



# Hiding Forever

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**Category:** Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action

**Description:** You can hide from the past, your fears, and the world, but you can't hide from love.

Riley

My life changed for the worst when a tragic event landed me in witness protection. Ever since, I've been cyberstalking my past and the people I loved and lost, while trying to move on without provoking further danger, especially now that I'm a houseguest to an old family friend.

Nova is the last person I expect to join me in seclusion. The curvy beauty of mixed ethnicity causes a media frenzy wherever she goes. But the more time I spend with her, my concerns over my privacy morph into an attraction that will only cause problems for us both.

There isn't a world where a person in hiding can be with a person in the limelight.

Nova

After being publicly humiliated and dumped by my popstar ex, I fled for the shelter of my grandmother's highly protected estate in an attempt to hide from the world until the media loses interest in me.

The loss of my father sent me into the arms of the famous musician, whose toxic behavior fueled my insecurities and created new ones. I need to heal and find direction. I don't want to make friends with the sexy, secretive houseguest who seems to get me in a way no one ever has before. But the more I'm around him, the harder it is to resist the recluse who wants nothing to do with the outside world.

My isolation is temporary, but he's made it clear his is forever.

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# Page 1

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1

Nova

Pictures of the celebrity duo are all over the internet.

The caption reads: “Justice Bran and Hope Collins are the hottest couple to wed this year.”

A few photos mention me, the ex-girlfriend and how I’ve been MIA ever since Justice and Hope’s Vegas wedding made the news.

Does he not care that he’s openly hurting me?

The worst part is they look good together. Him a pop-star sensation and her a model.

A bump in the road jostles me, stealing my attention from my phone. The SUV pulls through the gates to Grandma Gia’s—Gigi, as she prefers—California mansion.

I let out a breath and my tightly wound muscles relax for the first time since this nightmare started.

Gigi’s estate is the perfect place for me to hide and let the hype die around my disaster of a life. My grandma’s mansion has more security than Fort Knox. No worrying about paparazzi or plain ol’ haters shouting at me. Here I am protected. Here I am safe.

When Gigi was in her early twenties, she starred in a movie that made her a Hollywood sex symbol. That status made her an A-list actor and put her on the radar of a certifiable stalker. The lunatic broke into her Beverly Hills mansion and masturbated on her bed. The police never identified or caught the man, and Gigi was never the same.

She moved to this estate in Santa Barbara for the secluded lot and fortress-like wall surrounding the property, and made security and protection her top priority.

Ben, Gigi's personal driver, parks the SUV near the detached four-car garage and opens my door for me.

I get out and stretch, my muscles stiff from the long flight. Warm sun caresses my body. Even in April, the temperature is beautiful here. No clouds, or snow, or rain, or frigid gusts like on the East Coast. When it comes to the perfect weather, Southern California never fails to deliver.

I meet Ben at the back of the SUV, where he unloads my luggage and closes the hatch with the press of a button. "I'll have this sent to your room, Miss."

"Nova," I correct him for the second time. "We've known each other for too long for you to call me Miss." Ben has worked for Gigi since before I was born.

"Forgive me, Nova. It's been awhile. You're all grown up now, and your mother prefers the formalities."

"Yes, but I'm not my mother, nor do I strive to be." I smile.

Ben ducks his head, probably embarrassed by my remark.

I didn't mean to make him feel uncomfortable; it's just nothing about me screams my

mother. She's tall, lean, and beautiful. She looks stylish, even when working out, and wouldn't be caught dead in a tie-dye sweatshirt dress, sneakers, and no makeup.

I follow him as he rolls my luggage toward the side door of the main house—not that I need him to show me the way. I lived here during my elementary school years. It seems smaller, though, which is silly. The mansion has nine bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, seven fireplaces, a tennis court, an Olympic-size pool, and picturesque grounds with landscaping that looks straight out of Tuscany.

It's also surrounded by mansions of equal grandeur and size, or bigger. Oprah has an estate a few blocks away in Montecito, along with other celebrity heavyweights who favor land and privacy.

“Do you know which room Gigi put me in, by any chance?” I ask Ben before we enter, hopeful it's the Caribbean suite.

“I wouldn't know.”

He removes his hat, his white hair shocking me for a moment. Last time I saw him, he had a head of thick salt-and-pepper hair.

“I'm sure Inez knows. She has it all worked out.”

“Of course she does.” The Guatemalan woman runs the house and knows everything about anything that concerns guests, security, visitors, and even the weather. She's like a human Alexa for the estate.

Ben opens the side door for me.

“Thank you.” I enter into a black-and-white marble tiled entry.

Ben sets my luggage inside the door and nods at the other door across the room. “Inez should be in the kitchen.”

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I thank him one last time and head in there.

The black-and-white stone floors continue in here. The kitchen is huge, classic in design and all white. Everything is marble except for the cabinets and appliances. Even the tabletop in the sun-drenched breakfast nook is marble.

Gigi and I dyed eggs every Easter at that table when I was younger. I wasn't raised to be religious. I got a little dose of everything when I lived here, and Gigi wanted me to enjoy multiple holidays and traditions.

My time here was fun. Gigi was more of a mother to me than my mom during those years. Mom would never apologize for her absence, though.

"The life of an actor requires sacrifice," she'd say before leaving me for weeks at a time, desperate to follow in Gigi's famous footsteps.

Unfortunately for Mom, her acting career never took off. She blames it on being adopted and not inheriting Gigi's talents. Had she not been adopted, though, she never would have become a famous model. She owes her signature beauty to her mixed ethnicity—half Black and half White. Even though Mom is adopted and has dark-olive skin and chocolate-brown hair, she and Gigi have similarities. They're both tall and thin, and they both have emerald-green eyes. That likeness made Gigi believe she and Mom were destined for each other. Personality-wise, the two are polar opposites.

Inez ambles into the kitchen and gives me a double take. "Nova?" She glances at her watch. "You weren't scheduled to arrive until noon?"

“My flight landed early.” Ten minutes early, but who’s counting? Inez, that’s who. I point to the room that has my luggage. “Let me grab my stuff.”

“Ah-ah-ah.” She waves her finger at me. “Aaron will get that. He’ll be here in five minutes. Had I known you were coming early, I would have had him here already. Why didn’t you text me?”

“I didn’t think of it. I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

Understanding shows in her brown eyes. “I suppose you have. Gigi is by the pool. You can go say hi while I get your luggage and room situated.”

Situated. I remember what that means—all luggage delivered, unpacked, and arranged so the guest or family member feels at home the moment they arrive.

“Which room am I in?”

I’ve only ever stayed in two: The Marie Antionette room, decorated to match the royal suite in the Palace of Versailles. The decor was inspired by Gigi’s third husband, a famous movie producer in France. And the Taj Mahal room, filled with white and jewel-toned accents. The wallpaper looks as if it were embedded with brilliant stones. I used to call it the Princess Jasmine room.

“Gigi thought the Zen room would be appropriate for your stay.” Inez’s phone chimes. She takes it from her sweater pocket. “Aaron should be here in three minutes.”

I shuffle closer to her, and set my Gucci bag on the counter. “I was hoping for the Caribbean suite. Do you think Gigi would mind if I switched?”

Inez doesn’t like change of any kind once plans are set, but Gigi is persuadable.

“Any other time she might not mind, but I’m afraid the Caribbean suite is already occupied.” She puts my purse on a hook by the door. “I’ll have this brought up with your things.”

“Occupied? Does Gigi have guests?”

I’m looking for solitude, not company. The Caribbean suite is in the pool house near the back of the property. I imagined myself staying in there, away from the servants, for optimal privacy. My heart needs mending, and Gigi likes to push people to move past their problems. She means well and can be extremely helpful in many ways, but her style of moving on is different than mine—than most. I need time for my heart to heal from this insult and injury. Breaking up after a year of on-and-off dating doesn’t erase feelings in one night like it clearly did for Justice when he decided to get married. I still can’t believe it, almost as much as I can’t believe the marriage hasn’t been annulled.

“We only have one guest. Riley,” Inez says. “He’s as polite as he was as a child, but he keeps to himself and doesn’t interact much.”

Images of a blond-haired boy flash in my mind. I played with a kid named Riley one summer when I lived here. He was visiting with his father, who at the time was dating Gigi. They married shortly after but in typical Gigi fashion, it didn’t last.

“Riley, as in the governor’s son?” His dad wasn’t a politician back then, but who else could she mean?

Inez nods. “That’s the one.”

“I didn’t know he and Gigi stayed in touch.” She and his dad were only married for four months before Gigi left to film a movie in France, where she met husband number three.



“You know Gigi. She never cuts off anyone, especially family members.”

Ex-family member.

Inez grabs a towel and cleaner and wipes down the counter. “Your grandmother loves to help and would never refuse a person in need.”

“What is he in need of?”

“A place to stay? A place to hide? Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is Gigi wants him cared for. I cook his meals and make sure the pool house is clean. He’s not messy, and he doesn’t ask for much, but I only see him when he walks from the pool house to the gym above the garage.” She gestures in that direction and continues cleaning the counters. “Gigi talks to him in passing. Small talk, but mostly he just smiles and keeps to himself. I’m not one to pry, but he showed up a month ago without warning. Usually Gigi gives me two weeks’ notice before guests arrive so I can prepare, but not this time. She gave me two days’ notice. Then he appears in the middle of the night. I didn’t even know he arrived. He took his own luggage to his room. It’s not how I like things done. From what I’ve seen, he didn’t bring much with him, and he doesn’t seem to have any friends. It’s very strange, but you know me, I don’t like to pry.”

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“Of course not.” I clip a smile. Inez is nosey personified. Too bad she doesn’t know more about what Riley is doing here, and why he has the suite I wanted for myself.

The door behind me clicks open and then closes.

Inez checks her watch and smiles at the young man who just entered the room. “Right on time, Aaron.”

He nods and glances at me, his eyes aglow with a star-struck look. I know that look and only started getting it when I began dating Justice. I almost blurt, “Save it for Hope,” but then she’s probably received that look her entire life for just being herself.

“Gigi’s granddaughter is to be set up in the Zen room,” Inez says in a curt tone, as if to remind him I’m not a celebrity. I’m family and not to be gawked at. “Please deliver her luggage there promptly.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Aaron stiffens, taking the hint.

For a second, I think he’s going to salute her.

Poor guy. I give him a soft smile, but he doesn’t dare glance my way again.

I’d guess he’s around my age, twenty-two or maybe a bit younger. He’s cute, too, with those hazel eyes and curly brown hair. Something about him seems familiar.

He takes my luggage and rolls it out another side door that leads to an elevator I used to play in when I was a kid.

“New employee?” I ask Inez.

“Aaron is Mr. Jones’s son. You remember his dad. He’s the landscaper.”

“Oh. That’s why he looks familiar.”

“Come.” Inez waves for me to follow her. “I have refreshments set up by the pool for you and Gigi. Let’s not keep her waiting.”

2

Nova

All I want to do is go to my room and rest or be left alone, but I know better than to argue with Inez. Plus, it'd be rude not to catch up with Gigi before going into self-imposed isolation.

Inez leads the way down the sun-drenched corridor. On the left, a ballroom sized living room opens to the grand staircase and main entrance. Large glass doors that arch at the top flank the right side. The view of the garden and grassy courtyard beyond has me breathing easier. I'd forgotten how beautiful it is here. This is exactly what I need.

We pass through a set of the open doors and stroll along a stone pathway as it curves through boxed hedges trimmed in patterns. Fuchsia bougainvillea grows everywhere, adding pops of color to the otherwise green landscape.

After a few winding curves, we make it to the pool area. Gigi reclines on one of six chaise lounges. Across from her, the guesthouse stretches the length of the rectangular pool. Like the corridor we just left, arched glass doors line the entry. Two lead into the Caribbean suite, which is like a one-bedroom apartment, but the third set leads to the massage room.

I don't see anyone else around the pool. Either Riley is out or in the suite I'd hoped would be mine.

Don't be mad. I didn't request it, and no one knew I was coming.

I didn't even know I was coming until news broke about Justice and Hope. We'd only broken up two weeks before his race to the altar.

"Nova!" Gigi stands and walks to me.

For a seventy-year-old, she looks incredible. A long turquoise dress shows off the length and shape of her lean body. She paired it with a floral kimono and tons of jewelry. Her signature beaded bracelets made from varying healing crystals adorn her ankles and wrists. Auburn hair falls to her shoulders in soft curls and her makeup is perfectly done.

She opens her arms and greets me with a hug. When she pulls back, she cups my cheeks. "Darling, you grow more beautiful every time I see you. I know acting isn't your thing, but you must let me introduce you to my photographer, Roberto. He could do a full shoot and have you signed and booked at a modeling agency of your choice. Just say the word."

"You forget, I'm not tall. This is an illusion." I glance at my shoes. Three-inch-high platform sneakers. According to model standards—and Hollywood, for that matter—five five is short. "Then there is my curvy figure." Hips, boobs, and a booty.

"With a face like yours, it won't matter. I knew your mother would make a beautiful baby."

Gigi's compliment is genuine, but I've heard similar comments from less than compassionate people. Santa Barbara, Malibu, the Palisades, Beverly Hills, and much of Southern California is filled with string-bean women who are over five eight. In the real world, I'm of average size, but here, I'm an Oompa Loompa.

“Dad contributed to the gene pool, too,” I say without thinking.

I got my yellow-green eyes and ash-brown hair from him. My physique, too. All the women on his side of the family are curvy and petite. Compared to them, I’m tall.

“I suppose he did.” Her true feelings show in her bitter tone.

Time doesn’t heal all wounds, even when those wounds are from a misunderstanding. But then, Mom and Gigi never forgave Dad for what he did—or what they thought he did and what prompted Mom to move us in with Gigi when I was a child.

“How are you?” I shift the topic away from Dad. “You look fabulous as always.”

“Age is nothing compared to youth, but I’m hanging in there. Thank you for the compliment, darling.” She kisses my cheek, then gestures to the chaise lounge next to hers. “Join me.” A table between the chairs has a tray with hummus, vegetables, fruit, and two glasses filled with green juice. “The hummus is to die for. Carrot flavored. From my garden. I grow vegetables now.” She gracefully lowers onto her chair. “Well, Mr. Jones grows them. But it was my idea to plant the garden.”

I laugh, my first genuine laugh in three weeks. “I’ve missed you.”

“Then don’t stay away for so long.”

“I won’t.” I follow Gigi’s lead and dip a carrot into the hummus. “Mmm. You weren’t kidding. This is amazing.”

“Grandma knows best.” She smiles and takes a polite bite of her carrot stick.

Meanwhile, I dunk another carrot into the hummus and scoop a dollop so big it spills onto my chest before I can get it into my mouth.

Gigi giggles and hands me a cloth napkin. “That’s why I take small bites, darling.”

I clean myself off, then re-dip the carrot in the hummus. This time, the food makes it into my mouth.

Gigi giggles again.

“What?” I ask. “I followed the rules.” Rules I learned at a young age. Small bites. Chew with my mouth closed and thirty-two times before swallowing. I didn’t count just now, but I did a lot of chewing.

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“It’s not that. You missed some on your chin.”

“And in your hair,” a deep voice says.

A shadow falls over me.

I shield my eyes and take in the young man standing at the foot of my chaise lounge.

He’s wearing shorts, no shirt, and has a small towel around his neck, like he just finished working out.

Tan skin shows off his sculpted torso and six—no, eight—pack abs. His shoulders are wider, forming a perfect V to his trim waist. He’s not muscular like a football player, but he’s built, for sure. His once blond hair is golden brown and grown out, giving him a surfer vibe.

“Nova, you remember Riley?” Gigi grins, as if she hopes I’ll be impressed.

Meddling grannie.

“Yeah.” He didn’t look like this back then, but I see a hint of the boy I knew. “It’s been a long time.”

Gigi beams at Riley. “I’m glad we ran into you, or Nova might not have had the chance to meet you again. You do keep to yourself a lot.”

Such a meddler.



He shrugs. "I don't want to be a bother."

Gigi swats at the air. "Nonsense. How could you be a bother? Your presence here is a delight. Don't you agree, Nova?"

I sneer at her, well aware of what she's doing. Ever the matchmaker. Doesn't matter that my heart was publicly ripped out and stomped on just weeks ago.

Off with the old and on to the next is Gigi's mindset.

"Is this the first time you've been here since the summer we met?" I ask Riley.

He nods.

"Is it how you remember it?"

He takes in the beautifully landscaped grounds. "It's more peaceful."

"It is peaceful." I narrow my gaze on him. "Is that why you're here? For peace and quiet?"

Gigi lays her hand on my thigh. "Nova, don't be rude."

"How was that rude?"

"Riley is here for private reasons," she says.

"Do you know what those reasons are?" I ask in earnest, making sure she's being as careful as she used to be with her property and safety.

"Yes." She removes her hand from my leg and rests it on her lap. "And that's my

business, dear.”

I glance at the two of them. They both look uncomfortable, and I can’t say I blame them. This is a weird conversation. Maybe I’m the one out of line. It’s not like I want to spill my guts to Riley about why I’m here, nor do I want Gigi to share my news with him. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. You’re right—your business is your own.” I give them both an apologetic grin.

“It’s fine, dear.” Gigi pats my knee and gestures to the tray. “Have another carrot.” To Riley, she says, “Join us, won’t you? There’s more than enough food.”

“Thanks, but I should shower.”

“Sure thing,” Gigi says with a fond smile.

Something passes between them—an understanding that makes me even more curious about what’s going on.

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“See you later,” I say.

Riley nods at me and walks off.

I don’t mean to stare at his back muscles or toned ass; it’s just they’re on display and hard to miss.

Gigi sips her green juice and waits until Riley is in the pool house behind closed doors to say, “He grew up nicely, didn’t he?”

“Who?” I know exactly who she’s talking about.

Gigi arches a brow. “Eye candy never made a broken heart worse.”

I let out a heavy sigh.

“I hope you’re not this pouty the whole time you’re here. I was hoping to have some fun with my favorite granddaughter.”

“Your only granddaughter.”

“Only the best granddaughter ever.”

That gets a smile from me, despite my reluctance to be cheered up. “Did you plan this little meet-cute?”

“I did no such thing.” She crosses her arms and avoids my gaze.

“You did!” I gasp. “I know you, Gigi. Inez told me how she never sees Riley except for when he walks to the gym. She said you chat with him when he does, and now I’m supposed to believe it was a happy coincidence that you were at the pool when I arrived and had me meet you here, which also happened to be at the same time Riley finished his workout?”

“Darling, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She dips a sliced radish into the hummus and dabs her lips with the napkin after taking a bite.

“What was your plan?” I keep on, having too much fun. “For Riley and me to fall in love at first sight and ride off bareback into the sunset together?”

She cracks a small smile but is quick to hide it. “Don’t be silly. I don’t own horses.”

I point at her face. “You are so busted. Admit it. You plotted all of this.”

She lifts her chin and lets a bit of that smile free. “I admit to nothing, dear. And you would be wise to do the same. If it’s not validated, it’s nothing more than hearsay, a rumor.”

“A tabloid—in my case.”

“Fake news.” Gigi’s voice is stern.

“But not always.” I frown, as a cool breeze flutters over my sun-warmed skin.

Gigi pats my leg, tenderly. “I know, dear. I’m sorry for what you’re going through. Living in the spotlight isn’t easy. But I can tell you from experience, it will pass. Someone else will catch the media’s attention and you’ll be old news.”

“Maybe.” I shrug. Hopefully.

“This conversation took a turn for the worse.” Gigi sighs.

A wet piece of something slaps the side of my face and falls to my lap. I pick up a slice of radish from my thigh and glare at my grandmother, who’s staring ahead, pretending to watch the sun glisten off the pool water.

“You threw a radish at me?” I ask with disbelief.

“I had to do something to get that frown off your pretty face.”

“Gigi!” I grab a handful of radishes and toss them at her.

She laughs as they land all over her arms and hands. One sticks to her wrist.

I giggle and wait to see what she does.

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Instead of retaliating, she smiles at me. “That’s a much better look on you. What can I do to keep you smiling?”

She means it—would do anything, buy anything, take me anywhere—and I love her for it, but the truth is she can’t fix this for me. “You’re already doing it. Giving me a place to hide while I rethink my life.”

“Life? Is it that serious?”

I nod. “I know where I went wrong.”

“Justice.” She’s not asking.

“It started before that. I know you don’t like to hear about him, but when Dad died, I was so mad I wanted to forget everything, who I was, what I had with my father and how I’d just gotten it, only to lose him.” I meet her gaze. “He wasn’t a gold digger, Gigi. He loved me in a way Mom never could. I needed that. When it was gone, I needed an escape.”

“Enter Justice.”

I shrug, my mind and heart still working out that part.

“Time, my dear.” Gigi picks the radishes from her body and chair, and dumps them on the tray. “Time can heal all wounds and bring clarity. You came to the right place.” She stands.

I shoot upright on the chair. “Where are you going?”

“To make sure your room is ready. I think you could use a little peace and quiet.”

“Thank you.”

“Not a problem, dear. Stay here and relax. Try the green goddess juice; it’s heavenly. I’ll have Inez text you as soon as your room is ready.”

“Sounds good.”

She takes a step then pauses and murmurs, “Maybe you’ll get lucky, and Riley will walk by with his shirt off again while you’re waiting here.”

“I know what you’re doing, and it won’t work.”

“I saw the way you looked at him when he left.”

“Well, I’m not blind, but I’m not looking for anything, either. At this point, I might even give asexuality a try.”

“I always found sleeping with a man helped, but I also got married and divorced five times, so don’t listen to me.”

I roll my eyes.

“Love you,” Gigi calls out and waves as she walks away.

“Love you, too.” Smiling, I rest my head and close my eyes, hopeful life has something wonderful in store for my future.

3

Riley

Nova Allen living at the estate is the last thing I need. The girl is a tabloid explosion and a threat to my whereabouts.

I'm here hiding from the world until I figure out my next move. Gigi's compound has everything I need to do that—security, privacy, protection from the public eye. Ever since the Hollywood icon retired three decades ago, she's lived a low-key life. No drama. No publicity or social media. And no paparazzi.

That's why this was the perfect place for me—until now.

Fuck. I turn on the water in the shower and strip out of my shorts.

With Nova staying here, I'll need to rethink my plan, try to quicken my move, and get things in order to make that happen. It won't be easy, and I'll be stuck here for at least another month, but staying is too risky.

I've avoided the world for a reason. I'm a threat and possible target. If a picture or news gets out about where I am, Gigi and everyone else here could be in danger. That was never the plan.

Maybe I should scrap everything and move back to Hawaii. I felt safe there, secluded, because I was. Living in a remote area on the Big Island has its benefits. Daily surfing. No neighbors. No one in your business, not that I had much privacy sharing a



yurt with my half-sister, her husband, and their two-year-old daughter. But I'm grateful I got to meet and know them.

I didn't even know Macy existed until my freshman year of college, when I overheard my drunk father talking to his friends. His slurred words reached me through the slight opening of the doors to his private library.

“Nothing kills a politician's career faster than a one-night stand with a stripper who ends up pregnant. I buried that disaster with a check and a one-way ticket to the West Coast.”

I felt bad for the woman and child, even tried to find out who they were and where they ended up, but I had no luck.

My dad is great at concealing things. Hell, I trusted him to hide me after what happened the spring before I graduated from college—trusted him to remove me from witness protection and shield me from a psycho Mafia princess and her infamous family.

As the governor of North Carolina, my father has the means and security, but nothing is free when it comes to that man. In return, he wanted complete control over my life. So I did what any desperate son would do. I contacted my former FBI handler and asked for advice.

Agent Keller didn't have to help me or care, but he did—still does. He told me to find a place to hide where no one would think to look for me. Enter Macy. After tracking down my secret half-sister, we devised a plan for me to meet her. To my luck and great relief, she was on board.

I smile at the memory of my time there and the beauty of the tropical paradise, until I recall the daily struggle I had connecting to the internet. That part sucked, and

considering online day trading is essential for my next plan, returning to the island is a bust.

I sigh and notice steam covers the large bathroom mirror.

Shit.

I jump into the shower and let the hot water soothe my strained muscles. They're tight from stress and pushing myself harder than usual this afternoon in the gym. My gut told me to, as if intuitively I knew something was about to change. Little did I know that change would be a bombshell.

I squeeze shampoo into my hand and lather it into my hair. It's longer than I like but getting a haircut hasn't been my priority. I have no doubt Gigi would bring in a hair stylist if I asked, but I'm not here to have her do me favors. Her letting me stay here, knowing why, is favor enough.

After rinsing my hair, I run soap over my body and stand under the water, appreciating the heat and steam—a luxury that isn't reliable in Hawaii when you live in a yurt.

If I'm honest, staying with Gigi is a much better fit. She said the universe told her to contact me when she did. Not sure if I believe that, but the timing was uncanny. Macy was seven months pregnant with her second child, and even though she wanted me to stay, I knew it was time to go.

That very day, I got Gigi's email. She sent it to an old personal account that I stopped using but still monitored.

She and I had stayed in touch after she and my father divorced. She's caring in that way and grew to become like an aunt to me. During my last year of college,

communication between us slowed and then stopped when all hell broke loose, and I was placed in witness protection.

The email she'd sent said she was thinking of me, wanted to make sure I was okay, and if I ever needed anything at all, not to hesitate to ask.

Moving in with her was my best option—a temporary one until I could carry out my newest plan of action.

I never imagined Nova would end up here, too. Hell, until now she'd been traveling the world with her pop-star boyfriend. Not that I follow her, but when you date someone as famous as Justice, you appear everywhere.

I never gave much attention to the pictures of her on social media other than a passing glance.

Did I think she was pretty?

Of course.

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Was I prepared for how stunning she is in person?

Not even a little.

That tan skin. Those yellow-green eyes framed by long black lashes. Those pouty, full lips. That silky, shoulder-length hair with its natural wavy texture. Those curves. Her body is about as perfect as it gets. Plump breasts, plump ass, small waist, full hips.

Images of her on the chaise lounge with her tan legs stretched to the end fill my brain. I'm hard in an instant. Like usual, I pleasure myself before leaving the shower, but this time—for the first time in a year—I picture Nova instead of my ex, Seraphina, the girl who broke my heart mere months before my old life ended and this new one in hiding began.

Much more relaxed, I dry off and dress in sweats and a T-shirt. My routine has been the same since I arrived: Wake up early, eat, occasionally surf before the crowds arrive, day trade in my room while eating lunch, add to my savings for a place of my own, make small talk with Gigi on my way to the gym, work out, eat, search the web for news on the two crime families who led to my life in hiding, and go to bed.

I sit at the desk in my bedroom and open my laptop. Then I repeat the dumbest action, which I've been doing for far too long. I pull up my ex-girlfriend's Instagram and Facebook pages and spy on her like I've done so many times before. Why? I don't know. I miss her? I miss having someone? I haven't been in love with anyone since her?

I cyberstalk other people from my past, too—old friends and places I used to visit, clinging to a life that was stolen from me. Most of my good friends from that time don't post anything anymore. Sera is constant, always on social media just like she was when we dated for a year. Maybe that's why I stalk her the most. It's a connection to my past. Whatever the reason, it isn't healthy. I need to let it go. That life is gone. Over.

I'm about to close out from social media when I change my mind and type in Nova Allen.

Pictures, gossip websites, and articles about her are everywhere.

Most of them are of her and her ex when they were together. Justice Bran is a pop-star icon. His music is good, but he's always in trouble and breaking the law. I don't know her that well but from what I know about Gigi and remember of Nova as a young girl, I don't get the appeal of Justice for her. She was a sweet girl, never bragging about her family or inherent wealth. She liked to play and do silly things. She didn't mind if she got sweaty or dirty or ruined her dress. Once she dared me to jump in the pool with my clothes on. She went first and was wearing a Disney princess gown Gigi had bought her that day. She didn't do it out of disrespect, just for fun.

Her hair was always a mess back then because she played hard. I remember laughing a lot with her, although I don't remember about what. I also remember thinking she had the coolest eyes. Sure, she was pretty. But the woman she grew into is breathtaking.

She's the kind of beauty you can't help but feel the universe spent extra time on. Like a sculptor perfecting his work. The maker got creative, and the reward goes to all who are lucky enough to gaze upon her.

She certainly was a catch for Justice. The guy is shorter and thinner than most men. Is his new wife attractive? Of course. She's a model but she's too thin for my taste. I don't need a girl whose stomach muscles are as toned as mine.

He seems like an ass, too, because he married Hope shortly after his breakup with Nova. Who does that?

I laugh at myself. This is what happens when you live in seclusion. My only outlet to the world is social media. I would tell myself to get a life, but it's a bit difficult when you're in hiding.

4

Nova

After another fifteen minutes of waiting and no Riley sightings, I get the text that my room is ready.

I trek back to the main house and follow the grand staircase to the second floor.

When I was a child, I stayed in the left wing of the house, so I was closer to Gigi's primary suite. The Zen room is in the right wing and must have been an ordinary room back when I lived here because I don't remember anything Zen.

A spa is the first thing to come to my mind when I enter. Salt rocks are embedded in a section of a wall. They glow a pretty shade of peachy pink. Spa music fills the air, mixed with the sound of the ocean. I explore the adjoining bathroom, where the spa theme continues with teak wood, stone, and bamboo. My makeup is unpacked on the counter and my toiletries are set up in the shower.

Mom always made me unpack my stuff immediately when we traveled, and when we moved from Gigi's to a house of our own across the country, she had me unpack all my boxes and set up my room myself. I didn't mind because I got to decide where I put my things. She likes a tidy house and can't stand a mess because she was raised with people doing everything for her.

I take my phone from my back pocket and text Mom that I arrived okay, in case she's curious, which I doubt. If she were, she would have texted to make sure I got here

safe. It's nothing I'm not used to with her, though.

Last week, I told her I was leaving New York. I'd been staying at my good friend Porsha's apartment while she was in Europe vacationing with her family. Mom has a loft in Tribeca but didn't invite me to stay, even after I told her Justice kicked me out of his penthouse. She hated him and was still mad at me for dating him.

Even so, I hoped to see her before I came here and reminded her yesterday that I was leaving soon. She said she wanted to meet, but her schedule kept changing. I have no doubt it's true; she's a workaholic. Then she had to return to her estate in Connecticut—the home where I lived after Mom moved us out of Gigi's to raise me far away from the limelight of California.

She wanted my life to have the kind of values fame didn't allow. As soon as I was old enough to work, she hired me as her personal assistant—said it would keep me out of trouble. My life was school, studying, and work. I attended college, like she wanted, at Parsons School of Design where I studied fashion, which I happen to love. Mom hoped I'd choose to live a regular life and not the famous kind she fought so hard to attain. I was on my way toward that life when Dad died, and I sought comfort from a douche like Justice.

Ugh. I hate that he's on my mind every day, almost all day. Still.

The free-standing tub draws my gaze. What better way to relax after flying from New York to here? I turn on the water and add lots of bubble bath. Once it's near the top, I shut off the water and spread the foamy bubbles around before stripping and getting into the tub. Hot water eases my muscles and for a moment steals my attention from Justice.

This is heaven.



I should put on some music.

I grab my phone from the nearby table and search for my favorite Apple station. Lately it's been moody songs about broken hearts.

Once I get the music playing, I pull up my Instagram account out of habit.

I haven't posted anything in three weeks. That's a record for me. I only got into social media regularly because of Justice. He was always posting pictures of us in new locations for his tour in Europe and in Asia. It was fun visiting new places. If it weren't for him, I never would have ventured beyond Eastern Europe. I'd only ever traveled with Mom and Gerard, her photographer husband. I've been to France, Italy, Greece, and England but I never got to explore or do touristy things. Every trip was for Mom and Gerard's work.

I scroll through random pictures and somehow end up on Justice's page. It's filled with images of him and Hope, new photos from their wedding and the weekend pre-party. It was a who's-who event. Did they even spend time alone? If I know Justice, his entourage was with them twenty-four-seven and still are with them. So much for a private honeymoon.

"Stop," I yell at myself and slam the phone on the table, sloshing the water in the tub. "No more looking at his life."

I keep telling myself this, and I keep ignoring my own advice. I'm here to move on. To look toward the future. I'm better off without him. Deep down, I know that. It just hurts, being dumped for all the world to see. It makes me feel unworthy, like I wasn't good enough to get a real commitment from him. Not that I was seeking one or would have accepted his proposal had he asked, but he told me he wouldn't marry until he was in his late thirties. He's twenty-five. Which means I was the problem. I wasn't good enough.

Great. Now I'm tense. How can I be in a tub filled with bubbles and hot water and be tense?

I pop the drain, dry off, and wrap myself in a white robe Gigi has hanging in the bathroom. The soft material almost hits my ankles. The bedroom feels cool compared to the humid bathroom.

I glance at the bed but change directions and open the French doors to the balcony, stepping onto the rounded patio. The air is even chillier outside, but I like it.

From here, I have a clear view of the pool house across the long stretch of lawn. I didn't think the structure was visible from any part of the house, but I was wrong. Is that another reason Gigi gave me the Zen room? She wants me to spy on Riley? She hopes his visual appeal will help me get over my heartache?

I shift my gaze to the peach-colored sky. Dusk paints the horizon and hills in matching desert shades.

I can't see the sun from here. It sets in the front of the estate, disappearing into the Pacific Ocean, visible from the front of the house and Gigi's private suite.

A breeze flutters wisps of my hair into my face. A few strands tickle my cheeks. I brush them away and catch movement by the pool.

My gaze jumps to the person walking around the patio. Is it Riley?

Nope. Mr. Jones hooks up the robotic cleaner and sinks the machine into the pool.

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It reminds me of when Justice pretended his pool cleaner was an octopus and wrestled it in front of his entourage for a laugh but ended up breaking the device.

If I'm honest with myself, he and I weren't in a good place before he dumped me. We were constantly on each other's nerves. For most of our relationship, my emotions revolved around his life and mood. I lost myself and now it's time I find who I want to be. If only there were a book with instructions on how to find yourself. I'd read it tonight.

"My dear, I could hear your sigh from the hallway." Gigi waltzes onto the balcony and puts her arm around my shoulders for a sideways hug.

"I sighed?"

As if she knows what I'm thinking, she says, "You deserve better than a pop star with no substance or staying power. See it for what it was. A time of fun and exploration. He was a moment in your life. One day you'll be thankful he's gone."

"I wish that day were today." I rest my head against her shoulder.

"Well, that's what cocktails and wine are for."

I giggle.

"And this." She slips into the room and returns with a sketchbook and colored pencils.

“You want me to draw?” I ask as she hands me the stuff.

“I want you to reconnect with things you once loved. When was the last time you sketched a design?”

I shrug. “A year.”

“You used to draw gowns. Remember? We’d watch the Oscars and Grammys, and you’d sketch gowns the women should have worn or an improved version of what they were wearing. You had such a great eye, even at a young age.”

“I’d forgotten about that.” I was ten when Mom moved me away from Gigi to New England, but I visited her every spring, summer, fall, and winter. Whatever award ceremony was happening, we’d watch it, critique the outfits, and I’d sketch several designs.

“I didn’t forget. I still have some of your sketches. They’re framed in my dressing room.”

“They are?” I can’t believe she saved them. I try to recall what they look like. “Can I see them?”

“Of course, darling. But you must promise if you create any new designs, you’ll share them with me. You never know when I’ll need a new dress.”

I follow Gigi out of the room and down the hallway. We cross from one side of the house to the other via catwalks that overlook the grand foyer and double staircase.

We enter Gigi’s massive master suite, which could pass as a spa in Morocco with its peaceful vibe and mix of hanging lanterns and vibrant colors. When I was little and living here, I would have sleepovers in Gigi’s giant bed. She would finger comb my

hair and sing to me as I fell asleep.

In the dressing room, sketches I drew years ago hang from an oversized mirror that rests on the floor.

Gigi points to two on the right side. “These are my favorites. I had this one made for a party.”

“You did?” I gape at her. “You never told me.”

“I’m sure I mentioned it once or twice.” She waves a hand, the bracelets on her wrists clinking with a pretty sound.

“I think I’d remember you telling me you had one of my dresses made.”

“Hmm?” A line forms between her eyebrows. “Well, it’s a good thing you’re here or you might have never known.”

“I can’t believe you had one of my dresses made,” I say, still in awe. She must have really liked the sketch. “Can I see it?”

Gigi walks to the far end of the room, where a row of gowns hang. She fingers through them until she finds the dress.

The one I sketched is colored blue, but this dress is a glittery green. “I altered the color,” Gigi says. “Green is much more flattering on me, but the rest of it is identical to your drawing.”

I touch the sparkly fabric and examine the dress closely. It’s well made, with tight, straight stitching and a hand-sewn hem that would impress the most critical eye.

I step back and take a moment to admire the creation I dreamed up, a sketch from paper brought to life, and smile in admiration. “Wow. It’s sexy and kinda fabulous.”

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“Fabulous indeed! You have talent, Nova. You always have. Do you know how many compliments I got on the night I wore it? Everyone wanted to know who the famous designer was.”

“No way. Who’d you say?”

“You, of course.” She smiles fondly. “I’m certain I texted you about it because I had inquiries about other dresses you designed.”

“When did you wear it?”

“Let me think.” She taps her chin. “It was about eight months ago.”

“Oh.” I slump. “You might have texted me. I lost my phone a few times while I was on tour with Justice. If you texted me then, I wouldn’t have gotten it.”

Sometimes I didn’t read texts from my mom or Gigi back then. They both, in their unique ways, wanted to know how I was doing, and I didn’t want to answer them, knowing it would lead to unwanted advice.

Gigi cups my cheeks with her gentle hands. “This heartache will pass. I promise.”

I could cry. Mom tells me I’m better off without Justice but her concern is more about how he made me look publicly and how that made her look as my mother. She never liked him and thinks him dumping me was the best thing that ever happened. Not once has she asked how I’m doing or showed sympathy toward my feelings.

“Thank you, Gigi. I needed to hear that.”

“Well, grandmothers are good for some things.” She lowers her hands. “Do you want it?”

“Want what?”

“The dress?”

“That you had made?”

“Of course that one.”

I think about it. The dress is my masterpiece in design, but I didn’t bring it to life. Gigi did—or rather, her seamstress. Besides, it’s nothing I’d ever wear. “You keep it. But thanks for offering.”

Gigi studies me. “If you change your mind, it’s yours. In the meantime, if you have any new sketches you want brought to life, I can have the outfits made so you can see them in person. It’s always fun to see creations brought to life. It might help keep your mind occupied, which is always helpful when mending a broken heart.”

“You’re right. Sketching will keep my mind occupied.” And my hands busy versus using my fingers to troll the internet for information about Justice and his new bride.

Ugh. The thought churns my stomach.

“I’m having a dinner party tonight with some old friends. You remember them, I’m sure. Judy, Kirsten, Jack and Mia, Kate and Ansel.”

“Kate and Ansel as in Ansel from Ash and Roses?” The band was huge in the eighties



and has become famous again on T-shirts, totes, and coffee mugs, along with other eighties bands. I've heard a few of their songs. They were good.

"You were listening. I thought for sure I lost your attention at 'dinner party.'"

"I was listening." Sorta. "How do you know Ansel?" Last I remember, he isn't an old friend like the others.

"Kate, Ansel's wife, is Kirsten's daughter."

"Oh."

"Does this interest mean you'll join us? We're having Pasta Buffet Night."

"Tempting." I love Pasta Buffet Night. Inez has a spread of choices and customizes the dish to whatever you'd like—from vegan to gluten-free to vegetarian or traditional type dishes. "Any other time, I'd say yes, but I'm not feeling very social and I'm sleepy from traveling," I add, to soften my rejection.

Gigi gives me a look that says she's not buying my excuses. "Everyone will be heartbroken."

"What if I'm sketching?" That might get her to give me a pass.

"You can take a break for an hour to eat. What if Riley comes? It would be nice for him to have someone his age to talk to."

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“He’s not my age.” He’s two years older, if memory serves me correctly.

“You’re much closer to his age than anyone else who will be there.” Her brows go up with her hopeful expression.

I sigh. “Fine. If Riley comes to dinner, text me and I’ll show up for a little.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Ah-ha! I knew she had an ulterior motive. “I’ll be fine in my room.”

“At least come down and let Inez fix you a plate of pasta. You know how she loves to feed people and prides herself on her cooking.”

“I can do that.”

She smiles and presses her hands together. “Thank you, dear. And should you see Riley eating pasta alone on the grounds somewhere, feel free to join him. He’s mending his life, as well. Maybe you two can help each other.”

“I’m not looking for a friend.”

“Neither is he, which is why he might be the perfect distraction. A sympathetic ear to share your concerns.”

Riley is mending his life? Is he suffering from a broken heart, too? His story gets more and more intriguing.

“I’ll think about it,” I say and turn to leave. “I’m going to sketch.”

“Pasta Buffet Night starts at eight.”

I laugh and shake my head as I exit the closet.

5

Riley

I stand at the threshold to the pool house, my gaze fixed on the main house in the distance.

I really don't want to do this, but I don't want to be rude, either. Gigi has been beyond kind to me by letting me stay, knowing I'm possibly a danger to her and anyone else here.

With Nova visiting, it could be only a matter of time before the paparazzi are camped outside. No more morning surfing. So far it's been safe. No one has a clue where I am, but all it takes is one picture of me to change that—to change everything.

Although a pasta buffet sounds delicious, I'd rather eat alone. When I first arrived, I participated in a couple of Gigi's parties. She's always hosting something. Game Show Night. Tarot Card Night. Yoga Under the Stars Night. Mexican Fiesta Night.

I get it. She doesn't like to go out into the public any more than I do, so she invites friends to visit her. I didn't, however, know it was part of the deal to stay here.

Gigi said Nova would be at the dinner, but I get the feeling that girl wants her privacy, too. After all the negative media attention, I would want to disappear for a while if I were her.

A shadowed figure emerges from the landscaped pathway that leads to the main

house. The person seems to be carrying a tray. Inez? I appreciate the way she loves to feed people, but she doesn't need to be catering to me whatsoever. I've told her that a few times. I grew up being waited on. My dad treats his staff like a nuisance. He's not kind or caring the way Gigi is to her employees. She treats them like family. Maybe that's why they are so good to her.

"I'm glad you're here, or else I don't know how I would have knocked on the door," a sweet, familiar voice says. Nova stops a few feet away from me, carrying a large, covered tray. "I brought you food."

I hurry over and take the tray from her shaking arms. "Let me help."

"Thank you." She sounds relieved. "The tray got heavier the farther I walked."

The scents of tomatoes and cheese fill my nose when I inhale. Mmm. "I'm sorry. Did you say you brought me food?"

"Well, us. I brought us food, if that's okay?" She crosses her hands in front of her, her palms touching.

She looks cute and innocent, in a way that doesn't match the sexy curves of her body. Normally, I'd be staring at her boobs, which are now shoved together between her arms, or trying to not stare at them, but with Nova, I can't get past her face. She's so damn pretty.

She raises her eyebrows, and I realize I haven't answered yet. "It's fine. Thank you. Did Gigi tell you to do this?" Because why else would she?

She clears her throat. "I took it upon myself to save us both from enduring the dinner party."

I can't help but chuckle. "You didn't want to join Pasta Night?"

"From the look on your face when I got here, I'd guess you didn't want to join, either."

"I was debating whether or not to go. I'm not big into social gatherings these days." I shrug with the tray in my hands.

"I know the feeling." She steps to my side. "Should we go in?"

"Oh. Yeah. Uh, come in." I follow her through the open glass door and to the dining table near the small kitchen.

She clears away the decorative place settings and table runner. "You can put the tray here."

"Thanks." I set it on the table.

Nova pulls out a chair on the end and rests her knee on it as she lifts the lid from the tray.

Warm, rich aromas assault my nose, and I salivate. "That smells amazing."

"Inez is a bit controlling but she's one hell of a cook." Nova points to the bowls. There are several. "This is traditional marinara sauce. These are meatballs. This is grilled chicken, and this is fettuccine sauce. This bowl has pasta carbonara with prosciutto." She points to two other bowls. "This has a garlic and wine sauce. This is spaghetti noodles, and these are cauliflower noodles. I couldn't fit salads on the tray or dessert, but I can go back and get some if you'd like."

"Nova, this is perfect and more than enough. I can't believe you carried all this from

the main house.”

“Me, neither.” She rolls her shoulders. “I’ll get us some plates.” In the kitchen, she opens a cabinet, grabs two plates, and gathers silverware from a drawer. She’s familiar enough with the suite to know where everything is.

I notice we don’t have drinks. I head to the refrigerator as Nova passes me on her way to the table. “I only have bottled water, sports drinks, and beer. Any of those sound good?”

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“There should be some wine in the buffet.” She sets the plates in front of two chairs and opens the door to the furniture near the dining table. Bottles of wine, vodka, and rum are inside.

“Wow. I didn’t know that was in here.”

“White or red?” Nova holds up a bottle of each. “You’re supposed to drink red with pasta, but I don’t believe in following the rules.”

Again, I chuckle. “I don’t either. But I’m not picky, so I’ll let you choose.”

“Good, because I’m not a fan of red.” She puts the red wine away and takes the white wine to the table.

“Need a bottle opener?” I feel oddly at ease, which is strange since I haven’t had or wanted company for some time now.

“It’s in the drawer to the left of the stove.” She points to it and sits.

I get the opener and two wine glasses. I only know where they are because the cabinet doors are glass. At the table, I open the bottle of wine. The label says Prosecco.

Nova watches me. “If you’d prefer another...” She rises from the chair.

“It’s fine.” I would have had a beer with my spaghetti, but wine will do, and I don’t mind Prosecco, even if it’s on the sweeter side.



I fill our glasses and sit at the head of the table beside her. I'm starving, but I don't want to dig in before we each have our food. I reach for the tray since my arms are longer. "Which would you like?"

She stands and serves herself the cauliflower pasta and garlic wine sauce.

I knew she'd pick that.

"What about you?" Her beautiful eyes narrow. "You look like a spaghetti, marinara, and meatball kind of guy."

Good guess. "You'd be correct."

She smiles, and I swear the room brightens. I could stare at her face all day, it's that interesting and unique.

Nova fills my plate and sits back down. We both take our cloth napkins and drape them over our laps.

She giggles but doesn't say anything, just eats her pasta.

I follow her lead and moan at the delicious taste. "This is incredible."

She nods and sucks a noodle through her lips.

With a mouth like hers, it's erotic as hell. I rinse my food down with some wine. "This surprisingly pairs well with the spaghetti."

"Prosecco pairs well with anything." She takes another sip. "In my opinion," she adds.

I smile and continue to eat.

Silence falls between us.

Right when it starts to grow awkward, Nova says, “I feel like one of us should say something.”

To the point. I can get on board with that. It’s refreshing, considering all I’ve dealt with over the last year. People who know my story tend to tiptoe around me. “How have you been?” I ask the first thing to come to mind, and wish I could take it back the moment she frowns.

“Not good.” She stares at her pasta. “I’m sure you’ve seen the media posts about me. They’re everywhere.”

I shrug, like I haven’t Googled her. “I don’t really follow social media.” True, unless it involves the Gianni or Morello family, or Sera, who I intend to stop cyberstalking.

She studies me with those magnetic eyes. “I believe you.”

Another refreshing response. I sip more wine.

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“I hate it. I’ve never liked social media. I mean, I like it, reading about celebrities and fashion and seeing posts from my friends, but I don’t like when it revolves around me.”

I nod, afraid to say something else I might regret.

Nova chugs some wine. “I didn’t know Justice was going to dump me. I had no clue. He had his bodyguard tell me.”

I almost choke on my spaghetti. “His bodyguard?”

“Yep. He left early for a show and had one of his bodyguards stay behind to give me the news. ‘Justice feels trapped and needs to spread his wings for a while. He appreciates the time you had together and wishes you the best.’ Then he nodded to three suitcases near the door. ‘He had your stuff packed so you don’t have to deal with it and says the luggage is a gift.’”

I’m stunned. “What a dick.”

Her face lights up at my comment. “Thank you. He is a dick. It was beyond shitty what he did, avoiding me, using his bodyguard—the one I never liked, mind you, and he knew it. As for the luggage, the dumbass didn’t even realize it was mine. My luggage that I brought when I moved in with him.” She laughs without humor. “That was just one of many mistakes I made with him. The worst being with him at all.”

“I’m sorry he treated you that way. He sounds like an asshole, and I never liked his music.”

She cracks up, her smile so infectious I feel my mouth lifting at the corners.

“I like you, Riley. You’re cool.”

I arch an eyebrow and tease, “If I’m Nova Allen-approved cool, it must be true.”

“Stop.” She nudges my arm with her small hand.

She’s average in height and plump in all the right places, but there’s a delicateness about her. Small hands, feet, wrists, and ankles. It’s a unique mix, just like her.

She catches me studying her. “What?”

“Justice is a fool.”

This time, she treats me to an endearing smile that melts a little of the steel cage I’ve built around my heart.

She lifts her wine glass. “Cheers to that.”

6

Nova

This is unusually strange but good. Much better than I expected. In truth, I expected Riley to send me packing with my food so he could eat alone.

Somehow we ended up dining together in his suite and having a good time.

I didn't plan to eat dinner with Riley. I used him as an excuse to leave the dinner party. I knew if I told Gigi I was getting food for Riley and me, she wouldn't argue or demand I stay. I never even had to greet the guests. The buffet room is around the corner from the dining hall. I slipped in and out, with only Gigi and Inez catching me.

Then I came here with no plan other than a tray full of pasta dishes and the hope that Riley would like one of them. The rest fell into place. It was easy, like him. He's easygoing, unless he's been faking enjoying himself this whole time. But I don't think that's the case. He seems genuine. It's a wonderful change from what I'm used to.

I meant it when I told him I like him. I do. He's pleasing to the eyes and has a casual way about him that is so nice compared to the moodiness Justice used to put out. If the pop star wasn't happy, no one could be.

"Are you okay?" Riley asks with concern. "You're frowning."

"I am?" Geez. I shake my head. "I was thinking about—you know what? I don't want

to talk about him. He doesn't deserve my attention. Not anymore."

He nods. "Agreed."

I finish the last of my wine and pour another glass. "More?" I hold the bottle up to Riley.

"Thank you."

I fill his glass and put the bottle on the table. "I'm sorry I hijacked your evening."

"You didn't. You saved me from having to be social."

I giggle and sip more wine, my head growing light and fuzzy. "We have that in common."

"You're not here to be social?" He sounds hopeful.

Huh? "I'm hiding from the world." I drink more. "If...when the social media buzz around me dies down, I'll return to the public eye but until then I'm on lockdown."

He studies me with those navy eyes. "It must be hard being in the limelight."

"But I'm not." I sip more wine and hiccup. "I'm not famous, only by association. I've done nothing to earn a title for myself."

"Do you want to be famous for yourself?" He sits back and swirls his wine before taking a sip.

"I don't know. I wouldn't mind if I were recognized for something I did, I guess. I'm confused."

He doesn't add his two cents or start talking about himself like I'm used to; he just listens and sips his wine as if he's waiting for me to say more.

And because I'm relaxed, if not a little buzzed, I go on. "My mom wanted to raise me in as normal a way as possible—well, her version of normal. I lived here when I was in elementary school because she was pursuing her modeling career and traveling all the time. My dad tried to get custody of me, but my mom swore it was to get child support and money from her. Gigi thought so too. I didn't get to know him while I was growing up. Mom and Gigi held all the cards because they had all the money and power. When my mom married my stepdad Gerard, she moved us to Connecticut to give me a normal life." I make air quotes with the word normal. "There isn't anything normal about Connecticut. The kids are just as rich there, but their families are either in finance, law, own private businesses, or have old family money. They're snotty toward West Coasters, who make money off fame. It's not like we suffered, either. I spent my middle and high school years in a beautiful colonial mansion in Greenwich. But I didn't feel like moving back to California after I graduated."

I pause to sip wine.

Riley's sole focus is on me. "Because?"

He wants to know more? I thought I was rambling and boring him. So strange but nice. The wine-d-up version of me wants to keep talking and bare my soul, so to speak. I guess that's why I say, "Because I got accepted into fashion design school and because of my dad. He'd moved to the East Coast to be closer to me. Once I was eighteen, my mom couldn't stop me from seeing him. He'd always written me letters and sent me Christmas and birthday gifts, but now he wanted to get to know me. My mom and Gigi were against it, of course. Well, Gigi said I should be careful and keep my guard up so I don't get hurt. My mom still thought of my dad as beneath her."

"How did your mom meet him?"

“They were both trying to break into the acting world. Neither made it beyond commercials and B movies. They never married. Mom got pregnant and blamed my dad, but she kept me, so that was a win.” I pause to chug some wine. “They broke up before I was born. Dad continued his pursuit as an actor for a few more years, then left the industry altogether, while Mom switched to modeling. I don’t know if they ever had anything in common other than acting.”

“Hmm.”

He looks so casually cool reclined in his chair, sipping his wine with old-school manners.



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Gigi taught me the same table manners. My mom only taught me how to eat with my fork upside down because it keeps bites small and forces you to eat slower. Oh, and to leave more than half of my food on my plate, to avoid overeating.

“Are you and your dad close now?” he asks.

I lower my head, my gaze blurring on the plate of pasta. “We were.”

“Were?”

Tears burn my eyes. I don’t always cry when I think of my dad. Sometimes it hits me harder than other times. It could be the wine or Riley’s attentiveness causing me to be emotional. I feel a bit unhinged. “He passed away a little over a year ago.” And because I don’t want to talk about him anymore—fear I might become a sniveling mess—I turn the conversation to Riley. “What about you? Are you and your dad still close?”

They seemed close back when he visited that one summer, even though his dad came across as a bit controlling.

I can tell by Riley’s expression he’s aware of my switcheroo. He answers me anyway. “My dad and I don’t agree on anything.”

“That sucks,” I say—or slur—and cover my mouth quickly. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It does suck, but my dad has tunnel vision. It’s his way or the highway.”

I snort-laugh. “Your dad and my mom have a lot in common.” I finish my glass of wine. “I’m sorry about your dad, though. Parents shouldn’t suck. They should support us no matter what we choose.”

Riley chuckles.

“What?”

“You’re cute when you’re buzzed.”

I stiffen. I don’t know why. It’s not as if he’s hitting on me, but hearing him say I’m cute has me self-conscious all of a sudden. Why? Because my self-esteem is in the shitter, thanks to Justice and social media vultures? Because, until this moment, I didn’t think Riley thought much about me at all? Or because deep down I’m attracted to Riley, and I want his approval and I want him to find me attractive too, so at night when I’m trying not to think of Justice and Hope, I can remind myself that someone as intriguing and sexy as Riley thinks I’m cute?

“I should go. I’ve taken up enough of your time.” I stand and sway. Geez.

Riley’s on his feet in an instant. He grabs my arm to steady me. “Maybe you should crash here. You had two large glasses of wine.”

“You think I’m a drunk now, don’t you?”

“I don’t think anything other than I’d hate for you to hurt yourself on the way back to the house.”

“You could always carry me,” I tease and pat his abs with a floppy hand as I sway toward him.

His body tenses.

Shit. Did I miss and pat his private part or something? Maybe I'm in worse shape than I think.

I gather our plates, aware of how loud I'm clinking things, and set them on the tray. My fingers are covered with marinara sauce. How did that happen? I lick them clean with a popping sound from my lips. "That's really good."

Riley chuckles again. "Oh, Nova. You are something else."

I lift my gaze to his face, but my eyelids are heavy with exhaustion. The day has finally caught up to me. "That's me. Something else." Not famous. Not skinny. Not tall. Not Black. Not White. Not doing myself any favors by drinking so much wine.

Riley wipes my hand clean with a cloth napkin. "I'll get the tray and food. You sit over here." He puts his arm around me and guides me to the couch in the family room.

I flop down and rest my dizzy head on the arm cushion. "I'm sorry, Riley. I'm not usually like this."

Not anymore. I swore not to drink as much. It's all Justice did and one of the many reasons we fought at the end. Two glasses aren't a lot, but I've never been able to hold my alcohol. I'm one of those people who end up with a massive headache, vomiting in the bathroom, or both.

"Don't worry about it." He brushes my hair from my face, his fingers gentle and warm.

When was the last time any guy touched me in such a tender way? So long I can't

remember.

Dishes clink and clatter. Water sounds from the kitchen. I feel bad but I don't have the energy to get up and help. I'm so tired.

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I doze off and wake up to the sun shining in the bedroom. Not my bedroom. I'm in the Caribbean suite, tucked under a mound of covers. I don't remember coming to bed, though. I thought I was on the couch. Actually, I thought it was all a dream. But I'm here, so I gather it was all real: my drinking, talking about my family to him like he's a therapist, and passing out on the couch. My mouth feels like the Sahara.

I notice a full glass of water on the nightstand. There's a note, too.

In case you're thirsty when you wake up. You have the place to yourself. I left early to surf and then I'll be hitting the gym. Take your time. No rush. R

What a disgrace. He must think that about me. Great first impression, Nova. Ugh. I sip the cold water—so good—and look at the other side of the bed. It's neatly made, which means he didn't sleep here. He must have taken the couch. I should run and never show my face to him again.

No rush, my ass. If I could blink myself to my room, I would. After chugging more water, I slowly rise. I'm still in my clothes. He probably didn't know what to do with me and put me to bed like this. Had he changed me into something else, it would have made this even more awkward, especially because I don't have the perfect body by any means. My curves are real and bountiful.

When I was with my dad the last couple of years before he died, I never worried about my appearance. It didn't matter, and his side of the family is where I got my curves. I fit in, unlike here.

My shoes are near the nightstand. I put them on, grab the water, and race to the

kitchen. I don't know what time Riley left and how long he works out for, but I don't want to be here when he returns. I stuff the glass into the dishwasher and notice all the pasta plates are in there, too. He did the dishes? Can I be a bigger inconvenience?

My eyes are wide and on every movement as I cross the pool deck to the lawn and landscaped trail that leads to the main house. Please don't let me run into Riley. Please, please, please.

I have no idea what my face or hair looks like, and my breath is a mix of garlic and wine. I'd probably kill a plant if I opened my mouth.

I make it to the main house and enter through the open French doors to the great room. Gigi only closes them when the weather is bad or cold.

Inez appears out of nowhere. She gives me a once-over. "Where did you just come from?"

"Nowhere."

"Where's the pasta tray from last night and the dishes?"

"Uh...I brought them to Riley's room."

"And you just came from there?" She gives me another once-over.

"No. I was taking a morning walk."

"In your clothes from last night?"

Whistling draws my attention. It sounds masculine. Could be the gardener or his son or Riley. I'm not sticking around to find out.

“I have to go.” I rush into the house.

Inez calls out, “Don’t forget your breakfast. I’ll have it ready soon.”

“Thank you.” I wave and keep going. I trip on the stairs but catch myself and hurry to my room, where it’s safe.

7

Riley

I put my hoodie up and my sunglasses on before the Uber XL arrives. After walking back to Gigi's with my surfboard once, I decided the hike was too long and my paranoia too high to ever do it again. Taking an Uber while semi-disguised seemed like a much better option.

Cooper, a cyber security guy Agent Keller put me in touch with, set up a fake account with the name the Feds gave me when I was in witness protection—Rider, because it's similar to Riley. The picture is fake, and the bank card it's linked to is also under the fake name. My entire life has been fake for a year.

I sling my bag over my shoulder, my wetsuit inside, and hold the surfboard in the other. The only good thing about the last year is I've been able to surf more than ever. It's crucial for my mental sanity, along with working out in Gigi's home gym. That place is state of the art. She spared no expense, even though I rarely see her in there. She seems more into yoga these days.

Surfing, building muscle, and day trading are all I have in my life. Perhaps that's why dinner was so much fun with Nova. I didn't want to eat with her, but she was sweet enough to bring me food, so I couldn't turn her away. I didn't want to get to know her or like her. My attraction to her is already a weakness I can't afford. Not that I would ever make a move on Gigi's granddaughter. That would be disrespectful.

I thought about it a lot last night, though.



Even if Nova didn't have the face and body of my dream girl, her personality and honesty are alluring. She has a sweetness and innocence I didn't expect. How the hell did she end up with a guy like Justice? He's known for being reckless and toxic. I assumed she was a typical self-centered, party girl in search of the spotlight, but she's not that at all. Her mom sounds more like that. Nova also gave off an insecure vibe at one point. I could be wrong, but she seemed to tense up when I complimented her. In my defense, I was doing my best not to say more. She's inadvertently sexy, with those lips and how she licked her fingers and batted her long lashes at me. It wasn't an act. She seems clueless to her appeal, which makes her even more tempting.

She passed out on the couch in the most uncomfortable-looking position. I couldn't leave her that way, so I carried her to my bed and tucked her under the covers.

She felt damn good in my arms—too good, because I could feel the softness of her curves and the warmth of her body.

Shit. I have to stop thinking of her in this way. I won't survive staying at Gigi's, and I need another month before I have my finances in place. Maybe I can avoid Nova for the next four weeks.

The SUV pulls up to the curb and the driver rolls down his window. "Rider?"

"That's me. Can you open the hatch for my board?"

He does, and I rig the surfboard so it fits before climbing in the back seat. We drive in silence. The Uber drivers here seem to prefer it, which is fine by me. He drops me off at the corner about a block from Gigi's estate. I never give her address or have myself dropped off at her estate.

After walking the short distance to Gigi's, I put the code into the gate and stroll up the driveway to the garage. This has been my routine for the last month. Usually, I eat

my breakfast in the kitchen but I'm hesitant. What if Nova is in there eating?

What if she wants to talk and disarms me with her cute mannerisms and stories—or worse, what if she licks her fingers again?

Yeah. I should skip breakfast today.

“I see you,” a feminine voice calls out.

I turn and find Gigi ambling toward me. She sprint-walks around the estate grounds on occasion. Based on her matching workout attire, I'd guess she either just finished or is about to start.

“Morning.”

“Inez has your breakfast waiting. I hope you aren't planning to sneak off to the gym to work out on an empty stomach. She wouldn't like that.”

Gigi and her intuition. “I'm not really hungry.”

“Too much pasta last night?” She waltzes closer, a curious glint in her emerald eyes.

“Something like that.”

“How are you doing?” Her motherly tone comes out, and it's filled with concern.

“I'm great. Really, I am. Staying here has been amazing. I can't thank you enough.”

“No thank-you necessary.” She says this every time. “I'm happy to help. I wish I could do more. Did you and Nova have fun last night? I hope you got the chance to catch up after all these years.”

She knows exactly where and when to insert questions she wants answers to.

“We did a little. She’s a great girl—great young lady.”

A loving smile brightens her face. “Yes, she is. She’s special. A little lost, but who isn’t, right?”

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I nod, not blind to the hints Gigi keeps throwing out. “She’s sweet.”

“Sweet indeed. Someone should remind her of that.” She pats my arm. “I’m off for a morning walk. Don’t forget your breakfast.”

I considered waiting until she’s far enough away that she wouldn’t see me go to the gym, but knowing Gigi, she would swing back, pretending to forget something, and bust me.

Here goes nothing. I enter through the side door and walk into the kitchen, where I greet Inez.

“Riley. I was getting worried.” She lifts the tray off my plate of food that’s set up at the breakfast table. “Your usual.”

Behind the surly exterior, Inez is a marshmallow, always catering and caring for the people around her.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” I sit at the table. The morning haze has lifted and the sunlight shines on the garden area beyond the rows of windows.

“Tell me, is it good?” She asks the same thing every morning.

I take a bite of my omelet. “Delicious as always.”

“That’s right. Don’t you forget it. Now eat up.”

I smile and shovel the eggs into my mouth. I might get a cramp or stomachache from eating this quickly, but the faster I get out of here, the better.

Inez places a table setting in front of the chair next to mine.

“Who’s that for?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“For Nova. She’ll be down shortly.”

Must eat faster.

“Slow down, Riley. It’s not good for your digestive system.”

I swallow the last bite. “My digestive system works just fine, and thank you for the scrumptious omelets.”

She beams and heads for the stove.

I guzzle my glass of orange juice, wipe my mouth, and put my plate in the sink.

“Always such good manners. Thank you, Riley.”

“I’m off to work out.”

She gives me a questioning look. “You don’t work out until the afternoon.”

“Yeah. I’m changing things up today.”

“It’s good to change up your routine, but it’s also good to take a day off and give yourself and body a rest once in a while.”

“I’ll rest when I’m dead,” I tease.

She shakes her head and returns her attention to the pot on the stove.

I hurry out the side door and exhale with relief. Breakfast could be a problem if Nova will be joining me each morning. Might have to switch up my routine even more.

8

Nova

I take a quick shower, brush my teeth, and run a comb through my damp hair.

I've just changed into my robe when my phone dings with a text from Inez.

Breakfast is ready.

I'll take it in my room. I'm not feeling well. Thank you, I reply and snuggle on my bed while I wait. It'll make my ruse more believable.

I don't like lying to Inez. I'm sure she's serving Riley breakfast, though, and I can't see him after what happened last night. He had to sleep on the couch. Because of me.

It was kind of him to give me his bed, but he should have left me where I passed out. Justice left me on the floor once. Stepped right over me and went to sleep in his bed. The fact that Riley was a gentleman makes me feel worse about crashing his evening.

Knocking sounds on the door.

I open it and let in Inez.

Behind her, Aaron pushes a cart covered with a tablecloth into the room.

"Set it up by the balcony." Inez points to the French doors, which are opened, letting

in the fresh air.

It was the first thing I did when I got to my room.

She touches my forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

“I’m jet-lagged, not sick.”

“Rest up. I made your usual oatmeal with coconut milk and berries. I added some turkey bacon for protein. You take your coffee the same, I assume?”

“Yes. Thank you, Inez. It smells delicious. I appreciate it.”

“Eat up.” She gestures to the cart.

Aaron pulls the desk chair over to the cart now that it’s set up like a table.

“Text Aaron when you’re finished eating, and he’ll collect everything,” Inez says.

“I can bring it down myself.” That’s what the elevator is for—well, that and luggage and older guests who can’t make it up the stairs. I sit in the chair.

“I thought you needed to rest?” Inez asks.

“I do, but I, uh, might feel better after I eat. You know how my blood sugar gets.” Now I’m lying about my condition?

“I do, which is why you shouldn’t push yourself if you don’t feel well.” Aaron leaves the room, and Inez follows but stops at the door. “Riley ate his breakfast in a hurry this morning.”



Her suspicious tone has sweat forming above my lip. “Is that unusual?” Is he avoiding me, too?

“He’s never been in a hurry before.”

“Maybe his stomach was upset,” I say as an excuse.

Her eyes tighten with a death glare.

“Not because of your cooking,” I’m quick to add. “Stress affects the body in strange ways.”

“Stress? What does he have to be stressed about? He works out every day. Unless you know something I don’t?”

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“I don’t know anything.” It’s true. I did all the talking last night, blabbing away while he listened but gave nothing in return. “Do you know something?”

She waves a hand. “You know me. I mind my own business. Now, I need to go clean.” She leaves before I can say another word.

I would nag Gigi for information about Riley, but it’d be a waste. She doesn’t share people’s stories, believing we should share our own stories in our own time, on our own terms.

After eating my breakfast, I walk out onto the balcony and scan the grounds, taking in the beautiful landscape and morning. A couple of birds chirp in the distance. I look everywhere, resisting the urge to focus on the pool house. What if Riley can see me? I don’t want him to think I’m spying.

“What’s your story?” I murmur and turn my head, pretending to look at the hills when really my gaze is on the pool house. He couldn’t possibly tell the direction I’m staring from this far away. If he’s even watching me, which I doubt.

Five minutes pass before I give up on catching a glimpse of him and head inside. I text Aaron that he can collect the cart, and then I push it into the hallway.

This is how my life was when I lived here as a child, but after Mom moved us to Connecticut, I didn’t have this kind of pampering. Mom had a chef for her dietary needs—models can’t gain weight—but she wanted me to cook and clean for myself. I did poorly at both. We had a cleaning lady come once a week, but she was instructed not to touch my room or bathroom.

We had a landscape company do the yard work or else I would have been in trouble. I don't know dick about pulling weeds or trimming trees...and lawn mowers? Forget it.

Plus, it would have made Mom and Gerard look cheap if we were the only house in the posh neighborhood without a yard service.

Two knocks sound on the door. "Nova, it's Gigi. Inez tells me you're not feeling well."

This is why lying is bad; one always spirals into more.

I open the door. "I'm feeling better actually. Must have been my sugar." I don't have diabetes, but my condition is similar. To my credit, if I hadn't eaten when I did, I would have suffered a bad episode or a "sugar attack" as I call it.

"Oh, good. I have a neighborhood committee meeting I need to get ready for, but I was going to cancel if you weren't well."

"I'm fine." I tug the belt to my robe. "I was about to get dressed."

"You have the doors open." Gigi breezes toward the balcony, steps outside, and inhales the fresh air. "This is one of the reasons why I chose this room for you. It has one of the largest balconies and an impressive view. The weather here is simply perfect, don't you think? Much nicer than on the East Coast."

"For sure." I stand at the threshold.

"You could do yoga out here in the mornings."

Gigi does it on her balcony every day before breakfast.

“Maybe.”

“It’s great for the mind. Keeps plaguing thoughts away.” She turns to me, her workout clothes the same color as the sky.

I nod. Agreeing with Gigi is easier than disagreeing and, who knows, maybe I’ll try yoga out here one morning.

“How was dinner with Riley?” Her jade-colored eyes hold mine. “Did he like the pasta?”

“He did.” I fold my arms and lean against the doorframe.

“And...?”

“And nothing. We ate. I did most of the talking, and that was it.”

“Oh.” She tilts her head, her brows drawn. “Did you have fun?”

“As fun as two strangers can have.”

“You’re not strangers.” She waltzes inside and opens the closet doors. “You’ve known him for years.”

“I met him years ago. I haven’t known him for years.” There’s a difference.

“Did you see the new outfits I had sent over for you?” She fingers through the dresses, shirts, rompers, and jeans hung on the left side.

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Those are for me? I thought they were left over from some other guest. “Gigi. That wasn’t necessary.”

“Grandmas like to spoil their grandchildren. I only have one, so you get extra.” She pats my cheek. “I’ll be at the meeting for a few hours. We have water issues to deal with. Someone is always complaining that we’re not getting enough.”

“It’s California. Aren’t there always water shortages?”

“Yes, but this is more of a private property issue. Perhaps I should have a rain dance party and see if we can stir the spirits to help us.”

I laugh, even though I know she’s serious.

“See you later, darling.” Gigi heads for the door. “Text Inez if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” I call out as she disappears down the hallway.

I explore the new clothes she bought me. They’re all in my size. Gigi’s personal shopper is amazing—can take one look at a person, even if it’s in a picture, and know what size he or she wears. The outfits are beautiful and very much my style—a little sweet, a little sexy, solid colors, no patterns.

You’re too thick and short to pull off stripes or patterns, Mom’s voice sounds in my mind.

I shake my head to get rid of it and choose an outfit of my own. Something casual

and comfortable compared to the clothes I wore for the last year. Justice liked me to be done up all the time, as if we were going to a club. Don't get me wrong. I love dressing up, but not on a regular basis. I pull on a T-shirt that hangs off one shoulder, forgo a bra, and pair it with cut-off jean shorts and sneakers. I hate bras. They're uncomfortable and the few pretty ones that fit breasts as big as mine offer little support.

Justice liked when I didn't wear a bra; Mom hates it. "Your boobs will sag prematurely," she'd complain.

Ugh. I'm not here to think about either of them, but if I don't find something to do, I'll drive myself crazy.

I could go for a walk around the property or lay out by the pool. I could sketch. I glance at the desk with the pad of paper and colored pencils, but my eyes seek the view beyond the balcony and sun-drenched sky.

For the last month, Justice and I were in New York, where it was freezing. Before that, we were in Northern Europe, where it's just as cold. We stayed up late and slept during the day, rarely seeing the sun, not that there is much in those places during those months. If my skin weren't naturally bronze, I'd be as pale as Gigi. Justice liked that about me, too. My skin. He was born in Canada and had the pasty skin that goes with it.

Stop. Thinking. About. Him. I smack my head with each word, then trek down the hallway to the stairs—anything to distract my mind.

On the first floor, I pop into the kitchen for a Gatorade. The room is spotless, and Inez is nowhere in sight.

Good. I don't want to explain what I'm doing or get a lecture on how to take care of

myself.

I'm about to exit the side door when I remember it leads to the garage and home gym. What if I run into Riley?

Turning on my heel, I race out of the kitchen, down the corridor, and pass through the open French doors, praying I don't run into anyone at all. I should have brought my earbuds. No one will bother me if they think I'm listening to music.

But I'm not going back inside and upstairs to my room to get them. It's far and I want to be in the sun.

Strolling along the stone path, I veer to the left, away from the trail that leads to the pool house. Palm branches sway in the breeze with a rustling sound. I inhale a breath of nature and relax my tense shoulders as I lift my face to the warm rays.

My mom's voice echoes in my head. Are you wearing sunblock? Where's your hat? You don't want to age prematurely.

"Stop, stop, stop." I cover my ears, because that makes sense.

My butt cheek vibrates. I take my phone from my pocket and answer, seeing it's Porsha.

"Hey."

"Hey. How are you doing, hun?" Sincerity rings in her tone.

"I'm hanging in there. How are you doing? How's Paris?"

"It's crowded for spring. More than usual. We just got back from the Riviera for a

week. The weather was beautiful, but it was crowded there, too.”

I can hear the eye roll in her voice.

“Is the whole family with you?” Her father makes them take a family vacation every year to France. He started it after he separated from their mother, as though vacations to France fix his cheating on their mom and then leaving her for the other woman.



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“All four of us, plus Mercedes’s new fiancé.”

“I can’t believe she’s engaged.” She’s only twenty. “Has he seen her erupt yet?” Mercedes and her twin Bentley are three years younger than Porsha, and spoiled brats. They have hissy fits when they don’t get their way.

“He has.”

“And he’s fine with his wife-to-be acting like a toddler with attitude?” I can’t imagine any guy is cool with that kind of behavior.

“He’s like my dad—tries to please her so she’ll stop making a spectacle of herself.”

“Wow. I’m shocked.”

“You and me both. Bentley isn’t doing well. She misses the full attention of her twin and them being single together.”

The path ends where it meets a stretch of vibrant grass. I continue walking toward the wall surrounding the property.

“Engaged after three months is quick.” I’m not jealous. I just wonder what these women do to get a man on one knee so readily. “What does Gabby think?” Gabby and Porsha have been together for two years, but neither has even talked about marriage.

“You know Gabby. She’s skeptical about everything. At first, she thought Mercedes

was pregnant and that's why Aleksy proposed. Her stomach hasn't changed or grown though, so that idea was a bust. Then she thought Mercedes lied about being pregnant to get Aleksy to propose. Now, she's in disbelief that any guy would hitch his wagon to either of my twin sisters. With one comes the other. I give the marriage less than a year before Aleksy calls it quits and moves back to Kaliningrad."

"I'm sure the wedding will be one hell of a party. Your stepmother must be on cloud nine."

She rambles off something angry in French, which I don't understand other than the wordoui. "Enough small talk. How are you really?"

"I'm hiding from social media and paparazzi. That should tell you how I'm doing."

"I know. I'm so sorry. Justice is a shit-stick. He'll realize what he lost, but it'll be too late. Right?"

"Definitely, considering he's married. But I doubt he misses me. He looks happy."

She gasps. "You've been spying on his social media platforms! I told you to stay off your phone if you can't control yourself. He's not worth it. He gave you up, so he's clearly dumb, and we don't waste our time on dumb people. Especially ones who look like a truck driver in need of a haircut. Nova, shame on you."

I release a heavy sigh. "I know. I've been bad." I drop onto a bench that rests under an arch covered with bougainvillea. It backs up to the ivy-covered wall surrounding the property and is a nice private spot to chill.

"It's okay. I know it's hard. Call me next time you feel the urge to spy on him. I'll remind you of how amazing you are and not to waste your time."

“Okay.” I agree, even though I won’t. The time change would have me calling her at all hours of the night. Besides, I need to learn to control myself.

“Time has a way of changing things,” she says.

“You mean healing. Time has a way of healing things.”

“That, too, but I’m talking about changing. Give life time and change will occur. It’s inevitable.”

“You’re like an old wise lady trapped in the smokin’ hot body of a twenty-three-year-old.”

“Trapped? Hardly. I manifested this body in my previous life and vowed never to share it with a man. They’re not worthy. If only you were gay. Lesbians would be lined up for a date.”

I smile despite my depressive mood. “If only...”

“Merde. You sound worse. My wise old lady vibes aren’t working their mojo. I can leave and fly to wherever you are, if you want.”

“No. That’s not what I want. Besides, your sisters would kill me. They’re cyber bullies, and I already have enough bad publicity.”

“Stop looking at that, too. In fact, leave that to me. If I see something that needs your attention, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, stay off social media. Get a massage or have a spa day or something. Where are you, anyway?”

“Not in New York, that’s for sure.”

“You don’t want to tell me?”

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“It’s not you I don’t trust. It’s your sisters.” They’re worse than TMZ. If they knew I was in Santa Barbara with Gigi, I have no doubt they’d send paparazzi just to out me. Those girls are ruthless. “When do you get back to New York?”

She lives in her apartment in the city, but she grew up on the West Coast where her family has a huge estate in San Clemente. It’s as well guarded as Gigi’s place, but with her sisters still living at home, it’s not a place I’d feel safe visiting.

“Two more weeks, and I should be back in New York. Gabby is meeting me for a romantic week in London before we return.”

“Isn’t Paris where you go for romance?”

“Not when your family is staying there for the rest of the month.”

“London it is. Tell Gabby I said hi.”

“Of course. Now, stay off social media and call if you need me. Kisses. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

A shadow falls over me as I end the call.

“Your mom?” Riley asks.

I glare up at him. “Excuse me?”

“You said love you. Were you talking to your mom?”

“No, and nosey much?”

He grins, like my anger is funny.

I hold onto my attitude, ignoring how perfectly straight and white his teeth are and how sexy his smile is.

“I walk here every day. It’s usually vacant. I didn’t notice you until I was too close not to overhear.” He shrugs. “Sorry.”

“You don’t look sorry. You look amused.”

“What makes you think that?” He stuffs his hands into his jeans pockets.

“You’re grinning.”

His features straighten and his brows pucker. “Huh.”

“Huh? I tell you you’re smiling, and your response is huh.”

He shrugs again. “I haven’t smiled in a while.”

“Oh.” My anger fades. “I haven’t either.”

He retreats a few steps. “I can come back later for my turn.”

His turn on the bench? I hop to my feet. “No. Stay. I’m done anyway.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Oh, and, uh, I’m sorry about last night. I didn’t mean to steal your bed.”

“You didn’t. I gave it to you.”

“But you wouldn’t have had to if I hadn’t fallen asleep in your suite.”

“It wasn’t a big deal.”

“It was to me. Thank you.”

He studies me, his eyes crinkled at the corners as if he’s confused.

I hitch my thumb over my shoulder, toward the house. “I have to go.” Without another word or glance at him, I take off.

I should be relieved but even though I apologized for my behavior, I still feel like I made a fool of myself. I don’t know why I care anyway. I blame Justice. Because of him, I’m a self-conscious mess.

9

Riley

I sit on the bench under the shade and watch Nova walk away.

Now that is a great ass.

Who am I kidding? Everything about her is great.

I wasn't going to approach her when I spotted her framed by the bougainvillea-covered arch, as if she were meant to be surrounded by nature's beauty.

I planned to turn around and give her privacy. It's one of the reasons I come to this spot daily—for the outdoor privacy. But then I heard her say, "Love you, too," to the person on the phone, and I got worried it might be her ex. The guy is known for cheating on his girlfriends. Who's to say he wouldn't cheat on his new wife with his ex? According to social media, he cheated on Nova with Hope before he dumped her.

It's none of my business what Nova does with her life, but at that second, when I heard her say those words, I grew concerned. I didn't tell Nova she talks in her sleep and said stuff about Justice that worried me.

"Please, Justice, I didn't mean it."

"Don't, Justice, please don't."



“I’m sorry. I don’t want to be fat.”

The last statement could be unrelated to Justice, but I don’t think that’s the case. I think he made her feel like shit.

The tabloids are doing a number on her, and it makes me want to destroy the people targeting her. She’s hardly fat. Society doesn’t know what fat is anymore.

Nova is beautiful and curvy and desirable in so many ways. If I read another post about Justice trading in Nova for a better, fitter version, I might punch a hole in a wall.

Hope is nothing like Nova. She’s fake. Fake tan, fake nose, fake hair color, fake lips. I’ve seen the before and after pictures. We all have. Nova is natural and exquisite.

One post went as far as showing Nova drinking a milkshake and claiming she has an obsessive eating disorder. If you look at the picture closely, Nova is at a smoothie bar. Drinking a motherfucking smoothie. Even if she was enjoying a milkshake, why is it anyone’s business?

How does she handle the negativity?

My father squashes as much fake news as he can that’s reported about him. Lots of political figures do, not that they can remove or erase all of it, but Nova doesn’t even seem to care. Shit. I could even have Cooper wipe clean as many posts as possible.

I admire her for not reacting to the media bullshit surrounding her, but I can’t imagine what it’s like, living with that kind of scrutiny. I suppose she chose the exposure when she dated Justice, which still has me confused as fuck.

Nova disappears across the stretch of lawn into the landscaped path that leads to the

house.

I let out a sad sigh and then laugh at myself for my reaction. Isolation is my problem. It has to be why I'm suddenly interested in Nova's life. She's also the first person my age I've been around in a while. It doesn't help that she's my fantasy version of the perfect girl.

Her behavior last night—bringing me food, her ability to make conversation easily, and the cute way she acts when she drinks wine—only increased my interest.

Nothing could ever happen between us, for so many reasons: My respect for Gigi. The fact that she's famous, and I want nothing to do with the spotlight. How our lives are on extremely different paths. Her desire for her own fame, and my need to be a recluse.

The only good thing to come of this new fascination is that I'm not thinking about my old life as much or stalking people from it on the web like I used to.

My phone dings.

It can only be one of a few people. No one else has this number.

The caller reads as Unknown. My shoulders tense. I answer but don't speak.

“Hunting?”

I relax. Hunting is the code word Agent Keller gave me when I was in witness protection.

“Hey. Thanks for getting back to me.” I stare at the second floor of the main house, the only part visible over the lush shrubbery from where I am.

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“I had to do a little digging, but I wanted to have the latest update for you.”

“I appreciate it.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m good, but I’m getting restless. I want to move on, but without as much worry.”

“I have good news then. As you know, a lot changed in the Gianni family after what happened. Salvatore Gianni isn’t even in the country anymore. He’s back in Italy, awaiting his sickly father’s death. We haven’t seen any activity that shows you’re on his radar anymore.”

“But?” He always lays out the good before the bad.

“Marina and her family have me a bit more concerned. Her behavior has been erratic, even for her. She’s completely derailed from her usual routine. We don’t know what she’s up to, yet, but she’s having secret meetings with a new member of the family. We don’t know what she’s planning, but it’s something. In regard to you, we still monitor her online activity, and there have been a few searches.”

I let out a heavy breath. Will this ever end? “What is your opinion regarding me still being a target?”

“Her dad is always looking for someone to blame. I can’t say for certain he won’t focus on you if you reappear in the public eye, or if she won’t target you out of resentment or sheer insanity. The majority of the blame was placed on Ainsley, but

they'll never find her, which leaves the second person in the incident."

"Me." I say it for him, my blood boiling in my veins. I hate Marina more than I should hate anything or anyone. "The blame belongs on her."

"I know that," he says in a calm voice. "You know that. But the Mafia doesn't live by the same moral compass that the rest of us do."

"How is Ainsley doing?" Last time I asked about the college student who got sucked into this mess with me was shortly after being placed in witness protection. She lost more than I did from this ordeal.

"I haven't monitored her in a long time. She got a new handler awhile ago, and I lost track of her."

I nod, even though he can't see me, and close my eyes in contemplation. "So the only way to know for certain if Marina or her family have any vengeance toward me is to put myself out there like bait?"

"Yes." His tone is solemn. "If she's watching you, we'll know. You're too far from the East Coast to be in immediate danger. We can step in and—"

"Put me back under protection? You know I don't want that. I want my life back—a modified version of it, anyway. I've accepted I'll never live a normal life again where I'm not always surrounded by security and looking over my shoulder, but whatever I have, it needs to be mine, on my terms."

"I understand that. I applaud you for how well you've done, too, but it's okay to take help. And, one day, if we get lucky enough to press charges and detain Marina, you would be a valuable asset toward implicating her."

“For all we know, her father will blame me for that, too.”

“He most certainly would.”

The conviction in his tone sends ice down my spine. If that happened, I’d need to rejoin the program for my safety.

“Is there a chance I’m no longer a target?”

“Yes,” he says with the same conviction. “But to know for certain, we have to slowly put you in the public eye and see how or if they react.”

I’d need to be prepared to uproot my life again by whatever means possible if they come after me.

“Are you still working toward your plan?” Keller asks in a lighter tone.

“I am. I’m close to getting it, too.” A few more big trades, and I’ll have what I need to buy the property I want.

“Now is the time to make small waves then. Nothing crazy. Keep it simple. A trip to the mall or a popular public place where you might be recognized. Go to Malibu or Santa Monica. It’s safer if you don’t do it around where you are.”

“I wouldn’t be comfortable doing anything here. I can protect myself, but not the people around me. They’re innocent.”

“I heard Gigi’s granddaughter is living there now. With her social status, you being there is a risk. We need to know if you’re still on Marina’s radar, not plaster your face on social media with an open invitation to your whereabouts.”

“I know.” I draw in a breath and run a hand through my hair. “I miss when life was simple.”

“Most people in hiding do. Safe is better than simple.”

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It's one of the first things he told me after I'd been rescued and put in witness protection.

"I have another call I have to take, but think about making a few trips to the places I mentioned."

I only leave the house to surf, early before most people are awake, and it's always incognito. The thought of going out in public without any disguise draws sweat to my forehead.

"I'll contact you immediately if you're pinged. But email me and let me know before you do anything, so we can monitor the Morello family and Marina closely."

"I'll think about it and let you know what I decide. Thanks again."

"No problem. Take care." He ends the call.

There might come a time when Agent Keller is no longer a resource for me. That's another reason I need to get my affairs in order and move on as soon as possible. I would never want to put Gigi, Nova, Inez, or anyone else here in danger.

If Gigi didn't have the security she has, I wouldn't have risked staying here at all. I'm going to have to talk to Nova and find out whether she plans to invite publicity while she's here. She said she's hiding from the world but who's to say that means the same thing to her as it does to me? Besides, celebrities always seem to be changing their minds and status.

10

Nova

Someone knocks on my bedroom door.

“Come in,” I say from where I sit at the desk, sketching garbage.

“Can we talk?”

Riley’s voice jolts me to attention. I thought it was Gigi or Inez. Not him.

I turn in my chair and blink wide eyes at the beautiful guy with his disheveled hair standing before me. “How do you know where my room is?” It comes out as an accusation.

He studies my stiff posture and one corner of his mouth hikes with a crooked, too-sexy grin. “Does it scare you that I know?”

“No.” My voice is too high, my response too fast.

He arches a brow.

“Fine.” My shoulders round with a slouch. “I’m not scared. I’m...embarrassed.”

“About what?”



“How I acted last night.”

“It wasn’t a big deal. Please don’t be embarrassed.”

“But it was. You even avoided me this morning, or you tried to by eating your breakfast faster than usual.”

This time he’s the one blinking wide eyes. “Who told you that?”

Not wanting to out Inez, I say, “It was just talk from the staff.”

“News travels fast around here.”

I nod. “Mm-hm.”

“I wasn’t avoiding you.” He walks toward the bench at the end of the bed and gestures to it. “May I?”

He’s asking if he can sit? How gentlemanly. But then, he was raised with all the rules and proper manners that go with being the son of a politician. “Sure.” I swivel my chair all the way around so I’m facing him.

He spreads his knees and rests his elbows on them as he clasps his hands together, looking like a delicious magazine ad for a new sexy cologne. “I was keeping myself to a schedule, and I ran behind.”

“Right.” I don’t buy it.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “It’s true.”

“Okay.” I sit back, feeling less nervous now, and cross one leg over the other,

noticing how Riley's eyes track the movement. "You can tell me the real truth when you're ready."

His gaze narrows with amusement.

"Out of curiosity, why do you stick to a strict schedule?"

He shrugs. "It's comforting."

"Comforting. Interesting word choice."

His mouth lifts at the corner with that crooked grin again. "Can I ask you something?"

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“Shoot. I’m an open book. Whether I like it or not.”

He takes a moment, as if planning his words carefully.

“Just ask, Riley. I promise you I’ve been asked worse.”

He sits up and rubs his palms on his jeans-covered thighs. “What makes you think it’s bad?”

“You wouldn’t be nervous if it were good.”

“Fair point.” He rubs his arm. “I don’t really know how to say this, so here it goes. Do you plan to attract media attention within the next few weeks?”

“Like?”

“Call attention to yourself? Invite famous people around? Have a party...anything that might attract paparazzi?”

“Oh. This is a serious question. Okay. Well, I thought I mentioned I’m hiding from the world, but maybe I didn’t. I don’t want anyone to know I’m here. As a matter of fact, I didn’t even tell my best friend—the person I was talking to earlier when you were eavesdropping—where I am.”

He smirks at my eavesdropping reference.

“Is there a reason why you’re asking? Would you like me to?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then we agree. We’re both here in secret. Yes?”

He gives me a once-over and holds my gaze as he nods.

“Now that I’ve got you here.” I gesture to the room and lean forward, noting how his pupils enlarge. Interesting. “What is your reason for hiding?”

“It’s better if I don’t say.”

“Why?”

He shifts on the bench. “It’s better for you if you don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Because it is.”

“Because it’s dangerous?” Excitement buzzes inside me.

“Because I’m leaving by the end of the month, and it won’t matter.”

He’s leaving? So soon? We haven’t even had time to get to know each other. The idea of him gone makes me sad, and I don’t know why. Loneliness. I’m lonely, and he’s potential friend material who’s also fun to look at.

“You okay?”

I refocus my gaze on him and find him studying me.

“Yeah. Fine.” I perk up and fake a smile.

Silence falls between us. I want to say something, but my mind is blank.

Riley stands.

I do, too.

“If anything changes regarding your plans to stop hiding, could you do me a favor and let me know first?”

“It’s not going to happen.”

“But if you do...”

“You don’t know me very well.” I fold my arms, a little peeved.

“I know you dated a famous celebrity, and the media loves you.”

“Loves to hurt me is more like it.”

“I know.”

His somber tone, as if he cares, confuses me.

“What do you know about it?” I inch closer to him.

His gaze roams my face. “Only what I’ve seen. It’s bullshit. You’re gorgeous.”

He says it with such conviction, I can’t help but smile. “Thank you.”

Now he really studies my face and unless I’m mistaken, he looks mesmerized.

Figures. The one time I find a guy who possibly sees me for me and not who I’m related to, and he’s leaving.

He walks toward the door.

I don't know why but I blurt, "I hope everything works out for you."

He looks over his shoulder at me, his navy eyes beguiling. "You too, Nova."

Hearing him say my name causes a physical reaction in me I can't quite explain. Butterflies erupt, heat explodes, my heart palpitates, and my breath freezes in my lungs.

Is this desperation or something more? Not that it matters regarding Riley because he's leaving, but I'd like to know for me. I haven't felt this way about a guy since high school. I dated a boy who had charm and manners similar to Riley. The great-grandson to one of America's oldest and wealthiest families. He was super preppy and not my type at all, but he asked me to a school dance, and I thought why not. All the girls seemed to envy me for going with him, but no one more than his ex-girlfriend Caroline, who suddenly wanted him back. He only had eyes for me, though—for one night, anyway. He never asked me out again and I never knew why, though I suspected it had to do with Caroline.

It was the last time a guy ever made me feel special. Even Justice, with all his fame and grandeur, couldn't make me feel that way. He was more about pleasing himself, and I was desperate enough to let him undervalue me. A mistake I don't plan to repeat again. Not with anyone.

I study the sketch I'd been working on for about an hour. Is it pants or a dress? I can't decide and I'm not in the mood to try to figure it out. Where's my passion? I can't draw great designs if I'm not inspired.

On my phone, I pull up the self-improvement and personal development blog I've been following. Porsha says it's her go-to for mental blockage and moving out of ruts.

So far I've done several worksheets and read about how to heal a broken heart, as well as how not to repeat past mistakes and how to move on. Is it helping? Not yet. But I'm not one to give up easily.

Today the post is about pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Do something you want to avoid or resist, especially if it involves people or loved ones.

Not really doable in my current situation.

A text flashes on my phone.

Gigi: I'm hosting Game Show Night and would love it if you joined.

Me: Game Show Night?

Gigi: A few of us started it last month after hearing about the game show America Says. Have you seen it?

Me: No. Where is this taking place?

Gigi: At the house, or rather the backyard. It would be good for you. Who knows, you might even have fun.

My immediate reaction is to come up with an excuse to get out of Game Show Night, but then I think about what I just read.



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Me: Okay.

Gigi: You won't regret it! I'll send you the details once I know more.

Me: Great.

Gigi: See you then.

This will definitely be me doing something I want to avoid. Implementing self-improvement and personal development blog advice, check.

I glance out the open balcony doors to the pool house in the distance and wonder whether Riley will attend Game Show Night. My guess is no. He's probably still walking back, so I don't go out on the balcony where he could see me spying on him. My new distraction, as unhealthy as it might be.

Mom always tells me to take it slow and get to know a person before moving into anything serious. And by serious, she means sex of any kind. Not once does she mention catching feelings for a person, like relationships aren't built on emotions. Although, I can't say I've ever really felt much for any of the guys I've dated. In truth, it always seemed like they were using me for something. My connection to the great Gia Gardner. Her connections to Hollywood icons. My family's money and fame. What I can do for their image. Justice thought I'd be great for his image because I didn't have a tumultuous past or too much tabloid appeal. He said I was sweet and innocent. I suppose, in celebrity standards, I have a clean image, or I did before Justice cheated on me and then dumped me to marry that very girl. Now I'm just the sad, pathetic, overweight ex.

I glance down at my body, my hips, ample chest, and thighs.

“I’m not overweight,” I declare but can’t say I believe myself.

I miss my dad. I miss the normalcy of his life.

11

Riley

I read the text from Gigi.

It's Game Show Night again. I'd love for you to join us. Nova will be there.

Game Show Night again?

I'm not sure which is better: interacting by answering questions or interacting over a meal. I'd say I prefer her food-themed nights but sitting at a table with strangers is worse than participating in a game.

It's been awhile since I attended any of Gigi's special events, and if Nova is going, I should join too or else I might seem ungrateful for all Gigi's done for me.

I leave the solitude of my suite and stroll across the lawn to the same place as the last time. The night air blows cool and smells of the ocean and fresh-cut grass. Edison bulbs strung between palm trees brighten a seating area to the side of the main house. Tall hedges line the concrete fence surrounding the grounds, blocking the view to the neighbor's property beyond.

Gigi's friends, along with Nova, sit on chairs divided into two sections, like for a wedding. A podium is at the front. A screen hangs between two palm trees, and a projector points at it from the back, behind the rows of chairs. Roger, Gigi's game night assistant, sits there, ready to work the projector while Gigi mans the podium as

the host.

“Welcome.” She raises her arms. “For those who are new to tonight’s event, we’re playing America Says. I was introduced to the TV game show over a month ago and have found it to be great fun. Are you ready?”

I slide onto the seat in the back next to Nova. “Hey.”

She glances over and her eyes widen. “You’re here.”

“In the flesh.”

“I didn’t think you were coming, even though Gigi said you were.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” I say with fake enthusiasm.

She laughs.

And what a laugh it is—musical and sweet sounding.

“What?”

“You seem as excited to be here as I am.”

Her smile is infectious.

My lips curl up at the corners in response, something only she seems able to draw out in me.

“At least we have each other,” she says, her tone light and carefree.

“And I’m not the youngest person here this time.”

She glances around and then smiles and whispers, “Omigosh, you’re right.”

Gigi gestures to the two groups of players. “On the right side we have the team the Colorful Coyotes. And on the left we have the Buttered Biscuits.”

Nova and I are on team Buttered Biscuits.

“A biscuit would be good right now.” Nova leans closer and whispers near my ear.

Her breath reaches my nose, carrying the scent of cinnamon. I breathe it in, and my mind returns to my youth and my obsession with Hot Tamales candy.

I chuckle at the random comment. “A warm biscuit with butter and cinnamon and sugar.”

“Mmm. You just made my mouth water.”

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She sends me a dreamy smile.

My brain fills with images of Nova beneath me on a bed, that dreamy expression put there because of me. Shit. Fantasizing about her when I'm jerking off in the shower is one thing; doing it when she's this close and we're surrounded by people is trouble.

Thoughts like this are dangerous, especially considering I haven't had physical contact with a woman since I slept with a surfer I met in Hawaii. The woman was harmless, a lost soul with no real motivation other than to catch waves and help her family sell fruit at the local market. In hindsight, I shouldn't have done it, but she'd been hitting on me for days and wasn't looking for anything serious, so I gave in to my urges.

I shake that night from my mind and focus on Gigi as she explains the rules of the game.

"Each team is given one question, with thirty seconds to guess all seven answers correctly. The first letter to each word will be given to help guide your answers. If you answer incorrectly, the guess goes to the next player on your team and so forth, until time runs out."

She instructs which team will start the game, and the first question appears on the screen.

After the first four answers, Nova and I start to get into the game. By the second round, we're really into it, hooting and hollering. We even stand a few times to shout our answers.

Nova's responses are hilarious, like when the question was about furry animals you can have as a pet. She answered a wolf and a meerkat and was one hundred percent serious.

My stomach muscles ache by the fifth round, and the best part is I haven't once thought about my past or stressed about my future and circumstances.

Servers pass around drinks and hors d'oeuvres. I have a beer, and Nova has something fruity that's half-yellow and half-pink. We eat mini shrimp cocktails, mini cups of beer cheese soup with croutons, and filet medallions wrapped in bacon. Those are my favorite.

"This is the last round of the night," Gigi announces.

Nova and I set aside our food and focus on the screen.

I rub my hands on my jeans and wait for the question to appear.

Name famous pop stars, the question reads. A list of blanks with first letters show beneath. The biggest blanks in the center have a J and B.

It's the other team's turn. An old woman shouts Justice Bran! When I first came here and participated in Game Show Night, the pop culture knowledge of the older ladies blew my mind.

"He's such a pretty boy," another lady calls out.

Nova stiffens in her chair.

Gigi's eyes widen on her, then she glares at Roger and waves for him to move on. "Next answer."

Nova stands and walks off.

Concern shows in Gigi's eyes, but no one else seems to notice what's going on.

I stand and mouth to Gigi, I got it.

She nods and continues the game as I chase after Nova.

She's halfway across the lawn, headed toward the pool.

Now that I'm far enough away from the crowd, I call out, "Nova?"

She doesn't acknowledge me.

I catch up to her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She snuffles and wipes under her eyes, continuing her fast pace.

She's crying?

"Nova, stop." I touch her arm. Her skin is warm and smooth as silk. "Talk to me."

"Why?" She wipes under her nose. Lights from the pool area catch her profile, illuminating her tear-stained cheeks.



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“Because you’re upset, and I want to help.”

“It’s stupid, Riley.” She folds her arms across her chest and lowers her head. “I’m stupid for getting upset from hearing his name. It’s not like I don’t think it a million times a day but hearing it...” Her voice trembles and a few more tears leak from her eyes. She wipes them away.

“It’s okay.” I touch her shoulder.

“It’s not okay,” she snaps, her eyes glossy and red. “I came here to be alone, not to be surrounded by people or play games. I shouldn’t have let Gigi talk me into joining.” She stares longingly at the pool house, the lights glowing within. “I wish I had the Caribbean suite.”

“Caribbean suite?”

“The room in the pool house. Gigi names all the rooms based on their décor. Yours is the Caribbean suite and the most private on the property.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. But if having that room will help, then it’s yours. I can move my stuff out tonight.”

Glistening yellow-green eyes jump to mine. “You would do that?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” I shrug. “It’s just a room. I didn’t pick it. Gigi put me there, but I don’t mind moving or trading rooms with you.”

She studies me like I’m an alien. “No one is that nice.”

“Maybe you haven’t met the right people.”

“Maybe.” She glances at the grass and then lifts her gaze back to mine. “Would you really give me your room tonight if I asked you to?”

“Yes,” I say with certainty.

“Wow. You are like no one I’ve ever met. No guy, anyway.”

Cheers erupt from the direction of the party.

Nova glances that way. “Do you think everyone saw me leave?”

“No. And those who might have, seem to have forgotten.”

“I’m tired of being embarrassed because of him. I’m tired of hurting.” She wipes a stray tear from her cheek. “I need to get over it already and move on.”

“It doesn’t work like that though, does it? Getting over someone or something because you want to. The heart and mind don’t have an on/off switch. If they did, I’d have turned mine off long ago.”

I’m not sure why I’m telling her this, except to try to make her feel better. I don’t usually open up this way.

Her eyes widen with surprise, then her expression turns sincere. “You’re a good guy,

aren't you, Riley?"

I run my fingers through my hair. "I wasn't always."

"I can't imagine you were ever awful."

"Let's just say I've had a lot of time to think about the past and my actions."

"I'm glad you're here." Her exquisite lips tilt with the sweetest smile.

If the sun were to break through the night sky, it'd be dull in comparison. That smile is like a hundred shooting stars.

I don't know what it is about Nova or why she affects me the way she does, but I'm sure I'll be sad to say goodbye when the time comes.

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Nova

My steps are light as I walk to the main house, the smile on my face genuine thanks to Riley and his sweet words.

Do not fall for him. Not even a little, I scold myself. He's leaving. Catching feelings for him would lead to more pain. I can't nurse my wounded heart by falling for someone else. It would only make things worse for me. But he doesn't make it easy for a girl to resist his charm.

How is it that he doesn't have a girlfriend? I bet there's a trail of broken hearts behind him. He said he wasn't always nice, although I'm not sure I believe that. I knew him when he was a child, and he was sweet back then.

If I can't get answers from him or Gigi about why he's hiding or what he was up to before coming here, maybe I can find some myself.

In the main house, a yawn escapes me as I climb the steps. No, no, no. I can't fall asleep until a reasonable amount of sleuthing is done.

I make it to my room without another yawn. To be safe, I wash my face and change into my pajamas before climbing into bed. Then it's on. Phone in hand, I search the internet for anything on Riley Cohen. Other than older stuff from when he was young and lived at home before college, there's nothing.

Thirty minutes and two yawns later, I manage to find a picture of him with a bunch of crazy-hot guys at what looks like a party. It's on some girl's Instagram account—HarperDDLuv. The girl who posted it is a pretty brunette but when I click the link, it says the account no longer exists.

Who's the girl? Did he date her? My guess is it's from college because he doesn't look much different, a bit younger and not as built.

After an hour of more searching and coming up empty, I give up on finding anything on Riley. Maybe he's one of those anti-internet types. It fits with his personality.

I go to my Instagram and consider deactivating the account. Would doing so help?

Maybe I should just go to sleep. I'm about to close out when I notice I have a few messages. My gut tells me not to click on them, but I ignore it.

One message is from a follower who sent me a picture of Justice tripping on steps outside a bar and almost falling on his ass. She titled it, *Jerk*. It's an old picture of him, though, from before we got together because his hair was still brown.

Another message is from some random guy asking me if I want to date. I delete it.

The last message is from a girl, and it's titled, *You look beautiful. Did you lose weight?*

Huh?

There's a picture of Justice and some tan, super-skinny girl on a yacht. Not me. Hope.

Because I'm stupid, I click the link. The next thing I know, I'm at Hope's Instagram account.

Of all the places for them to honeymoon, they chose the South of France. Once, I told him I wanted to vacation there on a yacht, Princess Diana style. He didn't appear to be listening. Guess he had been.

Because I'm a glutton for punishment, I click on a picture of Hope standing at the bow of the ship in a pose only a model could pull off. She has zero body fat or curves. Lean and toned, she looks like she spends hours doing Pilates. I read somewhere she's obsessed with hot yoga. My mom is, too. I tried it a couple of years ago at my mom's favorite yoga center in Connecticut and almost passed out. Not because I couldn't do the workout. My body doesn't regulate temperature well. Heat causes my blood sugar levels to drop. I grow lightheaded and feel like I'm about to faint. If I don't bring my blood sugar up, I could faint. It's hard to diet when you have to maintain a certain amount of carbohydrates. The celebrity diets are too dangerous for my health, which means, genetics aside, I'll never be a twig.

Justice had a love-hate relationship with my body. He liked my boobs and butt; however, he wanted me to lose weight in certain areas. Like I have control over that.

Once, he rubbed the small pooch I have on my lower belly and asked whether I wanted a tummy tuck. I acted like his words didn't hurt me, when inside they'd torn me apart.

Ever since I hit puberty and developed my curves, I've been scrutinizing my figure. I reach under my tank top and pinch my small belly. So what if my stomach is soft and not flat compared to Hope's or most women in SoCal? It doesn't mean I'm defective.

Before Dad died, he told me, "Never trust anyone who tries to change you."

He said he made that mistake for most of his life and regrets ever trying, especially with my mom. He regretted a lot of stuff he did in his past, but he learned from it and changed.

I should accept and embrace my body, but it's hard when I'm surrounded by a bunch of toothpicks.

I sigh and put down my phone. Comparing myself to Hope, or anyone else, won't help me work through this emotional roller coaster. Neither will looking at Hope or Justice's social media accounts. I promised myself and Porsha I would stop and have failed miserably, so far.

My phone chimes with a text.

I tense and nearly jump off the bed, thinking it's Porsha, and she somehow knows I was spying on Justice again.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

Nope. The number isn't one I have in my contacts.

Unknown: I hope you don't mind but I got your number from Gigi. I saw these and thought of you. R.

Riley?

A picture of a wolf in snow-covered woods appears on my screen, followed by a picture of a meerkat perched on a rock in the Serengeti.

These do not make good pets,he texts.

Laughter bursts from me. I can't believe he remembered my answers from game night earlier. I add his name and number to my contacts.

Me: But they're so cute.

Riley: These are cute and appropriate.

He sends a picture of a basket filled with kittens.

"Aw." I finger pet the tiny furballs on my screen.

Me: You're right. They are adorable. I think we should get one for the house. Gigi needs a pet. How about tomorrow we visit a local shelter and adopt one for her?

Silence. Little bubbles don't even show on my phone, indicating he's replying. Did



my invitation offend him?

Finally, a text comes through.

Riley: I'd be happy to help you pick out a kitten but I'm not sure how I feel about leaving the property with you.

I try not to take the comment personally.

Me: With me or with anyone?

Riley: You attract a lot of attention.

Right. He said that concerned him when he came to my room and is worried about me drawing the paparazzi here. Still, his rejection hurts my already bruised ego.

Me: Got it.

Riley: Are you upset?

Me: Nope.

Riley: One-liners from a girl usually mean she's upset.

Me: I'm fine.

I'm a baby.

Riley: I don't mean it personally. I would hate for something to happen to you because of me.

That hits me in the heart. He's concerned? For me? How sweet—and also a little scary. What could possibly happen to me? I want to ask him, but I don't. If he wants me to know, he'll tell me. Until then, I will practice patience, even though it's getting harder by the second. Riley is too intriguing. It'd be better for me if we spent the rest of his time here apart.

Me: I'll have some kittens brought to the house tomorrow. That way you can help me pick one. So much for taking my own advice.

Riley: You can do that?

Me: This is California. Anything is possible for a price. But don't worry, I'll make them sign an NDA. Gigi always has one around.

Riley: That seems like a lot of trouble just to include me, and I'd rather you not waste money on my behalf.

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Me: Contributing to pets in need is never a waste of money. As for my leaving the house, it's better if I stay here too, in case I draw unwanted attention. I'd feel terrible, and this is no trouble at all. Gigi has most people who come to the house sign an NDA. It's protocol for all outsiders.

Riley: Okay. I guess I can help you then.

A huge smile spreads across my face.

Me: It'll be fun. I'll text you the details as soon as I have them. But you can always back out. No pressure. It's your call. Okay?

Riley: Thank you. I'm sure it'll be fine.

Excitement like I haven't felt in a while rushes through me. I'm going to adopt a pet. I have something to look forward to. This is a good thing.

For the first time in weeks, I drift to sleep with kittens and a sexy surfer on my mind instead of turmoil and heartache.

\* \* \*

I sit at the breakfast table in the kitchen, eating steel-cut oatmeal with pecans, cinnamon, strawberries, and bananas. I already ate the two slices of turkey bacon Inez made for me. The combination of healthy carbs, fiber, and protein is the perfect meal for my condition.

Inez is not only an excellent cook, but she was a nurse when she lived in Guatemala before moving here. Her passion is in the kitchen, though. Everyone who has had the pleasure of enjoying her food is thankful for that.

She might be feisty, but she cares and knows how to ensure my glucose levels don't crash from a sugar-infused breakfast.

"How are the oats?" Inez asks from the kitchen island where she fills a tray with tea, yogurt, and fruit.

"As delicious as I remember," I reply with a smile.

"Good." She beams and sets the tray on a cart. "I'm bringing this to your grandmother. Eat up."

I nod as she opens the door and pushes the cart into the room that leads to the elevator.

Gigi prefers to eat breakfast in her suite on her balcony, while watching the ocean in the distance. She follows breakfast with yoga, enjoying the breeze and sounds of nature. The morning ritual started after Mom moved us to Connecticut, but had I still lived here, I'm sure Gigi would have taught me all about it.

I focus on the garden outside and a yellow butterfly flitting about the flowers.

"Morning." Riley's voice sounds from behind me.

My head snaps in his direction. "You're here."

"You sound surprised." He brushes his damp bangs away from his face.

“I wasn’t sure if I’d see you until later—or at all. You know? In case you changed your mind about the kittens.”

His answer is a sexy smirk. He yawns and stretches his arms over his head, his gaze on the view outside while mine lingers on his body, where the hem of his shirt is lifted, revealing a couple of inches of tanned abs.

Wow. Mornings look good on him.

Before he catches me gawking, I use my spoon to point to a covered plate on the island.

“That’s for you. Inez wanted me to tell you in case you came to eat before she returned.”

He shakes his head. “I wish she’d let me cook my own food.”

“Never going to happen. Inez runs this kitchen, and every item and appliance in it.”

Riley carries the plate to the table and sits beside me. “When I first told her I could cook for myself, I got a lecture in Spanish—which I understood, to her surprise.”

“You speak Spanish?”

He nods and lifts the lid from his plate, revealing what looks like Inez’s famous Guatemalan omelet, minus the beans and plantains. It smells heavenly.

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“I wish I could eat that for breakfast,” I murmur, drooling. “I love eggs, but protein isn’t my friend. Well, protein alone isn’t—and definitely not in the morning.”

“Why’s that?” Like pasta night, he places his cloth napkin on his lap, picks up his fork, and eats with all the manners of an aristocrat.

“I have reactive hypoglycemia,” I answer. “It means what I eat or don’t eat causes a reaction in my body.”

“My sister has that or something like it because of her pregnancy. Eating is a source of frustration. She has to be meticulous about her meals, says it’s a juggling act.”

“Yes. It is.” I slap the table a little too hard. “I know how she feels. It’s very frustrating, even now, and I’ve had this for most of my life.”

“I’m sorry. I know how hard it can be.”

He’s sorry? Tears sting my eyes. How can he be so caring? So kind? For most of my life, people think I’m exaggerating about my condition because I don’t have diabetes. They don’t understand the struggle and how one day it could turn into that. When you have reactive hypoglycemia as bad as mine, the risk of becoming diabetic is real.

I blink away my tears before he notices how emotional I am this morning. “Thank you for saying that.”

He sends me a warm smile and continues eating his omelet.

It gives me a moment to think. “You said, sister? I thought you were an only child.” I remember Gigi explaining to me back when they visited that one summer when we were kids, that he was an only child and not to ask about his mom because she died. During childbirth, I learned when I was older.

He stops eating, as if I caught him off guard. “I am. Or, I was. I only found out about Macy, my half-sister, during college.”

Half-sister? I want to pry, but this is way too touchy of a subject.

“Any updates on the kittens?” Riley changes the subject.

“Yes, actually. I confirmed our appointment earlier. Linda from the local shelter will be over around two this afternoon. She said they do this a lot—bring pets to houses for adoption. It’s popular in this area.” Like I had thought.

“Make sense. Are you excited?”

“Yeah.” I can’t contain my smile.

Riley’s gaze circles my face before settling on my eyes, his navy blues glinting with white flecks in the sunlit breakfast room. Until this moment, we haven’t made eye contact for long and certainly not in an intimate way like this.

I swallow deep in my throat and grow lightheaded. Not from my blood sugar being low but from his stare, as if he sees into my soul and understands my troubles. I doubt that’s the case, considering we’re just getting to know each other again, but something in my gut tells me his problems aren’t that different from mine.

We finish our breakfast, talking and giggling like old friends. It’s refreshing. Riley has the kind of quiet humor you’d miss if you aren’t paying attention. Justice cracked

jokes all the time, but no one laughed. I take that back. No one laughed genuinely. It was more of a fake, forced, you better laugh or risk his wrath. His mood swings were like a revolving door. Happy, then angry, then sad, then happy, and angry again. It was exhausting.

If I could go back and do it over, I wouldn't have agreed to be his girlfriend or go on tour with him. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. I'd just lost my dad, and Justice was a great distraction from the pain. He'd just lost his grandmother too, so it felt like we had that in common. He could be fun and offered an endless supply of places to visit and things to do. The world and everything in it were a phone call away for him. Sometimes it seemed like he was trying to distract himself from his true feelings, too. I felt a connection to him, even if it was misguided.

Finished with our breakfast, I take my plate and Riley's to the sink. "I need to brush my teeth, then we can hang out until the kittens arrive if you want. I have background information on each of them and their pictures."

"Sure." He nods and pushes in his chair at the table. "I need to squeeze in some time for day trading but that should only take me an hour. Is that cool?"

"You're a day trader?" I had no idea.

He shrugs like it's no big deal and slips his hands into his jeans pockets. "I studied finance in college, along with political science at my father's insistence, but I never wanted to follow in his path. I like making money from behind a computer, where no one can bother me."

I dry my hands on a dish towel and lower my head to hide my smile. He's talking about himself, and I don't want to jinx it. In what I hope is a casual tone, I say, "I can see you liking that."



“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s a loner job, and I don’t see you needing to be the life of the party.”

“Nope. Not an attention seeker.” He stares out the window, his expression contemplative.

“I like that about you. It’s a nice change.”

That draws his gaze back to me. “I bet you haven’t known a lot of loners.”

“Not unless you include me.”

“Really?” He faces me, seeming unconvinced.

Because I dated Justice. He’s not the first person to assume this about me. “Before my last relationship, I dated either aspiring artists or musicians. They were outcasts like me. I wasn’t popular in Greenwich.”

A beautiful smile breaks across his face. “I don’t believe for a second you were ever an outcast.”

“Why’s that?” I stroll toward him, noticing how he watches my hips when I walk. I stop a few inches away from him, closer than ever before, and stare up into his eyes.

He peers down at me, holding my gaze. The temperature feels ten degrees hotter.

After a few intense moments, he says, “If you were ever alienated, it was by your own choice.”

I frown, not liking the sound of that.

“You were born to stand out,” he adds. “Everything about you draws attention. Your body, your face, your eyes, your skin, your voice, even your outgoing personality is like a welcome wagon. I’ve never talked this openly to someone I don’t know that well but with you, it seems natural.”

Wow. My legs feel weak, like I could collapse at any moment. I’ve always felt like an

outcast in most situations, except for the few years I had with my dad, but maybe there is truth to what Riley sees. Maybe I put myself in that category by not being confident enough in who I am. I'd love to see me the way he does.

"That might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me. Thank you." Appreciation rings in my tone.

"Even your response is endearing. Most girls would have blown off the compliment or tore themselves down, but you accepted it and thanked me for it. That's a nice change."

I smile, my gaze catching on his lips. For a second, I consider closing the small distance between us and kissing him, which is a horrible idea.

I'm in a bad mental place. As for Riley...I have no idea if he's flirting or just naturally charming. My guess is it's natural. Plus, he has secrets—ones that make him think he'd put me in danger—ones that have him hiding here and leaving to go to who knows where in a month!

Distance, I remind myself. Keep my distance. Guard my heart. Don't be a fool.

"So...?" I step away and hook my thumbs into the back of the waistband of my leggings. "I'll meet you by the pool in about an hour?"

Other than blinking, he shows no reaction to the weird way I distanced myself from him. "I'll text you when I'm done."

"Great," I say with too much enthusiasm. Ugh. It's like I'm an idiot all of a sudden.

He walks toward me, headed for the door, but stops and touches my hair.

I suck in a sharp breath.

“You’ve got some oatmeal.” He slides his fingers to the end of a wavy strand framing my face and wipes the piece of steel-cut oats on a nearby dish towel.

Heat rises up my neck and flames my cheeks. How long has the piece of food been in my hair? Did he just notice it or was he too embarrassed to point it out before? What kind of a slob am I to have food in my hair?

Trying to hide my mortification, I force a smile. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He passes me and leaves the kitchen.

I consider canceling the kitten adoption this afternoon just so I can hide from him—again!—but that wouldn’t be fair to the kittens.

13

Riley

I finish my trading for the day. The market was shit, but I still made a good profit. It took me longer than an hour, but only because my thoughts kept distracting me. Nova, with those swinging hips and haunting eyes, is all-consuming.

Does she have any clue how sexy she is?

I meant it when I told her Justice is a fool. From what I know and have seen of Nova, she's much more of a woman than the bony Hope Collins. But then, I like my girls curvy and soft. Why would any guy want to caress abs as tight as his own on a chick? Plus, I like big tits. All guys do, and those who say they don't are lying. Not that a guy can't be attracted to a girl who's flat...just not this guy.

I'm about to text Nova when an email alert appears. It's from the account I don't use anymore but still monitor, and it's from...holy shit. No way.

I open the email.

Riley,

This may not reach you ever but in the off chance that it does, I'm sending it. I've tried finding you, but you are one elusive son of a bitch. I mean that as a compliment. If I can't find you, then no one else can either. I assume you're still in hiding or else you would have contacted me. I miss you, man, and I have some big news.

I'm getting married. Yes. You read that correctly. And no, not to Harper, which I assume would be your first thought. I'm not that crazy. Harper was fun but that relationship ran its course. My fiancée is Kensington. I've mentioned her a few times in the past, I'm sure. She's a family friend and the love of my life. I realize how sappy that sounds, but it's true, man. I'm in love and it's amazing. I've never felt this way about anyone before and as one of my best friends (gone but not forgotten), I wanted you to know. You would have been my best man. Sebastian, too, had he survived. I'd love to tell you about her and the wedding, but this email would get really long. Honestly, I don't know much about the wedding details. Between Kensington, my mom, and her mom, everything is covered. I show up when needed, do what I'm told, help where I can, and let them do the rest. They like being in charge, which works just fine for me.

If you get this, know you're missed. I hope you're doing well and staying safe. If you ever want to reach out, my number is the same. I understand if I never hear from you. If you ever need anything from me, do not hesitate to ask. I added the engagement link with a pic of me and Kensington. Take care.

Nathan.

I click the link. A news article from Dallas, Texas pops up with a picture of Nathan and a hot chick with maroon hair. She doesn't look familiar, but he said she's a family friend. Maybe she's from Texas where he grew up and where his family resides. The article says Nathan still lives in Orlando. Huh.

We used to live in Winter Park when we attended college. Did he move? And engaged? Already?

I sit back and exhale. Before I was put in witness protection, Nathan was dating Harper. She was hot, too, with huge fake tits, but the games she played were toxic. I had no doubts they wouldn't last, but I never imagined he'd be getting married.

Nathan was a partier. It's only been a year since I've been gone. Damn, a lot can happen in twelve months.

I considered reaching out to him more than a dozen times, but I never did, believing it is safer for him. Agent Keller was always telling me the less my old friends know, the safer they'd be.

I remember Nathan talking about a girl named Kensington a few times when he was drunk. When he was sober, he referred to her as his cousin. After some liquor though, Kensington seemed more like an unattainable obsession. Guess he figured a way around the family and his fears.

I study the picture. Nathan looks happy and at ease in a way I've never seen. Must be true love.

The wedding date is set for this fall.

Maybe I should reply, let him know I'm well, and wish him the best. Or maybe I should wait until I test the waters and make a few public appearances, like Agent Keller suggested. I've kept Nathan distant for a reason—his safety. Until I know I'm not a target, it'd be best if I don't interfere with his life, especially now that he's getting married. I'd hate to do something to ruin that for him.

Yeah. I'll wait a little while longer before getting in touch. It's the right thing to do.

"Congrats, man," I murmur and close the email, truly happy for Nathan. He deserves to be content. One day we'll reunite and pick up where we left off—if he isn't too angry with me for hiding out for so long. I'm sure he knows I'm not in witness protection. His ex-military family owns a security business that has connections and access to people and intel out of reach to most. The fact that he hasn't found my new cell number means with the help of Agent Keller and Cooper, I've done well at

hiding from society.

A burst of excitement hits me at the thought of seeing Nathan again in the future. Maybe sooner than I had anticipated.

My phone dings.

Hey. It's been almost two hours. If you've changed your mind about the kittens, I'll understand. If not, and you've avoided me for worthy reasons, get your ass to the lawn by the pool. The kittens are here!!!

I jump up so quickly I almost knock over the chair. That's a surprising response.

I calm myself as I make my way to the pool deck.

As soon as I'm outside, I spot Nova standing next to a lady with curly brown hair and a tall, skinny dude with earrings, nose rings, bleached hair, and a ton of tattoos.

I raise my hand to shield my eyes from the bright sun and notice the way Tattoo Boy is staring at Nova. Or, more accurately, staring down her sweater, which hangs off one shoulder. Her beaded nipples are visible from here. Is she not wearing a bra?

I march more than walk over to her and the eager fellow. The lady with the curly hair has the kittens in a plastic fence that looks like a playpen my sister has for her two-year-old daughter.



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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

The cutest heart-wrenching meows meet my ears. I have to stop myself from saying I'll take them all.

Nova lifts her gaze and smiles at me as if I'm her favorite person. I like the way that look makes me feel. It takes me a moment to realize I'm rubbing my chest, over my heart.

I drop my hand.

"Finally," she blurts but the smile on her face makes her curt tone more cute than serious.

"Sorry. I got held up."

"You're forgiven." She beams, those yellow-green eyes glistening in the sun.

That was easy. Is she always this forgiving?

"This is Linda and Asher." Nova gestures to them, then introduces me. "This is Riley. He's going to help me pick a few out."

"A few? I thought you said one."

"Look at them, Riley. How can I choose just one?"

I nod at Asher and stand protectively beside Nova, making sure to block his view down her sweater. "Which are your favorites?" I ask her.

She lets out a big sigh and then climbs over the low bright-green fence. “I thought I’d let them decide.” She sits crisscross on the grass in her jean shorts, her bronze legs looking silky smooth. “Join me.” She pats the grass beside her.

“What for?”

“Since we’re going to be co-owners, they need to choose you, too.”

“Co-owners?” I scratch my head. “I thought I was just the helper.”

She eyes me. “We’re in this together. Partners in crime. Now, get in. I want to see which ones favor you.”

Still unsure about the co-owner thing, I step over the fence and sit beside Nova. The smile she sends me makes it worth it.

A furry white kitten and a calico one with colors of cream, butterscotch, and dark brown play near her legs as she pets them.

They’re all so small and cute. Eight fill the pen. Two whites, two calicos, two orange ones, a black one, and one that looks like a leopard. That one is bigger than the others but not by much and has yellow-green eyes. He or she walks over and bites my finger.

“Hey.” I inspect my skin for blood. All good.

“That’s Itty-bitty,” Linda says. “She’s six months old but was the runt of the litter, so no one wanted her. She’s playful and lovable for the right owner.”

She paws my hand with her tiny claws and bites my finger again, sucking it into her mouth. Next, she’s licking my finger with her sandpaper tongue.

“She likes you,” Linda says.

“And now that I know her story, I have to have her,” Nova says. “Don’t you agree?” she asks me and strokes the cat from head to tail.

“Absolutely.” I hold Nova’s gaze. “No outcasts left behind.”

Her smile radiates warmth, challenging the sun. “That’s right.”

“Your turn to choose,” I tell her.

She giggles as the kittens in her lap tumble over her thighs. “I believe these two have chosen for me.”

The white one totters toward me, its blue eyes the color of the sky. “Hey little guy. Girl?” I look to Linda for the answer.

“Girl.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

“I’m outnumbered.” I pet her behind her ears while Itty-bitty continues to suckle my finger.

“This one is a boy.” Nova picks the calico kitten up and holds it close to her breasts. The shameless little guy nestles his face in her cleavage and purrs.

“Smart boy.”

Nova giggles. “Stop. He’s a kitten.”

“He’s a male kitten, making himself right at home.”

Asher laughs. “Damn straight.”

I shoot him a look. This isn’t the part where we fist-bump. It’s the part where he leaves, along with the informative and helpful Linda. “Looks like we’ve decided. Thank you so much for your time. What do we need to do to wrap this up?”

Gigi appears with a fond smile on her face as she gazes at me and Nova. “I already took care of it.”

“Gigi,” Nova says, the kitten still nestled in her chest, happy as a clam. “You do enough already. Let me take care of this.”

I shake my head. “I’ve got this. It’s the least I can do.”

“No way. You’re a guest and it was my idea,” Nova argues.

“And it’s my house. I’ve already handled it.” Gigi looks at Linda and Asher. “Thank you for what you do. You are incredible human beings.”

“And thank you for your generous donation. It helps more than you know,” Linda says while Asher packs up the kittens into a triple pet stroller.

Didn’t know those came in multiple sizes. Makes sense to use, though—a much easier way to transport pets than in carriers or boxes.

“What about these?” I ask. “How do we get them to the house? Or where do we put them in the house? They could get lost too easily in a place this big. They could die.”

Nova takes in my worried expression. “Don’t stress over it, Riley. I have the perfect place for them, and Asher is leaving us a box big enough for all three. Plus a few cat beds and kitten food and some toys.”

“And a litter box,” he adds and winks.

I sneer at him.

Gigi lets out a soft laugh.

My gaze jumps to her, but her expression is filled with fondness like before.

“You’ll need two litter boxes once they get bigger. Maybe even three depending on how often you scoop and change their litter,” Gigi says, like she has experience with cats.

“I recommend no more than two days,” Linda chimes in. “You’ll want a scratch pad too, so they don’t claw up the furniture.”

Sweat forms on my upper lip as I digest the instructions. Cute but a ton of work and we have three. We have three kittens. What happens when I leave here? Will Nova or Gigi keep them? Damn, this happened fast.

With the kittens secured in the mesh-enclosed stroller, Linda packs up the playpen.

Asher sets two large bags beside Nova and an opened cardboard box. “Want my help getting him in?”

He reaches for the cat nestled between Nova’s breasts.

I stand, a kitten in each hand. “We can manage. Thanks.”

Nova gives me a knowing grin. “I’m going to carry this one inside. He’s too comfortable for me to force him away.”

If I were him, I wouldn’t want to move, either. I nod and stick the kittens I’m holding into the box. They meow like crazy, only it sounds like they’re crying. My heart tugs, and I have the urge to rescue them from the safety of the box, which is crazy.

“Come on.” Nova stands and walks toward the pool house.

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Confused by where she's headed, I grab the bags with one hand and carefully hoist the box with the other so I can follow her.

We enter the family room area, which is open to a dining space and kitchen. My bedroom is to the left.

Nova faces me. "The pool house is tiled, so it's best to keep them here in case of accidents on the wood and marble floors in the main house. Don't worry, though. I'll sleep on the couch in case they get scared at night."

"What? No. I'm not letting you sleep on the couch."

"I don't mind, Riley. And I'm not about to take over your bed again. Besides, the couch is super comfy." She lowers onto the cushions without disturbing the sleeping prince on her breasts.

I set the box and bags on the floor, the kittens meowing away. "What should I do?"

"Keep these closed so they don't escape," Gigi says, suddenly here, and shuts the glass doors.

"Thank you for this, Gigi," Nova says. "I love them already."

Gigi beams. "Anything to see that beautiful smile on your face. You deserve happiness. You do, too." Gigi eyes me.

I smile in thanks.

“You have to believe it for yourself for it to be real,” she adds in her not-so-subtle way.

“Thanks, Gigi. I’m working on it.”

“I know you are. You both are, and I couldn’t be prouder.” Her brows lower. “I do wonder, though. Was this your way of getting out of future game nights?”

“No.” Nova’s voice is high. “Not at the time when I thought of it. Now, however, it does seem convenient. You couldn’t possibly expect us to leave our babies to play a game. What if they need us?”

“Of course I wouldn’t. Kittens need a lot of attention. They’ll need to acclimate to their new surroundings and bond with their new owners. I’m sure you two will do a marvelous job.”

“I think we will.” Nova pets the kitten on her boobs.

“I’m going out tonight. A fundraiser. But I won’t be too late.”

“Okay,” Nova says. “Have fun.”

“I always do.” She gives us a mischievous grin. “Inez has been instructed to deliver whatever food you want to eat. I told her about the kittens. She’s not a fan of pets but she respects your decision to adopt less fortunate animals.”

Less fortunate animals. I never thought about it that way. “And if we wanted to order pizza?”

Gigi gasps. “Don’t offend her with that idea. Inez is excellent at making whatever your heart desires. You won’t be disappointed.”



“Of course not.” I nod with conviction. “We will order from Inez’s fine Italian diner.”

Gigi smiles and shakes her head. “Riley, you are one of a kind—one of the best kinds.” She winks and leaves the pool house, closing the door behind her.

“You can let the little ones out to roam. Just keep an eye on them.” Nova moves to sit on the floor near the box.

“On it.” I take out Itty-bitty and then the other. “Should we name them? Itty-bitty has a name, unless you want to change it, but the others don’t.”

“Hmm? The pressure of a name. Got any suggestions?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start. That’s all you.” I sit in front of her while the calico kitten and Itty-bitty climb over my legs.

“Let me think.” Nova’s features twist with the cutest expression.

It’s then I realize she’s not wearing makeup. Yesterday, her face was done up, but today she looks as good as she did this morning. Beautiful and bare.

“We could name the white one Poppy.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

“That’s unique. Why Poppy?”

She shrugs one shoulder. “I’ve always liked the name.”

“Then Poppy it is. What about this little fellow?” I pet the male kitten’s back.

“Little fellow sounds cute but it’s a mouthful. So...maybe we could name him Vizzini.”

“Where do I know that name?” I murmur to myself.

“The Princess Bride.”

“Oh yeah. That was a great movie. But wasn’t Vizzini the bad guy?”

“Yes. But I like saying the name. And it’ll be good on him. Because he’s good.” She stares at the kitten on her chest.

“It’s settled then. Itty-bitty, Poppy, and Vizzini.”

Nova’s face brightens. “I like it when you say it, too. And I love them so much.” She kisses Vizzini’s head. “It’ll be good for us to focus on something else other than our problems.”

I hadn’t realized I was doing just that until she said it. All my thoughts are about me, my life, my loss, my ex, my existence, my hiding, my solitude. Focusing on something—some things—else is exactly what I need. “I agree.”

We eye each other and tension in my neck releases. I didn't know it was there until this moment but letting it go feels like a step in the right direction. "You are wise, Nova."

"And you are kind—one of the best kinds." She winks, and the steel around my heart melts a little more.

14

Nova

Riley and I had pizza for dinner thanks to Inez, and we agreed it was the best pizza either of us has ever eaten.

Now, I lie on the couch with Poppy snuggled on my chest. Riley is on the floor on a pile of blankets from the linen closet. Itty-bitty and Vizzini lay entwined on his chest. Itty-bitty's tail taps his chin to a calm beat.

It doesn't take me long to dose off to the sound of purring and the vibration from Poppy's little furry body.

Like the other night, my dreams are filled with kittens and a sexy surfer-looking guy.

When I wake, morning light filters through the windows and glass doors. Heat radiates throughout my body from the kitten asleep on my chest. Did she move at all?

On the floor, on his back, Riley is shirtless. Vizzini sleeps, curled in a ball by Riley's ear, and Itty-bitty lies under Riley's hand on his chest—and what a chest it is. Defined pecs and chiseled abs rise and fall with his even breathing. I have the urge to nestle against his side and caress his tan skin.

Is there anything sexier than a shirtless man surrounded by kittens? I don't think so.

Slowly, I raise my arms above my head and stretch my body, waking it up. Poppy

lifts her face and peers at me through sleepy eyes.

“Morning, little girl.” I pet her head. She shivers and rises to her paws. Claws dig into my torso. I hiss and sit up while moving Poppy to my lap. My hair is an unruly mess. I tuck strands behind my ear to get it out of my face.

Riley’s eyes blink open, and a slight smile forms on his lips. “Morning.”

He stretches, too, and wow. All I can do is stare and sigh a bit too loudly.

Riley’s gaze jumps to me.

Busted. I rub my eyes, trying to cover up the fact that I was openly gawking at him.

To my nice surprise, Riley doesn’t call me out or pick on me for my behavior. Justice would have said something about how sexy he is and try to have sex with me. He’s clueless when it comes to romance or foreplay.

“How’d you sleep?” I ask, wondering whether he’s sore.

“Not bad. You?” He moves Itty-bitty to the blanket as he sits up. She nips at his hand.

I laugh. “She loves to bite you.”

Riley chuckles, the sound sleepy and sexy as hell. He drops his head forward and rubs his eyes before raising his head and pushing his long bangs away from his face.

My bottom lip falls at his inadvertent sex appeal. Does he know he’s a walking fantasy?

Look but don’t touch, I remind myself. I moved too quickly with Justice, I realize

now. Of course, that's how Justice is with everything. If he wants it, he makes it his.

Vizzini stands and arches his back as he yawns.

I lean sideways and pet behind his ears. "Morning, little guy."

Itty-bitty looks at Riley and meows the cutest, sweetest baby sounding meow. "What?" He gives her a long stroke. "Are you hungry? I bet you are. I bet you all are." He glances at each of them and stands. "I'll fill their bowl."

"You don't have to." I stand and sway with a dizzy spell.

Riley grips my hips to steady me. "Get up too quickly?"

His gravelly voice and strong hold unleash a swell of heat and excitement throughout my body.

This kind of reaction won't do if I plan to resist his appeal.

"Yeah," I answer. "I'm okay now. Thanks." Our eyes lock, and I feel dizzy again, except this is from not breathing.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

Justice was almost eye level with me, but Riley is tall and damn if that isn't even more of a turn-on.

I mean to move away but instead I just stand there, letting him hold me, liking it more than I should allow.

Riley's thumbs make small circles on my hip bones. The light, soothing touch causes my core to clench. To my horror, I let out a shaky breath.

Riley's gaze drops to my breasts, and he observes my faster rising chest.

My core clenches more. What is wrong with me? I never responded like this to Justice.

"Riley?" His name leaves my lips with a breath.

His gaze rises to my mouth and then to my eyes. For a second, he seems confused by my reaction, like he can't believe it. I can't either. How can such an innocent moment be so erotic? Am I that desperate for a man's attention, or is it just Riley's attention?

One of the kittens meows over and over again. The soft cry tugs at my heart. I glance down to see Itty-bitty staring at us as she meows.

"We're starving them." I rush away in the direction of the kitchen.

A chuckle sounds from Riley.

He follows me and gets the food while I get the bowl. I set it on the floor and Riley pours in the food.

The sound of tiny pellets or maybe the smell draws the kittens' interest. In case they don't know where to go, I grab two of them—Poppy and Vizzini—and set them by the food. Riley gets Itty-bitty, who's halfway to the kitchen. He pets her head as he carries her to the bowl. When he sets her down, she digs in, along with Poppy and Vizzini.

Quickly, I fill another bowl with water and place it near the food. "Here you go. You're probably thirsty, too."

"So this is what it's like to have pets," Riley murmurs.

"Did you not have pets growing up?" I lean against the marble counter.

"We borrowed the groundskeeper's dog for family photos to make us look wholesome. That was as close as I got to owning a pet." He scratches his chest, drawing all my attention there.

"Do you want your shirt?" I don't wait for a response and head to the couch to snatch it from the floor.

Riley takes it from me. "Thanks." He seems confused, rightly so.

I don't want him to cover himself up; I need him to.

He pulls on his shirt, and I shamelessly watch his muscles contract as he moves.

"Excuse me." I race to the bathroom to chill out and empty my bladder. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I return to the family room.



Riley stands by the counter, watching the kittens eat and drink.

“You don’t have to stay here and babysit,” I blurt so he knows it isn’t his duty to be here.

His navy blues narrow with confusion.

“I just mean, you’re not a prisoner. It was my idea to adopt the kittens. I’d hate for you to feel like you can’t come and go as you please. You’re not trapped here.” I give a small smile and lift one shoulder.

He lets out a humorless laugh. “Actually, I am. But it’s not because of you or the kittens.”

I inch closer to the kitchen. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” He glances toward his bedroom. “I’ll be right back.”

I nod and set up the litter box for the kittens. I should have done this last night. Well, if there are any accidents in the room, I’ll just clean them up and make sure the kittens know this is where they go to the bathroom.

Riley returns to the room. His hair is a little damp, like he washed his face.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

I smile and show Poppy the litter box because she stopped eating. “Should I put her inside?” I ask Riley, which is silly. He’s as clueless as I am.

“Sure.” He sets Vizzini and Itty-bitty near the open litter box, too. “This is where you do your business. Think you can remember that?”

I laugh. “Guess we’ll find out.”

“Want some coffee? Breakfast?” Riley asks. “I can get it and bring it back here.”

I like that he doesn’t say I’ll get Inez to wait on us. Riley was raised with a staff of housekeepers, but he doesn’t expect anyone to serve him.

“Coffee would be great.”

“What about your hypoglycemia? Shouldn’t you eat, too? I don’t want you getting sick.”

He remembers, and he understands. My heart flip-flops in the most pathetic way. But how else should I respond to Riley’s thoughtfulness? Justice constantly forgot I have reactive hypoglycemia. Sometimes he acted like it wasn’t a medical issue I have but something I made up.

“Yeah, I should eat. I’ll text Inez that you’re coming.” Although she probably has my breakfast ready—and his, for that matter.

“I’ll be right back,” Riley says on his way to the glass doors.

“Thank you,” I call out before he closes them behind him.

He flashes me that charming smirk and then walks across the pool deck toward the main house.

I get my phone and text Inez about breakfast before setting it on the counter.

Itty-bitty is using the litter box.

“Good girl,” I praise her and clap.

It hits me then. Last night was the second time I didn’t troll the internet for pictures of Justice and Hope before going to bed.

A small victory but it feels huge. I pet the kittens as they wander around. “Thank you, babies, for saving me from myself.”

I should shower but the heat won’t help my blood sugar levels, especially since I haven’t eaten yet. I’ll have to wait.

The kittens explore the room, seeming much more comfortable than they were last night. “This is your new home. I hope you like it.”

My phone chimes with a text. I check it.

The message is from Porsha.

Porsha: I bet the bastard is behind this or his jealous new wife. I should have him offed.

Me: No, you shouldn’t. Karma will get him back and you won’t have to do a thing.

That's what Gigi always says.

Me: Wait... Behind what?

Porsha: Good. You don't know yet. I'm glad I get to tell you instead of it being a surprise. I wish I were back in the States but I'm still in London. Do me a favor. Once you see this, try to forget it and know it's not true. You are one of my most beautiful, sexy friends. Nothing on you needs changed! Social media and people are dicks!

Oh shit.

She sends a Twitter and a TikTok link.

My hands shake as I click the Twitter link first.

A post about my weight appears, with a picture of me and Hope cropped side by side. It's a horrible angle of me. I'll admit I look chunky for me, but it's also hard not to look fat next to a girl who can't even pinch an inch.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:37 am*

Nova Allen pregnant. Is it Justice's baby or a secret love child that caused the breakup between them?

Another post shows me at that same bad angle and says, Who's the father?

I don't understand. Is this some new kind of fat-shaming? I'm not pregnant! Never have I ever imagined this would happen. Nothing like it ever has. Compared to Hollywood standards, I'm not thin but no one has ever mistaken me for being pregnant.

A tear drips onto my phone, alerting me that I'm crying. This is stupid. I wipe my wet cheeks and sniffle, working to stop myself before I break into an ugly cry. I'm not what these posts say but I can't stop the hurt they cause.

I hate being singled out. I put myself in the limelight with Justice, but I don't deserve this. I've done nothing since I learned he married. I've kept quiet and to myself.

I wipe my nose and burning eyes.

The glass door opens.

Riley's gaze finds mine.

"What the hell?" He races into the room, a tray in his hands, and sets it on the dining room table. He's in front of me in a second. "What happened? Are the kittens okay?"

I nod and try to force myself to stop crying. "They're fine. This is something else."

More tears form and I hate myself for my lack of control.

“Are you hurt?” He studies me, searching for injuries.

“I’m okay. I mean, I’m not hurt like that.” I inhale and work harder to calm down.

“What’s wrong then?” He touches my arms, his expression torn.

“Social media is cruel.” I wiggle my phone.

Riley takes it from me. I’m too slow to react to stop him from seeing the post, not that he wouldn’t eventually. They’re all over, I’m sure.

He reads the posts and his features twist with anger. “Fucking assholes. How dare they? You are not pregnant. You don’t look it, either. You’re a fucking goddess. This is bullshit. I’m going to stop it.”

He stomps to his bedroom.

Itty-bitty rubs against my leg, like she knows I’m sad. I pick her up and kiss her head. “Thanks, girl. I love you, too.”

The other kittens are cuddled together, sleeping on the blankets where Riley slept last night. I take Itty-bitty into Riley’s room. “You can’t stop this, Riley.”

He sits at his desk and types on his laptop. “Like hell I can’t.” He hits Send with a loud click. “There. Give it some time and they’ll be wiped from the internet.”

I stroll toward him. “What’d you do?”

“I know a guy who’s a genius with social media. He monitors stories for me or about

me. He can take care of this. Well, he can't stop them from posting but he can have them wiped from the internet—most of them.” He stands and pulls me to him, like it's natural. He kisses the top of my head while Itty-bitty squirms between us. “I'm so sorry this is happening to you.”

I melt in his warm, strong arms and want to put Itty-bitty on the floor, but I also don't want to move from his embrace. More tears form, and I break down. Itty-bitty meows and wriggles for me to let her go.

“Here.” Riley takes her, sets her down, and wraps me in his arms again.

Our bodies meld together and it's the best feeling.

I'm soaking his shirt with my tears, but I can't bring myself to care. My past boyfriends never even comforted me this way. They'd cop a feel or make a dirty joke.

Riley is simply holding me, giving me what I need. Compassion and support.

I don't know how long we stand like that for, only that it seems like a long while.

I lift my head to look at him. “Thank you. I'm sorry I soaked your shirt.”

He brushes my hair from my face. “It's fine. How are you feeling?”

“Violated.”

He nods.

“Hurt.”

His jaw clenches. “Social media is bullshit. You are one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen. You’re perfect exactly as you are. You know that, right?” He cups my cheeks.

“Thank you.” I sniffle but can’t look him in the eyes.

“Look at me,” he murmurs.

I take a second, then meet his navy gaze.

“I was shocked when I first saw you by the pool. Shocked because you are so stunning. Your body, your face, your skin, your eyes. You are a walking fantasy.”

I laugh but it’s weak. “You don’t have to say this. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

I nod and lower my forehead to his chest. “Thanks.”

“You don’t believe me.” He isn’t asking. “I masturbated to you in the shower after we met. How’s that for honesty?”



I lift my face and choke on a laugh as I stare at him, trying to gauge whether he's telling the truth.

He holds my gaze and gives me a reassuring nod.

“You masturbated to me?”

He nods again, shamelessly.

My cheeks heat, along with other parts of me. I shouldn't be aroused by this but I so am. Kiss him. No. Don't. Yes. Kiss him and forget everything else. I bet sex with him would be a thoughtful, amazing experience.

I focus on his lips. Instead of kissing him, I ask, “Who are these other beautiful women you've seen?” I try for teasing. “Anyone I know?”

His tense features relax with a smile. “A few celebrities and music artists.” He shrugs.

“Anyone not famous? Besides me?”

His Adam's apple bobs with a deep swallow and his gaze drifts to the side.

“That would be a yes.”

His eyes find mine again. “She doesn't matter.”

I smile with understanding and leave it at that. If Riley wants to tell me about her, he will.

I search the floor around our feet for Itty-bitty. “She's gone!” I gasp.

The plan was to keep the kittens in the family room. The entire pool house is big enough for them to get lost.

“Itty-bitty?” I check under the desk and bed.

Riley moves the curtains, looking for her, too.

I find her sleeping under the bed near the headboard and wall. “I can’t reach her.”

“Let me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

I stand and Riley takes my place on the floor.

He scoops her out with one hand and holds her to his chest. “We should keep them in the other room.”

“Agreed.”

Dizziness hits me, and my body grows hot and weak from my blood sugar level dropping. “I need to eat.”

Riley puts his arm around me, the kitty tucked in his other, and guides me to the dining table. He sets Itty-bitty on the floor and puts my oatmeal in front of me. He gives me orange juice, too. “Take my OJ. My sister said it helps.”

He’s right. “When I’m this bad, it does. Thank you.” I prop my elbow on the table and support my head with one hand while I feed myself the drink with the other, chugging it until it’s gone.

After a few moments, my strength returns. Until I eat food, this strength will be only temporary. I shovel the oatmeal into my mouth, even though I’m not hungry. Another drawback of reactive hypoglycemia is I’m often not hungry when I get to this point because I feel sick. I continue to eat anyway, until the oatmeal is almost gone, and I feel more normal.

“Better?” Riley asks from the seat beside me.

Has he been sitting here the whole time? I hate for him to see me like this, as if I

don't take care of myself. "Sorry."

"For what?" His brows tighten.

"Getting sick."

"It's not your fault. I'm glad I was here to help."

This guy... "You're pretty awesome, Riley. I hope you know that."

He grins and sips his coffee. "Want some?"

"Yes, please."

Riley fills the additional coffee mug from the tray. "Creamer?" He puts a handful in front of me.

I pick out the sugar-free vanilla creamers.

"Sugar?"

I nod and take two Splenda from the tray.

Riley adds them to my coffee and stirs. "You have a sweet tooth."

"I do." A sheepish grin tugs at my lips. "How do you take your coffee?" I missed him making it while I was eating.

"Half and half, and a regular sugar."

"Noted." Tomorrow I'll make his coffee, like he made mine today.

He sips from his mug, and I think it's to hide his smile. He glances toward the couch.  
"Itty-bitty found her sister and brother."

She's curled up with them on the blankets.

My phone chimes from the counter. I don't remember setting it there.

Riley gets it before I can stand and sets it on the table near me.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

He eyes me cautiously as I read the text, maybe because he thinks I'll lose it again.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

Porsha: Are you okay? You stopped replying.

Me: Yeah. I'm okay. Thanks for letting me know.

Porsha: I didn't want to, but I didn't want you to stumble across it on your own either. It's total bullshit. Like you'd be dumb enough to let your douchebag ex knock you up, or anyone else for that matter. You're too young and hot. And I mean HOT! Gabby agrees! She says you're a sexy babe and don't let this get in your head. I love you. Call if you need me.

Me: Thanks. I will. Have fun with Gabby.

I put my phone down and close my eyes with an exhale. No more falling apart.

"Sera is the only other non-celebrity girl," Riley says to my surprise. "She's my ex."

"Oh," is my brilliant response. I wasn't expecting him to tell me anything personal. Will he tell me more? I like when he gives me a peek into his secret life.

15

Nova

“Were you together long?” I tread lightly around the subject.

He refills his mug with coffee from the silver pitcher. “On and off for over a year.”

“Do you miss her?”

He stares at the table. “I don’t know. I used to. I was upset and then angry.”

“Did she break up with you?” It sounds like it.

He nods. “She’s Indian and her family arranged a marriage for her. She tried to break things off a few times but always came back, claiming she loved me and not him. He was what her parents wanted.” He laughs without humor. “I was dumb enough to believe her.”

“Not dumb. Hopeful.”

His eyes connect with mine and then drift away. “It didn’t matter. She chose him and her family’s wishes for her future.”

“She’s the dumb one. Sorry,” I add quickly, hoping he isn’t offended.

He sips his coffee. “I thought she was strong enough to make up her own mind. She’s

married now.”

“Married?” I make a face.

“I know.” He exhales. “I just found out a few weeks ago.”

“Is that why you’re here? You’re hiding like me?”

“I’m not hiding from her.” He sips more coffee and reaches for my bowl. “Are you done?”

Ah. The old subject change. Conversation over. “I got it.” I stand, place the bowl on the tray, and wipe a droplet of oatmeal off the table. “Thank you for helping me feel better, mentally and physically. I appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

“What about your breakfast?” His covered plate is still on the tray. I put it in front of him along with a napkin and silverware. “I hope it’s not too cold.”

“It’ll be fine. Thanks.” He removes the lid and takes a bite of omelet. “Still warm,” he says after swallowing his bite.

“I wonder if my mom has seen the posts,” I murmur, mostly to myself.

“Will she be pissed?”

I bark out a laugh. “At me—for allowing myself to be a target.” And for not being as fit as I could be, according to her. I don’t say that one out loud.

“Will she really?” he asks with disbelief.



“My mom and I don’t see eye-to-eye on most things. She’s obsessed with her appearance. Most models are, but it’s hard for her to accept I’m her biological child because I take more after my father’s side of the family. Physically.” Maybe mentally, too.

He sets down his fork. “I’m sorry you have to deal with that.”

“Me, too.” I hand him the utensil. “Please don’t stop eating because of me. I’m not trying to bring you down.”

He takes the fork and pokes at his omelet. “You’re not.”

“Being here is helping me,” I say, hoping if I lighten the mood he’ll finish eating.

“How so?”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

“Being away from Justice and his toxic lifestyle is helping me see how disconnected I’d become from what matters. I’ve been thinking about how you said I isolated myself by choice.”

“I didn’t mean it in a—”

I hold up my hand. “No, it’s okay. I’m not upset. It helped me realize that I’ve spent most of my life afraid to fit in.”

“I think a lot of people do that for one reason or another, especially in high school.” He bites his omelet.

“I also think I’m a pro at feeling sorry for myself, but I’m finally coming around to seeing the light and all.”

“What light is that?” He takes another bite.

“The one people have been trying to shine on me. The one where I accept that Justice wasn’t a good boyfriend, and I was with him for the wrong reasons.”

“Why were you with him?” His tone is genuine, not accusing.

I fold my hands together on the smooth surface of the table. “According to my mother, I was being rebellious and acting out of character.”

“And according to you?”

I love how he asks my thoughts instead of assuming my mother is right. “It was out of character for me, but only because I was lost and lonely. I had no one to talk to about my dad. My mom and Gigi never liked him. I felt more alone than ever.”

“I know about feeling lonely. It sucks.”

“It does. My mom was never around when I was growing up. She still isn’t, which is why I always clung to friends or Gigi.” I glance toward the main house. “Anyone who gave me attention. I’d met Justice at a club one night. His friend was interested in me but then Justice made me the focus of his attention and his friend backed off. It felt good to be wanted, and Justice was a great distraction. We traveled, stayed at his penthouse in Manhattan and his house in Beverly Hills. He rented out Disneyland, flew us to Europe on a whim. We had the best seats at games. Private viewings of movies before they released. We traveled all over South America and Europe, stopping to visit every tourist attraction with private entry and tours. It was a whirlwind of nonstop events, which I realize now is why I stayed. But I wasn’t rebelling. I was escaping.”

He says the word at the same time as me. “I’ve been escaping for a long time, too.”

“From what?” I mean to say, You have?, but that’s not what comes out.

He sets his fork on his now-empty plate and gives me a long, hard stare. “I trust you, Nova. It seems like we have a lot in common. But if I tell you why I’m here, you might not want to be around me, and I don’t want that.”

“You don’t?”

“You’re the first person I’ve connected with in a long time. I’m not ready to lose that yet.”

“Why would you lose it? When I become friends with a person, it’s forever. I’ve known abandonment, Riley. I would never do that to someone else without a helluva good reason.”

He sets his plate on the tray. “Well, my reason might be good enough.”

I put my hand over his. “I doubt that.”

He stares at our hands together on the table.

“Sorry.” I move mine to my lap. “I’m a touchy-feely person.”

“I don’t mind.”

“And I don’t mind if you tell me the reason you’re here. I don’t frighten easily.”

One of the kittens meows, sounding like it’s crying. Another one joins in and soon all three are meowing for attention.

“Saved by the kittens,” I tease and sit on the floor by Vizzini. I pet his head and pull Poppy onto my lap.

Riley curls Itty-bitty in his hands. “Do you think they’re hungry again?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I should have asked for a pamphlet on how to care for them. Wait. I think Linda put one in the box.” I carry Vizzini to the box and find a paper of instructions.

Poppy cries again, and Riley places her in his lap.

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I return to my spot on the floor. “It says we need to provide the proper nutrition, which we do. And if we choose to leave dry cat food out, we need to make sure they don’t overeat or we can put the kittens on a feeding schedule, and we need to provide clean water at all times.” I lower the pamphlet. “What do you think?”

Riley pets Itty-bitty and Poppy behind the ears. “Sounds good.”

“No.” I laugh. “Which should we do: leave the food out or put them on a schedule?”

He shrugs. “What do you think?”

I laugh again. “I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“I’m not a cat expert, Nova. What happens if they overeat?”

I read the pamphlet and wrinkle my nose. “They vomit.”

“Scheduled feedings sound good,” Riley says with all seriousness.

“Definitely. I guess we can give them a snack for now. It says to feed them twice a day, but they’re kittens, and I think they’re hungry.”

“Or they just want attention,” Riley suggests.

“Maybe. But to be sure, I’m going to put out some more food.” I give Vizzini to Riley, whose hands are now entirely full, and sprinkle some food into small separate bowls from the kitchen. “We should label these or get them their own, so they learn

they have their own food bowls.”

I return to Riley, balancing the bowls carefully in my hands, and set them on the floor in front of the kittens.

Vizzini meows and tries to escape Riley’s hold. He sets him down by one of the food bowls and Vizzini starts in.

Poppy lifts her head and crawls off Riley’s lap, headed toward the middle bowl. She stretches and then eats, too. Riley places Itty-bitty in front of the third bowl. She paws the tiny pellets, sniffs them, and then nibbles on the food.

“They’re so cute, aren’t they?” I gush, watching our babies eat.

“They are.” Riley stands and brushes cat fur from his jeans and T-shirt. “They’re major shedders, too. Geez.”

I giggle. His clothes are dark in color, which makes the fur show easily, and it’s everywhere. “Let me help.” I brush his pant legs and move higher, accidentally brushing his dick. I gasp and try not to laugh too hard. “Sorry.”

When I glance up to meet his gaze, he’s smirking in that charming way.

“You make it hard for a girl.”

He straightens and glances at his groin. “I’m not hard.”

“Oh. No. I know. I mean, you make it hard for a girl to resist you.”

“Really?”

I nod and brush fur from his shirt, unable not to notice his rock-hard abs.

“Do I make it hard for you?”

“Very,” I say, then tense and glance up at him again.

Now the grin on his face is seductive. Wow. Can he be any sexier? If I were wearing underwear, it'd be wet. It would be easy to fall into bed with Riley, but I'd never want to use him as a crutch to get over Justice. I'm still trying to figure things out.

16

Nova

I sleep on the couch again that night and force Riley to sleep in his bed. Being around him and his sexy charm is messing with my head.

I'm not one not to make a move when the mood strikes. With Riley, the mood keeps striking and that is not fair to him or me. I like him. A lot. He's becoming a good friend. Neither of us need to go beyond that. He won't even tell me the real reason he's here.

I wouldn't care. He's not a bad person, and I doubt he's done anything detrimental, but the not knowing is starting to get to me. Is that why I can't sleep?

I check the time on my phone again. 5 a.m. Exactly forty minutes since I last checked it.

If I had my sketchbook and colored pens, I'd draw. There has to be something around here I can use.

The kittens are asleep in a pile of blankets in the box. Riley and I emptied it and tucked them in for bed. It helps with having to search for stray kittens. I also ordered a playpen like Linda had so we can leave them now and then without worrying.

I tiptoe to a desk near the kitchen and check the drawers. Ah-ha! A notepad and pen will work for now.



I sit on the chair, close my eyes, and search my brain for inspiration. Soon, a dress comes to mind. I start sketching but keep messing up, which requires starting over on a new piece of paper because I don't have an erasable pen.

Each time I flip a page and tear one out, I cringe and glance at the kittens and Riley's bedroom. He left the door open in case I need his help. He's so damn sweet. It's hard to imagine a guy can be hot, cool, and thoughtful. I've yet to know a guy who encompasses all three traits—before Riley, I mean.

“Third time's a charm,” so goes the saying. For me, the sixth time or six sketch is. The dress is unique. It looks like a pair of overalls or a jumper but with a skirt. Instead of the skirt being fitted, the bottom flows and falls to the knees. The material should be soft. A cotton blend, made to look like light-washed denim. I have it paired with a white cropped tank top, a black leather Gucci belt, and heeled ankle boots. It's funky and fun. I love it so much I decide to take Gigi up on her offer to have it made. I'll dress it up with necklaces and bracelets and a crossbody black Gucci bag. No, a red or fuchsia purse for a pop of color. Yes. I love the idea and wish I had colored pencils to bring the vision to life instead of imagining it in my mind. I'll have to draw another one in color before giving the final sketch to Gigi to be made.

Excitement fills me, along with something else—pride. Gigi is right. I am talented and I forgot how much I love to draw. I flip to a blank page and sketch another outfit before the idea leaves me. This is a suit with wide pant legs, high heels, and a tailored jacket that would need double-sided tape to stay in place because it doesn't require a shirt. It should be left open, showing cleavage, and decorated with a single necklace that hangs between the breasts. It'll be black, of course, but I also like the idea of one in cream.

This will also need to be made. I think the cream one, so I can wear it now during the spring. But wait. Where would I wear it? I promised myself I'd keep a low profile for at least a month. Longer if necessary. However much time it takes for the world to

forget I was ever tied to Justice.

Who am I kidding? That will never happen. Someone somewhere will remember and I'll make social media headlines like I am now.

Ugh.

"What's with the heavy sigh?" Riley's voice sounds from behind me.

"Shh." I turn around and stare at the box that holds the kittens, but I'm too low to see inside.

Riley grins, like my shushing him is cute, and scratches his bare chest.

Geez. Does he not wear a shirt on purpose because he knows how much I like it? No. He was sleeping, and most guys sleep without a shirt. He's being casual. We're friends. I need to keep reminding myself of that.

He walks over to the box. "They're stirring, probably for food."

"What time is it?" My phone is by the couch.

Riley glances at the kitchen, probably reading the clock on the microwave. I can't see it from here.

"Almost 8:00," he says.

"I've been drawing for two hours?" I think out loud.

"What are you drawing?" Riley strolls over in his navy cotton pajama pants that sit low on his waist, showing off his sculpted hip bones.

Good gawd.

I focus on the desk and let out another deep breath.

“Tired or frustrated?” he asks.

Frustrated and horny. “Tired.”

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He leans over me, resting one hand on the back of the chair and the other on the desk.

I try not to inhale too deeply. He smells amazing, like man and clean laundry.

“I’ve been sketching outfits.” I don’t look up at him. “I used to be really good at it.”

“It looks like you still are.” He takes the pantsuit drawing from my hand and studies it closely. “Is this for you?”

“No. I mean, I would like it made and to wear it, but I have no place to go, so...”

“You’re really talented.”

“You think?” I watch him examine my work. “If it was in color, it’d look better, but I only have a pen.” I wiggle it.

“The drawing is amazing. The proportions and figure of the model are precise, but if you ask me, she’s a little too bony. Women should have curves.” He sets down the sketch and taps the image of the thin model I drew. “You would look incredible in this. You should make it or have it made just to show me.”

A smile breaks across my face and my cheeks heat. “Careful, Riley. I might get the wrong idea and think you’re flirting with me.”

“Oh yeah?” He smirks in that sexy, charming way. “What if I am?”

I swallow deep in my throat. “That would change things between us considerably.”

His gaze bores into mine. “How so?”

As if in unison, the kittens meow, like they’re crying. Once again, saved by the pets.

I jump up and race to fill their bowls with food. “Will you let them out, please, so they can eat?”

“Sure.” He strolls to the kittens.

I busy myself with getting fresh water and making sure the kittens find their bowls.

“I hated that you slept on the couch, Nova.” Riley appears behind me.

“I don’t mind, really.”

“Tonight, I’ll sleep on the couch, and you can have the bed. How about that?”

I giggle and stand, putting some distance between us. “If I’m going to be spending so much time in your suite, I should get some stuff to keep here to make it easier.”

“I’m fine with that.”

His gaze holds mine, and it’s like he’s flirting with me again. Is he or is it my imagination?

“I feel bad.” I rest my hand on my hip. “I’ve taken over your life here without giving you fair warning. You didn’t even know this would become the kittens’ domain. If it’s too much, we can switch rooms.”

He sends me a crooked smile. “Is this your way of getting the Caribbean suite? I told you I’d give it to you before we got the kittens. You don’t need them as an excuse.”

“It’s not an excuse. I just feel bad, like we’re taking over your freedom here.”

He chuckles in his sexy, gravelly voice.

I feel it between my legs and squeeze my thighs together.

“You’re not. If you were, I’d tell you.”

“You would?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t blink.

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“Honesty. That’s nice.” Yet another fascinating, refreshing trait of Riley’s.

“I have no reason to lie to you.”

“Other than not telling me why you’re here,” I tease, then realize he might not see what I said as funny. Crap.

He nods, his gaze unfocused, as if he’s thinking about it.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Bad joke.”

“No. It’s honest. I like that about you.”

“I like that about you, too.”

He draws in a deep breath. “How about we take a break from the kittens tonight and do something fun? If you want,” he adds. “And only for a little while.”

“Okay. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. Something outside. Tennis maybe?”

“Hmm? I like the outdoor idea and I like tennis, but what if we did something else?”

“Like?”

I think of some options. “What about the beach? We could walk down there dressed

in disguise. I doubt anyone would recognize us at night.”

“What kind of disguises?”

“Hoodies and sunglasses?”

“At night?”

“Wigs and hats?”

Riley laughs.

Itty-bitty jumps at the deep sound.

“Sorry, girl.” He pets her head. “They eat slowly.”

“Is that a no?” I ask.

He straightens and draws in a breath of contemplation. “It’s a yes. I’d love to get in disguise and walk to the beach with you.”

“As long as it’s not too risky,” I add. “We can always play tennis, even at night. The courts have lights.”

“I like the beach idea. I love the smell and sound of the ocean.” He gets a dreamy look in his eyes, and my heart sighs.

Not making a move on him tonight might be my biggest challenge yet. We need to keep things simple and not add desires into this adventure—his first outing with me. I can’t screw it up.



17

Riley

I map the distance to the beach on GPS to see how far of a walk it will be. It's a thirty-five-minute walk. The weather gets chilly at night here in Santa Barbara but I'm not sure hiking down a hill for over a half an hour is something Nova would like.

I text her and ask what she wants to do.

The sun set not that long ago but it's dark enough that in disguise I'll feel comfortable to chance a first outing. Nova doesn't want to be recognized, and I don't want to put her in jeopardy in case someone from the Morello family is still watching for me. If they are, one picture of me in the tabloids would make me and possibly her an open target. I can't let that happen.

For a moment, my mind returns to the fateful night at the warehouse in Florida. Marina firing the gun at me. The fear on Ainsley's face. Being saved by the Feds, and then learning my good friend, Sebastian, died.

My heart tightens, and I force my thoughts to the present, like I have so many times since that night.

My phone dings with a text.

Nova: How do you feel about riding bikes to the beach instead of walking?

Me: Fine.

Nova: Great. Meet me at the garage.

I slip my phone in my pocket and walk the property to find Nova.

She stands inside one of the open garage doors. Two bikes are parked near the entrance.

“Good. You’re here.” She reaches into a plastic bag and removes a couple of wigs. One is purple, the other one pink. “Which color do you like better?”

I grin. “Does it matter?”

“Sure, it matters. I’m giving you first pick.” She raises the wigs. “Choose.”

I take the purple one. “Where did you get these?”

“Gigi has a dozen costumes.” Nova fits the pink wig over her hair.

I do the same, certain mine is crooked. “Does she know what we’re doing?”

“Yep. She suggested these wigs.” Nova straightens mine and runs her fingers down the shoulder-length purple hair. “You look pretty.”

“Thanks.” I fake a girl's voice and fluff one side of my hair.

She cracks up. “One last thing.” She removes oversized heart glasses that remind me of a disco-themed party we had back when I was in college. “Which color?”

I take the blue pair, leaving her the purple glasses. “How do I look?” I ask after

sliding them on.

“Gorgy. What about me? Do you think I’ll be recognized?” She tilts her chin up in a cute pose.

“I think you look adorably sexy and doubt that anyone will know it’s you.”

The baggy shirt, hoodie, and leggings she’s wearing disguise her figure, too. Those curves are forever embedded in my brain.

“This bike is for you.” She points to the bicycle designed for a male rider and climbs onto her Tiffany-blue girl bike, complete with a basket.

“I GPS’d the route to Hammonds Beach.”

“I did, too.” She takes out her phone and shows me the same route.

I laugh. “You are something else.”

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“Something good?” She raises her brows behind the purple-tinted lenses.

“Definitely.” If I had to describe what hanging out with Nova is like, I’d use the word easy. Despite her reactive hypoglycemia, she’s the least needy girl I’ve ever known.

Nova removes a tube of what looks like chewable vitamins from the bag and sets it in the basket.

“What’s that?”

“Glucose tablets in case my sugar drops. I don’t think it will, but I like to be prepared just in case.”

I hate that she has to worry about that all the time. My sister’s condition will pass after the pregnancy, but Nova will have this for the rest of her life. I looked up reactive hypoglycemia. When Nova’s blood sugar levels drop, they can make her feel shaky, anxious, unsteady, sick, hot, weak, and like she’s about to pass out. If her blood sugar drops too low, she will pass out or have a seizure. There is no cure, and she could develop diabetes later in life.

I like how she’s prepared, but I want to be able to help if she gets sick, too. I worry about her, even if she isn’t mine to worry about.

18

Nova

Riley and I ride down to the beach, coasting most of the way. Going back up will be a challenge because of the hills, but I'll worry about that later.

We secure our bikes at the racks near the public beach access.

The breeze cuts through my open hoodie, feeling colder now that we're by the water. Ocean waves crash in the darkened distance. I zip my hoodie up to my chin and shove my hands into my pockets.

"Cold?" Riley stuffs his hands into his pullover hoodie.

"Yeah. I love the weather here when it's sunny, but the beach always makes me chilly." My sneakers sink into the sand as we walk toward the sound of the ocean. "It's darker than I thought it'd be out here."

I glance up. The sky is clear, though, and stars twinkle like diamonds. One shoots across the sky. I gasp. "Riley, look! A shooting star. Quick—make a wish."

I close my eyes and clench my fists. Please let this media circus around me pass and allow me to open up to love again without fear. Also protect Riley from whatever it is he's hiding from.

"That was a long wish," Riley says, amusement in his tone.

I shrug. “I wanted to get it right, and I added a wish for you, too.”

“You did?” His voice goes up with surprise.

“What? You didn’t wish anything for me?” I tease and walk parallel to the close-sounding waves.

“Uh...”

I laugh. “It’s okay, Riley. I’m teasing you.”

“Actually, my wish did involve you. I just wasn’t sure about sharing it.”

“Why’s that? Too dirty?” I tease him more.

“I was always told if you share a wish, it won’t come true.”

“I’ve heard that, but I don’t believe it.”

“No? Tell me your wish then.”

“Fine. I wished for the media about me to end, to be able to love again, and for you to be safe.”

He’s quiet for a moment, the dark outline of his head turned toward me as we walk in the sand. I feel his gaze boring into the side of my face.

Did my wish surprise him? “Your turn, unless you didn’t make a wish. In which case, shame on you for passing on such a rare moment.”

He chuckles, the deep and throaty sound so sexy I feel it in my chest and between my

legs. Oh no. I'm in trouble.

He removes his wig and runs his hand through his grown-out hair, making me long to see how the strands fall around his features, but it's just too dark.

"Well," he says, "I wished I had reconnected with you before all this craziness happened in our lives."

My heart melts in my chest like a Popsicle on a hot, sunny day. Riley makes himself irresistible without even trying. "Things happen at a certain time for a reason. Maybe we were different in the past and wouldn't have liked each other. Maybe we're getting close now because we can relate and help each other in a way we couldn't before."

"Damn, Nova," he murmurs and stops walking as he rubs his hand over his heart.

"What?" I face him, turning against the wind so the strands of my wig blow behind me instead of in my face.

"You're so different from anyone I've ever known."

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“It’s the California in me,” I tease.

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s just you.” His low, sensual voice is far from teasing.

I feel his eyes on mine as we stare at each other’s silhouettes in the dark, the waves crashing to the shore.

I should thank him and continue walking. Neither of us are in a position for more. But that’s not what I do. My heart thumps louder in my ears, and my body hums with emotions and desire. I close the distance between us.

Riley doesn’t back away.

I brush his fingers with mine and then I do something that might ruin everything that’s been growing between us. I lift my face and kiss him.

His lips are soft, warm, and stationary. I took him by surprise, I’m sure, but I thought—hoped—he’d respond in some way.

I pull back and lower my head. “Sorry. I...I shouldn’t have done that.” When he doesn’t move or say anything, I tilt my head back to stare at his shadowed features. “Are you okay?”

In a swift move, he cups my cheeks with his big, warm hands and pulls me to him for a kiss.

His lips meet mine with a hunger I didn’t know was in him. They move, part with a



breath, claim mine, and open more as he slides his tongue into my mouth.

I moan at the feel of him and his taste. Holy shit. Riley is an amazing kisser. I match the slow, sensual thrusts of his tongue. My skin feels hot as a fire ignites inside my body. I clutch his hands where they cup my face as if to keep him connected to me.

More. I need more.

As if Riley does too, he draws me closer and slides his hands down my back to cup my ass and move me against him so I can feel his arousal. And what an arousal it is.

I moan again, my head light and tingly. Am I breathing?

“Nova,” he murmurs against my lips. “You taste like salt and heaven.”

My knees threaten to buckle.

Next, we’re both lowering to the sand. Riley pulls me so that I straddle his lap. Our lips have barely disconnected. My fingers are in his silky strands while his hands remain on my ass, rocking me against him. It’s so hot, I don’t care that we’re at a public beach, going at it like teenagers making out for the first time in our lives.

“I love your ass,” Riley says as he kisses a trail down my neck. “I love everything about your body.”

He loves my curvy, soft figure? I wasn’t sure what he was into and even though he’s said a few times that he thinks I’m attractive, I wondered whether he was trying to make me feel better or whether he genuinely meant it. I can tell by the way he’s groping me and the hardness in his pants that he is wholly genuine. It sends me into overdrive, and I grind against him on my own, loving the friction at my core, and the feel of his hands and lips on my body.

Riley kisses a path back up my neck. “You’re breathing so fast. I don’t want you passing out on me.” His voice is a low rumble. He chuckles and cups my cheeks again, holding me a few inches away from him. “How’s the sugar? Are you doing okay?”

The thoughtfulness—and in this moment. I could come.

“I’m good.” I pant. “You?” I ask, although I don’t know why.

“I’m better than good.”

He doesn’t sound like he’s breathing any slower or quieter than I am. I sense a smile on his face and wish more than anything that I could see in the dark.

“Let’s go back home and continue this in private.”

Riley nods and holds me to him as we both work to control our racing breath.

Why did I suggest riding bikes here when we could have driven? It’ll take so long to get back. Maybe we should get an Uber.

“Ready?” Riley stands and tugs me to my feet, pulling me in for another kiss. Quickly, he ends it and shakes his head. “You should stay out of arm’s reach from me until we’re back at the house.”

I giggle but agree. And because I’m in such a hurry, I say, “Race you to the bikes?” Not waiting for his response, I dart across the sand toward the public access where we left them.

The ride back to Gigi’s sucks. I’m horny, in a hurry, and frustrated as hell. My leg muscles burn from being out of shape—not that I was ever much in shape—and my

scalp itches from sweat and this hot-as-fuck wig.

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I rip it off and shove it in the basket on the bike.

“Is everything okay?” Riley calls out from behind me, not out of breath at all because he’s in much better shape than I am.

“Yep.” I glance over my shoulder at him. “All good.”

It’s not all good. At this rate, I’ll need a shower, snack, and rest before we can resume any kind of make-out session. What was I thinking, choosing bikes? We should have driven.

“We can walk the rest of the way if you want?” Riley calls out again. He catches up to me and matches my pace.

“How are you not out of breath?” I pant.

He shrugs, and I laugh. It’s called exercise, Nova.

His muscles and zero body fat make it obvious he works out hard regularly. Note to self: start using the treadmill or elliptical in Gigi’s home gym.

Sweat drips down my back. “I need a shower,” I blurt.

“I can help with that,” Riley replies.

I stiffen for a second, surprised by his response. Not once has he been this direct with me. I like it—a lot—even though I shouldn’t. In fact, I should separate from him the

moment we get home, but I don't want to.

Headlights shine behind us on the street. This is the third car to go around us, only this car slows alongside us, and the passenger window rolls down. A camera appears and flashes before I can blink.

"Shit!" I completely forgot about paparazzi, my mind distracted by Riley, hormones, and how unfit I am.

Riley veers closer to the car.

"Watch out!" I shout.

He grabs for the camera but the shadowed figure jerks back and the car races away.

Oh my gosh. They got a picture of us. Neither of us are wearing our disguises. This will be all over social media by tomorrow.

I can see the headlines: "Is Nova already moving on?" "Who's the mystery guy she was out with?"

They'll comment on my hot-mess appearance, for sure. Another tabloid headline flashes in my mind: "Is this guy the father of Nova's baby?"

This is a disaster. And what about Riley? I don't even know what he's hiding from, but this will make him a social media target.

"I'm so sorry." I pant harder, filled with dread.

Riley doesn't reply, his shoulder stiff, his head forward as he pedals alongside me.

“Are you okay?”

It takes him a moment to respond. “That picture is going to be everywhere, isn’t it?”

My stomach tightens, as if I’ve been punched. “Most likely. I shouldn’t have taken off my wig. I’m so sorry, Riley.”

“It’s not your fault. I took mine off, too.”

“I wasn’t thinking. I was hot...”

“Let’s just get back to the house.” Riley pedals faster.

I don’t know how but I manage to keep up with him. Adrenaline rush? Pure will?

At Gigi’s, I punch the code into the call box and wait for the gates to open. They seem to move slower than usual.

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Once we're inside and the gates close behind us, I push myself to make it up the sloped driveway. Tomorrow, my body will hate me. But my biggest concern is Riley and how he'll feel about me—about us.

I push the button to open the garage. We park the bikes inside and walk toward the house.

Riley's posture remains stiff.

"I don't know what this means for you, but I assume it's not good."

"No," he murmurs. "I need to contact my former handler."

"Handler? Like FBI?" I've seen enough movies and shows to know what the word means.

Riley nods as we enter the side door and continue into the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, grabs a bottled fruit protein smoothie, and hands it to me. "You should drink this."

Even with the stress of what just happened, he still thinks of me and my hypoglycemia. And now I've possibly put him in danger.

"Thank you." I take the smoothie and wipe the sweat from my face with a paper towel.

"Riley, what can I do to help?" I ask, desperate to make this better for him. My hands

shake as I twist off the top, a sign that I need sugar, and I guzzle the cold drink.

His skin glistens with a little sweat—nothing like my dripping shit-show—and his features pucker with thought. He runs his hands through his hair. Here under the lights of the kitchen, I can see the way the strands fall around his face and eyes, like I wanted to see when we were back on the beach, only the tension-filled moment ruins my enjoyment.

His navy gaze finds mine, as if he just registered my question. “Nothing. This isn’t your fault. I agreed to go.”

The natural sugars in the drink kick in and my muscles feel stronger. “It was my idea to take the bikes.”

He shakes his head. “This isn’t your fault,” he repeats, his eyes unfocused, as if he’s still processing what happened.

I don’t know what to say or do to fix this. Never have I felt so helpless. Paparazzi is a difficult part of this life. I learned that at an early age but until this moment, I’ve never hated their existence this much.

“How bad will this cause problems for you?” I ask, not wanting to pry into his business, but needing something.

“I’m not sure.” He sighs, then blinks and meets my concerned gaze. “I need to take care of some things. Are you good?”

I nod, hating this change of events. “We never should have left the house,” I murmur and lower my head.

Riley slips a finger under my chin and lifts my face until I meet his gaze. “This isn’t



your fault, but it does change things. Let's get cleaned up and then we can talk."

"About?" I have to force myself not to grab his hand when his finger falls from my chin.

"Shower. Eat if you need to, then meet me in the pool house."

He walks away, leaving me chilled, even in my sweat-soaked skin.

One minute, we were happy, making out on the beach, talking about showering together, and now we're separated by an imminent social media disaster that could ruin his life. I'll get over the headlines. I'm used to this, not that it'll be easy or enjoyable, but I'll deal. Riley is out of his element and possibly in danger now because of me and my stupid idea to take the bikes.

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Riley

Fuck. This is the last thing I need. I'm not ready for exposure. I was still warming up to the idea of putting myself out in public. Now, that picture of me will be blasting social media.

Nova is top news. She might not think so, as humble and naïve as she is, but the media loves her. They loved her with Justice. They loved to post pictures of her when she was with her mother as a younger girl, unaware of her rare beauty and the attention her mother got when they were photographed together. I've done more digging on her. Out of curiosity, I told myself, but it was more out of fascination. The camera loves her. I've no doubt the paparazzi know this and are drawn to her for the money they make off her appeal to the public.

I tear off my clothes and hop into the shower. The chilled water runs over my heated skin. It feels good. I need it, too, after having my first taste and feel of Nova and her incredible body. Those hips, that waist, and her plump, perfect breasts. Damn. Flashbacks of the beach and the way she was grinding against me return. I'm hard in an instant. With all this stress, I don't know how it's possible. Nova has a greater effect on me than I could have imagined. She's become important.

The water heats up. I wash my hair and focus on the repercussions of tonight. When I first got to my room, I sent an email to Agent Keller explaining what happened. I contacted Cooper and told him what happened, too. I doubt he can erase every picture of me and Nova that is sure to surface on social media, but he might be able to do

something to limit them.

I haven't been this desperate since Marina held me hostage with Ainsley in that warehouse. Agent Keller said it was time for me to try out the public eye again. Well, how's this for jumping feet-first into the deep? What will he think? He told me not to draw too much attention, and I went and did just that. How quickly will he get back to me?

I turn off the water and dry off with a towel, securing it around my waist while I comb my frustratingly too-long hair. I want to cut it, but Nova seems to like it. I catch her staring at me when I run my fingers through it, and the look on her face gives me a peek into what she's thinking. She's as attracted to me as I am to her. One damn bike ride might have ruined everything, too. When I finally give in to my temptations and do what I've been dreaming about doing to her, the shit hits the fan. Seems to be a trend in my life.

A soft knock sounds on the bathroom door. "Riley?"

How did Nova get ready faster than me? How long had I been on the laptop before taking a shower? I also fed the kittens and left them safe in their box after they ate, but that didn't take long.

I open the door. Damp, wavy hair falls to the top of her left breast. Her baggy T-shirt hangs off one shoulder, and her black leggings hug her shapely thighs. She has zero makeup on and looks gorgeous.

I swallow the desire burning through me. "Hey."

"Hey." She ducks her head and lowers her gaze, but not before I catch her checking out my abs.

The insecurity she feels over tonight's events needs to stop. I slide my finger under her chin and lift her face. I like touching her this easily. "Listen to me," I say when her gaze meets mine. "You didn't cause this. We can't control the paparazzi."

"But we could have stayed here, where we're protected."

"What's done is done. We can't go back in time."

"Are you going to leave now?" Tears glisten in her eyes. "I don't want you to, but I'll understand if you have to."

Fuck. That rips off a section of the steel surrounding my heart. I pull her in for a hug. She buries her face in my bare chest, and I love the feel of her against my skin. Her arms encircle my waist, and she hooks her hands behind my back, letting them rest near my ass. Sweet torture.

I kiss the top of her head. She smells like heaven, but I won't lie to her. She deserves the truth. "I don't know what I'm going to do." She stiffens a little. As much as it pains me to let her go, I say, "Let me get dressed and we'll talk in the family room."

She keeps her arms around me for a moment longer, then nods and slips away, heading to the other room.

My body chills at once. I try not to think of what could have been between us. Nothing is certain right now, and that kind of thinking won't help either of us. Over before it started. Maybe.

I pull on a cotton T-shirt and pair of jeans. Before joining her, I check my email. To my shock, Agent Keller already replied.

Stay where you are. I'll look into it and get back to you.

My stomach tightens with more anxiety. At least he replied. The “Urgent” I put in the subject must have grabbed his attention.

Barefoot, I walk to the family room.

I find Nova bent over the box, petting the kittens. When she straightens, she takes in my clothes, a small frown forming on her lips. She liked me better in a towel.

“I saw you fed them.” She points to the dirty bowls.

“Yeah. They cried when I came in, so I gave them food. It wasn’t their feeding time but since I couldn’t play with them, I thought I’d give them something to eat.”

I gesture to the couch. “Come sit.”

She draws in a deep breath, as if inhaling courage, and joins me, putting a safe distance between us. At least she’s not at the far end of the couch.

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“I think it’s time I told you why I’m hiding so you can understand if I have to...” My throat closes around the rest of the sentence, and a deep ache builds in my chest.

Nova hugs herself but lifts her chin and nods in silent understanding.

“I was under federal protection not that long ago.”

She nods again, clearly having figured out that much based on my handler comment earlier. In typical Nova fashion, she doesn’t push for me to divulge more, just waits for me to continue.

“It’s a long story, but to sum it up, I knew a guy in college whose family is in the Mafia. He was a good guy, a good friend. Sebastian was his name. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the Gianni family.”

Her eyes widen. “I’ve heard about them—well, read some stuff that was all over the news about a year ago, I think. I don’t remember the details but the head—godfather or whatever—was in trouble or something.”

I inhale a calming breath to keep my emotions in check. “Salvatore Gianni was Sebastian’s father. He’s a violent, uncaring man. I always thought he’d be the death of his son, but it was the girl who Sebastian’s father had betrothed him to who ended up causing his death.”

“Betrothed?” she asks.

“Her name is Marina. She’s a psycho and the daughter of the Morello crime family.”

She shakes her head, as if never hearing of them.

“They’re not as famous as the Gianni family,” I explain. “Anyway, Marina found out that Sebastian had fallen for a girl from our college. Ainsley. She kidnapped her and me in an attempt to break them apart. Sebastian never loved Marina. He’d been with her out of duty to his family. He never expected to fall in love with Ainsley, but it happened, and it changed him. He wanted to be free from his Mafia obligations to be with her. Our other good friend Nathan—we all lived in his house during college—got in touch with a federal agent who’d been trying to connect with him about Sebastian. They made a plan for him to leave but then Marina kidnapped me and Ainsley.”

“Kidnapped?” Confusion shows in her eyes.

“Marina had guys do her dirty work. They tasered us, knocking us out, and brought us to a warehouse on the east coast of Florida. She threatened to kill Ainsley if Sebastian didn’t come. And she... she tried to force us to sleep together so Sebastian would hate us both, particularly Ainsley. She was—is—completely unhinged. In her warped mind, she thought it would taint Ainsley and make her a traitor in Sebastian’s eyes, ending his infatuation with her. She didn’t understand he loved Ainsley. She couldn’t, never having experienced love herself.”

Nova’s bottom lip falls. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

It’s only a whisper.

“Thank you.” I can’t help but smile. Nova is unlike any girl I’ve ever known. Every guy she’s ever dated was a fool to let her go. An absolute insane fool.

She takes my hand and threads our fingers together. The sweet gesture deepens the ache in my chest at the thought of possibly having to leave her.

“Marina’s plan failed. Nathan saw the kidnapping on the house security cameras; I knew he would—I just didn’t know if it’d be in time. He sent the agent he’d been in contact with to get us. Marina fled when she got word they were coming. The worst part is during that time, in Sebastian’s race to get to Ainsley, he crashed with a semi and died.”

“Oh my gosh.” Her features pinch with sincerity, and her fingers squeeze mine. “That is so sad. I’m sorry you lost your friend, too. That must have been so hard.”

She says all the right things. I nod. “It was incredibly difficult. My life changed dramatically in one night. I was sent to witness protection. I couldn’t talk to anyone, not even Nathan. Until the Feds knew the fallout over Sebastian’s death, Ainsley and I needed to remain hidden. I never got to talk to or see her again, either. She was a sweet girl, didn’t deserve this at all.”

“Neither did you.”

She squeezes my hands again, the tenderness in her voice and eyes making me fall for her more.

I didn’t want to admit it before, but I’m falling for this beautiful, caring woman who can never be mine. She’s too famous. Her popularity and tabloid exposure would never fit with the low-key, secluded life I want for myself. Even if I’m free to go out on my own after this, even if it’s safe for me to live without fear or in hiding, I don’t want to be surrounded by a media circus. I grew up with cameras on me and hated it. I had a break in college, which is why I chose to attend Ryland—small and private and away from media attention. I loved it. After all this, I want even more seclusion. I’ve been working on attaining it, building a nest egg from my stock investments in preparation for the next phase in my life. It’s nothing Nova would ever want.

“Did tonight put you in danger again?” Tears sparkle in her eyes with the question.



I stroke her cheek. “I don’t know. I left witness protection awhile ago but have been in touch with Agent Keller. He’s going to look into this. He thought I should try easing into the public world again before tonight’s possible exposure. I’m not sure if this will change my situation. He wanted me to test things by going out and seeing if I sparked attention from the Morello family. The death of Sebastian meant the families couldn’t unite through the marriage of their two heirs like they’d intended. The families weakened as a result—the Morellos more than the Giannis—and it caused a rift between them. Marina blamed Sebastian’s death on Ainsley, and me because I wouldn’t sleep with Ainsley, though I doubt that’s what she told her father. That’s the only reason why they’d still be interested in me—revenge for the colossal failure of the union. I was hopeful they’d forgotten about me and moved on. They may have and this might not change anything, but either way, I don’t want to be in the spotlight ever again. I’ve worked hard to stay off the grid.”

Nova shakes her head and tears stream down her cheeks. “I had no idea. I never would have suggested we go out. You should have told me no. If your life is destroyed further because of this exposure, I’ll never forgive myself.” She sniffles.

Without thought, I cup her cheek and bend to her lips, kissing them gently. “It’s not your fault. None of this is.”

“You were fine before I got here. Now I’ve ruined this place for you, too. I hate being known.” She sniffles again. “I don’t want you to go, but I don’t want you around me, either.”

She leans away, as if about to stand.

The pain in her eyes is too much. I take her hand and pull her to me. Her head falls to my chest, and I hold her tight in my arms as she nestles against me. I don’t want her to go. Not yet, even though I should. Getting any closer to her will only make my leaving harder. It’s not like we have a future. She’s famous, whether she wants to be

or not.

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I stroke her bare shoulder. “You have to stop blaming yourself for this. I was in this mess long before you, Nova. You didn’t do anything. I was here hiding before you showed up. Had a single picture of me gotten out, this could have happened. It may end up being nothing,” I say to try to comfort her.

“I doubt that.” She lifts her head and treats me to those yellow-green eyes now streaked with red veins. “What was your plan before this?”

“I didn’t really have one, beyond securing my finances and getting a secluded place of my own.” I shrug but keep my arm around her, pinning her to me. “I was going to slowly rejoin the world, see what happened and go from there.”

“Was your plan to leave California?”

I nod, the truth of that hitting me hard. Kissing her on the beach and opening myself up to her was a mistake. I was always going to leave her, and now I made it this much harder on both of us. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Her brows lower, as if my statement is incomprehensible.

I pause. “I shouldn’t have kissed you. You have enough going on. Kissing you was selfish of me.”

“I believe I was the one who kissed you.” She flattens her hands on my chest and searches my eyes. “Do you regret it?”

“Only the part about making things more difficult for both of us.”

“In what way is it more difficult?” she asks, still searching my gaze.

“I never asked you what you wanted, for starters.”

“Meaning if I wanted you?”

“Do you want me?” I didn’t mean for this conversation to go this way.

“Do you want me?”

Again, I smile. She brings it out in me, despite the doomed circumstances. “I thought it was obvious how much I wanted you.”

“Wanted? Past tense?” She leans away, her hand slipping lower on my chest.

I can’t look away from her bewitching gaze. “Want. From the moment I saw you, I wanted you. It’s impossible not to. Everything about you is a temptation. The way you act, the things you say, your kindness and thoughtfulness. Your face, your eyes, your body. It’s the perfect package...but it’s not for me.”

She frowns. “Because I’m famous by association.”

“Because regardless of our attraction, we don’t want the same things.”

She digests my words, and her gaze falls to the side. “I don’t know what I want.”

“You like to design clothes. From what I’ve seen, you’re incredibly talented. You could have a future there if you wanted, I’m sure.”

“Gigi thinks so, too.” She picks a cat hair from my shirt.

“Could you see yourself as a fashion designer?”

She considers my question. “I love designing and seeing my creations brought to life. I was pursuing a degree toward it before I let Justice derail my plans. I guess I could try it professionally. I have the connections to make it happen.”

“See? You’re destined for fame.”

Her eyes finally connect with mine. “And you don’t want that.” She’s not asking.

I answer anyway. “I want solitude. A place in the mountains with lots of land and privacy.”

She leans close to me again. “What would you do in the place in the mountains?”

“Stuff I loved when growing up. My Uncle Mack—he wasn’t really my uncle. He worked for my dad and would join us on hunting trips to my dad’s lodge in Maine. My dad would get sidetracked with work...or maybe he chose to work. Regardless, I was always with Mack. He taught me how to fish, build a fire, and hunt with a bow and a rifle.”

Her lips curl with disgust. “What’d you hunt?”

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“Lots of wildlife. I’ll spare you the details.” I brush her lip with my finger.

She licks her lips, and I lose my train of thought.

One side of her mouth hitches up. “You want to kiss me again, don’t you?”

I shift my gaze to her eyes.

“What I want doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does.” She moves closer, her breasts pressing into my chest, and sweeps my hair from my face.

“I won’t do this to you.” It might kill me, but I won’t.

“Do what?”

“Indulge in you, only to leave you.”

“Because we’re on different paths?”

I just stare in her eyes.

“I don’t regret kissing you,” she murmurs. “But I will regret not living in this beautiful moment, even if it’s all we’ll ever have.” She brushes her lips over mine. Once, twice...

She doesn't get a third time because I devour her. A hint of salt mixes with her delicious taste. This time from tears, unlike at the beach when it was from the ocean breeze. I slide my hands into her hair and cup the back of her neck, drawing her closer to me.

She moans.

In all my life, I can't remember a more beautiful sound. I don't know what this is. Attraction? Yes. But it's more. The beginning of something great that can never be. I thought I had great with Sera. I thought the world of her. I thought I'd never feel as strongly for anyone else. I realize now what we had was one-sided. I wanted Sera to be a part of my world, but I never wanted to be a part of hers. I thought what I had and could give her—a life without the demands and the control of her parents—was best. When in reality, I was trying to control her in a different way. I never asked her what she wanted. I assumed I knew, and I was wrong because I never thought she'd dump me or marry the man her parents chose for her husband.

I would never try to force Nova into a situation that wasn't of her choosing. I know her well enough to know a mountain life isn't for her. I want her to be happy, as much as I want her.

If she can handle this moment, I'll give it to her and myself, especially when everything about being with her feels right.

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Nova

Like Cinderella's shoe was a perfect fit, Riley's lips and the way he kisses me feels too perfect to be true.

Can lips be made for each other? Can a person's kissing style match beyond any others?

I felt the connection the moment we kissed on the beach. It seems surreal, like a romantic scene in a movie, where the characters' chemistry is so on point you're certain they're into each other off-screen, too.

Everything seemed easy with Riley. Maybe not from the start by the pool where we were reintroduced, but by dinner time we clicked, like old friends picking up where we left off.

We even parent the kittens in an effortless way, like we're naturally in sync.

I've never had a relationship with a guy, friendship or otherwise, be this easy. What does it mean?

Riley's hands tangle in my hair and then slip down my back as his tongue teases mine. He cups my backside and slides me onto his lap. I'm straddling him again, like I did at the beach, and I'm soaked.



With Justice, it took awhile for me to get to this point. I never truly believed he wanted me. It's hard to when he was often criticizing my appearance and how if I did this or that, I'd look better.

Riley never gave me that impression. From early on, he complimented my appearance and stared with an intensity that hinted his attraction, even if I didn't realize it at the time.

Maybe that's why I respond to him the way I do.

I'm already panting like a dog who's been running in the summer heat. I slide my fingers through Riley's hair at the back of his neck and tug.

He groans and grips my hips, helping me rock against him. He's so hard and ready.

Justice used to get so high, he couldn't get hard at times—a lot of times, in fact.

I need to stop comparing the two. You can't compare a donkey to a stallion.

Riley kisses a path down my neck to my exposed shoulder. He kisses my skin, then gives me a gentle bite.

I squeal from the rush of heat pooling between my legs. Once again, I'm not wearing underwear and my leggings are soaked.

His eyes brighten with my response. He kisses a trail up my neck and bites my earlobe.

Who knew I liked being bit so much?

When Riley's lips find mine, we kiss, our tongues tangling, and then I bite his bottom

lip.

He groans and grips me harder. His hands drift under my shirt to my breasts.

I want his hands on me there so badly.

His warm palms caress my breasts, then his fingers find my nipples through the lace bra and pinch. It's not that time of the month but it's getting close and the sensitivity I feel is near overwhelming.

"You like that." Riley smirks and does it again.

I let out a high-pitched moan that sounds like a whimper, my head dizzying.

In an instant, Riley is lowering me onto the couch. He pauses and stares at the doors that lead to the glowing pool area.

The kitchen lights are on, and it's easy to see inside and what we're doing. That's where my thoughts are.

Riley must be thinking the same, because he stands and tugs me to my feet. "We should go to the bedroom."

"I agree."

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He leads me by the hand to the other room and closes the door.

I walk to the bed and position myself in the center, where I sit with my feet tucked under my butt.

Riley strolls over and stops at the foot of the bed, staring at me. “I like seeing you on my bed.”

“You’re about to see a lot more,” I murmur and pull my shirt over my head, tossing it at his face.

He catches it with ease and inhales the fabric. “You smell amazing. But you know that, don’t you?”

“Actually, you’re the first to compliment my scent.”

“Insane.” He shakes his head, his gaze shifting to my breasts clearly visible through my lace bra.

His Adam’s apple bobs with a deep swallow. He drops the shirt to the floor and climbs toward me. “Lie back.”

I do, my insides squirming with anticipation. Part of me feels like a teenager again, about to make out with a boy for the first time.

He kisses my raised knee and then hovers above me, lowering only his head to kiss my lips. It starts off slow and sensual but quickly escalates when the weight of his

body covers mine. He rocks against me, rubbing his hard length between my legs at a tantalizing pace.

I join him and arch my back when his hands snake under me to unhook my bra. That joins my shirt on the floor. For a moment, he just stares at me, watching as my nipples harden before his eyes. He groans and licks my right nipple. I squirm and moan loudly.

“These might be my favorite part of you,” he murmurs in a sexy tone, “but then, I haven’t ventured south yet.”

As much as I’d love that, I want more on my breasts. They’re so sensitive right now; it’s amazing. I’m about to tell him to wait before going down on me, when he licks my nipple again and sucks it into his mouth.

“Yes. Please, yes!” I arch my back, needing more.

Riley pushes my breasts together and moves back and forth between them, kissing, licking, and sucking my nipples into his glorious mouth.

“Fuck,” he hisses, short of breath. “I could come from just doing this to you.”

“Me, too.” I pull his head back to my breasts in case he’s thinking of moving on. “More. Please.”

His mouth curls up at one side. “Damn, you’re sexy when you beg.” He continues playing with my nipples and breasts until I’m writhing beneath him, so close to coming.

“Riley,” I pant and tangle my fingers in the back of his hair.

“Say my name again and I’ll reward you.”

For someone so easygoing, he likes to take charge in the bedroom, and I can’t say I mind at all.

“Riley,” I purr, curious of my reward.

His tongue finds my nipple again and then he bites down, not too rough but enough to send a twinge of pain that I feel between my legs as moisture pools.

“Again,” I murmur without thought.

He repeats the action on my other breast, and I orgasm with an unexpected rush. Once my body relaxes and clear thought returns to my mind, I apologize. “I’m sorry. That’s never happened before.”

Riley kisses my lips. “Why on earth would you be sorry for that?”

“It was too fast. We were just starting and...”

He quiets me with another kiss. “It wasn’t too fast. It was perfect and shows me how responsive you are. If anything, it’s a compliment to my skills. Guys love when a girl is responsive. Don’t ever apologize for that, certainly never to me.”

Justice hated when I orgasmed too quickly, like it insulted him. It only happened twice in the beginning of our relationship, when he was trying to impress me versus partying himself into a limp-dick philosopher.

Both times, he said I ruined the moment for him and now he had nothing to work toward. He’d have me attend to him so he could get off, then he’d thank me and leave to party with his entourage. I felt used but never said anything about it because I

didn't want to seem needy.

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“If I have it my way,” Riley goes on with a sexy grin, “you’ll orgasm at least two more times before we’re done.”

Two more times? Before we’re done and not just him? “You want more?”

“So much more.” He gives me a sensual kiss and rubs his hardness against me, as turned on as he was before my orgasmic outburst. “Are you okay? How’s the sugar?”

A flutter of tears sting my eyes. I giggle and nod, loving that he remembers and cares enough to ask. No guy ever has. “I’m good. Better than good.” I reach down and cup his hard length, rubbing my hand over it in his jeans. “Your turn.”

His eyes close and he enjoys my ministrations for a moment before he pins me with a heated gaze and takes the hand I’m using on him, securing my wrist near my temples. He does the same with the other. “Who said I was done with you? I’m still having fun, getting to know you and your body better. I like to learn.” He winks. “I’m a perfectionist that way.”

I’m in too much awe to argue. Can this be real?

He sits up between my spread legs and raised knees. His gaze devours my breasts, and he licks his lips.

It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Keep these here.” He releases my wrists and gently runs his fingers down my chest, over my breasts, my sensitive nipples, and my stomach until he reaches the elastic

band of my leggings.

His gaze finds mine, as if he's asking for permission.

I lift my hips and watch his expression as he slides my leggings down my thighs. The moment he notices I don't have on underwear, he sucks in a breath. "Damn, Nova. That is sexy as fuck."

I like how I surprise him. It could be a West Coast thing or just a guys-I've-dated thing, but none of them ever seemed surprised by me.

I hope he likes it bald down there. I got hair laser removal a few years ago. Most of the girls I know do at an early age, so we don't have to shave. It makes going to the beach easier too. Bikini-ready at all times. The only hair on my body is on my head.

Riley tosses my shorts on the floor and takes me in as I lie naked on the bed. A blush heats my skin, like it always does when I bare myself to a guy for the first time.

"Take off your shirt," I say, to distract myself from his penetrating gaze.

"You do it." Riley smirks, watching my every move.

I sit up and pause, worried what he'll think when he sees I have a slight belly. No washboard abs for this girl.

"What's wrong?" Concern fills Riley's navy eyes.

"I'm not the typical California beauty. I have curves."

He nods, his eyes gleaming with desire. "And I love every single one of them. A woman should be soft and curvy." He brushes the backs of his fingers down my arm.



“Your body is perfect. Heaven.”

My confidence soars. I shouldn't need a guy to tell me I'm beautiful. I'm supposed to see it for myself. But after the whole Justice debacle, I haven't felt sexy.

“Are you going to leave me fully clothed, or would you rather be the only one naked? I'm not complaining. In fact, I think you should walk around naked all the time with me.”

I giggle and scoot close enough to kiss him. His arms snake around my body and pull me close, his tongue delving into my mouth as if worshipping my taste.

As much as I love how he's crushing me to him, I want his shirt off so I can feel his skin against mine. I lean away, grip the hem of his shirt, and pull it over his head.

Tan abs, wide shoulders, and a V-shaped waist greet me.

Damn.

I unbutton his jeans. “If I'm naked, you have to be naked, too.”

“I can live with that.” He rises to his knees so I can slide down his jeans. To my surprise, he's not wearing underwear either.

“Aren't we a pair?” He smirks and removes his jeans all the way, throwing them off the bed.

Riley has a beautiful body. Even his penis is gorgeous—thick, smooth, and the perfect length and shape.

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I lick my lips and slide my fingernails up his thigh.

Like earlier, Riley lets me touch and stroke him a few times, but then he stops me.

He kisses my palm. "Lie down."

I do, my insides squirming with anticipation. Once I'm on my back, Riley hooks his hands under my knees and forces them up and apart. He kisses my lips and teases my breasts, flaming my desires. As soon as I'm panting and reaching for him, he lowers, kissing a trail down my stomach to between my legs.

He glances at me with a small smirk and then licks my core up to my clit.

I lose my breath and force my hips to stay on the bed.

"You taste like heaven, too."

Holy shit. Riley is the sexiest man I've ever known.

He licks me again and sucks on my clit.

My head falls back onto the pillow, and my eyes close. I lose myself in the rhythm and feel of his tongue, moving in all the right ways.

He inserts fingers into me and groans. "You're tight."

I haven't had sex in a while and Justice was nothing to brag about in terms of size.

Using his mouth and fingers, Riley treats me to more of his amazing talents.

Sweating, panting, and writhing, I can't get enough. My core tightens, and I know I'm close. "Riley...I can't stop...I'm going to..." I scream, my words cut off by an explosive orgasm that feels deeper and lasts longer than any I've known.

When I come down from the high and open my eyes, Riley lies on his side, staring down at me. "How's your sugar now?"

I try to laugh but lack the energy. "How's your sugar?"

He chuckles. "I'm good, baby."

"Yes, you are." I stretch, completely comfortable with my nakedness in his presence now. "You should warn a girl about your talents so she knows what she's getting into."

"And ruin all the fun as I watch her come undone?"

My thoughts race to the worst place possible—Riley doing this to other girls. I'm sure he has. You don't get this skilled without practice. It's ridiculous and selfish of me to want this to be ours only, but I do.

"Your brows are furrowed." He touches the skin between them.

"Only poets and writers use the word furrowed. Are you hiding more talents from me?"

"Are you trying to change the subject?"

"No. I'm trying to repay you for your incredible skills." Now isn't the time to bring

up other girls and my silly wishes.

I push him onto his back and lose myself in the saltiness of his skin as I kiss a trail to his erection. Slowly, I lick the fat head and slide my mouth over the length of him. It's difficult to take him completely and I almost gag, but I don't stop. I want this to be good for him.

With a moan, he relaxes onto the bed and his hands find my hair, tangling the strands as he whispers how good it feels, and how my lips and tongue are amazing.

Soon, he's thrusting into my mouth, doing most of the work himself as he holds my head in place. It's erotic as hell and nothing I've ever experienced before. He tries to pull out, murmuring, "I'm about to come."

I push against him and let him finish in my mouth, swallowing every last bit of my reward for a job well done.

Riley rests his head on the pillow, his breath racing, his eyes closed.

I crawl to him and kiss his neck. "How do you feel?"

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He chuckles. “Is that a trick question?”

I kiss his lips but don’t try for more in case he doesn’t want to taste himself in my mouth. As soon as I move away, he cups the back of my head and tugs me in for a deep kiss. Guess he doesn’t mind.

Never did I imagine he’d be like this. He’s kind and caring and thoughtful. I assumed any sexual act with him would be similar, and although he is very attentive to my body and needs, the touch of control he exhibits, his confidence, and lack of inhibitions are like secret weapons. You don’t just date a guy like Riley—you marry him.

I stifle a gasp at my train of thought. Marriage? Where did that come from?

“Nova,” Riley says on a sigh. “You just blew my mind.”

“I believe it was your dick, but we can call it your mind if you want.”

He cracks up, his teeth on full display, his abs contracting—make that every muscle in his perfect body. He looks beautiful, sexy, better than I imagined...add in the deep sound of his raspy voice when he laughs, and damn. Until this moment, I didn’t realize how much trouble I could be in when it comes to Riley and my fragile heart.

21

Nova

The difference between last night and this morning is monumental.

Last night, Riley and I pleasured each other, played with the kittens for a while, watched Moana—Riley's niece's favorite movie. I'd never seen it but found it incredibly enjoyable—and fell asleep naked in his bed.

He didn't try to do more than kiss me and hold me close, while his gentle fingers caressed my back until I drifted to sleep.

When I woke, I was alone. The sun brightened the room and Riley was nowhere to be found. I checked the family room for him. The kittens played securely in the playpen I'd ordered. Guess it came last night or early this morning. Did Riley set it up? He had to have; no one else takes care of the kittens except us.

The litter box is in there, too, and the kittens seem content on a pile of blankets. Itty-bitty chews on Vizzini's ear, but he doesn't seem to mind. Such cute little furballs.

"Riley?" I call out.

No response.

I find my phone on the coffee table and check social media for a post about last night.

For a moment, it seems we're in the clear until I check my messages. Porsha sent me a text with a headline and picture.

“Looks like Nova has a new man. Rebound guy or baby daddy to her unborn child?”

The photo is grainy and not of good quality. Still, it's clear enough to tell it's me on a bike, sweating and looking alarmed. Riley is a tad blurry, but I recognize him. Does that mean the Mafia will, too?

Shit, shit. I wish we hadn't gone on that stupid bike ride. No matter how great the outcome was in terms of Riley and me getting closer, nothing is worth his well-being and peace of mind. What if he leaves? Could I handle it?

Instead of heading off to look for him, I shower and pray he isn't gone. Please let him still be here. I deserve a goodbye, don't I?

With damp hair, I change into some clothes I stuffed in a bag before coming back to the pool house last night. The tank top dress hugs my curves and stops just below my knees. I add a cropped jean jacket for warmth. My weather app showed heavy fog, which makes it chilly out compared to a day with full sun. I text Riley as I make my way to the main house.

Me: Hey. Are you okay?

No reply.

A distant voice catches my attention as I walk across the lawn. Riley stands by the bougainvillea arch near the property wall. His phone is to his ear, and he paces, talking to someone.

Relief cries out in me, and I release a huge sigh. He's here. Thank the universe, he's

still here.

His shoulders and back look stiff.

He's stressed. Must have seen the post.

I stand there watching him, debating what to do. Go over and comfort him or leave him be? What if he's on the phone with his handler? At least he hasn't left.

He has my text. I can wait until he's done and contacts me. I will wait, no matter how impatient I might be.

I head to the house to get breakfast—or brunch, considering the time. 11 a.m. I'm surprised my sugar hasn't dropped, but then, I snacked on popcorn before going to bed last night. It must have helped.

Mr. Jones and a few other gardeners are pruning the roses outside the back entrance to the main house. "Morning," I say and enter the open French doors.

The house is quiet, except for a vacuum sounding from somewhere upstairs.

I enter the kitchen. Gigi and Inez are talking. They stop and look at me.

"You see?" Gigi says. "She's fine, like I said." She walks to me and kisses my cheeks. "Morning, darling. Late night?"

Her insinuating tone and expression say she knows about me and Riley. How?



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“We stayed up watching a movie,” is all I divulge. I’m afraid to share more. Not about Riley and me; Gigi wouldn’t care. I don’t know how she’d react to our getting caught by paparazzi. She might think it’s best for Riley to leave. I need to talk to him about his intentions first.

“Nova.” Inez pulls out a chair to the breakfast table. “You need to eat. I have a special breakfast made for you. Sit. I’ve been keeping it warm.”

“She’s been worried.” Gigi states the obvious and gestures for me to sit at the table.

She joins me, a glass of what can only be her favorite green juice in her hand.

Inez sets a tray in front of me and lifts the lid. A bowl of oatmeal with bananas, and peanut butter toast with a swirl of honey are before me, as well as cubed cheese and fruit.

“Extra protein and natural sugars for you this morning,” Inez says. “Eat up.”

“Thank you,” I tell her as she takes the tray lid to the sink before returning with coffee and water for me. I thank her again.

“Inez, you’re the best.” I beam at her and bite the toast. Peanut butter of any kind isn’t my favorite thing by any means, but it is really good for my sugar levels. Bananas are, too. Nerves fill my stomach and keep me from wanting to eat, but I force down as much of the food as I can so I don’t get sick.

“What’s the matter, Nova?” Gigi brushes my hair behind my ear. “You still look

worried.”

I curse myself for having such a telling face. My expression gives me a way every time. Mom loves to tell me how disappointed I always look when I’m with her.

“It’s my sugar.” I lie. “I ate enough that I’ll feel better soon.”

Gigi arches an auburn brow. “I made a living off acting, Nova. Earned two Oscars for it. Now tell me what’s really going on.” Her tone is tender, not accusatory.

My phone chimes with a text. I snatch it from the table and read the screen.

Riley: Sorry. I was on a call. Where are you?

“It’s Riley,” I say with too much relief in my voice. “I need to talk to him.” I stand.

“Let me know if you need my help,” Gigi calls out.

“I will,” I say over my shoulder before exiting the kitchen.

I want to run but I don’t want to look like an idiot. For all I know, Gigi is watching or following me to make sure I don’t fall flat on my face. I’m not a klutz, but I’ve been known to trip here and there.

A quick glance behind me shows I’m in the clear. Gigi must still be in the kitchen.

She’s concerned. I understand and I’ll explain things to her later. For now, I need to see Riley.

I pass through the open glass doors in the great room and resist the urge to break into a run.

Outside, I speed-walk on the path through the manicured landscaping, trying not to trip over the flagstone walkway. Once I reach the lawn, I walk faster. The property seems bigger today, like it's taking me forever to reach the pool house.

The sparkling pool water comes into view. I can't help it. I run.

The doors to the pool house are open. I slow down before entering. Riley has the kittens on the rug near the couch. Does that mean he's not leaving? If he had dire news, he'd be stressed, right? Not playing with the kittens.

"Hey." I join him on the rug. "Everything okay?" Poppy rubs her head on my knee and meows. I pet her behind the ears and try not to focus on how long it's taking Riley to respond.

He draws in a deep breath.

Oh no. No, no, no! I stiffen and continue to pet Poppy.

"Cooper couldn't stop all the photos from leaking onto social media."

I nod. "I know. I saw one this morning. I'm so sorry."

He exhales and has yet to look me in the eyes. "There's been a development."

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My heart shrinks. It's my worst nightmare come true.

Finally, his eyes lift to mine. "I have to leave."

Fuck. "When?"

"Today."

"Why?"

He swallows, and his gaze falls away. Like me, he mindlessly pets Itty-bitty while Vizzini wriggles on the rug.

"Marina is missing."

"Marina?" I can't remember which crime family she belongs to.

"She's the one who kidnapped me and Ainsley. She's with the Morello family."

"And her missing is a threat to you?" I hate this.

"Maybe." His navy eyes find mine again. A heaviness shows in them that I've never seen. "It's the timing that's concerning. She left her estate in New York this morning, which is completely out of her usual routine."

"And now she's missing?" I don't understand how this affects Riley.

“She’s MIA. She boarded her family’s private jet, headed for Santa Barbara Airport. That’s all the Feds know for now. Her flight path could change. She could be coming here for other reasons, but it’s suspicious. My former handler wants me to be safe, just in case.”

“And here isn’t safe enough?” Before he can answer, I blurt, “Gigi has the best security systems. We’d know if someone tried to break in. She could even hire extra protection.”

“That’s not what I want for you guys. It wouldn’t be fair. And if something happened to either of you, I’d never forgive myself.”

My chest aches, and tears burn my eyes. “I can’t believe this.” It’s a whisper.

“I know.” Riley stops petting Vizzini. “I’m going to miss these little guys.” He rubs behind Itty-bitty’s ears, and she purrs up at him from where she lies on the rug.

I swallow the emotions threatening to break free, urging myself not to ugly cry. There’ll be time for that later—once he’s gone. “Where will you go?”

“The less you know, the better.”

And I didn’t think I could hurt more. “Riley, I...I’m not ready for this. I know you need to do what’s best for you but I’m not ready to say goodbye.” I sniffle and wipe my nose.

When I glance at him, moisture glistens in his eyes. “Me neither.”

“I could go with you,” I blurt without thought.

He gives me a sad smile. “No, you can’t. You have a life filled with promise and a

future here.” He pauses. “You and I are on—”

“Different paths.” I finish his sentence. “I know.” I watch the kittens through blurry eyes as they play on the rug, tackling and pawing each other. “How long will you have to go away for?”

“I won’t be coming back, Nova. I’d always planned to leave. It’s just sooner now.”

The heartache is near unbearable. I’m losing a friend, one of the nicest guys I’ve ever known, and the possibility of more in the future with him. As unlikely as it might have been, the hope of it is now dead. “This sucks.” I wipe a stray tear from my eyes and blink.

“Yeah.” Riley nods.

We sit in silence for a while.

“You could take one of the kittens if you want, so you don’t get lonely.” I pet Itty-bitty’s head since she chose Riley that first day.

He laughs, but it sounds more sad than happy. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

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“If you did, you’d always remember me.”

His gaze finds mine. “I could never forget you.”

It’s crazy how much this affects me. I don’t remember being this sad over Justice. Maybe a part of me was relieved to be free of the criticism and toxicity of his lifestyle. Until Riley, I had no idea what a healthy relationship was like. The ones I had in the past were always short-lived and the guys tended to be self-serving.

“Will you stay in America? Can you at least tell me that? I’d feel better knowing you’re still here somewhere.”

“I’ll be here. Somewhere.”

“In the mountains?”

His sad smile is all the answer I get.

I let out a hurt-filled breath.

Riley stands.

It feels as if the floor is crumbling beneath me.

He takes my hands and tugs me to my feet. Carefully, he steps over the kittens and pulls me into his arms for a hug. I clutch him for the last time because I know this is goodbye.

“I’ll miss you,” he says into my hair.

“I’ll miss you, too,” I murmur into his neck and let the tears fall.

He holds me while I cry, tightening his arms around my waist.

I can’t believe this is it.

When his hold on me loosens, I panic and lock my arms around his neck. “Not yet.”

He lets out a sad chuckle and straightens enough to gaze at my face. “I expect to see great things from you.”

He’s referring to social media. The thought of him looking up my life on the internet does little to console me.

“Promise me this isn’t goodbye forever. Anything can happen. Maybe Marina is here to shop or see someone else. You can’t be in danger forever.”

“I hope not. Either way, I was always leaving for a different life.”

“I know.” Mountain life. “If you get lonely and want a visitor, call me. I’ll come incognito.”

He chuckles for real this time and leans down to kiss my lips. They’re wet from tears, salty in taste, and everything a goodbye kiss should be—deep, emotion-filled, consuming—and then it’s over.

“I’m really happy I came here and got to have this with you.”

“Me, too.”



His hands loosen to rest on my hips. “I have to catch a plane.”

“Private?”

“Yeah. Agent Keller is having some pictures staged to leak to the media, so they know I’m leaving California. It’ll ensure your and Gigi’s safety.”

I nod, numb, and force myself to release him.

He cups my cheeks and stares into my eyes before kissing me one last time. “Be good to yourself.”

I stand in the family room, my gaze out the glass doors to the pool as he slips away to his room to pack, I assume.

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The kittens meow at my feet. I should put them in their playpen, maybe feed them a snack. What time is it?

I blink myself out of my stupor and twist my neck to look at the clock in the kitchen. Definitely snack time. Mindlessly, I go through the motions of feeding the kittens and putting them in their playpen, along with the litter box before remembering I offered one to Riley.

I want him to take Itty-bitty so he won't be alone, but how, on such short notice? Maybe Linda can help. I call her cell. She answers on the third ring.

With rushed words, I explain the situation, leaving out major details, and ask if she can help.

To my surprise and relief, she has experience with this, too. Famous people leaving on a whim have had this problem before.

"I'll have one of our mobile vets meet you at the airport," she says.

"Uh. It'll be just Riley. Not me."

"Okay. Text me the information and I'll send her off ASAP."

"Wow. You're insanely helpful."

"Like I said, you're not the first person to make this kind of last-minute request."

“Thank you.” I end the call and assure myself I’m doing the right thing.

A minute later, Riley rolls his luggage out from the room. When our eyes meet, my body feels heavy with sadness that I’m sure is reflected in my stare.

“My driver is at the gate,” he says.

“Already?”

He nods.

“What about Itty-bitty? Don’t you want to bring her?”

“I don’t have the time to make it happen.”

“I took care of it—well, Linda is. Believe it or not, we’re not the first people who need a pet to leave town on a whim. She’s sending a vet to meet you at the airport. And she told me to send you with some supplies; she’ll bring the rest.”

I hurry and fill a bag with necessities for Itty-bitty as Riley watches me gather everything. I snatch a blanket and stuff it in one of the smaller boxes that Linda brought when we picked out the kittens. “You can put Itty-bitty in here, and when you text Linda your airport information—I’ll send you her number— she’ll have the vet meet you with more supplies and medicine to make Itty-bitty comfortable for the flight.”

“Nova, you don’t have to do this.”

“It’s done.” I stop, my heart pounding from racing around. We stare at each other for what feels like minutes but is probably only seconds.

He glances at Itty-bitty where she sits licking herself near her food bowl.

“I’ll get her.” I place her gently in the box, close the lid, and hand it to Riley. Heartbreaking meows sound from inside, making the moment almost unbearable. “This is hard.” I will myself not to cry.

Riley nods, his brows drawn as he glances from the box he holds in one arm to me. He opens his mouth, closes it, then opens it again. “Will you tell Gigi goodbye for me?”

I nod, even though my instincts are to shake my head no. “I’ll go do it now.” Or else I might beg him to stay.

“Thank you, Nova,” Riley says when I reach the glass doors.

I stop and glance at him. “For what?”

“For helping me past my rut and showing me there’s more than what I had begun to believe.”

For one last time, I take in the beautiful man before me. The man who started a healthy change in me that I hope doesn’t leave when he does.

“Ditto.” I blow him a kiss and force myself to walk away.

22

Riley

“Turn your head toward me but look past my shoulder,” the photographer says from where he stands on the runway as I pretend to board the private plane Agent Keller arranged for me.

I stop a few steps before the open door to the plane and pose as instructed.

We’ve taken several pictures of me walking out with my luggage and standing by the plane.

“That’s a wrap,” the photographer says and gestures to his team.

I thought they only said that in movies or TV shows.

“You can board now. We got what we need.”

“Thanks.” I nod and step into the small plane.

Tan leather seats with tables in between greet me first, followed by a long, thin couch on one side and a mini bar across from it.

A young Asian woman walks out from the cockpit area. “Mr. Connelly.” She uses my previous fake name Rider Connelly as opposed to my real last name, Cohen. “I’m Kim. I’ll be taking care of you. Please have a seat wherever you’d like.” She gestures

around the small cabin.

I scan the seats for Itty-bitty's carrier and find it secured to a seat in the second row. Carefully, I undo the belt looped around the carrier and move her to a seat next to me.

I choose one of the forward-facing chairs with the tables. I've been on personal jets before. My dad has a membership to a private company. No matter how big the plane is or whether it has a bedroom in the back, I like to sit facing in the direction I'm flying. Always have.

"Would you like a drink?" Kim asks.

"Sure. What do you have?"

"Champagne, cocktails, beer, wine, orange juice, soft drinks, bottled water, coffee, and tea."

"What kind of beer?"

"We have Blue Moon Belgian White, Heineken, Miller Lite, Samuel Adam—"

"Sam Adams, please."

"Certainly, sir."

Sir. I haven't had this kind of formalities since I left my father's house. I can't say I miss it, either. I'm a laid-back guy.

Kim returns with my beer. "As soon as we're in the air, I can serve you food. Here's a menu. If you need anything else, just hit your button."

“Thank you.”

When she walks to the back of the plane, I get out my phone and text Agent Keller thanks for the connections and help.

I’m paying for this myself. I’d left witness protection, so the Feds can’t front my bill, nor do I expect them to unless I rejoin the program, which is something I can’t do.

I need control over my life. I don’t want to answer to anyone or explain myself—my actions or whereabouts. I don’t mean it as a stubborn rebellion. The program helps many people. I just don’t need it to help me.

I don’t have what I need financially to buy the place I want yet, so I’m renting a cabin nearby. It’ll do until I make a few more good trades. Then I’ll be set.

I could purchase a house that’s less expensive but because I plan to be a recluse, I want the extra square footage. Especially for during the winter months.

The pilot announces the plane is clear for takeoff.

Soon, I’ll be far away from Nova and the relationship that never had a chance. The memories I’ll keep. At least I have a physical companion to keep me from getting too lonely. I wouldn’t have brought her if Nova hadn’t insisted and arranged everything. I’ll need to reimburse her; this couldn’t have been cheap. And I don’t like the idea of her paying for anything when it comes to me, especially regarding my leaving her. I stop the thoughts before they spiral into something worse that causes me to act in a way I’ll regret. This is for the best.

\* \* \*

The driver pulls up to my temporary home. Nestled in the mountains in South Lake Tahoe, California, the cabin sits surrounded by a variety of rich green trees. Cabin might be a stretch. The rental has a modern vibe, although it doesn't look out of place among the scenery.

"I'll get your luggage." The driver parks, gathers my stuff from the trunk, and sets it beside me.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Have a great day." He gets in his car and pulls away.

I tip him on my app, then carry Itty-bitty into the house before she gets cold. Snow falls from the sky and adds to the thick blanket of white covering the ground. I follow the cleared walkway to the front door and unlock it with the code.

Like the outside, a modern cabin greets me with soaring ceilings and an open floor plan. It's not at all like the rustic cabin I'm interested in buying, which happens to be a mile from here, but it's home—for now.

Itty-bitty lets out a sleepy meow.

"Hey, girl. Are you awake finally?" I put her carrier on the leather sectional and open it for her to come out.



Hesitant, she looks around and peeks her head out of the case.

“It’s okay, little girl. This is your new home.” I pet her head, ignoring the ache in my chest that formed the moment I left Gigi’s estate. If the pain had a name, it’d be called Nova.

Itty-bitty stretches her legs as she exits the carrier, sniffing the couch and spying her new home with curious eyes. I have the urge to record her on my phone so I can share it with Nova later. I want to tell her where I am and how I am. Mostly, I want to hear her voice and know if she’s okay or if she feels a similar ache since I left.

The silence reminds me that I’m alone. I find the remote and turn on the flat screen above the fireplace, just to hear other voices.

Itty-bitty jumps to the floor and smells the rug.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her and get my luggage from outside, where the driver left it.

I open one of the suitcases on the floor and remove the bag of supplies Nova packed for me. Inside, a sandwich bag holds at least three days’ worth of food. I’ll need to order more as soon as possible.

In the adjoining kitchen, I find two bowls, filling one with food and the other with water. I set them near the end of the counter where it meets the great room so Itty-bitty can find them easily.

“Here you go, little girl.” I make sure she hears the food pellets hitting the bowl.

She darts around the corner of the sectional, charging me and the food. Wow. She snaps back quickly.

Again, I have the urge to text Nova and tell her all about it. I'm sure she's concerned about Itty-bitty and how she did on the flight. Maybe I should text her just to let her know Itty-bitty is fine.

Old warnings surface in my mind from when I first went into hiding.

Contact with anyone puts them in potential harm.

If you care about them, leave them alone.

Agent Keller had said a few more back when he first placed me in witness protection, but I can only remember the two.

It was easier being in hiding the first time. I was too afraid to even look out a window for a while. The desire to contact anyone other than Nathan wasn't there. This, isolation by choice, for the right reasons, feels harder.

That pain in my chest deepens every time I look at Itty-bitty, which makes me think of Nova.

"It'll go away," I tell myself and stroke the small cat from head to tail.

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

I stand and snatch it from my pants.

Cooper: Checking in. Send me your info when you can, and I'll have the security system and house cameras linked to your phone for access. Remember, you can always send me an alert text and I can follow the same protocol as before. Take care.

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Me: Will do. Give me a few and I'll get you what you need. Thanks.

He gives my reply a thumbs-up.

He also wanted to give me a new number, but I couldn't part with this one. Nova knows it. I have saved texts from her. In the future, when the memory of her fades—if it ever does—I'll get a new phone. For now, I need to hold on to something, even if it's as silly as my own contact information and saved texts from a girl who can never be mine.

I explore the first and second floor, move my luggage to the main suite, and get the security information that Cooper needs. That was part of my reason for choosing this house to rent. I needed a place that had a high-end security system. The other reason was the location. I had two cabins in mind: one in Utah and one in this area. Nova and staying in the same state as her might have helped sway me toward this cabin. I liked the trees, too, and how green they stay during the winter months.

The view beyond the many large windows shows snow-covered ground. Longing for Gigi's lush estate hits me. It hasn't even been a day and already I miss the place and the people.

I stroll into the great room and find Itty-bitty curled up on the couch, near the TV remote. She must have sat on it because now the TV is off.

I join her and let out a long exhale. A wall clock sounds from the entrance hallway.

Tick, tick, tick.

This is solitude. I thought I kept myself isolated at Gigi's—anti-social for the most part—but it was nothing compared to this quiet, empty house.

Unable to resist, I pull up Nova's Instagram account, with the sole purpose of seeing her face. She hasn't posted anything new in a while. Keeping off social media is the best thing for her right now, but what I wouldn't give to see a new selfie of her.

Itty-bitty stretches a paw and touches my thigh. I rub her head, thankful for the companion.

23

Nova

“I can’t believe I’m crying.”

Gigi hands me another tissue from the nightstand.

We sit on Riley’s bed where she found me, unwilling to leave his room. Of course, the kittens are here, but it’s more than that, and she knows it.

“This is insane.” I wave the tissue as I speak. “I’m insane for reacting this way. Riley and I are nothing.”

“Not nothing. You were developing a friendship again.”

“And that friendship developed straight into a romance.”

Gigi releases a sympathetic grin. “I knew you two would hit it off.”

“It doesn’t matter.” My eyes fill with fresh tears. I flip back onto the pillows. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

Gigi brushes my hair from my face. “You most certainly should have. I love having you here. And Riley was good for you.”

“Was. Was is past tense. He’s gone already. We didn’t have enough time. I wanted

more. I still do.” I sit up. “And I know what you’re thinking. There’ll be someone else. This is proof I can get over Justice. But all I see is another failed attempt at a relationship.”

I slump. “Relationship might be too strong a word. Riley and I were friends. But even though we didn’t know each other for as long as I knew Justice, it felt like Riley and I were closer. What we shared felt more real than anything I’ve had in the past. Maybe because I didn’t have friendships established before I dated a guy.” I dated random people I met at school, or a party, or through a friend. The guy and I would get to know each other through the course of our relationship, which is probably why it never worked.

I sigh and lower my head. “I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m rambling because I’m sad and hurting. Like always, it seems.” I haven’t vented like this to Gigi in a long time. I hope I don’t overwhelm her.

She puts her arm around me so my head rests on her shoulder and kisses the top of my head. “I’m sorry you’re hurting. I feel responsible. If I hadn’t pushed you and Riley together—”

I lift my head and meet her emerald gaze. “This isn’t your fault. You didn’t push anything, either. Riley and I connected in a way I think neither of us expected. Regardless, I don’t think we were meant to be. ‘We’re on different paths,’ he would say.”

“What do you mean, dear?”

“He wants to live in solitude in the mountains, and I...I don’t know what I want to do yet. I’m still figuring it out.” It hits me then how right he is. I couldn’t see it before, but I do now. Riley has direction, and I have none. He has a destination whereas I’m drifting, letting the wind set my course. I straighten my spine with new clarity. “Until

I figure out my plan in life, I can't have a successful relationship. I have to know what I want and go after it before I can hitch myself to someone else and expect things to work."

"Well said." Gigi pats the top of my hand. "It'll be nice to see you get self-absorbed and self-involved for once. You put too much attention on others. Now it's time to do you!"

Her words touch on a sore spot. "I don't want to become too self-absorbed." I can't become my mother. I don't say that out loud. Gigi is her mom, after all.

"You couldn't possibly. You're not like me or your mother, thankfully. We raised you well enough to know the difference. When you were born, I swore to myself we'd give you 'All of our strengths and none of our weaknesses.'"

"You wished that for me?"

"Of course. Your mother and I both did."

I don't believe Mom did at all, but Gigi would never miss the chance to make her daughter look better than she is. Or maybe she doesn't see her the way I do.

"The first part of my declaration came true and then some." She cups my cheek. "You have more strength in you than me or your mother. More beauty, kindness, and talent, too."

I roll my eyes. "Now you're just delivering lines."

"I'm not." She lowers her hand to rest on the bed. "You are by far the best of both of us. But I'm afraid our weaknesses found a way in—with the help of society. The road from youth to adulthood is filled with bumps that help shape who we become."

“I’ve definitely had my share of bumps.”

“Which have only made you stronger. Pain, once healed and learned from, becomes power. Don’t ever let anyone steal that power from you, especially now that you’ve found it within yourself.” She stands. “Your dreams are within your grasp, my darling, and I am always here to help.”

I climb from the bed. “Are you leaving?” Gigi and her dramatic exits. She waltzes in on a cloud and leaves just as graciously, if not too quickly at times.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

“Not for long. I had Tarot Card Night planned for later, but I’m going to cancel. You need me more than my friends need their fortunes told. It’s not like we don’t do this regularly.”

“Wait.” I step around the bed to stand in front of her. “Tarot Card Night sounds like fun. I don’t want to sulk. I have a life to plan. A good fortune reading may help direct me.”

She tilts her head, her eyes narrowed with thought. “Are you sure? I have about seven people confirmed to come, but it’s not a problem to reschedule the event.”

“No. I want to join. It will be good for me.”

She beams and caresses my cheek. “See? So much strength amid hardship.”

My lips inch up with a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, my dear.” She turns for the door. “I was planning a Mediterranean food theme. Greek tapas. How does that sound to you?”

“It sounds wonderful.”

Gigi waltzes from the room, and I follow but head for the kittens when she exits the doors. We haven’t left them open since getting the kittens. I should order a gate for the doors. I bet the kittens would like to see the outside world and they’re too little to jump high enough to escape.

Decided, I pull up a pet store app and order an extendable gate. I can have Mr. Jones install it if necessary. Even though he's the gardener, he's also the unofficial handyman around the estate.

The kittens meow. Vizzini and Poppy. Do they miss Itty-bitty and Riley? I hadn't considered we'd be separating them. My thoughts had been on Riley and not wanting him to be alone. I wish I knew how he was doing. I wish I knew where he was.

If I'm wishing, I might as well wish him to be here and safe instead of in hiding.

I open the gate for Poppy and Vizzini to escape and sit on the corner of the rug so they don't have to walk too far to get to me.

"Come on, babies. Come to Mama." Mama. I laugh at myself. I guess I am, though.

With sleepy eyes, they make their way over to me. Vizzini plops onto my lap while Poppy rubs her head against my knee. Purring sounds come from both of them.

I get my phone from where I left it on the side table and record them for a minute. "Smile for the camera." I move the phone to get each of their faces. Poppy sniffs the screen and goes back to rubbing her head on my knee. "This is new behavior," I say, recording it. "What do you think, Vizzini?" He doesn't bother to acknowledge me or the phone in his face. "How can you be sleepy? You just woke up." I raise the phone to my face and roll my eyes. "Kittens."

On a whim, I decide to post the video to my Instagram account.

I haven't posted anything in nearly a month, but I have no way of reaching Riley, and I want him to see the kittens. Before he left, he told me not to text him, that he'd be changing his number and any connection to him could put me at risk.

He didn't say I couldn't post cryptic messages in the hope that he'll see them and know they're for his benefit.

As for the backlash this might—will—cause on social media, I don't care anymore. This is more important to me. Screw any haters and tabloids for turning this into more than it is. They will always reach for something. It's their job—a shitty job, but it's not personal. It's business.

Wow. This is the first time I've ever thought this way.

It's freeing, not caring. "Screw social media!" I shout across the pool house.

The kittens tense and Poppy runs away.

"Sorry, baby." I go after her and catch her to snuggle her against my cheek. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." I return to the rug and nearby blanket, where Vizzini has partially buried himself. "Sorry, boy. I didn't mean to scare you, either."

I pet his butt and tail, the only parts visible from the blanket.

"I was excited about recording a video for your daddy."

My heart pinches, and I release a humorless laugh. "Daddy. Yes, that's what Riley was to you two."

Vizzini backs out from the blanket at the sound of Riley's name. It could be a coincidence, but I choose to believe otherwise.

"Should we send him another video?" I ask, well aware that I'm conversing with kittens as if they were humans.

This time, I choose a cat face filter and record myself and the kittens as they sniff and paw each other. Then I show my cat-filtered face and blow a kiss at the camera. “We miss you.”

My eyes burn with a few tears as I post the video. I fight them back and put my attention on the kittens. New mindset. Remember, Nova. No sadness. Only happiness that I had time with Riley. That he helped me get over Justice, or realize what an ass he’d been and a fool I was for dating him. Riley helped me to see that I’m worthy of greatness. Like him.

No. I stop that train of thought before it turns sad and I ugly cry over the loss of him.

I give the kittens a few more pets before securing them in their playpen fence and showering.

“Water is a cleanser for the soul,” Gigi says sometimes. “Believe it washes away your troubles and it will.”

I work my hardest to convince myself of that, staying under the hot water longer than usual. After I’m dried and dressed, I get my sketchbook and colored pencils to keep my mind busy, and to draw some new ideas that came to me while I cleansed my soul in the shower.

When I’m done sketching them, I’ll show the drawings to Gigi and discuss having the outfits made. Today will be a positive day. I’ll make sure of it.

24

Riley

“The camera app is working,” I say into the phone. “Thanks again for the help.”

“No problem,” Cooper responds. “If you have any issues, just text me. I’ll get right on it. Is there anything else I can do for now?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

“All right, man. I have to get back to my day job, but like I said, text if you have any problems.”

“Will do. Talk to you later.”

I end the call and scan the camera feed now linked to my phone. Five cameras surround the exterior of the cabin and doors that lead outside. The windows are all connected to the alarm system, as well as the doors. If anyone were to approach the cabin, I’ll know. If anyone dares to enter, I’ll know and be ready.

A soft meow catches my attention. I stroll to the great room, where Itty-bitty was asleep on a blanket on the floor. I didn’t want her to jump down from the couch and hurt herself. She’d probably be fine. She’s a cat, but she’s tiny and I’m overprotective, I guess.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty.” I pick her up and carry her into the kitchen. “Want some

food?”

Neither of us are on a schedule like when we were at Gigi's. I plan to fix that today.

After I fill her bowls with food and fresh water, I set her on the floor. She digs right in.

While she eats, I check my app to see whether the supplies I ordered last night are arriving today.

Kitten food and bowls, a playpen fence, a litter box, and litter are all on track to be delivered this afternoon.

Nova packed some litter in a bag for me, but it wasn't nearly enough, and the casserole dish I put it in leaves a mess all over the wood floors.

I yawn and decide to have a second cup of coffee. I usually limit myself to one in the mornings, but I slept like shit last night. New place, lots on my mind, and a chill I couldn't escape no matter how many blankets I piled on myself.

Agent Keller hasn't given me an update on Marina's whereabouts yet, and I don't have a good feeling. When I was finally able to get some solid sleep last night, I woke in cold sweats, ripped from a nightmare about Nova being in danger.

She was at the beach instead of at Gigi's and someone was chasing her.

I pull up the videos she posted on Instagram yesterday. My lips curve with a smile even as I rub the ache squeezing my heart. I didn't double-tap to like them, even though I set up a fake account so I could spy on her. I'd just finished setting it up and followed her account when she posted a video, as if she somehow knew I needed to see her.

Red rimmed her eyes, alerting me that she'd been crying but she otherwise seemed happy. I must have watched those videos a dozen times. I only stopped because it seemed as if Itty-bitty could hear the meows and purrs from her fur-siblings and was sad.

We snuggled on the couch and watched a movie to get our minds off what we left in Santa Barbara. Not once had a place felt like home to me, not my home growing up and not Gigi's place, until I left. Now, when I think about it, I long to return, like I belong there.

I keep telling myself it'll pass. I tell myself these feelings for Nova will pass, too. They're not real but rather a result of connecting with someone my age after so long.

I don't know whether I believe a person can slip into a relationship as easily as slipping into bed at night. Nova is like the finest sheets I've ever experienced, though. Too easy means it can't be real. Right?

The wordlieblasts from a place deep inside me.

It was real; we just couldn't make it work. Yes. Falling for Nova was easy. Staying with Nova was the challenge, and there's always a challenge.

That seems to be my new life motto ever since the incident in college that changed my life.

I check my email to see whether Agent Keller has responded yet.

My stomach tightens at a reply.

Marina landed in LAX and left for Malibu. We have eyes on her. I don't think this is related to you given the pictures of you leaving the Santa Barbara Airport is getting

attention online. Nothing is certain however, so stay low until you hear from me.

Now my stomach churns with anger and concern. I don't like being away from Nova and Gigi when Marina is so close to them. Agent Keller wants me to stay put but now I'm second-guessing leaving them so suddenly. Yes, Gigi has a state-of-the-art security system and a staff of people at the ready, but none of them are trained against Mafia people. Sebastian aside, most of their kind are crazy and reckless. Marina is one of the craziest.

Every cell in my body burns with the need to return to Nova and Gigi. I can protect them better than a security system. I shouldn't have left. I thought doing so would draw Marina away from them. I thought they'd be safer. Now, I want to go back.



25

Nova

I've kept myself from crying for a week. That's not to say I haven't felt the familiar burn of unshed tears whenever I think of Riley, which is all the time. But, I have kept those liquid emotions under control.

I've also sketched fifteen designs in total, enough for a collection. Gigi's seamstress, Katia, made three of my designs so far and continues to work on the others I sent.

I should take a break. I've been on a strict schedule: kittens, yoga in the yard after breakfast, kittens again, discussing fabrics and going over my designs with Katia, walking the treadmill in the gym, more kitten time, and posting daily videos for Riley.

Social media is all over my posts, speculating who they're for and even suggesting I'm crazy or locked in rehab and this is my way of seeking help to escape. That was my favorite. Gigi and I laughed about it, making jokes over wine and pasta.

I walk to the guest room that Gigi and I turned into an office for me. Katia will be bringing two new outfits by this afternoon. I pin the next two I want made on the bulletin board and gather two options of fabric for an evening gown I created the other day. I want a shimmery gold, but Gigi thinks shimmery green would look best. This one is a nod to old Hollywood glam from the twenties. Maybe I'll have the gown made in both fabrics.

Gigi waltzes into the room. “Green?” Her bright eyes devour the shimmery emerald material. “Please.”

I laugh. “You’re begging? That’s a first.”

“I woke up with the most brilliant idea. Gatsby Night!” She waves her hands, making an arch. “Everyone will be expected to dress in theme, of course. We’ll have a showing of the movie on a projector in the yard and serve a buffet of popular dishes from that era. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds very you. And it’s a good thing I decided to have two gowns made. One in gold and one in green. For each of us. Although, now, I’m thinking of designing something a bit flapper-inspired for me.”

“And miss the chance to dress as twins with your beloved grandmother?” Gigi says, and for the first time I can’t tell whether she’s joking.

In the past, I would have been ashamed to wear a dress that I know would look better on Gigi’s lithe figure than my curves, but I’m tired of that girl. She’s exhausting. Besides, I’ve considered why certain celebrities, like Kim Kardashian, have no problem rocking their curves, which are near-identical to mine, and I am ridiculed by the press. My conclusion is that they own their bodies. They celebrate their curves. I even found some bad press, hurtful posts about Kim K’s figure throughout her career. She’s not immune to it any more than I am. She just keeps showing off how amazing she looks and how proud she is, and it seems to overshadow the rest.

For so long, I allowed this hurt to consume me. Now, I only need my approval to be happy. It isn’t always easy, and I have moments, but I work through them. I self-talk.

Porsha has been trying to show me this inner strength through the blog she connected me with, but my eyes or mind weren’t open to it before. Shit. I forgot to text her my

latest design last night.

“Hold that thought.” I raise a finger to Gigi, then find my sketch on the desk and snap a picture of it to send to Porsha.

Me: Sorry, girl. I fell asleep. But here you are. I was thinking a soft linen fabric in khaki with gold buttons. If you want it made, let me know.

She replies with a laughing emoji.

Porsha: I fell asleep, too. And I LOVE this design. Yes to the linen khaki and gold buttons. When can I order one?

She wants one? Of course she does, and immediately. It's so her.

Me: I'll have one made and if it meets my approval without needing adjustments, perhaps in a month. Katia is busy bringing my complete collection to life. Can you believe I have a collection?

Porsha: Yes! I wondered what took you so long. Your creations were always better than mine. And since I've shifted gears to being a stylist, I no longer feel inferior. lol On a diff note, how are you doing?

Porsha called me a few days after Riley left. I tried faking a good mood, but she knows me too well. Without going into too much detail, I told her about a guy I was friends with and sort of fell for by mistake, which she found hilarious and replied with, “Maybe you were meant to fall for him. Maybe he's the one.”

That put too much hope in my head. I like to keep that hope to Riley seeing my Instagram posts of me and the kittens. Besides, she wouldn't understand how wrong she is without knowing the full story and it's not mine to tell.

Me: I'm doing well and keeping busy. The good news is my head is in the right place for the first time in my life.

In regard to he-who-can't-be-named, I still miss him and want him more than I want this collection brought to life. I don't add that, just keep it to myself.

Porsha: I'm happy for you, love! So happy! Gabby says she's glad you found your lady balls. Keep me posted on the outfit.

Me: Will do! I add a heart-kiss emoji.

"I haven't seen you smile that big in a long time," Gigi says from where she stands near the dress fabric.

"I was texting Porsha."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

“She’s a good friend. You should invite her to visit.”

“Really?”

“Of course. It’s not like I lack the square footage,” she teases and sets the sketch for the gown on top of the green shimmery fabric. “Are we twinning for the Gatsby party or what?”

“Maybe. When will this party be?”

“I’ll have to speak with Inez, come up with the guest list, and have invitations made. It will be bigger than my usual themed nights. A month? I’ll know more after I talk to Inez about the menu. She’ll need help with the catering, but she will want to remain in charge.”

“No hurry. I was just wondering. It would be nice if Porsha and Gabby could come.”

“Of course, darling. Whatever you want. How about we plan this event together? I was thinking of inviting your mother, if her schedule allows it.”

Mom loves vintage-inspired clothing, particularly the twenties. She called me the other day. I think Gigi had something to do with it. The conversation consisted of small talk, no emotions, no insight to my private life or feelings. Typical for us. We laughed a few times about her miniature poodle, Marseille, and how he ate a snack bag of fire-flavored popcorn. Gerard loves to snack on them and must have dropped a bag on the floor. She found the pantry door open and Marseille’s white furry face covered in red powder. His stomach didn’t react kindly to it, which I was sad

about...but not how every time he released his bowels, he made sure to do it in Mom's closet. She lost a rug, a pair of shoes, and a scarf that she left on the ottoman. Apparently, Marseille pawed it to the floor before dumping on it.

Why she didn't just close the closet door is beyond me, but I had a good laugh. She and Gerard are about as hands-on with Marseille as she was with me. Only, unlike me, Marseille can't clean up after himself, so she had to hire a live-in dog nanny. I believe that says it all.

She was happy I had my own pets, though, and even more excited that I was designing again. We ended the call on a good note. That's all I can hope for with her.

Gigi's phone chimes with a text.

"Katia is here," she boasts. "I'll go greet her and bring her up."

"Thanks." I love how excited Gigi gets over my designs.

As soon as she leaves, I walk to the large window that overlooks the front of the house and the ocean. The fog from the morning has lifted and the Pacific glistens in the distance. I use my phone to zoom in and record the ocean.

When I post it to Instagram, I caption it:For you, in case you miss the view.

Then I record myself, particularly my eyes as the sun shines in them.Also for you, in case you miss the view.Like always, I end the recording by blowing a kiss.

It might be silly or wishful thinking, but I believe these videos are a lifeline for Riley, and a reminder that even though he's gone, he's not forgotten.

"Miss Nova." Katia enters the room with bagged clothes on one arm. "I have

beautiful things for you.”

“Just Nova, please.” I remind her and greet her with a kiss to each cheek, as is customary for her. “I’m excited to see the suits.”

I’d drawn them when Riley was still here. He wanted to see me in it. I figured I’d take a picture of myself in the cream one and post it later today.

Katia hangs the bags on the clothes bar. “Oh, Ms. Gigi says she’ll be up after she talks with Inez.”

“I figured.” I nod and giggle. This Gatsby event has her on cloud nine.

The outfits she unveils are exquisite. Better than I imagined. The pantsuit, the edgy jeans skirt/overalls, and a mini dress in silk champagne that would be perfect for clubbing.

I decide to adjust the straps to the mini dress, but otherwise nothing else needs to be altered. The suit has two copies, one in the typical model size and one in my size. The other designs are model size as well, but...

“I’m thinking of adding a curvy-girl line so my designs can be viewed on women with a natural body type, similar to mine. What do you think?” I ask Katia.

“It’s a brilliant idea,” she says. “I’ll start on the duplicates at once.” Before she leaves, she stops at the door. “I almost forgot. I found this in my mailbox this morning. It’s addressed to you.” She removes an envelope from her bag. “I can’t imagine why it was in my mailbox.” She shrugs and hands it to me.

My brows pull tight as I think of why that might be. The media did a post that I was working with a local designer after I shared a teaser glimpse of a dress I sketched the

other night. It was my first post that wasn't of the kittens or my face. Some fans replied on a previous post about how I was and what I'd been up to.

After some deliberation, I decided I would reply to nice supportive fans and ignore the rest. Still, I don't know how anyone would know I'm working with Katia. She signed an NDA, of course.

"I'm sure it's fine." I smile even as I battle the nerves fluttering in my stomach.

My first thought is hate mail. My second thought is Riley. Did he do this so he wouldn't be directly connected to me?



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

For privacy, I take the letter to the Zen room and read it.

Dear Nova Allen,

You don't know me, but I believe we have a mutual acquaintance. It's been made clear he's no longer in Santa Barbara. However, I do wish to find him. I won't state names. I can't say that you know his real name anyway, but your male friend—the one in the pic on social media—looks a lot like a guy I'm trying to reach. If you still have contact with him, do me a favor, and let him know Marina comes in peace and wants to talk.

I gasp and drop the letter. Marina? The girl who kidnapped him and is part of a crime family? What was her last name again? M something. Dammit. I can't remember.

Worse, I don't know what to do. Riley needs to know about this. How did this girl even find me? The picture that leaked to social media didn't say where I was staying, although I suppose it's not a stretch considering who my grandmother is; her address isn't public record, but the knowledge that she lives in Santa Barbara is.

Shit. Are we in trouble? Is Riley? What does come in peace mean? Is this her kind of joke? Riley said she was a psychopath.

I want to shout for Gigi, but she wouldn't hear me from this side of the mansion. If I could get my feet to move, I'd find her, but they're frozen at the moment. My phone. I snatch it from my pocket and text Gigi.

Me: I need help.

As soon as I send the text, my legs decide to cooperate, propelling me from the room and down the hallway toward the stairs.

My phone chimes. I don't bother to read the text. I'd have to stop and I'm in a full-on sprint. I grab the railing so I don't fall as I charge down the staircase. Gigi and Inez barrel out from the direction of the kitchen, Gigi's raised hand clutching her phone.

"I texted you back," she says, slightly winded. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

I stop before her and realize I don't have the note or the breath to say everything I want to say. My heart pounds in my chest like a snare drum banging against my ribs.

"The note," I manage to get out and glance up the stairs. "Zen room. Riley."

"Breathe." Gigi grabs my arms. "Deep breaths." She inhales deeply, and I mimic her enough times until I can speak.

"M-Marina. The Mafia girl who trapped Riley. She sent me a letter. She wants to find him." My gaze darts around the great room, with all the natural light and windows and glass doors. I feel exposed in a way I never have. "Are we safe?"

Dumb question. But I can't get my mind to comprehend the facts.

"Yes. Yes, my dear. We are perfectly safe." She brushes my hair behind my ears and guides me to one of the couches. "Sit. Inez will make you some tea, and I'll call Mr. Glenn."

He's the head of security and not only monitors Gigi's estate but also does personal visits.

Inez says, "There have been no alerts. Mr. Jones was out all morning, tending the

shrubbery around the property wall. All has been quiet. I'm sure we are fine. I'll have Aaron fetch the note from your room while I make you some tea. Okay?"

I nod, agreeing robotically, my mind elsewhere. "Do you know where Riley is?" I ask Gigi, my hands a little shaky. "What if he's in danger? Why would she send the note to me?"

"I don't know." She rubs my arms as if to warm me, only I'm not cold.

Aaron rushes across the room, toward the stairs. "Is it a paper note?" he asks me.

Gigi looks to me for the answers.

I nod. "It's on the floor by the bed."

"I'll be right back." He races up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Something registers. "Was he wearing rubber gloves?"

Gigi nods. "If the note is from this girl, it's evidence."

Gigi's phone rings and she moves it to her ear. "Yes. It's me. We're fine. Thank you, but there is a problem. Could you come to the estate?" A pause. "Yes. A letter. We're already taking care of it." She nods. "Thank you, Mr. Glenn. See you soon."

I watch her, waiting to hear what he said. She sets her phone on the coffee table.

"Well?" I say, impatient.

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“It’s okay, dear.” She pats my knee. “He’s on his way over to inspect the note and speak with you.”

“How are you so calm?” I hug myself, feeling displaced, like I’m having an out-of-body experience.

“This isn’t the first time something like this has happened. I’m no stranger to suspicious letters.”

Right. Gigi’s been through much worse through her career. Stalkers. Crazy fans. She’s also fine and lives with top-of-the-line security as a result. I remind myself of that and unwind a little.

“How did you get the note?” Gigi asks.

“I, uh...um, Katia brought it. It was in her mailbox.”

“Really?” Gigi nods, her demeanor as cool as a cucumber.

Amazing woman!

She picks up her phone, texts that information to Mr. Glenn, and sets her phone back on the table.

Inez returns with a tray of tea. She places it on the massive coffee table and pours two cups, setting them in front of me and Gigi.

“Yours has sweetener and a bit of honey,” she says to me.

I take the warm teacup. “Thank you.”

“Lemon?” she asks Gigi, before squeezing a slice into the other tea.

Gigi nods. “Thank you, Inez. Mr. Glenn should arrive shortly. Let him straight in. We’ll stay here.”

“Of course. Let me know if you need anything else.” Inez smiles and returns to the kitchen.

“Sip some tea. It will help calm your nerves,” Gigi instructs and drinks some of her own, as if she’s doing it to get me to mimic her again.

It works.

Warm sweetened tea slides down my throat in a soothing way. I sip some more and my shaking eases, finally. “I didn’t mean to get so upset.”

“It’s natural, my dear.”

“I just can’t believe she sent me a note. A girl in the Mafia who kidnapped Riley when he was in college.”

Gigi nods and lowers her teacup to the saucer on the table. “He told you everything then?”

“Yeah. Do you think he’s safe?”

“Riley is very resourceful and careful. He left to protect us. I offered for him to stay.”

“You did?”

“Mm-hm. I gather that’s why he didn’t want to say goodbye to me in person. He knew I’d talk him into staying. I called him after you told me he left, but his mind was set, and he needed to leave for his own peace of mind.”

“Were you ever worried about having him stay here?”

She shakes her head. “Like I said, dear. I’ve had my share of frights and close calls. I know we’re safe in the estate. Riley was just as safe as we are now.”

“Maybe it’s better he left since Marina knows he was here.”

Her auburn eyebrows draw together.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

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Aaron returns with the letter sealed in a large sandwich bag.

“Thank you, dear.” Gigi takes it from him.

“Can I be of any more help?” Aaron’s concern-filled gaze swings from Gigi to me.

“Check on Inez and see if she needs anything. Otherwise, we’re fine.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turns and leaves the room.

Usually Gigi corrects people for calling her ma’am. She doesn’t like formalities any more than I do, but her attention is on the sealed letter. She retrieves a pair of reading glasses from a small chest on the coffee table and examines the note.

“What do you think?” I ask, still a tad on edge.

She lowers her glasses. “I don’t know her, so I don’t know what to think or if it’s even authentic.”

“But who else would send it, if not her? Who else would care?” My heart thumps faster again. “Someone else in the Mafia?”

Gigi lays her hand on my bouncing knee. “Darling, you have nothing to fear. We will get to the bottom of this. Mr. Glenn has a military background and is a former federal agent. He has connections and will know a great deal more than me. Patience. It’s very helpful in times like this.”

“I’ve never been in a time like this.” My hand shakes again, and I almost spill the tea.

Gigi takes the cup and sets it on the matching saucer, then she wraps her warm, soft fingers around my hand. “Perhaps some edible marijuana is in order.”

“Maybe, but not yet.” As a teenager, I smoked a few joints with friends. In college, Porsha and I ate gummies when we were stressed with projects or exams. Justice smoked pot regularly—too much, if you ask me. But I’m not ready to relax yet, as if my nerves are holding me together, which sounds ridiculous.

Inez enters with a tall, built, much grayer-haired man than I remember. I only met Mr. Glenn once or twice in the past.

Gigi rises to greet him. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

“I wasn’t that far from the area.”

Gigi explains to him what happened and shows him the note.

“Who else touched it?” he asks.

“Nova and Katia, my seamstress. Her prints are on file, along with everyone else who works for me.”

Mr. Glenn nods and excuses himself. He makes a call and moves across the room, speaking in a muffled voice.

Gigi joins me on the couch again. “See? Everything is under control.”

Mr. Glenn walks over after a few more minutes. “I need to take this to my office. I also have someone checking into Riley and if we can contact him.”



“He’s friends with an FBI agent,” I blurt, then tense. Should I be saying this? I don’t want to get anyone in trouble.

Mr. Glenn moves closer, stopping across the coffee table from us. “What kind of agent?”

I send Gigi a nervous glance.

“It’s okay. Whatever you know is important in finding Riley.”

“No one will get in trouble?” I ask Gigi, even though the question is directed to Mr. Glenn.

“I promise,” he answers.

Gigi gives me an approving smile.

I peer up at Mr. Glenn. “Agent Keller is his former handler from witness protection. They still talk.”

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He nods, his expression thankful. “That will help.”

I hope so. He walks away again and talks to someone on his phone.

I let out an uneven breath.

“You’re doing wonderfully,” Gigi says.

“Aren’t you worried at all?”

“Very much. For you and for Riley. I’m confident in my security team and Mr. Glenn, though. He’s been with me a long time. I trust him. You can, too.”

I nod, but unlike Gigi, I have no patience for stuff like this, and I want proof that Riley is fine and will be.

If he’s not, I’ll blame myself for letting him leave when I could have begged him to stay—should have!

26

Riley

My phone rings with an unknown number.

It can be only one of a handful of people: Cooper, Agent Keller, the local Italian restaurant, or the owner of the cabin. The last two numbers are programmed into my phone with their names, which limits the pool of callers to two people.

I answer without speaking.

“Hunting?” a familiar voice says.

I let out the breath stuck in my chest. “What do you know?”

He’d texted last night an incident occurred at Gigi’s house regarding Nova, but he didn’t want to text the details.

“She’s safe. They both are. I want you to know that first.”

“Okay.” I stand and pace across the wood floors of the great room, flames dancing in the gas fireplace. Itty-bitty lifts her head and watches me from where she lies on the blanket next to where I sat a moment ago.

“Nova received a letter from Marina.”

What the fuck? My breath blows like steam. “How?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“Hired help. A seamstress, I believe. I’m not working the case. I don’t have all the details.”

“How do you know this?”

“A former agent works for Gigi now.”

“Mr. Glenn. I met him on the first day I arrived.” He had insisted, for Gigi’s sake, and I had no complaints. I knew she had the best security money could buy and expected they’d want a face-to-face.

“He’s in charge, of course, and doing everything necessary to ensure Nova and Gigi’s safety.”

“And?”

“And that’s all I know for now. He’s busy tracking down leads and amping up their security. For the time being, they’re both on house arrest, so to speak.”

It’s all I can do not to put my fist through the wall. Not my house, I remind myself and try to calm the lava of rage burning through me. “Why is Marina anywhere near them? The pictures of me leaving California are everywhere.”

“I know.” He sounds tired. “She has to know you left, which leads me to believe she’s contacting Nova for other reasons.”

“What other reasons could there be than me?” I lash out and have to stop myself from kicking a hole in another wall. “Nova has no ties to Marina or me anymore.” I want to hunt down that photographer and strangle him, but that wouldn’t do any good. I

left the estate. I wasn't wearing a wig. The photographers were doing what they do. I'm to blame for this.

"I can give you a direct line to Mr. Glenn. He can tell you more than I can, but he's busy. If he doesn't respond at first or answer, give him time. I told him I would offer it to you. He knows you might call."

I shake my head, my breath blowing even hotter. "I'm going back."

"I don't know if that's wise."

"I can't stay here. My leaving hasn't drawn the wolf away. Instead, it led her right to them, unprotected."

"They're not unprotected."

"They could have me, too. I'd rather be there, aware of what's going on, than away from it all, waiting by the phone."

"But your safety—"

"Screw my safety. They matter more"—Nova matters more—"and I brought this to their fucking doorstep."

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“You did the right thing by leaving. This is on Marina.”

“Yeah. Like it was before, and look what happened. Sebastian is dead!”

I kick an ottoman. It tips over and Itty-bitty jumps from the couch, headed for the security of her open playpen and cat carrier I placed in there, along with a blanket.

“Give it another week,” Agent Keller says, and I nearly have a heart attack.

“Another week? How long ago did this happen?”

Silence.

“How long?” I grate.

“Eight days.”

Fuck. I clench one hand into a fist while the other gives my phone a death grip.

“I’m returning. Can you help me get a plane or give me the number of a secure company?”

He sighs. “I’ll give you the number of the company that flew you from Santa Barbara.”

“Thank you.”

“If you must go, at least be smart. Don’t go and be a hero. Leave that to the trained professionals.”

What better reason could there be than to be a hero to the people you love?

The room spins with that realization, then stops suddenly. Could I have fallen in love with Nova in the brief time we were together? Is that even possible?

It took me a month to fall for Seraphina, and that was after we slept together. I met her at one of our college house parties and asked her out. We were an insta-couple, but it worked—or so I’d thought.

Nova and I are like close friends from another lifetime who reconnected and have extreme sexual chemistry. Is that love?

I loved Sera but what I felt for her was nothing compared to the ferocity spiraling inside me, demanding I return and protect Nova until my dying breath. Not even a year into my relationship with Sera did I feel this level of protectiveness. Granted, we weren’t in a life-and-death situation. Still, the last two weeks being here has done little to quell my need to hold Nova, to have her near, to inhale her sweet scent, see her smile, hear her voice, and watch her laugh and play with our kittens.

Picturing my life with her is as easy as imagining the sun rise between the trees and snowy landscape in the morning. She’d design clothes, leaving drawings all over our place, and I’d day trade. We’d play with the kittens, watch movies, and eat dinner together, sharing our day. I’d get to hold her every night and catch her beautiful gaze each morning. I could even see us visiting Gigi regularly or living there temporarily if she’d have us, not that I’d want to impose. Not that I think she’d mind. I’d do whatever is best for us—whatever Nova wants.

Well, I’ll be damned. Not once have I ever put anyone’s needs before my own.

“Do you have a pen?” Agent Keller asks.

“A pen?” What did I miss?

“For the number?”

Oh. Right. I switch the phone to speaker and bring up my notes app. “Go ahead.”

He gives me the number to the company and the name to a woman he uses. Desiree. “Tell her I referred you. She’ll remember you after setting this up such a short time ago.”

“Thanks.” I save the information and close my notes.

“Be safe, Riley. Please. This case, and what happened to all of you, stuck with me. I blame myself for not intervening sooner. It’s why I’ve always stayed in touch and helped where and when I could.”

“I appreciate it, too. All of it. I truly do.”

“Desiree should be able to get you out ASAP.”

“Thanks again.”

“All right. I’ll be in touch.”

I end the call and turn to pack before spotting Itty-bitty. She inches out of her carrier, her big green eyes on me with caution.

“Sorry, girl.” I bend and put out my hand. “I got upset. Your mommy scared me. I’m still scared but we’re going back home to see her.” Itty-bitty comes closer and sniffs



my fingers. “Would you like that? Do you want to see your brother and sister?”

She nudges my hand with her head, her way of letting me know I’m forgiven. “Thanks, girl. You want to help me pack?” I gather her in my arms and stand. “I should call Desiree first and see how quickly we can get out of here, and when to give you your sleepy-time meds or you won’t like the flight.”

She meows and purrs as I make the call. Everything in me says this is the right thing to do. Nova doesn’t have to love me back, although I think she does—or will. Regardless, I want to be there for her and Gigi. They are the closest thing to family I’ve ever had. Even when I was with my sister, I was the outsider. The fourth wheel, soon to be fifth, in a family that had no room for me. Despite their offer for me to stay, it was always temporary.

Gigi and Nova don’t feel that way. They feel like home.

27

Nova

“Are you getting cabin fever?” I ask Gigi as I straighten the towel underneath me.

We lie on the lounge chairs by the pool, soaking up the afternoon sun. The last few days have been overcast and chilly, with the morning fog lasting until evening.

It surprised me how quickly my mood shifted to glum, considering I spent part of my life in Connecticut, where the sun hid for months during the winter. I remember hating Greenwich when we moved there. I missed the sun and dry weather of SoCal, but after a while it became part of life and I became used to the depressing, bone-chilling winters.

After being here for over a month, I can’t imagine going back. I’m a California girl and it took me until now to realize it. Boom. Another future decision checked off my list. Riley would be so proud.

“In case you didn’t notice, I only leave the house out of necessity,” Gigi answers and dips a celery stick into the carrot hummus on the table between us.

The moment is oddly reminiscent of the first day I arrived—minus Riley.

“How about you?” she asks.

“I’m used to worse conditions, like being trapped inside due to bad weather.” Or only

going out at night when Justice was awake. “This is easy, and we’re hardly cooped up.” I gesture to the beautifully landscaped surroundings.

“Tennis later?” Gigi adjusts her hat so that the wide rim shades her face.

It’s our new thing as of this week. Gigi thinks it keeps my mind off being on lockdown and helps distract me from thoughts of Riley. I’ve been keeping busy, designing, overseeing the garments brought to life, planning the launch of my first collection—the goal is the fall—and working out daily, whether it’s in the gym or on the tennis court. I have a schedule but even with all the distractions, Riley is never far from my mind. I imagine him peering over my shoulder, reassuring me like he used to do. I even imagine his arms around me at night when I sleep in his bed. I’m fully moved into the Caribbean suite, like I’d wanted from the start, but it’s not the same without him here. He’s a part of me now. I can’t imagine a day without thinking about him, wondering how he’s doing, wondering what he’d think about my life and how I’ve turned myself around. He doesn’t even know he was a role model to me, inspiring me to believe in myself and love myself as I am, not how I think I should be.

“Any new updates from Mr. Glenn?” I sip my green juice.

“Same as yesterday.”

“And no word from Riley?” I thought for sure he’d contact me after what happened. I dreamed he did, only to wake up disappointed when reality set in.

“He says no news is good news.” She tilts her head to the side, a tender smile on her face. “Don’t give up hope. Remember what Shantay said.”

I look away as unshed tears sting my eyes. I don’t let myself cry over his loss anymore because, in my mind, he’s still with me. In my heart, we’re not over. I don’t

know how long I'll hold onto this, although I fear it will never leave me. No one will be good enough, and if I allow a guy into my life, I will compare him to Riley on every level, in every way. I know I will.

The night of the tarot card party, I was last to get my reading, too afraid of what Shantay might say. When I finally sat at her round table off to the side of the garden, far enough away from the party for privacy, she said she'd been waiting for me.

Shantay does the readings at all of Gigi's parties. I met her the summer I was sixteen and visiting for a month. My reading then was mostly about my relationship with my mom and self-acceptance. I saw her the summer after that, and the reading was similar; however, she stated a life-changing event was on the horizon that could send me into a spiral. I know now that life-changing event was my father passing and my relationship with Justice.

This time, she said I had a clear path ahead of me and a journey I've never experienced. I had a chance for a fresh start and the life that was planned for me if I seized the opportunity and didn't waste what I've been gifted. She also said my heart found its match and would forever be tied to that person. He is my soul mate and from my past, reinserted in my life at the right time for both of us.

How could I not believe that person is Riley, and the gifts are my talent and my resources?

I've wasted a lot of time, being reckless and not seeing the amazing things and people around me. I don't even despise my mom the way I used to, although I have moments when I allow myself to dwell on the past and how she wasn't there or what I needed her to be. Then I think about Gigi and how even though I wasn't given the mother I needed, the universe gave me my grandmother. Some people don't even get that. But I did, and she is amazing.

I'm amazing, too. Shantay told me to recite those words five times before I went to bed at night. I do, even though it was hard to say—five times felt exhausting—and I didn't so much believe it at first, but I do now. It's easy to say, and more importantly, I believe it. I believe in myself, which is why I can't let go of Riley. As much as I believe in myself now, I believe we're not over. We can't be. I refuse to accept that, despite the obstacles and huge fact that he is nowhere near my life. I don't even know where he is, but that letter from Marina was sent to me for a reason. Fate still wants us united.

"Shantay has never steered me wrong," Gigi says as if she knows my thoughts. "She was talking about Riley in your reading; I believe that wholeheartedly. I knew the moment you two intersected in this very spot that the stars had aligned."

I snort. "You couldn't have known that. He and I barely talked, and I had food all over me. The stars wouldn't be that cruel."

"It's been my experience that the most important and influential moments in my life are based on interactions or events that seemed inconsequential, if not disastrous." She wipes her hands on the cloth napkin on her lap. "The day I met your mother was one of the worst days of my life. I wasn't planning on adopting a child. I'd been pondering the idea of becoming a mother, but I was on location in Spain and didn't think anything of it. The director added a last-minute shoot in the south of Portugal. We had a small plane. The air conditioning broke. My luggage got destroyed. The weather was horrible. No one had bothered to check the weather or realized a storm had been brewing off the coast. When it hit, we were driving to a remote outdoor location and had to seek shelter because the dirt road flooded.

"We ended up at an orphanage. They were incredibly kind and accommodating. I met several children that day but was drawn to the shy girl in the corner who was terrified of storms. I sat with her on a blanket, where she cuddled a ratty teddy bear, and I read her a story, wanting—needing—to comfort her. When the storm passed enough for us

to depart, I couldn't get her out of my mind. I dreamed about her and longed to see her again and hold her in my arms. I could still feel her against me, her big green eyes watching my face as I read rather than taking in the pictures in the book. I was as fascinated with her as she was with me.

“Weeks passed and the film finished, but I couldn't leave without seeing her one last time. So I rearranged my schedule to return to the orphanage. The journey wasn't much better—apart from no storm—but I didn't notice the struggles like I did the first time. I was on a mission, and I knew it would have a happy ending. Your mother ran into my open arms when she saw me, and I never let her go.”

“You never told me that story before.” I got a short version from my mother, who focused on how horrible her life was before Gigi and then how difficult it was after, adjusting to luxury, fame, her ethnicity, and why she couldn't have been fated to be Gigi's biological child—something she still deals with today.

“Your mother doesn't like to hear it. She says I tell the story as if it were a scene from a movie.”

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“It is. A beautiful movie. One I’d watch over and over again.” Tears fill my eyes again, but not out of sorrow.

Gigi lifts her shoulder. “She didn’t like it and believed I left out the bad parts to make it sound more magical. What she never realized is that to me it was magical. But people see what they want. I can’t pretend to know how she suffered before me or even after me. I did my best, and I’m not one to sugarcoat that story. My best wasn’t great.”

I reach over and grab her hand, squeezing her fingers. “If it helps, you’ve been an amazing grandmother.”

The endearing smile she gives me has me choking back more tears. “I’d learned a great deal by then and promised myself not to repeat the mistakes I made with your mother. I was in a different place in my life and career by then, too, and was able to give you everything I didn’t get to give her.”

“She didn’t turn out bad,” I assure Gigi. “I think she’s happy, too.” As happy as she can be.

Gigi nods but her smile no longer reaches her eyes. “The world is a mysterious place. Had I not got stuck in a flood, I wouldn’t have adopted your mother, and you wouldn’t be sitting here with me today. We can’t foresee where life will take us, but we can make sure not to miss opportunities that sing to our hearts.”

“Sing?”

“Some people believe our hearts share a song with those who are meant to be in our lives—a melody that can’t be heard with human ears, but that can be felt if we pay attention.”

“Like intuition?”

“Exactly.” She gets her green juice from the table and takes a sip. “There is so much we don’t know about our bodies, the mind, our spirits and how we connect to people and nature. Some simply don’t believe in any of it. I feel sorry for those people because they’re missing out. Hope, faith, destiny—they’re all the same.”

“I think my heart and Riley’s share a song. I don’t know why or how—I just believe it in here.” I touch my chest. “Even if it’s far-fetched, it’s there, undeniable, and I can’t ignore it. I don’t want to.”

Gigi’s phone chimes with a text.

She reads the screen, and her brows squeeze together with obvious confusion.

“What is it?” I turn to her.

She raises a finger and responds to the text.

“Gigi? Tell me?” I plant my feet on the ground, about to snatch the phone from her hand. My heart hammers my ribs. “Is it Riley?” He’s always my first concern.

Her phone chimes again. “I don’t believe it.” Her mouth hangs open now with shock or that same confusion, only worse.

“What?” I beg.



“He’s here.” She stands and stares at the main house in the distance.

I mimic her. “Who?”

“Riley.”

I must have heard her wrong. Or she said the wrong name. He can’t be here. I take the phone from Gigi’s hand, as she continues to gape at the estate as if frozen with disbelief.

The text is from Mr. Glenn. He’s been staying here ever since the Marina letter. It also says Riley is at the gate.

“He’s here,” I murmur, certain my expression mirrors Gigi’s...because why? How?

Gigi snaps out of it first. She takes back her phone and grabs my hand, dragging me forward. “Well, let’s greet him.”

I stumble behind, still unsure whether I believe he’s here. He said he’d never return. He’s in hiding. Here is dangerous. We’re halfway to the house when my voice returns. “Do you really think it’s him?”

“Who else could it be?”

“But here isn’t safe. Why would he come here?” We follow the winding stone path toward the house, getting closer.

“I suspect you are the reason.”

My heart continues to race, and my stomach joins in, filled with a mix of trepidation, anger, and elation. I’ve dreamed of seeing him again, wished it with all my heart...

We enter through the open doors at the back of the estate. The house is quiet until shoes sound from the hallway that leads toward the kitchen. A big man appears first.

Gigi nods at Mr. Glenn. I hold my breath.

Mr. Glenn steps to the side and there Riley stands, in the flesh, looking more beautiful than I remember—minus the stress straining from his gaze as he takes in Gigi and me.

My breathing echoes in my ears, or maybe it's echoing off the floor in the massive room. Riley's eyes lock with mine, and I can't stop my feet from racing toward him. A second later, I'm throwing my arms around his neck and kissing him on the lips. Lips I wondered if I'd ever feel again.

28

Riley

“Let’s give them a minute,” I hear Gigi say.

Mr. Glenn retreats and then it’s just me and Nova. Man, I forgot what it feels like to have her warm, soft curves against me. My memory did this little justice.

I had a speech planned—a greeting for Gigi. Yet here I am, lip-locked with Nova, unable and unwilling to release her.

After a few more desperate kisses, I force my hands to her waist and push her back a little. A quick scan of the room tells me we’re alone.

“Sorry.” Nova’s cheeks flush the prettiest pink. She lowers her head and then glances behind her to where Gigi stood when I first arrived, but she’s no longer there. Neither is Mr. Glenn.

“They left,” I say.

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “I didn’t mean to jump you. I don’t know what came over me. You didn’t even get to say a word before I pounced like some feral animal.” Her gaze lifts to mine. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t stay where I was. Not while Marina is sniffing around. I felt helpless being so far away.”

“Oh.” She frowns and steps back.

“What’s wrong?” Why did she move away?

“That’s not safe. You should have stayed in hiding.”

“It’s not safe for you and Gigi here, either. If it weren’t for me, Marina wouldn’t be lurking around and sending letters. I was going crazy with worry.”

“We’re fine, as you can see.” She raises her palm and lets her hand fall back to her side.

That’s when I notice a slight difference in her appearance. She looks... I can’t put my finger on it. A bit toned? Taller? Her shoulders aren’t curled in like they always were before. Well, they weren’t a moment ago, anyway. Now, she’s slumped.

“Did something else happen since the Marina letter?”

“No. Nothing new other than you showing up.” She takes another step back and angles her body away.

What the hell? Maybe she didn’t want me to return. Maybe she was happy to see me go. Relieved.

“Are you planning to stay?” she asks without meeting my gaze.

“If Gigi is okay with it.”

She nods. “I took over your room. It was easier to care for the kittens.”

“Speaking of kittens.” I lighten my tone, attempting to cheer up her mood. “I brought

a friend. She misses her sister and brother.”

“Itty-bitty?” Nova presses her hands together, and her eyes finally find mine, the beautiful color aglow with excitement.

I’m beyond confused. She looked at me that way when I walked in, right before she rushed over to embrace me. Then, her demeanor shifted, and she put actual distance between us.

“Where is she?”

“In the kitchen, I guess. Aaron helped bring in my stuff.”

She darts past me to the kitchen.

I follow, eager to talk to Gigi about staying, but I don’t want to leave Nova until I sort out what’s going on with her sudden indifference.

In the kitchen, near the breakfast table, Inez and Gigi are talking to Mr. Glenn.

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They spot Nova and me, and Mr. Glenn excuses himself.

“Are you hungry, Riley? Can I make you something to eat?” Inez asks.

“I’m good, thank you.”

Gigi says, “Aaron took your things to your room. I assume you’re here to stay.” No judgment or disagreement sounds in her tone.

“Uh, yes. Thank you. But I don’t have to stay if you’re not comfortable with it. We haven’t had a chance to discuss it yet.”

Gigi waves a hand as she walks over and greets me with an open-armed hug. “You are always welcome here.”

I hug her back, then hold her keen gaze as we part. “Are you sure you feel okay about this? I can make other arrangements. It’s not a problem.”

“Nonsense. We’re all fine and safe, and it’s less worry having you here—for both of us.” She eyes Nova, who smiles but it seems forced.

“I need to take care of some things,” Gigi says. “Please make yourself at home. You two should catch up. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.” She touches Nova’s arm on her way out of the kitchen.

“What room am I in?” I ask before Gigi leaves.

“The Caribbean suite. Of course.” She smiles approvingly at me and Nova before disappearing around the corner.

Based on Nova’s expression, she seems unsure.

“I can stay somewhere else, if you’d prefer?” I offer, even though I don’t mean it.

“Or I can.”

What is going on with her?

“I want you to stay in the Caribbean suite.” I make it clear. With me, I want to add, but I don’t. I pushed Sera to see, do, and want what I wanted. I don’t want to make that same mistake again, certainly not with the woman I want to be with forever. And I want to be with Nova and love her forever. I’m not sure she wants to be with me indefinitely—or at all, given how she’s acting.

“We should check on the kittens,” I suggest, to get her away and in a private space. Maybe that will help with how she’s feeling.

She nods and heads for the doors that lead to the backyard.

I catch up to her and walk by her side in silence. How did things become so awkward between us? “What have you been up to since I left?” I ask, just to make small talk.

“Designing. I’m creating my own collection.”

“Really? That’s great. I’m happy for you.” I truly am but my shoulders sag as my heart shrivels. Her own collection means the public eye and fame. I figured mountain life wasn’t for her, but I’d toyed with the idea of staying here and trying to make it work. Now, I realize us having a future is as hopeless as it was before I left, and

that's a painful truth to swallow. Perhaps that's why she's being indifferent. When I first arrived, her emotions got the better of her; then she remembered our situation and doesn't want to get caught up in anything romantic with me.

"Thanks." Sincerity and a hint of surprise sound in her tone. She treats me to a glance for a brief moment before focusing on the stone path.

My phone rings. I take it from my pocket. The caller is unknown—no surprise there. I don't answer.

"Shouldn't you get that?"

"It can wait."

She releases an emotion-filled sigh.

"What's wrong, Nova? You can tell me anything."

"It's confusing having you back."

I nod. "Yeah. Are you worried about my staying here—for your safety, I mean?"

"No," she blurts, to my relief. "Not at all. But I am concerned for you. This isn't part of your plan...or, it wasn't."



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“No. It wasn’t.”

We exit the path onto the pool deck. Sun glints off the blue water as we walk toward my old retreat. When we enter the pool house, meows from the kittens echo off the walls.

Nova races toward them and stares down into the playpen. “I thought they were crying, but I think they’re happy.”

She opens the playpen, freeing the furballs, and scoops up Itty-bitty, carrying her over to the rug. “Hi, pretty baby. I missed you.”

The groggy cat flops onto her side and lets Nova pet her belly.

“I shouldn’t have taken her away.” I sit next to Nova, the familiarity both happy and sad. Happy because it’s us and sad because it’s also not us—not anymore. Everything is different.

“Did you not like having her with you?” She doesn’t look at me but keeps her attention on the kittens, who sniff and paw one another, getting reacquainted.

“I loved having her with me. She reminded me of everything I loved when I was here. But she was lonely and missed her sister and brother. It wasn’t fair to her.”

“But then you would have been alone.”

I shrug and pet Poppy when she walks over and sniffs my pants. “I’m used to being

alone. I can deal.”

“Doesn’t mean you should have to.”

“Are you mad at me, Nova?” I can’t take this awkwardness between us anymore.

Her eyes snap to mine. “No. Not at all. Are you mad at me?”

“Not at all,” I echo her. “Then what’s wrong? Your greeting was...incredible, then something shifted and I’m not sure if you want me around.”

She stares at me for a long moment, thoughts clouding her eyes.

“Just say it. You won’t hurt me.”

She frowns. “I don’t want to hurt you. I would never hurt you. I...” Her lips press together, and she visibly swallows.

“Nova?” I brush the backs of my fingers against her soft cheek.

She sighs, and her eyes close as she leans into my touch. This is the reaction I hoped for.

“Come here.” Before she goes distant again. I set Poppy with Itty-bitty and Vizzini and drag Nova onto my lap.

She comes willingly and nestles her face into the crook of my neck.

“I’ve missed this,” I breathe.

“I’ve missed it, too. So much.”

I stroke her hair. “Are you worried I’ll leave again?”

“Won’t you? You’re only here because of Marina and our protection.”

“I’m here for you, to protect you and Gigi.”

“We have Mr. Glenn and the best security. Besides, Marina hasn’t done anything, not since the letter. If you came back out of guilt or something, you don’t have to worry. We’re safe. You should be more concerned about yourself.”

“I’m not here out of guilt.”

“Then why?” She leans her head away and meets my gaze.

Tell her? Don’t tell her? I don’t want to scare her away.

“Riley, please?”

“I couldn’t be apart from you. Not anymore. It was killing me. I want to protect you. I want to be by your side.” I cup her hair and the back of her neck and pull her lips close. “I love you, Nova. And I’m terrified that I can’t have you.”

She exhales and then crushes her lips to mine in a sensual kiss. It’s urgent, desperate, hot, wet, sloppy, and everything I could have imagined.

“You can have me however you want me,” she murmurs against my lips and returns her tongue to my mouth for more of that kiss.

There’s more I want to say and ask. Answers, requests, so much more—but they can wait. With her in my arms, I want to cherish this moment. I want to cherish her in the way she deserves.

29

Nova

“We should put the kittens in the playpen,” Riley mumbles between kisses.

“Okay,” I whisper mindlessly, too lost in Riley’s taste and tongue to put meaning to his words.

He pulls away.

I tense. “Where are you going?”

He takes in my expression and laughs. “To put the kittens away, like I said. I’m taking you to the bedroom and don’t want them to get into trouble while we’re busy. And we’re going to be busy for a while.”

My core clenches. Without a word, I grab Poppy and put her in the playpen, securing her inside, while Riley does the same with Vizzini and Itty-bitty.

Once the kittens are good to go, I throw myself at Riley. He catches me and holds my weight easily. Tongues swirling in the best way, he carries me into the bedroom and kicks the door closed behind us.

I laugh but quickly sober the moment he sets me on the bed and removes his shirt. What a vision. I want that tan skin, toned chest, tight abs, and strong arms all over me.

I grip the waist of his jeans.

He leans away and smirks. “I want you naked first. I need to see what I’ve been missing.”

My underwear is instantly soaked. With Riley’s help, I tear off my shirt and bra and undo the button to my jean shorts, letting him slide them down my thighs, along with my underwear. I’ve never worn so many layers around him before and have never been so desperate to be stripped.

As soon as I’m naked, I reach for the button to his jeans.

“Uh-uh.” He bends to kiss my lips and eases me onto the bed, his warm, strong body covering mine, but the moment is brief. He kisses a trail down my body, taking time to lick and pinch my nipples before his mouth slides lower and his hands cup the back of my knees. “Plant your feet on the edge of the mattress,” he murmurs into my belly button, his navy eyes hot on mine.

I do as he commands, my insides screaming with anticipation. In the next moment, he’s on the floor on his knees, his head positioned between my spread thighs. “I’ve missed you. I’ve missed this.” He blows onto my core.

I draw in a breath and force myself to be still as his mouth descends onto my clit, teasing and torturing me until I’m out of breath and coming on his talented tongue.

When I open my eyes, Riley’s face is aglow with desire—endless desire, it seems, for me alone.

“I love you,” I whisper and reach for him.

He rises to his feet. The button and zipper of his jeans are already undone. How?

When?

He slides them down and, gloriously naked, climbs onto the bed.

I push him down and straddle him. “Your turn.” I kiss his neck and chest, but he stops me.

“I need you, Nova. I need to be inside you. Let me.”

Let me? Mr. Alpha in the bed is asking me to let him have sex with me? If my heart weren't pounding rapidly in my chest, I'd believe I were dead for sure because no guy can be this perfect.

I return my lips to his for a passionate kiss, then I sit up and grip the base of his hard penis, guiding it to the entrance of my core. It's bright in the room, even with the sheers over the windows closed, but I'm not insecure about my body—maybe for the first time in my life. The way Riley's gaze devours me says I have nothing to be ashamed about. He loves my body how it is, and I've come to appreciate my curves, especially when the desire in his eyes practically penetrates my skin. There are his roaming hands, too, and how he can't keep them off me, even for a second.

With him watching, I slowly lower onto his hard length. It's a tight fit but it feels amazing.

I'm only halfway down, when he grips my hips and utters, “You are a goddess, created just for me.” He helps ease me down the rest of the way and moans when his penis hits my cervix.

I let my head fall back and ride him at an even pace, gradually moving faster, as his hands continue to grip my flesh at the hips. Soon, my core is tightening, readying for another mind-blowing orgasm.

“Not yet.” Riley sits up with a wicked grin and slows the tempo. He kisses me, as if savoring the moment, and lowers to my breasts.

I lean back as he holds me by the waist and sucks on my nipples, drawing me close to that orgasm again.

“Riley, please. I need to come.”

He chuckles against my neck. “And I need more of you.”

He lifts me off him. “Face down, ass up, baby. I want to see you from behind.”

As if he were a sergeant, I jump to attention and do as he says, my core clenching so hard I’m surprised I didn’t come from his words.

On all fours, I wait to see what Riley will do.

He runs his hands from my shoulders down my spine and massages my backside. “I love this ass. This is the perfect view. Your curves will be the death of me.”

“Riley,” I bark, panting. “I need you inside me. Now.”

“Baby, I’ll give you all of me until you’ve had enough,” he whispers in my ear, his hands on the bed, arms caging me in, his chest touching my back.

Supporting himself on one arm now, he rubs the head of his erection against my core and then he fills me from behind, until he’s all the way in.

I moan and thrust against him when he touches my clit, playing with me until my only thoughts are of how good he feels and how badly my body wants release.

His warmth leaves my back as he rises onto his knees and grips my hips the way he loves to do as he thrusts harder and deeper inside me.



“Oh God,” I chant, never having called out this much before. “Riley. I’m going to…”

He pulls out and tosses me onto my back before I can make sense of what happened.

My mind spins, my heart hammers my ribs, sweat coats my skin, I can barely breathe—in a good way—and my body is dying for the orgasm he keeps denying me.

“I’m sorry.” He kisses my lips, panting. “I can’t get enough of you. Your body. Your everything. It will never be enough.”

Melting, I force my eyes open. “I’m so frustrated with you right now, but I love you and what you do to my body, too. Now, please—please—get back inside me and finish what you started.”

He chuckles, kisses me, then asks, “How’s the sugar?”

I have glucose tablets on the nightstand. I run my hand down his roped abs and reach for his hard-as-steel erection.

“Need one?”

When we’re done. For sure. For now… I clutch his penis. “I need this.”

He teases my entrance, and then pushes inside me until we’re one again. He sets the rhythm but soon, I’m matching his thrusts. His hands and lips are everywhere, devouring every area he can reach, and I love it. I love him so much.

“Riley,” I pant. “I’m so close.”

He cups under my knees and lifts my legs, thrusting deeper than he’s ever gone. I’m pinned to the bed, helpless to do anything but take what he’s giving.

A moment later, I'm rewarded with the best, most fierce orgasm I've experienced in my life! It goes on forever, it seems. I see stars and might black out because I don't remember Riley finishing or collapsing on top of me, but he is.

"Are you okay?" I stroke the damp hair at the back of his neck. He's heavy, but I don't care.

He lifts his head, his navy eyes content as he stares down at me. "That was incredible. I'm beyond okay. But what about you?" He rubs the tip of his nose against mine, the action so sweet and gentle compared to the sex we just had. "What can I get you? Water? Glucose tablet? Juice? Food?"

"You'd go get me food?"

"I'll get you whatever you want and whatever you need."

I might as well dig my heart from my chest and hand it over because it belongs to him now more than it does to me. "A glucose tablet might be a good idea."

My weakened muscles could be a sign my sugar has dropped, but it could also be from the exertion I just put out. Holy crap. I didn't know sex could be like that.

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Riley pushes up on his forearm and reaches for the glucose tablets on the nightstand, grabbing the bottle. The whole time, his lower half stays connected with mine, like he's not ready to separate.

“One or two?” he asks.

I smile, not pointing out how we're still connected—like he doesn't know—and unscrew the lid while he holds the bottle. “I'll take two to be safe.”

He empties the amount requested onto the bedding.

I snatch them and stuff them both in my mouth, struggling to keep my lips closed as I chew the large, orange-flavored tablets.

“You look good with your mouth full.” Riley flashes that sexy smirk, desire shining in his eyes again.

“Oh, no.” I shake my head. “I'll need a meal for sure before we can do that again.”

Too late. He's already growing hard inside me.

“I'll have to make it quick then.”

I could argue, except I don't want to. I had two glucose tablets. I doubt I'll pass out, but even if I do, I'm not sure I'll mind. I also don't think Riley would ever let that happen. He'd stop, mid-thrust, to get me orange juice and food if needed, I have no doubt.

With that in mind, and my body returning to life, especially my desire, I smile and lift my head to kiss his lips. “What’s mine is yours.”

The sex starts off gentle but escalates quickly into a wild fuck that I absolutely love. I orgasm after five minutes, and Riley follows right after.

“So you can come quickly?” Humor fills my voice, even as I struggle to catch my breath.

“I can do anything you want,” Riley murmurs into my shoulder.

I smack his bare ass.

“But you like when I draw out the sex, too. Admit it. No, wait, you don’t have to. Your body says it loud and clear.”

I smack his butt again and giggle.

“Are you trying to turn me on for another round?”

I laugh hard and feel my core clutch around his length, which is still inside me. “I will definitely need to eat first.”

“And this is when I wish we could order a pizza to be delivered to the door.”

I imagine what that would be like, us living in our own place. “Would you sneak out after it was delivered and get it naked?”

“Why would I sneak? I’m a feast for the eyes.”

I crack up but smack his shoulder, playfully. “You’re a feast for my eyes only.”

“Likewise.” He gives me a tender kiss, and I forget about the world outside our Caribbean suite bubble for a little while longer.

30

Riley

Meows sound from the other room.

Nova glances at the closed door. “Why are they crying? Do you think they’re hungry?”

“They probably heard us and want attention.”

Her gaze stays fixed on the door. “We should check on them.”

She tries to sit up, but can’t with me on top of her, inside her still, ready to go. An earthquake could hit and I wouldn’t separate from her, but she won’t be able to focus on anything until the kittens calm down.

I force myself to ease out of her body and sit up. “I’ll go check on them. You stay right here. Don’t move. I’m not done with you.” I kiss her and slip on my underwear before exiting the room.

The water bowl got knocked over somehow. A stream of it leads to the blankets. The kittens’ paws look wet, too.

“Uh-oh. What happened?” I get a dish towel from the kitchen and wipe up the spilled water. I wipe the kittens’ paws, too, and only fill the bowl with a little water before putting it back in the playpen. One of the blankets didn’t get wet. I remove the other

two and give them each a treat. That should buy me some more alone time with Nova.

I fill a glass with orange juice, then return to the bedroom.

Nova lays with her head on the pillow, her hair tousled around her, the sheet pulled over her glorious body.

I pause at the sight of her, caught by her beauty. “You covered yourself up.”

“I was naked.”

“I know. That’s why I told you not to move.” I wink and hand her the glass. “Thought you might need this.”

“Omigosh. Thank you.” She takes the glass, gulps the drink, and moans. “Orange juice is good.”

“Not as good as you.” I set the glass on the nightstand and slip under the sheets, covering her body with mine. I’m hard as granite.

“Wow.” She gives me a sexy grin. “You weren’t kidding about not being done.”

“Hell no. I finally have you in my bed.”

“My bed.” She nips at my shoulder. “But you’ve had me here before.”

“Not like this. Before, I was leaving.”

“And now?”

Instead of answering, I kiss her, avoiding a topic she might not be ready for. I still don't know how I'm going to pull off staying with her—if she's willing to be with me and try to make things work long-term. And what that would look like for us regarding my need to hide from the spotlight and remain a secret part of her life that the public couldn't know about.

My phone rings again, giving me pause.

I force myself away from Nova. No one calls me this much in such a short amount of time. "I should get that." I stand and dig my phone out of my jeans pocket.

Like always, I answer without speaking.

"Hunting," a familiar voice says.

"Yes?" I wasn't expecting to hear from Agent Keller unless he had news on Marina.

"We have her."

"Who?" He couldn't possibly mean Marina.



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“Ms. Morello wants to speak with you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This needs to be explained in person. Mr. Glenn is being debriefed as we speak. He’ll be given instructions for where to take you.”

“What? When?”

“Now.”

“Now?”

“Trust me. You want to hear this, and she’s made speaking with you a requirement for her cooperation. We won’t let anything happen.”

“I understand,” I say, even though my brain couldn’t be more confused. I lower the phone from my ear, my thoughts in a state of shock.

“What is it?” Nova touches my hand and entwines our fingers. “You look stunned.”

I blink and focus on her. Wrapped in a sheet, she stands before me, concern painting her features.

“I have to go.”

“Go?” Her voice is hoarse as terror fills her eyes.

“Just for a little bit.” I think. Hope. “That was Agent Keller. They have Marina.”

“How?” She squeezes my hand tighter.

“I don’t know. She wants to see me.”

“Why? Is it safe?”

“The Feds have her. It’s more than safe. I just don’t know why she wants to see me.” I kiss her forehead and force myself to appear calm. “It’ll be okay. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Her grip on my hand doesn’t lessen. “Can I come?”

I love that she wants to be with me. It’s a good sign. “You need to stay here, preferably like this, in that bed”—I nod to it—“looking like the goddess you are, so I can finish what we were about to start.”

Desire flashes in her eyes, but it fades quickly. “I’m worried.”

“Don’t be.” I cup her cheeks, forcing her to release my hand, and kiss her delicious lips. “I’ll be fine.”

She nods but her posture remains stiff and unsure.

“I’ll be back.” I head to the bathroom to clean up quickly before redressing. As soon as I leave the bedroom, Mr. Glenn appears at the doors of the pool house, his hand raised, about to knock. I greet him.

“You spoke with Agent Keller?”

I nod.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

I follow him across the pool deck toward the main house and to an uncertain encounter with the deranged Mafia princess who’s haunted me for a year now.

31

Nova

Stay in the bed?

That was two hours ago.

“Where is he?” I glance at Gigi, who sits on the couch in the pool house.

“I don’t know. I don’t believe we’re meant to know this information, but I trust Mr. Glenn and Riley trusts Agent Keller. We have no reason to fear.”

I pet Vizzini, as he sleeps on my lap, from where I sit on the rug near the couch. Poppy licks her fur, giving herself a bath, and Itty-bitty lies near her, pawing Poppy’s head every time it comes within reach. “What if he doesn’t come back?”

“He’s coming back. Mr. Glenn was clear about that.”

I stare up at her face; no worry shows in her eyes. “You asked him?”

She nods. “He’s coming back. Of that, I am certain.”

But will he be staying? I don’t ask that out loud. Gigi knows how much Riley means to me. He loves me, but is that enough to keep him around? When he makes up his mind, he seems to stick with the plan. I imagine he has one now. He’s not the kind of person not to; I just don’t know whether it includes a future with me.

I'm not what he wants in life—a public-eye figure. Not that I'm famous by merit, but I might be if my collection takes off.

“What's on your mind, dear?” Gigi tucks her bare feet up onto the cushion.

“I think I want to keep Riley,” I murmur to my lap where Vizzini purrs.

“I figured as much. Have you two had a chance to talk about that?”

“Not really.” I stroke the soft fur between Vizzini's ears. The left one twitches. “We talked a little but then he had to leave before we could discuss anything deeper.”

“And you're scared.” She's not asking.

“I've never been scared of a relationship or a guy or love before. Why am I now? I'm more confident than I've ever been. I believe in myself. I have a plan for my future, but I know my goals and dreams are exact opposites of Riley's. He wants to live a secluded mountain life.”

“Would that be so bad if it means you get to be with the one you love?”

Vizzini stands and arches his back high before heading in the direction of the litter box. I stretch out my legs to get the blood circulation going and lean back on my hands. “It wouldn't be bad living with Riley, but I don't want to hide forever. I'm done hiding. I want to visit my friends, go to the beach without a wig, go shopping, kiss Riley in public for all the world to see and have him kiss me back without fear of being a target.”

“Is that all?” she asks in a perceptive tone.

“What else could there be?”

“For both of you to be happy and free?”

“Yes. That, too.”

“And together, in love forever?”

“For sure!”

“What about marriage? Babies? Does he want any of these things? Do you?”

“I haven’t even considered those.”

“He may have.” She plants her feet on the rug and leans forward, resting her elbows on her thighs. “Has he told you he loves you?”

I blush. “He did.”

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A knowing smile eases across her face. “Then you’ll work it out.” She sits back, confident.

“How?”

“If you want it badly enough, can’t imagine your life without him, you’ll find a way. I always did.”

I raise my brows at that.

“Yes, yes. I know what you’re thinking. I divorced everyone I’ve ever loved, and that is true. Some I still love, though. We just couldn’t work it out or we weren’t meant to. I’m in love with love, darling. I haven’t given up on it yet either. Love is mysterious and surprising.”

“Yes, it is.”

“But I’m happy being single. I don’t need a man to complete me. You don’t either, but when you find one as good as Riley, you hold on to him. I have a feeling, once you two set the record straight about your intentions, you’ll find a young man unwilling to walk away from you.”

I can’t stop a smile from forming at the thought. I try to imagine a future with him and then a future without him. My frown comes swiftly. Perhaps we can work it out. Perhaps there is hope. I love him more than I ever thought possible. I admire him. I’m insanely attracted to him, and I feel respected by him, which is new to me, and wonderful. Riley would be an incredible father, based on how loving he is toward our

kittens. I'd never imagined that path for me but only because I couldn't imagine any of the guys I dated being fathers. They sucked. With Riley, I could have more than I dreamed of for myself.

Cold fear slithers down my spine at the thought of losing him. It's also something I've never experienced. I check the time on my phone, which is beside me on the rug. Three hours have passed.

"He'll be back." Gigi stands, and I wonder if she can read minds. "Let's walk to the main house and make our own food. Inez will have a fit."

I laugh. "That is like declaring mutiny." My hands grow clammy at the thought.

"I've always been a bit of a rebel." She winks.

"Yes, you have." And I love her for it. Couldn't imagine the kind of grandmother who bakes cookies or knits. Do grandmas who knit exist these days?

I secure the kittens in the playpen and head to the room to get my sneakers from the closet. Gigi left her shoes by the door and is waiting there for me.

"Nova, dear?" she shouts from the other room. "I'll meet up with you later."

What is she talking about? I tie my laces in a hurry and race back to Gigi, only she's gone and in her place stands Riley.

Like before when he arrived this morning, I charge him. He smirks and opens his arms wide to catch me. I leap and strangle his neck as I pepper kisses across his cheeks, chin, and stubbly jawline.

He chuckles. "I missed you, too."



“Don’t say you’re leaving,” I murmur between kisses to his warm lips. I feel them curve with a smile.

“I’m not leaving. Ever.”

My breath catches. “Ever?” Please let this be real and not a dream.

“I’m yours, baby, for as long as you’ll have me.” He kisses my neck.

“And if I said forever?” I tilt my head back, giving him more access while my fingers dig into his hair, my legs wrapped tightly around his waist. He’s hard already.

“I’d say move me in for good.”

I lift my head, dazed and horny as hell. “Are you serious?”

He kisses my lips. “One hundred percent.”

“Where would we live?”

He kisses under my ear. “Wherever you want.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

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“What did I miss? Is Marina in jail or something?” My desire cools at the sound of her name.

“Do you want to talk about it now or after?”

“After what?” I hold his navy gaze, which seems to be glowing in a way it never has before.

“I make sweet love to you—three or four times.”

I laugh, then try but fail to fake a serious face. “Promise?”

“I promise it all. Myself. My heart. My soul. My future. My body. It’s all yours, baby. I hope you’ll agree to be all mine.”

“I’ve been yours from before I even realized it. You captured my heart, Riley, and I don’t want it back. It belongs to you.”

His nostrils flare and emotions burn in his eyes as he inhales a shaky breath. “You know what else is mine?” He carries me toward the bedroom. The kittens meow, as if noticing him. “Later, kids. Mommy and Daddy need some private time.”

I giggle, even though his words have me hot and bothered in the best way.

He lowers me onto the bed, the kittens meowing in the background, and then pauses. “Don’t move. Not an inch.”

He darts from the room before I can form a coherent thought and returns just as quickly.

“What’d you do?”

The sexy smirk I love appears.

“They were crying. I had to give them a quick pet.”

“Omigod. I love you so much more for that and I am so wet, it’s not even funny.”

“Now that I want to see.” He drags down my jean shorts and panties, sniffs the lace fabric, and then spreads my legs as he lowers himself between my thighs.

I want to squeal with anticipation because Riley is so good at this. A master. He could win an Olympic gold medal. Maybe I’ll have one made for him, as a joke.

All humor leaves me the moment his tongue licks my core. He knows I’m a buckner and has one hand over my pelvis, pinning me to the mattress. I bet my moan can be heard by the neighbors a good distance away.

“I love this. I love you.” I work my hips as much as I can beneath the weight of his hand pressing me to the mattress. After some more licking, sucking, and finger play, I’m gone, soaring among the clouds, shouting Riley’s name as I come undone.

“Your turn,” I say once I return to earth.

He laughs, deep and sexy. “Not even close.”

I lose track of how many times I orgasm. Three? Four? My legs feel like jelly and I’m certain I passed out at one point. “Seriously, how did I get so lucky?” I roll onto my

side and face him.

He mirrors my position, his eyelids heavy and his expression sated.

“You can’t doze off. I need to know what happened and why you get to stay now. What changed?”

“Five minutes and I’ll tell you.” His eyes close.

I nudge him, and his lips part with a hot-as-fuck grin. “Riley, please. I waited like a good girl.”

His eyes spring open and he laughs. “Waited? Hardly. You even took a nap.”

“I did not.” Did I?

“I fed the kittens and brought you water.” He points to the nightstand behind me.

Sure enough, a glass of water and my glucose tablets rest on the surface.

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“I love you,” I blurt, kiss him, then down some water and pop two glucose tablets to be safe. Based on the amount of sweating I did, I’d guess the sex we had equals an hour of high-impact aerobics.

I’ll need to eat real food soon, considering I haven’t had more than a granola bar and green juice while he was gone. I just couldn’t bring myself to eat.

One more sip of water, then I turn to Riley and in my sweetest, sexiest voice whisper, “Please, baby. Please tell me.”

His eyes are closed again but like before, he smiles. “You keep talking like that and I’ll have my way with you again.”

I beam, surprised to feel I’m wet after everything we just did, and get myself together enough to use his words against him. “If you have the energy to fuck me again, you can tell me what happened.”

In an instant, I’m pinned beneath his hard body and equally hard cock. He grinds his hips and hardness against my core. “Do you want me to fuck that dirty mouth of yours or do you want me to fuck your pussy? Because one of the two is happening.”

Holy shit. Wetness pools between my legs, dripping toward the mattress.

He must feel it because he groans and rubs his length against me again, his eyes closing. “I swear, Nova, you’ll be the death of both of us.”

“It’s not a bad way to die,” I tease but refuse to give in, even though I’m about a

minute from pushing his length inside me myself. “You can’t have any more of this body until you tell me.”

“Is that what you think?” He slips a finger into me and angles it, finding my G-spot.

“Riley!” I scream his name in ecstasy, and spread my legs, desperate to have him inside me. And like that, we’re having sex again.

32

Nova

I pull my damp hair over my shoulder and finish my last bite of chicken, rice, and sweet potatoes.

To my horror, Riley asked Inez to make us a hardy dinner, filled with sugar-sustaining foods.

She has to know why. I may never show my face in the kitchen again. I get mildly embarrassed in front of Gigi, but she also has never shown restraint or judgment in any area of her life, so it's not a big deal to her. Inez has been with Gigi for so long she probably isn't fazed by much, but I can't help but feel mortified that she knows I needed a solid meal because of my sexual activity with Riley.

Of course, he isn't embarrassed. He even greeted her with a shit-eating grin at the door when it was delivered. Men. I cowered in the corner of the couch, unable to show my face from under the blanket.

"I ate. I feel fine now." The heat of the shower, a must after all we did, finished me off and sent my sugar plummeting. I felt sick and faint, and Riley blamed himself for my predicament, even after I told him I was a willing and able participant, and this could not be blamed on him. He swore never to push me like that in the future—to which I protested in my weak state that he isn't allowed to make such a promise because I loved every second of it and will want a do-over once a week at the very least for the rest of my life.

“Now, I’ll tell you.”

“Finally.” I roll my eyes, even though I secretly love the way he takes care of me.

He carries my plate to the kitchen and rinses it in the sink before putting it in the dishwasher. “Marina was engaged to a foot soldier, who works for her father.” He has to explain what that means in Mafia terms to me. “They kept it secret, knowing her father wouldn’t approve, but he found out and murdered her fiancé in front of her to prove a point.”

I gasp and cup my gaping mouth. “I thought stuff like that only happened in the movies.”

He shakes his head. “There is a dark part that is as real as any movie. I learned that from Sebastian and from when I was younger through some of my father’s shadier business ventures.”

“Your dad is—”

“No. But he’s been known to take a handout from them during campaign season in the past.”

“Oh.” I sip some of my wine.

He pets Itty-bitty on the head on his way back to the dining table. We let them roam freely while we ate.

“Anyway. Marina was furious with her father. Their relationship had always been tumultuous, especially after the Sebastian incident, but this was unforgivable in her eyes. She must have truly loved him.” He shakes his head. “Shocking for a woman who seemed incapable of love at all.”



“Why did she want to see you?” I ask.

“She wanted to make amends for what happened with Sebastian and what she did to me and Ainsley. She said she gets it now and understands love.”

“Did she seem sincere?”

He plays with the stem of his wine glass. Red for him. White for me. “She did. She wanted me to know I’m not a target to her family, either, because the information she’s giving the Feds will take him and his entire operation down.”

“Holy shit. She’s turning on her dad?”

He nods and sips more wine. “If anyone can do it, it’s her.”

“And you believed her when she said you’re not a target?”

“I’d only be a target if she wanted me gone.”

Anger churns inside me at the power she has. “I hate her.”

“I’m no fan. Trust me. She admitted I was a target for a while, just so she could toy with me. She assumed I was in witness protection and couldn’t be found, but the idea of the chase excited her and kept her going for a long time. Then she fell for Luca, and I didn’t matter anymore. She found her ‘purpose in life,’ as she called it.”

“And then her father killed him in front of her.” How can I be sad for a woman who tortured Riley in so many ways, forcing him into hiding?

“She’s getting revenge. It’s their way it seems, and she’s determined. She said the only thing better than killing her father herself is to take him and his organization

down.”

“Do you think she could kill her own father?” The loss of mine sent me into a self-deprecating, toxic relationship.

“I wouldn’t put anything past Marina.”

“Wow.” So much to digest.

\* \* \*

Riley

I give Nova a minute then put my hand over hers, where it rests near her wine glass. “It’s good news for us. I don’t have to hide anymore. I’m finally free to live without fear. Without worrying I’ll put people in danger just by being around them. I meant what I said.”

Her gaze lifts to mine, the light green and yellow color arresting.

“I want to be with you forever. Wherever. If you’re there, so am I. Here. A place around here. New York. Name it. Where you go, I go.”

Tears fill her eyes. She leaps from the chair and onto my lap like a cat.

I hold her tight, my fingers in her hair, my other arm wrapped around her waist, holding her close.

“I...” She snuffles. “I didn’t know if this would ever be possible. I hoped. Dreamed...” She lifts her head and stares into my eyes as tears stream down her cheeks. “I don’t know if I deserve you, but I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving I do.” She hugs me.

“Funny, I feel the same.” I pull back and kiss the salty tears from her cheeks. “I love you, Nova Allen.”

She giggles and kisses my lips. “What now?”

“That’s a dangerous question when you’re sitting on my lap, looking like dessert.”

Her brows go up. “You couldn’t possibly?”

“Oh, I could, so you’ll have to be more specific with your question.”

“It seems like multiple questions now.”

“Okay.” I tuck her hair behind her ear. “I’m listening.”

“I think we should live here for a while. In the pool house. It’s private enough and Gigi won’t mind. She’d love it, actually. I need to finish my collection, and she has the space here. And maybe the protection would be nice until we adjust to you not being in danger anymore.”

I smirk. “Is there a question in there?”

Her cheeks flush red; against her bronze skin, it’s stunning. I kiss the pink color and trail a finger down her throat.

She wiggles in my lap and I’m instantly hard. Like I said—the death of me.

“Eventually, I want to get a place of our own.”

“Okay.” I narrow my brows, waiting for that question.

“I was wondering if maybe we could get a place here? I love Santa Barbara, and I know you like the beach and surfing. But if you wanted, maybe we could get a second home in the mountains, like a cabin.”

Can this woman steal my heart any more? “I would love that. I know just the place, too.” Lake Tahoe and the cabin I have my eye on. “If we stay here, I can save up enough to buy the cabin and a place for us.”

“I can help with that, too. Gigi says even if my collection doesn’t get international attention, it will still be successful in the US. She has connections.” She lifts a shoulder, her mouth twisting with a sheepish grin. “I’m not above using her resources.”

“I don’t blame you.”

My approval seems to spark something in her. She takes a deep breath and treats me to a sugary-sweet smile that feels like warm maple syrup over my heart.

“Are we really doing this?” she asks.

“Nothing could stop me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:38 am*

She leans back, her hands hooked behind my neck. “You know, if we get married, Gigi will want to have it here.”

“Oh, we’re getting married. Whenever you’re ready. I should probably meet your mother first.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes to the sky. “You will and all her beauty, though don’t expect too much attention from her. She mostly saves that for herself and Gerard.”

“She can’t be all that bad. She had you, for which I am eternally grateful.”

She smiles, her gaze contemplative. “I wish you could have met my father.”

“Me, too. But you can tell me all about him.”

“Now that we have all the time in the world.”

There’s a comfort that comes with trust and knowing when someone says they want to be with you forever that they mean it.

### Epilogue

RILEY

My hand shakes as I type in Nathan's number on my phone.

I came here to sit and have privacy for this conversation. The bougainvillea are in constant bloom and offer great shade from the sun, but I'm too nervous to sit.

He knows everything. I sent him an email explaining my life for the last year.

It was easier to write it than to tell him the story over the phone. I would have left stuff out unintentionally had I told him, and I didn't want to do that. He deserves to know everything.

We exchanged a couple of emails afterward. He doesn't know my new number so he couldn't call me, or I'm sure he would have.

I did it this way to prepare myself. Guilt weighs heavily on me over how I left, and over the way Sebastian—Nathan's best friend, too—died.

But it's time. Nova said I'd sleep better if I rip off the Band-Aid and talk to him.

So that's what I'm doing.

I press the Call button and tense at the sound of ringing.

Don't pick up. Pick up. I'm not sure what I want.

Maybe he'll think it's a spam call and not answer.

"Hello?"

His familiar voice has me freezing in place.

"Hey, man. It's—"

"Riley," he says before I can. "How are you, man?"

No anger. That's good. "I'm great. Really great. How about you? Congrats on the engagement, by the way."

"Thanks. I'm still in shock sometimes over how much my life has changed in the last year, but if it's what I had to go through to get me here with Kensington, then it was worth it."

"I know exactly what you mean."

We talk for an hour, and I can't believe how easy it is to pick up where we left off. Nathan isn't the same person he was when I left. I'm not, either. We've grown up and have soul mates, as Nova likes to call us.

Souls that have a past and seek each other out in every life after.

It's not my particular way of thinking, being raised Catholic, but it's very her and Gigi, who I'm sure inspired this mindset in Nova.

A smile tugs at my lips. I can't think about Nova and not smile these days.



She's the bright light in my life. Soon to be a self-made famous fashion designer. I'm so proud of her.

She insisted I invite Nathan and Kensington to Gigi's estate.

We're looking for our own place around Santa Barbara, but the prices are sky-high. Depending on how well Nova's fashion line does, I might have to push off buying a place in the mountains until I can save more money. That dream still lives in me but for enjoyment now, not as a place to hide permanently.

Those days are behind me. I never imagined it would be possible. I had resolved myself to a life alone, always looking over my shoulder, paranoid of being discovered.

Sometimes I have to remind myself that I'm no longer a target and don't have to hide. Nova helps. Gigi does, too.

My gaze catches on a person moving across the lawn.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:39 am*

Nova paces along the edge of the pathway.

She's worried about me.

Again, I smile. And my heart feels light but also filled with so much love, it seems unreal. This kind of love doesn't exist or isn't meant for me. But it is.

I inhale a deep breath, my muscles relaxing as I do, and walk to Nova.

She glimpses me when I'm halfway to her.

"Did you talk to him?"

I nod.

"And?"

"And we're good. He's even cool with coming to visit in a month."

Her face lights up in the best, most beautiful way. She sprints for me and leaps into my open arms. Her lips rain kisses on my cheeks and jawline as I spin her around in the air.

"I'm really happy it worked out. I was so nervous for you," she says after I stop twirling and steady myself, while keeping her secured in my arms.

"I know." I kiss her lips and rest my forehead against hers. "You brought me out of

the shadows and into the light. You're my good luck charm."

"Aw." She melts against my body and hugs her arms around my neck, kissing me passionately. "You're my good luck charm, too. I wouldn't be as confident in myself if it weren't for you."

"I think you always had it in you. You were just hanging around the wrong people."

"True." She stares into my eyes with so much love, my chest aches. "Are you ready for tonight?"

I nod.

"Are you sure?"

"Are you?"

Tonight is her fashion line pre-launch party, a teaser to get everyone excited for the real show next month. Gigi offered her the estate for the show, but Nova wanted a public venue. She's tired of hiding, too. In a way, it's a coming-out party for both of us. Coming out of our shells and reclaiming our lives without fear.

"I'll have you by my side," she murmurs across my lips.

"And Gigi."

"And the protection she insisted on for the event. Never leaves home without it."

I chuckle. "Nope." Gigi will always be paranoid and famous. Nova, too—she just doesn't realize how famous she is or always has been by association. She believes this fashion line will finally make her and her name recognizable. I love how unaware she is. If she weren't, the fame might have gone to her head. I love her mindset the

way it is. I love everything about her.

“I suppose we should start getting ready.” I kiss her, refusing to loosen my hold on her by even an inch. “A shower together, followed by a thorough towel drying of your incredible body, and—”

“And it sounds like we’ll be late.” She playfully bites my bottom lip.

“Fashionably late. Isn’t that a thing?”

Her eyes widen. “I can’t be late to my own show.”

“Okay. We’ll skip the towel drying part.”

She giggles, then jumps and wraps her legs around my waist. “We better hurry then.”

“That’s my girl.”

“One of them. The kittens are your girls, too.”

Nova, three kittens, my college best friend, and no more hiding—if someone told me a year ago, or even four months ago, this would be my life, I would never have believed it. The future is uncertain, that is for sure. You can’t predict it. All you can do is embrace the moments you have and the people in them and have faith that things will work out—sometimes better than you could have ever imagined.