



# Remember Me

**Author:** *Nelle L'Amour*

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Investigative reporter, Skye Collins, is determined to expose the story that will blow Hollywood apart. But when she digs too deep, she literally digs her own grave. Her car careens off a cliff and explodes. Skye is killed instantly, and her sensational, tell-all story is buried with her.

Was it an accident... or murder? Did someone want Skye dead?

Skye's husband Finn, a struggling artist, tops the list of suspects. But Finn goes free, and his wife's tragic death remains a mystery.

Five years later, Finn, now a successful painter, hires a live-in governess to homeschool his young daughter, Maddie. Scarlet is perfect —caring, a brilliant teacher, and Maddie adores her. Finn finds himself drawn to his attractive employee even as she keeps her distance.

Because Scarlet is hiding a deadly secret. She knows the shocking truth about what happened to Finn's late wife.

And this truth may cost Scarlet her life too.

**Total Pages (Source):** 70

## CHAPTER 1

Skye

“T hanks for meeting me here.”

“No problem,” I say, adjusting my seat at a table for two at a small coffee shop in Silverlake. It’s off the beaten path. Not crowded, it seems to be frequented by artsy young locals. Hipsters. The vibe is funky, filled with flea-market finds and local artwork, including, to my surprise, one of my husband’s abstract paintings. It’s definitely not the kind of place you’d expect to find one of Hollywood’s A-List actresses... Nicole Farrell.

Sitting across from me, she’s barely recognizable. Devoid of makeup, she’s wearing an oversized gray hoodie and a Dodgers baseball cap, which holds back her flaming red hair and partially obscures her face. Even without makeup, she’s stunning with her porcelain complexion, high cheekbones, full lips, and almond-shaped green eyes. In fact, she’s more exquisite in person than she is on the big screen.

Last month she won an Emmy for her portrayal of Gloria Steinem, the outspoken and daring twentieth century crusader for women’s rights and equality. The critically acclaimed movie was a Netflix original. Nicole’s acceptance speech was exceptional. Moving. Heartfelt. Teary-eyed, she thanked the Television Academy and accepted the award on behalf of women everywhere, urging them to speak up and to fight for the respect they deserve.

She takes a sip of her piping hot coffee, then sets the cup down. I have no idea why

she wanted to meet with me nor am I prepared for what she has to tell me.

“Skye, I’m a big fan of yours,” she says, her voice sincere. “Your piece last month on human trafficking was amazing.”

“Thanks,” I say humbly. “The feeling is mutual.”

She quirks a fleeting, half-smile. “I need to get something off my chest... something I’ve been hiding.” Her voice is unsteady, nothing like the confident actress who delivered her bold acceptance speech.

She takes a deep breath and then slowly spills out the words: “I was sexually assaulted by...”

Silence. A long tense pause.

“Tell me, Nicole, by whom?” I anxiously wait for her to answer and finally she does.

“Sheldon Greenberg.”

At his name, I visibly jolt and feel my vocal cords shake. “That’s a serious accusation.”

She looks at me imploringly. “Please. You must believe me.”

“I do.” How could I not? Sheldon Greenberg, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, lives in a dark, distant place of my mind. A suppressed memory I’ve tried to forget.

My companion lets out another breath, this time of relief. “Thank you. I came to you because I thought you would. And because I felt I could trust you.”

“When did it happen?”

“Seven years ago. When I was twenty-three . . .”

Inwardly, I shudder. About the same time as me.

“I was auditioning for a recurring role in one of his Criminal Justice shows. He told me I got the part. Meghan Jones... the no-nonsense DA from The Bronx.”

I remember her on that series... from when I used to watch it. A standout character and performance. A woman after my own heart—fearless, ballsy, and self-confident in a tough male-dominated world. A perfect blend of grit and grace. Anxious to hear more, I take a sip of my hot beverage as she continues.

“I was ecstatic as it was my first big television break. Then afterward, he told me he wanted to meet with me to talk about my career.”

All ears, I set my coffee cup down and reach into my backpack for the pocket-size recorder I always carry with me. “Nicole, do you mind if I record this?”

“Please, I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Can I take notes?”

She nods. “Yes.”

My hand still in my bag, I fish for my small spiral notebook and a felt-tip pen. Slipping them out, I place them on the table, opening the notebook to a clean page. I remove the cap of the pen and put it to the lined paper.

“So what happened?” I ask.

Her eyes darken as she recalls the incident. “He asked me to meet him at the Chateau Marmont where he was staying. When I got there, I assumed he’d be at the restaurant, but he wasn’t. So, I went to the front desk and inquired about his whereabouts. The clerk called up to his room and told me he was ordering room service and expecting me. So I took the elevator up. It was the penthouse suite.”

She takes another sip of her caffeinated beverage and I do the same. “I rang the bell and he came to the door. To my shock, he was wearing only a bathrobe. Despite my reservations, I accepted his invitation to share some champagne with him. Letting him lead me inside the suite, I was taken aback by its size and grandeur. I was just an ingénue from Indiana and had no experience with Hollywood glitz and glamour.” She pauses. “Or Hollywood power.”

After one more sip of her coffee, she perseveres. “He poured us each a glass of champagne and we toasted to my career.” Her face tenses. “Then, he told me I owed him.”

“Owed him?” I repeat back her words, my brows lifting.

“Let me see if I can repeat his exact words.” She makes air quotes. “‘Sweetheart, I’m giving you the opportunity of a lifetime. Do you realize how many girls like you would kill to get a starring role on Criminal Justice?’” My companion pauses, setting her hands down on the distressed wood table and giving me time to jot down her words.

“What did you say?” I ask, looking up.

“I merely shook my head and then he threatened me. ‘Girls like you are a dime a dozen. If you’re not nice to me, I’ll recast the part.’”

Nice to him? The word nice doesn’t belong in the same sentence as the pig.

“Then, he untied his bathrobe.” She pauses again, her lips quivering. “He was wearing nothing beneath it and had an erection.”

I remain speechless as tears fill the actress’s eyes. Genuine ones, not the kind you put on for show. “Then he shoved me down on the couch and forced himself on me.”

I feel myself stiffen. “Did you try to fight him off?”

“I tried to free myself, but he was too big and powerful for me. And he was hurting me... groping my breasts... squeezing my nipples.”

The sleazebag.

“The creep hiked up my skirt and ripped off my panties.” She blinks back tears. “And then he... r-raped me.”

She breaks down and begins to sob. Feeling her pain, I reach across the table and rest my hands on top of hers. They’re cold as ice and shaking.

“It’s okay,” I say softly. “Thank you for sharing your story.”

To myself, I shout, “The bastard.”

Sniffling, she blots the tears spooling down her cheeks with a paper napkin. “I wish I’d come forward sooner, but I was afraid.”

“Better late than never. What made you reach out to me now?”

“The Emmy. When I accepted it, I felt like such a hypocrite. Here I was playing the part of a brave woman who stood up for herself and I was a silent victim. Sheldon was in the audience... the front row. I swear he was leering at me, taking credit for my

success. And mentally undressing me. All I wanted to do was throw my Emmy at him and shout out what he did to me. I'm such a coward." She bows her head in shame.

"No, Nicole, look at me." Her head lifts slowly and she meets my gaze. "You're very brave." I squeeze her hands. "I mean that."

"Skye, I'm not the only one he abused."

A cold shiver zigzags down my spine. With all the will power I can muster, I refrain from sharing my past. "There are others?"

"Yes. We have a kind of secret club. Not everyone was raped like me. But he forced himself on them, touching them in places he had no right to be and coercing them to perform other sexual acts against their will."

She goes on to give me a list of names. A dozen in all. My initial shock gives way to abomination. Greenberg's a monster!

Her sobs subside. "Skye, I've come to you because I want to expose what he did to me and so many others."

"You've come to the right person." I shoot her a reassuring smile. Inside, I'm burning up with rage. "When I'm done with him, he'll never work in this town again."

"Thank you." A grateful smile and then it fades. "He took a part of my soul that I can never get back. I don't want more women to lose theirs."

The check comes. I insist on picking up the bill, scribble down a few things, and then slam my notebook shut. My eyes flit to my husband's painting, a mash-up of oils and garbage he aptly titled Hollywood Trash . Sheldon would have worked too.

After all these years, I'm going to take the monster down.

Time's up.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:56 am*

### CHAPTER 2

Skye

Lying next to me, his warm, bare chested body flush against mine, Finn, my husband of seven years, caresses me. His deft fingers graze the gold locket I always wear around my neck. I can feel his hot breath against the nape.

Sex is not on my brain; my mind is elsewhere. An investigative reporter for Conquest Broadcasting News, I'm about to break a story that's going to blow the entertainment industry apart. If all goes to plan, I will have all the evidence I need to bring down one of Hollywood's biggest players. The repercussions are formidable. Like bowling pins, one by one, every womanizing asshole in this town will go down. And each time one does, I'm going to do a happy dance. This is the story that's going to put me on the map. Maybe win some kind of Pulitzer. Get me my own news show. And best of all, let me at last have my revenge.

I resist my husband's sexual advances and squirm away from him, creating a distance between the two of us. The queen-size bed doesn't allow for much. I tug at the comforter so that it completely covers my chest.

"C'mon, Skye."

"Not tonight. Please. I'm tired."

He huffs a frustrated breath. "That's what you said last night. And the night before. We haven't had sex all week."

“I’ve got too much on my mind. I’m working on a big story.”

“You’ve got to stop working so hard. Whatever story you’re working on, let go of it.”

“I can’t. It’s too important.”

“What’s it about?”

“I can’t tell you yet.” Nicole swore me to secrecy. I haven’t even told my boss about it though I will have to. I’m not sure what he’ll think. Sheldon’s production company, Greenlight Entertainment, is a major supplier to Conquest Broadcasting. Best known for the long-running series, Criminal Justice and its various spinoffs set in gritty cities from coast to coast. Dominating the network’s prime time line up, the highly rated franchise has earned Conquest billions of dollars in advertising revenue.

Since the meeting with Nicole, I’ve interviewed other victims—including Zoey Taylor, the star of Conquest’s hit comedy, Perfect 10—who told me Sheldon Greenberg squeezed her genitals and played with himself in front of her when she was working as a masseuse. While I have numerous allegations of this sort, running the gamut from sexual come-ons to making victims take showers with him, the key is getting concrete evidence. Tomorrow. Fingers crossed. Until then, it’s he said, she said. Nothing that can be taken to court.

Before I can roll over, Finn turns his head toward me. “Baby, I’m worried about you. You’ve been so distracted lately.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble. “The story is close to home. It’s personal to me.”

“You need to be closer to home. To us. Maybe it’s time to get a desk job. It’s too damn risky being in the field.”

Inching back next to me, he nuzzles my neck, his day-old stubble brushing against my flesh as I process his words. He's even urged me to quit my job and stay home ever since our life changed drastically nine months ago. Heated arguments have ensued, straining our marriage. But I can't. Uncovering the truth is in my blood. I need to be in the field as much as he needs to be in a studio. My stories are his paintings; my words, his brush strokes.

My husband is an artist—a painter—but his creative talent extends from a canvas to a mattress. From his studio to our bedroom. So gifted. And he himself is a work of art, with his sculpted, hard as marble body and chiseled face that looks as if an Italian master crafted it.

Before he can take his ministrations or questions any further, a loud wail from the shoebox size room next to ours pierces the walls.

Our baby.

"I'll take care of her."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'll be back in a bit." I pull off the covers and slip out of bed.

Feeding our nine-month-old daughter is just the distraction I need. Hopefully by the time I'm done, Finn will be fast asleep.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:56 am*

### CHAPTER 3

Skye

“Thanks for seeing me, Jim,” I tell my boss, seated stiffly in an armchair that faces his pristine desk. My spine is straight, my legs crossed, and my hands clasped on my lap.

“What’s up, Skye?” His Texas drawl is curt, his eyes focused on the dozens of television monitors that line one of the walls of his thirty-first floor corner office, which overlooks all of LA, from downtown to the ocean. Each one is set to a different news channel from around the world.

“I’ve been working on a story . . . ” My voice trails off.

“So . . . ”

“I need your support. I believe it’s going to be groundbreaking.”

His brows lifting, he focuses his attention on me. My eyes take him in. A highly respected network veteran with a prestigious Peabody Award to his name and who single-handedly made Conquest News the most watched cable news channel, Jim Hartley is what I’d call debonair. Extremely handsome, in his mid-fifties, tall and fit. I’ve heard secretaries refer to him as “our Silver Fox,” a jab at our rival, Fox News. A master of Southern charm, his often-flirtatious behavior precedes him. Almost every woman in the division harbors a secret crush on him though they all well know he’s married and a family man. It’s rumored that over the years a few have left the

department, unable to handle their attraction to him.

My gaze stays on him as he picks up a pair of Chinese stress balls from his desk and squeezes them in the palms of his hands. “Do you want to share it with me?”

The word “duh” is on the tip of my tongue... why else would I be here? Biting it back, I start off slowly, vaguely.

“Jim, there’s some serious shit happening in this town.”

He chortles. “There always is.”

“I mean really serious.”

He cocks his head at me. “What do you mean?”

“Sheldon Greenberg . . .”

His brows draw together as he works his jaw.

“I have reason to believe he’s a sexual predator.”

He sets the balls down, and his slate-gray eyes darken. His gaze sharpens on me.

“What makes you think that?”

“Several major actresses have reached out to me. Come forward with their stories—”

He cuts me off, his voice challenging. “What kind of stories?”

Undeterred by his tone, I look him straight in the eye. “He groped them... exposed

himself... forced them to have sex with him.” I refrain from using the r-word. Or telling him anything more—including Nicole Farrell’s horrific encounter.

Jim digests my words, then rises from his chair. Folding his hands behind his back, he strides over to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the distant Pacific. I observe him. He cuts a beautiful picture with his tall, lean physique and meticulously tailored sterling gray suit that complements his shimmering silver hair. From my perspective, he’s almost painterly, and for a second, I think about Finn, my husband. Silently, he stares out the window. After a few moments, he pivots and faces me. His arms are now folded across his chest, the intense expression on his face borderline menacing.

“Skye . . .”

“Yes?”

“I want you to drop this story.”

Shockwaves course through my body. Doesn’t our motto, “the truth is everything,” mean anything to him?

Anger quickly replaces my shock. “Why, Jim?”

His face tenses. “Skye, are you out of your mind?”

My eyes narrow at him. “I don’t understand.”

He swipes his usually smooth forehead. A deep crease lines it. “Seriously? Sheldon is the number one supplier to Conquest Broadcasting. You bring him down... you bring us all down.”

“But, Jim. This man is a monster. He needs to be brought down.” My mind flits to the post-grad school event that ironically changed my life.

While my chest squeezes at the memory, Jim stiffens, his lips pulled tight in a flat, pensive line. After a stretch of silence, he strides up behind me, and rests his hands on my shoulders, his fingers lightly massaging them. I squirm.

“Skye, darlin’... you have a great future ahead of you.”

His voice softens, his smug tone cajoling, almost phony. In my mind’s eye, I picture a smarmy smile on his face.

“We’re thinking about giving you your own show.”

“Yeah, right.” I’ve heard that God knows how many times before. Skye’s the Limit. I hold my own, not backing down. I’m tired of his bullshit.

“Jim, I want to break this story.”

A tense pause and then he squeezes my shoulder blades. His tone grows as firm as his touch. “Don’t go there.”

Without another word, I jump up from my chair and face him. Rage rises inside me like mercury and so does my voice.

“What about the first amendment? Freedom of the press?”

“Don’t. Go. There,” he repeats, each word now as sharp as a tack.

“I’m not backing down.”

Jim's expression turns glacial, his voice icy. "Skye, you're going to regret this."

His cold, ominous words go in one ear and out the other. Stalking out of his office, I curse under my breath. I'm going to pursue my story. Pursue the truth.

I owe it to all these poor innocent women.

I owe it to myself.

Nothing's going to stop me.

Nothing.



### CHAPTER 4

Finn

I spend the morning in my studio painting. Working on a triptych that I'm entitling Past, Present, and Imperfect Future . The colors go from serene, to chaotic, to a blur. The paintings represent the way I see this tumultuous world, the past so peaceful, the present so chaotic and violent, and the future so unknown. I'm almost done with the second in the series. It's a mixed media mash-up that combines monochromatic shades of gray paint with pieces of shrapnel, rusted nails, and fragments of glass. Given the political unrest and terrorism in our world, I'm thinking that the third painting may be a nihilistic splotch of black paint or tar that I'll fling at the canvas with my bare hands. But who would pay big bucks for a colossal canvas with just some random blob resembling a slimy Rorschach personality test? Then again, art collectors are unpredictable and you never know what the next breakout piece of work will be. I often like to think of Picasso, who blew away the art world with his unprecedented cubist masterpieces.

I, however, have yet to blow the art world away. At best, I've sold some pieces on Etsy and at the Fairfax Flea Market, where I exhibit every Sunday, and to some of our friends. Nothing much. I'm lucky if I make a whopping thirty grand a year. I'm fortunate my wife Skye supports us and allows me to indulge my passion. But it's nothing to be proud of. I'm thirty-two and have been at it since I was a kid. Sometimes, I want to throw in the towel. Start all over again. But Skye has faith in me. And it has never wavered. "It just takes one person to recognize your genius," she's told me over and over.

I love my wife. And today, she may be right. Kayla Phillips, one of the hottest promoters in the art world, contacted me after I shot her an email and included a file of my portfolio. It was prompted by an article I read about her in the Los Angeles Times. She said she was looking to represent emerging artists. Bold. Creative. In touch with the times. To be honest, I never expected to hear back from her, and I'm sure every struggling artist and their mother reached out to her, but she responded almost instantly. The email was brief and to the point.

Intrigued by your work. Let's meet for lunch at Fig & Olive this Friday. Reservation at 1 p.m. in my name.

Though being a little superstitious about the day—Friday the 13th—and hating lunches because they dig into my painting time, I readily agreed. Judging by her response time, she seemed eager to meet me. Maybe today, despite the stigma associated with it, is going to be my lucky day. It's my wife's lucky day. Her thirtieth birthday. Maybe we'll have an extra special reason to go out and celebrate tonight.

My studio is located in industrial Vernon—a depressing as hell place—strewn with one ugly warehouse after another. A gloomy canvas of grayness and bleakness. Population: 112. Seriously. No one lives here and I can't blame them. Even the perpetual SoCal sunshine can't brighten industrial Vernon. Adjacent to downtown LA, it's a city that hardly anyone knows or frequents unless you're employed by one of the food or fashion labels whose manufacturing and distribution headquarters are based here. For me, it was an opportunity to rent a warehouse for an unheard of reasonable sum. The hip, pricier Arts District is not far away, but to rent an expansive space like mine there would cost an arm and a leg.

After getting in some painting time, I abandon my work-in-progress and clean my paintbrushes. It's a lengthy, multi-step process involving soaking them in a paint thinner solution and rubbing the bristles against a rag until they're blond again with no trace of paint. The final step is rinsing them off with a little soap and water and

storing them in a plastic container. I follow the procedure to the letter because the sable brushes are expensive as shit, some costing over a hundred dollars.

The studio has a small, dilapidated bathroom where I wash up afterward. The paint is peeling and the old fluorescent light casts a dismal gray hue. As I scrub my hands, I glance at myself in the mottled mirror above the sink to make sure no paint has mixed with my stubble. Not a speck. Nor in my thick dark hair, which is getting unruly. I've got to decide whether to get it cut or let it grow long again and tie it back in a ponytail or put it up in man bun. Skye prefers it short—and says I look like a Greek god—but in some ways, it's a lot easier to manage when it's long. Out of sight. Out of mind.

As much as I've scrubbed, flecks of paint still dot my hands. Sometimes it takes days to get rid of them. Drying my hands off with a towel, I quickly change out of my paint-stained T-shirt into another identical one I've brought along from home. Basic black though I wanted to wear a graphic one of my music idol, Bruce Springsteen. The Boss. I also switch from my sweats into a pair of faded jeans. Worn Nikes complete my ensemble. Despite feeling comfortable, second thoughts bombard me. Maybe I should have brought along a suit. From what I've learned about Kayla online, she's A-list all the way. Smart. Cultured. Stylish. Beautiful.

Brimming with a blend of dread and anticipation, I head out at noon for our lunch. With the LA traffic that seems to get worse by the day, I wanted to give myself plenty of time to get to Fig & Olive, which is located on La Cienega, not far from the Larchmont neighborhood where Skye and I live. In retrospect, maybe I should have stayed home this morning and gone to lunch from there. Time management has never been one of my strengths.

As soon as I get onto the bumper-to-bumper 10 Freeway, I wish I'd left earlier. An apropos Springsteen album plays on my stereo. The title song: "Working on a Dream." I listen to the entire album and despite the crawl, I get to my destination a little before one. There's a lineup of cars waiting to be valeted. All of them high end.

Mercedes, Porsches, Jags... plus several Teslas, Bentleys, and limos. My old Ford pickup sure as hell doesn't belong, and I swerve away, looking for parking on the street... a spot where my vehicle will be out of sight. After several frustrating laps around the block, I finally find one on a residential side street. I read the sign in front of me carefully. Good. Two hours free parking. After anchoring the truck between two parked vehicles, I hop out and jog over to the restaurant. Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I glance down at the time. It's almost one o'clock. Shit. I'm going to be late. I pick up my pace, segueing into a sprint. As I cross the street, a massive black Mercedes comes careening toward me.

Not braking. My heart races.

My career's going to be over before it launches.

### CHAPTER 5

Finn

I narrowly dodge the sedan. The driver curses at me while he speeds away. The windows tinted, I barely glimpse the asshole's ruddy face. Definitely one of those arrogant Hollywood types with his overpriced designer sunglasses. Catching my breath, I'm not sure if this is my lucky day. Or my unlucky day. Friday the thirteenth can't be trusted. Without further life-or-death drama, I reach my destination. Though I wonder if that driver really wanted to kill me. The art world is conspiratorial. Competitive... And deadly.

Fig women in designer dresses revealing perfect tans and toned limbs. All engaged in lively conversation, no one takes notice of me as I head toward a table for two in the center of the restaurant. Soon after I take a seat, a young, good-looking waiter comes by and hands me a menu.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asks.

"Just some water will be fine."

Though I'd love something alcoholic to calm my nerves, I don't want to be drinking in front of Kayla. I have too much at stake.

"Bottled?"

"Regular water's fine."

The waiter gives me a dismissive look, but returns quickly with my request.

“Can I get you anything to start off with?” he asks, his voice as icy as the glass of water he sets down.

“No, I’m fine. I’m waiting for someone.”

The insolent server forces a smile and skirts off while I take in my surroundings. The place is filled with Hollywood moguls and celebrities. I immediately recognize Brandon Taylor, the Emmy-winning star of the hit TV series *Kurt Kussler*. Though he’s dressed casually in a T-shirt and jeans, he’s lunching with a suit—another familiar face—Blake Burns, the head of Conquest Broadcasting where my wife works. At a table nearby, I spot her boss, Jim Hartley, who’s lunching with a voluptuous brunette. There’s electricity in the air. A buzz. The sound of success.

After several sips of my water, I catch sight of a tall, stunning blonde heading my way. I recognize her immediately. Kayla Phillips. She’s clad in a tight white pencil skirt, a cream silk blouse, and shiny black stilettos. A monstrous red designer bag grazes her arm. Her breezy gait exudes confidence, power, and sex. All eyes are on the statuesque beauty, and on her way, several diners spring to their feet to give her a chummy hug. She’s obviously a regular here.

While she stops and chats with someone, I play back in my mind what I know from googling her. Age 29. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Her father, Stanton Phillips, billionaire film financier. Her mother, Esme Rawlings, Hollywood royalty, the daughter of one of Hollywood’s legendary studio chiefs. Kayla... an only child. Highly educated. Fluent in five languages. Swiss boarding school, followed by Yale undergrad and the prestigious Sotheby’s Institute of Art master’s degree program in London. Quickly hired by their competitor Christie’s, where she became head of the Contemporary Art Department, bringing in record revenues. Followed by a daring solo entry into the art world where she brokered major deals and privately curated

major collections. Revered by all. A regular on the A-List party scene from international art fairs to Hollywood bashes. The epitome of brains and beauty. Catching my eyes on her, she shoots me a knowing smile as she saunters my way.

“Finn?”

“Yeah.” Nodding, I rise from my chair as she extends her slender, manicured hand. I take it in mine and we shake. Just like the rest of her, her firm shake is one of confidence and power.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she says as I help her into the chair opposite mine. Her voice is breathy, laced with a slight British accent. It hints at wealth and culture.

“Not a problem. I haven’t been waiting long.”

“Thank you for meeting me here. I have a meeting afterward with one of my clients, who owns an art gallery on Melrose. Perhaps you’ve heard of him... Jaime Zander.”

“The son of the late painter PAZ?” Payton Anthony Zander.

“Yes.”

“I’m a big fan of his father’s work.”

“I am, too, and have sold several pieces to art collectors all over the world. The average price for one of his paintings has shot up from a few hundred dollars to over one hundred thousand in just a few years.”

I register the dollar amounts. Wow! They’re in the stratosphere.

“That’s amazing.”

“Of course, I’ve been instrumental. I represent the estate.”

Before I can respond, the waiter comes by again. At the sight of Kayla, his expression warms. His eyes light up. What a kiss-up.

“So good to see you again, Ms. Phillips. Will you be having your regular?”

“Yes, and please, Chad, bring my Bellini with the salad.”

“Of course,” says the server as I peruse the menu. Everything sounds delicious and I ultimately decide on a gourmet cheeseburger with fries. Nothing to drink. I’ll stick to water.

As soon as the waiter dashes off with our orders, Kayla resumes our conversation. She obviously doesn’t like to waste time.

“So, Finn, I must say I was very impressed by what I saw. And you are very prolific.”

“Thanks,” I say humbly.

“How long have you been painting?”

“I think I was born holding a paintbrush.” My early years are ones I’d like to forget. I’m grateful she doesn’t pursue them.

Instead, my attractive companion laughs. Her laugh is throaty. And sexy.

“And what about professionally?”

I sold my first painting at twelve. I peddled it outside the Midtown Tunnel. Manhattan. I’m thirty-two now. I quickly do the math in my head and answer, “About



twenty years.”

“That’s quite a long time. Have you ever exhibited?”

“I sell on Etsy and have had friends come down to my studio. I also sell at the Fairfax Flea Market every Sunday.”

“Seriously?” There’s contempt in her voice. Haughtiness. Nervously, I take a sip of my water while she continues.

“Andy Warhol once said, ‘Making money is art.’ He’s right. You’re totally wasting your time. You need to think big.”

As I ponder her words, our waiter returns with our orders. A roasted beet and goat cheese salad along with a flute of peachy champagne for my companion and a cheeseburger with parsley fries for me. Kayla immediately takes a sip of her tinted bubbly.

“Are you sure you don’t want one? The Fig makes the best Bellinis in Los Angeles.”

I’m tempted but decline and instead take a couple more gulps of my water.

“Bon appétit,” she chimes.

“Bon appétit,” I repeat before biting into my burger. It’s delicious. Perfectly grilled, medium rare the way I like it.

Kayla picks at her salad, her acid green eyes on my hands.

“Finn, you have extraordinary hands. I bet your long fingers are talented in more ways than one.”

I almost choke on my next bite. Did she just hit on me? I falter for a response.

“I play the guitar and I’m very handy. I can fix just about anything.”

A smug smile lifts the corners of her full red lips. “Oh, I bet you can.”

Her eyes don’t move. She notices the gold band on my ring finger.

“So, I see you’re married.”

“Yeah.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

She’s clearly not done a lot of digging about me. The truth is, not much comes up when you google me. Google my wife, however, and there are hundreds of entries and I’m mentioned in some.

“What does your wife do?”

“She’s a news reporter... an investigative journalist for Conquest Broadcasting News.”

She cocks her head. “Interesting. What’s her name?”

“Skye Collins. She uses her maiden name.”

“Well, I must say that was a wise decision. No one would take anyone with the last name Hooker seriously. Especially a newscaster.” She rolls her eyes. “I’ve seen her on TV. Quite the in-your-face one.”

I let the digs go. “Yeah, she’s really passionate about what she does. And is really good at it.”

“Like you.” She pauses to take another sip of her sparkling beverage. “So, any children?”

“Yeah. One. We had a baby nine months ago... a girl.”

Another eye roll. “Shame on me. I should have known better. I thought your wife was getting fat when she was in fact pregnant.”

I’m taken aback by her words. They border on another insult, but I bite my tongue and say, “She carried very small. Hardly anyone knew she was pregnant. Plus, she never mentioned it on the air or took a maternity leave. She purposely low-keyed it.”

“Whatever.” To my relief, she changes the subject, refocusing on me. “So, Finn, have you ever had representation?”

“You mean like an agent or manager?”

Another pick at her greens. “Yes, exactly.”

“No.”

“Well, you should. You have untapped talent and I would like to be the one to see you reach your potential.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know many collectors who will pay top dollar for your work. The marketplace right now supports emerging artists. Everyone wants to be the first to own someone

new and fresh. Art on the edge. A gifted artist who will one day become legendary.”

I set down my burger and digest her words. Is she saying what I think she’s saying?  
On my next rapid heartbeat, my hunch is confirmed.

“Finn, I’d like to represent you.”

“Wow!” The word flies out of my mouth.

“However, you must be open to reinvention.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll be honest with you. And you should know I never hold back.”

My heart thuds in anticipation while she takes another sip of her Bellini.

“Your name... it’s got to go. It will never sell paintings. You need something new... a memorable one with an artistic ring.”

“What’s wrong with Finn?”

“Ugh! Seriously? The first thing that comes to mind is that Huckleberry douche from that god awful book my sixth grade teacher forced on me.”

I don’t tell her that Huckleberry Finn was my childhood hero. A dreamer like me. And that coincidentally, Hooker was the last name of a wealthy woman he fabricated to save his slave friend Jim. Instead, I say, “It’s short for Phineas.”

“Phineas. I love it. It’s so breathy and sexy!” She flashes another seductive smile.

“Who is your favorite artist?”

So many names whirl around my head. Picasso . . . Chagall . . . Matisse . . . O'Keefe. Then, I blurt out another: Jackson Pollack.

Back to her drink, she scrunches her face in deep thought. Then, she puts the flute down and breaks into a triumphant smile. Her next words sail off her lips. "Phineas Jackson. It's perfect!"

I say the name to myself. Phineas Jackson . It does have a ring.

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Wonderful. Now, with that little issue out of the way, let's talk business."

I let her talk away. I don't know the first thing about business. Maybe that's why I've never succeeded.

"It's a straight forward deal. I take a commission of twenty-five percent. I know it's a little higher than the standard, but I am not your standard agent." Narrowing her eyes, she shoots me a wry smile. "And may I add, not in any way. Daddy taught me you get what you pay for in life."

My pulse in overdrive, I'm still processing my incredibly good fortune to be repped by the best in the art world—wait till I tell Skye!—when a thickset, greasy-haired man swaggers up to us. Dressed like so many here, he sports a navy gabardine jacket over an open-collar white shirt and jeans. His paunch hangs over his belt, the shirt buttons straining. As he gets closer, his cloying cologne wafts up my nose, nauseating me a bit. I feel like I've met him before, but where? Kayla's eyes instantly light up at the sight of him. Leaping up from her seat, she gives him an effusive kiss on both jowly cheeks.

“Sheldon! How wonderful to see you. I missed you at Art Basel in Miami.”

“Yeah, I had to miss it. Network shit.” His voice is loud and gruff with a thick New York accent. “You see anything good?”

“To be honest, darling, same old, same old. No one set the world on fire though the parties were divine.” She turns to me. “Oh, forgive me... Let me introduce you to one of the foremost collectors of contemporary art in the world... Sheldon Greenberg.”

Sheldon Greenberg? The Sheldon Greenberg? The producer of all those crime shows I’ve watched on TV?

“Sheldon, I’d like you to meet Phineas Jackson . My newest client.”

The meaty man doesn’t offer his hand. He doesn’t smile. Just a jut of his stubbly double chin and one throaty throwaway word: “Hey.”

Kayla ignores his prickish behavior as I study him. His face is vaguely familiar. Again, I wonder—have I met him before? Seen his photo somewhere? With his expensive sunglasses perched on his large, balding head, could he possibly be the jerk who minutes ago almost ran me over? Before I can search my mind, my companion chimes in.

“Sheldon, you’re going to cream your pants when you see his work. There’s absolutely nothing like it out there anywhere.”

“I’m ready, sweetheart. Call me anytime.”

“Trust me, Sheldon, Phineas is going to set the art world on fire.”

I suddenly want a Bellini to quench the burn in my chest. One of my favorite

Springsteen songs spins in my head.

“I’m on Fire.”

### CHAPTER 6

Finn

Though I didn't consume any alcohol, I'm on a high when I depart the still hopping restaurant. Kayla insisted on paying the bill, despite my protests, and we set up a time when she could come down to the studio and see my work. She also told me her attorney would be sending me a contract to review and sign. Thank God, Skye has a good one whom she trusts to negotiate her employment contract at Conquest. I'm not sure if he's ever had experience in the art world, but it doesn't seem like my agreement will be hard to handle. It's a basic five-year deal with a set commission rate.

Heading back to my vehicle with a big smile on my face, I punch the air. "Yes!" Finally. I have a chance to show the art world who I am. Make a mark. Make a name.

I can't wait to share the great news with Skye. Out of fear of letting her down, I didn't tell her anything about my meeting with Kayla Phillips. But now I want to shout out everything. My life is about to change. Our lives are about to change. Tonight, we'll go out to celebrate. Both her birthday and my deal. Surprise her with the red dress I bought. Wine and dine at our favorite restaurant. Come home and have epic sex. Almost at my truck, I pluck my phone from my pocket and speed-dial her number. She picks up on the third ring.

"Finn?"

A siren blasts my ear. A fire engine. It's turning from La Cienega onto the side street



I'm walking down.

The bright red truck zooms down the pavement past me. "Baby, hold on... Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can now, but I can only talk for a minute. I'm about to go into a meeting."

I huff with frustration. She's always about to go into a meeting, or is in the middle of one, or out in the field.

"What's up?"

"I have some exciting news."

"Hold on. Charlene is calling me."

Charlene is our twentysomething nanny. We hired her through some fancy agency and are paying her big bucks. She probably makes more money than me. We've, however, been less than thrilled with her performance. Constant emergencies and prior obligations. A lot of drama. We've thought of firing her, but neither of us has had the time to come up with a replacement. Skye is in the middle of some big story, which she won't share with me, and I've been focused on my latest work.

Skye returns. "Oh my God."

"What's wrong?" I ask, alarm rising in my voice, thinking something has happened to our baby.

"Charlene . . . she just quit."

"What?!" Though I'm relieved our child isn't in any danger, my thoughts are already

miles away from the good news I wanted to share.

“Her boyfriend proposed and they’re eloping tonight. Flying to Mexico.”

Processing her words, I curse under my breath. Skye’s voice is in a panic.

“This is the worst possible timing.”

Tell me. Our celebratory romantic dinner has just gone down the drain.

“Finn . . . I need to go out tonight . . . Business.”

Again? “What about your birthday?”

“We’ll celebrate it tomorrow.” She pauses. “Can you stay home and take care of Maddie?”

Our beautiful baby. Though I love her to death, disappointment threads through me. Reluctantly, I murmur, “Sure.”

“Great. I’ve got to go. My meeting is starting.”

The phone goes dead. And I wonder—what’s happened to “I love you” before saying goodbye.

### CHAPTER 7

Finn

S ix p.m. I'm slouched on my favorite chair in our family room, my legs stretched out on the coffee table. A heated-up Indian concoction from Trader Joe's on my lap. A Heineken in my hand. Yup, my romantic dinner; pity party for one. The big screen TV's on. Some rerun of Criminal Justice, Las Vegas with Nicole Farrell guest-starring. I swear there could be a whole 24/7 Criminal Justice network, a series that my wife, for some reason, won't watch. That Greenberg guy I met today must be worth a fortune. No wonder he's one of the world's foremost art collectors. I can only begin to imagine what's in his collection. Maybe later I'll google him and find out. That one of my paintings may one day be among them is still hard for me to believe. I take a glug of my chilled beer, and as the frothy beverage shoots down my throat, I hear a car pull into the driveway. It must be Skye. Sure enough, the front door unlocks and the clickety-clack-clack of her heels reverberates in my ears, getting louder and faster as they near me. I'm eager to tell her about my exciting news. But instead of popping in to say hello to me, she whisks upstairs.

My heart sinks and I take comfort in my beer, my eyes glued to the TV. I don't think I've seen this episode before. A missing wife. A suspect husband. As the show goes into a commercial break, heels sound again, clambering down the stairs. My head swerves toward the hallway and I catch sight of Skye scurrying my way. She looks hot as sin. In a tight black mini-dress that accentuates her curves, and strappy metallic heels. Her honey-brown hair pulled back, she's wearing more makeup than usual, her lips painted Russian red, and her lashes thickened with black mascara. My spirit brightens, and I feel a tingle of excitement. Maybe she's had a change of heart and

decided to go out for a romantic dinner with me. Arranged for a babysitter for Maddie. It's not too late. I've eaten only half of my frozen dinner and am more than willing to scrap the rest. To be honest, it tastes like crap.

"Hey, baby," I say as she swoops into the room. "You look amazing."

"Thanks," she mutters, fiddling with the gold locket that hangs from her neck and draws attention to her cleavage. I gave it to her when Maddie was born. It cost a bloody fortune, and I had to finally barter with the jeweler, giving him three of my paintings to afford it. Inside is a small photo of the three of us taken on the day we brought our newborn daughter home from the hospital.

Skye has a tendency to toy with it when she's thinking or stressing. Close-up, she looks on edge. Maybe she had a rough day.

"How was your day?" I wish she'd asked me first, and I could share my great news. My type-A wife is not one for small talk.

"Fine." Her voice is clipped. "What time is it?"

I glance down at my watch. "Six-thirty."

"Shit. I'm late."

Late? "Late for what?" All dolled up, is she going to some kind of cocktail party? Or awards event? My fantasy of a romantic dinner has just evaporated into thin air.

Nervously, she snaps open her small beaded purse and checks inside it. "I'm about to break a story."

What story? The secret one she's been working on? This is not the first time she's

gone out this week, looking like this. Wearing a sexy dress and a pair of skyscraper stilettos I've never seen before. Same excuse. Breaking a story. In this outfit? My mind wanders. Maybe, she's hiding something. Then, as she snaps her bag shut, I notice she's not wearing her wedding band. A shudder rolls through me. Maybe she's seeing someone. Had enough of me. I'll be the first to admit that since Maddie was born our marriage has been strained, juggling our careers with parenthood and trying to make ends meet. Life in LA is expensive. And stressful.

"Can't you tell me about it? Even a little?"

She shakes her head. "No, I'm sorry. I still can't." She quickly changes the subject. "I checked on Maddie. She's fine. If she wakes up—and she probably won't—there's a bottle already made."

"What time will you be back?" I ask, disappointment coursing through me. This is not the time to share my exciting news.

"I'm not sure. Don't wait up for me."

Suspicion again creeps into my veins. My turn to stab the word "fine" back at her, and then almost as an aside, I wish her a happy birthday. A half smile flits on her lips. Bending to give me a peck on my forehead, she slings the purse over her shoulder by its dainty chain, pivots on her heels and hurries toward the front door. My eyes stay riveted on her shapely ass. It better belong to me.

Only me.

### CHAPTER 8

Skye

So many tears have been shed over the past few weeks since meeting with Nicole Farrell. While none of the women I've interviewed experienced anything as extreme as Nicole's rape, their vivid accounts from Greenberg groping their breasts and genitals to masturbating in front of them have shaken me to the bone, forcing me to fight back my own tears. I know what they've been through. But Jim Hartley, the head of Conquest News, still won't let me break the story, and before I left work today, he threatened me again. "Stay away, Skye, if you know what's good for you. You have no proof. All you have are allegations."

Unfortunately, he's right. Greenberg paid off most of his victims and made them sign confidentiality agreements without giving them a copy. Moreover, not one of them has a videotape, recording, or witness to substantiate their horror stories.

This story is not just a story that needs to be told; it's personal to me. These women spoke to my soul. As I began my journalism career after graduating with honors, I vowed to champion the rights of women. To be a voice of compassion and justice for victims like me. If Jim Hartley needs concrete evidence, then that's what I'm going to give him. I'm not afraid of his threats. I'm not backing down. I'm determined to take Greenberg down. To expose him for the monster he really is. It's been a long time coming. Way too long.

Earlier this week, I stalked Greenberg at the Chateau Marmont bar. Learning that it was his favorite hangout, I went there three times this past week wearing a sexy little

black dress, the highest of heels, and a blond wig because I knew from my research that he had a predilection for leggy blondes. And because I didn't want him to recognize me. When he finally showed up last night at the hotel, he took the bait.

"Hi, sweetheart," he began as he plunked down onto the vacant chair next to mine. Legs widespread.

With a seductive smile, I said "hello" in my sweetest voice. His calling me "sweetheart" made me cringe, but I kept my cool. His sickening cigar-breath warmed my cheek, and I felt his fetid heat as he slid his seat closer to mine.

He was clad in his usual sleazebag uniform. A navy blazer that screamed Brioni, a crisp open-collar dress shirt, expensive designer jeans, lots of flashy gold jewelry, and alligator loafers. The buttons of his shirt strained against the Egyptian cotton while his belted jeans fought with his unsightly paunch. His lustful eyes never strayed from my cleavage. I swear he was salivating.

"You new in town, doll? I haven't seen you here before."

"Yes. I just moved here from Marietta."

"Where the hell is that?"

"Ohio."

His face lit up. "My dear mother used to love to sing that song." Crooning off key the song's why-oh-why first line, he made goo-goo eyes with me. Pretending I was enjoying his attention, I let him twirl a lock of my wig around one of his stubby, manicured fingers.

"Why did'ya move out here?"

“I’m looking to break into the entertainment business.”

“So, you’re an actress?”

I laughed lightly. “An aspiring one.”

He chortled. “You’re a cute one. You’ve come to the right place.”

I twitched a small, flirtatious smile.

“So, sweetheart, can I get you something to drink?”

“A glass of champagne would be nice. Thanks.”

Looking up from my chest, he called out to the bartender. “Hey, Gus, bring the beautiful lady some champagne—make it Cristal—and a Scotch on the rocks for me.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Greenberg,” replied the bartender with a smile. Though the bar was packed three deep with movers and shakers and wannabes, the attentive bartender catered to the fat pig. Greenberg was a regular here—both a big spender and big tipper.

While the bartender prepared our drinks, Sheldon’s attention returned to me. I sat silently on the bar stool, my legs crossed, while his leering eyes roved down my body. I soaked him in. He hadn’t changed much since my last encounter with him except for being at least fifty pounds heavier. His facial features were repulsive—dark beady eyes, pockmarked skin, a bulbous nose, a prickly double chin, and rubbery lips. To top it off, the three-time divorced fifty-five-year-old was balding but dyed his hair and sported one of those pathetic comb overs.

“So, sweetheart, what’s your name?”



“Lana Monroe.”

“Lana Monroe,” he repeated. “It fits you. It’s got star-power.”

I batted my eyelashes. Such a good actress thanks to my college drama courses. Courses that helped me become a dynamic on-air reporter. “Really? You think so?”

He smirked. “With your looks and body, I know so.”

“Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to say a thing. Maybe you don’t know who I am.”

My eyes widened with feigned innocence. “I-I’m sorry. I don’t.”

His eyes glinted with bravado. “I’m Sheldon Greenberg—”

“Oh my God! The big Hollywood producer?” Monster!

With a pompous grin, he puffed out his chest. “Yup, that’s me. You’ve met the right person.”

At that moment, our drinks arrived. The bartender set them down on the counter in front of us.

“Let’s toast,” said Greenberg, lifting his tumbler.

“Okay,” I replied, following suit with my flute full of bubbly.

“To you. And to the beginning of a great career.”

We clinked glasses and then we each put them to our lips. I took a dainty sip of my champagne while my companion—or should I say predator—downed his Scotch in one guzzle. As the effervescence popped on my tongue, a loud burp burst from his mouth. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he placed the other on my bare thigh. My knee-jerk reaction was to pull away, but I forced myself not to stir as he rubbed my leg. His rough caress nothing like Finn's. Creeping me out as he turned himself on.

“Wow, you're gorgeous.”

Before I could utter another word, his slobbering lips were all over mine. In a few suffocating breaths, his foul-tasting tongue thrust into my mouth. My eyes squeezed shut as the slimy organ thrashed about like a lizard. Numbness trumped my urge to vomit. Pure will held back my urge to bite it.

By the time his next drink came, I was invited to his house. To explore my potential.

And to expose him for the monster he is.

### CHAPTER 9

Skye

Located off tawny Benedict Canyon, Greenberg's gated pink stucco villa is majestic. Reminiscent of the nearby Beverly Hills Hotel and definitely built in the mid-twenties. For sure some legendary movie star once lived here, and as I pull up to it, I'm regretful I didn't research the residence.

Two burly, intimidating guards stand outside the massive iron gate, one on either side. Clad in muscle-hugging black jeans and T-shirts, they look like they were plucked from the World Wrestling Federation. What's more they're wearing semi-automatics slung around their broad chests. My breath hitches. They're armed. Trying to stay calm and upbeat, I roll down the window of my Prius and introduce myself. One of them, with the stoic demeanor of a soldier, speaks into a walkie-talkie.

"Sir, Miss Monroe is here to see you."

"Check her bag," responds a gruff voice, unmistakably Greenberg's.

"Get out of the car," orders the guard closest to me. "And hand over your bag."

The word please is definitely not part of his vocabulary. Taking a fortifying breath, I have just enough time to glimpse myself in the rearview mirror and adjust my blond wig a tad, making sure the silky locks cascade over my shoulders. Then, I collect my purse. My wallet with my driver's license along with my cell phone is locked in the glove compartment. All that's inside it is my lipstick, which is actually a spy-tech

recording device, and a small vial of mouthwash, which is really unmarked pepper spray. I found both on Amazon. I sling the bag over my shoulder and step out of the car, the motor still running.

To my horror, the guard outside my door frisks me while the other rounds the car and snaps open my purse.

“What are you doing?” I ask, gritting my teeth.

“Security precautions,” says the guard, rifling through my bag. My pulse accelerates as he examines the two items inside. I inwardly sigh with relief when he puts them back intact.

A few minutes pass by. My body stiffens as the first guard’s mammoth hands crawl down my body, not overlooking my inner thighs, while his almost identical twin, done with my purse, gives me the once-over. I put a sweet smile on my face, but their expressions are anything but friendly. Small talk with these guys is out of the question. Finally, I’m cleared.

Sheldon’s voice comes through the walkie talkies. It’s not as gruff as before. “Good. Let her in and tell her I’ll meet her at the front door.”

Relieved, I hop back into my Prius as gracefully as I can in my stilettos, and as the gate parts open, I drive up the manicured road that leads to a sweeping semi-circular driveway in front of Sheldon’s breathtaking house. It’s big enough to hold a dozen cars. I park my Prius and turn off the ignition. Tossing the key inside it, I sling my purse over my shoulder and step out of the car, ready to provide all the evidence the Conquest Broadcasting brass needs to take the monster down. As the car automatically locks behind me, I clutch my lucky locket and suck in another breath.

Without ringing the bell, I wait for Sheldon to come to the front door. A few long,

anxious minutes pass. Finally, the oak door swings open. Sheldon, with a smug grin on his face, hovers over me in his other uniform. His monogrammed navy bathrobe. Belted below his paunch, the velour garment stops just below his knees, bringing my attention to his thick hairy calves. Matching velvet slippers complete the ensemble.

“Hi,” I say in my best breathy voice. I can tell from the lustful expression on his face that he likes what he sees.

“Come on in, sweetheart.” He waves me in before I can say another word. In one hand is a communications device. The one he uses to talk to his armed guards.

“I don’t want any interruptions,” he tells them before slamming the door shut behind me.

“So sweetheart, can I get you something to drink?” he asks as he ushers me inside, one hand splayed on my ass. His inappropriate gesture repulses me, but I don’t let on.

“Your house is magnificent,” I say, taking in my surroundings and not knowing where he’s leading me. Antique furniture and artwork fill every nook and cranny of the vast mansion.

He snorts. “It’s just leftover shit from my last wife. I wanna dump the crap. Start over fresh. Well, except for the paintings.”

In contrast to the dark, baronial furnishings, the colorful, large paintings on the wall are contemporary. I recognize some of the artists—there’s a Basquiat, Pollock, and Schnabel. In my research, I read that he’s a major collector and owns one of the largest collections of contemporary art in the world.

“Maybe you can help me... you know, redecorate.”

“Sure, that sounds like fun.”

I cringe at my trite words as he leads me to a grand, well-stocked bar. Bottles of the finest liquors line the shelves along with expensive, glistening crystal. I watch as he pours himself a Scotch and sets the tumbler down on the gleaming surface.

“How ’bout some champagne?”

I eye a silver ice bucket holding a bottle of Cristal. “Just some water, please.”

“C’mon, gorgeous. Water is for paupers. Let me pour you a glass of champagne. It’ll help you relax.”

Not responding, I let him pour me one. While his back is turned, I slip out my lipstick from my purse, and as I apply it, I activate the recording device. One click of the base. I quickly put the tube back inside. Just in time.

“Let me take your purse,” he says, handing me the bubbly.

“I’d prefer to hold on to it.” I clutch my small bag. Thankfully, he doesn’t oppose me.

“So let me propose another toast.” I raise my glass as he does, his eyes cast down on my cleavage. “To those killer tits.”

You pig. I smile, clinking my glass against his, and take a sip of my champagne while he guzzles his cocktail.

His eyes stay glued to my breasts and then suddenly he gropes one mound with his free hand. “Mmm... nice.”

I squirm. “Sheldon, I’d rather you not touch me that way.”

“Relax, sweetheart.” Ignoring my request, he squeezes my other breast. It hurts like hell, my breasts still extra-sensitive and swollen from nursing, but I hold back a yelp. “What size are these knockers?”

Steeling myself, I deflect his question. “Sheldon, you have something you want me to audition for?”

The sleazebag scratches his balls. “Sweetheart, let’s take it slow. I’ve had a shit day. Those idiot network executives think they know everything. I told them to eat it. No one tells me what to do.”

“I’m sorry.” The arrogant asshole. His reputation precedes him.

“Come with me, sweetheart. First, I need to see if you can take direction.”

My pulse again speeding up, I let him usher me to a massive burgundy velvet couch. Taking a final sip of his drink, he sets the crystal tumbler down on the gilded coffee table in front of it.

“I need to de-stress. Give me a massage.”

My muscles tighten. “Do I have to?”

“Sweetheart. I’m surprised at you.” He swipes at his comb over. “You’re looking for your big Hollywood break and you’re questioning me?”

Mentally, I smile. Fingers crossed I’ve got it all recorded. “I-I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting—”

He cuts me off. “Just do it, babe. We don’t have all night.”

Impatiently, he snatches my champagne flute and sets it down next to his depleted tumbler. My heart hammers—is he going to disrobe? I don’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed when he doesn’t and instead plops down on the plush couch. He rolls over face down onto his potbelly.

“I like it hard, doll,” he mutters under his breath.

“Me too.”

“Sweetheart, now you’re talkin’ my language.”

Without another word, I bend down and start kneading his upper back. I happen to excel at giving massages because I love getting them from my husband. A sudden wave of guilt sweeps over me, thinking that the only man I should be touching is my beloved Finn. I’m doing my job, I tell myself. It’s just a job. No different than an actress’s.

“Wow, babe! You’re good,” mumbles Sheldon, cutting into my second thoughts. “I’m loving this. Don’t stop.”

For the next fifteen minutes or so, I continue to knead his meaty body. It’s hairy, laden with moles, and he stinks. Muffled grunts, groans, and “oh yeahs” spill onto the cushions. He shifts and then rolls over onto his back. His hideous comb over has fallen into his half-open eyes. He brushes the greasy strands off his forehead.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“I need you to do the rest of me.”

Before I can take my next breath, he unbelts his robe and exposes himself. Unprepared for the ghastly sight of what awaits me, I swallow hard, overcome by a



sudden rush of nausea. What's wrong with me? I'm an investigative reporter. I've witnessed fatal gun wounds, stabbings, and gory accidents. Mass destruction by fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Mass murder by bombs, gunfire, and arson. I've possibly seen every atrocity known to mankind, but I can't stomach the engorged, veined, purple monstrosity before me.

"Sheldon, I think you should—"

"Shut up and get down on your knees," he orders, his voice deep and belligerent.

"Shel—"

"Do it. Suck me." His voice grows several decibels louder with anger. "That's if you don't want your career to be over before it starts, sweetheart."

Oh God. I pray that my secret recording device is getting all of this. "Sheldon, this is sexual harassment."

He snickers. "Harassment, my ass. Nobody gets ahead in this town without giving a little head. So, Lana..."

His voice trails off as I slowly fall to my knees, the cold marble sending a chill up my spine. He squeezes the base of his erection with his hand and aims it at my face. I have the burning urge to run as far away from him as possible. Escape while I can. He doesn't give me a chance and presses down on my scalp with the splayed fingers of his broad hand, forcing my lips toward his monstrous appendage. I zip my lips together as they hover over the bulbous crown. Bile rises to my throat. My gag reflex activated, I can't make myself clamp my mouth around it. I want to cry out for him to stop, to let go of me, but for sure, I will vomit if I open my mouth, so revolted I am by the sight of his repulsive organ and the equally repulsive scent of his sweaty, hairy balls.

“Suck me,” he growls, pressing down on my head with more pressure. “What’cha waiting for?”

I resist, pinching my lips together so hard my teeth dig into them. Still squeezing the base of his penis, he begins to pump it, waiting for me to give him what he wants.

Casting my eyes upward, I glimpse him. His head is tilted back, his face contorted, and his eyes glued shut. In anticipation. “C’mon, babe!” he murmurs.

I suddenly realize I have a window of opportunity. Still held prisoner by him, I fumble with the latch of my bag, still slung on my shoulder, and manage to open it. His heavy breathing drowning out my ministrations, I reach inside my purse and readily find what I’m looking for. My secret weapon. My pepper spray.

Grabbing it, I pop open the lid and then put my thumb on the spray button. Now, I’ve got to get him to open his eyes. Bingo. An idea pops into head. My gaze still on my predator, I take my other hand and claw his hairy, portly thighs with my sharp nails, digging deep enough to draw blood. With a pained yelp, he looks down, his eyes wild and dilated.

He throws a string of expletives at me, swearing madly.

On my next strangled breath, I aim the vial at his eyes and press down on the button. The blinding spray shoots out in full force as I wave the vial back and forth, making sure to nail both eyes. Whoosh! Then, another excruciating scream.

“What the hell are you doing?” he shrieks, my thumb still glued to the spray button. He scrunches his face in agony, squeezing his eyes shut in defense.

“You monster!” I shout out.

“You twat!” he screams back, rubbing his tearing eyes.

Without a second to waste, I spring to my feet, but I’m not quick enough for the ugly monster. Still groaning with agony, he grabs me by the hair. So forcefully my blond wig flies off. Oh shit!

“What the—?” Holding the cluster of blond curls in his hand, he forces one burning, red eye half-open. It glints with recognition.

“I know you! You’re that badass reporter.”

I gulp back panic. Clutching my bag, I make a mad dash for the front door. Despite his condition, he goes after me, his lumbering footsteps thudding in my ears. My heart beating triple time, I curse myself for wearing strappy stilettos, but I can’t stop to take them off. Breathless, I reach the front door and jerk it open, Sheldon hot on my trail.

I fly past the guards. I’m surprise to see them. Sheldon must have ordered them to stand by the front door while I was waiting for him to open it.

“Get her!” yells Sheldon at the top of his lungs. “Kill the bitch!”

### CHAPTER 10

Skye

Not looking over my shoulder, I race to my car, fumbling for the key in my purse. I find it and unlock my Prius. Click. Fingers quivering, I fling the door open and jump inside, having no time to fasten my seatbelt. I start up the car, shift into drive, floor the gas pedal, and do a screeching hairpin U-turn out of the driveway, almost knocking down the two guards as they leap out of my way. Keeping my foot slammed on the gas pedal, I speed down the driveway at close to one hundred miles an hour. In my rearview mirror, I glimpse a monstrous black SUV careening down the asphalt behind me. I curse under my breath. They're after me. My heart thudding, I reach the security gate.

"Open, open, open!" I mutter out loud. As if the massive iron structure has heard my desperate plea, its lotus wings spread apart, and I fly out of the property. I blow out a hot breath of relief when the gate closes behind me before the two henchmen can get through it. A little leeway!

My pulse in overdrive, I race down the private road and then make a sharp, screeching left onto Benedict. As I tear down the canyon, an unexpected obstacle suddenly gets in my way. A parked moving van clogging the middle of the two-lane road, blocking traffic in either direction. I blast my horn to no avail. No one's inside it. My mind spins. Getting to Sunset is no longer an option. I have no choice but to do a quick U-turn and head back up the twisty, dimly lit canyon. Crap. I'll likely pass my assailants. My heart slams against my ribs so hard it hurts. I'm as good as dead.

My heart in my throat, sure enough, I tear past the black SUV. Will they notice me? I'm about a hundred feet ahead of them when they realize I'm going the other way. They whip around, and in hot pursuit, they trail me.

Without slowing down, I grip the steering wheel so tightly I can see my knuckles turning white. Adrenaline flowing, I navigate the sharp curves of the canyon like a stuntwoman. The goons are still behind me. Then, as I turn right onto Mulholland, I hear something that resembles firecrackers. A terrifying, vise-like reality seizes me. Gunshots! Oh God! They're firing at me!

Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Bouncing off my car, shot after shot ricochets in my ears. Somehow, they keep missing. Maybe the sharp curves of the desolate, poorly lit road are my saving grace. God bless legendary Mulholland Drive. For a split-second as I zoom past one of its scenic lookouts, my mind wanders. It's where Finn and I made love the first time we set foot in Los Angeles, beneath the starry sky, overlooking the twinkling lights of the San Fernando Valley below. One of the most magical nights of my life. But tonight, a thick cloud of fog shrouds the earth, and my life hangs in jeopardy. Another shot is fired, and a fear like none other shoots through me. I silently pray to God that I'll escape unscathed. After this is all over, I promise to spend more time with my husband and baby. God has a weird way of putting things in perspective.

Another shot is fired as I swerve around the next hairpin curve. But that's not what makes my eyes pop and my heart almost stop. In the beam of my headlights stands a creature. Oh God, it's a deer! As still as a statue. As frightened as a child. In all my years here, I've never encountered one. His frozen wide-eyed gaze meets mine as I slam my foot on the brake. Everything comes to a screeching halt, but not soon enough. Time freezes.

"No!!!" I wail like a siren as my vehicle approaches the poor, helpless animal. He disappears. I don't think I hit him. And then smack! The SUV slams into the back of

my car, and before I can take my next breath, the road vanishes. My car rockets over the edge, flying into the air. My hands grip the wheel as if I can steer it to safety while my foot slams the brake, with so much pressure my ankle aches. Not wearing a seatbelt, I use all my strength to stay put. Every organ lurches forward, about to jump out of me. Terror fills my every cell, every molecule as the Prius plunges down the steep, jagged cliff. Somersaulting. At least three hundred feet. I squeeze my eyes tight, shuttering my horrible destiny. My ear-splitting screams clash with the grating sound of metal against rock as the velocity of the car accelerates with the force of gravity. A heavy metal symphony fills the air. The air I may never breathe again.

I want to cup my ears. Cover my eyes. Block it all out. But paralyzed, my hands stay glued to the steering wheel as if they've been welded together. Then bam! The car hits rock bottom, tumbling over and over, my stomach rolling with it.

My air bag explodes in my face, but not before my head goes crashing through the windshield. Splat! The glass shatters into a million tiny pieces. My face on fire, my head cracked open, every rib in my chest smothering my lungs, my pelvis crushed, I experience the most horrific, bone-crushing pain I've ever felt in my life. The car, no longer moving, is upside down, the fog peering at me through my cracked window like a peeping Tom. The insipid taste of rust seeps through my mouth. Warm liquid leaks from the corners, drizzling down my chin. Blood. Am I bleeding internally? I roll my tongue over my teeth, dipping the tip into wet, gummy chasms and over ragged enamel. Shards and daggers. I've lost several teeth and broken others. I attempt to spit out the pool of blood in my mouth, but it hurts too much to purse my lips. I think my jaw is fractured. A groan stays trapped in my throat while bitter bile rises and mixes with the metallic blood. I can't swallow and I can barely breathe.

With the last ounce of strength and consciousness I have left, I peel off the tattered airbag from my skin, then feebly reach for my door handle and crank it open. Leaving behind the rancid smell of gunpowder, I tumble out of the car and claw my way along the rough, prickly terrain on my elbows as far away from the battered vehicle as I

can, my limp, useless legs dragging behind me, my lacerated purse trailing alongside me. The cruel earth scrapes my broken body. Tearing my skin. Shredding my dress. My breathing labored, desperate, I battle the excruciating pain that consumes every inch of my being, from my head to my toes. Hot tears, like acid rain, scald my burning, raw cheeks, then salt the earth. Oh the pain! How I wish could magically make them stop falling! Make this whole night go away!

Then, boom! A deafening blast bellows in my ears. A burst of flames surges behind me. The navy-gray sky lights up as a fiery heat sears my flesh. The nauseating scent of burning rubber, gasoline, and metal wafts in the damp night air. One more heartbeat, one more breath. Stretched out, anchored on one elbow, I clutch my treasured good luck locket—the one with the three of us—that still dangles around my neck. Oh God, please take care of Finn and my beautiful baby! Please!

Another thundering explosion. Embers fly, dancing in the dim sky like the fireflies I remember from my childhood. My life passes by as if it's a slideshow projected against the screen of dense fog. My childhood with my parents traveling from country to country. Their untimely death. Then, fast-forwarding to my college years... my marriage to Finn... then our baby. Without warning, darkness cuts the memories short. Claims me. The screen fades to black. All the pain evaporates.

I remember it's my birthday. My last?

Finn . . . Maddie, I love you.

The world subsides and so do I.

### CHAPTER 11

Finn

Unable to sleep, I turn and glance at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It's almost three a.m. Why isn't Skye home? Yeah, she said she was working on a story, but doubt seeps through my veins. The past few weeks haven't been easy. She's been consumed by this mysterious story, and I've been focused on finishing my triptych. My wife's career is soaring; mine has been at a standstill up until today. Maybe I've been a disappointment to her. She's the breadwinner, me the sporadic contributor. Maybe she's had enough of it. Enough of me. The image of her in that skimpy black dress flashes into my mind. Hell. She's never looked that hot for me when we've gone out. I dwell on the fact that she wasn't wearing her wedding band and replay her words in my head. I'm about to break a story. What story? In retrospect, I don't believe a word she said. A gut-wrenching reality eats at me. She must be having an affair. Landing Kayla Phillips as my manager may be after the fact. There's nothing to celebrate. I'm losing my wife.

My desolation finally succumbs to sleep, but shortly after I doze off, Maddie's wails awaken me. Groggily, I roll out of bed and pad over to the small room, her nursery, adjacent to ours. I lift her out of her crib. The fury of her cry tells me she's hungry. Cradling her in my arms, I reach for the nearby bottle of formula that Skye left for me. I put the nipple to my princess's lips and she sucks it vigorously. When she's halfway done, my cell phone rings. Still holding Maddie, I dash back to our bedroom. The phone's on the nightstand. I blindly accept the call and put it on speaker expecting or should I say hoping to hear Skye's voice.



Instead, a solemn male voice drifts into my ears.

“Finn Hooker?”

“Yes.”

“Officer McGowan from the LAPD. I’m afraid I have bad news.”

My pulse instantly quickens as panic trickles to my gut. The bottle shakes in my hand, and falls out of Maddie’s mouth. She bawls as trepidation rises inside me.

“Your wife has been in an accident.”

My heart stutters in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“She encountered a deer on Mulholland Drive . . . ”

“And . . . ” My voice trails off.

“She lost control and the car skidded off the road.”

“She’s okay, right?”

“Mr. Hooker, I’m sorry to inform you . . . ”

My heart practically stops, anticipating the officer’s next words.

“The car exploded on impact.” Pause. “Your wife is dead.”

The bottle falls from my hand and rolls across the floor.

In a state of shock, I clutch our baby who hasn't stopped crying.

It takes several long minutes for the devastating news to sink in. When it finally does, it hits me like a knife to my chest. I fall to my knees, still clinging to our baby. A raw feral sound, half sob, half roar, explodes from my throat and wracks my body, tears of despair joining Maddie's.

She's now mine to raise alone.

### CHAPTER 12

Finn

The next couple of days are a total nightmare.

I was supposed to be spending the weekend celebrating my wife's milestone thirtieth birthday, but instead I'm preparing for her funeral.

To make things worse, I'm in a state of denial, confusion, and rage, all compounded by emotional and physical fatigue.

In my haze, I try to put two and two together. It's so unlike Skye to lose control of a car. Hell. She trained as a racecar driver! And could handle any speed and the sharpest of turns. Something doesn't sit right with me. The racy outfits. The late-night meetings. Was she having an affair? Drinking too much with her secret lover?

My mind plays games with me. A bitter cocktail of love, loss, and doubt wrestles with my sanity. Thank God for Maddie. My precious daughter is the only thing that keeps me grounded. And accountable. Virtually overnight, I've had to learn to be a single parent, attending to her every need.

One week after Skye's tragic accident, a memorial service is held at the church where we belong. Her body wasn't recovered. The car exploded upon impact, taking her with it. I've had sleepless nights replaying the accident, those awful last minutes of her fall from the earth. Hearing her screams. Wondering what her last thoughts were. Did she cry out for Maddie and me? Or a lover? Then other nights, I'm tormented

with: What if she survived the fiery crash? Mutilated or burnt beyond recognition. Or both. How would I have been able to live with her like that? Could she have gone on being my wife and the mother to our child? There are no answers; only sadness. My only blessing is that I get to remember her as the beautiful, brilliant woman she was.

The sanctuary is packed, filled with friends and colleagues from Conquest Broadcasting. I sit in the front row, holding Maddie, in her little black romper, on my lap. Amazingly, she hasn't uttered a peep, perhaps in deference to her mother.

An easel displaying a blown-up photo of Skye stands in front of the pews. Dozens of bouquets of white flowers surround it. Tears back up in my eyes as one Conquest Broadcasting News colleague after another goes up to the podium to share stories about my late wife and shower her with accolades.

"She was fearless and a great friend and reporter."

"She loved the impossible. No story was too challenging for her."

"She championed the underdog. Stood up for the rights of minorities, the oppressed, and women."

"She was like a family member. Remembering everyone's birthdays and special life events."

"She was a ninja. A kickass woman in a male-dominated world."

"She met death's eyes over and over again. Never flinching on the battlefield or wherever she was."

I'm in awe. Despite the suspicions I harbor, my heart swells with pride. My late wife was a dynamite reporter respected by all. I glance around the sanctuary. There's not a

dry eye in the house. To my surprise, Emmy winner Nicole Farrell is seated in the back row. Though she's wearing oversized dark sunglasses to mask her identity, I recognize her immediately. Her face is pale and tears fall from beneath the shades. I wonder how Skye knew her as I don't recall them doing a celebrity interview together. The announcement of the next eulogist thwarts my attention back to the podium.

Jim Hartley. The slick, silver-haired head of Conquest Broadcasting News gives a short speech, praising my wife for her contributions and pursuit of the truth. His cool tone and terse words make it sound more like a broadcast than a tribute. To be honest, I never liked the prick. He always gave me the cold shoulder whenever I encountered him. Like I was some inferior species. Even now, he doesn't make eye contact with me.

Hastily returning to his seat, he's followed by Blake Burns, the head of the network, who gives a heartfelt eulogy that brings the crowd to tears, praising my wife's dignity, brilliance, and passion. A short video montage of some of her groundbreaking stories plays. At the end, he addresses the crowd, his voice choked.

"Skye Collins.

Journalist. Activist. Wife. Mother.

She lived by her words: Dig deep, then dig deeper.

You will be missed."

My heart is cracking as he steps down. Finally, my turn. Holding Maddie in my arms, I lumber up to the podium. I have no speech prepared. I couldn't sit down and write one, with the overload of emotions that have consumed me this past week. I'm an artist, not a writer. I paint words.

My throat constricts as I stare out at the crowd. Silence. Dead silence. Finally, a few words spill out. “Thank you for being here.” Tears well in my eyes and then sobs overwhelm me. I can’t say another word.

My knees weak, I stumble back to my seat. I know at this moment how much I still love my wife. Despite any indiscretion, how much I will miss her. Maybe this was all my fault. My sweet little girl meets my tearful gaze. I see so much of Skye in her. With her tiny hands, she wipes away my tears of shame, and I vow to be the best father I can be to her. To make Skye proud of me. Wherever her soul now lies.

### CHAPTER 13

Skye

I am trapped in my own body. Like a corpse buried in a coffin.

I can't move.

Not a finger. Or a toe.

My legs are paralyzed.

I try, but can't pry my eyes open.

I'm living in darkness.

Every breath hurts.

I can't move my mouth.

My throat is as dry as a desert and so unbearably sore.

Like I've swallowed shards of glass.

Sometimes, I can't feel a thing.

That only lasts for a short while.

Until screaming pain seeps back into my bones.

I can only hear.

Fear fills me.

Rhythmic beeping sounds ring in my ears. Beep, beep, beep.

Around me, muffled voices. Male and female.

“How is she doing?”

“No improvement.”

“She’s still in a coma.”

“It’s been more than a week.

“What are her chances?”

Silence.

Please talk to me. Someone!

I don’t know if I’m dead or alive. Or why I’m here.

I belong with my husband.

Finn. Beautiful Finn.

And my baby. My precious Maddie.



I love them with my heart and soul. With all I still have.

A glimmer of hope.

Maybe I'm alive. I can think with my mind. Feel with my heart.

Visions of our life together dance in my head.

Or perhaps it's all an illusion.

I drift off into a neverland, not sure if it's heaven or hell.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

The voices: "She's flatlining!"

"She's going into cardiac arrest!"

"We're losing her!"

"Code blue emergency!"

Then, a white light.

### CHAPTER 14

Finn

S even a.m. I'm in the kitchen, making coffee. Hoping the caffeine will pour some life into me. Another sleepless night in my empty bed, I feel like a zombie. Only my heartbeat lets me know I'm alive. The timer dings, and almost simultaneously, the doorbell rings.

I hate the doorbell. All week along it's been constantly ringing, neighbors bringing over food and flowers. The bell rings again. It must be yet another neighbor, checking in on me or bringing me a fucking fruitcake or some other do-gooder crap to cheer me up. Don't these people know that I just want to be left alone, mourn the loss of my wife, and take care of my child? Sweets can't sugarcoat my aching soul. Or bring back my Skye.

Maddie's still in her crib, sound asleep. I hope the doorbell doesn't wake her. She used to wake up with a gleeful coo. Now, she wakes up crying. She misses her mother. I know it. I do too.

The bell rings again, but this time it's followed by a fierce rap. Dressed in sweats and a ratty old T-shirt, I take a quick sip of my coffee and hurry to the front door, hoping to get to it before the fracas gets to be too much. I unlock the deadbolt, expecting to see another neighborhood matron with cheap store-bought flowers or a Saran-wrapped platter of home-baked cookies. Wanting to come in to offer their condolences and make small talk about my wife when I know they're here to ogle me.

Grief is still burning in my chest like a bonfire. I'm in no mood for people. No mood for conversation. Ready with my brief gratitude speech filled with trite platitudes, I swing the front door open and am caught off guard by my visitors. The muscles in my forehead lift as I take them in. One is a medium-height stocky man with a head of thick jet black hair that defies his fifty or so years and clad in a shabby trench coat; the other a taller, younger, crew-cut male wearing an ill-fitting blue suit that hangs on his lanky physique, chewing a wad of gum. Before I can say a word, the older, heavier one reaches into the pocket of his rumpled coat.

"Detective Pete Billings from the Los Angeles Police Department." His voice laced with an unmistakable Jersey accent, he shows me his shiny badge and introduces his companion. "And my partner, Lieutenant Mancuso." The scrawny officer likewise shows me his badge.

"Can we come in?" asks the detective.

Puzzled, I agree to let the two cops in and lead them to the living room. Billings settles into an armchair, making himself at home, while his partner heads to the chair next to him. I take a seat on the couch facing them.

The detective's dark eagle-sharp eyes survey the room, stopping on my abstract paintings scattered on the walls. "Nice place you have here."

"Thanks," I mutter, wondering what the point of their visit is.

"Mind if I have a piece of this?" he asks, already helping himself to a slice of the fruitcake that's sitting on the coffee table.

"Sure, go ahead," I say as he stuffs his mouth, crumbs falling onto his lapels.

"Thanks," he mumbles, his mouth full of the candied cake.

“What can I do for you?” I ask as his partner withdraws a small yellow-lined pad from his breast pocket along with a pen.

“We have a couple of questions to ask you.”

“Okay.” My voice is tenuous.

“What kind of marriage did you and your wife have?”

I’m somewhat taken aback, but I answer. “We had a good one. We loved each other very much.”

The detective nods. “I see. But after seven years together, you must have had some little problems. Me and the missus always get into squabbles.”

I twist my wedding band. I haven’t been able to bring myself to take it off.

“We had a hard time conceiving a baby. We went through years of fertility treatments.”

“They’re very expensive, aren’t they?”

“Skye’s health insurance paid for most of them. It was more the emotional toll they took on us. A lot of years of trying with no results.”

“But you have a kid.”

“We got lucky one night.”

“Good for you. There’s nothing like getting your woman knocked up.”

I'm put off by his words but choose to say nothing.

"Was Skye a good mother?"

"Yes, but she spent too much time working. She didn't even take a maternity leave."

"Oh, by the way, my wife was a big fan of her news segments. Sorry about your loss."

"Thanks," I say humbly, noticing the simple gold band on his ring finger that resembles mine. A pang of envy shoots through me. Lucky bastard has a wife.

"Did it bother you that she was making a mid-six-figure income while you were a struggling artist?"

As the detective's eyes again dart to a painting, I ponder his question. Yeah, sure it bothered me. Not because I was jealous, but because it made me feel inadequate at times. I didn't like her being the principal breadwinner all these years, springing for all the luxuries we had in our life, but it never seemed to bother her. Holding back my thoughts, I simply answer no.

His eyes stayed fixed on the painting. One of the few figurative ones.

"Say, is that a portrait of your wife?"

"Yeah." My wedding present to her. It pains me to look at it. I've considered taking it down.

"I don't know much about art, but you seem rather talented to me." He turns to his partner. "What d'ya think, Mancuso?"

His partner shrugs. He chews his gum as Billings continues.

“Are you aware your wife had a five million dollar life insurance policy?”

I flinch, unable to contain my surprise or the shock in my voice. “No. She never mentioned that to me.”

The grating detective stuffs his face with more of the cake, then gulps it down. “You know a lot of people would kill to get their hands on a boatload of money like that.”

His words rattle me. Rage rises in my chest. “What are you saying?”

“We have reason to believe your wife was murdered.”

At his unexpected words, my heart drops to my stomach. My mouth goes dry as I process them. It takes me several moments to have the wherewithal to respond. Just one word pours out.

“What?!” My mouth stays open, my jaw hangs low.

“Several witnesses saw your wife speeding down Mulholland, being chased by an SUV. A couple of teenagers, who were hanging out on one of the outlooks, thought they heard gunshots.”

I’m stunned into silence as he continues, his partner quietly taking notes.

“In our investigation, we found some bullet shells along Mulholland.”

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“You know, with that hefty life insurance policy—”

With anger in my voice, loud enough to wake Maddie, I cut him off. “You think I killed my wife?” It’s always the husband.

“Where were you that night?”

“I was here. Watching the baby.”

“Do you have anyone who can back that up?”

“Yeah, my wife. But that’s not going to help, is it?”

“Why did your wife go out that night?”

“She told me it was for work. She was working on a big story.”

“Did she tell you anything about it?”

“She was very secretive about it. She often was when it came to her stories.”

“I see. Was there anything unusual about your wife’s behavior that night?”

“She seemed a little on edge.”

“Was she wearing her work clothes?”

“She was a little dressed up.”

“Like how dressed up?”

“A mini dress and high heels.” I don’t tell them she looked hot as hell.

“Like a hooker? No pun intended.”

His words affront me. “No, my wife could never look like a... prostitute.”

“Like she was going on a hot date?”

I swallow my anger and emphatically tell them again that she was working on a story.

“Did you believe her?”

I hesitate. Do I tell him that I had my doubts? That it was the third time that week that she got all dolled up in a seductive black dress and fuck-me shoes. That in the back of my mind, I thought she might be having an affair.

The detective reads my mind. “You’ve heard of the seven year itch. Do you think your wife was having an affair?”

A bitter mix of anger and doubt sizzles through me. “I don’t know. I mean NO.”

“Is there anyone who would want to harm her?”

“She was an investigative reporter. She made a lot of enemies. But I don’t think she ever had a death threat.”

“We found a pepper spray dispenser near the wreck.”

“Skye always carried pepper spray or mace. It was part of the job. It made her feel safer.”

My eyes stay fixed on the detective as he retrieves something from his coat pocket. A dented gold tube of lipstick. I don’t recognize it. Skye always wore lip-gloss that she



brushed on with a wand.

“We also found this at the site of the crash. It was one of the few other things that survived it. Well, more or less.” I watch as he clicks the base.

An angry, gruff voice: “Kill the bitch!”

Shocked, I can’t form words.

“Do you recognize it?”

I shake my head though the voice sounds vaguely familiar. At least it’s not mine.

“Can you identify the voice?” I ask anxiously.

“Unfortunately, it’s distorted. And not enough to run through our voice tracking software.”

I silently curse.

“Mr. Hooker, we have reason to believe your wife’s life was in danger. That whoever she was investigating or seeing intended to harm her.”

I process his words. He’s implying that it’s still possible she was having an affair.

“And we have reason to believe that as long as this potential killer is out there, your life and that of your child’s may be in danger.”

Silently, nervously, I rake my hand through my hair, my chest so tight I can barely breathe.

“Am I still a suspect?”

“Until your wife’s murderer is found, we can’t rule out anyone.”

“Have you talked to her boss at Conquest? Jim Hartley. Maybe he knows something.”

“We talked to him earlier. He didn’t tell us much. Except that your wife seemed a little anxious recently. He attributed it to her concern about getting a promotion.”

“What about her desk? Or her computer?”

“Her desk was cleaned out. And both her laptop and cell phone were demolished in the accident.” The detective stuffs one more slice of the fruitcake into his mouth. “Do you mind if we take a look around?”

“Sure. Be my guest. But please keep it down because our baby’s asleep.” I can’t help saying “our.”

A few minutes later, the twosome returns.

“Well, we won’t take up anymore of your time.” Then, he spots my guitar perched in the corner. And the poster above it of my idol—The Boss.

“You play guitar?” he asks.

“Yeah.” Though I haven’t gone near the acoustic instrument Skye gave me as a wedding present since she passed.

“I’m from Hoboken. Me and the missus are big Springsteen fans.”

So, we have something in common. I think about giving him the concert tickets we

have—I mean, I had—to a Boss concert at The Greek, but just let it go, not wanting to make more conversation. Or spend more time with him. My eyes stay on the detective as he reaches into the breast pocket of his coat and slips out a card. He hands it to me. “Call me if you think of anything.”

As he and his partner head out, I stare down at the card.

Detective Pete Billings

Los Angeles Police Department

Homicide Division

Cell phone: 213-555-6161

A wail sounds from the nursery.

And at that moment, I know our lives are changed forever.

If someone could kill Skye, someone can kill us.

### CHAPTER 15

Skye

Four Years Later

I squirm. The sharp snip of scissors sends a chill down my spine. Goosebumps erupt along my arms.

“Stay still.” The gentle voice of my plastic surgeon, one of the many wonderful doctors who have attended to me since my near fatal accident. After years of rehabilitation, most of which have been spent at a nun-run facility, the new me is about to make her debut. Sister Marie, the big-hearted nun, who took me under her wing and lovingly nursed me back to health, both physically and emotionally, holds my hand.

“Doctor, be careful of my necklace,” I stammer, moving my other hand to the dangling gold locket. The one single thing that’s gotten me through my darkest moments. Those many times I wanted to give up. Having the photo of my family—my husband, baby daughter, and me inside it close to my heart—gave me the will to persevere. And gave me hope.

“Honey, it’s going to be all right,” says Sister Marie, her voice as soothing as a balm. How many times she’s said that to me, getting me over humps of severe depression and despair. Thinking that I’d never walk or talk again and most of all never see my family. My beloved Finn and our precious Maddie. Gripping the large cross that hangs on her buxom chest, she says a soft prayer as my surgeon continues to work on

me.

Snip. Snip. Snip. Snip.

Sitting upright on an examining table, I keep my unblinking eyes on my doctor as he cuts through the layers of bandages that swath my face. My heart beats overtime. I suck in a deep breath. This will be the first time I see my new self. My face, mutilated in the accident I can't remember, has required years of plastic surgery along with countless other operations to repair the rest of my battered body. Years of painful, painstaking surgeries, months confined to a hospital bed hooked up to all kinds of IVs and fed intravenously, weeks on end using a wheelchair, walker, or crutches, hours and hours of grueling physical, occupational, cognitive, and speech therapy. I've been told my car went over Mulholland Drive. A horrific car crash. If a Hollywood tour guide hadn't seen it burst into flames, I would have been left to die. It's a miracle I survived, says Sister Marie. A double miracle. Resuscitated by the medics and then I almost didn't make it in the hospital. Touch and go in a coma for three months, followed by a year in critical care in a full body cast.

In rehab, I learned to walk and talk again. But because of the extensive, disfiguring damage, my face has remained hidden to me. For the last few years, I've looked much like the Invisible Man or should I say Woman, my head wrapped like a mummy's in bandages with apertures for my eyes, nose, and mouth. One reconstructive facial surgery after another. After each, my doctor telling me, "We're getting there."

I never was what one would consider beautiful though Finn always told me I was. At best cute with my dimpled chin, puppy-brown eyes, and upturned nose. Somehow, the network makeup people camouflaged my imperfections and made me glow on the air. My dynamic personality and intelligence also helped me shine.

"Are you okay?" asks Dr. Sanders as he unravels the bandages.

I nod. Inside my chest, my heart is hammering. Every nerve is buzzing. A dizzying mixture of anticipation and dread spools through me. In addition to sustaining major lacerations, almost every bone in my face was shattered in the accident. My jaw, my cheekbones, even my teeth. I also sustained a serious brain injury—blunt force trauma—that resulted in retrograde amnesia. I’m unable to recall the traumatic events of the night that almost cost me my life. Not one. Nor the days leading up to it. I’ve totally blocked them out. And despite extensive psychotherapy, there’s a good possibility I may never remember what happened. All I know from a Detective Billings is someone tried to kill me.

“How’s it going, doc?” I ask hesitantly. My raspy voice after all these years still sounds alien to me. My windpipe, I was told, was crushed in the accident. I’m lucky I can talk says my speech pathologist. Another miracle.

“So far, so good,” replies my plastic surgeon as layers of gauze peel off. I can hear a smile in his voice. He’s working from the base of my neck up.

Suddenly, a cold draft hits the exposed flesh of my face. The air conditioning. Another shiver runs through me. Not because I’m cold, but because I’m apprehensive. Butterflies flit in my stomach as my heart constricts in my chest.

Chewing my lips, I fight the urge to touch my face. I slide the hand Sister Marie isn’t holding under my butt to keep it at bay. Temptation taunts me.

“We’re almost there,” says the good doctor, still unwinding the gauze. It feels like an eternity.

“Oh, honey!” exclaims Sister Marie. Her face is beaming. I can hear happy tears in her voice.

My gaze stays on the bespeckled doctor as he peels off the last of my bandages. A

tangle of gauze dangles from his hand.

“How much longer will it take?” I ask, impatience mixing with my trepidation.

His eyes unwavering, he flashes a smile. “We’re almost there.”

Anxiously, I inhale again through my nose and feel my nostrils flare. The doctor’s eyes stay on me and his smile widens as he places the mountain of gauze on the tray table next to him. Next to the pile is a large hand mirror.

“Beautiful,” he breathes out.

Sister Marie echoes him, her voice still teary. “So beautiful.”

The three syllables of the word spin around my head. “Beau-ti-ful.” Beautiful.

My heart still in my throat, I watch as Dr. Sanders lifts the mirror to my face. “Take a look.”

With baited breath, I meet my reflection. In disbelief, I blink my eyes several times. My mouth falls open and I audibly gasp.

“Oh my God.” The words spill out as if they’re almost one. My mouth stays agape as I behold my face. It’s perfection.

Except for one small scar that intercepts my right eyebrow, my skin is smooth... creamy like porcelain... and almost wrinkle-free except for a few faint smile lines around my brand new hazel eyes, thanks to a revolutionary laser procedure. My thinner oval face now has high cheekbones that bracket a slightly turned up slender nose and accentuate my strong jawline. My former chin-length dyed hair is back to its original shade of auburn and floats along my back in a long loose braid. I’m

paralyzed by the sight of myself. All the surgeries and laser treatments have totally transformed me.

“What do you think?” asks my surgeon, cutting into my stupor.

My emotions in turmoil, I try to form words. But I can't. Shock has hijacked my voice.

“Well?”

I try to squeak out a word. Only a soft gasp spills out.

“Smile,” he says cheerfully. “Put on a happy face, Skye.”

To please him, I force a smile. A small closed-mouth one.

“Come on, you can do better. Let's see those beautiful teeth.”

Hesitantly, I give him a toothy smile. My perfect pearly white caps and implants have lushened my lips. They're fuller.

“There you go,” he beams as I hear Sister Marie sigh.

Enough. Abandoning the smile, I run my fingers along the contours of my new face. Slowly, trying to ingest, memorize, and savor the softness of my skin along with every new angle. One word finally forms on my lips. A breathy whisper. “Wow.”

I don't recognize myself.

Nor will anyone else.



I am, for the first time in my life, truly beautiful.

Yet, tears fill my eyes.

Who will remember me?

No one.

Not even my husband who's been told I'm dead. And he seems to have disappeared from this planet with no trace of him. Finn Hooker no longer exists.

Nor do I.

### CHAPTER 16

Skye

My first official day in the Witness Protection Program. My first official job since my horrific accident. For all intents and purposes, investigative reporter Skye Collins is dead. I've googled myself and even read my obituary. I have no clue about what really happened to me. And no clue about who would want to kill me. Buried six feet under and forgotten. Private tutor and schoolteacher Scarlet Callahan is, however, alive and well. She even has a Facebook page and a LinkedIn account.

The fact that I had a teaching degree in addition to my journalism degree as a backup made the choice of my new occupation easy. During my last few months in rehab, I took a few online courses in early childhood education to refresh my skills. Focusing mainly on the progressive Montessori method, which is how my parents educated me. In the meantime, the law enforcement agency readied my new birth certificate, social security number, driver's license, passport, and résumé. The photo on the latter three documents stuns and saddens me as much as my reflection still does in any mirror. As exquisite as my new face may be, I miss my old self. The life I lived as a reporter, wife, and mother. Going back to my old job or getting one similar was not an option. Nor was going back to Finn and my daughter, who's now going on five.

I was an unlikely candidate for California's program as most witnesses are protected in exchange for testifying in a trial against a criminal involved with organized crime or other serious offenses. Detective Pete Billings of the LAPD, who's relentlessly worked my case, worked with the attorney general to get me in. He convinced him that as a high profile newscaster, my life was endangered with my likely contract

killer still at large.

My only stipulation was that I wanted to remain in Southern California and not relocate. With my possible killer still out there, I knew that was risky. But my longing to somehow be reunited with Finn and Maddie took precedence. It's a dream I've never let go of.

The high-end tutoring agency that the program set me up with has placed me in a live-in job in Malibu. All I know is that the family will be traveling a lot and has a kindergarten-age daughter. They obviously have the means to be able to privately homeschool their child. As I drive to my destination, I think about Finn and Maddie. I think about them all the time. It's like they've fallen off the face of the earth. Driving down the 101 from Santa Barbara to the Pacific Coast Highway, I impulsively pass my exit and make a detour to drive by our house with the hope of seeing them. It's over an hour out of my way but worth it. Even to get a glimpse of them.

Parking in front of the Craftsman-style house, which hasn't changed a bit, I turn the ignition off and wait. A forest green mini-van is parked in the driveway—maybe Finn traded in his pickup or got a second car. My pulse drums in my ears at the prospect of seeing him and Maddie. How will I react? Jump out of the car and grab my daughter. Hi, remember me? I'm your mommy! Please. Who am I kidding? They'll think I'm some kind of crazy person! A stalker! And call the police! After a long fidgety hour, second thoughts assault me. This is all wrong. Ready to drive off, the front door suddenly bursts open and a cute little ginger-haired girl who looks to be Maddie's age comes skipping out. My heart does a cartwheel, then almost stops. Right behind her is an attractive brunette about my age carrying a baby. I feel sick to my stomach. Finn's new wife? I don't know whether to laugh or cry when a short balding man in a suit and horn-rimmed glasses follows them out the door. The latter wins. My vision blurs with tears as they clamber into the mini-van and pull out of the driveway. A devastating thought settles in the pit of my stomach. My family is gone. And as much as I've googled him and used every investigative tactic I know, Finn Hooker is

nowhere to be found. Even Detective Billings doesn't know how to reach him. All his social media sites are shut down and his cell phone is out of service. Maybe he moved to Europe. He always told me he wanted to live in Paris. Has he relocated to the City of Light? Found another woman?

With a heart so heavy it can weigh down the world, I get back on the 10 and cruise up the Coast Highway heading toward Point Dume, the northern end of Malibu. Having no recollection of the accident, I'm not afraid of driving. After a few lessons to get me back behind the wheel, it came back easily to me. It's like riding a bike. Or a lover. You never forget.

The exhilarating drive along the Pacific Ocean with its majestic white-crested waves lifts my spirits. My window is down and the fresh salty scent of the sea mixes with the warm ocean breeze. A picture-perfect mid-August day, surfers dot the water, trying to catch the next big wave while beachgoers of all ages frolic in the sea, stroll along the shoreline, and sunbathe on the beach. The oceanfront houses, one after another, vary greatly—ranging from unpretentious cottages to mini-mansions. As I pass by Pepperdine University in my new Jeep Cherokee, the scenery changes, going from residential to rustic. Soon, there are no more houses visible along the coast. Just trees. Following my GPS, I turn left onto a private road and pull up to a massive iron gate. Stopping, I hit the call button on the intercom and announce myself. In a few anxious breaths, the gate swings open. Winding down a cypress-lined road, I come to a two-story contemporary house—an architectural masterpiece that's all sand-colored stucco and tinted glass. A vast cactus-garden surrounds it, full of exotic succulents and colorful shrubs. Sitting on a bluff overlooking the blue-green ocean, the secluded property is in a word: Magnificent.

My body tenses as I contemplate my new job. My new life. I wonder who lives here. The analytic, investigative reporter in me tells me that they must be very private and protective. And likely creative. Unsure where to park, I pull my Jeep into the semi-circular driveway. My heart thudding in my chest, I hop out of the car and retrieve

my two large suitcases from the trunk before trekking to the front door. Inhaling a fortifying breath that draws in the ocean-scented air, I set my luggage down and ring the doorbell. It buzzes. On my next breath, the fiberglass door swings open. A casually dressed Latino woman in her mid-fifties greets me. Her toffee-colored face is warm and inviting.

“Bienvenido , Señorita Callahan. We have been expecting you. I am Rosita, the housekeeper.” Her English is heavily accented, but otherwise impressive.

I respond in Spanish. “Sorry I’m a little late. Hope that’s not a problem.”

The housekeeper smiles at my fluent Spanish, a language I learned when I lived in Costa Rica for two years while my parents shot a documentary about rainforests. “Come inside. Por favor. ”

A bit on edge, I reach down for my bags and step over the threshold, finding myself in a vaulted two-story entryway lit by a skylight. From a sweeping staircase that curls like a wave, a tall, commanding masculine figure descends. Barefoot, he’s wearing gray sweats and a simple white tee. My eyes stay locked on his perfectly mussed dark hair, intense gem-blue eyes, and chiseled features.

A face more familiar than my own.

Oh. My. God. Can it be . . . ?

### CHAPTER 17

Skye

My husband!

My eyes blink once. Twice. Then they freeze.

My stomach lurches. My heart almost stops.

The words Oh My God loop around my head like a record on repeat as Rosita introduces us.

“Señorita . . . el papá . . . ”

He steps in. “Phineas Jackson.”

The heart-melting, husky voice is the same, but the name is different. Phineas Jackson? No wonder I couldn’t track him down.

His sapphire eyes lock with mine. The blood drains from my head. My knees grow weak. Finally, after a gulp of air, I pull myself together. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Jackson.

“Please call me Finn. I’d prefer that.”

“Finn,” I repeat breathily. How I love saying his name! Finn... my Finn.

He extends his paint-flecked hand. I hesitate to shake it, not because I'm worried the paint will get on mine, but because I'm frozen with shock.

"Ms. Callahan, you look like you've just seen a ghost."

I have!

He glances down at his hand. "Don't worry. The paint is dry."

That deft, long-fingered hand that could stroke my flesh as masterfully as a canvas. That elegant paint-stained hand that caressed every part of my body and brought me endless pleasure.

Finally, I lift my hand and he takes it in his. Countless kisses, but I've never shaken his hand before.

His hand is warm, the grip firm, exuding strength and confidence. Only he holds my hand in his longer than expected. His gaze stays on me and I stare at his dazzling face.

He's now thirty-six. A few fine lines fan from his eyes, but somehow they only add to his allure. Giving him depth and dimension. He's also a little fuller, in a good way. More buff. His shoulders broader, the tattooed muscles of his biceps bulging, his forearms veined and contoured. He's sexier than I remember. A masterpiece of virility.

"Can I take your bags?" asks Rosita, her animated voice making a small dent in my stupor.

"Yes, thank you," I mutter as she bends down for them. Given how heavy they are, I'm surprised she lifts them with ease.

“Gracias, Rosita,” says Finn. “Please bring them to the guest cottage.”

“Sí, Señor.” Without another word, the housekeeper whisks my bags away, disappearing out of sight.

“I’d like to chat with you a bit, Ms. Callahan.”

“You can call me Sk—.” I catch myself in time. “Scarlet.”

A sweet smile flickers on his lips. “That name suits you.”

With my long reddish brown hair, hazel eyes, and reconstructed face, I look entirely different than my former self. Even my voice is different. There’s not a glimmer of recognition in his glistening eyes.

“Thanks,” I murmur as he ushers me inside. The long fingers of his hand splay across the small of my back, sending a rush of tingles to my core. His familiar woodsy scent adds to my lightness of being. As I walk, I don’t feel my feet touch the floor. The effect he has on me is almost identical to what I felt many years ago... the first time we met.

It was love at first sight.



### CHAPTER 18

Skye

Twelve Years Earlier

New York City

I slog out the revolving glass doors of 30 Rock onto the plaza, totally dejected. Adieu NBC.

My sixteenth interview in the city that never sleeps. And apparently doesn't hire. Just like at all the other networks and news organizations I've met with, there's a job freeze. The damn recession. Everyone tells me my credentials are impeccable... Barnard magna cum laude, followed by two years at the prestigious Columbia School of Journalism, where I graduated first in my class and received many awards. My exposé on date rape was even published in the Huffington Post .

The same lame excuses. And insipid advice. We'll keep your résumé in the active file. Try some local affiliates. Do some freelance work. Check back with us in a few months.

Adjusting my shoulder bag, I huff out a frustrated breath. I need a job. I want a job. A steady, full-time, meaningful one. I'll take any entry-level position in any major news department, but in these tough economic times, they don't exist. Everyone's scaling back. They're eliminating existing jobs and not creating new ones.

As I step outside, a blast of the cold December air assaults me like a slap on the face. I tighten the plaid scarf around my neck and then hug myself, thankful I wore my heavy wool coat, a thrift-store find. Shivering nonetheless, I walk aimlessly around the plaza. The electricity in the air does little to lift my spirits. Rockefeller Center is bustling, with rush hour commuters charging out of office buildings, and myriad shoppers carrying colorful Christmas bags despite the economy. I behold the massive Christmas tree that lights up the plaza and sadness sweeps over me. This is the first year I won't be spending the holidays with my parents, my only family. Six months ago while filming a documentary in Laos, they drove over a live land mine. Instant death. Not one of their Jeep crew survived the horrific explosion. Friends from school have invited me to spend Christmas with them, but I've declined all their kind offers. I just want to spend it alone in the city in my small Upper Westside apartment and attend midnight mass, remembering my parents. There's a church right across from Barnard where I've gone to services before.

Picking up my pace, I glance down at the skaters circling the iconic ice rink below. There are skaters of all ages, some newbies with wobbling legs and holding on to the hand railing, and others like the elegant woman in the middle doing intricate jumps and spins, obviously experienced. My parents used to take me skating here when I was a kid whenever we spent Christmas in New York, then for a hot chocolate at the café. Another pang of sadness stabs me. I need to go home. Pour myself a glass of wine. Obliterate the deep funk I'm in. Yup, it sucks to be me.

With my weighty heart sinking to my stomach, I skulk across the touristy plaza, passing the many stylish shops as well as the venerable auction house, Christie's. I peek inside the latter. There's a cocktail party going on. In need of some warmth and a drink, I impulsively decide to check it out.

"Can I take your coat?" asks an attendant as soon as I enter.

"Thanks, but I'll just keep it," I stammer, not sure how long I will stay.

Tugging off my gloves and stuffing them into my coat pockets, I make my way further inside and soak in both my surroundings and the crowd.

The place is packed with chi-chi people who are sipping champagne and chatting about the contemporary artwork on display. The elite of New York. The women are dressed in chic black cocktail attire and dripping with jewels, the men tan and clad in expensive dark suits. From what I hear and see, you'd never know we're in the middle of a major recession. Vivaldi's Four Seasons plays in the background, adding to the festive mood.

"Darling," says one rail-thin woman to another. "What do you think of the Rothko?"

"It's divine. And such a steal."

"Totally!"

I glance at the auction estimate posted under the abstract painting. \$500,000-\$1,000,000.

Yikes! That's a small fortune. I guess not everyone is affected by the recession.

Meandering through the crowd, another conversation captures my attention between a stunning, statuesque blonde and an older, paunchy man in a navy blazer and open-collar white shirt. She's dressed in a winter-white pencil skirt, cream cashmere pullover, and black alligator stilettos. About my age, she exudes wealth, class, and confidence. A modern-day Grace Kelly, who could easily be a supermodel. Maybe she is.

If she is the epitome of elegance, he is the epitome of sleaze. Sporting slicked back dyed hair, a thick gold chain around his neck, a pinky ring, and shoes that are too shiny. On closer inspection, I recognize him. Sheldon Greenberg, one of Hollywood's

biggest TV producers. I wanted to interview him for the thesis I was writing on the future of women in television, but he basically told me to get lost. What a jerk!

“Yo, Kayla!”

He and the attractive woman exchange kisses, the European way on each cheek.

“Darling, so good to see you,” gushes the woman.

“So, sweetheart,” he drawls in a thick New York accent, his eyes on her chest, “is anything a steal?”

She runs a manicured hand through her glossy hair. “Check out the Warhol. Don’t tell anyone I’ve told you, but there’s no reserve.”

I get the sense the stunning woman works for the auction house. Grrr! She’s got a job!

The sleazebag winks at her. “Thanks for the tip, sweetheart.” He chugs his champagne and stuffs an hors d’oeuvre into his mouth, chewing it noisily. “Your parents here?”

“No. They’re at their house in Aruba.”

Sheldon wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. Slob. “Tell your father to call me when he gets back in town. I have a hot TV project cooking.”

“I will. Where are you staying?”

“At the Mercer downtown. Come by later. I’m having an after-party.”

She smiles flirtatiously. “I’ll be there.” Her crystal-green eyes roam the crowd of art collectors. “Listen, I’ve got to schmooze. I’ll see you later, darling.” I watch as she pecks a kiss on his cheek, and they part, each working themselves into the crowd.

I move on, plucking a glass of champagne from one of the white-gloved waiters along with an hors d’oeuvre. A cheese puff. Hungry, I snag another and move into a corner, intimidated by these glamorous people. Stuffing the crusty pastry into my mouth, I catch sight of him, standing across the room in front of a colorful abstract painting. The most beautiful man I’ve ever set eyes on.

A tad older than me, he’s tall, dark and handsome, but not in the traditional, fairy-tale way. Unlike all the clean-shaven middle-aged suits here, his chiseled face is laced with a sexy layer of scruff that hints at a riot of dark hair beneath his adorable beanie. Dressed in all black, his lean, athletic body sports faded ripped jeans, beat-up Doc Martens, and this ridiculously sexy leather bomber jacket over a Springsteen T-shirt. He’s downtown cool. A bad boy.

Our eyes lock. Holy cow. He’s staring at me. I behold him like a work of art. Despite the distance between us, I can feel his magnetism. An attraction like none I’ve ever felt. My body reacts in a way I’ve never experienced—heart palps, shortness of breath, and tingles all over. It’s so heated I contemplate taking off my coat.

He loosens his wool scarf and a cocky, crooked smile curls his lips. It’s almost a teasing smirk. Telling me it’s suddenly hot in here.

It is!

I nervously sip my champagne. What’s my next move? Flipping around, I face a painting so I don’t have to deal with Mr. Swoonworthy.

My breathing shallow, I absent-mindedly stare at the canvas. A Jackson Pollock.

Estimated Sale Price: 1-1.5 million dollars. Nothing compares with the masterpiece I just beheld. I can still feel his eyes on me. My temperature is rising; my pulse is in overdrive.

Moments later, a warm breath licks the nape of my neck. A pair of strong arms circles my waist, trapping me. My heart skips a beat; goosebumps pop beneath my coat. Oh God! Is it possibly him?

“Sweetheart, you’re more amazing than any painting here.”

It’s not him! The voice is gruff with a thick New York accent. I recognize it immediately. Sheldon Greenberg. The scent of his putrid cologne drifts up my nose and nauseates me. To my horror, he thrusts a hand under my coat and gropes my breasts.

“Mmm,” he hums as he squeezes them.

“Please stop!” I squirm, but he holds me prisoner, gripping my waist with one arm.

“Please . . . you’re hurting me!”

“Relax, sweetheart. We’re just getting started.”

On my next desperate breath, he corners me against the wall, pressing me so hard against it that the plastic tumbler I’m holding crushes in my hand. A sharp pain slices through the base of my thumb as it slips out of my fingers. The pain is fleeting, overpowered by my need to get away from this monster. No matter how much I writhe, trying to fight him off, I can’t break free of him.

Caging me with his weighty body, he shuffles his hand down my torso, until it reaches the waistband of my skirt. Digging his stubby fingers beneath my pantyhose,

he travels further south.

“I bet you have a pussy that belongs in a catalogue,” he growls. His erection presses against me. Frightening me. Sickening me. Bringing me to tears.

My face smooshed against the wall, I cry out as loud as I can, “Please stop!”

“Let go of her, asswipe!”

A new voice! On my next harsh breath, I’m freed. I whirl around and find Sheldon sprawled on the floor, face down. My hero glares at my assailant with frightening intensity. His piercing blue eyes as razor-sharp as shark teeth. An unnerving snarl curled on his lips.

“She’s mine.”

His husky voice is intense. Forceful. Commanding. Possessive.

“If you ever touch her again, I’ll kill you.” Greenberg staggers to his feet and stumbles away, not looking back at the ravishing man with the badass jeans and leather jacket, who just rescued me.

Ignoring him, my hero cups his hands on my trembling shoulders. “Are you okay?” His voice is now soft with a touch of gravel. His eyes, two exquisite sapphires, glittering with concern.

“I’m fine,” I reply, still shaken. “Thank you.”

His jeweled eyes travel down my body and then darken with fury. “Shit! The bastard hurt you.”

Suddenly, I'm aware of a twinge of pain and the sensation of warm liquid trickling down my palm.

As I glance down at my bloody hand, he yanks off his scarf.

"Hold up your hand."

My heart hammering, I do as he asks and watch as he wraps the scarf around it, forming a makeshift bandage.

"I'm going to ruin your scarf." Tingling all over, I can barely get the words out.

He smiles a sexy, dimpled smile that turns my bones to liquid. "Don't worry. They're a dime a dozen. You can buy me a new one on the street tomorrow."

Tomorrow?

"There... all done." He knots the scarf. "How does your hand feel?"

"Good. Thanks." The truth is I can barely feel it, so numb from the tingles that shoot through my body, my senses dulled by my overpowering attraction to him.

He cups my shoulders again. As I grow weak in my knees from his touch, another heart-melting smile fixes on his lips.

"Do you know you're beautiful?"

Me, beautiful ? I stay speechless as he leans into me, his warm breath dusting my cheeks. He smells divine of leather and pine.

"What's your name?" I stammer.



“Finn.”

“As in Phineas?”

“As in Huckleberry.”

He whispers in my ear.

“Let’s get out of here.”

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One hour later, we’re in Brooklyn, at his painting-filled loft, butt-naked on his one piece of furniture—a micro-suede futon that’s sprawled out on the butcher-block floor next to his worn guitar. Our bodies are entwined, a mad tangle of arms, legs, and tongues. Exploring each other as if we’re two conquerors discovering new lands. Springsteen’s “She’s the One” plays on his sound system.

So in the moment, my very skilled, generous, rough around the edges lover brings me to places I’ve never known before. Making me forget about what happened at Christie’s. And my now expired V-Card.

We spend the rest of the night opening our hearts. Bearing our souls. We’re bathed in each other’s scents, twined in each other’s limbs, wrapped in each other’s dreams. I tell him about my nomadic, magical childhood, traveling across the globe while my parents filmed award-winning documentaries. And then about their untimely, tragic death. The CliffsNotes version of my education. Followed by my dreams and aspirations.

My past seems happily-ever-after as he shares his. I learn he’s a product of the system. The son of a crack whore mother who abandoned him at birth, leaving him

alone to drift from one foster family to another. A talented artist from an early age, he turned to painting as a means to both escape his hardships and express himself. It was the only constant in his ever changing, challenging life. His passion when love was nowhere to be had. Two years older than me—twenty-five—he tells me he won a full scholarship to the prestigious Pratt Institute, from which he graduated.

“What were you doing at Christie’s?” I ask, my head resting on his chest, his arm wrapped around me.

“Networking with collectors and dealers, hoping to jumpstart my painting career. What about you?”

“After my depressing job interview at NBC, I went inside on a whim to warm up and get a drink.”

A chance encounter.

He affectionately flicks my nose. “They should have hired you.”

“One of your paintings should have been hanging at Christie’s.”

We exchange a laugh . . .

And he takes me again.

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Last night, it was lust.

By morning, it’s love.

One day later, I get a life-changing phone call. A job offer from Conquest Broadcasting in Los Angeles to become an associate producer in their news department.

That night after a celebratory session of delicious lovemaking, my naked, beautiful Finn rolls off the futon and stands up.

“Now, I’m gonna make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

I laugh at him, appreciating his valiant attempt to sound like Marlon Brando in The Godfather . “What?”

“It’s a surprise. Close your eyes.”

I do as he asks. A few moments later, a ticklish, wet sensation brushes across my abdomen.

I squirm. “What are you doing, Finn?” It lasts less than thirty seconds.

“Baby, sit up and open your eyes. I hoist myself to an upright position. Finn’s sitting cross-legged next to me, holding a paintbrush, the bristles coated in a shimmer of red. He flashes a cocky smile.

I look down. My jaw drops as I silently read the two words he’s painted on my body.

**MARRY ME!**

Two weeks later, we exchange our forever vows at a chapel in Las Vegas en route to Los Angeles.

The city of angels.

The city of dreams.

### CHAPTER 19

Skye

“Please have a seat, Scarlet.”

Finn’s raspy voice catapults me back to the present. He’s led me to a sprawling art-filled great room. Bathed in natural light, it’s sparsely decorated with contemporary furnishings, a tasteful combination of creamy leather, polished metals, and gleaming dark wood that showcases the large abstract canvases on the soaring white walls.

Still shaking inside and not the least bit recovered, I do as he asks, settling into one of the oversized sofas. He lowers himself onto an armchair across from me. Leaning back, he crosses an ankle over his knee as I fold my hands in my lap.

“Help yourself to some water.”

My eyes flit to the two bottles of Evian on the coffee table between us. “Thanks, but I’m good,” I lie, my emotions in a jumble and my mouth desert-dry.

His eyes meet mine. “Scarlet, I was very impressed by your credentials and well-traveled background as well as by your glowing recommendations.”

I nervously thank him. “Why did you decide to homeschool your daughter?” Our little girl! I can’t wait to meet her!

He looks at me earnestly. “Numerous reasons. For one, I’ll be traveling a lot this

year, which would mean pulling her out of school for long periods of time to be with me.”

“I see.” He’s obviously devoted to her. “Where exactly are you going?”

“I’m an artist and have several exhibitions set up at galleries around the world. After Los Angeles, I go to London, Paris, and Hong Kong.”

Wow! He’s come so far. He must be mega-successful. Pride soars in my chest. “That’s amazing.”

He humbly shrugs. “Personally, I’d rather stay put and paint in my studio. You, of course, will accompany us because I don’t want my daughter to miss a day of her studies. I assume you have a passport.”

Nodding, I tell him I do. My mind flashes back to my own childhood, globe-trotting with my parents. “The knowledge she’ll get from traveling the world will be immeasurable.”

“I agree. One of the reasons I hired you is that you’re multi-lingual. I would like you to incorporate some basic foreign language skills into her curriculum. By the way, she has a knack for languages.”

Just like me .

“She already speaks fluent Spanish.”

“That’s wonderful. She should be able to pick up French easily.”

“Yes, she’s extremely smart. In fact, she’s been tested and shown to be gifted though she’s rather small for her age. The administrator of the private school I thought about

sending her to felt she would be very bored in kindergarten or even the first grade. She already reads at the third-grade level, but putting her in the third grade with kids much bigger than her felt wrong to me. I thought it better she learn at home.”

“You made a good decision,” I comment, knowing from a story I did on bullying that smaller kids are easy prey.

“Another reason I’ve chosen to homeschool her is for her safety. I’m quite renowned, and I didn’t want the paparazzi to hound her.” He pauses. “Or have to worry she might be taken from me.”

Kidnapped. Inwardly, I shudder. The investigative reporter in me wonders: Has their life been threatened? The unsettling thought circles my mind as he grabs one of the bottles of water.

“You’re very protective.”

“I’ve had to be. I lost my wife. I can’t lose her. She’s everything to me.”

My stomach clenches at his first mention of me. I debate whether or not to ask him about his wife as he twists open the bottle cap. My heart hammering, I go for it.

“How did your wife die?”

His eyes darken. “A car crash.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s been a while.”

My curiosity is piqued. I’m bursting to hear what circumstantial details he knows.

Signaling that he doesn't want to talk about it, he takes a long swig of his water.

Holding the bottle in his left hand. I notice for the first time he's no longer wearing his wedding band. Or a different one. A glimmer of hope flickers inside me. Maybe he's never remarried.

After another sip, he sets the bottle down on the table. "There's one more reason why I'm overprotective and have decided to homeschool my daughter." He pauses. "She's rather sickly."

My chest constricts. My stomach dips. The C-word? Oh God, no!

"What do you mean?" I spit out the words, unable to mask the alarm in my voice.

"She has asthma and is prone to attacks."

Though I silently sigh with relief, a wave of sadness sweeps over me. I try to imagine my skinny, pale little girl when a bright raspy voice lights up the room.

"Hi, Daddy! Is this my new teacher, Ms. Callahan?"

I look up. An adorable, wide-eyed little girl hippity-hops toward us, her two cinnamon braids flying behind her. I force myself to stay glued to the couch when I long to run up to her, lift her into my arms, and smother her with kisses. I can't help but gasp.

She's the spitting image of me!

The me I used to be.

The miracle of all miracles.



My daughter!

### CHAPTER 20

Skye

Six Years Earlier

“M mm,” hums my husband, kissing the ticklish area just beneath my chin. This hypersensitive spot always gets to me. My head lolled back, I close my eyes and moan.

“We’re going to make a baby tonight,” he whispers in my ear.

A baby. How long have we been trying? I’ve lost track. Finally, this past month we gave up on fertility treatments. Not that I couldn’t afford them. I had enough. The days of recording my cycle; counting the days to ovulation; running home from the office to have sex; those countless shots of Clomid, something my husband had to do for me because I couldn’t bear injecting the long needle into my thigh; the clinic visits; the egg retrievals; the IVF procedures. Then, the wait. The hope. The disappointment. The tears. Not to mention the stress it’s put on our marriage.

“I’m sorry. We don’t understand why you can’t get pregnant. Your husband’s sperm are healthy, strong swimmers and your eggs are top-notch A-quality.”

The same story over and over again.

I’ve given up on having children. Convinced myself that not everyone needs to have them. That for us, it’s not meant to be. Maybe in light of my all-consuming career,

it's better this way. I don't need the added stress of a child. It's a sign. My defenses go only so far to mask my grief.

"Where are you on your cycle?" my husband asks.

"I-I don't know," I stammer. Actually, that's the truth. Since the fertility treatments, my periods have been irregular. They come and go, and I've stopped counting the days in between.

"It doesn't matter. Tonight's the night."

"How do you know?" I murmur, my arousal making it increasingly difficult to talk in full sentences, let alone talk at all.

"I just do. I feel it in my gut."

For once I just want to make love with my husband and not worry about the consequences. Not feel the pressure. By the time we explode together, swimming in blissful ecstasy, I've shoved the word baby to the back of my mind. It's the best, most fulfilling sex we've had in ages.

Recovering, Finn traces the outline of my face with his forefinger. "That was amazing,"

"Yeah," I breathe out, running my hand through his damp hair.

"I bet we made a baby."

No matter what, it all comes back to that. Not showing my true emotions, I humor him. "Bet what?"

“Bet your sweet ass.”

“Fine. I bet yours we didn’t.”

A wicked glint lights up his eyes. “We’re not done. And the bet is on.”

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In the days that follow, I feel different. I can’t pinpoint exactly what’s different. For a lack of words, I’d call it an inexplicable lightness of being.

Two weeks pass. Finally, today’s the day. The test. Okay. I’m lying. I’ve been doing a pregnancy test every day since that night. So far, nada. I knew I would be right. I’ve begun to accept the fact that a baby isn’t in my cards. Our cards. And I’ve resigned myself to winning the bet I secretly want to lose.

The bathroom door is closed. I sit on the toilet, my legs pressed together, the pee-stick in my hand. It’s the last one I have, and after today, I swear I’m never going to buy another box. Good. I’ll save myself some money. I push and a hot stream of urine pours from my center. Midway, I spread my legs and put the strip part of the stick under the flow for a few seconds. God, I’ve done this so often I could do a YouTube tutorial and explain everything. Done emptying my bladder, I wipe and then flush the toilet. The roaring whoosh of the water makes me feel like I’m flushing down all hope. Standing, I pull up my leggings and then set the magic stick on the tile counter. The window side up. Anxiously, I wash my hands, lathering them more than usual with the fragrant soap. I dry them off with a soft towel, avoiding eye contact with the stick. My heart ticks like a clock. My skin prickles. Straightening the magazine rack to pass the time, I try not to think about the outcome. Then, I glance down at my watch. Exactly three minutes have transpired. I pivot toward the stick, my eyes focusing on the narrow window in the middle. A distinct blue line appears. My heart skips a beat. In disbelief, I blink my eyes several times, thinking this will

make my vision clearer. No longer batting my lashes, I stare at the window again. The line is darker. Thicker. My heart rattles, my chest constricts. I carefully lift the stick between my fingers and hold it up to my eyes. The results are loud and clear. Oh my God. This can't be. I need to do the test again. Gripping the stick, I hurry over to the wastebasket and dig out the box of pregnancy detectors. I shake it madly, hoping another stick will fall out. Nada. I toss the box onto the floor.

A loud rap sounds at the bathroom door. Along with a quizzical voice.

“Baby, what are you doing in there? We’re going to be late for your awards dinner.”

The doorknob twists, and on my next frantic heartbeat, the door swings open. Finn, dressed in one of his few suits, strides in.

“What’s going on? You’re not even ready.”

Still in shock, I hold up the detector. “Look.”

Finn snatches the stick from me and stares down at it. His eyes widen, his jaw drops. “Holy shit. It’s positive.”

I nod.

“Are you sure?”

“I think so.”

Without warning, he gathers me into his arms, and the sob I’ve been holding back spills out against his chest. He plants a kiss on my head and then chuckles.

“I won the bet.”

“I accept.” My heart swells with unprecedented happiness. For once, the super competitive me, who’s always strived to be the winner, is happy she’s lost. Tears of joy fill my eyes and then I begin to laugh too. Oh my God! We’re having a baby!

Twenty-four hours later, I’m sporting a small tattoo on my butt. A delicate flower. A symbol of life.

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### Nine Months Later

Labor Day. Though I’m off from work, the Monday starts like any other morning. Finn and I are both up early. Nine months pregnant and only twenty-five pounds heavier, I head sprightly to the kitchen to make breakfast. First, a pot of coffee for Finn, and then, some decaffeinated Earl Grey tea for me. The divine aroma of the coffee wafts up my nose as I boil water in the tea kettle. Inhaling the dark rich brew, I long for a cup. My obstetrician, however, has forbidden me from drinking caffeine as well as alcohol during my pregnancy and despite my love of both, I’ve obliged. Once the baby is born, I can at least go back to coffee. One cup a day. My doctor’s assured me the caffeine won’t affect the quantity or quality of my breast milk nor the baby.

The baby is due in two weeks though she could drop any day. I believe it’s going to be a girl while Finn is positive it’ll be a boy. Three months into my pregnancy, we made another bet—same stakes. Either way, I just want to give birth to a healthy baby, and I’m grateful that I’ve had such an easy pregnancy. No morning sickness, cramping, or lack of energy. In fact, I’m still working full-time, much to Finn’s chagrin. He’s wanted me to take the next two weeks off, but I refused to give in. Resting is not part of my vocabulary. I’m a lot like my mother, who right up to giving birth to me, was shooting a documentary in Australia. One day, I’ll share the story with my child—Dad was driving a Jeep in the Murramarang Nature Reserve with my very pregnant mom next to him in the front seat. The open-air vehicle flew over a

sizable pothole and my mother instantly went into labor. Thirty minutes later I was born in the backseat while she was shouting out to their production team not to miss one shot of the kangaroos hopping by.

“Good mornin’, baby.” A familiar rasp brings an end to my musings. I look over my shoulder.

Finn. Dressed in casual sweats that sit low on his hips and bare-chested. Unshaven, his mop of bedhead hair falling into his sapphire eyes. He shoots me his dazzling, dimpled smile.

“Mmm. The coffee smells good. What’s for breakfast?”

Before I can answer, the kettle whistles. I hurry to the stove to turn it off.

Then suddenly, I feel it. A rush of warm liquid pouring down my inner thighs. Panic rises up inside me. It’s not supposed to happen this way. What happened to the contractions?

“Oh my God!” I cry out.

“Skye, what’s the matter? Are you okay? Did you burn yourself?” Finn’s voice is even more panicked than mine.

“Finn, my water just broke!”

He glances down at the puddle of liquid around my bare feet. Speechless.

“I’ve got to get to the hospital.”

Five minutes later, with the overnight bag I’ve had packed for over a month, we’re on

our way. A Springsteen song playing—“Countin’ on a Miracle.” Praying that we won’t be pulled over for speeding. Or get into an accident. The gut-wrenching contractions start coming. Praying that all will go well.

Cedars-Sinai Medical Center is about twenty minutes away, but without traffic, we make it there in ten. Finn drops off the car at the Emergency Room entrance and lifts me into his arms, leaving my overnight bag behind. Carrying me, he darts through the automatic doors and dashes up to the reception area.

“My wife is about to have our baby!” he spits out in a panic.

The attendant on duty rolls her eyes at him. “Relax. It happens all the time.”

Ten minutes later I’m in the delivery room, Finn by my side. Assisted by several nurses, a young Asian doctor examines me. I don’t recognize her.

“Who are you?” I mumble.

“Dr. Woo.”

Dr. Who?

“I work with Dr. Harris, your regular doctor. She’s on vacation.”

What!? On Labor Day? The day of all days I’m in labor!

I manage one word: “Oh.” Which morphs into “ooh” when another agonizing contraction stabs my gut. Groaning, I contort my face as Finn’s alarmed voice fills my ears.

“Do something, doctor! My wife’s in pain!”



I glance up at my dressed-in-scrubs husband. His face is more pinched than mine. And he's sweating.

Dr. Woo gently presses down on my swollen belly. "Chill, everyone. I've got this. Everything's going to be fine."

"What's going on?" I mutter.

"Mrs. Hooker, because your water broke before your contractions, we're going to give you an epidural."

"An epidural?" That was so not part of the plan. Dr. Harris, Finn, and I all agreed I'd have the baby naturally.

"Yes. It'll minimize any potential infections. As well as the pain you're experiencing."

The epidural kicks in quickly—no pain—but thankfully Finn never leaves my side. He's my husband, lover, partner, coach, and the father of our child... that's if the baby ever comes out.

"Push, baby, push!" he urges.

My legs bent and spread, I give it all I have. I push. I grunt, I cry. I shriek. Sweat beads cluster on my chest. Oh, the pain! Please, my baby, come.

Finn repeats his three desperate words.

I push and I push and I push. Why, oh God, won't she come out? Every horror story I've read fills my head. That she's breach... tangled in the umbilical cord... and the most horrifying of all... she's stillborn. Tears spill from my eyes as I do everything I

can to bring my baby into this world.

Then, suddenly, on my next push, I feel something different. Something pushing out of me like an alien. It hurts so much! I shriek in agony and in fear. Finn squeezes my hand.

“Skye, the baby’s head is coming out!” He gasps. “Now the shoulders.”

“Push again!” orders the doctor with an excited smile.

Why the hell is she smiling? This is no picnic! With a thundering grunt, I push again, looking up at Finn. Tears leak from his eyes. Why is he crying? It’s freaking me out.

“One more big push!” I hear the doctor say as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Uggggh!!!” Then suddenly, my belly feels empty, and I hear a hungry, little cry. Then, the voice of a nurse.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Hooker. You have a healthy baby . . .”

“Girl. It’s a girl.” The soft, bewildered voice of my husband.

What? I open my eyes. And watch as they clean her off. My tiny, mottled, peach-haired life form. My little beauty. Her sweet cries music to my ears as they swaddle her and lay her gently on my breast. Misty-eyed, I gaze down at her and feel the deepest of love, a powerful connection that can’t be put into words. One that transcends all others.

“She’s beautiful.” Finn’s voice is hardly above a whisper. “Our Maddie.”

We decided on names early on, for both a boy and a girl. We’re calling her Madeline

Soleil. After my favorite storybook character and my late mother whose name meant sunshine. Maddie for short.

I nod, glancing back down at her. “Yes, my love, she is.”

He kisses her scalp. Then, he kisses my forehead.

“You won the bet.”

I flash him a smile. “It’s going to hurt to sit tomorrow.”

Twenty-four hours later, my husband is sporting a tattoo identical to mine.

### CHAPTER 21

Skye

The memory of that flower tattoo on Finn's buttock is cut short. Maddie's sweet voice brings me back to the present.

"Daddy, my new teacher is so pretty!" She can't take her sparkling eyes off me nor can I take mine off her. Her gaze darts to her father. "Don't you think so?"

Finn's eyes soak me in. A slow, dimpled smile spreads on his lips. "Yes, she is, sunshine."

I feel myself blush, flush all over. "Thank you."

"Daddy, can Kangy and I show Ms. Callahan my room?"

Kangy must be the stuffed animal she's holding. I cast my eyes down. For sure, it's the toy kangaroo I cherished as a child. The one my father bought after my mother gave birth to me in Australia. Now lovingly worn and minus the joey that used to be in her pouch. Another melancholic smile forms on my lips.

"If you'd like, you can call me Scarlet." Or Mommy . My heart clenches at that thought.

"That's such a nice name! S-C-A-R-L-E-T."

“Wow! You know how to spell it?”

She nods proudly. “Yup! My daddy has a tube of paint called scarlet red.”

Finn smiles proudly. “I told your teacher you’re super smart.”

An ear-to-ear grin lights up her face. “I am!”

God, she reminds me so much of myself at her age. Bold, confident, and precocious.

Her eyes stay on Finn. “So, Daddy, is it okay if I show Scarlet my room?”

“Sunshine, I think she might want to get settled in first. Unpack her bags and relax a bit.”

I quickly correct him. “Actually, Finn, I’d love to see your daughter’s room.” In truth, I desperately want to spend time with her and I need to get away from him. The devastating effect he’s having on me is almost unbearable. The urge to tell him who I really am makes me want to jump out of my skin. And fall into his arms.

Finn agrees and an elated Maddie jumps up and down, shouting “Yay!” On my next breath, she takes my hand, coaxing me to stand up. The warmth of her little hand in mine melts my heart like chocolate, the sensation so overwhelming I stagger to my feet like a drunk.

“C’mon, Scarlet. It’s upstairs. I’ll show you.”

Finn’s amused eyes stay on us as she eagerly leads me out of the room to the winding stairs, her plush kangaroo still dangling from her other hand. We march up the steep steps side by side. When we get to the landing, she bolts down a long hallway. I quicken my gait to keep up with her, amazed how energetic my asthma-stricken little

girl is. Her room is almost at the very end.

“Here it is!” she says brightly.

I stand at the doorway as still as a statue, her hand still in mine. Truthfully, I’m not sure if I can let go of it. It belongs to me. Now and forever. The connection is so strong it’s as if they’re melded. A whirling dervish of emotions swirls through me.

Joy.

Excitement.

Love.

Shock.

Fear.

Frustration.

Sadness.

When it all comes to an end, the only one that lingers is shock. I still can’t believe I’ve been reunited with my husband and child. While I yearn to shout out who I am, I need to collect myself and remember why I’m in the Witness Protection Program. Someone tried to kill me and that someone is likely still out there. I could be a threat to their safety.

“Scarlet, isn’t it pretty!?” chirps Maddie, her enthralled voice erasing my unsettling thoughts and brightening my spirits. Bubbling with pride, she leads me inside.

It's a far cry from her closet-sized pink and white nursery. A pang of melancholy jabs me. My baby girl has grown up. Whimsically decorated in lavender, white, and moss green, the roomy, sunlit space reflects the personality of a sophisticated but fun-loving little girl. Optimally placed on the whitewashed plank floors are various pieces of sturdy but stylish bleached wood furniture, including a large armoire, a dresser with a mirror, and a queen-size sleigh bed. The bed can easily fit the two of us.

"Scarlet, do you like my room?" She lets go of my hand and prances over to the bed. Hopping on to it, she begins to jump up and down as if it's a trampoline. "Daddy and I picked out everything together from Pottery Barn. He let me have this big girl bed!"

"I love it, sweetie," I say, my eyes roaming. They land on an antique white rocker in the corner. Even with the newly upholstered green gingham cushions, I recognize it instantly. Tears brim in the back of my eyes. It's the chair I sat in while nursing Maddie. Night after night.

She catches my gaze on it and breaks into a smile. "That's my special chair! Daddy says my mommy used to like to rock me in it."

My heartbeat speeds up; my stomach knots. "Your mommy?"

She stops jumping and bobs her head. "She died when I was a baby."

Cautiously, taking advantage of her chattiness, I ask, "How did she die?"

"My daddy told me she was in a terrible car accident."

"I'm sorry." And I'm sorry I can't take you into my arms and hug you to pieces. And that I've missed so many formative years of your life. Your first steps. Your first words. Your first birthday. Your first everything. I'm so, so sorry, my baby. Regret eats away at me like burning acid. My eyes sting.

“Don’t be sad, Scarlet. It’s okay. I don’t remember her.”

“Not at all?” Such a stupid question. She was only nine-months old! Yet, there’s a hole in my soul that longs to hear that there’s some kind of recollection. A connection.

She shakes her head. “My daddy says my mommy is in heaven.”

Her words pain me, sending an ache to my gut so great I almost wince. “Sweetie, I think she’s right here with you.”

Puzzled, my little girl furrows her brows. “What do you mean?”

My heart stutters. I falter for words. “What I mean is that she’s in your heart.”

“That can’t be!”

“Yes. I’ll prove it to you.” I put her little hand to her heart and hold it there with mine. “Do you feel that?”

She nods. “Why is my heart beating so hard?”

“That’s your mommy. Her heart is beating with yours. Every second. Every minute. Every hour of the day.”

“But dead people can’t be alive!”

“They are in a different kind of way. They live in your heart forever. I want you to believe me, Maddie.”

What I can’t believe is that I’m having my first conversation with my daughter about



me, and it's so heady, so profound. My wiser-than-her-years little girl seems to be taking it all in stride.

"I do believe you, Scarlet!" She jumps off the bed. "Do you want to see a picture of her?"

"Sure." Unsure.

"Look!" She lifts off a small, framed photo from her night table. With hesitant steps, my heartbeat accelerating, I join her. She shows me the picture, pointing at the radiant young woman. "That's my mommy."

I stare at the photo, swallowing past the lump forming in my throat. "Can I hold it?"

"Sure." She hands me the photo. Bringing it closer to my eyes, I battle the tears that threaten to erupt. The old me! Standing next to Finn, holding newly born Maddie in my arms. Big smiles on our faces. I remember the day it was taken as if it were yesterday. It's the very same photo that's in my locket. The locket that's a part of me. Even now it's around my neck concealed beneath my top.

My hand trembling, I lower the photo so it's almost eye-level with Maddie. Rising on tippy-toes, she peers at it again. "My mommy was so pretty! Like you!"

Like you . The irony of her words rattles me. Yet, I'm touched and speechless. While I always considered myself smart, I never thought I was that pretty. Though I photographed well, I always complained about my faults, but Finn saw through them all and loved me all the more for them. He said they gave me character. Made me painterly.

Once again, Maddie's sweet voice brings me back to the moment. "Don't you think so?"

“Yes. She was. And it looks like she really loved you and your daddy.” And still does! My wobbly voice is soft and full of emotion. Though I’ve seen hundreds of images of the old me online, not one of them was of our family. I kept my personal life very private. Away from social media. For a brief minute, I reflect on the past. The way I used to be. So young! Full of life! So fulfilled! A beautiful family... a meaningful career. The old me who possessed undaunted optimism. A sense that the world and its possibilities were open to me. My heart contracts with raw emotion. The present mourns the past. What was can never be. Sorrow soars inside me.

Maddie is oblivious to my sadness. Cheerfully, she says, “Daddy told me I look just like my mommy!”

Despite my grim self, a small smile forms on my lips. I look down at my smiling daughter, and reminisce about how I used to look in my youth. The similarities between us are extraordinary. The same thick cinnamon hair, big expressive chocolate-brown eyes, cute little button nose, and slightly cleft chin. The only thing that’s different is that she’s inherited Finn’s enviable full lips and kissable dimples. “You do, my sweetie.”

Maddie cocks her head and looks up at me. “Scarlet, how do you know that?”

I swallow back tears. Three little words. “I just do.”

For a brief moment, she digests my words, then takes my hand again, entwining her tiny fingers with mine. My body warms as she tugs me away.

“Come, Scarlet. I want to show you our classroom. It’s right next door.”

Grabbing her kangaroo from the bed, my energetic little girl ushers me through a door, which I thought was a closet. It opens to another bright, sunlit space with wraparound windows. I take in my surroundings, my eyes flitting from wall to wall of

the spacious corner room.

“Do you like it?” asks Maddie as she darts to the child-size table in the middle and plops down on one of the two chairs. “This is where you’re going to teach me!”

My eyes continue to circle the room. Low-level shelves line the walls. They’re filled with books, educational games, arts and crafts supplies, and other learning aids. In addition to the shelves, there’s a play area with assorted toys and colorful mats, and across from it, a comfy cozy slipcovered couch—more the size of a loveseat—the perfect place to curl up and read a book or have one read to you. On the bright yellow walls, I eye a map of the world and a handy whiteboard as well as charming framed paintings obviously done by my talented daughter.

“So, Scarlet, what do you think?” she asks again.

“It’s awesome!” It really is the perfect learning environment. Whimsical, cheery, stimulating.

My little girl beams. “My daddy designed it! He built the bookshelves all by himself.”

“Wow.” What an incredible father Finn has been to our child. Single-handedly grooming her to be bright, insightful, inquisitive, and polite as well as imaginative and creative. My mind fills with his ruggedly handsome face and I ache to see him again. My gaze follows Maddie as she leaps up from the table and waltzes over to a bookshelf. She squats down, setting Kangy on the floor, and surveys the books.

“This is my library. My mommy bought me all these books before I was born.”

“I remember them.” A wistful smile tugs at my lips. Indeed, I do. That day, in my third trimester, I snuck out of my office at lunchtime and drove to Barnes and Noble,

wishing they had a shopping cart for all the books I intended to purchase. I vowed that I would make my child, be it a son or daughter, fall in love with books like I did as a child. And to become a reader. Books, preached my late mother, are dreams you hold in your hand. They open worlds you've never experienced and maybe will never know. From the get-go, I planned to instill the value of reading into my child.

Sliding out a book from the bottom shelf, my little girl looks over her shoulder. She shoots me a puzzled look. "What do you mean you remember them?"

I bite down on my bottom lip. I said something I shouldn't have. Note to self: Think before you speak. I have to be careful. It's not going to be easy. Hastily, I rectify my faux pas. "I mean I remember reading all your books."

Thankfully, with a smile, she buys into my response. "Guess what, Scarlet! I'm an excellent reader." She proudly draws out the word "excellent."

I smile back at her, my heart swelling with pride. "I know. Your daddy told me."

Her grin widens, the dimpled smile just like Finn's and making me ache again for him. Clutching the book, she stands up and faces me. With both hands, she holds it up. "This is my favorite book."

I silently read the title: Madeline.

The fearless, feisty, fictional little girl who inspired my daughter's name. Just knowing her for the short time I have, I can tell my pint-sized bundle of energy is equally fierce and fearless. A girl after my own heart.

"That was my favorite book, too, when I was your age. I loved Madeline."

"You did?"

I nod. “Uh-huh.” I asked my mother to read it to me so many times I could recite it by heart.

She looks up at me with hopeful eyes. “Scarlet, do you want to read it together?”

“I can’t right now. I need to head back downstairs and talk more with your father and then settle into my quarters.”

She frowns with disappointment, but then her face brightens. “Maybe, we can read it together when I go to bed tonight?”

“I’d love to do that.”

“Yay!” Returning the book to the shelf, she skips over to me and gives me a hug. Her little arms circle my waist and her head rests on my hips. Tears she can’t see break loose and trickle down my cheeks.

I’m drowning with emotion. Unadulterated love.

She squeezes me tighter. “Oh, Scarlet, I’m so happy you’re my new teacher!”

“Me too, sweetie. Me too.” Happier than she will ever know.

### CHAPTER 22

Skye

I trail Maddie as she bounds down the winding stairs. When she nears the bottom, she leaps over three steps, flying in the air and landing right in front of a startled Rosita.

“Dios mío, mi amor! You are going to hurt yourself!”

Maddie giggles. My fearless Madeline! “Poo, Rosita! You’re such a worry wart!”

“Worry wart?”

Maddie translates into Spanish. There’s no exact translation for that expression, but she communicates the meaning well enough. Her accent is perfect.

The housekeeper dramatically throws up her hands. “Aye , chiquita, you will be the death of me.”

Maddie laughs again. “¿Dónde está mi papa?”

“En la sala grande.”

Finn’s still in the great room. In addition to Spanish, I can fluently speak six other languages I picked up from my world travels with my parents. French, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Mandarin, and Arabic.

“Mi chiquita, es hora de—”

Time for what? Maddie dashes off before Rosita can finish her sentence. I follow her. Butterflies flit in my stomach at the thought of seeing Finn again.

When we get to the great room, Finn is now seated on one of the sofas. Reading something. A white binder sits on his lap.

Maddie runs up to her father. “Daddy! Guess what!”

At the sound of her voice, he lifts up his head, his gaze meeting her bright eyes. Whatever he was indulging in doesn’t matter. He slides the binder onto a cushion, allowing Maddie to climb onto his lap.

“Tell me, my love.”

“Scarlet’s read all my books! And she loves Madeline!”

He looks up at me. “Really?”

Before I can respond, another voice enters the room.

“Darling.” Female. Breathy. Seductive. Maddie’s smile fades as I look over my shoulder.

Sauntering toward us is a vaguely familiar statuesque blonde. There’s only one word to describe her: Stunning.

Movie star beautiful with a chic platinum bob and a svelte long-limbed figure. Flaunting her subtle curves, she’s dressed to the nines in head-to-toe white—tight designer jeans and a cashmere V-neck sweater—and toting a monstrous designer bag

that matches her strappy stilettos. She oozes wealth, glamour, and confidence.

“You really must get rid of that cheap drugstore brand hand soap in the guest bathroom. It’s so abrasive.”

What an opening line. Then . . .

“Phineas, did you review the pricing chart for the paintings?” She shoots Maddie a dirty look. “Or were you too busy with her ?”

Even her haughty voice is vaguely familiar. I turn to look at Maddie. She pokes her tongue out at the insolent blonde. I love my girl!

My eyes return to the woman. Her face turns livid. “The nerve of that child! Phineas, you must really teach her some respect.”

Rage surges inside me. Talking about abrasive! The audacity of this pig-headed woman to criticize my sweet little girl. Before Finn responds, I jerk around and blurt out, “She’s only five years old.” Not even.

Swinging her bag, the woman strides up to the couch and meets me face to face. I don’t forget faces. Especially one as striking as hers. I know I’ve met her before. But where? I search my mind as she glowers at me.

“And who might you be?”

Finn’s wife! The mother of his daughter! I bite my tongue before the words fly out like flaming arrows. Finn introduces us.

“Kayla . . .”



The name, too, is vaguely familiar. Where have I heard it before?

“...this is Maddie’s new teacher. Scarlet. She’ll be living in the guesthouse.”

Pursing her lips, the icy blonde gives me the once-over. Her venomous green eyes glint with contempt. “Well, I hope you can teach that child a little respect.”

Sparing me from saying something I may regret, Rosita returns and announces lunch.

Finn gives Maddie an affectionate noogie. “Sunshine, why don’t you go with Rosita and have something to eat.”

Our little girl looks up at him with her big puppy brown eyes. “But, Daddy, aren’t you going to have lunch with me?”

“I can’t today, baby girl. I need to spend time with Kayla and go over things for my upcoming exhibition.”

Frowning, she turns to me. “What about you, Scarlet?”

Inwardly, I sigh. “I’d love to, but I need to talk with your father and then get settled in.”

Kayla shoots me another contemptuous look that borders on possessive. It’s obvious she doesn’t like me. And the feeling is mutual.

Sensing the tension in the air between us, Rosita chimes in. “ Ven conmigo, mi amor. Hice tus tacos favoritos. Pescado.” She’s made Maddie’s favorite tacos. Fish.

Sulking, my little girl acquiesces. After giving Finn a hug, she bounces off his lap and follows Rosita out of the room. I’m already missing her as she disappears.

Just the three of us remain—Kayla and I awkwardly still standing next to each other.

She harrumphs. “Excuse me, Sarah—”

“Scarlet,” I correct in a curt tone.

“Whatever. Phineas and I have important business to discuss.” She pauses.  
“Privately.”

Finn interjects. “Kayla is my manager.”

She fires me a fiendish smile. My eyes don’t leave her. Suddenly, it comes to me like a hailstorm in summer. I know where I’ve seen her before.

### CHAPTER 23

Skye

At Christie's... the night I met Finn. I'm positive it's her. Her hair is shorter now, her face thinner, her cheekbones more pronounced, but for sure she's the woman who was talking to that sleazebag—that revolting pig, who put his hands all over me. And ironically connected me to Finn—my knight in shining armor who came to my rescue. A shiver shimmies down my spine. This is all too uncanny. All too much.

“Scarlet, what do you need to talk to me about?” asks Finn, hurtling me back to the present. Blinking hard, I stammer.

“Maddie's curriculum.”

“Can it wait for later?”

“Of course, it can,” snaps Kayla. “Your show at the Zander Gallery is way more important.” She tosses her enormous bag onto the couch and then smooths her lustrous hair with her left hand.

My heart skips a beat. My eyes grow wide. For the first time I see it. A humongous pear-shaped diamond on her ring finger. At least three glittering carats, it practically blinds me. She catches me staring at it and holds up her hand so it's in my face.

“Oh, Phineas forgot to tell you . . . ”

Smirking, she pauses as bile ascends up my chest. No! Please God, no!

“I’m also his fiancée. We’re getting married in a few months.”

Her words are like bullets to my heart. Little black spots dance behind my eyes. Sweat beads cluster on my chest as I feel the color leaving my face.

“Scarlet, are you all right?” Finn’s concerned voice drifts into my ears, but I can’t get words out past my constricting throat. On my next strangled breath, I feel my knees buckle, the world going dark. Just as I begin to spiral to the floor like a limp strand of spaghetti, Finn leaps up from the couch and catches me, lifting me into his strong arms.

“Scarlet, can you hear me?”

I blink my eyes several times, then open them slowly. Worry etched on his face, my forever hero holds me intensely in his gaze. My head resting against his taut chest, the thud of his heart brings me back to consciousness. I nod weakly.

“You fainted. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Puh-lease. The wilting flower is such a drama queen,” snips Kayla, lowering herself onto the couch next to her bag.

“Yes,” I reply to Finn, recovering. “I’m sorry. I think I’m just a little overwhelmed.” That’s an understatement. I’m devastated. Nauseated. Sick to my stomach. The news of Finn’s impending marriage to his despicable manager has sucked the air out of me.

“Can I get you anything?”

“No. I think I just need to rest.”

“Do you need me to help you to the guesthouse?”

I shake my head. “I think I can make it there on my own.”

“You’re sure?”

I nod. On my next faint heartbeat, Finn gently sets me down. Still nauseous, I wobble on my legs. Wrapping his arm around me, he steadies me.

“Hey, why don’t you sit down while I get you some water?” I notice that the two bottles that were on the coffee table earlier are no longer there.

Nodding, I let him escort me to a chair. Thank goodness, I’m not sitting next to Kayla. And thank goodness, she ignores me, opening the binder Finn left on the couch.

“I’ll be right back.” Finn hurries off, leaving me alone with his fiancée. The strong, cloying scent of her floral cologne wafts in the air. It assaults my nostrils and trickles to my lungs, nauseating me further.

My eyes stay fixed on her as she reaches into her bag and withdraws a slick silver pen. Clicking it, she marks up one of the binder pages, then looks up at me. Her snake-like eyes fixate on the fine white line that trails down my face, from my right eyebrow to my temple. The permanent reminder of that fateful night I can’t remember. The night that stole my husband from me. And almost my life.

She snickers. “Since I can’t remember your name, maybe I should call you Scarface.”

I swallow back the hurt, tears thickening in my throat.

The snark-meister twirls her pen, then points it at me like a poison dart. “You owe me

an apology.”

Still battling tears, I narrow my eyes at her. “Excuse me?”

She sneers. “Seriously? When you heard I was marrying Phineas, a congratulations was in order.”

My breath hitches; my blood heats. I need to get away from this witch!

I feel myself about to hyperventilate. My chest tightens; my pulse quickens; my breaths grow rapid. Just in time, Finn returns with a bottled water. He twists off the cap and hands it to me. I thank him. Lifting it to my lips, I gulp it down, not realizing how parched I was. The cool beverage quenches my thirst and calms me.

“How do you feel?” Finn asks as I set the almost depleted bottle down on the coffee table.

“Better, thanks.”

“Good. I’ll show you to the guesthouse.”

Kayla looks up from what she’s reading. “Seriously, darling, she’s a teacher. She’s supposed to be smart. Don’t you think she can find the guesthouse all by her itty bitty self?”

Ignoring her, Finn helps me to my feet. His touch zaps me like a bolt of lightning. The electricity palpable. It obliterates the toxicity.

“Thanks,” I murmur, every hair standing on end, my skin prickling.

His hand moves to my lower back. “C’mon.”

Kayla shoots Finn a dirty look. “You need to stop procrastinating. We have a lot of ground to cover.” Then, she looks at me dismissively. “I suppose I’ll go fix myself a Bellini in the meantime.”

“Fine.” Finn stabs the word at her as she stands.

She, in turn, stabs a kiss on his cheek, one watchful eye on me, waiting for me to react.

Mine. She doesn’t have to say it for me to hear the heart-piercing word.

I want to spit the word back at her. But in my weakened, nauseated, still-in-shock state, I don’t have the wherewithal. I force myself not to show any emotion, focusing on holding back tears. And not throwing up.

Finn leads the way out. I drag my feet as if I’m wading through mud.

Kayla’s tart voice trails us. “Darling, please make it snappy. We’ve also got wedding plans to go over.”

Suddenly, the floor turns to quicksand and I’m sinking fast.

### CHAPTER 24

Skye

The guesthouse is located in the rear of the vast property and has a view of the ocean. It's a lot older than the main house. A charming Craftsman bungalow. With its gray-blue siding, white trim, and gabled roof, it resembles the house we lived in years ago. A garden of lavender and succulents surrounds it. The scent of the wild purple flowers mixes with the salty sea air, creating an intoxicating perfume. Finn escorts me up the four steps to the porch, then turns the knob of the front door; it's unlocked. Pushing it open, he ushers me inside, his fingers still splayed on the small of my back.

I step straight into a narrow entrance that separates a cozy living room with a fireplace from a dining area. A staircase in the middle leads to a second level. The dark hardwood floors glisten and the white paint on the walls smells fresh.

"I hope you like it," he says. "It's the original house that sat on this property. One of the oldest in Malibu. It's what drew me here. It dates back to the early twenties. It reminds me a lot of the house I shared with my late wife."

It more than reminds me of the house we shared. It's furnished with all the furniture we bought from Crate & Barrel along with our flea market finds and some of Finn's early paintings. Memories of our old life swarm my mind. I mentally try to swat at them, but they buzz like a circle of flies in summer. I can't make them go away.

"It's small but functional," Finn continues as the buzz in my head overwhelms me.



“Your bedroom and a small study are upstairs.” I briefly glance up. “Rosita stocked the refrigerator with food. I hope you’re not a vegan. And I bought a Keurig for you to make coffee.”

“Thank you,” I mutter. “That’ll be fine.”

“Of course, you’re always welcome to share meals with us in the main house.”

I thank him again.

“Rosita brought your bags up to your bedroom, so unless you need anything more, I’m going to split.”

I need you. I practically choke on the thought and gasp for air.

“You’re sure you’re okay, Scarlet?”

I nod. “Yes. I’m getting over something, but I’m perfectly fine.” Who am I kidding? I still feel sick to my stomach. Worse than before.

Finn looks concerned. “Will you be able to start with Maddie tomorrow?”

“Of course.” I pause. “I just need a good night’s rest.”

“Excellent. If you’re up for it, why don’t you join us for dinner?”

The temptation is great, but I need to get away from him. Gain clarity. Gain composure.

“Um, uh, thank you, but I want to settle in and go over your daughter’s first day of school. I want to personally evaluate her reading and math levels with some testing.

We're going to start with an integrated unit on food groups and nutrition. And I plan to introduce her to French."

Finn's face lights up. "That sounds perfect. I have a good feeling things are going to work out. My daughter has already taken a strong liking to you."

And me to her. Understatement. I already love her so much. I always have. Even in my bleakest times. She's born from my flesh and bones . Our flesh and bones. Our love.

As I reflect on what my wise savior, Sister Marie, once told me—love never dies—Finn glances down at his watch. The vintage one I bought him for his thirtieth birthday. The worn leather band is now covered with paint flecks. A small victory for me. He still wears it!

"Hey, let me know if you need anything. Rosita left the keys on the kitchen counter. Please lock the door at night." His cell phone pings. A text. He slips it out of his pocket and looks down at the screen. His dense brows knit together. "I'm sorry. I need to get back to Kayla."

At the mention of her name, the nausea that subsided rushes back full force to my chest. I desperately need to get to a bathroom. Without another word, I dash up the stairs, hoping it's en suite with my bedroom. Behind me, I hear the front door slam shut. Finn's gone.

Gripping my gut, I find the bathroom and dart inside it. Falling to my knees on the cold tile floor, I fold myself over the toilet and do what I've needed to do since finding out Finn now belongs to another.

I vomit.

Except I don't wrench my guts. There's nothing inside me. Sobbing, I vomit tears.  
Tears upon tears.

I watch as they drip into the bowl, making tiny starbursts as they collide with the water. I cry and I cry and I cry. The tears endless.

My husband lost me. Now, I've lost him.

The tears still spilling, I flush the toilet and watch my old life whirl away.

### CHAPTER 25

Finn

The next couple of weeks keep me busy. I spend them mostly in my studio readying my final paintings for my first solo exhibition. My time spent with my daughter is limited, but according to her new teacher, she's doing well. Maddie substantiates it, excitedly telling me about the things she's learning day after day. She's even impressed me with her French.

“Je t'aime. Tu es mon héros.”

“What does that mean?” I ask over breakfast, unable to speak a word of the language.

“It means: I love you, Daddy. You are my hero!” she says proudly, scooping up a heaping tablespoon of Raisin Bran.

Unusual words for beginner's French. But nonetheless, I'm touched by them. So charming and heartfelt.

Maddie hasn't stop telling me how much she loves her new teacher. Wanting to get to know her better, I've asked Scarlet to join us for dinner on more than one occasion, especially because Maddie wants her there, but she's politely declined. She keeps to herself. Sometimes, I think she's deliberately avoiding me and whenever Kayla is around she disappears. A sadness often washes over her. She seems like an old soul. Hiding something behind her eyes.

Things with Kayla are on edge. She's more preoccupied with our pending nuptials than my first solo show. Frustrated that nothing is falling into place. Two weeks after Scarlet's arrival, she insists we go out for dinner to talk.

"Jacques, this looks divine," coos my fiancée as our meal is served. She's seated across from me at her new favorite French restaurant. Le Petit Peu.

Maddie, who was thrilled to stay home and have dinner with Scarlet, translated it for me. The Little Bit. A fitting name. I glance down at my plate of artfully arranged baby-sized samples of dishes I can't even pronounce. Kayla tells me it's a special gourmet dinner—from the chef-selected tasting menu. Trust me, I'm going to want an In-N-Out burger after we leave this joint. This frou-frou meal is strictly for the birds. I'm a man with a big appetite and this ain't gonna cut it.

"Merci, chérie," replies the beaming proprietor, a slight, dark-suited man with a handlebar mustache. "Can I get you something else?"

"Another Bellini would be wonderful."

It's her third. He turns to me. "And you, monsieur?"

"I'm fine." I take a sip of my sparkling water.

The restaurateur's eyes zoom in on Kayla's ring as she lifts her flute to her lips.

"Ah, chérie, mes félicitations!" The sparkling three-carat diamond captures the light of the blazing fireplace we're seated by. The restaurant's most coveted table, which, of course, my fiancée had no problem snagging. For Kayla, the world is her oyster.

A wide toothy smile flashes on Kayla's face. "Merci, Jacques!"

“And when eez the special day?”

My stomach knots. Kayla’s been pressuring me to lock a date, but for some reason I’ve procrastinated. Something I excel at.

We’ve only been engaged for a short time. A month. Our relationship was purely professional and platonic until one night four years after my wife’s passing Kayla seduced me. While the sex wasn’t great, it made me realize what I was missing. That I had needs. We began to have regular sex—appointment sex as Kayla calls it—at her place once a week. Afterward, she takes a hot bath alone and gets her beauty sleep while I go home to my daughter. Which is fine by me.

The art world began to perceive us as a couple. It was Kayla who proposed. Or should I say made a proposal. To get married and become the next powerhouse couple to take the art world by storm. To join the long list of others including, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Jackson Pollack and Lee Krasner, Man Ray and Lee Miller. And to knock the reigning king and queen—John Currin and Rachel Feinstein—off their pedestals. Kayla wanted not only to conquer the art world... she wanted to rule it. She convinced me that we were perfect for each other. Me, the ruggedly handsome, mysteriously widowed abstract painter; she, the stunning golden girl promoter who can wrap anyone around her finger. Including me.

I thought about her proposal. While my relationship with her was nothing like my passionate relationship with my late wife, it made sense. Moreover, I thought my daughter, now entering her formative wonder years, could use a strong female role model. Someone with ambition. Class. Power. Culture. And taste. So, I said yes.

And now as I approach the biggest moment of my career—my first solo show at a major art gallery—a cloud of regret hangs over me. Kayla has failed to embrace the single most important thing in my life—my precious daughter. As much as I’ve tried to get my new fiancée to warm up to her—including inviting Maddie to all our

glamorous dinners including tonight's—Kayla wants nothing to do with her. She treats her like an annoying puppy that jumps up against your legs for affection, and constantly shoos her away. Whenever she's at my house, she insists on Rosita taking my daughter up to her room or outside to play. I've more than once seen her do her signature eye roll whenever Maddie's needs have come before hers. She has failed to understand that no one comes before my daughter. Not her. Not me. Plain and simple. I'd kill for Maddie. And die for her.

Hijacking my thoughts, Kayla answers the mustached man's question. "Darling, we haven't set a date yet, but you can be sure you'll be invited."

Grinning, the restaurateur leaves us to enjoy our meal. Bon appétit . Easier said than done. After a heated argument about me moving back into town—something I'll never do as I relish the privacy and protection our secluded Malibu house offers us... the ocean views which inspire me... and the fresh, clean air given Maddie's asthma—Kayla drains her drink and then slams the flute on the table. Not getting her way, she leaps up from her chair and stalks out of the restaurant. I pay the three hundred dollar bill and curse under my breath. Damn Kayla and her champagne taste.

Trust me, we won't be setting a wedding date soon.

And there's another reason why.

Though she avoids me, I'm inexplicably attracted to my daughter's new teacher.

I leave the restaurant on an empty stomach. And with an empty heart.

A juicy cheeseburger would be good, but what I really hunger for is love.

Even a petit peu.

On the drive home, Springsteen's "Hungry Heart" plays in the car.



### CHAPTER 26

Skye

Right after purging my old life, I sat against the bathroom door, my legs curled to my chest and thought about my new life. I had one option: Love it or leave it. My tears gave me strength to go forward—to stay here with my beloved husband and daughter. Each day I've grown stronger, more attached to my amazing Maddie.

Tonight I had dinner with her—a first—and every minute was special. Full of chatter and laughter. Questions and answers. Joy. In conjunction with her unit on food and nutrition, I taught her how to say all of the things we were eating in French. My brilliant girl soaked in the words like a sponge. After dinner, I put her to bed and at last read her *Madeline*, with the two of us alternating pages. Now, with Maddie fast asleep upstairs, I'm back at the kitchen island, my laptop open on the counter. My fingertips dancing across the keyboard, I google her: Kayla Phillips. Know your nemesis, I learned in a grad course on crime reporting. For all I know, she is the one who tried to kill me. Take me away from Finn and Maddie so she could move in.

The first few entries confirm her privileged upbringing, impeccable education, and illustrious career. That doesn't stop me. People aren't always who they say they are. I, of all people, should know that. The investigative journalist in me surfaces. Dig deep, then dig deeper.

On a hunch, I google: Yale University, Class of 2006. An alphabetical list of graduates comes up. I scan it quickly. Kayla Phillips isn't listed. Already I feel adrenaline rising in me like I used to when I uncovered a story. My fingers are

itching.

Following my instincts, I type: Kayla Phillips/Yale in the search bar.

A single entry comes up. The Yale Daily News dating back fifteen years. I click on the link. The headline: Legacy Letdown.

Kayla Phillips, the daughter of wealthy film financier and Yale alumni, Stanton Phillips, was ousted from the university this week on the grounds of unlawful possession, use, and distribution of illicit substances. The stunning announcement comes just after Ms. Phillips was caught last month in a swank New York City hotel lounge snorting cocaine with friends . A spokesperson for Yale president, Richard C. Levin, said that regardless of her status as the daughter of one of the university's most influential donors, she won't be welcome back this fall. He cited Yale's strict no-drug policy.

My pulse speeds up. Anxiously, I type: Kayla Phillips/Sotheby's Institute of Art in London in the search bar. Almost instantly, a flurry of articles from various UK gossip magazines appears. One after another, I click on the headlines.

OK!: American Heiress Drug Bust!

Daily Mirror: Kay-Lo's Rock Star Drug Orgy

Daily Mail: Sotheby's to Kay-Lo: Get Clean or Go Home!

Tatler: American Princess Royally Screws Herself

Party after wild party. An endless orgy of sex, drugs, and booze. I click on the last article and discover that Kayla was indeed expelled from the prestigious academy after having a drugged-out affair with one of her professors and plagiarizing one of

his scholarly papers.

A Yale and art school grad? Bullshit. She's a total fake. But what really alarms me is her reckless, drug-addicted past. Does Finn know about it?

And there's this: Did her drug habit drive her to try to kill me?

Suddenly, the thud of footsteps drums in my ears. I swivel my head.

Finn. He looks stressed out. And tired.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" he asks, trudging my way.

Quickly, I slam my computer shut. I don't want him to know I was stalking his fiancée.

"I hope you don't mind, but I told Rosita to leave early. She wasn't feeling well."

Finn lifts his brows. "What's wrong with her?"

"Just a bad headache. Since she has the weekend off anyway, I thought she should get an early start. A good night's rest."

Finn nods in approval.

"I cooked dinner and put Maddie to bed."

Finn perks up at the mention of his daughter's name. "Did she give you a hard time?"

With a laugh, I tell him that she was perfectly behaved and that we read Madeline together. The delicious memory of her kissing me goodnight is not one I share. Finn

seems pleased.

“What are you still doing up?” He glances down at his watch. “It’s late.”

“I’m not tired and besides, I didn’t want to leave Maddie alone in case she woke up.”  
Or had an asthma attack, I add silently.

“Thank you.” He folds his long legs over the stool opposite me. “Are there any leftovers? I’m starving.”

“I whipped up a spaghetti casserole—enough to feed an army.”

“A spaghetti casserole?”

“Uh huh.” It was one of the few simple dishes I made in my other life and Finn loved it. “Do you want some?”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

I can feel his eyes on me as I prepare a generous plateful and place it in the microwave. When the electronic oven dings, I return to the island with the heated up pasta.

“Here you go.” I set the plate down on the counter along with a fork and tablespoon. Then go back to where I was sitting.

Finn’s face brightens as he takes a whiff. “This smells so good!” He wastes no time digging in. I watch as he twirls the long strands around his fork, my eyes traveling from his tattooed biceps to his contoured forearms. Then to those magnificent fingers. He puts the bundle of noodles to his lips, slurping it up with gusto, and then gulps it down.

“Wow, this is good. It reminds me of a dish my late wife made.” A wistful pause and then he licks a bit of the tomato sauce off his upper lip. A little gesture that sends my libido into a tailspin.

“Thanks for heating some up for me.”

“Sure,” I mutter as he scoops up another forkful.

“How did Maddie do with her lessons today?”

My heart swells with pride and joy. “Oh, Finn, just wonderfully. She amazes me. So much passion. She’s an incredible reader and learner. Far more advanced than I thought.”

A melancholy smile crosses his lips. “She takes after her mother.”

My heart slams against my chest. I. Am. Her. Mother . The words crawl up my throat and burn on my lips. I want to blurt them out, but instead, I bite my tongue and change the subject.

“How was your dinner with Kayla?” God, I hate saying her name, even more knowing what I know about her.

He languidly twirls another batch of spaghetti around his fork, knitting his brows together in deep thought. He ingests the forkful, swallows, and responds with two monotone syllables.

“O-kay.”

The gloom etched on his face says it all.

“I wish she took more interest in Maddie.”

Suddenly, the monitor on the counter sounds.

A frightening combination of intense coughing and harsh breathing fills the air.

“Daddy,” rasps a little voice in between the wheezing.

Finn drops his fork. “Holy Jesus! Maddie’s having an asthma attack.”

My heart leaps into my throat as I jump off my seat and follow him upstairs to her room, each of us taking two steps at a time.

My baby!

Not stopping, we cross the threshold of Maddie’s room and find her sitting halfway up in bed.

“Daddy,” she chokes out, “I can’t breathe.” She can barely get the words out. Her incessant wheezing frightens me, but I force myself to stay calm. I sit down next to her on the bed and do what any mother would do. I hug and comfort her while Finn frantically retrieves her inhaler.

I mask my alarm as she keeps gasping for air, her narrow shoulders heaving with each desperate breath. Her eyes are watering and she can barely talk.

“Scarlet, it hurts so much.”

Her strained words sever me. My heart is cracking. “Sweetie, it’s going to be okay.”

More wheezing. I can only pray I’m right as Finn hurries to her bedside with the

inhaler in his hand. He puts it to Maddie's gaping mouth.

"Breathe in, baby!" His voice is urgent, bordering on despair.

I watch as our little girl inhales and exhales several times, but she's still wheezing. In fact, it's getting worse. Panic grips me like a tentacle.

"Oh my God, Finn. Her lips are turning blue."

"Jesus."

What's more each time she breathes in, her chest concaves. Tears are streaming down her cheeks.

Terror fills Finn's voice. "This has never happened before."

On my next pained breath, he scoops her little body into his arms as she holds her inhaler to her mouth.

"Scarlet, call 911. We've got to get her to an emergency room."

My heart galloping, I pull out my cell phone from my jeans pocket and do as he asks. On the third ring, someone picks up. The voice female and nasal.

"911. What's your emergency?"

"Our little girl isn't breathing," I spit out, cognizant of the possessive adjective I've used. Finn, whose attention is focused solely on Maddie, doesn't notice or react. To my horror, the dispatcher asks a series of ridiculous, time-wasting questions. "When did the asthma attack start? Has her color changed? What medicine is she on? Is she able to walk and talk?"

“Please just get someone here!” I want to strangle the person on the other end. Doesn’t she realize my little girl’s life is at stake? Time is of the essence. I vomit out our address so fast I can only hope she’s gotten it right.

Grabbing Maddie’s beloved Kangy off her bed, I follow Finn down the stairs, praying an ambulance will be here shortly.

Thankfully, ten minutes later, Maddie is strapped on a gurney, her pale face covered by an oxygen mask. She looks so frail and vulnerable. My heart splinters as fear claws at every nerve in my body.

The three EMTs wheel her to the front door at breakneck speed.

“I’m going with her,” shouts Finn, right behind them.

“Finn, I’m coming with you.” I need to be there for my child. And I need to be there for him.

My blood turns to ice with a terrifying thought.

Oh God, what if she dies?



### CHAPTER 27

Skye

At the hospital, we head to the waiting room while Maddie undergoes emergency treatment. Both of us begged the paramedics to let us be with her, but they absolutely refused. Against hospital rules and regulations.

Finn ushers me to a couch, a hand splayed on the small of my back. The familiar touch of him sends a rush of pinpricks across my skin, the small affectionate gesture a painful reminder of the past. It's how he always treated me, gallantly and protectively. I take a seat on the tweed couch, thinking he'll sit on one of the armchairs. Instead, he sits down next to me, so close our knees touch. The warmth of his body radiates, heating my chilled bones. I let him take my hand in his, resting our twined fingers on his muscular thigh. On my lap is Kangy. With my other hand, I stroke the stuffed animal's soft fur and say nothing. My emotions are in a jumble. Sneaking a peek at my companion, I try to read his mind. His face is strained, full of tension like the air between us.

"Thanks for being here for me," he finally says.

"Of course." My voice is as soft as a prayer.

"I don't know what set her off. I try so hard to keep her environment controlled. I even moved to the beach so she wouldn't have to deal with pollution and pollen. And switched from oil paints to acrylics which aren't so toxic. Her quick relief medicine should have worked. I don't know what happened. Maybe I'm not doing enough."

The love this man has for our child makes my heart want to burst. So does the guilt he harbors inside.

“It’s a freak thing,” I tell him. “She’s going to be okay.”

“God, I hope so. I would give my life for her.”

I would too.

“I love her more than life itself.”

I do too. I fight back tears.

When a doctor walks into the waiting room, I’m spared. Both of us jump up from the couch, our fingers still laced. My free hand clutches Kangy.

“How is she?” blurts out Finn.

The doctor, an attractive Black woman in her mid-thirties, smiles. “Mr. and Mrs. Jackson...”

Not correcting her faux pas because it happens to be the truth, I hold my breath and let her continue.

“I am happy to tell you that your daughter is doing just fine.”

Finn squeezes my hand and blows out a breath. “Thank God.”

“Thank goodness,” I echo, relief flooding every cell of my body.

The doctor goes on. “She’s a fighter. And quite the feisty one.”

Smiles blooming on our faces, we both let out a little laugh to release our tension.

“That’s so true,” injects Finn.

Maddie is not only my spitting image, but in spirit as well. In every way, we are mother like daughter. “Can we see her?”

“Yes, of course. She wants to see you both.”

Both of us. My heart is again melting like chocolate.

The smiling doctor adjusts the stethoscope around her neck. “Please don’t be alarmed. She’s hooked up to a multitude of monitors as well as an IV, and she’s got a breathing tube up her nose. But honestly, she’s fine.”

A few moments later we’re at the entrance to Maddie’s room, still hand in hand. While the doctor prepared us for the sight of her, I’m thrown off balance when I see her little body attached to all the wires and monitors. The nose tube particularly upsets me. But thank God other than these gizmos, she looks perfectly fine. Her color back, she breaks into a smile as we set foot in the small sterile room. I’m still holding Kangy though she’s hidden behind my back.

“Scarlet! Daddy!” Even her voice is bright and strong.

Finn sprints up to her, and since I’m still linked to him, so do I.

“Hi, sunshine!” Smiling, he plants a kiss on her forehead. “You gave us a scare!”

Us.

“Yeah, Daddy, that was scary.”

“It sure was,” I chime in. “I brought you someone special.” In a sweeping abracadabra move, I bring my right hand forward and hold up the worn, little kangaroo.

My sweet little girl’s eyes light up. “Yay! Kangy!”

I hand over her favorite toy.

She hugs the fuzzy animal to her chest. Her joy brings a smile to my face. My heart is overflowing with happiness when a nurse walks into the room.

“I’m afraid visiting hours are over. The doctor wants your daughter to stay overnight for observation.”

“What does obserbation mean?” asks Maddie, having difficulty pronouncing the word.

“It means that your doctor wants you to sleep here tonight so all the people in the hospital can watch over you and make sure you don’t have another asthma attack.”

“Can we stay with her?” asks Finn.

“I’m afraid not. There was a food poisoning outbreak at a local restaurant, and we’re short on extra beds and loungers. However, there’s a small hotel down the street that might be able to accommodate you.”

Fifteen minutes later, we’re at the hotel. There’s only one room available. And we’re sharing it.

### CHAPTER 28

Finn

To say this is a hotel is stretching it. The seedy, rundown inn is more like a roadside motel. Make that the Bates Motel. It's seriously straight out of Hitchcock's Psycho. Even the character at the front desk. A wiry man with big ears, an ill-fitting brown suit, and metal-rimmed glasses that sit low on his beaky nose.

After giving him a credit card, he hands me a key. The old fashioned metal kind, not a keycard. His voice is nasal.

"Room 113. It's at the end of the hall to your right." He shoots me a salacious smile. "Enjoy your evening... together." He eyes Scarlet like she's a whore. And me, like I'm about to score.

"Remember, check out time is eleven a.m."

Trust me, he doesn't need to remind me. I already want to check out of this fucking joint. The stench of mold and stale coffee is nauseating me.

The room we're given is no better. Decorated in the sixties, it's never been updated. Ugly as sin walnut furniture, a Zenith TV set, pea-green carpet, and a double bed with a faded floral bedspread that matches the shabby curtains. In addition to the bed, there's a worn corduroy couch.

"Nice, huh?" I snort with sarcasm.

“Right out of Architectural Digest ,” deadpans my companion, taking in our depressing as hell accommodations.

“Are you okay sharing this with me?” I ask, aware of the awkwardness of the situation.

“Seriously, I’d be afraid to stay here alone.”

I can’t help a little laugh after all we’ve been through tonight. Maddie’s asthma attack totally unraveled me. De-stressing, I feel almost back to myself.

“Hey, do you want to take a shower?”

Scarlet gulps. “Um, uh . . .”

Her shocked expression makes me mentally kick myself. I sound out of line. Like I’m propositioning her. I quickly rephrase my question.

“I—I mean, do you want to take a shower while I turn down the bed?” Upon my clarification, she lightens up.

“I don’t think so. Norman Bates may be in there and throw knives at me.”

I do my best Norman Bates imitation or maybe it’s more like a dagger throwing circus performer. Either way it’s hilarious, and we both burst into laughter. Soon, we’re both laughing so hard we’re crying. And bent over. Tears are cascading down our faces and when we exchange glances, we laugh even harder. My insides hurt.

“Scarlet, I’m sorry about this place,” I manage to say.

Still roaring with laughter, my roommate swipes at her tears. “I’ve seen worse.”

Truthfully, I have too. On our road trip to LA, my late wife and I shacked up in hellholes that made this place seem like The Ritz Carlton. Finally, our laughter dies down and I ponder our sleeping arrangement. “You take the bed. I’ll take the couch.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

A ghost of a smile plays on her lips. “Okay, I’m going to call it a night then.”

She treads toward the bed. Before she takes two steps, I call out to her. She pivots and meets my gaze. The look on her face is wistful. Mine wishful.

“Come here.” My voice is soft but commanding.

Silently, she pads toward me. A breath away from me, I haul her into me. She looks up at me, and I stare into her captivating green-brown eyes.

“Hey, I just want to thank you again for being here for me and Maddie.” My lips want to touch down on hers, but I refrain.

“It’s okay.”

“Really, it means a lot to me.” My voice grows softer, more emotional. “She scared the crap out of me tonight.”

“Me too.”

“Maddie is my everything. If I lost her, I couldn’t live.”

Tears well in her eyes. “I understand.”

There's something about the way she says those words that tugs at my heartstrings. Something so heartfelt, so genuine. Drawing her closer to me, I plant a chaste kiss on her head. For the first time, I inhale her hair. The delicious vanilla scent wafts up my nose, obliterating the room's foul odor. I inhale again. Mmm. She smells so good. Feels so good in my arms. Like she belongs there.

Why do I feel so drawn to this woman? So insanely attracted to her?

It's not just the scent of her silky hair, which reminds me of my late wife's.

Or her expressive face. Or the sensuous touch of her curves. Or the warmth of her flesh.

There's something more. Something deeper. Something Kayla and I have never had. An inexplicable connection. An electricity.

Like I've known her forever.



### CHAPTER 29

Skye

His soft snores fill my ears. Glancing at the couch, illuminated by a beam of moonlight, I can see his chest rhythmically rising and falling. His beautiful face is basked in serenity.

Oh, God! How I long for him to be sleeping beside me. I've missed him so much. The soft sounds of him; the hard form of him. Spooned against him. Blanketing me with his body and warmth.

With a mixture of resignation and longing, I pull the scratchy sheet over my chest, then the worn blanket. My mind reflects on this night. How intense it's been. Maddie's life-and-death episode uniting us both emotionally and physically.

I want him back in my life so badly. But things are so damn complicated. My charade. The fact that he's engaged to another. The danger we face with my possible killer still out there.

There's only one way to end this masquerade: I've got to find the person responsible for almost ending my life.

The investigative journalist still in me tells me he or she hasn't vanished into thin air.

### CHAPTER 30

Finn

My eyes peel open as a sliver of daylight trickles through the slightly ajar curtains. Reaching for my phone I left on the side table, I check the time. It's not even six a.m. I throw off the mildewy blanket I found in the closet and roll off the couch. My body aches; the lumpy couch was far from comfortable.

Scarlet is still sound asleep. Quietly, I watch her, her face peaceful, her breasts heaving with each soft breath. Mesmerized by her beauty, I fight the urge to run my fingers along her gently parted lips.

A little moan escapes them, and for a few seconds, I reflect on how close I got to kissing her last night. So close I could almost taste her lips on mine, feel their tenderness and warmth. She's all I thought about as I tossed and turned on the couch, unable to get comfortable.

I stare at her as she stirs. Something is so wrong with this picture. She's off limits. She's my daughter's teacher and I'm engaged to another. The woman who made me. I owe Kayla my career; I owe her everything. Yet, right now, all I want is the woman in the bed before me.

I rake my fingertips through my unruly hair like I'm scratching my head. Searching for answers. I need to take a shower. Maybe that will give me clarity and wash away these lustful thoughts.

The shower of this rundown joint is surprisingly good. Though the pink and blue ceramic tiles must date back to the sixties along with the frosted glass shower door, the water pressure is excellent. The hot, forceful jet that pours from the showerhead soothes my cramped muscles as I lather up my hair with a bit of the cheap, complimentary shampoo. Harsh, it smells nothing like the sweet vanilla scent of Scarlet's lustrous hair.

Fifteen steamy minutes later, I'm relieved physically, but mentally I'm in a brain fog. Stepping out of the stall, I wrap a skimpy sandpaper-brown towel around my hips, feeling as conflicted as I am confused.

I can't get involved with my daughter's teacher. Hands off. It would be career suicide. With my one-man show around the corner, the last thing I need is for Kayla to go ballistic. Or for me to be accused of sexual harassment.

Thinking she's still in a deep sleep, I traipse back to the bedroom. I'm in for a rude awakening. She's gone!

### CHAPTER 31

Skye

Holding two steaming Cremora-filled coffees, I teeter into our room and my jaw drops. The Styrofoam cups almost slip out of my hands. Finn, with just a skimpy towel wrapped around his waist, stops dead in his tracks. Our eyes lock. The shocked expression on his face mirrors mine.

Hastily, he checks his towel, making sure it's secure. "Shit... I mean, good morning. I thought you were still sleeping."

My breath catches in my throat. "I woke up while you were in the shower and went to the lobby to see if there might be some coffee." I hold out the cups. "Bingo. I got you some. Lots of cream... two sugars... the way you like it."

"Thanks." Striding my way, he takes one of the coffees. "Do you think it's safe to drink?"

"I tried it. It's not exactly Starbucks, but it's drinkable."

My gaze stays on him as he takes a sip. Straight out of the shower, his thick dark hair glistens and is slicked back. My eyes travel down his torso. Finn always had an amazing body, but I don't remember it being this gorgeous. Chiseled like a Greek statue that belongs in a museum. Thank God, he's wearing a towel.

He takes another sip of the brew. "You're right... it's not bad. How did you know

how I like my coffee?”

Because that’s how you drank it every morning of our seven years together . I falter for a response. “Um, just a hunch.”

“A good one.” He grins. “You sleep okay?”

“Yes.” Truthfully, I hardly slept a wink, not dozing off until the wee hours of the morning. I tossed and turned, thinking about him. Thinking about Maddie. Thinking about this awful predicament I’m in... and why I’m in it.

He fiddles again with his towel. “You should take a shower. It’s actually pretty good.”

“What about Norman?” I joke though I’m half serious.

He laughs. “Don’t worry, he’s nowhere in sight. Plus, I’ll be here to protect you.”

I can’t help but smile as I sheepishly pad past him, feeling his eyes on me.

He’s absolutely right about the shower. It’s surprisingly good. Hot and forceful. Only one thing would make it better—having him share it with me. Like we used to do every morning. Soaping myself up, I turn to face the back wall and my head lolls back, letting the fierce spray cascade over my hair and shoulders. For a good ten minutes.

I turn around again and I blink my water-soaked eyes several times. Then freeze. There’s a man staring at me! No, it’s not Norman, but Finn. How long has he been in here? Watching me? With the pelting water, I didn’t hear him enter. I suddenly feel more naked than I am though I must look like a blur through the frosted glass door and cloud of steam. Holding me in his unblinking gaze for a second, he quickly

retrieves the clothes he left in the corner and dashes out.

Questions linger. Why was he watching me? And why did he look so shocked? Then it hits me like a tsunami. Could he have possibly seen all my scars through the mist? And the flower tattoo etched on my rear? I turn off the shower hoping he didn't, hoping he did.

### CHAPTER 32

Skye

We check out of the dump and Uber to the hospital to pick up Maddie. The ride is short and neither of us makes mention of the bathroom incident. I assure an anxious Finn that she's fine. Like him, I can't wait to see her.

When we get there, she's sitting up in bed, watching TV with Kangy stacked against her pillow. There are still a few attached monitors along with an IV taped to her wrist, but the breathing tube in her nose has been removed. She looks back to normal, her rosy cheeks glowing and her bright eyes sparkling. I inwardly sigh with relief.

Her face lights up when she sees us. "Daddy! Scarlet! Yay! You're here!"

Finn breaks into a big smile. With me beside him, he strides up to her and smacks a kiss on her forehead. "Hey, sunshine. How're you doing?"

"Great!! Guess what!"

"What?"

"I had Jell-O with whipped cream for breakfast. And chocolate-chip pancakes."

I raise my brows. So much for a healthy breakfast, but I'm over-the-top thrilled that her appetite is hardy. Before I can utter a word, a nurse enters the room. Likely in her early fifties, plump, and clad in a Minnie Mouse smock.

“Hi, Nurse Andrews!” shouts out Maddie, full of glee.

“Hi, cutie patootie. I have good news for you and your parents.”

She corrects the nurse. “That’s my daddy. But Scarlet’s not my mommy.”

My heart squeezes in my chest and I swallow hard. Despite the ball of anguish that lodges in my throat, the desperate urge to scream out who I really am besieges me. Mustering a small smile to hold back the truth and hide my torment, I inform the nurse that Maddie is homeschooled and that I’m her teacher.

Maddie beams. “Scarlet is the bestest teacher in the whole wide world.”

Recovering, I return the compliment. “And you’re the bestest student a teacher could have.”

And the bestest daughter a mother could have. Unaware of my pain, pride washes over Finn’s face. “So, Nurse, what’s the great news?” he asks as she waddles our way.

“Your daughter had an excellent night. All her vitals are normal. Her doctor greenlit her discharge.”

Maddie cocks her head. “What does that mean, Daddy?”

I answer for him. “It means, sweetie, that you can go home.”

“Yay!”

Our eyes stay on the nurse as she gently removes the hook ups, one by one. Maddie watches too. Before removing the IV, the jovial woman reaches into a pocket and



pulls out a Band-Aid. She peels it open and once the IV is out, covers the spot before it bleeds.

Maddie's face again lights up. "Coolio! A Madeline Band-Aid!" She sports it proudly. "Can Kangy have one too?"

"Of course, honey," replies Nurse Andrews, proceeding to give my daughter's beloved kangaroo the same medical attention.

Finn completes some paperwork as well as reviews Maddie's new action plan should she have another asthma attack. A few minutes later, Maddie is back in her own pajamas and in a wheelchair, with Kangy on her lap. While she's squealing with excitement as if it's a fun amusement park ride, the sight of my little girl in this big chair sends a bone-chilling shiver down my spine. She looks so tiny and vulnerable, and it brings back horrific memories. How many months did I spend in a wheelchair while my battered body mended? Months that added up to years. Years away from my child and husband.

"Scarlet, are you okay?" asks Finn as he wheels Maddie full speed ahead to the entrance of the hospital.

"Yeah," I murmur, struggling to keep up, cold beads of sweat clustering beneath my tee. My heart palpitating, my breathing strained. A lie. I'm having an anxiety attack.

The truth, the sooner I get out of this hospital the better.

### CHAPTER 33

Skye

A n unexpected car awaits us in the driveway of Finn's house. A shiny white Mercedes convertible with the top down. As Maddie jumps out of the Uber, Finn curses under his breath. I silently echo him, having a strong hunch whose car it is.

Maddie skips up to the front door, with Finn and me close behind her. The door jerks open before Finn can unlock it with his keys. A tall willowy blonde, dressed in head to toe ivory, stands before us. Kayla. Without acknowledging her, Maddie, clutching Kangy, scurries inside.

Scrunching her face, Kayla plants her hands on her jutting hipbones. "Phineas, where the hell have you been?"

My blood bubbles. Thank goodness, Maddie didn't have to witness this snake-tongued woman's crass welcome. Her eyes narrowing with fury, Finn's fiancée continues her rant, her voice growing more incensed. Her language harsher.

"You're late. We have brunch in twenty minutes with Sheldon on his new yacht."

Sheldon? Could it be? That Sheldon? The one she conversed with that night so long ago at Christie's? That slimeball Hollywood producer who assaulted me? That encounter, as terrifying and vilifying as it was, is long in the past, so why does that name rattle me so much? It's like a memory is banging away at the edges of my mind, trying to make its way inside. My head spins with uncertainty while Finn's jaw

ticks.

“Kayla. I’m sorry. We had an emergency.”

We. The little two-letter word calms me down, but the name Sheldon still swirls around my head. Forming a question mark. In search of an answer as Finn explains.

“Maddie had a major asthma attack last night. She had to go the emergency room.”

“There’s always drama with that child.” With a huff, Kayla rolls her eyes. “Seriously, darling, except for me, who’s more important than Sheldon Greenberg?”

My breath hitches. It is that Sheldon! Finn has no idea he’s the sleazebag who put his grubby hands all over me as he never got a glimpse of his face. And eager to put the encounter behind me, I never told him his name or brought it up again. Now is not the time with Kayla ranting.

“He’s your biggest supporter and is about to plunk down a million dollars on three of your paintings.” She sneers. “That child of yours takes up way too much of your time.”

Anger is rising inside me like bile. I want to punch this woman out. How dare she care so little about my daughter? This darling little girl who will soon be her stepchild. My blood runs cold at the thought.

Finn looks at her, his gaze fierce. I can actually see daggers shooting out of his eyes. “Kayla, let’s get this straight right now. There is no one more important in my life than my daughter. Do you understand that?”

Kayla gives him a dismissive look. “Whatever. Get ready and let’s go.”

“I want to take Maddie with me.”

She screws up her face. “Darling, are you kidding? A yacht is hardly the place for an impetuous, sickly child, and Sheldon has no patience for kids.”

A short, tense moment of silence follows. Then, a wicked smile crosses Kayla’s face.

“Just leave her with your babysitter.” She fires me a snide look. I remain stone-faced despite the rage that’s fueling me to explode.

Finn looks at me imploringly. “Scarlet, I know it’s your day off, but would you mind watching Maddie for a few hours?”

I agree. There’s nothing more I want to do than spend time with my daughter. Except... spend time with both him and her.

A sudden fury comes over me. I now more than ever need to find the person who took them away from me. If I find them, I may kill them.

### CHAPTER 34

Skye

“Let’s go already,” barks Kayla as Finn lifts Maddie into his arms.

“I love you, sunshine.”

“Come home soon, Daddy!” She affectionately cups her tiny hands around his handsome face.

Finn kisses the top of her head. “I will.”

Kayla scoffs. “Seriously, Phineas, what part of not being late don’t you understand?”

“Okay, okay.” Kissing Maddie one more time, he sets her down and looks at me. A mixture of frustration and worry flickers in his eyes.

I give him a reassuring smile. “Finn, don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on her. We’re just going to low-key it and stay inside.”

“Thanks,” he murmurs as Kayla hooks her arm in his and smirks at me.

“Have fun.” The noxious woman leads him to the front door after he and Maddie exchange a final affectionate goodbye.

My heart sinks to my stomach as they disappear and I hear Finn’s Land Rover drive

off.

“Scarlet, are you okay?” asks Maddie, taking my hand. “You look sad.”

I must be wearing my gloom on my face. My precocious child is so perceptive.

I nod and squeeze her hand. “I’m okay, sweetie.” The warmth of her little hand in mine radiates through me. My spirits lift. My daughter is indeed a ray of sunshine.

Her face brightens with a hint of mischief. “Scarlet, let’s play hide-and-seek!”

I mull over her suggestion. The thought of her having another asthma attack while hiding, unable to be found, makes me pass on that idea.

I have a better one. Arts and crafts. “How ’bout we do some coloring? We can make pictures to give to your daddy when he comes back.”

“Okie dokie! I’ll go upstairs and get my crayons.”

She scampers off. I’m grateful she’s amenable to the sedentary idea. A few minutes later, we’re seated side by side at the kitchen island. Set out on the granite counter is her big box of Crayolas, and two sheets of paper, which I tore out from her sketchpad.

“What are you making?” I ask as she starts to outline an oval shape with a black crayon.

“A face.”

“Oh. Who are you drawing?”

“My daddy!”

As she adds in sapphire blue eyes, a pensive smile, some unruly black hair, and dotted specks of stubble, my eyes stay on her picture.

“Wow! That’s so good!” I really mean that; she’s inherited her father’s artistic talent. “It looks just like him.”

She smiles proudly as she starts outlining a body, complete with brawny, tattooed arms that look a little like Popeye’s. Adding a T-shirt and jeans, she starts to color the latter in with the denim blue crayon.

“My daddy is very handsome.”

My heart flutters at her words. “He is.” Oh, is he!

“Do you like him?”

I love him! “I do.”

A Cheshire cat grin lifts her sweet lips. Her dark eyes twinkle. “My daddy likes you a lot.”

My breath catches. “How do you know that?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because I can tell. He’s always happy when he’s around you.”

Taking advantage of Maddie's chattiness, the investigative journalist in me asks, "Isn't he happy around Kayla?"

At the mention of Kayla's name, Maddie makes a face. "Never! She's always so mean and bossy!" Before I can probe further, she changes the subject.

"What are you going to make, Scarlet?"

Looking down at my blank sheet of paper, I contemplate her question. While I can paint a picture with words, my artistic talent is limited. Forcing myself to shove Kayla and Finn to the back of my mind, it suddenly comes to me. The one thing I can draw well. I search the box for a silver-gray crayon. Slipping it out, I begin to, like Maddie, outline a head. Except it's not human.

Watching me, Maddie's eyes flash with recognition.

"Are you making a horsey?"

"Sort of."

I continue to work on my picture... adding its mane and tail before lightly shading the body, leaving most of it white. Picking out more crayons, I make the flowy mane and tail a pretty shade of pink. Maddie continues to watch as I add a cone jutting out of the creature's head. I color the spiral in, making bold stripes with assorted bright colors. I'm getting creative!

Maddie giggles. "Horses don't have rainbow cones!"

"Sweetie, this is a special horse. A unicorn."

"A unicorn?"



“Yes, it’s mythical.”

“What does mythical mean?”

A tough question. My inquisitive daughter is worse than me. Twisting my lips, I ponder a definition that’ll make sense in her almost five going on twenty-five-year-old brain. My mind works overtime. And then badda bing! “It means that it’s a little bit make-believe though some people think it may have existed.”

She accepts my definition, but the questions aren’t over.

“Why does it have a horn?”

“The horn is magical.”

Maddie cocks her head. “How is it magic?”

“The horn gives the unicorn powers.”

“You mean like super powers?”

“Yes. They are said to have healing powers. Like the unicorn’s tears which can be an antidote for poison.”

“An-tee-dote?”

“It’s a big word for ‘cure.’”

She repeats the word back to me, more smoothly. Now comfortable with it, she asks, “So, can unicorns make my asthma go away?”

I'm a little taken aback by her question, but reply quickly. "Yes, but unfortunately, they're very hard to find. They live in hidden lands."

Maddie frowns. "Do they have other powers?"

"Yes. Some people believe they can make wishes come true."

Maddie's eyes light up like bulbs. "Later, can we look for one?"

"Maybe tomorrow." I smile, remembering with fondness how my mother used to search for them with me all over the world.

We silently go back to coloring, me focusing on creating the perfect unicorn. Several minutes in, I glance at Maddie's picture. It's no longer just a portrait of Finn. She's added a little girl with long braids who without a doubt is a self-depiction. She's holding her father's hand. My eyes travel across the paper and widen. Standing next to her on the right, holding her other hand, is a woman who looks just like me! She's wearing jeans and a mint green T-shirt identical to the one I'm wearing.

"Do you like my picture?" asks Maddie, unaware of my startled reaction.

"It's awesome," I stammer.

She grins proudly. "I made a family. Daddy, me and . . ."

I hear a vehicle pull up on the intercom and my breath catches in my throat. I cut her off. "I think your daddy may be home."

I glance at the security monitor. My heart sinks. It's only the mailman. He stuffs a bunch of envelopes into the drop-off box and drives off.

Our pictures all done, Maddie trots off to the adjacent media room to watch some television while I clean up, collecting the crayons scattered on the counter. My mind wanders as I put them back in the big yellow box in a systematic order. Lining up the colors, I think about Finn... about Kayla... about them. Gripping the green crayon, I feel the color of envy seep into my veins.

Then, they turn blue with sadness.

### CHAPTER 35

Finn

There must be over one hundred boats of varying sizes moored at the Marina Del Rey Yacht Club. But one dwarfs them all. It's a monstrous yacht as long as a city block—close to three hundred feet—with five levels. Kayla, her arm tucked in the crook of mine, leads me toward the dock. Holding one of her oversized handbags, she's dressed in her usual all-white—tight, high-waisted capris, a creamy leather jacket, and strappy stilettos. Her cropped platinum hair blows in the cool ocean breeze.

“That's Sheldon's yacht,” she says, pointing at the massive boat.

My eyes widen. I've never seen anything like it. The monstrosity looks more like a cruise ship. As we get closer, I can make out a name—Marilyn—scrawled in a bold red font across the bow.

“He calls it Marilyn. It's named after his late mother.”

“Wow.”

“It cost two hundred million dollars. Sheldon got it in a fire sale—some Silicon Valley venture capitalist went bust and had to sell it in a hurry. He invested another fifty million dollars into retrofitting it, transforming it into the ultimate party boat. It can accommodate fifty overnight guests plus the one hundred-man crew, but the disco is big enough for five hundred people. There's also a gym, spa, heated pool,

full-service salon, 3-D theater, and even a helicopter landing on one of the outdoor decks. The one thing it's still missing is artwork—I'm sure Sheldon would love to put some of your choice pieces on the walls."

"Maybe, he'll give me a tour," I deadpan, still in awe of the jaw-dropping vehicle.

"I doubt it," replies Kayla. "Sheldon's so not a show off."

Yeah, right, I muse, climbing up a ramp to the million-dollar boy toy and thinking about how he can easily afford my paintings. Fifty thousand dollars is a mere drop in the hat. At least for him.

A few minutes later we're on board. A white-uniformed steward wearing an admiral's cap with an "M" emblazoned in gold greets us.

"Ah, Ms. Phillips, so good to see you again." He smiles mechanically, his stance stiff and formal. His eyes drift to me. "And you must be Mr. Jackson."

"Yes." Though I've never gotten used to my new name, we share a firm handshake as Kayla introduces us. His name is Hans.

"Phineas is my fiancé," adds Kayla, pecking my cheek. "Where is Sheldon?"

"I believe he's just finishing up a game of Baccarat."

"Oh, I forgot to mention," chimes in my companion. "Sheldon installed a full Vegas-style casino, with slot machines and game tables. His game night parties are to die for. Complete with fireworks!"

What doesn't this mega yacht have? Sheldon is definitely a man who says: I see it, I want it, it's mine. His wealth and power are formidable, though unrivaled by his

ruthless don't-waste-my-time reputation. I still remember how intimidated I felt when I met him for the first time with Kayla... that fateful day.

The steward stops me from venturing to that dark place. "Would you like to join Mr. Greenberg in the casino?"

"I don't gamble," I reply, wondering whom he's playing against. Having once been a dirt-poor struggling artist, it's always been hard for me to foolishly risk my hard-earned money. Plus, I'm only carrying a hundred dollars in my billfold, definitely not enough to plunk down in a high stakes game.

"Very well," says Hans. "I'll let Mr. Greenberg know you're both here and have him meet you in the executive dining room." He plucks out a phone from his pristine, perfectly pressed white pants and relays the information.

A few minutes later, we descend a swirling grand staircase that looks like it's straight out of an old movie star mansion with its gilded ebony banister. Along the way we pass several opulently decorated rooms, including the cinema with its burgundy velvet seats and matching gold-fringed curtains. The dining room is on the third deck, two levels down.

Just like the other quarters I've glimpsed, it's lavishly decorated in 1920's art deco, a style I studied while at art school. A stately dining room suite dominates the paneled room—a veneered table that can sit twelve plus a mirrored bar stocked with fine crystal and every expensive bottle of liquor possible. Sheldon is at the bar, his back to me, pouring himself a drink. When Hans announces us, he flips around, holding an amber-filled tumbler. Dismissing the steward, he lumbers toward us.

"Kayla, baby. Great to see you!"

Kayla meets him halfway and gives him one of those pretentious double cheek kisses.

“Sheldon, thank you for having us. You look wonderful! Have you lost weight?”

I soak him in. He doesn't look any slimmer since the last time I saw him. Nautically clad in shorts that bag over his thick, hairy calves and a striped T-shirt that hugs his fat rolls, he gulps his drink and chortles.

“Yeah, thanks. My personal trainer put me on a low carb macrobiotic diet. I've lost three pounds. I hate this shit. I want a goddamn steak.”

Kayla throws her head back and laughs. “Oh, darling, it'll be so worth it. You already look so amazing.”

Give me a break. He looks exactly the same. She's such an in-your-face kiss up. Knowing exactly what to say at the right time. It's all part of her skill set. The ultimate promoter.

“Don't tell anyone I'm having a couple of bourbons. And I may cheat today.”

Kayla winks. “Don't worry, darling. It'll be our little secret. Girl Scout's honor.” She gives him the three-finger salute.

Sheldon's expression grows salacious. His beady eyes travel down her endowed body. “Sweetheart, you wore one of those cute little green dresses?”

Unfazed by his roving eyes, she laughs. “Yes, darling. And I was also a Brownie leader with fifty badges. It all helped me get into Yale.”

Maybe that's how she got her brown-noser skills. I can't imagine sexy, long-legged Kayla in one of those goody two-shoes uniforms.

Cutting into my thoughts, Sheldon asks if we want anything to drink. Kayla goes for

her usual—a Bellini, which he expertly prepares—and I settle on a beer. A Heineken, which he retrieves from a built-in icebox. Our host then refills his tumbler with an expensive bourbon.

He proposes a toast. “To your marriage. May it last longer than any of mine.”

Kayla laughs on cue. “Oh, Sheldon, you’re way too cute. There’s no doubt in my mind I’ve found my Prince Charming.” She turns to me, a cloying smile plastered on her face. “Let’s toast again. To us! The power couple of the art world.”

Reluctantly, I clink my bottle against their glasses. The crystal-clear pings sing in my ears.

Taking a sip of her drink, Kayla sets her eyes on me. “Darling, Sheldon has offered us both his house and yacht for our wedding. What do you think?”

Before I can respond, footsteps sound in the room. I spin around to find a tall, handsome, silver-haired man striding toward us. He’s dressed casually but elegantly in a gray cashmere turtleneck that complements his shimmering hair and tailored charcoal slacks. I recognize him instantly.

“Jim, get your big dick over here and let me introduce you to my guests,” our host calls out.

I don’t need an introduction from Sheldon. I know who he is.

Jim Hartley. My late wife’s former boss.

“So nice to finally meet you,” coos Kayla, running her manicured fingers through her sun-kissed hair. “Sheldon didn’t tell me how handsome you are.”



Jim's steel-gray eyes stay on her. Making their way down her body, he seems smitten by her icy beauty. "Nor did he tell me how beautiful you are. Why haven't we met before?"

Sheldon intervenes. "Sorry, Jimbo. She's taken. Phineas here is her fiancé."

Helping himself to a shot of Jack Daniels, Jim's attention diverts to me. Recognition flickers in his eyes. "Hey, don't I know you?"

"My late wife worked for you. We met briefly at a Conquest Broadcasting Christmas party."

Taking a sip of his whisky, the Southerner digests my words, furrowing his brows as if he's trying to remember our encounter. Truthfully, it wasn't memorable—a quick, perfunctory "nice to meet you" and he moved on to more important people in the crowd. The movers and shakers. The beautiful women, many of them models and starlets.

He takes another swig of his drink. Time to jog his memory.

"Perhaps this will help you. You gave a speech at her memorial service."

He swallows hard. "Are you talking about Skye Collins?"

"Yeah."

"What?" mutters Sheldon, choking on his drink. He regurgitates the liquid, spraying it all over the floor as he staggers back against the bar.

"Sheldon darling, are you okay?" asks Kayla.

A snarl curls his lips as he nods his head and gestures with his hand: Stay away!

Jim, on the other hand, maintains his composure.

“I’m sorry about your loss. Your late wife was one of our finest investigative reporters. It’s a real shame her life was cut short. Such an unfortunate accident.”

“Yes, such an unfortunate accident,” parrots Kayla, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Anger surges inside me. While I’ve never discussed the circumstances of Skye’s untimely death with anyone, the need to get it off my chest consumes me. Maybe Hartley knows something. I take a fortifying breath.

“Actually, it may have been more than an accident. The police believe she was murdered.”

Sheldon blanches while Jim flinches. Artists, like writers, are observers. Their skittish reactions disturb me. Something’s off. A tense silence fills the air until I break it. Curiosity pulses through me.

“I hear you were interrogated.”

Hartley sips his drink before answering. “Yeah, the police came snooping around her office. Some shlumpy cop who was a dead ringer for Columbo.”

Detective Billings.

“He went through her desk and asked a lot of annoying questions.”

“Like what?” I spit out the words, hoping that Skye’s former boss can shed some light on her murder, which is now considered a cold case.

“Like if she was working on anything unusual.”

“What did you tell the dickhead?” asks Sheldon, the anxious tone of his voice mirroring his vexed expression.

“Nothing. There was nothing to tell.” As Sheldon drains his drink, Hartley turns to me. “Your wife was more consumed with getting home early to spend time with your baby.”

The hairs on the back of my neck bristle. He’s bullshitting me. Skye always put her career first. Nothing was more important to her than chasing down a story; a nine-to-five job didn’t exist for her. While I brood, unable to probe further, Kayla interjects.

“Puh-lease, let’s get off this morose subject. Bygones are bygones. Let’s celebrate the future.” Setting her flute on the bar, she dips her hand into her enormous bag. “I’ve brought along a special treat.” She holds up a small Ziploc plastic bag filled with white powder and smiles seductively. “Anyone?”

Cocaine? No fucking way. My blow days are long over. I haven’t touched the stuff since I was in art school. My one-time near overdose put the kibosh on ever snorting up the shit again. And now as a single-father, I can’t risk it. Maddie means too much to me.

Sheldon’s face lights up like a kid in a candy store. “Way to go, babe. Let’s do some lines on the dining room table.” He grabs a few cocktail straws off the bar.

“Works for me,” pipes up Hartley, heading over to the table with Kayla and Sheldon.

Holding my beer, I watch as Kayla pours the white powder onto the table, and then with a credit card, arranges it into three lines, spaced a few inches apart. Sheldon passes out the straws.

“Ladies first,” insists Hartley with a wink, standing next to her.

“Aww! Such the gentleman.” She bends over the table, her tight, perfectly shaped ass high in the air, her perfectly coiffed hair dusting the surface. Her nose hovering over the white substance, she puts the six-inch straw to one nostril and pinches the other. As I drain my brew, she expertly snorts in the coke with a swift, single inhale. Jeez. She must be a regular user. Suddenly, I understand her mercurial behavior. My gut knots. She’s both my manager and fiancée. The future mother to my daughter. What in God’s name have I gotten myself into?

Hartley plants his manicured hand on the small of Kayla’s back as she rises. “Nice job, sugar.”

Licking her upper lip, she shoots him a slow, alluring smile. “Try some, Jim.”

His eyes glaring with lust, he repeats her actions, though it takes him two snorts to inhale his line.

“Dang good stuff,” he drawls.

Then, it’s Sheldon’s turn. He bends over, his paunch folded over the table. He snorts it in loudly and quickly.

“Wow, sweetheart. This is really good shit!”

“Sheldon, only the best for you. You have such great taste. But you should really thank my new dealer.”

“Why don’t we thank him by doing another round?” He swings around to face me. “C’mon, man. Don’t be such a stick in the mud. Have some fun with us.”

Thirty minutes later, when they decide to cruise to Catalina, I excuse myself, eager to get the hell off this boat and go back home to my daughter and her sweet teacher, Scarlet.

High as kites, they don't even know I've parted.

### CHAPTER 36

Skye

M addie spends the next few hours watching TV, curled up on the couch, Kangy on her lap. I spend them snuggled next to her in deep thought, my emotions all over the place. Sadness and regret wrestle with jealousy and anger.

There's a reason Finn's with Kayla. Not only is she stunning, but she's also been there for him in a way I never was. She made his career her priority and brought him fame and fortune. Made him a shining star in the art world... helped him achieve his lifetime dream.

Maybe in retrospect, I was never really there for him. I let Finn do his thing, but I never treated his passion for painting as anything more than a hobby. A hobby I could support. Maybe my relentless ambition and shameless self-promotion blinded me from seeing that he was as driven as me. That he wanted recognition. For the world to see him for the truly gifted artist he is.

I put myself first, driven by my own ambition. My career. Finn used to half-joke that I was married to my job. My stories were my babies, the truth my sustenance, adrenaline my drug. Danger and the impossible were never part of my vocabulary. I risked my life time and time again when I had a husband and a child who needed me. And then I put them in harm's way. How selfish I was! How stupid! I wasn't the good wife. Nor the good mother. Maybe I deserve my fate.

Maddie's laughter gets me out of my tumultuous thoughts. My attention turns to my

precious little girl, cuddled next to me, engrossed in a silly cartoon. The sweet sound of her voice makes my heart melt with love until a shiver skitters down my spine. Last night was a game changer for me. Her near-death episode made me remember that life can change in an instant. It did for me. Finn had no idea how terrified I was of losing her. I had to be strong for him.

Maddie is linked in my thoughts and heart in a way that's so powerful it defies description. I'm breathing her with every breath. Her breath is my breath. We share the same air. If she can't breathe, I suffocate. If she can't see, my world is dark. If she can't hear, there's no music in my life. If she dies, a part of me dies too.

Consumed by my turbulent emotions, I'm surprised when the closing credits of the cartoon come on. My bubbly, very alive girl tells me she's hungry. Turning off the TV, I collect myself.

"C'mon, sweetie. Let's have lunch." We both bounce off the couch, and taking her hand, I head toward the kitchen. The warmth of her little hand in mine radiates to every part of my being.

Fifteen minutes later, we're seated catty-corner at the kitchen island. Kangy's on the counter. I watch as my darling daughter takes a big bite of the simple sandwich I've whipped up.

"Scarlet, you make the bestest grilled cheese in the whole wide world."

"Really?" Though she also loved my spaghetti casserole, my cooking skills have never been anything to write home about.

"Totally! It's yumma-roo!" She tears off a small crusty bit and pretend-feeds it to Kangy. "Here, Kangy, you have some too." Holding the morsel to the kangaroo's mouth, she makes munching sounds.

“Does she like it?” I ask.

Grinning, Maddie nods the plush toy’s head. “Uh huh! A lot!! She wants more!” She “feeds” the kangaroo another bite.

“Drink your milk, sweetie,” I tell her.

“Mmm, chocolate milk! Kayla never lets me have chocolate milk.”

The mention of her name sends a chill to my skin. My blood runs cold in my veins.

“Why don’t you like her?” I ask, picturing my daughter’s tongue stuck out at Finn’s despicable fiancée.

Maddie blows bubbles with her straw and then looks up at me. “She’s super mean. I think she hates me.”

How could anyone not love this adorable, precocious, big-hearted child? “What makes you say that?”

“She yells at me a lot. And she never wants to play with me!” She pauses, making a face. “I wish she wasn’t marrying my daddy.”

So do I! My stomach twists and my heart clenches. “Why do you think your daddy likes her?”

Taking another bite of her grilled cheese, she shrugs. “Maybe because she’s pretty. But I don’t think so. She looks like the ugly old Barbie she gave me.”

Despite the ache in my chest, I can’t help but laugh at her barb. “Maddie, can I tell you a secret?”



Her eyes light up. I take that as a yes.

“I don’t like her either.” Skank. “And she’s really mean to me too.”

Maddie frowns, then smiles at me. “You’re the nicest person in the whole wide world. And the prettiest and smartest too.”

I’m touched by her words. And humbled. She looks at me earnestly.

“Scarlet, can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“You promise not to tell anyone?”

I nod.

“Do you cross your heart and hope to die?”

At her last words, I inwardly tremble. I never want to be in death’s way again. Taken away from my husband and child. Eschewing her question, I give Maddie my word.

“I promise . . . not a soul.”

“Kangy and me . . . ”

“I,” I correct.

“Kangy and I wish my daddy was marrying you and you could be my new mommy.”

I’m speechless. Tears cluster in the back of my eyes. I AM your mommy.

The words ripping through my heart, I look down at Kangy. Solace. Taking the worn toy in my hand, I reach into her pouch. Nothing's in it.

“What happened to Kangy's baby?”

“I don't know. Maybe it got lost when we moved here.”

“Do you know a kangaroo's baby is called a joey?”

“Joey? That's a boy's name. Kangy's baby was a girl!”

I can't help another laugh. Oh, the joy my daughter gives me! “My sweetness, all baby kangaroos are called joeys. Whether they're a girl or a boy.”

“That's weird!” She looks wistfully at her plush kangaroo. “Kangy looks sad. I bet she misses her baby.”

I glance down at the stuffed animal and a gust of sadness sweeps over me. Babies and their mothers should never be separated. I've missed so much of my little girl's life. All those milestone occasions—from saying her first word to taking her first steps to celebrating each birthday. A painful lump forms in my throat.

“Yes, I think she misses her baby too.”

“Scarlet, do you think Kangy will ever find her baby?”

A melancholy smile forms on my lips. “Yes, I do.”

Closing her eyes, Maddie folds her hands on the counter. As if in prayer. “What are you doing, sweetie?”

“I’m praying that Kangy finds her baby. And that my daddy doesn’t marry Kayla. Rosita says that God can hear me.”

I battle the tears that threaten to fall. My love for this child—my child—is so all-consuming it hurts. For most of my life, I’ve had a love-hate relationship with God, but suddenly I want to believe there is someone watching over us.

And that unicorns exist.

### CHAPTER 37

Skye

We spend the rest of the afternoon playing board games including Chutes and Ladders, Clue, and Junior Scrabble. Competitive like me, Maddie beats me fair and square almost every time—except at Scrabble. I show off my word power and expand her vocabulary. Totally receptive, she keeps my mind off Finn though I wonder why he hasn't called to check up on her. Still a bit worn out from her hospital ordeal, I make my lovebug go to sleep early after catching her yawning throughout the arroz con pollo dinner Rosita prepared for us. Even more tired than I thought, her eyes close while I'm reading her Madeline's Rescue. Thankfully, before she can beg for a dog like Genevieve.

With my little girl fast asleep, I spend time on the Internet. I'm past diving into the news stories I broke as Skye Collins, not one giving me a clue of who tried to kill me. Instead, I google one retailer after another. Click. Click. Click. Bingo! Within a half hour, I find exactly what I've been looking for on Amazon. It's so, so cute. So perfect! With a happy smile on my face, I put it in my shopping cart and proceed to check out with my credit card. With Maddie turning five shortly, it'll be the perfect birthday present. About to place my order, a car pulls into the driveway. It must be Finn. With Kayla. My stomach knots with dread. Just as I hear the front door open, I complete my purchase. As I await the confirmation, he staggers into the kitchen. Alone.

“Hey,” I say, looking up at him.

He looks stressed. Tired. Almost haggard. Strained lines bracket both his eyes and mouth.

He shrugs off his bomber jacket, letting it drop to the floor. My first instinct is to pick it up and fold it over a chair, but I let it be.

“Is everything okay?” My thought bubble: Where’s Kayla?

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “How’s Maddie?”

My voice picks up. Brightens. “She’s great. We had a wonderful day.”

“No wheezing?”

“Absolutely none.”

“She’s asleep?”

I smile. “Yes, as far as I know.”

“I want to see her. Please come with me.”

The tone of his voice is demanding. Almost needy. He takes off his shoes and I do the same. Barefooted, I silently follow him to Maddie’s room.

Just as I expected, she’s lost in dreamland, her cherubic face aglow in the nightlight. One arm curled around Kangy. Her breathing normal.

“She looks so peaceful,” he says softly, standing beside me.

“Yes, she does.” I can feel his eyes on me as I tenderly brush off a few stray hairs that

have fallen on her face.

Then, I watch as he bends down and plants a soft kiss on her forehead.

She stirs a little, a smile curling on her rosebud lips.

“Daddy?” She’s only half-awake, her eyes still glued shut.

“Yes, baby. I’m here.”

“Can we look for a unicorn tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“Give Scarlet a kiss for me.”

“I will.” The two little words make my heart flip, but I know he doesn’t mean them. He’s just appeasing his daughter.

“Come,” he whispers after she dozes off again.

Quietly, we head back downstairs.

“Have some wine with me.”

That sounds so tempting, but I decline.

“C’mon, I insist.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I work for you.”

“Technically, you’re off duty. It’s your day off. So no excuses.”

Five minutes later, we’re in the great room, Finn seated on the couch, his long legs stretched out on the coffee table and me on one of the cushy chairs, angled toward him. The blaze in the fireplace crackles as we share a delicious Merlot. The velvety red wine courses down my throat and warms me.

“I owe you an apology,” he begins, setting his glass down on the table.

“What for?”

“I should have called you to check up on Maddie, but I lost my damn phone in one of the stores I was in.”

“You went shopping?” With Kayla?

“Yeah, I went to a mall to look for a present for my daughter. Her birthday’s next week.”

“Labor Day.”

His face registers surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Um . . . she told me.” Quick thinking!

“I want to do something special. Any ideas?”

“Well, since it’s a holiday and she has the day off from school, I thought we could go on a road trip.”

“Where?”

“Apple picking in Oak Glen.”

“Where’s that?”

“Not far from Palm Springs. The orchards offer a lot of fun things to do with kids plus it’ll tie in nicely with the unit we’re doing on food and nutrition.”

Finn’s face brightens. “That sounds awesome.” Reaching for the bottle, he pours me more wine. I take another sip.

“This is really nice.”

“It reminds me of you.”

My brows shoot up. “Really? How?”

“It’s earthy, expressive, and complex.”

I let out a little laugh. “You sound like a wine connoisseur. One of those people who writes reviews in Wine Spectator.”

“Describing fine wine is a lot like describing fine art. Or a fine woman.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to put your five senses into it. Extrapolate the experience.”



“Well, I guess I’ll never be an art or wine critic. I lack the vocabulary.”

We drink more of the Merlot over a short stretch of silence. Setting his glass down, Finn’s eyes stay on me.

“Thanks for taking care of Maddie today on such short notice.”

“Of course. We had a great time. It was fun to do things with her other than schoolwork.”

“She really seems to like you.”

“The feeling is mutual. I’m really fond of her. She’s very special.”

“She is.”

Silently, we intake more of the wine. While my glass is not depleted, Finn pours more into each of our goblets. I’m feeling the effects of the alcohol. More relaxed. My guard down.

“Were you ever married?” he asks.

Even in my loosened up state, his out of the blue question throws me for a loop. My skin bristles. I hesitate before answering, my voice small and tentative.

“Yes.”

A brow lifts. “You’re divorced?”

“No.”

“Separated?”

How do I answer that when at last we’re re-united? My vocal cords knot. “Sort of.”

“He left you?”

I nervously twiddle with the locket that’s hidden under my top. “No, I left him.”

Finn is stunned into silence. He imbibes more wine and then asks, “Any kids?”

“Yes... one. I left my child with my husband.”

Finn says nothing. His face pinches in deep thought. Perhaps shock.

I try to imagine what’s going through his mind. Does he think I’m neglectful? Selfish? Even evil? I swallow hard to banish these thoughts. It’s futile. When he finally asks me why, my voice cracks.

“I had no choice. It was for the best.” For you. For her. For us. “It’s not something I really want to talk about.”

I’m grateful he doesn’t probe as he sets his wineglass back down on the table. “Come over here, Scarlet.”

I don’t budge.

“C’mon.” Patting a leather cushion, he shows me where he wants me. The expression on his face is so warm and inviting, the glow of the fireplace bathing him in a soft amber glaze. I can’t resist.

Slowly, with my wineglass in hand, I rise and tread over to the couch, lowering

myself next to him. As I sink into the cushion, the heat of his body radiates through mine, setting every bone and cell on fire. Before it spills, I set my glass on the coffee table next to his.

“Scarlet, you’re very maternal. I bet your child really misses you and needs you.”

His words resonate deeply with me. My heart swells with unspoken emotion. Feeling tears well in my eyes, I bite down on my bottom lip and gulp them back. His hand touches down on my thigh, grazing it lightly.

“Have you seen your child recently?”

I nod. “I have. She’s very special. I love her so much.”

“Ah, so you have a daughter. No wonder you’re so good with Maddie.”

Still battling tears, I twitch a half-smile and say nothing as he takes another sip of his wine.

“Just let me know if you ever need to take some time off to see her. A child shouldn’t be separated from their mother for too long.”

“Thanks, I will.” Truth : I never want to leave Finn and Maddie. I never want us to be separated again. Everything I want in my life is right here. A few traitorous tears leak out from the corners of my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, brushing them away. “Sometimes I get emotional.”

Finn turns my way, his beautiful face shining light onto mine. He cups my tear-streaked face in his hands. “Hey, it’s okay,” he says softly.

Though I try blinking them back, the tears keep coming. So close to me, I can feel his warm breath heat my soaked cheeks. His eyes burn into mine, the sparks between us palpable. Almost visible. My heart flutters like a hummingbird as a rush of desire pulses between my legs. I want him so badly I can taste him. Then, without warning on my next blink, he leans into me, and still cradling my face in his palms, he reads my mind, sinking his lips onto mine. I submit, having wanted this kiss for so long. It's everything I remember. Sensual. Possessive. Generous. All-consuming. My body grows slack, melting into him, as if a lightning bolt has hit me. Fireworks explode behind my sealed lids as he deepens the kiss, the wine-laced taste of him making me drunk with need and desire. Our tongues dance as if they've known each other forever (they have!), mine chasing his as it sweeps through my mouth. Moans gather in the base of my throat like musical notes, mixing with the percussion of my thudding heart.

I can't get enough of him.

Then, suddenly, as if someone has pulled a plug, the music stops. His tongue disappears.

### CHAPTER 38

Finn

I pull away as fast as my lips captured hers. Jesus. What the hell did I just do? I'm engaged to my manager, Kayla, with a wedding around the corner and I just kissed my daughter's teacher. And what's worse, I more than liked it. Everything about the kiss felt so delicious, so familiar. Like our mouths have known each other forever. She melted right into me, willingly, and I could tell from her moans and breathing she felt everything I did. I wanted more of her in the worst way until I came to my senses and managed to refrain.

Catching my breath, I drop my hands from her face and stare at her. She looks shell-shocked. Her porcelain skin flushed, her kissable lips still parted, her misty eyes frozen wide. Her breathing harsh like mine, her body quivering with each shallow breath. Her eyes stay fixed on me, finally blinking. As if she's trying to make sense of what just happened.

"I'm sorry," I breathe out, not knowing what else to say. What came over me? But to be blatantly honest, I want my lips back on hers, her body in my arms so badly I can scream.

Silently registering my two lame words, she continues to breathe hard. The rest of her is paralyzed. I've probably given her some kind of anxiety attack. Her glistening lips start to tremble, but words don't form. A panic button goes off inside me.

"Are you okay?" My heart races as I anxiously await her response.

Finally, after a few seconds, she nods. And one word is whispered. “Yes.”

“Scarlet, please forgive me... “I didn’t mean to assault—”

She cuts me off, her face softening. “You didn’t. You kissed me. And I let you.”

At her tenderly spoken words, relief washes over me. Her words reconfirm what I felt. She wanted my lips on hers. She could have fought me off, but she didn’t. She let me deepen the kiss, hold her face in my hands.

Despite my relief, I falter again for an excuse. “Honestly, I don’t know what got into me. It was totally impulsive.”

“Yes, it was impulsive.”

“I got carried away.”

“Me too.”

Her eyes drop to the coffee table, landing on our empty bottle of Merlot and depleted glasses, then lock with mine.

“It must have been the wine.”

“Yeah, for sure the wine.”

A faint smile flickers on her lips. “It was really good.”

“I can open another bottle if you want more.” Almost instantly, I regret my offer. And my double entendre. I’m asking for trouble. I’m already drunk enough with lust for this woman. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m engaged. She works for me. With

my kid! She's totally off limits.

Forbidden.

Fortunately, she declines my offer. The smile on her face fades and is replaced by a somber expression. Her voice grows quiet and serious, and under it, I can detect uncertainty and a hint of regret.

“Finn, I’m going to call it a night.”

I remain silent as she rises from the sofa. I study her face; she looks to be verging on tears again. Unsteady, she sucks in a breath like she needs to fortify herself.

“Finn, let’s forget this ever happened.”

And with that she stumbles away, leaving me bereft and bewildered.

### CHAPTER 39

Skye

Quiet stills me; darkness blinds me. I don't know what time it is. All I know, I haven't been able to fall asleep.

Closing my eyes with the hope that sleep will claim me, I keep reliving that kiss. That earth-shattering kiss. The kiss of all kisses. I wanted him so badly. Like an animal in heat. I don't think he noticed, but I had to sit on my hands as his mouth ravaged mine so I wouldn't take it any further.

A mad rollercoaster of emotions whirls through me.

Confusion.

Sadness.

Guilt.

Regret.

Desire.

Lust.

Loss.



Love.

How much longer can I keep up this masquerade? This charade?

But I have no choice. If I reveal my identity, their lives may be endangered.

And now, he's engaged to another.

Plus, he thinks I'm married.

Maybe I should leave him. Them.

But how can I go on without them? Let my husband share his bed with that dragon lady? Leave my precious daughter in her wicked claws?

The ache in my heart competes with the ache in my core.

Tomorrow, I have another day off. Sunday. First thing in the morning, I'm going to call the one person who can help me. The one person who can help me see the light. When the road ahead is uncertain. And so dark.

### CHAPTER 40

Skye

“Thank you, Sister Marie, for meeting with me on such short notice.”

“Of course, my dear. Anything for you.”

Clad in her black and white nun’s bib, we’re sitting side by side on the bench where we always sat. The rehab center’s park-like grounds are still under the spell of summer. Beneath the mid-afternoon sun, the leaves of the trees glimmer like emeralds, the surrounding flowers and shrubs like other precious gems.

Patients, dressed in bathrobes, stroll by. Many escorted by nurses, others on their own. Some are in wheelchairs. Memories of my time here swirl around in my head. Three and a half years of recovery. With bumps in the road and mountains to climb. Sometimes, it was so painful, so exhausting I wanted to give up. But Sister Marie, God bless her, never let me. She made me persevere, always telling me there was a light at the end of the tunnel. That some people get new hearts; others new limbs. A few like me, new lives.

“We miss you,” she says, cutting into my mental ramblings.

“I miss you too. How’s Sally doing?”

Sally is an inpatient who was abused by her husband. He almost beat her to death.

“She’s progressing beautifully. She’s strong enough to testify at his trial.”

I smile. “That’s great.”

“What about you?”

I answer with silence. I let the choir of chirping birds fill the air around us. Sister Marie’s brows knit together.

“Something’s wrong.” She knows me so well.

I nod.

She tenderly cups a warm hand on one of mine. “Tell me, my dear.”

I collect my thoughts like someone frantically gathering their treasured possessions at the onset of a fire.

“Finn . . .”

“What about Finn?” She knows all about my husband.

“He’s my employer. I’m working for him. I homeschool his daughter.”

“You mean your daughter.” If she’s surprised, she doesn’t show it. “How wonderful!”

“No, Sister, it’s not wonderful. Sometimes it’s closer to torture.” A pregnant pause.

“He’s engaged to another.”

Sister Marie nods pensively. “I see.”

“I want to quit. Go some place far away from them.”

“And leave the man you love? And your beloved daughter... when God has sent you to them?”

I nod again. My head stays bowed down in shame. I make my confession.

“Last night he kissed me. It was a fluke thing. But he ignited a fire inside me. A fire I can’t put out.”

Tears rise to my eyes. Spilling onto my lap, they can’t extinguish my pain. Or despair.

“My dear, look up. Please listen to me.”

My eyes still watering, I do as she asks. A heart-wrenching story unfolds. A revelation I’m not prepared for. I listen sans interruptions. Sister Marie was in love once. With her high school sweetheart. They made love. She lost her virginity. He was drafted. Vietnam. She got pregnant. Her mother, a strict Catholic, forced her to keep the baby. Instead, she secretly got an abortion. Her mother found out and disowned her. He came back. Except with his new, beautiful Asian wife-to-be.

Absorbed in this sad saga, close to tears, I ask, “What happened?”

“I gave in. I didn’t fight for him.”

“Why?” I ask softly, feeling her pain.

“I was too insecure. Not strong enough. I turned to God, the only man I thought who could love me. Save me. Forgive me.”

Silence, then she breaks it.

“Skye, my dear. You are a much stronger woman than I was. You valiantly fought for your life and won. Now, fight for your man. Make him fall in love with you again.”

I fidget with the locket around my neck.

“How do I do that? I can’t compete with his fiancée. He’s beholden to her. She’s given him everything. Single-handedly made his career.”

“But you gave him a child. And your heart.”

I suck in a lungful of air. “She’s a powerhouse. Manipulative and possessive.”

“Just be yourself.”

“But I’m such a different person.”

“People don’t change that much. Especially on the inside.” She pauses. “He’ll come back.”

She glances into the horizon. “Fate is God’s way of dealing cards. You’ve been dealt your hand. Now, my dear, play it to your advantage.”

Gripping her sturdy hand, I watch as the fiery August sun dips into the mellow turquoise sky.

I came here with my heart filled with despair.

I’m leaving with hope.

I hug Sister Marie, ready to begin a new leg of my journey.

### CHAPTER 41

Skye

Determined and optimistic, I head back home. The drive along the 101 from Santa Barbara to the edge of Malibu takes less than an hour. The sky darkening as I pull into the driveway, I muse how I already think of Finn's compound as my home. Where I belong. With my husband and child. My family. Parking my Jeep, I make a decision to have dinner with them. Something I've never done before.

To my surprise, the last person I want to see greets me in the kitchen.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the babysitter!"

It's Kayla, dressed in another one of her white designer ensembles. I meet her glaring green eyes, as hard and cold as raw emeralds. My gaze stays on her as she saunters to the Sub-Zero refrigerator. She swings the door open and pulls out a chilled bottle of Prosecco.

"It's a shame Phineas doesn't have any peaches so I could make a Bellini," she mutters as she expertly uncorks it and pours some of the sparkling wine into a flute. Without offering me any, she returns to the island where I'm sitting and takes a seat opposite me. Her monstrous bag is on the counter.

She sips her drink. "I was just about to leave."

Don't let me stop you.

“And if I didn’t have to pick up my car, thanks to Phineas who deserted me yesterday, I wouldn’t be here at all.” She scoffs. “I can’t believe he had the gall to make me Uber!”

Poor little Miss Entitled.

Imbibing more of her sparkling wine, she gives me the once over. “Maybe it’s good you’re here too. We can have a little girl talk.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to talk about.” My voice is icy.

“Think again.” She fires the words at me. “It’s one thing babysitting the little imp—”

“Excuse me. I’m the child’s teacher!”

“Whatever. But it’s another thing babysitting her father.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Puh-lease. Don’t tell me Miss Know-It-All doesn’t have a clue.”

Fortified after my afternoon with Sister Marie, I narrow my eyes at her. “Enlighten me.”

She sneers. “I see the way you look at him. Watch his every move. Like a pathetic puppy. You’re practically drooling.”

Her python eyes take on a venomous glint. “You’d better keep your hands off him if you know what’s good for you.”

My eyes don’t stray from her. “Is that a threat?”



“No, it’s a statement.” She flashes the big diamond on her ring finger at me. “He belongs to me.”

No! He belongs to me! I so want to spit out the words and tell her he kissed me, but bite my tongue. My blood is simmering, my temperature rising faster than the bubbles of her beverage. My next words tumble out of my mouth.

“I know about your past.”

She purses her lips, her expression piqued with curiosity. “ Enlighten me .”

“A BA from Yale? An MFA from Sotheby’s? I. Don’t. Think. So.”

Not reacting, she takes another sip of her drink. I’m not deterred.

“A little cocaine habit, perhaps?”

Turning beet red (Ha! That got her!), she slams her flute on the granite. “So you’ve been spying on me?”

“No. Researching. I like to know whom I’m dealing with.”

“Well, the past is the past. And thanks to all of Daddy’s connections, my little screw-ups don’t matter anymore.”

“Does Finn know about them?”

“You mean Phineas? I suppose he does, but his past isn’t so perfect either. And besides, everyone in the art world snorts a little. It’s not a secret, Miss Goody-Goody.”

She holds me in her contemptuous gaze. “You better be careful. I have a lot of power. One wrong move and I can bring Phineas down. And trust me, he’ll never recover.”

There’s some truth to her words. I’m caught between a rock and a hard place. The last thing I want to do is destroy Finn’s career, something he’s worked so hard for. While I weigh my options, she continues.

“It’s funny how life works. Some people like me fall up. Others like Phineas’s ex fall down... literally. No pun intended.”

Is she referring to my life-defying accident? Does she know who I really am? Was she involved?

An icy chill sends goosebumps to my arms as she laughs at her cleverness. “You’re the kind of spineless person who’s doomed to fall down.”

Inside, I’m burning up with rage; I feel my cheeks heating. I’m not Finn’s ex-wife. I am his wife. And the last thing I am is spineless!

“Finn doesn’t have an ex -wife!”

With a fling of her head, she lets out a huff. “Semantics. Whatever way you look at it, she’s gone.”

Wrong! She’s alive and well and you’re looking right at her!

As fury mounts inside me, she reaches inside her bag and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Marlboro Lights. Opening the box, she slips one out, and to my horror, lights it up and takes a drag. Tilting her head back, she blows out a puff of smoke. The ring floats in the air.

“Please put the cigarette out.” I try to temper my anger. How dare she smoke around an asthmatic child?

She shoots me a defiant look. “Are you kidding me? You’re telling me what to do?”

This time, I don’t hold back. “Put out the damn cigarette, Kayla. The smoke is really bad for Maddie’s asthma.”

“Asthma shmasma.”

Throwing back her head, she takes another drag and this time deliberately blows a cloud of smoke in my face.

I choke. Not so much on the smoke but on the bile that is rising in my throat. I can’t let this insipid woman marry my husband. And become the mother of my precious daughter. I can’t! My mother used to tell me: “What goes up, must come down.” Whatever it takes, I’m taking Kayla down. Starting now. The tough, ballsy, fearless Skylar Collins is back with a vengeance. I hold her fiercely in my gaze.

“Kayla, get the hell out of here.”

“How dare you talk to me like that?!”

“Kayla, what the hell are you doing?”

The gruff, angry voice is accompanied by thudding footsteps. With a jerk of my neck, I look over my shoulder.

Finn! Marching toward us, his face dark with rage.

“Oh, hi, darling!” In the blink of an eye, the tone of Kayla’s voice has gone from

malevolent to saccharine. But it falls on deaf ears.

His paint-stained hands clenched by his sides and his lips pinched tight, Finn steamrolls straight up to Kayla and snatches the cigarette out of her hand.

“Jesus, Phineas. What are you doing?”

With a sharp flick of his wrist, he tosses the half-smoked butt onto the floor and then stomps it out with the toe of his Nike. His eyes, flickering with fury, meet Kayla’s.

“I thought you gave up smoking.”

“Well, I did. But the little chat I was just having with your little helper mandated a ciggie.”

Finn breathes in and out from his nose. Smoke is virtually coming out of his flaring nostrils. He looks like he may implode. “I thought I told you never to smoke in my house.”

Kayla rolls her eyes before shooting Finn a look of innocence. “Whoops. Just a little slip up.”

Finn’s eyes power into her. “A little slip up? Are you fricking kidding me, Kayla? Maddie could have a major asthma attack from inhaling particles of smoke. Don’t you know it’s a major irritant?”

Just then, a bright little voice fills the room.

“Daddy!”

Maddie! I pray she won’t break into a coughing fit. She doesn’t.

Clutching Kangy, she gallops up to her father. As if the ugly conversation between Kayla and him never happened, his face lights up as he lifts her into his arms. My own rage dissipates at the sight of them. Joy fills my heart. Her limbs curled around him, he affectionately tugs at one of her braids.

“Hi, sunshine! Tell me something good!”

“Scarlet and I drew pictures yesterday while you were away. Coloring!”

“You did?”

Maddie bobs her head. “Uh-huh. Wanna see what we made?”

“Of course!” He lowers our twinkly-eyed daughter to her feet, and she scampers over to the kitchen counter to fetch our two drawings. She prances back to us with our creations dangling from her hand.

“Daddy, look at what I made. A family!” She shows him the threesome she drew—Finn, her, and me.

Finn breaks into a dazzling smile. “That’s awesome, baby girl!”

Maddie beams at her father’s compliment while Kayla screws up her face.

“That doesn’t look a bit like me!”

Maddie butts in. “It’s not you. It’s Scarlet.”

Kayla’s jaw drops to the floor. Her eyes smolder.

“You know what, Finn? I came all the way over here to discuss your upcoming

exhibition at Jaime Zander's gallery. An exhibition that can make us millions. But you seem to be more interested in this totally amateur, juvenile piece of trash."

Finn's smile falls off his face. Rage burning in his eyes, he meets her fiery gaze. His voice rises. "Kayla, I've told you. Nothing comes before my daughter."

His words resonate deep inside me. Remorse settles in the pit of my stomach. If only I had felt this way before. I suddenly hate every story I broke after she was born. Every minute that took me away from my beautiful girl. The last one, whatever it was, literally and figuratively.

With an angry scowl scrawled on her face, Kayla hops off the stool, slamming her flute on the counter. She narrows her eyes at Finn.

"Darling, when you come to your senses, call me. And don't forget that tomorrow we have a meeting with Jaime at his gallery."

Grabbing her bag, she stalks out of the kitchen.

From the corner of my eye, I see Maddie poke her tongue at her.

A smile crawls across my face.

My darling sassy daughter.

She's a spitfire.

I love her so much.

I've begun my fight for her father.

And I have her on my side.

### CHAPTER 42

Skye

The next week goes by quickly. Without any drama. I spend my days instructing Maddie and looking forward to our evenings having dinner with Finn. Finn spends the rest of his time in his studio, prepping paintings for his upcoming exhibition. I miss him when he's not with us and though I've been tempted to go over there and watch him paint, I refrain. The good news is that Kayla has been out of sight, out of mind.

Until Labor Day. Maddie's fifth birthday.

As planned, the three of us are in the Land Rover en route to Oak Glen for a day of apple picking. I'm in the front seat next to Finn. Adorably dressed in overalls and a striped tee, Maddie's seated behind him. Strapped into her car seat and wearing earbuds, she's listening to music on her iPad, Kangy on her lap. A half-hour into the drive down the 10, I'm surprised when Finn turns off the freeway onto the Robertson Boulevard exit.

"Finn, where are we going?"

"We're picking up Kayla."

At the mention of her name, I jolt. This was so not part of the plan. My blood runs cold as Finn goes on.



“When I mentioned our road trip to her last night, she insisted on coming along. That she needed to de-stress and get out of the city. She also said she realized she needed some quality bonding time with Maddie.”

I bristle. Bonding time with Maddie my ass! She despises the child. But she obviously despises me more. So, she wants to play games with me? Fine by me! Thanks to my parents’ globetrotting, I’m the Queen of Adventure. Let’s see who will win.

Kayla’s luxury high-rise building is located just off Sunset Boulevard. Already outside, she’s pre-occupied on her cell phone, talking to someone via a headset when we pull into the semi-circular driveway. The attentive doorman hurries to open the back passenger door of the SUV.

“What?!” I hear her shriek through my open window when she sees me. “You’re coming too?”

I guess that Finn neglected to mention that I was coming along. Or that I organized the trip.

“Get! Up!” she barks. “You’re sitting in my seat!”

My blood curdling, I jerk the door open, almost slamming it into her before she jumps out of the way. Hopping out of the vehicle, I slide into the back seat next to Maddie. My eyes take in Kayla as she climbs into the car. Unlike me who’s wearing jeans, a hoodie, and solid walking shoes, she’s clad in skinny white pants and a body-hugging cashmere pullover, looking more dressed for lunch at some posh restaurant than for a day of rustic apple picking. Plus she’s wearing strappy stiletto sandals, hardly ideal for navigating the hilly terrain, and carrying a matching monstrous bag. Maybe the latter will be good for gathering apples, I muse, as I fasten my seat belt.

Kayla simultaneously buckles herself in. “You know what? On second thought, I’m glad you’re here. You can help Finn and that child pick dirty, worm-infested apples. I actually can’t believe I agreed to do this.”

“It’s going to be fun,” pipes up Finn.

Truthfully, it would be more fun without her. Way more fun.

The drive along the freeway is uneventful. Kayla spends most of it on her phone, chatting with clients and perusing fashion magazines, which she’s stuffed into her enormous bag. Occasionally, she looks up and asks: “Are we there yet?” the irritated tone of her voice more annoying than that of a whiny child.

Maddie and I pass the time reading more about Oak Glen on her iPad. It does look like so much fun. In addition to apple picking, there are many other child-friendly activities, including a petting zoo, arts and crafts, and pony rides. Plus the bustling little town is filled with charming restaurants, bakeries, and gift shops. Truthfully, I was nervous about taking asthmatic Maddie to the scenic “mile-high desert town” with its over four thousand foot elevation, but her doctor assured us she would do fine in the fresh, clean mountain air. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” he reminded us. Not taking any chances, I have her inhaler and medicine packed in my backpack. Fingers crossed we won’t have to use it.

A couple hours in, the rugged San Bernardino Mountains come into view. Soon afterward, we pass a sign.

“Look!” squeals Maddie. “Oak Glen... Next Exit. Yay!”

I’m as equally happy to see the sign as I am to hear my bright little girl read the words. So is Finn.

“You read that all by yourself, sunshine!” he beams, merging into the far right lane.

“Yup, Daddy!” A proud cheek-to-cheek grin stretches across her face.

Kayla looks up from her magazine. “Big whoop!”

Within a few minutes of exiting, we ascend a twisty scenic road that takes us straight to apple country. Sitting in the backseat, I feel a little queasy, but Maddie is loving every minute as if it’s a carnival ride. I point out the many beautiful trees lining the two-lane road, some of which have multi-color leaves that resemble gemstones. An early taste of autumn in Southern California.

Kayla goes back to reading her magazine, totally oblivious to the breathtaking scenery. Glancing over her shoulder, I see that she’s flipping through the pages of a Christie’s Contemporary Art catalogue. How ironic! My mind flashes back to the Christie’s Preview in New York... where Finn and I met. My eyes flicking to his handsome profile as he expertly navigates the serpentine road, I relive that encounter. That sensual, unexpected encounter that changed my life and his. A knot of desire curls in my core.

Kayla’s shrill voice slices into my thoughts. “Oh, my God! This Balthus is to die for! It’s perfect for Sheldon! He’s been desperate to add one to his collection. We need to put in an absentee bid right away.” She immediately reaches for her phone and punches in a number.

“Shit! There’s no cell service here.”

Maddie, minus her earbuds, turns away from the window. “Daddy, did Kayla just say a bad word?”

I fight back my anger. What is with this woman? Isn’t she aware there’s a five-year-

old sitting behind her? A sweet, innocent little girl. Obviously not. She impatiently tries her phone again. Again no luck getting service.

She curses again, saying the word over and over.

Taking his eyes off the bumper-to-bumper road, Finn shoots her a glaring look. “Kayla, put the phone down. And watch your language. My kid’s back there.”

Kayla jerks her head his way, her eyes full of venom. “You obviously don’t understand, darling. I’m talking about a five million dollar painting that could net me— us— a ten percent finder’s fee. Do the math!”

“I can do the math,” Finn replies coldly. So can I. Wow! Five hundred thousand dollars! But no amount of money is worth compromising my daughter’s emotional and physical well-being.

As Kayla huffs with frustration, my heart swells with admiration. And love. Deep-seated and unconditional. What a wonderful dad Finn is. I couldn’t have possibly chosen a better man to father my child. So protective. So loving. Desperate to distract myself from my feelings, I map out our day’s activities as we meander up the long, winding road, now passing farms. Maddie is over-the-moon thrilled to see horses and cows, and I share her excitement.

The traffic lessens and ten short minutes later, we reach our destination. Riley’s. While we’ve passed many apple farms along the way, Finn and I chose this one as it seemed to be the most child-friendly, offering a ton of activities. I unbuckle Maddie’s car seat while Finn parks the SUV. Due to how crowded it is, we’ve had to park in a lot across the street. Kayla complains.

“Seriously, darling, can’t you park any closer? Does it look like I’m wearing hiking boots?”

Turning off the ignition, Finn glances down at her high-heels.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t bring sneakers or boots?”

Kayla makes a face. “Phineas, are you kidding me? Hiking boots are for peasants, and seriously, did you really expect me to wear—and ruin!—my thousand dollar Chanel sneakers in this muck?”

With a roll of his eyes, Finn hops out of the car, then helps Maddie out. She leaves Kangy behind.

I follow suit, then Kayla. As she steps out of the SUV, a deafening scream pierces the air.

“Oh my God, Phineas! You parked in mud. I may have just ruined my brand new Louboutins!”

I glance down at her mud-covered stilettos and silently laugh. The six-inch heels are almost six-inches buried.

The fun has just begun. Little do I know this day will take a surreal turn, making me question who I am, what I want, and the safety of everyone near and dear to me.

### CHAPTER 43

Skye

Five minutes later, we're standing in line to get into the farm.

Encyclopedic Maddie excitedly tells her father about all the apples we read about. The area offers close to a hundred varieties, including heirlooms, which are no longer commercially sold. Bored out of her mind, Kayla pays little attention to my precocious little girl. She tries her phone yet again and curses under her breath when she can't get service. Losing her patience, she pouts.

"Phineas, why on earth did you have to choose this fuh ...farm?" By the skin of her teeth, she manages to avoid the F-bomb. "We passed dozens of them and none of them had lines."

"Because this one is the most fun!" chirps Maddie. "Guess what!"

"What!?" Kayla snaps back.

"It has a petting zoo and a tractor ride." She looks up imploringly at her father, with those big puppy-brown eyes you just can't say no to. "Daddy, can we visit the animals and ride the tractor after we pick apples?"

Finn affectionately ruffles her hair. "Of course, birthday girl."

"Yay!" Maddie claps her hands, then clamps her arms around her father's long

muscular legs. His face lights up while Kayla's grows horrified.

"You must be kidding! I'm not getting anywhere near some stinky animals that can bite or riding some trailer park vehicle!"

Finn is clearly annoyed by her contentiousness. He narrows his eyes at her. "Listen, Kayla, you can do whatever you want. After we go apple picking, you can check out some of the stores."

She huffs. "The only store I'm interested in is Neiman Marcus." She glances down at her mud-encrusted high-heeled sandals. "You owe me a new pair of shoes." She screws up her face. "Thank you very much."

Finn's obnoxious, self-centered fiancée makes my blood simmer. I've never met anyone with such a sense of entitlement. I want to punch her in the face and actually clench my fists by my sides so I don't.

Despite its length, the long line to the entrance moves quickly. About to embark on our apple picking adventure, we're given eco-friendly paper bags which can hold up to five pounds worth of apples as well as long poles with a small basket at the end for gathering apples off the trees. Finn tells Maddie that she can share his. Kayla declines both with one word: "Seriously?"

We're off. Holding his pick along with a bag, Finn takes Maddie by the hand. She looks my way, her sparkling eyes gazing up at me.

"Can I hold your hand too, Scarlet?"

"Of course, sweetie." I take her other hand so that she's sandwiched between Finn and me. The warmth of her little fingers twined with mine makes my heart smile. With a jubilant Maddie jumping and skipping, we head down a long dirt road

surrounded by apple trees on either side in search of the first orchard with ripe, ready to pick fruit. Occasionally, we swing Maddie into the air and she squeals at the top of her lungs. It all feels so natural. Like the three of us have walked together like this forever. People passing us smile. Several even comment: “What a sweet child you have! You’re a beautiful family!” Neither Finn nor I say more than a heartfelt “Thank you.”

Kayla trails behind us. I don’t look back. Nor does Finn.

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We get an “A” for apple picking. Just from the first orchard we stopped at, our bag is more than halfway full. We must have over two dozen heirlooms. Toting the heavy bag, Finn insists we move on to another orchard so we can bring home a variety.

Next stop: Classic McIntoshes.

The orchard is packed, with people of all ages clambering for the popular shiny red apples. We find a ripe tree that’s not too populated.

Gazing up, Maddie instantly spots an apple she covets.

“Look, Daddy! A baby apple!”

Sitting piggyback on top of Finn’s shoulders, she aims the fruit picker at it.

I look up at the apple-laden tree. Yes, in the midst of all these big red apples is a petite one. Like my baby!

“Go for it!” Finn tells her.



Expertly, she swipes at the tiny apple, but it refuses to drop into the basket. No matter how many times she tries, the stubborn little Mac remains dangling on the tree. I study it. It's perfect. Rosy. Unblemished. Radiant. Feisty. Just like my sweet little girl. The apple of my eye.

Maddie frowns. "Why won't it come down?"

"Sweetie, I don't think it's ready. I think it wants to stay with its mommy and daddy."

Scrunching her brows, she digests my words and then gazes back up at the tree. She points at the two mature apples that bracket the small one, one on either side.

"Do you think those two big apples are the mommy and daddy?"

"Yes, darling. I do. We should keep them together. They're a family."

With a squeeze of my hand that makes my heart flutter, Finn gazes up. "Sunshine, I think Scarlet's right. We should let it be. Why don't we check out one more orchard and then we'll have lunch."

Before we take another step, a tart, familiar voice descends upon us.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been looking all over for you, Phineas!"

I look over my shoulder. It's Kayla. She looks completely disheveled, her perfectly blown hair a mess and her expensive ensemble laced with dust. Fuming, she stomps toward us, fury fueling every step. A few feet away, she trips over a rotten apple and goes tumbling to the ground, landing in a twisted heap.

She curses under her breath, her voice pained.

Maddie bursts into laughter.

“Why are you laughing, you little imp?” shrieks Kayla as she sits up.

“That was funny!”

Red-hot with rage, Kayla makes a scathing face at the little girl. “No, it’s not!” Then, she examines her outfit, frantically brushing off the patches of dirt and dry bits of foliage that pepper her slacks and sweater. “Oh my God! My brand new Armani pants are totally trashed.”

Lifting Maddie off his shoulders and setting her down next to me, Finn hurries to Kayla’s aid. The two of us follow him.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice full of concern.

A dart of jealousy stabs me as Kayla massages her ankle. “Do you really have to ask?”

“Let me help you up.” He grabs Kayla’s hand and lifts her to her feet. She grimaces, her right foot unsteady.

“Can you walk?”

Holding onto Finn, she takes a step and, with a groan, almost crumples to the ground.

“Ugh! I think I’ve broken my ankle. I can’t put any pressure on it. I need to get medical attention immediately!”

Despair washes over Finn. “Guys, I think we need to end this day early. We’ve got to get Kayla to an emergency room.”

Disappointment sweeps over Maddie. Her lips quiver and tears brim in her eyes. “But Daddy, you promised I could pet the animals and ride in the tractor.”

“Sunshine, I’m sorry.” His voice sounds so sincere, so remorseful.

A fat tear rolls down Maddie’s cheek as she starts to cry. Her sobs pain me.

“What are you crying about, you little brat!” barks Kayla. “This is all your fault!”

“No, it’s not!” I bite back, lifting the sniffing, runny-nose little girl into my arms. “It was an accident.”

Kayla sneers at me and then turns to Finn. “You need to carry me to the car. Let’s get the hell out of this dump!”

The vision of Finn gallantly carrying his beautiful wounded princess in his arms sickens me. Before he can lift her into his arms, a cute elderly couple that was picking apples alongside us approaches him. They’re each carrying a bag full of fruit.

“Is everything all right?” asks the concerned, snowy-haired woman.

His face tense, Finn blows out a breath. “My fiancée tripped and hurt her ankle. We have to cut our apple-picking trip short so we can take her to an emergency room.”

The wife’s gaze moves to me, taking in the still wailing Maddie.

“I bet your little girl wants to stay.”

Finn’s voice softens. “She does. And it’s her birthday.”

“Aww!” sighs the lovely woman. “Happy Birthday, sweetie!”

“Thank you,” sniffles my little one, turning her head, her politeness filling me with pride.

With a warm, appreciative smile, the woman shifts her attention again to Finn. “I have an idea. My husband and I are about to leave. We’re driving back to Santa Monica. Is that by any chance close to where you live?”

Still nursing her foot and grimacing, Kayla cuts in before Finn can respond. “Jesus, Phineas, this is not the time to start up a conversation with some lowlife octogenarians you don’t know I’m in pain! Let’s go!”

Finn ignores her. His face brightens as he answers the woman’s question. “Yes! I live in Malibu.”

“Perfect! We can drop your fiancée off at St. John’s,” says the kindly, bespeckled husband.

St. John’s is one of LA’s top hospitals. Located near the beach, it’s not too far from either Kayla’s apartment or Finn’s house.

“Really?” asks a shocked Finn.

“Not a problem.”

“I’ll help my fiancée to your car.”

“Stay put. We’ll talk to the people at the information center, explain the situation, and get permission to drive our pickup here. Then, we’ll take her with us.”

Kayla’s face burns red with rage. I swear if she could walk she would physically assault one of us.

“Are you really serious, Phineas? You’re going to leave me alone with two derelict strangers who could possibly abduct me? And make me travel in a truck?”

I bite down on my bottom lip to refrain from laughing and admire the thick skin of the lovely couple. They have a sense of humor! A half-hour later, despite a tantrum, Kayla is out of sight. Out of mind.

And Maddie is having the time of her life on the tractor ride. Make that... we are having the time of our lives. The three of us. Finn, Maddie, and me.

### CHAPTER 44

Skye

The grassy picnic area near the entrance of the apple farm is filled with families and kids. While some have managed to snag one of the scattered planked tables, most like us are seated on blankets spread out on the ground.

Next to the jug of cider we made is a big wicker basket. We've devoured almost everything Rosita packed for us. The scrumptious Mexican lunch included fresh guacamole and chips, tacos de carnitas, and esquites, a tasty grilled corn salad. Plus the yummy apple donuts I bought at the village bakery.

The early afternoon weather is divine. The clean, fragrant air is crisp, and the sun shines brightly in the clear blue sky. Everything is picture postcard perfect. Nearby, two aging musicians are playing oldies but goodies. Harmonizing, the shaggy-haired men, one paunchy, the other wiry, strum their amped up guitars. Despite their years, they're actually really good, and probably in their heyday in the early eighties, they were a popular duo that got lots of gigs. Children of all ages are frolicking on the grass to the classic songs, including Maddie. Leaving me alone with Finn.

After I stash everything in the picnic basket and move it out of the way, Finn sprawls out on the plaid blanket, propped up on his elbows, his tattooed biceps flexing as he holds his head between his fists. Admiring his long lean, muscular body, I reposition myself so I'm lying next to him. Both of us have our eyes on barefooted Maddie, who's uninhibitedly swirling and whirling to the rockabilly music. It's hard to believe that this robust little girl almost died of an asthma attack a few weeks ago.

At the sight of her, joy surges inside me. “She’s such a free spirit,” I say, adjusting the sunglasses I’ve put on.

Finn doesn’t take his eyes off her either, but I can hear the smile in his voice. “Yeah, she is. Sometimes I wish her mother could see her.”

At his unexpected words, my breath hitches. “Maybe she can.”

“What do you mean?”

We turn to face each other. His eyes search mine, waiting for me to elaborate.

Keeping my gaze on him, I falter for words. “I mean, maybe her presence is here.”

“Like an angel?”

“Yes. In a spiritual way.”

His tone grows serious. “Do you believe in life after death, Scarlet?”

“Yes. I do.” How could I not? I’m a living example. I died and came back. I was given a second chance like none other. “What about you?”

“I’m not sure though I’d like to believe we come back in other forms.”

His response makes my skin prickle. “Do you think about your wife a lot?”

“All the time. I can’t help it. Maddie is the spitting image of her.” He pauses. “And not just physically. She inherited a lot of her mother’s personality. Her inquisitiveness, spunk, and courage.” A wistful smile lifts his lips. “They say the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Your wife sounds like she is... I mean, was an amazing woman.”

“Yes, she was.” His voice is melancholic, like he’s drifting back in time. “Perhaps, you know her.”

My vocal cords are on the verge of imploding. I want to scream out I know her well. So well . I. Am. Her. Instead, I swallow back the words and ask, “What do you mean?”

“She was a well-known reporter for Conquest Broadcasting. Skye Collins.”

“Skye Collins.” I repeat back my name slowly, reflectively. It’s the first time I’ve spoken it in ages. It feels so natural on my lips yet so alien. “Yes, I remember her. She died in a car accident, right?”

“Yes, a terrible accident. Her car went over Mulholland.” His jaw ticks, hesitation etched on his face. “The police believe she was murdered.”

“Oh my God! How horrible!” Jolting, I act like this is news to me. “Does Maddie know?”

“No, not at all. I don’t want to frighten her. But that’s one of the reasons I’ve been super-protective of her. Whoever did this to my wife is still out there. My daughter’s life could be in danger.”

At this reminder, I inwardly shudder. Yet, despite my unease, my inquiring mind is at work. What exactly does Finn know about the accident? Perhaps, he can shed some light on what happened that fateful night. He’s in a talkative mood. The investigative reporter in me probes further. I need to know the truth. Dig deep, then dig deeper.

“Do the police have any clue as to who may have cost your wife her life?”



Finn shakes his head. “Believe it or not, the police initially suspected me.”

His words rattle me. A chill runs down my spine. There’s no way this beautiful, loving man could be a killer. “That’s insane! What made them think that?”

He chews on his lip. “Because she had a substantial life insurance policy. Plus, they suspected she was having an affair. Put two and two together and you’ve got a classic Criminal Justice story: Jealous husband kills cheating wife and inherits her money.”

A sick feeling washes over me. The thought of infidelity is unfathomable. “Do you think she was cheating on you?”

“The night of the accident she went out by herself. She was all dressed up in this hot little outfit... a black mini-dress along with some strappy high heels I’d never seen before. Not the kind of things she usually wore. Plus, she had on a ton of makeup and her hair was swept up. She told me she was working on a story. She was rushed and nervous.” He fidgets with his watch. “To be honest, I didn’t believe her.”

My heart clenches at this revelation and my stomach churns. I try hard to remember, but nothing comes to mind. Not even a glimmer of that night. Flustered, I splutter, “Why didn’t you believe her?”

“It wasn’t the first time. She did the same thing earlier in the week and was very secretive about the story she was working on. She said she couldn’t talk about it.”

What story? What was I working on? I painfully, frantically try to recall that night. Think, Skye, think! My mind does somersaults. Nothing. I have no recollection. Not even of the dress I was wearing. My forehead scrunches as I squeeze my eyes shut in a desperate search for answers. Rubbing my temples, all I see behind my eyelids is a whirl of darkness. Why can’t I remember?

“Are you okay?” Finn’s concerned voice brings me back to the moment. My eyes snap open.

The possibility of having an affair has unraveled me. Did I? An acid blend of guilt and sorrow surges inside me. I swallow past the burn in my throat, then nod, “Yes.”

“Scarlet, do you think I could be a cold-blooded murderer?”

“Of course not!” My voice is sharp. Definitive. I turn the tables. “Do you really think your wife was having an affair?”

He lowers his eyes, absent-mindedly picking at a tuft of grass. “It’s very possible and with just cause.”

Pausing, he tosses the green blades as my stomach clenches with dread. “What do you mean?”

“Though I loved her with all I had, I don’t think I was good enough for her. I was a struggling artist. Never could make enough money. She was a huge success; I was a huge failure. Maybe, she wanted someone who could give her more than I could.”

His words pain me. The ache in the pit of my stomach coils through me. “How can you say that? You’re an incredible man! An incredible father! She had to love you!”

His gaze meets mine again. “You act like you know her.”

I do! I am her! And I’ve always loved you, Finn! Every molecule of my being wants to shout out the reality of who I am. The words burn on my tongue, pleading to come out. Sucking in a lungful of air, I collect myself and swallow hard. My voice grows watery. “Finn, I understand her. I left my husband. But I never stopped loving him. Ever.”

“And I’ve never stopped loving my late wife. She still lives in my heart and always will.” A faint smile plays on his face. “You remind me a lot of her.”

“How?”

My heart pounds as he lowers my sunglasses to the blanket and looks straight into my eyes.

“Your eyes. There’s something about your eyes. The shape of them. Their intensity. The way you look at me.” He plucks a dandelion from the grass and dusts the flower under my chin. My hypersensitive spot. The spot which when touched lights me up like a volcano. At the sensation of the saffron petals on my flesh, my neck arches and a soft moan escapes my lips.

“Stop,” I mutter, fighting my arousal.

He doesn’t. “It’s weird. My late wife had a very sensitive spot on her neck too.”

Memories of him kissing this spot and sometimes testing a new paintbrush along it dance in my head. Goosebumps pop along my arms as a flare of desire shoots up my legs. I bite down on my trembling lips, hoping they won’t betray me. Taking no chances, I turn away.

“Look at me, Scarlet.” The love of my life’s voice is soft but assertive.

Slowly, I do as he asks and face him again. His heated gaze penetrates my depths.

He leans in closer to me, still sweeping the flower across my sensitive flesh in little circles. Figure eights. His head lowers, his lips part, his breath warms mine, my eyelids lower, and then...

A song drifts into my ears. A song that will stay in my heart forever.

Elvis's "Love Me Tender." Love me true. The song the Vegas preacher serenaded us with after he married us. At the memory, a rush of emotion wells up inside me. Tears seep from my eyes.

"What's wrong?" Finn asks, brushing the tears away with the flower. They salt the glistening petals.

"This song... it reminds me of my husband."

Does he remember? Silently, Finn stands up, then helps me to my feet. Facing each other, our hands laced, his soulful gaze burns a hole in my heart.

"It's special to me too."

While one of the musicians keeps singing, his baritone voice quite good, the other makes an announcement. "Okay, all you lovebirds, let's show these youngsters how to really dance."

One by one, couples of all ages flock to the grassy dance area, all wrapping themselves in each other in a slow, amorous dance. Neither Finn nor I move.

The nostalgic Elvis lyrics tug at my heartstrings. A breath away from Finn, my hands in his, every organ, every cell, every particle of my being quivers with need. I'm about to implode with love waiting for him to say something. Then, finally, he says softly, cupping his hands on my shoulders...

"Scarlet, dance with me."

### CHAPTER 45

Skye

I 've been to heaven. Literally. At least for a few moments.

Now, I'm literally in heaven again. Heaven on earth.

A beautiful eternity.

As the old rockers croon the song that united us, Finn sways me in his brawny arms. Just like he did twelve years ago in that tacky chapel off the Vegas strip. His arms looped around my waist, mine around his neck, my head resting on his chest. The heat of his taut body radiates through his T-shirt as his heart beats rhythmically in my ear like a muted drum. Over a dozen couples are dancing, but I'm oblivious to all of them. In my fairy-tale world, there's no one but the two of us.

His lead is strong. Confident. I follow him with ease, knowing just when he's going to spin me. It's slow and perfect. I don't miss a step. Our eyes meet, and as he draws me back into him, we resume our body-to-body position. How I love being in his arms! Holding him tight!

My eyes closed, I soak in the lyrics. When we got married at the Vegas chapel, they were almost a joke. The cynic in me figured the Elvis impersonator preacher sung this song at every wedding ceremony he performed. It was his routine. I was just happy to be married to the man I loved.

But now, they mean something way deeper. The implication of endless love no matter what happens. An undying love that transcends the passage of time.

As the song comes to an end, Finn sings, his husky voice harmonizing with the duo. Oh so tenderly!

“For my darling, I love you . . .”

And I always will.

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Finn

I, Finn Hooker, take thee, Skylar Collins, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.

I hold Scarlet closer to me. Feel her heartbeat.

Love doesn't die.

### CHAPTER 46

Finn

Three p.m. Heading home. By the time we reach the freeway, Maddie is fast asleep in her car seat, my now five-year-old wiped out from the day's non-stop activities. I glimpse her in the rearview mirror. How angelic my little girl looks! Her head slumped, her rosebud lips slightly parted, her cheeks brushing against her plush kangaroo, which serves as a makeshift pillow.

Without me asking, Scarlet reaches behind and manages to throw a blanket over my daughter.

"Thanks," I say appreciatively.

"Sure." Facing forward, she quirks a fleeting smile as Springsteen's "Two Hearts" plays softly on the stereo.

We spend the rest of the trip steeped in silence. My companion keeps her head angled toward the window, looking like she's more in deep thought than taking in the scenery. I sneak a peek at her, marveling at the planes of her exquisite profile—that chiseled nose, her high cheekbones, and those long-lashed eyes.

I'm undeniably attracted to this woman. She does things to me—things I have no control over. I loved holding her lithe body against mine as we swayed to the Elvis song that once belonged to my wife and me. It felt natural, so real. She followed my lead as if she'd danced with me a hundred times before. If Maddie hadn't been

watching us, I would have kissed her. How much I longed to press my lips against hers when the song ended as she stood there staring at me, her eyes glazed, her lips slightly parted, like an open invitation.

But it's way more than just physical. I had the most fun I've had in ages with her. And when Kayla had to leave after her mishap, things got even better. She made me laugh during all those kid-friendly activities. And made me smile with how loving she was with my daughter. They've taken to each other like bread and butter. I, too, feel so at ease with her. As I cruise up the 10, I reflect on our intimate conversation, my willingness to open up to her about my late wife and the unsettling secret I've harbored. She listened, asked questions, and not once did she judge me. In fact, she made me feel like I've been needlessly beating myself up. Blaming myself for things in the past that maybe I shouldn't. Two broken hearts, two adults who have committed mistakes and made wrong choices, we have a lot in common. There's more than just her hypnotic eyes that reminds me of my late wife, and perhaps that's even more reason why I feel the way I do about her.

Scarlet is nothing like Kayla. Just the thought of my fiancée knots my stomach. It was a bad idea to bring her along. What the hell was I thinking? Her idea of an outdoor adventure is flying first class to Paris and staying at The Ritz or sailing on Sheldon's superyacht and getting high on coke. To be honest, I was glad she twisted her ankle and had to leave. I didn't miss her one fucking bit. Nor did my daughter. In fact, Maddie's aversion to Kayla may be greater than Kayla's to her. No matter how much I've tried, it's just not working. Seeing Scarlet around my daughter has made me have second thoughts. Realize that Kayla is all wrong. With her substance abuse, sailor mouth, and party-girl ways, she's unfit to be a mother. Why didn't I see these warning signs earlier? Was I too blinded by her beauty? Too eager for fame and fortune? Too desperate to find a new woman to mother my daughter?

Twisting my lips, I ponder—what the hell am I going to do? With my upcoming one-man show and engagement to Kayla the buzz of the art world, things are so damn



complicated. Should I break up with her? Destroy my career? There's no doubt in my mind that if I leave her, she will do everything in her power to bring me down. With all her faults, Kayla is a force to be reckoned with. She gets what she wants when she wants it. If she wants to see me fail, it will happen. Everything I've struggled for will— Snap! —disappear.

I glance again at my sleeping beauty in the back seat through the rearview mirror and can't help smiling. Success has given me financial security and artistic validity, but it hasn't given me joy. J-O-Y, that simple three letter word... something my daughter gives me daily in big doses. Something I experienced today with Scarlet. My emotions spinning like a top, my vision shifts once more to my pensive companion, her eyes still glued to the window. What is she thinking about? Our day? My Maddie? Maybe me? I wonder if she feels all the things I feel. Is she as attracted to me as much as I am to her? Her aloofness offers no insight. It's time to break the silence between us.

“Hey, Scarlet, are you okay?”

With a slow turn of her head, she meets my gaze. Her expression borders on forlorn. Her eyes are watery, as if she's been crying.

Before she can utter a word, my cell phone chirps my Bluetooth. Shit! I should have muted the damn thing. It beeps again and my chest tightens like a fist as I glance at the caller ID. Crap. Kayla. I attempt to reject the call, but accidentally answer it instead.

“Kayla, what's up?” My tone is curt. From the corner of my eye, I see Scarlet tense up.

“Where the hell are you?” yells the voice on the other end.

Thank God, Maddie is still out like a light. Not wanting to wake her up, I fumble for my earbuds and put them on, thinking how I need to have a come-to-Jesus meeting with my fiancée about her crass language. Maybe, it'll segue into a breakup.

“We’re driving back,” I reply. “We should be in LA in about an hour if we don’t hit traffic. Where are you?”

“I’m still in the emergency room.”

“Is everything okay?”

“No!”

Despite myself, an alarm button sounds in my head. “What’s wrong?”

“I pulled some ligaments.”

A sprinkle of relief. It could have been a hell of a lot worse—like some kind of head injury.

“I’m glad it’s only that.”

Her voice rises with fury. “What!? Are you kidding me? I have to wear this absolutely hideous black boot and I may need crutches!”

My empathy level is low. Make that zilch.

“I need you to pick me up and take me home.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

She shrieks. “What do you mean by... I. Don’t. Know. If. I. Can?”

Despite her outburst, I maintain my cool. “It’s Maddie’s birthday. I have a little party planned for her tonight.” The words “that you’re invited to” never leave my mouth.

“Scrap the stupid party! She’ll have another birthday! I need you to keep my foot elevated and iced!”

There’s no reasoning with this woman. I blow out a huff of air, not caring if she can hear it.

“Phineas, are you there?” Her voice grows louder and angrier. “Answer me for God’s sake!”

Several beats of silence prevail while Scarlet slips out a small black spiral notebook from her backpack along with a pen. It reminds me of the notebooks my late wife Skye always carried with her. She opens the pad and scribbles something down. Then, tears out the page and hands it to me.

Pinning it against the steering wheel, I read it.

Tell her to go screw herself .

I meet Scarlet’s twinkling eyes. Mine smile with hers.

Next line: Then tell her to take an Uber. She’ll live.

As I read it, Kayla’s seething voice again pierces my ears.

“Phineas, what the hell is going on? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, but barely,” I lie. “You’re breaking up. The traffic’s insane so you should probably Uber home.”

“What the—” she yells.

I cut her off. “Sorry Kayla, I can’t hear you. I’ll call you later.” And with that I end the call, promising myself I won’t pick up if she calls again, which is a given.

And sure enough she does.

“Finn, are you going to answer your phone?” asks Scarlet.

“No, I’m going to turn it off,” I reply to the bold, sensuous woman next to me. As I press the off button, a groggy little voice from the back seat slips into my ears.

“Daddy, are we almost home?”

“Soon, baby girl.”

Thirty minutes later, we reach LA and sail through Santa Monica. As we approach Malibu, the 10 Freeway becomes the Pacific Coast Highway. The sun, a red ball of fire, is beginning its descent into the ocean. The familiar landscape excites Maddie.

“Hooray! We’re almost home!”

“Are you ready for your birthday party?”

“Yup! Scarlet, are we still going to bake an apple pie and put candles into it?”

“Of course!”

My heart is melting. All this sweetness and love.

### CHAPTER 47

Skye

Rosita, back at the house to celebrate Maddie's birthday, gathers plates and utensils from the kitchen cabinets as well as a quart of vanilla ice cream from the freezer while I open the oven door to check on the apple pie I made with Maddie.

"Gracias , Rosita." I thank her.

"De nada . You are a very good woman for Se?or Jackson and Maddie. Se?orita Phillips —she makes a face of disgust— muy mala! Perra!"

I silently laugh. She just called Kayla a bitch! Putting everything on a tray, she heads to the great room for the final leg of Maddie's birthday celebration. Warm apple pie with ice cream and the opening of presents.

I poke my head inside the oven. Mmm . The pie looks perfect. The crust high and golden, glistening with a fairy-dust layer of sugar. With a pair of potholders, I slide it out and carefully set it on the counter next to the box of candles.

I turn off the oven and admire our creation. It was so fun making the pie with Maddie. We followed a recipe we found online. The perfect mother-daughter activity.

This whole day has been perfect—well, almost. Kayla was the only blemish, but thankfully fate took care of her. I had an amazing time with both my daughter and husband. Dreamily, I relive our picnic. Finn opened his heart to me. And when he

held me in his arms, dancing barefoot on the grass, I don't think I'd ever felt closer to him in my entire life. I sense tension between him and Kayla, but I've got to keep my optimism guarded because there's a lot at stake. My past. His future. I haven't contemplated my next move and the cunning witch can easily outsmart me. I'm just going to listen to Sister Marie. Be myself. And hope that Finn will fall in love with me again.

With a sigh of longing, I open the box of multicolor candles and slip out a pink one. Holding it between my fingers, I suddenly realize that this is the first birthday I'm sharing with my little girl. While a wave of sadness sweeps over me thinking about all the others I've missed, I brighten at the thought of sharing this one with her and Finn. For me it's a milestone. And in my heart of hearts, I hope there will be many more.

Heading to the great room, the pie lit up with six flickering candles (one for good luck), I begin to sing "Happy Birthday." Rosita and Finn join in, my husband harmonizing with his sexy voice that rivals Springsteen's. Maddie's face lights up with a smile as bright as the sun.

"Happy Birthday, sweetie." I set the pie on the coffee table. "Now, you've got to make a wish and blow out the candles."

Her sparkling eyes dart from me to Finn and then back to me, taking on a glint of mischief. "Okie dokie, I've got one." Moving closer to the pie, she inhales a deep breath and then exhales, managing to blow out all the candles in a single sweep.

Cheers and claps all around.

While I slice a piece of pie for each of us with Rosita doling out scoops of the ice cream, Maddie's eyes flit to the chair where her presents are stacked.

“Can I open my presents now, Daddy?”

Finn smiles. “Be my guest, sunshine.”

Jumping up from the couch, she waltzes over to the chair and selects a small box wrapped in colorful striped paper.

“Es el mío, mi chiquita!” Rosita smiles brightly. The love she has for my little girl warms my heart.

Excitedly, Maddie opens the present. It’s a charming music box. Maddie winds it up—the “Mexican Hat Dance” plays as multi-ethnic children in sombreros circle around.

“Me gusta mucho, Rosita!” She runs over to hug the beaming woman. “Gracias!”

Grabbing Kanga, she prances back to the chair and goes for one of mine. My stomach flutters. I hope she likes it. My eyes fix on her as she opens the card attached to the small pink gift bag. On the front is a cute illustration of a kangaroo. She reads it aloud.

“Hoppy Birthday!” She flips it open and the kangaroo now with a joey in her pouch pops up. Giggling, Maddie continues reading. “My Sweetest Girl~ May all your dreams hop right into your lap! Happy Birthday! Love and kisses~Scarlet.”

How much I wanted to sign it “Mommy.” Maybe, next birthday I will. My gaze stays glued on her as she removes the tissue paper and reaches into the bag. Gasping, she stares at the tiny kangaroo in her hand.

“Oh my gosh! It’s Kanga’s baby, Joey. She’s back!” Breaking into a megawatt smile, she cuddles the adorable beany toy and then tucks it into Kanga’s pouch. It fits



perfectly.

I smile. “See, I told you Kangy would find her baby!”

Clutching her treasured stuffed animal with its newfound baby, Maddie runs over to me and gives me a big hug. “Oh, Scarlet!! Kangy is so happy! Me too! Thank you!”

My daughter’s glee makes my heart swell with joy. “I have another present for you.”

Her eyes bounce back to the chair. She gazes at the large box that’s wrapped with a whimsical Paris-themed paper I found online. “I thought that was from my daddy.”

“No,” says Finn. “I have something else for you.” He juts his strong chin. “Go open it, baby.”

Wasting no time, Maddie hurries back to the chair. She opens the card, which depicts her favorite storybook character Madeline holding a suitcase, and reads what’s on the inside. With a perfect French accent that makes my heart swell with love and pride.

“ Ma plus chère Madeline~

J’espère que tu vas porter ma surprise à Paris l’année prochaine avec ton papa et moi.

Mille bisous~ Scarlet”

“What does it say?” asks Finn, impressed by her ability to read and speak beautiful French.

“Daddy, it says: I hope you’ll wear my surprise next year in Paris with your daddy and me... A million kisses.”

An awed smile lights Finn's face as Maddie eagerly tears off the paper and opens the box. Unfolding the delicate layers of tissue paper, she beholds my surprise—a last minute Etsy purchase that I couldn't resist. Her eyes grow round as saucers and her jaw drops to the floor.

“Mon Dieu! It's an outfit just like the one Madeline wears in the books.” She holds up the royal blue coat and then the wide-brimmed yellow hat.

“Scarlet, can I put them on?”

“Of course, my sweet girl!” I watch as she shimmies into the coat and slips on the hat. Though the coat's a little big for my petite girl, she looks totally adorable in it. My Madeline.

“Come over here, sweetie. I'll button it for you.” With a cheek-splitting grin, she skips over to me and I help her with the buttons. Then, I tie the red bow that accents the white collar.

She looks up at Finn. “Daddy, do you like it?”

“I love it.” He shoots me a dazzling, dimpled smile that makes my heart melt. “C'mon, sunshine. You're dressed perfectly to go outside.”

“Outside?”

“Yes, that's where my present is.”

Exchanging a conspiratorial wink with Finn, Rosita offers to clean up.

Perplexed, Maddie and I follow Finn outdoors. He leads us down to the beach. And there it is shimmering in the moonlight. I gasp.

A magnificent white stallion that's been made up to look like a magical unicorn—complete with a sparkling pink mane and tail and a rainbow cone—just like the one I drew. Maddie must have shown him the picture. I don't know how my gorgeous husband pulled this off. He never ceases to amaze me. My heart is overflowing with emotion. And love.

My little girl is as blown away as I am. "Daddy, it's a unicorn!"

"Uh-huh. He's come for your special day. Tomorrow, he will return to his kingdom."

"Can I pet him?"

"Of course." Finn lifts her up and she gently strokes his neck.

"Daddy, he's so sweet and beautiful. Scarlet told me unicorns are magic!"

"They are. Come on, let's go for a ride." He sets her on the sequined blanket draping the horse's back and then takes the reign, slowly leading the noble creature along the beach with me by his side. He takes my hand in his, every cell in my body lighting up like the stars above us.

Together, we stroll along the black as night ocean to the lull of the white-crested waves softly ebbing and flowing beneath the celestial sky. The silver moon is full, smiling down upon us.

My eyes mist as the magic of this moment fills every atom of my being. Narnia . I never want this day to end.

I make a wish. Then a vow. I can't lose my husband and daughter again. Ever.

They are my unicorns.

### CHAPTER 48

Skye

The magic of last night carries over to the next day. While I don't see Finn, who's had an early start in his studio, Maddie and I have a wonderful school session. Moving on to a new science unit about the solar system, we've delved into some Greek mythology and constellations. She's obsessed with Pegasus, the winged white horse.

Leaving Maddie with Rosita for her afternoon snack, I get a text from Finn.

Please come to my studio. Need your help. Also want a Maddie progress report.

Surprised, I immediately reply: On my way.

My heart pitter-patters. Despite living here for almost a month, this is the first time I'll set foot in his studio. Something I've so wanted to do. And the timing to give him an update on Maddie's progress is perfect.

Finn's studio is located at the far edge of the property overlooking the ocean. Architecturally magnificent, the two-story structure reminds me of a conservatory. With the outpour of natural light from its high vaulted ceilings, it feels almost spiritual. As if I've just stepped into a crystal cathedral.

Large abstract paintings are stacked against the walls. A few of which I remember Finn painting before my accident, some already boxed up for his show. My eyes

circle the vast space. There are shelves filled with vats of paint, various sized brushes, and other supplies... drafting tables with scattered reference books... and a home gym—with a bench press, weights, and other workout equipment, including a trapeze. It's a study in beautiful chaos.

I spot Finn in the southwest corner standing before a tall canvas, a drop cloth covering both the painting and easel it's propped against. His back to me, he doesn't see me. For a few minutes, I silently observe him as he mixes paints on the portable stand next to him and admire his breathtaking virility. He's dressed in low-hung sweats, a black tee, and barefooted.

"Hi," I finally say.

He spins around and smiles. "Scarlet! Thanks for coming."

"Your studio is amazing." Indeed, it's a far cry from the dark, depressing warehouse in decrepit Vernon.

"Thanks. It's one of the things that sold me on this property. The light, the size, the ocean view. The property belonged to some fitness guru who became a monk. This is where he worked out and meditated. It was perfect for me. It has a great sound system and he even left me some of his workout equipment, which I use daily."

My eyes dart again to the workout area, and in my mind's eye, I can picture Finn with his rippled muscles lifting weights, his tattooed biceps bulging. I try to banish the image of his sculpted body glistening with a coat of sweat, but it's impossible.

"You should work out with me sometime. I'll teach you how to use the trapeze."

Imagining swinging on it with me on his lap, I falter for a response. "Sure. Maybe some time when I'm wearing workout clothes."

His eyes roam down my jean-clad body and then he flashes a dazzling smile. “I’ll look forward to that.”

Heating, I ask him why he needs my help.

“Come here, Scarlet.” He motions for me to walk over to him with his long, deft fingers. My heart thudding, I head his way. My eyes never leave him as he flips around and yanks off the drop cloth covering the mysterious canvas, letting it fall to the floor. Then, they practically pop out of their sockets as my heart almost stops. Oh. My. God.

He turns again to face me. “Scarlet, this is my masterpiece. It’s called Girl with the Flower Tattoo . I started it years ago—I was going to give it to my late wife on her next birthday—but I stopped working on it after she died. Only recently have I been able to go back to it.”

“It’s b-beautiful,” I stammer, trying impossibly hard to control my emotions and not let him see through them. It’s a life-size nude portrait of me—of how I used to look—except instead of chin-length brown hair, the woman, who’s looking over her shoulder, now has lustrous auburn hair that cascades over her luminescent flesh and stops at her waist. Just above her right buttock—the one with the flower tattoo. It’s exactly like the one on my ass. And his.

“Scarlet, I can’t seem to get the contours of her shoulders or backside right. Do you think you could model for me? Your body shape is a lot like hers.”

My heart races. The hairs on my body stand on end. “You mean, get naked for you?”  
Reveal who I really am?

He pauses reflectively, his eyes boring into mine. I swear he’s mentally undressing me. Or seeing through my clothes. And I’m doing the same with him. Temptation

gnaws at me, my body growing feverish with need and desire as I decide whether to placate him. Or run away as fast I can.

He senses my distress. “If it makes you more comfortable, you can keep your undergarments on. I won’t look while you undress. When your clothes are off, I want you to pose like the subject in the painting... over there.” He points to a spot not far from the easel.

I hesitate. What if he sees my tattoo? Or my scars. I anxiously bite down on my lip. “Is this painting going to be featured in your show?”

“I’m not sure. I’m thinking of holding on to it. Maybe, one day giving it to a museum.” He pauses again. “Scarlet, if you’re uncomfortable, I understand and we can just chat about Maddie’s progress for a few minutes.”

“No, Finn, I’ll do it.” With all my heart, I want to help this beautiful man—my husband, the devoted father of my child—achieve his dream of greatness. Moving to the location where he wants me, I face a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the Pacific, and with my back to him, I pull my top over my head, letting it drop to the floor. I’m not wearing a bra. Feeling Finn’s traitorous eyes on me, I kick off my Vans and slide down my jeans until I can step out of them. All that remains is a pair of skimpy lace panties that barely hide the tattoo. My body trembles. So much of me wants to yank down the bikinis. Reveal the tattoo to him. Finally end this masquerade.

Finn’s voice: “Good, Scarlet. Now look over your shoulder at me.”

My back still to him, I do as he asks and meet his penetrating gaze. The eyes of an artist. Expecting him to pick up a paintbrush, he instead lopes up to me.

“I need to fix something.” Gently, he pulls my ponytail out of the elastic, and as my

long hair falls down my back, he styles it so it's draping over one shoulder just like in the painting. His fingers graze my flesh and I shiver with desire. A desire so great it shakes me.

His eyes on fire, he steps back and studies me. "Scarlet, you're absolutely perfect."

To my relief, he hasn't noticed the scars scattered on the front side of my body. I twitch a nervous smile. Feel my bare breasts quiver. And watch him jog back to the canvas. Before starting to paint, he picks up a remote and music fills the space. The Boss. "Brilliant Disguise," an early Springsteen song that couldn't be more fitting. More unnerving. And I wonder, more deliberate.

"Relax, Scarlet." He selects a paintbrush, and dipping it into a can of pigment, he puts it to the canvas, his intense eyes on me. My gaze meets his and I feel even more naked and exposed than I already am. So connected to this man. So full of lust and love. Getting into a groove, he begins to sing along with his music idol, his gravelly voice every bit as good as the rock star's. With each brush stroke, his eyes still burning into mine as he belts out the refrain. In my mind, I sing back, desperation in each silent word:

Yes, it's me, baby. Look in my eyes. It's just a brilliant disguise.

I'm your wife . . . Skye.

The girl in your painting with the flower tattoo.

My heart is aching. Breaking. I want to scream out to him who I really am. I want him to take me in his arms, devour me with his lips, and make love to me. Anywhere. Everywhere. Against a wall. On a drafting table. On the floor. Just like we used to.

Suddenly, his phone rings. He turns down the volume of the music and pulls it out



from a pocket. He curses under his breath as he looks down at the caller ID. Putting the phone to his ear, his face tenses.

“Shit! I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He shoves the phone back into his pocket and flings the paintbrush on the stand without cleaning it.

“Scarlet, I’ve got to split.”

“Is everything okay?” My mind instantly jumps to Maddie’s well-being. My pulse spikes.

“I have an emergency. I’ve got to pick up Kayla and meet with the dickheads who printed the catalogue for the opening. They screwed it up with all the wrong images, and it’s supposed to be going out to five hundred people tomorrow. Maybe, we can work together later if I don’t get back too late.”

My heart plummets to my stomach; my face falls. I can’t mask my disappointment. “I understand. You should go.”

As he hastily tidies up, I throw on my clothes. As I pull my top over my head, I look down and gasp. My gold locket with the photo of Finn, Maddie, and me is missing! I frantically look all around me. It’s nowhere in sight. Despair sets in with the force of a wrecking ball. Maybe it fell off in the house. Or on my way here. Or maybe worse, on the beach last night! It’s been my lifeline to my family and my sanity—my lucky charm—and now it’s gone!

Panic grips me. I feel sick to my stomach. My heart racing, I dash out of the studio, hoping to retrace my steps.

“Scarlet! Wait! What’s the matter?”

Finn.

I don’t stop to answer him. My fate is at stake.

### CHAPTER 49

Finn

I arrive back home at close to midnight, exhausted. With a headache the size of Texas. The rest of this day has been a total nightmare.

It began mid-afternoon with Kayla's emergency phone call about the loser catalogue publisher she hired. I hurried to her condo, battling the LA traffic, only to find her not ready for our trip to Hawthorne. Forty fucking miles away.

"Sorry, darling, I'm in slow-mo with my crutches, thanks to your bright idea to go to that despicable apple dump with your imp and that wilderness girl."

Too bad I couldn't tell her forget the catalogue and then turn around. Go back home. Finish my painting. Spend time with Scarlet.

Then, I battled more traffic on both the 10 and San Diego Freeway, which included a big rig accident that brought everything to a standstill. Another two unbearable, agonizing hours. With Kayla chewing my ear off. My audacity. The nerve of me abandoning her yesterday. My incompetence. Like it's my fault the catalogue got screwed up. My clothing. Sweats are for peasants. My driving. As if I can make the traffic go away.

An ugly shouting match followed at the printer's with Kayla threatening to sue the small start-up company. I actually felt sorry for them. Just a bunch of young creative guys. And the screw up wasn't even their fault as it was Kayla who sent the wrong

images.

Once everything was resolved to her satisfaction, she insisted I take her out for dinner at the Chateau Marmont, her favorite hangout, to talk about “things.” I foolishly agreed thinking that she wanted to go over final details of my show. Wrong. All she wanted to talk about was our upcoming wedding and I didn’t want to talk about it at all. More angry words were exchanged. Had we not been at a public place surrounded by her high falutin friends, many of them coming to the opening, I would have broken up with her right then and there. I lost my opportunity, when in a tiff, she Ubered home.

On my drive back to Malibu, I put on some Springsteen. All I could think about was Scarlet, replaying in my head our afternoon together. Beautiful, sensuous Scarlet. There was a moment as I fixed her hair that I wanted to rip off those scanty panties, then splay her on my drafting table... paint her body... tease her with a brush... and possess every inch of her. All the erotic things I did to my late wife. The similarities between the two of them have messed with my sanity. Both my heart and my head. In retrospect, I should have ripped off that little piece of lace and confirmed what I thought I saw in that motel shower. Then, I thought it was just a coincidence. Maybe just a bruise. But now, I’m having other thoughts. Could it be possible? All just “A Brilliant Disguise?”

Rubbing my throbbing temples, I lumber into the kitchen and pour myself a Scotch. I guzzle it in one shot, the searing liquid quickly seeping into my veins and alleviating my tension. A warm, familiar voice sounds in my ears.

“Se?or Jackson.” Rosita. “You are home late.” Shuffling my way, she studies me. “Your eyes, very heavy.”

“I’m tired. Tired and stressed.”

“That muy mala mujer —she does that to you.”

Rosita has made it no secret that she despises Kayla, who treats her like a lowlife servant.

“You do not belong with her. Se?orita Scarlet, she eez a good woman!”

At the mention of Scarlet’s name, my spirits lift.

“Did she have dinner with you and Maddie?”

She shakes her head. “She was feeling sick. Went to bed early.”

A mixture of guilt and concern ripples through me. Maybe it’s all my fault she’s fallen ill. I fight the urge to check up on her. If she’s sleeping, I don’t want to awaken her. And if she’s up, God knows what I’ll do to her. I switch gears.

“It’s late, Rosita. What are you doing down here? You should be sleeping too.”

“I came for a glass of water for Maddie.”

“My daughter . . . she’s up?”

“Sí, se?or.”

I set my tumbler down. “You know what, Rosita? Why don’t you get some shut-eye, and I’ll bring Maddie some water.”

Five minutes later, I’m in my daughter’s room with a plastic sippy cup in my hand. Her nightlight is on. She bolts up when she sees me.

“Daddy! You’re back! Where did you go?”

“I had some business to take care of.” No mention of Kayla. “What are you doing up, baby?” I stride over to her bed, my spirits brightening at the sight of my bright-eyed child.

“I couldn’t sleep.” I hand her the cup of water and she takes several sips. “Thanks, Daddy!”

“I want you to go to sleep now. Tomorrow’s a school day.”

“Can I show you something first?”

Reluctantly, I say yes. Her eyes glistening with excitement, she dips her little hand inside her worn, fuzzy kangaroo’s pouch.

“Look what I found.” My jaw drops and my eyes flare with shock as they behold the object in her palm. A necklace.

“Where did you find that?” I gasp.

“In my classroom. Under my desk. Before I had dinner. I think it belongs to Scarlet.”

My mind is a whirling dervish. While I try to make sense of Maddie’s discovery, she snaps open the object hanging from the gold chain. A locket.

“Daddy, it has a picture of you, me, and Mommy. Just like the one on my nightstand.”

I stare at the photo, my heart and mind racing, thinking back to that fatal night. It was around Skye’s neck! I’m sure of it!

Frenzied, I refocus my attention on my daughter. She snaps the locket shut and then flips it over, showing off her reading skills. “And on the back it has the word “Forever.” She spells it out, then cocks her head. “Daddy, why would Scarlet have this locket with our picture in it?”

I have no words; I’m speechless. Rattled to the bone, I want to snatch it from her, but force myself to slip the heirloom out of her hand as gently as possible. Quickly, I tuck my daughter back into bed and kiss her goodnight. Hurrying out of her room, I hear my heart thud. My need for the truth pulses through my head like a freight train. In answer to her question, I’m going to find out.

Right this very second.

### CHAPTER 50

Skye

No matter how much I will it, I can't fall asleep. Tossing and turning, I feel feverish. The loss of my locket has undone me. Tormented, all I can think about is the afternoon I spent in Finn's studio. What kind of game was he playing with me? Showing me that portrait. Asking me to practically bare myself to him. Touching me. Staring at me. Taunting me. Playing that Springsteen song that begged me to reveal myself. Then, the phone call. Rubbing my chest where my locket should be, I start to obsess about Finn and Kayla. The two of them together. Getting married. My heart aches. This masquerade has gone on far too long. But it's probably too late to end it. Besides, why would he ever take me back? He thinks I cheated on him. Had an affair. Maybe I did. I still can't remember what led to my near-fatal accident. Any glimmer of the truth eludes me.

The melodic ebb and flow of the ocean drifts through the open window, the soothing sound on replay. It doesn't relax me. Why can't I remember? I search my mind, but it's too clouded with self-doubt and anguish. My head throbs with frustration that gives way to despair. Tears in my eyes, I at last succumb to the night.

My slumber is short-lived. Just after I doze off, a loud rap at the front door awakens me. The rapping is ruthless, growing louder and faster with each knock. Finn's voice accompanies the banging.

"Scarlet, open the door!" More pounding. "Goddammit! Open it!"



Shouting my name, he sounds frantic. Almost manic. I bolt up and jump out of bed. My heart gallops. Maybe something's wrong with Maddie! Another asthma attack though I've not heard any indications on my monitor. Was I too fast asleep? Too dead to the world? My chest squeezes with clawing dread.

Foregoing a bathrobe or slippers, I hurry to the front door in my nightshirt, clambering down the stairs, alarm and fear filling every atom of my being.

"Open up, Scarlet." The pounding grows louder, more desperate. "If you don't, I'll knock down the damn door."

Something's wrong. Very wrong! My fingers trembling, my heart clenching, I unlock the door and swing it open. His formidable body hovers over me, so close we're almost touching. His flexed arms stretch across the doorframe. His head bowed, he glares at me, who, barefooted, barely reaches his chin. Shaking, I look up and meet his gaze. A madness, like none other, flickers in his eyes. Narrowed and piercing, two cobalt arrows, I've never seen him like this before.

He clutches my shoulders. His grip is powerful, borderline painful. "Let me in!"

Before I can say a word or move away, he forces himself in, shoving me against a wall. The stucco scrapes my back. He leans in closer, holding me against it. His face is a palm's width away from mine, his mouth so close I can taste him. His breathing is heavy, thick with the scent of alcohol. His breath sears my cheeks, the heat of his body permeating every particle of my being.

"Finn, you're drunk," I spit out.

"I'm not drunk."

"What's wrong?" A chill runs through me. "Is everything okay with Maddie?"

“This has nothing to do with Maddie.” Pinching his lips, he breathes in and out of his nose. His nostrils flare. “On second thought, maybe everything.”

“Please tell me what’s going on. I don’t understand.”

Pinned against the wall, I have no choice but to hear him out. My pulse drums in my ears. My shoulders ache.

His eyes, darkening with rage, stay locked on me. Still caging me with his concrete body, he slips his hand into a pocket. My gaze follows him.

He pulls something out. Gold and shiny. Dangling it like bait, he holds it in front of me.

Oh my God! It’s my necklace with my lucky locket with the photo of the three of us. Taken just after Maddie was born.

“H-how did you get this?” My voice shakes.

His smoldering eyes laser into mine. “Maddie found it. Your question belongs to me.”

My throat constricts. My mouth goes dry. I can’t form words. Shock and fear have stolen my voice.

Finn’s jaw stiffens. “This belonged to my late wife.”

I swallow hard and finally, two little words form on my quivering lips.

“It’s mine.”

“What!?” he bites out, shoving the necklace back into his pocket. “How the hell did you get it?”

Shuddering silence. His eyes grow darker, his pupils dilating with each harsh breath. The wild expression on his face frightens me. My stomach twists and churns.

“Tell me, Scar-let. Who. Are. You?” Each word is a sharp shard of glass.

“Please,” I beg, tears lacing my voice. “I can’t tell you.”

“You can and you will!”

“I-I’m...” I can’t complete my thought. I can’t say my name. My voice is strangled. My heart pounds in my throat.

“Tell me.”

His voice rises decibels with fury. His hipbones still pinning me, his searing gaze fixed on me, he lifts one hand to my face and squeezes my jaw so hard I wince.

He squeezes harder, each word a bullet. “TELL. ME.”

I whimper again. My lips pucker. The pain so great, tears leak from my eyes. His grip so forceful, I can’t look away from him. His breathing grows more ragged. His gaze more Satanic.

“TELL ME,” he repeats, his voice raw against my neck. “Call me by your name or I’ll force the truth out of you.”

He leans in closer to me and I feel him pulsing against me. I want him in the worst possible way. The truth is painful. The ache so beautiful.

Then, before it snaps, he releases my jaw.

Remember me.

As my mouth relaxes, I utter one word.

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### CHAPTER 51

Finn

“S kye .”

Her name. She says it softly. Like a prayer. Tearful. Soulful. Beautiful.

“Skye...” A shocked pause. “Is it really you?”

Sobbing, she buries her head on my shoulder, her body heaving.

I hold her tightly. Not knowing my next words or move.

Tears falling in spades, she looks up and cradles my head. Strokes my hair.

“Yes, Finn, it’s me.”

As much as I want to believe her, a kernel of doubt unfurls in my gut.

“How can I be sure?”

There’s only one way.

On my next heated breath, she pivots and faces the wall.

Wordlessly, she lifts up her nightshirt.

There it is. On her right cheek. The flower tattoo that's identical to mine.

I fall to my knees and kiss it.

Then take her and make her mine once again.

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Seated cross-legged on the floor of the narrow entryway, we clutch each other after our earth-shattering sex as if the small area rug is a raft and we've found each other in a shipwreck. Yes, I suspected who Scarlet really was, but still nothing prepared me for the mind-blowing moment of truth. Myriad questions bombard my mind, my lips burning to ask them.

The answers begging, I slip my fingers under her chin and tilt up her head. Her deep-set eyes still glisten with tears.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," I start off, regretful of how rough I've been with her.

"You didn't. I'm the one who needs to apologize." Her lips quiver. "Finn, can you ever forgive me?"

I bristle. Forgive her for what? For disappearing for five years? For keeping up this charade? For cheating my daughter of a mother? For making me grieve? For putting our lives in danger? All of the above plus one more question that burns on my tongue as I remember that fateful night. And relive it.

"We need to talk." My entire body tenses at the possibility of hearing things I don't want to hear. The truth is a powerful weapon that can make you whole or tear you apart.

With a solemn expression, she nods.

A sea of secrets lies ahead. Steeling myself, I hope for the best.

### CHAPTER 52

Skye

His cerulean eyes bore into me, burning a hole in my soul. An opening to tell him the truth, to let the words flow. Yet, as much as I want to get my story off my chest, I can't get words to form on my lips. My throat is parched; my mouth is dry. My anxiety inhibits me. Where do I begin? How does one condense over four traumatic years into an engaging short story? For God's sake, I'm a journalist. I tell—okay, told—stories for a living, but I can't manage to communicate my own.

His gaze never strays from me. He circles my lips with a fingertip.

"It's okay," he says softly, before taking my cold hands in his. They warm me. He gives them a squeeze of encouragement. I swallow hard again, and finally courage vanquishes the constricting lump in my throat.

Taking a shaky breath, I cast my eyes down, then look up. "You know I had a terrible car accident."

"Yes. The police told me you went over Mulholland. But they lied to me and said you died."

"Finn, it's true. The paramedics resuscitated me. It must have been a mistake—a miscommunication." Hushed and stunned, he lets me continue. "Every bone in my body was shattered and every organ damaged almost beyond repair. Parts of my flesh were charred, others ripped open. I was in a coma for over a week, and then I went



into cardiac arrest.”

“Jesus,” my husband murmurs as the haunting sound of the flatline hums in my head. I shudder.

“My love, I know what it’s like to experience death. I did. I saw the white light they all talk about. But somehow, I willed myself to live. In the light, I saw you and my baby girl, and I knew it couldn’t be my time. I had too much to live for.”

A faint smile flickers on Finn’s face. It’s all I need to persevere.

“I spent almost a year in a hospital convalescing, drifting in and out of consciousness, often hallucinating so I’m told. Undergoing one operation after another to fix my plethora of life-threatening injuries. From skin grafts and bone grafts to metal plates and pins. I was heavily sedated and don’t have a clear recollection of those endless months.”

Finn’s unblinking eyes search mine. “But why didn’t anyone tell me you were alive?”

“Initially, I didn’t understand why. In my moments of lucidity, I cried out for you. Pleaded to see you and Maddie. But my desperate pleas were only met by more sedatives to calm me down. Dull all my senses. And make me numb.”

“That doesn’t explain shit,” interrupts Finn, a surge of anger in his voice before it softens. “I would have been there for you. Never left your side.”

“I know, baby, I know.” I press my forehead against his. We stay like this for several loving moments until I pull away and go on.

“Every minute I was awake and conscious, I wanted to bolt out of the hospital. Escape. Find a way home to be with you and Maddie. But it was impossible. I was

bed-bound, completely debilitated and crippled by my egregious injuries. Every limb in a cast. My jaw and nose broken, my cheekbones shattered, my skull fractured, my teeth cracked. Fed intravenously. A breathing tube up my nose. My mangled face swathed in bandages.”

Finn stares at me with intensity, the artist in him trying to picture my unfathomable state. If only I could blur the horrific memories. Paint over them. Erase them forever.

“But slowly, day by day, I got better. Grew stronger. And recovered enough to talk to the police, who wanted to know the events of that fateful night.”

“Detective Billings?” asks Finn.

I nod. “How did you know?”

“After you ‘died,’ he came by to talk to me.” He lets go of me to make air quotes, and then cups his hands on my shoulders. “What did you tell him?”

My eyes lower, my voice falters. “Nothing.”

“Look at me, Skye.” Finn’s voice is soft but commanding.

Slowly, I lift my head and meet his questioning eyes. His thick brows are drawn together in almost a straight line.

“What do you mean... nothing?” He punctuates my last word.

Tears again form behind my eyes. Though I hesitate, his unyielding gaze extrapolates the truth out of me. Forces me to respond.

“I had . . . have no recollection.”

Finn arches his brows, his eyes widening. “What?”

“My doctors told me because of my head injury, I was suffering from PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

A stunned Finn stays silent.

“Retrograde amnesia. I don’t know how the accident occurred. I’ve blanked it out. As well as the events leading up to it.”

“You seriously can’t remember anything?”

I shake my head. “No. Not a thing.”

While Finn ingests my words, I caress his cheek. “Maybe you can help me remember.”

He inhales a deep breath. On the exhale, with his penchant for details, my artist husband starts to tell me everything about that week. That day. That night.

I listen intently, with few interruptions. Filled with remorse, my heart sinks to my stomach while guilt ascends like a high-speed elevator.

It was one of the best days of Finn’s life. A turning point. He’d, at last, gotten an agent who appreciated his talent. Yes, Kayla, but nonetheless, someone who could turn his life around. Ecstatic, he wanted to celebrate with me. Especially since it was also coincidentally my birthday. He made reservations at our favorite restaurant. Even bought me something special to wear. A sexy red dress. But his plans went south... with our then nanny quitting on us and me having other plans. To break a major story.

“Did I tell you anything about the story?” I ask, hoping for a breakthrough.

“Nothing except that it was personal. Then you left in a hurry.”

My eyes blink several times, trying to remember. The futile attempt makes my head pound.

“What was I wearing?”

“You were all dolled up. In a tight little black dress I’d never seen before and stilettos. Your hair and makeup done to the nines.”

I remember him telling me this when we picnicked in Oak Glen. So not like me even if I was going to go to some kind of awards banquet or black tie event. My taste has always been and still is conservative.

My gaze stays on him. He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Skye . . .”

The unsettling tone of his voice unnerves me. My stomach knots and my tenor grows tentative. “Yes?”

“There’s one thing I didn’t mention that day at the apple farm.”

A short pause, one that feels like an eternity.

“You weren’t wearing your wedding band.”

What!? I never took it off. Even to wash my hands. My initial shock gives way to a curl of uncertainty. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Only your locket” He pauses again, his lips pinching. “Skye, I need to ask you something.”

Dread rising inside me, I silently nod.

“Were you having an affair?”

His hot, pointed words pierce me. My mind burning, I rub my forehead like I’m trying to put out a fire. I feverishly search for the truth, but for the life of me, I can’t remember that night. Or anything leading up to it. I have only one other place to search for an answer. My heart. Knowing the truth lies within in it, I clutch Finn’s waiting face.

“Finn, I’ve only loved you. There’s never been another man in my life. Not ever!” My voice is thick with tears. “Please, believe me.”

My watering eyes stay on his contemplative face as a wave of sorrow and remorse sweeps over me.

“I’ve caused you so much pain. Leaving you bereft... with the burden of bringing up our little girl all alone... thinking I was untrue to you.”

“Raising Maddie has never been a burden. It’s been the only joy I’ve had in my life.”

Another sharp pang of sadness. “I wish I could turn back the hands of time. Been there with you to have watched our little girl grow up. Together.”

Finn’s brows furrow. “I still don’t understand why you stayed away for almost five years.”

“Years of reconstructive surgery and intensive therapy. My pelvis crushed, I had to

learn how to walk again. My windpipe damaged, to talk again. Every day, I worked for hours with physical therapists, speech pathologists, and psychiatrists. Once I was stable, I was told by Detective Billings that someone attempted to murder me. That this person was still out there, and because I was a well-known television personality, this person would likely come after me and be a threat to you and Maddie.”

Finn’s jaw ticks. “Did he ask if you suspected me?”

My heart stutters. “Y-yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That it was impossible. That you loved me unconditionally with all you had... I mean, have.”

Silence. Finn digests my words, a crease forming between his brows. Hoping he believes me, I continue.

“Because of the extreme damage to my face, I underwent reconstructive surgery. Countless operations. On account of our lives being in jeopardy, I agreed to let the surgeons change my appearance... give me new features... make me unrecognizable. Then, Detective Billings worked with the Witness Protection Program to give me a brand new identity. A new name and a new career as a tutor. I was told to stay far away from you and Maddie. It was too dangerous for all of us. Then somehow, by fate, I ended up here.”

“What’s meant to be will always find a way.” The expression on his face softens. Any trace of venom in his voice evaporates and is replaced by tenderness. “We were destined to be together.”

Without warning, I burst into sobs and splutter, “Finn, I’m so, so sorry. Can you ever

forgive me?"

"My love, there's nothing to forgive." He brushes away my tears with his thumbs. "You've suffered so much. What matters is that we've found each other. Tonight, you're mine again."

Quieting, I watch him slip his hand into a pocket and pull out the necklace. The locket. "I never stopped loving you, Skye. I always believed our love was forever."

Overcome with emotion, I let him put the locket back on my neck. Where it belongs. Taking my hand, he puts it to his heart. "This belongs to you, too, my one and only."

Wrapping his strong arms around me, my hand still on his chest, he draws me in closer. Our bodies touch. A breath apart, the greatest distance between us is a kiss. He seals the space by tenderly cupping my face and crushing his warm lips on my mine. The kiss is hot, passionate, and possessive. I melt into it. I've never been kissed with such heat, such desire, such love.

When he finally pulls away, I'm breathless. "What are we going to do?"

His face darkens, his eyes narrow. "We're going to find the sick fuck who did this to you... to us... and when we do, his soul is going to rot in hell."

### CHAPTER 53

Skye

Moonlight beams into Finn's bedroom as scented candles flicker all around us. Bathed in their glow, I'm sprawled naked on the bed we used to share, every part of me exposed, including the scars I've tried to hide. The painful reminders of that night.

"I have a lot of scars," I murmur, worried that my marred body will turn him off.

He hushes me. "I loved you without your scars and I love you with them," he whispers, a long finger caressing one of my major scars, left behind from one of the many surgeries I had to repair my right femur.

I've always hated them even though Sister Marie told me to embrace them. "Scars," she said, "show that you survived."

My magnificent husband, lover, soul mate, and the father of my child tenderly kisses one of my many imperfections. "Your scars make you more beautiful to me. More special. I want to own them... reclaim every inch of your body."

He makes love to me yet again. This time so tender. So in the moment. Taking his time. Each stroke deliberate and precise like the skilled artist he is. As if my body is his temple, and he's worshipping me. I moan with pure bliss, never feeling more cherished or beautiful in my entire life.



We come to together, and a sad thought cuts through the ecstasy. Because of my internal injuries, I can never have another child. Unshed tears well up behind my shuttered eyes.

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We don't go to sleep. At least not right away.

"Finn, did you ever suspect who I really was?"

"There were similarities. The way you looked at me... your eyes... that first kiss... the way you danced with me and followed my lead. Plus, how you and Maddie took to each other. There were other little things, but I ignored them, thinking it was impossible."

"That morning at the motel, did you see my tattoo when I was in the shower?"

"To be honest, I saw something. But in the steamy frosted-glass stall, it looked more like a bruise."

"You had a lot of nerve going into the bathroom while I was naked in the shower."

He chortles. "Hey, I needed my clothes."

I laugh back. "I needed you."

A saucy smile crosses his lips. Tenderly, he brushes a fingertip over the one-inch scar that slashes my eyebrow.

"Another one of your scars?"

“Yes. It used to be a lot worse. It still bothers me. An ugly reminder.”

“I think it gives you character.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m going to add it to your portrait.”

His words move me. How much I love him!

“Did you deliberately play Springsteen’s “Brilliant Disguise” when you painted me this afternoon?”

“No, it was just a coincidence.”

A beautiful coincidence . A beautiful surprise.

“Then, when Maddie showed me the locket, everything changed in an instant. I went crazy. I had to know.”

Leave it to our daughter to unite us. To end the charade.

“Oh, Finn, I’ve missed you so much. Never stopped thinking about you.”

Unconsciously, he plays with my locket.

“Baby, I never stopped thinking about you either. Remembering you.” He slides the gold heart close to my own. “How could I? Every time I looked at Maddie I saw you.”

I weigh the intensity of his words and an alarming reality hits me. “Finn, what are we

going to do?”

“About what?”

“About us? About Maddie?” About her. Kayla’s name stays stuck in my throat.

A shaky breath follows as I hear Finn inhale and exhale, feeling the rise and fall of his chest beneath me. “I don’t know yet. It’s complicated.”

Complicated ...that’s an understatement. Our situation is like a soap opera. So over-the-top crazy in every way. The kind of story some whacked out romance or thriller writer would come up with.

In addition to Kayla, there’s a killer out there. Someone after my life.

When I wake up in the morning, Finn is gone.

### CHAPTER 54

Finn

When I woke up at dawn and saw her, I knew what I had to do. Sprawled on the bed, her hair fanned out on a pillow, her face so peaceful with her full lips parted, she was a thing of beauty, a work of art. Even with her canvas of scars more visible in the early morning light. This woman who I made love to all night long, whose body I spooned until sunlight snuck through a window. This exquisite miracle. The mother of my child. The only woman who's shared my bed. My wife. My beauty. My Skye.

I have everything to risk; everything to gain.

Quietly slipping out of the bed, I pull the thick duvet over her. She stirs, lifting an arm over her head and curling a smile on her face. I smile back at her, bending to lightly kiss her forehead. Her eyes closed, she moans a happy moan. Not wanting to make any noise opening and closing drawers, I quickly gather the clothes I wore last night. My sweats and T-shirt strewn on the floor. The clothes I couldn't get off fast enough. I get dressed quickly and holding my sneakers in my hands, I tiptoe out of the room.

Anxiety builds as I trek down the stairs, making my way to the kitchen. Hastily, I make some coffee using my Keurig. Once it's done, I take a few fortifying sips of the piping hot black brew. I search my mind. What the hell am I going to tell her? My mind draws a blank. The coffee no help, I toss the remainder of the dark liquid down the drain and slam the mug on the counter. No more procrastinating.

There's one thing I've got to do before I leave. My pulse revving in my ears, I hurry to the great room and make a beeline for the very early portrait I did of Skye right after we got married and moved to LA. It was my wedding present to her. Carefully, I remove it from the wall and set it down. Behind it is a small built-in safe. Punching in the combination—12-22-06—the date we got married, I watch as the steel door springs open. Reaching inside, I anxiously fish for what I'm looking for. Under the deed to the house, I find it. A small red velvet pouch. Removing it from the safe, I give it a little shake. The jingle inside is music to my ears. Thinking about my plan brings a smile to my face. Tightening the drawstring to make sure the contents are secure and don't fall out, I slip the bag into a pocket and close the safe.

Two minutes later, I'm out the door. And behind the wheel.

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I glance at the clock on my dashboard. Exactly seven. It's Saturday and minus the weekday rush hour traffic, I've gotten to my destination in less than an hour. I swerve my Land Rover into the crescent-shaped driveway of her luxury hi-rise condo building. Sierra Towers. The venerable, impossible-to-get-into home to movie stars, moguls, and other assorted A-listers. Close to trendy Sunset Plaza, the Chateau Marmont, and many prestigious art galleries, including Jaime Zander's. It makes sense Kayla would choose to live here. Especially since Daddy had a spare unit. I throw the SUV into park, crank the door open, and jump out. A smiling doorman, who works the morning shift, greets me. Harry.

“Mr. Jackson. We weren't expecting you. Especially so early.”

“It's a spur of the moment visit. Is Kayla here?”

“I believe so. Would you like me to notify her that you're here?”

“Harry, let’s keep it a surprise.” Reaching into my pocket, I slip him a twenty-dollar bill.

With a wink, he gladly accepts it, shoving it into a pocket of his prim gray uniform. “I’ll let the concierge know you’re cleared.”

“Thanks,” I say as I lope to the entrance of the building. “By the way, do me a favor, Harry. Keep my car here. I won’t be long.”

At least I hope. With a smile, he swings open a glass door, and I dash inside. The lobby’s a blur as I jog through it. There’s only one thing on my mind.

Thank God, the elevator comes quickly. The doors ding open. To my relief, there’s no one inside it or waiting to share it. Stepping into the pristine carriage, I jab the button marked PH. Kayla’s condo is a penthouse unit, thirty-two floors up with spectacular views of the city. The doors close smoothly. My heart thuds as the elevator ascends swiftly. It doesn’t make any stops.

When the elevator reaches the top floor and dings open, I charge out, marching straight to Kayla’s unit. There are only two units on the floor. One to the right, one to the left. Kayla’s is the latter.

I stare for a brief moment at the sterile white door, collecting my thoughts. Stupid me should have written down a speech. Rehearsed it. Then, memorized it. But once again, so not like me. I couldn’t even prepare a speech for my beloved wife’s funeral. I’m going to have to wing it.

I ring the bell. No answer. I ring again. Once more, no answer. My pulse spikes with frustration. I ring yet again, this time holding the buzzer down. It rings in my ears like a bee about to sting. Bzzzzzz!

Nada.

Then, just as I'm about to give up, I hear the hiss of a chain followed by the double click of a lock. The door swings open.

Kayla, holding a crutch and dressed in a sheer white negligee, faces me. Leaving little to the imagination, the short nightgown grazes her long, toned legs, one of which sports a black boot cast. Her cropped platinum bob is a bedroom-made bird's nest. To no avail, she tries to fix it, raking her free hand through her scalp like a plow. She gives up.

"Phineas, what the hell are you doing here?" she gasps. "I thought you were the Grub Hub delivery guy."

"Let. Me. In." I punch each short word with authority.

She glares at me. "What do you want?"

"We need to talk." I fire the words at her.

She chews her lower lip, her expression atypically anxious. Then, another voice drifts into my ears.

"Hey, darlin.' Breakfast is here?"

A velvety drawl. I recognize it immediately. Kayla's cheeks flare as I look over her shoulder.

A tall, lean, fit man, wearing just a stark white towel wrapped around his hips treads toward us. His thick silver hair is slicked back as if he's just stepped out of a shower.

Our eyes clash as he stops dead in his tracks. If either of us took another step, it would be a fatal head-on collision.

Looking at me coyly, Kayla fidgets with her sparkling engagement ring. “Darling, I can explain.”

“Explain what!?”

I answer my own question. “Explain him !” I stab the pronoun at her.

“Oh, you mean Jim?” The nonchalant tone of her voice makes my blood curdle. I can feel my body heating as I hold her hot in my gaze.

“Are you screwing him?” Silence. “Answer me, Kayla!”

Composing herself with a fling of her head, Kayla bats her thick eyelashes, then plasters a smug, confident smile on her face.

“Darling, please, it’s just business. Jim is a new client. He’s even interested in acquiring one of your works to expand his collection.”

“Are you fricking kidding me? Are you on drugs?” I bark. “Maybe the bastard’s got other interests.” Blow and blowjobs.

The silent observer swaggers up to us and stands behind Kayla. Barefoot, he’s about my height. Meeting me eye to eye, he snarls. “Did you just call me a bastard?”

“I should have called you one years ago.”

He scoffs at me. “What the hell do you mean?”



“For screwing my wife over. Skye deserved to have her own show.”

Hartley snickers. “She was too nosy for her own good.”

“So obnoxious,” singsongs Kayla.

“You would know.” I spit out the words, my teeth clenched as tightly as my fists. My nails bite into my palms as my eyes stay gridlocked with the prick.

“So now, you screw my fiancée.”

Cupping his hands on her shoulders, he shrugs dismissively as if he has my permission. You know what? He does. Suddenly, I remember, through my shock and anger, I came here to break up with Kayla. I mentally grin like a Cheshire cat. He’s made it so goddamn easy for me.

“Guess what, bastard. You can fuck her as much as you want.”

Overtaken by surprise, Kayla’s eyes widen again. “What are you saying, Phineas?”

“Read. My. Lips. It’s over.”

“Over?” She repeats the word like a toddler learning it for the first time. Ha! Maybe I should spell it for her.

“O-V-E-R.”

Do tears leak from her eyes? Hell no. Not a single one. Instead, they narrow into two sharp jade blades that can cut through anything. But me.

“Are you out of your mind?” she shrieks.

“No.” Pause. “I’m out of here. ” For a brief second, I glance down at the ring I gave her. The three-carat diamond twinkles like it’s winking at me. My eyes return to hers. “Keep your damn ring. I don’t want it back.”

“Good,” she bites back as I pivot on my heel and lunge toward the elevator. I punch the down button in victory, the word “Yes!” loud on my breath. I’m done with Kayla. I can’t wait to get back home and gather Skye in my arms. And that’s just for starters. Impatiently, I tap my foot. Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Goddamn elevator. Slower than torture. I jab the button again, feeling Kayla’s eyes on my back.

“What about our contract?” Her voice is shrill. “Don’t forget, I represent you till the end of the year.”

Shit. I forgot about that contract.

“If you break it, I’m going to sue your ass for all you have.”

“I’ll call you,” I say calmly though my muscles clench at the thought of being stuck with her. Even professionally.

“And you better not screw up the Zander show. There’s too much riding on it. Including your career.”

The door to her condo slams shut with a bang as the elevator glides open with a ding. A harmony of sorts. I step inside it and the doors slide closed. As the elevator descends, I blow out a breath.

Mission accomplished. Sinking a hand into my pocket, I clutch the soft velvet pouch, rubbing the hard contents between my fingers.

A euphoric lightness of being soars inside me. I'm a free man. It's time to officially reclaim my wife.

### CHAPTER 55

Skye

Nine a.m. I trudge to the kitchen to make myself some coffee, discarding the stale coffee pod left in the Keurig. An empty mug sits beside it. The Boss. The words printed on it in red. His mug. Where is he? Why did he leave me?

Last night was one of the most intense and unforgettable nights of my life. One of soul-blazing confessions and passionate lovemaking. Rediscovery and reconnection. Our bodies and hearts reunited after close to five long, painful years apart.

Then, I woke up this morning alone. Finn gone. Nowhere to be found. Bereft, I checked the entire house, my bungalow, and his studio. There wasn't even a note.

The light of my life—Maddie—is still sleeping. Saturday, Rosita has the day off. Too wound up to heat up some milk, I sip the strong black brew, hoping for some clarity. It's complicated. It all comes back to that. My stomach twists. Insecurity kicks in. Gloom looms over me. Did he go back to her?

I weigh my options. If Finn marries Kayla, I don't think I can stay here. After last night, the pain would be too great. Unbearable. But the thought of never seeing him again—and my beloved daughter—is equally unbearable. In fact, unfathomable. I feel like I'm standing on a fault line, the earth about to cave in. My body quakes; my hands shake. As I lift my coffee mug to my lips, I lose my grip and it tumbles to the terracotta floor. Shattering. At least a dozen jagged ceramic pieces swim in the pool of dark liquid surrounding my feet. Grabbing a wad of paper towels from the nearby

dispenser, I squat down to clean up the mess. Still shaking, I blot up the coffee and gather the shards. Tears blur my vision. Suddenly, a sharp pain rips through my finger. I yelp. A river of blood starts pouring down my digit, forming crimson tributaries on my palm. Shit. I've cut myself badly. I hold the soaked towel to my wound and as a fire engine-red stain permeates the paper, I begin to sob uncontrollably. Fraught with emotion, I stare down at the floor, my hot ugly tears coming down like raindrops. I'm sobbing so loudly I don't even hear footsteps.

"Skye, what's the matter? What happened?"

Without brushing away my torrent of tears, I look over my shoulder.

Finn. Worry etched deep on his beautiful face. He jogs over to me and squats down beside me, eyeing the bloodstained paper towel wrapped around my finger.

"I cut myself," I splutter.

"Let me see." His voice as tender as his touch, he takes hold of my trembling hand. I watch as he removes the towel. Blood gushes from the deep gash.

"Sheesh. You really did a number." On my next shaky breath, he slips his T-shirt over his head and presses it against my finger.

"Hold this. Don't move. I'll be right back."

"But what about the mess?" Doing as he asks, I cast my eyes down at the scattered mug fragments and coffee puddle saturating the floor.

"It can wait." Leaping up, he hurries to one of the kitchen cabinets. My eyes stay on him as he jogs back with a box of Band-Aids and a tube of ointment in his hands. Squatting back down, he sets the bandages on the floor and then unscrews the cap of

the ointment. Neosporin. Holding it in his hand, he removes his shirt from my finger. There's a huge splotch of blood on the fabric.

"I ruined your T-shirt." I sniffle, thinking back to our first encounter at Christie's when I ruined his scarf with my bloody mess of a hand. It was then when I fell in love with him. And knew that this man would take care of me forever.

He laughs lightly. "This is nothing compared to all the paint stains I've gotten. It'll wash out." He squirts a dollop of the antiseptic ointment on my still bleeding finger. "This cut is nasty, but I don't think you need stitches."

Inwardly, I sigh with relief. I've had enough stitches to last a lifetime. But what's one more scar?

He flips open the box of Band-Aids and pulls one out. He peels it open. "Baby, I leave you for a couple of hours and you turn into a hot bloody mess."

I can't help but smile through my tears. I am a hot mess. My life feels like an open wound. But as he gently but securely wraps the adhesive strip around my finger, the hole in my heart begins to close.

"How does your finger feel?"

"Better." I give it a little wiggle. Truthfully, it does.

"Why are you still crying?"

I shrug a shoulder and blink back tears. A jumble of emotions clouds my thinking. "I don't know."

He tenderly brushes away my tears and then traces my lips with a glistening finger.

At his touch, my tears subside. A cocky smile glides across his face. His jewel-like orbs glint with mischief.

“Maybe I need to kiss the boo-boo.”

I glance down at my bandaged finger. The next thing I know, he’s lifted my hand to his mouth and with a kiss, is helping me to my feet.

Letting go of my hand, he grows serious. The smile fades as his fingertips trace my jawline. “Skye, I didn’t come back here to put a Band-Aid on your finger.”

My pulse quickening with anticipation, my gaze stays on him as he digs his hand into a pocket and retrieves a small red velvet pouch. Loosening the silky drawstring, he empties the contents into his right palm. My eyes grow wide and my breath hitches in my throat.

Our matching wedding bands!

“Put mine on me, baby.”

My hands trembling, I do as he asks. Staring at the sparkling gold ring on his finger, my eyes start welling up again with tears.

His expression grows intense, filled with emotion. “Now, give me your hand.”

Slowly and silently, I lift my left hand. My heart swells with love for this man as he takes it in his. Without as much as a blink, I watch as he slides the gold band over my ring finger, my mind flashing back to that night in Vegas when we exchanged our forever vows.

“Skye, I love you so much.” His voice is a soft rasp, borderline tearful. “Not even

death will keep us apart.”

At his last words, my heart cracks and I totally lose it. The dam behind my eyes breaks loose, and the reservoir of tears I’ve been holding back storms down my face.

“Finn, my love,” I choke out, “I’m never going to leave you again.” True to the inscription on the back of my locket, I silently vow once again to be his forever.

He cradles my face. The intense shimmer in his gem-set eyes is blinding. “Skye baby, I’m never going to let you go. Ever.”

My lips quiver at his words. They part with my need for him. My hunger. His eyes burn into mine.

“I think I need to kiss more than your finger.”

I think so too. My skin prickles. My knees grow weak. I’m overwhelmed with love and longing.

Reading my mind, he draws me into him and crushes his lips onto mine. The kiss is deep and fiery. Long and passionate. A kiss that says you’re mine. Fireworks explode behind my eyelids, the electrifying sparks lighting up every cell of my body. Any trace of doubt and insecurity evaporates as I become lost in him.

“Holy guacamole!”

As I tangle my tongue with his, those two words bounce into my ears.

A startled Finn releases my lips as quickly as he claimed them. He spins around and we both face her.



Maddie!

Clad in her pajamas and clinging Kangy, she stares at us sheepishly. Then, a priceless smile lights up her face like a Christmas tree.

“Are you guys being romantical ?”

My heart stuttering, my cheeks flushing, I wait for Finn to respond. He waits for me. Dead silence.

Finally, Finn’s lips part. “Sunshine, come here. I need to tell you something.”

My heart thuds; my stomach bunches. Is he going to tell her the truth about me? I’m not sure if I’m ready.

My joyous little girl skips up to her father. He lifts her into his arms and smacks a kiss on her forehead as she wraps her arms around his neck.

“What, Daddy?”

“It’s about me and Kayla.”

Just the mention of her name sickens me. A shiver spirals down my back, turning my spinal cord into an iced-over river. She’s still in the mix.

The smile on my little girl’s face falls off. She knits her brows as Finn strokes her hair.

“Baby girl, Kayla and I broke up this morning.”

My eyes stay on my wide-eyed daughter as I register the news. They broke up? Is that

where Finn disappeared to earlier?

“Daddy, does that mean you’re not going to marry her?”

Finn nods. “Yup.”

“Hooray!” shouts an ecstatic Maddie. “And does that mean you’re marrying Scarlet because you kissed her?”

I feel myself blush. I gulp a breath waiting for Finn to answer.

Finn winks at her. “Can you keep a secret?”

Our little girl bobs her head. “Uh-huh.”

“Promise?”

She gives him a pinky-up. “I promise, Daddy.”

“I already married her.”

Maddie’s eyes pop. “You did?”

Finn’s sapphire eyes twinkle. “Uh-huh.”

“No way!”

“Way! I’ll prove it to you. Sk... Scarlet, tell her.”

“It’s true, my sweetness.” I lift my left hand, showing her my ring. Finn follows suit, able to hold her up with one arm. “We have matching wedding bands.”

Maddie's jaw drops. Her eyes grow wider, then challenging. She gazes up at Finn. "Why doesn't Scarlet have a diamond ring like Kayla's?"

Finn grins. "Because I want to buy her a bigger one! One with three diamonds—one for each of us. And I want you to help me pick it out."

"Coolio! I have excellent taste!" She strokes his stubble "Are you guys having a wedding?"

"Yes. But after my show. And you're going to be the flower girl."

"Yay!" shouts Maddie. "I'm gonna get to wear a fancy dress!"

Then, she looks my way with a smile as wide as the sky, her face as bright as sunshine. "Scarlet, does this mean I can call you Mommy?"

Mommy . The word spins around my head like a pinwheel in the wind. How long I've waited to hear it! Many times thinking I never would. Tears of pure joy brim in my eyes. "Yes, my sweet girl. I'd like that."

She stretches her arms toward me and I take her from Finn. Curling herself around me, she gives me a delicious hug. My heart is melting like a candle, dripping with love.

She tugs at the locket around my neck. For a moment, I wonder if my curious little girl's going to question why it's back in my possession, but to my relief, she doesn't.

"Mommy, can I tell you a secret?"

"Of course."

“Guess what I wished for on my birthday!”

She whispers in my ear. “That you would marry my daddy.”

My heart is about to burst with happiness.

My unicorn!

### CHAPTER 56

Skye

The next six weeks of my life are the happiest I can ever remember. Finn, Maddie, and I become a family. At last, again. Only one other person knows we're married. Rosita. Our wonderful, live-in housekeeper couldn't be more ecstatic for us, thrilled that Kayla's out of Finn's personal life. It's mostly because of this vindictive "mala mujer" that we have to keep our secret. For all intents and purposes, to the outside world I'm simply Maddie's teacher. It works as I'm still homeschooling her. For now, until after Finn's one-man show, we have to play things safely as Kayla is a loose cannon who can destroy his career with as little as a single phone call.

Finn told me the details of his breakup with Kayla. It was long coming. Besides her contempt for our incredible little girl, she was still doing drugs, and I finally shared the dirt I found online about her coked-out past. With me back in his life, Finn didn't need another reason to dump her, but the topper was she was having an affair. To my utter shock, with my former boss, Conquest Broadcasting news chief, Jim Hartley. Confession: I gasped.

With my attempted murder still unsolved, the investigative journalist in me longs to confront Jim... ask him what he knows about it. Find out if he knows what story I was working on. If the two were linked. Finn, however, is insistent I stay away from him. Especially because he's involved with Kayla. With his big solo show at the Zander Gallery around the corner, he can't afford to get her worked up. Given her spiteful, mercurial disposition, she could make everything he's worked for fall apart. Besides, Detective Billings talked with my ex-boss during his investigation and it led nowhere.

Deep inside my heart, I know there's something more. Something Jim didn't tell him. But for now, I have to let it go.

Instead, I funnel my time and energy into catching up with motherhood. Taking Maddie shopping, baking cookies together, visiting museums, collecting shells on the beach, going for mother-daughter mani-pedis, even planning our trip to Paris. All the things I could have missed out on. I love every minute of our time together. And I love her so much.

I haven't, however, told her about my past. About who I really am. Though she's super precocious for her age, she's way too young to understand what happened to me. Or what I went through. And I certainly don't want her to know that someone tried to kill me. And that person's still out there. It doesn't matter to me if I'm Scarlet or Skye. The only name that means something to me is "Mommy." Every time she says it, my heart balloons with joy, an emotion I can't put into words.

Finn and I quickly fall into a daily routine. Waking up early. Making delicious love in our bed or the shower. Breakfast with Maddie. Finn goes to his studio. I instruct Maddie in her classroom. We break together for lunch. More of the same. Dinner together. A bit of television for Maddie while I plan her daily lessons and Finn goes back to his studio. At eight, I put Maddie to bed with a goodnight story and await Finn to return. Some nights I visit him in his studio. With his show fast approaching, he's been working later and later. I bring him a snack and watch him paint. I love to watch him in action. And the action is not limited to a canvas. On more than one occasion, he's feverishly disrobed me and painted words of love on my body. Masterfully claiming me.

Two nights away from his show, Finn staggers into our bedroom and collapses on the edge of the bed. Still half-awake, I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It's almost two a.m. I roll over onto my back and sit up.

“Finn, it’s so late. Are you all right?”

My husband exhales a long, drawn out breath. “Yeah. I did a few last minute touchups on some canvases I’m sending over to the gallery tomorrow. I’m really stressed.”

Crawling behind him, I massage his shoulders. I can feel his knots. Those tight little balls of tension. I dig deeper with my fingers, squeezing and kneading. He groans. My poor husband needs more than a massage. I slip off the bed and work my magic.

With his paint-flecked hands, he cups my head. As his hooded eyes meet mine, a slow, sexy smile spreads across his lips.

“Baby, that was amazing.” Removing his clothes, he crawls into bed with me and reaches for the remote.

“You want to watch TV?” I ask as he clicks the remote. “Seriously?”

“Just for a bit. I’ll keep it low so you can go to sleep.”

The last thing I am is sleepy. My eyes dart to the big screen TV on the wall in front of us. I recognize the show that’s playing. Criminal Justice, New York . An old rerun from one of the early seasons.

Finn wraps an arm around me. He knows how much I dislike this show though I’ve never told him the reason why.

“Do you want to watch something else?” Finn asks as I banish the thought of the monster behind it.

“No, it’s fine. Leave it on.”

My eyes stayed glued to the screen. A gun is being held to the head of rookie DA, Meghan Jones. I recognize the actress playing Meghan immediately. A young Nicole Farrell in her breakout role that catapulted her to stardom. “Put the gun down and save your life,” she tells her captor, a deranged rapist. Something comes over me. I stir in the bed, sitting up straighter.

“Nicole Farrell,” I murmur, my body tensing.

“What about her?” asks Finn.

My heart palps. My head pounds. It feels as if someone’s drilling a hole into it.

I dig my fingers into my temples and hold them there.

A memory is breaking through.



### CHAPTER 57

Skye

Journalists are sleuths. All of us. Nancy Drews at heart in search of finding clues and solving the mystery. Uncovering the truth. Where there's a will, there's a way. I'm no different.

Nicole Farrell. Seeing her on Criminal Justice is a trigger. A palpable force is trying to knock down the door to my brain, kicking at it like a ruthless FBI agent. Open up!

"What are you doing?" asks Finn as I grab my cell phone off the night table. "You need to call someone at this ungodly hour?"

My heart is galloping, my adrenaline flowing. Every nerve in my body buzzes as I google her.

"I need to track down Nicole Farrell."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes. I won't be able to sleep if I don't."

"Huh?"

"Finn, she has something to do with that night."

“What!? Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m one hundred percent positive. Make that two hundred.”

“Jesus,” he mutters as I hastily thumb the letters of her name. Then, he tells me he’s sure she was at my memorial service. This only reconfirms my hunch.

If it were business hours, I’d simply call SAG—the Screen Actors Guild—and find out her agent or manager. But because their offices won’t be open until the morning, I type in the following: Nicole Farrell Contact Information . With bated breath, I await the search results. They show up quickly. I click the top one. Bingo!

“Any luck?” asks Finn.

“Yes. I’ll call her agent first thing in the morning.” In my mind, I begin to formulate a plan that will land me a meeting with her. Celebrity access isn’t easy, something I learned in my reporter days.

Finn strokes my hair. “Skye, baby, look at me.” Still clutching my phone, I turn to face him. “I’m worried about you.”

“Finn, I have no choice. I need to find out who did this to me. The person who almost cost me my life and took me away from you and Maddie.”

The sound of the television drifts into my ears and I turn my head to the screen. Criminal Justice is still on. Meghan bravely confronts her assailant, now arraigned.

“Justice will be served, you monster.”

Her words resonate in my head. I’m going to find my monster and when I do, I’m going to take him to his grave.

### CHAPTER 58

Skye

“M ommy, are we going to the Country Mart today after you vote?” Maddie tugs at the tail of my nightshirt as I pour myself a much-needed cup of coffee. I barely slept, my mind preoccupied with getting in touch with Nicole Farrell. The caffeine and my adrenaline work wonders to get me going.

“I’m not sure, sweetie.” It pains me to say these words as I pivot toward the kitchen island, my mug in one hand, my phone in the other. Maddie’s frown pains me further.

Clad in her pajamas and holding Kangy, she follows me to the island. “But you promised.”

It’s Election Day, an official school holiday, so we have the day off though most businesses and retailers are open. The Malibu Country Mart, a small charming shopping center with upscale boutiques, restaurants, and a children’s play area, is one of Maddie’s favorite places, and she’s been looking forward to our mother-daughter outing. Guilt gnaws at my conscience, adding to my anxiety.

“I know, baby girl, but I may have an important meeting.”

“Who are you meeting with?”

“Um, an old friend.”

“What’s her name?”

“Nicole.”

“That’s pretty. Can’t I come with you?”

“Sorry, sweetie. Not this time.” I inwardly shudder at the thought of my daughter finding out the truth about me from another. The truth that terrifies me and can put us all in harm’s way.

The tantalizing aroma of pancakes wafts in the air. Rosita hovers over the stove, fixing them for breakfast. Setting both my coffee and phone on the counter, I hop onto a stool. Maddie follows suit, taking a seat opposite me, Kangy in her lap.

Still frowning, she plants her elbows on the counter and sinks her head between her fists. The tips of her long braids dust the surface, her big, sad puppy-like eyes on me, making me feel guiltier than I already do. Averting her gaze, I take a sip of my steamy hot brew and glance down at my phone. The time: nine a.m. At last. ICM is officially open, but I bet Nicole’s agent’s assistant has been there for an hour. If not more. I know their type. Same as in a newsroom. Ambitious brown-nosers who dream of making it to the top. I know because I was one too.

“Why do you keep looking at the time, Mommy?” asks my perceptive daughter. “We don’t have school today. It’s Election Day!”

Before I can respond, Rosita brings us each a plate stacked with fluffy pancakes, along with a side of mixed berries.

“Eat, mis amores !” Smiling, she points to the maple syrup and butter already on the counter. While Maddie grabs the jar of golden syrup and drizzles it all over her pancakes, I grab my phone and google ICM. The agency’s phone number instantly

pops up on my screen. I hop off my stool and pad toward the sliding doors that lead to the patio.

“Where are you going?” shouts Maddie. “Your pancakes are going to get cold!”

“I’ll be right back,” I reply, the phone pressed to my ear. It rings, and as I head outdoors, someone picks up. The nasal female voice is sing-songy, reminiscent of a commercial jingle.

“ICM.”

“Can you please connect me to Kate Howard’s office.” Kate is Nicole’s agent.

“Hold on please.”

The phone rings again and on the second ring, an effeminate male voice answers.

“Kate Howard’s office.”

My heart begins to race as I adjust the phone to my ear. “Hi. Is she in?”

“She’s unavailable.” Shit. Cryptic assistant-speak, meaning she doesn’t want to be bothered or she’s not there. Pacing, I take a steeling breath.

“When will she be back in her office?”

“She’s away until next Monday.”

Shit again. That means she’s unreachable unless there’s an emergency.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

I'm relieved the assistant isn't being a jerk.

"Yes. And by the way, what is your name?"

"Gene."

"Like in Gene Kelly?" I could have said Gene Hackman or Gene Simmons, but my gut told me this Gene was a fan of old musicals.

"Yeah." I can hear a smile in his voice. Score one for me.

"Gene, I need you or Ms. Howard to get an important message to your client, Nicole Farrell."

The voice on the other end grows suspicious. "Who is this?"

"My name is Scarlet Callahan. Please let Ms. Farrell know that I'm a close friend of Skye Collins."

"The newscaster who died a few years ago? The one she was going to do an interview with?"

"Yes. Please let Ms. Farrell know who I am and tell her to call or text me. It's urgent."

Silence. My pulse kicks up a notch, unsure if the assistant is going to be cooperative or tell me to piss off.

"What's your cell number?"

A flood of relief sweeps through me as I spew it out. He repeats it back to me.

“Yes. And, Gene, I can’t emphasize enough how urgent this is.” About to say, “It’s a matter of life or death,” I instead add, “And I can’t begin to tell you how much this means to me.”

“Sure. I’ll contact her right away and ask her to get in touch with you.”

A smile blooms on my lips. “Thanks, Gene. You’ve been awesome. I hope big things happen to you.”

The call ends. Now it’s time to play the waiting game.

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When I return to the kitchen, Finn is there, freshly showered, wearing ripped jeans and a T-shirt. Holding a mug of coffee, he paces the room, his phone to his ear. Tension lines his forehead.

“Daddy’s not in a good mood,” Maddie tells me. “He’s talking to yucky Kayla.”

Just the mention of her name bunches up my stomach, adding to my angst. My ears tune into his conversation.

“Kayla, tell Sheldon he can’t have the nude. No matter how much he wants to pay for it.”

Sheldon Greenberg wants the painting of me? His tone sharp, Finn continues.

“It’s not for sale. Period. And Kayla, no, I can’t pick you up right now and take you to the gallery. I have to supervise the movers, who are bringing over the last few canvases.”

Finn's jaw tightens as he listens to her reply. "The same to you."

Have a nice day. Or. Screw you. The way he abruptly ends the call, it's likely the latter. Despite my anxiety, I can't help a smug smile. Shoving his phone into a pocket, he catches sight of me. His face relaxes a bit.

"Hi, baby. I'm sorry. Just some last minute bullshit."

Maddie giggles. "Daddy, you just said a bad word."

Finn slaps his forehead. "Snap! I didn't mean to." He turns to our housekeeper. "Rosita, would you please get Maddie dressed and then take her for a walk on the beach?"

"Sí, señor. A gleeful Maddie jumps off the stool and pirouettes out of the room, Rosita trailing her.

Once they're gone, Finn and I gather at the island, seated catty-corner to one another. Lifting his fork, he stabs at his cold, soggy pancakes.

"I'll make you some eggs," I say softly, my fingertips brushing across the top of his hand.

"Don't bother. I'm not really hungry."

The tension etched on his face eats at me. "You're worried about tonight?"

"A little bit." He takes a sip of his coffee, which is probably cold too, then sets the mug down. "I'm more worried about you. Did you reach Nicole?"

I relay my conversation with her agent's assistant. Guarded optimism, but with each



passing minute, I'm losing hope. For all I know, she may be out of the country. Inaccessible. Just as I'm about to share my growing despair, my phone pings. A text. My heart thudding, I glance down at the screen. A text. It's from her! Nicole Farrell!

I share the good news with Finn. "She wants to meet with me at noon."

"Let me come with you."

I shake my head. "I've got to do this alone. At least this first step. Besides, you've got to focus on your show."

He blows out a breath. "Then we should call the police."

"Please, Finn, not yet. It's too soon."

### CHAPTER 59

Skye

Noon. Parking my Jeep on Beverly Glen, I hop out with my backpack in tow. Slung over my shoulders, it feels weighty with my notebook, laptop, and phone, which now has a recording app. Briskly, I head into the park, wondering why a celebrity of this magnitude has chosen such a public place to meet.

Passing elderly men and women, elegantly clad in all white and engaged in a leisurely game of lawn bowling, I make my way to the other side of the leafy oasis. Swings and slides come into view. Squealing toddlers and youngsters occupy them, with parents and caretakers close by. With the low-seventies sunny weather, it's a perfect fall day to spend here, and for a moment, I wish Maddie was here with me. How fun it would be to push her on a swing or catch her in my arms after gliding down a slide.

Shoving these maternal thoughts aside, I search for the sandbox and find it quickly. I scurry toward it, my eyes scouring the surrounding park benches in search of Nicole. A few feet away from the toddler-filled sandbox, I spot her, seated all alone. A smile warms her exquisite face, easily recognizable though she's trying to be incognito, wearing oversized dark sunglasses and a big floppy hat to hide her signature red hair. Faded jeans, combat boots, and a baggy sweater complete her ensemble, mine almost the same except for my baseball cap.

"Nicole?" Though I'm certain it's her, my tone is more of a question than a statement as I approach her.

Averting her sight from the sandbox, she glances up at me. “Scarlet?”

Taking off my shades, I inhale a deep breath. “No.”

She cocks her head, her expression puzzled. My gaze doesn’t stray from her.

“My name is Skye. Skye Collins.”

As she clasps a hand to her mouth, I sit down beside her.

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It doesn’t take me long to tell Nicole my story after she gets over her initial shock. She listens intently, hanging on to every word, her eyes occasionally darting to the sandbox and then back to me. Her dark glasses mask her emotions, but they can’t hide the tears that trickle down her cheekbones. I tell her about my lengthy and painful rehabilitation, then about my subsequent entry into the Witness Protection Program, and finally about how fate brought me back to my husband and daughter.

She takes my hand, her lips quivering, the tears falling. “I-I’m so sorry. I almost cost you your life. It’s all my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“Nicole, that’s why I’m here. I don’t remember the accident or anything leading up to it.”

“Oh my God.”

“Nicole, I need you to help me remember. To help me find the person who did this to me and put them away.”

“I knew your accident had something to do with me,” she splutters. “I should have gone to the police.”

“Why didn’t you?”

She hangs her head in shame. “I was too afraid. Soon after your tragic accident, I got married and adopted a child.”

Her gaze shifts again to the sandbox. A darling little boy in overalls, who looks to be the same age as Maddie, waves at her. My companion forces a smile and waves back.

“That’s my little boy . . . Skyler.”

“Skyler?”

“Yes. I named him after you. I believed you died for me. I wanted to keep your memory and bravery alive with my son. I went to your memorial service.”

My heart swells with emotion. “Thank you,” I say softly with a squeeze of her hand.

The little boy goes back to building his sandcastle. A short stretch of silence ensues before I break it.

“Why were you afraid?”

“I was afraid he would come after me . . . ”

He . The pronoun spins in my head as Nicole continues.

“And hurt me. Just like he did to you. He’s very powerful.” She brushes away a tear. “He hurt me once and I swore I’d never let him do it again... to anyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t even remember the two of us meeting a few weeks before your accident?”

I shake my head. “I have no recollection.”

“We met for coffee. I told you what he did to me. I wanted the world to know.”

My need to know grips me like a vise and stifles any other thought.

“Nicole, tell me again. What did he do to you?”

The color in her face drains. A painful memory has stolen it. Her lips tremble, her hand grows cold and clammy. I give it another reassuring squeeze.

“It’s okay, Nicole. I’m here for you. You can tell me.” You must tell me.

For a quick second, she checks on her son and then faces me. My blood roars in my ears, draining out the laughter and chatter of the children around us.

Nicole bites down on her bottom lip, taking in a shuddering breath. Then, her lips part. The words tumble out one by one. “He. Raped. Me.”

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“And there’s something I didn’t tell you the first time we met. He threatened to kill me if I didn’t submit and sign his non-disclosure agreement.”

“Who did this to you?” Every muscle in my body clenches as I await her response. My heart slams against my chest, every beat faster.

When his name spills out, I gasp so loud it hurts. It’s my turn to clasp a hand to my mouth, not because I’m shocked, but because I may vomit.

My heart almost stops.

I flash back a dozen years.

Oh my God!

It’s the monster that assaulted me!

My husband’s backer.

Sheldon Greenberg!

### CHAPTER 60

Finn

I pace my studio, my head bowed and two fingers pressed deep into my throbbing temples.

“Skye, are you kidding me? Sheldon Greenberg?”

I still can’t get over the news that my biggest collector, who’s hosting my first major one-man show, may be linked to my wife’s attempted murder.

“Are you sure?”

“Finn, look at me.” Her voice is firm and commanding.

I stop in my tracks. Dropping my hands to my sides, I make eye contact.

“Yes, I’m sure. One hundred percent positive. It had to be Nicole Farrell’s story I was pursuing. That night—and the ones before it—when I was all dolled up and not wearing my wedding band—I likely went undercover to meet him. He must have somehow uncovered my true identity and gone after me.”

Rage floods every vein of my body. The thought of the pig touching my wife anywhere makes my blood simmer, bringing it to the boiling point. At the thought of him putting his sick dick anywhere near her, I explode.

“The fucking son of a bitch! What did he do to you?”

“Baby, I don’t remember. That night’s still a total blank.”

My imagination goes wild. In my mind’s eye, I see the pig pinning her down, slobbering all over her, and forcing her to have sex with him. Pummeling her with his one-eyed monster, my wife crying, trying to break free of him.

I can’t contain my rage. Standing next to the metal drafting table, I bang it with my fist. My knuckles sting, but the pain is nothing compared to the anguish—the wrath—that’s eating me alive. The goddamn bastard! Skye’s voice cuts into my fury.

“Finn, there’s something else you need to know.” She pauses, our eyes still connected. “That night at Christie’s when we met...”

“What about it?”

“He was the one who assaulted me.”

“What!?” It takes me several long moments to process this revelation as I flash back to that night. I never got a good look at the bastard’s face and we never talked about it again. But now, in the back of my mind, I remember Skye telling me the story was personal to her. A tidal wave of anger and remorse surges inside me. I should have killed the motherfucker that night. Bashed his face so badly he couldn’t take another bloody breath. Then broken every bone in his body just like he did to Skye. It’s not too late.

Skye halts my murderous thoughts. “So it makes sense I would pursue Nicole’s story. Attempt to bring Sheldon Greenberg down.”

There’s no reasoning. I lose it. All rationality goes by the wayside. White-hot rage



consumes me. One by one, I start tossing my canvases across the concrete floor. Storming through my studio like a cyclone.

“Finn, what are you doing?” Skye cries out. “Stop it!” The rapid thud of her footsteps sounds behind me and then I feel her hands clutch my shoulders, trying to hold me back. I shrug her off. Nothing can stop my rampage.

“Goddamn bastard. I want to kill him for what he did to you. For what he did to us. And to Maddie.” I rip off another painting from an easel and hurl it. Skye tries harder to stop me, gripping my elbows. Her voice grows louder, more desperate.

“Please, Finn, stop! You can’t destroy your paintings. Your career!”

“Screw him! I’m canceling the show.”

“No. You can’t do that! Please, you’ve got to listen to me!”

My rage only escalates. I’m about to blindly fling another painting, when she steps in front of it, spreading her arms across the canvas. It’s her portrait. The nude. She picks up a nearby palette knife.

“Get of my way!” I yell.

“No! If you want to toss this painting, then you’re going to have to get rid of me first. Toss me out the window like I’m a worthless piece of junk.” She glares at me. “Or slash me with this knife.”

She throws the knife at me and I catch it by its handle. Her eyes stay fierce as they fill with tears.

“Do it, Finn! Do it! And you’ll be a monster just like him!”

Her words pierce my heart like a thousand knives. I could never hurt my wife! Ever! Unclenching my fists, I drop the knife and fall to my knees. Skye joins me on the floor. Facing me, she tenderly tips up my head and then cradles it between her hands. The rage inside me subsides.

“I’m sorry, baby.” My voice is a hoarse, regretful rasp.

She caresses my jaw, her touch as light as a feather. “It’s okay. I understand how angry you are. But I need you to be strong for me. And help me bring him down.”

I search her steadfast eyes. “Skye, what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to do your show tonight.”

I survey the dozen or so paintings strewn on the floor. A ten-car pileup, but not a carnage. They all look to be in good shape. I can get them there in time.

Lowering Skye’s hands, I clasp them, lacing my fingers with hers. “I want you to be there with me tonight.”

“Of course, my love.”

Relief laces her soft voice. Her eyes stay on mine, her voice growing stronger.

“Finn, do you still have that dress you bought me to wear that night?”

My mind jumps back to the day I bought it. How excited I was for her to wear it to celebrate her birthday and my good fortune to have landed an agent. That day I met Kayla and she introduced me to the bastard. The irony of it makes my blood freeze over, but maybe it’s all meant to be. After Skye’s alleged death, I gave away all her clothes to a women’s shelter, but I couldn’t part with that sexy red dress. I thought

about returning it, but the image of her wearing it kept her alive in my mind. I tell her I still have it.

“I’m going to need it.” A fleeting smile, then her expression grows fierce. “To take the monster down.”

Then, she tells me her plan. Christ. I can’t let her go through with it. She’s out of her mind and I’ll be out of my mind if I do. It’s way too risky. Her life is at stake. Our lives, everything we’ve rebuilt. I try to talk her out of it, but there’s no stopping my kick-ass wife. My mind in a frenzy, an idea comes to me—there’s someone I need to call. Back at the house, I frantically search for his business card. Shit. Where the hell did I put it? Shoving open kitchen drawers like a madman, I finally find it hidden under one of Maddie’s paintings on the fridge. I grab my cell phone and dial the ten-digit number on the card, my forefinger gliding across the keypad like a speed skater. There’s no way in hell Skye is going through with this alone. I lost her once. I’m not going to lose her again.

The phone rings and rings and rings. I hear myself curse. C’mon. Pick up your fricking phone.

Finally, just as I’m about to give up, a gruff voice with a heavy Jersey accent, spills into my ear.

“Detective Pete Billings here . . . ”

### CHAPTER 61

Skye

Getting the remainder of his paintings to the gallery, Finn leaves the house a little after two p.m. to supervise their installation. The reception begins at six.

I have a couple of hours to get myself ready. He's sending a car for me at four, allowing two hours to get to West Hollywood in the rush hour traffic.

Alone and on edge, I soak in his sunken bathtub, contemplating my plan. The hot bath does little to calm my nerves. Stepping out, I wrap myself in his fluffy terrycloth robe and proceed to put on my makeup. I'm going heavier than usual—smoky eyes, lots of mascara, and ruby red lips. And extra foundation to cover the faint scar by my eyebrow—a never-ending reminder of that near-fatal night. As I'm applying my lipstick, Maddie bops in. Minus Kangy, she gapes at me.

“Wow, Mommy! You look so different!”

I study myself in the mirror. She's right.

“What do you think?” I ask after blotting my lips with a tissue.

“Wow! You look like a movie star!”

Magic words. That's exactly the image I want to project. And it comes along with a well-rehearsed pitch for a show I want to write and star in. The story of my life.

I brush my long hair, which I washed in the morning while showering with Finn. It cascades over my shoulder. My daughter stares at me in awe.

“Sweetie, come. Help me get dressed.” I need the company. My darling daughter will keep me grounded and collected. She’s seen my scars and I told her I was in a car crash. “Like my first mommy,” she said and I replied, “Just like your first mommy.” When she asked me more about it, I said I didn’t remember. But tonight, that’s going to change. I’m going to find out how the bastard almost killed me and then put him away.

I take a fortifying breath and follow my little girl as she waltzes into Finn’s adjacent bedroom. Our bedroom.

As I step inside, anxiety revisits me. My sexy red dress is laid out neatly on the bed. Beside it is a lacy black push-up bra and matching thong along with a brand new pair of shiny black stilettos and a small, dressy bag, which I had delivered from a trendy Country Mart boutique. The bag is just big enough to hold my cell phone, credit card, and lipstick.

Maddie studies the array. She focuses on the lace underwear.

“Mommy, you can get your tooshie into those teensy weensy panties?”

As on edge as I am, I can’t help but laugh.

Keeping the robe on, I reach for them and slip my legs into the openings. I slide them up my thighs until they’re sitting on my ass.

“Let’s see, Mommy.” The tone of my sassy daughter’s voice is demanding.

“Wait till I put my bra on.”

Before I can, she grabs it and holds it up against her chest. My inquisitive daughter glances down at the stiff, sculpted cups of the strapless undergarment.

“Mommy, am I going to have big boobies like you when I grow up?”

Despite my unease, I chuckle again. My B-size breasts are not exactly generous, but to a flat-chested little girl they must look enormous. For a moment, I reflect on this memorable mother- daughter moment and on my next breath, anger seeps into my bloodstream. How many did I miss? The answer: countless. I hate the monster more than ever for taking my precious child away from me for almost five long, unbearable years. I can feel my face darkening. My blood pressure rising. He’s going to pay!

Maddie breaks into my thoughts, reining in my rage. “Mommy, you didn’t answer my question.”

“Maybe,” I stammer, “but it’s going to be a long time before you need a bra.” A shudder runs through me. I better be around to buy her first bra. The monster isn’t going to take away that special mother-daughter occasion. Or any other!

Shoving the robe off my shoulders and lowering it halfway, I take the front-hooking bra from her and put it on. I work my breasts into the padded cups.

Maddie watches as I unbelt the robe and shrug it off. Letting it fall to the floor, I reach for my dress and slip it over my head. Once my arms are in the apertures, I adjust it over my hips, the silky chiffon caressing my flesh. Knowing my taste, Finn’s dress is perfect. Sexy yet demure. Understated elegance. Stopping mid-thigh just below my scar, the chic high-low gown fits me to a T. The length accentuates my long legs, and the sweetheart neckline shows off just the right amount of cleavage. Enough to whet a predator’s appetite. I inwardly shudder again at the thought, then compose myself.

“I need your help, baby girl. Can you zip me up?”

“Okie dokie.”

I sit down on the edge of the bed to make it easier for her. She hops onto the mattress beside me and slides up the zipper. The hiss sends a shiver up my spine. I hope only one man will be unzipping it later. Finn.

Collecting myself, I glance at the clock on the nightstand. 3:45. The Town Car will be here in fifteen minutes.

“Mommy, can’t I come with you tonight to Daddy’s show?” my little girl begs as I slip my feet into the high-heeled pumps. “ Please! ”

“Sweetie, it’s a grown-up night. I’ll take you to the gallery tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. As Maddie pouts, the word sinks my stomach like a cannonball. As I’ve learned in my life, it’s not promised to anyone. Suddenly, I’m fraught with emotion. What if things don’t go right tonight? The possibility hits me like an ax. My heart splintering, I suck in a deep breath as if it’s my last. I may never see my beloved husband or daughter again!

“My sweet baby girl, come here. Let me give you a hug.” Tears threatening, I signal for Maddie to sit on my lap. Obliging, she crawls onto me, folding her arms around my shoulders. I hold her close to me and savor the warmth of her petite body against mine.

“Sweetie, I just want to tell you how much I love you and Daddy.” I thread my fingers through her silky hair. “The two of you are my everything.”

“I love you and Daddy too!” She spreads her arms wide. “ Thiiiis much!”

At the thought of never holding my little girl in my arms again, a tear escapes my eye.

Maddie tenderly brushes it away. “Mommy, why are you crying? You’re going to ruin your makeup.”

“Because I love you so much. Promise me you’ll always remember that.”

“I promise!”

“Thank you, my baby.” I twitch a sad smile when another voice enters the room.

Rosita.

“Señora, el carro está aquí .”

It’s time. The Town Car is here. Lifting Maddie off my lap, I inhale a steeling breath and stand up. Maddie’s sparkling eyes stay on me.

“Rosita, doesn’t my mommy look so pretty?”

The soft woman gazes at me, her kind, dark eyes smiling.

“Bellísima, mi cara .”

With a quick nervous smile, I thank her for the compliment. Grabbing my bag, I pad over to the dresser to give myself a final inspection. I stare into the mirror. My reflection startles me. I look stunning. Hot. But I’m missing two important things. I cast my eyes down at my lucky locket and a brand new watch. I quickly slip the necklace around my neck—it hangs perfectly between my clavicles, drawing attention to my cleavage. Then, I fasten the sleek watch, a last-minute gift from Finn,



around my wrist. The watch that will be my lifeline tonight. I gaze again at my reflection. It grows confident. Determined. Fierce.

I'm Scarlet Callahan. Frustrated schoolteacher. Aspiring actress and screenwriter. And tonight, Sheldon Greenberg, I'm going to take you down!

I fidget with my lucky locket hoping that luck will be on my side.

### CHAPTER 62

Skye

I planned to be the first one at Finn's show. Leaving so early from Malibu. But because of the unexpected fog, the drive along the Pacific Coast Highway is reduced to a crawl. Bumper to bumper traffic. A red sea of brake lights. The frustrating ride does nothing to calm my nerves. We've worked out a plan. It's up to me to set it in motion. To plant the bait. I anxiously look down at my new watch. Four-thirty and we've only gone a short mile. At this rate, I may never get there.

Sitting next to me, my cell phone rings. I pick it up. It's Finn.

"Baby, what's going on? You're not even at Gladstones?"

Well, at least my new watch works. It does more than tell time. It's also a tracking and recording device. I tell Finn about the fog and the standstill traffic. Hopefully, it'll lift as we get closer to town.

Two long hours later, we finally exit onto La Cienega, and I try calling Finn to make sure he knows where I am, but after several rings it goes straight to his voicemail. I leave him a message as we make our way up the busy boulevard to Melrose. Another slow crawl. Another slow hour. The time: 7:15. The event ends at eight. As I gaze out the window, a mélange of anxiety and impatience makes my heart beat double time and my nerves buzz. We at last reach the gallery, where a long line of luxury cars and limos, waiting to be valeted, stretches down the street. Forget it. Adrenaline kicking in, I hop out of the sedan and hurry to the entrance in my skyscraper heels.

A bouncer, a Dwayne Johnson lookalike, confronts me. He's holding a clipboard and wearing a headset. "What's your name?"

"Scarlet Callahan."

He scans the guest list. "I don't see your name anywhere."

Kayla . My skin bristles. I bet she took me off it.

"Let me see."

Reluctantly, he shows me the long list. It's arranged alphabetically by last name. Skimming over some celebrity names, I get to the C's. Sure enough, one of the names is scratched out with a pen, but the letters "S-c-a-r" are still visible.

I point to the name. "This is me... Scarlet Callahan." And quickly come up with an explanation. "I didn't think I would make it because of the weather conditions so I called Kayla to take my name off the list." I flash a smile. "But here I am."

The bouncer glares at me suspiciously, then says to my relief, "Okay. You can go in."

Without thanking him, I dash inside.

The gallery is still packed with well-dressed Hollywood types mingling and admiring Finn's paintings. My eyes search the vast space for Finn. He's nowhere in sight. Maybe he's on the second level. I look up but don't see him. Scanning the main level again, I spot my target in front of one of Finn's finest paintings. Metamorphosis. In my head, I change things up... switch gears. The predator is now the prey. My prey. Holding a drink, he's chatting with a stunning couple. I recognize them instantly. Jaime Zander, the gallery owner, and his statuesque platinum-haired wife, Gloria, the founder and CEO of the lingerie chain, Gloria's Secret. I recognize them because I

happened to have covered a headline-making red-carpet event that became the talk of Hollywood when Gloria shot and killed a Russian thug to save the life of her future husband. With my new identity, I'm sure neither of them will recognize me. Inhaling a fortifying breath, I make my first move and strut over to the painting. On the way, I grab a glass of champagne from a passing cocktail waiter. Bubbling with nerves, I need it.

To my relief, the power couple moves away to chat with another that I also recognize. Blake Burns, the head of Conquest Broadcasting where I used to work, and his pretty wife, Jennifer. I seize the moment and make a beeline for Sheldon, while he's not distracted.

I soak him in. The fat ugly pig! Wearing a smug expression and stuffing his face with hors d'oeuvres. One after another. Slowing my pace to a coquettish gait, I make eye contact with him. A salacious smile wolfs across his face. A small victory for me.

Deliberately crossing by him, I study the painting I know so well and sip my champagne. The bubbly does little to slow down my pulse. It speeds up when a hot breath descends on my shoulder.

"There's nothing like a woman in a red dress."

I spin around and face him, meeting him eye to eye. I give him a seductive smile.

"Why, thank you," I say breathily.

"It takes balls to wear red."

I silently snicker. Trust me, I have them.

His beady, lustful eyes roam down my body before darting to the painting. "You like

this painting?”

I glance at it briefly. “Yes. It’s very intense. I love the way the colors jump at you and collide. A metaphor for sex.”

He grins. “Wow. I never thought about it that way. You’re so fucking smart.”

“Thanks,” I say humbly.

“I like smart, sexy women. And you’ve got great taste.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, missing a chunk of bruschetta on his stubbly double chin. Then, takes a chug of his drink and glances at the painting again.

“I’m glad you like this painting because guess what... I just bought it. Fifty thousand clams. I’m a big supporter of this artist. Phineas Jackson. I know art and one day his pieces will be commanding high six figures. Maybe more.”

“You’ve got great taste.” The cloying scent of his cologne getting to me, I take a sip of my champagne.

Licking his upper lip, he relishes my innuendo.

“Sweetheart, how come I’ve never seen you at one of these events? The art world is small. Everyone knows each other.”

“I’m new in town.”

He focuses his energy on my cleavage. “What’s your name?”

“Scarlet Callahan.”

“Are you a starlet or something?”

My demeanor perks up. “Indeed, I am. I’m actually an aspiring actress-slash-screenwriter.” I draw a sharp slash mark with my forefinger. Like a knife blade I want to scroll across his chest. “I have a film project I want to sell and star in.”

So far, I’m right on script.

He snorts. “Well, you’ve just met the right person.”

Feigning innocence, I lift my brows. His eyes bore into me.

“Do you know who I am?”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Does the name Sheldon Greenberg sound familiar?”

“Oh my God! You’re the big TV producer! I love Criminal Justice! I think I’ve seen every episode three times.” The truth is I boycotted the show once I learned he was the producer. Why give the monster another moneymaking eyeball?

A smirk curls the corners of his slimy lips. “I’m liking you better and better, sweetheart.”

A server passes by and he snags another hors d’oeuvre. A stuffed mushroom. He shoves it into his mouth.

“I have a pending three-pic deal with Netflix. Maybe your movie idea fits the bill. Is it high concept?”

“Yes!” I say excitedly. “Very!”

Then, on my next breath, he gropes my breasts.

“I like high concepts.” Leering at me, he squeezes them. “And I like big tits. These are very nice.”

I’m repulsed by him, but have my first opportunity to prove sexual assault. This is just the beginning. By the end of tonight, the beast will be wishing to be tried as a felon. Fingers crossed my new watch is working and he’ll be charged for attempted murder. Squirming, I confront him.

“Please take your hands off my breasts. It makes me uncomfortable. And you’re hurting me.”

Ignoring my plea, he squeezes harder. “Drink some more champagne. C’mon, babe. Loosen up.”

I do as he asks, taking another sip. It pleases him.

“Good girl.” Another pinch. “Sweetheart, we should get to know each other better.”

Before I can respond, a familiar voice trills in my ears.

“What are you doing here?”

Kayla! She scoffs at me, then shoots Sheldon a dirty look.

“Darling, why are you wasting your time with this pedestrian schoolmarm?”

I hold my own. “Sheldon, I should have told you. I’m teaching until I get my lucky

break. A girl needs to make a buck.”

Sheldon’s face sweetens like syrup. “You’ve got my respect, beautiful. My beloved mother, God bless her, was a schoolteacher. She put the bread on our table. I wouldn’t be here without her.”

A miffed Kayla throws back her head and rolls her eyes. “Whatever. I’ll catch up with you later.” As she stalks off, I breathe a silent sigh of relief. That my lecherous companion didn’t learn about my connection to Finn.

Not wasting any time, the swine goes back to tweaking a nipple. “So where were we, doll?”

Flinching, I notice the crowd thinning and glance down at my watch. Almost eight p.m. The event’s almost over. I’ve got to score! Sheldon notices me fretting about the time.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ve got all the time in the world. The party’s just getting started. Why don’t you come with me? I’m throwing a small intimate after-party. A dinner. You can meet one of my buddies and tell me your movie idea. What d’ya say?”

“I’d really love to meet the artist first.” Where is Finn?

Sheldon snickers. “Get over it. He’s not worth it. C’mon. Let’s blow this pop stand.” He snatches my hand, lacing my fingers with his thick, stubby ones, and lumbers toward the entrance of the gallery. While he snags one more hors d’oeuvre—a greasy chicken skewer—en route, I look over my shoulder and glance up at the second level. My husband, so devastatingly handsome in dark jeans, a Springsteen T-shirt, and a ridiculously sexy leather bomber jacket, meets my gaze. For a brief moment, I think about when we first met at Christie’s, making eye contact across the gallery of



paintings. How we fell in love at first sight. My aching heart reaches out to his. How I long to be in his loving arms! How I long for this night to be over!

He begged me not to go through with this, but nothing he could say or do could stop me. Worry burns in his eyes as he shoots me a thumbs up and mouths, “Be careful. I love you.”

Pursing my lips, I blow him a kiss. A loud burp from Sheldon intercepts it.

“C’mon, sweetheart. Let’s get the hell outta here.”

Dread knotting in the pit of my stomach, I give myself a quick mental pep talk like I used to do when I confronted adversity as an investigative reporter. Skye, stay strong. You can handle this. Skye’s the limit. It works!

I’ve got my mojo. My mind is armed like a battalion ready to charge the enemy. You scumbag! I’m going to take you down. Put you away. Whatever in God’s name it takes.

On our way out, we pass one of the few remaining attendees. A thickset, raven-haired man in a crumpled trench coat. In my peripheral vision, I see him pull out his cell phone.

Game on.

### CHAPTER 63

Finn

“S o, what’s your favorite Springsteen song?” asks Billings, his eyes glued to the road. “For me and the missus, it’s ‘Tunnel of Love.’”

Is he kidding? My wife’s life is at stake and he’s making small talk? I don’t answer him; I can’t. My heart is slamming so hard against my ribcage it may crash through my jacket and splatter on the hood of his Impala—his ancient police car. With every long, angst-filled minute, my heart beats faster as if faster’s possible. Strained silence fills the narrow space between us until I break it with a question that’s been burning on my lips.

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew my wife was alive?” I ask the detective as he plows through the thick fog engulfing us.

His eyes stay straight ahead, focused on the road, his lips pressed together. “I couldn’t. I was working with the Witness Protection Program and it was their one pre-condition for allowing her into it. No one, not even you, could know about her existence. It was too risky.”

“Did you have anything to do with placing her with me and my daughter?”

“It was a freak thing, but when I found out from the nun who was taking care of her at the rehab joint, I let it be.”

“Even when you suspected I could be her would-be killer?”

Another beat of silence. Then, “Like Sister Marie, I’m a good Catholic. I believe that God has a way of handling everything for the best.”

As it begins to drizzle, I digest his words. I almost lost my wife once. I can’t lose her again. At that thought, every muscle in my body clenches as apprehension surges. Then, another voice sounds. It’s coming from the car’s radio device.

“Mancuso, here. We lost them.”

“What do you mean you lost them?” Billings’s voice bellows in my ears.

“The fog. We couldn’t tailgate them and lost track.”

What!? My heart literally stops as Billings slams a hand on the wheel.

“Damnit. Where were they heading?”

“We thought he was heading to his mansion off Benedict Canyon. But when we got there, no one was there except a couple of guards.”

The detective’s jaw tightens, his eyes stiff on the slippery, rain-slicked road.

“Balls. Any clue as to their whereabouts?”

To make matters worse, thanks to a power outage, I learn that Skye’s smart watch—part tracker, part recorder—that Billings made her wear has been malfunctioning. My throat constricting, the air evaporating from my lungs, I curse under my breath.

Then static. We've lost the connection. Jesus. How much more can I take?

"Mancuso, I can't hear you!" yells my companion before the connection reactivates. I blow out a breath. Thank God.

"The last thing we heard before we lost them was that he wanted her to meet Marilyn."

Gripping the wheel, my companion jerks his head toward me. "Do you know a Marilyn?"

My mind races like it's in the Daytona 500 and then it comes to me. "Yes! It's his yacht."

"Where does he have it docked?"

"In the Marina."

"Crap. They're miles ahead of us."

"With this fog and traffic, we'll never get there in time." Panic coils in my gut as my pulse pounds in my ears. Reality stabs me like a knife to my chest. I may lose Skye again! This time for good!

Every nerve in my body about to implode, my eyes stay on the detective as he punches three numbers into his communications device.

"Billings to headquarters. Send Lucy Goosey." He looks at his GPS coordinates and spells them out.

A terse pause, then he barks at the response. "Don't tell me you can't fly her in the

frigging fog. Send her now!”

I have no clue what’s going on, but in my dire state of despair, I can only trust in the detective’s words.

God has a way of handling everything for the best.

I pray He does.

### CHAPTER 64

Skye

“Sweetheart, meet Marilyn.”

So this is Marilyn. As much as I tried to extract information out of the bastard on the ride here, he refused to divulge any. He wanted to surprise me. Barely able to read the name of the massive yacht because of the fog, I repeat it back as Sheldon grins proudly.

“Named her after my mother, may she rest in peace.”

“It’s an amazing boat. Is this where you keep her?”

“Yup. The Marina’s her home.”

Good. A location. Finn and Billings will know where I am. I follow Sheldon as he leads me up a ramp. The cold, damp air makes me shiver. Despite the chatter of my teeth, the pig doesn’t offer me his jacket. I hug myself to ward off the chill as I climb up the steep incline.

The captain of the ship welcomes us aboard. He tells Sheldon that his other guests are already here. They’re waiting in the stateroom. “Let me know if you need anything, sir.”

“What’s the weather forecast?”

“Not good. The fog won’t be lifting any time soon. The winds are at forty-five knots and a storm’s coming in.”

Sheldon pats his back. “Keep me posted. We can weather anything, right?”

The captain dons a nervous smile. “Of course, sir.”

A cloud of doubt as thick as the fog falls over me. Maybe he won’t take things further with me. The tweak of a nipple isn’t enough to put him where I want him. Wondering what his intentions are and worrying about the weather conditions, I let him lead me to the third level. He cups a hand on my ass as we step into the elegantly appointed quarters.

The stateroom.

“Sweetheart, I want you to meet my pal.”

Hovering over the bar, the trim, silver-haired man pivots around. I gulp down my shock.

It’s my former boss! Jim Hartley. Now almost sixty. As dapper as ever.

Clad in charcoal gray slacks and a black cashmere turtleneck and carrying a tumbler of some amber-colored liquid, he strides toward me. Sheldon introduces us, telling him my name.

He doesn’t recognize me. His lustful eyes travel down my body like a slow-speed elevator, making a stop at every level. A lascivious smile slithers across his face. I want to rip it off.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he draws.

“She’s a hot one,” pipes up Sheldon. “And she’s smart.”

“Brains and beauty. It doesn’t get any better.”

Utterly disgusted, I compose myself, and in my most seductive voice, I test him.

“I think we’ve met before.”

“Darlin’, if we had, surely I wouldn’t have forgotten. I never forget a beautiful woman.”

Left-handed, he takes a sip of his cocktail—for sure a bourbon. I notice he’s still wearing a wedding band. The scumbag. Maybe, that’s why several female colleagues abruptly left the department while I was there. I even remember him inappropriately touching me on occasion. Giving me a pat on my ass. Sometimes a shoulder massage. There were also sexually insinuating comments. I brushed them off as playful innuendos. My mind jumps; my tongue burns with questions. Was he involved with my attempted murder? Did he know I was investigating Greenberg? Before I can go any further with my conspiracy theory, Sheldon diverts me.

“Gorgeous, let’s have some kinky-ass fun.” He puts my hand to his crotch, rubbing it up and down. Right in front of him is Jim, who lecherously looks on while nursing his drink. An enormous erection forms under my palm. I feel nauseous.

“Sheldon, please stop it. You told me I could pitch you my movie idea.”

I try to pull away, but he won’t let me. “Stop it!” I repeat, my voice rising.

“C’mon, sweetheart. The pitch can wait. Let’s get to know each other better. Jimbo wants to watch. Then, play with us.”



Play with us? What does that mean?

“Shelby baby, I’m ready.”

To my horror, my former boss sets his drink on a table and then shoves me to my knees. He holds my head down.

“What’s going on?” I cry out as Sheldon keeps my hand pressed to his appendage.

“Sweetheart, it’s party time. Zip down my fly.”

“Please don’t make me do this.”

He snorts with laughter. “Sweetheart, trust me, I’ll be way more receptive to your pitch.”

“No!” I shout out.

“Stop wasting my precious time. It’s not every day you’re gonna get this chance of a lifetime.”

I hear him unbuckle his belt. My heart races as bile rises to the back of my throat. I don’t think I can suck his monstrous organ, let alone stomach the sight of it. Besides, I need more than sexual assault. At most he’ll get a few years in prison at some upscale white-collar penitentiary and then early parole if he’s on good behavior and agrees to rehabilitation. Then, he’ll be sent to some ritzy rehab joint in Malibu or Scottsdale with luxurious accommodations—complete with a deluxe suite, spa, pool, and gourmet dining.

I need to prove he tried to kill me. The thought of him getting away with murder is unfathomable. The bastard! He needs to suffer as much as he made me suffer. I take

that back. Make that more!

Rage livewires through me. It's time to go in for the kill. Pun intended though my mental double entendre makes me shudder. I need a confession. As risky as it is. I can't let Jim's presence throw me off. Or a pending blow job. I need to stick to my plan. The script.

"Listen, Sheldon, why don't you let me pitch my story and I'll do anything you want."

"Maybe you can fuck it out of her," chortles Jim. In my mind's eye, I can see him laughing at his own joke.

It's not funny. In fact, it horrifies me. I manage to cast my eyes upward. Creasing his forehead, Sheldon weighs his options. My heart thudding, I remain silent with anticipation as the monster scrunches his bulbous nose.

"Nah. Let her get her pitch off her chest." He snickers. "Then she can get me off. Who knows... maybe she's got something good besides a hot little pussy. I'm desperate for something to sell."

I inhale a breath of relief. Things are back on track.

Sheldon orders Jim to take a seat. Releasing my head, he grabs his bourbon and folds into an armchair. I stand up as Sheldon plops down on an opulent couch. His potbelly is so big he can't close his legs. He scratches his balls.

"Go ahead, sweetheart. Don't take too long. Give me the elevator pitch."

I know what that means. Jim, with his short attention span, taught me that term when it came to pitching news stories. It means summing up your story in a couple of pithy

lines. Making it high concept.

“I’ll try. It’s a complex story.”

Sheldon scratches his crotch again and huffs out a frustrated breath. “C’mon, sweetheart. Make it fast. My balls are itching.”

I suck in a steeling breath and make eye contact with my audience. My pupils ping-ponging between Sheldon and Jim. Ultimately landing on Sheldon, I begin. My voice is strong, my expression animated. My hands sweep the air dramatically.

“Imagine . . . Dark Passage meets Brenda Starr . . . meets Madeline . . .”

The two men furrow their brows.

“Who the hell is Madeline?” grumbles Sheldon.

Jim informs him. “Some ballsy French kid. My wife used to read those books to my daughter when she was a toddler.”

“Whatever.” Sheldon juts his double chin. “Go on.”

Not having the luxury to waste time, I continue.

“What happens when a young investigative reporter at a major news network learns from an A-list actress that one of Hollywood’s major players sexually assaulted her?”

Sheldon narrows his eyes. “What d’ya mean?”

“What I mean is he raped her.” Having Sheldon and Jim’s full attention, I don’t stop. “Against her boss’s wishes, the reporter decides to prove that the actress’s accusation

is more than an allegation.”

Jim squirms and takes a long swig of his bourbon. “Sheldon, I don’t like where this is going.”

Swiping his greasy comb over, Greenberg dismisses him. “Let her finish. This has potential.” Inwardly breathing a sigh of relief, I pick up where I left off.

“The determined reporter goes undercover and manages to get the Hollywood mogul to invite her to his house. He forces her to have sex with him.”

“What kind?” asks Sheldon, his voice thinner, his face darkening.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s against her will.” I pause for a beat. “Somehow the bigwig TV producer figures out the true identity of the woman and goes after her. Determined to stop her from exposing him, even if it means putting an end to her life. Then—”

Suddenly, my pitch sinks in. While Jim turns chalk-white, Sheldon turns a shade of purple, his nostrils flaring, his pupils dilating. He cuts me off.

“Shut up! Who the hell are you?”

With my arms folded across my chest, I face him squarely. “Does the name Skye Collins ring a bell?”

A stunned Jim chokes. He drains his bourbon. “Skye Collins? She’s dead! You don’t look anything like her!”

“Looks can change, Jim,” I say calmly though every nerve in my body is on edge. “How are the ratings these days without me?”

The tumbler in Jim's shaking hand falls to the floor and shatters as Sheldon explodes.  
"Don't fall for her! My boys ran that bitch off Mulholland! I read the obits!"

My heart does a high five against my chest. Yes! A confession! The bastard confessed! A smug, triumphant smile curls on my lips.

"Remember me?"

### CHAPTER 65

Skye

The smile stays on my face as Sheldon glares at me. His brows furrow.

“You’re bullshitting me. I don’t believe you!”

Time for a reality test. I turn to my former boss. He’s white as a sheet and shaking like a leaf.

“Jim, tell him how I came back to work the day after I gave birth to my daughter and was the first on the scene at the Woodland Hills school shooting and made Conquest News the number one news outlet in the country.” It’s a little known fact that only he and a few others would know.

In a state of shock, Jim remains silent.

“Tell him!” My voice goes up decibels with each syllable.

His lips quivering, he buries his face in his hands and mutters, “Holy Jesus. It’s her.”

I face Greenberg again. “So, Sheldon, do you still think I’m bullshitting you?”

Reality sets in. His ugly face contorts with rage. “You almost blinded me, you twat!”

“You almost cost me my life!” I bark back as he starts sweating like a pig.

“I should have killed you myself! It’s not too late!”

His words terrify me, but I counter his threat. “I wouldn’t bother now. I’ve got everything recorded. The police have heard everything. And they know where I am.”

Regaining his composure, he snorts. “Don’t ya think they’d be here by now?”

Worry floods me. My stomach twists into a tight spiky ball. He’s right. Billings and his team should have been here already. An unnerving thought invades my head. Maybe my communications device—the hi-tech watch I’m wearing—isn’t functioning. Or maybe they lost track of me because of the fog. And have no clue where I am.

I can’t let Sheldon know that I’m beginning to freak. I have to be like my childhood heroine—Madeline. Like my precious daughter. Bold. Brave. Not afraid of the ferocious tiger. I’m the predator. He’s the prey. I swallow back my fear and hold him fiercely in my gaze.

“Think about it, Sheldon. You don’t want to kill me. You might get twenty years behind bars for rape and attempted murder—and possibly early parole—but you’ll get life for pre-meditated murder. Maybe the death penalty.”

He snarls. “I wasn’t the one who fired at you! I never left my house. Go ask my housekeeper!”

I will myself to stay calm as a sinister smile snakes across his face.

“And I didn’t rape you.” He snickers. “I didn’t even get a taste of you.”

Unsure if I want to know what he did, I counter, “But you raped Nicole Farrell! And threatened to kill her!”

He chortles. “Another stupid wannabe. This town is filled with them. How are you gonna prove it? I’ll claim I didn’t. It’ll be her word against mine. And her little stint in rehab won’t help. Plus, who gives a damn about what happened twelve years ago?” He laughs wickedly. “Sometimes, I can’t remember what I did twelve hours ago.”

Trepidation crawling back into my blood vessels, I let him continue against my better judgment.

“I only asked you to blow me.” He swipes his comb-over. “And you didn’t even do that. When you had the audacity to spray me with that mace shit, I inadvertently pulled off your wig and recognized you instantly. I told my boys to go after you. They got a little carried away. It’s all your fault your car went over a cliff.”

Though I still can’t remember that night, the pieces are coming together. The thought of his appendage anywhere near my mouth revolts me. I choke back a gag.

His beady eyes stays on me, his forehead creased in deep thought until his facial muscles relax. “You know what? Get the hell out of here before I change my mind. I have no time for personal vendettas.”

I weigh his words. My options. One thought dominates my mind. Why isn’t Billings here? It’s been close to an hour. Maybe I should take Sheldon up on his offer. Walk off this boat while I have a chance. Pray that I’ve gotten everything recorded though in my heart I’m growing more and more convinced that my carefully orchestrated plan to take Greenberg down is an epic fail. Despondency mixes with resignation. And the frightening reality that I’m not safe here given his death threat. The loves of my life—my Finn and Maddie—are far more important to me than my ego and need for revenge.

“Fine. But you can be sure the minute I get off this boat, I’m going straight to the police.”



He throws up his hands. “Sweetheart, be my guest.” Then he snorts again. “Oh, and by the way, I’m passing on your movie idea. It’s been done before.”

The mockery in his voice only adds to my defeat. I pivot on my feet, passing by a catatonic Jim.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles as he slumps in his chair.

Worthless sack of shit.

Screw him! Somewhat disoriented, the room dimly lit, I search for the way out.

“Sweetheart, let me escort you.” Sheldon’s patronizing voice. “This yacht is very confusing. And it’s dark.”

“No need,” I say, blindly walking away from him as fast as I can in my spiky heels.

Not slowing down, I hear his heavy footsteps thudding behind me. His hands touch down on my bare shoulders, and then—gasp!—I’m pushed from behind. So forcefully, I go flying ten feet forward. He tricked me! Trying to break my fall, I go tumbling in my stilettos and wince as I hit the cold, hard floor. A sharp stab of pain shoots up my leg. I think I’ve twisted my ankle. Possibly broken it. Dazed and in agony, I try to scramble to my feet. But I can’t put any pressure on my right foot; my ankle buckles. To my horror, Sheldon shoves me to the floor again and I land smack on my face. Stars spinning in my head, I let out a groan as he squats down and rolls me over. He pins me down with his broad hands and the weight of his body. Tears brimming behind my eyelids, I meet his diabolic gaze. His eyes blazing with madness. His mouth foaming like a rabid dog. The face of a monster. Terror fills every crevice of my being as the beast lifts up the skirt of my dress and squeezes my genitals. As if he’s scrunching a wet paper towel.

“It’s too bad I never got any of this.”

“You’re hurting me!” I cry out.

“Shut up!”

Without warning, his hand crashes across my cheek. The sting of the slap radiates to my toes as my head jerks away.

Whack! He slaps me again. Harder. “Look at me!”

Slowly, tearfully, I turn to face him.

“You stupid, stupid bitch. Did you really think I was going to let you get away?”

His fetid breath mixes with his cologne and perspiration, the repulsive scent nauseating me. With the hand that struck me, he whips off his belt, and then lifting my arms up by my wrists, he begins to bind me. Writhing and screaming, I try to resist, but it’s futile. The leather rips into my flesh, bringing on fresh tears.

“Jesus, Sheldon, what the hell are you doing?” It’s Jim.

The monster continues to shackle me as my watering eyes shift to my former boss.

“Please, Jim. Help me!”

“Answer me, Sheldon!” shouts Jim.

Ignoring him, Sheldon knots the belt with a sharp yank, then shoves his hand into a pocket. He thrusts out a crumpled handkerchief and stuffs it into my mouth, muffling my desperate screams. Sweat beads cluster on his forehead.

“The slut knows too much.” He looks over his shoulder at Jim. “Give me your belt.”

“What!?”

“Give it to me! Now! She’s gonna bring us both down. We need to get rid of her!”

Jim blinks nervously. “Sheldon, I protected your ass. I’m not getting involved with cold-blooded murder. You’re out of your mind.”

I process their exchange. The awful truth seeps through me like sludge. A cover up. Jim protected Greenberg. He knew about his sexual transgressions. His crimes.

“You should have tried harder. Stopped the skank!” thunders Sheldon. “Fired her sorry ass.”

“I tried. She didn’t listen.”

Sheldon’s fiery eyes burn into my frozen ones. “Do you know what happens to little girls who don’t listen?”

I shake my head from side to side.

“They get punished.”

My unblinking gaze stays on him as he slides his hand under his jacket and around to his backside. My eyes widen and I hear myself gasp. Oh my God! He’s got a gun—a Beretta—and he’s pointing it at me. Right between my eyes. He pulls back the trigger. Click. My chest heaves as I swallow down panic. As I turn my head away, he swivels and aims the weapon at Jim. Fear fills the other man’s eyes.

“What the hell are you doing?” The terror in Jim’s voice mirrors his expression.

“If you want to see your wife and two kids again...”

He doesn't deserve them!

“ . . . take off your belt and tie up her legs!”

Jim freezes. Sheldon yells.

“Do it!”

### CHAPTER 66

Skye

My heart beats like a jackhammer. Sheldon's gun stays on Jim as he stumbles to his feet. His hands trembling, he unbuckles his belt, sliding it through the loops of his slacks as he staggers toward us, his lips pulled tight in a thin grim line. Sheldon's gun doesn't move an inch as my ex-boss kneels down and coils the belt around my ankles, sparing no mercy for my injured foot. A garbled groan fills my throat as another voice drifts into the room.

"Sheesh. What shipwreck have I just walked into?"

Kayla! Teetering in her stilettos as she heads our way. Hope fills me. Could she be my saving grace?

"Where have you been?" asks Sheldon through gritted teeth.

"Chill, darling," she slurs, taking in the scene while I observe her. Her eyes are glazed and a fine layer of white powder coats her glossed lips. My heart sinks to my stomach. In my career as a news reporter, I've seen this too many times before. She's totally coked out.

"What is this? Some kind of kinky bondage thing?" Her glassy eyes travel from my bound feet to my bound hands. My eyes silently beg for help, but in her drugged-out state, she is completely oblivious.

Sheldon grins. “Yeah. Do you want to play with us?”

Kayla rakes a hand through her hair. “Checkers would be more exiting. I’m out of here. I need my beauty rest.” Pausing, she glowers at me, then laughs a haughty laugh. “Just throw the slut overboard when you’re done with her.”

And with that, she spins around, disappearing out of sight. The sharp staccato of her stilettos fading. Any hope for salvation has just evaporated. Unless Jim comes through.

“Let’s just get it over with,” he mutters to my utter dismay.

“Take her feet,” orders Sheldon as he grabs my wrists.

Jim does as he’s asked, circling his long fingers around my ankles, and together they lift me. Thrashing like a helpless fish out of water, I try to wriggle myself free. But the excruciating pain in my ankle and their combined strength force me to succumb. I’m at their mercy—a limp puppet. A marionette tethered by the strings of their fingers. With the end in sight, tears sting my eyes. I long to vanquish fear. My real enemy. I remember my valiant mother telling me: The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. And Sister Marie saying that God hears our prayers.

Bravely, silently, I pray for someone to help me. To save me from this fate. For my precious daughter’s sake. For my beloved husband’s sake. For all our sake.

Sheldon’s labored breaths cut into my prayers. We’re now at the entrance to the stateroom. He jabs a button on the nearby intercom with his elbow.

A deep male voice instantly responds. Half statement, half question. “Yes, sir.”

I recognize the voice. The yacht’s captain.

“What can I do for you?”

“Take Marilyn out to sea.”

A brief pause. Then... “But sir, visibility is almost nil. And a major storm is about to hit. The waves are already at fifty feet and the wind is about forty miles per hour. It’s not safe.”

Sheldon’s voice hardens. “I don’t pay you to challenge me. Just do as I say if you want to keep your job.”

I hear: “Aye, aye, sir.” In a few rapid heartbeats, the boat stirs. Fifteen terrifying minutes later, I’m outside. Standing on the deck. Still bound. The rain pounding, pricking my skin like needles. The gusting wind, whipping my hair across my face. The boat rocking violently as it battles the ruthless storm.

With Jim out of sight, Sheldon yanks out my gag.

“Where are we going?” I choke out, not sure if I want to know the answer.

The monster aims the gun at me and snickers. “It’s not where we’re going. It’s where you’re going.”

### CHAPTER 67

Skye

A mixture of nausea and fear turns my blood into ice as Sheldon holds the gun pointed at me.

“What do you mean?” I stammer through my chattering teeth.

“It means you’re never going to work in this town again. Turn around!”

I don’t budge. The excruciating pain in my ankle gives me strength, driving stubborn determination into me.

“What part of turn around don’t you understand?” He presses the barrel of the gun into my throat giving me no choice. Hopping on my good foot, I turn and face the dark tumultuous sea. A narrow railing is all that separates us.

“Now, bend over!”

Hesitantly, trying to maintain my balance, I do as he asks as the yacht sails like a wicked rollercoaster over the monstrous waves. My soaked hair draping me like a wet curtain, I keep my eyes focused on my dangling lucky locket, wishing I could clutch it. My teeth chatter, partly because I’m drenched and freezing, partly because I’m wheezing with fear. The Beretta’s now pressed against the nape of my neck.

“Are you going to shoot me?” I stammer, struggling to get the words out as my teeth



clatter . Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

“Maybe.” He digs the gun deeper into my flesh. “I hear there are a lot of sharks in the water at this time of the year.”

My fear morphs into a powerful wave of nausea. I gulp back the bile that burns my throat. I taste salt. I taste bitterness. I taste death. He’s going to shoot me and throw me overboard. Oh, God! I’m going to drown! Die of hypothermia. Or be shark bait! All of the above. I’m living my last story. A horror story that’s coming to its tragic end.

As if reading my mind, he cackles. “That’s right, Miss Know-it-All. When this night is over, you will officially be a missing person. No one’s gonna find your body. Maybe I’ll stay and watch the feeding frenzy. I love Discovery’s Shark Week.” He laughs again. “This will be better.”

“You’re not going to get away with this!” I yell back, calling on my last bastion of courage.

He snickers. “Guess what! You’re not going to be around to find out.”

A sudden clap of thunder booms in the air. Followed by a lightning bolt that cuts through the fog and downpour like the sign of Zorro. Then, as if I’m hallucinating, a bright light beams onto the stormy dark water. Round like a searchlight. Overhead, the whir of blades slices through the veiled sky. A helicopter? The police?

“Huh?” mutters Sheldon.

Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it disappears. Just as quickly, all hope vanishes into thin air. I’m doomed. I’ll never see my beloved husband or daughter again. A tempest of emotions whirls inside me. Terror. Sorrow. Despair. Finality. No one’s

coming to my rescue. Not even my hero. Like the onslaught of a tsunami, sobs wrack my body. Loud, heaving ones.

“Shut up!” screams Greenberg.

Suddenly, sirens blare in the near distance.

“LAPD. Drop the weapon and put up your hands.”

A booming voice. Echoing in my ears as if it’s coming through a megaphone. I blink open my wet, stinging eyes. Bright lights three decks below blind me. The yacht is surrounded by a swarm of police boats! And it’s not moving!

“I repeat. Drop the weapon and put up your hands.”

As the yacht bobbles in the riotous ocean, Sheldon shouts down at them.

“You listen to me, assholes! One move and I’ll blow her to pieces.” He presses the gun harder against me. A shiver of panic zips down my spine. I bite down on my quivering lips so I don’t provoke him. Or throw up.

Another voice, this time female, floats into the air. A familiar, firm, and direct one I’ve heard before while covering a hostage story. The negotiator. Tried and true, Jan Lunden.

“Mr. Greenberg. Please calm down. We want to work with you. Tell us what you want.”

“This is what I want.” His voice bellows against the crashing waves. “I want you to get off my back and let me sail to Mexico with no intervention. Once I’m free and clear, I’ll let her go.”

Or not! I don't believe him. Any way I look at it, my life is over. It just takes one bullet.

An instant response from the voice below: "All units. Put down your weapons. Do not engage." My leaden heart sinks like an anchor as I watch the fleet of police boats retreat. The yacht begins to move again, battling the sky-high waves.

The monster roars with laughter. "The stupid pigs. They fell for it! Should I shoot you now and just get it over with or should I take you on a little cruise? There are a lot more sharks off the coast of Mexico." The cold barrel of his gun digs deeper into my neck.

"Shoot me now!" I scream.

On my next breath, a deafening pop thunders in my ears. The scent of gunpowder surrounds me. My legs buckle.

"Skye!" I hear my name as I go down.

A groan and then a crush of my bones. A rush of heat bellows up my neck and my throat closes. The menacing gray sea and obsidian sky become one as the fog fades to black.

### CHAPTER 68

Finn

The wheels of the gurney grate in my ears as the rain beats down upon me, the wind still gusting. Clad in a rain parka, I'm close by her side, my heart in my throat, as Skye is transported into the chopper to airlift her to a nearby Marina Del Rey hospital. When she came to in my arms, she was shivering like crazy and in a state of shock. Her pulse frighteningly low, her pupils dilated, her lips blue.

Now inside the helicopter, the EMTs work at breakneck speed to get her out of her soaking wet clothes and then wrap her in a thick blanket before inserting a fluid resuscitation IV into her arm and placing an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose. Silently, I sit next to her holding her icy cold hand, never taking my eyes off her. A violent chill of my own runs through me at the thought of how close I came to losing her again.

"I love you, baby," I tell her as we lift off. Weakly, she squeezes my hand as a ghost of a smile appears beneath the plastic mask. That's all I need.

The ride to the hospital takes less than ten minutes. While Skye is rushed into the trauma unit, I'm forced to remain in the waiting room. Eager to talk to her, Billings offers to stay with me, but I tell him to come back in the morning. Anxiousness ticks with each passing minute. And guilt tolls like a death knell at each passing hour. Why the hell did I let her go through with this? What the hell was I thinking? I should have stopped her! Finally, after almost three long hours, a doctor ambles up to me as I stare remorsefully at the floor.

“Mr. Jackson?”

Startled, my head jerks up as he introduces himself. “I’m Doctor Linderman, your wife’s attending physician.” My weary eyes meet his. They look glazed. Like he’s tired and overworked.

“My wife... is she okay?” Apprehension fills every word.

He lifts his horn-rimmed glasses on top of his head and pinches the bridge of his nose. I’ve watched far too much TV to know this isn’t a good sign. My heart thuds in my ears as I brace myself for bad news.

Then, he exhales a breath and twitches a smile. “We’ve done a full work-up on her—an MRI, a CT scan, and routine blood work—and all her vitals are stable.”

I blow out the breath I’ve been holding as he goes on.

“She was in shock, but her blood pressure and heart rate are back to normal.”

“So, she’s fine?” I blurt out.

“Yes, except for . . .”

For what?

“A badly sprained ankle. She tore several ligaments and will have to be on crutches for some time.”

I heave another breath of relief. I can handle that.

“There’s something else you should know.”

My pulse speeds up again, anxiety coiling in the pit of my stomach. “What is it?”

“Your wife is pregnant.”

It takes several moments for the news to sink in. Not too long after I discovered that Skye was alive, she told me it was unlikely she could have another child due to the internal injuries she sustained from her near-fatal accident. She thought I’d be terribly disappointed, but I told her it didn’t matter. I had her and I had Maddie. Everything in the world I needed.

I’m speechless as shock whooshes through my veins. Skye’s pregnant. The baby is fine. A burst of elation... then red-hot rage. The hatred I feel for that bastard can’t be put into words. Or measured. Greenberg not only almost cost me my wife’s life—twice!—but also that of my unborn child. I hope the son-of-a-bitch dies on the operating table. If I could kill him myself, I would.

I take several deep calming breaths, then ask, “Can I see my wife?”

“Yes. She’s awake and eager to see you. Follow me.”

Five minutes later, I’m in Skye’s room. The doctor leaves me alone with a nurse who’s setting a pair of crutches against a wall close to Skye’s bed. She’s now in a hospital gown, propped up against several pillows and covered with a blanket. An IV along with a heart monitor are attached to her. Though she looks exhausted from her ordeal, she’s a far cry from the limp, shivering woman I carried to the helicopter. Her wan face brightens when she sees me.

“Finn!”

I jog up to her bedside. “Skye!” Saying her name is like an endorphin. Sitting down next to her, I take her into my arms. Holding her tenderly, I kiss the top of her head,

keeping my lips pressed against her scalp for what seems like an eternity. It feels so good to hold her. To feel her heartbeat. To know she's still mine.

Finally, I break the kiss and smooth her matted hair. "Baby, how do you feel?"

"I want to go home."

The buxom nurse interjects. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Jackson. You need to stay overnight for observation."

Skye's face tightens, her eyes darkening. I know this look—it's the look of determination. Nothing can sway her.

"No way!" she barks at the nurse.

Before the startled nurse can respond, Skye peels off the heart monitor pad from her chest— Whoosh! —and then yanks out the IV from her wrist. Alarm floods my cells as a fountain of blood pours all over her forearm.

"What are you doing?" shrieks the nurse as Skye bolts upright and wrenches off the covers.

"I'm going home. Plain and simple. You can't keep me here."

If there's anything I've learned in my twelve years of marriage and especially tonight, you can't hold back my headstrong wife. I look at the nurse imploringly. "Please. Can you do something about the bleeding?"

With a look that could kill, the nurse manages to bandage Skye's wrist as she throws her legs over the bed. Her right ankle is taped. Gripping the bed railing, she steps onto her good foot, her balance shaky.

“Let me help you, baby.” For the second time tonight, I sweep my wife into my arms. Sinking into me, she wraps her arms around my neck and rests her head against my shoulder.

“Finn, let’s get out of here!” Nope, nothing can stop my wife.

“Can you please do me a favor?” I ask the nurse.

Narrowing her eyes, the frizzy-haired woman fires me another disapproving look.

“Can you grab her crutches?”

Ten minutes later we’re signed out of the hospital.

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The storm and fog now out to sea, we Uber to the house in less than an hour. I help her upstairs.

“I need to take a hot bath,” she tells me as I transport her to our bedroom. “Cleanse myself of that monster.”

That monster! Rage again surges inside me. I would have liked to have been the one to give him that bullet. Billings beat me to it. Too bad it didn’t kill him. Gravely injured, he, too, was airlifted to the hospital and immediately taken to surgery. For all I care, the sick fuck can take his last fetid breath and go to hell. Where he belongs.

A few minutes later, we’re in my sunken tub. Scented candles lit. The Jacuzzi jets on. Soothing every muscle of our tired bodies. Skye sits between my legs, her back to me, her head against my chest, as I gently sponge her. Running the soft object over her bruised flesh and scattered scars. Relishing every sensuous inch of her body.



Dropping the sponge into the bubbling water, I rub my hand over her belly, knowing there is a life form growing inside her. “Skye, the doctor told me,” I whisper against her neck.

Her hand meets mine as she plays with her gold locket. “We’ll need to add a new photo.”

I hear the happiness in her voice. For the first time in over twenty-four hours, a smile lifts my lips. Knowing there will be a tomorrow, tonight I will hold her in my arms. Never let her go. About to kiss her, I hum a Springsteen song.

“Don’t Look Back.”

The future is ours.

### CHAPTER 69

Skye

Six Months Later

Paris

“M aman! Papa! Regardez-moi! Je danse sur le pont!”

The sweet raspy voice calls out to us, the French accent perfect.

My heart warms as I watch my pigtailed daughter frolic across Paris’s majestic Pont Royal, swinging Kangy and her baby Joey. She’s wearing the big yellow hat and royal blue coat that I bought her for her fifth birthday . My Madeline! The coat, which hung on her then, now fits her perfectly. My little girl is getting big!

Finn squeezes my hand as we trail her. “She’s something,” he says, love and pride brimming in his voice.

“Yup.”

“Just like her mother. Smart, beautiful, and brave.”

I feel myself blush. “And artistic like her father.”

To my joy, Finn’s career has continued to soar. Without Kayla, who’s disappeared

from the art scene. His first show in Paris at a prestigious Left Bank gallery sold out, each painting commanding six figures. Later this year, we will be going to Art Basel in Switzerland, the premier art show of Europe that brings together the who's who of the art world, and then to Hong Kong where Finn's work is in high demand among wealthy Chinese art collectors.

As we walk across the bridge hand in hand, our fingers entwined, I take in the magnificent City of Light and think how lucky I am to be here with my family. I almost lost my life—not once, but twice. One tragic night I may never completely remember; the other I will never forget. As I look down at the Seine, a tourist boat cruises under the bridge. People of all ages are clamoring on the two decks, enjoying the sights of the city and the mild spring weather. I shudder. Six months ago I was hanging over the deck of a yacht in the Pacific Ocean, facing a dark, stormy sea. And a more tumultuous future. Possibly none. With Sheldon Greenberg pinning me against the railing, holding a gun to the base of my neck, I was minutes away from being shark chum. To my horror, the squad of police boats, which had come to apprehend my assailant, retreated. Unbeknownst to me, it was all part of a carefully executed but risky plan. The helicopter that I'd heard overhead earlier didn't fly off. Rather, while the distracting bellow of police sirens sounded below, it stealthily landed on the yacht's helicopter pad. Inside it was LAPD's infamous homicide detective, Pete Billings. And my husband. Both armed and wearing bulletproof vests.

About to say adieu to my life, I heard a gunshot. Cold and nauseated, I couldn't understand why I felt no pain. Perhaps death was numbing. In my last moments of consciousness, the night of my near-fatal car crash flashed into my head. I wasn't even going to take the fleeting memory to my grave because I knew my body this time would never be found. I'd never see my husband or daughter again. Nor would I ever see Greenberg rot in hell.

Darkness claimed me. It wasn't until I came to in my husband's arms moments later that I learned that Billings had nailed Greenberg with one shot. A bullet to his lower

back. No, it didn't kill him. Death was too good for him. Instead, the bullet shattered his spine, leaving him quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down and confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his sorry life. It was a perfect punishment for the predatory monster. Groping women and forcing them to have sex with him will never happen again. He has no use of his limbs, and his dick is as useless as tits on a bull.

His confession—all of it—was caught on tape via the smart watch Billings had given me. Both his attempt on my life and his sexual assault of Nicole Farrell. I, who reported news, was now headline news. Soon after my Pulitzer-nominated story appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, women came out of the woodwork like termites and told the media of how Sheldon had harassed them and/or assaulted them. The first was actress Zoey Taylor, who shared how Sheldon had once propositioned her when she was a masseuse. Then, another after another and not just actresses. The list ranged from writers, directors, and assistants to a FedEx driver, a hotel waitress, and even his proctologist's nurse. A thirty year history of sexual harassment and abuse. His actions disgusting, appalling, and unconscionable, running the gamut from masturbating in front of his victims to forcing them to have kinky sex with him... and everything revolting in between.

All of us testified at his trial, all of us sitting together in the courtroom and wearing black in solidarity. The world had to know about the atrocities we'd suffered at the hands of this monster. The shame and pain we'd endured. The #RememberMeToos we called ourselves. Clad in an ill-fitting orange jumpsuit, a dissipated Sheldon sat in the front in his wheelchair with his lawyer, his head bowed down the entire time, unable to face us. When the no-nonsense female judge read him his sentence—one hundred seventy years in prison with no chance of parole—he looked up briefly and muttered, "I'm sorry." The bastard couldn't even say the two words to our faces. In unison, we gave him the finger.

Sheldon's two guards, who'd attempted to shoot me, were also tried. Pleading guilty, they were each given twenty-five years.

The shitstorm didn't stop with Sheldon. Within days of my exposé, women came out of the woodwork and spoke out about other sexually abusive Hollywood moguls—top directors, producers, executives, and writers. The stories were ugly. Among those implicated was my former boss Jim Hartley, who thanks to his strong defense team, got off being tried as an accessory to murder. But he got his due anyway. Several of my colleagues came forward and accused him of unwanted sexual advances, a few sexually molested against their will. Settlements were made and Jim lost his job. Plus, his wife and two kids. Sentenced to ten years in prison with no parole, the cowardly womanizer wept on the air. I almost felt sorry for him.

Nicole and I, however, weren't done with Greenberg after he was sentenced. Nor were the other #RememberMeToos. Collectively, we filed a class action civil lawsuit for physical and emotional damages. Another victory! We won and were awarded in excess of ten million dollars plus the proceeds of his art collection once it was auctioned off. None of us needed or wanted the money, so we pooled it and started a #RememberMeToo Legal Defense Fund to aid other victims of sexual abuse. My words— Speak Out! —became our credo.

As we near the end of the bridge, my joyful daughter shouts out again, cutting into my reminiscing and bringing me back to the present. Our beautiful here and now.

“Maman, je veux une glace!”

Standing by a vendor, she wants some ice cream.

“You want some too?” asks my husband.

I can't pass up his offer. He knows how much I love ice cream—especially the French kind. He jogs ahead of me to catch up with Maddie and then returns with two cones, a noisette for me and a chocolat for him. After he hands me mine, I get to work, licking the creamy cold treat with my tongue. I roll it around and then lick up

and down. It's so, so good!

"Jeez. You're making me hard," laughs Finn.

Laughing, I take another long lick. "Maybe I can solve your big problem when we get back to our hotel suite." Then, without warning, a sharp pang shoots through my abdomen. Grimacing, I put my free hand to my tummy.

Alarm washes over Finn's handsome face. "Skye, what's wrong?"

I twitch a pained smile. "The baby... it just kicked! Feel!" I place Finn's hand on my swollen belly. The baby, a miracle child like Maddie, kicks again.

Finn's face lights up. "Holy moly! I felt it!" He laughs. "It kicks like a girl!"

I laugh back. I know for sure it's a boy. I accidentally found out when I went for my last ultrasound before leaving for Paris, but didn't tell Finn. He's due in three months. And in three months someone I know is going to be sporting another tattoo on their ass. \*Wink\* It's not me!

My eyes return to my darling Maddie, skipping ahead of us and licking her ice cream cone. She's still too young to understand my complicated story. One day, when she's older, I will tell it to her. I want her to know what happened to me and how a brave group of magnificent women bound together to stand up against adversity. To stand up for themselves. And I will also tell Emmet, her future brother, and raise them both to respect their co-workers and peers—women and men alike of all races and genders—and never turn a blind eye to corruption and injustice. To tyrants and victims, secrets and lies.

Time's up. We no longer have to endure silence. But the fight for our rights is not over. There will always be the next monster, who will try to abuse us. Ready to strip

away our dignity and confiscate our souls.

Wherever there's a story, I'll be there. Dig deep, then dig deeper. I will never stop uncovering the truth. It's the most powerful tool we have.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:56 am*

Skye

Six months later

Los Angeles

“Welcome to Skye’s the Limit . On tonight’s show, five brave, outspoken individuals will join me. Three of them are women; two are men. One is under the age of eighteen. Each claims to have been sexually assaulted by the President of the United States.”

“Stay tuned for their stories . . . ”

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If you were gripped by Remember Me, be sure to read my utterly addictive, highly rated psychological thrillers, The Night Nanny and The Family Guest . You’ll be hooked from the very first page!

Keep reading for exclusive excerpts or get them here!

The Night Nanny

“HOLY TWISTS!... I kept turning the pages until I got to the jaw-dropping ending!”

—Freida McFadden



Please don't worry, Ava. Your baby is safe with me. I'm going to take care of her like she's my own..."

Ever since my daughter Isa was born, I've been struggling. I can't remember anything, and my brain is in a fog. So when my husband Ned suggests we hire a night nanny, I leap at the chance.

When she walks into our home, I smile at her, relieved she's finally arrived. But then I notice her eyes: the color of amethysts. A memory flashes across my brain, but before I can grasp it, it's gone...

Then I see Ned whispering with her as she touches his arm. A chill runs down my spine. But I try to brush it off, sure that my mind is playing tricks on me. I know I desperately need this woman's help.

But then I find my baby girl face down on her stomach and struggling to breathe. I scream as I hug her close and Isa cries in shock. For one moment relief floods my body: she's okay. The next moment I'm frozen to my core as I turn to find Ned behind me...

I look into my husband's deep brown eyes, and realize one thing: he thinks it was me.

I have to figure out what's happening to keep my baby safe. Is this all in my head, or is someone trying to destroy me?

The totally gripping page-turning psychological thriller with twists that will leave you guessing until the very last page. Perfect for fans of Freida McFadden, Shari Lapena, and Daniel Hurst.

## PROLOGUE

Dearest Mama~

If you don't hear from me again, I'm dead.

I'm scared. This place is creepy. It's dark and damp and smells really bad. Musty and medicinal, and I just saw a rat. Somewhere a girl is crying. It sounds like she's in terrible pain. And when I went to use the bathroom, there was blood in the toilet. So much blood I almost threw up.

It didn't look so bad on the outside; in fact, it looked like one of those beautiful homes you work in. All brick, two stories, with a shrub-and-flower-filled yard, and it overlooked a crystal-blue lake. An attractive woman in an elegant suit met me at the front door and instructed me to use a side entrance that led to the birthing clinic in the basement.

Right now, I'm sitting here all by myself in the waiting room on a hard wooden chair, one arm folded across my big, swollen belly. I so wish you were here with me, but I know that if you took a day off from work, that awful couple whose ginormous house you clean would fire you in a second. One day when I become a famous actress, you won't have to work for people like that anymore. If I have it my way, you'll never have to work again, and you and Em can live with me and my baby in our Beverly Hills mansion.

The girl's crying is getting louder. It sounds like she's dying! I want to cover my ears, but someone is calling out my name.

A woman in a white uniform. She's tall and intimidating. Her name is Nurse Bates. I see it on her name tag. She flashed me a smile, so maybe she's nice.

A high-pitched scream is mingling with the sobs, and someone just burst through the door to the delivery room. It's a little girl with waist-length blonde ringlets who's clad in a frilly pink dress. She looks a few years older than Em. Maybe age eight or nine. So pale, she looks like she just saw a ghost.

The nurse yelled at her to go upstairs. But first the poor little thing dashed to the bathroom before I could stop her. When she came back out, vomit was splattered all over her pretty dress. Our eyes connected, hers wide with terror, and then she ran up the stairs as fast as her feet could carry her.

A sharp voice is ringing out at the top of the stairs. “There you are, you naughty child! I’ve been looking all over for you! You should have NEVER gone down there!”

I recognize it. It’s the woman who met me at the front door. She sounds very angry. I can no longer see or hear the frightened little girl. Oh, Lord!! I hope she doesn’t get into trouble.

In the meantime, the sobs have gone silent. The girl before me must have had her baby. Now it’s my turn. I’m freaking out. More than a little.

I’m wearing the beautiful necklace with the small gold cross you gave me and hope it will bring me good luck. That it won’t hurt and there’ll be no complications.

Guess what?! The baby just kicked and I feel a tingle of excitement. I can’t wait to give birth and hold her in my arms. And I can’t wait for you and Em to meet her.

Sorry, I’ve got to go. Nurse Bates is giving me the stink eye. I’m going to give her this letter and ask her to mail it to you. I hope she’s someone I can trust.

Just one last thing... if something does happen to me or my baby, promise you’ll never forget the man who forced me to come to this horrible place.

And to NEVER forgive him.

He needs to pay.

Forever~ Your loving daughter