



Say You'll Stay

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Description: Vasey Hamlin has been loved and forgotten. West is part of her past and she's determined to keep him there. It doesn't matter how many sweet memories he rekindles. There's only pain at the end of the rainbow. There's no way he'll get her to stay.

Weston Evers knows a lot about the art of a deal. He's managed to parlay his meager army earnings into a financial empire. He can size up an opponent in one look and take him down in the next. What he can't seem to do is convince his old love that he's back for good but he'll do anything to get her to say she'll stay forever.

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Chapter One

VASEY

“ I know the bird isn’t going to heaven. I don’t believe in that, but at least he’ll be at peace, right?” Jasmine, my twelve-year-old charge, pushes a piece of sod down into the dirt. I help the girl to her feet.

“Yes.” Even if I believed otherwise, I’d lie to make this girl happy. I smooth down her golden hair. “This is a good place for him.”

Jasmine found the bird on the terrace this morning. The neck had been snapped and the body left there for her to find. She and I always are the first ones to have breakfast. Her father, Thomas Ware, is the only one who is up before us, and he eats breakfast in his office downtown. Jasmine’s stepmother, Roberta Franklin-Ware, doesn’t roll out of bed before nine as only the “poors” need to see the sunrise. She’s not wrong, just a classist narcissist. Yes, poor people see the sunrise because they’re either getting up to work their grueling jobs or coming home from working their grueling jobs. Only the indolent rich can sleep in every day.

As for Jasmine’s stepbrother, Gideon, he stumbles home in the early morning hours from whatever drug or alcohol, mostly both, dominated rager he attended. At sixteen, he’s on the fast track to destruction, but his mother is too afraid of him to intercede. Jasmine’s dad is busy tending to his empire. Plus, it’s obvious to everyone, including Gideon and Roberta, that the Ware patriarch does not care about Gideon.

He does love Jasmine in an absent-minded, open-wallet sort of way, but this enrages

Gideon and Roberta even more. It would almost be better if Jasmine's father despised everyone equally.

"Let's go inside, sweetie. I think it's going to rain."

Jasmine wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and lets me lead her back into the mansion. The summer sun is starting its descent, and by the time we reach the back of the house, the outdoor lights have turned on and the cicadas have begun singing.

Kai, one of the staff members, holds the door open. "There's a situation near the front," he warns quietly as I pass by.

I nod in acknowledgment. "Jasmine, go upstairs and wash up. I'll have dinner brought up. We can watch some Minecraft builds together."

She sends me a grateful, watery smile. We part ways with her going upstairs and me heading toward the situation. I find Roberta and Gideon facing off.

"Going out?" Roberta steps toward her son, who is at the door. Every line of her body screams fear from her tightly clasped hands to her hunched shoulders and bowed head.

The sixteen-year-old stares down his newly healed nose. The surgery he got earlier in the summer has made it perfectly straight. "Why wouldn't I?"

"The Academy's entrance examinations are coming up, and I thought we could go over a few things."

"You study it if it's so important."

"I can't take the test for you."

Gideon makes a face. “Figure it out.”

“If you take this one test, then your future is secured. The Academy has a 100 percent placement rate.”

Her son pulls the door open. “I don’t give a rat’s ass.”

“Every Ware has gone to Harvard, Gideon. You must get in.”

The cold in his eyes could freeze a battalion. “Buy my way in like everyone else does.”

The door slams shut. Roberta’s head falls even farther. I back away quietly. I don’t think Roberta will come after Jasmine tonight, but I can’t be sure. I wish I could pack her up and spirit her to a safe house away from Roberta and Gideon, but her father would hunt me down and kill me then. I do like my life.

Jasmine is pretending to study when I arrive at her room. The TV’s off, and the dinner tray is barely touched. “Hiding on the stairs again?”

She shrugs lightly, not a denial but not a confession either.

“If Roberta caught you, you’d be locked in here for a month,” I chide. The plate is cold to the touch. I take it to the little kitchenette that separates her suite from mine and reheat it.

When I return with the warm food, Jasmine is watching a Minecraft simulation. She hardly ever plays it, but she enjoys watching the videos. I don’t understand the appeal, but there are worse ways to spend an evening.

“I know he’s going to hurt me someday. That’s why I watch him.” She takes the tray

from me without looking away from the screen. The nonchalant tone spears me. Her world is one where she assumes she'll be harmed. I hate that. "Do you think the bird felt anything?"

"No. It's a quick, painless death. I looked it up." I've researched so many gruesome animal deaths that if anyone saw my browser history, I'd probably be locked up. It would be okay if I could get Gideon in there with me.

"That's good." She lapses into silence as she eats.

A few moments later, she says, "Will my death be quick and painless or will Gideon torture me?"

"He's not going to lay a hand on you," I say fiercely.

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm here."

She turns her head until her eyes meet mine. I hold her gaze steadily until she nods. "Okay."

As she readies for bed, I clean up. The easiest thing would be to kill Gideon myself. I clench the table knife in my hand and try to envision myself stabbing him. I can't do it. He's still a child himself. A sixteen-year-old child with an ugly temper and a propensity for cruelty, but still a child.

I have dozens of photographs of animals he's killed—mostly small creatures like birds and rats which the city has in abundance—but no actual proof that it's him. Jasmine and I know that he's the one behind it because he told her, the day after he moved in, that she'd better watch her back because he was going to take everything

she has—her father, her family, her home. The first warning offering was a mouse left on her window sill, which means he crept in while she was sleeping and placed the animal there.

Jasmine woke up and screamed her head off. Her dad was home and came rushing in. I suggested it was planted. Thomas Ware called the exterminator. Three dead mice were discovered outside of Jasmine's window in weird, contorted shapes. Ware believed this was the result of the exterminator, but Jasmine and I knew it was Gideon.

A week later, there was a family dinner. Gideon arrived first. Jasmine came second. I hovered outside the door, so I saw her jump up from the table, and something gray and small flew off in her direction. I heard Gideon laugh. When Ware arrived with Roberta, I had Jasmine in my arms. She was crying and stammering about a mouse on her plate, but the plate wasn't empty. Instead, there was paté in the shape of a panda that wasn't there before. Gideon said that Jasmine was seeing dead mice everywhere because of what happened earlier. Ware agreed, and the next day, a trauma therapist showed up.

Jasmine didn't say a word in those sessions, though. Somehow, she knew that she would never be believed, and ever since then, I have been the only one she told when she found a dead animal near her room or around her belongings. And I knew I could never leave her after that. She'd never be safe alone.

"I'm sorry I'm holding you here." Jasmine rubs her lips together and hugs her big, floppy bear close to her chest.

"I'm not. I love being here." I shut out the memories of my past and focus on the present. I do love Jasmine. Ever since I pulled her from the ocean five years ago, I've loved her. She's a precious, sweet child.

“You’re alone though. Even Daddy has somebody.”

That somebody being Roberta. He must have been lonely because why else would he hook his carriage to such a terrible human being? I guess she doesn’t look terrible to a man. She’s tall and blonde with a big rack, and despite being in her mid-thirties, she still looks dewy fresh. I should give Ware credit for marrying someone his age instead of a twenty-something model.

“I don’t think I’m meant to be with anyone, Jasmine. Some people are okay being alone. Plus, I’m not really alone. I have you.”

“Don’t you want a husband some day?”

I stroke her small head. “What’s brought this on? Why are you trying to marry me off?”

“I’m not. It’s just like, even in some of the Minecraft sims I watch, there are couples. You’ve never been a couple, Jasmine. Aren’t you lonely?”

“No.” I need to get out of here. I give her a swift kiss on the forehead. “Don’t stay up too late reading.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I try not to rush out, to make it look like she’s hit a nerve, but for some reason, her words are causing me to tear up. Yes, Jasmine, I’m lonely because I have been a couple before. I was one half of a perfect whole, and because of that, I will never be able to love another. I gave my heart to someone a long time ago, and even though he no longer loves me, he no longer wants my heart, it is still in his hands.

I close my bedroom door quietly and sink to the floor. That someone lives here in this

city. He's only a few miles away. I can't text him, can't reach out to him. I severed that connection long ago, and I don't deserve to ask him for help. He probably hates me. Even if he doesn't hate me, I know he's moved on. I agonize about it, avoiding all society pages so I don't have to read about who he's seen with. I know he's with someone. How could he not be? He's too attractive—and now too rich—to be single. I try not to think about it but sometimes, particularly at night, it torments me. Images of him with another woman, him kissing another woman, him putting his hands and mouth on her body. Him sliding his cock inside of another woman's sex. I cry out, the sound startling me in the silence of the room. I bite the back of my hand and reach between my legs with my free one.

I try to replace those bad images with the good memories that I've kept, ones that I've tended carefully and revive again and again even though I know they're bad for me. The ones where we were young and dumb but so, so eager. He would do anything with me. He loved my body. He brought it to life.

I rub myself slowly at first, remembering the feel of his rough fingers, the inexperienced but eager exploration. We were each other's firsts in every way. He learned everything I liked. How the friction against my sex needed to be hard and fast, and that he could make me come just by rubbing me, even through my clothes. He took advantage of that, by getting me off in theaters and at restaurants.

Once he even did while he was driving. We were going to the shore, over three hours away. I'd gotten bored and horny from watching him drive. There had always been this innate sexiness about him. He handled himself with such confidence, even back then when we were teens, that I didn't have much control when I was alone with him. That time, I slipped off my panties and braced my heels against the dash and fingered myself. He swore and reached across the console and pushed my hand away. His long fingers replaced mine, and it wasn't just one, but three that thrust inside me. I pinched my clit while he fucked me with his hand. Never did he take his eyes off the road despite my shuddering and crying in the seat next to him.

The moment we arrived at the shore, he was on me. He hauled me into the back seat, tearing at his jeans so hard that the metal button popped off. He slammed into me and came about two seconds later. Sweat dripping off his forehead, he pressed his nose against mine and said, “Never ever fucking do that again. It’s not safe, and I only have so much self-control.”

He hitched up his jeans, hauled me out of the car, and dragged me down to the beach. I hadn’t come, but he made me sit there and eat subs and chips while I was a mass of nerves and want.

He was right, though. It was unsafe, so I took my punishment silently or what I thought was silent. When the sun set and the shoreline grew dark, he drew me under him. “You suffering, baby girl?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t ashamed to admit to that. I pushed at his T-shirt, hungry for contact. My whole body was quivering.

“You were testing me today.” His hands slid under the elastic of my swimsuit bottom.

“The car ride was boring,” I whined.

“So you decided that you’d touch yourself and make me sit there when I couldn’t do anything.”

His hand hovered over my sex. Every time I raised my hips, he’d lift his hand higher. I couldn’t make any contact.

“West, please.”

“You put yourself in danger, baby. I can’t have that.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Please, please make me come.”

For a moment, he hesitated but he couldn’t hold out because he loved me so. He slid into me gently, but after the first few strokes he lost control. I loved it when that happened. His face would grow taut and his grip hard. I never felt so secure and loved than when he was thrusting inside of me, chanting my name between promises to love me forever.

I move my hand faster and faster, imagining that it’s his fingers between my legs, his hand squeezing my breast. He loved me. Loved me so much that I left him. I come with bitter tears on my lips. I have no right to reach out to him, no right to call him, no right to ask him for help.

I wash my hands and face, pull the nightgown over my head, and take my sleeping pill.

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Chapter Two

WEST

The light goes off on the third floor. I find that my hand is on the door latch of my car, and I have to intentionally peel it off. That's not my house and not my woman. I have no right to her.

Yet.

Vasey Hamlin has been watching over that slip of a girl for five years now, and I'd be some kind of monster to separate the two. When Vasey and I were kids together in the foster system, bumping from one bad situation to another, the thing she missed the most was having a momma. She'd cling to those mother figures even when they slapped her, used her up, and kicked her out. She was always finding excuses for them. Having five kids in the house is hard. Teens are moody. I think I'm a lot to handle.

She never was. She was just a kid looking for a place in the world to call her own. I was going to provide that for her, but I made the wrong decision. I left for the military, and when I got back, she was all tied up. I waited for her to untangle herself. I thought this nanny position would be temporary, that she'd move on and I'd present her The Academy on a silver platter, and that would be it.

That was not it.

I was dumb as fuck to think that, which is why I'm sitting in this car outside of her

employer's mansion with my dick in my hand and not inside her sweet pussy.

Metaphorically, that is.

A half-million-dollar sports car roars by me with Ware's stepson at the wheel. He nearly crashes twice before the taillights wink out of view.

Rumors are that Ware has little interest in this kid, and no one knows why he remarried. Roberta Franklin came from money, but Ware is loaded. He didn't need her or her connections. Her looks are ordinary, crafted by the finest surgeons on the East Side. The only thing Ware seems to care about is his empire and sometimes his daughter. He needs to pay closer attention to his daughter, enough so that the kid doesn't need a nanny anymore. The nanny belongs to me, and it's time to claim her.

"She loves me." Snip. "She loves me not." Snip. Snip. The boy with the scissors laughs maniacally as the locks of hair he's just cut fall to the floor. The call girl on his lap forces out a giggle, but the pained look on her face says she'd rather be on her knees than suffering this.

I catch her eyes and jerk my head toward the door. She doesn't waste a minute in escaping.

"Hey, bitch, get back here," the boy yells. He shakes the scissors at a club staffer. "I paid for that. Fetch her."

The staffer glances in my direction. I nod lightly and stroll over. "I paid for her to go." I pluck the scissors out of his unsteady grip and hand them off.

"Who the hell are you?"

He's only been here an hour, but the coke and booze have him slurring his words

together and swaying in his seat.

“Friend of your mom’s,” I lie.

The chair across from the boy’s is dusted with strands of light blonde hair. A staffer rushes over and tries to clean the seat for me, but the hair clings stubbornly to the velvet. “It’s fine.” I wave the man away.

“So, you’re Ware’s new charge.”

“Son.” The kid juts his chin out. “I’m Thomas Ware’s new son.”

“He adopted you? I hadn’t seen the news.”

“Fuck you.” The response is venomous. Obviously, a touchy subject.

“You seem bored.”

“You don’t know a thing about me, old man.”

“I know your kind of excitement is using a fake ID to get into a bar, snort some coke, and cut off the hair of an Insta model, which screams boredom to me. It’s giving big loser energy.”

He stiffens defensively. “I’m fucking popular. Every bitch around wants in my pants, and every guy wants to be me. Have you seen my wheels? Custom V12 Lambo with hand-stitched Napa leather?—”

“I don’t care.” I am not interested in listening to this little shit talk about the things Ware has bought him so he doesn’t have to actually parent. “If you really want to do something interesting, call this number.” I flip him a card.

There's no need to wait for an answer. Curiosity will drive him to contact me. I know his type. The question is once I have him in my trap, what do I do with the sociopath? I can't easily make sixteen-year-old rich boys disappear, especially ones connected to Ware, but as long as this kid remains in the sphere of Jasmine Ware, my woman is out of my reach.

Things have to change, and I've run out of patience.

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Chapter Three

VASEY

I get up early to ambush Ware. He hardly ever loiters anywhere in the house in the morning. It's almost like he wants to make an escape before anyone can catch him, so I station myself by the front door. Kai eyes me suspiciously.

"Don't piss him off," he warns.

An angry Ware makes for a miserable household. A moment later, the clickety clack of his dress shoes bounce off the tile. Kai moves toward the door in anticipation.

Ware narrows his eyes at me. "What's wrong with Jasmine?"

"There have been a lot of small animals that she's come across that have met with unfortunate endings."

"Killed, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And you think you know who did it?"

"I have some sus?—"

"Darling, off so early?" Roberta's loud voice echoes off the marble floors.

I spin around to see her practically running across the floor, her diaphanous robe billowing like a queen's train behind her.

"This is the same time I always leave." Ware arches an eyebrow. "Whatever dispute the two of you are having, work it out. You can submit your suspicions to me in a report with documented evidence." This last instruction is directed to me, which means I'm getting nowhere with him. It's not like I have anything more than photos of dead animals, Jasmine's fear, and my hunches. No amount of bullet points and Times New Roman fonts are going to help me.

Kai opens the door.

"Don't forget we have the Nock Ball this Saturday," Roberta trills.

Ware pauses, gives a terse nod, and then is gone. As soon as the door closes, Roberta turns to me. The slap comes so fast I don't have time to duck.

"Don't you dare try to set my son up," she seethes.

"I never named your son."

She slaps me again. Kai steps forward, but Roberta shakes her finger in his direction. "I'm the woman in the household. I run this place. If I want to slap you, I can. Report me and Ware will bury you and everyone you know six feet under the ground."

Kai retreats, and I stand there like an idiot because Roberta's not wrong. Ware takes the family's reputation seriously, and me reporting that I was struck by his wife would result in character assassination so severe that I'd be lucky to get a job sucking waste out of the river through a straw.

"Now that we have cleared the air, what will you be doing today?" Roberta peers

down her nose at me.

I grind my teeth together. “Jasmine has activities.”

“Get to it then. You don’t want to be late.”

It’s six in the morning. The girl is still sleeping, but rather than argue, which would earn me another slap to my already sore cheeks, I dip my head and retreat.

There’s only one recourse. I have to go to Weston Evers. He’s my only hope.

I drop Jasmine off at the museum for a class. “I’ll be back in an hour. Do not leave with anyone.”

“I’m not five. I know all about stranger danger.” She rolls her eyes.

“Fine, but no leaving by yourself either. Not even to get food. Eat at the café here if you get hungry.”

“Where are you going?”

“To see an old friend.”

“Oh?” Jasmine is intrigued. I have no social life, so this is uncharacteristic for me. “Is ‘friend’ a new word for going to the library to check out a book or standing in line at the new place downtown that’s selling viral croffles?”

I feel a little twinge of remorse that those are two actual examples of things I’ve done during some of her summer activities. “Those croffles were good, and you ate two of them,” I remind her.

“I know. That’s why I was asking what you were doing because obviously I’m going to want at least a half dozen.” She grins cheekily.

I pinch her chin fondly. “You wouldn’t be able to eat more than two, but no croffles today. When I pick you up, though, we can go to Jill’s Candy and get a banana split.”

“Deal.” She smacks my hand and then takes off.

An hour is not much time to get to The Academy, convince Weston Evers that he should help me without any reward, and return here for Jasmine, but a girl’s gotta make do. I hail a cab and tell them to haul ass downtown. The Academy is on the Lower East Side in a giant brick building that used to be an old garment factory in the twenties. The internet says that in the '60s it was bought by a Dutch woman wanting to incorporate Montessori elements with psychology and art training. While very prestigious, it had funding problems and was about to close when two years ago, it was saved by an anonymous buyer.

The only reason I know the buyer is Weston is because I overheard Roberta and Ware arguing about it. Roberta wanted Ware to buy Gideon’s way in, and Ware refused. He said that Weston Evers wouldn’t take money for a student and that Gideon needed to earn it anyway because how else would he even survive as a student there if he couldn’t pass the admissions test?

Roberta argued and cajoled, but Ware wouldn’t be moved. When I heard West’s name, I nearly died. I started trembling and ran to my bathroom and threw up. I had tried so hard to get over him, but there’s no forgetting your first and only love. You bury it deep inside you, but it sits there, like a vine, and slowly overtakes you. I press my hand against my heart and take a shaky breath as I step out of the cab.

I don’t know what I’m more afraid of: that he remembers me or that he’s forgotten me.

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Chapter Four

WEST

“Y our admin is looking frustrated.” Griff Harris leans back so he can get a better view of Headmistress Susan’s annoyed face.

“She wants me to care about what is happening here at The Academy.” I flip through a proposal for new student workstations and sign the contract.

“And you don’t.”

“Not really.” I toss the signed paperwork onto the completed pile and reach for another contract. “I didn’t buy this place because I have a keen interest in schools. I bought it to woo a woman into my bed.”

“That seems to be going well.” Griff snorts.

“Mock me more and you’ll find a lipstick stain on your shirt. Have fun explaining that to Lauren.”

“Do that and I’ll kill you.”

He’s probably serious. I move to a different topic. “Did you find someone to fight Mick?” Mick is Griff’s nineteen-year-old soon-to-be brother in law who has a surprising aptitude for boxing.

“Yeah, I’m bringing in a trainer from Las Vegas who has coached two world champs. I want Mick to have good fundamentals.”

“I invited a kid to the Friday night sparring. Mick would be a good opponent for him.”

“You’ve seen this kid fight?”

“No.”

“He any good?”

“Doubtful.”

“Then why the hell are you bringing him?”

“Because he needs the shit kicked out of him, and since he’s a teen, it’d be unseemly for me to do it, but Mick would be perfect.”

Griff frowns. “You’re not telling me the whole story.”

A knock at the door delays my response. “Give me a second and I’ll explain.”

The person standing just outside my door causes the words to die on my tongue.

Suddenly I’m fourteen and at Bill and Mary Johnson’s home, my fourth foster placement in as many years.

I hate them on sight. She’s got a mean, tight mouth, and Bill’s got a wandering eye. I don’t want to stay here. I figure I can get myself kicked out in three days. Maybe less.

I open my mouth to tell Mary that her home smells like old fucking socks when a wave of honey-blond hair appears in the living room.

“This is Violet. Violet, this is your new brother Wesley.”

“Weston,” I correct.

“Wesley,” Mary continues as if I never spoke, “you will share a room with Mark. He’s currently pulling weeds in the back garden. Violet, show Wesley his room and get him changed. He can help you all with the evening chores.”

“While you wait for ol’ Wes here to get ready, why don’t you make the bed?” Bill suggests.

Violet tenses. She’s got a perfect read of Bill, too, which means going into his bedroom is not something she wants to do.

“At my last placement, the family had a small motel, and I changed about a bazillion sheets, so I can do that for you.” I tack on a “sir” so he doesn’t beat me for ruining his little plan to watch this girl bend over his bed. “I’m good to work in these.” I pluck at my plaid button-down that I got from the charity bin. It’s the “nicest” thing I own since everything else in my pack is worn jeans and hand-me-down T-shirts.

“Fine. Do that,” Mary orders. “Violet, while Wesley makes the bed, you can put away the dishes from lunch. After that, go out and finish weeding and then pick all the green beans and whatever else is ripe in the garden.”

Both of us get our duties done quickly. I meet Violet at the back door.

“It’s Weston, actually. Not Wesley,” I tell her because for some reason it’s important she know my real name.

“I’m Vasey.” She holds out her hand. “Not Violet.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is?” Mary exerts control over her charges by changing their names. How fucking annoying. “How long have you been here?” I ask as we make the trek to the decent-sized garden plot in the back yard. A small boy is crouched between rows of greens.

“Six months. It’s not so bad. We get three solid meals. Mary’s a decent cook, and she doesn’t mind if I take the reins now and then. Bill likes to watch, but he doesn’t touch any of the kids. Could be a lot worse.”

I point a finger at a circle of bruises around Vasey’s wrists. “How do you calculate those? Part of the worse or the not so bad?”

“I’ll take a little squeeze around my wrist over being scared someone’s coming into my room at night.”

“Fair.”

”How about you? What happened at your last home?”

“Kicked me out because I was too old. It was a good place, but I guess I wasn’t cute enough. I don’t know really.” Saying it out loud brings back some hurt. I was disappointed—no, to be honest, crushed—they were done with me.

A small hand slides into mine. “I think you’re pretty cute.”

My gaze flicks from our interlocked fingers and to her big beautiful eyes, full of warmth and sincerity. I fall in love with her right there. “You probably haven’t seen more than five dudes in your whole life.”

She grins at me. “And what about it?”

She looks the same. Beautiful, like she was birthed by the sun itself, but the cheerful disposition she held all her teen years despite never having a stable home, fighting off assholes, and dealing with me is gone. Weariness is etched into her forehead and in the drooped slope of her shoulders. Her light has gone out, and it makes me insane. Even though I know this is partly my fault, red washes over me.

“I’ll kill him.”

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Chapter Five

VASEY

The woman at the front with a plate on her desk that reads Headmaster eyed me warily when I asked to see Weston Evers. Eventually she nodded toward a door, not even giving me the courtesy of speaking to me. I could tell from the tightness of her mouth that she was annoyed, but it had been that way before I asked her anything. The woman fit what I would think a headmaster would look like. Uptight, stick in the mud. I guess a fancy school would be pernicious. I'm sure it is also boring.

My breath hitches when I catch sight of West. His office door is open. I stand there, rooted for a long moment, taking him in. He had always been larger than the other boys, but he has now grown into a man. He's added about thirty pounds of muscle and is a few inches taller. But he's still devilishly handsome.

He's wearing slacks with a buttoned-up shirt. The sleeves are rolled up. West isn't only a man, he is a well-off one. He's so freaking different but the same in so many ways. How that is possible, I don't know. It's clear he's in a whole other league. One that I exist around but definitely am not a part of. I never will be. No matter how hard I have tried, I could never find my spot or anyone that wanted to stick around.

I'm sure there are a million other things that have changed about West besides his looks. He could be married with kids too. I shake those thoughts from my head. I won't let myself picture him with another woman or think of him having a child with someone else. It's something I'd rather stay ignorant of. I'm perfectly fine remaining in my little bubble when it comes to him.

So many of my core memories are with him. They were the happiest times of my life, and I don't want them to be sullied by reality. Thinking of him with anyone else is a sure way of doing exactly that. There were many nights as we lay awake that I would share with him my dreams of becoming a teacher. To be a mother one day. To have a family. One that was my own. He'd always tell me that I'd make beautiful babies. I yearned to have children with him.

Stop , I order myself. I can't go there. This is not the time to take a trip down memory lane or dream of what could have been. I'm here to try to save another little girl . I'm not sure how it is that I think West is going to help me. But somehow, I know he might be my only hope. He always protected me when I was a young girl. Until he was gone.

Forcing myself, I lift my hand and knock, interrupting the man he's speaking with. West's dark green eyes that I picture so many nights lock with mine. We stare at each other for a long moment. Is he trying to remember who I am? Does he not recognize me after all these years?

His mouth moves, but I'm not close enough to hear him. The man next to him raises his brows. "Why don't you come in?" he offers.

"Are you sure?" I lick my dry lips. This is West's office. Shouldn't he be the one to invite me in?

"Of course." West finally speaks but doesn't move. His eyes remain on me.

"We'll finish this later," the man says before giving me a nod as he passes by. I hear the click of the door close behind him, leaving West and me all alone. A rush of nerves suddenly hits me, but I push it down.

"I'm not sure if you remember me." My voice cracks a little. I take a deep breath,

getting a handle on myself.

“Violet?” I snort a laugh, covering my mouth with my hand. In a snap, West puts me at ease. “It’s been a long time.” He moves, clearing the rest of the space between us. His hand comes up to cup my cheek. I lean into it. The familiarity is welcome. “How have you been, Vasey?”

Emotion starts to rush through me. I fight it down so that I can speak. This is harder than I thought it would be. I want to fling myself at him. To get lost in him the way I used to when I was younger.

“Okay,” I lie.

“Don’t lie to me, sweetn—” I stiffen. “Vasey,” West quickly corrects, thinking I didn’t want to hear him call me the term of endearment he used to use. My stomach tightens, and I realize how much I’ve missed that word. It had been so close to leaving his lips, but I fucked it up. That really is starting to be the story of my life. But I can’t fuck this up. Not for Jasmine. She needs me.

“I’m sorry, West.” I step back, making him drop his hand. Guilt tugs at me. It’s twofold, really. I did lie, but I’m also here because I need something. This is not a social visit for me to tell him how much I’ve missed him. I suppose he hasn’t sought me out either. I’m sure a man with his means could have found me if he wanted to. The thought of him not wanting to is way too much for me to think about in this moment.

“You don’t have to apologize.” He steps back too. His hands form fists at his side. Have I pissed him off? West could be quick to anger, but it was never at me and often in defense of me. “Would you like something to drink?” He moves toward a small kitchen area.

“No, I really don’t have a ton of time.” I pull out my phone and check it. Shit. “I’m sorry,” I mutter again. Wow, I really can’t get it together here.

“Sit,” he orders, coming back over to put his hand on my hip to move me toward one of the chairs. West takes the one next to mine, leaning in close like I’m about to tell him a secret. I suppose it might be.

“I need your help,” I blurt out, knowing that time is running out because I have to be back to pick up Jasmine. “I mean, would you help me?” We aren’t who we used to be. I can’t assume West is still the boy who would always help me. He has a life. A big one.

“Did you not think I would help you, Vasey?”

“I honestly don’t know anymore.”

That’s not a lie.

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Chapter Six

WEST

I should have gone to her sooner. I don't know why I didn't. Was it pride? Was it hurt feelings? When I was discharged, I went straight home only to find out she'd moved. When the Army fixed its fucked-up logistics, I found a letter where she wrote to tell me of a nanny position she'd accepted. I followed her here and found her living in a mansion bigger than the mayor's house from back home. Her boss was one of the richest men in the world.

I couldn't compete with that on my retired sergeant's salary, and decided I'd earn money and come back to her. I bought The Academy for her. When she didn't come to me, I laid a trap for the stepson and figured I'd blackmail her into my bed by agreeing not to press charges for trying to steal test results in exchange for her by my side.

The sadness in her eyes, the air of desperation that holds her frame tight, kills me. I shouldn't have waited this long. I lean against my desk.

"Tell me what you want. Not what you need, but what you want, Vasey."

She doesn't comply with my unstated order. "I'm a nanny now."

"For Thomas Ware."

"You know?" She seems surprised.

I get the sense that if I'm completely honest with her, that I've been watching her for months now, that she's going to be pissed off and leave. "Ware's very wealthy, and I own a school for wealthy kids."

She nods. "That's right. I'm surprised you own this. It doesn't seem like something you'd be interested in."

"Are you referring to my less than great performance in high school? I admit scholarly shi-stuff has never been on my list of must-haves, but this seemed like a good investment."

"Really? A school?"

"For wealthy kids."

She gives me a disbelieving look.

"Okay, it's a good tax write-off. Like a charity."

"But for wealthy kids," she adds.

"Something like that." Fuck, none of this sounds very believable. I might as well tell her the truth. "I bought it for you."

She bursts out laughing. And doesn't stop. I get up and go pour her a glass of water.

"Thanks," she sputters with eyes wet and cheeks red. She looks edible. I could take a bite of her right now.

"It wasn't a joke."

“Sure.” She rolls her eyes as she takes a drink.

“Why would I buy a school if not to give it to a school teacher?”

She sets the glass carefully on the table next to her. All traces of laughter are gone. “I’m not a school teacher, I’m a nanny, and if you bought this for me, you’ve made a big mistake. I only ever wanted you. I didn’t need money or things. I just needed you.”

“You know why I left.” I hate that we’re rehashing this.

She rises. Her mouth is pinched tight. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Is it Ware? Do you love him?”

“No. Not that it’s any of your business, but he’s my boss.”

“As if that has stopped anyone before,” I scoff.

“So you’re sleeping with the headmistress out there.” She jerks her thumb in the direction of Susan’s office.

“Of course not.”

“Why? What’s wrong with a little office romance?” Vasey taunts.

I bite back a retort and rub the creases between my brow. The last few days before I shipped out, all we did was argue. She didn’t understand that I wanted to provide for her, that I needed to be able to put food on her table, buy her pretty things, or I wouldn’t be able to allow myself to love her.

“Vasey, I don’t want to argue with you. Tell me what you need and I’ll fix it for you.” I’ll get her list of wants later.

She adjusts her purse strap, appearing to think on it, and then says, “Nothing. I was foolish to come here. Goodbye, West. I’d say it was good to see you again, but it’s not really.”

I slam my hand against the door so she can’t open it. “I’m not letting you leave, Vasey. You sought me out for a reason even though you despise me for abandoning you. Get some of your lick back by making me do something for you.”

“Or what? You’ll lock me in this office?”

“Yeah, if I have to.”

“You can’t do that.” Her eyes spark with fire. My cock hardens instantly. It’s always been like this between us. Instant attraction.

“Don’t test me.”

“Are you actually getting turned on?” She pushes me.

“Yes. Why are you surprised? I sported a woodie a good 95.5 percent of the time I was near you and the other 4.5 percent of the time was because I was passed out.”

“I don’t care.”

“Your body says something totally different.” Her nipples are poking through her shirt. I drop my hand to cup one of them.

She hisses when I pass my thumb over the pert tip. “See,” I whisper hoarsely.

“Nothing’s changed between us, sweetness. Tell me what you need from me. I’ll take care of it. I’ll take care of you.”

I bend down to kiss her, to take her tender mouth with mine, but she ducks out from under my arm and out of my grasp. I bang my head against the door once before twisting around to see her take her phone out of her purse.

“Is it Ware you’re calling or the police?” I’m hoping it's the police because if she runs to Ware when she feels in danger, then we’re going to have problems.

“A cab. I need to go pick Jasmine up. What would Ware do?” She scowls.

It’s the first positive sign she’s given me. I adjust myself and back away from the door. “Come on. I’ll drive you.”

“No. Jasmine won’t get into a car with a stranger.”

“You can introduce us, and then we won’t be strangers anymore.”

“We’re strangers because you made it that way, and that’s how it’s going to continue to be. Leave me alone, West. It shouldn’t be hard. It’s what you’ve done for the last ten years. You have a lot of practice.”

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Chapter Seven

VASEY

Coming here was a mistake. My desperation has put me back in West's hands, but it's not how I ever pictured it. His hand holds my wrist tightly, not letting me go. I knew I wasn't going to win the battle of calling a cab.

I should've known better. It's the reason he now has me by the wrist, leading me out of his office. The headmaster lady watches us walk by over the brim of her glasses. She still has that annoyed expression on her face. I know it's pointless to even try to break free.

"Mr. Evers." She tries to snag his attention.

"Handle it." West doesn't spare her a glance. One of his fingers drifts back and forth, stroking the inside of my wrist. My thoughts and emotions are already all over the place, his touch isn't helping. I'm still trying to process some of the things he'd said to me.

"But there—" She tries again.

"I don't care," he snaps with a finality that makes even my spine stand up straighter. The woman's brows shoot up. It's not until we enter a garage bay with a line of fancy vehicles that he releases his hold on me. "In," West orders, holding open the door to a fancy SUV.

“West—” I try to talk some sense into him.

“Get in, or I’ll put you in.” I glare at him, but his expression is unwavering, giving nothing away.

When he moves to grab me by the hips, I quickly get in before he can. I don’t think I could handle his hands on my body right now. I’m already a mess inside.

“Where to?” he asks as he leaves the bay.

I bet all those fancy cars belong to him. West really did make it. It was a struggle for me to finish college. I was always trying to find grants and loans to help pay for it while still keeping a roof over my head.

“The museum on Lincoln.” I pull out and check my phone again.

I should have told him to go to the bakery down the street from the museum, damn it. Now he’s going to drop me off right out front. Everyone will see, including Jasmine. I was hoping to somehow maneuver my way out of this before then. But I can’t think straight with him so close to me. I need to get it together.

“Don’t get any ideas. We’ll pick the kid up, and I’ll take you where you need to go.” I forgot how well he knows me. Or used to anyway.

“Her name is Jasmine.” I say it defensively.

“Jasmine,” he repeats, glancing my way, and he offers me a half smile. A dimple appears on his right cheek.

A familiar flutter that only he could give me returns. I have always loved his dimples. Every time I’d kiss his cheek, I made sure it was on one of them. Then West started

to turn his head whenever I did so that our lips would brush, until he finally kissed me on my fifteenth birthday. It was the most special birthday I've ever had.

"You're protective of her."

"I adore her."

"You always wanted to be a mom." I know he's not trying to be insensitive, but his words strike a chord in me. I have always wanted to be a mom. I had planned for it to be of his children, but that didn't work out for me. I might not have loved the foster care homes, but I did love all the children together. It was why I wanted to teach.

"She's not mine." I wish. Then I could take her. I could really protect her then. Or maybe not. Mr. Ware is a very rich man.

"Is that what you want?"

"What?" He can't mean what I think he does.

"For her to be yours?"

"I want her to be safe and happy." To not be terrorized. No little girl should have to live that way. I don't understand Gideon's need to torment her. Then again, do we ever know why crazy people do the things they do?

"What is that?" West asks when the SUV rolls to a stop at the light. He grips my chin between his thumb and index finger to tilt my head to the side.

"What?"

"A small bruise." I pull back from his hold to flip down the sun visor to get a look in

the mirror for myself. There is a small bruise from when Roberta struck me. It must have started to form only now.

“I don’t know.” I flip the visor back into place. There is no way I’m going to admit to West how I acquired the bruise in question.

“You’re starting to piss me off with the lying.”

“Well, you’re just pissing me off in general!” I throw my hands up. “It’s a stupid bruise. It doesn’t matter.”

“It fucking matters,” he bites out. “Was it Thomas?”

I jerk around at his question. “You really have dug into my life.” I shake my head, fighting the sting of tears.

“Was it him?”

“No.” That one I can answer honestly. “Such bullshit,” I mutter.

“Sweetness.” West’s hand comes down on my thigh.

“No, West!” I break. I’m so mad about the fucked-up shit I’m dealing with at the Ware’s and now this. “It’s clear you have known where I’ve been for a while, Mr. I bought you a school and I also know where you live and what you’re up to . It’s all bullshit!” I shout the last words. “Then, where have you been? Why did you leave me? Do you not know how to call or even send a text?”

“It’s not?—”

“I don’t give a shit what it’s like, Weston.” I use his full name, knowing it will hit the

bullseye and piss him off. “You couldn’t have missed me that much.” I jerk off my seat belt as we pull up to the museum. “Just forget about me like the rest of the world.” I try to open the door, but it won’t. “Unlock it.”

“No.”

“I swear to God if you don’t—” I’m cut off when West’s hand cups the back of my neck, pulling me toward him.

“You might have liked me, loved me, but I fucking love you, Vasey,” he grits out before he takes my mouth in a hard kiss.

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Chapter Eight

WEST

T ouching her is a mistake. Kissing her is fatal. The desire I've suppressed for the past decade rushes to the surface. This kind of love never dies. I devour her. I dig my hands into her hair, pulling her close. There's too much distance between us, too many clothes. I angle her head so I can gain deeper access.

My hold is tight and fierce. Her body can't move, but her mouth can. Her lips part. Her tongue battles mine. The fire between us has never died. I taste the hunger on her tongue. I run one hand down her arm and stop at her waist. I need her on top of me. I need to be inside her. My fingers search for a zipper. My fierce want rings in my ears, an incessant buzz of longing blaring in my head.

"West!" Vasey pushes me back.

I blink at her in confusion and then shake my head. The ringing isn't my lust, it's my driver. I lower the divider. He gives me an apologetic grimace. "We're here, Sir."

I nod and let the smoked glass slide up. "We'll drive you and Jasmine home."

Vasey has brushed her hair back into place and straightened her clothes. Despite her attempts at respectability, her lips are cherry red, and her cheeks are rosy. She looks like a woman who's been loved up.

Not enough, though. I have a decade of loving to make up for.

“Jasmine won’t get in the car with you. And...I need time to sort through”—she waves a hand in my way—“what all this is.”

She’s pissed, and she has every right to be. It’s not that I was wrong to go to the military, to want to make money, to provide for her. It was wrong to fight before I left and wrong to allow distance to grow between us. Her ignoring my declaration of love with a hand wave should at least irk me, but I can only acknowledge that this is the result of my fuck-up. I thought this big gesture would win her over, but it doesn’t. I get it. I’ve got work to do.

“Fine, but you’ll be sorting through with me around. I’ve learned my lesson. Go get Jasmine, and we’ll take her back to Ware’s. I’ll meet with Ware and let him know that you and I are getting married so he can have time to find a new nanny. Obviously, you can see Jasmine whenever you want. I won’t stop you.”

Her mouth parts. I smile. I almost miss her hand coming up to slap me. I catch it and press her palm to my lips. “What’d I say wrong this time?”

“You won’t stop me from seeing Jasmine? You don’t have any rights over me, West. You can’t just appear out of nowhere, say you love me, and expect me to fall in your lap.” She jerks her arm out of my grasp.

“I know.” I try to soothe her. “I know I did you wrong, and I’m going to make up for it.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to.”

My gaze falls to her pert nipples pushing against her shirt. I bite my tongue from stating the obvious. “Then it’s my job to make you want me, isn’t it? Let’s solve your Jasmine problem. You’re worried about her and don’t want to leave her. If it’s not her dad that’s the problem, then it’s his wife or kid.”

Her mouth thins out at the mention of Gideon. “The kid, then.” I act as if I don’t know. “Have you talked to Ware?”

“I tried this morning, and he told me to write him up a report, but I don’t have any proof. It’s just a gut instinct thing.”

One that at least one other staff in Ware’s household shares. “Does it make sense for me to send you and Jasmine back into the lion’s den without protection?”

“Ware would never let you take his child from him.”

She’s right about that. I don’t have any legal recourse, either. “How about you tell Ware that you’re going to a summer sleepaway camp and come stay at my place on the shore?”

“He wouldn’t buy that. He’d say to go stay at his place down on the island.”

Ware is a fucking impediment. I wonder if Vasey has feelings for him that she’s not admitting. I fist my hands. “You’re putting Ware between us, and that’s going to be a problem.”

“He’s not between us.” She puts her hand on the door and then turns to give me a bitter smile. “Because there’s no us.”

She scoots out the door and runs over to a small girl wearing long shorts and an oversized white T-shirt declaring her love for Wonder Woman. The girl beams at her and starts chattering immediately. Vasey gazes down on the girl with serious affection. It’s like a punch to the gut. That should be our kid.

Going over there will upset her, though, and I don’t want that. I watch as the two climb into the waiting car, and then I follow them back to the Ware mansion. The

black gates open and swallow them up. I look around and see a driveway behind me. I press the buzzer.

“Who is it?”

“Weston Evers. I want to buy your home.”

Two hours and an obscene amount of money later, I am the new owner of the mansion across the street from Ware. There’s an unfurnished carriage house with a bedroom and a bathroom at the front of the property that’s unused, and to the confusion of the former owner who said that they couldn’t vacate the property for a week, I start ordering shit. Bed. Dresser. Portable stovetop. As everything is delivered, I stand at the side of the road to monitor the situation. And by monitor, I mean I sit in a lawn chair and stare at Ware’s drive. Soon enough, the black gates open, and Vasey appears on the other side of the road.

“What is going on?”

“I’m your new neighbor, sweetness.”

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Chapter Nine

VASEY

I bite the inside of my cheek so that I won't smile. I can't smile because I'm pissed off, but nonetheless, my mouth tries to form one. This is a very Weston move. He always had a knack for pushing his way through obstacles. If he had a goal, nothing would stop him from achieving it. He was relentless. Obviously, time hasn't changed that aspect of him.

I suppose part of my hurt stems from the fact that it took him so long to find me. Scratch that; he clearly always knew where I was. He just hadn't attempted to contact me. I think that's what I'm struggling with. In fact, it was I who ultimately reached out to him.

That's how it had been when he made the decision to go to the Army. He didn't even take my opinion into account. I begged him not to go, but still he went. He left, but I'd been the one to end things.

I told him if he left me, I'd leave too. I was young and stupid. Hurt, really. I had become accustomed to people abandoning me or leaving me behind. I wasn't the best at handling things either. Still, those wounds ache inside of me.

"You can't be serious." Of course, he is. West starts crossing the street.

"I won't stop."

"And I won't leave her."

"I know." His words make me relax a little. "All I want to do is help. Isn't that why you came to me?"

"Yes," I said, dropping my eyes. It's difficult to stare into his. It brings back so many emotions. "I don't know," I mutter. I can't think straight around him.

"You don't know?" West puts a finger under my chin, making me meet his gaze again.

"If I'm honest, I think a part of me just wanted to see you." His brows lift, and a smile pulls at his lips. I can still feel the warmth of his kiss on my lips. "I'm still mad at you." There's not as much fire in my tone now. It's ridiculous that he moved in across the street, but another part of me is filled with relief that he will be so close.

"I know, but you're talking to me, so I'll take it." His thumb brushes along my cheek.

"I can't believe I'm going to ask this." I shift on my feet. "Never mind." I wave my hand, needing to get out of here before I say things I shouldn't. West grabs me by the wrist, preventing me from leaving.

"Say it," he orders. I don't break his stare; my challenge is clear. He has no right to make demands of me. "Please." He quickly changes his approach. This time, I can't fight the smile. Weston Evers, always so strong-willed, I was the one that could always talk him down. They often sent me to do just that when we were growing up.

"I'm not saying anything is happening between us."

"It is."

I ignore him and keep going. “But I want you to tell me now that you’re staying. That you won’t up and leave.” I’m not sure that I would be able to handle him leaving again.

“I’m never leaving.” West steps closer to me. “I promise.” He sinks his hand into my hair. I can’t stop myself from leaning into his touch. It’s been years since I last talked to him, but there is no one in the world who knows me better.

In college, I kept my head down, working and studying. Then I got this position with the Wares. There was never an opportunity to pursue a social life. Having him back brings a sense of comfort that I haven’t had since he left.

With him so close now, I see how much I’ve missed it. I long to have that connection back. I don’t think I would survive if it were ripped from me again. Even if I tell myself there isn’t going to be a Weston and me again, I still want him within reach. I feel less alone.

I tense when I catch sight of Roberta’s car coming down the road, recalling our encounter from this morning. She can be vindictive in her cruelty. Where Gideon does things to just be a dick, Roberta is more self-serving with hers. They have purpose; Gideon is chaos. I take a few quick steps back from West. He follows my gaze, tensing.

“It’s Roberta, not Ware,” I tell him. “His wife.” Where he came up with this idea that Ware and I were a thing, I have no freaking clue, but West was always territorial when it came to me.

“I know who she is.” That has me narrowing my eyes on him. Not because I think there is something going on between them, but I sense he knows her beyond passing names. He had mentioned he knew a lot of wealthy people because of the school.

“It was her,” West says, his entire body tensing up.

“What?” I look around, unsure of what the heck he is talking about.

“I can see it on you. It was her that fucking hit you.” Oh crap. I may not know this grown-up version of Weston too well, but I know without a doubt how protective he’s always been when it comes to me. Believe me when I tell you, there is no good coming out of him knowing that Roberta is the one that left a mark on me.

“West, don’t, please,” I beg him, pretty much confirming his suspicions. “Not now, please.” He grits his jaw but nods.

Roberta’s car rolls to a stop. The back window rolls down. “And who do we have here?” Her eyes eat Weston up. I can tell she just came from the spa. She is all dolled up. How can someone so pretty be so vile?

“New neighbor,” I rush to say.

“Oh, my.” A come-hither smile spreads across her face. “You should come in. We’ll be having dinner soon.” I glare at West silently, telling him not to accept. He knows what I’m saying. He reads me like a damn book.

“I’d love to.” He smiles back at her. Roberta’s eyes light up, reading West all wrong. I know that smile. West has his sights locked on Roberta now.

And not in the way that she hopes.

Chapter Ten

WEST

“Y ou don’t seem to be the type of man to buy a school or even run one.”

Ware does not like another man at his table. I get it. The home is the castle etcetera etcetera. I probably would be the same, so I keep my temper in check as he prods me. I turn my hand palm up, rubbing the calluses. “What kind of man do I seem like to you?”

“Not one that would buy a school. They’re not profitable.”

“Can’t a man love learning?” Roberta interrupts in a high-pitched, panicky voice. She’s in a rough place. Her man is glaring at me, the person that she is desperate to make happy.

“Is that what you are, Evers? A man who loves learning?”

“Yes, I’ve always wanted to know more.” I stare at Vasey, who is still a mystery despite all the years I’ve known her.

She presses her lips together and drops her gaze to her plate of lobster and steak.

“I hear the entrance requirements are quite high.” West scrapes his knife across the china.

“Which is good for Gideon. He’s really so perfect for your school,” Roberta trills.

“Is he?” Ware raises an eyebrow. “I haven’t seen an application to know.”

“He’s very bright. It doesn’t always show in tests, but aren’t academics moving away from that outdated form of measuring student abilities?” Roberta fixes a bright smile on her face. “If schools like yours aren’t profitable, they must rely on donations. We give generously to many good causes.”

“I leave all of that up to the administration. Like your husband said, I’m not the type of man to run a school. I bought it as a wedding gift. My bride-to-be was always interested in teaching and taking care of kids. I heard that The Academy was looking for a buyer, and that’s how I came to own it.”

“How...romantic.” Roberta is vaguely puzzled.

Ware eyes me thoughtfully. “When was it that you bought the Sampson place? I didn’t realize it was for sale.”

“Today.”

“Today?” Roberta nearly screeches in shock.

“What is the age requirement at The Academy?” Ware asks.

“Fifteen and up.”

“Jasmine is only twelve.” His gaze shifts to Vasey, who hasn’t said a word yet. I can see him compiling the facts. “Vasey won’t leave her.”

“No. I won’t,” Vasey admits.

I clench my teeth.

“Jasmine? What does she have to do with this?” Roberta turns in her seat. “I’ve already applied for Gideon. When will you send out the acceptances?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have anything to do with the admin aspects of the school.”

“I’m not interested in this fu—” Gideon cuts himself off at a pointed look from Ware, “—school. I’m fine where I am.”

“How come it’s only high school students?” Jasmine pokes her head out from where she had been hiding behind Vasey’s arm.

“That’s a good question, but I don’t know the answer. You should come by and ask the headmistress about it,” I invite.

“She’s too young.” Ware closes the door on that.

Jasmine frowns. I give her a wink. “When Vasey comes to visit me, you can at least tag along and see if you’re interested.”

“Vasey? How do you know our nanny?” Roberta demands.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? The two are lovers.” Ware points toward me with his steak knife. “Evers here bought the Sampson residence to be close to her. You two are serious, then?”

“Yes,” I say.

“No,” Vasey says.

Ware smirks. Roberta stares at the two of us in distress. She knows Gideon is never getting into my school. That disappointment doesn't make up for hitting Vasey. Roberta's going to have to pay.

"We're getting married," I follow up so that it's clear to everyone what my intentions are.

"No!" a youthful voice shouts. I swing my attention from Roberta to Jasmine, who has stood up, her little hands fisted by her side. "Vasey is mine. You can't have her. I won't let you! If you let Vasey get married, I'll never speak to you again!" This last part is screamed at her dad before she runs off. Ware blinks in astonishment at the rapidly disappearing figure.

"Jasmine, honey, I'm not leaving you." Vasey casts me an apologetic but frustrated glance and then chases after Jasmine.

I fork another piece of steak into my mouth. Honestly can't believe I'm getting cock-blocked by a twelve-year-old. Ware settles back in his seat, having won this round—or so he thinks.

"Vasey is a big fan of Gideon. I know she would want him to attend your school." Roberta makes a last-ditch effort.

"I'd be careful making assumptions about other people's feelings. You never know when they might strike back." I push back my chair. "Your steak was excellent, Ware. I'll say my goodbyes to Vasey and then leave your family to enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Make sure it's a goodbye," he says.

"You should be prepared to find a new nanny, Ware, because I will never change my

mind about Vasey.”

Vasey meets me at the base of the stairs. “Come here.” She grabs me and drags me into a small room smelling of cigars and leather. The walls are filled with wine racks, and there is a single chair in the middle of the room. Ware must drink in here...alone. The relationship he has with Roberta is curious.

“You can’t be running around telling people that we’re getting married.”

I drop all thoughts of the Ware family and draw Vasey into my arms. “I agree you deserve a proper proposal, but I think we both know I’m going to marry you. Why hide that?”

“Jasmine isn’t ready, and she isn’t safe either.”

“I’m not taking you away right now. We’ll prepare her. And we won’t remove you until she’s safe. But I’m working toward that. It’s been a long time since we’ve been apart. We need to be together now. Tell me, what are the conditions that you need to feel like she’s protected?”

Vasey grimaces. “Gideon has to be gone, but that’s not possible. Roberta won’t send him to boarding school because she wants him to be close with Thomas.”

“Ware has no interest in the kid. He barely has interest in Roberta. It’s hard to understand why the two of them married.”

“To give Jasmine a mom,” Vasey confesses. “He came home one day after a business trip and said he was giving Jasmine what she wanted the most. I thought, stupidly, it was this doll from Japan that she’d been talking about, but it was a mom in the form of Roberta. Only Roberta is interested solely in Gideon, and she hates Jasmine.”

That explains a lot. “This actually works in our favor. We just need to get solid evidence that Roberta is a scheming, dangerous bitch and then present it to Ware. The two get divorced, and you and I get married.”

“How is that easy?” Vasey cries.

“Just watch.”

Chapter Eleven

VASEY

The sound of a mysterious creak has me sitting up in bed. I've been a light sleeper my whole life. Especially when I was younger. Back then, it was about survival. The uncertainty of my surroundings always had me on guard.

The only time I ever fell into a deep sleep was when I was with West. I knew that if he was close, nothing would happen to me. He was my safe place and my protector. I miss having that, but maybe soon I will have it again.

When I hear another creak, I throw my legs over the bed and slowly stand. I try not to make a sound. Jasmine is fast asleep. I ended up falling asleep in bed with her last night. She clung to me, thinking that I was leaving. I reassured her over and over that I wasn't ever going to leave her. Seeing her like that broke my heart.

My eyes stay trained on the door as I tiptoe closer to it. There is no missing the shadow of feet that land on the other side of it. I already have a good idea of who it is. The lock I flicked before turning off the lights tonight clicks over. I grab the handle and open it before he can.

Gideon's eyes go wide when he sees me standing there. He stumbles back a step, giving me room to walk out into the hallway and close the door behind me. I have the element of surprise on my side.

"What are you doing, Gideon?" I make a concerted effort to look at his hand holding

the tool he was using to pick the lock. He doesn't answer. I can tell his wheels are spinning, trying to think of some sort of an excuse as to why he would be breaking into a little girl's room in the middle of the night. The silence stretches between us. He wobbles on his feet, and I realize he's drunk. His eyes are glazed.

"What are you doing?" he slurs out.

"You should go to bed." Gideon's eyes wander down and back up my body, making my skin crawl. I hadn't thought about how I was only wearing thin sleep shorts and a tee.

"We can go to bed." A smirk pulls at his lips. I keep my shoulders back to avoid giving the impression that I'm intimidated by him. Even if I am. Gideon might be a teenager, but he's not small.

"It's late."

"Actually—" He lifts his hand to check the time on his fancy Rolex watch, which likely cost more than I make in a year. He squints in order to see it clearly. "It's early morning." Gideon takes a step toward me. I match it by taking a step back, but I find myself pressed against the door.

"Go to bed." I keep my tone firm. It does nothing. The next thing I know, he's on me, pressing me hard into the door. My hands go to his chest.

"You're not my nanny. I don't have to listen to you."

"Stop it." I push, but he doesn't budge.

"Give me a goodnight kiss first." He lowers his face toward mine, and I do the only thing I can to stop it. I lift my knee and nail him straight in the balls. He lets out a

high-pitched yelp, stumbling backward before he falls to the ground. The tool in his hand lands next to him. I snatch it off the floor.

“You cunt!” Gideon groans out.

“Stay out of her room.” I don’t wait for a response. I hurry back into Jasmine's room, flicking the lock back into place.

I lean up against the door, trying to listen to what he might be doing. My heart is racing. Fuck. I hate that little shit so much. When I feel tears burning, I close my eyes. I will not cry. A million questions flit through my mind, including if he’s going to snitch on me. I’m going to bet not. Then he’d have to explain why he was trying to sneak into Jasmine’s bedroom.

My back slides down the door. I’m not sure how long I sit there, but I see the sun start to peek through the bottom of the blinds. I might have dozed off for a second. I pull myself up from the floor and go to my own room to get dressed for the day.

When I make it back to Jasmine, she slowly wakes up. “Morning, sweetheart.” I drop a kiss on top of her head.

“You’re here.”

“Of course I’m here.” I sit down next to her. “I told you I wasn’t ever leaving.”

“I know.” Jasmine rubs her eyes. “When I asked about you dating, I didn’t think you’d go and get married.”

I let out a small laugh. “I’m not getting married tomorrow.”

“You love him, don’t you?”

“I do.” I tuck a piece of her hair behind her ear. “But I love you too.”

“He stares at you differently than Dad does Roberta.” I'm not sure how to respond, but Jasmine goes on saying what I didn't want to. Not because it's not true. I just didn't want to say it to her. “It's because he loves you.”

“He does,” I agree. Jasmine wiggles to sit up in bed. “Let's not worry about any of that.”

“Can we go see him?” That catches me off guard, but Jasmine can be curious.

“If you want.”

“Today?”

“I'm sure that can be arranged.”

As Jasmine wakes up and prepares for the day, I locate my phone. I see I have a bunch of missed calls and texts from West. It makes me smile. Another text pops up. This one belongs to the Wicked Witch of the West. I click it. A picture pops up. My heart sinks.

It's a picture of Gideon and me from our incident. It's of him pressing me up against the door. My hands are on his chest. It almost looks intimate. Another text comes in from her. The threat is clear.

Get him into that school.

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Chapter Twelve

WEST

I see them walking up my drive before they reach the porch. It's sunny out, and I lift my hand to shade my eyes, welcoming them with a broad smile.

"Here for breakfast? I've got pancakes, bacon, eggs..." My litany of food stock trails off at the grim look on Vasey's face. I bite back a "what's wrong" and stoop down to Jasmine's level. "Or cereal. Your pick."

"I like pancakes," she says.

"With blueberries inside or strawberries on top?"

"Blueberries."

"Awesome. I love blueberry pancakes." I ruffle the top of Jasmine's hair and lead the two inside.

"This place is actually pretty nice," Vasey observes as we walk down the carpeted hall to the sunny breakfast nook at the back of the house that overlooks an expansive lawn, a pool, and a stable. "I guess we got the water on our side and you have the riding trails on yours."

"No horses," I say quickly. "It's for show." At Jasmine's crestfallen face, I hurry to add, "But we can get horses. It's just that the previous owner didn't have any."

“That’s okay.” Jasmine’s words are polite, but her tone is one of disappointment. It makes me want to run out and buy an entire stud farm.

“I’ll have horses here next week.”

“Really?”

“West...” Vasey drawls warningly.

I ignore her. “Really. What color do you like?”

“I don’t know. Brown?”

“I’ll bring in an assortment. Do you know how to ride or do you need a tutor?”

“I know how to ride. I even have boots and a helmet! I went to horse camp last summer!” Jasmine jumps up and down.

“Great. You’ve grown some since last summer, I bet. We’ll need a new helmet and boots along with the new horses. Let’s go make some pancakes.”

“You can make your own pancakes?” Jasmine is wide-eyed.

“I can make a whole shi—slew of stuff. I was in the Army for years. You have to learn to take care of yourself there.”

I take the batter I pre-mixed out of the fridge and set it down beside Jasmine. “Want to mix in the berries?”

She nods eagerly. Together we mix the batter while Vasey heats up the pan. I make the cakes, and the girls set the table. It’s very domestic, very homey, and it makes me

want to throw Vasey onto the counter and impregnate her with my kid. Doing this activity together makes me realize that I want nothing more in life than to have a family with Vasey.

“Jasmine, why don’t you take the iPad and watch a couple cartoons while I help West wash the dishes?” Vasey takes the girl over to the window seat. After the little one is settled in with a blanket, a pillow, and a pair of headphones, Vasey joins me at the sink.

“Gideon showed up outside her bedroom this morning. Made an advance on me”

I clench my teeth and my hands. “That little shit.”

Vasey covers my fist. “He’s a minor, West, and I don’t want to visit you in prison. Plus, Thomas would ruin anyone who tried to smear the Ware name.”

“I don’t care if I’m ruined. I made money in the market to support the two of us and the family we’d have together. I bought that school for you. You and I don’t have any family but each other, Vasey. I’d rather have you than any of this shit.” I wave my hand around the big kitchen. “Plus, what about the girl? Gideon’s not going to stop at making kissy faces with you in the morning.”

“Roberta was there, too. She took a photo, and I’m sure she’s going to use it to accuse me of sexual impropriety with him.”

If that ass stain was anywhere near me, I would grind him into a piece of dust. “Roberta’s not a minor, so let me go take care of her right now.”

“How? Do you really think it’s possible for even you to take on Thomas Ware’s wife?” Vasey sounds distraught.

“Yeah, babe, I do. First, Thomas Ware does not care about that woman. I don’t know why he married her, but it’s not because he loves her. Second, as long as his reputation isn’t harmed, I don’t think he’s going to care what I do to her. He’ll probably be grateful I got rid of an expense on his balance sheet that was dragging him down.” I cup her head with my wet, sudsy hand and pull her face next to mine. “Let me worry about this. I’m going to take care of it. Do you trust me?”

Our faces are so close together I can almost feel the flutter of her eyelashes when she blinks. “Yes, I do.”

“Good.” I give her a quick kiss. Well, it is supposed to be quick, but the moment our lips meet, I can’t stop. I push my tongue between her lips and sweep inside, tasting the blueberries and cream and her sweetness. The dishes are forgotten, the problems across the street drop out of my mind. The only thing I’m able to focus on is her. I angle her head to the side for deeper access. My cock pulses with need. I slide my hands to her ass and lift her off the ground so that the notch of her legs rubs against my cock. I hate the clothes that are between us, the lack of a bed nearby. I spin around toward the island and stride over. Any horizontal surface will do. It’s been too long.

“Are you going to take Vasey away from me?”

I freeze in my tracks. Vasey scrambles out of my arms. We both turn to see Jasmine standing about ten feet away with her headphones around her neck and the iPad in her hand. Her mouth is turned down into a huge frown. She does not approve. Vasey takes a huge step to the side to put space between us. I close the distance and slide my arm around Vasey’s waist. I didn’t anticipate I’d have to fight a jealous twelve-year-old for Vasey’s heart, but a man’s gotta do what he’s gotta do, and I’m not giving up my woman.

“Yeah. I am, but I’m not going to keep her from you. You can visit all you want.

Vasey can still take you to school and classes, but she's going to be living with me from now on."

"No." Jasmine shakes her head. "Vasey lives with me. You can visit, but she's mine."

"Now, Jasmine. I don't belong to anyone. Just like you are your own person, I am my own person, too. West and I have been apart for a long time, and we need to have time together."

I start to smile, but it fades when Vasey turns to me. "You know the situation with Gideon and Roberta. I'm not leaving until that's resolved."

I have my orders. Fix the Gideon and Roberta problem or Jasmine gets to keep Vasey. "Fine. We'll all move into Ware's place. I'll go pack."

"What?" the two girls shout as one.

I grin. "We're all going to be roomies, I guess. Let me know which room is mine."

Chapter Thirteen

VASEY

I have always found it so interesting when and how Jasmine can get her father to bend to her will. I know Thomas has a soft spot for his daughter. I just don't often understand it, considering he doesn't pay her much attention. He also makes terrible decisions that affect her. Marrying Roberta being at the top of that list.

Jasmine really doesn't ask him for much. I wish he would make more of an effort to have a relationship with her. I guess Thomas does what he believes is best and least inconvenient for himself. That's why the Wicked Witch of the West and her demon spawn have become a constant fixture in our lives.

Yes, he loves Jasmine, but he loves himself more. When it comes to home life, Thomas wants whatever is going to make his life easier.

And that is precisely how we have gotten here with Weston having wiggled his way right into the Wares' home. The man really does have a knack for getting what he wants. It's impressive. Honestly, not much has changed in that aspect.

"I raise you three kisses." Jasmine drops three of the silver-wrapped chocolate Kisses into the center of the circle we've made. We're all sitting on the floor in her bedroom.

We told Thomas that Weston was having his place worked on, and with Jasmine not being ready for me to move, that letting him stay here was the best plan. Thomas and I both know Jasmine would be a mess if I moved out. He may not like Weston, but

this is the lesser of two evils for him. Even when he saw her upset at dinner last night, I could tell it bothered him. Jasmine isn't one to throw fits. We bluffed and won. This time.

"Maybe we should play Uno," I suggest for the fifth time now.

When I suggested we play a game together, poker wasn't what I had in mind. Jasmine had never heard of it before, and West told her he'd teach her. Jasmine is curious and eager to absorb anything. There was no talking either of them out of it.

"You're just mad I got all your Kisses." Jasmine giggles from behind her cards.

"I am." West winks at me, making Jasmine laugh harder, we all know he's not talking about chocolate kisses.

I roll my eyes at them but bite the inside of my cheek so as not to smile. The two of them are going to end up in some sort of cahoots if I'm not careful. Now that Jasmine isn't so scared that West is going to take me away from her, she's taken to him.

"So?" Jasmine tries to make a poker face like Weston showed her.

"Hmm." West pretends he's not sure of what he's going to do.

I can tell he is only playing in a certain style in order to teach her. He'd let her have a few hands and then pull some right back. Watching the two of them is entertaining. But I can't help the sadness that creeps into my thoughts. Thinking about the million other life choices and paths that would have been possible. There were so many years lost with West.

Him and me together with our own children. If things had been different. I can't help but wonder if he hadn't left all those years ago, where would we be? Would we have

kids already? I'm sure.

It makes me ache, but I remind myself that this path led me to Jasmine. That her life is better for having me in it. A girl that needs me. I don't want to imagine how things could have been for her if I hadn't been here.

"Call." West tosses his last three Kisses into the pot. Jasmine shows her hand, her eyes wide. West's face falls, and his shoulder drops.

"You got me." He sighs in defeat.

"Really?" Jasmine's expression turns hopeful.

"Yep."

"Yes!" Jasmine jumps to her feet and starts to do a victory dance, making me laugh. She's so animated today. I wonder if having West here puts her more at ease.

"All right." I scoop the Kisses up. "Put these on your nightstand but none until after dinner."

"Okay." Jasmine takes them from me.

"Wash up for dinner too."

"On it!" she chirps, bouncing off toward her bathroom after putting the Kisses away. I reach over and grab West's cards.

"You little liar." I shake my head, smiling at him. With his hand, he cups the back of my neck, pulling me toward him. He meets me halfway, taking my mouth in a kiss. I close my eyes and let myself get lost in him for a few seconds. I was so freaked out

this morning, but now West has washed many of those feelings away, allowing hope to return.

"I'd lose every hand if it gave me that smile and these kisses." I press my forehead against his.

"I've missed you so much," I whisper. "Everything feels okay when you're near."

West closes his eyes for a long moment. "I'm sorry."

"No." I stop him. "No more sorries. Things happened how they needed to."

"All right," he agrees, pressing another kiss to my lips.

"You two are always kissing," Jasmine interrupts.

"Sorry."

"You'll get used to it." Both West and I say it at the same time.

"It's kind of sweet." Jasmine sits down at the end of her bed. "You two seem more like a real mom and dad." She swings her legs back and forth. Jasmine doesn't remember her mother. I often wonder how Thomas was with her.

"That's what you want?" I shoot West a glare.

"It would be nice to be normal." She shrugs one shoulder.

"Normal isn't always what it's cracked up to be." I get up and sit next to her. "West and I didn't grow up anywhere near normal."

“But you had each other,” Jasmine points out quickly.

“And look,” West cuts in. “You’ve got us too.”

That makes both Jasmine and me smile.

Chapter Fourteen

WEST

“What are you really doing in my home, Evers?” Thomas Ware's eyes follow me as I wander around his study. I get the sense that he'd like to plant his boot in my ass and send me across the street. Sad for him, but I spent a decade in the military. I'm immovable when I want to be.

I take a seat. “You have a problem, but you're too busy doing Wall Street stuff to see it. Fortunately for you, I'm here to protect my girl and yours.”

A muscle in the back of his jaw twitches. “Are you going to tell me what it is or do I have to come around the desk and beat it out of you? I'm happy to do the latter.”

“Why'd you marry? From what I read, you seemed to have been disinterested in holy matrimony. No one saw you with any woman at all, and then suddenly your wedding announcement to a random social climber appeared in the paper. Some speculated that you got Roberta pregnant, but no baby ever showed up. You don't love her, so that's not why you tied the knot.”

“Are you an expert on love?” He hands me a glass of whiskey and returns to his place behind his desk.

I take a sip. The stuff is good. “I am now.”

He grits his teeth. “Do you think your past with Vasey gives you the right to question

my personal decisions?”

“No. It’s my future with Vasey that gives me that right. I’m trying to be respectful here, Ware. We don’t need to fight. Not with our fists or our wallets, but I’ll spend every last dollar of yours and mine to secure a future with my woman.”

His jaw muscle ticks again, but after a few beats of silence, he gives way. “I did a background check on Roberta. My people interviewed her friends, family, even her parents. She’s greedy and vain, but she’s a devoted mother who puts her child first and presents no danger to her family.”

So he married her to provide a mother for Jasmine in the form of Roberta. “You miscalculated. Her loyalty only extends to Gideon. The only child she is protecting is hers, and she doesn’t consider Jasmine hers.”

“Spell it out.”

“Jasmine has been the recipient of several dead animals. All small—rats, mice, frogs. The latest was a bird whose neck was wrung. I followed Gideon the other night to a shady club where he was cutting a sex worker’s hair off. That’s what he paid to do. Not to have sex with her but to mutilate her appearance. I gave him a card to my friend’s boxing gym so that when he showed up, I’d have someone beat some fear into him, but Jasmine isn’t safe with him, and neither is Vasey.” I explain to him what happened to Vasey this morning and how Roberta planned to blackmail her. “Obviously, I won’t be allowing him into my school where he could terrorize other girls, and I won’t leave your home until you do something about him. You can fix this or I will.” I get to my feet. “Thanks for the whiskey. I can see you have decent taste in some things.”

I arrive at Vasey’s room to see her pacing. She stops abruptly at the sight of me and then races over to pat my face, my shoulders, my arms. “Are you all right? You

didn't fight, did you?"

I capture her hands and press a kiss to them. "No fighting, and I'm fine. Come over here and I'll tell you all about it."

I lead her over to the set of pretty chairs situated by the window overlooking the stone terrace and the river beyond. I drop into the chair and draw her onto my lap. "Is Jasmine sleeping?"

"Yes, it took her some time, but eventually she drifted off. I had to put a chair under her doorknob and show her how no one could get in and I promised to do the same to my room."

We both look at Vasey's unprotected door.

"I knew you were coming," she says in protest.

"I should spank you."

An evil smile spreads across her face. "I'd like that."

"Jesus." I close my eyes and count to ten.

"You're hard," she whispers and wiggles her ass against my erection.

"Yes," I choke. I gather up the tattered ends of my control and open my eyes. "Good job at distracting me. Do you want to know the rest of the details, or should I just give up and fuck you?"

She pouts a little. "I can't have a little fun?"

I surge to my feet. “Okay, fucking it is.”

“No. No, I’m kidding,” she squeals softly, a giggle in her throat.

I sit back down, my cock aching but my heart happy at seeing a smile on her face. It’s almost like the last ten years never passed and we’re sitting in a borrowed pickup in the middle of a copse of trees arguing about whether it would be more comfortable inside the cab or in the bed of the truck. We almost always made love inside the cab. The corrugated steel truck beds were uncomfortable as hell. “Fine, but after I’m done, you’re on your knees and sucking me off in penance.”

“How is that penance?” She licks her lips. “That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking about doing.”

She’s a menace. But I can match her. I slip my hand up the bottom of her nightshirt and right past the elastic of her panties. She’s wet, like she’s been thinking of that spanking and licking and fucking for the past few hours. “This is what I’ve been thinking about doing.” My long fingers dive right inside of her in one hard thrust. She cries out and spasms.

“God, West.”

“Oh, I know, sweetness. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

Chapter Fifteen

VASEY

“T oo long.” I moan, gripping the front of his shirt. West works his fingers in and out of me. My mind flashes back to when we were teenagers. He wanted our first time together to not be painful, so he’d broken my hymen with his fingers while his mouth devoured me. I’d barely felt the pain. But that was the thing about West; he could always take it away and fill it with something else. Something that was so much more.

West pulls his hand out, making me gasp. “Hey.” I watch as he brings his fingers to his mouth, taking his time to suck my pleasure away from each one of them. He closes his eyes, savoring it. A long groan comes from him.

“Fuck, I’ve missed your taste, sweetness.” His eyes open. “Missed this.” West claims my mouth in another kiss, letting me get a taste too. I get lost in him, the way I always have.

“Naked,” I say between kissing, wanting there to no longer be anything between us. Yearning for us to be skin to skin again after all of these years going without each other. We pull and yank at each other's clothes, desperate for one another. “Inside me,” I tell him when I’m finally naked. West lifts me, tossing me to the center of the bed. I barely hit the mattress, and he’s coming down on top of me.

“I give the orders in bed.”

“Please.” I reach down between us, wrapping my hand around his cock.

“This first time will be quick.” I smile inwardly, loving the fact that my touch still has the same effect on him after all these years.

“Yes,” I agree. “Take the edge off.” All I want is to feel connected to him. My whole body aches with the need. West takes over, guiding his cock to my entrance. Our eyes stayed locked as he thrusts fully inside of me to the hilt. My body accepts every inch of him.

“Vasey,” he groans. I grab his shoulders. I’m so full of him it almost burns, but in the sweetest of ways.

I lick my lips and say, “Go on, West. You’re not going to break me.”

“Never.” He pulls out, thrusting back in, his mouth coming down onto mine.

I wrap my legs around him, raising my hips to meet each of his thrusts as he pounds into me. I can see the need and desperation in his eyes. It’s in every slide of his cock in and out of me as he tries to get as deep inside me as he can, digging his knees into the mattress. I match his rhythm, knowing tomorrow every inch of my body will feel him.

One of the things I always loved about West was his need for me. That he could never get enough. A few of the girls told me to be careful. That it could be a dangerous game to play with a man, but the only danger I’ve ever had when it comes to West is my heart.

He shifts his hips, making sure to hit that sensitive spot inside me. His pelvic bone is rubbing against my clit. It’s too much and not enough at the same time. West always knew how to get me there. We’d lie in the back of the truck, and he’d explore every

inch of me, trying to find out what I enjoyed most. It's obvious by the way he's working me over that he hasn't forgotten a thing.

"I'm with you," I say before he can ask. His eyes flare at my words. After all of these years, we're still so connected. We can read each other. I'm hovering on the edge of an orgasm. West grips my hips, pinning me firmly down to stroke hard and deep.

I explode, my sex locked down around his cock. As the pleasure ripples through my body, I cry out his name. West is right there with me. It's not long before his release spills inside of me as he groans. I cling to him, holding him close, skin to skin, never wanting this moment to end but hoping we have many more like it in our future.

West shifts, rolling over so I'm on top of him, his cock still inside of me. I rest my head on his chest. His fingers roam up and down my back. Tears sting at the corner of my eyes.

"I love you," West says.

"I love you too." I turn to kiss his chest over his heart, placing my head back down on it. I want to savor every second of this. My emotions begin to spill over. Tears of happiness sting my eyes, thinking about being here with him like this. Something I never thought was in the cards for us again.

I let out a small laugh when West's cock jerks inside of me. The man is still hard, and I know he came. I can feel it inside of me. As soon as that thought hits me, so does another realization. Oh crap.

"West." My heart sinks.

"What?" His arms tighten around me.

“Never mind.” I don’t want to bring this up right now. “West!” I squeak out when he flips me over, so I’m now under him.

“You tensed up on me. No more keeping shit from each other.”

“We should talk about it later.” I lick my lips. “When your cock isn’t inside me.”

“You’re going to have to get used to that.”

“Shut up.” I laugh, making my sex contract around him. He groans, his cock jerking inside of me. West lets it slip out, but he stays hovering over me.

“Out with it.”

“We didn’t use anything,” I point out. When I was younger, I was on birth control, and we’d both been virgins. “I haven’t been on anything in years,” I admit, hoping it doesn’t kill the moment or cause him to freak out.

“So?” He shrugs as though what I said is no big deal.

“But—” I close my eyes, not wanting to say this. The thought of him having been with someone else kills me, but it’s been years, so I shouldn’t expect that he was celibate. It makes me want to throw up.

“Don’t you fucking say it, Vasey.” My eyes flutter open to meet his. “I’d never do that. You’re my only girl. Ever.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“You’re sorry?” He smirks. “Then you’ll make it up to me.”

“Oh, really?” I roll my eyes, fighting a smile.

“Three orgasms.”

“Three?”

“Yeah.” He starts to trail kisses down my neck. “Let me eat you to three.” His tongue circles my nipple.

“And that’s how I make it up to you?” West sucks my nipple into his mouth, making my back bow off the bed. I slip my fingers into his hair.

“All I want is your sweetness.” He runs his tongue down my stomach. I spread my thighs farther for him, loving the way he makes me feel.

“It’s all yours.” I moan, giving myself over to West.

Chapter Sixteen

WEST

“W hat’s Ware doing here?” Griffin scowls.

Ware ignores him and takes a seat in one of the metal chairs near the ring.

“He’s Gideon Franklin’s guardian, and since the kid is underage, his guardian gets to watch.”

“You told him the kid has no chance against Mick, right?”

Mick is Griffin’s brother-in-law, a nineteen-year-old boxing phenom. We didn’t know he was a phenom until a few months ago when Griffin took one look at Mick’s sister and decided he was going to marry her. The brother and Griffin had a rocky start, but Griffin gave him a job at the gym, the kid stepped into the boxing ring, and the rest is history. And by history, I mean this kid is going to make history in the future. Today, though, he’s going to knock some sense into another kid, and then we’re going to see if that kid is salvageable. I don’t think he is, but we have to try for Vasey and Jasmine’s sake.

“I told him. I don’t think he cares much.”

Griff looks confused. “Isn’t that his kid?”

“No. It’s his wife’s kid, and before you ask, I don’t think he cares much for her

either.”

“Then why—” He cuts himself off. “Never mind. You don’t have any answers.”

I shrug. “How long do you think this kid can last?”

“Against Mick? Ten seconds.”

“Can we extend that to at least a minute?”

“Do you want him to just stand there?”

“Yes?”

Griff sighs. “I could be home with the wife. Instead, I’m here watching my teen pummel your teen into the mat.”

“Not my teen.”

“Semantics. Can’t you just kidnap Vasey and take her to a secluded island until this kid is eighteen and goes off to college?”

Both our eyes land on Ware, still sitting in his metal chair doing nothing but staring at the ring.

“Did I tell you Ware and I are neighbors now?”

“No, but if it’s because you want to be close to Vasey, I get it. If you can’t be in the same house, that’s the next best thing.”

Before his marriage, Griff would not have understood this. He didn’t understand me

buying The Academy because what was the point of an expensive gift to a woman you couldn't have? Now he gets it. He'd do anything for his woman which, prior to his marriage, was getting his hair cut weekly since that was what his woman does for a living.

I give him a chin nod and go over and greet Ware. "Griff told me that Gideon wouldn't last ten seconds against Mick, so we can call it off right now before anyone is hurt."

"He's been plucking the legs off frogs, snapping birds' necks, and leaving rats with their entrails wrapped around their necks? I think ten seconds is a gift."

He must have talked to his daughter.

"What are you going to do about it? Him getting beat up by Mick isn't going to change him."

"Then, why did you give him a card to come here to your gym?"

"Because he's a minor, and I can't do much about that but get someone else to put the fear of God into him."

"Seems reasonable. I'm divorcing Roberta. What happens to Gideon will depend on how much fear gets pounded into him. How long can Mick make this last?"

"A long time, and by that, I mean, maybe a minute."

It's not even a minute. Mick hits him once, and Gideon collapses. Ware heaves a deep sigh and pushes to his feet. He walks over to the boxing ring and peers down to see if Gideon is conscious. "I'm divorcing your mother. You two will be out of the house by the morning."

Without another word, he turns and walks to the exit. At the door, he stops. “Vasey will still be living with me until Jasmine goes to college. Especially since you robbed Jasmine of her mother.”

“That’s all on you, man. You married the wrong woman and put your daughter in danger. Try being a father so that you don’t have to rely on a stranger to parent your kid. Vasey will continue to care for your daughter because she loves that girl, but she’ll be living with me because she loves me.”

Ware clenches his jaw.

I tilt my head toward the ring. “I’m happy to go a couple of rounds with you. Best man wins all sorts of things.”

Ware snorts. “I’m the richest man in the city because I know what battles to fight and what ones to walk away from.” The door opens and closes behind him silently.

When I get home, Vasey is in the bedroom, unpacking a suitcase. I lean against the door frame and just watch her for a while as she pushes my underwear to the side to make room for her lacy panties and bras, replaces another drawer full of white T-shirts with a colorful collection of graphic tees and sweatshirts. It’s homey and mundane, but I could watch this show for hours and never tire of it.

“You should be helping me instead of just standing there.”

“Your tits jiggle when you bend over. If I move, I won’t be able to see that.”

Vasey slaps her hand against her chest. “Are you admitting to spying on me?”

“You could try being less hot. I’d like to watch you sit on the bed and finger yourself. Remember you did that once when we were driving? I almost crashed into a tree. I

jerked off to that memory of you more times than is healthy.”

“Yes, well, hmmm,” she sputters.

I laugh and take two strides until she’s in my arms.

“I’m not done!” she squeals.

“Think of it as a break.” I place her on the bed and then go and grab a chair.

She gives me an uncertain look. I unzip and pull out my cock. “Let me see you touch yourself.”

Uncertainty gives way to greed at the sight of my shaft. I squeeze the base so I don’t shoot off my wad while she’s staring at me.

“I want a taste.” She starts to climb off the bed.

“No,” I order sharply.

She stills, pushing her lower lip out. “But, West, you’re supposed to give me what I want.”

“Slip off your panties and spread your legs. Let me see what’s mine.” It’s a battle now, mostly between me and my own desires but for her heart, too. She needs to see that her pleasure is the most important thing in the world. That she comes first in my heart. Everything I do is for her, including this. I don’t want her to go another minute with her thinking I don’t want her, don’t lust after her, don’t spend every second of every day with her at the very front of my mind.

Her sex is a dusky rose and wet. I can see her juice glisten like expensive diamonds

under the candlelight. She hovers her fingers over her mound. I bite my tongue until I taste blood. I'm not going to last.

"Lower, Vasey. You're off your mark by about six inches."

"This is embarrassing, West," she hisses.

"How can it be? It's just me, your lover, holding his own cock in his hand ready to come at any second, wanting to see you touch your pretty cunt. Nothing to be ashamed of."

She slides her fingers lower until they rest at the entrance of her sex. I exhale heavily, probably looking like an angry bull with my nostrils flaring and my teeth bared but she's so damned sexy I want to explode.

Her eyes flutter closed when she pushes past the slight resistance of her cunt. It's unused to activity, and despite our lovemaking last night, even two slender fingers inside is tight. The memory of the sensation of being wrapped in her sheath grips me by the throat and cuts off my airway.

"Tell me what it feels like."

She licks her bottom lip. "Warm. Squishy. Tight."

She begins to fuck herself slowly. Her fingers don't penetrate far. Her hands are too small, her fingers too short. She gnaws on her lip, searching for a release that dangles just outside her reach. I rub my cock tighter and faster, imagining that it's her mouth, her hand, her soft, wet, squishy cunt surrounding me.

"Do you remember when I touched you there for the first time? It was on the Morris Farm. We finished our chores. I was mucking the stables, and you were feeding the

goats and chickens. We were both hot and sweaty.”

“You had hay in your hair.”

“Shit on my boots.”

“I sprayed you down with the hose.”

“And stared at me like you’d never seen me before.”

“Your T-shirt was white and thin.” She pauses.

“Don’t stop.” I want to hear about all her lustful thoughts.

“Very thin.” Her tongue peeks between her teeth. She’s so hot.

“It wasn’t the first time I kissed you, but it was the first time I kissed you there.” I look toward her cunt where her fingers are shuttling in and out.

“You were hard. I could see it through your jeans.”

“Wet denim is a bitch to pull off. I tore your panties by accident.”

“Accident?” She huffs out a disbelieving laugh.

“Hard to say now. My fingers were rough and calloused and when I touched you, I was afraid I’d hurt you.”

“It felt so good.”

“Are you imagining that it’s my fingers inside you right now?”

She nods.

“I want it too, babe, just like back then, but I couldn’t stop with touching you. I had to taste you. You came on my tongue, and it was so sweet and tangy. We would’ve gone further, but the Morrisises called us in for supper.”

“I had to go without underwear.” Her eyes are half-lidded as she remembers that night at dinner.

“Your cunt rubbed against the seam of your jeans.”

“I kept shifting, and Mrs. Morris asked me if I had to go to the bathroom.”

“And you said yes and went to the bathroom to touch yourself.”

“I had to,” she cries.

I sat at the dinner table an extra-long time because my hard-on was too obvious to stand up. “I kept thinking about how my cock would feel inside you because my tongue, my fingers, weren’t enough. Just like your fingers aren’t enough for you now.” I stand to my feet and strip off my jeans. In one stride, I’m on top of her. I take myself in hand and thrust inside her wet heat. She gasps and rakes her fingernails down my back.

I had been trying to teach her a lesson, but I’m the one that got taught. I don’t have any control when it comes to her; I’m nothing but a mass of desperate need. I devour her mouth, plunging into her again and again until her cum drips over my shaft and I flood her with my seed. We doze off and when I wake again, I’m still inside of her, hard and ready. I roll her over and take her from behind, pushing her up on her knees and taking her so hard the bed skitters across the floor.

“I love you, Vasey. I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you, too, West. It’s been too long.”

“Never again.” I keep working her until we’re both spent.

She moans when I touch her hip. “I can’t take another round. I don’t even know if I’ll be able to walk tomorrow.”

“I’ll carry you,” I say confidently despite my own knees feeling like Jell-O.

She laughs and pushes at my hand.

I grab a blanket and cover us both.

I’m not sure what wakes me a few hours later. Intuition? Some leftover Army instinct? I get to my feet and grab my phone. On the security app, I see a dark figure climb the fence just to the left of the gate to Ware’s estate. I put a camera facing his driveway so I could check Vasey’s comings and goings. Or maybe I’d put it there just for this. Gideon would want revenge after getting kicked out. Whether he was going to take it out on Ware or his daughter, I’m not sure. I could leave this up to Ware, but if you want something done, you gotta do it yourself.

I throw some clothes on and stuff my Beretta into the back of my jeans. I climb over at the same spot Gideon did and follow the soft depressions in the grass he made. The trail leads me to the staff entrance where the numbskull is fumbling with the lock and cursing loudly. A red light from the security camera overhead blinks quietly. Gideon didn’t notice it. Ware is probably inside watching with amusement.

“I thought you didn’t live here anymore.”

He whirls around at the sound of my voice. There's a knife in his hand. I remove my gun and point it at him. "What are you doing with that toy?"

"You gonna shoot me?" he jeers, but there's a quaver of fear in his voice.

"I'd like to, but since that'd probably put me behind bars, I opt for a different plan." I toss the gun to the side. It lands exactly where I wanted it to, closer to him than me. "Let's fight, then. You've got age on me."

"Sure." He dives for the gun, and when he brings it up, he shoots. I dive to the right and feel the blow in my shoulder.

In dramatic fashion, I fall to the ground, clutching the wound. "You shot me," I gasp.

The side door opens, and Ware steps out. "I watched it all on camera. Attempted murder." He shakes his head.

"What? No!" Gideon protests. The gun falls out of his hand to the ground. "I was defending myself."

"The entire interaction is on video." Ware points to the security cam. "Evers threw down his gun. You grabbed it and shot an unarmed man who was trying to stop a robbery."

"Robbery with a firearm is an aggravated felony," I add helpfully.

"Does The Academy have law classes?" Ware asks.

"Just a little tidbit I picked up."

"You planned this," Gideon shrieks, but his protestations are drowned out by police

sirens.

“I gave them a call when I saw Gideon in the security camera,” Ware explains.

“Nice.”

“Your acting is top-tier.” He hands me a towel.

I press it against my wound. “I was shot for real.”

“You stepped into the bullet,” he says quietly. “That kid has never shot a gun before and would have missed you even from point-blank distance.”

“You can’t prove it.” Not even the camera footage would reveal that.

“No, but it’s a good plan. Gideon will be put away for several years, and my family will be safe. I owe you one.”

“Great. I’m calling in the favor. Hire a new nanny. Vasey will always be there for Jasmine, but you need a new caretaker for your girl.”

Ware sighs. “I honor my debts.”

The ambulance squad brings over the backboard. I refuse it but agree to ride to the emergency room to get stitched up. When I get back home, the sun is peeking through the clouds. Vasey’s on the steps looking unhappy.

I grin. “Honey, I’m home.”

Chapter Seventeen

VASEY

“ I still can’t believe he shot you.” I rest my head against West's chest. Despite having been shot hours ago, he remains as handsome as ever.

“It’s for the best.” I snap my head up and glare at him. What a ridiculous thing to say.

“You being shot isn’t for the best. You’re lucky it was only in the shoulder.” I can’t bear the thought of something happening to him.

“That little shit’s in jail, so—” He shrugs. I huff out a breath.

"If something had happened to you..." Tears sting my eyes. “I only just got you back.”

“Sweetness.” West slides his fingers through my hair. “You have always had me.” I smile against his chest. He's not wrong. On some level, I knew he was always there. It's why I'd gone to him to begin with. I knew he could fix everything. He always did in the end. This time, with Gideon, was no different.

“I should go check on Jasmine.” I am expecting her to show up soon. I’m surprised she slept through all the commotion. But ever since West has come into her life, I’ve noticed she sleeps more soundly. She trusts him. That thought alone makes my heart happy. I’m looking forward to telling her that Gideon will no longer be a problem for her.

“Ware is going to hire a new nanny.”

“West.” I sigh.

“It will be an additional pair of hands for Jasmine. We’ll stay across the street, and you’ll still be a part of her life. Ware won’t stop that. You can go over as often as you like, but you’ll be in our bed at the end of the day.” I chew on my bottom lip, debating this. I don’t want Jasmine to think that I’m abandoning her. But I also know that I’ve put my life on hold for long enough. “You also get to have your own life, Vasey. There is nothing wrong with picking yourself sometimes.”

“And what is it that I’m picking?”

West’s hand slides down to my ass, giving it a squeeze. “Our family. I left because I wanted to be able to provide and give you something. That is all I have ever wanted. Now I can do all those things.”

“But what about you, West? What do you want?” He has consistently prioritized my dreams and desires. What about his?

“I want you. I have wanted you since the day I first laid eyes on you.”

“There isn’t more?” I don’t want him to wake up in twenty years and resent me because we lived out my dreams.

“Your dreams are mine too, sweetness. When we would lie in the barn and you would envision a future and explain everything to me, you also inspired me to desire those things. I could envision us working together to achieve these goals. Before you, I only lived day to day. You gave me dreams.” I melt into him.

“I love you so damn much.”

“Love you too, sweetness.” He leans down to kiss me. When he tries to make it deeper, I pull back.

“You’ve been shot,” I remind him.

“I’m fine—” West is cut off by a scream. “The hell?” He releases his hold on me. “Stay,” he orders.

“You think this is over!” The high-pitched screech makes my skin crawl. I hastily follow West toward the front door, fully aware of who is making the commotion. How had I forgotten all about her?

“Fucking hell, this cunt,” I hear a man say as West pulls open the front door to reveal Roberta along with the man I’d seen in West’s office the day I’d gone over to The Academy. Next to him is a beautiful, curvy blonde with long, thick hair that falls around her in waves. She’s glaring at Roberta. If looks could kill, she’d be six feet under.

“All of you.” Roberta waves her finger around at everyone. “You did this!”

I roll my eyes. “No, you did this.” I’m so over her shit. I’ve dealt with it for long enough for Jasmine’s sake, but I no longer have to. Roberta is nothing now that she doesn’t have Ware to back her. She’s spiraling right now because she knows it too. “You and your son got exactly what you deserved, Roberta. He’s a demon spawn, and guess what that makes you?”

“You can’t talk to me that way,” Roberta states, indignant as usual. Nothing will ever change this woman. I can’t help the laugh that comes out of me.

“I just did. Let me make myself crystal clear, Roberta. If you come near any of us again, including Jasmine, I’ll make sure it’s the last thing you ever do in your life.” I

should've anticipated her next move because it's typical Roberta behavior, but before her hand connects with my face, the curvy blonde grabs her wrist, twisting it behind her back. Roberta lets out a high-pitched scream.

"You're done here." The woman shoves her. Roberta stumbles forward, one of her heels breaking in the process before she hits the stone driveway. "Hi." The woman steps right over her. "I'm Lauren."

"Lauren Harris," the man beside her adds. Lauren rolls her eyes, but a smile plays at her lips. "And this is my husband, Griffin."

"It's nice to meet you," I tell them both.

"No, it's nice to meet you. We've been waiting for this day." Lauren beams at me.

"You have no idea." Her husband wraps an arm around her. "Should have known it would take you getting shot to get your girl back."

"Don't get pissed because I'll take a bullet for my woman." West pulls me into his side.

"Yeah." Lauren elbows her Griffin. "Pretty sure you two held me at gunpoint when we met." Griffin gets a sheepish expression, confirming it to be true.

"What!" There is a story there, and I want to hear it. "Why don't you both come in?"

I want to hear their love story. There is nothing better than people falling in love and everyone getting their happily ever after.

Chapter Eighteen

WEST

“Will you be taking over The Academy?” Lauren asks as we clear the table. Griffin had brought over steaks and a propane tank.

We hooked up the grill in the back and made dinner while the girls got to know each other.

“I don’t think so. I don’t know anything about running a school. It was a nice gesture, though.” Vasey pats me on the shoulder.

“I guess I’ll sell it.” I pick up my stack of dishes and follow the girls inside. Griffin trails behind.

“You could go to school for it,” Lauren suggests. “I’m taking business admin classes because I want to open my own salon, but all I know how to do right now is cut hair and deliver plates.”

“Customer service is a good skill,” Griffin calls from over my shoulder.

“You don’t have to defend me, babe. I know I need more know-how before I can start a business.”

“I didn’t have any,” Griff says.

“You had West, who you say yourself is uncommonly smart about business things.”

“Thanks for the compliment, Lauren.” I shoot a grin at Griff, who is frowning since his woman paid the slightest bit of attention to someone other than him.

“Where will you open your new salon?” Vasey asks.

“I’m not sure. Was hoping that West would help us out on that. Put together some feasibility plans, market comps, and stuff.”

“Be happy to.” I place the last fork inside the dishwasher basket, and Vasey hip checks the door closed. “Good teamwork.” We high-five.

Lauren’s phone dings. She reads a text and then motions for Griffin. “We have to go. Mick’s done packing, and we need to take him to the airport. He’s doing some sparring with a boxing champ in Vegas,” she explains.

“It was wonderful meeting you.” Vasey and Lauren hug.

It’s good to see them get along, not that I was worried that they wouldn’t. Griff wasn’t going to fall for a woman like Roberta. As the two women move toward the door, Griff pulls me aside. “Wanted to let you know that in my deep dive on Ware, I found out that Jasmine isn’t his bio kid. It’s his cousin who died right after Jasmine was born. Ware took the kid in.”

“Interesting. Anything else?”

“No. Rich as hell. Came from a rich family. Will die as part of a rich family. Take care of yourself. Let’s get together again.”

“Next week?”

“It’s a plan.”

Upstairs, as Vasey puts on her face stuff, I tell her the news about Ware.

“I know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone knows that Jasmine isn’t his bio daughter, but it doesn’t matter because he views Jasmine as his own flesh and blood and would ruin anyone that would suggest otherwise. That’s why no one says anything. Does it matter to you?”

“That Jasmine is adopted? No. Why would it?” I could watch Vasey do her nighttime routine for hours. For one, I get to stare at her gorgeous face, but two, seeing all her jars and bottles strewn across our bathroom sink is a mark of her presence. She’s here, with me, forever.

“No, I mean would you be against adoption?”

“Hell, no.” I rear back, slightly offended because we were foster kids. I would’ve been thrilled to be adopted. Then I think about her words and wonder. “Do you want to adopt?”

“I’m open. If I can’t get pregnant, I would.”

“Maybe you’re pregnant already.” I spent enough cum inside of her to fill a house.

“I’m not, but Lauren is.”

“That explains all the hovering Griff was doing during dinner.”

“I wouldn’t mind being pregnant.” She meets my gaze in the mirror. “You want kids, don’t you?”

I drop my hands on her shoulders and then tilt her neck to the side to place a warm kiss there.

“Absolutely. Whether you carry them or whether we adopt them makes no difference to me. Should I sell The Academy, then?”

She hesitates. “I just don’t know anything about running a school. I’ve never even taught a class.”

“You taught Jasmine a lot of things, but I hear you. What about going back to school like Lauren suggested?”

“I’m intrigued,” she admits, “but going back to school at my age?”

“I’m gonna go back to school.”

“For what?” She twists in her chair.

I crouch down and take the bottle from her hands. It smells good. Fresh, like flowers. I squirt some into my hand and start to pat it on her face like I saw her do last night.

“Since we’re gonna have a boatload of kids, I better learn how to cook. All I know how to do is make pancakes and grill steak. I have to have a bigger skill set.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one cooking and taking care of you?”

“No.” I stop patting long enough to kiss her on her lips. “You should play with Jasmine, watch television, and read books.”

“I thought I was supposed to go to school and study to run The Academy.” She sounds a little breathless.

I pull down the collar of her shirt and start patting the cream on her chest. When the ribbed band is stretched as far as it can go, I give up and just dip my hand under the tee to stroke her nipples to hard buds. She leans back against the counter to give me better access.

“School. Books. Isn’t that the same thing?” I lift one bare leg over my shoulder and then the other.

“Not really.”

I pull my hand out from the top of her shirt so I can push it up from the bottom. Her panties are soaked. I nudge the wet fabric aside and begin to lap at her. The discussion on school, cooking, her duties, my duties, the future all fall by the wayside. Those things will take care of themselves. The important thing is that we’re together now. The dreams we had as kids, when it was just the two of us against the world, are finally a reality.

I look up at her from between her legs, my hands around her waist, all the love I have for her in my eyes. “It doesn’t matter what we do as long as we do it together.”

Her hand cups the back of my head. “Yes, West. You’re right. As long as we’re together.”

I rise and gather her in my arms in one motion and stride into the bedroom to seal our vows. What started so long ago when we were barely adults has finally been realized. Two hearts making one life together.

VASEY

“Those centerpieces need a few more lilies in them.” I gesture toward one of the numerous tables that occupy the outdoor tent we built in our backyard. “Oh, and the cake. It should be between the two ice sculptures.” One indicates the year, while the other displays the university logo that Jasmine has selected.

All the colleges she applied to had accepted her. I was pleased she ended up picking one that was close to home. It’s funny how she used to cling to me; now it’s me doing the clinging. I’m not ready to let her go, but I know she needs to spread her wings and explore the rest of the world.

“I sound snotty, don’t I?” I cringe, looking over at Rebecca, the party planner. I know I’m being particular, but I want everything to be perfect for Jasmine. She deserves it.

Never in my life did I think I’d be talking about centerpieces, ice sculptures, and picking chandeliers to hang in an outdoor tent for a party, but here I am. I remember when West and I would pool our money just to be able to buy ice cream at the local ice cream shop. I couldn’t have imagined throwing a party of this caliber all those years ago.

“You sound like an excited mom.” Rebecca gives me a reassuring smile. I might not be Jasmine’s birth mother, but it warms me that people see me as a mother figure in her life. Even Jasmine.

I was worried about how things would go after I moved across the street, but Ware actually stepped up some. I mean, he didn’t do a complete three-sixty, but he

definitely put in more effort than he had before. I think he realized it was easier to have a small role in Jasmine's life than to marry a woman he couldn't stand. Jasmine still spent a large amount of her time over at our house, but she had dinner with Ware a few nights a week. He's even insisted on paying for the party. In his own way, Ware cares.

"Sweetness." West comes up behind me, placing his hand on my small baby bump. This one popped out way sooner than my last, which is saying something because it was twins. Two precious little girls who will be waking up from their nap soon. "I want you off your feet for a while." I turn in my husband's arms. "We have staff that can handle this." He's probably right. My feet do tend to swell, and I'll be on them a lot tonight when the party starts.

"You just want me off my feet and on my back," I tease him.

"Now there is an idea. Help you work some of the stress out." He gives me a devilish smile as he leans down to kiss me. I melt into my husband. I never get tired of his kisses. I cherish all of them.

"I need to shower and change."

"We can do that." I let out a small squeal when West scoops me off my feet, carrying me inside the house.

I'd tell him I can walk, but it would be pointless. Instead, I rest my head on his shoulder and let him do as he pleases. The man is always giving me what I want. He does everything for our family. I want to do the same, and if carrying me around is what he wants, so be it.

West doesn't stop until we're in the bathroom. "Let me." I undo the buttons on his shirt. He hasn't lost any of the muscle he'd gotten while in the Army. He'd left a boy and come back a man in every sense of the word. My man.

“It’s me that’s supposed to be taking care of you.”

“You always take care of me.” He’s been watching out for me since the very start. Making sure that I was protected and taken care of. West does the same with our babies. He loves our family with everything in him.

“And?” He drops to his knees to remove my shoes. I rest my hand on his shoulder, allowing him to undress me.

These past years have been some of the best of my life. West had been true to his word when he left for the Army. He’d gone to make something of himself so that he could give us a life we could only dream of. I may not have understood it at the time, but somewhere deep inside me, I knew he would find me again. We’ve been able to do so many wonderful things because of him.

It wasn't only about finding Jasmine. She needed me, and this path we ended up taking, while not always together, led to that, but also all the other children we have been able to help. I wasn't in love with The Academy at first. I think it was the idea of catering to all those rich families.

That’s when a new idea came to life. Why did it have to be for the rich? West and I didn’t need the money from the school. What about all the bright kids out there that could use a hand? I knew that would be a challenge to pull off, but West had all the confidence in the world in me and encouraged me.

We kept The Academy but changed it to serve underprivileged kids, and helped them get job training or into college, whichever path they wanted to pursue in life. What surprised me was how many other people thought this was a good place for their money too. West and I hold a lot of parties like this because rich people like to be fed and entertained before they write their checks, but I’ve gotten used to that too. Once I got into the swing of things, I flourished.

“Let me love on my wife before our girls wake up.”

West leads me into the shower, having me sit on the bench. He turns the water on, waiting for it to get to the right temperature. He kneels before me, soaping up his hands to rub along every inch of my body. Doing exactly what he said he would, taking care of me. The same way he always has, and I know he always will.