants what it wants.

How am I supposed to choose? And what if I don't have to?

Filthy Rich Single Daddies is a steamy, standalone why choose romance with a heart-racing HEA and chemistry that'll knock your socks off. No cheating, just explosive attraction.

**Total Pages (Source):** 86

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

### Skylar

It's the perfect kind of afternoon for a skinny-dip in the neighbor's pool. The cool water laps against my skin as I glide through the crystalline pool. God, this feels amazing. I arch my back, letting the late afternoon sun warm my exposed breasts as I float languidly. The golden rays catch on the rippling surface, sending shimmering patterns dancing along the pool floor.

After the day I've had, I deserve this little slice of paradise. My students were absolute terrors today, and the PTA meeting afterward nearly drove me to tears. The PTA treasurer, Karen (not her real name), wouldn't stop trying to micromanage everything, as if my life weren't chaotic enough already. But this—this is my sanctuary now.

I dip beneath the surface, relishing the silky feel of the water against my naked body. When I emerge, droplets cascade down my face, and I push my wet hair back with both hands. The sprawling houses around me are barely visible through the lush landscaping. Not that I'm worried about prying eyes—this house has been vacant for months.

The only signs of life I've seen on the neighbor's property lately have been the pool and lawn guys, showing up like clockwork to maintain a house that no one lives in. So, when I got home and saw this beautiful, empty pool going unused—again—I decided I wasn't going to waste the opportunity. Call it opportunism or a bad case of poor impulse control, but it's not like anyone's going to know.

I swim to the edge of the pool and rest my arms on the sun-warmed concrete, gazing out at the manicured lawn. A gentle breeze rustles the trees, the faint sound of distant traffic reminding me I'm not completely isolated. "If only my students could see Miss Deveraux now." I chuckle.

Then it hits me—if they could see me, my third graders would be seeing me naked. I grimace at the thought and drop my head into my hands. Maybe not the best idea, Skylar. But the thought passes quickly, the ridiculousness of it all drawing a reluctant laugh from my lips. What am I even worried about? Here, surrounded by walls of greenery, I'm untouchable.

The stress of the day melts away as I close my eyes and tilt my face toward the sky, replaced by a deep sense of contentment. I push off from the wall, executing a lazy backstroke across the length of the pool. My mind drifts, savoring the peace and solitude.

The sunlight filters through my closed eyelids, warm and soothing. A bird chirps nearby, its melodic trill adding to the ambiance. I let myself drift, weightless and free, the water cradling me.

A gentle breeze caresses my skin, and I sigh in pleasure. "Now this is living," I say to no one in particular. "Eat your heart out, step monster." The words are sharper than I intend, but the thought of my father's wife stumbling upon me like this is too funny to ignore. Her judgmental, pinched expression would be priceless.

For now, at least, all my worries seem as far away as the horizon.

So, when a thunderous barking shatters my serenity, I'm startled to say the least. I whip my eyes open just in time to see a massive dog, all snarling teeth and wild eyes, barreling out of the supposedly empty house.

What the actual fuck?

"Holy shit!" The words burst out of me as my heart leaps into my throat. I freeze mid-stroke, treading water in the center of the pool, unsure whether to swim for the edge or stay put. The beast looks like it could swallow me whole, and I'd rather not find out if that's on its to-do list.

Just as I'm contemplating my odds of outswimming Cujo, a deep, masculine voice cuts through the chaos. "Djinn, come!"

The dog halts at the pool's edge, teeth still bared, emitting a low growl that seems to vibrate through the water. Relief floods my system, but it's short-lived. Because now, I have a bigger problem. Stepping out from the shadow of the house, is a man. And not just any man.

No, this is the kind of man sculptors dream of chiseling from marble—tall, with a jawline that could cut glass, piercing blue eyes, and the kind of effortless arrogance that screams power. His shirt clings to broad shoulders, the sleeves rolled up just enough to reveal forearms that are almost indecently attractive. He's the kind of handsome that belongs on magazine covers, not in the backyards of suburban mansions.

He stops at the edge of the pool, and his gaze locks on me—wet, naked, and very much trespassing.

"Well, this day just keeps getting better," I mutter, half to myself, though the sarcasm does little to mask my mortification. As if the situation wasn't awkward enough, a striking woman with a tablet joins Mr. Tall-Blond-and-Frowning. She's polished to perfection with a sleek ponytail, sharp blazer, and a look on her face that shifts from composed to wide-eyed as she takes in the scene.

Lovely. Just lovely.

I force myself to meet their gazes, fighting the urge to sink beneath the water and never resurface. "Lovely day for a swim, isn't it?" I call out, my voice dripping with false cheer.

I cross my arms over my chest, desperately wishing I had a towel, or better yet, an invisibility cloak. The water laps at my shoulders, cool against my flushed skin. I consider making a dash for the pool's edge, but what's the point? They've already gotten an eyeful.

Their silence stretches for an eternity—or maybe three seconds—before the Adonis speaks, his tone clipped and accusing. "Who are you? And what, exactly, do you think you're doing in my pool?"

I raise an eyebrow, trying to summon some bravado despite my very obvious disadvantage. "Your pool? I don't see your name on it. This house has been empty for months."

His jaw tightens, a muscle ticking in his cheek. "I'm Austin Rhodes, the new owner of this no-longer-empty house. Your turn."

Crap. Of all the rotten luck.

I plaster on a strained smile, the kind I usually reserve for PTA meetings and difficult parents. "Longtime neighbor and pool enthusiast."

"Also known as a trespasser," he replies smoothly.

"Tomato, to-mah-to," I quip, pushing wet hair off my face. "Well, Austin Rhodes, it seems we have a bit of a misunderstanding on our hands."

## Page 2

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His eyes narrow, those impossibly blue irises darkening like storm clouds. "What I understand is that you're trespassing. In my pool. Naked."

I can't help it—I laugh. It's that or cry, and I refuse to give him the satisfaction. "Guilty as charged on all counts. Though in my defense, I had no idea anyone had moved in."

I toss my wet hair over my shoulder, ignoring the water dripping down my back. "Look, I live next door, and I've been using this pool all spring. No harm, no foul, right?"

Austin's gaze rakes over me, a mix of irritation and something hotter simmering beneath the surface. "I'd hardly call breaking and entering 'no harm'."

"Breaking and entering?" I scoff, gesturing to the open gate with my chin. "The gate's been broken for forever, so technically, you should thank me for alerting you to a security issue."

The woman beside him clears her throat, tapping furiously on her tablet. "Mr. Rhodes, would—should I get started on the master bedroom?"

He waves her off, his eyes never leaving mine. "Yes. Thank you, Amelia. I'll be in after I've dealt with this...situation."

I roll my eyes. "Oh please, don't let little old me disrupt your busy billionaire schedule. I'll just grab my things and be on my merry way."

"Not so fast," Austin growls, taking a step closer to the pool's edge. "We're not done here."

The tension crackles between us, electric and dangerous. I know I should be embarrassed—ashamed, even—but something about his authoritative tone grates on my nerves. I'm not some naughty schoolgirl to be scolded.

"Actually," I counter, cocking an eyebrow, "we are. Unless you'd like to join me for a swim?"

His eyes widen fractionally, and for a moment, I think I've rendered the great Austin Rhodes speechless. Then his lips curve into a predatory smile that sends a shiver down my spine.

"Don't tempt me, trouble," he purrs, his voice like velvet over steel. "You might not like the results."

Oh, but I think I would.

I push off the wall with a lazy stroke, letting the water lap around me. "Look," I say, trying for casual, "I didn't know anyone had moved in. It was just a harmless swim. No big deal."

Austin's gaze follows me, his expression unreadable but intense. "No big deal?" His voice drops, silk and steel. "Breaking and entering is a crime. I could have you arrested."

I roll my eyes. "Breaking and entering? Really? If anything, I was doing this pool a favor. It was practically begging for attention."

There's a beat of silence. Then, to my surprise, the corner of his mouth twitches. Just

slightly. That predatory smile is back, wider, and oh. Oh. It's the kind of smile that could make a girl forget her own name. He studies me with an intensity that makes my skin tingle.

Then he tilts his head, his smile deepening. "You should count yourself lucky, trouble. If I weren't in such a good mood today, this conversation might've gone differently."

"Lucky?" I scoff, refusing to be intimidated. "Let me guess—this is the part where you threaten to call the cops?"

"Only if you leave without agreeing to replace the bottle of scotch I'll need after dealing with this," he drawls.

I laugh, the sound bubbling up unbidden. Damn him. He's insufferable, but I can't deny the spark crackling between us.

"Deal," I say, my voice laced with defiance. "But only if you promise not to sick Cujo on me next time."

"Djinn," he corrects, his eyes glinting with humor. "And that depends entirely on how well you behave."

"Oh, I never behave," I reply, pushing off the wall with a smirk. "But something tells me you already knew that."

As I glide away, I feel his gaze burning into me, electric and unapologetically intrigued. So much for peace and quiet.

The auditorium buzzes with excitement as I guide my students through their final bows. Glitter rains down from homemade banners, catching the stage lights and

transforming the chaos into something magical. Parents cheer, siblings wave wildly, and the faint hum of a hundred simultaneous conversations creates a symphony of post-performance euphoria. I clap along with the crowd, my chest swelling with pride as my students beam under the spotlight.

"Great job, everyone!" I call out, my voice straining to rise above the din. "Remember to thank your families for coming!"

A few of the kids run up for high fives, their faces flushed with the adrenaline of a successful show. My heart melts as I see the pure joy radiating off them. Moments like these make the long hours of rehearsals and lesson plans worth every second.

The principal gets on the microphone, her voice cutting through the chatter. "Families, please come forward to collect your star performers! We'll release them directly to you."

## Page 3

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I hustle to my designated area, where a cheerful, hand-painted sign bearing my name marks my station. I adjust it slightly, ensuring it's visible from the crowd, and glance down at my clipboard. The organized chaos begins as parents filter in, some with flowers and others still wielding phone cameras.

"Lucas Rhodes? Lucas Rhodes?" I call out, scanning the sea of faces for the young boy's family. My eyes dart to the entrance, but no one steps forward. "Is Lucas Rhodes' family here?"

A familiar tune catches my ear. Is that... theJawstheme? I shake my head, chalking it up to post-performance jitters. But then I see him, moving through the crowd like a shark gliding through water. The sea of parents part as if they sense his presence before they even see him.

Austin Rhodes.

And he's not just here—he's dressed to kill.

He looks positively edible in a charcoal suit that probably cost more than my yearly salary. It hugs his tall frame perfectly, every detail screaming power and privilege. Our eyes lock, and suddenly I'm back in that pool, naked and vulnerable under his scorching gaze. My stomach flips, but I swallow hard, pasting on my best professional smile. Whatever he's doing here, I refuse to let him see me sweat.

Game on, Mr. Billionaire. Game on.

His eyes are dark and intense, a mix of heat and something harder—disappointment?

Anger? I can't quite place it, but it makes my skin prickle.

"Miss Deveraux," he clips out, my name sounding like an accusation on his tongue.

I lift my chin, meeting his gaze head-on. "Mr. Rhodes. What a...surprise to see you here."

Oh, shit. Rhodes. Lucas Rhodes. Hisson. He's here for his son. That I teach. Well, isn't that a fun coincidence? And thank God Lucas wasn't with him when he caught me naked in his pool.

His jaw tightens, and I can practically feel the tension radiating off him in waves. It's clear he's not thrilled to find me in this setting, but why? Does he think I'm not good enough to teach his son? The thought makes my blood boil.

Even if my first impression was a little lacking...in the clothing department. It wasn't lacking in chemistry.

"I wasn't aware you were a teacher," he says, his voice low and controlled.

I arch an eyebrow, unable to resist the urge to poke the bear. "There's a lot you don't know about me, Mr. Rhodes. Though I suppose that goes both ways, doesn't it?"

His jaw tightens, the muscles flexing in a way that's both infuriating and...unfairly attractive. His eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think I've pushed too far. But then a small voice pipes up from beside me.

"Ms. Deveraux! Did you see my solo?"

I tear my gaze away from Austin to find Lucas beaming up at me, his eyes shining with excitement. He's practically bouncing on his toes, his face glowing with pride.

My heart melts a little at his enthusiasm, and I can't help but smile back.

"I certainly did, Lucas," I say, crouching down to his level. "You were absolutely fantastic up there. Your voice is getting stronger every day."

Lucas's smile widens, and he practically hops with enthusiasm. "Really? Do you think I could be a singer someday?"

I feel Austin's eyes burning into me, but I keep my focus on Lucas. "With talent like yours? Absolutely. The sky's the limit, kiddo."

Lucas looks like I've just handed him the moon. "Thanks, Ms. Deveraux!"

When I straighten, I can feel Austin's gaze burning into me. I turn to find him watching me with an expression I can't quite read. There's something softer in his eyes now, though it's fleeting—gone as quickly as it appeared.

Deciding to lighten the mood, I flash him a teasing smile. "You know, Mr. Rhodes," I say, injecting a playful lilt into my voice, "if you're interested in seeing more of my teaching skills, I offer private swimming lessons too."

Austin's lips purse, a muscle ticking in his jaw. I've hit a nerve, but I can't bring myself to care. Let him be uncomfortable. I'm done feeling ashamed.

"Lucas," Austin says, his voice tight. "It's time to go."

The boy hesitates, glancing between us before finally nodding. "Okay, Dad."

Austin takes his son's hand, steering him away without so much as a goodbye. But as they weave through the crowd, Lucas turns back, waving enthusiastically.

"Bye, Ms. Deveraux!"

I wave back, my smile lingering even as the knot in my stomach tightens.

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As they disappear from view, I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. My heart is still pounding, a mix of frustration and something I don't want to name simmering beneath the surface.

"Well," I mutter to myself, tucking my hair behind my ears. "That went about as well as expected."

At least I didn't back down. But deep down, I can't help but wonder if this is just the beginning. Because no matter how much I want to deny it, there's no escaping the fact that Austin Rhodes is now a very real—and very complicated—part of my life.

He is my new neighbor after all.

## Chapter 2

Skylar

Summer is officially here and I am officially off the clock.

The sun kisses my skin as I stretch out on the lounge, relishing the warmth of early summer. A gentle breeze rustles the leaves overhead, carrying with it the faint hum of bees flitting around the garden. I should be summer job hunting, I really should—but right now, I'm savoring this rare moment of peace. The scent of blooming roses drifts over from Birdie's meticulously maintained garden, mingling with the earthy aroma of freshly watered soil.

I close my eyes and tilt my face toward the sky, letting the sunlight dance across my

cheeks. For the first time in weeks, the tension in my shoulders starts to melt away.

I love the outdoors. I'm not really an outdoorsy girl—I'd rather sip cocktails on a patio than go hiking—but there's something about being outside that soothes me.

"Enjoying yourself, dear?" Birdie's voice carries across the lawn, lilting and warm with a hint of amusement.

I sit up, squinting against the brightness as I shield my eyes with one hand. Birdie is making her way toward me, her silver hair catching the light like a halo. She's the picture of elegance in one of her signature flowing caftans, this one a vibrant turquoise that sets off the sparkle in her eyes.

"Just soaking up some vitamin D before I dive into the job search," I call back, trying to keep the guilt out of my voice.

Birdie waves a hand dismissively, her golden bangles jangling softly. "Oh, pish posh. You should take the summer to relax—you've earned it. If you're really itching for something to do, why don't you come help me wrangle this garden into submission? Heaven knows it's getting the better of me these days."

I laugh, stretching my arms over my head as I stand. "How can I ever say no to you? Besides, I think I'm actually starting to like gardening. Who would've thought?"

Birdie's eyes twinkle with a mischievous glint as she reaches my side. "Darling, you're far too practical to be a trust fund baby. It's one of the things I adore about you."

We stroll toward the rose bushes, the warm grass brushing against my bare feet. I can't help the twinge of discomfort that creeps in as I take in the perfectly manicured lawns and sprawling estate. It's beautiful, breathtaking—familiar, even—but so far

removed from where I thought I'd end up. If it weren't for Birdie's kindness, I'd probably be holed up in some dingy studio apartment, eating ramen noodles and dodging my landlord.

"You're thinking too hard again," Birdie chides gently, handing me a pair of gardening gloves and a pair of shiny shears. "I can practically hear the gears grinding in that pretty head of yours."

I force a smile, trying to push away the memories of my old life. "Just wondering how I got so lucky to have you as my fairy godmother."

Birdie lets out a rich, warm laugh that feels like sunshine. "Oh, please. If anything, you're my knight in shining armor. Who else would keep this old bird company and help with the gardening?"

As we work side by side—well, as I work and she watches—trimming away faded blooms and pulling up weeds, I feel the weight of gratitude settle over me. My life had imploded in ways I never thought possible, but somehow, I'd landed here. Or rather, Birdie had caught me before I hit the ground.

"You know," I say, carefully snipping a wilted rose, "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm kind of glad about everything that happened. It led me here, to you."

Birdie pauses, her eyes softening as she looks at me. Her hands are folded over the handle of her cane, the sunlight glinting off the gold rings that adorn her fingers. "Well," she says with a small smile, "their loss is my gain. Now, enough of this sappy nonsense. Tell me—any interesting prospects on the job front?"

She retreats to the shade of the porch, settling into a cushioned chair with a glass of iced tea in hand. I know she'd love to be out here in the dirt with me, but the years have taken their toll, and it's not as easy for her anymore. Still, the way her eyes

linger on the flowers tells me she's just as invested, even if she's not the one doing the pruning.

Sweat beads on my forehead, but I don't mind. There's something strangely soothing about the repetitive motion of pulling weeds and trimming back overgrown vines. The world feels smaller out here, the chaos of the past few months fading into the background.

"You missed a spot, darling," Birdie calls from her perch, her voice playful.

I roll my eyes, but can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. "I thought you were supposed to be resting, not supervising."

"What can I say? Old habits die hard," she quips, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she raises her glass in a mock toast.

I'm about to fire back a snarky retort when a sharp voice cuts through the peaceful afternoon air. My hands freeze mid-pull, dirt crumbling between my fingers. The muscles in my shoulders tense as I glance over my shoulder toward the sound, my stomach twisting with unease.

"What is wrong with you? Can't you do anything right?"

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The words are harsh, dripping with disdain, each syllable cutting through the quiet yard like a serrated knife. I tilt my head, straining to pinpoint the source.

"I swear, if I have to tell you one more time—"

I clench my jaw, protective instincts flaring in my chest like a lit match.

"Skylar?" Birdie's voice is laced with concern, her expression worried as she leans forward in her chair. "Who is that?"

I stand slowly, brushing dirt from my knees. My heart starts to race, the edges of my vision narrowing with laser focus. "I'm not sure," I murmur, "but I don't like what I'm hearing."

The cruel words are unmistakably coming from next door. My stomach twists tighter, a nauseating combination of dread and anger pooling in my gut. Lucas. It has to be Lucas. My chest tightens further, a mix of seething fury and fierce protectiveness rising in a wave so strong I have to clench my fists to stay grounded.

"I'm sorry," I hear a small, trembling voice respond. The tone is soft, hesitant, and heartbreakingly familiar. "I'll do better, I promise."

That's definitely Lucas. His voice has that unmistakable note of desperation, the kind that makes my protective instincts scream louder. I can picture his wide, expressive brown eyes, brimming with unshed tears, his head ducked as though trying to make himself invisible.

My fingers wrap tightly around the handle of my spade as I strain to hear more. Then, I let it go and drop my gardening gloves, too, completely forgetting about the flowers.

"Skylar?" Birdie calls again, but her voice seems distant, like it's coming from another room.

I bite my lip, torn between the burning need to intervene and the logical voice in my head warning me to stay out of it. Don't meddle, it says. It's not your business. What if I make things worse? What if Austin gets angry at me for interfering?

But then I hear it—a sharp cry, followed by more horrible words.

"Useless! Absolutely useless! The venom in the words makes my blood boil. "I don't know why they even bother with you!"

That does it. The logical voice is silenced, drowned out by a tidal wave of rage. My hesitation evaporates like morning dew under a scorching sun. I can't stand by and let this continue—not when I know how sensitive and eager-to-please Lucas is. Hell, it wouldn't matter if the kid was a stranger. This is unacceptable.

"I have to go," I mutter to Birdie, already moving toward the fence separating our properties.

"Wait, what?" Birdie stands, iced tea glass still in her hands, but I'm already halfway across the yard.

Glad the spade is no longer in my white-knuckled grip, I march across the perfectly manicured lawn, my heart pounding in my ears. My thoughts are a chaotic blur of anger and determination. As I round the corner and see the back of Austin's sprawling mansion, the source of the shouting comes into view.

Lucas is there, his small frame hunched over like he's trying to disappear into himself. Beside him stands a younger girl I don't recognize—she must be his sister. My breath catches in my throat as I see their terrified faces, their wide eyes darting nervously toward the woman towering over them.

The woman's back is to me, but even from a distance, I can sense her seething anger. For a split second, I assume she's their mother, but as I draw closer, I realize how young she looks—she's in her early twenties at most. Her trendy outfit and lithe figure scream trophy wife rather than caregiver, but something about her posture feels all wrong.

"What were you thinking?" she hisses at Lucas, who flinches visibly. "You could have broken it! Do you have any idea how much that costs?"

My stomach churns with disgust. Is this really who Austin chose to be with? Someone who treats his children like this?

And then it hits me—I'm living in millionaire land. And, while this may be Austin's newest trophy wife, this isn't their mother. Relief washes over me briefly, only to be replaced by a renewed surge of anger. She's the nanny. She has to be. And judging by the scene in front of me, she's failing at it spectacularly.

"Lucas?" I call out softly, not wanting to startle him.

His head snaps up, those soulful brown eyes widening in recognition. "Miss Deveraux!" he exclaims, a hint of desperation and relief in his eyes.

The nanny whirls around, her perfectly made-up face contorting into a scowl. "Excuse me, who the fuck are you?"

I paste on my sweetest smile, my fist clenching so tightly that my nails bite into my

palm. "I'm Skylar, the neighbor," I reply, letting my voice drip with faux-politeness. "I couldn't help but overhear..." I let the sentence hang in the air, my gaze flicking meaningfully between her and the children.

Lucas edges closer to me, as if seeking protection. The little girl, her bright blue eyes full of curiosity and fear, clings to Lucas' side. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what's to come. Nanny or not, I won't let this woman terrorize these kids for another second.

"Look," the nanny starts, her tone defensive. "You don't understand what it's like dealing with these two. They're spoiled, ungrateful little brats—"

"Brats?" I interrupt, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. My voice is sharp, each syllable laced with righteous fury. "They're children, not prisoners in a boot camp."

She scoffs, her posture rigid with indignation. "This is exactly the problem. Everyone coddles them, and then I'm left to clean up the mess."

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I take a step forward, positioning myself between her and the kids. I can feel Lucas and the little girl huddling behind me, their small frames pressed close to my back.

"That's enough," I snap, my voice as sharp as the spade in my hand. "You don't get to talk to them like that."

The nanny's face reddens, her voice rising to a shrill pitch. "How dare you interfere! I'm their nanny, and I—"

"And you're supposed to care for them," I cut her off, my anger bubbling dangerously close to the surface. "Not berate them until they're scared to breathe wrong."

I can feel my heart pounding, memories of my own childhood threatening to surface. I push them down, focusing on the here and now. These kids need me.

"You have no right," the nanny sputters, but I can see the uncertainty creeping into her eyes.

I lean in close, my voice low and dangerous. "I have every right to protect children from abuse. Verbal or otherwise."

The nanny's face contorts with rage. "Abuse? You have no idea what you're talking about!"

I raise an eyebrow.

Her jaw works furiously, but no sound comes out. She throws her hands up in

exasperation. "You know what? Fine! I'm done. I quit!" She glares at the kids one last time. "Let's see how you handle these little monsters!"

As she storms off, the tension in the air lingers like a storm cloud. I turn to face Lucas and the little girl, their tear-streaked faces breaking my heart.

"Hey, it's okay," I say, softening my voice. "She's gone now."

Lucas, always protective, wraps an arm around the little girl. She leans into him, her big eyes scanning me. "Miss Deveraux?"

"How about you call me Miss Skylar when we're outside of school? Does that sound fair?"

"Y—yes."

"Good. And, who might you be, sweetheart?"

"Elodie."

"What...what happens now?" he asks, his voice small.

I run a hand through my hair, my mind racing. What the hell am I supposed to do? I didn't think this through. But I can't just leave them.

"Now," I say, trying to inject confidence into my voice, "we call your dad. And maybe have a sweet treat. Let's see what you guys have inside."

Their faces light up, and I feel a small surge of triumph. Okay, Skylar, I think to myself.

As we walk toward the house, Elodie slips her tiny hand into mine. The gesture catches me off guard, and I feel a warmth spreading through my chest.

"You're not going to leave us, are you?" she asks, her big blue eyes searching my face.

I swallow hard, pushing down the panic rising in my throat. "No, sweetie. I'm not going anywhere."

## Chapter 3

### Austin

The steering wheel creaks under my white-knuckled grip as I pull into the driveway, my jaw clenched so tight I can hear my teeth grinding. Fucking perfect. A million-dollar deal hanging in the balance, and our nanny decides to up and quit without warning. What the hell kind of timing is that? It's like the universe has a vendetta against me. The thought makes my blood simmer, the tension in my neck rising like a live wire.

Miss Deveraux's hurried explanation over the phone still rings in my ears, but I can't shake the feeling that there's more to the story, that the skinny-dipping teacher isn't being entirely truthful. Her words were all rushed, flying out of her mouth, like she was trying to cover something up. Something doesn't add up, but I'll deal with that later. Right now, the clock's ticking, and I've got to keep it together.

I'm not the kind of guy to make snap judgments. Okay, maybe I am. But something about her doesn't sit right—whether it's the way she dodged my questions or the fact that I caught her naked in my pool before finding out she was teaching my son. I don't trust her, and I'm damn sure not buying whatever story she's selling.

I storm through the front door, the air in the foyer thick with an electric charge that matches the storm brewing inside me. My footsteps echo like thunderclaps, reverberating off the vaulted ceilings as I make my way into the house. "What the hell is going on here?" I bellow, my voice bouncing off the walls. I don't give a shit if any of the staff is around to hear it. I need answers.

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"Dad!"

Just like that, the rage melts away. Lucas barrels toward me, his little arms outstretched, and I scoop him up without hesitation. His familiar scent of apple shampoo and fruit snacks floods my senses, grounding me in a way nothing else can. For a moment, I let myself breathe him in, holding him close.

"Hey, buddy," I murmur, my voice softening, fighting the lump in my throat. "Everything okay?" I'm not sure if I'm asking him or trying to reassure myself.

Before Lucas can answer, a high-pitched squeal pierces the air, sharp and excited. "Uncle Austin! Where's Daddy?"

I look up to see Elodie perched in Miss Deveraux's arms, her golden curls bouncing as she wriggles with excitement. For a moment, I'm struck by the sight of them together—Miss Deveraux's long, dark hair a stark contrast to Elodie's fair locks.

"Your dad's still at work, Elodie sweetheart," I explain, trying to keep my voice light. "He'll be home soon."

As I set Lucas down, I can't help but marvel at how quickly these kids can diffuse my anger. One minute I'm ready to breathe fire, the next I'm melting like ice cream on a hot sidewalk. I run a hand through my hair, realizing it's probably sticking up in all directions now. So much for the controlled image I try so hard to maintain.

"So," I say, locking eyes with Miss Deveraux, "want to tell me what really happened here?"

Her hazel eyes flash with indignation, and I can practically see the flames dancing in them. Her jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think she might actually breathe fire.

"Excuse me?" she says, her voice low and dangerous. "Are you implying that I lied to you, Mr. Rhodes?"

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can get a word out, Elodie pipes up from Miss Deveraux's arms, her voice shrill with excitement.

"Oh, Uncle Austin! It was awful!" she exclaims, her blue eyes wide with excitement. "The nanny was yelling at Lucas for spilling his juice, and she said such mean things!"

I feel my eyebrows shoot up. "Really?" I ask, glancing between Elodie and Miss Deveraux, trying to gauge the truth in her words. Elodie isn't known to fib, but she is six and impressionable.

Elodie nods vigorously, her golden curls bouncing. "Uh-huh! And then Miss Skylar came in like a superhero! She told the mean lady to stop being so nasty, and the lady got all red in the face and stormed out!"

I can't help but picture Miss De—Skylar, in a cape, hands on her hips like Wonder Woman. The mental image is both amusing and...oddly appealing. A strange flutter stirs in my chest, and I quickly push it aside, trying to focus.

"Is that so?" I ask, looking back at Skylar. Her expression has softened slightly, but there's still a hint of defiance in her eyes. She's not backing down, and I can respect that. Even if it makes me want to dominate her in every way.

"That's...a pretty accurate summary," Skylar admits, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips as she turns her attention to the little girl in her arms. "Though I'm not sure about

the superhero part."

I feel a twinge of guilt for doubting her earlier. I open my mouth to apologize again, but the words don't come out right. "I...I'm sorry for implying you weren't truthful," I say, running a hand through my hair again, wishing I could take back my earlier assumptions. "It's just been a hell of a day, and I—"

"It's fine," Skylar cuts me off, her tone clipped but not unkind. "I understand. These things happen."

I nod, feeling a mix of relief and lingering tension, but also an odd sense of familiarity. I've only met this woman a few brief times, and yet, it feels like there's something more here, something beneath the surface I can't quite reach. As I watch Skylar gently set Elodie down, I can't help but wonder what other surprises this woman might have in store for us.

I meet Skylar's eyes, and suddenly I'm back at the pool, watching droplets of water cascade down her smooth skin. The name Skylar suits her perfectly. She's wild and untamed, like a storm-tossed sky. I clear my throat, willing away the inappropriate thoughts before they become entirely too obvious.

"Thank you, Miss Deveraux," I manage, my voice a bit rougher than I'd like. "I appreciate your help today. I'll take it from here."

Skylar nods, her hazel eyes still burning with that fierce intensity. "Of course, Mr. Rhodes. Happy to help."

"Austin. You can call me Austin."

"Fine, then. Austin. I guess I'll see you around."

She crouches low to the ground, her hands briefly resting on her knees as she looks down at Lucas and Elodie, a soft smile tugging at her lips. It's like she's a different person when she's with them—gentle, warm, genuine.

"Goodbye, you two," she says, her voice warm and sincere despite the awkwardness hanging in the air. "If you ever need anything, I'm right next door. You can come find me or Birdie, okay? Always."

Lucas gives her a shy wave, his big brown eyes resting worshipfully on her face, while Elodie babbles happily, oblivious to the tension. Skylar gives both a gentle pat on their heads before standing up again, her posture confident and graceful.

As she walks toward the door, I can't help but feel that pull, like an invisible thread tugging me closer to her. There's something about Skylar—something I can't quite put my finger on. Maybe it's the way she commands attention without even trying. Or maybe it's the sass, the defiance that radiates from her like an electric current. I bet she'd be a brat in bed.

Jesus, Austin. Stop thinking about her naked.

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As I watch her leave, the thought of dragging her back inside flashes through my mind. I just want to see if she tastes as good as she looks. But then, I shove the thought aside—she's not mine to take.

Stop thinking about this woman naked, Austin. Nothing good can come of it.

As I settle the kids in the living room with a movie, I can't help but wonder what I've gotten myself into moving next door to this woman. And Skylar Deveraux is a complication I definitely don't need right now.

Hours later the front door slams, jerking me out of my thoughts. Cohen storms in, his face a thundercloud, with Theo close behind looking happy as a clam. But then, Theo always looks like that.

"What the hell, Austin?" Cohen's voice booms through the house, sounding every bit like the older brother who thinks I'm a walking disaster. "Why didn't you call me earlier?"

I hold up a hand, trying to rein in the situation. Cohen's temper has always been hot, and right now, it's spitting sparks. "Keep your voice down, Cohen," I hiss, nodding toward the living room where the kids are playing. "They've had a rough day."

Cohen's jaw tightens, but he lowers his voice, though the edge is still there. "Elodie's okay though, right? And who the hell is this woman you let watch them?"

I can see why he's upset. The idea of a stranger being in charge of the kids, especially after everything that's happened, must be a shock. But it doesn't mean I'm in the

mood to backpedal. My head is already pounding, and the last thing I need is Cohen jumping down my throat right now.

"Elodie's fine," I snap, not bothering to soften my tone. "They're both fine."

"You're sure?" "I'm positive, Cohen. And I didn't let her watch the kids. She stepped in when she heard what was going on and stayed when the nanny stormed off. Miss Deveraux is our neighbor—one of them, anyway. I think she lives in the carriage house next door."

Cohen's eyes flash with disbelief, and I can almost see the gears grinding in his mind as he processes this new information. "A complete stranger?" His voice rises again, the outrage still clawing at him, before he forces himself to calm down. "A complete stranger was watching our kids?"

I fight the frustration rising inside me, but keep my cool. This conversation is already edging too close to what I don't want to talk about: the mess we're all in. "She was also Lucas's teacher this year. While not ideal, she's not exactly a stranger."

Cohen runs a hand through his hair, his temper flaring in a way I haven't seen in a while. His eyes darken, and I know we're not going to get through this without some friction. "You could've called me. I would've dropped everything and come home. Why didn't you just let me know earlier?"

Theo steps in, his hand resting gently on Cohen's shoulder, trying to calm the storm. "Let him explain, man," he says quietly, his voice that soothing tone he always uses when he wants to defuse tension. It's usually effective, but Cohen's not in the mood to listen or be calm right now.

I nod, feeling the weight of his words. The truth is, I should've called. I know I should have. But everything's been a mess since our divorces. It's why we're here in

the first place, living like some kind of family co-op. The condo was too big for just me and Lucas, even if Djinn takes up enough space for three humans. And honestly, I couldn't stand the idea of being alone with all that space, of hearing the silence in the rooms that were once filled with the noise of a life that's no longer mine.

Even if Brielle never really felt like mine. Even if she was just an obligation.

Cohen was in the same situation. After his wife up and left to "find herself" with her yoga instructor, it was just him and Elodie. Unlike me, who knew deep down what I was getting into with Brielle, Cohen was devastated when Chelsea left. It's something we don't talk about much, but we both know how the other feels—alone, frustrated, exhausted.

And, Theo, well, we haven't really done much without him since college. He's as much a part of this family as anyone. It wasn't even a question that he should move in with us, too. I know I could rely on him for anything, and lately, that's been more than a little reassuring.

I clench my jaw, fighting to keep my own temper in check. The last thing I need right now is to let Cohen get under my skin. "Look, I should've called. I know that. But I was thinking about keeping our children safe and cared for while I figured out what to do next."

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words. "I know it's not ideal. But Miss Deveraux handled the situation well. She's used to being in charge of many kids at a time. The kids are safe, and that's what matters."

Cohen runs a hand through his hair again, a habit he's had since we were kids. I know this is his way of trying to think through things when he's feeling cornered. "Fine. But we need a new nanny, stat. Can't the agency send someone else?"

I shake my head, feeling the weight of every decision that's been made up until now. "Yeah. But I don't trust the agency anymore. After today, I'm done with them."

"Then what's the plan?" Cohen demands, his frustration boiling over once again. I can hear the panic rising beneath his words.

I look between my brother and Theo, feeling the weight of responsibility on my shoulders. I should have made a plan before now, but the fact is, I've been too distracted by everything else. "I don't know yet. But we'll figure it out. Together."

As if on cue, the patter of little feet echoes down the hallway. Elodie bursts into the room, her curls bouncing, with Lucas hot on her heels. Their faces are flushed with excitement, and I can't help but smile despite the tension in the air. The sight of them always lightens my mood, even when everything else feels like it's falling apart.

"Daddy!" Elodie squeals, launching herself into Cohen's arms. He catches her effortlessly, his earlier anger melting away as he peppers her face with kisses.

I scoop Lucas up, relishing the warmth of his little body against mine. I know he'll start to protest about the affection soon. He's eight and growing every day, but for now, I hold him tight. It's moments like this that remind me of why I keep pushing through, despite the mess we're all in.

Elodie wiggles out of Cohen's grasp, her eyes sparkling. "Daddy, Uncle Austin, can Miss Skylar come back tomorrow? She's so much fun!"

I exchange a glance with Cohen before answering. I don't want to disappoint the kids, but I also know that's not realistic. "Well, sweetheart, Miss Deveraux surely has other things to do besides look after you two rascals all day."

"But we like her! She's my favorite teacher," Lucas chimes in, his lower lip jutting

out in a pout that's eerily similar to my own.

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The kids wrangle themselves away from us and go charging back into the living room.

I take a deep breath, frustration bubbling up inside me. "Skylar Deveraux might be our only option in the short term."

Cohen is about to respond when Theo's voice cuts through the air, barely above a whisper. "Deveraux. You said Skylar Deveraux?"

I turn to look at him, confused by the sudden change in his demeanor. Theo's usually calm face has gone pale, his eyes wide and unfocused. He looks like he's seen a ghost. His gaze is locked on the ground, and for a moment, I wonder if something's wrong.

"Yeah, Skylar Deveraux," I confirm, furrowing my brow.

Cohen nods, his expression thoughtful, as if he's processing something behind those stormy eyes of his. "We could look into her background, see if she'd be okay temporarily nannying while we search for a more permanent solution."

I can't help but picture Skylar as I first saw her, emerging from the pool like some kind of water nymph, her long hair glistening with droplets that caught the sunlight. I clear my throat, pushing the image away. Again. "That's...not a bad idea, actually. But just temporarily."

Theo's gaze darts between me and Cohen like he's trying to make sense of something, but there's a slight tension in the air that I can't place. Something doesn't

quite add up, but I decide not to push it for now. "All right. Cohen, can you start looking into her background? I'll give her a call tomorrow and see if she's even interested in a temporary arrangement."

"Sure thing," Cohen says, already pulling out his phone, clearly willing to dive into whatever research he needs to do to fix this. "I'll get right on it."

I can't shake the feeling that we're about to step into something much more complicated than just hiring a temporary nanny.

## Chapter 4

Theo

I blink, trying to process the bomb Austin just dropped. Skylar Deveraux. The name echoes in my mind, stirring up a whirlwind of emotions I thought I'd buried years ago.

Okay, that's a lie. The only thing I've buried is my cock in her sweet, sweet pussy. At least, that's what I imagine in my late-night fantasies. And my shower fantasies. And my middle-of-the-day fantasies.

Skylar Deveraux was and will always be my dream girl.

"You guys can handle the nanny situation, right?" I manage to croak out, my voice sounding foreign to my own ears. "I need some air."

Austin's brow furrows with concern. "You good?"

I force a weak smile, but it's all I can muster. "Yeah, just...need a minute. I'll catch up with you later."

Before either Austin or Cohen can protest, I'm out the door, my feet carrying me to the back patio. The warm afternoon sun hits my face, but I barely register it. My mind is locked on one thing, one name. Skylar.

I pause and look at the quaint little building with a rustic charm that seems almost too perfect for its surroundings in the back yard. The ivy creeping up the stone walls, the slanted roof, and the wooden shutters on the windows—everything about it screams nostalgia. It feels out of place and at the same time, like it's meant to be here, tucked just far enough away from the main house that it's separate but still connected.

The smell of freshly cut grass mixes with the faint scent of wood and leather, taking me back to summers long gone. To simpler times, to moments when things weren't so complicated. When I wasn't constantly fighting the pull of a past I couldn't escape. I was only ever fighting the desperate need to be next to her.

Could it really be her? After all this time?

I can almost hear the laughter, the voices, the way we used to talk for hours without a care in the world. Skylar and I...it was like nothing else mattered when we were together, like the world outside of that small, shared space didn't exist. It was the only place where I felt truly free, truly myself. With her.

But then the reality sets in. Time has passed. Things have changed. People have changed. Even if my feelings haven't.

I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the curls in frustration. "Get it together, Theo," I mutter to myself, trying to shake off the feeling gnawing at me. "It's probably not even the same person."

But what if it is?

The thought sends a jolt through my body, equal parts excitement and terror. My chest tightens as I think of all the years that have passed, of the way my life has been a slow-motion collision course with nothing but regret and the longing for something I can't have. Skylar. She's been the one thing I've never been able to shake, the one who slipped through my fingers like sand.

I haven't seen Skylar in years, not since our families tore us apart. The memory of our last goodbye still stings. The wound is fresh, as if it happened yesterday.

I lean against the patio half-wall, my eyes never leaving the carriage house. "This is crazy," I say aloud, shaking my head. "There's no way it's her. It's too...convenient. Too perfect."

A chuckle escapes my lips, tinged with a hint of bitterness. "When has anything in your life ever been perfect, Theo?"

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The sound of laughter drifts from the carriage house, carried on the gentle breeze. It's faint, barely audible, but it makes my heart skip a beat. I strain to hear more, to catch a glimpse of movement behind the curtained windows.

"You're losing it, man," I tell myself, running a hand over my stubbled jaw. "Next thing you know, you'll be camping out here with binoculars."

But I can't bring myself to move. I stand there, rooted to the spot, my eyes fixed on the carriage house as if it holds all the answers to questions I've been asking for years. What if this is the moment everything changes? What if this is the moment I get the chance to make things right? My mind races in a thousand different directions, but my feet stay firmly planted, unwilling to move, unwilling to let go of the fantasy that it might actually be her.

That she might still feel the same, too.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of freshly cut grass and blooming jasmine. The memories flood back, unbidden. Skylar and I, sneaking out at night to meet in her family's garden. The way her hazel eyes sparkled in the moonlight, as though she held the entire universe in her gaze. The soft curve of her lips when she smiled at me, a secret just for the two of us.

The weight of those memories presses on me, pulling me under like an anchor. "Enough," I mutter, pushing away from the wall. "This is ridiculous."

But my feet have a mind of their own. Before I know it, I'm walking across the lawn, each step bringing me closer to the carriage house. To her. My heart pounds in my

chest, a thunderous rhythm that drowns out all other sounds.

I try to ignore the ache in my chest—the one that's always been there, waiting for the right time to resurface. If I focus, maybe I can shut it off again. Maybe I can just see her, confirm whether it's really her, and walk away like nothing happened. But I know that's a lie. Deep down, I know that if I see her again, I'll never be able to walk away.

I pause at the edge of the path leading up to the front door. "What are you doing, Theo?" I ask myself, but I already know the answer. I need to see her, to know if it's really her.

My hand trembles as I reach out. I hesitate, then pull back. No, this is crazy. What if she's not here? What if she has company? The thought sends a rush of pain through my body. For a moment, I consider turning around, heading back inside, pretending I never saw the carriage house at all. Pretending I didn't feel my entire world shift when I heard Austin say her name.

But then I shake my head, trying to clear it. "Focus, Theo. You're here to confirm her identity, not..."

I trail off, unable to finish the thought. Taking another deep breath, I raise my hand and knock on the door, the sound echoing in the quiet afternoon.

"Just a minute!" a voice calls from inside, and my world stops spinning.

That voice. I'd know it anywhere. It's her. It's really her. My stomach flips, my pulse races, and for a brief moment, I forget how to breathe.

The door swings open, and suddenly, I'm face to face with Skylar Deveraux. My Skylar Deveraux. Time seems to stop as I drink in the sight of her.

She's changed, but then again, she hasn't. Her chestnut hair is longer now, falling in soft waves around her shoulders, brushing against the curve of her neck. Those hazel eyes I remember so well are wide with shock, framed by dark lashes that make her look like she's stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine.

My gaze travels down, taking in the barely-there shorts and low-cut tank top she's wearing. I swallow hard, trying to keep my composure. She looks as stunning as I remember, and the weight of all the years between us presses down on me like a storm.

"Theo?" she breathes, her voice a mix of disbelief and something else I can't quite place.

The sound of my name on her lips breaks something inside me. Without thinking, I reach out, my hand cupping the back of her neck. I pull her toward me, pressing my lips to hers with an urgency I didn't know I possessed.

God, she feels real. She tastes real. The softness of her lips, the warmth of her skin under my palm—it's all exactly as I remember, yet somehow even better. Every touch, every movement feels like the culmination of everything I've been yearning for all this time.

I pour everything I've been holding back for years into this kiss, hoping she can feel it too. The longing, the regret, the love that never truly faded and probably never will. The way her body presses against mine, like she's never been gone, like we've never been apart, sends a flood of warmth through my veins.

Is this real? Am I dreaming? If I am, I never want to wake up.

Part of me expects her to push me away, to slap me across the face for my audacity. But she doesn't. Instead, I feel her hands gripping my shirt, pulling me closer. I can

feel the warmth of her body, the way her breath comes in soft gasps against my lips. It's real. She's real.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue tasting the sweetness of her, as though I'm trying to make up for lost time, for all the years I've spent wondering what might've been. I can barely think as Skylar kisses me back with equal fervor. Her lips are soft yet demanding against mine, and I feel like I'm drowning in sensation. When we finally break apart, both breathless, I rest my forehead against hers.

I look into her eyes, searching for any hint of what she's feeling. She's quiet, her chest rising and falling as though she's struggling to catch her breath too. Her fingers are still curled into my shirt, and I can't help but wonder if she feels the same urgency, the same fire that's burning inside me.

"Theo, I don't understand," Skylar whispers, her voice trembling. "How... why are you here?"

I want to explain, to tell her everything, but words escape me. All I can focus on is her proximity, the scent of her shampoo, the way her chest rises and falls with each breath. I've dreamed of this moment for so long, and now that it's here, I'm overwhelmed.

"I can't...I just need..." I trail off, my hands cupping her face. My thumbs trace her cheekbones, relearning the contours I once knew so well. "God, Skylark, I've missed you so much."

Skylar's eyes, still wide with shock and a hint of something else, meet mine. The uncertainty and question in her gaze are palpable, but I can see a glimmer of recognition there, too. A flicker of the past we once shared.

Her lips are still glistening, swollen from our kiss, and I can't help but lean in to taste

them again. I want to know everything, feel every inch of her.

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"Theo," she whispers, her voice barely audible, as she closes her eyes and lets out a small sigh. Her hands grip my shirt tighter, pulling me closer as if afraid I might disappear at any moment.

Without thinking, I gently tug at her tank top, pulling it down. A groan escapes me as I realize she's not wearing a bra. Her dusky pink nipples harden in the cool air, and I'm mesmerized.

"You're still so beautiful," I murmur, my voice husky with desire.

Skylar's breath hitches as I lower my head, taking one perfect nipple into my mouth. The taste of her skin, the softness against my tongue—it's intoxicating. When I suck gently, she lets out a cry that sends shivers down my spine.

"Theo," she gasps, her fingers threading through my hair. "Oh God..."

I lose myself in the moment, in the taste and feel of her. All the years apart, all the pain and longing—it all fades away. Right now, there's only Skylar and me and this.

I switch to her other nipple, savoring the way she arches into me. Her body is so responsive, just like I remember. Without breaking contact, I slide my hands under her thighs and lift her into my arms.

"Bed," I murmur against her skin. "I need you."

Skylar wraps her legs around my waist, her arms circling my neck. "Yes," she breathes, her lips brushing my ear.

I carry her through the open door, my heart pounding as I glimpse the bed beyond. It's surreal, like a dream I've had a thousand times.

"Is this real?" I lay her down on the bed, our bodies still connected, I pull back just enough to look into her eyes. I run my hands up and down her soft curves, feeling the warmth of her skin against my touch. Savor it.

She looks up at me, her hazel eyes dark with desire. "I'm here, Theo. I'm real."

My hands tremble slightly as I reach for the waistband of her shorts. "Can I...?"

Skylar nods, lifting her hips to help me. As I slide the fabric down her legs, my breath catches in my throat. She's completely bare, and more beautiful than I ever imagined.

"God, Skylark," I whisper, drinking in the sight of her. "You're incredible. I've missed...everything about you."

I drop to my knees beside the bed, overwhelmed by the need to taste her again. I slowly lower my head, brushing a kiss against her inner thigh, savoring the taste of her skin. Her sigh vibrates through me, and I continue my journey upward, kissing and licking every inch of her skin until I reach my destination.

"Can I taste you, baby? Please?"

"Yes," she moans, her legs falling open in invitation.

I lean in, breathing in her scent, and press my face against her. As my tongue flickers across her sensitive flesh, we both groan.

She digs her fingers into my hair, her hips bucking slightly, urging me on. My tongue dances along her folds, teasing, tempting, building anticipation. Each movement

draws a soft gasp from her lips.

I savor each taste, each sensation, committing them to memory again. Her body arches into me, a silent plea for more, and I oblige, my hands guiding her hips as I explore every curve and crevice of her.

I can't get enough of her taste, of the way she responds to every touch. I push her knees toward her chest, opening her up to me completely. My tongue explores every inch of her, savoring the sweet nectar I've dreamed about for so long.

Her taste is like a drug, intoxicating and addictive. I never could get enough of her.

"Theo," Skylar gasps, her fingers tangling in my hair. "Oh God, yes."

I repeat the motion, dragging my tongue along her folds, circling her clit. Again and again, I lap at her, drunk on her flavor and the little sounds she makes.

"You taste even better than I remember," I murmur against her sensitive flesh before sucking her clit into my mouth.

Skylar's back arches off the bed. "Please, don't stop," she begs.

I have no intention of stopping. I nip gently at her inner thigh, smiling at her sharp intake of breath. It's a move I know she's always loved, and I'm thrilled to find it still affects her the same way.

"Still like that, huh?" I tease, my voice husky with desire.

"Some things don't change," she pants, her eyes meeting mine with a mix of hunger and vulnerability that takes my breath away.

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I maintain eye contact as I slowly insert two fingers into her warm, wet heat. The feeling is indescribable, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to regain my composure.

"You feel amazing, Skylark," I whisper, curling my fingers inside her as I return my mouth to her clit.

I lose myself in pleasuring her, alternating between sucking and licking her most sensitive spot while my fingers work in tandem. Skylar's moans grow louder, her thighs beginning to tremble on either side of my head.

"That's it, baby," I encourage her, feeling her pussy start to clench around my fingers. "Let go for me. I've got you."

With a cry that sounds like music to my ears, Skylar comes undone. Her thighs tighten around my head as her inner walls pulse around my fingers. I continue to lap at her gently, helping her ride out the waves of pleasure until she collapses back onto the bed, breathless and flushed.

I rest my cheek against her thigh, my own breath coming in heavy pants. "God, I've missed you, Skylark," I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to her skin.

I surge to my feet, wiping my chin with the back of my hand. My heart's racing, and I can barely form coherent thoughts. All I know is that I need her, desperately. I can't help but gaze at her in awe, my desire for her intensifying with every passing second. As I strip off my own clothing, my eyes never leave hers.

"I'm clean, Sky. I swear I'm clean," I blurt out, the words tumbling over each other. "I haven't...I'm clean."

Skylar's eyes lock onto mine, her chest heaving. "Theo," she breathes, her voice husky with need. "Please...I want to feel you. Need you...fuck me, Theo. Please."

My breath catches in my throat. "Are you sure?"

She nods frantically. "Yes, God yes. Please, Theo."

I don't need any more encouragement. In one swift motion, I plunge into her, and we both cry out at the sensation.

"Fuck," I groan, overwhelmed by how incredible she feels. "You still feel so good. So perfect."

I start to move, slowly at first, savoring every inch of her. But the urgency builds quickly, and soon I'm thrusting harder, faster. Skylar meets me thrust for thrust, her nails digging into my back.

"Wait," I pant, slowing down. "I want...I want you on top."

In one fluid motion, I roll us over, settling Skylar astride me. I cup her face in my hands, drinking in the sight of her.

"Take your pleasure, Sky," I tell her softly. "Show me how you want it."

I pull Skylar's face down to mine, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. She begins to move, rolling her hips in a sensual rhythm that has me groaning into her mouth. I can't stop kissing her, my hands roaming over her soft skin, relearning every curve and plane of her body.

"God, Sky," I breathe against her lips. "You feel incredible. I've missed this...missed you...so much."

Her eyes flutter open, meeting mine with an intensity that steals my breath. "Theo," she whispers, her voice trembling. "I can't believe this is real."

I brush a strand of hair from her face, marveling at how beautiful she looks in the throes of passion. "It's real, baby. I'm here. We're here."

Skylar's eyes shine with lust and vulnerability, and I can't help but feel a tightness in my chest. I open my mouth to tell her how I feel, to tell her I never stopped loving her, not for one moment, but she twists her hips and tightens her inner muscles, and the only sound that escapes my lips is a gasp of pleasure.

Her movements become more frantic, her breath coming in short gasps. I can feel her tightening around me, and I know she's close. I slide a hand between us, finding that sensitive bundle of nerves.

"That's it, Skylark," I encourage her, circling my thumb. "Let go for me again..."

With a cry that's music to my ears, Skylar comes undone above me. The sight of her in ecstasy, combined with the feeling of her clenching around me, sends me over the edge. I follow right after her, my release hitting me so hard my vision starts to darken at the edges.

As the aftershocks subside, I don't pull out. Instead, I wrap my arms around her, burying my face in the crook of her neck. I breathe her in, savoring her familiar scent mixed with the musk of our lovemaking.

"Stay," I murmur against her skin. "Just...stay like this for a moment."

Skylar nods, her fingers threading through my hair. We lay there, hearts pounding in unison, as the reality of what just happened begins to sink in.

I finally roll us so I'm on top and pull out, watching with a mix of awe and primal satisfaction as my cum trickles from her. The sight stirs something deep within me, a possessive hunger I'd forgotten I was capable of feeling.

"Fuck, I've missed you," I breathe, my voice husky with emotion.

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Skylar's eyes meet mine, a storm of emotions swirling in their hazel depths. "Theo, I..." she starts, then falters.

I reach out, cupping her cheek gently. "I know, baby. We've got a lot to talk about."

She nods, leaning into my touch. "This is...God, I can't believe you're here. After all this time..."

I pull her close, reveling in the feeling of her skin against mine. "I can't believe it either. When I heard you lived here, I thought I was dreaming."

Skylar chuckles softly, the sound vibrating against my chest. "Some dream, huh?"

I can't help but laugh, too, the tension easing slightly. "Better than any dream I've had in years."

We lay there in comfortable silence for a moment, fingers tracing patterns on each other's skin. I'm struck by how familiar yet new this feels, like coming home to a place you've haven't been to in a long time.

## Chapter 5

Skylar

I stumble into Birdie's sunlit kitchen the next morning, my head pounding and thoughts swirling. One look at my disheveled appearance and Birdie's eyebrows shoot up to her hairline.

"Sit," she commands, gesturing to a chair. "I'm making tea."

I slump into the seat, grateful for her no-nonsense approach. The familiar clinking of china and the whistle of the kettle fill the air as Birdie busies herself, moving with the kind of grace and efficiency that speaks to years at finishing school. She's been through her fair share of hardships, but there's an elegance about her that's always remained unshaken. Despite all of it, she carries herself with a grounded calm that makes everything seem just a little less overwhelming. Somehow, being in her presence always makes me feel like everything will eventually be okay, no matter how messy things get.

"Rough night, dear?" she asks, her tone light but knowing.

I manage a weak nod, my mind drifting back to Theo. His unexpected appearance, his touch, his...everything. The sex was mind-blowing, just like it always was with him. But now, in the harsh light of day, the heartbreak lingers like a bruise. I never thought I'd see him again, and yet here I am, tangled in emotions I thought I'd buried.

"Earth to Skylar," Birdie sing-songs, waving a hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go just now?"

I blink, focusing on her concerned expression. "Sorry, I'm just...processing."

Birdie sets a steaming mug in front of me, the scent of peppermint wafting up. "Processing what, exactly? Or should I say, who?"

The warmth from the mug radiates through my fingers, a small comfort. I'm grateful for something to anchor me to the here and now. Theo did always have a way of taking up all my thoughts, good and bad. "It's complicated," I mumble.

"Isn't it always?" Birdie chuckles, settling into the chair across from me. Her bright

eyes study me over the rim of her own mug, her attention unwavering. She has that way about her—like she sees right through me, without judgment, without rush. She's patient. I've always envied that about her. "Want to talk about it?"

I take a sip of tea, buying time. How do I even begin to explain Theo's sudden reappearance? The way my body sang at his touch, while my heart screamed in protest? I want to tell Birdie everything, but the words feel too heavy.

"I ran into someone from my past," I finally admit. "Someone I never expected to see again."

Birdie leans forward, her expression a mix of curiosity and concern. "And I'm guessing this someone left quite an impression?"

I can't help but snort at her understatement. "You could say that."

I stare into my tea, watching the steam curl upwards. Memories flood my mind—Theo's smile, the sound of his laugh, the way his hand fit perfectly in mine. It feels like a lifetime ago. I want to reach for those memories, but they're so tangled up in pain, so wrapped in the heartache of everything that went wrong. "It's Theo," I confess softly. "My ex. The one I thought was...well, the one."

Birdie's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh my. That is quite the blast from the past."

"Yeah," I sigh, tracing the rim of my mug, watching the faint trail of steam rise and dissipate. "I keep thinking about how it all fell apart. Our parents never approved, but..."

"But?" Birdie prompts gently.

I swallow hard, the lump in my throat growing. "He stayed away. He chose to obey

them. He left me." The words taste bitter on my tongue. "And then, like dominoes, I lost everything else too."

Birdie reaches across the table, her wrinkled hand covering mine. She doesn't say anything at first, just offering silent support. Her touch is warm, grounding. It's like she knows there's no need for words. She's been here before, seen it all, felt the weight of what it's like to lose someone you thought would always be there.

After a moment, she squeezes my hand. "My dear," she says softly, her voice filled with compassion, "sometimes the universe has a funny way of bringing our past back to us. Not to hurt us, but to heal us."

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I look up, meeting her wise gaze. "Or to remind us why we left it behind in the first place," I counter.

Birdie's lips quirk in a half-smile. "Perhaps. But tell me, Skylar, what does your heart say?"

I open my mouth to respond, but the words catch in my throat. What does my heart say? It's a jumbled mess of longing, anger, and fear. I'm not sure I'm ready to untangle it just yet. I'm afraid of what I'll find if I do.

Because I made a pact with myself when everything was ripped out from under me. Money only ever brought sorrow. I'd seen it all firsthand—the fake conversations, the empty promises, the hollow hearts that came with that world of privilege. My parents' obsession with appearances, with climbing higher on the social ladder, all for the sake of some illusion of happiness. Theo had been a part of that world, and I'd let myself get swept up in it too.

But after everything fell apart, I swore I'd never go back. I wouldn't let myself fall into the arms of another man with money, no matter how easy it might be. Because in the end, that life had only left me feeling empty, even when it seemed like everything was perfect on the outside.

I take a deep breath, pushing down the tumult of emotions. "It's just my past coming back to haunt me," I say, forcing a wry smile. "But I'll figure it out. I always do."

Birdie nods, her eyes twinkling. "That you do, my dear. You're nothing if not resilient."

I'm grateful when she changes the subject, asking about my latest project. We chat about lighter topics—the unreasonably warm weather, the new bakery in town, Birdie's ongoing feud with her neighbor's yappy dog.

As I'm laughing at one of Birdie's colorful descriptions of said dog, I notice a shadow pass over her face. She sets down her teacup, her hand trembling slightly.

"Skylar," she says, her voice uncharacteristically serious. "There's something I need to tell you."

I lean forward, concern creeping in. "What is it, Birdie?"

She takes a deep breath. "I've been feeling...not quite myself lately. The doctors are running some tests, but..." She trails off, looking more vulnerable than I've ever seen her.

"Oh, Birdie," I breathe, reaching for her hand.

"Now, now, don't go getting all maudlin on me," she says, straightening her shoulders. "It might be nothing. But if it is something, well...I've been thinking about selling the house."

I feel like I've been doused with ice water. "Selling? But why?"

"My sister lives down in Florida," Birdie explains. "If I need...support, it would be good to be closer to family."

My mind reels. The thought of losing Birdie, of losing this place that's become my sanctuary—it's almost too much to bear.

I force a smile, trying to keep my voice steady. "Of course, that makes sense. Family

is important."

But inside, I'm crumbling. The familiar ache of loss settles in my chest, a weight I know all too well. It shouldn't surprise me anymore, this constant cycle of abandonment. First Theo, then my mother, and then everything else.

"Are you all right, dear?" Birdie asks, her brow furrowing with concern, her voice tender.

I nod, swallowing hard. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just...thinking."

My mind races, calculating figures. There's no way I can afford to stay in this area if Birdie sells. The realization hits me like a punch to the gut—I'm about to lose my home. Again.

"Have you thought about when you might list the property?" I ask, proud of how steady my voice sounds, even though my insides are spinning.

Birdie sighs. "Nothing's set in stone yet. But I wanted you to know, to give you time to...prepare."

I force myself to meet her eyes, pushing down the panic rising in my throat. "I appreciate that, Birdie. Really."

She squeezes my hand. "You know I consider you family, Skylar. This isn't easy for me, either."

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. The irony isn't lost on me—just when I'd started to feel settled, to believe I might have found a place to belong, it's all slipping away.

Later that day, I'm sprawled on the couch in the carriage house, nursing a glass of wine and wallowing in self-pity. The room is dim, the light from the TV flickering over me like a ghost, adding a surreal layer to my discontent. My mind keeps playing over the conversation with Birdie, the night I spent with Theo, everything.

The knock on the door startles me out of my funk. My heart skips a beat. Theo? My stomach flutters uneasily, but there's a tight, churning knot in my gut. I sit up, the wineglass still in hand, my fingers trembling just a little.

I glance down at my ratty tank top and sleep shorts, suddenly feeling like a complete mess. Screw it. If it is Theo, he's seen me in worse. And less. Just last night, even. The thought stirs something deep in me—something I choose to ignore like a healthy, well-adjusted adult.

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The memory of last night's passion is a full-body ache, but it's drowned out by the hurt of his abandonment years ago. Every inch of me knows I shouldn't want him here, shouldn't want to feel anything for him. But damn, it's hard to ignore the pull.

I swing the door open, my breath catching in my throat, but not in the way I expected. Instead of the familiar, heart-wrenching green eyes and tousled brown curls I had braced myself for, I find myself staring at a broad chest in an impeccably tailored suit.

My gaze travels up—slowly, involuntarily—until I meet icy blue eyes that flash with heat before quickly cooling. It's a look I'm coming to know all too well.

Austin Rhodes.

"Skylar," he says, his voice clipped, professional.

I blink, suddenly very aware of my state of undress, my cheeks flushing. "Austin? What are you doing here?"

His jaw tightens as his gaze sweeps over me, lingering a moment too long on my bare legs before snapping back to my face. "May I come in?"

I hesitate, acutely aware of the mess behind me—the half-empty wine glass on the coffee table, the mismatched couch pillows, the clutter scattered around like I've given up on life for a while now. And my appearance...let's not even go there.

"Um, sure. Just...give me a second."

As I turn to grab a sweatshirt, I catch a glimpse of his face. Is that a smirk? Great.

I tug on an oversized sweatshirt, grateful for the extra coverage, and brush my hair back from my face with a hasty hand. It's not like I'm trying to impress him—hell, I don't even care what he thinks, but a little dignity wouldn't hurt. "Okay, come in," I say, stepping aside.

Austin enters, his presence immediately filling the small space, his polished shoes clicking on the hardwood floor with an unnatural precision. He looks around, taking in the modest furnishings, the pile of books on my coffee table, the dusty window with half-drawn curtains. I resist the urge to straighten up.

"Nice place," he says, though his tone suggests otherwise. It's not insulting, just...clinical. Detached. It's the way he seems to talk about everything—like he's dissecting it, trying to make sense of it.

I cross my arms, a knee-jerk defense mechanism. "Thanks. I'm sure it's a far cry from your mansion, but it suits me just fine."

He turns to face me, his expression unreadable. "I have a proposition for you."

My eyebrows shoot up. "A proposition? Should I be flattered or worried?"

A flicker of something—amusement?—crosses his face before disappearing. "It's a job offer, actually. I need a temporary nanny for my son. And for my niece."

I blink, caught off guard. "A nanny? Me?"

"Yes, you," he says, his tone matter-of-fact, as if it's the most normal thing in the world. "It would be for a few weeks, a live-in position, with a generous salary."

My mind races, trying to process what he's saying. A nanny? For his kid? The idea is absurd, but...the promise of financial stability is tempting. Especially after Birdie's news...and the bills that seem to keep multiplying in my inbox.

"I don't know, Austin," I hedge. "I'm not exactly Mary Poppins material."

He shrugs. "You don't need to be. You just need to be responsible and keep him safe. You're an elementary school teacher, so presumably you can manage such a feat."

I chew my lip, considering. The money would solve a lot of problems, but living in Austin's house? Being around him every day? It sounds like a recipe for disaster. But then I think about my dwindling bank account and the uncertain future looming ahead.

I take a deep breath. "Okay. I'll do it. But I'll be living here for now."

Austin nods, looking oddly relieved. His gaze sweeps over me, his eyes lingering a moment too long on my chest. I resist the urge to cross my arms.

"Get dressed," he says, his voice clipped, almost impatient. "We're heading to the house. You need to meet Cohen, my brother. He's Elodie's father."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes and arch an eyebrow. "Right now?"

"Yes, right now," he replies, his tone brooking no argument. "Is that a problem, trouble?"

As he strides out, I roll my eyes at his back. Who died and made him king?

I trudge to my bedroom, muttering under my breath. "Sure, Your Highness. Whatever you say."

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Rummaging through my closet, I grab the first decent top I see and a pair of jean shorts. It's not interview attire, but hey, I've already got the job, right?

I shake off the nagging feeling plaguing me—something that feels too much like a warning—and slip on a bra, followed by the top. It's nothing fancy, but it'll do. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and consider my messy bun. For a split second, I debate fixing it, but then I shrug.

"Screw it," I mutter, leaving my hair as is. "If they wanted polished, they shouldn't have sprung this on me."

I head for the door and step outside, blinking in the bright sunlight. Austin's leaning against his sleek black car, arms crossed, looking like he just stepped out of a CEO magazine. Do those exist? They must. His eyes rake over me, lingering on my messy bun and bare legs. I catch a flicker of...something in his gaze before his expression hardens.

He huffs, a short, irritated sound. "That's what you're wearing?"

I plant my hands on my hips. "You said get dressed. I'm dressed."

Austin pinches the bridge of his nose, muttering something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like, "impossible woman." But he doesn't push it further, just jerks his head toward the passenger side. "Get in."

The drive to his place is silent and tense. It is difficult, but I resist the urge to ask why he didn't just walk across the yard. It would have been much quicker. And it would

feel a lot less like I was suffocating in his aura.

I fidget with the hem of my shorts, sneaking glances at Austin's profile. His jaw is clenched tight, hands gripping the steering wheel like he's imagining it's my neck.

We pull up to a sprawling mansion that makes my eyes bulge. "Holy shit," I whisper, almost too low for him to hear. I've never actually seen this place from the front. It's situated well back from the road, blocked by an ornate gate and a lined drive. It's...well, it puts Birdie's place to shame.

"Language," Austin snaps, but there's no real heat behind it. He's trying to maintain control, but I'm starting to see the cracks.

As we walk to the front door, my nerves kick into overdrive. What if Cohen doesn't like me? What if—

The door swings open, and my brain short-circuits.

Standing there, all tousled hair and stormy blue eyes, is a face I know all too well. A face I last saw in a haze of tequila and neon lights in Vegas.

"Hey, you must be Skylar," he says with an easy smile, no hint of recognition in his eyes. "I'm Cohen. Come on in, we've got a lot to talk about."

And, right beside him is the man who was inside me last night. Theodore Bronson Shepherd III.

My mouth goes dry. What the fuck?

Chapter 6

Cohen

I run my fingers through my hair for the thousandth time, pacing in front of the massive oak door. The house feels too quiet, too still without Elodie's laughter filling the space. She's upstairs, in her room, probably playing or drawing—oblivious to the fact that her dad is overthinking everything right now.

We'd asked the kids to hang out upstairs so we could have an adult conversation with Skylar and make sure she was the right fit. Austin certainly had his reservations, and after her background check, so did I. But, Austin was right. She's our only option right now. An agency would certainly be more efficient, but after the last experience we're not comfortable with that option.

That trash they'd sent us came with glowing reviews and a list of references. Did they even check into their employees? Because after the way she spoke to our kids—we'd watched the security footage the next day, seeing her tear into Elodie and Lucas like they were criminals—she deserved jail time, not a job.

Skylar had stepped in then, and even though it wasn't her responsibility, she made sure they were okay. She didn't just sit there and do nothing. Maybe it's that, more than anything, that has me considering her.

I peek out the window when I hear gravel crunching, watching Austin's black Audi pull into the driveway. Open-minded, I remind myself. For Elodie.

"They're here," I call out, running a hand through my shaggy hair. It needs a trim, but that's low on my list of priorities right now.

Thundering footsteps echo behind me as Theo bounds down the stairs. "Ready for this?" he asks, clapping me on the shoulder.

I let out a wry chuckle. "As I'll ever be."

We move to the front door, and I take a deep breath before pulling it open. The late afternoon sunlight spills in, momentarily blinding me. As my vision adjusts, I see her.

The woman standing before me is breathtaking. Chestnut hair frames a face that could launch a thousand ships, with sharp cheekbones and hazel eyes that seem to pierce right through me. But it's not just her beauty that strikes me; there's something achingly familiar about her, like I've seen her before but can't place where.

"Hey, you must be Skylar," I say hoping my smile doesn't come off too forced. "I'm Cohen. Come on in, we've got a lot to talk about."

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Her eyes meet mine, and for a split second, I catch a flash of something—surprise, then shock, followed by a flicker of anger. It happens so fast, like a storm passing through the sky. But just as quickly as it came, the emotions clear, leaving behind nothing but a blank, professional expression. It's like I never saw anything at all.

Skylar doesn't immediately step forward, her gaze shifting from me to the open door behind me as if she's deciding whether or not to trust the invitation. Then she meets my eyes, and for a split second, I feel a sharp jolt of recognition—something that feels like déjà vu, but it's gone before I can grasp it.

"Mr. Rhodes," she says, her voice cool and professional.

I extend my hand, trying to ignore the jolt of electricity that runs through me when our fingers touch. "Please, call me Cohen. Come in."

She nods slightly, her lips curving into a polite but distant smile, and steps inside. There's a tension in the air already, and I'm not sure if it's coming from her or from me. Or maybe it's both of us, drawn together by the weight of this conversation.

Or, maybe it's Austin. He's been acting strange the last few days. I catch a glimpse of him behind her, standing just at the threshold, his jaw tight, his gaze sharper than usual. It's like he's silently watching, waiting for something.

I hear Theo's voice behind me, a light greeting to Skylar, but I can't tear my eyes away from her. Theo, ever the social one, takes a step toward her, and for a brief moment, Skylar stiffens. Her eyes flicker to him, then she steps back instinctively—smacking right into Austin's chest.

Austin doesn't flinch, his gaze fixed on the interaction. I watch as Theo's expression tightens, his eyes narrowing just a little too long at Skylar. It's a look I recognize—something between curiosity and something deeper, more personal. It unsettles me, and I feel a tightness in my chest. What the hell is going on between them?

Austin, sensing the tension, steps forward, breaking the silence. His voice is sharper than usual, more clipped. "We don't have time for nonsense. We need to get this sorted."

I feel the shift in the air as the casual note in Austin's tone fades, replaced with something more authoritative. He's never been one for drama, and right now, I can tell he wants this to be as smooth as possible—despite the obvious tension.

I look to Skylar, then back to Austin, offering a tight smile. I clear my throat, suddenly aware of how dry my mouth is. "So, uh, shall we sit down and discuss the details?"

Skylar nods, the same blank professionalism settling into place on her face. I can't shake the nagging feeling that there's so much more going on here than any of us are letting on. I feel like I'm missing something important and it's starting to piss me off.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" I offer, more out of habit than anything else.

"No, thank you," Skylar replies, her tone clipped.

As we settle onto the couch, I notice how she sits ramrod straight, her posture screaming tension. It's as if she's bracing herself for something, and I wonder if it's just the nerves of this interview, or something more personal.

Theo takes the seat next to her, a little too close, and I can't help but notice how his

gaze lingers on her, like he's drawn to her in some way he still hasn't fully understood. He can't seem to keep his eyes off of her and he isn't even bothering to hide his attention. Her eyes flick to him every now and then, like she's trying to make sure he hasn't somehow moved closer. I've never seen him like this—not with anyone.

Austin and I used to enjoy the draw our family name had on women—nothing serious, just fun and the kind of casual connections that came with our lives. But Theo...he'd always been different. While Austin and I reveled in the freedom and opportunity, Theo never chased. He'd participate, but he always kept his distance, as if there was a reason he couldn't—or wouldn't—get too close.

And now, watching the way his gaze lingers on Skylar, I'm wondering if I'm looking at the reason why.

The air between them crackles with unspoken history, and I feel a sudden, unexpected tightness in my chest. What the hell is going on here?

Austin drops into an armchair across from us, arms folded, his jaw tight, and his gaze cutting in and out of Skylar's direction. He's been quiet since she arrived, and I can feel the tension thickening with every second that passes.

He clears his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "Let's go over the schedule, shall we?" His tone is clipped, professional, but there's an edge to it that I've rarely heard from my usually composed brother.

"We, uh, really need someone right now," I begin, trying to break the silence, my voice coming out sharper than I intended. "After, well...everything with the last nanny, we're kind of scrambling to find someone who can fit in and keep things running smoothly."

Skylar tilts her head slightly, acknowledging my words without giving away much. "I understand. I mean, I was there to witness that fiasco, so I really do understand. I'm confident I can handle whatever's needed."

I clasp my hands tightly in my lap, feeling more on edge with every passing second. "We're...we're in a tough spot. Elodie's needs are pretty specific, and we need someone who can step in and not just care for her but understand how to handle the unpredictability that comes with her."

Austin shifts in his seat, obviously done with the pleasantries. His voice comes out sharp, cutting through the growing tension in the room. "We need someone who can start, like, yesterday."

I keep my focus on Skylar, watching for any signs of discomfort. There's a lot of unknowns here, but we don't have the luxury of being picky.

"I can start immediately," she says without hesitation, her face a mask of professionalism. But I notice the flicker in her eyes—there's something else behind that calm demeanor.

I swallow down the growing frustration I feel, trying to keep it together. "All right, let's talk specifics, then."

I can see Theo's interest piquing. His usual cool exterior seems a little less under control now, and his focus is entirely on Skylar, like he's waiting for her to say something—anything—that will give him the answers he's looking for.

I shoot him a quick look, but he doesn't even acknowledge it.

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Austin pulls out his phone, probably accessing some meticulously crafted schedule. "We'll need you here from seven in the morning until five-thirty in the afternoon, Monday through Friday. Weekends are your own."

I watch Skylar's face as Austin rattles off a list of dietary restrictions, house rules and daily routines. She nods along, her expression neutral, but there's a tightness around her eyes that speaks volumes.

"Should you need to stay later, the kids have a strict bedtime routine," Austin continues. "No sugar after six, and..."

My mind wanders as I study Skylar. There's something about her that doesn't quite fit.

"Is that all clear?" Austin's voice snaps me back to attention.

Skylar nods, her tone clipped. "Crystal. I'll follow your instructions to the letter."

"I don't see you taking notes, Miss Deveraux. Are you certain—"

"I think I can handle it," she interjects, a hint of challenge in her voice.

I can't help but smirk at the way Skylar pushes back against Austin's need for control. It's refreshing, in a way, but also unsettling. This isn't how things usually go in the Rhodeshousehold and I'm not sure Austin will be able to handle it for long.

Austin's jaw tightens. "I'm sure you can, Ms. Deveraux. I just want to ensure we're all

on the same page."

Austin clears his throat, drawing our attention. "Well, there's one more thing to discuss. I understand you'd prefer to stay in the carriage house rather than move in here."

Before Skylar can respond, Theo cuts in, his voice sharp. "Wait, what? Why wouldn't you want to stay in the house?"

I whip my head around, startled by Theo's sudden intensity. His usual laid-back demeanor has vanished, replaced by a tense, almost protective stance. What the hell is the history between these two? And why are they pretending it doesn't exist?

Skylar's eyes lock with Theo's, and I swear I can see sparks flying between them. Her jaw tightens as she grits out, "It would be inappropriate and...uncomfortable."

The weight of unspoken history hangs heavy in the air. I glance at Austin, seeing my own confusion mirrored in his face.

"I don't see why it would be—" Theo starts, but Skylar cuts him off with a look that could freeze hell itself.

"Drop it, Theo," she hisses, her composure cracking for just a moment.

Austin, ever the peacemaker, waves his hand dismissively. "It's fine, really. But if you change your mind, just let us know. Having you in-house might simplify things, even if it is only temporary."

Skylar nods stiffly, her gaze fixed anywhere but on Theo or me. There's something cold in the way she holds herself now, and I can't help but notice how she avoids any kind of eye contact with either of us. It's like she's already drawing a line between

herself and us, and I don't know if I'm supposed to feel reassured or more on edge because of it.

"Right," Austin continues, his tone forcefully cheerful. "How about a quick tour of the house?"

Skylar looks like she's going to protest, but the words die on her lips. She stands with a slight rustle of fabric, her movements sharp and clipped as she follows Austin toward the door. I watch them both walk out, the air between us feeling just as heavy now as it did when they first arrived.

Theo and I are left in the silence. I glance at Theo, who's still staring after Skylar, like he can't stand the thought of her being out of his sight.

"You okay, man?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual.

Theo startles, as if pulled from a trance. "Yeah, yeah. I'm good." But his eyes are still fixed on Skylar's retreating form.

I feel an unexpected surge of...something. Jealousy? Possessiveness? What the hell is wrong with me? I've just met this woman, and yet the idea of Theo having some sort of connection with her sets my teeth on edge.

"So, you two know each other?" I press, unable to help myself.

Theo's gaze finally snaps to mine. "We...uh, we ran in the same circles back in the day."

I raise an eyebrow. "Is that it?"

He has the grace to look sheepish. "It's complicated, Cohen."

I trail Austin as he leads Skylar through the house, his usual smooth professionalism faltering. She challenges him at every turn, her sharp wit clearly getting under his skin. And yet, there's something else there too—a spark, an undeniable attraction simmering beneath the surface.

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"Seems like there's a lot of 'complicated' going around," I mutter to myself.

### Chapter 7

Skylar

The key slides into the lock with a satisfying click as I push open the door to the carriage house. The silence inside is a stark contrast to the chaos swirling in my mind.

It's a miracle I even made it back here in one semi-sane piece. As soon as I'm inside, I lean against the cool wall, letting out a long breath I didn't realize I was holding.

What the actual hell just happened?

I stumble to the kitchen, my legs feeling like jelly. The cabinets mock me with their emptiness as I search for something—anything—to take the edge off. Finally, I spot it: a dusty bottle of red wine tucked away in the corner. I would love something much, much stronger, but it looks like this is all I have. It'll have to do.

As I wrestle with the cork, my thoughts drift back to the meeting. Austin's stern face, Cohen's sheepish grin, and Theo...God, Theo. The cork pops free, startling me out of my reverie.

"Get it together, Skylar," I mutter, pouring a generous glass.

The wine is bitter on my tongue, but I welcome the burn. I collapse onto the plush couch, kicking off my shoes and curling my legs beneath me. The fabric is soft

against my skin, a small comfort in this mess I've found myself in.

"So, let me get this straight," I say to the empty room, swirling the wine in my glass. "I'm now working for my ex-boyfriend's best friend, and his brother, who also happens to be the guy I had a wild weekend with in Vegas." I take another sip, wincing at the taste. "Oh, and did I mention said ex-boyfriend—the one who randomly reappeared and rocked my entire world down to its foundation—lives next door? With my new employers. Fucking fantastic."

The weight of the situation settles over me like a heavy blanket. I close my eyes, willing the world to make sense again. But all I can see is Theo's face—those intense green eyes that used to look at me with such adoration, which is now clouded by the years that have passed.

"This is fine," I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Everything's fine. I'll just pretend I don't know any of them. Professional boundaries and all that jazz."

But even as the words leave my lips, I know it's impossible. The history between us is too tangled, too raw. At least Cohen doesn't seem to remember that mind-blowing weekend. That hurts like hell but it makes my life easier. I take another swig of wine, grimacing at the taste. It's going to be a long night of sorting through these thoughts.

"Well, Skylar," I mutter to myself, "you love a good fresh start. Congratulations, you've got yourself one hell of a complicated mess instead."

A sharp knock at the door jolts me from my wine-induced pity party. My heart skips a beat as I catch a glimpse of familiar tousled brown curls through the window.

Theo.

I freeze, wine glass halfway to my lips. Part of me wants to pretend I'm not home, to

close the curtains and hide from the complications he represents. But my traitorous feet are already moving toward the door.

"Come on, Skylark," his muffled voice carries through the wood. "I know you're in there."

I hesitate, hand on the doorknob. Opening this door means opening a Pandora's box of emotions I'm not sure I'm ready to face. But the nickname tugs at something deep inside me, a reminder of lazy summer days and stolen kisses. Of how he used to tell me I was never meant to be caged.

"Dammit," I mutter, yanking the door open just wide enough for him to slip inside.

Theo's eyes light up as he sees me, a crooked smile playing on his lips. "Hey," he says softly, running a hand through his hair. "I, uh...I owe you an apology."

I cross my arms, trying to ignore how good he looks in his well-fitted jeans and casual button-down. "For what? Not mentioning you lived next door when you appeared at my door last night? Or for the fact that you're besties with my new boss?"

He winces. "Both? Look, Skylar, I'm sorry. I should have said something."

"Before or after you were buried inside me?"

"Skylark..."

I want to be angry. I want to unleash all the frustration and confusion of the day on him. But exhaustion wins out, and I find myself sighing instead. "I'm too tired to be mad right now, Theo. It's been...a day."

"I can imagine," he says, his green eyes searching my face. "Can we talk? I promise

I'll explain everything."

I hesitate, knowing I should send him away. But the familiar warmth of his presence is already seeping into my bones, making me yearn for the connection we once had. Against my better judgment, I step back, allowing him fully into my space.

"Fine," I concede, "but this doesn't change anything. We can't just pick up where we left off."

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Theo nods, a mix of relief and something else—hope, maybe?—flashing across his features. "I know. I just...I've missed you, Skylark."

The nickname sends a shiver down my spine, and I turn away to hide the effect he still has on me. "Let's just talk," I say, leading him towards the couch. "And maybe you can explain how I've managed to land smack in the middle of what feels like a soap opera plot."

I flop back onto the couch, my body sinking into the cushions as if they could swallow me whole. The wine bottle sits temptingly on the coffee table, and I reach for it, foregoing any pretense of civility. As I take a long swig directly from the bottle, I catch Theo's wince from the corner of my eye.

"That bad, huh?" he asks, his voice a mixture of concern and amusement.

I lower the bottle, letting out a sardonic laugh. "You have no idea."

Theo settles onto the opposite end of the couch, his body angled toward me. The familiar scent of his cologne wafts over, stirring memories I've tried hard to bury. I push them aside, focusing on the present.

"Look, Sky," he begins, running a hand through his tousled brown curls. "I know this situation with the kids complicates things, but...I still want you. Please, don't end this now when I've only just found you again."

His words hang in the air between us, heavy with implication. I take another sip of wine, buying time as I process the emotions swirling inside me. Part of me wants to

leap into his arms, to reclaim what we once had. But the walls I've built around my heart stand firm.

"Theo," I say, my voice coming out harsher than intended. "You can't just waltz back into my life and expect everything to be the same. Do you have any idea what I've been through?"

He leans forward, his green eyes intense. "Tell me, Sky. Help me understand."

I sigh, flopping back against the cushions. "First, explain something to me. How the hell did you end up living next door with tweedle-asshole and his brother tweedle-oblivious?"

Theo's lips twitch at my nicknames, a ghost of a smile appearing. "It's...complicated," he begins.

"I've got time," I retort, gesturing with the wine bottle. "And plenty of liquid courage. So spill, Shepherd. How did you end up playing house with the billionaire brothers?"

Theo runs his knuckles along his stubbled jaw, a nervous habit I remember all too well. "It started at boarding school," he begins, his voice soft with reminiscence. "The one my parents shipped me off to after...well, after us."

The memory stings, and I take another swig of wine to dull the pain.

"Austin and Cohen were there too. We weren't close at first, but we found common ground. After graduation, we ended up at the same college, and that's when things really clicked. We became inseparable."

I raise an eyebrow. "Inseparable? That's not the Theo I remember."

He shrugs, a rueful smile playing on his lips. "People change, Sky. We all did. After college, we started a business together. When they decided to live together post-divorce, it just...made sense for me to join them."

I process this information, trying to reconcile the Theo I knew with this new version. "So you're what, the three musketeers now?"

"Something like that," he chuckles, then his expression turns serious. "But Sky, none of that changes how I feel about you. Seeing you again...it's like no time has passed at all."

But time has passed. So much time. Time in which he never once looked for me. The only reason he's here now is because I almost literally fell into his lap. My heart races, old emotions bubbling to the surface. I want to give in, to lose myself in those green eyes and gentle hands. But the scars run deep.

"Theo, I can't..." I start, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't go back to what we were. Too much has happened. I'm not that girl anymore."

The hurt in his eyes is palpable, like I'm breaking his heart into a million tiny pieces. I can't bear to see him in pain, so I add, "It can't be more than sex, Theo. That's all I can offer."

His gaze intensifies, a mix of desire and determination. "I'll take whatever you're willing to give, Skylark. As long as it means I get to be with you again."

I swallow hard, wondering if I've just made a terrible mistake or the best decision of my life.

Theo leans in, his breath warm against my cheek. I press my hand against his chest, feeling his heart thundering beneath my palm. "Wait," I say, my voice steadier than I

feel. "There are rules."

His eyes search mine, a flicker of hurt still visible beneath the heat. "Rules?"

I nod, steeling myself. "No kissing. No sleeping over. No dates." I take a deep breath, willing my voice not to waver. "Nothing between us during the day. You can come to the carriage house at night or on weekends. That's it."

Theo's jaw clenches, but he doesn't argue. Instead, he says softly, "I'll take whatever you're willing to give me, Skylark."

Every time he says that nickname, it sends a jolt through me, memories of whispered promises and stolen moments flooding back. I push them away, reminding myself why I need these boundaries.

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"I mean it, Theo," I insist, more to convince myself than him. "This can't be more than physical."

He nods, but there's a determination in his eyes that makes me uneasy. "I understand."

I want to believe him, want to trust that he'll respect my limits. But a voice in my head whispers that I'm playing with fire. Because the truth is, I'm willing to give him everything—and that terrifies me.

"You say that now," I mutter, more to myself than to him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Theo asks, his brow furrowing.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "It means I've been burned before, Theo. More times than I care to count. And I don't..." I trail off, struggling to find the right words.

"You don't trust me to stick around," he finishes, his voice tinged with sadness.

I meet his gaze, seeing the hurt there, but I can't bring myself to deny it. "Can you blame me?"

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. "So, are we in agreement? About the rules?"

Theo's eyes darken, a mix of resignation and desire swirling in their green depths. "Yes, we're in agreement."

Relief floods through me, but it's quickly overshadowed by a surge of heat as Theo leans in, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. "Now, can we seal the deal with a kiss?"

My body tenses, ready to push him away. "I said no kissing, Theo. That was one of the—"

"I know," he interrupts, a feral smile spreading across his face. "I didn't mean those lips."

My breath catches as his meaning sinks in. Theo reaches for the wine bottle, setting it carefully on the table. The deliberate movement sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

I watch, frozen, as Theo kneels before me. His fingers trail up my legs, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "May I?" he asks, his hands hovering at the waistband of my shorts.

Unable to form words, I nod. In one fluid motion, he peels the shorts down my legs, tossing them aside. The cool air hits my exposed skin, but it's nothing compared to the heat of Theo's gaze.

Without warning, he buries his face between my thighs. The first swipe of his tongue has me crying out, my hips bucking involuntarily. "Theo!" I gasp, my fingers tangling in his hair.

He hums against me, the vibration sending sparks of pleasure through my body. Then he nips at my inner thigh—that familiar, delicious bite that he knows I love.

God, how does he still remember? The thought flits through my mind before dissolving into pure sensation as Theo's mouth closes over my clit.

I'm lost in a haze of pleasure when Theo pulls back, his fingers replacing his tongue. He runs them through my soaking folds before plunging two deep inside me. I arch my back, a cry escaping my lips.

"Still so responsive," Theo murmurs, his voice husky. He pumps his fingers in and out, his thumb circling my clit. "I've missed this. Missed you."

His words send a pang through my chest, but I push it aside. This is just sex, I remind myself. Nothing more.

Theo's lips trail a path of kisses up my body—my thighs, my hips, my stomach. Each touch ignites a new spark of desire. When he returns his attention to my center, I'm trembling with need.

"Theo, please," I whimper, not caring how desperate I sound.

He focuses on my clit, alternating between broad strokes of his tongue and quick flicks that have my eyes rolling back in my head. The pressure builds, a familiar tightening in my core.

"That's it, baby," Theo encourages. "Let go for me."

His words are my undoing. I come hard, crying out as waves of pleasure crash over me. Theo doesn't let up, drawing out my orgasm until I'm a quivering mess.

As I catch my breath, I tug at my top. "Get undressed," I command, peeling the fabric over my head.

Theo doesn't hesitate, stripping efficiently. My eyes are drawn to his cock—long, veiny, the head an angry purple and already weeping with anticipation.

I lean forward, unable to resist a taste. My tongue darts out to lick the tip, savoring his sharp intake of breath.

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"Are you going to be a good boy and follow the rules?" I ask, looking up at him through my lashes.

A growl rumbles deep in Theo's chest, his eyes flashing with primal hunger. In an instant, he's on me, tackling me back into the couch cushions. His face buries in my neck, hot breath fanning across my skin as he pushes himself inside me in one swift thrust.

I gasp, overwhelmed by the sudden fullness. Theo doesn't even take time to get fully situated—one knee up on the couch, one foot planted on the floor—before he starts moving. The position is awkward, but the friction is delicious.

"God, Skylark," he groans, voice muffled against my throat. "You feel incredible."

"Deeper," I demand, arching my back to change the angle. "I need you deeper."

Theo obliges, shifting his hips to drive into me with renewed vigor. Each thrust sends sparks of pleasure radiating through my body.

"Harder," I pant, digging my nails into his shoulders. "Don't hold back."

He bites down on my shoulder, not quite hard enough to break the skin, but enough to send a jolt of exquisite pain-pleasure straight to my core. His hips snap forward with increased force, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the room.

Just as I'm nearing the edge again, Theo suddenly pulls out. Before I can protest, he flips me over, manhandling me onto my hands and knees. I barely have time to catch

my breath before he's plunging back inside, somehow even deeper than before.

"Fuck," I moan, dropping my head between my arms. "Just like that, don't stop."

"Still like it rough?" Theo's voice is husky, laced with a hint of challenge.

I manage a shaky nod, my body trembling with need. I can't fully suppress my next moan as Theo hits that perfect spot inside me. My thoughts scatter like leaves in the wind, leaving me unable to form coherent words.

"Good," he growls, his approval sending a shiver down my spine.

Suddenly, his hand tangles in my hair, gripping tightly but not painfully. His other hand finds my hip, fingers digging in hard enough to leave marks. The dual sensations ground me, heightening every nerve ending.

Theo starts moving again, but this time it's different. Gone is any semblance of gentleness or restraint. He fucks me like a man possessed, each thrust deep and brutally hard. The pace is punishing, bordering on feral.

I gasp, struggling to catch my breath. "Oh God, Theo..."

He doesn't respond with words. Instead, I feel pressure between my shoulder blades as he pushes me down. My chest and stomach press into the couch cushions, changing the angle once more. The new position leaves me completely at his mercy, and a thrill runs through me at the realization.

Theo keeps up his relentless pace, never faltering. His lips find the nape of my neck, pressing heated kisses there before trailing down my spine. Each brush of his lips is punctuated by a particularly deep thrust, making me whimper.

"You're perfect," he murmurs against my skin. "So fucking perfect."

I close my eyes, losing myself in the sensations. For this moment, nothing else matters—not our complicated history, not my new job, not the mess we're undoubtedly creating. There's only Theo, me, and the fire building between us.

"Mine. Say you're mine," he growls, his voice low and guttural, filled with a primal need I've never heard from him before.

"Theo..." I whimper, arching my back to meet his thrusts.

"You've always been mine," he responds, slowing his movements to a torturous pace. "Say it, baby."

I can't help it; I whine in frustration.

That earns me a stinging slap on my ass. Electricity radiates from the point of impact, fueling the inferno building inside me.

"Say it."

"F-fuck you," I manage through clenched teeth, trying to regain some semblance of control.

Another smack, this time harder. My backside burns, but my core clenches around him, desperate for more.

"That's right, baby," he pants, and then he's fucking me again, driving us both to the edge of sanity.

"Theo," I pant, my orgasm barreling down on me like a freight train.

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He doesn't break in his rhythm, however. If anything, he picks up the pace, ramming into me with a single-minded focus.

"Say. It."

"Y-yours," I manage, panting and breathless.

That's all he needs. He curses and picks up the pace even more, slamming into me mercilessly until we both shatter, my walls clenching around him as we both come undone.

He collapses on top of me, his chest heaving as we both catch our breath. Slowly, he pulls out and watches, dazed, as his cum drips from my swollen sex. I'd forgotten how much he'd always liked that.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

## Chapter 8

Skylar

The sound of children's laughter echoes through the spacious living room, warming my heart despite my best efforts to remain detached. Like that was ever gonna happen.

I watch as Lucas and Elodie chase each other around the plush, cream-colored sofa, their giggles infectious. Why anyone with kids buys cream furniture I'll never

understand. But I guess these guys could just replace the couch weekly if they felt like it.

"Catch me if you can!" Elodie squeals, her pigtails bouncing as she darts behind an armchair.

Lucas, determined not to let his cousin win, lunges forward. "I'm gonna get you!"

I can't help but smile, my lips curving upward of their own accord. These kids are so wonderful. Sweet, well-behaved, and surprisingly easy to manage. I mean, I taught Lucas this year, so I know he's a sweetheart. What the hell was wrong with the previous nanny?

Shaking my head, I glance at the clock on the wall. "All right, munchkins, time for lunch!"

They groan in unison but obediently make their way to the kitchen. As I follow them, my eyes fall on the thick binder sitting on the counter. Austin's babysitter manifesto, as I've taken to calling it. Ten pages of meticulously detailed instructions, covering everything from meal prep to bedtime routines.

"Your dad sure likes his schedules, huh?" I mutter under my breath, flipping through the pages.

"Dad says structure is crucial," Lucas pipes up, his big brown eyes looking up at me earnestly.

I bite back a sarcastic retort. "Of course he does, buddy. Now, let's see what's on the menu for today."

As I prepare their sandwiches, following Austin's precise instructions down to the

exact number of cucumber slices, I can't help but roll my eyes. The man's need for control is bordering on obsessive.

Just as I'm setting the plates on the table, a strange sound comes from the direction of the front door. Before I can process it, Djinn's loud bark echoes through the house, making me jump.

"What the—" I start, but catch myself before finishing the expletive. "Stay here, kids. I'll go check what's going on."

My heart races as I approach the foyer, Djinn's barks growing more frantic. So much for an easy first day on the job. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever's on the other side of that door.

"It's probably nothing," I whisper to myself, trying to quell the anxiety bubbling in my chest. "Just some delivery guy who doesn't know how to ring a doorbell."

But as the strange sounds continue and Djinn's barking intensifies, I can't shake the feeling that this is going to be anything but simple. Welcome to nanny life, Skylar. Let's see how you handle this one.

I reach the front door, hovering in the foyer. I can see a shadow moving on the other side of the cloudy glass inserts in the door. The sound of someone fumbling with the lock on the other side sends a chill down my spine. Whoever it is, they're trying to get in—and failing miserably.

"Hello?" I call out, my voice steadier than I feel. "Can I help you?"

No response. Just more frustrated jiggling of the handle and what sounds like...muttered curses? Great.

I lean closer, pressing my ear against the cool wood. "Look, if you're trying to deliver something, you can just leave it—"

A high-pitched shriek cuts me off, followed by a series of rapid-fire thumps against the door. I jump back, heart pounding.

"Austin!" a shrill voice screams from outside. "Austin, open this goddamn door right now!"

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Jesus. Who the hell is this? And why are they looking for Austin in the middle of a workday? Dude is a workaholic. No way he's home at lunchtime.

"I'm sorry," I say, trying to keep my voice calm and authoritative. "Mr. Rhodes isn't here right now. Can I take a message?"

Another shriek, this one somehow even more piercing. "Who the fuck are you? Where's Austin? Let me in!"

I bite my lip, considering my options. On one hand, Austin's strict instructions didn't cover "what to do when a banshee tries to break down your door". On the other hand, I'm not about to let some random psycho into the house with the kids.

"Ma'am," I say, injecting as much ice into my tone as possible, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Mr. Rhodes isn't here, and you're not getting in without his permission."

The pounding intensifies. "You bitch! You can't keep me away from my—"

I turn to the kids, who are huddled nearby with wide, frightened eyes. Lucas looks particularly pale, his small hands trembling.

"Hey," I say softly, crouching down to their level. "I need you all to go upstairs to the playroom for a bit, okay? Everything's fine, I just need to handle this."

Elodie, ever the protector, wraps an arm around her older cousin. "Come on, Lucas. Let's go play."

As they scamper up the stairs, I pull out my phone, thumb hovering over the emergency call button. The woman outside has moved on from incoherent screeching to a stream of profanity that would make a sailor blush.

"You fucking homewrecker!" she shrieks. "I'll sue you for kidnapping! I'll have you arrested!"

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. Austin's "manifesto" might not have covered this scenario, but I'll be damned if I let this woman think she can intimidate me.

The pounding on the door doesn't stop, and neither does the shouting. Djinn barks even louder, his sharp yips blending with the woman's shrill voice into a cacophony that grates on my nerves.

"You're making a mistake, Austin!" she screams, her voice ragged. "You think you can just erase me and start over? I made this family!"

Her words hit me like a freight train. Replace? Made this family? What is this woman talking about? I grip the edge of the foyer table, trying to steady myself.

"You'll regret this!" she yells again, her voice breaking. "You know I have rights! You're not going to keep me from my son!"

Wait—son? I glance up the stairs where Elodie and Lucas disappeared moments ago, my stomach twisting.

The woman slams her fists against the door, rattling it in its frame. "Austin! Open the damn door!"

I swallow hard, the pieces clicking into place. Whoever this is, she's not just some unhinged stranger. She knows Austin. She knows Lucas. My pulse races as a fresh

wave of adrenaline surges through me.

This must be his ex-wife, Lucas's mother. Well, that complicates things.

I pull up Austin's contact card, the urge to call him overwhelming. But I hesitate, doubt creeping in. It's my first day, and I don't want to give Austin any reason to think I can't handle this job. Plus, a nagging suspicion tugs at me—what if this is some sort of test? It wouldn't be beyond Austin to orchestrate something like this to see how I'd react.

"You've got this, Skylar," I mutter to myself, pocketing my phone. Djinn whines at my feet, his massive body vibrating with tension.

I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders and plastering on my best dealing-with-difficult-parents smile. It's the same one I've perfected over years of parent-teacher conferences and PTA meetings. With a steady hand, I unlock the door and open it just enough to wedge my body into the gap.

The woman on the other side looks like she's been slapped. Her mouth drops open, eyes widening in comical surprise. She's tiny, barely reaching my shoulders, but the rage emanating from her is palpable.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself against her venom. "Hi, I'm Skylar. And you are?" I ask, though I already know the answer. Djinn's growls intensify behind me, his nails scratching at the hardwood as he tries to squeeze past my legs.

The woman's eyes narrow, her lips curling into a sneer. "Brielle," she spits out, as if the name itself is poison. "I'm Lucas' mother. Now move aside."

She lunges forward, trying to shove past me into the house. I plant my feet firmly, gripping the door frame with white knuckles. My heart races, but I refuse to show

fear.

"I'm sorry, Brielle, but I can't let you in without permission from the owners," I say, my voice firm despite the tremor I feel in my chest.

"Owners? This is my husband's house, you little bitch. That's my son in there!" She slaps her hand on the door and pushes.

I grit my teeth, pushing back against her surprisingly strong grip. "Be that as it may, you're not on the approved list for entry. If you'd like to schedule a visit, I'm sure we can arrange something with Mr. Rhodes."

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"Who the fuck are you?" she demands, recovering quickly. Her eyes dart past me, trying to see into the house. "Where's Austin?"

I tighten my grip on the door, using my body to block her view. Behind me, Djinn lets out a low growl. "I'm afraid Mr. Rhodes isn't available right now. Is there something I can help you with?"

The woman's face contorts, a mix of fury and disbelief. "You're kidding me, right? Another one of his little playthings? God, you're barely out of high school!"

I roll my eyes. I'm twenty-five, thanks. I keep my voice level as I respond. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the property. If you have any concerns, I'd be happy to pass them along to Mr. Rhodes."

She seems to realize her game isn't working and changes tactics.

Brielle narrows her eyes as she gives me a once-over. A smirk plays at the corners of her perfectly painted lips, and I brace myself for whatever she's about to throw my way.

"So, you're the new flavor of the month, huh?" she purrs, her voice dripping with venom. "Tell me, sweetheart, which one of them are you fucking?"

I feel my cheeks flush, but I refuse to let her see she's gotten under my skin. Instead, I let a slow, lazy smile spread across my face. "Oh honey," I drawl, channeling every ounce of sass I possess, "why limit myself? I'm fucking all of them. And let me tell you, they are unbelievably talented."

The shock on Brielle's face is priceless. Her jaw drops, and her complexion turns a vibrant shade of red that reminds me of the roses in Birdie's garden. For a moment, I almost feel bad for her. Almost.

"You little slut!" she shrieks, her composure completely shattered. "You think you can just waltz in here and take what's mine?"

I roll my eyes, my patience wearing thin. "Last time I checked, people aren't property, Brielle. And from what I understand, you gave up any claim to this family a long time ago."

Her face contorts with rage, and she launches into a new tirade of obscenities. I stand my ground, refusing to flinch as she hurls insult after insult at me. Inside, though, my heart is racing. What have I gotten myself into?

"You're nothing but a gold-digging whore!" Brielle screams, trying once again to push past me. "You think they care about you? They'll use you up and throw you away, just like they did to me!"

I plant my feet more firmly, using every ounce of strength to keep her at bay. "I'm not here for money or status, Brielle," I say, my voice steady despite the tremor in my hands. "I'm here to do a job, and right now, that job is keeping you out of this house."

She scoffs, lunging forward. Her manicured nails digging into my arm as she tries to pry me away from the door.

Pain shoots through my arm as her nails dig in, but I refuse to give her the satisfaction of a reaction. Instead, I meet her wild gaze with a calm, unyielding stare.

"Brielle, I suggest you take your hands off me," I say, my voice cold and sharp. "Now."

For a moment, she hesitates, her grip loosening just slightly. But then she seems to double down, her manic energy flaring again.

"You don't scare me," she hisses, her face so close to mine I can smell the faint hint of alcohol on her breath. "You have no idea who you're messing with."

I arch a brow, my lips curling into a smirk. "Neither do you."

Brielle's face twists into a mask of rage, her grip tightening once more. Before she can launch into another tirade, I jerk my arm free, stepping back just enough to put some distance between us while keeping my hand firmly on the door to block her entry.

"You need to leave," I say firmly, my voice like steel. "This is private property, and you're trespassing."

Her laugh is sharp and bitter, cutting through the tension like a blade. "Trespassing? Trespassing?" she repeats, her voice rising to a near shriek. "This is my family! My family! Who the hell do you think you are, playing gatekeeper like you belong here?"

I tilt my head, letting her words roll off me like water off a duck's back.

Brielle's eyes narrow, a calculated gleam replacing the wild fury. "Fine," she hisses, her voice dropping to a menacing whisper. "You want to play tough? I'll call the cops. You can't keep me from my son."

My heart skips a beat, but I force my face to remain impassive. I've dealt with manipulative parents before, but never quite like this. I take a deep breath, centering myself.

"Austin would have mentioned if you were due for a visit," I say, my tone clipped and professional. "He didn't. So, unless you have court-approved visitation scheduled for today, you have no right to be here."

Brielle's nostrils flare, and for a moment, I think she might actually lunge at me. Instead, she reaches for her phone, her manicured nails clicking against the screen.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" she snarls. "We'll see how smart you are when you're explaining to the police why you're keeping a mother from her child."

I feel a bead of sweat trickle down my spine, but I stand my ground. This woman is used to getting her way through intimidation, but I refuse to be another one of her victims.

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"Go ahead," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "Call them. But before you do, let me make something clear." I lean in slightly, matching her intensity. "If you don't leave this property right now, I'll be the one calling the cops. For trespassing and attempted breaking and entering."

Djinn's growls grow louder behind me, as if sensing the tension. I continue, "Or, I could always let Djinn out here to keep you company while we wait for them to arrive. Your choice."

Brielle's face contorts with rage, her perfectly arched eyebrows knitting together. "You little bitch," she hisses, her voice rising to a shrill pitch. "You have no idea who you're dealing with!"

I grip the doorframe tighter, my knuckles turning white. My heart races, but I force my voice to remain calm. "I think I do, actually. And I'm not impressed."

Her rage amps up, and for a moment, I wonder if she might actually try to hit me. Instead, she takes a step back, her eyes blazing with fury.

"You will regret this," she hisses again. "I'll be back, and next time, you won't be able to keep me out."

"Bye, sweetie," I wave, my voice saccharine sweet.

She takes a step back, her designer heels clicking on the porch. "This isn't over," she spits, jabbing a finger in my direction. "Austin will hear about this, and you'll be out on your ass before you can blink."

I watch as she storms down the driveway, her hair whipping in the wind. Only when her car peels out of sight do I allow myself to exhale, sagging against the door.

"Holy shit," I mutter, running a shaky hand through my hair. Djinn whines softly, nudging my leg. I reach down to scratch behind his ears, grateful for his steady presence.

My mind races. Should I call Austin? It's my first day, and I don't want to seem incapable. But this isn't exactly a normal situation.

I pull out my phone, my thumb hovering over Austin's contact. Screw it. He needs to know.

"First day on the job, and I'm already dealing with psycho exes," I type, trying to keep it light. "Brielle showed up. Don't worry, I handled it. Kids are safe upstairs. Call when you can?"

I hit send, then lean my head back against the door, closing my eyes.

My day can only get better at this point.

## Chapter 9

Cohen

The glowing numbers on my watch mock me as I slouch in my leather chair, waiting for Austin to wrap up his last meeting. The three of us drove in together this morning, a decision I'm now regretting as the minutes tick by.

The door to my office swings open, and Theo lopez in, his casual grace a stark contrast to my restless energy. Without a word, he flops onto the leather couch across

from my desk, his long legs sprawling out in front of him. His eyes are glued to his phone, a frown creasing his forehead.

I want to ask what's wrong, but the words stick in my throat. There's something in the set of his shoulders, the downward curve of his mouth, that makes me hesitate. Whatever's on that screen, it's hit him hard. And I have a sinking feeling I know what—or who—it is. I don't want to go there.

Theo's green eyes flick up to meet mine for a brief moment before returning to his phone. "You look like shit, man," he says, his voice carrying that dry humor I've come to expect from him.

I snort, leaning back in my chair. "Thanks. I was going for the 'overworked single dad who can't remember the last time he slept' look. Nailed it, right?"

He chuckles, but it's half-hearted at best. I watch as his thumb scrolls, his expression growing more pained with each swipe. The urge to ask burns in my chest, but I swallow it down. Some things are better left unsaid, especially when it comes to matters of the heart.

"Austin still in that meeting?" Theo asks, finally setting his phone face-down on his chest.

I nod, glancing at my watch again. "Yeah. Should be wrapping up soon, though."

Theo hums in acknowledgment, his gaze drifting to the ceiling. I can practically see the wheels turning in his head, memories playing out behind those intense green eyes. It's a look I know all too well—the same one I see in the mirror when thoughts of my ex-wife creep in.

"You want to grab a drink after this?" I find myself asking, surprising even myself

with the offer. "Looks like we could both use one."

Theo's lips quirk up in a small smile. "Make it two, and you've got a deal."

The office door slams open, startling both Theo and me. Austin storms in, his usually impeccable appearance slightly disheveled, tie loosened, and a few strands of dark blonde hair falling across his forehead.

"Women," he spits out, pacing the length of my office. "Nothing but trouble, the lot of them."

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I lean back in my chair, running my hands through my hair and over my face. The tension in the room is palpable, crackling like electricity. Austin's intensity is a force of nature, and I can feel Theo tensing on the couch beside me.

"What happened?" I ask, my voice steady despite the knot forming in my stomach. "What's got you so worked up?"

Austin whirls to face me, his blue eyes stormy. "What happened? What always happens, Cohen. They take and take and take, and when there's nothing left, they find new ways to drive you insane."

I watch him, noting the tight set of his jaw, the way his hands clench and unclench at his sides. This isn't just about his ex-wife; there's something else simmering beneath the surface.

"Is it Brielle again?" I probe gently, knowing I'm treading on thin ice. "Or is there something else going on?"

Austin's laugh is bitter, cutting through the air like a knife. "Brielle, Skylar, does it matter? They're all the same in the end."

At the mention of Skylar's name, my heart skips a beat. I feel a haze of memories associated with her that I can't quite grasp, no matter how hard I try. It happens every time I think of her. I'm certain I know her from somewhere, I just can't place her. Now's not the time, though.

"Come on, man," Theo pipes up from the couch, his voice uncharacteristically

serious. "You can't lump them all together like that. Skylar's different."

I watch as Austin's gaze snaps to Theo, something dangerous flickering in his eyes. "Is she? Or are you just too blinded by those pretty eyes to see the truth?"

The tension in the room ratchets up another notch. I find myself standing, moving between my brother and my friend, hands raised in a placating gesture. "All right, let's all take a breath here. Austin, what exactly happened?"

Austin's nostrils flare, his jaw clenching as he spits out, "Brielle showed up at the house. Tried to force her way inside." His eyes narrow, voice dripping with disdain. "And you know how I found out? A fucking text from Skylar."

I feel my brow furrow, confusion settling in. "What did you expect her to do?"

Austin doesn't answer, just continues to fume, his chest rising and falling rapidly. I can practically see the steam coming out of his ears. For a moment, I wonder if he's going to start huffing and puffing, ready to blow the whole office down like some corporate Big Bad Wolf.

So much for that drink, I guess.

"Look," I say, trying to keep my voice level, "we should probably head home. Sort this out there."

Theo jumps up from the couch, eager to escape the tension. "Shotgun!" he calls, already heading for the door.

I roll my eyes, following behind as Austin storms out, keys jangling angrily in his hand. As we pile into the car, I can't help but feel a twinge of apprehension. Austin's always been a bit of a speed demon, but when he's pissed? It's like being strapped into

a rocket with a death wish.

The engine roars to life, and we peel out of the parking lot, tires screeching. I grip the door handle, my knuckles turning white as Austin weaves through traffic, barely missing a delivery truck.

"Whoa there, Speed Racer!" Theo quips from the front seat, his laughter tinged with nervousness. "I'd like to make it home in one piece, if possible."

I reach up and slap him on the shoulder. Now's not the time for jokes, even if gallows humor is Theo's go-to coping mechanism.

As we narrowly avoid sideswiping a minivan, I can't help but wonder if we'll actually make it home at this rate. My mind drifts to Skylar, to the situation waiting for us. I just hope we live long enough to face it.

Thank fuck we do. Though, it was a close call.

As we pull into the driveway, my heart rate finally begins to slow. I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, the tension draining from my body as the car comes to a full stop. Home. Safe. Thank God.

We pile out of the car, Austin still radiating anger, Theo unusually quiet. I lead the way, pushing open the front door, bracing myself for whatever chaos might await us.

But the scene that greets me stops me dead in my tracks.

There, on the living room couch, is Skylar. She's curled up with Lucas and Elodie on either side of her, a large storybook spread across their laps. Her soft voice carries through the room as she reads, "And the prince said..."

I can't move. Can't breathe. The sight of her there, so at ease with our children, hits me like a punch to the gut.

"Well, isn't this cozy," Austin mutters behind me, his tone sharp.

I barely register his words. My eyes are locked on Skylar's face, watching the way her lips move as she reads, the gentle curve of her neck as she leans down to show the kids a picture.

"Dad!" Lucas spots us first, his face lighting up. "Come listen to the story!"

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Skylar looks up, her eyes meeting mine. For a moment, I swear I see a flicker of...something. Hurt? Anger? It's gone before I can place it.

"I didn't hear you come in," she says, her voice steady but with an undercurrent of tension.

I force myself to step forward, to breathe. "Don't stop on our account," I manage, my voice rougher than I intended. "Looks like you've got quite the captive audience."

As I sink into a nearby armchair, I can't shake the feeling of déjà vu. It's like I'm seeing double—the present moment overlaid with a hazy memory of another time, another life.

Maybe it really is another life. A life where this scene wouldn't be so jarring, so...achingly beautiful.

My chest tightens with an unexpected surge of possessiveness. I want to freeze this moment, to protect it. To keep Skylar here, safe and warm, surrounded by the laughter of our children.

It's ridiculous. Dangerous. But as I watch her tug one of Elodie's ringlets, I can't deny the longing that courses through me. For what, exactly, I'm not sure.

All I know is that I want more of this. More of her. And that terrifies me more than Austin's death-defying driving ever could.

Austin's voice cuts through the room like a whip, shattering the tranquil moment.

"What the hell was Brielle doing here?" he demands, his eyes narrowing on Skylar.

I tense, watching as Skylar's posture shifts. She gently disentangles herself from the kids, her movements deliberate and controlled. The warmth in her eyes hardens to steel as she meets Austin's glare.

"Your ex-wife showed up uninvited," Skylar replies, her tone clipped. "I handled it."

Austin scoffs, taking a step closer. "Handled it? That's all you have to say? I want details, Skylar. Now."

I feel the tension in the room ratchet up a notch. Skylar rises to her feet, crossing her arms over her chest. "She demanded to see Lucas. I refused. She left. End of story."

"And you didn't think to call me?" Austin's voice drops dangerously low.

Skylar doesn't back down. "I texted. You said you were in meetings all day. I made a judgment call."

As I watch them face off, I'm struck by the crackling energy between them. It's like watching two alpha predators circling each other, each refusing to show weakness. The air feels charged, electric.

A knot forms in my stomach, an uncomfortable mix of admiration and...jealousy? I try to shake it off, but it clings to me like a second skin. I've never seen anyone stand up to Austin like this, matching him blow for verbal blow.

"A judgment call?" Austin practically snarls. "This isn't some corporate takeover, Skylar. This is my son we're talking about."

"I'm well aware," Skylar snaps back. "And I protected him, which is my job. Or have

you forgotten why I'm here?"

I can't tear my eyes away from them. The fire in Skylar's eyes, the tension in Austin's jaw—it's mesmerizing. And deeply unsettling. I find myself wanting to step between them, to...what? Protect Skylar? Stand with her against my brother?

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. I want her. Not just physically, but in a way I haven't wanted anyone since...well, since before my world fell apart. Maybe even before that. And watching her go toe-to-toe with Austin only intensifies that desire.

As I struggle with this revelation, movement catches my eye. Theo leans against the doorframe, his gaze fixed on Skylar. The look on his face is one I've never seen before—pure, unguarded admiration. His eyes are wide, almost dreamy, as if he's watching some kind of miracle unfold.

I mean, if he were a cartoon, there would be literal hearts in his eyes.

"You're incredible," Theo murmurs, just loud enough for me to hear.

Skylar turns, her fiery gaze softening slightly as it lands on Theo. A small smile plays at the corners of her mouth, and I feel a fresh wave of jealousy wash over me.

"Thanks, Theo," she says, her voice losing some of its edge. "At least someone appreciates my efforts."

I run a hand through my hair, trying to sort through the tumult of emotions coursing through me. "Look," I interject, desperate to regain some control, "maybe we should all take a moment to cool down."

But as soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize I'm not ready to let this moment

end. I want to keep Skylar here, in our orbit, for as long as possible. The realization is both thrilling and terrifying.

"Cohen's right," Austin grudgingly agrees, his eyes still locked on Skylar. "We can discuss this more...rationally...later."

As they begin to disperse, I'm left with a sinking feeling in my chest. What am I doing? Between Theo's puppy-dog eyes, Austin's volatile chemistry with Skylar, and my own messy history, pursuing anything more than a professional relationship with her seems impossible.

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And yet, as I watch her gather the kids and head upstairs to work on homework I assume, her movements graceful and self-assured, I can't help but wonder: what if?

I find myself drifting back to memories of college, of nights spent tangled in sheets with Austin and whoever caught our fancy that week. The image of Skylar overlays those hazy recollections, and I feel a familiar heat coiling in my gut.

"You okay there, Cohen?" Theo's voice cuts through my reverie. "You look a million miles away."

I blink, focusing on his concerned green eyes. "Yeah, just...thinking."

Austin snorts from across the room. "Dangerous pastime."

"For you, maybe," I retort, falling into our usual banter. But my mind is still churning. I clear my throat. "Remember when we used to, uh...share?"

The room goes still. Austin's eyebrows shoot up, and Theo's lips part in surprise.

"That was a lifetime ago," Austin says, his voice low and guarded. "And keep your voice down. The last thing we need is for her to hear us talking about this."

I nod, feeling the weight of unspoken possibilities hanging in the air. "All I'm saying is...it worked for us then."

Theo leans forward, his usually relaxed posture taut with interest. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

I run a hand through my hair, heart pounding. "I'm not suggesting anything. I'm just...remembering."

Austin's eyes narrow. "Remembering, or fantasizing?"

I meet his gaze, unflinching. "Both, maybe."

The silence stretches between us, thick with tension and unspoken desires. Finally, Theo breaks it with a soft chuckle.

"Well," he says, a hint of his usual dry humor creeping back into his voice, "you know me. I've always preferred company when it comes to...intimate situations."

I remember all too well. Theo, always so guarded, only truly letting loose when he wasn't the sole focus of attention. It was his way of keeping emotional distance, I realize now.

Austin paces the room, his movements sharp and agitated. "This is insane," he mutters. "We're not in college anymore. We have responsibilities, reputations to maintain."

"And feelings," I add quietly, thinking of the way Skylar's presence seems to electrify the air around us all.

Theo nods, his expression thoughtful. "Complicated feelings."

We fall silent again, each lost in our own thoughts. The possibility I've raised hangs between us, tempting and terrifying in equal measure.

The room feels charged, the tension palpable as we all silently navigate the undercurrents of what hasn't been said. My pulse thuds in my ears, and I can't tell if

it's from the implications of our conversation or the lingering image of Skylar standing her ground, like she belonged here more than any of us.

Austin stops pacing abruptly, turning to face us with a scowl that doesn't quite mask his discomfort. "This is ridiculous. She's here for the kids. That's it. Anything else is irrelevant."

His words cut through the moment like a whip, and I see the hard set of his jaw, the way his fists clench at his sides. But I know him well and it's not anger—it's fear. Fear of losing control. Fear of the emotions that seem to swirl around Skylar and pull us all into her orbit.

Theo crosses his arms, his usual easygoing demeanor replaced with something sharper, edgier. "You're not blind, Austin. You see the way Cohen looks at her. Hell, you know the way you look at her."

"Enough! She's the nanny. The temporary nanny. Period. Let's not lose sight of that."

I open my mouth to respond, but he holds up a hand, silencing me. "And don't think for a second I haven't noticed the way Cohen looks at her. Or the fact that Theo's clearly hiding something."

Theo bristles, his jaw tightening. "I'm not hiding shit."

Austin arches a brow, his expression skeptical. "Really? Because the way you're acting screams otherwise."

"I'm not hiding anything. She didn't want to address it, so I respected her wishes. Doesn't mean I'm pretending it never happened."

"What? What happened?"

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Theo takes a step forward, his green eyes blazing. “You want the truth?” His voice is low, almost a growl. “Fine. Skylar was mine. Always has been. Always will be.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Austin demands, his voice rising.

Theo exhales sharply, his jaw tightening. “She’s the reason I ended up at that damn boarding school. Our parents—” He stops, his voice cracking. “Our parents weren’t exactly friendly with each other. The moment they realized what we were to each other, they tore us apart, sent me away, and I never saw her again. Until now.”

The confession hangs in the air, thick with emotion. I glance at Austin, who looks momentarily stunned before his features harden again.

Austin pinches the bridge of his nose, muttering under his breath. “This is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I didn’t ask for this,” Theo says quietly, his voice raw, “but I’m not going to ignore it either.”

I lean back, letting the tension between them play out, but I can’t help the knot forming in my stomach. Theo’s claim feels like a gauntlet thrown down, one I’m not sure I want to pick up—or avoid entirely.

Austin looks between the two of us, his expression a mix of frustration and resignation. “If either of you think you’re going to drag her into some kind of tug-of-war, think again. I need her to focus solely on the kids, and I won’t have her caught in whatever this is.”

Theo glares at him but doesn't respond, his silence speaking volumes.

I finally break the stalemate, my voice calm but firm. "Austin's right. We can't let this get messy. She's part of this family for now at least—whether we like it or not."

Theo's jaw tightens, but he nods, the fire in his eyes dimming just slightly. Austin, satisfied for now, turns to leave, muttering something about needing a drink.

Theo waits until the sound of Austin's retreating footsteps fades before speaking, his voice low but resolute. "She's mine. I will take her in whatever way she'll have me."

His words are a gut punch, raw and unapologetic. He meets my gaze, unflinching. "But what happens between you and her? That's between the two of you. I won't interfere."

The declaration is both a challenge and a concession, leaving no room for doubt about how far he's willing to go.

The question is: how far am I willing to go?

## Chapter 10

### Austin

I storm down the hallway, my footsteps echoing off the marble floors. "Fucking Theo and his bullshit claims," I mutter under my breath, my jaw clenched tight. "Women digging their claws in, ruining everything we've built."

The weight of his words still sits heavy on my shoulders, digging in like sharp nails. I rub at the back of my neck, trying to shake the tension that seems to coil tighter with every step. It doesn't help. Nothing does lately.

The living room comes into view, and I stop short. She's back on the couch with the kids.

Beautiful trouble, curled up on the oversized leather sofa like she belongs there. Her caramel-brown hair catches the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows, turning it to warm, golden strands. She's reading to Lucas and Elodie again, her melodic voice soft but animated as she brings the story to life.

I should interrupt. Tell her to pack up and go. But my feet stay rooted, my eyes drawn to the scene like I'm watching a car crash I can't look away from. Her finger traces the words on the page as she reads, her movements graceful and precise. She's not just reading—she's guiding. Teaching.

She gives Lucas and Elodie turns, coaxing them gently when they stumbles over a word. Elodie's confidence has been a struggle lately, especially with reading. It's usually like pulling teeth to get her to practice, but here she is, focused, determined. And smiling.

Skylar makes it look effortless.

A sharp pang hits me square in the chest. I rub at it absently, willing the sensation away. What is it about her that gets under my skin like this? It's not just irritation—it's something deeper, something I don't want to name.

"And then the brave knight..." Skylar's words fade as she looks up, those piercing hazel eyes locking onto mine.

"Dad!" Lucas' eyes light up as he spots me, his small face beaming. "You're back!"

I force my hand away from my chest, squaring my shoulders. My suit feels too tight suddenly, the fabric constricting as I try to shake off the lingering discomfort. "I am,

bud. I see you're still here," I say to Skylar, my tone clipped.

Skylar arches one perfectly shaped eyebrow, her lips curving into a faint smirk. "Your powers of observation never cease to amaze me, Austin."

The kids giggle, and the sound grates against the frayed edges of my patience. "I thought you'd be gone by now," I say, taking a step closer. My voice hardens, the words coming out sharper than I intended. "We're home now. Your services are no longer required."

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She doesn't flinch. Doesn't even blink. Instead, she sits up straighter, the movement so subtle it's almost imperceptible, but I see it. It's a challenge, one I recognize immediately.

"It turns out they didn't have any homework and they requested another story," she replies smoothly, her gaze steady and unwavering. "Unlike some people, I find it difficult to deny them simple pleasures."

The barb stings, but I refuse to let it show. Instead, I cross my arms over my chest, the fabric of my tailored suit pulling tight across my shoulders. "And you always do exactly what the children want, is that it?"

Skylar's lips curve into a sardonic smile, and the sight sends another jolt through me. Damn her. "Oh, Austin," she purrs, "if I always did what others wanted, I wouldn't be here at all, would I?"

Her words linger in the air between us, charged and heavy. Another pang in my chest, sharper this time. I ignore it, focusing instead on the way her slender fingers toy with the edge of the book. Why does everything she does infuriate me so much?

"Uncle Austin," Elodie pipes up, her small face peering around Skylar's arm, her wide eyes hopeful. "Can Skylar stay for dinner? Please?"

I open my mouth to refuse, but Lucas jumps in before I can speak. "Yeah, please?" His grin is so earnest, so full of admiration, that it twists something inside me.

I force a smile, but it feels brittle on my face. "I'm sorry, bud, but it's time for Miss

Deveraux to head home."

The words have barely left my lips when twin cries of protest erupt from the children, their voices high-pitched and pleading.

"No!" Lucas exclaims, his brown eyes wide with dismay. "C'mon, Dad! Please?"

Elodie chimes in, clutching Skylar's arm like a lifeline. "Pretty please? We're almost done with the chapter!"

I look at Skylar, silently willing her to decline. To pack up her things and walk out that door. To come back tomorrow just as I'm leaving and vacate my sanctuary the moment I return home.

But there's a glint in her eye that tells me she's not going to make this easy for me. She tilts her head, studying me with an infuriatingly calm expression, as if daring me to put the children's happiness second.

I harden my gaze, silently demanding she make an excuse and leave us in peace. Leave me in peace.

But she doesn't. Of course she doesn't.

I know she can read it. I know she's aware that I don't want her here, invading our space any more than she needs to be. But, I also know that she's not going to give me what I want. She is, however, going to make the children very happy.

So, why doesn't that make me happy?

"Well," she drawls, "I suppose I could stay. If it's not too much trouble, of course."

I struggle to maintain my composure, caught between the children's eager faces and my burning desire to see Skylar walk out the door. The tension in the room is palpable, and I can feel my carefully constructed control slipping away with each passing second.

Every glance from Lucas and Elodie tugs at the fraying threads of my resolve, their innocent excitement chipping away at the walls I've worked so hard to keep intact.

Just as I'm about to put my foot down and insist on Skylar's departure, Theo's voice cuts through the thick silence like a knife through butter, shattering the moment with his usual nonchalance.

"Come on, Austin," he says, sauntering into the room with that infuriatingly easy smile of his, hands stuffed casually in his pockets like he doesn't have a care in the world. "Let the kids finish their story. And, of course, we would love to have Skylar stay for dinner, right?"

The muscles in my jaw tightens as I turn to glare at him. Of course, Theo would side with the children. Of course, he'd swoopin at the last second, playing the role of the laid-back uncle, and undermine my authority without a second thought. He always has to be the fun one, the favorite.

That's never bothered me before. They need that, need his lighthearted happiness. So, why is it suddenly a problem? I'll tell you why. Skylar Fucking Deveraux.

"I'm sure Miss Deveraux has other plans," I grit out, keeping my eyes locked on Skylar. She meets my gaze with that maddening smirk, the one that makes my blood boil and my pulse quicken in ways I refuse to acknowledge.

"Actually, my evening is wide open," she says smoothly, her tone light and full of challenge. "I'd be delighted to stay."

Her words hang in the air, a gauntlet thrown down between us. The kids' cheers erupt around me, a cacophony of excitement that only fuels the fire burning in my chest. I can feel control slipping further and further from my grasp, and it's infuriating. She's infuriating.

"Fine," I manage to say, the word bitter on my tongue, each syllable laced with frustration I can't fully conceal. "But just for dinner."

The kids erupt in cheers, and I feel my control slipping even further. Skylar's brash confidence, her ability to push my buttons with just a look or a word, it's all too much.

Lucas and Elodie leap to their feet, their laughter filling the room as they chatter excitedly about what Skylar's presence might mean for the rest of the evening. Skylar, for her part, looks positively triumphant, her smirk deepening as though she's just won some unspoken battle between us.

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It sends another jolt through me, a mixture of anger and something else I can't quite name. Something I'm not ready to examine too closely.

I turn on my heel and leave, the sound of their laughter following me down the hallway like a taunt. My fists clench at my sides, the muscles in my shoulders taut with tension. Everything about this woman gets under my skin. Her brash confidence, her infuriating ability to push my buttons with nothing more than a glance or a word.

The sound of Theo's laughter and the kids' excited chatter follows me down the hallway, each step fueling my anger.

When I reach my office, I slam the door shut behind me, the sound echoing in the stillness. My sanctuary, the one place in this house where I can think clearly, feels stifling tonight. I cross the room in quick, purposeful strides, yanking open the cabinet and pouring myself a stiff drink. The amber liquid burns its way down my throat, but the fiery sensation does nothing to dull the irritation simmering beneath my skin.

She's chaos wrapped up in a deceptively pretty package, and the longer she's here, the more obvious it becomes that she's a threat to everything I've spent years building.

Everything about her irritates me. She's brash, sassy, and always pushing back against me.

And Theo? Don't even get me started. His easy camaraderie with Skylar, his unflappable charm—he doesn't see what I see. He doesn't understand the danger she

represents, the way she disrupts the balance I've fought so hard to maintain. He claimed her. Fucking claimed her, and just expected us to fall in line.

But what really gets to me, what twists the knife even deeper, is the way Cohen looks at her. Like she's some kind of puzzle he's dying to solve. Or the way Theo talks to her so easily, drawing out her laughter like it's the simplest thing in the world.

And Cohen's comment about sharing? No. Hell fucking no.

What I need to do is find a permanent nanny. End this ridiculous charade so I never have to deal with her again.

So why does the idea of her leaving make me just as angry as having her here every day?

The sound of laughter pulls me out of my thoughts. The kids. I throw back the rest of my drink and loosen my tie, heading to my bedroom. The plush carpet muffles my footsteps as I enter. The expansive space, with its muted grays and blues, usually offers a sense of calm. Today, it feels stifling.

I loosen my tie further, the silk sliding through my fingers as I toss it onto the bed. "Get it together, Austin," I mutter, unbuttoning my shirt.

The suits are necessary for work, but when it's just the kids and me, I like to keep it more relaxed. Things have been chaotic enough since the divorces—what they need is stability, calm.

The room feels oppressively quiet. Too many thoughts swirl in my head, each one tugging at my focus like a tide I can't fight.

As I change into a soft Henley and dark jeans, I can't help but think about the kids.

Lucas' shy smile, Elodie's infectious laugh. They've been through so much.

I lean against the dresser, studying my reflection in the mirror. The man staring back looks tired, the weight of responsibility etched in the lines around his eyes. "They deserve some peace," I whisper.

I run a hand down my face and try to settle my mood. I don't like to be this...this controlling force of nature with the kids. Okay, I can do this. I can endure her presence for one dinner to make the kids happy.

Padding barefoot out of the bedroom, I hear Skylar's voice, warm and encouraging. "That's it, Lucas! Now, what do you think happens next in the story?"

I pause in the hallway, out of sight, and listen.

"Maybe...maybe the dragon isn't really mean?" Lucas suggests, his voice hesitant but hopeful. "What if he's just scared and lonely?"

"Oh, I like that!" Skylar exclaims. "What do you think, Elodie?"

"Yes!" Elodie chimes in. "And the princess can be his friend! They can have tea parties and fly through the clouds together!"

Their laughter mingles, a sound so pure it makes my chest ache. I lean against the wall, closing my eyes.

"Damn it," I whisper, the realization hitting me like a punch to the gut. As much as I hate to admit it, Skylar might be exactly what the kids need right now. They deserve calm, stability. And that seems to be exactly what she provides them.

I clench my fists, frustration boiling inside me. Why did it have to be her? Why did it

have to be this infuriating woman who gets under my skin like no one else?

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself and step into the living room. The scene before me—Skylar curled up on the couch with Lucas and Elodie on either side, all three engrossed in a colorful storybook—sends another pang through my chest.

"Looks like you're having fun," I say, aiming for casual but hearing the strain in my voice.

Three pairs of eyes turn to me, and I brace myself for whatever comes next.

## Chapter 11

Skylar

The sun glints off the water as I watch Lucas and Elodie splash in the pool, their laughter echoing across the manicured lawn. I dip my toes in, savoring the cool relief from the sweltering heat.

"Skylar, watch this!" Elodie calls out, her pigtails bouncing as she cannonballs into the deep end.

I clap and cheer, playing my part as the attentive nanny. It's become easier to slip into this role over the past week. No more surprise visits from psychotic exes or uncomfortable standoffs with Austin. Well, those haven't actually gone away completely.

"Quite the little fish, isn't she?" Birdie's voice drifts from the shade of a nearby oak tree. She's perched on a lounge, sipping lemonade and looking impossibly elegant despite the humidity.

"They both are," I reply, gesturing to Lucas as he perfects his backstroke. "I'm starting to think they're part mermaid."

Birdie chuckles, her silver hair catching the sunlight. "Oh honey, with their fathers' genes, I wouldn't be surprised if they sprouted gills and fins by puberty."

I roll my eyes, fighting back a smirk. "Don't give them any ideas, Birdie. I'm barely keeping up as it is."

"You're doing just fine, dear," she says, her tone softening as she looks at me with those wise, knowing eyes. "They adore you, you know."

A warmth spreads through my chest, unexpected and a little unsettling. I shouldn't feel this way, shouldn't let myself get attached. But I have. Slowly, day by day, these kids have chipped away at the walls I built around myself.

"It's just a job," I say, more to myself than to Birdie. But it's a lie. A terrible, hollow lie. Because I adore them right back. And that terrifies me.

This is temporary though. Everything is temporary.

I might not even be living here by the time school starts. Birdie's health might decline, or she could decide to sell the house and move down to Florida to live with her sister even if it doesn't. Now that the seed has been planted, why wouldn't she? Unlike me, she still has family that loves her, that wants her around.

If that happens, I'll be left scrambling for new housing, starting over yet again.

And on a teacher's salary, with barely any savings, the options aren't great. I can't afford much—just a shoebox apartment at best—and that's if I can even find something close to the school. The idea of uprooting my life yet again, of saying goodbye to the small sense of stability I've managed to carve out here, sends a pang of dread through me.

I glance at Birdie, who's humming to herself as she watches the kids, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing in my mind. It's all so fragile. My job. My home. This tenuous little family I've found myself a part of.

I need to remind myself not to get too comfortable, to keep my heart out of it. Because when it all falls apart—and it always does—I'll be the one left to pick up the

pieces.

"Skylar!" Lucas calls out, interrupting my brooding. "Can we turn on the sprinklers? Please?"

I nod, grateful for the distraction. As I walk over to the control panel, I catch sight of my reflection in the pool house windows. My chestnut hair is a mess of damp waves, my sundress clinging to my curves. For a moment, I barely recognize myself—this carefree version of me that's emerged over the past week.

The sprinklers burst to life, and the kids squeal with delight as they run through the spray. I can't help but laugh, their joy infectious.

"You know," Birdie says, appearing beside me with a knowing glint in her eye, "it's okay to enjoy yourself, Skylar. The world won't end if you let yourself be happy for a moment."

I bristle at her words, my walls slamming back into place. "I'm fine, Birdie. Really."

But as I watch the kids play, their faces alight with pure, unbridled joy, I can't help but wonder if maybe—just maybe—Birdie might be right.

With a sigh, I slip off my sundress that's covering my swimsuit and dip into the cool water. I can see the kids just fine from here and I need to cool my overheating mind.

As I drift lazily in the pool, my mind wanders to Cohen.

My standoffs with Austin might be less frequent, but Cohen and I? Our eyes have been meeting more frequently lately, charged with an electricity I can't quite explain. There's a flicker of recognition in his storm-blue gaze, as if he's trying to place a half-forgotten melody.

If only he knew.

My skin prickles with heat as memories of Vegas flood my senses. Two days of uninhibited passion, fueled by tequila and an intoxicating freedom I'd never known before. Cohen's hands on my body, his rough fingertips exploring every inch of my skin. The way his lips trailed fire in their wake, setting off explosions of sensation that made me forget everything but him.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the vivid images to fade, but it's no use. I can still hear the low rumble of his laugh, feel the press of his body against mine, and taste the salt of his skin. It was supposed to stay there, in Vegas, tucked away like a souvenir from a life that wasn't really mine.

But now, every glance, every casual brush of his skin against mine, threatens to pull me under. And he obviously doesn't remember a fucking thing.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:10 am*

And then, of course, there's Theo.

I bite my lip, my heart racing as I think of the way he's been slipping into the carriage house every night this week. The way he lounges on my couch like he belongs there, all easy charm and effortless confidence. His smirk is maddening, his touch electric. He's a distraction I can't seem to resist, no matter how much I tell myself I need to keep my distance.

It's just physical. It has to be.

I can't afford to let my guard down, not with any of them. This arrangement—this thing—can't be anything more than stolen moments and tangled sheets. I've learned the hard way what happens when you let people in.

Austin, Cohen, Theo—they're all dangerous in their own way, each one capable of unraveling the careful threads of my resolve.

But no matter how much I want to believe I can keep my feelings out of it, the lines are starting to blur.

And that terrifies me.

The shrieks of laughter pull me from my reverie. I blink, focusing on the present scene before me. Lucas and Elodie are darting through the sprinklers, their small bodies glistening with water droplets in the afternoon sun. From my perch in the pool, I can't help but smile at their unbridled joy.

"Time for a lemonade break, kiddos!" Birdie calls out, her silvery hair catching the light as she waves them over.

I watch as the children scamper towards her, their excited chatter filling the air. Lucas, ever the cautious one, approaches slowly, while Elodie practically bounces with each step.

"This is the best lemonade ever, Miss Birdie!" Elodie exclaims, her blue eyes wide with delight.

Birdie chuckles, a warm, rich sound. "Well, thank you, sweetheart. It's my secret recipe."

As I float on my back, letting the cool water soothe my sun-warmed skin, I hear Elodie's sudden gasp of excitement.

"Look! A butterfly!" she cries out, her voice filled with wonder.

I turn my head, curiosity piqued. Sure enough, a delicate monarch butterfly is fluttering past, its orange and black wings a stark contrast against the clear blue sky.

"Oh, isn't that lovely?" Birdie says, her voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. "You know, I planted special flowers in my garden just to attract those beautiful creatures."

"Really?" Lucas asks, his usual shyness giving way to genuine interest.

I smile to myself, impressed once again by Birdie's ability to captivate the children. As she launches into an animated explanation about her butterfly-friendly garden, I can't help but feel a twinge of envy. How nice it must be to find such joy in simple things, to be unburdened by complicated feelings and tangled relationships.

But then again, I muse as I lazily paddle through the water, perhaps it's not too late for me to learn.

"Can we go see?" Elodie asks, her voice brimming with excitement. "Please, Miss Birdie?"

Lucas chimes in, "Yeah, can we?"

I hear Birdie's gentle laugh. "Well, that depends on your nanny. Skylar, dear, would you mind if I showed the children my butterfly garden?"

I lift my head from the water, pushing my wet hair back. Part of me wants to keep the kids close, to maintain the careful routine I've established. But their eager faces make my resolve waver.

"That's a great idea," I say, treading water. "But remember, your dads will be home soon. Don't be gone too long, okay?"

"We won't!" the kids chorus in unison.

As Birdie leads them through the yard toward the gate, I call out, "And no touching anything without permission!"

"Yes, Skylar," they reply, their voices already fading as they disappear into Birdie's yard.

I watch them go, a mix of emotions swirling in my chest. It's been a week of this nannying gig, and I've already grown more attached to these kids than I'd like to admit. I sink back into the pool, relishing the sudden quiet.

The water envelops me, cool and soothing. For a moment, I let myself float, eyes

closed, enjoying this rare moment of peace. No kids to watch, no complicated men to avoid. Just me and the gentle lapping of the water against the pool's edge.

I take a deep breath, savoring the tranquility. But even as I relax, I can't quite shake the nagging thought that this peace is temporary. Soon, the kids will be back. Soon, their fathers will return. And with them, all the complications I've been trying to ignore.

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And, there's everything else lurking in the background.

As I open my eyes, my gaze drifts toward the house. That's when I see him. Austin. He's standing just inside, his piercing blue eyes locked on me with an intensity that makes my breath catch.

The heat in his stare is unmistakable, a stark contrast to his usually cold demeanor. It's as if he's undressing me with his eyes, and suddenly, I'm acutely aware of every inch of my body beneath the water's surface.

"Enjoying the view, Mr. Rhodes?" I call out, my voice steadier than I feel.

He doesn't respond, but his jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. I can't help but remember our last encounter by this pool, when he caught me skinny-dipping. The memory sends a wave of heat through me that has nothing to do with the warm summer day.

Emboldened by the distance between us and the shield of the water, I decide to push his buttons. I maintain eye contact as I reach for the strap of my bikini top, toying with it between my fingers.

"You know," I say, my voice low and teasing, "I could give you a repeat performance of the other day. No one else is around."

I let the strap slip down my shoulder, revealing just a hint more skin. Austin's eyes follow the movement, his gaze darkening. For a moment, I think he might actually take me up on my offer. But then he turns abruptly, disappearing into the house

without a word.

I'm left alone in the pool, my heart racing. What am I doing? This is my employer, for crying out loud. But the way he looks at me...it makes me feel things I shouldn't. Things I can't afford to feel.

The sliding glass door opens again, and I instinctively pull my bikini strap back into place. But it's not Austin who emerges—it's Cohen. My stomach does a little flip as he approaches the pool, his tattooed arms on full display in a fitted t-shirt.

"Hey," he calls out, his deeper blue eyes scanning the yard. "Where are the kids?"

I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice neutral. "Birdie took them to see her butterfly garden. They should be back soon."

Cohen nods, then settles into one of the lounge chairs near the pool's edge. I can feel his gaze on me, and it takes everything I have not to squirm under its weight.

"How are they doing?" he asks. "Lucas mentioned something about a new game you taught them."

"They're doing well," I reply, my tone clipped. "And yeah, just a simple card game to keep them busy."

I watch him from the corner of my eye, searching for any hint that he remembers our weekend in Vegas. But his face remains frustratingly neutral, almost carefully so.

"That's good," he says, leaning back in the chair. "They seem to really like you."

I shrug, treading water. "Kids are easy. It's the adults that complicate things."

Cohen raises an eyebrow at that, and I wonder if I've said too much. But instead of pressing, he just chuckles softly.

"Fair point," he concedes.

We lapse into silence, and I can't help but think about how different this is from our time in Vegas. Back then, we couldn't stop talking—or doing other things with our mouths. Now, every word feels like a potential landmine.

Is he fucking with me? I wonder, studying his relaxed posture. Does he really not remember, or is this some kind of game?

Cohen shifts in his chair, his eyes suddenly taking on a more serious glint. "So, Skylar," he begins, his tone casual but with an undercurrent of curiosity, "Theo mentioned you two have some history."

My body tenses involuntarily, and I sink a little lower in the water, grateful for its coolness against my suddenly flushed skin. "Did he now?" I keep my voice neutral, but inside, my heart is racing.

"Yeah," Cohen continues, seemingly oblivious to my discomfort. "He didn't go into details. So, anyone serious in your life now?"

I let out a short, humorless laugh. "Serious? No, not since Theo." I pause, debating whether to continue. Screw it. Let's see how he reacts. "I did have this amazing weekend in Vegas last year, but he probably doesn't even remember it."

My eyes lock onto Cohen's face, searching for any flicker of recognition. My heart pounds so loudly I'm sure he can hear it echoing across the water. For a split second, I swear I see something flash in his eyes—surprise? Guilt? But it's gone so quickly I can't be sure it was ever there.

It hurts that he doesn't remember. But, at the same time, I can't exactly fault him. Neither of us shared our names—we did that on purpose. And while he looked like he does now, I had looked different. Full makeup, shorter hair, and thanks to the bride's demands, a temporary dye job that left me with bright bubblegum pink strands for the bachelorette party weekend.

I tell myself it's better this way, that it's a sign our weekend was meant to stay in the past. But as Cohen's gaze lingers on me, a shadow of something unreadable in his expression, I realize—maybe it's not just the past I should be worried about.

## Chapter 12

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:10 am*

Austin

I can't tear my eyes away from her. Skylar glides through the water, her movements fluid and graceful, like some kind of siren luring me to my doom. I've retreated to a hidden alcove off the main living area, peering through a gap in the curtains like some kind of voyeur. I just can't help myself.

The memory of her earlier taunt echoes in my mind. "I could give you a repeat performance of the other day."

Her voice had been low, teasing, full of promise. It had sent a jolt of electricity through my body, hardening me instantly. I'd gripped the door frame so tightly I'm surprised I didn't shatter the glass.

And, when she slid that thin little strap down her shoulder, fuuuuuuuck.

Now, as I watch her standing in the pool—my pool, water cascading down her curves, I feel that same surge of desire. My cock strains against my zipper, begging for relief. I grit my teeth, willing my body to calm down.

"Get it together, Austin," I mutter to myself. "She's nothing but trouble."

But even as I say the words, I know they're a lie. Skylar Deveraux is far more than just trouble. She's a force of nature, wild and unpredictable. And God help me, I want her more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

She tosses her wet hair over her shoulder, droplets sparkling in the sunlight. My

fingers itch to run through those damp strands, to pull her close and taste the salt on her skin. I imagine her sharp tongue, usually so quick with a biting retort, put to much better use.

"Fuck," I breathe, adjusting myself discreetly. This woman is going to be the death of me.

I watch as she stretches languidly by the pool's edge, every movement a deliberate tease. Does she know I'm watching? Is this all for my benefit? The thought both thrills and infuriates me.

I should walk away. I should focus on work, on my son, on anything but the maddening creature before me. But I remain rooted to the spot, unable to look away from the tempest that is Skylar Deveraux.

The sound of childish laughter breaks through my lust-filled haze. I blink, refocusing as the kids come skipping through the gate. Birdie follows close behind.

"Skylar!" Birdie calls out, her voice warm and full of affection. "Your little ones are back. I'm going to head back inside, dear. Thank you both for spending some time with a boring old lady."

"Bye, Birdie," the kids call out. "Thank you."

I watch as Skylar turns, her face softening in a way I've never seen before. It's like a mask slipping, revealing a glimpse of something tender beneath her usual icy exterior.

"Thanks, Birdie," Skylar calls back, her voice light. "I'll be in soon."

The exchange hits me like a punch to the gut. This softer side of Skylar, so at odds

with the sharp-tongued woman I've come to know, stirs something uncomfortable within me. It's a reminder that there's more to her than the facade she presents, more than the trouble she represents in my carefully ordered world.

I lean against the wall, closing my eyes briefly. "This is insane," I mutter to myself. "She's nothing to you. Nothing. Just the kids' nanny."

But even as I say the words, I know they're hollow. My body's reaction to her, the way my heart races at the mere sight of her, tells a different story. One I'm not ready to face.

I open my eyes, my gaze drawn back to the pool like a magnet. Cohen's there now, his shaggy hair damp from the water, guiding the kids toward the house. He moves with that easy grace he's always had, despite the weariness etched in the lines around his eyes.

"Come on, munchkins," he calls out, his voice carrying a hint of forced cheerfulness. "Let's get you all dried off and fed."

I watch as Skylar glides through the water, her movements fluid and graceful. She reaches the edge of the pool where Cohen stands, and for a moment, their eyes meet. There's a flicker of...something. Understanding? Longing? It's gone before I can name it, but it leaves an acrid taste in my mouth.

My fists clench at my sides. "What the hell is going on here?" I mutter under my breath.

Before I can dwell on it further, Theo strides out onto the patio, all casual confidence and easy smiles. He approaches the pool's edge, extending a hand to Skylar.

"Need a hand, gorgeous?" he asks, his voice carrying that infuriating hint of charm.

Skylar looks up, a smirk playing on her lips. "Such a gentleman," she teases, reaching for his outstretched hand.

As Theo helps her from the pool, his hand slides down her back, coming to rest firmly on her ass. It's a blatant, possessive gesture that sets my blood boiling.

"Motherfucker," I growl, my vision clouding with red. The urge to storm out there and rip his hand away is overwhelming.

I force myself to take a deep breath, trying to regain control. But the sight of Theo's hand on Skylar, the way she leans into him ever so slightly, it's like a knife twisting in my gut.

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"This isn't your problem," I remind myself harshly. "She's nothing to you. Nothing."

Lies. Lies. Lies. The jealousy coursing through me is all too real, and I'm powerless to stop it.

I turn away from the window, my jaw clenched tight enough to crack teeth. As I stalk through the house, searching for a better vantage point, my eyes land on a neatly folded pile of clothes in one of the downstairs bedrooms. Skylar's clothes. The sight of her delicate lace bra peeking out from beneath a silky blouse sends a jolt of heat through me.

"Fuck," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. I know I should walk away, but my feet remain rooted to the spot. The urge to touch, to inhale her scent, is overwhelming.

A noise in the hallway snaps me back to reality. I pivot, striding out of the room just as Skylar rounds the corner. She's wrapped in a towel, water still beading on her bronzed skin. Her eyes widen as she sees me, a small gasp escaping her lips.

"Austin," she breathes, clutching the towel tighter. "What are you doing down here?"

I drink in the sight of her, my body thrumming with barely contained desire. "I live here, remember?" I reply, my voice low and rough. "Unlike some people who seem to think they can just waltz in and make themselves at home."

Skylar's eyes narrow, that familiar defiance flashing in their hazel depths. "If you have a problem with me being here, maybe don't have me nanny your children."

Weren't you the one that invited me to live here too? Or, am I imagining that?"

I say nothing.

"Besides, Theo and the kids want me here."

The mention of Theo's name sends a fresh wave of anger through me. I take a step closer, crowding her against the wall. "Oh, I'm well aware of how...welcoming Theo's been."

I clench my jaw, fighting the urge to close the remaining distance between us. "You're a distraction, Skylar. A complication we don't need right now."

Her lips curl into a sardonic smile. "A distraction?" She tilts her chin up, defiant. "Seems like a personal problem, Austin. Maybe you should work on your focus."

God, she infuriates me. And yet, I can't look away from the curve of her neck, the soft swell of her breasts barely concealed by the towel. I want to taste her, to feel her skin against mine. The thought alone makes my body tighten with need.

"My focus is just fine," I growl, leaning in closer. Her scent—a mix of chlorine and something uniquely her—fills my senses. "It's you who needs to remember your place here."

Skylar's eyes flash dangerously. "My place? And where exactly is that, Austin? Under your thumb? I don't think so."

She moves to push past me, her shoulder brushing against my chest. My arm snaps out, blocking her path.

"Where are you going?" I can't let her walk away, not like this. The tension between

us is a live wire, crackling with electricity.

"The guest room," she snaps, jerking away from my touch. "I need to change."

I crowd her against the wall, our chests mere inches apart. Her breath hitches, and I feel the warmth radiating off her skin.

"You're trouble," I growl, my voice low and intense. "I can't have you bringing chaos into my life, into my home."

Skylar tilts her chin up defiantly, her eyes blazing with a mixture of anger and a desire she can't even begin to hide. "It's not my fault you can't stop thinking about me naked, Austin," she retorts, her words sharp enough to cut.

She tries to push past me, but my hand moves of its own accord, gripping her hip. My thigh wedges between her legs, and I can feel the wet heat of her core even through my suit pants. The sensation sends a jolt of electricity through my body, and I have to stifle a groan.

"What are you doing?" she gasps, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

I lean in closer, my lips barely grazing her ear. "Proving a point," I murmur, my voice husky with need. "You're not as immune to this as you pretend to be."

Her body trembles against mine, and I can feel her pulse racing. God, I want her. The need to taste her, to claim her, is overwhelming. But I can't. I won't. I've worked too hard to build this life, to create order out of chaos. I can't let her destroy everything I've built.

"Let me go, Austin," she whispers, but there's a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

I pull back slightly, meeting her gaze. "Is that really what you want?"

Skylar's hazel eyes flash with defiance, a smirk playing at the corners of her lips. "What I want?" she purrs, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "I think this is more about what you want. A more private show. Isn't that what you're after?"

Before I can react, she drops the towel, leaving her clad only in that sinfully small bikini. My erection strains against my zipper, the metal teeth digging into my flesh. I grit my teeth, fighting for control.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

"Careful, trouble," I warn, my voice low and dangerous. "You're playing with fire."

She laughs, a sound that's both mocking and alluring. "Oh, I think you're the one who's burning up, Rhodes."

My hands clench as Skylar's fingers dance along the edge of her bikini top. She's teasing me, testing my limits, and God help me, I'm falling for it.

"Don't," I growl, but it's weak, unconvincing even to my own ears.

She ignores me, of course. Slowly, torturously, she peels back the fabric, revealing a dusky pink nipple. The sight of it, pebbled and perfect, sends a rush of heat through my body. I want to touch her, to taste her, to lose myself in her softness.

But I can't. I won't.

I clench my fist so hard my nails dig into my palm, the pain a welcome distraction from the ache in my groin. "You think this is a game?" I hiss, struggling to maintain my composure.

"Isn't it?" Skylar challenges, her eyes never leaving mine. "You're the one who can't seem to decide what he wants."

I watch, transfixed, as Skylar's nimble fingers move to the other side of her bikini top. With agonizing slowness, she peels it back, baring both breasts to my hungry gaze. Her defiant stare burns through me, igniting something primal in my core.

"You think you're teasing me," I grit out, my voice rough with barely contained desire. "But we both know you're teasing yourself. We both know you're dripping wet."

A flicker of surprise crosses her face before she schools her features. "Well, I was just in the pool," she retorts, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

I lean in closer, my lips nearly brushing her ear. "Oh, trouble, we both know I'm talking about that tight little pussy."

The sharp intake of breath tells me I've hit a nerve. Good. I'm tired of being the only one affected by this maddening attraction.

"Should I test my theory?" I ask, pressing my body closer to hers. The heat radiating from her skin is intoxicating, and I have to fight the urge to claim her lips with mine.

Skylar says nothing, just clenches her jaw and holds my gaze. The challenge in her eyes is unmistakable. She thinks she has the upper hand, but two can play this game.

I pull my hand from her hip, trailing it slowly across her collarbone. Her skin is impossibly soft, still damp from the pool. As my fingers trace a path down between her breasts, I feel her pulse quicken beneath my touch.

This is dangerous territory, but I can't seem to stop myself. My hand continues its journey, sliding under the curve of her left breast. I circle her nipple with my thumb, relishing the way it hardens under my touch.

Skylar lets out a moan, and the sound goes straight to my groin. My dick weeps in my pants, straining painfully against the confines of my zipper. God, what this woman does to me.

"Austin," she breathes, and for a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability in those hazel eyes.

I should stop this. I should walk away before we both do something we can't take back. But as I stare into Skylar's eyes, I realize I'm already in too deep.

I trail my hand lower, savoring the softness of her skin as I trace a path down her stomach. Her muscles quiver beneath my touch, betraying her arousal despite her defiant expression. My fingers ghost over her thigh, teasing, exploring.

"Last chance to stop me, trouble," I murmur, my voice husky with desire.

Skylar's eyes narrow, but she remains silent. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, and I can feel the heat radiating from her body. I reach the edge of her bikini bottoms, letting my fingers play with the hem.

"No objections?" I ask, searching her face for any sign of hesitation.

When she doesn't protest, I slip my fingers inside. The moment I make contact, I have to stifle a groan. She's so wet, so warm, practically dripping with need. It takes every ounce of self-control not to take her right here against the wall.

"Fuck, Skylar," I breathe, teasing her lips with feather-light touches.

Her hips jerk forward, seeking more pressure, more friction. The power I feel in this moment is intoxicating. I could make her come undone with just a few well-placed strokes, but I hold back, never quite touching that sensitive bundle of nerves.

"Is this what you wanted?" I ask, my voice low and gravelly.

I slowly withdraw my fingers, savoring the slick heat one last time. Skylar huffs, a

mix of frustration and arousal flashing in her eyes. My dick twitches at the sound.

"What's wrong, trouble? Didn't get what you were hoping for?" I taunt, bringing my fingers to my lips.

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Her gaze follows the movement, molten with desire. I lock eyes with her as I suck my fingers into my mouth, groaning at the taste of her. Fuck, she's delicious. Tangy and sweet, like forbidden fruit.

"You're playing a dangerous game," I warn, my voice rough with need.

Skylar's lips curl into a defiant smirk. "You're the one playing games, Austin."

I lean in, drawn by an irresistible magnetism. My body screams to taste more, to devour her completely. Our breath mingles, hot and heavy between us.

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," I growl, my lips a whisper away from hers.

Suddenly, the patter of small feet and high-pitched giggles echo down the hallway. Reality crashes back like a bucket of ice water. Skylar and I spring apart, the spell broken.

"Fuck," I mutter, running a hand through my hair.

Skylar's eyes dart toward the sound, then back to me. For a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability in her expression before her walls slam back into place.

"Looks like playtime's over," she says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Better luck next time, big shot."

With a final challenging look, Skylar slips into the guest room, the door clicking shut behind her. I'm left alone in the hallway, my body thrumming with unfulfilled desire

and my mind a chaotic mess of conflicting emotions.

"Damn it," I hiss, slamming my palm against the wall. The sharp sting does little to quell the inferno raging inside me.

I pace the hallway, my thoughts a jumbled whirlwind. How does she do this to me? One minute, I'm in control, the next, I'm coming apart at the seams. It's maddening.

"Dad!" Lucas's voice calls from down the hall. "Can we have ice cream?"

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. "Just a minute, buddy," I call back, my voice strained.

Leaning my forehead against the cool wall, I close my eyes. I need to get it together. I'm Austin Rhodes, for fuck's sake. I run a multi-billion-dollar company. I don't lose control over a woman in a bikini.

But Skylar isn't just any woman, is she? A traitorous voice whispers in my mind.

"Stop it," I mutter to myself. "She's trouble. Nothing but a distraction."

Yet even as I think it, I know it's a lie. The taste of her lingers on my tongue, a reminder of how close I came to giving in to temptation.

I straighten up, adjusting my suit and willing my body to calm down. I have to focus. There are kids to care for, a company to run, a life to keep in order. I can't let Skylar Deveraux derail everything I've worked for.

But as I descend the stairs, my resolve already feels shaky. How long can I keep resisting the pull between us? And more importantly, do I even want to?

## Chapter 13

Theo

The weight of Skylar's body against my chest is a comfort I never want to go away. Her skin glistens with a thin sheen of sweat, our ragged breaths slowly returning to normal in the dim light of her bedroom. The scent of sex and her jasmine perfume hangs heavy in the air.

I never want to leave. But I know my time is limited.

I can't resist trailing my fingertips along the smooth expanse of her thigh, relishing this rare moment when she allows my touch to linger. It's only in these post-orgasmic moments that her walls come down, if only slightly.

I want to love her with everything I am, everything I have, for the rest of our long lives. She wants to keep me at arm's length and use our shared past to justify it.

"You're thinking too loudly," Skylar murmurs against my skin, her voice husky.

I chuckle softly. "Just enjoying the moment, Skylark."

She shifts, propping herself up on an elbow to look at me. Those hazel eyes, usually so guarded, are soft now. "Don't get used to it," she says, but there's no real bite to her words.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I reply, my hand still tracing lazy patterns on her skin. I want to memorize every curve, every freckle. "Although, a guy could get addicted to this view."

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Skylar rolls her eyes, but I catch the hint of a smile. "Smooth talker."

"Only for you," I say, meaning it more than she'll ever know.

She leans in, and for a heart-stopping moment, I think she might kiss me. But she stops just short, her breath warm on my lips. "You know the rules, Theo."

I nod, even as my heart aches. "I know." I'd give anything to close that distance, to feel her lips on mine again after all these years. She let me that first time. I think it was the shock, honestly. Because she hasn't even considered it since. No matter how desperately I want that connection with her. But I won't push. I can't risk losing what little of her I have.

Instead, I pull her closer, savoring the feel of her body against mine. These stolen moments are all I have, and I'll take whatever she's willing to give.

As I hold Skylar close, the familiar gnawing sensation in my gut intensifies. This isn't healthy, this desperate addiction to a woman who keeps me at arm's length. But how can I blame her? Our parents may have torn us apart, but I didn't exactly fight for us, did I? I accepted our fate, let the distance grow between us.

And, while I was building my world, Skylar's was falling apart piece by piece. She lost her grandmother, the one person who truly cared for her, not as a trophy or a prop, but as a person. Then her mother. And just when it seemed like she didn't have anything else to lose, her father remarried some gold-digging bitch who swept in and took everything. Suddenly, Skylar went from a promising college student with a future to a broke, disinherited outsider, cast aside like she never mattered at all.

My pretty little Skylark was never meant to be caged, yet life has clipped her wings at every turn.

"What are you thinking about?" Skylar's voice breaks through my reverie.

I look down at her, drinking in every detail. The way she bites her lower lip, a habit I've noticed she does when she's concentrating. "Just...us," I admit softly.

She tenses slightly, but doesn't pull away. "Theo..."

"I know, I know," I say quickly. "No strings, no expectations. But can you blame a guy for reminiscing?"

Her laugh is brief but genuine, softening the edges of my world. "I suppose not. We did have some good times, didn't we?"

I nod, remembering stolen kisses and whispered promises. "The best."

She falls silent, her gaze darting away from mine. It's something I've noticed she does often, never lingering too long in anyone's gaze, as if afraid of what they might see.

"Hey," I say gently, tipping her chin up. "You okay?"

For a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes. But then it's gone. "I'm naked in bed with a billionaire tech genius. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

I can't help but laugh. "Well, when you put it like that..."

"You know," I start casually, "I think I heard a strange noise coming from your bathroom sink earlier. Want me to take a look?"

Skylar arches an eyebrow, her lips curving into a knowing smirk. "My sink is fine, Theo."

"Are you sure? Because I'm pretty handy with a wrench," I insist, my fingers tracing lazy patterns on her arm. "Or maybe your Wi-Fi needs an upgrade? I could boost your signal."

She laughs, the sound warming me from the inside out. "My Wi-Fi is perfect, as you well know. You set it up yourself last week, remember?"

I shrug, feigning innocence. "Just being thorough."

Skylar sits up, pulling the sheet around her. "You don't need excuses to be here, you know."

Her words should be reassuring, but I catch the hint of unease in her tone. Because it's not the truth. I do need excuses. She only lets me in here for late-night trysts, and I want so, so much more.

I watch as she subtly puts more distance between us, her walls going up brick by brick.

"Don't I?" I ask softly, unable to keep the longing from my voice.

She looks away, that telltale lip bite making an appearance. "Theo, we talked about this. It's just—"

"Complicated," I finish for her. "I know."

I reach out, brushing a strand of hair from her face. She flinches slightly, and it's like a dagger to my heart. But it only makes me want to push harder, to break through

those defenses she's built so carefully.

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"Sky," I whisper. "Look at me."

When she does, I see a storm of emotions in her eyes—desire, fear, longing. She's buried so deep in my soul, I know I'll never get her out. And I don't want to.

But she doesn't want to be there. And it fucking hurts.

I open my mouth to speak, but before I can, Skylar's pulling away. She rises from the bed, grabbing a T-shirt from the floor and slipping it over her head in one fluid motion. My eyes can't help but follow the curve of her body, lingering on the wet, glistening trail down her thigh.

"I need to clean up," she says, her voice clipped and businesslike.

I nod, knowing the routine. "Of course."

As she disappears into the bathroom, I sit up, running a hand over my jaw. The sound of running water fills the silence, and I can't help but wonder if she's washing away more than just the physical evidence of our encounter.

"You don't have to go," she calls out, but we both know it's just a formality.

I start collecting my clothes, scattered around the room like breadcrumbs of our passion. "It's late," I reply, pulling on my jeans. "I should head back."

When she emerges, her face is scrubbed clean, her hair pulled back. She looks younger, more vulnerable, and it takes everything in me not to pull her back into my

arms.

"Theo," she starts, her voice soft. "This isn't—"

"I know," I cut her off, not wanting to hear the rest. Not tonight. "It's okay, Sky. Really."

She nods, relief and something else—regret, maybe?—flashing across her face. I head for the door, pausing with my hand on the knob. "Goodnight, Skylark."

"Goodnight," she whispers.

As I step out into the cool night air, I can't help but feel like I'm leaving a piece of myself behind. With a heavy sigh, I begin the short walk back to the house, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

I pause at the door, my hand hovering over the doorknob. Skylar's scent still clings to my skin, a bittersweet reminder of what I can have but never truly possess.

"She needs time," I mutter to myself, drawing in a deep breath. "We can't rush this."

As I push open the door, the rich aroma of aged whiskey greets me, mingling with the tension that immediately thickens the air. Cohen and Austin are lounging in the living room, their postures deceptively casual. The amber liquid in their crystal tumblers catches the low light, glinting like accusatory eyes.

"Late night?" Cohen asks, his tone light but his gaze sharp.

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance. "Lost track of time."

Austin snorts, taking a long sip of his drink. The muscle in his jaw twitches, a telltale

sign of his tightly leashed emotions.

"I'm sure you did," he mutters, not quite under his breath.

I move to the bar, pouring myself a generous measure of whiskey. The burn as I swallow matches the heat of their stares on my back.

"Look," I start, turning to face them. "I know this is...complicated."

Cohen raises an eyebrow. "That's one word for it."

The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken accusations and shared desire. I can see it in their eyes—the same longing that consumes me. They don't have the history, but the need is there just the same. It should make me jealous, possessive. Instead, it feels like recognition of a fundamental truth.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I'm about to say. "Look, I know we've all been dancing around this, but we need to talk about Skylar."

Cohen's eyes light up with hope, while Austin's entire body tenses, his jaw clenching visibly. The contrast between their reactions is stark, mirroring the conflicting emotions I feel churning inside me.

"What about her?" Austin's voice is low, dangerous.

I press on, despite the warning in his tone. "We can't keep pretending there isn't something going on. Something that affects all of us."

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Austin's nostrils flare, his blue eyes flashing with anger. "I don't want to hear about how you're sticking your dick in the temporary nanny, Theo. Some things are better left unsaid."

His words hit me like a physical blow, igniting a fury I didn't know I was capable of. I'm on my feet in an instant, fists clenched at my sides.

"Don't you dare talk about her like that," I snarl, my voice trembling with rage. "She's not some object, Austin. She's not just a warm body or a convenient fuck."

The room goes deathly quiet. I can feel Cohen and Austin's eyes on me, shock evident in their expressions. But I can't bring myself to care. All I can think about is Skylar—her laugh, her smile, the way she makes me feel whole for the first time in years. The same way she did back then. She's my missing piece.

"She's everything," I repeat, softer this time, more to myself than to them. "And she deserves better than to be reduced to a crude joke or a temporary arrangement."

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm raging inside me. My gaze shifts between Austin and Cohen. It's time to lay all our cards on the table.

"I'm not blind," I say, my voice low but steady. "I see the way you both look at her. The way she looks at you."

Cohen shifts in his seat, his fingers tightening around his glass. Austin remains still as a statue, but I can see the muscle working in his cheek.

"We all want her," I say softly, the whiskey loosening my tongue. "And I think...I think she wants us, too. In her own way."

Cohen leans forward, his eyes intense. "What are you saying, Theo?"

I drain my glass, the alcohol burning a path of liquid courage through my veins. "I'm saying she hides from this, from me, from anything real. But, maybe...maybe if it's not just the two of us, maybe if it's all of us, she'll be able to relax, to trust this, us."

"I see what's brewing. And I'm tired of pretending it isn't happening," I continue. "We've always shared everything, haven't we? Our house, our business, our lives."

I pause, my heart pounding so hard I'm sure they can hear it. This is it. The moment that could change everything.

"Why not share a woman?"

The words hang in the air, heavy with possibility. Austin's eyes widen, a mix of shock and something else flashing across his face. Cohen leans forward, his expression unreadable.

I hold my breath, waiting for their reaction. Part of me can't believe I've actually suggested this. But another part, a deeper part, knows it feels right. Skylar isn't just mine. She never has been. She's a force of nature, too big, too bright to belong to just one person.

"Are you serious?" Cohen finally breaks the silence, his voice rough with emotion.

I nod, meeting his gaze. "Dead serious."

The tension in the room shifts, crackling with new possibilities. As I watch their

expressions change from shock to contemplation, I realize we're standing on the edge of something profound—something that could change everything.

I set my empty glass down, the crystal clinking against the mahogany side table. The sound echoes in the loaded silence of the room.

"You can't be serious," Austin finally says, his voice a mix of disbelief and something darker, hungrier.

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance even as my heart races. "Why not? It wouldn't be the first time we've shared."

Cohen shifts in his seat, his eyes distant. I can almost see the memories flickering behind them—hazy nights in college, tangled limbs, and shared laughter. He is the one who brought up sharing Skylar. I know he can see it with her just as clearly as I can.

Even if the tension between them is different, colder. Even if he hasn't made any kind of move yet.

"This is different," he murmurs. "Skylar's not some random hookup."

"No," I agree, my voice soft but firm. "She's absolutely not."

Austin snorts, but I catch the flash of vulnerability in his eyes. "And you're okay with that? Sharing 'everything'?"

I lean back, considering. "It's not about being okay with it. It's about accepting what is. We all want her. She wants us. Why fight it?"

"Because it's too fucking complicated, that's why," Austin growls.

I nod, acknowledging the truth in his words. "Life's complicated. Doesn't mean we can't make it work."

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Cohen's quiet voice cuts through the tension. "And what about Skylar? Have you asked what she wants?"

The question hits me like a punch to the gut. Because the truth is, I haven't. I've been too afraid of her answer, too scared of pushing her away completely.

"No," I admit. "But I think...I think she needs all of us. In different ways."

The room falls silent again, each of us lost in our own thoughts, our own desires. I can't help but wonder what Skylar would say if she could see us now, plotting and planning like she's some prize to be won.

But that's not what this is. It's about giving her— giving all of us—the freedom to explore something that feels inevitable.

"I'm not walking away from her. And I'm not giving up." I swirl the amber liquid in my glass, watching the light catch on its surface. "Skylar isn't some fleeting thing, guys. She's not temporary, and she's definitely not a toy." My voice grows soft, almost reverent. "She's my forever. But maybe...maybe she could be ours too."

Cohen leans forward, his blue eyes intense. "That's a big leap, Theo. Are you sure you've thought this through?"

I chuckle, but there's no humor in it. "It's all I've been thinking about."

Austin paces near the window, his body taut with tension. "This will never work. The two of you will fight. You'll want to own her. Sharing a quick fuck is one thing.

You're talking about sharing an entire relationship."

"And you're talking like you're not included in this. The only person you're bullshitting is yourself. It's inevitable, Austin. Don't even try to fucking deny it."

But it could. I think about all the late nights brainstorming business ideas, supporting them through failed relationships, celebrating victories both big and small. We've been through it all together.

"Look at us," I say, gesturing around the room. "We've built an empire together, navigated personal shit that would've torn most friendships apart. Hell, we've even managed to live together without killing each other."

Cohen snorts at that, a small smile tugging at his lips.

I continue, my voice gaining strength. "If anyone can make this work, it's us. We've always had each other's backs. Why should this be any different?"

Austin stops pacing, his expression conflicted. "It's not that simple, Theo. Skylar isn't just another business venture."

"No," I agree, meeting his gaze. "She's so much more. Which is exactly why we need to approach this together. United."

The room falls silent as we each contemplate the weight of what I'm proposing. It's unconventional as fuck, maybe even crazy.

Austin starts pacing the room again. His controlled facade is cracking, revealing the turmoil beneath. "This is insane," he mutters. "She's not...we can't just..."

"Why not?" I challenge, watching him closely. "Tell me you don't want her, Austin."

Look me in the eye and say you haven't thought about it."

He stops, turning to face me. For a moment, I see a glimpse of the raw need he's been trying so hard to hide. It mirrors my own, and I know—we're all in deeper than we ever expected.

"No." There's a finality in his tone, but we both know it's a fucking lie. He wants her. He just doesn't want to want her.

"You're going to crack. It might not be today, it might not be tomorrow, but you are going to crack. You want her just as badly as Cohen."

"You're so willing to share this woman you love? The one that got away? Love of your life ripped from you too soon, and now you finally have a second chance, and you want to throw her at me and Cohen, too?" He laughs humorlessly. "Nah, I don't think so, Theo."

"She was never meant to be caged, Austin. That girl has been through hell and she has survived, thrived even. She deserves all the love and affection. All of it. And so do you two. Your ex-wives are life-sucking demons. Skylar is...she's sunshine and freedom.

Austin's jaw tightens, his hands balling into fists at his sides. "And you think the answer is splitting her between us? You think that's what she deserves? To be passed around like some...some consolation prize?"

"Stop being so damn reductive," I snap, my patience wearing thin. "This isn't about ownership or taking turns. This is about her choosing what she wants—who she wants—and not being shackled by anyone's expectations. Not yours, not mine, not Cohen's."

Austin exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. His pacing slows, but his agitation simmers just below the surface. "You just said she hides from what the two of you have. And we're supposed to throw all this at her, expecting her to just...what? Embrace it?"

"She'll come to us when she's ready," I say firmly. "But she can't do that if we're too busy tripping over our own damn insecurities. Do you want her or not, Austin?"

He glares at me, the intensity in his eyes almost enough to make me back down. Almost. "Not."

"Bullshit. You're not fooling anyone—not me, not Cohen, not yourself, and definitely not Skylar. You think she doesn't notice the way you look at her? She's not blind, Austin. And she's not stupid."

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Austin's face softens for a moment, and I know I've struck a nerve. His shoulders slump slightly, the fight draining out of him. "She deserves better than us," he mutters. "Better than this...mess."

"Maybe she does," I admit. "But we're what she's got. And if there's one thing I know, it's that we'd move heaven and earth to give her the world. All three of us. You can't tell me that isn't better than what she's had before."

Austin sinks into a chair, resting his elbows on his knees as he buries his face in his hands. "It's a disaster waiting to happen," he says, his voice muffled.

"Maybe," I concede. "But it might also be the only thing that's ever made sense."

### Chapter 14

#### Skylar

The sun beats down mercilessly as I kneel in Birdie's lush garden, my fingers buried deep in the rich soil. Sweat trickles down my spine, and I can feel my shirt clinging to my back. The heady scent of roses and lavender fills the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of freshly turned dirt.

"Skylar, darling, you're working too hard," Birdie calls from her shaded perch on the patio. "Come take a break before you melt into a puddle."

I glance up, squinting against the glare. Birdie sits like a queen on her throne, a tall glass of something that's undoubtedly spiked with bourbon beside her. "I'm fine,

Birdie," I call back, unable to keep the amusement from my voice. "Unlike some people, I'm not afraid of a little hard work."

"Cheeky girl," she retorts, but I can hear the fondness in her tone. "I'll have you know I've done my fair share of gardening in my day. Why, there was this one time in Morocco..."

As Birdie launches into another of her colorful stories, I return my attention to the flowerbed. My hands move almost of their own accord, weeding and pruning with practiced ease. It's mindless work, but there's something soothing about it. Here, with my hands in the earth and Birdie's voice washing over me, I can almost forget about the mess that is my life.

A bead of sweat rolls down my forehead, and I laugh as I swipe at it with my wrist. My skin comes away smeared with dirt and dotted with colorful petals. For a moment, I'm struck by how fitting it is—I'm a mess, inside and out.

"What's so amusing down there?" Birdie inquires, her story apparently finished.

I shake my head, still smiling. "Nothing, just thinking about how I probably look like some kind of flower-covered swamp monster right now."

Birdie's laughter rings out, clear and bright. "Oh, my dear, you could never look anything less than lovely. Even covered in dirt and sweat, you're still the prettiest thing in this garden."

Her words warm me more than the sun ever could, but I roll my eyes to hide how much they affect me. "You need your eyes checked, Birdie."

"My eyes are just fine, thank you very much," Birdie huffs. "It's your self-perception that needs adjusting."

I don't respond, focusing instead on a particularly stubborn weed. Birdie's kindness is a balm to my battered soul, but it also stirs up feelings I'd rather keep buried. Affection, gratitude, the dangerous hope that maybe, just maybe, I've found somewhere I belong.

But I know better than to let myself believe that. People leave, that's just how it is. Better to keep my walls up, to not get too attached. Even to someone as wonderful as Birdie.

"You know," Birdie says softly, breaking into my thoughts, "you remind me so much of myself at your age. All prickly on the outside, but with such a tender heart underneath."

I look up at her, my chest tight with emotions I can't quite name. "I'm nothing like you, Birdie," I say, my voice huskier than I'd like. "You're...you're extraordinary."

Birdie's eyes soften, and for a moment, I think she might cry. But then she squares her shoulders and fixes me with a stern look. "Nonsense. You're every bit as extraordinary as I am, Skylar Marie Deveraux. And don't you dare argue with me about it."

I duck my head, hiding my smile as I return to my work. The sun continues to beat down, but somehow, it doesn't feel quite as oppressive anymore.

I pause in my weeding, glancing up at Birdie with a frown, unable to ignore the obvious any longer. Something's off about her today. She's been sitting in her usual spot on the patio, she's still chatty and complimentary as ever, but her movements are slower, more deliberate. And there's a cloudiness in her eyes I've never seen before.

"Birdie?" I call out, wiping my dirt-streaked hands on my shorts. "Everything okay?"

She blinks, focusing on me with visible effort. "What was that, dear? Oh, yes, yes. I'm fine. Just...just a bit warm, I suppose."

"Maybe you should take a break inside?"

"You know," she starts, then trails off, her brow furrowing. "I was going to say something, but it's slipped my mind."

I stand, worry gnawing at my insides. This isn't like her at all. Birdie's always sharp as a tack, ready with a witty comment or sage advice. But now...she seems to be fading the longer we're outside.

"Maybe we should take a break," I suggest again, trying to keep the concern out of my voice. "It's pretty hot out here."

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Birdie nods, seeming relieved. "Yes, that's an excellent idea. Why don't you join me for some iced tea?"

I make my way to the patio, settling into the chair beside her. The cold glass she hands me is a welcome relief against my overheated skin.

"Look at those butterflies," Birdie murmurs, gesturing towards the garden. "Aren't they lovely?"

I follow her gaze, watching the delicate creatures flit from flower to flower. "They are," I agree softly, stealing another glance at her.

What's happening here? I wonder, fear coiling in my stomach. Is this just the heat, or is it something more serious?

"You know, Skylar," Birdie says suddenly, her voice stronger. "I've been meaning to tell you how much I appreciate all your hard work. This garden...it's never looked better."

I swallow hard, touched by her words but still uneasy. "Thanks, Birdie. I love working in the garden. It's...it's become a kind of sanctuary for me."

She reaches out, patting my hand. "I'm glad, dear. Very glad indeed."

We sit in silence for a moment, sipping our tea. I want to ask her if she's feeling all right, if there's anything I can do. But the words stick in my throat. I'm not used to caring this much, to being this afraid of losing someone. Not since I lost Theo.

Stay detached, a voice in my head warns. Don't get too close. You know how that ends.

But as I watch Birdie, her silver hair gleaming in the sunlight, I know it's already too late for that.

I turn back to the garden, watching the butterflies flit through, bees buzzing from flower to flower.

Suddenly, Birdie makes a strange, strangled noise. My head whips around, heart leaping into my throat. Her face has gone ashen, eyes wide with panic.

"Birdie?" I reach for her, my voice trembling. "What's wrong?"

She waves a hand dismissively, but I can see the effort it takes. "Nothing, dear. Just a bit of...indigestion, I'm sure."

But there's something in her eyes, a flicker of fear that sends ice through my veins. This isn't right. This isn't Birdie.

"Don't give me that," I snap, my worry manifesting as anger. "Something's wrong. Tell me."

She meets my gaze, and for a moment, I see the fierce, independent woman I've come to love. Then her shoulders slump. "Perhaps...perhaps you should call an ambulance, Skylar. Just to be safe."

My hands shake as I pull out my phone. "What are your symptoms?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady as I dial.

"Chest pain," Birdie admits quietly. "And...and my left arm feels numb."

Oh God. Oh God, no.

As I explain to the dispatcher, my eyes never leave Birdie. She's pale, too pale, and her breathing is labored. I'm halfway through describing her symptoms when it happens.

Birdie's eyes roll back, and she slumps in her chair.

"Birdie!" I scream, dropping the phone and lunging for her. "No, no, no. Stay with me. Please, Birdie, stay with me."

My hands are on her shoulders, shaking her gently, desperately. This can't be happening. Not Birdie. Not the only person who's truly cared about me in years.

Don't leave me, I think, tears blurring my vision. Please don't leave me alone again.

The world blurs around me, a kaleidoscope of fear and panic. My chest heaves as I try to breathe, but it feels like I'm drowning. Birdie's limp form before me is all I can focus on, her pale skin a stark contrast to the vibrant flowers surrounding us.

"Ma'am? Ma'am, can you hear me?" The EMT's voice cuts through my haze. I blink, realizing I'm still on my knees beside Birdie's chair. I don't know how long it's been but the EMTs are here now, thank God.

"Yes," I choke out, wiping furiously at my tears as I look up at the man towering over me. "Please, you have to help her."

"I can't do that if you don't talk to me," he tells me, his tone professional but kind. "Can you tell me what happened before she collapsed?"

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I try to speak, but my words come out in a jumbled mess. "She...we were just sitting here. Having tea. And then she...she made this noise. And her arm...she said her arm was numb."

The EMT nods, jotting down notes. "Anything else?"

"I don't know," I sob, frustration rising. "I should have noticed sooner. I should have—"

"It's okay, hon," his partner says as she kneels down next to Birdie. "We've got her."

The EMTs move swiftly, their calm efficiency both reassuring and unnerving. One checks Birdie's vitals while the other asks me more questions.

"Did she say anything else before collapsing? Any other symptoms you can remember?"

I rack my brain, but it's like trying to hold water in my hands. "She...she looked pale earlier. Maybe a little tired. But she always brushes it off, says it's just age catching up with her." My voice wavers, guilt heavy in my chest.

The female EMT glances at her partner, a silent exchange passing between them. "Okay, ma'am, we're going to get her to the hospital now. She's stable enough to move, but time is critical."

I watch as they secure Birdie onto the stretcher, strapping her in with practiced care. Her head lolls slightly to the side, and I resist the urge to reach out and smooth back

her hair.

“Birdie?” I whisper, as if saying her name might wake her.

“She’s unresponsive right now, but that doesn’t mean she can’t hear you,” the EMT says gently, as they wheel her toward the front of the house.

I follow closely, my steps stumbling as panic grips me again. The sight of the ambulance parked at the curb feels surreal, like a scene I’m watching unfold in someone else’s life.

When they load her into the back, I step forward instinctively. “I’m coming with her.”

The EMT hesitates, his expression apologetic. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Unless you’re immediate family, we can’t allow you to ride in the ambulance.”

“I—” My voice cracks. “She doesn’t have anyone else. Please.”

The man softens, but his response remains firm. “I know this is hard, but you can follow us in your car. We’ll make sure she’s in the best hands when we get to the hospital.”

I nod, even though every part of me screams to argue, to demand they let me stay with her. My eyes stay locked on Birdie’s still form as the doors close, sealing her away from me.

"Skylar!"

The familiar voice cuts through my spiral. I whip my head around, my tear-filled eyes landing on two figures rushing towards me. Theo and Cohen. My heart lurches at the

sight of them, a confusing mix of relief and anxiety washing over me.

Theo reaches me first, his hands immediately cupping my face. His touch is electric, grounding me. "What happened?" he demands, his green eyes wild with concern. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head, fresh tears spilling over. "It's Birdie," I manage to choke out. "She...she collapsed. I don't know what's wrong."

Theo's expression softens, his thumb gently wiping away a tear. "Oh, Sky," he murmurs, and for a moment, I want to lose myself in his embrace, to let him shield me from this nightmare.

But I can't. Not now. Not when Birdie needs me.

I pull back, my gaze darting between Theo and Cohen. "I don't know what to do," I admit, hating how small my voice sounds. "She can't...I can't lose her."

Cohen steps closer, his presence a solid warmth at my back. His hand finds the nape of my neck, strong fingers kneading gently. "We've got you, Skylar," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that reverberates through me. "We'll take you to the hospital."

I nod, grateful for their support even as guilt gnaws at me. I should have called the ambulance earlier? What if she doesn't make it?

Theo's arm wraps around my waist, steadying me. "Come on, baby," he says softly. "My car's right over there."

The pet name slips out so naturally, as if the years apart never happened. My first instinct is to protest, to remind him that I'm not his "baby" anymore, but the words die in my throat. Right now, I need this—need them—more than I care to admit.

As we walk to Theo's car, I can't help but notice how seamlessly they work together, Theo and Cohen. Two parts of a whole I never knew existed. Cohen opens the back door, and Theo helps me inside.

"I'll sit in back with her," Cohen says, his hand lingering on my shoulder. "We're right here with you, Sky."

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The drive to the hospital is a blur. Theo keeps glancing at me in the rearview mirror, his brow furrowed with worry. "She'll be okay," he says, though I'm not sure if he's trying to convince me or himself. "Birdie's tough as nails, remember?"

I manage a weak smile, memories of Birdie's stubborn determination flooding back. "Yeah," I whisper. "She is."

At the hospital, we're ushered into a waiting room. Hours crawl by, each tick of the clock a cruel reminder of how powerless I feel. I'm not family, so they won't give me any information. Theo and Cohen flank me on either side, a united front against the uncertainty.

I should be thinking about Birdie, about what this means for her—for us. Instead, I find myself hyper-aware of every point of contact between us. Theo's arm draped over my shoulders, Cohen's knee pressed against mine. Their quiet strength, their unwavering presence.

"Ms. Deveraux?" A nurse calls my name, and I snap to attention. "She's awake. You can see Ms. Blackwood now."

As I stand, Theo squeezes my hand. "We'll be right here," he promises.

I nod, unable to find the words to express my gratitude. As I follow the nurse down the sterile hallway, I realize I haven't once stopped to marvel at how wonderful Theo and Cohen have been. Their support has been...everything.

I push open the door, my heart clenching at the sight of Birdie propped up in the

hospital bed. Her usual vibrancy is dimmed, but her eyes still spark with that familiar mischief as she sees me.

"There's my girl," she says, her voice weaker than I've ever heard it. "Come here, darling."

I rush to her side, clasping her frail hand in mine. "Birdie, what happened? Are you okay?"

She chuckles, but it turns into a cough. "Oh, I've been better, dear. But don't you worry about me. We need to talk about you."

My brow furrows. "Me? Birdie, you're the one in the hospital."

"And I'm afraid I won't be leaving anytime soon," she says, her tone somber. "The doctors say my heart's giving out. It's time for me to make some changes."

The weight of her words crashes over me. "What kind of changes?"

Birdie squeezes my hand. "I'm selling the mansion, Skylar. I need to move to Florida to be with my sister and my niece. They can help care for me."

My world tilts on its axis. "But...but what about the garden? What about—"

"You?" Birdie finishes for me. Her eyes are full of understanding. "Oh, my dear girl. You've given that old house more life than it's seen in years. But it's time for both of us to move on."

I bite my lip, fighting back tears. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Birdie. That house...you...it's all I have."

She cups my cheek with her other hand. "You have so much more than you realize, Skylar. Those boys next door? They care about you. More than you let yourself believe. I see Theo sneaking in and out of the carriage house at all hours."

I shake my head, my walls threatening to crumble. "I can't rely on them. I can't rely on anyone."

"Sometimes," Birdie says softly, "the bravest thing we can do is let others in."

As her words sink in, I realize the future I thought I had mapped out has vanished. And I have no idea what comes next.

The ride back is a blur of city lights and muffled voices. I stare out the window, my forehead pressed against the cool glass, barely registering Theo and Cohen's attempts at conversation.

"Sky?" Theo's voice breaks through my haze. "You want to grab some food?"

I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

Cohen leans forward from the back seat. "We could stop for ice cream. Remember that place with the—"

"I'm fine," I manage, my voice hoarse. "Just...home. Please."

They exchange a look I catch in the rearview mirror, but mercifully fall silent.

As we pull up to the house, I see a familiar figure waiting outside. Austin. My stomach does an involuntary flip. Why is he here?

I stumble out of the car, exhaustion seeping into my bones. Austin's piercing blue

eyes lock onto mine, and before I can process it, he's there. His hand, warm and steady, cups the back of my neck. With gentle pressure, he tilts my chin up.

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"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice low and intense.

I want to laugh. I want to cry. I want to scream that nothing is okay. Instead, I hear myself say, "Birdie's selling the house."

Austin's brow furrows. "What?"

"She's sick. And she's moving to Florida," I continue, my voice hollow. "To be with her sister."

Theo steps closer. "What does that mean for you, Sky?"

I shrug, feeling numb and adrift. "I don't know. I guess...I guess I'm out of a home."

The realization hits me like a physical blow. My legs wobble, and suddenly Austin's arm is around my waist, steadying me.

"Easy," he murmurs.

I should pull away. I should stand on my own two feet. But right now, I can't summon the strength to do either.

"Let's get you inside," Cohen says, his voice gentle.

Austin's grip on my waist tightens slightly as we reach the front door. I can feel the heat radiating from his body, a stark contrast to the cold emptiness settling in my chest.

"You're moving in with us," Austin states, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Just for the summer. I already offered you a live-in position, remember? You turned it down then, but this time you won't."

I blink, trying to process his words through the fog of shock and grief. "What?"

He continues, his voice softening slightly, "This way, Birdie can sell without worrying about a tenant, and you'll have somewhere to stay while you figure out your next move."

I look up at him, searching his face for any sign of pity or ulterior motive. But all I see is that same stoic mask, those intense eyes betraying nothing.

"I...I can't," I stammer, my pride warring with my desperation. "It's too much, I—"

"Sky," Theo interjects gently, "Let us help you. Please."

I close my eyes, feeling the weight of their concern pressing down on me. Part of me wants to run, to prove I can handle this on my own. But the larger part, the part that's terrified and exhausted, knows I need this lifeline.

"Okay," I whisper, hating how small my voice sounds. "Thank you."

As the words leave my lips, I feel a surge of conflicting emotions. Relief mingles with anxiety, gratitude with resentment. I'm leaning on them—on him—and it goes against everything I've taught myself about independence.

Austin's hand moves from my waist to my shoulder, squeezing gently. "You'll get through this. We'll help you," he says, and for a moment, I almost believe him.

Chapter 15

Skylar

The last of the cardboard boxes seals with a satisfying press, the tape gun whisking across its seams. I survey the now-bare carriage house, stripped of my existence within its walls. It's a strange feeling, like uprooting a tree that's spent years entwining its roots into the soil. But it's time for new ground.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Maybe if I repeat it enough times, it will feel true.

"Need a hand with that?" Cohen's voice ripples through the space, his easygoing presence a comfort I hadn't expected.

"Thanks, but I've got it," I reply, hoisting the box under my arm. I follow him outside where Theo is methodically organizing the SUV's trunk, his green eyes focused, yet always holding that spark of mischief.

"Looks like we're playing Tetris with your life here," Theo comments, sliding a box into an impossibly small gap. "You sure you need all this stuff?"

"Each one carries a piece of me," I shoot back, not in the mood for his teasing. It's too close to the bone today, when everything feels fragile and momentous.

Once the car is packed to the brim, the boys climb in, and I'm left to make the short journey on foot. Theo had offered to let me ride shotgun while he made the trek between yards, but I craved a moment of solitude.

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I stride across the backyard, the familiar path now a bridge to a future uncertain and thrilling. The weight of change settles on my shoulders, lighter than expected. Even if the idea of confining myself with the men who have me twisted up inside sounds like an absolute nightmare.

Austin's mansion looms ahead, grand and imposing. I never get tired of looking at it. You'd think it would be garish and over the top given its size, but it's not. It's done really tastefully, and if I had the opportunity to design my own dream home, I imagine it would look a lot like this one.

I push through the back door planning to head toward the foyer to wait for Cohen's SUV to arrive. Of course, life has other plans because he's there. The man is a statue of composure as always. The heat in his eyes could almost be mistaken for that brooding intensity he exudes, but I know better. He slipped and showed me his hand. He wants me as badly as I want him.

"Hey," Austin greets me, his tone neutral, but those dark blonde locks and tailored suit strike an image that's anything but. "Everything go smoothly?"

"Smooth as can be," I answer, trying to ignore the way my skin prickles with awareness at his proximity. "Lead the way, Mr. Rhodes."

He nods, stepping aside to let me pass, and I catch the faintest scent of his cologne—clean, crisp, with a hint of something spicy that makes my heart pick up its pace for reasons I won't admit. Not out loud, anyway.

He places a hand on my lower back—which sends a spark through my nerve endings

that I am most definitely going to ignore—and leads me toward the back hallway. After what seems like an eternity, he pulls his hand back and steps in front of me, leading the way.

He doesn't look back to see if I'm following; it's as though he assumes I wouldn't dare stray from the path he's set. I'm led not to the grand staircase that leads to the upstairs bedrooms but toward a door on the main floor. A door I know all too well.

"Your room," he states, gesturing with a hand more accustomed to commanding boardrooms than showing guests their accommodations. It's separate from the rest of the bedrooms, which are on the upper floor, an intentional placement that doesn't escape me. Privacy, or perhaps a buffer zone from the rest of his perfectly ordered world? I can't be sure.

"Thank you," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. My attempt to sound gracious is betrayed by the tightness in my throat. The memories attached to this room—or the wall outside of it—are too fresh, too potent. That evening, still dripping with the water from the pool, when lust and longing nearly tipped the scales—when I almost succumbed to the magnetic pull that Austin exerts.

I pause at the threshold, my gaze fixating on a particular spot on the wall. It would be innocuous to anyone else, just part of the structure holding up the mansion. But to me, it's where he had pressed me close, where his fingers traced secrets onto my skin, igniting a flame that still burns beneath my skin. His touch lingered long after our bodies parted, an imprint that time and Theo haven't erased.

A shiver courses through me, involuntary and revealing. My breath hitches as I recall the feel of his fingers slipping between my thighs, the way he tasted my arousal with a satisfaction that bordered on smug. He was right about this dangerous game we're playing, teetering on the edge of control and chaos.

"Skylar?" The sound of his voice pulls me back to the present, and I force a smile, willing my body to calm its riotous response.

"Sorry, just...thinking about where to put everything." It's a flimsy excuse, but it's all I have.

The air shifts as he steps out of the room, his impatience palpable like a tangible force. But then he halts, his eyes following my line of sight to the wall—a silent witness to our near surrender. A moment hangs between us, heavy with unspoken questions. Is he thinking about the way his hands mapped my body? The stifled moans against unspoken pleas for more?

He clears his throat, a slight shake of his head disrupting the stillness. It's as if he's mentally closing the door on those fevered moments, putting them back in their secretive box. "Let's focus on getting you settled," he says, the CEO taking the reins once more.

I nod, chastened, and step past the threshold with him trailing behind. The room is spacious, the afternoon light casting a soft glow over the muted colors.

"If there's anything else you need...new sheets, or any other furnishings, just let me know." His words are casual, but I catch the slight emphasis, an undercurrent of something more. Is it an offer of comfort, or another layer of the control he wields so expertly?

"Thanks, Austin. That's very generous," I manage, trying to keep my voice steady despite the tumult of emotions inside me.

"Of course." He nods once, sharply, as if signing off on a business deal rather than discussing the intimate spaces where I'll live my life.

"Is there anything else I can help with?" His tone suggests duty rather than genuine interest, but I find myself strangely grateful for the distance he maintains.

The air between us crackles with an electricity that's hard to ignore, charged with the weight of unspoken words and heavy glances. I can feel the heat emanating from Austin's body as he stands close, too close, in the doorway of what will be my new room. The space suddenly feels smaller, more intimate.

"Anything else?" His voice is low, each syllable a soft brush against the silence.

"Actually—" The rest of my thought scatters as the front door bangs open, its sound like a gunshot ringing through the mansion's halls.

"We're here!" Theo's voice booms out, rich with unchecked enthusiasm. It's the disruption I didn't know I needed, pulling me back from the edge of something dangerous.

"Right. Let's get this done," I murmur more to myself than to Austin, slipping past him with a swiftness that betrays my eagerness to escape the tension-filled room.

Outside, the sun dips lower, casting elongated shadows across the lawn. My feet find their rhythm on the familiar path, but my heart still hammers from the almost-moment left hanging unfinished in the air behind me.

"Skylar, over here!" Theo waves from the trunk of his SUV, his curls catching the fading light. Beside him, Cohen lifts a box, his muscles flexing under the strain, tattoos crawling up his forearms like ivy on old stone.

It's not helping. No, it's not helping at all. The fire that Austin stoked is still burning strong. I want all three of them and that's not fair.

"Hey." I force a smile, reaching for a box labeled "Books". "Thanks for helping."

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"Of course," Cohen replies, his voice a soothing balm to the chaos of my thoughts.

We shuffle back and forth, our arms laden with pieces of my life packed away in cardboard containers. It's quiet and methodical, thank fuck. I'm not sure I'm able to form coherent thoughts anymore. Being surrounded by them is a lot, too much, maybe. How am I going to survive living with them through the end of the summer?

"Where do you want the rest of these?" Cohen nods toward the pile that's rapidly outgrowing the confines of my new room.

"Umm..." I glance around, seeking a solution.

"Use the garage for now," Austin's voice cuts through the confusion, steady and sure. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, eyes hidden behind the veil of dusk. "Anything you don't need day-to-day can be stored there."

"Thanks," I say, though it feels inadequate for the sanctuary he's offering, even if it's just a corner of his garage.

"Let's move them before it gets too dark," Theo suggests, ever the pragmatist beneath his carefree exterior.

I nod, feeling the strain in my muscles as we shift the less essential items into the cavernous space of the garage. Everything has its place, ordered by Austin's unerring sense of structure, yet he's granted me this small pocket of disorder within his world.

"Looks like that's the last of it," Cohen says, wiping his brow with the back of his

hand.

"Thank you both, really." My gratitude is genuine, a warmth that spreads through the fatigue.

"Anytime, Skylar." Theo grins, but there's an edge of something else in his gaze—a promise or perhaps a warning.

The cardboard flaps give way beneath my fingers as I peel back the seal of yet another box, the scent of dust and old paper mingling in the air. My hands work methodically, unpacking books and trinkets, each item adding to my new space, taking it from a blank slate to something that more closely resembles me.

I try to pretend that Cohen and Theo aren't lingering, watching, waiting—for what, I don't know. My skin feels heated and too tight. Their eyes follow my every movement, and I'm nearly ready to combust. It doesn't help that my dirty, filthy mind has wandered into dangerous territory. I know what both of them look like naked, what they feel like moving inside me, the noises they make when they come.

What if they shared me? What if, instead of this tense, unspoken staring contest, they decided to take what they both clearly want—together?

Heat coils low in my stomach, my mind rocketing at the thought. It's reckless, ridiculous. And yet, the idea lingers, wrapping around me like a slow, sultry whisper. I shake my head, forcing myself back to reality, but the damage is done.

I can't unthink it. Can't unfeel the way my body reacts to the mere possibility.

And worst of all? I don't know if I want the thought to disappear.

"Need a hand with that?" Theo's voice is smooth, the smile on his face more than

obvious in his voice.

"Thanks, but I've got it," I reply without looking up. "Really, you guys should go enjoy your evening. I'll be fine here."

"You've got a lot to unpack, Skylar. We don't mind helping."

"And I appreciate that, I do. But, it's been a long couple of days. I'm...I honestly wouldn't mind the time alone to unpack."

"Okay." Cohen's footsteps retreat, his acceptance quiet but clear.

Theo, however, remains—a silent figure lingering on the edge of my periphery. His presence weaves a thread of tension through the calm I am desperately trying to maintain.

"Skylark," he starts, and there's something in the way he says my name, a depth to his voice that resonates with memories long locked away. "I can't tell you how excited I am to have you close."

His words hang in the air, weighted with implications I'm not ready to confront. I stiffen, every muscle coiled tight as I force myself to meet his intense green gaze.

"Being in the same house doesn't change anything, Theo," I say, my tone clipped. The walls around my heart stand firm, impenetrable. "There are still boundaries. This is still casual."

He studies me for a moment, those eyes trying to peel back the layers I've worked so hard to build. But then, with a nod, he concedes, stepping back.

"Of course," he agrees, though the curve of his lips suggests he's not entirely

convinced. "Just know that I'm here. Whenever you're ready."

He steps closer, the air between us charged with an undeniable energy. His gaze roams over me like a caress. "Maybe," he murmurs, the corner of his mouth quirking up suggestively. "But I can't wait to be inside you. Do you think you can be quiet for me? We wouldn't want to wake anyone."

Heat floods my cheeks, and I'm torn between indignation and arousal. It's a game we play—a dance of desire and defiance. "You're incorrigible," I manage, my voice steady despite the quickening of my pulse.

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"Only for you," he teases, taking a step back, leaving me with the ghost of his touch and the promise of more.

He turns and follows in Cohen's footsteps, leaving me alone with the rest of my boxes. Alone—just as I wanted, just as I always am. The silence settles over me, a shroud of solitude that's both comforting and suffocating. I sink to the floor amidst the boxes, surrounded by everything and nothing all at once.

I'm just about finished when the kids come rushing into my room to tell me dinner is ready. I force a smile, pushing aside the hollow ache that's settled in my chest.

"Thanks, you two, I'm coming," I tell them, brushing off the dust from my jeans as I stand.

As I follow them down the hall, their laughter echoing around me, I try to shake off the weight of my own thoughts.

By the time I reach the dining room, I've tucked the feeling away, locking it up tight. But as I take my seat, Cohen's eyes meet mine from across the table, unreadable yet intense, and I know—whatever this is, whatever we are—it isn't over. Not even close.

Living here is not going to go well, I can just feel it.

The hours slip by, filled with the clink of cutlery and the chatter of conversation. For a moment, I allow myself to belong—to be part of this mismatched group—and it feels dangerously close to contentment.

"Sky," Theo nudges me gently, passing the salt. Our fingers brush, sparking a silent conversation that says more than words ever could.

"Thank you," I murmur, keeping my gaze fixed on the crystal shaker, avoiding the knowing smiles that might lurk on the faces of our companions.

When the meal ends and the kids scuttle off for a bath and bed, I linger for a moment, watching the easy camaraderie between the men who have unexpectedly become a part of my life. They're clearing dishes, bantering, sharing a bond I'm only peripherally a part of.

I push back from the table, the scrape of my chair against the floor breaking the comfortable hum of conversation. "I think I'm going to call it a night," I say, stretching to mask the sudden tightness in my chest.

Theo doesn't hesitate. "I'll walk you."

I open my mouth to protest, but the knowing glint in his eyes tells me it would be pointless. He's never been one to hide what he wants, and apparently, I'm no exception. I should be mad; I laid clear boundaries, and keeping this quiet was one of them. But I'm not angry. And I don't know why.

As we move down the hall, Theo falls in step beside me, his presence a steady warmth against my side. When we reach my door, he stops me with a gentle hand on my arm. Before I can react, his lips brush over my shoulder, then my neck—soft, lingering, deliberate.

"You'll get used to having me around again," he murmurs, his breath sending a shiver down my spine.

I don't get the chance to respond. The weight of another gaze prickles against my

skin, drawing my attention down the hall. Austin stands at the entrance to the hall, his posture rigid, his jaw clenched. But it's his eyes that hold me in place—dark, intense, burning with something unspoken.

My breath catches.

It's not anger. It's something else. Something dangerous.

And it sends a whole different kind of shiver through me.

## Chapter 16

Cohen

Lightning fractures the night sky, a web of electric veins illuminating my bedroom in sharp, fleeting bursts. I'm lying in bed, sheets tangled around me, anticipating the next rumble of thunder.

I'm not sleeping. Haven't been for hours. The storm is relentless, but it's not the only reason I'm awake.

Skylar.

She's here, under the same roof, her presence a silent siren call that drowns out even the storm outside. I can almost feel the weight of her in this house, an invisible force that pulls at me, demanding my attention, my focus, everything.

She...doesn't seem to want me the way she does my brother and Theo. But, damn if she doesn't get under my skin—the way she walked into my life, into this home, and unsettled me so thoroughly.

A sharper crack of thunder snaps me back to the present, and I sit up, running a hand through my shaggier-than-usual hair. The shadows dance on the walls as the storm rages. It's chaos, a perfect reflection of the turmoil inside me.

Skylar Deveraux. Just thinking of her name sends an unfamiliar jolt through me. There's something about her—a fiery independence, a challenge in every word she speaks. And beneath that, something else...a guarded vulnerability that she keeps hidden away, locked tight behind a fortress of sass and sarcasm.

There's something so familiar about her that I can't put my finger on. Maybe it's just the fact that I want to put my fingers on her. Every. Damn. Inch of her.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

It's been a while for me. Between Elodie, work, moving, and trying to come to terms with what happened to my marriage, I haven't exactly had time. Outside of that wild weekend in Vegas shortly after my wife left me—a weekend that I only vaguely remember thanks to copious amounts of alcohol—there's been nothing. No one.

I haven't even thought about anyone. Until Skylar.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, the need to see her, to confirm she's real and not just some vivid figment of my imagination, overwhelming. She's probably asleep, untouched by the storm, cocooned in her new room while I'm wide awake, restless with thoughts of her.

But there's no denying it now—Skylar has invaded my space, my head, my goddamn dreams. It's madness, but it's there, a pull as undeniable as gravity.

"Get a grip, Cohen," I mutter to myself, but the empty room offers no reply, just the echo of my own words. Rising from the bed, I decide it's futile to try and sleep. With each flash of lightning, with each tremor of thunder, there's an image of her, hauntingly vivid, seared into the darkness behind my eyes.

The storm won't let me rest. But neither will Skylar Deveraux.

The kitchen tiles are cold against my bare feet as I pad through the darkness, guided by occasional flickers of lightning illuminating the space. It's eerie, this silence between the booms of thunder, like the world is holding its breath. I reach for a glass, the clink of it hitting the marble countertop louder than I anticipated it would be in the stillness.

"Damn," I whisper to myself, hoping the sound hasn't traveled far. I fill the glass with water from the fridge, the gentle whir of the appliance a comforting background noise.

As I lean back against the counter, a soft rustle echoes from outside. The covered patio. I freeze, listening intently. There it is again—a subtle shuffle of movement that can't be the wind. Curiosity piqued and water forgotten, I edge toward the sliding door, pressing my face against the cool glass to peer into the shadows.

Lightning flashes, stark and revealing. Skylar is out there, her figure just a silhouette against the tempestuous backdrop. She's huddled on a wicker chair, knees drawn up to her chest, looking every bit the enigma she is.

Sliding the door open, I step onto the patio, the rain-scented air fresh against my skin. "Can't sleep?" My voice breaks the quiet, and she jumps, her head snapping in my direction, hazel eyes wide in surprise.

"Jesus, Cohen!" Her hand flies to her chest, and there's a hint of irritation in her tone. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry." I offer a sheepish grin, watching as she relaxes back into her chair. "The storm's pretty wild tonight, huh?"

Skylar nods, tucking a loose strand of chestnut hair behind her ear. "Yeah, it's like the sky's throwing a tantrum. Impressive, though." Her gaze follows the jagged branches of lightning across the sky, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Ever think that maybe it's just trying to get someone's attention?" I muse aloud, taking a seat beside her. The storm seems to echo my inner turmoil—chaotic, unpredictable, electric.

"Who's attention? God's?" She chuckles, her quick wit surfacing even now, in the middle of the night under a raging sky.

"Maybe yours," I shoot back, meeting her eyes. There's a spark there, a challenge, and it sends a thrill through me.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she teases, her laughter mingling with the distant rumble of thunder.

"Yeah?" I lean in closer, drawn to the warmth of her despite the chill in the air. "Even during a late-night rendezvous with Mother Nature?"

"Especially then." Skylar's smile falters a little, her gaze flitting away from mine. Her walls are up again, that icy, unapproachable aura slipping back into place. But for a moment, just a fleeting moment, I saw something else there.

We sit in companionable silence, the storm our soundtrack, as we exchange anecdotes about the most ridiculous things we've ever been afraid of. Her stories are laced with sarcasm, but the laughter that spills from her is genuine, and its music to my ears.

"Snakes," she admits after a particularly loud clap of thunder. "I know it's cliché, but they really give me the creeps."

"Reasonable fear," I agree, nodding solemnly before breaking into a grin. "Mine's clowns. Can't stand them."

"Clowns?" Skylar raises an eyebrow, her hazel eyes dancing with amusement. "Now that's an image—big, tough Cohen Rhodes brought down by a red nose and oversized shoes."

"Hey, those shoes could be hiding anything," I protest, but I'm smiling too, caught up

in the ridiculousness of it all.

The patter of rain against the patio roof syncs with the thudding of my heart—a rhythm of restlessness that refuses to subside. Hell, it's only gotten worse now that I can see her instead of just daydream about her. I take a deep breath, feeling the humid air fill my lungs, tasting the storm on my tongue.

"So," I begin, tentatively breaking the lull in conversation. "You mentioned you haven't been serious with anyone since...since Theo." I watch her body language, trying to read the story her tense shoulders are whispering. "What happened between you two?"

She sighs, the sound mingling with the distant roll of thunder. "We were kids, you know? High school sweethearts, but more. Or, at least, that's what I thought we were." A bitter smile flickers across her lips, and then it's gone, like it was never there. "But our families had other plans. His parents shipped him off to some fancy boarding school across the country to keep him away from me. Just like that..." She snaps her fingers, the sharp sound punctuating her point. "I didn't hear from him again until a few weeks ago, when he showed up out of nowhere."

I let the weight of her words settle between us, feeling the remnants of her heartache as if they're my own. It's a familiar sting, one that echoes inside me, too.

"Your turn." Skylar turns to face me now, her hazel eyes probing. "What's your story? Who left their mark on Cohen Rhodes?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

I chuckle dryly, the sound more self-deprecating than anything else. "Ah, well, there's not much to tell." I tug at the frayed edge of my shirt, buying time, wishing the fabric could absorb the unease that comes with opening old wounds. "Married young, had a daughter...but my ex, she was always chasing something bigger, something I couldn't give her. Eventually, she found it—or someone who could offer it—and that was that."

It was most of the truth. But, saying she ran off with her yoga instructor to Europe to “find herself” sounds as ridiculous out loud as it did when I read her haphazardly scribbled note.

Yup. She left me via a note. And, not just me, but Elodie, who definitely didn't deserve to be abandoned by her own damn mother.

"Divorced?" Skylar asks, the word soft but heavy, like it's soaked in empathy rather than pity.

"Yep." I nod, the simple gesture feeling as if I'm affirming more than just my marital status. As if I'm acknowledging the toll it took on me, the way it shaped the man I am now—cautious, yet still craving connection.

"Sounds like we've both weathered our fair share of storms," she says, standing up and stretching her arms, her silhouette blending with the shadows.

"Seems so," I reply, the words hanging in the air, mingling with the scent of rain-soaked earth.

My feet carry me closer to her, drawn like a compass needle to true north. Skylar's gaze, those deep-set hazel eyes hold storms of their own. I feel the pull of her gravity.

"Skylar," I breathe, my voice barely above the whisper of wind outside.

Her lips part slightly, an invitation written in the softness of her breath. I lean in, every fiber of my being screaming to close the distance, to taste the cool air on her skin. But the space between us is more than just inches—it's lifetimes, heartbreaks, walls built so high I can't see where they end.

I hover there, caught in the eye of my own hurricane, then retreat as if snapped back by an invisible tether. Confusion washes over me, cold and uninvited. Why does she undo me like this? Why now, when everything inside me is already a maelstrom?

"Goodnight, Cohen," she murmurs, her voice steady against the chaos of my thoughts.

"Night," I reply, watching her silhouette fade into the house, leaving me alone with the roar of the storm.

Minutes tick by, or maybe hours—the time warps around me. I'm not sure what compels me to follow her, some force beyond reason or logic. My feet move of their own accord, carrying me through the silent corridors, shadows playing tricks on my eyes.

When I reach her door, it's ajar, and the charged energy within hits me like a physical blow. Theo's there, his light brown curls haloed by the dim glow of the bedside lamp. The atmosphere thickens, heavy with something unsaid, something unfinished.

I freeze.

Skylar stands with her back to me, Theo close behind her. His hands rest on her waist, fingers pressing into the fabric of her shirt as if he's staking a claim. Then, as if sensing my presence, he turns his head slightly—just enough for me to see the look in his eyes before his lips find hers.

Something tightens in my chest, sharp and unwelcome. I should leave. I should turn away. But I don't.

I can't.

The air between us crackles, thick with the weight of something I don't want to name. The storm outside howls against the windows, but it's nothing compared to the one raging inside me.

And for the first time in a long time, I have no idea whether I want to fight it—or let it pull me under.

I linger in the doorway, a spectator to an unfolding scene that feels both intimate and alien. Each of their movements seems choreographed in a dance I don't know the steps to, yet I can't tear my eyes away.

The air is a living thing, charged with the same electricity that dances across Skylar's skin under Theo's deliberate touch. My hand grips the door frame tighter, knuckles whitening as I watch, unable to look away.

Theo meets my gaze, his smile a silent challenge—or is it an invitation? His hands continue their journey across her body, peeling away fabric like layers of a mystery I'm desperate to understand. Each open-mouthed kiss he places on her flesh sears me too, though I'm nothing but a ghost in the doorway.

Skylar's back arches, and I wonder if she senses me here. The thought that she might

knowingly accept this dual adoration sends a surge of heat through me. But she's made no move to acknowledge my presence. I should leave. But selfishness roots me to the spot. I'm desperate to witness her unraveling, even from the shadows.

Fabric falls away completely, relinquished to the floor, and Theo guides Skylar with a gentle firmness that speaks volumes of their past intimacy. She folds forward, hands pressed into the mattress, presenting to him—to us—the most intimate parts of her being.

It's a sight so raw, so vulnerably erotic, that it has my heart pounding against my ribs, a frenetic drummer urging me toward the brink of madness.

"Fuck." The word escapes me in a breathless whisper. Her plush, pink pussy glistens with arousal.

The bulge in my pants is almost painful. My hand grasps at my erection, feeling the pulse of blood pumping through it with each throb. I'm so fucking hard, my dick is weeping with anticipation. I can feel the dampness, proof of my own unchecked need.

Skylar shifts slightly, whether in discomfort or anticipation, I can't tell. But the movement draws my gaze to the junction of her thighs once more, and I'm captivated by the sheer perfection of her. I'm undone by her, utterly and irrevocably lost to this beautiful woman.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

Theo's grin is a silent challenge, a predatory curl of his lips before he drops to his knees behind her. His head dips, and he vanishes between Skylar's thighs. The sound of her sharp inhale is nearly drowned by another rumble of thunder.

I bite down on my fist, to stop myself from groaning out loud. My hand shifts, fingers tightening around the hardness straining against the fabric of my pajama pants. The pressure is both relief and torture, grounding me in this moment where chaos reigns in my mind.

Theo's movements are deliberate, worshipful, as he indulges in Skylar's offering. He pulls back then, repositioning himself with his back against the mattress. He grabs hold of her thighs and throws his head back until it's nestled snugly between Skylar's parted legs.

"Ride my face," he demands.

Her compliance is immediate. She moves over him, finding her position, taking control of his head.

From this angle, I can see everything. Every detail.

Those plush pink folds, the trail of moisture running down her inner thighs, and the way Theo's skilled tongue glides between her velvety lips.

I am a voyeur here, torn between the ache to join them and the weight of my own restraint. Every nerve ending screams for release, but it's the echo of raw need in Skylar's muffled moans that threatens to shatter my resolve.

I can't tear my gaze away. Theo's tongue paints a rhythm of pleasure on Skylar, each stroke a lightning strike that seems to ignite her very essence. Her moans pierce the air, each one luring me deeper, tempting me further.

"Quiet," Theo's voice is a low growl, punctuated by a sharp slap to her ass that sends a quiver through her body. "Or I'll stop."

"Don't you dare stop," she fires back, her tone threaded with defiance and desire, a challenge flung into the face of the storm.

Her muffled moans mix with the wet sound of Theo's tongue dragging through her arousal are obscene. Fuck. Heat coils low in my stomach, sharp and insistent.

My dick is so hard I'm pretty sure a stiff breeze is enough to make me come.

Theo's dedication to Skylar's pleasure is a testament, something bordering sacred—a ritual that commands my undivided attention. His tongue dips lower, delving with precision as if he's mapping every secret inch of her, coaxing out the beads of desire that now glisten on his chin.

I should be anywhere but here, a voice in my head protests, a feeble attempt at honor in the face of raw need. But the crescendo of Skylar's moans wraps around me, binding me to the spot. The sight of her thighs trembling, the waves of her impending climax nearly tangible in the air—it seizes me, holds me captive.

She's coming, and it's nothing less than cataclysmic. Her body arches, a bow drawn taut before releasing its arrow, her voice cracking the air like thunder. Each shudder that wracks her form etches itself into my memory.

The aftermath is tender, Theo's mouth gentle as he guides her through the aftershocks, licking her through it. He's an artist, I think, even as jealousy gnaws at

my guts. Then, he lifts his head, eyes blazing with triumph, and catches me in his gaze. "Cohen," he says, his voice roughened by lust, "you need to taste her."

Heat crawls up my neck, a flush of embarrassment.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, my heart thundering in my ears.

My feet shuffle backward, the instinct to flee is overpowering. The room feels smaller, the air heavy with a tension that coils around my spine. But Theo's voice cuts through the haze, a command wrapped in velvet.

"Stay, Cohen. We're just getting started."

It's casual, the way he says it, like we're discussing the weather and not the unraveling of my self-control. I shake my head, trying to find the firm ground of resistance. My eyes flicker to Skylar, searching for an excuse, any reason to escape the spell she effortlessly casts.

Then she moves.

Her arm extends, her fingers splayed in an offering or a plea—I can't tell which. Her voice slices through my thoughts, every syllable laced with authority and something softer, something that makes my chest ache.

"Stay."

There is no way I could possibly say no to her.

Chapter 17

Theo

The hesitant shadow in the doorway doesn't escape my notice. Cohen stands there, a silent sentinel wrestling with an internal storm I know all too well. Desire and doubt clash in his eyes, and I understand how he feels.

But he doesn't get my attention. Not right now. Not when this goddess, the woman of my fucking dreams, is naked and wanting.

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I rise from my knees and turn to face her. Her skin is velvet under my touch. I savor the warm silkiness that begs for more than just a caress. My fingers trace the curves of her ass, the firm globes fitting perfectly in my palms. She's a living sculpture. A perfect beauty. Mine, even if she wants to deny that right now.

My lips find their destination at the base of her spine, pressing a kiss against her skin. There's reverence in that touch, an unspoken apology for the scars we left on each other's hearts.

Please, baby. Please don't let our pasts dictate our future. Because, you are and have always been my future.

I hear Cohen's breath catch, the sound barely louder than a whisper over Skylar's steady breathing. He knows what this is, what it could mean. We've navigated these waters before, but never like this, never with so much at stake.

Skylar isn't just another nameless one-night adventure. She's everything. I am never walking away from this girl. And, I think Cohen knows that. She's perfect for me. But I think she's perfect for him too. And for Austin. If only they would get their heads out of their asses.

Skylar's body reacts to my touch, a subtle arching into my hands that betrays her control. Her hazel eyes remain fixed ahead, but I feel her awareness flicker back to Cohen, to me, to the space between us.

"Skylar," I murmur against her skin, the word more than just a name—it's an invocation, a hope, a risk.

I chance a glance back toward the doorway. Cohen's eyes flicker with something unreadable, a wariness that has him rooted to the threshold. His hesitation hangs thick in the air, and I feel it—a challenge, a question. My fingers trail up Skylar's spine as I watch him.

"Come on, Cohen," I say, my voice low and steady, "are you watching or are you joining us?" The words are an offering, a nudge for him to step out of the shadows and into this with us.

At this suggestion, I can sense the thrill that courses through Skylar. Our gazes lock in silent conversation, hazel to green. I know she wants this. And, whatever my girl wants, she gets.

I wrap my arm around her waist, the heat of her flesh searing against my skin. With a fluid motion, I lift her effortlessly, aligning her body with mine until her back melds into my chest. Then, I twist, spinning until I'm sitting on the edge of the mattress and she's straddling me in reverse.

She whimpers as I tease the head of my cock against her dripping pussy. Heat radiates between us, a silent language of desire that only Skylar and I seem to speak fluently. The pads of my fingers trace the curve of her waist, feeling her shiver at my touch. I guide her down, the slow descent an exquisite torture as she envelops me inch by agonizing inch. My eyes flutter shut, surrendering to the sensation as her tightness wraps around me like a promise.

"God, Skylark," I breathe out, barely recognizing my own voice, strained with need. "You feel incredible. I told you—uhng—told you I couldn't wait to be inside you again."

Fingers splayed across her belly, I anchor her to me, while my other hand finds the delicate column of her throat. Her pulse jumps under my touch, a wild beat echoing

my own heart's erratic thumping.

"Stay with me, beautiful," I whisper, urging her to meet my gaze in the reflection of the mirror opposite us. There's something powerful in watching ourselves come together, in witnessing the raw intensity that has always existed between us.

I wish she could see it, feel it. She's trying so hard to keep me at arm's length. And, I don't blame her, not really. She doesn't trust that I'll stay. But I've already lost her once and I'm not about to walk away a second time.

I start moving beneath her, each thrust measured and deliberate. This isn't about chasing a quick release; it's about relearning every gasp, every moan that spills from Skylar's lips. It's about claiming and being claimed in return. It's about tempting Cohen until that tight coil of restraint snaps.

The air is thick with our mingled breaths, and I'm lost in the rhythm of her hips rolling against mine. She whines as I pin her hips in place.

"Faster, Theo."

My palm connects with the tender nub of her clit. Skylar's cry fills the room, high and needy, and I have to cover her mouth with my hand to keep her from waking up the others.

"Patience," I murmur, though it's more a reminder to myself than to her. I want to memorize this moment, the way she looks right now—flushed, fierce, and utterly mine.

"God, you're incredible," I say, low and fervent. It's the truth—how she feels wrapped around me, her intoxicating scent making my head swim with longing. Love coils tight in my chest, an emotion too big to voice just yet. She's not ready. Not yet. But,

soon.

I risk a glance at the doorway, where Cohen still lingers. His hand betrays him, moving subtly against the bulge in his pants. Our eyes lock, a silent conversation passing between us—come on, dude, just give in.

"Are you watching or participating?" I ask again. For a heartbeat, there's hesitation—a flicker of something haunted in his eyes before the hunger wins out.

Cohen takes a hesitant step forward and I can't stop the smile that takes over my face. Cohen's hesitation hangs heavy in the air, a battle waging behind his stormy gaze. But then—just a breath, a heartbeat—he takes another step forward. It's small, but it's enough. Enough to send a thrill of satisfaction curling through me.

Skylar doesn't notice yet. She's too lost in the moment, her body soft and pliant beneath my hands. I press a lingering kiss to her shoulder, savoring the way she shivers against me. She's close—close to giving in, close to realizing that this doesn't have to be a fight. That I'm not going to leave her again. That this time it isn't just about me—it's about us.

Cohen exhales sharply, and when I look up, his jaw is clenched tight, his fists curling and uncurling at his sides. He's still holding back, still pretending this isn't unraveling him.

I watch as he breaks. He closes the distance between us in two strides, dropping to his knees between our spread thighs. Reverence and raw need are painted across the rugged lines of his face.

He breathes in the scent of her arousal, gripping Skylar's thighs possessively. Cohen's gaze is fixed on where I'm buried deep inside her, his eyes darkened with lust.

"Look at that thirsty little pussy," Cohen growls, his voice low and guttural, laced with a hunger that mirrors my own. The words are crude but intimate, a stark contrast to the usually composed man he shows to the world. In this moment, there's no hiding behind pretenses or polite facades. We are raw, primal beings, driven by need and the magnetic pull Skylar exerts on us.

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“You going to let him fill you until you’re dripping with his release?”

Then, without warning, Cohen leans forward, his storm-blue eyes never leaving her pussy. His lips find her clit, and he sucks hard, pulling a gasp from between Skylar's parted lips. The sensation ripples through her, a shockwave that tightens her around me, squeezing so hard she nearly strangles my dick.

The sound that escapes me is part animal, part man—a grunt of pure, undiluted ecstasy. My fingers dig into Skylar's hip, tighten on her throat, anchoring her to me as Cohen devours her with his lips. Each movement of his mouth sends her grinding down harder onto me. Fuck, it’s so good.

Skylar's lost in the sensation, in the push and pull of flesh, and I'm swept along with her. My mind empties of everything but the feel of her, the taste of her skin under my lips, the sound of her pleasure mixing with ours.

I can't hold back anymore, not with Skylar's hips rolling and grinding down onto me in a desperate rhythm, not with Cohen's mouth latched onto her with an intensity that rivals my own craving. I start pounding into her from below, each thrust desperate and claiming.

Skylar's sounds are like music, high-pitched notes of ecstasy that rise above the low, guttural growls escaping my throat. And there's Cohen, unrelenting, his tongue working magic as it flicks and sucks at her clit, occasionally brushing against me. The sensation should be jarring, but there's no room for anything but pure, undiluted pleasure.

Cohen's movements become more frantic, he pulls one hand from her thigh, shoving his pajama pants down and gripping his cock. He begins to stroke himself at a frenzied pace, his eyes locked on Skylar's face, watching as she nears her peak.

I can feel my own pleasure nearing its peak, my balls tightening in anticipation of release. I know she's close. We're close.

"Such a good girl," I whisper against the smooth skin of Skylar's throat, my lips trailing fiery kisses along her pulse point. "Taking me so well." My words are both praise and plea, coaxing her toward release. "Come for us, Skylar."

The sensation is undeniable—a vice-like grip that threatens to unravel me completely as Skylar's body clenches around my own. Heat floods every vein, the pressure building to an unbearable crescendo until I'm spilling into her, a pulse of pleasure that feels fucking amazing.

"Fuck, Sky," I gasp, the words torn from my throat, raw and honest. The world narrows down to this single point of connection—the place where our bodies join.

Cohen gives Skylar's clit a final, lingering lick, a gesture that sends another shockwave through her—and by proxy, through me. He rises to his feet in one fluid motion and surrenders to his own climax, coming all over Skylar's flushed skin.

It's filthy. It's dirty. And it's beautiful in its rawness.

Breathing hard, I watch Cohen, seeing the echoes of my own lust etched across his features. In the aftermath, as breaths come in jagged pulls and heartbeats start to slow, I know I'm so fucked.

I love Skylar. God, how I love her. How I've never stopped. It's a ferocious thing that lingers in the marrow of my bones, an emotion that refuses to be tamed or quieted.

I wonder if she understands just how much I crave not just her body, but her soul, her very being.

I want this to work. I want us to find harmony in the chaos, to navigate the treacherous waters of jealousy and possession and come out on the other side stronger for it. I want them to stop being so stupid and just accept what I already know.

She. Is. Ours.

I allow myself to envision a future where we are not fragments but a whole. It's a dangerous dream, perhaps a foolish one. But it's mine, and I can't help but cling to it with everything I have.

## Chapter 18

Austin

Isnap awake, heart drumming a staccato rhythm against my chest. It's that unsettling prickling of skin, the sense that something isn't quite in its place—and it's not just the cold space beside me in the bed where no one now sleeps. Every morning feels like this now, ever since Skylar Deveraux decided to turn my carefully ordered world on its head.

Padding barefoot down the hallway, the faint aroma of coffee beckons me forward, a call I'm reluctant yet desperate to answer. I'd mainline the shit if I could. When I round the corner into the kitchen, there she is, commandeering the space as if she's always belonged here.

Skylar, in all her irritating glory, stands at the counter, her slender fingers wrapped around the handle of my French press. She's in Theo's fucking hoodie—the oversized garment swallowing her frame, the sleeves hanging past her hands, the hem

brushing against the curve of her thighs.

Beneath it, barely peeking out from beneath the hem are the world's tiniest sleep shorts. My dick twitches in appreciation.

"Morning, Austin," she greets me, her voice a melody of smug satisfaction. "You look like you've been wrestling with your demons all night."

Her words strike, sharp and unerring, and I bristle at the casual observation. My grip tightens on the back of a chair, wood cool beneath my fingers. "Maybe I have," I retort, unable to keep the bite from my voice. "Some of us have real responsibilities to contend with."

Skylar chuckles, a low, throaty sound. She leans back against the counter, those hazel eyes glinting with a challenge I know all too well. "Is that so? Taking care of your child isn't a responsibility? Huh."

I loathe how she reads me, how she prods at the edges of my composure with the precision of a surgeon. Yet, I can't help but take the bait, the tension between us crackling. "What I can't stand," I say, stepping closer, "is someone who thinks they can waltz in and claim territory that isn't theirs."

"Is that what this is about?" She tilts her head, studying me, her expression unreadable behind the armor of her confidence. "Territory?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

"Maybe it is." The admission scrapes out raw, more honest than I intend.

"Then mark your boundaries, Austin." Skylar pushes off from the counter, closing the gap until we're nearly toe-to-toe. "But remember, I'm not one to obey 'no trespassing' signs. Besides, aren't you the one that invited me to live here? Or am I remembering that wrong?"

The air shifts, charged with something dangerous and tempting. For a moment, we're suspended in a standoff, the silence pregnant with the promise of a battle neither of us may be ready to wage.

"Your coffee's getting cold," she says finally, the smirk returning as she steps around me, leaving me to grapple with the disarray of my thoughts and the lingering scent of her defiance.

I pour myself a cup, the black liquid mirroring the turmoil inside of me. Skylar Deveraux might think she has the upper hand, but I'm Austin Rhodes—I don't yield, I conquer. Except, I realize with a jolt of unease, when it comes to her, victory feels perilously like defeat.

I stride into the living room, my steps measured, hoping for some solitude to sort through reports. But of course, she's there too, lounging on the couch next to Theo. Her laughter is a melody that grates against my resolve. She's everywhere, an omnipresent force in this house.

"Mind if I join you?" The question slips from my lips before I can stop it, each word tasting like a concession.

"By all means," Theo says, his grin wide as he pats the cushion beside him. "Skylar was just telling me about her first time teaching pre-K."

She chuckles and leans into Theo, the camaraderie between them a visible thread that tugs at something deep within me. I nod stiffly, taking a seat on the opposite end, the distance doing little to ease the tension that coils inside me.

The day drags on, a seemingly endless loop of accidental encounters with Skylar. In the hallway, her shoulder brushes against mine, a fleeting contact that sets off sparks. At the dining table, our fingers nearly touch as we both reach for the salt, and she retracts her hand with a smirk, as if she's playing a game only she understands.

As much as I try to ignore it, I can't help but notice the way Theo looks at her. He doesn't bother to hide his desire, his eyes tracing her every move with an intensity that stirs an unwelcome heat in my chest. He's not bothering to hide that they're together anymore either. It's not just attraction; it's possession, and the thought of it ignites an unfamiliar rage within me.

And then there's Cohen. Observing them together, I catch the subtle shifts in their interactions: an exchanged glance here, a half-whispered conversation there. They suddenly share a flicker of understanding, a silent language that speaks of something more, something hidden beneath the surface. The tension simmers, potent and unspoken, and it gnaws at me, this suspicion of secrets shared between them that I'm not privy to.

My gaze lingers on Skylar, her hazel eyes alight with mischief as she responds to Cohen's veiled innuendo. There's a dance of words and glances between them, one that suggests a connection that needles at my composure. Something between them has changed, too. And I want to know what.

I retreat to my office, the sanctuary of leather-bound books and polished mahogany

offering no relief from the disquiet that has taken root in my mind.

"Damn it," I mutter to myself, staring out the window at the sprawling grounds below. She's under my skin, infiltrating my thoughts, challenging the boundaries I've meticulously erected.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I can still hear her giggling with the kids. This isn't far enough; it's not enough distance. So, I head downstairs to the gym I had put in after we moved here.

Each lift, each curl, each controlled breath is an attempt to drown out the chaos Skylar has brought into my life. Sweat trails down my back, a testament to my exertion, the desperate need to expel the frustration that coils inside me like a spring wound too tight.

I'm mid-rep when the door swings open with a soft creak, and she steps in. Skylar, in all her infuriating glory, stands framed by the doorway, her eyes scanning the room before they settle on me. There's a moment—a flicker of something unspoken—that passes between us before she schools her expression into one of indifferent curiosity.

"Looking for this?" She holds up a jump rope, one eyebrow arching as if she's just stumbled upon some great secret. "The kids said it wasn't theirs, so I assumed it belonged down here."

I grunt in acknowledgement, but offer nothing more. I can't. I'm literally frozen. That is what this woman does to me and it's infuriating. It's unfair how beautiful she is, how tempting.

I want to storm across this room and drag her body into mine, force her to

acknowledge what she does to me. Demand she take care of the problem. My jaw nearly cracks with how tightly I set it, forcing the images of Skylar on her knees out of my mind.

"Don't stop on my account," she teases, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth, her tone light but not without intent.

I set the weights down with more force than necessary, the clatter reverberating off the walls. I stand, facing her fully now, feeling the pull of muscles stretched and worked, the heat emanating from my skin. I'm acutely aware of the space between us—charged, alive with an electricity I want to deny. Want to, but can't.

"Wasn't planning on it," I retort, keeping my voice even, though I can feel the edge in it mirroring hers.

Her gaze drifts—a slow, deliberate sweep—over the sweat-dampened fabric clinging to my chest, down the lines of my arms, pausing at the flex of my hands. Her lips quirk, and it's clear she's enjoying this little game, the push and pull of tension we've danced around since the day I discovered her in my pool.

But, is that all it is? A game? I fucking hate games.

"Good," she replies, stepping further into the room, her movements calculated and sure. "Wouldn't want to disrupt your...routine."

With every word, every look, she's challenging me, daring me to break, to show any sign of weakness. But I hold steady, because that's what I do—I maintain control, keep my emotions in check. Even when everything in me screams to react, to call her out, to close the distance that separates us.

Instead, I turn away, picking up another set of weights, the cool metal grounding me

as I refocus on the task at hand. I won't give her the satisfaction of seeing just how deep under my skin she's gotten. Not now, not ever.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

"Make yourself at home, Skylar," I say over my shoulder, my tone deceptively casual. "You seem to be good at that."

There's a beat of silence where I imagine she's weighing her next move, deciding how far to push before she crosses a line we both know is there, drawn in the sand but never acknowledged aloud.

"Always do," she responds, and I don't need to see her to know she's smiling that smug, self-assured smile that tells me she's won this round.

But this isn't over—not by a long shot.

I expect her to leave now that she's returned the jump rope, but she doesn't. Instead, I watch Skylar root through the cabinets. She's a deliberate thorn in my side, and the way she carries herself, all nonchalant confidence, only sharpens the sting.

"Looking for something in particular, or just enjoying the view?" The words slip out before I can rein them in, barbed and loaded with a challenge I'm not entirely sure I want her to accept.

She straightens up, turning slowly, and there's that smirk again—weaponized casualness that could cut glass. "Maybe both," she retorts, and in two strides, I'm in her space, our bodies inches apart. I can see every fleck of gold in her hazel eyes, the rise and fall of her chest quickening.

"Careful, trouble," I ground out, my voice low, my control fraying at the edges. "Don't start a game you're not prepared to finish."

Her breath catches, and there it is—the flicker of something raw and unscripted. We're teetering on the edge of a cliff, the drop both terrifying and tempting. Our gazes lock, and the air around us crackles with the tension of a storm about to break.

Time slows, our breathing melds, and I swear she's leaning in, those regal features softening with an emotion I can't quite name. Don't want to. For a heartbeat, I think this is it—she's going to bridge that last bit of distance between us, she's going to be the one to give in.

But we stay frozen, toe-to-toe, the moment stretched taut, a silent battle of wills. And then, as if nothing happened, she blinks, shattering the illusion.

She scoffs, a sound sharp as a knife's edge in the silence between us. Her eyes, those deep-set hazel pools that had just been locked with mine, now glint with something like victory—or is it defense? She whirls around, chestnut hair cascading over Theo's hoodie, and my gaze follows the sway of her hips as she departs. Every muscle in my body tenses, my fists clenching at my sides.

"Skylar," I start to say, but she doesn't turn back. The door shuts behind her with a quiet click, and I'm left alone.

The frustration coils tighter within me, a serpent squeezing around my chest. I throw myself back into my workout, each lift, each press, an attempt to push her image out of my mind. But it's useless.

Evening descends and dinner calls. Laughter and conversation mingle with the rich aromas of a delicious meal, but the atmosphere is heavy, laden with undercurrents of tension. I feel like I'm living on the edge, just barely hanging onto the last thread of my control. She's unraveling me bit by bit.

Skylar and Theo are in their own little world. He's relaxed, his whole demeanor

easygoing as he slings an arm around her shoulders, casual as if he's done it a thousand times before. His lips find her temple in a tender kiss that should be innocent enough, but it's like a match to the powder keg inside me.

I'm glaring. The realization hits when her eyes, those deep pools of hazel, lock with mine. A flicker of something—recognition? Amusement?—crosses her features, and she holds my gaze. It's insolent, challenging, the air between us crackling.

Then Theo turns his head, his green eyes landing on mine, and I see it—the slow, knowing smirk that curls his lips. He sees right through me—damn him.

"You good, man?" His voice is light, tinged with laughter. It's a simple question, but from him, it feels like an accusation, a call out on the stage we're all playing our parts.

"Fine," I grind out, each syllable sharp as shards of glass. The lie tastes like ash, but admitting the truth isn't an option. Not here. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Skylar's gaze hasn't wavered, though her expression has shifted ever so slightly, the corners of her mouth pulling down in what might be concern, or maybe curiosity. There's a storm brewing in those eyes of hers, but I can't read its path.

"Good." Theo's response is nonchalant, but his eyes are alight with something akin to victory. He knows he's gotten under my skin, and he's relishing it. The bastard.

I force my attention back to my plate, the food suddenly unappealing. But I can feel Skylar's eyes still on me, studying, probing, as if she's trying to peel back my layers and peer into the chaos within me. And I hate how much I want her to keep looking.

The night stretches on. I prowl through the halls of the house like a shadow, each step echoing the discord inside me. It's the kind of night that feels alive with possibilities

and regrets, and it draws me toward Skylar's door.

I pause, hovering at the threshold of a line I know better than to cross. The murmur of voices seeps through the wood, Theo's low baritone mingling with the soft timbre of Skylar's laughter. Each chuckle is a velvet caress against my skin, stirring something primal within me. The bed creaks—a mundane sound transformed into an intimate whisper—and my imagination flares.

My fists clench at my sides, nails biting into my palms, a feeble defense against the surge of emotion threatening to overwhelm me. I shouldn't be here, lingering in the shadows like some lovelorn fool. I shouldn't care about the intimacy shared behind that door—yet here I am, bound by invisible chains of longing and frustration.

With a sharp turn, I retreat from the precipice of madness, only to come face-to-face with Cohen. He stands there, a mere few feet away, his eyes locked onto mine. His presence is a mirror, reflecting back the turmoil I've tried so desperately to hide. And in his silence, he speaks volumes.

"Man," he breathes out, his voice laced with an edge of humor and resignation. "Yeah. You're screwed."

The words hang in the air, heavy and undeniable. They settle on my shoulders, an added weight to the burden I already carry.

I don't bother with a response; what's there to say? The truth doesn't need affirmation—it just is. I turn away and walk down the hall.

He's right. I am screwed.

I'm screwed because Skylar isn't just living under this roof. She's infiltrating my senses, my peace of mind, unraveling the control I've clung to for so long.

But acknowledging that only gives it power—power I'm not willing to concede. Not yet.

With a shake of my head, I banish the thought. My footsteps are more determined now, carrying me toward my own room where order reigns and emotions are neatly boxed away.

As I close the door behind me, I lean back against the solid wood, allowing myself a moment of weakness. My heart throbs against my ribcage, a reminder that no matter how much I try to suppress it, there's fire beneath the ice. And Skylar...she dances too close to the flames.

### Chapter 19

Skylar

Consciousness seeps in, slow and warm, as I feel the steady rise and fall of a chest against my back. I can sense his presence more than see it. Theo's arms are an unyielding circle of warmth around my waist, his face hidden somewhere in the tangle of my chestnut hair. His breath is a soft whisper against my skin, each exhale stirring something deep inside me.

I don't move, basking in the comfort that comes from being this close to him. It's a dangerous comfort, one that threatens the walls I've spent years erecting around my heart.

Theo shifts slightly, dragging me closer—if that's even possible—and nestles his face deeper into my hair. He sighs, a sound so full of contentment it resonates within my chest, echoing in the hollow spaces I've tried so hard to ignore. He presses a lazy kiss to the nape of my neck, a simple act that shatters the precarious balance I've maintained.

I blink rapidly, attempting to push back the sudden rush of tears that blur my vision. But the dam breaks, emotions flooding in—because this isn't just sex anymore. It never really was. I can't pretend; not now, not with his lips writing truths on my skin. I still love him. Always have. It's like trying to deny the pull of gravity, futile and nonsensical.

"Morning," Theo murmurs, his voice rich and groggy with sleep. His fingers trace idle patterns on my stomach, igniting trails of fire that I fight to ignore. "You okay?"

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat, afraid that if I speak, all of my carefully curated defenses will crumble under the weight of three little words that claw at my insides. So instead, I turn within his embrace, forcing a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "Yeah, just...didn't sleep well."

He searches my face, his green eyes soft with concern, but I avert my gaze. I can't let him see the truth there, can't afford the luxury of vulnerability. Not when everything inside me yearns to lean into his touch, to confess sins and secrets best left buried.

Because I don't trust this. I don't trust him. I can't. The first time broke me. If I let him in only for him to leave again? I think I'd shatter.

"Bad dreams?" he asks, and there's an edge of something more in his voice—a need to fix what's broken.

"Something like that," I lie, because the reality is far more complicated than a mere nightmare. It's the waking up that's haunting me—the realization that I'm in his arms, and how much I crave this closeness.

"Come here," Theo whispers, pulling me back against his chest. And I let him, because for just a few more seconds, I want to pretend that nothing has changed—that we're still those two lovesick teenagers who thought they could take on the world.

I can't ignore the shiver that runs down my spine, not from the cool morning air but from the weight of realization pressing down on me. I've lied to myself for so long, wrapping my heart in layers of pretense and denial, convincing myself it was all just temporary. Theo would move on just like last time.

But this...this unwavering grip he has on me, the way his arms feel like they're etched into my very being, it tells a different story. One where Theo never left, where every “goodbye” was just a pause between breaths, waiting to be drawn back in.

The thought terrifies me. The certainty that deep down, beneath the armor of independence and self-preservation, I never wanted him to let go. That maybe, just maybe, I've been craving this return, this reclamation of what we once had, even as I've been fighting against it with every fiber of my being.

And now, as his breath warms the nape of my neck, as his presence wraps around me, grounding yet unshakable, it's clear. This isn't just desire; it's an echo of love that refuses to fade, no matter how much I will it away.

Theo shifts behind me. I can feel his heart beating a rhythm that seems to synchronize

with mine.

"Sky?" His voice is still groggy with sleep, laced with concern. It's too much.

"It's nothing," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. I can't face him, can't let him see the raw fear and longing in my eyes. So I do the only thing I can—I pull away.

Gently, so as not to disturb the fragile peace between us, I slide out from under his arm, out of the warmth of our shared cocoon. The bed creaks softly as I plant my feet on the cold hardwood floor, and I feel the last vestiges of his touch slip away as I stand.

"Wait," Theo begins, but I'm already moving, tiptoeing across the room.

"Need some air," I lie again, the words tasting bitter on my tongue as I grab the first items of clothing within reach—some of my shorts and a sweatshirt that likely belongs to him—and shrug it over my head.

I shuffle into the kitchen, hoping he won't follow but knowing he will. My feet are cold against the tile, but I'm grateful for the chill—it keeps my mind from wandering back to the warmth of the bed I left behind.

Lucas and Elodie are a welcome distraction. They're already perched at the island counter, their little legs swinging beneath the stools. Lucas spots me first, his face lighting up like I just walked in with a basket full of puppies.

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“Skylar!” he exclaims, hopping off his stool and running toward me. His arms wrap around my waist in a tight hug, his head barely reaching my stomach.

Elodie, not one to be outdone, scurries over and attaches herself to my side, her tiny hands fisting the hem of Theo’s sweatshirt where it drapes over my thighs. “You’re awake! Daddy said we shouldn’t wake you.”

I force a smile, pushing aside the lump in my throat. “Well, I’m awake now. What did you dream about?”

Lucas pulls back just enough to grin up at me. “I dreamed about hockey! And pancakes!”

Elodie gasps. “Me too! Pancakes with chocolate chips and whipped cream.”

Lucas looks instantly betrayed. “Mine had blueberries.”

I let out a soft laugh, ruffling his hair. “Guess we’ll have to make both, then. Won’t we Daddy Cohen?”

As I approach the counter, Cohen turns from the stove, a spatula in hand. His eyes find mine, those deep blue pools that have a way of seeing right through someone. He gives me a once-over, and I can almost hear his thoughts clicking into place—Cohen never misses a beat, not even when he’s buried in fatherhood and work responsibilities.

“Morning,” I manage, my voice sounding more hoarse than I intended.

"Hey," he replies, a hint of a smile playing on his lips as he steps closer. He hands me a mug of coffee, the black liquid steaming gently, and I wrap my fingers around it, savoring the heat as it seeps into my palms.

"Thanks," I murmur, lifting the cup to my lips, letting the bitter aroma fill my senses.

"Any time." His hand reaches out, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear with a tenderness that contradicts the strength in his calloused fingers. It's a simple gesture, but my skin tingles where his touch lingers.

"Hey, kids," he continues. "Go on up to the playroom and I'll call you when pancakes are ready."

Lucas and Elodie hightail out of the kitchen, discussing which game they wanted to play first.

"Did you sleep okay?" Cohen asks, his voice low enough that it doesn't carry.

"Fine," I lie, and take another sip of coffee. "You?"

"Like a rock," he answers, but the shadows under his eyes tell a different story—one of late nights and early mornings, of burdens shouldered alone.

The doorbell's chime slices through the quiet hum of the kitchen, and Austin's voice echoes from the foyer, "I've got it!"

Cohen's gaze takes on a more serious tone as he looks down at me. He hasn't pulled back, still standing so close I can almost feel his chest with each breath. But something has shifted.

"Skylar," he murmurs, his tone carrying a weight that pins me to the spot. "We need

to talk."

Before I can muster a response, Theo is there. His chest presses against my back, his arms possessively circling my waist. The oversized hoodie I've thrown on does little to shield me from the solidity of him, the familiar scent of his cologne engulfing me. For a moment, I'm drowning in memories, in what his touch used to mean. Still does.

"Hey," Theo breathes into my hair, the word a soft caress against my ear.

"Hey back," I echo, voice barely above a whisper. My gaze flits to Cohen, who watches us with an unreadable expression, his proximity setting my nerves alight.

Then, the atmosphere shifts, heavy footsteps signaling Austin's return. He strides into the kitchen, Brielle in tow. She's all sharp angles and sleek lines, the epitome of poise and polish. But her composure fractures when her gaze lands on me, disheveled in Theo's hoodie, trapped between the two men who've managed to unravel me in their own ways.

"You," Brielle seethes. Her eyes rake over me, taking in every detail—the tousled hair, the way I'm sandwiched between Theo and Cohen. It's a scene ripe for misinterpretation—although it isn't really a misinterpretation, is it? From the tightening of Brielle's lips, I know she's drawing every possible conclusion.

"Hi, Brielle," I manage, stepping forward to untangle myself from Theo's embrace. I inch away from Cohen, too, striving for a semblance of professionalism despite the incriminating setup. But the room feels smaller now, charged with tension that no one dares to address—not yet.

The silence in the room feels like a tangible thing, thick and suffocating. I swallow hard, my pulse racing as I catch the narrowing of Brielle's eyes. Her perfectly shaped lips twist into a sneer, and she turns her head toward Austin, seeking some sort of

solidarity in her outrage.

"Are you kidding me?" The sharpness in her voice slices through the tension, making everyone still. It's a sound that demands attention, from someone who is accustomed to bending others to their will.

Her gaze snaps back to me, dissecting every inch of my disarray with clinical precision. "This is completely inappropriate," she hisses, stepping closer. "How unprofessional can you be, nanny? Or is it teacher? Or whore? Iknewit. Ijust didn't realize—" She gestures at Theo and Cohen with a manicured hand, her tone dripping with disdain.

I feel my cheeks burn hot with embarrassment, but there's a fire in my belly, too. This isn't her place, her business. But then she takes it a step further, her eyes lighting up with a cruel kind of glee. "I should take this to the school board," she threatens, voice laced with smug satisfaction. "They would have a field day with this scandal."

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The word “scandal” echoes in my mind, a harsh reminder of how quickly things can unravel. I'm frozen, caught between indignation and fear, the taste of bile rising in my throat. My hands clench into fists at my sides. Austin remains silent, his face an unreadable mask, his blue eyes cold and distant.

Brielle's triumphant smirk tells me she thinks she's won, but I can't—won't—let her have the last word. Not here. Not now.

It's not Austin who puts her in her place. It's Cohen.

"Enough, Brielle," he says, and the room seems to draw in a collective breath. "This isn't your concern."

She bristles visibly at his interference, but Cohen doesn't flinch, doesn't back down. He holds her glare with an unyielding stare, and I find myself momentarily grateful for the barrier he's placed between her venom and me.

Austin remains silent, his expression locked away behind a mask of indifference. It's unsettling, this silence of his—like the calm that comes before a storm. When Brielle finally huffs and storms off, her departure does nothing to lighten the atmosphere; if anything, it feels heavier, loaded with unspoken words and unresolved tensions.

"Lucas," Austin's voice breaks through the silence, sharp and clear, carrying up to the playroom. "Backpack. You're spending time with your mother."

The command hangs in the air, another point of tension, and suddenly I need to escape. Without a word, I turn on my heel and flee the kitchen, my feet carrying me

quickly down the hallway, towards the sanctuary of my bedroom.

"Skylar!" Cohen's voice follows me, echoing off the walls, but I don't stop. Not until he throws out a single phrase, heavy with meaning, one that roots me to the spot.

"You mentioned Vegas."

My heart stutters in my chest, and I can't move, can't breathe.

I force a casual shrug, feigning ignorance as I pivot to face Cohen. "Vegas?" I let the word hang between us, playing dumb.

His eyes narrow, a silent plea for honesty that I'm not ready to give. "It was you, wasn't it?" His voice is a mix of frustration and something else—pain, maybe.

He wants to bring this up now? I should have known letting Theo involve him the other night would only breed chaos. At first, I'd been hurt, angry that he didn't remember me. But I'd since realized it was a good thing.

It was a drunken weekend. I'd been dressed like a damn sorority girl, my hair dyed an obnoxiously bright pink. I had looked completely different, nothing like myself. But I had sounded like me. I should have known that's what would finally jog his memory: the sound of me coming apart at the seams with pleasure. He'd certainly heard it enough in Vegas.

I don't need this on top of everything else. Why now?

"Why didn't you say anything? Why did you let it go on this long? Why did you let me touch you when it was—"

"Because you didn't remember me!" The words erupt from me in a yell, raw and

unfiltered. My throat burns with the effort to keep my composure from fracturing completely.

Turning away from his piercing gaze, I continue my retreat toward my room, but he's persistent, following close behind. He reaches out, trying to coax me into facing him, into explaining, but I can't—I won't.

Then, like an omen, Austin's figure fills the doorway, halting us both. His presence—a solid wall of tailored suit and controlled emotion—demands attention. His blue eyes, normally icy, seem ablaze with a fire I've stoked without meaning to.

Austin's gaze skewers me, his posture rigid as he orders Cohen out with a curt nod. "I need to talk to Skylar. Alone." There's an unspoken command there, one that speaks of boardrooms and power struggles.

Cohen hesitates, his expression torn between concern and frustration. His eyes flicker to mine, searching, questioning. I give him nothing, my face a mask of determination. He knows better than to argue with Austin in this mood. With a final, lingering look, Cohen exits, his reluctance clinging to the air like a tangible thing.

Now it's just Austin and me, another silent standoff. "You don't get to just walk away," he growls, the roughness in his voice betraying the cool exterior he maintains. It's a challenge, a dare for me to confront whatever is brewing beneath the surface.

I let out a long sigh, feeling the weight of the morning's chaos press down on me. My words are tinted with exasperation as I address him, "What do you want me to do, Austin? I live here. If you'd given us a heads-up about Brielle's visit, I wouldn't have been caught off guard...like this."

I gesture vaguely to my disheveled appearance—the hoodie hanging loose on my frame, the wild tumble of my hair. It's not the way I like to be seen. I value control

over my image, over how I present myself to the world. But then again, Austin has a way of disrupting my equilibrium, leaving me flustered and more vulnerable than I care to admit.

“I wouldn’t have let my guard down like...that.”

I gesture vaguely toward the kitchen where I had most definitely let Theo and Cohen sandwich me, no matter how innocently.

Austin's scoff echoes in the room. "Yes, you would have," he says, his blue eyes ice-cold yet burning into me with an intensity I can't evade. He crosses the room, grabbing my arm before I can turn away from him. "This has been your game all along."

"What game?" My voice comes out sharper than intended, but I'm past caring. I jerk my arm free from his grasp, my skin tingling where his fingers lingered. "What do you want me to say, Austin?"

His face is inches from mine, every line of tension on his forehead etched with the need for control. "I want you to admit it," he snaps, the words slicing through the thick tension.

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It's laughable, really, how he thinks he can pin this all on me. My laughter fills the space, bitter and jagged, like broken glass. "You think I'm the problem? You think I'm the only one who feels this?"

The question hangs there, suspended in the charged atmosphere. Austin's gaze doesn't waver, and neither does mine. We're locked in this dance, this battle of wills, and neither of us seems willing to back down.

The space between us shrinks, the heat of our argument morphing into something darker, heavier.

My breath hitches as Austin's hand moves—deliberate, rough—until his fingers curl around the back of my neck. His grip isn't painful, but it's firm, demanding my attention, refusing to let me slip away.

His breathing is ragged, matching the erratic rhythm of my own.

"Say it," he growls, his voice low and edged with something raw. The sound rolls through me, awakening something I don't want to name.

I should shove him away. I should break free of the hold he has on me—both physical and otherwise. But I don't.

Instead, I let myself feel it. The tension. The frustration. The way my body betrays me, drawn to him even as my mind screams at me to keep my distance.

His thumb brushes against the side of my throat, and I shudder. His eyes darken,

tracking the movement, his pupils blown wide.

“Damn it, Skylar,” he mutters, his other hand clenching at his side like he’s fighting himself, like he’s trying to hold on to the last shreds of his restraint.

I swallow hard, my pulse hammering beneath his fingertips. “You think this is a game?” I challenge, my voice uneven, breathless.

His jaw flexes. “I think you like to play with fire,” he says, his fingers tightening just enough to make my knees go weak.

I don’t get the chance to respond before he yanks me forward, crushing his lips to mine.

It’s not gentle. It’s not sweet. It’s a collision, a clash of anger and need.

Austin kisses me like he’s trying to prove a point, like he’s trying to punish me for making him want this, for making him feel something he swore he never would.

And God help me, I kiss him back.

He pulls back, pressing his lips to the corner of my jaw and tracing the line down to my throat. His breath is hot on my skin, his grip tight enough to send shudders cascading through me.

"This is a bad idea," I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah," Austin's agreement comes out rough, strained. He's close, so close his features blur into a stormy expression I can feel but not see. And then his lips crash against mine again—hard, desperate, consuming. It’s like he's been wandering in a desert and I'm the first raindrop in years.

My mind screams protest, but my body betrays me, melting into the kiss. His tongue sweeps over mine, telling me he's starved for this—for me—and it ignites something fierce within my chest. This man, this infuriating, controlled man, is losing himself against my mouth, and it's terrifyingly exhilarating.

I grip his shirt, knuckles whitening as I pull him closer, or he pulls me; it doesn't matter. His taste, raw and intense, floods my senses, drowning out the voice that insists we're diving headfirst into chaos.

## Chapter 20

Skylar

"Skylar," he growls against my lips, the sound vibrating through me. His kiss is desperate and searing. I'm a moth to his flame; no, I am the dry kindling, and Austin Rhodes is the conflagration threatening to consume me whole.

Heat radiates from where we touch, spreading like wildfire through my veins. I'm unraveling, and it feels like freedom, like falling, like flying.

Then he's peeling back layers of clothing, stripping me of anything that isn't him. Theo's sweatshirt becomes an obstruction, an unwelcome barrier, and Austin shoves it over my head with rough impatience. The fabric bunches around my wrists, momentarily trapping them until the garment yields.

Austin's lips trail a scorching path down my throat, branding me with each open-mouthed kiss. Possessive. Hungry. His breath is hot on my skin, and it's like he's marking his territory with every press of his lips against my collarbone, my chest. I'm burning up, consumed by the fire that's Austin Rhodes.

"More," I gasp, not recognizing my own voice—breathy, desperate.

"I want to give it all to you," he murmurs against my fevered skin, his voice a low rumble.

With deft hands, he shoves my shorts and panties down in one go. The fabric bunches around my thighs, then slides, inch by tantalizing inch, until gravity claims them, leaving them in a heap at my feet. My heart pounds, every nerve ending alight with anticipation and the sheer rightness of Austin's touch.

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Then, without warning, he grips my thighs and lifts me. My back arches reflexively, seeking out his heat, his strength. He carries me effortlessly, each step he takes resonating through me. But as we approach my bedroom door, panic flares within the haze of desire.

"Wait—shit, the door," I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

His stride doesn't falter. "I know."

"Elodie..." The name tumbles from my lips, laced with concern.

"Focus on me. Just me." He commands, yet there's an undertone of reassurance that stills the fear in my veins.

"Please," I breathe out, my plea hanging between us.

My back hits the wall with a thud that reverberates through my bones. Before the shock can simmer into fear, Austin's body is against mine, an unyielding barricade between me and everything else. His hand snakes behind me, and the door slams shut with a finality that echoes in the suddenly enclosed space.

"Right now, you're mine," he growls, each word a brand searing through the fog of my consciousness.

His lips crash against mine, an all-consuming force that leaves no room for protest. Not that I want to protest. The world narrows down to the taste of him, the heat of his mouth pressing with a desperate hunger that resonates deep within me. There's no

room for doubt or guilt, only the need for him, for this, for us.

Fingers fumbling, I reach for his shirt, hating the barrier of fabric between us. He seems to understand, catching the urgency in my touch. With a fluid motion, his hands grip the collar at the back of his neck, and the cloth rips away, pulled over his head in one smooth motion.

The coarse texture of stubble grazes my fingertips as they trail along Austin's jawline, down the column of his neck. His skin is a map of heat and desire beneath my touch. A low groan vibrates in my throat as I explore the hard planes of his chest. My nails scrape lightly, marking him with my need. Each inch I cover leaves a craving for more—more contact, more of him.

"Sky," Austin murmurs, his voice rough like gravel, as if it is being pulled from the depths of a primal hunger. His hand finds my breast; fingers splaying wide before he cups me, his palm warm and possessive. He thumbs over my nipple, and it tightens instantly, aching for more attention.

I can't help but arch into his touch, craving the pressure, the pleasure. His hips roll against mine in a rhythm dictated by pure instinct. Every push of his erection against me jolts lightning through my veins.

His mouth descends to my nipple, tongue tracing circles that leave me gasping and clawing at his back.

"More," I find myself whispering again, the word torn from the chaos of my thoughts. More friction, more of his touch, more of this intoxicating loss of control.

He obliges without hesitation, switching to my other breast with an open-mouthed kiss that draws a whimper from my lips. He gives me exactly what I need without hesitation. Two fingers thrust inside me, stretching, filling, while his thumb seeks out

my clit.

"Fuck my fingers. Make yourself come." His command is laced with authority and an edge of raw need that mirrors my own.

I obey, moving against him with abandon, riding the waves of pleasure he offers. My hands grasp at his shoulders, seeking leverage, desperate. Each stroke of his fingers pushes me closer to oblivion, each circle of his thumb fans the flames higher.

"Ah, Austin..." My hips move on pure instinct, each roll and thrust a desperate chase after the pleasure that coils tighter within me. The world fades until there's nothing but the raw sensation, the heat of his body against mine, and the insistent pressure where I need it most.

"Please," escapes my lips in a breathless whisper, though I can't articulate what I'm pleading for—more, less, harder, never stop. His digits curl and uncurl inside me, an exquisite torture, drawing moans from deep within my throat that quickly turn into desperate cries. I'm so close, teetering on the brink of release.

But Austin, damn him, knows the power he wields. Just as the world begins to shatter, he withdraws his fingers, leaving me gasping and bereft. "No, don't—"

The protest dies as he maneuvers me effortlessly, my back hitting the mattress with a soft thud. Before I can catch my breath or voice another complaint, he's there, his mouth replacing where his fingers had been.

"Ah, fuck," I hiss, tangling my fingers in his hair, holding him to the pulsing heat between my legs.

He groans against me, the vibration sending sparks up my spine. His tongue is relentless, and I'm lost again.

"Please, Austin, don't stop," I beg, my walls clenching in anticipation, my body yearning for the release he's more than capable of granting.

The world narrows to the sensation of Austin's mouth on me—the insistent tug of his lips, the skillful dance of his tongue. I'm a livewire, every nerve ending alight with pleasure as he devours me with a hunger that echoes my own. My fingers tighten in his hair, nails scraping against his scalp as I guide him deeper into my madness.

"Ah—Austin!" The cry rips from my throat, unbidden, raw. My hips buck against his face, seeking more, always more. He obliges, the pressure of his mouth increasing, his tongue a relentless force that sends me spiraling. My body clenches around nothing, desperate for release, and when it comes, it's cataclysmic.

I shatter, stars exploding behind my closed eyelids, my lungs seizing in a breathless climax.

For a moment, there's only silence and the loud drumming of my heart in my ears. Then the absence of warmth between my thighs registers, and I peel open my eyes to find Austin rummaging through my nightstand. His movements are hurried, purposeful, but when he turns to me, frustration etches his handsome features.

"Condoms," he growls, the word a command more than a question, his voice laced with that same authoritative edge that makes every fiber of my being stand at attention.

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With a languid motion, I wave toward the dresser across the room, still too dazed to articulate where the small foil packets are stashed. There's a brief flicker of annoyance in his piercing blue eyes before he strides over to the dresser, muscles rippling under his taut skin. A part of me, the part not lost in the haze of post-orgasmic bliss, admires the power coiled within him, the sheer maleness that he exudes without even trying.

Austin locates the foil packet, making quick work of tearing it open with his teeth. The sound of the wrapper giving way sends a new wave of anticipation coursing through me. He rolls the condom onto his impressive length, and I can't help but swallow hard. Fuck, he's thick. Thicker than Theo—a thought that triggers an involuntary shiver.

As he turns to stalk back toward the bed, my eyes are riveted on the primal intent etched in every line of his body. He's all controlled power and raw masculinity, and it commands my full attention.

But then, the image of Theo flashes in my mind—his gentle green eyes, the softness of his touch. And Cohen. A pang of guilt gnaws at my insides, murky and unsettling.

"Skylar," Austin's voice rumbles, slicing through my turmoil as he looms over me. His piercing blue eyes lock onto mine, heavy with desire and something darker, something possessive.

I should be thinking about the complications, about the promises unspoken and the tangled web of relationships. But all thoughts scatter as Austin aligns himself with my body, the tip of him pressing insistently at my entrance.

His gaze never wavers from mine as he settles over me, and for a breathless moment, we're suspended in the charged space between action and consequence.

Then he thrusts into me, to the root, in one swift, brutal motion that tears a scream from my throat. Every inch of him stretches me, filling me in a way that obliterates reason and memory. There's only here, only now, only the searing connection as he claims me with a fierceness that resonates deep within my bones.

Austin's hand is pressed firmly over my mouth. There's a warning heavy in his gaze as he pins me with a look that could scorch the earth. "Quiet, Skylar," he growls, his voice a low rumble of command. "We wouldn't want one of them to come check on you, would we?"

I can only shake my head, breaths coming in ragged gasps, as he leans back. The withdrawal is an agonizing tease, every muscle in my body tensing in anticipation. And then he slams back inside, so deep, so full, it borders on pain and pleasure.

My eyes roll back, a strangled cry clawing at my throat, muffled by the strength of his hand. I'm at the mercy of his rhythm, the brutal pace he sets as he ruts into me. Every impact of his hips against mine is a symphony of raw, primal need.

"Look at you, trouble," he snarls, his voice thick with lust. "So fucking tight for me. You like that, don't you? Taking all of me."

I can't speak, can't think, reduced to nothing but sensation and need. The bed creaks under the force of our coupling, his dominance unyielding and absolute. There's no gentleness—only the potent mix of power and desire as he claims me.

"Can you feel how hard you make me?" he taunts, fingers digging into my thigh, leaving marks that will remind me of this moment long after he's done. "This is what you do to me, Skylar. No one else...just you."

His words feed the fire inside me. There's no room for anything else, not guilt, not questions—just the relentless pursuit of climax that builds with every thrust of his hips, every stroke of his cock inside me.

The tempo of Austin's hips against mine is relentless, a symphony of flesh that drowns out every thought.

"Come on, baby," he grunts, the filthy encouragement spurring me on. "I want to feel you come around my cock. Do it. Come for me, Skylar."

And I'm close, teetering on the edge, spiraling towards oblivion under the weight of his body.

"Come, Skylar," he orders, his thumb finding that tender nub between us, circling with a precision that borders on torture. "Now." The command in his voice is absolute.

My body obeys before my mind can process the command. The climax hits like a meteor strike, incinerating all sense of self as the pleasure sears through me. I'm scattered to the winds, each piece of me alight with ecstasy, and for a fleeting second, I swear my spirit detaches, hovering above this tangled web of limbs and sweat-drenched sheets.

Austin's groan rumbles through his chest, a primal sound that vibrates against my skin. He follows me over the edge. His release is a thing of raw beauty, etched into my mind. I watch, fascinated as tension lines his face, the normally controlled CEO surrendering.

It's an image I want to capture, to replay over and over, memorizing the way he looks at the pinnacle of vulnerability.

But then it's over—the intensity fades, and he pulls away, stepping back from the bed as if shedding the intimacy with the condom he discards. The sight of him, retreating from me, sends a fresh jolt through my system, one that has nothing to do with desire or satisfaction.

"Wait..." My voice is a hoarse whisper, but he doesn't hear, or maybe he chooses not to. He strides away, leaving me sprawled and bare, the echoes of our passion lingering in the air like a ghost.

The bathroom door clicks shut, then swings open again. His movements are efficient, the silence heavy between us. He approaches with a warm washcloth, and I can't muster the strength to do anything but watch him. There's a tenderness in his touch that belies the fervor of moments ago, as he cleans me up with careful hands. He doesn't speak, and neither do I.

There's an intimacy to this. At least...I thought there was. But now he's grabbing his clothes and slipping them on. He's not even looking at me. I should say something—anything—but my voice is trapped behind the lump in my throat. With each button he fastens, it's as if he's sealing away the heat of our encounter, leaving nothing but cool distance in its wake.

He's at the door now, turning the handle, and still, I lie there—a rag doll discarded after playtime. The click of the latch punctuates the end of whatever this was, and he's gone, footsteps fading down the hall.

Alone, I stare at the ceiling, feeling the weight of what's just happened. What does this mean? My mind races to Cohen. And Theo. Guilt gnaws at me, an unwelcome intruder in the aftermath of ecstasy. I've crossed lines I can't uncross, and now I'm adrift in the consequences.

Breathing in deeply, I try to settle the turmoil churning inside me. The raw intensity

of being with Austin—it's unlike anything I've ever felt, but at what cost? I've opened a Pandora's box of emotion, and I'm not sure I'm ready for what's about to spill out.

I drag myself upright, the room tilting on its axis. My chest feels tight, my heart an erratic drumbeat echoing the chaos in my head. What do I even want?

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The sheets cling to my skin, reminders of what just happened. Austin's scent lingers, a ghost that won't be exorcised.

I press the heels of my palms into my eyes, willing away the images that haunt me. A tear escapes, tracing a warm path down my cheek. It's a rare show of vulnerability, one I quickly quash with a shuddering breath.

"Get it together, Skylar," I mutter to myself.

The shrill ring of my phone slices through the silence. An unknown number flashes on the screen. My heart skips a beat. I hesitate, the last vestiges of peace slipping away. With a shaky hand, I swipe to answer.

"Hello?" My voice is foreign to my own ears.

"Skylar Deveraux?" The voice on the other end is formal, detached.

"Speaking."

"I'm calling on behalf of your father's estate. My name is Richard Calloway, your father's attorney. I regret to inform you that he passed away earlier today."

The words hit like a freight train. The phone slips from my grasp, clattering against the hardwood floor. My father. The man whose approval I could never win, whose shadow I've been trying to escape my whole life. Gone.

I'm numb, caught in the eye of a hurricane. All the anger, the hurt—it's still there, but

now there's nowhere to direct it. What am I supposed to do with all these feelings? They're mine to carry, alone.

My father's death doesn't erase the past, but it closes the door on any future reconciliation. Whether I wanted one or not, the option is gone.

"Miss Deveraux?" The voice calls from the phone, distant and insistent.

I bend down, fingers trembling as I pick it back up. "Yes, I'm here."

"I'm also calling regarding the reading of the will. The firm is handling the estate. As his only child, you're expected to be present."

A bitter laugh bubbles up before I can stop it. Of course. Even in death, my father finds a way to pull me back into his orbit.

"Miss Deveraux?"

I swallow hard, forcing my voice into something steadier. "Thank you for the call, Mr. Calloway. I'll be in touch."

I end the call without another word, staring at the screen like it might offer some kind of answer. But there's nothing. Just silence.

## Chapter 21

Skylar

I zip the overnight bag shut, my movements sharp and efficient. It's just one night—barely a few hours in that suffocating world of marble mausoleums and feigned sympathies. I can survive that much.

I spin on my heel, ready to head for the door, but Theo blocks my path. His presence, like a boulder in a stream, diverts the current of my determination.

"Skylar, you shouldn't be alone." His voice is steady, but there's something raw just beneath the surface.

"Like hell, I shouldn't." My words are ice, a blizzard swirling inside me. "I don't need an entourage, Theo."

He doesn't move. He just stands there, watching me like he can will me into agreeing. His green eyes search mine, seeking entry into the fortress of my resolve. I won't let him see the cracks.

"Cohen wants to be there for you, too," he says. "And Austin—"

"Is Austin," I finish, rolling my eyes. "So what? You all planning a field trip to my personal hell?"

Theo doesn't flinch at my biting tone. He's always been like this, the calm to my storm. But right now, his tranquility feels like a taunt.

"I know your family is complicated," he says.

"Complicated?" The word is acid on my tongue. "Try toxic."

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He doesn't argue. Just steps closer, voice softer. "You don't have to do this alone, Skylark. We can face them together."

"Them?" My laugh is bitter, hollow. "You mean the high society that chewed me up and spat me out?"

"Skylar—"

"No, Theo." I cut him off with a raised hand, my overnight bag clutched in the other. "I don't want you there. And certainly not because of some misplaced sense of duty to a girl you left behind years ago."

"Why won't you let me be there for you?" he persists, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

"Me?" I scoff, shaking my head. "What do you know about me anymore?"

"More than you want to admit."

"Stay here, Theo," I command, my voice laced with finality. "This is my battle. Not yours."

"Skylar," he says softly, but I've heard enough.

"Stop." My voice is steel, even as my resolve wavers under his intense green gaze. "I already told you no."

He doesn't budge, his casual stance at odds with the stubborn set of his jaw. I sidestep him, brushing against the soft cotton of his shirt, and he smells like home and heartache. It's almost enough to break me.

"Sky," he begins again, following me now, a shadow I can't shake.

"God, Theo! Just—stop, okay?" I snap, spinning on my heels to face him. His proximity is a tangible force, the air between us charged with words left unsaid.

"I don't want you there. Take a fucking hint."

His hand lifts, fingers gentle against the line of my jaw, tracing skin that burns at his touch. "I know you're hurting," he murmurs, eyes searching mine, seeing too much. "Lean on me—when you're ready. I'm not going anywhere. Ever."

I stare back at him, every fiber of my being screaming to relent, to collapse into those arms that promise solace. But I harden instead, erecting walls he has no right to tear down.

"Your stubbornness isn't charming, Theo. It's suffocating."

He doesn't flinch, doesn't waver. And as I leave him standing there, something inside me fractures—a tiny crack in the armor I've spent years fortifying.

My pulse stutters. But I shove it down, not yielding to it. I can't. Not now. Not with my father's funeral looming and everything it has dragged to the surface. I ignore Theo behind me and head for the front door.

Cohen's there, leaning against the frame. He doesn't speak right away, just watches me with those knowing eyes, as if he can see through the cracks in my facade.

"Hey," he says softly, reaching out. His fingers brush a stray curl from my forehead, tucking it behind my ear with a gentleness that feels like far too much for me at the moment.

"I'm here." The simple promise lingers in the air between us. "When you're ready."

I nod, because what else can I do? Words are too much; they ask for more than I can give. So I step past him, feeling the ghost of his touch like a whisper over my skin.

The car pulls up, sleek and black, waiting to whisk me away from this place, from them. I slip inside without looking back, without saying goodbye to Austin, or acknowledging Theo's lingering presence. The driver shuts the door, cocooning me in silence and solitude.

But that elusive peace is short-lived.

As we near the hangar where Austin's jet waits—the one show of support he bothered to offer—I spot him. Not Austin. Theo.

How the hell did he even beat me here?

"Damn it, Theo," I mutter under my breath, frustration simmering hot beneath the surface. He shouldn't be here. He's the last thing I need right now.

The car door opens and I step out, bracing myself for the confrontation I know is coming. My heart stutters again, but I quash the sensation ruthlessly. Emotions are a luxury I can't afford, not with the gauntlet I'm about to run.

"Skylar," he calls out, and I steel myself, ready to face him and whatever storm he brings with him.

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I stride across the tarmac, the roar of the jet engines a backdrop to the turmoil swirling inside me. The sleek silhouette of Austin's private plane looms ahead. I can do this. I can get there without acknowledging him, without giving in.

"Skylar, wait," he says, his voice carrying over the noise. I don't slow down. This is a journey I need to take alone, a final goodbye to a man who never truly saw me.

"Please." There's an edge of desperation in Theo's plea, but it doesn't sway me. It can't. Not when every step toward that plane takes me closer to a past I'd rather forget.

"Damn it, Theo," I snap without turning, "you're not coming with me."

But he's persistent, has always been, ever since we were kids and sneaking around corners of my father's estate. Maybe that's why it hurt so much that he never fought for me. He just let them tear us apart.

He catches up, falls into step beside me, his gait easy even as my own is rigid with tension.

"Skylar," he says again, his hand brushing against mine, and I jerk away, my skin tingling from the brief contact.

"Stop," I hiss, hating the way my defenses crumble with just a touch. "You shouldn't have followed me."

"Can't let you go alone," he replies, green eyes piercing through the defenses I've

tried to maintain. "Not when you're hurting like this."

"Like you know anything about how I feel," I retort, glaring at him now.

"Maybe not," he says, quiet but firm. "But I'm not leaving."

I turn away, stepping onto the plane without another word. The cabin is silent save for the hum of the engines.

"Miss Deveraux, Mr. Shepherd," the flight attendant greets us, revealing nothing of her thoughts on the tension that must surely be palpable between us.

"Thank you," I murmur, making my way to the leather seats, sinking into one as far away from Theo as possible.

He joins me anyway, taking the seat opposite, his gaze never leaving my face. "You know I'm here for you, Skylar. Whenever you're ready."

"Ready?" I scoff, meeting his intense stare. "I'll never be ready to walk back into that world. Your world."

"Then let me help carry the burden. Just a little."

I let out a bitter laugh. "You can't. Not this."

"Your father—" he starts, but I cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"Was no father to me. And you know it."

He doesn't argue. He knows better. The silence between us is thick with everything we've been—everything we used to be. I close my eyes, willing the memories away,

but they don't budge. They never do.

"Skylark," Theo whispers, his voice steady despite the roar of the jet picking up speed. "I know I've let you down before. But not this time. I'm here, whether you want me to be or not."

The funeral is a spectacle.

Not in the way funerals should be—quiet, somber, respectful—but in the way that only the absurdly wealthy can make grief feel like a performance. The cathedral itself is beautiful, if unexpected. My father was hardly a religious man and I know my stepmother has never set foot in a church—if she had, she would surely have burst into blasphemous flames.

But they've taken the natural beauty of this building and turned it into something else entirely. The air is thick with perfume and hushed gossip, the kind of whispered condolences that sound more like stock phrases than genuine sentiments. White roses spill over every surface, their cloying scent clashing with the gleaming gold accents and the polished marble beneath my heels.

It's excessive. It's theatrical. It's exactly the kind of show my stepmother would orchestrate.

I step through the towering double doors, my heels clicking against marble so polished it could be a mirror. Conversations hush, whispers slither through the air, and a chill settles over the room that has nothing to do with the temperature.

Despite the fact that it's my father on display at the front of the cavernous room, my arrival was clearly unexpected.

At the front of the room, a woman stands draped in couture black, diamonds glittering

at her throat, grief painted on like the rest of her makeup. Trista. My darling stepmother.

She clearly wasn't expecting me. I see it in the way her posture stiffens when I step inside, the slight widening of her perfectly lined eyes before she smooths it all away beneath a practiced mask of grief.

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Her gaze moves to Theo beside me, and for a moment, something flickers across her face—shock, surprise, maybe even a touch of disdain. It's gone in an instant, but not before I notice.

She doesn't like it. My presence at this "event" or Theo's presence at my side.

Her mouth tightens, her gaze lingering for a beat too long, calculating. She won't make a scene. Not yet. Not until she can maximize the damage.

She smooths a perfectly manicured hand over her hip, then turns back to the guests, the picture of composed devastation.

It won't last.

I take my seat near the back, Theo following suit, our presence acknowledged only in stolen glances and shifting shoulders. No one speaks to me. No one asks why I'm here. They already know I don't belong.

The service drags on, an endless stream of hollow words that feel foreign when attached to my father. They call him generous. They call him a man of integrity. They call him a loving husband, a devoted patriarch. I stare at the casket, wondering if he'd recognize the version of himself being eulogized.

Then, silence. A beat too long. A moment stretched thin.

And then—

Trista moves.

She dabs at her eyes, her breath shuddering just enough to be heard, before she rises from her seat. The widow in black. The tragic, grieving wife.

And I know. This is the moment she's been waiting for.

"I just..." She pauses, swallows, gathers herself. "I just want to say a few words."

She turns to face the mourners, but her gaze lands on me.

"I know we all want to honor my husband's memory today," she begins, voice soft yet clear, a well-rehearsed tremor giving it weight. "And I know he would have wanted this day to be about love. About family."

She sighs, her fingers tightening around the handkerchief she hasn't actually used.

"But it pains me that some people—" A pause. A glance in my direction. "—don't understand the meaning of respect."

The air in the room shifts. Attention locks onto me.

I stay quiet. My jaw clenches, but I remain still. I know the role she's trying to force me into. She won't get it. Not this time.

Trista leans into the moment, her lips quivering as she turns toward the mourners, voice rising in false indignation. "He would have wanted peace," she continues. "He would have wanted dignity. And instead, we have...this."

Her gaze drifts over to me again, her lips curling with a smirk before it disappears behind another tearful gesture.

I inhale sharply through my nose but I don't flinch.

She's baiting me.

She wants a reaction, a reason to turn me into the villain of her carefully spun tragedy.

I won't give it to her.

The hush in the room feels suffocating, like the air itself is holding its breath, waiting for the next act in her performance.

Trista looks around, her eyes wide with faux shock, lips trembling just enough to make it convincing. "I tried. I tried to make him happy," she says, her voice rising as she glances at the mourners. "I gave him everything. My love, my devotion, my loyalty."

Her words roll off her tongue like velvet, but I know the truth. She gave him nothing but control and self-interest. But I don't speak. I just watch her, every word from her mouth pulling at the seams of my own restraint.

"But there are some people here today," she continues, her eyes cutting to me again, "who...who just can't seem to understand the importance of family. Of sticking together, through thick and thin. Who want to make this about them."

The guilt-tripping is blatant. She's the tragic widow, forsaken and misunderstood, and I'm the heartless stepdaughter ruining her grief. She waits for the murmur of sympathy that follows, as if she's already calculating the success of her performance.

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Her eyes flick to Theo once more, lingering, and I catch the flicker of something—something darker in the way her gaze narrows.

“We should be focused on honoring my husband’s memory,” Trista continues, her voice trembling with the weight of her melodramatic grief. “But it’s hard to do that when others come here to stir up conflict. To make a spectacle of what should be a time of peace.”

My heart races, not with anger, but with something heavier, more suffocating. Outsider. Intruder. Imposter. All words I’ve heard, all feelings I’ve buried deep for too long. Trista’s carefully crafted martyrdom is only amplifying what I’ve always known: I don’t belong here. Not in this world, not among these people.

I sit straighter, willing myself not to let the heat rise in my chest, not to let the suffocating weight of this family’s cruelty take root again.

She’s watching me, like a predator sizing up her prey, waiting for me to crack. She’ll twist whatever I say or do into another piece of the drama she’s creating.

“I just...I just wanted a peaceful life with him,” Trista continues, voice lowering into a delicate sob. She clutches her handkerchief as though it might be the only thing keeping her upright, even though her back is as straight as ever.

“I gave him everything. My love, my loyalty. I tried to make him happy, to give him a family, to keep the peace.”

She pauses, scanning the room as if searching for allies, her gaze briefly brushing

over the mourners, who watch her, captivated by her theatrics.

A soft sob escapes her lips, and she bites her bottom lip, shaking her head as if the very thought of it is unbearable. And then, just as the room seems on the verge of breaking into collective sympathy, she lifts her chin, eyes locking onto me once more.

"But there are some people who just can't seem to understand the importance of family," she says, her voice rising just enough to ensure the words carry. "Some people who would rather tear everything down just to make themselves feel important. That's the kind of selfishness that ruins families."

The words land with a thud, echoing in the room, and I feel the eyes of every single person turn toward me. My pulse quickens, and for a brief moment, I think I might choke on the weight of the silence that follows. The room holds its breath, and I feel every eye in the room burn through me.

She's no longer pretending to mourn. She's painting me as the villain, the one who's come to ruin her perfect life, her perfect marriage, her perfect family.

I swallow hard, but I don't flinch. I won't give her the satisfaction. I won't become part of her twisted story.

Trista lets the silence drag on, her eyes never leaving mine. She seems to savor the weight of the tension before continuing, voice laced with false sincerity, "I just...I just don't understand why some people—" She glances at me again, then quickly turns away, "—can't leave well enough alone."

I brace myself for what comes next, knowing full well that every word she says from here on will only deepen the divide she's already tried to create.

But I won't be her scapegoat. Not today. Never again.

I stand up slowly, feeling the weight of every gaze on me as I make my way to the front, my heels clicking against the marble floor, sharp and sure. Trista's eyes narrow, but she doesn't stop me. She doesn't want me to leave—not now. She wants me to fight. To engage.

But I won't give her that satisfaction.

I stop in front of her, my back straight, my breath steady. "I'm not here to make a spectacle of his memory," I say, my voice cutting through the tension, low but unwavering. "I'm here because he was my father, and I deserve the right to say goodbye to him. This"—I gesture to the opulent room, the lavish decorations, the staged sorrow—"is not what he would have wanted. Not for me. Not for anyone."

Her face freezes, and I can see the moment the mask slips. For a heartbeat, the woman who has built an empire on manipulation and control falters. But she quickly regains composure, pressing her lips together in a thin line.

"Don't pretend you knew him," she hisses, her voice sharp. "You never did. You were never part of this family."

I take a deep breath, my gaze steady on hers. "Maybe that's the problem," I say, my voice quiet but firm. "Maybe you never wanted me to be."

And with that, I turn on my heel and walk away, the sound of my footsteps the only thing breaking the silence.

As I make my way out of the room, I feel a strange sense of peace settling in. It's the kind of peace I haven't felt in years. Maybe this is the moment I finally stop pretending. Maybe this is the moment I walk away from everything that's never truly been mine.

Theo catches up to me by the door, his hand brushing mine as I step into the quiet of the hallway.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice low, concerned.

Theo's hand settles on my shoulder, his touch a tether I never asked for. He stands too close. His refusal to leave, even now, is a violation of my last sanctuary.

"Please, don't." The words scrape raw from my throat, but he doesn't flinch.

"You don't have to go through this alone."

"Alone is how I've lived it, Theo," I shoot back, shaking off his hand. "Alone is how I'll survive it."

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I move away, finding refuge near a stained-glass window where fragmented light scatters across my path. Each color is a memory I wish I could forget—the crimson of whispered arguments, the sapphire of tears shed in silence, the gold of expectations unmet.

"Your father would have wanted—"

"Stop," I cut him off, the word a lash. "He wanted nothing to do with me. And she made sure of it."

My stepmother's voice crescendos then, shrill and insistent as she recounts her version of the story—a narrative crafted to serve her own ends, painting her as the bereaved widow, cruelly abandoned by her stepdaughter. She's abandoned all pretenses of this being about my father, her husband, and his death.

I walk away from the chaos of my stepmother's performance, from Theo continuing to ignore what I want. The room seems to close in on me as I make my way down the long, echoing hallway.

It isn't just her. It's everything. This world of wealth and privilege—it suffocates me. It always has.

I find a quiet corner, a window that overlooks the manicured gardens, where nothing feels real anymore. The tears that have been threatening to spill all afternoon stay put, but my thoughts are a storm.

Theo is still behind me, of course.

“Skylark,” his voice is soft, tentative, but there’s an urgency underneath. “Please, baby.”

I turn, my eyes flashing with frustration. I can feel the emotions welling up, the years of being overlooked, dismissed, of being abandoned. “You just don’t listen, do you?” The words are sharp, but they feel necessary. “What is it you even want from me, Theo? You want to play house for a little while, make me fall for you all over again, and then just walk away a second time?”

His face tightens in confusion, and I see the frustration in his eyes too. He’s trying to help, trying to be here for me, but it feels like a foreign concept. Like he’s still trying to make me fit into a life I’ve never wanted.

“I’m just trying to be here for you. Don’t shut me out.”

It’s the same argument we always have. He wants to fix things, but he doesn’t see that the real problem is deeper than any gesture he can offer. It’s in the very foundation of this world I was born into. The wealth, the image, the status—none of it was ever mine. They’ve always treated me like an outsider, like a shadow that only half-belongs in their perfect picture.

“Maybe you’re right,” I say, my voice quieter now, the anger slowly bleeding out. “Maybe I’ve been shutting you out. But you’re not hearing me. You want to pull me into this world, into the life I’ve tried to escape, but I can’t do it anymore. I can’t keep pretending that I fit here.”

Theo takes a step forward, his face softening, but it’s not enough. “You don’t have to fit in, Sky. You don’t have to change who you are. I don’t want you to.”

But I already have, haven’t I? For years, I’ve tried to blend in, to find a place among them, even as they made it clear that I was never meant to be a part of their world. All

that effort, all that bending and twisting to meet their expectations—what did it get me? A few half-hearted attempts at love? A family who only wanted to control me and then abandoned me completely when I wouldn't become some Stepford daughter?

“Maybe I don't need to change who I am,” I murmur, almost to myself. “But I don't want to be a part of this anymore. Not with you, not with Cohen, not with Austin...”

Theo flinches like I've struck him, and for a moment, I see something raw in his eyes—hurt, confusion, but also a sliver of understanding. Maybe it's the same realization that's settling in my own chest: that I've been lying to myself, pretending this world could somehow be mine.

“I think I need to figure things out on my own,” I continue, my voice steady now. “I can't keep holding on to something that's never been real.”

Theo's silence speaks volumes. He's not going to argue. Not now. I'm not sure if it's relief or something darker that's filling the space between us, but I know one thing for sure. This is the first time in years I've felt like I'm taking control of my life, and for the first time, I feel a little lighter. It's not Theo or Cohen or Austin—it's me. It's my choice. My decision to walk away from the chaos, the privilege, and the toxic web they've all tangled me in.

“You don't have to make any decisions now,” Theo says quietly, his voice soft but firm. “But whatever you choose, I'll respect it.”

I nod, swallowing the knot that's formed in my throat. “I know. But right now, I need space. I need time to think.”

I don't look back as I walk away. Maybe this is the beginning of letting go—of finally unshackling myself from the suffocating expectations and false promises of a

family I never truly had. Maybe this is where I start to live for myself.

## Chapter 22

Skylar

I don't go to the will reading. I don't even consider it. What's the point? I already know what it will be—me left out of everything with all of it going to my stepmother or some charity. His blood runs in my veins, but it's not enough to tie me to this world anymore. And honestly, I'm done pretending like it matters.

Without him, I have no reason to stay, no reason to cling to anything about this world—the mansion, the people who fill it, the role they want me to play. It's all fake, all smoke and mirrors. And I walked away from all of it years ago.

I don't want to see my stepmother's smug face or hear her lecture me on my "lack of gratitude" for what little she decides to spare me.

I'm standing outside on the tarmac waiting to board the jet home. Theo stays back, lingering by the door. He looks miserable, and I can feel the weight of it every time he looks at me. But he's not pushing. He's not offering me comfort, no words of reassurance. He's not trying to fix anything. He's just...here. And for once, I'm grateful for the space. Because I don't know what to say to him either.

We're finally beckoned onboard. I don't wait for Theo. I just board and find a spot to sit. The engine hums to life, and I stare out the window as the world outside blurs past.

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The closer we get to home, the more I realize how fast summer is slipping away. I'm not sure what comes next. I should be thinking about the kids—about my responsibilities, about the school year starting soon and how everything will go back to normal. But normal doesn't feel like something I can grasp anymore.

I've told myself this is temporary, this whole arrangement with Austin. It's never been built to last. But now, as I watch the landscape slip away behind me, I wonder if I can even go back to the life I knew before.

Will things really go back to normal? Or have I changed too much to ever fit into that world again?

The kids won't need me soon, and neither will their fathers. Sure, they'll need help after school, but it won't be hard for them to find part-time help to fill that role. Someone who doesn't come with baggage.

A temporary fix—that's what I've been. A band-aid for a family adjusting to divorce, my role always had an expiration date. It wasn't supposed to matter. I wasn't supposed to care.

I should be excited. I should be thinking about all the things I have planned for the future, but all I can focus on is the feeling that this whole summer, this whole experience with Austin and Cohen and Theo, has been like a fever dream.

I can't shake the thought that I was never a part of it. Not really. Maybe I was just a distraction for them—especially Austin. Wasn't that all I was? A temporary break from their reality, something to keep their minds occupied, a way to pass the time

before they returned to their real lives?

It makes me feel small. Unimportant. Like I've been playing along with a group of people I didn't belong with, and now that it's over, I'm left wondering what I was even doing here in the first place. What purpose did I serve in their world?

I push the thought away for a moment, but it lingers. Because if I'm being honest with myself, I can't help but feel the pull of it.

Theo. He was never going to stick around. That was obvious from the start. He'd already shown me who he was the last time—when he walked away without a second thought. He'd left me behind, surrounded by the empty promises of a future we could build together. And now, as I look at him, sitting there, his face etched with regret, I know nothing's changed. He'll leave again.

Cohen's no different. He's been running from his pain for so long, trying to patch up the holes his ex-wife left behind, and I was just another way to fill that void. Twice now. Once in Vegas and again this summer. I don't think he ever saw me as more than that. Another distraction, a temporary fix to soothe the ache. He'd never stay. None of them would. I knew that deep down, even when I wanted to believe otherwise.

And Austin...I don't even know what to think about him anymore. Maybe he wanted me in the beginning because I was something to conquer—something unattainable, something he could claim. But after he got what he wanted, after he had me, it was like I was nothing more than a trophy to him. A fleeting moment of desire. After he let me fall for him, after I'd given in, he's barely spoken to me since. It's like I never existed beyond that night.

I felt used, and I didn't like it. I hated that he could just walk away and leave me to pick up the pieces of whatever it was we had—if we ever had anything at all.

So maybe it's better this way. Maybe it's better if I just stop pretending like any of them really want me around. Maybe it's easier to walk away first, before any of them have a chance to do it again.

I should focus on the one thing I can control. The one thing that hasn't betrayed me.

I pull my thoughts back to the kids. The reality of what's ahead. The need for a clean break from everything, from all of them. Because no matter how I try to spin it, I know deep down that I'm never going to be a part of their world. Not in the way they want me to be. And I can't keep pretending otherwise.

We land and head back to the mansion, and it's like nothing ever changed. The house is just as cold, just as grand, just as empty. The walls hold secrets, just like they always have. I try to keep my head down, to bury myself in the routine of things, in the daily tasks that keep me busy enough to forget the mess I've gotten myself into.

Days bleed into one another, each as indistinguishable as the last. I fall back into my old patterns quickly, like slipping into a pair of worn-out shoes, but there's no comfort in the familiarity.

I retreat. I keep my distance, both physically and emotionally. I don't let myself get too close to them again. I can't. Not after everything that's happened, not after realizing how easy it is for them to walk away. Or for me to convince myself it's not real.

The men sense the shift in me, the emotional distance that's grown like a chasm between us.

Theo lingers. He doesn't push. He doesn't try to talk to me, doesn't ask if I'm okay. I can see the misery in his eyes, but there's a quiet resignation there too, like he's decided that whatever this is between us is over. He seems to be waiting for

something, but neither of us knows what. We're both stuck in this space where we're not quite together, not quite apart. It's the most uncomfortable place I've ever been, and I'm not sure how to get out of it.

Cohen doesn't even seem to notice the distance. Although, I suspect he's avoiding me almost as much as I'm avoiding him. Maybe he's just hoping it'll all blow over, that the tension will ease with time. But it doesn't. He keeps his distance, but there's a coldness in the air every time I walk by him. It's like a flicker of disappointment, maybe. Or maybe it's guilt. I'm not sure anymore.

Austin, though—he's harder to read. He watches me, like he's studying me, waiting for some sign, something. It's suffocating, like he's waiting for something to crack, for me to fall apart or finally give in. But I won't.

We all know something's wrong, but no one knows how to fix it. I don't know how to undo the damage that's been done or how to go back to the way things were. And maybe, deep down, I know we never can.

Because how do you fix something when you don't even understand how it broke? How do you reconnect when you're not sure you were ever truly connected at all?

Why do I even want to?

I wake up each morning with the same gnawing feeling in my chest, the same emptiness that's been there since I got here. I'm still a stranger in my own life. A guest in a world that isn't mine. A temporary fix for a family that doesn't really need me.

A week after my father's funeral, my phone rings with another call from his lawyer. Rain pelts against the window in a steady rhythm, matching the throb in my temples. I snatch up my phone, pressing it to my ear, steeling myself for another hollow

exchange.

"Ms. Deveraux?" The lawyer's voice is crisp, a stark contrast to the muffled storm outside.

"Speaking." My reply is clipped, wary of more bad news.

"How are you doing, my dear?"

"Fine. Is there something you need?"

"Yes, yes. Good news this time, I'm sure you're happy to hear. I want to apologize in advance, Ms. Deveraux. This should never have happened to you. Your father...he set up a trust fund for you. You've had access since you turned twenty-one."

"I...what?"

I freeze, the words swirling around my head, none of them fitting together. My father set up a trust fund for me? How could that be true? The last time I spoke to him, he'd made it clear I was dead to him. He cut me off financially—and emotionally—when I was nineteen. No calls. No checks. Nothing.

The lawyer's voice remains steady, unfazed by my confusion. "I understand this is a shock. It should have come to your attention much sooner, but your stepmother took steps to ensure you were unaware of the account. It was only through the recent reading of the will, and some additional digging, that we uncovered the discrepancies. Everything has now been corrected, and I wanted to make sure you were aware of the account immediately."

His words hang heavy in the air, and for a moment, all I can hear is the relentless drumming of rain. A trust fund. Money that should have been mine, kept just out of reach by a woman who relished in wielding control as much as she did her designer handbags.

“This...doesn’t make sense,” I mutter, though the words feel hollow. “Why would he—why would she—”

“The details of why are not entirely clear, but we believe your stepmother took actions to prevent you from benefiting. Perhaps she thought she could control the inheritance in some way. In any case, the account is now yours, as it should have been from the beginning.”

The rain beats against the window, and I open and close my mouth, trying to think of something to say.

"Are you still there, Ms. Deveraux?"

"Yes," I manage, my voice barely above the patter of raindrops. "Yes, I'm here."

"Shall I proceed with the details?"

"Please." My mind races as he outlines figures and stipulations, but it's the freedom they represent that sends a shockwave through me.

“Ms. Deveraux, the account is substantial, and it's all yours now. We can arrange for you to access it at your convenience. If you would like to discuss the details further, I am available at any time.”

I struggle to find my words. “I—I don’t know what to say. I didn’t even know about this...why didn’t he tell me?”

There’s a pause on the other end, almost as if the lawyer is carefully considering how to respond. “I’m not sure, Skylar. Your father was more than a client, he was a friend. I never understood his decision to cut you out of his life. It seems perhaps he intended to protect you, though his actions were misguided. Regardless, the trust is now yours.

You are entitled to it, and I would suggest we meet to go over the specifics.”

“Thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

I sit there for a long time after the call ends, staring at the phone as if the answers will magically appear on the screen. My hands are cold, my thoughts colder. I have financial freedom now. Real freedom. The kind I’ve always wanted but never thought I’d get. A trust fund, hidden from me all these years, now suddenly back in my name. The world is mine to take, to do whatever I want with it.

I could leave. I could pack up and go anywhere. Anywhere but here. The idea isn’t even just a fleeting thought anymore—it’s possible. There’s nothing holding me back now. No ties, no debts. I could leave my job at the school and figure out where I want to settle. I have the money to keep me afloat while I search for a new job in a different district.

The men aren’t my responsibility. The kids won’t need me once school starts back up. I could disappear, go somewhere warm, somewhere quiet. Maybe travel, find a place where no one knows my name.

I should want that, right? It should be the easiest decision in the world, to walk away from everything that’s left me twisted up inside. The mansion, the men, the ghosts of the past—there’s nothing keeping me here now but some lingering sense of obligation I don’t fully understand.

But for some reason, leaving feels harder than it should and that surprises me.

When I picture it, I see myself on a plane, the seat next to me empty. I can already hear the hollow sound of my own footsteps in whatever place I find. The silence presses down on me, and it feels like my chest is going to crack open from the weight of it.

I try to picture what life would be like without them. I don't want to leave them behind. They have their own problems, their own baggage. I know that. I'm not the one who can fix them. But somehow, when I imagine walking out the door for good, I feel like I'm the one who's giving up on us. Giving up on them. And maybe, just maybe, on myself.

So, why does it feel like I'm already losing something I never even had?

Maybe this is what freedom feels like. The space to run, but the constant pull to stay.

## Chapter 23

Theo

I watch Skylar pace the room, her chestnut hair swaying with each sharp turn. Her words from the funeral echo in my head—sharp, final. It's just grief, I tell myself. It has to be.

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Please let it just be the grief.

"Sky," I start, reaching out to steady her, but she shrugs me off, her hazel eyes flaming with that familiar intensity. My heart lurches at the coldness. This isn't us. Not the Skylar and Theo who once shared whispered secrets under starlit skies.

"Please, don't," she snaps, and it's like a door slamming shut. I drop my hand, feeling the gap between us widen. In desperation, I claw through my memories, searching for a time when the space between us wasn't filled with regret and what-ifs.

We were young, hidden away in my family's lake house. The air was thick with the scent of pine and the promise of first loves. I remember how her laughter sounded like music, how it filled the empty spaces inside me. That night, under a blanket of darkness and the naive belief that love could conquer all, we gave ourselves to each other. It was clumsy and sweet, a moment etched into my soul.

But then dawn came, reality set in, and I let go without a fight. The world expected too much from us, and I caved. I left for a future that seemed golden but was tarnished without her in it.

My parents had their plan for me, for my future, one that didn't include her. And my father, the force that had always dictated my life, made it clear that I had no choice but to follow his path. They didn't just tear us apart—they made sure I was pulled far away.

The boarding school was a punishment, a way to separate us, to ensure we wouldn't disrupt the perfect future they had planned for me. I never had a say in it. The

moment I stepped onto that plane, I knew it was a mistake. But I was young. I let them win. And I've regretted it every day since.

I left for a future that was nothing without her in it. Even after all these years, after everything I've built, I still carry her with me. I never stopped thinking about her. She's always been in my heart, even when I tried to ignore it. She's never been far, and I've never forgotten.

Now, watching her slowly slip away from me again? I can't. I can't do that again. I can't lose her. Not now, not when I finally have a second chance. I wasn't strong enough to fight for her then. I'll be damned if I let her walk away again now.

"Skylar," I say again, softer this time. "Talk to me."

She stops pacing, her shoulders rigid. "What do you want me to say, Theo? That everything's fine?" Her voice is tight, her words clipped.

I want to tell her that I know things are far from fine, that every fiber of my being screams to close the distance between us, to not make the same mistake twice. But fear clamps down on my tongue, and I swallow the truth.

"Nothing's changed." My voice barely rises above a whisper, laden with an emotion I can't disguise. "I'm still here for you, no matter what."

She looks at me then, really looks at me, and for a second, I catch a glimpse of the girl who used to look at me like I was her whole world. But then she vanishes as quickly as she appeared, replaced by the steel fortress Skylar built around herself.

"Go back to your tech toys, Theo," she says, turning away. "That's where you're best, isn't it? Hiding behind screens."

Her words sting, but I know they're just a deflection—a way to keep some distance between us. I won't let her push me away again. Not this time. I'm not the same boy who didn't fight hard enough, who couldn't see past the present.

"Maybe," I concede, because arguing would only drive her further away. "But I never stopped caring about you. Not for a single day."

She doesn't respond, but the slight hitch in her step tells me she's heard me. It's not much, but it's enough. Enough for me to hold onto the hope that maybe, just maybe, she feels it too—the pull of a bond that's been stretched and frayed but never broken.

It's not just her, though. Cohen and Austin, with their stubborn pride and foolish games, are fanning the flames of this disaster. I watch them, my gaze flickering between Skylar's retreating figure and the two idiots who seem hell-bent on driving her away for good.

"Seriously?" My voice cuts through the silence, sharper than I mean it to be. "This is how you're going to play it?"

Cohen looks up, his eyes meeting mine. There's an edge there, but it's dulled by exhaustion, shadows lying heavy beneath his blue gaze. He knows he's messing up, has to know, yet he's trapped in his own head, playing defense against ghosts of his past.

"Play what, Theo?" he asks, his voice low.

"Like you don't see what's happening," I snap. "Like you don't care that she's one bad day away from leaving us all."

Austin's lips press into a thin line, his expression unreadable. It's like trying to read the surface of a frozen lake, knowing there's life underneath but unable to reach it.

But I see the cracks forming; I see how much Skylar shakes the ground he stands on.

"Is this really your best?" I challenge him, unable to keep the accusation from my tone.

"Watch it, Theo," Austin warns, his voice steady but his blue eyes betraying a storm beneath.

"Or what? You'll lose her because you're too damn scared to face your own feelings?" I can feel my control slipping, anger bubbling up. I won't let their stupidity—their fear—be the reason Skylar disappears from our lives.

"Enough," Cohen mutters, running a hand through his hair. "We're not having this discussion now."

"Then when, Cohen? When she's gone?" My words are a punch, thrown with the desperate hope that they'll knock some sense into them.

"Look," Austin starts, taking a step toward me, his jaw clenched. "We all know what's at stake."

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"Do we?" I question, the doubt obvious in my voice. "Because it seems to me like you're both ready to write her off as collateral damage in whatever internal wars you're fighting."

They exchange a glance, a silent conversation that I'm not privy to but that speaks volumes about the chaos brewing beneath the surface. The resolve hardens within me like cooling steel.

I won't give up. Not on Skylar, not on the possibility of something more—something real. Even if I have to drag these two kicking and screaming into the fight, I'll do it. Because nothing matters more than making sure Skylar stays in our lives, that the tentative threads holding us together aren't severed by fear or foolishness.

And if it's a war they want, then it's a war they'll get. Because when it comes to Skylar, I'm all in. For the long haul, no matter what it takes.

"Listen," I snarl, my voice low and laced with barely controlled rage. "This—" I gesture between the three of us, "—this isn't working."

Austin's gaze hardens, the muscles in his jaw twitching. "What do you want, Theo?"

"Dammit, Austin, look at her!" I half-shout, throwing my hand at where Skylar is standing, alone, radiating an aura of untouchable grace even as she masks her crumbling world. "She's pulling away because of us, because of your damn distance! Why are you acting like she doesn't matter to you?"

His eyes narrow, and he crosses his arms defensively. "I've got a lot on my plate,

Theo. It's not about her."

"Like hell, it isn't." Frustration seethes through me, hot and vicious. "Skylar needs us—to be there, to be present. And you're treating her like she's just another item on your to-do list, something you can check off and move on from. Is that all she is to you? A passing distraction?"

The silence that follows is heavy, loaded with unspoken truths and denial. Austin looks away, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows whatever excuses threaten to spill out. He knows I'm right, we both know it, but his stubbornness is a wall I'm determined to tear down.

"Why are we even doing this?" Austin's voice breaks through the tension, his words rough and edged with frustration. "You finally have your second chance, Theo. Why not just take it and leave the rest of us out of it? Why drag us into something that clearly isn't meant to be?"

His challenge hangs in the air, thick with accusation. It stings, but I don't back down.

"Because it's what she wants," I reply, my words sharper than I intended them to be. "Skylar wants this. Even if she's fighting it now, she wants us—all three of us. I can see it."

Austin's jaw clenches, his muscles tight as if fighting back something far deeper than just a conversation. I see it—his stubborn pride, the walls he's built, and the fear that's keeping him locked in his own head. The tension between us tightens, pushing me to stand firm.

"And if she's fighting it?" Austin presses, his voice low but furious. "What then? You really think this is what's best for her? For any of us?"

I step closer, my frustration boiling over. "She's not fighting it because it's not meant to be, Austin. She's fighting it because she's scared. Scared to hope, scared we'll pull away. And you—" I gesture between the two of us, "—are making it worse with your distance, your damn fear to be real with her."

Austin takes a step back, as if my words have struck deeper than he's willing to admit.

"Skylar deserves better," I press on, my voice dropping to a hoarse whisper, the hurt mingling with the anger. "She deserves all of us. Not this half-assed attention you think you can get away with. If you care about her, really care, then prove it. Because if we lose her now, we lose her for good."

With Austin momentarily silenced, my gaze slides over to Cohen, the intensity of my frustration far from diminished. "And you," I start, my voice low and threaded with accusation, "what's your excuse? Why are you just standing there, watching her crumble?"

Cohen crosses his arms. His eyes, dark and clouded like an impending storm, meet mine but flicker away too quickly. "It's not that simple," he mutters, the scruff on his jaw seeming all the more pronounced as he clenches his teeth.

"Make it simple," I demand, stepping closer to him. "She's falling apart, Cohen, and you're acting like you don't see it. Like the last few weeks never happened. Are you really going to let her slip away without even trying?"

He exhales sharply, a sound that carries the weight of his own battles. "You think I don't care?" There's a fire in his voice now, a spark of something that I've been waiting to see. "I'm just trying to keep my head above water, man. You know what I've been through."

"Then don't drown alone!" I shoot back, my patience threadbare. "Don't let Skylar drown either. She needs us—all of us—to be real with her. To show up, not just physically, but emotionally too."

The standoff is palpable, two men driven by their own demons. How can they not see that she's become our center of gravity?

"Skylar's been through hell," I murmur more to myself than to them, the silence wrapping around my words. "She's trying to heal, and she needs us—not this...whatever we've been giving her."

"Look," I start again, my voice firm but calm, "I'm not saying I have all the answers. But I can't—I won't—let her slip away without a fight."

I meet Austin's gaze first, then Cohen's, letting them see the determination etched into every line of my face. I need them to understand how serious I am.

"Whatever it takes," I say, each word deliberate, "we have to remind her that she's not alone. That she's loved and wanted. By all of us."

They nod, a silent agreement passing between us, and something shifts in the room. It's subtle, but it's there—a renewed sense of purpose. We're on the same page now, or at least starting to turn to it.

As they walk away to process everything, presumably to figure out their next steps, I stay rooted in place. A sense of clarity washes over me. Skylar's pulling away for a reason. She's been hurt before, and she's scared it'll happen again. Who wouldn't be?

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But I'm not going anywhere. Not this time. And if that means putting in the hard work, facing the tough conversations, and tearing down those walls brick by brick, then so be it.

### Chapter 24

Austin

I lean back against the cool marble countertop, a glass of whiskey in hand. The ice clinks softly as I take a slow sip, the burn of the alcohol grounding me. Across the kitchen island, Cohen rummages through the fridge, pulling out leftovers from last night's dinner.

"Thai again?" he chuckles, glancing over at me with that familiar crooked grin.

"Better than whatever take-out you'd have ordered," I retort, my tone light but firm. The mundane banter, the comfortable back-and-forth—it's our way of keeping the peace, avoiding the tension simmering just beneath the surface.

Cohen plates up the food and slides into a chair. We eat in silence for a few moments before I set down my fork, my thoughts drifting to the woman who's turned my life sideways. Skylar.

"Can we talk?" I ask, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

"About what? The Henderson merger or the fact that we're out of coffee?" Cohen replies, his attempt at humor falling flat between us.

"Skylar," I say, cutting straight to the heart of the matter. There's no point in dancing around the issue anymore.

He pauses mid-chew, his expression closing off for a moment before he swallows and nods. "Yeah, okay."

"Look, we've shared women before, but this..." I trail off, struggling to find the right words. This would be different. Permanent, even. My fingers tighten around my glass.

"Isn't temporary," Cohen finishes for me, his voice low. He leans back, running a hand through his hair. "This wouldn't be like those other times."

"Exactly." I stand, pacing the length of the kitchen. "So how do you feel about all this?"

There's a long pause. Cohen's gaze meets mine, a silent understanding passing between us. We're brothers, bonded by blood in every sense, but this...this is new territory.

"I don't know, Austin." His voice is laced with an honesty that catches me off guard. "It's complicated with her."

"Complicated," I echo, feeling the weight of that word settle in my chest. It's not just about sharing Skylar; it's about the tangled web of emotions she's awakened in each of us. Emotions I'm not sure any of us are ready to navigate. Well, except Theo. He knows exactly what he wants when it comes to Skylar Deveraux.

"Look, we need to figure this out," I say, stopping in front of him. "Before it's—"

"Too late?" Cohen suggests, and there's a resigned edge to his voice.

"Right." I take another drink, the whiskey doing little to soothe the restless energy coursing through me.

The ice in my glass clinks as I set it down, the sharp sound slicing through the silence. My eyes narrow, locking onto Cohen's. "You're holding something back."

Cohen shifts in his seat, a flicker of unease crossing his features. He runs a hand over his stubble, a tell that never fails to betray his discomfort. "Skylar," he starts, his voice rough around the edges, "she was the one I met in Vegas."

"Vegas?" The word echoes in my head. "Why the hell didn't you say anything before now?"

He hesitates, tension coiling around us like a serpent. His deep blue eyes look stormy, clouded with memories he'd rather forget. "It was right after..." His voice trails off, but there's no need for him to finish the sentence. Right after his wife left him shattered.

"Go on," I prod, a bitter taste creeping into my mouth.

"I was a mess, Austin." He fidgets with his watch, his movements betraying his calm facade. "I barely remembered anything from that trip. Didn't even know it was Skylar until later. Much later. We never exchanged names and she looked...I don't know, different?"

"Christ, Cohen." I rake a hand through my hair, frustration mounting. "And now?"

His gaze meets mine again, more vulnerable than I've seen in a long time. "Now, it makes sense why I was so drawn to her. Even from the start."

Cohen sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. "I can't explain it, Austin. But I want her

in ways I never expected. It's always felt natural with her. Like we've known each other forever."

A knot forms in my stomach, not from anger, but from something else. Something deep. I swallow hard, my jaw clenching. "You're telling me you want her? You want this...mess?"

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He nods slowly, his voice lower now. "Yeah. I do. It feels strange, and it's not easy, but I want it. I want her, Austin. All of her. Even if it means sharing her. And that's hard to admit, especially to you, but I can't keep pretending it's just some casual thing."

I feel like I've been hit with a freight train, and for a moment, I don't know how to respond. The words I want to say are tangled up, too heavy to get out.

"So what do we do now?" I finally ask, the question hanging in the air between us.

Cohen takes a deep breath, his shoulders tense. "I don't know, man. But I don't want to walk away from this. Not now. Not with her. It's messy, but...it's real." He looks me straight in the eyes. "I think I've fallen for her."

The weight of his confession settles over me, and for a moment, everything goes quiet. It's almost suffocating. My chest tightens, and the words that have been swirling inside of me for days finally rise to the surface.

I swallow, trying to shake off the lump in my throat, but it's no use. "I think...I think I've got real feelings for her too."

The silence stretches between us, heavy and pregnant with possibilities. For a long moment, we both just sit there, the weight of what we're saying finally starting to settle into place.

You need to figure out what you want," Cohen says finally, his voice steady. "She's not gonna wait forever. Neither of us can keep dragging our feet."

I nod, but the ache in my chest tightens again. He's right, and I know it. I've been pushing Skylar away, testing her, but I've never let myself truly admit how much I care. And now, I don't know if she's still waiting for me—or if she's already moved on.

After the conversation with Cohen, something shifts inside me. The weight of it all, the mess I've created, and the confusion swirling around me—it's suddenly clear. I don't want to push Skylar away anymore. I don't want to keep pretending that the distance I've been creating between us is for some higher purpose, some noble reason.

It's because I'm scared.

But knowing what I don't want doesn't make figuring out what I do want any easier. I'm stuck. Stuck between desperately wanting to fix this and being too damn scared to actually make the first move. I don't know how to get back to her, how to bridge the gap I've created. The more I think about it, the more frustrated I become, and the more I feel like I'm drowning in this sea of uncertainty.

It's hard to look at her sometimes, because when I do, I see everything I've messed up, everything I can't fix with a single apology. I want to make things right, but every time I open my mouth, I feel like I'm just digging myself deeper into the hole I've already created.

But I can't sit in this mess forever. I need to know if there's still something between us. If I'm not just holding on to something that doesn't exist anymore.

So, I decide to test her.

I don't know why I do it. Maybe it's instinct, maybe it's desperation. But I start pushing her, in small, subtle ways. Snide comments, little digs at her, trying to

provoke some kind of reaction, something that'll tell me where we stand.

"Don't you think we've had enough of the silent treatment?" I throw out casually, watching her out of the corner of my eye as she sorts through some papers on the kitchen counter. It's a jab, an attempt to get a rise out of her. She's been quiet lately, distant in a way that's hard to ignore.

Her eyes flick up, but she doesn't bite. Instead, she just sighs, shaking her head. "Not everything has to be a confrontation, Austin."

I feel my jaw tighten. Of course she's not biting. She's too damn calm, too composed. It's like she's already pulled away, already disconnected.

A few days later, I push again. "You know, I don't really get why you're so hung up on making everything so perfect. It's like you're trying to win some kind of award for being a saint or something." I throw out the words, sharp and biting, but I can't ignore the way my heart starts to race.

Skylar's eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think I've hit a nerve. But she doesn't rise to it. She just shrugs, unfazed, her voice quiet but firm. "I don't need an award, Austin. I just want to be left alone."

Her response stings. More than it should. It's like she's pulling away, inch by inch, and no matter how hard I try to provoke her, she just keeps retreating further into herself. And with every step she takes back, I feel my own frustration building. Why isn't she fighting for this? Why isn't she reacting the way I want her to?

I refuse to back off, though. I can't. I can't be the one to give up on this. So, I keep pushing. A snide remark here, a sarcastic jab there. It's like a game, but I'm the only one playing.

And as the days go on, I can't ignore the way she's pulling back more and more. The space between us grows wider, and every attempt I make to provoke her only seems to make things worse. It's like I'm driving her further away, but I can't stop myself. Every time she closes off, I feel more desperate to reach her, but the harder I push, the more she shuts down.

I feel sick to my stomach.

I realize it's time to stop playing games. If I can't get her to react the way I want, maybe I need to just ask her—ask her what she wants, what she's feeling, where we stand. Maybe, just maybe, I'll get the answer I need.

It's time for an actual conversation.

I stride across the room, determination setting my jaw firm. Skylar's back is turned to me, her posture rigid, as if she's bracing against an invisible storm. It's time I own up to my shit.

"Skylar," I call out, my voice sounding like I'm under control despite how I feel.

She pauses but doesn't turn around.

"Please, just a minute."

Finally, she faces me, those hazel eyes locking onto mine with a guarded coolness that makes my chest tighten. She's poised to flee, I can tell, but this time, I'm not letting her escape—not without hearing me out.

"Look, I know I've been...difficult," I start, hating how inadequate the word sounds for all the tension I've caused between us.

"Difficult?" she echoes, one eyebrow arching in challenge. "That's one way to put it."

Her sharp tone stings, but it's deserved. I've been pushing her, testing her, trying to ignite some reaction, any sign that she cares. But the cold truth is, I've been acting like a damn fool.

"More than difficult," I concede, stepping closer. "I've been a jerk. And I'm sorry."

The air between us charges with the weight of my admission. She blinks, surprise flickering across her face before the mask of indifference slips back into place.

"Apology accepted," she replies mechanically, turning as if that's all there was to say.

But I reach out, lightly grasping her arm. "Wait, please." It's a plea, raw and unguarded. "I need you to hear me out."

She hesitates, and I can see the internal struggle playing out behind her stoic gaze. Finally, she nods, granting me this chance—a chance I can't afford to waste.

"I've been trying to provoke you into...into something," I admit, my hands clenching at my sides. "But I realize now it's not working. It's not what I want."

"Then what do you want, Austin?" Her voice is steady, but there's a tremor beneath it that only I would recognize—one that tells me she's not as unaffected as she appears.

I take a deep breath, knowing that what I say next might change everything. "I'm scared of losing you," I confess, the words tasting of vulnerability. "And I don't know how to fix things."

For a moment, silence hangs heavy between us. Then she steps back, her gaze softening just slightly, as if my honesty has chipped away at her defenses.

"Being scared doesn't give you the right to be a jerk," she says quietly, but there's a note of understanding in her voice that wasn't there before.

"I know, and I'm truly sorry." My throat tightens as I add, "I don't want to lose you, Skylar."

There's a long pause where neither of us moves. The distance feels like miles rather than feet. She watches me, examining my face for sincerity, and I let her look—I let her see the fear, the regret, all laid bare.

"Okay," she finally murmurs, a word that feels like the first step on a bridge over an abyss. "Let's talk."

I watch her face, trying to read the thoughts swirling behind those guarded hazel eyes. She crosses her arms, a clear line of defense, and leans back against the cool wall, putting space between us.

"It was just sex," Skylar declares, her voice firm but lacking its usual sharpness. "We

both got what we needed. End of story."

The words sting, a slap of denial that I know isn't true. She's pushing me away, retreating into that shell where she believes she's safe from the complications of emotions. But I see the flicker in her gaze—the one that speaks of something deeper, something she's too stubborn to admit.

"Don't do this," I say, stepping closer, determined to breach the distance she's so expertly placed between us. "It wasn't just sex. Not for me, and I don't believe it was for you either."

She turns her head, refusing to meet my stare, and I take another step, close enough now that I can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. "Look at me."

Reluctantly, she complies, and in that moment, with our eyes locked, I let down my walls. "I'm scared," I confess, the words coming out in a rush. "Scared to let you in. Scared to lose control, scared to lose...you."

Her expression softens, but she remains silent, giving me the space to continue.

"Everything in my life has always been about maintaining order, control. With you, I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, and every moment with you is a step closer to falling." My voice breaks, but I push through. "And yet, here I am, telling you that despite the fear, despite not knowing how this could ever work, I'm afraid of things not working out and losing you anyway."

She gasps softly, and I wonder if she realizes how much it costs me to reveal these insecurities. The CEO, the man who commands boardrooms and bends deals to his will, is laying himself bare before the woman who's managed to unravel him.

"Sky," I say, my tone softer, imploring, "I need you to understand that I've never felt

this way before. I'm not asking you to decide anything now. I just want you to know the truth."

There's a vulnerability in admitting this, in acknowledging that the power she holds over me is unlike anything I've ever experienced. And yet, as I stand here, stripped of the armor I've always worn, there's an odd sense of freedom in the honesty of the moment.

Now, it's up to her to decide whether to step off the ledge with me or turn back to solid ground. But either way, I've finally spoken the truth, and that alone feels like a victory.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

I close the distance between us with a step that feels like crossing into a new world. My hands lift to cup her face, my thumbs tracing the sharp curve of her cheekbones. She doesn't pull away, and her stillness is an invitation I can't refuse.

My lips meet hers in a kiss that's gentle, a question rather than a demand. The softness surprises me, an emotion like hope or maybe something even more terrifying blooming in my chest. It's raw and undefined, but it anchors me to her in a way that nothing else has.

Skylar kisses me back, her lips tentative against mine, as if she's not sure she should be doing this. But she is, and her hesitation tugs at something inside me. I feel her walls, sense her holding back, and it only makes me want to draw her out more, to show her it's safe here with me.

"Sky," I murmur against her mouth, pulling back just enough to see her. Her eyes are a storm of emotion. "The ball's in your court. But I want you to know, I want this. I want you. Even if it means sharing you with Theo and Cohen."

It's a concession that rips through my need for exclusivity, for control. But when it comes to Skylar, I'm starting to realize that the usual rules don't apply. She's under my skin, a constant pulse in my veins that's rewriting the script of what I thought I knew.

Her breath catches, and she looks at me like she's seeing someone new. Maybe she is. Maybe we both are. There's no going back from this moment, from this admission that shakes the foundation of who I am.

"Say something," I urge softly, needing to hear her voice, to understand what's churning behind those guarded eyes.

But she doesn't speak, and the silence stretches between us, heavy with possibilities and fears. I've laid my cards on the table, bared a part of my soul I didn't even know was there. Now, it's up to her to decide how this game ends.

I study her face, the way she bites down on her lower lip, the indecision flickering in her eyes. She's still holding back, and that ice around her heart hasn't melted yet. But I can't let her walk away now, not when everything is at stake.

"Skylar," I start, my voice steady despite the tumult inside me. "I don't want you to just be a passing part of our lives." My hands find hers, fingers entwining as if they could convey what words might not. Her skin is warm against mine, a stark contrast to the coolness of her gaze.

"You're more than that, more than just a nanny to Lucas and Elodie." The mention of the kids seems to soften something in her, a subtle shift in her posture that tells me I'm getting through, bit by fragile bit. "You've become a part of our family, a part we can't afford to lose."

The room feels too big around us, every inch echoing with the gravity of this moment. Her presence fills all that space, commanding, undeniable. God, how did I ever think I could walk away from this woman?

"I want you to stay, Skylar," I say, letting the truth of my words sink in for both of us. "Not out of obligation, not because of the kids. But because you belong here—with us, with me. As a permanent part of our lives."

There's a vulnerability in laying this bare, a crack in my armor I never thought I'd reveal. But with Skylar, the risk feels worth it. Maybe even necessary. She's the chaos

to my order, the question mark at the end of a sentence I thought I had punctuated long ago.

"Think about it," I whisper, my thumb brushing across her knuckles. "Really think about what it could mean, for all of us."

I look into her eyes and I know I've hit a nerve. Good. Because if there's one thing I've learned from dealing with SkylarDeveraux, it's that she doesn't back down from a challenge. And neither do I.

## Chapter 25

Skylar

Ihate hospitals.

There's no sob story behind the aversion; I just don't like them. The too-bright lights, the sterile smell of antiseptic and sickness, the way time seems to slow to a crawl the second you step inside. It's the waiting, the uncertainty, the quiet tension that clings to the air like a second skin.

People come here to get better, but it never feels that way to me. It feels like a place where people unravel—where control slips away, where vulnerability is exposed under fluorescent lights and scratchy sheets. Where you sit in a stiff plastic chair, waiting for news you may not be ready to hear.

I square my shoulders and head down the hall, my boots echoing against the linoleum. The scent of disinfectant clings to the air, mingling with something artificial and vaguely floral—an attempt to mask the inevitable. I hate it. All of it.

But I love Birdie.

And that's why I'm here.

That and I needed an escape from the house, from the chaos that is Theo, Austin, and Cohen—three men who've managed to knot themselves into the fraying edges of my life.

Birdie has been in here much longer than she expected to and I've been by to keep her company many times in the past few weeks.

I pause outside her room, pressing my hand against the cool metal of the doorframe. Just a second to breathe, to push back the tightness in my chest and the worry about Birdie's future...and my own. Then I step inside.

Birdie is sitting up, propped against a mound of pillows, her thinning silver hair brushed back neatly. She looks smaller than she should, swallowed by the hospital bed and the endless wires and machines that beep softly in the background. But her eyes—sharp as ever—find mine, and she smiles.

My chest tightens at the sight of her, the vibrant spirit I know now muted by illness.

"Hey, Birdie."

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“There’s my girl,” she says, her voice warm despite the rasp of exhaustion beneath it. “I was beginning to think you got lost in this godforsaken place.”

I huff a soft laugh and drop into the chair beside her bed. “Not lost. Just loitering.”

“Good. Wouldn’t want you taking up real estate anywhere but right here.” She pats the edge of the mattress, an invitation I don’t hesitate to take. I shift, sitting so I can face her, my hands resting in my lap.

“You’re looking better,” I lie, and Birdie snorts.

“Flattery won’t get you out of helping me break out of here.”

My lips twitch. “And where exactly would we go?”

“Anywhere with decent coffee and a damn porch swing.” She sighs, her gaze drifting toward the window. “I miss home.”

I swallow hard, because home isn’t really home anymore. Not since she decided to sell the house. Not since I moved next door. “I know.”

She glances at me then, really looks at me, like she can see straight through the cracks I’m trying to hold together. “How’s it been over there?”

I know what she’s asking. How I’m doing. How I’m handling the complicated mess I’ve landed in with the three men next door.

I force a smile. “It’s...an adjustment.”

Birdie hums, unconvinced, but she doesn’t push. Instead, she reaches for my hand, her skin papery and cool against mine. “You’re a stubborn thing, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.”

"Guess what?" Birdie leans forward slightly, as if to share a secret between old friends. "There's an offer on the house. A nice family, from what I hear."

"Already?" The words tumble out, sharp with surprise. The house has been another source of tension—a symbol of change I'm still grappling with.

"Mhm," she nods, her silver hair catching the light. "And they say I'll be out of here soon. Back to causing trouble before you know it." A mischievous glint dances in her eyes, but it doesn't quite reach the usual level of rebellion I've come to love.

"Good," I manage, though the idea of her being so far away hurts more than I thought it would. I’ve made a life out of complete detachment.

It’s safer that way.

If you don’t get attached, you don’t get hurt. If you don’t care, it won’t break you when people leave—because they always do. That’s the one thing life has been consistent about. People walk away, situations change, and the second you start to feel steady, the ground shifts beneath you.

And I...I've been broken one too many times.

So I learned not to hold on. Not to let myself want too much. Not to expect anything beyond the moment.

But lately...I've been slipping.

Birdie was the first crack in the armor. I told myself it was different—she was temporary, an older woman who needed some company, nothing more. But somewhere between late-night talks on the porch, her blunt wisdom, and the way she looked at me like I washers, she snuck past every wall I had.

Then came the guys next door.

And now?

Now I feel exposed.

Because for the first time in a long time, I have people in my life who matter. People I don't want to lose. And that terrifies me more than anything.

"Really, Skylar," she says, her tone softening. "It's good news."

"I know," I reply, forcing a smile. "It is."

We sit in silence for a beat, the steady beep of her heart monitor filling the space between us. It's a precious reprieve, reminding me that sometimes, just being present is enough. And for the first time in days, I allow myself to simply breathe.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:11 am*

But old and fragile as she may look in here, Birdie is not one to be fooled.

She watches me, her sharp gaze scanning my face like she's reading between the lines I haven't spoken. She watches me with those sharp, knowing eyes, and I can feel her reading me like one of her beloved, dog-eared novels. She's always been too good at that. At seeing the things I try to bury.

After a long moment, she tilts her head. "Something's eating at you."

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

"Bullshit." Her hand tightens around mine, frail but firm. "You're wound up tighter than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

I huff a laugh, but it's weak. "I just...it's a lot. You selling the house, moving in next door, you being here..." I swallow past the lump forming in my throat. "Everything feels like it's shifting all at once."

Birdie hums like she expected that answer but isn't satisfied with it. She waits, letting the silence stretch between us, giving me the space to fumble my way through my own thoughts.

And I almost leave it there. Almost let her believe it's just the house, just the change, just the usual discomfort of life shifting under my feet. But then her fingers squeeze mine again, and something in me buckles.

"It's Austin." The words slip out before I can stop them.

Birdie lifts a brow. "Ah."

That's it. Justah. Like she already knew.

I fidget with the edge of the scratchy hospital blanket, avoiding her gaze.

"Sky?" she presses, and I know I won't escape this conversation without spilling something.

"And Theo," I grumble. Then after a moment of silence where I can feel her stare digging into the marrow of my bones, I relent. "And Cohen."

Birdie doesn't speak right away. Instead, she watches me, her expression unreadable. Then she sighs, shaking her head. "Men are stupid."

A surprised laugh bursts from my lips. "That's your wisdom?"

"That's my truth, dear. Talk to me," she urges gently.

My mouth opens and closes, hesitant. The dam inside me trembles, ready to break. I clamp my lips shut, shaking my head again.

Birdie doesn't push right away. She just watches me, her thumb brushing over the back of my hand in slow, deliberate strokes. Then, after a long silence, she murmurs, "You know, I've seen you scared before."

My chest tightens.

"But I don't think I've ever seen you this scared."

I exhale sharply, my whole body going stiff.

She doesn't let up. "So, what is it? What's got you looking like you're waiting to be left behind?"

And just like that, the dam breaks.

"It's just...everything feels like it's closing in on me," I start, the confession tasting bitter. "I went to my father's funeral. And it was like I was that teenager all over again, completely cut off from the family."

"That must've been tough," she murmurs, squeezing my hand.

"Without him, Birdie, I..." My throat tightens, choking the words. "I literally have no family left. I mean, I know I didn't really have him to begin with, but it felt more—I don't know, final?"

Birdie is quiet for a moment, then she tilts her head. "And what am I, then?"

I blink, caught off guard. "What?"

Her grip tightens just slightly. "If you have no family left, where does that leave me?"

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My breath stutters. "Birdie, that's not what I meant—"

"Then say what you do mean," she says, her voice gentle but steady. "Because as far as I'm concerned, you are my family. And I don't need blood to make it so."

When I don't respond, she continues: "Family can be built, not just born, Skylar. And being alone doesn't mean you have to be lonely. Remember that."

She squeezes my hand before letting go, settling back against the pillows.

"And, what about the boys?"

I'm quiet for a long moment, then finally shrug, trying to feign casual. Birdie raises an eyebrow, a soft smile tugging at her lips. She waits. And waits.

Dammit.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I confess, the words tumbling out in a rush. "I told myself I wouldn't get involved, that I'd keep my distance, but somehow, I'm in the middle of this tangled mess, and I don't know how to get out. Or if I even want to." My voice drops to a whisper. "And that's the worst part."

Birdie doesn't flinch, doesn't look surprised. She just nods like she's been waiting for me to catch up to what she already knew.

"They make you happy?" she asks simply.

I let out a breath, running a hand through my hair. “Yes. No. I mean...sometimes. And other times, they make me want to scream.”

Birdie chuckles. “Sounds about right.”

“I don’t do this,” I admit, gesturing vaguely. “Relationships. Feelings. Letting people in. But with them...it’s like I don’t have a choice. And it scares the hell out of me.”

Birdie squeezes my hand again, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. “That’s how you know it’s real, sweetheart.”

I blink at her, my throat tight.

“Life’s gonna change whether you want it to or not,” she continues, her voice softer now. “The question is—are you gonna fight it the whole way, or are you gonna let yourself have something good for once?”

I watch her chest rise and fall with a steadiness I crave as my own breath comes in jagged pulls. The beep of her heart monitor is a metronome to my spiraling thoughts, a reminder that life ticks on even when you feel stuck.

"Skylar," Birdie says, her voice cutting through the fog of my mind. "You're still holding back. Spill it."

My gaze flicks to her, then away. I study the sterile white walls, anything to avoid those knowing eyes.

"It's...complicated," I finally admit, feeling the tension knot up in my shoulders. "Theo, Austin, Cohen—they're all tangled up in this mess that's my life." I pause, swallowing hard. "They're from that world. The one I've been running from. And yet..." My voice trails off, betraying the conflict within.

"And yet?" Birdie prompts, her tone soft but insistent.

"Despite everything, I've fallen for them. Hard." The words tumble out, laced with an edge of disbelief. "But how can I trust they'll stick around? Choose me?"

No one else has. Theo included.

"Haven't they already?"

"What?"

"Well, they offered you a job. They drove you to the hospital after my unfortunate incident. Stayed with you too, if I'm not mistaken. Then they offered you a home too, didn't they?"

"All of that is temporary."

"Is it? Don't let fear make the decision for you, sweetheart."

She reaches out, her touch grounding. Her eyes hold mine, fierce and unwavering. "You create your own family. With friends, with lovers. It's about the people who choose you, who stand by you."

"Choose me," I echo, the concept foreign yet intoxicating.

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“Yes, choose you. Those boys have chosen you, whether you see it or not.”

"So, build your tribe, love. Blood relations or not, it's the bonds we forge that make us whole." Her conviction resonates, stirring something deep within me.

I sit with that thought, rolling it around like a smooth pebble in my hand. Could I really fashion a new family from the shards of my past? From the men whose very existence complicates my life in ways I never imagined?

She squeezes my fingers gently. “Don’t let your pride keep you from happiness, Skylar. Sometimes, all it takes is reaching back.” I press my lips together, the lump in my throat making it impossible to answer. Because the truth is, I don’t know if I’m reaching for them—or running away.

We don’t talk much after that. We just sit and watch her favorite game show until she drifts into a restful slumber, and I find myself alone with the weight of her words.

I stand, my body stiff from hours spent crouched on the edge of a paper-thin mattress, and move to the window. The city sprawls beneath me as dusk settles like a blanket over the skyline. Families are reuniting after long days, their lives intertwined in a thousand small, unspoken ways. A pang of longing stabs through me; an ache for something I've only just allowed myself to acknowledge.

It's more than desire that connects me to Theo, Austin, and Cohen. It's laughter shared in the darkest hours, hands held without hesitation, and silent understandings that scream louder than any words ever could. They've become my sanctuary, the eye of every storm I've weathered since we collided in a twist of fate.

A family.

The realization hits me hard, fast—a comet streaking across my personal night sky. Despite the guilt that gnaws at me, the fear that they're too good to be true, there's no denying the space they've carved in my life. They offer belonging, a place where I'm wanted, not for the Deveraux name or any semblance of wealth, but for the fractured, spitfire soul that is entirely mine.

With a sigh, I press my forehead to the cool glass. Birdie's words echo, a mantra that seeps into the cracks of my self-built fortress. Create your own family.

Night presses on, and eventually, I slip away from the window, back to Birdie's side. Her steady breathing tells me she won't wake anytime soon. With visiting hours coming to an end, I'll have to leave without a proper goodbye. I scribble a note for her to read when she wakes and head back to the mansion.

I don't sleep much that night.

I toss and turn, my mind racing with Birdie's words, every thought a tangled mess of confusion and frustration. It's like trying to untangle a knot I didn't know I tied, each thread representing something I've spent years pretending didn't matter.

Family. People. Relationships. The idea that I could need anyone—that I could let someone close enough to matter. It all feels...wrong. But why does it feel so wrong? Why do I feel like I'm suffocating at the thought of needing someone, even when part of me knows I've been doing exactly that?

The silence in the house is heavy, the kind of quiet that makes me feel like I'm the only one awake in the world. I stare at the ceiling, fighting against the suffocating pull of uncertainty. Why did I let Birdie get under my skin? Why did I let myself start believing in something I know could tear me apart?

I groan, burying my face in the pillow, but nothing helps. I'm stuck in this loop of wanting to connect and pushing away, afraid of what will happen when I do.

By the time the sun starts creeping through the blinds, the exhaustion has settled deep into my bones. My eyes sting from lack of sleep, but all I want is clarity. Some kind of sign that tells me what to do. How do I make sense of all of this without letting myself get hurt?

But instead, there's only more questions. More confusion.

And the nagging feeling that maybe...just maybe...it's time to stop running from the people I care about.

I just wish I knew how to stop being afraid of what that might mean.

The distance I've been maintaining, the walls I've fortified around my heart, they have little to do with the men who've patiently chipped away at them. It's my own fear—of being loved, of not being enough—that's kept me at arm's length. I've been guarding myself against heartache, but in doing so, I've also shielded myself from the very thing I crave most: connection.

I slip out of bed, careful not to disturb the quiet. The floor creaks under my feet as I move across the room, my fingers grazing the edge of Theo's sweatshirt that he left behind. I pull it over my head, the fabric soft and comforting, tinged with his scent—earthy and familiar.

I breathe it in deeply, and it settles something in my chest.

The house is still, the silence inviting rather than oppressive. I move through it with a sense of purpose, drawn toward the kitchen. I start the coffee, and fill a mug with the steaming liquid when it's ready. Then, wrapped in the warmth of the sweatshirt, I

walk outside to the covered patio, the early morning dew glistening on the lawn.

I settle into one of the wicker chairs, cradling the mug between my hands as I watch the sun finish its ascent, the light spilling over the horizon in shades of pink and gold. The world feels alive, as if it's waking up with me. For the first time in a long while, I feel like I might be ready to do the same.

I trace the veins on the back of my hand, paths that lead to an uncertain heart. Love isn't a battlefield; it's a garden, and I've been starving mine of light.

I've spent years tiptoeing around my own heart, believing vulnerability was synonymous with weakness. But here, in this small kitchen, with the sun rising just for me, I see the lie for what it is. Love isn't about losing myself; it's about finding myself and us, together.

A laugh escapes me, unexpected and bright. They've shown me what a family can be—not bound by blood or obligation, but by choice. By the sheer force of wanting to weather every storm side by side.

Austin and Cohen might be brothers by blood, but Theo is found family. And...I could be too if I just let it happen. Their trust, their patience—it's not something to fear or run from. It's a gift, a foundation upon which to build a life I've never allowed myself to imagine.

I set the empty mug in the sink, its hollow clink a punctuation mark at the end of an old chapter. The time has come to choose the future I want—unscripted, uncertain, and utterly mine. My chest swells with a courage I didn't know I had, and my heart beats a steady rhythm of newfound determination.

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"Alright, girl," I say to the silence, "let's write a new story."

### Chapter 26

Skylar

The spray of the shower pelts against my skin, a rhythmic drumming that matches the chaos still swirling in my mind. I stand there longer than I should, letting the steam cloud my thoughts. Today's the day.

Well, today's the day I finally figured things out. So, in that sense, today's a pretty monumental day. But more than anything, today is the day I'm going to tell them how I feel.

I shut off the water, the sudden silence almost deafening. Wrapping myself in a towel, I avoid the mirror. I don't need a reminder of the uncertainty dogging me by looking at my worried reflection. My hair sticks to my shoulders, still wet as I head back to my room, my heart racing in time with my footsteps.

I shuffle through my wardrobe, pulling out a sweater and jeans—a simple choice, nothing too fussy. It's just an outfit, but today it feels like armor, like something I can hide behind while I find the words I need to say.

I take a deep breath, mentally preparing myself. The kids are still sleeping, and I know I need to move fast if I want to talk to the men before they leave for work. This is my moment. There's no turning back now.

I'm not going to let myself hide anymore. I want to write a new story—with them.

As I dress, the silence of the house presses in on me. The kids, bless their unpredictable sleeping patterns, have been granting me these small pockets of quiet in the mornings. I'll take it as a sign, a sliver of opportunity to say what needs to be said without the distraction of their youthful curiosity.

A glance at the clock warns me that time is slipping away. If I'm going to catch Cohen, Austin, and Theo before they scatter to their respective corners of the world—or, y'know, the office they share—I need to move. Now. I swipe a hand through my hair, giving up on taming down the damp waves. Let them think I'm not put together. Maybe it'll soften them up for the onslaught of confessions.

My bare feet pad across the cool hardwood floor, carrying me toward the kitchen where morning light spills through the windows, casting the room in a gentle glow. The scent of coffee lingers in the air, mixing with the faint aroma of toasted bread. Someone is awake. That's a good sign.

"Today's the day," I whisper to myself, a mantra to bolster my courage. "You can do this."

My heart hammers a frantic beat as I make my way down the hallway. This is it. I'm about to lay everything bare—the fears, the desires, the stubborn pride that's kept me from admitting how deeply they've burrowed into my life.

"Morning," I greet them, forcing a smile onto my face as I find all three of them gathered around the kitchen island. They're a striking trio: Cohen's slightly scruffy appearance belies the stormy thoughts behind his ocean-colored eyes; Austin's suit is the armor of a man who's built walls so high he might not see over them himself; Theo leans against the counter, casual but alert, his light brown curls refusing to be tamed.

Their heads turn in unison, weary gazes meeting mine. Despite the early hour, the weight of the world already seems to rest on their shoulders.

"Hey, Skylar," Cohen greets, his voice tinged with the fatigue that comes from juggling too much alone.

"Can we talk? Just for a minute before you all head out," I say, trying not to let my voice waver. There's no hiding the seriousness of my request, the way my hands unconsciously fiddle with the edge of my sweater.

Austin raises an eyebrow, his calculated stance unwavering. "Of course. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's...it will be," I manage, my heart pounding a rhythm that threatens to break free from my chest.

Theo pushes off from the counter, his stubbled jaw set in a line that tells me he's bracing for whatever comes next. "We're listening, Skylark."

I stand there, anxiety making my hands shake and my thoughts scatter. My fingers are twisting and untwisting around each other. The silence stretches—a rubber band pulled taut, ready to snap.

"Sky?" Theo prompts, his voice gentle, as if he senses the turmoil beneath my cool exterior.

"Right," I breathe out, steadying myself. I force my hands to stillness, to let go of the fabric of my sweater, and instead, they find each other, clasping in a bid for strength. They've been patient with me—God, so patient—and it's time I match their courage with my own.

The next words slip out before I can censor them, raw and trembling. "I love you."

It's as if I've dropped a crystal glass, the silence shattering around us. Their expressions are frozen, caught between disbelief and hope. And I'm stunned too because those three words were not part of my planned speech.

But now they hang in the air, stubborn and defiant, a truth I can no longer contain. The confession reverberates in the quiet kitchen, echoing off stainless steel appliances and marble countertops.

"Sky..." Cohen starts, but I hold up a hand, needing to push through the barrier I've just broken.

"No, let me finish," I insist, my voice finding strength as I face the enormity of what I've just revealed. "This isn't how I expected it to come out, but it's out there now. And it's real." My gaze flits from one to the other, locking onto eyes filled with questions and, perhaps, the dawning of understanding.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself against the kitchen island. The cool marble beneath my fingertips grounds me, its smooth surface a stark contrast to the whirlwind of emotions inside me.

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"I'm sorry," I begin, my voice soft yet clear, each word carrying weight. "For how I've been lately—distant, evasive. It wasn't fair to any of you." My eyes drift to the floor, but I force them back up, needing to see their reactions. "It wasn't about you. It was me...all me."

Theo leans against the counter, his green eyes searching mine with an intensity that makes my heart flutter. Cohen's brow is furrowed, his hand absentmindedly stroking his stubbled jaw. And Austin, he just watches, silent and thoughtful, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Here's the thing," I continue, the words spilling from me like a river breaking through a dam. "I want you, all of you." I pause, letting the magnitude of my admission sink in for them—and for myself.

My fingers twist together nervously as I press on. "And I hope you're okay with that because I can't choose. I don't want to choose." Their gazes never waver, and something unspoken passes between us, a flicker of surprise, maybe even relief.

"What I feel for each of you..." I struggle to find words that can encompass the complex tapestry of my emotions—past hurts, present desires, future dreams. "It's unique, real, and it's worth pursuing. Worth fighting for." I lock eyes with each man in turn, silently pleading for understanding, for acceptance.

The room is heavy with our collective breaths, the only sound in the silence that stretches out, taut like a wire. I watch them closely, waiting for some kind of verdict, some clue to what they're thinking. The vulnerability I've laid bare feels like a tightrope beneath my feet, and I'm poised at the center, unsure if I'll find solid ground

on the other side.

"Trouble," Austin finally breaks the silence, his voice gruff but not unkind. "That's a lot to take in."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I know."

But there's no going back now. I've peeled back the curtain on my heart, showing them the chaos and longing hidden within. It's out there, raw and exposed—the most honest part of me, hopeful and trembling, waiting for them to reach out and take it.

The air shifts, a current of decision and raw emotion as Theo takes a purposeful step toward me. His green eyes pierce through the space between us, fierce and unyielding like storm-tossed waves crashing against a rocky shore. He's always had this gravity about him, an intensity that pulls you in and holds you captive without even trying.

I felt it the moment I first met him. I felt it even as he walked away, my heart trailing behind him, helpless—like a moon tethered to its planet, unable to break free.

But, I...I don't think he's going to walk away this time.

"Skylark," he murmurs, and the sound of my name falls from his lips like a whispered vow, heavy with meaning I've never heard before. "I can't live with the thought of losing you again." His voice trembles slightly, each word sinking deep into me, carving itself into my heart.

"I never stopped loving you, Sky," he continues, his gaze locked with mine, raw and open. "I always hoped—prayed, really—that we'd find our way back. But I was too scared to come looking for you." His breath hitches, his hands slide to my face, cupping it gently, as if afraid I'll disappear. "Then fate intervened, and you were right here, right next door. I couldn't believe it."

I shudder at his words, and for a heartbeat, the world feels like it's just us, bound by the weight of our past and the promises of a future we're still too scared to reach for.

Theo leans in, his lips brushing mine in a kiss that starts soft, tentative—like he's not sure if I'm real or if this is all just some fragile dream. But then I kiss him back, and it becomes something more, something certain.

"I should have fought for you," he murmurs against my lips, the words breaking free with an intensity I can feel in my bones. "I didn't, and it's the one thing I will always regret. But I'm here now, Sky. To fight for what we have. For you. And I'm not leaving. Not this time. Ever. You are my past and you are my future. I love you so fucking much. Thank you for giving me another chance. I promise...I promise you. I will not fuck this up."

He steps back, his hand lingering on my jaw before he turns and looks at the brothers pointedly. Before the resonance of his words fades, Cohen steps closer, his presence a steady anchor.

His hair falls into his eyes, darkening their usual spark, replacing the playful gleam with something deeper—something raw. He doesn't mask his vulnerability, not now, not with so much at stake.

"Sky," Cohen's voice is quieter now, each word wrapped in a quiet urgency. "I've been just as scared as you, maybe even more. Terrified, really. Terrified of being left behind again, of you slipping through my fingers like you did once before." His chest rises with a shaky breath, and for the first time, I see the weight of the fear he's been carrying. "Of you never forgiving me for not recognizing you. So, yeah, I pulled away, too. I shut down because I couldn't face the thought of someone walking away from me again—of you walking away from me. But I'm done with that. Done with letting fear decide everything for me."

His eyes find mine, locking on with an intensity that matches Theo's, and his next words hit me like a punch to the gut. "You've got my heart. All of it. And I'm not going anywhere. Not ever. I'm here, and I'm not letting you go. Not without a fight."

His admission tumbles over me, warming places long chilled by doubt and loneliness. The walls I've built tremble under the weight of their confessions, bricks of fear and self-preservation dislodged by the sincerity in their eyes, the resolve in their stance.

I absorb their words, let them sink beneath my skin and fill the spaces they've claimed inside me.

It's Austin's turn now.

At first, I'm afraid he's going to walk away again. But he surprises me, stepping forward with that controlled grace he carries everywhere—the boardroom, the bedroom, and now, here, in this space where vulnerability is the currency.

Austin's expression is unreadable. His blue eyes, often ice-like in their stoicism, flicker with an intensity that's both disarming and achingly familiar. The morning light catches the faint freckles on his nose, reminding me there's softness beneath his armor.

He came to me the other night. He told me how he felt more or less. But I still don't know what he's going to say.

"Trouble," he starts, his voice gruff yet threaded with an unexpected tenderness. "I've built walls so high I never thought anyone could scale them." He hesitates for a fraction of a second, then continues, "You've turned my world upside down, made me question everything I thought I knew about...this." He gestures vaguely between us, encompassing Theo and Cohen in the sweep of his hand.

"Never imagined feeling like this for someone. Let alone sharing..." His jaw tightens momentarily, a telltale sign of the internal war he wages. "But what we have—what we could have together—it's worth it. Worth the chaos, the unknown. Worth breaking every damn rule I've ever made." There's a rawness to his confession that strikes a chord deep within me.

My heart swells, pressing against my ribs as if it's trying to reach out to each of them. The icy walls around it crack, fissures spreading until they shatter completely. In this moment, I see myself through their eyes—not as the untouchable Skylar Deveraux, but as someone worthy of love, of being fought for, of belonging.

“I love you, too.”

They stand before me—and I realize, with a clarity that steals my breath, that they want me just as fiercely as I want them.

Family. The word blossoms in my mind, filling me with a warmth I've long denied myself. We are more than the sum of our parts; together, we're something indefinable, something whole. They are not just men in my life—they are my stronghold, my sanctuary.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice steady even as emotion swells within me. "For seeing me, for wanting me." My gaze flits between them, locking onto each set of eyes in turn. "And for giving me a place where I don't have to run anymore."

A quiet breath hangs in the space between us, each of our heartbeats in sync, the silence thick with promises. This is it—the moment where everything that came before us shifts. We've built something more than love. We've built a future. No longer paralyzed by fear or doubt, I step into it fully, embracing the strength we've found in each other.

In the warmth of their arms, the certainty settles inside me. We're not just surviving anymore. We're home.

Chapter 27

Skylar

## Epilogue 1

### One Year Later

I lean against the cool marble counter, my eyes drifting out the window, where the children are lost in play. The afternoon light filters through the leaves of the old oak tree, casting dappled patterns on the lawn. Their laughter fills the air, pure and unburdened, a melody that wraps itself around my heart.

Birdie is with them, her silver hair catching the sunlight, a beacon of vitality. She leads the games with the energy of someone decades younger, her laughter blending with theirs—a harmony of joy. Not so long ago, I feared we might lose her. Now, here she is, a living testament to resilience. I should never have doubted her.

She did sell the house and she did move down to Florida to be with her sister, but we stayed in touch. She's here visiting for a few weeks and the kids just adore her. Everyone adores her.

A smile pulls at my lips, a quiet recognition of just how far we've come. The walls of this house, once dripping with hurt and abandonment, now hum with warmth.

I hear Cohen and Austin arguing about something. At first, I can't make out the words, but the tone is unmistakable—frustration tinged with the kind of brotherly affection that only siblings can pull off. It's a sound I've come to know well in the year since we've all settled into this new rhythm.

As their voices rise, the sharpness of their words cuts through the air, but there's something oddly comforting about it. Despite the bickering, there's an unspoken understanding between them. This—this—is what family sounds like.

"Can't you just admit you're wrong for once?" Cohen's voice carries more weight than

usual, his patience worn thin.

"Me? Wrong?" Austin snorts, the sound sharp and incredulous. "That would imply you actually know what you're doing."

Their bickering should irk me, disrupt this tranquil moment of watching Birdie dance with the children outside, but it doesn't. Instead, there's an odd tranquility in the discord, a reminder of the vibrant life filling the corners of this once-empty house.

A floorboard creaks behind me, and without looking, I know it's Theo. The air shifts, charged with his scent—something woodsy and clean.

His arms encircle my waist, pulling me back against a chest that has become my haven. Lips press gently against the skin of my neck, and I tip my head to the side, granting him better access.

"Hey," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. My hand finds his where it cradles the swell of my belly.

"Hey yourself," he replies, his breath warm on my skin. There's laughter in his voice, a soothing melody that drowns out the distant squabble of the brothers upstairs.

"Think they'll ever figure it out?" I ask, the corner of my mouth lifting in amusement.

"Eventually," Theo chuckles, his fingers splaying across the fabric of my shirt, gentle over the curve of our growing miracle. "They're just too stubborn to see eye to eye right now."

"Want to come see how the nursery's shaping up?" he asks.

I nod, my heart skipping at the thought of what awaits us upstairs. The hardwood

feels cool under my bare feet as I follow Theo, his hand gently guiding my lower back. Climbing the stairs, I can't help but feel every step is bringing us closer to a future I once thought was unreachable.

At the top of the staircase, Austin and Cohen's banter grows louder, the usual back-and-forth escalating. Theo clears his throat with deliberate force, and just like that, the noise cuts off completely. With a glint of boyish pride in his eyes, he pushes open the door, and I step into a dream spun into reality.

Blue hues wash over the room like the calm tide of the ocean—soothing, serene. The afternoon sun spills across the wooden floorboards, casting a warm, golden glow. A rocker rests by the window, its cushions soft and inviting. Along the wall, a large dresser holds so many tiny clothes, folded neatly, waiting to cradle a new life.

And there, at the center of it all, stands the crib—a labor of love, not yet complete. With the way the two men building it have been bickering, I've wondered if it will ever be finished. But Austin's laughter rings through the air as he hands Cohen a tool, their earlier tension dissolved by the easy camaraderie between them. The sight of them working side by side, their focus entirely on this symbol of new beginnings, fills me with such warmth.

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"Looks amazing, doesn't it?" Theo whispers, his breath warm against my ear.

I nod, my voice barely more than a breath. "It's perfect."

I drink in every detail—the scent of fresh paint mingling with the promise of tomorrows yet to come. This room, nearly ready to welcome a new life, holds everything we've worked for—everything but one final piece. And as I watch Austin and Cohen, their hands steady and sure, I know that even that will soon fall into place.

A flutter of movement beneath my palm sends ripples of emotion through me, and I stand rooted to the spot, drinking in the sight of our nearly finished nursery. My heart swells, heavy with a love so profound it threatens to spill from my eyes.

Another kick—tiny but unmistakable—reminds me of the changes soon to unfold. A year ago, this moment was unimaginable. The warmth that now fills this home—my home, with Theo, Austin, Cohen, and their kids—was beyond reach. But here it is.

Theo steps behind me, his presence solid and grounding. His hands find my shoulders, his touch gentle but sure. "We've climbed mountains to get here, you know?"

I nod, unable to speak past the emotion swelling in my throat. Words are unnecessary. Theo's touch says everything.

"Look how far we've come," he murmurs, his voice steady, tinged with pride. "The fear, the uncertainty...we've weathered it all. And now..." His voice trails off, leaving

the rest of the thought unspoken, but we both feel it—hope and endless possibility.

I lean into him, the warmth of his chest against my back a quiet reassurance. This journey—filled with its own set of struggles—has also been defined by unwavering support, by love that has carried us through.

"We're ready for whatever comes next," I whisper, the promise in my voice as firm as the hands resting on my belly.

It's a promise, a vow spoken not just to Theo but to myself—to the woman who once believed she'd face the world alone.

But I'm not alone. Not anymore.

Theo's hands shift to the curve of my stomach, a gentle pressure that causes a ripple of sensation deep inside. "Can you believe it?" he asks softly. "We're really doing this."

I smile, my heart full as I imagine all the milestones ahead. And I know, with certainty, that no matter what comes next, we're in this together. My hand covers his, feeling the warmth and strength of his grip, the steadiness that has always been there for me. For us.