



Judge Me Not

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: But I don't need money for frivolous things. I need it for my daughter, and time is running out.
So when Colton Ash tells me he wants an exclusive contract with me, I agree to things I never thought I would.
Until you're in my shoes, Judge Me Not.

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1

Jasmine

Children change everything in life. Or they should, but not everyone sees it that way. My husband, Troy, who I thought was my forever, didn't seem to think it was important enough to stick to our vows or even be a father.

After two years of marriage, I got pregnant. Eight months in, Troy decided he wasn't ready.

"This is more than I bargained for, and the baby isn't even here. My career is finally taking off. I can't be held down."

The air in the room suddenly felt as if it were suffocating me. My gut twisted as I stared at him, speechless, while he continued throwing clothes into boxes. I had just gotten home from the second job I had taken so we could have money to help further his musical career. His band always needed funds to produce their next album, or buy new costumes or instruments. And I was the stupid girl who worked her butt off to supply it so my husband could fulfill his dream.

God, I was stupid.

"Wh-what are you saying? I'm eight months pregnant. We're having a girl," I barely got out.

We're having a girl. As if that statement would make him want to stay and be the

husband and father I thought he would be.

He dropped his socks in the box and sighed. His green eyes met mine. "I still love you. If you get an abortion, then we can keep things as they are."

I gaped at him. Hurt beyond belief, I also got pissed. I found my voice again. "You don't get an abortion at eight months! And we've already picked out a name. It's Abby, remember?"

He sighed again and ran his tattooed hand through his long, black locks. The tattoo was a heart, shaded perfectly, with a J through it to represent my name, Jasmine. I loved that tattoo and everything else about his overall bad-boy-rocker looks.

My mother warned me about him. I never knew my father, and from the moment I met Troy, my mother told me to stay away from him. She claimed boys like Troy were selfish, unable to love, and no good. But I didn't listen. She died a few years before we married. When Troy loaded up his car with his boxes and kissed me on the forehead, I'm sure she was rolling over in her grave.

I haven't seen him since that day. I don't know where he plays or resides. I've never gotten a dime of child support from him. The divorce papers he left on the table, wet with his signature, I didn't sign or file for several years.

When Abby was born, my cousin, Cee Cee, was there. She's all I have. Both of our mothers have passed. They were sisters, and neither of us has ever known our fathers. So maybe it's karma my baby girl doesn't know her daddy. Perhaps it's a family curse that won't allow the women in our family to have a happily ever after. Whatever it is, I can't dwell on it.

Abby is now six. I don't work two jobs anymore. I work three. But I'm not in your typical single mother situation. I don't work three jobs to only feed, clothe, and

shelter her. I'm not doing it to put Christmas presents under the tree. Hell, I don't even know if we'll be able to afford a tree.

I only started working three jobs to pay for her medical treatment.

I'm fighting for my child's life.

"There is a new treatment available. It just got approved last week. Ninety-six percent of the patients who receive it become cancer-free. There have been ten years of trials, and not one patient's cancer has returned. And they were all children similar to Abby's age and medical situation," Dr. Plax informs us.

I grab Cee Cee's forearm, and tears fall. My baby has already been through so much. Multiple treatments have failed over the last few years. We were told the remaining options weren't promising and would only extend her life for a few months, a year at the most. They came with lots of long-term side effects, and there still wasn't a high survival rate. I was trying to decide if we would even go through with it when the doctor's office called to meet.

Cee Cee clutches her hand over mine. "And Abby is a candidate?"

Dr. Plax nods. "She's a perfect candidate right now. If her health falters, she may not be."

"When can we start?"

"The hospital is scheduling the first round of treatments in the first week of January."

"They can't do it sooner?"

"No. The board only approved it last night. But as long as you keep Abby home and

her immune system up, I expect her not to have any issues starting the treatment."

New tears of relief fall. "Thank you, Doctor."

He hesitates.

I've seen his worried eyes enough to know something is wrong. My gut drops. "What is it?"

"This is considered a new treatment. Your insurance doesn't cover it, nor does anyone else's. I don't expect it to change anytime soon. And the hospital won't allow anyone to have it who isn't paying cash."

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The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. "How much?"

"She's going to need between ten and twelve rounds. Each round is fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand dollars," Cee Cee cries out.

My mouth hangs open. "I don't have enough for one treatment, much less the rest of them."

Dr. Plax nods. "I assumed, so I spoke with our foundation. They will cover half the cost of each treatment. They are not able to do anything more. I pushed as much as I could."

Twenty-five thousand dollars a treatment times ten.

Two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Oh my God.

I put my hand over my face, wishing I could stop the tears. I'm drowning in over a million dollars of unpaid medical bills already. Debt collectors call me all day long.

Cee Cee puts her arm around me. "Is there anything else we need to know about the treatment?"

Dr. Plax's voice is sympathetic. "No. Here is the packet of information about the

treatment."

I take a deep breath and remove my hand. "Other children need this treatment?"

"Yes."

"Is it like the other ones? If we don't do it now, we'll be on a list, and there will be no guarantee if we can get it?"

"I'm sorry, but yes. There are limited quantities of the medication available. Only eight children will receive it, and we currently have twenty-two who need it."

"When do we need to decide?" Cee Cee asks.

He points to the packet he gave Cee Cee. "The hospital requires the first five-thousand-dollar deposit to be paid by next week to secure your first treatment. The subsequent payments are listed in the folder."

Where am I going to get five-thousand dollars by next week?

There's still twenty after, and it's only for one treatment.

Everything about this meeting is cruel. It's like taking a person who has barely any hope left, telling them they can save the person who means the most to them in life, then taking that hope away.

I'm her mother. Whatever I have to do to save her life, I will do.

But what options do I even have?

Cee Cee and I shake Dr. Plax's hand and leave. I read the information in the packet on

the subway. I get to the last page and stare at the scheduled fees and dates they would be due.

"How am I going to do this?" I barely manage to say.

"We'll find a way. I'll sell my kidney if I have to."

A little laugh escapes me, but Cee Cee and I would both do it if it were an option. We're desperate to heal my baby girl. But desperation doesn't solve problems, especially when unfathomable amounts of money are surrounding them.

When we get home, we both lather ourselves in hand sanitizer before we go inside the house. Cee Cee and her teenage daughter, Maribel, moved in with me so we had more funds for Abby's treatment. Maribel is sixteen and babysits whenever we meet with the doctor.

"Mommy!" Abby's face lights up, and she jumps into my arms.

I hug her as tight as I can. "Hey, sweetie. Did you have fun?"

"Yes. Maribel let me put on the new lip gloss. Look."

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She pulls out of my embrace and bats her hazel eyes, which are full of excitement. She is wearing the pink hat I knitted for her, which seems to be her favorite right now. Her eyelashes and eyebrows, along with her hair, haven't grown back from the last treatment she went through. Her skin is starting to regain color since she's between treatments though. The beautiful mix of her father's Italian genes and my mulatto ones normally gives her a healthy glow. She puckers her shiny, light-pink lips.

"Great color on you! But I need another hug," I tell her.

She jumps back into my arms, and I hold her until she wiggles out and goes back to playing with Maribel.

The longer I watch her play, the more I tell myself that no matter what I have to do to come up with the money, I will.

I just wish the answer was clear on how to get it.

2

Jasmine

"Didyou try the new scent yet?" Karla asks.

I groan. "My nose can't handle anything else. It takes me all week to breathe right and then I come back and get to violate my nostrils all over again." I'm at Claudio's for my weekend job. It's a high-end department store in Manhattan. I take several busses

to get here, but the money is worth it, especially right now during the holiday season. The cosmetic department pays a salary and commission, and there isn't anything here under fifty dollars. The women who come in are used to paying a fortune for their personal products. The men mostly come for gifts and will buy anything you tell them they need.

Karla nods. "It's powerful, so go easy when you do."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Hey, how did your appointment go yesterday?"

My chest tightens, and I take a deep breath to calm my emotions. I tell Karla what the doctor said about the treatments and how much it's going to cost.

"That's highway robbery!" she cries out.

"Tell me about it."

A woman comes over wearing a fur coat and carrying a dog purse. A small, white puppy is inside it.

Karla rolls her eyes, and I furrow my brows for her to behave. I would help her, but I have to finish wrapping the last order I took. The customer is at another makeup counter while I complete it.

"Can I help you?" Karla asks.

The woman purses her lips. "Just looking."

Karla puts on a fake smile. To everyone, it looks genuine. But I've known her for too

long. "I'm here if you need me."

I pack all the items I wrapped into a bag and walk around the corner to the woman who bought them. "All wrapped. Do you need anything else?"

She turns and draws her eyebrows together. Her eyes travel down my body and back to my face. It's the second time she's done it. Her scrutiny threw me off when I helped her, but there are many strange people in New York. I ignored it earlier, but it gives me the creeps right now. "Can we talk for a quick moment?"

This is weird.

She's rich. Most people who have money are.

Okay, that isn't fair.

Maybe she'll buy more.

I can't afford to turn any customers away.

I force a smile. "Sure." I walk to the edge of my counter, where it isn't crowded. "Can I help you find something else?"

"You've got a sweet look about you."

"Umm...thanks?"

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"You've got a great body."

Is she hitting on me?

"Thank you. Is there something else you wanted to look at?" I hold up a bottle of perfume. "This just came in. I can give you a sample if you'd like?"

Her full, red lips twitch. "How much do they pay you here?"

"I'm sorry?"

She crosses her arms and plays with her long blonde hair. It's beautiful, but she must pay a fortune for her extensions. Her thick, black eyelashes flutter. "My guess is they don't pay you near as much as what you could earn."

I nervously laugh. "Are you offering me another job? I'll take five-thousand dollars per day, in cash, please." I lean in to say under my breath, "Don't tell Uncle Sam."

She raises her eyebrows. "Five thousand. Is that all you think you're worth?"

Oh, wait. Is she recruiting me to be a prostitute?

"Umm...I was kidding. I'm happy here. Really."

She smirks then her face becomes serious.

Abby needs treatment.

I couldn't do that.

If you don't do something, she's going to die.

"Wait. Are you..." I glance around me then lower my voice. "Recruiting me to be a...well, you know."

Her eyes turn to slits. "A what?"

Oh, crap. Now I've insulted her.

"I'm sorry. I'm confused by what's going on right now."

She tilts her head then puts her arm around me. "Let's take a walk."

"I'm supposed to stay around the counter."

She turns to Karla. "Are you able to cover the counter while Ms..." she turns to me and looks at my name tag, "Jasmine, helps me with a special request?"

Karla tries to cover her "you're with a crazy lady" expression. "Sure."

Way to have my back.

What is this lady trying to get me involved in?

She leads me to the corner of the store, where the lingerie department is. "Your breasts. They're natural?"

"Excuse me?"

She softly laughs. "Natural breasts like yours are hard to find. You'll get paid more for them."

I open my mouth to tell her I'm not doing anything that pays me for my breasts, but then Abby's face comes to my mind, and I snap it shut.

"Ahh. You do need to make money."

My face burns red. I look away from her.

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She clutches my chin and turns me toward her. "My name is Star Vintage. No, it's not my real name. That name is long gone, as well as the girl it belonged to. But I no longer fight to feed my children. I don't work all the time, never to see them. I choose the men I'm with and don't rely on them for anything." She leans close to my ear. "No one pays to eat my pussy, darling, so stop thinking I'm a hooker."

I gape at her. My words finally come out in a stutter. "I-I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult you."

She shrugs. "You didn't. I don't judge anyone for how they feed their families. But I don't need to do that. I use my assets to my advantage and don't do anything I don't choose."

My heart races. "So, what do you do?"

She twirls a lock of my hair around her finger. "Is this your natural hair?"

"Yes."

"And you're..." She peers closer at me. "Black and white?"

I nod. "My mother was black. My father..." I shrug.

"If you were taller, you could model. You would be plus-size, of course."

"Sorry? I'm not—"

"You have curves and aren't a twig. And men will pay big money to see those curves."

"How?"

Why am I asking her this? I shouldn't encourage her.

Abby's face pops up again. Yes, I should.

She smiles. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"To the dressing room."

"I'm on the clock. I can get in trouble."

She tilts her head. "What do you make for the weekend? Two hundred dollars? Three tops, and that's only during the holiday rush? Come January, this place will be dead. They will lay you off. You and I both know this."

"I still need my job."

Her face becomes more solemn. "Yes, you do. You're a mother?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

"I saw it in your eyes when I mentioned my children."

I twist my fingers. "You understand I can't lose my job, then?"

"You can if you make more in an hour than you do working here in two weeks."

My pulse quickens. I'm not sure why I tell her. I usually hide it to avoid pity stares or comments. My tears well, and I blurt out, "My child is sick. I don't mean a cough. Legitimately going to die if I don't pay for her treatment. So I can't afford to take any risks."

Her eyes widen.

I look away, willing myself not to break down but unable to stop the tears that fall. I put my fingers to my eyes, trying to stop the flow.

She hands me a tissue, and I take it, still not facing her.

"I'm sorry to hear about your daughter. I don't know how much you need, but this is the address where I'll be tonight. Tell Donovan you're my guest when you arrive. He's the bouncer. You can't miss him. Come watch. We'll talk."

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She puts her card in front of me.

I hesitate but finally take it.

She gently pats me on the back and leaves.

I go into the bathroom, clean up my eye makeup as best as I can, and sigh. The reflection in the mirror isn't anyone I recognize anymore. I don't know what Star sees in me. All I feel is old and exhausted.

I take her card out of my pocket. It feels like velvet. There isn't a business name on it, only Star Vintage, an address in Upper Manhattan, and a phone number. The writing is all in raised gold.

I'm not sure what she does or who she is. I'm sure whatever she's involved in isn't anything I've ever done before.

I return to my work area, focus on customers, and avoid answering anything Karla asks me. She wants to know what Star wanted, but I'm not sure what to tell her.

Can I make enough money to pay for Abby's treatment?

I'm never going to do it here.

Abby might die while I'm slinging makeup.

I walk right out from behind the counter and go into the bathroom stall when that

thought hits me. It's one I try to push out of my mind whenever I think about how much time I'm not spending with Abby. But everything Star said, I relate to. Maybe too much. I have a complete breakdown and try to quiet my sobs.

Whatever Star's involved in can't be good. I need to stay away. For the rest of my shift and on the multiple bus rides home, I tell myself I won't go.

Then I walk in and see Abby, curled up in blankets, having a bad day compared to yesterday. And the resolve to do whatever it takes to help her heal comes back.

3

Jasmine

Cee Cee's twenty questions only get more intense the vaguer I am. She puts her hand on her hip. "Maribel, go watch TV with Abby."

"I don't want you to go out tonight, Mommy," Abby says, breaking my heart further.

I hug Abby, squeezing her shoulder, and force a smile. "I wish I didn't have to. But tomorrow night, after I get home from work, we'll play all night, okay?"

Abby nods in disappointment and follows Maribel to the family room.

Cee Cee clears their plates and sits next to me. She leans toward me with her elbow on the table. "Where are you going? And don't lie to me. Do you have a date or something?"

"No! When do I ever date?"

"What else can it be?"

"I told you. I have a job interview."

"At night?"

I glance out at the girls. The TV is on, and Abby's head is on Maribel's lap. I turn back to Cee Cee. "I met this woman today. She said I could make more than five-thousand dollars a night."

"Doing what?" Cee Cee cries out.

"Shh." I glance back, but the girls aren't paying attention to us. "I'm not sure. But it's not prostitution—"

"Is it drug dealing?"

"No!"

Cee Cee raises her eyebrows.

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"I don't think it is," I whisper.

"I don't like the sounds of this," Cee Cee warns in a disapproving voice.

"I think it's a strip club or something of the sort," I admit.

"What gave you that impression?"

"She took me over to the lingerie section but told me she wasn't a prostitute."

"I don't like this," she repeats.

"What do you want me to do? Hmm? I'm never going to have five grand by the hospital's deadline. Do you want..." I close my eyes and can't continue.

Cee Cee puts her hand on mine. Her voice softens. "I'm not judging you. I'm sorry, you're right. Let's check this out, whatever it is. But I'm coming with you."

"No. You can't. Stay here with the girls."

"No way. Maribel can watch Abby. And Opal is home for the night. I'll have her come stay with the girls." Opal is our retired neighbor. She loves both girls and helps out from time to time.

"Cee Cee—"

"It's decided." She rises. "What do we wear to this place?"

"Ummm..." I swallow hard. "I don't know."

"Text your friend."

"She's not my friend. I just met her."

Cee Cee smirks. "Your pimp then. Text your pimp."

I slap her arm. "Stop it."

"Text her."

I groan and remove the card from my pocket. I send her a text.

Me:It's Jasmine...the girl from Claudio's. What should we wear tonight?

Star:We?

Me:My cousin Cee Cee won't let me come by myself.

Star:Cee Cee is female?

Me:Yes.

There's a pause, and I get nervous she might tell me to no longer come.

Star:She can come but no one else. And boyfriends, husbands, whatever, are never allowed.

Me:What about my B.O.B.?

As soon as I send it, I regret it.

Me: Sorry. I shouldn't have written that.

Star: We have those here. It's high-end. Wear your best club dress.

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I freak and look at Cee Cee. I avoid telling her about the sex toys comment. "I don't have a club dress. I'm a mom."

"You used to."

"Yeah, like, a decade ago," I sarcastically reply.

Cee Cee takes my hand and pulls me into the bedroom. "Sit." She flicks her wrists, moving my everyday wear until she's able to pull out a few dresses from my closet.

"I was young when I wore those," I point out.

"You're thirty-two and don't look it."

"Yeah, I look older."

"No, you don't." She scans through her stack and pulls a black, sleeveless minidress out. "This is perfect. Go do your hair and makeup. I'm going to get ready."

Within an hour, both of us have on our dresses and makeup. We arrange for Opal to come over, kiss our girls goodnight, and leave.

We're on the subway when I admit, "I'm nervous, are you?"

Cee Cee snorts. "I'm not the one considering whatever this is."

I turn to face her. "What if this is a strip place?"

Cee Cee's face falls. She pauses before answering. "I'm not going to judge you for anything you do. If I had the body, I would do it if it got me enough money for Abby."

"So, I should do it?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not saying that. We don't even know what it is."

"You just confused me."

She squeezes my hand. "I will never judge you. But I don't want you to get hurt in any way or do something you'll regret."

"If Abby dies and I didn't help her, I won't be able to live with myself," I blurt out, and tears well. "Oh God. I can't even talk anymore without crying all the time."

Cee Cee puts her arm around me. "You've always done all you can. We have figured it out up to this point. We will find a way to pay for her treatment."

"We only got the treatment because of my insurance. The denied bills keep coming in. I'm going to have to claim bankruptcy, you know? I'll never be able to repay the million dollars of debt."

She nods. "We can't worry about that. We live in an unfair world where some people have it all, and some people have none. We must be grateful for what we do have."

"I don't feel very grateful for anything anymore," I admit.

"Well, let's check out whatever this is, and maybe we'll have something new to be grateful for."

We get to our stop, make our way off the subway, and walk several blocks until we get to the address.

"This can't be it?" I say. The building is a residential unit.

"Are you sure you have the right address?" Cee Cee asks, looking at the front door.

"Yes."

"We are in New York. Everything goes here. Come on." She climbs the steps, and I follow. When we get to the top, she rings the doorbell.

A man in a very expensive suit opens the door. His sandy blond hair is wavy. His brown eyes are warm, but something tells me he isn't someone I want to meet in a dark alley. His body is full of muscle, and the fabric of his suit stretches over it enough to show off his physique. He checks us out and raises his eyebrows.

"Are you Donovan?"

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"Yes." His voice is deep and menacing.

I step closer to Cee Cee. "Star said to tell you we're her guests."

He clenches his jaw, exhales deeply, then steps back, motioning for us to come in. As soon as we step through, the door shuts, and I jump.

"First time?" he asks.

I spin. "Y..."Get a grip.I clear my throat and stand straighter. "Yes."

He studies us again and then points. "Through the door, to your left, then first door on your right."

"Thank you," Cee Cee replies and loops her arm through mine. She guides me down the hall, and we go into the room.

The room is small and dark. A soft pink light illuminates the walls. There's one bartender, a man in a suit, and several small tables with candles lit.

I look at Cee Cee for help. This is entirely out of my comfort zone. I don't go out to bars, or dark, sexy places, or anywhere, except work and hospitals.

"Ladies. Have a seat." The bartender nods to two seats in front of him and next to the stranger.

We sit, and a smell so intoxicating it flares in my nostrils, makes my body throb. I

slowly inhale and try to ignore the zinging in my blood.

The bartender opens a bottle of champagne and puts two glasses in front of us.

"We can't afford that," I blurt out.

His lips twitch. "It's on the house. You don't pay here."

"H-how does that work?"

The sexiest voice I've ever heard replies. It sends shivers down my spine. "This is a membership club. Men pay. Women..." He pauses until I turn to him.

My heart stops. He has chiseled cheeks barely covered with a five-o'clock shadow. His dark hair has a few streaks of silver running through it. The blue of his eyes, you could get lost in and happily never come out. And I've seen expensive suits from the department store I work at, but I assume his is custom-made. The black fabric stretches over his broad shoulders in perfection. He doesn't wear a tie, and his white shirt has several buttons undone, showcasing his ripped pecs. A tattoo barely peeks out, so I can't tell what it is.

"Women get whatever they want." His voice and face are cocky. He takes a drink of his scotch, revealing his hand tattoo, never taking his eyes off mine.

I blush and curse myself. Everything about him says bad boy in a suit. I had my round with a bad boy. I don't need another spin on the merry-go-round.

I don't respond to him and sip my champagne, but it only heats my blood further.

"You're here to see Star?" the bartender asks.

"How did you know?"

"You're too beautiful not to be," the man next to me answers.

My cheeks erupt in flames. Against my better judgment, I glance at him.

He cockily raises an eyebrow, as if he expects me to argue with him. His lips curve up.

God, he's hot.

I hate myself for that thought.

But he is.

He's a bad boy, my mother's voice flies into my head.

Stay away.

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I quickly focus on Cee Cee. My stomach does somersaults, and I haven't felt anything like this since I met Troy. All he gave me was a broken heart and license to single motherhood.

She smirks, and I want to slap her.

I blurt out, "Maybe we should go."

Cee Cee opens her mouth to speak, but Star enters the room and says, "Jasmine. I see you've met Colton."

"Who?"

She walks up and puts her hand on the bad-boy stud sitting next to me.

Jealousy tears through me that she's touching him and I'm not. I cringe inside, wishing I didn't have any of these thoughts.

"Jasmine," he says, and the way my name rolls off his tongue and his eyes flare create heat in my loins.

I shift in my seat, uncrossing and recrossing my legs, then realize I just drew attention to my thighs when his eyes dart to them. He slowly lifts his gaze and blue heat sizzles from his eyes.

Oh God.

"Ladies, if you'll come with me," Star says.

Relieved to leave Mr. Lickable, I get up too fast and stumble. He rises and grabs me, steadying me by palming my ass and head.

My face rams into his chest, and my lips brush against his skin. I look up. He towers over me but dips his face inches from mine. The intoxicating smell I inhaled earlier only gets more potent, and I quiver inside.

"You okay?"

"Mm-hmm," I meekly reply.

His jaw clenches, and his blue eyes darken. The warmth of his breath mixes with mine.

Star's voice cuts through my trance. "I'm Star. And you are?"

I spin into Mr. Lickable's hard frame, and he drops his arms so they are around my waist. "Sorry to be rude. This is my cousin Cee Cee."

Why isn't he removing his hands?

I need to step away.

He feels so good.

Star shakes Cee Cee's hand, smirking. "You came to give your stamp of approval?"

Mr. Lickable murmurs in my ear, "I wasn't planning on going inside tonight, but now I'm going to have to."

My skin hums from his touch. I squirm, but all it does is make his erection harden against my back.

The quivering in my gut gets faster, and my legs shake.

He strokes his thumb near my belly button.

I freeze.

He releases me, turns to the bar, and finishes the last mouthful of his scotch. His large hand slides along my back, and he guides me toward a door.

"Uh, where are we going?"

His hot breath hits the skin on my neck, accelerating all the tingles already racing through my bones. "To my suite."

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"Your...what?" Panic takes over. I spin out of his grasp and bump into Star. "Sorry."

"Is there a problem?" she asks.

I glance at Cee Cee for help, but she only gives me a tiny shrug and has her "I don't know what we're doing" expression on her face.

"Well?" Star asks impatiently.

Mr. Lickable touches my waist, and I sharply inhale. "Star, give the ladies your tour. Drop Jasmine off in my suite when you're through, please."

"Sure."

"Excuse me, but—" I shut my mouth.

Star raises her eyebrows and crosses her arms. "Why don't I show you around, and then we can talk. Hmm?"

Abby's face fills my mind. Don't blow this before you even know what it is. It may be your only chance of getting the money to save her. I stand straighter and nod. "Yes."

Colton removes his hand, and I want to grab it and put it back.

Stop these thoughts. He's trouble.

We all step into another hallway. It's black, just like the bar, with pink near the

ceiling. Colton goes one way, and Star leads Cee Cee and me in the opposite direction.

We pass dozens of doors with silver numbers. We finally get to the end. The only number on it is a one. Star opens the door and motions for us to go through.

Cee Cee and I step in, and we both freeze. Like the bar, the atmosphere is dark, with soft neon lights against the walls. A long bar stretches the entire length of the wall. Men fill the stools. Several small stages with poles are positioned in different parts of the room. Women dance, some with lingerie on, some with none. The center has leather couches and chairs. Waitresses wear barely any clothes. Some men have women on their laps. Some are near the stages with money.

Cee Cee and I exchange a nervous glance. Then I turn behind us. Each of the doors we passed were entrances into private suites. Some of the suites have shades pulled. Some of them are half-open. Some are entirely up, revealing lap dancers. They are filled with black leather couches, matching armchairs, and each have similar stages with poles in them.

Star takes both our hands and pulls us over to a table. We sit.

"So, this is a strip club," I blurt out.

"It's not just any old dirty strip club," she says, as if I insulted her.

"I didn't mean—"

"This is a private, members-only, highly vetted gentlemen's club. All the members submit tax returns and net worth statements verified by their accountants. A billion dollars is the requirement. Members and dancers get STD tests monthly."

"So, men would pay Jasmine for sex—"

"No, I didn't say that," Star sternly reprimands Cee Cee.

"I'm not following then," Cee Cee replies.

"Every woman here has choices. She always can accept or deny the request."

"The request?" I ask.

"Yes. See that woman over there?" She points to a blonde woman giving a man a striptease in the middle of the room.

"Yes."

"That's Tiffany. And you see that man in the corner? The one with the blue suit coat?"

"The bald one?" I ask.

Star smiles. "Donald has Rockefeller in his blood."

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"The real Rockefellers?" Cee Cee gapes.

"Yes. He wanted a lap dance from Tiffany. She doesn't like him very much, but she does like his money. She said no. He offered her two thousand dollars."

"For one dance?" I gasp.

"Yes. If you say no several times, the price always increases."

"How?"

"These are men who are used to getting what they want. No one tells them no. Tiffany could just tell him ten thousand because that's what she will eventually get from him. But instead, she took five from Ted over there and insisted they didn't go into the suite. She knew Donald would be drooling and more desperate than ever to give her what she wants. And he wants it private, in his suite. So she'll insist it's double for the suite, and he will pay, thinking he's getting something the others can't have."

"So it's a sick, twisted, rich person's game?" Cee Cee asks.

Star laughs. A waitress sets a drink down in front of us, and Star picks it up and takes a sip. "A little. These men want beautiful women surrounding them who don't bring them drama. Some are trust fund babies, and some are self-made. Half of them have enormous pressures at work. They don't want to deal with the issues relationships bring. They are here to blow off steam."

"So, she does have to sleep with them?" Cee Cee asks again, and I don't blame her. Star even said they always get what they want, so my thoughts echo Cee Cee's.

"That's up to Jasmine."

"I don't understand," I say.

"You will be approached. You can always say no, or you can sometimes say no. Or, if you really want, you can always say yes. It's always up to you."

"Why would they be okay with us saying no?" I ask.

Star's eyes turn to slits. "These men are rich. They are cocky and looking to relieve stress. They are not rapists. They know you have the choice and hold all the cards. It's the only time in their lives they don't have complete control. But I won't lie. It is a challenge for some of them to see if they can get the girl they want into their bed. So you must be prepared for them to continue to approach you even when you've already said no."

Blood pounds hard between my ears, and I gaze around the room. Then I freeze when I get to the suite positioned in the center of the room. Colton stands at the window. His jacket is off, sleeves rolled up, and forearm full of tattoos in full view. He takes a sip of his scotch and focuses on me.

"He doesn't invite women into his suite," Star says.

I jerk my head toward her. "What? How is that possible?"

"He almost always stays in the bar area unless he has out-of-town business colleagues he's entertaining. Those men are all STD tested before they come in here as well. They also have to sign a release agreeing to the rules and aren't allowed to make any

agreements that involve my girls outside the club."

"But the other members can?" Cee Cee asks in a disapproving tone.

"Yes. The members are vetted. They understand what they have here can be taken away. They won't risk it."

I tap my fingers on my drink. "What does he want from me?"

To sleep with me.

Star raises her eyebrows. "I don't know. You'll have to ask him. But the other girls will be jealous."

"Why?"

She snorts. "Did you look at him?"

My face flushes.

"Ah. I don't need to explain any further."

"What do you get out of this?" Cee Cee asks.

Star takes another drink and smiles at her. "You ask smart questions. I am the manager. I get ten percent of anything anyone makes. The girls, the bartenders, etc."

"So, you don't dance?" I ask.

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"I do, but I only have specific men I dance for. They pay me extra to be exclusive to them."

"What does Jasmine get for your ten percent?"

Star laughs. "She gets my guidance and support. She gets my protection. And no one comes through the door without paying the house. I am the house."

I take a sip of the drink.

Could I do it?

There are so many men.

I survey the room again. The diversity of women surprises me. All sizes, shapes, and ethnicities are represented.

Star leans forward. "I suggest you always negotiate for your gentleman to pay me my fee. Then you don't get a cut."

"They will pay more?"

She snorts. "What they pay us is pocket change. It's hard to comprehend but the truth. Always negotiate higher. Always have them pay my fee."

"And that's why she makes the big bucks," Cee Cee teases.

I lock eyes with her. "What do you think?"

Cee Cee shakes her head. "I can't make this decision for you."

"But if you were me?"

She says nothing. I already know the answer. There is no choice. My daughter needs to live and stop being sick all the time. This is the answer to my money problems.

I turn to Star and put on a brave smile. "Okay. I'll do it. But I'm not sleeping with any of them."

She rises. "Come with me. It's time for your first job."

"Tonight?"

She tilts her head and squints. "You don't want to make money tonight?"

"I... I wasn't... I'm not even wearing anything sexy."

Star nods to the window. Colton is still staring at us, and I wonder if he's looked anywhere else while we've been talking. "I don't think it matters what you wear. I suggest you take his money while he's interested. The one thing Colton Ash doesn't do is come back here unless he's entertaining business associates. So if you've caught his eye, I'd cash in on that while you can."

4

Jasmine

Star drops me off at Colton's suite and leaves. My stomach flips faster.

Colton's cocky expression does nothing to cool the heat burning between my legs.
"Are you going to come in or stand by the door the entire time?"

I twist my fingers. Think about Abby. I manage a smile. "Should I sit?"

"Do you want to sit?" he asks in a teasing tone.

I tighten the grip on my hands. "I...um... I'm not..." I glance out the window. Cee Cee is sitting at the table with Star, watching me.

What am I doing here?

Colton steps forward, and his scent wafts in my nose. "Why don't we sit down and talk."

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I glance up. "Talk?"

His lips twitch. He steps closer and twists a lock of my hair around his fist and lightly tugs it. "Do you want to do something else right now?"

I open my mouth and shake my head, not sure what to say.

He laughs then releases my hair. "I'm teasing you." He steps back and holds his arm out for me to take a seat.

I perch myself on the end of the couch and cross my legs.

Colton's eyes drift to my thighs. He studies every part of my body. His eyes could be lasers, burning heat straight to my core. He reaches my face. "Do you want a drink?"

"No. Yes. No. I'm not sure." I bite my lip, not sure if I should be drinking or not.

Probably not.

He continues assessing me then picks up a metal pitcher of water and a glass. He fills it and hands it to me. "Maybe water is better right now?"

"Yes. Thank you." I accept the water, immediately taking a cool drink.

He chooses the seat next to me so our bodies touch. A trail of tingles races up my thigh. I inhale sharply. He leans into my ear and says, "You should never go into a man's suite until you've agreed upon your terms."

I turn quickly, and he glances at my lips. "I don't know what I'm doing. I'm sorry. I should go." I rise, and he pulls me down on his lap.

"Don't go."

My heart hammers against my chest cavity. My mouth goes dry.

"Another thing you should never do is allow a man to keep you in his room if you don't want to be there." He cocks his eyebrow.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

His face turns serious. "You're here for a reason?"

Abby connected to machines in a hospital bed fills my vision. I blink hard and nod.

"Okay. So am I."

"Oh?"

"How much for exclusivity?"

Exclusivity?"I don't understand."

He traces my jaw. "I don't want any other man in here having any access to you. How much?"

The air becomes thick. I take shorter breaths, shaking my head. "You only want me in your room?"

"Yes. Or anywhere I choose. But no one else can have you."

"Have me?"

"No touching, no dancing, no flirting with any of them. No deals. You are mine and mine alone. How much?"

I would be his.

Yes, please.

No. This is not a relationship.

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"What would you expect from me?"

His lips curl. "Whatever I want."

"I won't sleep with you," I blurt out.

He leans into my ear. "I don't pay for sex. When you sleep with me, I'm not paying you." His tongue hits the back of my ear.

My pussy clenches. I gasp.

His hand massages my ass.

I close my eyes, softly moan, then realize what is happening. I pull away from him, and I rise to leave. "This isn't going to work. I'm sorry—"

"Stop," he commands.

I freeze.

He pulls me back on his lap. "Tell me how much you want."

"I'm not having sex with you. I can't."

"You have a husband or boyfriend?"

"No."

"You're a lesbian?"

"No."

He glances at my lower body. "You have a chastity belt under there?"

"What? No! I—"

His face breaks out into a huge grin.

He's teasing me again. "I'm not letting anyone pay me for sex."

His face falls. "I already clarified I'm not paying you for sex."

"Then what are you paying me for?"

"Exclusivity. You're at my beck and call. When I tell you I want to see you, you stop whatever you're doing and meet me wherever I tell you to."

"I have other jobs."

"Quit."

"I can't."

"Do they pay you as much as this?"

"I don't know what this pays."

"Tell me what you want."

"You haven't said what I'm going to be doing when I'm with you."

"Yes, I did. I told you, whatever I want."

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"But I said I won't sleep with you."

"You need to work on your listening skills. I do not pay for sex. Never. I don't need to." His cockiness reappears on his face.

I'm so out of my element here. I can't do this.

I get up. "You're not answering my question. I'm not doing this. Thank you, but no thank you." I get to the door, and his hand comes over the top of my head.

He slams it into the door. "Wait."

I jump and spin. "You're scaring me."

His eyes widen. "I am not a man who hurts women. If I frightened you, I apologize. Don't go."

I focus on his chest. Abby's face once again haunts me.

"I will give you a thousand dollars when you leave if you sit down and finish negotiating with me."

I gape at him.

Is this guy crazy?

Yep, he has to be.

One thousand dollars just to sit down?

"Fine. Please step back."

He exhales and obeys.

I walk to the armchair so he can't sit next to me. "I won't agree to anything unless I know what I'm getting involved in."

The cockiness he had earlier disappears. "You're smart to ask. Don't go into an agreement with any man unless you understand what you will be doing."

"And we would be doing...?"

"From time to time, I have events to go to. You will be my date."

My closet full of yoga pants and second-hand store dresses comes to mind. "I don't have fancy things."

"I will take care of it. Anything you need comes from me as a gift."

Events sound easy. I can do that.

"That's it?"

A smoldering expression crosses his face. "No."

"What else?"

He licks his lips, and his eyes wander over my body. I try not to squirm. He says, "When we are in here, you will also dress in what I provide."

"So, I'll be clothed?"

"Until I tell you to take it off."

My heart races. I glance out at the room full of people.

"I will shut the shades. I will not allow any other man to see you."

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I'm at a strip club. I agreed to work here. This isn't unreasonable.

How far can I fall?

It's not about you. It's about getting Abby her treatments.

"Okay, on the clothes, but what will I do when I am in here?"

"Whatever—"

"Don't tell me whatever you want. I need you to be a little more specific."

He rises and holds out his hand. When I don't take it right away, he says, "Take my hand, Jasmine. It isn't sex."

I release a big breath and obey. He pulls me up and leads me to the window. He stands behind me, circles his arms around my waist, and leans close to my ear. "You see all those women?"

I tell myself not to sink into him, but I do. "Yes."

"What are they doing?"

I glance around. "Dancing."

"And?"

"Talking."

"Keep going."

"Drinking."

His breath hits my neck. "Do you see them touching?"

Almost all the women are touching some man. "Yes."

"And are they having sex?"

"No."

"Okay, so is it clear what I'll be paying you for?"

Can I really do this? The women all look comfortable and secure in what they are doing. I'm going to have to do it in private with Mr. Lickable focused on me.

"I don't know how to do what they are doing. I haven't done this before."

He softly chuckles and traces his finger over the curve of my waist. "I think it's all learnable. Don't you? Plus, it's just us."

Would it be better out there with others watching or just us in here?

How am I even going to do what those women do? I don't know the first thing about dancing or stripping.

Tell him you can't do this.

The memory of Abby's almost-lifeless body a few months back when I thought we were losing her cuts through my soul.

I don't have any other options.

"Tell me what you want, Jasmine, to quit your jobs."

I want my daughter to live.

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I keep my eyes shut, leaning against him, smelling his sexy scent, and feeling the beat of his heart against my head. This isn't anything I thought I would ever be doing. But if he will give me the money I need to save my daughter, then there aren't any choices to make.

"I can't quit my main job. I need my insurance, and when this is over, I still have to have it. I'll quit my other two."

"I'll add you to my company payroll and benefits."

I open my eyes and tilt my head. "That's very generous, but I need insurance forever. I... I have reasons I need it."

"Would ten years of benefits give you enough security?"

Shocked, I try to find words.

He mistakes my silence. "Twenty years?"

I don't think my pulse has ever beaten so hard outside of the hospital.

"I'll put it in a contract. Benefits for twenty years. When this is over, I'll give you an ongoing stipend of five thousand dollars a month, along with your benefits package for the duration of whatever is left on the time."

I could stay home with Abby and spend time with her.

She has preexisting conditions. I can't just switch insurances without reviewing it.

"Ten thousand a month," he says.

Holy...

"I think it's a fair offer. Or is there something else you want in order to quit your job?"

"I need to review your coverage."

"One thing I do, Jasmine, is take care of my people. I have the best of everything, including my benefits."

I've dealt with enough insurance issues every time my employer changes companies to save a few bucks. "I'm sorry, but I won't agree to quitting until I review your policy."

"Is there something specific you're looking for? I highly doubt it isn't covered, but if it isn't, I will make sure it is."

I sternly reply, "I will let you know after I read through it." Something tells me not to tell him anything about my personal life or problems. And right now, I'm an emotional basket case. Every other minute, I seem to erupt in tears. The last thing I want is Mr. Lickable, who wants no drama and is offering to solve my money issues, to see me cry.

He lowers his voice. It softens a few levels. "You don't want to tell me what you're looking for?"

I shake my head.

"I will allow you to review it, but you must promise me if there is something not in it you need, then you tell me so I can add it."

I don't respond to his request for my word. Instead, I blurt out, "Are you an honest man?"

He doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

"So, you aren't lying right now?"

"About what?"

Am I in some sort of dream where my money issues go away and I can have hope for Abby again? Or a nightmare where I will wake up tomorrow and he'll have changed his mind?

"This is a crazy proposal. At least, for me it is. I don't live in your world."

"Maybe you should step into it."

I ignore his statement, which makes it sound like it's so easy to just go from my state of drowning poverty to his lavish lifestyle. "When you say you're going to do these things, do you ever go back on your negotiation?"

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His lips graze my ear. "I am a man of many things. Rich. Selfish at times. Unable to not go after what I want." He pauses then says, "Some people might call me a bit obsessive. Right now, I want to have you at my beck and call, doing the things I demand. What you should know about obsessive men is, they don't stop wanting when they close their eyes at night."

I need to hold on to something, so I reach for the window in front of me.

He steps forward and presses me closer to the glass then growls, "How much?"

I need twenty-five thousand each week of treatment.

"I'm also impatient, Jasmine. Give me your daily rate."

"How many nights a week will I see you?"

"Once. Three times. Every day if I wish. It depends on my schedule. But I reserve the right at any time to see you. So if I want more, I get more. And it isn't only nights. If I want you at five in the morning, you will come to me."

I have to make sure I have someone to watch Abby.

I always figure it out. This will be no different.

If I got five thousand a day, I could have the money in a few weeks for the first treatment, a week and a month at the longest if he only saw me once a week.

I need five grand for the deposit now.

I tilt my head up. "Five thousand a day. Cash."

"Done."

"Until I see the contract and your benefits, I won't commit to anything. And I want five thousand for tonight's negotiations."

He steps back, walks to the wall, and moves a picture. A safe is behind it, and he punches in a code. It's full of cash. I've never seen so much in one place before.

An impressed expression fills his face. "Well done. You are smarter than you think." He grabs a stack, counts out ten bills, then picks up another stack and adds it to the loose cash. He shuts the safe and adjusts the picture over it.

My insides shake.

The blue in his eyes reflects his satisfaction. He steps forward and puts the cash in my hand. "Six thousand. One for staying and five for negotiations."

I try to breathe. I have her deposit. Do not cry in front of him.

I clear my throat and stand straighter. "Thank you. I need to leave now. I didn't come prepared to stay long. Oh, I also require you to pay the extra ten percent to Star so it doesn't come out of my five thousand."

More approval crosses his face. "Done." His eyes roam on my lips. "Give me your cell number and email. My assistant will send the insurance policy information tonight. You will have a contract in your mailbox in the morning. Tomorrow, I will have my HR department contact you to add you to my benefits. And I need you to go

shopping. I will courier a card for you to use at your discretion."

"Shopping?"

He licks his lips. "Yes. Pick your first outfit. Surprise me."

5

Colton

The moment Jasmine leaves my suite, I pick up my phone and text my assistant, Janelle, Jasmine's email. I instruct Janelle to immediately send the insurance policy details. I'm not sure what Jasmine needs to have covered, but I'm going to find out.

Her red pouty lips and heart-shaped face drove my dick to a state of chaos the minute I laid eyes on her. And her legs. Fuck. She kept crossing and uncrossing her legs, tempting me to drop to my knees and put my face in her pussy. And now she's left my suite, and her floral scent lingers.

I groan. This is so very bad. Everything about bringing her into my suite and negotiating with her spells trouble. I can already feel the obsession taking hold over me. It's something I reserve for my business deals, not women.

This is wrong.

Better her with me than those douchebags out there.

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Her hazel eyes are etched in my mind. She's trying to be brave about something, I could see it. Pain and fear were swirling in them. But there was also courage. The way she negotiated surprised me. I'm not sure what I expected. But she held her ground and didn't back down from me. It made me respect her more.

I call my attorney. He answers after two rings. "Colton. What can I do for you?"

"Charles, I need a contract drafted tonight."

"For what?"

What do I call it? I don't engage much at the club. Most men have their favorites but will sample the other women from time to time. I don't have any interest in lap dances, stripteases, or paying a woman for sex. Sure, the women are all beautiful, but I don't have the needs the other men do.

Until she walked into the bar. Suddenly, the things I had no interest in, I want her to do for me.

My membership is for business purposes. When you mix sin and money, you find out a lot about a man's weaknesses. My suite is to entertain businessmen who are visiting from out of town. Otherwise, I don't come inside it. I stay in the bar. Not many men use it. Mostly they bypass it, going directly to where the women are.

The quiet, dark atmosphere of the bar is calming to me. Tim, the bartender, knows exactly how I prefer my scotch. I avoid the hassle of crowded bars and everything else that goes with the hustle and bustle of New York—especially during Christmas.

I don't fault anyone for loving it. I did a long time ago. But I'd prefer to skip it altogether. I breathe a sigh of relief every year when life resumes to normal and New York City goes back to its usual unjolly ways.

Star is the only dancer who ever comes into the bar. And only when she is meeting a new woman she's recruiting.

I usually don't talk to the new girls. They are all here for the money. I don't know their reasons or want to. But I also don't judge them. Money makes the world go round. I learned it early on in life. And I know what it's like to have nothing and feel desperate to solve your problems.

The men who are members have more wealth than they know what to do with. The women hold all the power in their negotiations. And the club rules are strict. If a woman says no, it's no. There's nothing any member can do to change her mind besides offer her a better deal and try to persuade her. So in my eyes, it's a better situation for these women than what they could resort to.

Why is she here?

What is her problem she needs to solve with the money?

What is she looking for in the insurance policy?

How did Star find her?

My obsession takes hold. I take a large mouthful of scotch and enjoy the burn down my throat. "An exclusivity contract."

"Oh?" Charles asks.

"You could call it a severance package after the exclusivity ends."

"How long is the exclusivity period?"

"Until I say."

"Until you say?" he repeats in confusion.

"Yes."

He lets out a big breath of air. "And the length of the severance?"

"Twenty years, ten thousand a month, complete with full benefits."

Charles clears his throat. "This sounds extreme."

"I don't care. Get it done."

"What are the duties?"

I can't tell Charles to put in writing what she's going to do for me.

"Personal assistant."

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The line goes silent.

I wait him out. Charles is the best of the best, but he's a typical attorney, always overanalyzing everything, which is why I hired him. He keeps me out of trouble.

"You want a personal assistant to have a twenty-year severance package?"

"Yes. And I want it clearly stipulated she is on call at all times. There are no off-hours. If I message her, she is to report to duty."

"Are you firing Janelle?"

I snort. "God, no. I'd rather slit my wrists."

"What's the real situation behind this?"

"I just told you. Get it done, Charles. And make it simple. No games. No extended language or get-out clause for me. Keep it black-and-white and nothing in between." I hang up the phone, and a text message pops up.

Janelle: The information was sent. Do you need anything else?

Me: No. Thank you. Have a good night.

Janelle: Anytime.

Janelle's been with me for over fifteen years. She, too, is at my beck and call, but

there isn't anything sexual between us. I never have to ask her to do anything twice or explain myself. I have a hunch I pay her more than any other assistant in New York. The saying everyone is replaceable usually is true but not for Janelle. I enjoy every transfer I make to her bank account because she's worth every penny.

I shouldn't call Jasmine. It's late. She said she needed to leave. I don't know her reason, but I can't help myself. I hit Jasmine's name on my phone.

She answers after five rings in a hushed tone. "Hello."

"Check your email."

"You could have texted me. It's late."

"But I didn't."

Her soft breathing filters through the line, and I close my eyes, wishing she were in front of me.

"Are you home?" I question.

"Yes."

I almost ask her where she lives, but I remind myself I'll have all her information tomorrow when she's added to my payroll.

"I need to renegotiate one point."

She inhales sharply. "What?"

I can feel her stress over the phone. "While cash is king, most things require proof of

funds. For instance, if you want to buy a house, or car, or anything of value. And if you're on my benefits, you'll need to be on my payroll as an employee. Your wage will be directly deposited into your bank account."

"But...umm..." She holds her breath, as if in distress.

"I'll gross up your wage. After taxes are taken out, you'll still have the five thousand per day deposited into your account. I'll withhold more than necessary. You'll probably get a refund. Consider it a bonus."

Her voice comes out choked up. "Okay. Thank you."

Oh, sexy woman, why do you need this money?

"You didn't tell me your last name. I need it for the contract."

"Barello. Two L's."

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Jasmine Barelllo.

"Are you in bed right now, about to go to sleep?" The thought of her in pajamas, even flannel ones, sends my blood reeling.

"No."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Laundry. Scrubbing my toilet."

I glance at my Rolex. "At one in the morning?"

"I work three jobs. There isn't a lot of time during normal hours."

"Not anymore, you don't. You should sleep. Tomorrow you will be up late."

"I've not reviewed things yet," she sternly replies.

"Everything we discussed will be in the contract, and there will be no insurance issues. Like I stated when you were here, if something isn't covered, tell me, and I'll take care of it. I'm a man of my word."

"You just called me and went back on a term we agreed upon," she points out.

The hairs on my arm stand up. I don't expect her to fully trust me yet, but I can't argue what she accused me of. "I did. It's in your best interest. It's a small detail I

overlooked, necessary to complete our agreement. Was I not fair? Did I try to screw you?"

She pauses for a moment. "No. You're right. I'm sorry."

"Let's get clear on something. I have no reason to harm you in any way. It's not my intention and will never be."

She doesn't respond.

"Tomorrow, after you sign the contract, I will send a car. They will take you to the salon and store."

"Why do I need to go to the salon? What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you. You're perfect."

More silence.

"Stop cleaning. Review the policy I sent. Get some sleep, and be ready to sign first thing tomorrow. I'm an impatient man. I'm not going to keep this deal on the table forever." It's a lie. I'll give her as much time as she needs. But I don't want her taking forever.

"You don't need to pressure me. Details may not be important to you, but missing one critical thing can impact my life. You can afford mistakes. I can't. And I have responsibilities I can't just ignore."

"Like what?"

"I'm hanging up now. Please don't call me again tonight. I'm not on your clock yet."

"Wait."

She sighs. I hear the weight of the world in it. I want to fix whatever is causing her so much stress. "What?"

"Don't hang up mad at me."

Several moments pass. My heart beats faster, wondering if she's more pissed.

In a friendly voice, she replies, "I'm not. I really do need to go though."

"Okay. Get some sleep."

"Goodnight."

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The line goes silent, and I walk to the glass. Star glances my way. I open the door and motion for her to come in.

She steps inside. "What can I do for you, Colton?"

"Where did you find Jasmine?"

She hesitates then says, "Working at the makeup counter at Claudio's."

"And what do you know about her?"

Star smirks. "I know you haven't shown much interest in the girls, but do I need to refresh you on the rules?"

Rule twenty. Any details about the women's personal lives are private unless they offer to tell you about it.

I put on my negotiator's face and add in the charm I've perfected. "I think everything has a price, don't you?"

Star does the opposite of what I thought she would. Her face falls. She's never glared at me before, but I want to crawl into a hole, it's so vicious. "There is no amount of money you can give me to break the trust or confidence my girls put in me. If you think you're the first member to try, you're wrong. And I'm giving you a pass since you typically stay in the bar. But next time, I'm putting you on warning, Colton. I will not have any member of this club break the rules."

I hold my hands in the air. "All right. Point taken. Sorry I asked."

Star glances out the window. She says in a low voice, "I don't know your intentions with her, but all I'm going to tell you is this."

"What?"

She faces me. "Every woman has their own reasons for being here. They are all important to them. Some have more heart-wrenching issues than others. Don't do anything to screw her over."

"I'm not. I wouldn't."

She smiles and pats me on the shoulder. "Good. I'm going to hold you to it." She leaves my suite.

The conversation does nothing to make my obsession with Jasmine diminish. I leave, go home, and hardly sleep. I can't stop wondering why she needs the money, and the guilt about crossing this line churns in my gut.

6

Jasmine

All night, I review the insurance policy. Like Colton stated, it covers almost everything on earth. Unlike my employer, who is always cutting benefits to drive the cost down, Colton's policy has to cost a fortune.

Relieved I won't have to worry about preexisting conditions, cancer treatment, or other issues I experienced with past insurances, my silent tears fall onto my pillow until I finally drift to sleep.

My alarm rings. I start to drag myself out of bed, exhausted as always, but a notification pops up on my phone with the contract. I sit on the edge of the bed and open it.

I'm relieved to see it's only one page. The language is easy to understand and clear. I'm not an attorney, but I don't see anything that could harm me. And it came from his lawyer, so I assume it's legal.

I'm his beck-and-call stripper. Is it legal?

Stripping isn't illegal. Is it?

No.

But is this arrangement?

It says I'm his personal assistant. Is that what all rich guys call their personal strippers?

I push my thoughts away. Think of Abby.

I sign it electronically and send it back. I put my feet on the ground, and my phone chimes with a text.

Colton: Good morning.

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I wish I could stop the smile forming on my face. I don't want to be attracted to him. I definitely don't want to fall for him. I'm not ever going to sleep with him.

I respond.

Me: Morning. Are you always up this early?

He calls me, and I pick up. "Hi."

The sound of his voice alone makes my heart pitter-patter, and I curse myself again.

"I scheduled the car to pick you up at ten. Your credit card won't arrive until tomorrow, so I added you to my La Perla account. Talk to Tracey when you get there."

And so it begins.

My chest tightens. "Is there a certain color or style you prefer?"

"Surprise me. Pick what you want. Let's start with five outfits."

"Five?"

"Yes."

My anxiety increases. "What am I to wear over it?"

"After La Perla, I'm sending you to Bergdorf's. Bree will assist you. You're on my account there, too."

"And Bree knows what I'm looking for?"

"Yes. We have a fundraiser tonight. It'll be boring and stuffy. I highly suggest focusing on alcohol."

I laugh.

"I wish I were kidding."

"Oh. Sorry."

"I'll get us out of there as soon as possible."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "And then?"

"Then I'm going to unwrap you and see what gift you got for me at La Perla."

My cheeks turn to fire. "I meant after Bergdorf's."

"Oh. The driver will take you to the salon and then home. I'll pick you up at six."

"No. I'll meet you."

"No, I'll pick you up," he sternly says.

"The contract said I was to meet you. It didn't say anything about you coming to my home." I don't want him to know anything about me. This is business, and I want to keep it that way. And I never want my daughter or Maribel to see or know about him.

I wait out his silence, thinking of more rebuttals if he tries to convince me.

He finally caves. His voice is harsh. "Did you lie? Are you married?"

"No."

"Boyfriend?"

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"No. I don't lie."

His voice drops several octaves. "Then why don't you want me to pick you up?"

I say the only thing that comes to my mind. "This is business. We aren't dating."

His voice sounds angry and maybe a little hurt. "No, we aren't dating. But you are mine. Or did you forget that detail?"

I close my eyes. "The contract said I would meet you. Please stick to our arrangement."

The line goes silent.

"Are you still there?"

"Fine. I will not pick you up. After the salon, my driver will bring you to my house. You can get ready there."

I'll miss dinner with Abby.

The one thing I get to do with Abby every day is have dinner. I'm not home a lot due to my jobs, but I've always been home for dinner.

"I need to be home first."

"Pick, Jasmine. Either I pick you up, or you come to my place. Which one?" he

growls.

It's one night. Then I'll get to spend more time with Abby during the day.

"I'll go to your place."

His voice softens. "Okay. I'll see you tonight."

I don't say goodbye and hang up. What have I gotten myself into?

Cee Cee knocks on the door, pulling me out of my moment of panic. "Jasmine? You okay?" She comes in and sits on the bed next to me.

I nod. "Yes. Everything was as he stated. I signed."

She forces a smile and puts her arm around me. "That's good. I would have done the same thing."

My eyes well with tears, and my body shakes.

"Oh, hey. What's wrong?" She pulls me tighter to her.

I wipe my face. "I'll be gone from ten this morning, and I don't know when I'll be back. I just spoke with Colton. I'll miss dinner with Abby tonight."

"Yes. But if you don't leave until ten, you'll get to make her breakfast. I bet she's going to be excited about that."

I take a deep breath. "You're right."

"I'll be here with her. She'll be okay. Why don't you try to have some fun while you're

out?"

"With Colton?"

"Yes."

I snort. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why? Because he's sexy, rich, and totally into you?"

"He's paying me."

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Cee Cee shrugs. "If a man wants to pay me what he's paying you, I'd be okay with it."

I tilt my head.

"Jeez. You don't have to give me the look of death. Not everything taboo has to be off-limits."

"What do you mean?"

She pushes my hair off my face. "Sweetie, I don't know anyone who's been through what you have. You deserve a break and some fun. Maybe you should treat this as such and forget about the minor details."

"Minor details being that he's paying me?"

Cee Cee smiles. "Yes."

"What does that make me?"

"What does it make him?"

"Since when did you get so loose on your morals?" I would never have expected Cee Cee to be on board with any of this.

She glances toward the door. "Since life showed up. The important things were put into perspective. And you have nothing to feel shameful about. You're doing everything you can to save your daughter. If anyone wants to judge you, who cares?"

And if a man like Colton wants to give you his money to solve your problem, why should you not accept it or feel bad about it?"

I'm not sure how to answer her, or even what I believe anymore. I rise. "I'm going to spend some cuddle time with Abby."

"Good idea." Cee Cee hugs me tight. "You're the best mom. Keep your head up."

"Thanks." I go into Abby's room and crawl into bed with her. For a half-hour, I listen to her breathe, thinking about how much better her medical care can be now that we have better insurance. I make a mental note to schedule her surgery and get a cashier's check for the five-thousand-dollar deposit. I try again not to cry.

She slowly wakes up, tilts her head, and smiles. "Mommy."

I kiss her. "Did you sleep well, sweetie?"

"Mm-hmm." She snuggles closer.

"How do you feel?"

She yawns. "Okay."

I stroke her head. "My work schedule changed today. I won't be home tonight, but I don't have to leave for a few hours. How do chocolate chip pancakes sound?"

She sits up. "Can I have extra chocolate in mine?"

I laugh. "Sure."

She jumps out of bed. "Okay."

At least she wasn't upset I won't be home tonight.

I spend the morning cooking and playing dolls with Abby then I quickly shower and get ready. When the car pulls into the driveway, I pull her into my arms. I kiss her forehead and put my hand on it. "Honey, do you feel okay?"

"Yes."

Cee Cee is working at her desk. She convinced her employer to allow her to work remotely. She's a graphic designer, and it allows her to be at home during the day with Abby. My job doesn't have the option of me working from home, so it was a saving grace her employer agreed. Worry fills Cee Cee's face. "What's wrong?"

"I think she might have a fever."

"I'll get the thermometer."

Abby's immune system is still compromised. Any sickness could be life-threatening or derail her ability to get treatment.

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Cee Cee brings the thermometer over, and there's a knock on the door. She hands me the thermometer and opens the door.

The driver says, "Pickup for Ms. Barello."

"She'll be right out. Please go wait in the car."

"Sure." He leaves, and Cee Cee shuts the door.

I press the button and aim it at Abby's forehead. It beeps. "Ninety-eight point seven."

"I'm sure she's okay. We've been up one point before, and she wasn't sick," Cee Cee reminds me.

"But what—"

"Jasmine, you need to go. I will take care of her. If anything changes, I'll call you."

"I'm fine, Mommy."

I smile bravely. "If you feel sick, tell Auntie Cee Cee."

Abby rolls her eyes. "I know, Mommy."

I hate how my little girl knows more about being sick than any child should. It's not right she has to try and comfort me and convince me she's okay.

I kiss her, give her a hug, and tickle her stomach.

She giggles and shrieks, "Mommy!"

"Go," Cee Cee demands and points to the door.

This is an ordinary workday. If I were going to my old job and her temperature was ninety-eight point seven, I would rely on Cee Cee to watch out for her and call on breaks for updates.

Nothing about this is typical.

It's my new normal.

I reluctantly leave. The driver is waiting outside the car. It's black, shiny, and looks like a sore thumb in my neighborhood of dilapidated houses. "Ma'am." He nods.

"Hi."

He opens the door, and I slide into the leather luxury. I take my phone out of my purse and snap a photo. I send it to Cee Cee. Going to try and see the positives. Better than the subway or bus.

She sends three emojis with heart eyes back.

Colton's HR department calls, and the woman on the phone asks me questions and sends me a link to their portal. I sign in and finish all the required paperwork as the car pulls up to La Perla.

I spend the next few hours working with sales associates to pick out lingerie, a dress, and shoes. I send Cee Cee photos of me in everything to get her opinion, between

checking on Abby. I've not paid attention to fashion since before I got pregnant. All of this is out of my comfort zone and wheelhouse.

But I can't deny the luxurious material makes me feel sexy, which I haven't felt in years. Maybe it's better I feel sexy if I have to do whatever it is Colton is going to demand of me.

With Cee Cee's approval, I decide on the red satin, halter dress with thin straps.

Cee Cee:It's perfect for the holidays.

Me:Too bad it's wasted on Colton.

Cee Cee:Is it?

My stomach flutters when Colton's chiseled face pops into my mind.

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Me:Yep.

I cringe inside. I've come to hate the holidays. Abby asked when we were getting a tree this year, and I made up a lie and told her there weren't a lot of trees available this year, so I wasn't sure if we would get one or not.

All Christmas does is remind me how much I'm failing at everything.

Bree from Bergdorf's hands me a pair of six-inch stilettos. They have crystals on the heels. "These are perfect!"

"Am I going to be able to walk in those?"

She circles her hand from behind her back and reveals a matching pair but with four-inch ones. "These better?"

A bit of relief surges through me. I'm still worried but not as much. I used to wear shoes like this. Well, not as expensive, but when I was younger, I lived in high heels. "Yes, thank you." I take them and slide them on.

Bree has me stand on the platform. A seamstress comes out and pins the bottom. Bree assures me, "We'll have this hemmed and delivered to Mr. Ash's home before five."

"Wow. Okay. Thank you."

"What about jewelry?"

I try to push the thought about how the cost of everything could be another payment toward Abby's treatment.

It's not coming out of your wage. Deal with it.

"I'm good. Just the dress and shoes, please."

Bree purses her lips. "Are you sure? We have several—"

"Yes. I'm sure. Just the dress and shoes, please." My voice is harsh, and I cringe inside when Bree winces. But I don't apologize. I need to get out of here. The amount of wasted money on this outfit when it could be paying for better things eats at me.

She nods. "Okay."

I leave and go to the salon. It, too, is somewhere I would never normally go. It's huge and also has spa services. When I check in, the woman has me fill out all sorts of waivers.

"This seems extreme for hair and makeup," I mutter.

She laughs. "Did Mr. Ash not tell you what he booked you for?"

"I'm assuming hair and makeup for the event we're going to tonight."

Her smile widens, and her eyes light up. "No. You get everything."

Dread fills me. "Everything?"

"Yes. Well, not the facial. I talked Mr. Ash out of it when he said you had an event tonight." She leans forward. "You know men. They don't understand the intricacies of

facials and downtime."

Downtime? I have no idea what she's talking about, but I nod. "So, what am I booked for?"

"A ninety-minute massage, mud bath, full-body wax"— she waves her hand in front of her and whispers like it's a secret—"he left that at our discretion." She winks. "A pedicure, manicure, and your hair and makeup."

I gape at her.

I'm away from my child, who might be sick, so I can spend the day getting plucked and groomed so I'm acceptable for him.

So much for his declaration that I'm perfect how I am.

"Susie will take you to the locker room."

I go through the motions and text Cee Cee after I get my robe on.

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Me:How is Abby?

Cee Cee:She's fine. Go enjoy the spa!

I'm too worried about Abby and upset I'm wasting precious time here when I could be with her.

Right before I get into the massage room I get another text.

Cee Cee:Abby's temperature is ninety-eight point eight. I called Dr. Plax to be safe. As I suspected, he said to watch her but not to worry yet.

Me:I'm coming home.

Cee Cee:No. I have everything under control. This is work. You wouldn't come home right now if you were at your other job.

Me:I'm at a spa. This isn't work.

Cee Cee: It is. And the five thousand you are earning today is too much to lose.

I can't argue with her.

Me:Please tell me if it goes any higher.

Cee Cee:Of course I will. Go relax and enjoy your spa day.

I close my eyes and softly bang my head against the locker.

"Are you Jasmine?"

I spin. "Yes."

A woman beams at me and holds out her hand. "I'm Sarah. I'll be giving you your massage and mud bath today."

I take a deep breath. "Okay." I slip my phone into my pocket.

"I'm so sorry, but we have a strict policy. No phones in the treatment rooms. You'll have to put it in your locker."

"I need my phone. I'll keep it on silent."

She smiles bigger. "I'm sorry, but I'll lose my job. The members are rather strict about it."

"Members?"

"Yes. Did you not know this is a spa club? Only members and their special guests are allowed in."

Of course it is. Why would Mr. Lickable send me anywhere that wasn't exclusive and you had to pay just to step inside?

"I didn't. How much is the membership?"

She raises her eyebrows. "I'm not the membership director, but I believe they start around one hundred thousand a year. If you want, I can add her to your schedule so

you can discuss joining?"

I laugh. "No, thank you. I'm a normal person. Somedays, I can't even afford McDonald's."

Sympathy crosses her face. "I know the feeling." She points to my phone. "If you stick your cell in the locker, we can get started."

I spend the next few hours worried, my chest in knots. By the time I'm able to look at my phone, I feel like I might have a nervous breakdown.

As soon as I get back to the locker room, I text Cee Cee.

Me:How is Abby?

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She sends me a picture of her curled up on the couch, sleeping.

Cee Cee: Her temperature is back to ninety-eight point seven.

I should be relieved it went down and not up. But it still is not perfect.

She texts again when I don't respond.

Cee Cee: She's fine.

Me: Okay. That's good.

Cee Cee: Yes. Try to enjoy yourself.

But there's no amount of pampering that can make my worries disappear.

7

Colton

My day's one fire after another. The merger I'm in the middle of closing has several issues arise. As soon as I fix those, a notification pops up on my phone with the Bergdorf's invoice.

I call Bree. "Thanks for taking care of Jasmine." Bree is Janelle's sister. Between the two of them, I never have to worry about what I'm wearing.

"She's sweet."

I smile. "Yes, she is." When she's not trying to fight me. I'm still a tad bitter she won't let me pick her up.

Bree stays quiet. I know that silence.

"Do you have something you want to tell me?" I ask.

"I'm worried about her accessories."

"What about them?"

"She didn't get any."

"Why not?" I growl.

"I asked her to look at jewelry, and she refused. I was taken aback. Your girlfriends usually go to the jewelry section before the dresses. So I didn't even think about her evening bag. She's not going to have anything to carry her phone or lipstick in."

I crack my neck, staring out my window and watching the cars race across the Manhattan Bridge. "Did you send the dress to my house yet?"

"No."

"Pick a purse for her. Text me some jewelry pieces, and I'll let you know what to send."

"Will do."

She didn't want it? What kind of woman doesn't want jewelry?

Is she trying to prove a point to me?

What am I even doing with her?

Any free moment I've had, I've asked myself this. When she told me I couldn't pick her up because we aren't dating, it didn't lessen my obsession for her to become mine.

She hates me.

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She was going to work at the club. I couldn't let anyone else have a chance with her.

She needs money. I have it. She should be thanking me.

I'm such a prick for these thoughts.

Bree texts me several photos of jewelry options. Some are ridiculously flashy. Most of my past girlfriends would have loved them. But something tells me to tone it down with Jasmine. I pick a matching diamond necklace, earring, and bracelet set. It's classy but not over the top. It reminds me of her.

The intercom buzzes, and Janelle says, "I have the file you requested."

"Bring it in."

Janelle comes in, hands me the folder, and says, "You know you aren't supposed to look at these things, right?"

I clench my jaw. "Your point?"

"Nothing. Just checking," she sings, smiles, and leaves the room.

I open the folder and scan through the information Jasmine entered into our portal.

Thirty-two. Lives in a rough part of Queens. Manager at the local credit union near her house. One dependent. Degree from—.

I flip farther into the folder, but all I can find is that she has a six-year-old daughter named Abby.

That's why she didn't want me to pick her up.

Where's the baby daddy?

I search all the social media platforms, but Jasmine has her profiles on lockdown. I can't see anything, not even a picture of her.

Janelle interrupts me. "Dexter is on line three."

I groan. "What now?"

"You don't want to know."

I spend the rest of my afternoon moving from one catastrophe to another. By the time Janelle intercoms me it's time to leave, I'm a ball of pent-up stress.

My phone never stops ringing. I continue to solve problems, which only irritates me since I pay people to create solutions and not involve me. When I get to the house, I'm chewing out my accountant.

I storm into the bedroom and remove my jacket and tie. "How do you screw up numbers at this point, Jack?"

"There was a data error—"

"I don't give a shit about your data error. You cost me half a million today."

"The important thing is we got it solved."

I shake my head. "You're not the one paying for your mistake. I'd be careful what you claim isn't important on this call."

Jack sighs.

I drop my pants and unbutton my shirt, holding the phone to my ear. "We're talking more about this tomorrow. No more fuckups on my dime, Jack." I hang up and toss my phone on the bed. I open the closet and freeze.

Jasmine gapes at me then crosses her arms over her body to cover herself up.

My pulse was already high from my conversation. Now I might have a heart attack.

I forgot she would be here. How that's possible, I don't know. But she's an apparition of an angel and temptress all in one. Her black lingerie is lace, strappy, and barely there, accentuating every curve she has.

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I swallow hard and step forward. "I didn't know you were here."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't sure where to change. Your housekeeper told me the dress was in the closet. I didn't know you would be in here."

"You don't need to apologize."

She stays frozen but takes shorter breaths.

"You look beautiful." Her hair is in long, black curls. Her hazel eyes pop, and her cheekbones are a creamy mix of tan porcelain and rose.

Those pouty red lips...oh fuck.

My dick starts to harden. I step closer to her. "Are you going to be scared of me all the time?"

"I'm not scared of you."

"No?" I arch an eyebrow and focus on her hands, which are still trying to hide her breasts.

"I'm half-naked right now if you haven't noticed."

"That, you are." Like a pervert, I slowly take in every detail of her. When I get back to her face, her cheeks are scarlet red, but I catch her checking out my chest tattoo.

I step closer, take her hands, and wrap them around my neck.

She inhales sharply.

"Don't move," I order her.

She obeys.

I slide my hands down her arms, and her eyes flutter. When I get to her shoulders, I move one hand down her back and palm her ass. I tug her tight to me. My other hand cradles her head. Her warm breasts push against me. I lean down to her lips. "Did you have a relaxing day?"

Confusion fills her face.

"Shopping? The spa?" Her confusion turns to anger. I suddenly get the impression something went wrong.

My heart beats faster. "Did someone not treat you right?"

She shakes her head. "No. Everyone was fine."

"You didn't like my gift?"

She turns away and takes a shaky breath.

"Look at me," I growl.

She turns back.

"You didn't like it?"

"I was not required to be there? If it was a gift?"

My head jerks back. "You didn't like my gift?" I repeat.

How can she not like my gift? Every woman I've ever dated loved to shop and go to the spa.

"You made it sound like I didn't have a choice whether to go or not."

Was it her choice?

What am I doing with her?

She continues in an angrier tone, "So I could have been home? I could have come here and gotten ready and not been gone all day?" Her body shakes, and her heart beats harder.

Or maybe it's my heart.

"You don't like to shop? Or hang out at the spa?" I ask in disbelief.

"How often will I have to go for upkeep? Is there a way to get all my outfits at once so I don't have to spend my hours and multiple days shopping?"

"Upkeep? What are you talking about?"

"The spa. All the things you wanted them to do to me so I could look however you wanted me to."

"That's not—"

She holds her hands in my face. "Like these nails. It's an entire hour of my time. And during that time, I can't text or..." She turns away.

"You think I had you go to the spa because I wanted your appearance changed?"

She clenches her jaw. Her eyes are full of fire. "Didn't you?"

"No. You didn't enjoy it?"

"I had to keep my phone in my locker."

"So? It's good to turn it off every now and then. Forget about life and whatever the hell is going on."

Her lip quivers harder as well as her voice. "I don't have the luxury of forgetting about what is going on in life. If you would please let me know in the future what is a requirement and what is not, I would appreciate it." She turns her head, and a tear falls down her cheek.

I don't understand how I hurt her by sending her for a day at the spa. But something is tearing at her, and my protective instincts kick in. I pick her up and start walking toward the bedroom.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh." I sit on the bed.

She tries to get away from me, but I don't release her.

"Stay still for a minute."

She finally stops moving and keeps her head on my chest. I stroke her hair. "I sent you to the spa to relax. You were stressed out last night. I didn't mean to upset or insult you. I apologize. You don't have to go again if you don't want to."

She lifts her head. "That's why you sent me?"

"Yes. I told you, you're perfect as you are. I'm sorry if I insulted you."

She squeezes her eyes shut then looks down. "I'm sorry. I ummm..." She puts her hand over her face. Then she completely breaks down.

I sit up straighter and tighten my arms around her. "Shhh." I hardly know this woman. But my heart's cracking for her. Her entire body shakes, and her sobs become loud. My chest hair dampens with her tears.

I don't know what to do, so I keep holding her and saying, "It'll be okay," and, "Shhh."

From time to time, she says, "I'm sorry," and then more wails come out of her. When she finally slows to a whimper, she looks up. Shame and anguish are in her eyes. "I'm so embarrassed. I'm sorry. Please don't fire me."

"Shhh." I lean down and kiss her. It's quick and meant to comfort her, but damn if her lips aren't the sweetest things I've ever tasted.

She freezes, breathing harder, locking her gaze to mine.

The tension in the air builds. I don't move. If I do, I'm going to have her in all ways, and I don't want to take advantage of her.

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Then she moves toward me. It's only an inch, but it might as well be a mile. All resolve I have to hold back dissolves in an instant.

I weave my hand through her hair. Our lips and tongues collide. Her lips barely part before my tongue slides against hers, flicking and stroking, needing anything she's willing to give me.

I'm a greedy bastard for it. I don't know what's wrong and why she broke down. She's in a situation where I should be giving to her, whatever that situation is. But I take. And I take. And I take from her some more until she can hardly breathe, and I'm on top of her with my raging hard-on.

"If you don't tell me to stop, I'm not going to," I warn her. My dick aches and pushes out of my boxers against her heat.

She scrunches her forehead and whispers, "I don't want to be your whore."

"You aren't," I sternly reply.

She turns away.

The realization of what I've done hits me like a brick to the face. In all my years of doing underhanded things, this is my most significant offense. The world I live in is full of ruthless businessmen who will screw you over in a minute. At times, you have to be the first one to make a move, or you'll get eaten alive. But my obsession to make her mine and keep her away from the other men in the club drove me to do something so stupid, I'm not sure how to recover from it.

I degraded her.

I made her feel like my whore.

Fuck.

"Jasmine."

"Hmmm?" She continues to avoid my eyes.

I stroke her jaw with my thumb. "Is this why you were crying?"

Her voice comes out scratchy. "No."

"Tell me why."

"I can't."

A new thought occurs. "Is someone harming you?"

"No." She slides away from me and sits on the edge of the bed with her back to me. "I need to get ready. My makeup is probably a mess."

"Jasmine, we don't need to go." I do need to be there, but she's so upset.

"Can we forget this happened and return to our agreement? I'm sorry I added drama. It won't happen again. Please... I... I need this job. I can't go into the long-term arrangement yet." Her voice is desperate. Her shoulders and arms shake.

"Jas—"

"Please." It comes out broken, and she grips the edge of the comforter, as if to steady herself.

"Okay. You don't need to worry about our arrangement," I tell her.

What exactly is our arrangement?

How am I getting out of this with her?

I don't want her as my prostitute. I've never wanted any woman as such. I'm trapped within the gravity of my actions and the agreement I've made with her.

"Why don't you just tell me what you need, and I'll give it to you. Then we can—"

"I don't have a lot. And I may have reached the bottom, but I'm not looking for handouts. As long as I do my job, and you stick to your part of our arrangement, I will earn what I need." She rises, walks into the bathroom, and shuts the door.

Self-loathing consumes me. I've never hated myself before. At this moment, I understand what it feels like. And I think I've done the unforgivable.

8

Jasmine

The woman staring back at me is unrecognizable. I go into the closet and put the gown on, then go back to the mirror. I'm wearing thousands of dollars of material. The lingerie under my dress is for a man I barely know. A man I wish I could succumb to, even if for only one night.

His kisses were full of fire. They sent so much warmth through my body, I was humming. For a split second, I forgot about hospitals, debt collectors, and our arrangement.

Then reality slapped me in the face.

No matter what I do or don't do with him, I'm his escort. There isn't any way to get around it. We'll go to the event tonight then I'll be his to command. He's paying me to do so. Will it be at his house or the club or somewhere else? I don't know what he has planned, but all his kisses did was show me how much power he has to hurt me.

I don't want to be a blip on his radar or his fuck toy to pass the time. But I'm some sort of challenge to him, and I need to keep feelings out of this.

No more kissing. No more falling apart or under his spell. From here on out, I do my job and go home to Abby as soon as I can.

I straighten my shoulders, clutching my phone. I curse myself for not letting Bree

show me accessories. But I won't go without my phone, so I guess I'm holding it all night since my ten-dollar purse isn't going to match.

When I step out of the bathroom, all the pep talks in the world can't stop me from holding my breath. My heart pitter-patters.

Colton's in a black tux. His bowtie and handkerchief match the red color of my dress. Like his suits, this tuxedo appears to be made especially for him.

"You look beautiful," he says. His eyes are full of fire. It's the same lust I saw last night at the club. But something else is there, too. I'm not sure what, but I see it.

I wish I didn't feel excitement when he shows his attraction toward me. Nothing good can come of it. But every look, compliment, and touch lights me up. I smile. "You look nice, too."

He suddenly shifts on his feet, as if nervous.

I raise my eyebrows in question.

He turns and picks something up off the bed. "Bree said you didn't pick a bag. Do you want this for tonight?" He holds out a matching red clutch with a tiny bit of bling on it.

"Yes. Please! Thank you!"

His lips turn up. "Glad I got it right." He winks.

I freeze. "Colton."

"Yeah?"

"I got things wrong. Your gift was nice. If things were different...well..."

"It's okay. You know, if you ever want to tell me what's going on, I've been told by a select few people I'm a good listener."

I softly laugh. "Only a select few?"

Something passes in his eyes. Is it grief? As soon as it comes, it goes. "Yeah. I'm normally giving orders."

I bite my lip. "I can see that about you."

He runs his hand through his hair. "I have something else for you. But if you don't want them, it's okay."

"What is it?"

He steps aside. Three boxes are on the bed, filled with diamond jewelry. Each piece is expensive and real but not over the top, which is what I would have expected him to choose. Everything from the private club and spa, to the stores he sent me to shop at today, represent a world I don't live in. A world that screams "flash your money," and I expected him to only select jewelry in the same way.

Maybe I'm wrong about him?

"Wow. Those are gorgeous."

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"You like them?"

"Yes. They're exquisite," I admit.

"They reminded me of you." His eyes are full of sincerity and show no sign of his typical cocky expression.

Earlier in the day, I didn't want anything to do with jewelry. But something about the fact he picked them out for me, and the glaring ugly scene I made about the spa, makes me push my thoughts about how expensive they are out of my mind. I reach up and put my hand over his heart. "Thank you. Will you help me put them on?"

"Sure."

I hand him the necklace box and put the earrings on. He stands behind me, moves my hair to the side, then secures the cool metal around my neck. "Hand me the bracelet."

I obey.

He circles his arms around me, and I lean back into his hard frame. Everything about him feels safe and good. I hold my wrist up, and he snaps the bracelet in place.

He leans into my ear. "Mission accomplished."

I inhale his sexy scent and spin. "What is this event for tonight?"

His face hardens. "It's a fundraiser my company put together. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

He leads me out of the bedroom and through the penthouse.

"Your home is lovely, by the way. The views are fantastic." Modern grays, whites, and blacks coordinate through the house.

"Thanks."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Few years."

"It's just you?"

His lips twitch. He leans down to my ear. "I'm not hiding a wife and five kids in the pantry."

I laugh. "Would they fit in your pantry?"

He winces. "Possibly."

"Wow. Do you like to cook?"

"I don't know how. Janelle's usually shoving food at me between meetings, or I'm dealing with some dickhead at dinner."

"You don't like what you do?"

"I do. It's the people I have to sometimes deal with I don't care too much for."

I let his words sink in then ask, "Who's Janelle?"

"The world's best assistant."

"Guess I won't be getting that title, then," I tease.

He glances at the ceiling.

"Sorry. Just a joke."

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The elevator opens, and he guides me inside. "I wasn't sure what to put on the paperwork." He pushes the button.

"I'm glad you wrote 'personal assistant' over 'beck-and-call stripper,'" I admit.

He cringes. "Jasmine, I don't—"

The elevator opens, and an older couple steps inside. I step closer to Colton. He places his hand on the side of my hip.

I try to ignore the zings rushing to my pulsing insides.

We get out of the elevator and go directly to his car. A different driver opens the door. We slide in. Colton's phone rings.

He glances at it and shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I need to take this."

"It's okay."

"Bernie, what're the stats?"

I pull my phone out of my clutch and text Cee Cee.

Me: Everything okay?

Cee Cee: Yes. Temperature normal. She adds three party emojis.

I breathe a sigh of relief then send her three fist bumps.

Cee Cee: She wants to talk to you. Is that okay?

I glance at Colton. He's looking out the window and aggressively speaking.

Me: Yes, but tell her I need to be super quiet and can't talk long.

My phone rings, and I put it to my ear. I, too, turn toward my window. In a quiet voice, I say, "Hi, sweetie."

"Mommy, Auntie Cee Cee and I made cupcakes. I saved you a pink one."

"Thank you. What are you doing now?"

"Maribel and I are going to have a tea party with my cupcakes."

I smile. "That sounds fun."

"Are you coming home soon?"

Guilt eats at me. "No, sweetie. I'll be home late. But tomorrow we'll have breakfast together, okay?"

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Yay." She claps.

"I have to go, sweetie. Be good for Auntie Cee Cee."

"Love you, Mommy."

"Love you, too."

We hang up, and I put my phone in my purse. When I look up, Colton is staring at me.

Great. Did he hear my call?

"Was that your daughter?"

My pulse increases. "How do you know I have a daughter?"

Guilt crosses his face. "HR paperwork."

"Do you look at everyone's HR file?"

"No. Are you going to be mad at me all night?" He raises his eyebrows.

I pause but then reply, "No."

He takes my hand and kisses the back of it. "Good. So your daughter is six?"

"Yes."

What else does he know?

"Her name is Abby?"

"Yes."

He opens his mouth then snaps it shut.

He knows.

I take a deep breath. "What were you going to ask me?"

His eyes drill into mine. "Where is her father? Is he in New York?"

For some reason, I let out a small laugh. "No idea. After two years of marriage, and while I was eight months pregnant, he told me he wouldn't leave me if I got an abortion. Haven't seen or heard from him since the night he left the signed divorce papers on the table."

Colton's eyes widen. "At eight months?"

"Yes."

"What a fucking idiot," he blurts out.

Maybe it's the stress of the day or how I lost it in Colton's room, but I lose it again. Only this time, laughter brings my tears.

Colton chuckles, too. "Why are we laughing?"

"I don't know. Just the way you said it. Plus, he is a huge idiot, isn't he?"

"Yes. Total loser."

When we finally stop, he hands me his handkerchief, and I dab my eyes, fold it to hide my tear and makeup stains, then put it back in his chest pocket.

"So, what else do you know about my life?"

"Thirty-two, manager of the credit union, and you have a daughter. Oh, no offense, and I can say this because I'm from there, but you live in a shitty area of Queens."

I should be insulted, but it just makes me smile. Everyone who lives in my neighborhood knows it's a rundown dump with hardly any taxpayer money to support it.

"You're from Queens?"

He nods.

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"You didn't grow up with a silver spoon in your mouth?"

"No."

"Wow. That's impressive."

He ignores my compliment. "Did I miss anything about you?"

"Sounds like you got the full picture."

He rolls his head toward me. "I forgot about your degree. Why are you working in a credit union if you have an art degree?"

"Oh. You want all the fun details tonight."

"Bring it on."

I've already told him more than I ever planned on. But the words continue to roll out of my mouth. "Ok. My husband was a musician in a band. I took the job at the credit union and a second one to support his career. Albums, equipment, and costumes all cost money. And then when he left, I was pregnant. So..." I shrug my shoulders.

"He's never seen Abby, then?"

"No."

"He doesn't pay you child support?"

"I don't know where he's at. There's no way to collect it."

"Do you have family who helps you?"

"My mom died—she hated him, by the way. Every chance she had to tell me to run from him, she did. But I didn't listen. When he left, Cee Cee helped me. I don't have any other family."

"Cee Cee is your cousin?"

Enough about me.

"Yes. Are you close to your family?"

The same expression he had when he told me about the charity event tonight fills his face. "My mom is in New York."

"Are you an only child?"

He stares out the window. "Depends on how you determine that."

"What do you mean?"

He turns back. "You didn't ask me how I made my money."

"Isn't it rude to ask?"

He smiles. "I don't think you're a rude person."

"No?"

"No."

I wince. "Even when I mistake a nice gesture like a spa day?"

He smiles. "Even then."

"Hmmm. Okay, I'll bite. How did you make your money?"

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He licks his lips and swallows. "Do you remember the issues a few years ago about water contamination in Queens?"

I turn in my seat. "Yes. They linked it to the chemical plant, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

He glances at his feet then back at me. "We were one of the families affected. My father got prostate cancer and died when I was ten. My younger sister was eight when she passed from leukemia. My mother had breast cancer but survived."

I put my hand over my mouth, too stunned to speak. My eyes fill with tears. "I'm so sorry."

He focuses on the divider window. "We were poor. There weren't a lot of options, especially with both my parents out of work. I'm still unsure why I didn't get sick."

I put my hand on his.

His blue eyes darken. "Anyway, shortly after I graduated high school, my mom received the proceeds from the lawsuit. She gave me money to go to college, but instead, I took it and invested in properties. Then I started buying companies with it."

"Wow."

"The fundraiser tonight is for a nonprofit children's ward. It'll be a state-of-the-art cancer center in my sister's name. While it won't turn away any child, the purpose is to help those children who can't afford treatment. My mom will be there. She's heading it up and has been working on it for years."

My heart almost stops. He's building a center for children like Abby? I'm so choked up, I can hardly speak. "That's amazing."

The driver pulls up to the curb and comes to our door. He opens it, and Colton steps out, then reaches in for me. I try to contain my shock. We're at the hospital Abby is always at. It's the part I've never been in since it's reserved for events. The pit in my stomach I always get when I'm here grows.

I need to calm down. It's a different reason I'm here. It's a good reason.

There's a red carpet and photographers. In a blur, I go through the motions, smiling while Colton guides me through it.

"Sorry about all the chaos. It's a necessary evil for donations. I forgot to warn you," Colton says when we get inside.

Pull it together. This is an important night.

I smile. "It's okay. I don't have any money to donate, but if your mom needs any help, I could volunteer."

He smiles. "You would want to do that?"

I nod. "Yes. Very much."

He hesitates then says, "Do you want to meet her? She's in front of the Christmas

trees."

"Please."

He leads me through a sea of people with his arm around my waist. The ballroom is huge and decorated for Christmas. Instrumental holiday-themed music plays. Three giant Christmas trees are at the front.

A beautiful woman with dark hair and gray streaks running through it stands in front of them, shaking hands and hugging guests. She wears a long green dress. When she sees Colton, her face lights up.

They embrace, and he steps back.

Her face is kind, and she smiles at me. "And who is this?"

Colton puts his arm around my waist. "This is Jasmine."

"Jasmine. It's nice to meet you. I'm Caroline." She hugs me. "My son never brings anyone to our event. You must be special."

"She is special," Colton confidently states.

Heat rises in my cheeks and flutters take off in my stomach. I quickly glance at Colton but turn back to his mom. "It's nice to meet you, too. I think it's amazing what you're doing. If there's any way I can help, I would love to."

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"I think that would be fabulous. Maybe then I could see my son more, too, hmm?" She raises her eyebrows at him then looks back at me. "He's always working so hard. I tell him all the time he needs to take a breather. I hope you're making him rest and do some things besides work."

"Mom," Colton reprimands.

"What? It's true."

Well, I am his beck-and-call stripper.

Why do I find it amusing all of a sudden?

I seriously am off my rocker tonight.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he isn't working all the time."

Someone behind us shouts, "Caroline!"

His mom hugs me again and says in my ear, "I'm so glad you're here."

"Thanks. Me, too. And thank you for what you're doing...for the children and their families."

She only smiles. There's sadness in her eyes. It's an expression a mother who's lost a child or fears it on a daily basis wouldn't miss. I look away, blinking hard, and spin to leave.

Colton steers me away. "Sorry. My mom—"

"Is great."

He studies my face.

"She is."

"Yeah, she is," he agrees and grabs two glasses of champagne from the waiter. He hands me one.

I take a sip. "I do have a question."

"Shoot."

"Why does your Christmas tree in your house look like that one?" I point to the tree his mom is standing in front of. "Don't get me wrong, it's incredible. But I've never seen identical trees in two different places before."

His face turns red. "My mom designs the trees for every fundraiser. Every year, she has the company come put mine up so I don't forget and miss the Christmas season."

"Because you're working?"

"Yes and no. I'm not a big fan of the holiday."

I snort. "You and me both. What's your reason?"

"It's not very exciting when you're an adult and it's just you and your mom. Plus, it was my sister's favorite holiday. After she died, it was a reminder that she's no longer here."

I stay quiet.

"What's your reason?" he asks.

I choose my words carefully. For some reason, I still don't want to disclose Abby's cancer. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's a self-preservation thing so I don't become a sobbing mess again. So I take the easy way out. "It's not fun when you can't even give your child a Christmas tree."

I don't miss the shock in his expression.

I quickly ask, "You don't take a break very often?"

He recovers. "No."

"Is that why you're part of the club?"

His jaw clenches.

"Sorry. Star said you don't usually...associate with the women."

His blue eyes darken. "No, I don't."

"Then why are you a member?"

He nervously shifts but doesn't take his eyes off mine. "It's the only bar in New York where I can have a drink and think. And when I'm doing business deals, I take the men there. You find out a lot about a person and what their weaknesses are at the club. They tend to agree to more things than they normally would."

My stomach flips, but I still ask him what I can't figure out. "If you don't normally do this, why do it with me?"

"It's not obvious?"

"No."

He motions for the waiter to come over. He takes my glass out of my hand and puts both his and mine on the tray. "Thanks," he says to the waiter then steps closer to me and cups my cheeks.

My butterflies take off.

He tilts my head and leans closer to my face. "I like you. I didn't want any other man to touch you. And I think I fucked it all up between us."

I inhale sharply.

"Did I?" His breath merges with mine, and his eyes drill into me, as if I am all he wants. I saw his possessiveness the prior night, but tonight it's laced with fear and regret.

Blood pounds in my ears. The music shuts off, and a man announces, "Please take your seats."

"We have to sit down," I murmur.

His face falls, and he releases me. He guides me to the front of the room and pulls out my chair. We sit with his mom and other people he introduces me to, but I struggle to pay attention.

He keeps his arm around me. I feel like I'm his and this could be real. That somehow, we could be together, and I could have a happily ever after. And I want him.

But after dinner, they show slides of children with cancer. Several families come on stage and speak to draw in donations. And while I love and appreciate what he and his mom are doing more than they'll ever know, it takes the broken pieces I've mended together too many times and throws bricks on them.

I struggle to breathe. I manage to hold it together so I don't have another breakdown in front of him and all these people, but it reminds me why I'm here.

I'm not here to find my happily ever after, or eat an expensive meal, or dance. I'm not here to fall in love.

I'm only here to save the person who deserves all of my love. My baby can't fight if I don't. And the only way to do that is by keeping my deal with Colton. I don't have the room to take risks. As much as I hate the fact I've become a desperate person for money, nothing has changed. I still have to pay twenty-five thousand dollars for ten to twelve treatments.

After the presentation, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. Colton follows me. "Jasmine, are you okay?"

I manage to say, "Yes. I need a few minutes."

He hesitates, as if he knows something is wrong.

I force a smile. "I'll meet you at the table." I spin, go into the women's room, and lock myself in a stall.

I don't know why I don't tell him about Abby. But hearing all the stories about children who didn't make it because they couldn't afford treatment and how they might have lived if they had, tears at my heart. And it's already ripped into shreds. I'm not sure how much more it can take before there's nothing left of it.

I pull out my phone to check on Abby and see I missed a call and several text messages from Cee Cee. The last makes my heart almost stop.

Cee Cee: Meet me at the hospital. Abby's temperature came back, and it's over one hundred.

My body shakes. I've been drinking champagne all night while my baby was here, under my nose, ill again.

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I run out of the bathroom and don't even see Colton. I barely hear him behind me.

He catches up to me and stops me. "Jasmine. Where are you going?"

I don't attempt to hide anything anymore. I blurt out while crying, "My daughter. She has cancer. Her fever spiked...and..."

His eyes widen, and he pulls me into him.

I push him away. "I have to go." I start to run again and don't even realize he's behind me.

Since I've been here so much, I know the hospital like the back of my hand. I race through the halls and don't wait for the elevator. I take the stairs. When I get to the waiting room, Maribel is sitting on a chair, hugging her knees. Cee Cee is pacing.

"What's going on?"

I've seen Cee Cee's worried expression too many times. "We don't know. They took her for tests."

9

Colton

Abby has cancer.

Why didn't she tell me?

Cee Cee embraces Jasmine, and my phone buzzes.

Mom: Why did you and Jasmine run out of here? What is wrong?

Me: We're on the eighth floor.

Mom: Why?

I glance at Jasmine. Cee Cee is talking to her in a hushed tone. My heart bleeds.

Me: I didn't know.

Mom: About?

Me: Her daughter. She has a fever. I'm not sure what is going on.

Mom: I'll be right up.

I put my phone away, feeling helpless, wishing Jasmine would have told me about Abby.

I preyed on a mother whose child has cancer and made her into my "beck-and-call stripper."

I hate the term she used and the fact I made her feel cheap. And she may not have done anything yet, but there is no hiding what I did or the shame I feel. It started last night when I went to bed and has only been escalating throughout the day. Now, I've officially hit bottom. My self-disgust can't get any higher.

Why would she tell me when I made her feel like my prostitute? There's no bouncing back from this. How could she ever see me as anything but a pig?

The doctor comes out. Jasmine and Cee Cee rush over to him. I step behind them.

"Dr. Plax, what's happening?" Jasmine's voice is so full of fear, I automatically put my arm around her.

She doesn't push me away. Her body is trembling, so I tighten my arm around her.

Dr. Plax looks at me in surprise. "Colton." He nods then refocuses on Jasmine. "Abby's test came back clear. Her fever lowered to ninety-nine point one. Nothing is showing up on her blood work or the scans. Her immune system is currently fighting whatever is going on."

"Can I see her?"

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"Yes. She's in room eight-twenty-one, but let's keep it to one person at a time."

"Thank you." Jasmine races down the hall.

"Dr. Plax, what's Abby's full situation?" I ask. I've known him for years. My mother knows him better since she has done most of the groundwork for the new wing, but I've been in several meetings where he came in to consult on different issues.

"I can't discuss her situation due to the laws. You'll need to get that from her mother. Or Cee Cee." He winks. "Excuse me. I need to see another patient."

I turn to Cee Cee. "Please tell me what's going on."

She hesitates.

I firmly say, "Cee Cee, I can help."

She purses her lips and glances at the teenager in the chair. "Yes. I'm aware of how you can help and what's involved."

I cringe. "Can we discuss my downfalls at another time and focus on what is important right now?"

She sighs. "Okay. Abby has leukemia. She's had too many treatments to count over the last three years. There is a new treatment that just got approved. The hospital is starting it in January."

"I'm aware of it."

She gapes. "How?"

"Because we pushed the hospital," my mother's voice says behind me.

Cee Cee scrunches her face.

"This is my mother, Caroline. Mom, this is Jasmine's cousin, Cee Cee."

My mom holds out her hand, and Cee Cee shakes it. "Nice to meet you. But why would you know about the new treatment?"

"It's a long story. Colton will fill you in. However, can you finish explaining what is happening with Abby?"

Cee Cee continues, "Before we met with Dr. Plax last week, all the doctors told Jasmine the only options for more treatment would only briefly extend Abby's life. They gave Abby anywhere up to a year. Everything depends on her not catching anything and how quickly the cancer would continue to spread. Dr. Plax said Abby was a perfect candidate for the new treatment. But the hospital won't allow it to start until after the new year. Abby needs to stay healthy enough to start, and Jasmine has to come up with twenty-five thousand dollars a treatment. Dr. Plax said the foundation had approved to pay the other half."

I say to my mother, "Who on the board pushed for the January rollout?"

Disgust fills her face. "Who do you think led the pact?"

"Nelson?"

My mom nods.

"Who's that?" Cee Cee asks.

"The greedy bastard who doesn't think about sick people, rather how the hospital can make more money."

"I don't understand."

My mom sighs. She puts her arm around Cee Cee. "And you never will. Walk with me. I want to know everything." She glances at the girl in the chair. "Is this your daughter?"

Cee Cee smiles. "Yes. Maribel."

"She looks just like you. Should we have her come with us?"

Cee Cee shrugs. "She knows everything. Come on, Maribel."

Maribel obeys, and I watch them disappear down the hall. Dr. Plax appears, and I corner him.

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"The treatment will save Abby's life?"

He glances between us. "I can't—"

"Then we'll talk in hypotheticals."

His lips twitch. "Okay. What's our pretend situation?"

"A child with all the same medical conditions as Abby gets the treatment. What are her chances of survival?"

"The best we've ever seen based on the ten years of studies."

"And side effects?"

"Barely any."

"So, it's a miracle cure?"

"I won't call anything a miracle or a cure, but it's extremely promising."

I lower my voice. "And you could administer it right now?"

His face hardens. "The board approved January third."

"So, the medication is sitting in this hospital right now, and you're not able to dispense it due to the board?"

He double-checks no one is listening. "Hypothetically, you are correct. But you didn't hear it from me."

"And can a child with a fever receive the treatment?"

"No. The studies all show she needs to be forty-eight hours fever-free."

"But then she could get it?"

"As long as her bloodwork comes back normal."

I pat him on the back. "Okay. I'll see you soon."

He raises his eyebrows. "What are you going to do?"

"Be the board's worst nightmare."

He takes a deep breath. "Good luck. Keep my name out of it."

"I will." I move quickly through the building, my rage building with every step I take. When I get to the ballroom, I scan the room for the table several of the board members are at.

I grab an empty seat from another table and spin it so it's backward. I sit behind Dr. Nelson and the other major influencer on the board, Dr. Petri.

"Gentlemen," I say and pat their backs.

They turn and kiss my ass like they always do.

I hold my hand up. "I've got a situation I need your immediate help with."

"Oh?" Dr. Nelson turns in his chair more.

"I assume you appreciate—no, let's cut the bullshit. I know you don't want to lose any of my support for this project or future ones."

Dr. Petri scrunches his forehead. His voice crackles. "Of course not. What can we do for you?"

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I point at Dr. Nelson. "You convinced the board not to allow the new treatment for children with leukemia to start until the new year. You're going to have an emergency board meeting right now and override this decision, or I'm not only pulling all my funding, but I'm also going to get up on the stage with a microphone and tell everyone in this room the situation."

"What situation is that?"

"A little girl is dying without the treatment, and I'm sure other children are, too. And you're the guy allowing her to die."

"I've done no—"

"You are."

"There are logistics for treatment. We have to receive the medication."

"It's in the hospital. I've confirmed it."

His eyes turn to slits. "From whom?"

"None of your business. Your decision is stopping the treatment. So fix this immediately, or you'll see I don't make threats. I implement them."

His face turns red, and he scowls.

Dr. Petri clears his throat. He looks across the table. "Roy. Peter. Get Jenson and

Hanover behind you. Board room in fifteen minutes." He scoots out of his chair. "I'll gather the others."

"Why?" Peter asks.

"Emergency meeting. Don't be late so we can get this over with." He walks off.

I lean into Dr. Nelson's ear. "If you fuck this up, I'm taking it personally." I pat him on the back again and walk off.

When the members start to leave, I follow them and wait outside the door.

I pace the hallway but not for long. Five minutes later, the door opens. Dr. Nelson sneers. "You got what you wanted."

"Send notice to the pediatric ward."

"Now?"

"Yes, now," I growl.

He sighs, takes out his phone, and sends an email. "Happy?"

"With your greedy ass?"

He glares at me. "I'd like to get back to my evening now."

I refrain from punching him and go down to the billing department. An older woman with blonde hair and oversized blue glasses is at the counter. She smiles. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to pay off an account."

"Name?"

"Abby Barelo. Her mother's name is Jasmine."

She types quickly, and her eyes widen. "How much would you like to pay toward it?"

"The balance."

Her expression turns sympathetic. "Sir, it's almost one point two million dollars."

I pull out my wallet and put down my card. "Please run it in full."

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She swallows hard. "The full amount?"

"Yes."

She quickly types, swipes my card in the machine, and surprise appears on her face when the approval pops up on the screen. A stack of papers print, and she grabs them. She pulls the bottom page out. "I assume you don't want to go over each charge?"

I shake my head. "No, ma'am."

She puts an X on a line. "Sign here, please."

I sign then give her my business card. "Please change the billing for Abby to me. Here's my information."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you." I turn and go back to the eighth floor. I find the room Abby and Jasmine are in. The door is closed, but the curtain is open. It's dark, aside from a small, dim light. Jasmine lies on the bed. Abby is curled up asleep. Jasmine stares at the wall in front of her, wiping her face.

My heart beats harder as I watch them. Abby has to lose her fever for forty-eight hours to start the treatment. There isn't any way for me to make it happen. I'm not sure what to do to help Jasmine.

My mom appears at some point and puts her arm around me. "I heard you pissed

some board members off."

I grunt. "That's why you're the one who deals with them and not me."

"You did good. And I'm still the nice one," she teases.

"Thank God for that," I mutter.

We stay silent for a while, watching through the glass.

"Have you talked to her?" my mom asks.

"No. She didn't tell me about Abby."

"Why do you think she didn't trust you with this information?"

I cringe as I focus on the ceiling. I finally admit, "I didn't show her the best side of me when we met."

"Ahh. I see."

"I've made a lot of stupid decisions in my life, but this one..." I shake my head, watching Jasmine kiss Abby's head. "I'm not sure how to make up for it."

My mom squeezes her arm around my waist. "Life is short. If anyone knows that, it's us. But Jasmine does, too. You have a good heart, but sometimes, your ego gets in the way. I suggest you grovel. It typically worked well when your father would do it."

More dread washes over me. "I don't think any amount of groveling will make what I did right."

My mom releases me. "Try it. I saw how she looked at you. You might be surprised."
She kisses me on the cheek and leaves.

I don't move. At some point, Jasmine glances over at the glass and sees me. When she looks away, my heart rips again. But I don't leave. I stay there all night until Cee Cee comes and tells me she needs to talk to me with Dr. Plax.

10

Jasmine

Exhaustion sets in, and I fall asleep. When I wake up, the sun is shining into the room. Cee Cee sits next to the bed with coffee.

"What time is it?" I whisper, not wanting to wake Abby up.

"Seven. Abby's been fever-free for the last three hours."

I exhale in relief. She's not out of the woods. We've been down this road before where it dips then comes back with a vengeance. But all I can do is hope it doesn't spike again.

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Cee Cee hands me the coffee, and I take a sip.

"A lot has happened while you've been asleep."

"Oh?"

She tries to hide a smirk. "Mr. Lickable is growing on me."

"Shh," I reprimand her and double-check Abby is asleep. "Don't call him that."

Her face and voice turn serious. "He did something, and the board agreed to let the treatments start now. If Abby stays fever free for forty-eight hours, Dr. Plax said he could administer it."

Chills run through my body. My chest tightens. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"This is—" I shut my eyes. Panic crawls through me.

"What?" Cee Cee asks. "This is amazing."

"I don't have all the money." I set the coffee between the railing and my legs and put my hand over my face.

Cee Cee puts her arm around my shoulder. "It's already paid for. Colton took care of it. And not just the first treatment. All of them. Plus, he paid off your account."

I freeze. The blood drains from my face. "What?"

Cee Cee nods with a big smile. "All of it."

"It was over a million dollars," I whisper.

"Yes. He's been here the entire time. He won't leave. And his mom, too. She's really nice, by the way."

I gape at her.

She snorts. "You should see your face right now."

My thoughts are all over the place. Relief, gratitude, and also trepidation fill me. His regret over our arrangement seemed genuine at the fundraiser. But I can't fathom the amount of money he just paid. Surely, he's going to want something from me.

Am I going to have to be his whore now?

How many times do I have to sleep with him to pay him back?

Then I look at Abby and feel guilty. Whatever Colton wants from me to pay off my debt to him, I shouldn't worry about. The only thing that matters is her life. If he hadn't done what he did, then I wouldn't even be thinking about this.

It could be worse. At least I'm attracted to him.

I should feel grateful and fall to his feet in thanks.

I'm sure he'd love that.

Jeez, why am I even worrying about this right now?

"Mommy," Abby whispers.

I smile and stroke her cheek. "Hey, sweetie."

"I'm thirsty."

Cee Cee hands me a Styrofoam cup filled with ice water and a straw.

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"Take a sip but go slow." I sit up and pull Abby with me.

She takes a few sips, and I kiss her bald head.

Cee Cee takes the cup back.

I ask Abby, "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Can we go home?"

"I need to speak with Dr. Plax."

Cee Cee rises. "Maribel is waiting to see Abby. Have her come back, and you talk with Dr. Plax."

I kiss Abby's head again and hug her. "I'll be back." I rise and go to the waiting room. Maribel and Caroline are playing a game of checkers. Colton is on his phone, in his day-old tux, still looking sexy as hell, pacing the room.

Maybe it won't be so bad being his prostitute.

What the hell am I saying?

At least he's the best kisser on the planet.

These thoughts aren't helping anything.

He sees me and hangs up. I turn away from him.

"Maribel, Abby's awake and wants to see you."

She jumps up. "Can we finish later?"

Caroline smiles and rises. She's still in her green dress from the night before. "Sure." She hugs me. It's warm and motherly. I haven't felt anything like it since before my mom died, and it catches me off guard. I return her hug. She puts her hands on my shoulders. "How are you holding up?"

It's a loaded question. I see in her eyes she understands everything I'm going through. I've seen it with other mothers I've gotten to know whose children have cancer. I don't give her my standard answer of "okay." Something tells me not to lie to her. "I feel like I'm a window that's had a baseball thrown through it. But I'm also one ball away before the glass shatters into millions of pieces."

Her sympathetic smile doesn't feel like some I've received. It's not full of pity. It's a level of compassion and knowledge that others don't have. They can't. They've not been in my shoes, but she has.

"I'll tell you a secret," she says.

"Please. Enlighten me." I attempt a smile.

"When the baseballs come flying, and the shards fly everywhere, it's okay to let others sweep them up." She leans closer. "Even if sometimes they're idiots and don't make the best decisions."

Oh God. Does she know what I agreed to do?

My face burns in embarrassment.

She hugs me again. "I'm going to go home for a few hours. I'll be back later. Colton will give you my number. You call me if you need anything. Even if it's just to talk."

"Thank you."

She squeezes my hand, pats Colton on the shoulder, then mumbles something in his ear I can't hear. He takes a deep breath and comes over to me.

"Please tell me your mom doesn't know about—"

"She doesn't."

"But she said—"

"I told her I was the world's biggest idiot, did something incredibly stupid, and wasn't sure how you would ever forgive me. I didn't go into details, and she didn't pry."

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I release a big breath. "Good. I really like your mom."

"She feels the same about you."

We stare in uncomfortable silence. He steps closer. "I wish I had known about Abby and what you were going through."

"Not something you tell someone when you're signing a contract to be a 'beck-and-call stripper,'" I sarcastically say.

His face hardens and turns red. "I can't tell you how much I hate myself for what I did."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for. I went to the club. I had a notion about what happened there. I agreed to your terms. I'm not innocent in all this, and honestly, if I had to do it again, I would. I didn't have any other options."

"I'm not judging you, Jasmine. I'm disappointed in myself. There's a reason I don't engage in the club activities. I saw you and lost my head. I'm sorry."

I try to calm my flutters down. No matter our history, I can't deny I like the fact he wanted me.

"We both made choices," I claim, giving him a pass.

We stare at each other.

I take a nervous breath. "Cee Cee told me what you did. I need to thank you. How do you want me to repay you?"

Shock registers on his face. His voice sounds insulted. "There's no repayment."

"It's a lot of money."

"Don't worry about it."

"I am. It's more than anything we discussed, and—"

"Jesus, Jasmine," he growls.

I jerk my head back.

He steps forward and firmly holds my cheeks. His blue eyes blaze into mine. His delicious scent overpowers me. "Do you not understand I don't care about the money?"

My insides quiver.

I force myself to ask, "Then what do you care about?"

"You. I care about you and making sure Abby gets whatever she needs. And I care about figuring out a way for you to forgive me and learn to trust me, since I didn't treat you how I should have."

"There isn't anything to forgive. I already told you there were two of us who made choices."

"Yes, there is. And this is all on me, Jasmine. Not you," he firmly states.

I glance at his lips. It's not intentional, but they're so close. I don't want to hate him or hold a grudge. He's already done more for me than I could ever imagine, and he's telling me he wants nothing in return.

He leans closer. Our lips are only an inch apart. "Give me a real chance."

"What does that mean?" I whisper.

"It means I'm going to be the man I should have been when I first laid eyes on you."

"I'm kind of a mess if you haven't noticed."

His lips twitch. He brushes them against mine. "I can handle messy."

I only nod a few times. His lips touch mine, and his tongue parts my mouth. His hand slides to the back of my head, fisting my hair. His other hand slides around me and palms my ass, tugging me closer to him until our bodies press together in perfection.

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Heat and hunger ignite and build until my knees go weak and toes curl. I'm breathless when I hear someone clear their throat.

I spin, and Colton keeps his arms planted on my waist and body against mine.

"Dr. Plax!" My voice cracks.

He grins. "Jasmine. Colton. I checked on Abby, and things look promising to begin treatment."

I smile in relief. Colton tightens his arm around me, and I sink further into him. "Can we take her home, or does she need to stay?"

He glances at Colton.

"The nurse is on standby," Colton states.

"Nurse?"

Colton nods. "Dr. Plax said she could go home if she had a private nurse. It's all arranged."

"Colton—"

He puts his finger over my lips. "Abby will be more comfortable at home. Cee Cee agreed."

"Okay. Thank you."

He pecks me on the lips and winks.

"I'll have the nurse get her discharge papers ready. She has the details for the first treatment. Assuming Abby's fever doesn't return, I'll see you in a few days."

"Thank you so much."

"Yes, thank you," Colton says.

"Of course." Dr. Plax squeezes my shoulder and leaves.

I turn to Colton. "That's very generous of you to hire a private nurse."

"There's only one catch."

"What?"

"The company the nurse works for is a franchise. They don't go to Queens. But Dr. Plax said they're the best. And the nurse I hired, he knows personally. She worked for years in this unit."

My heart pounds harder. "But, I live in Queens."

"I guess it's good I have a Christmas tree, game room, and movie theater. I think Abby will like it."

"You want us to stay with you? In your house?"

His lips turn up. "Yep. I even have a legit popcorn machine. And Cee Cee and

Maribel can come stay, too, if you want."

"Seriously?"

He shrugs. "I have six bedrooms. No one has ever slept in them."

"You want the four of us to take over your house?"

He chuckles. "Sure. Why not?"

I stare at him, as if he's crazy.

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"If it makes it easier to decide, Maribel and Cee Cee voted to come stay."

"They already know?"

"It kind of came up in conversation. My mom will probably come over, too. She, Cee Cee, and Maribel hit it off."

"I don't want you to feel obligated—"

He dips down and kisses me again. He murmurs in my ear, "If you come stay with me, I'm going to have a hard time keeping my hands off you. My bedroom is optional. And I'm officially firing you."

My pulse increases. I never thought I would be happy to be fired. "If you're sure you—"

He kisses me again. "You should learn I don't do anything I don't want to do. So tell me you'll stay, and let's get Abby out of here."

I finally agree. "All right."

He puts his arm around my shoulder, kisses the top of my head, and we go back to Abby's room.

I've never introduced any man to Abby. I've not dated anyone since Troy. My stomach flutters when we walk inside.

"Mommy, can we go home?" she says when I get to her bed.

"Soon, sweetie. Umm..."

"Who are you?" she asks.

Colton chuckles. "I'm your mommy's friend, Colton."

She tilts her head and smiles. "You dress fancy."

I laugh. "Colton was with me last night at an event."

"For work?"

Oh, crap. I told her I was going to work.

Colton clears his throat. "Yes. Your mommy was helping me raise money. Do you want to know what for?"

She nods. "Yes."

Colton holds out his hand. "Let me show you something."

She takes it, and he leads her to the window. He crouches down and points. "Do you see the grassy area and big orange sign?"

"Yes."

"Well, your mommy, my mommy, and I were raising money last night to build a new hospital for kids."

"Ones who are sick like me?"

He smiles. "Yeah. What do you think about it?"

"Will it be better than here?"

"Yes."

"That's cool. Can I go home now?"

"You could, but I heard you like popcorn and movies. Is that true?"

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"Yes."

"I have a movie theater in my house. I thought you and your mommy, Cee Cee, and Maribel might want to have a sleepover at my place. What do you think?"

Her eyes light up. "Mommy! Can we?"

I nod. "Sure."

She turns back to Colton. "What movie can we watch?"

"Tell you what. When we get to my place, I'll show you all your options, and you can pick. How does that sound?"

She grins. "Okay!"

"Sounds like a deal. Should we fist-bump on it?" He holds out his hand.

She bumps it, and he rises.

The nurse comes in, and I sign a bunch of forms.

"Colton, can my dolls come to your house?"

He smiles. "You can bring anything you want. As long as your mommy's okay with it."

"Why don't Maribel and I go to the house and pack bags?" Cee Cee suggests.

"I'll have my driver take you after he drops Jasmine, Abby, and me off," Colton says.

"Great. Jasmine, can I talk to you for a minute in private?" Cee Cee asks.

"Sure."

We step into the hall. "What's wrong? Colton said you thought it was a good idea to go to his house."

Her lips twitch. "I think it's a great idea. Better than sitting around our place, waiting for every minute to pass."

"Okay. What's wrong, then?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to know where the lingerie from La Perla was."

"Why?"

She smirks. "I think you should wear it tonight."

11

Jasmine

Caroline kisses Abby's cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow. Get some sleep."

"I'll walk you outside to the car, Mom," Colton says.

We've spent all day watching Christmas movies, playing games, and baking cookies

and other holiday desserts. Caroline brought over construction paper. She cut them into strips so Abby and Maribel could make a chain. She also brought needles and thread. Colton made a ridiculous amount of popcorn. Caroline taught Abby and Maribel how to string it then they added everything they created to the tree.

"Okay, Abby. Time for bed."

"Mommy," she whines.

"Nope. You need your rest. Let's go."

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"Get sleep so we can have more fun tomorrow," Caroline tells her.

Abby dramatically sighs. "Okay."

I take her to the guest room. Colton put her stuff in it earlier. All her dolls, favorite blanket, and a few outfits are there. She's already in her pajamas. After she goes to the bathroom, I slide next to her in the queen-size bed.

She snuggles into me. "I like it here."

I smile and stroke her head. "I do, too."

"Colton's nice."

"Mm-hmm."

"Is he rich?"

I pause for a moment. Debating how to answer her question. "Yes. But he grew up in our neighborhood."

"He did?"

"Yep."

She yawns.

I kiss her forehead. "Close your eyes, sweetie."

She obeys, and within a few minutes, falls asleep. I creep out of her room and go back into the kitchen.

"She asleep?" Cee Cee asks.

"Yep. Where is Maribel?"

"The theater. We're going to watch a marathon."

"Of what?"

"Some new reality show that's streaming. Don't ask." Cee Cee rolls her eyes.

I chuckle. "Have fun with that."

"You, too." She wiggles her eyebrows.

My stomach flips. "Stop it," I whisper. Cee Cee's been making comments all day whenever she gets a chance.

"Did you wear the red outfit?"

I groan. "Since you conveniently didn't pack any bras or underwear for me, yes, I'm wearing the red set."

"And a very merry Christmas it'll be," she teases.

I swat her on the arm. "Stop. And I haven't had sex in over six years. You're making me nervous."

"So you are going to do it?" she chirps.

My face gets red. "I didn't say that."

She tilts her head and raises her eyebrows.

"What?"

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She smirks. "I think you're a bit overdue. Don't you think?"

My insides quiver. I look around and whisper, "What if I don't remember what to do?"

Cee Cee grunts. "It's like riding a bike. Get on and pedal, girl."

I put my face in my hands. "You're not helping."

"Stop overthinking it. You like him, right?"

"Yeah."

She rises and rubs my back. She leans in and mutters, "Sometimes you pedal fast, sometimes you pedal slow. The point is to keep going until you get a flat tire. Well, or someone else does."

I elbow her. "You're killing me."

She laughs, kisses me on the cheek, and waves. "I'm taking Abby duty all night. See you tomorrow." She leaves.

I go into the living room, stand at the window, and stare out at the blinking lights of the New York City skyline. So much has happened in a matter of days. I don't have financial worries anymore. I'm still scared about Abby's outcome, but I have hope for the first time in what feels like forever.

I don't hear Colton come up behind me. His arms slide around my waist, and I close my eyes, inhaling his scent.

"Abby asleep?" he murmurs and licks behind my ear.

"Mm-hmm," I reply, my body already humming against his.

"Where's Cee Cee and Maribel?"

"Watching some marathon for the rest of the night."

His lips trail down my neck. He moves my shirt aside and kisses my collarbone. "So, we're finally alone?"

My stomach flutters, and I spin. I put my hands on his chest.

His cocky expression appears. "Did you decide if you're staying in my room?"

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

His face falls. "It's okay. There's no—"

"No. I didn't mean... I...well..." I bite my lip and look at his chest.

He takes his finger and tilts my chin. "Tell me what you're trying to say."

I try to gather my thoughts.

He strokes my cheek. "You're stressed."

"I haven't been with anyone since my ex-husband."

His eyebrows arch. "If you want me to stop at any time, tell me to stop, and I will."

"No. I don't want you to stop."

His lips twitch. "Then why are we out here?"

I shrug.

He reaches down and grabs my ass cheeks and picks me up.

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"What are you doing?" I nervously laugh.

He kisses me, and I wrap my legs around his waist. Between kisses, he says, "Getting us out of this room. I don't think it would be appropriate for me to do all the things I've been dying to do to you out here when we have company."

Is this really going to happen?

What is he going to do to me?

He deepens his kiss, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders, sliding my hand into his hair. We get in the bedroom, he shuts the door, and turns me so my back is against it.

His lips travel to my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

"Oh God," I whimper, my sex pushing against his growing erection. "You feel so good."

He grunts. "I'm going to make you feel really good."

"Yeah?" I breathe.

He sucks on my pulse.

"Oh God." I moan.

Did it feel this electric before?

He pulls my top over my head and groans.

I forgot about my bra, which pretty much covers my nipples, and that's it. The material is thin and delicate.

"You're so fucking beautiful." He mumbles and slides his tongue between the lace and my skin, over my nipple.

Heat consumes every inch of my flesh. "Holy shit... I...oh..." I grind my body against his erection. "Pants...off...oh..."

Did I just say that out loud?

He softly chuckles, spins me, and sets me on the bed. His long fingers curl under my waistband, and he removes my pants in one swift motion.

He stands at the end of the bed, chest heaving, eyes flaring with blue heat. "You're going shopping more often."

I bite my smile.

He slithers up my legs, kissing my inner leg from my ankle, then lingering on my thigh.

Sweat pops out on my skin. I slide my hands in his hair and widen my legs.

He slides a finger under my panties, stroking my slit.

I moan. It's loud, uncontrollable, and desperate for him to give me more.

He arches an arrogant eyebrow and puts his mouth over my barely there panties. His hot breath penetrates, and he gently bites me.

I lurch up, and he splays his hand on my stomach, then starts eating me through my panties.

"Holy...oh...ohhhhhh!"

His hand reaches for my bra, yanking it off with a quick motion, then plays with my nipple with his thumb before pinching it.

Zings race through my body, buzzing, vibrating, bringing me back to life.

His mouth tugs on the delicate lace, ripping it. Then his tongue ferociously flicks, sending me higher and higher until I'm gripping his hair and screaming.

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Tremors take hold. He grabs my hips and pulls my lower body closer to his mouth, sucking and gnawing on me until I see stars.

I'm breathing harder than I ever have. He glances up, wipes his face on his arm, then removes his shirt and drops his pants.

I gape at his erection and abs and pecs and thighs, not knowing what part of his body I love the most.

He fists his cock. "Like what you see?"

"Yes," comes out in my raspy voice.

You'd have to be a blind nun not to appreciate his ripped body.

He smirks.

I crawl back on my elbows until I hit the headboard, and he shimmies up my body, nibbling, licking, and sucking on the way.

The flicking of his tongue against mine is potent heroin for an addict. I want more and can't get enough. I hungrily kiss him back, tasting my orgasm, ready to overdose on his every touch.

I slide my hands over his rock-hard abs and to his cock, palming his shaft, and he groans.

"I can't get over how sexy you are," he murmurs, fists my hair, and drags his teeth down my neck.

"Oh God," I moan, wondering how he knows exactly what to do with my body.

He flips over to his ass, grabs a condom off the dresser, and rips it open. He puts it on and straddles me over him.

The tip of his erection teases me, pushing into my sex, and flames lick my skin.

He holds my head firm to his lips. His eyes twinkle. "Do you want me?"

"Yes," I whimper and slowly sink more on his erection.

"Good. I want all of you." He grips my hips, moving me up and down, inching me onto him until our skin meets.

I can't stop moaning. My walls pulse against him, full, needy, buzzing from his sweet friction.

"Just like that, Jasmine. Fuuuuuck," he growls, thrusting his hips into me.

I put my elbows on his shoulders, pushing my breasts in his face.

He moves his thumb to my clit, making quick circles, and adrenaline flies to all my cells. "Don't stop moving," he mumbles then sucks on my nipple so hard, a bolt of pleasure goes straight to my sex.

I'm quivering, humming like never before. Fireworks of pleasure burst over and over in all my cells.

And then he pushes me farther over the edge. He climaxes, stretching my walls, hitting something in me I didn't know existed.

I scream out his name as he groans mine then hang limp over his body. He circles his arms around me tightly. When I finally catch my breath, I lift my head out of the curve of his neck.

He kisses me and pushes a lock of my sweaty hair behind my ear. "You okay?"

I smile. "Yes. The best I've been in a long time."

"Me, too," he admits.

"Really?"

"Mm-hmm." He scoots down and kisses me then pulls me into his arms.

I curl into his chest, and for the first time ever, I feel safe and happy. As if things might just be okay.

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We spend the rest of the night talking, laughing, and unable to keep our hands off each other.

I'm almost asleep when Colton murmurs, "Let's have a big Christmas."

I open my eyes and tilt my head up. "What do you mean?"

"It'll be a week after Abby's first treatment. Let's have a really big, outrageous Christmas."

My heart beats faster. "What does that mean?"

He grins. "Family, food, and lots of presents. And I get to keep you in my bed."

I smile.

"I know you don't like extravagance, but—"

"No. It's perfect. Let's do it."

He kisses me and pulls me tighter to him. He murmurs, "And I thought I was going to have to convince you."

I snort. "How would you do that?"

He flips me onto my back. His eyes smolder into mine. "Do you want to sleep, or should I show you?"

"Ummm...you can show me if you insist..."

Epilogue

Colton

One Year Later

"All of Abby's tests are clear, just like the last time," Dr. Plax informs us.

Jasmine lets out a big breath of relief. No matter how many times we get the good news, she's still always nervous about getting test results.

I pull her tighter to me and peck her on the lips. "Great news."

"She's doing great. We'll do her next checkup in three months. Then we'll move to six-month intervals." Dr. Plax shuts the folder and smiles.

"Thank you again. For everything," Jasmine says.

Dr. Plax points to me. "Thank Colton. Getting the board to change the start date may have saved other children as well. And the additional threat your mother made if they didn't increase the number of children who could receive it this past year made a huge impact. Every one of the children who have had this treatment is doing well."

I rise and pick up Jasmine's coat and hold it out. "I'm happy to hear it."

Jasmine slides into her jacket, and I shake Dr. Plax's hand. Jasmine hugs him, and we leave the hospital.

"I'm so relieved," Jasmine admits when we get into the car.

I pull her onto my lap. "We have another reason to celebrate, too."

"Oh?" She arches an eyebrow.

"Janelle texted confirmation. He signed off. The papers arrived before she left."

She opens her mouth and then shuts it. I wait for her to process it, and she says, "How much did he demand?"

"Ten thousand."

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She takes a deep breath, and in it, I see her anger.

"We already know he's a moron," I remind her.

She smiles. "Right. Besides, this is good. It's what we want. I just..."

"Abby's worth way more."

"He shouldn't have gotten a penny," Jasmine seethes.

"No, he shouldn't have. But it was worth it to get him out of the picture."

"You're right."

I lean into her ear. "Can you say that louder, my sexy wife?"

She playfully pushes my chest. "Don't push it."

I fist her hair and kiss her. "Should we let Abby open my present tonight, then? I know you like to wait until Christmas morning, but it is Christmas Eve. And everyone will be there."

"Okay. You can give her that one only. No more. Last year you snuck gifts while I was making dinner with Cee Cee."

I shrug my shoulders. "Don't take all my fun away. Besides, I might have one for you tonight."

"Oh?" She bites her lip.

"It's in your closet." I push my fingers between her thighs. "I've been waiting for two weeks to give it to you."

"Two whole weeks! Wow! A record!" She laughs.

"You know I don't like to wait. Especially when it involves this." I slide my fingers and stroke her through her panties.

She squirms on my lap.

"Did you wear this skirt because you wanted something on the way home? Hmm?" I lick my lips, ready to taste her and be fed, but there's limited time. I like to take my time and savor her pussy when I tongue fuck her. But we've got a house full of people waiting for us, and it's Christmas Eve.

She opens her mouth, but then shuts it, flushing slightly, which is what she always does. It turns me on like a dog in heat. I know what she wants, but she's too shy to admit it even though she's my wife.

I unzip my pants, release my cock, then turn her so she's sitting on me backward. I push her thin panties to the side and slide my cock into her in one thrust.

Thank God for La Perla.

Once she got over the cost and realized she could buy the entire store and our bank account still wouldn't feel it, she admitted she loved them. The sales manager calls her whenever there is anything new, which is good since I rip most of them off of her anyway.

Her breathy gasps make my cock ache. I fist her hair, kissing her neck, and mumble, "I can't wait to see you in your present and eat your pussy tonight."

She shudders.

"Do you want that, Mrs. Ash?"

"Yes," she breathes.

"And I love my cock in you."

"Oh God, yes," she moans, closing her eyes and leaning back on me.

I slide my hand to her clit and create a pattern of fast, then slow, then fast again until she's shaking and begging me.

"You're the best wife on earth," I murmur and suck on her lobe while I send her over the edge. And she is. She's more than I ever anticipated.

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I move her faster on me while her walls tighten then spasm on my shaft. Right before I release in her, she cries out my name, going into another orgasm.

I pull her tight against my chest, both of us breathing hard. I kiss her cheek. "I love you."

She turns. Her hazel eyes sparkle. "I love you. So much." She pecks me on the lips then grabs a tissue and cleans herself up. I do the same, and the car stops. I hit the lock to signal to the driver not to get out. Once we're presentable, I get out and reach in for her.

She takes my hand. I escort her into the building. We wait for the elevator, and I turn to her. I slide my hands along her cheeks and tilt her head. "Hey."

"What?"

"Merry Christmas."

She smiles. "Merry Christmas."

I kiss her, and I'm so wrapped up in her, we miss the elevator. It dings shut, and she laughs. "We have to get on."

I press the button, and the doors open. "Is Cee Cee at our place with the girls or hers?"

"She's cooking at ours."

"Okay." I bought a condo a few floors below the penthouse for Cee Cee and Maribel when I asked Jasmine to move in with me. It was only after Christmas when Jasmine suggested she should go back to her place and not overstay her welcome. I didn't want Jasmine and Cee Cee to be far from each other, and frankly, I didn't like Cee Cee living in their dangerous neighborhood.

"Your mom should be here, too. I think she was coming over at three," Jasmine says.

"Can we tell Abby right away, or are you going to make me wait until after dinner?"

Jasmine reaches up and strokes the side of my head. "Let's tell her when we get inside."

I can't help my grin. I remind her again, "Good. I hate waiting."

"Yes, I know. You have zero patience," she teases.

I step in front of her so she's against the wall. "I'm a man who knows what I want."

Her lips twitch. "Glad that's me."

"Yes, it is."

The elevator dings, and I kiss her on the lips, then grab her hand. We go into the kitchen. It's full of our family, and I can't help smiling. I love all of them. Since Jasmine entered my life, it feels warm and full.

Abby sees us, and her eyes light up. She runs up and throws her arms around both of us. Her hair started to grow back and is brown, silky, and curly like Jasmine's. Abby likes to wear bows in her hair. Today she has a red-and-green plaid one on.

I pick her up, throw her over my shoulder, and tickle her until she's screeching.
"Daddy, stop!"

She started calling me daddy six months ago. It was after I proposed to Jasmine.

I reposition her so she's on my hip. "I have something for you. Your mommy said you could open it."

Her eyes light up. "What is it?"

Jasmine laughs. "You have to open it." She pats my ass. "I swear your impatience is rubbing off on her."

I carry her to the couch, and the three of us sit down, Abby on my knee and Jasmine next to me. I pull a box out of my inside coat pocket. It has a pink ribbon, which is her favorite color.

Abby smiles so big, my heart swells. "Pink isn't for Christmas."

"This isn't a Christmas present. It's an every day present."

Abby nervously glances at Jasmine then holds her hand to my ear. She whispers,
"Mommy said no more every day presents."

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I chuckle. "It's okay. Mommy approved this one."

Abby claps, takes the box, and opens it. Her mouth falls open, and she traces the rose gold pendant. I had it specially designed. It's two interweaving words, Abby Ash.

When I proposed to Jasmine, she started asking a lot of questions. She was done with her treatments and wasn't sick anymore. We explained to Abby the best we could why she couldn't change her name to Ash until I could adopt her, but it was hard for her to understand.

She looks up, and tears fill her eyes.

I suddenly get nervous. "Do you still want me to adopt you?"

She nods her head, and tears fall down her cheeks.

"Okay, sweetie. Monday morning, we're going to the courthouse, and you'll officially be an Ash."

She inhales sharply. "Really?"

"Yes."

She throws her arms around me, and I blink hard, controlling my own tears. I put my other arm around Jasmine and hug my two girls tight. They're everything I never knew I needed.

Against all odds, we found each other. Maybe it was a Christmas miracle. I'm not even sure if I believe in those. But somehow, through all the challenges we've faced, we're all standing here, healthy and happy, enjoying a holiday both Jasmine and I previously couldn't stand.

I look around the kitchen, feeling grateful for all the love and happiness I have in my life. And maybe it was a Christmas miracle.

Andre and Naomi

She's a Secret Treasure of War...

It's a routine mission in Belize. Get in, get out, save the women.

Then I see Naomi's photo and watch her hostage video.

A stirring...an ache...a desire so deep for her heats up my blood and annihilates me.

And then I meet her.

It accelerates my thirst, riling up my inner beast.

She's an investigative reporter and knows things she shouldn't.

But all the women have secrets...knowledge about a global force so powerful the world will implode with greed. Freedom will no longer exist.

Instead of delivering her, we run.

The heat of the jungle is a blow torch demolishing my restraint, until I have to make her mine.

But enemies lurk everywhere. After it's over, I'll have to piece her back together again.